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Big, bold and unchecked: Russian influence operation thrives on Facebook

Pro-Kremlin network “Doppelganger” is buying Facebook ads to spread divisive content on social media site ahead of EU election.

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The Russian influence network was able to buy and run ads on Facebook to target Germany and France and increase its chances of being seen as part of a broader failure of Facebook to police political ads, the research found. | iStock

APRIL 17, 2024 6:00 AM CET

BY CLOTHILDE GOUJARD

A well-known disinformation network is growing on Facebook by pushing pro-Kremlin narratives with ads purchased through fake accounts, just weeks ahead of Europe's major election in June, according to an investigation shared exclusively with POLITICO.

First exposed in 2022 and later sanctioned by the EU, the Russian campaign Doppelganger has continued to influence Europeans online and was flagged by French and German authorities in recent months.

New research by not-for-profit research group AI Forensics showed the operation is not only active but growing, reaching five to 10 times more people than previously thought.

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“We knew that Doppelganger was active but the scale that we uncovered was completely unmatched,” said Paul Bouchaud, a researcher with AI Forensics.

The campaign is taking place as European authorities repeatedly try to stamp out foreign and malign influence operations looking to sway public opinion ahead of the European Parliament election on June 6-9. This year's election integrity concerns are further fueled by the rise of the latest generation of artificial intelligence technologies amplifying disinformation and fake content online.

France is "being overwhelmed with propaganda and disinformation," French minister for European affairs Jean-Noël Barrot said Tuesday. "In the past six weeks, there [has] not been one week without a coordinated disinformation campaign affecting France."

The Russian influence network was able to buy and run ads on Facebook to target Germany and France and increase its chances of being seen as part of a broader failure of Facebook to police political ads, the research found. Over 65 percent of ads connected to political and social issues were spreading unlabeled on Facebook in over 16 countries in the European Union — and Meta took down less than 5 percent of these ads, it said.

The dissemination of undeclared political ads violates Facebook's own policy and could even violate the EU's new content-moderation law, the Digital Services Act (DSA), that went into effect on August 2023 for very large online platforms.

Ben Walters, a spokesperson for Meta, said, "The Russian operations targeting Ukraine are aggressive and persistent, which is why we continuously detect and remove the accounts and Pages associated with these campaigns." He added that threat detection teams had seen a "consistent decline" in the overall following of the coordinated campaigns from Russia in the past few years.

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Ukraine chickens and farmers' protests

“If we do not oppose Ukraine’s accession to the European Union, we will ruin our farmers,” said a paid post in French on January 28, as protests swept across EU countries from France to Poland to Germany.

The ad in French, portraying the import of Ukrainian chickens and eggs as “unfair competition,” is one of the nearly 4,000 sponsored messages pushed by thousands of fake Facebook pages operated by Doppelganger between August 2023 and March 31, 2024. Such messages were seen by at least 38 million users.

Around 138,600 Facebook users in France and 37,500 users in Germany saw at least one of these ads undermining Ukraine and the EU and connected to events like announcements of new aid packages to Kyiv, the Israel-Gaza conflict and farmers’ protests every day in that period. Researchers were still detecting new ads reaching hundreds of thousands as of April 15.

“They’re extremely reactive,” said Bouchaud. “We saw that they tended to start to post new ads just one day after major events.”

Fewer than 20 percent of the paid and boosted pro-Russian propaganda ads were taken down by Meta after being shown to users at least 2.6 million times.

The researchers also identified more than 8,000 ads for crypto scams that reached over 128 million accounts mainly in France, Italy and Spain in January and February 2024, which seemingly came from a coordinated network.

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An advertisement for Snowflake. At the top right is the AdChoices logo. The Snowflake logo is centered at the top. Below it, the text "BUILD A DATA-CENTRIC PLATFORM FOR GENERATIVE AI AND LLMS" is displayed in a bold, blue, sans-serif font. Underneath the text is an orange button with the text "LEARN MORE". The bottom right portion of the graphic features a photograph of a classical building with an American flag flying in front of it, all set against a background of a grid of small dots.

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Doppelganger track record

What's striking is that the campaign was being conducted by a network well-known to European authorities, disinformation organizations and even Meta.

The operation dubbed Doppelganger was first uncovered in 2022 after spreading propaganda from websites spoofing Western media outlets like The Guardian, Ansa and Spiegel on social media networks like Facebook and X through ads and fake profiles. Meta at the time estimated that the network had paid more than \$100,000 for the propaganda ads.

The network seemingly focused on influencing Germany and France was also later found to impersonate government ministries and other media outlets like Le Monde.

Meta identified two Russian companies, Struktura and Social Media Agency, already in 2022. The EU sanctioned the entities in July 2023.

Meta, which owns Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram, said in August 2023 that it was monitoring and taking action against the network but cautioned that it considered it to be large and persistent but “low-impact on the platform.”

Walters, the Meta spokesperson, said that Meta had blocked tens of thousands of pages connected to the Doppelganger network and that pages cited in the report were almost all removed within hours of posting an ad.

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AI Forensics researcher Bouchaud, who also works with France’s School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences (EHESS), said it was “frightening to see that such a platform claiming to make commitments about online safety doesn’t do anything despite multiple warnings.”

AI Forensics used data from Facebook's public ad library to build and train its own algorithm on 230 million Meta ads to detect political ads across 16 EU countries. Meta in August 2023 was forced, along with other major platforms to publish detailed information about all its ads in the EU in a detailed public library under the DSA. Meta started a repository in 2019 with self-declared political ads in the EU in 2019.

The algorithm aimed to mimic Facebook’s moderation systems to identify political ads and looked for messages based on indicators like the names of leaders like French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, similar text or words connected to Ukraine targeted at people in 10 different languages.

Researchers said the thousands of ads they found came from Facebook pages that were “basically just created to pay for an ad, immediately reach a significant amount of accounts and then just be deleted,” said Bouchaud. “It’s more effective than to grow a community where they have to attract real people to engage with accounts.”

Meta's spokesperson Walters rejected the findings, arguing their ad library doesn't include the 430,000 ads the company rejected in the EU between July and December 2023 before they were published. He also disagreed with the definition of political ad for the algorithm used for the report.

Prime time

For researchers, their ability to identify thousands of covert ads including a large known Russian influence network "in just a few days and with just a fraction of the data available to Meta," is a sign that the company that counted over 65,000 staff and \$38.7 billion in advertising revenue in 2023 isn't ready for election primetime.

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"We are two months ahead of an election facing a threat that has been previously identified, that is active and that Meta is really not taking serious measures to tackle it," said Marc Faddoul, AI Forensics director.

More than half of Facebook pages that displayed U.S. political ads already managed in 2020 to escape the platform's scrutiny and conceal the identities of their backers.

The disinformation findings come as European authorities are already on alert about potential election threats.

The Czech government on Wednesday in March sanctioned a Kremlin-backed operation through the website Voice of Europe, which has been peddling propaganda.

"According to our intelligence services, Moscow's objectives are clear: help elect more pro-Russian candidates to the European Parliament and reinforce the pro-Russian narrative in that institution," Belgian Prime Minister Alexander de Croo, whose country is currently leading the Council of the EU, said last week.


Belgium's federal prosecutor opened an investigation last week into the Voice of Europe network, accused of paying Members of the European Parliament to promote the Kremlin's agenda.

This article has been updated with more detail on Meta's ad depository.


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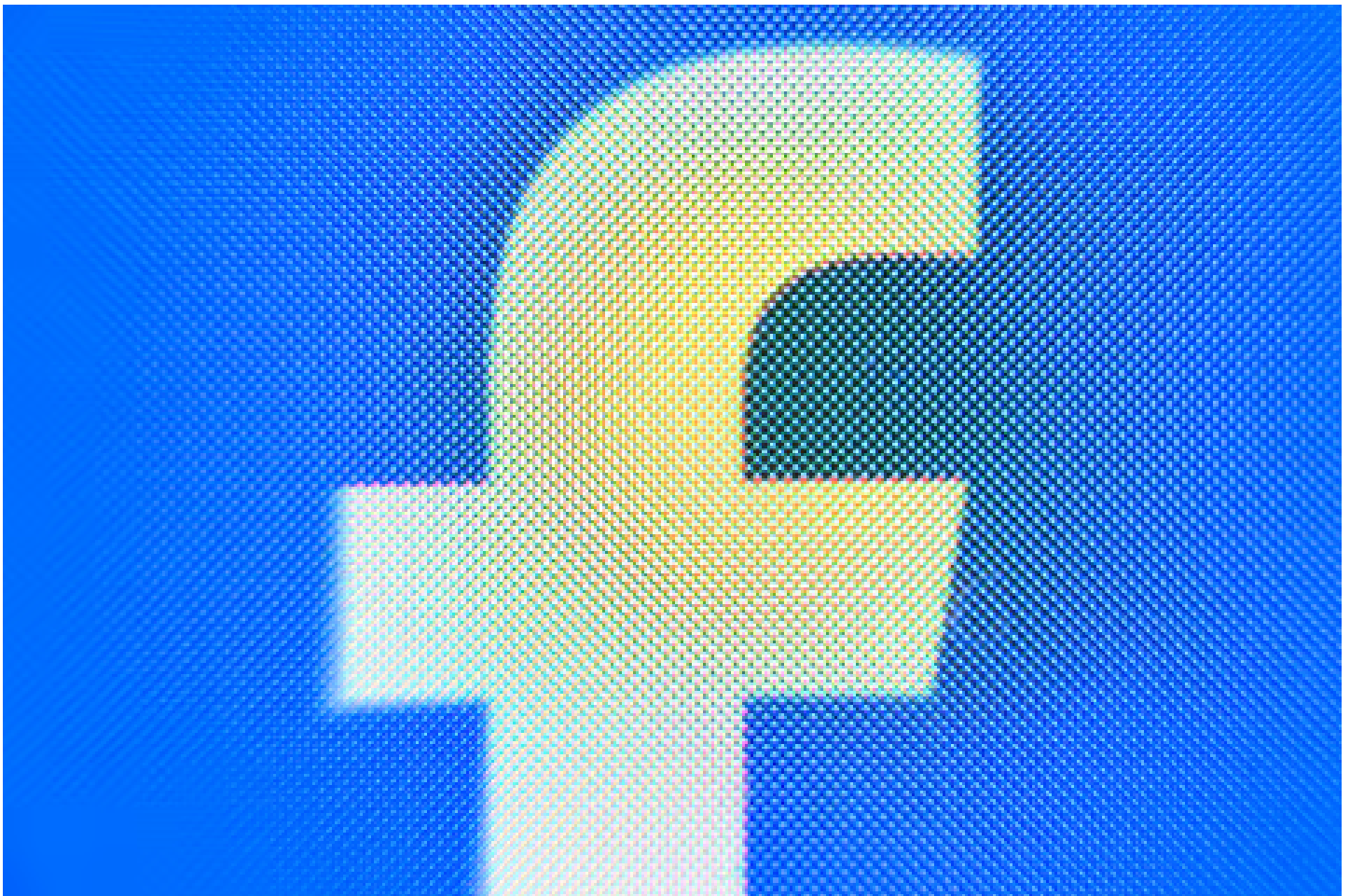
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