European Day on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse

Child sexual exploitation and sexual abuse are among the worst forms of violence against children, and are crimes that know no borders. The constant rise of these crimes, exacerbated by the pandemic, underscores the importance of harmonised national legislation and international cooperation to improve prevention, protect the victims and prosecute the perpetrators. The European Day helps to raise awareness to this end.

Background

The European Day on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse, is marked every year on 18 November. A Council of Europe initiative, the Day is designed to raise awareness and facilitate open discussion on the need to prevent child sexual exploitation and abuse, and protect children from these crimes. The 2023 edition is dedicated to ‘Learning from victims/survivors of childhood sexual violence to inspire policy change’. At EU level, the Commission launched the EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse in 2020. A form of cybercrime, child sexual exploitation is also an EU priority in the fight against serious and organised crime under the EU 2020-2025 security union strategy and the European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats (EMPACT).

A 2020 UNICEF report estimated that 1 in 8 children globally have been sexually abused or exploited at some point in their life. In Europe, 1 in 5 children are estimated to be victim of some form of sexual violence, and between 70 and 85 % of child victims know their abuser. A third of abused children never tell anyone about the abuse. Reasons include feelings of shame and guilt, fear of not being believed, not knowing whom to tell, or inability to recognise the abuse. Child sexual abuse and exploitation increasingly occur online. The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), a United States-based non-profit organisation, saw the number of reports worldwide of online child sexual exploitation increase from 1 million in 2010 to more than 21.7 million in 2020. The figures jumped to record highs of 29.3 million reports in 2021 during the pandemic, involving nearly 85 million images and videos, and more than 32 million in 2022, with NCMEC identifying 49 000 urgent reports that involved a child in imminent danger. Both the European Commission and Europol have expressed concern about this growing phenomenon, highlighting the need to promote preventive and educational initiatives across Europe.

International and EU efforts to combat child sexual abuse

International legal framework

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) formed the starting point for an international framework for combating child sexual abuse and exploitation, providing for the protection of children from all forms of (sexual) exploitation and abuse, and maltreatment. In 2007, the Council of Europe adopted a Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No 201). Known as the ‘Lanzarote Convention’, this was the first international instrument to establish the various forms of child sexual abuse as criminal offences. Furthermore, it requires the parties to adopt appropriate legislation and measures to prevent these offences from occurring, to protect victims, and to prosecute perpetrators. It entered into force on 1 July 2010 and has been ratified by all EU Member States.

EU legal framework

The Commission aims ensure that the EU has the right legal framework to protect children. The main EU legal instrument on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography is Directive 2011/93/EU. The directive criminalised various forms of child sexual abuse and exploitation, harmonised these criminal offences across the EU, and established minimum sanctions. Furthermore,
European Parliament position

Parliament condemns all forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse, and is supporting the Commission in its efforts to combat these crimes both offline and online. Parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (LIBE) is currently working on the proposed regulation on new rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse. On 14 November 2023, LIBE voted to enter interinstitutional negotiations on the basis of its report (rapporteur: Javier Zarzalejos, EPP, Spain). Drawn up in response to a specific request by the LIBE committee, a recent EPRS briefing offers a succinct overview of the role and purpose of stakeholder consultation under the Commission’s Better Regulation agenda in this context.

In a 2017 resolution on implementation of the 2011 Directive, Parliament called for better child protection and a greater focus on prevention and awareness-raising. In 2019, marking the 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Parliament stressed that information and communications technology companies and online platforms should take some responsibility in the fight against child sexual abuse and exploitation online. In its resolution on BIK+, Parliament called for greater national investment in digital education. Parliament supports the creation of a European centre to prevent and counter child sexual abuse and in its resolution on the EU children’s rights strategy, it welcomed Europol’s prevention and awareness-raising work.

Recent developments

In 2022, under the EU strategy for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse, the Commission proposed new legislation introducing an obligation for providers of online communication services to detect, report and remove CSAM. The new rules would replace the 2021 interim regulation providing a temporary derogation from EU rules on confidentiality of electronic communications to enable detection, reporting and removal on a voluntary basis. The proposal, now entering the negotiation phase in Parliament, also envisages the creation of a European centre on child sexual abuse. The proposal was presented together with an updated strategy for a ‘better internet for kids’ (BIK+), aiming to ensure that children can navigate the digital environment safely – a priority under the EU strategy on the rights of the child. Another important step towards creating a safer online environment was the adoption in 2022 of the Digital Services Act (DSA), updating the rules governing digital services. The DSA puts notice and action mechanisms in place for online platforms to fight the dissemination of illegal content, including CSAM. The Commission is also working on improved online age verification for children. In addition, the Commission is reviewing the Victims’ Rights Directive and preparing a recommendation on integrated child protection systems, scheduled for beginning 2024.

International cooperation through EU agencies, initiatives and networks

Various EU agencies, such as Europol, support law enforcement cooperation among Member States to form a united front against (online) sexual exploitation and abuse of children in Europe and beyond. The stop child abuse – trace an object initiative, designed to help trace the origin of objects linked to criminal investigations, is one example of Europol’s efforts; the initiative has led to the identification of a number of victims, as well as offenders. Eurojust supports judicial cooperation among Member States to facilitate the prosecution of child sexual abuse perpetrators in cross-border cases. The European Commission also funds and supports several initiatives and networks, including the BIK portal, raising awareness of the potential risks children face online, and INHOPE, a network of hotlines combating online CSAM by analysing and reporting illegal content. The WePROTECT Global Alliance, supported by the United States, the United Kingdom and the European Commission, develops political and practical solutions to make the digital world safe for children, and seeks to prevent online sexual abuse and long-term harm. The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF), co-funded by the EU, provides a hotline for reporting online sexual abuse content globally, and raises awareness through prevention campaigns.

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