Biggest fines under EU privacy law

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Mark Zuckerberg's social media firm -- owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp -- has racked up roughly two billion euros in fines.

The European Union rolled out its mammoth data privacy regulation five years ago this week, and has since handed down billions in fines.

Ireland's data watchdog smashed the record for an individual fine on

Monday when it demanded 1.2 billion euros ($1.3 billion) from Meta over its transfers of personal data between Europe and the United States.

Here are some of the worst offenders of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR):

Meta: undisputed fine king

Mark Zuckerberg's social media firm—owner of Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp—has racked up roughly two billion euros in fines.

Breaches by Meta have included a mega-leak of some 533 million phone numbers and emails, mishandling children's data and repeatedly failing to give a legal basis for its data collection.

Meta, along with the likes of Google, Twitter and LinkedIn has its European headquarters in Ireland, a low-tax regime that has courted big tech.

The Irish privacy watchdog has been reluctant to hand down big fines but said in a statement on Monday that the EU's central authorities had ordered it to collect 1.2 billion euros from Meta.

Austrian campaign group NOYB said it had spent millions in a decade-long legal battle to force the Irish watchdog to tackle the case.

"It is kind of absurd that the record fine will go to Ireland—the EU Member State that did everything to ensure that this fine is not issued," said NOYB's Max Schrems.

US giants: In Meta's shadow

Luxembourg lit a torch under the Silicon Valley data industry in 2021 by slapping Amazon with a record fine of 746 million euros.

The country, whose low-tax policies have led campaigners to label it a tax haven, confirmed the fine after only Amazon revealed it in its regulatory filings.

The Luxembourg watchdog told AFP on Monday that Amazon had not yet paid the fine because they had filed an appeal that was still being considered.

The watchdog added that it was legally barred from publishing its decision in full until the case was resolved.

The online retail giant had been accused by a European consumer group claiming personal data was collected for ad-targeting without permission.

Google has faced plenty of GDPR pain too.

France's data watchdog hit the search giant with 50 million euros in fines for a lack of transparency on its Android mobile operating system in 2019—the biggest such fine of that year.

Clearview AI: Widespread penalties

Clearview AI may not be a household name, but it claims to own billions of photos of people's faces that it sells as a searchable AI-powered database to law enforcement and other clients.

It scrapes the images from the web, often from social media accounts, without asking permission.

Privacy watchdogs in Greece, Italy, France and the UK have all hit the

US firm with fines totally roughly 70 million euros, and regulators in Germany and Austria have declared it illegal.

The firm has consistently said it has no offices or clients in Europe and is not subject to EU privacy laws.

The status of the fines is unclear. France issued a penalty of five million euros recently, accusing the firm of failing to pay the initial fine.

Public bodies, hacks

In the early days of the GDPR, several watchdogs cracked down on public institutions, raising profound questions about the regulation's scope.

Bulgaria fined its own tax authority around three million euros in 2019 after hackers stole the details of millions of people.

But several issues in the case were referred to the European Court of Justice, including whether such a hack automatically meant the data controller had not complied with GDPR.

The court has not yet issued a final decision.

Portugal handed down one of the first significant fines under GDPR—400,000 euros—in November 2018 to a hospital near Lisbon.

The watchdog ruled that the institution had allowed unauthorized access to patients' data and the case was seen as an early wake-up call for public bodies to get busy with GDPR compliance.

Portugal later gave public institutions three years to adapt to the new regime, meaning the fine was never enforced.

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