

Protecting  
human rights,  
democracy and  
the rule of law  
in the digital  
environment

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

# DIGITAL PARTNERSHIP



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## Assessing challenges

The rapid evolution of technology and cross-border delivery of digital services, especially over the internet, offers numerous opportunities. However, they also present users with challenges who are increasingly faced with, among other things, online crime and insecurity, extremism and violence, abuse and intolerance. While protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms is undoubtedly primarily the task of states, achieving this is no longer conceivable without multi-stakeholders' cooperation.



The Council of Europe first recognised the critical role that digital companies play in delivering essential services and facilitating the exercise of rights online through its **Internet Governance Strategy 2016 – 2019**. This Strategy stressed the need for fostering dialogue and cooperation with internet companies and their representative associations to establish a shared commitment in tackling the challenges brought about by digital transformation.

The Internet Governance Strategy has now been succeeded and built upon by the **Digital Agenda 2022-2025 “Protecting human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in the digital environment”**.

## Building partnerships

On 8 November 2017, during the World Forum for Democracy, Council of Europe Secretary General signed initial **partnership agreements** – in the form of an exchange of letters – with representatives from eight

leading technology firms and six associations. This framework saw the addition of two more partners joined in 2018 and nine others in 2020. Finally, 2 new partners joined in June 2022, bringing the number of participants up to 27.

**Current partners (27):** Apple, AT&T, BT, Cloudflare, Computer & Communications industry association (CCIA), Deutsche Telekom, DigitalEurope, ServiceNow (formerly Element AI), EuroISPA, European Digital SME Alliance, European Telecommunications Network Operators' Association (ETNO), Facebook, Global Network Initiative (GNI), Google, GSMA, IBM, ICCO, IEEE, Intel, ISOC, Microsoft, Kaspersky, Orange, RIPE NCC, Telefónica, ICC and the LEGO Group.

## Cooperation Highlights

Several cooperation initiatives have already yielded tangible results in various areas such as combating cybercrime, ensuring the integrity of online information, protecting privacy, content moderation, immersive realities, promoting equality and fostering inclusion. A report assessing the impact of the Metaverse on human rights was launched in 2023.

A multilateral partnership has been pivotal in the shaping the Council of Europe **Framework Convention on AI**. Ongoing activities include topics such as children's rights, user rights and policy frameworks, combating hate speech, promoting gender equality and fairness in sports.

## Enhancing cooperation

This partnership facilitates the engagement of companies in various activities of the Council of Europe and allows them to cooperate with governments in **shaping digital policies**. Concrete areas of cooperation may include (but are not limited to) the following spheres:

- artificial intelligence;
- bioethics;

- protecting children in the digital environment;
- combating cybercrime and the misuse of the internet for terrorist purposes
- data protection, including Big Data;
- promotion of digital literacy;
- digitalisation of cultural heritage and cultural services;
- addressing abusive forms of expression online (i.e., incitement to violence) and disinformation;
- democratic elections and e-voting;
- combating money laundering and corruption.

## Exploring new opportunities



Cooperation within the broader framework of the Council of Europe's partnership with internet companies and their representative associations may take various forms, including:

- **participating in the work of committees** and other inter-governmental or expert organs, bodies and structures of the Council of Europe to contribute to the development of legally and politically binding standards.
- **co-organising conferences** and other awareness-raising events.
- **providing expertise** for Council of Europe studies and thematic reports through activities such as hearings with experts or brainstorming sessions.
- **receiving Council of Europe expertise** through training sessions or seminars.

- **developing joint projects** such as reports, visibility activities, exploring new technologies, and targeted partnerships.

## Considering benefits

Partnerships offer digital companies and their representative associations a unique opportunity to:

**Boost public confidence** and user trust in their services by publicly affirming their corporate social responsibility and commitment to upholding human rights and the rule of law online.

**Gain a deeper understanding** of the Council of Europe's legal frameworks and international policy considerations, including the **prevention** of cybercrime, data protection, and addressing hate speech.

**Access the network of the Council of Europe's 46 member states and 6 observer states and civil society organisations** to engage in dialogue and confront challenges. This network serves as an early warning system for the rapidly evolving and increasingly complex legal and human rights issues in the digital realm.

**Gain insight into governmental and societal expectations**, particularly in emerging markets where physical offices may not yet be established.

**Contribute to the development of Council of Europe digital policies** by actively participating in discussions, ensuring that recommendations and legal instruments are well-crafted and capable of addressing both current and future policy changes.

**Design and implement corporate social responsibility initiatives more effectively** by leveraging the expertise of the Council of Europe and cooperating with other stakeholders to meet international human rights standards and optimise investment in such initiatives.

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# The digital transformation

of our society offers opportunities for human progress but also presents challenges and risks.

While the role of states is to protect human rights and the rule of law in this new environment, businesses also play a crucial role in meeting the demands of the modern era by providing and managing digital infrastructure.

Partnering with the Council of Europe enables companies to work alongside governments on digital policies.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

@ **DIGITAL  
GOVERNANCE**

Protecting  
human rights,  
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environment

Social Media



Council of Europe  
# Digital Governance

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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

