

Governing the Mood Machine

The Challenge

For many young Europeans, political engagement now happens on short-form platforms like TikTok, where algorithms serve a steady stream of personalised, emotionally charged videos. These vivid clips shape political impressions more quickly and powerfully than factual information (Meyer et al., 2025; Zannettou et al., 2024), pushing reactions toward emotion and strengthening the pull of ideological extremes instead of the political centre (Bartmann & Brückner, 2025; Rami et al., 2025; Tukiainen et al., 2024). Although the DSA sets strict rules for transparency and risk mitigation, these safeguards are almost invisible inside creator-driven feeds, where simple or adversarial narratives about the EU can take hold long before young voters encounter context or reliable information.

A Dual-Track Strategy

To address this gap, the EU should pursue a dual-track approach that links immediate communication reforms with long-term structural governance.

1. Affirmative Track: Visibility and Understanding

This track makes EU safeguards intelligible where political meaning is formed.

Key elements:

- EU Youth Civic Spaces combines creator-led TikTok communication, platform-native explainers on digital rights, and offline democratic forums.
- EU-wide emotional, algorithmic, and civic literacy, delivered via a Council Recommendation and supported by EDMO hubs.

These measures rely on participatory, youth-centred communication rather than static institutional messaging and strengthen young people's capacity to interpret emotionally charged content.

2. Transformative Track: Structural Affective Safety

The EU should treat affective amplification for minors as a systemic platform risk by introducing an EU Affective Safety Standard (EASS), including:

- Affective Load Limit to interrupt high-arousal recommendation loops
- Affective Transparency Protocol for emotional ranking signals
- Affective Safety-by-Design obligations in youth-facing recommender systems

Implementation Pathway

- **Phase 1:** Pilot Youth Civic Spaces, define EASS metrics, test literacy modules.
- **Phase 2:** Scale communication initiatives, integrate EASS into DSA-aligned governance, and institutionalise literacy programmes.

Why this matters

Short-form platforms amplify the kinds of high-arousal, identity-driven content that can pull young people into polarising emotional currents and leave them vulnerable to manipulation. If the EU wants to support a resilient and confident generation of young voters, it must meet them in the digital spaces where their political impressions are formed. Otherwise, it risks leaving the field to actors who speak more loudly, more emotionally, and far less responsibly.