

APRIL 2021

DETAILED REPORT

# April 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report

FACEBOOK



We're constantly working to find and stop coordinated campaigns that seek to manipulate public debate across our apps.

## PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

Over the past three and a half years, we've shared our findings about [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#) we detect and remove from our platforms. As part of our regular CIB reports, we're sharing information about all networks we take down over the course of a month to make it easier for people to see progress we're making in one place.

## WHAT IS CIB?

We view CIB as coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal where fake accounts are central to the operation. There are two tiers of these activities that we work to stop: 1) coordinated inauthentic behavior in the context of domestic, non-government campaigns and 2) coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign or government actor.

## COORDINATED INAUTHENTIC BEHAVIOR (CIB)

When we find domestic, non-government campaigns that include groups of accounts and Pages seeking to mislead people about who they are and what they are doing while relying on fake accounts, we remove both inauthentic and authentic accounts, Pages and Groups directly involved in this activity.

## FOREIGN OR GOVERNMENT INTERFERENCE (FGI)

If we find any instances of CIB conducted on behalf of a government entity or by a foreign actor, we apply the broadest enforcement measures including the removal of every on-platform property connected to the operation itself and the people and organizations behind it.

## CONTINUOUS ENFORCEMENT

We monitor for efforts to re-establish a presence on Facebook by networks we previously removed. Using both automated and manual detection, we continuously remove accounts and Pages connected to networks we took down in the past.

## SUMMARY OF APRIL 2021 FINDINGS

Our teams continue to focus on finding and removing deceptive campaigns around the world — whether they are foreign or domestic. In April, we removed nine networks from six countries. The vast majority of them targeted people in their own countries. We have shared information about our findings with industry partners, researchers, law enforcement and policymakers.

We know that influence operations will keep evolving in response to our enforcement, and new deceptive behaviors will emerge. We will continue to refine our enforcement and share our findings publicly. We are making progress rooting out this abuse, but as we've said before — it's an ongoing effort and we're committed to continually improving to stay ahead. That means building better technology, hiring more people and working closely with law enforcement, security experts and other companies.

- **Total number of Facebook accounts removed:** 1,565
- **Total number of Instagram accounts removed:** 141
- **Total number of Pages removed:** 724
- **Total number of Groups removed:** 63

### NETWORKS REMOVED IN APRIL 2021:

1. **Palestine:** We removed 447 Facebook accounts, 256 Pages, 17 Groups, and 54 Instagram accounts from Palestine that targeted primarily Palestine, and to a lesser extent Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, and Qatar. In addition, WhatsApp removed multiple accounts that were part of this activity. We found this activity as part of our internal investigation ahead of the election in Palestine and linked it to Fatah, a political party in Palestine.
2. **Azerbaijan:** We removed 124 Facebook accounts, 15 Pages, six Groups and 30 Instagram accounts from Azerbaijan that targeted primarily Azerbaijan and to a much lesser extent Armenia. We found this network as a result of our internal investigation following routine enforcement against two third-party Android applications — Postegro and Nunu, which misled people into giving away their Instagram credentials. It appears that this activity was separate and unrelated to the same actors' coordinated inauthentic behavior. Our CIB investigation found links to individuals associated with the Defense Ministry of Azerbaijan.
3. **Central African Republic (CAR):** We removed 46 Facebook accounts, 32 Pages, and six Instagram accounts from CAR that targeted domestic audiences in that country. We found this network as part of our internal investigation into suspected coordinated

inauthentic behavior in the region and we linked it to ANA, an NGO in the Central African Republic. This organization and its entities are now banned from Facebook.

4. **Mexico:** We removed 162 Facebook accounts, 11 Pages, and seven Instagram accounts from Mexico that targeted the state of San Luis Potosi in that country. We found this network as part of our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region ahead of the Mexican elections, and we linked it to individuals in San Luis Potosi associated with the political campaigns of Xavier Nava (mayoral candidate) and Octavio Pedroza (gubernatorial candidate).
5. **Mexico:** We removed 44 Facebook accounts, 11 Pages, and one Instagram account from Mexico that targeted the state of Yucatán in Mexico. We found this activity as part of our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region ahead of the Mexican elections, and we linked it to Julián Zacarías (mayor of Progreso) and Sombrero Blanco, a PR firm in Mexico.
6. **Peru:** We removed 80 Facebook accounts and six accounts on Instagram from Peru that targeted domestic audiences in that country. We found this network as part of our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region ahead of the Peru elections, and we linked it to individuals associated with the Fuerza Popular party and individuals employed by Alfagraf, an advertising firm in Peru.
7. **Peru:** We removed 80 Facebook accounts, 12 Pages, five Groups and three Instagram accounts from Peru that targeted the Ancash region in that country. We found this network as part of our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region ahead of the Peru elections, and we linked it to a marketing entity in Ancash, Peru, most recently known as Marketing Politico Elohim.
8. **Ukraine:** We removed 105 Facebook accounts, 24 Pages, and five Instagram accounts that originated in and targeted Ukraine. We began looking into this activity after reviewing public reporting by Bukvy, a news media organization in Ukraine. Our investigation found links to individuals associated with Sluha Narodu, a political party in Ukraine.
9. **Ukraine:** 477 Facebook accounts, 363 Pages, 35 Groups and 29 Instagram accounts that originated in and targeted Ukraine. Based on a tip from the FBI, we began looking into and uncovered this Ukraine-focused activity, which we attributed to entities and individuals [sanctioned](#) by the US Treasury Department — Andriy Derkach, Petro Zhuravel, and Begemot-linked media entities, and also political consultants associated with Volodymyr Groysman and Oleg Kulinich. **(See a detailed analysis of this network's activity at the end of this report, on page 24).**

# 01

We removed 447 Facebook accounts, 256 Pages, 17 Groups, and 54 Instagram accounts for violating our policy against [foreign or government interference](#) — which is [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#) on behalf of a foreign or government actor. In addition, WhatsApp removed multiple accounts that were part of this activity. This network originated in Palestine and targeted primarily Palestine, and to a lesser extent Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, and Qatar.

The people behind this activity used fake accounts — some of which were already detected and disabled by our automated systems — to create elaborate fictitious personas and organizations posing as European and Middle East-based journalists, human rights NGOs and marketing entities. To make these personas appear more authentic, this network created additional accounts pretending to be their family members. These fake personas purported to have authored press articles, attempted to hire media contributors and seed their stories with news organizations in the Middle East. The operation ran across multiple internet services and managed Pages promoting Fatah; criticizing Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran; and posting about the coronavirus pandemic, Palestinian politics and the upcoming election in Palestine. They posted primarily in Arabic and English, and to a lesser extent in Turkish.

We found this activity as part of our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region ahead of the election in Palestine. Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to Fatah, a political party in Palestine.

- *Presence on Facebook and Instagram:* 447 Facebook accounts, 256 Pages, 17 Groups, and 54 Instagram accounts.
- *Followers:* About 1.64 million accounts followed one or more of these Pages, around 3,700 people joined one or more of these Groups, and about 7,300 accounts followed one or more of these Instagram accounts.
- *Advertising:* Around \$336,000 in spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram paid for primarily in Israeli shekels, US dollars and euros.
- *Events:* 2 events were hosted by these Pages. Up to 2,000 people expressed interest in at least one of these events. We cannot confirm whether either of these events actually occurred.

Below is a sample of the content posted by some of these accounts and Pages.



Translation:

Caption: #where\_are\_we\_going And then? Where to?

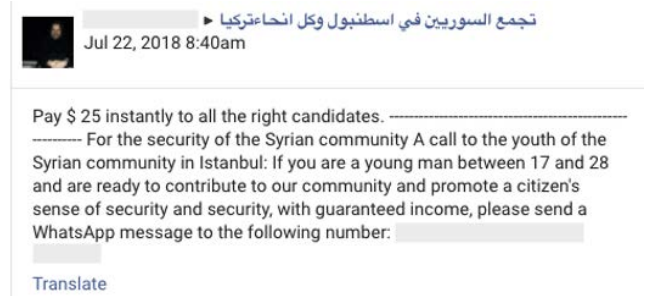
Image overlay: The truth under siege



Translation:

Link

Headline: #where\_are\_we\_going And then? Where to? Headline: Israel-Palestine peace plan: most Arab countries display an awkward silence



# 02

We removed 124 Facebook accounts, 15 Pages, six Groups and 30 Instagram accounts for violating our policy against [foreign or government interference](#) — which is [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#) on behalf of a foreign or government entity. This network originated in Azerbaijan and targeted audiences primarily in Azerbaijan and to a much lesser extent in Armenia.

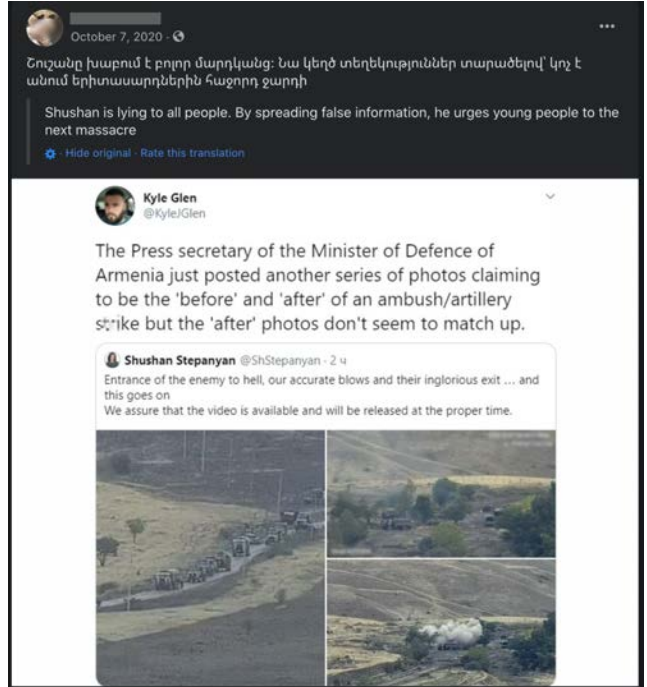
The people behind this activity used fake accounts — many of which had already been detected and disabled by our automated systems — to create fictitious personas, post, comment on their own content, and manage Pages posing as independent news entities. Some of these accounts went through significant name changes over time and engaged in coordinated reporting of users and Pages, including the opposition in Azerbaijan. This network posted in Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Russian about news and current events in the region, including supportive commentary about the Azerbaijani military and criticism of Armenia. Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals associated with the Defense Ministry of Azerbaijan.

We found this CIB network as part of our routine enforcement against two third-party Android applications — Postegro and Nunu, which misled people into giving away their Instagram credentials and were linked to the same individuals behind the CIB. This activity appeared to be separate from the coordinated inauthentic behavior. We took steps to block their infrastructure from reaching our platform and required Instagram users who self-compromised in this way to reset their passwords to help secure their accounts. As always, we strongly encourage people to avoid sharing their credentials with third-party apps. We've also issued a cease and desist letter to the developers behind these apps and requested that Google remove them from their Play Store. Both have now been taken down from Google's app store.

- *Presence on Facebook and Instagram:* 124 Facebook accounts, 15 Pages, 6 Groups and 30 Instagram accounts.
- *Followers:* About 61,000 accounts followed one or more of these Pages, around 45,000 people joined one or more of these Groups, and about 53,000 accounts followed one or more of these Instagram accounts.
- *Advertising:* Less than \$15,500 in spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram paid for in US dollars.



Below is a sample of the content posted by some of these accounts and Pages.





# 03

We removed 46 Facebook accounts, 32 Pages, and six Instagram accounts for violating our policy against [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#). This network originated in the Central African Republic (CAR) and targeted domestic audiences.

The people behind this network engaged in a number of deceptive tactics, including the use of fake accounts to post content, manage Pages posing as news entities and drive people to off-platform websites masquerading as independent pan-African news sites. This network posted primarily in French about news and current events including African politics, Russia's support for CAR, and criticism of France and the peacekeeping efforts by the United Nations.

We found this activity as part of our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region. Although the people behind it attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to ANA, an NGO in the Central African Republic. This organization and its entities are now banned from Facebook.

- *Presence on Facebook and Instagram:* 46 Facebook accounts, 32 Pages, and 6 Instagram accounts.
- *Followers:* About 148,000 accounts followed one or more of these Pages (less than 4% of which were in CAR) and around 1,200 people followed one or more of these Instagram accounts.
- *Advertising:* About \$11,000 in spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram paid for in US dollars and euros.

Below is a sample of the content posted by some of these accounts and Pages.



Translation:

Page name: Africa's Potential

Headline: Central African Republic: The firmness of President Touadera, with a view to bringing peace to the country



Translation

Page name: The Daily of Africa

Caption: Africa: Open letter from the secretary general of the NGO Alternance Africaine, Babacar Gueye to President Emmanuel Macron.

Translation

Page name: The actions of the Central African Government

# 04

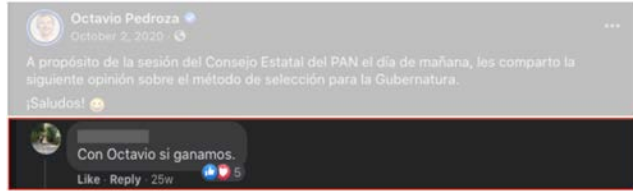
**We removed 162 Facebook accounts, 11 Pages, and seven Instagram accounts for violating our policy against [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#). This network originated in Mexico and targeted the state of San Luis Potosi in Mexico.**

We found two connected clusters of activity that relied on fake accounts — some of which were already detected and disabled by our automated systems — to react to and post comments in Spanish on other people’s content, including by Pages of political candidates and local media. One cluster focused primarily on posting about the mayoral campaign of Xavier Nava. The other cluster focused on the gubernatorial campaign of Octavio Pedroza. Some of these fake accounts also participated in online polls by local media, and criticized political opponents of Nava and Pedroza, particularly the gubernatorial candidate Ricardo Gallardo. The people behind this activity managed Pages posing as independent news Pages and amplified their content to make it appear more popular than it was.

We found this network as part of our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region ahead of the Mexican elections. Although the people behind it attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals in San Luis Potosi associated with the political campaigns of Nava and Pedroza.

- *Presence on Facebook and Instagram:* 162 Facebook accounts, 11 Pages, and 7 Instagram accounts.
- *Followers:* About 45,500 accounts followed one or more of these Pages and around 80 people followed one or more of these Instagram accounts.
- *Advertising:* About \$7,000 in spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram paid for in Mexican peso.

Below is a sample of the content posted by some of these accounts and Pages.



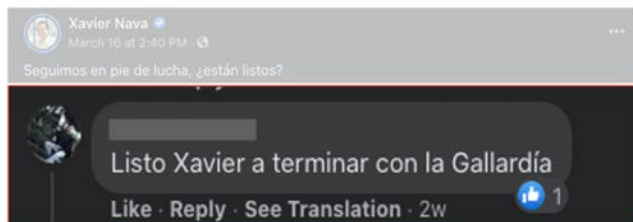
**Translation:**

**Comment by this network's account:** With Octavio we will win



**Translation:**

**Comment by this network's account:** Xavier Nava has done a great job in San Luis Potosí and I'm sure he will continue to do so.. my vote goes to Xavier Nava.



**Translation:**

**Comment by this network's account:** I am ready for Xavier to finish the Gallardos

# 05

We removed 44 Facebook accounts, 11 Pages, and one Instagram account for violating our policy against [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#). This network originated in Mexico and focused on the state of Yucatán in Mexico.

The people behind this activity used newly-created fake accounts to post, comment and manage Pages posing as independent local news entities. They primarily focused on amplifying the re-election campaign of Julián Zacarías, the current mayor of Progreso, and criticized his opponent Lila Frías Castillo. The campaign was early in its operation and had minimal following when we took it down.

We found this activity as part of our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region ahead of the Mexican elections. Although the people behind it attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to Julián Zacarías and Sombrero Blanco, a PR firm in Mexico.

- *Presence on Facebook and Instagram:* 44 Facebook accounts, 11 Pages, and 1 Instagram account.
- *Followers:* Less than 8,000 accounts followed one or more of these Pages and less than 5 people followed this Instagram account.
- *Advertising:* About \$515,000 in spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram paid for in US dollars and Mexican peso. That includes the entirety of historic advertising activity by both inauthentic and authentic accounts removed as part of this network engaged in coordinated inauthentic behavior.

Below is a sample of the content posted by some of these accounts and Pages.



**Translation:**

**Caption:** Lila 'The Copy Paste' Frias. We show you how Lilita raised her voice to be Lord Yulian's promoter, copying his poses and outfits, but it wasn't only the Lord of Progreso that got copied by her. Lila returned to apply copying and pasting with another of her competitors, her former party friend - the dark donkey. Lila, used to make more than 200 thousand pesos per month as director of Progreso tec. Now as a deputy, earns more than 100 thousand a month and can't pay a team to have new ideas.



**Translation:**

**Caption:** This is my neighborhood mayor.

**Image overlay:** The glasses here mean that the progress of Progreso will continue.



LOS PROGRESSEÑOS SIGUEN QUERIENDO A JULIÁN ZACARÍAS Empiezan las encuestas políticas y al parecer los progresseños siguen queriendo al candidato del Partido Acción Nacional, Julián Zacarías Curi y así lo dieron a conocer la empresa Data Talk. Entre el 16 y 17 de abril del 2021 se realizó una encuesta de opinión política en Progreso, Yucatán, la cuál, se aplicó a 500 personas que fueron seleccionadas del Padrón Electoral al 30 abril del 2018 (44,195 personas). El esquema de muestreo utilizado fue sistemático, y el tamaño de la muestra se cálculo con base al parámetro de proporción con un error de estimación menor al 5 % y una confianza del 95 %. Resultando 381 encuestas con resultados válidos y completos.

Translate



Translation:

**Caption:** Citizens of Progreso still want Julián Zacarías. Political polls begin and citizens of Progreso seem to continue to want PAN candidate Julián Zacarías Curi as per Data Talk results. Between April 16 and 17, 2021 a political opinion poll was conducted in Progreso, Yucatán, which interviewed 500 people who were selected from the Padrón Electoral on April 30, (44,195 people). The sampling used was systematic, and the sample size was calculated based on the ratio parameter with an estimated error less than 5% and a 95% confidence. Resulting 381 polls with valid and complete results.



# 06

We removed 80 Facebook accounts and six accounts on Instagram for violating our policy against [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#). This network originated in Peru and targeted domestic audiences in that country.

The people behind this activity used fake accounts — some of which had already been detected and disabled by our automated systems — to post and comment in Spanish on political issues in Peru. They focused primarily on content about political candidates from the Fuerza Popular party, including re-sharing of posts by candidates' official Pages. Some of these accounts also posted criticism of Fuerza Popular's opponents. Once we completed our investigation, we took action in early April, ahead of the Peru election.

We found this network as part of our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region ahead of the Peru elections. Although the people behind it attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals associated with the Fuerza Popular party and individuals employed by Alfagraf, an advertising firm in Peru.

- *Presence on Facebook and Instagram:* 80 Facebook accounts and 6 accounts on Instagram.
- *Followers:* About 800 accounts followed one or more of these Instagram accounts.
- *Advertising:* About \$3,000 in spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram paid for in Peruvian sol.

Below is a sample of the content posted by some of these accounts and Pages.

▶ VAMOS KEIKO PRESIDENTA 2021  
Apr 5, 2021 7:14pm

**Sergio Vasquez K19**  
Apr 3, 2021 8:56pm

DR. VASQUEZ I El Abogado de Fujimori Este 11 de Abril por la Libertad de Alberto Fujimori, marca la K para Keiko Presidente y Marca la K y escribe el 19 de #FuerzaPopular para congresista. #FujimoriLibertad #Rescate2021 #VotaK19 #FujimoriPresidente #k19



¡Fujimori Libertad! - K19 DR. SEGUNDO SERGIO VASQUEZ ALBERTO FUJIMORI ABOGADO DE KK19 19

▶ CIENEGUILLA CITY ▼  
Apr 7, 2021 12:36pm



▶ CIENEGUILLA CITY ▼  
Apr 7, 2021 12:36pm



### Translation

**Caption:** DR. VASQUEZ I Fujimori Lawyer This April 11th for Alberto Fujimori Freedom, marks the K for Keiko President and marks the K and writes the 19 of #PopularFuerza for Congressman. #FujimoriLibertad #Rescue2021 #VoteK19 #FuJimoriPresidente #k19

# 07

We removed 80 Facebook accounts, 12 Pages, five Groups and three Instagram accounts for violating our policy against [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#). This network originated in Peru and focused on the Ancash region of Peru.

The people behind this activity used compromised and fake accounts — some of which were already detected and disabled by our automated systems — to post content and manage Pages posing as independent local news entities. Some of these accounts appeared to have been purchased and went through significant name changes over time. They posted in Spanish, primarily focusing on politics in the Ancash region of Peru, local infrastructure projects, corruption, and congressional races including the campaigns of Victor Olortiga, Walter Vazquez, and Darwin Espinosa Vargas. This network also shared content criticizing the current governor and his administration. Once we completed our investigation, we took action in early April, ahead of the Peru election.

We found this activity as part of our internal investigation into suspected coordinated inauthentic behavior in the region. Although the people behind it attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to a marketing entity in Ancash, Peru, most recently known as Marketing Politico Elohim.

- *Presence on Facebook and Instagram:* 80 Facebook accounts, 12 Pages, 5 Groups, and 3 Instagram accounts.
- *Followers:* Around 46,000 accounts followed one or more of these Pages, less than 4,000 accounts joined one or more of these Groups, and around 600 people followed one or more of these Instagram accounts.
- *Advertising:* Around \$2,200 in spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram paid for in Mexican peso.

Below is a sample of the content posted by some of these Pages and accounts.



### Translation

**Caption:** Chimbote (*city in Ancash*) candidate for the Andean Parliament for party Avanza País with number 13, Manuel Gasco, achieves great acceptance in Lima next to presidential candidate Hernando de Soto.

**Image overlay:** Hernando de Soto for President. Manuel Gasco for the Andean Parliament. For a responsible vote. Avanza Pais party for social integration.



### Translation

**Caption:** Once again, Vladimir Meza is funding corrupt candidates, and involving them with his criminal group "Maicito" (Little Maize).

**Image overlay:** "If I don't win the campaign for congress, next year I will be a candidate for regional government. Vladimir promised it to me." Independent Regional Movement "Maicito" (little maize)

### Translation

Victor Guzmán Bravo ▶ Empleos Chimbote  
Mar 10, 2021 2:39pm

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Victor Olortiga al Congreso  
Mar 10, 2021 6:27am · 🌐

👤👤👤 Es muy preocupante el nivel de contaminación que está afectando a muchas vidas, lamentable la falta de empatía por parte de las autoridades. Tenemos que legislar adecuadamente, pensando más en la vida y la conservación de la misma.  
#FamiliasSeguras

Translate

**Caption:** The level of pollution is concerning and is affecting many lives. The lack of empathy on the side of authorities is regrettable. We need to legislate adequately, thinking more about life and its conservation. #SafeFamilies

**Image overlay:** Victor Olortiga for Congress. Mark the Morado party. Pick candidate number 3.

# 08

We removed 105 Facebook accounts, 24 Pages, and five Instagram accounts for violating our policy against [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#). This network originated in and targeted Ukraine.

The people behind this network used a combination of authentic and fake accounts — some of which had already been detected and disabled by our automated systems — to post, manage Pages posing as independent news Pages, and drive people to off-platform websites masquerading as news entities. Some of these accounts went through significant name changes over time. They frequently shared posts from legitimate news organizations in Ukraine, in addition to posting their own content. This network unpublished and deleted many of its Pages and accounts in February 2021 when some of this activity was reported on by Ukrainian journalists. This campaign had limited following when we removed it.

The people behind this activity posted in Ukrainian and Russian about news and other topics like corruption; politics; automotive industry; satiric content about covid-19; supportive commentary about the Sluha Narodu party and the current Ukrainian government; and criticism of opposition parties and politicians including former president Poroshenko and the mayor of Kyiv, Vitali Klitschko.

We began looking into this activity after reviewing public reporting by Bukvy, a news media organization in Ukraine. Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals associated with Sluha Narodu, a political party in Ukraine.

- *Presence on Facebook and Instagram:* 105 Facebook accounts, 24 Pages, and 5 accounts on Instagram.
- *Followers:* About 23,000 accounts followed one or more of these Pages and around 1,500 people followed one or more of these Instagram accounts.
- *Advertising:* About \$210,000 in spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram paid for primarily in US dollars.



Below is a sample of the content posted by some of these Pages and accounts.

Про головне  
Nov 27, 2020 12:54pm · 🌐

Про реформування вищої юридичної освіти В Україні сотні вишів видають тисячі дипломів юриста. Але далеко не всі випускники є дійсно фахівцями з права. Як змінити ситуацію, розповідає народна депутатка від «Слуги Народу» Юлія Гришина, голова підкомітету вищої освіти Комітету Верховної Ради з питань освіти, науки та інновацій.

Translate



SLUGA-NARODU.COM

Юлія Гришина про реформування вищої юридичної освіти | Політична партія «Слуга Народу»

Політична Божевільня  
Feb 3, 2021 9:25am · 🌐



OCR Extracted Text

коли попросили винести смеття І ти винс канали медве дчука

Translate

👍 41

## Translation

**Page name:** About Major Things

**Caption:** On reforming higher legal education. In Ukraine, hundreds of universities issue thousands of law degrees. But not all graduates are truly professionals in the legal field. Yuliia Hryshyna, lawmaker from the Servant of the People party and the Head of the Higher Education Subcommittee of the parliament committee on education, science and innovation, talks on how to change the situation.

## Translation

**Page name:** Political Madhouse

**Image overlay:** When they asked you to take out garbage, and you took out Medvedchuk TV channels





Геть політику  
January 9, 2019 · 🌐



#жарти очами невидющих



👍 🤔 😬 9

### Translation

Page name: Down with Politics

Caption: #jokes through the eyes of the blind

# 9

## IN DEPTH ANALYSIS

### CROSS-PLATFORM POLITICAL INFLUENCE FOR HIRE IN UKRAINE

*By Ben Nimmo, Global IO Threat Intelligence Lead and the IO Threat Intelligence Team*

#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Last month, we took down a network operated from Ukraine which targeted people in its own country for violating our policy against [coordinated inauthentic behavior](#) (CIB). Our investigation found links to individuals and entities [sanctioned](#) by the U.S. Department of Treasury — Andrii Derkach, Petro Zhuravel, and Begemot-linked media, and also political consultants associated with Ukrainian politicians Volodymyr Groysman and Oleg Kulinich. We removed Derkach’s accounts in October 2020 and began our investigation into this Ukraine-focused activity soon after, based on a tip from the FBI.

While Derkach and others were sanctioned for election interference in the United States, this activity was solely focused on Ukraine. We assess this network to be run by at least three separate teams of operators — each connected to a different politician: Derkach, Groysman and Kulinich.

The individuals behind this activity managed a long-running deceptive influence operation (IO) across multiple social media platforms and their own websites, primarily copying and pasting news content from other Ukrainian news media. They built a ready-made network of seemingly independent media websites and social media assets that worked to promote content favorable to the three politicians and their political groups, while also engaging in similar behavior in support of other political actors across the entire political spectrum, likely for hire. This included competing political parties in Ukraine. The operation posted consistently anti-Russia content.

Notably, Ukraine has been among the top sources of the CIB activity we’ve found and removed from our platform over the past few years, with the vast majority of deceptive campaigns targeting domestic audiences. Many of these operations that we disrupted since 2018 were linked to political parties and commercial entities like PR and ad agencies. From a global trend analysis, this

signals the burgeoning industry of what we call *IO-for-hire* that offers media and social media services involving inauthentic assets and deceptive amplification across the internet.

Another trend worth noting here is that even though Ukraine has been a consistent source of the domestic CIB we remove from our platforms, it also is a home to a growing civil society that includes NGOs and independent investigative journalists who continue to uncover and report on these deceptive campaigns. In fact, our own analyses have often benefited from public reporting and tips from Ukraine. With so much attention on these operations and people behind them, one area of research that would benefit our collective understanding of these threats is: analyzing and measuring the impact of these public disruptions by platforms and civic groups in Ukraine on the commercial actors and their subsequent operations.

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## TAKEDOWN BY THE NUMBERS

- Presence on Facebook and Instagram: 477 Facebook accounts, 363 Pages, 35 Groups and 29 accounts on Instagram.
- Followers: About 2.37 million accounts followed one or more of these Pages, less than 56,000 people joined one or more of these Groups, and about 30,000 people followed these Instagram accounts.
- *Advertising*: About \$496,000 in spending for ads on Facebook and Instagram paid for primarily in US dollars and also in Russian rubles.

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## A COMPLEX INVESTIGATION

We began investigating this network after we received a tip from the FBI about the US-focused activity associated with Derkach. This led to a collection of websites, fake accounts and Pages focused entirely on Ukraine, rather than the United States. As we analyzed the initial patterns of inauthentic behavior, we discovered further connections between the fake accounts and two other operator teams headed by associates of Groysman and Kulinich. This gave the network a distinctive pattern: each team ran its own cluster of fake accounts and Pages, but the clusters were connected through technical signals and on-platform links.

This “network of networks” operated across multiple internet platforms and ran their own websites. We saw corresponding activity on YouTube, Telegram and the Russian network VKontakte. We also saw at least a dozen branded websites, some of which changed their domains repeatedly. For example, according to web archives and publicly available WhoIs

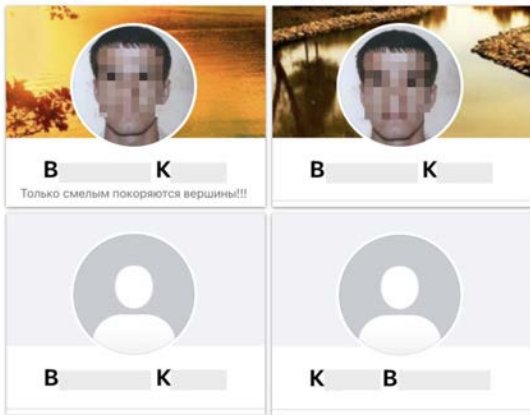
registration records, the “Begemot” brand used the *.media* top-level domain from 2016 until it was sanctioned in January 2021. It also used the *.news* top-level domain from July to September 2017, but then redirected it to another of the operation’s sites, *thickpolicy[.]media*. Public Whois records show that both sites were registered by Zhuravel. After related media entities were sanctioned in January 2021, Begemot shifted to using the *.com* top-level domain, likely in an attempt to evade enforcement.

Throughout its operation, this network took some steps to conceal their identity and coordination. The records for their more recent websites are privacy-protected and obscure the owners’ names. Their fake accounts were set up one by one or in small batches over a period of months, likely to evade automated detection. Some of the accounts had detailed biographies to appear more authentic, while some of their Groups and Pages appeared to have been purchased. When it comes to their profile photos, we noticed a number of patterns. Some appeared to be photos of other people taken from across the internet. Others used female photos likely generated using machine learning techniques like generative adversarial networks (GAN). In an unusual technique, some of the accounts had profile photos that looked like they were created by scanning old-style printed passport photos.



**Image:** A profile picture from one of the accounts in the network, seemingly scanned from a physical passport-style photo. We have blurred the person’s face.

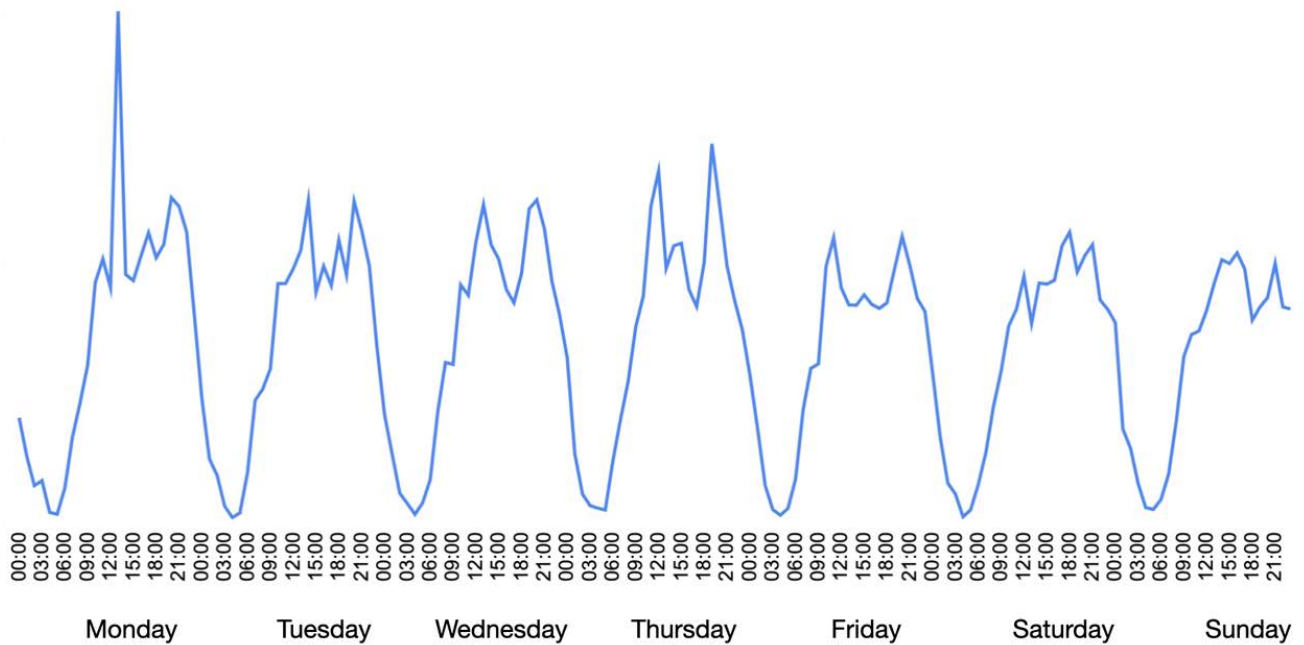
We discovered technical and on-platform connections between the fake accounts and the people who were running them. Some of the same people were also listed as running the operation’s websites. All these overlapping signals allowed us to connect the fake assets to the operators, and the operators to one another.



**Image:** Four of the network’s fake accounts sharing a name. Clockwise from the top left, they were created in April 2020, May 2020, and one day apart in November 2020.

## INFLUENCE FOR HIRE

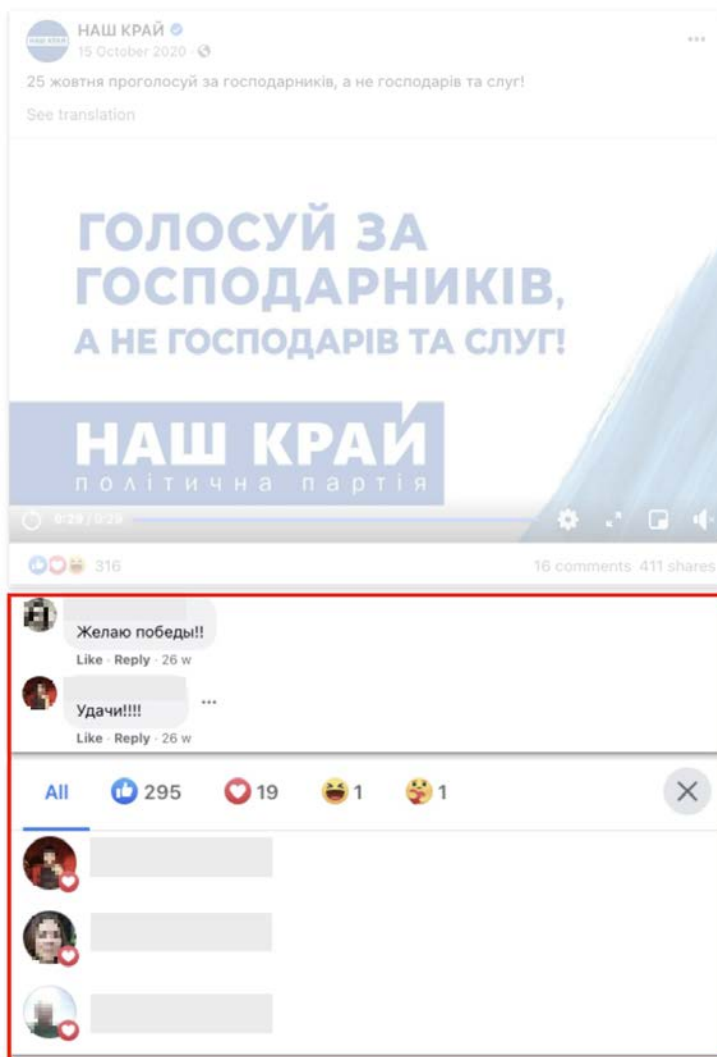
The network looked very similar to how a normal media operation would appear online, minus fake accounts. For example, it posted according to a consistent timetable, seven days a week, and appeared to have singled out “prime time” periods that were different for weekdays, Saturdays and Sundays. During the week, its posting activity spiked around 12-1pm and 8-9 pm, Ukrainian time. On Saturdays, the activity reached a more sustained peak between 5pm and 9pm, while on Sundays the peak was between 2pm and 5pm, with a second, shorter peak at 9pm.



**Graph:** Posting frequency by day of the week, Monday through Sunday, CET.

However, unlike a regular media brand, almost all its content was copied from other legitimate sources — often without accurate attribution. For example, in April 2021, most of the articles on the *thickpolicy[.]media* website had first appeared on Ukrainian news site *focus[.]ua*. Most of the articles on the Begemot site had first appeared on either *gordonua[.]com*, *korrespondent[.]net* or *sensor[.]net*.

The network used its fake accounts to boost its own content and comments about it. For example, the first fake account would post a favorable article about a politician. Others would then make supportive comments, more fakes would like the post, and still more would like the comments. With this behavior, the network acted as inauthentic cheerleaders for the politicians they attempted to promote.



**Image:** Top, an election ad from Derkach’s party Наш край (Our Country), on a Page whose admins included members of the network.

“On October 25, vote for households, not masters and servants!

**Center:** comments on the post made by two fake accounts:

**1st comment:** “Wishing you victory!”

**2nd comment:** “Good luck!”

**Bottom:** three of the network’s fake accounts liking the post.

The fake accounts’ activity on some posts was perfunctory, and consisted of short comments — only two or three words or memes and GIFs without text. For others, the response was lengthier,

with comments from dozens of this network’s accounts, some of them a paragraph or more in length.



**Image:** Post on the page of the Poltava branch of the Dovira group about its leader, Oleg Kulinich with two comments by this network as examples. At least 26 different fake accounts in the network commented on this post.

**Article headline:** “Oleg Kulinich: ‘Dovira’ unites the best”

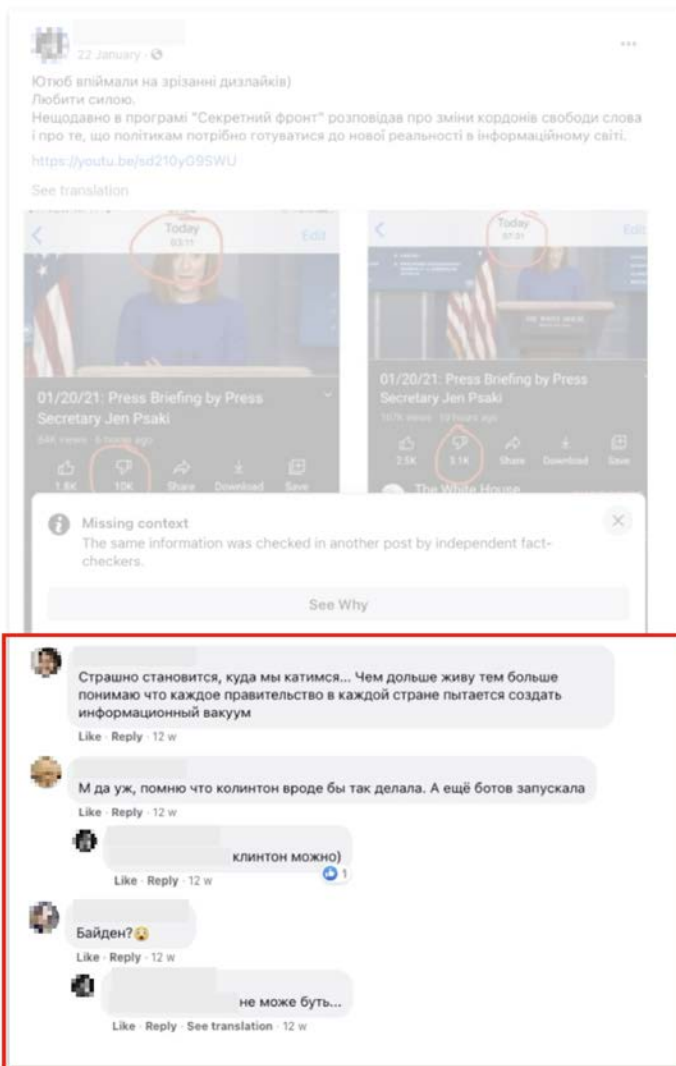
**1st comment:** “This is still a normal option. I wonder how many people will vote for Kolomoisky’s 'For the [expletive] Future' party? They shouted that Poro is an oligarch without a conscience, and now they're campaigning for an even bigger oligarch.”

**2nd comment:** “I support it. New faces have already proven their incompetence. So better to have proven staff.”

On some occasions, the fake accounts and the operators engaged in conversations around the posts. In the below example, one of the main operators shared an article that accused YouTube of reducing the number of dislikes on a White House video in January 2021. Several of this



network’s fake accounts then commented on the post, and the main operator replied to their comments.



**Image:** Top, a post by one of the network’s principal figures.

**Bottom:** comments by fake accounts run by the network, together with further replies from the principal.

**1st comment:** “It’s getting scary the way we’re going... The longer I live the more I understand that every government in every country tries to create an information vacuum.”

**2nd comment:** “M yeah, I remember that Clinton [*sic*] sort of did the same. And used bots too.”

**Reply:** “Clinton could ) ”

**3rd comment:** “Biden?”

**Reply:** “It can’t be...”

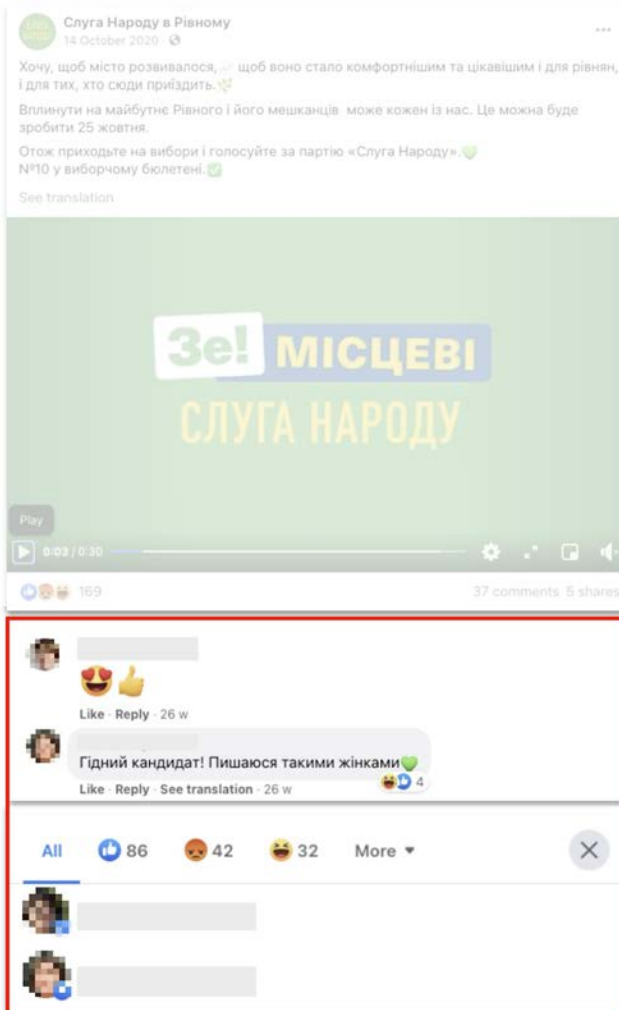
## PLAYING BOTH SIDES

Some of this network’s content supported the politicians and parties with whom the operators were directly associated — Derkach’s Nash Krai Party, Groysman’s Ukrainian Strategy Party, and Kulinich’s Trust (Dovira) group. On other occasions, the network primarily focused on self-promotion of its ready-made pseudo media farm and cross-promoted each other. For example, the website run by the operators associated with Derkach published an article that promoted a Facebook Page run by individuals linked to Groysman. The entire network of these assets routinely posted links to the operation’s websites.



**Image:** One of the network’s political memes about Volodymyr Groysman that appears to have been copied from someplace else.

However, this network’s activity was not limited to supporting these particular politicians only. The operation posted supportive content and comments about a wide range of political actors in Ukraine, across the entire political spectrum, seemingly without much ideological preference. At times, these were competing political groups. It included Viktor Bondar and the Revival Party and the ruling Servant of the People Party. We haven’t seen evidence of connections between people associated with those parties and the deceptive network we took down.



**Image:** A post by a local Page of the “Servant of the People” party. This Page was not run by this operation.

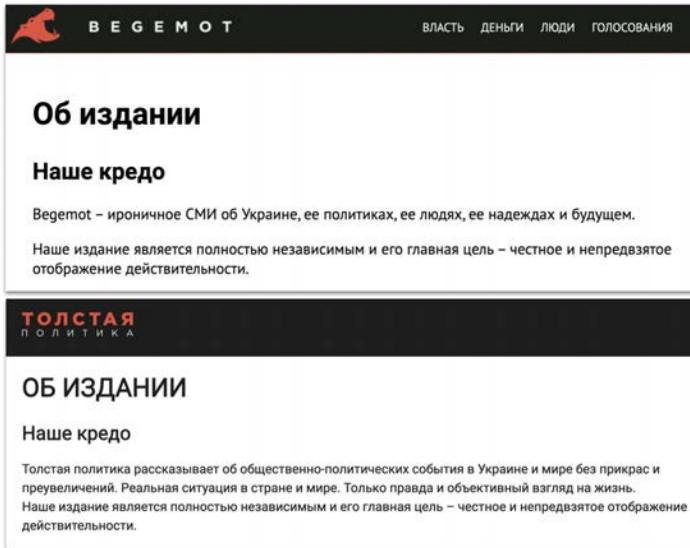
**Center:** fake accounts reply, praising the candidate.

**Comment:** “A worthy candidate! Proud of these women”

**Bottom:** fake accounts liking the same post.

## CONTENT THEMES: UKRAINE, RUSSIA (AND THE UNITED STATES, SOMETIMES)

The network focused solely on audiences in Ukraine, posting in Ukrainian and Russian about Ukrainian politics. Some of the Pages were named for specific regions or cities, including Kyiv, Odessa, Zhytomyr, Lviv, and Ternopil. Their websites and media brands stated that Ukraine was their main focus.



**Image:** The “About us” sections of several of the network’s media brands have identical disclaimers and claim to be “completely independent.”

**Top:** the Begemot brand, calling itself an “ironic media outlet about Ukraine, its politics, people, hopes and future.”

**Bottom:** the Толстая политика (“thick policy/politics”) brand, saying that it reports on “socio-political events in Ukraine.”

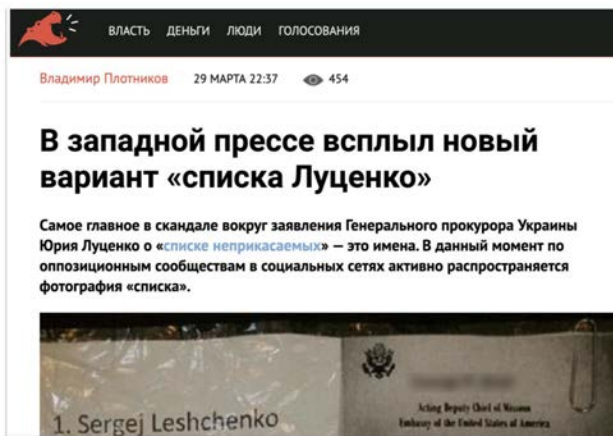
Interestingly, while the U.S. Department of Treasury [identified](#) Derkach as an active Russian agent, this Ukraine-focused operation was consistently anti-Russia in its content, including in early 2021, during Russia’s military buildup near Ukraine’s border. This was not limited to commentary about Russia-Ukraine relations, it also included, for example, posts about a failed missile test by the Russian Navy and the video report alleging corruption by the Russian President. The people behind this network also shared broadly positive content about NATO and Ukraine’s bid for membership. Articles and memes on this topic were primarily copied from elsewhere on the web. We assess this activity was likely designed to appeal to their core Ukrainian audience.



**Image:** Anti-Russian meme posted by the Page Толстая политика on April 19, 2021, originally published by the Daily Telegraph on September 14, 2018.

The network’s coverage of US politics was mostly neutral. It included, for example, copied articles about the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, American sanctions on Russian citizens, and US relations with Russia more broadly.

In an interesting twist, in March 2019, the Begemot website and four different Facebook Pages run by this operation posted an article that claimed to reveal a “secret list” of Ukrainian officials whom the United States had declared “untouchable” by the law. The Begemot article speculated that the publication of the “list” was the result of political maneuvering between Poroshenko and the Trump administration. In fact, at the end of 2019, a team of researchers including the author of this report and others at [Graphika](#) have identified the “list” to be a forgery by a known Russian influence operation dubbed *Secondary Infektion*, which Facebook’s team first found and [exposed](#) in May 2019.



**Image:** Screenshot of an archived version of the Begemot article, showing part of the photo of the alleged “list”.

**Headline:** “New variant of the ‘Lutsenko list’ appeared in the Western press.”

**Text:** “The main thing in the scandal around Prosecutor General Yuriy Lutsenko’s claim about a ‘list of untouchables’ is the names. Now a photo of the ‘list’ is being actively spread around opposition groups on social media.”

We have not identified other cases of the network amplifying disinformation from Russian operations in this way. As noted above, its editorial tone was primarily anti-Russian.

As part of disrupting this operation, we took down their accounts, including authentic assets of the people behind this network, blocked domains associated with their activity and shared our findings with law enforcement, policy-makers, other platforms and with independent researchers so they too can take action if they find violating activity.