

Facts & Findings



EU Safe Social

Social Media That Protects Kids and Strengthens Sovereignty

Ben Scott, Pencho Kuzev

- › The EU should link the policy goals of child online safety and digital sovereignty by embracing Safe Social – a proposal outlined in this paper that brings together popular economic and social policy.
- › A growing body of evidence shows that major social media platforms violate the spirit and the requirements of the EU law. The case for under-16 age restrictions merits the emergency measures being taken by Member States to ban harmful products after years of neglect by companies.
- › A social media ban should be *paired* with an EU-wide policy of exemptions that seeks to “re-boot” digital services rules to protect children *and* open the market to European alternatives to the current oligopoly.
- › The EU should establish mandatory certification standards for safe social products to ensure child safety, similar to those applied to toys, electronics, and childcare products. Any product that is certified “safe” can enter the market for under-16s with an exemption from the ban.
- › To ensure this new market is not controlled by dominant platforms due to network effects, all new entrants must agree to simple interoperability standards, just like e-mail or SMS. This will foster competition among new services, providing European developers a chance to offer scalable alternatives.

Introduction

The debate on digital sovereignty is often framed as an abstract geopolitical challenge centred on cloud infrastructure, semiconductors, and industrial policy. While these issues are undoubtedly important, they remain distant from the everyday digital experiences of most European citizens. Too often, the sovereignty debate overlooks the digital environments in which Europe's children grow up.

For parents and teachers, the challenges are neither abstract nor theoretical. They are immediate and tangible: excessive screen time, exposure to harmful content, manipulative design practices, behavioural addictions, and the broader impact these developments can have on children's wellbeing, learning, and development. If digital sovereignty is to gain broad public support, it must address these most salient concerns directly.

While individual studies differ in methodology and findings, the emerging, multi-national body of research from social science points in a consistent direction: problematic patterns of social media use are associated with elevated risks for mental health and wellbeing, particularly among younger users.¹ Numerous studies document the persistence of design features and engagement mechanisms that may expose minors to harmful content, excessive use, and other risks to their wellbeing.² Tragic events of children injured or killed because of social media occur with alarming frequency.³ And the everyday experience of teens and even pre-teens receiving unwanted sexual advances and pornographic content through digital channels is now commonplace.⁴ These experiences alongside concerns about rising levels of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and exposure to harmful online content have made child online safety a central public policy issue across many European countries.

This raises a fundamental question for policymakers. If Europe is serious about digital sovereignty, should the debate focus exclusively on infrastructure and technological capacity? Or should it first address the digital products and services that shape the daily lives of millions of European children? A credible plan for digital sovereignty must do both, addressing urgent public priorities with policies that shape markets to increase the EU's technological autonomy – a strategy this paper seeks to offer.

Digital Sovereignty and
Child Online Safety

Social Media Ban as Transitional Measure

According to the latest ifo Education Barometer survey (2025) in Germany, an overwhelming majority of the population (85 percent) supports setting a minimum age of 16 for social media use.⁵ Similar findings have been reported by other representative surveys conducted by Forsa⁶ and Appinio⁷. The huge demand in Europe for an under-16 social media ban⁸ reflects the severity of the harm and the years of unsuccessful attempts to constrain the behaviour of a handful of (mostly) American tech giants that sit astride the market. People want to see change.

Not least because of this strong public support, the protection of minors has long been an important policy objective of the EU, reflected, among other instruments, in the Digital Services Act (DSA). The DSA addresses systemic risks and imposes specific obligations on online platforms, including requirements to design their interfaces with the highest levels of privacy, safety, and security. It also requires providers to address risks arising from the design of online interfaces that intentionally or unintentionally exploit the vulnerabilities and inexperience of minors or contribute to addictive behaviour.

Public Support for a
Social Media Age Limit

Despite these clear obligations, a growing body of evidence suggests that many major online platforms continue to operate in ways that are inconsistent with both the spirit and the requirements of the EU regulatory framework. The core business models and engagement-driven design incentives of major social media platforms remain largely unchanged, and violations of law proceed with impunity. The pace and capacity of regulatory oversight is designed for a market in which non-compliance with the law is anomalous and unusual, not one in which market failures that harm children are normative and routine. Moreover, the trillion-dollar corporations these rules are meant to discipline spend sums on lobbying and litigation to blunt oversight that exceed every other industry.

Platforms Ignore
EU Rules

Consequently, many of the features associated with excessive and harmful social media use – including infinite scroll, algorithmic amplification, social validation mechanisms, highly personalised recommender systems, disappearing messages, and more – continue to shape the online experiences of children and adolescents. Landmark judicial decisions in the United States that found tech platforms liable for knowingly fostering addiction in young users demonstrate the extent of the problem and clarify the need for change.⁹ This is a “tobacco moment” for social media that demands urgent action. Current regulations are important, but they are not getting the job done.

Unsafe by Design

Europe is not alone in this. Emerging regulatory proposals to govern child online safety have been passed in Australia and proposed in the UK and Canada. Both the EU and the German government have convened expert commissions to provide policy guidance to address the issue. Although many Member States – including France, Spain, Denmark and Greece – have begun legislative processes to bar young people from access to social media,¹⁰ the legal authority to establish clear rules for the Single Market lies in Brussels. The EU needs to act with all deliberate speed to address the problem, avoid regulatory fragmentation, and provide certainty in the market – for consumers and service providers alike.

Within all of these nations that are grappling with protecting kids online, it is impossible to ignore the reality that none of the offending firms are domestic. With the exceptions of TikTok and Telegram, they are all US corporations in a tight oligopoly structure that seldom permits new competitors. Many lawmakers have concluded that if the firms and products in the market were more diverse – including local competitors – they may be more responsive to the law and attentive to the harms caused in their own communities. These considerations of sovereignty are germane to the child safety debate as path to accountability and as a method to open markets to competitive innovation that have long been closed to European business.

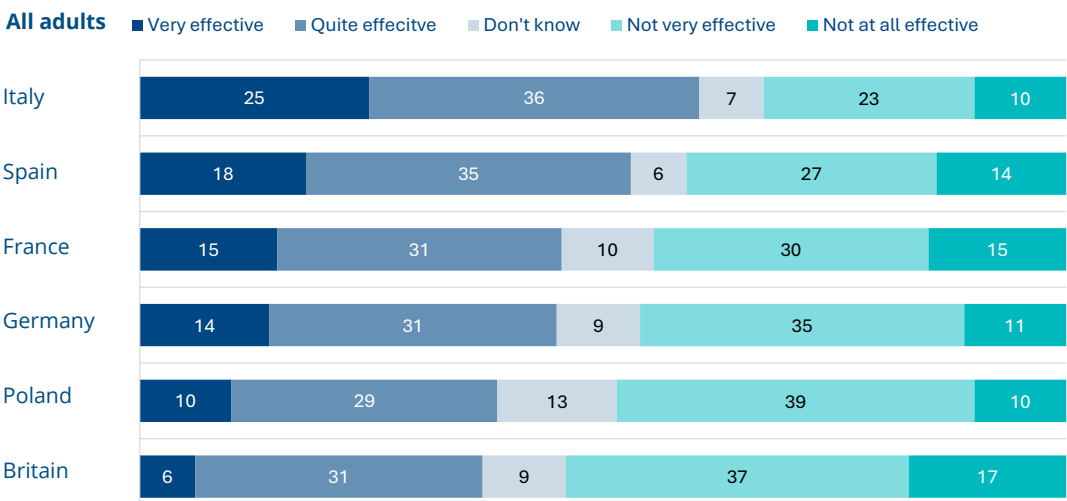
The EU should therefore link policy goals of child online safety and digital sovereignty by embracing public demand to restrict access for children to dangerous social media products. This can be done by creating a “smart ban” – a variation on the outright prohibition of social media for kids in favour of new market rules that more effectively mandate safety and harness market forces to the purpose.

A Smart Ban for
Safer Social Media

This policy reflects the reality that while the public strongly favours social media restrictions, they aren’t confident such a policy by itself will work. However popular the policy may be, an outright ban on kids using technology carries drawbacks. It may raise concerns regarding fundamental rights to speech, trigger incentives for platforms to facilitate circumvention of age-verification mechanisms or to increase surveillance and potentially push children towards less regulated online spaces. Moreover, a blanket ban does not address the design

While most Europeans in six countries support a social media ban for under-16s, they vary greatly in terms of how effective they think it will be

How effective, if at all, do you think a ban on children under the age of 16 from having social media accounts would be at stopping children from creating and using social media accounts?



Source: YouGov, European Political Monthly Survey, March 2026. Published by YouGov as “Most Europeans in Six Countries Support a Social Media Ban for Under-16s”, 2 April 2026.

features that contribute to harm, nor does it place additional obligations on major platforms, which may continue to market their services to underage users as they do today. These concerns help explain both the opposition to such measures and the scepticism – even among some supporters – regarding their long-term effectiveness.

For these reasons, age restrictions should not be viewed as an end in themselves, but rather as an emergency, transitional measure that must be accompanied by a broader framework for safe, competitive, and child-friendly digital services.

We therefore propose the creation of a European Safe Social market that provides children with safer digital services while fostering competition and European technological alternatives. The path forward is to ensure that the policy achieves two objectives: first, to prevent companies from profiting from harm to children; and second, to create a clear pathway towards safer, higher-quality products for kids that parents can actually trust.

Digital Sovereignty and Safe Social

The recent history of social media leads to two overarching conclusions. First, Europe needs a child-focused digital media market built around safety – a safe social ecosystem spanning microblogs, image sharing, short-form video, and AI-curated feeds. And second, Europeans have growing distrust for American tech companies (which have a tragic record of exploiting children for profit) and strong consumer demand for alternative products. The reason there are no viable alternatives today (despite the degraded quality of products in the market) is the reality of network effects. Quitting an existing social media platform due to unreasonable harms also means leaving behind a social network of desirable content and engagement. Consumers are reluctant to do so even when they are very dissatisfied with the product

Building a European
Safe Social Market

experience.¹¹ A new product market for kids must therefore solve *both* the safety *and* the network effects problems in order to avoid setting up new standards for a market that is simply captured by the same services that return to the race to the bottom we live with today.

Converging Models for
Safer Social Media

The practical starting point is the status quo. Multiple Member States are currently pursuing some form of social media bans for under-16s. If these policies proceed, some families will be happy to abandon these products. But others will want something better as an alternative. This will create demand for Safe Social in the market, and it provides a greenfield opportunity to reboot both product standards *and* competitive market dynamics. This must be done intentionally – to future-proof solutions that work for evolving technology and to create market incentives for companies to design products to high standards. The EU can achieve Safe Social with a new legal framework for conditional access to the under-16 media market.

This can be done with legislation that bans social media for under-16s but provides provisions for *exemptions* to this ban for companies that certify they will abide by a **mandatory set of features**. Many of these features are already described in the guidance for protection of minors pursuant to Article 28 of the Digital Services Act:

Designing the Under-16
Digital Market

- › **Age Assurance** – An accurate, privacy-protecting, difficult-to-circumvent verification method (i.e. this can be done without introducing unwanted surveillance technology). The newly launched EU age-verification solution and the European Digital Identity (EUDI) Wallet provide a ready model that grants neither the service nor the government more information than the single fact that the requirement is met.¹² Any equivalent standard that delivers the same level of data minimisation should qualify.
- › **Addictive Design Restrictions** – A prohibition on infinite scroll, auto-play, social proof (e.g. likes, streaks, read receipts) and push notifications.
- › **User-Controlled Algorithm** – The selection of what topics and types of content appear – and in what order – is decided by the user, not the platform. This is not merely a default setting; user control must be the only option.
- › **Age-Appropriate Content Restrictions** – Strict moderation requirements for pornography, gambling, drugs, self-harm, and other content illegal for minors to access.
- › **Privacy Restrictions** – A prohibition on the use of behavioural data and default restrictions on location sharing, contact syncing, camera/mic access, and adult interactions with minors outside of friends and family.
- › **AI Guardrails** – Any product that includes AI functions must submit to pre-launch and ongoing testing to ensure guardrails suitable for children are in place. Shared product liability for companies that enable unlawful conduct may incentivise high standards.
- › **Interoperability** – All products must be technically capable of communicating with one another, meaning posting and reading on any safe social product is available across all safe social products, promoting competition and avoiding lock-in.

This approach of bans-with-exemptions is not theoretical. In June 2026, Canada introduced Bill C-34, the Safe Social Media Act, which sets a minimum age of 16 for social media accounts but pairs the restriction with an exemption pathway. A service may be permitted to reach under-16s where it demonstrates to the regulator that it has established and main-

tained adequate safeguards for children.¹³ Similarly, the Expert Commission established by the German Government, in one of its key recommendations, calls for stronger child protection on social media through safety by design and by default, including age-appropriate default settings and design requirements for youth accounts. The mandatory safeguards, including restrictions on recommender systems, dark patterns, and other high-risk features, should be tailored to different age groups, particularly ages 13 to 16 and 16 to 18, and applied by default, without requiring any active intervention by young users. As the experts rightly argue, “this approach shifts protection from individual responsibility to structural safeguards: it operates independently of whether parents, educational institutions, or young people themselves possess sufficient digital literacy, since high-risk functionalities are disabled or restricted by default.”¹⁴ And notably, Australia has narrowed its under-16 social media ban so that it applies based on harmful design features such as algorithmic recommender systems, infinite scroll, likes and other feedback mechanics, and disappearing-content features. Services that omit these features now fall outside the ban.¹⁵

That three comparably positioned “middle powers” are converging on a ban-plus-exemption design indicates that an analogous European framework would be neither unprecedented nor out of step with international practice.

Market Incentives and Digital Sovereignty

By creating a regime of certified exemptions to the ban, we create a new dynamic in the market. All market entrants will be required to meet the mandatory standards in advance of product launch. The criteria for the exemption will be set and managed by a regulator with an expedited review process so as not to delay product launch. The standards will be the same for all new entrants. However, for incumbents with a history of non-compliance with child safety measures, oversight may be stricter and more intensive prior to granting the exemption. The procedures for complaint and investigation of non-compliance may rely on existing protocols set out in the Digital Services Act, but with accelerated action to prevent immediate harms and issue behaviour-changing sanctions. The difference between standard DSA enforcement and policing of the exemption criteria is simple but critical. A prima-facie complaint featuring evidence of non-compliance with Safe Social standards – adjudicated by the Commission in the first instance as likely to succeed – would result in the rapid suspension of the service in the affected country until/unless the problem is remedied and does not recur.

Certification Before
Access

In order to avoid overly complex ex-ante regulatory compliance, the Commission could consider a simpler self-certification process with spot checks and testing to ensure validity. However, this only works if the penalties for non-compliance are very high and provide a real deterrent.

The key to this policy is not only high standards and strict enforcement – it is unleashing market forces that find good practice is good business. If companies can accept persistent regulatory investigation and fines as a cost of doing business, then the policy has failed. If, by contrast, the incentives are such that safety becomes not only a necessary condition of doing business but also a feature for competitive differentiation of products to appeal to consumers, the policy is a success. Without interoperability, this potential for “safety differentiation” would be swallowed by the power of network effects (i.e. consumers settling for a less safe and less desirable product in order to maintain access to an established social network). This is the why interoperability is the key criterion for Safe Social.

Safety, Competition and
Interoperability

By virtue of breaking the network-effect advantages of today's incumbents, EU-based companies can now emerge to take advantage of access to a new market free from oligopoly power. They will benefit from an EU consumer preference for indigenous products (after years of suffering exploitation by US giants). But no service will be able to replicate the business model of monopolisation and exploitation of the past due to the interoperability requirements. It will be too easy to switch providers! Rather, profit maximisation will require competing on the basis of what consumers want – a combination of high standards of safety *and* entertainment value.

Finally, the technical feasibility problem of retrofitting old products for interoperability (which has impeded similar policy in the past) will be removed by requiring bright-line standards for all new entrants to the Safe Social market. The rapid development of AI agents means there is no longer a technical need for a standardised protocol that sits beneath the entire product market. All that is needed is some form of machine-readable data stream or API. This offers a practical way to make European digital sovereignty tangible for citizens and to pioneer a new model for digital services markets.

This is a recent and consequential shift. The European Commission's 2026 study on interoperability in social media markets concludes that interoperability is technically feasible but warns that negotiating a single common protocol across platforms with different architectures would be slow, contested, and liable to lock obsolete technical choices into law.¹⁶ That objection loses much of its force once AI agents can integrate multiple services seamlessly, a technical option not considered in the study because AI only recently acquired that capacity. Rather than mandating one protocol beneath the whole market, regulators need only require that each certified product expose a simple, machine-readable read/write API. The work of integration then happens at the application layer, where competing certified apps use agentic AI to read from and post to one another's services within the scopes the user has authorised – a capability for which prototype applications already exist in the market. The regulatory obligations for content moderation will fall on the platform that originates posts, but other services providers are free to build additional safety filters and user controls on top of this baseline.

Avoiding Legacy Constraints and AI agents

This API-based interoperability standard keeps the obligation light and easier to oversee. It lets the integration layer evolve as the technology changes rather than freezing it in legislation, and it leaves regulators with the levers that matter: admission to the market, audit of API parity, and enforcement against discrimination. Because the requirement applies only to greenfield entrants seeking certification, the retrofit and architectural-complexity problems the Commission flags for today's incumbents never have to be solved.

Law and Policy – a Phased Approach

The market will require new legislative standards and regulatory oversight to achieve the safe social objective. However, this is not law-making in a vacuum. The EU already has child online safety in law – principles and provisions upon which these new standards can build, referencing existing protections, regulatory structures, and enforcement procedures. The EU could bring forward these changes in a focused review of the Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act – or through new legislative vehicles such as the Digital Fairness Act.

But we must be clear-eyed that this will not happen overnight; it will take months or years to get right, particularly the standard setting for exemption criteria and interoperability.

We cannot wait to act, but neither can an emergency ban leave a permanent vacuum in the market that drives kids and platforms alike to evade the law. Therefore, we need a phased approach. It is likely that Member States will act in the coming months to phase in a ban on today's social media products for under-16s. The EU should simultaneously begin work on the Safe Social standards. And during the interim period between the bans and the opening of the new market, bright-line rules can be drafted for safe social products. This will enable companies to begin to develop services as soon as possible, recognising that these may be subject to refinement through regulatory oversight in the future, and as technologies evolve. The policy proposed here is not designed as a quick fix but rather as a sustainable solution for the longer term.

A Phased Regulatory
Strategy

Conclusion

There is strong political momentum across many EU countries to move quickly to age-gate social media for children under 16. This is a rational response to the level of harm in the market. But this age restriction should not be an end in itself. If it is, it denies kids the opportunity to experience the benefits of technology simply because the incumbent tech companies have proven unwilling to offer safe products under current market rules. Europe can do better for kids, and create an opportunity to open the market to competitors and strengthen European digital sovereignty in the process. What is needed is a policy for Safe Social that mandates safety in a stricter regulatory regime and harnesses market forces to give incentives for doing well commercially by doing right by the community.

Beyond Age Gates:
Building Safe Social

- 1 See, e.g., WHO Regional Office for Europe & Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study, A Focus on Adolescent Social Media Use and Gaming in Europe, Central Asia and Canada (Sept. 2024) (problematic social media use among 11- to 15-year-olds rising from 7 % in 2018 to 11 % in 2022 across 44 countries and regions), <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/25-09-2024-teens--screens-and-mental-health> (last accessed: 30 June 2026); Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, Social Media and Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory (2023), <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/sg-youth-mental-health-social-media-advisory.pdf> (last accessed: 30 June 2026).
- 2 See, e.g., Jonathan Haidt, Jean Twenge & Zach Rausch, Social Media and Mental Health: A Collaborative Review (ongoing unpublished manuscript, New York University), available via <https://jonathanhaidt.com/social-media/> (last accessed: 30 June 2026). This is the living document collecting the correlational, longitudinal, and experimental studies.
- 3 See, e.g., litigation over child deaths linked to the TikTok “blackout challenge,” including *Anderson v. TikTok, Inc.*, No. 22-3061 (3d Cir. Aug. 27, 2024), and claims brought by UK families on behalf of children who died in 2022, *Grieving Mum suing TikTok says hearing was ‘painful’*, 17 January 2026, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c20gvp3pzwpo> (last accessed: 30 June 2026).
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- 8 YouGov, Most Europeans in six countries support banning social media for under-16s, fieldwork 6–24 March 2026 (published June 2026), <https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54429-most-europeans-in-six-countries-support-banning-social-media-for-under-16s> (last accessed: 30 June 2026).
- 9 In March 2026 a Los Angeles Superior Court jury in *K.G.M. v. Meta Platforms, Inc.* (Social Media Cases, JCCP No. 5255) found Meta and YouTube liable on a product-liability/addictive-design theory for an adolescent plaintiff’s injuries; and in *State of New Mexico v. Meta Platforms, Inc.*, No. D-101-CV-2023-02838 (1st Jud. Dist. Ct., Santa Fe Cnty.), a jury found Meta liable under the state’s Unfair Practices Act and awarded \$375 million.
- 10 See, e.g., France (bill barring under-15s from social media adopted by the National Assembly in January 2026, pending Senate consideration); Spain (draft legislation setting a minimum age of 16 with mandatory age verification, announced 2026); Denmark (government agreement to bar under-15s, with parental override for 13- and 14-year-olds); and Greece (under-15 restriction and age-verification app pilot). For an overview, see Euronews, Which European countries are considering banning social media for children under 16? (2025), <https://www.euronews.com/next/2025/12/23/which-european-countries-are-considering-banning-social-media-for-children> (last accessed: 30 June 2026).
- 11 Leonardo Bursztyn, Benjamin Handel, Rafael Jiménez-Durán & Christopher Roth, When Product Markets Become Collective Traps: The Case of Social Media, in: *American Economic Review* 115(12): 4105–36 (2025) (also NBER Working Paper No. 31771), <https://www.nber.org/papers/w31771> (last accessed: 30 June 2026), finding that many users are caught in a “product-market trap” – they would prefer that platforms such as TikTok and Instagram not exist, yet keep using them because of network effects and fear of missing out.
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Imprint

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