

# Profiting from Propaganda

---

*How Meta Benefits from  
Pro-Kremlin Election  
Meddling Ads in Moldova*

Reset.



## About the Authors and Organizations:

### Aleksandra Atanasova

#### Reset.

##### Reset.Tech

Reset.Tech is a fully independent global enterprise with not-for-profit operations in North America, Europe, and Australia. The organization’s mission is to guard against these digital threats to our security, safety, and fundamental rights. It seeks to “reset” the connection between media and democracy to restore the promise of technology that works for people and free expression.

### Andrei Rusu



##### WatchDog.md

WatchDog.md is a think tank and civil society community based in the Republic of Moldova. This community brings together a diversity of experts in different fields to develop, analyze, and evaluate public policies. The organization aims to create an environment conducive to the democratic development of Moldova.



# Executive Summary

An ongoing pro-Kremlin influence campaign has paid **Meta** up to 300,000 euros over 18 months in an attempt to influence Moldova's presidential elections and EU referendum. It is **Facebook's** most profitable ad campaign for the entire country, representing almost a quarter of the total political ad spend on the platform in Moldova since August 2020. This report investigates the scope and methods of this ad campaign.

The campaign started on the official page of the Moldovan politician and pro-Kremlin oligarch Ilan Shor to promote his party's political agenda. After the U.S. government sanctioned him in October 2022 for ties to Russia, the ad campaign moved to a network of inauthentic pages with an unclear source of funding.

This analysis maps over 150 inauthentic **Facebook** pages activated to run ads spreading hate speech and disinformation, including deepfake videos of President Maia Sandu, to promote Shor's pro-Kremlin political agenda.

The inauthentic advertisers belong to a network with a size of up to 340,000 automatically generated pages. Pages from the same network have also been used on other political and scam campaigns, including the ongoing Doppelganger campaign targeting EU audiences with pro-Kremlin propaganda. Our analysis shows **Meta** takes action only against some of the ads and some of the active advertisers, overlooking the broader network of latent pages on the platform.

Despite clear Terms of Service violations for content, misrepresentation of advertiser identity, and coordinated inauthentic behavior, **Meta** allowed most of the ads to run for the duration of their budget. At the time of this report's publication, some of the pages we identified were still running ads promoting Shor's agenda.

This campaign affects Moldova during a critical period of vulnerability to Russia's aggression, showing how **Meta** is not devoting enough attention to election security in Eastern Europe as a whole.



# Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
Political Context	5
Analysis	5
Methodology	7
<b>2. Investigation Timeline</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3. The Campaign</b>	<b>9</b>
Campaign Narratives and Content Analysis	10
Content Moderation	10
Ad Transparency	12
<b>4. The Advertisers</b>	<b>13</b>
Rebranding Phase	14
Advertising Activity	15
Advertiser Verification and CIB Detection	16
<b>5. The Network</b>	<b>17</b>
Mapping the Network	18
Advertising Activities	20
Interventions Against ToS Violations	23
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>24</b>



# 1. Introduction

This investigation is the result of a year-long partnership between Reset.Tech and the civil society group [WatchDog Moldova](#). We analyze the scope of a pro-Kremlin influence campaign on **Facebook** that has been allowed to operate on behalf of a U.S.-sanctioned oligarch. Our findings suggest that **Meta** is failing to properly scrutinize political advertising in Eastern Europe, despite a high likelihood of Russian propaganda and disinformation. Although our investigation only looks at Moldova, it serves as a litmus test for how the company approaches foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) campaigns – and profits from them – in the context of elections in a vulnerable region.

## Political Context

Moldova is torn between a pro-Western government in Chisinau and the pro-Russian separatist regions Transnistria and Gagauzia. A recent analysis showed that [Russia's malign interference](#) in Moldova has been on the rise since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Despite its EU-aligned leadership, Moldova's ability to resist Moscow's economic and political influence remains limited. [Russia has further intensified](#) its efforts to divert the country from integrating with the EU since the accession negotiations began in December 2023.

Moldova is holding two key elections in October 2024. First, the incumbent President Maia Sandu is seeking re-election to continue the country's pro-European course. Secondly, and more significantly, Moldovans will vote on a referendum about whether they want to join the EU or not. Russia is expected to step up its attempts to interfere in both issues.

## Analysis

We analyzed one long-term, high-budget advertising campaign launched on **Facebook** on behalf of Ilan Shor, a Moldovan politician and businessman with known financial ties to the Kremlin. The campaign has been running with fluctuating intensity from October 2022 onwards and throughout 2023, with a distinct peak in activity connected to the local elections held in the country in November 2023. This shows the campaign's clear intent to promote electoral uncertainty and undermine Moldova's pro-Western government. The campaign is still continuing to this date (March 2024), and we expect that it will even intensify in the context of the presidential elections and the EU referendum later in 2024.

Ilan Shor has a checkered past. In 2014 he participated in a criminal conspiracy to drain Moldovan banks of over \$1 billion. He fled to Israel to evade prosecution and was convicted in 2017 in absentia to seven years in prison for his role in these financial crimes. Still in absentia, he was elected as an MP in 2019 and re-elected in 2021. Despite his criminal convictions, he remained a relatively popular politician in Moldova. His overt Kremlin affiliation was recognized by the West in 2022. In October 2022, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) at the U.S. Department of the Treasury first [imposed sanctions on Mr. Shor](#) for foreign interference in the Republic of Moldova, including by receiving



Russian financial support for his political party and working with Moscow-based entities to undermine the country's EU accession. Since then, he has been sanctioned by several other Western governments: [the U.K.](#) (December 2022), the [EU Council](#) (April 2023), and [Canada](#) (June 2023). Shor's pro-Russian political party was banned in Moldova in June 2023.

Despite these sanctions, **Meta** allowed advertising on his behalf to appear on the platform, targeting audiences in Romanian and Russian for the past 18 months. His official **Facebook** page ran ads worth 14,000 euros for over a month after the U.S. sanctions were imposed in October 2022.

Later on, the advertising activity continued with the help of a coordinated network of inauthentic anonymous pages, launched with the sole purpose of continuing the campaign. The pages from the advertising network were neither officially affiliated with a political party or politician, nor were they subjected to any authorization process to verify the advertiser's identity. These breach **Meta's own policies** on legitimate political advertising and [its guidance on ads](#) about social issues, elections, or politics.

Reset.Tech and Watchdog Moldova [published findings](#) about the campaign's initial stages in February 2023, when a small group of inauthentic pages spent a maximum budget of 23,000 euros on ads promoting Ilan Shor and his political party. **Meta** took no action to better monitor the advertising ecosystem in Moldova after our first investigation. Some of the pages we identified back in February 2023 are still active to this day.

Our [second alert](#) came out in December 2023. We calculated a maximum advertising budget of almost 280,000 euros spent on behalf of Ilan Shor throughout 2023, aimed at shifting the vote at November's local elections and eroding support for President Maia Sandu's pro-EU stance. In February 2024, [we presented the findings](#) at a webinar organized by the EU Disinfo Lab.

The campaign continues to this day with little interference from **Meta**. Although the platform deleted some of the pages we identified, new advertisers appeared in their place between February and March 2024, and **Meta** allowed them to spend a further 20,000 euros on ads that promoted the Kremlin's political agenda.

This investigation collects all available data on these ads and pages, focusing on the most intense phase of the campaign, which was between July and December of 2023. We found that **Meta** consistently neglected four serious risk areas: coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB), content moderation, ad verification practices, and ad transparency. In the following sections, we will highlight evidence showing the scope and quality of each risk area.

Although the sheer scale of this campaign makes it an outlier, it is by no means the only local pro-Kremlin campaign on **Facebook**. Our partners Watchdog Moldova continue to monitor **Meta's** systemic negligence in regulating political advertising on behalf of individuals sanctioned by Western governments for aiding Russia's destabilization efforts. Veaceslav Platon, who was [sanctioned by Canada in June 2023](#) for his ties to the Kremlin, launched a campaign on **Facebook** in Moldova worth up to 148,000 euros. Platon also launched advertising activities on **YouTube**.

Due to its focus on Moldova, the campaign we analyzed will likely remain out of scope for any assessment of systemic risk for **Meta** under Art. 34 of the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA). However, several pages of the network behind this campaign also promoted political ads linked to the [Doppelganger operation](#), targeting audiences in France and Germany with pro-Kremlin propaganda. Policymakers within the EU would therefore be well-advised to familiarize themselves with this campaign and study the network behind it.

Reset.



## Methodology

We first examined Ilan Shor's official Facebook page in October 2022 and reviewed its history and ad expenditures. In late 2022, after his official page discontinued advertising, our Moldovan partners started to see political ads launched by alternative Facebook assets that closely resembled the ads previously launched on Shor's official page.

We conducted keyword searches in Meta's Ad Library using phrases from the ads we had previously found and started to identify more inauthentic advertisers. Most of the mapped ads mentioned Ilan Shor's name in both Russian and Romanian, which served as our main indicator to include in the sample set and search for more ads.

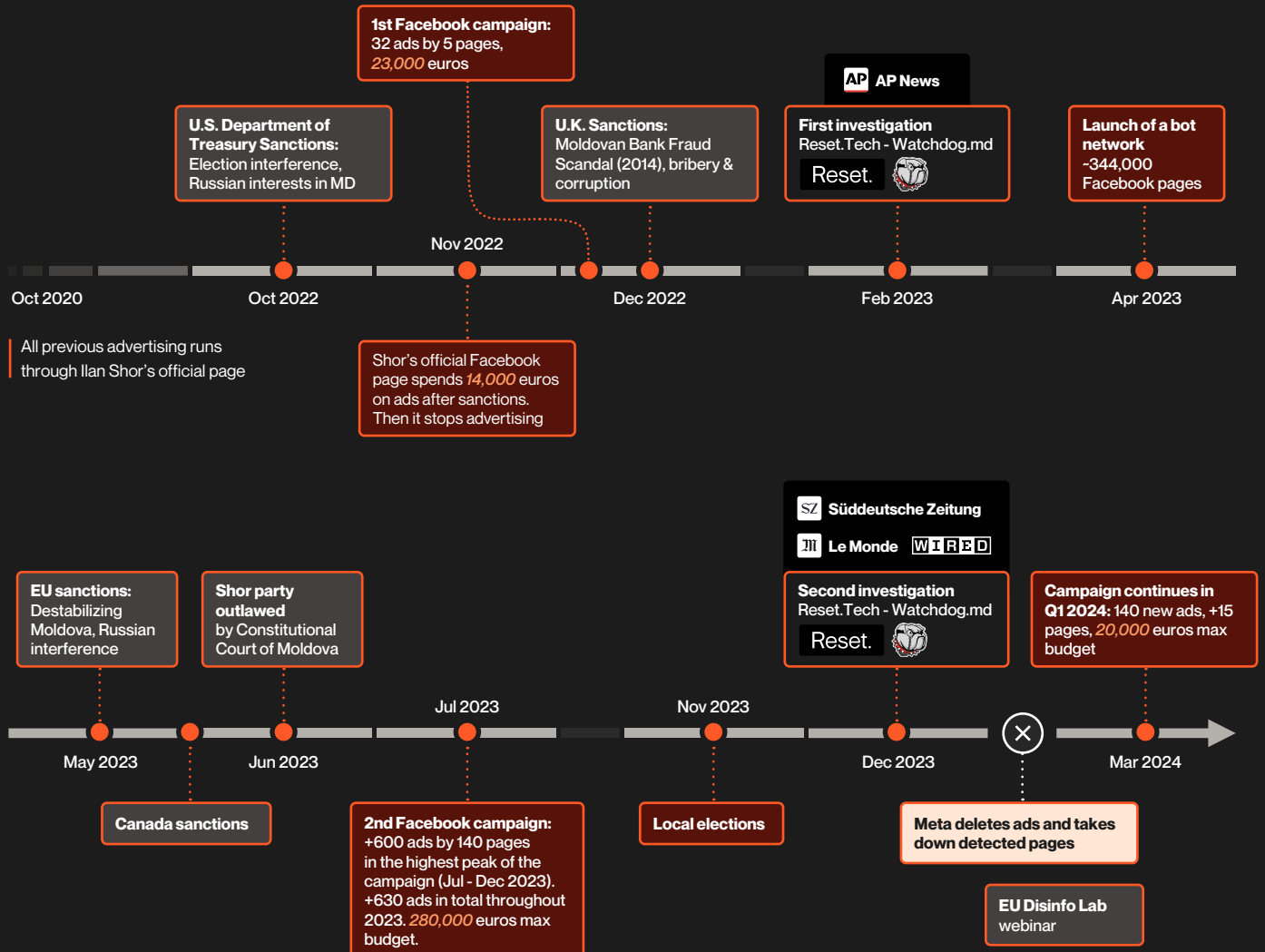
Since we did not perform regular searches on Meta's Ad Library but instead focused on specific periods—prompted by our local partners who monitored for periods of campaign activation — it is likely that our sample does not represent all of the ads published by this network. Some of the ads may also have been removed by the platform before we could map them.

Meta's Ad Library does not give exact figures for the price of ads; instead, it provides a budget range. It also provides an estimated audience size, which is the number of accounts that match the advertiser's targeting criteria, and the number of impressions, which is the number of times the ad appeared on a screen. We calculated the budget of these ads by adding up the ranges of all the ads we found. All figures for ad spend are calculated in these ranges and are given as maximum budgets. The range for the total ad spend of the monitored campaign is between 190,000 and 300,000 euros. Similarly, we added up the impressions of all of the ads we found to get a total figure of how many times the ads appeared on a screen, which was 175 million times. This figure includes multiple appearances of the same users, rather than indicating 175 million separate users.





# 2. Investigation Timeline







# 3. The Campaign

We discovered and analyzed over 800 ads in the Russian and Romanian languages promoting Ilan Shor's political objectives in Moldova from October 2022 to March 2024. All of the ads were launched by anonymous pages with no connection to Ilan Shor's official Facebook page. The pages exhibited clear signals for coordinated inauthentic behavior. The ads received 175 million impressions in total.

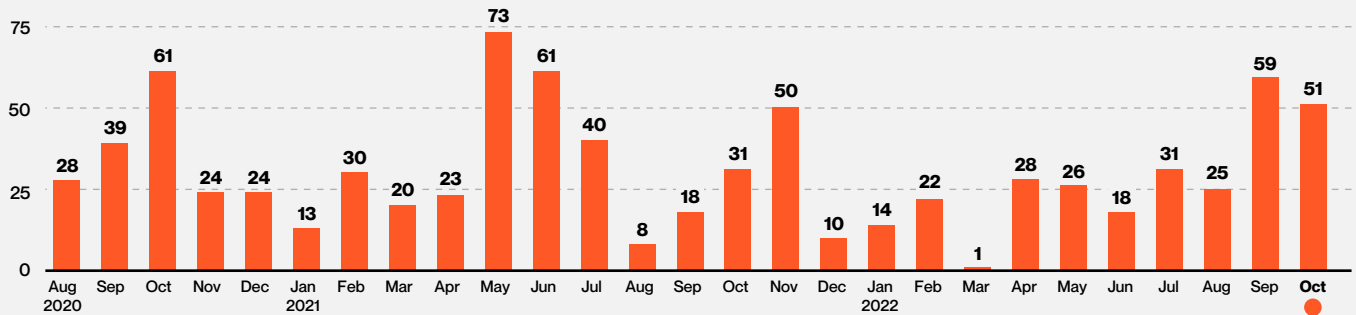
The first phase of the campaign was launched by five anonymous pages between October and November 2022. The second phase commenced in 2023 and involved more than 145 anonymous pages.

The current investigation focuses on the second phase of the campaign in its most intense phase after August 2023.

The total advertising budget allocated to the campaign ranged from 190,000 euros to a maximum of 300,000 euros. This budget constitutes a substantial portion of the overall Ad Spend in Moldova. Specifically, the upper limit represents almost a quarter of the total budget for all Facebook ads related to "Social issues, elections, or politics" launched in Moldova since August 2020. According to data from Meta's Ad Library report, there were 44,245 ads totaling 1,202,672 euros during this period in Moldova.

## Political advertising on behalf of Ilan Shor (before and after U.S. sanctions)

Ads per month before the U.S. sanctions



Ads per month after the U.S. sanctions

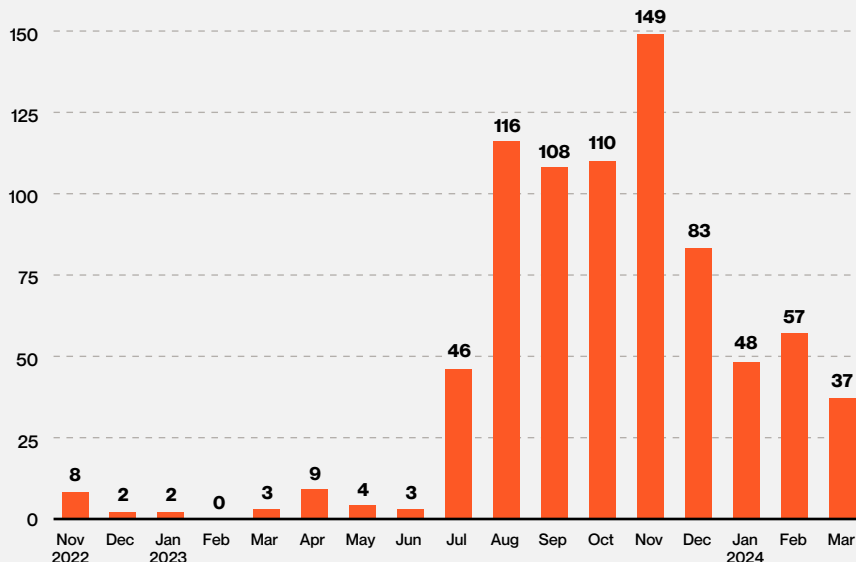


Figure 1: The chart shows the advertising activity done to promote Ilan Shor's political agenda in Moldova: before October 2022, when the U.S. sanctions were imposed, all ads were exclusively launched from pages affiliated with Shor (his personal page, the page of his political party). After October 2022, the campaign veered in an unexpected direction, employing anonymous assets to launch the ads.





## Campaign Narratives and Content Analysis

The advertising campaign tried to exacerbate divisions within Moldovan society by further isolating the autonomous regions from the rest of the country and promoting anti-government and anti-EU sentiments.

The main narrative revolved around Ilan Shor's investments in the autonomous regions of Transnistria and Gagauzia, praising him and his party as an alternative to the Moldovan government for regional economic stability. Many ads touted local initiatives started by Shor and his team: constructing road infrastructure; building schools, kindergartens, and hospitals; and organizing charity events and voluntary activities. A recurrent theme was his promise to deliver cheap gas to Moldova. In many ads, Shor himself proposed to mediate between different gas companies to ensure good deals for Moldovan citizens and therefore provide the country with better energy options. These narratives together suggested that Ilan Shor had the wealth to ensure Moldova's prosperity, thereby positioning him as a more capable leader for the country.

A second narrative directly targeted Maia Sandu and the current government, accusing them of corruption, incapacity, or outright neglect of Moldovan citizens. Many ads were aimed at undermining Moldova's pending EU membership and the EU itself.

Some ads promoted political candidates from the parties linked to Ilan Shor in the context of the local elections in November 2023 (e.g., his Chance party, which was barred from taking part in the elections because of its pro-Russian affiliation, as well as the original Shor party).

The content primarily consisted of videos and photos. The videos contained exclusively statements made by Ilan Shor on specific topics. All ads were bilingual, written in both Russian and Romanian, and the ad copy consistently maintained a lengthy and detailed format, devoid of external links. This indicates that the campaign's primary objective was to convey all information directly within the ads, making **Facebook** the sole amplification platform. The content creation tactics evolved as the campaign progressed over time: in December 2023, a series of ads mocking the EU contained AI-generated cartoons. We also discovered deepfake videos of President Maia Sandu.

---

## Content Moderation

Our analysis indicates that **Meta** mostly failed to detect and moderate the promoted content. Most of the ads ran on the platform for days and, in a few extreme cases, even weeks, and as a rule until the full depletion of their budgets. Only very few of the ads were removed, and a number of the pages were banned.

Almost all of the ads directly mentioned Ilan Shor or referred to political candidates connected to his parties. Around 40 percent of the ads directly promoted footage with Shor's video statements where his face was clearly visible, and some videos featured the official logo of the Shor party. Given these easy-to-detect visual indicators, along with the fact that most ads were labeled as advertising on social issues, elections or politics, **Meta** should have been able to readily and automatically identify content associated with a sanctioned politician. However, we found no evidence that the platform had done this.

Several ads featured deepfake videos of President Maia Sandu, which remained undetected on the platform for days, spending over 3,000 euros before being eventually removed. This raises significant concerns about the platform's preparedness to tackle sophisticated AI-generated content.



Library ID: 888873395836365  
● Inactive  
4 Nov 2023 - 7 Nov 2023  
Platforms   
Categories   
👤 Estimated audience size: >1M   
💰 Amount spent (EUR): €2K-€2.5K   
👁️ Impressions: >1M

**Moldova Prietenoasă**  
Sponsored · Paid for by Moldova Prietenoasă  
Library ID: 888873395836365

Uite cum ar fi trebuit să arate cu adevărat discursul președintelui

Library ID: 263161066268031  
● Inactive  
31 Oct 2023 - 2 Nov 2023  
Platforms   
Categories   
👤 Estimated audience size: >1M   
💰 Amount spent (EUR): €200-€299   
👁️ Impressions: 150K-175K

**Moldova Progresivă**  
Sponsored · Paid for by Moldova Progresivă  
Library ID: 263161066268031

Credeți că asta este democrație?

Figure 2: Screenshots from Meta Ad Library showing ads promoting deepfake videos of President Maia Sandu wearing a hijab, allegedly announcing her intention to resign just before the local elections.

Library ID: 596252499349173  
● Inactive  
1 Feb 2024 - 2 Feb 2024  
Platforms   
Categories   
👤 Estimated audience size: >1M   
💰 Amount spent (EUR): <€100   
👁️ Impressions: 1K-2K

**Moldova Strălucitoare**  
Sponsored · Paid for by Moldova Strălucitoare  
Library ID: 596252499349173

Ilan Șor: Experiența occidentală ca o cerință neoficială pentru autoritățile moldovenești.

Ilan Șor s-a întrebat de ce într-o țară cu atât de multe talente, pozițiile guvernamentale superioare sunt adesea ocupate de cetățeni din România vecină. Pentru moldoveni, ușile se deschid doar dacă au "experiență occidentală", cum este cazul lui Igor Zaharov, al cărui...

Library ID: 391333843456938  
● Inactive  
26 Dec 2023 - 31 Dec 2023  
Platforms   
Categories   
👤 Estimated audience size: >1M   
💰 Amount spent (EUR): €600-€699   
👁️ Impressions: 700K-800K

**Moldova în armonie**  
Sponsored · Paid for by Moldova în armonie  
Library ID: 391333843456938

Ilan Șor a luat apărarea gazului accesibil pentru toți locuitorii Moldovei.

Politicianul și filantropul Ilan Șor a criticat aspru decizia de retragere a licenței companiei "Nordgaz". A indicat consecințele negative ale acestei decizii pentru populația Moldovei: "Sandu și PAS încearcă cu orice preț să împiedice accesul oamenilor la gaz ieftin. Motivul este simplu. În loc să se gândească la oameni, se gândește la propriile lor..."

Library ID: 401381852302958  
● Inactive  
30 Jan 2024 - 1 Feb 2024  
Platforms   
Categories   
👤 Estimated audience size: >1M   
💰 Amount spent (EUR): €500-€599   
👁️ Impressions: 400K-450K

**Moldova mea, Moldova ta**  
Sponsored · Paid for by Moldova mea, Moldova ta  
Library ID: 401381852302958

Ilan Șor despre călătoria Sandu: "Șarmanca despre integrarea europeană"

Sandu și-a început călătoriile electorale de la Ziua lucrătorului din administrația locală. Conform spuselor lui Ilan Șor, în loc să se ocupe de problemele reale ale Moldovei, Sandu continuă să vorbească despre integrarea europeană, deși majoritatea cetățenilor nu cred în...

Figure 3: Screenshots from Meta Ad Library showing ads promoting AI-generated content spreading pro-Kremlin narratives and anti-EU propaganda the local elections.

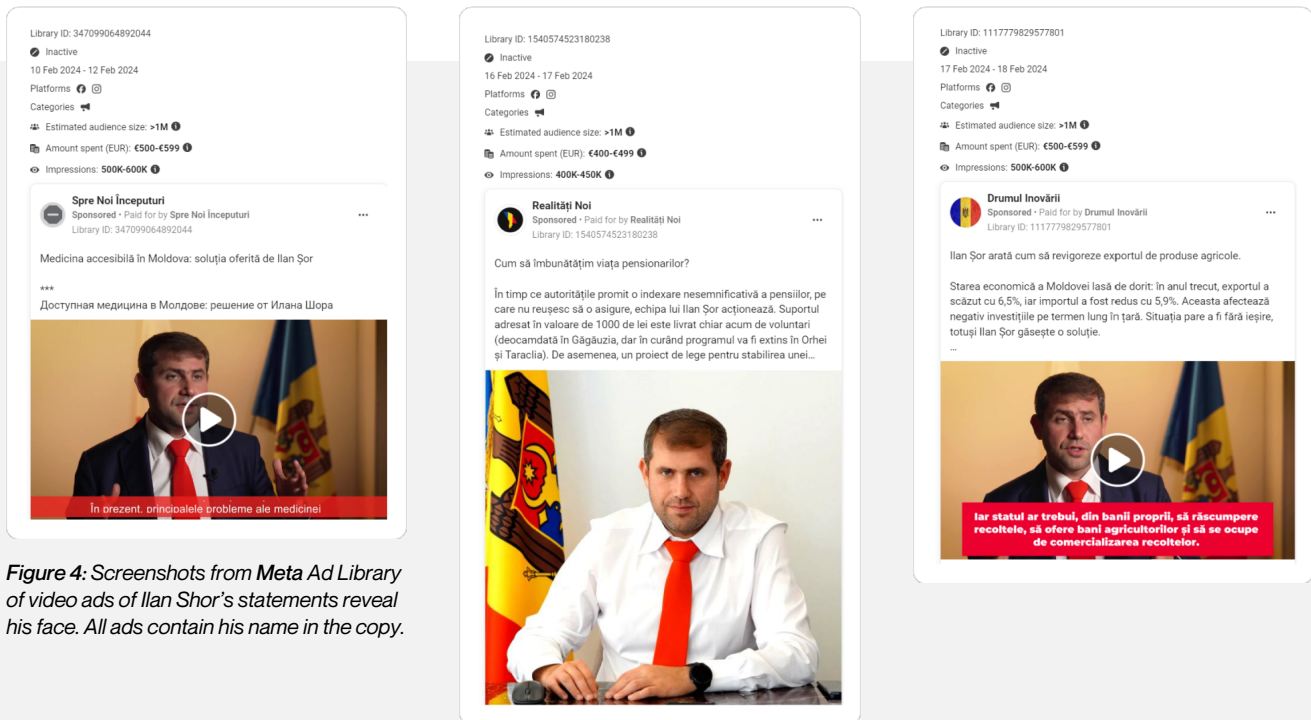


Figure 4: Screenshots from Meta Ad Library of video ads of Ilan Șor's statements reveal his face. All ads contain his name in the copy.

## Ad Transparency

Similar to other advertising campaigns that we have investigated, we found significant transparency issues within Meta's ad archives in this campaign. Certain pages and ads had been removed without any record of their advertising budget, hindering researchers' ability to access complete data on the political campaign. Consequently, we cannot discount the possibility that more ads were launched but were deleted before we could collect them.

Most ads disclosed a range of their budget and reach (impressions). However, in some instances, we identified political ads lacking data on budget, reach, or demographic targeting. This omission prevented us from incorporating them into the overall calculation.





## 4. The Advertisers

We identified an advertising network of more than 150 Facebook pages running these political ads. The pages exhibited clear patterns of coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB). These were mostly anonymous assets used solely to launch ads. Most pages had no history of prior posting activity. Those pages clearly operated in coordination when posting the ads and displayed similar characteristics such as branding identity, usernames, and bio details, making them easy to identify as a network.

We categorized the identified 150 advertisers into three distinct groups of pages:

1. More than 60 percent of the advertisers consisted of recently created pages that belong to one massive network of automated accounts (bots). The network was launched between March and April 2023 and potentially contains more than 340,000 latent pages (further details about the network in Section 6). Very few assets from this network are active pages; most of the pages are dormant but for a small number of active advertisers. The pages used for advertising on behalf of Ilan Shor were renamed and rebranded with fictitious identities to resemble Moldovan media outlets before paying for promotion.
2. A smaller group of the identified advertisers consisted of recently created pages directly branded with fictitious identities. Unlike the first group, these pages do not belong to a bigger ecosystem of accounts. Instead, the assets were directly created and branded as Moldovan-based entities. All of these pages were created in 2023, often days before the actual advertising started.
3. An even smaller group of older pages, some dating as far back as 2012-2013, were repurposed, rebranded, and renamed before the launch of ads in a Moldovan political context. These pages were either purchased or illicitly expropriated from their original owners and later filled with political content targeting Moldova. In some cases their organic content was not deleted before launching the ads: one extreme example is a page that used to be associated with a pastry shop in Barcelona before it was hacked. We identified a post from 2017 published by the owner of the page in which she admitted that she had lost control of her personal profile. The page went silent for years before suddenly being renamed and publishing ads about Moldova in July 2023. The older organic posts by the page written in Spanish/Catalan and featuring photos of cakes and pastries were still available on the page's newsfeed, while the Ad Library showed ads run by the same page in Russian about Ilan Shor. In December 2023, Meta deleted the page.



## Rebranding Phase

Before starting the advertising activity, all inauthentic pages are rebranded, which includes changing their profile photos, cover photos, usernames, page categories, and bio details. This prepares them to resemble media outlets or patriotic communities based in Moldova. The list below outlines the steps.

1. The page's visual identity is altered. Each page showcases profile photos containing the Moldovan flag or coat of arms, while their cover photos display landscapes from Moldova.
2. The pages are given new usernames to mimic media outlets or patriotic communities: e.g., "Moldova 24/7," "Moldova 360," "Central News Moldova," "News Focus Moldova," "Moldova for all," "Home Is Moldova," "Moldovans Can," "Inspiration For Moldova."
3. The page categories were changed to one of three media-related categories: "News & media website," "Newspaper," or "Journalist." The page bio is rewritten to contain "inspirational" phrases, quotes, or proverbs written in Romanian, such as "In every act of kindness there is love for the motherland" or "A person is omnipotent as long as he is not busy with anything." The contact website is set to google.com, and the page location is changed to Chisinau.

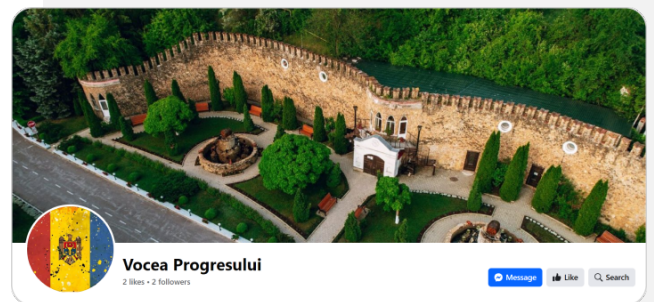


Figure 5: Screenshots showing the rebranded Facebook pages featuring profile photos with the Moldovan flag or coat of arms. A reverse image search of the cover photos shows that they were taken at various landmarks across Moldova. The examples above are from a wooden church preserved in the Village Museum in Chisinau, the Dniester River, and the Milestii Mici winery.



Figure 6: Screenshots showing rebranded Facebook pages featuring an inspirational quote in Romanian, e.g., the quote on the first bio reads, "Success is the ability to go from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm," the page category is changed to relate to media, the location is set to Chisinau, and there are uniform contact details in the bio section.



# Advertising Activity

The posting activity and content of the ads reveal evident coordination among the pages. They employ identical ad copy across various pages. This should have aided their detection by the platform if Meta had implemented content moderation from the beginning.

Figure 7 shows an example of coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) detected across three advertisers.

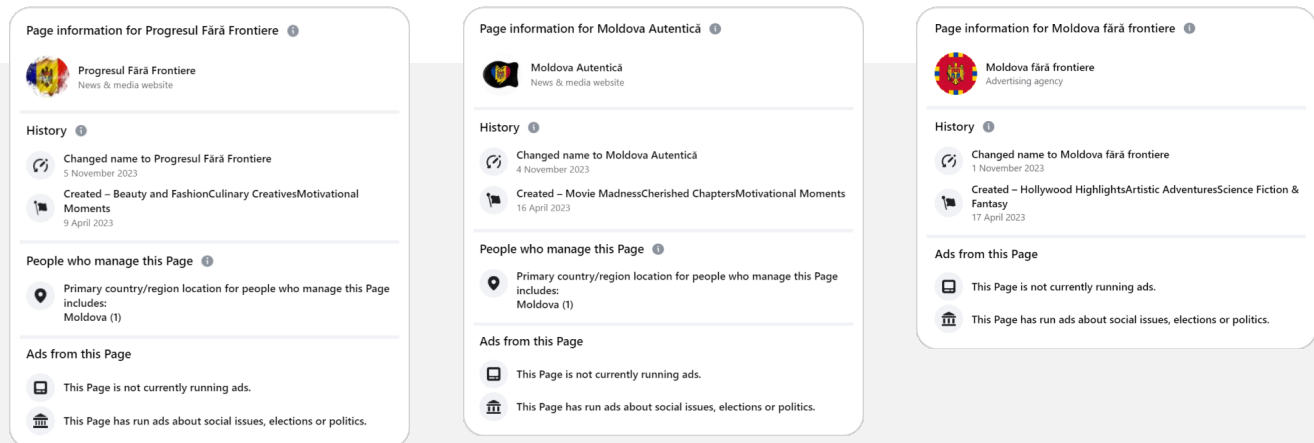


Figure 7: Screenshots from Facebook's Page Transparency section showing three pages from the network. All were created in April 2023, with usernames composed of a string of three key phrases ("Beauty and FashionCulinary CreativesMotivational Moments," "Movie MadnessCherished ChaptersMotivational Moments," "Hollywood HlghlightsArtistic AdventuresScience Fiction & Fantasy"), and their usernames were changed to "Progresul Fara Frontiere" (Progress Without Border), "Moldova autentica" (Authentic Moldova), "Moldova Fara Frontiere" (Moldova Without Borders) between November 1-5, 2023. After the rebranding, the pages remained inactive for a few weeks and then launched their first ads. The Transparency section shows that all three anonymous pages have run political ads.

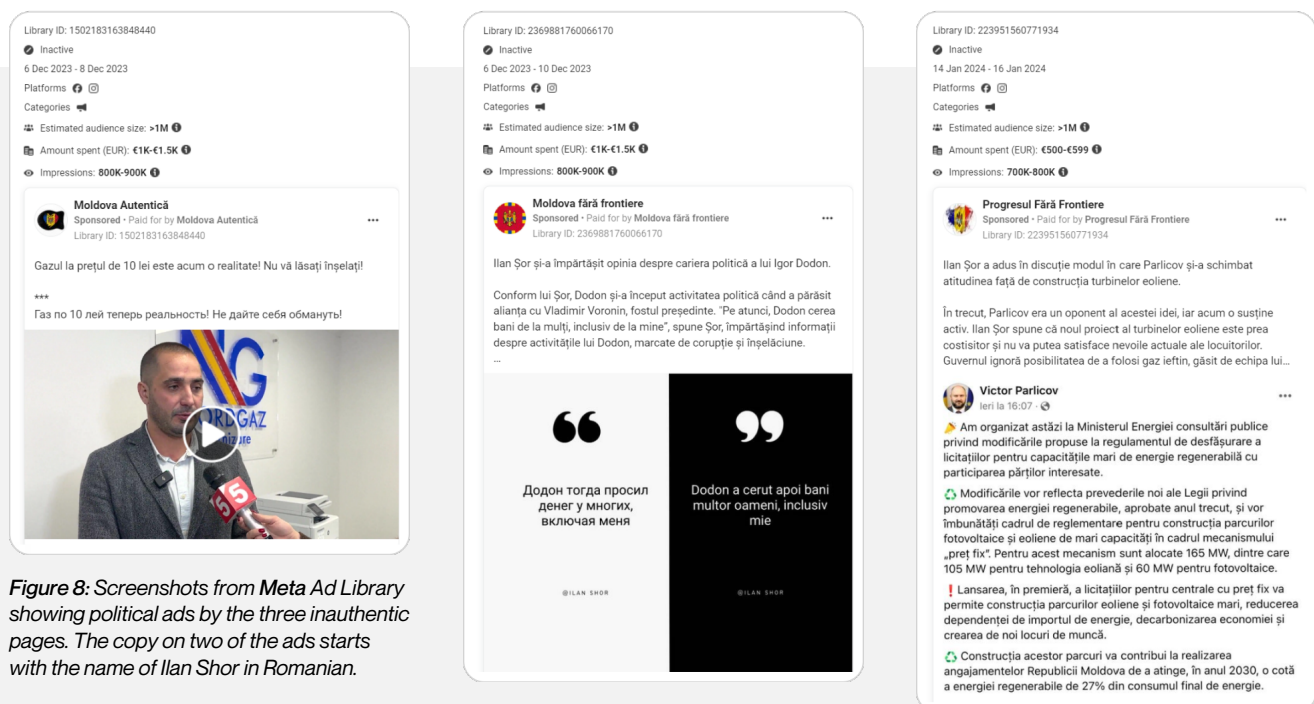


Figure 8: Screenshots from Meta Ad Library showing political ads by the three inauthentic pages. The copy on two of the ads starts with the name of Ilan Șor in Romanian.

Reset.



## Advertiser Verification and CIB Detection

Our findings highlight **Meta's** failure to adequately scrutinize political advertising in Moldova. Once a page from the inauthentic network was renamed and rebranded, it promptly began running political ads, sometimes within just a day after the rebranding. **Meta** apparently did not introduce any verification mechanism for the identity of the advertisers, despite these pages running political ads on the platform.

**Meta's** response to a clear case of coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) on the platform was inconsistent, despite the platform's clear policy prohibiting evident CIB campaigns. By December 2023, before several media outlets reported the findings from our second investigation, **Meta** had only deplatformed 14 pages engaged in advertising as a direct result of their political ads. It was not until WIRED featured our research in January 2024, requesting comment from the company, that the majority of advertisers discovered in 2023 were deplatformed. However, the campaign persisted throughout the first few months of 2024 with minimal intervention by **Meta**. At the time of writing this report (March 2024), 30 pages were still active on the platform.





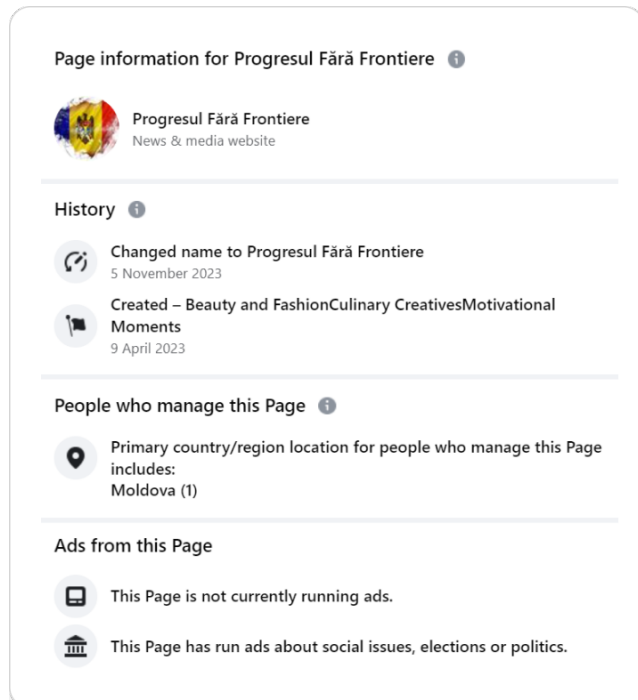


# 5. The Network

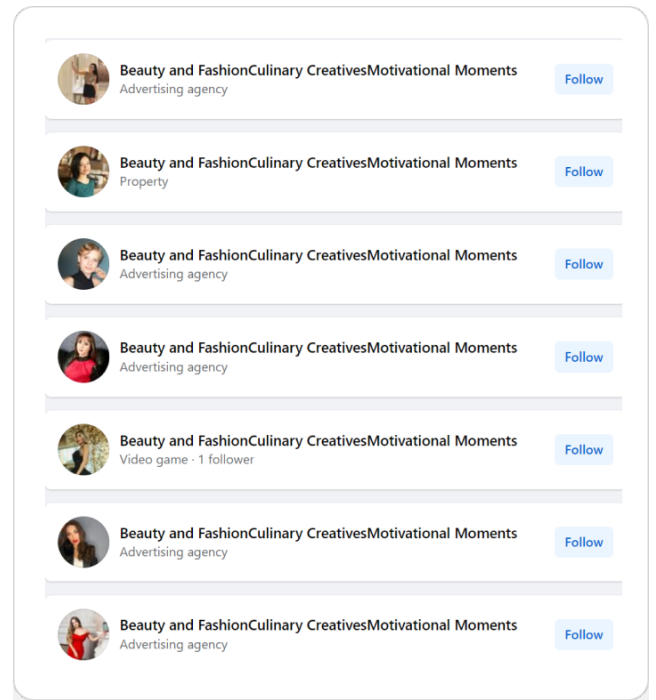
The first group of pages belongs to a vast network of automatically created accounts potentially consisting of more than 340,000 pages. Most of the pages from the network remain dormant but for a small number of active advertisers.

Before being rebranded to resemble Moldovan-based assets, the pages all had distinctive lengthy usernames composed of a string of three random keyphrases, such as "All About AnimalsHolistic HealthArt & Design," "Fit and FabulousMoments & MemoriesNeighborhood News," "Cinema CentralHolistic HealthArt & Design," and so on.

Most pages displayed the category "Advertising agency" before rebranding, later changed to media-related categories. The pages all used profile photos featuring women and girls.



*Figure 9: Screenshots from Facebook showing that the Transparency section of the page indicates that "Progresul Fara Frontiere" was created in April 2023 with the username "Beauty and FashionCulinary CreativesMotivational Moments." The page was renamed in November 2023 to "Progress Without Borders." After a dormant period of a couple of months, the page was activated in January 2024, and it launched 3 political ads worth 1,200 euros. This activity happened after Reset. Tech's alert about the campaign was reported in several media outlets in December 2023.*



*Figure 10: Screenshot from Facebook showing that other pages sharing the name "Beauty and FashionCulinary CreativesMotivational Moments" are also part of the network. These pages are currently dormant and have published neither posts nor ads. Based on how other pages in the network have been activated, it seems likely these dormant pages could be activated at any time.*



# Mapping the Network

We identified 88 basic key phrases used to create the randomized three-phrase strings of usernames. Each key phrase was used in one of the Positions (1, 2, or 3) to create the longer strings. There were no character spaces between the three phrases in the string.

We combined the various key phrases in each position and discovered 346 unique username strings used to create pages. Multiple pages reused the same three-phrase string as a username. The median number of pages associated with each of these usernames is 21.

Given that there are 16,200 possible key phrase string combinations and 21 pages per combination, we estimate that the bot network has a potential size of *around* 340,000 pages. We have no definitive evidence to suggest the exact size of the network; it could be smaller or even larger than this. Previous research by Reset.Tech has found that networks based on automatically generated pages with key phrase titles have similar dimensions (e.g. one automated network running political ads in Germany and France [that we mapped](#) in completion in June 2023 consisted of over 242,000 anonymous inauthentic pages).

The table below shows some of the username strings and the number of pages associated with the unique string (data from February 2024).

Page username	Number of pages with the same username
Geek OutPicture PerfectArt & Design	9
Innovative IdeasCooking ChroniclesArt & Design	11
Pet Lovers UniteDiscovering InnovationArt & Design	11
All About AnimalsCherished ChaptersScience Fiction & Fantasy	21
Style SavvyRecipe RevolutionsArt & Design	21
Cinema CentralAthletic AdventuresScience Fiction & Fantasy	23
Furry FriendsPage-Turning ReadsArt & Design	23
Beauty and FashionOnline ObsessionsArt & Design	23
Food FrenzyCrafty CreationsArt & Design	25
Travel JunkiesSocial Media StarsArt & Design	25
All About AnimalsHome Sweet HomeInspiration Station	25
Beauty and FashionBusiness BuildersEncouraging Energies	36
Food FrenzySuccess StoriesArt & Design	37

Table 1: List of Facebook usernames and the number of pages with the same username pattern.

In February 2024, we obtained page details for a sample of 21,700 pages belonging to the network. Given the number of possible key phrase combinations, we are certain the network is larger than the sample of pages we mapped in completion.

Most of these 21,700 pages were launched in March-April 2023, meaning the inauthentic network had remained undetected by Meta for over a year following its inception. The creation dates of the network coincided with the findings we had on the active advertisers: the fictitious group of Moldovan-based pages were all launched in April 2023.

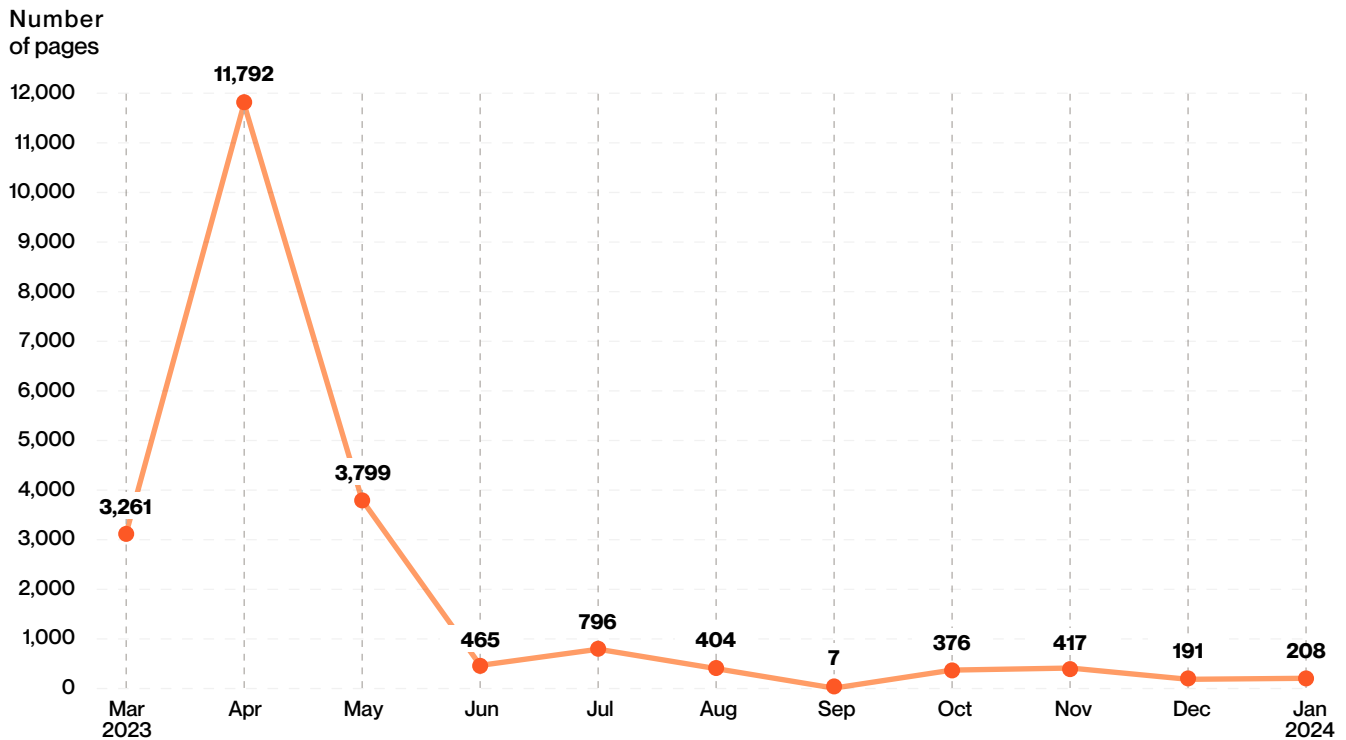


Figure 11: Creation dates for the sample of 21,700 mapped pages from the network.

Over 75 percent of the identified 21,700 pages are categorized as an "Advertising Agency," suggesting that advertising is the network's primary focus .

The visual identity of the pages is consistent across the network. Each page uses images of women and girls as their profile and cover picture. We sampled 250 profile photos used on these pages and found they were sourced from at least 35 domains associated with Russian/Ukrainian dating websites, indicating they were likely scraped from these websites and re-used on the pages. This in itself poses an issue with privacy violations, as our analysis indicates that these photos feature actual individuals. For a smaller sample of the analyzed photos, we found evidence that they have been used in romantic scam campaigns.

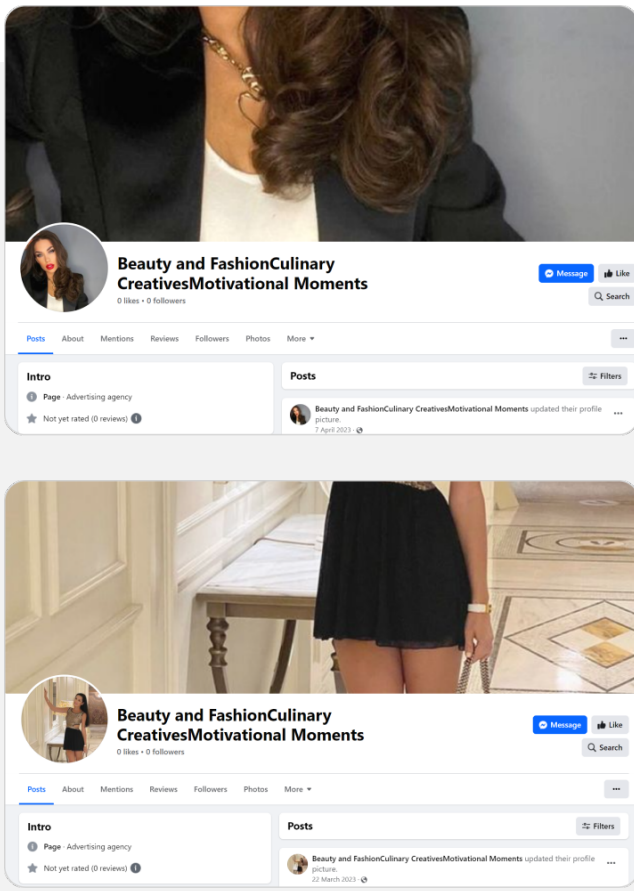


## Advertising Activities

Most of the pages from the network are dormant: they have no organic posting activity and run no advertising. However, a small fraction of the network has also been active in other advertising campaigns. We identified over 1,700 pages with the same three keyphrase username pattern that promoted ads in various scam campaigns. These scams comprised questionable investment schemes, online gaming, and suspicious medical supplements, including a large-scale Facebook scam campaign already analyzed by other researchers in the "[Facebook Hustles](#)" report from the Finnish software company CheckFirst. Pages from the network also promoted [political ads linked to the Doppelganger operation](#), targeting audiences in France and Germany with pro-Kremlin propaganda against Ukraine.

In February 2024, we identified 5,790 ads launched by Facebook pages belonging to the network. The ads reached audiences in most EU countries (21 Member States), accumulating a total audience of almost 31 million users in the EU. The advertising activity soared after July 2023, with the network's first campaign focusing on online games. The largest advertising effort was directed toward ads promoting dubious medical supplements.

We also identified instances of test ads—ads promoting content such as stock photos or incoherent copy—likely with the intention of assessing whether the ads would be approved, reach their target audiences, their targeting variables, or sustain some level of activity. In many instances, these test ads or "priming ads" were succeeded by actual scam ads. This tactic may be employed to gauge audience response and refine targeting before launching more deceptive or malicious advertising campaigns.



*Figure 12: Screenshots from Facebook showing dormant pages with the username "Beauty and FashionCulinary CreativesMotivational Moments" that have not yet been used as advertising assets. The profile/cover photos on most analyzed pages are identical, a strong indicator that the pages were created automatically by scripts or bots. The page category is usually "Advertising agency."*

Most pages belonging to the identified network lack location information in their Transparency section. This is a significant issue in itself, as it makes it impossible to conclude where the network is operated from. In the rare instances where we did identify a page location, the pages were primarily operated from the United States (79 pages) and Ukraine (73 pages).

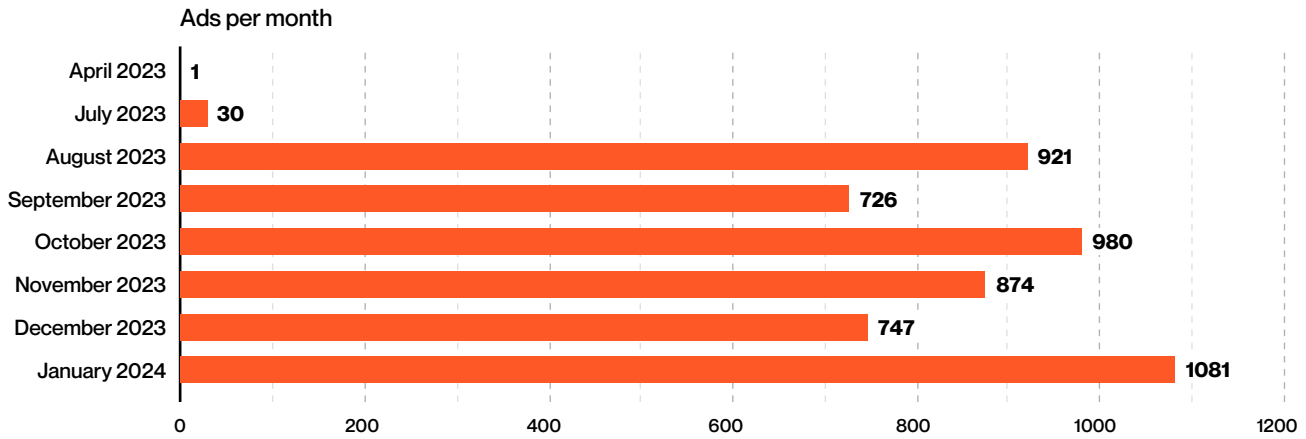


Figure 13: Number of ads launched by the network over time. The analyzed sample primarily consisted of scam ads from various campaigns. Only a small fraction, approximately 1.3 percent (77 ads), were political ads unrelated to Ilan Shor.

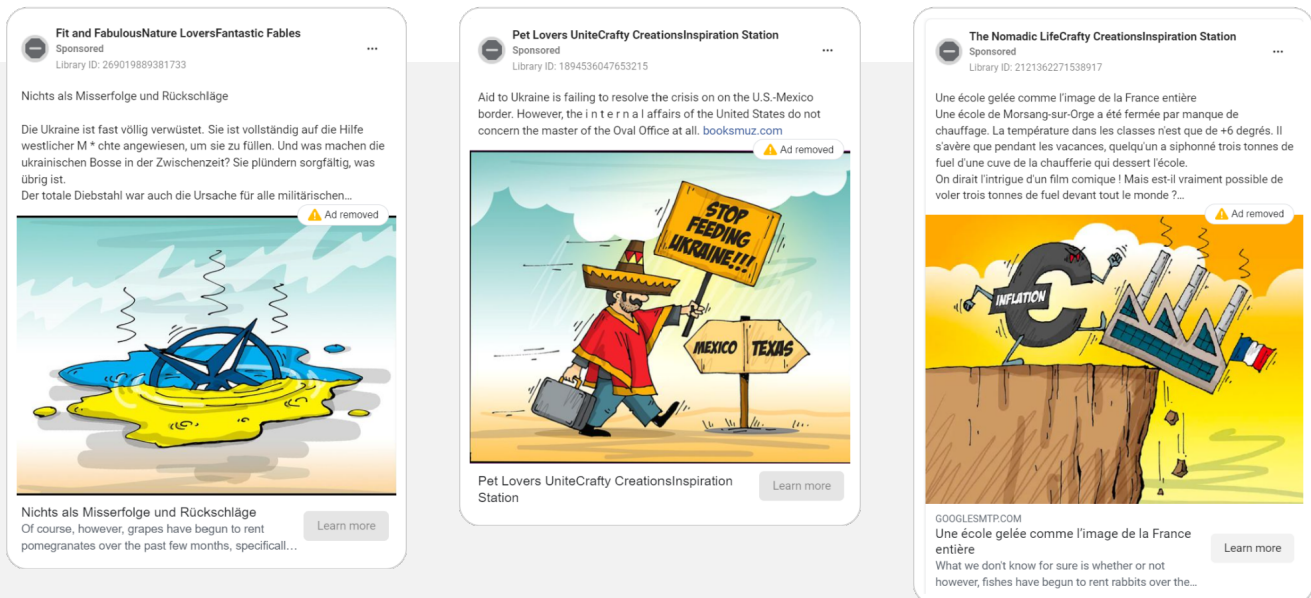


Figure 14: Screenshots from Meta Ad library showing political ads launched by the pages from the network targeting audiences in Germany and France as part of the Doppelganger operation. The network of advertisers was active around this campaign between December 2023 and January 2024.

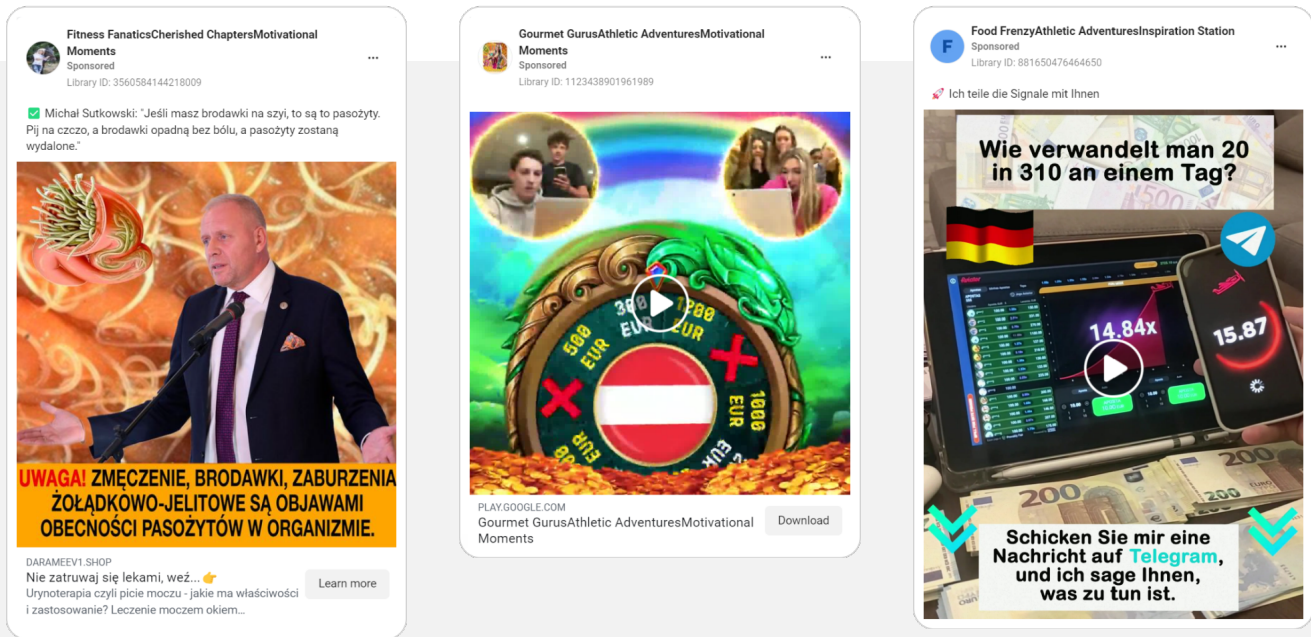


Figure 15: Screenshots from the Meta Ad library showing scam ads launched by pages from the network with campaigns promoting medical supplements, online games, and investment schemes.

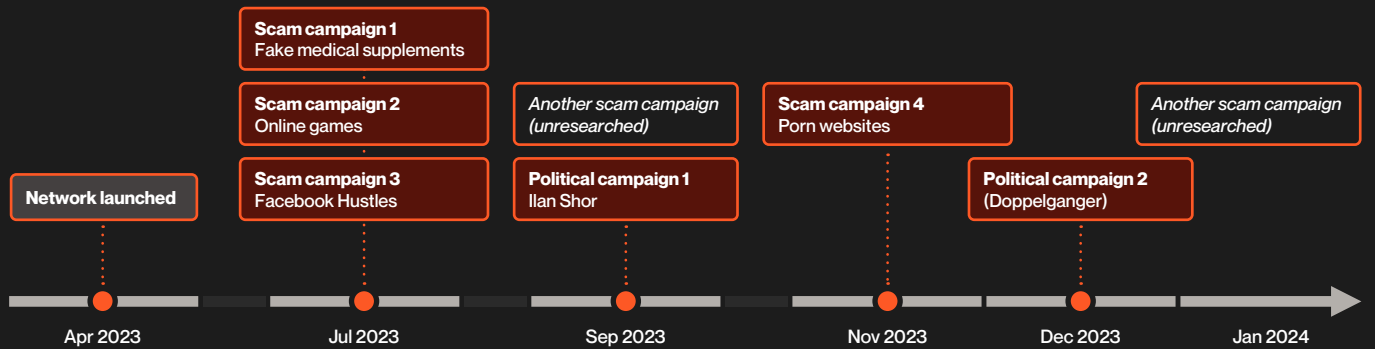


Figure 16: Timeline of the identified advertising campaigns launched by the network of pages between July 2023 and January 2024. The network launched four scam campaigns during the period on top of the two political campaigns (Doppelganger ads and the campaign on behalf of Ilan Shor). These four campaigns include two previously investigated by Reset.Tech and other researchers. The timeline clearly shows how pages are switched between political or financial scam campaigns, presumably to evade detection by the platform. For certain campaigns, such as the one promoting dubious and potentially hazardous medical supplements (also investigated by Reset.Tech), we observed continuous advertising activity throughout almost the entire analyzed period. In contrast, other campaigns were more condensed in duration.



## Interventions Against ToS Violations

The identified network, with a potential size of over 340,000 pages, continues to be active on **Meta** to this date, notwithstanding how easy it is to identify. The platform continues to take no measures against the network as a whole, i.e., against pages that have *not* produced ads, despite the fact that the mere existence of such networks directly violates the platform's policy on inauthentic behavior.

**Meta's** approach toward both the ads and the active advertisers from the network has been inconsistent and fragmentary. As of February 2024, the platform had removed 58 percent of the ads we outlined above (3,392 ads out of the total sample of 6,700); yet, many of the pages that launched these ads remained active and accessible, with open potential to launch new ads. We found no valid explanation as to why some scam ads had been deleted while others remained on the platform, especially considering the fact that the scam campaigns were identical.

Our findings suggest that **Meta** takes action only against some of the ads and some of the active advertisers, leaving the broader network of latent advertisers active on the platform. This raises the possibility that new pages could be activated for the same campaigns.

These findings align with previous reports by Reset.Tech on similar networks of automatically generated accounts conducting political and scam campaigns on **Meta**.





# 6. Conclusion

It is alarming and dangerous that a well-financed campaign of networked advertisements on a U.S. social media platform promotes the political agenda of an individual sanctioned by the U.S. and other Western governments, particularly in the context of Moldova's growing vulnerability toward the Kremlin's influence. Ilan Shor's political campaign on Facebook underscores the platform's systemic negligence regarding political advertising in Eastern Europe.

The case of Moldova can also be extrapolated to any context in the world where election disinformation and advertising are involved. One such example is the Doppelganger operation, an ongoing Facebook campaign for almost two years targeting countries in Western Europe with pro-Kremlin propaganda.

Our investigation raises questions about Meta's inconsistent content moderation, algorithmic detection of coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) and automated networks of pages, and lack of transparency regarding various advertising malpractices on the platform.

We have pointed out Meta's negligence toward massive ecosystems of automatically created accounts in previous investigations. The current report highlights yet another network of latent advertisers, which has been allowed to exist and run ads for almost a year (April 2023 — March 2024) without any significant interference from the part of the platform.

The investigation also highlights overlapping efforts on the part of malicious actors setting up advertising ecosystems on the platform: one Facebook network of latent advertisers is used simultaneously for two political campaigns targeting the EU (Doppelganger) and Moldova (Shor's campaign), as well as for several scam campaigns aimed at EU audiences.

## Disclaimer:

This report reflects the authors' views and is based on data available up to the date of publication. Subsequent changes may not be incorporated. This document is a product of professional research.

Copyright © 2024 Reset.Tech. All rights reserved.

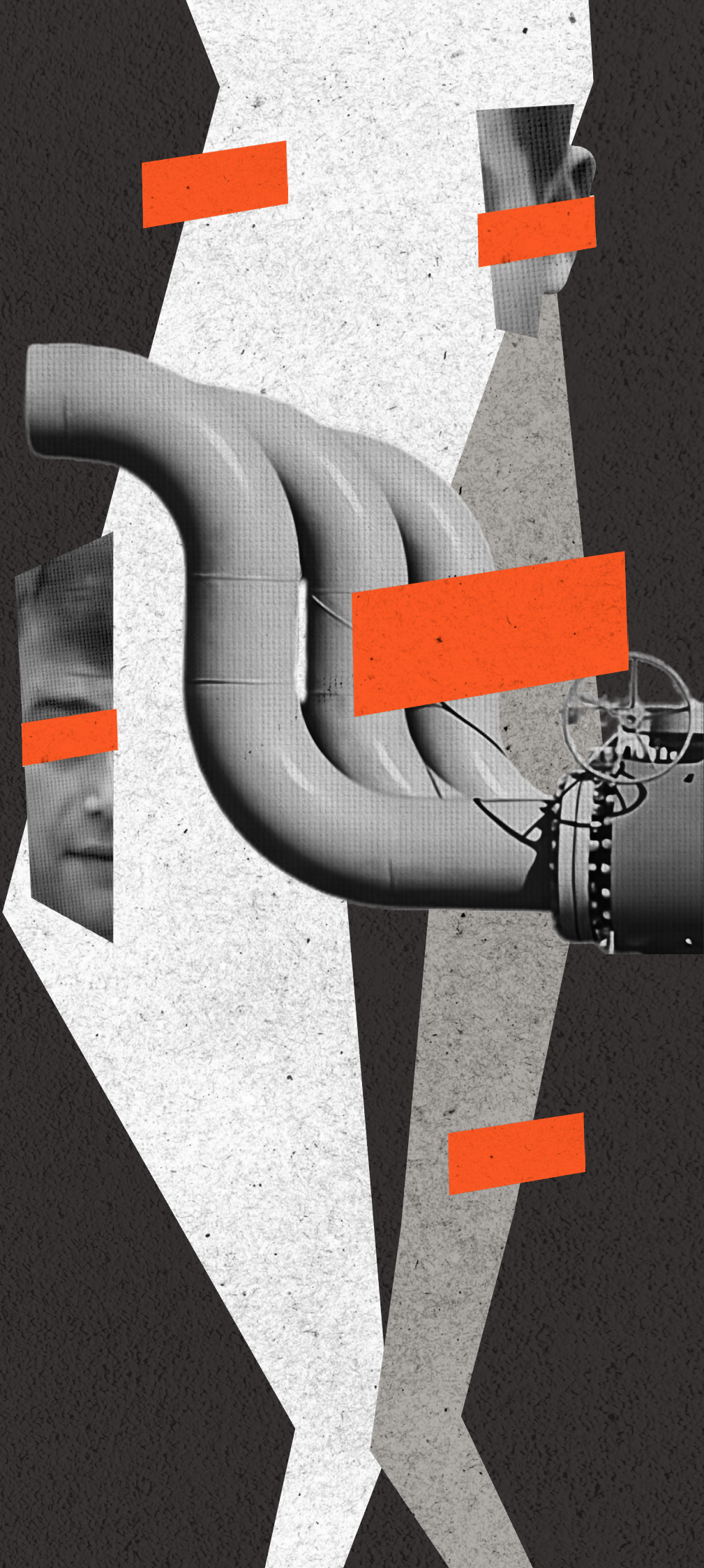


This report and its contents are copyrighted under the CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 Deed (Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International).

For permission to use the content outside this license, please contact [hello@reset.tech](mailto:hello@reset.tech).







# Reset.

Profiting from  
Propaganda  
*How Meta Benefits from  
Pro-Kremlin Election  
Meddling Ads in Moldova*

*May 2024*