

Deep Russia:
S3LF-C*NSoRSH1P.
How do Russians veil their criticism?

What Russians discussed on "VKontakte" and on "Telegram" from 7 to 13 September

Period	7 - 13 September 2026
Platforms	VKontakte, Telegram (regional communities)



Key Findings

There is no single approach to moderating political and military topics in regional public groups. The level of permissible criticism differs substantially not only between regions, but also between individual public groups within the same region. In some communities even direct criticism of Putin and the authorities is allowed, while in others neutral or veiled comments are deleted. The boundary of what is permissible is unstable. Even in relatively open public groups, comments with similar content may either stay up or be deleted.

The audience's level of openness is also not a stable characteristic. It often depends on the specific public group, the topic and the current situation. In some regions, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle attacks, fuel shortages or other tangible consequences of the "Special Military Operation" are accompanied by more open discontent. In others, political and military topics are effectively not discussed at all.

Almost everywhere, the most sensitive topics remain the war, the military, criticism of Putin and the federal authorities, elections, mobilization, calls to end the war, and information about the consequences of attacks. Because of this, a significant part of critical communication shifts into sarcasm, euphemisms, deliberate misspellings, hints and discussion of the economic consequences.

Drone attacks became the most discussed topic of the week and the only one that appeared in the public groups of all regions. Rostov went through several consecutive nights of attacks. In Tatarstan, warnings about the danger were issued over loudspeakers, and airports suspended operations. Tolyatti and Perm also came under strikes. There is no single reaction to these events. Comments criticizing the authorities, expressing sympathy for the victims, voicing fatigue and trying to figure out how to keep themselves and their loved ones safe gather equal support. The discussion of the attacks is intertwined with other events of the week. Commenters joke that life will improve right after the vote, bring up the unresolved fuel problems and are outraged by fireworks amid a possible air threat.

The petrol shortage became the second-largest topic of the week. During the week, channels reported the shutdown of the Kirishi oil refinery and strikes on oil refineries in Tatarstan, Perm Krai, Saratov and Slavyansk-on-Kuban. People discussed queues forming at filling stations, prices that in places exceeded one hundred rubles per liter, and the introduction of restrictions on fuel sales in some regions. The most support went to the discussion of how to distribute the petrol that is in short supply.

Ahead of the **State Duma vote**, the main news hooks were the removal from the election of Communist Party of the Russian Federation deputy Nikolai Bondarenko and the forecast by the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center, which promised "United Russia" more than 50% of the vote. In the discussions cited, distrust and irritation are far more noticeable than interest in the candidates' programs. Commenters doubt that they can influence the result, see no acceptable choice and judge the authorities through everyday problems such as queues at filling stations and broken roads.

1. S3LF-C*NSoRSH1P. How do Russians veil their criticism?

How do Russians self-censor?

There is no single approach to moderating political and military topics in regional public groups. The level of permissible criticism differs substantially not only between regions, but also between individual public groups within the same region. In some communities even direct criticism of Putin and the authorities stays up, while in others neutral or veiled comments are deleted. The boundary of what is permissible is unstable. Even in relatively open public groups, comments with similar content may either stay up or be deleted.

Almost everywhere, the most sensitive topics remain the war, the military, criticism of Putin and the federal authorities, elections, mobilization, calls to end the war, and information about the consequences of attacks. Criticism of utility problems, prices, local authorities, corruption and the general decline in living standards gets through much more easily.

The main methods of self-censorship used by the audience

1. To self-censor, the audience most often **modifies trigger words that may be sensitive, but in a way that does not change the overall meaning**. "War" becomes "the situation" or "the dvizhukha" (the hustle), Putin becomes "Volodya", "grandpa" or "the geostrategist", a missile becomes a "fast-flying object", an explosion at a plant becomes a "pop", the authorities become "them over there", "up there at the top". People use distorted spelling, replace letters with digits or symbols, drop letters and use abbreviations, so that automated moderation does not recognize the trigger while the audience still reads it. For example, "c o f f i n s", "_issiles and _rones" (missiles and drones), "w*r" (war), "VVP" (Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin).

Perm Krai

"Strength to the family to get through this grief! How long will this, as the main tsar says, HUSTLE go on? 🤔🤔🤔 Or do they enjoy watching it from the bunker? I simply have no words anymore, then let them all take their children and entourage and go on playing their war games, leave people alone, let us live in peace!!!" —

September 7 at 9:21, ♥236

2. **Using veiled, deliberately unfinished statements, that leave room to fill in the rest.** For this, people use phrases like "you know why yourselves", "well, you get it", "I'd better keep quiet". To show that they do have an opinion but will not voice it for fear of persecution, they use phrases like "I would say it, but", "I won't

like this", "it's dangerous to comment". Rhetorical questions under sensitive topics are also used.

Novgorod Oblast

"Look how they shifted the problem of the lack of fuel onto the people. Before, it was everywhere, and after you-know-what it disappeared, and ordinary people are to blame again. That's why the pumps with 95 and so on gradually started closing.. people, how are you not fed up with these liars from United Russia" — June 28 at 18:01, ♥57

Rostov

"I'd better just keep quiet, because they'll jail me" — July 7 at 20:16, ♥317

3. **Irony, sarcasm and fake loyalty.** Instead of criticism, phrases like "everything is going according to plan", "we believe", "thank you for the peaceful sky", "but Europe will freeze", "but at least no gay parades" are used.

Moscow

"No panic. It's not critical. Everything is going according to plan. Putin knows best. Long live the Minsk agreements, the ghost of Istanbul, the spirit of Anchorage and the red lines! Victory is near!" — August 23 at 7:36, ♥192

4. **Shifting politics and the war into a purely everyday and economic plane.** People try to find space to express their dissatisfaction with politics and the situation in the country in topics where this can supposedly be done safely. Usually these are fuel prices and the state of hospitals and roads.

Mari El Republic (under a news item about petrol prices)

"So drones are hitting oil refineries while our generals are dithering, that's why petrol is expensive." — June 20 at 12:01, ♥56

5. **Quoting instead of stating one's own view.** The most popular sayings encountered are: "War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength."; "Comrade Major is watching you."; "Give me a company of soldiers made up of the elite's children, and the war will end the next day."; "When a state starts killing people, it always calls itself the motherland.".

Arkhangelsk

"And this on top of the fuel shortage! Everything is going according to their plan! The people think only about survival. As the novel '1984' says, to keep power you need to keep the people in want — but this is not just a whim, it is part of the logic of a totalitarian system" — August 31 at 19:32, ♥235

Activity in the regions

Regions with stricter moderation

In our observation, the strictest moderation is in Karelia. There, almost all criticism of Putin, the State Duma and the "Special Military Operation" is deleted, as are comments linking current problems to the war.

In Moscow Oblast, blocking and deletion extend even to criticism of utility problems, and mentions of the war and Putin are practically absent from the comments. Buryatia also has strong censorship of the words "Special Military Operation", "war" and direct mentions of Putin, although discussion of corruption and economic problems remains possible.

In Krasnoyarsk Krai, public groups close comments entirely on certain sensitive topics. In others, according to the author's observation, stop words are applied to direct mentions of the top leadership, the war, mobilization and protests. In Kaliningrad Oblast, reports of military activity, air defense, explosions, flights and movements of equipment are moderated especially strictly.

In Bashkortostan, Rostov Oblast, Temporarily Occupied Crimea and a number of other regions, the practice of deliberately distorting words, replacing letters with digits, and using dots and euphemisms persists. In Rostov Oblast, information about the consequences of Unmanned Aerial Vehicle attacks is especially sensitive. Direct criticism and calls to end the "Special Military Operation" are often deleted in these regions.

Regions with more open discussion

At the same time, there are regions where direct statements get through much more often. In Saratov Oblast there is no noticeable censorship, including of harsh criticism of Putin. In Samara Oblast, open mockery of the authorities and "United Russia" is allowed, but harsh calls to action, revolution or aggressive comments are deleted more often.

In Omsk, Kemerovo, Pskov and Volgograd Oblasts, the situation depends largely on the specific public group. In some communities, open criticism of the authorities and the war is allowed, and sometimes even administrators join the discussions. In pro-government public groups, critical comments are deleted much more often and users are blocked.

In Novosibirsk Oblast, harsh personal criticism of Putin and the local authorities occurs. At the same time, direct condemnation of the war is rare. More often, a cautious wish to end the war is expressed, or its economic consequences are discussed.

The impact of immediate problems on the tone of discussion

Observations show that in some regions, the aggravation of everyday and security problems is accompanied by more open statements.

In Perm Krai, before the attacks began, the military topic practically did not get through. Against the background of long queues for petrol and regular attacks, users began to speak more openly about the authorities and the wish for the "dvizhukha" to end, although real users still often limit themselves to phrases like "it's scary" or "I want peace".

The behavior is similar in Tatarstan, where after regular attacks and casualties there has been more open negativity toward the authorities and more questions about ending the war.

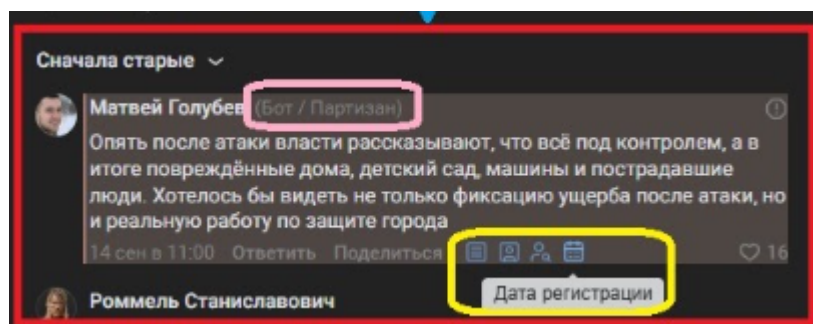
In Altai Krai, dissatisfaction with the war is often shifted into the economic plane. Instead of direct criticism, people discuss the cost of fuel, the state of hospitals and roads, and the allocation of budget funds. Questions about the expediency of the war are also disguised as ironic questions about its results and the need to "endure a bit longer".

Low activity

The absence of criticism does not mean a positive attitude. In Vladimir Oblast, political and military topics are practically not discussed at all, despite comments being open. In Irkutsk Oblast, posts about the war, volunteering and the fallen also hardly provoke any discussion. In Dagestan activity is low, and the topic of the "Special Military Operation" has effectively disappeared from discussions.

Mechanisms for restricting discussion

- Manual deletion by administrators, automatic stop words, closing comments under certain topics, adding users to blacklists and blocking accounts.
- Public group admins post the most sensitive news late in the evening or on weekends.
- Recently, news views have dropped from tens of thousands to a few thousand, sometimes even to zero. This may be a consequence of mobile internet shutdowns.
- Kremlin bots get in first under a sensitive news item and leave comments consisting of just emojis, which pushes down the other, meaningful comments in the feed.
- Public group admins' use of organized bot groups and the Botnadzor extension, which highlights accounts it identifies as bots, in order to mass-report such accounts.



Conclusions

Statements about the war, Putin, the military, elections and ending the "Special Military Operation" are the most self-censored. Because of this, a significant part of critical communication shifts into sarcasm, euphemisms, deliberate misspellings, hints and discussion of the economic consequences.

At the same time, the level of openness is not a stable characteristic of a given region. It often depends on the specific public group, the topic and the current situation. In some regions, Unmanned Aerial Vehicle attacks, fuel shortages or other tangible consequences are accompanied by more open discontent. In others, political and military topics are effectively not discussed at all.

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

Top discussions on Telegram and VKontakte

1. Unmanned Aerial Vehicle attacks and air raid alerts

Drone attacks became the most discussed topic of the week and the only one that appeared in the public groups of all 86 regions. Rostov went through several consecutive nights of attacks. In Tatarstan, warnings about the danger were issued over loudspeakers, and airports suspended operations. Tolyatti and Perm also came under strikes.

There is no single reaction to these events. Comments criticizing the authorities, expressing sympathy for the victims, voicing fatigue and trying to figure out how to keep themselves and their loved ones safe gather equal support. The most notable feature of these discussions is the target of the discontent. The grievances are directed primarily at the federal authorities and at Putin personally. For regional public groups, where responsibility for problems is usually placed on governors and local officials, this is a significant difference. People ask where the promised protection is and bring up "the bunker" and "the main tsar". Discontent is often expressed through sarcasm, for example by "thanking" for the peaceful sky.

Tatarstan

"Thanks to our government, the whole calendar will soon be in mourning." — September 13 at 21:19, ♥43

The discussion of the attacks is intertwined with other events of the week. Commenters joke that life will improve right after the vote, bring up the unresolved fuel problems and are outraged by fireworks amid a possible air threat.

Perm (a longread by a Perm resident)

"The picture in the post is, of course, wonderful: 'no casualties', '36 shot down', 'we will not be broken' and cheerful little hearts on the posters. Only behind this window dressing the authorities are diligently hushing up the main question: who is actually to blame for heavy combat drones flying for hours in broad daylight over Perm Krai, one and a half thousand kilometers from the border? Why, in an industrial region of a million people in the Urals, did air raid sirens wail for eight hours, children in schools and universities were hidden in corners, Bolshoye Savino airport was paralyzed, and drivers are panic-searching for petrol in secret chats? Since when has permanent life in the deep rear under the threat of strikes and disruptions become a 'norm' for us that officials invite us to be proud of?

And yet before February 2022, not a single resident of Perm had even in their worst nightmare heard sirens overhead or seen a closed sky over the Kama region. And what is

happening now became possible for exactly one reason: the Kremlin dictator unleashed a criminal war of conquest against a neighboring sovereign country. And to cover up this failed adventurism and hold the front at any cost, incompetent generals stripped the air defense of our entire huge country! Air defense systems and radars that were built with our taxes to protect our cities, industries and strategic plants were massively herded off to the occupied territories. There, more than one and a half thousand units of our air defense were methodically burned and turned into scrap metal, leaving the sky over Russian cities and Ural enterprises absolutely full of holes and defenseless. The culprit of this nightmare is one person — the deranged Kremlin maniac who has been sitting in power for a quarter of a century and, to hold on to his personal throne, pushed the country into a senseless catastrophe. No cheerful little posters from officials will bring safety back to our homes or stop the strikes while this slaughter continues. Ukraine is waging a just war for its home and is hitting back like a boomerang at the aggressor's military and fuel facilities, while ordinary people are made to pay for the Kremlin's adventures with anxiety, devastation, closed filling stations and fear for their children. And all this hell in Perm and other regions is happening solely for the sake of the sick ambitions of the Kremlin gang and for the sake of seizing someone else's land, which ordinary Russians don't need one bit 🙄" — September 11 at 13:52, ♥112

The fuel crisis and queues at filling stations

The petrol shortage became the second-largest topic of the week. During the week, channels reported the shutdown of the Kirishi oil refinery and strikes on oil refineries in Tatarstan, Perm Krai, Saratov and Slavyansk-on-Kuban. People discussed queues forming at filling stations, prices that in places exceeded one hundred rubles per liter, and the introduction of restrictions on fuel sales in some regions.

The most support went to the discussion of how to distribute the petrol that is in short supply. People tried to establish who has the right to fill up without queuing, how much can be dispensed per person, and whether it is fair to fill canisters while others wait. The greatest irritation is caused by those who, in others' view, take more than their share. Some defend the right to stock up on fuel, others demand equal restrictions for everyone. There is a separate argument over whether people entitled to benefits should be able to fill up without queuing. In these discussions, commenters direct their grievances mainly at each other.

Perm

"I stood in the queue, they give 40 liters, pour it in your pocket or in a canister, what difference does it make to anyone where I pour my 40 liters after standing in the queue."
— September 11 at 14:24, ♥79

Commenters also mention Putin and the governors, hold them responsible for the shortage and suggest putting officials on minibuses so they feel the consequences of the crisis for themselves. They assume that before the vote the authorities will try to temporarily stabilize the situation, and after it the problems will return or get worse.

Yekaterinburg

"Well, this is a temporary phenomenon (window dressing)" — September 13 at 8:52, ♥175

Some commenters believe that the petrol shortage was created deliberately to raise prices. Here the grievances are addressed to private filling stations, where a liter costs more than one hundred rubles. A very small share of commenters link the fuel shortage to attacks on oil refineries and fear new strikes.

Nizhny Novgorod

*"The petrol and the volunteers have left for the next region, following Putin 😊.
It's amazing how, the day before his visit, petrol appeared at ALL the filling stations,
even where there had been none for months, so that the tsar wouldn't see the queues." —
September 8 at 21:19, ♥90*

The question of the authorities' responsibility remains noticeable, but conflicts over access to fuel get the most response. For a person in the queue, the immediate cause of outrage is often another driver with canisters or with the right to fill up earlier.

The pre-election week

Ahead of the State Duma vote, the main news hooks were the removal from the election of Communist Party of the Russian Federation deputy Nikolai Bondarenko and the forecast by the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center, which promised "United Russia" more than 50% of the vote.

In the discussions cited, distrust and irritation are far more noticeable than interest in the candidates' programs. Commenters doubt that they can influence the result, see no acceptable choice and judge the authorities through everyday problems such as queues at filling stations and broken roads.

Comments saying that the percentages have long been "drawn" and that the vote will change nothing get the most support. In such remarks, the All-Russian Public Opinion Research Center forecast is perceived as a ready-made plan for the election commissions.

Part of the criticism concerns the entire list of deputies, regardless of party affiliation. Commenters believe that people go into power to enrich themselves, and suggest that deputies try living on the subsistence minimum they themselves set. Behind the harsh statements lies the notion of officials detached from the lives of ordinary people. Unwillingness to vote for "United Russia" has the widest regional spread. People call for supporting anyone but the party of power. At the same time, new party projects also arouse suspicion, because people see in them a familiar political force under a different name. There is a widespread feeling that there is no one to choose from.

Tolyatti

"And yet we vote for the United Russia lot, how clever of us" — September 12 at 8:31, ♥82

↳ *"Yekaterina, that's exactly the point, people sit it out and don't vote. But you have to go. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation is the only alternative." — September 12 at 8:45, ♥71*

↳ *"Yekaterina, all parties are on a leash, just not the Government's leash. Both the Government and the State Duma are on the leash of the Presidential Administration. Everything is decided there, so it makes no difference which party's members are warming their backsides in the State Duma 🙌" — September 12 at 8:49, ♥67*

Under election news, commenters often return to what worries them every day. That is the fuel shortage, queues at filling stations, potholes on the roads and neglected courtyards. They demand that candidates first solve these problems and only then ask for support.

People discuss pressure on employees of public-sector institutions, in particular schools and kindergartens, who, according to commenters, are forced to work on election commissions or go and vote. At the same time, part of the discontent is directed at the teachers themselves. They are reproached for their submissiveness and for complying with demands that the participants in the discussion consider illegal.

The start of the heating season

The start of the heating season was discussed in most regions. It was this topic that gave individual comments the most likes of the entire week. Almost half of all the support was gathered by a single demand — to turn on the heating, because it is already cold at home, apartments are damp, nights are cold, and laundry does not dry for weeks. The greatest response went to arguments with "neighbors" who believe it is still too early to start the heating season.

The audience is irritated by the feeling that they have to beg for heat, even though they pay for it. Some recall Soviet times when, in their words, the heating was turned on according to a schedule. Others compare their region's situation with Moscow or are outraged by the writing off of debts to other states.

Even where the radiators have already warmed up, there is no shortage of reasons for discontent. The conversation turns to the lack of hot water, damaged networks, dug-up streets and the cost of services. Some commenters link the connection of the heating to the approaching vote. They ironically thank "United Russia" and perceive the start-up dates as an attempt to win over voters.

Rising prices and tariffs

Rising prices for food, services and utility bills are discussed alongside the start of the heating season, often under the same posts. People compare prices, count their expenses and ask how to cover them with current salaries and pensions. Specific examples of price rises, complaints about incomes lagging behind and distrust of official inflation figures get the most reactions. Rising prices become a reason for discontent with the authorities. The word "stability" is used sarcastically, because, in the view of these commenters, the only

thing that remains unchanged is the constant deterioration of their financial situation. There are expectations of price rises after the elections. Some commenters assume that prices are being held down until the vote so as not to intensify discontent. Much less often are the causes of rising prices sought in sanctions or financial aid to other countries. In particular, Abkhazia and Tajikistan are mentioned, contrasting these expenditures with unmet needs inside the country.

The basis of these discussions is the personal budget. Commenters assess the economic situation by how much they leave at the store, what amount they see on the utility bill and what they can afford after mandatory expenses. It is precisely the gap between this experience and official reports that fuels distrust.

Denial of a new mobilization

The occasion for discussion was Medvedev's statement on 11 September denying plans for a new mobilization. Regional channels spread the statement with the clarification that this is already the fourth such denial. It was this very repetition that became a separate reason for distrust.

In the comments, the statement is by now assessed in a formulaic way, primarily through the experience of the authorities' previous decisions. The most support again goes to reminders of the promises not to raise the retirement age and the assurances that preceded the 2022 mobilization. People say they no longer trust any official assurances and explain this by the reputation the authorities have created through their own actions.

Altai Krai

*"Meanwhile VKontakte is already showing ads that mobilization is about to happen)" —
September 10 at 16:59, ♥8*

At the same time, the opposite position is also noticeable, where the audience believes the official explanations and considers the rumors a hostile information campaign. Supporters of the authorities claim that there is no need for mobilization, since there are enough volunteers and Russian troops are advancing. They attribute the spread of rumors to Ukraine and urge people not to trust them.

Bashkortostan

*"Dmitry, of course, as usual hits the nail on the head))
and anyway, what mobilization are we even talking about? there are plenty of contract
soldiers - they're signing up for the Special Military Operation at 30k a month" —
September 10 at 13:20, ♥12*

Part of the discussion focuses on Medvedev himself. Instead of the substance of the statement, people discuss his appearance, joke about hangovers and express contempt. There are also calls to mobilize the sons of deputies, officials and Medvedev himself. In places the argument becomes personal, with participants reproaching each other for not having sent their own children to the war.

The audience analyzes the words "not planned as of today" quite carefully and notes that they contain no promise for the future. Some suggest that a new call-up may be called a "rotation" or "reserve recruitment".

Perm

"And what exactly did they deny?

They said it is not planned as of today, they said nothing about tomorrow and the days after.

Yes, and who believes them? Pupkin promised not to raise the retirement age, promised a minimum wage of 1,000 dollars, they promised us a lot of things..." — September 11 at

22:52, ♥69

City days and fireworks

City day celebrations in more than 20 regions took place amid drone attacks and queues for petrol. This affected the discussion too. Grievances over spending on fireworks and concerts gathered the most support. People asked why money is found for celebrations while everyday problems remain unresolved. Some see the celebrations primarily as a way to "absorb" the budget. They suggested spending the money on the city's needs, for example repairing roads and heating networks, improving courtyards and bus stops, and upgrading clinics.

Supporters of the celebrations stress that everyone needs joy and a breather even in hard times. They oppose constantly linking city events with the war and recall that even in the past, during wars, people found reasons to celebrate.

Opponents of the celebrations discussed the inappropriateness of fireworks during the war and air raid alerts. They are troubled by the very sound of fireworks in cities where people have already become used to fearing explosions. Others say they find it hard to accept fireworks because of the deaths of soldiers.

Voronezh

"People, what holiday. there's a war in the country, what festivities, guys are dying, this is a feast during the plague, horror, horror, horror" — September 13 at 14:12, ♥9

A small share of participants link the concerts and fireworks to the approaching vote. They perceive them as an attempt by the authorities to win over voters.

Methodology

What this project is. Systematic monitoring of sentiment in Russian regions — with a focus on critical and negative posts as an indicator of what irritates, frightens or outrages people. The conclusions rest on two parallel sources from monitoring regional VKontakte groups and Telegram.

VKontakte and Telegram. Automated data collection in regional Russian communities on VKontakte (536 groups) and Telegram (428 channels) — regional news channels, local public groups, oblast media, local "chat bots" with audiences ranging from several thousand to hundreds of thousands of subscribers. Coverage — all Russian regions and the occupied territories of Ukraine. Observations by regional analysts were additionally used.

Quotes in the report text are given verbatim.