

Ads, Influence, and Democracy: Meta's Role in Romania's 2024 Presidential Election

Research note - 9 December 2024



Reset•Tech



Acknowledgments

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Disclaimer

Due to the urgency of the findings, this research note should not be read as a full report, but as a rendition of early findings. This research note did not go through CheckFirst's usual evaluation process.

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³ <https://substack.com/@drepturisistrambe>

⁴ <https://www.disinfo.eu/>

⁵ <https://context.ro/>

Versioning

Version	Date	Comment
1	09.12.2024	Initial version
1.1	09.12.2024	<p>Removed informat.ro from the websites lists.</p> <p>The website and the Facebook page are not part of the network. They have been listed by mistake. The number of Facebook pages listed was edited to 24 instead of 25. Ad expenditure, reach and impression numbers were corrected accordingly.</p>

Executive Summary

This note underscores systemic oversight in moderation of political advertising on Meta platforms in Eastern Europe, with a particular focus on Romania. Failures in moderating content in breach of Meta's own policies are particularly striking given that multiple public reports have been documenting these issues since April 2024. The platform took no action to effectively halt the activities of the campaign in the months leading up to the election. We attribute 3,640 ads on Meta's platform to the campaign. On December 3, Meta officially stated⁶ that it had found no evidence of significant incidents of election interference or misinformation on its platforms in the context of the Romanian Presidential election.

Our research expands on earlier findings by the Romanian media Context.ro from June 2024, revealing high-budget advertising campaigns promoting far-right candidates active on Facebook and Instagram for years leading up to the Romanian Presidential election in November 2024. Our own findings show a continuation of the campaign's activities and evidence of cross-platform coordination on Meta's platforms, TikTok, a network of websites publishing unverified claims and ads placed through Google. The campaign may have violated electoral purdah as ads might have been run after the legal campaigning period.

The campaign is driven by a coordinated network of Facebook pages and websites supporting the political agenda of the far-right party Alliance for Uniting Romanians (AUR) and their candidate George Simion, and, to a lesser extent, the far-right pro Russian candidate Călin Georgescu while attacking Romania's pro-EU candidate Elena Lasconi and others.

The campaign violates several of Meta's advertising policies: transparency of identity of political advertisers and disclosure of payment for political ads, coordination and inauthentic behaviour⁷, sensational content⁸ in ads, content attacking individuals⁹ based on protected identities, e.g. gender identity-based attacks, as well as several of the platform's Community Standards¹⁰, incl. denigration of individuals.

Our findings highlight the significant budget and outreach of these ads: the network has spent at least 139,858 EUR and up to 224,083 EUR on the campaign since August 2024, reaching a total audience of 148 million, according to data from the Meta Ad Library.

The current investigation further highlights Meta's persistent failure to address problematic political advertising and election interference in the region.

⁶ [Meta didn't notice major disinformation in Romanian election, says Nick Clegg | Euronews](#)

⁷ [Inauthentic Behavior | Transparency Center](#)

⁸ [About Meta Advertising Standards | Meta Business Help Center](#)

⁹ [Introduction to the Advertising Standards | Transparency Center](#)

¹⁰ [Community Standards | Transparency Center](#)

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Introduction

The role of digital platforms in shaping public opinion and influencing electoral processes has grown significantly in recent years, with the 2024 Presidential election in Romania providing a salient example. The now invalidated first round of the presidential election was a pivotal event, reflecting the nation's complex political dynamics and susceptibility to external influences.

The election's first round, held on 24 November 2024, resulted in a surprising lead for Călin Georgescu, a far-right candidate known for his pro-Russian sentiments and criticism of NATO. Georgescu secured approximately 23% of the vote, surpassing expectations and advancing to a runoff against centrist candidate Elena Lasconi¹¹. However, the electoral process faced significant challenges. Allegations emerged of Russian interference, particularly through the social media platform TikTok, where coordinated campaigns leveraging influencer profiles helped amplify Georgescu's profile. Intelligence reports¹² published by the Romanian authorities indicated that around 25,000 TikTok accounts directed from Moscow were involved in this operation¹³.

In response to these allegations, Romania's Constitutional Court invalidated the first-round results on 6 December 2024, citing the impact of foreign interference on the election's integrity¹⁴. This unprecedented decision led to the cancellation of the scheduled runoff and necessitated the rescheduling of the entire electoral process. This invalidation of results underscored the vulnerabilities in Romania's electoral system and highlighted the broader challenges democracies face from digital disinformation campaigns. The European Union expressed concerns over the interference, emphasizing the need for robust measures to protect democratic institutions from such threats¹⁵.

Our findings are consistent with previous investigations into political advertising in Eastern Europe, reinforcing the platform's ongoing failure to adequately moderate ads from questionable parties and individuals as well as prevent foreign interference in elections. One notable example is an advertising campaign in Moldova previously investigated by Reset Tech¹⁶, which uncovered a network of coordinated Facebook pages running a total budget between 180,000 and 300,000 EUR on behalf of the pro-Kremlin oligarch and politician Ilan Shor, an individual on the sanctions list of the U.S. Department of the Treasury for his ties with Russia. Similarly to the case in Romania, the political campaign in Moldova was running for months with little scrutiny from the platform.

This research note examines the critical role of Meta platforms (Facebook and Instagram) in the presidential election, particularly during the first round.

¹¹ [A far-right populist shocks Romania by heading into the presidential runoff | AP News](#)

¹² [Comunicat de presă](#)

¹³ [Romania Scraps Election After Russian Influence Allegations | WSJ](#)

¹⁴ [Romania cancels election after 'Russian meddling' on TikTok | The Times](#)

¹⁵ [The EU makes an urgent TikTok inquiry on Russia's role in Romanian election turmoil | AP News](#)

¹⁶ [Profiting from Propaganda — Reset Tech Report](#)

1. An Ongoing Coordinated Campaign

1.1. Previous findings

In June 2024, the Romanian media *Context* revealed¹⁷ that the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) had developed a sophisticated network of inauthentic Facebook pages to amplify its propaganda and conspiracy theories. Their findings suggested a coordinated inauthentic campaign¹⁸ on the platform, as all assets were linked to a single Romanian company and operated without any official affiliation with AUR. The investigation uncovered that nearly €70,000 had been spent for online ads over a three-month period to promote extremist content aligned with AUR's nationalist and far-right agenda. Alongside the network of Facebook advertisers, this operation involved websites managed by the same company, which masqueraded as news portals. These sites were used to publish unverified claims and heavily biased narratives in support of AUR.

Our own investigation echoes the previous findings of *Context* but is unable to directly attribute the campaign to AUR. We show that the campaign continued unobstructed after June 2024 and to this day, significantly increasing its budget in the months leading up to the elections. The political ads were run through a larger network of pages than the one identified by *Context*, again without any moderation from the platform. Throughout the months leading up to the elections, none of the pages disclosed their official affiliation with AUR, despite running political ads during an electoral campaign. Some of the ads promoted by this network used the same creatives as those shared by the official AUR pages on Facebook, further indicating their direct connection to the party (as detailed in the next section).

¹⁷ [Rețeaua minciunilor de AUR. Zeci de site-uri și conturi de Facebook umflate cu bani ca să amplifice propaganda și conspirațiile | context](#)

¹⁸ [Inauthentic Behavior | Transparency Center](#)

The far-right Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR), established in 2019, has rapidly emerged as a significant force in Romania's political landscape. Positioning itself as a nationalist and conservative party, AUR emphasizes themes of family values, patriotism, Christianity, and sovereignty. Its rhetoric often includes nationalist narratives that align with Russia's political agenda, particularly concerning Ukraine and historical territorial disputes¹⁹.

In the 2020 parliamentary elections, AUR surprised many by securing approximately 9% of the vote, enabling it to enter parliament²⁰. This ascent continued, and by the 2024 parliamentary elections, AUR had doubled its support to around 18%, becoming the second-largest party in the legislature.

The rise of the AUR movement has been accompanied by controversies, including allegations of promoting pro-Kremlin propaganda and disinformation in Romania. Analyses have shown that AUR's online platforms and affiliated news sites often disseminate narratives favorable to Russian interests, particularly regarding Ukraine²¹. The rising political influence of the party from 2020 to 2024 parliamentary elections likely explains the significant advertising efforts put forth by AUR assets on Facebook.



¹⁹ [In 'Echo-Chambers' of Nationalist Romanian Party, Russia's Favourite Narratives | Balkan Insight](#)

²⁰ [Romania's pro-Western parties win parliamentary election as far-right makes gains | AP News](#)

²¹ [La sombra de la propaganda rusa planea sobre las elecciones en Rumania | Internacional | EL PAÍS](#)

1.2. Intensification of the campaign ahead of the election

After the first round of the 2024 presidential election in Romania, we initiated an in-depth analysis of the advertising activities on social media platforms, focusing on Meta's Ad Library. Our investigation aimed to identify potential irregularities and infringements related to electoral content.

By using keyphrases associated with the names of presidential candidates following the first round of elections (Călin Georgescu, Elena Lasconi), we searched for ads coming from pages unaffiliated with the official assets of parties or politicians. This is how we mapped a network of 24 Facebook pages with a total audience of over 935,000 users. All pages presented themselves as news, information, or entertainment sites, while displaying political discourse by either targeting opponents of Georgescu, directly promoting the AUR party, or spreading unverified claims to polarize Romanian voters. The pages often used the same copy or hashtags in their ads, which allowed us to map the network. **These pages ran 3,640 ads classified as political** between 1 August and 5 December 2024.

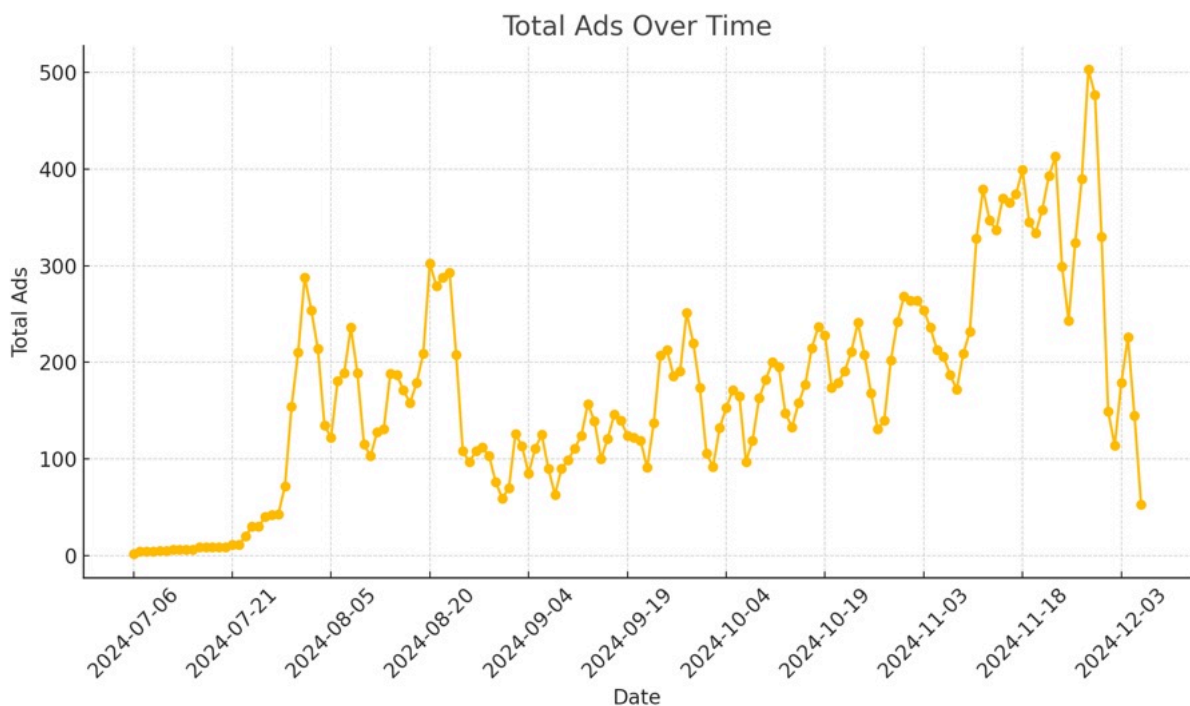


Fig 01. Number of ads run on the network of Facebook pages over time.

Fig 01 shows an intensification of the number of ads ran on the network of Facebook pages linked to the campaign. After a relatively short burst at the end of last summer, the number of ads decreased at the beginning of September only to progressively attain their peak just before and after the first round of the Presidential election, culminating at 503 concurrent ads on 28 November²².

²² The data provided by Meta reports all ads ran by campaign start date, meaning that a query for active ads from 1 August to 5 December will produce results with earlier dates, as those correspond to campaigns still active on 1 August.

Each of the 24 Facebook pages linked to the campaign is associated with an eponymous website that masquerades as an independent news outlet. The domains of these outlets are listed in the contact information of the respective Facebook pages. Our findings show that all websites are connected and pertain to a shared ecosystem (read more about the network of websites in section 5).

Page	Followers (Dec 2024)	Admin Location	Creation Date
4media.INFO	208,900	Romania	Aug 23, 2020
ACTIUNEARO	3,000	Romania	Dec 17, 2020
Anchetatorii.RO	131,900	Romania	Dec 21, 2020
comentatorii	18,500	Romania	Jun 12, 2023
Criticii.RO	8,400	Romania	Dec 26, 2020
CurierulRomanescRO	23,600	Romania, Moldova	Oct 12, 2017
DIGIPRES.RO	3,400	Romania, Moldova	May 20, 2020
Economistii.RO	6,800	Romania	Mar 24, 2022
FLUX60RO	3,600	Romania	Nov 29, 2020
Gazetarii.RO	34,200	Romania	Feb 23, 2021
guvernulAUR	13,000	Romania	Apr 13, 2022
5news.romania	39,100	Romania	May 4, 2022
60M.RO	191,300	Romania, Moldova	Feb 11, 2020
PATRIOTIIINFO	8,700	Romania	May 25, 2020
Patriotul-George	3,800	Romania	Dec 26, 2023
political.ro	4,900	Romania	Aug 29, 2020
politicalinsider.romania	900	Romania	May 4, 2022
presaromaneasca.ro	2,100	Romania	Sep 29, 2021
ProPublica.RO	1,700	Romania	Feb 16, 2021
RedNews.ro	10,000	Romania	Mar 8, 2022
ropres.ro	4,900	Romania	Nov 23, 2020
TemaZilei.RO	2,600	Romania	Feb 23, 2021
viatapolitica.ro	1,600	Romania	Sep 29, 2021
zece.tv.ro	206,800	Romania	Sep 29, 2021

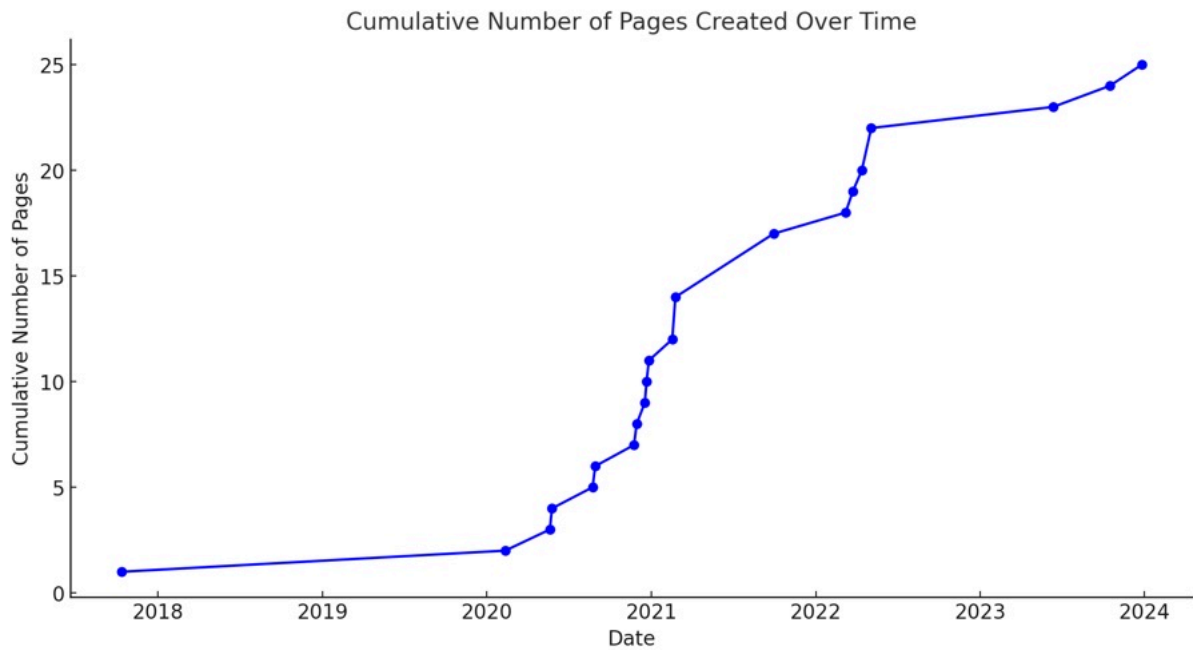


Figure 02: Cumulative number of pages created over time

As evident from their creation dates, this network of pages has been active for years, with new assets being launched regularly. Most of the pages were created in 2020 and 2021.

Meta's Ad Library reveals that the pages have been engaged in political advertising long before the 2024 elections: since their activation in 2020, they have run tens of thousands of political ads. In 2021, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) first reported²³ on the network, describing the pages as allegedly independent news outlets, which are in fact coordinated by the AUR party. According to BIRN's findings, these assets were used to spread pro-Russian propaganda, COVID conspiracies and political disinformation in Romania. In 2021, one of the websites in the network acknowledged²⁴ its ties to one of the party's leaders.

The administrator accounts of the pages from the network are mostly based in Romania, but some of these assets are also coordinated by administrators from Moldova. This cross-country coordination is not surprising, given that the AUR movement is also active in Moldova. We discovered that assets originally used for spreading news in Moldova have been repurposed to promote content in Romania. For example, one of the pages from the network was launched in 2017 as a Moldovan news outlet and in April 2020 rebranded itself as a Romanian media platform.

²³ [Cum propagă grupurile de Facebook ale AUR propaganda rusă](#)

²⁴ [In 'Echo-Chambers' of Nationalist Romanian Party, Russia's Favourite Narratives | Balkan Insight](#)

1.3. Narratives and Key Themes in Ads

We focused our analysis on the advertising activities of the network in the months prior to the presidential elections. Between 1 August and 6 December 2024, these 24 pages ran 3,640 political ads reaching a total audience of more than 148 million.

The ads are clearly political in nature and are labeled as such on Meta's platforms, while the Transparency section of the pages discloses that they have run ads about "Social Issues, Elections or Politics". Many ads directly mention the names of the leading candidates in the Romanian presidential elections:

1.3.1. Elena Lasconi

The pro-European, pro-NATO candidate Elena Lasconi is heavily targeted by the campaign, while the pro-European coalition supporting her is viewed as supporting Romania's elite status quo against the true interest of the people. Lasconi is accused of voter manipulation and corruption, while also being targeted with identity-based attacks, e. g. about her support for same-sex marriages. Many ads accuse her of being a puppet of the West. She is frequently labeled as a "globalist" or a representative of foreign interests, with accusations that she is willing to align Romania with the West at the cost of national sovereignty. Her personal character is also frequently attacked. She is accused of arrogance, being uninformed, and making damaging statements about Romanian voters. Her credibility is questioned with accusations that she lacks education, such as not having a university degree.

1.3.2. Klaus Iohannis

The incumbent president Klaus Iohannis is often described as a "dictator" and his support for the coalition behind Lasconi is questioned. Many ads refer to Iohannis as deeply unpopular, authoritarian, and disconnected from the needs of the Romanian people. His mandate is described as having disastrous consequences for the country's economy, social systems, and political landscape.

1.3.3. Călin Georgescu

The campaign overtly promotes Romanian far-right extremist politician and frontrunner in the second election round, Călin Georgescu, who is depicted as the "president patriot", defending Romania against the political establishment. He is framed as being under attack from both the ruling regime and the media. Many ads emphasize the widespread opposition to his candidacy, suggesting that nearly all political parties are against him because of his independent stance. In contrast to Elena Lasconi, Georgescu is presented as advocating for Romania's national sovereignty and economic independence. His balanced position on the Ukraine war is highlighted as a means of maintaining peace with both the West and the East.

1.3.4. George Simion

The campaign is also clearly promoting the AUR, with many ads using electoral hashtags linked to the AUR's official and inviting people to vote for the candidate George Simion. At least 800 ads directly mention the abbreviation AUR in the copy. Simion is often depicted as a defender of the interests of Romanians against the traditional political elites, who are accused of blocking numerous projects proposed by AUR. The ads also present AUR as advocates for a conservative vision of national and traditional values, with a critical stance toward globalization and external influences, particularly coming from the EU.



1.3.5. Evaluation of narratives

A manual review of the ads allowed us to pinpoint categories of narratives and themes:

National Sovereignty and Self-Determination:

- Ads highlight the importance of Romania's independence and sovereignty.
- Messaging includes promises to uphold strong defence policies (e.g., maintaining military capabilities like the Deveselu shield²⁵).

Anti-Establishment Sentiments:

- Criticism of the political elite and references to "secretive" systems or inefficiencies.
- References to exposing government mismanagement, including financial accountability for public officials.
- Some ads use fear and controversy, leveraging socially sensitive issues and economic concerns.

Populist and Patriotic Appeal:

- Candidates are framed as being for "the Romanian people" against bureaucratic or foreign influence.
- Promises of participatory democracy to give more voice to citizens.

Defence of National Identity:

- Some ads suggest a threat to traditional values or family structures, emphasising the need to protect these.

Conspiracy-Laden Claims:

- Hints of foreign or covert interference, particularly from the U.S. and global elites,, with accusations that external actors are attempting to manipulate the country's elections and undermine its sovereignty.

Rejection of Political Unity Among Major Parties:

- Ads criticise resolutions or agreements among mainstream political parties as self-serving or disconnected from the people's needs.

Pro-Russian Sentiment:

- While there are no direct mentions of Russia, the opposition to globalist policies and support for AUR's nationalist message suggests some alignment with pro-Russian ideologies, particularly in the context of the anti-NATO and anti-EU rhetoric.
- Some ads parrot Kremlin's key narrative against military and political support for Ukraine.

²⁵ [Deveselu Military Base - Wikipedia](#)

Our findings show that as the elections approached, the campaign shifted its focus to supporting the presidential candidate Călin Georgescu alongside the AUR leader George Simion, seemingly as a strategy to increase the chances of a far-right candidate winning in Romania. The narratives collectively aim to promote AUR's agenda or cultivate trust in Georgescu as defender of national interests, while sowing doubt about other political entities.

 <p>"Elena Lasconi wants war, not peace: 'Romanians must die for foreign interests'"</p> <p>The ad suggests that Lasconi serves the interests of foreign states, and aligns with the pro-Russian narrative about peace in Europe, while also playing into conspiracy theories about the global elites. Framing: Portrays Lasconi as unreliable leader, neglecting Romania's real interests.</p>	 <p>"Alliance P.U.L. – PSD, USR and the Liberals, Romania's New Viagra"</p> <p>The copy of the ad is an example of gender-based attacks targeting Lasconi as a female political candidate in the presidential elections. Framing: The ad sexualizes Lasconi and undermines her leadership, while also suggesting that the pro-EU coalition is impotent.</p>	 <p>"Vote for AUR, save Romania! Lasconi is for the gay propaganda!"</p> <p>The ad spreads homophobic rhetoric, weaponizes LGBTQ+ issues for political gain, and marginalizes the LGBTQ+ community. Framing: The ad leverages anti-LGBTQ sentiments to target Lasconi's politics towards gender rights and same sex marriage, while portraying her as dangerous political figure. At the same time, the ad augments homophobic attitudes in Romania and endangers minorities.</p>
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"The battle between Lasconi and Georgescu: The Devil and the Angel on the political stage" The [ad](#) directly demonises Lasconi using polarisation in stark, simplistic terms to gain support for Georgescu depicting him as the good side. Framing: The narrative portrays Lasconi negatively, stirring fears about her political agenda.



The [ad](#) infers that the daughter of Elena Lasconi has emigrated from Romania due to poor relationships with her mother and the aggravated economic situation in the country.

The ad is problematic as it represents an attack on Lasconi's family while using a personal issue as an attack on her character.

Framing: This is a personal attack against Lasconi who is framed as an incompetent leader and mother.



"Elena Lasconi wants to govern the country with the gang of thieves from PNL"

The [ad](#) uses defamation, referencing Lasconi and the PNL (National Liberal Party) as a "gang of thieves" without evidence, potentially damaging the reputation of the politician.

The language of the ad instigates hostility and can account for a toxic political discourse.

1.4. Possible breach of electoral silence

Romanian law 370/2004²⁶ on the election of the President of Romania defines the duration of the electoral campaign. Its article 35(1) states that “The electoral campaign shall start 30 days prior to the elections date and shall end on the Saturday morning preceding the elections date, at 7:00 hours.” instituting an electoral purdah between after the end of the campaign and the closing of last polling stations.

Data from the Meta Ad Library shows that 452 ads were running by some of the pages uncovered in this note on Saturday 23rd and Sunday 24th of November, i.e. on the dates of the electoral silence period corresponding to the first round of the Romanian Presidential election. Since Meta only offers ad counts for 24 hour periods, the available data does not offer sufficient granularity to assess if ads were effectively run between Saturday 7:00 and the closing of the polling stations on Sunday.

A reasonable doubt can be however expressed about ads having been seen by users during the electoral purdah.

²⁶ [LAW no. 370/2004 on the election of the President of Romania, republished, with subsequent amendments and completions](#)

2. Campaign Coordination

In a response made to, and published by Context²⁷, Meta states that the company did not observe evidence of inauthentic behaviour related to the network of Facebook pages reported to them.

However, we observe signs of coordination between the pages in the network. We define it as a **Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB)** campaign, based on the CIB definition²⁸ by EU Disinfo Lab as "*the amplification of content in a coordinated and non-organic way, using either authentic accounts, fake accounts, or a mix of both.*" The manipulative communication strategy employed to disseminate the ads—while concealing the identity of the pages as linked to the AUR party, despite the fact that the network is orchestrated by a company officially associated with the AUR —reveals significant breaches in transparency regarding advertiser identity.

We identified several markers of coordination: overlapping names of payers and beneficiaries of the ads, duplicate ad copy used across ads launched by different pages, common content strategy, overlapping creation dates of the accounts, cross-platform coordination with anonymous accounts on other platforms (TikTok).

2.1. Overlapping Beneficiary and Payer names

The EU Digital Services Act (DSA) mandates that Meta disclose information about "the natural or legal person on whose behalf the advertisement is presented" (the ad's beneficiary) and, if different, "the natural or legal person who paid for the ad" (the ad's payer)²⁹. Using data from Meta's Ad Library, we identified a significant overlap between the names of advertisers (payers) and the recipients of advertising (beneficiaries) featured in the ads. This reveals coordination among the listed entities and a shared budget across the advertisers.

Pages from the network frequently feature each other's names as mutual payers and beneficiaries, suggesting that these assets share a common Facebook Ads Manager account. For example, the payer name in the Ads Manager may default to the name of the business page associated with the ad account, even if the campaign is being run for a different page. If multiple pages have access to a shared account, the payer name can be the name of the business page that has granted access to the other pages.

The data revealed recurrent entities, including the names of pages that are not part of the mapped ecosystem, such as *Natural by Ladybug*³⁰, a Facebook page for a children's furniture store³¹, or *21 de Rubini*³², the page of the Romanian movie *21 Rubies*³³ (2023). The names of the

²⁷ [AUR pentru Georgescu: Zeci de mii de euro pompați în propagandă electorală pentru candidatul cu zero cheltuieli declarate | context](#)

²⁸ [Coordinate Inauthentic Behaviour Detection Tree - EU DisinfoLab](#)

²⁹ [Beneficiary and Payer Requirements for Ads Targeting the European Union | Meta Business Help Center](#)

³⁰ [Natural by Ladybug](#)

³¹ [Natural by Ladybug](#)

³² [21 de Rubini](#)

³³ [21 Rubies - When a political turmoil brings a Romanian prosecutor into the spotlight, she is offered the position of attorney general.](#)

pages *5news.RO* and *60m.RO* appear across multiple ads as either advertisers (payers) or beneficiaries. This pattern points to coordination or mutual promotion within a network of interconnected pages operated from a common Business Manager account.

The practice of pages associated with non-political entities such as a movie or a furniture store purchase political advertisements is atypical and raises questions about Meta's standards for approval of political advertisers.

This analysis also revealed direct political links, with political organisations such as AUR's official page, *Partidul Politic ALIANȚA PENTRU UNIREA ROMÂNILOR*³⁴, directly funding the ads by one page from the network, *5news.RO*. These findings introduce more questions about the online influence of political parties via networks of non-affiliated online assets.

21 de Rubini is a pro-Russian film portraying Romania as a colony of the USA and EU, *21 de Rubini* stirred controversy in Romania. Directed by Ciprian Mega, a 39-year-old Orthodox priest from Oradea, it features Mickey Rourke, Anthony Delon, and Romanian celebrities. The film premiered at the BRICS festival in Moscow, where Mega was photographed with Maria Zakharova, Russia's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, shortly after her accusations of Romanian "cancel culture."³⁵

Mega, known for boasting about meeting Putin and conducting ceremonies in Moscow, has faced rejection from cinemas and major festivals, which he attributes to "censorship" and claims of offensiveness to Jewish and LGBT communities. Despite his failed 2024 presidential bid, Mega continues to allege conspiracies and lament restrictions on free speech in Romania.

³⁴ [AUR](#)

³⁵ [Dezvăluire surprinzătoare: Preotul orădean Ciprian Mega s-a întâlnit cu Vladimir Putin!](#)

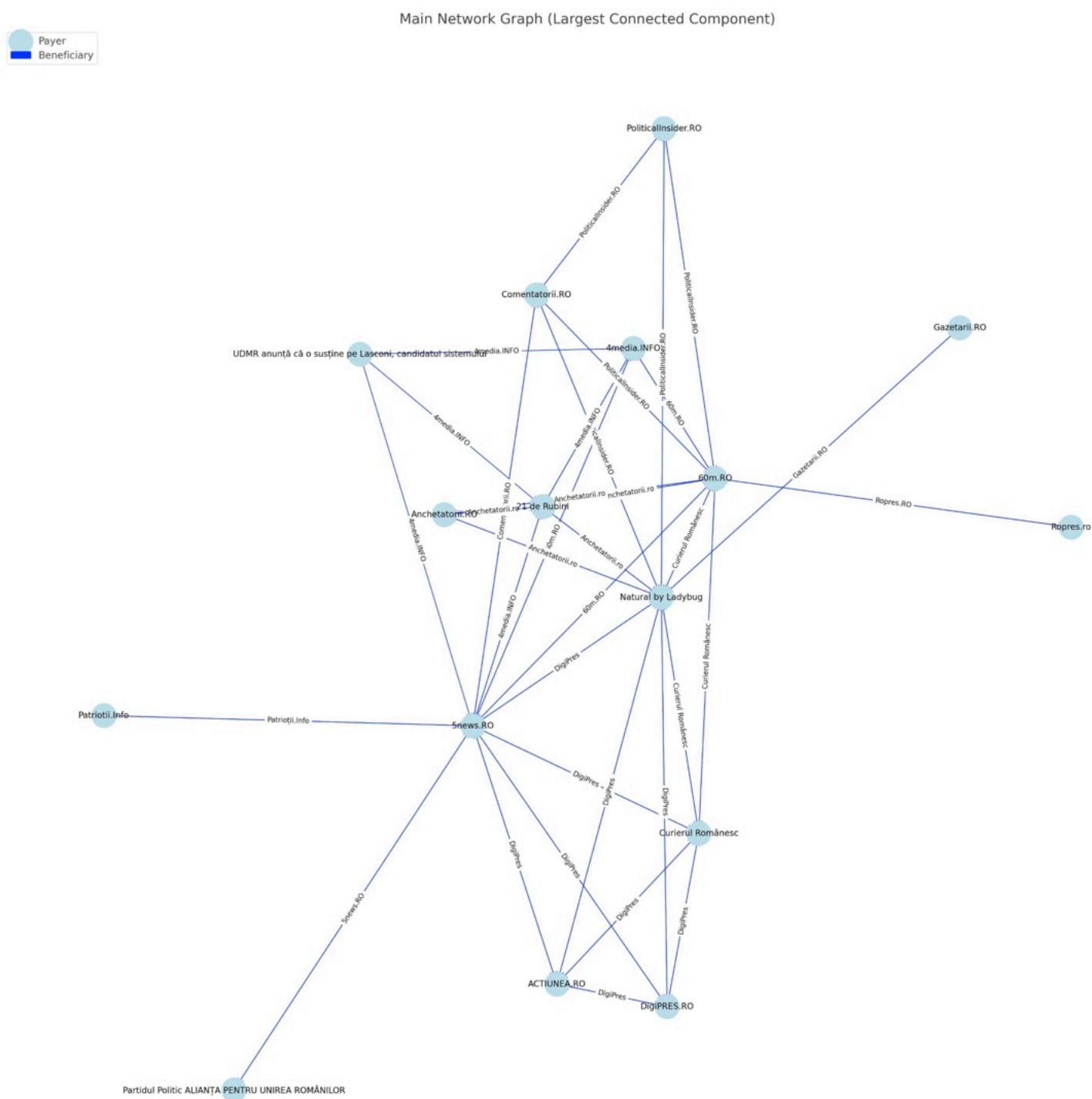


Fig. 03: Network visualization showing the overlap between payer/beneficiary names based on the sample of 4,100 ads

2.2. Identical Ad Copy Across Pages

Many pages use identical or very similar phrases in their ad copy and publish the ads in quick succession. These ads often link to the respective websites of the media outlets, where articles with duplicated or nearly identical titles are published. We identified over 1,700 ads with matching key phrases, run across multiple pages within the network. Some of these ads were launched in coordination with ads by official pages linked to the AUR movement, which may also signal the coordination between the party and the network of unofficial assets.



Fig: 04 Duplicate copy in ads by two of the pages from the network. The ads link to articles with the same title published by the respective media outlets, Criticii.RO and Curierul Românesc Sources (Facebook Ad Library [1](#), [2](#))

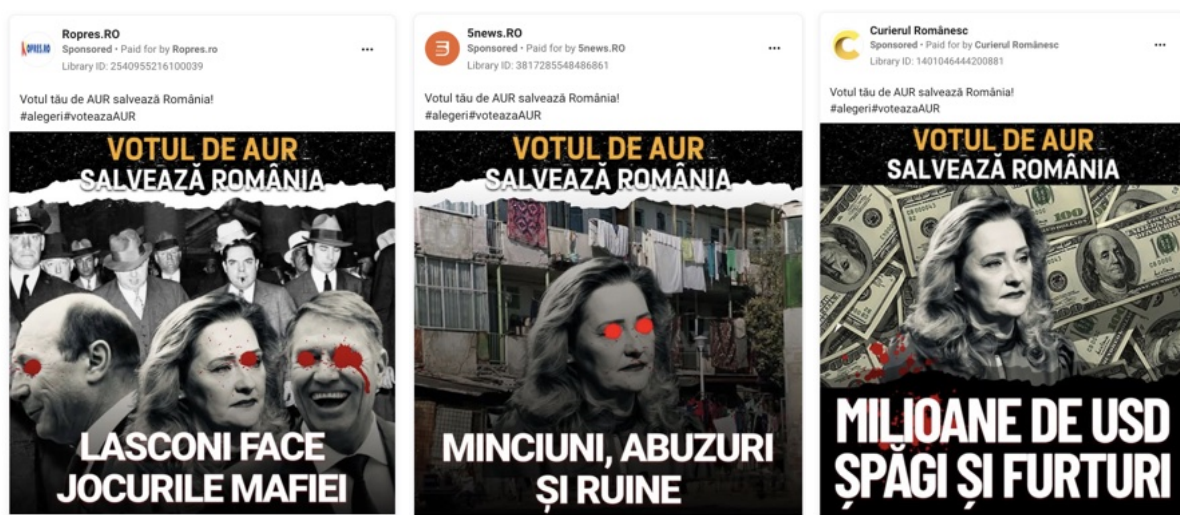


Fig 05: Multiple pages from the network ran ads denigrating pro-EU candidate Elena Lasconi using similar visuals and identical phrases to ask for voter support for the AUR party. A keyword search by this phrase reveals that the official pages of the AUR movement use the same visuals and keyphrases. Sources (Facebook Ad Library [1](#), [2](#), [3](#))

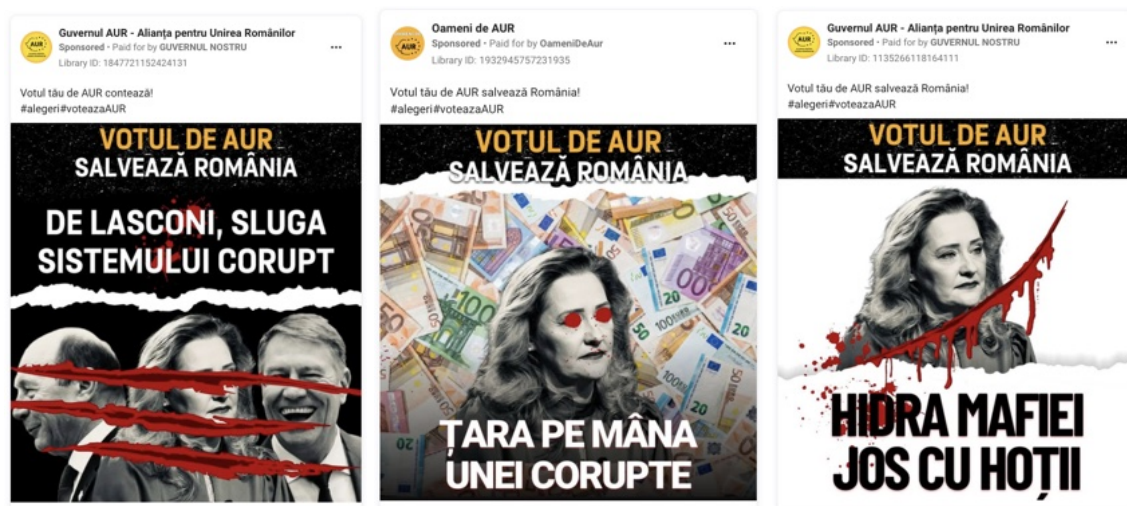


Fig 06: Pages with names and branding officially linked to the AUR movement (Guvernul AUR - Alianța pentru Unirea Românilor, Oameni de AUR) have been running ads with the same keyword phrases and similar visuals as those used by pages in the network. Source: Meta Ad Library ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#))

2.3. Other Markers of Coordination

2.3.1. Creation dates

There is clear evidence of coordination between the Facebook pages from the network, with assets being created within a short period in 2020 and 2021. For example, three of the pages were launched on September 29, 2021.

2.3.2. Cross-platform coordination

There is evidence for cross-platform coordination between the network of Facebook pages and individual TikTok accounts. Some of the Facebook ads launched by the pages include strings of hashtags, such as [#tiktok](#), [#tiktokRomania](#), [#foryou](#), [#fy](#), [#viraltiktok](#), and others commonly used on TikTok. This content strategy suggests that the content is being promoted on both platforms. Since hashtags in Facebook ads are not clickable (a feature Facebook limits to maintain control over the user experience and prevent external navigation from the ads), their inclusion signals automation: the videos were likely posted at the same time across both TikTok and Facebook accounts using a social media management platform. We identified individual TikTok accounts where this content was promoted, some branded similarly to the Facebook pages, using the logos and names of the media websites.

However, we were unable to find any ads running on TikTok under the names of the Facebook advertisers. This does not rule out the possibility that the content has been promoted on the platform through other TikTok accounts.

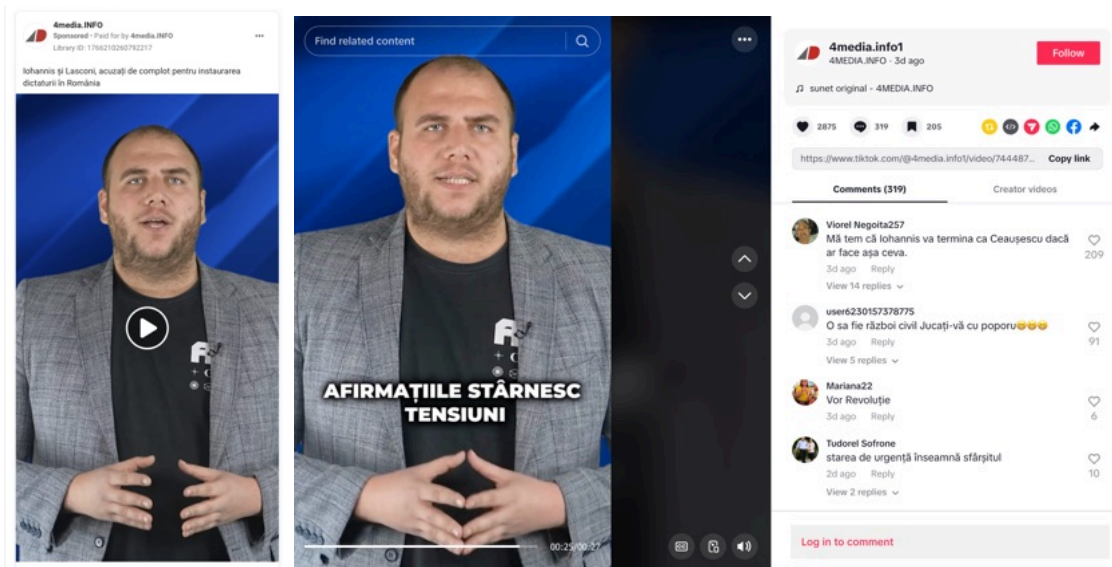


Fig 07: Cross-platform coordination: a Facebook ad published on the page 4media.INFO, accusing Klaus Iohannis and Elena Lasconi of plotting to establish a dictatorship in Romania. The same video was posted by two other TikTok accounts, branded with the identity of the media outlet. The TikTok account @4MEDIA.INFO started posting content on the platform in December, the first post was created on December 1. It appears to be an account that has been repurposed and rebranded to disseminate the content by the media outlet. Sources (Facebook Ad Library 1, TikTok, 2)

3. Campaign Budget and Outreach

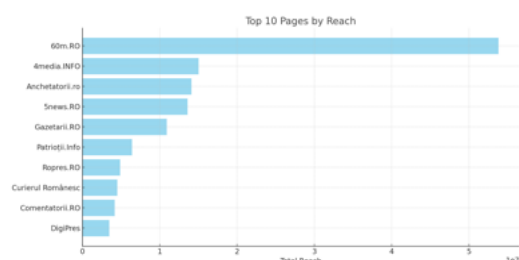
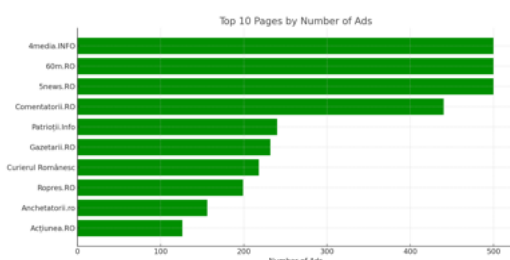
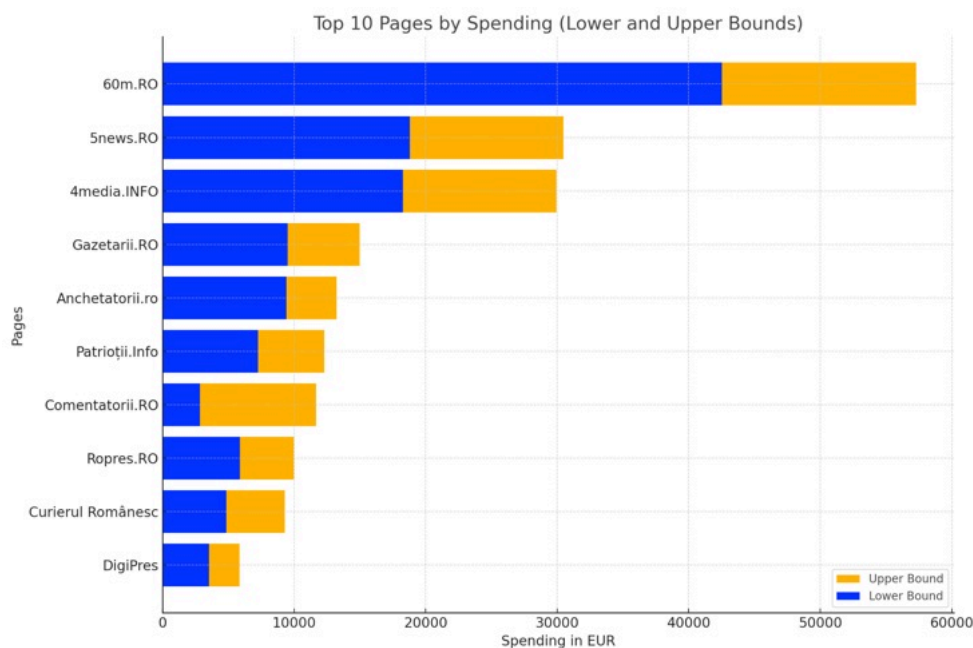
The analysis of spending and audience data from Meta's Ad Library reveals significant investment in advertising campaigns, with a total reach of over 148 million in Europe and impressions ranging from approximately 158 million to 179 million.

This campaign collectively represents a substantial effort to engage and influence audiences on a large scale. **The total spending on these ads falls between 139,858€ and 224.083€, spread across 4.140 ads between August and December 2024, a significant amount relative to Romania's economic context.**

Among the pages analysed, *60m.RO* emerges as the top spender, with an expenditure of 42.774€ to 57.643€ and an impressive reach of 53.8 million people.

Other notable players include *5news.RO*, which spent 18.912€ to 30.663€ to reach 13.6 million. This level of spending underscores a strategic focus on maximising audience penetration, often through high-frequency campaigns. For instance, *4media.INFO* ran 500 ads, highlighting their aggressive approach to maintaining visibility and shaping public discourse.

Interestingly, smaller campaigns such as those run by *Flux60.ro* and *ProPublica.RO* demonstrated cost-efficiency, achieving significant reach with minimal budgets of under 40€.



4. Meta's Lack of Moderation and Transparency

4.1. Publicly available information on the campaign has been available since April 2024

We reiterate that this note is not the first to expose publicly, at least partially, this campaign.

The media outlet *Context* previously exposed it in June 2024 in their report titled "The Golden Lies Network: Dozens of Websites and Facebook Accounts Inflated with Money to Amplify Propaganda and Conspiracies."³⁶

Another piece, published in April 2024 titled "The Web of Lies: Facebook Influencers Who Spread Conspiracies, Disinformation, and Pro-Kremlin Propaganda"³⁷ already described influence activities on Facebook and websites sharing unverified claims, in part related to the network.

Lastly, on 6 December, *Context* published the piece "GOLD for Georgescu: Tens of thousands of euros pumped into electoral propaganda for the candidate with zero declared expenses"³⁸, following the first round of the election. For the purposes of this article, we confirmed with *Context* that they have reached out to Meta, providing their June article for comments. *Context* added an update to their December article, including a summary of Meta's response:

Update:

In a response to Context.ro's request, the Meta company makes the following clarifications:

- it is the advertiser's responsibility to ensure that they comply with all applicable local laws;
- Meta will conduct a careful legal analysis and take action, if a violation of local law is found, if it receives reports of illegal content or advertising from users or authorities in Romania, through officially designated channels, explaining the problem;
- Meta has not received any court order or removal request from the Permanent Electoral Authority of Romania regarding these advertisements;
- Pages are properly authorized to run political ads on our platforms, and their ads carry "paid for by" labels in accordance with Meta policies;
- the ads served by these pages do not violate the Meta Advertising Standards. It is not against Meta rules to promote or support parties such as AUR, as long as the ads do not otherwise violate the Advertising Standards;
- Meta does not observe evidence of inauthentic behavior.

Contributed by: Marionela Toma and Matei Capota

Figure 08: Caption from Context.ro website

³⁶ English title machine translated from Romanian [Rețeaua minciunilor de AUR. Zeci de site-uri și conturi de Facebook umflate cu bani ca să amplifice propaganda și conspirațiile | context](#)

³⁷ English title machine translated from Romanian [Rețeaua minciunilor: Influencerii de pe Facebook care ventilează conspirații, dezinformări și propagandă pro-Kremlin | context](#)

³⁸ English title machine translated from Romanian [Rețeaua minciunilor de AUR. Zeci de site-uri și conturi de Facebook umflate cu bani ca să amplifice propaganda și conspirațiile | context](#)

4.2. Meta failed to enforce their own policies, European Commission's guidelines

Meta applies specific policies to regulate political advertising on its platforms. These policies are designed to ensure transparency, prevent misinformation, and maintain the integrity of electoral processes³⁹.

Meta mandates that all political advertisements include clear disclosures about their origin. This entails the advertiser to provide information on who funded the ad, ensuring end-users can identify the source of political content.

Additionally, Meta requires advertisers globally to disclose when they use AI or digital methods to create or alter a political or social issue ad in certain cases.

Advertisements that contain misleading, deceptive, or harmful content are strictly prohibited. This includes content that violates Meta's Community Standards, such as hate speech, violence, or any form of discrimination⁴⁰.

All ads go through an ad review system designed to evaluate before they go live. This system relies primarily on automated technology to apply advertising policies to the millions of ads that run across Meta's platforms. While the review is largely automated, Meta's teams build and train these systems, and in some cases, manually review ads to ensure compliance⁴¹.

Our analysis revealed multiple advertisements that violated Meta's Terms of Service (ToS), particularly concerning election-related claims. These ads propagated misleading narratives and unfounded claims, raising significant concerns.

Besides Meta's own policies, the European Commission published on 26 April 2024 guidelines⁴² on the mitigation of systemic risks for electoral processes as described in Art 35 of the Digital Services Act⁴³. This document is destined to platforms such as Meta's and Tiktok in their capacity of Very Large Online Platforms under the Digital Services Act. Article 27(e) of the guidelines addresses political advertising, in particular urges platforms to "Ensure that there are adequate policies and systems in place to prevent the misuse of advertising systems to disseminate misleading information, disinformation and FIMI with regards to electoral processes, including deceptive AI content".

The content uncovered in this note emphasises Meta's lack of enforcement of its own policies. It also demonstrates Meta's failure to follow the European Commission's recommendations to comply with the DSA.

³⁹ [How Meta Is Planning for Elections in 2024](#)

⁴⁰ [About Meta Advertising Standards](#)

⁴¹ [About the enforcement of Meta Advertising Standards](#)

⁴² [52024XC03014 - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

⁴³ [Regulation - 2022/2065 - EN - DSA - EUR-Lex](#)



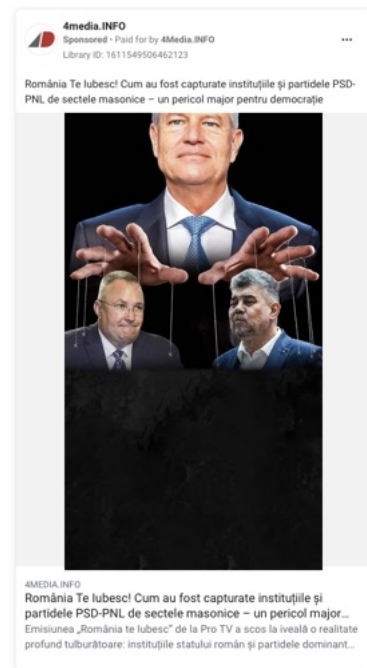
The [ad](#) suggests the arrest of Klaus Iohannis for allegedly planning a coup d'etat.

While the content may not explicitly call for violence, implying that the president is involved in such an act could be perceived as an attack on his legitimacy and authority.



The [ad](#) accuses the Romanian Intelligence Services (SRI) of spreading disinformation about foreign interference in the presidential elections.

The narrative aims to undermine public trust in Romania's institutions and spread fears and uncertainty amongst votes.



The [ad](#) infers that the Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the National Liberal Party (PNL) have been captured by Masonic sects.

The ad spreads baseless conspiracy theories about AUR's political opponents and seeds voter mistrust in the electoral integrity, suggesting that some hidden powers are responsible for the agenda of democratically elected political parties.

5. A Network of Websites

Upon further examination, we identified that the pages responsible for these advertisements were not operating independently but were part of a coordinated network of websites.

The websites share the common point of being self-described as “independent media organisations”⁴⁴ publishing a lot of political content. It is useful to notice that we could not find any mention of editorial teams/reference to editorial practices on most of the websites suggesting these websites are actually behaving as reputable media organisations.

Domain	Page
4media.info	4media.INFO
actiunea.ro	CTIUNEARO
anchetatorii.ro	Anchetatorii.RO
comentatorii.ro	comentatorii
criticii.ro	Criticii.RO
curierulromanesc.ro	CurierulRomanescRO
digipres.ro	DIGIPRES.RO
economistii.ro	Economistii.RO
flux60.ro	FLUX60RO
gazetarii.ro	Gazetarii.RO
guvernulnostru.org	guvernulAUR
5news.ro	5news.romania
60m.ro	60M.RO
patriotii.info	PATRIOTIIINFO
patriotulgeorge.ro	Patriotul-George
political.ro	political.ro
politicalinsider.ro	politicalinsider.romania
presaromaneasca.ro	presaromaneasca.ro
propublica.ro	ProPublica.RO
rednews.ro	RedNews.ro
ropres.ro	ropres.ro
temazilei.ro	TemaZilei.RO
viatapolitica.ro	viatapolitica.ro
zece.tv	zece.tv.ro

⁴⁴ [SPECIAL: 19 „publicații independente”, marca AUR, plătesc Facebook pentru a amplifica propagandă de partid și conținut fals](#)

According the DNSlytics, some of of the domains share a single AdSense identification number, suggesting a single entity is behind them.

Domain	Google Tag
timpul.md	pub-3092856282745430
60m.ro	pub-3092856282745430
anchetatorii.ro	pub-3092856282745430
curierulromnesc.ro	pub-3092856282745430
gazetarii.ro	pub-3092856282745430
propublica.ro	pub-3092856282745430
agentiadeinformatii.ro	pub-3092856282745430
comentatorii.ro	pub-3092856282745430

Moreover, an analysis of the infrastructure demonstrate that many of the domains⁴⁵ share the same IP address (92.114.98.11) in their SPF records, indicating that emails from these domains originate from a common server. This points to a shared hosting or email infrastructure.

Additionally, the directive `include:nyxmx.hosterion.net` is repeated across many of the domains, suggesting reliance on a shared external SPF policy provided by the same email or hosting service. Organisations or groups managing multiple domains often adopt identical SPF records to streamline administration, particularly when the domains operate within the same infrastructure or depend on the same hosting provider.

Based on the evidence collected (AdSense, SPF Record, usage of the same WordPress theme and lack of references to editorial teams), it is reasonable to assess that these websites are likely coordinated off-platform by a single actor.

Using third party data sources obtained by the authors and assessed with a moderate degree of confidence, as well as public reports of their role, we identified *DGI Multimedia Design SRL* as the company behind the creation of all the websites.

6. The role of DGI Multimedia Design SRL

⁴⁵ See annex 1

6.1. One organisation linked to multiple campaign assets

At the core of the campaign, we identified evidence suggesting that a single entity played a central role across multiple components detailed in this report. Assuming that DGI Multimedia Design SRL (DGI) is responsible for creating the websites described earlier, and given the connection between these websites and the network of 24 Facebook pages central to the campaign, it becomes evident that DGI is also linked to these Facebook pages. Secondly, we demonstrated in section 2.2 that identical content was spread both through ads run from the network of Facebook pages and TikTok accounts. This suggests an involvement of DGI in some of the TikTok accounts used in the campaign. Moreover, DGI can be tied to pro-AUR advertisements run on Google according to data from the Google Ad Library.

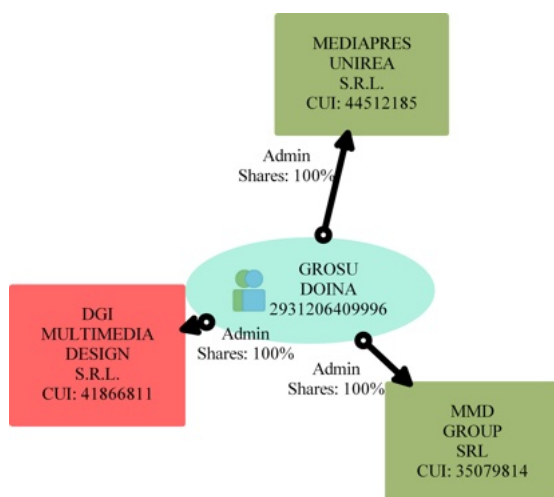
This strongly suggests that the content distributed across Meta, Google, and TikTok platforms was likely coordinated by a single actor working to benefit a specific political candidate.

The ads run through Google by DGI amounted to 27,850 EUR, and received over 30 million views. Notably, the ads exclusively promoted the AUR party. This figure likely represents just a fraction of the overall campaign budget on the platform. Due to the limitations of Google's Ad Transparency Centre, which lacks keyword-based search functionality, we were unable to identify other potential advertisers who might have run similar ads on Google. This suggests there could be more undiscovered ad spending linked to the campaign across the platform.

6.2. What is DGI Multimedia Design

DGI Multimedia Design S.R.L.⁴⁶ is a Romanian company specialising in custom software development, established on 7 November 2019. Its headquarters are located at Str. Orhideei, Nr. 68, in the village of Orzeni, Holboca commune, Iași County.

DGI Multimedia Design S.R.L. is registered under the fiscal code 41866811 and the Trade Register number J22/3432/2019. Its main activity, according to the CAEN code 6201, is "Activities of custom software development (client-oriented software)."



Doina Grosu⁴⁷, the owner of the company, and Marius Lulea, vice president of AUR, are central figures in the domestic influence ecosystem related to Romania's far-right AUR party, as revealed by *Misreport's* investigation "*'independent publications', branded AUR, pay Facebook to amplify party propaganda and fake content*"⁴⁸ in November 2023.

Grosu, the owner of DGI Multimedia Design SRL, has been closely associated with AUR's media campaigns. Her company collaborated with the party during the 2020 electoral campaign, earning 240,000 lei in 2021 for services rendered.

Figure 09: DGI Management

Beyond her financial ties, Grosu has played a more public role by appearing in videos on the website *60m.ro*, presenting herself as a journalist reporting on current events. However, these productions were revealed to be biased narratives designed to promote AUR's political agenda under the guise of legitimate journalism.

Investigations have demonstrated that several domains linked to these pseudo-independent media sites were registered directly in his name or through companies connected to him, such as *Unirea 1918 MEDIA SRL*.

According to Snoop, DGI Multimedia Design is the main beneficiary of the AUR's political public funds⁴⁹ for online activities in 2024.

⁴⁶ [DGI MULTIMEDIA DESIGN S.R.L. din Baicoi - CUI 41866811](#)

⁴⁷ [Cum funcționează mașinăria de propagandă AUR. Femeia pusă la comanda fabricii de conținut radical](#)

⁴⁸ [SPECIAL: 19 „publicații independente”, marca AUR, plătesc Facebook pentru a amplifica propagandă de partid și conținut fals](#)

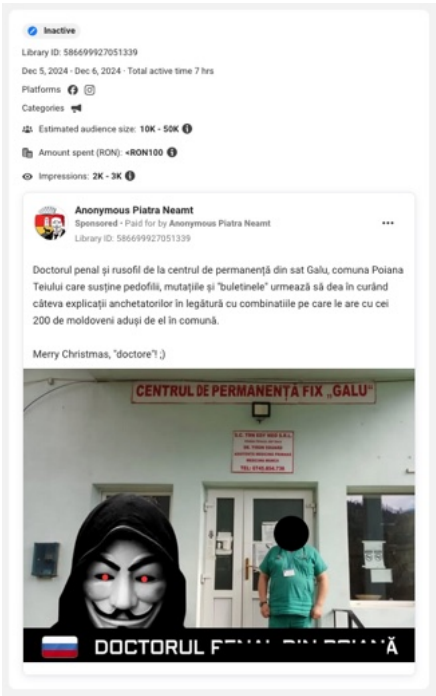
⁴⁹ [Facturile cu care au cucerit țara: 9 milioane de euro a cheltuit Coaliția PSD-PNL pe publicitate TV și online în doar o lună - Snoop](#)

7. Other Policy Violations

While not linked to the network described above, our research allowed us to uncover another notable violation of Meta’s policies which remained unaddressed. As previously outlined in this note, Meta enforces specific policies to regulate political advertising on its platforms. However, an analysis of overall advertising activities during the Presidential Election has revealed some notable cases.

“The criminal and Russophile doctor from the care center in Galu village, Poiana Teiului commune who supports pedophiles, mutations and "ids" will soon give some explanations to the investigators in relation to the combinations he has with the 200 Moldovans brought by him in the commune. Merry Christmas, "Doctor"! :)”

For example, the advertisements⁵⁰ placed by the Facebook account of Anonymous Piatra Neamt⁵¹ (7.2K likes and 8.3K followers), which presents itself as part of the Anonymous collective in the Romanian city of Piatra Neamt. Many of these ads violate Meta's advertising policy. See the attached example, the text contains clear defamatory, insulting, and profane statements aimed at a specific individual. The accompanied photo shows an identifiable person and the name and telephone number of a care center. In the picture, the person depicted is referred to as a 'criminal doctor'.



The advertiser's contact details lead to a web page⁵² with the same name as the Facebook account. The telephone number provided does not work, when calling the number an audio message is played saying that it is not in use. The site's domain name data has been anonymized.

This example clearly violates Meta's advertising policy, as advertisements may not contain profanity and must not include attacks designed to humiliate or shame individuals. In addition, the advertisement was placed by an anonymous account on a Facebook page of a 'public figure'.

Information from the advertiser

This information was submitted by the advertiser.
Submitted Apr 16, 2023

- Disclaimer
Anonymous Piatra Neamt
- Phone number
+40 [REDACTED]
- Email
contact@anonymous[REDACTED].com
- Website
https://anonymous[REDACTED].com/
- Address
Piatra Neamt, Neamt

⁵⁰ [Anonymous Piatra Neamt - Facebook Ads Library](#)
⁵¹ <https://www.facebook.com/anonymouspiatraaneamt>
⁵² <https://anonymouspiatraneamt.com/>

8. Conclusion

This note underscores that while much attention was placed on TikTok's role in Romania's unvalidated Presidential election, a significant volume of concerning activities have also been taking place on Meta's platforms. Illegal advertisements and those violating Meta's Terms of Service and the Digital Services Act (DSA) are pervasive, highlighting a systemic issue of poor moderation. The discovery of a coordinated network of websites tied to these ads—operating as a smear campaign—emphasises the risks posed by coordinated inauthentic behaviour. Despite evidence and warnings, Meta's moderation remains inadequate, as evidenced by email exchanges with Context.ro and the platform's apparent denial of issues that should have been red flags, particularly given potential links to past campaigns by the same entities.

The findings in this note were made possible primarily due to the ad repositories mandated by the DSA, both in scope and swift timing. However, the process could be expedited and insights broadened if all ad libraries adhered to a standardised data format such as SDAF⁵³. Such a move would significantly enhance the ability to detect and mitigate cross-platform coordination.

Finally, the investigation reveals early signs of emerging campaigns ahead of Romania's yet-to-be-scheduled elections. These developments call for heightened vigilance and proactive measures by both platforms and regulators to safeguard democratic processes. Failure to act decisively risks allowing the continuation of harmful and deceptive practices that erode public trust and compromise electoral integrity.

⁵³ [Standardised Digital Advertising Format \(SDAF\) Project](#)

Annexes

1. Domains SPF configuration

Domain	SPF Value	IP	Host
ropres.ro	v=spf1 +mx +a +ip4:92.114.98.11 +include:nyxmx.hosterion.net ~all	92.114.98.11	nyx.hosterion.net
presaliberă.ro	v=spf1 +a +mx +ip4:92.114.98.14 include:hyperionmx.hosterion.net ~all	92.114.98.14	nyx.hosterion.net
4media.info	v=spf1 +a +mx +ip4:92.114.98.11 include:nyxmx.hosterion.net ~all	92.114.98.11	nyx.hosterion.net
5news.ro	v=spf1 ip4:86.107.43.20 ip4:37.156.4.73 +a +mx +ip4:86.107.43.81 ~all	86.107.43.20	nyx.hosterion.net
comentatorii.ro	v=spf1 +a +mx +ip4:92.114.98.11 include:nyxmx.hosterion.net ~all	92.114.98.11	nyx.hosterion.net
agentiadeinformatii.ro	v=spf1 +a +mx +ip4:92.114.98.11 include:nyxmx.hosterion.net ~all	92.114.98.11	nyx.hosterion.net
gazetarii.ro	v=spf1 +a +mx +ip4:92.114.98.11 include:nyxmx.hosterion.net ~all	92.114.98.11	nyx.hosterion.net
curierulromanesc.ro	v=spf1 +a +mx +ip4:92.114.98.11 include:nyxmx.hosterion.net ~all	92.114.98.11	nyx.hosterion.net
anchetatorii.ro	v=spf1 +a +mx +ip4:92.114.98.11 include:nyxmx.hosterion.net ~all	92.114.98.11	nyx.hosterion.net
60m.ro	v=spf1 +a +mx +ip4:92.114.98.11	92.114.98.11	nyx.hosterion.net

	include:nyxmx.hosterion.net ~all		
actiunea.ro	v=spf1 +a +mx +ip4: 185.199.175.90 include:chironmx.hosterion.net ~all	185.199.175.90	chiron.hosterion.net