

Forget Batman. Russians Get Own Superheroes

By [Lena Smirnova](#)

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This female character sets out with a group of adventurers in pursuit of the Holy Grail.

Russia is a long — and often perilous — way to go from the Western world, so much so that even superheroes rarely make the journey.

Spider-Man has no skyscrapers to climb on his way through the Baltic coast, and the sturdy Batmobile would likely perish in the frozen plains of Yakutia.

For now, Russians resort to watching Western heroes perform miraculous feats abroad, but one local company has heard their silent pleas and is lining up a team of Russian superheroes to triumph over the evil that lurks in this nation's underworld.

News Media is preparing to launch four comics with Russian superheroes in October under the Bubble brand. The project, the first to introduce local superheroes in Russia, could shape up to be a heroic act in itself, given the country's lack of a comics culture and its long record of

failed comics projects.

“We want to create characters that could compete in Russia with existing Western superheroes,” explained Ashot Gabrelyanov, acting director of News Media, who grew up watching the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Spider-Man. “It’s a big problem that children now idolize Captain America. If this ever happened in America, if someone like Captain Russia were a hero there, it would be a national tragedy.”

The new comics will reflect Russian reality, including its criminal world and corruption problems, Gabrelyanov said. There are currently several commercial and self-published comics in Russia, but none of them feature local superheroes.

“There are no Russian superheroes,” said Natalya Nesterova, chief editor of Panini Russia, which prints translated versions of nine Marvel comics in the country. “There is a sentiment that superheroes are good for America and it’s good to watch superheroes in an American context, but that in Russia superheroes would be absurd and funny.”

The Lineup

News Media has a lineup of muscular characters to challenge such reservations about Russian heroes.

The new superheroes include a young copywriter whose ancestry dates back to soldiers from an ancient world, a Moscow investigator searching for a serial rapist who kills lawbreaking Duma deputies, a team of crafty characters who are looking for the Holy Grail, and a caped crusader who battles demons.

Each of the comics will have a circulation of 10,000 copies and will be published monthly. Prices for individual booklets range from 30 to 35 rubles (\$1).

The heroes in the News Media comics are not the first Russian superheroes to exist, but they are the first that were created by Russian artists.

Marvel prints stories about Natalia Romanova, also known as Black Widow, who appeared in the Ironman and Avengers series, as well as the Russian mutant Piotr Rasputin, also known as Colossus, who consistently pops up among the X-Men.

Nesterova said that nationality alone is not enough and that superheroes need to be adapted to the Russian reality to be embraced by local audiences.

“They should not be like [the Western heroes] in their bright red briefs,” she said. “This is very bold and cool, of course, but a Russian superhero must be different.”

Hobby comics artist Vladimir Strelnikov agreed that Russian comics should be different from the Western publications and suggested bypassing not only the elaborate costumes but also the superpowers. The stories should be more like Soviet cartoons, he said.

“A superhero would be an ordinary guy or girl with high moral and ethical principles,” Strelnikov said. “Instead of superpowers, like in American comics, they should have a big and good heart.”

Battling for an Audience

Nikolai Gordeyev is interested in superheroes, but he rarely reads comics. He is more interested in television series and movies based on these characters.

“Here [the comics culture] is probably not as well-developed as it is in the West,” Gordeyev said. “There are people, of course, who are interested in comics and there are quite a few of them, but it’s not like in the West.”

Alexander Borshevsky, a coordinator of the St. Petersburg comics society SPBComics and one of the organizers of the international comics festival Boomfest, which will take place in St. Petersburg this fall, said that the comics culture has not yet taken hold in Russia.

“The comics culture is only forming in Russia now,” he said. “There is still a stereotype that comics are meant for children.”

Those who are interested in comics are mostly artists themselves, Borshevsky said. His St. Petersburg club, which opened four years ago, currently has about 100 members.

The lack of a comics-reading culture in Russia has dealt a crushing blow to numerous startups that tried to launch their own comics series over the past 10 years.

Most projects closed down within the first year, Nesterova said.

Gabrelyanov is not concerned that there is no comics culture in the country. There was no culture for reading tabloids either, he remarked, but these publications now have a stable audience.

His ultimate battle objective is to get the News Media characters onto Russian movie screens. The comics won’t bring much profits in themselves, but capitalization of the superheroes through movie projects in 15 years will bring in more revenue than all the media holding’s publications bring in now, Gabrelyanov said.

News Media plans to have at least one movie that is based on its superheroes released in five years. Local movie companies are already showing an interest in adapting such heroes to the big screen, Gabrelyanov said.

“I guarantee you, if tomorrow I bring them a script with a sturdy character that is interesting to the audience, I swear on my arms and legs that a movie company will do anything to get their hands on that character,” he said.

Gabrelyanov said that he wants his superhero lineup to have an international appeal, and he doesn’t rule out the possibility of dispatching them to the Western market.

“It’s not necessary for these characters to be interesting only to Russian children. No, absolutely not. They just have to be interesting,” he said. “Let them be interesting to children who live in India or children in the United States. Why not?”

Panini Russia doesn’t yet have plans to create its own superheroes and will continue to focus on distributing Russian translations of Marvel comics. One of its priorities now is to cultivate

a stable comics audience in Russia by providing an assortment of comics for different age groups.

“It’s not bad to have just [Western superheroes],” said Eleonora Belopukhova, the publishing house’s marketing director. “In any case, like our Russian fairy tales, their stories are about good triumphing over evil, just in a different form. There are more bright colors, but the general idea is the same.”

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