Reconsidering Ru(li)net: Russian literary self-publishing platforms and the war in Ukraine. A case study of Litnet.com
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Abstract
In this paper, I examine online self-publishing literary platforms in Russia from a historical and legislative perspective. Using a mixed methods approach, including digital ethnography, field diary, phenomenological interviews, I trace how the Russian Internet, and particularly literary self-publishing platforms, transformed from a free space without legislation or geographical borders to a limited digital arena controlled by the Russian state. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this transformation was complete: the boundaries of the Russian literary Internet coincided with the geographical borders of Russia. The notion of Runet as a community of Russian-speaking people was broken by regulative acts of the Russian government and a war. Literary and online self-publishing practices, contrary to Soviet samizdat, depend on state legislation due to their commercial nature. Regulatory acts limit authors’ capacities to express their thoughts and feelings in literary work.

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Introduction
At the earliest stage of its development, the Russian Internet was considered a free, borderless space where Russian-speaking people could communicate. Online literary and cultural projects, being key elements of Runet from the very beginning, were relatively free from so-called security regulations enacted by the Russian government in 2012–2019, allowing the state to control Web sites. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 had a crucial effect on the socio-cultural landscape in Russia.

Economic sanctions were established against Russia and Russian citizens; cultural institutions such as universities, theaters, publishing houses, and film distribution services suspended collaboration with organizations affiliated with the Russian state. Many artists, cultural figures, and scholars left Russia (Boutsko, 2022; Kantchev, et al., 2022).

Social networks Facebook and Instagram in early March 2022 were blocked in Russia (Roskomnadzor, 2022). A few days later, the Moscow City Court recognized Meta Platforms Inc. as an extremist organization and banned its activities in the territory of the Russian Federation (Mosgorsud, 2022). Russian politicians issued new laws towards information dissemination, according to which it was a criminal offense to publicly disseminate “under the guise of unreliable reports” or “discrediting any participants” anything considered deliberately false information on the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, that is, about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the early days of the war, there were also fears that Internet connections in Russia would be disrupted and authorities would implement the Sovereign Internet Law, establishing technical isolation of the Russian Internet.

In this article, I examine how the Russian literary Internet, being relatively free from the established geographical-based notion of Russian digital sovereignty, became a geographically conditioned space under strong state control and self-censorship, with borders that coincide with the geographical borders of the Russian Federation. This research is based on empirical data that I collected, firstly, in 2016–2022 through digital ethnography and non-participant observation, and secondly in March–May 2022.

I will describe, firstly, the history of the Russian literary Internet (“Rulinet”) and its legislation, and secondly, how authors use these platforms, how they communicate with their readers, what changes occurred after the Russian invasion, and how this invasion influenced authors’ strategies. Before the war, self-publishing authors made a choice where to put their works based on royalty percentages and audience expectations. After the war, they preferred to choose platforms located inside Russia and with Russian legal entities. Readers who lived outside
Russia lost an ability to continue buying books on Russian platforms. Ukrainian authors and readers intentionally stopped the collaboration with Russian-based platforms. The notion of Runet as a community of Russian-speaking people was broken as a result of a war and a Russian Internet sovereignty campaign.

This paper consists of four sections. In section one, I will discuss the theoretical and methodological backgrounds of the article. In section two, I provide a brief history of the Russian literary internet, focusing mainly on self-publishing platforms, their position in the Russian publishing market, and the main conventions existing on them. In section three, I describe events that occurred after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022. That section covers the period from 28 February to the end of April 2022. In the fourth and final section, I present authors’ and readers’ reactions to these events, their subsequent fears, and how their behavior on self-publishing platforms changed after the invasion.

I started to write this work in September 2022, and my observing field was changing while I was writing and describing it; therefore, some observations and conclusions might be less true after September 2022. In the coda, I attempted to hold the changes that occurred while I wrote. As a Russian citizen, I was deeply touched and shocked by these tragic events. I aimed to capture that moment of instability, fear, and panic that was caused by the war.

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Theoretical and methodological framework

For this article, I use concepts of digital sovereignty and digital borders. I aim to explore how the idea of sovereignty is realized in connection with literature as a social activity, how it is functioning on the Internet as an initially independent space, where governments of the industrial world had no sovereignty (Barlow, 1996), and how digital borders are constructed in virtual space.

Traditionally, in political discourses, sovereignty is understood as state autonomy, a power to rule and enact decisions without any interference and influence. Grimm (2015), exploring the history and the concept of sovereignty, emphasized a strong connection of sovereignty with geographical specification, as a power operates under a specific territory.

The idea of Internet sovereignty was developed in connection with Internet governance, which argued the necessity of limiting information flows by national governments with the purpose of protecting domestic culture, among others (Budnitsky and Jia, 2018). Proponents of Internet sovereignty idea stressed “the primacy of national borders and state autonomy in regulating the Internet” (Budnitsky and Jia, 2018). Exploring the concept of digital sovereignty, its history, and discourses, Pohle and Thiel (2020) claim that: “In the most prominent category of digital sovereignty claims, the emphasis is on the idea that a nation or region should be able to take autonomous actions and decisions regarding its digital infrastructures and technology deployment” and “In many instances, the idea of strengthening digital sovereignty means not only actively managing dependencies, but also creating infrastructures of control and (possible) manipulation.”

Therefore, the idea of national sovereignty in cyberspace is strongly connected with legislation and the state as an actor of power and authority, exercising control over specific territories. Sovereignty is also related to the idea of a border as a fixed point on territory, where the state performs control over borders to ensure military security and independence. Also, Glasze, et al. (2023) pointed out that digital sovereignty should be analyzed as a geopolitical representation carried out by different actors, depending on context and serving specific political objectives.

Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2019) proposed two dimensions for a concept of a digital border: digital governmentality of geographical borders, i.e., territorial borders, and digital narration of migration, i.e., symbolic borders. They defined a digital border as a techno-symbolic assemblage, underlining that a digital border is a mediated border, meaning the importance of the semiotic borders’ signs, and proposed to switch focus from a border as a fixed point on a territory to a bordering as a process.

I approach concepts of digital sovereignty and digital borders, continuing the metaphor of the Internet as a place proposed by Markham (2003). The term “Runet,” first used by Israeli blogger Raffi Aslabnekov in 1997, is an abbreviation of “Russian,” also referring to the .ru domain zone, and “net” in the meaning of “network,” reflects the notion of a Russian Internet as a specific cultural realm with its own laws and atmosphere, compared with a global, U.S.-oriented Internet. Rather than being framed geographically in terms of nationality, citizenship, or local presence, from the outset Runet was formed as a Russian-language community without geographical borders where users from different countries could communicate (see Schmidt, 2001; Gorny, 2006; Mjor, 2009).

The story of governance of this borderless space started in 2012 (Roskomsvoboda, 2022), when Federal Law № 139, colloquially known as the “websites black-list,” came into effect. In 2014, there were amendments to the federal law “On information, information technologies and information protection,” which allowed Web sites to be blocked without judicial intervention if they contained prohibited information such as calls for mass riots, extremist materials, suicide techniques, child pornography, or information on drug manufacturing procedures. In 2014, Federal Law № 242 also came into effect, requiring Internet companies working with personal data of Russian citizens to keep that information within the territory of the Russian Federation. In 2016, Federal Laws № 374 and № 375, colloquially known as the “Yarovaya laws,” demanded that Internet companies store information about user actions and their conversations, starting in July 2018. Additionally and uniquely, this law provided a legal definition of a Russian Internet user. To be considered Russian, a user should use a Russian ID document, register with a Russian phone number, or use services whose Internet address could be defined as being located in Russia. Hence, it was not necessary to be a Russian citizen or speak Russian — just being in Russian territory meant being Russian and being treated as Russian.

Federal Law № 90, the Sovereign Internet Law, enacted in 2019, obliged telecom operators to install government equipment at traffic exchange points for traffic analysis and filtering inside Russia and communication connections crossing the Russian border. It was claimed that this law was created to ensure the safety of Russia and the Russian Internet in the event of the loss of a global connection. At the same time, this equipment made it possible to disconnect the Russian Internet from the global network on command from within Russia.
All these laws were created to protect Russian state security, but in fact have been used for political censorship, limiting free expression on the Internet (Soldatov, 2015; Ognyanova, 2019; Sivetc, 2021), mostly in mass media and on social networks. The Russian state consistently maintained its policy of controlling and limiting Runet within the geographical borders of the Russian Federation and developed a notion of digital sovereignty based solely on geography (Nocetti, 2015; Ristolainen, 2017).

China, Brazil, and other BRICS countries were also those countries that tried to challenge the technological hegemony of the United States. China created its sovereignty brand in close collaboration with national digital companies such as Baidu (Budnitsky and Jia, 2018; Zeng, et al., 2017). In Brazil, India, and South Africa, there was weaker data sovereignty than in China and Russia (Polatin-Reuben and Wright, 2014). In Europe, the idea of digital sovereignty is regarded more as the idea of supranational instead of national because of economic organization (Flordi, 2020). Linda Monseses and Daniel Lambah (2022) agreed that in many publications, it is claimed that “much of the digital sovereignty rationale is driven by the current geopolitical climate”. At the same time, they claimed that the digital sovereignty idea is not only geopolitical imaginaries, but connected with identity (Moneses and Lambah, 2022).

Turning to the cultural specificity of online national spaces, it is worth noting that literature was one of the core aspects of Runet; even a special term “Rulinet”, meaning “Russian literary Internet”, appeared. Rulinet was relatively free from so-called security legislation enacted by the Russian government; Russian-speaking people all over the world could read and communicate freely. China also had its own separate online culture spaces and literature (Hockx, 2015). On the US.-dominated Internet, there were platforms such as Wattpad, a Canadian-based platform founded in 2006, which offered an opportunity to publish stories in 56 different languages, including Russian and Chinese Simple and Chinese Traditional, reaching 85 million authors and readers. Kindle direct publishing, a service established by Amazon, provides the possibility to publish a book in 45 languages, mostly European, excluding Russian, but including Traditional Chinese, which is used in Taiwan. Therefore, Rulinet, as well as the Chinese literary Internet, seem to be a specific and separated area even within the global literary Internet, mostly because of the importance of book culture, which is distinctive to Russian culture.

This work is a qualitative study, deeply grounded on the empirical data collected mainly by digital ethnography methods. From 2016 until September 2022, I undertook research in Russian self-publishing literary platforms using non-participant observation. I registered on Litnet.com in August 2016, on LitRes: Samizdat and Ridero in September 2018, on Author.Today in October 2020. In 2020–2022 I held three series of phenomenological interviews with authors and readers: in 2020 there were six, in 2021–January 2022 there were twelve, and in March–April 2022, after the invasion of Ukraine, there were six.

Starting from March 2022 I consequently read groups on the Russian social network vk.com, the largest social media in Russia, devoted to self-publishing literary platforms where authors and readers discuss their thoughts: Tikho v lesu (Quiet in the forest), Avtory Zhurnal Samizdat (authors of Samizdat magazine), Zakrytie Litnet. Novosti. Novye slyiki avtorov (Litnet closing. News. New authors’ links), Tikho (Gromko!) v russkov lesu (Quiet [Loud!] in the Russian forest), and kept a field diary. Also, in my analysis, I used authors’ personal blogs on litnet.com and other literary platforms, as well as on the social network vk.com.

My main goal was “to uncover the conceptual structures that inform our subjects’ acts, the ‘said’ of social discourse, and to construct the system of analysis in whose terms what is generic to those structures, what belongs to them because they are what they are”, i.e. create a thick description, following Clifford Geertz’s approach [1]. During the fieldwork, ethnographer and anthropologist should document events and actions they observe very carefully and with all possible details, and also detect and try to reconstruct meanings that are important for informants. Such an approach allows to capture and describe things in a moment when they are happening, especially in the heart of war, and to unveil substantial implications of observed practices.

In the next section, I will analyze the history of Rulinet, focusing on the history of self-publishing platforms in Russia.

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Rulinet and the self-publishing industry in Russia

The most famous Russian online literary project, library lib.ru, started as a private endeavor by Maksim Moshkow in 1998 and became a “cultural symbol of early RuNet, a marker of cultural identity for Russian Internet users also outside the Russian Federation”, as Mjør (2009) noted.

Self-publishing Web sites started to appear around 2001, allowing people to publish their own literary works without any external editorial control: sites such as shti.ru and proza.ru, alongside Zhurnal Samizdat (samizdat magazine), a new section in Moshkow’s library with the domain name Zhurnal.lib.ru, later samlib.ru. These three sites were the most noticeable self-publishing resources on Rulinet for years.

Gorny (2006) claimed that “almost any book published in Russian can be found and freely downloaded online.” He explained the initial popularity of online self-publishing due to a lack of enforced copyright laws in Russia and the idea of information being able to circulate freely, compared to the “Western” Internet, which faced severe limitations due to copyright controls [2]. At that time, there were many pirate, illegal libraries that placed books without permission of rights holders.

Anti-pirating laws regulating the book industry on the Internet appeared first in 2006 and then were amended in 2012 and 2013. These laws blocked Web sites that broke copyright under the application of the rights holder. Many online libraries were subsequently made illegal or placed in a “gray zone.” Ostromooukhova (2021) proposed a detailed analysis of these initiatives and examined different tactics admins of shadow libraries such as lib.ru, lib.rus.ec, fibusta, and Maxima Library are used to circumvent restrictions and to be accessible to Russian users and stay in the Russian cultural landscape. They tried to stay in the legal field by collaborating with LitRes (Librusec), creating a new section for self-publishing (Moshkow), or moving the hosting company to Ecuador (Librusec). Some of those attempts were unsuccessful, and Librusec and Fibusta were eternally blocked on the territory of the Russian Federation and available only via VPN services. These were the first signs of breaking the Russian language community in virtual space, creating a digital border between Rulinet and the global Internet.
Federal Law № 436 “On Protection of children from information harmful to their health and development,” accepted in 2012, implemented an age rating: all information products, such as books, both printed and electronic, films, Web sites, should be labeled according to their content. There were ratings for ages 0+, 6+, 12+, 16+, 18+, and 18+. Ratings implied that there were anatomical depictions of sexual relationships, sexual scenes, obscene language, or non-heterosexual relations. The label 18+ banned gay propaganda to children, accepted in 2013.

Although books and cultural Web sites seemed to be relatively free from security regulations described earlier, they were still in the eye of the Russian state. In a 2010 interview, Maxim Moshkow described how the FSB called him and asked “to deal with one girl’s page who wrote verses about Chechen snipers” and how the initial address of his self-publishing project zhurnal.lib.ru was blocked because one user published writings that were labeled radical by a court (Kharitonov, 2010). Moshkow responded by transferring the resource to another Internet address.

Owners of Internet companies could establish their own rules regarding content control. Chernoritskaya (2006) recalled how, in 2004, the National Russian Literary Network administration, owners of proza.ru and stihi.ru, tried to limit topics in works published on the sites, prohibiting negative comments on individuals such as the Russian president or parliamentarians. This decision was finally withdrawn, but Web site administrators can set their own rules for users and ban those who do not follow them.

In 2020 Schmidt claimed that a “territorially-based understanding is not appropriate for the geographically dispersed reading audiences using Russian-language online libraries, e-book stores, or self-publication platforms” [4]. At the beginning of the 2020s, self-publishing in Russia was diverse. There were platforms where authors could publish but not sell their works, such as Moshkows’s samlib.ru, as well as proza.ru and stihi.ru. In a 2010 interview, Moshkow said that he did not want to sell books and that he launched his self-publishing project so that there would always be free fiction books on Runet for those who didn’t want to pay to read (Kharitonov, 2010).

Proza.ru (2001) was positioned by its founders as the largest network collection of contemporary Russian-language prose. This platform was not intended to sell books, but there was a copyright marketplace where every author could propose that their work could be purchased with a desired royalty percentage. Commercial opportunities were present on these sites, though authors could not sell their works directly.

The idea of commercialization and legal electronic book trading was first proposed by LitRes, founded in 2007. The presumption that electronic books were not entirely meant to be downloaded for free but should have some cost has subsequently become more popular among readers.

In the 2010s, a “new generation” of self-publishing platforms started to appear, where authors could not only publish but also sell their work. Samolit.ru and cellulozoa.ru were both launched in 2012, with feisovet.ru opening in 2013. These sites were not popular; they stood outside the traditional publishing industry and literary process. The situation changed in the second half of the 2010s when more commercial platforms, such as Lit-Era, later Litnet, Author.Today and Ridero, were founded.

Ridero appeared in 2015 and LitRes: Samizdat, a part of LitRes Holding, launched in 2016. On Ridero.ru and LitRes: Samizdat, authors could publish their novels for free download or for a fee. Both fiction and non-fiction books were published, as well as on samlib.ru and proza.ru. Authors could offer their readers not only electronic books to purchase but also printed versions, using print-on-demand technology.

On Litnet, Author.Today and Litmarket, authors could also publish their books for free or purchase. These platforms hosted mainly fiction books, “low-brow” genres such as romance novels, science fiction, fantasy, military fantasy, and portal fantasy, where heroes travel between worlds and time. Most books on these platforms were published in serial form, chapter by chapter in the course of being written.

Alongside these, ficbook.net was launched in 2007. The platform was primarily aimed at publishing fanfiction, but the site still has a large number of original stories.

By the beginning of 2022, Litnet, Author.Today, and Litmarket had become the most visible of all self-publishing resources and provided a significant amount of literary text on the Russian book market. Traditional publishers monitored the sites for promising authors to publish. In October 2021 there were 79,356 books on Litnet, 84,337 on Author.Today, and 17,438 on Litmarket. Compared with the traditional book market, according to Russian book chamber reports, there were 19,423 fiction books published in 2019, and 17,076 in 2020.

According to the independent research organization SimilarWeb.com [4], the most accessed site was Litnet: there were more than 60 million visits in January 2022 (repeated visits of one user were taken into account). Author.Today and Litmarket had substantially lower figures, with 22 million and only 390,000 visits, respectively.

The most prominent platform, Litnet.com, was founded in 2015 by two Ukrainians, Sergey Grushko and Andrey Nechaev. Initially called Lit-Era, in 2016 it was renamed Litnet, an abbreviation of literary network because the founders planned to expand it to new language markets abroad. In 2018, Ukrainian and Spanish language versions were released, and in 2019 in English. The Russian version worked under the name litnet.com, and the others under booknet.com, where a user could switch the interface language. The managing company for Litnet.com was LITNET CY LIMITED, registered in Cyprus, and for the booknet.com — LITNET ES LIMITED, also based in Cyprus. The location of the company’s registration did not matter before the invasion, but it became important afterward.

Author.Today was founded in 2016 by Sergey Shapin. Litmarket.ru was started in January 2020 by two writers, Dmitry Rus and Nikita Averin. Both platforms were registered in Russia and functioned only in Russian and on the Russian market.

Each platform had its own genre setting. On litnet.com, the leading genre was romance novels of all kinds: contemporary, fantasy, erotic, and so on. Litnet founders Nechaev and Grushko stated that the platform’s main audience in 2019 was women aged 25 to 40, with most of the authors’ pseudonyms female (see Figure 1), which could explain why this genre was so popular on the platform.
Fantasy and science fiction were the most popular genres on Author.Today. Its representatives have argued that this result was not planned, but among users, it is believed that Author.Today remains a “masculine resource.” The platform is designed in blue colors, and there are many male pseudonyms on the main page (see Figure 2).

Litmarket.ru was not being targeted at a particular age or gender group. The founders noted that they were eager to avoid a “genre or gender ghetto into which other portals are turning in” (Averin, 2021). The site’s leading genre was sci-fiction and fantasy, but romance fantasy and romance novels were also represented.

On all of these platforms there is room for comments, blogs, and book reviews, and authors and readers actively communicate. Each platform had its own communities and audience relationships.

On Litnet.com, which is known as a “female,” “pink” site, comments were mostly kind, friendly, and well-wishing. Readers discussed heroes and plots as if they were real people and stories. Popular books could obtain thousands of comments. For example, the novel Imperatorskiy otbor (Imperial selection), written by one of Litnet’s most popular authors Victoria Svbodina, on 14 June 2020 received 22,908 comments.
Books published on Author.Today received fewer comments than on Litnet, and users said that these comments could be rude and harsh (Shtolz, 2021). Blogs were an important component of Author.Today, and whereas on Litnet, only novels published on the site were discussed, on Author.Today, blogs also covered relationships with publishers, politics, and personal matters.

Litmarket had significantly fewer users. According to my observations, there was an opinion among self-publishing authors that the site administration was friendly and open but that the site itself was not popular among readers (Crack, 2020). Therefore, it did not make much sense to some to publish on it.

The only thing that one needed to publish their work on any of these platforms was to be a registered user and observe Russian Internet control, i.e., information dissemination and anti-pirate laws, as described earlier. Nationality or citizenship did not matter. Most readers on these platforms were from Russia, but there were also Russian-speaking authors and readers from Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Moldova, and other post-Soviet countries, as well as from other locations across the world. There was no preliminary moderation on these resources, but any user could file a complaint, and a moderation team would check it.

When authors chose a platform for publishing, they follow their Web site of choice’s genre conventions and respond to readers’ expectations. If they are interested in selling their work, they needed to meet the site’s requirements. On Litnet, the author had to have published one completed book no less than 300,000 characters for free and have a minimum of 200 followers on the platform. On Author.Today, the administration assessed each application individually. On Litmarket, one could sell a work immediately after publishing with no special conditions.

The three platforms had many free books available, but those authors with novels at the top of genre ratings were financially successful. For many, this was their only source of income and main professional activity. As a result, authors also considered the royalty percentage when selecting a publishing platform, which ranged from 50 to 80 percent, depending on whether an author desired to publish their book under exclusive or non-exclusive terms.

On Litnet, when authors achieved commercial status, they signed a contract with the site's administration stating that they must publish their work following a strict schedule, facing penalization if they did not meet deadlines. Popular authors could earn an above-average income in Russia, but to achieve it, they had to work under a strict pressure of deadlines, creating a book within two or three months.

The conditions were the same on Author.Today, but with a less severe schedule, less than half a year to complete a book.

On all three platforms, an author had to do all duties that were usually the publisher's responsibility. Authors would run advertisement and promotional campaigns for their books, think about book covers and editing, decide on the book price. All these points, according to my observations, complicated the author’s life but gave them a feeling of independence and control over their writing.

On Litnet, there was also an option to sign a special “flat-fee” contract. The author received an advance payment and assigned distribution rights to Litnet administration for a specified period of time, during which he was unable to do anything with the book, such as move it to other platforms or provide a discount. This procedure was quite similar to those used by traditional publishing houses when an author transferred rights to a publisher and lost control over a work. Some authors considered these conditions to be oppressive. In the interviews, authors remarked that Litnet administration was doing everything possible to ensure that authors publish their work exclusively on Litnet.

On the other two platforms, this option was not available. In case an author acquired commercial status and wanted to sell a book, they were provided a contract with the platform’s administration, specifying publication schedule, royalty percentage, exclusive or non-exclusive distribution, and so on.

Key to becoming a popular author was meeting readers’ expectations. Authors had to follow common genre and plot trends to discover what was popular and not so popular so they could predict whether their new book would sell well. Communication while writing and reading was a success factor for books. An author had to actively communicate with their readers: answer comments, post news and fun facts about books on their social networks, and provide other interactions. Some authors even wrote direct messages to readers in a given novel’s text, encouraging them to guess how a story will develop. For example, in the novel It’s impossible to forget you (Zabyt’ tebya nevozmozhno), author Maria Vysotskaya, while publishing, at the end of chapter three, described a ring over the heroine’s finger, stressed this fact, and after the end of the text, said, addressing to readers: “Well, now your assumptions, what is the ring she has” (Nu a teper’, vashi predpolozheniya, chto eto u nee za kolechko). Readers also could follow their favorite authors on the platform as if on Twitter and Facebook, receiving notifications about new books, new chapters, sales, and other news.

Publishing novels in serial fashion allowed authors to engage readers in the writing process and caused them to repeatedly return to the platform. This style of publication also had the advantage of reducing piracy. While a given book was still incomplete, there was little sense to steal it. Copyright is significant for self-publishing authors, first because they did not want to lose income on piracy and second because they desired control over the dissemination of their text.

The uses of platforms and authors’ and readers’ behavior were stable for 5–10 years by the beginning of 2022. Texts published on these platforms were considered light, easy recreational reading: low-brow, popular literature. Some authors migrated from one platform to another, but most selected one favorite platform that corresponded to the genres that they wrote, accumulating a reader base on it, communicating with them, and generating an income. This situation changed after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

The war in Ukraine and the case of Litnet.com

In the first days after Russia invaded Ukraine, both writers and readers experienced shock and tragedy. According to blog entries and comments
on all three platforms and on social networks, authors were outraged and felt badly about what had happened. Some authors, both Russian and Ukrainian, stated that they would take a break from publishing their stories. Some Ukrainian authors reported that they were unable to continue publishing because they were in a combat zone and would return to the site once they had moved to a safe location. Some authors posted supportive messages on their social networks and blogs. Other authors who sold their books organized discounts and sales, provided promo codes, and even gave their books away for free, mainly to Ukrainian readers but also to anyone feeling down and in need of support.

Other authors doubted whether it made sense to publish their light, entertaining books in the midst of such horrific events and questioned who would read them. Discussions on platforms and social media questioned whether it was appropriate to advertise and promote such non-genuine, popular literature. There were some occasional messages such as “stop advertising your pregnant dragons it is too difficult to see all this,” but most readers agreed that reading low-brow fiction was helpful at this time, and authors who were able to continue their work should do so.

On 25 February, a post on a vk.com group asked “if there would be the death of Litnet because economic sanctions against Russia had been established.” Authors and readers were concerned that because Litnet is a foreign company registered in Cyprus, sanctions would have an impact on the financial system: authors would be delayed in receiving royalties, and readers would be unable to purchase books. The second worry was that Litnet founder and owner Sergey Grushko is a Ukrainian citizen, which could influence his policy on the site. Other users discussed whether Grushko would sell Litnet to a Russian host, as he had mentioned at one point that he had received good offers from Russian companies.

On 28 February, Sergey Grushko, in his own blog on booknet.com, answering those who had accused him of making money on the Russian market and demanded he close Litnet, stated that funds that he had received from the Russian version of Litnet.com had been used to fund Ukrainian military Forces (Grushko, 2022), and if he were to close Litnet, there would not be enough money to support it. Later, the message was modified, and there are no longer any references to supporting the Ukrainian military, yet it had been saved in its original form on the Web archive.

This message caused different reactions.

First, authors feared that they would be accused of state treason. On 27 February, the Prosecutor General of Russia issued a warning (Genprokuratura Rossi, 2022) that providing assistance to foreign countries targeted against the Russian Federation’s military security was regarded as state treason. Keeping in mind this acknowledgment and “anti-terrorist” laws, authors worried about Litnet being blocked by Russian authorities or if Grushko’s statement about profiting from Litnet could be classified as a crime.

Second, authors and readers had a feeling that they had been deeply insulted. Litnet focused on Russian users with a majority of the paying audience based in Russia. Profiting from Russian residents while supporting Ukrainian military forces was beyond the pale for both Grushko and Ukrainian authors. Discussions essentially placed responsibility for future actions on authors.

Other platforms reacted quickly to Grushko’s statement.

Also on 28 February, Author.Today’s administration declared itself to be a literary site where anyone who wrote in Russian could publish their works. Readers from any country could read them, where citizenship and political views of the site’s owner were irrelevant. Author.Today’s stance was essentially apolitical. Their moderation team deleted comments and blog posts for “initiating the political discussion and political provocations.”

On 1 March, the Litmarket administration announced that due to recent events, they would help all authors who decided to change platforms. They made special adverts and promos for those who would move to Litmarket and emphasized that Litmarket was a Russian company, registered in Russia. On 3 March, Author.Today proposed the same conditions.

As a result, the community of authors fragmented. Those who were just beginning their careers on Litnet started to leave the platform and publish their works on other sites. Popular authors on Litnet who had a large and loyal audience and who gained a flat-fee contract were less willing to leave the platform. Nonetheless, some started to prepare to move as well; others thought that they had no real choice as they were bound by their liabilities both to Litnet and to their readers, so they elected to wait.

On 5 March, Mastercard (2022) and Visa (2022) declared that they suspended operations in Russia. For Russian users, this meant that they could not use their bank cards on Litnet.com due to it being based in Cyprus. It was treated as a foreign operation.

On 8 March, the Litnet administration sent a newsletter to authors saying that due to the volatile financial situation, all prices were converted to Euros. The administration also stopped accepting payments from Russian and Belarusian customers, as well as from Russian and Belarusian bank cards. Litnet management explained that there were EU sanctions against the Russian Federation, as well as currency restrictions on financial transfers for Russian Federation citizens. The Litnet’s administration also acknowledged that their decision could lead to a reduction in sales, especially for authors interested in selling books to Russia and Belarus despite the political situation. They reminded authors that they remained bound to their exclusive contracts. For those authors who had not terminated their exclusive contracts, they offered opportunities to move to non-exclusive contracts, except for those under flat-fee contracts. The Litnet administration also emphasized that the Litnet team was located in Ukraine, working from bomb shelters. The team was grateful for all support from its users.

These events meant that neither authors nor readers located in Russia could use the site in a traditional sense. Readers were unable to purchase new books; writers were denied opportunities to sell books to their target audience and earn royalties for deposition in their Russian bank accounts. Now even top authors had no reason to remain on the platform, especially those who relied solely on Litnet royalties. Only readers who lived outside Russia and wanted to read books on the platform could then purchase titles. On 12 March, Litnet announced on its official Telegram channel that it was reconstructing itself to allow Russian-speaking authors from normal countries to publish their books.

By this point, most authors realized that they had to leave Litnet, and so began seeking new places to publish their works. Even those for whom it was difficult contractually and who could not leave the platform immediately started a transition around 1 March, appealing to Litnet to stop
marketing their books, publishing links on their Litnet blogs to their profiles on other social networks.

To help authors and readers stay in touch, special social network communities were formed, where authors announced where they were going to move. A Google document was launched where readers could gather names of authors and link to social network accounts and new platforms where they had decided to move. Author.Today, Litmarket, as well as other sites like LitRes: Samizdat and Ridero, offered assistance in migrating various works. However, there were several obstacles that prevented some authors from migrating their work immediately.

First, there were legal difficulties. The most notable authors had signed exclusive contracts to distribute their works only on Litnet or with a flat-fee scheme; these contracts could not be easily abandoned. Invoking force majeure — simply, a contractual means of dealing with unexpected events — was discussed (see, for example, Fyr, 2022). However, since the contracts were between Russian citizens and a Cypriot company, and war had not been proclaimed formally between Russia and Cyprus, there claiming force majeure would be ineffective, leading to penalties for breach of contract.

Second, authors were concerned that after moving to a new platform, they would lose their readers. Loss of readers would result in a loss of income, and they had already financial suffered from Litnet’s decisions. They could start from scratch on a new platform and hope that they managed to save their core audiences, but this move posed a severe threat to those authors solely dependent on Litnet royalties.

Authors joined private groups in social networks to develop effective transient strategies. Outsiders could not become involved in most of these chats; to be accepted, one required recommendations or being acquainted with someone already in the community. Additionally, many authors were very stressed about the situation, suspicious of newcomers and unknown individuals.

Third, Litnet management attempted to prevent authors and readers from leaving their site. On 12 March, they removed the “About” section on the author’s page, where authors published personal details and placed links to their social networks and other sites where they positioned their works.

There had been a conflict between Litnet and Author.Today in 2018 over copyright issues, which resulted in authors being restricted from mentioning Author.Today on Litnet, facing a temporary ban in violation of this rule. When the war started, and authors were placing links for readers to find their work on new platforms, Litnet blocked posters from leaving comments or creating new blog posts. Furthermore, they started deleting readers who followed those authors who were posting about migrating to different platforms, setting authors’ reader counts to zero, depriving authors of free and open communication with their readers.

Authors tried to circumvent these restrictions. They left notes in the text of novels, using allegories and metaphors. For example, “seek heroes in the Blue house” (meaning the “blue” Author.Today) or placed text on their avatars that would not be captured by automatic detection.

Authors were mainly switching to two platforms: Author.Today and Litmarket.ru, but still encountered difficulties on both.

On Author.Today, where the audience and prevailing genre was male, some authors claimed that “we are not waiting for women authors from Litnet.com with their pregnancies, dragons, and sexual bosses on our website.”

Litmarket appeared to be more welcoming and kind to authors migrating from Litnet. However, the platform did not include functionality that Litnet users were accustomed to, such as reading apps for smartphones, so faced technical limitations. On 11 March, the founder of Litmarket, Nikita Averin, reported on his personal blog that thousands of authors had registered on the site and uploaded thousands of books. Because the site was not prepared for this level of traffic, servers were not functioning correctly. Administration decided to switch off servers to upgrade them. The site was down for more than two days. After it was accessible again, its creators noted continuous distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks on the platform until the beginning of May. Litmarket was not the best immediate choice for those who requiring immediate income for their stories.

Migrating authors found other platforms to be even less suitable to their needs. Prodaman.ru allowed for serial posting; however, the platform was outdated, the publishing process inconvenient, and the audience relatively small. LitRes: Samizdat had a significantly lower royalty percentage than Litnet and was not intended for serial publication, although it did have the necessary functionality. On Ridero, there was no active community of readers, meaning it was impossible to publish stories serially and profit from this style.

Over the first four months of 2022, Litnet lost almost half of its audience, both authors and readers. According to SimilarWeb, there were 63 million visits in January 2022, 54 million in February, 42 million in March, and 30 million in April. At the same period, Author.Today’s traffic changed slightly: there were 22 million in January, 19 million in February, 21 and 22 million in March and April. Litmarket’s traffic increased significantly: from 400,000 visits in January and February to 4 million in March and 9.4 million in April. There were some users who left Litnet altogether: On 18 March, there were 81,222 books on Litnet, 100,952 on Author.Today, and 25,524 on Litmarket; On 27 April, there were 75,251 books on Litnet, 106,185 on Author.Today, and 34,857 on the Litmarket.

Discussion: Reactions, reflections, consequences

Subsequent chaos on Russia’s self-publishing platforms, fears of disrupting the Internet in Russia, old and new laws on information dissemination affected the authors’ communities significantly, with the appearance of a special term: euromarch (евромарт).

Authors who had published their works on Litnet were caught in the crossfire. Pressed on one hand by Russian Internet control laws and on the other by Litnet management’s actions, authors could either stay on the platform, risking being accused of treason, suffering financially with dwindling core audiences, or leave the platform, penalized as a result, losing money and their primary audiences. Those authors whose reader counts had been set to zero actually had no choice. They had already lost all that they had built over time, so they had to start again from
Unable to pay for new books, readers followed authors in leaving Litnet. They claimed on social networks that they would stick with their favorite writers no matter the platform, but even for most experienced authors, it was clear that it would be hard to retrieve new audiences elsewhere.

The notion of Runet as a community of Russian-speaking people had been broken. Authors and readers living in Ukraine were now separated from those outside Russia. Authorial strategies also changed. Before the war, authors chose a platform on which to publish based on genre preferences of readers, their expectations of a given platform, and royalty percentages. After the war began, they started to pay close attention to the Russianness of a given site: it should be geographically based in Russia, i.e., their legal entity should be Russian, but also the domain (as *.ru), and even the server’s geographical location started to matter. Authors felt safer if they signed contracts with Russian management: with the sanctions in place, a Russian site meant that there would not be any problem with royalties, and they would be paid on time. Authors also thought that it protected them from personal data leaking: there were fears that Litnet’s administration could leak personal data as an act of revenge. At the same time, readers who lived outside Russia lost an ability to acquire books on Russian platforms such as Author.Today and Litmarket.

Some authors who, before the war, were living in Ukraine, writing in Russian and publishing their works on Litnet or other platforms, declared that they could no longer write in Russian. Other authors, such as Henry Lion Oldie, the pen name of Ukrainian authors Dmitry Gromov and Oleg Ladyzhensky, residing in Kharkiv, continued to publish their works on the Author.Today. On 9 March, they posted a message that they would no longer be writing on their blog because they did not have the energy to discuss music, films, and literary issues while something was happening in their country that they were prohibited from calling under the letter “V,” in the frank and free Runet (Oldie, 2022). “V,” is considered to be equivalent to the Russian word voina (war), the use of which concerning Russian invasion is being prosecuted.

In 2009, within the framework of the Cyber.Rus project, investigating whether there was a virtual (re)unification of Russian culture through online Russian-language culture and literature, Henricke Schmidt interviewed Alexander Kabanov, a Ukrainian poet from Kherson:

“There is no Russian-language literature. There is Russian literature. And it is not important what nationality you have: if you write poems in the Russian language, it means that you are a Russian poet. Everything else is just geography.” (Schmidt, 2009)

The war in Ukraine and the case of Litnet demonstrated that geography matters. In 2022, there emerged an ethnically and geographically defined Runet and Rulinet caused by Russian laws, economic sanctions, and military activity in Ukraine, with boundaries running along the same lines as the geographical border of Russia.

In 2006, Kratasjuk claimed that Runet, starting as a space for self-representation, conditioned by a lack of state control, by the middle of the 2000s, became an ethnically defined virtual community [6]. In 2023, after the Russian invasion, Runet and Rulinet can be understood as geographical ideas rather than national ones. People who speak and read Russian outside of Russia may consider themselves to be part of the Runet community, but in practice, their access to services based in the Russian Federation is now limited or unavailable.

The initial idea that Runet, and particularly self-publishing literary platforms, were a space for free circulation and distribution of books and other works, in contrast to a “Western” Internet, where access was limited by copyright and other laws, had finally failed. Literature on the Internet exists in strong connection with political and geopolitical issues and could not avoid the processes of sovereignization and digital bordering that the Russian government consequently conducted. Political censorship and control, which was implemented in Russia, influenced not only mass media and social networks but also popular literature that seems removed from political issues.

Nicole Moore claimed that:

“Censorship embodies the tension between the historical legal limits of nation state and the new planetary reach of the communicative sphere, and contemporary regulation of media landscapes is no longer isomorphic with the border of single country or the spread of a single language.” [7]

In the case of Russian self-publishing platforms, the state controls the media landscape within its geographical borders. This control is more about the social being of literature, publishing, and distribution, than book content itself. However, there were some titles removed from Litnet, such as The war in Ukraine (Voyna v Ukraine) by Nikita Litvinenko [8], proving that online book publishing depends on state power and authority. The same situation exists in China, where the government controls dissemination and publishing, with service and content providers responsible for content that they distribute. Such an approach leaves more room for self-censorship, widely practised by Chinese writers (Ng, 2015).

The border between Ru(li)net and the rest of the global Internet, as a techno-symbolic assemblage, is created by payment systems, political stances of users, nationalities and citizenship, political censorship, and regulatory acts, limiting the possibilities of expression.

Tinatin Japaridze (2023) argued that Russia, being opposed to the notion of a supposedly U.S.-dominated Internet, has begun replicating the Chinese model of Internet control with strong internal censorship. Opposing the West is also a part of Russia’s self-representation as an external referent (Claessen, 2023), widely used among geopolitical and spatial narratives.

Kratasjuk (2006) argued that the method of self-representation common in Runet reflects a search for self and a national complex connected with an absence of a historically formed identity. In 2022, this process of identity formation continued in connection with geopolitical processes and the war. The decision whether to publish on a Russian site and in Russian becomes a moment for identity reflection for those writing in...
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Kåre Mjør (2009) found some connection between contemporary Internet self-publishing and the distribution of literary works between friends in the Soviet *samizdat*, as originally proposed by Andrei Yurchak:

> “the Russian Internet of the 1990s is now frequently understood by means of the cultural model of *samizdat*. By the same token, it is applied not so much in order to stress an oppositional character, as to emphasise the practice of self-publishing.”

But the *samizdat* existed as a practice to avoid Soviet censorship. Contemporary commercial Internet self-publishing cannot avoid legislative and content control. Despite continuity of terminology, it is the opposite of earlier Soviet publishing practices. Author.Todays, Litnet, Litmarket, as well as LitRes: Samizdat and Ridero are commercial platforms that carefully monitor the Russian Internet as well as content compliance because their businesses depend upon it.

Paradoxically, for authors who worked hard and had substantial income publishing their books on Litnet, the events after the invasion of Ukraine brought a moment of freedom. They had previously lost control over their books because of Litnet’s harsh conditions, some of them even felt they had lost their life’s work. They were now free from the control of site owners and audiences. Despite the loss of income, they felt that now they could try new promotional strategies, experiment in new genres, or simply to rest and think about what to do next. Those who were going to continue their writing tended to wait for the situation to stabilize.

At the beginning of June 2022, Litnet was purchased by one of Russia’s leading book market actors, Boris Makarenkov, who also has a role in the traditional publishing houses Rugram and T8, as well as being CEO of the Russian office of Storytel, the world’s largest audiobook company. On Litnet’s blog, Sergey Grushko announced that this purchase meant that investing so much time and energy in developing Russian literature over the previous seven years had been a mistake. After this news, some authors placed Russian flags and the slogan “Litnet is ours,” (a reference to the slogan “Crimea is ours”), on their Litnet pages. Hence, the literary platform became a site for political communication, which could be expressed not only by text but also in different modes: image, music, color, gesture, and design (Kress, 2009).

On 2 June, all financing was converted to rubles, although the difficulties in acquiring books and paying royalties to those who lived outside of Russia continued.

Makarenkov held a conference for authors on 16 June to answer the most critical issues. He confirmed that he had purchased 100 percent of the Litnet project; the servers would be located in Russia; the company would be registered in Russia; all royalties would be paid; and, the administration would pay penalties for late payments, as the previous host had failed to pay royalties to Russian authors since March. He also proposed special conditions for top authors who had left the platform but wished to return, especially for those whose reader counts had been set to zero.

The traditional book industry experienced the same crisis as Litnet and other self-publishing platforms. In March 2022, some Western publishing houses announced that they were ceasing collaboration with Russian publishers, due to political and commercial reasons, along with uncertainties about paying royalties. At the same time, there were rumors about a lack of paper for printing. In August 2022, Storytel announced it was leaving the Russian market.

Sergey Anuriev, CEO of LitRes, in early September 2022, emphasized that the effects of sanctions had been delayed for traditional printing and publishing houses, whereas electronic book trading had experienced difficulties quickly after the invasion and imposition of sanctions. Difficulties in purchasing books on LitRes from outside Russia continued all year long. Other platforms, such as Author.Todays, Litmarket, and Litnet experienced the same issues.

At the same time, Anuriev stated that from the third quarter, the situation was returning to normal. He predicted that the self-publishing segment in Russia would grow, mostly because authors tended not to put their books exclusively on one platform and preferred to use several resources on non-exclusive basis.

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**Conclusion**

The Russian literary Internet, electronic and online book trading in Russia, which originally appeared to be more open to geographical borders and political conditions at its beginning, turned out to be overregulated and susceptible to more constraints than traditional publishing.

The idea of online self-publishing as a space for independent representation of authors, freedom of expression, and opportunities to be independent of traditional publishing failed. To develop an income and distribute work successfully, authors need to comply with Internet and content control laws, obey website administration requirements, and meet expectations of diverse readers. The feeling of independence that existed at the beginning of Runet has been lost.

The notion of Runet as a community of Russian-speaking people was defeated. The history of Litnet demonstrates that legal entities, domain zones, citizenship of users, economic restrictions generate borders in cyberspace. These borders became a reality due to the Russian state purposefully campaigning for Runet sovereignty, which ended with the invasion of Ukraine. Geopolitical issues strongly affected a notion of digital literature, especially in connection with monetization.
Coda

While I was working on this article, in November and December 2022, Federal Law № 479 was passed and enacted. According to it, the propagation of non-traditional sexual relations and gender reassignment was totally prohibited among children and adults. For legal entities, there was a penalty of one million rubles (about US$11,000) or suspension of corporate activities for up to 90 days.

One reason for Federal Law № 479 was the appearance of a book entitled (in translation) Summer in the Red Scarf (Лето в пионерском галстуке) by Ekaterina Silvanova and Elena Malisova, where gay love between a boy and scout leader was depicted. It was initially published on ficbook.net and later printed by the “Popcorn” publishing house. The text became quite popular, and the authors were among the twenty most published in 2022, according to the Russian Book Chamber Report [9].

Slash and femslash, where non-heterosexual relationships portrayal are central to the story, were popular genres on self-publishing sites, particularly ficbook.net. This topic was of marginal interest to traditional Russian publishing houses, but it was relatively easy to publish and distribute these works on the Internet without editorial control.

Before Federal Law № 479, it was sufficient to label these works texts as 18+. After Federal Law № 479, they are illegal. Self-publishing platforms have issued rules over publishing text considered in violation of the notions enshrined in Federal Law № 479.

On 1 December 2022, Author.Today issued a message stating that it was prohibiting slash or femslash genres. Those already published would be hidden; updating published works in these genres would be impossible.

In October, when Federal Law № 479 was being formulated, Ficbook management announced that Ficbook was located outside Russia, outside the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation. They claimed that they would not delete slash and femslash text on their site. If Roskomnadzor subsequently blocked Ficbook, they will close access to slash and femslash in Russia.

On 6 December, a day after Federal Law № 479 was signed by President Putin and came into force, they confirmed that they would not delete slash and femslash text. To avoid the platform being blocked, they launched a separate site only for slash and femslash, slashbook.net. All text in those genres would be moved to this new site, and there would be no slash or femslash fiction on ficbook.net. All profiles, followers, and reviews would be shared between these two platforms. If Slashbook were to be blocked, Ficbook would still be accessible to users in Russia.

On 5 December, Litmarket informed its readers that all text with the genre hashtags slash and femslash were deleted including their covers and annotations. On a given book’s page, a statement appears: “The book was deleted due to the adoption and entry into force of Law № 479.”

On 5 December, Litnet.com announced that slash and femslash would be hidden from sale.

On 13 December, LitRes: Samizdat released a new feature that allows text to be marked by labels reading “the book contains non-heterosexual relations” and “this is not a propaganda.” For already published books, the administration proposed to analyze text and change as necessary.

On 29 November, Ridero mailed authors, asking them to check their text, book covers, and abstracts for non-heterosexual relations and gender reassignment depictions. If authors found work that might be in violation of Federal Law № 479, an author should withdraw it. On 5 December, they announced a neural network release that would detect suspected text with such topics and remove them.

Even platforms located outside of the Russian Federation appear to recognize Federal Law № 479 in order to not lose users in the Russian Federation. Platforms located and registered in Russia implemented self-censorship immediately. Authors now have fewer places to publish work that does not fit into the mainstream, as designated by the government. Their freedom of expression hence is further limited.

At the same time, the authors, who adapted to the changes that occurred in 2022, said that the crisis was over and the situation had returned to normal, although they still feared that something else would be banned. They, as Anuriev predicted, have started to sell books on different platforms simultaneously, on a non-exclusive basis. The self-publishing sector is expected to grow, based on 2022 results.

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Notes

5. A colloquial expression and value judgment used by Russian-speaking people inside and outside Russia, meaning “Countries with liberal
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democracy.”


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Editorial history

Received 15 June 2023; revised 3 October 2023; accepted 30 November 2023.

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Reconsidering Ru(li)net: Russian literary self-publishing platforms and the war in Ukraine. A case study of Litnet.com
by Anna Murashova.
First Monday, volume 28, number 12 (December 2023).
doi: https://dx.doi.org/10.5210/fm.v28i12.13224