The right to protection of personal data: The new posterchild of European Union citizenship?

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1. Introduction – The ‘model’ trajectory of the right to data protection and the development of European Union citizenship

Like European Union (EU) citizenship, the right to the protection of personal data is rooted in market integration. It has however quickly taken a life of its own, and now firmly follows a rights-focused trajectory. Formally speaking, the right to the protection of personal data is not a EU citizenship right. It is not listed in Article 20 TFEU and Chapter V of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR, or ‘Charter’) on citizens’ rights. The EU institutions and bodies nonetheless treat the right to data protection as an important right of EU citizens. This is clearly visible in Advocate General Da Cruz Vilalon’s conclusion in the Digital Rights Ireland case, as he stated that ‘the collection and... the retention...of the large quantities of data generated or processed in connection with most of the everyday electronic communications of citizens of the Union constitute a serious interference with the privacy of those individuals.’ The EU Commissioner Vera Jourova recently stressed that the data protection reform ‘strengthens citizens’ rights’, and the European Parliament (EP) presented it as ‘put[ting] the citizen back in the driving seat’. Moreover, the Article 29 Working Party guidelines explain that data protection authorities will focus their work on ‘claims where there is a clear link between the data subject and the EU, for instance where the data subject is a citizen or resident of an EU Member State.’ The right to data protection may not be a EU citizenship right stricto sensu, but it certainly qualifies as a fundamental right of EU citizens, and belongs to the core EU values protected under Article 2 TEU, and which define EU citizenship.

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1 Advocate General Opinion in cases C-293/12 Digital Rights Ireland and C-594/12 Kärntner Landesregierung, Michael Seitlinger, Christof Tschohl and others ECLI:EU:C:2013:845 (emphasis added).
Personal data is peculiar in the way it brings the dignity of a human being together with valuable economic properties. Like silkworms producing a raw silk thread to make a luxury cloth, individuals generate a personal data trail as a by-product of their multifarious online activities, which largely exceeds the personal information they actively volunteer in online transactions. Thanks to the ‘smart’ everything - from phones to watches, household appliances, cars and cities - our movements and activities get registered, even when we are offline. What used to be the exclusive domain of governments - surveillance - has become regular business. This new ‘surveillance capitalism’ uses data to ‘predict and modify human behavior … to produce revenue and market control.’

Since the 1990s, the EU, mobilized by various institutional and civil society actors, has sought to tame public and private appetites for personal data and to subjugate their use to principles and procedures. The protection of personal data is nowadays guaranteed by an effective combination of various EU legal instruments, notably the EU Treaties, the EU Charter, and secondary EU legislation. It offers a legal and institutional framework which is unparalleled in other parts of the world, and which protects not only nationals of Member States but also Third Country Nationals who can demonstrate some connection with the EU (e.g. through residence).

In this chapter, we argue that the right to data protection is the posterchild of EU citizenship in the digital era. We start by providing a brief overview of the gradual construction of the right to personal data protection in the EU. We then identify a range of actors who have played a particular role in the construction process, including EU citizens themselves. Next, we review the current legal ‘architecture’ of the right to the protection of personal data and discuss whether it could serve as a model for the future development of EU citizenship, notwithstanding remaining challenges at the level of national implementation and public and private compliance with EU rules. Finally, we reflect on the future development of the right to data protection, and its contribution to the development of EU citizenship as a legal regime.

2. The gradual construction of the right to personal data protection: new EU citizens’ rights for the new digital age

Over the years, the right to personal data protection has evolved from a market building device into a core EU fundamental rights, and arguably, a de facto EU citizenship right. Initial EU legislation ensuring protection to personal data in the context of market integration has been extended to other areas of activities and further reinforced by constitutional recognition, which attributes to this right a particularly strong position in the EU legal order.

2.1 Born as internal market legislation

Whilst originating in the internal market, the protection of personal data was infused from the beginning with human rights considerations, which influenced its later development. Indeed, in response to the first wave of automated data processing, in 1995, the predecessor of the

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9 See Article 29 Data Protection Working Party (above n 4).
EU, the European Community, adopted the first major legislative instrument: the Data Protection Directive. Based on the EU competence to approximate member states’ laws in order to ensure the realization of internal market objectives, the Directive’s official purpose was to ease the mobility of personal data across EU borders. It nonetheless also invoked the right to privacy as a general principle of Community law, deriving from the constitutions and laws of the member states and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR). Its recital indeed made it clear that ‘data-processing systems are designed to serve man …[and] must, whatever the nationality or residence of natural persons, respect their fundamental rights and freedoms, notably the right to privacy, and contribute to economic and social progress, trade expansion and the well-being of individuals’. The twin purpose of the Directive, to guarantee both the free movement of personal data and the protection of individuals’ fundamental rights, has been regularly emphasized by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU).

The Data Protection Directive applied to a whole range of activities involving the processing of personal data in both the public and private sectors, thus ensuring a broad scope of protection. However, it excluded police and justice cooperation, or national security. In 2008, the EU adopted legislation which sought to ensure the protection of personal data when these are transferred in the context of cooperation between member states’ authorities in those policy areas. The processing of personal data by EU institutions and bodies themselves is, for its part, governed by a separate Regulation, which is equivalent in substance to the Data Protection Directive. These various legislative instrument are, nowadays, complemented by, and embedded in, a robust constitutional right.

2.2 A free standing constitutional right

The growth of data processing since the turn of the century, and in particular the increased volume, variety and velocity of ‘big data’ applications and resulting data collection and movement, called for an upgrade in the degree and level of protection at European level. The

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11 Now Article 114 TFEU.
13 Data Protection Directive, Recital 2 (n 10).
14 See CJEU, joined cases C-465/00, C-138/01 and C-139/01 Rech-nungshof v Österreichischer Rundfunk and Others and Christa Neukomm and Joseph Lauermann v Österreichischer Rundfunk, ECLI:EU:C:2003:294, para. 70.
The right to personal data protection, now primarily framed as a fundamental right, rather than a market device, has gained a prominent position in the EU constitutional framework.

The right to the protection of personal data made its first significant ‘constitutional’ appearance in Article 8 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights. Drafted in 1999, the Charter codified judge-made general principles for the protection of fundamental rights, and also introduced a few new rights, such as the right to the protection of personal data (Article 8 CFR). After being solemnly proclaimed in 2000, the Charter was eventually granted legally binding force by the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 (Article 6(1) TEU). It applies to EU institutions and bodies, as well as member states when they implement EU law (Article 51(1) CFR). The ‘new’ right to personal data protection is ‘based’ on the Data Protection Directive and ex-Article 286 EC, and is inspired by Article 8 ECHR on the protection of private and family life, as well as the Council of Europe Convention of 28 January 1981 for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data, ratified by all EU Member States. Article 8 CFR is an atypical provision in many respects. First of all, it provides for an autonomous right to the protection of personal data, separate from the right to privacy. This is distinctive of the EU approach to data protection, and the full implications of this emancipation of data protection are yet to be explored. Second, it prescribes an institutional requirement of supervision by an ‘independent authority’, which entrenches continued and professionalized data privacy bodies in the EU and could prevent cross-border flows of personal data to countries which do not provide sufficient institutional guarantees.

In addition to the Charter provision, the Treaty of Lisbon also introduced special data protection provisions into the EU treaties. Article 16 TFEU establishes the right to personal data protection, as its first paragraph replicates the wording of Article 8 CFR. In its second paragraph, it lays down a legal basis which empowers EU institutions to adopt ‘rules relating to the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data by Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies, and by the Member States when carrying out activities which fall within the scope of Union law, and the rules relating to the free movement of such data’. It reasserts that respect for the protection of personal data must be ensured by dedicated independent authorities. Article 16 TFEU belongs to Title II ‘Provisions of general application’, which confirms its general importance across all EU areas of activities. It is complemented by Article 39 TEU, which provides for guarantees for the protection of personal data in the separate context of the Common Foreign and Security Policy.

The multiple inclusion of the right to data protection in the EU primary law since Lisbon confers it a solid constitutional status. The effect is already perceptible in institutional practices. For example, the CJEU’s balancing act when interpreting the Data Protection Directive has visibly tipped in favor of an ‘effective and complete protection of the fundamental rights and freedoms of natural persons’ and ‘a high level of protection.’ The successful invocation of the ‘constitutionalized’ right to data protection in litigation before

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19 For official clarifications on the scope of application of the Charter, see Praesidium of the Convention on the Future of Europe, ‘Explanations relating to the Charter of Fundamental Rights’ (2007/C 303/02), OJ [2007] 303/17, 32. This was confirmed in C-617/10 Åklagaren v Hans Åkerberg Fransson ECLI:EU:C:2013:105, para 19-21.

20 See Explanations, ibid., 20.


22 Case C-131/12 Google Spain SL and Google Inc. v Agencia Española de Protección de Datos (AEPD) and Mario Costeja González, ECLI:EU:C:2014:317, para. 53.

EU and national courts against not only national but also EU intrusive measures, such as the Data Retention Directive, EU Commission Safe Harbor Decision) has further reinforced its position in the EU fundamental rights’ framework.24

2.3 A new generation of legislative instruments: the EU data protection reform

Since the adoption of the 1995 Directive, automated data-processing activities have decoupled, due to the significant improvements in data storage and computing capabilities, which underpin contemporary practices, such as ‘big data’ and ‘cloud computing’.25 Moreover, algorithmic decision-making, machine learning and artificial intelligence are fueling data-driven markets, with serious implications for individuals and society at large. As part of its 2012 Digital Agenda Strategy, the Commission initiated a major reform of the data protection legislative framework.26 It sought to overcome the persistent fragmentation of the internal market caused by divergent national implementations of the 1995 Directive, to modernize data protection law, and to guarantee a better protection of individuals’ fundamental rights.27 After four years of intense legislative wrangling, the EU legislator adopted the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR),28 as well as a new Directive concerning data protection in the context of law enforcement.29

The GDPR, as it is known, enters into force in May 2018. By and large, it continues the regulatory approach of the Data Protection Directive but comes with improvements and a few novelties. Probably the most interesting innovation or at least one which possibly has interesting implications for the concept of EU citizenship, concerns the territorial scope of the Regulation. Indeed, the GDPR applies extraterritorially, to protect all individuals located in the EU and whose personal data is gathered in the course of online transactions or in the...
context of monitoring their behavior.\textsuperscript{30} That way, it ensures the protection of EU citizens and residents from abusive practices from companies operating from outside the EU.\textsuperscript{31} Its practical effectiveness remains to be seen thought. Moreover, despite relevant adjustments, the GDPR has been criticized for preserving an outdated logic of linear lifecycles in personal data processing that no longer corresponds with today’s capabilities in computing and data analytics.\textsuperscript{32}

Like its predecessor, the GDPR applies to both the public and the private sectors, with exceptions for law enforcement and national security activities which fall outside the scope of EU law. The protection of personal data in law enforcement activities is governed by a new Directive, which replace the pre-existing Framework Decision, and which was adopted in parallel to the GDPR. The EU nonetheless missed the opportunity to integrate its own institutions’ data processing activities into the general framework, and retains the model of regulation through a separate instrument. The fragmentation that prevailed before the adoption of the GDPR has therefore not disappeared. Member States and private actors are subject to the same general regime, except in matters related to law enforcement, where states are subject to a different framework, and EU institutions and bodies follow their own set of rules (which are nonetheless substantively equivalent).

3. The ‘builders’ of the right to data protection

The current relatively comprehensive EU system of protection of personal data came about thanks to the effective and successful mobilization of the EU legislators and courts by determined societal actors, including key institutional players, expert groups, civil society organizations and EU citizens themselves. Traditionally, in the EU, the Commission initiates legislation, drafting proposals which it submits to the EU legislator (ie the European Parliament and the Council) for discussion, amendment and adoption. However, more often than not, new EU laws and policies, or reform of existing ones, occur under the impulsion and influence of a broader set of political and societal actors, involving corporate players,\textsuperscript{33} expert networks,\textsuperscript{34} interest groups\textsuperscript{35} or civil society organizations.\textsuperscript{36} Moreover, through strategic litigation, organised interests can effectively use the judicial system to raise awareness on a problem and influence the policy agenda, or to secure the development of new rules or favorable interpretation and application of existing rules.\textsuperscript{37} In the case of data


\textsuperscript{31} Irion and Luchetta (n 26).

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., For an analysis, see Bert-Jaap Koops, ‘The Trouble with European Data Protection Law’ (2014) 4 International Data Privacy Law 1.


protection in the EU, an epistemic community of data privacy experts effectively lobbied an initially reluctant Commission to harmonize the protection of personal data in Europe, monitor respect for EU data protection rules, and ensure their adaptation to new challenges. The EU framework was further consolidated through litigation activities. Here, not only organized interests (e.g. corporations, NGOs), but also concerned and affected EU citizens themselves, actively mobilized courts at national and EU level, to flesh out the EU protective apparatus or to enforce the right to data protection against the inertia or negligence of national and EU institutions and bodies in the face of growing tendencies of public and private surveillance.38

3.1. The adoption and reform of EU data protection legislation: expert communities in action

The construction of the EU legislative framework for data protection resulted primarily from the active mobilization of expert communities. It proceeded in two distinct waves. The first generation was the consequence of the activism of national privacy specialists. The more recent reform was the product of intense negotiations and lobbying, in which data protection specialists from various institutional bodies and elected representations proved influential, countering heavy corporate lobbying.39

In the first wave, members from national data privacy authorities, who ‘feared that unconstrained technology would threaten the civil liberties of European citizens’40 and were concerned that market integration would jeopardize protection standards and challenge their regulatory authority, successfully deployed their expertise to push for a protective agenda at EU level.41 They leveraged both the potential adverse impact of diverse - and for some deficient - national data protection regimes, on the free flow of data across the EU, and the reorientation of the European project towards citizens’ rights following the Maastricht Treaty (i.e. EU citizenship, fundamental rights protection) to secure protective harmonizing legislation at EU level.42


The second wave saw a concerted effort from institutional data privacy experts, in the face of intense lobbying from corporate giants. The Article 29 Working Party, which coordinates Member States’ data protection authorities, influenced the EU policy process through the timely and targeted release of opinions and interpretative guidelines on existing and future data protection rules. The European Data Protection Supervisor (EDPS), which is the dedicated EU independent supervisory authority, also played an important supporting role. Flagging its mission, which includes that of ensuring that EU institutions’ respect the right to personal data protection when they design, adopt and implement policies, it issued numerous critical opinions and statements which influenced the drafting of the reform proposal. The EP rapporteur, acting with other members of the competent parliamentary committee, was also central in defending the protective dimension of the legislative proposal. The Vice-President of the Commission, Viviane Reding, also fought hard against backsliding attempts. The unprecedented lobbying by corporate players or powerful third countries’ authorities led many MEPs to react and mobilize in support of privacy rights. During the reform discussions, European Digital Rights (EDRi), the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) and a few other groups intervened to represent the interests of EU citizens and individuals at large. Being notoriously on the shorter end of resources and womanpower, they nonetheless managed to gain public attention by exposing the extent of corporate lobbying through the publication of a comparison between stakeholder documents and MEPs’ tabled amendments. Academics across Europe also released an open statement in support of the data protection. The Snowden revelations in early 2013, and international news media reporting over the reach of mass surveillance by the US National Security Agency, which was seemingly tapping into the personal logs and data of the largest US Internet companies, further fueled mobilization in support of stricter data protection rules.

Whilst expert communities were instrumental in bringing about legislation on data protection and ensuring high protection standards, despite corporate attempt at undermining them, civil society organizations and citizens have effectively mobilized national and EU judicial systems to consolidated EU protection of personal data.

3.2 Creating protective precedent: civil society and citizens’ mobilization

43 David Bernet, Democracy (Documentary film, 2015).
46 A crowdsourcing platform run by the Berlin-based Open Data City project shows which amendments were proposed by lobbies and submitted as such verbatim by MEPs, but also visualizes how the member states voted in the Council (www.lobbyplag.eu).
Courts are reactive and contingent institutions, deciding on questions about the interpretation and application of the law, in the context of disputes which are submitted to them by public and private litigants.\textsuperscript{49} They can, to some extent, ‘control’ their docket, by showing more or less sympathy towards certain kinds of claims, and open the door wider to particular claimants.\textsuperscript{50} In the case of data protection, the CJEU has displayed a welcoming and encouraging approach, which contribute to further reinforce the protective EU framework.

The Court’s ‘special regard’ for the right to the protection of personal data is revealed by a range of indicators and anecdotal evidence.\textsuperscript{51} First, the well above average frequency with which the Court sits as a ‘Grand Chamber’ in data protection cases signals their importance in the eyes of the Luxembourg judges. Second, the unusual readiness with which the Court annulled EU acts found to disproportionately restrict the right protected by Articles 8 CFR, also suggests that data protection is ‘different’ from other rights,\textsuperscript{52} for which the Court has shown greater deference to EU law-makers.\textsuperscript{53} Finally, the quality and rigor of the Court’s reasoning in data protection cases, which contrasts with the brusque manner in which it sometimes brushes away other human rights arguments,\textsuperscript{54} suggests there is a strong consensus within the Court in support of that cause.\textsuperscript{55}

The development and enforcement of the EU regime of personal data protection is, moreover, supported by favorable legal opportunities in some member states, such as legal standing for NGOs, or the possibility of collective claims, which have encouraged EU law based litigation and provided material and opportunities for the CJEU to mold protective principles. It also benefits from a strong societal vigilance, perhaps rooted in European authoritarian pasts. For example, after the adoption of the Data Retention Directive, 34 000 German citizens filed separate actions against the national implementation measures, and obtained from the German Constitutional Court that it strikes them down.\textsuperscript{56} In the meanwhile, the Irish organization ‘Digital Rights Ireland’, as well as an Austrian local government and more than 11 000 Austrian citizens brought separate actions against domestic courts against domestic implementation measures. The case was referred to the CJEU, which invalidated the controversial EU measure, and took the opportunity to lay down the ground rules for national data retention regimes.\textsuperscript{57} This visibly encouraged data privacy defenders to contest other EU measures. In 2016, Digital Rights Ireland, and La Quadrature du Net, a French digital rights group, filed separate actions against the ‘EU-US Privacy Shield’, an arrangement which succeeds the Safe Harbour agreement, invalidated by the Court in Schrems I,\textsuperscript{58} to facilitate

\textsuperscript{51} Irion (n 12).
\textsuperscript{52} Granger and Irion (n 24).
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Rumor even has it that the Schrems ruling of 6 October 2015 was delivered only two weeks after Advocate General Bot delivered his Opinion to allow President Vassilios Skouris to take part in the ruling before his term ended.
\textsuperscript{57} Digital Rights Ireland (n 24).
\textsuperscript{58} Schrems I (n 23).
the transfer of personal data from the EU to the US. 59 The same year, Maximilian Schrems, an Austrian law student now turned ‘legal entrepreneur’, brought an action which challenges the Commission’s decision on EU-US data transfer channels used by Facebook, in which he represents the interests of more than 25 000 ‘consumers’ (Schrems III). 60 With the entry into force of the GDPR, public interest groups will have the right to represent the interests of ‘data subjects’ (Article 80), mirroring similar provisions in EU environmental and consumer protection law. The relaxation of standing rules for NGOs should result in further data protection litigation.

EU and national data protection authorities also play an important role in the judicial development and enforcement of EU data protection law. The EDPS has managed to secure broad participation rights in the CJEU, which it has used to influence case law developments. Indeed, the original mandate of the EDPS granted the office holder the right to intervene in proceedings concerning data processing by EU institutions and bodies. However, in the Passenger Name Records (PNR) cases, which concerned measures allowing for the transfer of the personal information of air transport passengers, the EDPS claimed a right to intervene in direct actions (e.g. annulment actions, infringement proceedings) which have implications on data protection, which the CJEU granted. 61 In preliminary reference proceedings (Article 267 TFEU), which make up the bulk of the CJEU case law and through which it most significantly contributes to the development and enforcement of EU data protection rules, the CJEU has developed a practice of asking the EDPS to provide expert opinions, based on Article 24 of the Court’s Statute. 62 The EDPS has actively taken up this new role, pleading for the enhanced recognition of data protection as a fundamental right and an important value in EU law. 63 Its expertise, and position in the EU institutional framework, contributes to its influence on the shaping of EU data protection law.

In sum, the increased frequency with which the CJEU rules on data protection is not only a reaction to contemporary challenges in the digital environment, but is also the result of the Court’s welcoming approach to privacy concerns. This, in turn, has empowered and emboldened organizations fighting for greater informational privacy across the EU, as well as individual citizens concerned by intrusive surveillance practices, who called upon EU law and the Court to uphold protective standards. The resulting growing number of references, and the variety of questions raised, has given the Court the opportunity to make significant principled contributions on data protection standards. It has also offered the Court a unique opportunity to boost its own legitimacy and expand its review powers. In the process, it has positioned itself as a champion in a field of increased relevance to EU citizens, and has shown it could live up to its constitutional mandate of protection of fundamental rights. 64

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59 General Court, case T-670/16 (Digital Rights Ireland v Commission) and case T-738/16 (La Quadrature du Net and Others v Commission), both pending.


64 Irion (n 12).
Still, despite the mobilization of citizens and civil society, data protection authorities and the support of important EU institutions, the development of data protection rules suffers from a corporate bias, in the sense that litigation targets primarily state measures and not corporate practices. This results both from features of EU law and the nature of societal concerns. First, provisions of EU Directives, such as the Data Protection Directive, have only vertical direct effect: when non (properly) implemented, they can be invoked in courts only against emanations of the state, but not against private parties. This may explain why the EU case law, fueled by preliminary references from national courts, concerned mostly violations of the right to personal data resulting from public actors’ activities or omissions, and not from those of corporations. Moreover, citizens’ vigilance and mobilization of the judicial system seems stronger in the case of state surveillance, as citizens worry about public authorities’ intrusion into their private life, whilst they are resigned over corporations turning their personal data into a counter-performance in exchange for access to services, in the context of e-commerce, social networks, or other internet-based services. Still, despite some deficiencies, the EU system of data protection is a robust one, which could be emulated to promote and protect other important fundamental rights of EU citizens.

4. The legal ‘architecture’ of the right to the protection of personal data – a possible model for the effective protection of EU citizens’ civil liberties?

The architecture of the right to the protection of personal data is a relatively solid one, with two strong constitutional pillars, and an extensive legislative framework. The articulation of the different legal instruments is complex, but makes for an interesting set up. Indeed, despite some substantive overlap and repetition, the Regulation-Treaty-Charter triptych appears like an good recipe to ensure the protection of data privacy in the EU against intrusions from both public and private actors.

The coming into force of the GDPR carries important implications. First of all, as an EU Regulation, it is directly applicable (Article 288 TFEU). This feature does away with problems related to delayed, incomplete or incorrect transposition of EU Directives. Second, it imposes direct and clearer obligations on both public and private actors. Third, it makes the EU dimension of the protective legislation more visible, and with it, the associated requirement of effective judicial protection (Article 19(1) TEU and Article 47 CFR). Finally, and foremost, unlike the Directive, it produces direct horizontal effect, and can thus be invoked in litigation against both public and private actors. It thus increases the potential exposure of private actors and may contribute to refocusing litigation towards intrusive practices by corporate actors, rather than just public bodies.

Moreover, Treaty recognition can contribute to the development of a more robust and consistent approach to data protection across a broad range of activities. Indeed, EU Treaty provisions can produce both vertical and horizontal direct effects, meaning that they can be relied on in domestic litigation against both state and private actors. The formulation of
Article 16 TFEU appears sufficiently clear and precise to produce direct effect. Its wording stands the comparison with Article 21 TFEU which guarantees EU citizens’ right to free movement, and which the CJEU recognized as directly effective. In any case, following the Mangold/Kücküdeckeuci line of reasoning, developed in the context of age discrimination, like data protection characterized by the presence of specific Treaty provisions and strong legislative instruments, one could also argue for the recognition of a general principle for the protection of personal data, which could be invoked against public and private actors where EU legislation reaches its limits. The horizontal effect of Charter provisions, such as Article 8, is still an open question, but loses some of its relevance when the right protected by a Charter provision (like Article 8 CFR) is also embedded in Treaty provisions, general principles and legislative provisions which themselves can be applied in horizontal disputes. The (potential) recognition of the right of data protection as a directly effective primary EU law norm offers a stronger guarantee that all public and private authorities are subject to similar obligations, irrespective of whether their activities fall under the scope of the GDPR or other instruments, and should support the more coherent development of EU data protection law.

In a manner similar to the EU equal treatment and non-discrimination framework, the articulation and complementarity between the different legal instruments which guarantee the right to the protection of personal data in the EU offer an interesting model for the future of the protection of EU citizens’ civil rights, such as, for example, the right to a fair trial or freedom of expression. Indeed, under the ‘regular’ Charter scheme, individuals can only invoke Charter provisions ‘when Member States are implementing EU law’ (Article 51(1) FCR), a notion which is interpreted by EU (and national) courts in a restrictive and inconsistent manner, and which prevents citizens from relying on the EU Charter and activating EU law remedies against violations of their Charter rights which do not fall within the scope of EU law so defined.

5. ‘Maintenance work’ – the constant challenge of enforcement and compliance

Whilst the EU has pieced together a comprehensive framework for the protection of personal data, its implementation and practical application still pose problem. The political science literature on Europeanization and EU compliance has identified various factors that affect compliance with EU rules. These include notably the compatibility between existing national


69 The CJEU ruled in relation to Article 18 EC, the predecessor of Article 21 TFEU. See case C-413/99 Baumbast and R v Secretary of State for the Home Department ECLI:EU:C:2002:493, para 84.

70 See case C-144/04 Werner Mangold v Rüdiger Helm ECLI:EU:C:2005:709; C-555/07 - Kücküdeckeuci ECLI:EU:C:2010:21.


72 Case C-176/12 Association de médiation sociale v Union locale des syndicats CGT and Others ECLI:EU:C:2014:2.

laws and EU norms (‘goodness of fit’), the ‘quality’ of EU legislation (its clarity and precision), the participation of stakeholders in the EU law-making and implementation process, or the EU enforcement capacity, as well as a range of domestic legal and political factors (e.g. the openness, quality and effective functioning of the national judicial systems in relation to EU based claims; administrative capacity; support or opposition of domestic political actors, etc.). Many of these factors are relevant to the specific context of ensuring public and private actors’ compliance with EU rules for the protection of personal data. Moreover, data protection law is complex, subject to fast-moving technological developments and involving significant profits, which further hampers the effectiveness of an otherwise strong protection system. The incorporation of the right into EU primary law and the adoption of the GDPR can help address some of the enforcement challenges, but difficulties which are both classic implementation problems, and others more peculiar to the field of data protection are likely to remain.

The Commission’s reports on the implementation of the 1995 Data Protection Directive, the impact assessment which preceded the recent reform of the EU data protection regulatory framework, and research on threats to civil rights arising in the context of the implementation of the EU Data Protection instruments, suggest that the Directive not only failed to achieve its internal market harmonization objective, but also suffered from significant enforcement problems. The Commission identified a number of shortcomings. Some concern the EU instruments themselves, which sometimes do not provide for sufficiently precise or adequate definitions, as well as the way public and private actors (ab)use of the lee-way they have to apply EU rules in a manner which defies the protective aim of the Directive. Particular problems arose in relation to the definition of personal data (e.g. inclusion of IP addresses or geo-location data); the notions of ‘controllers’ and ‘processors’ and their respective roles and responsibilities; the definition of ‘consent’; the scope of certain exemptions (e.g. ‘household exemptions, or freedom of expression); the territorial scope of application of the Directive; the interpretation of key principles of data protection (e.g. ‘purpose-limitation’, ‘data minimization’, ‘transparency’ and ‘accountability’); the classification of so-called ‘sensitive data’ (e.g. genetic and biometric or health data, offences and criminal convictions) and the scope of the public interest exception; the nature of the duty to inform data subjects, and the range of rights afforded to them (access, rectification, deletion, withdrawal, etc.); the question of the legality of, and safeguards applicable to, the transfer of data to third countries, and so on.


77 Granger and Salat (n 66).

78 Commission Staff Working Pape (n 76).
Furthermore, there are significant problems with administrative and judicial enforcement mechanisms. These appear particularly pronounced where data protection or privacy have not traditionally received prominent protection in the national legal system (e.g. in the United Kingdom), or where administrative and judicial systems are generally deficient (e.g. Hungary). Moreover, there are serious practical challenges. Given the technical expertise (including legal knowledge) required to design and apply compliant data protection policies, and to monitor compliance, public bodies, such as data protection authorities, have an important role to play. They are, however, not always granted sufficient guarantees of independence, investigative or sanctioning powers, or resources, to carry out their tasks effectively. Some contributed significantly to the enforcement of EU data protection rules, and cooperated in the context of joint enforcement actions, but others fail to take on an active role.

Judicial remedies, before either/or administrative and ordinary courts, are generally available. However, the apparent small stakes, and the complexity of the field, which incur important legal expertise costs, probably discourage many individuals from taking violations to court. In this context, NGOs play a fundamental role by actively supporting individual cases, organising collection litigation, or even constructing and bringing cases themselves (like in the Digital Rights Ireland case), in particular in taking on corporate giants or public surveillance schemes. Oftentimes, national courts have offered assistance and upheld privacy concerns. They appear ready to stand up to big corporations, but are often more deferential to data collection and use for security purposes by law enforcement bodies, unless these practices are clearly too far reaching (e.g. the ‘File of Honest People’ in France) and disproportionate to the security objective pursued. Already prior to the invalidation of the Data Retention Directive by the CJEU, a number of national courts had criticized national implementing measures on national constitutional grounds. Eventually, the question came before the CJEU, which annulled it, and imposed strict limitations on national data retention policies. Many national courts followed up by striking down or neutralizing national data retention measures. National legislators nonetheless keep on adopting new amending measures, which still include pre-emptive and blanket data retention, despite the CJEU prohibition. NGOs brought the matter back to the CJEU, which in its recent ruling on the Tele2/Watson case, reaffirmed that EU law outlawed ‘national legislation which, for the purpose of fighting crime, provides for the general and indiscriminate retention of all traffic and location data of all subscribers and registered users relating to all means of electronic communication.’

Granger and Salat (n 66), 38-39.


Jacob Kohnstamm, ‘Getting Our Act Together: European Data Protection Authorities Face Up to Silicon Valley’ in Paul de Hert and David Wright (eds), Enforcing Privacy: Regulatory, Legal and Technological Approaches (Springer International 2016), 455.

Granger and Salat (n 66).


Granger and Irion (n 26).


See Joined Cases C-203/15 and C-698/15 Tele2 Sverige AB, Tom Watson and Others ECLI:EU:C:2016:970, para. 112.
Until now, sanctions imposed on those who breach EU data protection rules, whether administrative fines or criminal penalties, are not commensurate with the financial benefits derived from the collection, access and use of personal data. The GDPR could alter the cost-benefit calculus and increase the deterrent effect of the EU regime, as it provides for new sanctions amounting to up to four percent of the total worldwide annual turnover of the undertaking. 87

The reform of the EU data protection framework, and notably the adoption of the GDPR, is supposed to address some of the implementation and enforcement shortcomings, but the complexity of EU data protection law, and practical difficulties in its operationalization will continue to be major factors undermining its effectiveness. Even willing, resourceful and well-advised public bodies, corporate actors or civil society organizations struggle to be fully compliant with the specifications of EU data protection law. These difficulties are further exacerbated by rapid technological change, which leave law and legal procedures oftentimes lagging behind, 88 and the financial benefits and market advantages drawn from undercutting or bending data protection rules. With the adoption of the GDPR, a further challenge will concern the geographical scope of applying the Regulation. Following a ‘destination’ approach, the Regulation seeks to reinforce the effective protection of EU citizens in the age of the Internet, as data travel across the world faster than the time that it takes to click. 89 Whilst logical from the perspective of the protection of EU citizens’ right to data protection, it will inevitably trigger conflicts of laws and jurisdictional issues, and generate controversies related to the legitimacy of the extraterritorial application of EU data protection law. 90

5. Conclusion: the right to data protection – the new EU citizens’ right

Over two decades, the protection of the right to personal data has undergone a radical transformation, mutating from a market supporting device into an autonomous civil right of those who live in the EU, and a core European value. The mixed legal framework which ensures its protection could serve as a model for the future development of EU citizenship, in particular if it is to evolve towards a more rights-based notion, away from its reminiscent market building function. 91 The future of the right to data protection nonetheless faces a number of challenges. It imposes demanding requirements on public and private actors alike, which require access to, and the deployment of, significant human and financial resources not all can afford. These burdensome requirements are not always necessary to secure a sufficient level of protection. The recent reform, notably, failed to address the ‘scalability’ of protection, as regulatory interventions regulate each single act of processing through rather malleable obligations. 92 Moreover, the strong recognition currently afforded to data protection in the EU raises concerns as to the balance of rights which constitutes the EU constitutional identity. The CJEU has recognized that the fundamental right to data protection is not absolute, that it must be ‘considered in relation to its function in society’, 93 and

87 Article 83(5) GDPR.
88 Granger and Salat (n 66) 38-39.
89 de Hert and Czerniawski.(n 30).
90 Ibid.
92 Irion and Luchetta (n 26).
reconciled with other fundamental rights. As a matter of fact, the protection of personal data often supports the exercise of other important fundamental rights and values (e.g. freedom of expression), but it can also be (ab)used to limit them (e.g. freedom of information). There is also the risk that the EU right to data protection falls victim of its own success. Indeed, the improved legal opportunity structures for the protection of personal data under EU law, together with the publicity surrounding the coming into force of the GDPR, could trigger a sharp rise in data protection litigation and a massive increase in case referrals to the Luxembourg Court, which may well be tempted to tone down its initial enthusiasm and adopt more restrictive approaches to avoid overload. There is moreover a recent tendency to overcharge EU data protection law with expectations that it would come to terms with the much more complex challenges of algorithmic decision-making and artificial intelligence. Personal data protection regulation is not capable of remediing all negative effects technology can have on personal autonomy and our social fabric. The ongoing transformation from information technology and the Internet are deeper and more profound than the isolated concern about informational privacy.

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94 CJEU, case C-73/07 Tietosuojavaltuutettu v Satakunnan Markkinapörssin Oy, Satamedia Oy ECLI:EU:C:2008:727, para. 53.
95 E.g. C-203/15 and C-698/15Tele2 Sverige (n 86), para. 101; see Oostveen and Irion n 25; Ronald J. Krotoszynski, Privacy Revisited: A Global Perspective on the Right to Be Left Alone (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016).
96 Granger and Salat (n 66), 37-38.