



# How much did the oligarchs spend on online ads in August 2024

**Analysis**

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## Summary

In August 2024, fugitive oligarchs Ilan Șor and Veaceslav Platon, with support from the Kremlin, ramped up their online disinformation campaigns targeting Moldova's European path. The estimated cost of these campaigns, mainly conducted through advertisements on Facebook and Google, was **€33,300** between 1-30 August. They aimed to manipulate public opinion ahead of the presidential elections and the EU accession referendum, scheduled for October 20, 2024.

### Main manipulative narratives:

- **EU destroys national identity:** The authors claim that the accession to the EU will erode Moldova's cultural heritage, contrasting with Russia, which allegedly protects national identity.
- **EU drives Moldova into debt:** The narrative suggests that financial aid from the EU represents loans that will burden future generations.
- **Energy crisis caused by EU:** The narrative accuses the EU of Moldova's high energy prices, promoting Russia as a cheaper energy source.
- **Russia, as Moldova's strategic partner:** The narrative promotes the idea that Moldova's prosperity and security depend on close ties with Russia, minimizing the threats posed by Moscow.
- **EU membership is pointless:** The campaigns aim to convince the public that Moldova will never be accepted into the EU and that the referendum is merely a PR manoeuvre by President Maia Sandu.

These campaigns seek to undermine Moldova's pro-European trajectory, destabilize the political climate, and erode trust in State institutions. The insufficient actions of Facebook and Google in countering these manipulative advertisements allow the continued influence on Moldova's public discourse. In collaboration with civil society, Moldova's authorities must intensify efforts to combat disinformation, actively informing the public and urging tech platforms to prevent electoral interference.

## Introduction

The Russian Federation's hybrid war against Moldova becomes more aggressive as the Presidential elections and the EU integration referendum on October 20 draw closer. To spread pieces of disinformation and biased interpretations, their authors mainly use social media, which offers almost instant access to the end consumer. Moreover, there is a possibility to share information anonymously, thus simplifying the manipulation of the public.

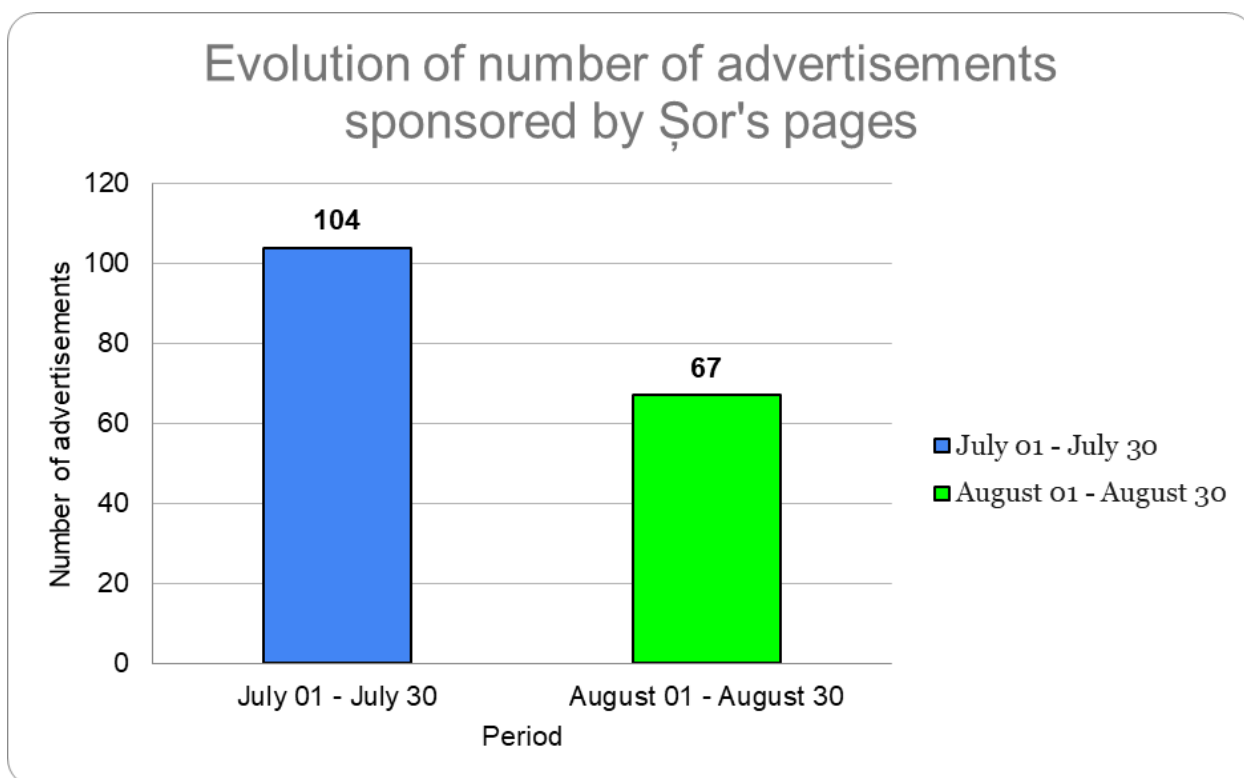
Advertisements on Facebook and Google are a key tool for promoting malicious content. The public policies of these two companies allow almost anyone to quickly place an advertisement message on the social network, targeting the audience of interest. In the context of a hybrid war, the Kremlin actively exploits this opportunity to carry out informational attacks against Moldova and its citizens.

The main malign actors who pump money into online disinformation are fugitive oligarchs Ilan Şor and Veaceslav Platon. The two oligarchs spend thousands of euros monthly to spread panic among Moldovan society, intending to derail the State's European course.

At the moment, Moldova has no effective tool to stop these manipulation campaigns and can only request their cessation post-factum from Google and META platforms.

## Şor's expenses between 1-30 August 2024

Fugitive Ilan Şor promoted at least **62 advertisements** through **15 Facebook pages** between August 01 - August 30, spending approximately **€18,000**. The number of advertisements decreased due to **META's actions in removing anonymous pages affiliated with Ilan Şor**. In the context of the Russian Federation's hybrid war against Moldova, these actions are commendable but insufficient.



*Fig. 1. Evolution of number of advertisements, sponsored by pages affiliated to the Şor group from August, 01 – August, 30, compared to July 01 – July 30*

This situation is also evident in the advertising budget, which is approximately **12,600 euros lower** than in the period July 1 - July 30.

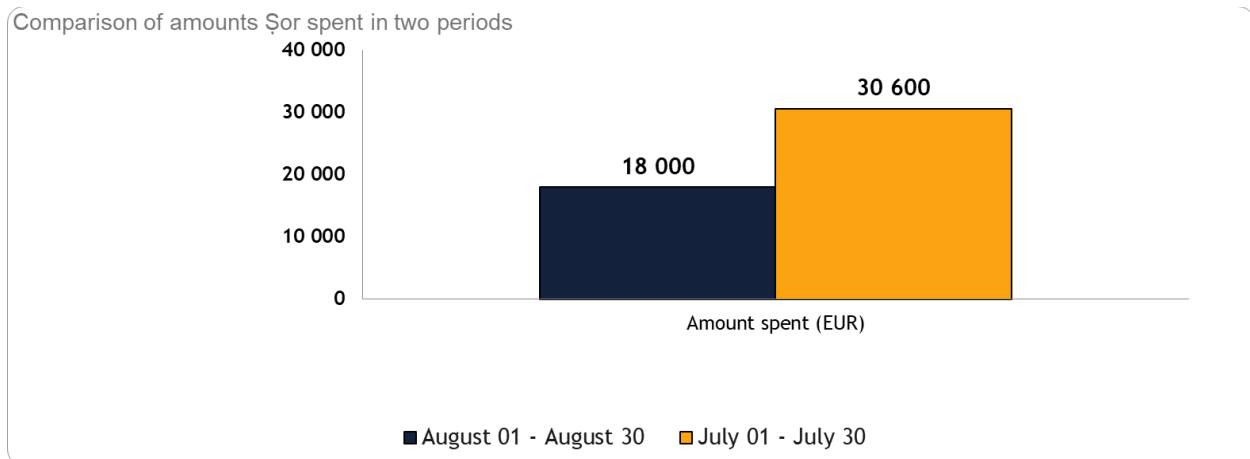


Fig. 2 – Evolution of amounts spent on sponsored advertisements by Facebook pages affiliated with Ilan Șor during the period from August 1 to August 30 compared to the period from July 1 to July 30.

Three pages belong to members of the "Renaissance" Party, officially supported by Ilan Șor: [Veaceslav Jucov](#) and [Alexandr Nesterovschi](#). The rest of the pages use a similar visual identity: they have profile photos featuring the Moldovan flag and usernames that allude either to media organizations or patriotic organizations: "[Moldova Live](#)", "[Our Moldova](#)", "[Focus Nation](#)", "[Fresh Moldova Headlines](#)", "[Moldova Informs](#)", "[Moldova in Improved Media](#)", "[Autonomous Moldova](#)", "[Moldova in Lights and Colours](#)", "[Vibrant Nation Events](#)", "[Development of Moldova](#)", "[Moldova Radiance News](#)", "[Our Moldova, Free Moldova](#)" and "[Eurasia](#)". All these pages use categories such as "News/Media Web Page", "Newspaper", or "Media Production and Broadcasting Company" to create the illusion that they belong to legitimate media institutions.



Fig. 3 – Page "Cultural Moldova Plus" uses Moldovan flag as its profile picture and is categorized as a "News/Media Web Page".

Șor's anonymous pages promoted mainly the following manipulation narratives:

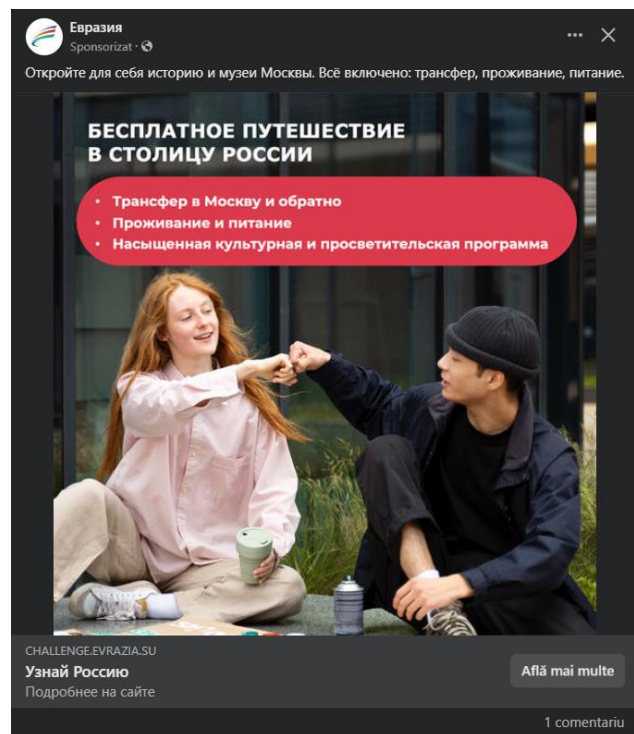
- **EU destroys national culture and identity of member states** – The fugitive [Ilan Șor](#) declared that "unlike Eurasia, the EU tramples on and disrespects the history of its member countries". Șor only mentions the nations living in Russia, whose "history was not erased", while not considering the Member States of the Eurasian Union. The reason

is simple: Russia views these States as former colonies. According to Şor, Russia should serve as a model for Moldova in dealing with ethnic minorities.

- **EU drives Moldova into debt** – Another [manipulation promoted](#) by the anonymous pages is that *"funding from the EU drives Moldova into debt"*. According to Ilan Şor, *"our children and grandchildren already have to pay millions of euros"*. To prevent Moldova from paying off its debts to Europe, Şor urges people to vote against European integration in the referendum.
- **Moldovans pay high amounts for electric energy because of EU** – In the context of the approach of the heating season, Russia and its agents in Moldova test the waters on energy prices. Şor claims that *"the Moldovans pay more for electric energy purchased from the Romanians, while in Transnistria, the electric energy is cheaper because it is produced from Russian gas"*. He accuses Maia Sandu and the EU of being responsible for the increase in prices of electric energy. Şor opposes connecting Moldova's energy system to Romania's, as *"this would subdue the State to Romania and the EU"*. He promotes the idea that *"if Moldova were a member of the Eurasian Union, it would benefit from cheap energy"*.
- **Russia is Moldova's strategic partner** – In a meeting with the leader of the Russian Liberal Democratic Party, Leonid Slutski, the fugitive [Ilan Şor](#) declared that *"Moldova cannot get out of the socio-economic crisis without Russia"*. According to Şor, *"Europe turns Moldova into a new military training ground and does not care about its fate"*.

In addition to manipulations about the European integration process, Şor also heavily funds the Facebook page of the NGO "Eurasia", founded in Moscow on April 24, 2024. The page sponsors advertisements calling on Moldovans to travel to Moscow to learn about the programmes of this organization, supported by Russian secret services. The page does not display advertisements in the META library; thus, it is difficult to identify how much money is spent.

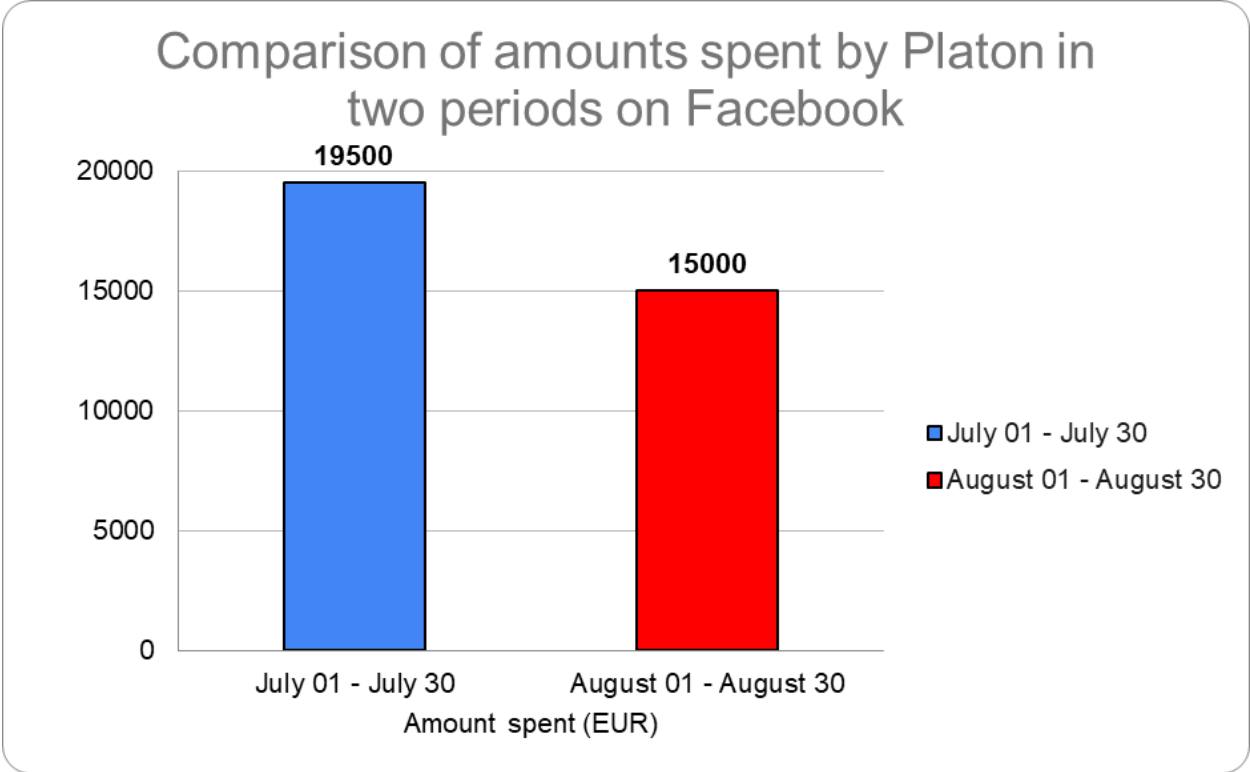
*Fig. 4 – Page "Eurasia" promotes event "Discover Russia", inviting young Moldovans to travel to Moscow. NGO led by Ilan Şor promised young people to fully cover their travel, accommodation, and meals.*



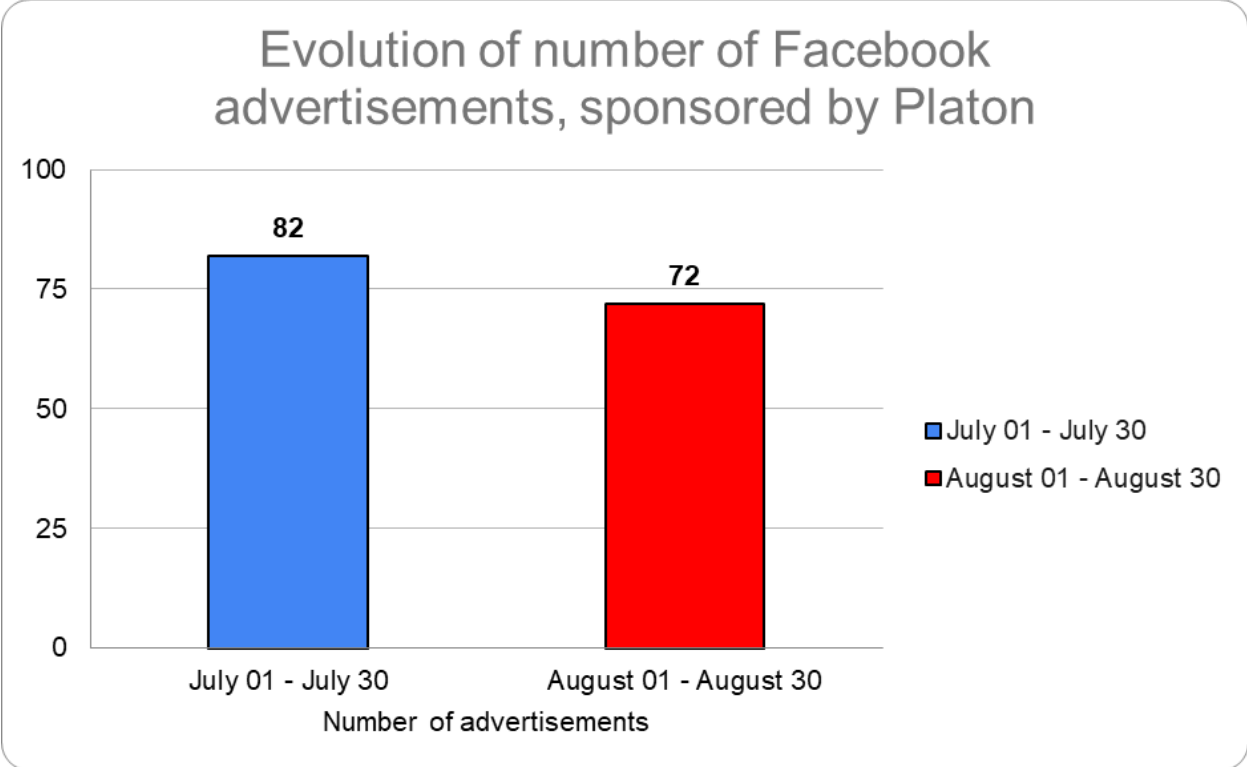
The image is a screenshot of a Facebook advertisement. At the top left, the logo for 'Евразия' (Eurasia) is visible, with the text 'Sponsorizat' (Sponsored) next to it. Below the logo, there is a line of text: 'Откройте для себя историю и музеи Москвы. Все включено: трансфер, проживание, питание.' (Discover the history and museums of Moscow. All included: transfer, accommodation, food). The main headline of the ad is 'БЕСПЛАТНОЕ ПУТЕШЕСТВИЕ В СТОЛИЦУ РОССИИ' (FREE TRIP TO THE CAPITAL OF RUSSIA). Below the headline, there is a red rounded rectangle containing three bullet points: '• Трансфер в Москву и обратно' (Transfer to Moscow and back), '• Проживание и питание' (Accommodation and food), and '• насыщенная культурная и просветительская программа' (Rich cultural and educational program). The central image shows a young woman with long red hair sitting on the ground, holding a green cup, and a young man in a dark jacket and cap sitting next to her, looking at her. At the bottom left of the ad, there is text: 'CHALLENGE.EVRAZIA.SU', 'Узнай Россию' (Discover Russia), and 'Подробнее на сайте' (More on the website). At the bottom right, there is a button that says 'Află mai multe' (Learn more) and a counter that says '1 comentariu' (1 comment).

# Platon's expenses for the period of August 1 - August 30, 2024

During the period from August 1 to August 30, Veaceslav Platon promoted around **72 advertisements** on [his personal Facebook page](#) and the Facebook page belonging to [Natalia Morari](#), spending approximately **15,000 euros**. Compared to the period from July 1 to July 30, Platon spent about **4,500 euros less** on sponsoring advertisements on Facebook.

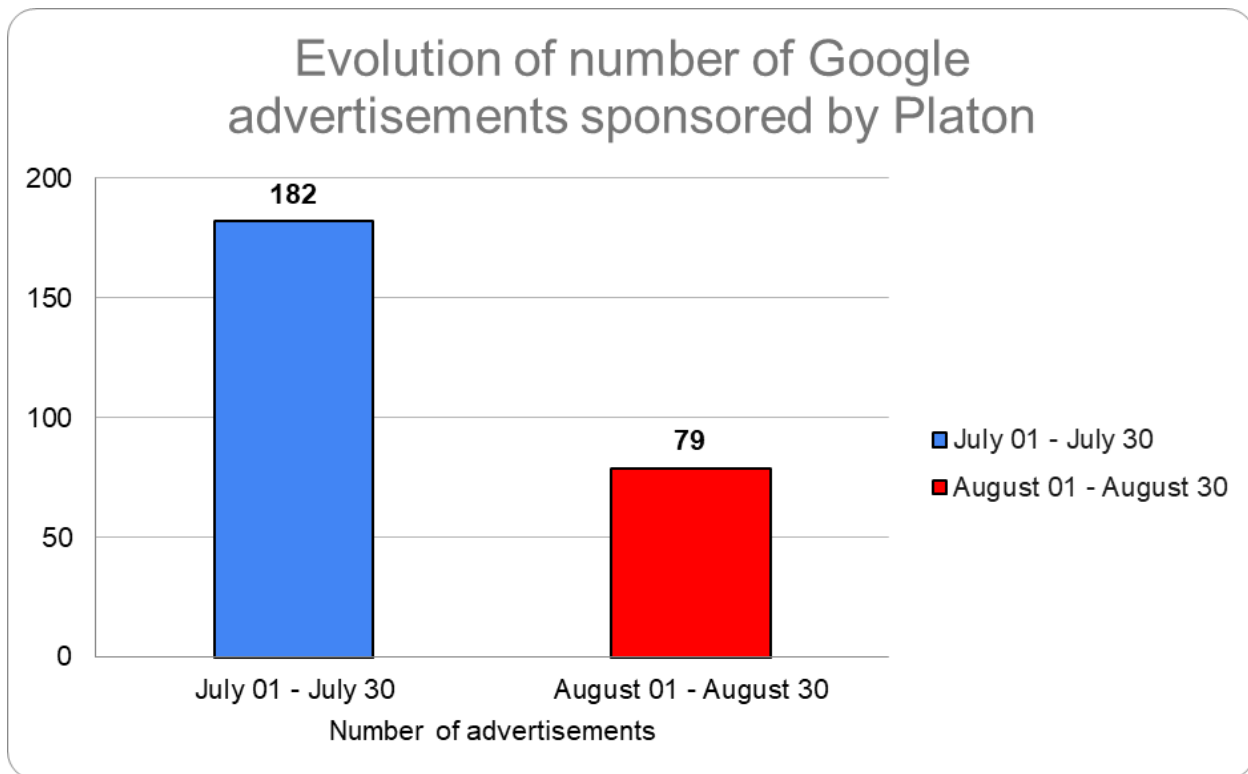


*Fig. 5 - Comparison of amounts spent by pages affiliated with Veaceslav Platon during periods from August 1 to August 30 and from July 1 to July 30.*



*Fig. 6 - Evolution of number of advertisements sponsored by Facebook pages affiliated with Veaceslav Platon during the period from August 1 to August 30, compared to the period from July 1 to July 30.*

The low number of Facebook advertisements and the reduced spending on them are because Platon began promoting his and Natalia Morari’s content on Google platforms. While Facebook is more transparent in showing expenses on advertisements, Google does not allow for the viewing of the amounts spent by the advertiser or the duration for which the advertisements were set. Recently, it became more difficult to detect how many advertisements ran for a specific period. Thus, for the period from August 1 to August 30, **79 advertisements** ran from Morari’s and Platon’s accounts. It is worth noting that some of them also ran in July, but in Google Ads Transparency, they appear as unique advertisements.



*Fig. 7 - Evolution of number of advertisements sponsored by YouTube pages affiliated with Veaceslav Platon during period from August 1 to August 30, compared to the period from July 1 to July 30.*

**The main manipulations promoted by pages affiliated with Platon were:**

- ***EU doesn't need Moldova*** – According to [Veaceslav Platon](#), "the authorities in Chişinău must prepare a backup plan in case the EU does not respond to the positive results of the referendum". Platon claims that "the EU will not pay attention to the Moldovans' desire to become members of the community, just as they ignored the European Moldova National Assembly".
- ***Government institutes censorship*** – [Natalia Morari](#) presents an anonymous investigation published on the Telegram channel "PATRIOT", managed by Fulga Grabovschi, about how the Government intends to shut down more television stations. According to the so-called investigation, the officials are preparing to close TV stations that are "not affiliated" with the Government. In the promoted video, Morari stated that "the press that fought against the Plahotniuc regime became affiliated with the Government". In another [video clip promoted](#) from Morari's account, she repeats the idea that the independent press became affiliated with the Government. She also suggests that during Plahotniuc's time, the independent press felt more comfortable.



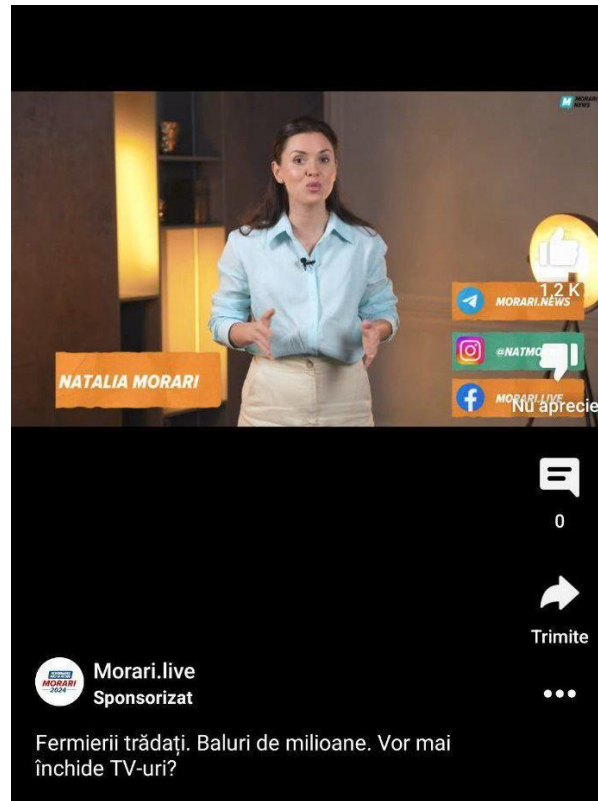


Fig. 8 - YouTube advertisement promoting [episode](#) where Morari presented the so-called anonymous investigation claiming government is about to shut down disloyal media.

- **Referendum is a PR stunt by Maia Sandu** – In the [promoted video](#), Natalia Morari declares that "the referendum is an electoral PR move of Maia Sandu", and that as a result of it, "nothing will change". According to Morari, "the referendum campaign is not about Europe but about Maia Sandu".

### Presidential candidates – promoters of Russian propaganda

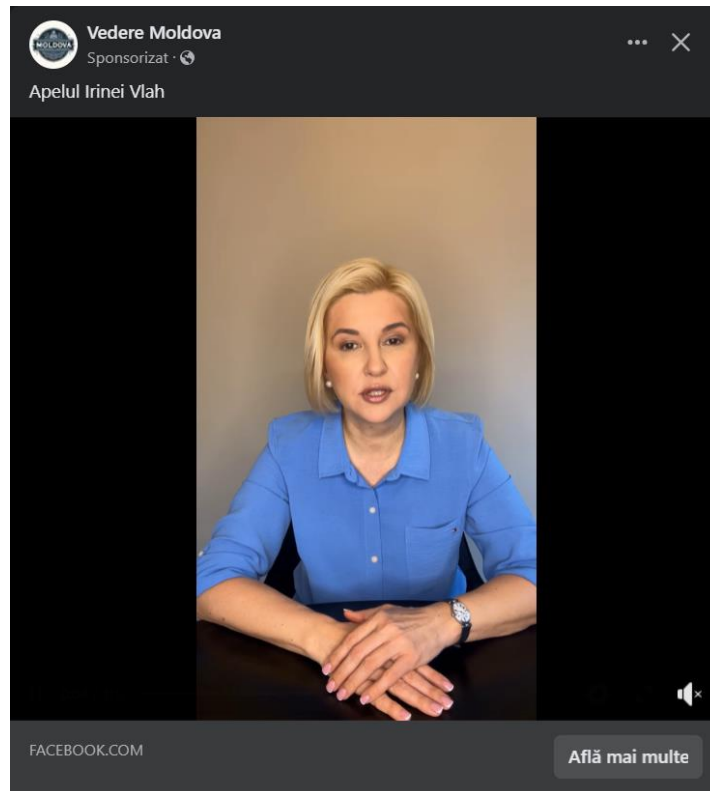
In addition to the advertisements sponsored by fugitives Veaceslav Platon and Ilan Șor, we also detected manipulations in advertisements sponsored on behalf of the presidential candidate Victoria Furtună. She spent approximately **2,400 euros on 12 advertisements** between August 1 and August 30. At the beginning of August, the [WatchDog.MD Community](#) calculated that for a campaign placed on **25 international web pages**, Victoria Furtună spent between 4,250 and 13,250 USD, depending on the complexity and scope of distribution and promotion. This includes the costs for distribution, writing, and promotion on social media.

In her [video of launching the campaign](#) for the Presidency, Furtună spread several pieces of disinformation typical of Russian propaganda. According to Furtună, if Maia Sandu wins a second mandate, "the next day, a second front will open in the Transnistrian region". She also claims that "all the funds coming from external partners aim at involving Moldova in the war". Furtună states that "Moldova received nothing in return after helping Ukrainian refugees". In her video, the former Anti-Corruption Prosecutor neither condemned nor even mentioned that Russia conducts a hybrid war against Moldova and threatens the country with a real war.



*Fig. 9 - Victoria Furtună's video of launching presidential campaign, promoted on Facebook, claims that if Maia Sandu wins the second round, she will drive Moldova into war.*

Similarly, candidate Irina Vlah was promoted by an anonymous page on Facebook. In a video sponsored by the "[Vision Moldova](#)" page, Irina Vlah [accuses](#) Maia Sandu of using administrative resources in her electoral campaign and claims that the referendum is an electoral trick and a geopolitical lie. We could not identify the sponsored advertisement in the META advertisement library, which prevents us from seeing how much money was spent on promoting this video.



*Fig. 10 - "Vision Moldova" page shares the video where Irina Vlah accuses Maia Sandu of using administrative resources in her electoral campaign*

## Findings

As we approach the European integration referendum and the Presidential elections on October 20, fugitive oligarchs, together with Russian secret services, will intensify their capacities on Google and META platforms to spread disinformation and conduct informational and psychological operations.

Their main goal is to derail Moldova's European path by launching manipulations about the EU integration process. The two oligarchs continue to push the idea that Moldova will not be accepted into the EU and that the referendum is merely an election-rigging scheme.

At the same time, Ilan Șor's role is to unite Moldova's pro-Russians around the idea of integration into the "Eurasian Economic Union", led by the Russian Federation. Under the guise of the Eurasian Union, Șor and his allies in Moldova will attempt to improve the image of Vladimir Putin's regime.

We also see Moscow increase budgets for other presidential candidates, who act as spoiler candidates. Their role is limited to launching manipulations and scaremongering in the public space during the election period.

META and Google's actions are not enough to stop the manipulative content promoted on their platforms. Moldova's authorities should make greater efforts in their dialogue with these two companies. Although the expansion of the advertising market on these platforms brought small economic contributions to the State, the Ministry of Economy did not take into account the risks this sector now faces. Thus, the YouTube advertisements sponsored by Ilan Șor and Veaceslav Platon will have more serious consequences for Moldova and its European path than the small advertising revenues for local businesses.

To combat the disinformation messages promoted by Russia and the two fugitive oligarchs more efficiently, authorities and media institutions should respond immediately to disinformation campaigns by issuing press releases and materials that debunk disinformation. Security institutions must increase monitoring of social media platforms to quickly identify and report manipulative content.

We anticipate that during the referendum campaign and Presidential elections, electoral authorities will face a wave of informational attacks. They should openly inform the public about the changes they plan to make to avoid speculation that these authorities are preparing to rig the elections.

## Recommendations

1. **To intensify cooperation with technology platforms (Meta, Google):** The Moldovan authorities must strengthen their dialogue with Meta and Google, urging them to take stricter measures to stop the promotion of manipulative advertisements by sanctioned oligarchs and by actors supporting Kremlin interests. Concrete actions, such as the swift removal of fake pages and greater transparency in expenses on advertisement, are essential.
2. **To improve the legal framework that regulates online political advertising:** We recommend developing a legislative framework that strictly regulates the financing and promotion of political advertisements on digital platforms. This framework shall include clear sanctions for those who violate transparency and correctness rules in advertising. The proposed innovations include the obligation to ensure transparency for all online advertisements on platforms, along with administrative penalties for the infringement of this obligation.
3. **To encourage the involvement of civil society and independent media:** Independent media and civil society organizations play a vital role in combating disinformation. The media shall also be encouraged and protected by electoral legislation to actively debunk disinformation narratives promoted by malign actors.