

Deep Russia: TO MOBILIZE OR NOT TO MOBILIZE?

What Russians discussed on "VKontakte" and "Telegram" from 25 to 31 May

Period

25–31 May 2026

Platforms

VKontakte, Telegram (regional communities)



Key Findings

Throughout May 2026, there were no official decisions from the Russian authorities regarding a new wave of mobilization; however, rumors about its potential announcement continued to circulate. Russian officials continued to maintain their previously established position that there was no need for mobilization measures, emphasizing that the armed forces were being staffed through contract recruitment.

Monitoring of regional Telegram channels and VKontakte groups shows no signs of growing fears about a new wave of mobilization. In most regions, the topic of mobilization is virtually absent from the information agenda. Attempts by individual discussion participants to initiate such discussions typically receive little support or are met with accusations of "fearmongering."

However, the mobilization topic remains socially sensitive and generates notable audience interest even in the absence of direct mobilization decisions. **Some media outlets and activists closely monitor indirect signals that may indicate the state's preparation for mobilization. The most telling triggers were:** expanded access of security forces to citizens' personal data; a law on preventive talks by the Ministry of Internal Affairs with individuals evading military service; formation of regional BARS units; campaigns to recruit volunteers and contract soldiers.

The vacuum left by the absence of open mobilization is being filled by contract service advertising. The key messages are: high payments upon signing a contract; the opportunity to defend one's own region; training in modern military specialties; Unmanned Aerial Vehicle operator training; allegedly serving without deployment outside one's region.

A source of latent discontent is the population's perception of disproportionately stricter application of mobilization and registration practices toward local residents compared to migrants. The public insists more on "fair" tightening of control over all categories of the population than on canceling or easing mobilization measures.

As for other war-related discussions, the week on Russian regional "VKontakte" and "Telegram" was marked by growing anxiety about attacks on the rear. Air raid alerts, explosions, and drone attacks became a subject of mass discussion in regions that had previously been considered rear areas. At the same time, attention to sanctions and new restrictions on the import of technology and goods surged sharply.

1. TO MOBILIZE OR NOT TO MOBILIZE?

According to [estimates](#) ISW, in the first quarter of 2026, Russian contract recruitment lagged behind the pace needed to reach the target of 409,000 contract soldiers and was lower than the estimated losses for the same period. In other words, Russia has a problem with personnel manning.

At the same time, Russian officials continued to maintain their previously established position that there was no need for mobilization measures, emphasizing that the armed forces were being staffed through contract recruitment. In particular, Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov [stated](#) that contract recruitment plans were being exceeded, while Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev reported that over 127,000 contracts had been signed since the beginning of the year. A similar position was voiced by individual members of the State Duma, who publicly denied the need for mobilization in the near term.

The pro-Kremlin media narrative remains reassuring: "there is no new mobilization," "recruitment is conducted through contracts," "rumors are hostile information provocations." Pro-government media emphasize the successes of contract recruitment, payments, and the technological specialization of the army, particularly Unmanned Aerial Vehicle forces.

The most significant development in May concerned the expansion of administrative mechanisms for mobilization readiness.

In 2026, year-round conscription is in effect in Russia: conscription procedures are conducted from January 1 to December 31, and the date of appearance following a summons from the registry cannot exceed 30 days after its posting. The law also provides for a ban on leaving Russia from the day the summons is posted in the registry.

Independent media reported growing administrative pressure on military-age men. [Meduza reported](#), that reservists frequently receive summonses for data verification, and during their appearance they may be issued a mobilization assignment, offered enrollment in the reserve, or a contract.

An additional indicator of mobilization infrastructure development was [reporting](#) by independent Russian media about the General Prosecutor's Office of the Russian Federation preparing mechanisms for enhanced oversight of military registration, conscription, and mobilization. According to the published information, prosecutorial oversight is to cover the functioning of the military registration registry, the summons registry, as well as the interaction of military commissariats with law enforcement agencies, employers, and educational institutions. At the end of May, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a [law](#), aimed at preventing evasion of military service. On its basis, Ministry of Internal Affairs officers will be able to conduct preventive talks with those evading military service. The law is also aimed at "countering the distortion of historical truth."

Thus, the Russian state has acquired additional tools for controlling military-age men without the need to announce separate mobilization campaigns.

Conclusions on actual trends

- Russia's public rhetoric in May does not indicate preparation for an open new wave of mobilization modeled on September 2022. The authorities demonstratively maintain the line that "there is no mobilization and none is planned; there is contract recruitment."
- There is a gap between rhetoric and practice. The administrative system of mobilization readiness is being strengthened: year-round conscription, electronic summonses, automatic restrictions, work with reserves, mobilization assignments, and prosecutorial oversight.

Monitoring of regional Telegram channels and VKontakte groups

Monitoring of regional Telegram channels and VKontakte groups shows no signs of growing fears about a new wave of mobilization. In most regions, the topic of mobilization is virtually absent from the information agenda. Attempts by individual discussion participants to initiate such discussions typically receive little support or are met with accusations of "spreading panic." This is especially characteristic of Bashkortostan, Samara, Vladimir, Tyumen, Sverdlovsk, Rostov, and a number of other regions.

However, the mobilization topic remains socially sensitive and generates notable audience interest even in the absence of direct mobilization decisions. **The population closely monitors indirect signals that may indicate the state's preparation for mobilization.**

The most telling triggers were:

- 1. The law on preventive talks by the Ministry of Internal Affairs with individuals evading military service.*

The law on the prevention of military service evasion, which authorized the Ministry of Internal Affairs to conduct preventive talks with evaders, became virtually the only mobilization-related topic of the week that was equally prominent on both Telegram and VKontakte. The tone of discussions was predominantly sarcastic: the law was compared to disciplinary talks in kindergarten. Direct analogies with Ukraine's Territorial Recruitment Center were also drawn, with fears of forced mobilization practices.

- 2. Expanded access of security forces to citizens' personal data.*

On VKontakte, commentators linked the new rules on security forces' access to citizens' personal data with the expansion of military commissariats' capabilities and potential mobilization. On Telegram, the mobilization interpretation was present but significantly

less common. In these cases, there was a latent concern about further expansion of state control mechanisms, rather than mobilization as such.

3. Formation of regional BARS* units

**Combat Army Reserve of the Country*

The invitation by the Governor of Nizhny Novgorod Oblast, Gleb Nikitin, to join BARS attracted the most public attention in Chuvashia, Voronezh, and Nizhny Novgorod oblasts. Such battalions are formed and replenished on an ongoing basis, and this was simply another round of announcements and discussions. Discussions were predominantly marked by skepticism. Users questioned the voluntary nature of recruitment, joked about financial incentives, and raised the question of why the officials promoting these units do not join them themselves.

4. Campaigns to recruit volunteers and contract soldiers

The vacuum left by the absence of direct mobilization is being filled by contract service advertising. Over 230 relevant publications were identified on Telegram across 61 regions in recent weeks.

The key messages are:

- high payments upon signing a contract;
- the opportunity to defend one's own region;
- training in modern military specialties;
- Unmanned Aerial Vehicle operator training;
- serving without deployment outside one's region.

The highest concentration of recruitment content was recorded in Perm Krai, Belgorod Oblast, Samara Oblast, and Chuvashia. Comments under such publications were either absent or few in number.

In Lipetsk Oblast, the recruitment of mobile fire groups to combat drones was being actively promoted. The authorities emphasized the local nature of the service and the possibility of combining it with one's primary job. This demonstrates an attempt to engage the population in defense activities without using direct mobilization rhetoric.

Selected observations from VKontakte discussions

- Krasnoyarsk Krai and Novosibirsk Oblast were among the only regions where users openly discussed the possibility of a new wave of mobilization. However, the prevailing opinion in discussions was that the army's current needs are being met through contract soldiers and volunteers.
- A source of latent discontent is the population's perception of disproportionately stricter application of mobilization and registration practices toward local residents compared to migrants. The public insists more on "fair" tightening of control over all categories of the population than on canceling or easing mobilization measures.

In lieu of conclusions

Mobilization rarely becomes a standalone topic of discussion. Its presence in the information space is often linked to adjacent news stories. Even when it is mentioned, users more often talk about dissatisfaction with the tightening of state control than about the actual risk of conscription. In many regions, mobilization-related topics were intertwined with discussions about migrants, officials' children, and those who, in the audience's view, unfairly avoid participation in the war.

2. The week on Russian regional "VKontakte" and "Telegram"

The week on Russian regional "VKontakte" and "Telegram" was marked by the expansion of the zone of fear. Air raid alerts, explosions, and drone attacks became a subject of mass discussion in certain regions that had previously been considered rear areas. At the same time, attention to sanctions and new restrictions on the import of technology and goods surged sharply.

The week covers data from two platforms:

- Telegram (41,901 posts, 411 channels, 82 regions, 541 million views, and 2.46 million forwards)
- VKontakte focus groups (320 groups, 33 regions, including Temporarily Occupied Crimea and Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions)

Shared topics of the week

1) *Missile threat/drones*

The top "war-related" topic of the week was the massive attack involving 208 drones by the Armed Forces of Ukraine, which affected a significant number of regions. The resonance was amplified by the fact that Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Tyumen, and Kurgan oblasts declared a missile threat regime for the first time since the beginning of the war. The most discussed strikes were in Nizhny Novgorod and Volgograd.

In regions where the air raid alert sounded for the first time, confusion and anxiety prevailed. Commentators tried to make sense of the new reality: some wrote that "these are the times we must accept," others joked sarcastically that "grandpa led us into a bright future," while still others were indignant about "fearmongering."

In regions where air raid alerts had already become routine, discussions were more pragmatic. People discussed the lack of shelters, problems with notification systems, and the authorities' inability to ensure safety. In Kaliningrad, the airport was closed, and passengers did not understand what to do. In Nizhny Novgorod, people were outraged that the siren did not go off during the strike. Officials' explanation that they did not warn people "to avoid panic" only increased irritation.

Nizhny Novgorod

Valentina Lodygina (May 28, 10:22 AM): "The top brass promised us safety and 'Kyiv in three days,' but in reality dragged the country into such a mess that people in the rear are forced to sit under shelling and listen to air defense fire. What kind of 'stay calm' is this when the war has come right to our homes and nobody knows where the next strike will land tomorrow. For what illusory goals is the peaceful life of our cities being destroyed?" —

♥ 270

Vladimir

Aleksandr Vorobyov (Apr 28, 9:10 AM): "It feels like Tuapse will be completely destroyed, and the federal authorities will stubbornly keep quiet. And they're clearly silent on orders from above. But the main question is: why was there no reinforcement of air defense after the first and second attacks???" — ❤️ 318

2) Parallel imports

New restrictions on the import of electronics through the parallel import mechanism came into effect. At the same time, reports emerged about changes in taxation of supplies from Eurasian Economic Union countries and forecasts of technology and clothing prices rising by up to 50% by the end of the year. Comments were predominantly ironic and pessimistic. Such measures were most often called "another step toward isolation."

Samara

Dmitry Davydov (May 27, 8:12 AM): "Let the officials lead by example and show how they themselves use import substitution. Let them switch from foreign cars to domestic auto industry products and dress in clothes from Samara-based and similar Russian garment factories. Then it will be possible to offer the people import substitution..." — ❤️ 101

3) Digital surveillance

Throughout the week, users discussed the blocking of VPN services, MTProto proxies, the Ministry of Digital Development's decision to expand the list of data that telecom operators share with security agencies (passport data, geolocation, IP addresses, bank details), and plans for SIM card registration via biometrics. In discussions, the topic went far beyond technical inconveniences and turned into a debate about freedom of access to information. For many users, these decisions form a unified picture of increasing state control. The reactions were dominated by an ironic tone and absurdist humor, going as far as "banning Russians in Russia."

Kursk

Yevgeny Koroteyev (May 27, 8:23 PM): "The Ministry of Digital Development seems to be developing in the wrong direction" — ❤️ 56

4) Return from the front: violence in the rear

One of the most resonant topics of the week was incidents of violence involving military personnel and former convicts who returned from the "special operation."

The greatest resonance on Telegram was generated by the story from Leningrad Oblast, where Andrei Kiyko, convicted of three murders and who signed a contract instead of serving a 25-year sentence, escaped from a hospital after his return. Additional attention was drawn by cases of unauthorized absence by a contract soldier in Kimry, Tver Oblast, and an acid attack in Leningrad Oblast. In VKontakte regions, the topic continued in Krasnodar through discussion of Wagner fighters who killed entertainers, with the case having been "frozen" for three years.

Discussions quickly went beyond specific cases and turned into a conversation about the future consequences of the "Special Military Operation" for society. Many comments expressed fear that after the end of hostilities, the number of such incidents could increase.

In some regions, a tendency has formed to explain any cases of aggression or violence through a possible connection with frontline experience.

Karelia

Nikolai Konovalov (May 27, 6:08 PM): "Wow. The Ministry of Defense is now signing contracts with maniacs?" — ❤ 11

5) Overtime law

A bill to increase the annual overtime limit from 120 to 240 hours provoked a negative reaction in virtually all monitored regions. On Telegram, this was most often called the official recognition of Russians as slaves.

On VKontakte, the news was almost never discussed in isolation. It was combined with two other stories of the week — the proposal to employ children from the age of 12 and calls to incentivize young people to relocate to rural areas. In Sverdlovsk Oblast, Altai Krai, and a number of other regions, a perception formed that the state is trying to compensate for the consequences of the demographic and labor crisis at the expense of additional burden on the population.

6) Fuel crisis in Temporarily Occupied Crimea

Starting May 31, restrictions on fuel sales went into effect in occupied Crimea: A-92 gasoline was limited to no more than 20 liters per vehicle, and A-95 was available only with coupons. Over the past year, the price of A-92 rose from 64 to 87 rubles per liter. The position of local authorities, who denied the existence of a shortage throughout the week, provoked the most discontent. In response, users posted photos of empty gas stations and commented that "there is no shortage only because there is no gasoline."

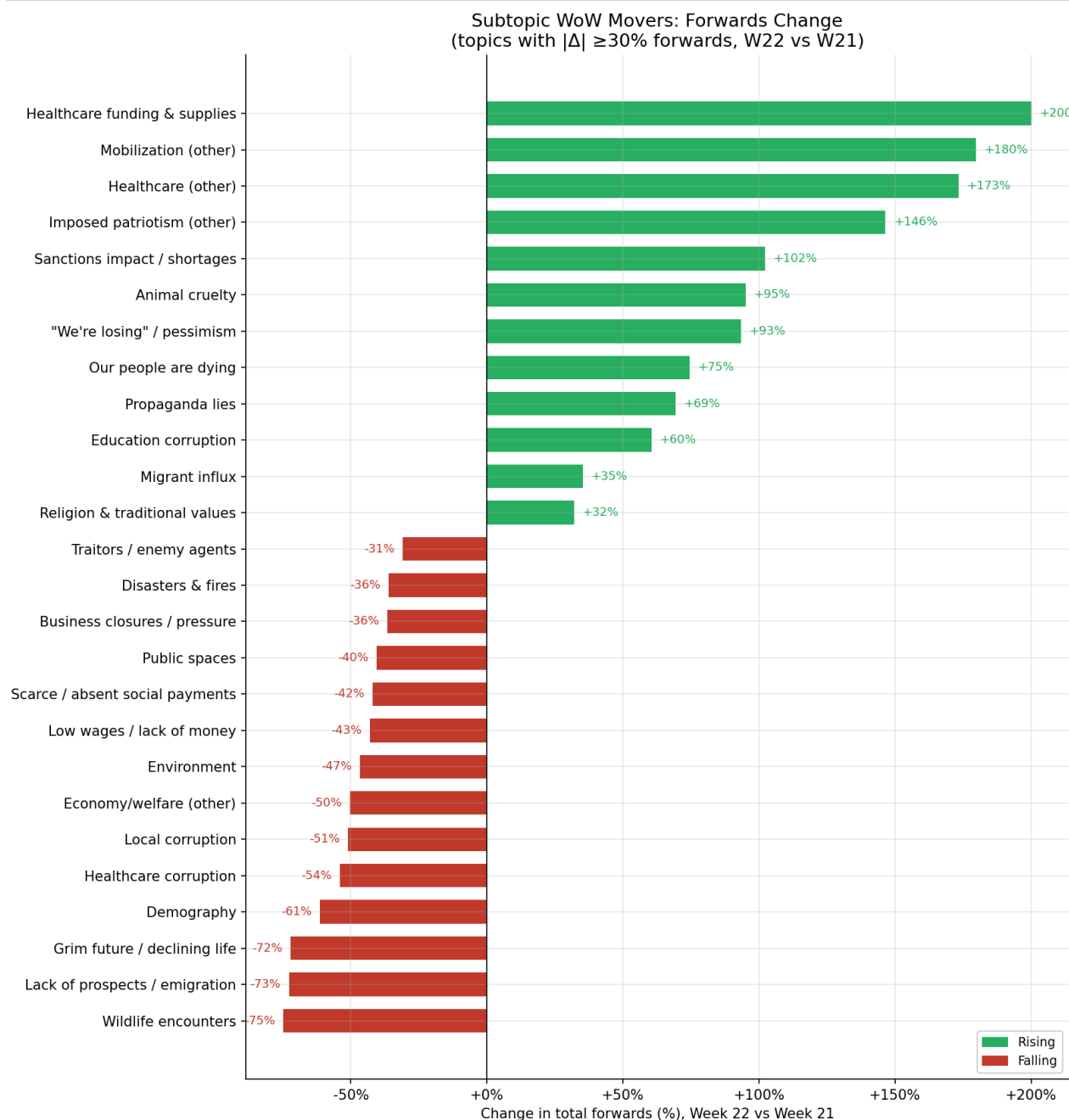
In discussions, the causes of the crisis were linked to strikes on oil refining infrastructure and logistics problems through the Kerch corridor. An additional irritant was the short-lived ban on using phones at gas stations "due to the risk of sparks," which the Ministry of Emergency Situations had to retract within just a few hours.

Crimea

Zhenya Zhachuk (May 28, 8:33 AM): "What nonsense. All gas stations in Sevastopol are empty. Who are they writing this rubbish for" — ❤ 21

What else made it to the top discussions on Telegram?

The Big Topics remained stable, with no notable structural shifts. At the same time, certain sub-topics showed a sharp increase in engagement: healthcare, crimes involving military personnel returning from the front, and discussions about a possible Russian defeat. The bulk of regional discussions, as before, was driven by everyday problems — government inaction, rising prices, corruption, and distrust of state institutions.



1) Putin on "a quick end to the conflict"

Putin stated that Russia "can speak of a quick end to the conflict." The news quickly spread across regional communities, but instead of optimism, it primarily triggered an ironic reaction. Users recalled previous promises of a quick end to the war and commented on the news in the vein of "we've heard this before" and "let it just be over already." The statement was perceived especially harshly in regions that experienced an air raid alert for the first time that very day — specifically in Sverdlovsk and Tyumen oblasts.

Tatarstan

Rishat Gaifiev (May 29, 10:49 PM): "A fairytale idiot." — ❤️ 66

2) Potatoes on flower beds: the symbol of the week on prices

One of the most viral stories was a post from Dmitrov in Moscow Oblast, where residents of an apartment complex planted potatoes directly on flower beds. The post garnered 3,035 forwards and quickly spread across regions. Users actively shared similar stories about vegetable gardens near apartment buildings on residential grounds. "Potatoes on a flower bed" perfectly highlighted problems related to rising prices, economizing, and declining living standards, which were raised in the comments.

3) Explosion in Chuvashia

On May 29, the channel "Angry Chuvashia" published a report about a possible explosion in the Southwestern district of Cheboksary. The post received 9,083 forwards and became the most viral regional news story of the week outside Moscow Oblast.

No official confirmation of the event ever emerged; however, this had almost no impact on the discussion. Users attempted to reconstruct events based on their own observations and immediately linked the incident to the war or drones. The reaction showed that even in a region where "nothing ever happens," any unexpected sound is now instantly associated with military danger.

What else made it to the top discussions on VKontakte?

1. Not corruption, but redistribution

People discussed the case of former Deputy Defense Minister Shoigu's deputy Ruslan Tsalikov, with declared damages of 5.5 billion rubles, and the arrest of the director of "Uralvagonzavod" Semizorov on May 27. In Novosibirsk Oblast and other regions, the arrests were interpreted as intra-elite redistribution of resources, rather than genuine punishment. In Kursk Oblast, people compared the persecution of relocated "traitors" with the lenient treatment of officials suspected of embezzlement. In Dagestan, the discussed practice was the engagement of friendly or related contractors: people do not believe it can be any different, because the region has only clans, family connections, and corruption, but deep down they want to change it.

2. Benefits for "Special Military Operation veterans"

Throughout the week, the authorities announced new benefits for war participants and their families, including: debt forgiveness, promises of housing certificates, and additional leave for parents. The audience's reaction was mixed. Some users viewed the new benefits primarily as a tool for recruiting new contract soldiers. Others pointed to problems with previously promised payments. In Karelia, the case of a deceased soldier's family that has been unable to receive due compensations for over six months was actively discussed. Additionally, the question was raised of why the support that the state offers to war participants is not available to other socially vulnerable groups.

3. Housing and communal services, roads, and schools: accumulated frustration

Infrastructure problems remained a constant topic of regional discussions. In Tyumen Oblast, a school that has been in an emergency state for nine years was mentioned. In Orenburg, people recalled that the embankment after the 2024 flood has still not been restored. In Murmansk Oblast, long-delayed construction projects that have been unable to finish for years were discussed, while in Kaluga Oblast — over 900 applications for gas disconnection.

4. Other observations

- The demand for an end to the war was most prominent in Tatarstan, Belgorod, Samara, and Rostov oblasts.
- Official statistics on average wages and government approval ratings remained an object of irony.

3. EXPECTATIONS INDEX (VKontakte)

During the monitoring weeks, the Expectations Index stood at **2,6** points on a 5-point scale. Last week, the indicator was at **2,7** points.

Fully pessimistic sentiments were observed in Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Mostly pessimistic sentiments were observed in Karelia, Perm Krai, Samara, Murmansk, Belgorod, Volgograd, and Kemerovo oblasts.

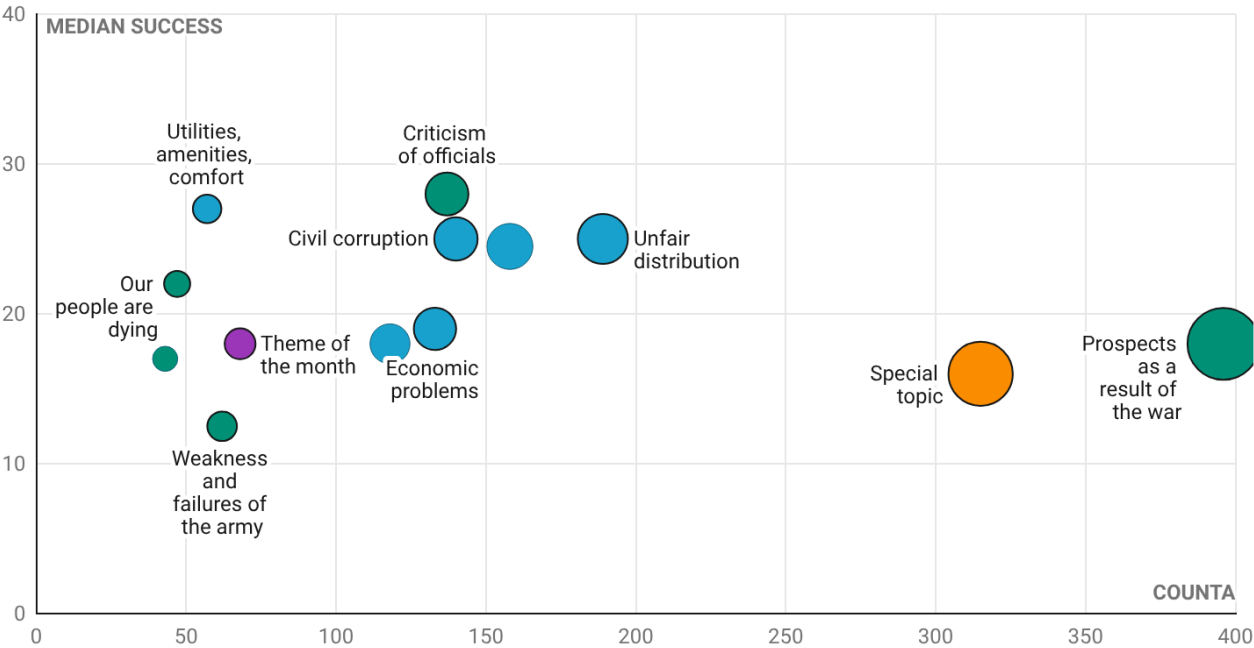
4. NETWORK INFLUENCERS' ACTIVITY

During the monitoring week, network influencers operated in their base regions. In total, **1044** discussion threads were initiated, of which **64** were deleted (which is partly related to the deletion of several accounts).

Most commonly used commenting topics

Topic	Share
War-related prospects	18.3%
Special topic	15.8%
Unfair distribution	10.2%
Propaganda lies	9.5%
Criticism of officials	6.3%
Lawlessness of security forces and courts	6.1%
Economic problems	6%

Prevalence and median effectiveness of narratives from May 18 to 31



Created with Datawrapper

5. SPECIAL CAMPAIGNS AND NARRATIVE TESTING

Topic of the week — Risks of declaring official mobilization amid high losses, covert recruitment, and economic pressure.

Core narrative of the special topic "Mobilization": the authorities are waging a hopeless and uncontrollable war in which "ordinary" people die, suffer, and pay for everything (See Appendix 1 for details).

Activity results: In total, **165** discussion threads were initiated, of which **9%** were deleted, and **79%** of the posts that passed censorship received reactions.

The most discussed topic (including the development of discussions under other news items) was in Krasnoyarsk Krai, Belgorod, and Orenburg oblasts. **Active discussions were also** observed in Tatarstan, Krasnodar and Perm krais, Lipetsk, Kemerovo, Volgograd, Samara, Orenburg, and Kursk oblasts.

Kemerovo Oblast

Elya Ponomareva (May 27, 1:08 PM): "What a nightmare! So what now? He'll be able to sign a contract to avoid prison, because the state created that option for criminals(((And now mobilization has already begun and they won't care who they send. At my husband's work, management has started pressuring employees into contracts. Here we go..." — ♥ 24

Samara Oblast

Dmitry Davydov (May 25, 6:37 PM): "Am I understanding this law correctly — that now, anywhere in the world where a Russian official or businessman is arrested, there could be a new Special Military Operation, with mobilization from the common people? And do ordinary mortals once again need to defend someone else's ambitions?" — ♥ 37

Additional initiatives

The team proposed **a post** in a group on behalf of a female resident of Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions about Moscow's indifference to the suffering of "Donbas" after the Armed Forces of Ukraine drone attack on May 22 on Temporarily Occupied Starobilsk. The post was published in a local public group of Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions and in total gathered over **668** reactions, **22** reposts, **21 thousand** views.

How did people react? The majority supported the narrative about Moscow's and the elites' indifference to the tragedy in Starobilsk; some commentators also reproached the people in general for callousness as long as the trouble does not affect them personally. There was also a noticeable minority that defended Moscow.

Methodology

What this project is. Systematic monitoring of sentiments in Russian regions — with a focus on critical and negative posts as an indicator of what irritates, frightens, or outrages people. Findings are based on two parallel sources.

VKontakte. Observations by analysts who work in regional Russian VKontakte communities — in selected regions of all eight federal districts of the Russian Federation, as well as in Temporarily Occupied Crimea and Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Telegram. Approximately 410 regional Russian channels — regional news channels, city public groups, oblast-level media, local "chatbots" with audiences ranging from several thousand to tens of thousands of subscribers. Coverage — all Russian regions and the occupied territories of Crimea and Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Quotes in the report text are presented verbatim.