

Fact sheet: foreign interference in the Romanian elections

➤ Cyber-attacks

- Between 20-26 November, including on election day and the following night, more than **85,000 cyber-attacks (SQL Injection Cross Site Scripting)** using advanced anonymization methods to hide their provenience were coordinately launched **from 33 countries**.
- The *modus operandi* and the scale of the cyber campaign **point to a state actor**. Previously, access credentials for domains associated with the electoral process were published on cyber-crime platforms associated to Russia.

➤ Use of social media, mainly TikTok, to manipulate elections

- An **aggressive, coordinated and unflagged campaign** that eluded electoral legislation and exploited social media algorithms was used to promote one candidate (Călin Georgescu - CG). This preferential treatment was augmented by TikTok breaking the electoral legislation.
- The campaign was based on a **network of accounts** (25,000 accounts became very active two weeks before the elections; of these, 797 accounts were created in 2016 and kept dormant). No shared technical resources were used and **no shared IP was observed**. TikTok admitted the existence of accounts involved in manipulation in electoral contexts and of a network of accounts affiliated to **Sputnik**, aimed at users from Romania and Rep. of Moldova.
- The activity of the accounts **would have been coordinated** from outside TikTok - **via Telegram and Discord – by a state actor**, which used an alternative channel of communications.
- Starting in November 2024, **more than 100 influencers** (with a total of **8 million followers**) were subject to a manipulation campaign and used to promote candidate CG.
- A sudden increase in the popularity of video content associated with hashtags used to promote candidate CG was detected between **13-26 November**, reaching **number 9 in popular trends worldwide on TikTok**. TikTok admitted that this was a mass guerilla political campaign and messages were disseminated by swarming.

➤ Influencing operations – setting the mood/minds

- The process was conducted under the “Equilibrium and Verticality” campaign.
- The *modus operandi* mirrored **the Russian “Brother next to Brother” campaign used in Ukraine ahead of the invasion** – using legitimate but unaware of the scope of their actions micro-influencers, paid directly or *via* proxies with aprox. 78 EUR/20,000 followers.

➤ Campaign Financing

- Candidate CG declared to the Romanian Electoral Authority **zero electoral campaign budget**. However, just one TikTok account used by a **Romanian citizen** to promote candidate CG on social media was financed with **over one million EUR**. TikTok representatives confirmed this involvement, as well as payments of **381,000 USD made between 24.10 and -24.11.2024** to users of TikTok accounts promoting candidate CG, **including after the cut-off date of the electoral campaign** (in violation of TikTok policies and Romanian electoral legislation).
- **The financing** of the TikTok influencers was ensured through the **FameUp platform**. One of the methods of attracting Romanian influencers to collaborate in promoting CG was contacting them by e-mail by the South African company FA Agency, which offered them **1,000 EUR for the distribution of a video clip** made by this agency.