

Mariya Gabriel: The future of Europe and of the world is inevitably digital

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Interviews

European digital economy and society Commissioner Mariya Gabriel talks GDPR implementation, cyber hygiene, Netflix quotas and more.



Mariya Gabriel | *Photo credit: European Commission audiovisual*

This Commission is entering the final year of its mandate. Where do you believe progress needs to be made to achieve a genuine digital single market?

Three years after its launch, the digital single market is becoming a reality. In total, 29 legislative proposals have been presented by the Commission.

Those on mobile roaming and portability of online content services have already been adopted. The general data protection regulation is now directly applicable across the Union.

Other major new steps on network and information security and electronic identification will be in place in a matter of weeks. The next wave of legislative proposals, opening up access to online services (geo-blocking, for example), has been agreed and will follow before the end of the year.

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These are all critical steps in completing the digital single market. Now the focus is to make sure that all 29 proposals can be translated into ambitious, adopted legislation that will be implemented on the ground.

This is our main priority: ensuring that the digital single market changes the life of citizens and businesses for the best. As such, rather than thinking about new ideas, we should focus on implementation and delivery.

Following the Cambridge Analytica scandal, and Mark Zuckerberg's appearance in the European Parliament, what guarantees can you give to Europeans that data protection is a priority for the Commission?

There should be no doubt about that. The general data protection regulation (GDPR), in force since 25 May 2018, is the global gold standard for the protection of personal data in the digital economy and society of the 21st century.

The emergence of the data economy, the use of big data for developing and delivering innovative products and completely new services, is only sustainable if the trust of our citizens and businesses is there.

That is why it is essential that the GDPR unifies the rules across the EU, backing them up through effective enforcement by the data protection authorities in the member states. However, it doesn't end with the GDPR.

We have proposed to also unify the rules for the protection of our privacy online, with the ePrivacy regulation. This is about the confidentiality of communications and about making sure the user is in complete control of what is put on or taken from their electronic device.

SMEs have found the implementation of GDPR complicated. How can the EU ensure it will not hamper innovation and competitiveness?

In reality, for many companies, not a lot will change if they were already taking the old data protection rules seriously. Getting clarity about what data is processed in a company, where it is stored and how it is protected is an investment in sustainability.

Consider the risk of a data breach. A company may think it could save a lot of money by not making this investment. Yet it takes only one incident to show that such behaviour is not only risky for the individuals whose data might be lost but also for the company itself.

Make no mistake: the GDPR does not mean that there will be less data to work with and learn from. It means that all the data has to be managed and treated in a more systematic and responsible fashion. I am convinced that this is the only way to run a sustainable digital business today and in the future.

I very much welcome the need for businesses to explain to their customers what they actually want to do with the data. Citizens are smart and they will learn to recognise transparent and responsible companies who deserve their trust.

How will the Commission deal with the problem of fake news, and how can it ensure the right balance between protection and freedom of speech?

The Commission is deeply committed to freedom of expression - a fundamental right for all Europeans. It is also committed to tackling the proliferation of online disinformation.

The two are not mutually exclusive and should work hand in hand. We just announced our action plan to stem the flow of online disinformation.

This includes a self-regulatory approach to push online platforms to act more responsibly towards transparency, political advertisement, fake accounts or the use of bots. Here, I expect a code of practice to be agreed by July, producing decisive results by October.

We also want to support the nascent ecosystem of fact-checkers in Europe, to launch an 'European week of media literacy' and to explore the use of new technologies in tackling disinformation.

Should the Commission consider breaking up giant online platforms to protect consumers and smaller companies from their monopolistic powers?

The Commission makes full use of its competition policy, which precisely aims to address abuse of dominant position. Online platforms are not above the law and must also abide by competition rules.

As you know, several cases are ongoing and the Commission is applying the rules very strictly, as demonstrated by the large fine handed down to Google last year. The Commission has also decided to take action even in the absence of dominant position, considering that online platforms should not leverage their market power to implement unfair practices.

Last April, we adopted a regulation proposal that includes transparency disciplines and the possibility of redress for businesses. Consumers are protected by the unfair commercial practices directive and related guidance, including specific consideration for online platforms.

Beyond this, and given the importance of personal data, the GDPR is also a tool to protect people against big online platforms.

What measures is the Commission considering to protect children from harmful content and bullying and help parents?

The main provisions are set out in the audiovisual media services Directive (AVMSD) which

establishes minimum standards in this field.

The applicable rules for on-demand services will soon be strengthened and aligned with the rules on TV broadcasts, by requiring restricted access to any kind of harmful content.

The most harmful content (such as gratuitous violence and pornography) will be subject to the strictest measures providing a high degree of control, such as age verification or PIN codes. The revised directive seeks to ensure protection of minors also on video-sharing platforms, notably as regards hate speech.

The revised rules foresee an obligation to ensure that video-sharing platforms put in place measures, such as tools for users to report and flag harmful content, age verification or parental control systems, allowing users to rate the content, protecting minors from harmful content online.

Protecting the vulnerable online is one of my major priorities and, of course, the protection of young people and children is paramount.

We are mobilising all possible tools at our disposal to make this happen. We are strengthening our efforts to fight against illegal content, which includes content that is potentially harmful for children.

We published a recommendation last February and launched an impact assessment that should be ready by the summer (a public consultation is currently ongoing on the basis of a questionnaire published online).

I also launched a #Saferinternet4EU campaign last February, which aims to mobilise all actors towards this objective of protecting children online and helping parents: hundreds of events are being organised, online tools are being made available by safer internet platforms, outreach actions are being organised in all member states with the involvement of key players, including online internet platforms.

An online safety MOOC was operated between February and March with hundreds of people following the course; I have also nominated ambassadors who are ready to actively support the campaign.

A cooperation with ENISA was developed on cyber hygiene in particular to provide teachers with online learning.

A #saferinternet4EU contest was launched to reward high quality resources and initiatives from professionals, teachers and young people. I will hand out the awards at the Safer Internet Forum 2018 on 20 November.

How can the AVMSD protect access to European content and culture on digital platforms? Are cultural quotas the answer, or can they indirectly affect competition and innovation?

The modernisation of the AVMSD is creating a level playing field between traditional broadcasting and on-demand audiovisual media services. Under the new rules, TV broadcasters will continue to be obliged to broadcast at least 50 per cent European works (including national content).

Video-on-demand services - which already have to promote European works under current rules - are subject under the revised directive to more specific obligations: they need to ensure a share of at least 30 per cent of European content in their catalogues and should give good visibility to European content in their offers.

Overall, strengthening the promotion of European works for on-demand services will lead to a broader and more diverse offer for Europeans. This will have a positive impact on cultural diversity and bring more opportunities for European creators. Video-on-demand services are already taking steps in that direction: at least 17 of this year's Netflix films will be in languages other than English, including French, Hungarian and Spanish.

With the upcoming MFF negotiations, which are complicated by Brexit, how can you ensure high levels of investment in R&D of digital innovations and technology will be maintained?

The future of Europe and of the world is inevitably digital. Therefore, independently of the political situation, Europe must make sure to take the place it deserves and use the opportunities that new technologies offer.

Our proposals for the EU's next multi-annual budget include strong support for digital. As a package, research, innovation and digital funding should amount to an increase of 64 per cent.

For the first time, the EU should have a dedicated funding programme for digital with a budget of €9.19bn in the Digital Europe programme. Currently there is an important digital investment gap.

In order to bridge this gap, the Commission has proposed a Digital Europe programme to shape and support the digital transformation of Europe's society and economy. This financing gap is particularly evident in capacity building, deployment and use of computing and data handling, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence. This is what the programme aims to remedy.

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