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The new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+)

European Parliament resolution of 5 October 2023 on the new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+) (2023/2670(RSP))

(C/2024/1190)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union,

— having regard to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (the 'Charter'),

— having regard to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 20 November 1989,

— having regard to Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and child pornography ([1]) (The Child Sexual Abuse Directive),

— having regard to Directive 2010/13/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 10 March 2010 on the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services (The Audiovisual Media Services Directive) ([2]),

— having regard to Directive 2005/29/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2005 concerning unfair business-to-consumer commercial practices in the internal market and amending Council Directive 84/450/EEC, Directives 97/7/EC, 98/27/EC and 2002/65/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council and Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council ('Unfair Commercial Practices Directive') ([3]),

— having regard to Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC (General Data Protection Regulation) ([4]),

— having regard to Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act) ([5]),

— having regard to the Commission proposal of 11 May 2022 for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council laying down rules to prevent and combat child sexual abuse (COM(2022)0209) and the opinion of the Committee on Culture and Education,

— having regard to the Commission communication of 11 May 2022 entitled 'A Digital Decade for children and youth: the new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+)' (COM(2022)0212),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 9 March 2021 entitled '2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade' (COM(2021)0118),

([1]) OJ L 335, 17.12.2011, p. 1.
([2]) OJ L 95, 15.4.2010, p. 1.
([3]) OJ L 149, 11.6.2005, p. 22.
([4]) OJ L 119, 4.5.2016, p. 1.
([5]) OJ L 277, 27.10.2022, p. 1.

— having regard to the Commission communication of 24 March 2021 entitled 'EU strategy on the rights of the child' (COM(2021)0142),

— having regard to the Commission communication of 30 September 2020 entitled 'Achieving the European Education Area by 2025' (COM(2020)0625),

— having regard to the joint declaration of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission of 23 January 2023 entitled 'The European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade' ([6]) (The European Declaration),

— having regard to its resolution of 20 November 2012 on protecting children in the digital world ([7]) and the Commission follow-up adopted on 20 February 2013,

— having regard to the study by the Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies of the Directorate-General for Internal Policies of 15 February 2023 entitled 'The influence of social media on the development of children and young people' ([8]),

— having regard to the study by EU Kids Online of 12 February 2020 entitled 'EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries' ([9]),

— having regard to the study by the Joint Research Centre of 9 February 2021 entitled 'How children (10-18) experienced online risks during the COVID-19 lockdown: Spring 2020' ([10]),

— having regard to the question to the Commission on the new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+) (O-000030/2023 — B9-0029/2023),

— having regard to Rules 136(5) and 132(2) of its Rules of Procedure,

— having regard to the motion for a resolution of the Committee on Culture and Education,

A. whereas a child is entitled to all the rights and values enshrined in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, the Charter and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, including their digital rights; whereas the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration in all digital actions and decisions concerning them and their physical and mental health, safety and well-being;

B. whereas the General Data Protection Regulation, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, the Digital Services Act and the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive recognise that children merit specific protection with regard to their online experience in the constantly evolving digital environment;

C. whereas ensuring appropriate protection for children online requires specific measures and education programmes targeting not only children, but also their teachers, parents and caregivers; whereas these measures should primarily seek to develop and implement prevention techniques and awareness-raising and digital literacy campaigns; whereas parents and caregivers should be informed of the existence and functioning of the digital tools in order to limit and direct their child's/children's experience online and restrict access to age-inappropriate or harmful content online;

D. whereas children should not be passive technology consumers, but be actively in charge of the technologies they use; whereas, in this regard, promoting digital education and enhancing the digital skills and competences, including media literacy, of children, parents and educators, particularly children from vulnerable groups, in line with the Charter, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the European Declaration and the 2030 Digital Compass, are key to ensuring safe digital experiences for children, as well as their digital empowerment and active participation online;

([6]) OJ C 23, 23.1.2023, p. 1.
([7]) OJ C 419, 16.12.2015, p. 33.
([8]) O'Neill, B., 'Research for CULT Committee — The influence of social media on the development of children and young people', European Parliament, Policy Department for Structural and Cohesion Policies, Brussels, 15 February 2023.
([9]) Smahel, D. et al., 'EU Kids Online 2020: Survey results from 19 countries', EU Kids Online, 12 February 2020.
([10]) Lobe, B. et al., 'How children (10-18) experienced online risks during the Covid-19 lockdown — Spring 2020', Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 9 February 2021.

E. whereas targeted measures to combat the digital divide and enhance equal opportunities should be made available so as to offer inclusive and accessible digital environments for every child in the EU, particularly those from vulnerable groups, such as children with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds, including by equipping them with modern digital infrastructure, also in remote or rural areas;

F. whereas lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the educational and digital divides, impacting children's access to digital education tools and information, and their social participation and inclusion, and have also had negative effects on their physical and mental health; whereas it also led to an increase in domestic and gender-based violence and child sexual abuse and exploitation online, on both the surface web and the dark web;

G. whereas several monitoring studies have found evidence of children being active on social media from an early age, with significant numbers under the minimum age set by most social media platforms;

H. whereas the constantly evolving digital environment is central to children's everyday life, including their education, communication and data sharing; whereas children's access to and experience on the internet and social media platforms have many benefits, but also pose some risks and expose children to dangerous behaviours and content, due to their pervasiveness, such as online child sexual abuse and solicitation (grooming), cyberhate, different forms of cyberbullying, sexualised content, violent images, content that promotes eating disorders, and disinformation; whereas this may affect children's physical and mental health, including increased aggression, problematic sexual behaviours, unhealthy eating habits, body image dissatisfaction and distorted values and attitudes;

I. whereas the EU Kids Online 2020 survey estimates that 23 % of children between the ages of 9 and 16 have been bullied online; whereas the study on 'How children (10-18) experienced online risks during the Covid-19 lockdown: Spring 2020' found that 49 % of children have experienced at least one form of online aggression or bullying; whereas, even if there is no streamlined approach, some Member States have already taken measures such as Coco's Law in Ireland;

J. whereas the new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+) is one of the cornerstone actions of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, which includes initiatives to ensure that children are protected and empowered online within its thematic areas;

1. Welcomes and endorses the Commission's new European strategy for a better internet for kids (BIK+);

2. Stresses that all children need protection online, but certain children are in a more vulnerable situation, such as those with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds, and should be able to benefit from targeted measures, where appropriate, to bridge the digital divide and enhance their digital skills and competences, including media literacy;

3. Reiterates its call for the EU to step up its action to keep children safe online and raise awareness on and prevent child sexual abuse, including online solicitation of children (online grooming);

4. Emphasises that digital skills and competences, including media literacy, should be recognised as mandatory skills and should be included in the school curriculum across the EU; underlines that they are an essential part of education and lifelong learning and should focus on educating children, parents, carers, educators and the general public on online safety, including online parental control and how to recognise and report online solicitation of children;

5. Calls for the EU and the Member States to allocate more investment to education and training to ensure digital literacy, including protection from peer-to-peer bullying and cyberbullying in and outside schools, for children of different age groups, while taking into account new technological developments, such as the metaverse;

6. Calls on the Member States and educational institutions to guarantee the right to inclusive education and to promote, in an age-appropriate manner, sex education, digital skills and competences, including media literacy, and cyber safety through formal, non-formal and informal education, targeting educators, parents, carers and pupils;

7. Calls on the Commission to develop, in coordination with the European Education Area, a European strategy against bullying and cyberbullying in schools, establishing a package of measures to improve data collection, and to propose the necessary solutions in cooperation with the Member States;

8. Stresses that the strategy should call on the Member States to allocate all the necessary resources to strengthen the capacities of hotlines, helplines and Safer Internet Centres, and to develop and implement meaningful prevention and awareness-raising campaigns in their schools, with demonstrable results, as a vital part of their early education curricula and educational institutions; believes that cooperation between researchers and practitioners is key in this regard;

9. Stresses that it is important that the strategy introduce measures to update the existing EU framework for action on mental health and well-being, which should be fully inclusive, in order to also meet the needs of children experiencing online sexual abuse or solicitation, especially those from vulnerable groups; calls for the availability and adequacy of mental health care providers for children to be assessed by conducting a thorough mapping of existing services in the light of the deteriorating mental health situation, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the unique set of challenges posed by the online environment, including cyberbullying and exposure to harmful content;

10. Takes note of the creation of a European standard on online age verification by 2024 and the recent setting up of the special group on the EU Code of Conduct on age-appropriate design (The Code); emphasises the importance of developing the Code in a timely manner, by ensuring its full alignment with the Audiovisual Media Services Directive and the General Data Protection Regulation; stresses the importance of involving civil society, academia and young people in the Code development process; underlines the obligation, under the General Data Protection Regulation, of social media platforms that rely on user consent to make reasonable efforts to verify parental consent before children under the relevant age limit may create an account;

11. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to scale up investments in the provision of support to victims of online child abuse or solicitation, including anonymous public reporting, and mental health and psychosocial services for victims and their families; calls for training to be made available for professionals and officials, including in law enforcement authorities, who deal with cases involving children, depending on their specific needs;

12. Calls on the Commission and the Member States to provide more systematic data collection on prevention measures and victim assistance programmes, including the number of children in primary education who are taking part in awareness-raising campaigns, and through education programmes on the risks of all forms of sexual exploitation of children, including in the online environment;

13. Underlines the lack of sufficient comparative research at EU level, as well as studies on children's development in the context of digitalisation; highlights, in this regard, that the fast-paced development of technologies may rapidly overtake policies, thus creating new vulnerabilities for children; recalls, therefore, the need to develop a large-scale research activity at EU level;

14. Calls on the Commission to ensure that the BIK+ Strategy is consistent with other priorities and legislative proposals, that information is presented to children in child-friendly language, that children of all ages are involved in the monitoring process and the effective implementation of the strategy and that there is adequate follow-up to compare best practices and results across the Member States;

15. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the governments and parliaments of the Member States.