

"Kursk Operation" in social networks: reactions, trends and counteraction of Russian propaganda

Comprehensive media analysis using artificial intelligence*



**For the period from August 6 to 24, 2024*

Introduction



This report is based on a comprehensive sentiment analysis of the residents of the Kursk region at the onset and during the first weeks of the Ukrainian "Kursk operation" on the territory of the Russian Federation. This period is the most significant because it marks the transition of the hostilities to the Kursk region, translating into the beginning of a new reality for the local inhabitants trying to realize this and how Russian propaganda was actively reacting to these events.

The purpose of this study is to reflect the main trends in Russians' reactions to the "Kursk operation," the actions of the Russian authorities in response to the invasion, and the critical aspects of propaganda aimed at influencing Russian public opinion in connection with these events.

Identifying and tracking the reaction patterns of the residents of the Kursk region, as well as analysing the responses of the Russian authorities during this military operation, provides important insights within the context of the Russian army's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This analysis includes critical aspects of the information warfare Russia is waging against Ukrainian citizens and highlights their vulnerabilities.

The scale of public reaction to published reports and their qualitative analysis during the initial period of the "Kursk operation" shows the extensive efforts of Russian propaganda to downplay the significance of these events for Russian society. The Kremlin has made concerted efforts to push the facts of the invasion out of public discussion. However, this does not imply the complete displacement of these topics from private discussions. This study covers the media landscape and records the reactions of Russians to events in the Kursk region during August 2024.

Resume

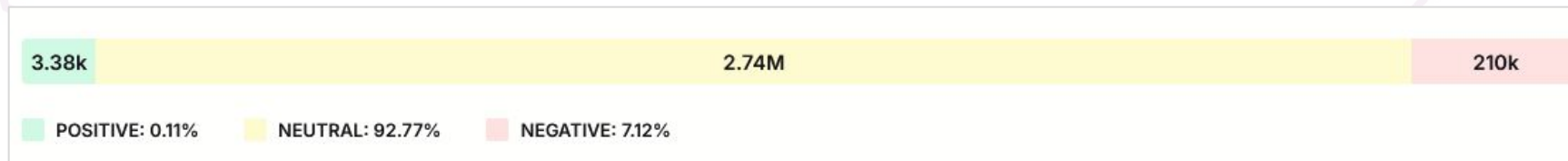


Figure 1 illustrates the peak of Russians' reactions to the events in the Kursk region on August 8 (with more than 600,000 mentions). However, the volume of reactions decreased to almost 80,000 by August 14 and 18,000 as of August 24. Additionally, as shown in Figure 2, more than 92% of the reactions were neutral, while only 7% were negative.

Figure 1. The dynamic of views of Telegram messages related to the Kursk operation from August 6 to 24, 2024.



Figure 2. Reactions to messages related to the Kursk operation from August 6 to 24, 2024.



Resume



Based on the analysis of posts from the Kursk region during the Ukrainian "Kursk operation" (August 6–24, 2024), the information space revealed a trend of panic among residents of front-line cities and nearby areas.

A wave of dissatisfaction quickly spread among Russians due to the surprise effect of the Ukrainian attack. This frustration was compounded by the absence of official statements from the Russian leadership and the rapid flood of user-generated photos and posts, which showcased the swift advance of Ukrainian forces deep into Russian territory.

Additionally, a qualitative analysis of messages from Kursk region residents highlighted differing perceptions within Russian society. Ignoring official publications, including those from authorities and propaganda media, social network users (primarily Telegram communities) were divided into two groups: those in the conflict zone who expressed sharp criticism of local authorities and those in other regions who passively observed events through their smartphone screens.

Resume



As the operation progressed and more propaganda materials were introduced, the initial panic among Kursk region residents began to shift. Criticism of the authorities gave way to support for the Russian Armed Forces and the incitement of international hostility. However, direct witnesses of the armed conflict, particularly residents of captured settlements like Sudzha, continued to post photos and videos from the combat zone. The Kremlin responded to this by implementing strict censorship, systematically removing such content from Telegram communities.

It is worth noting that specific episodes during the operation had a significant impact on the context of these publications, such as numerous cases of Russian troops surrendering, including large numbers of conscripted soldiers. These events caused widespread shock across the Russian Federation's information space. The strong public reaction pressured the Kremlin to organize an unprecedented prisoner exchange before Ukraine's Independence Day, swiftly freeing some of its conscripted soldiers.

Publications about the mass surrender of Russian conscripts and Russian losses in this theatre were closely monitored by Kremlin control bodies and subjected to harsh criticism, as indicated by numerous surrogate accounts (bots) later deleted.

Research Methodology



The study's findings on the sentiment of Kursk region residents at the beginning of the Ukrainian military operation are based on a media analysis using artificial intelligence, including posts and comments from social network users between August 6 and 24, 2024. Additionally, publications by individual servicemen of the Russian Armed Forces, whose data were verified through OSINT tools, were also analysed.

Keywords and phrases related to the above-mentioned events and associated topics and publications were monitored to define the context of these developments across popular Telegram communities, including:

Regional		Nationwide		Military blogs	
Source	Audience	Source	Audience	Source	Audience
<u>VOBLYA • Курск</u>	1.5M	<u>Рыбарь</u>	1.3M	<u>Операция Z: Военкоры Русской Весны</u>	1.6M
<u>Иван Утенков КУРСК</u>	400k	<u>Телеканал Дождь</u>	475k	<u>Два майора</u>	1.08M
<u>КУРСКИЙ БОМОНДЪ</u>	250k	<u>ZERGULIO</u>	380k	<u>WarGonzo</u>	1.04M
<u>Суджа Родная</u>	90k	<u>Белорусский силовик</u>	346k	<u>Сладков+</u>	918k
<u>Суджа в Telegram</u>	32k	<u>КАШИН</u>	70k	<u>Спецоперация Z</u>	480k
<u>Теткино. Комментарии</u>	3k	<u>Логика Маркова</u>	70k	<u>Русская Весна Z : спецоперация на Украине и Донбассе</u>	186k

Research Findings

The research identified the following topics as critical triggers of public discontent, which were subject to censorship and blocking:

- ❖ Concealment and misinformation regarding the current situation at the border
- ❖ Evacuation difficulties
- ❖ Problems with compensation payments to IDPs
- ❖ Issues with Internet and cellular access
- ❖ Bombing of Kursk region settlements by the Russian Armed Forces
- ❖ Fakes concerning war crimes committed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces
- ❖ Posts by Russian military bloggers and soldiers
- ❖ Obscuring defence failures and exaggerating Russian military achievements





>>> Below is a more detailed description of these topics, along with relevant comments.

Concealment and Misinformation regarding the Current Situation at the Border

In the initial hours of the Kursk operation, regional and central authorities attempted to conceal the true situation at the Kursk region border, creating an information vacuum that was soon filled with disinformation. As a result, local residents and military bloggers became the primary sources of news from the scene.

Statistics on publications concerning the situation in the Kursk region at the start of the operation show that more than a third of the 159 sources - including 16 Kremlin-affiliated media outlets, 31 confirmed disinformation sources, and 19 propaganda channels - were utilized by the Russian Federation's military-political leadership to spread false information.

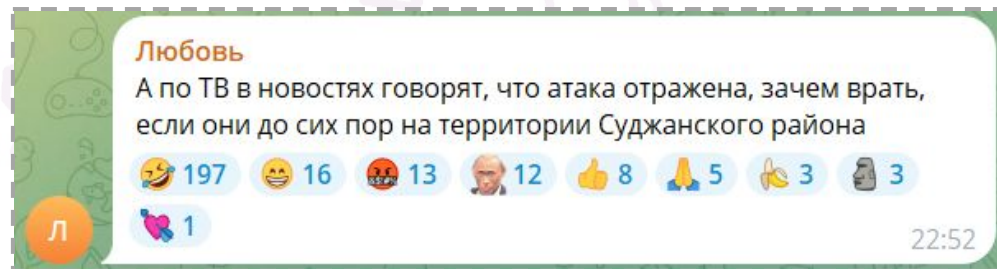
Figure 3. Publications about the border situation in the Kursk region from August 6 to 24, 2024.

 ACTORS 159	 PUBLICATIONS 240	 VIEWS 12.2M	 REACTIONS 72k
INAUTHENTIC 8	STATE-AFFILIATED 16	DISINFO SPREADERS 31	INFLUENCE OPERATIONS 19

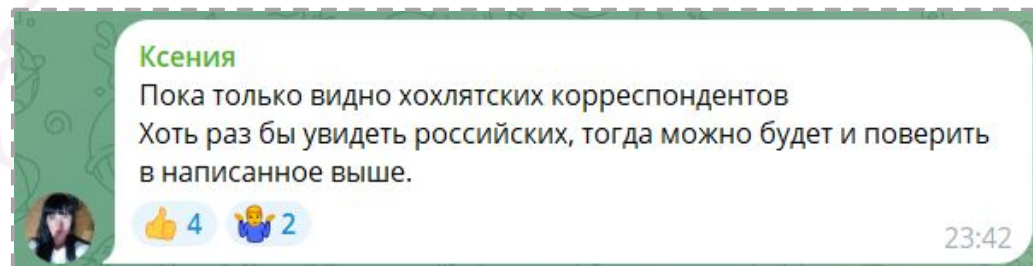
Concealment and Misinformation regarding the Current Situation at the Border

The Russian leadership actively uses methods of propaganda and disinformation to shape public opinion. Regarding the Kursk region invasion, all possible media tools were used to maintain the status quo and create the illusion of proper control over the situation in the area.

A typical reaction of Telegram readers to concealment and misinformation about the situation at the border in the Kursk region:



And on TV, they say that the attack was repelled, why lie if they are still in the Sudzha district

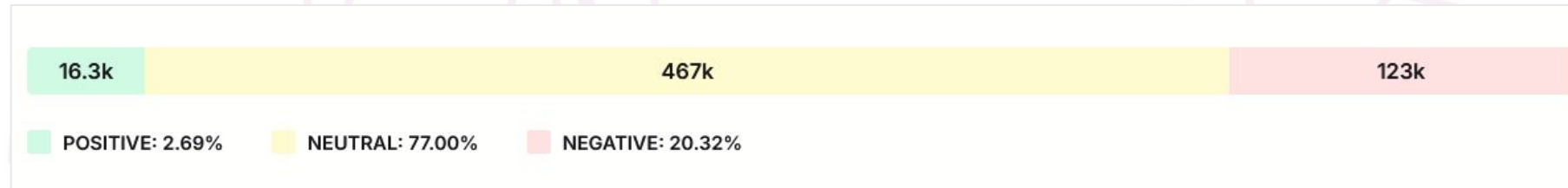


So far, only Ukrainian correspondents are visible, if only I could see Russian ones at least once, then I could believe in the above

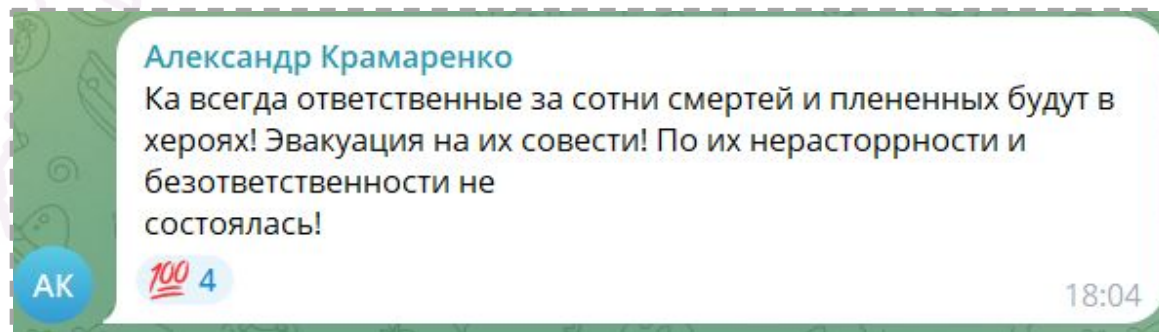
Evacuation Difficulties

One of the main complaints from Kursk region residents was the lack of organized evacuation measures for the civilian population and the inadequate response from local authorities. Between August 6 and 24, more than 600,000 reactions were recorded, with 20% expressing a negative view of the evacuation efforts and less than 3% showing a positive response.

Figure 4. Reactions to posts about evacuation from the war zone in the Kursk region from August 6 to 24, 2024.



A typical reaction of Telegram readers to inadequate evacuation:











As always, those who are responsible for hundreds of deaths and prisoners will become "heroes". Evacuation is their responsibility. Due to sluggishness and irresponsibility, it did not happen.

Evacuation Difficulties

According to official Russian data, the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) exceeds 180,000. Since the beginning of the operation, the topic of evacuation has been actively exploited by pro-Kremlin media, often to spread disinformation and propaganda narratives.

Statistics indicate that out of nearly 4,000 sources providing information during this period on the evacuation from the Kursk region, over 600 were compromised communication channels (including communities, groups, and users) that systematically disseminated Kremlin propaganda and fake news.

Figure 5. The use of propaganda and disinformation in the context of the evacuation in the Kursk region from August 6 to 24, 2024.

COMPROMISED ACTORS		VIEW DETAILS	
Total actors	Split by type	Top compromised actors	
643	Disinformation 312 Influence operations 326 Sanctions 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">  Топор Live  РИА Новости   Mash   Мир сегодня с "Юрий Подоляка"  Readovka  	Influence operations Disinformation Disinformation Disinformation Disinformation
Total audience: 83.2M			

Evacuation Difficulties

The number of bots involved in this information campaign exceeded 800. These bots were used to promote pro-Kremlin narratives, with their behaviour clearly indicating their inauthenticity.

Figure 6. Statistics on surrogate communication channels (bots) in the context of the evacuation in the Kursk region from August 6 to 24, 2024.

INAUTHENTIC ACCOUNTS		VIEW DETAILS	
Total actors	Split by type	Top inauthentic accounts	
804	Immature accounts 22	FIB - федеральное информаци...	Inauthentic behavior
Total audience: 3.8k	Inauthentic behavior 782	Враги народа	Inauthentic behavior
		СЛОН RU	Inauthentic behavior
		Московский компромат	Inauthentic behavior
		Чиновник РУ	Inauthentic behavior

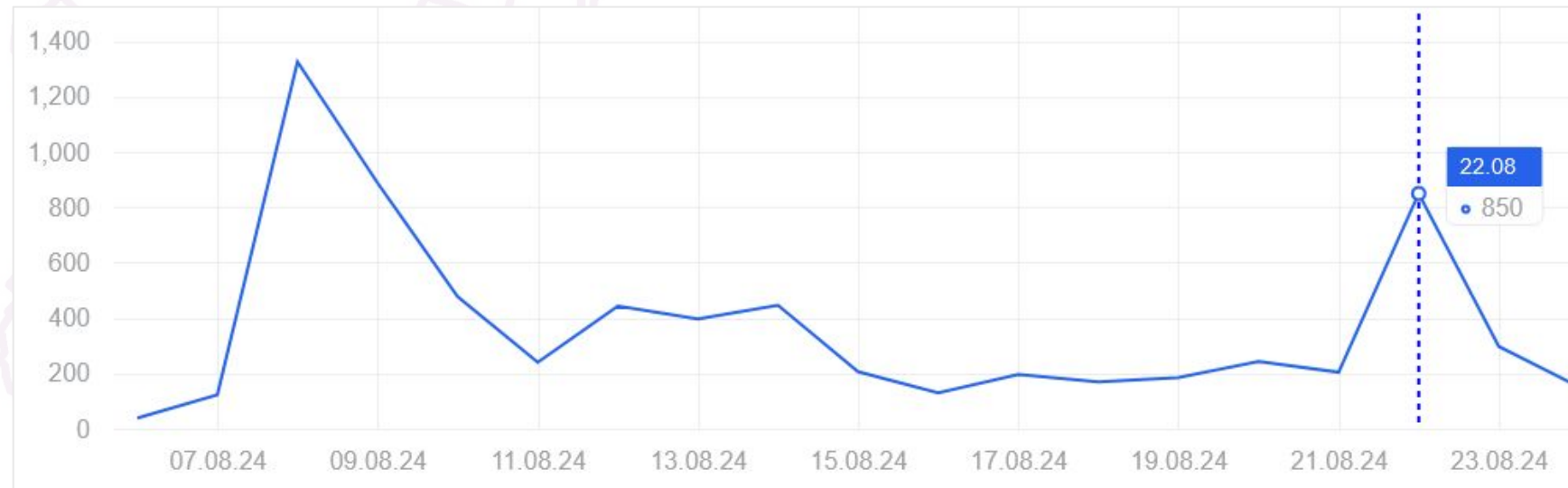
These sources are primarily used to automatically disseminate pro-government media messages and propaganda.

Problems with Compensation Payments to IDPs

In response to the growing number of internally displaced persons (IDPs), Vladimir Putin made a personal promise to provide compensation, initially set at 10,000 rubles. However, implementing this promise proved difficult. Residents of Sudzha submitted numerous repayment requests, many of which were rejected, as reflected in multiple posts.

After the first few days of the Kursk operation, the issue of IDP compensation resurfaced in the information space on August 22, 2024. On this day, Vladimir Putin held a meeting regarding the border region situation and announced the automatic reimbursement for IDPs in the Kursk region.

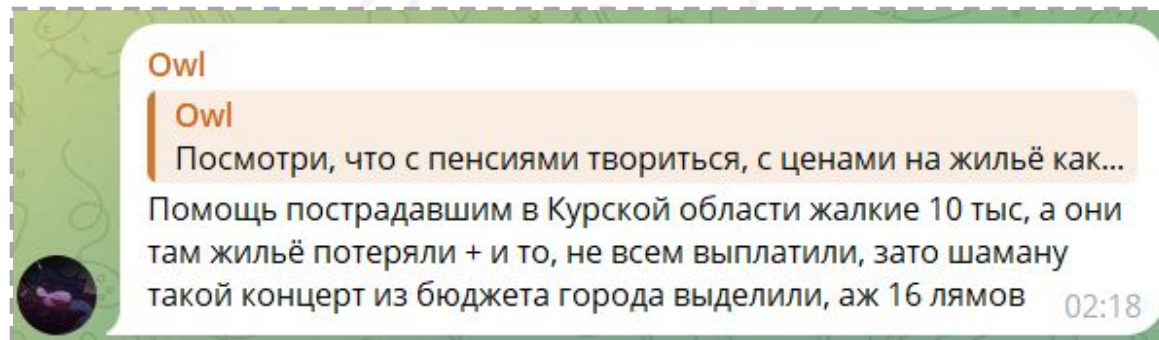
Figure 7. Messages across Telegram communities about payments to IDPs from August 6 to 24, 2024.



Problems with Compensation Payments to IDPs

The material compensation for forcibly displaced residents of the Kursk region, whose numbers approach 200,000, has become a cornerstone of the Kremlin's social policy. In addition to the burden on the state budget, it also creates a negative impact on the personal image of President Putin.

A typical reaction of Telegram readers to the poor organization of IDP payments:



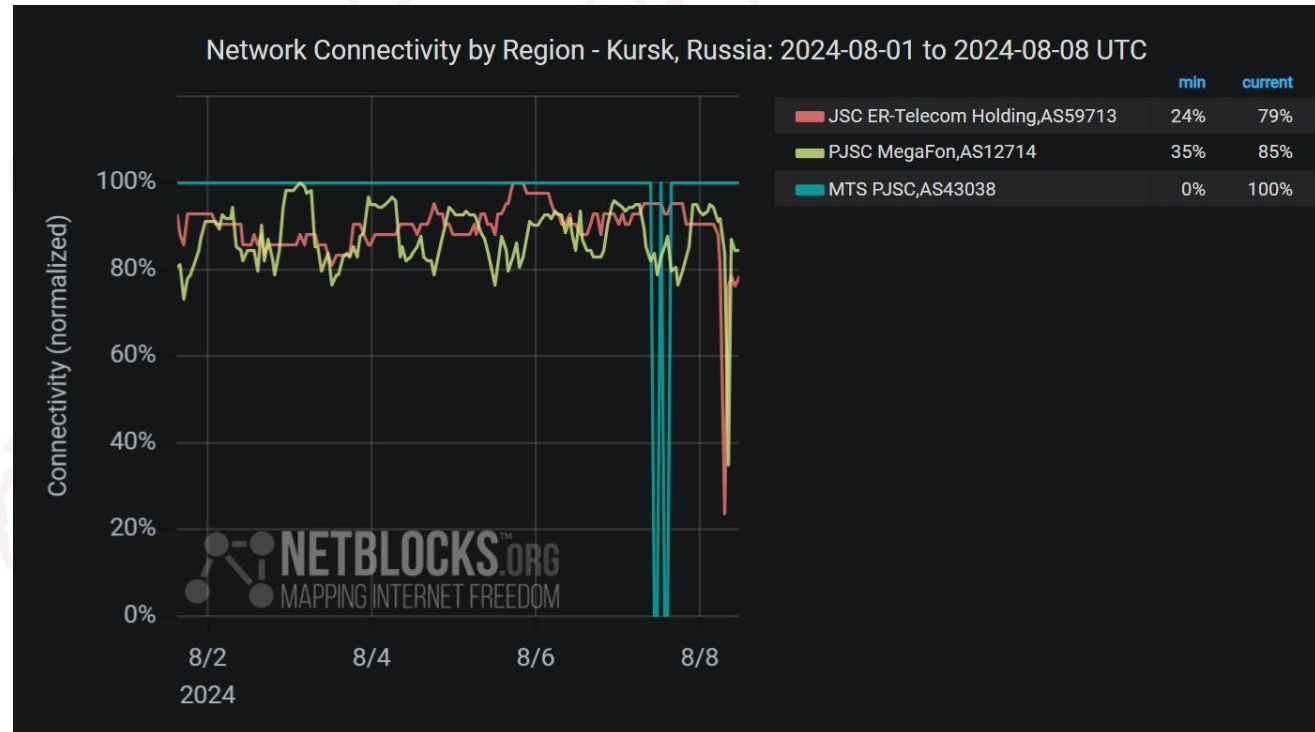
Look what happens to pensions and commodity prices...

Aid to the victims is a measly 10 thousand, and they lost a lot of money there, and they didn't even pay everyone... but they spent 16 million from the budget on the shaman's concert

Problems with Internet and Cellular Access

From the onset of the "Kursk operation," residents consistently reported poor or completely absent cellular services and Internet access. These outages were likely caused by deliberate interference from the Russian military, creating artificial barriers. This was part of a broader information campaign designed to maintain uncertainty and secrecy surrounding the invasion, targeting both local residents and other network users.

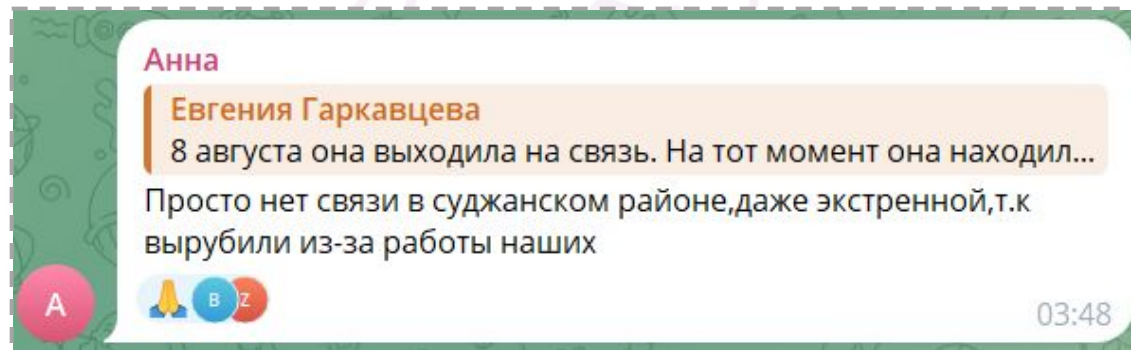
Figure 8. Internet connection and cellular service issues among major Russian providers in the Kursk region, August 2024 (source: netblocks.org).



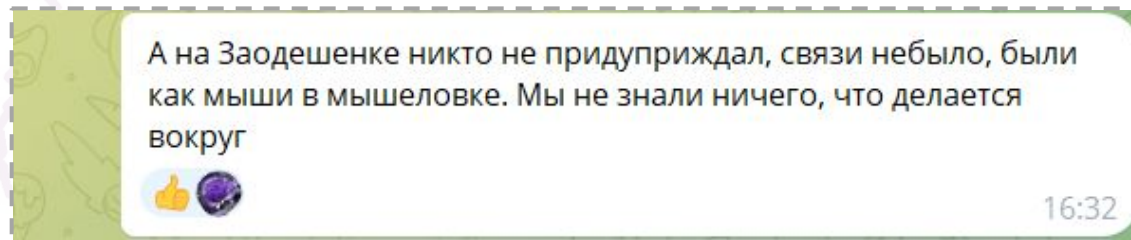
Problems with Internet and Cellular Access

The population isolation in the combat zone and the creation of an information vacuum are practical tools of information warfare, which the Kremlin has been testing since the very beginning of the Russian invasion of Donbas in 2014, as well as in the city of Mariupol in 2022.

A typical reaction of Telegram readers to the lack of Internet connection and cellular services:



There is no cellular network in the Sudzha district, even the emergency one as it was cut off because of our troops operating there.

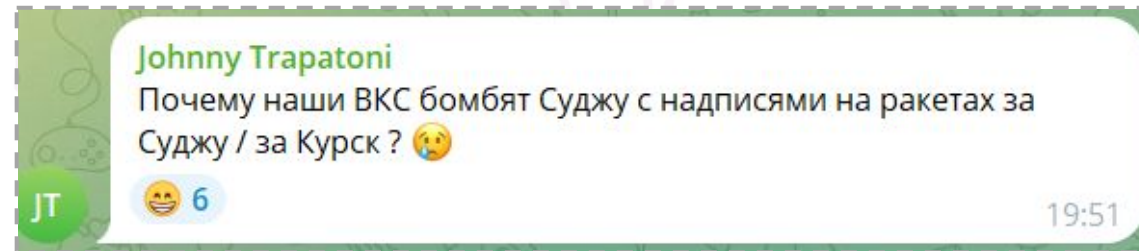


No one warned as there was no network, we stayed as mice in mousetrap... knowing nothing about what's happening around.

Bombing of Kursk Region Settlements by the Russian Armed Forces

In addition to the failures on the Kursk front, the Kremlin has also concealed the fact that the Russian Air Force and artillery have systematically and randomly shelled their own towns and villages. This is a highly undesirable issue for the Russian leadership, leading to the immediate deletion of such reports. As a result, the lack of available evidence makes it nearly impossible to collect and display accurate statistics.

A typical reaction of Telegram readers to the indiscriminate bombing in the Kursk region:



Why is our air force bombing Sudzha with signed rockets and bombs stating "For Kursk", "For Sudzha"?

Since the start of the invasion of Ukraine, the Russian army has consistently employed heavy firepower and aviation against civilians, indiscriminately shelling infrastructure and residential areas. These same methods have been used against their own population, with the Russian authorities typically denying responsibility and shifting the blame onto the actions of the Ukrainian Armed Forces.

Fakes concerning War Crimes committed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces

Fake news is one of the most frequently used tools in Russian propaganda, particularly about Ukraine's Armed Forces and military-political leadership. Through such disinformation, the Kremlin not only obscures the real situation on the battlefield but also seeks to discredit the Ukrainian Defence Forces and incite international hostility.

Figure 9 displays statistics on compromised Russian sources that systematically spread fake news about the Ukrainian Armed Forces during the initial stage of the Kursk operation. Over 344 million views were generated from just 2,000 disinformation messages during this period.

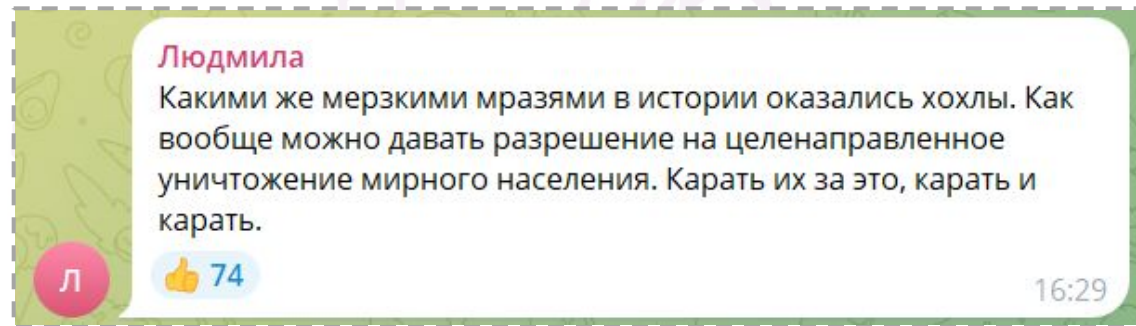
Figure 9. Compromised sources spreading disinformation about the Ukrainian Armed Forces in the Kursk region from August 6 to 24, 2024.

 ACTORS 642	 PUBLICATIONS 2.02k	 VIEWS 344M	 REACTIONS 6.45M
INAUTHENTIC 107	STATE-AFFILIATED 149	DISINFO SPREADERS 149	

Fakes concerning War Crimes committed by the Ukrainian Armed Forces

Russian propaganda frequently employs fake news to discredit the Armed Forces of Ukraine and incite international hostility. At the beginning of the Kursk operation, this became one of the main disinformation methods, along with censorship and bot use.

A typical reaction of Telegram readers to fake posts about the Ukrainian Armed Forces during the "Kursk operation":



*What disgusting bastards hohols appear to be in... history.
How can they sanction the aimed elimination of civil people?
They should be punished...*

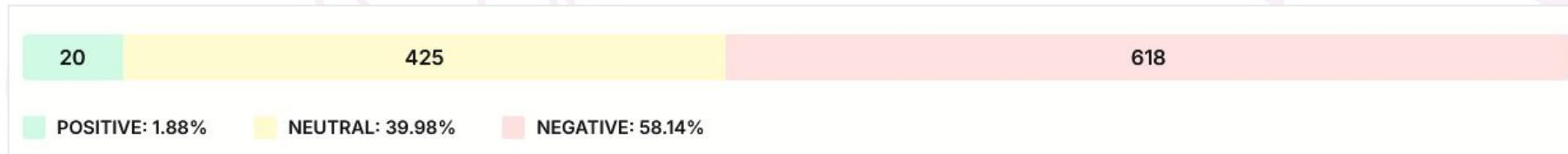
Posts by Russian Military Bloggers and Soldiers



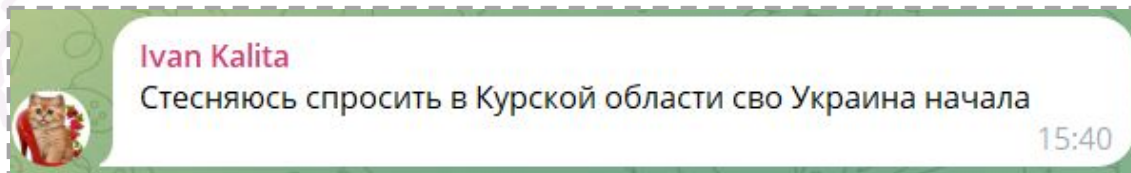
The Russian military has split into two broad groups: critics of the political leadership, who openly expressed dissatisfaction with the command's indecisive actions, and loyalists who remained steadfast in their support.

During the initial stage of the so-called "SMO" and the "Kursk operation," most military-related news carried a negative tone. Russian military bloggers criticized both the command and political leadership for the lack of a clear action plan and the failure to defend the Kursk region, resulting in significant territorial and personnel losses.

Figure 10. Message sentiment across military blogs and groups mentioning the "Kursk Operation" and "SMO" from August 6 to 24, 2024.



A typical reaction of Telegram readers (military blogs) to the incompetence of the Russian leadership in connection with the operation of the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the Kursk region:



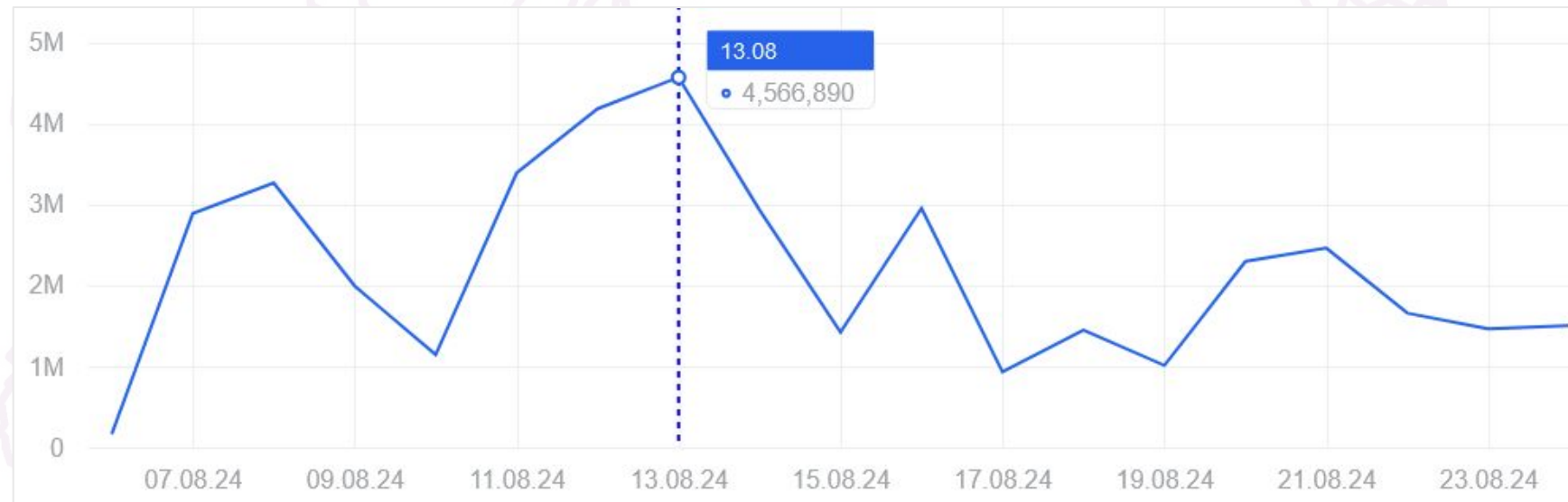
Shy to ask, does Ukraine start "SMO" in Kursk?

Posts by Russian Military Bloggers and Soldiers



The following figure shows the peak of message views related to the "SMO" and the Kursk region across Russian military blogs, occurring on August 12 and 13, 2024. This spike may be attributed either to the anniversary of the sinking of the nuclear submarine Kursk in 2000 or to developments in the defence operation, which had reached a critical point a week after the invasion began. During this period, there was a persistent spread of fake reports about the successes of Russian units in this theatre, including Chechen forces.

Figure 11. The number of message views about "SMO" and the Kursk region across Russian military channels from August 6 to 24, 2024.



Given the significant losses among Russian troops, the command's incompetence, and the failure of the defence in the Kursk region, increasing numbers of "SMO" members have turned to military blogs as platforms to criticize both the Kremlin and their commanders.

Obscuring Defence Failures and Exaggerating Russian Military Achievements

The inability of the Russian Armed Forces to prevent the border breakthrough in the Kursk region pushed the Kremlin to employ reality-distorting methods, promoting wishful thinking as fact. Propaganda actively spreads myths about the invincibility of the Russian military while remaining silent on the significant territorial losses, combat casualties, and mass surrenders, including conscripted soldiers.

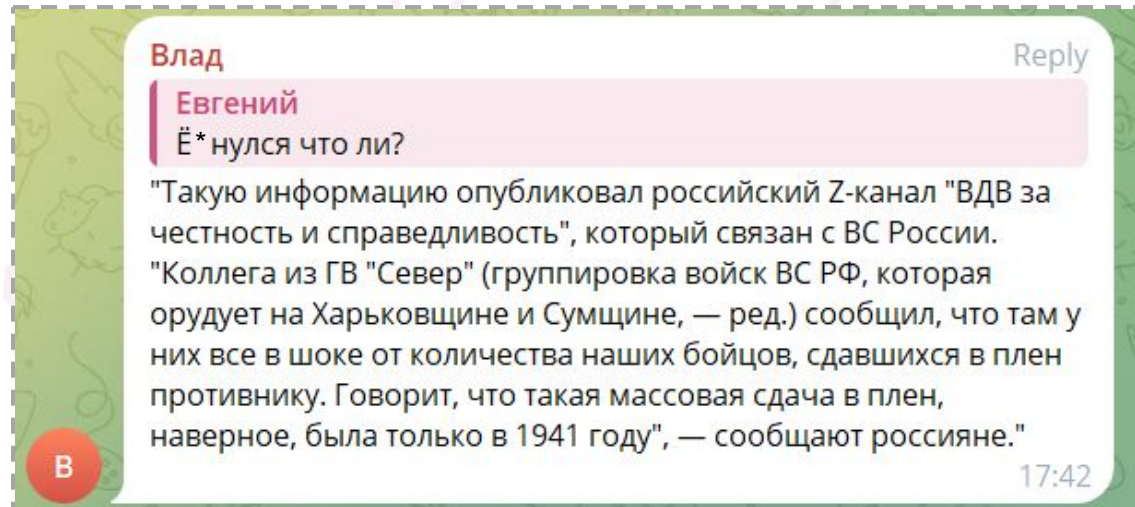
The graph below illustrates how discussions about conscripts became a central topic in Russian Telegram communities at the beginning of the operation and on August 15, when reports of a prisoner exchange initiated by the Russian authorities began circulating. This discussion peaked on August 24, when the actual exchange took place.

Figure 12. The number of posts on conscripts in the Kursk region from August 6 to 24, 2024.



Obscuring Defence Failures and Exaggerating Russian Military Achievements

A typical reaction of Telegram readers to a large number of war prisoners during the deployment of the Ukrainian Armed Forces operation in the Kursk region:

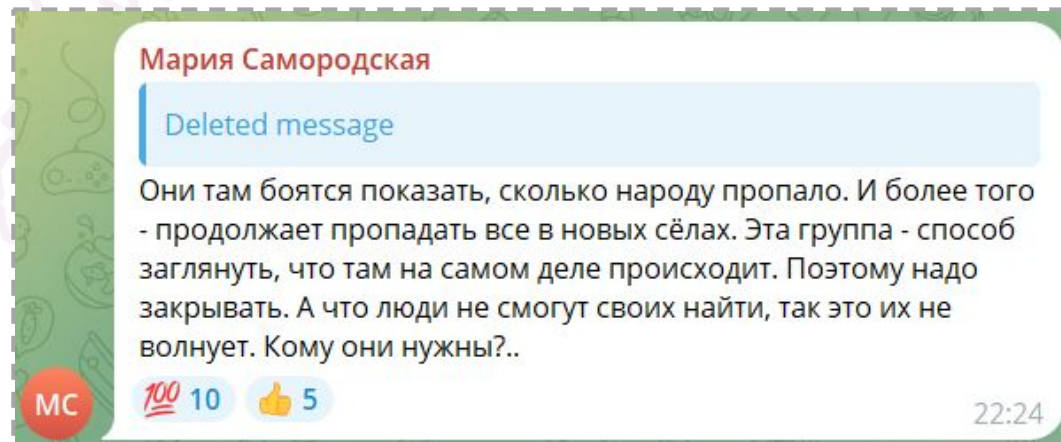


...our alias reported that they all were shocked by the amount of captured troops. They say that such a massive [russian] war prison capture occurred only in 1941...

Obscuring Defence Failures and Exaggerating Russian Military Achievements

In terms of both combat and civilian losses, the Russian leadership took extensive measures to prevent the dissemination of information about the dead and missing. For example, a group called "Sudzha - Search for People," which published the names and phone numbers of missing Russians, including military personnel in the Kursk region, was blocked on the VKontakte social network. Access to the group was restricted exclusively to Russian IP addresses.

The Kremlin actively exploits the Telegram platform and other similar resources while preventing the spread of undesirable posts and comments. Therefore, most such publications exist in the public space only until the first audit, after which they are immediately deleted. A typical reaction of Telegram readers to the Russian authorities' actions regarding attempts to find missing persons in the Kursk region:



They [government] are afraid to show how many people are missing. And what is more, keep missing. This group is the way to look into and understand what is actually happening there. That is why it was blocked. And no one cares that people cannot find their relatives.



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The Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia

Thank you for your attention!