



EUROPEAN DATA PROTECTION SUPERVISOR

The EU's independent data protection authority

28 January 2026

“Data Protection Day 2026: Reset or Refine?”

Closing Remarks

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Dear colleagues, dear friends,

As we bring Data Protection Day 2026 to a close, it is worth pausing for a moment — not simply to conclude an event, but to reflect on what this day represents, and why gatherings such as this one continue to matter.

Data Protection Day is not an anniversary for its own sake. It is a reminder of a shared European commitment: to ensure that technological progress, economic innovation and public administration develop in a way that remains firmly anchored in the protection of fundamental rights.

For the European Data Protection Supervisor, and I trust also for many of you, this day is an opportunity not only to reaffirm principles, but to test them against reality — legal, institutional and technological.

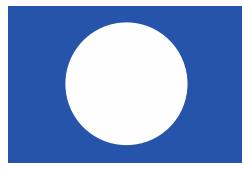
Throughout today's discussions, one theme has consistently resurfaced: the tension between stability and adaptation. Data protection law is no longer a young or experimental framework. It is embedded in daily administrative practice, in business models, in judicial reasoning and in citizens' expectations. Precisely for that reason, questions of simplification, clarification and legal certainty now arise with renewed intensity.

The GDPR has rightly been described as a cornerstone of the European Union's digital legal order. It has set a global benchmark and has demonstrated that strong rights protection and economic activity are not mutually exclusive. At the same time, its success has made it visible — and visibility invites scrutiny.

Calls for simplification should therefore not be read as a rejection of the framework, but as evidence of its centrality. When a law becomes indispensable, the quality of its application becomes as important as the ambition of its design.

Several of today's panels explored whether, and how, the GDPR might evolve to respond to this reality. What emerged very clearly is that simplification cannot be treated as a purely technical exercise. It is not a matter of shortening texts or lowering thresholds. Simplification, if it is to be meaningful, must enhance legal certainty without weakening protection; it must reduce friction without eroding substance. In other words, simplification is a means, not an end.

This brings me to the important role played today by judicial interpretation. Our discussions began with a close examination of the Court of Justice's judgment in *EDPS v SRB*. That judgment has been widely discussed because it touches upon the very concept of personal data — a concept that lies at the very heart of the entire data protection framework.



The Court reminded us that personal data cannot be assessed in the abstract. Identifiability is contextual, relational and functional. This clarification is valuable, and it reinforces a line of case law that has long resisted rigid or formalistic definitions. At the same time, as several speakers rightly noted, judicial interpretation alone cannot resolve every future borderline case. Courts clarify principles; they do not replace day-to-day supervisory judgment, nor do they anticipate every technological configuration yet to come.

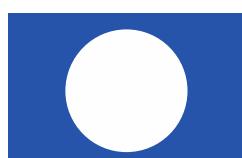
It is also important to recall that the concept of personal data did not originate with the GDPR. Long before Regulation 2016/679, European standards on privacy and data protection were developed within the framework of the Council of Europe. Convention 108, and today Convention 108+, provided the normative foundation upon which the Union's legal architecture was built, paving the way for Directive 95 and the GDPR.

In this respect, our joint celebration today is more than symbolic. Convention 108+ remains the only legally binding international instrument with global reach in the field of data protection. It offers a common language for like-minded countries and provides a level playing field rooted in shared values. The European Union's framework and the Council of Europe's standards are not competitors; they are complementary expressions of the same constitutional commitment.

Let me therefore express, once again, our sincere appreciation to our partners from the Council of Europe, and in particular to Peter Kimpian, for continuing this close cooperation. At a time when data flows are global but trust is fragile, such institutional alignment is not a luxury — it is a necessity.

The later panels of the day turned our attention to practical and emerging challenges. The discussion on simplification and clarification highlighted how difficult it is to balance accessibility with precision. European values — dignity, autonomy, fairness — are not abstract ideals; they are operational constraints. Any reform that claims to simplify must be assessed against its impact on those values.

The final panel on online tracking technologies reminded us that regulation is always, to some extent, running behind innovation. Tracking mechanisms evolve rapidly, often invisibly, and increasingly across technical layers that are difficult to map. The question is not whether the law can freeze technology — it cannot — but whether it can remain conceptually robust enough to govern new forms of data use without constant reinvention.



Across all these discussions, one conclusion stands out: effective data protection today depends less on finding entirely new principles than on applying existing ones intelligently, consistently and cooperatively.

In this context, I would like to warmly thank our keynote speakers — Beatriz de Anchorena, Virant Burnik and Anu Bradford — whose interventions helped frame these debates with both intellectual rigour and practical insight. I also thank all panellists and moderators for contributing not just expertise, but genuine openness to dialogue.

A special word of appreciation goes to Jennifer Crama, who managed to capture the diversity of views expressed today and translate them into a live conversation accessible beyond this room. Creating spaces where complexity can be discussed without simplification — in the negative sense of the word — is itself an achievement.

I would also like to underline the value of the format we have used today. Data protection thrives on exchange: between institutions and practitioners, between regulators and those they regulate, between different legal cultures and professional backgrounds. These exchanges do not always produce immediate consensus, but they build something more durable: mutual understanding and trust.

As we look ahead, the challenges facing data protection are not diminishing. Artificial intelligence, large-scale data integration, cross-border enforcement and geopolitical fragmentation all place new demands on legal frameworks and supervisory authorities alike. Against this backdrop, the role of institutions such as the EDPS is not only to enforce the law, but to help ensure its coherent and credible evolution.

This also brings me to a point that is both institutional and forward-looking.

The strength of the European data protection framework depends not only on rules and case law, but on the stability and authority of the institutions entrusted with their application. In that respect, the leadership at the European Data Protection Supervisor matters.

The EDPS occupies a singular place in the Union's constitutional architecture: independent by design, central to the supervision of Union institutions, with its advisory role towards the legislator and closely connected to the courts. That role is most effective when it is exercised with a clear mandate and a stable institutional horizon enabling the strategic considerations.

As the Union continues to navigate rapid technological and regulatory change, ensuring that this authority remains fully anchored and forward-looking is in the



shared interest of all institutions involved. It is an important element of legal certainty, credibility and trust in the European data protection framework.

The same is true for our cooperation with the Council of Europe, national authorities, courts and stakeholders. Data protection is not defended by any single actor. It is sustained through a shared commitment to legality, proportionality and accountability — and through the willingness to engage seriously with complexity rather than evade it.

Before closing, let me express my sincere thanks to all those who made this event possible: our colleagues from the Council of Europe, the EDPS teams who worked behind the scenes, and our partners at Tactical Tech Studio, whose Data Detox Bar reminded us — in a refreshingly concrete way — that empowerment begins with understanding.

With that, it is time to move from reflection to conversation of a different kind. Thank you for your engagement, for your attention, and for the seriousness you brought to today's discussions.

I now invite you to continue those conversations informally, and to enjoy the reception.

Thank you.

