



Information Warfare Watch No. 19

January 9, 2023 Ilan I. Berman

Related Categories: Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Russia; Ukraine

MOSCOW BEGINS WEAVING A NEW NARRATIVE

At its outset, the Kremlin's war in Ukraine was sold to the Russian people as a limited "special military operation" that would take just days to accomplish. But massive battlefield setbacks have led to a protracted conflict now in its tenth month – and created a propaganda problem for Russian officials who previously promised a quick and decisive victory. As a result, Russia's propagandists are now shifting their narratives and tactics significantly as they attempt to accommodate themselves – and their audiences – to a new and more sobering reality.

"I think you have seen that over the last three months, the rhetoric of all Kremlin propagandists has changed dramatically," Kyrylo Budanov, the head of Ukrainian Defence Intelligence, recently said in a televised interview. This, according to Budanov, has entailed a shift away from triumphalism about Russian dominance in Ukraine to a more nuanced – and self-reflective – mode. "First, they started to cautiously criticise their leadership, then – the top generals," he notes. Now, Russian elites "have reached the point where victory is out of the question," and commentary has shifted to the necessity for Russia "just not to lose."

To that end, pro-Kremlin media personalities are taking pains to point out the potentially dire consequences of a Russian defeat for ordinary Russians. For instance, Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of the Kremlin's official *RT* channel, has said publicly that ongoing aggression against Ukraine is "the only thing we can do in this situation." Simonyan's rationale? That if Russia loses the current war, the negative consequences will be widespread for all Russians. "Listen, what we must be afraid of is losing; we must be afraid of disgrace," she told Kremlin-aligned propagandist Vladimir Solovyov in December during an appearance on his popular talk show, "Sunday Evening." "If we manage to lose, The Hague ... awaits even the janitor who sweeps the pavestones behind the Kremlin wall!" (*Ukrainskaya Pravda*, December 6, 2022; *The Grid*, December 6, 2022)

NEEDED: A FUND FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Since the start of the Ukraine war, there has been a veritable exodus of opposition media from Russia. Outlets like *Meduza*, *iStories* and a host of others have been forced to relocate outside of Russia to continue their work amid a slew of new Kremlin restrictions and growing governmental pressure. The result has been an influx of these media outlets into Europe (particularly the Baltics), and the emergence of a qualitatively new media sphere there. However, this ecosystem is still fledgling in nature, and requires international support if it is to survive. That's the assessment of *Novaya Gazeta* Editor-in-Chief – and 2021 Nobel Laureate – Dmitry Muratov. Muratov, who himself has fled Russia and relocated to the West, has publicly called for international funding for exiled journalists in order to preserve and sustain their work. Following the invasion of Ukraine, all independent media in Russia "have been shattered," he said, and those that have fled and gone into exile need backing in order to continue their important work. Muratov has proposed naming the fund, if one is established, after Anna Politkovskaya, the well-known *Novaya Gazeta* reporter killed in 2006 because of her critical reporting on the Kremlin and the wars in Chechnya. (*Rappler*, October 29, 2022)

RUSSIA'S NEW SAMIZDAT INDUSTRY

In the face of onerous new restrictions on speech within Russia, and the drying up of opposition media inside the country, ordinary Russians are turning to a tactic used to disseminate ideas during the decades of the Cold War. Self-publishing (or "samizdat," in Russian) "became an ever more important channel for Soviet citizens to discuss issues of importance to them that the authorities did not want raised, until Gorbachev's glasnost campaign rendered it unnecessary," notes Russia expert Paul Goble on his *Window on Eurasia* blog. "Now, with the increasing repression of the Putin regime and ever more restrictive censorship on publishing, a new kind of samizdat is emerging, not the handwritten or typescript kind of the Soviet past but rather crowd-funded publishing of works that couldn't pass muster at more controlled publishing houses." "Most often," Goble explains, "this takes the form of authors posting their works online and then asking readers to send money to support them. As a result, authors can live by their writing without subjecting themselves to the restrictions of government-controlled publications or publishing houses."

Just how sizeable is this industry? "An estimated three to four billion rubles (60 to 80 million US dollars) flowed through this 'monetization' of samizdat" in 2022, Goble says, citing Russian sources. "That still pales in comparison with the regular book market in the Russian Federation, which totals an estimated 70 billion rubles (1.1 billion US dollars); but like samizdat in Soviet times, these self-published materials are helping to keep intellectual life alive by distributing materials and by reviving ties between readers and writers just as samizdat did." (*Window on Eurasia*, December 6, 2022)

TIGHTENING KREMLIN RESTRICTIONS ON THE INTERNET

The Kremlin, meanwhile, is clamping down still further on the internet in its efforts to control information available to its citizens. During just one week in December, Russian authorities reportedly blocked nearly 15,000 new websites, says internet monitoring NGO Roskomsvoboda. According to the non-profit's estimates, Russia's state censor, ROSKOMNADZOR, blocked an average of 4,900 websites per week in 2022 as part of the government's efforts to shape the media narrative surrounding Russian policy and its war in Ukraine. (*Meduza*, December 12, 2022)