

ONLINE PLATFORM SYG.MA: "WE AIM TO BUILD NETWORKS OF SOLIDARITY ACROSS NATIONAL BORDERS"

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syg.ma is a multilingual, self-organized, open online platform. In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the platform took a clear anti-war stance. novinki publishes an interview with Konstantin Koryagin, one of syg.ma's editors.

Interview auf [Deutsch](#) lesen. / Читать интервью [на русском языке](#).

[syg.ma](#) is a multilingual, self-organized, open online platform where researchers, artists, small publishers and activist communities publish their own materials. syg.ma was founded in 2014 in Moscow and is now not only a working media, but also an archive with more than 25,000 publications on philosophy, art, politics, psychoanalysis and film, including activist manifestos, academic essays and poetry collections. Between 150,000 and 250,000 users per month visit the site from around the world.

In the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the platform's main goal of being a platform for bringing together diverse communities has become even more relevant: syg.ma has taken a clear anti-war stance and focused on expanding its international audience by diversifying its linguistic presence on the platform, inviting contributors from artistic, cultural and activist communities from all over the world, including Ukraine. In its commitment to horizontality and "platform-ness", syg.ma represents a valuable alternative to both pro-Kremlin and "independent" liberal media in the Russian-language and international media space.

novinki publishes an interview with one of syg.ma's editors, Konstantin Koryagin. When Russia attacked Ukraine, he decided not to return to Russia and stayed in Berlin, ending up, like most of the editorial staff, in exile. syg.ma maintains connections with (primarily left-wing) communities and authors both within the "country of the aggressor" and around the

world — and aims to be a platform "where different activist and volunteer communities read and get to know each other, share experiences and audiences", where activist texts are "combined with in-depth analysis and research, bringing together theory and practice".

novinki: When and how did you first learn about *syg.ma*? When did you join the editorial board and what is your current position in the team?

Konstantin Koryagin: I learned about *syg.ma* at the time of its launch in 2014. I remember I really liked the way its homepage juxtaposed almost [diary-like notes by authors unknown to me](#) with serious academic research by philosophy stars, experimental poetry with big special projects, such as the ["official blog of the Moscow Biennale"](#). I saw this as a very inspiring example of the horizontal redistribution of symbolic capital and the displacement of established hierarchies. By reading *syg.ma* one could follow the life of self-organized cultural initiatives in the Russian-speaking environment and keep abreast of the novelties of independent book publishers. It also published a lot of texts on contemporary continental philosophy and psychoanalysis, which I was very interested in at the time.

I joined the editorial board in March 2018, while studying at the Philosophy Department in St. Petersburg. I was called to the editorial board by a friend of mine. Since then, I am one of the editors-curators of the platform and am mainly responsible for finding authors, texts and topics, inviting communities to the platform, communicating with them, and occasionally managing social media.

novinki: How many permanent members does the editorial team count at the moment, where are they based?

K. K.: Right now *syg.ma* consists of six people: three editors, two developers, one editorial manager. Also, when we have money, we hire an smm manager on a paid basis. When there is no money, the editors run the social networks themselves. Apart from one person who was born and raised in Uzbekistan, the other members of the editorial staff were born and raised in different regions of Russia. After the war started, the part of the editorial staff that was still in Russia left because of opposition to the war and because it was simply not safe to do such a project in Russia. Now we are scattered all over the world: Georgia, Armenia, Germany, and the United States.

As part of our ecosystem there is also [radio.syg.ma](#) — with mixes, releases and live performances of experimental musicians from all over the world. The radio has its own editorial staff, but their path, position and geographical location are similar to ours.

novinki: The founding year of *syg.ma* is 2014. Does it coincidentally overlap with the beginning of the war in Ukraine or are those events perhaps somehow related to each other?

K. K.: It is a coincidence.

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novinki: One of the goals of the project is to support alternative collectives and communities — primarily in Russia, but not only. *syg.ma* was conceived as an "experimental" online platform — a new, alternative media project that had not been seen before in the Russian-language media sphere. Please tell us a little about the structure and goals of the platform.

K. K.: It is very important to understand that *syg.ma* is a self-organized platform, the authors and communities mostly bring their texts to our platform themselves, using it as their own website and archive where their texts are stored. Thus, on *syg.ma* today there are collections of independent book publishers, artistic and activist communities, cultural institutions and individual authors. These texts we intentionally do not edit. Therefore, most of the time the task and function of the platform's editors is rather curatorial and consists of finding and communicating with authors and communities. And also, of selecting the texts published on *syg.ma*: we choose which articles we support and make more visible on the platform (e.g., by putting them on the homepage, adding them to thematic collections and posting them on social networks) and which ones not. This is why we often refer to ourselves as the "weak editorial team".

At the same time, we have [special projects](#), such as "[Atlas](#)", where we and our authors think about borders and identities, or "[Tashkent-Tbilisi](#)" about the history and culture of Central Asia, for which we have budgets (most often grants) and in which we act as a full-fledged editorial office: we come up with topics in advance, pay fees to the authors, proofread and edit the texts. We also organize collaborations with other media, for example, we have a [special collection](#) of Russian translations of selected materials from *e-flux* magazine.

Our initial goal was to basically set a precedent for a self-organized platform that is self-funded and relatively popular, thus amplifying the voices of self-organized artistic and cultural initiatives, independent publishers, leftist and feminist political movements, decolonial activists, near-academic authors and poetry communities by giving them access to each other's audiences. We wanted to increase the visibility of all those who could not find a platform in the classical media, which in Russia before the war were either pro-state conservative or oppositional but right-liberal. In this sense – yes, *syg.ma* did and does provide an alternative.

It's also worth realizing that we have never been and will never be a classical news media, nor a media outlet like, for example, *DOXA* has now become in many ways. Therefore, we cannot say that we played on the same field with them and never sought to compete with them. We have always had a different, more experimental, discursive and analytical focus: we have published feminist poetry, decolonial studies, diary essays, academic essays on philosophy and psychoanalysis, art criticism, philosophy translations, etc.

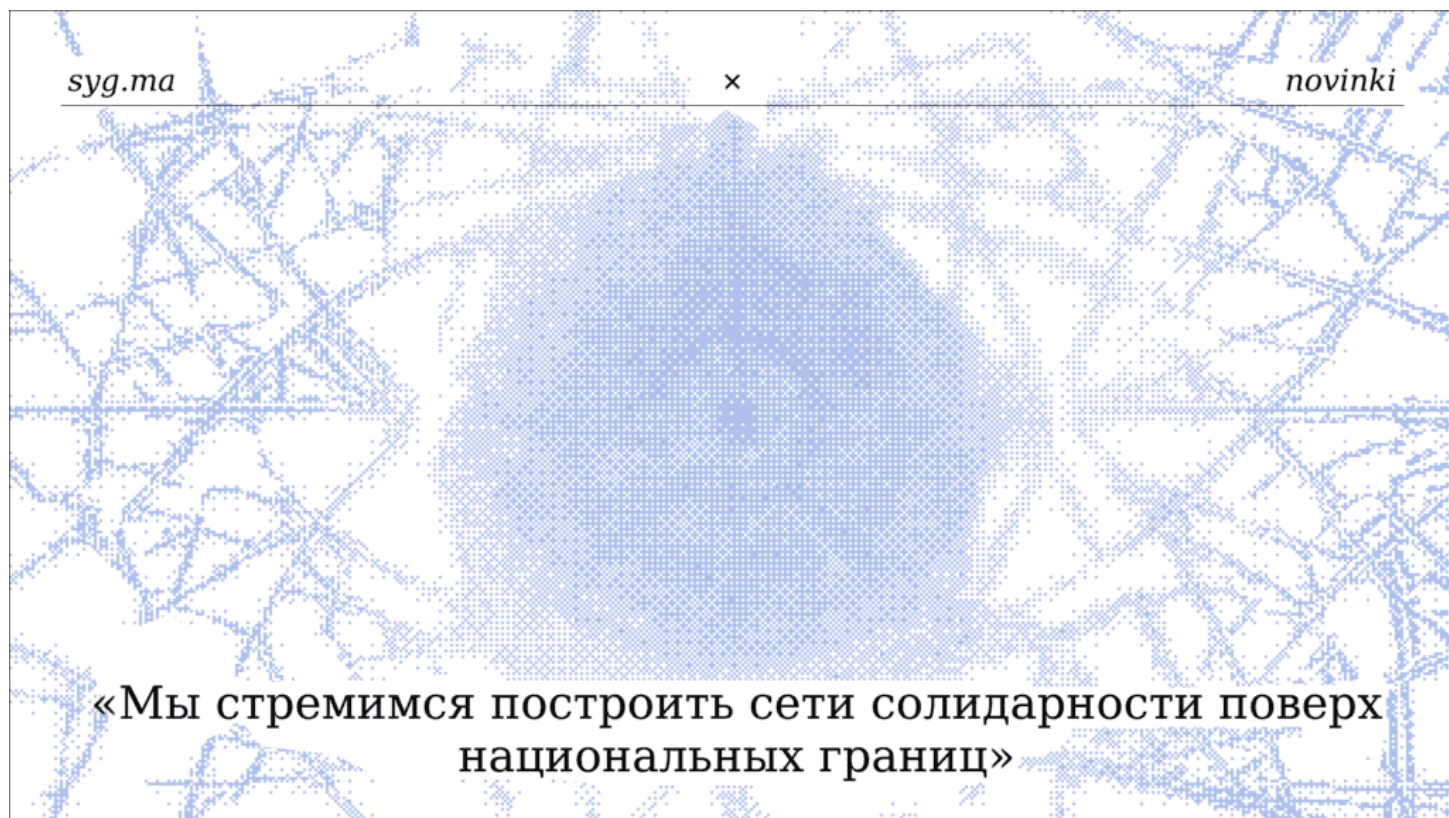


Illustration (also featured image above): © Sonya Umanskaya.

novinki: *syg.ma* provides a platform not only to individual authors but also to collectives. This very much became apparent after February 2022, when various anti-war materials and manifestos appeared on *syg.ma*. How did you react to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, what materials have been published since then? Can *syg.ma* become a platform for critical reflection on the war and anti-war protest inside (and outside) the "aggressor country"?

K. K.: When the war started we halted our editorial work for a month because we did not see the possibility of publishing content about culture at such a moment. Then, when it became clear that the war was not going to end, and other opposition media were blocked in Russia, we decided that it was crucial to resume work to promote an anti-war stance and uncensored discussion of the situation.

We wrote the following [statement](#). We did not manage to fulfill all of our plans mentioned there, but still — our editorial policy has changed a lot: we have tightened the moderation rules and the criteria for getting texts on the main page (any texts supporting Russian aggression in even the smallest way are blocked and deleted), we have shifted our focus from cultural, artistic and academic to activist and volunteer communities and texts, from Russian to

multilingualism (although we started doing it before the war). We have switched the infrastructure of the platform to English, so now there are a lot of texts in [English](#) and [Ukrainian](#), there are texts in [German](#), and soon we will have a whole collection of texts in Uzbek. You can switch languages right on the main page of the site.

After we took an open anti-war stance, we were quickly blocked in Russia — but we continue to be read there via VPN.

As I said, we set ourselves the goal of attracting activist, anti-war and volunteer communities to the platform. And also to publish important translations analyzing this war. You can find different texts analyzing the war in two special editorial collections: <https://syg.ma/antiwar>

and <https://syg.ma/antiwar2>. Speaking of communities: some major feminist organizations use *syg.ma* as the main platform to publish their texts, there are collections from the [media resistance group](#), materials from the [University Platform](#) and many others. We have also had quite a few texts published on the notion and practice of decolonization.

The shift in focus to anti-war initiatives does not mean that we have stopped publishing on other topics. [Poetry](#), [film criticism](#), texts on [art](#) and [philosophy](#), and young authors have premiered their [video works](#) on *syg.ma*.

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novinki: How important is the international focus for you, and how relevant is it to connect with communities inside Russia that are heavily censored? What connections do you have to Ukraine?

K. K.: The international focus is very important because we want to build networks of solidarity across national borders. We aim to be a platform where texts and people from different countries and contexts meet, also sharing some common values. That is why we are especially happy that during the war period different authors and communities from Ukraine and writing in Ukrainian have [appeared on syg.ma](#). Some of them we approached deliberately, some came on their own. They are mostly activists and researchers with left-wing positions, which I think is not surprising, because the left has always emphasized a universal, international component. We also maintain links with authors from Russia, many of whom publish anonymously or under pseudonyms.

As one example of this, I would like to mention the ["War Diaries"](#) by Ukrainian gender researcher and feminist Irina Žerebkina.

novinki: Is there any data that tells us who reads you, what is your audience, how many regular/free authors collaborate with you?

K. K.: In nine years, *syg.ma* has published about 25,000 pieces. In this sense, we can say that we are a full-fledged archive of Russia's cultural and intellectual life of the last decade. Between 150,000 and 250,000 unique users visit the site per month. Conditional breakdown by country per month: from Russia 9000, from Ukraine 6000, from Germany 4000, from USA 2500, from France 2000, from Kazakhstan, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia 1500 each, etc.

novinki: What is the importance of donations for the existence of the platform and its projects?

K. K.: *syg.ma* is largely based on volunteer labor. Most of the time we work for free, in our free time we realize (often with the entire editorial team) third-party projects for money, sometimes we win grants for special projects from foundations and institutions — then our work is paid.

In the last two years before the full-scale invasion, donations allowed the editorial staff to afford a smm manager who ran our social media. After the of the war, when transfers from Russia were blocked, this opportunity disappeared and the number of donations decreased very much. Plus we made decisions not to work with Russian institutions, which also limited our financial resources. After the full-scale invasion started, several European foundations helped us with a couple of extensive special projects, thus supporting us and our authors. These have now come to end and at this point there is nothing that would bring *syg.ma* financial support. Individuals with an international account can support us through [Patreon](#).

novinki: What aspects of working in the *syg.ma* editorial team do you value the most, what are your doubts and worries? What does the future of the *syg.ma* platform look like?

K. K.: *syg.ma* is a very valuable project for me, which I feel a deep ethical, theoretical and ideological connection with. What I value most is the opportunity to communicate with a huge number of initiatives that are close to my heart. And also to read interesting texts every day, because this is literally my job. Speaking of worries, of course, at some point, for various reasons, I and the rest of the team may no longer have enough time and energy for the necessary support and updating of the platform — if we don't figure out a way to find at least minimal financial stability on its basis.

Prospectively, we want to move towards even more platformization, so that communities use our platform as their own website independently of editorial processes. Doing so they can customize their collections themselves: see for example [FAS](#) or [Cosmic Bulletin](#). We, of course, would wish for even more representation of different languages and perspectives on the platform, we want activist texts to be combined with in-depth analysis and research, bringing together theory and practice.

We've also recently made a [major update to our editor](#), adding the function to create more visual contributions.

We've improved navigation and search functions on the platform. Overall, I think the structure of our project is already established and working well. With the expenditure of relatively small human and time resources of the editorial team, the platform continues to work, develop and reproduce itself.

novinki: How did you choose such a name — *syg.ma* — in 2014?

It happened quite accidentally. At that time we were oriented towards *medium.com* at the level of functionality. And one of the founders of the project had the idea that — since one of the meanings of 'sigma' in mathematics is either 200 or 400 — it could be used as an explanation that the platform would have a minimum number of characters in each piece (as opposed to Twitter, where there is a maximum number of characters). Then there was also the thought of 'sigma' meaning 'sum'. But all this was forgotten pretty quickly when we realized that all the friends we discussed the name with just liked the word.

novinki: Thank you for taking the time answering our questions!

The interview was conducted by Elisabeth Bauer in February 2024.