



June 2021

Global Response Against Child Exploitation

# Issue #1





# Editorial



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Vicomtech

Welcome to the very first GRACE project newsletter, I am delighted to share with you everything you need to know about the project and our key achievements so far.

GRACE has just reached the end of its first year, and what a year it has been! We kicked-off in June last year, with 22 partners coming together with one common goal, tackling the increasingly challenging fight against CSE (child sexual exploitation).

The project commenced in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and, like many others, it has had an impact. Whilst the partners are yet to meet face-to-face, with all meetings and workshops taking place online, practical engagement has been somewhat affected. To combat this, a six month project extension was applied for and has now been granted by the European Commission, for which we are thankful.

Despite the current climate the project is progressing well, our initial pilots are planned for November and our first periodic review will take place at the end of the year in December. Whilst we are pleased with the current status of the project we must not become complacent about the hard work still ahead, and together we will maintain our commitment to the work plan in order to reach the ultimate goals of the project.

We look forward to providing many more updates along the way, if you would like receive future newsletters or connect with us on social media please see how to do this on the last page.

Thank you for your support on this very important project.

*Peter*

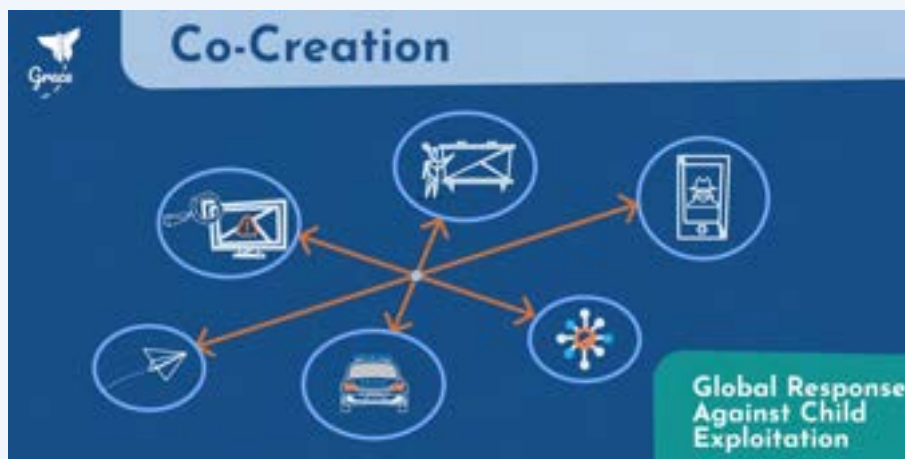


## Progress so far...

- Internally, since early May, Peter Leskovsky (Vicomtech) took the lead of the project's coordination, after Juan Arraiza decided to focus on his next professional challenge. Juan, we wish you great success in your new endeavours!

*"The level by Juan was set high but I'll do my best to keep the project rolling to reach its challenging and noble goals".*

- Successfully reached the first milestone, justified by the availability of the first data analytics and processing tools.
- Submitted 20 administrative, technical and regulatory project deliverables. These deliverables concluded the first technical phase of the project dedicated to the initial specifications and requirements that will pave the road for the development and fine tuning of the tools to the needs of the LEAs (law enforcement agencies).
- In May, we concluded the first co-creation workshop in which the state-of-the-art analytics tools were presented to the LEAs and adaptations specific to the needs of GRACE have been agreed.



- Finally, we have established collaborations and started discussions with a number of projects active in the crime-fighting and CSEM processing domains.



# What is GRACE?

GRACE is a H2020 research and innovation project that aims to safeguard CSE victims, prosecute offenders and limit the spread of CSEM (Child Sexual Exploitation Material) by providing LEAs with a next-generation AI-powered investigative platform.

The project began in June 2020 and will end in November 2023. It is funded by the European Commission and has total budget of almost 7 million euros.

## Vision for GRACE



### Address CSEM referrals

Provide a scalable and validated route to directly address the growing backlog of CSEM referrals from online service providers to EU Member State LEAs.



### Deploy a federated-learning infrastructure

Implement a secure and privacy-aware, federated learning infrastructure for beyond state-of-the-art content classification within CSEM across Europe.



### Automate the analysis of CSEM content

Deliver a semi-automated CSEM content analysis and prioritisation mechanism that enables LEAs to better safeguard victims and apprehend offenders.

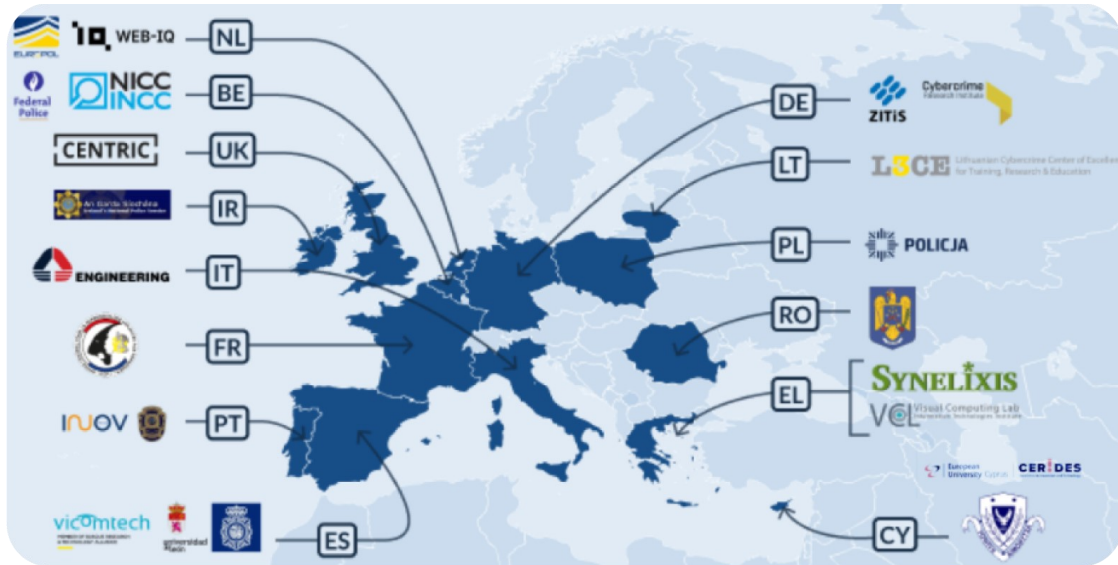


### Track trends in online CSEM

Facilitate LEAs' ability to track short and long-term trends in the production, dissemination and consumption of online CSEM to inform preventive strategies and policy decisions.



## Project details



### Partners

22

### Duration

42 months - 2020 - 2023

GRACE includes partners from 14 Member States, with a broad geographic spread, that will drive basic and applied research. The composition of the consortium is driven equally by the needs of the law enforcement community and by applied research opportunities in CSEM.

GRACE promotes the goal of technology transfer to end-users, who will motivate and define the requirements and outcomes of the project.

## Key project activity

### 1 • Kick-off meeting

GRACE launched at the start of June, 2020 with a successful kick-off meeting attended by all project partners. Through a series of virtual meetings, the partners gathered to set the roadmap for the delivery of GRACE over the next three years.



## II•Co-creation workshops

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In April, 2021 the first GRACE co-creation workshop took place. This coincided with the first cycle of the DESIGN of the GRACE platform. The ANALYSIS-focused work package also hosted sessions to show the current progress and capabilities of the modules to the GRACE LEAs.

## III•ENFSI Forensic IT Working Group

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On the 28th May 2021, GRACE partner NICC presented the project during the ENFSI Forensic IT WG web meeting. Around 55-60 participants from LEAs and forensic institutes from across the EU participated in the meeting.

## IV•LION-DC's closing conference

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GRACE was presented at the closing conference of H2020 project LION-DC on 8th June, 2021. The two-day online event showed the work completed within the LION-DC project whilst also bringing together other relevant EU funded projects. GRACE was presented on the second day of the event by coordinators VICOM.

## V• First EAB and Ethics Board meeting

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An extremely beneficial first joint meeting of the GRACE External Advisory Board (EAB) and the Ethics Board took place on 16th June, 2021. The EAB comprises of experts with extensive experience who will offer great value to the project by providing objective advice and guidance on project methodology, best practices and high level guidance on innovation management. The Ethics Board will ensure the project follows the highest compliance with regards to research ethical guidelines.



## VI• Collaborations

We are extremely proud to have established collaborations with three highly regarded projects and organisations that share the same goals and objectives to GRACE in regards to the development and promotion of capabilities in the prevention and deterrence of CSE. Through the identification of specific aspects of research, technology development, and communication activities the collaborations will provide mutually beneficial results for all involved. Read more about these projects on the [GRACE website](#).

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## Why is GRACE so important?

The sexual exploitation and abuse of children and the subsequent production and distribution of this material via the internet is a shocking and abhorrent crime.

Referrals from Online Service Providers (OSPs) are crucial to fighting CSE, and the exponential growth in the number of referrals of CSEM to LEAs is being driven both by increased availability and distribution of online CSEM and improved detection and reporting processes.

The extent of referrals is affecting LEAs' capacity to respond to these referrals promptly, leading to an inability to prevent harm to infants and children, rescue those in immediate danger, and investigate and prosecute perpetrators.





The NCMEC (National Center for Missing & Exploited Children) process has seen recent improvements to the referral process and improved LEAs capabilities. However, the sheer volume of data obtained in CSE cases stretches human resources and limits the manual analysis beyond most LEAs reach.

Given there has been a 4,000% increase in referrals since 2014, a new approach to managing, processing and analysing this content is not only necessary but paramount.

## Grace leads the way...

GRACE is a pioneering project that will apply proven techniques in machine learning (ML) to improve the CSEM referral and analysis process.

With Europol and eight MS LEAs as project partners, GRACE is able to leverage current knowledge and processes on addressing CSEM. Upon completion of the project, GRACE's practitioners will be able to use the GRACE model for their future missions whilst enhancing their technological autonomy.



## European strategy on CSEM

One thing is certain, one child sexually abused, exploited or exposed to online harm is one too many. Children are vulnerable because they are children and child sexual exploitation is a serious crime with long-lasting consequences for every victim. Fighting against this crime is a priority for the European Union and other partners, therefore further efforts are needed to ensure that all children are free from abuse and exploitation.

In two separate documents, the Justice and Home Affairs Council and the European Parliament called for more concrete action:

- [Council of the EU, GSC conclusions, doc. 12862/19 of 8 October 2019 on combating the sexual abuse of children,](#)





- [European Parliament resolution, TA\(2019\)0066 of 26 November 2019 on children's rights on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child \(2019/2876\(RSP\)\)](#).

To complement and improve existing EU activities in protecting children from sexual abuse, and to address new challenges such as unforeseen risks of end-to-end encryption, the European Commission has put forward a new strategy:

- [EU strategy, doc. COM\(2020\) 607 final of 24 July 2020 for a more effective fight against child sexual abuse](#).

The strategy sets out eight initiatives for 2020-2025 that focus on implementing and developing the right legal framework, strengthening law enforcement's response and galvanising a coordinated multi-stakeholder response on prevention, investigation and assistance to victims.

An additional strategic document that covers all other aspects of children's rights in European Union is in preparation. The document is titled "EU strategy on the rights of the child (2021-2024)", and will provide the framework for EU action to better promote and protect children's rights.



It will contain a set of measures for the EU to implement, addressing among others:

The rights of the most vulnerable children,

Children's rights in the digital age,

The prevention of and fight against violence,

The promotion of child-friendly justice.

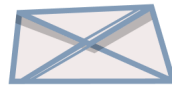


# Next steps for GRACE...

September 2021 - Second co-creation workshop

November 2021 - Initial pilot tests

December 2021 - First periodic project review



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