

The Vladimirror Network:

Pro-Putin Power-Users on Facebook

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About this publication

Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) researchers identified key pro-Putin accounts with two or more duplicates engaged in administering, moderating, and contributing to large public Facebook groups with hundreds of thousands of members fawning over the Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Russian military, and occasionally spreading Kremlin disinformation, all while generating millions of posts across the platform. This briefing note outlines the mechanics, narratives, and linkages of the pro-Putin power users — producing content at a high-rate day in and day out since the start of the invasion — on Facebook to pro-Kremlin groups and pages, painting a picture of a coordinated, seemingly inauthentic campaign intended to buttress the image of Putin in a range of languages and geographies. While research is still ongoing, ISD has identified emerging linkages between this network and the Kremlin media apparatus, which provides much of the content used.

Pro-Putin support has long been a staple of several pages, groups, and networks on Facebook. The role of what appear to be inauthentic networks, however, has been under-reported outside of election cycles. This briefing note highlights a different reality, where disparate yet connected micro-networks of duplicate pro-Putin power users are always active, evading moderation and detection for years.

About the author

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Contents

About	2
1. Introduction: The Long Con	4
2. Key Findings	6
3. The Power Users: Micro-Networks at Work	7
4. Pro-Putin Groups and Pages: Astroturfing Public Putin Support	9
5. Conclusion: Manufacturing Support	10
Endnotes	11

Introduction: The Long Con

Account X¹ has only two consistencies between the four Facebook accounts in her name. The first is that she lives in Rosario, the largest city in the Argentinian province of Santa Fe. The second is that she has been seeding, spreading, and showing clear support for Vladimir Putin on Facebook since late 2020. Account X's story is emblematic of the micro-mechanics of manufactured pro-Kremlin support across Facebook. Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) researchers identified key pro-Putin accounts with two or more duplicates engaged in administering, moderating, and contributing to large public Facebook groups with hundreds of thousands of members fawning over the Russian President, the Russian military, and occasionally spreading Kremlin disinformation, all while generating millions of posts across the platform.



Figure 1.

The pro-Putin accounts represent a small sample of overall support on the platform for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. More importantly, they are part of an astroturfing campaign using 10 public groups with a collective membership of more than 650,000. These pro-Putin groups have posted 16,500 times receiving more than 3.6 million interactions while growing their membership by 106,782 (more than 31%) in the 30 days since the start of the Russian invasion. The content shared by the groups was liked and loved more than 2.8 million times over the same 30-day period.

At the core of these pro-Putin groups are networks of power users — producing content at a high-rate day in and day out since the start of the invasion — active on Facebook since 2019. This set of seemingly inauthentic accounts, each with two or more duplicates, is also linked to public pages that claim to belong to security services of the Russian state or Putin himself. These accounts, groups, and pages produce content in a range of languages and are supportive of key Russian geopolitical allies, such as Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud, Indian President Narendra Modi, and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

While individual pro-Putin power users will appear innocuous to outside observers, they have been continually seeding pro-Putin content since the start of the Russian invasion in large groups ISD researchers have been monitoring, generating thousands of shares and millions likes in the process. The Kremlin has a history of astroturfing — the practice of masking content to make it appear as though it originates from or is supported by grassroots participants — across social media platforms.² This network of power users administering, moderating, and seeding content into large Facebook pro-Putin groups is an extension of what appears to be a long-standing astroturfing campaign focused on plastering Putin's visage across the platform since 2019. The campaign creates the appearance of widespread support for Putin and the Kremlin in the shadow of the invasion and relies on a phalanx of micro-networks of seemingly inauthentic accounts at its core to accomplish its goal.

This briefing note outlines the mechanics, narratives, and linkages of the pro-Putin power users on Facebook to pro-Kremlin groups and pages, painting a picture of a coordinated, seemingly inauthentic campaign intended

to buttress the image of Putin in a range of languages and geographies. While research is still ongoing, ISD has identified emerging linkages between this network and the Kremlin media apparatus, which provides much of the content used.

Pro-Putin support has long been a staple of several pages, groups, and networks on Facebook. The role of what appear to be inauthentic networks, however, has been under-reported outside of election cycles. This briefing note highlights a different reality, where disparate yet connected micro-networks of duplicate pro-Putin power users are always active, evading moderation and detection for years.



Figure 2.

Key Findings

ISD research conducted on Facebook from February through March 2022 indicates a network of pro-Putin duplicate accounts, pro-Putin groups, and pro-Kremlin pages, are astroturfing Putin and Kremlin support across the platform. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, these networks, which have been on the platform for years, are increasing their content production, and primarily focus on a defensive propaganda strategy that paints Putin as an “ethical leader” and a “hero” for standing up to Western aggression. Using the Facebook social monitoring tool CrowdTangle, ISD researchers assessed the impact of the content shared by the pro-Putin power users, groups and pages that are a part of a loosely coordinated, seemingly inauthentic network.



Figure 3.

ISD researchers identified 10 pro-Putin groups with a collective membership of 652,582 on Facebook sharing adoring Putin photos and videos in English, Russian, Farsi, Arabic and Khmer. The public groups have shared 7,472 photographs generating millions of interactions over the past 30 days. The photographs primarily consisted of Putin walking confidently, holding puppies, staring longingly into the camera, saluting troops, and riding an array of wild animals, including bears and lions.

The administrators, moderators, and key contributors of the top 10 pro-Putin public groups on Facebook are stacked with pro-Putin power users with duplicate accounts, all of which are engaged in seeding and sharing pro-Putin content across the platform. ISD researchers monitored and tracked the top 10 pro-Putin power users, all with duplicate accounts, functioning as administrators, moderators, and top contributors in

the pro-Putin groups. In some instances, they shared their duties with Facebook pages claiming to be security services and military of the Russian state, such as the FSBRussia, Armed Forces of Russia, and the Russia Federation.

The top power users have shared thousands of photographs and videos of Putin in pro-Putin groups, where they function as administrators, moderators, and top contributors. One Khmer-language administrator account shared 96 Putin photographs in a month-long period. The 96 photographs accumulated 34,384 likes and loves, and 4,315 shares. The content shared during the invasion tripled the account’s likes. Many of these photographs were cross-posted into other pro-Putin groups generating further shares.

The top 10 users are connected through their friends’ networks to other power users with duplicate accounts, also spreading pro-Kremlin and pro-Putin content across Facebook. The power users with duplicate accounts function as the primary content producers for large groups and pages and are micro-networks of content production and dissemination. Researchers found 101 duplicate accounts exhibiting the same behavior, sharing pro-Putin content in a range of languages, including English, Russian, Italian, Serbian, Farsi, Arabic, Thai, and Khmer. The accounts were also engaged in tagging each other in posts within pro-Putin groups.



Figure 4.

Six pro-Kremlin Facebook pages with more than 500,000 followers were similarly functioning as moderators and administrators of the same pro-Putin groups moderated by pro-Putin power users. These 6 pages shared 1,288 photographs generating some 710,652 interactions over the month-long period since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, including support for Putin and the Russian military, and ‘Z’ military operation art.

The content shared by the pro-Putin power users does not violate Facebook's Community Guidelines. However, the use of duplicate accounts is a violation under the inauthentic behavior clause of the same guidelines, which note "we do not allow people to misrepresent themselves on Facebook [or] use fake accounts." The core of the pro-Putin groups relies on administrators, moderators, and contributors that have multiple duplicate accounts who post in clusters, across a range of groups, and continue to operate unencumbered on Facebook.

The Power Users: Micro-Networks at Work

Account Y's 3 duplicate accounts are administrators in 3 different pro-Putin groups. The accounts effectively seed pro-Putin content to more than 116,000 members of those groups and have been doing so since 2020. Y is a pro-Putin power user, astroturfing Putin support in Arabic despite Facebook guidelines. Y's 3 accounts are not an outlier, ISD researchers found 101 accounts with numerous duplicates, some as many as 11, functioning as pro-Putin micro networks that either administer, moderate, or contribute to large pro-Putin and pro-Kremlin groups and pages.

Y's content posting habits follow a similar pattern, posting concurrently at the same time daily across the three pages using all 3 accounts. Y's content typically consists of a fawning message and a Putin photograph, and occasionally features photoshopped images of Putin and a wild animal, such as a lion or bear. The written posts follow similar patterns, using the same text in most instances. On March 23, Y's 3 accounts posted 45 posts across the 3 pages the accounts administer, with each post coming within 15 minutes of each other. Y's primary posting language is Arabic, and the account mixes Putin support with support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a Middle Eastern regional ally to Russia.

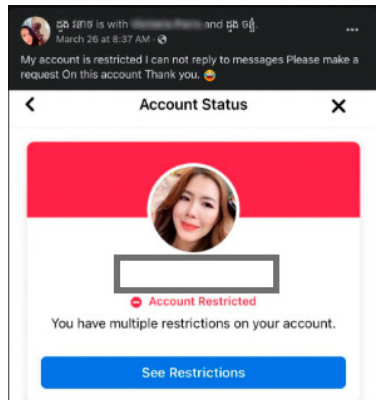


Figure 5.

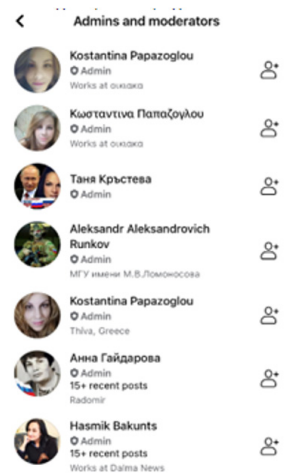


Figure 6

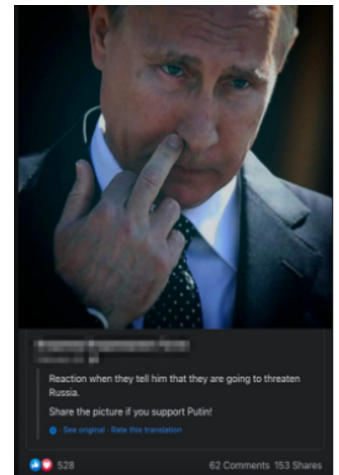


Figure 7.

Account Z has 3 accounts, each with different names and avatars, and each posting in a mix of emojis, English and Khmer. 2 out of 3 of account Z's duplicates function as administrators in a large Khmer language Pro-Putin support group with 27,001 members titled "Duong Vanath," which is incidentally the same name as one of Z's three accounts. Z also has 2 Facebook pages that do not post Putin or Kremlin support in any shape or form. A single account affiliated with Z has shared 96 Putin posts since February 4 in the Khmer language group, generating 34,384 likes, loves and hugs, and 4,315 shares.

The Z accounts were by far the most active in "Duong Vanath", posting 248 pro-Putin images and videos, which were shared 10,008 times across the platform. Zs' primary account, consisting of a Putin avatar, posted primarily in Khmer, but similarly shared Arabic, English and Russian videos in support of Putin and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Both the Z and Y accounts shared administrator duties in the Khmer-language pro-Putin page, suggesting that there was coordination between duplicate pro-Putin power users on the platform. Y, which had been a part of the Khmer language group as early as February 12, shared content primarily in Arabic, posting some 47 pro-Putin images and videos, and generating 9,478 likes and loves, and 609 shares. While both accounts focused their support on Putin, they similarly supported other regional strongmen and dictators, such as North Korean President Kim Jong-un, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al-Saud.

Beyond Arabic and Khmer content in support of Putin and the Kremlin, other duplicate pro-Putin accounts shared content in Greek, Spanish, Hindi and Italian. ISD researchers homed in on the top duplicate pro-Putin power users functioning as administrators of large

public groups such as account A, linked to five duplicate accounts, producing content in Greek and English, and administering at least three pro-Putin groups with a collective following of 144,246. KP, posted 206 pro-Putin images, videos and videos between March 2020 and March 2022, averaging nine posts a month, and generating 12,569 likes and loves, as well as some 523 shares.

The A accounts may not have been as prolific as the other power user accounts in the ISD dataset, but they illustrate just how long duplicate pro-Putin account holders are able to evade detection and spread content. Moreover, they illustrate the multilingual nature of the network, and the challenge this presents to effective moderation. The A account did not use any obfuscation tactics to hide the duplicate accounts, used the same profile picture of the same young woman, and the same name, just in the Greek alphabet.

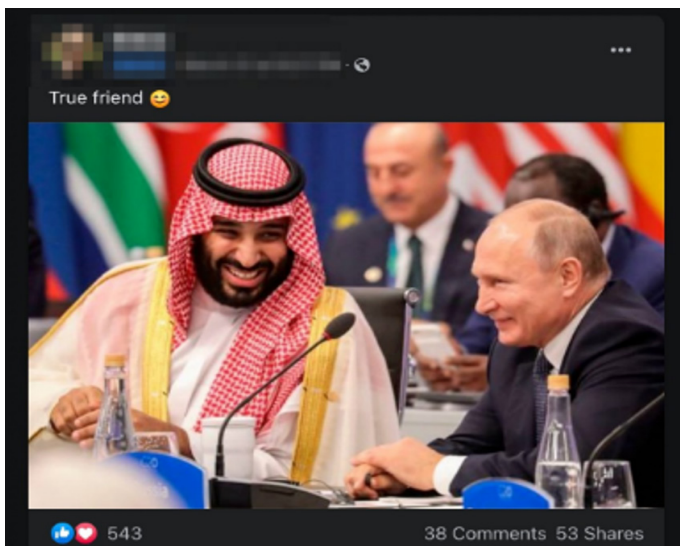


Figure 8.

B's smaller account was friends with 70 other users on the platform, 68 of which were accounts using Putin, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, or Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as an avatar. The larger B account linked to 133 users, had a similar set of friends, and included anti-vaccine accounts as well as supporters of the former United States President Donald J. Trump. Researchers reviewed the content of the friends and found they too expressed support for these leaders in languages including Arabic and Khmer. The B account posted content from other power users, as well as juxtaposed photographs of the supposed account holder next to images of Putin.

Taken together, the pro-Putin power users, smaller networks of single or dual accounts, and regional strongman supporters, indicate similar dynamics for a range of dictators globally. ISD's research suggests that micro-networks of pro-Putin users are ultimately linked to regional ally supporters, using the same tactics to spread and seed pro-dictator content on the platform, much of which is in violation of the inauthentic behavior clause of Facebook's Community Guidelines.



Figure 9.

“Taken together, the pro-Putin power users, smaller networks of single or dual accounts, and regional strongman supporters, indicate similar dynamics for a range of dictators globally.”

Pro-Putin Groups and Pages: Astroturfing Public Putin Support

By themselves, the pro-Putin power users are only as effective at generating widespread likes and shares as the size of the groups they run or contribute to. Where they had the most success in spreading content was in large groups with 10,000s of members who would reshare their content in a variety of languages. This brought traffic back to the groups, which operated with primarily Russian names, such as “Vladimir Putin – Leader of the Free World,” “FOR VLADIMIR VLADIMIROVIC PUTIN,” “PUTIN IS THE HERO OF OUR TIME! THANK GOD WE HAVE SOMETHING TO BE PROUD OF!” or in English, such as “Vladimir Putin Ethical Leadership.” ISD researchers found 10 pro-Putin groups linked to the duplicate account pro-Putin power users. There are many more but focusing on this set grants us understanding of the mechanisms for astroturfing support.



Figure 10.

posts that were shared some 341,309 times, illustrating just how much impact these groups were having on content across the platform. The 10 groups grew collectively by 106,782 users during the first 30-days of the war, around 30%.

Six pro-Putin pages assisted in moderating and administering the pro-Putin groups. They had a collective follower base of 520,139, which had grown by 9,683 followers since the start of the invasion. The pages posted 1,989 times over the course of the month; these posts were shared 54,840 times. Most of the content featured images, with more than 80% or more of the content posted to the pages being images of Putin, the Russian military, or other Kremlin personalities.

The pro-Putin groups and pages were hubs of activity for pro-Putin users, who spread the content elsewhere on the platform. These spaces were central to the power users' mechanisms for generating and manufacturing support within the groups and elsewhere, often opening fronts for support for regional allies in other languages.

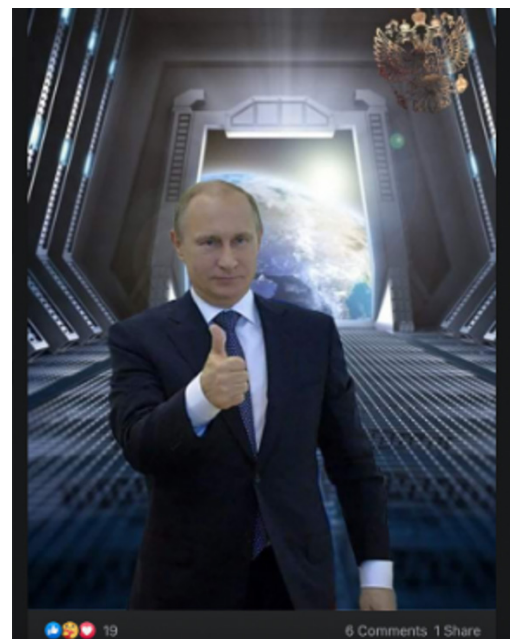


Figure 11.

The 10 pro-Putin groups had an overall membership of 652,582 accounts, averaging some 71 posts a day across all the groups. Almost all the posts featured an image, in fact, 60% or more of all posts in all groups were images, often of Putin, the Russian military or other Kremlin personalities and regional allies. Over the month-long period since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the pro-Putin groups received 329,233 comments, on

Conclusion: Manufacturing Support

At the onset of the Russian invasion, micro-networks of pro-Putin supporters with duplicate accounts, which violate Facebook's inauthentic behavior clause of its Community Guidelines, began seeding pro-Putin content across the platform at a faster rate. The pro-Putin power users identified by ISD researchers primarily engaged in support for the Russian president but were also linked to networks of supporters of regional allies in the Middle East and Asia.

As researchers parse the networks of support for the Russian invasion, and the use of disinformation as a central tactic to undermine Ukrainian leadership and defense forces, one part of the challenge is understanding just how much grassroots support Putin and the Kremlin have. The existence of the pro-Putin astroturf network illustrates that support networks are in and of themselves a disinformation power play.

Through the manufactured support of the President, typically led by accounts that are exhibiting seemingly inauthentic behavior, on Facebook, thousands of pieces of content, shared tens of thousands of times, are being leveraged to present the image of widespread Kremlin support. The failures of moderation are evident at the micro-network level, where accounts with duplicates have been operating since late 2020, often unabated.

As the war continues and Russian support for the conflict wanes, these users will play an increasingly important role in astroturfing support across languages and regions, masking any decline in support. Researchers will need to understand the scale of this manufactured support before making broad claims about regional support for the invasion. What is clear from ISD's research is that a small subset of users, violating platform guidelines and posting primarily fawning images and videos of the President in a coordinated fashion, continues to be a primary mode for delivering a singular message — Putin is loved. Undermining that support is the artifice of its creation, serving to skew the picture of a more nuanced reality.

Endnotes

- 1 *The account names have been deliberately obfuscated in this report as not to draw traffic back to the accounts.*
- 2 Al-Rawi, A., Rahman, A.. "Manufacturing Rage: The Russian Internet Research Agency's Political Astroturfing on Social Media." 2020. First Monday. Accessed at: <https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/10801/9723>



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