

30/06/2020 LTT- Common charger for mobile phones

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Sound bite

The Commission promotes solutions that favour technological innovation in the field of chargers while avoiding market fragmentation.

The preferred voluntary approach did not meet the consumers' and our own expectations so we are now considering a legislative approach.

The Commission is working on building policy options on the best way to proceed to improve consumers' convenience, to reduce the environmental footprint and to promote innovation at the same time.

On the record

The Commission welcomes any new innovative solution as long as it is a "common" one as requested by the co-legislators and in line with consumers' expectations.

The Commission launched a study to analyse the impact of a common charger solution on consumers, on the industry and on the environment providing assessment and guidance for a possible implementation of different policy options. This study has been published on February 7th 2020.

The study found that the introduction of the common charger alone would not have sufficient impact on reducing e-waste, unless complemented with measures on de-coupling (i.e. selling of phone without their chargers).

The European Parliament resolution of January 2020, while calling for the introduction of the common charger, also urges the Commission to ensure that consumers are no longer obliged to buy new chargers with each new device.

Given these two developments, the Commission will soon launch a complementary study on decoupling.

The Commission has continued monitoring the situation in the market and is committed to meet the objectives of enhancing interoperability and consumer convenience, and reducing electronic waste.

Legislative options

- A delegated act based on the Radio equipment Directive is one of the options to be considered since it empowers the Commission to take certain type of regulatory measures in this field.
- We are ready to analyse other options, including through ordinary legislative procedure. However, given the limitation in the scope of RED and of its empowerment, any action through ordinary legislative procedure and/or through other instruments, such as implementing measures under the Eco-design Directive should be further explored and thoroughly assessed.

Main results of the study

The study indicates that a combination of policy options will have to be carefully designed.

Harmonising the charging interface of smartphone would deliver consumer's benefits, but this option may not be sufficient to reduce significantly electronic waste. In order to enhance the positive benefits stemming from the harmonisation of the charging interface, accompanying measures aimed at incentivising/mandating decoupling (i.e. selling the phone without the charger) should be considered.

In addition, the scope of any regulatory measure may be enlarged to cover not only smartphones, but also other electronic devices, such as tablets, e-readers or cameras, which have a similar charging behaviour.

Next steps

In its reviewed work-programme, the Commission has included a legislative initiative on common chargers for adoption in the 1st quarter of 2021. As the study published in February concluded that the benefits of a common charger solution would be enhanced if complemented with measures aimed at incentivising or mandating de-coupling, a complementary study on this latter

aspect will be launched soon. This study will also assess measures on the quality of cords.

Q & A for on the record follow-up

- **What has the Commission done over these 11 years to achieve the objective of a common charger?**

The Commission has definitely not been inactive during this period. The original Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) of 2009 proved to be successful for both consumers and the industry, while guaranteeing reduction of e-waste. It was a major success, as it allowed reduction of charging solutions from more than 30 available in 2009 to 3 chargers types.

When the first MoU came to effective end in 2014 the Commission started negotiations to renew it and put much effort to find consensus on a new MoU. Unfortunately, the industry's proposal of March 2018 was not satisfactory as not delivering a single common charging solution.

Given that, the Commission started new actions, and in particular a supporting study was committed in preparation of a legislative approach under Radio Equipment Directive.

In the meantime, new scenarios and new technical challenges, such the introduction of wireless and fast charging, had to be taken into account in addition to the initial 'charger' issue.

But, above all, there is nowadays the necessity to address environmental challenges so to limit e-waste.

Different Commission services are currently collaborating to address those circular aspects and are fully involved to address all these challenges.

The Commission already facilitated a voluntary agreement on the common charger in 2009 with the involvement of over 90% of all mobile phone manufacturers on the EU market. This agreement came to an effective end in 2014.

By this new MoU, the industry:

- Commits that new smartphone models can be connected to cables that have the Micro USB-B technology at least at one end;
- Considers that mobile phones that can be charged by
 - a cable terminating with a Micro USB-B interface;
 - a cable with detachable cable (either USB-A or USB-C interface at external power supply (EPS) end) and terminating with a Micro USB-B at the other end
 - if a manufacturer makes available an Adaptor from the Micro USB-B connector to a specific non-Micro-USB socket in the Mobile Phone

will be compliant with this MoU;

- Foresees a 3-year transitional period;
- Allows placing models on the market compliant with the first MoU until the end of their production cycle;
- Allows opting-out from the MoU if this is needed to allow for innovation.

What is your detailed assessment of the MoU from March 2018?

- On 20 March 2018, the industry published a new Memorandum of Understanding. However, the Commission found that proposal unsatisfactory, as it did not propose one 'common charger' solution by allowing several ones. In addition, its scope was restricted only to smartphones, failing to capture other portable devices. As such, consumer convenience and reduction of e-waste was not enhanced.
- The Commission has put much effort into finding consensus for a renewed and ambitious voluntary agreement among all industry stakeholders.
- As a result of the MoU in 2009 the fragmentation of chargers for mobile phones has significantly decreased. However, although the old common interface (micro USB type B) is being progressively replaced by the USB-C, there is still a degree of fragmentation in the charger market, which prevents the envisaged full interoperability between chargers and smartphones of all brands.
- The Commission is of the view that the new Memorandum of Understanding of 2018 is not as ambitious as the previous MoU on

policy objectives such as interoperability, reduction and prevention of fragmentation, eWaste reduction and timely phasing-in.

- The Commission is also monitoring market developments and consumer feedback in the field with a view to gather evidence to inform future policy decisions.

What did the Memorandum of Understanding from 2009 cover?

- The MoU of 2009 allowed the possibility to use proprietary interfaces and all signatories complied with it. As a result of the MoU, the interfaces for charging were reduced from several to two only types (micro USB type B and Apple's Lightning).
- This agreement came to an end in 2014
- In parallel, the Commission launched a call for an Expert Group on Radio Equipment, in order to provide expertise to the Commission when examining issues related to radio equipment, also with respect to the delegated empowerments, including the one on the common charger.
- For further information, a report was commissioned and published on the Commission's website: 'study on the impact of the MOU on harmonisation of chargers for mobile telephones and to assess possible future options' (2014):

<http://ec.europa.eu/DocsRoom/documents/7432/attachments/1/translations>

For your background only

The Commission launched in December 2018 an impact assessment study in support of a possible regulatory option under the Radio Equipment Directive (Article 3(3)(a)), which empowers the Commission to adopt a delegated act.

The study has been published on the RED sectoral webpage (https://ec.europa.eu/growth/sectors/electrical-engineering/red-directive/common-charger_en)

Key take-aways of the debate in the Plenary (EP) – 13/01/2020

- There is a unanimous call and support for the common charger from the EP (all political groups). Now it is time to act.
- All MEPs criticised the fact that the problem is on the table since 10 years and is not solved yet. For MEPs, the voluntary approach did not work and invited the Commission to come up soon with legislative solutions including a delegated act. Consumers, environment (i.e. electronic waste), digital

transition and innovation were crucial aspects regularly raised by MEPs. Planned obsolescence was mentioned as a topic to be taken into account. EP calls the Commission to facilitate life of citizens doing something concrete. Many MEPs indeed mentioned personal examples of finding many unused chargers at home.

- 28 MEPs took the floor and almost all speakers are key MEPS and especially key players in IMCO committee, such as Ms De Sutter (IMCO chair).
- Vice-President Sefcovic, replacing Commissioner Breton, explained the situation and concluded the debate indicating that the Commission heard loud and clear the EP message and shared its view. The Commission will work very actively and will count on the EP support.

Our assessment of the March 2018 MoU:

- **Interoperability**
With this MoU, industry only commits that future cables for mobile phones will have at least one USB-C interface. However, manufacturers with a proprietary interface will be allowed to keep it. This will not ensure interoperability.
- **Fragmentation**
The proposed MoU preserves and formalises the status-quo, and is actually a step back with respect to the previous MoU, which had allowed a reduced number of choices. This is reinforced by the clause that manufacturers introduced at the very end of the text, namely that they will be allowed to opt-out at any time.
- **eWaste reduction**
With the previous MoU, only two technologies for the cable (micro USB-B and Apple's Lightning) were allowed on the market. With this new MoU, the three existing technologies (micro USB-B, USB-C, Apple's Lightning) will be allowed to be sold indefinitely. The new MoU also allows choice between two technologies for the connection between the power supply and the cable (USB-A and USB-C) thus decreasing even further the interoperability and reusability of power supplies and cables. As a result, this MoU will lead to an increase in the eWaste.
- **Transitional time**
The new MoU provides for a transition period of 3 years. It also allows old smartphone models compliant with the technical requirements as laid out

in the first MoU still to be sold indefinitely. This long transitional period does not seem proportionate or justified.

- Fast charging

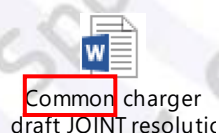
This point is not addressed in the MoU. Manufacturers guarantee fast charging only when the mobile phone and the charger are from the same manufacturer. In all other cases, manufacturers block this feature* and only slow charging is permitted. As a result, consumers suffer from reduced interoperability, possibly because of marketing strategies. (*The mobile phone can recognise whether the charger is from the same manufacturer and impose the charging speed accordingly.)

- Wireless charging

This point is not addressed in the MoU. Wireless charging is currently situated at the beginning of the life cycle. At the moment its energy efficiency is only around 60%, and around 28% of overall phones sold in 2018 were wireless enabled. Nevertheless, as this technology will take increasing importance there is need to envisage future interoperability.

- Indifference to Commission's remarks

It was already explained to Digital Europe how to improve the level of commitment, yet they chose to set to one side these Commission considerations.



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