

The Power of Algorithmic Propaganda in Romanian Elections

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N.B.: This presentation is based on a research project that I coordinated and was conducted by students from SNSPA. It is still a work in progress and is intended for academic purposes only. It is not intended for publication.

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Case Study:

Calin Georgescu



Campaign overview

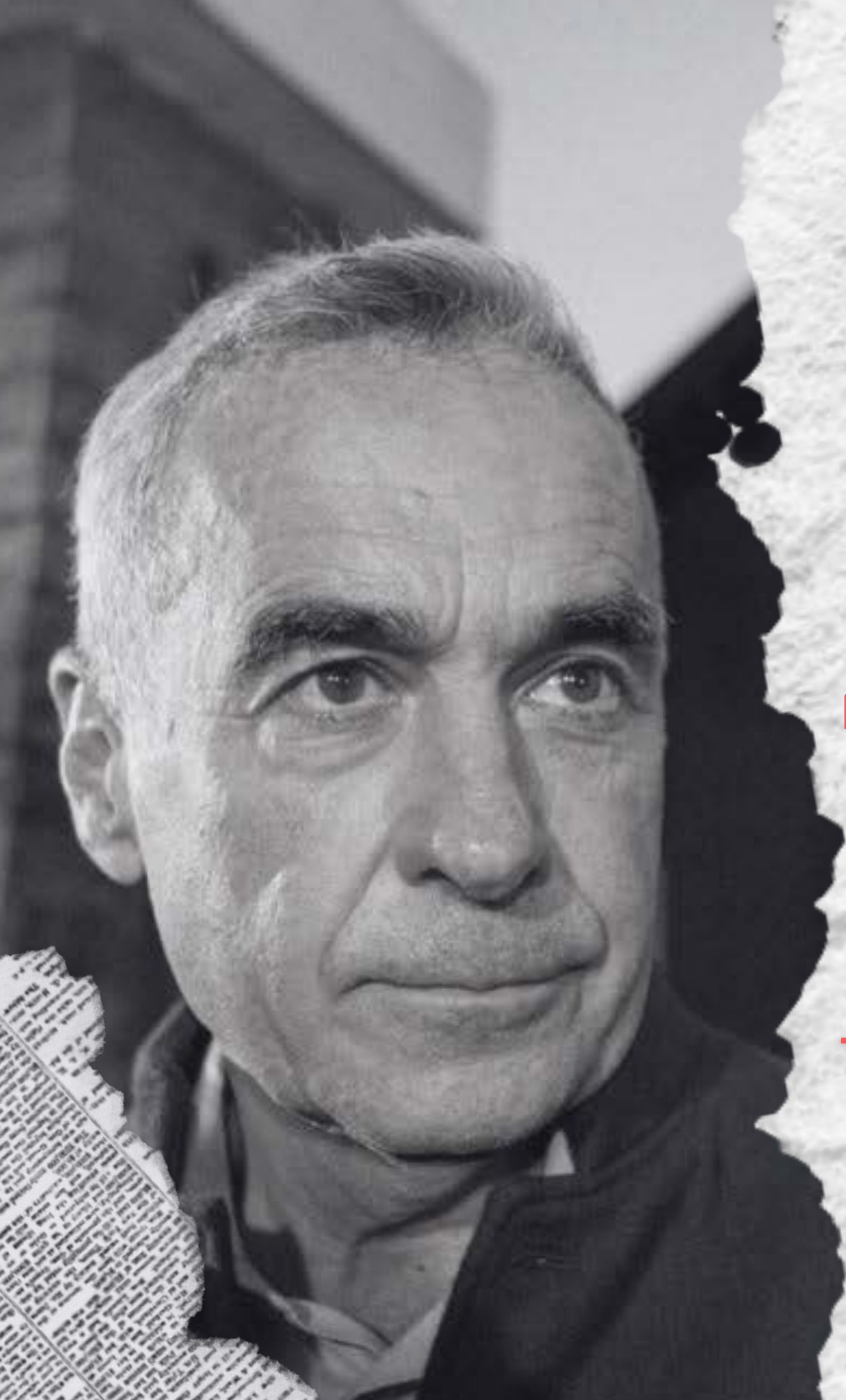
- A relatively unknown figure in Romanian politics **has** risen to prominence as a key contender in the 2024 presidential elections.
- Călin Georgescu's strategic reliance on social media platforms, particularly TikTok and Telegram, **has been crucial.**"

POLITICAL MESSAGING

- National sovereignty, cultural identity, anti-establishment views, and 'economic patriotism.'
- Ultraconservative values (references to God, tradition, and controversial historical figures).

TARGET

- Young voters (aged 18–35) and older voters (mainly from rural areas or small cities), focused on family values, tradition & the Romanian diaspora.



TikTok: tool for political viralization

Calin Georgescu's campaign utilized TikTok's algorithm for unprecedented visibility

- High engagement metrics, prioritized by the FYP algorithm (likes, comments, shares) boosted reach.
- Emotional and polarizing content further amplified visibility.
- Strategic hashtags— **#echilibrusiverticalitate** **#prezidentiale2024** — gained millions of impressions.

Timing was critical:

- Content posted during peak activity hours ensured constant presence on the FYP.
- A disciplined posting specifically targeted younger voters.



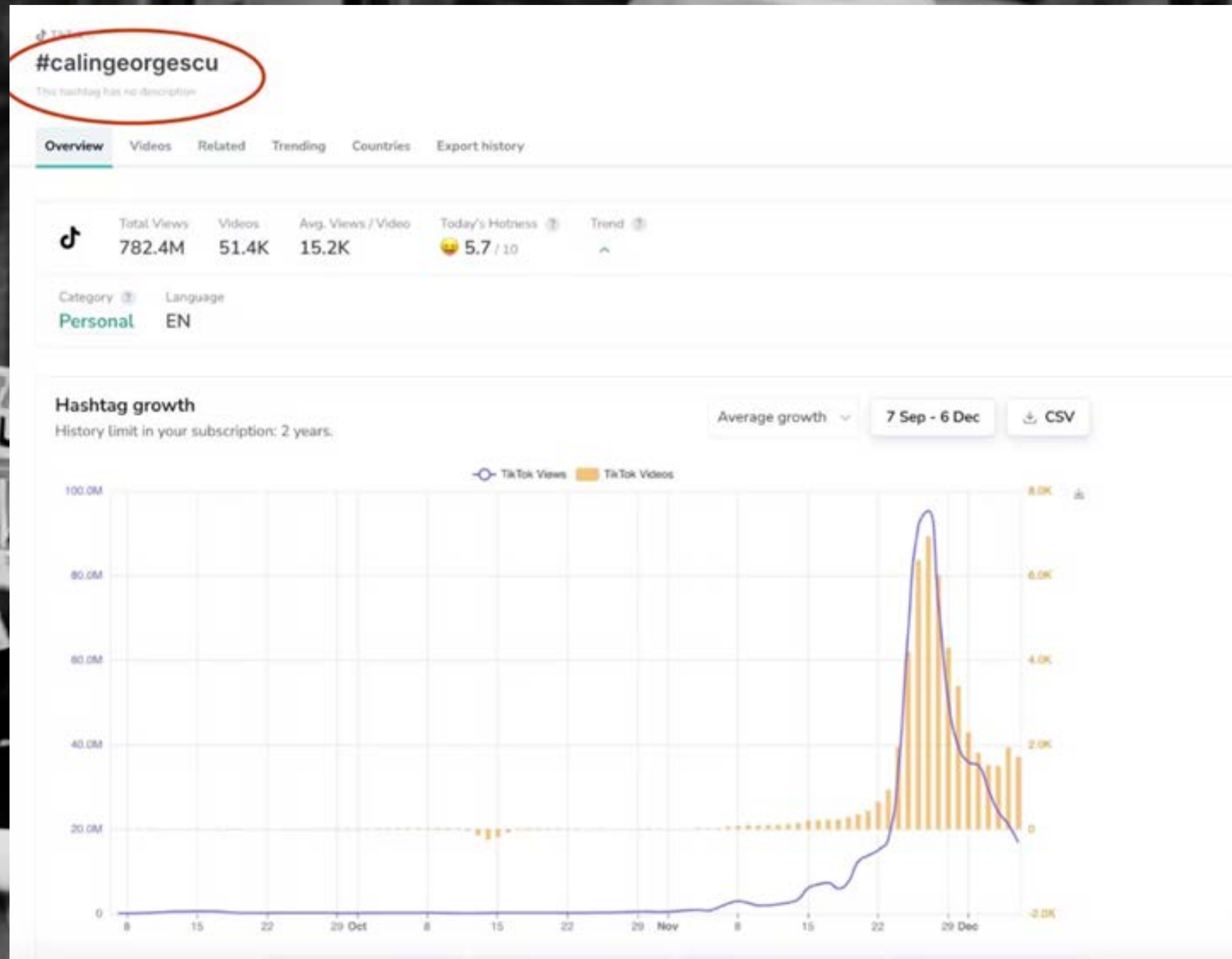
7.2 M likes in 2 weeks

TIKTOK CONTENT ANALYSIS



- Reports suggest manipulation through influencers, automated accounts, and paid promotions
- Capitalized on TikTok to target younger voters.
- Leveraged short videos (e.g., attending church services, doing physical activities, and curated podcast appearances), user-generated content, and viral trends.
- Supporters further amplified his presence by creating viral content that emphasized his controversial positions.
- A specific TikTok sound associated with his campaign, featuring the lyrics 'We vote for Călin Georgescu,' was used in over 155.5K posts!





Source: Snoop.ro

Engagement tactics: From likes to viral success

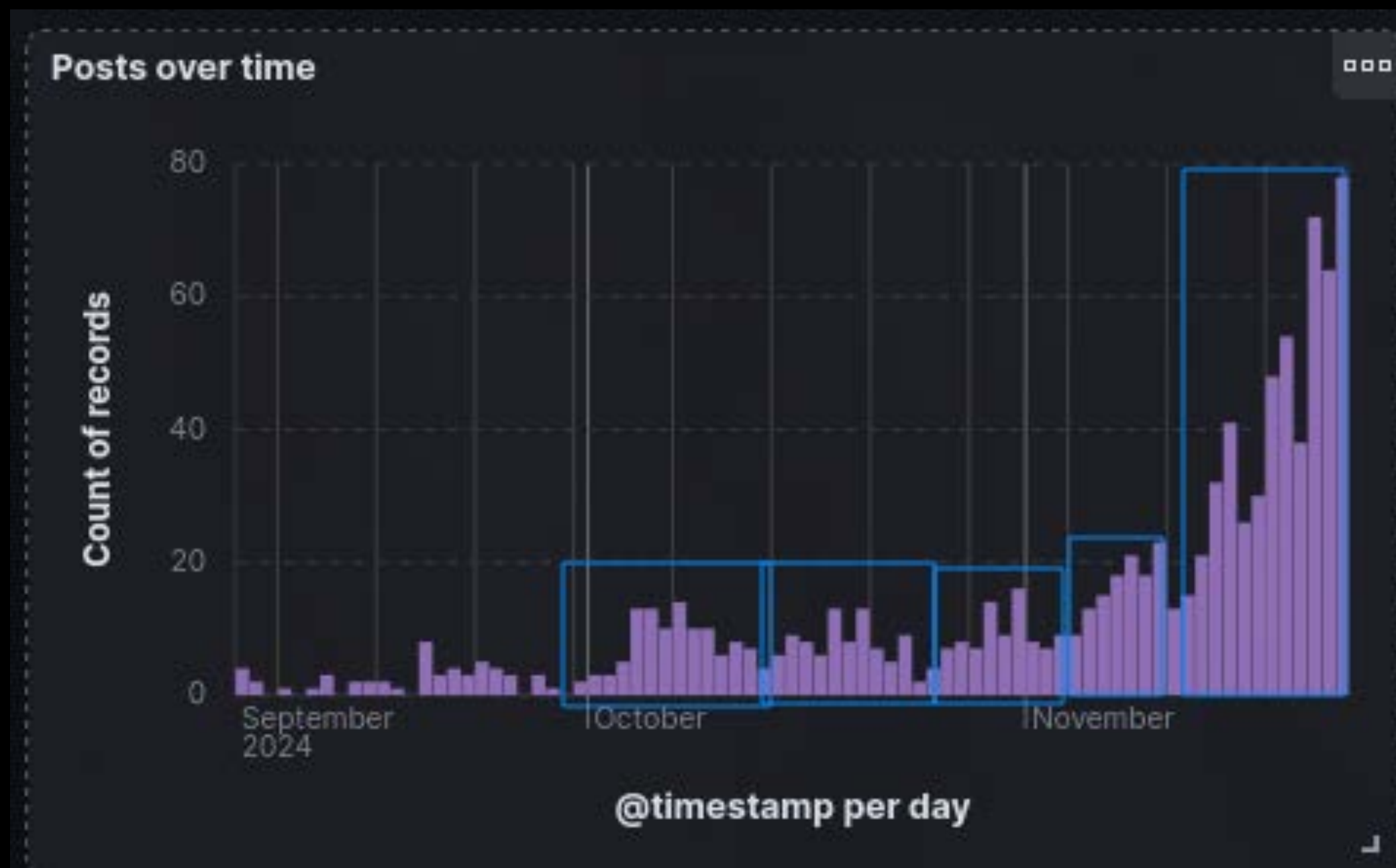
ALGHORTIMIC BOOSTS

- Comment bombing with phrases like 'Georgescu for President!' created a sense of widespread support.
- Cross-platform sharing amplified campaign videos.

THE VIRAL SUCCESS

- Video metrics: 50,000 likes, 10,000 comments, and 5,000 shares in one hour.
- Pre-election tour videos:
1st: 1.7M views | 2nd: 655K views | 3rd: 3.1M views
4-5% likes-to-views ratio, indicating exceptional organic reach

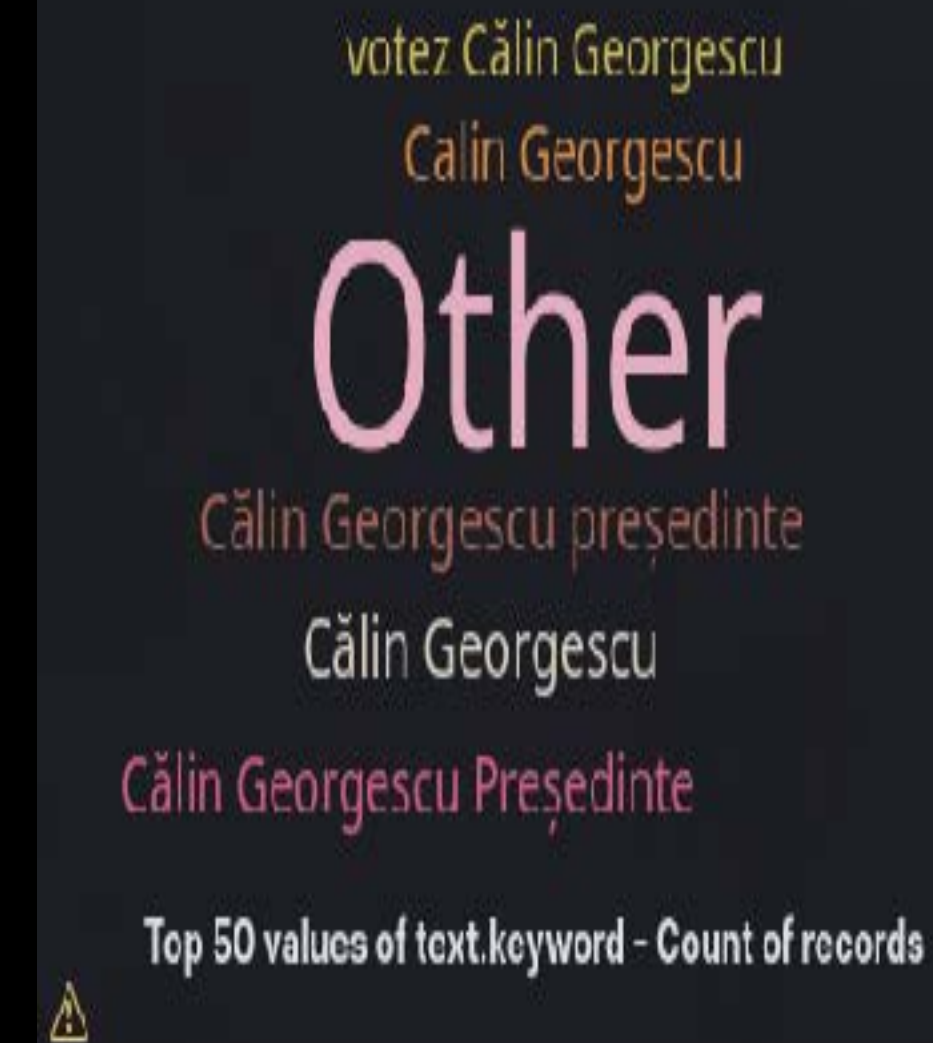
Mass posting, algorithmic manipulation, and coordinated account activity



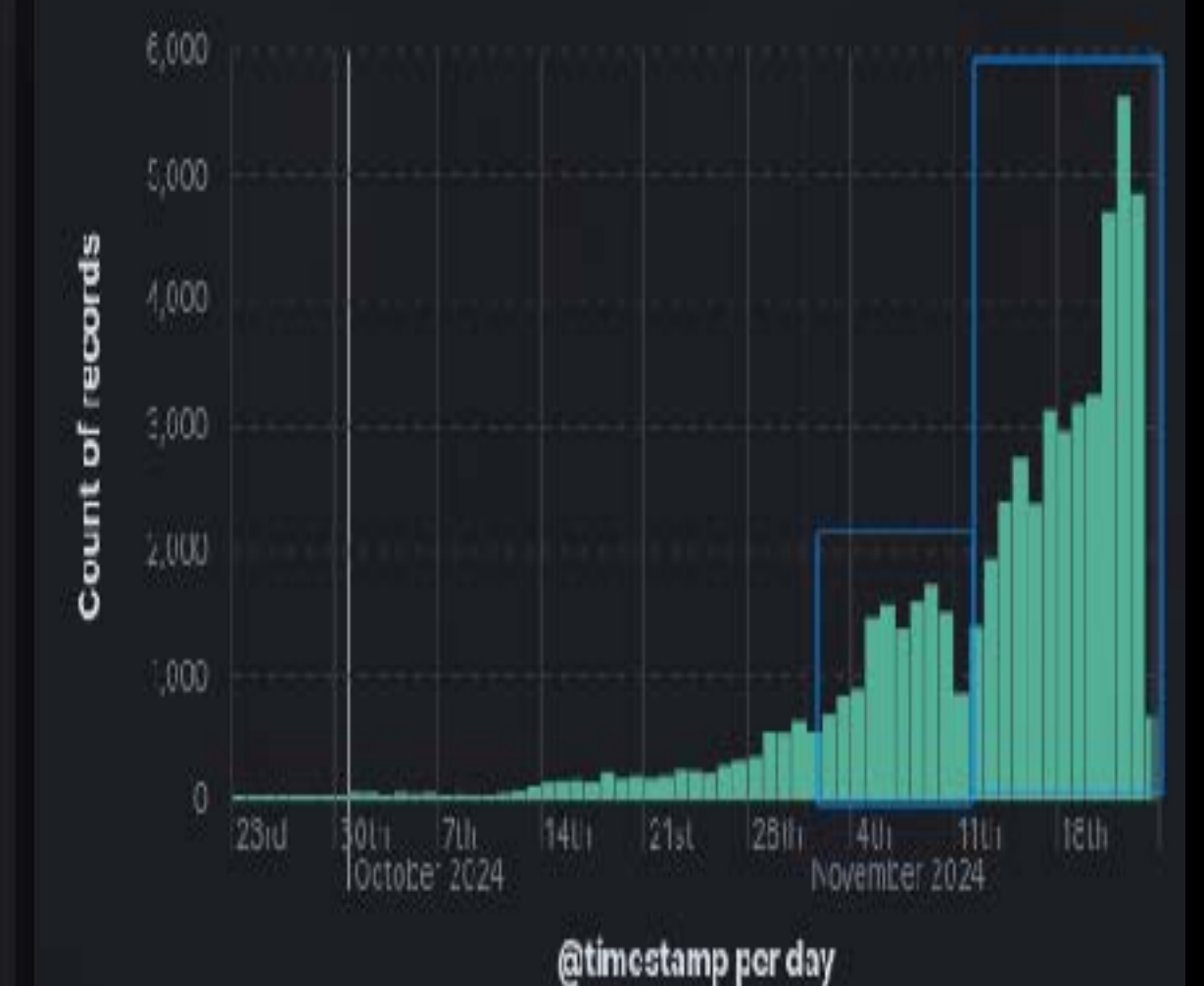
95,000 posts analyzed

- Deliberate effort to saturate the platform with favorable messaging
- Engagement in the comments sections
- Accounts posted repetitive or slightly altered comments to enhance the perceived popularity of the content.
- Reactivation of dormant TikTok accounts: Accounts that had been inactive for long periods were used to share campaign-related content, leveraging their existing follower bases.

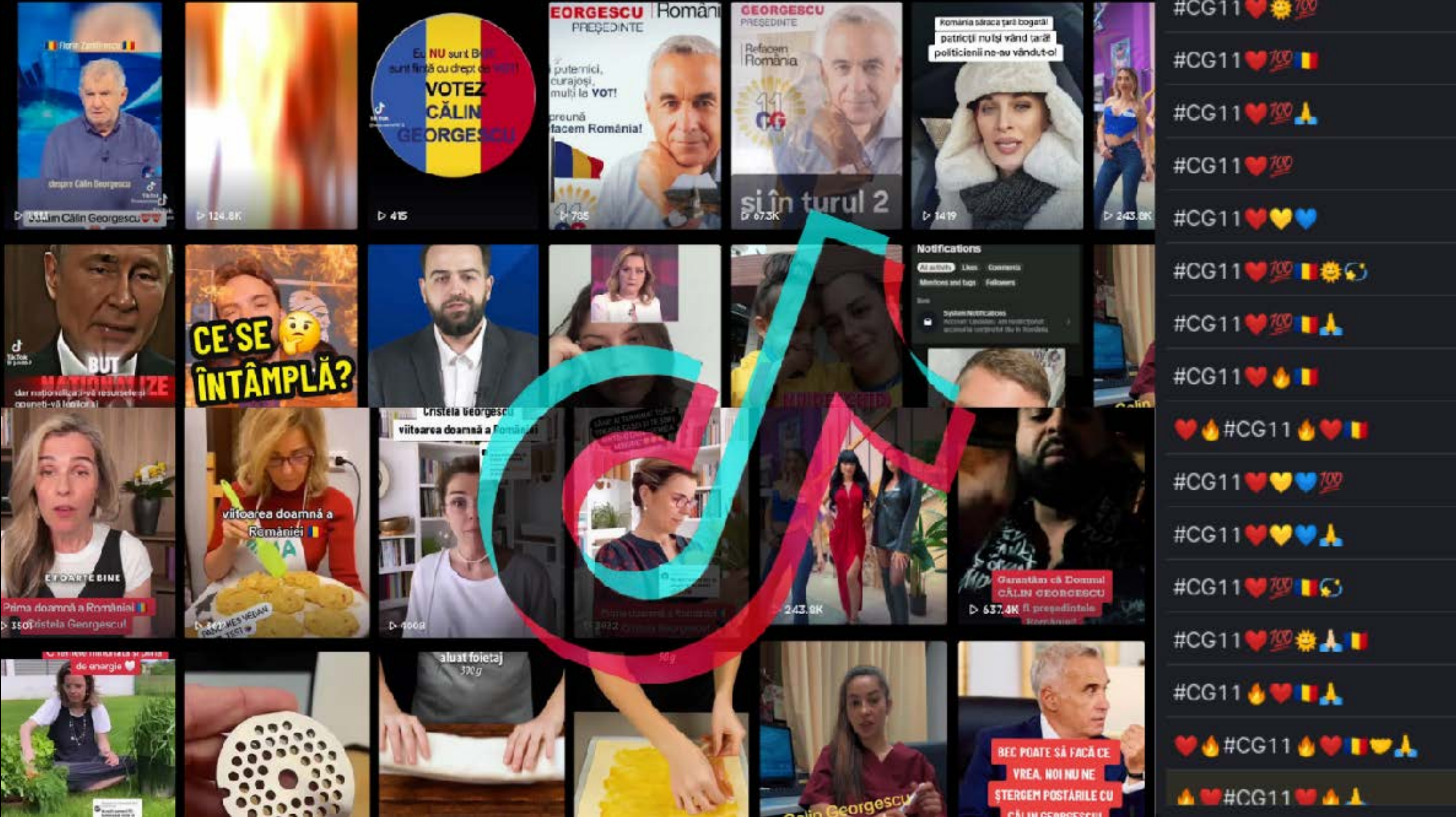
Wordcloud



Comments time distribution



The campaign faced allegations of using fake accounts to fabricate comments and manipulate social media engagement



Leveraging Micro-influencers

Why Micro-Influencers?

- Followers: 10,000–50,000, perceived as authentic and relatable.
- Targeted outreach to niche audiences.

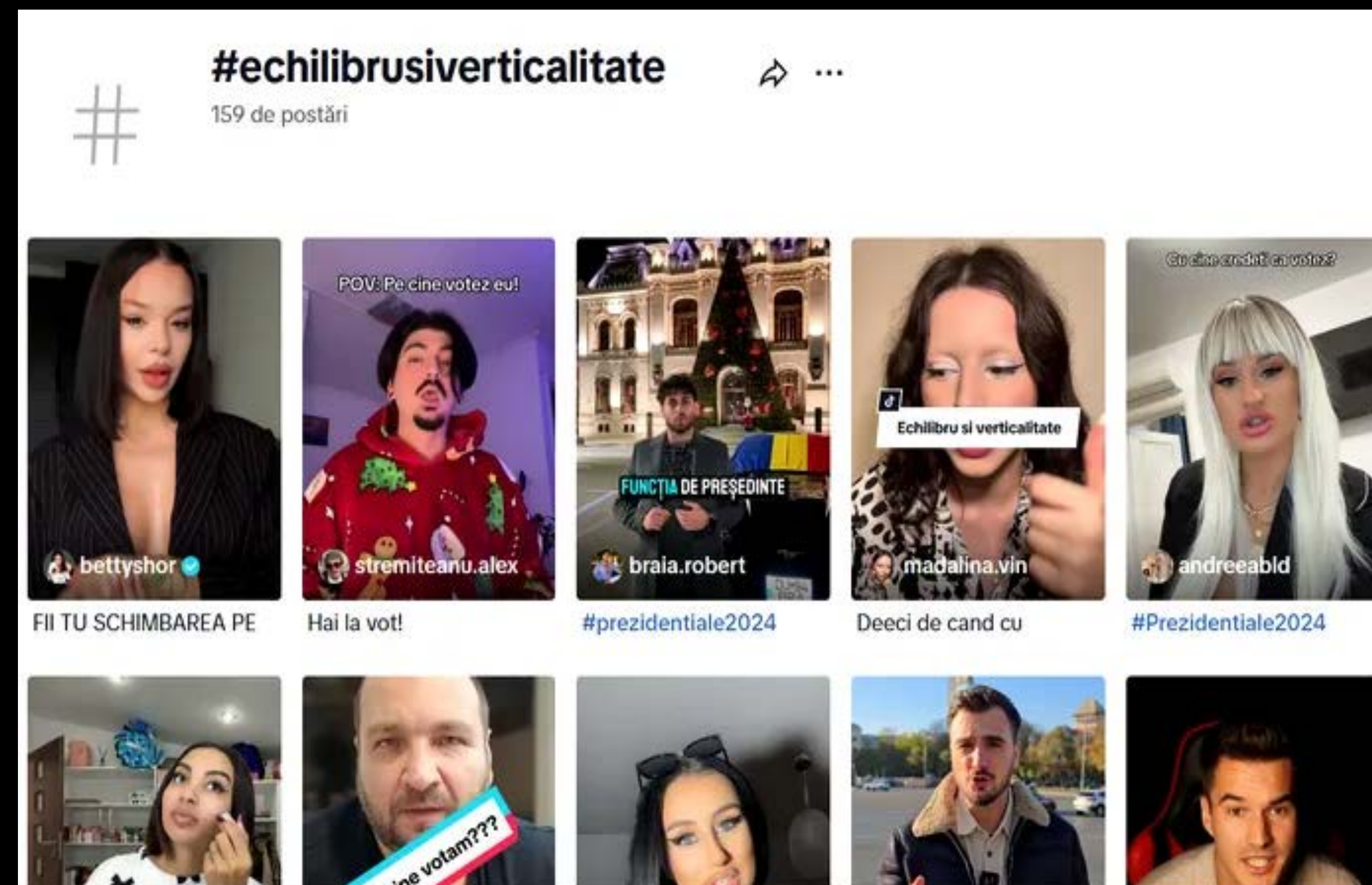
Campaign Strategy:

- Over 100 influencers involved, collectively reaching 8 million followers.
- Posts garnered up to 50,000 views each.
- Payments: 390 RON to 1,000 Euros per post

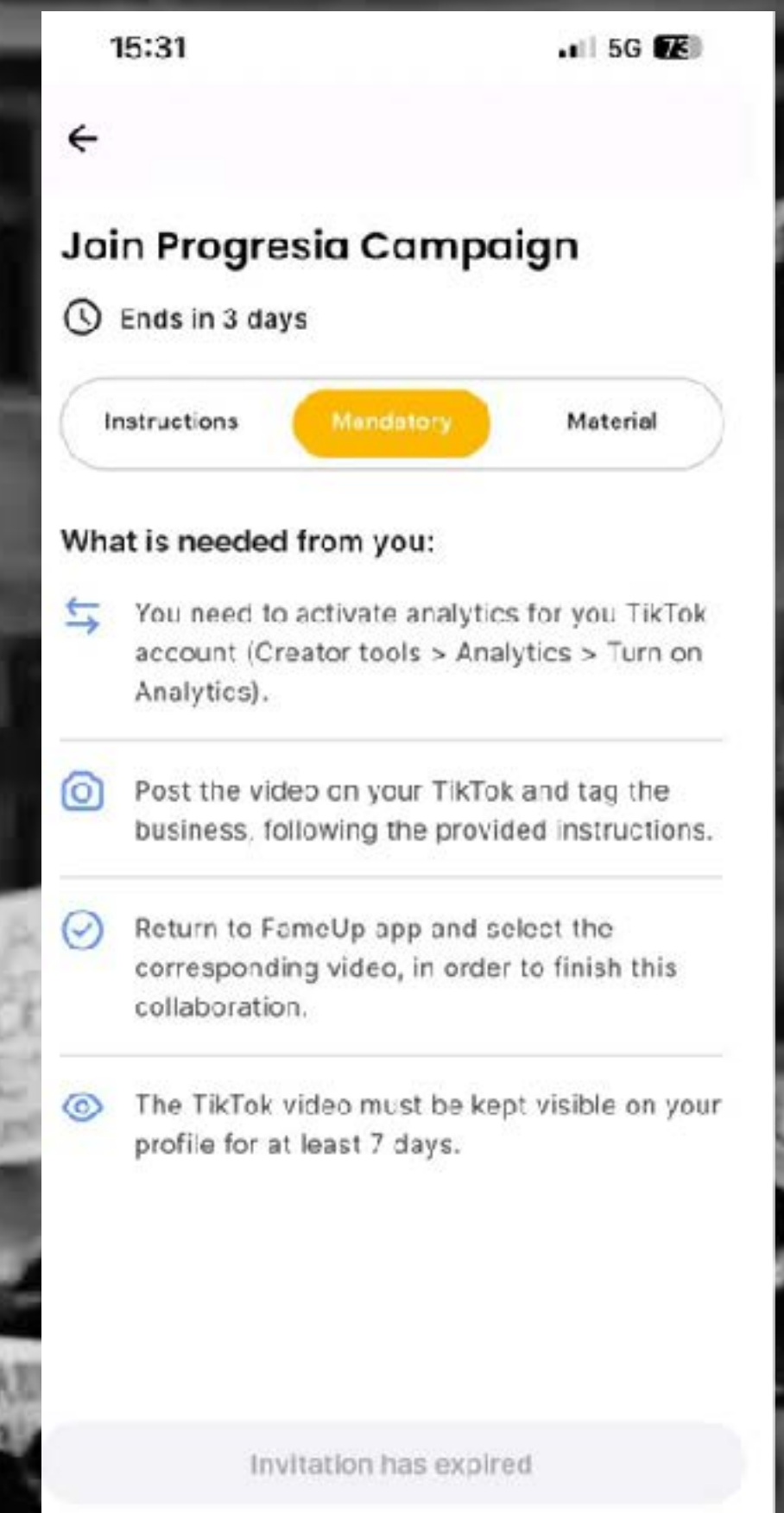
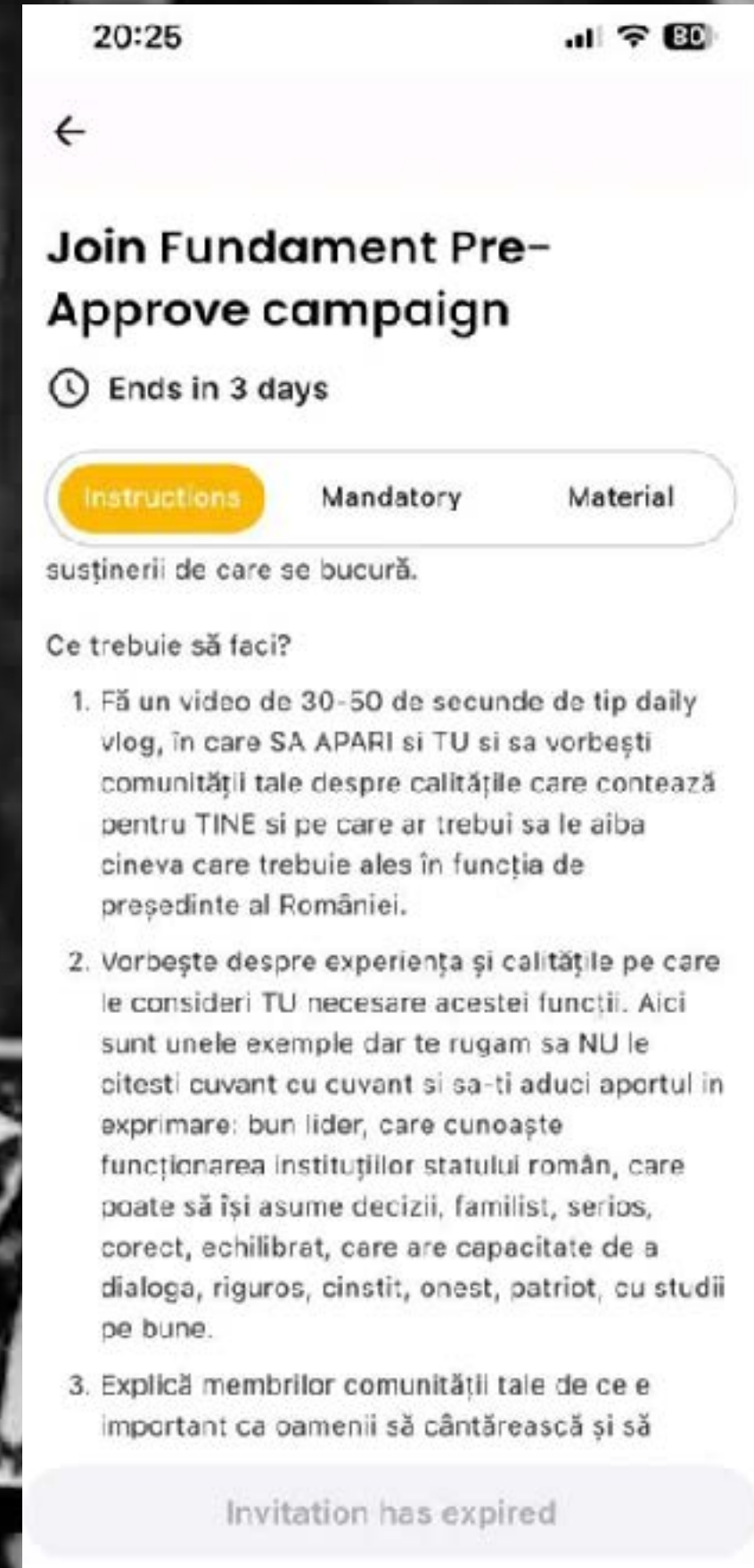
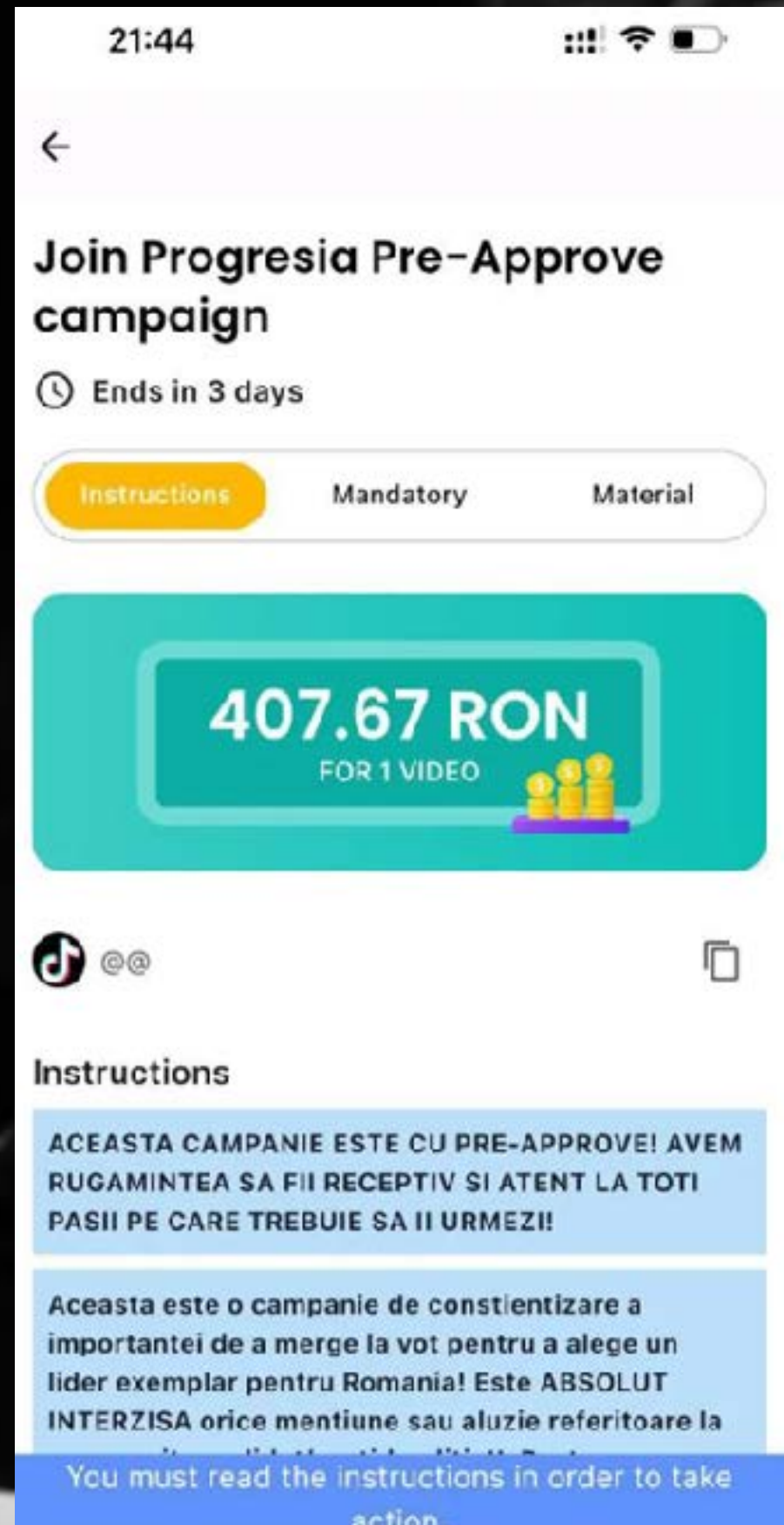
#calingeorgescu (782M views Sep-Dec 2024)

Consistency and Coordination

- Influencers used **pre-written scripts** describing Georgescu as the ‘ideal candidate’ and a ‘vertical president.’
- Examples included patriotic themes and cultural symbols (e.g, Romanian flags, etc.).
- **FameUp platform facilitated influencer payments.** Influencers received funds in virtual wallets, with no source transparency.
- Several influencers disclosed paid partnership, used campaign hashtags, and admitted to receiving scripts.



Consistency and Coordination



Breach of election laws and non-compliance with rules imposed by the National Electoral Authority.

The candidate, CG, declared "zero funding," which conflicts with leaked invoices and disclosures from the Supreme Council for National Defence (CSAT).

FINANCIAL LINKS

- CSAT revealed **\$381,000** in payments made through **Fame Up** between **October and November 2024**.
- Funders included **Bogdan Peschir** and **FA Agency** (of South African origin), with links to **interlope clans**. Other potential connections to **paramilitary groups** are currently under investigation.

National Liberal Party's (PNL) INVOLVEMENT

- Kensington Communication admitted to funding the campaign on behalf of PNL, resulting in the misuse of public taxpayer money for private political promotion.

TIK TOK'S ROLE

- Denied allowing paid political content but confirmed processing paid invoices during the electoral period.



Bots Activity Analysis

So did he had bots or...?

25,000

automated accounts

767

Created from 2016-> became active in the election period

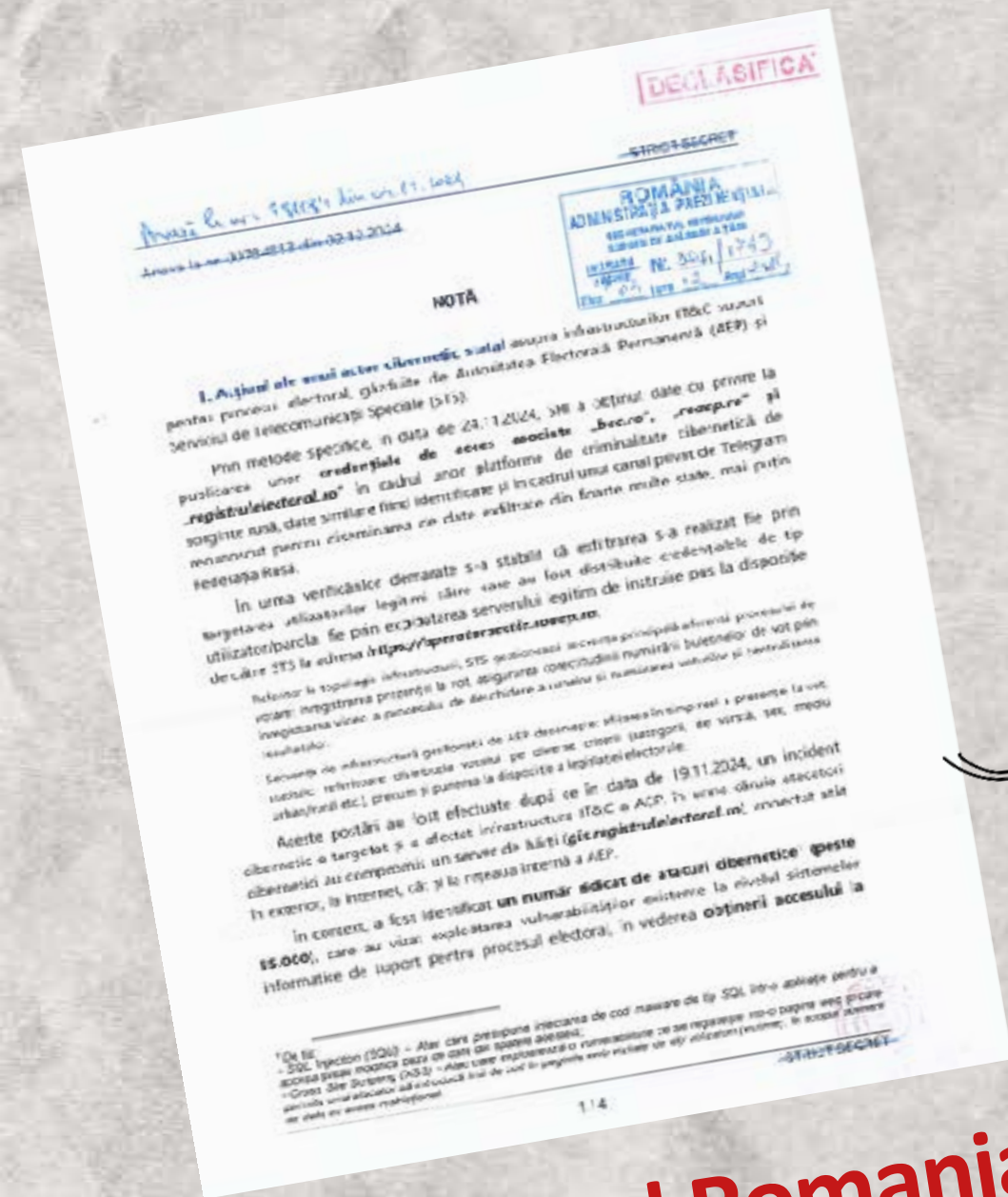
Declassified Romanian
Secret Service's report

#calingeorgescu

100 mil views in one day

Sept 7- Dec 6

over 700 million views

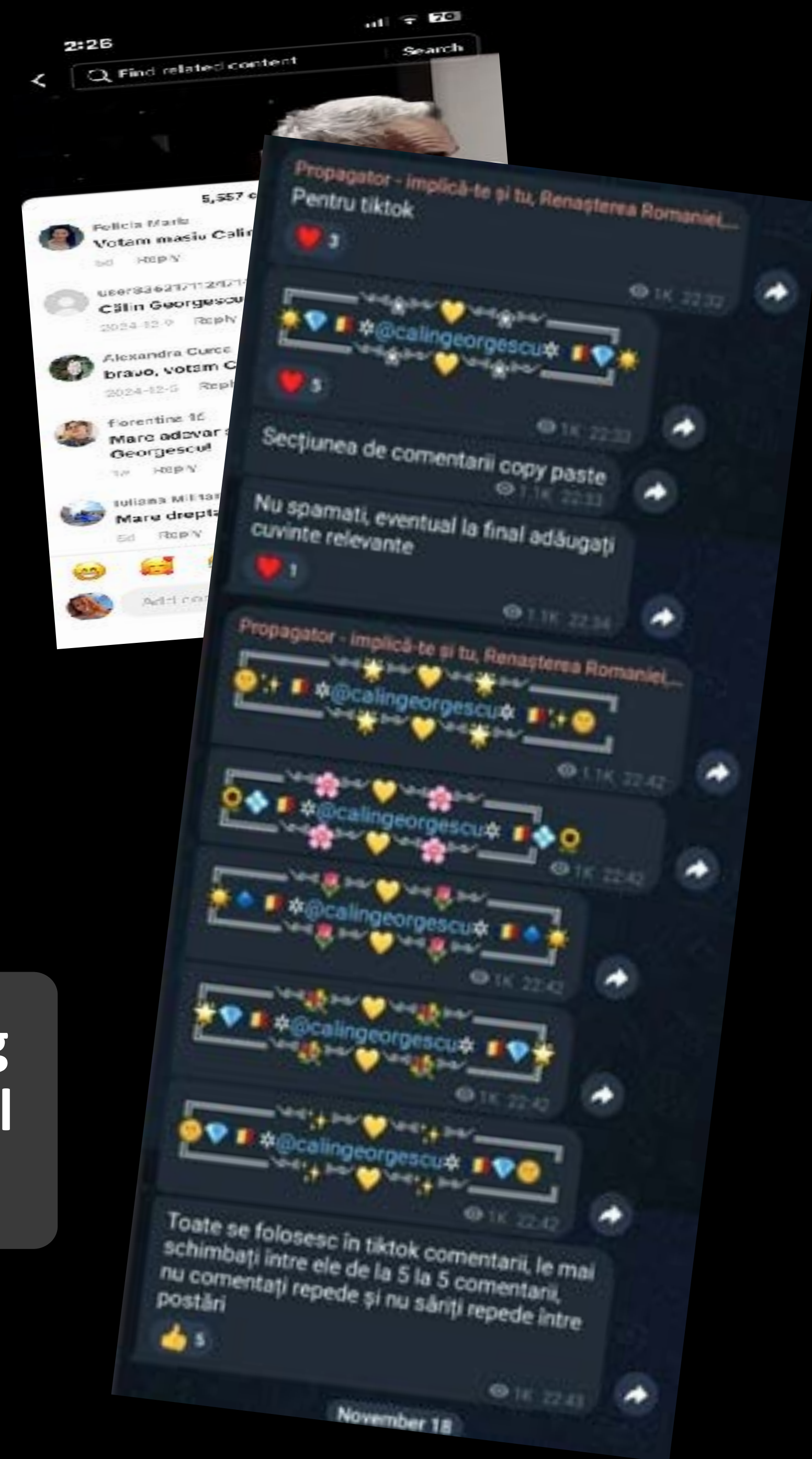


Several indicators of bot-like behavior and automated account activity can be observed in his campaign.

Reports suggest that thousands of fake accounts promoted Georgescu through videos and comments prior to Romania's election-> repetitive comments and messages were used across various platforms

After the appearance of the Telegram group -> 76 new accounts on TikTok pro-CG, spreading propaganda

83 accounts posted these type of comments -> leaving 2912 comments on videos (23% of them on his official page)



Visibility & message dissemination at scale



Calin Georgescu can gain “organically” 4 mil views over night on a new account.

A 4 mill views video posted after the formal proceedings of the Commission and the retention order issued for TikTok

A system is created where bots make space for real people, drawn in by a "viral" video.

From fake traffic organic traffic is generated.



Temporary Email Creation -> Bypass phone number verification for automated TikTok account creation.

Username Generation:->Scripts combine first and last names from online sources (e.g., Wikipedia).

Captcha Bypass ->Scripts solve Captcha challenges, enabling account creation.

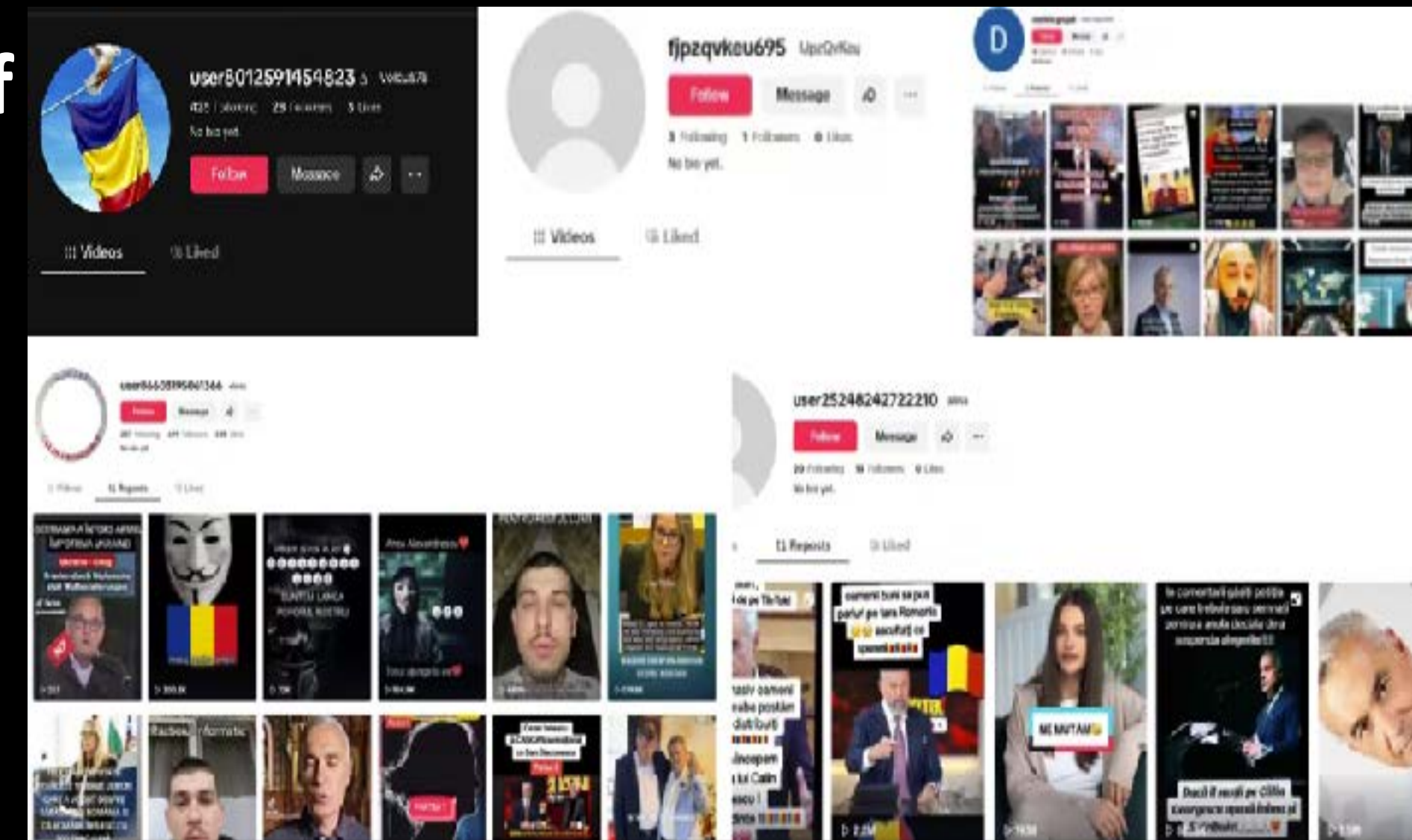
Web Scraping ->Identifies relevant videos using keywords and uploads them to Telegram.

Automated Reposting ->Videos reposted on fake accounts to boost visibility and viral potential.

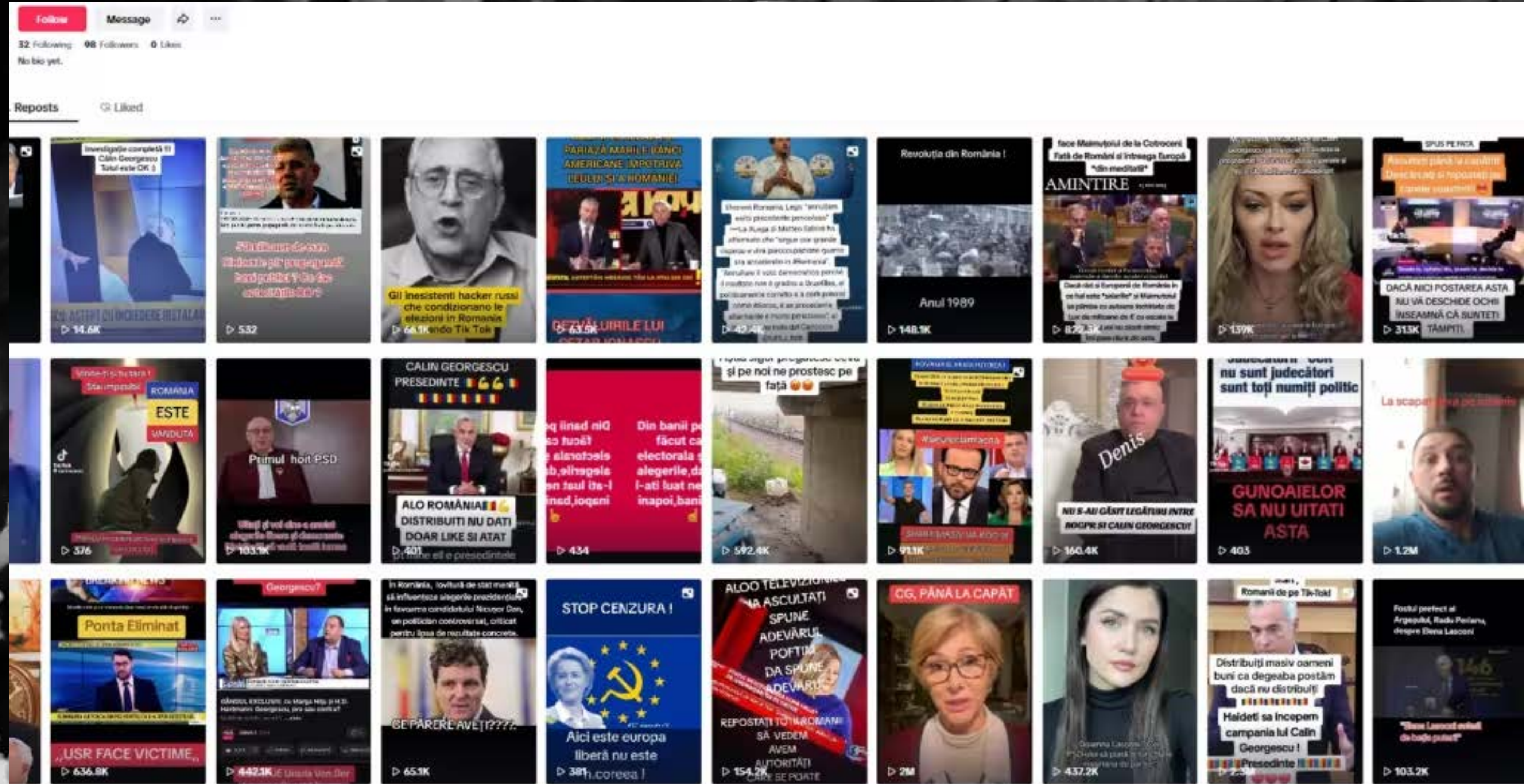
Viral Status ->Videos accumulate millions of views using automated strategies.

Automated Engagement -> Comments and likes are generated from pre-created files or databases.

Fake Account Indicators -> Accounts with no likes but large view counts, manipulating TikTok's algorithm.



BOT ACTIVITY ANALYSIS



An account with 0 likes (top corner), but with dozens of reposts of videos praising CG and criticizing his opponents, the EU, or the Constitutional Court.

Exploiting Loopholes

- Bot activity amplifying content.
- Undisclosed influencer collaborations blurred the lines between organic support and paid promotion.
- TikTok bypassed spending limits imposed on TV/print media.
- Regulatory oversight required for digital elections.



**REGULATIONS NEEDED FOR
FAIR POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS**



! Must watch !



Marea breșă a TikTok

Cât de ușor poate un candidat să
obțină 1 milion de vizualizări

Experiment Recorder

7:10

1 hour = 1 million views

Source: Recorder.ro

CG on Telegram: Case Study

Coordination between TikTok & Telegram = mass-propaganda

 **Telegram Group founded in June 2024**
with a coordinated effort to dominate social media

Over 2,000 images and videos have been distributed to its members for simultaneous sharing across all social media platforms



Revealed clear patterns on how content was initially shared on Telegram, edited, and then disseminated on TikTok

 Main instructions repeatedly emphasized by the group's moderator was for each user to edit or personalize the content

Constant cycle of content creation and sharing -> visible on all platforms

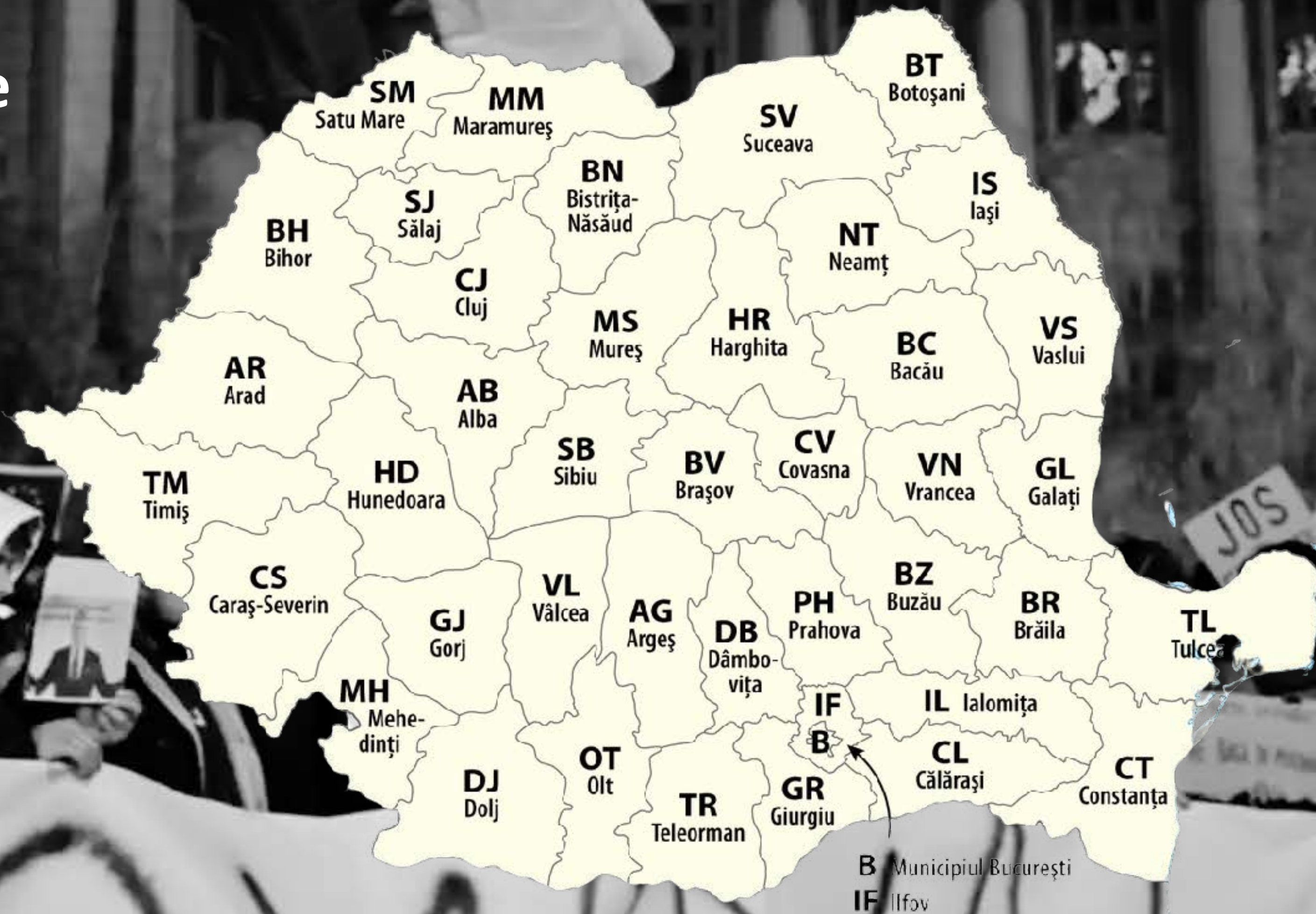
Helped to sustain engagement throughout the election period & before



Support for Calin Georgescu on Telegram

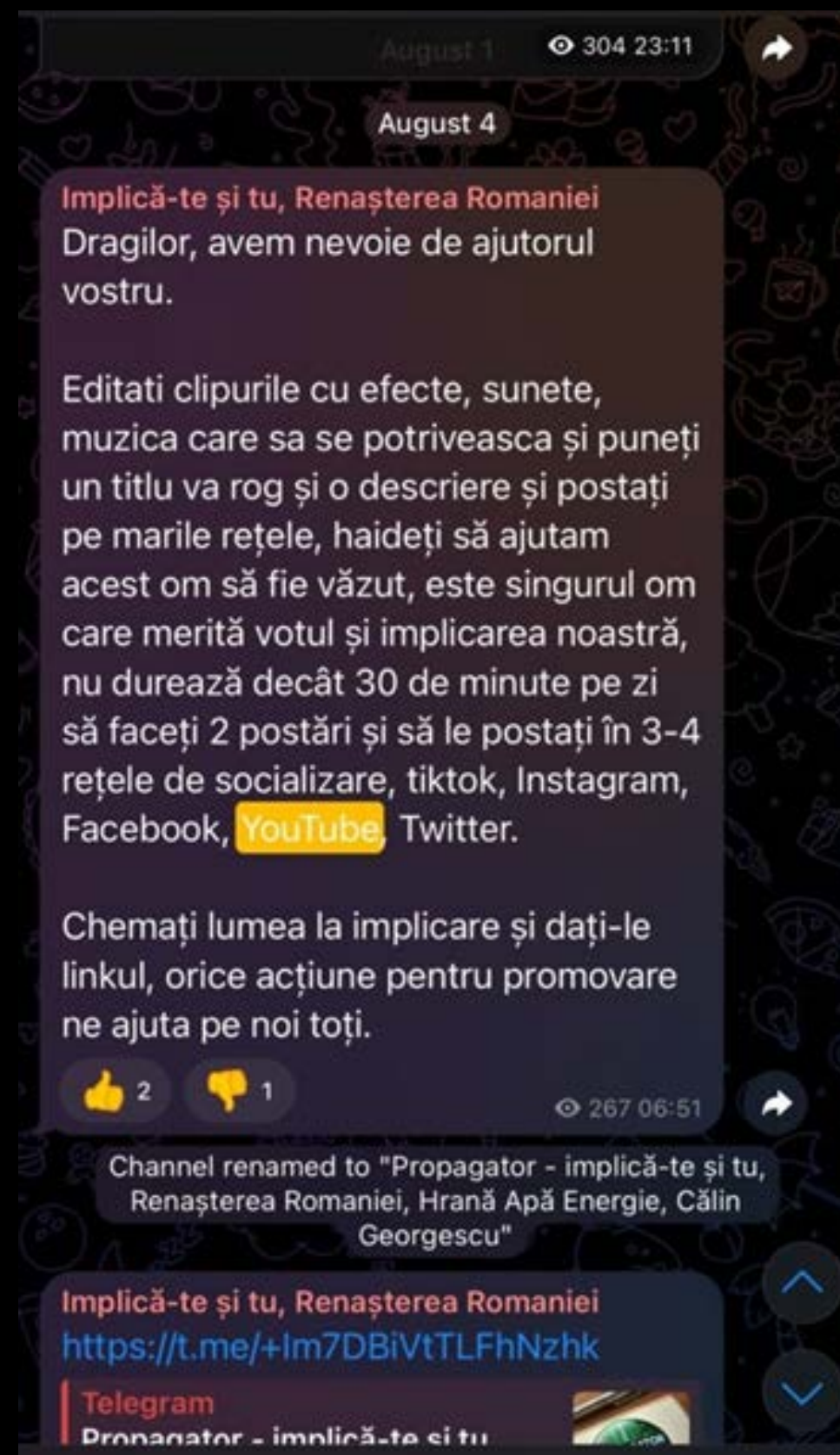
Coordination between TikTok & Telegram

Every county from Romania had a specific group that pushed members to join & be active



Cross-platforms support for Calin Georgescu

The mobilization was aimed at all social media platforms



Users being encouraged that the task would take no more than "30 minutes a day."

Receive almost weekly starting in June, to be shared after being edited and personalized by each user.

Explicit Tutorials on how to edit, save posts, add personalization features

Emotional Messaging & Targeted Outreach: High level of interaction, with supporters actively participating in spreading the campaign's messages.

Calin Georgescu's Telegram

The mobilization was aimed at all social media platforms



Pre-elections

Telegram group was primarily focused on disseminating content that portrayed Georgescu in a positive light

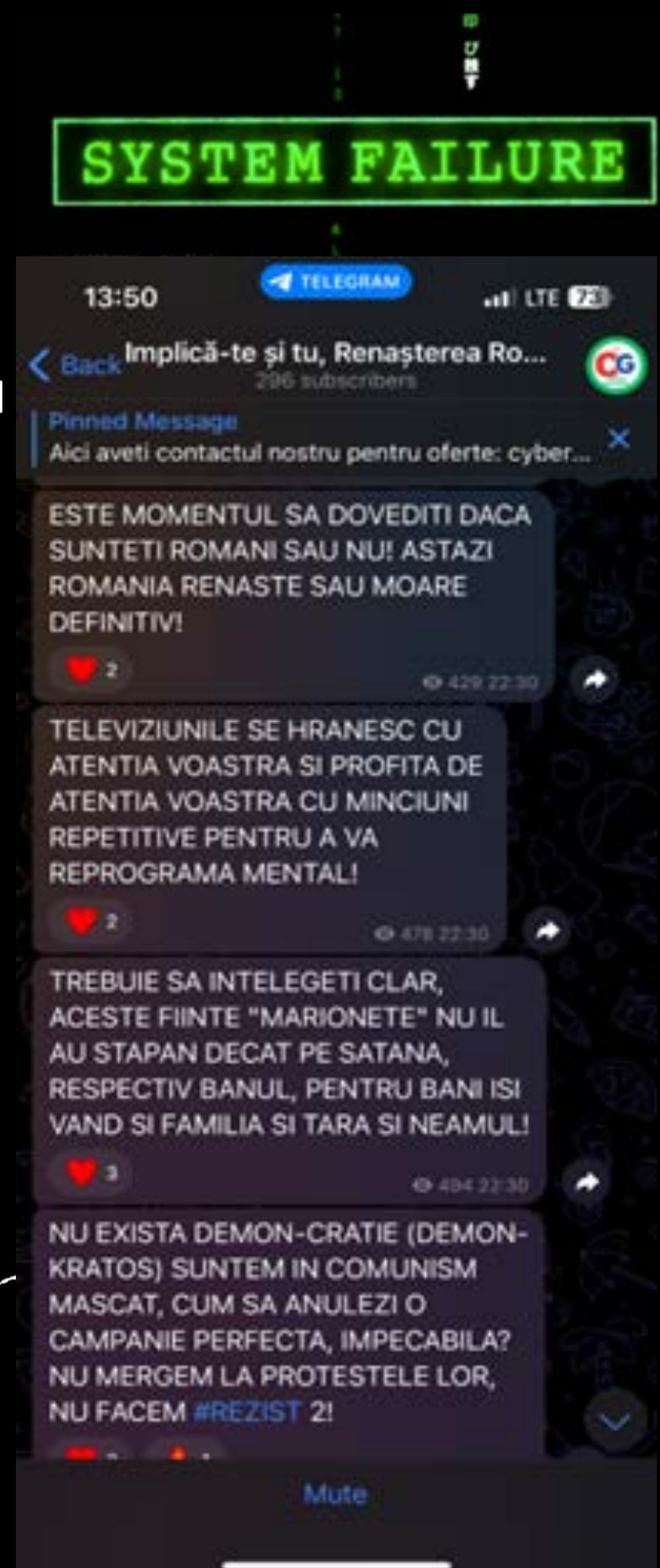
Strategically addressing national concerns and anxieties

After cancelling the elections

SRI: Telegram group constituted a form of vote manipulation, facilitated by the permissive algorithms of the TikTok application

"CG 11 – Exit from the Matrix," alongside the phrase "System Failure,"

Deleted on 6th of December



Near the elections -> mass-mobilization move
"Romania is waking up, it's the time"
"Propagate with all your might"

External influence



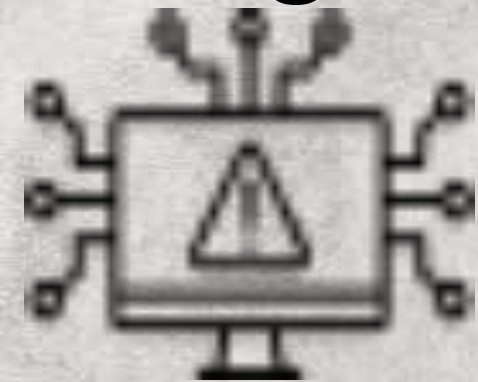
5 declassified documents

MAI, SRI, STS, SIE



Russian Hybrid Operations

Romania targeted by cyberattacks, data leaks, and sabotage aimed at destabilizing the country and influencing elections.



Over **85,000 attacks** detected on Romania's electoral systems, suggesting a state-sponsored actor.



Challenges

Centralized platforms

- Struggle with user privacy, harmful content amplification, and limited transparency
- Downsized trust and safety teams
- Restricted data access.

Decentralized platforms

- No Single Point of Failure
- More resilient to verification mechanisms and cyberattacks
- Enhanced privacy reduced oversight. Limited enforcement.

Systemic risks

Need for strong regulatory framework to address election interference, i.e. manipulated content, amplification of divisive narratives, troll farms, bot networks, and coordinated campaigns.

Serious lack of management of risks to elections and civic discourse, linked mainly to:

- TikTok recommender system: risks linked to the coordinated inauthentic manipulation or automated exploitation of the service.
- TikTok's policies on political advertisements and paid-for political content. Reports indicate that TikTok's prohibition of paid political advertising was largely ineffective.
- No mitigation of risks posed by specific regional and linguistic aspects (insufficient content moderation) of Romanian elections.
- Limited access to data for independent researchers.

Conclusion

- Social media has **evolutionized the political landscape**, enabling real-time engagement, broader outreach, and the mobilization of politically disengaged voters. BUT...
- Shift from disinformation to FIMI = coordinated efforts by foreign or domestic actors to interfere in democratic processes in a systematic way.
- Lack of transparency on decentralized platforms like Telegram and TikTok = urgent need for more **accountability** in digital political campaigns.
- Monitor and address interference through Rapid Response Mechanisms, apply regulations under DSA, and use Code of Conduct on Disinformation as a benchmark for platform accountability.

Sources

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+ More available by request

THANK YOU
Questions & Discussion

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