

Policy brief

Beyond ban, towards regulation of TikTok

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The Academy of Political Studies is a member of the International Network Against Cyber Hate (INACH) and part of the TikTok Community's Partners program. In cooperation with the National Cyber Security Authority (AKSK) and the Center Against Violent Extremism (CVE Center), ASP has been supporting the Albanian Trusted Flaggers Network since 2023 to monitor harmful content on social networks and report it in a privileged manner to social platforms.

Note:

This document was based on social media monitoring data from the Trusted Flaggers. A group of 15 flaggers trained by the Academy of Political Studies (ASP), National Cyber Security Authority (NCSA) and Coordination Center for Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) on identifying hate speech, violent extremism and extremist propaganda, have been monitoring the social platforms of Facebook, Instagram, TikTok since May 2023 with the aim of reporting harmful content to the providers of these platforms. These flaggers have listed in a database all the threatening content that has been identified, on the basis of which the information has then been analyzed.

Introduction

On January 6, 2025, the Ministry of Education and Sports unveiled¹ the New Action Plan for School Safety, officializing the announcement on the ban of the TikTok platform for approximately one year in Albania. This restrictive measure, as argued, was based on the opinions gathered during consultations with 65,000 parents from schools nationwide, aimed at combating violence, bullying, and digital threats against students.

Such decision-making has, thus far, lacked the necessary transparency in consultation processes and has not included other non-state stakeholders that have the required expertise in this sector.

The complete ban on TikTok access has prompted many questions regarding the Albanian authorities' limited technological capabilities to enforce such a measure, including its effectiveness in reducing incitement to violence among youth, as similar risks will persist on other comparable platforms.

Examples of social media bans in other countries have so far failed to achieve their intended goals. The experience of age restrictions² in Australia has shown that rather than mitigating risks, blocks make platforms and users' practices less regulated by institutions. Users bypass controls, oversight is fragmented, and transparency gives way to ambiguity.

Regardless of the uncertainties regarding the service's blockage, it is evident that TikTok, similar to all other social media platforms, operates in Albania without the sufficient regulatory measures and transparency in its services.

TikTok - A global concern

TikTok's swift growth is unprecedented in the history of the internet. In just a few years, it evolved from a niche lip-syncing application for children to one of the leading social media platforms globally, increasingly being used for staying updated.

In 2018, the Chinese company, ByteDance, introduced TikTok to the global market, based on its Chinese app Douyin. In September 2021, the platform reported reaching one billion active monthly users, a milestone that took Facebook more than eight years to achieve. The platform is expected to reach 2.14 billion users by the end of 2025.

¹ Introduction of the New Action Plan for Strengthening School Safety Mechanisms
<https://arsimi.gov.al/do-te-bllokohet-tiktok-manastirliu-plan-i-ri-veprimi-per-fuqizimin-e-mekanizmave-te-sigurise-ne-shkolle/>

² EXPERT REACTION: Australia's social media ban passes the Senate, 29 November 2024 -
<https://www.scimex.org/newsfeed/expert-reaction-australias-social-media-ban-passes-the-senate>

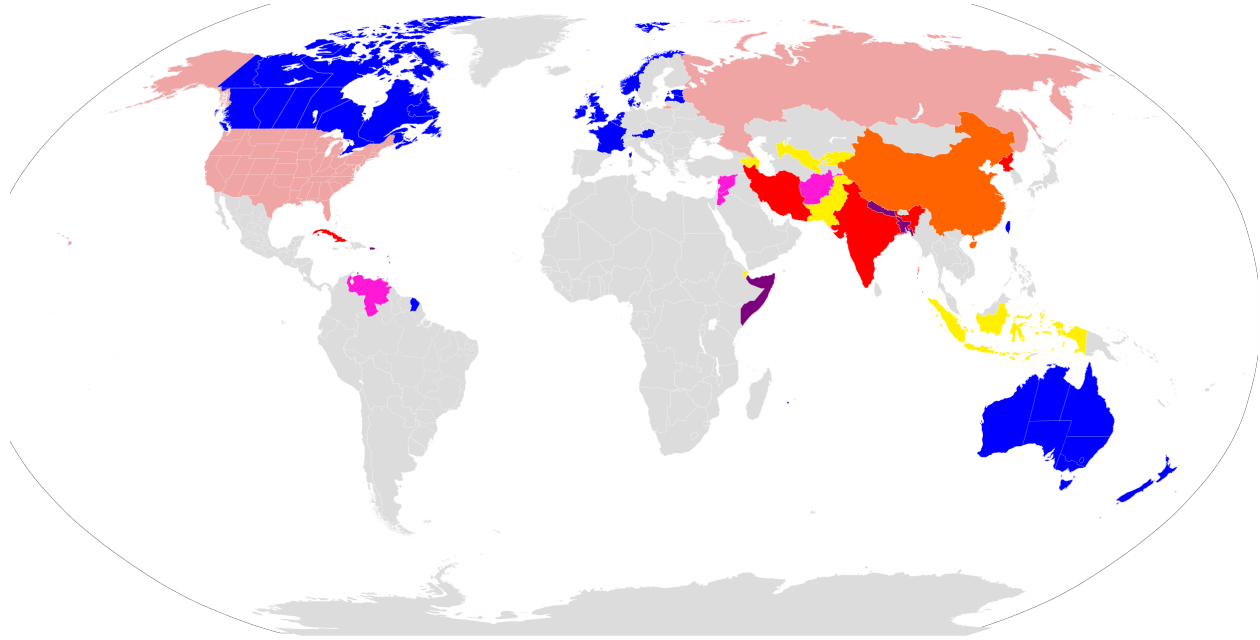
The key to the app's success lies in TikTok's "For You" page - a personalized stream of videos that is different from one user to another. It starts automatically upon opening the app, analyzing everything that captures users' attention, including the duration they watch a clip before swiping to the next. This is how, over time, the software becomes increasingly familiar with users and tailors the videos they view to match their interests.

There are certainly concerns regarding TikTok's algorithms, which have prompted skepticism among several governments and cybersecurity experts. Below you can see some of the key issues:

1. Data privacy: TikTok gathers extensive user data, which includes location, age, gender, device details, and even facial and voice information. This extensive data collection raises concerns regarding its usage and the potential for surveillance.
2. Content censorship: TikTok's algorithm has been criticized for censoring content, particularly material that is critical of the Chinese government. This has raised worries about freedom of expression and the possibility of biased content moderation.
3. Exposure to harmful content: The algorithm may occasionally expose users, particularly younger ones, to harmful content, such as videos that promote eating disorders or dangerous challenges. This raises concerns as regards its impact on the users' mental health.
4. Addiction: TikTok's algorithm fosters addiction through predictive modeling: It identifies engagement patterns and adjusts content in real time. It employs reinforcement learning to optimize content feed. This capability to influence user behavior has sparked worries in relation to addiction and adverse impacts on mental health.
5. National Security: Concerns exist that the Chinese government may access user data via TikTok's algorithms, which poses a potential national security threat. This has sparked discussions on whether the app should be banned or restricted to specific countries.

These concerns have led to the restriction of TikTok in 20 different countries so far³.

³ The list of countries where TikTok is banned or restricted can be consulted in Annex 1



TikTok available on all devices
 TikTok banned on national governmental devices
 TikTok previously banned for all users
 TikTok discontinued for download
 TikTok banned for all users *de jure*, but not enforced
 TikTok banned for all users *de facto*
 TikTok banned for all users
 TikTok unavailable; Douyin used instead
 Not shown: Banned on EU and NATO devices

Source: Wikipedia – Countries where TikTok has been censored

Risk to children and young people

International reports to date, which have sought to shed light on the impact of TikTok on young users, express concerns about the significant psychological effects that this social platform may induce.

A study⁴ by Amnesty International, released in November 2023, initiated significant debates by concluding that TikTok's content recommendation system and its "invasive data collection practices" pose "a risk to young users, as it reinforces depressive and suicidal content that could exacerbate pre-existing mental health issues." Experts highlighted in this study that the main reason behind these problems should be found within TikTok's aggressive business practices to increase audience and generate advertising revenue.

Some investigations conducted in October 2024 indicated that TikTok was aware of the issue regarding teenagers on its platform, yet took no action to address the problem.

⁴ Driven into Darkness: How TikTok's 'For You' Feed Encourages Self-Harm and Suicidal Ideation - <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/POL40/7350/2023/en/>

The European Commission also launched an investigation⁵ last February into TikTok for its possible failure to protect children and user privacy under the Digital Services Act (DSA). The investigation is still underway, and if any violations are found, the company could face fines of up to 6 percent of its annual global revenue.

In response to this pressure, TikTok recently announced an investment of over \$2 billion to enhance the security of its 175 million monthly users in Europe. The platform also updated its age verification policy and made some changes to its effects to mitigate any adverse impact on the mental well-being of young people.

These measures are also dependent on the entry into force of the Digital Services Act⁶, in February 2024, which serves as a regulatory framework for social media platforms operating within the European Union member states. Through this Act, TikTok and other major platforms are held accountable for the content they deliver and must ensure transparency regarding their services.

TikTok and Albania

While there is no official count of TikTok users in Albania, it is evident from the abovementioned global figures that Albania represents a trifling market for the large Chinese company.

As our country is not yet a member of the European Union, we cannot take advantage of the protections provided by the DSA regulation, nor can we engage in joint legal and financial actions in cases of violations by TikTok and other major platforms.

The 2024-2027⁷ Growth Plan document for Albania sets forth as an objective the launch of a legal gap analysis between national legislation and the DSA, with the aim of full transposition of this framework by June 2026.

Simultaneously, the Albanian government has initiated direct communications with TikTok since 2023, enabling exclusive channels for reporting harmful content via the State Police and the Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA). In recent months, TikTok has committed to hiring moderators proficient in the Albanian language and has established dedicated channels for

⁵ European Commission opens formal proceedings against TikTok:
https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/ne/ip_24_926

⁶ Digital Services Act (DSA) -
https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/europe-fit-digital-age/digital-services-act_en

⁷ National Reform Agenda 2024–2027
<https://www.drejtesia.gov.al/ep-content/uploads/2024/11/Dokument-Politik-Agjenda-Kombetare-e-Reformave-2024-2027.pdf>

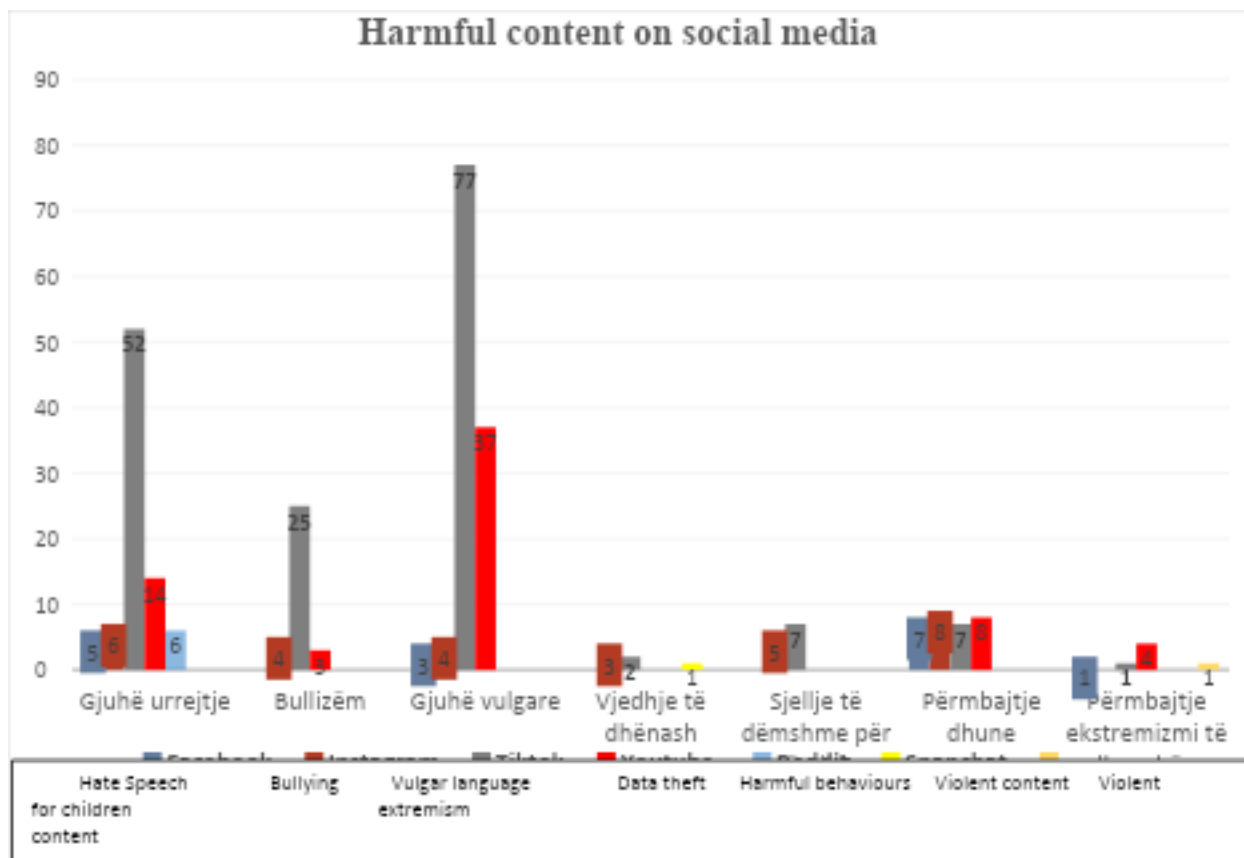
organizations experienced in reporting harmful content, including Isigurt. al (CRCA) and the Trusted Flaggers.

If Albania suspends the TikTok service in the coming months, there is a risk of losing these official communication channels to initiate criminal investigations or blocking evidentiary materials available in Albanian for users who will continue to access the network through other means.

All official attempts to engage with TikTok have not improved the situation in 2024. Monitoring conducted by the **Trusted Flaggers** regarding hate speech and extremist propaganda in Albanian on social media confirms the concerns of parents and teachers about the TikTok platform.

For the second consecutive year, social media analysis has identified TikTok as the platform most exposed to hate speech, violent content, and sexist behavior.

The graph below shows the monitoring data gathered from the Trusted Flaggers during 2024:



Analysis of the materials reveals concerns that the TikTok platform shows a significant spread of vulgar language, hate speech, and bullying among its young users, who make up the majority of its audience.

The analysis shows that TikTok does not employ suitable filters or specialized computer intelligence for the Albanian language. Meta company has developed filters that prohibit the posting of specific words or hashtags in Albanian connected to bullying, racial and gender discrimination, and violent crimes.

Another challenge in moderating such a content on TikTok is related to the main content, which is in video format. Computer and human moderation is more difficult in the case of spoken language than in written language.

Gifts or other rewards among platform users also foster intense discussions in live chat rooms or the sharing of violent images, which draw a larger audience and result in financial gains.

It is essential to recognize that TikTok is not the sole platform where violent content and hate speech are present, indicating that the existing issues within social network mirror a culture of violence and broader societal problems in Albania.

Recommendations

The algorithmic systems of TikTok and other social media platforms currently prevail in our digital public spaces. Social networks serve as the primary platforms for communication, information, expression of opinions, and civic engagement. In this regard, it is crucial to enhance the regulation of these influential platforms without limiting the individual freedom of expression of their users.

In contrast to the ban on TikTok and similar platforms, the implementation of legal regulations for the services provided by these networks constitutes a more sustainable solution that upholds the fundamental rights of citizens.

To date, governments and international regulatory institutions, including Albania, have concentrated on identifying and mandating platforms to remove illegal content or attempting to limit their services. Nonetheless, these efforts are insufficient to manage and eliminate the vast amount of harmful content generated by billions of users, along with the platform owners' desire to expand their audiences and profits.

Consequently, the primary recommendation is to develop legal measures and mechanisms that govern the operation of social media platforms, holding them accountable for boosting transparency and enforcing measures over the content shared through their services.

Recommendations for Albanian authorities

In line with the best international practices, the following measures may be necessary for Albanian authorities to regulate TikTok's operations in Albania:

- **Increase in transparency:** According to the DSA practice, the platform must ensure transparency for Albanian regulatory authorities regarding its content, algorithms, and the actions taken concerning materials reported by Albanian users. Detailed annual reports for each member country are a practice required by the European Union since 2023.
- **Periodic audits:** Regulatory bodies and independent researchers should be permitted to assess content suggestion algorithms and moderation practices to ensure their effectiveness and update with the latest threats and trends.
- **Improved age verification:** Enforcing more rigorous age verification procedures to guarantee that only individuals above a specific age can access the platform. It is advisable to raise the age limit for users (currently users over the age of 13 can be registered).
- **Parental controls:** Enhancing parental controls to enable parents to oversee and restrict the app usage by their children. This could involve establishing time limits, limiting specific content types, and obtaining activity reports.
- **Improved content moderation:** Increasing the number of human moderators for Albanian and enhancing automated moderation systems (filters) in Albanian to more effectively identify and remove harmful content.
- **Priority reporting:** Educating users and flaggers proficient in the Albanian language and promoting exclusive channels for collaboration to identify and block harmful materials and disinformation on this network.

These recommendations should extend beyond regulating TikTok to include all other social media platforms commonly used in Albania.

Further recommendations for educational purposes

In addition to regulatory measures for platforms, a comprehensive approach addressing the social issues that contribute to youth violence and hatred on social networks is essential:

- **Development of educational and awareness programs.** Implementing comprehensive educational programs aimed at young people to increase awareness of the risks associated with hate speech and violent narratives. These programs should emphasize critical thinking skills, media literacy, and digital citizenship.

- **Promotion of positive online spaces.** Fostering the development of positive online environments that encourage tolerance, diversity, and inclusion. Combating extremist narratives using social media campaigns, online forums, and uplifting stories.

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Annex 1 - TikTok restrictions in other countries

More than 20 countries have enacted partial or full bans on TikTok because of concerns regarding data privacy, cybersecurity, and possible foreign influence. Below you can find a summary:

Full ban:

- **India:** In 2020, due to border tensions with China, India implemented an indefinite ban on TikTok, citing national security issues.
- **Afghanistan:** In April 2022, the Taliban government prohibited TikTok, citing concerns about its impact on youth.
- **Somalia:** On August 2023, Somalia's government officially announced a ban on TikTok (along with Telegram and 1xBet) citing the spread of propaganda and indecent content.
- **Nepal:** In November 2023, Nepal declared a ban on TikTok, expressing concerns about the app's potential to disrupt social harmony.
- **Iran:** Access to TikTok in Iran is restricted due to platform policies and national censorship regulations.
- **Syria:** TikTok is prohibited in Syria, although information regarding the ban is scarce.
- **Jordan:** In December 2022, Jordan enacted a temporary ban on TikTok in response to the death of a police officer during protests. The status of the ban has changed, with reports suggesting it was lifted and then potentially restored.
- **Kyrgyzstan:** In August 2023, Kyrgyz authorities banned TikTok due to worries about its impact on child development. The ban was lifted a few days later.
- **Uzbekistan:** TikTok is prohibited in Uzbekistan, although information regarding the ban is limited.
- **United States:** On January 19, 2025, the US enacted a nationwide ban on TikTok, resulting in the app's shutdown across the country.

Partial ban and restrictions

- European Union: In February 2023, the European Commission and the European Council banned TikTok on official devices due to cybersecurity concerns.
- France: In March 2023, France prohibited government employees from using TikTok and other recreational apps on their devices because of data security issues.
- United Kingdom: In March 2023, the UK government prohibited the use of TikTok on official devices belonging to ministers and civil servants due to security concerns.
- Belgium: In March 2023, Belgium prohibited the use of TikTok on federal government work devices due to concerns regarding cybersecurity, privacy, and misinformation.
- Denmark: In March 2023, Denmark's Ministry of Defense prohibited TikTok on work devices, reflecting wider European concerns regarding data security.
- Norway: In March 2023, Norway warned against installing TikTok on devices that have access to its parliamentary system, citing concerns over data privacy and possible security risks.
- Netherlands: In March 2023, the Dutch government advised civil servants to refrain from using TikTok while a review of the app's data privacy practices is conducted.
- New Zealand: In March 2023, New Zealand prohibited TikTok on devices linked to its parliamentary network due to cybersecurity concerns.
- Australia: In April 2023, Australia prohibited TikTok on government devices due to security concerns.
- Canada: In November 2024, Canada mandated TikTok to shut down its offices and subsidiary in the country citing national security concerns, although access to the app remained available.