

## Deep Russia: **MOSCOW WITHIN REACH**

*What Russians discussed on "VKontakte" and "Telegram" from May 11 to 17*

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<b>Period</b>	May 11–17, 2026
<b>Platforms</b>	VKontakte, Telegram (regional communities)

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## Key Findings

The attack on the night of May 17 was the largest targeting the Moscow region since the start of the full-scale war.

The federal television's response was to minimize the event. The topic was not completely silenced, but it was not allowed to become central. The event was briefly mentioned in morning broadcasts; by daytime news, the topic had nearly disappeared, and evening analytical programs did not dedicate a separate segment to it. Outside the main broadcasts, the tone was harsher. Propagandists said Ukrainian strikes were meant to sow fear and "civil confrontation" in Russia. In the Z-segment, criticism of air defense gaps intensified along with demands for a harsher response.

Against the backdrop of the attack, there was a sharp surge in activity in Moscow **VKontakte** groups. The public reacted with considerable panic: sharing what they heard and saw. Overall, fear and despair dominated the discussions, occasionally escalating into thoughts that it was time to end the "special operation." Bots attempted to redirect fear toward aggression against Kyiv, but this did not gain noticeable traction.

In **Telegram** groups, reactions from regions outside Moscow split. In frontline regions (Belgorod, Kursk, Bryansk oblasts), it was perceived as "routine" news with a bitter note of "finally it's your turn too"; in distant regions (Yakutia, Irkutsk Oblast), it was perceived as a signal that the war had definitively ceased to be something remote.

In **VKontakte**, more than half of the monitored regions either had no posts about the attack on Moscow or were limited to one or two posts without any noticeable audience reaction. In border and frontline regions, a similar reaction was observed as in Telegram groups: the news was perceived almost routinely. Rear regions with active audiences (Tatarstan, Krasnoyarsk Krai, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Novosibirsk, Sverdlovsk oblasts) produced the most diverse reactions. Discussions expressed fatigue, sarcasm, and dissatisfaction, but rarely genuine fear or panic.

Besides the attack on Moscow, both platforms actively discussed **the State Duma initiative to write off loans for new contract soldiers**. For a significant portion of the audience, this initiative appeared not as social support for military personnel, but as evidence of an acute shortage of volunteers and the state's attempt to compensate through financial incentives.

The voluntary resignation of Vyacheslav Gladkov from the post of governor of Belgorod Oblast and the appointment of Aleksandr Shuvayev as acting head of the oblast became the most emotionally charged political events of the week in the border oblasts. The public demonstrated an unusually high level of support for the former governor Gladkov.

## 1. MOSCOW WITHIN REACH

Mid-May 2026 marked a notable moment in the long-range strike warfare between Ukraine and Russia. For Ukraine, it was another stage of shifting pressure onto the Russian war economy and rear infrastructure. For Russia, it was a painful information episode: the attack reached not the border regions but the capital and its nearest industrial belt. According to available data, the attack on the night of May 17 was the largest targeting the Moscow region since the start of the full-scale war: the Russian Ministry of Defense claimed 556 Unmanned Aerial Vehicles downed across the country, and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin reported over 120 drones downed on approaches to the capital within 24 hours. Russian interception figures in this report are presented as official claims, since their full scope cannot currently be independently verified.

The Ukrainian side presented these strikes as a response to the Russian air campaign against Ukrainian cities. President Volodymyr Zelensky called the strike on the Moscow region a “completely fair response” to Russian attacks on civilians in Ukraine, and [the Security Service of Ukraine and the Defense Forces confirmed hits on military-industrial and fuel infrastructure](#): the Moscow Oil Refinery, the Solnechnogorsk fuel station, the Volodarsk oil pumping station, and the Angstrom microelectronics plant in Zelenograd. Subsequently, [Reuters](#) reported that the Moscow Oil Refinery temporarily halted processing to reduce risks following the attack, although the agency’s sources did not report significant damage to the facility itself. This is an important detail: even limited damage or risks can produce an operational effect when it concerns fuel logistics hubs near the capital. Russian military analyst Ruslan Leviev, in a comment for [Mediazona](#), also noted that mass raids create major difficulties for air defense, and drones may lose navigation due to electronic warfare systems or route errors.

### 1.1. Russia’s official reaction: preventing a discussion about vulnerability

The official Russian line was built around the word “terrorist attack.” [Maria Zakharova called the attack on Moscow a “mass terrorist attack” by Kyiv, carried out](#) “to the sounds of Eurovision” and “with EU money,” claiming that civilian facilities were the targets. [Dmitry Peskov, as early as May 8, commenting on Ukrainian strikes on transportation infrastructure](#) in southern Russia, spoke of the “terrorist nature of the Kyiv regime.” After May 17, this formula allowed the Kremlin to avoid speaking substantively about why the Moscow region proved accessible to such a large number of drones, shifting the conversation to a moral-legal plane.

Illustrative was the episode with propagandist Pavel Zarubin’s question to Peskov about whether the nuclear status of a state matters if it can be attacked with drones. As reported by [Charter97](#), Peskov did not substantively address air defense, but reduced his answer to the thesis that nuclear deterrence is a tool for protection against threats to the state’s

existence. This appeared to be a deliberate refusal to raise the stakes in an official comment.

Regional officials operated in a different role. Moscow Mayor Sobyenin and Moscow Oblast Governor Vorobyov published brief operational summaries: numbers of drones downed, addresses of damage, emergency services operations, and assistance to families of victims. At the same time, several days before the attack, the Moscow anti-terrorism commission banned publication of photos and videos showing the aftermath of Unmanned Aerial Vehicle strikes, leaving the factual monopoly to official statements.

### **1.2. State media: brief on Moscow, lengthy on Russian strength**

The most notable response of federal television was minimization. [According to Meduza's monitoring](#), Pervyi Kanal, Rossiya 1, and NTV mentioned casualties and damage only briefly in their Sunday morning broadcasts of May 17; by daytime news, the topic had nearly disappeared, and evening analytical programs did not dedicate a separate segment to it. In Vesti Nedeli, Dmitry Kiselyov, after an extended segment on the Sarmat missile, only briefly recounted the summary of downed drones; NTV and Pervyi Kanal in their main wrap-up programs did not make the attack on the capital the central event.

Outside the main broadcasts, the tone was harsher. On Vladimir Solovyov's program, Margarita Simonyan said that Ukrainian strikes were intended to sow fear and "civil confrontation" in Russia. In the Z-segment, [according to ISW's assessment](#), criticism of air defense gaps intensified along with demands for a harsher response, including radical calls that do not align with the Kremlin's position but demonstrate pressure from the ultra-patriotic community.

### **1.3. Russian public reaction: VKontakte monitoring**

In VKontakte, more than half of the monitored regions either had no posts about the attack or were limited to one or two posts without any noticeable audience reaction. Specifically, in Dagestan, Buryatia, Altai, St. Petersburg, Perm, Krasnodar, and Altai krais, Murmansk, Kemerovo, Volgograd, Saratov, Irkutsk, and Kaluga oblasts, there were no traces of discussion. In Kaliningrad, posts existed but comments had been scrubbed.

**In border and frontline regions** (Belgorod, Kursk, and Voronezh oblasts), a reaction along the lines of "this is already routine for us" was observed, as shelling and attacks have been ongoing there constantly.

**Rear regions with active audiences** (Tatarstan, Krasnoyarsk Krai, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Novosibirsk, Sverdlovsk oblasts) produced the most diverse reactions. Discussions expressed fatigue, sarcasm, and dissatisfaction, but rarely genuine fear or panic.

### ***Key emotional reactions***

#### **Calls for escalation and strikes on Ukraine**

The dominant direction of reactions was demands for a harsh response against Ukraine. Users called for strikes on Kyiv or even the use of nuclear weapons. Such comments were

massively observed in Bashkortostan, Rostov Oblast, Sverdlovsk Oblast, Chelyabinsk Oblast, the Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, and a number of other regions.

Rostov

**Igor Markov:** *A couple of Yars [missiles] and they would have deleted this error 404 from the map long ago. They just keep dragging their feet.*

May 17 at 8:00 AM ♡ 109

In Moscow Oblast, such messages were predominantly pushed by Kremlin bots. A similar situation was observed in Sverdlovsk and Tyumen oblasts. The most organic aggressive calls were in Rostov Oblast and the Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which were simultaneously combined with skepticism about the authorities' real readiness to act and questions about "red lines."

### War fatigue and demand for an end to the conflict

In a significant number of regions, comments about war fatigue and the desire for hostilities to end were recorded. This was most notably manifested in Tatarstan, Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Novosibirsk, and Belgorod oblasts. Users raised the question "how long will this last," discussed the deterioration of living standards, and expressed despair over the constant attacks.

In some regions, audiences questioned the effectiveness of official rhetoric and the security system. In Novosibirsk Oblast, official statements about the situation being under control provoked sarcasm and irritation. Separately, claims about Russia's "formidable weapons," which are unable to protect Moscow from regular Unmanned Aerial Vehicle attacks, were mocked.

Belgorod

**Stanislav Ts:** *On the other hand, it shouldn't only be Kursk and Belgorod suffering every day — [they in Moscow] just live their lives and have no idea what's going on,*

May 17 at 10:07 AM ♡ 261

### Distrust of authorities and censorship

In several regions, dissatisfaction with information restrictions was recorded. In Krasnoyarsk Krai, the ban on publishing photos and videos of attack aftermath was criticized, interpreted as an attempt to conceal the scale of strikes.

In Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, users mocked the authorities' "preparation" for attacks through banning publications about Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, and also directly recalled that in 2022, Russians were assured that the war "would not come to Russian territory."

Separately, criticism of internet shutdowns and messenger blockages was also observed, which, according to users, did not affect the effectiveness of Unmanned Aerial Vehicle attacks.

Some commenters mocked official euphemisms such as "pops" and "debris."

### Regional specifics

## How did Moscow react to the “strikes”?

A sharp surge in activity in Moscow groups was triggered by the Unmanned Aerial Vehicle attacks on Moscow and the Moscow region on May 17.

- ↪ The news did not spread across all Moscow public groups.
- ↪ The number of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles was not specified in the posts.
- ↪ The public reacted predominantly with panic: sharing what they heard and saw.
- ↪ Bots attempted to redirect the fear vector toward aggression against Kyiv, which did not gain noticeable traction with the public.

*Moscow*

**Elvira Borovinskaya:** *At 4:30 we were woken up by very powerful explosions.*

*The dogs went crazy.*

*We counted 9 VERY powerful explosions. Impossible to confuse with anything else.*

*We found out from the news that it was literally 1 km away from us.*

*Condolences to the victims 🙏*

24 minutes ago

Overall, fear and despair dominated the discussions, occasionally escalating into thoughts that it was time to end the “special operation.”

### Other regions

- ↪ In Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, the pro-Kremlin segment of the audience interpreted the strikes as Ukraine’s attempt to derail potential negotiations, while skeptically inclined users, conversely, questioned the Kremlin’s own readiness for peace, pointing out that after the “parade” ceasefire, Russia itself launched a massive strike.
- ↪ In Samara Oblast, demonstrative indifference and even delight at the fires in Moscow were recorded.
- ↪ In Lipetsk Oblast, users projected the Moscow attack scenario onto their own region, speculating that a similar strike on Lipetsk would have catastrophic consequences. Criticism of the authorities and the United Russia party was also voiced there.
- ↪ In Nizhny Novgorod Oblast, the focus was on everyday inconveniences caused by flight rerouting and fear for personal safety.

### 1.4. “Retaliatory strikes”: how Russia legitimizes the shelling of Ukraine

The Russian “retaliation” formula was noticeable even before the May 17 attack. On May 6, [the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on foreign diplomatic missions to evacuate personnel from Kyiv](#) in case of a massive strike if Ukraine attempted to disrupt the May 9 parade; Zakharova spoke of the “inevitability” of Russia’s response. [On May 15, the Russian Ministry of Defense stated](#) that from May 12 to 15, it carried out one massive and two group strikes “in response to Ukraine’s terrorist attacks on civilian sites” on Russian territory; targets named included military-industrial enterprises, energy, transportation, and port infrastructure, military airfields, depots, and Unmanned Aerial Vehicle launch

sites. On May 18, following the strike on Moscow, [the Ministry of Defense repeated nearly the same template](#) and announced a massive strike on military-industrial, energy, transportation, and port infrastructure, as well as airfields in Ukraine, concluding the statement with the formula “the strike objective was achieved.”

In formal communiqués, the phrase “in response” is more common, while “retaliatory strike” is used more actively by pro-government media and headlines. The official language remains bureaucratic and suitable for diplomatic use, while the media language adds a punitive, emotional charge. Thus, the Russian audience receives a simple chain: Ukraine attacks Russia, therefore Russia has the moral right to strike Ukraine.

The deadliest episode of this wave occurred in Kyiv on the night of May 14. According to the Ukrainian Air Force, Russia launched 56 missiles of various types and 675 strike drones; [Kyiv Independent reported](#) at least 24 killed and 48 wounded, including three children among the dead, and part of a residential building was destroyed in the Darnytsia district. The day before, on May 13, Russia deployed more than 800 drones in a prolonged daytime strike on Ukraine; [according to Ukrainian reports](#), at least 14 people were killed and over 80 were wounded.

### ***How VKontakte reacted to Russian strikes on Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities***

In many regions, news about Russian strikes on Kyiv and other Ukrainian cities was either entirely absent or published without active discussion. At the same time, where reactions were present, three main trends dominated:

- Support for “retaliatory strikes.” The most aggressive reactions were recorded in Rostov, Sverdlovsk, Tyumen, and Kaliningrad oblasts, as well as the Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Comments were dominated by calls to “hit harder,” “destroy Ukraine,” and “avenge strikes on Russia.” Some commenters explicitly demanded attacks on Kyiv and Bankova [the Ukrainian president’s office].
- Criticism of the weakness of Russian authorities for failing to achieve the goals of the Special Military Operation. This was most vocal in Voronezh, Novosibirsk, Omsk, and Pskov oblasts.
- Growing demand for an end to the war. Particularly in St. Petersburg, Kursk, and Belgorod oblasts.

Rostov

**Maksim Del:** *When will Putin have the guts to admit he f\*\*\*ed up and that no one is going to win this war, but no, people like him can't admit the failure of their «geostrategy»*

May 15 at 8:46 AM ♡ 51

**Maksim Del:** *Elena, turns out people on the couch are smarter than those in the Kremlin*

May 15 at 9:08 AM ♡ 32

## 2. The week in Russian regional "VKontakte" and "Telegram"

### 2.1. Massive Unmanned Aerial Vehicle attacks on Russian regions / strike on Ryazan

Besides attacks on Moscow, an important topic in terms of coverage was Unmanned Aerial Vehicle attacks on other Russian regions, which effectively shaped the main “wartime” agenda on both platforms. The attack on Ryazan (3 killed, 12 wounded) became the central media event discussed in most regions.

In VKontakte public groups, responses much more frequently featured calls for a “harsh response” and new strikes on Kyiv, especially in Moscow and Tyumen oblasts. The Telegram audience, in contrast, more often shifted to reflection on civilian vulnerability, air defense ineffectiveness, and a general sense of defenselessness.

Omsk

**Ivan Shilen:** *Strange, they keep writing that Unmanned Aerial Vehicle debris fell on residential buildings and factories — the way I see it, if it's debris, then it's the air defense's fault for shooting them down over residential areas. Why Unmanned Aerial Vehicles still fly calmly across half the country is also not entirely clear — where is the early detection perimeter? Where are the multiple lines of national defense? They fly in like they're coming home...*

May 15 at 8:44 AM ♥ 155

Tyumen

**Galina Danilova:** *So it turns out it's cheaper to clean up the rubble than to f\*\*\*ing hit Kyiv*

3 hours ago ♥ 116

Common to both platforms is frustration over internet shutdowns during attacks and the ban on filming and publishing footage of the aftermath. Information control in this case is perceived as an attempt to conceal the true scale of events.

### 2.2. Loan write-offs of up to 10 million rubles for new contract soldiers, tightening of military registration and conscription control

The State Duma initiative to write off loans for new contract soldiers generated widespread resonance in regional communities, particularly in Tatarstan, Rostov, Kursk, Pskov, and Omsk oblasts. Despite differences in communication style between platforms, the overall logic of reactions proved virtually identical.

For a significant portion of the audience, this initiative appeared as evidence of an acute shortage of volunteers and the state's attempt to compensate through financial incentives. In active discussions, users pointed out a fundamental inequality: loan benefits apply only

to new contract soldiers, while those mobilized who have been fighting for years do not receive equivalent compensation.

It was also reported that prosecutors at all levels were given powers to monitor military registration in government agencies, at employers, and in universities. Users perceived this as “virtually mobilization” without its formal announcement. This measure is perceived in conjunction with the loan write-offs for contract soldiers — as a combination of the stick and the carrot. The public tends to believe that if the state simultaneously offers such large-scale financial benefits and strengthens the conscription control system, it means the volunteer shortage problem is reaching a critical scale.

Samara

**Elina Levitskaya:** *So Vladimir Putin really wants to fight — well then let him and his vast harem and countless offspring do the fighting. He has a huge peasant family there — enough for all the wars, and we'll live in peace and harmony with our neighbors and won't go to war with anyone. Moreover, we all intend to lawfully leave the Russian Federation, because we're tired of the lawlessness and powerlessness of the authorities, we don't agree with the current government's policies, we refuse to live in such inhumane conditions and send our children, husbands, fathers, and brothers to their deaths.*

May 15 at 5:51 PM ♡ 51

### 2.3. Housing and communal services tariffs to rise 36% by 2029

The upcoming increase in housing and communal services tariffs became one of the most geographically widespread topics of discussion on both platforms, making this news effectively nationwide.

The tone of reactions on Telegram and VKontakte proved nearly identical. Bitter irony, fatigue, and a sense of hopelessness dominated. Users perceived the news as yet another confirmation of a long-familiar pattern: prices steadily rise while household incomes fail to keep pace.

The reaction in Tyumen Oblast was illustrative, where people no longer see the point in discussing constant price increases. In Saratov Oblast, Volodin's criticism of tariff policy was called “a publicity stunt.”

Yamal

**Deni Akhaev:** *The tariffs are clear enough, but how much is the salary going to skyrocket?*

2 hours ago ♡ 18

On both platforms, an attempt by bot networks to soften the negative reaction was also noticeable, but audiences barely engaged with these messages.

### 2.4. Official statistics vs. real experience: wages, GDP, “growth”

The theme of the gap between official economic statistics and the population's everyday experience remained one of the most persistent in regional discussions of the week.

On VKontakte, it manifested through various news triggers, but all of them ultimately boiled down to the same reaction — total distrust of state economic indicators.

In Samara Oblast, users reacted sharply to Putin’s claims of 1.8% GDP growth, commenting with phrases like “he lives in a fantasy world.” In Volgograd Oblast and Krasnodar Krai, audiences mocked Reshetnikov’s statement that Russia “surpassed the US in economic growth rates.” In Leningrad Oblast, a similar reaction was triggered by data about an alleged 87% wage increase — users discussed how such figures exist “only in the imagination of those in power.”

St. Petersburg

**Tasenska Schalkowa:** *They wrote it wrong — they raised prices by 87% on transportation and in stores 🤔 and salaries in Smolny [the governor’s residence] 😡*

May 13 at 12:28 PM ❤️ 173

On Telegram, this contradiction between official rhetoric and reality received an even more illustrative reflection. On May 12, two news stories spread simultaneously: one about a 23.9% wage increase and one about every fourth company in Russia cutting staff. It was the second topic that went viral, collecting thousands of forwards, while the “wage growth” report barely generated any audience interest.

On both platforms, the reaction mechanism is identical. Official statistics are not refuted through facts — they are mocked through personal experience. Trust in any state economic indicators on both platforms is low, and it is precisely this zero-level trust that serves as a persistent background marker of the week.

### 2.5. Specific regional discussions on VKontakte

**Prisoner of war exchange in a “205-for-205” formula.** The prisoner exchange became one of the few “war-related” topics of the week that generated a relatively consolidated and positive reaction. Commenters sincerely rejoiced at the return of their fellow countrymen and relatives. Alongside this, in Kemerovo, Omsk, and Pskov oblasts, a sense of hopelessness was also present. Users wrote that “they’ll be sent back to the front anyway” and called the situation “hopeless surrealism and madness.”

#### ***Governor Gladkov’s resignation and Shuvayev’s appointment***

The voluntary resignation of Vyacheslav Gladkov and the appointment of Aleksandr Shuvayev as acting governor of Belgorod Oblast became the most emotionally charged political events of the week in Belgorod, Kursk, and Rostov oblasts.

**What was published?** The topic encompasses several news triggers at once: the fact of the governor’s resignation itself, the appointment of a new acting governor who is a Special Military Operation veteran, and the accompanying media coverage. In Belgorod Oblast, media published Gladkov’s farewell video, reported that the president awarded him the Order of Alexander Nevsky, quoted Peskov’s statements that Gladkov would be offered a new position, and also published the new acting governor’s biography.

#### **How did the public react?**

- **Perception of Gladkov’s resignation.** Gladkov enjoyed considerable popularity among the people. A key role was played by the governor’s proactive communication with the population. Following reports of his resignation, the public expressed an extraordinarily high level of support. No other region has exhibited such a level of support for an official. Commenters are convinced that Gladkov worked specifically in the interests of the people.
- **Attitude toward the central government.** The level of negative sentiment toward the central government among Belgorod residents has, subjectively, risen sharply. Part of the audience believes Putin “betrayed” the region by appointing Shuvayev and suspects that Gladkov was pressured into resigning.
- **Reaction to the new governor.** The public considers Shuvayev incompetent, noting that military personnel should stick to their own field rather than govern an oblast. Some commenters see a threat in the new governor — a Special Military Operation veteran — fearing that the oblast could be turned into a staging ground for combat operations. After his appointment, Belgorod was attacked by the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The public began asking where the new governor was, as he had provided no operational information about the situation.
- **What did Kremlin bots write?** A large number of bots appeared in the public groups attempting to discredit Gladkov, accusing him of financial manipulations, but these messages were actively countered by real Belgorod Oblast residents. Old comments about Shuvayev’s military unprofessionalism, his “strange orders,” and heavy personnel losses near Avdiivka were also being deleted from the groups.

*Belgorod*

**Natalya Shalimanova:** *The people of Belgorod will not forgive Gladkov’s resignation!!!*

*Gladkov could not have abandoned the oblast voluntarily, he just couldn’t!!!*

May 13 at 8:02 PM ♡ 1,126

## Methodology

**About this project.** Systematic monitoring of sentiments across Russian regions — with a focus on critical and negative posts as indicators of what irritates, frightens, or outrages people. Findings are based on two parallel sources.

**Vkontakte.** Observations by analysts working in regional Russian VK communities — in selected regions across all eight federal districts of the Russian Federation, as well as in Temporarily Occupied Crimea and the Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

**Telegram.** Approximately 410 regional Russian channels — regional news channels, city public groups, oblast media, local “chat bots” with audiences ranging from several thousand to tens of thousands of subscribers. Coverage: all Russian regions and the occupied territories of Crimea and the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

**Quotes** in the text of the report are presented verbatim.