



BFMI and Sensika's

'TikTokcracy'

Tracker:

Live monitoring of algorithmic
manipulation in Southeastern Europe
2026 Bulgarian elections



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Executive Summary

Digital manipulation is no longer an exceptional event in European elections. It is a recurring feature with documented precedents in Romania, Moldova, and beyond. What varies is the speed and coherence of the institutional response. With Hungary, Slovenia, and Bulgaria all voting within weeks of one another, Europe's spring electoral calendar presents both an opportunity for coordinated institutional vigilance and a risk that attention and resources will be stretched too thin to be effective.

This tracker is part of BFMI's ongoing effort to close the gap between the identification of manipulation and the institutional response to it. It builds directly on [Tackling TikTokcracy in the Balkans: A Blueprint for Fighting Algorithmic Manipulation in Europe](#), produced in partnership with Sensika and presented at the European Parliament in late autumn last year. The report mapped the tactics and infrastructure of algorithmic manipulation across the region, identified Bulgaria as a persistently high-risk environment, and flagged specific dormant networks that had not yet been activated.

The first edition of the current tracker covers the period up to 17 March 2026, with the Bulgarian parliamentary elections scheduled for 19 April. Its central finding is that Bulgaria's information environment is already being manipulated at scale, that the manipulation is sophisticated enough to be difficult to distinguish from genuine public sentiment, and that neither the platforms carrying it nor the authorities responsible for regulating it have yet responded in any meaningful way. That combination of active interference, legal obligations unmet, and institutions yet to act is what this tracker exists to document and to challenge.



Main Findings

- ▶ On social media, former president Rumen Radev has already won the election. The surge in pro-Radev content across Facebook and TikTok far outpaces every other political force in the country, with Boyko Borissov's GERB a distant second. How much of this activity reflects genuine public support, and how much has been engineered through fake accounts, repurposed pages, and coordinated posting designed to simulate grassroots momentum, remains the central and as yet unanswered question of this campaign.
- ▶ What is not in question is that dormant networks inside Bulgaria's information environment are now active. Data from BFMI's partner Sensika identifies at least three operational tactics: seed boosting through purchased pages, coordinated and inauthentic behaviour across platforms, and the systematic hijacking of opponents' hashtags. Disinformation from clickbait websites circulates through the same channels, extending the threat beyond electoral integrity into broader information security. Several of these tactics appear to breach both platform terms of service and European law. What enforcement would look like in practice, and who is responsible for it, is addressed in the recommendations section of this report.
- ▶ The evidence presented here underscores that Europe's current defences are inadequate to the threat. The window for intervention before 19 April is narrow and closing. A credible institutional response would serve both the integrity of the result and Bulgaria's standing as a participant in the EU's broader effort to defend its democratic processes.

What's at stake

Bulgaria enters its eight elections in five years against a backdrop that is unusually conducive to manipulative political communication. The anti-corruption protests of 2025 toppled a government without resolving the grievances behind it. The transition to the euro at the start of 2026 has added fresh economic anxiety, leaving Bulgarian voters in an unusually volatile state. Years of revolving-door governments have hollowed out institutional trust and left political parties without the credibility or organisational depth to compete on equal terms in an information environment shaped by algorithms. Into that vacuum, fear-based content thrives. Russia's war in Ukraine, now entering its fifth year, and fresh conflict in the Middle East provide a near-inexhaustible supply of material that platforms are structurally inclined to amplify.

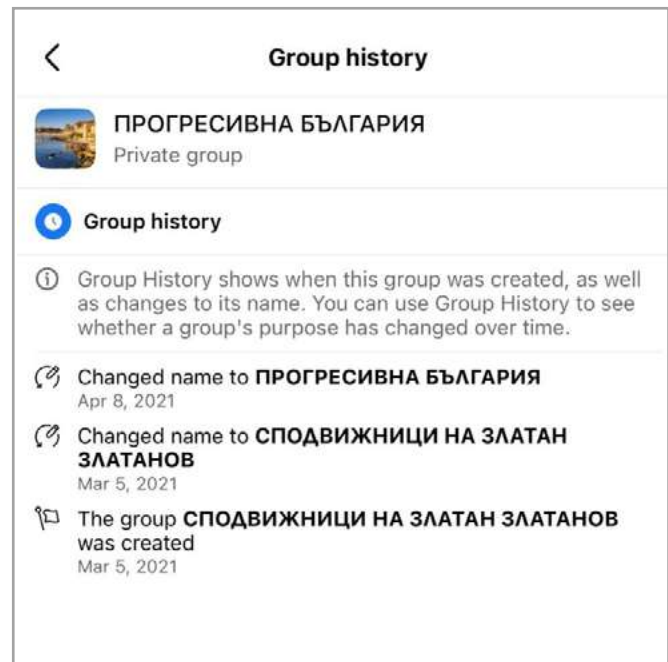
Bulgaria is not alone in facing consequential elections this spring. Hungary votes on 12 April, one week before Bulgaria, and Slovenia is similarly in play. The EU has already activated its Digital Services Act Rapid Response System ahead of the Hungarian vote, at Hungary's request. Slovenia has sought equivalent assistance. Bulgaria has not. As of 16 March, the Foreign Minister indicated she would raise the question of requesting European Commission support with the government, but no formal request had been made. That hesitation carries a cost. Bulgaria is arguably the least institutionally prepared EU member state to manage the threats that digital manipulation now poses to democratic legitimacy, and the time before polling day is short.

What we found

Radev himself maintains only his official presidential Facebook page. His coalition-party, **Progressive Bulgaria**, launched an official Facebook page on 4 March and an official TikTok account just six days before the publication of this report. These are nascent presences. The vast infrastructure operating on his behalf has been built almost entirely from unofficial fan pages, political pundits, and activist accounts. That makes direct attribution impossible on publicly available data alone. The networks promoting Radev may be connected to his campaign, or they may represent independent actors capitalising on his political moment. Both possibilities are consistent with the evidence. What the data establishes unambiguously is that his campaign is the principal beneficiary, and that the advantage it has accumulated is too substantial for any rival to close through organic means alone.

On Facebook, analysis of the thirty largest pro-Radev groups reveals over 1.3 million memberships, representing an estimated **400,000 to 600,000** unique users. Since only the largest groups were examined, the true figure is certainly higher. **Some groups are growing by four to six thousand members per week and publishing between seventy and one hundred and thirty posts per day.** GERB's thirty largest groups similarly exceed 400,000 to 500,000 unique users in membership, again a floor rather than a ceiling, but the network grows at a fraction of the pace and reaches roughly half the scale of Radev's.

The disparity is sharper on TikTok. The hashtag #rumenradev has accumulated 90.4 million views across 2,700 videos, growing at over sixty times the rate of #gerb and twenty times that of #vazrazhdane, the hashtag associated with the far-right Revival party. Radev-linked hashtags are the only political hashtags showing sustained momentum: a 326 per cent increase in views and 369 per cent growth in video output over two months. No other political actor comes close. With the campaign's most intensive



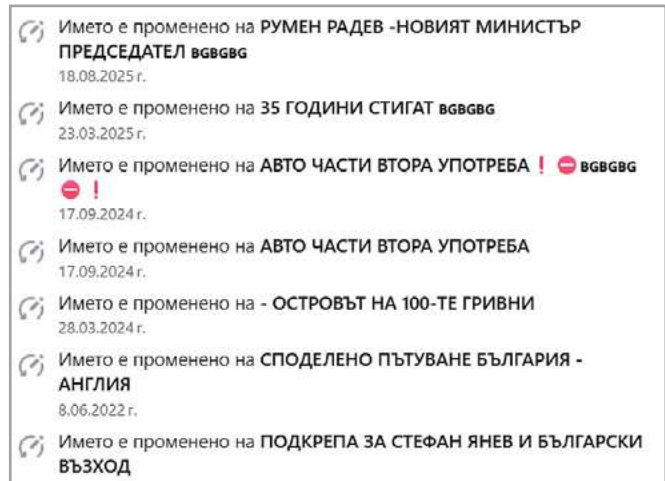
period still ahead, the structural advantage these networks have built will not be reversed by organic activity alone.

The parallel deployment of both platforms appears deliberate and effective. By end-2025, Facebook reached 65 per cent of Bulgarian adults, making it a near-universal channel for political communication among older voters. TikTok's reach is now considerably broader than its reputation as a platform for the young suggests. According to figures published in TikTok's own advertising resources and reported by DataReportal, TikTok had 2.63 million users aged eighteen and over in Bulgaria at end-2025, reaching 47.6 per cent of all Bulgarian adults in that age group. It is also the fastest-growing platform in the country, with a 21.4 per cent increase in users within a single year. Together, these two platforms are now the primary arena in which this election is being contested. The networks promoting Radev operate across both simultaneously, with a coherence that official party campaigns have not matched.

Sensika's data identifies three distinct tactics through which that reach is being artificially extended.

The first is seed boosting through purchased pages.

A number of Facebook pages with no prior political history were converted into pro-Radev properties within a short period. One documented example is a **second-hand car parts account renamed "Rumen Radev — New Prime Minister."** Acquiring pages with existing audiences, even modest ones, generates initial engagement that triggers broader algorithmic distribution. The same mechanism appears to be operating on TikTok, where a small number of unofficial accounts have accumulated hundreds of thousands of views within weeks of creation.



The second is coordinated and inauthentic

behaviour. On Facebook, clusters of profiles administering multiple pages and groups simultaneously have been identified, the majority tied to Radev-related content. Week-on-week membership growth is consistent with either coordinated recruitment or automated inflation. Across both TikTok and Facebook, very high view counts combined with negligible engagement rates, the repetition of identical slogans and visuals, sudden unexplained spikes in reach, and the presence of hollowed-out accounts all point to systematic rather than organic amplification. GERB is not absent from this picture. The media portal dniplovdiv.bg appears to play a coordinating function for Borissov-aligned content, which suggests inauthentic amplification is not exclusive to Radev's networks, even if his are the most extensive.

The third is hashtag hijacking, and it is operating across multiple parties. The PP-DB coalition's primary TikTok hashtag has been so thoroughly flooded with hostile and off-topic content that the coalition has retreated from it, falling back on the personal profiles of its leaders. Those profiles speak primarily to already-committed supporters. The retreat therefore represents not a neutral tactical adjustment but a measurable loss of organic reach among undecided voters.

DPS — New Beginning, the party led by Magnitsky-sanctioned oligarch Delian Peevski, has meanwhile mounted a substantial and coordinated operation to dominate its own corner of TikTok. Alongside one official account, @dps_novo_nachalo, between ten and fifteen accounts bearing Peevski's name have been identified: among them @peevskiforreal, @novo.nachalo, @peevski.daily, @dailydoseofpeevski, @peevskionly, @novonachalozadps, @peevski.tribune, @peevskiexclusive, @peevskichronicle, and @peevskivibesonly. These accounts function as a parallel publishing operation, posting videos of near-identical style and message daily, with the evident purpose of keeping the hashtag #dpsnewbeginning saturated with favourable content. The strategic intent is to manufacture the appearance of momentum through volume and repetition rather than genuine engagement.

That party and candidate hashtags are outperforming the general election hashtag #izbori is itself telling. Reach on TikTok flows to those with established or manufactured audiences, not to those making the strongest arguments. Social media has become the decisive electoral terrain precisely because it rewards the former over the latter.

Cutting across all three tactics is the pervasive recycling of disinformation from clickbait and so-called mushroom websites. Many Facebook pages nominally dedicated to Radev function primarily as distribution channels for content from sites with hidden ownership, several of which are established vectors of pro-Russian disinformation. The financing behind this ecosystem remains opaque. There is evidence that pages were purchased ahead of the election, but the scale of that practice and its ultimate source cannot be established from publicly available data alone.

What laws and platform rules are being broken

The tactics documented above do not exist in a regulatory vacuum. They engage a well-established body of platform policy and European law, and both sets of obligations are, on the available evidence, being violated.

Platform terms of service

Both Meta and TikTok explicitly prohibit coordinated inauthentic behaviour. Meta defines this as the use of fake accounts, coordinated activity, or deceptive means to artificially inflate the apparent popularity of content. The purchase and repurposing of Facebook pages for undisclosed political purposes, the operation of clusters of profiles administering multiple pages simultaneously, and the use of hollowed-out accounts to generate artificial engagement all fall squarely within conduct that both platforms' community standards forbid. TikTok additionally prohibits the artificial manipulation of metrics and the use of automation or purchased engagement to distort reach. The hashtag-flooding tactic deployed against PP-DB and the parallel-account saturation operation run on behalf of DPS — New Beginning constitute what TikTok's own policies describe as platform manipulation. These are not borderline cases. They represent the conduct both companies have publicly committed to prevent.

European Law

The Digital Services Act obliges very large online platforms, a designation that covers both Meta and TikTok, to identify and mitigate systemic risks to electoral processes. This obligation has been in force since August 2023 for the largest platforms and since February 2024 across all designated services. The Commission published specific election-integrity guidelines under the DSA in March 2024. It has already demonstrated willingness to act on them, opening formal proceedings against TikTok in December 2024 following the Romanian presidential elections. The Bulgarian evidence is materially similar in character. Beyond the DSA, the EU's Political Advertising Regulation, in force since 2025, requires paid political content to be transparently labelled and targeting techniques to be disclosed. The use of purchased pages and opaque financing networks to distribute political content without disclosure is precisely what this regulation was designed to address. Where content originates from or amplifies foreign state actors, it may additionally engage the EU's hybrid threats framework and Bulgaria's obligations as a NATO member.

Bulgarian National Law

Bulgaria's Electoral Code prohibits anonymous financing for electoral campaigning and requires the disclosure of campaign expenditure. The purchase of social media pages for electoral purposes through deliberately obscured channels raises serious questions of compliance that the Central Electoral Commission should be examining now, not after polling day.



What's ahead?

The current data is a snapshot, not a peak. Analysis of comparable campaigns, including the Georgescu case in Romania, shows that coordinated online activity intensifies significantly in the two to four weeks immediately before polling day. The networks already visible are likely to become more active, better resourced, and harder to monitor as 19 April approaches.

The conversion and purchase of social media pages tends to accelerate as elections near and the premium on existing audiences rises. Hashtag manipulation typically becomes more aggressive as official campaigns intensify. The disinformation flowing through clickbait and mushroom websites tends to become more targeted, shifting from ambient narrative-building towards specific claims designed to suppress turnout or discredit results.

The opaque relationship between these networks and the political figures they promote leaves open the possibility that external actors are exploiting the

election environment without any formal connection to the campaigns themselves. What the data establishes is that dormant networks in Bulgaria's information environment are now active, that they remain in the early stages of what is likely to be an intensifying operation, and that Radev's campaign is their principal beneficiary. GERB benefits secondarily, at least on Facebook. The asymmetry between the two is, at this stage, considerable.

The 2026 campaign may not produce a Romanian-style annulment. But it is generating something arguably more durable: a political landscape in which manufactured consensus and genuine public sentiment have become very difficult to tell apart.

Given the scale and nature of the coordinated digital activity identified in this report, and the serious questions it raises about compliance with both platform policies and European law, immediate action is required from platforms, European institutions, and Bulgarian authorities alike.

Recommendations

Platforms

Social media platforms operating in the EU carry a dual responsibility in electoral contexts. As private companies, they are bound by their own community standards and terms of service, which explicitly prohibit coordinated inauthentic behaviour and the artificial manipulation of reach. As designated Very Large Online Platforms under the Digital Services Act, [Meta](#) and [TikTok](#) are additionally subject to binding legal [obligations](#) to identify and apply, in the Commission's own formulation, "reasonable, proportionate and effective mitigation measures, tailored to the specific systemic risks" of an election. The activity documented in this report engages both sets of responsibilities. Platforms should urgently undertake the following:

- ▶ **Immediate audits** of the accounts, pages, and networks identified in this report are warranted under existing coordinated inauthentic behaviour policies. Pages demonstrably purchased and repurposed for undisclosed political activity meet the threshold for labelling or suspension under current terms of service.
- ▶ **Clusters of profiles** administering multiple political pages simultaneously require investigation for automated or coordinated operation. Hashtags subject to systematic flooding or artificial saturation require enhanced monitoring and, where manipulation is confirmed, remedial action.
- ▶ **The network of accounts** operating on behalf of DPS — New Beginning merits particular scrutiny given the volume, uniformity, and evident coordination of their output.
- ▶ **Dedicated Bulgarian-language election integrity liaisons** and clear public guidance on reporting mechanisms are a minimum standard of electoral preparedness. In the days before 19 April, proactive monitoring of political content in Bulgaria warrants significant intensification. Applying and extending initiatives like Meta's Community Integrity Team and TikTok's Global Elections Integrity Hub are warranted.

The European Commission

A formal enquiry under the Digital Services Act into whether Meta and TikTok are meeting their electoral integrity [obligations](#) in relation to the Bulgarian elections is warranted by the evidence presented. The [precedent](#) established by the Romanian proceedings applies directly. Additional actions include:

- ▶ **Activation of the [Rapid Response System to Bulgaria](#)**, under the Code of Conduct on Disinformation to Bulgaria, enabling the rapid exchange of information between civil society, fact-checking organizations, and online platforms.
- ▶ **Sharing with Bulgarian authorities** the operational lessons from Germany's pre-election platform [stress test](#) of January 2025 represents an immediately actionable step within existing coordination mechanisms.
- ▶ **Where evidence of foreign state involvement** in the disinformation networks is established, treatment as a hybrid threat under the relevant EU [frameworks](#) must follow.

The Bulgarian government and Central Electoral Commission

Bulgaria has no dedicated national legal framework targeting disinformation or algorithmic manipulation, leaving it reliant on EU legislation and ad hoc domestic initiatives that are widely acknowledged to be insufficient. This is not, however, a reason for inaction. The DSA creates clear obligations and access mechanisms that Bulgarian institutions can invoke immediately.

- ▶ A formal request for European Commission support under the DSA framework is a necessary and overdue first step. The Foreign Minister's indication on 16 March that she would raise the matter with the government is not yet a clear action.
- ▶ An investigation by the Central Electoral Commission into the purchase and repurposing of social media pages for undisclosed electoral purposes is warranted by the evidence already in the public domain. Formal engagement by Bulgaria's designated Digital Services Coordinator with Meta, TikTok, and the European Board for Digital Services, with a view to sharing evidence and requesting platform data access under the DSA's researcher and regulator [provisions](#), falls within existing institutional competences and requires only the will to act.



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