

FAKE FANS

**How Anti-Western Actors
in Ukraine and Russia Are Using
Troll Armies to Push Their Agenda**

fake

Anti-Western propaganda is typical for **Putinist Russia**. But over the past few years, it has also been **massively developing in Ukraine**.

UkraineWorld.org regularly studies narratives and practices of anti-Western actors in Ukraine, which you can follow on the [UkraineWorld website](https://ukraineworld.org). These actors, linked to pro-Russian parties or some Ukrainian oligarchs, prolifically promote a narrative that Ukraine is under an “external governance” of the West, and that it should break free from the control of “IMF”, “Soros”, “America”, “Bill Gates” etc. They also work hard to discredit Ukraine’s pro-European reforms.

To promote their narratives, anti-Western actors in Ukraine and Russia are actively using the concerted actions of **troll armies**. These troll armies massively retweet their content. They multiply their messages and make them more visible on social networks.

In the present study, we dig into these actors’ **concerted (dis)information behaviour** and reveal networks of **fake fans** which “ordinary soldiers” of pro-Russian and anti-Western actors are using in their information warfare against Europe, the US, the IMF, and Ukraine’s sovereignty.

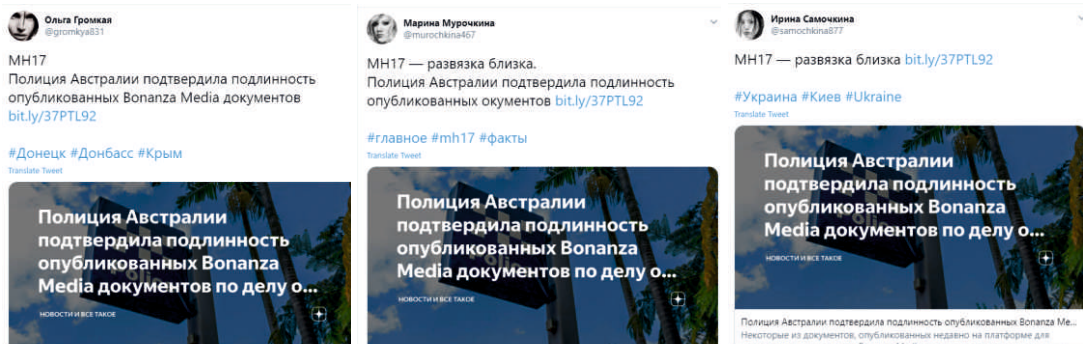
Let’s look at the **key conclusions** of our study.

fans

1 A Russian troll army is pushing pro-Russian narratives on the MH-17 tragedy

A network of suspicious Twitter accounts is promoting the Kremlin version of MH-17 tragedy, and it originates in Russia

When the MH17 trial began at the beginning of March 2020, experts from **Trollrensics.com** collected tweets mentioning MH17 and including the #MH17 hashtag. They detected a suspiciously **high number of tweets with similar content** and referring to Russian sources. When the court case resumed in June, they again observed a **spike in MH17 tweets by the same accounts**, which all contained links to zen.yandex.ru articles. The network also pushes conspiracy theories and mythical stories about UFOs.



Jointly with Trollrensics.com, we looked into the accounts and found a **whole troll army**, with links to Russia, pushing Kremlin narratives on MH-17 and more.



Read more: <https://bit.ly/MH17trolls>

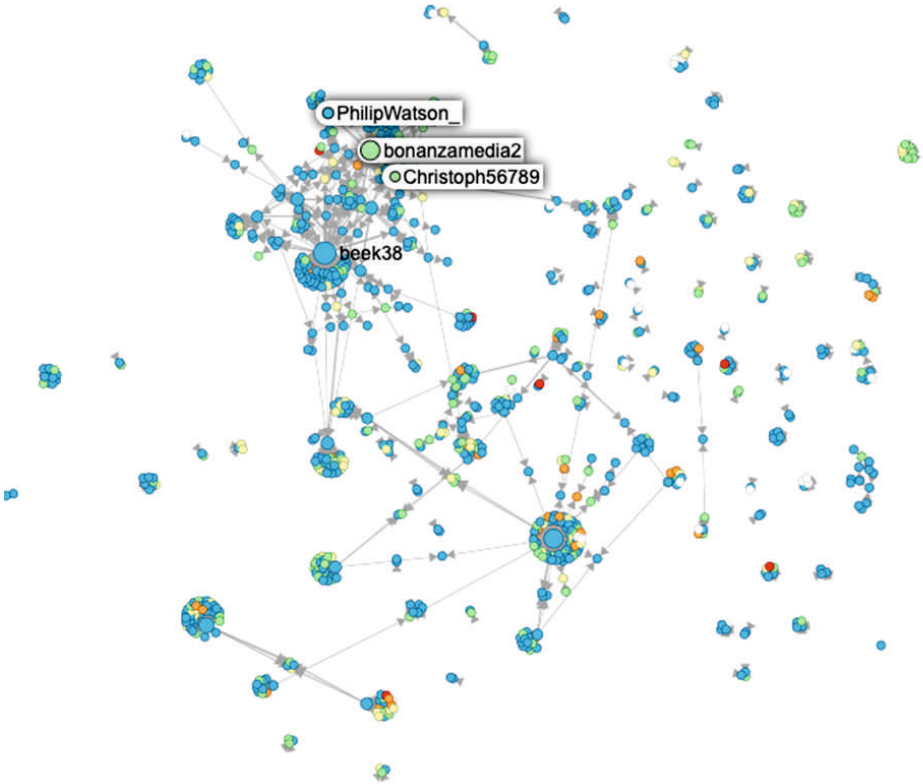
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Russia uses disinfo networks on Twitter to discredit MH17 court case on the MH-17 tragedy

This network also attacks Bellingcat — a research group which has proven Russia's guilt

As the MH17 court case resumed in June 2020, **Russia activated its disinformation network** on Twitter. One of the key accounts in this network is [Bonanza Media](#) — a “platform for independent journalists” co-founded by Yana Yerlashova, a former RT journalist who [directed](#) two **RT movies** on MH-17, and Max van der Werff, a Dutch journalist who has promoted **Russian propaganda** on the MH17 case.

[Hoaxy](#), an online tool visualizing the spread of messages online, shows that Bonanza Media's Twitter account has been a key conversation starters on the MH17 topic.



One of the most recent [narratives](#) shared by Bonanza is that “the Ukrainian authorities provoked the incident [the MH17 catastrophe]” by “using the MH17 as a shield for a Ukrainian fighter jet.” They also [accuse](#) Bellingcat, a research agency which proved Russia’s direct involvement in the catastrophe, of deceiving a “witness” who claimed he had seen warplanes downing MH17.

Accounts “close” to Bonanza on the map — [@PhilipWatson_](#), [@Christoph56789](#) and [@beek38](#) — also attack Bellingcat and share Russian disinfo on MH17.



Read more: http://bit.ly/bonanza_trolls

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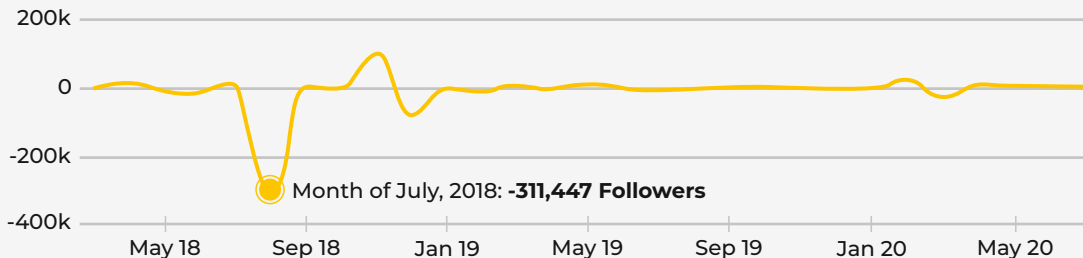
Putin's top ally in Ukraine has used over 300 thousand Twitter trolls

Victor Medvedchuk lost most of them when Twitter deleted troll networks in 2018

Victor Medvedchuk, Vladimir Putin's key ally in Ukraine and the leader of the pro-Russian **Opposition Platform For Life** party, has very likely been using a **huge troll army** on Twitter.

He currently has **151.5 thousand followers** on Twitter. He used to have many more, but in July 2018, he lost over **311 thousand followers**.

Monthly Gained Followers for @MedvedchukVV



Додати: Source: Socialblade.com

At that time, Twitter banned the accounts of trolls and bots, deleting a total of around [70 million](#) accounts.

If these accounts had not been deleted, he would currently have had almost **half a million** followers, most of them most likely to be Russian bots or trolls.



Read more: http://bit.ly/MEDVEDCHUK_trolls

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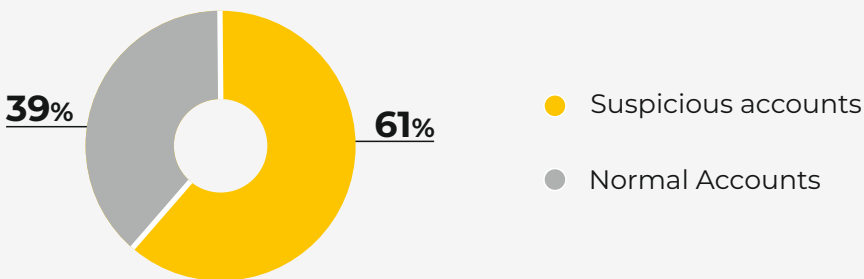
Medvedchuk has continued using pro-Russian trolls

Despite a dramatic decrease in followers in 2018, Medvedchuk's favor towards troll armies remains strong

Our analysis reveals **troll networks** among the current followers of Medvedchuk's Twitter account. These users have profile pictures and background photos taken from the internet and follow each other or other pro-Russian bloggers and politicians.

An analysis of over 200 recent followers of Medvedchuk's account by Botometer shows that **61% of the accounts have a score 2,5 or higher**, putting them under suspicion of being bots, or inactive or empty accounts. Only about **39%** of the analyzed accounts are likely to be "normal" users.

Probable bots/trolls among the followers of @MedvedchukVV



These trolls mostly push a pro-Russian agenda. Many of them come from the same network. Interestingly, the owners of these accounts tend to put images of kitties or puppies as their profile pictures. Therefore, we called this network "Putin's Kitties."



We also examined several of Medvedchuk's posts and looked at who retweets them. For example, we chose [one post](#) where Medvedchuk raises the issue of secret “biological” or “bacteriological” labs which, he says, the US created in Ukraine and some other Eastern European states to carry out experiments on humans and to create biological weapons.

This particular post had 27 retweets. Almost all of them - **23 (85%)** - were accounts with practically **no authentic activity**. They **almost never tweet on their own, but rather only retweet**, and do so very regularly. They also have unusual Twitter nicknames and mostly abstract or stolen pictures. All this leads us to conclude that they are bots or trolls. Out of the remaining 4 accounts, one belongs to Medvedchuk's “Ukrainian Choice” movement; 2 belong to real people living in Russia, and only 1 might belong to a real person living in Ukraine.

85%

of the accounts which retweeted

**Medvedchuk's
“biolabs” post are
trolls**



Read more: http://bit.ly/MEDVEDCHUK_trolls

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A former Yanukovich ally is using trolls to promote an anti-Western agenda

Andriy Portnov, a former Yanukovich ally and current promoter of an anti-Western agenda in Ukraine, has tried to enlarge his audience with the help of trolls who tweet around the clock

Andriy Portnov has been very active in recent years with efforts to discredit the Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity and the country's subsequent pro-European reforms. He is also among the top actors promoting anti-Western agenda, according to a [UkraineWorld study](#).

In our current study, we look at accounts which retweet Portnov's posts. We found accounts tweeting with **superhuman speed and regularity**: some of them up to 70, 100 or even 180 tweets per day!

We found accounts with huge numbers of tweets (over 1,000 this year) but with only five or six followers. We also found that a large share of Portnov's recent followers are accounts, created in the past few months, with no activity at all. These new accounts usually do not have user pictures or have strange ones; they have few or no tweets and mostly like or retweet posts by Portnov or other anti-Western actors (such as Shariy, Lukash, etc.).



Read more: http://bit.ly/antiwest_trolls

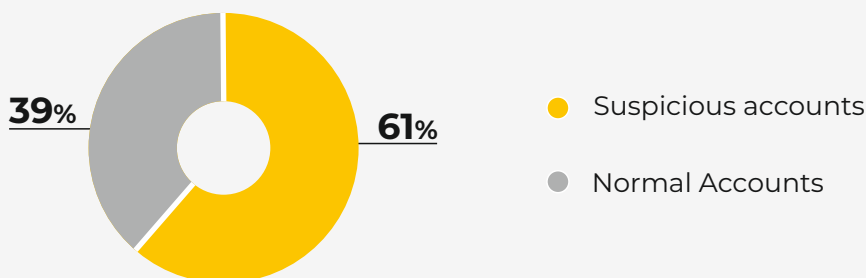
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Another former Yanukovych ally is also employing trolls

Olena Lukash, a former member of the Party of Regions and justice minister in the Azarov government under Yanukovych, is also using suspicious accounts to promote her agenda

We analysed 200 most [recent followers](#) of Olena Lukash (as of July 16) through Botometer. Of those, **67** most likely **bots with bot scores higher than 2.5**. Another **45** followers have **empty timelines**. Ten more are protected accounts with very few followers, which are also suspicious. This leads us to conclude that about **61%** of Lukash followers (out of the 200 we analyzed) are suspicious accounts likely to be bots or trolls.

Probable bots/trolls among the followers of @lukash_el



Read more: http://bit.ly/antiwest_trolls

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The fake audiences of Olena Lukash and Andriy Portnov overlap

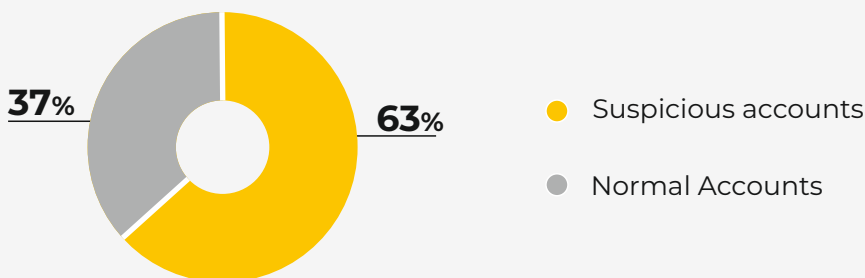
Both Ukrainian revanchist politicians have many common followers on Twitter, most of whom are likely bots or trolls

An analysis by TweepDiff [shows](#) that Olena Lukash and Andriy Portnov, who often share similar messages on various topics, have **4179** common followers on Twitter. This figure amounts to **24,5%** of Lukash followers and **43,1%** of Portnov's followers.



We analysed the [100 most recent common followers](#) of Lukash and Portnov as of July 20. Of them, **38** are most likely bots with **bot scores higher than 2.5**, according to Botometer. Another **19** recent followers have **empty timelines**. Six more are closed accounts with very few followers, which are also suspicious.

Probable bots/trolls among the common followers of @lukash_el and @AndriiPortnov



Read more: http://bit.ly/antiwest_trolls

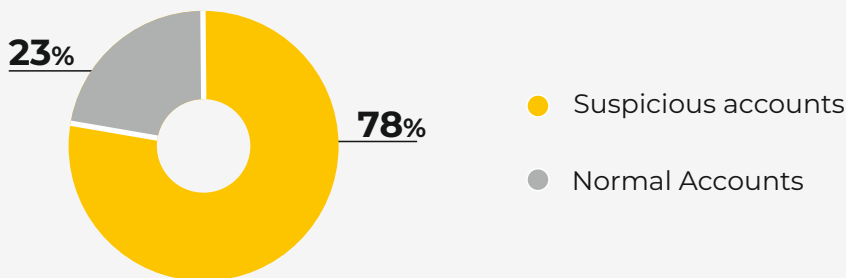


A popular anti-Western blogger and politician massively uses Russian trolls

Anatoliy Shariy, a popular blogger and politician, the head of the increasingly-popular “Party of Shariy”, is likely massively using pro-Russian or Russia-based trolls

According to Botometer, suspicious accounts (highly probable bots/trolls or inactive accounts) constitute **78%** of 200 of his newest followers which we analyzed. Only **22%** of Shariy’s 200 recent followers are “normal” users.

Probable bots/trolls among the followers of @anatoliisharii



We also discovered that almost **half (48%)** of Shariy’s 200 recent followers have very **strange Twitter nicknames**, which seem to be a **random combination of symbols**: @gjsPuvIqbcBPv37, @67hwx9u cpY2n5zL, @quY2bLTSP2OVQ6Y etc. Many of them have **no profile picture** and almost no activity.

Shariy’s tweets are massively shared by accounts which tweet (mostly re-tweet) pro-Russian, pro-Putin and anti-Western content. On Facebook, many of his followers (real and otherwise) are also “passionate fans” of other anti-Western / pro-Russian actors in Ukraine.



Read more: http://bit.ly/antiwest_trolls



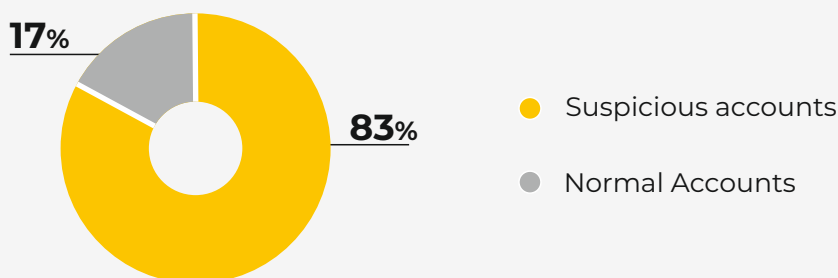
Trolls are also being used by a key Kolomoyskyi ally

Over 80 % of Oleksandr Dubinskyi's followers on Twitter are likely to be trolls

Oleksandr Dubinskyi is one of the key information allies of **oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi**, former owner of PrivatBank and one of the key opponents of the IMF in Ukraine. As an MP from the Servant of the People, Dubinskyi uses highly aggressive rhetoric and hate speech against the proponents of Ukraine's pro-Western orientation, calling them **"sorosiata"** ("Soros piglets"). **UkraineWorld** has studied this rhetoric in our [regular digests](#).

However, Dubinskyi is also likely to be using troll armies. Our analysis of over 200 accounts of Dubinskyi's Twitter followers on Botometer shows a **remarkably large share (47%) of suspicious accounts** whose bot-likeness score is over 2.5 . 36% of accounts contain no timeline, which also makes them highly likely to be trolls. Together, about **83%** of Dubinskyi's followers in our selection are likely to be bots or trolls. Only 17% are "normal" accounts.

Probable bots/trolls among the followers of @alexdubinskyi



Read more: http://bit.ly/antiwest_trolls

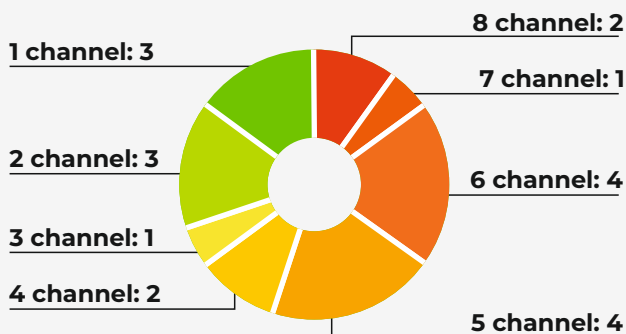
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Bots and trolls flood comments on popular anti-Western YouTube channels

The most popular commentators regularly comment on several channels at once, some appearing on eight of the ten channels we studied

We also analysed the 20 most popular commenters on ten popular YouTube channels which have been regularly spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian messages: [Klymenko Time](#), [Anatoliy Shariy](#), [Olga Shariy](#), [Strana.ua](#), [112 Ukraina](#), [ZIK](#), [NewsOne](#), [Topinform](#), [Ukraina.ru](#), and [Andrey Portnov](#) during the period of 10 June-10 July, 2020. It turned out that most of these commenters were leaving comments on **several channels at once**. Over 50% of them comment on five **or more channels**, with some of them commenting on **eight of the ten channels** we studied.

How many most active users top on many channels at once



One of these users is incredibly active, leaving **over 500 comments during the month** across 8 channels; another one wrote **identical comments under 6 out of ten** channels we studied.



Read more: https://bit.ly/YouTube_trolls

Conclusion

In 2014, when the **Revolution of Dignity** (Euromaidan) ousted authoritarian president Victor Yanukovich, and Ukraine chose a path of reforms towards a more democratic and transparent society, the country's pro-European choice seemed to be irreversible.

After six years, however, the country's information space has been flooded with **anti-Western narratives** promoted by pro-Russian or anti-Western oligarchs, as previous [UkraineWorld studies show](#). The ratings of anti-Western parties like the **Opposition Platform For Life** and the **Party of Shariy** are also growing.

The audience of these narratives and parties is **real and massive**. In this study, however, we have also shown how these anti-Western actors are prolifically using **fake fans** and **fake audiences** to organize concerted **(dis)information behaviour** and promote their messages. Quite often, the roots of these troll armies are in Russia; their behaviour is also often linked to a pro-Kremlin agenda. We also showed how Russian trolls have promoted Kremlin narratives on such important topics as the **MH-17 tragedy**.

There is a link between **fake supporters** and **real supporters**. Fake supporters help anti-Western actors make their narratives **more visible** on social networks, and to gain real supporters. More importantly, however, this inauthentic behavior seeks to **deceive** by pretending that the messages they sent are liked and shared by real people.

It is also important to note that these anti-Western actors, often using virulent **hate speech against democratic values and Western civilization**, are using Western instruments (social networks like Twitter or YouTube) to undermine the very culture that created them.

The study was done by **Internews Ukraine** and **UkraineWorld.org**.

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The analysis and views presented in this study are the sole responsibility of Internews Ukraine and do not necessarily reflect the official position of NATO.

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