



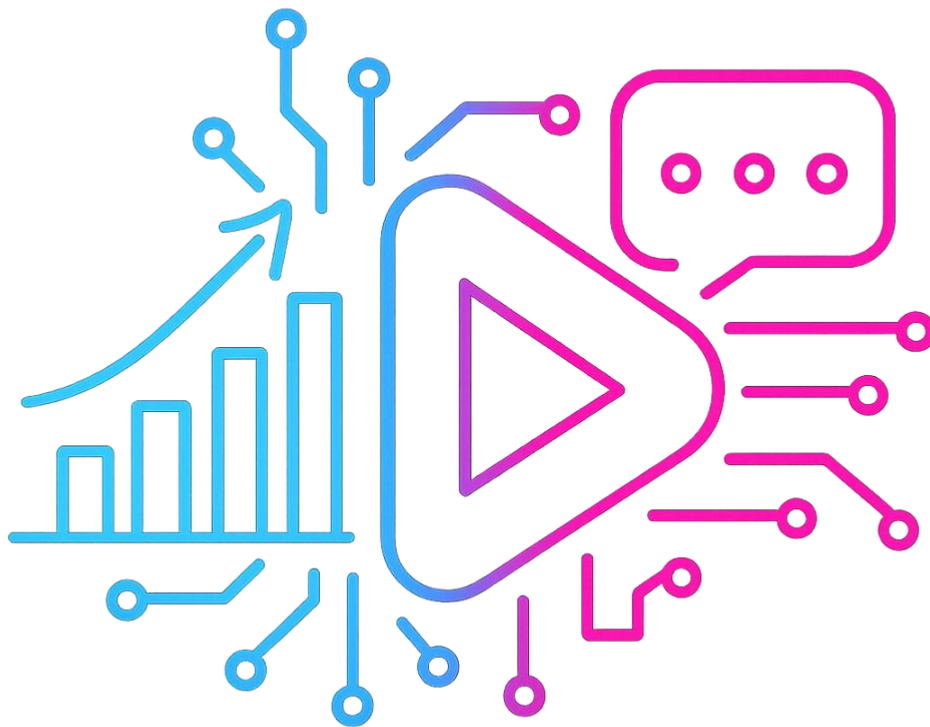
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PROELECT
PROMOTING ACCOUNTABILITY IN ELECTORAL PROCESSES

The inauthentic network industry. Episode 2

How do the presidential candidates' accounts grow overnight?



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Or why you can't succeed online if you play by the rules

The era of fake news is history. Not that we should no longer be concerned about fake news, which is a matter of content; combating it remains important. But the stakes in the 2025 campaign have become the ability to flood the digital space with oceans of information, memes, and videos about one's own candidate, plus negative propaganda about opponents, much more so than in the past.

In other words, it is about exploiting platform algorithms, to the limit or beyond the provisions of Romanian law, which are restrictive but outdated, lacking effective enforcement mechanisms. Because it is one thing to put false or manipulative narratives in the virtual space, but whose source can be identified – and another to create from scratch tens of thousands of supporters who do not exist, i.e. accounts based on bot networks, which fill the public conversation with duplicate posts and comments, giving the impression of popularity and mobilisation.

We are facing a phenomenon of automated mass communication, in which the visibility and credibility of candidates are mechanically inflated with tools that fall under the definition of *Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB)*, a practice that is morally dubious at best, when not actually prohibited by the internal rules of social media platforms. Nevertheless, CIB activity has grown exponentially in recent weeks. It seems that political actors, far from distancing themselves from the Georgescu-2024 phenomenon, have in fact taken it as a model.

For example:

- In the last 30 days, **EFOR has identified over 100 million views generated by 600 CIB videos. Of these, 270 inauthentic promotional clips are for George Simion; 180 come from inauthentic pro-Crin Antonescu networks.**

- Another potential problem is the growth patterns on the candidates' official accounts. Victor Ponta has a massive online campaign, **illustrated by the viewing data in the following two graphs. On TikTok, the gap is evident in the last week: 100,000 new followers on TikTok for Ponta, followed by Nicușor Dan with approximately 30,000 new followers.** We have only observed similar growth patterns during November-December 2024, at the height of the electoral scandal.

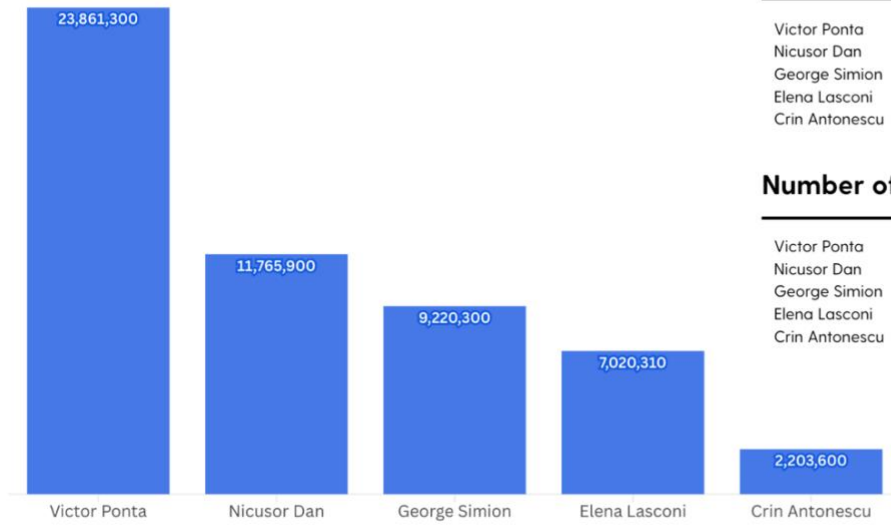
- We also identified patterns of repeated comments and found comments suspected of being massively duplicated: Victor Ponta (47.6% of the total); Nicușor Dan (37%); George Simion (23.1%).

- **The massive and predominantly positive visibility of candidate Crin Antonescu comes mainly from support networks, not from his official account, which is not very visible (only 17,000 followers).** He is constantly at the top of the visibility rankings and has reached a total of 118 million views in recent months, most of them favorable, through the coordinated action of inauthentic promotion networks.

Further details can be found in the analyses dedicated to the five main candidates in the text below. Finally, we offer the authorities and the public some recommendations to reduce the CIB phenomenon as much as possible.

Video Views in the last 30 days

Official accounts of candidates on TikTok



Totalul vizualizărilor înregistrate pe contul fiecărui candidat.

Number of videos posted

Victor Ponta	139
Nicusor Dan	63
George Simion	16
Elena Lasconi	83
Crin Antonescu	58

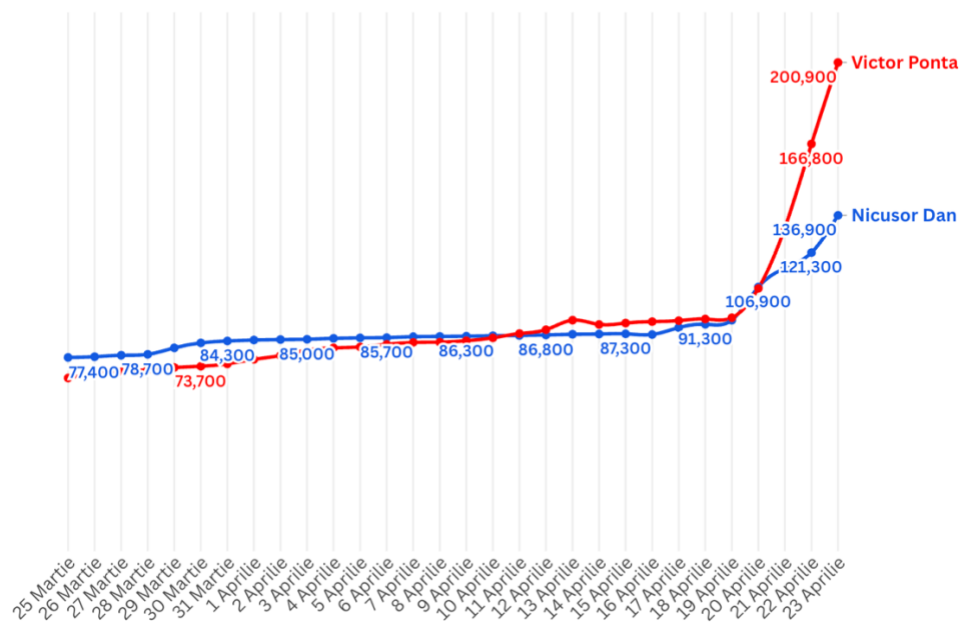
Number of followers

Victor Ponta	217 200
Nicusor Dan	155 100
George Simion	1 300 000
Elena Lasconi	156 200
Crin Antonescu	17 700

Growth in followers (daily)

Nicusor Dan vs Victor Ponta

25 March - 23 April



Where does the problem come from?

Coordinated inauthentic behavior (CIB) remains one of the most difficult phenomena to detect online. In our previous analysis (here <https://expertforum.ro/industria-retelelor-inautentice-pe-tiktok/>), we investigated networks of inauthentic accounts and the overall visibility of hashtags associated with candidates. Here are the main findings: over 100 million views attributed to inauthentic content and over 600 CIB videos, all posted in the last 30 days.

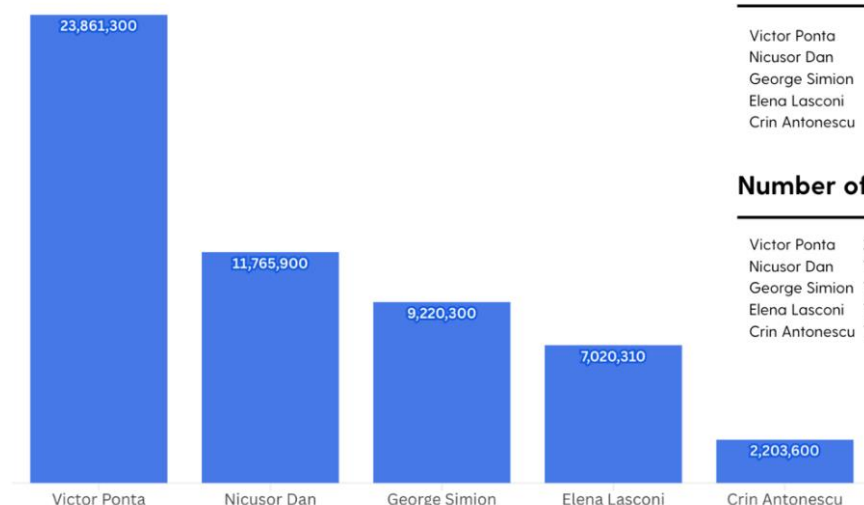
Beyond these networks, the discussion extends to the candidates' official accounts. It has become an increasingly debated topic in our society: who is amplifying their online presence through inauthentic networks and what is their impact? Candidate Nicușor Dan, for example, has filed a complaint with national and European authorities, alleging possible external interference with his social media accounts.

In this context, we have decided to publish the data collected by Expert Forum. We note that it is currently difficult to estimate how much of the interest in candidates is organic and how much is the result of an "invasion" – intentional or not – of official accounts by inauthentic networks. As we are in a period of heightened political interest, it is worrying that some official accounts have seen increases of 20,000–30,000 followers per day, when in 2024 they did not exceed this threshold in total. However, we must consider this data in light of the special case of TikTok, which has an extremely opaque virality algorithm that selects content to promote based on unknown criteria. In our previous analysis, we observed accounts with fewer than 1,000 followers and no previous political content that managed to reach hundreds of thousands of views on their first political video.

The impact of these traffic flows on the visibility of candidates is, in turn, uncertain and raises serious questions about measures to reduce systemic risks during the election period. In the absence of serious audits of platform algorithms and how content goes viral, we are essentially in the dark: data collected with difficulty over months only allows us to see the tip of the iceberg. The conclusion is that, at this point, the invasion of bots (intentional or not), seemingly organic but unlikely traffic, and TikTok's algorithmic decisions that can randomly amplify certain accounts remain hypotheses that deserve further analysis.

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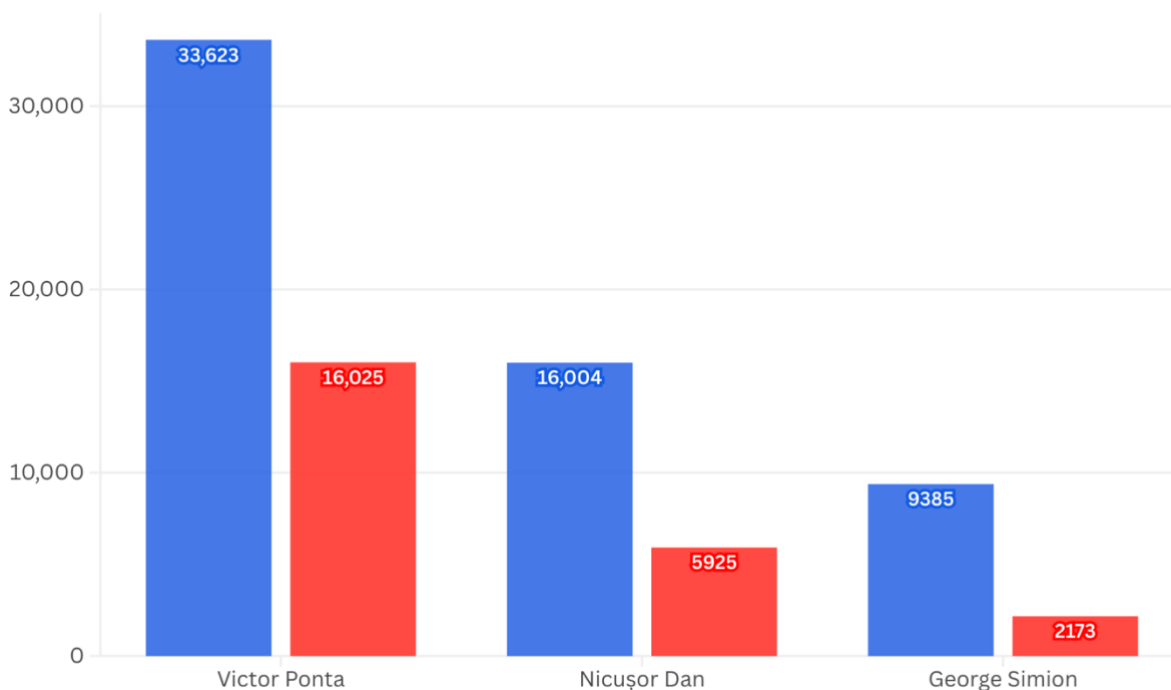
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Comment analysis (last 30 days)

Analysis of comments on videos posted by candidates on their official accounts.

■ Comments ■ Potential duplicates



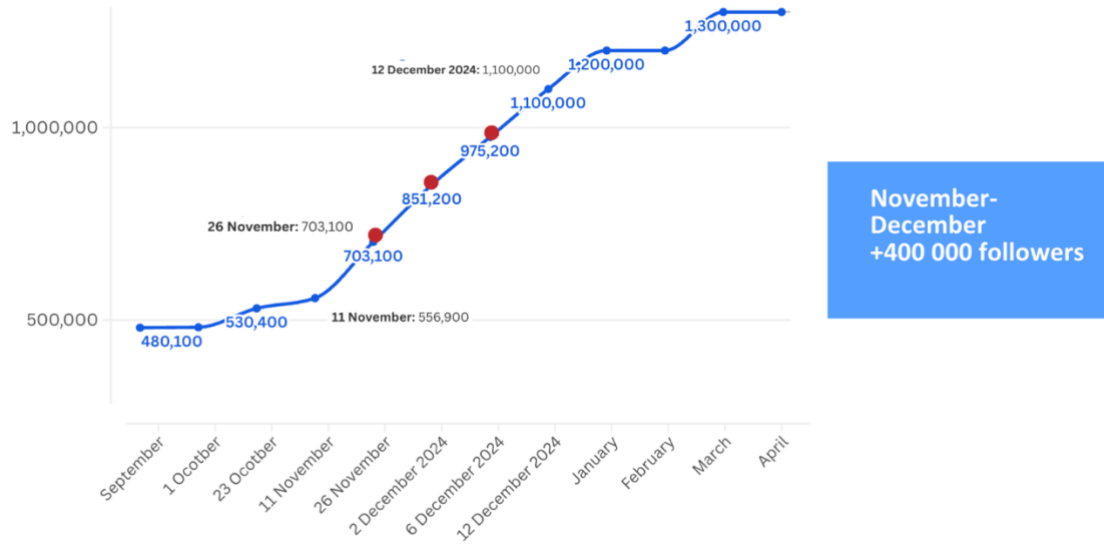
The main candidates and their online profiles

Let's look at the growth peaks of the presidential candidates' accounts. For example, the graphs below show that Elena Lasconi and George Simion recorded significant growth between November and December 2024. In the case of George Simion, the

number of followers doubled during a period of peak electoral interest, with increases of up to 40,000 followers per day.

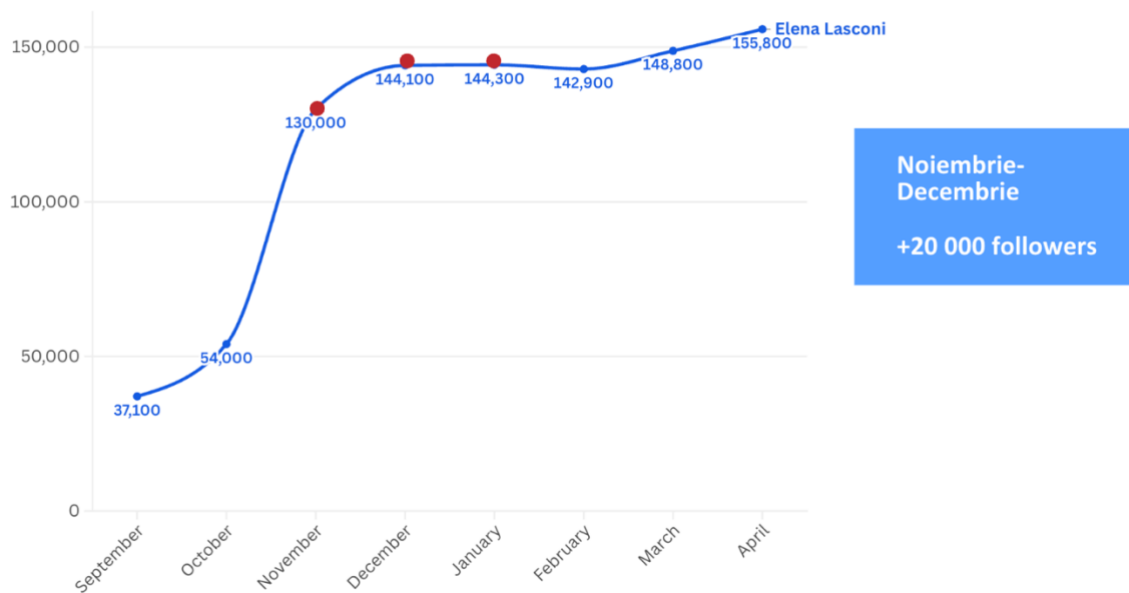
George Simion

Followers Growth



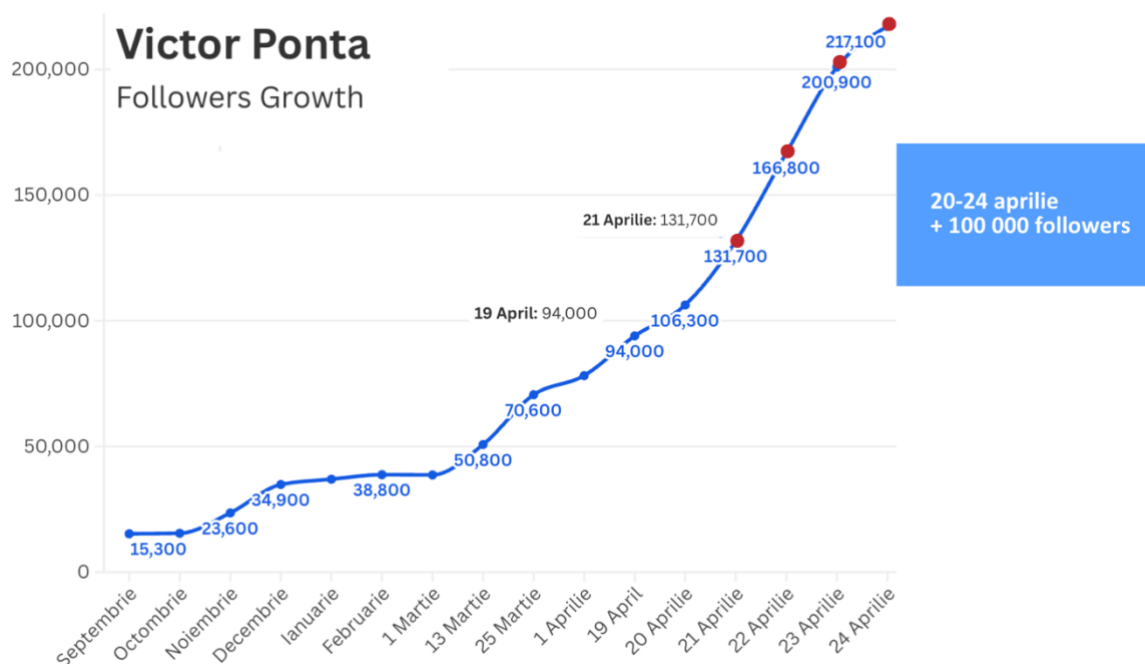
Elena Lasconi

Followers Growth



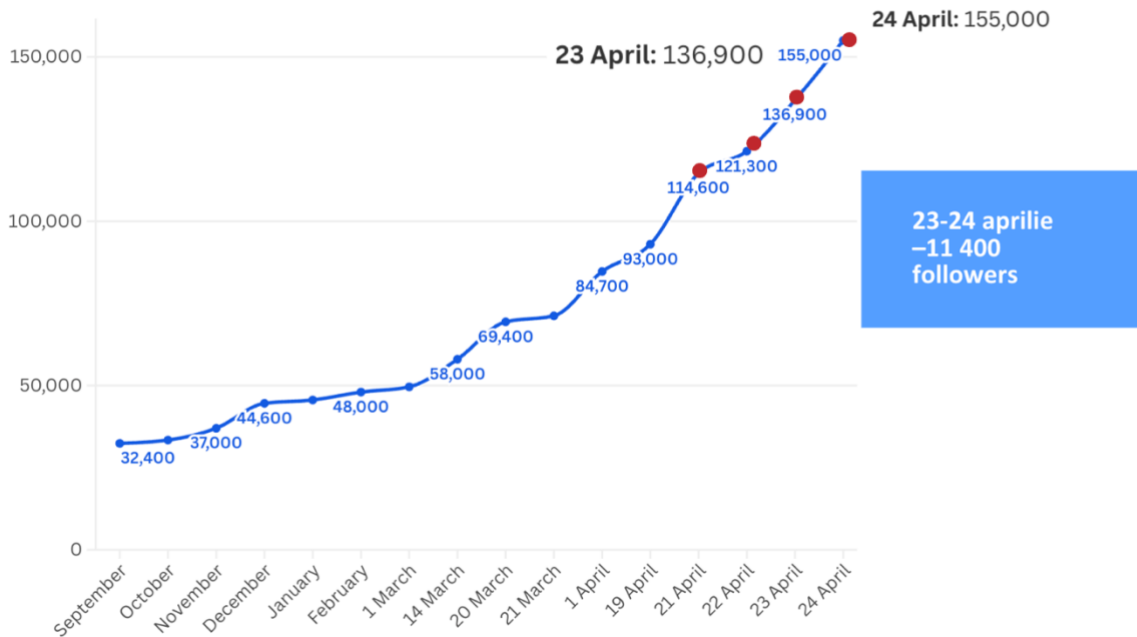
On the other hand, Nicușor Dan and Victor Ponta, candidates registered only in the 2025 presidential race, are currently experiencing rapid growth in the number of followers. It remains to be seen, of course, whether this interest is truly comparable to that seen in November 2024, when the election campaign for other types of elections was generating widespread mobilization. However, the current pace—with audience numbers doubling or even tripling in just a few days—raises questions about the nature of these increases.

It is possible that some of this traffic reflects genuine interest, generated by recent media appearances or strategic political positioning. But in the absence of transparency from the platform regarding the source of these followers or the viral behavior of the content, any conclusion remains speculative. Against a backdrop of declining public confidence in the democratic process and the work of politicians, we consider it necessary for candidates to clarify these trends and make a firm commitment to transparency regarding their online activity.



Nicuşor Dan

Followers Growth



There are several relevant differences here. On the one hand, Nicuşor Dan starts with 32,400 followers in September 2024, after winning the Bucharest City Hall. He has used the TikTok platform throughout the year to promote his political agenda and gradually build an active audience.

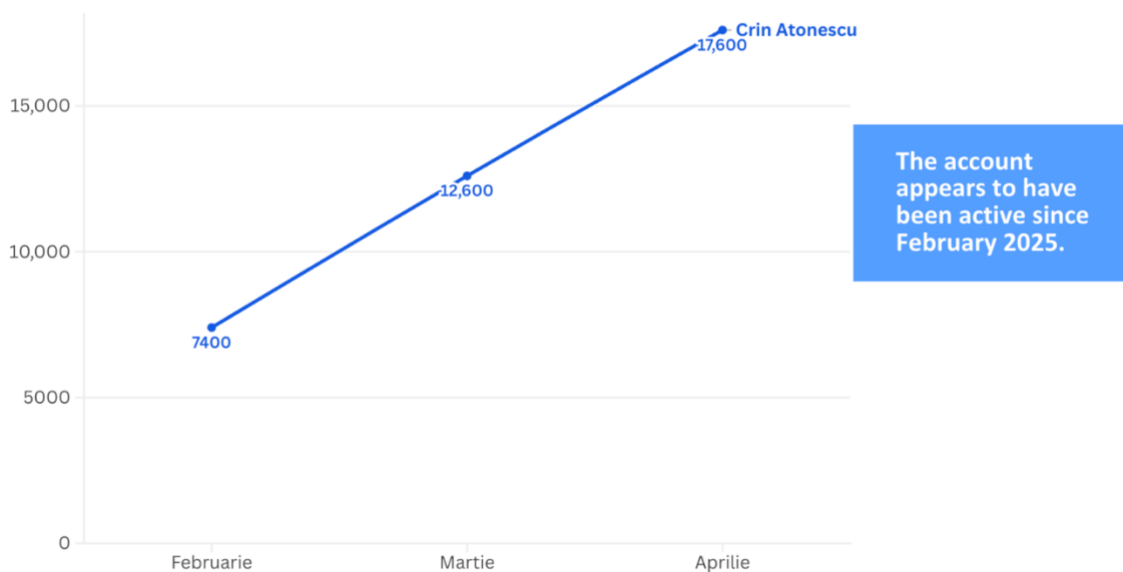
On the other hand, Victor Ponta starts with less than half of Nicuşor Dan's followers, with a much lower public presence, both in public life and on TikTok in recent years. However, by March 25, 2025, Ponta manages to catch up with him and then surpass him by about 70,000 followers. A particularly significant pattern is observed between April 20 and 24, when Victor Ponta gains 100,000 followers in just four days.

Ponta spent 11 million lei, compared to 4.3 million lei in the first report, of which 60% was spent online (6.6 million) and 20% on radio/TV/press (2.1 million lei). Of the funds paid for online advertising, 2.1 million went to a contract for the production of TikTok election materials and the dissemination of online election propaganda; more details can be found in the report - [Financing of the 2025 presidential election campaign \(IV\) - April 17, 2025](#).

Such abrupt and unexpected jumps, in the absence of a visible campaign or sustained public presence on the platform, raise serious questions about the source of these followers. Is this a disguised digital campaign, a coordinated mobilization of networks, a phenomenon of spontaneous viralization, or a combination of these?

Crin Antonescu

Followers Growth



As we pointed out in our previous report, Crin Antonescu's official account is systematically neglected, which is reflected both in its low activity and in the relatively small number of followers. However, Crin Antonescu's positive visibility comes mainly from his support networks, not from his official account. How, then, does content about Crin Antonescu manage to consistently rank high in visibility and reach a total of 118 million views in recent months, most of them favorable?

The answer lies in the coordinated action of inauthentic promotion networks. In the last 30 days alone, 180 such videos have been identified, a phenomenon that suggests the existence of amplification campaigns that do not depend on the candidate's official communication strategy, but rather on the ability of inauthentic networks to shape a favorable public perception through massive, seemingly organic content.

Analysis of comments on videos posted on Victor Ponta's page

33,623 comments on Victor Ponta's videos in the last 30 days analyzed.

 Total Duplicate Comments: 16,025

 Unique Duplicate Texts: 500

For a comment to be considered a duplicate, it must have been posted at least 5 times in an identical form.


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Comment	Count
victor ponta preşedinte	1161
ponta preşedinte	747
😂😂😂	528
victor ponta preşedinte!	405
ponta presedinte	367
victor ponta presedinte	314
👍	307
😂😂😂	240
👍👍👍	223
👍👍👍	222
😂😂😂	211
👍👍👍	188
vot ponta	173
😂😂😂	162
victor ponta preşedinte 🙏	144
ponta preşedinte!	132
😂😂😂	128
🙏🙏🙏	123
👍	122
votetz victor ponta	110
votetz victor ponta!	107
❤️❤️❤️	106
😂😂😂😂😂	104
😂😂	100
votetz ponta	96
victor ponta preşedinte !	89
❤️	87
victor ponta presedinte!	85
victor ponta preşedinte! 🙏🙏🙏	84
😂	82
votetz victor ponta preşedinte	73
😂	70
victor ponta preşedinte.	67
victor ponta preşedinte al româniei	67
😂😂😂😂	66
corect	66
victor ponta preşedintele româniei	65
😂😂😂	65
😂😂😂	64
votam masiv victor ponta 🙏🙏🙏	60
bravo	58
votetz ponta preşedinte!!! pentru o româ	57
😂😂😂	55
succes	54

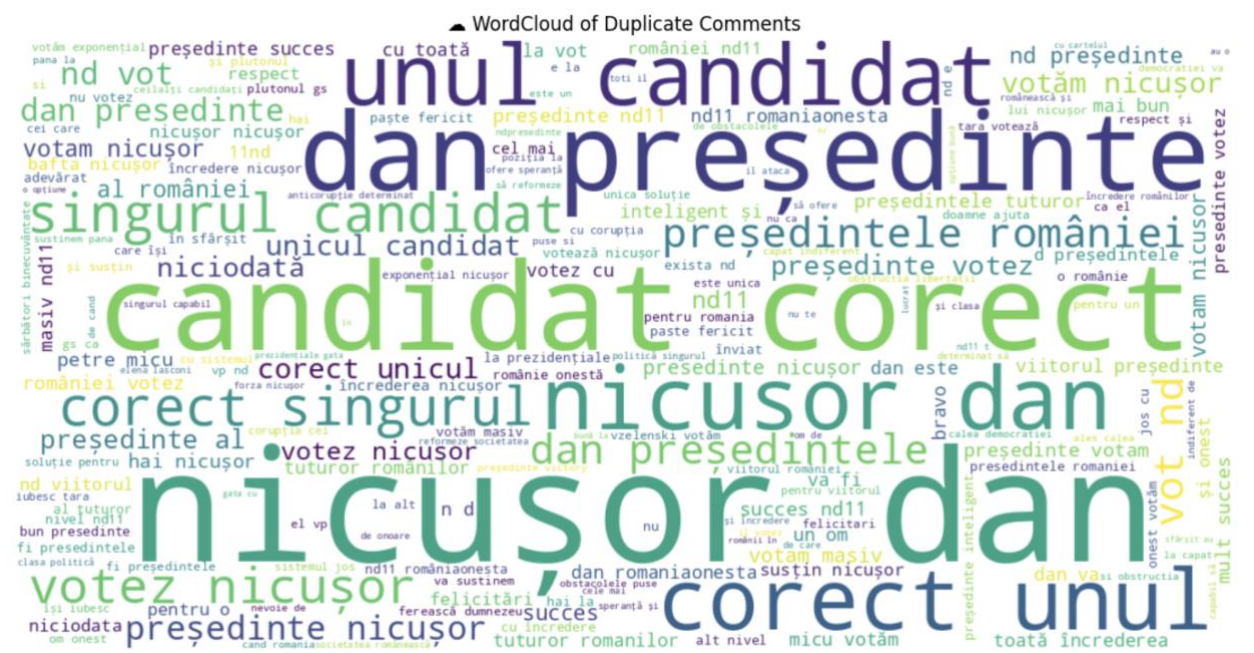
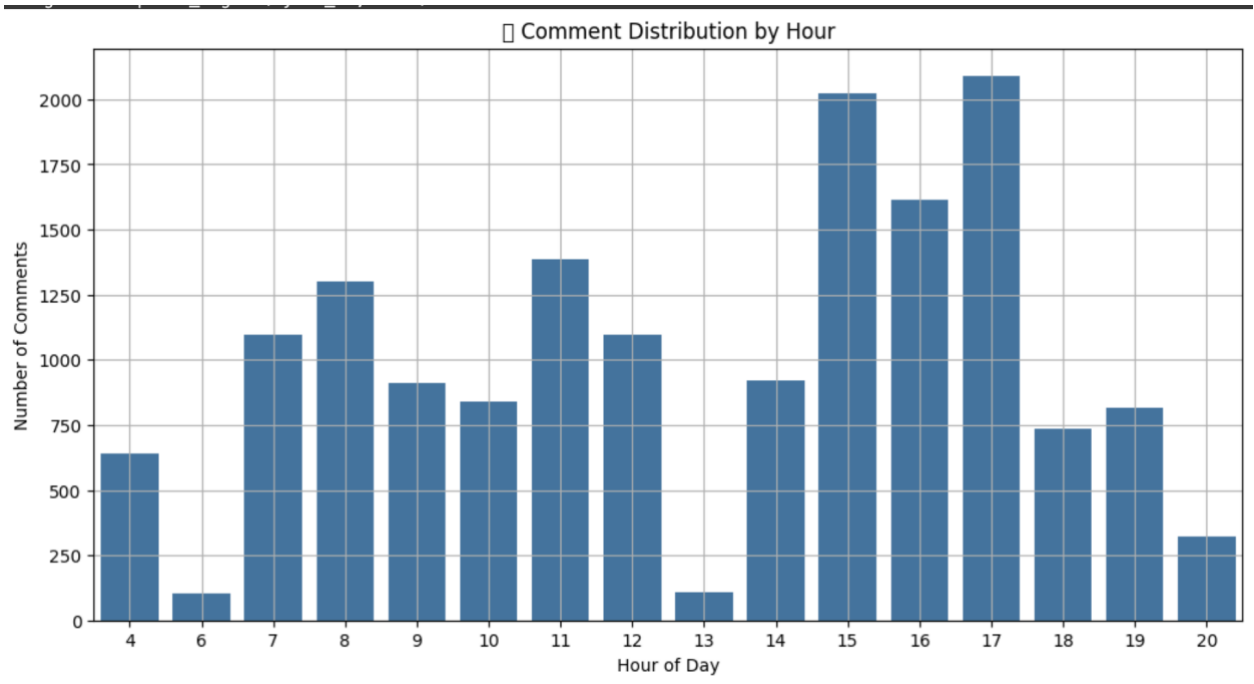
The most popular comments and how many times they have been posted on the candidate's videos in the last 30 days

Analysis of comments posted on Nicușor Dan's page

Total comments 16,004

 Total duplicate comments (including all repetitions): 5,925

 Unique duplicate texts used 5+ times: 242



THE INAUTHENTIC NETWORK INDUSTRY. EPISODE 2

comment_text_clean	count
unul candidat corect	313
singurul candidat corect	290
🥰🥰🥰	180
😂😂😂	175
👏👏👏	130
👍👍👍	113
unicul candidat corect	111
nicușor dan președinte	101
❤️❤️❤️	92
😡😡😡	79
👍	71
votez nicușor dan	64
👏👏👏👏	64
nicușor dan președinte!	54
😂	53
🥰	51
❤️	47
nicusor dan presedinte!	47
niciodată	42
😄😄😄	39
votez nicușor dan!	34
@petre micu 70:votăm nicușor dan p	34
hai nicușor!	34
👏👏	33
😂😂😂	32
nicușor dan președinte 🙏	31
votez nicusor dan! 🇷🇴🇪🇺 #romani	31
nicușor președinte	30
#nd11	30
succes!	29

What should be done?

We need to strengthen our capacity to monitor inauthentic networks at the level of state institutions. This does not mean developing opaque structures that consume public money, including European funds, and then communicate nothing to the public under the pretext of confidentiality. In countries with good practices in combating manipulation and inauthentic online activity, such as the Baltic States, Scandinavia, the Czech Republic, etc., even the secret services have a practice of publishing reports full of interesting content that serve to debate issues in society. In our country, if non-governmental organizations can carry out such analyses using only public data, the argument of confidentiality should not hide the indolence or incompetence of state institutions.

We need genuine digital analysis capacity at the national level, not just fake institutional shells and sinecures. Dedicated structures should be set up within ANCOM or a civil entity similar to the STRATCOM model, made up of IT experts, artificial intelligence specialists, data analysts, and legal advisors specializing in technology. Such a structure should operate transparently and collaboratively with civil society and electoral authorities, **not spend money on software that does not work and never produces public reports.**

- It is necessary to bring back to the forefront the obligation of digital platforms to cooperate proactively in the automatic detection of inauthentic networks. It is not enough for platforms to wait for ad hoc reports from NGOs with limited resources and restricted access to data. Platforms have a duty to comply, not just to cooperate voluntarily, in combating systemic risks, which have become elements of a veritable hybrid war threatening the integrity of electoral processes in the European Union. So we need to work quickly, massively, and as much as possible ex ante, not just reacting after the fact.

At the national level, unfortunately, priority continues to be given to what is easy to quantify, to the detriment of interventions with real impact. As a result, fundamental rights such as freedom of expression are restricted, as we have explained in detail <https://expertforum.ro/decizii-bec-campanie-libertate-exprimare/>], and digital responsibilities are assigned to institutions without technical expertise, leading to bureaucratic bottlenecks (e.g., at the BEC) and, sometimes, dangerous decisions.

- The Expert Forum has repeatedly pointed out the need for real-time auditing of electoral financial statements, coupled with monitoring of online advertising spending as reflected in the platforms' databases. Instead of fixating on and endlessly discussing the complaints received by the BEC, which are insignificant in number compared to the volume of content distributed on social media, it would be much more effective to focus on these systemic issues.



Găsiți mai multe despre subvenții pe platforma EFOR <https://www.banipartide.ro/subventii>, care cuprinde istoricul complet începând cu anul 2006



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