

Supporting Evidence:

Pro-Russian Ads Campaigns

Approved by Meta

from May 1 to May 27, 2024.

in Italy, Germany, France & Poland

***Non-Exhaustive List of Pro-Russian Advertising
Campaigns Approved and Run by Meta
weeks ahead of the EU Parliament election***

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Findings:

- Between May 1st, 2024, and May 27th, 2024, Meta approved at least 275 pro-Russian propaganda ads without political disclaimers to target France and Germany. These ads collectively reached 3 075 063 accounts:
 - 61 ads reached a total of 1 441 543 Italian accounts
 - 101 ads reached a total of 854 052 French accounts
 - 75 ads reached a total of 429 369 German accounts
 - 38 ads reached a total of 350 099 Polish accounts

Context:

- On March 26, 2024, the European Commission [issued guidelines](#) under the Digital Services Act (DSA) to mitigate systemic risks online associated with elections. In particular, it advises Very Large Online Platforms to implement robust policies and systems to prevent the misuse of advertising mechanisms for spreading misleading information and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference related to electoral processes.
- On April 17th, 2024, [AI Forensics](#) revealed that political ads on Meta are left unchecked, allowing pro-Russian propaganda and financial scams to thrive in the Union. In particular, we uncovered a network of pro-Russian propaganda ads, approved by Meta to run without political disclaimer, reaching nearly 40 million accounts in France and Germany between August 2023 and March 2024.
- On April 30th, 2024, the European Commission [initiated formal proceedings](#) to investigate whether Meta has violated the DSA. The Commission has raised concerns that Meta may be failing to adhere to DSA requirements regarding the prevention of deceptive advertisements, disinformation campaigns, and coordinated inauthentic behavior within the EU. The widespread dissemination of such content poses potential risks to civic discourse, electoral processes, fundamental rights, and consumer protection.

About the authors

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Findings

With the EU elections less than two weeks away, our findings indicate that Meta still fails to adequately prevent the misuse of its advertising systems for spreading misleading information and foreign information manipulation and interference related to electoral processes. There has been a notable increase in the reach of pro-Russian propaganda ads in recent weeks. New target countries include Italy and Poland, alongside the previously targeted France and Germany.

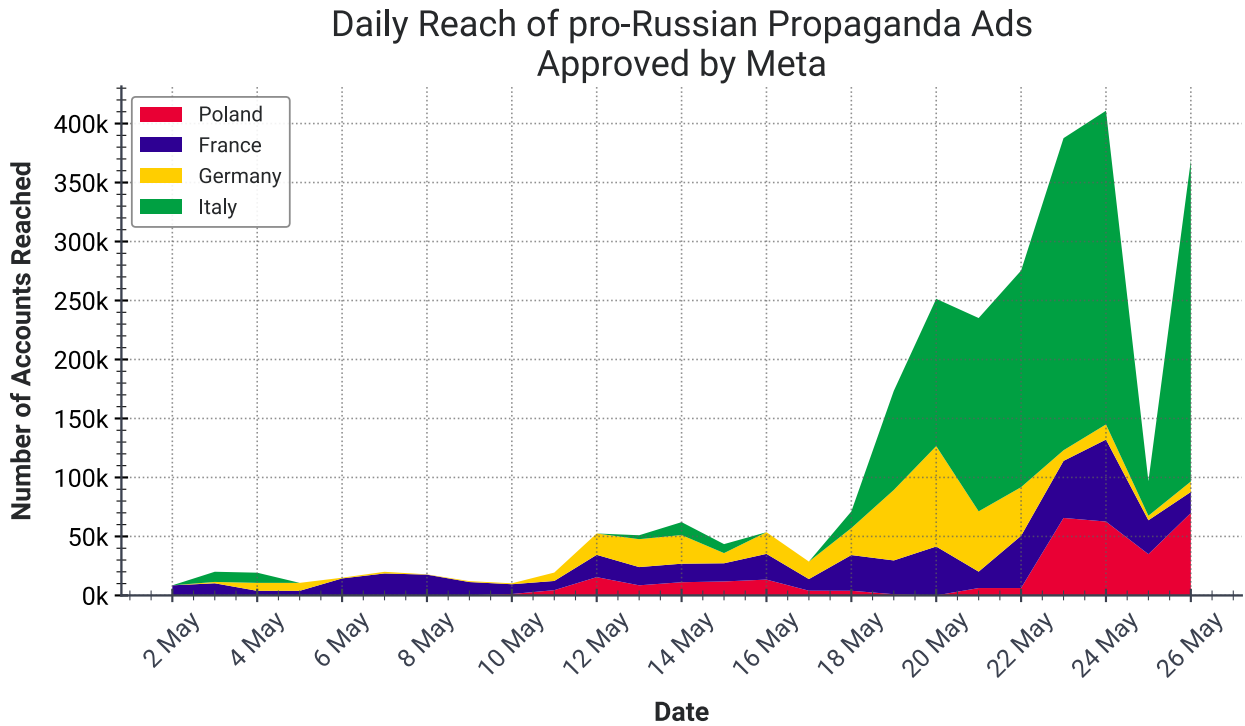


Figure 1: Daily Reach of pro-Russian Propaganda Ads Approved by Meta in May 2024

Detection Methodology & Limitations

This document reports a non-exhaustive inventory of pro-Russian advertising campaigns approved by Meta to run without political disclaimers, targeting user accounts in Poland, France, Germany, Italy from May 1st, 2024, to May 27th, 2024.

We leverage the methodology described in the article *"On Meta's Political Ad Policy Enforcement: An Analysis of Coordinated Campaigns & Pro-Russian Propaganda"*, Bouchaud, 2024 [[hal-04541571](https://arxiv.org/abs/2405.04541)].

Specifically, we collected advertisements approved by Meta containing keywords of interest (e.g. Ukraine, European Union), targeting Italy, Germany, France or Poland during the pe-

riod of interest. We then automatically identified ads having failed to declared their political nature, under Meta’s political advertising policy. Among these, we searched for coordinated activity, understood as multiple pages publishing the same or highly similar advertisements.

We emphasize that all pro-Russian propaganda advertisements we detected, fall under Meta’s political advertising policy and should have been rejected by Meta to run without proper disclaimers during the initial review of the ad. Additionally, our detection pipeline is entirely automated, showcasing the technical feasibility for Meta to robustly address this pro-Russian campaign.

For each detected campaign we report:

- **Country:** Targeted by the ads.
- **Total Reach:** The sum of the reach of all ads within the campaign. Meta defines [reach](#) as "the number of Accounts Centre accounts that saw [the] ads at least once."
Disclaimer: Some accounts may have been exposed to multiple ads from the same campaign.
- **Number of Ads:** The total number of ads within the campaign.
Disclaimer: This estimate is a lower bound; additional ads from the campaign might have been ran beyond the analysis timeframe, or their content might have become inaccessible for analysis after Meta removed them due to the detection of a violation of their Advertising Standards.
- **Number of Text Variations:** Some ads may run with slight variations, e.g., an extra comma or space.
- **Campaign Start:** The date on which the first ads of the campaign began being delivered to users by Meta.
Disclaimer: Some ads in the campaign may have started later. The campaign may have started before the observation window.
- **Campaign Stop:** The date on which the last ads of the campaign ceased being delivered to users by Meta.
Disclaimer: Discrepancies exist between the Meta Ad Library API and the web portal; the 'ad_delivery_stop_time' field may be blank in the API despite an ad being inactive for weeks, as displayed on the web portal.
- **See in Meta Ad Library:** Refers to Meta Ad Library web portal where one can search for ads containing the first sentence of the campaign.
Disclaimer: As slight variations in the text may occur, results in the web portal are purely indicative and may not include all ads from the campaign.
- **Translated Text:** Automatic translation of the truncated ads.
Disclaimer: Due to coarse obfuscation techniques used by propagandists, such as inserting spaces or dashes within a word, the automatic translation may be unreliable.

Techniques used to circumvent Meta's lax moderation


Advertisements violating terms of service exploit basic techniques, such as hidden characters and word obfuscation, to bypass Meta's lax moderation systems. Hidden characters, like zero-width non-joiners, are inserted into text, and words are split with dots and spaces, making it difficult for naive automated filters to detect inappropriate content. Addressing this issue could be as simple as removing such unicode characters and detecting obfuscated words.

We developed a simple Python script that performs these operations, which successfully spot the ads identified in this report.

```
1 import re
2
3 def detect_hidden_content_advanced(ad_text):
4     # Define patterns for hidden characters and abnormal word splitting
5     special_chars_pattern = r'[\u200b\u200c\u200d]' # Matches zero-width space,
6     non-joiner, and joiner
7     split_word_pattern = r'(\b\w+)(?:\.\s|\.\u200b|\u200b\.\s|\u200b|\s)+(\w+\b)'
8     # Matches words split with dots, ZWNJ, and spaces
9
10    # Find all special characters
11    special_chars_match = re.findall(special_chars_pattern, ad_text)
12
13    # Find all abnormal word splittings
14    split_word_match = re.findall(split_word_pattern, ad_text)
15
16    # Create a report
17    report = {
18        'Special characters detected': special_chars_match,
19        'Abnormal word splitting found': [''.join(match) for match in
20            split_word_match]
21    }
22
23    # Clean the text
24    cleaned_text = re.sub(special_chars_pattern, '', ad_text)
25    for match in split_word_match:
26        full_word = match[0] + match[1] # Join the split parts into a full word
27        split_pattern = re.escape(match[0]) + r'(\s|\u200b)*\.\s(\s|\u200b)*' + re
28            .escape(match[1])
29        cleaned_text = re.sub(split_pattern, full_word, cleaned_text)
30
31    return report, cleaned_text
```

Campaigns

Campaigns are ranked by decreasing reach.




Shadowy Solid
Sponsored
Library ID: 1524735381756889

Ci stanno togliendo il futuro. L'Italia sta letteralmente perdendo il suo futuro perché i nostri giovani partono verso luoghi dove ci sono più opportunità. Da noi scrivono che il 21,4% dei giovani italiani sono disoccupati. Coloro che hanno un lavoro non possono garantirsi una vita dignitosa. Molti guadagnano meno di 376 euro al mese, che non bastano nemmeno per affittare una stanza. Per evitare che le persone scappino, i nostri leader devono investire in Italia: sviluppare l'industria, migliorare il livello della medicina e dell'istruzione, creare posti di lavoro, sostenere...

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Total Reach: 427,850 accounts
Number of Ads: 9
Number of Text Variations: 1
Campaign Start: May 14th, 2024
Campaign Stop: May 22nd, 2024
[Open in the Meta Ad Library](#)
Translated Text: "They are taking away our future Italy is literally losing its future because our young people are leaving for places where there are more opportunities. We write that 21.4% of young Italians are unemployed. Those who have a job cannot guarantee a dignified life. Many earn less than 376 euros a month, which is not even enough to rent a room. To prevent people from escaping, our leaders must invest in Italy: develop the industry."



AlikoNeradina
Sponsored
Library ID: 381052441636306

I prezzi sono di nuovo alle stelle. I nostri prezzi per tutto sono aumentati così tanto che riesco a malapena a far quadrare i conti. A colpire maggiormente le tasche è l'aumento dei prezzi dell'elettricità e del gas. La nostra famiglia deve pagare molto di più, soprattutto ora che esiste il "libero mercato". Per questo motivo i costi aumenteranno di centinaia di euro all'anno! Non importa quanto lavori, non guadagnerai per una vita normale. Non ricordo che ciò sia accaduto due anni fa. A quei tempi, quando eravamo amici dei russi, tutta l'Europa utilizzava il loro gas a buon...

Total Reach: 236,964 accounts
Number of Ads: 7
Number of Text Variations: 2
Campaign Start: May 22nd, 2024
Campaign Stop: May 26th, 2024
[Open in the Meta Ad Library](#)
Translated Text: "Prices are skyrocketing again Our prices for everything have gone up so much that I can barely make ends meet. The increase in electricity and gas prices is hitting pockets the hardest. Our family has to pay a lot more, especially now that the "free market" exists. For this reason the costs will increase by hundreds of euros per year! No matter how much you work, you will not earn for a normal life. I don't remember this happening two years ago."