



# Graphika

## Postmen, Knocked

Facebook Takes Down Inauthentic  
Network in Ukraine Tied to PR Firm

Graphika Team

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Takedowns

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## Facebook Takes Down Inauthentic Network in Ukraine Tied to PR Firm

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### Introduction

On July 8, 2020, Facebook [took down](#) a network of inauthentic accounts and pages on Facebook and Instagram that it connected to a Ukrainian marketing agency, “Postmen”.

The assets mainly posted about political and social events in Ukraine. They attacked former president Petro Poroshenko’s electoral rivals Volodymyr Zelensky - now the president - and Yulia Tymoshenko, and urged Ukrainians to boycott Russian companies and products.

Announcing the takedown, Facebook said, “The people behind this activity used fake accounts — some of which had already been detected and disabled by our automated systems — to create fictitious personas, post in Groups and on Pages, comment on their own content, evade enforcement, and manage Pages. Some of this network’s accounts had also been removed for hate speech and impersonation.

“This network was particularly active during the 2019 presidential and parliamentary elections in Ukraine. (...) Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation linked this activity to Postmen DA, an advertising agency in Ukraine.”

Before the takedown, Facebook shared a number of assets with Graphika for an independent assessment of their publicly visible activity.

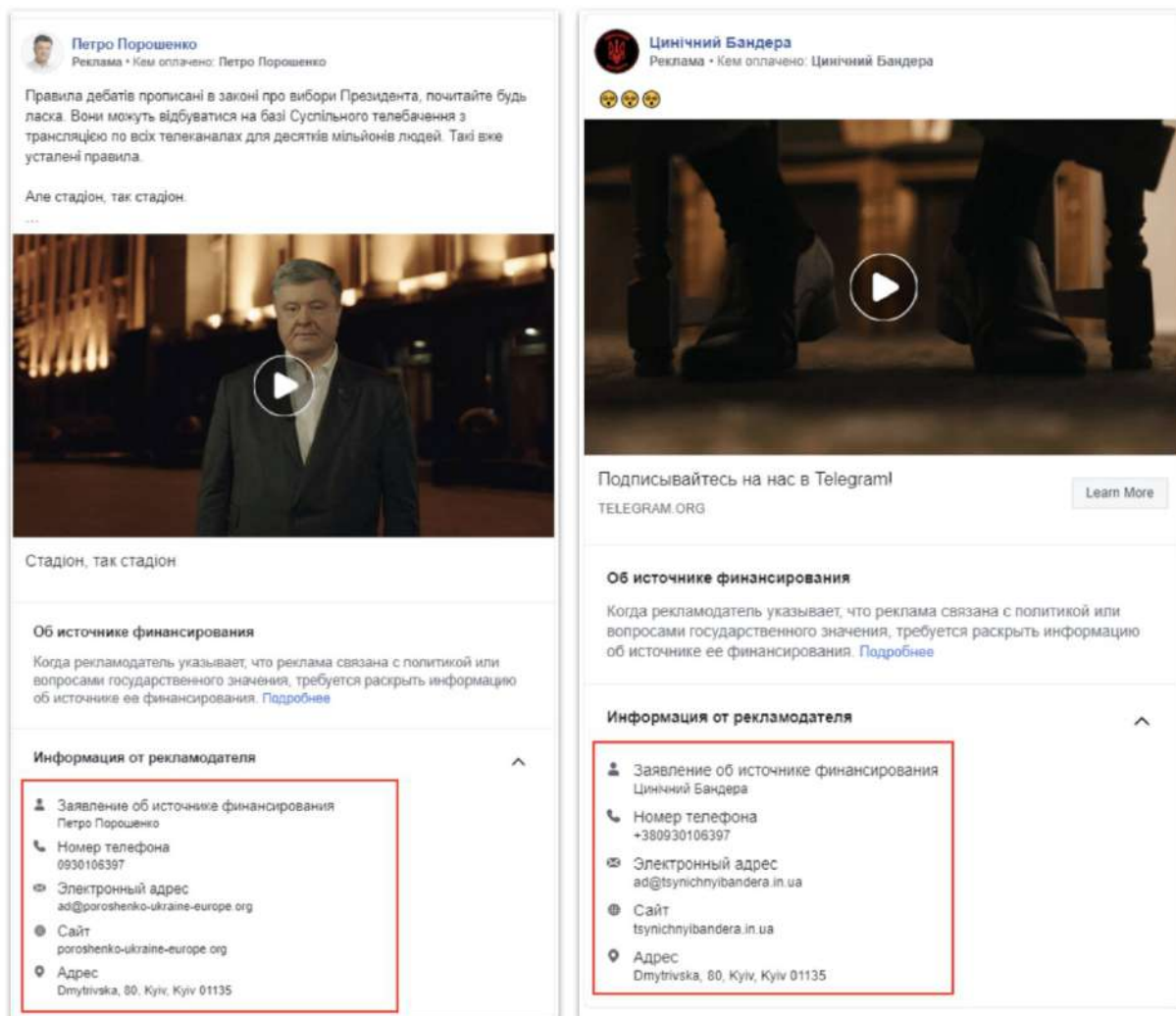
### Background

Ukraine held presidential elections in March-April 2019. In the final days of campaigning, Ukrainian news site thebabel.com.ua [reported that](#) a Ukrainian advertising agency called “Postmen” had been running a series of covert Facebook pages that attacked the challengers to then-President Petro Poroshenko, especially Zelensky.

These pages had run ads, and therefore given a phone number and street address for the entity that paid for them, as part of Facebook’s ad transparency system. Thebabel.com.ua analyzed five

such attack ads, two pro-Poroshenko ads on the then-president's official pages, and one pro-Poroshenko ad on an unofficial page, and demonstrated that they were connected.

"We discovered that the capital city's Postmen digital agency is behind all eight ads, and the president's official page and the 'black' PR ads against Zelensky were linked to one phone number. The 'black' campaign against Zelensky was carried out in three stages, and at least two million hryvnia (roughly \$75,000 at the time) went into its promotion in five groups," the outlet wrote.



*Sponsored Facebook posts in 2019 on Poroshenko's page (left) and the "Cynical Bandera" page (right), annotated to show the matching phone number and street address. Image from [thebabel.com.ua](http://thebabel.com.ua).*

According to this reporting, the campaign featured positive content about Poroshenko and negative content about his rivals, especially Zelensky, whom it accused of being a drug addict and an appeaser of Russia. The report named three pro-Poroshenko Facebook pages as being run by the "Postmen": Poroshenko's personal and campaign pages and a page whose name translates

as “Successful Ukraine” (“Успішна Україна”). It named five “black PR” pages: “Boycott the Party of the Regions” (“Бойкот партії регіонів”), “Cynical Bandera” (“Цинічний Бандера,” a reference to wartime nationalist leader Stepan Bandera), “Ministry of Labor” (“Міністерство бариг”), “Yellow Ribbon” (“Жовта стрічка”) and “Betrayal / Victory” (“Зрада\перемога”).

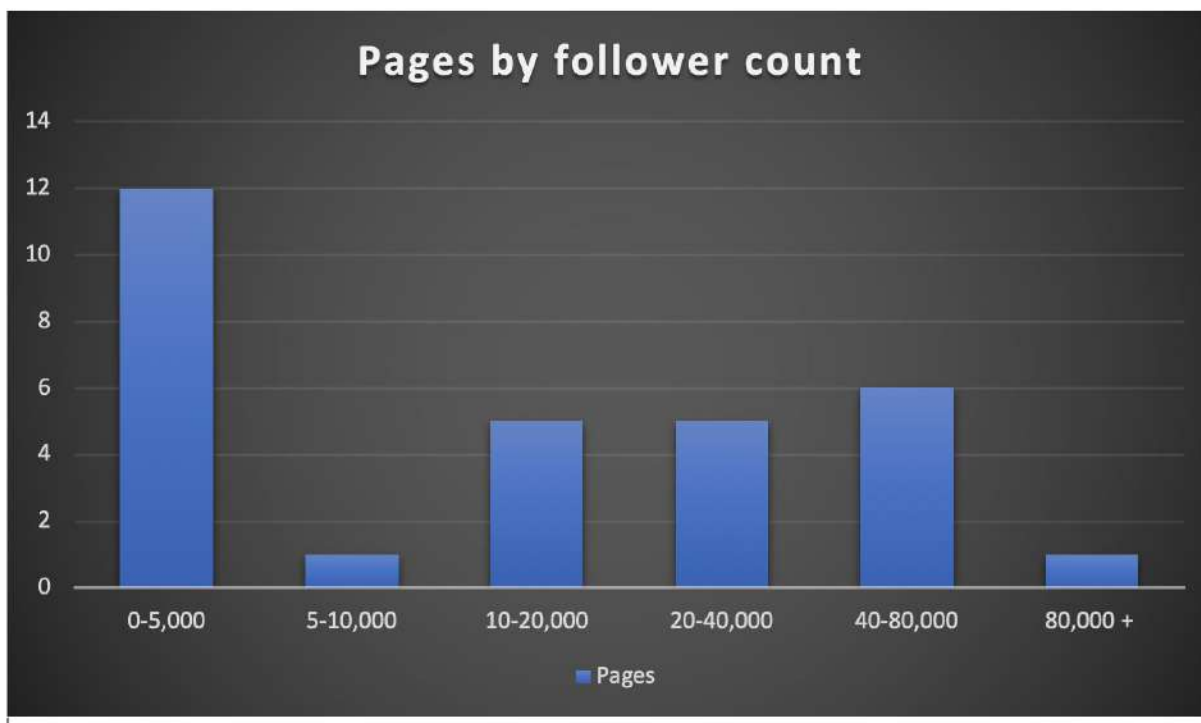
“Successful Ukraine” and all five of the “black PR” pages featured in the takedown set of July 2020.

## The Takedown

The network that Facebook removed consisted of 72 Facebook accounts, 35 pages, and 13 Instagram accounts, primarily focused on Ukrainian politics and current events. Graphika further discovered a cluster of almost 40 accounts on Twitter that appeared connected to the same agency and whose handles all featured variations on the name @PostmenKnew.

The pages were overtly political, and often overtly partisan. They included pages with names like “Boycott the Party of the Regions” (a pro-Russian party once headed by former President Viktor Yanukovich), “Stop Yulia” and “Baroness of Lies” (both attacking Tymoshenko). and “the freak’s servant” (portraying Zelensky as the puppet of oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky, who is reportedly [linked](#) to thebabel.com.ua).

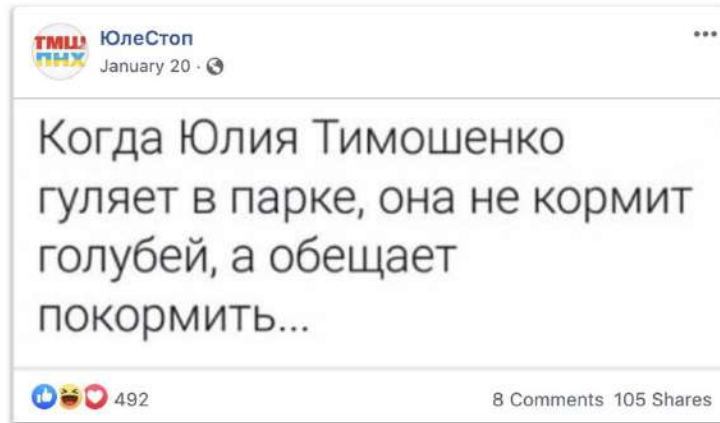
Some of the pages had a substantial following at the time of the takedown. The most popular, “Boycott the Party of Regions,” had over 127,000. The next most popular, “Батя, я стараюсь” (“Dad, I’m trying”), had almost 60,000. Five other pages, including “Stop Yulia,” had more than 40,000 followers each. Twelve pages, by contrast, had under 5,000 followers each.



*Pages in the "Postmen" Facebook network, divided by follower count.*

The majority of assets focused on individual politicians and parties, but a few posted negative comments about Russia. The following for these was generally lower: the most followed of these pages was one called "Boycott Russian companies," a page that accused various Ukrainian and international companies of spreading or supporting Russian propaganda. Such nationalist pages generally fared less well in attracting an audience: "Boycott Russian Companies," whose handle was @DestroyRusBiz, had 27,000 followers by the time it was taken down.

Some of the Facebook pages had been active for a considerable period. The page "Stop Yulia" ("ЮлеСтоп," handle @TymoshenkoStop) was created on March 13, 2014, three days before Russia annexed Crimea. It was originally called "Зупинити Юлію Тимошенко" ("Stop Yulia Tymoshenko"), then "Зупини Юлю" ("Stop Yulia"), before settling on its final form. It was still posting anti-Tymoshenko memes sporadically in 2020.

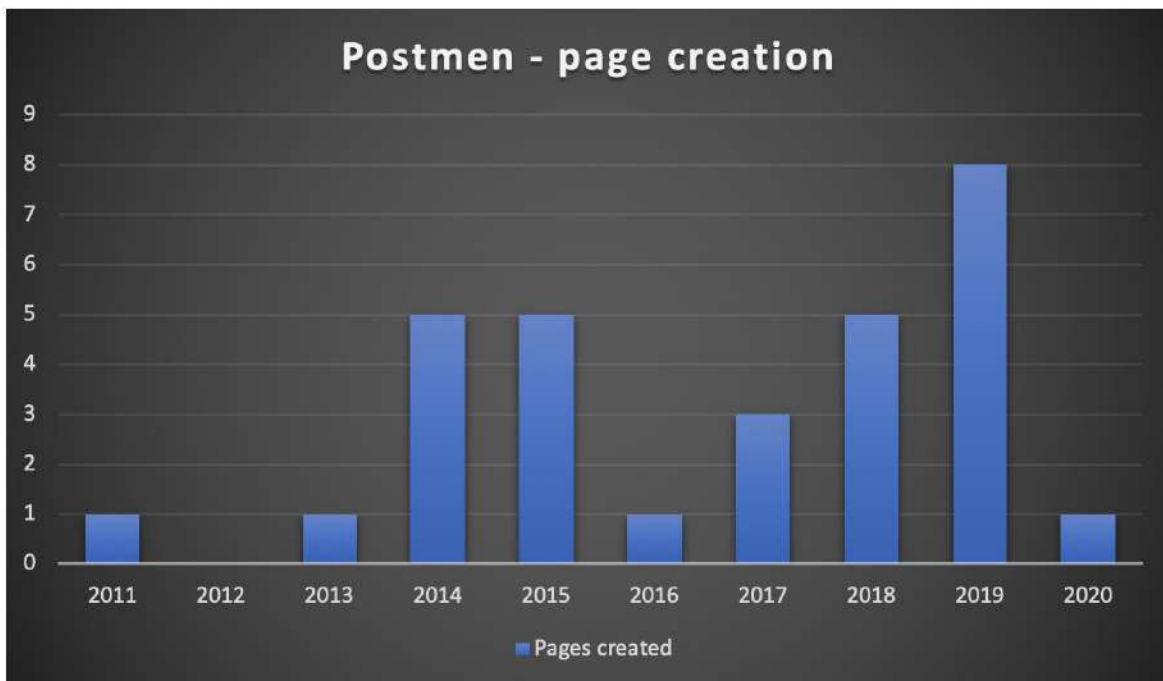


*"When Yulia Tymoshenko goes for a walk in the park, she doesn't feed the pigeons, she promises to feed them." Meme by "Yulia Stop," January 20, 2020.*

The network grew steadily over the years. The set viewed by Graphika included one page each created in 2011 and 2013, five created in 2014, five created in 2015, one created in 2016, three in 2017, five in 2018, and eight in 2019. The newest page, called "Міністрество зашкварів" ("dirty Ministry"), was created on May 21, 2020. It criticized the Ukrainian government, establishment, and media.



*"Orwell reading the Ukrainian news." Meme by "Dirty Ministry," July 1, 2020.*

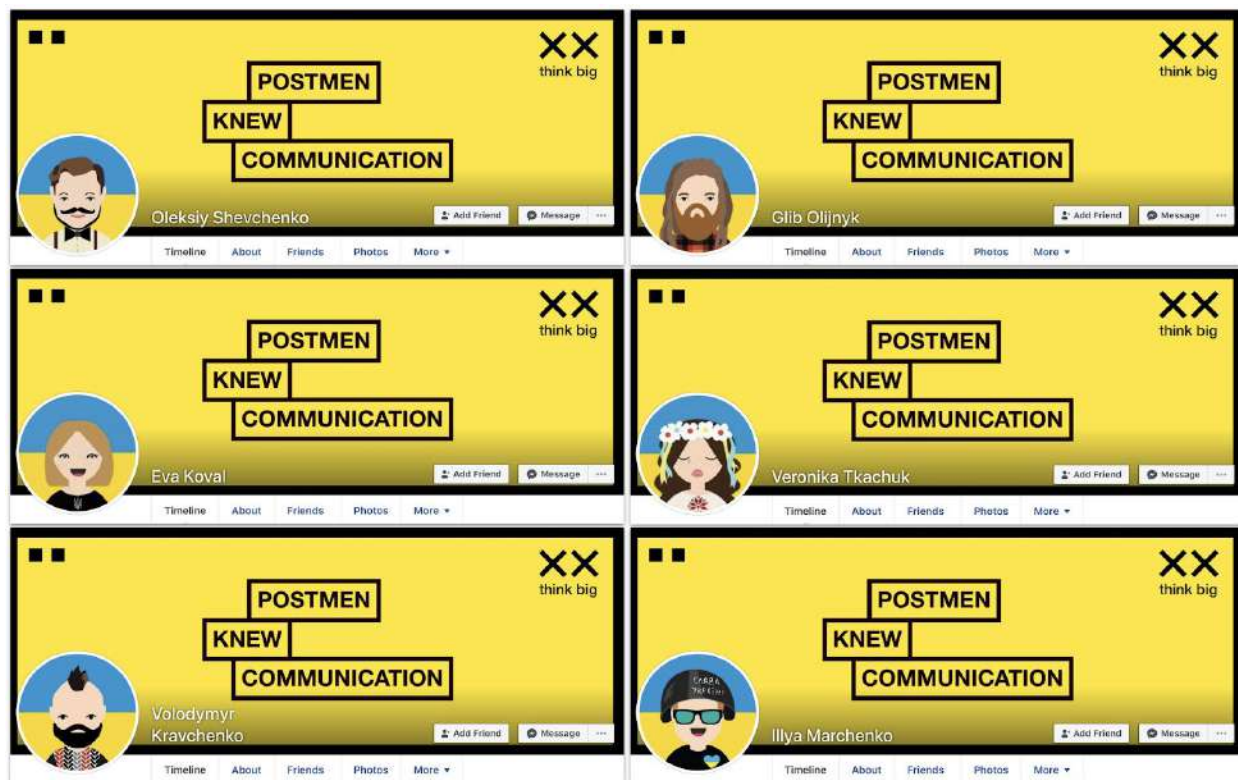


*Chart showing the page creation dates in the "Postmen" network. Of the pages created in 2019, five were set up in January through March, before the election.*

Despite their varying creation dates, almost all the pages were still active into 2020, though some only posted sporadically.

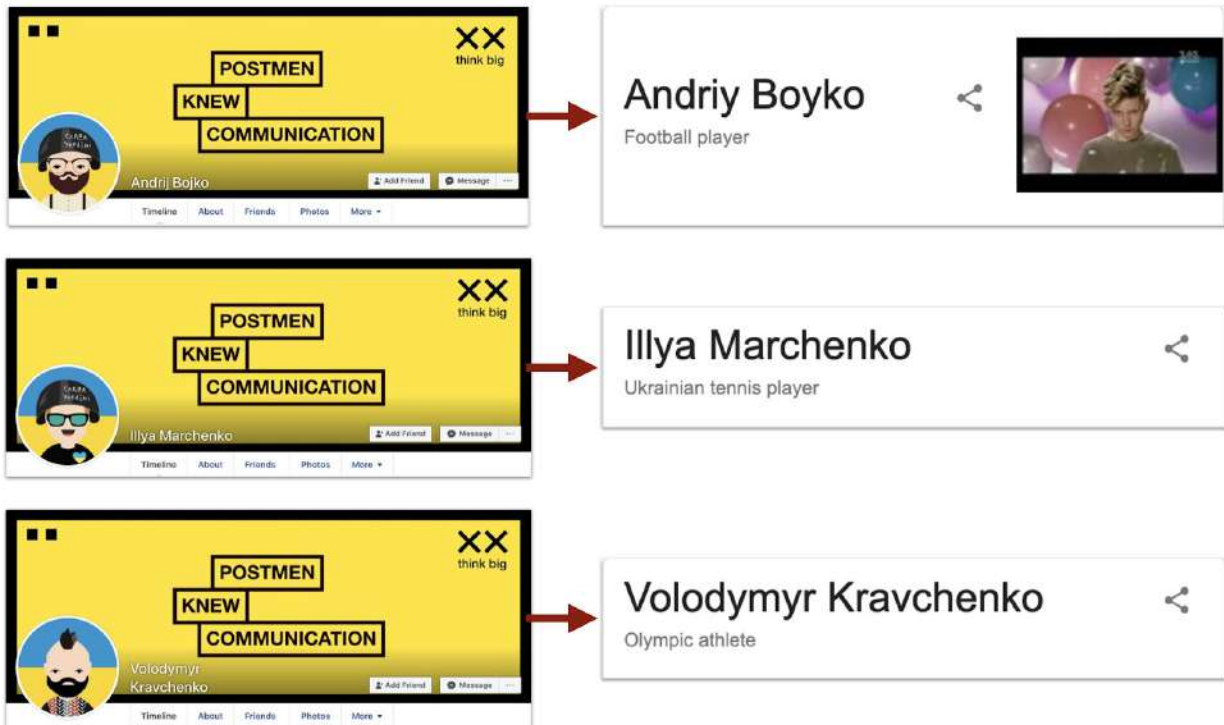
## Inauthentic and Coordinated

Alongside these pages, Facebook identified several dozen personal accounts that belonged to the network. Some belonged to apparently authentic individuals who claimed to work for "Postmen." A number of others featured only cartoon images for their profile pictures and a standardized black-and-yellow cover picture with the motto, "Postmen Knew Communication." These accounts showed no visible posting history, and all uploaded their profile pictures and banners on the same day, February 18, 2016.



*Facebook profiles for "Oleksiy Shevchenko," "Eva Koval," "Volodymyr Kravchenko," "Glib Olijnyk," "Veronika Tkachuk," and "Ilya Marchenko."*

Some of the accounts with male personas had the same name as Ukrainian sports personalities, notably [Andriy Boyko](#) (a footballer), [Ilyia Marchenko](#) (a tennis player), and [Volodymyr Kravchenko](#) (an Olympic triple jumper).

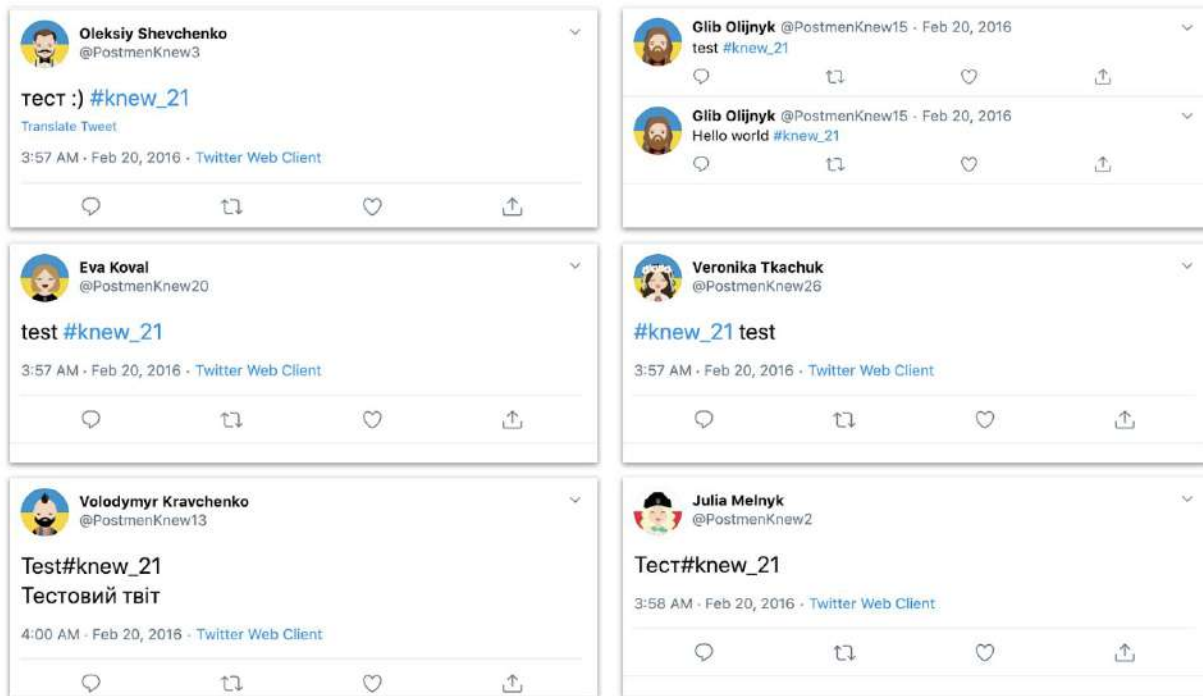


*Name that star: "Postmen" accounts and sportsmen with the same names.*

Many of the same names, and the identical banners and profile cartoons, featured on a series of Twitter accounts whose handles ranged from @PostmenKnew2 to @PostmenKnew45. (An account called @PostmenKnew1 was suspended some time before July 2020.) Unlike the Facebook accounts, some of the Twitter accounts showed at least a minimal posting history, but only on one day: February 20, 2016, when they each started out by tweeting the phrase "test #knew\_21" and then shared a small number of tweets, primarily about Poroshenko's address to the nation setting out his priorities for 2016. Other Twitter accounts showed no tweets at all.



Twitter profiles for "[Oleksiy Shevchenko](#)," "[Eva Koval](#)," "[Volodymyr Kravchenko](#)," "[Glib Olijnyk](#)," "[Veronika Tkachuk](#)," and "[Ilya Marchenko](#)."



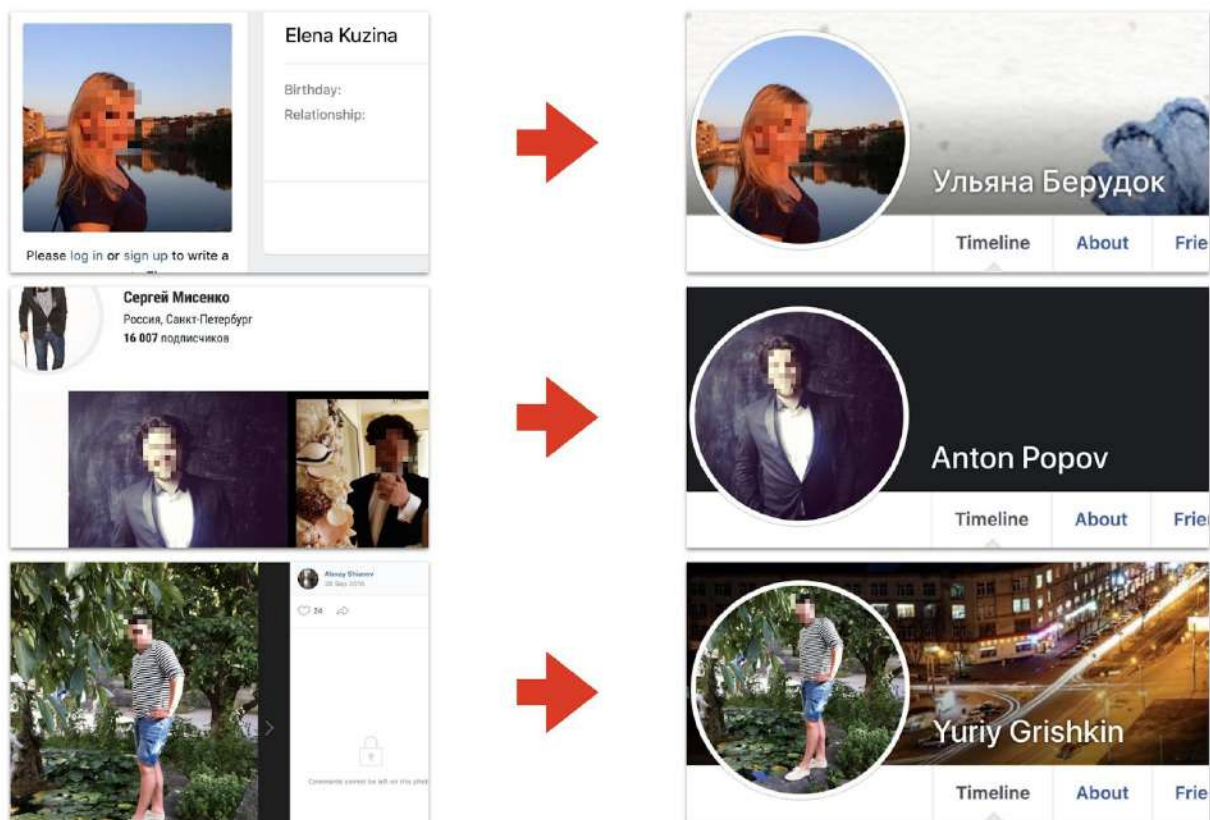
Testing, testing: the first tweets from "Oleksiy Shevchenko," "Eva Koval," "Volodymyr Kravchenko," "Glib Olijnyk," "Veronika Tkachuk," and "Julia Melnyk," all posted within a few minutes on February 20, 2016. (The timestamp is set to Eastern Summer Time.) Note how "Glib" broke with protocol by tweeting "Hello, world" first.



Tweets about Poroshenko's 2016 address in English and Ukrainian from the network.

Other Facebook accounts appear to have made a greater effort to pass as everyday users by taking the profile pictures of genuine users on other platforms, especially the Russian VKontakte (VK). For example, the Facebook account attributed to a blonde woman from Ukraine called “Ульяна Берудок” (“Ulyana Berudok”), whose profile picture was uploaded on October 22, 2015, used the profile picture of a VK user from Moscow called [Elena Kuzina](#), who uploaded her picture on August 30, 2015.

Similarly, the Facebook account “Anton Popov,” which claimed to live in the Donetsk region of Ukraine, used for its profile picture a photo of Russian photographer [Sergei Misenko](#), while the Facebook account called “Yuriy Grishkin,” allegedly from Kharkiv in Ukraine, used the profile picture of a VK user called [Alexei Shianov](#), from Podolsk in Russia’s Moscow region.



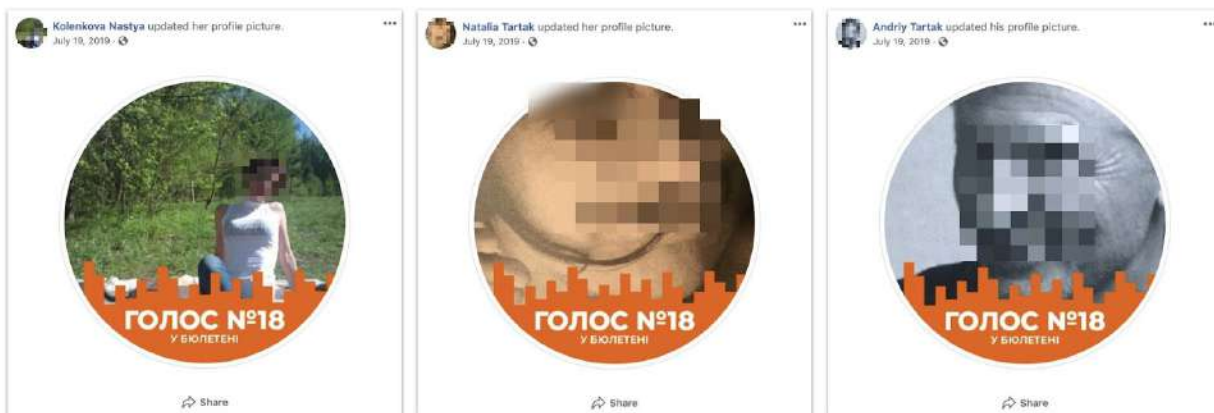
Left column, top to bottom: VK photos for Elena Kuzina, Sergei Misenko, and Alexey Shianov. Right column, top to bottom: Facebook pages for “Ulyana Berudok,” “Anton Popov,” and “Yuriy Grishkin.”

Some of the network’s activity was clearly coordinated. For example, a number of the pages used the identical cover image and motto, “зупинити паліїв” (#stoparsonists).



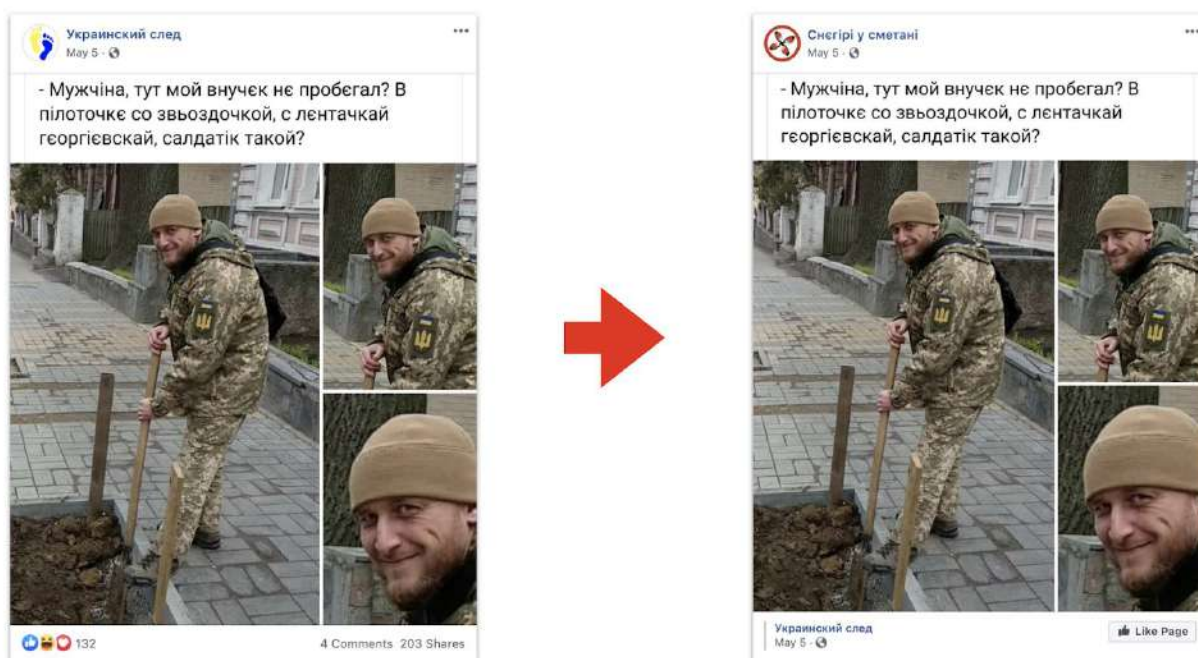
Top to bottom, cover pictures for the pages "Boycott the Party of the Regions," "Cynical Bandera," and "Dad, I'm trying," featuring the hashtag #зупинити паліїв.

A number of accounts updated their profile pictures on July 19, 2019, two days before Ukraine's parliamentary elections, to add the subtitle "Voice: number 18 on the ballot" in the identical font and logo. On the day of the vote, they all posted the same meme, with hashtags and comments supporting one political party. Interestingly, the party in question was not Poroshenko's party, but the "Голос" ("Voice") party of Svyatoslav Vakarchuk, which was listed at [number 18 on the ballot](#).



Left to right, profile updates by "Kolenkova Nastya," "Natalia Tartak," and "Andriy Tartak," with the identical message on voting for "Voice" on July 19, 2019.

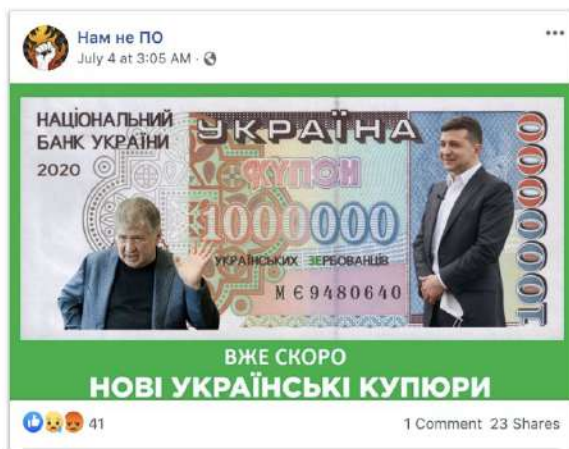
On some occasions, pages and accounts in the network amplified each other's content. Sometimes this consisted of direct re-posting; on other occasions, pages in the network posted different memes with the same overall message on the same day.



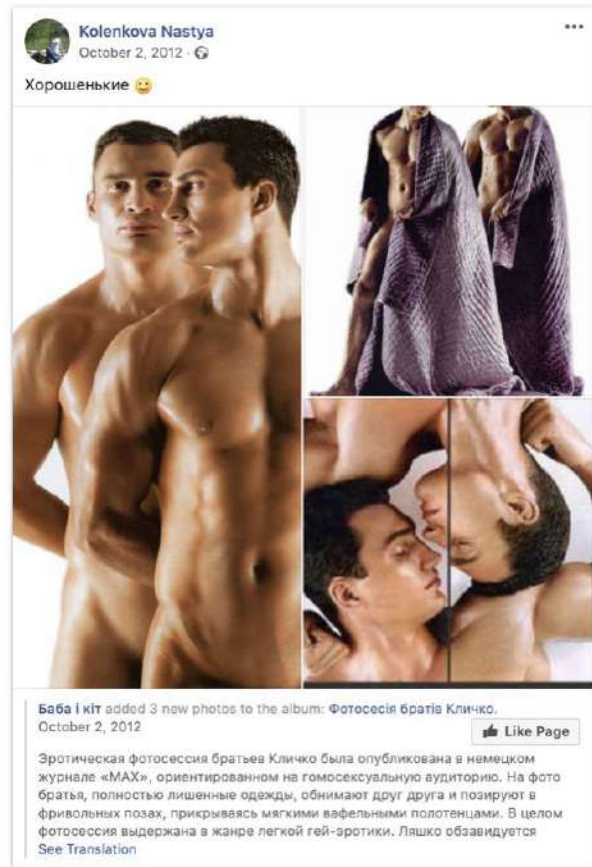
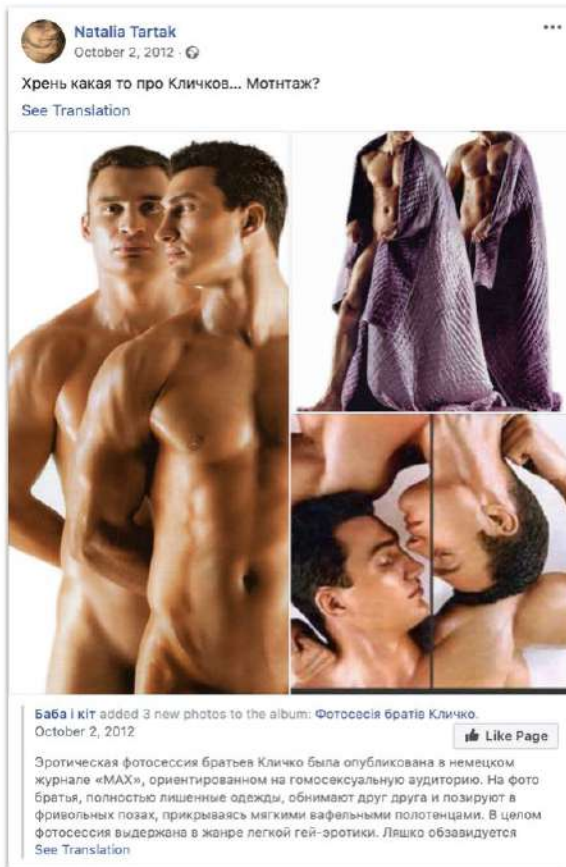
Left, post on May 5, 2020, from the page "Український слід" ("Ukrainian footprint"). Right, re-post of the same content by the page "Снегірі у сметані" ("Bullfinches in sour cream") on the same day.



Same picture posted on June 29, 2020 by "Повстанська кривка" ("Insurgent hideout," on the left) and "Скелети в шафі" ("Skeletons in the closet," on the right) one minute apart from each other.

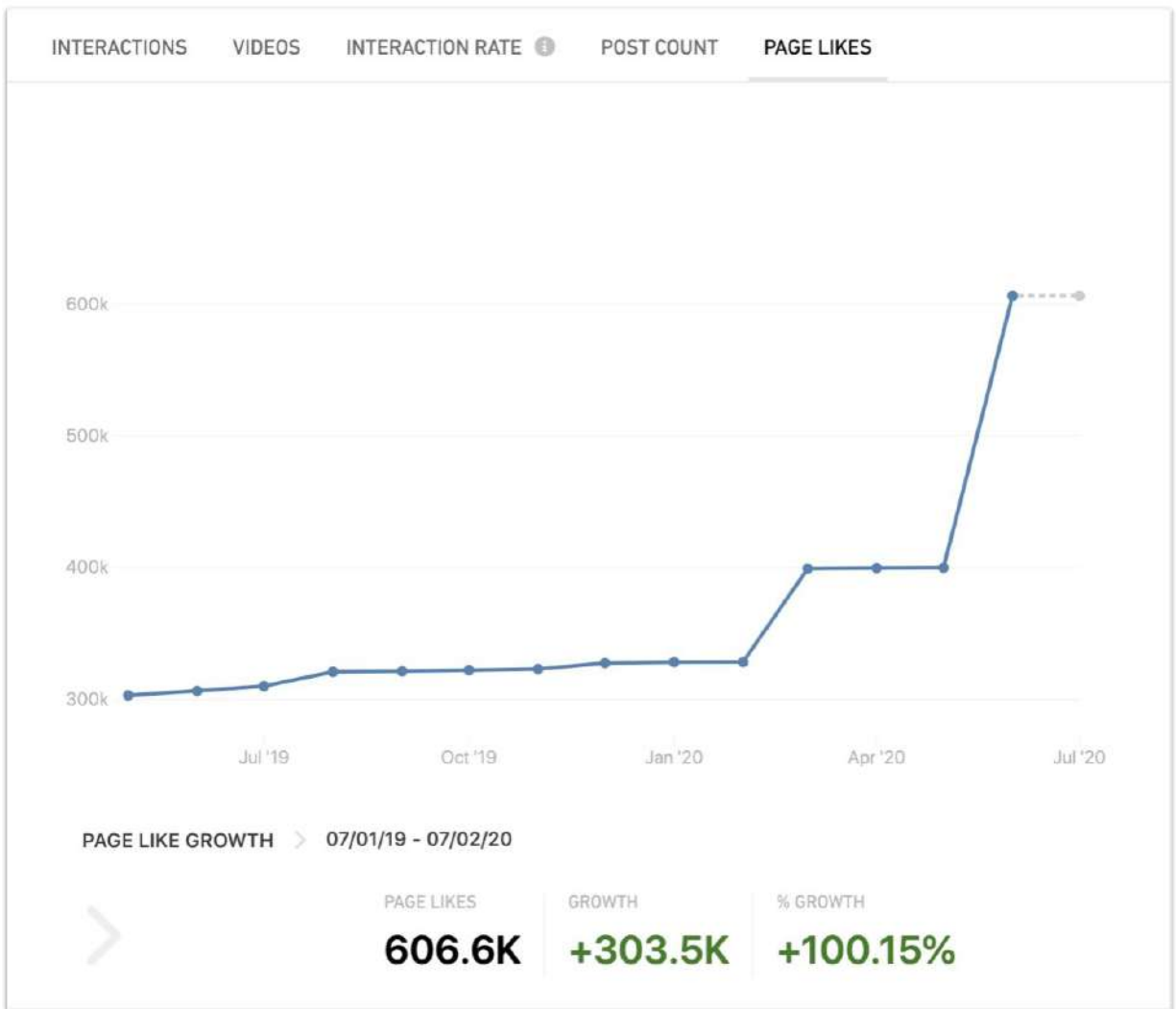


Two posts on July 4, 2020, about inflation rates in Ukraine, from the pages "Нам не ПО" ("We give a \*\*\*\*," left) and "Слуга урода" ("The monster's servant," right). This name is a pun on "Слуга народу," "servant of the people).



Same post from "Баба i kit" (baba and the cat) shared by two assets two minutes apart from one another on October 2, 2020. The post mocks the Klyschko brothers for an erotic photoshop they did for a German gay magazine. The last sentence translates "Lyashko is jealous."

There are some indications that the pages, too, may have benefited from coordinated inauthentic amplification in the way their followings grew. According to the analytical tool CrowdTangle (owned by Facebook), the pages' combined number of likes jumped by some 50 percent in June 2020, having jumped by 21 percent in March.



Graph showing the growth in likes for the pages in the takedown set, May 2019 through July 2020, via CrowdTangle.

TIMEFRAME	TOTAL	GROWTH	% GROWTH	
May 01 - May 31	303.0K	+3.3K	+1.09%	
Jun 01 - Jun 30	306.4K	+3.4K	+1.11%	
Jul 01 - Jul 31	310.0K	+3.6K	+1.17%	
Aug 01 - Aug 31	320.9K	+10.9K	+3.52%	
Sep 01 - Sep 30	321.3K	+424	+0.13%	
Oct 01 - Oct 31	322.2K	+834	+0.26%	
Nov 01 - Nov 30	323.0K	+837	+0.26%	
Dec 01 - Dec 31	327.6K	+4.6K	+1.42%	
Jan 01 - Jan 31	328.3K	+740	+0.23%	
Feb 01 - Feb 29	328.4K	+39	+0.01%	
Mar 01 - Mar 31	399.3K	+71.0K	+21.61%	
Apr 01 - Apr 30	399.8K	+433	+0.11%	
May 01 - May 31	400.0K	+213	+0.05%	
Jun 01 - Jun 30	606.6K	+206.6K	+51.65%	
Jul 01 - Jul 31	606.6K	+8	+0.001%	

*CrowdTangle data for the 30 pages, May 2019 to July 2020.*

## Narratives

The pages and accounts in this network largely posted about Ukrainian domestic politics, especially about issues of importance to Poroshenko, notably praise for his policies, hostility toward Russia, and electoral politics.

The network reserved particular hostility for Yulia Tymoshenko and, later, Volodymyr Zelensky (a newcomer to the political scene in 2019). The network often portrayed Tymoshenko via sexualized imagery or presented her as aristocratic and corrupt, while it portrayed Zelensky as an infant, or the puppet of Kolomoisky. It portrayed both politicians at times as servants or messengers of the Kremlin.

## Praising Poroshenko

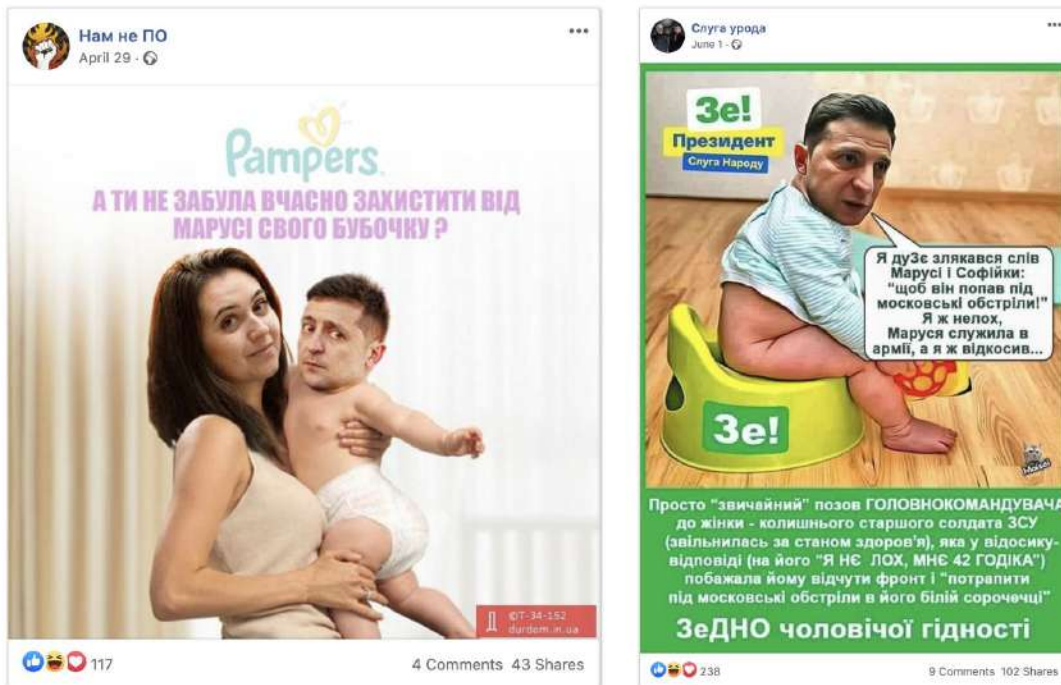


Left, post focusing on Poroshenko's apparent popularity with young Ukrainians. Right, the post mockingly compares Proshenko's military charisma to Zelensky's lack of military abilities and credibility.



Left, share of a post from Poroshenko's own account by persona "Ilona Prydyuk," calling for the expulsion of Russian priests from Ukraine. The post from "Зрада/Перемога" (Betrayal/Victory) claims that Poroshenko is the greatest leader Ukraine ever had and displays a campaign video from Poroshenko.

## Zelensky



Two posts from the network portraying Zelensky as an incontinent baby.



Post from the network portraying Zelensky as kissing Russian President Vladimir Putin.

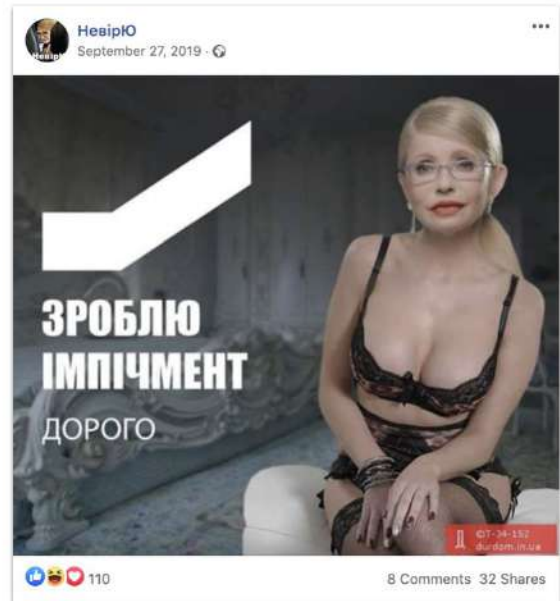


Banners showing Zelensky and Kolomoisky together. The upper page was called "Servant of the Monster" and portrayed Zelensky as Kolomoisky's servant. The lower page was called "КоЗел," literally "goat" or "buck," but figuratively meaning "idiot," and a play on the two men's names.

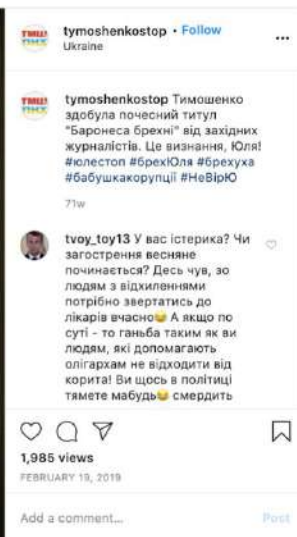


Memes mocking Zelensky's relationship with Kolomoisky from other pages in the network. The right one translates "Is Gonsharuk saying here that 'the budget is badly composed'? and the picture "We only want your money."

## Tymoshenko



Memes sexualizing Yulia Tymoshenko, shared by "ЮлеСтоп" (YuleStop) and "Невірю" (I don't believe - with a word play on the final Ю "yu" and Yulia). These memes featured repeatedly among the anti-Tymoshenko content shared by the network. The right one reads "I will expensively impeach."



Parody of Wonder Woman ("Диво-Жінка") reading "Impoverishing Woman", a portmanteau word between зубожіння ("impoverishment") and Жінка ("woman"). The right one reads "Tymoshenko won the honorary title of "Baroness of lies" from Western journalists. This is recognition, Yulia!"



"Get up, Yulia!" Meme of Putin reviving a moribund Tymoshenko from the page "Baroness of Lies."

## Anti-Russian Content

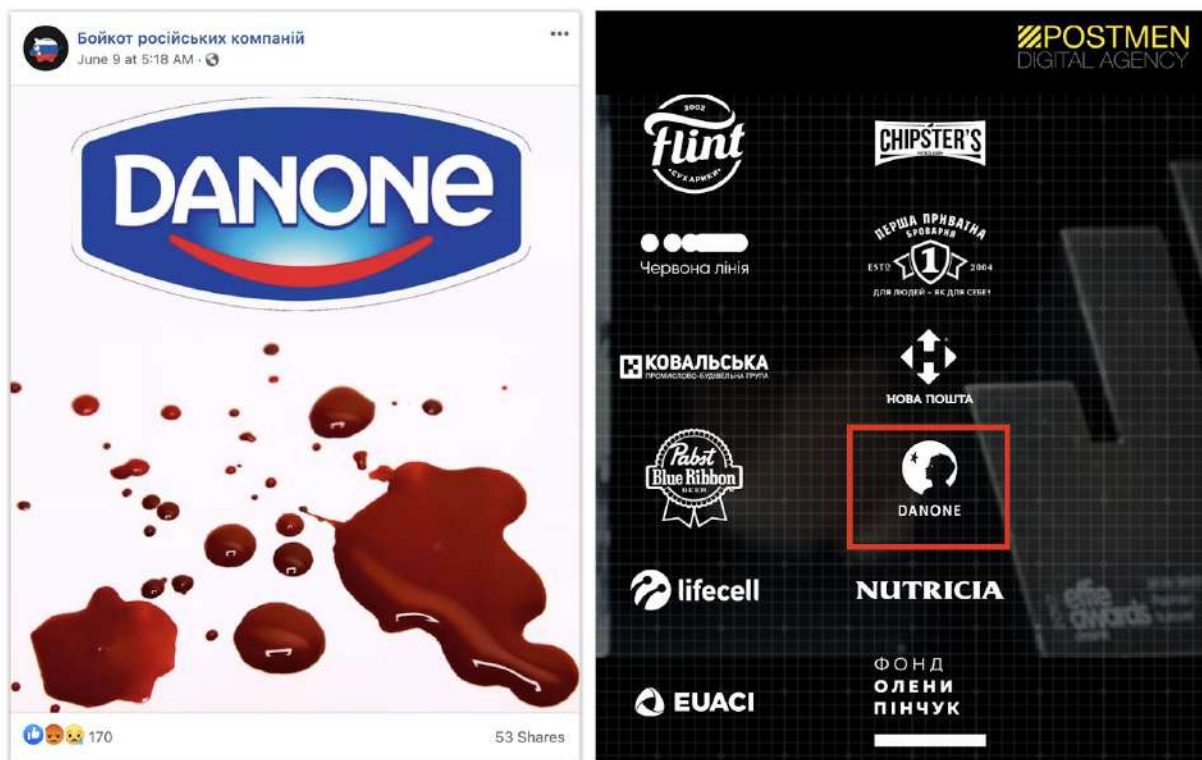
Pages within the network shared a considerable amount of content that was anti-Russian in nature, with a special emphasis on the disputed annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass. Some pages, such as "Boycott the Party of the Regions" ("Бойкот партії регіонів") and "Boycott Russian Companies" ("Бойкот російських компаній"), were especially focused on attacking the Russian government and the Party of Regions, a pro-Russian Ukrainian political party.



The Facebook page "Boycott Russian companies" expressed its views on Russia both through its name and on its banner, which displayed Vladimir Putin's face covered with the names of Russian companies doing business in Ukraine.

Most of the recently created anti-Russian content was aimed at the Danone dairy company. In one of its recent posts, on June 9, 2020, "Boycott Russian Companies" ("Бойкот російських компаній") portrayed the Danone logo with bloodstains underneath; this is particularly notable

because, according to the Postmen agency's [website](#), Danone is a client of the company. The post referred to a [scandal](#) in which a [Danone ad](#) in Russian featured a Russian actor who had fired a heavy machine gun at Ukrainian troops in 2014. A related post accused Danone of sponsoring terrorism and included a photo of the actor with the machine gun. Danone reportedly [pulled](#) the ad on June 10. Conversely, some content praised McDonald's Ukraine, which [implemented a language policy](#) banning Russian from electronic kiosks in its restaurants.



Left, post by the page "Boycott Russian companies" showing the Danone logo and bloodstains. Right, screenshot of Postmen's [client page](#), with Danone highlighted.

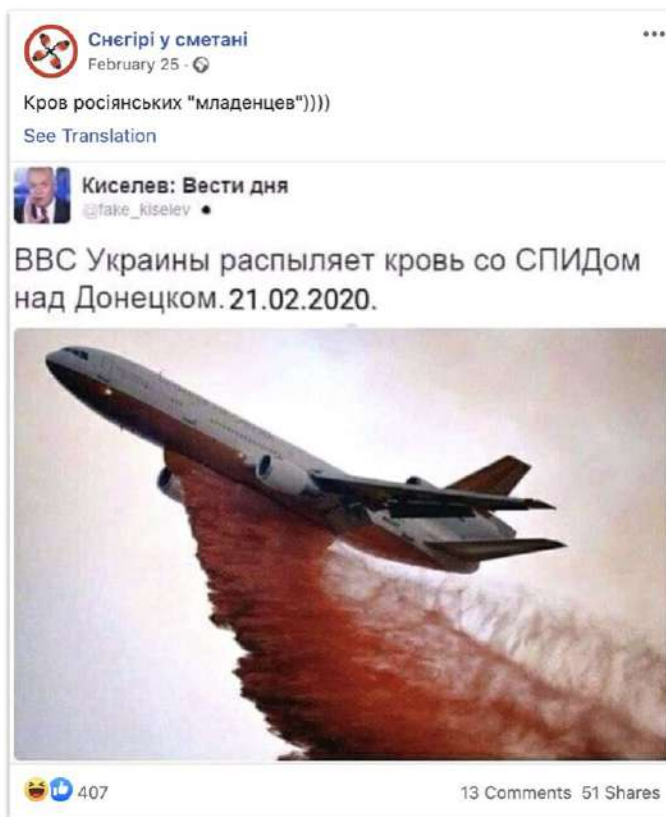
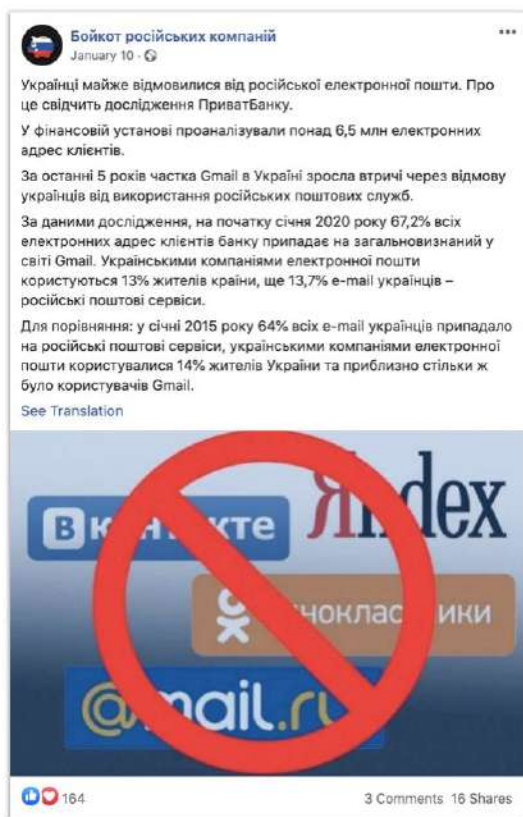


"The 'Danone' company is a sponsor of terrorism." Post by "Boycott Russian Companies" ("Бойкот російських компаній") on June 9, 2020. The individual in the blue "Press" helmet is Russian actor Mikhail Porechenkov, filmed [firing a heavy machine gun](#) at Donetsk Airport in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk Oblast in October 2014.



Example of pro-McDonald's content featuring a pun between the Ukrainian нехай щастить ("let's be happy") and the Russian нехуй шастать ("Fuck off").

The presence of anti-Russian content reflects a broader cleavage in Ukrainian politics. Poroshenko [has called for international confrontation with Russia](#) on territorial disputes centering on Crimea and the separatist regions of Donbass. He has [repeatedly claimed](#) that people around Zelensky - thought to be eager to [conciliate with Russia](#) in order to solve the disputes that have been gnawing the country since 2014 - has been acting in Russian interests and that some of them have been acting as "[Russia's fifth column](#)." The pages in the network made similar allegations against Zelensky himself and Yulia Tymoshenko.



Left, post claiming that Ukrainians are increasingly refusing to use Russian email services. Right, a comment from the page "Bullfinches in sour cream," responding to a post by a parody Facebook account that claimed to show the Ukrainian air force dropping blood infected with AIDS over Donetsk. "The blood of Russian 'lads,'" the comment ran.

The background of the image is a dark, starry sky. In the lower right quadrant, there is a large, dense, and vibrant orange-red light trail that curves upwards and to the right. This trail is composed of many fine, overlapping lines, giving it a sense of motion and energy. The overall composition is abstract and visually striking due to the contrast between the dark background and the bright, dynamic light trails.

**Graphika**

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