Observatory of the Right (not) to Use the Internet

When the internet first made its appearance, it was welcomed as a blessing that made everyone's life easier and more social, and that provided endless digital connection opportunities. With time, this blessing has in some ways turned into a source of dependency that requires people to be connected in order to function in society. The world is divided – while some crave access to the internet and consider it their basic right, others fight for the right not to be forced to use it.

As the internet has now permeated almost every facet of our lives, there are increasing attempts to address the challenges that it brings by invoking the narrative of human rights. However, there is still much legal uncertainty about the right to access the internet as well as the right *not* to access the internet, either as standalone rights, or as 'subsets' of existing human rights. While policymakers, legislators, academics, judges and the general public increasingly refer to these (prospective) rights, the need for those rights, how they can or should be shaped and how they can or should be operationalized, remains underexplored. This is especially the case when it comes to vulnerable groups in society, such as children, elderly or individuals with disabilities.

Therefore, the project will set up a European observatory on both the right to access the internet and the right not to access the internet. The observatory will map, monitor and critically assess ongoing legal and policy developments on these rights in Council of Europe Member States. The project will contribute to further analysis in the fields of internet governance and human rights law, and it will become the reference point for the research community for these two understudied rights. Ultimately, the project will develop a set of recommendations for policymaking. The results of the research will be widely discussed and freely disseminated on the observatory's website.

Particular attention in the project will be given to vulnerable groups such as children, elderly or individuals with disabilities who are disproportionately affected by both the lack of the internet access as well as the increasing expectations regarding connectivity as certain (public) services are only accessible online. As the internet accompanies children from their first moments of life, young people cannot imagine everyday reality without digital access to information and digital communication, while the older generation feels pressured and lacks the skills to access and use online services to interact with government services, friends and family alike. For individuals with disabilities, the online environment can reduce certain barriers to engage with others, but at the same time create new barriers that affect their inclusion. To that end, the project will actively involve relevant stakeholders in the research and carefully consider their views on the subject matter.

The project will be carried out in cooperation between two renowned universities – the University of Bialystok (Poland) and Ghent University (Belgium), which both have an excellent track record and complementary expertise in law and political science.