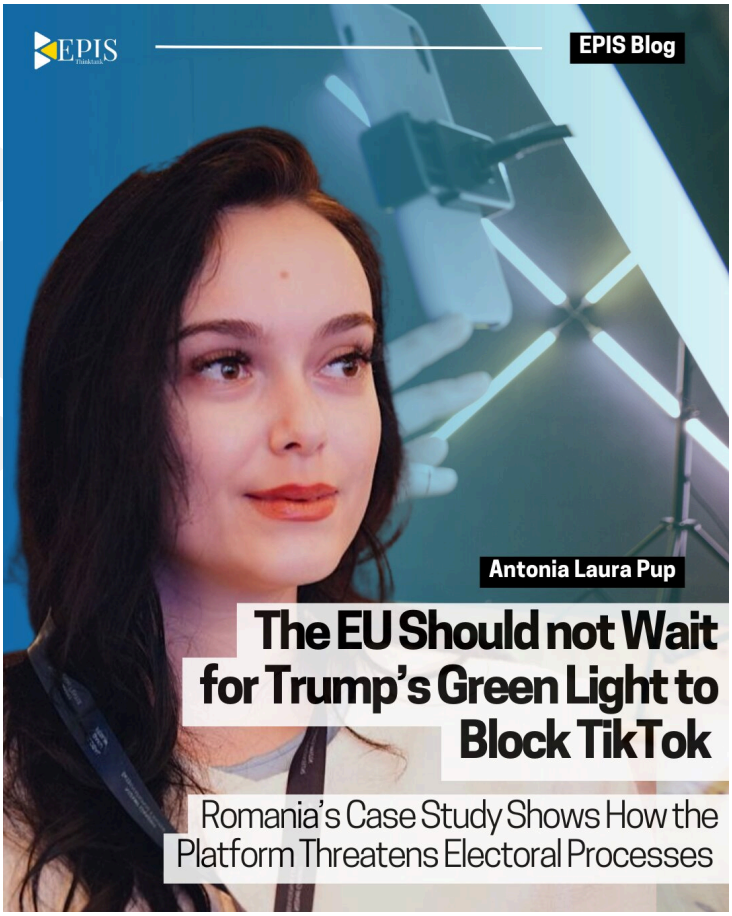
The EU Should not Wait for Trump's Green Light to Block TikTok

28 FEBRUARY 2025

AntoniaLaura Pup



Romania's case study should inform the European policymakers' decision to enforce an EU-wide ban on TikTok — without waiting for Trump to take the lead. The first round of Romania's November 2024 presidential elections was won by Călin Georgescu, a candidate with no political party and no funds, backed by 5'000 fake accounts and 10 millions fake followers on TikTok amplified two weeks before the elections and the platform's decision to favour him by not marking his content as electoral. Although the

national electoral authority issued a legal order requiring that his content shall be removed because it does not comply with the national regulations of electoral marketing, both the candidate and TikTok refused to take actions for aligning with the rules. The CEO of TikTok was called to testify in the European Parliament regarding his platform's role in the Romanian elections.

With 23% of the vote, this "TikTok candidate" outvoted the competitors of the two mainstream political parties in Romania, the Social-Democratic Party (PSD) and the National-Liberal Party (PNL). This example shows the vulnerability of the European electoral ecosystem is to TikTok, a platform that takes advantage of the ambiguities of the Digital Services Act and the slow nature of European bureaucracy to change the rules during the political game. The EU's Digital Services Act grants primary authority to the European Commission rather than to national governments in negotiating with social media platforms, which leaves the national regulators with little room to ensure that social networks take steps to ensure the legality of electoral marketing. However, to refer the matter to the European Commission is not the most effective course of action when social networks refuse to comply with the regulations during an ongoing election, and every campaign day counts.

Romania's Constitutional Court decided to annul the first round of the presidential elections by a unanimous vote, after the declassification of documents by Romanian secret services proving malign influence. However, TikTok managed to get away with it, still functioning and without being fined. While Romania will have its new round of presidential elections in May 2025, the problem of over relying on TikTok's willingness to respect the Digital Services Act and ensure the integrity of electoral promotion persists. The status quo makes the EU worryingly dependent on a social media platform controlled by China, a player with an opaque strategic agenda that has a vested interest in seeing the European Union weak and divided. The dangerous dependence of democracies on TikTok was also highlighted in the case of Donald Trump, who decided to reverse the decision to ban the platform – a decision made by Congress and upheld by the Supreme Court – because TikTok would have been instrumental in winning young voters in his campaign. With scheduled elections around the corner in Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic, European decision-makers should see Romania's case as a precedent that could be replicated with all too great ease in their own countries at minimal costs.

The French Service for Oversight and Protection against Foreign Digital Interference (VIGINUM), an authority subordinate to France's General Secretariat for Defence and National Security, released a comprehensive report analysing how algorithms were manipulated in the Romanian presidential election and what the risks are for France. In its conclusions, French representatives stated regarding TikTok that "malicious foreign actors could be tempted to choose this platform — due to its growing role among certain

audiences — to implement the same operational plan, either with the aim of disrupting an electoral event or launching specific themes in the French digital debate space".

Furthermore, the report highlights the ease with which TikTok users can be exposed to a particular topic without the platform moderating the content presented or deeming it false, as they are obliged to do under the Digital Services Act. The French report shows that the manipulation of the algorithm is possible because the online platform does not respect its responsibilities to moderate and label content, despite these regulations. All these findings show that TikTok is currently a perfect laboratory for hostile actors to exert their influence, manipulate European elections, and disproportionately promote candidates favourable to their own agenda to the TikTok audience. Moreover, the case of Romania precisely exposed how easy it is for illicit financial flows to be used for damaging the integrity of electoral campaigns, while remaining under the radar.

The EU has already taken steps that signal its leaders are aware of the risks associated with TikTok's growing influence and lack of algorithm transparency. The European Parliament has already decided in 2023 to ban TikTok on staff phones. A Union-wide ban would show that the EU takes the concept of digital strategic autonomy seriously and is willing to make the Digital Services Act a flexible instrument that can effectively combat malign interference in elections. Without waiting for Trump to decide what he will do with TikTok, taking the initiative to ban this platform closely linked to the Chinese communist government would show that the EU is a geopolitically powerful actor ready to defend its own values. This would also send a strong signal to Trump, signaling that the EU has learned to speak the language of power and will not be intimidated by Elon Musk's attempts to question the soundness of the Union's electoral rules. The time for strong signals has come, and the EU shall not shy away from using them when the very backbone of our democracies is under attack.