

"Go f**k yourself!" Snake Island and Ukraine's war narrative



EVENTS ENCAPSULATE NARRATIVES

- Narratives are often the compilation of multiple long-term cultural components; (symbols, music and cultural styles of humor to name just a few). But sometimes it is relatively small-scale events that grow to be emblematic of a wider theme or concept.
- Often, it is acts of resistance, group strength and defiance against the odds that are best remembered (e.g. the 300 Spartans at the Battle of Thermopylae, the Battle of Agincourt, the Great Escape and Martin Luther King's "I have a Dream" speech).
- Few events have encapsulated Ukraine's defiance of the Kremlin as much as Snake Island (also known as Zmiinyi Island). Although only a minor skirmish in the conflict, it became central to Ukraine's narrative and captivated the International Community.

SNAKE ISLAND

- The island itself a fraction of a square kilometer in size and, despite the name, has no snakes to speak of.
- Despite its small size, the outcrop is in a strategic location to allow any actor that holds it to dominate Black Sea shipping lanes from Ukraine's South coast. It is for this reason that it was a primary target during the first phase of Russia's invasion.



Source: Radio Free Europe

- 13 border guards were stationed on the island when a Russian warship, the Moskva, approached and ordered them to surrender; the Ukrainian border guards retorted to the warship and its crew: "Go f**k yourself!"
- The act of defiance (captured on video) went internationally viral; inspiring memes, merchandise, an official postage stamp (see above) and a theme of rude resistance against the Kremlin among the Ukrainian populace. Since the event, road signs have been replaced with "Go f**k yourself", "Go f**k yourself again" and "Go f**k yourself in Russia," while Ukraine's volunteer cyber army have attempted to trend the hashtag "F**k off Putin."
- It has become a trade mark of Ukraine's strategic communications; appealing to Ukrainians and the wider international community frustrated by their feeling of powerlessness in the face of Russian aggression with both its expression of anger and humor.
- The fact that border guards have been found to be alive and well, while the Moskva was famously sunk in a devastating blow to the Kremlin, has only added to the event's prestige as symbolic of Ukraine's victories against the odds.

THE WIDER NARRATIVE WAR

- The Defiance of Snake Island and all it encapsulates has been at the centre of Ukraine's war narrative. But as the conflict continues to progress, there are multiple narrative fronts that must be addressed.

1. The cost of living crisis, that the Kremlin's invasion has exacerbated, coupled with the general waning interest among the public that accompanies all wars, risks creating "Ukraine fatigue" among western populations who may begin to question support for Ukraine weighed against what are perceived as more pressing domestic problems.
2. At the same time, the Kremlin's blockade of Ukraine's ports has risked creating a global food crises. The Kremlin has engaged in a potent disinformation campaign to deflect blame for this onto Ukraine and the West; risking undermining support for Ukraine in the Global South.
3. Lastly, the Kremlin continues to obfuscate the facts around alleged war crimes by its soldiers and espouse disinformation about a fictional genocide against Russian-speaking Ukrainians while utilising anti-Semitic themes in its narratives. This risks inflaming ethnic tensions, fueling further war crimes and creating a long-term diversion from reality among Russian citizens akin to North Korea.

- The Ukrainian narrative and the facts surrounding the conflict must be supported in the West and the Global South. At the same time, credible Russian voices must be publicised if the International Community is to stand united, bring pressure onto the Kremlin and shorten the current conflict.