

Podcast Transcript: Lens EU – Episode 17

“EU Kids Act & Social Media Bans: Where Europe Stands on Protecting Minors Online”

Speaker Legend

Speaker Number	Name	Role / Organization
Speaker 1	Anna Wallner	Host & Podcast Lead (Die Presse, Austria)
Speaker 2	Anna Gabriel	EU Editor (Die Presse, Austria)
Speaker 3	Anton Ambroziak	Journalist (OKO.press, Poland)
Speaker 4	Max Hillenberg	Editor at Salon Fünf (Correctiv, Germany)
Speaker 5	Andrejs Timofejevs	Journalist (TVNet Group, Latvia)

1. Introduction & EU Kids Act: Brussels & Austria

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

By the time your average European teenager hits 9th grade, the European Union wants a say in whether they are allowed to open an Instagram account at all. In her State of the Union speech on 16th September, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the EU Kids Act, which means no social media under the age of 13 and no personal account without parental consent under the age of 15. It is not law yet. It still has to clear the European Parliament and the Council of Member States, and plenty of people have opinions about it—from children's rights groups to the platforms themselves to governments who already started regulating this on their own long before Brussels did.

Welcome to Lens EU, Episode 17. My name is Anna Wallner. I'm a journalist at the Vienna daily newspaper Die Presse, where among other things I run our podcast section. This episode is produced first in English and then translated into all Lens EU languages. Today we want to find out where Europe actually stands on this. In the studio I am joined by my colleague Anna Gabriel, our EU editor who covers this from Vienna. We will talk about how von der Leyen's proposal came about and how it was received, and we will then zoom in on Austria, which already has its own plan for a minimum age of 14. After that we hear from three more countries on where they stand: Poland with a report from OKO.press, Germany with a report from Correctiv, and Latvia with a report from TVNet.

But Anna, I would say let's start at the top: What exactly is the EU Kids Act and how far along is it right now?

Speaker 2 (Anna Gabriel):

The EU Kids Act is a legislative proposal presented by the Commission in mid-September, and its objective is to provide better protection for children and adolescents across the European Union against online risks and mechanisms that promote addiction. So what they plan is a general prohibition on creating accounts under the age of 13. Then between 13 and 15, independent accounts are not permitted, but users can access main accounts that are managed or supervised by parents. Aged 15 and older, these children are permitted to open their own standard accounts. That's the plans we know about so far.

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

Okay. Von der Leyen framed it in her speech kind of in the way that the EU is finally following countries like Australia who have rules like that already implemented. But how much of this proposal is new and how much was already in the pipeline before her speech?

Speaker 2 (Anna Gabriel):

It's not new at all, actually. Every time the Commission proposes big legislative proposals, there has been a lot of work ahead. So they've been working on this for months, if not even years. There are many experts in the Commission doing this, and also many member states are planning to implement rules quite similar to what von der Leyen proposed. And there was a lot of pressure coming from the member states to have general guidelines.

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

Yes. Okay, so we see that the states are more or less in favor of these new rules that come along with the EU Kids Act. But what are the platforms in the tech industry saying and who are the loudest critics there?

Speaker 2 (Anna Gabriel):

The tech industry's response is quite mixed. It ranges from public support for the harmonized regulations that are now being planned on an EU basis, but there are also behind-the-scenes concerns—and there are many of them. The industry generally welcomes the EU-wide approach instead of a patchwork of 27 different national laws. Tech giants like Meta also often point to teen accounts which they have already proactively introduced. But criticism arises especially concerning the reversal of the burden of proof. They have to prove that their platforms are safe for children, and that's what they don't like because they say it prohibits innovation. Also behind closed doors, there's a lot of lobbying going on in Brussels, so they really try to convince politicians to water down the legislative reform.

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

Mhm. Before we zoom into Austria's regulation or plans, we can have a look at other EU countries. This is also the reason why we do this episode, because a lot of countries didn't wait for Brussels. France, for example, tried to ban social media for under 15-year-old kids; Spain announced something similar; and Denmark has gone a different route with an alliance against tech giants rather than a hard ban. In a sentence or two each, how do those approaches differ from what von der Leyen is now proposing?

Speaker 2 (Anna Gabriel):

The EU Kids Act differs from the individual plans of the member states primarily through its holistic regulatory approach. It's a three-tiered age-based model and has the objective of preventing a fragmented patchwork of national prohibitions. While many member states are debating measures

focused primarily on strict age limits and outright bans on social media, the EU proposal goes well beyond date-of-birth verification by holding tech companies accountable for their system architecture. I think that's the most important difference.

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

Okay, so let me come to Austria now. The government agreed on a minimum age of 14 this March and the draft law has been in the pipeline since July. Where exactly does the law stand today?

Speaker 2 (Anna Gabriel):

The draft legislation has gone through a consultation phase which is now concluded. The draft was submitted to parliament in summer, and over 200 statements have been received from public authorities, associations, and organizations. The draft bill is scheduled by the government to enter into force on January 1st, 2027, which is quite ambitious, I would say. And yeah, it would be a long time before the EU law would come into force, which will for sure take a lot of time.

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

Mhm. Okay. And what is the concrete idea? What would actually be banned under the Austrian proposal, and which platforms or apps are explicitly carved out?

Speaker 2 (Anna Gabriel):

In the Austrian proposal, only social media apps are included—so it's TikTok, Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram. No messenger apps like WhatsApp are included, which many children's protection organizations criticize.

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

And then there is the opposition, of course. Particularly the FPÖ party has criticized the plan already as an attack on young people's freedom of expression. How serious do you think is this political pushback, or is there also criticism from the other side, from people who think the law doesn't go far enough? We heard already that some children's protection associations think it doesn't go far enough, but is there any other criticism?

Speaker 2 (Anna Gabriel):

Yes, some think it's not going far enough—some think there should even be bans on social media until the age of 18. And there is also the criticism that messenger apps are not included, so that's what many of these organizations just don't understand. Concerning the criticism of the FPÖ party, I think a majority of the population in Austria, but also in Europe, is pro-regulation on social media for minors because it becomes more and more necessary. And I think what the FPÖ is saying—basically that parents should watch over what their kids do, not the government—some might say that's true, but I think the majority is pro-laws against too early social media usage of young kids.

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

Mhm. And that's what a lot of people always forget—that already now in the terms and conditions of messenger apps like WhatsApp, it's written down that parents should observe the usage of their kids. And as we know, most people don't do it, because a lot of kids use WhatsApp when they come to secondary school after elementary school for class chats and things like that. And I'm sure that parents don't always watch and observe what the kids are doing there. Still, the criticism is that these messenger apps can be an open door for harassment, because often these chats are the beginning of communication with people these young children shouldn't communicate with, whoever it might

be.

Okay, let me come back in with our last question on the difference between Austrian law and EU law. If the Austrian law and the EU Kids Act both end up in force, how do the two fit together?

Speaker 2 (Anna Gabriel):

Well, Austria's law would have to give way to the EU-wide rule. That's for sure. The EU Kids Act is drafted as a regulation, and its rules apply automatically, uniformly, and directly across all the member states. So as soon as it is implemented, the Austrian law would be gone.

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

But that means it's kind of chaotic for all the parents and children who are, for example, now 12 years old, and in the next one, two, or three years these different laws will be implemented. So it's not so easy to oversee the regulation process.

Speaker 2 (Anna Gabriel):

Not at all. That is true. It can be quite confusing. But what I can say is that it will take some time until the European regulation will come into force—that always takes a lot of time; there will be a lot of lobbying from the tech companies, so it'll take years.

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

And because you said before the Austrian plan is ambitious, do you think that the Austrian law will be quicker than the EU law?

Speaker 2 (Anna Gabriel):

Yes, that's for sure. I think so, it will be quicker. If not at the beginning of next year, then maybe a few months later. I mean, Europe is going to take two years at least.

2. Poland: Proposing a Total Ban Under 15 (Anton Ambroziak)

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

So much to Brussels and Austria. Let's cross over to Poland, where the government isn't just following the EU Kids Act—it wants to go further. Our colleague Anton Ambroziak from OKO.press has been following the debate there, from a ban on phones in primary schools to proposals that would cut everyone under 15 off from social media entirely. Here is his report.

Speaker 3 (Anton Ambroziak):

Poland is following in the footsteps of most European countries. Since September, primary schools have fully banned cell phones unless they are used for learning or safety. But that's just the beginning. The government is going a step further, working on a law to completely cut kids and teens under the age of 15 off from social media.

Why? Well, the answer lies in the flood of recent reports on our digital hygiene, or rather the complete lack of it. Data from the National Research Institute, NASK, is staggering: kids between 7 and 14 spend over 4 hours a day looking at screens on average; older teens spend 5 hours on weekdays and even more on weekends. What's more, nearly 60% of elementary school kids have an account on at least one social media platform. And as numerous studies show, these kids are not safe there. One in three teenagers has experienced online hate and cyberbullying.

Parents feel completely helpless right now. They want change, and they're absolutely right, because the burden of keeping Big Tech in check shouldn't fall on their shoulders. Polls show that nine out of 10 adults are demanding tough regulations.

But the devil, as always, is in the details. Public opinion is split: over a third of Poles want a hard ban for kids under 15; about a quarter think the key is mandatory parental consent for all minors; some would prefer limiting the ban only to younger kids under 12; while one in 10 demands a radical social media ban for absolutely all minors.

Work on age verification systems has been underway here for two years now, but everything keeps getting delayed. Why? Because creating a mechanism that actually verifies age while guaranteeing privacy is a massive technological challenge.

Now, even though Poland supports Europe's EU Kids Act, the government wants to push it even further. While the EU proposes a ban on independent accounts until age 13, Poland wants to raise that limit to 15. Everything points to the Polish bill being passed quickly, driven by upcoming elections in 2027 and a broad social consensus.

The catch is this: national laws will be far less comprehensive than the EU rules. A national regulator simply doesn't have the leverage to force Silicon Valley giants into what's called 'safety by design'—meaning building inherently safe apps. The EU wants to sweep away addictive algorithms for minors by default, blocking features like autoplay, infinite scrolling, aggressive push notifications, and contact from strangers. The Polish law alone won't fix that.

Politicians shifted into high gear in early October. Why then? Because the country was rocked by a horrific string of school knife attacks carried out by minors. This tragedy sparked a massive nationwide debate about how the internet and social media are radicalizing our kids. Yet, the government's response relies on oversimplified slogans: 'Just ban it,' because social media is the ultimate villain that needs to be wiped out. The problem is the conversation focuses entirely on banning young people rather than mandating rules for the platforms themselves.

Experts are calling it like this: as long as Big Tech fails to self-regulate, external verification systems are absolutely necessary. It's like replacing a club bouncer who pretends to check IDs but lets everyone in anyway with an automated turnstile that scans your data. But in the long run, this won't change much. At best, it just postpones the pathological issues you face online by a few years. We are focusing on blocking access to addictive products and just naively hoping for the best. The government is taking a piecemeal approach—banning photostreaming, banning phones in classrooms, banning social media. Meanwhile, national and European regulators could join forces and simply force these companies to fix their products. As the Panoptikon Foundation rightly pointed out, if tech giants refuse to comply, we should strip them of their right to operate in the European Union. We have the power to do exactly that under the new EU Digital Services Act. Access to the European single market should be a privilege, not the right of the strongest.

3. Germany: Seeking Youth Inclusion & Systemic Rules (Max Hillenberg)

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

Next we go to Germany. There, Max Hillenberg reports for us, an editor at Salon Fünf, the youth newsroom of Correctiv, which makes journalism by young people for young people. And here is what he told us about where Germany stands.

Speaker 4 (Max Hillenberg):

There is currently no social media ban for young people in Germany, but there is a pretty big debate around the issue. The main questions are: At what age should young people be allowed to use social media, and how can children and teenagers be better protected from the problems that can arise on these platforms? At the same time, there is now the EU Kids Act on the table. Among other things, it proposes that children under 13 should not have access to social media and that teenagers should only be able to open an account independently from the age of 15. Germany is looking at how these European rules could be implemented and potentially supplemented with national measures. So there is no ban yet, but the political debate is definitely underway.

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

And what surprises you about the whole debate?

Speaker 4 (Max Hillenberg):

What I find particularly interesting is how much people talk about young people while their perspectives are often barely visible in the public debate. At Salon Fünf, we talk to young people every day, and we see that they have very nuanced views on social media. They are very aware of the risks—like addiction, social pressure, or harmful content. But at the same time, social media is also a safe space for them, a place to communicate, be entertained, and find information. So I think the really interesting question is: If adults are deciding how young people should be allowed to use social media, how much are young people actually involved in those decisions themselves?

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

And Max, tell us, how does this affect people in Germany and how is the political debate developing?

Speaker 4 (Max Hillenberg):

For young people in Germany, social media is simply a normal part of everyday life. You can also see that in the numbers. According to the 2025 JIM study, a study on young people's media use, 69% of 12 to 19-year-olds use WhatsApp, 63% use Instagram, and 53% use TikTok. When we talk to young people at Salon Fünf, there is rarely a simple answer. Some clearly say that they want more protection or think certain age limits make sense. Others say a ban would take away an important part of their social lives. But most fall somewhere in between: they see the problems, but would rather have better rules, more control over the platforms, or changes to the algorithms than a complete ban.

I think these different perspectives are really important because the political debate is also moving beyond just age limits. It now includes things like safer default settings, the responsibility of platforms, and media literacy. And this is where meaningful participation could come in: young people should be asked regularly what they think, involved in political consultations, and given a real say in decisions that directly affect their everyday lives. Because if adults are making decisions about young people's digital world, their voices shouldn't only be heard at the very end.

4. Latvia: School Phone Bans & Fading Political Momentum (Andrejs Timofejevs)

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

And finally, we come to Latvia. Social media is just as big a part of everyday life there as anywhere else in Europe, and it has already left its mark on at least one election. Our colleague Andrejs Timofejevs, a journalist with the TVNet group, took a closer look at where the debate about children, teenagers, and social media currently stands in his country. And here is his report.

Speaker 5 (Andrejs Timofejevs):

Social media is no less popular in Latvia than anywhere else in the world, and its role has long extended beyond simple communication. For example, in 2022, political scientists attributed the success of the populist party For Stability! in the parliamentary elections to the so-called 'TikTok effect,' as the party's members had actively used the platform during their campaign. However, social media did not save the party from defeat in recent years.

Public initiatives concerning social media have also emerged in Latvia, although my fellow Latvians have shown relatively little enthusiasm for them. In 2024, an online petition called for TikTok to be banned in Latvia. According to its author, the platform had become a breeding ground for Kremlin propaganda and also raised concerns about personal data protection. Over two years, the petition collected fewer than 5,000 signatures and never made it onto the politicians' agenda.

Nevertheless, some steps toward restricting social media have been taken. This spring, the Saeima—Latvia's parliament—expanded the ban on mobile phone use in schools. Previously, pupils in grades 1 through 6 were prohibited from using their phones, but the ban now extends through grade 9, when most pupils are around 15 or 16 years old. An exception is made only when a teacher allows phones to be used for educational purposes. However, the rules apply only within schools and do not prevent children from using TikTok, Instagram, or other social media platforms at home.

More radical proposals to restrict social media were also discussed in parliament. This spring, all three parties in the governing coalition at the time supported the initiative, although neither a specific age threshold nor a mechanism for age verification was agreed upon. One proposal called for particular attention to be paid to protecting children under 12. While the responsibilities of both the state and parents were also discussed, the Health Minister meanwhile proposed restricting internet use among children under 15. He argued that such measures were necessary to protect teenagers' mental health, highlighting the risks of anxiety and sleep disorders as well as broader concerns about children's safety.

Politicians also acknowledged that national legislation alone might not be sufficient and expressed their intention to push for common European solutions. Our neighbor Estonia, meanwhile, has emphasized the importance of digital literacy and has refrained from imposing strict bans, arguing that they could limit young people's access to information and opportunities for self-expression. Some experts share Estonia's position. Last summer, Latvian public broadcaster LSM published an article featuring comments from researchers at the Latvian Academy of Culture who participated in the international EU Kids Online study. Their research analyzed responses from 29,000 children across 19 European countries. The researchers warned that a blanket ban could limit opportunities for communication, participation in digital culture, and the development of digital skills. Rather than

introducing sweeping restrictions, they recommend placing greater emphasis on digital education, combating cyberbullying, and holding social media platforms themselves accountable.

For now, however, the issue appears to have slipped far down the political agenda in Latvia. Members of our parliament are preparing to hand over power to a newly elected Saeima, which will face pressing security and economic challenges. So whether the issue will return to the agenda of the new governing coalition and government remains unclear for now.

5. Conclusion & Outro

Speaker 1 (Anna Wallner):

Yeah, that was Episode 17 of Lens EU, the podcast about Europe. Four countries, four different approaches to the same question: we have Austria moving ahead with its own national age limit alongside the EU Kids Act; Poland pushing to go even further and faster, driven by a wave of public alarm and most recently tragedy; Germany still searching for the right answer, with young people asking to be heard in a debate that is mostly about them, not with them; and Latvia, where the political momentum for stricter rules has quietly faded since the election, while Brussels tries to pull all of this into one EU-wide rule book.

Thank you to my colleague Anna Gabriel here in Vienna for walking us through the EU Kids Act and the Austrian law, and to our colleagues at OKO.press in Poland, Correctiv in Germany, and TVNet in Latvia for their reports.

You can read more on the topic in our newsletter, looked after here at Die Presse in Vienna this week by Tina Stani, and I say also thank you for that. If you liked what you heard, feel free to tell others about it. And if you are interested in these topics, don't forget to check the Lens EU channel regularly, whichever language you prefer for the podcasts and newsletters—German, Latvian, Croatian, or Polish. You can find all the podcasts on the audio marketplace website, and the German versions also on YouTube. I put all the links in the show notes of this episode.

My name is Anna Wallner. Thank you for being with us today. You can find more podcasts from Die Presse in the Presse Player in our app. Take care and see you next time.

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