Evaluation of disinformation campaigns

financed by Șor and Platon: impact and limited reaction of social platforms

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Summary

Fugitive oligarchs Ilan Șor and Veaceslav Platon intensified their disinformation campaigns on online platforms. Between June 1 and June 30, 2024, both spent about **55,250 euros** promoting disinformation on Facebook. Compared to the period from April 25 to May 24, the two spent **24,250 euros more** on promoting disinformation.

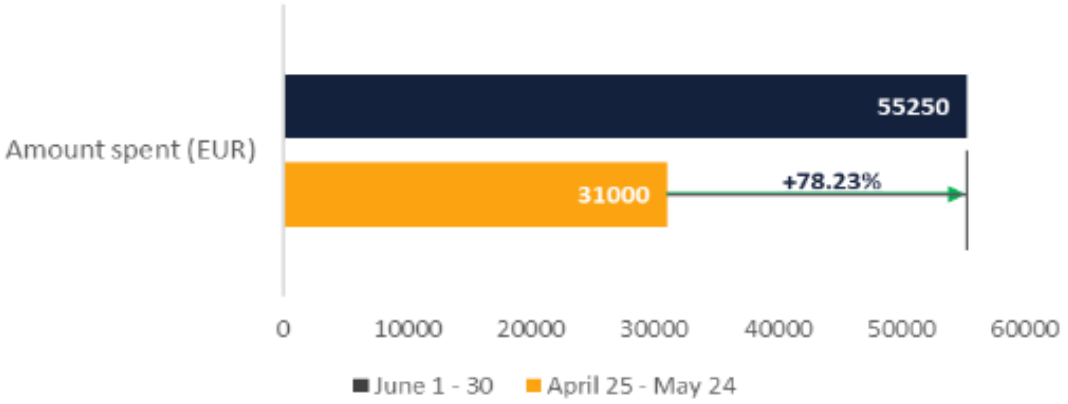

Fig. 1 - Comparison between the total amounts spent by Ilan Șor and Veaceslav Platon for promoting disinformation on Facebook in the periods June 1-30 and April 25 - May 24.

META's limited reaction did not stop the spread of disinformation on Facebook and Instagram. Blocking the pages of Ilan Șor, Marina Tauber, Eugenia Guțul and Alexei Lungu did not deliver any visible results in combating disinformation. It instead increased the number of anonymous pages that sponsor disinformation for enormous sums, against which META is belatedly taking action.

The pages of members of the "Renaissance" Party remain active, and unlike Ilan Șor or Eugenia Guțul, they openly promote manipulative and hate-inciting advertisements from their pages.

The main manipulations promoted are "*Moldova is ruled by foreigners*," "*Moldova does not negotiate on equal footing with the EU*", "*The autumn elections will be rigged*," and "*Russia is the strategic partner of Moldova*."

The main purpose of these sponsored campaigns is to sow panic in society, discredit Moldovan European integration process, and whitewash Russia's image.

Introduction

In Russia's hybrid war against Moldova, one of the main tools of disinformation is sponsored advertising on platforms like Facebook (owned by META) and Google.

The main malign actors pumping money into online disinformation are fugitive oligarchs Ilan Șor and Veaceslav Platon. They spend thousands of euros monthly to sow panic in Moldovan society, aiming to derail the country's European course.

Moldovan authorities do not have direct mechanisms to stop these campaigns and can only request their cessation post facto from international platforms.

Șor's expenses for the period June 1- 30, 2024

Fugitive Ilan Șor promoted at least **84 advertisements on 14 Facebook pages** between June 1-30, **spending 30,000 euros**. Compared to the period April 25 - May 24, the number of **sponsored advertisements increased by 29** and the budget of the advertisements by 17,300 euros.

During one week only, **24-30 June**, he spent approximately 6,350 euros on advertising promotions.

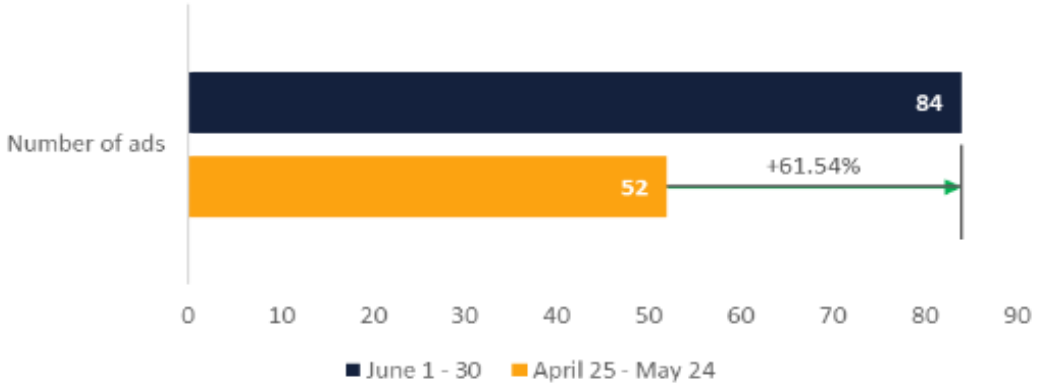

Fig. 2 - Evolution of the number of advertisements sponsored by the pages affiliated to the Șor group in the period June 1-30, compared to the period April 25 - May 24.

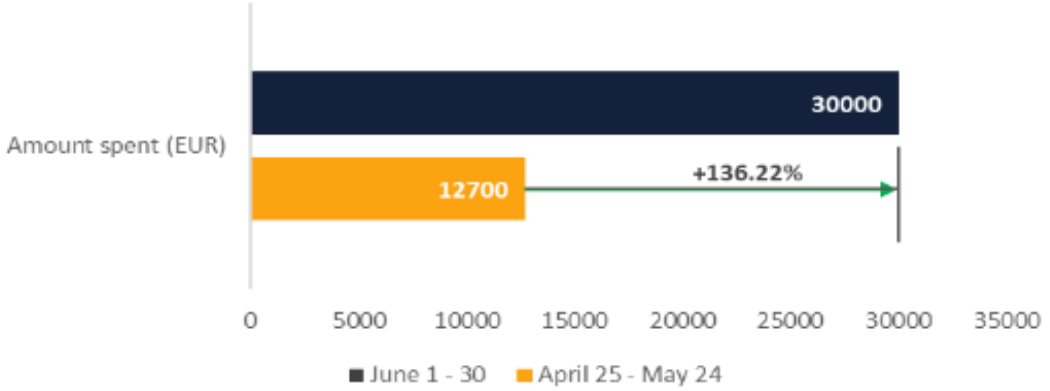

Fig. 3 - Comparison between the amounts spent by pages affiliated to the Șor group in the periods June 1 - 30 and April 25 - May 24.

Two pages are owned by members of the "Revival" Party, officially supported by Ilan Șor, Veaceslav Jucov and Alexandr Nesterovschi. The rest of the pages use a similar visual identity: they have profile pictures with the Moldovan flag and usernames that allude to either media organisations or patriotic organisations: "Moldova Culturală" (Cultural Moldova), "Moldova în Media" (Moldova in the media), "Moldova pentru fiecare zi" (Moldova for Every Day), "Moldova Informează" (Moldova Informs), "Evenimente în Țară" (Events in the Country), "Tot ce trebuie să știi în Moldova" (Everything You Need to Know in Moldova), "Ritmul Națiunii" (Rhythm of the Nation), "Simple Overkill 2" and "Secrete ale Moldovei" (Secrets of Moldova). All of these sites categorise themselves as "media/news website", "newspaper" or "media production and broadcasting company" to create the illusion that they belong to legitimate media institutions.

Fig. 4 - The "Moldova Cultural Plus" page uses the flag of Moldova as its profile image, and under the category it notes that it is a "Media/news website".

The main manipulations promoted by Șor's anonymous pages were:

- ***"Moldova is ruled by foreigners" -*** this falsehood is spread by activist Veaceslav Valico after members of the Șor group were denied access to the legislative chamber by agents of the State Protection and Guard Service. Valico insinuated that the agents could not answer to the Șor group as to why their entry was restricted because they were foreign agents who do not speak Romanian.

- ***Russia is the strategic partner of the Republic of Moldova -*** Member of the "Revival" party, Veaceslav Jucov, stated at a rally that "*the hand of Moscow exists, it is the helping hand that Russia extends to our citizens*." Similarly, an anonymous page promoted Ilan Șor's statements that "*Moldovan products are appreciated in the Russian market, while in the Western market they are not known*."

- ***Autumn elections will be rigged -*** One of the promoted posts accuses the Central Electoral Commission (CEC) of preparing to rig the elections, using the argument that the institution does not separate electoral lists for the referendum and presidential elections. Another anonymous page sponsored a video clip from the "Victory" Bloc meeting, where the government was accused of discriminating against Moldovans in Russia by allegedly limiting their right to vote. The argument is manipulated by claiming that the largest diaspora of Moldovans outside the country lives in Russia.

Fig. 5 - "Moldova in the Media" page accuses CEC of taking decisions in the interests of Maia Sandu regarding the autumn elections.

- ***Moldova should not/will not join the EU -*** The start of Moldova's EU accession negotiations was discredited by promoting the message that "*negotiations will take many*

years," using Turkey, which has been in negotiations for 40 years, as an example. To show a bleak future for Moldova in the EU, Hungary was given as an example, when it was fined 200 million euros by the European Court of Justice for refusing to accept refugees.

- ***Șor does not promote propaganda on Facebook -*** Blocking of Facebook pages of Ilan Șor, Eugenia Guțul, Marina Tauber, and Alexei Lungu caused dissatisfaction from the Șor group. Deputy Alexandr Nesterovschi promoted a post indirectly accusing Facebook of censorship. An anonymous page promoted statements from Ilan Șor's lawyers, who claimed that "*META received distorted data from SIS*" and that "*they did not find propaganda or disinformation in their client's actions*."

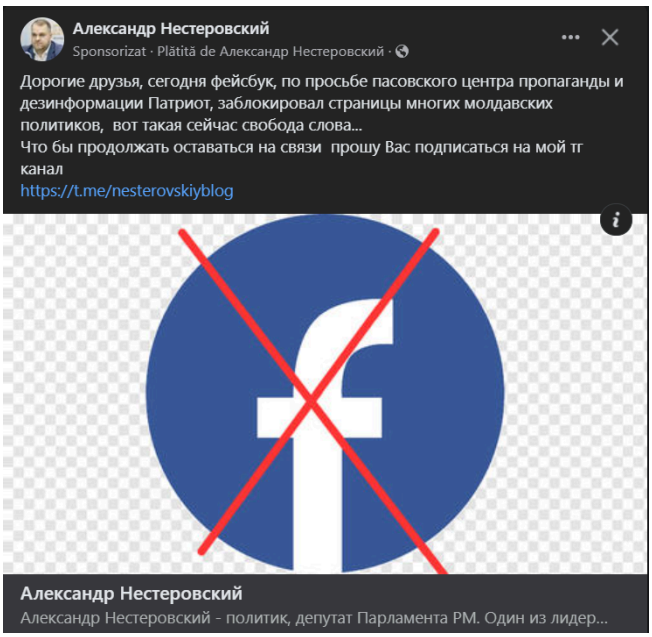

Fig. 6 - Alexandr Nesterovschi promoted a post indirectly accusing Facebook of censorship.

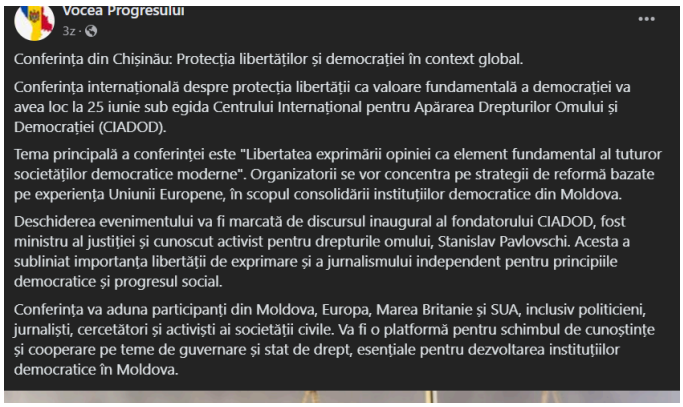

Fig. 7 - "Voice of Progress" page sponsors an event organized by lawyer Stanislav Pavlovschi on "protecting freedoms and democracy in a global context." At that event, Pavlovschi presented a survey from an Israeli company, according to which "only 11% of Moldovans trust the national press." Sponsored ads from this page were deleted from the META Ads Library, and the data on how much the page spent on promoting the ads does not appear in the META report.

Platon's expenses for the period June 1- 30, 2024

Veaceslav Platon promoted approximately **71 ads** on his personal Facebook page and that of his partner Natalia Morari from June 1 to June 30, spending **around 25,250 euros.** Compared to the period from April 25 to May 24, Platon spent **an additional 6,850 euros on ad sponsorship**, despite **having 13 fewer ads**. Just for the period of **May 18-24**, Platon spent **5,346 euros** on promoting ads on both pages. The oligarch largely distributes propagandistic content provided by Natalia Morari.

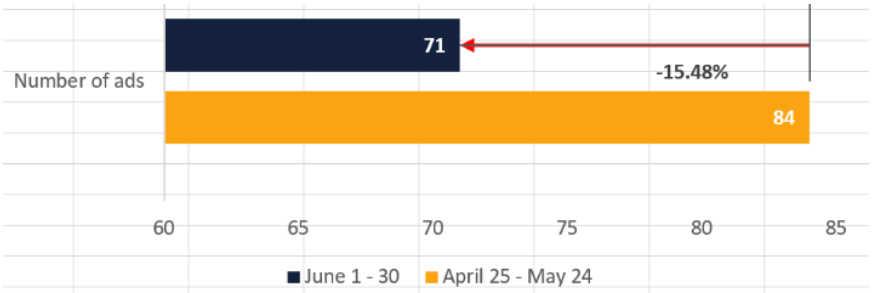

Fig. 8 - The evolution of the number of ads sponsored by Veaceslav Platon's affiliated pages on Facebook in the period June 1 - 30, compared to the period April 25 - May 24.

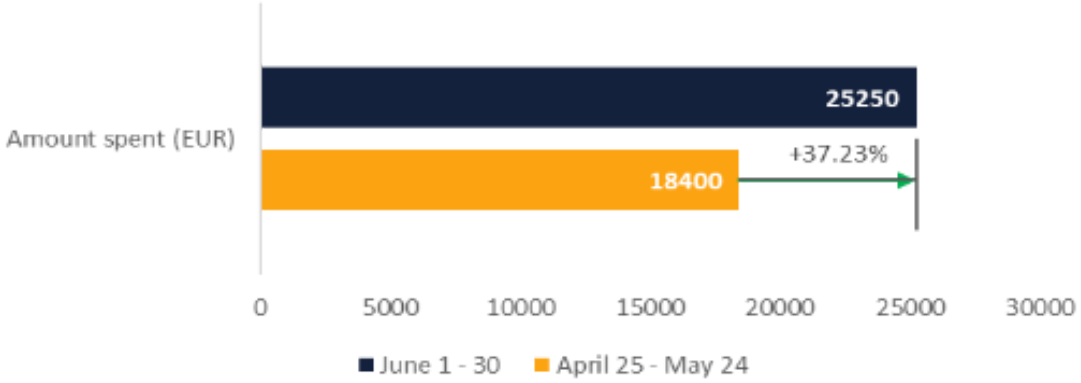

Fig. 9 - Comparison between the amounts spent by pages affiliated to Veaceslav Platon in the periods June 1 - June 30 and April 25 - May 24.

Fig 10 - [Advertisement sponsoring](#) Natalia Morari's interview with journalist Gheorghe Gonța from N4 TV. In the video clip, the two argue that the government is dividing society by calling those who criticise it 'the hand of Moscow'. At the same time, the CRJM report on the phenomenon of attacking civil society organisations and human rights defenders in Moldova in 2023, which Morari calls "denunciation", is criticised.

Besides the sponsored ads on Facebook, Platon actively promotes content on YouTube. However, the problem is that the **amounts spent by Platon** for sponsoring ads on his channel and Natalia Morari's channel **are not displayed** on Google Ads Transparency. The period during which the ads were promoted and the number of users they reached are also unknown. In total, Platon sponsored **25 ads** in June on his and Natalia Morari's YouTube channels. In comparison, for the period from April 25 to May 24, Platon sponsored **19 ads** on the two channels.

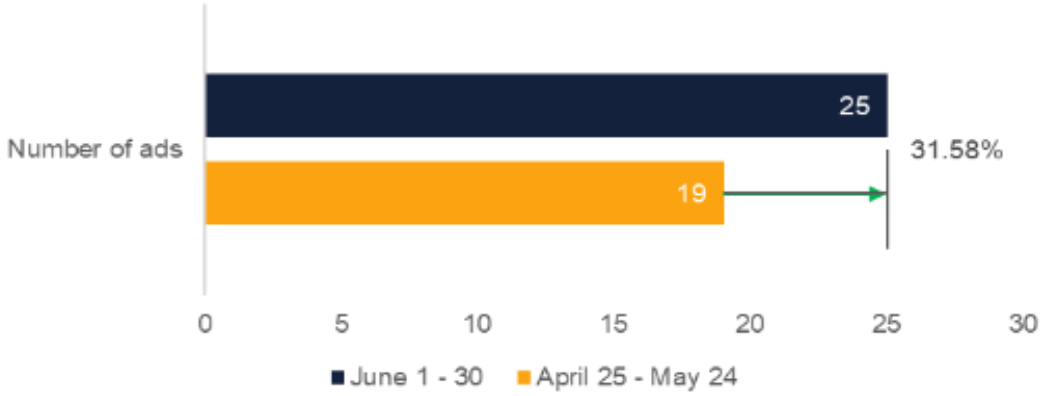

Fig. 11 - Evolution of the number of ads sponsored by Veaceslav Platon's affiliated pages on YouTube from June 1 to June 30, compared to April 25 to May 24.

The main manipulations promoted by Platon-affiliated pages were:

- ***The referendum is an electoral PR action of Maia Sandu -*** Natalia Morari claims that the main purpose of referendum is to get out to the polls those who were disappointed with Maia Sandu and "the good times of PAS".

- ***"Censorship" at the "Luceafărul" Theater -*** Natalia Morari stated that the show "Invisible," which was supposed to take place at the "Luceafărul" Theater, was canceled at the direction of the president's cultural advisor, Angela Brașoveanu. According to Morari, the reason was that the texts in the show were "*unpatriotic*" and "*against the current regime.*"

- ***Moldova does not negotiate on equal footing with the EU -*** Platon promoted a post in which he criticizes Maia Sandu for signing the decree to start EU accession negotiations. According to Platon, Maia Sandu will agree to any condition imposed by the EU without debating it.

Conclusions

The number of promoted manipulations increases as the European integration referendum and presidential elections approach. Platon, for example, diversifies his sources for promoting disinformation.

META's limited reaction has not stopped the spread of disinformation on Facebook and Instagram. Blocking the pages of Ilan Șor, Marina Tauber, Eugenia Guțul, and Alexei Lungu has not delivered any visible results in combating disinformation, as these pages did not openly promote propagandistic narratives. The pages of members of the "Revival" Party remain active, unlike Ilan Șor or Eugenia Guțul, openly promoting advertisements with manipulative content that incite hatred.

The image laundering against the image of the Russian Federation became more aggressive. The pages affiliated to Ilan Șor are trying to present Moscow as a strategic partner for Moldova, while Natalia Morari is trying to promote the idea that "*the danger from Russia is an invention of the PAS government"*. In this context, the two oligarchs are actively promoting the narrative that Moldova will not become an EU member in the near future, citing the example of Turkey. Of course, they avoid mentioning that this country interrupted the negotiation process because of the Erdoğan regime.

We also observe a concerted attack on the electoral authorities. The purpose of this is to convince the voters that the results of the referendum and presidential elections will be fraudulent, even before the start of the electoral campaign.

To stem this massive wave of disinformation, it is important that civil society and media join forces to fight disinformation and inform society correctly. Another important aspect is related to pro-European politicians and parties, who, due to their own frustrations with the current government, are weakening the positions of the European vector ahead of the referendum. The pro-Europeans should strengthen their forces to resist Russian Federation's hybrid war against Moldova, but not to feed Russian propaganda narratives. As for authorities in the electoral sector, they must openly inform society about the changes they are about to make in order to avoid speculation that they are preparing to rig the elections.

At the moment, the state lacks effective mechanisms to combat such disinformation tools. Companies like META and Alphabet should pay attention to calls from Moldovan authorities and civil society to stop running advertisements in favor of sanctioned oligarchs. One solution could be for these companies to hire content moderators from Moldova, as those from Romania may not be familiar with the socio-political situation in Moldova.