



The Institute for Conflict Studies and Analysis of Russia

# What the Russians are talking about: the main trends of social networks for September 2024

**Comprehensive media analysis using artificial intelligence**

# Resume



In early September, the Kursk operation remained a highly discussed topic on Russian social media. This was largely due to the announced counteroffensive actions of the Russian Armed Forces and promises to quickly push the Ukrainian Armed Forces out of Russian territory. User engagement peaked on September 11, with relevant Telegram posts receiving over 8 million views in a single day. However, by September 13, as reports emerged about a new breach of the Russian border and the potential encirclement of Russian attacking forces, interest in the Kursk operation sharply declined. By the end of September, while discussions about battles in the Kursk region persisted, they no longer garnered peak views or priority attention from Russian users.

The topic of a new wave of forced mobilization in Russia also gained substantial traction on social media among Russian users in September. The Kursk operation itself, along with the lack of progress from the Russian military in this theater of war, highlighted issues related to personnel shortages, leading to widespread discussion. One peak of attention occurred on September 5, when Dmitry Peskov stated that 'new mobilization in Russia is not being discussed,' resulting in 1 million views of relevant posts in a day. The highest spike for September was noted on the 16th, when Vladimir Putin signed a decree to increase the Russian Armed Forces' personnel to 1.5 million. Consequently, the number of views on mobilization-related publications the following day approached 4 million.

# Resume



Another significant topic that stirred the Russian information space in September was the mass drone strikes by Ukraine deep within Russian territory, coupled with the possibility of increased these strikes due to the supply of Western long-range weaponry to Ukraine. The peak of discussions and views on relevant posts occurred on September 6, with nearly 6 million mentions and reactions following NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's statement that Ukraine has the right to self-defense 'which does not end at the border' with Russia.

The study also reveals a trend of significant fluctuations in social sentiments among Russian citizens, closely tied to the dynamics of the military-political situation in the Russian Federation. The sentiment scale among readers of leading Z-channels, reflected in comments mentioning the word 'war,' indicated that out of over 20,000 such comments published in September, 70% carried a sharply negative tone.

Another crucial indicator is that out of more than 200,000 comments in social media throughout September mentioning Vladimir Putin, over 60% were negative. This is evidently a consequence of both the ongoing full-scale war and the Kursk operation, as well as the kinetic effects of the conflict spilling over into a broader territory of Russia. It is important to continue monitoring the dynamics of these sentiments and reactions, as they touch upon two fundamental indicators: the routinisation of war for the Russian populace and the sacrality of Vladimir Putin's personal authority. Both indicators are interrelated and crucial for the future trajectory of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

# Research Methodology



Our findings on the sentiments of the Russian Federation citizens are based on an AI-powered analysis of the Russian media landscape. This study encompassed social media posts and comments from users in September 2024, as well as news from leading media outlets and official statements.

The objective of this research is to identify the key factors shaping public sentiment in various Russian regions, particularly in the context of ongoing military operations and recent military-political decisions made by the Russian government. Furthermore, we examined the patterns of reactions to these events as portrayed through pro-Kremlin propaganda.

Our analysis involved tracking keywords and phrases related to these topics, alongside associated discussions and publications. The findings provide insights into the prevailing attitudes within Russian society, the main topics in public discourse, and typical responses to the ongoing military aggression against Ukraine.

Specifically, we assessed major military actions through the perspectives of Russian soldiers at the front lines, residents of border regions affected by the Ukrainian Armed Forces' 'Kursk operation,' and individuals living in larger Russian cities. Additionally, we examined concerns such as rising prices and inflation, regional elections in Kursk and other regions, and the level of resources the Kremlin is willing to allocate to sustain its military activities against Ukraine.

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# Course of 'SMO'

# Kursk Operation: Counteroffensive of the Russian Armed Forces



Following the failed Russian counteroffensive in the Glushkovsky district, efforts to promote new Kremlin narratives about the swift liberation of the Kursk region have similarly fallen short. After the Ukrainian Defense Forces (UDF) successfully broke through near the village of Novy Put in September, Kremlin officials were forced to adjust their propaganda strategy. The narrative shifted from attempting to expel Ukrainian forces from the Kursk region to emphasizing Russian advances in the Donbas.

As illustrated in the graph depicting viewership for pro-Kremlin channels, audience interest in the Russian counteroffensive initially peaked at over 8 million views but rapidly declined following reports of another breach along the Russian border and the potential encirclement of Russian forces.



**Figure 1. Views of messages about the Russian counteroffensive in the Kursk region on propaganda channels, September 2024.**

Notably, by September 13, pro-Kremlin channels began reporting on the slowing pace of the offensive and the deployment of new Ukrainian reserves.

*'...I think today he [i.e., the enemy] will introduce new reserves here to reach the Glushkovo railway station, which is intended to lead to the tactical encirclement of our forces and thus turn the tide of battle in his favor.'* – says the channel's author in his [summary](#).

# Strikes on the Russian Rear Facilities and New Supplies of Western Weapons to Ukraine



In addition to the unsuccessful counteroffensive, the Russian media landscape was further destabilized by a series of large-scale Ukrainian drone strikes deep within Russian territory. What initially appeared as isolated incidents escalated into frequent and systematic drone attacks.

Ukrainian drones specifically targeted major weapons depots, and in September, they once again reached Moscow. In the context of the ongoing Kursk operation, these strikes have significantly undermined the Kremlin's authority, dispelling the narrative that the war remains distant from the everyday lives of Russian citizens. For a more detailed analysis of the decline in Russian politicians' approval ratings see the [Declining Trust in Government Officials](#) section.

The issue of supplying new weapons to Ukraine and approving the use of long-range missiles against military targets within Russia gained significant attention beginning on September 6. This discussion surged, garnering nearly 6 million mentions and reactions following NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's [statement](#) affirming Ukraine's right to self-defense, emphasizing that 'this right does not end at the border' with Russia.

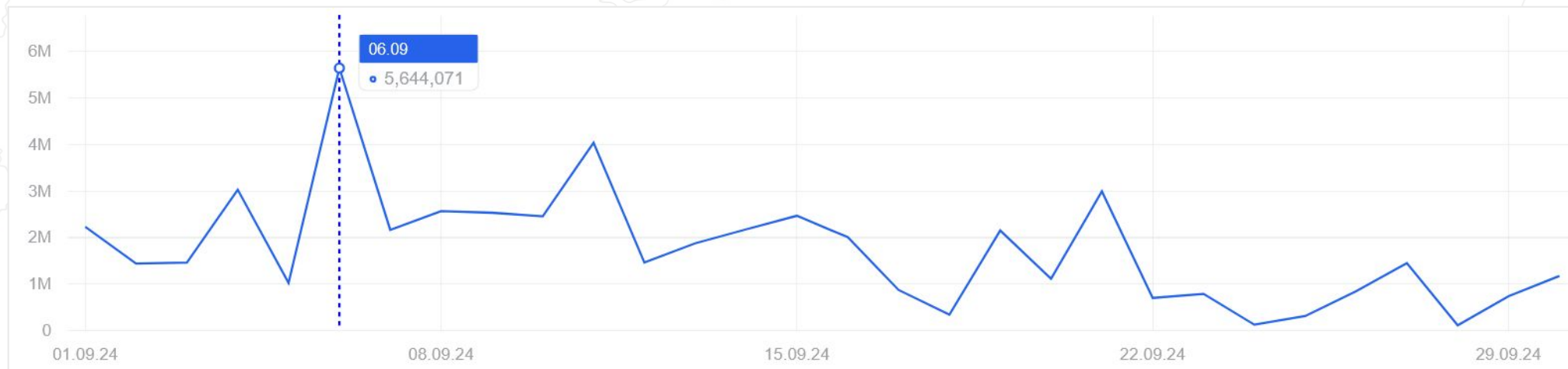


Figure 2. Discussions on Ukraine's right to self-defense following NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg's statement on September 6, 2024.

# Strikes on the Russian Rear Facilities and New Supplies of Western Weapons to Ukraine



Typical reactions of Russians on Telegram to Ukrainian drone attacks:

**Max\_Z\_OV**

А вообще мрачно, налет то не массовый был, и с учётом нагрузки ПВО и самого количества средств ПВО странно, что укры долетают. А была бы массовая атака - под тысячу дронов, да следом пакеты атакмс+ пресловутые фантомы - и все, горит Москва, но не даром сдана укрскоту, шойгец и ко не на виселице?!

👍 11

06:33

*But in massive and it's gloomy, the raid wasn't massive and considering the air defense load and the number of air defense assets, it's strange that the Ukrainians are getting through. But what if there had been a massive attack - a thousand drones, followed by Atacms packages + the notorious Phantoms - and that's it, Moscow is burning, but it wasn't for nothing that it was surrendered to the Ukrainian cattle, Shoigets and Co. weren't on the gallows?!*

**HardBorus**

У приграничных регионов, практически каждый день такой. Может немного прозреют, что творится в стране.

06:58

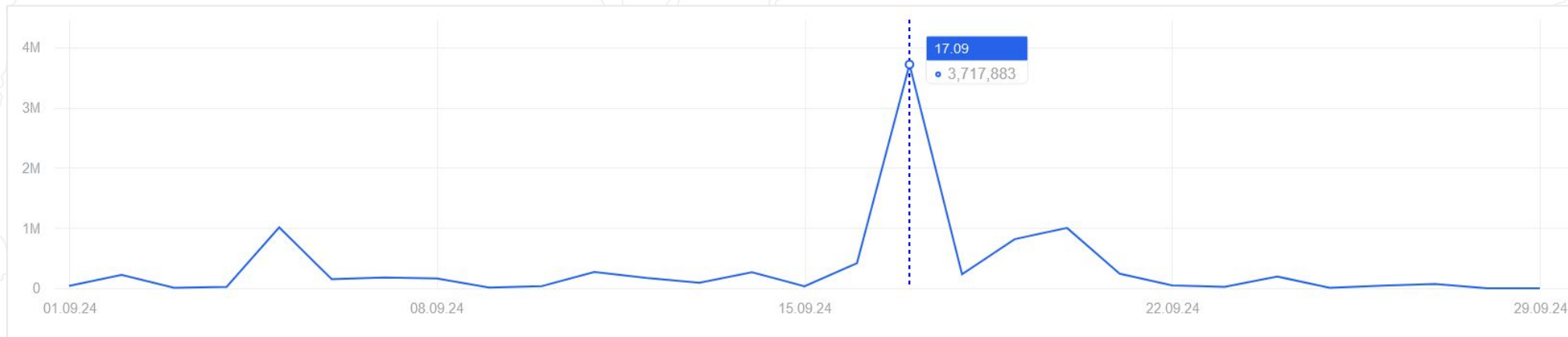
*In the border regions, it's like this almost every day. Maybe they'll wake up a little bit to what's going on in the country.*

# Mobilization in the Russian Federation

One of the critical issues currently on the Kremlin's agenda is the implementation of another wave of forced mobilization. Following the breach of the Russian border and the capture of substantial territories in the Kursk region by the Ukrainian Defense Forces, the issue of personnel shortages has become increasingly urgent and has been widely discussed on Russian social media platforms.

As shown in the graph depicting views on mobilization-related content, interest in the topic surged on September 5, following a statement by Vladimir Putin's press secretary, Dmitry Peskov, who asserted that 'new mobilization in Russia is not being discussed.' He further claimed that the flow of individuals volunteering to sign military contracts has not diminished.

Putin addressed the issue directly by signing a decree on September 16 to increase the size of the Russian Armed Forces, aiming to raise the number of military personnel to 1.5 million. Consequently, the number of views on mobilization-related publications spiked the next day, reaching nearly 4 million.



**Figure 3. Views of mobilization posts in the Russian Federation, including after Vladimir Putin's statement on September 17, 2024.**

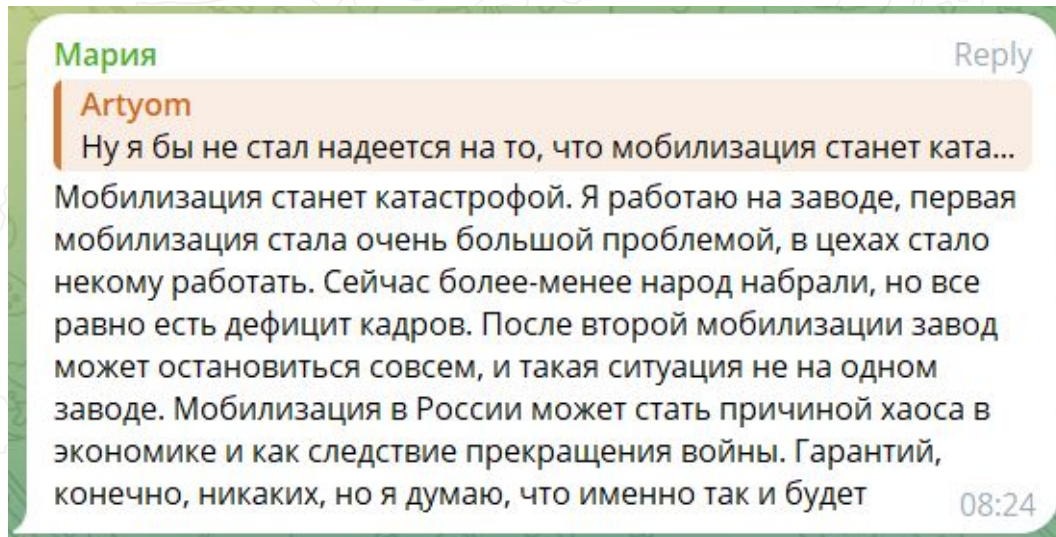
On September 20, President Putin issued a decree establishing an Interagency Commission within the Security Council of the Russian Federation, tasked with staffing the Russian Armed Forces with contract servicemen. This interagency body is intended to coordinate with local authorities to facilitate the recruitment of candidates for military service under contract, drawing from both Russian citizens and foreign nationals.

# Mobilization in the Russian Federation

Despite earlier assurances from Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov, Vadim Kozyulin, head of the IAMC at the Diplomatic Academy of the Russian Foreign Ministry, has suggested that a new wave of mobilization may be imminent. In his comments, Kozyulin highlighted the declining number of contract servicemen, stating: *'At present, this flow [of contract servicemen] is drying up, despite the state increasing payments to over 2 million rubles for signing a contract.'*

More details about social payments can be found in the [Socio-Economic Sentiments](#) section.

Typical reactions of Russian social media users to possible mobilization:



**Мария** Reply

**Artyom**

Ну я бы не стал надеется на то, что мобилизация станет ката...  
Мобилизация станет катастрофой. Я работаю на заводе, первая мобилизация стала очень большой проблемой, в цехах стало некому работать. Сейчас более-менее народ набрали, но все равно есть дефицит кадров. После второй мобилизации завод может остановиться совсем, и такая ситуация не на одном заводе. Мобилизация в России может стать причиной хаоса в экономике и как следствие прекращения войны. Гарантий, конечно, никаких, но я думаю, что именно так и будет

08:24

*Mobilization will be a disaster. I work at a plant, the first mobilization was a very big problem, there was no one to work in the shops. Now they have more or less recruited people, but there is still a shortage of personnel. After the second mobilization, the plant may completely stop, and this situation is not at one plant. Mobilization in Russia can cause chaos in the economy and, as a result, the end of the war. Of course, there are no guarantees, but I think that this is exactly what will happen.*



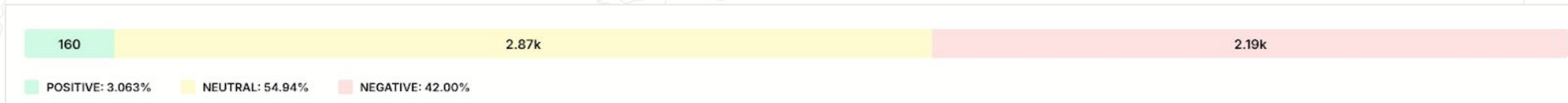
# Socio-Economic Sentiments

# Delay in Social Payments

Russia continues its systematic reorientation of the economy towards military priorities. According to the [2025 budget law](#), over 40% — amounting to approximately 13.5 trillion rubles — has been allocated to national defense and internal security. For comparison, [in 2020](#), this figure stood at 3.16 trillion rubles.

In addition to subsidies directed at the defense industry, including the repair and restoration of damaged or mothballed military equipment, a significant portion of these funds is earmarked for repayments to servicemen in the Russian Armed Forces. Simultaneously, the Kremlin promotes narratives of strong growth in average salaries and purchasing power, driven largely by payments to contract servicemen and mobilized personnel engaged in the so-called 'Special Military Operation.'

However, there has been a growing number of complaints from both military personnel and ordinary Russians regarding delays or partial payments. This discontent is evident in the analysis of public sentiment, particularly in comments on Telegram related to social payments and compensations for participants in military operations in Ukraine. Out of more than 5,000 messages analyzed in September, over 42% expressed negative sentiments, while only 3% conveyed a positive tone.



In particular, from an [appeal](#) by one of the participants in the so-called 'Special Military Operation' to the military lawyers' committee, it becomes clear that issues with payments and compensations are subjects of manipulation and fraud by the Russian command:

*'... Good day.*

*I am a contract serviceman. I sustained an injury during combat operations in the area of the Special Military Operation on September 17, 2024.*

*I ruptured the ligaments in my right ankle. The hospital says that a payment of 3 million rubles is not applicable; is that true? They won't give me Form 98. My commanders conducted an investigation behind my back, which included my explanation, even though I didn't write one. I got injured due to my own carelessness; I slipped on some equipment and fell.'*

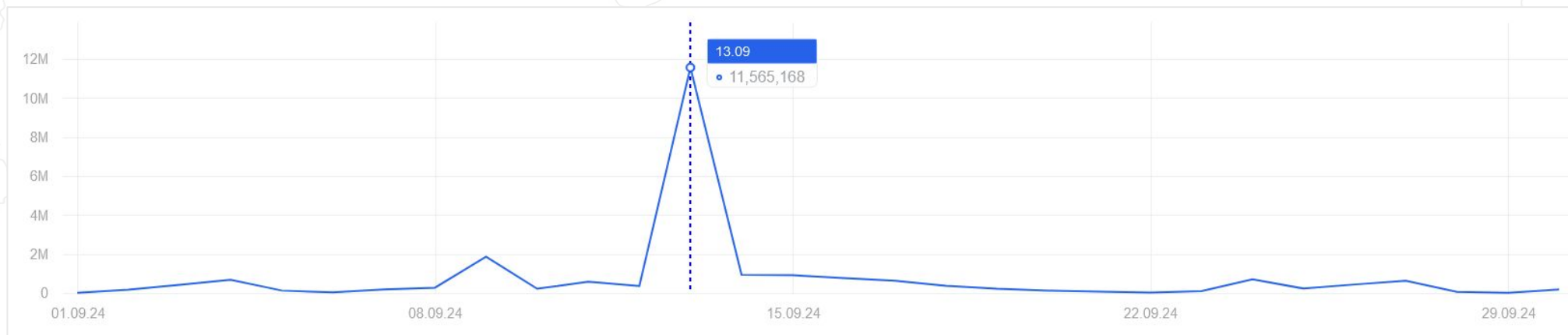
# Inflation and Rising Costs of Consumer Goods, Services, and Fuel



Military actions against Ukraine are placing a significant strain on the Russian federal budget. To cover these rising costs, the Russian government has been compelled to raise taxes and excise duties, contributing to an increase in prices for consumer goods, fuel, and services.

Additionally, the Central Bank of Russia has gradually increased the key interest rate in an effort to control inflation (from 16% to 18% in June, to 19% by September 13, with potential hikes above 20%). This has had a substantial impact on domestic lending programs. Russian banks have responded by scaling back preferential lending and raising interest rates, making the loan terms less favorable. For example, VTB Bank increased the down payment for family mortgages to 50.1% of the property's value starting September 20, citing reduced limits for the government-backed program. The last increase by VTB occurred in mid-August, when the down payment rose from 20.1% to 30.1%.

As illustrated in the graph, the tightening of monetary policy triggered widespread discussion. On September 13, publications on this topic garnered over 11.5 million views.



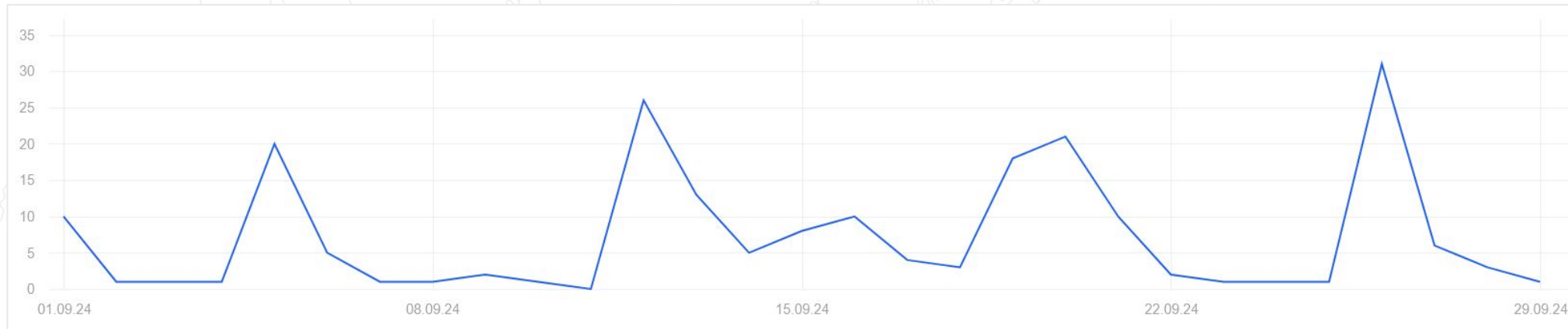
**Figure 4. Number of views of articles about the key rate increase, including after the Central Bank of Russia's statement on September 13, 2024.**

# Inflation and Rising Costs of Consumer Goods, Services, and Fuel



Moreover, despite the decline in global oil prices, the cost of gasoline in Russia continues to rise. Specifically, premium grades such as AI-98 and higher have increased by 14.6% since the beginning of the year, doubling the rate of inflation. For instance, in the Rostov region, the price of AI-98 rose by 3.5 rubles in just one week in September. The rise in fuel prices and increasing inflation are driving up the costs of food and other consumer goods. According to Russian media, by early September, the consumer basket in Russia had increased in price by 11.5% since the beginning of the year. Additionally, discussions about price controls on food resurfaced in September.

As shown in the graph, in September, reports about the rising price of AI-98 gasoline were published at least once a week.



**Figure 5. Number of views of messages about the price of AI-98 gasoline, September 2024.**

Overall, the socio-economic climate in Russia is tending to worsen, impacting critical factors such as birth rates. In particular, according to Rosstat, the birth rate among Russians set a new low in the first half of 2024, declining by 3% compared to the same period last year. In their comments on this issue, Russians express concerns about the lack of conditions to encourage childbirth:

*'Once they create proper conditions for young families, there won't be any need to force anyone to have children. Young people typically lack housing, transportation, stable jobs, and spots in kindergartens... Prices for groceries are skyrocketing. People might want to have more kids, but they're afraid they won't be able to support them. After all, they want to give their children the best...' – writes a Telegram user.*



# Socio-Political Sentiments

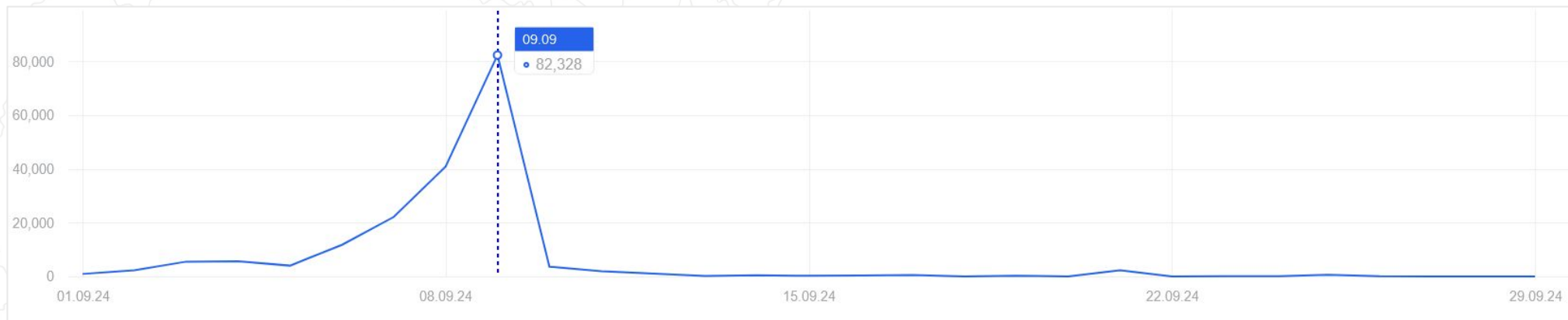
# Declining Public Trust in Government Officials



Despite the Kremlin's efforts to obscure the true course of military operations in the Kursk region, public sentiment surrounding the invasion has significantly eroded Russians' trust in both local and central authorities.

Even with ongoing fighting near the Russian border, the region proceeded with its gubernatorial and local elections, extending the typical three-day voting period to 12 days. The Russian government claimed a record level of support for the acting governor, Alexey Smirnov. However, independent observers assert that the official results were grossly inflated, estimating Smirnov's actual support at 45-50%, in contrast to the reported 65%.

As depicted in the graph, the topic of local elections in the Kursk region was heavily promoted by pro-government propaganda channels, yet it quickly disappeared from public discourse after the official 'results' were announced.



**Figure 6. Information campaign of Russian propaganda (number of reactions) during elections in Kursk region, September 2024.**

A common reaction of Russians to municipal elections:

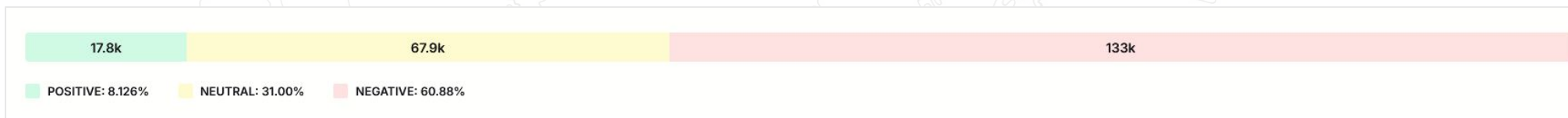
*'The gentlemen have completely lost their bearings – in St. Petersburg, they are blatantly fabricating Beglov's victory in the elections, and in the Kursk region, they also have a fondness for the governor who abandoned the people – they've given him 65%. They just don't care about anyone!'*

# Declining Public Trust in Government Officials



As a result, the inability of the Russian authorities to ensure the defense of Russia's borders, manage evacuations, provide social support to those affected, and even maintain the functionality of the missile alert system has negatively impacted the level of trust in local officials and in President Vladimir Putin himself. His overall approval rating has hit an all-time low during the so-called 'Special Military Operation,' even in controlled surveys.

Notably, from more than 200,000 comments mentioning the Russian president's name during September, over 60% were negative:



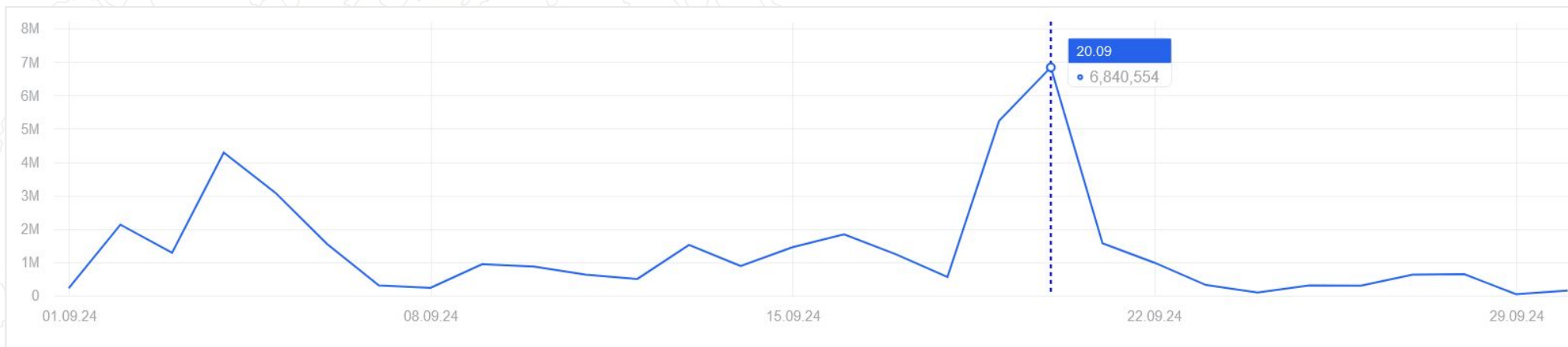
In addition, a significant factor in the decline of trust in the government was the attacks of Ukrainian drones deep into Russian territory, including on the Russian capital, Moscow.

# New Restrictions on Freedom of Speech and Expression



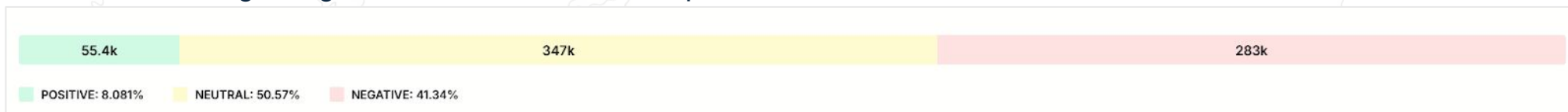
Since Russia's official withdrawal from the European Convention of Human Rights in February 2023 and its refusal to comply with rulings from the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), the situation regarding freedom of speech and expression has progressively worsened in the Russian Federation.

Notably, without any formal announcements or explanations, the regulatory agency Roskomnadzor imposed significant [restrictions on YouTube](#) in August, reducing the platform's performance by a factor of ten. YouTube, which has approximately 100 million users in Russia, saw its [traffic cut in half](#) following these measures. In response to widespread complaints, including from internet service providers, some restrictions were eased starting September 20, with YouTube resuming normal functionality in certain instances, as reflected in updates shared on Telegram.



**Figure 7. Number of views of reported problems with YouTube, September 2024.**

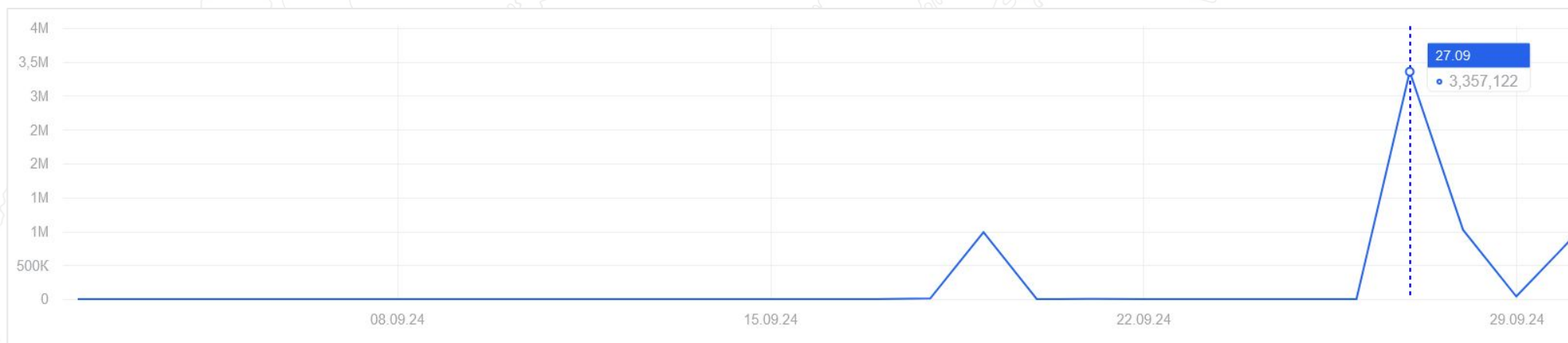
However, overall user reactions to the restrictions on YouTube's functionality have been sharply negative, as indicated by the sentiment scale regarding mentions of the service's operation:



# New Restrictions on Freedom of Speech and Expression

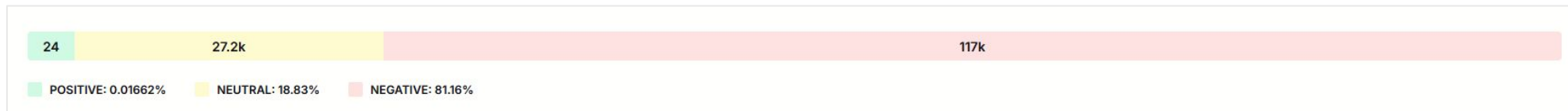
Also in September, there were [reports](#) online that another popular service, the Discord messenger, whose audience in the Russian Federation is about 40 million users, could soon be blocked in Russia. Subsequently, Roskomnadzor issued five decisions against the platform for violating the law "on information technology and information protection", which effectively served as the basis for further blocking of the service.

As shown in the timeline chart, the first reports of issues with Discord's functionality began appearing on September 19, and by September 27, news about the potential blocking of the service started to spread, including in Russian media.



**Figure 8. Number of views of the news and posts about outages and possible blocking of the Discord service in Russia, September 2024.**

Overall, user reactions to the news of Discord's cessation in Russia have been extremely negative:



Blocking the communication services of Western origin is part of a fundamental process that the Kremlin refers to as '[digital sovereignty](#).' This process involves state control over all digital platforms and social networks, similar to traditional media such as television, radio, and newspapers.



**Thank you for your Attention!**