Protecting children in the digital world

2012/2068(INI) - 24/10/2012 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Culture and Education adopted the own-initiative report by Silvia COSTA (S&D, IT) on protecting children in the digital world.

Members note the fact that almost 15 % of internet users who are minors aged between 10 and 17 receive some form of sexual solicitation, and 34 % of them encounter sexual material that they have not searched for. They consider, in this context, the measures taken by Member States to prevent illegal online content are not always effective and inevitably involve differing approaches to the prevention of content that is harmful to children.

According to Members, the protection of minors in the digital world must be addressed at regulatory level by deploying more effective measures, including through self-regulation by engaging the industry to assume its shared responsibility, and at educational and training level by training children, parents and teachers in order to prevent minors from accessing illegal content. This is why they propose a strategy that seeks to strike the right balance between free access to the internet and combating illegal content.

A framework of rights and governance: Members point out that a new stage of protecting the rights of the child in the EU framework started with the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, together with the now legally binding Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, whose Article 24 defines the protection of children as a fundamental right. They reiterate the need for the EU to fully respect the standards of the relevant international instruments and urge the Member States to transpose and implement, in a smooth and timely manner, all legal instruments in the area of the protection of minors in the digital world.

Members welcome the Commission's European strategy for a better internet for children and call on the Commission to enhance existing internal mechanisms to ensure a consistent and coordinated approach to child safety online, underlining that **only a comprehensive combination of legal, technical and educational measures**, including prevention, can adequately **address the dangers that children face online**, and enhance the protection of children in the online environment.

In this context, several measures are recommended:

- the continuation of the Safer Internet Programme, with adequate funding to carry out its activities;
- research and education programmes aimed at reducing the risk of children becoming victims of the internet;
- close collaboration with civil society associations and organisations working inter alia for the protection of minors, data protection and education.

Media and new media: access and education: pointing out that the internet provides children and young people with immensely valuable tools, which can be used to express or assert their views, access information and learning and claim their rights, as well as being an excellent tool of communication, Members also highlight the inherent risks for the most vulnerable users: child pornography, the exchange of material on violence, cybercrime, intimidation, bullying, grooming, children being able to access or acquire legally restricted or age-inappropriate goods and services, exposure to age-inappropriate, aggressive or misleading advertising, scams, etc.

They, therefore, support Member States' efforts to promote **systematic education and training** for children (from an early age), parents, educators, schoolteachers and social workers, aimed at enabling

them to understand the digital world and identify the associated dangers. To this end, they encourage ongoing digital training for educators who work with students in schools on a permanent basis.

Members also highlight the **role of parents and of the family** and urge the Commission to support awareness-raising initiatives aimed at parents and educators in order to ensure that they can best support minors in the use of digital tools and services.

They highlight, in particular, the **role of the private sector and industry as regards their responsibility** in relation to these issues as well as child-safe labelling for web pages, and promotion of 'netiquette' for children. In this context, they urge the Commission to include in its main priorities the **protection of children from aggressive or misleading TV and online advertising**.

Right to protection: Members outline their vision of protecting children from the dangers of the internet. The report focuses on the following measures:

1) Combating illegal content: in this regard, Members call for:

- the collection, in the framework of its reporting obligation on the transposition of Directive 2011/92/EU, of exact and clear data on the crime of online grooming ;
- further improvement could be achieved in connection with further harmonisation of the criminal law and criminal procedures of the Member States, including eventual proposals for **material EU criminal legislation** that fully respect the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality;
- the strengthened cooperation with third countries as regards the prompt deletion of web pages containing or disseminating illegal content;
- the introduction and strengthening of **hotline systems** for reporting crimes and illegal content and conduct, respecting the rights of suspects and the improved information for children and families regarding national hotlines and other contact points such as "safety buttons";
- strengthened international cooperation between law enforcement agencies and the development of synergies with other related services, including police and juvenile justice systems;
- the dissemination of reliable instruments, such as warning pages or acoustic and optical signals to limit direct access of minors to content that is harmful to them;
- a **stronger commitment from digital content and service suppliers** to implement codes of conduct compliant with the regulations that are in force, to identify, prevent and remove illegal content based on the decisions of the legal authorities;
- the proper implementation by Member States of the existing procedural rules for deleting websites hosting exploitative, threatening, abusive, discriminatory or otherwise malicious content.

Members also regret the failure to comply with the pact signed on 9 February 2009 between the Commission and 17 social networking sites, including Facebook and Myspace, which promoted the protection and security of minors online.

2) Combating harmful content: Members consider it urgent for the Commission to examine the effectiveness of the various systems for voluntary classification of content unsuitable for minors in the Member States and call on it, as well as the Member States and the internet industry, to **reinforce cooperation in the development of strategies and standards to train minors in the responsible use of the internet**.

The following measures are recommended:

- the integration of the protection of minors into the respective by-laws associations of audiovisual and digital service suppliers

- the harmonisation by the Member States of the classification of digital content for minors (e.g. games by age-group), in cooperation with the relevant operators and associations, and with third countries;
- the establishment of the '**European Framework for Safer Mobile Use**' by exploiting the options that facilitate parental control.

3) Protection of privacy:

Although Members welcome the new proposal for a Regulation on personal data protection and its special provisions on children's consent and the right to be forgotten, which bans the preservation online of information on the personal data of minors, which may pose a risk to their personal and professional life, they call for further clarification. They consider that owners and administrators of web pages should indicate in a clear and visible way their data protection policy and should provide for **a system of mandatory parental consent for the processing of data of children under the age of 13**. Members favour ensuring that users have more information on how their personal data (and that of associated parties) are handled and consider that this information should be made available in a language and form adapted to the user profiles.

They call for t**he promotion in every digital sector of technological options which, if selected, can limit the websurfing of minors within traceable limits** and with conditional access, thereby providing an effective tool for parental control.

4) Right of reply in digital media: Members call for the development and harmonisation of systems relating to the right of reply in digital media.

Right to digital citizenship: given the impact of digital technology as an important learning tool for citizenship, Members call on the Member States to consider digital platforms as training tools for democratic participation for every child. Measures would have to be taken to take into account the most vulnerable. They recall that information and citizenship are closely linked on the internet and that what threatens the civic engagement of young people today is the lack of interest they show in information. Lastly, it should be noted that in accordance with Rule 52(3) of Parliament's Rules of Procedure, a minority opinion was tabled in the context of this report by several members of the ALDE group.

The Members in question reject the report's focus on government campaigns and the extension of enforcement to ISPs and other self-regulating mechanisms which, in their view, diminishes the role of parents in their children's education. They consider that the measures included in the report furthermore demonstrate an unwarranted bias towards the perceived dangers of the Internet, limiting the opportunities for education and innovation.

The minority opinion recommends rather that youth's resilience and independence should be strengthened and that efforts should be directed at educating children and youth and developing their e-skills.