Parliamentary Assembly
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Resolution 2547 (2024)[1]

The protection of children against online violence

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly stresses the urgency to protect children from violence in the digital environment, especially in view of growing dangers on the internet and new forms of online violence.

2. Children are increasingly exposed to various forms of online violence, sometimes from a very early age. The physical and psychological repercussions are often devastating. Increased use of the internet and digital tools, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, has led to children being overexposed to age-inappropriate content and behaviour. Smartphones have undoubtedly opened up a new avenue for the development of their presence online, but they are also a potential source of violence.

3. Creating a safe environment and minimising the risk of harm are essential for protecting children online. Mindful of the difficulty of reconciling the protection of children and their freedom of expression, and other competing rights, the Assembly reiterates that the best interests of the child must prevail in the development and implementation of any measure or policy.

4. The Assembly therefore calls on member States to establish a comprehensive legal framework that protects children in the digital environment by applying an integrated and balanced approach to reduce exposure to harm online while not infringing on children's opportunities to benefit from the internet. In particular, it asks the member States to take the following steps to protect children:

4.1. as a minimum standard, introduce effective age verification obligations on websites, particularly on sites providing goods and content which are not intended for children, and which would incur similar obligations in the offline world;

4.2. involve and raise awareness of parents and child carers, who often lack the knowledge and support to detect exploitation, abuse, violence and exposure of children to pornography online, and empower them to deal with this problem with the backing of civil society and family organisations;

4.3. take specific measures to protect young children from premature exposure to the digital environment, given their vulnerability to, *inter alia*, violent, sexual or pornographic content and the limited benefits of digital tools with respect to their particular physical, physiological, social and stimulation needs;

4.4. in order to prevent child sexual abuse material and punish perpetrators, set up digital fingerprint or hash databases, supplemented by appropriate cybersecurity measures with a view to expediting actions to identify and locate children subjected to sexual exploitation or abuse; remove or restrict access to such content; apprehend perpetrators; and provide child victims with the necessary psychological support and rehabilitative care;

4.5. implement school-based educational programmes and outdoor activities, in particular to promote peer-to-peer interactions and parental involvement;

4.6. in such programmes, provide children and young people with training in assertiveness, empathy, problem solving, emotion management and help seeking;

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1. *Assembly debate* on 19 April 2024 (14th sitting) (see Doc. 15954, report of Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, rapporteur: Mr Joseph O'Reilly). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 19 April 2024 (14th sitting).
See also Recommendation 2274 (2024).

4.7. implement comprehensive sexuality education that covers the issues of online dating and relationships in depth, and aims to counter portrayals of violence in sexual relationships and homophobic bullying, and raise awareness about the fight against the oversexualisation of children;

4.8. run information and awareness-raising campaigns on harmful deepfakes, including those of a pornographic nature; ban deepfakes and ensure their removal from digital platforms.

5. The Assembly recommends that member States work closely with stakeholders in the technology industry in order to:

5.1. improve the development of policies and regulatory frameworks and facilitate their appropriation and implementation by the technology industry;

5.2. increase the accountability and responsibility of stakeholders in the technology industry to protect child users, including by requiring them to provide assistance to law-enforcement authorities in terms of equipment and technical support in order to facilitate the identification of perpetrators of crimes against children and the collection of evidence required for criminal proceedings;

5.3. develop and implement policies that address cyberbullying, harassment and incitement to hatred and violence in the digital environment, including clear information on unacceptable behaviour, reporting mechanisms and the importance of support for children affected by such conduct;

5.4. integrate safety and privacy at the design stage and by default, while taking into account the right of children to protection from violence online, as guiding principles for the features and functionalities of products and services intended for or used by children.

6. As a follow-up to the latest edition of the European Day on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse on 18 November 2023, the Assembly is convinced of the importance of learning from victims and survivors of childhood sexual violence in order to develop effective policies based on real-life experiences. It recommends that member States listen to victims of childhood online violence, taking all necessary precautions, while drawing up measures and policies to prevent, protect against and combat online violence.

7. The Assembly notes the importance of international and cross-border co-operation in protecting children from online violence and calls for as many countries as possible around the world to accede to the relevant treaties and effective mechanisms that already exist. In this respect, it calls, in particular, for:

7.1. observer States of the Council of Europe and States whose parliaments enjoy observer or partner for democracy status with the Assembly to accede to the Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201, Lanzarote Convention);

7.2. member and observer States of the Council of Europe, and States whose parliaments enjoy observer or partner for democracy status with the Assembly that have not yet done so to accede to the Convention on Cybercrime (ETS No. 185, Budapest Convention);

7.3. Council of Europe member States that have not yet done so to join Interpol and make use of its International Child Sexual Exploitation Database to exchange information on child sexual abuse cases.

8. The Assembly commends the Committee of the Parties to the Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Committee) for its work on the second monitoring round (2017-2022) on the implementation of the Lanzarote Convention, focusing on the protection of children against sexual exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs), and addressing the challenges raised by child self-generated sexual images and/or videos. It invites the States parties to this convention to pursue their work on children and emerging technologies, in particular artificial intelligence and the virtual world, in greater depth, taking into consideration new risks for children, including those linked to deepfakes of a sexual or pornographic nature.

9. The Assembly is determined to further examine the issue of “violent pornography”, including pornography available online, taking into account the specific problem of children being exposed to such content.