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Pro-War 'Z-Banners' Disappear in Some Russian Cities

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The pro-war banner displayed at the offices of the A Just Russia political party. **t.me/mironovonline**

Local authorities in cities across Russia have removed banners with the letter "Z" – a symbol of support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine – in recent days as the war appears to enter a new phase of bloody fighting and limited territorial gains in eastern Ukraine.

The head of the A Just Russia political party, Sergei Mironov, said earlier this week that Moscow city inspectors ordered him to take down a pro-war banner from the party's headquarters in the Russian capital.

At least one other pro-war Z-banner appears to have been removed in downtown Moscow, in addition to cases in cities including St. Petersburg, Novosibirsk and Kirov, according to local media reports.

"It might be some kind of rebranding. The war has clearly stalled both politically and militarily," Abbas Gallyamov, a political analyst and former speechwriter for Russian President Vladimir Putin, told The Moscow Times.

The banner on A Just Russia's offices was removed after "numerous appeals by citizens,"Mironov said Wednesday in a post on messaging app Telegram.

He added that "nothing reminds you of the war" in Moscow anymore.

The letters "Z" and "V," initially used as recognition markers by Russian forces in Ukraine, were adopted as a popular symbol of support for Russian troops — used in school flash mobs, displays on buildings, T-shirts and even as decoration on food.

While there is no evidence of a mass rejection of the Z symbol, its removal from some public spaces in major cities could suggest that the Kremlin is seeking to portray the war in a different light as the fighting approaches its fourth month without a Russian breakthrough.

A photo posted Thursday appeared to show workers removing a banner with the Z letter that proclaimed "For the President! For the Army! For Victory!" from the main office of state-owned Russian Railways in central Moscow.

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Ahead of celebrations of a public holiday to mark Russia Day on Monday, flags and banners in downtown Moscow showed no signs of the Z and V letters – and were, instead, just painted in the white, red and blue colors of the Russian national flag.

In Saint Petersburg, a Z-sign was removed Thursday from a building following a formal complaint by local residents. Other such banners have been taken down in the city of Kirov, 950 kilometers east of Moscow and in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk.

While the disappearance of Z-banners are unlikely to indicate a major policy shift, it may represent the beginning of a new phase in the fighting, said Andrei Kolesnikov, an expert on Russian politics at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

"Perhaps something is being corrected in PR strategies due to the new stage of the war in which the focus will be on 'liberated' territories," Kolesnikov told The Moscow Times, referring to areas of Ukraine occupied by Russia.

While Russia captured large amounts of territory in southeastern Ukraine in the early weeks of the invasion, its military advance has since largely come to a halt, with the fighting now concentrated in a relatively small area of eastern Ukraine.

Analyst Gallyamov said that the removal of highly visible signs of war might be a way to prepare the population for military defeat — or at least the absence of a clear-cut victory.

"When visual symbols are removed, the public interest will decline and people will pay less attention to what's really going on," said Gallyamov.

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