

Rolf Schwartzmann
Marek Steffen Jansen
Moritz Köhler (eds.)

Casebook European Data Law

Ten Years of the GDPR –
A Milestone in EU Data Regulation

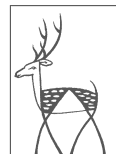


Nomos

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HART



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The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

ISBN (Print) 978-3-7560-4175-6 (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, Baden-Baden)

ISBN (ePDF) 978-3-7489-7129-0 (Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH & Co. KG, Baden-Baden)

ISBN (Print) 978-1-048-00110-5 (Hart Publishing)

1st Edition 2026

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Preface

A decade is a long time in data policy. As the European Union becomes ever more deeply immersed in digitalisation, the challenge of maintaining an appropriate balance between the protection of personal data and the free flow of data has grown correspondingly. In the ten years since the GDPR entered into force, the EU legislator has not fundamentally revised the core legal framework for the harmonisation of privacy protection. However, it has significantly expanded and reshaped the broader regulatory landscape through the adoption of new legislation – such as the Data Act, the Data Governance Act, the Digital Markets Act, the Digital Services Act and the AI Act – which interacts with data protection law. As the GDPR enters its second decade, the European Commission has now initiated a legislative process to amend it.

Since its entry into force in May 2016, the case law of the Court of Justice of the European Union as well as the work of European data protection authorities have shaped the GDPR. On the occasion of its 10th anniversary, we have taken the opportunity to invite contributors from academia, practice, civil society and regulatory institutions to reflect on this development through commentaries on selected court decisions or supervisory authority guidance. As editors, we have structured these contributions thematically and provided a common analytical framework. The result is an impressive journey through ten years of European data regulation. The contributions reflect a wide range of perspectives and starting points, mirroring the diversity and complexity of the underlying case law. Appreciation does not necessarily imply agreement. Some decisions are celebrated, others are criticised. What all the contributions have in common is a respect for the legislature and its judicial interpretation by the courts.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all contributors for their insightful analyses, and the four key figures who played the central role in bringing the GDPR into being for their forewords to this volume. From within the ranks of the European Commission, this includes Viviane Reding; from within the European Parliament, the rapporteur Jan Philipp Albrecht and the shadow rapporteur Axel Voss. They took the opportunity to write a joint statement. We were also able to secure the participation of

Preface

former State Secretary Ole Schröder from within the ranks of the Council of the European Union.

We live in an age of artificial intelligence. In light of this development, we have decided to permit the use of AI on a limited basis, to assist in the drafting of case summaries, while the commentary remains the sole responsibility of the respective authors. To the best of our knowledge, the use of AI in this volume has remained within the scope defined by the editorial policy.

Finally, we would like to thank Nomos Verlag, in particular Marco Ganzhorn and his team, for making this project—which is both fascinating in terms of its content and ambitious in terms of its timeline—possible.

No milestone birthday should go without a celebration. We look forward to presenting the book on 20 May 2026 at the Second Symposium of the Journal of European Data and Information Law (*Zeitschrift für Europäisches Daten- und Informationsrecht, EuDIR*) as a symbolic gesture and celebrating the 10th anniversary of the GDPR with contemporary witnesses. The event is being held in collaboration with the Cologne Research Centre for Media Law at the Cologne University of Applied Sciences, where, in the spirit of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, scholarship is approached from a practical perspective. This is precisely the approach taken in our Casebook on European Data Law, captured in its guiding motto: ‘Understanding Data Law from Practice — case by case’.

Cologne and Mainz in April 2026

Prof. Dr. Rolf Schwartmann

Dr. Marek Steffen Jansen

Dr. Moritz Köhler

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European Parliament

The GDPR entered into force on 24 May 2016. This year, it celebrates its first major milestone anniversary. For both of us, European Union data protection law is now almost 15 years old. That is how long ago the work of the EU institutions began. The Treaty of Lisbon, which entered into force at that time, finally introduced through the Charter of Fundamental Rights a binding and explicit fundamental right to data protection and, through Article 16 TFEU, conferred upon the EU legislator a comprehensive competence to legislate for its protection and for the free movement of data within the European market. The General Data Protection Regulation, which emerged from this framework, has been applicable since 25 May 2018. For an EU legislative act, it has not only become an exceptionally well-known and widely applied set of rules governing social and economic life on this continent; it has also become a regulatory export success of the European Union – its standards are now globally recognised and influential.

Yet we all know: this has not come without burdens and many people still groan when confronted with the data protection law “made in Brussels.” The relationship remains ambivalent. However, on the occasion of its tenth anniversary, there may also be room for a degree of pride in a legal instrument that has placed the relationship between law, individuals, and a data-driven world on a new footing. The harmonised EU-wide framework has indeed contributed to trust and legal certainty among individuals; many of the dire predictions regarding its effects have not materialised. At the same time, however, it has not significantly facilitated data use. Those who argue that Germany overregulates in the field of data protection and point to countries such as Estonia, Denmark, or the Netherlands cannot meaningfully attribute their critique to the GDPR, as it applies equally and directly in all those jurisdictions.

At the same time, it is also evident: instead of treating the GDPR as the central guiding framework for data protection and interpreting it uniformly across Europe, a considerable number of special rules continue to exist across the 27 EU Member States and, within Germany, across the 16 federal states. Moreover, the rules are sometimes applied in markedly divergent and ambitious ways. Greater consistency and clarity must therefore become the guiding principle for the future. Economic actors who complain about

European Parliament

the GDPR might also benefit from focusing more on the many possibilities it creates for data processing – not least where anonymous information is concerned. Such data, as is well known, falls entirely outside the scope of the GDPR. In truth, the GDPR is far better than its reputation suggests; however, its impact in achieving a genuinely unified data market within the European Union still falls short of expectations.

In the tenth year following its entry into force, the GDPR is no longer the sole instrument of European data law. It now forms part of an emerging ensemble of legal acts that address both data protection and the data economy. To prevent their interaction from descending into a cacophony, the application of EU legislation must be carefully orchestrated. The close interconnection between the digital economy, artificial intelligence, and data law is evident, and the legislator must act accordingly.

In a democracy, laws are not set in stone. Timed to coincide with its tenth anniversary, amendments to the GDPR are already being planned. The European Commission has identified a need for reform in data protection law and, in November 2025, launched a legislative proposal. The so-called “GDPR Digital Omnibus” is intended to liberalise data protection law in light of the needs of the digital economy. The GDPR is to be adjusted in order to streamline the legal framework and make it more accessible.

The Court of Justice of the European Union has significantly advanced the detailed interpretation of the GDPR and has, at the same time, shaped the European Union’s transatlantic data policy with considerable determination. For this reason, it is only fitting to congratulate the GDPR through the lens of this case law. One may hope that the Court will receive both approval and constructive criticism from academia and practice, as reflected in this volume.

This book, published on the occasion of the GDPR’s tenth anniversary and presented at the 2nd EuDIR Symposium in May, is a fitting birthday tribute. We, too, congratulate this legislative instrument and wish it continued success in guiding data protection in a fair manner for both individuals and businesses in the European Union into the next decade.

Jan-Philipp Albrecht

Axel Voss

European Commission

Since the beginning of the European construction, the ECJ was instrumental for turning abstract legal concepts into practical applied rules. Europewide. Also concerning the GDPR. That is why your publication, systematically reviewing case-law, is an interesting anniversary-gift for 10 years of GDPR. Thank you! It all began in 2009, when the Treaty of Lisbon and the Charter of Fundamental Rights entered into force, becoming a point of reference for rules-based policy-making. Art.8 of the Charter (“Everyone has the right to the protection of personal data“) led the Commission to present a masterplan for data-protection in the digital age (4.11.2010).

The European Parliament, always keen to protect citizens rights, followed with the report by Axel Voss (06.07.2011). This endorsement accelerated the preparatory work, and on to 25. January 2012 I was ready to present the legal proposal for GDPR. Helped by the negotiation-skills of the EP-rapporteur Phillipp Albrecht and the good-will of several Council Presidencies, the text was agreed on 27.April 2016, to be applied on 25.May 2018. The long and complicated negotiation-period (strongly influenced by the Snowden-revelations) is explained in a brilliant way by David Bernet in his film “Democracy, im Rausch der Daten” a “food for thought“ art work!

GDPR was a milestone- step from a mostly economic union to a union of citizens and fundamental rights. It was drafted at a time, when the influence of digitalisation on individuals and on the economy had only started. Nevertheless, its extraterritorial impact led it to become a world-standard rapidly. An important tool for facing “ubiquitous computing” and AI-centred revolutions. The digital changes in today’s society are massive and ultra-rapid. It seems evident that an adaptation of GDPR to this evolving reality is a must. Preserving the personal rights and the industrial development possibilities in parallel is a challenge. May the impact of scholars, jurists and politicians be a valuable guide for the next decade...

Viviane Reding

Council of the European Union

Ten years after the GDPR was enacted, it is appropriate to assess its influence and at the same time to look ahead.

The surrounding conditions of data processing have developed very dynamically over the last ten years. On the one hand, we are experiencing exponentially increased surveillance and data analysis capacities, which are a potential threat to civil liberties.

On the other hand, data processing has become even more of a prerequisite for the exercise of central fundamental rights. Freedom of expression, for example, is nowadays largely realized via digital communication platforms. Economic participation and social prosperity also depend inseparably on the ability to process data in a data-driven economy. This ambivalence has been further intensified by big data analyses and AI-supported systems. Today, more than ever, data protection law operates in a tension between the threat to fundamental rights by data processing and the availability of data that enables innovation and fundamental freedoms. Whether we have succeeded in balancing this tension without undermining the practical applicability and practical enforceability of the law is the central question that arises with new urgency after ten years of the GDPR.

The present volume, which systematically reviews the case law of the ECJ on the GDPR, makes an important contribution to this. After all, it is not least the ECJ that, through its interpretation, decisively decides how the abstractly formulated data protection law is applied in practice.

In my role as Parliamentary State Secretary to the Federal Minister of the Interior, I was directly involved in these negotiations. Many of the challenges we are discussing today were already present at the beginning of the legislative process. It was clear that the traditional data protection concepts of the GDPR were only of limited suitability for the digital environment and required substantial modernization. The regulatory approach of the GDPR is still rooted in an analogue world. It is based on a model of data processing that is subject to purpose limitation, controllable, and organized within clearly defined structures of responsibility. At the same time, developments such as Big Data, cloud computing, the Internet of Things, and interconnected systems were already central during the negotiations. In particular, the question of how to allow for further processing for

new purposes was highly controversial in the light of these technologies. The so-called compatibility test was intended to provide a solution—an approach that was already recognized at the time as legally fragile and difficult to apply in practice.

With the rapid development of data-driven technologies, these challenges have been further intensified: Artificial intelligence, machine learning, large language models, and self-optimizing systems are fundamentally based on the idea that insights are generated only through the processing of large volumes of data. In such contexts, a precise specification of purpose in advance is structurally impossible. Against this background, core principles of the GDPR, such as purpose limitation, data minimization, and transparency, appear increasingly detached from reality: purpose limitation turns into a fiction, data minimization into a mere formality, and transparency into an illusion, while the specification of purpose is drafted so broadly as to become effectively meaningless

The fundamental approach of a system of prohibition subject to authorization also reaches its limits in this context. It seeks to prevent any unlawful data processing through *ex ante* regulation. However, the reality of large-scale, globally distributed data processing, particularly in the context of AI-driven applications, demonstrates that this approach is neither effectively enforceable nor capable of providing meaningful protection for individuals. Despite considerable bureaucratic effort, a structural enforcement deficit is evident, while individuals are often left largely exposed to actual data processing practices.

In addition, there is a considerable degree of legal uncertainty. The GDPR works with numerous indeterminate legal terms, the specification of which is largely left to the ECJ. In its case-law, the court focuses very much on the practical effectiveness (*effet utile*) of data protection and thus primarily strengthens the standard of protection, while taking less account of conflicting fundamental rights. In conjunction with the broad interpretation of Art. 82 GDPR, this creates a significant, hardly calculable liability risk for companies.

The GDPR was designed to be supplemented by national law. Its numerous opening clauses were intended to enable necessary specification at Member State level and thereby enhance legal certainty. The current lack of legal certainty is therefore also linked to the absence of such national rules. It is noteworthy that the ECJ itself refers to national law when interpreting the Regulation, for example in the interpretation of legitimate interests.

A look at the political objectives and their implementation is ambivalent. There is no doubt that a stronger and more binding enforcement of data protection law has been achieved. The marketplace principle has also been further strengthened, enabling the European Union to apply its regulatory standards beyond the internal market.

Nevertheless, the global impact of the GDPR remains limited. It is true that in parts it has developed into an international reference model and has influenced numerous legal systems. However, a strictly preventive prohibition model comparable to the GDPR has not prevailed internationally. Instead, other jurisdictions predominantly pursue more flexible, risk-based approaches that focus more on controlling specific threats than on the upstream control of data processing.

However, there are considerable missed targets. The "one-size-fits-all" approach places a particular burden on small and medium-sized enterprises, while large global platforms can take advantage of structural advantages, especially when it comes to obtaining consent. The intended openness to technology has been proven to be limited too.

For the future, the central question is whether the existing approach to data protection law is still suitable for meeting the challenges of a data-driven society. There are strong arguments for shifting the focus more from the formal control of data processing to the protection of specific legal interests and risks. A more risk-based, innovation-friendly and at the same time effective protection approach could help to better balance the existing tension.

This volume provides a valuable foundation for this discussion. It not only demonstrates how the CJEU interprets the current legal framework, but also opens the door to a necessary debate on its further development.

Ole Schröder

European data protection case law in numbers

Sebastian Dienst

With the GDPR of 2016, the EU significantly expanded its regulatory framework for data protection initially laid down by the DPD of 1995. For nearly 30 years, case law of the ECJ has been continuously shaping and sharpening European data protection law.

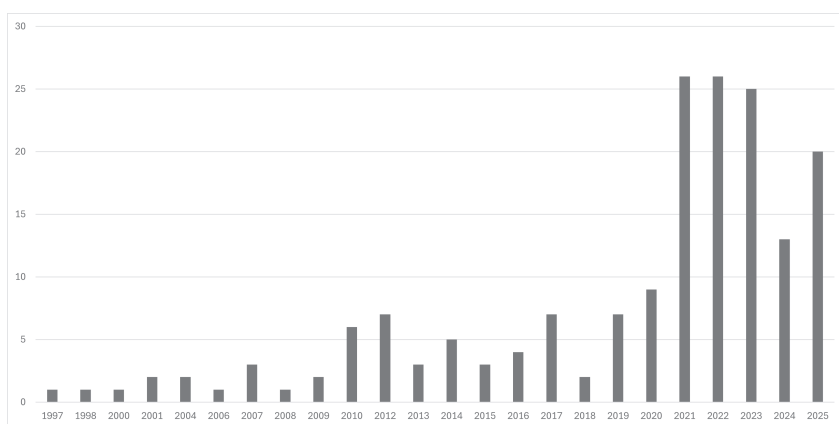


Figure 1: Numbers of new ECJ proceedings on DPD and GDPR by year

After the DPD came into force in 1995 (which still needed to be transformed into EU member state law), it took some time for the number of data protection law cases before the ECJ to increase. Since the GDPR came into force in 2016 (directly applying in all EU member states since 2018), we have seen a significant rise in the number of referrals on data protection law to the ECJ.

The first proceeding on the DPD at the ECJ was initiated on 2.6.1997 (C-209/97). This proceeding also led to the first judgment of the ECJ regarding the DPD on 18.11.1999.¹ The ECJ handed down its last judgment

¹ ECJ 18.11.1999 – case C-209/97, ECLI:EU:C:1999:559.

Sebastian Dienst

regarding the DPD on 4.10.2024.² In total, 51 proceedings relating to the DPD were initiated at the ECJ. The first proceeding dealing with the GDPR was initiated on 17.8.2017 (C-496/17). In this proceeding, the ECJ also handed down its first judgment regarding the GDPR on 16.1.2019.³ Until the end of 2025, 127 proceedings regarding the GDPR have been initiated at the ECJ. In less than 10 years, the GDPR has led to more than twice as many ECJ proceedings as the DPD since 1995.

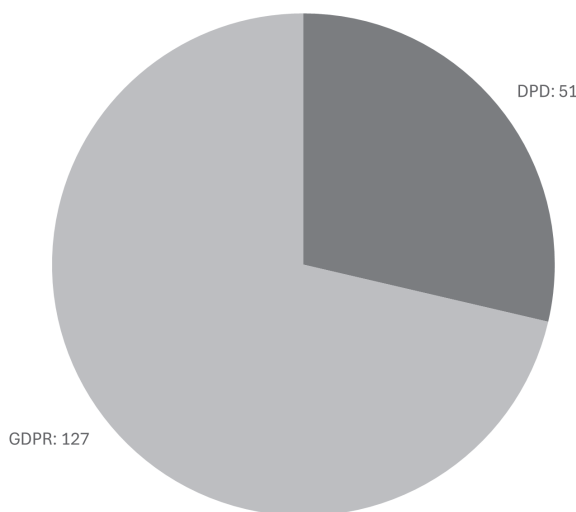


Figure 2: Total numbers of DPD and GDPR cases (until December 2025)

Looking at GDPR cases, by far most proceedings deal with general provisions and principles, with most cases on Art. 6 GDPR (Lawfulness of processing) (41 cases), followed by cases on Art. 4 GDPR (Definitions) (26 cases) and Art. 5 GDPR (Principles relating to processing of personal data) (23 cases). It is certainly not surprising that a significant number of cases also deal with Art. 82 GDPR (Right to compensation and liability) (20 cases) and Art. 15 GDPR (Right of access by the data subject) (16 cases), emphasizing both the practical relevance and need for clarification of these provisions.

² ECJ 4.10.2024 – case C-21/23, ECLI:EU:C:2024:846.

³ ECJ 16.1.2019 – case C-496/17, ECLI:EU:C:2019:26.

Sebastian Dienst

2021 and 2022 both marked a record high of new data protection law proceedings at the ECJ (26 each), closely followed by 2023 (25). In 2024, for the first time since 2018, fewer proceedings were initiated (13) than the year before. 2025 again brought a rising number of new proceedings (20). Looking at the number of pending data protection cases in the beginning of 2026 (29), it is likely that we will continue to see a constant flow of data protection rulings over the next years.

Overview

Case	Author(s)
Judgements	
ECJ 6.11.2003 – case C-101/01, ECLI:EU:C:2003:596 – Lindqvist	Marek Steffen Jansen
ECJ 16.12.2008 – case 73/07, ECLI:EU:C:2008:727 – Tietosuojaalvaututettu v Satakunnan Markkinapörssi Oy and Satamedia Oy	Rafaela Nicolazzi Corrêa da Silva
ECJ 13.5.2014 – case C-131/12, ECLI:EU:C:2014:317 – Google Spain	Desara Dushi
ECJ 8.4.2014 – Joined Cases C 293/12 and C 594/12, ECLI:EU:C:2014:238 – Digital Rights Ireland Ltd v Minister for Communications, Marine and Natural Resources and Others and Kärntner Landesregierung and Others	Robert Spano/Miles Lynn
ECJ 13.5.2014 – case C-131/12, ECLI:EU:C:2014:317 – Google Spain SL and Google Inc. v Agencia Española de Protección de Datos (AEPD) and Mario Costeja González	Katelyn Ringrose
ECJ 6.12.2016 – case C-582/14, ECLI:EU:C:2016:779 – Patrick Breyer v Bundesrepublik Deutschland	Per Meyerdierks
ECJ 5.6.2018 – case C-210/16, ECLI:EU:C:2018:388 – Wirtschaftsakademie; ECJ 10.7.2018 – case C-25/17, ECLI:EU:C:2018:551 – Jehovan todistajat; ECJ 29.7.2019 – case C-40/17, ECLI:EU:C:2019:629 – FashionID	Indra Spiecker gen. Döhmman/ Loïc Reissner
ECJ 24.9.2019 – case C-507/17, ECLI:EU:C:2019:772 – Google LLC, successor in law to Google Inc. v Commission nationale de l’informatique et des libertés (CNIL)	Axel Spies
ECJ 16.7.2020 – case C-311/18, ECLI:EU:C:2020:559 – Data Protection Commissioner v Facebook Ireland Limited and Maximilian Schrems; GC 3.9.2025 – case T-553/23, ECLI:EU:T:2025:831 – Philippe Latombe v European Commission	Helen Dixon
ECJ 15.6.2021 – case C-645/19, ECLI:EU:C:2021:483 – Facebook Ireland Ltd and Others v Gegevensbeschermingsautoriteit	Henry Ogunrinde
ECJ 1.8.2022 – case C-184/20, ECLI:EU:C:2022:601 – OT v Vyriausioji tarnybinės etikos komisija	Christiane Wendehorst

Overview

Case	Author(s)
ECJ 20.10.2022 – case C-77/21, ECLI:EU:C:2022:805 – Digi Távközlési és Szolgáltató Kft. v Nemzeti Adatvédelmi és Információszabadság Hatóság	María González Gordon/Antonio Negueruela Maldonado
ECJ 12.1.2023 – case C-154/21, ECLI:EU:C:2023:3 – RW v Österreichische Post AG	Daniel Pauly
ECJ 9.2.2023 – case C-453/21, ECLI:EU:C:2023:79 – X-FAB Dresden GmbH & Co. KG v FC	Andreas Jaspers
ECJ 30.3.2023 – case C-34/21, ECLI:EU:C:2023:270 – Hauptpersonalrat der Lehrerinnen und Lehrer; ECJ 19.12.2024 – case C-65/23, ECLI:EU:C:2024:1051 – K-GmbH	Lorenz Fander
ECJ 4.5.2023 – case C-60/22, ECLI:EU:C:2023:373 – UZ v Federal Republic of Germany	Ulrich Baumgartner
ECJ 4.5.2023 – case C-60/22, ECLI:EU:C:2023:373 – UZ v Bundesrepublik Deutschland	Dieter Kugelmann
ECJ 4.5.2023 – case C 300/21, ECLI:EU:C:2023:370 – UI v Österreichische Post AG	Boris P. Paal
ECJ 4.7.2023 – case C-252/21, ECLI:EU:C:2023:537 – Meta Platforms Inc and Others v Bundeskartellamt	Jonathan Dunne
ECJ 4.7.2023 – case C-252/21, ECLI:EU:C:2023:537 – Meta Platforms Inc and Others v Bundeskartellamt	Thomas Fuchs
ECJ 26.10.2023 – case C-307/22, ECLI:EU:C:2023:811 – FT (copy of the patient file)	Christoph Werkmeister/Katharina-Isabelle Prenzel
ECJ 5.12.2023 – case C-683/21, ECLI:EU:C:2023:949 – Nacionalinis visuomenės sveikatos centras prie Sveikatos apsaugos ministerijos v Valstybinė duomenų apsaugos inspekcija	Florian Thoma
ECJ 5.12.2023 – case C-683/21, ECLI:EU:C:2023:949 – Nacionalinis visuomenės sveikatos centras prie Sveikatos apsaugos ministerijos v Valstybinė duomenų apsaugos inspekcija	Dominik Roderburg
ECJ 5.12.2023 – case C-807/21, ECLI:EU:C:2023:950 – Deutsche Wohnen SE v Staatsanwaltschaft Berlin	Tim Wybitul
ECJ 7.12.2023 – case C-634/21, ECLI:EU:C:2023:957 – OQ v Land Hessen, SCHUFA	Moritz Köhler
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Author profiles

Alpmann, Klaus is a lawyer with extensive expertise in data protection and information security. As Global Head of Group Data Protection and Vice President at CARIAD SE, a Volkswagen Group company, he successfully leads global data protection strategies and implements innovative solutions for data protection management. During his career, he has developed groundbreaking data protection and compliance systems at MAN, Munich Re, and the WEKA Media publishing group, among others, which have received the highest ratings in audits. *Mr. Alpmann* combines legal expertise with technical competence and has led numerous international projects. He lives with his family in Wolfsburg.

Arzuaga, Pilar is a partner at McDermott, Will and Shulte in London specialising in EU and UK data protection, privacy, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and digital regulation, with a focus on GDPR compliance, regulatory investigations and emerging technologies.

Baumgartner, Ulrich, Dr., LL.M. (King's College London), CIPP/E is a lawyer with more than two decades of practical experience in data and IT law. Ulrich assists international clients in complex legal matters with a focus on GDPR litigation, AI and the EU Data Act. He has authored numerous other publications and acts as the German Country Leader for the International Association of Privacy Professionals. After having worked in international law firms for almost two decades, Ulrich is a founding partner of the boutique law firm BAUMGARTNER BAUMANN based in Munich, Germany.

Brink, Stefan, Dr., Stefan Brink, born in 1966, studied law in Mainz, Heidelberg, Dijon, and Paris. After completing his doctorate under Prof. Dr. Hans Herbert von Arnim (DUV Speyer), he worked for the Scientific Service of the Rhineland-Palatinate State Parliament, then as a judge at the Administrative Court of Koblenz, and as a research assistant at the Federal Constitutional Court (1st Senate, Prof. Dr. Reinhard Gaier). From 2008 to 2016, he was Head of Private Data Protection at the State Commissioner for Data Protection in Rhineland-Palatinate, and since 2012 he has also been Deputy State Commissioner for Freedom of Information

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in Rhineland-Palatinate; from January 2017 to December 2022, Dr. Stefan Brink was State Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information in Baden-Württemberg. Since January 2023, Dr. Stefan Brink has headed the independent institute wida in Berlin (Scientific Institute for the Digitization of the Working World), which accompanies digital change with a view to our civil rights and promotes digital projects.

Craddock, Peter is a lawyer with a software development background, based in Brussels. Whether as a data litigator or as a global data strategy advisor, he helps clients with highly technical issues, notably on the scope of data protection rules, AdTech, AI training and ePrivacy.

Dienst, Sebastian is a lawyer and associated partner at Noerr. He is responsible for the European Data Legislation & Case Law Trackers at noerr.com/europeandatalaw. He regularly publishes updates on ECJ data case law in the German legal journals *Recht der Datenverarbeitung* (RDV) (starting 03/2026) and *Zeitschrift für Europäisches Daten- und Informationsrecht* (EuDIR) (starting 1/2027).

Dixon, Helen is former Data Protection Commissioner for Ireland (2014 to 2024).

Dose, Michael, Dr. is Senior Manager for Data Protection, Data Law, and Data Economy at the Federation of German Industries (BDI). He studied business law and earned his PHD at the University of Kassel and also works part-time as a lecturer at various universities.

Dunne, Jonathan is a Director in Regulatory Affairs at Google, advising on GDPR, ePrivacy, and AI. He is a dual-qualified lawyer in Ireland and England & Wales.

Dushi, Desara, Dr. holds a double PhD in Law, Science, and Technology from the University of Bologna and the University of Luxembourg. She is an EU Policy Counsel at the Future of Privacy Forum, and an affiliated researcher at the Law, Science, Technology & Society Research Group (LSTS) of Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB), where she previously worked as a senior postdoctoral researcher. Dr. Dushi's career spans diverse roles, including in academia, government, and civil society. Her research and professional focus center on critical issues such as human rights in the digital age, privacy and data protection, cybercrime, online child safety, artificial intelligence, as well as broader topics related to Internet governance.

Ermis, Beyza is a research assistant at McDermott Will & Schulte in Düsseldorf focusing on privacy and cybersecurity. She supports clients on EU and German data protection law, cybersecurity regulatory frameworks, and compliance projects, including matters related to NIS2 and other emerging digital regulations.

Fander, Lorenz is a doctoral candidate at the Institute for Labour Law and Social Security Law, Chair of Prof. Dr. Thüsing LL.M. (Harvard).

Fuchs, Thomas, LL.M.EUR. has been the Hamburg Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information since 2021. He is a member of the High-Level Group for the DMA. From 2008 to 2021, he served as the Director of the State Media Regulatory Authority of Hamburg/Schleswig-Holstein and was a member of the federal Commission for Youth Media Protection. Thomas studied law in Hamburg and Brussels.

Gäthke, Carolin, German Attorney-at-law (*Syndikusrechtsanwältin*) and M.A. (*Magistra Artium*) in Philosophy and Ethnology, offers over 16 years of expertise in the tech sector. With a proven track record in IT law, she steers key strategic and complex data governance and privacy initiatives. Currently serving as Senior Legal Counsel (Regulatory Affairs) at Google, her professional foundation is built upon a versatile career spanning M&A, Private Equity, and the digital entertainment industry, encompassing both elite law firms and senior in-house roles.

Gerlach, Natascha holds the position of Director of Privacy and Data Policy at the Center for Information Policy Leadership (CIPL). Her work is focused on a range of privacy and data related topics including AI, Privacy Enhancing Technologies, children's privacy and safety, data governance, and cross-border data flows. Before joining CIPL, Natascha was a Senior Attorney with Cleary Gottlieb in their Brussels office, where she headed Cleary's European eDiscovery group, an early adopter of AI technology. Natascha is a member of the OpenAge Advisory Board; Chair Emerita of The Sedona Conference Working Group 6 on International Electronic Information Management, Discovery and Disclosure (WG6) Steering Committee. She is a member of the advisory board for the Georgetown Law AEDI, and a founding member of the IDLF.

González Gordon, María has more than 24 years of experience in intellectual property and leads the Industrial / Intellectual Property & Digital Business department at CMS Albiñana & Suárez de Lezo. She advises

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domestic and international clients on IP, copyright, and technology, with a strong focus on the full spectrum of IP litigation (trademarks, trade secrets, patents, designs, copyrights, and unfair competition), transactional work, and the design of IP and technology strategies. She also counsels international clients on cyber incidents, with a particular emphasis on the liabilities of boards of directors and corporate officers in crisis scenarios. Internationally, she serves as global co-head of the CMS Digital Business group, coordinating 250+ partners worldwide, and leads the CMS Digital Regulation Hub Initiative. She has represented sector-leading companies on high-impact matters, including Spain's largest media outlets in litigation against collective management organisations, culminating in a landmark preliminary ruling before the Court of Justice of the European Union that significantly influenced Europe's music and broadcasting industries. She has extensive experience litigating before the EU trade mark courts in Alicante in cases with pan-European effects. She is an authorised representative before the SPTO and EUIPO, has represented clients before the Spanish Supreme Court and the EU General Court, and is recognised by Chambers & Partners, Legal 500, Managing IP, World Trademark Review, IAM Patents, MLI, and Who's Who Legal.

Grzeszick, Bernd, Prof. Dr., LL.M. Professor for Public Law, first in Münster, then in Erlangen and Mainz, now in Heidelberg as Director of the institute for Constitutional Law, Constitutional Theory and Legal Philosophy. Director of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies, Member of the Heidelberg Academy of Sciences and Humanities and Fellow of the Marsilius-Kolleg. Since 2021 Judge at the Constitutional Court of the State North Rhine-Westphalia.

Hahn, Isabel works for the Delegation of the European Union to the United States and the European Commission's AI Office. She previously served as a Member of Cabinet at the European Data Protection Supervisor. She holds law degrees from Harvard Law School and the London School of Economics and is admitted to the New York Bar.

Hansen, Marit, Dr. h. c. has been the State Data Protection Commissioner of Land Schleswig-Holstein and Chief of Unabhängiges Landeszentrum für Datenschutz (ULD) since 2015. After graduating with a diploma degree in computer science in 1995, Marit has been working on data protection by design & by default from both the technical and the legal perspectives.

Havlikova, Stepanka is a seasoned data privacy & AI lawyer and a researcher. She advises on AI, data privacy, IP, software contracts and licensing. Her dissertation research focuses on web scraping and generative AI training. Stepanka is endorsed as a Leading Associate and Rising Star by Legal500.

Hentsch, Christian-Henner, Prof. Dr., a professor of copyright and media law at the Cologne Research Center for Media Law at TH Köln. He is also Director Legal & Regulatory Affairs at game – The German Games Industry and managing director of VHG – Verwertungsgesellschaft für die Hersteller von Games, the very first collecting society for games. Previously, he represented the interests of television and radio stations as well as newspaper and magazine publishers as Head of Policy for the collecting society VG Media and worked as a research assistant in the German Bundestag. He studied law and history in a double degree programme in Freiburg and Bonn and completed his legal clerkship in Düsseldorf, Washington DC, Frankfurt and Berlin.

Jaksch, Christian, Dr., LL.M. works as Compliance & Legal Lead at CARIAD SE in the department of Integrity, Compliance & Data Protection and currently advises the cross-brand bundling of the software development activities in the Volkswagen Group. He is particularly concerned with issues related to vehicle data processing and the implementation of data protection in the context of software development. Before joining CARIAD SE, Dr. *Christian Jaksch* worked for the Group Data Protection Officer of Volkswagen AG. Dr. *Christian Jaksch* studied law with a focus on International Law, followed by PhD studies (University of Vienna, Leibniz University Hannover) with a PhD at the University of Vienna. In addition, he completed a postgraduate master's degree (LL.M.) in information and media law. He regularly publishes on data protection law topics in German and Austrian journals.

Jansen, Marek Steffen, Dr., LL.M., AIGP, CIPP/E, Attorney-at-law, specializing in regulatory strategy and innovation governance. Held senior roles across Volkswagen Group, Google, the Federation of German Industries and the German Parliament, shaping digital and AI policy and advising at the intersection of industry, technology and regulation.

Jaspers, Andreas, Attorney-at-law, is Deputy Managing Director of the Society for Data Protection and Data Security (Gesellschaft für Datenschutz

Author profiles

und Datensicherheit – GDD) e.V., Bonn. He is co-author of several legal commentaries on data protection law. Together with Yvette Reif, he heads the annual expert forum of the journal *Recht der Datenverarbeitung* (RDV). He also serves as a lecturer in the GDD training programme for certified data protection officers (GDDcert. EU).

Karniyevich, Natallia, Dr. is a lawyer and partner at McDermott Will & Schulte in Düsseldorf. Natallia focuses on global privacy and cybersecurity, advising multinational companies on regulatory compliance and the management of cybersecurity incidents. She has extensive experience supporting digital service providers, the electronic communications sector, healthcare and life sciences, financial institutions, and operators of critical and digital infrastructure. A key focus of her practice in the context of cybersecurity is advising on the implementation of NIS2, the CER Directive, the Cyber Resilience Act, and DORA.

Keber, Tobias, Prof. Dr. has been the Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information in Baden-Württemberg since July 2023. Tobias Keber was Professor of Media Law and Media Policy in the Digital Society at Stuttgart Media University (HdM), lecturer in internet law in the Master's program in Media Law at the Mainz Media Institute at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and a member of the steering committee of the Institute for Digital Ethics (IDE) at Stuttgart Media University. Before his academic career, he worked as a lawyer. He is chairman of the Scientific Advisory Board of the Society for Data Protection and Data Security (GDD), editorial board member of the journal *Recht der Datenverarbeitung* (RDV), member of the advisory board of Transparency Germany and the Institute for Consumer Research and Sustainable Consumption (vunk). He is co-editor and author of numerous specialist publications on national and international media, IT, and data protection law. He is the co-chair of the German Data Protection Authorities' AI working group, alongside Rhineland-Palatinate.

Knuth, Thoralf is Chief Data Protection Officer and Global Head of Information Security and Privacy for Bosch. He previously worked as the deputy head of compliance investigations. Before that, he was a senior lawyer at Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, advising multinational clients on complex technology, corporate governance, and compliance matters and providing strategic counsel to mitigate risk. A key focus of his work is on a holistic

approach to Governance, Risk, and Compliance (GRC) that breaks down silos between legal, technology and security disciplines.

Köhler, Moritz, Dr. is a legal trainee at Mainz Regional Court. He has written his doctoral thesis on the distinction between the impermissible replacement of human judges and their permissible support by artificial intelligence.

Kugelmann, Dieter, Prof. Dr. has been the State Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information in Rhineland-Palatinate since October 1, 2015, and was re-elected in 2023 for a second term of office. He finished his habilitation in 2000 at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz on the subject of the citizen's informational legal status. Most recently, he was a full university professor of Public Law, with a focus on Police Law including International Law and European Law, at the German Police University in Münster. He is the editor of a commentary on the Rhineland-Palatinate State Data Protection Act and co-editor of a commentary on the General Data Protection Regulation. He leads the working group DSK 2.0, which deals with the further development of the Data Protection Conference, and jointly with Baden-Württemberg is in the lead of the working group AI.

Kulińska, Wioletta, AIGP, CIPP/E, CIPP/US, CIPM is the founder and attorney-at-law at Kulinska Legal, specializing in privacy, digital law, AI governance, former Global Privacy & Compliance Lead and DPO at Huu-uge Games and a guest lecturer in video-games law.

Linardatos, Dimitrios, Prof. Dr. holds the Chair of Civil Law, Digitalization Law, and Business Law at Saarland University since April 2023. His research focuses on the distribution of responsibility in the use of autonomous and networked systems as well as issues relating to the data economy.

Loy, Carolin, has been working at the Bavarian Data Protection Authority for the Private Sector since 2020, where she heads the 'Digital Economy and Legal Issues of Artificial Intelligence' department.

Lynn, Miles is an Associate at Gibson Dunn (London/New York), specializing in AI, privacy, and cybersecurity law. He brings a background in computer science to his technology-focused legal practice.

Mercuri, Gabriela is Managing Director of SCOPE Europe, a two-time accredited Monitoring Body pursuant to Art. 41 GDPR. In this capacity,

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she oversees the development, negotiation, and implementation of codes of conduct under the GDPR.

Meyerdieks, Per is an attorney and privacy legal expert with over 18 years of experience. As former Director, Privacy Legal at Google, he led teams on AI governance, privacy legal strategy, cloud computing, international data transfers and regulatory engagement. He is a frequent speaker and published author on privacy law.

Nägele, Peter, Dr. is an AI officer and technical expert in the German and European Cooperation Department at the Office of the Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information in Baden-Württemberg. He is rapporteur at the European Data Protection Board. Prior to joining the Office of the Commissioner for Data Protection, he earned a doctorate in physics and worked as a software engineer for many years.

Negueruela, Antonio is a senior associate in the Industrial / Intellectual Property & Digital Business department at CMS Albiñana & Suárez de Lezo. He specialises in advising on intellectual and industrial property, unfair competition, privacy, e-commerce, and digital business. He provides contentious and non-contentious advice related to information technology, audiovisual law, copyright, trademarks and unfair competition, including advising on disputes before the different industrial property title registration offices such as the SPTO, EUIPO and WIPO. He has a strong focus on advising clients with the negotiation of a wide range of contracts (from complex information technology agreements, such as software licenses or software development, to production of audiovisual content contracts or acquisition of audiovisual content contracts for media services). He works with clients across a wide range of sectors and industries, in particular, Tech and Media. He is a member of the Madrid Bar Association and the Spanish Entertainment Law Association (DENAE) and he has been recognized by Legal 500 as *key lawyer* for the CMS TMT industry practice.

Nicolazzi, Rafaela is a dual-qualified lawyer holding a Master's in Private International Law from the University of São Paulo. She is the author of a 2024 Thomson Reuters book about data protection and international cooperation in the BRICS countries and has over 15 years' experience across law firms and tech companies. She currently works on EMEA privacy and consumer protection for a leading AI lab.

Nordmeyer, Arne, Dr., LL.M. studied law and legal informatics in Göttingen, Hanover and Stockholm. Ph.D. in software and antitrust law from HU Berlin. He completed his legal clerkship at the German Consulate General in Guangzhou (China), among other places. Lawyer since 2013, in-house lawyer since 2015 (first in legal tech, then in the automotive industry). Since mid-2025, he has been head of data protection management at one of Germany's largest health insurances.

Ogunrinde, Henry, Dr., LL.M.: Law studies in Germany and Austria; legal work at a smart mobility provider; research assistant and data protection officer at the Institute for the Theory and Future of Law, University of Innsbruck; PhD awarded in 2024 in cooperation with Audi AG; legal advisor on data protection and data governance in Audi AG's technical development division; currently active in the area of data protection at Volkswagen Group Charging GmbH.

Paal, Boris P., Prof. Dr., M.Jur. (Oxford) holds the chair for Law and Regulation of the Digital Transformation at the Technical University of Munich (TUM). He serves as Of Counsel at BAUMGARTNER BAUMANN, a boutique law firm for data and digital regulation, and practices as a certified business mediator. From 2020 to 2023, he sat as a judge at the Hamburg District Court (chamber for IP and IT Law). Professor Paal has more than 25 years of experience in academia and legal advisory. He is the editor and author of leading commentaries and influential publications in data and digital regulation. Professor Paal has authored more than 250 publications, including standard works on privacy, information, media, and data (protection) law. He advises public and private institutions in various capacities and serves on several advisory boards. Among others, he acts as an expert to the European Commission, the German Bundestag, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, the Leibniz Institute for Media Research, and EUMETSAT. Research stays and guest lectureships have included stays and guest lectures at leading international universities, including Berkeley, Cambridge (UK), Harvard, New York (Columbia, Fordham, NYU), Oxford (UK), Peking (CUPL, Tsinghua), Seoul (SNU), Shanghai (ECUPL, Jiao Tong), Stanford, and Yale.

Pauly, Daniel A., Dr. is a lawyer and partner at the international law firm Linklaters LLP. He has been advising on data protection law for over two decades, is co-editor and co-author of Paal/Pauly – Commentary on the

Author profiles

GDPR and the BDSG, now in its 4th edition – and regularly speaks on the various facets of data protection law at conferences and seminars.

Plum-Schneider, Ruben, Dr. is the personal advisor to the German Federal Commissioner for Data Protection and Freedom of Information. Previously, he worked as a data law attorney at an international law firm and holds a doctorate in data protection law from the University of Bonn.

Prenzel, Katharina-Isabelle is a research assistant in the ‘Data & Technology’ practice at Freshfields. She is currently undertaking her doctorate in the field of digitalisation of administration with a focus on fully automated administrative acts.

Reif, Yvette, attorney-at-law, LL.M., is Deputy Managing Director of the Society for Data Protection and Data Security (Gesellschaft für Datenschutz und Datensicherheit – GDD) e.V., Bonn. She is a co-author of several legal commentaries on data protection law and a co-editor of a handbook on data protection on the Internet. Together with Attorney-at-law Andreas Jaspers, Managing Director of the GDD, she co-heads the annual specialist forum of the journal *Recht der Datenverarbeitung* (RDV). She also serves as a lecturer at the GDD training programme for certified data protection officers (GDDcert. EU).

Reissner, Loïc is Senior Researcher at Prof. Indra Spiecker genannt Döhmann’s Chair for Public and Administrative Law, Information Law and Legal Theory and the Institute of Digitization at the University of Cologne, Germany, and at University of Frankfurt, Germany. He is presently completing the mandatory legal clerkship in Frankfurt, Germany.

Richter, Frederick, LL.M. has been Chairman of the German Data Protection Foundation since 2013. Prior to this, he was digital policy advisor in the German Bundestag and an industry association’s DPO. He studied law at University of Hamburg and earned a master’s degree at Universities of Vienna and Hanover.

Rigod, Boris, Dr. is a technology and competition lawyer with over a decade of experience in both private practice and in-house. He holds a Ph.D. and an LL.M. from the EUI and was, inter alia, a Fulbright-Schuman Scholar at Stanford Law School and NYU School of Law. He has published widely on competition, data protection and international trade law.

Ringrose, Katelyn, CIPP/EU, CIPP/US, CIPM, FIP manages data protection issues for multinational companies at McDermott Will & Schulte. As Google's former Global Policy Lead for Law Enforcement and Government Access, she handled cross-border data flows, access, and retention.

Roderburg, Dominik, Dr. judge at the Higher Regional Court of Cologne, currently seconded as head of department to the State Chancellery of North Rhine-Westphalia, research assistant at the Federal Constitutional Court under Federal Constitutional Court Judge Dr. Sibylle Kessel-Wulf from 2016 to 2018, lawyer, specialist lawyer for tax law and tax advisor until 2012.

Schwartzmann, Rolf, Prof. Dr is head of the Cologne Research Centre for Media Law at the Technical University of Cologne and chairman of the board of the Gesellschaft für Datenschutz und Datensicherheit e.V. (Society for Data Protection and Data Security). In September 2025, he was appointed by German Federal Minister of Education Karin Prien to the expert commission 'Kinder- und Jugendschutz in der digitalen Welt' (Protection of Children and Young People in the Digital World).

Sohm, Sophie, MBA, FIP, is a fully qualified lawyer which currently works as a Privacy and Data Policy Manager at Meta. *She also serves as the WISP Chapter Lead for the DACH region.* She brings a strong academic and professional background, including experience as a policy expert at the European Parliament and as a legal professional at a major Spanish law firm. Her expertise spans privacy management, policy development, and stakeholder engagement across the tech, policy, and legal sectors

Spano, Robert is a Partner at Gibson Dunn (London/Paris) and Co-Chair of the AI Practice Group. He served as President of the European Court of Human Rights (2020–2022) and is an expert in EU law and fundamental rights.

Spiecker genannt Döhmann, Indra, Prof. Dr., LL.M. (Georgetown Univ.) holds the chair for Public and Administrative Law, Information Law and Legal Theory and heads the Institute of Digitization at the University of Cologne, Germany. She is co-editor of the leading commentary on the GDPR.

Spies, Axel Dr. is a partner at Potomac Law Group, also licensed as "Rechtsanwalt" in Germany as an attorney, holds a French degree and is CIPP/E certified. He is a trusted advisor for organizations navigating the

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evolving intersections of technology, privacy, and global regulation and a prolific author. With decades of international experience, he has handled complex cross-border matters ranging from licensing and competition to telecommunications, national and international data privacy, and AI. A recognized thought leader, Axel has co-authored books and published more than 100 articles on various legal topics. He co-publishes the German Journal of Data Protection (ZD) that he co-founded and the European telecoms journal MultiMedia & Law (MMR).

Stroot, Isabelle is a fully qualified lawyer. She studied law in Hamburg and Hanover, specializing in IT and intellectual property law. She is a certified data protection officer and data protection auditor. As Head of Data Protection Law and Policy at Bitkom, she is responsible for regulatory and data protection policy matters.

Sundermann, Steffen, Dr. is a lawyer and Senior Associate at Noerr. He advises companies on legal issues relating to data protection, telecommunications, and artificial intelligence. Before joining Noerr, he held a position in the legal department of the Hamburg Commissioner for Data Protection, where he was responsible for enforcing the GDPR. He regularly publishes on current topics in data protection law.

Taranto, Lilly is an experienced data privacy, AI and cybersecurity lawyer. Currently serving as Director of Global Privacy and AI at Sony, Lilly previously held the position of Global Digital and Privacy Counsel at GSK. Prior to going in-house, she was a Senior Associate at Hogan Lovells and had Associate positions at Field Fisher Waterhouse and Orrick, Herrington & Sutcliffe.

Thoma, Florian is a German attorney-at-law (Rechtsanwalt) and Senior Director, Data Privacy, Data & AI Compliance with Accenture where he oversees data privacy compliance globally. Prior to that role, he was Chief Privacy Officer of a large German electronics multinational. In addition, he has held various roles including in Bitkom e.V. and the International Association of Privacy Professionals.

Ustaran, Eduardo is global co-head of Hogan Lovells' Data, Privacy and Cybersecurity practice, author of *The Future of Privacy*, and co-founder and editor of *Data Protection Leader*. He advises multinationals and governments on privacy and AI compliance strategies.

Vogel, Simone has been a legal counsel in the automotive industry since 2013 and a freelance lawyer since 2016, focusing on IT and digitalization law. Her most recent areas of expertise have been AI and data law, telecommunications, IT security, and licensing law. Since 2024, she has been head of data protection law consulting at Dr. Ing. h.c. F. Porsche AG.

Weiß, Rebekka, LL.M. is Head of Regulatory Policy at Microsoft Germany. Rebekka is a fully qualified lawyer and studied law in Germany, Switzerland, and the UK. She is co-editor of various legal journals and regularly publishes on the AI Act, data law, IT security law, and related legal fields.

Wendehorst, Christiane, Prof. Dr., LL.M. (Cambridge) is a professor at the University of Vienna and, among other things, Scientific Director of the European Law Institute (ELI) and a member of the Presidium of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Her research focuses on the law of digitalisation, and she was, among other things, co-chair of the German Federal Government's Data Ethics Commission.

Werkmeister, Christoph, Dr., LL.M. (Cambridge) is a partner and global co-head of the 'Data & Technology' practice at the global law firm Freshfields. He has advised on some of the highest-profile GDPR (fine) proceedings and data-related (mass) litigation and he is a leading advisor on digital regulation and AI.

Wybitul, Tim is a partner at Latham & Watkins LLP in Frankfurt am Main (GER), certified specialist in employment law, CIPP/E. He defends companies in fine and court proceedings on data protection law and regularly publishes on European data law.

Zenner, Kai is a digital policy expert based in Brussels. He currently serves as Head of Office to Axel Voss MEP in the European Parliament. He was a central figure in the technical negotiations of the EU AI Act and focuses on the intersection of law, technology, and European digital sovereignty.

Ziegenhorn, Gero Dr. is partner at Redeker Sellner Dahs specialising in all aspects of data protection law. He has many years of experience in litigation before German courts of all instances and the CJEU and is a Lecturer for data protection law at the FernUniversität in Hagen.