

Facebook ran ads in Moldova for oligarch sanctioned by US

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Meta's logo can be seen on a sign at the company's headquarters in Menlo Park, Calif., Nov. 9, 2022. Meta, which is Facebook's parent company, allowed a Moldovan oligarch with ties to the Kremlin to run ads on its platform urging protests against that country's government — even though he and his political party are subject to U.S. sanctions. Credit: AP Photo/Godofredo A. Vásquez, File

Facebook allowed an exiled Moldovan oligarch with ties to the Kremlin to run ads calling for protests and uprisings against the pro-Western government, even though he and his political party were on U.S. sanctions lists.

The ads featuring politician and convicted fraudster Ilan Shor were ultimately removed by Facebook but not before they were seen millions of times in Moldova, a small nation of about 2.6 million sandwiched between Romania and war-torn Ukraine.

Seeking to exploit anger over inflation and rising [fuel prices](#), the paid posts from Shor's [political party](#) targeted the government of pro-Western President Maia Sandu, who earlier this week detailed what she said was a Russian plot to topple her government using external saboteurs.

"Destabilization attempts are a reality and for our institutions, they represent a real challenge," Sandu said Thursday as she swore in a new government led by pro-Western Prime Minister Dorin Recean, her former defense and security adviser. "We need decisive steps to strengthen the security of the country."

The ads reveal how Russia and its allies have exploited lapses by [social media platforms](#)—like Facebook, many of them operated by U.S. companies—to spread propaganda and disinformation that weaponizes economic and social insecurity in an attempt to undermine governments in Eastern Europe.

Shor's ads have helped fuel angry protests against the government and appear to be aimed at destabilizing Moldova and returning it to Russia's sphere of influence, according to Dorin Frasinieau, a foreign policy adviser to former Moldovan Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita, whose resignation led to the formation of the new government on Thursday.

"Even though he is on the U.S. sanctions list, I still see sponsored ads on Facebook," Frasineau said, saying he had spotted what he believes were fake accounts sharing the posts this week. He said the Moldovan government sought answers from Facebook to no avail. "We have talked with Facebook, but it is very hard because there is no specific person, no contact."

Rules governing the sanctions list prohibit U.S. companies from engaging in financial transactions with listed individuals and groups. The U.S. Treasury Department, which manages the sanctions program, declined to comment publicly when asked about the ads.

In a statement to The Associated Press, Meta, the company that owns Facebook and Instagram, said it removed the posts as soon as it found them.

"When Ilan Shor and the Shor Party were added to the U.S. sanctions list, we took action on their known accounts," a company spokesperson said. "When we identified new associated accounts, we took action on those, as well. We adhere to U.S. sanctions laws and will continue working to detect and enforce against fake accounts and pages that violate our policies."

Meta, which recently announced [deep layoffs](#), did not respond to questions about the size of its staff in Moldova, or the number of employees who speak Moldova's languages. Like many big tech firms based in the U.S., Meta has sometimes struggled to moderate content in languages other than English.

The ads were identified by researchers at Reset, a London-based nonprofit that researches social media's impact on democracy, who shared their findings with The Associated Press. Felix Kartte, a senior adviser at Reset, said Meta's response to disinformation and propaganda

in Moldova could have sweeping implications for European security.

"Their platforms continue to be weaponized by the Kremlin and Russian secret services, and because of the company's inaction, the U.S. and Europe risk losing a key ally in the region," said Kartte, who is based in Berlin.

Nine different paid posts from the Shor Party ran on Facebook after the U.S. imposed sanctions. Most were removed within a week after the sanctions announcement, though Shor bought another paid post in January, two months after he was sanctioned. All were clearly identifiable by Shor's name.

The posts can be found on Facebook's online [advertisement library](#), which contains a searchable catalogue.

The library confirms the ads placed by Shor and his party were seen millions of times before they were ultimately removed.

The most recent ad, taken down a month ago, was pulled because it failed to include a disclaimer about the ad's sponsor, according to a notation attached to one of the videos in the library. The library does not mention the sanctions.

The ads weren't money makers for Meta, generating only about \$15,000 in revenue, a pittance for a company that [earned \\$4.65 billion in the last quarter](#).

Nonetheless, they were effective. One ad, which ran on Facebook for just two days—October 29-30—was seen more than a million times in Moldova. In the post, which cost Shor's party less than \$100 to upload, the oligarch accuses Sandu's government of corruption and kleptocracy.

"You and I will have to pull them out of their offices by the ears and throw them out of our country like evil spirits," Shor tells the audience.

Shor, 35, is an Israeli-born Moldovan oligarch who leads the populist, Russia-friendly Shor Party. Currently living in exile in Israel, Shor is implicated in a \$1 billion theft from Moldovan banks in 2014; is accused of bribery to secure his position as chair of a Moldovan bank, and was named in October on a [U.S. Treasury Department](#) sanctions list as working for Russian interests.

The U.S. says Shor worked with "corrupt oligarchs and Moscow-based entities to create political unrest in Moldova" and to undermine the country's bid to join the EU. The sanctions list also names the Shor Party and Shor's wife, a Russian pop star. The U.K. also added Shor to a sanctions list last December.

Last fall, Moldova was rocked by a series of anti-government protests initiated by the Shor Party, which saw thousands take to the streets in the capital, Chisinau, at a time of skyrocketing inflation and an acute energy crisis after Russia reduced gas supplies to Moldova.

Many of the protesters called for early elections and demanded Sandu's resignation.

Around the same time, Moldova's government filed a request to the country's Constitutional Court to declare the Shor Party illegal, a case that is ongoing. Moldova's anti-corruption prosecutors' office also opened an investigation into the financing of the protests, which prosecutors said involved at least some Russian money.

On Monday, Sandu went public with what she claimed was a plot by Moscow to overthrow the government using external saboteurs, to put the nation "at the disposal of Russia" and to derail it off its course to one

day join the EU.

Sandu said the purported Russian plot envisioned attacks on government buildings, hostage-takings and other violent actions by groups of saboteurs. Russia has since strongly denied those claims.

Once part of the Soviet Union, Moldova declared its independence in 1991. In recent years, the country has lurched from one political crisis to another, often caught in limbo between pro-Russian and pro-Western sentiments.

But in 2021, after decades of largely oligarchic power structures and various Russia-friendly leaders, Moldovans elected a pro-Western, pro-European [government](#), which put it on a more distinctly Western-oriented path. In June, Moldova was granted EU candidate status, the same day as Ukraine.

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