

Russia RTF Short Paper # 3

Battening Down the Hatches

By
Maj Frank Perry

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 was met with international criticism and outrage throughout the globe. The Kremlin is acting swiftly to shield the Russian public from dissenting voices, both inside and outside of the country. The censoring of social media, news outlets, and any voice which counters the official Russian narrative has taken Russian information control to a level not yet seen during Putin's 22 years in power.¹ Additionally, a new law seeking to punish those publicly opposing or spreading "false information" about the war in Ukraine can carry a sentence of up to fifteen years in prison.² These extreme actions are the regime's fearful grasp to try to contain and support their false narrative which has been clearly refuted in the international media.

On 5 March 2022, Putin signed a new law prohibiting the spread of information referring to the Russian Army operations in Ukraine as "war," "invasion," or anything other than the national narrative of "special military operations" with penalties up to fifteen years in prison.³ The law also prohibits making "calls against the use of Russian troops to protect the interests of Russia," or "for discrediting such use" with penalties of up to three years.⁴ This action is a direct response to an abundance of criticism in independent news outlets inside Russia, as well as the escalating protests around the country. The Kremlin, emboldened by their fear of the Russian populous, has taken this drastic step to reduce the dissenting voices inside the country and to limit information to those who would be critical.

The result has been the suspension and shutting down of many news outlets including RFE/RL, the BBC, CNN, Bloomberg, CBS, and Germany's ARD and ZDF.⁵ Similarly, nearly all independent Russian news outlets have been blocked, suspended, or chosen to shut down to avoid breaking the new law.⁶ Similarly, since the initial invasion over 15,000 protestors have been arrested and jailed, with reports of many beaten or tortured.⁷ Similar protests occurred

during the invasion and occupation of Crimea in 2014, and eventually petered out due to government crackdown.⁸ The effectiveness of this new law on recent protests still remains to be seen.

While information control and the disallowance of public protests are not new tactics for the Kremlin, this escalation represents a new norm in today's information rich environment. A fear driven response elicits some presumption of guilt by the Russian public, and while the "curtain" may be closed, some information is sure to leak though. This is also likely to present new challenges to the government as they seek to control the populous, such as underground networks supporting information dissemination as well as new technologies that circumvent censorship activities. As a fearful Kremlin seeks to rule by fear, it will be a careful balance required to maintain power over a populous that will surely become increasingly dissatisfied as economic consequences take hold.

¹ Anton Troianovski, "Russia Takes Censorship to New Extremes, Stifling War Coverage." *The New York Times*. March 4, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/world/europe/russia-censorship-media-crackdown.html>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, "New Russian Law On 'False Information' About Army Being Used Against Activists." March 17, 2022. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-law-crackdown-prison-false-news-ukraine-invasion/31758148.html>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Steve Inskeep and Charles Maynes, "Russia has reasserted state control over the country's major media companies." *NPR*, March 7 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/07/1084870797/russia-has-reasserted-state-control-over-the-country-s-major-media-companies>

⁷ *The Moscow Times*, "Steadfast Pensioner Becomes Symbol of Russia's Anti-War Movement." March 18, 2022. <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/03/18/steadfast-pensioner-becomes-symbol-of-russias-anti-war-movement-a76977>

⁸ Ibid.