

EMBARGOED TILL

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Pro-Russian propaganda operation exploits Meta failures on political advertising ahead of EU elections

- New study reveals that less than 5% of undeclared political ads get moderated by Meta, opening door to massive influence campaigns in EU
- A known network is still targeting voters with pro-Russian propaganda in France and Germany, reaching more than 38 million accounts in the last six months.
- EU urged to take decisive action against influence networks and Meta under the new Digital Services Act

Paris, France - A new investigation by AI Forensics has explored a sprawling Russian influence operation exploiting Meta's failure to moderate political advertising in the European Union. The findings raise serious alarms about the integrity of the upcoming EU parliamentary elections in June.

"The systemic failure in moderating political ads by Meta is deeply concerning, especially with elections on the horizon. The surge of pro-Russian propaganda is a prime example; despite repeated warnings, Meta has acknowledged the issue, claimed significant investment in safety and security, yet neglected to effectively address it, casting doubt on their commitment to democratic integrity." said Paul Bouchaud, the lead researcher of the study.

"While pro-Russian propaganda efforts in Europe intensify, Meta is not taking effective action, even against operations that have been repeatedly exposed and acknowledged. These elections are a critical first test of the EU's new Digital Services Act, which finally gives the EU the tools to act on such oversight." said Marc Faddoul, director of AI Forensics.

Deceitful political ads left unchecked on an industrial-scale

The research reveals significant lapses in the company's enforcement of its political advertising policies – showing, too, how covert pro-Russian influence operations benefit from Meta's negligence.

The study examined Meta's Ad Library across 16 EU countries since August 2023 – when the Library was expanded to comply with the EU's new Digital Services Act. The study detected undeclared political ads among the corpus of 30 millions published in January and February 2024.

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Despite efforts to enhance transparency following the 2016 US elections, the method used in this study estimates that less than 5% of undeclared political ads are moderated by Meta. Moreover, 60% of ads moderated by Meta do not fall under their own moderation guidelines on political advertising.

The problematic ads slipping through include cross-border investment scam campaigns that reached over 128 million user accounts in January and February 2024 alone.

When searching coordinated-campaigns, understood as multiple advertisers running the same or highly similar advertising content across multiple pages, the research uncovered a network of 3,826 pages disseminating pro-Russian propaganda.

In France and Germany, for example, this campaign reached a staggering 38 million users between August 2023 and March 2024, with less than 20% of the ads being moderated by Meta as political, usually well after the content had spread through the network (ads ending up moderated by Meta still been show by Meta between 2.6 and 3.6 millions times [range provided by Meta])

According to Meta's own terms of service, advertisers are only permitted to run political ads in their country of residence, on verification of an ID, and alongside a "Paid for by" disclaimer.

Amid systemic failures, a Russian influence operation runs rampant

Unveiling the full structure of this massive pro-Russian ad campaign – in plain sight in Meta's Ad Library – highlights its intention to rapidly adapt to real-world events.

For example, the research highlights a continually evolving effort to push pro-Russian narratives surrounding the invasion of Ukraine to millions in France and Germany. The network rapidly deploys new waves of ads with adapted messaging timed to major developments in the war.

After the US announced \$1 billion in Ukraine aid in September, ads claimed the US instigated the war to increase arms sales, reaching over 130,000 French accounts.

After an October Hamas attack, ads accused Ukraine's president of embezzling weapons used against Israelis, being delivered by Meta to over 2.1 million accounts in France and 624,000 in Germany.

When Germany raised military aid in November, 463 ads criticised its government's support for Ukraine, reaching 1.6 million accounts.

As France joined an artillery coalition with Ukraine in January, ads claiming Ukraine's EU accession would create unfair competition for French farmers were run, during massive farmers' protests.

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Within 48 hours of the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack in Moscow in March 2024 for which an Islamic State affiliate has claimed responsibility, ads repeated Kremlin claims of Ukrainian involvement to 42,000 French accounts.

A well-known influence network highlights the need for EU enforcement

Previous iterations of this pro-Russian network have been investigated by [Reset](#), [EU Disinfo Lab](#), [Viginum](#), and acknowledged by [Meta](#) itself in September 2022. Similarly, the massive cross-country investment scam ads, was thoroughly investigated by [CheckFirst](#) and brought to Meta's attention in June 2023. Yet, Meta did not take any meaningful action to prevent the ongoing proliferation of such campaigns on their platform.

The investigation comes as the EU looks to implement more stringent regulations designed to strengthen oversight on advertising. These include the Digital Services Act, as well as new regulation on the transparency and targeting of political advertising, and the EU Commission's recently published guidelines on election integrity, which compel platforms to clearly label political ads and enhance transparency.

"If there is one thing to celebrate, it is the fact that the new transparency requirements for platforms in the EU are proving effective: without those rules, which Meta diligently implemented, we would not have had access to the data which allowed us to expose this operation." said Marc Faddoul, Director of AI Forensics.

AI Forensics calls on the Commission to initiate infringement proceedings against Meta for its inaction against coordinated Russian political operations, and to mandate all platforms to disclose ad contents in a transparency repository, facilitating external investigations.

Lastly, the organisation also calls on Meta to take immediate action against these networks and proactively monitor for similar operations during the elections, and to enhance moderation of political advertisements, ensuring no foreign entities can place political ads in Europe in the run-up to the elections.

ENDS

Scientific paper with full methodology: <https://hal.science/hal-04541571>

Background and update on the project: <https://aiforensics.org/work/meta-political-ads>

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Background

About AI Forensics

[AI Forensics](#) is a European non-profit that investigates influential and opaque algorithms. We hold major technology platforms accountable by conducting independent and high-profile technical investigations to uncover and expose the harms caused by their algorithms.

Our mission is to apply innovative methods to uncover digital rights violations and provide information to help shape regulatory policies because we work towards a world where algorithms are accountable, adjustable and avoidable. In other words, we are the digital detectives who shine a light on hidden algorithmic injustices, and work to bring accountability and transparency to the tech industry.

Methodology

This investigation is based on the article “*On Meta's Political Ad Policy Enforcement: An analysis of Coordinated Campaigns & Pro-Russian Propaganda*”, Bouchaud, 2024. We refer the reader to <https://hal.science/hal-04541571> for further information about the methods and findings.

Meta has made its Ad Library publicly available, containing metadata on all ads targeting people in the EU since 17 August 2023. The researchers collected a comprehensive dataset of over 200 million ads from this library across 16 European countries between August 2023 and March 2024.

While Meta claims to consider text, images, videos and landing pages for ad moderation, the researchers only had access to the ad text through the API. They filtered out very short ads and focused on the most widely used languages accounting for over 90% of EU ads

To train a machine learning model to classify political ads per Meta's guidelines, the researchers:

- Used examples from Meta's guidelines, translated across 14 languages
- Searched for similar ads to create a balanced 560 ad training set
- Added ads mentioning political figures, parties, elections based on Meta's rules
- Manually annotated 700 ads moderated by Meta and 1,120 non-political ads
- Overall annotated over 3,200 ads across 14 languages for training

This approach allowed them to assess Meta's moderation accuracy, calibrate their model's scores, and estimate undeclared political ads while being conservative relative to Meta's own policies.

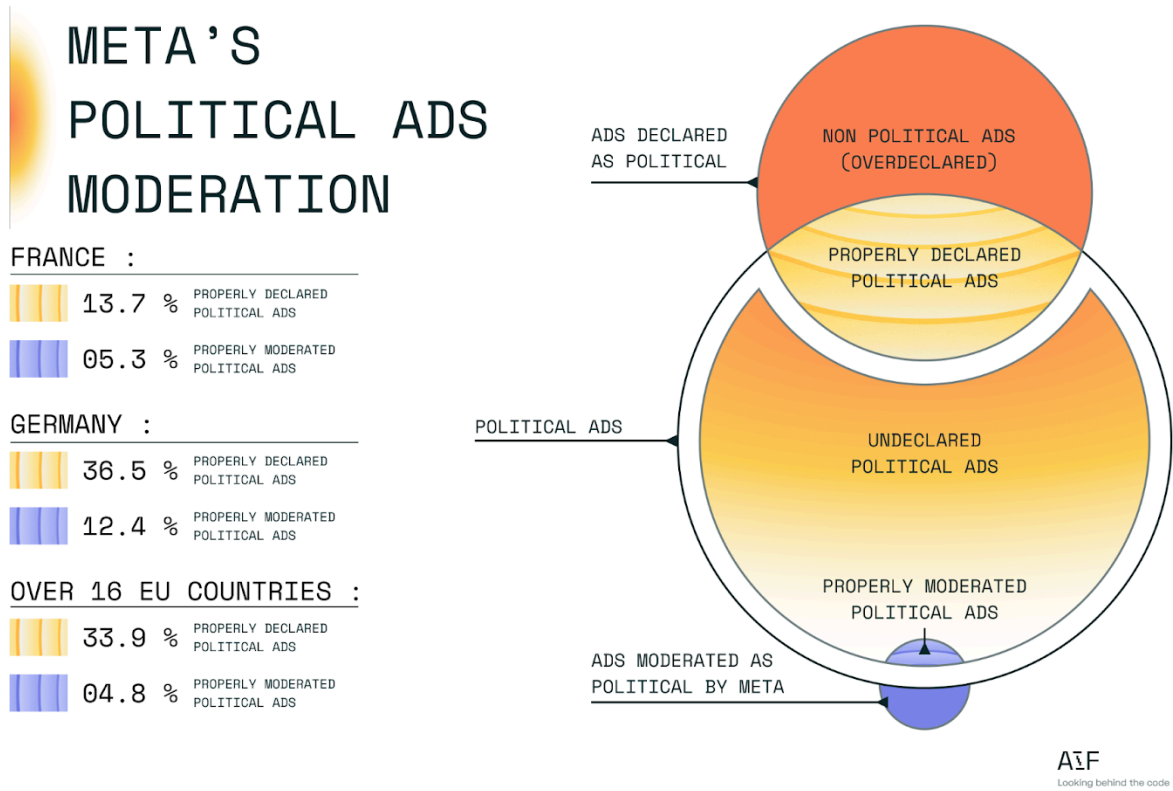


Figure 1: Meta's Political Ads Moderation

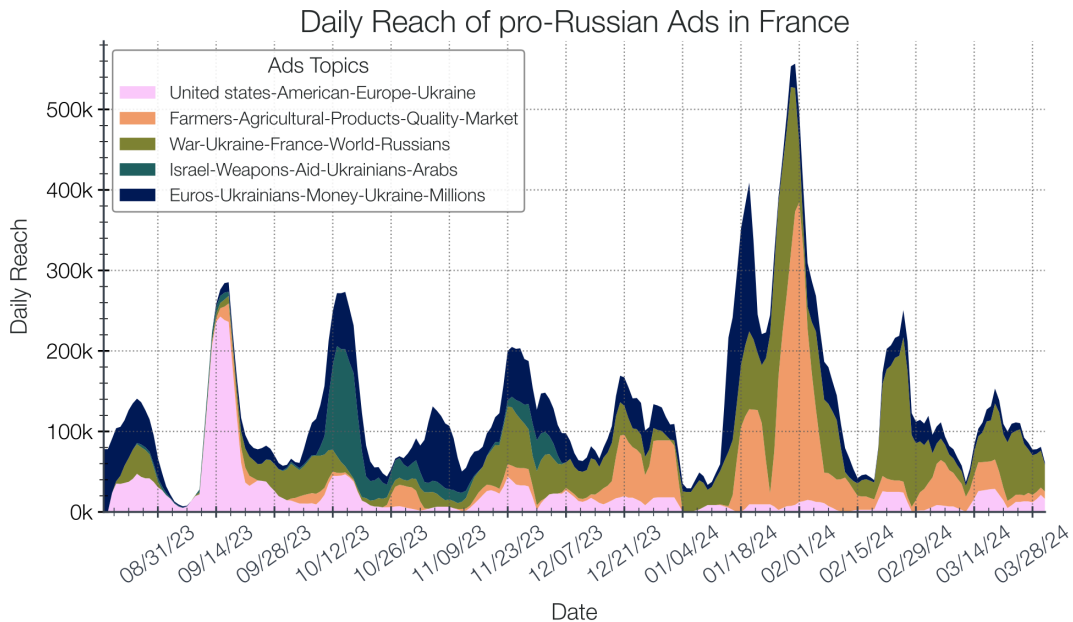


Figure 2: Daily Reach of pro-Russian Ads in France since August 2023

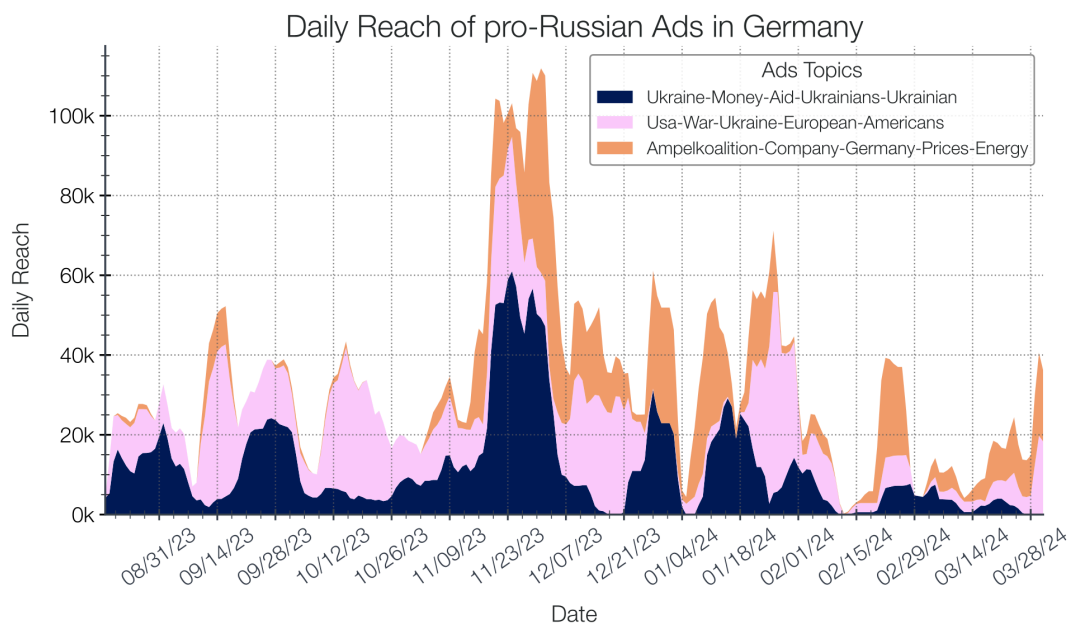


Figure 3: Daily Reach of pro-Russian Ads in Germany since August 2023

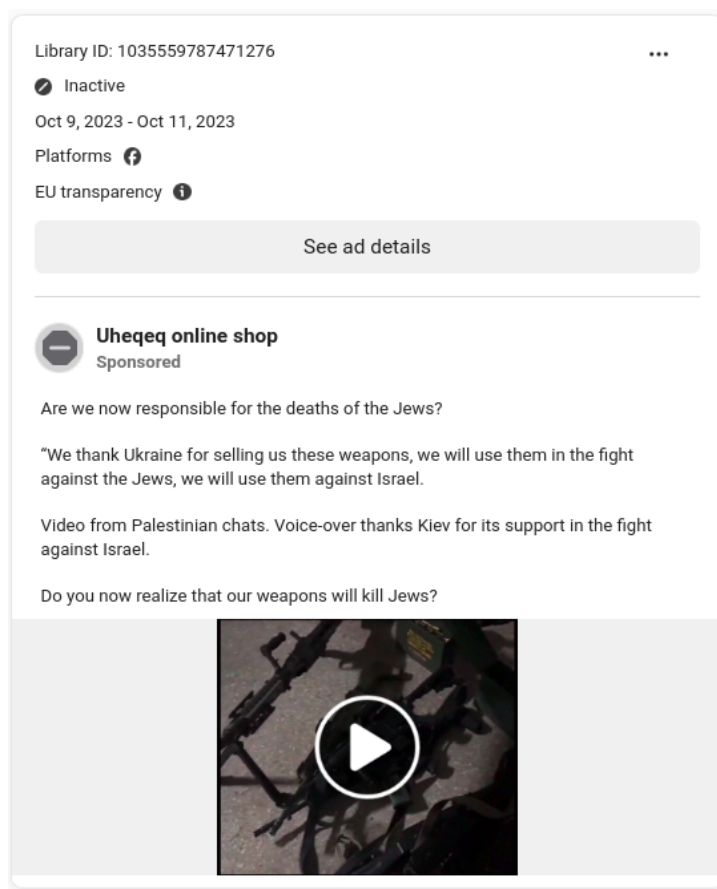


Figure 4: Example of unmoderated political ad targeting German users (translated)

 **Beauteous gxr5**
Sponsored

We will oppose Ukraine's accession to the European Union," declared Manon Aubry!

According to various studies, the cost of Ukrainian chickens and eggs is 75% lower than that of French chickens and eggs!


Importing these products means creating "unfair" competition for French farmers.

If we do not oppose Ukraine's accession to the European Union, we will ruin our farmers...
More information here jamildentalcare.com





Figure 5: Example of unmoderated ad targeting French users (translated)

Library ID: 2018219775219890 ...


 Inactive

Oct 9, 2023 - Oct 11, 2023

Platforms 

EU transparency 

[See ad details](#)

 **Evuwuw online shop**
Sponsored

Today, our weapons are killing Israelis!
The Arabs have launched a massive attack on Israel! Cities across the country are under fire, people are dying.
And what are these Arabs armed with? The very weapons that we and other allies supplied to the Ukrainian army!
How did they end up in their hands? The Ukrainian comedian and his henchmen simply stole these weapons from their own warring army and sold them to anyone who wanted them. After all, the comedian needs money to buy diamonds for his wife. And it's not for nothing that they say that in Ukraine, everyone likes to fly!
But Ukrainian thieves are not the only ones responsible for the current situation! We are the ones who supported their war and provided them with our weapons! We are the ones who turned a blind eye to the fact that they are stealing our weapons and selling them to criminals!
It is we who continue to supply them with weapons, even when the Americans and the British have found an excuse to refuse them!
And we can't get rid of it...

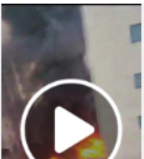


Figure 6: Example of unmoderated ad targeting French users (translated)