

Governing the Mood Machine

A Dual Strategy to Empower and Protect Young EU Voters in the Platform Era

Introduction

Youth political engagement in Europe is experiencing a deep structural transformation. Traditional sources of political information, newspapers, television, and institutional communication, no longer serve as the primary entry point into democratic life. Instead, young Europeans encounter politics through short-form videos on platforms such as TikTok, where algorithmic curation creates personalised, emotionally charged streams of content. Thus, TikTok has become a central arena of political communication. Parties, influencers, and political entrepreneurs reach millions of young voters through short-form content optimized for engagement rather than accuracy (Meyer et al., 2025). Research shows that emotionally vivid videos, those eliciting humour, indignation, fear, or excitement, spread more quickly and widely than informational content (Zannettou et al., 2024). For young Europeans, politics increasingly resonates emotionally rather than appeals to ideology.

This shift occurs in a period of heightened democratic vulnerability, marked by rising populism, declining institutional trust, and intensified polarisation. Lilliana Mason's concept of "uncivil agreement" (Mason, 2017) illustrates how emotional and identity-driven dynamics can overshadow substantive policy reasoning. When group identity becomes more politically salient than policy content, emotional reactions can harden into political worldviews. In digital spaces designed to maximise engagement, this effect is amplified. Across Europe, emotionally charged TikTok content consistently outperforms informational videos and strongly shapes youth political impressions (Meyer et al., 2025; Widholm et al., 2024; Zannettou et al., 2024). This pattern coincides with growing attraction to ideological extremes and declining appeal of the political centre (Bartmann & Brückner, 2025; Rami et al., 2025; Tukiainen et al., 2024). Research further demonstrates that actors who successfully mobilise affect and identity achieve disproportionate visibility on TikTok, heightening youth vulnerability to manipulation, radicalisation, and influence operations (Ferreira, 2024; King's Think Tank, 2024; Uhl, 2025).

Against this backdrop, the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) establishes extensive transparency and risk mitigation obligations for major platforms to safeguard democratic processes. However, these safeguards mainly function through institutional oversight and are largely disconnected from the emotionally optimised, creator-driven spaces where young users form political impressions. In these engagement-oriented feeds, simplified or adversarial narratives about EU regulation can spread quickly, especially when delivered in emotionally resonant formats.

Problem statement

The EU faces a structural governance challenge in addressing how political meaning is formed among young citizens in digitally mediated environments. While existing EU platform regulation addresses systemic risks at the level of institutional oversight and compliance, these safeguards remain largely invisible within the emotionally optimised, algorithmically curated feeds where youth political socialisation increasingly takes place. As a result, engagement-driven recommendation systems shape political perceptions more rapidly than institutional communication or democratic literacy can provide context. At the same time, the emotional design of short-form platforms amplifies affective polarisation by favouring high-arousal and identity-reinforcing content. Existing EU rules were built to ensure transparency and accountability, not to address these emotional feedback loops. The core challenge is therefore not missing regulation or a lack of democratic capacity among young people, but a mismatch between where EU safeguards operate and where youth political socialisation now takes place.

EU Framework

Europe has built one of the world's most ambitious regulatory architectures for the digital sphere. Yet a closer examination reveals a structural mismatch: while the DSA, the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP), and the Code of Practice on Disinformation target the informational and legal dimensions of online risk, they remain poorly aligned with the affective and algorithmic dynamics that increasingly shape how young Europeans encounter politics on platforms like TikTok. These frameworks were designed to govern content, transparency, and electoral fairness, but not the emotional infrastructures of digital political communication.

The EU operates a multilayered digital governance architecture grounded in binding legislation, coordinated enforcement, and independent monitoring capacities. The DSA (Regulation (EU) 2022/2065) is the central instrument. It establishes transparency, accountability, and systemic risk-mitigation obligations for Very Large Online Platforms and Very Large Online Search Engines. Enforcement is led by the European Commission, which has issued multiple Requests for Information to TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat, opened formal investigations into recommender systems and political advertising, and published preliminary findings of non-compliance in TikTok's ad repository (European Commission, 2025b). The Delegated Regulation (European Commission, 2025a) operationalises researcher access to platform data. National regulators cooperate with the Commission through the DSA Cooperation Network to align investigations, share risk assessments, and monitor online environments during elections.

The EDAP (COM(2020) 790 final) complements this system by strengthening electoral integrity, media freedom, and civil society resilience. It announced the European Election Integrity Package, updated rules on political advertising, support for independent journalism, and coordinated election monitoring. Communication efforts are channelled through Commission platforms, the European External Action Service's StratCom units, and partnerships with civil-society organisations. While these measures enhance institutional preparedness and informational transparency, they largely rely on top-down communication and the dissemination of existing regulatory frameworks. As a result, they engage only in a limited and indirect manner with affective polarisation, emotional mobilisation, and identity-based conflict dynamics that increasingly structure political communication in digital environments.

The (Strengthened) Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission, 2022) functions as a co-regulatory instrument in which platforms commit to limiting the spread and monetisation of harmful and falsifiable content. Signatories produce implementation reports evaluated by the Commission and the permanent task force chaired by DG CONNECT.

The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), established via the Commission's 2020 call for proposals and coordinated by the European University Institute, provides analytical capacity for cross-platform monitoring, fact-checking, and research collaboration. EDMO publishes election-monitoring briefs, reports on platform manipulation, and media literacy resources targeted at educators and youth audiences. Yet, its outputs largely remain expert-driven and informational, with limited emphasis on translating insights into emotionally resonant, participatory communication strategies.

Taken together, these instruments form a robust framework for platform regulation, risk monitoring, and democratic support. But the EU's approach remains structurally oriented and regulation-centred, engaging only marginally with affective polarisation and mainly relying on explaining existing rules rather than using adaptive, youth-centred strategies that meet young voters where they are. The next section, therefore, examines how this system can be expanded and recalibrated to better help young Europeans in the digital public sphere.

A dual-track strategy: Affirmative solutions and transformative goals

The policy challenge identified is twofold: EU safeguards are largely invisible within the platform-native feeds where youth political impressions form, and current governance tools do not directly address the

affective feedback loops through which recommender systems can intensify polarisation. To close this gap, we propose a dual-track strategy that combines (1) immediate measures, which focus on youth-centred and participatory communication, with (2) longer-term reforms that treat affective amplification for minors as a systemic platform risk and introduce technical rules to limit ideological and emotional polarisation.

The Affirmative Track: Visibility and understanding

The affirmative track aims to make EU safeguards intelligible and usable where political meaning is formed, namely inside algorithmically curated feeds and the everyday civic contexts surrounding them. Moreover, it introduces EU-wide dynamic, interactive, and innovative platforms designed to engage young people directly and equip them with the knowledge and capacity to interpret emotionally charged political content. The EU's static presence on these platforms limits its ability to communicate effectively and leaves space for more extreme actors to shape the conversation. This track, therefore, aims to build an EU presence that engages young audiences organically and takes an active role in the digital public sphere, rather than relying on institutional messages alone.

1) EU Youth Civic Spaces

The EU should integrate creator-led TikTok communication, platform-native explainers on digital rights, and offline democratic forums into a coherent youth engagement ecosystem. Instead of relying on static institutional messaging, this approach uses organic and culturally resonant communication that matches how young EU voters encounter politics. Creator-led formats convey EU values through trusted voices, while short, interactive explainers translate complex regulatory ideas into accessible narratives. Offline forums then provide space for dialogue and reflection, linking digital engagement to meaningful civic participation. Together, these initiatives make EU safeguards visible in the environments where political impressions form and help counter polarisation through inclusion and sustained, participatory engagement.

2) EU programme for Emotional, Algorithmic, and Civic Literacy

In parallel, the EU should support an EU-wide literacy programme, which should be implemented through a Council Recommendation and supported by EDMO hubs. It should focus on three concrete competencies:

- Recognizing emotional manipulation and escalation cues
- Understanding recommender-system logics (e.g., feedback loops, engagement optimisation, asymmetric exposure)
- Learn how to correctly interpret the DSA and other policies' safeguards (e.g., transparency and risk mitigation)

This program can, long-term, be developed as a European Civic Education Baseline to ensure minimum media and political literacy across Member States.

The Transformative Track: EU Affective Safety Standard (EASS) for minors as a systemic risk tool

While the affirmative track strengthens resilience within the current system, it does not fully address the structural conditions that fuel affective escalation on TikTok and similar platforms. Thus, the transformative track targets the structural driver: the emotional architecture of recommender systems. The EU should develop an *EU Affective Safety Standard (EASS)* that operationalises affective amplification risk for minors and embeds it into platform risk assessment and mitigation. The EASS consists of three regulatory components:

- 1) **Affective Load Limit:** Platforms must detect and interrupt high-arousal recommendation loops for minors. This is not content censorship, but a design constraint on escalation patterns, such as repeated delivery of high-intensity fear content without diversification
- 2) **Affective Transparency Protocol:** Platforms must disclose how emotional engagement signals shape ranking systems
- 3) **Affective Safety-by-Design:** Platforms must demonstrate that their youth-facing recommender systems include built-in safeguards to reduce escalation dynamics, to shift responsibility from users to platform infrastructures

Implementation roadmap

Phase 1: Pilot, test, and define the model

- Launch Youth Civic Spaces in 3–5 Member States to test creator-led, platform-native formats.
- Convene a Commission expert group to define EASS indicators and audit methodologies.
- Task EDMO hubs with adapting emotional, algorithmic, and civic literacy modules and piloting them with youth organisations and schools.
- Gather real-time feedback to refine engagement formats and identify cross-national variations.

Phase 2: Institutionalise the affirmative track and integrate EASS into EU platform governance

- Adopt a Council Recommendation on the literacy module as a stepping stone toward a broader Civic Education Baseline.
- Scale Youth Civic Spaces across EP Liaison Offices and civil society partnerships.
- Conduct pilot EASS audits with cooperating platforms and independent researchers and publish aggregated results.
- Embed EASS obligations into youth-specific platform governance, integrating them into DSA-aligned systemic risk mitigation for recommender systems.

- Establish regular audit cycles and supervisory mechanisms, with escalation tools in cases of non-compliance.

Limitations and challenges

Throughout both tracks, the strategy anticipates the political and institutional risks inherent in youth-focused platform governance. Concerns about overreach emerge whenever the EU intervenes in emotional or algorithmic architectures, while education-related measures must respect Member States' competencies. Non-EU platforms may challenge new obligations, and any intervention must remain fully compatible with freedom of expression. The proposal, therefore, relies on pluralistic messengers to avoid institutional dominance, phased regulatory development to allow for contestation and adjustment, Member State flexibility in education to preserve subsidiarity, and strict content neutrality to safeguard rights and avoid perceptions of political steering.

Taken together, this integrated strategy provides a coherent framework that is both operationally realistic and innovative. The affirmative track strengthens communication, competence, and civic capacity today, while the transformative track reshapes the emotional conditions under which political content circulates tomorrow. By combining both, the EU can reduce affective polarisation among young voters and reinforce democratic agency in an emotionally volatile digital sphere.

Conclusion

A resilient European democracy requires action on both fronts. Emotional safety in the digital sphere and meaningful democratic engagement online and offline are mutually reinforcing conditions. Leaving the digital public sphere unattended, or relying solely on formal regulation and institutional messaging, risks ceding affective and narrative space to polarising actors. Addressing the psychological, infrastructural, and civic dimensions of youth political socialisation, therefore, requires the EU to move beyond a predominantly institutional, top-down approach and engage in more organic, bottom-up forms of communication within the environments where political impressions are formed. At the same time, the EU cannot ignore the fact that the systematic design of major platforms, particularly affective amplification and recommender architectures, structurally intensifies polarisation. While short-term action must operate within existing political and legal constraints, this structural dynamic must be taken seriously as a long-term governance challenge. The future of European democracy will be shaped by young citizens who can recognise manipulation without disengaging, contextualise emotion without cynicism, and participate meaningfully without being absorbed into polarising dynamics. Enabling this capacity depends not only on communication and civic engagement today, but also on the EU's

willingness to confront, over time, the systemic platform designs that shape emotional exposure and political behaviour in the digital sphere.

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