How social media shaped Zelenskiy's victory in Ukraine

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Contents

Introduction

There's no doubt that social media played a role in Ukraine's surprising 2019 election results. As a comedian and actor by trade, Volodymyr Zelenskiy was well versed in using social media to grow his following and promote his work as an entertainer.

His critics portrayed him as the incompetent puppet of an oligarch who will bow to Russia. His fans say his digital strategy of micro-targeting campaign material was "more accurate" than the one deployed by the U.S. president Donald Trump in his 2016 campaign.

Meanwhile, Western-sponsored studies suggest bots originating from Russia may have initiated a quarter of all social media content on the election in Ukraine. And Ukrainian election monitors were seemingly caught off guard: ill-equipped to police new phenomena like cyber troops and digital manipulation.

How did Zelenskiy so effectively cement his appeal in the social media era? And what of the digital footprint of neighbouring Russia, who just six years ago illegally annexed a part of Ukraine in the south and has supported proxies in the east? Just how big of a role did social media play in determining the latest political victories in Ukraine?

Does it matter? To paraphrase American historian Timothy Snyder's January 2020 Twitter thread[1]: what happens in Ukraine matters for the rest of the world because it acts as "a signal of coming political trends". It is also at the centre of two major challenges of contemporary politics: "oligarchy and digitalization"

Disclosure: Zelenskiy's former chief of staff Andriy Bohdan, in his official capacity, filed a lawsuit against the media company I work for, RFE/RL. Zelenskiy's new chief of staff Andriy Yermak has vowed to do the same. These cases are not related to this paper, which was produced independently of my work for RFE/RL.

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[1] https://twitter.com/TimothyDSnyder/status/1221547288218230784. Accessed 14 August 2020

From comedian to president

On a spring evening in 2019, I arrived at Volodymyr Zelenskiy's election headquarters in Kyiv to await the results in the first round of voting for the new president of Ukraine. I was overseeing coverage for the RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service, and had arrived just moments before the candidate.

Dressed in a shirt and suit pants, under the gaze of dozens of cameras, Zelenskiy played ping pong with one of the many reporters who packed the hall. He had agreed to give an interview to the winner.

Zelenskiy plays ping pong with journalists at his electoral headquarters on March 31, 2019.
The winning journalist was able to interview him (Photo: REUTERS/Valentyn Ogirenko)

Over the coming days, we would learn that Zelenskiy had won the March 31 election with 73% of the vote, followed by another landslide for his political party in the July 2019 snap parliamentary election.

The unconventional style I witnessed on election night would become a signature of both the Zelenskiy campaign and his early presidency. His party – named the Servant of the People party, after a TV sitcom of the same name in which he played the lead character – was the first in Ukraine's political history to win such a clear majority in the parliament, controlling over half of the seats.

And what followed from Zelenskiy's victorious camp was some bold anti-media rhetoric. Speaking to RFE/RL[2] a few months later, Zelenskiy's new chief of staff Andriy Bohdan dismissed the role of the traditional news media. "As our election campaign has proved, we communicate with a society without mediators, without journalists," he said, while dismissing further questions.

Before being appointed by Zelenskiy, Bohdan had been a lawyer for Ukrainian billionaire Ihor Kolomoysky, an oil and real estate tycoon who owned the media outlets that first employed Zelenskiy as an actor and then supported his presidential bid.

In February 2020, President Zelenskiy replaced Andriy Bohdan with his aide, a former producer and lawyer, Andriy Yermak. At the first press conference in his new capacity, Yermak took the opposite stance: "Without media monitoring and showing our mistakes, the government would not be able to become better daily. We have to acknowledge this."

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It all began for Zelenskiy on a TV screen. Before trying his hand at presidency in real life, he played a school teacher who becomes famous after an angry speech about the state of the country's affairs goes viral on YouTube. The hit TV sitcom *Servant of the People* follows the unlikely – or apparently not that unlikely – story of what happens when the teacher becomes president and begins to drain the corrupt swamp.

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[2] «Ми спілкуємося із суспільство без журналістів» – Богдан про свою «відставку», Радіо Свобода Україна, 3 August 2019, <youtube.com/watch?v=ObIhls-R-J4>. Accessed 14 August 2020

The political satire premiered in October 2015 on the popular TV channel 1+1, owned by the Ukrainian billionaire Ihor Kolomoyskiy. The sitcom continued to run until its finale on March 28, 2019 – two days before the presidential election – blurring the line between entertainment and politics.

According to the Democratic Initiatives Foundation report[3], 50% of all Ukrainians had watched the TV series before the election campaign began, and 85% had seen Zelenskiy's other popular touring variety show, Kvartal 95, a comedy troupe turned production company that Zelenskiy himself created in 2003.

Kolomoyskiy's political sympathies were not covert: he wanted to bring President Petro Poroshenko down. But did he plan for a star from his TV channel to take the real oath? Speculation continues about the exact role of the oligarch, but he distances himself from any claims that the sitcom was used as a political tool.

"It was Zelenskiy's own decision to run," Kolomoyskiy told RFE/RL in an April 2019 interview from Israel[4]. "I first learned about it in the middle of 2017. [...] In retrospect, I realise that when they started making this film, they might have had such thoughts [about the presidency]. But he did not share with anyone, did not ask anyone; this is an independent decision."

After the victory, Zelenskiy met with Kolomoyskiy "to discuss business in Ukraine".
*(Photo: President of Ukraine's Facebook page, September 2019)*

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[3] 100 days after the presidential election: assessments and expectations of citizens, DIF, <https://dif.org.ua/article/100-dniv-pislya-prezidentskikh-viboriv-otsinki-ta-ochikuvannya-gromadyan>
[4] Igor Kolomoisky's interview with Schemes: I want Zelenskiy to become president, Mikhail Tkach, <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/schemes/29887901.html> Accessed 14 August 2020

The comedian formally announced his intention to run for office on Kolomoyskiy's TV channel 1+1 on New Year's eve. He was given the midnight slot for his announcement – a slot traditionally reserved for the president's annual New Year's address. But the popular channel postponed the president's speech, causing significant uproar and putting even more of a spotlight on the actor.

It's a remarkable story, but it is not wholly unique. Other comedians have moved into politics before Zelenskiy in Guatemala (Jimmy Morales), Italy (Beppe Grillo), Slovenia (Margin Šarec), and Iceland (Jón Gnarr). Below a picture of himself posing with comedian and former mayor of Reykjavik, Jón Gnarr, chief of staff Bohdan wrote on Facebook in September 2019: "We made history based on his example."
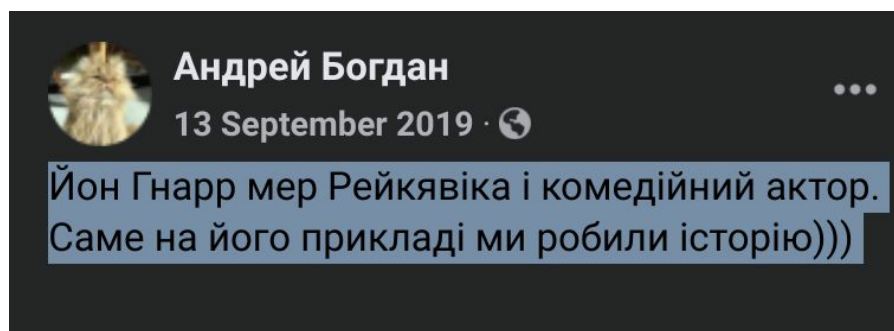
Facebook caption on a picture of Andriy Bohdan and former Icelandic mayor, Jón Gnarr. (Screengrab)

In a Telegram messaging app group maintained by Zelenskiy's digital team, an interview with the Icelandic mayor was shared in March 2019, in which he said "old political wolves" may make fun of comedians, but lose.

During the campaign, TV channel 1+1 continued to elevate Zelenskiy's profile, going so far as to have him narrate a documentary about Ronald Reagan, which they aired the night before the election. "We want to show how a man from show business becomes the president," the po-faced broadcasters announced.

The National TV and Radio Council of Ukraine[5] calculated that during the presidential campaign, channel 1+1 devoted 14% of its total airtime to shows produced by Zelenskiy's company Kvartal 95 – or over 200 hours of programming. The regulator also found the channel's news coverage included "no critical reports or information" about candidate Zelenskiy, but many critical words about his main rival, Petro Poroshenko.

Poroshenko was the incumbent, a veteran politician, a former government minister, and a wealthy businessman, who was linked with two TV stations himself: Channel 5 and Priamyi. Neither station held back from criticising Poroshenko's rival, but their combined reach is a fraction of 1+1, which according to research[6] was also the most popular and trusted TV channel in Ukraine. In addition, Kolomoyskiy's media group was more prominent on social media platforms and amplified the messaging.

That hasn't stopped the TV stations from throwing punches after the battle: on 31 December 2019, both Channel 5 and Priamyi followed 1+1's example, and instead of showing President Zelenskiy's New Year's greetings at midnight, they showed Poroshenko's New Year address (who by now was only an opposition MP).

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[5] During the three election months, the presence of presidential candidate Volodymyr Zelensky on the air of "1 + 1" reached 14 percent, Nrada, <https://www.nrada.gov.ua/za-try-peredvyborchyh-misyatsi-prysutnist-kandydata-na-post-prezydenta-volodymyra-zelenskogo-v-efiri-1-1-dosyagla-14-vidsotkiv/?fbclid=IwAR1zi8VsT_7qon0zY5qT4oxfmRlMiHfxdUsfP1ep2zZcq5kdS2S5-x6QcQk> Accessed August 2020
[6] Trust in the media, the influence of Russian propaganda, media literacy in Ukraine, Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, (February 2019).

Mirror of the people

In early 2019, the mood in the country was grim. Amid an ongoing war with Russia, Ukrainian voters were the most dissatisfied electorate in the world according to Gallup[7], who said only 9% of Ukrainians expressed confidence in the national government.

IMF rankings[8] placed Ukraine second only to Moldova as the poorest country in Europe. And Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index[9] put Ukraine at 126th out of 180 countries: ahead of Russia (137), but far below another key neighbor, Poland (41).

The comedian's messaging was right on target for this unhappy audience: just like the character he played in Servant of the People, he campaigned on a platform of anti-corruption and anti-elitism. His slogans were: "The president is a servant of the people", and "When spring comes, we'll start planting" (plays on the Ukrainian homonym for planting arrest)

Zelenskiy turned to Facebook to draft his political manifesto. (Screenshot:Facebook)

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[7] Zach Bikus, 'World-Low 9% of Ukrainians Confident in Government', Gallup (March 21, 2019) https://news.gallup.com/poll/247976/world-low-ukrainians-confident-government.aspx Accessed August 20, 2020

[8] https://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDPDPC@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD Accessed August 20, 2020

[9] https://www.transparency.org/country/UKR Accessed August 20, 2020

Instead of posting a manifesto explaining his policy points after his New Year's eve announcement, Zelenskiy posted a Facebook video on 8 January 2019, asking Ukrainians to help him draft what they felt his manifesto should include. "It appears to me that old politicians live by a simple principle: don't ask anybody anything, promise a lot. I will do it the other way," he told Ukrainians. "I will write my program together with you."

In the video address, seen more than 1.2 million times on Facebook alone, Zelenskiy asks voters to describe the top problems of the country. Over 10,000 people left comments, and his party claimed a further 120,000 wrote to Zelenskiy's election headquarters. In the comments, Ukrainians complained primarily about the war, low salaries, and corruption.

In another [video][10], posted in February 2019, Zelenskiy asked for recommendations of top professionals to hire to government positions. No more nepotism or backroom appointments, he vowed. After his victory, Zelenskiy went on to put members of his comedy troupe in key positions of power. Among them: childhood friend Ivan Bakanov was made head of the Ukrainian intelligence services. Zelenskiy defended his choices, saying entertainers were more likely to be resistant to corruption.

As a presidential candidate, Zelenskiy avoided press conferences or sit-down interviews. He preferred to post messages and videos on his social networks. And instead of town halls and election tents, he toured the country with a comedy act. When the new Ukrainian president did eventually sit down with reporters, it was six months after his victory. He answered 500 questions from more than 300 journalists in an event lasting 14 hours. A representative of Ukraine's National Records Agency declared it the longest press conference in history.

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[10] https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=376583402892553

*While avoiding media during the campaign, Zelenskiy conducted his
first major press conference at the Kyiv food market. (Photo: Serhil Nuzhnenko/RFE/RL)*

Hosted at the Kyiv food market, it seemed more like a food festival than a press conference, with hamburgers, sushi rolls, and avocado toast served alongside Kyiv-brewed India Pale Ale, while journalists awaited their allotted shift.

This was not the only unusual communications format Zelenskiy introduced: he posted videos of himself talking to a camera while driving a Tesla, and granted an "interview" to a former co-star from Servant of the People to mark 100 days of the real presidency.

By contrast, when approached on the street in January 2019 by one of my colleagues at RFE/RL for comment about possible ties to Russian companies, Zelenskiy became irritated and snapped: "I do not owe you anything!"

The morning after that report aired, Ukrainians saw a different candidate: In a social media video that showed him coming straight from the set of the Servant of the People season 3, Zelenskiy apologised to the journalist for possibly overreacting, and once again reiterated that he longer has projects in Russia.

One day later, he admitted the outlet *Ukrainska Pravda*: "Our company owns shares of that company [Grin Films]," Zelenskiy said. "That is true." He promised[11] to divest.

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[11] REFE/RL Staff, *Ukrainian Presidential Hopeful Admits Russian Assets, Promise To Divest, RFE/RL (Jan 20, 2019)*https://www.rferl.org/a/ukrainian-presidential-hopeful-admits-russian-assets-promise-to-divest/29720448.html

Zelenskiy is not only a famous comedian, but a successful producer too. And, just four days before the election, a report by Slidtsvo.Info[12] claimed he had failed to disclose all of the trappings of his success by omitting a 15-room luxury villa in Italy from his public asset declaration. Zelenskiy countered on Instagram, saying that the home was owned by a company, and it was enough that he had declared he owned the company.

Neither of these controversial news stories could put a dent in Zelenskiy's campaign. His promise of change was enough to capture the voting public's imagination and secure his success.

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[12] https://www.slidstvo.info/articles/ze-villa-italijskyj-majetok-zelenskoho-v-otochenni-rosijskyh-oliharhiv

From the source's mouth

In line with the global trend, more Ukrainians are getting their news online, and television audiences are getting smaller. There is little doubt that social media played a role in the 2019 election, but there is little consensus on how significant that role might have been.

A USAID-Internews survey[13] conducted in the summer of 2019 found social media had surpassed TV as the primary source of news for the first time (68% vs 66%). Social media and TV were followed in popularity by the websites of major news brands (59%), while radio and print media dropped to 18% and 15% respectively.

Other polls paint a contradictory picture. The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) conducted a poll[14] in February 2019 at the request of the watchdog Detector Media. It found Central Ukrainian TV channels remained the top source of information for the majority of the population (74%), while only about a quarter (24%) relied on social media.

A third poll[15] in the summer of 2019, conducted again by KIIS and funded this time by the Democratic Initiatives Fund, found TV extremely dominant to social networks as the main source of news on election campaigns (72% vs 29% respectively).

	Sample size	Methodology	Timing	Question phrasing
USAID-Internews survey	4,056	Focus-group discussions	June-July 2019	What channels did you watch for news in the past month?
KIIS poll	2,042	Personal interviews using tablets	February 2019	Choose top three sources from a list
KIIS and DIF poll	2,040	Personal interviews	August 2019	What sources were the main ones for you during the campaign?

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[13] https://internews.org/story/online-and-social-media-overtake-tv-popularity-ukraine-new-usaid-internews-media-consumption Accessed August 20, 2020

[14] https://detector.media/doc/images/news/archive/2016/164308/DM-KMIS_Report_05_2019_ENGL_WEB.pdf Accessed August 20, 2020

[15] https://dif.org.ua/article/100-dniv-pislya-prezidentskikh-viboriv-otsinki-ta-ochikuvannya-gromadyan Accessed August 20, 2020

Table: Comparison of survey design shows how different methodologies achieved different results.

Ukrainian sociologist Iryna Bekeshkina, who led the Democratic Initiatives think-tank in Kyiv and spoke to me in December 2019, said these different findings are likely a result of methodology.

"Most Ukrainians voted for Zelenskiy regardless of their sources of information," Bekeshkina told me. Her survey found that 41% of Ukrainians who said they had never used social media, voted for Zelenskiy. And the same candidate was chosen by 49% of Facebook and Twitter users, and half of all Instagram users.

Voters under 30, she said, did not use only social media in their information gathering process before voting: of those polled, 60% said they used online sites, 52% said they used TV, and 46% said they used social networks to gather information about the candidates. And if only the votes of people under 30 had been counted, Zelenskiy would have been elected in the first round with 57% of the vote[16].

The Kyiv-based Center for Content Analysis [analysed](#)[17] the social media behavior of Poroshenko and Zelenskiy supporters. It concludes that TV, not social media, was the main driving force in the 2019 campaign.

That's not to say Mark Zuckerberg's platform hasn't become one of the main political debate stages in Ukraine. By the middle of 2019, 13 million Ukrainians were Facebook users[18]. Instagram reach was around 11 million, appealing more to younger users. By comparison, the average audience for a political show on the top-rated Ukrainian TV channels is several million people.

By the time of the first election day, Zelenskiy had the biggest following on Instagram, with 4.2 million subscribers compared to Poroshenko's fewer than 300,000. By contrast,

[16] Maksym Vikhrov, Portrait of the Servant as a young pol, Ukrainian Week, (October 28, 2019). <https://ukrainianweek.com/Politics/237054> Accessed August 17, 2020

[17] "Russian Style Propaganda" And "Retired Opinion Leaders", Center for Content Analysis: https://bit.ly/3h6YHeZ, Accessed August 17, 2020

[18] https://plusone.com.ua/fb/en/facebook_in_ukraine.pdf, Accessed August 17, 2020

Poroshenko had a clear lead on Facebook, with 2.5 million followers of his official page vs Zelenskiy's 400,000.
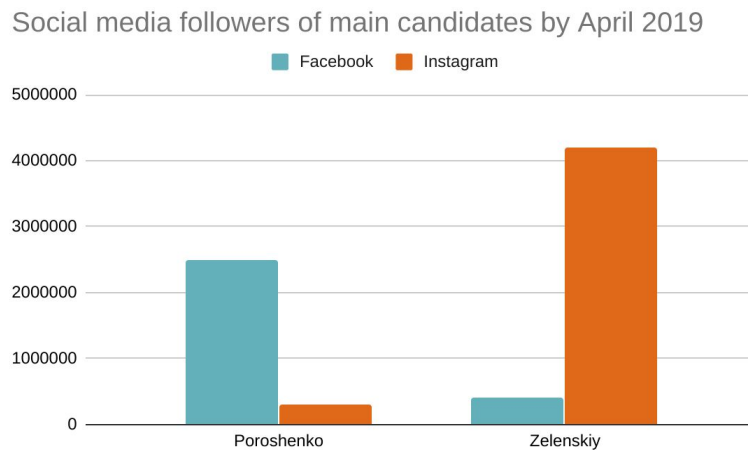
Graph: Poroshenko was more popular on Facebook; Zelenskiy on Instagram

Media NGO Internews-Ukraine teamed up with social media intelligence agency Singularex to [analyse](#)[19] over 67,000 social media posts on Ukraine's three most popular social platforms: Facebook, Instagram and Russian-owned VKontakte network (VK).

They found pro-Russian narratives on VK, said Facebook was the most political of all three with one in five users posting something political in the lead-up to the election, and found Zelenskiy dominated Instagram with 82% of sampled posts mentioning him.

Research co-author Volodymyr Yermolenko said: "Instagram, for Zelenskiy, was like Twitter for Trump: a way to bypass the [traditional] media in communication with the audience." And with the increasingly blurred line between entertainment and politics in Ukraine, he said, the visual nature of Instagram "was essential".

Independent Ukrainian monitors, who analysed electing campaigning using Council of Europe methodology, identified additional key features of local digital campaigns[20]:

[19] [https://ukraineworld.org/articles/infowars/ukraines-elections-facebook-instagram-and-vk-what-ukrainians-think-about-top-parties-and-leaders](https://ukraineworld.org/articles/infowars/ukraines-elections-facebook-instagram-and-vk-what-ukrainians-think-about-top-parties-and-leaders), Accessed August 17, 2020

[20] Final Report on Findings of the Independent Monitoring of Media Coverage of the Presidential Election Campaign in Ukraine / O. Burmahin, D. Dutsyk, R. Kuzhel, Ye. Kuzmenko, O. Yurkova._ K., 2019. – p.44

- Of the top 10 presidential candidates monitored, only Zelenskiy used social media to its "full extent" by using informal language to communicate on equal terms, and actively involving the audience through flash mobs and polls. Communication was built around the personality of the candidate, not around his political position, with an emphasis on the fact that he will listen to experts and the people.
- The main communication channel for Zelenskiy was an Instagram account, which he created years earlier to promote his work as a performer. He acquired his primary audience at that time. The Facebook page was promoted later. Zelenskiy also had an advantage with the number of followers on YouTube and Telegram messaging app networks.
- For the first time in Ukraine, before the second round, social networks began to set the tone of the election campaign. That was a result of Zelenskiy's strategy of not appearing in the media (except for participation on a talk show on TV channel 1+1), and communicating instead with voters through professionally assembled short videos.

News would break first on social media, and then be reported by traditional outlets. In early April 2019, Zelenskiy called on Poroshenko to debate him at the national stadium, and to take alcohol and drug tests. The video, which immediately went viral, included a deadline to respond. "As Mr. Zelenskiy [has said], it should be the stadium, so let it be the stadium", Poroshenko replied via video.
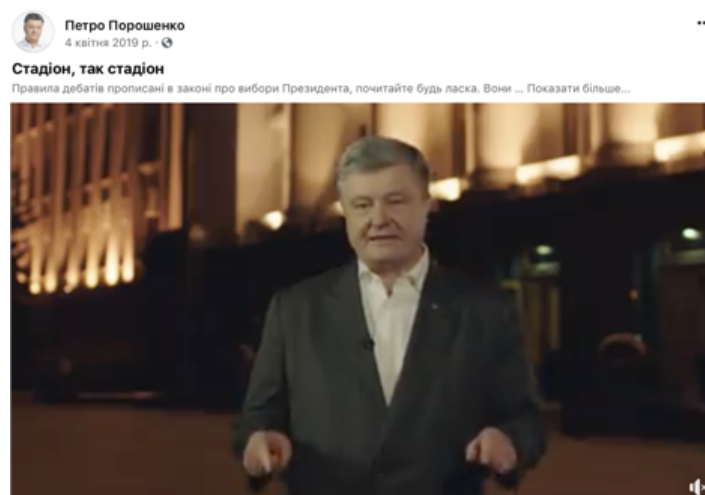
On 4 April 2019, on Facebook, Poroshenko agreed to debate Zelenskiy: "Let it be the stadium." (Screenshot)

A tale of two campaigns: Fedorov vs Parscale

Trump's digital director Brad Parscale has said of the 2016 campaign: "Twitter is how [Trump] talked to people; Facebook was how he won"[21]. Zelenskiy's digital expert, Mykhailo Fedorov, says he spent less and deployed more accurate microtargeting than Parscale in 2016.
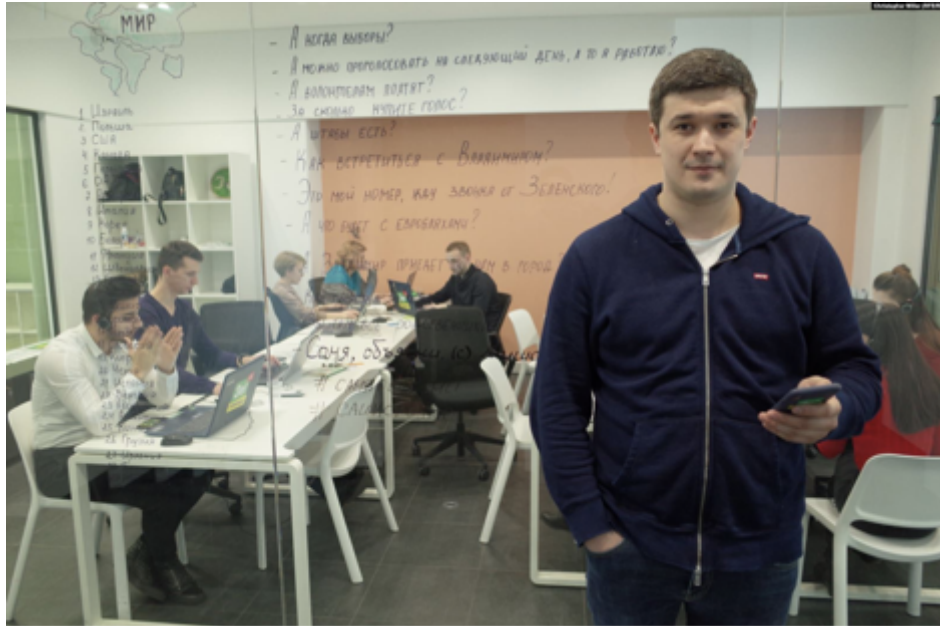
Mykhailo Fedorov has compared his digital campaign with the efforts of the American president.
(Photo: Christopher Miller/RFE/RL)

A native of the south-eastern Ukrainian region of Zaporizhzhya, Fedorov ran the digital agency SMMStudio. Zelenskiy's comedy troupe was one of his clients. The 28-year-old businessman with no political experience led the digital campaign that defeated Ukraine's political veterans.

Parscale was also a former digital marketer with no political experience. He got help from – among others – a digitally savvy former Facebook employee: 28-year-old James Barnes. But are there any other similarities?

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[21] Lesley Stahl, *Facebook "embeds," Russia and the Trump campaign's secret weapon*, CBS News, (June 10, 2018) https://www.cbsnews.com/news/facebook-embeds-russia-and-the-trump-campaigns-secret-weapon-60-minutes/

Both candidates promised to "drain corrupt swamps" and had previously appeared in entertainment shows. But Trump was awarded his nomination by an established and organised political party; Zelenskiy's comedy troupe had to found its own party, and named it after a TV sitcom.

Both campaigns relied on targeted digital advertising to address tailored messaging to specific groups of voters. Here's where Parscale had the edge: Facebook provided his team with Republican-leaning employees who were embedded in the campaign's digital office to help with their ad tool.

Facebook said (and the Democratic campaign confirmed) it offered identical support to candidate Clinton. But that offer was rejected, and the Republicans went on to run "the single best digital campaign ever" on the platform, according to a leaked memo by Facebook executive Andrew Bosworth obtained by The New York Times[22].

By comparison, Zelenskiy's head of digital complained to RFE/RL that the tech giant had been slow to answer his campaign requests.

In 2016, Trump's team spent about $44 million on Facebook advertising[23]. The Clinton campaign spent $28 million. The Trump campaign website, Parscale told 60 Minutes, cost about $1,500 to build.

Fedorov says his digital team and their spend accounted for a small fraction of what the Zelenskiy campaign spent in total. The digital campaign budget leading up to the first

[22] Kevin Roose, Sheera Frenkel and Mike Isaac, *Don't Tilt Scales Against Trump, Facebook Executive Warns*, New York Times, (Jan 7, 2020). https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/07/technology/facebook-trump-2020.html?searchResultPosition=2 Accessed August 20, 2020
[23] Sarah Frier, *Trump's Campaign Said It Was Better at Facebook. Facebook Agrees*, Bloomberg (April 2018) https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-04-03/trump-s-campaign-said-it-was-better-at-facebook-facebook-agrees Accessed August 20, 2020

round was around $200,000[24], he told news outlets, with an additional $50-70k to cover freelance contracts and IT-outsourcing.[25]

The work was carried out by eight full-time employees, including two copywriters who reportedly prepared content for all social media platforms[26]. There were a limited number of freelancers, and around 600,000[27] volunteers.

The Zelenskiy camp created a contact centre to solicit volunteers (mostly students), via the Telegram messaging app. They created ZeBook, an electronic database where they could field questions from potential voters, and encourage them to vote.

Parscale's team had help from Cambridge Analytica to narrow his online targets to 32 personality types and came under fire for attempting to use psycholinguistic model to adapt messaging to these data sets, but he told CBS News' Lesley Stahl that their technology did not work and that his team's A/B testing of ads was the real key[28].

Fedorov told LIGA.Tech his team used artificial intelligence tools to analyse data from volunteers, and segmented their data, using keywords, into 32 categories for targeting, including "lawyers" or "mothers on maternity leave".

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[24] Bogdan Kutepov, With such support, we did not need bots - the head of Zelenskiy's digital campaign, Hromadske, https://hromadske.ua/posts/za-takoyi-pidtrimki-nam-ne-potribni-buli-boti-kerivnik-didzhital-kampaniyi-zelenskogo?fbclid=iwar1the-xozvzfqqzfpskejxupiuogcgvzt2uh6a65iis2rlmnvg67xcxpqs Accessed August 20, 2020

[25] In an interview for this paper with Ihor Feshchenko (a political expert at local election watchdog Chesno), he said neither of these expenditures on digital campaigns was reflected in the official Zelenskiy election report.

[26] Evgeny Shishatsky and Stas Yurasov, Interview: Zelenskiy's team, LIGA.Tech (April 26, 2019) https://tech.liga.net/technology/interview/pochemu-poroshenko-proigral-intervyu-s-onlayn-strategom-zelenskogo Accessed August 20, 2020

[27] Bogdan Kutepov, With such support, we did not need bots - the head of Zelenskiy's digital campaign, Hromadske, https://hromadske.ua/posts/za-takoyi-pidtrimki-nam-ne-potribni-buli-boti-kerivnik-didzhital-kampaniyi-zelenskogo?fbclid=iwar1the-xozvzfqqzfpskejxupiuogcgvzt2uh6a65iis2rlmnvg67xcxpqs Accessed August 20, 2020

[28] Lesley Stahl, *Facebook "embeds," Russia and the Trump campaign's secret weapon*, CBS News, (June 10, 2018) https://www.cbsnews.com/news/facebook-embeds-russia-and-the-trump-campaigns-secret-weapon-60-minutes/ Accessed August 20, 2020

Other key steps, as described by Fedorov to *LIGA.Tech* and *Ukrainska Pravda*[29], included:

- Identifying seven key audience segments and used these to create messaging that was specific to each segment, and tested the response to that messaging.
- Personalised the messaging: explained to students what they would do for students; to pensioners the same. But they went a layer deeper. So, for instance, what would the campaign do for 30- to 35-year-old men who worked for Uber?
- Targeted people who had no already indicated support for the current regime (by checking their Likes)
- Sent 18 million messages to different segments of the population, including over half a million emails;
- Engaged 600,000 volunteers and helped 2,000 "unofficial" community pages in different regions by providing design items and videos to administrators of such groups first;
- Spent the majority of ad spend on Facebook/Instagram targeting, and the rest on YouTube and Google display ads;
- Used the youth-oriented Telegram app: leading people there from Facebook and Instagram, and sometimes posting news exclusively on Telegram (which would later be picked up and reported on by the traditional media)
- Conducting competitions for the best sticker, cup, meeting the candidate, which boosted the size of the audience; and
- Experimenting: a lot.

Fedorov told LIGA.Tech he made more than 100 campaigns on Facebook, although he did not specify how many ads were tested during their experiments for each campaign. Trump's digital director told CBS that they used AI to generate an average of 50–60,000 ads per day. Parscale also said they spent most of their advertising budget – around 80% – on Facebook.

A Facebook page funded by Trump supporters (Defeat Crooked Hillary), posted a conspiracy video that implied Hillary Clinton was taking drugs and had secret ties to

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[29] https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2019/09/27/7227431/ and
https://www.pravda.com.ua/articles/2019/03/6/7208437/ Both accessed August 21, 2020

Russian president Vladimir Putin. In 2016, Trump [challenged Clinton](#)[30] to take a drug test before the final debate.

Three years later, in Ukraine, Zelenskiy made a similar offer of drug and alcohol tests to Poroshenko. Allegations about Zelenskiy's drug dependency seem to have first appeared offline among a group of war veterans, according to Ukrainian watchdog Detektor Media[31]. The allegation was later shared online by Poroshenko supporters.

Currently, in the US, Parscale has joined the new Trump election 2020 campaign. In Ukraine, following the 2019 election, Fedorov became vice prime minister of Ukraine and a minister for digital transformation.

During a phone call with Trump, Zelenskiy told his American counterpart he had learnt a lot from him. The White House released a transcript[32] of the July 2019 conversation between the two leaders during the impeachment inquiry. "We used quite a few of your skills and knowledge and were able to use it as an example for our elections," Zelenkskiy told Trump.

Later, in an interview with [The Guardian](#)[33], Zelenskiy explained his flattery, saying that Trump had shown him how "an outsider can win without having to adapt to the supposed rules of the game".

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[30] Elizabeth Turk, Donald Trump Challenges Hillary Clinton to 'Take a Drug Test' Before Final Debate, NBC News, (Oct 15, 2016) https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2016-election/donald-trump-challenges-hillary-clinton-take-drug-test-final-debate-n666896 Accessed August 20, 2020

[31] Katerina Goncharova, Where did the idea about "Zelensky-drug addict" appear in the media, MediaSapiens. https://ms.detector.media/manipulyatsii/post/22796/2019-04-26-zvidki-u-zmi-zyavilasya-teza-pro-zelenskogo-narkomana/ Accessed August 21, 2020

[32] https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Unclassified09.2019.pdf

[33] Shaun Walker and Andrew Roth, *Volodymyr Zelenskiy: 'My White House invitation? I was told it's being prepared'*, The Guardian (7 March 2020) https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/07/volodymyr-zelenskiy-tv-comic-who-became-ukraine-president-trump-putin Accessed August 20, 2020

A "nonsense" comparison

Vadym Denysenko, a former MP from Poroshenko's political block (2014–2019) and a representative of the government in the Ukrainian parliament, who also analyses digital campaigns, spoke to me on Christmas Day in 2019 about the role of social media in Ukraine's elections.

"It is nonsense to compare Zelenskiy's digital campaign with the campaign of Trump," he said.

Other experts phrased their doubts more diplomatically: Oxford University researcher Jens Hoed Madsen (author of The Psychology of Micro-Targeted Election Campaigns, 2019) described the comparison of Zelenskiy's campaign with the Trump campaign as "speculative".

Madsen analysed the Fedorov's digital efforts and spoke to me last winter: "First, it is unclear how Cambridge Analytica and the Ukrainian campaign influenced their respective elections. Second, unless Fedorov has access to the models and data used by Trump in 2016, the comparison is entirely speculative. Third, as the available data is different (for instance, Facebook has changed the API access), the campaign regulations are different, and the political context is different; the comparison is moot."

"It sounds like they have run a very basic, yet sensibly run, data-driven micro-targeted campaign, while the data was most likely demographic," Madsen noted. "It appears that they have used data-driven segmentation, but foregone the psychological components supposedly used by Cambridge Analytica."[34]

Denysenko puts it more bluntly: "They did not engage in deep-targeting. I have observed only eight socio-demographic groups that they targeted in Ukraine; others say 12,"

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[34] Cambridge Analytica executives originally promoted, but later walked back claims that their "psychographics" were used in the Trump campaign.
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/us/politics/cambridge-analytica.html

Denysenko told me. He concedes: "Zelenskiy conducted a well-organised, centralised campaign."

Denysenko has his own theories about the size of Fedorov's team, too: "We have heard the report that there were only eight people [working full time], but this is nonsense. A much larger team would be needed just to control what was going out and monitor comments."

The key to making Facebook work for your campaign, Denysenko explained, is to have many similar messages shared among many popular accounts simultaneously. "Zelenskiy was very good at this: they had around 500 such 'dumping points'. Poroshenko had approximately 100–150 less," he said. Then again, this could be explained by the 2,000+ regional fan pages that Fedorov's team was in direct communication with.

Madsen notes that the responsiveness of Ukrainian citizens to Zelenskiy's messages was remarkable. This allowed the campaign to test and refine messages that resonated with each of the voter groups.

But it was the mood of the country, not Fedorov's technological brilliance that won Zelenskiy the office, according to Denysenko. "We are overestimating the role of social media and Fedorov during that campaign. It was an electoral revolution. A digitally unsavvy 80-year-old grandfather could have run that social media campaign, and it would have worked – maybe not as effectively."

Dr. Natalia Boyko studies social networks at the Institute of Sociology, National Academy of Science of Ukraine, and she also believes mood should be considered.

"Zelenskiy's digital campaign used positive and optimistic messages. I am sure this was one of the key factors of his victory," she told me in a December interview. "Society was tired of the black PR used by other candidates: the country was at war, and people wanted to hear messages of hope. Social networks [were hungry to] spread such ideas widely, and it was their main role in the campaign."

While Fedorov insists his team did not use any negative messaging about rivals, there was an abundance of negative messaging from other sources.

Now a parliamentarian and deputy chair of the banking and customs committee, during the campaign Oleksandr Dubinsky was working for 1+1 as the host and producer of a journalistic investigation show, *Ukrainian Scoops*.

Before the election, his show was responsible for making one of the darkest allegations of the election campaign: it claimed President Poroshenko was linked to the 1997 death of his elder brother, who was killed during a road accident many years ago. On YouTube, as of 2020, the video has had over 1.6 million views. The conspiracy first originated in 2017 in the Russian media[35], and was recirculated again after the 1+1 program.

Zelenskiy's official campaign says it did not spread the murder conspiracy. But it did share at least one message by Dubinsky on Telegram on February 13th: one from his YouTube vlog, saying that Poroshenko associates did not want to allow the screening of *Servant of the People* Season 3 during the campaign.

As a journalist at 1+1, Dubinsky reported in favour of channel owner Ihor Kolomoyskiy, particularly concerning the nationalisation of Privatbank[36]. He denies any close ties with the billionaire and has evaded questions about how his family affords dozens of properties and expensive cars, including seven Mercedes and a Maserati. Dubinsky's response – "My mom likes speed" – has become a meme in Ukraine.

In April 2019, Poroshenko vowed to file a lawsuit against 1+1 for running the story about his brother. "They have crossed the line," the then-president said. Poroshenko's press service did not reply to my enquiries about whether the complaint would be filed, and 1+1 told me it had not received any legal complaint.

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[35] https://www.ntv.ru/peredacha/rus_sensations/m19400/o473620/video/ Accessed August 20, 2020
[36] Dubinsky also submitted over 1,000 amendments to a banking bill that would prevent the return of nationalised banks to their owners. It was dubbed the anti-Kolomoyskiy bill because it would prevent him retaking control of Privatbank. The bill passed on May 15th 2020.

What Poroshenko did

In contrast to Zelenskiy, the incumbent president of Ukraine ran his re-election campaign on three clear pillars: army, language, and church. He also took pride in promoting his work to negotiate 90-day visa-free travel to the EU for Ukrainian citizens.

Prominent Ukrainian intellectuals, some of whom are social media influencers, vigorously supported the incumbent. They were concerned that having a comedian for president would have a detrimental effect on the country's independence.

"In the history of mankind, such circuses always ended in dictatorship… usually of the foreign variety," warned the First of December Group, which includes prominent Ukrainian scholars and intellectuals. "Ukraine is over the abyss", famous writer Oksana Zabuzhko stressed before the election.

Before the first presidential round, Poroshenko posed with Orthodox Church of Ukraine leaders, who recently broke from Russia. (Screenshot from Instagram, by author)

Official social media pages underlined Poroshenko's achievements and warned about the threats to the north-east. In an email to me, Poroshenko's press service said: "Our main

task was to inform [the electorate] about the activities of Petro Poroshenko as the head of state, since election did not alleviate him of his duty to defend the country from aggression."

After the first round, Poroshenko's campaign decided to take a leaf from Zelenskiy's playbook and started a channel on Telegram messenger, with the promise: "Let's add drive. Let's rock."

Their first attempts at mastering the platform were painful for some to witness: attempts at using informal language and youth slang were met with derision.

Like Zelenskiy, Poroshenko officials told me their campaign's social media efforts were managed by a team of eight full-time employees. "Our main emphasis was on Facebook," his press office told me, noting that his page on this platform remains the most popular.

Zelenskiy's digital guru Fedorov said he had so many grievances about how they conducted their campaign that his team assembled a "black library" of all the unethical messages and hate speech posted.


18/04/2019   Поширити

How fair did Poroshenko's team feel the other side played? "Our opponents put the main emphasis [for negative PR] on TV, where the number of manipulations skyrocketed," they said. They accuse the ZeTeam, "together with Russians", of creating an arsenal of misinformation pretexts.

Porohenko's teams points to examples of campaign misinformation that were debunkd by the fact-checking initiative, StopFake.orgdisinformation: the false claim that Poroshenko "murdered" his elder brother, reports he ran from a crowd of protestors when he was approaching the rally, and the incorrect claim he paid to meet President Trump (a story for which the BBC has apologised and agreed to pay damages for).

Ahead of the run-off vote the atmosphere became even more tense. The main messages against Zelenskiy were that he was the puppet of an oligarch, incompetent, and would bow to Russia. In April 2019, billboards appeared showing Petro Poroshenko facing off with Russian President Vladimir Putin with a caption: "The Decisive Choice".
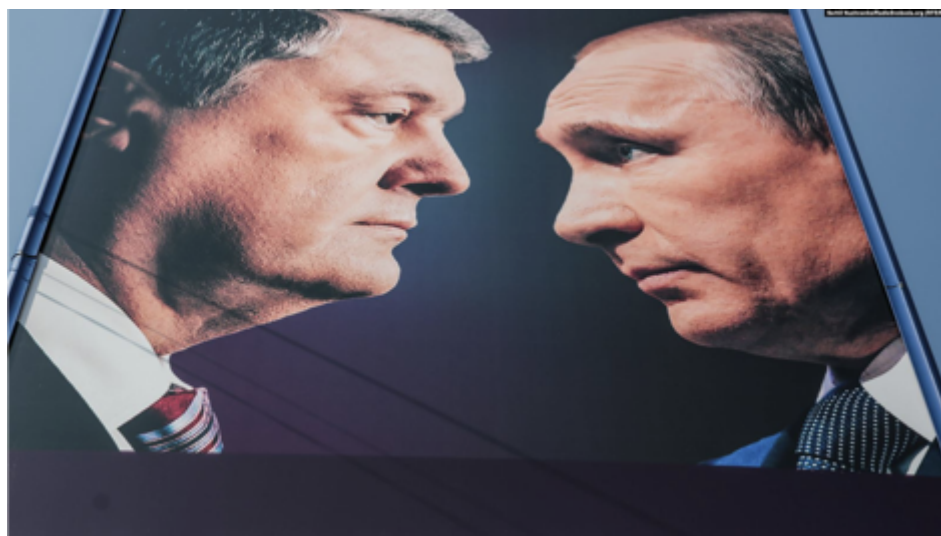
A billboard in Kyiv before the run-off depicts Poroshenko and Putin. (Photo: Serhil Nuzhnenko/RadioSvoboda.org)

Poroshenko's camp worked with Kyiv-based Postmen DA to run its social media accounts. This agency is one of Ukraine's market leaders, with clients ranging from the country's foreign ministry to the EU Anti-Corruption Initiative and Electrolux.

In mid-March 2019, Facebook disclosed data on who paid for which political ads. It was a bombshell: reporters and observers found examples of Black PR in the data, paid for by Postmen DA.

A report by [The Babel](#) (an online outlet co-funded by Kolomoyskiy until 2020) said the agency paid to promote videos claiming Zelenskiy was a drug addict. One such video showed Zelenskiy being hit by a truck. Observers from the Chesno campaign for fair election in Ukraine found $250k had been spent on ads targeting four candidates, including Poroshenko but none more than Zelenskiy.

In July 2020, Facebook announced the results of a year-long investigation[37]: they had removed 65 Facebook accounts, 32 Pages, and 8 Instagram accounts – all involved in coordinated inauthentic behavior in Ukraine. They also noted that all four candidates had been targeted. And despite attempts "to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation linked this activity to Postmen DA". It said $1.91 million had spent to promote the content.

Postmen DA did not respond to my request for an interview.

Asked whether they were aware of the practices undertaken by Postmen DA, Poroshenko's press office responded that "Postmen DA is an independent agency that worked with different clients, including political. The electoral headquarters acted strictly within the law." They denied any involvement with the truck video.

Depictions of political violence were not limited to Facebook: TV series Servant of the People included a scene where the president, as played by Zelenskiy, opened fire in

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[37] https://about.fb.com/news/2020/07/removing-political-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/ Accessed August 20, 2020

parliament. A spokesperson of the Interior Ministry, Artem Shevchenko, condemned the violence in both videos during the campaign, but said the difference between the two was that, in the series, all characters were fictional.

'President', played by Zelenskiy, fires at the Verkhovna Rada. (Servant of the People, screenshot by author)

After the presidential election, Postmen DA and Poroshenko's election headquarters ceased cooperation. The agency's founder Yaroslav Vedmid joined Holos, the party of Ukraine's other have-a-go politician: rockstar Sviatoslav Vakarchuk. Holos has said Vedmid' denies engaging in manipulative activities, suggesting the CEO was not aware how the agency handled it's biggest political client.

After the election in July 2019, Zelenskiy's team announced that the police would investigate who had authored the "drug addict" video, and that they could face up to five years in prison.

In August 2019, the police conducted searches at the apartment of activist Denys Lubchenko from Poroshenko's party's youth arm. He denied creating the video and said he took it from the Internet. In March 2020, I asked the National Police of Ukraine for developments in the case, but was told the investigation is still ongoing. Judging by Lubchenko's Facebook page, he is still actively engaged in politics, including appearing in a photo with Poroshenko's wife.

Questions also remain about how these digital campaigns were funded. Chesno's Feshchenko said his monitors observed a serious ad boost on Poroshenko's Facebook page in the summer of 2018, ahead of the campaign launch. "We wanted to know whether this was taxpayers' money or from other sources," the analyst told me. "Administration of the president answered that they do not know who is behind such efforts."

While Zelenskiy did not officially declare any expenditures on social media, Poroshenko reported spending $160,000. This number aligned with figures released by Facebook in March 2019, but does not cover spend on unofficial pages supporting the candidate.

According to Ukrainian law, the Central Election Commission and National Anticorruption Agency have to check candidates' and political parties' reports before and after the national election. However, they have limited time to conduct checks, as well as little capacity to verify sources of funding, according to Feshchenko.

To ensure online transparency, Feshchenko says, Ukraine has to both "improve laws and motivation of civil servants".

Off-the-books payments remain an impediment to transparency: in December 2019, the *Kyiv Post* reported that the Poroshenko administration had paid bloggers to sway public opinion. Documents obtained by the English-language newspaper cover events during 2015 and 2016, and suggest that Poroshenko's allies might have been swayed to direct smear campaigns against his critics on social networks.

Political consultant Kateryna Koval told the *Kyiv Post* that she coordinated bloggers who supported the army, offering to help then commander-in-chief, Poroshenko. She claimed around 20 popular writers received money, with top bloggers making $1,500 per month – several times more than an average salary in the country. Others claimed the bloggers received offers of paid advisory posts in the government or other perks.

The former president's associates deny the existence of any secret media plan or payment to bloggers, including off-the-books. Bloggers, likewise, have denied taking money, with some explaining that they simply shared the same views as Poroshenko's office around the same time they were promoting those talking points.

Sponsored bloggers are suspected to be widespread across the political spectrum in Ukraine. Head of the Penta Center, Volodymyr Fesenko, told the *Kyiv Post*: "Zero political analysts work for free, but no one will tell you the terms under which they work." Fesenko, one of the most popular local political experts, often quoted by Western media, was one of the names that appeared on the list. He has denied being on Poroshenko's payroll.

Rumours, accusations and lies dominate the conversation about digital marketing in 2019. So we leave the final word to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, whose final election report[38] found that attack ads, "played a central role during the second-round period: particularly from supporters of Petro Poroshenko and to a lesser extent of Volodymyr Zelenskiy".

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[38] OSCE, ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report, Warsaw, 20 November 2019
<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/ukraine/439631?download=true>

Assemble the Post-Truth Army

It was inevitable: if social media was used in the election year, bots and trolls were to be found. Trolling involved politically motivated or paid actors posing as ordinary citizens to initiate charged discussions and push a partisan political agenda. Bots attempted to do the same as cheap, fully automated accounts.

In an interview with RFE/RL[39] in February 2019, Kyiv-based political consultant Dmytro Raimov explained how his troll farm works.

"I hire students majoring in political science, or sociology, or psychology. It is interesting to work with psychologists because they know how to get emotions out of people", he said.

Raimov estimates that, on average, Ukrainian politicians pay between $2,000 and $5,000 per month to get support on social media. He describes himself a specialist in crisis communications, and describes his colleagues as a "post-truth army". He does not always disclose the identity of his clients[40].

In an interview with The Babel[41] in October 2019, Raimov claimed he was in charge of bots used to support the election campaign of Volodymyr Zelenskiy, paid for by parties interested in seeing him succeed – namely, businessmen whose interests were being frustrated by the incumbent.

Raimov said Zelenskiy's team was presented with the results after the work was done.

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[39] Valery Yegoshin and Kira Tolstyakova, How bots distort public opinion, RFE/RL <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/schemes/29744533.html> Accessed August 22, 2020
[40] Olena Poskkana, Ramoiv: As a technologist I have preconditions, Gordonua.com (Feb 20 2019) https://gordonua.com/ukr/publications/raimov-skazhu-jak-polittehnolog-dlja-novogo-majdanu-je-vsi-peredumovi-733373.html
[41] Maria Ulyanovska, How bot farms helped Zelensky, The Babel, (25 October, 2019) <https://thebabel.com.ua/texts/37302-yak-botofermi-dopomagali-zelenskomu-chomu-tak-dovgo-movchala-ochilnicya-moz-i-na-kogo-oriyentuyetsya-vidomstvo-interv-yu-kolishnogo-radnika-ministra-dmitra-raimova?fbclid=IwAR1h-fdAa_chFlN8hcKK8eR0fnsZFV93dF-8Mwhf2bc7E4Pl08-c6aCMSGY>

"We had bot farms, a network of public pages, Telegram-channels and groups of experts and bloggers", Raimov said.

Raimov claims his efforts on behalf of the comedian were a reaction to "dirty tricks" by "Israeli political consultants". In April 2019, bloggers[42] circulated the theory that Poroshenko had engaged the services of Israeli political strategist Moshe Klughaft, who had a record of aggressive campaigning in Israel and Georgia. Both Klughaft and Poroshenko's headquarters have denied such cooperation.

Zelenskiy's associates deny that Raimov ever worked for their election campaign. "This is nonsense. He has never worked with the team or visited headquarters", Iryna Pobedonostseva told me. Pobedonostseva is currently responsible for the information policy of the presidential office. During the campaign she was Zelenskiy's press person.

'I, bot' is the first undercover investigation inside a Ukrainian troll farm. (Screenshot by author)

Ukraine's digital "under market" has expanded, and experts estimate it is an industry now worth millions of dollars per year. Last summer, independent TV outlet Hromadske[43] sent a Slidstvo.Info journalist to work undercover at a troll form.

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[42] http://www.politiko.ua/blogpost153741

[43] Vasyl Bidun, *Uncovering the work of a Ukrainian troll farm*, Hromadske. (November 8, 2019.) <https://en.hromadske.ua/posts/the-sunday-show-uncovering-the-work-of-a-ukrainian-troll-farm>

He reported that trolls had to write around 300 comments per day on different topics in return for around $400 per month, the average salary in the country. The troll farm exposed in the documentary was blocked by Facebook two days before the video's release in September 2019.

Researchers at VoxUkraine[44] analysed Facebook comments on political posts in the six weeks before the 2019 parliamentary elections. They found the two politicians with the most active bot following were Volodymyr Zelenskiy (27,926 bots) and Petro Poroshenko (20,065 bots).

Bots can be deployed either by a politician or by their opponents. For example, "only 24% of bot-written comments about Zelenskiy were positive", indicating that the bots might be run by his adversaries. Both Zelenskiy and Poroshenko's associates, as well as other Ukrainian politicians, deny that they have ever used fake accounts themselves.

According to 2019 research paper released by the Oxford Internet Institute[45], the capacity of cyber troops seeking to manipulate voters on digital platforms in Ukraine is around 20,000. They rank Ukraine among countries with a "medium level" of cyber troops: alongside the UK, but not as intense as efforts recorded in the U.S. or Russia.

"Our estimate of cyber troop activity is built upon a qualitative content analysis of news articles and reporting about social media manipulation, as well as a secondary literature review and expert consultations," study co-author Samantha Bradshaw told me. "We don't know the actual size of the cyber troop army in Ukraine – and sometimes numbers can be inflated for political purposes – but the purpose of highlighting the estimated size is to demonstrate that government actors are strategising about ways to use computational propaganda in their own country."

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[44] Maryana Ott and Volodymyr Lozovyi, Erase this if you can: What Ukrainian Bots Are Doing on Ukrainian Politicians' Pages, VoxUkraine. (August 7, 2019) <https://voxukraine.org/en/erase-this-if-you-can-what-ukrainian-bots-are-doing-on-ukrainian-politicians-pages/>
[45] Professor Philip Howard and Samantha Bradshaw, 'The Global Disinformation Order: 2019 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation', OII, (September 26, 2019) <https://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/news/releases/use-of-social-media-to-manipulate-public-opinion-now-a-global-problem-says-new-report/>

Democracy watchdog Freedom House has observed a similar pattern. In its annual Freedom of the Net 2019[46] ranking, it describes the proliferation of trolls and persistent cyberattacks as an essential issue, and ranks Ukraine as a 'partially free' country, next to India, with a score of 56 (a score of 100 indicates the highest levels of Internet freedom).

Ukrainian political consultants tell me that everybody is doing this today. Beyond Ukraine, such efforts also often go unpunished, with little public stigma attached. As Kyiv-born British journalist Peter Pomerantsev observed[47]: Western PR agencies regularly use fake online personas for their clients.

But there are efforts to respond. In January 2020, the Ukrainian government presented a new bill to counter disinformation. It envisions criminal prosecution, including up to five years behind bars, for spreading deliberately false stories with bots. The draft bill has been sharply criticised by the media community, including international watchdogs, for including provisions that undermine journalists[48].

"If this law passes, journalists will be required to hold a professional press card from a state-sponsored organisation [...]; media content will be monitored by a Special Commissioner who will implement a policy of fines, blocking and sanction; a Trust Index based on criteria developed by the Special Commissioner will be introduced; the status of a professional journalist will be granted and denied in accordance with the Code of Journalistic Ethics; and the media will be required to publish official identification information," said National Union of Journalists of Ukraine President, Serhiy Tomilenko.

The minister who proposed the controversial bill, Volodymyr Borodyansky, did not survive the February 2020 government shakedown, and it remains to be seen how the debate on cyber troops will continue.

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[46] Freedom of the Net 2019:
https://www.freedomonthenet.org/report/freedom-on-the-net/2019/the-crisis-of-social-media
[47] Peter Pomerantsev, 'This is Not Propaganda', Faber & Faber, (2019), p.41
[48] NUJU, 'Ukraine: journalists' union rejects new draft law on disinformation', European Federation of Journalists, (January 22, 2020)
https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2020/01/22/ukraine-journalists-union-rejects-new-draft-law-on-disinformation/

The Russian question

The Kremlin has repeatedly denied interfering in elections in Ukraine or elsewhere. But Moscow officials do not always remain on message.

In a 2012 interview with [Kommersant](#), the editor-in-chief of government-financed outlet RT, Margarita Simonyan, likened her work to an "information war".

"It's impossible to start making a weapon only when the war has already started," she said. "That's why the Defense Ministry isn't fighting anyone at the moment, but it's ready for defense. So are we."[49]

In 2017, Russia's defense minister Sergey Shoigu told parliament he had created an information warfare task force. "Propaganda must be smart, competent and effective," he said[50].

And, according to a 2019 Princeton University study[51] (Martin & Shapiro, 2019), Russia was responsible for 72% of foreign disinformation operations around the world (China, Iran, and Saudi Arabia made up most of the remainder). Ukraine was the target of 4% of all Foreign Influence Efforts recorded in their study, putting it in the top seven most-targeted nations.

Russian state media networks are known for pushing outlandish narratives. During the Ukraine 2019 election campaigns, for example, Russian state TV portrayed Ukrainian leader Petro Poroshenko as an ugly nationalist and poked fun at the comedian candidate

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[49] DFR Lab, 'RT's Military Mission', Medium. (Jan 8, 2018)
https://medium.com/dfrlab/question-that-rts-military-mission-4c4bd9f72c88
[50] Aleksandar Vasovic, 'Russia sets up information warfare units - defence minister', Reuters, (Feb 22, 2017).
https://www.reuters.com/article/russia-military-propaganda-idUSL8N1G753J
[51] DA Martin & JN Shapiro, 'Trends in Online Foreign Influence Efforts', Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton (July 8, 2019)
<https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/jns/files/trends_in_foreign_influence_efforts_2019jul08_0.pdf>

Volodymyr Zelenskiy. The ballot and its many candidates – 39 people had registered – with no predictable outcome, was portrayed as a circus.

Russian state media has argued for years that Ukraine is a failed state: personally attacking Poroshenko and falsely depicting him as an alcoholic.

Russian media also stated that Zelenskiy, who is of Jewish origin, would be controlled by the U.S. and Israel. And despite the shock victory by Zelenskiy, the EU Disinformation Unit observed after the election that the Russian narrative remains that Ukraine is a fascist regime.

EU Disinformation Unit was launched in 2015 to monitor disinformation campaigns by Russia. (Source: eudisinfo.eu, screenshot by author)

But not many Ukrainians would have been exposed to the messages of Russian state TV. Since the Ukrainian government banned it from the airways, only a few Ukrainians said they used Russian media as a news source: different surveys[52] put the number between 4 and 13%. Most citizens also distrust such outlets (the balance of trust is -75%, according to the Democratic Initiatives 2019 annual survey[53]).

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[52] See Detector Media - SOURCES OF INFORMATION, MEDIA LITERACY, AND RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA vs 2019 USAID - Internews ANNUAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION SURVEY
[53] Results of 2019 and forecasts for 2020: public opinion, DIF
https://dif.org.ua/article/pidsumki-2019-gromadska-dumka

That said, Kyiv-based Detector Media[54] watchdog has noted that several Ukrainian TV channels and their social media arms have shared messaging that is remarkably in line with Kremlin narratives. Vivid examples are channels 112 Ukraine and NewsOne, both connected with Ukrainian MP Viktor Medvedchuk.

He is a known ally of the Russian president and frequently visits the Kremlin, including a trip taken before the election in Ukraine. The warm welcome with which is received should come as no surprise: Putin is, after all, also a godfather to Medvedchuk's daughter.

Putin greets pro-Russian politician Medvedchuk in Kremlin a few days before the Ukrainian parliamentary election in July 2019. (Photo: Kremlin Press Service)

Pro-Russian Ukrainian party, Opposition Platform – For Life, to which Medvedchuk belongs, took second place in the 2019 parliamentary election, winning 13% of the vote. They were far behind Zelenskiy's Servant on the People force, but beat Poroshenko's European Solidarity, which got 8%.

In May 2017, under Poroshenko's rule, Ukraine banned Russian social networks. As a result, many users moved to Facebook or Instagram, but the effect of the ban was still

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[54] Peter Burkovsky, 'They confused Minsk with Kyiv. Review of the penetration of Russian propaganda into the Ukrainian media space in July 2020', Detector Media (August 18 2020) https://detector.media/category/monitoring/

limited. As of summer 2019, VKontakte remained the third largest social media network in Ukraine (after Facebook and Instagram), with around 7 million users.

Russian narratives were dominant on this Russian social network. According to an Internews-Singularex group study, the most shared posts in Ukraine came from popular groups that support Russia's actions in Ukraine and the Kremlin-backed separatists.

The [Ukraine Election Task Force](), set up by Ukrainian, American, and Danish groups, said the Kremlin did not try to boost either of the key presidential candidates in Ukraine in 2019. "If there was one candidate who seemed to be attacked more often than his competitors, it was probably the incumbent, President Petro Poroshenko," the election monitor reported.

But on VKontakte, Zelenskiy also came under attack – especially when he contradicted the Russian government agenda. The Poroshenko's camp argued that the Kremlin boosted Zelenskiy as well, but there was no real evidence to support this claim.

As the Russian journalist Ekho Moskvy's editor-in-chief Alexey Venediktov observed, "Mr Chaos" was the Kremlin's candidate: "Whoever would bring more chaos – the weaker a candidate – the more, Putin believes, this is beneficial for Russia."

In December 2018, the Secret Service of Ukraine (SSU) reported[55] a surge in Russian-based attempts to buy Ukrainian social media accounts. The SSU said these activities were made via the Internet Research Agency. The same company has been indicted in the U.S. for working to meddle in the 2016 American presidential election; it also tried to undermine the 2014 vote in Ukraine.

Kyiv claimed Russia had been hoping to use local proxies to get around its defences. In March 2019, the Ukrainian government published a [confession]() from a man who stated that his Russian bosses wanted to use his Ukrainian digital accounts to post political ads

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[55] SSU official site:
https://ssu.gov.ua/en/news/1/category/21/view/5525?fbclid=IwAR0S1NTXGuZZhbBScfOXmazqjK34eRbwNGGu0Amg8ZlfKVYJXGV6jXcbHl8#.06nHRoe4.dpbs

or to plant fake articles. In the first three months of the presidential campaign, the SSU reported 17 cases of Russian political meddling via social networks.

In its 2019 annual report, the SSU announced that it had pressed charges against 34 administrators of social network accounts engaged in anti-Ukrainian propaganda. Not all of these cases were election-related.

The Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity (a watchdog with headquarters in Copenhagen and Washington DC) also conducted real-time monitoring of social media in Ukraine between March and July of 2019. It said it found that bots originating in Russia had initiated a quarter of all social media content about the presidential election in Ukraine. Homegrown pro-Russian narratives were hard to come by, they said.

"[Posts with a] pro-Russian narrative were heavily based in Russia. We could geo-locate this; the IP would be Russian," said Harry Nedelcu, lead researcher of the study and senior advisor to Anders Fogh Rasmussen (Secretary General of NATO, 2009–2014). Speaking to me in January, Nedelcu said only about 5 to 10% of all pro-Russian posts had originated in Ukraine.

Some of the bots they observed had lain dormant for years, created as far back as 2011, only to be activated in a unified way by a person. "For instance, just before the second presidential round, we saw the activity of Twitter accounts, aggressively spreading pro-Russian narratives, taking up 3 to 4% of the national conversation. Behind them were 3,000 Twitter accounts, mostly bots, based in Russia."

Twitter is not hugely popular in Ukraine, but was used as the starting point of analysis because of ease of access to data and because narratives often move from Twitter to other social media.

The researchers also analysed gender and found that the pro-Russian narratives tended to appeal more to men. "Over time, messages from the pro-Zelenskiy cluster appealed and were shared more by women. It was never 50:50, but at one moment, we saw 43% of

women. I do not know whether it was a silver bullet that explains his victory, but this is a trend that we saw starting from the presidential and going forward to the parliamentary election," Nedelcu said.

Pro-Kremlin bot activity was significantly more abundant in Ukraine than in other countries analysts monitored, such as Macedonia, Mexico, and Italy.[56]

"We came in to see whether Russia considers Ukraine as a 'ground zero' for disinformation it is conducting in other places. And yes, it is: data shows this."

These sorts of activities by Russian-backed cyber troops in Ukraine risk undermining public trust, OII researcher Samantha Bradshaw told me. "It is hard to combat foreign influence operations: highlighting the fact that operatives try to sow discord can make people overly suspicious and no longer trust anything they read or anyone they meet online."

There is a robust civil resistance in Ukraine to the Kremlin's disinformation efforts. Civil society platforms that monitor and debunk such narratives include StopFake, Ukrainian Crisis Media Center, Texty.org.ua, and others. Experts like Kateryna Kruk created guidebooks based on the Ukrainian experience to help other nations experiencing Russian disinformation.

Despite the attempts made to interfere, OSCE and other international watchdogs found the 2019 vote in Ukraine to be competitive, but lacking in genuine discussion about matters of public concern[57].

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[56] Nedelcu said data for the 2016 US elections was not available for comparison to the 2019 Ukraine campaigns.
[57] https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/3/439631_0.pdf

How Zuckerberg treated Ukraine

Ukraine has been trying to get the attention of Facebook for years. President Petro Poroshenko said he used every avenue possible to get the tech giant's attention, eventually resorting to a [Facebook post](#) asking Mark Zuckerberg to open an office in Ukraine.
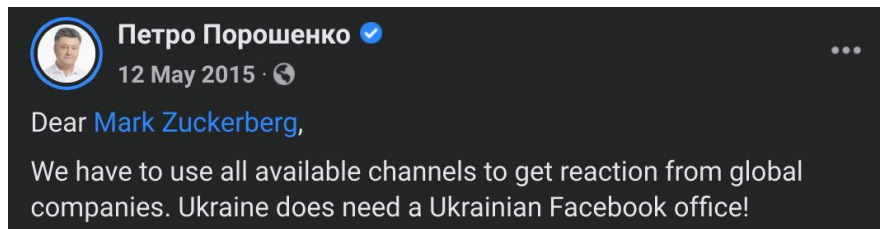
Poroshenko resorted to attempting to communicate with Zuckerberg on Facebook (Screenshot)

At that time, there were many complaints that Facebook was blocking pages by Ukrainian bloggers posting about Russia's war against Ukraine.

At a [town hall](#) in Silicon Valley, the request for localised support did not get a sympathetic ear. "Over time, this is something that we might consider", Mark Zuckerberg said. After all, Ukraine's 12 million Facebook users were only a small part of the company's few billion global audience.

But growing global criticism, including a grilling in the US after the 2016 election and remarks that Facebook "would have let Hitler buy anti-Semitic ads", the giant has started to move on Ukraine. Before the election, in August 2018, the Ukrainian government announced[58] that it had agreed with Facebook to improve communication.

In January 2019, the platform reported[59] removing 107 Facebook pages, groups, and accounts, and 41 Instagram accounts, "for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior as part of a network that originated in Russia and operated in Ukraine".

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[58] https://mip.gov.ua/news/2516.html
[59] https://about.fb.com/news/2019/01/removing-cib-from-russia/

In March 2019, Facebook announced another takedown of nearly 2,000 Russia-linked pages, groups, and accounts, partially involved in posting disinformation on Ukraine. It also introduced political ad transparency rules[60] – promising to allow for greater public scrutiny. But this happened less than two weeks before the first round of the presidential election in the country.

The new policy did not work to its full extent. Nina Jankowicz, American disinformation expert at the Wilson Center, writing about the Facebook rules for [Politico](#)[61], said the Ukraine changes "were slowly enforced, and pages that repeatedly violated them were still allowed to attempt to buy ads".

Feshchenko says Ukrainian political actors quickly learned how to bypass new Facebook rules that required revealing who had paid for them. For instance, they could say an ad had been paid for by a fake Ministry of Hucksters.

Platform dynamics also mean that new fake pages could quickly reappear where the old ones were taken down. Critics, including Western governments and independent experts[62], say Facebook's efforts on removing inauthentic accounts were too slow and not sufficient.

Fedorov also voiced concern that Facebook had been too slow to respond whenever his campaign reported fakes. The tech giant said it did remove such pages. But it was by all accounts a tedious process that could last days. By that time, the damage was done, Fedorov told [RFE/RL](#)[63]. Zelenskiy's personal account was verified quickly, but the Facebook and Instagram pages for his campaign were not, his team also said.

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[60] https://www.facebook.com/business/news/bringing-more-transparency-to-political-ads-in-2019
[61] Politico: https://www.politico.eu/article/facebook-regulation-fail-ukraine-should-worry-europe/
[62] The Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/29/europe-accuses-facebook-of-being-slow-to-remove-fake-accounts
[63] RFE/RL: https://www.rferl.org/a/leading-ukraine-candidate-zelenskyy-facebook-fakes-political-ad-rules/29828605.html

At the Munich Security Conference[64] in February 2020, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg said the social media company does its best but called for more guidance and regulations from the states on election interference, political advertising, and harmful content.

Zelenskiy shared a photo with Zuckerberg in February 2020, taken in Davos. He did not say whether they discussed any issues. (Source: Ukrainian president's Twitter account)

DC-based National Democratic Institute[65], who observed the election, said social media companies should also invest more in local language capacity and representation in the country to protect the integrity of Ukrainian democracy.

Currently there is still no Facebook office in Ukraine. However, in June 2019, the company hired a public policy manager for Ukraine who is based in Poland, and has supported local fact-checking initiatives.

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[64] Munich Security Conference: https://securityconference.org/en/medialibrary/asset/conversation-learn-fast-and-fix-things-social-media-and-democracy-20200215-1700/

[65] https://www.ndi.org/publications/presidential-runoff-ukrainians-affirm-democracy-and-demand-change

Epilogue: a president out of a chair

Social media became an essential political tool during the Ukraine 2019 elections. And the candidate who was best able to exploit these platforms was a born entertainer.

In 2019 the Zelenskiy team was rocking on Instagram and engaged in crowdsourcing and micro-targeting on Facebook. As in North America, Ukraine experienced a spike of activities from Russian bots and other digital manipulation tools – including homebred interventions. It remains unclear how (or whether) this affected the outcome of the election.

We do know that TV played an essential role in shaping an image of the candidate and spreading his messages.

A year after deciding to lead Zelenskiy's online political campaign, Fedorov says he now appreciates what an important role TV has to play in Ukraine. "I thought about this: I think that the role of social media [in Ukraine] has been exaggerated," Fedorov said in an interview with RFE/RL[66] in December 2019 at his new government office.

Russian tycoon Boris Berezovsky, who is credited with using his TV station to help Putin to assume the mantle of power, is sometimes quoted as having said: "Give me a TV remote control, and I will turn a chair into a president."

But, Fedorov says, social media will need a higher market penetration before it can start turning chairs into presidents. "In five to seven years, or maybe 10, people [in Ukraine] will be watching social media much more, and then one can use it to create a well-known brand and run for office."

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[66] https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/30357704.html

The timeline may be shorter than Fedorov estimates if ad spend is any indicator: according to the [Internet Association of Ukraine](#), Ukrainian media spent more on online campaigns than on TV ads in 2018.

In the meantime, Fedorov keeps seven EAPC Polaris trophies in his office, won last year at the global competition for election campaigns and political communications. "We won seven out of the eight awards in Athens: six gold, and one silver. I promised Zelenskiy that in a few years we would get awards for the digital transformation of the country."

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy (L) and his adviser Michael Fedorov attend an IT conference in Kiev, Ukraine May 23, 2019. (REUTERS/Valentyn Ogirenko)

His boss has faced many challenges since taking office, including how to communicate on the war, reforms, and coronavirus.

As head of state, Zelenskiy has come under fire for poorly explaining his policy decisions. The role of president, it turns out, is more complicated than that portrayed by his lovable character in *Servant of the People*, and confidence in his government has started to erode.

Angered by disinformation, bots, and even poor grammar on Telegram, Zelenskiy now warns Ukrainians about the dangers of social media and messaging apps.

With no hint of irony, the president told [Interfax](#) he believed journalism was being diluted by those who would "play" at taking on an expert profession.

"With all due respect to some bloggers, it seems that the many people who pick up their phone today and become 'journalists' have generally polluted the profession," he said. "The destruction of any trade always occurs when a non-specialist comes there. And as their numbers grow, the trade is destroyed, because trust is lost."