



## **The Kremlin's Responses to Anti-War Voices in Russia: Setting the Tone in the First Year of War**

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### **Abstract**

The “special military operation” (SVO) launched by Vladimir Putin against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, took most Russians by surprise. They had to be persuaded of its correctness, by any means. This article details the Russian state’s methods for sustaining its changing official narrative about the “SVO” as well as the ways and means the dissident portion of Russia’s citizenry made their objections to the war in Ukraine heard during its first year. The Kremlin’s already firm grip on the distribution of information was tightened; Russia’s wordsmiths were silenced, jailed, or forced to flee the country. School curricula were reorganized so that they became incubators of young Russian patriots. The article concludes with conjecture on why the state’s message found such a welcoming audience among Russians, at least during the first year of the war.

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“When war is declared, truth is the first casualty.”

(quoted in Ponsonby 1928, p. 11)

The old adage that truth is the first casualty of war held fast in both the build-up to and the conduct of the “special military operation” (hereafter SVO) launched by Vladimir Putin against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. At that time, he claimed to be fulfilling an obligation to “protect the Russians and our people” in the Donbas, to demilitarize and de-Nazify Ukraine and to prevent any further expansion of NATO toward Russia’s borders (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 2022). His speech rang with vilification of the ‘collective’ West and NATO for their failure to take Russia’s legitimate security interests into consideration. Putin insisted that he had no plans to occupy any Ukrainian territory or to impose anything by force (*Rossiyskaya Gazeta* 2022).<sup>2</sup> With these last two qualifications, the barrage of wartime falsehoods was underway. Given that regular surveys showed that the Russian people did not regard Ukrainians as their enemy, it should not have surprised the Kremlin that those segments of the Russian population who were paying attention reacted to their president’s sudden pronouncement with shock and dismay.

Those early reactions are described here, along with the state’s come-lately but increasingly effective efforts to curb them. There are many important components to Putin’s war on Ukraine. While the media and the political world focus quite naturally on fighting at the front, the extent of the struggle over the distribution of information on the domestic front tends to be ignored or dealt with in bits and pieces. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the Kremlin’s efforts to persuade Russians of the rightness of its cause and to the attempts by some Russians to counter those efforts during the first year of the war. Whereas the long-term effectiveness of the state’s campaign to indoctrinate by persuasion, force, and control of the classroom must be left to future judgements, those findings will have to be based on knowledge of the war of words on the home front, the first stages of which will be found in the picture painted here.

### Message from the Kremlin

The announcement on February 24 set off an immediate outcry from Russia’s startled population. Spontaneous demonstrations against the war, single-picket and mass rallies compelled the Kremlin to issue new censoring edicts and the government to amend existing laws designed to curb public dissent. Legislative guarantees that only one message would be heard culminated on November 4 with an order banning public discussion of unclassified matters in a way that the information might be “used by foreign states, organizations and citizens against Russia’s security.”<sup>3</sup> That meant

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<sup>2</sup> For the English-language version, see Putin, Vladimir. 2022a. “Address by the President of the Russian Federation.” Accessed March 20, 2024. en.Kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843. The early morning televised announcement was titled “On conducting a special military operation” (*O provedenii spetsial’noi voennoi operatsii*).

<sup>3</sup> Prikaz Federal’noi sluzhby bezopasnosti Rossiyskoi Federatsii ot 4 noyabrya 2022 No. 547. 2022. ‘Ob utverzhenii Perechnya svedeniy v oblasti voennoi, voenno-tekhnicheskoi deyatel’nosti Rossiyskoi Federatsii, kotorye pri ikh poluchenii inostrannymi istochnikami mogut byt’ ispol’zovany protiv bezopasnosti Rossiyskoi Federatsii’” [Order of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation of November 4, 2022, No. 547 ‘On the inclusion of the listing of the information in the field of military, military-technical activity of the Russian Federation, which, if obtained by other sources, may be used against the security of the Russian Federation’]. Registered November 17, 2022 No. 70986. Accessed March 25, 2024. [publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202211170017?index=10&rangeSize=1](http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202211170017?index=10&rangeSize=1).

subjects dealing with the structure and size of Russia's armed forces, its weapons, finances, deployments, morale, mobilization, civil defence and more—60 taboos in all.<sup>4</sup> Anyone sharing such information could be designated a “foreign agent,” a label originally applied only to Russian NGOs receiving funds from abroad and also dabbling in Russian politics (Black 2023). The designation had been gradually extended so that by March 2022, it encompassed entities and individuals who expressed criticism of the SVO.

No matter the degree to which the state came to control the dissemination of information, it was always clear that the realities of war would seep through to Russians who wanted to know. Thus, within hours of Putin commencing his invasion of Ukraine, thousands of progressive Russians counter-attacked using the catchphrase No to War! (*Net voine!*). An asymmetrical domestic war of words was started.

In addition to the torrent of information, misinformation, and disinformation from the state in support of its war on Ukraine, dozens of public organizations formed to promote the war effort. Some of these took shape of their own accord, others grew out of existing nationalist movements, and more were created by federal, regional, or municipal agencies. Among the former groups was the Soldiers' Widows (*Soldatskie vdovy*) of Russia that, in January 2023, urged Putin to call for general mobilization. Citing the example of Stalin, who thought only “in terms of Victory,” the Widows accused foreign-based Russian opposition publications, such as *Meduza*, of treason (Faulconbridge 2023).

Another self-proclaimed patriotic organization, calling itself the Committee for the Protection of National Interests (*Komitet zashchity natsional'nykh interesov*), listed “Traitors” and “Cowards and Runaways” with their photos and job descriptions on its website [inagent.info](http://inagent.info). Among its favourite targets were “foreign agents,” whose names, job descriptions, and even photos were recorded in an “Encyclopaedia of Foreign Agents” (*Komitet zashchity natsional'nykh interesov* 2022).

In its turn, Russia's ruling party, United Russia (UR), nurtured and exploited the natural tendency of Russians to ‘rally round the flag.’ While preparing for regional elections set for September 2023, the UR instructed its members to take advantage of the celebration of the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the defeat of the Nazi troops in the Battle of Stalingrad by drawing analogies between those eight months in 1942–43 and the eight years of modern-day Russians ‘defending’ the Donbas. UR members were also asked to arrange lectures on courage and the need to “combat the falsification of history” for secondary school students (Makutina 2023). By falsification, UR meant Western versions of the Second World War's origins and finish.

To mark the historic event more dramatically, a monument to Stalin was unveiled at the site of the WWII victory, which was renamed Volgograd in 1961. Putin visited the city during the festivities and took the opportunity to rail against “Nazism in its modern form,” the “collective West,” and the fact that Russia was “again being threatened by German Leopard tanks with crosses on them” (Putin 2023). A campaign to portray Putin as a Stalin-like, victorious wartime leader was a no-

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<sup>4</sup> Prikaz Federal'noi sluzhby bezopasnosti. 2022. Accessed March 25, 2024. [publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202211170017?index=10&rangeSize=1](http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202211170017?index=10&rangeSize=1).

risk, no-gain tactic, meaning that he and UR needed success in Ukraine if all their electoral eggs in that basket were not to be broken (*Moscow Times* 2023a).

To help galvanize young people, private clubs such as For Victory! (*Za Pobedu!*) organized volunteers to help children write letters to soldiers at the front, usually giving them the right things to say. “White Armband” (#whitepovyazka) flash mobs circulated photos of private citizens, government workers, teachers, and schoolchildren, each wearing a white armband (or bandage) in solidarity with the Russian army. The Latin alphabet letter “Z” appeared everywhere as a sign of support for the war, first on military vehicles and then on private vehicles, T-shirts, caps, buildings, and large posters (BBC 2022a). Sweatshirts sporting the slogan “I am not ashamed” (*Mne ne stydno*), along with a small Russian flag, were marketed aggressively (Kolesnikov 2022). The letter “V,” also from the Latin alphabet, cropped up all over the place as well; internationally, the letter was a symbol for “victory,” ironically, the Russian state claimed it stood for “strength in truth” (*sila v pravde*). Both letters often were depicted in the black and yellow stripes of the Ribbon of St. George, an icon of the Red Army’s defeat of the Nazis.

While thousands of blogs, websites, and Twitter (now X) accounts were banned for various offences related to the war, pro-war bloggers flourished. These included *The Grayzone*,<sup>5</sup> *Reverse Side of the Medal*,<sup>6</sup> and *Rybar*,<sup>7</sup> with hundreds of thousands of followers between them. Their role in the propaganda efforts of the war attracted attention in April 2023, when prominent pro-war blogger Vladen Tatarsky was assassinated in St. Petersburg and received posthumous praise from such luminaries as the Spokesperson for the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Maria Zakharova, and even Patriarch Kirill—the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia.

The most commonly accessed of these is *Rybar* (fisherman), which publishes detailed reports and accurate maps of the front lines and uses channels on X and Telegram, Russia’s most widely used global messaging service. Western media, such as CNN and Bloomberg, and military analysts, such as the Institute for the Study of War, sometimes turn to *Rybar*, though they recognize its strong biases on the side of Russia. *Rybar* was started in 2018 to study issues pertaining to the Middle East, at which point it had about 30,000 followers. Following Putin’s initiation of the “SVO,” it rose to more than a million followers. Its financial contributors were said to be connected to Yevgeny Prigozhin, the now-deceased head of the infamous Wagner Group. The blog also carries posts and notices from Russia’s federal security service, the FSB (*The Bell* 2022).

### Anti-War Political Activism and the State’s Response

The outburst of anti-war rallies in February 2022 resulted in about 14,000 detentions during the first two weeks after the SVO was announced, most of them for a matter of hours or overnight. The most striking journalistic reaction came on the very first day when *Novaya Gazeta* issued the gloomiest possible cover: all black with “RUSSIA. BOMBS. UKRAINE” in large white capital letters.<sup>8</sup> State agencies reacted quickly after the next issue carried photos of dead Russian soldiers and a burned-out tank near Kharkiv, and TV channels *Dozhd* (Rain) and *Ekho Moskvy* broadcast

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<sup>5</sup> The Grayzone. n.d. Accessed March 25, 2024. <https://thegrayzone.com/category/Russia/>.

<sup>6</sup> Reverse Side of the Medal. n.d. Accessed March 25, 2024. <https://t.me/rsotmdivision>.

<sup>7</sup> Rybar. n.d. Accessed March 25, 2024. ([t-me/rybar](https://t.me/rybar)).

<sup>8</sup> For an image of the cover, see BBC News. 2022. “Ukraine War: Russia’s Nobel Winning Editor Muratov Doused with Paint.” April 7, 2022. Accessed April 18, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-61029931>.

pieces about the ‘war’ in Ukraine (*Novaya Gazeta* 2022a). As early as the third day, the federal body for control and supervision of the media, *Roskomnadzor*, made it illegal to identify the assault as an “assault,” the war as a “war,” or the invasion as an “invasion” (*Moscow Times* 2022a).

The magazine cover in question carried an inscription in Russian and Ukrainian: “The editors of *Novaya Gazeta* recognize the war as madness. The editors of *Novaya* do not consider the Ukrainian people as enemies, or the Ukrainian language as an enemy language.” It was signed on the cover by editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov, co-winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021. Even with this powerful personal endorsement, or perhaps because of it, the journal was forced to close by March 4. It continues to publish abroad in Russian and English as *Novaya Gazeta Evropa*. Although that black cover was unique in its intensity, the shift out of the country was not. According to a report issued a year later by a Russian legal aid group called Net Freedom (*Setevye Svobody*), about 1,000 journalists left Russia in 2022. Entire journalistic teams and individual bloggers fled to Europe and the South Caucasus, forming what the report called a second *Runet* (Russian-language Internet) that draws on YouTube and Telegram to carry their opinions to Russians back home (*Setevye Svobody* 2022). The staff of *Dozhd* and *Ekho Moskvy* were among the émigré journalists who recreated their projects outside of Russia.

There were stunning individual moments of defiance. One of these came when Marina Ovsyannikova displayed her opposition to the war on national TV during the March 14 news broadcast on the program *Vremya* for which she had worked as an editor for a decade. Sneaking up behind the broadcaster, who seemed not to notice her, Ovsyannikova waved a large poster in mixed English and Russian with the following text: “NO WAR. *OSTANOVITE VOINU. NEVER ‘TE PROPAGANDE. ZDES’ VAM VRUT. [STOP THE WAR. DON’T BELIEVE THE PROPAGANDA. THEY ARE LYING TO YOU HERE.] RUSSIANS AGAINST THE WAR,”* while repeating in Russian: “Stop the war. No to war.” For this extraordinarily bold action, she was taken into custody, heavily fined, and lost her job. Ovsyannikova was arrested again in July 2022, this time for brandishing an anti-war placard on the side of the Moscow River opposite the Kremlin. Her sign, all in Russian this time, read: “Putin is a murderer. His soldiers are fascists. 352 children died. How many more should die for you to stop?” (Ovsyannikova 2022). Three children’s dolls with red paint on them were spread out at her feet. Confined to her house while awaiting trial, in October, she slipped out of the country with her eleven-year-old daughter and was placed on the federal wanted list (*OVD-Info* 2022a).

On March 15, one day after Ovsyannikova’s first bold protest, Anastasia Parshkova stood courageously alone in front of the Christ the Saviour Cathedral in Moscow, holding a placard saying, in Russian: “Sixth Commandment: Thou Shalt not kill” (*Avtozak LIVE* 2022). She, too, was scooped up by the police, even though single-person pickets do not need permission to demonstrate. Among many personal deeds of protest, the action of feminist artist and LGBTQ+ activist Sasha Skochilenko stands out for its imagination. In April 2022, Skochilenko replaced price tags at a supermarket in St. Petersburg with data on the death toll in Ukraine as a result of Russian bombings (*Moscow Times* 2022b). Arrested and charged with disseminating “knowingly false information,” she remained in detention before appearing on trial in December 2023 (*RFE/RL* 2022). Then there was the twenty-two-year-old Moscow baker, Anastasia Chernysheva, whom authorities detained for posting photos of anti-war confectionaries for sale on Instagram. The offending cakes and cookies were often in Ukrainian colours and carried the slogan “No to War!”; some even depicted quite obscene references as to what Putin could do with himself (Stewart and

Hagan 2023). Chernysheva was not arrested until April 2023, getting away with this act of defiance for nearly a year. She was fined and released but awaited further charges for “discrediting” Russia’s military (*Moscow Times* 2023b). One of Anastasia’s cakes featured the blue and yellow colours of Ukraine’s flag with the caption in Russian: “The sun will rise,” taken from the Soviet rock band Grazhdanskaya Oborona’s song of the same name that goes: “the night will be over, so will the hard times, the sun will rise.”<sup>9</sup>

Individual rebellious acts were slowed to a trickle by government actions but not stopped entirely. As of mid-August 2022, 16,437 Russians had been arrested for anti-war protests since February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022 (*OVD-Info* 2022b). By far, the greater number of the detainees were street demonstrators, but 138 of them were for anti-war posts on social networks, 118 for displaying anti-war symbols and 62 for specific anti-war actions (*OVD-Info* 2022b). At the end of 2022, 380 citizens were on trial for disrespecting and spreading “hatred” of Russia’s Armed Forces (*OVD-Info* 2022b). The number of incarcerations grew to 19,535 by February 2023, more than 2,000 of them related to anti-mobilization activities (*OVD-Info* 2022b). These data are provided on a regular basis by *OVD-Info*, the leading independent Russian website for information on political arrests, criminal proceedings, and human rights violations in Russia. Founded in 2013, after the notorious Bolotnaya Square roundup of demonstrators against election rigging, *OVD-Info* took its name from its main target, the Department of Internal Affairs (*Otdel Vnutrennykh Del*). Designated as a “foreign agent” in September 2022, *OVD-Info* remains active and runs a 24/7 hotline open to anonymous reports.

Community pressure to conform intensified on March 16, 2022, when, during a speech delivered at a meeting intended to work out socio-economic support for the regions,<sup>10</sup> Putin raged over a litany of Western plots against Russia. Among these was an accusation that the West had created a fifth column (“national traitors”) in Russia, thereby encouraging the public to hunt for opponents of the SVO (Putin 2022b). He declared that “the Russian people, will always be able to distinguish true patriots from scum and traitors and simply spit them out like a midge that accidentally flew into their mouths, spit them out on the pavement. I am convinced that a natural and necessary self-purification of society will only strengthen our country, our solidarity, cohesion and readiness to respond to any challenges” (Putin 2022b). With his reference to “self-purification,” Putin inspired neighbours to snitch on neighbours, children to snitch on classmates or teachers, and workers to snitch on co-workers. In the Stalinist era, this was the hated practice of “denunciations” (Putin 2022b).

Arrests of Russian opponents to the war in Ukraine rose dramatically after Putin declared partial mobilization on September 21, 2022. At least one organization, the Youth Democratic Movement “Spring” (*Vesna*), called for an all-Russia protest against the mobilization that very day. The appeal urged call-ups either not to report or to surrender once they arrived on the front line. *Vesna* proclaimed: “Thousands of Russian men—our fathers, brothers and husbands—will be thrown into the meat grinder of war. What will they die for? Why will mothers and children shed tears? For Putin’s Palace?” (*Dvizhenie “Vesna”* 2022).

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<sup>9</sup> For an image of the cake, please see Bakery XOXO (@bakery\_xoxo). 2022. Accessed April 17, 2024. [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cqpz-tkNkF8/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cqpz-tkNkF8/?img_index=1).

<sup>10</sup> In this instance, “regions” is used to refer to the outlying *oblasts* and *krais*.

Partial mobilization briefly re-vitalized large-scale anti-war activities. On the very first day post-proclamation, *OVD-Info* tallied at least 1,310 detentions in 39 Russian cities, 538 of them in Moscow, 479 in St. Petersburg, 49 in Yekaterinburg, and the rest spread throughout the country (*OVD-Info* 2022c). In the North Caucasus, there were brawls between protesters and police in Makhachkala, Dagestan, and Nalchik, Kabardino-Balkaria (*Meduza* 2022). Huge numbers of young men attempted to avoid conscription by leaving the country. Direct flights to visa-free Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Uzbekistan sold out quickly (Dziadko and Koreniako 2022). On the ground, traffic at Finland's border with Russia backed up overnight, and Russia's borders with Georgia and Kazakhstan were overwhelmed with traffic (*Kavkaz.Realii* 2022; Lehto 2022).

The newly-resurrected and independent *Novaya Gazeta Evropa* (2022c) claimed on September 25, 2023, that up to 261,000 young men had already fled the country. Although that number may seem apocryphal, videos of long line-ups and mob scenes at airports and border crossings suggest that it might not have been greatly exaggerated (Tenisheva 2022). A Telegram channel titled "Relocation Guide from the Russian Federation" [*Gaid po relokatsii iz RF*] listed options for emigration, which countries were accessible, how to find work abroad, how to deal with border control, and so on (*Gaid* n.d.). Visits to the "Guide," which was created by Istanbul-based Ira Lobanovskaya in February 2022, soared after partial mobilization was announced, welcoming 1.5 million on September 22 alone.

The State Duma reacted to the out-flow by adopting legislation setting long prison terms for desertion (10 years) and "voluntary surrender" (15 years). Amendments defined draft dodging during a period of mobilization or war as desertion, and even conscientious objectors risked a three-year term (*Moscow Times* 2022c). *OVD-Info* (2022d) reported arrests of some 2,500 protesters over the first week of mobilization, and the process itself was so chaotic and inefficient that officials eventually had to send home thousands of men who did not fit the criteria for selection. The situation worsened when citizens learned from social media posts that recruits had been deployed to combat units with too little training and poor equipment. To counter the wave of anger and frustration against the mobilization fiasco, the Ministry of Defence (MoD) distributed videos and displayed large posters showing happy and well-prepared young men going off to fight for their Motherland. It was left for body bags to tell the real story.

As individual public protest became too dangerous, organized collectives moved to the forefront of opposition to the war. These tended to be dominated by women who opposed positions taken by state-supported groups, such as Soldiers' Widows. For instance, members of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance (*Feministskoe Antivoennoe Soprotivlenie*), or FAR, stuck small flyers with names of soldiers who were killed or went missing on signposts, information stands, and shop windows. The FAR movement had its formal beginning the day after Russian forces invaded Ukraine. On that day, it posted a Manifesto on Telegram that concluded with the statement: "We are the opposition to the war, to patriarchy, to authoritarianism and militarism. We—are the future and we will win" (*Feministskoe Antivoennoe Soprotivlenie* 2022). FAR's activities spread to dozens of Russian cities, where it continues to distribute anti-war and anti-conscription messaging. The Resistance works closely with *Vesna*, even as many prominent members of both movements have had to flee the country because of surveillance and harassment from authorities. On International Women's Day, March 8, 2022, FAR asked that women not be given flowers in the traditional manner; rather, flowers bound with blue and yellow ribbons (Ukrainian colours) should be laid at war memorials throughout Russia. This took place in over 90 Russian cities and towns (Silina

2022). FAR also distributes a newspaper titled “Female Truth” (*Zhenskaya pravda*), an “anti-war newspaper that it is not ashamed to show mothers and grandmothers!” (*Zhenskaya pravda* n.d.).

A particularly artistic mode of protest made its presence known in the form of sophisticated street graffiti. Members of the Reality (*Yav*) art group, openly, anonymously, or with tag names, painted anti-war murals on the sides of deserted buildings or fences; many of them in Banksy style and quality. If the artist was identified, they were detained and fined for “petty hooliganism” (*Moscow Times* 2022d). As murals were whitewashed by authorities, others popped up. One prominent graffiti artist, eighty-five-year-old Vladimir Ovchinnikov, kept painting anti-war murals, paid fines and then did it again somewhere else. One example of his work featured a little girl dressed in Ukrainian colours with bombs dropping around her painted on the side of a dilapidated building in Borovsk, a village close to Moscow. The caption reads: “Stop!!!”<sup>11</sup> It was painted over by the authorities, and he was fined 35,000 roubles (circa US \$560) for “discrediting the Russian armed forces” (Hopkins 2022). Undeterred, he later drew doves on the spot.

Then, there were the hard-nosed political agencies of dissension. The Navalny network, which had 50 regional offices around the country before it was disbanded in 2021 as an “extremist” organization, decided to re-organize precisely to oppose the war in Ukraine and mobilization in Russia. Announced in the first week of October by Ivan Zhdanov, former director of Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (*Fond bor’by s korruptsiei – FBK*), and his chief of staff Leonid Volkov, both still in exile, the new body proclaimed that it would operate as a “partisan underground” disseminating information, providing legal assistance, and even sabotaging recruiting offices (Volkov 2022).

According to some reports, there was also an aggressive underground anti-Putin movement in place, calling itself the National Republican Army (NRA). Dissident-in-exile Ilya Ponomarev announced its existence in a YouTube video, where he credited the NRA with the assassination of Darya Dugina in August 2022 (*Utro fevralya* 2022). Ponomarev, the only State Duma deputy to vote against the annexation of Crimea in 2014, used the Telegram channel titled February Morning (*Utro fevralya*) to contradict state propaganda about the war in Ukraine. According to one source, at that time, February Morning had “27 regional outlets each with its own Telegram channel where activists and journalists mingle to gather and share news of anti-Putin actions” in Russia (Ptak 2022). They set up another Telegram channel called Russian Partisan (*Rospartizan*), which provided them with a link to the secretive—and, some say, mythical—National Republican Army and also to the militant Freedom of Russia movement (*Rospartizan* n.d.). Freedom of Russia refers to a paramilitary unit of Russians who fight on the side of the Ukrainian army; it is also known as the Free Russia Legion.

Not surprisingly, Russia’s Ministry of Justice’s register of “foreign agents” grew exponentially during the first year of the war. Journalists, editors, cartoonists, musicians, Bashkir and Chuvash activists, the Mayor of Yekaterinburg, and the CEO of Bookmate, a book distribution company, could be found among the nearly 600 people and entities on the list as the first year of war wound down (BBC 2022b). Well-established organizations such as Russia’s branch of Transparency International, the independent pollster Levada Centre, and newer groups like FAR and the Sports

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<sup>11</sup> For an image of the mural, please see Aaron, Jane. 2023. “7 Anti-War Street Artists Still Working Inside Russia.” *The Moscow Times*, January 2, 2023. Accessed April 1, 2024. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/01/02/7-anti-war-street-artists-still-working-inside-russia-a79835>.

LGBT Community were so labelled, as were human rights activists and agencies. These latter included Russia's oldest human rights body, Memorial, the Moscow Helsinki Group, Roskomsvoboda, and the Sakharov Centre. Even environmentalist groups, among them the Sakhalin Environmental Watch, the Arkhangelsk's Movement 42, the Poltava Anti-Dumping movement, and the World Wildlife Foundation, were forced to register as foreign agents. Once branded, often without warning or explanation, there was no recourse. The state was forcing all critics and potential critics to stay quiet or to act clandestinely. Experienced politicians were not immune. Authorities charged three members of *Yabloko*, the only remaining political party in Russia that could claim a liberal-democratic platform, with "discrediting the Russian army" (*Zaks.ru* 2022). Their crime was to publish an open letter to the chair of Russia's Investigative Committee, Aleksandr Bastrykin, calling on him to initiate an inquiry on the massacre at Bucha (*Moscow Times* 2023c).

Intensified efforts to shut opposition down notwithstanding, instances of individual and unobtrusive opposition to the war continued to crop up; for example, when pictures of civilian residences bombed in Dnipro on January 14, 2023, circulated via social media, Russians placed flowers and mementos on statues and memorials in Russia honouring Ukraine and Ukrainians. Authorities removed them, only to have more show up the next day. In Moscow, a statue of Ukrainian poet Lesya Ukrainka was a popular site for such favours (Hopkins and Heitmann 2023). So were Yekaterinburg's Memorial to Victims of Political Repression and St. Petersburg's statue of famous Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko. Silent acts of disobedience such as these were still common weeks later in at least 60 cities across the country (Tenisheva 2023).

Acts of dissent mentioned so far were political ones. It should not be forgotten that all of Russia's wordsmiths found themselves in jeopardy. Many Russian winners of international awards for art, drama, literature, and human rights activities fled the country or were sent off to jail. Pressure at home on prominent artists, singers, comedians, theatre directors, and writers intensified. The Kremlin's war against words spread beyond the streets and broadsheets into all corners of Russian cultural life. Deputies in the State Duma even debated ways and means to remove actors who had bolted the country from existing films, perhaps even naming them as "traitors" in film credits (*Lenta.ru* 2023). Others proposed a blacklist of performers banned from TV and film and recommended that their scenes be cut out of existing films (Shevchuk 2023). "Human and civil rights" joined "war" and "invasion" as bad words.

George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1943) and *1984* (1949) in Russian translation began materializing in shop windows and were sometimes distributed on the street by dissenters. Taken as a none-too-subtle commentary on current affairs in Russia, *1984* topped online book sales in Russia in 2022, often coupled with the Soviet Union's own dystopian science fiction, *We (My)*, written by Bolshevik Yevgeny Zamyatin in 1921 (Prakash 2022). In response, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Maria Zakharova rather pathetically insisted that Orwell's works were really depictions of Western liberal societies (*RIA Novyi Den* ' 2022).

### **Russian Voices from Abroad**

The laws that brought an end to mainstream media opposition to the war were mostly reactive. For instance, an amendment adopted by the State Duma in January 2023 defined any map or chart that challenged Russia's "territorial integrity" as "extremist" material and subjected its creator to heavy

ines. That meant that any mapmaker who left doubts on Russia's hold on the four areas of Ukraine annexed in September, Crimea, or even the Kuril Islands, could be charged with a crime. By this time, most Western news sites, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter were banned in Russia. YouTube remained, though partially blocked. Such well-known Russian news and commentary media as *Mediazona*, *Meduza*, *Moscow Times* and *iStories* joined *Novaya Gazeta* and TV's *Dozhd* outside of the country and continued to feed accounts of the war and domestic politics to Russian audiences via social media. *Mediazona*, founded by leaders of the celebrated punk rock protest group Pussy Riot, was blocked in Russia as early as March 6, 2022, but continued to spread harsh indictments of Putin in Russia via YouTube (*Mediazona* 2022); these included Pussy Riot renditions. Pussy Riot's rhetoric against Putin had grown more strident since their first arrest in 2012. They explained their aggressive stance to Russians in a video posted on Instagram on December 26, 2022: "The music of our anger, indignation, disagreement, [is] a reproachful desperate cry against Putin's bloodthirsty puppets, led by a real cannibal monster, whose place is in the infinity of fierce hellish flames on the bones of the victims of this terrible war" (Pussy Riot 2022a). Their new music video featured the atrocities committed in Bucha and culminated with one member of the band, masked and robed, relieving herself on a portrait of Putin (Pussy Riot 2022b).

Operating out of Latvia since June 2022, *Dozhd* claimed to have 14 million unique viewers in Russia and up to 22 million altogether.<sup>12</sup> Its audience grew quickly after the partial mobilization because, according to its editor-in-chief, thousands of Russians who were indifferent to the war had suddenly noticed it closer to home. Moscow's reaction to criticism from Russians-in-exile was to propose the confiscation of whatever assets they still had in Russia and cancel their passports, forcing them into a permanently disgruntled diaspora (Borogan and Soldatov 2023). Deputy Chair of the Russian Security Council, liberal turned hawk Dmitry Medvedev, advocated even stiffer punishment, including the reintroduction of the death penalty (Medvedev 2023). Rebellious Russian voices from abroad grew louder.

### Incubating Young Patriots

Aware that opposition to the war rested primarily with the younger generation, authorities in Moscow fell back on the Soviet principle of *vospitanie* (upbringing), i.e. using the school system to shape the political thinking of the country's youth. In Soviet days, that meant that schools were expected to graduate keen young communists; in Putin's Russia, schools are now expected to graduate keen young patriots. To that end, the Russian Ministry of Education introduced a new short course for all General School classes. Titled "Conversations About Important Matters" (*Razgovory o vazhnom*), and launched in the summer of 2022 by Putin himself, the lesson started the day for students every Monday beginning on September 5, 2022. In the lesson, teachers stressed moments in history that inspired national unity against outside threats (Morton 2023). Children in the first four grades were taught about the world's natural wonders and how to support and beautify their own country. Stories of heroics in Russia's past and the current war in Ukraine were provided for students in the fifth and later grades. These lectures were not optional. The Ministry of Education provided detailed outlines on its website on what lessons to give and when, with carefully worded instructions on how they should be taught. Beginning in February 2023, the

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<sup>12</sup> The Latvian government cancelled *Dozhd*'s licence in December 2022, claiming that it was assisting Russian soldiers in Ukraine. *Dozhd* has since moved to the Netherlands.

course was also aired on Channel One's regular morning TV show on Mondays so that children who missed school that day and their parents could view it at home (*Razgovory o vazhnom* 2023). The purpose of "Conversations" was clear: instil patriotism and spread support for the war to all corners of Russia. There was pushback. As schools launched the new mandatory curriculum in September 2022, the Teachers' Alliance (*Al'ians Uchitelei*) posted templates for letters of protest and urged their members and parents to send them to local school directors and other authorities, including the Federal Ministry of Education, as follows:

Teacher Application Template! Refuse to conduct lessons 'Conversations about important matters!' Not only is teaching these lessons not the teacher's responsibility, it is against your employment contract! The teacher is obliged to comply with all restrictions imposed by the federal law 'On Education.' Therefore, we have prepared a letter template for notifying the director of the impossibility of conducting such lessons (*Al'ians Uchitelei* 2022a).

One of the templates was titled "We defend schoolchildren from propaganda. How to refute 'Patriotic Hour.'" It is not known how many teachers actually submitted a letter of complaint, probably very few, but the resistance was strong enough that the Ministry removed direct references to Ukraine, the SVO, and military propaganda from school manuals on patriotism (*Al'ians Uchitelei* 2022b).

As the Teachers' Alliance pointed out, the Russian law on education forbids CPSU-style political 'agitation' in schools. To get around this restriction, early in 2023, the Ministry of Education issued instructions to incorporate the "Conversations" into existing history courses for grades 10-11, adding discussions of the causes and consequences of the collapse of the USSR, the 'reunification' of Crimea with Russia, the SVO, and other major events of the 20th to early 21st centuries to both the curriculum and final examinations. By winter 2023, new sets of textbooks and teaching aids for history and social science were being readied for primary general (Grades 1-4), basic general (Grades 5-9), and secondary general education (Grades 10-11) (*Vedomosti* 2023). To get teachers on board, the First Deputy Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration, Sergei Kiriienko, offered unspecified incentives to teachers who inculcate a "feeling of patriotism and a sense of pride" in the "heroes" of the SVO (*RAPSI* 2022). Speaking to the All-Russian Forum of Class Teachers in Moscow, he intoned: "we are defending Russia and the territory of Russia, we are defending the culture of Russia, we are defending the history of Russia and the memory of the heroes that every Russian family has. And this is such a special task" (*RAPSI* 2022). Out of school, the same themes were advanced by a state-funded youth movement called Big Change (*Bol'shaia peremena*) approved by the State Duma in May 2022. This new configuration of the Soviet pioneers program absorbed several existing youth bodies (*TASS* 2022). In February 2023, the government allocated 18.6 billion roubles (circa US \$250 million) for the newly established *Avangard* project, which recreates Soviet-style pioneer summer camps for children, this time to nurture patriots.<sup>13</sup>

The school curriculum add-ons echoed the Kremlin's ever-widening mantra that the fight in Ukraine was really against the "collective West." Leading the pack in this connection was Dmitry Medvedev, who marked Russia's Unity Day, November 4, 2022, with a virulent anti-West post on Telegram, just two days after he proposed reinstating the death penalty for wartime saboteurs. He

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<sup>13</sup> For the first *Avangard* Centre program instituted in 2022, see Black 2023.

characterized the Ukrainian leadership as “a bunch of insane Nazi drug addicts, a nation drugged and intimidated by them, and a large pack of barking dogs from the Western kennel” (*Moscow Times* 2022e). Occupied regions in Ukraine were “sacred” parts of Russia’s “thousand-year history,” he contended and would not be ceded to anyone. Russia’s mission was to wrest the world out from under the grip of the West, “masters of darkness, the slave masters and oppressors, who dream of their monstrous colonial past and yearn to maintain their power over the world” (*Moscow Times* 2022e). Known for liberal and reformist views during his one-term presidency (2008–12), Medvedev emerged from his cocoon to become the head cheerleader for the Russian government’s most extreme anti-Western memes (Black 2015). Chair of the Russian Security Council, Nicolai Patrushev, confirmed the revised official narrative in an interview on January 9, 2023: “the events in Ukraine are not a clash between Moscow and Kyiv. It’s a military confrontation of NATO, above all the US and Britain, with Russia. Fearing a direct engagement, NATO instructors push Ukrainian men to certain death” (*Argumenty i Fakty* 2023). Doubtless, these opinions are imbedded in the new school textbooks and are much more likely to be accepted as fact by Russians who may still find it hard to think of Ukrainians as their enemy.

The military contributed to the re-education frenzy as well. First Deputy Minister of Defence and Chief of the Army General Staff, Valery Gerasimov, advocated that about 140 hours over the student’s final two years of secondary school be allocated to instruction in basic military skills, first aid, and orientation. Coupled with another new course offered by the Ministry of Education, “Fundamentals and Principles of Statehood,” school curricula will be loaded with ‘good citizenship’ and ideological training just as the Soviet school system was (Bashlykova 2022). Additionally, previously fading cadet training was reinvigorated in schools. Military education for students in the upper grades, male and female, now includes instruction on how to fire Kalashnikov assault rifles, throw grenades, and administer first aid (Edwards 2024). Cadets hear lessons on the ‘re-integration’ of Crimea, the SVO, the consequences for Russia of Western sanctions, and learn how to use gas masks (*Moscow Times* 2023d). Teachers’ organizations objected, pointing out that such hands-on militarization modules had been cancelled in the 1990s for reasons of safety, but to no avail (Edwards 2024).

Complementing the cadet program was the Young Army (full title: “All-Russia Children Youth Military Patriotic Social Movement ‘*Yunarmiya*’”), a military youth organization founded by Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu in 2015 and funded by the MoD (Staalesen 2022). In addition to basic military training, members of these units prepare documentaries and group photos in support of the war and are regularly subjected to statements from officials encouraging patriotism and insisting that the West has declared an information war against Russia. The organization accepts boys and girls from the ages of eight to seventeen. The *Yunarmiya* had some 540,000 members in 2019, spurring to 718,000 by August 2022, and, one may assume, has grown since then (Maj. Ray Finch 2019).

There were dozens of other military agencies established for Russia’s youth, many of them long-standing but now recharged. These included the Eaglets of Russia (*Orliata Rossii*) for primary school children and civilian clubs and associations to teach military skills, such as Warrior (*Voin*) and School of Heroes (*Shkola Geroev*) to train boys between the ages of two and seventeen how to be war heroes (*The Bell* 2023). Clearly, the Kremlin hoped that the entire student body would quickly become militarized and unquestioningly patriotic. Only time will tell if the domestic campaign is successful.

## **Conclusion**

Although public opinion polls conducted after a full year of the “SVO” revealed widespread confidence in the army and the president, they also showed a steady increase in preferences for a transition to peace talks. In February 2023, nearly 70 percent of respondents to a Levada Centre survey in the 18–24 age group were in favour of ending the war somehow, while 52 percent of the older generation (55+) wanted the war to continue (Levada-tsentr 2023). Over 60 percent of all respondents believed the “SVO” was going well, nearly 10 percent more than in October 2022. Giving up occupied territory was not an option for any age group (Levada-tsentr 2023). These respondents were the ones paying attention. After nearly a year, a surprisingly large portion of Russia’s population, 47 percent, still appeared to be paying little attention to the war as long as it had not yet affected them directly (Levada-tsentr 2023). Results from Levada Centre surveys would suggest that the state’s internal propaganda campaigns were having their desired results, though fear of the authorities may well have shaped the responses (Volkov 2023). By shifting domestic wartime propaganda to premises that triggered national consciousness, raising the spectre of a foreign threat, and generating ‘rally around the flag’ sentiments, the state’s narrative fell on more readily receptive ears.

Putin had certain historical intuitive advantages as well. It seemed that variations of Nikolai Danilevsky’s nineteenth-century notion that Russia and Europe represented distinct civilizations fated to compete with one another, and the instinctive Leninist conviction that Russia is surrounded by enemies (“two immutably hostile camps”) also helped provide Putin with a malleable citizenry already open to the state’s preferred storyline (Robinson 2022). By the start of the second year of the invasion, opposition voices inside Russia had been muted by coercion, harassment, and forced exile. Restrictions imposed on the Russian population by legislation and public peer pressure already had a feeling of permanence about them as the war moved into its second year. To date, the only potential stumbling block in the way of an Orwellian future for the Russian home front lies with the ever-growing, angry, and enlightened diaspora, but only when and if it were ever to return home.

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