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WORKING GROUP FOR CHAPTER 24: Justice, Freedom, Security

Strengthening Albania's Response to Cybercrime and Child Online Protection: Legal Alignment and Institutional Capacities

Recommendations

I. Institutional and Operational Capacity

- Online child sexual exploitation and cybercrime are evolving phenomena that require continuous institutional adaptation. While important steps have already been taken — including the establishment of a dedicated sector for the investigation of online child sexual abuse material, further strengthening of institutional and operational capacities remains essential.

- the Cybercrime Unit should be reinforced through sustainable human resource planning. The increasing number of online threats, combined with the technical complexity of investigations, demands the recruitment and retention of **specialized personnel in digital forensics, data analysis, and cyber investigations**.

-**Continuous training** should be ensured in order to prevent the loss of expertise and maintain operational resilience.

-**investments in modern technological tools** are necessary, including advanced software for image and video analysis, secure data storage systems, and AI-assisted identification tools. Given the sophistication of perpetrators in the online environment, law enforcement authorities must be equipped with equally advanced investigative capacities.

- **the functioning of the 24/7 contact point** for international information exchange should be ensured with adequate staffing and technical support. Time-sensitive cases, particularly those involving live-streamed abuse or active exploitation, require immediate cross-border coordination and rapid evidence preservation.

-consideration **should be given to establishing a centralized national case-tracking** or database system for online child abuse cases, in full compliance with data protection standards. Such a mechanism would enhance coordination between institutions, facilitate pattern analysis, and support evidence-based policymaking.

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Legislation and Implementation

- Full alignment with the EU acquis under Chapter 24 requires continuous legislative review and effective implementation. Particular attention should be given to ensuring alignment with Directive 2011/93/EU on combating the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, as well as relevant developments at EU level related to digital services and online platform responsibilities.
- A comprehensive **assessment of the Criminal Code** should be conducted to ensure that online grooming, possession and distribution of child sexual abuse material, live-streamed abuse, and other technology-facilitated forms of exploitation are clearly defined and adequately sanctioned.
- In addition, discussions during the Working Group highlighted the need to review the **legal framework concerning cyberbullying and other forms of online harassment affecting minors.** The rapid evolution of digital behavior may create legal gaps that undermine effective prosecution and victim protection. Clarifying these provisions would strengthen legal certainty and improve enforcement.
- Implementation must be accompanied **by clear procedural protocols for the processing of international reports, including those received from NCMEC** and other international partners. Standardized procedures for prioritization, referral, investigation, and statistical reporting would enhance transparency, accountability, and operational efficiency.

Information, Prevention, and Awareness

- While enforcement remains a central pillar, prevention should be treated as a long-term strategic priority. The online environment often blurs the line between entertainment and risk, particularly for children. Early education and digital literacy are therefore essential preventive tools.
- **National awareness campaigns** should be developed and regularly implemented, targeting children, parents, teachers, and the wider public. These campaigns should utilize social media platforms, national television, and school-based programs to disseminate accessible information about online risks, reporting mechanisms, and available support services.
- Inspired by good practices from EU Member States, Albania may consider **developing a dedicated online platform** providing guidance, educational materials, and reporting instructions for individuals who feel threatened or exposed to cybercrime. Such a platform could serve as a centralized resource hub for prevention and victim support.
- Furthermore, the **institutionalization and expansion of trained police officers** assigned to schools could strengthen early intervention mechanisms. School-based engagement fosters trust, improves reporting rates, and creates a safer digital culture among minors.

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Cooperation with Other Actors

- Given the transnational and multi-dimensional nature of cybercrime, effective cooperation remains indispensable.

At international level, continued and enhanced engagement with Europol, Interpol (including ICSE), NCMEC, and other strategic partners should be ensured. Participation in Joint Investigation Teams and international projects contributes to knowledge exchange and strengthens Albania's alignment with EU standards.

Cooperation with major digital platforms such as TikTok, Meta, and other widely used services should be further formalized. While access to reporting channels represents an important achievement, structured cooperation protocols with clear communication procedures and response timelines would significantly improve operational efficiency and evidence preservation.

Inter-institutional cooperation at national level should also be strengthened through regular coordination mechanisms involving the Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Justice, Prosecutor's Office, child protection authorities, data protection institutions, and other relevant bodies. A permanent expert or coordination group could ensure strategic coherence and consistent monitoring of progress.

Finally, the role of civil society organizations should be formally recognized and supported. Their expertise in child protection, digital rights, and victim assistance complements state efforts and contributes to a more holistic, rights-based approach. Involving civil society in prevention campaigns, policy consultations, and support services aligns with EU principles of participatory governance and strengthens the credibility of reforms under Chapter 24.

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