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Russia's Fuel Crisis: From A Gasoline To A Narrative Deficit

Ukrainian strikes on Russia’s oil infrastructure have triggered fuel shortages across dozens of regions, disrupted logistics to occupied Crimea, and exposed the failure of Kremlin propaganda.

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The fuel shortage, triggered by an unprecedented Ukrainian campaign of strikes on Russian oil and gas infrastructure and now affecting dozens of Russian regions, has become not only a logistical and economic problem for the Kremlin but a propaganda one as well.

Following their well-worn playbook, the authorities have responded with denial, insisting that the situation is "normal" and attributing the lines at gas stations to motorists' desire to "use the restroom and grab a hot dog." This official rhetoric is being openly mocked even by the pro-war Z-community, while a wave of public outrage is growing on social media.

Key topics:

1. Genesis and growing scale of the fuel crisis

2. Public outrage and the propaganda response

3. The Z-community: another wave of criticism

Executive Summary

The fuel shortage, triggered by an unprecedented Ukrainian campaign of strikes on Russian oil and gas infrastructure and now affecting dozens of Russian regions, has become not only a logistical and economic problem for the Kremlin but a propaganda one as well.

Following their well-worn playbook, the authorities have responded with denial, insisting that the situation is "normal" and attributing the lines at gas stations to motorists' desire to "use the restroom and grab a hot dog." This official rhetoric is being openly mocked even by the pro-war Z-community, while a wave of public outrage is growing on social media.

Ukraine's large-scale campaign of strikes on Russian oil and gas facilities has not only had a notable effect on Russian public opinion but has also exposed the strategic vulnerability of the domestic fuel market and refining sector, which, according to independent estimates[1], has contracted by almost a third, to its lowest level in 21 years, below 4 million barrels per day.

The greatest impact has been felt in the occupied territories, where drone operations by the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) along the so-called land corridor to Crimea have jeopardized the whole of Russia's logistics, both supply for the Russian army and passenger and freight transport, the latter officially restricted[2,3] on the Novorossiya federal highway since late May.

As of June 16, the fuel crisis has locally affected at least 33 constituent regions of the Russian Federation[4], including Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as the nationwide filling station networks by Rosneft and Tatneft, which have been forced to impose limits on gasoline and diesel sales[5,6].

The worst situation has developed in the occupied regions: in Crimea, the free sale of gasoline was effectively halted as of June 4[7], a situation made worse by the standing ban[8] on truck traffic across the Kerch Bridge, with gasoline dispensing limited to 20 liters per vehicle via personal QR codes.

Public opinion is responding to the gasoline shortage with increasing visibility: in the first week of June, the topic of the fuel crisis appeared for the first time in polling data[9] from the Kremlin-controlled Public Opinion Foundation (FOM, about 2% of citizens named it as one of the week's key events), while on social media a growing wave of criticism of the authorities can be observed, with videos showing lines at gas stations, dispensing limits, and at times the absence of fuel altogether, drawing millions of views[10,11].

Against this backdrop, the authorities have fallen back on their familiar tactic of denying problems, declaring at the regional level that the situation is normal while ignoring the topic in national media. The key crisis-management narrative to emerge has been a line handed down from the Presidential Administration (PA) that blames motorists themselves for the optics of the crisis: "there is no fuel shortage at the gas station. The lines form because people want to use the restroom and grab a hot dog,"[12] writes the St. Petersburg outlet Fontanka, and the line about restrooms and hot dogs is echoed by Sergei Karnaukhov[13], who is part of Vladimir Solovyov's media network, and by the official channel War on Fakes[14]. At the same time, Nezygar, a Telegram channel close to the PA, asserts that "the public reaction to what is happening so far remains uncertain [...] Most citizens are taking a wait-and-see position [...] A more definite attitude toward what is happening may take shape over the coming weeks."[15]

The fuel shortage and the logistics crisis along the land corridor to Crimea have given the Z-community fresh grounds for its already constant and vivid criticism of the Kremlin. The Z-channel Fighterbomber confirms the gasoline problems and mocks the authorities' denial of them: "It's all there. Gas, this or that kind. [...] The terminal just isn't working. And it doesn't take cash. Or cards,"[16] while the Z-channel Two Majors, which is close to the security services, directly criticizes the authorities' information policy: "Today our eyes nearly popped out at the clumsy anti-crisis messaging from our colleagues in the information business. For some, the Khokhols' (a derogatory Russian term for Ukrainians) mid-range strikes into the

operational depth turned out to be almost a joke, while for others all the gas stations in the country are now full of gasoline. It's clear this is an apparatus response to an information-psychological operation [IPSO] [...], but the response is so clumsy."[17]

At the same time, the Z-channel Bayraktar Witnesses and the channel of military blogger Yuri Kotenok openly acknowledge the AFU's current tactical superiority, especially when it comes to knocking out Russian logistics in the occupied regions: "The AFU have made a huge leap forward"[18] and "We have difficulties on the front. [...] This needs to be acknowledged, conclusions need to be drawn, and our approaches to organizing combat, to developing this branch of the Armed Forces [UAVs], and to methods of warfare in general need to change."[19]

For their part, the Telegram channels Svarshchiki (The Welders) and Two Majors, both close to the security services, are actively criticizing the sluggishness of the Russian military machine, which is unable to quickly adapt to the AFU's superiority in drones, and are emphasizing the unsuitable age of the command staff: "What kind of cards does our General Staff actually have on the table? I think they're medical ones, because it's long past time for all of them to take the 'Moscow Longevity' course and go do some Nordic walking at a sanatorium. [...] We need young advisers alongside the old ones: some propose, others reject and doubt, but that is how truth and Victory are born,"[20] and "The only thing that could sharply change the situation with bureaucracy in the agencies would be sending senior military and civilian officials on vacation to Crimea via the Novorossiya highway. Preferably routed through Kursk and Belgorod regions."[21]

Genesis And Growing Scale Of The Fuel Crisis

The AFU's shift to a tactic of systematically destroying and damaging facilities in the Russian oil and gas industry, a campaign that was inaugurated by strikes on oil terminals in the Baltic Sea back in March, has already prompted the Russian government to adjust its plans. According to Reuters[22], Russia intends to reduce crude oil export volumes in June in order to redirect that oil to refineries, a move driven both by the looming fuel shortage and by the disabling of export capacity.

Strikes on refineries (more than **38** attacks since January 2026[23]) have, according to independent estimates[24], reduced refining volumes by almost a third; in the first week of June, output fell below **4** million barrels per day, the lowest level in **21** years. Against this backdrop, it became known that the Russian government had extended[25] a permit allowing the production of lower-quality gasoline in order to ease local shortages.

The worst situation has developed in occupied Crimea, where restrictions on fuel sales were progressively introduced starting May 22, and the free sale of gasoline was effectively halted as of June 4[26], with gasoline dispensing limited to 20 liters per vehicle via personal QR codes.

Beyond the decline in refining volumes, this has also been driven by AFU attacks along the land corridor to Crimea: direct FPV drone strikes and remote mining by drone of the R-280 Novorossiya federal highway, which has effectively severed ground logistics chains in the region, compounding the standing ban[27] on truck traffic across the Kerch Bridge (Kerch–Taman).

This effect is reinforced by regular strikes[28] on the bridges connecting the occupied part of Kherson region with Crimea, the Chongar and Henichesk bridges. A partial restriction on truck traffic from Kherson region to the Dzhankoi checkpoint in Crimea has been in effect since May 21[29], and as of June 4,

commercial passenger transport on the Novorossiya highway has been banned[30].

The fuel crisis is slowly spreading to other regions as well: as of June 16, local restrictions are known to be in place in at least 33 constituent regions of the Russian Federation[31], including the occupied regions of Ukraine, Moscow, and St. Petersburg. In addition, on June 16, nationwide filling station networks began introducing blanket restrictions: Tatneft imposed limits on fuel sales[32], while Rosneft, along with its subsidiaries Bashneft and TNK, banned the sale of gasoline into jerry cans and delegated the authority to set local limits to regional management[33].

Public Outrage And The Propaganda Response: "Lines At Gas Stations For The Restroom And Hot Dogs"

According to data from the Kremlin-controlled FOM[34], the topic of the gasoline shortage and price increases entered the list of top events for the first time in the first week of June, named by about 2% of respondents, ranking fourth immediately after the SMO, SPIEF, and an open letter from Zelensky to Vladimir Putin.

Given the delayed publication of polling data, it is evident that the fuel shortage problem will only become more pressing in the coming weeks, as indicated by both the scale of the measures the authorities are taking and their geographic spread.

This is also confirmed by Nezygar, a Telegram channel close to the PA, which stated on June 15 regarding the fuel shortage that "the public reaction to what is happening so far remains uncertain. According to sources' assessments, the level of anxiety among the population is rising, though no signs of mass panic have been observed. Most citizens are taking a wait-and-see position, waiting to see how the situation develops further. A more definite attitude toward what is happening may take shape over the coming weeks."[35]

On social media, however, sharp criticism of the authorities has emerged against the backdrop of the ongoing fuel crisis: users are actively uploading organic content showing lines at gas stations, dispensing limits, and in some cases the absence of gasoline altogether, including "You arrive in Crimea, and everywhere there's free gasoline," set against footage of zero prices on gas station price boards (1.5 million[36] and 1 million views[37]), "Crimea, a line for gasoline" (5.1 million[38]), "There's no gasoline in Ulyanovsk" (1.2 million[39]), and others. The wave of viral content on social media reached a level at which the

authorities were forced to respond: the main official counter-narrative, the standard line used for any problem unwelcome to the Kremlin, was that **"the scale of the issue is being noticeably exaggerated on social media, and the situation is normal."**

At the same time, the topic of the fuel crisis is being ignored at the national level and pushed down to the regional level. A number of regional news portals, for instance, simultaneously published articles[40,41,42,43] explaining that the production of lower-quality gasoline will not affect motorists' experience: "We drove on 'Euro-3' for decades, and everything was fine. This isn't some radical degradation in fuel quality."

There is also a noticeable campaign of pieces written in the genre of "the editors checked the rumors on social media": with respect to lines at gas stations in St. Petersburg, it is claimed that "there is no fuel shortage at the gas station. The lines form because people want to use the restroom and grab a hot dog,"[44] while in Vladimir, it is claimed that "there is no shortage at Lukoil gas stations, fuel is being sold as usual, although demand has increased."[45]

Kremlin-controlled propagandists are amplifying these narratives, working from PA talking points: Sergei Karnaukhov, part of Vladimir Solovyov's media network, reposts a post that blames drivers themselves for the lines at gas stations, repeating verbatim the line about "restrooms and hot dogs": "Drivers and passengers who, after filling up, leave their cars at the pumps and go off to the restroom or to grab a hot dog paralyze the station's operation for 10–15 minutes. Now, in the summer season, this is being deliberately passed off as a 'collapse' to fit the narrative of a crisis,"[46] while the official channel War on Fakes claims that "There is no problem with gasoline at the gas station. The lines formed for a completely different reason. Summer is the 'culprit' [...] A gas station is a place where you can grab a bite, drink some water, and use the restroom,"[47] and that "the 'gasoline panic' in Russia is currently being deliberately stoked not only by hype-chasers and the Ukrainian CIPSO apparatus [Center for Information and Psychological Operations], but also by Russian opposition figures who have fled the country."[48]

The Z-Community: Another Wave Of Criticism Of The Kremlin

The Z-community's initial focus was on the intensifying blockade of Crimea, problems at the front, and strikes on Russian logistics in the area of the land corridor to Crimea.

The Z-channel Bayraktar Witnesses wrote that "Yes, we have serious problems with the enemy's drones. It's enough to drive the highway from Luhansk to Donetsk for even the most thickheaded patriot to understand that the AFU have made a huge leap forward,"[49] and **military blogger Yuri Kotenok made the same point**: "We have difficulties on the front. Why? Because the Ukronazi is the world's leader in the command, adaptation, and flexible use of unmanned systems, weapons, and innovative approaches to warfare. They are the best in the world at organizing the operation of drone systems. No one else can do it like that. This needs to be acknowledged, conclusions need to be drawn, and our approaches to organizing combat, to developing this branch of the Armed Forces, and to methods of warfare in general need to change. [...] Recently, the enemy has made a qualitative leap in new technology, thanks to their new leadership of the Unmanned Systems Forces and their new defense minister."[50]

Against this backdrop, the channel Two Majors, which is close to the security services, continued its now-customary, vigorous criticism of the current decision-making system within the Russian army and its sluggishness: "Decisions that don't lead to a systemic approach, but are instead one-off orders along the lines of 'let's just give the order,' will not produce any result,"[51] and "The only thing that could sharply change the situation with bureaucracy in the agencies would be sending senior military and civilian officials on vacation to Crimea via the Novorossiya highway. Preferably routed through Kursk and Belgorod regions."[52]

A similar line of criticism was echoed by Z-blogger Roman Alekhin, who has been designated a "foreign agent" by the authorities: "the main resource of the twenty-first century is becoming neither oil, nor money, nor even weapons. The main resource is becoming the speed of decision-making. The winner is whoever notices a problem faster, draws conclusions faster, and changes the system to fit new conditions faster. Everything else today is already secondary."[53]

Another channel close to the security services, Svarshchiki (The Welders), openly accused the leadership of being dominated by old men: "What kind of cards does our General Staff actually have on the table? I think they're medical ones, because it's long past time for all of them to take the 'Moscow Longevity' course and go do some Nordic walking at a sanatorium. [...] Fedorov and Brovdi have reinforced the Khokhols so well that almost all the roads in the new territories are now dangerous. [...] We need young advisers alongside the old ones: some propose, others reject and doubt, but that is how truth and Victory are born."[54]

The intensifying fuel crisis also did not go unnoticed within the Z-community: the author of the Z-channel Fighterbomber effectively confirmed the gasoline problems, mocking the authorities' attempts to deny them: "Came to fill up at an automated gas station. Reporting. It's all there. Gas, this or that kind. [...] The terminal just isn't working. And it doesn't take cash. Or cards. Now I understand what the phrase 'there's gasoline, there are just restrictions' means."[55]

The channel Two Majors also weighed in with criticism of the authorities' information policy, **directly accusing the people running it of incompetence:**

> "Today our eyes nearly popped out at the clumsy anti-crisis messaging from our colleagues in the information business. For some, the Khokhols' mid-range strikes into the operational depth turned out to be almost a joke, while for others all the gas stations in the country are now full of gasoline. It's clear this is an apparatus response to an IPSO [...], but the response is so clumsy that [...] In the end, say, a driver on the highway to Donetsk, after stopping at a gas station, will conclude that our people across the whole Russian information space are liars, and will go off to read the Khokhols, who post their drone strikes the very same day."[56]

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