

Ursula von der Leyen  
President  
European Commission  
Rue de la Loi, 200  
B - 1049 Brussels

Subject: Combatting cyberbullying  
Date: 6 June 2023

Dear President von der Leyen,

Cyberbullying is a very serious threat to the mental and physical health especially of children, teenagers and young adults. Research shows, that children and young people under age 25 who were victims of cyberbullying are more than twice as likely to engage in self-harm and suicidal behaviours<sup>1</sup>. A study conducted by UNICEF in 2019 found that one in three teenagers had been victim of online bullying and 71% considered cyberbullying an even bigger risk for young people, than violence, poverty or climate change.

One heart-breaking example is the story of Nicole Fox (“Coco”) a young girl from Ireland, who committed suicide in 2018 after years of horrific abuse online and offline. With unbelievable courage and strength Nicole’s mother, Ms. Jackie Fox, turned the tragic loss of her daughter around and started an inspiring campaign leading up to the criminalization of cyberbullying in Ireland by passing so called “Coco’s law” in 2021. After our plenary debate on the 10th of May, we are committed to support Jackie Fox in her campaign and move it to the EU level.

The EPP Group very much appreciates that, under your leadership, the Commission has taken a number of legislative and non-legislative measures in order to address this issue. The new Directive on Violence Against Women, which we are currently working on, the Digital Services Act, the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, the Cybercrime Directive, the EU Strategy for a Safer Internet for Kids (BIK+) or the EU Cybersecurity Strategy all include valuable instruments to fight this complex issue. Also Member States such as Italy, France or Germany have taken different measures on a national level in order to prevent and criminalise this digital violence.

However, in many Member States there are still no sufficient legal tools to fight these crimes. Despite all the efforts in recent years, data indicates that cyberbullying is still on the rise. In the last five years, cyberbullying has been by far the biggest issue with the EU-funded safer internet centres across Europe. We would like to encourage and support your efforts to make the fight against cyberbullying a new EU priority for the future. We would like to work with you on a comprehensive legal framework explicitly addressing cyberbullying with one decisive legal act at its core. We need to contain this epidemic of digital violence.

In this regard we would like to propose some ideas on how the fight against cyberbullying in the EU could become more effective.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.jmir.org/2018/4/e129/>

- Establish a commonly agreed definition of what cyberbullying is in the EU
- Streamline scattered legislative measures in one comprehensive act, codifying existing provisions and criminalizing all relevant practices of online abuse across the EU
- Strengthen the rights of victims by enabling them to file civil claims for damages against platforms and users, reveal the identity of users who are harassing them and obtain court orders to shut down (anonymous) accounts of online bullies.
- Implement a regulation on a minimum time span for saving IP addresses, as they are key for identifying anonymous cyberbullies and other criminals online.
- Make sure the aggravating effects of online abuse, which exponentially increases the scope of every abuse, are taken into account by criminal law. .
- Streamline non-legislative measures on national and EU-level with a EU Strategy on Cyberbullying with regards to prevention and awareness raising and implement a media campaign across the EU in order to inform about cyberbullying and the psychological effects
- Streamline the collection of data and research on cyberbullying within the EU

Dear President von der Leyen, our digital world offers great opportunities but also serious threats. The EU has an obligation to protect children and young people and we warmly welcome the leadership the Commission has taken on this matter to date. We would like to hear your thoughts on this matter, exchange ideas and start a dialogue on how we can prevent and prosecute cyberbullying across the EU.

Cyberbullying, intimate image abuse and other practices of online violence are cruel crimes, with long lasting effects that have tragically resulted in the deaths of young people. What is illegal offline must be illegal and prosecuted online. The EU must stand with young people and insist on zero tolerance for such online abuse. Let's criminalise cyberbullying.

Kind regards

Manfred Weber

Frances Fitzgerald

Paulo Rangel

Jeroen Lenaers