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Protecting Victims of Domestic Violence and Children in the Digital Age

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Preamble

Violence against women and domestic violence are not private matters. They are violations of fundamental human rights that no democratic society can tolerate. Every day in Europe, women are abused, stalked, harassed, and forced into marriage. Many do not speak out. Those who do are not always heard. Few perpetrators are tried and fewer are sentenced.¹

The state has not only the right but the legal obligation to act. By ratifying the Istanbul Convention, governments committed to changing their laws, allocating resources, and adopting a zero-tolerance approach.¹ Preventing and combating violence against women is no longer a matter of goodwill; it is a binding legal obligation.⁴ Technology has opened a new frontier of abuse. Spyware, geolocation tools, smart devices, and social media platforms have become instruments of coercion. Non-consensual image sharing, sextortion, cyberstalking, and online harassment affect millions of women and girls across Europe, extending domestic violence beyond the physical home and making escape harder.² Children are exposed to exploitation, grooming, and harmful content at an unprecedented scale. The EU has become the largest host of child sexual abuse material globally.³

The European People's Party has consistently led the fight to protect both women and children online. We call on all institutions and governments to match that commitment with action.

We, the Youth of the European People's Party, stand for a Europe where every woman and every child is safe: at home, in public, and online.

Recognizing that:

- Violence against women is both a cause and a consequence of unequal power relations between women and men, rooted in social constructs, stereotypes, and traditions that make it harder for women to disclose abuse and have their rights respected.¹
- The Istanbul Convention, in force since 2014, requires parties to criminalise domestic violence, stalking, sexual harassment, and psychological violence, and to adopt integrated policies encompassing prevention, protection, prosecution, and co-ordination.⁴
- GREVIO has documented persistent shortcomings across Europe: insufficient funding for victim support services, inadequate professional training, and entrenched victim-blaming.⁵ Its evaluation of France specifically called for stronger responses to cyberviolence against women and girls.⁶
- Online and technology-facilitated violence extends offline abuse into the digital sphere. Most forms are existing crimes amplified by the internet. Impunity remains the rule rather than the exception, with the Budapest Convention's Secretariat estimating that less than 1% of cybercrime ever leads to a criminal justice outcome.^{2 9}
- Key forms of technology-facilitated violence include non-consensual image sharing, deepfakes, cyber flashing, sextortion, cyberstalking via spyware or GPS, and psychological violence through online hate speech and incitement to self-harm. Studies from France found that 6-7 out of 10 domestic violence victims experienced cyber control or cyber harassment.²
- The cybercrime field remains largely gender-neutral: crimes committed online against women are not systematically recognised within cybercrime frameworks, and this gap trickles down to national policies and practice.²
- One in three internet users globally, and one in five in the EU, is a child. Children's daily online time in the EU nearly doubled between 2010 and 2020. They are regularly exposed to cyberbullying, sexualised content, and material promoting eating disorders and self-harm.^{3 7}
- Child sexual exploitation and abuse online is escalating. In 2019, the EU was the host of almost 90% of all known CSAM URLs ³ globally, which has decreased to around 60% in 2021 (IWF, 2023). Reports of child sexual abuse surged from 1 million in 2010 to over 20 million in 2024, and online grooming has increased twelvefold in three years. Law enforcement agencies across Europe are overwhelmed and underfunded.^{3 8}
- The Socialists and Democrats (S&D), together with Renew Europe, ECR, and the Greens, derailed the extension of EU rules against online child sexual abuse just days before the current law expired on 3 April 2026, creating a legal vacuum that directly benefits predators. MEP Javier Zarzalejos (EPP) stated: "Despite EPP efforts, S&D failed to lead the process. This is completely irresponsible." MEP Lena Dupont (EPP) added: "Protecting children is not optional. This leaves children exposed and offenders unchallenged."⁸
- Victims face severe practical barriers to seeking justice: evidence is volatile and easily erased, law enforcement is often untrained, and victim-blaming remains pervasive at every stage of the process.²
- The establishment of robust and age-appropriate safeguards for minors in the digital environment, including effective and privacy preserving age-verification mechanisms, age-appropriate design and proportionate restrictions on access to harmful online platforms, in full respect of fundamental rights and the best interests of the child.

Acknowledging:

- The Istanbul Convention (CETS No. 210, 2011) as the most comprehensive legally binding instrument in Europe on violence against women and domestic violence, structured around prevention, protection, prosecution, and co-ordinated policies.⁴
- GREVIO as the independent monitoring body of the Istanbul Convention, whose questionnaire and evaluation procedure require states to report disaggregated data on all forms of violence, explicitly including stalking and harassment committed through ICTs.⁵
- GREVIO's baseline evaluation reports as producing concrete, country-specific recommendations, including in relation to the digital dimension of violence against women, with Slovenia and Poland commended for extending stalking offences to cover online conduct.⁶
- The Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (2001) as the principal international instrument on cybercrime and electronic evidence, whose provisions on illegal access, data interference, system interference, and misuse of devices are directly applicable to technology-facilitated violence against women.⁹
- EU Directive 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence, establishing binding obligations to criminalise cyber stalking, cyber harassment, non-consensual image sharing, and cyber flashing, and to ensure accessible reporting mechanisms, victim support, and professional training.¹⁰
- EPP Congress Resolution No. 8 (Rotterdam, 2022)³ and Emergency Resolution No. 6 (Bucharest, 2024) as the EPP's established political commitments on child sexual abuse online and child exposure to harmful digital content.⁷
- CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35 (2017) and the Council of Europe Recommendation CM/Rec(2019)1 on preventing and combating sexism as key international instruments recognising gender-based violence and sexism in technology-mediated settings.¹¹
- The UN human rights treaty system, including CEDAW's monitoring mechanisms, as a complementary framework reinforcing Council of Europe and EU standards on violence against women.¹²

The Youth of the European People's Party calls upon EU institutions, Member States, and national governments to:

- Fully implement EU Directive 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence, ensuring national legislation criminalises cyber stalking, cyber harassment, non-consensual image sharing, and cyber flashing, with victim support services, professional training, and accessible digital reporting mechanisms in place without delay.¹⁰
- Accelerate ratification and implementation of the Istanbul Convention across all Council of Europe member states, treating GREVIO's country evaluations as binding guidance rather than optional recommendations, and allocating sufficient financial and human resources as required under Article 8 of the Convention.^{1 4}
- Act on GREVIO's country-specific recommendations, ensuring law enforcement, prosecutors, and judiciary receive regular, gender-sensitive training on all forms of violence against women, including online manifestations, with explicit modules on evidence gathering, secondary victimisation, and victim-blaming.^{5 6}
- Adopt a permanent EU legal framework to combat child sexual abuse online, establishing the independent EU Centre on Child Sexual Abuse as called for in EPP Congress Resolution No. 8 (Rotterdam, 2022), tasked with receiving and analysing CSAM reports and forwarding actionable intelligence to law enforcement.³

- End the cycle of temporary derogations caused by the political obstruction of S&D, Renew Europe, ECR, and the Greens, which left a legal vacuum on CSAM detection expiring on 3 April 2026. What is illegal offline must be illegal online.⁸
- Enforce the Digital Services Act rigorously against online platforms, requiring child impact assessments, privacy-preserving age assurance, and age-appropriate design, and prohibiting the collection of personal data from children beyond what is strictly necessary to provide the service.^{3 7}
- Invest in law enforcement capacity so that police, prosecutors, and courts can effectively investigate technology-facilitated violence, gather and preserve electronic evidence under the Budapest Convention framework, and pursue perpetrators across jurisdictions through mutual legal assistance.⁹
- Modernise protection and restraining orders to explicitly cover digital contact, online surveillance, geolocation tracking, spyware installation, and IoT-enabled coercive control, in line with GREVIO's recommendations on Articles 52 and 53 of the Istanbul Convention.^{2 6}
- Ensure victim-centred support services as required under Articles 20, 22, and 24 of the Istanbul Convention, including 24/7 helplines, specialist legal and psychological counselling for victims of online and technology-facilitated violence, and sustained funding for civil society organisations.⁴
- Integrate digital literacy and online safety into formal school curricula, as called for in EPP Congress Emergency Resolution No. 6 (Bucharest, 2024), equipping young people to identify abusive behaviour, understand the mental health risks of unregulated social media use, and access support.⁷

Resources:

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