

REPORT

Digital safety & security in Europe

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Executive summary

Europe is a relatively digitalized continent characterized by a high percentage of households with access to the internet at home and use of the internet for a wide range of activities. Despite all of this, less than a quarter of Europeans report having ever engaged in a training activity to enhance their digital and computer skills. This is of particular concern given the global trend of declining freedom on the internet and rise of digital authoritarianism.

Even though Europe ranks above the global average when it comes to internet freedom, global freedom and the state of civic space, civil society still faces serious challenges in the digital space. This report takes a closer look at the digital safety and security context in Belarus, Russia, Hungary and Ukraine in order to determine the emerging issues and concerns of digital communication in Europe. Based on the data, the most prevalent issues in Europe are violations of user rights and limitations on online content. Namely, violations of user rights include limitations on freedom of expression online, mass surveillance, violations of user privacy, and imprisonment and harassment for online activities, while limitations on online content include censorship, blocking websites and social media platforms, legal regulations on content, and lack of diversity in the online information space.

This report concludes that it is necessary to advocate for the development of alternative ways to maintain internet access during conflict and protests, a clearer framework on what can be constituted as a threat to national security in the digital context, the encryption of all digital communication tools, and for increased education and training on digital safety and security skills, especially for CSOs and human rights defenders. Since there are many tools and resources on digital safety and security already available, the focus of future action in this field should be on disseminating the existing tools and resources by making them more easily accessible and visible, which can be done by developing an online database of those resources.

1. Introduction

In Europe most households have access to the internet¹ and the majority of individuals use the internet at least once a week or more frequently.² European citizens use the internet for social networking, for internet banking, to sell or buy goods or services and to participate in civic or political activities, among other things,³ while only 7% of Europeans have never used the internet.⁴ Despite the high percentage of access to and use of the internet in Europe, only 24% of individuals have ever carried out at least one training activity to improve their digital and computer skills.⁵

In addition to the private use of the internet and digital tools by individuals, there has also been significant investment in digital technologies in Europe. Governments and private companies invest in the development of biometrics, artificial intelligence, video surveillance systems, facial recognition and the digitalization of public services (such as e-government, digital identity, public transport, security, health, etc).⁶ These technologies are often used in the region for purposes of public safety, surveillance and State Intelligence.⁷ However, the legal framework to regulate these digital technologies is lagging behind,⁸ which creates opportunities for misuse and, in some cases, severely restricts civic freedoms and violates basic human rights.

The main objective of this report is to assess digital security in Europe and the impact of digital authoritarianism⁹ on civil society. To do that, this report takes a more in depth look at the digital safety and security of civil society actors in four countries from Central and Eastern Europe - Belarus, Russia, Hungary and Ukraine. Belarus and Russia were chosen for this report because they have some of the lowest scores in terms of freedom on the internet¹⁰ and

¹ Eurostat, 'Regional ICT statistics: Households with access to the internet at home' (Eurostat, 2022) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_R_IACC_H_custom_7360565/default/table?lang=en> accessed 25 September 2023 [Eurostat: Households with access to the internet at home 2022]

² Eurostat, 'Regional ICT statistics: Individuals who used the internet, frequency of use and activities (Frequency of internet access: once a week (including every day))' (Eurostat, 2022) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_R_IUSE_I_custom_7360697/default/table?lang=en> accessed 25 September 2023 [Eurostat: Frequency of use 2022]

³ Eurostat, 'Regional ICT statistics: Individuals who used the internet, frequency of use and activities (Activities)' (Eurostat, 2022) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_R_IUSE_I_custom_7360691/default/table?lang=en> accessed 25 September 2023 [Eurostat: Internet activities 2022]

⁴ Eurostat, 'Regional ICT statistics: Individuals who used the internet, frequency of use and activities (Internet use: never)' (Eurostat, 2022) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_R_IUSE_I_custom_7360702/default/table?lang=en> accessed 25 September 2023 [Eurostat: Never used the internet 2022]

⁵ Eurostat, 'Regional ICT statistics: Way of obtaining ICT skills' (Eurostat, 2018) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_SK_HOW_I_custom_7360780/default/table?lang=en> accessed 25 September 2023 [Eurostat: Way of obtaining ICT skills 2018]

⁶ UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), 'The impact of digital technology on human rights in Europe and Central Asia: Trends and challenges related to data protection, artificial intelligence and other digital technology issues' (Study, United Nations Development Programme 2023) 1, 31 <<https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2023-03/The%20Impact%20of%20Digital%20Technology%20on%20Human%20Rights%20in%20Europe%20and%20Central%20Asia.pdf>> accessed 25 September 2023 [UNDP study]

⁷ UNDP study, 4.

⁸ UNDP study, 1.

⁹ For a definition of 'Authoritarianism' and 'Digital Authoritarianism' see section 2 of this report - LITERATURE REVIEW.

¹⁰ Freedom House, 'Countries: Internet Freedom Scores' (Freedom House, 2022) <<https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores>> [Internet Freedom Scores 2022]

the state of civic space¹¹ not only in Europe, but also in the world. The governments of both countries employ similar authoritarian tactics and Russia has often provided support to Belarus' authoritarian regime to help keep it in power.¹² Ukraine and Hungary rank slightly higher than Russia and Belarus in terms of internet freedom¹³ and openness of the civic space,¹⁴ but they still have some of the lowest scores in Europe. Ukraine is a unique case study in the European context. Namely, Russia's full-scale military invasion of Ukraine has created an unprecedented situation in Europe since World War II that has further undermined and complicated the already imperfect conditions in Ukraine regarding digital safety and security. Last but not least, Hungary was chosen because the policies of its regime are often associated with the rise of authoritarianism in Europe.¹⁵ In 2014, Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán famously proclaimed his regime an "illiberal democracy"¹⁶ and started implementing policies which led to the shrinking of the civic space. This report will explore the effects of these policies on internet freedom in Hungary.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that many democratic regimes also employ authoritarian practices, within and outside of the digital context. Therefore, to paint a more accurate picture of the European digital safety and security context, the report also explores examples of authoritarian practices in the United Kingdom and France, which have both been ranked as free in the Freedom on the Net 2022 Report.¹⁷

¹¹ CIVICUS Monitor, 'Territories: Europe and Central Asia, Status: Closed' (CIVICUS Monitor, 2022)

<<https://monitor.civicus.org/search/countries/?territories=Europe+and+Central+Asia&status=1>> accessed 25 September 2023

¹² Mike Smeltzer and Noah Buyon, 'Nations in Transit 2022: From Democratic Decline to Authoritarian Aggression' (Report, Freedom House 2022) 1 <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-04/NIT_2022_final_digital.pdf> accessed 25 September 2023

¹³ Internet Freedom Scores 2022.

¹⁴ CIVICUS Monitor, 'Territories: Europe and Central Asia, Status: Obstructed' (CIVICUS Monitor, 2022)

<<https://monitor.civicus.org/search/countries/?territories=Europe+and+Central+Asia&status=3>> accessed 25 September 2023

¹⁵ Studio Europa Maastricht, 'Ten Years Of Viktor Orbán: the rise of 'soft authoritarianism' (Newsletter Studio Europa Maastricht - Maastricht University, 25 November 2020) <<https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/news/ten-years-viktor-orb%C3%A1n-rise-%E2%80%98soft-authoritarianism%E2%80%99>> accessed 27 September 2023; Zack Beauchamp, 'It happened there: how democracy died in Hungary' (VOX, 13 September 2018) <<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/9/13/17823488/hungary-democracy-authoritarianism-trump>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹⁶ Amnesty International, 'What is going on in Illiberal democracy Hungary?' (Amnesty International, 31 May 2018)

<<https://www.amnesty.nl/actueel/what-is-going-on-in-illiberal-democracy-hungary>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹⁷ Freedom House, 'Freedom on the Net 2022: United Kingdom' (Freedom House, 2022)

<<https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-kingdom/freedom-net/2022>> accessed 25 September 2023; Freedom House, 'Freedom on the Net 2022: France' (Freedom House, 2022) <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/france/freedom-net/2022>> accessed 25 September 2023

2. Literature review

Authoritarianism, as a political system, is not new and is often perceived as the antithesis of democracy. It is characterized by the concentration of power in the hands of one authority which remains in power by restricting civic freedoms and undermining democratic processes, such as elections, separation of state powers, checks and balances and so forth.¹⁸ In recent years, the development of digital tools and technologies has enabled authoritarian governments to implement new methods to restrict civic space and civic freedoms. This has become known as **digital authoritarianism**, i.e., the use of technology and the internet by authoritarian regimes to surveil, repress and manipulate their citizens and control information flows.¹⁹ Some digital methods employed by authoritarian regimes include blocking access to the internet or certain websites (especially foreign sources), censoring content, spreading disinformation, and curtailing freedom of expression online by charging, arresting or imprisoning users in retaliation for posts about political or social causes.²⁰ According to Freedom House, in 2022 “[g]lobal internet freedom declined for the 12th consecutive year,”²¹ suggesting that more and more governments are using methods to restrict the digital space.

One of the potential explanations for this downward trend in global internet freedom is the process of **authoritarian learning**. Many scholars have discussed this concept, which can be described as “a process in which authoritarian regimes adopt survival strategies based upon

¹⁸ Kalu, in his book “A Functional Theory of Government, Law, and Institutions” defines authoritarianism as a “political system with limited political, economic, and social pluralism”, which is often used as a general term for non-democratic or transitional regimes where the power is concentrated in the hands of a limited political elite. According to Dresden, Baird and Raderstorf, in the publication “The Authoritarian Playbook”, authoritarian regimes can be identified based on their use of seven basic tactics in the pursuit of power: “(1) they attempt to politicize independent institutions; (2) they spread disinformation; (3) they aggrandize executive power at the expense of checks and balances; (4) they quash criticism and dissent; (5) they specifically target vulnerable or marginalized communities; (6) they work to corrupt elections; and (7) they stoke violence.”

Kalu N. Kalu, *A functional theory of government, law, and institutions* (Rowman & Littlefield 2019) 161 <https://books.google.mk/books?id=BhaeDwAAQBAJ&pg=PA161&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false> accessed 27 September 2023; Jennifer Dresden, Aaron Baird and Ben Raderstorf, ‘The Authoritarian Playbook: How reporters can contextualize and cover authoritarian threats as distinct from politics-as-usual’ (Protect Democracy 2022) 8 <<https://protectdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/the-authoritarian-playbook-how-reporters-can-contextualize-and-cover-authoritarian-threats-as-distinct-from-politics-as-usual-1.pdf>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹⁹ Alina Polyakova and Chris Meserole, ‘Exporting digital authoritarianism: The Russian and Chinese models’ (Policy Brief, Brookings 2019) 2 <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/FP_20190827_digital_authoritarianism_polyakova_meserole.pdf> accessed 25 September 2023 [Polyakova & Meserole 2018]; Adrian Shahbaz, ‘Freedom on the Net 2018: The Rise of Digital Authoritarianism’ (Report, Freedom House, 2018) <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2018/rise-digital-authoritarianism>> accessed 25 September 2023; Bahia Albrecht and Gaura Naithani, ‘Digital authoritarianism: A global phenomenon’ (*DW Akademie*, 17 March 2022) <<https://akademie.dw.com/en/digital-authoritarianism-a-global-phenomenon/a-61136660>> accessed 25 September 2023; Victoria Coleman and Janet Napolitano, ‘Digital Human Rights Need a Single Home in U.S. Government’ (*Foreign Policy*, 14 March 2022) <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/14/digital-authoritarianism-tech-human-rights/>> accessed 25 September 2023 [Coleman and Napolitano 2022]

²⁰ Adrian Shahbaz, Allie Funk and Kian Vesteinsson, ‘Freedom on the Net 2022: Countering an Authoritarian Overhaul of the Internet’, (Report, Freedom House 2022) 8 <<https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/FOTN2022Digital.pdf>> accessed 25 September 2023 [Freedom on the Net 2022]; Coleman and Napolitano 2022

²¹ Freedom on the Net 2022, 1

the prior successes and failures of other governments.”²² This explains how authoritarian regimes preserve, but also how authoritarian methods spread and evolve across the globe. Understanding this process, i.e. how authoritarian regimes learn, can help democracies protect their norms and values.²³

The literature on this topic describes three different aspects of authoritarian learning: (1) **authoritarian policy transfer/learning**, (2) **authoritarian diffusion**, and (3) **authoritarian promotion**.²⁴ *Authoritarian policy transfer/learning* simply refers to the process of one authoritarian government observing a successful practice in another authoritarian regime and implementing it domestically or observing an unsuccessful practice and learning what not to do from the mistakes of other governments.²⁵ *Authoritarian diffusion* refers to the spread of authoritarian conditions and policies within a region. Namely, it proposes that the presence of an authoritarian regime in a region increases the probability that other regimes in the region will follow a similar trajectory.²⁶ Lastly, *authoritarian promotion* refers to the process in which authoritarian governments encourage and defend similar governments, “especially those in close proximity”.²⁷

The concept of authoritarian learning can be applied to the digital space as well.²⁸ For example, according to different scholars, Russia and China have well-developed capabilities to export digital tools and strategies for oppression and control to other countries.²⁹ China’s export consists of a model based on highly developed surveillance technology and domestic censorship employed for purposes of social control.³⁰ On the other hand, Russia is not as technologically developed and, therefore, its model relies on weaponizing information technologies to repress opposition at home and undermine democracies abroad.³¹

Regardless of the type of model used, the aim of these digitally oppressive strategies is to maintain control over the citizens and reduce the threats to the regime. Digital tools and communication technologies have made it much easier for citizens to organize themselves,

²² Stephen G. F. Hall and Thomas Ambrosio, ‘Authoritarian learning: a conceptual overview’ (2017) 33(2) East European Politics 143 <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Stephen-Hall-18/publication/316751453_Authoritarian_learning_a_conceptual_overview/links/632ef4b386b22d3db4dbdaab/Authoritarian-learning-a-conceptual-overview.pdf> accessed 27 September 2023 [Hall & Ambrosio 2017]

²³ Stephen G. F. Hall, *The Authoritarian International: Tracing How Authoritarian Regimes Learn in the Post-Soviet Space* (Cambridge University Press 2023) <https://assets.cambridge.org/9781009098540/frontmatter/9781009098540_frontmatter.pdf> accessed 27 September 2023

²⁴ Hall & Ambrosio 2017, 145

²⁵ Hall & Ambrosio 2017, 148-149

²⁶ Hall & Ambrosio 2017, 150

²⁷ Hall & Ambrosio 2017, 151

²⁸ Polyakova & Meserole 2018

²⁹ Tiberiu Dragu and Yonatan Lupu, ‘Digital Authoritarianism and the Future of Human Rights’ (2020) 32-33 <<https://yonatanlupu.com/Dragu%20Lupu%20IO.pdf>> accessed 27 September 2023 [Dragu & Lupu 2020]; Polyakova & Meserole 2018, 2

³⁰ Polyakova & Meserole 2018, 1-2; James Griffiths, ‘China is exporting the Great Firewall as internet freedom declines around the world’ (CNN, 2 November 2018) <<https://edition.cnn.com/2018/11/01/asia/internet-freedom-china-censorship-intl/index.html>> accessed 27 September 2023; Michael Abramowitz and Michael Chertoff, ‘The global threat of China’s digital authoritarianism’ (The Washington Post, 1 November 2018) <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-global-threat-of-chinas-digital-authoritarianism/2018/11/01/46d6d99c-dd40-11e8-b3f0-62607289efee_story.html> accessed 27 September 2023; Paresh Dave, ‘China exports its restrictive internet policies to dozens of countries: report’ (Reuters, 1 November 2018) <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-global-internet-surveillance/china-exports-its-restrictive-internet-policies-to-dozens-of-countries-report-idUSKCN1N63KE>> accessed 27 September 2023

³¹ Polyakova & Meserole 2018, 1-2

stay informed, access information, and demand change. Therefore, as a self-preservation tactic, authoritarian regimes try to prevent collective action of citizens.³² There are two ways in which authoritarian regimes can prevent collective action or squash opposition groups: **reactive repression or preventative repression**. Most scholars focus on *reactive repression*, which refers to the practice of repressing the opposition once it has mobilized.³³ For example, cutting off social media during mass protests against the government is a reactive repression tactic. Dragu and Lupu provide a theory that analyzes the effects of technological development on the interaction between an authoritarian government and an opposition group. According to them, technological “innovation lowers both the cost of preventive repression and the cost of organizing dissent.”³⁴ Therefore, they claim that authoritarian governments use digital technologies not only for reactive repression, but also for preventative repression. *Preventative repression* can be defined as “the set of activities governments use to reduce the risk that opposition groups threaten governments’ power, including opposition efforts to mobilize and organize public dissent.”³⁵ An example of a preventative repression attempt is digital censorship or digital surveillance. However, once an opposition group is able to organize and mobilize protests against the government, the preventative repression attempt has failed and the government must move on to reactive repression tactics in order to maintain power. According to Dragu and Lupu, “the most violent human rights abuses [...] tend to occur as instances of reactive repression, whereas preventive repression, especially when successful, tends to involve less violent abuses.”³⁶

Regardless of whether reactive or preventative repression tactics are employed, the most common justification for their employment, both by authoritarian and democratic regimes, is national security. This process of framing something as a threat and making it an important security issue for the state is explained by the **theory of securitization**. This theory refers to five security sectors: the economic, the societal, the military, the political and the environmental sector.³⁷ However, with the development of technology and the rapid digitalization of every aspect of life since the turn of the millennium, a new security sector has emerged: cyber-security.³⁸ Through the securitization of cyberspace, governments justify imposing restrictions on digital communication and the internet, using digital technology to surveil and monitor its citizens, and censor certain information sources.

In this context it is also important to note that in Europe, for purposes of national security, states are able to exercise exceptional powers and limit the protection normally afforded to

³²Dragu&Lupu 2020, 35

³³Dragu&Lupu 2020, 6

³⁴Dragu&Lupu 2020, 7

³⁵ Dragu & Lupu 2020, 6

³⁶ Dragu & Lupu 2020, 6

³⁷ Clara Eroukhmanoff, ‘Securitisation Theory’ in Stephen Mcglinchey, Rosie Walters and Christian Scheinpflug (eds), *International Relations Theory* (E-International Relations 2018) 104-105 <<https://www.e-ir.info/pdf/72393>> accessed 27 September 2023

³⁸ Didem Aydindag, ‘Copenhagen school and securitization of cyberspace in Turkey’ (2021) *Propósitos y Representaciones* 3 <<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1298146.pdf>> accessed 27 September 2023; Lene Hansen and Helen Nissenbaum, ‘Digital disaster, cyber security, and the Copenhagen School’ (2009) 53(4) *International studies quarterly* 1157 <<https://www.dhi.ac.uk/san/waysofbeing/data/governance-crone-hansen-2009.pdf>> accessed 27 September 2023; Mark Lacy and Daniel Prince, ‘Securitization and the global politics of cybersecurity’ (2018) 8(1) *Global Discourse* <<https://eprints.lancs.ac.uk/id/eprint/89179/2/securitizationcyber21.pdf>> accessed 27 September 2023

certain fundamental rights,³⁹ such as the right to respect for private and family life,⁴⁰ freedom of expression,⁴¹ freedom of assembly and association,⁴² freedom of movement,⁴³ etc. Not only that, but states are also allowed significant discretion in determining what constitutes an issue of national security,⁴⁴ which creates opportunities for misuse by authoritarian and democratic regimes.

³⁹ Research Division at the European Court of Human Rights, 'National security and European case-law' (Report, Council of Europe 2013) 4[2] <<https://rm.coe.int/168067d214>> accessed 27 September 2023 [Research Division at the ECtHR 2013]

⁴⁰ Council of Europe, 'European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, as amended by Protocols Nos. 11, 14 and 15' (first published 1950, Council of Europe 2013) Article 8(2) <https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/convention_ENG> accessed 27 September 2023 [ECHR]

⁴¹ ECHR, Article 10(2)

⁴² ECHR, Article 11(2)

⁴³ ECHR, Article 2(3)

⁴⁴ Research Division at the ECtHR 2013], 2

3. Research design and methodology

Methodology

This report is part of a global research project assessing digital security across contexts and the impact of digital authoritarianism on civil society. The aim of the research is to map ways organizations are responding to digital communication safety and identify gaps and shortcomings in Europe. Desk research was conducted on this topic based on a literature review, a comparative analysis of relevant reports on internet freedom and civic space, and mapping of organizations that work in digital communication in Europe. The first part of the literature review was exploratory in nature. The purpose was to gain an overall understanding of the digital safety and security context in Europe. These initial findings were then categorized in several categories based on the objectives of the research: (1) organizations that work in digital communication in Europe, (2) gaps in digital communication, (3) specific challenges faced by civil society organizations (CSOs) and (4) emerging issues and concerns of digital communication. The desk research was based on academic articles, reports by civil society and international organizations, policy documents, media articles, and legal texts predominantly published no earlier than January 2018.

In addition to the literature review, the desk research analyzed statistical data from Eurostat and quantitative data from civil society reports and indexes. The data from Eurostat was used to assess the gaps in digital communication in Europe.⁴⁵ Eurostat collects data on 38 individual countries⁴⁶ and does not aggregate the data on a European level (only on a EU level). Therefore, all aggregated data or mean calculation was done by the researcher. The most recent data available was used for the analysis, but no earlier than 2018.

Moreover, data was analyzed from Freedom House and CIVICUS, regarding internet freedom,⁴⁷ global freedom,⁴⁸ and the state of civic space.⁴⁹ Data was analyzed both on a European level and global level to assess the comparative status of Europe in these rankings. All data was taken from the most recent reports, which is from the years 2022 and 2023, and all aggregated data or mean calculation was done by the researcher. For the purposes of this report, the countries which have been included as part of Europe are based on the CIVICUS Monitor category 'Europe and Central Asia' that includes 47 countries.⁵⁰

Limitations

⁴⁵ Eurostat data was taken to analyze the following eight categories: (1) Households with access to internet at home, (2) Individuals who used the internet, frequency of use and activities, (3) Individuals who used the internet for interaction with public authorities, (4) Individuals who accessed the internet away from home or work, (5) Way of obtaining information and communication technology (ICT) skills, (6) Individuals' level of digital skills, (7) Individuals' level of computer skills, and (8) Evaluating data, information and digital content.

⁴⁶ See Appendix I for a full list of countries included in the Eurostat survey.

⁴⁷ See Appendix I for a full list of European countries included in the Freedom on the Net 2022 survey.

⁴⁸ See Appendix I for a full list of European countries included in the Freedom in the World 2023 survey.

⁴⁹ See Appendix I for a full list of European countries included in the CIVICUS Monitor.

⁵⁰ CIVICUS Monitor, 'Territories: Europe and Central Asia' (Search results, CIVICUS Monitor 2022)

<<https://monitor.civicus.org/search/countries/?territories=Europe+and+Central+Asia&status=&page=1>> accessed 27 September 2023

The research has a narrow field of analysis focusing mainly on four European countries with low internet freedom scores. The analysis and conclusions are mainly based on the digital security and safety context of Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and Hungary, whose governance structures have been categorized as either a Consolidated Authoritarian Regime or a Transitional or Hybrid Regime.⁵¹ There were no democracies included among the selected countries for deeper analysis, which decreases the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation of this research is that it was solely based on desk research (secondary research) and no first hand materials or accounts were collected. Last but not least, it was difficult to define the boundaries of Europe since each source has a different understanding of what countries constitute Europe. Consequently, not all sources contained data on all relevant European countries.

⁵¹ Freedom House, 'Democracy scores' (Country scores, Freedom House 2023) <<https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores?sort=asc&order=Total%20Score%20and%20Status>> accessed 27 September 2023

4. Summary of findings and analysis

Gaps in Digital Communication

As the world becomes increasingly more and more digitalized, a new wicked problem⁵² emerges, i.e., digital divides. Digital divides threaten to widen societal inequalities due to discrepancies in Internet access and digital skills. Digitalization, globalization and demographic change are the three main processes driving economic, socio-political and cultural change in the world.⁵³ With the development of technology, everyday life moves into the digital space. Namely, social and recreational activities, work, education and health services are continuously transitioning to digital environments. This process was especially accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic,⁵⁴ which also highlighted the inequalities in access to digital tools and technologies.

According to Eurostat data, 92% of households in Europe had access to the internet at home in 2022⁵⁵ and 89% of individuals who used the internet used it at least once a week.⁵⁶ Out of the individuals who use the Internet in Europe, 67.5% use it for social networking, 62% use it for internet banking, 18.5% use it to sell goods or services, and 20% use it to participate in civic or political activities.⁵⁷ Only 7% of individuals in Europe have never used the internet.⁵⁸ Additionally, 62% of individuals use the internet to interact with public authorities in Europe.⁵⁹

Despite the high percentage of access to the internet in Europe on average, there are geographical discrepancies between the different regions. North and North-West Europe have a higher internet access rate than the other European regions, such as the Central, South-West, South and East Europe. Urban regions across Europe in general have a higher percentage of access to the internet compared to rural areas, especially in Southern and Eastern Europe where notable differences can be seen. Van Kessel et al. suggest that “low

⁵² Literature on wicked problems:

Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, ‘Dilemmas in a general theory of planning’ (1973) 4(2) Policy sciences <https://economy4humanity.org/commons/library/Rittel+Webber+Dilemmas+General_Theory_of_Planning.pdf> accessed 27 September 2023; Brian W Head, ‘Wicked Problems in Public Policy’ (2008) 3(2) Public Policy <https://www.sivoinstitute.org/schools/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/B-Head_Wicked-Problems-in-Public-Policy_2.pdf> accessed 27 September 2023; Tom Ritchey, ‘Wicked Problems: Modelling Social Messes with Morphological Analysis’ (2013) 2(1) Acta Morphologica Generalis <<https://aim-associes.com/eusa/ebook/prob-fr/pdf/wp.pdf>> accessed 27 September 2023; Johanna Lönngren and Katrien Van Poeck, ‘Wicked problems: A mapping review of the literature’ (2021) 28(6) International Journal of Sustainable Development & World Ecology <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13504509.2020.1859415>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁵³ Robin van Kessel, Brian Li Han Wong, Ivan Rubinić, Ella O’Nuallain and Katarzyna Czabanowska, ‘Is Europe prepared to go digital? making the case for developing digital capacity: An exploratory analysis of Eurostat survey data’ (2022) 1(2) PLOS Digital Health <<https://journals.plos.org/digitalhealth/article?id=10.1371/journal.pdig.0000013#references>> accessed 27 September 2023 [van Kessel et al. 2022]

⁵⁴ van Kessel et al. 2022

⁵⁵ Eurostat: Households with access to the internet at home 2022

⁵⁶ Eurostat: Frequency of use 2022

⁵⁷ Eurostat: Internet activities 2022

⁵⁸ Eurostat: Never used the internet 2022

⁵⁹ Eurostat, ‘Regional ICT statistics: Individuals who used the internet for interaction with public authorities’ (Eurostat, 2021) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_R_GOV_I_custom_7599089/default/table?lang=en> accessed 27 September 2023

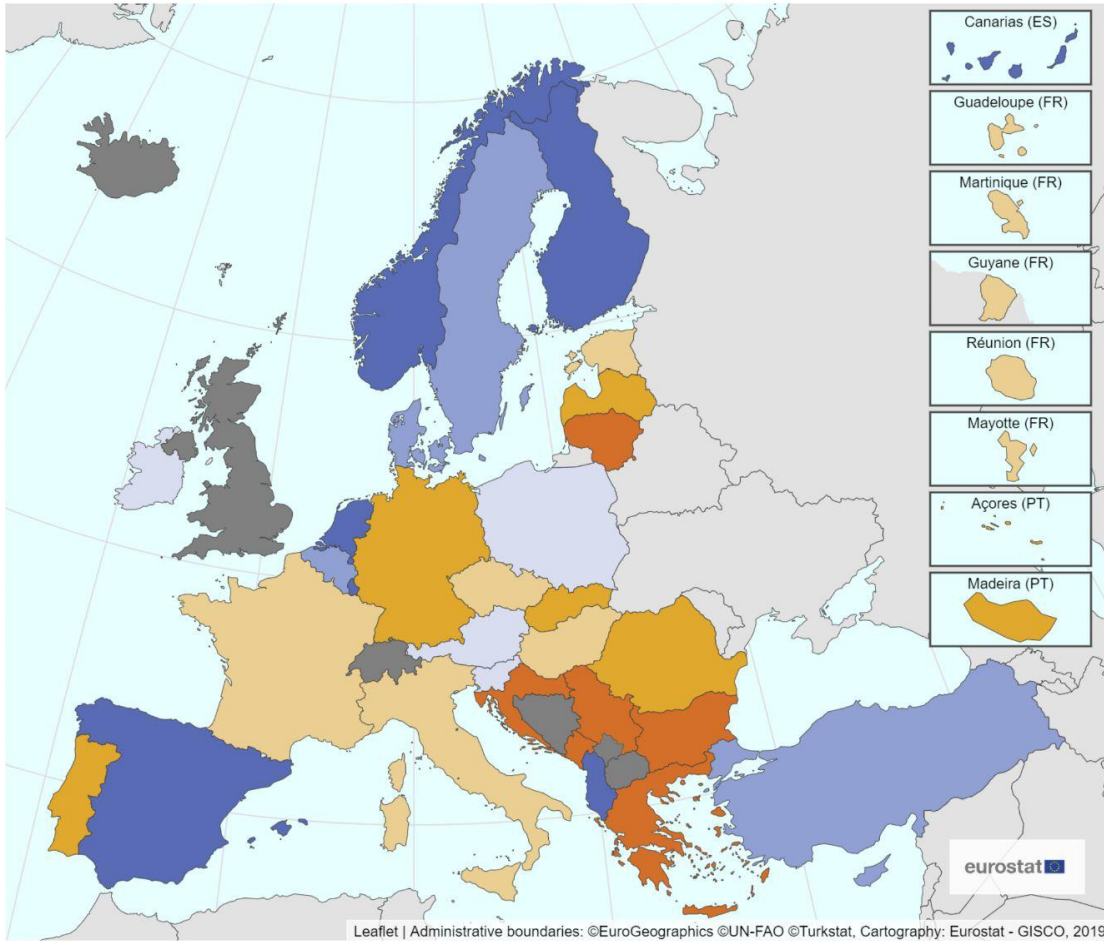
income may also be associated with lower levels of internet access.”⁶⁰ Regardless of these geographical differences, gender parity seems to have been achieved in Europe in terms of the use of the Internet in 2022. According to the International Telecommunication Union, regions with the highest Internet use also have the highest gender parity scores, such as Europe and the Americas.⁶¹

⁶⁰ van Kessel et al. 2022

⁶¹ International Telecommunication Union, ‘The gender digital divide’ (International Telecommunication Union 2022)
<<https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2022/11/24/ff22-the-gender-digital-divide/>> accessed 27 September 2023

Households with access to the internet at home

Geopolitical entity (reporting) / Time: 2022 Time frequency: Annual Unit of measure: Percentage of households



Legend



Households with access to the internet at home [ISOC_R_JACC_H]

Source of data: Eurostat - Last updated date: Tuesday, March 7, 2023 11:00 AM

Disclaimer: This map has been created automatically by ESTAT/EC software according to external user specifications for which ESTAT/EC is not responsible. Map included.

General disclaimer of the EC website: https://ec.europa.eu/info/legal-notice_en

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Figure 1. - Percentage of households in Europe with access to the internet at home⁶²

Eurostat also evaluated individuals' digital⁶³ skills across Europe in 2021. The data shows that only 2.7% of individuals have no overall digital skills in Europe, while 31% of individuals have limited, narrow or low overall digital skills, 29% of individuals have basic overall digital skills, and 26% of individuals have above basic overall digital skills.⁶⁴ Eurostat also collected data on whether individuals evaluated data, information and digital content in 2021. The results show that 48% of individuals report seeing untrue or doubtful information or content on the internet, while only 23% of individuals in Europe have checked the truthfulness of the information or content they found on the internet news sites or social media.

Last but not least, Eurostat collects data on how individuals in Europe have obtained ICT skills. In 2018, only 24% of individuals in Europe had carried out at least one training activity related to the use of ICT skills or the improvement of ICT skills. Most individuals had carried out free online training or self-study to improve their ICT skills.⁶⁵

Mapping Out Organizations that Work in Digital Communication in Europe

Due to the relatively high level of digitalization and use of the internet in Europe, there are many organizations actively involved in digital communication initiatives. They include (international and regional) intergovernmental organizations, international organizations and networks, and national or local organizations. Almost all major intergovernmental organizations operating in Europe have certain digital communication initiatives, including the European Union (EU), the Council of Europe (CoE), Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the United Nations (UN).⁶⁶ Activities regarding digital communication and digital safety and security can also be observed from major international civil society organizations, such as Amnesty International, Access Now, Human Rights Watch and Freedom House, as well as from smaller local civil society organizations, such as OVD-Info (Russia), Viasna (Belarus), Big Brother Watch (UK), and Liberty (UK).⁶⁷ These organizations constantly collaborate or network with each other to advance digital communication efforts through joint dialogue, forming networks, creating joint initiatives and so forth. Some initiatives or

⁶² Map taken from: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_R_IACC_H_custom_7622977/default/map?lang=en

The numbers in the legend refer to the percentage of households in Europe that had access to the internet at home in 2022. The country with lowest percentage of households in Europe that have access to the internet is Montenegro (80.96%) and the country with the highest percentage is Norway (99.01%).

⁶³ More information on how Eurostat measures digital skills: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/metadata/en/isoc_sk_dskl_i21_esmsip2.htm (4.1. Data description)

⁶⁴ Eurostat, 'Individuals' level of computer skills (2021 onwards)' (Eurostat, 2023) <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ISOC_SK_DSKL_I21_custom_7599116/default/table?lang=en> accessed 27 September 2023

⁶⁵ Eurostat: Way of obtaining ICT skills 2018

⁶⁶ See Appendix II for a list of some of the digital initiatives of these organizations.

⁶⁷ See Appendix III for a list of some organizations that work in digital communication in Europe.

networks regarding digital rights and freedoms are EDRI,⁶⁸CiviCERT⁶⁹ and Rarenet (Rapid Response Network).⁷⁰

The scope of work of and specific focus areas of these organizations in the field of digital communication is connected to privacy and data protection, combating disinformation, promoting digitalization and digital skills, advocating for digital human rights, engaging in political discourse, advocating for better digital policies and legal frameworks (on a regional and national level), monitoring and reporting on digital safety and security, and providing tools, resources and training for digital safety.

Specific Challenges Faced by Civil Society Organizations

The specific challenges faced by civil society organizations in Europe will be explored through the examples of Belarus, Russia, Ukraine and Hungary. In general, most states in Europe have a well-developed information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure and internet services are relatively affordable. This holds true for Belarus, Russia and Hungary, while Ukraine's ICT infrastructure has been severely damaged by the Russian military invasion,⁷¹ causing frequent internet blackouts.⁷²

Unfortunately, internet blackouts are common occurrences even in states not experiencing war, such as Belarus and Russia. In these cases, the blackouts are not due to damaged ICT infrastructure, but the internet is purposefully shut down as a tool of oppression. These kind of internet shutdowns occur especially around protests, elections, referendums, conflicts or crises. Individuals in Belarus experienced internet shutdowns during the protests before,⁷³ at the time of,⁷⁴ and after⁷⁵ the 2020 presidential election. Citizens in Russia have also experiences internet shutdowns during protest related to the September

⁶⁸ EDRI, 'About Us' <<https://edri.org/about-us/>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁶⁹Rarenet<<https://www.rarenet.org/>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁷⁰CiviCERT<<https://www.civicert.org/>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁷¹ James Pearson and Raphael Satter, 'Internet in Ukraine disrupted as Russian troops advance' (*Reuters*, 27 February 2022) <<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/internet-ukraine-disrupted-russian-troops-advance-2022-02-26/>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁷² Sebastian Moss, 'Ukraine: Ukrtelecom hit by 15 hour outage due to cyberattack' (*Datacenter Dynamics*, 29 March 2022) <<https://www.datacenterdynamics.com/en/news/ukraine-ukrtelecom-hit-by-15-hour-outage-due-to-cyberattack/>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁷³ Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 'In Belarus, A1 operator subscribers demand compensation for blocking Internet during unrest' (*Business & Human Rights Resource Centre*, 7 July 2020) <<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/in-belarus-a-1-operator-subscribers-demand-compensation-for-blocking-internet-during-unrest/>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁷⁴NetBlocks, 'Internet disruption hits Belarus on election day' (*NetBlocks*, 9 August 2020) <<https://netblocks.org/reports/internet-disruption-hits-belarus-on-election-day-YAE2jKB3>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁷⁵ Freedom House, 'Belarus: Freedom on the Net 2022 Country Report' (Freedom House 2022)

<https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-net/2022#footnote6_aqjnkqy> accessed 27 September 2023 [FOTN2022 Belarus]

2019 regional elections⁷⁶ and during mass protests in 2018 and 2019 in the Republic of Ingushetia.⁷⁷

Another prominent tool of digital authoritarianism is placing limits on digital content,⁷⁸ such as blocking websites and social media platforms, and removing content from the internet with the aim to control and restrict the information flow. This practice can be observed in all four states. The Belarus Government has been blocking websites since 2014, but it has dramatically increased its efforts to censor online criticisms and opposition voices since the 2020 elections.⁷⁹ It also blocked access to several websites in an attempt to curtail the opposition's campaign to protest the vote⁸⁰ before the Belarus Constitutional Referendum in February of 2022.⁸¹ The Russian government has also censored many online sources and critical voices, especially after the military invasion of Ukraine. Specifically, it blocked around 5,000 websites of international and Ukrainian news outlets, as well as civil society websites. In addition to these bans, Russia also blocked several social media platforms such as Facebook,⁸² X (Twitter),⁸³ and Instagram.⁸⁴ According to Roskomsvoboda, a Russian NGO operating in the field of digital rights protection and digital empowerment, there are over half a million websites blocked by the Russian government as of September 2023.⁸⁵ Moreover, the Russian government also prohibited the use of the word 'war' to describe its activities in Ukraine and mandated the use of the term "special military operation".⁸⁶ Anti-extremist and anti-terrorist legislation has been used to legalize and justify the censorship of online content

⁷⁶NetBlocks, 'Evidence of internet disruptions in Russia during Moscow opposition protests' (*NetBlocks*, 3 August 2019) <<https://netblocks.org/reports/evidence-of-internet-disruptions-in-russia-during-moscow-opposition-protests-XADErzBg>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁷⁷ Freedom House, 'Russia: Freedom on the Net 2019 Country Report' (Freedom House 2019) <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-net/2019#A>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁷⁸ Definition of the category 'Limits on Content' by Freedom House: "*Limits on Content analyzes legal regulations on content; technical filtering and blocking of websites; other forms of censorship and self-censorship; the vibrancy and diversity of online information space; and the use of digital tools for civic mobilization.*"

Freedom House, 'Freedom on the Net Research Methodology' (Freedom House 2022)

<<https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-net/freedom-net-research-methodology>> accessed 29 September 2023 [Freedom on the Net Research Methodology]

⁷⁹ FOTN2022 Belarus; Maria Xynou and Arturo Filastò, 'Belarus protests: From internet outages to pervasive website censorship' (*Open Observatory of Network (OONI)*, 15 September 2020) <<https://ooni.org/post/2020-belarus-internet-outages-website-censorship/#blocked-websites>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁸⁰ Nika Aleksejeva, 'Lukashenko regime undermines Belarusian opposition prior to referendum' (*Medium*, 24 February 2022) <<https://medium.com/dflab/lukashenko-regime-undermines-belarusian-opposition-prior-to-referendum-9417205924a2>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁸¹ International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), 'FAQs: Belarus Constitutional Referendum 2022' (*IFES*, 24 February 2022) <<https://www.ifes.org/tools-resources/faqs/faqs-belarus-constitutional-referendum-2022>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁸² Roskomsvoboda, 'The registry of blocked websites: Facebook' (*Roskomsvoboda*, 16 March 2022) <<https://reestr.rublacklist.net/en/record/4152168/>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁸³ Roskomsvoboda, 'The registry of blocked websites: Twitter' (*Roskomsvoboda*, 4 March 2022) <<https://reestr.rublacklist.net/en/record/4106096/>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁸⁴ Taylor Hatmaker, 'Instagram is now blocked in Russia' (*TechCrunch*, 14 March 2022) <https://techcrunch.com/2022/03/14/instagram-is-now-blocked-in-russia/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly9mcmVIZG9taG91c2Uub3JnLW&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALQuuILZoHntjJAAKmEkBq2mE79F7S2C2l_qnk-cggTZlhZCpCZFPahwnDLhq2Jihjstzamvhi-53J4cq3MzWy978bsKq9OHEQ8udFzjrIgdZNPW_M95RVdBPxA5zg7NgjqlMqFrFbF5U3f_uQUdveZn3xm4T7AJE91LU9gFM4D> accessed 27 September 2023

⁸⁵ Roskomsvoboda, 'Monitoring of registry: Blocked websites' (*Roskomsvoboda*, 27 September 2023) <

⁸⁶ Al Jazeera, 'Do not call Ukraine invasion a 'war', Russia tells media, schools' (*Al Jazeera*, 2 March 2022) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/2/do-not-call-ukraine-invasion-a-war-russia-tells-media-schools>> accessed 27 September 2023

and the limitations on the freedom of expression in both Belarus⁸⁷ and Russia,⁸⁸ in the interest of national security. Both governments have passed legislation which allows them to censor and limit online content which constitutes a threat to national security.⁸⁹ In 2021, the Belarus government had issued a list of potential threats to national security that warrant restriction of online expression, “including but not limited to manifestations of sociopolitical, religious, or ethnic extremism; the promotion of politics contrary to national interests; calls for riots; the destructive impact of information on an individual, society, or state institution; attempts to destroy national spiritual and moral traditions; the biased revision of history; and attempts to undermine public confidence in state institutions.”⁹⁰ Censorship of online content is less common in Ukraine and Hungary,⁹¹ but it occurs nonetheless. For example, in March 2022, Hungary blocked several Russian media outlets and websites in compliance with an EU regulation⁹². The regulation was in response to the Russian military invasion of Ukraine and Russia’s attempt to justify its aggression by spreading propaganda, and distorting and manipulating facts.⁹³ Moreover, as a consequence of the war in Ukraine, in occupied Ukrainian territories the internet has been routed to Russia and individuals are exposed to Russian censorship of the internet and ban of certain social media platforms.⁹⁴

Another major issue in Europe is state surveillance of citizens. For example, the Russian government monitors internet traffic, social media activities, Telegram chats, instagram pages, individuals who organize protests or run critical accounts, etc.⁹⁵ It has also used facial recognition technology to identify suspected protestors and detain them.⁹⁶ The Belarus government has also engaged in pretty sophisticated surveillance including wiretapping,⁹⁷ monitoring emails and internet chat rooms, and other web-based communication.⁹⁸ It has also used many Russian-developed systems for surveillance and

⁸⁷ FOTN2022 Belarus, B2

⁸⁸ Freedom House, ‘Russia: Freedom on the Net 2022 Country Report’ (Freedom House 2022) B3 <https://freedomhouse.org/country/russia/freedom-net/2022#footnote4_2m748xt> accessed 27 September 2023 [FOTN2022 Russia]

⁸⁹ Human Rights House Foundation, Article 19, International Media Support, Index On Censorship and Reporters Without Borders, ‘Belarusian Media Under Attack’ (*Human Rights House Foundation*, 3 June 2021) <<https://humanrightshouse.org/resources/belarusian-media-under-attack/>> accessed 27 September 2023; FOTN2022 Belarus, A3; FOTN2022 Russia, C2

⁹⁰ FOTN2022 Belarus, B3

⁹¹ Freedom House, ‘Hungary: Freedom on the Net 2022 Country Report’ (Freedom House 2022) <https://freedomhouse.org/country/hungary/freedom-net/2022#footnote1_eezp33j> accessed 27 September 2023; Freedom House, ‘Ukraine: Freedom on the Net 2022 Country Report’ (Freedom House 2022) <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/ukraine/freedom-net/2022>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁹² Council Regulation (EU) 2022/350 of 1 March 2022 amending Regulation (EU) No 833/2014 concerning restrictive measures in view of Russia’s actions destabilising the situation in Ukraine <<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32022R0350>> accessed 27 September 2023 [Regulation (EU) 2022/350]

⁹³ Regulation (EU) 2022/350, 2

⁹⁴ Matt Burgess, ‘Russia Is Taking Over Ukraine’s Internet’ (*Wired*, 15 June 2022) <<https://www.wired.co.uk/article/ukraine-russia-internet-takeover>> accessed 27 September 2023; Access Now, ‘Updates: Digital rights in the Russia-Ukraine conflict’ (*Access Now*, 13 April 2023) <<https://www.accessnow.org/digital-rights-ukraine-russia-conflict/>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁹⁵ FOTN2022 Russia, C5

⁹⁶ Current Time, ‘Dozens Arrested In Moscow Via Facial-Recognition System On Russia Day’ (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 13 June 2022) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/moscow-police-detain-dozens-using-facial-recognition-system/31896070.html>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁹⁷ Mariella Moon, ‘Belarusian hackers are trying to overthrow the Lukashenko regime’ (*Engadget*, 28 August 2021) <<https://www.engadget.com/belarusian-hackers-overthrow-lukashenko-government-200457163.html>> accessed 27 September 2023

⁹⁸ FOTN2022 Belarus, C5

access to communication data and open-source data.⁹⁹ There are also concerns that Hungary has abused its state surveillance powers and has employed the spyware product Pegasus to infect mobile devices of journalists.¹⁰⁰ In a landmark case¹⁰¹ in 2021, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) confirmed that bulk interception of communication violates fundamental rights,¹⁰² i.e., the right to privacy¹⁰³ and freedom of expression.¹⁰⁴ One year later, in 2022, the ECtHR issued a decision¹⁰⁵ that “confirmed the UK government’s admission that its mass interception regime was not compliant with Article 8 (right to Privacy) and Article 10 (Freedom of Expression) of the European Convention on Human Rights, with regard to the treatment of confidential journalistic material. The UK government acknowledged that parts of its historic mass investigatory powers regime violated these human rights.”¹⁰⁶

Last but not least, there are a variety of laws in European countries that impose criminal sentences or civil penalties for online activities. For example, “[m]ultiple internet users in Ukraine have been arrested, fined, or sentenced to prison in recent years” for expressing pro-Russian opinions and ideas.¹⁰⁷ Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government introduced a new amendment to the criminal code according to which individuals can be imprisoned for up to 15 years for spreading false information about the military.¹⁰⁸ In Belarus, individuals were jailed for up to 18 years for their online activities against the regime.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, physical violence against journalists and human rights

⁹⁹ FOTN2022 Belarus, C5

¹⁰⁰ Stephanie Kirchaessner, Paul Lewis, David Pegg, Sam Cutler, Nina Lakhani and Michael Safi, ‘Revealed: leak uncovers global abuse of cyber-surveillance weapon’ (*The Guardian*, 18 July 2021) <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/18/revealed-leak-uncovers-global-abuse-of-cyber-surveillance-weapon-nso-group-pegasus>> accessed 27 September 2023; Shaun Walker, ‘Viktor Orbán using NSO spyware in assault on media, data suggests’ (*The Guardian*, 18 July 2021) <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/jul/18/viktor-orban-using-nso-spyware-in-assault-on-media-data-suggests>> accessed 27 September 2023; Panyi Szabolcs and Pethő András, ‘Hungarian journalist reporting on corruption surveilled with Pegasus for months’ (*Direkt36*, 2 August 2021) <<https://www.direkt36.hu/en/honapokon-at-megfigyeltek-pegasusszal-egy-korrupcios-ugyeken-is-dolgozo-magyar-bunugyi-ujsagirot/>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹⁰¹ *Big Brother Watch And Others v The United Kingdom* App nos 58170/13, 62322/14 and 24960/15 (ECtHR, 25 May 2021)

<<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-210077>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹⁰² Amnesty International, ‘UK: Europe’s top court rules UK mass surveillance regime violated human rights’ (*Amnesty International*, 25 May 2021) <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/05/uk-surveillance-gchq-ecthr-ruling/>> accessed 27 September 2023; Privacy International (PI), ‘Human rights groups win European Court of Human Rights claim on UK mass surveillance regime’ (*EDRI*, 2 June 2021) <<https://edri.org/our-work/human-rights-groups-win-european-court-of-human-rights-claim-on-uk-mass-surveillance-regime/>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹⁰³ ECHR, Article 8

¹⁰⁴ ECHR, Article 10

¹⁰⁵ *Human Rights Watch v The United Kingdom* App no 64230/16 (ECtHR, 10 March 2022)

<<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-216801>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹⁰⁶ Privacy International (PI), ‘2022 Key highlights of our results’ (*PI*, 27 April 2023) <<https://privacyinternational.org/long-read/5059/2022-key-highlights-our-results>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹⁰⁷ Expatica, ‘Blogger detained for treason in western Ukraine’ (*Expatica*, 31 March 2022)

<<https://www.expatica.com/ru/general/blogger-detained-for-treason-in-western-ukraine-122161/>> accessed 27 September 2023; The Kyiv Independent news desk, ‘Pro-Russian blogger detained in Lviv on high treason suspicion’ (*The Kyiv Independent*, 31 March 2022) <<https://kyivindependent.com/pro-russian-blogger-detained-in-lviv-over-high-suspicion-of-treason/>> accessed 27 September 2023; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, ‘Ukraine Puts Pro-Kremlin Blogger Living In Europe On Wanted List’ (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 25 February 2021) <<https://www.rferl.org/a/ukraine-puts-pro-kremlin-blogger-living-in-europe-on-wanted-list/31122142.html>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹⁰⁸ Reuters, ‘Russia fights back in information war with jail warning’ (*Reuters*, 4 March 2022)

<<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-introduce-jail-terms-spreading-fake-information-about-army-2022-03-04/>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹⁰⁹ The Editorial Board, ‘They clicked once. Then came the dark prisons.’ (*The Washington Post*, 13 February 2023)

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/interactive/2023/political-protest-new-generation-faces/?itid=lk_inline_manual_9> accessed 27 September 2023 [Editorial Board 2023]; FOTN2022 Belarus, C3

activists is relatively common in Russia and Belarus and it further escalates during protests, elections or other political events. For example, in March of 2023, during the anti-war protests in Russia, protesters were arrested, often using excessive force, beaten and threatened for exercising their civil rights.¹¹⁰ Similar practices can be observed in Belarus as well.¹¹¹ “Since the 2020 election and related protests, state agents have used threats, arbitrary detention, torture, and physical violence in an attempt to suppress the work of independent journalists and bloggers.”¹¹²

In order to protect themselves from state censorship and surveillance, individuals in Belarus use Telegram, TOR, Psiphon, Bridgefy, and VPN services.¹¹³ “The outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2022 has also likely led to a spike in VPN usage in Belarus, as was the case in Russia.”¹¹⁴ However, these tools are not enough and this kind of oppressive environment has forced some civil society actors and human rights defenders to engage in self-censorship or to flee their respective countries.¹¹⁵

Similar examples which degrade freedom on the net can be found in other European countries as well. In July 2023, mass protests broke out in France over the killing of a 17-year-old boy during a police traffic stop. Protestors were accused by the French government of using social media platforms to incite riots and violence. In response, the French President suggested blocking social media platforms during the protests. Although this did not happen, the French President remained strong in his conviction that there needed to be a discussion about occasionally and temporarily suspending social media platforms.¹¹⁶ In the United Kingdom in January of 2022, a man was found guilty of posting a grossly offensive tweet about the death of a veteran. Consequently, the man was “placed under supervision for 18 months and ordered to perform 150 hours of unpaid work as a direct alternative to jail.”¹¹⁷

¹¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, ‘Russia: Brutal Arrests and Torture, Ill-Treatment of Anti-War Protesters’ (*Human Rights Watch*, 9 March 2022) <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/09/russia-brutal-arrests-and-torture-ill-treatment-anti-war-protesters>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹¹¹ Viasna, ‘Human Rights Situation in Belarus: August 2023’ (*Viasna*, 5 September 2023) <<https://spring96.org/en/news/112675>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹¹² FOTN2022 Belarus, C7

¹¹³ Techtypical, ‘VPNs Are Among the Most Wanted Apps in Belarus’ (*Techtypical*, 11 August 2021)

<<https://www.techtotypical.com/news/vpns-are-among-the-most-wanted-apps-in-belarus/>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹¹⁴ FOTN2022 Belarus, B7

¹¹⁵ Article 19, ‘HRC46: UN must take further action on Belarus’ (*Article 19*, 25 February 2021)

<<https://www.article19.org/resources/hrc46-unprecedented-human-rights-violations-in-belarus/>> accessed 27 September 2023; FOTN2022 Russia, B4

¹¹⁶ NEWS WIRES, ‘Macron's call to 'cut off' social media during riots sparks backlash in France’ (*France24*, 5 July 2023)

<<https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20230705-macron-s-call-to-cut-off-social-media-during-riots-sparks-backlash>> accessed 27 September 2023; Kim Willsher, ‘Macron accused of authoritarianism after threat to cut off social media’ (*The Guardian*, 5 July 2023)

<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/05/french-government-should-control-social-media-during-unrest-macron-says>> accessed 27 September 2023; Al Jazeera, ‘Macron appeals to parents, social media firms to end France riots’ (*Al Jazeera*, 30 June 2023) <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/30/macron-appeals-to-parents-social-media-firms-to-end-france-riots>> accessed 27 September 2023; Lyric Li, ‘Macron says social media could be blocked during riots, sparking furor’

(*The Washington Post*, 6 July 2023) <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/07/06/france-macron-social-media-block-riots/>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹¹⁷ Danya Bazaraa, ‘Man, 36, found guilty of posting 'grossly offensive' tweet about Captain Sir Tom Moore saying 'burn auld fella buuuuurn' plans to appeal conviction at European Court of Human Rights’ (*Mail Online*, 31 October 2022)

<<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-11373347/Man-guilty-grossly-offensive-tweet-Captain-Sir-Tom-Moore-appeal-conviction.html>> accessed 27 September 2023

FREEDOM ON THE INTERNET 2022 - FREEDOM HOUSE

	Russia	Belarus	Ukraine	Hungary	France	United Kingdom
Total score and status	23 Not Free	28 Not Free	59 Partly Free	69 Partly Free	76 Free	79 Free
Obstacles to Access	11/25 (44%)	12/25 (48%)	18/25 (72%)	22/25 (88%)	23/25 (92%)	24/25 (96%)
Limits on Content	6/35 (17%)	10/35 (29%)	21/35 (60%)	24/35 (69%)	29/35 (83%)	30/35 (86%)
Violations of User Rights	6/40 (15%)	6/40 (15%)	20/40 (50%)	23/40 (58%)	24/40 (60%)	25/40 (63%)

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2023 - FREEDOM HOUSE

	Russia	Belarus	Ukraine	Hungary	France	United Kingdom
Total score and status	16 Not Free	8 Not Free	50 Partly Free	66 Partly Free	89 Free	93 Free
Political Rights	5/40 (13%)	2/40 (5%)	22/40 (55%)	24/40 (60%)	38/40 (95%)	39/40 (98%)
Civil Liberties	11/60 (18%)	6/60 (10%)	28/60 (47%)	42/60 (70%)	51/60 (85%)	54/60 (90%)

CIVIC SPACE RATINGS 2022 - CIVICUS MONITOR

Russia	Belarus	Ukraine	Hungary	France	United Kingdom
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Score and rating	17 Closed	16 Closed	45 Obstructed	49 Obstructed	74 Narrowed	60 Obstructed
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Table 1. - Scores of six European states across different surveys (Freedom on the Net, Freedom in the World and People Power Under Attack)

Emerging Issues and Concerns of Digital Communication

Europe is often seen as a global leader in terms of democracy practices and freedom and the data from Freedom House and CIVICUS seems to support this perception. As it can be seen in the table below, Europe ranks above average when it comes to global trends on internet freedom, global freedom and the state of civic space.

FREEDOM ON THE INTERNET 2022 - FREEDOM HOUSE

	Global	Europe
Total score and status	53 Partly Free	66 Partly Free
Obstacles to Access	15/25 (60%)	20/25 (80%)
Limits on Content	20/35 (58%)	24/35 (68%)
Violations of User Rights	17/40 (43%)	22/40 (56%)

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2023 - FREEDOM HOUSE

	Global	Europe
Total score and status	55 Partly Free	81 Free
Political Rights	22/40 (54%)	33/40 (81%)
Civil Liberties	34/60 (56%)	48/60 (80%)

CIVIC SPACE RATINGS 2022 - CIVICUS MONITOR

	Global	Europe
Score and rating	52 Obstructed	73 Narrowed

Table 2. - Individual country scores and rankings across the different measurement instruments/indexes

However, despite Europe's overall higher scores in all of these categories, internet freedom in Europe has declined in the last year. Freedom House has calculated Internet Freedom Scores

for 13 European countries in 2022,¹¹⁸ out of which 10 mark a declining internet freedom score. Only Serbia,¹¹⁹ Georgia¹²⁰ and the United Kingdom¹²¹ have improved their internet freedom scores since 2021, but only by 1 point.¹²²

A trend which can be noticed from the data is that the category ‘Violations of User Rights’¹²³ scores the lowest in the Freedom on the Net 2022 survey across all levels (global, regional and national). Therefore, it can be concluded that the most pressing issue for Europe would be the protection of user rights. This includes freedom of expression, access to information and press freedom; no criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities; access to anonymous communication or encryption; limiting state surveillance of internet activities; protection from intimidation or physical violence in relation to their online activities; and strengthening cyber security to prevent hacking and other forms of cyberattacks.¹²⁴ The category ‘Limits on Content’ also scores relatively low compared to the category ‘Obstacles to Access’ in Europe, which is why attention must also be paid to prevent online censorship, blocking websites and social media platforms, legal regulations on content, and a lack of diversity in the online information space.

¹¹⁸ Russia, Belarus, Turkey, Ukraine, Hungary, Serbia, Italy, France, Germany, Georgia, United Kingdom, Estonia, and Iceland (least free to most free)

Source: Internet Freedom Scores 2022

¹¹⁹ Freedom House, Serbia: Freedom on the Net 2022 Country Report’ (Freedom House 2022)

<<https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-net/2022>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹²⁰ Freedom House, ‘Georgia: Freedom on the Net 2022 Country Report’ (Freedom House 2022)

<<https://freedomhouse.org/country/georgia/freedom-net/2022>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹²¹ Freedom House, ‘United Kingdom: Freedom on the Net 2022 Country Report’ (Freedom House 2022)

<<https://freedomhouse.org/country/united-kingdom/freedom-net/2022>> accessed 27 September 2023

¹²² At the beginning of October 2023, Freedom House launched the Freedom on the Net 2023 report, which confirmed that internet freedom continued to decline in Europe. Out of the 13 European countries that the Freedom on the Net report assesses, 6 mark a declining internet freedom score (i.e., Russia, Belarus, Turkey, Serbia, Georgia and Iceland) and no country has improved their score.

For more information see: <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-net/scores>

¹²³ “Violations of User Rights tackles legal protections and restrictions on free expression; surveillance and privacy; and legal and extralegal repercussions for online speech and activities, such as imprisonment, cyberattacks, or extralegal harassment and physical violence.”

Taken from Freedom on the Net Research Methodology.

¹²⁴ Freedom House, ‘Freedom on the Net 2022: Countering an Authoritarian Overhaul of the Internet’ (Report, Freedom House 2022) 41-43 <<https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/FOTN2022Digital.pdf>> accessed 27 September 2023

5. Conclusion and recommendations

In recent years, the internet has become one of the main tools for civic and political activism and mobilization in the world and in Europe. Human rights defenders and activists share information online, advocate for change, criticize their governments, and much more. Social media and online platforms are easily and freely accessible and allow individuals to share their opinions and beliefs with a wider audience. However, these online tools leave traces, which can then be used by governments to target individuals.¹²⁵ Therefore, digital communication tools and platforms create both opportunities and challenges for civil society organizations and human rights defenders.

Regardless of whether it is in reference to democratic or authoritarian regimes, oppression of the digital space happens all around Europe and all around the globe. Some of the main challenges in Europe facing civil society and human rights activists center on limits of content and violations of user rights. Therefore, the recommendations for actions based on the research are the following:

- **Advocate for the development of alternative ways to maintain internet access during conflict and protests.** For example, SpaceX's Starlink provided satellite internet services to Ukraine during the war, but this effort is estimated to cost \$20 million a month to maintain.¹²⁶ More affordable alternatives are required to provide digital lifelines during internet blackouts. However, affordability is not the only issue. In some cases, governments have criminalized equipment used for accessing satellite internet, which must also be taken into account to ensure that these alternative ways to maintain internet access do not put individuals in additional harm. Therefore, investment in further research is required to develop safe, affordable and effective alternatives.
- **Advocate for a clearer framework on what can be constituted as a threat to national security.** State sovereignty is one of the most important principles of international law, and attempting to define or limit what constitutes an issue of national security may be seen as a direct threat to this principle. However, it is extremely relevant to establish within the international legal order that critiques and dissatisfaction expressed by the citizens in relation to the ruling regime cannot constitute a threat to national security.
- **Advocate for the encryption of all digital communication tools.** Telegram has often been used by citizens to avoid state surveillance and scrutiny, but it is not sufficient. In this digital age, all digital communication tools should have to adhere to certain standards and principles for data and privacy protection, including mandatory encryption of data.

¹²⁵ Editorial Board 2023

¹²⁶ Mike Stone and Joey Roulette, 'SpaceX's Starlink wins Pentagon contract for satellite services to Ukraine' (*Reuters*, 1 June 2023) <<https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/pentagon-buys-starlink-ukraine-statement-2023-06-01/>> accessed 27 September 2023

- **Promote and advocate for increased education and training on digital safety and security skills, especially for CSOs and human rights defenders.** Despite the high usage rate of the internet in Europe, only a quarter of citizens have ever carried out training activities to improve their digital and computer skills. With the increase of digital authoritarianism and shrinking civic space, it is crucial for individuals to be aware of how their online activities can be misused to track and monitor their activities. Perhaps it is necessary to consider including digital skills and knowledge in the formal education curriculum.
- **Develop an online database of available tools and resources on digital safety and security.** Based on my research and analysis of organizations and tools, I would not recommend the development of a new tool or guidance on digital safety and security because there are so many tools and resources already available, including guides, courses, helplines, handbooks, etc.¹²⁷ However, they are quite difficult to find,¹²⁸ which is why it would be helpful to create a database of these tools and resources where they would be categorized by target group¹²⁹, type¹³⁰ and topic.¹³¹ There is already so much knowledge available on this topic and creating new tools would simply replicate this knowledge. I recommend AFSC to focus more on disseminating the existing tools and resources by making them more easily accessible and visible.

Research on digital security and safety across different contexts is extremely relevant. Online space is yet to be properly regulated and the use of digital tools creates a lot of uncertainty, especially taking into account the fast-changing nature of technology and the rapid rate of development of new technologies. Continuous research in this field is necessary to follow new and emerging trends and to update accordingly the recommendations for actions in the context of digital safety and security. Similarly, it is relevant to conduct this kind of research to evaluate the relevance and usefulness of existing international relations theories, such as the theory of securitization and the theory of authoritarian learning, in the context of the digital space. If these theories cannot be applied to the digital space, then a completely new perspective must be applied to digital policy and governance problems. Last but not least, understanding digital communication tools and their vulnerabilities is crucial to the protection of human rights and freedoms in an increasingly digital world. It would be interesting for future research on this topic in Europe to focus on regional trends and differences within Europe. Additionally, it would be interesting to focus on democratic regimes in Europe and analyze how they may be curtailing certain rights in the digital space. All of these are important and interesting questions that can contribute to the understanding of the digital safety and security context in Europe and globally.

¹²⁷ For a list of already available resources on digital safety see: <https://akademie.dw.com/en/digital-security-resources/a-37339199>.

¹²⁸ One of the very first things I tried to do before starting the research was google some digital safety tools and resources. I found some tips and guides but nothing substantial. Only after I conducted more in depth research for this report, I managed to find dozens of tools and resources. However, it took me a substantial amount of time and research to find them.

¹²⁹ For example: tools for journalists, for human rights activists, for children, for women, etc.

¹³⁰ For example: courses, guides, handbooks, helplines, toolkits, etc.

¹³¹ For example: encryption, use of social media, digital footprint, digital communication, digital skills, etc.

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Appendix I: European countries included in each survey

CIVICUS		Freedom House		Eurostat
CIVICUS Monitor		Internet Freedom	Global Freedom	
1	Albania	-	Albania	Albania
2	Andorra	-	Andorra	-
3	Austria	-	Austria	Austria
4	Belarus	Belarus	Belarus	-
5	Belgium	-	Belgium	Belgium
6	Bosnia and Herzegovina	-	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Bosnia and Herzegovina
7	Bulgaria	-	Bulgaria	Bulgaria
8	Croatia	-	Croatia	Croatia
9	Cyprus	-	Cyprus	Cyprus
10	Czech Republic	-	Czech Republic	Czech Republic
11	Denmark	-	Denmark	Denmark
12	Estonia	Estonia	Estonia	Estonia
13	Finland	-	Finland	Finland
14	France	France	France	France
15	Georgia	Georgia	Georgia	-
16	Germany	Germany	Germany	Germany
17	Greece	-	Greece	Greece

18	Hungary	Hungary	Hungary	Hungary
19	Iceland	Iceland	Iceland	Iceland
20	Ireland	-	Ireland	Ireland
21	Italy	Italy	Italy	Italy
22	Kosovo	-	Kosovo	Kosovo
23	Latvia	-	Latvia	Latvia
24	Liechtenstein	-	Liechtenstein	Lithuania
25	Lithuania	-	Lithuania	-
26	Luxembourg	-	Luxembourg	Luxembourg
27	Malta	-	Malta	Malta
28	Moldova	-	Moldova	-
29	Monaco	-	Monaco	-
30	Montenegro	-	Montenegro	Montenegro
31	Netherlands	-	Netherlands	Netherlands
32	North Macedonia	-	North Macedonia	North Macedonia
33	Norway	-	Norway	Norway
34	Poland	-	Poland	Poland
35	Portugal	-	Portugal	Portugal
36	Romania	-	Romania	Romania
37	Russia	Russia	Russia	-
38	San Marino	-	San Marino	-
39	Serbia	Serbia	Serbia	Serbia
40	Slovakia	-	Slovakia	Slovakia

41	Slovenia	-	Slovenia	Slovenia
42	Spain	-	Spain	Spain
43	Sweden	-	Sweden	Sweden
44	Switzerland	-	Switzerland	Switzerland
45	Turkey	Turkey	Turkey	Türkiye
46	Ukraine	Ukraine	Ukraine	-
47	United Kingdom	United Kingdom	United Kingdom	United Kingdom

Appendix II: Digital initiatives of international and European intergovernmental organizations

EUROPEAN UNION (EU)	European Digital Rights and Principles
	The Cybersecurity Strategy
	Shaping Europe's digital future: EU Strategy
	The EU4Digital Initiative
	DigitalHealthEurope
	Safer Internet Centres
	Better Internet for Kids
	Tackling online disinformation (#FactsMatter)
	The European Union Agency for Cybersecurity
	European Safe Online Initiative
	CyberSec4Europe
	The European Cybersecurity Competence Centre
	COUNCIL OF EUROPE (COE)
Internet Freedom	

ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE (OSCE)	Online safety and digital security for all journalists – a prerequisite for media freedom
	Digital Safety of Female Journalists
	Cyber/ICT Security
	OSCE Cyber Security Awareness Month
	To serve and to protect: The OSCE trains the next generation of Ukraine’s cyber police
	OSCE POLIS Digital Library
ORGANIZATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD)	OECD digital security policy framework
UNITED NATIONS (UN)	Digital Safety Tips
	UN General Assembly Resolution “The Right to Privacy in the Digital Age”
	Partnerships key to boosting online safety
	The Cybersecurity and New Technologies programme
	Secretary-General’s Roadmap for Digital Cooperation
	Office of the Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology
	New UN course helps cut through the noise to bolster online safety

Appendix III: Organizations that work in the field of digital safety and security in Europe

1. [The Chaos Computer Club](#)
2. [OVD-Info](#)
3. [Viasna Human Rights Center](#)
4. [Open Society Justice Initiative](#)
5. [We Are Social](#)
6. [DataReportal](#)
7. [Meltwater](#)
8. [Chatham House](#)
9. [Big Brother Watch](#)
10. [The National Council for Civil Liberties \(“Liberty”\)](#)
11. [English PEN](#)
12. [Open Rights Group](#)
13. [Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#)
14. [Privacy International](#)
15. [The Irish Council For Civil Liberties Limited](#)
16. [European Cyber Security Organisation](#)

Appendix IV: Relevant legal instruments applicable to the digital context

United Nations

- Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 12 (Right to Privacy)
- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 17 (Right to Privacy)

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

- Guidelines Governing the Protection of Privacy and Transborder Flows of Personal Data (1980)
- Recommendation Concerning Guidelines Governing the Protection of Privacy and Transborder Flows of Personal Data (2013)

Council of Europe

- Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), Article 8 (Right to Privacy) and Article 10 (Freedom of Expression)
- Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data
- Additional Protocol to the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data regarding supervisory authorities and transborder data flows
- Protocol amending the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data
- Budapest Convention on Cybercrime
- Convention on the development, design and application of artificial intelligence (*currently being drafted and important to have in mind for its future application and potential impact*)¹³²

European Union

- General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

¹³² Council of Europe, 'Council of Europe and Artificial Intelligence' <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/artificial-intelligence>> accessed 30 September 2023

