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Social Media Bans for Children – Protecting Health vs. Protecting Privacy

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Abstract

Regulation of social media use by children has moved to the forefront of political debate in many countries. The Australian model of a blanket ban for individuals under 16 represents the first real test of strict regulation, combining mandatory age verification with high penalties and the deletion of millions of accounts. This approach has also inspired European countries, such as France and Greece, and the debate has recently begun in Czechia as well. The key challenge remains age verification, which is technically feasible but always involves trade-offs between privacy and effectiveness.

Key Takeaways

- Green Australia as a test case: A blanket ban on social media for minors shows that governments can force platforms into major interventions—but not without increased data collection, technical challenges, and rule circumvention by young users.
- Limits and challenges of age verification: While technically possible, age verification faces three main issues in practice: low reliability of simple methods, high requirements for sensitive data in more accurate solutions, and the ease with which users can bypass the rules. The result is a trade-off between protecting children and protecting privacy, for which no stable solution currently exists.
- European or national solution? EU-level regulation offers unified rules and stronger enforcement against platforms, but also raises concerns about centralized oversight and standardized digital identity systems. National approaches are more flexible and better adapted to local conditions, but less effective when dealing with global tech companies.

Introduction

The debate on banning social media use for children and adolescents has recently become a global political issue. Australia has become the first country to introduce a blanket ban for individuals under the age of 16, with the stated aim of protecting mental health, preventing digital addiction, and limiting the harmful effects of algorithm-driven content. As of December 2025, major platforms are required to implement measures preventing minors from actively using accounts, or face significant financial penalties.

This move has triggered a broader international response. Age regulation is becoming one of the fastest-growing areas of digital policy and is gradually emerging in various forms across Europe. Greece plans to introduce a ban for children under 15 starting in 2027, France is pushing for stricter age limits and mandatory technical verification, and similar proposals are being discussed in Denmark, Portugal, and other countries, including Czechia.

Are blanket bans and age restrictions an effective tool for protecting young people’s mental health, or do they create new risks related to privacy, digital rights, and surveillance? What are the technical options for age verification, and how do they affect users’ rights? And is it more appropriate to address regulation at the national or European level? These are the questions this analysis aims to explore.

Australia’s Regulatory Model

The first national regulation to effectively ban access to social media for users under the age of 16—the Social Media Minimum Age Act—was adopted in Australia in 2024 and came into force on December 10, 2025. The law requires major technology platforms to take “reasonable steps” to prevent children under 16 from holding accounts on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, X, or Reddit. Failure to comply can result in fines of up to AUD 49.5 million. Platforms are therefore obliged to actively verify the age of new users and delete accounts that do not meet the minimum age requirement. As a result, approximately 4.7 million accounts belonging to underage users have been removed in Australia (OAIC 2025; PBS News 2026).

The official rationale behind these measures focuses on children’s mental health and protection from addictive behavior, similar to regulations applied to tobacco or alcohol. Australian authorities argue that targeted algorithms and the design of social media platforms contribute to rising issues such as addiction, cyberbullying, anxiety, and negative body image (eSafety 2025).

Public support—particularly among adults, not only in Australia—is relatively strong. Parents express concerns about their children’s unrestricted access to online environments. However, the technical implementation faces significant challenges. Although age verification technologies exist—ranging from identity document uploads to behavioral and digital verification methods—they are not consistently applied by platforms. According to the Age Verification Providers Association, the main issue lies not in the absence of technology but in its insufficient deployment. Despite the removal of millions of accounts in Australia, young users continue to attempt to bypass the system. Critics also warn that strict bans may unintentionally push children toward less regulated or anonymous online communities, where safety mechanisms are weaker or absent, potentially exposing them to even greater risks (Ofcom 2022; The Guardian 2025; AVPA 2026a).

Age Verification: Technology, Privacy, and Digital Rights

Beyond the fact that age verification tools may require sensitive data—such as date of birth, biometric identifiers, or government-issued ID numbers—and that their collection and processing raise risks of misuse, particularly in centralized systems, the debate on age limits also involves a technical challenge that is often underestimated: how to verify age in an online environment in a way that is effective, legally sound, and respectful of user privacy.

The chosen method of age verification ultimately determines whether a ban on social media for minors is enforceable in practice, or whether it leads to extensive data collection without delivering real results. A wide range of technologies and strategies exist, each with its own trade-offs, particularly in terms of privacy and digital rights (EPRS, 2023). Ten main approaches can be identified:

1. Self-declaration is the most common method today—users simply enter their date of birth. However, it is easily bypassed and provides virtually no real protection.
2. Payment card verification requires a symbolic transaction to access a service or make purchases. It does not guarantee that the card is used by its rightful owner, and the minimum age for holding a card varies across countries.
3. Biometric methods use artificial intelligence to analyze facial features or voice. They offer higher accuracy but raise serious privacy concerns, as biometric data are among the most sensitive categories of personal information.
4. Behavioral analysis relies on browsing history, posted content, language use, or purchasing behavior. This is a less visible but highly intrusive method, potentially leading to profiling and excessive data processing.
5. Physical offline verification, such as in-person ID checks, is difficult to apply in the context of social media platforms.
6. Parental consent is used by some applications, but in practice it is rarely verified whether consent was actually given by a legal guardian.
7. Third-party attestation, where another user confirms a child’s age, is considered highly unreliable.
8. Digital identity verification allows users to prove their age through a state-provided system without sharing additional data. Some countries (e.g. Australia, Canada, China) already use this model. In the EU, the European Digital Identity Wallet is being developed to enable this approach.
9. Dedicated verification apps require users to install a certified application to access certain types of content. This model is being considered in France, for example, for access to adult content.
10. Document-based verification, such as submitting an ID card or passport during registration, provides a high level of assurance but requires users to share sensitive personal data, which may be exposed in case of data breaches or misuse.

Despite this wide range of tools, practical enforcement remains problematic, as children and adolescents quickly adapt their behavior to new restrictions. In practice, both technical and social circumvention strategies are common. The most frequent is entering a false date of birth during registration, which remains effective where robust identity verification is not in place. Another widespread method is using accounts belonging to parents or older siblings, allowing access without verification. Some users also create “alternative accounts” registered with an older age from the outset.

Technical tools also play a key role—particularly VPNs, which allow users to change their virtual location and bypass geographic or age restrictions. As seen in Australia following the introduction of stricter rules, online tutorials explaining how to circumvent restrictions appeared within days, and users began systematically experimenting with methods to mask their identity and devices.

This ongoing “cat-and-mouse game” highlights that technological restrictions often lag behind user behavior, as users share workarounds across platforms and adapt rapidly (Biggs, Swan, 2025).

Inspiration for Europe

In recent years, the European space has significantly intensified the debate on regulating children's and adolescents' access to social media. While the Australian model represents the first blanket ban at the state level, European countries are taking a more nuanced approach, combining age limits, parental consent, and mandatory technical verification in varying degrees. The result is a rapidly evolving regulatory patchwork that may eventually lead either to EU-level harmonization or, conversely, to further fragmentation across member states (AVPA, 2026c).

Within the European Union, France has put forward one of the most ambitious proposals, building on a long-standing digital age of consent set at 15. In 2026, the French parliament adopted legislation requiring the blocking of users under 15 and the deletion of their accounts, with a strong emphasis on robust age verification systems and limiting addictive platform design. Implementation is planned for September 2026. Similarly, Greece has announced a ban on social media for children under 15, set to take effect on January 1, 2027. A distinctive feature of the Greek model is its reliance on state digital infrastructure, particularly the Kids Wallet application, which is intended to serve as a tool for age verification and access control.

Nordic countries tend to combine stricter limits with technical and legal exceptions. Denmark has proposed a ban for users under 15, with a parental "override" option for children aged 13–14, relying heavily on national electronic identity systems. Norway is preparing legislation to introduce a 16-year age limit and ensure a uniform approach across school cohorts, with platforms bearing responsibility for verification. In Germany, a proposal to ban social media use for children under 14 and restrict it for those under 16 has gained political support, but faces potential constitutional challenges related to parental rights (AVPA, 2026c).

Poland is considering a ban for children under 15 alongside restrictions on mobile phone use in schools, including proposals for high financial penalties for platforms. Portugal has taken a less restrictive approach, requiring parental consent for users aged 13–16. Spain has announced plans to introduce a ban for users under 16, placing it among the stricter European proposals, although the legislative process is not yet complete. Italy remains more cautious, favoring an approach based on digital literacy rather than blanket bans, although it has already set the digital age of consent at 14. In the United Kingdom, outside the EU, further tightening is being discussed under the Online Safety Act, including raising the age limit to 16 and introducing mandatory measures to limit addictive platform features such as infinite scrolling (AVPA, 2026c).

Overall, the European approach can be characterized as a shift from declarative child protection toward active enforcement of age limits through technology and platform accountability. At the same time, a fundamental question remains: whether this direction is sustainable in the long term without significantly affecting digital privacy and the architecture of the internet.

Czechia's Approach to Regulating Social Media for Minors

The Czech debate on banning social media for children gained momentum in February 2026. The trigger was a statement by Prime Minister and ANO leader Andrej Babiš, who supported a ban on social media use for children under 15. He referred to foreign examples, particularly France, and framed his argument around protecting mental health and ensuring children's safety online. He also emphasized that, according to experts he consulted, social media are harmful to children and that the state should intervene (iDnes, 2026).

Shortly after, President Petr Pavel also addressed the issue and publicly supported restrictions for children under 15. He highlighted the impact of social media on children's perception of reality, arguing that they often lack the context needed to critically assess online content. He also pointed to the risks associated with online anonymity, including hate speech and abuse. According to the

president, bringing online rules closer to those of the offline world could significantly reduce some of these problems (iRozhlas, 2026).

Despite this alignment between the prime minister and the president, broader political consensus is lacking, including within the governing coalition. MP Matěj Gregor, for example, argued that effective age verification would likely require logging into social media using official identification, which he considers unacceptable from a privacy perspective. He does, however, support restrictions on social media use in schools. Other political figures have also expressed critical views. Ivan Bartoš warned that a blanket ban could effectively end anonymity on social media and push children toward less regulated parts of the internet. Similarly, MP Libor Vondráček emphasized the importance of personal freedom and rejected blanket bans as an inappropriate policy tool (Echo24.cz, 2026; iDnes, 2026; iRozhlas, 2026).

Public opinion appears more unified. A survey by the NMS agency found that 86–90% of Czech parents support restricting social media use for children, with 15 years being the most commonly suggested age limit. Respondents see the main benefits in protecting mental health, preventing addiction and cyberbullying, and reducing exposure to online predators. At the same time, they are aware of the risks related to enforcement challenges and rule circumvention, as well as concerns about personal data protection in the context of age verification (MaM, 2026).

Experts also play an important role in the debate. Researchers from Masaryk University’s IRTIS team caution against a blanket ban, noting the lack of strong evidence that such measures have a long-term positive impact on children’s mental health. They argue that social media also serve important functions for adolescents, particularly in maintaining social connections, and that bans may push children toward less regulated platforms where risks could be even greater. On the other hand, some experts and representatives of the non-profit sector support regulation, pointing to increasing psychological pressure on children, issues related to appearance and performance, cyberbullying, and contact with inappropriate individuals. In their view, age limits could help establish clear boundaries and ease the burden on parents (ČT24, 2026).

The debate in the Czech Republic is still taking shape, but it is likely to follow patterns already seen abroad: a clash between child protection, individual freedom, the role of the state, parental responsibility, and the power of global technology companies. It is becoming clear that the issue is not simply whether to ban or allow social media use, but rather what rules should govern the digital space and who should enforce them. At this point, the discussion becomes more complex. Moving from general principles to practical implementation raises a fundamental question: how to reliably verify users’ age without disproportionately infringing on privacy and anonymity—and how to ensure that platforms take such rules seriously.

National vs. EU-Level Regulation: Considerations and Recommendations

The choice between national and European-level regulation of social media for children is not just a technical issue—it is fundamentally a question of political power and control over the digital space. At first glance, the European level appears to be the logical solution, as digital platforms operate across borders and unified rules could prevent market fragmentation and inconsistent legal standards. Former Minister of Education Robert Plaga, for example, noted that “the leverage of Czechia is close to zero” and that without an EU framework, it is difficult to effectively compel major tech companies to change their practices (Zdravotnický deník, 2026). In practice, a common regulatory approach could simplify enforcement of age limits and create a unified framework for age verification across the EU. At the same time, however, it would significantly strengthen the role of central institutions in shaping the digital environment across Europe.

This is where a key concern emerges. Centralized EU regulation may lead to an expansion of digital surveillance, as control over identity verification and access to content shifts toward supranational structures and, indirectly, state or EU authorities. Instead of a decentralized ecosystem governed primarily by platforms, there is a risk of creating a system in which access to digital services becomes increasingly dependent on state-approved identity and subject to administrative oversight. The European Commission has already introduced the concept of an EU-wide age verification application linked to digital identity, enabling repeated proof of age across services (European Commission, 2026). While digital identity is presented as a privacy-enhancing tool, its practical implementation raises concerns about data concentration and the potential for expanded surveillance (see Rovenský, 2026).

By contrast, national regulation offers greater flexibility and can better reflect the societal preferences of individual countries. It allows for faster legislative responses and more precise consideration of local differences in children’s digital behavior, levels of media literacy, and public willingness to accept interventions in the online space. In practice, this means that countries can strike their own balance between protecting children and safeguarding privacy, rather than adhering to a single European model. However, this approach faces a significant limitation: weaker bargaining power vis-à-vis global platforms, which may bypass or only formally comply with national rules.

This creates a fundamental political dilemma. A national approach provides greater autonomy but lower effectiveness, while a European model promises stronger enforcement but carries increased risks of centralized oversight and standardization that may not align with local needs or societal sensitivities. This trade-off will be a key issue for the Czech debate moving forward.

Conclusion

The debate on banning social media for children is gradually shifting from the simple question of “yes or no” to a much broader and more complex discussion about the shape of digital society as a whole. On one side is the legitimate effort to protect children from psychological risks, manipulative platform design, and harmful content. On the other, there is a growing concern over whether blanket bans and age limits actually lead to a safer online environment—or whether they create new challenges related to privacy, user autonomy, and control.

A key finding of this analysis is that regulation alone, without effective and ethically acceptable age verification, remains largely declaratory. Technological solutions do exist, but none are without trade-offs—ranging from low reliability to the risk of large-scale collection of sensitive data and the creation of infrastructure that could enable digital surveillance. It is precisely at this point that the broader direction is decided: whether child protection becomes part of a wider system of digital identity control, or remains a limited and targeted policy tool.

Both European and national levels of regulation represent distinct approaches, neither of which is clearly optimal. The European model promises greater effectiveness and uniform rules, but also concentrates power in central institutions and increases the risk of normalizing large-scale oversight of the digital space. National approaches preserve greater political control and flexibility, but at the cost of weaker enforcement against global platforms.

Ultimately, the issue goes beyond the regulation of social media. It reflects a broader challenge of balancing protection, freedom, and control in the digital age. The choices made in this area will have long-term consequences—not only for children and young people, but for the future shape of the internet itself.

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