

Ladies and gentlemen,

When I became a father for the first time, I realised it was the most important responsibility I would ever have. I had to protect my son, this gift from God, with my life. When each of my other three children was born, I experienced the same powerful sense of responsibility. I instantly felt the same pressing need to protect them.

Every adult has this important responsibility toward every child. To protect them and make sure that they can grow up healthy and happy. Free of worries, so that they can focus on their future. A bright future.

When I became the Dutch Minister of Justice and Security and saw the statistics on the scope of online child sexual abuse, my first response was revulsion. And then sadness and finally anger. How on earth could anyone even consider taking advantage of the physical and mental inequality between an adult and a child? To commit the most brutal act imaginable?

As the digitalisation of society expands, the spread of online child sexual abuse is increasing at an alarming rate. And the COVID-19 restrictions are only compounding the problem. So, we must tackle this horrific crime head-on.

And the Netherlands has an important role to play because – unfortunately, it can't be denied – most child abuse content is hosted in our country. This doesn't necessarily say anything about the origin of the material. But the fact remains that it's on Dutch territory, drawn here by our strong digital infrastructure. We cannot allow the internet to be used as a filthy garbage dump.

It is not acceptable that there is a darkweb where criminals can ply their trade. We must fight this. And in that fight we must always be mindful of one thing. Although end-to-end encryption is an important feature of privacy protection and cybersecurity, criminals can use it as a shield. So we need a balanced approach that protects children from the heinous crimes we are talking about today, while also taking account of privacy and cybersecurity considerations. We need to continue the dialogue with tech platforms and find a solution that respects all legitimate interests.

I'd now like to tell you about the Dutch approach. Time is limited, so I'll focus on 2 aspects: public-private partnerships aimed at a clean and safe internet, and prevention by vetting workers.

And I'll tell you right now that I'm going to urge you that we work together better in these 2 areas in Europe so that we can protect more children.

The Dutch government is investing heavily in building effective partnerships with the private sector, and with web-hosting providers in particular. For example, in cooperation with the police and the Child Pornography Reporting Centre, operated by the Dutch Expertise Bureau for Online Child Abuse, we introduced the HashCheck server last summer. This service is free of charge and helps providers to scan their servers for child sexual abuse material.

I'm pleased to see that companies in the web-hosting sector are shouldering their responsibility. They are taking preventive measures by using the HashCheck service to clean up their servers. And they're using responsive measures to remove content reported to the Child Pornography Reporting Centre within 24 hours.

Ultimately, the hosting companies are the leading players in this process. So, we have to be rigorous in dealing with companies that fail to cooperate. That's why we are preparing a bill for introducing an administrative enforcement instrument to eradicate child pornography faster and more efficiently.

In addition, I have announced to publicly blacklist uncooperative companies starting in September. Naming and shaming for a higher purpose.

There is a risk that child abuse content will shift to hosting companies in other Member States. I therefore fully support an EU approach to ensure a safe and clean internet.

As I've said, the Netherlands is also taking preventive measures. For example, we're vetting workers to make sure the wrong people are not allowed to work at daycare centres, pre-schools and primary schools.

When EU citizens living in the Netherlands apply for a certificate of conduct, which is common practice for people who work with children, the Dutch authorities always check in their country of nationality to see if they have a criminal record. Using the European Criminal Record System, ECRIS, we try to prevent sex offenders from victimising more children in a different country.

Unfortunately, however, we receive very few requests of this kind from other member states. And as for EU citizens convicted of child abuse outside the EU, they are often not even on our radar. We have to find a solution for this. And by 'we' I mean all the member states together. Because we can't make it happen without a joint European approach.

Ladies and gentlemen, at the start of my remarks I told you that when I realised the full extent of child sexual abuse, it made me feel first sick, and then sad and finally angry. Often, emotion is a poor counsellor, but not in this case. These emotions helped me develop an effective approach.

We aren't there yet; we still have a long way to go. But I want to ask you to feel that grief and that anger, and maybe even the same revulsion I did, and protect all children as if they were your own.

Because our most important responsibility as adults is to protect our children. They depend on us, and we depend on them too. They are our future. To allow their future to be taken away is to risk our very humanity.

Thank you.