

European Values Center for Security Policy

The TikTok Problem

A STUDY ON COGNITIVE WARFARE

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FOREWORD BY EVC DIRECTOR JAKUB JANDA

European democracies face a strategic environment in which a Russian military attack on Nordic/Baltic NATO member states may become imminent within the next 3–5 years, as repeatedly warned by senior allied military and intelligence leaders. Given the proclaimed “no-limits partnership” between Russia and China—including the Russian war economy’s deep reliance on Chinese support—it is reasonable to expect that China would actively assist Russian offensive operations in Europe if Moscow and Beijing jointly decide to challenge or invade NATO territory.

Against this backdrop, any Chinese state-controlled data-collection system or influence instrument operating in Europe must be viewed as potentially supporting Russian war-planning or offensive actions.

Today, over 200 millions of EU citizens use TikTok. Should Europe find itself defending against a large-scale Russian attack in the coming years, governments must assume that this platform could be leveraged for Russian or Chinese strategic objectives aimed at weakening, destabilizing, or dividing Europe. TikTok has already demonstrated both its technical capacity and its strategic willingness to enable hostile interference: during the 2024 Romanian presidential election, Romanian authorities assess that the platform facilitated an overwhelming Russian influence campaign, ultimately forcing the Romanian Constitutional Court to take the unprecedented step of annulling the election.

In any future Europe-wide security emergency, European governments may need the capability—both technical and legal—to disable an adversary-controlled platform within days. The current state of European legislation and procedures makes such rapid, coordinated action extremely difficult, potentially causing irreparable damage to societal cohesion in the critical early phase of a major crisis or armed conflict. The Chinese state has already signaled, through its relationship



with companies like Huawei, that it views major private-sector platforms as instruments of statecraft; TikTok should be assumed to fall within the same paradigm.

In peacetime, European democracies are already in a strategically weak position because:

- A hostile state actor or its principal supporter controls a platform that shapes public discourse for roughly one-third of the European electorate. This constitutes a textbook strategic vulnerability.
- There is no meaningful plan across European capitals to reduce the influence or reach of this platform. Outside of limited technical measures with negligible systemic effect, Europe has no defensive strategy.
- TikTok's penetration is so deep that nearly every significant European political figure relies on it for campaigning. This creates the possibility that China—or Russia—could give preferential visibility to selected politicians by manipulating platform procedures. A hostile totalitarian state therefore retains the ability to amplify or silence voices in European democratic politics according to the preferences of the Chinese Communist Party or its “no-limits” ally - Russia.
- In practice, the integrity of European elections depends on the goodwill of a platform controlled by the Chinese Communist Party . The 2024 Romanian presidential election demonstrated that Europe lacks credible deterrence tools capable of discouraging TikTok from manipulating political processes. European governments have so far failed to develop serious policy instruments due to a chronic underestimation of this security threat.

Europe has not imposed meaningful consequences for TikTok's role in the Romanian election interference. Although an EU and NATO member state faced a direct information attack serious enough to have its Constitutional Court decide to annul an election, TikTok has faced no business-



model threatening penalties within the EU. This signals weakness and invites further strategic interference. For the Chinese Communist Party and TikTok itself, nothing currently disincentivizes a repeat of the 2024 Romanian operation should geopolitical conditions favor Russian or Chinese objectives.



INTRODUCTION

NATO [defines](#) **cognitive warfare** as a new unconventional form of hybrid warfare, where the **human mind becomes the primary battleground**. The goal is to manipulate not only what people think but also **how they think and act**. If successful, cognitive warfare can shape individual and collective beliefs to align with an aggressor's strategic objectives. In extreme cases, it can fracture society, eroding the collective will to resist an adversary's intentions. This form of warfare allows an opponent to subdue a population without direct force or coercion.

In today's world, where much of our lives unfold online, social networks create an illusion of social interaction while altering fundamental human behaviors. Digital platforms have reshaped entire generations, particularly those who grew up immersed in screens. Research now confirms the **long-term effects** of social media and mobile applications **on human psychological health, brain development, attention span, and behavior**. Social media addiction, particularly among children, is rising, exacerbating issues such as **cyberbullying, online grooming, disinformation, and political radicalization**. These vulnerabilities present an opportunity for adversaries to exploit digital platforms for large-scale psychological operations.



TIKTOK - OVERVIEW

TikTok, a short-video social media platform owned by China-based company **ByteDance**¹, has become one of the most popular apps among Generation Z (Gen Z)², a generation immersed in digital technology, the internet, and social media from childhood. While widely used for entertainment and marketing, **TikTok presents unique security and cognitive risks due to its ownership, data collection practices, and algorithmic influence.**

TIKTOK POPULARITY

According to [Statista](#), TikTok has 1.6 million monthly active users worldwide as of February 2025, ranking as the [fifth most-used social network](#) globally after having existed for seven years. Its powerful **algorithm**, which delivers highly personalized content to users based on their interests, location, and data from their devices, makes the user experience engaging but also **addictive**. The interface of the app is user-friendly; users can easily create and share content using various filters and tools. The content on the “For You Page” is offered based on users’ preferences and interaction with the platform.

TikTok’s interface is designed for continuous, full-screen video consumption, built around simple gestures and rapid engagement. The platform minimizes text and maximizes visual immersion. After opening the app, users land up on the Home Screen which is usually divided between the “For You Page” a personalized stream of short videos and “Following” tab which shows only content

¹ Founded in 2012, ByteDance Ltd. (in Chinese 字节跳动有限公司) is a Chinese internet technology company with headquarters in Haidian, Beijing. It is developer of video sharing apps Douyin (抖音) and TikTok, news platform Toutiao (头条) and video-editing app CapCut (剪映). One of its founders, Zhang Yiming (张一鸣) is one of the richest person in the world.

² Gen Z is a demographic cohort of those born between late 1990s and early 2010s. Gen Z follows the Millennials and precedes Generation Alpha.

from accounts the user follows. Some users will also see the “Discovery” tab where they can search for all sort of viral videos and trends. This feature is currently not available everywhere.

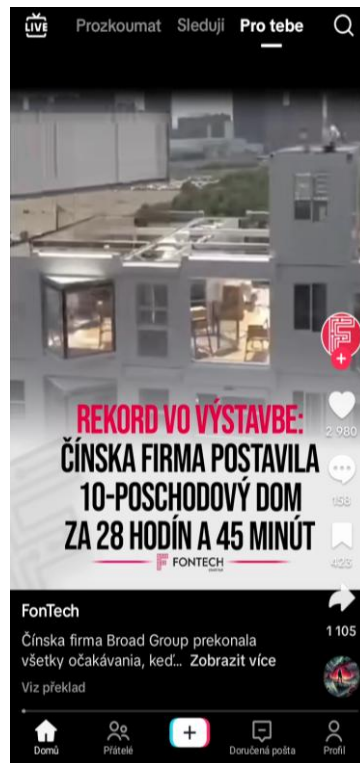


Figure 1: TikTok "For You" page

TikTok’s popularity **differs across regions**. In South-East Asia, for example, TikTok is far more popular than in Europe. The first five countries having the highest percentage of internet users (+16) using TikTok are Nigeria (89,7%), Thailand (83,4%), Vietnam (83%), Philippines (82,2%) and Saudi Arabia (81,8%). Romania is the first European country on this list, ranking 13 with 62% of 16+ internet users.

THE TIKTOK PHENOMENON

TikTok gained its global popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, offering users a [“way out”](#) from social isolation. Since then, the app’s growth has multiplied (see the chart below).

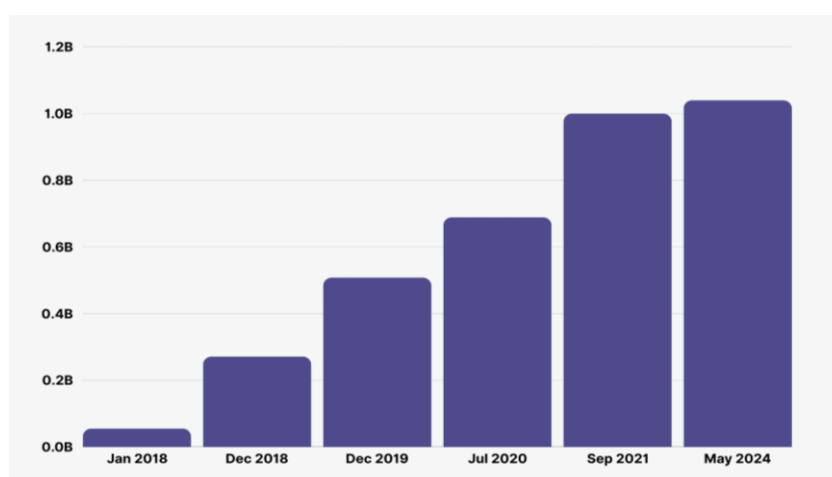


Figure 2: TikTok Monthly Users Worldwide. Source: [Backlinko](#)

In mid-2025, TikTok was the second [most downloaded app globally](#), surpassed only by ChatGPT. TikTok now caters to a diverse global audience as it attracts a wide range of content creators and users.

In **Europe**, usage has exploded in recent years: from only 8 million users in 2018, [official data](#) says that it reached over 200 million in 2025, with one third of EEA + UK citizens using TikTok.

In **Czechia**, TikTok ranks as the country’s **fifth most popular** social media platform after YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Pinterest. According to the [AMI Digital Index](#), **34% of Czech internet users aged 15 and above used TikTok in 2024**, an increase by 10 percentage points over two years.



DEMOGRAPHICS: WHO ARE THE TIKTOK USERS?

TikTok does not release a comprehensive demographic breakdown of its global user base. Instead, partial data are available through its Ads Manager and transparency reports. In its [“Audience Insights”](#) service for advertisers, it provides aggregated demographic data from the past 30 days but only includes users aged 18 and above (although advertising can be directed at users from 13+). Any TikTok-provided data or analysis thereof broadly referring to “TikTok users” really means “adult TikTok users” and will therefore not be entirely representative, especially given the high popularity of TikTok with teenagers.

Independent research helps fill this gap. In the United States, for instance, surveys conducted by the **Pew Research Center** provide a more detailed picture of user demographics. However, overall, there is a **lack of detailed and comprehensive data on TikTok’s user base** available to researchers, policy makers, and the public.

Looking at gender, across adult users in the United States, a [higher proportion of women](#) (40%) than men (25%) use TikTok. Among teens aged 13–17, [66% of girls](#) and 59% of boys reported using TikTok. In early 2025, TikTok’s adult audience in **Czechia** comprised 53.8% women and 46.2% men, according to [DataReportal](#).

The [demographic data](#) reinforce TikTok’s central role among younger audiences. In the United States, 63% of teens (13–17) used TikTok in 2024—surpassing the rate among young adults aged 18–34 (56%). TikTok provides for them an [“under-13 experience”](#) that restricts content and features, though its effectiveness depends heavily on self-reported age.

Gen Z, accustomed to visual-first communication, gravitate toward platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. Their participation in these spaces has transformed digital communication and self-expression. [Studies](#) suggest that the main motivator for TikTok use is **satisfaction**, driven by perceived usefulness, entertainment value, and social connection.

Although TikTok does not dominate in total user numbers globally compared to YouTube or Facebook, it leads in **average time spent per user**. Data indicates users spend **on average 1 hour 37 minutes per day** on TikTok (see the chart below). Popularity among Gen Z has made it a **key platform youth engagement**, including mobilizing the youth vote in elections.

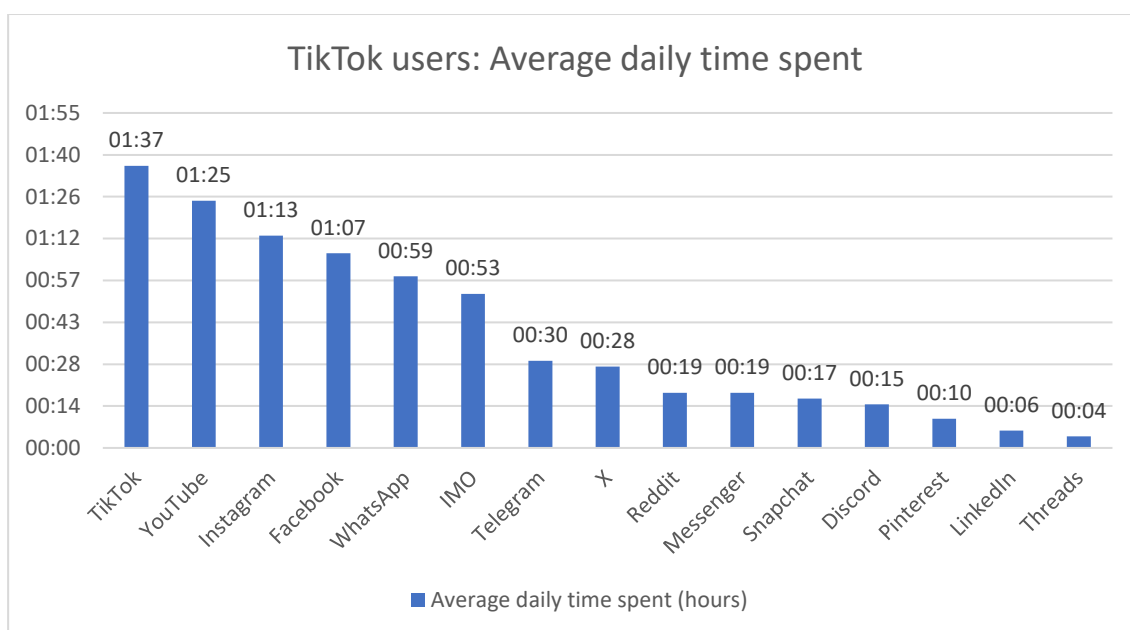


Figure 3: Source: [Meltwater and We are Social](#)

TikTok as an Information Source

TikTok’s relevance also lies in its growing importance as a source of information and news. Amid the decline of traditional media, internet users globally are increasingly depending on social media platforms like TikTok to stay informed. Although the extent of this reliance varies by country, the trend is universal and rising. [The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025](#) shows that TikTok’s growth as a news platform continues year by year, particularly among younger audiences. Notably, mainstream media organizations receive less attention on TikTok than



independent creators and online personalities. This imbalance facilitates faster dissemination of both misinformation and disinformation, highlighting TikTok's significance in discussions on media literacy and digital regulation.

In terms of geography, TikTok use as a news source is highest in Malaysia (48%), Thailand (59%), and Kenya (40%), compared to a global average of 16%, according to the 2025 [Report](#).

TikTok and Commercial Influence

Beyond entertainment and news, TikTok and other social media platforms are now key arenas for digital marketing and consumer influence. According to [Sprinklr](#), 45% of European Gen Z consumers rely on influencer recommendations when purchasing fashion products, while 98% of EU e-commerce users consult social media for product research before making purchases. Moreover, **37% of EU citizens now consider social media their primary source of news information**, underscoring the platform's growing economic and informational impact across European societies.



SECURITY THREATS

TikTok [collects](#) vast amounts of user data, including personal information, location, device preferences, device IP address, service provider, and even data from other installed applications such as calendars or health trackers.

In mid-2021, TikTok quietly amended its terms of service to [include biometric data](#)—it called it “faceprint” and “voiceprint”—but didn’t elaborate on what it was.³

Despite ByteDance's [denials](#) on user data access from mainland China it has been [revealed](#) that data of U.S. and EU users was accessed from China by China-based ByteDance employees. In May 2025 the Irish Europe’ regulator Data Protection Commission (DPC) in Ireland has [issued](#) a fine of **530 million euros** to TikTok for illegally sending personal data of EU’s TikTok users to China (between 2020 and 2022) and lack of transparency in its privacy policy. Because TikTok has its headquarters in Ireland it falls under jurisdiction of the Irish regulator who oversees enforcing the EU rules.

While other social media platforms also gather user data, TikTok’s risk is amplified by ByteDance’s obligations under Chinese law which requires the company and its employees to collaborate with China’s state institutions.

The 2013 **Company Law of the People's Republic of China** (2013 Amendment) (中华人民共和国公司法2013修订) establishes CCP’s control over private enterprises. According to [Article 19](#) every private enterprise must establish a CCP organization within itself to „carry out Party’s activities“.

³ This applies for non-EU or European Economic Area (EEA) users as Europe’s General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) provides stricter protection of European users’ biometric data.



The 2014 [Counter-Espionage Law](#) (中华人民共和国反间谍法) **Article 8** mandates state intelligence to request cooperation from China's citizens and organizations:

任何公民和组织都应当依法支持、协助反间谍工作，保守所知悉的国家秘密和反间谍工作秘密。

All citizens and organizations shall, in accordance with the law, support and assist counter-espionage work, and safeguard state secrets and counter-espionage work secrets that they become aware of.

And **Article 9** provides protection of the state to those who support the counter-espionage work:

国家对支持、协助反间谍工作的个人和组织给予保护。
对举报间谍行为或者在反间谍工作中做出重大贡献的个人和组织，按照国家有关规定给予表彰和奖励。

The State shall protect individuals and organizations that support and assist counter-espionage work.

Individuals and organizations that report espionage activities or make significant contributions to counter-espionage work shall be commended and rewarded in accordance with relevant State regulations.

The 2015 [State Security Law](#) (国家安全法) includes general obligation to provide help to state organs in questions of state security.

The 2017 [National Intelligence Law](#) (中华人民共和国国家情报法) requires PRC's citizens and organizations to support national intelligence in its activities to prevent and stop espionage and safeguard national security and keep confidential any state secrets and counter-espionage work secrets they become aware of.

Moreover, ByteDance actively collaborates with the Chinese government. For example, in 2019 ByteDance signed a **Strategic partnership agreement between ByteDance and the Ministry of Public Security(公安部)** where it states:



此次公安部新闻宣传局与字节跳动科技有限公司本着优势互补、融和协作、共同发展、互利共赢的原则，签署战略合作框架协议，旨在充分发挥今日头条、抖音在大数据分析、精准推送、创意策划等方面的专业技术和平台优势，整合双方优质资源，进一步加强公安新媒体专业能力和人才队伍建设，加强公安新媒体作品创作生产，提高帐号运营管理水平，提升网络影响力和网上话语权，进一步提升公安宣传传播力引导力影响力公信力，推动公安机关媒体融合向纵深发展，更好地服务公安中心工作和公安队伍建设，为新时代公安工作发展进步营造良好舆论氛围。

"This time, the News and Publicity Bureau of the Ministry of Public Security and ByteDance Technology Co., Ltd. signed a strategic cooperation framework agreement based on the principles of complementary advantages, integration and collaboration, common development, mutual benefit and win-win results.

*The agreement aims to give full play to the professional technology and platform advantages of TouTiao and Douyin in big data analysis, precise push, creative planning, etc., integrate the high-quality resources of both parties, further strengthen the professional capacity training and talent team building of public security new media, strengthen the creation and production of public security new media works, improve the level of account operation and management, **enhance network influence and online discourse power**, further enhance the publicity, communication, guidance, influence and credibility of public security, promote the in-depth development of media integration of public security organs, **better serve the central work of public security** and the construction of public security teams, and **create a good public opinion atmosphere** for the development and progress of public security work in the new era."*

These practices and legal obligations illustrate that TikTok's data collection, combined with ByteDance's ties to the Chinese government ruled by the Chinese Communist Party, creates a uniquely high-risk environment for the privacy and security of users outside China.



BEHAVIORAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RISKS

TikTok's AI-driven algorithm continuously and in real time learns user preferences, offering an endless stream of highly engaging content. This design fosters addiction by providing instant gratification in the form of "cheap dopamine," leading users to lose track of real time. TikTok users spend in average [one hour and 37 minutes](#) on the platform, which causes significant consequences for their attention span and mental health.

Short-form video content conditions users to expect instant stimulation, diminishing their ability to focus on longer and more complex tasks. Furthermore, TikTok's aggressive content-pushing strategy has been linked to increased anxiety, depression, and self-esteem issues, particularly among children and adolescents. The platform's addictive nature also makes users more susceptible to manipulation and exposure to ideologically charged narratives.

Among psychological issues frequently associated with relation to TikTok usage or more broadly usage of social media are physical health issues, stemming from inactive lifestyle and sleeping disorders, nomophobia⁴, struggles with social skills, anxiety, [depression](#), eating disorders, loneliness, low self-esteem, self-harm or even a suicide.

Amnesty International's [report](#) "Driven into Darkness" describes and analyze how children and young people can be easily driven into "rabbit holes" or watching harmful content by the TikTok algorithm. Their respondents describe the addictiveness of the app and how spending time on TikTok resulted in them failing submitting school assignments, spending less time with friends and family offline or scrolling the "For You" feed whole night.

⁴ **Nomophobia** or "no mobile phobia" is fear of not having (access) to a working mobile phone, situation such as having a low battery, losing the device or having no internet connection. Behavioral addiction to mobile phones



Distorted body image and eating disorders

Multiple studies find that TikTok use is linked to higher social comparison tendencies and lower body image satisfaction, particularly among teenage and Gen Z users exposed to appearance focused content. Users often engage in “upward comparison” with influencers or peers who display idealized bodies, lifestyles, or beauty standards, which is associated with body dissatisfaction and internalization of thin-ideal or appearance norms.

The [survey research](#) on teenagers in Saudi Arabia indicated high correlation between using TikTok and negative body image, and high social comparison among 12-19 years old teenagers. A mixed-method study research on [Gen Z Tik-Tok users in Indonesia](#) showed that upward appearance comparison is driven by video-based activity and appearance motivation, and that both upward comparison and thin-ideal internalization undermine body image satisfaction.

Among 778 young adult college women in the United States, TikTok use was [indirectly related](#) to body dissatisfaction through greater upward appearance comparison and increased body surveillance, in line with social comparison theory.

Dangerous Challenges

Social media are a place where culture of constant experimentation and viral challenges exposes young users to potentially harmful trends, including self-harming behaviors and dangerous stunts that occasionally result in fatal incidents. The quest for recognition, creativity, and community remains central to Gen Z’s engagement with the platform. This is particularly important for young users of TikTok (mainly group of 13-17 years old) whose brain (prefrontal cortex⁵) has [not been developed yet](#) and therefore they are much more vulnerable to peer validation or ability to stop

⁵ This part of human brain is responsible for danger assessing and impulse control.



watching or turn off the app. Furthermore, social media challenges gain popularity because they are built on the [sense of belonging](#) and peer belonging.

The most dangerous of these trends which has been also broadly associated with TikTok is the **Blackout Challenge**, in which a person deliberately deprives themselves of oxygen—often by strangulation—until losing consciousness to experience a brief sense of euphoria. The consequences can be severe, including bloodshot eyes, intense headaches, damage to neck tissue and blood vessels, brain injury, or death.

To date, there have been [over 100 reported casualties](#) linked to this challenge. In April 2024, a thirteen-year-old girl from Germany [died](#) after attempting it. In the United Kingdom, four families have [filed a lawsuit](#) against TikTok after losing their children, aged 12 to 14. The plaintiffs accuse the platform of being “a dangerous and addictive product that markets itself as fun and safe for children while lulling parents into a false sense of security,” and of “pushing dangerous prank and challenge videos to children based on their age and location in order to increase engagement time and boost revenues.”

Media outlets frequently report similar tragedies: primary school students in [Czechia](#) attempting the challenge; a twelve-year-old [boy](#) in the UK who died; a ten-year-old [girl in Italy](#) who passed away in her bedroom in Palermo; two girls, aged eight and nine, in the [United States](#) and many other.

In response, TikTok has blocked searches for the challenge’s title. Users looking for it are now redirected to a [resource page](#) offering psychological support and safety information.

Dangerous challenges have been viral and popular among youth on all social media platforms. What follows is a description of some which belong to the dangerous.



Eyeballing challenge [encouraged](#) individuals to pour alcohol into their eyes because the alcohol will easily and faster bring the state of drunkenness. The results can be corneal burns and other health problems, including blindness. Participants of the **Tide Pod Challenge** took a gel capsule for washing, chew it, swallow it, filmed yourself doing it and then share the video. The capsules contain a variety of toxic chemicals which can cause vomiting, choking and diarrhea, can burn mucous membranes, damage the lungs and digestive system and in rare cases death. In 2018 at least [39 cases](#) of poisoned children aged 13-19 were reported in the US.

Among other challenges is **Duct Tape Challenge** when children wrap their body tightly with a tape. **Cinnamon Challenge** lies in swallowing or inhaling a spoon of cinnamon powder causing breathing issues or choking. **Salt and Ice Challenge** causes skin burns, blisters, frostbite and scars. **Snorting Challenge** encourages participants to pull objects up their nostrils and then pull them out through their mouths. During the Milk Crate Challenge, people build a pyramid out of milk crate and then attempt to climb to the top, often resulting in falling and many injuries, even death. The **Fire Challenge** required people to pour alcohol on their body, light it and then dousing the fire in water resulting in many cases of burns, scarring, respiratory issues, infections or death. Another challenge encouraged individuals to swallow several **Benadryl tablets**⁶ to bring about hallucinations, often resulting in seizures, breathing problems, dizziness, heart issues, coma or death in the most severe cases. People attempting the [Chroming challenge](#) are in order to experience short-term high feeling, inhaling toxic fumes from household items such as nail polish, permanent markers or deodorant.

In order to increase security, on July 30, 2025 TikTok [updated](#) its feature "Family Pairing" allowing parents to observe what posts are they children (13-17 years old) sharing on TikTok. This feature has two main limitations: (1) Parents must have their TikTok account, and (2) they only receive

⁶ Benadryl is widely sold an antihistamine and sedative.



notifications when their children actively share content, with no visibility into what the algorithm serves to young users.

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CENSORSHIP AND INFLUENCE OPERATIONS

TikTok's control over content visibility enables not only the promotion of engaging videos but also the suppression of politically sensitive material. Documented cases reveal that TikTok [censored](#) discussions on topics sensitive to the Chinese government, such as the Uyghur genocide and human rights abuses in China, reflecting similar censorship mechanisms employed in the PRC.

[Research](#) conducted by Rutgers University confirms that content manipulation has been used on TikTok, amplifying pro-China narratives while limiting content critical of China. The study focused on China-sensitive topics—such as Tibet, Tiananmen Square, Uyghur rights, and Xinjiang—and examined their visibility on three major social media platforms: YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok. The results showed that content critical of China is far less visible on TikTok than on other platforms. Moreover, a survey included in the same study of U.S. TikTok users indicated that these users hold more positive views toward China.

A separate survey focusing on social media users in Germany [revealed](#) that young TikTok users are significantly more susceptible to Chinese and Russian propaganda than non-users of TikTok. According to the survey, 42% of respondents who use TikTok believe that authoritarian systems such as China's are more effective than democracy, and more than one third of the app's users believe that "Putin is fighting against a fascist regime in Ukraine." At the same time, unlike older respondents (aged 60 and above), respondents aged 16–30 largely do not believe that China is a dictatorship.

This illustrates the substantial influence social media platforms exert over the formation of public opinion.

ELECTION INTERFERENCE

Furthermore, substantial evidence indicates that TikTok can serve as a vector for foreign influence operations, particularly in the context of democratic elections. Despite its formal

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[prohibition of political advertising](#), the platform has repeatedly demonstrated **lack of effective prevention of electoral interference**. Multiple democratic states have documented inadequate content moderation and significant disinformation activity on TikTok both during and in the lead-up to elections.

Before and during **Taiwan's 2024 presidential election**, coordinated disinformation campaigns on TikTok, including deepfake videos, [aimed](#) to manipulate voters' behavior. During the **2024 European Parliament elections**, TikTok [failed](#) critical disinformation prevention tests in Ireland.

According to the [2024 Annual Threat Assessment](#) of the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence, "TikTok accounts run by a PRC propaganda arm reportedly targeted candidates from both political parties during the **U.S. midterm election cycle in 2022**." These accounts spread divisive narratives and attempted to shape voter perceptions across the political spectrum. This raised serious concerns over TikTok's potential role in foreign influence operations in the US.

Romania nullified its 2024 presidential elections due to coordinated manipulation on TikTok played a significant role in promotion of the pro-Russian candidate, Călin Georgescu. Over 25,000 accounts, many not authentic, amplified the far-right candidate using scripted videos, coordinated hashtags, and synchronized publishing to bypass moderation. In just three weeks his support [increased](#) from **5% to 23%**. The operation paid over \$879,000 to 265 users via Revolut, crypto, and in-app gifts, concealing transactions to evade campaign finance laws. Romanian authorities criticized TikTok for failing to flag the manipulation. The Constitutional Court then annulled the election, citing severe irregularities.

During the 2024 general election in the **United Kingdom**, TikTok's algorithm exposed users to [misleading and polarizing content](#). Deepfake videos of political leaders, misleading information about party policies, and racist or threatening comment sections were widespread. Many posts—often originating from anonymous or bot-like accounts—repeated similar phrases in comment



sections supporting the right-wing populist party Reform UK, creating a false sense of popular consensus.

The surprising success of Reform UK, which captured 14% of the vote share—an increase from 2% in the previous election—shows similarities between its social media and TikTok strategies and the messaging of other right-wing parties globally. Its [communication strategy](#) was highly personalized, leveraging the reach and influence of Nigel Farage and designed to evoke emotional responses, particularly fear linked to immigration.

Ahead of **Ireland's 2024 elections**, an [investigation by Global Witness](#) revealed that TikTok approved paid adverts containing false information about voting rules. Despite TikTok's ban on political ads, paid political adverts spreading disinformation were approved, such as videos claiming that voters needed two COVID-19 vaccinations or could vote via Facebook. Many used “algospeak”, self-censorship strategy of social media users adopted to evade content moderation. TikTok's failure to block these ads highlighted major gaps in the platform's content screening systems.

In **Brazil's 2022 presidential elections**, TikTok and rival app Kwai served as [key channels for spreading](#) pro-Bolsonaro disinformation. Short videos promoted false claims about voter fraud and incited violence against state institutions. Nearly half of the top videos in Bolsonaro-linked WhatsApp groups originated on these platforms. Despite the fact that TikTok as well as all the other big online platforms [signed](#) memoranda of understanding with the Brazilian Superior Electoral Court to stem disinformation during the electoral process, [researchers](#) found a lack of transparency and weak controls over politically charged content.

Before the **May 2025 Polish elections**, TikTok's algorithm [favored](#) nationalist right candidate Karol Nawrocki (Law and Justice, PiS) over centrist rival Rafał Trzaskowski (Civic Platform, PO). According to the organization Global Witness, Nawrocki-related content appeared five times



more often, even for politically balanced test accounts. This skewed exposure was likely caused by the platform's design to boost provocative content. TikTok dismissed the findings, but [investigations](#) suggested the company had not taken adequate steps to prevent algorithmic bias in politically sensitive contexts.



HARMFUL CONTENT ECOSYSTEM ON TIKTOK

VIOLENCE, EXTREMISM AND ONLINE RADICALIZATION

TikTok algorithm supplies its users with content which is both extremist and violent which can lead in some cases to online radicalization.

In **Czechia** five teenagers [were accused](#) of **terrorism and planning a terrorist attack** after they radicalized via social media. According to the Czech police, they were recruited to cooperate there by a recruiter from the Islamic State recruiter, who gave them their first tasks and with whom they planned a terrorist attack. The teenagers who were looking for violent content online, shared hatred towards LGBTQ+ community or Jews. According to the head of Czech Counter-Intelligence Agency (BIS) Michal Koudelka, TikTok's algorithms supplied these youngsters with posts full of violence which led to their fast radicalization.

[Research](#) conducted by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue revealed a network of neo-Nazi accounts on German TikTok, highlighting the promotion of hate speech, recruitment, and algorithmic amplification of neo-Nazi content, while also noting the platform's failure to remove illegal content. This is particularly concerning in the context of the 2025 elections. The study emphasizes that TikTok in Germany "[has a Nazi problem](#)," with the platform hosting pro-Nazi content such as Holocaust denial, glorification of Adolf Hitler and Nazi-era Germany, portrayals of Nazism as a solution to contemporary issues, and white supremacy. Much of this illegal content is amplified by TikTok's algorithm and often features AI-generated media.

In Germany, where TikTok is used by [30% of its adult population](#) (21.8 million users in 2025), far right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the left-wing Die Linke celebrated [unprecedented success](#) in the 2025 elections. AfD and its leader Alice Weidel dominated prior the German elections on TikTok, flooding the platform with posts on migration in the context of crime and security and fear and succeeded in leveraging a form of "participatory propaganda" when it

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provided incentives for its supporters to proactively share pro-AfD content to win a T-shirt signed by Weidel.

Amplification of Antisemitic Narratives

Moreover, TikTok [has emerged](#) as a hub for antisemitic content, often masked through coded language and visual [dog whistles](#). AI-generated videos of [Hitler's speeches](#), using euphemisms like “the great painter”, have gained millions of views. The platform also played a role in the viral spread of Osama bin Laden’s antisemitic “[Letter to America](#),” which was widely endorsed in user comments. The algorithm’s preference for provocative content funnels users toward extremist and conspiratorial material, challenging moderation efforts.

Violent and Harmful Trends Among Youth

In November 2024, [Albania became the first](#) European country to ban TikTok for one year following the fatal stabbing of a teenager reportedly linked to a TikTok dispute. Authorities cited growing concerns over the platform’s role in spreading violent trends and bullying among children, including incidents of youth bringing knives to school inspired by content viewed online.

Sweden: TikTok and the “LVU” Influence Campaign

A [report](#) published by Sweden’s Psychological Defence Agency described TikTok’s involvement in the largest influence operation the country has faced. The campaign spread false claims that Swedish authorities kidnap children, especially from Muslim families, under the Care of Young Persons Act (LVU). TikTok enabled the virality of key propaganda moments, such as the “Norrbotten couple” case of Syrian parents of five whose children were taken into compulsory care and was used by Islamist influencers to incite violence and martyrdom. Videos accused social services of corruption and “child trafficking,” while exploiting sensitive issues like same sex foster



care to inflame public sentiment. TikTok served as a platform for disinformation, radical rhetoric, and attacks on public trust in Swedish institutions.

The AllatRa/Creative Society Cult on TikTok

The Creative Society, linked to the AllatRa cult, [used TikTok](#) to spread false claims denying human-caused climate change while promoting pro-Russian views. Despite TikTok's policy banning political advertising and disinformation, the cult's 300 accounts amassed nearly two billion views. Some published paid ads featuring extreme weather clips with alarmist messages. The group's appeal, bolstered by TikTok's recommendation system, shows how the platform can serve as a launchpad for ideologically driven cultic movements.

Pro-Russian Propaganda and Foreign Influence

There are cases of TikTok's growing role in spreading Russian state-sponsored narratives. One example is [Olga Vlasova](#), a Czech-based influencer sponsored by sanctioned Russian state media house Rossiya Segodnya, who presents a sanitized image of Russian life under sanctions. Her viral content omits her affiliation with sanctioned media, reflecting TikTok's failure to ensure transparency. The platform's algorithm [accelerates](#) the reach of such propaganda, which aims to shape global perceptions in line with Kremlin interests.

Pro-CCP Manipulation and Algorithmic Bias

A [report](#) by the Network Contagion Research Institute found systematic amplification of pro-Chinese Communist Party narratives on TikTok. The platform reportedly suppresses critical content while promoting favorable portrayals through influencers and coordinated content strategies. Survey data shows heavy TikTok users are more likely to view China's human rights record positively, suggesting the app's influence extends into shaping geopolitical opinions—unlike similar platforms such as YouTube or Instagram.



Disinformation and Health Misinformation

[NewsGuard](#) found that nearly one in five TikTok search results contained false or misleading information. Topics included dangerous health “advice” (e.g., DIY hydroxychloroquine and herbal abortions), election-related conspiracies, and fabricated narratives about global tragedies such as the Bucha massacre or the Uvalde school shooting. TikTok’s suggested search terms often steered users toward misinformation, reinforcing concerns about its growing use as a primary search engine for youth.



EXISTING REGULATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND TIKTOK

Reflecting the rise in concerns over TikTok and various threats associated with it, as well as concerns around social media use in general, countries around the world have increasingly started putting in place new regulations to counteract them. Regulations that either affect or directly target TikTok tend to fall into one of several different categories, ranging from country-wide bans, to sector-, age-, or location-specific restrictions or rules. The reasons given for these regulations vary significantly – some are national and/or cyber security focused, others aimed at protecting minors or the public from objectionable content, while still others aim to regulate digital platforms.

NATIONAL TIKTOK BANS

The first category of TikTok regulations are targeted outright bans, which are often motivated (at least in part) by political considerations, both international and domestic. Perhaps the most prolific example is **India**, which [banned TikTok in 2020](#), following a border skirmish with China. In this case, TikTok was only one of around 60 Chinese apps banned, but its banning was particularly significant, since India made up [TikTok's largest market at the time](#) – around 200 million users –, with the app's popularity still increasing. It remains banned in India to this day, with some [copycat or alternative apps popping up to fill in the TikTok void](#), though with lackluster success. Critics of the ban have argued that the ban has set a [precedent for government crackdowns on online platforms in general](#), not just those from China.

In some cases, social values and public speech appear to be the primary motivator behind banning TikTok, rather than relations with China. **Pakistan**, a Chinese ally, has [banned TikTok four times](#), officially justifying them with concerns over [immorality](#) and lack of content moderation. However, some critics have argued that it is part of a broader push to censor public speech and [criticism of the government](#), especially that of the lower or middle class Pakistanis, amongst whom the app



became unexpectedly popular. Concerns over public decency and vulgarity were also cited in past TikTok restrictions in [Bangladesh](#) and [Indonesia](#), though Indonesia's most recent TikTok suspensions hinged around access to [livestreaming data from anti-government protests and suspected illegal gambling](#).

Nepal's 2023 TikTok ban saw the app as ["detrimental to social harmony"](#) but was criticized by members of the public who saw it as a platform for marginalized voices. Additionally, Nepal's ban was put in place by a pro-India government, in a time period when relations with China had stalled, though it is unclear if this was a direct motivation. The ban was [lifted in 2024](#), when TikTok agreed to a series of conditions from the government, committing to support Nepal's tourism, public education, and digital literacy, as well as use "mindful language". Notably, when a new registration requirement in 2025 led to the banning of many social media apps and subsequent widespread public protests over freedom of speech, TikTok was not among the banned apps, since it [complied and registered with the authorities](#).

Lastly, in 2022, the Taliban banned TikTok in **Afghanistan**, citing its "immoral content" and accusing it of [leading the country's youth "astray"](#). This ban comes as part of a much wider set of restrictions on the freedom of speech for Afghan citizens, which includes significant prohibitions on social media and internet usage, expanded greatly since the TikTok ban in 2022.

Arguably, efforts to ban TikTok under the first Trump administration and then Biden administration may also fall into this category, though it has been framed primarily in terms of national security, including concerns over Chinese government access to TikTok users' data and the possible spread of Chinese disinformation. The first attempt to ban TikTok in the [USA](#) came in 2020, when President Donald Trump issued two executive orders, blocking TikTok transactions in the country and requiring ByteDance to divest from TikTok's US arm within 90 days. These executive orders were eventually struck by the federal courts on legal grounds, though efforts to



achieve the same goals through negotiation continued. In 2024, under the Biden administration, the US Congress passed the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act (PAFACA), which once again mandated ByteDance divest from TikTok, or face a ban on US app stores. TikTok's algorithm is considered a controlled technology and falls under Chinese export control rules, so the divestment would require approval from the Chinese government, which it did not receive - likely for both economic and political reasons. Moreover, there was a lack of suitable buyers for the potential TikTok US operation. In light of these challenges, ByteDance chose to pre-emptively shut down TikTok in the US to avoid legal troubles. However, this shutdown only lasted little more than a day, as President Trump, once again in office, decided to delay PAFACA's enforcement with an executive order (and has delayed it again several times). To this day, TikTok should technically be banned in the USA by law, but the law is not being enforced. The Trump administration has pushed for an acquisition deal with Chinese backing, but no such deal has materialized yet.

China represents a distinct regulatory environment. TikTok, despite being developed by a Chinese company, is not available in the People's Republic of China (PRC), alongside other Western social media platforms such as Google, Meta services, X, and YouTube. Access to these platforms from within China requires the use of virtual private networks (VPNs) to circumvent China's so-called "Great Firewall."

Despite being officially inaccessible, Chinese state media and government-affiliated actors actively use Western social media platforms for international communication and self-presentation.

Domestically, China enforces strict regulations on online platforms. Users are required to register accounts using real-name or mobile ID verification, and the government imposes limits on minors' use of social media to address concerns related to internet addiction. A detailed comparison of



regulatory and functional differences between Douyin and TikTok is provided in the following chapter.

PUBLIC SECTOR RESTRICTIONS

Not all regulation affecting TikTok is as sweeping as that in countries like India. A more limited approach involves prohibitions or restrictions of TikTok usage on government devices and/or by public sector workers, which have been put in place by a number of governments around the world. These efforts began at the [state level](#) in the United States of America, though [Taiwan](#) was the first to issue a national public sector ban in 2022. Today, the list [includes](#) the Czech Republic, Estonia, Australia, Taiwan, New Zealand, Canada, Belgium, Malta, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Austria, Latvia, Norway, Sweden (only for the military), the United Kingdom, and the United States (both at the federal and state level). The same approach has also been taken by the [EU's top institutions](#), i.e. the Council of the EU, the European Parliament, and the European Commission, who were the first in Europe to put such a restriction in place in 2023. Notably, [NATO](#) has also followed suit by banning the app on all NATO-issues devices since 2023. These restrictions have largely been justified by general cybersecurity concerns, as well as fears over Chinese influence or data gathering. For example, the Czech Cyber and Intelligence Agency (NÚKIB) labelled TikTok a "[security threat](#)" in 2023, citing concerns over data gathering and Chinese jurisdiction risks, which then led to its banning for employees of various government bodies and ministries.

SCHOOL MOBILE DEVICE BANS

A significant subset of regulations affecting TikTok are so-called "schools bans", i.e. restrictions on phone or social media use in educational settings. In response to concerns about the negative effects of social media and smartphone addiction, as well as complaints by parents and/or teachers, recent years have seen a significant uptick in these kinds of regulations. These measures have the benefit of being simple and comparatively easy to enforce. They also appear



to respond to specific concerns about the negative impact the presence of smartphones (and through them, social media) can have on students learning and focus in a school setting.

France has been at the forefront of these efforts, banning mobile phones in primary schools and middle schools in 2018. Recently, it has sought to [strengthen its “digital pause” for students](#), by enforcing the ban up to the age of 15 and requiring middle school student between the ages of 11 and 15 to lock their phones away for the entire school day.

[New Zealand](#) and [Hungary](#) started their bans on mobile phones in schools in 2024. Notably, the Hungarian regulation allows headmasters to exercise discretion surrounding the possession and usage of mobile phones by students. At the same time, it also specifically restricts the use of mobile phones by teachers for educational purposes only.

In August 2025, **South Korea** [passed](#) a law that bans mobile phones and smart devices in schools nationwide. The law will take effect from March 2026. Although most South Korean schools already have some restrictions in place, this law - unique in its bipartisan support in the otherwise polarized country - will make the restrictions mandatory. However, the also law has its critics, who would prefer the government to increase media literacy rather than taking smart devices from children.

Similarly, [Finland's law banning mobile phone usage during class](#) time came into effect in August 2025, though some schools have voluntarily chosen to extend the ban outside of class time as well. The law codifies a previous recommendation against phones in classrooms by the Finnish National Agency for Education, making it mandatory. **Singapore** has gone a step further and [extended its ban on electronic device usage in schools](#) to include also non-class time from January 2026.

Outside of stopping mobile phones from appearing in classrooms by law, some places have also issued official recommendations to schools to much the same effect. These include [Ireland](#), **the**



[Netherlands](#), and [Denmark](#). Interestingly, [Taiwan](#)'s Ministry of Education attempted to put in place a similar directive, starting from September 2025, but was met with opposition, especially from high school students, who organized sit-ins and other protests. The students felt that their views were not being considered by the ministry and feared excessive restrictions on speech due to unclear rules for senior high schools. They also criticized the approach for not addressing the root causes of cell phone/social media addiction – a common criticism of school phone bans around the world. In response to these criticisms, the implementation was postponed and the policy is still in the public consultation stage.

AGE RESTRICTION AND VERIFICATION LAWS

While mobile device bans in schools are fairly effective and straightforward to enforce, they do not fundamentally solve the issue of teens or children becoming addicted to their phones or being exposed to objectionable content online. To solve this issue, some lawmakers are taking more comprehensive steps to restrict underage access to certain websites and platforms, like TikTok.

The best known instance is probably the **United Kingdom's** [Online Safety Act](#) (OSA), which was passed in 2023 and partially rolled out in 2025 (with full implementation coming in 2026). The purpose of the act is to protect people, especially children, from harmful, illegal, or age-inappropriate content and to regulate social media companies and search engines, creating a formal duty of care towards their users. Among other requirements, companies need implement systems for “highly effective age assurance” for sites that may host pornographic content or content harmful to children – not only porn sites but also social media sites where content can be shared between users, such as TikTok. Companies can either use credible age verification (using a government ID, credit card etc.) or reliable age estimation (using a facial detection software). A specific system, technology, or provider is not mandated, so companies are free to choose how they check users. However, a simple self-declaration (such as clicking a box that says “I am 18 years old”) is explicitly not sufficient. The age assurance roll out in June 2025 was mired in



controversy, due to the challenges of enforcement (especially for smaller companies, that cannot sustain the added financial burden), as well as data privacy concerns. Additionally, methods of avoiding the age checks quickly gained popularity, showcasing this legislation's possible weaknesses. These included using [VPNs](#) or using another person's documentation, but also more creative methods, like using realistic video game avatars to trick facial detection software. At the same time, however, [traffic to pornographic sites](#) did go down significantly, including amongst under-18s, since age checks began.

Australia has chosen a different approach to the UK. Having already put in place a mobile device ban in schools in 2024, it has now prohibited usage of major social media sites for those under 16. The policy, which came into effect on December 10th, 2025, currently affects 10 online platforms, including TikTok, although more may be added in the future. The designated platforms are assessed against a [set of three criteria](#), including whether the platforms purpose is to facilitate online interaction, as well as the ability of users to post material, and interact with one another. The platforms are required to deactivate accounts of users under 16 and prohibit the creation of new ones. In practice, this means they must employ age checks similar to those used in the UK, although a specific technology isn't required by the law. If enforced fully, TikTok's user base, which notoriously skews younger, could be reduced significantly. Given its recency, the effectiveness of the legislation is difficult to assess, though critics have pointed out that, in trials, age estimation technology (i.e. using AI/software to scan facial features and deduce age) has had [lower accuracy for female, non-White, or older individuals](#), prompting mistakes.

Some European countries have been pushing to raise their social media minimum age from 13 to 15 years old (although sometimes with provisions for younger ages with parental consent). **Norway** is the next likely country to put in place an age restriction law for social media, with the government pushing to [raise the minimum age limit from 13 to 15 years old](#). At present, the law is in the public consultation phase. Alongside it, a number of complementary measures, such as



recommendations to restrict mobile phone usage in classrooms are also set to be put in place. **France**, after passing a [law requiring age verification and parental consent for children under 15 years old](#) in 2023, is strongly [considering banning social media access until the age of 15 all together \(and has specifically called out TikTok](#) as one of the worst social media apps for teens' mental health). In November 2025, the government of **Denmark** announced that it would be putting in place a law similar to Finland, although taking the French model in terms of parental consent. How these higher age limits are to be enforced and whether age assurance technology will play a role is not yet clear.

DIGITAL SERVICES ACT (DSA)

Although a lot of TikTok-relevant regulations are aimed at restricting access to or usage of the app, some aim to regulate the platform itself. The single most prominent example is the **EU's** [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#), which regulates “**very large online platforms**” (VLOPs) and search engines (VLOSEs), defined as those “whose average users reach or exceed 10% of the EU population”. This is equivalent to **having 45 million users or more**. TikTok was designated a VLOP in 2023. For a full overview of all VLOPs and VLOSEs, see the table below.

Main establishment of the provider in the EU	Service	Average monthly active users in millions
AliExpress International (Netherlands) B.V.	AliExpress	104.3
Amazon Services Europe S.à.r.l.	Amazon Store	181.3
Apple Distribution International Limited	App Store	123
Aylo Freesites Ltd.	Pornhub	above 45
Booking.com B.V.	Booking.com	above 45
Google Ireland Ltd.	Google Search	364
Google Ireland Ltd.	Google Play	284.6
Google Ireland Ltd.	Google Maps	275.6

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Google Ireland Ltd.	Google Shopping	70.8
Google Ireland Ltd.	YouTube	416.6
Infinite Styles Services Co, Ltd	Shein	108
LinkedIn Ireland Unlimited Company	LinkedIn	Logged-in active users: 45.2 Logged-out site visits: 132.5
Meta Platforms Ireland Limited (MPIL)	Facebook	259
Meta Platforms Ireland Limited (MPIL)	Instagram	259
Microsoft Ireland Operations Limited	Bing	119
NKL Associates s.r.o	XNXX	45
Pinterest Europe Ltd.	Pinterest	124
Snap B.V.	Snapchat	102
TikTok Technology Limited	TikTok	135.5
Twitter International Unlimited Company (TIUC)	X	115.1
Whaleco Technology Limited	Temu	75
WebGroup Czech Republic	Xvideos	160
Wikimedia Foundation Inc 3	Wikipedia	151.1
Zalando SE	Zalando	Monthly average in retail: 74.5 Monthly average for third-party content: 26.8

Figure 4: Source: [Supervision of the designated very large online platforms and search engines under DSA](#) (updated on October 10, 2025)

The goal of the DSA is to prevent illegal or harmful activities online and prevent the spread of disinformation. It does so by creating a broad accountability regime for VLOPs and VLOSEs, including duties to mitigate systemic risks, provide data-access for vetted researchers, and increase transparency of moderation practices. As a VLOP, TikTok is subject to the strictest obligations under the DSA (article 33). If TikTok is at some point found to have violated the DSA



(and does not rectify the issue in time if given the opportunity), it could be fined up to 6% of their annual global turnover. This penalty has already been [issued to the platform X](#).

TikTok has already been investigated on multiple grounds under the DSA. The first investigation was launched in response to TikTok's "TikTok Lite Rewards" feature, which incentivized user engagement (likes, follows, views etc.) using a point system, redeemable for rewards like gift cards or coupons. The European Commission was concerned about the addictive design of this feature, as potential negative impacts on minors and mental health. [TikTok chose to voluntarily remove the feature in the EU](#), after which the investigation was closed.

The next investigation into TikTok had to do with advertising transparency, specifically TikTok's advertising repository. Complaints had been raised by civil society and researchers that they lacked sufficient access and that the repository was hard to search and potentially incomplete. There were also issues with ad labelling. In response to the European Commission's investigation, TikTok has committed to reform its ad repository to make it easier to search, as well as expanding researcher and civil society access, and improving labelling. [These commitments have been accepted by the European Commission](#) for the time being, and TikTok has not been fined. However, monitoring is ongoing and the final result will depend on whether TikTok meets its commitments and whether they are found to be satisfactory.

In response to concerns around the controversial 2024 Romanian election, in which TikTok played a significant role, the [European Commission opened an investigation into the platform](#). It was looking at systemic risks related to the spread of disinformation and unlabeled political content. This was the first time that the crisis response mechanism was utilized under the DSA. TikTok was not fined and voluntarily chose to cooperate with the EU and take steps to mitigate the issues raised.



Additionally, preliminary findings by the European Commission have concluded in 2025 that both [TikTok and Meta violated their obligations](#) regarding transparency reporting and data access for vetted researchers, which were found to be either insufficient or have gaps. At this stage, TikTok has the right to respond and potentially commit to fixing the specified issues. If it does not, the European Commission will escalate to a fine.

The most serious case against TikTok, however, is the European Commission's long-term, ongoing investigation into systemic risks related to [TikTok's addictive design and dangers to minors](#). It is looking into so-called "rabbit holes", where the TikTok algorithm leads users (particularly teens) towards more and more extreme content related to self-harm, dieting/eating disorders, and sexual or highly sexualized content. The infinite scroll and autoplay features are also subjects of concern, as they can encourage mindless scrolling, loss of time perception, and addiction. TikTok's highly personalized feed has also come under scrutiny, with the European Commission questioning whether this setup should be the default for minors. For infinite scroll, autoplay, and personalization, the issue isn't just that these features exist, but that TikTok has not sufficiently mitigated the risks they pose to minors. Questions have also been raised regarding TikTok's age assurance tools and their effectiveness. Lastly, there are concerns about the mental health impacts TikTok can have and whether/how it is taking these into account, as well as engaging with scientific research on the subject. This investigation is still in early stages and preliminary findings are yet to be published, not to mention any kind of punitive measures. However, it targets many of the key features of how TikTok functions and what makes it successful, which means its outcomes could be very significant.



CHINA: DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TIKTOK AND DOUYIN

Despite often being labeled as a “Chinese platform”, it is important to recognize that TikTok, alongside other “Western” social media (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, X and others), is banned in China. Instead, another app has been developed by ByteDance for Chinese users. **Douyin(抖音)**, literally “shaking sound” shares many interface features and tools with TikTok, but has key structural and regulatory differences.

The platform stresses **close connection between the person and its account**. On Douyin, users cannot use an account name, profile picture or description that suggests the identity of a different person. The account also cannot be transferred to a different person.

To register on Douyin, users must undergo real-name verification, providing personal data such as their full name, mobile phone number and national (Chinese) ID number. For users in Europe, Douyin is not available through standard app stores, but the installation file can be downloaded directly from the Douyin website. Non-Chinese users must provide a phone number and a valid permanent residence registration ID (in China), therefore users not living in China cannot register a full account on Douyin (see the screenshots below). Users from Taiwan may register with a Mainland Travel Permit for Taiwan Residents (台灣居民往來大陸通行證) or a Residence Permit for Taiwan Residents (中华人民共和国台湾居民居住证).

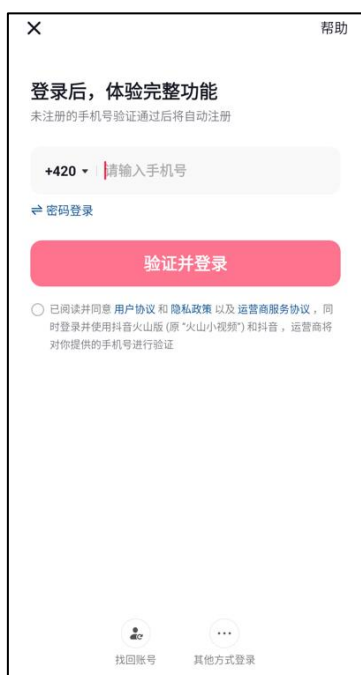


Figure 6: Screenshot from Douyin: registration with personal phone number

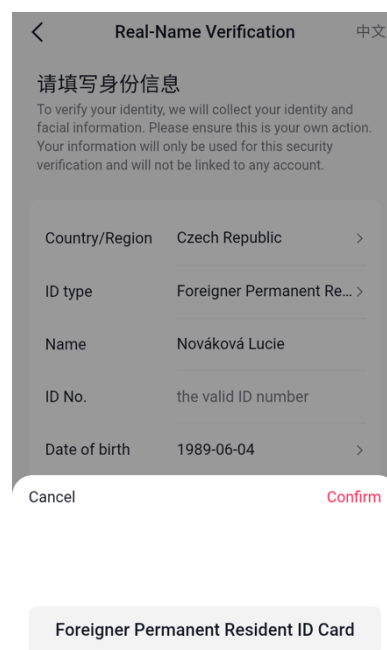


Figure 7: Screenshot from Douyin: registration - Chinese national ID or Foreign Permanent Resident ID needed



Douyin's policy documents are continuously updated, positioning the platform as an ongoing mediator between tightening state regulations and creators' activities. Douyin's [Community Self-regulation Convention](#) (抖音社区自律公约) prohibits all sorts of behavior under the framework of national security protection. This includes for example prohibition of publishing content current affairs harmful and false information that violates laws and regulations, endangers national security, damages the Party and the country, national dignity and image; endangering national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity; disclose state secrets, endanger national security or damage national honor and interests; promoting cults and feudal superstitions; spreading rumors and disturbing the economic and social order; incite illegal gatherings, associations, marches, demonstrations and gatherings to disturb social order; or seriously hurts national feelings.

Chinese users are highly accustomed to e-commerce via livestreaming, and Douyin's **livestream shopping ecosystem** is significantly [more developed](#) than TikTok's. Features such as integrated product links, in-stream purchases and professionalized sales networks are central to Douyin's business model.

Douyin's recommendation algorithm [prioritizes high-quality, professionalized content](#), favoring verified users, established creators and Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs). In contrast, TikTok's algorithm is more likely to amplify smaller or local creators, making viral discovery more accessible to new users.

Douyin maintains an official platform governance account, the **Douyin Safety Centre** (抖音安全中心, DSC). Through the DSC, the platform [publishes updates on rules and policies](#), typically aligned



with the state’s regulatory agenda. Douyin often uses fictional human characters or animated mascots to personify moderation bodies and explain rules to users.

The DSC actively interacts with content creators, encouraging them to monitor and report each other. A notable feature is the [“inspection livestreaming”](#) (直播巡检), during which a fictional moderator character—often referred to as Mei Loufeng—enters creators’ livestreams to check rule compliance in real time.

TikTok, by contrast, applies its [Community Guidelines](#) that prohibit hate speech, harassment, misinformation, and explicit content. TikTok moderates its content both by manual human moderation and AI tools, with rules adapted to regional legal environments (e.g., compliance with the EU Digital Services Act).

Content characteristics

TikTok is dominated by entertaining short videos—viral challenges, humor, music, fashion and lifestyle—driven primarily by user preferences and algorithmic optimization. Its content moderation is not designed to enforce state ideology.

Douyin, however, is subject to stringent Chinese government censorship. The platform [promotes “positive energy”](#) (正能量), patriotism, social harmony, stability and other CCP-endorsed values. Content tends to be more educational, self-improvement oriented and supportive of local businesses.



Moderation on Douyin is often pre-upload or in real time, whereas TikTok frequently relies on post-upload enforcement. Douyin also enforces strict rules restricting minors’ screen time, prohibiting “vulgar” behavior and curbing excessive celebrity worship (饭圈文化治理).

On Douyin there are limitations for minors. In order to prevent addictions, the platform has developed a “[teen mode](#)” “青少年模式” limiting time spent on the platform per day. Minors are also restricted from live streaming and life reward consumption.

Feature	Douyin (China)	TikTok (Global)
Audience	Chinese users only	International users
Content Style	Educational, positive, state-aligned	Trendy, viral, entertainment-focused
Moderation Approach	Preemptive, strict, government-aligned	Reactive/proactive mix, user-driven reports
Algorithm Control	Highly curated, limits harmful/inappropriate content	Personalized, engagement-optimized
Regulatory Environment	Chinese law, CCP control	Varies by country, more liberal in most cases

	Real-name use, time	
User Restrictions	limits for minors	Some restrictions, but less severe

Figure 8: Comparison between TikTok and Douyin



TIKTOK PRE-ELECTION DATA ANALYSIS: CZECHIA

Between 6 September and 4 October 2025, our research team conducted manual data collection from TikTok, covering the final month before the Czech parliamentary election (taking place on October 3 and 4). The purpose of this analysis was to describe TikTok algorithm and content it serves to new users with no interest in political topics.

Prior to the Czech elections TikTok [announced](#) that it will protect the integrity of Czech elections, strengthening its **“taskforce” team** claiming that 98,8% of content violating its rules has been removed even before the users reports it and 95,7% within 24 hours. However, these powerful claims no one can confirm.

According to [TikTok’s Global election hub](#), during and prior the Czech 2025 parliamentary elections **187,000 fake accounts were removed** by TikTok, together with 2,5 millions fake likes and over 2 million fake follower requests. The number of removed accounts by the platform is **unprecedented as it accounts for [7,8% of all TikTok user accounts in Czechia](#)**.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research team created two new profiles on the TikTok platform. Mobile phones used were cleaned (no other apps were installed) and after reset to factory setting to ensure as little effect on the algorithm as possible. Both profiles were using mobile data only to access the platform, both mobile phones geolocation was in the Czech Republic. When not using TikTok, the devices were turned off or in flight mode. Every day, the users recorded the first 20 posts which were shown on their “For You Page”.

Profile 1



The account was created with the intention to simulate an account of a woman in her 50s. The date of birth was set to June 18, 1971. During the account activation the interests were selected to reflect those typically associated with such a demographic. On TikTok's interest scale from -2 to 2, the proposed topics were filled out as follows:

art	0
dance	0
fashion and beauty	1
food and drinks	2
health and fitness	1
humor	0
lifestyle	1
nature	2
pets	2
sport	0
traveling	0

Profile 2

This account was created with the intention of simulating the activity of a young man (aged 16-25). The date of birth was set to June 13, 2002. During the account activation, the following interests were selected in the interface: football, cars, gaming, and sports (to reflect a specific demographic). On TikTok's interest scale from -2 to 2, the proposed topics were filled out as follows:

art	0
dance	0
fashion and beauty	0
food and drinks	0
health and fitness	1
humor	1
lifestyle	1
nature	0
pets	0
sport	1
traveling	0



To avoid influencing the algorithm, researchers recorded the screen and did not interact with the algorithm in the first 14 days of data collection. The manual analysis has been conducted from the records.

In the second half of the data collection period, researchers were tasked to start lightly interacting with the platform (likes or profile visits). The reason for starting to interact with the platform was that videos gradually became much longer as the algorithm learned that users were watching even long videos until their end.

DATASET

The dataset includes **1,160 TikTok posts** viewed between 6 September and 4 October 2025. The dataset captures date, username, language, thematic distribution, engagement behavior (number of likes, comments, and shares), and the presence of AI-generated content.

TOPICS

For each post, researchers could choose minimum 1 but up to 3 topics. See the description of the most frequent topical categories identified in the dataset:

Topic/Category	Description	Total count (profile 1)	Total count (profile 2)	Total
Anti-gov	content criticizing or mocking the government, anti-government content <i>Example: AI-generated video with Prime Minister Petr Fiala dancing on a musing, lyrics is critical to his government and rising prices in Czechia</i>	96	113	209
Vlog	personal daily-life video blogs <i>Example: truck driver sharing his daily routine</i>	61	111	172
Fun	humorous or entertaining videos	45	69	114

	<i>Example: sketch when a teacher on a bus stop gets coins to have coffee cup</i>			
Art	creative or artistic content <i>Example: filmed work of a street painter</i>	76	3	79
Manuals	tutorials or "how-to" guides, DIY, recipes <i>Example: replacing a bicycle chain with an engine</i>	27	33	60
Politics	political discussions or news <i>Example: post incitement to vote for the SPD and Stačilo!</i>	44	16	60
Anti-system	posts, videos that are critical towards the democratic system <i>Example: post with arguments why presence is worse than the past: children had boundaries and authority, pain gave rise to respect and not trauma, we didn't play the victim, etc.</i>	22	37	59
Anti-UA	content which is sharing hatred or is critical towards Ukraine, Ukraine refugees or UA government <i>Example: deepfake video about Zelensky allegedly donated Ukraine to the Americans</i>	25	34	59
Legends	stories or myths about famous people or legends <i>Example: the author shares the hidden truth about the archons, guardians of the matrix - beings who are destroying the world</i>	17	32	49
Animals	clips featuring animals <i>Example: funny animal videos</i>	8	30	38
Show	passages from TV shows, TV series or movies <i>Example: clip from the Czech show "Police in Action"</i>	17	19	36
Psychology	posts about human psychology, personalities <i>Example: video on how to recognize passive aggressive/toxic people in one's life</i>	14	17	31

History	historical facts or storytelling <i>Example: description of the rise and fall of Yugoslavia</i> (subcategory of this category is "alternative history")	17	11	28
Family life	family life content, parenting, or relationships <i>Example: sketch, choleric father teaches son to drive</i>	9	18	27
Motivation	motivational posts <i>Example: motivation for positive thinking - people don't have to understand you, success will come</i>	9	13	22
Health	posts about health, healthy life <i>Example: tips for lowering cortisol</i>	9	13	22

TOPIC FREQUENCY

Across all collected posts, the most frequently recurring topics are **Anti-government**, **Vlog**, **Fun**, **Art** and **Manuals** – showing a dual dominance of **politically charged** and **light-entertainment** content. This contrast suggests that the online environment was shaped by both **issue-driven narratives** and **every day or lifestyle engagement**.

Mid-frequency categories (30–60 mentions) included **Psychology**, **Sports**, and **Family life** – subjects that encourage engagement through personal relevance or emotional appeal rather than ideology.

Overall, the frequency distribution reveals a **polarized content ecosystem**. On one side, **anti-government and geopolitical narratives** dominate the discourse. On the other, entertainment and everyday lifestyle topics maintain steady but secondary visibility.

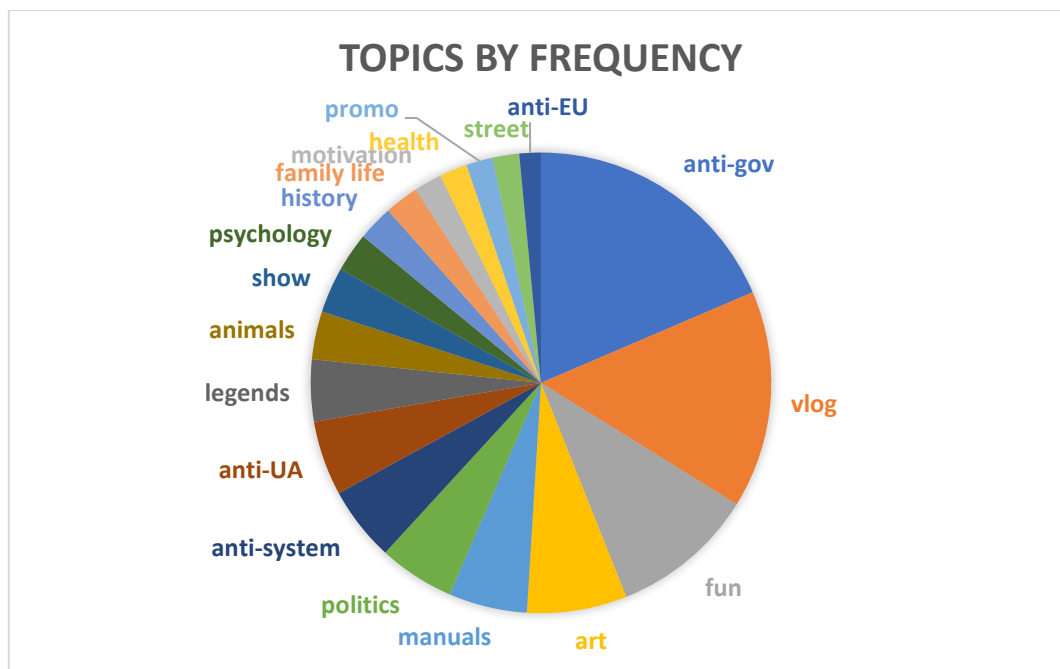


Figure 9: Topics frequency

ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIOR

Engagement by Topic

Among the top five topics popular by engagement are: News, Manuals, Animals, Music, and Legends. These categories attract audiences through informative content (News and Manuals), emotional resonance (Music), or strong visual appeal (Animals and Legends). The top liked and shared category is News has been influenced by one extremely viral post. The top liked, shared and commented post in our dataset was a post by *The Pattaya News Thailand* viewed on September 21 about land subsidence in Thailand, liked by 4,1 million users, with 90100 comments, 334100 saves and 710500 shares.

Moderate engagement was recorded with topics such as Vlog, Politika, Fun, and Art. These topics combine entertainment and social commentary, engaging both general and issue-oriented viewers.

Low-engagement categories: such as Technology, History, Psychology, and Science record comparatively fewer interactions.

Overall, engagement is strongest in content that is visually engaging, emotionally stimulating, or practically useful. In contrast, factual, niche, or analytical topics tend to generate lower but more stable forms of interaction.

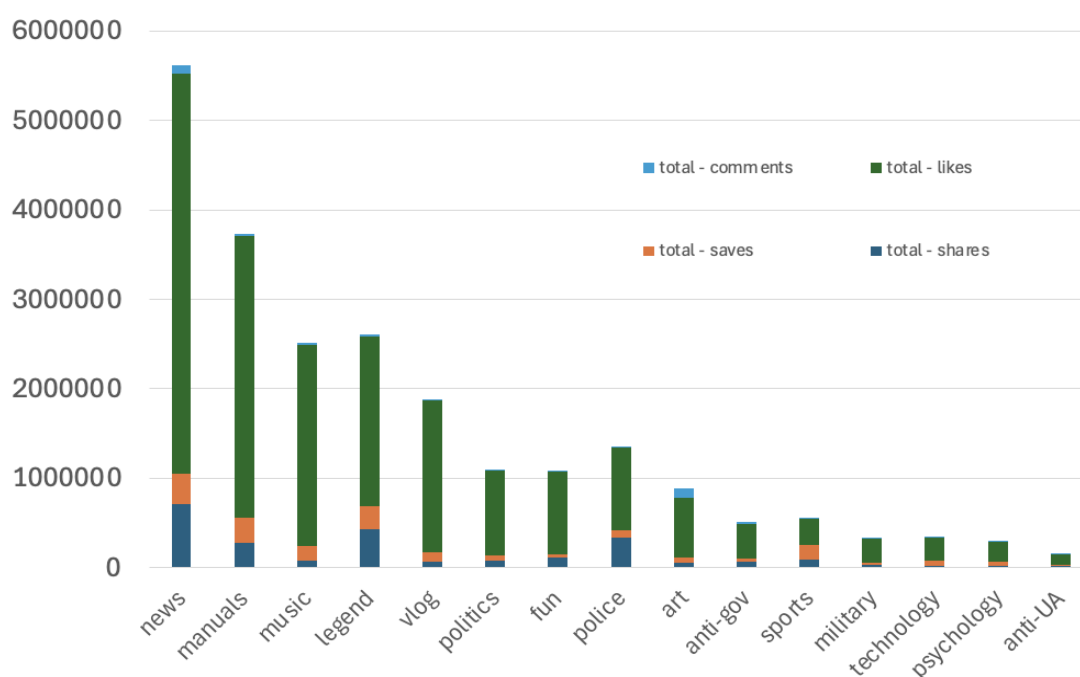


Figure 10: Engagement by topic

Distribution of Shares by Topic

Sharing activity is heavily concentrated in a few key categories, with **News** overwhelmingly leading all others. Legends ranks second, and Police and Manuals also perform strongly. Fun and Sports follow as steady contributors, driven by entertainment value and community relevance.

Politics and Anti-gov both achieve high share rates, reinforcing that political or oppositional narratives are particularly viral. Middle-tier topics – such as Art, Technology, Military, and Psychology – show moderate levels of sharing. Meanwhile, more academic or specialized content (e.g., Science, Religion, or Alternative Medicine) registers minimal share activity.

Overall, content that is news-oriented, emotionally resonant, or socially charged dominates sharing behavior.

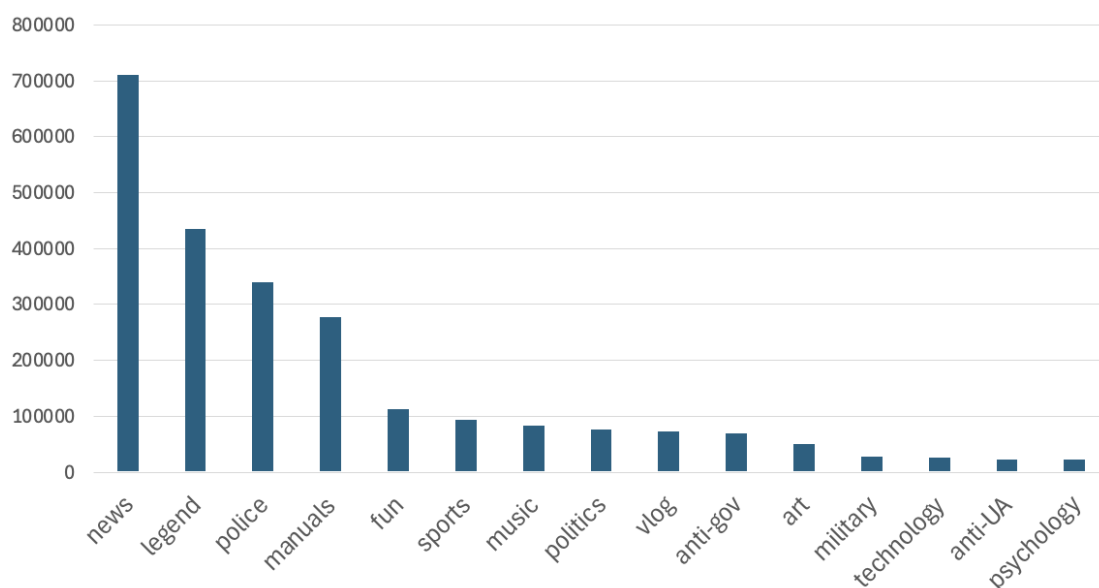


Figure 11: Topics with the highest number of Shares



Distribution of Saves by Topic

The save metric reflects a distinct form of engagement focused on content retention rather than instant reaction or sharing. Unlike shares or likes, saves indicate that users find a post informative, valuable, or worth revisiting.

Across all categories, the top performers — **News, Manuals, and Legends** — show that audiences tend to save informational, practical, or storytelling content for later reference.

Mid-tier engagement appears in **Vlog, Animals, Police, and Art**, where users may appreciate personal storytelling, relatable experiences, or striking visuals.

Similarly, **Politics and Technology** attract moderate saves — suggesting that political insight or tech knowledge content retains user interest even if it doesn't always go viral.

Lower engagement in saves is observed in Science, Religion, and Gaming.

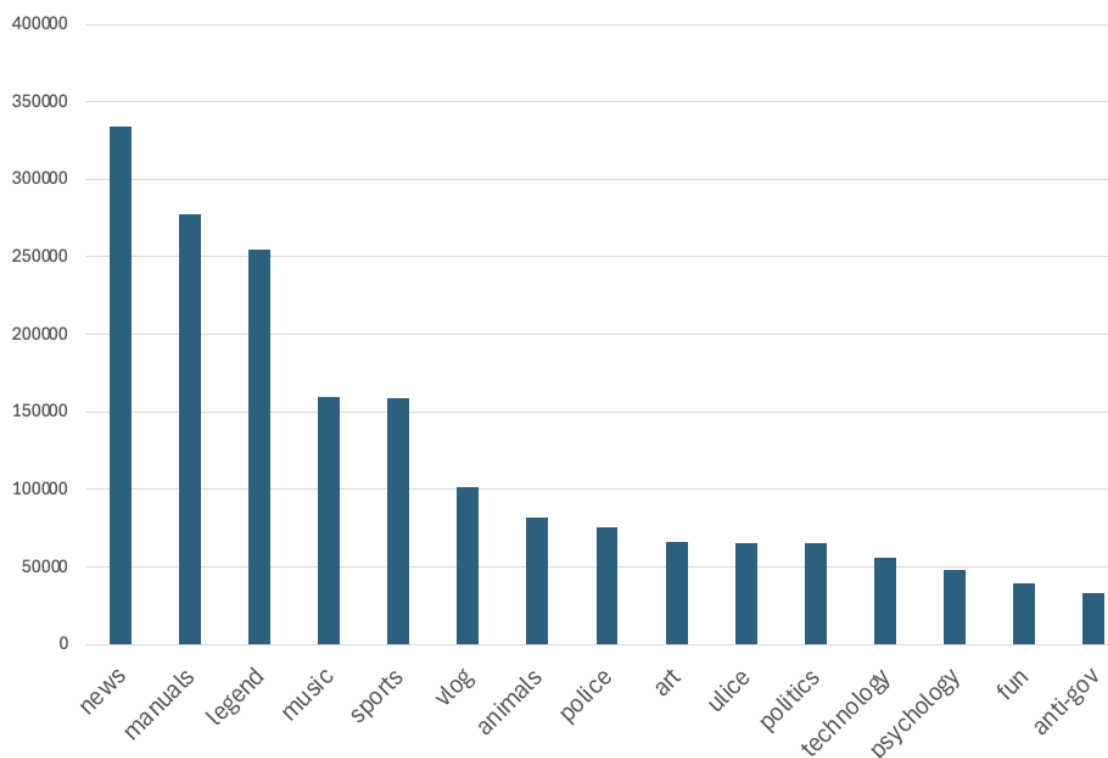


Figure 12: Topics with the highest number of Saves

Distribution of Likes by Topic

“Likes” represent the broadest and most spontaneous form of engagement, often driven by emotion, aesthetics, or relatability rather than information value. The chart shows that a few visually and emotionally engaging topics dominate likes, led by **News** (as explained earlier), followed by **Animals**, **Manuals**, **Legends**, and **Music**. Mid-tier engagement is observed in **Vlog**, **Politics**, **Fun**, and **Art**, where content tends to be more personal, creative, or discussion oriented. Lower engagement in likes appears in **Technology**, **Science**, **Religion**, and **Gaming**.

Overall, the “likes” metric confirms that emotionally charged, visually engaging, and socially relevant topics dominate audience approval. In essence, audiences are most likely to “like”

content that entertains, informs, or connects emotionally at first glance, reinforcing that *aesthetic and emotional appeal* remain central to audience engagement behavior.

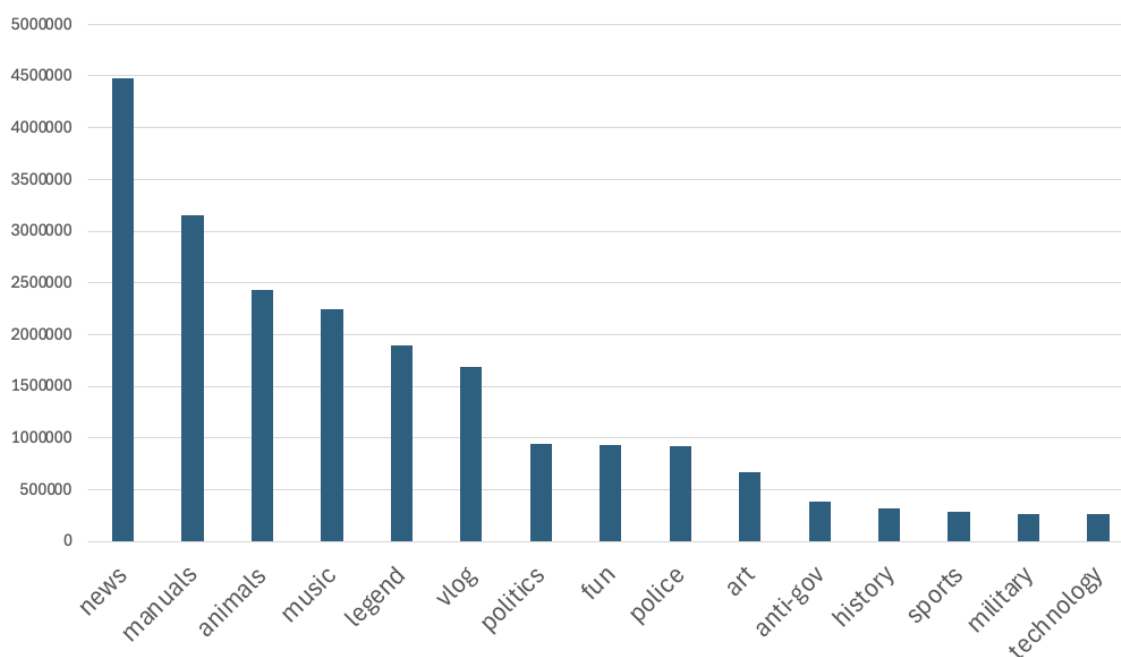


Figure 13: Topics with the highest number of Likes

Distribution of Comments by Topic

The “comments” metric reflects **active audience participation and opinion exchange**, revealing which topics encourage users not only to react but to engage in dialogue.

The data shows that **Art** and **News** dominate, followed by politically and socially charged categories such as **Anti-gov**, **Legends**, and **Manuals**. This indicates that **creative expression, current events, and ideological debates** are the most likely to inspire conversation.

Moderate commenting activity is found in **Music**, **Politics**, and **RU praising**, where interaction tends to combine **personal opinion with emotional reaction**.

The lowest comment counts appear in **Science, Technology, Religion, and Gaming**, which are typically **informational or entertainment-focused** but less conducive to conversation.

Overall, **Art, News, and politically themed topics** are the strongest triggers for audience discussion. In contrast, factual, niche, or purely entertaining content tends to generate fewer comments, highlighting how **controversy, creativity, and relevance** are key drivers of participatory engagement.

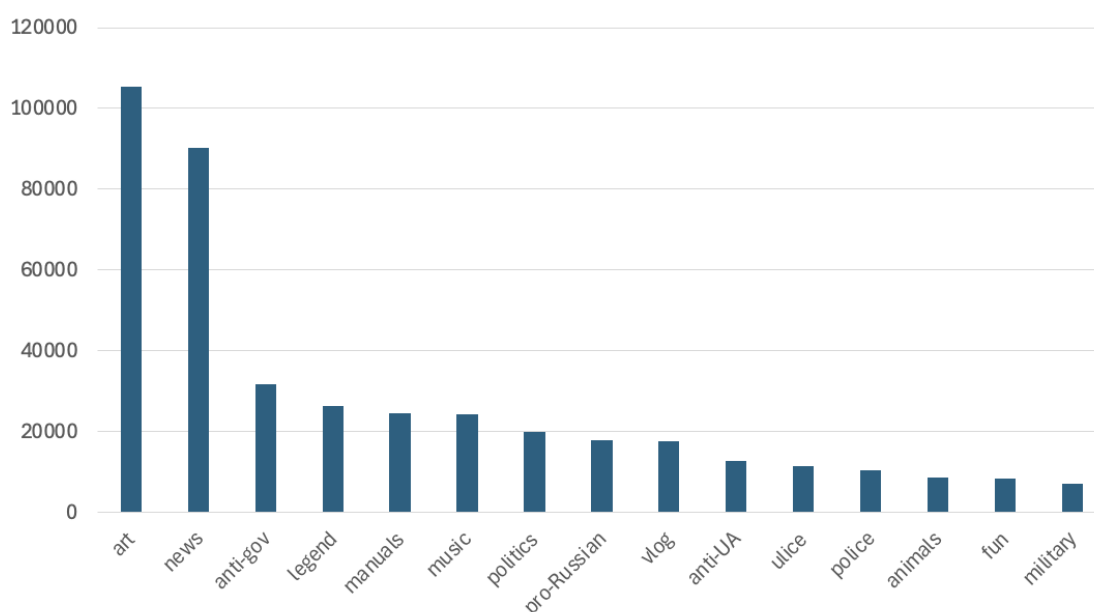


Figure 14: Comments by Topic

CROSS-METRIC SYNTHESIS

Across all engagement indicators, a consistent pattern emerges: audiences respond most strongly to content that combines **emotional appeal, visual clarity, and practical value**.

News dominates across all metrics – likes, shares, saves, and comments – confirming that informational and event-driven content holds both immediacy and lasting relevance. Its dual



strength lies in stimulating instant reactions (likes and shares) and sustained interest (saves and comments).

Manuals consistently perform well in likes and saves, showing that audiences value practical and instructive content that can be reused later.

Legends and **Animals** perform exceptionally in likes and shares, driven by storytelling and visual empathy. These categories demonstrate how emotional resonance fuels viral reach even without overt informational value.

Politics and **Anti-gov** show disproportionately high shares and comments compared with likes or saves – suggesting that **political content encourages opinion exchange and virality**, rather than aesthetic appreciation.

Art exhibits the opposite trend: relatively fewer likes and shares but high comment rates, indicating that **creative or interpretive content** prompts reflective engagement rather than instant approval.

Technology, **Science**, and **Religion** remain low across all engagement types, reflecting their niche appeal and limited emotional immediacy. They contribute to informational stability but not viral diffusion.

AI-GENERATED CONTENT

The distribution of AI-generated content is highly uneven across topics, with a clear concentration in **political, social, and entertainment-related themes**.

The chart below shows that Anti-gov, Vlog, and Fun dominate, followed by Art, Manuals, and Politics, suggesting that AI tools are being used not only for creativity and casual entertainment but also for propaganda or commentary.

Moderate AI presence appears in Legends, Show, Psychology, and Animals, categories that balance authentic footage with AI enhancement.

Lower AI usage is found in traditional or niche topics such as Science, Military, Religion and Gaming. These areas still rely largely on authentic, evidence-based, or personality driven content, where AI augmentation may risk undermining credibility.

Overall, the data highlights a dual nature of AI deployment:

Instrumental use in political or ideological narratives (Anti-gov, Politika, Anti-UA), where AI enhances persuasion.

Creative use in entertainment and education (Vlog, Fun, Art, Manuals), where AI expands production capacity and aesthetic appeal.

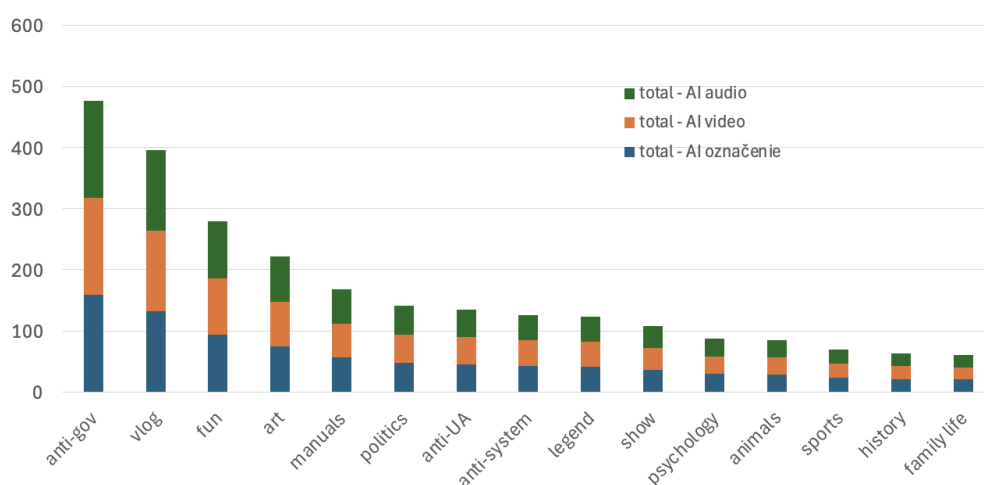


Figure 15: Topics with the highest proportion of AI-generated content

The following chart illustrates the number of AI-generated content: AI-generated videos, AI-generated audios (for example a photo or video with AI-generated narration only) and posts which

have been labeled as AI-generated by its authors. Only 12 contributions were labeled as AI-generated, even though the dataset recognized over 100 posts being generated using the AI.

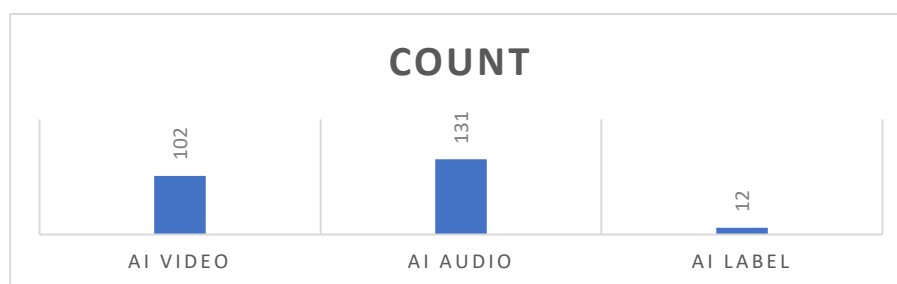


Figure 16: AI-generated content

TREND OVERTIME

In the beginning of data collection, the **anti-government** category averages roughly **1-2 posts per day**. Because researchers were tasked not to interact with the content to not influence the algorithm, the videos started to be longer – the algorithm learned that users tend to finish watching the videos and supplied them with longer content.

After users started interacting with the content (from September 21), the number of anti-government posts increases to **5-10 posts per day** with peaks on September 29.

Politics also climbs steadily, from occasional single mentions early in the month to **daily activity exceeding 4-6 instances** in the same period which also corresponds with the pre-election heated debates on the Czech social media.

In contrast, apolitical themes such as **music or animals** remain stable or decline.

ANTI-GOVERNMENT VERSUS PRO-GOVERNMENT CONTENT ON TIKTOK

In our dataset, anti-government content (209 posts in total) significantly outweighs pro-government content (five posts). Anti-government posts frequently overlap with the anti-system category and are often critical of the EU and of support for Ukraine.



The posts are often supportive of the SPD (a far-right party), the Stačilo! party (left-wing, patriotic, Eurosceptic, conservative, former Communist), or ANO (a populist party that won the election), as well as its leader Andrej Babiš, who is himself very active on TikTok. Among all politicians in our sample, his posts were shown most frequently to our two test users.

Anti-government content is frequently critical of the former coalition government and often directly attacks individual politicians. Petr Fiala (former prime minister and leader of ODS) was the primary target, criticized for rising prices, support for Ukraine, unfulfilled promises, and alleged censorship, and was often portrayed as a traitor. Such posts frequently employed patriotic framing. Other prominent targets included former Minister of the Interior Vít Rakušan (STAN), Member of the European Parliament and former presidential candidate Danuše Nerudová, President Petr Pavel, and former Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies Markéta Pekarová Adamová (TOP09).



MAIN OBSERVATIONS

- Without interaction with the content the videos become longer.
- Anti-government and anti-system content occurs to new users even before they start interacting with the platform.
- Content labeled as “anti-government” or “anti-system” had relatively low amount of likes but comparatively high number of shares and comments
- Content creators/Accounts are mostly failing to label their shared content as AI-generated.
- Anti-government posts are often AI-generated.
- Content which is critical towards the ruling government strongly outweighs the pro-government content
- **Politics** and **Anti-government** categories show disproportionately high shares and comments compared with likes or saves.



CONCLUSION

Despite mounting evidence of its dangers, political responses to TikTok in democratic countries remain fragmented.

In the **Czech Republic**, for example, the National Office for Cyber and Information Security (NÚKIB) has [issued](#) a cyber-security warning against installing TikTok on devices connecting to communication systems of the state's critical infrastructure. The text of the [Warning](#) describes risks associated with TikTok but it also builds strongly on China's legislative environment which require every Chinese citizen to collaborate with the state authorities as well as intelligence for the state security. Yet many Czech politicians continue to use TikTok to reach young voters.

In **Taiwan**, despite being a primary target of Chinese influence operations, political parties remained divided over regulatory actions against TikTok as it has become highly politicized topic. Only recently, Taiwanese authorities [decided](#) to restrict using TikTok on school Wi-Fi networks and ban the app for children under 12.

In the EU, the number of TikTok users has increased to that level so that in many countries, elections are winning or losing on the Chinese platform.

Meanwhile, the United States' shifting stance on TikTok along with the changes in administration, highlights the need for the rest of the democratic world to independently assess and address the risks associated with TikTok and other Chinese digital platforms.

Under the argument of defending freedom of speech, we allow TikTok's algorithm to influence our societies from very young age.

Question to think of: On one hand ByteDance is unable to prevent spreading of hatred, violence, disinformation on TikTok on the other hand, it can share socialist values on Douyin. Why moderation fails in the West?



Reasons for regulating TikTok are multifold: untransparent algorithm and problematic access to researchers, increasing addiction on social media, mainly among youth,

TikTok is a powerful tool for cognitive warfare, leveraging algorithmic manipulation, psychological addiction, and strategic censorship to influence global online audiences. As evidence of its risks mounts, democratic societies must recognize the threat, move beyond passive observation and take proactive and preventive steps to safeguard their information ecosystems, national security, and electoral integrity.



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

TRANSPARENCY

- Ensure data access for researchers.
- Require regular **independent audits of TikTok's algorithms** to assess and publicly report on risks related to bias, misinformation, and addictive design patterns.
- Oblige the platform to publish **quarterly reports** detailing the number of **banned or removed accounts and posts**, including the main grounds for action. These reports should be provided to state regulators and made available to researchers on request.

YOUTH PROTECTION

- Ban the use of smart devices (mobile phones, tablets, personal computers) during school hours and in classrooms.
- Introduce age-based time limits for platform usage.
- Implement parental controls and launch targeted media literacy campaigns aimed at adults to increase awareness and support responsible digital parenting.

DATA SECURITY AND GDPR COMPLIANCE

- **Expand the staff of DG Connect** to increase proactive enforcement and detection of GDPR and DSA violations.
- Maintain the existing ban on TikTok and similar platforms on government devices (already in place in several EU countries and EU institutions).
- Establish a **responsive contact office in every Member State**, designated as the main contact point for platform-related issues.

AI-GENERATED CONTENT, NON-AUTHENTIC BEHAVIOR AND PLATFORM ACCOUNTABILITY

- Require TikTok to improve and expand tagging of AI-generated content to increase transparency and user awareness.



- Oblige platforms to strengthen detection and management of suspicious or inauthentic account behaviors, such as sudden spikes in reposts or coordinated commenting activity.

SYSTEMIC RISK

- Propose a DSA update to allow Member States and relevant state regulators, under defined conditions of systemic risk (including states of emergency or the pre-election period), to temporarily restrict or shut down individual VLOPs—beyond the current limited provisions.
- Introduce clear punitive measures for platforms that breach systemic risk management obligations.

MEDIA LITERACY

- Enhance, finance, and support media literacy initiatives with a whole-society approach, extending beyond children to all age groups.
- Prioritize these efforts within DG Connect's mandate as well as at the Member State level.
- Take inspiration from best practices in Finland and other leading countries for long-term societal media literacy.



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