

Deep Russia: **ALL THE TAIGA FOR JUNK**

What Russians discussed on "VKontakte" and "Telegram" from May 18 to 24

Period May 18–24, 2026

Platforms VKontakte, Telegram (regional communities)



Key findings

Vladimir Putin's visit to China on May 19-20 did not become a significant news event for the regional audience. Where discussions did emerge, they were predominantly negative and centered around the image of Russia as a dependent raw-material appendage of China, the fruitlessness of the trip, and domestic problems (corruption, mobilization, lack of security). Loyal messages, including those inspired by bot networks (greatness, friendship, mutual benefit) were present, but fell short in scale and emotional impact compared to critical assessments. **The extension of the visa-free regime with China** prompted rather pragmatic and ironic reactions. In Leningrad Oblast it was discussed as a possible way to “escape in case of mobilization,” while reluctance to travel to Asia instead of Europe was also voiced. In the Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the visa-free regime is considered unnecessary due to the lack of money for such trips. **This state of affairs differed quite significantly from the agenda presented by the central media and the way it was communicated by the Russian authorities.**

A widely discussed story came from Irkutsk Oblast, where **local residents appealed to China for help building a school, offering in return to study the Chinese language.** Users called this a disgrace and a failure of Russian officials.

The news that the Russian Academy of Sciences allegedly proposed **lowering the marriage age to 14**, citing “particularities of maturation in the South,” became one of the hottest topics of the week on Russian social media. Discussion on Telegram immediately branched into several directions. Some perceived the initiative as a direct assault on children's rights and called it pedophilia. Others linked the topic to the demographic crisis or used it as a pretext for anti-migrant statements. In regional VKontakte communities, the picture was similar. The initiative was viewed negatively, and users actively discussed the causes of low birth rates: poverty, lack of prospects, war, and general instability.

On VKontakte, **the Armed Forces of Ukraine strike on Temporarily Occupied Starobilsk** became the central event of the week and drew reactions across most of the monitored regions. In Moscow, Kaliningrad, Belgorod, and Rostov oblasts, formal grief and calls for a “retaliatory strike” were most common. Notably, in Rostov Oblast the comment that received the most likes was a mournful one about civilians suffering on both sides. In Kursk and Novosibirsk oblasts, criticism most often targeted “the elites who do not suffer from the war,” and overall, all criticism was directed against their own leadership. In occupied Luhansk, a sense of abandonment and unequal attention to different regions by the Kremlin was evident.

On Telegram, a widely discussed topic was the news about **bonus points on the Unified State Exam for schoolchildren with drone piloting skills**, which provoked a mixed reaction. Many users perceived the innovation as yet another step toward the militarization of education. They ironized that after school, only the army or early marriage awaits young people. Some users directly called such initiatives preparation of youth for future mobilization. **The strengthening of the ruble** (from May 19–21 the dollar dropped to 71 rubles) sparked active discussion. Some advised urgently buying imported goods and travel packages, while others joked about “stocking up and relocating.”

On VKontakte, many regions publish **reports about those killed in the “Special Military Operation”**, yet they attract few reactions.

1. TAIGA FOR JUNK

How did Russian propaganda cover Putin's visit to China?

The Russian coverage of Putin's visit to China on May 19-20, 2026 was less about negotiations and more about the optics of status. The trip, timed to the 25th anniversary of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation, was presented as proof that Moscow is not isolated and that Beijing receives it as an equal partner. Against this backdrop, Russian media actively compared Putin's reception with Trump's recent visit to China: the main message was simple — Putin was supposedly given more warmth and political weight.

That is why the focus of the narrative was not the details of agreements, but rituals: the address “dear friend,” the honor guard, salutes, anthems, children with flags, tea ceremonies, formulas about the “unprecedented level” of relations. This created an image of personal closeness between Putin and Xi Jinping and a broader bond between the two states against the West. The anti-American framing was also noticeable: Moscow and Beijing criticized the American “Golden Dome” missile defense project, the militarization of space, and spoke of the need for a “fairer” world order.

The formal results for this narrative were: the sides signed a joint statement on deepening the partnership, agreed to extend the 2001 treaty, and China extended the visa-free regime for Russians until December 31, 2027. But the main economic intrigue — the “Power of Siberia-2” gas pipeline — did not yield a breakthrough. Peskov spoke only of understanding the main parameters of the route and construction; no specific timelines, prices, or final agreement were announced.

Russian media portrayed the visit as a diplomatic victory, but the most important practical result remained vague. China gained a convenient opportunity to once again demonstrate Xi's global weight, while Russia got a stage on which to demonstrate its non-isolation. The war against Ukraine was not a problematic topic in this picture: it was effectively hidden behind general formulas about international issues. Therefore, the main purpose of the Russian coverage was not the success of the negotiations, but an attempt to substitute the lack of concrete agreements with symbols of great-power politics.

How did VKontakte react to Putin's visit to China?

Vladimir Putin's visit to Beijing and the associated agreements — the declaration on a multipolar world, the extension of the visa-free regime until the end of 2027, and negotiations on the “Power of Siberia – 2” gas pipeline — did not generate noticeable public interest in most regions of the Russian Federation.

A characteristic feature of the information landscape was low audience activity: publications gathered few views, reactions, and comments. In a number of regions, the event did not make it onto the local agenda at all. At the same time, in some regions, comments under key news about the visit were closed by moderators, notably in Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Belgorod, and Leningrad oblasts. **The discussion topics were as follows:**

1. Russia as China's raw-material appendage.

The most notable discussions were related to the perception of Russia as an economically dependent partner of China and a supplier of raw resources. Such assessments appeared independently of each other across different regions of the country. In Novosibirsk Oblast, people spoke about the loss of positions and the role of a raw-material appendage. In Rostov Oblast, accusations of “selling out the country” and criticism of the fruitless visit were voiced. In Murmansk and Chelyabinsk oblasts, users discussed the transfer of natural resources and the risks of gradual economic exploitation of the Far East by China. In Karelia, users wrote about selling resources in exchange for expensive finished products, while in Volgograd Oblast they discussed supplying energy resources at low prices in exchange for expensive Chinese goods. In Krasnoyarsk Krai, ironic comments circulated about Russia developing the Chinese economy. In the Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the prevailing opinion was also that China exploits Russia for its own interests, offering almost nothing in return.

Kemerovo Oblast

Vladimir Neponyatny: “We give China valuable resources, and they give us cheap junk from AliExpress...” (31 likes)

Ironic comments in Tolyatti

Aleksey Balandin: “Under Putin, Russia stopped being Europe's raw-material appendage and became a ‘reliable energy supplier for China 👍.’ Sovereignty has reached a new level, you have to understand 🧐” (11 likes)

2. Domestic problems.

In Tatarstan and Krasnodar Krai, a widely discussed story came from Irkutsk Oblast, where local residents appealed to China for help building a school, offering in return to study the Chinese language. For users, this became “a disgrace for Russian officials.”

Omsk Oblast

Igor Chernozubov: “More than half of the officials, deputies, ministers, and unnecessary obscure agencies need to be CUT, and then money will immediately appear!... Damn, we've reached the point where simple peasants are turning to another country for help... this is a DISGRACE!!!” (116 likes)

Krasnodar Krai

Dmitry Karpenko: “You should study the Kalashnikov assault rifle, then the whole world will learn the Russian language!” (3 likes)

In Bashkortostan, Novosibirsk Oblast, and other regions, users pointed out that while the president was traveling to China, Russian regions continued to suffer drone attacks. In

Omsk Oblast, Putin's statements about international law were called cynical against the backdrop of the war.

Novosibirsk Oblast

Fedor Egorov: "Couldn't care less where he arrived. Better if Putin stopped the Special Military Operation so that civilians would stop dying every day.)" (46 likes)

3. Visa-free regime.

The extension of the visa-free regime prompted rather pragmatic and ironic reactions. In Leningrad Oblast it was discussed as a possible way to "escape in case of mobilization," while reluctance to travel to Asia instead of Europe was also voiced. In the Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, the visa-free regime is considered unnecessary due to the lack of money for such trips.

4. The loyal pole and bot activity.

Positive assessments of the visit were also present in discussions. In Moscow Oblast, the public took pride in the meeting of "two leaders of superpowers," with almost no criticism. In Sverdlovsk and Tyumen oblasts, China was called a "comrade" and users had positive expectations from the cooperation.

Kremlin bot activity was also observed, promoting the following narratives:

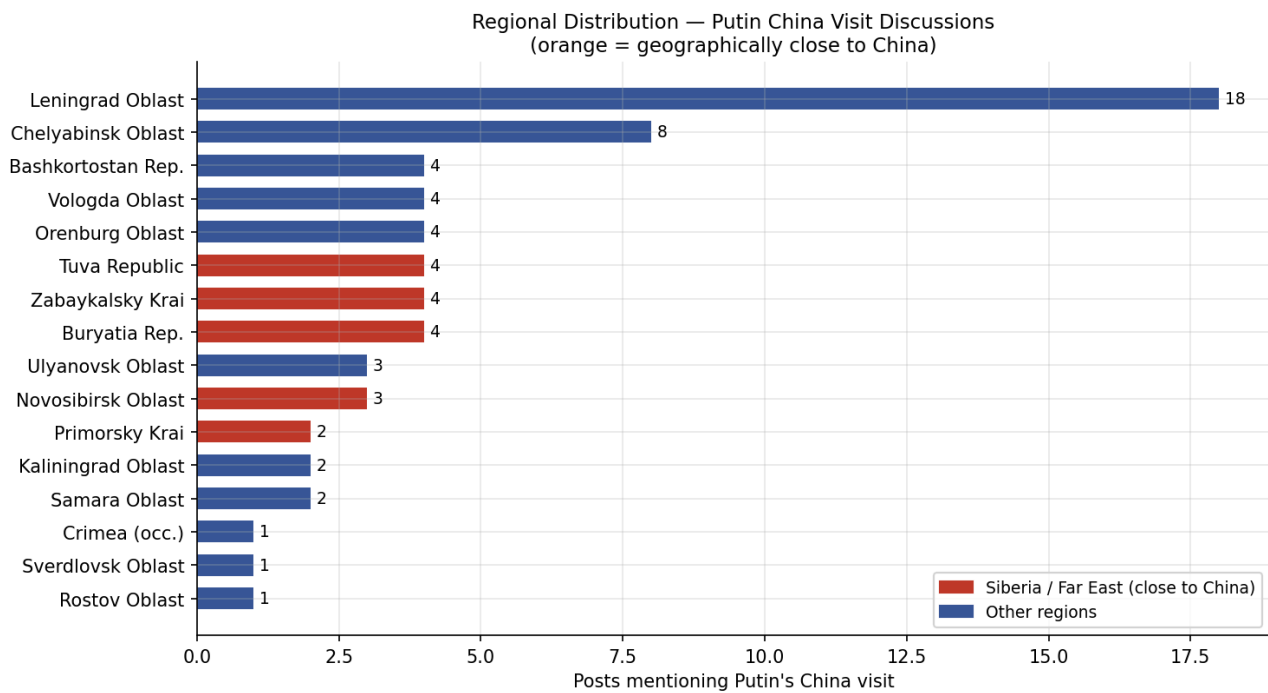
- Russia is strengthening its positions on the world stage.
- Russia and China are similar in their level of development and values, and their cooperation is mutually beneficial.
- Glorification of Putin and Russia as a resource-rich country that needs to sell its resources somewhere.

How did Telegram react to the visit?

Putin's official visit to Beijing was represented limitedly in regional Telegram: only 29 out of 82 active regions had relevant posts, and none generated viral discussion. Media channels in St. Petersburg and Chelyabinsk accounted for most of the traffic. The tone in discussions was predominantly skeptical or ironic. The audience focused on the unequal nature of trade, discount gas prices, and the risk of raw-material dependence on China.

Post topics.

74% of collected posts fell into negative categories, which is nearly double the national average for the week (41.9%). The dominant big topic was "Dissatisfaction with authorities" (32 out of 58 classified): the LLM classifier detected underlying skepticism in comments to neutral factual posts about the negotiations regarding the terms of the deal and Russia's role in relations with China. "Economy and social issues" (10) — posts where trade turnover, gas prices, and the visa-free regime were discussed. "War" (9) — posts where the context of negotiations was directly linked to possible peace settlement or "Chinese mediation."



Tone and reactions

🤡 (4,512) — the most common reaction, significantly ahead of 👍 (2,946). This is an atypical pattern: in most other topics during the week, 👍 or ❤️ lead or come first. The dominance of the “clown” over approval shows the audience’s ironic-skeptical attitude toward the rhetoric of “unprecedented level of relations.”

Based on comment analysis, three main ways of interpreting the visit were identified:

1. “Raw-material appendage.”

In Bashkortostan, Primorsky Krai, Chelyabinsk, Novosibirsk, and Krasnoyarsk, support for the rhetoric about Russia as China’s raw-material appendage prevailed. Users discussed that Russia supplies energy resources at a discount (gas is 34% cheaper for China than for other Gazprom clients), while China resells technological products at market price. China’s refusal of the “Power of Siberia-2” project due to unfavorable pricing terms was also cited as confirmation of the unequal relationship.

Primorsky Krai

“China refused to sign "Power of Siberia-2". They couldn’t care less about Russia’s interests. They only defend their own country’s interests.”

2. “Queuing for mediation.”

In Chelyabinsk, Samara, and Leningrad oblasts, the visit to Beijing was not perceived as a meeting of equal allies through the lens of the “Special Military Operation.” Users emphasized that after four years of war, it is Moscow that is far more interested in Chinese mediation in a possible peace process than Beijing is in cooperation with Russia.

Chelyabinsk:

“the great geostrategist has, over four years, brought the situation to the point where without Chinese comrades there’s nowhere to go... queue up for Chinese mediation?”

3. “Real mutual benefit.”

In Tuva, Ulyanovsk Oblast, and Temporarily Occupied Crimea, a less common but positive assessment of cooperation with China appeared. Users cited joint projects at the Tianwan Nuclear Power Plant (units 7 and 8), the development of the nuclear icebreaker fleet and the Northern Sea Route, as well as the visa-free regime as examples of mutually beneficial relations. In their view, these projects have practical value for Russia and demonstrate the existence of mutual benefit in cooperation with China.

Ulyanovsk:

“Russia is building the 7th and 8th units at the “Tianwan” Nuclear Power Plant. China is showing growing interest in the Northern Sea Route, and without our nuclear icebreaker fleet, navigation in the north is impossible.”

Overall picture across both platforms: The visit did not become a news event for the audience. Where discussions did emerge, they were predominantly skeptical and centered around the image of Russia as a dependent raw-material appendage of China, the fruitlessness of the trip, and domestic problems (corruption, mobilization, lack of security). Loyal and bot-driven messages (greatness, friendship, mutual benefit) were present, but fell short in scale and emotional impact compared to critical assessments.

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

The week of May 18–24 covers data from two platforms:

- Telegram (41,931 posts, 410 channels, 82 regions, 559 million views per week)
- VK focus groups (~37 regions, including Temporarily Occupied Crimea and the Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions)

Shared topics of the week

1) **Marriage at 14.**

The news that the Russian Academy of Sciences allegedly proposed lowering the marriage age to 14, citing “particularities of maturation in the South,” became the hottest topic of the week on Telegram. A single post by “Moscow News” alone gathered over 500,000 views and more than 1,500 comments. Discussion on Telegram immediately branched into several directions. Some perceived the initiative as a direct assault on children’s rights and without mincing words called it pedophilia. Others linked the topic to the demographic crisis or used it as a pretext for anti-migrant statements. In Dagestan itself, discussions centered around local religious and cultural traditions.

In regional VKontakte communities, the picture was similar. The initiative was viewed negatively, and users actively discussed the causes of low birth rates: poverty, lack of prospects, war, and general instability. In Kemerovo Oblast, war was named as one of the main causes of the demographic crisis. And in Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, people were irritated that the state essentially presents the population with a choice of “either give birth or go fight.”

Kursk

“Yuriy Shelimanov: There is no worse calamity than an idiot who has seized power... The bald runt apparently wants to finish off the country by the time of his funeral” (369 likes)

2) **More alarms in Russian cities.**

The topic of drone attacks once again remained one of the most prominent this week. On Telegram, the subtopic “War nearby” gathered 2,785 posts and 46.2 million views. Air danger alerts were reported in Moscow, Yaroslavl, Ryazan, Samara, Voronezh, Perm, Tula, and Chuvash oblasts. Despite complaints in discussions about nighttime alarms and chronic sleep deprivation, there is a tendency toward growing accustomed to the “danger.”

According to VK monitoring, the topic covered all regions where alarms sounded. There, the greatest source of irritation was the shutting down of mobile internet during air threats. For many, these shutdowns proved more distressing than the actual drone reports. Users also complained about the gap between official reports of “successfully intercepted targets” and what they actually heard or saw with their own eyes.

Ivan Morozov: “Trust only official sources of information? Do these sources actually say anything? A drone hit an industrial building. Wow, so much important information. Personally, I’ll remember these times not even for the war, but for the cowardice, stupidity, and boundless corruption of our authorities.” (155 likes)

3) **Points for drone piloting.**

The news that schoolchildren could receive bonus points on the Unified State Exam for drone piloting skills provoked a mixed reaction. Comments combined irony, sarcasm, and anxiety. Many users perceived the innovation as yet another step toward the militarization of education. They ironized that after school, only the army or early marriage awaits young people. Some users directly called such initiatives preparation of youth for future mobilization.

4) **Rising prices as a constant source of anxiety.**

Anxiety related to rising prices is present on both platforms. Users discuss fuel prices, utility rates, food prices, and pension levels. In various regions, people note that regardless of whether the ruble strengthens or weakens, prices keep rising. Comments increasingly feature everyday markers of economizing: giving up coffee, juices, and other non-essential purchases. Because of this, official statements about supporting the population are often met with skepticism and do not match people’s everyday experience.

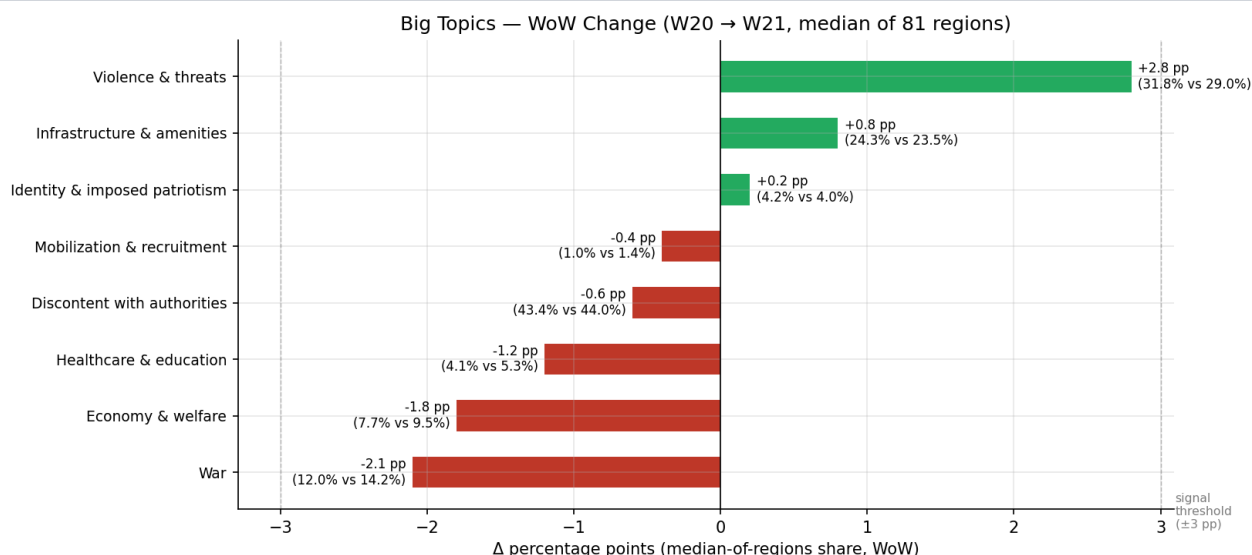
St. Petersburg

“Yes, products are getting more packaging and less actual product. We bought cookies for about 100 rubles and the package was full of inserts and dividers, while the actual product was just 4 cookies. At this rate, ice cream will soon be the size of a chocolate candy. And it’s like that with everything.” (60 likes)

What else made the top discussions on Telegram?

In the military bloc, the topic of the physical proximity of the threat dominated: drone warnings and fires attributed to the consequences of strikes spread across dozens of regions, not reaching the level of panicked posts but forming a background level of anxiety. The mobilization topic, conversely, after weeks of heightened “Mobilization is coming soon” activity, dropped almost to zero.

In the civilian bloc, the top discussions included: the proposal to lower the marriage age to 14 (which covered 77 regions simultaneously) and juvenile crime in St. Petersburg and Tambov, which escalated into criticism of police helplessness. Audience reach dropped by 3% while the number of posts grew by 5%, indicating a slight summer decline that is likely to continue.



More details on top discussions:

1. The ruble strengthened. From May 19–21, the dollar dropped to 71 rubles. The news sparked active discussion. Some advised urgently buying imported goods and travel packages, while others joked about “stocking up and relocating.” Separate dissatisfaction was caused by the news about QR payments through a Chinese service, which was perceived as a sign of dependence on China. The overall sentiment: the strengthening of the ruble is not associated with an improvement in quality of life.

2. Violence: Juvenile cruelty, police helplessness, animal abuse

The story of a teenage gang in St. Petersburg that attacked people with pepper spray cans and emergency hammers (on May 19, at least three people were injured, including a cadet with a fractured skull) became the most discussed topic of the week in Leningrad Oblast. In parallel, users actively commented on an incident in Tambov where a man with a knife was walking on a bridge while police officers in the video slowly surrounded him instead of neutralizing him promptly. 82 regions picked up the topic “Crime, vandalism,” and in most comments the main target of criticism was not crime as such, but police inaction.

Tambov Oblast:

what the hell, the cops aren't even running, as if running around with a knife is normal. I think this is either a drug addict or a Special Military Operation veteran. Clearly the guy was messed up badly."

Several cases of animal cruelty in Moscow Oblast, Temporarily Occupied Crimea, and other regions provoked an emotional reaction with demands for severe punishment. At the same time, some users criticized such attention to animals, believing that society reacts more acutely to this than to violence against people.

3. Night chats became a space for collective anxiety processing. In Khimki, 3,368 and 3,085 comments were recorded over two days, setting a record among local chats for the week. Yaroslavl, Tula, and Perm showed the same pattern. Night chats function as a space where anxiety, humor, news about attacks, and everyday matters are discussed in a single stream. In those same Khimki, after drone strikes, someone asked in the chat which street

to rename, and the response “Paint the balconies yellow and blue!” received approving reactions.

What else made the top discussions on VKontakte?

- 1) **Sympathy for Temporarily Occupied Starobilsk (Luhansk region).** The Armed Forces of Ukraine strike on Temporarily Occupied Starobilsk became the central event of the week and drew reactions across most of the monitored regions. In Moscow, Kaliningrad, Belgorod, and Rostov oblasts, formal grief and calls for a “retaliatory strike” were most common. Notably, in Rostov Oblast the comment that received the most likes was not a call for revenge but a mournful one about civilians on both sides. In Kursk and Novosibirsk oblasts, criticism most often targeted “the elites who do not suffer from the war,” and overall, all criticism was directed against their own leadership. In occupied Luhansk, a sense of abandonment and unequal attention to different regions was evident.

Discussion in Belgorod

Ilya Bogdanov: “Why during war is the enemy only bombed as a ‘retaliatory strike’? How does that work?” (92 likes)

Irina Nekrasova: “Ilya, it’s like that because some people only see that, while the guys work every day — they bomb, storm, and clear” (15 likes)

Ilya Bogdanov: “Irina, the main thing is that the Verkhovna Rada has been standing for five years, so what exactly are they bombing?)” (20 likes)

- 2) **“Who will take care of the Special Military Operation people?”** In many regions, problems with payments, support for military personnel and their families were discussed. In Belgorod Oblast, compensation payments for vehicles damaged during attacks were suspended. In Samara Oblast, the family of a serviceman was killed in a strike on Syzran. In Bashkortostan, the arrest of an official who was stealing payments to soldiers was discussed. Commenters questioned the official narrative about caring for war participants, recalling the experience of veterans from previous conflicts and cases of corruption around payments. Additionally, they expressed fear about the return of former prisoners as “heroes” from the front.

Samara

Vasilisa May: “Today in Syzran, a family was killed during an Unmanned Aerial Vehicle attack: a mother, 38, and her son, 19. The husband and father is serving in the Special Military Operation. Just think about it: the man is fighting there and alive, while his family, his wife and son, were killed in the rear! It’s beyond comprehension!!!!” (784 likes)

- 3) **Pensioners to the factory floor.** The proposal by the head of the Ministry of Economic Development Maxim Reshetnikov to send pensioners to work in order to close the labor shortage was discussed in most regions. Users criticized officials and discussed the causes of the labor shortage. In many comments, the labor deficit was linked to the “special operation” and its personnel losses, although this reason was almost never mentioned officially.


- 4) **Obituaries.** In many regions, reports about those killed in the “Special Military Operation” are published, yet they attract fewer and fewer comments and expressions of sympathy.
- 5) **Nuclear rhetoric.** In Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Okrug, Omsk and Pskov oblasts, and Temporarily Occupied Crimea, nuclear forces exercises and threats against Lithuania and NATO were discussed. Irony and sarcasm prevailed in the comments. At the same time, a segment of the audience perceived this as a source of pride in the country’s military power.

Pskov Oblast

Taras Tarasov: “Is this a warmup for expanding the Special Military Operation to the territory of Latvia? Like opening a ‘second front?’” (15 likes)

Kot Kotovich: “Taras, I wouldn’t want Pskov to become like Belgorod” (50 likes)

Chelyabinsk Oblast

Igor Markov: “It’s high time to introduce the Baltics and Little Britain to the Sarmat ” (9 likes)

Maxim Silantyev: “Igor, right into the lair ” (3 likes)

Methodology

About this project. Systematic monitoring of sentiments in Russian regions — focusing on critical and negative posts as an indicator of what irritates, frightens, or outrages people. The findings are based on two parallel sources.

Vkontakte. Observations by analysts who work 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, regional media outlets, 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 the Temporarily Occupied certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions.

Quotations in the text of the report are provided verbatim.