

This letter can be found at: <https://csa-scientist-open-letter.org/Sep2025>

The text below is an open letter on the position of scientists and researchers on the EU's proposed Child Sexual Abuse Regulation.

Signatures on Sept 9 2025

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Dear Members of the European Parliament,
Dear Members of the Council of the European Union,

**9th September 2025 - Joint statement of scientists and researchers
on the EU Presidency's new proposal for the Child Sexual Abuse Regulation**

We are writing in response to the [new proposal](#) by the Presidency dated 24 July 2025.

We share your concerns about the abuse of children in hideous crimes, resulting in serious harms to the victims and their families. In view of this, we are pleased to note the improvements in the new draft of the regulation proposal including the incorporation of some of the recommendations in our letters of [July 2023](#), [May 2024](#), and [September 2024](#). We particularly appreciate the addition of provisions to ease the voluntary reporting of illegal activity, and the requirement to accelerate the treatment of these reports. These are essential to guarantee swift and effective help for victims of abuse.

However, we read in dismay how none of the changes address our major concerns: it is simply not feasible to perform detection of known and new CSAM for hundreds of millions of users with an acceptable level of accuracy, independently of the specific filter. Moreover, on-device detection, regardless of its technical implementation, inherently undermines the protections that end-to-end encryption is designed to guarantee. Even worse, the changes in the proposal increase the reliance on technical means to support its goals, exacerbating the security and privacy risks for citizens without any guarantee of improved protection for children. We elaborate on these issues below.

The new proposal, similar to its predecessors, will create unprecedented capabilities for surveillance, control, and censorship and has an inherent risk for function creep and abuse by less democratic regimes. Achieving current security and privacy of digital communications and systems has taken decades of concerted effort by researchers, industry, and policy makers. There is no doubt that this proposal completely undermines the security and privacy protections that are essential to protect the digital society.

We also regret that policy makers have failed to create an open dialogue with experts on this topic in the last two years. In spite of the serious doubts on the effectiveness of detection technologies, there has been no public discussion, analysis, and assessment of these technologies that could justify the approach taken in the proposed regulation. This lack of transparency hinders an open and informed discussion that can identify suitable technologies to address children's abuse, and endangers the digital safety of our society in Europe and beyond.

1. The changes to reduce the scope of targeted material will not increase effectiveness

A major change being considered by the Council is that the proposed detection of CSAM (Child Sex and Abuse Material) only applies to **images** (visual information) and **URLs**. This is in contrast to previous versions of the proposal in which detection would be applied to any material sent between users (including text and audio). This change aims to reduce the scope of the proposal by limiting it to specific file formats, in order to increase the proposal's proportionality with respect to the intended goals, and avoid the issues associated with detection of illegal behaviour such as grooming in text.

While a reduction in scope is certainly welcome, it does not eliminate any of the serious concerns raised in our previous letters. There is no scientific basis to argue that detection technology would work any better on images than on text (see [our first letter](#) for more details). Experts have repeatedly shown that detection methods for known CSAM are easy to evade: changing a few bits in an image is sufficient to ensure that an image will not trigger state-of-the-art detectors. And while it may seem that keeping the detection algorithm a secret could prevent evasion, the latest work on this topic shows that these types of attacks can be effective even without knowing the algorithm used by the detection mechanism. Thus, those wanting to distribute CSAM will soon adopt these methods, completely bypassing the detection mechanism. **Existing research confirms that state-of-the-art detectors would yield unacceptably high false positive and false negative rates, making them unsuitable for large-scale detection campaigns at the scale of hundreds of millions of users as required by the proposed regulation.**

The current proposal further reintroduces the possibility of using machine learning and artificial intelligence to also detect unknown CSAM images. We reiterate that to the best of our knowledge there is no machine-learning algorithm that can perform such detection without committing a large number of errors (e.g., distinguishing between CSAM material and sexting teenagers is hard even for humans), and that all known algorithms are fundamentally susceptible to evasion. Besides all the existing attacks, once detection is mandatory we expect to see many more attacks developed by those motivated to share illicit material. **Given that AI-based technologies have an enormous attack surface, and that it is impossible to fully eliminate this surface, we expect these technologies to be highly ineffective in the case of CSAM detection.**

Beyond visual information, the new proposal additionally requests to check URLs for illegitimate content. Evasion is even easier for URLs: Redirection of URLs is trivial, via commercial services or locally, and can be done seamlessly even by unskilled users. The vast number of ways in which URLs can easily be changed, make the detection of malicious URLs a notable open problem, even though it is central to web security in general. In fact, similar challenges are faced in the context of intrusion detection, malware identification, or ad-blocking. Despite being widely researched by industry and academia, this problem is notoriously unsolvable, and detectors tend to *not* use URLs as an input to avoid manipulations that reduce the effectiveness

of the detector. **There is no reason to believe that when it comes to URLs hosting CSAM the result would be any different than in other fields where malicious URLs cannot be identified.**

Intuitively, on-device CSAM scanning might seem similar to malware checks by antivirus software, but the two are fundamentally different. Malware detection works well when it can target clear, well-defined threats, whereas CSAM detection is inherently contextual and cannot be technically defined with certainty—for example, teenagers’ consensual texting, medical photos, or family vacation images. As a result, CSAM detectors fundamentally cannot match the reliability of malware scanners. Moreover, if potential malware is found on a consumer device, the user is asked to make a decision. That is, malware scanning is voluntary, transparent, and not tied to law enforcement backdoors. Mandating on-device CSAM scanning, and providing law enforcement with access to any image matched by the algorithm, is incompatible with all these safeguards.

In conclusion, the changes in the proposal do not address the main shortcoming: existing detection technology is far from achieving the high accuracy level required in the context of CSA protection; and all security and privacy research on the field indicate that the issues that make them unreliable are inherent and will not be eliminated in the future. **Thus, there is no evidence that the changes in scope of detection makes any effective difference with respect to the previous proposal.**

2 On device detection inherently removes encryption protection

The proposal demands that the CSAM detection technology shall not lead to a “*weakening of the protection provided by encryption*”. We absolutely agree with this view: End-to-End-Encryption (E2EE) is essential to enable EU citizens to communicate securely and privately online, in particular when considering that core parts of our communication infrastructure are controlled by US Big Tech and many nation states have expanded their interception capabilities, both [on-device](#) and [on-path](#). Encryption protects not only the civil society, but [EU politicians](#), **decision makers, law enforcement, and defence forces also critically rely on E2E-encryption** to ensure secure communications against internal and external threats.

However, it is impossible to perform any detection of material and send subsequent reports without affecting encryption. The core design principles of secure end-to-end encryption protection include (i) ensuring that only the intended two endpoints can access the data, and (ii) avoiding a single point of failure. Enforcing a detection mechanism to scan private data before it gets encrypted – with the possibility to transmit it to law enforcement upon inspection – inherently violates both principles: **it undermines the functionality of E2EE by accessing the private data through the detecting mechanism and introduces a single point of failure into all our secure E2EE mechanisms through these enforced detections.**

In fact, the detection mechanism substantially increases the attack surface and becomes a high-value target for threat actors themselves. The mechanism cannot be technically limited to the detection of CSAM, or the targeting of visual information and URLs. It is trivial to reconfigure it to identify other types of data, and target further types of information related to other crimes or to financial or political interests (e.g., memes about political parties). Moreover, the current reduction in scope only seems to be a temporary appeasement, and the [changelog of the proposed regulation \[related to grooming. p.2. p.4\]](#) suggests that the scope will in the future again be extended to audio and text. In other words, **the new proposal does not address our concerns regarding the potential for function creep of on-device detection.**

The new proposal also reinforces previous changes to reduce the scope of detection to so-called “high-risk” parts or components of services. **Yet, the definition of high-risk would cover some services in their entirety.** A paramount example is E2E encrypted messaging, such as Signal or WhatsApp, used by regular citizens but also politicians, journalists, human-right workers, EU civil servants, and law enforcement officers. Should the proposal be approved, the protection provided by these apps would evaporate – which has led Signal to announce that they would [stop their service in the EU should on-device detection become mandatory](#), as any realization would inherently break with the promise of E2EE and put users at risk.

Finally, detection would require handling data outside of the scope of the E2EE. This implies that private communications content suspected of being CSAM (but not guaranteed to be so, as per our first point) will leave the device of the user, and potentially be accessed by national authorities. This is parallel to the case of *Podchasov v. Russia*, for which the European Court of Human Rights reiterates that **the mere storing of data relating to the private life of an individual amounts to an interference within the meaning of Article 8 (the right to privacy).**

In conclusion, **the new proposal's implications unequivocally violate basic E2EE principles and will weaken the protection provided by encryption.** Furthermore, this weakening threatens our fundamental right to privacy and can have severe consequences on our democratic processes and national security by preventing digital confidential communications.

3. Mandating the use of all possible technical mitigations does not increase security

Another critical change in the new proposal is to make it mandatory for service providers to take *“all reasonable measures to mitigate the risk of their service being used for abuse”*, and includes new provisions to foster and regulate the use of *“age verification and age assessment measures”*.

We first highlight that in security, taking additional measures does not always result in increased protection. Introducing new mitigations might reduce the protection of the system to the

protection offered by the weakest mitigation, while increasing the complexity – and therefore also risks – for the overall system. In the case of this proposal, **given the inadequacy of detection technologies as explained in the previous point, the addition of other mitigations can bring little extra protection to users and victims.**

Further, we do not believe that mandating age verification techniques to control the access to content on the Internet will bring the desired benefits. First, age verification controls can be evaded with ease. We have witnessed this in the UK, where the implementation of the Online Safety Act resulted in users turning to services that do not implement the controls -- which will always happen as long as there are services in the world that do not implement them. The UK also observed a surge of VPN connections to bypass the verification by accessing servers from other locations. Moreover, this leads to new risks. The mandatory character of age verification can become a reason to ban the use of privacy technologies such as VPNs that can help to circumvent it. This would threaten freedom of speech and freedom of information by preventing users from privately browsing the Internet and undermines the tools needed by whistleblowers, journalists and human right activists. It would also have devastating effects on the security of the web as VPNs are a security backbone for industry to enable the use of internal and external remote services.

Second, even if age verification is implemented with verifiable and certified attributes, as in the new age verification app of the EU, it still erodes fundamental principles of online anonymity and open access to information. Initially, such technology might only be demanded for proving that one is older than 18 years old, but once in place, the same technology can be used to demand the disclosure of other and more identifying information such as gender, nationality, or medical conditions. Before rolling them out, evidence is needed on the benefits that introducing such technology would bring, and evidence that the harms it introduces (e.g., potential for tracking or censorship) can be mitigated.

Furthermore, we are also concerned that the sudden pressure to implement such solutions might result in rushed decisions. Early prototypes by some Big Tech providers have not been studied in depth and lack open peer review; their use would not only entail a risk in terms of performance but will also create a dependency on Big Tech for Europe in a critical infrastructure aimed to protect children.

We conclude that increasing the number of technologies used to address the Child Sexual Abuse problem, and making them mandatory not only does not improve on the previous proposal but **increases its problems and broadens the potential negative impact of this proposed regulation on the security of the Internet and the freedom and privacy of its users.**

4. Secure paths forward for child protection

Two years after our first letter, we want to reiterate that given the limitations of technology, the current techno-solutionist proposal with main focus on removing abusive material from the internet at the cost of communication security, has little potential for impact on abuse perpetrated against children.

We remind that CSAM content is the output of child sexual abuse. Eradicating CSAM therefore, relies on eradicating abuse, not only on preventing the digital dissemination of abuse material. Instead of continuing the push to technologies with dubious effectiveness such as CSAM detection algorithms and age verification that significantly weaken security and privacy, we want to call again attention to the measures recommended by organisations such as the UN. These include education (on consent, norms and values, on digital literacy and online safety, and comprehensive sex education); trauma-sensitive reporting hotlines; and keyword-search based interventions.

The steps towards better reporting and faster removal are great advances, but we reiterate our recommendation to substantially increase investment and effort in supporting proven approaches towards eradicating abuse. By eliminating abuse, these measures will also eradicate abusive material without introducing any risk to secure digital interactions which are essential for the safety of the children the proposed regulation aims to protect.

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