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Soft Power: Cats, Branding and the Ukrainian Far-Right



Michael Cole







There are Three Keys to successfully interviewing gangsters (Galeotti, 2019)



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1) Convince them you're an academic, so your work is irrelevant



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2) Alcohol



Photo by [Julia Nastogadka](#) on [Unsplash](#)



3) Have a cute dog

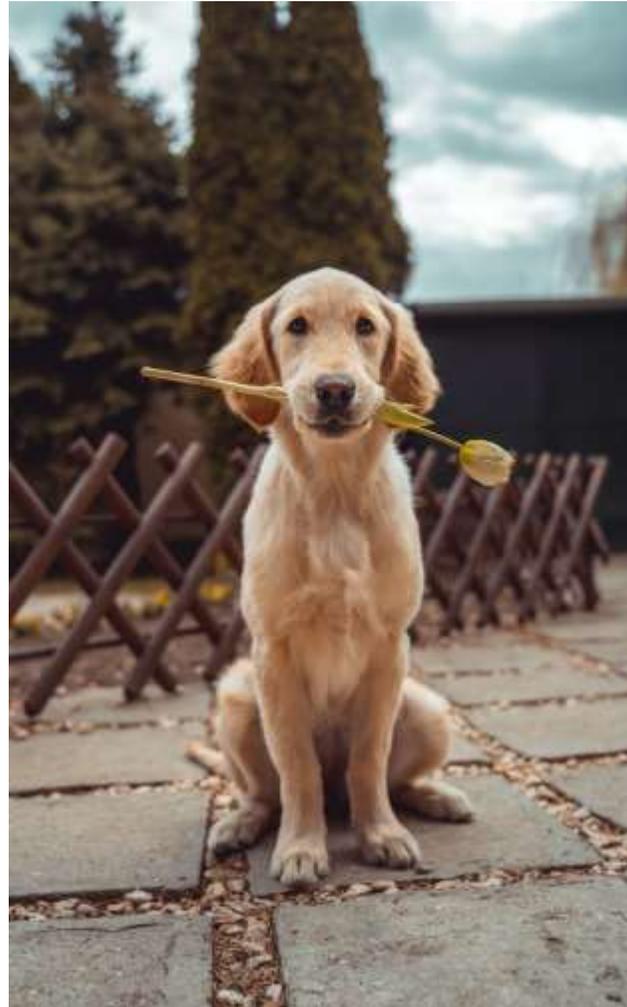


Photo by @RichardBryto <https://unsplash.com/photos/Sg3XwuEpybU>



The first two were no problem for me

Irrelevant



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But, the third
was more
challenging.
I don't have a
dog.



Photo by @RichardBruyto <https://unsplash.com/photos/Sg3XwuEpybU>



But, I do have a cute cat





Why populists adore cats - and use them in their political propaganda

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/shortcuts/2018/nov/27/why-populists-adore-cats-and-use-them-in-their-political-propaganda>



Photo by [Pacto Visual](#) on [Unsplash](#)

What if researchers weren't the only ones using cute pets to appeal to people they otherwise have little in common with?

As it turns out, lots of populist leaders are doing it!

Marine Le Pen often blogs about her cats



Photo by [Jae Park](#) on [Unsplash](#)

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/12196760/Marine-Le-Pen-Not-so-secret-cat-lady-National-Front-France.html>

Geert Wilders made an Instagram account for his cats – And it was featured on the Dutch news



Photo by [hang niu](#) on [Unsplash](#)

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/happy-hooker-relaxed-at-rise-of-dutch-trump-9zds2566k>



Photo by [Pacto Visual](#) on [Unsplash](#)

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/spotlight/how-a-wayward-cat-upstaged-putin-and-became-a-russian-celebrity/ar-BBUvWjS?li=AA59G2#image=4>

And then there's Mostik – the cat adopted by builders of a bridge between the annexed Crimean Peninsula and the Russian mainland

Mostik was the first Russian to cross the bridge upon its completion – even beating Vladimir Putin



Why Cats?

1) Cats are part of the populist strategy of presenting leaders as 'one of the people'

2) Pictures of cats get more social media coverage than overtly political posts

3) It's not just cats – it can be dogs, food, sports teams or a whole host of other non-political features

4) It's part of a strategy to soften the image of politicians promoting divisive and discriminatory political views



'Cossack House' is a cultural centre in Kyiv which hosts events organized by far right groups such as Azov Battalion

They also organise summer camps for Ukrainian children to learn survival skills and about 'patriotism'



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Azov_Regiment#/media/File:Emblem_of_the_Azov_Battalion.svg



Photo by [Tegan Mierle](#) on [Unsplash](#)

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2017/sep/04/i-want-to-bring-up-a-warrior-ukraines-far-right-childrens-camp-video>



One of Cossack House's most popular events is the 'Plomin Literature Club'

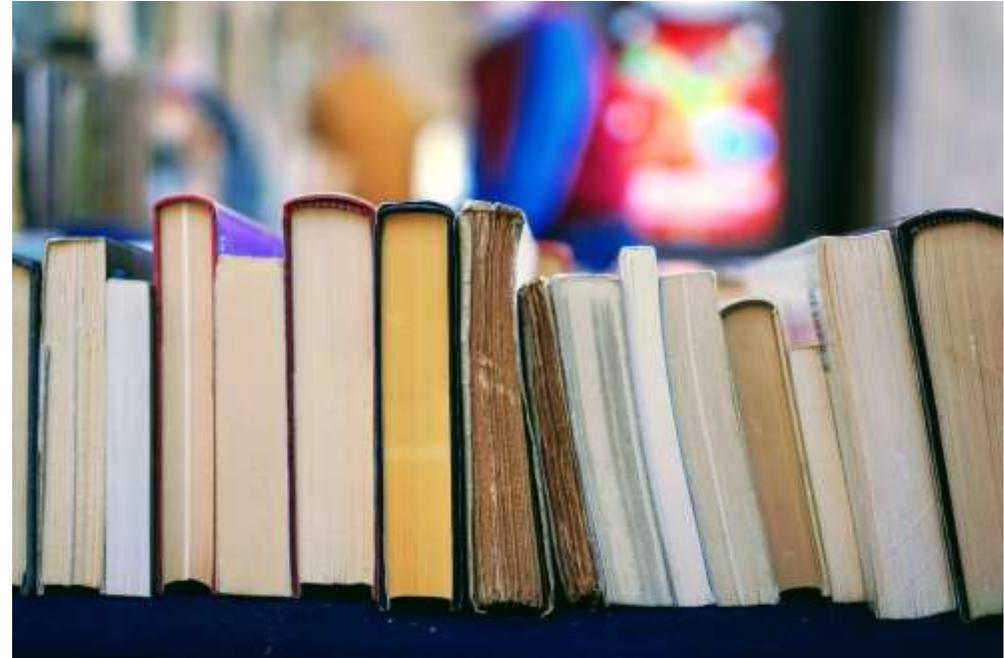


Photo by [Jacob Bentzinger](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Photo by [Tom Hermans](#) on [Unsplash](#)

<https://plomin.club/best-materials-summer-plomin-2018/>



Plomin use various social media strategies to attract attention to their club. But even posts containing pictures of young women reading books are not as popular as...

https://www.instagram.com/plomin_ua/



Photo by [Lenin Estrada](#) on [Unsplash](#)



...Cats!



Photo by [Irit Keynan](#) on [Unsplash](#)

https://www.instagram.com/plomin_ua/



Photo by [Sabina Sturzu](#) on [Unsplash](#)



Inspired by Mark Galeotti's advice, I made an Instagram account for my own cat



Instagram

sootyinestonia

Edit Profile



58 posts

860 followers

2,846 following

Sooty

Jordanian cat 🇯🇴 living in Estonia 🇪🇪 Interested in paper clips and sleeping.
Opinions expressed are my own and not those of my institution.

She soon attracted some interesting followers

Right Comp is a fashion brand producing clothes with logos used by Right Sector



<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=right+sector&title=Special:MediaSearch&go=Go&type=image>

https://www.instagram.com/right_comp/?hl=en



Photo by [Damir Spanic](#) on [Unsplash](#)

The Ukrainian far right focus heavily on community building to increase support through non-political means (Polyakova, 2014)

This increases plausible deniability for extreme political views

It contributes to the increased blurring of lines between patriotism and ethno-centric nationalism



Photo by [Tina Hartung](#) on [Unsplash](#)

<https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/.premium-the-upcoming-neo-nazi-concert-in-ukraine-that-no-one-is-talking-about-1.7391007>



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