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FOC Regional Consultations

Summary of Regional Consultation
in Europe

Table of Contents



Context	3
Summary	3
Trends	3
Recommendations	5
Annex	6



Context

- As 2022 Chair of the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC), Canada facilitated six multi-stakeholder regional consultations to engage directly with stakeholders and gather knowledge about Internet freedom challenges at the regional and sub-regional level.
- The multi-stakeholder consultations will feed into the FOC's upcoming "Ottawa Agenda", which will update the group's founding document, the **Tallinn Agenda**, with a set of commitments for promoting human rights online.



Summary

- During the European consultation held under Chatham House Rule, experts from civil society, media, academia, and the private sector agreed that disinformation, state mandated shutdowns, and the monopolization of Internet servers threaten global connectivity and access.



Trends

Participants highlighted that a digital world offers significant potential to improve lives, but is also leading to increasing economic, social, and political disruption. All aspects of human rights are increasingly tied to technology. They noted that this has often been seen through the lens of civil and political rights, but is closely tied to economic and social rights as well. This trend will be amplified by the onset of the metaverse, which technology giants have described as the future embodiment of the Internet: a vast, immersive, and three-dimensional virtual reality.

Many participants emphasized that the creation of quasi-monopolies by Big Tech companies using opaque algorithms inhibits transparency and accountability to the detriment of democracy. They

expressed concern that the threat of **disinformation** campaigns from state and non-state actors will continue to erode democracy and the rules-based international system. Experts highlighted that youth do not see as clear a distinction between the online and offline world as did previous generations. They also face greater vulnerability online, including financially. Better understanding of their perception of cyberspace offers valuable insights.

Connectivity is critical for digital inclusion; however, many digital sovereignty laws control domestic connectivity infrastructure, thus threatening global connectivity. State-mandated **Internet shutdowns** as well as partial content blocking also disrupt national and international connectivity. There is a need to ensure network diversity and enhance civilian resilience on the ground to manage attempts to stifle connectivity. Moreover, the Internet is inherently fragmented and de-fragmented at the same time; in order to manage this, key players, including platforms and regulators, must uphold accountability and transparency through continuous engagement with multi-stakeholder partners. The FOC has a role to play in promoting this approach, especially in light of the rising threat of authoritarianism to the multi-stakeholder approach, according to some regional experts.

Participants noted that because governments cannot and should not regulate all disinformation, **digital literacy** is key to the resilience of democracies. Digital literacy must go beyond elementary learning as it is intrinsically linked to connectivity. Government and civil society-driven initiatives should target all ages for life-long learning on resilience online. In particular, increased efforts are required to teach digital literacy in local languages to ensure accessibility for all. Digital literacy should also aim to empower those who are more likely to be marginalized online (i.e., women, refugees, and other vulnerable communities). Experts underlined that it is critical to teach these communities the most basic digital skills to ensure they can safely navigate the online sphere. Lastly, digital literacy initiatives must ensure transparent access to data to tackle discrimination.

The discussion focused on the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Digital Markets Act (DMA), which were viewed positively for encouraging smaller corporations and NGOs to become more digitalized and supporting them in de-regulation for increased innovation. A few

challenges were mentioned, including the visibility of the acts as well as their implementation in EU countries that have their own domestic legislation.



Recommendations

Participants recognized that the FOC can play a more active role in the protection and promotion of human rights online. They recommended several actions that FOC members, individually or collectively, could undertake to increase Internet freedom regionally and worldwide. The FOC should:

- Continue to address the threat of Internet fragmentation.
- Increase engagement with young people to avoid a digital divide and lack of civic participation.
- Host small-group consultations in the development of the “Ottawa Agenda” and future initiatives.
- Be more engaged with digital experts in the region.
- Host joint dialogues with stakeholders in the Global North and South, particularly given the EU’s and EU Member States’ work on (and funding for) digital literacy and human rights around the world.
- Implement commitments made in pre-existing statements, to build on long-term resilience rather than responding to short-term trends, and to condemn countries violating human rights online.

Annex

Discussion Questions

- What regional or global trends related to the evolution of digital technologies and the internet will have the greatest impact on human rights online and offline in the coming 5-10 years?
- What are the most pressing challenges to the protection and promotion of human rights online, both regionally and internationally?
- How do we define free, open, interoperable, secure and reliable Internet at the infrastructure and governance levels? How can governments defend against Internet fragmentation?
- Where should governments focus their attention and international assistance support in bridging digital divides and increasing digital literacy?
- How should the FOC respond to growing attempts made to restrict democratic voices online (i.e. internet shutdowns, disinformation, spyware technologies)?
- What programs, initiatives or processes should the FOC engage on in the next 5-10 years to help protect human rights and fundamental freedoms and advance meaningful digital inclusion?
- How can the FOC deepen dialogue and cooperation with the private sector on the effective implementation of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights?