RUSSIA AND ILAN SHOR: THE ARCHITECTS OF A FACEBOOK DISINFORMATION NETWORK

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Summary

The Kremlin has built a network of thousands of auto-generated Facebook pages to hijack public discourse through social media. The "*WatchDog.MD*" Community identified 1**46 anonymous pages** affiliated with fugitive oligarch Ilan Shor, which he uses to place political ads. Additionally, **315 more anonymous** pages from the same network are currently in "stand-by" mode" – they do not display a location but are ready to run ads. An analysis of the keywords used in the names of these pages shows they are part of a larger network of at least **2,167 auto-generated Facebook pages** created by the Kremlin to influence political processes in the Republic of Moldova and other European states. These figures likely represent only the tip of the iceberg.

Dozens of pages with randomly generated identical names composed of various keywords continue to operate on Facebook, even though META's rules prohibit the existence of two pages with the same name. In addition to the identical names, the pages use profile pictures of young women stolen from dating or cam sites.

In 2024, using such anonymous pages, the Russian Federation heavily funded Facebook ads to spread disinformation during the European Parliament elections. Approximately 65% of these political ads were aired without disclaimers on Facebook across at least 16 EU countries.

According to monitoring reports from the "*WatchDog.MD*" Community, between the date Ilan Shor was sanctioned by the U.S. on October 26, 2022, and September 1, 2024, the oligarch spent **€469 990 to promote 1,407 Facebook ads**.

The identified network will be reported to META, which must take the necessary measures to block pages used by individuals sanctioned by the U.S. for destabilizing the Republic of Moldova.

Introduction

The parliamentary elections on September 28 represent another critical crossroads for the Republic of Moldova. They will determine whether Chișinău will continue the EU accession process or return to Russia's sphere of influence. The Kremlin is using its entire hybrid warfare arsenal to derail Moldova's European path—vote buying, intimidation of civil society and independent media, and the promotion of disinformation through social media platforms.

In 2024, the Russian Federation led a wide-scale online campaign to sabotage the EU parliamentary elections. Through its network of anonymous pages, Russia massively sponsored Facebook ads to spread disinformation and divide the electorate ahead of the vote. According to a study by AI Forensics, over **65% of these political ads were broadcast without disclaimers on Facebook in over 16 EU countries, and Meta removed less than 5% of them.**
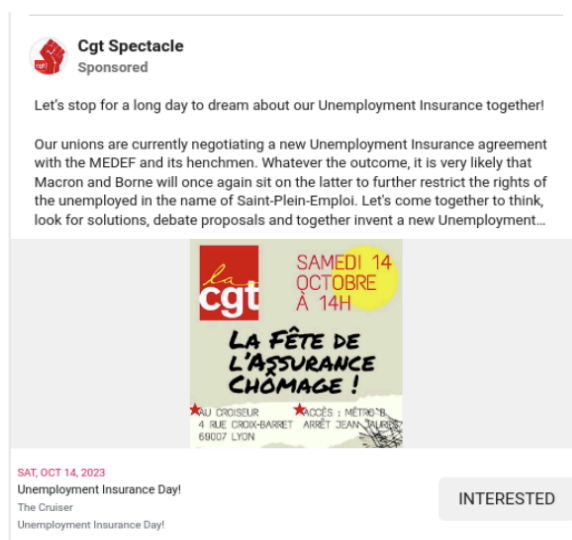
Fig 1. Example of a political ad sponsored without a disclaimer during the 2024 European Parliament elections. Source: AI Forensics

In the Republic of Moldova, the political advertising market is dominated by fugitive oligarchs Ilan Shor and Veaceslav Platon, who have been internationally sanctioned for actions aimed at destabilizing the Republic of Moldova in the interests of the Russian Federation.

Oligarch Veaceslav Platon ran manipulative ads from his official Facebook page and that of former journalist Natalia Morari, with whom he has a child. Ilan Șor, on the other hand, uses the tactic of running ads through anonymous pages, which have flooded Moldovan Facebook since the end of 2022.

"Ilan Shor for the People" – the first attempts to run manipulative ads

Ilan Shor was a puppet of the Plahotniuc regime, but after Plahotniuc lost power in 2019, both oligarchs fled the country. It was then that Șor began actively collaborating with the Russian Federation. The defeat of the pro-Russian forces led by Igor Dodon and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova (PSRM) in the 2020 presidential elections and the 2021 snap parliamentary elections brought Ilan Șor closer to the Kremlin through Dmitry Peskov, Vladimir Putin's spokesperson. Unlike Dodon and PSRM, Shor and his party proved to be more effective at election fraud in the Republic of Moldova.

The Kremlin transferred the privilege of rebroadcasting Russian channels from the Socialists' media conglomerate to that of Ilan Shor. At the same time, the importance of social media for disinformation increased. Shor understood the importance and effectiveness of Facebook as a powerful tool for political information and mobilization, which he had already used against the Plahotniuc regime and Dodon's pro-Russian government. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the start of Moldova's EU accession process, Moscow, through Ilan Shor, attempted to spark anti-European protests in Chișinău to destabilize the country.

In 2022, so-called civic movements like "A New Life," the "National Salvation Committee," and the "Movement for the People" emerged, all managed by Ilan Shor. These were also the first campaigns promoted by anonymous Facebook pages.

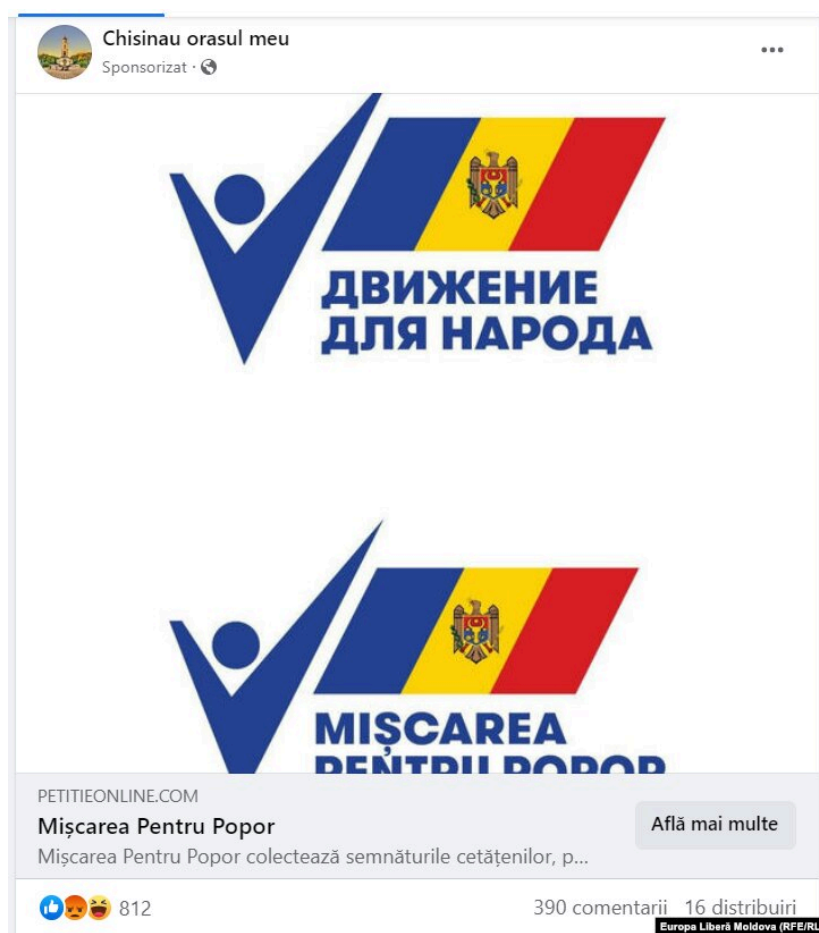*Fig 2. Anonymous page promoting a petition by the "Movement for the People," led by oligarch Ilan Șor. Source: Radio Free Europe Moldova*

At the end of 2022, Moldovan Facebook was flooded with a series of pages named "Ilan Shor for the People," using as their profile picture the image of the fugitive oligarch and the symbols of the "Șor" Party, which had not yet been outlawed at that time.

Fig 3.. Page named "Ilan ȘOR for the People." Source: ZDG.MD

The pages, originating from Southeast Asia, were running political ads in the interest of the fugitive oligarch without disclaimers, which violates META's community rules.
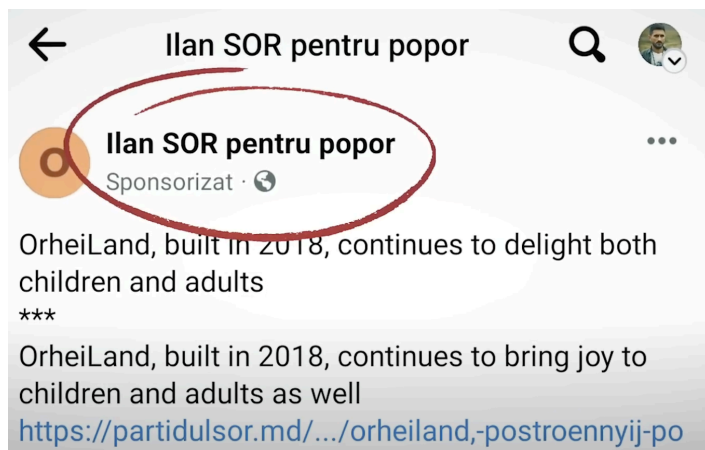

Fig 4. Fig 4. The page "Ilan Sor for the People" sponsors political ads in the interest of the "Șor" Party without a disclaimer. Source: ZDG.MD

To boost engagement with the posts, the Șor group used fake accounts to post flattering comments about the fugitive oligarch and to criticize the PAS government.
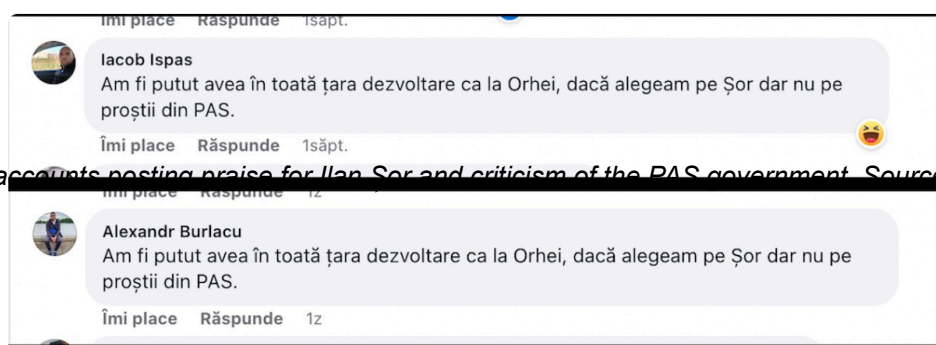

Fig 4. Fake accounts posting praise for Ilan Sor and criticism of the PAS government. Source: ZDG.MD

An investigation by *Ziarul de Gardă*, based on information extracted from a phone that belonged to the president of Orhei district, Dinu Țurcanu, revealed that in one of the party members' chats, a document titled "Организация диванных войск Оргеева" was shared—translated as "The Orhei Couch Troops Organization." In the same chat, it was mentioned that the document contained "the list of those who comment online."
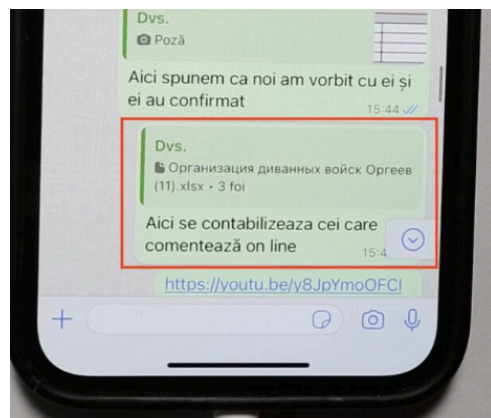

Fig 5. Screenshot from a chat between members of the Șor group discussing those who "comment online." Source: ZDG.MD

The ads were **sponsored from outside the Republic of Moldova**. What gives them away is the currency used for payments. Within Moldova, META only accepts payments in euros, while Shor's initial ads were paid for in dollars or other foreign currencies.
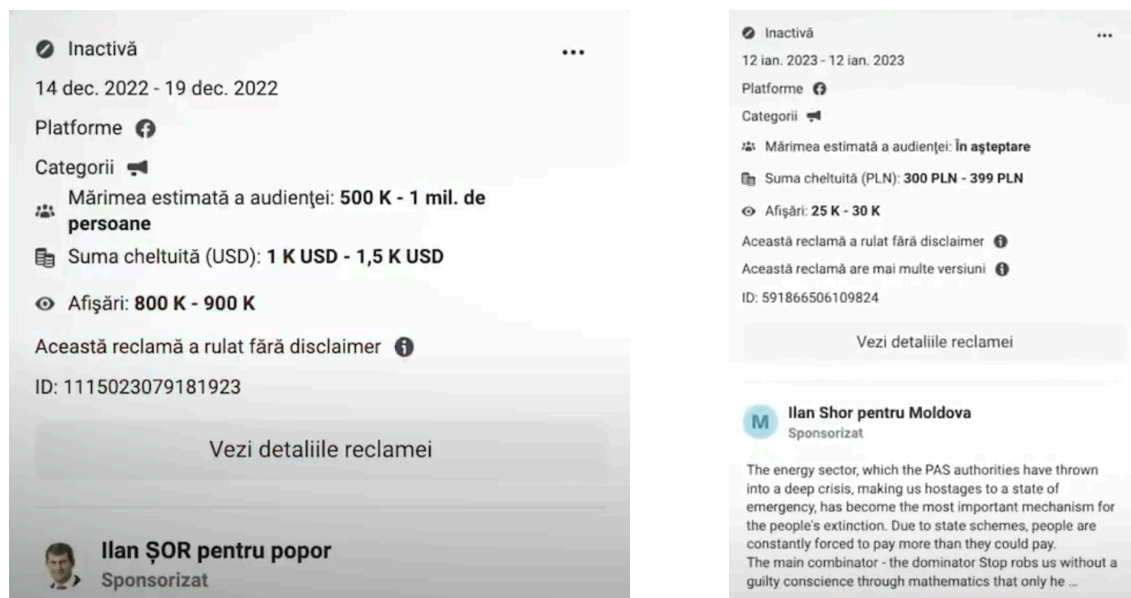

Fig 6. Ads paid in dollars and Polish zloty, proving that the pages were not managed from Moldova. The ads ran without political disclaimers, which allowed them to appear in Moldova as commercial ads. Source: ZDG.MD

Another detail proving that the pages were not managed from Moldova is the identity of their administrators. In the description section, it was indicated that the pages were managed from countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Timor-Leste, or the United Arab Emirates.
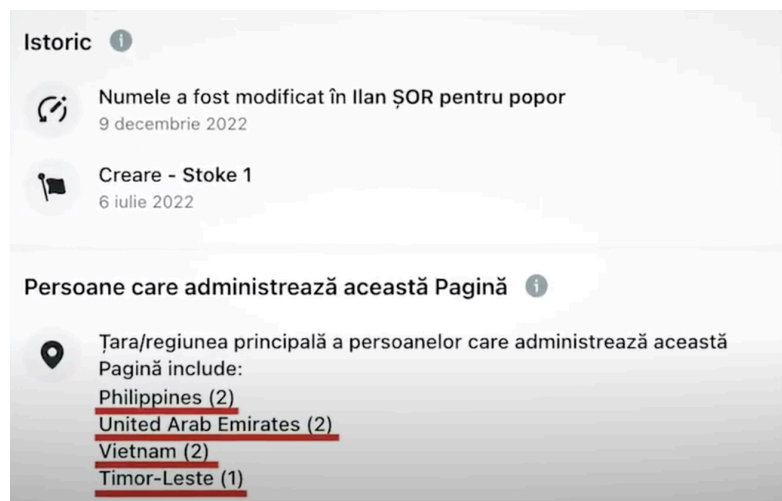

Fig 7. "Ilan SHOR for the People" page managed from Southeast Asia. Previously, the page was named "Stoke 1." Source: [ZDG.MD](ZDG.MD)

The new network of anonymous pages

After META took action to block the pages named "*Ilan Șor pentru popor*, (Ilan Shor for the People)" the oligarch switched to sponsoring ads from fake pages with patriotic names such as: "Authentic Moldova," "Today's Chișinău," "Гагаузия вперед" ("Gagauzia Forward"), "Moldova вперед" ("Moldova Forward"), "My Dream Moldova," "Orhei Today," etc. All the pages presented themselves as "Media/News Websites" or "Newspapers."

Fig 8. The page "Noutăți Moldova Zi de Zi" ("Moldova News Day by Day") promotes a video featuring Ilan Șor's promise, in the context of the local general elections, to allocate 50 million lei to the cities where candidates from his group are elected as mayors.

According to monitoring reports by the "*WatchDog.MD*" Community, from the moment Ilan Shor was sanctioned by the United States on October 26, 2022, until September 1, 2024, the oligarch spent **€469 990 to promote 1,407 ads on Facebook**. The actual amount may be even higher, as the fugitive Ilan Shor also used anonymous pages that ran ads without disclaimers, which are not recorded in META's Ad Library.

While in the case of the "Ilan Șor pentru Popor" ("Ilan Shor for the People") pages, the affiliation with Southeast Asia could be observed from the previous names of the pages and the location of their administrators, in the case of the new network of anonymous pages, this is harder to detect, as the administrators' region is not listed.

Fig 9. The page "Plaiul Moldovenesc Nou" ("New Moldovan Homeland") does not indicate the country from which it is administered.

Before being renamed, the fake pages had names generated from a series of keywords such as: "News," "Politics," "Cinema," "Fit and Fabulous," "Virtual," etc. At the same time, the anonymous pages promoting ads in the interest of Ilan Shor presented themselves as "Media/News Website," "Newspaper," or "Media/News Company."

Transparență privind Pagina ✕

Informații despre Pagină pentru Centrul de Știri Moldova ⓘ

Centrul de Știri Moldova
Site web media/de știri

Istoric ⓘ

Numele a fost modificat în Centrul de Știri Moldova
20 februarie 2024

Creare - Gourmet GurusCrafty CreationsMotivational Moments
28 aprilie 2023

Fig 9. The anonymous page "Centrul de Știri Moldova" ("Moldova News Center"), which before being renamed had a name generated from several random words, presents itself as a "Media/News Website."

These anonymous pages are part of a vast network of auto-generated pages on Facebook. The same page name can be found across dozens of fake pages. For example, the page "Centrul de Știri Moldova" ("Moldova News Center") is part of a group of 21 pages that all share the name "Gourmet GurusCrafty CreationsMotivational Moments."

Gourmet GurusCrafty CreationsMotivational Moments
Melodie
Urmărește

Gourmet GurusCrafty CreationsMotivational Moments
Spa, frumusețe și îngrijire personală
Urmărește

Gourmet GurusCrafty CreationsMotivational Moments
Agenție de publicitate
Urmărește

Gourmet GurusCrafty CreationsMotivational MomentsH cat
Agenție de publicitate
Urmărește

Fig 10. Auto-generated anonymous pages with the identical name "Gourmet GurusCrafty CreationsMotivational Moments," which included "Centrul de Știri Moldova" ("Moldova News Center") before it was renamed.

In total, the "WatchDog.MD" Community managed to identify a network of over **2,167 anonymous pages:**

- 39 anonymous pages were renamed to run ads for Ilan Shor;

- 107 anonymous pages changed their location to Chișinău but kept their original names;

- 315 anonymous pages have been identified as active promoters for running Facebook ads but do not display a location;

- 1,706 anonymous pages do not display a location and are not currently active as ad promoters on Facebook.

Out of the 2,167 pages, at least **146 are linked to the Shor criminal group**. In the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections on September 28, the number of active anonymous pages could rise significantly to promote Moscow-backed political actors in Chișinău.

Din cele 2167 de pagini, cel puțin **146 dintre ele aparțin grupării criminale Șor**. În contextul alegerilor parlamentare din 28 septembrie, numărul de pagini anonime active ar putea crește considerabil pentru a promova actorii politici de la Chișinău susținuți de Moscova.

The pages that have not been renamed mostly present themselves as "Advertising Agency," "Real Estate," "Business Center," or "Restaurant."
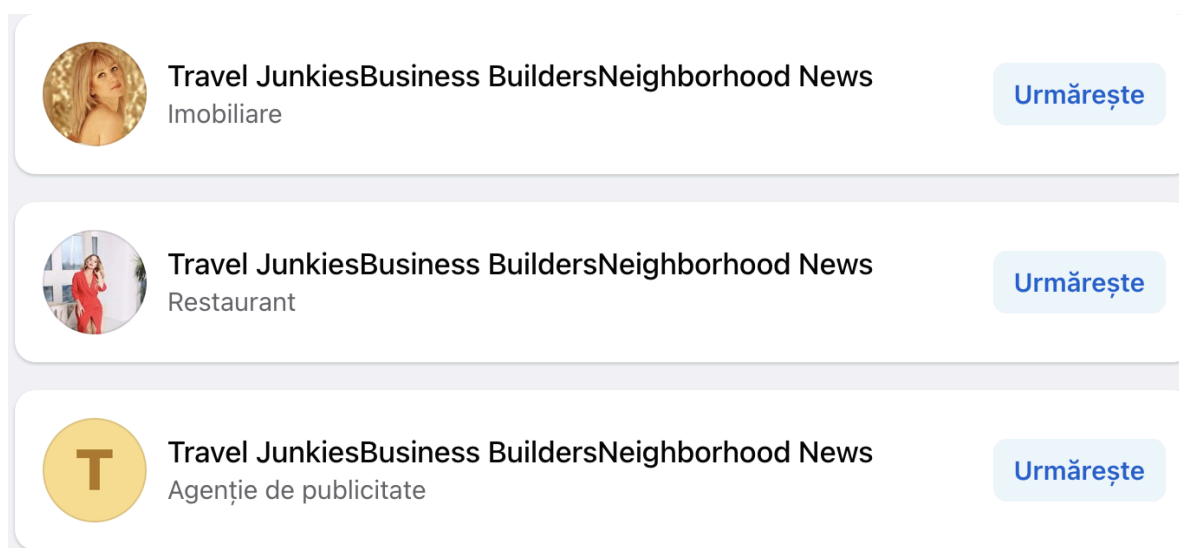

Fig 11. Anonymous pages named "Travel JunkiesBusiness BuildersNeighborhood News" list their description as "Restaurant," "Real Estate," or "Advertising Agency."

In addition to the identical names generated from multiple keywords, the pages use profile pictures of young women. These photos are taken from dating and cam sites featuring models from Eastern Europe, primarily from Russia and Ukraine.
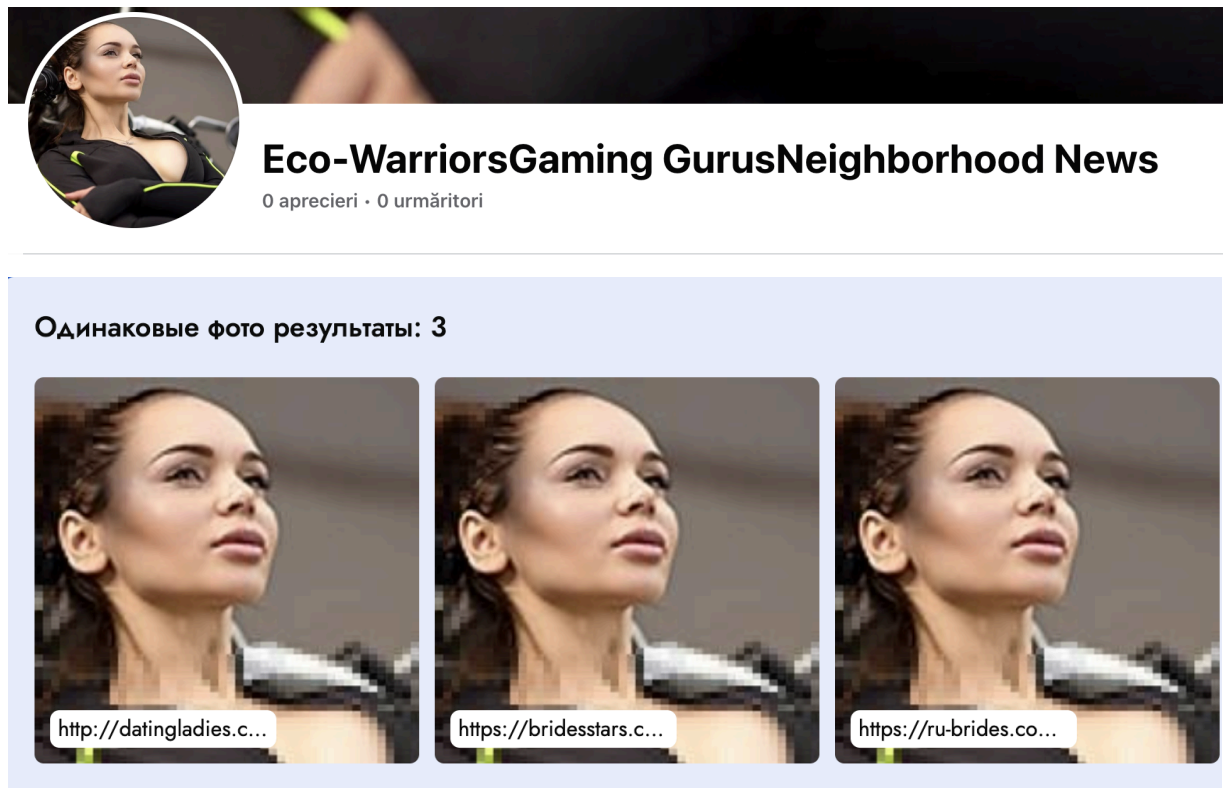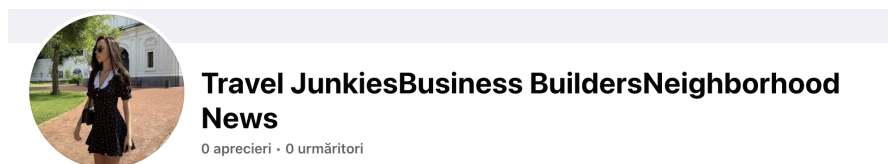

Eco-WarriorsGaming GurusNeighborhood News
0 aprecieri · 0 urmăritori

Одинаковые фото результаты: 3

http://datingladies.c...

https://bridesstars.c...

https://ru-brides.co...

Fig 12. The profile picture of the page "Eco-WarriorsGaming GurusNeighborhood News" was found on three cam sites featuring models from Eastern Europe, primarily from Russia and Ukraine.

One and the same photo can be found on multiple anonymous pages with different names, and the titles may contain the same keywords.

Travel JunkiesBusiness BuildersNeighborhood News
0 aprecieri · 0 urmăritori

Green LivingVirtual VictoriesNeighborhood News
0 aprecieri · 0 urmăritori

Travel JunkiesBusiness BuildersNeighborhood News
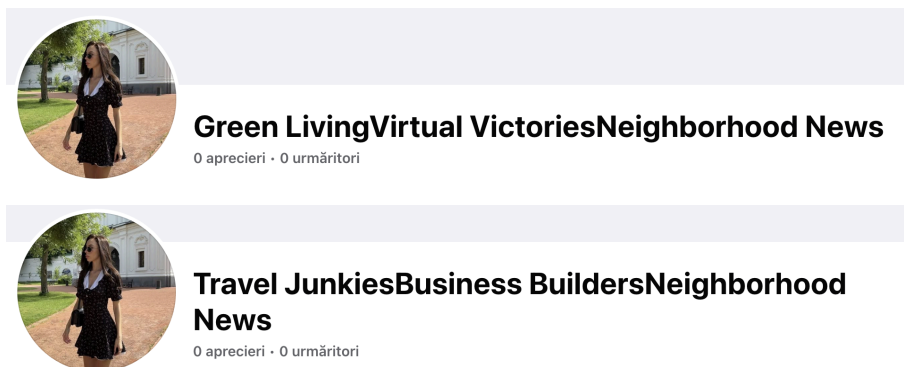0 aprecieri · 0 urmăritori

Fig 12. Anonymous pages from the same network with different names but using the same profile picture. At the same time, the titles of these pages feature the same keywords: "Neighborhood," "News," "Business," and "Builders."

Not all pages in the identified network change their names to run ads. For example, the page named "WealthWave Innovations," which promotes the "Eurasia" organization led by Ilan Shor and [sanctioned internationally](#), has kept its original name. This tactic is used to bypass META's algorithms that block pages affiliated with the fugitive Shor. Unlike the renamed pages, this one runs without a disclaimer in order to avoid displaying the amounts spent and information about the promoter.
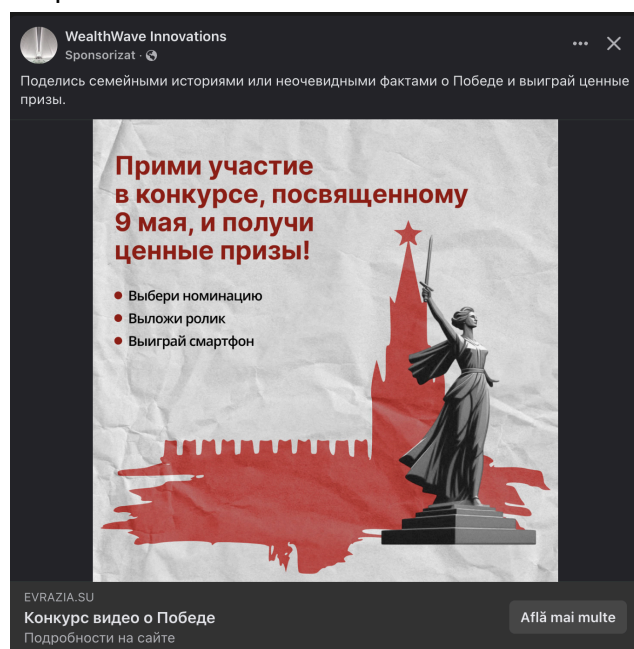

Fig 13. The page "WealthWave Innovations" promotes a propaganda contest organized by the Eurasia organization on the occasion of Victory Day.

This tactic was used last year to discredit the presidential elections and the referendum on European integration. At that time, anonymous pages like "Simple Overkill" promoted manipulative videos featuring Veaceslav Valico—who was involved in organizing the "Stars of David" provocation in Paris in the fall of 2023—and members of the Shor criminal group: Tudor Șoilița, Iunesa Gronik, and Serghei Mișin.
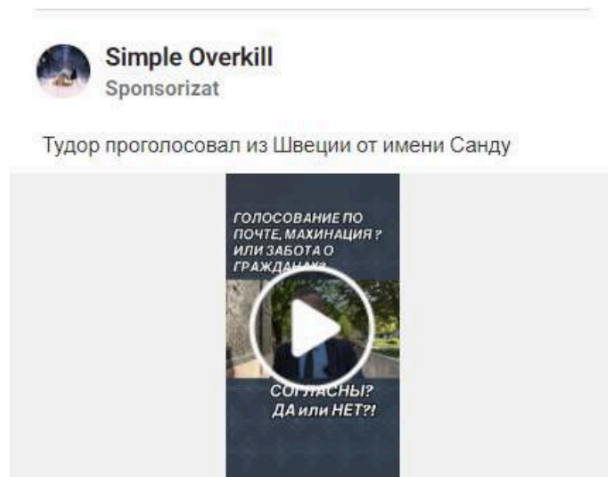

Fig. 14. The page "Simple Overkill" sponsors a video featuring Tudor Șoilița, promoting the false claim that mail-in voting is being used by PAS to rig the referendum on European integration and the presidential elections.

Findings

The promotion of disinformation through sponsored ads on Facebook is one of the key methods used by the Kremlin to undermine democratic processes in the West and destabilize states within its strategic proximity. The Republic of Moldova, which Moscow views as part of its legitimate and historical sphere of influence, is one of the primary targets of these hybrid operations.

In the context of the upcoming parliamentary elections on September 28, the Russian Federation is actively preparing an opaque online infrastructure made up of thousands of anonymous pages that serve pro-Russian propaganda and politically affiliated actors loyal to Moscow. The goal of these actions is to create a Kremlin-aligned parliamentary majority that would block Moldova's European integration process and jeopardize the stability of Ukraine's eastern flank.

Through the "Eurasia" network and other proxy entities, Russia continues its documented practice of voter manipulation—whether through financial incentives or systematic disinformation—just as it did during the 2024 presidential elections.

The 2,167 pages identified so far represent only a portion of a much broader network of auto-generated pages, which could extend to tens of thousands of entities used for similar operations in other European countries, including Romania—and this refers to Facebook alone, without accounting for other social media platforms.

In this context, the network documented by WatchDog.MD will be reported to META, which has the responsibility to intervene promptly and effectively to block digital tools used by individuals and organizations under international sanctions and involved in the destabilization of the Republic of Moldova.

Recommendations:

1. **Rapid intervention from META**
   META must treat the identified network of anonymous pages as part of a coordinated political interference operation, not as isolated violations of advertising policies. A complete shutdown of the automated infrastructure linked to these pages is required, not just the removal of individual ads.

2. **Classification of actions as foreign interference**
   The authorities of the Republic of Moldova, in cooperation with international partners, should officially classify the promotional campaigns carried out by networks affiliated with Ilan Shor and the Russian Federation as forms of **foreign interference** in elections. This classification would enable the activation of additional legal mechanisms and sanctions.

3. **Increased public transparency from the CEC and CNA**
   The Central Electoral Commission and the National Anticorruption Center must publish real-time monitoring data on online electoral advertising, including information about funding sources, page administrators, and the financial volumes involved. In this regard, the CEC and CNA should cooperate with the Center for Strategic Communication and Countering Disinformation.

4. **Creation of a blacklist of politically sponsored pages linked to sanctioned actors**

   An updated public list of pages directly or indirectly associated with sanctioned actors (e.g., Ilan Shor, the "Eurasia" organization) would provide civil society, journalists, and citizens with clear tools for verification.

5. **Pre-election digital literacy campaigns**
   The government and civil society must launch explicit prebunking campaigns that explain the mechanisms through which anonymous networks manipulate elections. These campaigns should specifically target information-vulnerable groups—seniors, rural populations, and the diaspora from eastern regions.

6. **Implicarea Comisiei Europene și a SEAE în presiuni instituționale asupra META**
   Given the cross-border scope of the network, a coordinated response at the European level is warranted, including through the *Code of Practice on Disinformation* platform and the analytical teams of the *EEAS (EEAS StratCom)*.

7. Investigarea rolului rețelelor de publicitate din Asia de Sud-Est

Digital service providers from the Philippines, Vietnam, the United Arab Emirates, and other countries involved in managing these pages must be identified and sanctioned when they facilitate foreign political interference.