

FOLLOW-UP PROVIDED BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION
TO THE OPINIONS OF THE
EUROPEAN COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS
PLENARY SESSION OF OCTOBER 2021
98th REPORT

N°	TITLE / LEAD DG	REFERENCES
SG.E1		
<p>1. Opinion adopted during the plenary session of June-July 2021</p>	<p><u>European Democracy Action Plan</u> Rapporteur: Aleksandra DULKIEWICZ (PL/EPP)</p>	<p>COM(2020) 790 final COR-2021-01278-00-00-AC-TRA CIVEX-VII/008</p>
DG JUST		
<p>2.</p>	<p><u>Union of equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025</u> Rapporteur: Kate FEENEY (IE/RENEW E.)</p>	<p>COM(2020) 698 final COR-2020-05861-00-00-AC-TRA SEDEC-VII/015</p>
<p>3.</p>	<p><u>New Consumer Agenda Strengthening consumer resilience for sustainable recovery</u> Rapporteur: Alexia BERTRAND (BE/RENEW E.)</p>	<p>COM(2020) 696 final COR-2021-00407-00-00-AC-TRA NAT-VII/016</p>
DG JUST & DG EMPL		
<p>4.</p>	<p><u>The EU strategy on the rights of the child and the European child guarantee</u> Rapporteur: Jari ANDERSSON (FI/EPP)</p>	<p>COM(2021) 137 final COM(2021) 142 final COR-2021-02601-00-00-AC-TRA SEDEC-VII/021</p>
DG HOME		
<p>5.</p>	<p><u>A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: Anticipate, Prevent, Protect, Respond</u> Rapporteur: Karl VANLOUWE (BE/EA)</p>	<p>COM(2020) 795 final COR-2021-01900-00-00-AC-TRA CIVEX-VII/009</p>
DG CNECT		
<p>6.</p>	<p><u>European Digital Identity</u> Rapporteur-General: Mark WEINMEISTER (DE/EPP)</p>	<p>COM(2021) 281 final COR-2021-03686-00-00-AC-TRA ECON-VII/019</p>

DG REGIO		
7.	<p><u>Effectively engaging local and regional authorities in the preparation of the Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes for the 2021-2027 period</u></p> <p>Rapporteur: Juraj DROBA (SK/ECR)</p>	<p>Council Presidency referral COR-2021-02505-00-00-AC-TRA COTER-VII/012</p>
DG GROW		
8.	<p><u>Protecting Industrial and Craft Geographical Indications in the European Union</u></p> <p>Rapporteur: Martine PINVILLE (FR/PES)</p>	<p>Own-initiative COR-2021-02689-00-01-AC-TRA ECON-VII/016</p>

**N°1 European Democracy Action Plan
COM(2020) 790 final
COR-2021-01278 – CIVEX-VII/008
145th plenary session – June/July 2021
Rapporteur: Aleksandra DULKIEWICZ (PL/EPP)
SG – Vice-President JOUROVÁ**

Points of the European Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential	European Commission position
<p>The CoR:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – underlines that the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) should pay special attention to the activities of local and regional authorities, as they are well placed to take part in the war on disinformation and can play an important educational role, creating the conditions for local communities to develop good democratic habits; 	<p>The Commission agrees that engaging with citizens and civil society – including local and regional authorities and other actors – is essential in order to build trust and develop interest in European affairs and to better tackle disinformation.</p> <p>In this regard, the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) proposes a set of measures involving the local and regional authorities, such as (i) encouraging the use of EU funding to support civil society and build capacity and institutional/administrative infrastructure for deliberative civic engagement and political participation; (ii) use of EU funds and opportunities under the EU Youth Strategy, citizenship education, the Creative Europe Programme and the Union of equality agenda to foster access to democratic participation and trust in democracy; (iii) developing a structural dialogue with civil society, private industry actors and other relevant stakeholders to regularly review the threat situation; (iv) supporting new innovative projects to fight disinformation under various EU programmes, in particular by civil society organisations and higher education institutions, with journalists’ involvement; and (v) increasing support and funding for and diversifying initiatives, including by civil society organisations, to promote media literacy and help citizens identify disinformation, within the EU and beyond.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – stresses that the concern for free and democratic elections referred to in the 	<p>Democracy is a common value of the EU. Support for free and democratic elections in the EU is a</p>

<p>EDAP should apply in equal measure to European, national, regional and local elections;</p>	<p>shared objective among the national, regional, local and European levels of governance.</p> <p>Following its 2018 Electoral Package to support free and fair elections in the EU, the Commission established its European Cooperation Network on elections to bring together representatives of Member States' authorities with competence in electoral matters, and to allow concrete and practical exchanges on a range of topics relevant to ensuring free and fair elections, including data protection, cyber-security, transparency and awareness raising.</p> <p>The Network supports cooperation with other European level groups and bodies, thereby enabling mutual support and a wider and effective dissemination of relevant alerts and other information. Discussions include the various levels of election organised in the EU. At the same time, Member States remain primarily competent over electoral matters.</p> <p>Building on experience gained in 2019 elections to the European Parliament and delivering on the priorities announced in the EDAP and the 2020 EU Citizenship Report¹, on 25 November 2021 the Commission adopted further initiatives to reinforce democracy and integrity of elections. These include a proposal to update the Regulation on the statute and funding of the European political parties and European political foundations², two proposals updating the Directives on the electoral rights of 'mobile EU citizens' in the elections to the European Parliament and municipal elections,³ and a proposal for a Regulation on transparency and targeting of political advertising⁴. These proposals aim to further contribute to promoting free and fair elections at all levels, to protect the personal data of natural persons and to strengthen the internal market for the provision of political advertising</p>
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¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/eu_citizenship_report_2020_empowering_citizens_and_protecting_their_rights_en.pdf

² COM(2021) 734 final.

³ COM(2021) 732 and 733 final.

⁴ COM(2021) 731 final.

	services.
<p>– proposes drawing up a non-compulsory and non-binding for the Member States, Europe-wide curriculum for civic education, critical thinking and media literacy, which would be subject to public consultation and then adapted to respond to regional and local needs. This should cover school education, training of civil servants, lifelong learning and public campaigns. The CoR would like to play an active role in drafting this curriculum;</p>	<p>The Commission supports a number of EU initiatives, which promote the listed areas, including civic education, critical thinking and media literacy (see point 24). As highlighted in the European Democracy Action Plan and the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan,⁵ the Commission will support media literacy across various programmes and initiatives with the twofold aim of strengthening media pluralism and countering disinformation. In addition, the revised Audiovisual and Media Services Directive⁶ has set out measures to help improve citizens' media literacy skills.</p> <p>However, according to Articles 6 and 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) the issues pertaining to the content of teaching, including the curriculum for civic education, fall within the Member States' competence, hence the Commission is not in a position to put forward proposals in that respect.</p>
<p>– believes that a European agency should be set up, in close cooperation with the European Parliament's INGE Committee (Special Committee for foreign interference in all democratic processes in the EU, including disinformation), tasked with carrying out preventive measures to tackle disinformation, hate speech, intolerance, violence against specific social groups and the spread of conspiracy theories;</p>	<p>It is important to clearly distinguish between different phenomena, like disinformation and hate speech. Disinformation, information manipulation and interference in most cases are not illegal and need very specific approaches and responses. Hate speech as well as violence against specific groups is illegal in many contexts and therefore can be addressed also by legal instruments.</p> <p>Currently, a number of Commission services are involved in fighting disinformation at EU level, together with the European External Action Service (EEAS). Inter-institutional cooperation in this field is also being developed, notably via the Commission's Network against Disinformation and the EEAS' Rapid Alert System, or at working party level in the Council.</p>

⁵ COM(2020) 784 final.

⁶ Consolidated text: 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 (Audiovisual Media Services Directive) (codified version) (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02010L0013-20181218>).

	<p>In addition, the Commission is providing funding to the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), which is an independent body aiming at supporting the creation and the work of a cross-border and multidisciplinary community of independent fact-checkers and academic researchers, which will collaborate with relevant stakeholders to detect, analyse and expose potential disinformation threats. On September 2021, eight independent regional multidisciplinary hubs became operational. They are part of EDMO network of hubs on digital media to contribute to the fight against disinformation across Europe. In November 2021, the Commission issued a call for proposal for further grants to regional hubs, with the aim of expanding coverage to 100% of the EU population.</p>
<p>– highlights the fact that attacking the media undermines European values and puts us on the path towards authoritarianism;</p>	<p>The Commission undertakes a number of initiatives in the media sector with particular attention to defending its role in our democracy. The Recommendation on the safety of journalists⁷, adopted by the Commission on 16 September 2021, is one of the key deliverables under the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) and represents a very first instrument that the EU issues in the area of the journalists’ protection. It tackles online and offline threats and address in particular the situation of women journalists.</p> <p>The Commission is currently doing the necessary groundwork to conclude an EU initiative protecting journalists and rights’ defenders against abusive legislation (SLAPP).</p> <p>In addition to this, the Commission indicated in its Work Programme for 2022 that it will come forward with a proposal for a European Media Freedom Act.</p>
<p>– stresses that the trust of EU citizens in the</p>	<p>The annual Rule of Law Report provides an assessment of significant developments related to</p>

⁷ Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/1534 of 16 September 2021 on ensuring the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists and other media professionals in the European Union; C/2021/6650; OJ L 331, 20.9.2021, p. 8–20. (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:32021H1534>)

<p>work of the EU's most important bodies is an essential precondition for the development of a democratic European community. The predictability and credibility of the central institutions in the Member States requires those countries to respect the rule of law. In this context highlights the key role of local and regional authorities in strengthening citizenship. Local and regional authorities are the authority closest to citizens and the one that is most trusted.</p>	<p>the rule of law in all 27 Member States. It aims to promote the rule of law and to prevent problems from emerging or deepening, stimulating a constructive debate and encouraging all Member States to examine how challenges can be addressed and to learn from each other's experiences.</p> <p>The Commission appreciates the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in national debates on the rule of law and looks forward to continue the dialogue at EU level.</p>
<p>1. The CoR considers that, while the EDAP focuses on short-term defence mechanisms for safeguarding democratic processes, it should be followed up by a longer-term and more strategic approach for promoting European democracy at all levels and both in its representative and participatory democracy dimension. Such an approach could build on existing legislation and best practices already applied in the Member States at national, regional and local level and lead to the drafting of a European Charter for Democracy.</p>	<p>The EDAP contains a number of long-term, strategic actions. The Commission committed that it would review its implementation in 2023, a year ahead of the elections to the European Parliament, and reflect on whether further steps are needed.</p>
<p>5. The CoR underlines the need to create a catalogue both of threats to democracy and of innovative good practices for citizen participation. Regional and local authorities are best placed to do so; invites the Commission, the Parliament and the Council to take note of the recommendations of the 2021 EU Annual Regional and Local Barometer, which was published in October 2021.</p>	<p>The promotion of citizens' engagement in the implementation of EU funding is high on the Commission's agenda. It is of utmost importance that local and regional authorities also have access to training on and relevant information about fighting disinformation.</p> <p>The Commission is paying the utmost attention to the second edition of the Committee of the Regions' Regional and Local Barometer, which forms a useful complement to the July – August 2021 Eurobarometer survey on citizens awareness and perception of EU regional policy⁸ (including its corona response initiatives) that was published on 11 October 2021, at the start of the European Week of Regions and Cities. It is of utmost importance</p>

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/studies/pdf/eurobarometer_2021_report_en.pdf

	<p>that local and regional authorities also have access to training on and relevant information about fighting disinformation.</p>
<p>8. The CoR notes that EU membership not only comes with a set of freedoms and financial resources; it also means respect for fundamental values. Specific legal instruments are needed to enable swift and effective action with a positive impact on encouraging and, in extreme cases, forcing members of the European community to apply the principles of a democratic state and the rule of law. There are currently no such legal instruments. The upshot is that the action taken by the European Commission to deal with problematic decisions in some Member States is not very effective as outlined in the European Parliament resolution of 10 June 2021 on the rule of law situation in the European Union and the application of the Conditionality Regulation 2020/2092, to which the CoR fully subscribes; questions whether Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) responds adequately to these challenges.</p>	<p>The EU is based on a set of shared values, including respect for fundamental rights, democracy and the rule of law. Respect for the rule of law, as well as democracy and human rights, are seen by Europeans as amongst the EU's main assets. Safeguarding these fundamental values is a shared responsibility of all EU Institutions and all Member States. As guardian of the Treaties, the Commission will not hesitate to use all the tools at its disposal to uphold the rule of law throughout the Union.</p> <p>The Commission has a number of tools at its disposal to ensure the respect of the rule of law in all Member States and the protection of the EU budget, including infringement proceedings, the rule of law conditionality mechanism, and procedures under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU). The annual Rule of Law Report aims to promote the rule of law and to prevent problems from emerging or deepening, stimulating a constructive debate and encouraging all Member States to examine how challenges can be addressed and to learn from each other's experiences. Each tool in the rule of law toolbox has a different goal, aiming to promote, prevent or respond to rule of law issues.</p> <p>As regards procedures under Article 7 TEU, the Commission has called on the Member States concerned and the Council to invest in accelerating the resolution of the problems raised under these procedures, finding solutions that protect the rule of law and the values common to all the Member States. The Commission remains committed to supporting the Council in the continuation of the Article 7 procedures until a solution to the concerns raised is found and the issues at stake are resolved.</p>
<p>9. The CoR calls for strategic action and legislation as soon as possible to effectively</p>	<p>In the EDAP and in the Communication on Protecting election integrity and promoting</p>

<p>tackle problems in some EU countries, e.g. with regard to election security at all levels.</p>	<p>democratic participation⁹ adopted on 25 November 2021, the Commission announced a new joint mechanism for electoral resilience. It will be organised and coordinated through the European Cooperation Network on Elections to support deployment of joint expert teams and exchanges on issues such as the cybersecurity of elections and online forensics, in close cooperation with the Network and Information Systems Cooperation Group and the EU's Rapid Alert System.</p> <p>The Commission will continue to facilitate strengthened cooperation among Member States' competent authorities in addressing specific challenges (e.g. linked to election periods, elections observation, independent electoral oversight and effective remedies) and covering monitoring (including online), threat identification, capacity building, the operation of national elections networks and engagement with the private sector. Options for mutual support, including an online forum, joint training, pooled resources and expertise, as well as online monitoring capabilities, will be explored. Marking electoral processes or aspects of their administration as critical infrastructure could render these efforts more effective.</p> <p>In its Communication on protection of election integrity, the Commission announced that it will organise a high-level event bringing together various authorities to address the challenges related to electoral processes as well as empowering citizens to participate as voters and candidates in the democratic process. The Commission also committed that it would assess whether a legislative proposal for the protection of electoral infrastructure as critical infrastructure could be considered.</p>
<p>11. The CoR believes that the EDAP should pave the way for relations and contacts with non-EU partners who do not accept democratic</p>	<p>The EDAP foresees the further development of the EU's toolbox to tackle foreign disinformation, information manipulation and interference that</p>

⁹ COM(2021) 730 final.

<p>standards, in violation of fundamental human and civil rights. An example could be the EU's policy towards countries such as Russia, Belarus and China and the work of the East StratCom Task Force; notes the need to support democratic movements among neighbours, including through the Eastern Partnership.</p>	<p>would allow imposing costs on perpetrators, as well as strengthening the EEAS' strategic communication activities and taskforces.</p> <p>A core element of the mandate of the Task Forces is the support to independent media and civil society. Working with civil society and independent media in authoritarian regimes is inhibited by censorship, intimidation and, in some cases, harassment. Therefore, such cooperation also needs to go hand in hand with diplomatic responses to the authorities in such countries.</p>
<p>17. The CoR calls for steps to be taken to strengthen the EU's and Members States' authority, the credibility of public rule of law institutions, education and the role of local and regional authorities as incubators of democracy.</p>	<p>The Commission is fully committed to the rule of law. The rule of law is essential for the trust of citizens and businesses in public institutions. The annual Rule of Law Report examines the functioning of Member States' public institutions in the national systems of checks and balances.</p> <p>The Commission supports local and regional authorities as incubators of democracy. Local and regional authorities often host European outlets via public grants as in the case of the Europe Direct network; the Europe Direct centres are best placed to act as strong partners for the European institutions on behalf of their municipality or regional authority. The 424 centres forming part of this network are tasked with specific missions on active citizenship and contact with schools in their catchment areas, and on accessing and disseminating information about the EU towards the local media system.</p> <p>In particular, the project 'Building Europe with Local Entities', being launched in 2021, aims at creating the first EU-wide network of local politicians for the purposes of communicating Europe on the ground. This is the concrete realisation of the principle put forward by the Sibiu summit, whereby communicating Europe is a shared responsibility between EU Institutions</p>

	and the various levels of national governance.
<p>20. The CoR calls for emphasis to be placed on the education of Europeans who are responsible, tolerant, capable of compromise and able to seek peaceful resolution to conflicts. The coexistence of different views and attitudes provides a true "vaccine" against fanaticism, racism and ethnic conflicts.</p>	<p>Article 11 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights¹⁰ protects the right to freedom of expression and information. This right is not unlimited. It does not prevent states from sanctioning and even preventing genuine and serious incitement to violence and hatred.</p> <p>According to the Framework Decision on combating racism and xenophobia¹¹, EU Member States should criminalise public incitement to violence or hatred directed against individuals or groups by reference to race, colour, religion, descent or national or ethnic origin. The law does not criminalise speech that is critical of religion or simply offensive. It relates to threats or incitement to violence and hatred against a person or a group of person simply due to the person's ethnicity, religion or nationality.</p> <p>The Commission attaches great importance to academic freedom, which is enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union applicable to Member States when implementing EU law. The EU Human Rights and Democracy Action Plan for 2020-2024¹² requires the EU to '<i>Support action to protect academic freedom, the autonomy of education institutions, as well as their capacity to provide online and distance learning</i>'.</p> <p>The EU anti-racism action plan 2020-2025¹³ sets out a series of measures to step up action towards a truly anti-racist European Union. These measures comprise mainstreaming inclusion in education policies and making the Erasmus+ programme and the European Solidarity Corps more inclusive,</p>

¹⁰ Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union; OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, p. 391–407. (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12012P%2FTXT>)

¹¹ Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA of 28 November 2008 on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law; OJ L 328, 6.12.2008, p. 55–58. (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32008F0913>)

¹² <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=JOIN%3A2020%3A5%3AFIN>

¹³ https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combating-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/eu-anti-racism-action-plan-2020-2025_en

	which is also at the core of achieving the European Education Area by 2025.
22. The CoR warns against the radicalisation of society and the rise to power of populists who use disinformation. In order to fight disinformation, the target groups most vulnerable to its negative effects must be identified. Special protection should be given to young people, older people, national and ethnic minorities, immigrants and those who are digitally excluded. The European Commission should pay attention to regions and groups that are particularly susceptible to disinformation, both external and internal.	<p>The Commission is aware of the challenges related to disinformation, and the fact that one of its aims is to sow discord and divide societies, to deepen conflict in societies and weaken trust in democratic processes and institutions and endeavours to address this issue in its overall response.</p> <p>To this end, on 25 November 2021, the Commission adopted a proposal for a Regulation on transparency and targeting of political advertising, which prohibits certain kinds of targeting of political advertising and imposes strict transparency requirements when such targeting is used.</p>
23. The CoR takes note of the guidelines presented by the European Commission on 26 May to remedy the shortcomings of its Code of Practice on Disinformation. It is welcome that the Commission calls for “stronger and more specific commitments in all areas of the Code” and for improved monitoring methods in particular, and that it invites other platforms operating in the EU, private messaging services, and other players in the online advertising ecosystem to join the Code. However, the Commission's difficulty in verifying the veracity of the monitoring reports provided by the platforms and the absence of any sanction mechanism significantly hamper the effectiveness of this Code and call for further regulatory action at EU level.	<p>The monitoring presented in the Guidance¹⁴ will be one of the elements that will help in evolving the existing Code of Practice towards a Code of Conduct as part of the co-regulatory framework foreseen in the proposed Digital Services Act (DSA). Without prejudice to the final agreement on the DSA, the proposal sets minimum criteria for such a Code concerning key performance indicators, monitoring and reporting, as well as concrete solutions for sanctions and enforcement.</p>
24. The CoR proposes, in this context, drawing up a non-compulsory and non-binding for the Member States, Europe-wide curriculum for civic education, critical thinking and media literacy, which, along the lines of the CIVIS programme in Finland as a best practice, would be subject to public consultation and then	<p>As highlighted in the EDAP and the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan, the Commission will support media literacy across various programmes and initiatives with the twofold aim of strengthening media pluralism and countering disinformation.</p>

¹⁴ COM(2021) 262 final.

regionally adapted to respond to regional and local needs. This should cover school education, training of civil servants, lifelong learning and public campaigns. The CoR would like to play an active role in drafting this curriculum and calls on the European Commission to work closely with Member States and civil society organisations, taking into account the principle of subsidiarity and the allocation of competences.

Furthermore, the revised Audiovisual and Media Services Directive has set out measures to help improve citizens' media literacy skills including an obligation for Member States to promote measures for the development of media literacy skills and report on such measures to the Commission, and a provision for video-sharing platforms to put in place effective media literacy measures and tools.

Many other EU level education and youth initiatives include important activities in the listed areas, in particular: the European Solidarity Corps, Jean Monnet Actions, EU Youth Dialogues, and dedicated initiatives under the Digital Education Action Plan, such as the one to provide guidelines for teachers and educators on promoting digital literacy and tackling disinformation.

The Commission has also organised a series of campaigns and events in the context of the eTwinning annual theme 2021: 'Media Literacy and Disinformation'. The main objectives of the annual theme are raising awareness, developing knowledge (empowerment), and taking action.

The Erasmus+ programme supports several actions enhancing the mutual learning and exchange of good practices among the Member States including on issues related to citizenship education.

The new Working Group on Equality and Values under the Strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030)¹⁵ will promote the implementation of the Council recommendation on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching¹⁶, as well as the Council recommendation on key competences for lifelong

¹⁵ Council Resolution on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) 2021/C 66/01; OJ C 66, 26.2.2021, p. 1–21.

([https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=CELEX:32021G0226(01)))

¹⁶ Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on promoting common values, inclusive education, and the European dimension of teaching; OJ C 195, 7.6.2018, p. 1–5.

(<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32018H0607%2801%29>)

	<p>learning, including the competences on citizenship and democratic participation¹⁷, both adopted in 2018.</p> <p>The new Working Group on Digital Education: Learning, Teaching and Assessment (DELTA) will be consulted on the guidelines for teachers and educators on promoting digital literacy and tackling disinformation.</p>
<p>26. The CoR finds it regrettable that local authorities play a secondary role in combating the spread of fake news, often due to lack of expertise, skills and resources; calls for the creation of a coherent funding mechanism to tackle disinformation.</p>	<p>The Commission is currently conducting a number of initiatives with involvement of local players. As mentioned above, a network of independent European Digital Media Observatory regional hubs is being developed with the help of funding from the Commission and further funding is expected to finance additional hubs and achieve a full coverage of the EU.</p> <p>The Commission is committed to strengthening existing structures and cooperation mechanisms as part of its work to combat disinformation. With regard to cooperation with Member States, this includes the existing cooperation between the Commission’s European Cooperation Network on Elections and the EEAS’s Rapid Alert System against disinformation (RAS), which regularly brief each other and mutually support each other’s work.</p> <p>As announced in the Communication on protecting election integrity, the Commission will establish a new operational EU mechanism to support resilient electoral processes, to be organised and coordinated through the European Cooperation Network on Elections and in close cooperation with the Network and Information Systems Cooperation Group and the EU’s Rapid Alert System.</p> <p>The European Cooperation Network on Elections brings together national networks of competent authorities to exchange information and best practices to promote free and fair elections in the EU. Meetings of the network have included</p>

¹⁷ Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning; OJ C 189, 4.6.2018, p. 1–13. (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2018.189.01.0001.01.ENG)

	<p>representatives from local governments and funded projects involving local government, and participants in the Network are encouraged to disseminate its material widely. Meetings have exchanged on practices to combat disinformation, from supporting awareness-raising among citizens to the provision of training for particularly exposed persons such as political candidates and journalists.</p> <p>The Commission has also provided around € 10 million through its Rights, Equality and Citizenship programme from 2015 to 2020 to fund projects to support the participation of mobile EU citizens, which has included support for resilience against disinformation and to projects organised by local authorities.</p>
<p>27. The CoR welcomes the Security Union Strategy, with its focus on hybrid attacks by state and non-state actors, cyber-attacks, damage to critical infrastructure, disinformation campaigns and radicalisation of political narratives.</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the Committee's support for the Security Union Strategy. The Security Union agenda is progressing on all fronts. In June 2021, the Commission published the second progress report on the implementation of the EU security strategy¹⁸, outlining the work done so far. The success of the Security Union Strategy will rest on the quality of its implementation. This requires the full engagement of the national authorities and constant cooperation between all actors concerned with Europe's internal and external security, including EU agencies.</p> <p>In its Communication on protecting election integrity the Commission announced it would assess whether a legislative proposal for the protection of electoral infrastructure as critical infrastructure could be considered.</p>
<p>28. The CoR sees a need for debate on freedom of expression and what this means in relation to the internet; highlights the Paweł Adamowicz Award for promoting social inclusion, equal opportunities and respect for human rights and civil liberties and for tackling prejudice and xenophobia, jointly launched by the Committee</p>	<p>The Paweł Adamowicz Award aims at honouring those working with courage and integrity against intolerance, radicalisation, hate-speech, oppression and xenophobia and those who promote equal opportunities, social integration and fundamental rights.</p> <p>The promotion of equality through inclusion and</p>

¹⁸ COM(2021)440 final.

<p>of the Regions, the International Cities of Refuge Network ICORN and the City of Gdańsk as a concrete step in this direction.</p>	<p>accessibility, and non-discrimination is strongly featured in a number of Commission initiatives aiming at achieving a ‘Union of equality’, such as for example the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, EU Anti-racism action plan 2020-2025¹⁹, EU Roma Strategic Framework for equality, inclusion and participation for 2020-2030²⁰, LGBTIQ Strategy 2020-2025²¹, EU Strategy for the rights of people with disabilities 2021-2030²² and the EU Strategy to strengthen the application of EU Charter of Fundamental rights²³.</p> <p>Freedom of expression is an essential foundation of democratic societies, enshrined in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. The Commission carefully mainstreams the respect and promotion of this right in all policy and legislative proposals. The Commission DSA proposal of 15 December 2020 clarifies the roles and responsibilities of online platforms in addressing, amongst others, the dissemination of illegal content, including illegal hate speech as defined by the Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA²⁴ while fully protecting fundamental rights including the right to freedom of expression.</p> <p>Furthermore, as announced in the Communication on ‘2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade’, the Commission proposed on 26 January 2022 a European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles, with the objective of promoting and upholding EU values in the digital space and ensuring that digitalisation delivers benefits to all Europeans, and participation in the digital public sphere, including as freedom of expression, pluralism in the public debate, safeguarding fundamental rights online and</p>
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¹⁹ COM(2020) 565 final.

²⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/eu_roma_strategic_framework_for_equality_inclusion_and_participation_for_2020_-_2030_0.pdf

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/lgbtiq_strategy_2020-2025_en.pdf

²² <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8376&furtherPubs=yes>

²³ COM(2020) 711 final.

²⁴ Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA of 28 November 2008 on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law; OJ L 328, 6.12.2008, p. 55–58. (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32008F0913>)

	<p>protection against disinformation and other forms of harmful content. The Commission proposes that such declaration is solemnly and jointly signed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission.</p>
<p>29. Alongside local and regional authorities and civil society, the CoR considers that the media must also be involved. Due to their practical and professional experience, people active in the infosphere have a keen awareness of disinformation.</p>	<p>The Commission believes that independent media actors play a key role in combating disinformation. Through the European Digital Media Observatory, the Commission intends to create a strong European network of key stakeholders, including fact-checking and media organisations that are actively involved in debunking disinformation and empowering users.</p> <p>Several new projects financed through a pilot project with a budget of € 2.2 million has started in the end of the 2021. These projects aim at involving small size online media in actions to tackle disinformation campaigns. Moreover, through a new pilot project with a budget of € 900,000 the Commission will finance an action supporting the creation of a Professional Code for fact-checkers, which should help the growth of such organisation in Europe. The EU is also providing support to independent media outside its borders, who are key players in enabling a pluralistic information environment.</p>
<p>31. The CoR highlights the need to ensure full consistency between the EDAP, the Media and Audiovisual Action Plan and legislative discussions on the DSA.</p>	<p>The consistency and complementarity of the Commission legislative and non-legislative initiatives are systematically ensured. Legislative works on the DSA proposal were conducted in close cooperation with services responsible for both action plans – European Democracy Action Plan and Media and Audiovisual Action Plan.</p>
<p>32. The CoR calls for a directive on digital services, proposing a horizontal framework for regulatory oversight of online space and rules to ensure platforms' accountability in how they manage content, advertising and micro-targeting.</p>	<p>The Commission proposed in December 2020 a comprehensive set of rules in the DSA to clarify and rebalance the responsibilities of services that intermediate content.</p> <p>The DSA includes numerous due diligence obligations to curb the spread of illegal content. It further obliges service providers to be transparent</p>

	<p>on their content moderation policies and to apply them in a diligent, objective and proportionate manner, taking into account the rights and legitimate interests of all parties involved, including the applicable fundamental rights of the recipients of the service.</p> <p>The DSA will give users additional possibilities to exercise their rights, including when these decisions are based on platforms' terms and conditions.</p> <p>In terms of advertising, the DSA sets out numerous transparency obligations, including for targeting criteria as well as a specific co-regulatory regime through Codes of Conduct.</p> <p>The Commission, by means of its proposal for a regulation on transparency and targeting of political advertising, has recently put forward more specific transparency obligations regarding political advertising, including when targeting and amplification techniques are used.</p>
<p>34. The CoR condemns the use of SLAPPs (Strategic lawsuits against public participation) against the independent media, and calls on the Commission to put forward a proposal to protect journalists and civil society.</p>	<p>The Recommendation on the safety of journalists, adopted by the Commission on 16 September 2021, is one of the key deliverables under the EDAP and represents the very first EU instrument in the area of journalists' protection. It tackles online and offline threats and addresses in particular the situation of women journalists. The Commission calls on Member States and all stakeholders for their contribution to the effective implementation of the measures that the Recommendation proposes.</p> <p>The Commission is currently preparing an EU initiative that will protect journalists and rights' defenders against abusive legislation. This initiative is planned for the first half of 2022 and is one of the actions under the EDAP that aim at strengthening media pluralism and media freedom in the EU. It is intended to encompass civil society representatives, as they play a key role in upholding democracy in the EU by serving the public interest and are also vulnerable to such abusive forms of</p>

	<p>litigation.</p> <p>The Commission’s objective is to propose a comprehensive package of legislative and non-legislative measures. On 4 October 2021, an open public consultation²⁵ was launched to identify the problems in this area and get the public’s views on what needs to be done to tackle SLAPP.</p> <p>In addition, the Commission is preparing the European Media Freedom Act to safeguard media freedom in the EU, foreseen for adoption in 2022.</p> <p>Moreover, in delivering on this initiative, it is also essential to maintain a proper balance of the rights at stake of all parties concerned, including the right to access to the courts.</p> <p>.</p>
<p>35. The CoR warns against marginalising the independent press through the monopolisation and politicisation of the media, especially if this is done using European funds. It calls for better monitoring of funds dedicated to such activities; supports the involvement of the regions in the distribution of EU funds; supports the creation of complementary legislative measures – while respecting Member States' competences – aimed at strengthening the EU's ability to intervene to ensure that freedom and plurality of independent media continue to be a pillar of our democracy.</p>	<p>The Commission is stepping up its efforts in supporting the news media sector. The news initiative announced in the Media and Audiovisual Action plan will bundle different actions to support holistically the news media sector. Measures will foster a structured dialogue, enhancing competitiveness, unleashing innovation and connecting better with citizens. As part of these efforts, the new Multiannual Financial Framework has a dedicated envelope for media pluralism, journalism and media literacy worth an estimated €75 million under Creative Europe.</p> <p>Commission services are currently working on a proposal for a European Media Freedom Act, which would aim at proposing a mechanism to increase transparency, independence and accountability around actions affecting media freedom and pluralism.</p>
<p>36. The CoR stresses that attacking freedom of expression narrows the public debate; draws attention to the right to freedom of expression in academic, research and artistic work.</p>	<p>On 2 December 2020, the Commission presented a new Strategy to strengthen the application of the Charter of Fundamental Rights in the EU. In order to ensure that the Charter becomes a reality for all,</p>

²⁵ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13194-EU-action-against-abusive-litigation-targeting-journalists-and-rights-defenders_en

<p>Intimidation, smear campaigns, political pressure, financial restrictions and obstacles in accessing public funds threaten the activities of researchers, the media and NGOs, making it impossible to carry out their role of oversight; warns against attempts by some governments to limit the independence of research activities and resort to the use of sanctions based on vague and controversial criteria.</p>	<p>the Strategy sets out the direction of the Charter implementation for the next 10 years.</p> <p>The Strategy recognises that civil society organisations and rights defenders are vital for a healthy democracy and a society where people can enjoy their fundamental rights. It commits to take action against measures that breach EU law - including the Charter - which affect civil society organisations, and to support an enabling environment for civil society organisations, in particular through the new Union values strand of the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values programme.</p>
<p>37. The CoR stresses that the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) should be organised in as many European regions as possible and run from the bottom up, enabling diverse groups of citizens to take part in the debate and to participate; recommends that citizens' panels be recognised as a form of participation in the EU decision-making process.</p>	<p>The Conference on the Future of Europe is a fully inclusive, transparent, and, bottom-up, -exercise in deliberative democracy. In terms of scale and scope, it is unparalleled in its reach. The Conference crosses borders, languages, cultures and histories to give a voice to every citizen when it comes to EU policymaking. The Conference is for all citizens and generations, with a special focus on young people. Indeed the European Commission is committed to ensuring that citizens's input and participation remain at the heart of the Conference. It does not belong to any one person or institution. Its success ultimately depends on every partner playing their role fully. Local and regional authorities are key partners to this endeavour. The Conference is built on the 3 pillars of the platform, the panels and the plenaries. Its central hub is the multilingual digital platform, allowing a broad range of citizens to participate, irrespective of their backgrounds or geographical location and this has proven particularly necessary given the pandemic. Citizens, Member States, regional and local administrations and members of the Committee of the Regions are encouraged to organise events on topics of interest to them, to announce and report back on them through the platform, thus ensuring that the European Citizens' Panels and the Conference Plenary take into</p>

	<p>account the results of their deliberations.</p> <p>The President of the European Parliament, of the Council and of the Commission have committed to listen to Europeans and to follow up on the recommendations made by Conference, in full respect of competences and the subsidiarity and proportionality principles enshrined in the Treaties.</p>
<p>38. The CoR calls on the EU institutions to build effective, transparent and inclusive channels for reaching out to citizens, especially those discouraged from engaging in public and social life; underlines the key role of young people in this process.</p>	<p>The Commission is actively engaged in opening effective, transparent and inclusive channels for reaching out to citizens. In the media domain, this is achieved through the Union’s Multimedia Actions line, which aims to strengthen news reporting on EU affairs from pan-European points of view, as well as with pilot projects and preparatory actions. Calls worth € 12 million to stimulate a lively and diverse public sphere and promoting citizens’ access to reliable information across the EU are currently ongoing.</p>
<p>40. The CoR stresses that the concern for free and democratic elections referred to in the EDAP should apply in equal measure to European, national, regional and local elections.</p>	<p>The Commission supports free and democratic elections in the EU and considers it a shared objective among the national, regional, local and European levels of governance. In this regard the Commission undertook a number of actions, such as 2018 Electoral Package, establishment of the European Cooperation Network on Elections and the most recent Democracy Package of 25 November 2021.</p>
<p>41. The CoR notes that political campaigns are increasingly taking place online. There is therefore a need for rules ensuring transparency of sponsored political content and guaranteeing guidelines for political parties and Member States; calls for account to be taken of the specific features of local elections, which are often overlooked when drawing up EU-wide legislation.</p>	<p>The DSA proposal includes a number of important measures around transparency for all advertising, including political advertising. It will ensure that when users see an ad online, it is clear that it is an ad, clear which parameters are being used, and on behalf of whom the advertisement is displayed. For very large online platforms, there is a further obligation to make all ads available in publicly accessible ad archives allowing important research into targeting criteria, including for political advertisement.</p> <p>On 25 November 2021 the Commission presented its proposal for a regulation on transparency and</p>

	<p>targeting of political advertising. The proposal complements the rules on online advertising proposed in the DSA, with the aim of having dedicated rules in place sufficiently ahead of the May 2024 elections to the European Parliament. The transparency of political advertising initiative will be complemented by the strengthened Code of Practice on disinformation, in particular following the Guidance issued by the Commission²⁶.</p> <p>.</p>
<p>42. The CoR notes that the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) makes insufficient reference to the periods between elections. Disinformation, propaganda, manipulation and attempts to change people's attitudes occur most frequently at this time.</p>	<p>Most of the measures introduced in EDAP will be in place at all times, not only during the elections.</p> <p>For instance, this is the case of the initiative to increase the transparency of political advertising, where the Commission proposed the definition of political advertising in a broad sense, including political messages outside of electoral periods and not connected to specific political actors or the proposal on the financing of European political parties. These were both adopted on 25 November 2021 as part of the package on reinforcing democracy and election integrity.</p> <p>The Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) are working hand in hand on tackling disinformation. Through its Network against Disinformation the Commission services monitor and analyse the cases of disinformation as they occur in various Member States. The Commission is active rebutting false messages and pursuing policies empowering citizens to be more continues recipient of information. Another part of the Commission work focuses on working with platforms so that they are tackling disinformation in a more robust way. To help this aim, the Commission in May 2021 issued a Guidance on the Code of Practise on Disinformation. The revised Code will be signed in 2022 by the platforms.</p> <p>The EEAS work focuses on tackling foreign disinformation, information manipulation and</p>

²⁶ COM(2021) 262 final.

	<p>interference on a daily basis. Such activity occurs throughout the year, but may intensify during specific events such as elections or crisis situations. The EEAS is therefore further developing the situational awareness capacity of EU institutions and supports Member States to be better able to track, analyse and assess tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) of foreign disinformation, information manipulation and interference, share and compare results and collect evidence. This methodological framework would allow for better preparedness in understanding and responding to the threat at any time, not only in specific situations or contexts. Furthermore, the EEAS is constantly engaging with Member States through the Rapid Alert System (RAS) and with international partners (G7, NATO) in order to ensure a permanent information exchange on the threat level as well as on best practices in countering the threat.</p>
<p>43. The CoR stresses that the EU Structural Funds should be used to finance civil society activities and build the institutional and administrative capacity and structures needed for active public participation in political life. Access to funds should be as straightforward as possible, with funds managed as much as possible by the regions.</p>	<p>Administrative capacity-building across Europe and the promotion of citizens' engagement in the implementation of EU funding are high on the Commission's agenda, as part of the political priority 'A new push for Democracy'.</p> <p>This is particularly true of cohesion policy, whose design and implementation relies on the partnership principle.</p> <p>Moreover, the Commission is committed to increasing access to EU funds by making the information on funding opportunities more easily available, notably via its funding portal on Europa.²⁷</p>
<p>44. The CoR welcomes the fact that the Commission launched on 19 April 2020 a public consultation open until 12 July 2020. The goal was to present in the last quarter of 2021 updated directives aimed at supporting EU citizens who reside in another EU Member State with the right to vote and to stand as candidates</p>	<p>As noted in the Commission 2020 report on EU citizenship, mobile EU citizens have the right to vote and stand as candidates in municipal elections and European Parliament elections in their Member State of residence. Despite this, their turnout is frequently lower than that of citizens who are nationals of the country. This is partly due to</p>

²⁷ [Communicating and raising EU visibility | European Commission \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/communication/)

<p>in both municipal and European elections. Indeed, as also raised by the European citizens' initiative (ECI) on Voters without Borders, while over 14 million mobile EU citizens are eligible to vote, turnout rates and the number of mobile EU citizens standing as candidates continue to be lower than for comparable groups nationally and they still face difficulties in the exercise of their electoral rights.</p>	<p>complicated registration processes and insufficient voting options. On 25 November 2021, the Commission presented two proposals to recast the relevant directives to strengthen mobile citizens' ability to exercise their electoral rights. The proposals update, clarify and strengthen the rules in order to ensure that they support the broad and inclusive participation of mobile EU citizens. Areas covered include the provision of targeted information to mobile EU citizens, including on the deadlines, the implications and durability of voter registrations, the exchange of information on the registration of mobile EU citizen voters and candidates in European elections, and the necessary adjustments following Brexit.</p>
<p>45. The CoR warns that the pandemic has illustrated the challenges of conducting fully democratic elections against the backdrop of restrictions that limit them. The organisational and technological challenge, including in terms of cyber-threats, is ensuring the security of the postal and/or electronic voting process.</p>	<p>As set out in the Joint Communication on COVID-19 disinformation²⁸, the Commission has monitored the impact of emergency measures on democracy and has worked with the Member States, including in the framework of the European Cooperation Network on elections, to exchange good practices and adaptations to ensure free and fair elections in this context. The elections network has met four times virtually to support such exchanges since March 2020, and discussions have included the experience obtained by a number of Member States, which have organised elections in this period.</p>
<p>46. The CoR calls on the Commission to look for long-term instruments that will be able to stand the test of time and help the EU face new threats. The "democratic vaccine" we are looking for should be effective, innovative and efficient, and should strengthen our democratic infrastructure now and in the long run.</p>	<p>The Commission is committed to looking for long-term instruments that will be able to help the EU face new threats. In her political guidelines, President von der Leyen stated her intention to give a new push for European democracy, as more needs to be done to protect ourselves against foreign interference. Concrete actions have been presented in the EDAP. The Commission is carrying out regular and systematic monitoring of the actions presented in the Action Plan and will review them in 2023.</p>

²⁸ JOIN(2020) 8 final.

<p>47. The CoR stresses that full participation in public life is the cornerstone of a pluralist and democratic community, but this can only be achieved with citizens' trust in state institutions. There can be no participation without trust and this will not be possible without educating the public. The CoR sees an important role for local and regional authorities in this respect.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that engaging with citizens and civil society – including local and regional authorities and other actors – is essential for building trust and developing interest in European affairs. Such is the case, for instance, of the Conference on the Future of Europe, which is based on inclusiveness, openness and transparency, while respecting the privacy of people as well as EU data protection rules. It enables citizens to actively participate in their democracy and provides a safe public space for deliberation on the topics that citizens want to address as they look to the future European Union they want to live and work in. This innovative and necessary process is key to making our democracy fit for the future.</p> <p>In fact, the Committee and regional authorities are part of the Conference on the Future of Europe. The Conference strengthens representative democracy. It does not replace it. Deliberative practices yield better policy outcomes because deliberation leads to considered public judgements rather than public opinions. This helps enhance public trust.</p> <p>Local and regional authorities' promotion activities, events and ideas submitted through the multilingual digital platform contribute greatly to involving a wide range of citizens in the process.</p>
<p>48. Finally, the CoR points out that democracy and the rule of law will remain robust only if political leadership at all levels is accompanied by informed citizens.</p>	<p>Communication must be integrated from the start in policymaking. Communicating about the EU is a responsibility shared by EU institutions and Member States at all levels – at national, regional and local level. It cannot be taken lightly or treated as an afterthought. At its essence, it is about enabling citizens to make informed choices and participate fully in European democracy. EU institutions and Member States need to respond as one body that explains the EU's fundamental role and benefits.</p> <p>The ongoing Conference on the Future of Europe provides a unique and timely opportunity for European citizens to debate on Europe's challenges</p>

	<p>and priorities, including values and rights and the rule of law. The Conference is for all Europeans to debate a shared vision of what they want the Union to be. Participants will debate at the second panel ‘values, rights, rule of law, democracy, and security’.</p>
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<p>N°2 Union of equality: LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025 COM (2020) 698 final COR-2020-05861 – SEDEC-VII/015 146st plenary session – October 2021 Rapporteur: Kate FEENEY (IE/RENEW E.) DG JUST – Commissioner DALLI</p>	
<p>Points of the European Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p>17. The CoR urges the Commission to combat all forms of violence against LGBTIQ people, and asks for the adoption of measures aimed at preventing and combating violence against LGBTIQ people, including online violence, which could become normalised among younger people.</p>	<p>The Commission condemns any violence committed against LGBTIQ people. The LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025¹ includes as one of its four main pillars ensuring LGBTIQ people’s safety, which will be implemented, <i>inter alia</i>, by reinforcing legal protection for LGBTIQ people against hate crime, hate speech and violence.</p> <p>As announced in the Strategy, the Commission presented an initiative to extend the list of ‘EU crimes’ in Article 83(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) to hate speech and hate crime². A Council decision in this regard will enable the Commission to propose in the future minimum standards to criminalise hate speech and hate crime on other grounds beyond racism and xenophobia, including against LGBTIQ people.</p>
<p>33. The CoR calls on the Commission, national, regional and local governments to raise the visibility of youth LGBTIQ homelessness as the ultimate form of social exclusion and to develop youth care centres and shelters in their communities, following the examples of Krakow and Berlin;</p>	<p>The LGBTIQ Equality Strategy 2020-2025 acknowledges that LGBTIQ people, especially youth, are particularly at risk of experiencing homelessness.</p> <p>As announced in the Action Plan on the European Pillar of Social Rights³, EU Institutions and Committees, relevant Member States authorities, social partners and civil society organisations have jointly set up a European Platform on Combatting Homelessness. The Platform will contribute to launching a dialogue between the Member States,</p>

¹ COM(2020) 698 final (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/lgbtiq_strategy_2020-2025_en.pdf)

² COM(2021) 777 final, 9.12.2021.

³ <https://op.europa.eu/webpub/empl/european-pillar-of-social-rights/en/>

	<p>the Commission, and stakeholders active in combatting homelessness for enhanced collaboration, and to create a framework for mutual learning, so that innovative and successful policy measures can be shared and scaled up to make tangible progress.</p> <p>The diverse needs of the homeless, including LGBTIQ youth, will be considered in devising the work programme and activities of the Platform.</p>
<p>45. The CoR believes in the significant added value of its inclusion in the formation of the Inclusive Capital Initiative, and so again calls for its formal involvement each year when designating one or more European Capitals of Inclusions and in the Council of Europe governmental LGBTI focal points network.</p>	<p>The Commission has involved the Committee in the preparation of the European Capitals of Inclusion and Diversity Award 2022 and will continue to do so in the future. In addition, the Commission will continue to take part in the work of the Council of Europe governmental LGBTI focal points network as observer.</p>
<p>53. The CoR calls on the Commission to ensure that European funds are not granted where structural discrimination mechanisms exist, and that funding is suspended or withdrawn where this is subsequently found to be the case; believes that the demonstrated power of such measures, in combination with dialogue, can create a fully inclusive European Union.</p>	<p>As the guardian of the EU Treaties, the Commission will continue to make sure that, when implementing EU-funded programmes, the principle of non-discrimination is fully respected.</p>

N°3 New Consumer Agenda - Strengthening consumer resilience for sustainable recovery
COM(2020) 696 final
COR-2021-00407 – NAT-VII/016
146th plenary session, – October 2021
Rapporteur: Alexia BERTRAND (BE/Renew Europe)
DG JUST – Commissioner REYNDEERS

Points of the European Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential	European Commission position
<p>9. The CoR recommends that consideration is given to extending consumer protection against cancellations to other sectors, such as culture and events.</p>	<p>EU consumer law currently does not regulate the conditions for and consequences of cancellation of individual services, such as events, concerts or accommodation. The rights as a consumer depend on national law and the type and terms of the contract, including the stated cancellation policy of the service provider (e.g. refundable or non-refundable booking).</p> <p>According to the Unfair Contract Terms Directive¹, standard contract terms used by traders must be transparent and must not treat consumers unfairly, for instance, by unduly limiting the rights of consumers under the relevant national contract law.</p> <p>The Commission conducted an open public consultation² from June until October 2020 on the New Consumer Agenda initiative³, where it asked also whether the EU should harmonise these consumer protection rules for cancellation of services. Few respondents reacted in support of the possible harmonisation and the Commission is not planning to address this issue.</p>
<p>12. The CoR underlines the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and the importance of maintaining a high level of</p>	<p>As announced in the New Consumer Agenda, the Commission has started a review⁴ of the Package Travel Directive⁵.</p>

¹ Council Directive 93/13/EEC of 5 April 1993 on unfair terms in consumer contracts; OJ L 95, 21.4.1993, p. 29–34.

² https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12464-A-New-Consumer-Agenda/public-consultation_en

³ COM(2020) 696.

⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13117-Package-travel-review-of-EU-rules_en

⁵ Directive (EU) 2015/2302 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 November 2015 on package travel and linked travel arrangements, amending Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004 and Directive 2011/83/EU of the European

<p>consumer protection in times of crisis. In this regard, the CoR also recommends carrying out the necessary regulatory reviews in order to establish the consequences of exceptional circumstances in consumer contracts before the situation arises (rebus sic stantibus clause). Such an approach, taking into account the principles of anticipation and forecasting, would strengthen consumer protection.</p>	<p>The analysis should show whether there are any gaps or legal uncertainty in the Directive. The consequences of unavoidable and extraordinary circumstances emerging before the start of a package or during the performance of the package are regulated in the Package Travel Directive.</p>
<p>25. The CoR recommends assessing whether it would be worth implementing a scheme requiring prior authorisation for green claims and ecolabels based on the scheme used for healthcare.</p>	<p>As announced in the New Consumer Agenda, the upcoming initiative on empowering consumers for the green transition⁶ intends to address consumers' access to information on environmental characteristics of products, including their durability, reparability or upgradeability, as well as the issue of the reliability and comparability of such information. Moreover, the New Consumer Agenda announced an initiative on the substantiating green claims⁷. In the context of these initiatives, a variety of policy options and sub-options are being assessed. Based on the outcome of these impact assessments, the Commission will present its proposals to better regulate green claims on the EU market.</p>
<p>37. The CoR highlights the need to expand the Eco-Design Directive to include energy-related products, but also to extend it to a broader range of products with a high environmental impact and to set out measures for waste prevention.</p>	<p>Under the Sustainable Products Initiative⁸, the Commission intends to expand the Ecodesign Directive⁹ from energy-related products (covered under the current scope) to a broader range of products. Already, for energy-related products there are provisions on design for repair and reuse, software updates and durability, in product specific measures. The revised framework intends to enable setting such requirements that contribute to waste prevention (i.e., reparability, upgradeability, durability, ease of reuse, etc.) for</p>

Parliament and of the Council and repealing Council Directive 90/314/EEC; OJ L 326, 11.12.2015, p. 1–33.

⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12467-Consumer-policy-strengthening-the-role-of-consumers-in-the-green-transition_en

⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/smgp/initiative_on_green_claims.htm

⁸ https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/12567-Sustainable-products-initiative_en

⁹ Directive 2009/125/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 21 October 2009 establishing a framework for the setting of ecodesign requirements for energy-related products; OJ L 285, 31.10.2009, p. 10–35.

	<p>other products too. The products with high environmental impact and improvement potential are currently identified in multiannual Working Plans.</p>
<p>39. The CoR calls on the Commission, the Member States and local and regional authorities to direct financial incentives from the EU recovery plan towards guaranteeing long-term economic, social and environmental progress while reducing resource use, avoiding and removing hazardous substances and improving circularity of materials and systems.</p>	<p>The Regulation establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)¹⁰ requires National Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) (i) to have a lasting impact on the Member State concerned; (ii) to only contain investments and reforms that do not do significant harm to environmental objectives within the meaning of Article 17 of Regulation on the establishment of a framework to facilitate sustainable investment¹¹ (the principle of ‘do no significant harm’); and (iii) to allocate at least 37% of the each plan’s total allocation to climate change objectives and contribute to the green transition.</p> <p>Therefore, the RRF and RRP are expected to support long-term progress while reducing resource use, avoiding and removing hazardous substances and improving circularity of materials and systems. In particular, the ‘do no significant harm’ principle ensures that no significant harm is done to the environmental objectives of the circular economy, and pollution prevention and control. Furthermore, around 40% (or €177 bn) of the currently 22 positively assessed and approved plans’ total allocations support climate change objectives – well above the minimum requirement of 37% – which also positively contributes towards achieving the green transition, including a circular economy and removing hazardous substances.</p>
<p>44. The CoR points out that EU product safety legislation focusing on consumers' physical safety should be modernised in order to address security issues relating to connected objects (respect for personal data,</p>	<p>The Commission, as part of the review of the EU product safety framework, adopted in June 2021 its proposal for a new General Product Safety Regulation¹². This proposal addresses the main challenges of digitalisation and proposes to cover</p>

¹⁰ Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility; OJ L 57, 18.2.2021, p. 17–75.

¹¹ Regulation (EU) 2020/852 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 18 June 2020 on the establishment of a framework to facilitate sustainable investment, and amending Regulation (EU) 2019/208; OJ L 198, 22.6.2020, p. 13–43.

¹² COM(2021) 346 final.

<p>cybersecurity, reliability, transparency and consumer information).</p>	<p>the new risks stemming from new technologies, for example regarding connected objects. This proposal is fully aligned and complementary to the Commission's proposals for an Artificial Intelligence Act¹³ and for the revision of the Machinery Directive¹⁴.</p>
<p>61. The CoR recommends that, as part of the drive to combat over-indebtedness, the Commission analyse the feasibility of a corrective EU legal instrument for the collective settlement of consumers' debts, going beyond preventive measures; also calls for specific policies to be adopted to avoid practices that have been shown to be particularly damaging to the consumer (such as revolving cards), by causing indebtedness and weakening the consumers' position vis-a-vis other forms of credit.</p>	<p>The Commission made in 2016 a proposal, for the Directive on restructuring and insolvency¹⁵ (adopted in 2019). This Directive was transposed in 2021 by 4 Member States, whereas remaining 23 Member States used the option of extended transposition by 2022.</p> <p>Within its discharge of debt provisions, the Directive obliges Member States to discharge debts of honest entrepreneurs within 3 years from their declaration of bankruptcy and allows Member States to apply this discharge of debts also to consumers. According to the current information available to the Commission, most Member States intend to apply the 3 years' discharge also to consumers.</p> <p>On the practices in the area of consumer credit that can be dangerous or problematic for consumers, the aim of the proposed revision of the Consumer Credit Directive¹⁶ is, inter alia, to prevent irresponsible lending practices and over-indebtedness, so the Commission is in agreement with the Recommendation of the Committee.</p>

¹³ COM(2021) 206 final.

¹⁴ COM(2021) 202 final.

¹⁵ Directive (EU) 2019/1023 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on preventive restructuring frameworks, on discharge of debt and disqualifications, and on measures to increase the efficiency of procedures concerning restructuring, insolvency and discharge of debt, and amending Directive (EU) 2017/1132 (Directive on restructuring and insolvency); OJ L 172, 26.6.2019, p. 18–55.

¹⁶ https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/banking-and-finance/consumer-finance-and-payments/retail-financial-services/credit/consumer-credit_en

N°4 The EU strategy on the rights of the child and the European child guarantee
COM(2021) 137 final,
COM(2021) 142 final
COR-2021-02601 – SEDEC-VII/021
146th plenary session – October 2021
Rapporteur: Jari ANDERSSON (FI/EPP)
DG JUST and DG EMPL – Commissioners REYNDERS and SCHMIT

Points of the European Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential	European Commission position
<p>4. The CoR would like to take part in future dialogue about child and youth policy and cooperation with the Commission, the Council of the European Union, civil society, children's rights groups and other relevant stakeholders.</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the opinion of the Committee.</p> <p>The Commission will soon establish the EU Network for Children’s Rights¹, which will reinforce the dialogue and mutual learning between the EU and Member States on children’s rights, and support the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the EU strategy of the rights of the child. The Commission will consider inviting the Committee to selected activities of the Network, in particular those with a specific relevance for local and regional authorities.</p> <p>The EU Youth Strategy² is the framework for EU youth policy cooperation for 2019-2027. It fosters youth participation in democratic life; it also supports social and civic engagement and aims to ensure that all young people have the necessary resources to take part in society.</p> <p>During a 2017-2018 dialogue process with young people from all over Europe, 11 European Youth Goals were developed; they identify cross-sectoral areas that affect young people’s lives and point out challenges³.</p> <p>The EU Youth Strategy has a strong cross-sectoral approach and calls for mainstreaming youth as a priority amongst different policy areas. The</p>

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/rights-child/eu-network-childrens-rights_en

² COM(2018) 269 final.

³ https://europa.eu/youth/strategy/european-youth-goals_en

Strategy fosters youth participation in democratic life, in line with Article 165 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU. It supports social and civic engagement, and aims to ensure that all young people, within and beyond the European Union have the necessary resources to take part in society.

Several instruments, such as the EU Youth Dialogue, support the implementation of the EU Youth Strategy. EU Youth Dialogue (EUYD)⁴ is the dialogue with young people and youth organisations involving policy and decision makers, as well as experts, researchers and other relevant civil society actors. It serves as a forum for continuous joint reflection and consultation on the priorities, implementation and follow-up of European cooperation in the field of youth.

The EUYD is a key tool for youth engagement and participation from the EU Youth Strategy. It strives to bring together young people, youth organisations and decision makers, supported by experts and evidence.

Moreover, the EU Youth Strategy aims at contributing to realising this vision of young people by mobilising EU level policy instruments as well as actions at national, regional and local level by all stakeholders.

The EU Youth conference is a recurrent event organised by each Presidency, in the framework of the EU Youth Dialogue. Usually around 200 young people from the EU, youth delegates, representatives from Youth ministries, NGOs, researchers alongside other stakeholders and institutions like the Council of Europe take part. The aim of the conference is to create a platform for exchange between young people and those responsible for the implementation of youth policy on EU level.

One of the overall objectives of the EU Youth

⁴ https://europa.eu/youth/strategy/euyouthdialogue_en

	<p>Strategy is to contribute to the eradication of youth poverty and all forms of discrimination and promote social inclusion of young people.</p>
<p>11. The CoR points out that poverty and the social inclusion of different ethnic groups and marginalised communities must be addressed in order to ensure effective protection of children's rights, and that poverty and social exclusion can significantly constrain the future opportunities of children and their families.</p> <p>12. The CoR draws attention to the need for specific actions implemented that address this to be targeted primarily at the most disadvantaged children; quality education must be ensured for all children so that every child is guaranteed the same opportunities to develop their own potential.</p>	<p>The Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee⁵ targets children in need - those at risk of poverty or social exclusion. Within this group, the Recommendation encourages Member States to take into account specific needs of children facing additional disadvantages, such as migrant background or minority ethnic origin, particularly Roma, or children with disabilities. The Recommendation also calls on the Member States to address the territorial dimension of social exclusion, taking into account the specific needs of children living in rural, remote and disadvantaged areas.</p> <p>The Commission agrees that equal access to quality and inclusive education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty and social exclusion and securing equal opportunities for children. This is why the Recommendation recognises the importance of quality education and recommends Member States to ensure for children in need free and effective access to early childhood education and care, education and school-based activities.</p>
<p>13. The CoR emphasises the need to define good practices for reducing child poverty and to improve access to key children's services and the enforcement of children's rights; recommends here that local and regional authorities be included in efforts to raise awareness and share good practices across the Union, and suggests that international, national and regional conferences and study visits be organised to this end.</p>	<p>The Commission will work closely with Member States, the National Child Guarantee Coordinators and the Social Protection Committee to facilitate mutual learning, share experiences, exchange good practices and follow up on the actions taken by Member States to implement the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee. The Commission already held three meetings with the national Child Guarantee Coordinators and plans to organise subsequent meetings on a regular basis.</p> <p>Furthermore, as part of the mutual learning programme of the Social Protection Committee⁶,</p>

⁵ <https://www.europeansources.info/record/proposal-for-a-council-recommendation-establishing-a-european-child-guarantee/>

⁶ <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=758>

	<p>the Commission stands ready to organise a number of events to exchange good practice and help Member States to learn from each other. To this end, one of the thematic priorities suggested by the Commission within the peer review programme for 2022 is dedicated to the European Child Guarantee.</p>
<p>17. The CoR notes that businesses and social entrepreneurship can play a key role in implementing the European Child Guarantee, and points to the need to invest in developing this capacity, ensuring access to finance, and entrepreneurship training, at the same time, the development of educational institutions and social assistance systems in less developed Member States through EU funding is also essential for the implementation of the European Child Guarantee.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that social entrepreneurship and social economy in general can play an important role in implementing the objectives of the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee, as set out in the Recommendation, namely with regard to the enabling policy framework.</p> <p>The Action Plan for the social economy⁷, adopted by the Commission on 9 December 2021, puts forward a number of actions aiming at enhancing social economy stakeholders' ability to grow and maximise their positive social impact. For example, it will help mobilise more budget through InvestEU and increased support for social innovation. It will also help build capacity by offering tailored trainings and support to upskilling and reskilling of staff in social economy organisations.</p>
<p>21. The CoR notes that European, local and regional authorities are uniquely placed to take positive action to uphold the rights of children, to promote their development in a protective and respectful environment where they are treated well, and to act to ensure that children are protected from any form of violence, including abuse and neglect. Cooperation between local and regional authorities should be promoted and the EU should provide support for more effective partnerships between such authorities, in particular with a view to sharing good practice.</p>	<p>In the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the Commission announced that it will develop closer collaboration with regional and local authorities, as well as with other relevant institutions, regional and international organisations, civil society and ombudspersons for children.</p> <p>In particular, it will do so through the EU Network for Children's Rights, which will reinforce the dialogue and mutual learning between the EU and Member States on children's rights, and support the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the strategy. Representatives of local and regional authorities will be invited to join selected activities of the Network.</p>

⁷ COM(2021) 778 final, 9.12.2021.

<p>22. The CoR calls on the Commission and on Member States to guarantee that the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child is appropriately financed, ensuring that EU internal and external funding, as well as national budgets, adequately support implementation of the priorities set out in the strategy.</p>	<p>The Commission will make its best efforts for the actions foreseen in the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child to be appropriately funded, and will continue supporting Member States to make the best use of EU funds in their initiatives to protect and fulfil the rights of the child.</p> <p>The Commission recalls that an entire section of the EU Strategy is dedicated to the contribution of EU funds to the Strategy's implementation.</p>
<p>26. The CoR notes that children are to be duly considered in the next European semester policy framework.</p>	<p>The Commission will monitor the implementation of the Council Recommendation establishing a European Child Guarantee in the context of the European Semester, supported by the revised Social Scoreboard and its new headline indicator on children at risk of poverty or social exclusion.</p> <p>The Commission will address recommendations to the Member States with identified challenges, as appropriate.</p>
<p>32. The CoR welcomes the proposal for a Council recommendation on blended learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education, as well as for the Council recommendation on pathways to school success that aims to decouple educational attainment and achievement from social, economic and cultural status; supports the Commission's invitation to Member States to ensure effective equal access to digital tools and high-speed Internet connection, digital literacy, accessible online educational material and tools for all children; at the same time stresses the necessity also to include in the strategy the provision of devices and out-of-school support to children with special needs, living in poverty, in marginalised communities, such as migrant and Roma children, or in remote and rural areas, along with guidance and training in digital skills for socially disadvantaged children and</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the support for the Council Recommendation on blended learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education⁸, which was adopted in November 2021.</p> <p>In line with the Digital Education Action Plan⁹, the Council Recommendation proposes shorter-term measures to address the most pressing gaps caused by the COVID-19 crisis, while outlining a way forward for building more resilient education and training systems.</p> <p>The Commission agrees that equal access to digital infrastructure, digital skills and high-quality resources and tools are crucial to enabling inclusive and accessible digital education and training. It also recognises that many disadvantaged groups, teachers, and families were unable to continue work and learning during lockdown, which has increased the risk of child poverty and widened inequality in education and</p>

⁸ COM(2021) 455 final.

⁹ COM(2020) 624 final.

adolescents and their families; advocates for public financial support for digital equipment for the children concerned.

training.

The inclusion of all learners across all ages lies at the core of the Digital Education Action Plan, which outlines several initiatives addressing the issues mentioned above. For example, with Action 4, the Commission encourages Member States to make the most of EU support for enhancing access to the internet, as well as the purchase of digital technology, e-learning applications and platforms, including through the Recovery and Resilience Facility, and in particular for students from disadvantaged groups and for students and educators with disabilities.

As part of Action 7, the Commission is developing common guidelines to help teachers and educators to promote digital literacy and to address disinformation through education and training. With action 3, the Commission addresses the lack of high-quality digital education content and tools and puts forward the development of a European Digital Education Content Framework. Finally, to empower Europeans to develop basic and advanced digital skills through education and training, the Commission will develop a proposal for a Council Recommendation on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training¹⁰.

As announced Communication on ‘2030 Digital Compass: the European way for the Digital Decade’, the Commission proposed on 26 January 2022 a European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles. The proposed declaration states that children and young people should be protected and empowered online, and includes a commitments to promote a positive, age-appropriate and safe digital environment for children, to provide opportunities to all children to acquire the necessary skills and competences to navigate the online environment actively, safely and make informed choices when online, to

¹⁰ COM(2020) 624 final.

protect all children against harmful and illegal content, exploitation, manipulation and abuse online, and to prevent the digital space from being used to commit or facilitate crimes. The Commission proposes that such declaration is solemnly and jointly signed by the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission.

As announced in the Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the Commission will present an updated Better Internet for Kids strategy¹¹ in spring 2022 to address new and emerging challenges and empower children to safely and skilfully navigate the online world.

The Council Recommendation on blended learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education states that beyond the pandemic, a blended learning approach is an opportunity to improve the quality, relevance and inclusiveness of education and training, such as better learning provision in rural and remote areas, including the outermost regions and island communities. It also states that all environments and tools should be equally accessible to minority groups, children with disabilities and from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and do not lead to discrimination or segregation.

Furthermore, the Council Recommendation on blended learning for high quality and inclusive primary and secondary education includes recommendations to Member States for boosting the development of digital competences of learners and families and the digital capacity of the education systems by encouraging investment at school and community level in available devices, connectivity and by providing opportunities to boost digital skills. This includes supporting teachers with the new online tool ‘SELFIE for Teachers’¹² which allows primary and secondary school teachers to review their

¹¹ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/european-strategy-better-internet-children>

¹² [SELFIE for Teachers: new tool under development to support teacher digital capacity | Education and Training \(europa.eu\)](#)

	<p>digital skills and identify areas for improvement. Investments and reforms related to digital education are also foreseen in national recovery and resilience plans¹³ to ensure that all learners can access the necessary equipment and learning opportunities.</p>
<p>39. The CoR urges the European Union, its Member States and regions to step up measures to end all forms of violence and discrimination directed at children, including physical, sexual, economic and psychological violence, abuse, neglect, ill-treatment and online violence, forced marriage, trafficking of migrant children, torture, honour killings, FGM, incest, early school leaving, and use of children as soldiers.</p>	<p>The Commission echoes the position of the Committee on the need to increase efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against children. One of the six thematic priorities of the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child focuses precisely on this and announces several concrete actions to be implemented at EU level in this field.</p> <p>The EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (2021-2025)¹⁴ focuses on protecting, supporting and empowering the victims, including the special protection needs of children in migration.</p> <p>The anti-trafficking strategy provides that the Commission will enhance partnerships with non-EU countries to ensure that victims' rights are guaranteed during all the steps of the return process and that they receive specific, tailor-made assistance and protection upon return, including specific safeguards for children in migration. In order to tackle the situation in countries of origin and transit to Europe and outside, thematic and geographical EU funding will be mobilised along the priorities of the anti-trafficking strategy, giving specific attention to addressing the special protection needs of children in migration.</p> <p>Also in spring 2022, the Commission will table legislation to effectively combat online child sexual abuse and exploitation.</p>
<p>40. The CoR notes that the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child must take account of all regulatory and other initiatives relevant to</p>	<p>The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child is the policy document bringing under one coherent framework the main EU policy, legislative and</p>

¹³ Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility; OJ L 57, 18.2.2021, p. 17–75.

¹⁴ COM(2021) 171 final.

<p>children's rights, so as to ensure consistency in protecting children from violence, human trafficking and abuse. The Commission is also urged to publish a precise timetable for the proposals in question and to ensure that the recommendations are properly implemented.</p>	<p>funding instruments aimed at strengthening the protection and promotion of child rights in the EU. Several other policy frameworks are also contributing to this aim, through a strong mainstreaming of the rights of the child in other policy areas. Annex I to the Strategy provides an overview of the existing legal and policy framework on which the Strategy was built on.</p> <p>As regards the suggestion to develop a roadmap and timetable for the implementation of the Strategy, the Commission has already communicated the timing of some of the actions, while others are yet to be defined.</p> <p>In addition to the comprehensive actions of the EU Strategy on victims' rights (2020-2025)¹⁵ and the comprehensive EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child, the EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings (2021-2025) proposes measures to improve the situation of victims of trafficking in human beings, with a specific focus on children. The anti-trafficking strategy highlights that special attention should be paid to child victims and children at risk of trafficking, with systematic reporting and alerts on missing children for an early identification, referral procedures tailored to child victims, speedy appointment of guardians and effective free legal aid.</p> <p>The Commission will also enable targeted funding support to specialised shelters for victims of trafficking, including specialised facilities for trafficked women and children via the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and Internal Security Fund and promote gender sensitive and child rights based training for officers and all practitioners likely to come into contact with victims.</p>
<p>42. The CoR calls on the Commission and the Member States to promote accurate information</p>	<p>The Commission is convinced that vaccination is a basic element of childcare. It therefore supports</p>

¹⁵ COM(2020) 258 final.

about vaccination in order to improve trust in the vaccination strategy and ensure that children's health is not negatively affected by the consequences of disinformation.

Member States in achieving or maintaining high vaccination coverage rates for public health reasons, including for childhood vaccines.

Vaccines authorised for use in the European Union are safe and effective in preventing diseases. Vaccines can only be approved and used if they comply with all the requirements of quality, safety and efficacy set out in the EU pharmaceutical legislation. It is important that information on the correct use of the vaccine is available. For all vaccines the information on the authorised use, including whether it is authorised for use in children and known side effects, are included in the product information associated with the vaccine. Once a medicine has been authorised for use in the EU, the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the EU Member States monitor its safety and take action, such as updating the product information, if new evidence indicates a change in its safety and efficacy.

Nonetheless, an increasing number of false and misleading narratives makes it difficult for citizens to make fully informed decisions about their health. As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, misinformation, disinformation and foreign interference is harmful and can even cost lives.

The fight against disinformation is a joint effort involving all EU institutions. In addition to facilitating the provision of information from authoritative sources, *inter alia* through the European Vaccination Information Portal¹⁶, the EU is working in close cooperation with online platforms to encourage them to promote authoritative sources, demote false or misleading content and take down content that could cause physical harm, in line with the self-regulatory Code of Practice on Disinformation¹⁷. Moreover, the

¹⁶ <https://vaccination-info.eu/en>
<https://www.who.int/teams/regulation-prequalification/regulation-and-safety/pharmacovigilance/vaccine-safety-net/vsn-members/european-vaccination-information-portal>

¹⁷ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_4945

	<p>Commission works with health care professionals in the Coalition on Vaccination¹⁸ supporting them as trusted informants regarding all types of vaccination. To increase the uptake of vaccines, including childhood vaccines, the Commission will step up its efforts to implement, together with Member States, the Council Recommendation on strengthened cooperation against vaccine-preventable diseases from 2018¹⁹.</p> <p>Under the EU4Health programme²⁰, a number of projects aim at further raising awareness of mis- and disinformation, improving health literacy and societal resilience. Specific material is under preparation to support teachers and teenagers to increase confidence in vaccination and raise awareness of the benefits.</p> <p>Given the rapidly changing nature of the information space, the Commission has also announced further initiatives to improve the capabilities to detect, analyse and expose disinformation under the European Democracy Action Plan²¹.</p> <p>The Commission is also supporting three large Research and Innovation actions to address low vaccine uptake and concerns about vaccinations among parents and health professionals, and ultimately improve vaccination coverage particularly among children and young adults.</p> <p>Three large consortia RIVER-EU, VAX-TRUST and JITSUVAX recently supported by Horizon 2020 with a total Commission contribution over € 9 million, are developing and testing interventions that should aid healthcare professionals and policy makers to improve vaccination uptake in the population, with special</p>
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¹⁸ <https://www.pgeu.eu/publications/coalition-for-vaccination/>

¹⁹ Council Recommendation of 7 December 2018 on strengthened cooperation against vaccine-preventable diseases; OJ C 466, 28.12.2018, p. 1–7.

²⁰ Regulation (EU) 2021/522 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 March 2021 establishing a Programme for the Union’s action in the field of health (‘EU4Health Programme’) for the period 2021-2027, and repealing Regulation (EU) No 282/2014; OJ L 107, 26.3.2021, p. 1–29.

²¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en

	<p>attention to children and adolescents.</p> <p>RIVER-EU²² is identifying the barriers of vaccination and successively will develop, test and implement new strategies with the overall aim to improve access to vaccination services for children and adolescents, reducing inequity and improving vaccine uptake of human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination and measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccination in underserved communities (of children and young adults).</p> <p>VAX-TRUST's²³ goal is to understand better vaccine hesitancy among parents and health care professionals (HCPs), and to develop evidence-based interventions to aid healthcare professionals in the challenges that they face through vaccine hesitancy. The project will generate recommendations to increase vaccine coverage in specific regional settings of Europe in seven countries (Finland, Belgium, Poland, Czech Republic, Italy, Portugal, and UK).</p> <p>The objective of the third project, JITSUVAX²⁴, is to leverage misinformation about vaccinations into an opportunity by training HCPs, thereby neutralizing misinformation among HCPs and enabling them to communicate more effectively with patients.</p>
<p>57. The CoR encourages the European Union and its Member States to step up the promotion of dialogue between national decision-makers and young people. In this regard, proposes the organisation of joint workshops, in cooperation with the local authorities, aimed at involving young people in decision making and taking into account their views regarding policy developments that concern them.</p>	<p>As regards the participation of children and adolescents below the age of 18, the Commission will establish in 2022 the EU Children's Participation Platform (CPP). The CPP will give the opportunity to bring together existing child participation mechanisms (e.g. national children's parliaments; children city councils; children's boards advising international non-governmental organisations, etc.) and work towards a more systemic, coherent, meaningful, inclusive and safe approach to child participation.</p> <p>Participating mechanisms will have the</p>

²² <https://eurohealthnet.eu/publication/river-eu-2021-2026/>

²³ <https://vax-trust.eu/>

²⁴ <https://jitsuvax.notion.site/jitsuvax/JITSUVAX-97638f0709a249f18de1f3e036526600>

opportunity to be connected with one another, as well as a direct contact with the EU institutions, which will be able to tap into the experience of existing child participation mechanisms to better involve children in EU decision-making processes. The activities of the CPP will contribute to a spill over effect by which child participation will become more used and supported at local, national and EU level.

The Conference on the Future of Europe has also a strong focus on young people. One third of its active participants, including in the European Citizens Panels are between 16 and 25 years of age.

N°5 A Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU: Anticipate, Prevent, Protect, Respond
COM(2020) 795 final
COR-2021-01900 – CIVEX-VII/009
146th plenary session – October 2021
Rapporteur: Karl VANLOUWE (BE/EA)
DG HOME – Commissioner JOHANSSON

Points of the European Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential	European Commission position
24. The CoR calls on the Commission to be included as a full partner in the EU Pledge on Urban Security and Resilience and for it to always be consulted on relevant proposals.	The Commission welcomes the support provided by the Committee and will closely involve it as appropriate, in accordance with the Committee’s competence, in the EU Pledge on Urban Security and Resilience and the related initiatives.
40. The CoR stresses the added value of the pilot EU Centre of Expertise for Victims of Terrorism, and calls for it to be continued and expanded beyond 2021 in order to carry out further practical work on the ground.	In January 2020, the Commission set up an EU Centre of Expertise for Victims of terrorism (EU Centre ¹) as a two-year pilot project on the request of the European Parliament. To date, the activities of the EU Centre have proven to be successful. In particular, the EU Handbook on victims of terrorism ² , national handbooks, trainings for national authorities and victim support organisations and the virtual Hub of expertise. The Commission is currently reflecting on how to continue funding some of the activities of the EU Centre beyond 2021.
33. Stresses the need for cross-border and cross-sectoral cooperation in combating terrorism, calls for close cooperation between regional and national law enforcement authorities and Europol, highlights the added value of the relevant CEPOL training.	<p>The Commission has proposed to strengthen Europol’s mandate and welcomes again the positive opinion, which the Committee has issued in that regard. The Commission will also propose a police cooperation package to improve cross-border cooperation between Member States, and strengthen the link between regional and national police cooperation in that context.</p> <p>The Commission takes note of the Committee’s appreciation for the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL’s) activities.</p>

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/criminal-justice/protecting-victims-rights/eu-centre-expertise-victims-terrorism_en

² https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/law/eu_handbook_on_victims_of_terrorism_december_2021_en.pdf

<p>25. The CoR stresses that EU cohesion policy funds can also be used to prevent radicalisation and upgrade public infrastructure through investments aimed at social cohesion, integration and resilience.</p>	<p>The Commission fully supports a stronger deployment of EU cohesion policy funds to prevent radicalisation. The use of these funds is Member-State driven, being under the so-called shared management, therefore the Commission can focus on raising awareness among Member States on these opportunities.</p>
<p>19. The CoR welcomes the Commission's commitment to support the further development of national networks of relevant actors, looks forward to the proposal on setting up an EU Knowledge Hub on prevention of radicalisation which, in addition to disseminating knowledge and expertise, should also promote the optimal use of funding opportunities under the various EU programmes.</p>	<p>The Commission welcomes the support of the Committee and has already started engaging in dedicated exchanges with Member States to gradually identify with them the possible scope and nature of such an endeavour.</p>

N°6 European Digital Identity
COM(2021) 281 final
COR-2021-03686 – ECON-VII/019
146st plenary session –October 2021
Rapporteur-General: Mark WEINMEISTER (DE/EPP)
DG CNECT – Commissioner BRETON

Points of the European Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential	European Commission position
<p>9. The CoR emphasises the need to ensure that all users are autonomous and not subject to discrimination, and therefore recommends that the Communication state clearly that there must be no indirect coercion to use the European Digital Identity Wallet when services are offered to natural persons. It is a matter of principle that use is a voluntary act.</p>	<p>The Commission proposal establishing a framework for a European Digital Identity¹ (eID proposal, which amends the existing eIDAS Regulation²) makes the use of the European Digital Identity Wallet voluntary for the user. As set out in the new Article 6a of the eIDAS Regulation introduced by the eID proposal³, the European Digital Identity Wallet is an enabler allowing users to securely request and obtain, store, select, combine and, in a manner that is transparent and traceable by the user, the necessary legal person identification data to authenticate online and offline in order to use online public and private services.</p> <p>The proposal also makes it clear that the acceptance of the European Digital Identity Wallet by relying parties shall be in addition to the acceptance of other electronic identification means for access to online public and private services, as set out in Article 12b.</p>
<p>12. The CoR urges that provision be made in the proposal for the use of digital identities by minors or in cases where responsibility lies with a guardian or carer, as well as for dealing with digital identities when somebody dies.</p>	<p>When it comes to the use of digital identities by minors and to whom the Digital Identity Wallets shall be issued, national rules apply. Some Member States issue electronic identities to persons above a certain age. Other Member States issue special electronic identity means to minors.</p>

¹ COM(2021) 281 final (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021PC0281>).

² Regulation (EU) No 910/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 July 2014 on electronic identification and trust services for electronic transactions in the internal market and repealing Directive 1999/93/EC; OJ L 257, 28.8.2014, p. 73–114.

³ All references to articles numbers in the rest of this text refer to the text of the eIDAS Regulation as amended by the eID proposal.

	<p>In all cases when national rules prevent the issuing of the European Digital Identity Wallet to a minor, a European Digital Identity Wallet may in such circumstances be issued to a parent or a legal guardian. The European Digital Identity Framework will allow a parent or another guardian to act on behalf of a minor relying on the use of electronic attestations of attributes in accordance with section 9 of the eIDAS Regulation as amended by the eID proposal. The right to act on behalf of minors or someone else entirely can be electronically verified against authentic sources in Member States.</p> <p>In cases when somebody has died, the issuing Member State can revoke the specific instance of the wallet issued to that person.</p>
<p>16. The CoR advises that, when it comes to the ID used for access by economic operators, the authorisation check should be designed with a secured certificate whose validity is of limited duration or cyclical.</p>	<p>The Commission fully agrees that the validation check of the European Digital Identity Wallet must be secure and based on technologies such as Public Private Key certificates whose validity are limited in time or cyclical to avoid fraud.</p> <p>To ensure that the authenticity and the validity of the European Digital Identity Wallet can be verified, Member States will have to provide a validation mechanism for the European Digital Identity Wallets in accordance with Article 6a (5).</p> <p>In accordance with Article 6a (11), implementing acts would be adopted by the Commission establishing the technical and operational specifications and standards for these requirements.</p> <p>The proposal provides for the possibility to suspend the issuance and revoke the validity of the European Digital Identity Wallet and inform the other Member States and the Commission accordingly in cases of security breaches, in accordance with Article 10a.</p> <p>In all other cases, the certification requirements set out in Article 6c should ensure that the validity of the European Digital Identity Wallet is limited</p>

	<p>in time, either as a result of sector-specific requirements (cybersecurity) or in view of similar requirements applicable to the Qualified Signature Creation Devices and certificates for electronic signatures. For example, Article 30 sets out that the certification of qualified services for the management of remote electronic signature creation devices shall be valid for five years, conditional upon a regular two-year vulnerability assessment..</p>
<p>21. The CoR suggests that the implementation, particularly in the start-up phase, should be configured incrementally. This is important because the hitherto partly unregulated economy is sometimes being involved for the very first time in the use of electronic identities at the assurance levels "substantial" to "high" as the current eIDAS environment evolves.</p>	<p>The Commission takes note of the suggestion that the implementation of the European Digital Identity Framework should be incremental. Indeed, the proposal provides for Article 12b that, in a first instance, only those industries that have the infrastructure to do so and that are obliged to accept it by law should be subject to the obligation to accept the wallet.</p> <p>When it comes to the so-called unregulated economy, the development of self-regulatory codes of conduct shall be encouraged, in accordance with Article 12b (4) . These codes of conduct shall ensure acceptance of electronic identification means, including European Digital Identity Wallets, in particular by service providers relying on third party electronic identification services for user authentication.</p> <p>A similar incremental approach has been applied to the verification of electronic attestations of attributes against authentic sources.</p>
<p>22. The CoR warns against hasty implementation of a European Digital Identity Wallet solution because of the technical risks inherent in the centralised storage of identity data in a mostly mobile application. Such a solution will undoubtedly be seen as a prime target for a wide range of cyberattacks and must therefore be able to fend off the threats at</p>	<p>The Commission fully shares the concerns raised about the potential threat of cyberattacks. That is why the proposal specifically requires that the European Digital Identity Wallet and its relevant components will have to be issued under a cybersecurity scheme pursuant to the Regulation on ENISA and on information and communications technology cybersecurity certification⁴. When it comes to the storage of the</p>

⁴ [Regulation \(EU\) 2019/881](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on ENISA (the European
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<p>any particular moment.</p>	<p>data, as well as other aspects of the functioning of the European Digital Identity Wallets, the Commission ensures close cooperation with EU Member States based on the Recommendation on a common Union Toolbox⁵ for a coordinated approach towards a European Digital Identity Framework, adopted along with the eID proposal. This structured process of cooperation aims to ensure that Member States agree on a toolbox including a technical architecture and reference framework, a set of common standards and technical references and a set of guidelines and descriptions of best practices for implementing the European Digital Identity Wallet. The toolbox should cover all aspects of the functionality of the European Digital Identity Wallets and of the qualified trust service for attestation of attributes as set out in the eID proposal.</p>
<p>4. The CoR calls for clear data protection provisions in the Commission's proposal for a European Digital Identity, which should adhere to the principles set out in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), notably data economy, data privacy and adequate justification, and also ensure that users will be able to control which data they want to share and with whom.</p>	<p>The adherence to the data protection principles set out in the General Data Protection Regulation⁶ is one of the fundamental aspects of the eID proposal. One of its core principles is that the user shall be in full control of the wallet and the identity data linked to it. Specific safeguards have been introduced to that end.</p> <p>Regarding Member States issuing the wallet, Article 6a(7) sets out that they shall not collect information about the use of the wallet which is not necessary for the provision of the wallet services, nor shall the issuer combine person identification data and any other personal data stored or relating to the use of the European Digital Identify Wallet with personal data from any other services offered by the issuer or from third party services which are not necessary for</p>

Union Agency for Cybersecurity) and on information and communications technology cybersecurity certification and repealing Regulation (EU) No 526/2013 (Cybersecurity Act); OJ L 151, 7.6.2019, p. 15–69.

⁵ C(2021) 3968: Commission Recommendation of 3.6.2021 on a common Union Toolbox for a coordinated approach towards a European Digital Identity Framework (<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/trusted-and-secure-european-e-id-recommendation>).

⁶ 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); OJ L 119, 4.5.2016, p. 1–88.

	<p>the provision of the wallet services, unless the user has expressly requested it.</p> <p>Furthermore, personal data relating to the provision of European Digital Identity Wallet shall be kept physically and logically separate from other data held.</p> <p>Similarly, strict requirements have also been set out for the providers of electronic attestations of attributes in accordance with Article 45f.</p> <p>The reason for setting out, in Article 6b, that relying parties who intend to rely upon European Digital Identity Wallets shall communicate it to the Member State where the relying party is established, is partly to ensure that, despite the other safeguards introduced by the eID proposal in the eIDAS Regulation, fraudulent consumption of personal data can be limited.</p> <p>Finally, compliance with the data protection requirements and the personal data processing operations carried out by the issuers of the European Digital Identity Wallets shall be certified pursuant to the Regulation on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data⁷.</p>
<p>8. The CoR recommends that the development and deployment of the European eID and the European Digital Identity Wallet should be carried out with a view to providing services with real cross-border added value for citizens.</p>	<p>Services with real cross-border value for citizens will be key to the use and uptake of the European Digital Identity Wallets. The pilot and use cases envisaged under the toolbox process will therefore focus on cases that can be easily deployed (maturity) and cases that can provide the most cross-border value for citizens as well as businesses. For example, use cases may include the use of the European Digital Identity Wallet to sign electronically using qualified electronic signatures, e-prescriptions, digital travel credentials, sharing diplomas and/or making</p>

⁷ [Regulation 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); OJ L 119, 4.5.2016, p. 1–88.

	payments.
<p>11. The CoR calls for a simple recommendation for the design that, in the nature of a toolbox, goes beyond mere data protection and accessibility and also enables people with minor impediments or lack of language knowledge to use the European Digital Identity Wallet (e.g. by more use of pictograms).</p>	<p>In line with the overall ambition of the proposal to make the European Digital Identity Wallet available to all, the Commission, together with Member States, will explore how the wallet can be designed to ensure maximum usability of the wallet by all users.</p> <p>Notably, Article 6b (10) provides that the European Digital Identity Wallet shall be made accessible in accordance with the accessibility requirements of Annex I of the Accessibility Directive⁸.</p> <p>This includes requirements that should enable people with minor impediments or lack of language knowledge to use the wallet, i.e. by requiring that operation, information, control and orientation is provided via more than one sensory channel (e.g. alternatives to vision, auditory, speech and tactile elements).</p>
<p>15. The CoR calls for account to be taken of two existing and substantively competing business models where use of the European Digital Identity Wallet in the economic sphere is concerned.</p> <p>These are, on the one hand, the major global social networks, which have a valid interest in getting their pseudonym accounts verified, possibly by a public institution. This would, however, undermine the freedom to use the internet and further drive users from its protected area into the dark web. The Committee of the Regions can see no interest in this.</p> <p>On the other hand, there are identity providers who make offers competing with the European Digital Identity Wallet and in order to do so also want to use an identity validated by a</p>	<p>The European Digital Identity Wallets will be a voluntary tool enabling users to rely on a common European Framework for sharing identity data under the user's full control to access online public and private services. It will provide users with an alternative to the use of social log-in mechanisms. It will also give relying parties a high level of assurance with respect to the identity of a person, thereby promoting the use of the wallet above the acceptance of social media log-ins provided by large global social networks. Only Member States can guarantee the legal identity of a person, so for all use cases relying on a high level of assurance in the identity of a person, the use of social log-ins is not an option.</p> <p>At national level, there are electronic identity schemes supported by governments providing access to public as well as private online services. A number of these schemes have been notified in</p>

⁸ [Directive 2019/882](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 April 2019 on the accessibility requirements for products and services; OJ L 151, 7.6.2019, p. 70–115.

<p>public institution.</p>	<p>accordance with the eIDAS Regulation, allowing cross border authentication for access to online public services.</p> <p>Identity providers may compete with the wallet for access to cross-border online public services in the circumstances covered by the rules on mutual recognition of national schemes in accordance with the current legal framework.</p> <p>The European Digital Identity Wallets will have to rely on such solutions for on boarding of personal identity data. However, only the wallet providers issuing European Digital Identity Wallets in accordance with the European Digital Identity Framework will be able to deliver a solution to all Europeans for access to public as well as private services.</p>
<p>16. The CoR advises that, when it comes to the ID used for access by economic operators, the authorisation check should be designed with a secured certificate whose validity is of limited duration or cyclical. The CoR welcomes similar considerations regarding trust service providers, but points out that the justification for the demand for data from the European Digital Identity Wallet by institutions or organisations must also be protected from abuse.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that the infrastructure to be deployed for the use of the European Digital Identity Wallet by economic operators has to ensure the highest level of protection against abuse. It must be possible for Member States issuing the wallets to immediately revoke the possibility to rely on the wallet in cases of fraud. That is precisely why the Commission has proposed for Article 6b that relying parties shall communicate their intention to rely on the wallet and the intended use of it.</p> <p>When it comes to the use of specific technologies such as secured certificates, Member States will agree on the most appropriate technical solutions in line with established international standards in the context of the toolbox process set out in the Commission Recommendation mentioned above.</p>
<p>18. The CoR strongly recommends that the recommendation to Member States referred to in the Commission's legislative proposal to develop a common toolbox for a coordinated approach to creating the necessary technical framework for the EUid draws heavily on national expertise.</p>	<p>The Commission agrees that national expertise and building on best practices is key to the success of the European Digital Identity Framework. That is why the structured process for cooperation between Member States and the Commission to develop the toolbox fully relies on national expertise. This collaboration with and between</p>

<p>This should include current examples of best practice, such as the outcomes and experience of Germany's "Digital Identities" and "Secure Digital Identities Showcase" projects.</p>	<p>Member States is also necessary for the exchange of best practices and to ensure that the European Digital Identity Framework can rely, as much as possible, on relevant national solutions and initiatives.</p>
<p>20. The CoR calls for the staffing and monetary costs of implementation in the Member States and in local and regional authorities to be taken into account in the overall planning. The European Digital Identity Wallet will be successful if it can be used often enough.</p> <p>National administrations at all levels play a key role here, alongside business. They are increasingly involved by virtue of their own actions, but also through Commission initiatives. The EU Services Directive and the EU Single Digital Gateway make valuable contributions to the digitalisation of the EU single market.</p>	<p>The Commission fully agrees that the costs of implementation have to be taken into account and that the Wallet will only be successful if it can be used often enough. With this in mind, in addition to the legal obligations to accept the wallet set out in the Commission proposal, the Commission has proposed to use the available European funding mechanisms to their fullest. This includes the Digital Europe Programme and the Recovery and Resilience Facility, the latter setting aside a substantial amount for the continuous digitalisation of public services, including the use and acceptance of digital identities such as the European Digital Identity Wallets. Overall Member States have to allocate at least 20% of their Recovery and Resilience Plans (RRPs) total allocation to measures supporting the digital transition, of which a certain part will be used on eGovernment (flagship ‘Modernise’).</p> <p>The Commission further agrees that national administrations at all levels play a key role, also through other Commission initiatives supporting the use and usability of the European Digital Identity Wallets. The procedures listed in Annex II to the Single Digital Gateway Regulation⁹, for example, could be potential use cases in the Toolbox process, according to which synergies will have to be found between the use of the European Digital Identity Wallets and the infrastructure for the once-only exchange of evidences in accordance with Article 14 of the Single Digital Gateway.</p>
<p>34. The CoR urges the Commission to engage</p>	<p>The Commission Recommendation on a common</p>

⁹ [Regulation 2018/1724](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 2 October 2018 establishing a single digital gateway to provide access to information, to procedures and to assistance and problem-solving services and amending Regulation (EU) No 1024/2012; OJ L 295, 21.11.2018, p. 1–38.

<p>in intensive discussions and negotiations with suppliers of equipment for the technical provision of the European Digital Identity Wallet to end-users. The aim is to make the technology base available as soon as possible, including in equipment in the low-cost sector.</p>	<p>Union Toolbox mentioned above provides that Member States should work towards the development of a Toolbox to support the implementation of the European Digital Identity framework in close coordination with the Commission and, where relevant, other concerned public and private sector parties. In this context, the Commission will invite feedback from a broad range of relevant private sector stakeholders, including equipment suppliers. For this purpose, a dedicated collaborative online space is publicly available since December 2021.</p>
<p>33. The CoR advocates an extension – beyond the original use of the European Digital Identity Wallet – to an EU identity worldwide, including features such as a passport (digital deposit of visas, for instance) or an official EU vaccination certificate. Agreements to be concluded along these lines should enable the European Digital Identity Wallet and the credentials in it to also be used outside the EU.</p>	<p>As proposed, the European Digital Identity Wallet will allow for the use of the wallet as a means to authenticate and identify, as well as to provide additional identity attributes and credentials linked to the identity of the person holding the wallet. In fact, one of the key recognitions behind the proposal is that, more and more, digital identity is not provided in isolation, but linked to other attributes in digital form allowing access to services.</p> <p>The Commission agrees that the value of the European Digital Identity Wallet will increase manifold once accepted for the provision of digital identity attributes globally.</p>
<p>30. The CoR recommends a requirement, when translating the European Digital Identity Wallet into specific applications, for detailed user guidance in a process-oriented form understandable to the target group of users.</p> <p>The European Digital Identity Wallet is to be profiled in usage scenarios as a homogeneous component with clear data transfer interfaces and to be presented visually as an EU product by means of distinctive labelling and design.</p>	<p>In the proposal, the Commission has already emphasised the need for the wallet to be user-friendly and the Commission will, in collaboration with Member States under the Toolbox process, ensure that the architecture and interoperability framework supports this objective.</p> <p>Requirements have also been introduced to ensure common interfaces towards relying parties.</p> <p>Article 6a (4) also sets out that the wallet shall display an ‘EU Digital Identity Wallet Trust Mark’ to visually ensure by design that the underlying Digital Identity Wallet has been issued in accordance with the European Digital Identity Regulation.</p>

<p>31. The CoR proposes that access to the European Digital Identity Wallet be standardised so that granting use or access to it can become almost a matter of routine for users, while also taking data minimisation requirements into account. This characteristic of routine both makes it easier to use it and enables even the less IT-savvy to do so without error.</p>	<p>As to the standardisation of the European Digital Wallets, the Commission will work together with Member States under the Toolbox process.</p> <p>Users should be able to download the wallet app and presented with a simple-to-use on boarding process to ensure that the legal identity data is linked to wallet, in accordance with Article 6a.</p> <p>As regards the relying parties, within six months after the entry into force of the regulation, the Commission shall establish technical and operational specifications for the procedure enabling the reliance on the wallet, in accordance with Article 6b. Technical and operational specifications shall also be set out for the presentation to relying parties of person identification data and for relying parties to request and validate person identification data in accordance with Article 6a (4).</p> <p>The Commission agrees that the granting of use and access to the wallet should be standardised and present a uniform approach, while also taking into account the data minimisation principle in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation.</p>
<p>29. The CoR recommends evaluating whether a general technical platform could be created for essential European Digital Identity Wallet functions by making an EU-certified open source toolbox available; maintenance and further development of the toolbox should then be coordinated by the EU.</p>	<p>To support Member States in the roll-out of the European Digital Identity Wallet, the Commission intends to procure a wallet based on the technical framework and standards agreed with Member States under the Toolbox process.</p> <p>This wallet and its functionalities will be certified in accordance with the European Digital Identity Framework and allow Member States to rely on it in full, or possibly in parts, for the issuing of the European Digital Identity Wallet fulfilling the criteria set out in Article 6a.</p>
<p>28. The CoR advocates designing the EUid scheme in a way that encourages progress towards the objective of Europe's digital resilience and digital sovereignty.</p>	<p>By offering a trusted and secure alternative to social media log-ins, putting users in full control of their personal data, the European Digital Identity Wallet will strengthen to Europe's digital</p>

	resilience and sovereignty.
<p>27. The CoR proposes binding rules on service providers to ensure, as a matter of principle, simple and transparent means of access to European Digital Identity Wallet data via uniform tools (e.g. dashboard) and to make these visible to users.</p>	<p>In accordance with Article 6a (11), the Commission will, within six months from the entering into force of the regulation, establish technical and operational specifications and reference standards for the requirements set out in paragraphs 3, 4, and 5 (of Article 6a) by means of an implementing act in the implementation of the European Digital Identity Wallet. This will also include requirements on interfaces towards relying parties.</p>
<p>25. The CoR calls for a technical implementation of the European Digital Identity Wallet that ensures it is sufficiently reinforced against cyberattacks and that suitable blocking facilities and dedicated secure backup systems permit secure reinstallation by the rights-holder.</p> <p>The strengthening of the European Digital Identity Wallet must be a permanent process. Security by design is the foundation for successful use over the long term and is also essential for the user economy, so it should already be provided in the toolbox.</p>	<p>To ensure a high level of security, the proposal is consistent with Union policies related to cybersecurity.</p> <p>The proposal requires Member States in Article 6a to issue a European Digital Identity Wallet under a notified eID scheme to common technical standards following compulsory compliance assessment and voluntary certification within the European cybersecurity certification framework, as established by the Cybersecurity Act.</p> <p>Certification should in particular rely on the relevant European cybersecurity certifications schemes established pursuant to Regulation on ENISA and on information and communications technology cybersecurity certification.</p> <p>The specific methods to be applied will be agreed with Member States as part of the toolbox process.</p>

N°7 Effectively engaging local and regional authorities in the preparation of the Partnership Agreements and Operational Programmes for the 2021-2027 period
Council Presidency referral
COR-2021-02505 – COTER-VII/012
146st plenary session – October 2021
Rapporteur: Juraj DROBA (SK/ECR)
DG REGIO – Commissioner FERREIRA

Points of the European Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential	European Commission position
<p>6. The CoR calls for the main strategic documents for the new programming period to be adopted without delay so that implementation can get under way as soon as possible.</p>	<p>According to the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR) 2021-2027¹, the Commission has four and five months to approve the Partnership Agreements and programmes respectively. The Commission will do its utmost to approve the documents as early as possible. In any case, the approval process depends very much on the maturity of the programming documents. A constructive informal dialogue with the Member State will render the approval smoother.</p>
<p>12. The CoR stresses that regional and local authorities already have a wealth of experience in preparing and implementing several programming periods, which must be built on in accordance with the partnership principle in order to better design the new programming period; points out, however, that their experience also shows that respect for the principles of partnership and multilevel governance varies from one EU Member State to another and that central administrations' processes are not necessarily inclusive.</p>	<p>The Commission has been monitoring the application of the European Code of Conduct in preparation of Partnership Agreements and programmes, and has been reacting in case of identified issues. The European Community of Practice on Partnership² will be created to facilitate further exchange of good practices in the application of partnership.</p>
<p>17. The CoR calls on the Commission and Member States to boost the attractiveness of</p>	<p>The Commission has set up a Transnational Network of Managing authorities to identify and</p>

¹ Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 laying down common provisions on the European Regional Development Fund, the European Social Fund Plus, the Cohesion Fund, the Just Transition Fund and the European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund and financial rules for those and for the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Internal Security Fund and the Instrument for Financial Support for Border Management and Visa Policy; OJ L 231, 30.6.2021, p. 159–706.

² https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2021/11/15-11-2021-the-european-commission-launches-the-call-for-expressions-of-interest-for-the-european-community-of-practice-on-partnership-2021-2027

<p>EU cohesion policy funding through further simplification and limitation of gold plating, and to consider reducing the complexity and, where appropriate, the number of regulations and guidelines.</p>	<p>promote further simplifications and try to avoid gold plating at national level. The Commission has already significantly reduced the number of implementing and delegated acts (compared to the 2014-2020 programming period).</p>
<p>19. The CoR finds it regrettable that the regulation of the Recovery and Resilience Facility does not require the application of the Code of Conduct, but only recommends the involvement of local and regional authorities. This led to the preparation of the national recovery and resilience plans behind closed doors and with very little involvement of or significant contribution from local and regional authorities, jeopardising their ability to absorb and implement funds. In practice, this makes local and regional authorities merely bodies that implement decisions taken by the Member States in relation to their own competences.</p>	<p>The Partnership principle is part of the Code of Conduct applicable to the Funds covered by the Common Provisions Regulation (CPR). It implies a multilevel consultation procedure of stakeholders including public authorities, economic and social partners. The partnership principle does not apply to the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)³, which is a programme under direct management.</p> <p>The RRF Regulation requires close cooperation with local and regional levels to achieve the objectives of the RRF, where appropriate. In particular, Member States are to provide a summary of the consultation process of local and regional authorities both for the preparation and, where available, for the implementation of the recovery and resilience plan, and an explanation how their input is reflected in the plan (cf. Art. 18(4)(q) RRF).</p> <p>The Commission will continue to pay very close attention to how stakeholders are involved and will encourage Member States to implement all reforms and investments under their Recovery and Resilience Plans with thorough and open stakeholder consultations.</p> <p>The Commission has recalled the importance of engaging local and regional authorities in the interactions with each of the Member States. As underpinned by the Commission services' assessments as well as the study undertaken by the Committee, most Member States have made a good effort to involve stakeholders, and in particular the local and regional authorities.</p>

³ Regulation (EU) 2021/241 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 February 2021 establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility; OJ L 57, 18.2.2021, p. 17–75.

	<p>The consultations undertaken must also be seen in the context of the complexity and time pressure under which each of the national Recovery and Resilience Plans was prepared as much as the different structures of national administrations across Member States.</p>
<p>25. The CoR calls for the partnership principles to be fully implemented under new instruments too, such as the Just Transition Mechanism, the Recovery and Resilience Facility and other new instruments financed under NGEU; points to the major impact that the Recovery and Resilience Facility will have on cohesion policy and to the risk of possible duplications and inconsistencies between these instruments.</p>	<p>As explained in the previous column, the partnership principle proposes a means-tested and inclusive consultation process with a long-established practice in particular for cohesion policy and other shared management funds. As the RRF is a new performance-based instrument that lends special importance to national ownership and the targeted design of investments and reforms respecting the specificities of each Member State, the consultation process consequently follows a similar path.</p> <p>On the synergy between the RRF and other EU funds, the key principle is that funding under the RRF needs to be additional and complementary (Article 9 RRF). It is primarily for the Member States to ensure complementarity, synergy, coherence and consistency among different instruments at EU national and regional levels in relation to measures financed by Union funds, both in the planning phase and during implementation.</p> <p>The Commission services stand ready to support national authorities in this respect. In their recovery and resilience plans, Member States have to demonstrate that they put in place the relevant arrangement to avoid and correct double funding. This was checked during the assessment as part of the assessment criterion on audit and control. This will be also verified during the implementation phase. In case of corruption, fraud and conflicts of interests or a serious breach of an obligation resulting from the Financing Agreement between the Commission and the Member State, the Commission can recover/reduce the financial contribution, or demand an early repayment of the</p>

	loan, if the Member State has not recovered the misappropriated funds itself.
<p>26. The CoR calls for the partnership principle to also be applied under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) when drawing up and implementing the strategic plans. In this regard, local and regional authorities should be closely involved, in particular in European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD) actions; underlines the opportunities, which the application of the partnership principle in the CAP offers, particularly in relation to finding synergies between projects, financed under the ERDF and the second pillar of the CAP.</p>	<p>The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plans also have to adhere to the European Code of Conduct as regards their preparation and implementation. The stakeholders for the CAP will participate, together with those for the funds covered by the Common Provisions Regulation, in the European Community of Practice on Partnership that will be created to facilitate further exchange of good practices in the application of partnership.</p> <p>The Strategic Plans Regulation (SPR) makes it clear that local and regional authorities, alongside with other stakeholders, must be part of the drawing up and consultation of the Plans. This consultation should be described in an Annex to the CAP Strategic Plan.</p> <p>The CAP Strategic Plans must describe how the funding is complementary with other EU funds, notably the Cohesion Funds and the Recovery and Resilience Facility.</p>
<p>30. The CoR calls for relevant documents to be sent to local and regional authorities in good time before working meetings; at the same time, finds it regrettable that partners often have very little time to comment on documents and therefore calls for them to be given an adequate timeframe commensurate with the importance of the documents being commented on. The involvement of regional and local authorities should not purely be a formality and feedback should always be given on comments made.</p>	<p>The European Code of Conduct recommends that all documents for Monitoring Committees are being sent 10 working days in advance of meetings. In a similar manner, all partners should be given sufficient time to analyse and comment on draft programming documents, and all comments should have been analysed and feedback should be given to the involved partners.</p>
<p>31. The CoR calls on the Commission to closely monitor application of the partnership principle both in informal negotiations with the Member States and in the assessment of draft partnership agreements and operational programmes, and to provide recommendations</p>	<p>The Commission has been monitoring the application of the European Code of Conduct in preparation of Partnership Agreements and programmes, and has been reacting in case of identified issues, asking Member States for</p>

<p>to Member States and relevant authorities to improve partnership processes.</p>	<p>corrective actions.</p>
<p>38. The CoR calls for regional and local governments to be fully involved in the mid-term review of the 2021-2027 programming period. This should include a CoR opinion on the experiences on the implementation in the first years and the expectations of local and regional authorities on the financial envelopes as well as on the technical implementation for the remainder of the current programming period; further it could result in the drafting of a study evaluating experience with the application of the recommendations of the European Code of Conduct ten years on from its introduction in 2024; the CoR should be involved in the drafting of the Terms of Reference of the study, discuss the study and be associated to the formulation of recommendations to follow up the conclusions of the study.</p>	<p>The Commission will launch in 2022 a study on application of the partnership principle in the context of the CPR Funds 2021-2027, which will also assess the implementation of the European Code of Conduct. The Commission will duly share the conclusions of this study with the Committee and closely involve it on the follow up. The Committee will also be part of the Dialogue with the Common Provisions Regulations (CPR) Partners expert group for 2021-2027⁴, which will continue on the basis of the Structured Dialogue expert group in the 2014-2020 period.</p> <p>This expert group will be a forum for representatives of partners at Union level and may provide comments, observations and other input about the effectiveness of the European Code of Conduct on Partnership as well as the application of the partnership principle.</p>
<p>39. The CoR calls on the Commission to closely monitor and evaluate the implementation of the European Code of Conduct and, if partnership is being insufficiently taken up, to revise it on the basis of examples of good practice in the Member States; calls on the European Commission to take this opinion's recommendations, as well as the conclusions of expert workshops, on board should the Code be revised.</p>	<p>The European Community of Practice on Partnership will review the European Code of Conduct and will deliberate on any improvements that are necessary for better implementation of the partnership principle in the 2021-2027 period.</p>
<p>40. The CoR recommends that the Commission, on the basis of the collected good examples, calls on the Member States to draw up action plans on how to improve the partnership approach in the implementation and monitoring of the current programming</p>	<p>The European Community of Practice on Partnership will be discussing and disseminating good practices in partnership, in order to improve its implementation in the 2021-2027 period. It will be up to the Member States to follow up in the most appropriate manner, taking into account the legal and institutional framework in each Member</p>

⁴ Commission decision of 9.7.2021 setting up the group of experts on the funds established by Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council ; C(2021) 5014 final.

period.	State.
<p>41. At the same time, the CoR recommends that the Commission contemplate setting up a barometer for the application of partnership that would encourage its greater use.</p>	<p>The Commission will consider this proposal in the context of existing Eurobarometer surveys. On top of the establishment of the European Community of Practice on Partnership, a study on partnership will be launched in 2022 to provide the Commission with more granular information about the application of partnership across the EU.</p>
<p>50. The CoR calls for the establishment of effective mechanisms to enable local and regional authorities to participate in the selection of ITI measures on the basis of the territorial principle, regardless of the remits of the entities involved; recommends that the Commission and the Member States analyse the existing effective collaborative mechanisms in the Member States, which can serve as examples of good practice.</p>	<p>The 2021-2027 CPR establishes minimum requirements for integrated territorial investments and other territorial tools designed by Member States to support integrated territorial development.</p> <p>The Commission will monitor the application of these requirements, including the involvement of relevant territorial authorities or bodies in the selection of operations, and the application of the partnership principle to involve local partners in the preparation and in the implementation of the territorial strategies.</p> <p>The Commission has been collecting and sharing information on integrated territorial and local development strategies supported in the 2014-2020⁵, and will analyse them further when carrying out ex post evaluation of the European Structural and Investment Funds, to be completed by the end of 2024.</p>
<p>59. The CoR recommends also building on examples of good practice in the use of online and interactive communication tools for the future, but takes the view that digital solutions cannot replace physical meetings and consultations and should only be used as a complementary means depending on the format and nature of the discussion.</p>	<p>Good practices in using digital tools in the partnership process will be discussed in the European Community of Practice on Partnership.</p>

⁵ <https://urban.jrc.ec.europa.eu/strategies/en>

<p>N°8 Protecting Industrial and Craft Geographical Indications in the European Union Own-initiative COR-2021-02689 – ECON-VII/016 146th plenary session – October 2021 Rapporteur: Martine PINVILLE (FR/PES) DG GROW – Commissioner BRETON</p>	
<p>Points of the European Committee of the Regions opinion considered essential</p>	<p>European Commission position</p>
<p>The follow-up given by the Commission to this opinion will be included in a subsequent report.</p>	