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“The Country Is Going In The Wrong Direction”: Public Opinion Dynamics In Russia Amid The Fuel Crisis

Russia’s fuel crisis turning the costs of war into everyday hardship and accelerating public distrust in the Kremlin

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Executive Summary

In the war's fifth year, the fuel crisis has become the clearest manifestation of the war with Ukraine for most Russian citizens, directly affecting their daily lives. As a result, the crisis of public trust in the authorities that had emerged in the first half of the year has visibly accelerated.

The Kremlin, meanwhile, continues to insist through propaganda that the situation is normal and under control, framing the crisis as "an attempt to split society," even as public demand for an end to the war continues to grow.

The fuel crisis in Russia, which has affected every region except Chukotka[1], has acted as a catalyst for public discontent: approval ratings for the authorities have accelerated their decline, and social anxiety has risen sharply, according to both independent pollsters and Kremlin-controlled polling organizations[2,3].

The independent Levada Center reports[4] a sharp 5 p.p. drop in Vladimir Putin's approval rating from May to June, alongside a simultaneous 10 p.p. rise, in a single month, in the share of respondents who believe "the country is going in the wrong direction," from 25% in May to 35% in June.

This is indirectly confirmed both by rare public statements from members of the Russian elite – for instance, German Gref, head of the state-owned Sberbank, said on June 30 that he hoped for "the swiftest end to the hostilities"[5] – and by commentary from Telegram channels linked to the Presidential Administration (PA): Nezygar, a channel often used for controlled leaks, states that "the public consensus around the hostilities that took shape in the war's early years is gradually being exhausted, while anxiety and discontent are growing in society," stressing that "the political system's high degree of manageability is maintained through administrative and security-force mechanisms rather than public support"[6].

Waves of anger over gasoline shortages, long lines at filling stations, and officials being served out of turn at gas stations,

all of which are highly visible on social media, have become an acute problem for staff in the PA ahead of the State Duma elections scheduled for September 2026.

Authorities decided to censor the negative coverage of the consequences of Ukrainian strikes, shifting focus instead to the "successes" of Russian strikes on Ukraine[7]. For example, on July 5, the Sunday evening news roundups of Russia's three largest nationwide broadcasters did not mention the fuel crisis a single time.

However, the scale of the **crisis reached a point** where **Vladimir Putin himself was forced to address it publicly**, setting the narrative frame that

> "the situation is normal"

and that attempts are being made

> "to split Russian society"[8];

this narrative has since become the dominant one in the sparse propaganda coverage of the issue.

The sensitivity of the situation is further confirmed by critical statements from representatives of the systemic, pseudo-opposition parties, whose rhetoric is partly controlled by the PA and deliberately used to "let off steam" during the election campaign.

On June 26, Sergei Mironov, leader of the A Just Russia party, **called the fuel shortage** "artificial," stating that

> "there is gasoline in the country. Someone just wants to make easy money"[9].

Equally notable was a statement by Nina Ostanina, a State Duma deputy from the Communist Party, who accused the authorities

of concealing the crisis and predicted defeat for the ruling party in the elections:

> "Why won't the responsible deputy prime minister honestly admit that almost a third of the country's oil refineries are out of action, and why isn't he, or the other relevant deputy prime ministers and ministers, introducing emergency measures? [...] I am confident that people will think hard about whom to entrust with their future in September. And no remote electronic voting or three-day voting periods will help certain people"[10].

Yet any criticism provokes a furious response from Russian propaganda. On July 5, Vladimir Solovyov, a leading Kremlin propagandist, repeated the narrative Putin had earlier voiced and lashed out at the growing and increasingly vocal ranks of pro-war critics of the authorities within the Z-community:

> "The situation is under the direct control of the president. [...] No one is trying to hush it up or downplay the scale of the threat. The enemy is counting on a repeat of 1916-17: it is trying to destabilize the situation from within. As for the military bloggers who keep dragging in the Ukrainian Nazi talking points, 'Oh, just stop it!', 'Oh, we weren't even there!', 'Oh, we didn't take it!', who are you working for, you scum? I'll just ask you straight out: who are you working for?"[11].

The same "anti-crisis" talking points were echoed by RT's editor-in-chief, Margarita Simonyan.

Negative assessments of the current situation genuinely predominate within the pro-war Z-community. The key narrative explaining the fuel crisis is that it represents "an attempt to destabilize society through everyday anger"[12], and the fact that this narrative is being widely promoted by Z-bloggers demonstrates the effectiveness of that tactic.

The authorities' inaction is being actively criticized: Z-channel MiG of Russia writes that "people keep complaining to us about

local authorities' failure to bring order to the fuel lines. [...] Dear officials, mistakes can be forgiven, but you can't just sit on your backsides!"[13].

At the same time, Z-authors continue to **criticize the military leadership** and the inertia of the Russian military machine. The Z-channel Fighterbomber states that "we simply have to accept that, with the resources currently available, we cannot defend such easily hit targets as oil refineries and fuel storage tanks"[14], while Two Majors, a channel close to the security bloc, argues that "no matter how many times we repair the oil refineries, new strikes, in the absence of more serious air defense (including technologically advanced systems), will burn through all the effort and resources invested"[15].

Yet amid this criticism, an effective, targeted messaging campaign aimed at the pro-war audience is clearly visible: war correspondents from official propaganda outlets[16,17] and channels linked to the security bloc are simultaneously promoting a counter-narrative about an effective campaign of Russian retaliatory strikes on Ukrainian gas stations.

Readovka, a central resource in the Z-ecosystem linked to the Ministry of Defense, published posts stating that "for a second day running, Ukraine is ablaze under massive strikes by the Russian army, with gas stations and logistics facilities being hit"[18], while Two Majors called for "an increase in the number of strikes, wiping out critical elements of Ukrainian gas stations, and finally moving on to destroying major oil depots"[19].

Some other Z-channels have criticized these narratives as artificial. The channel Svarshchiki, also linked to the security bloc, states:

> "Contrary to the psycho-neurotic, entirely misleading euphoria and the handful of videos from lines at border-area gas stations, we report the following: there is no fuel shortage whatsoever in either Odesa or Kyiv, let alone lines. In Odesa, people haven't even heard of this. We continue working; so far, no results"[20].

Public Opinion Polling: Anxiety Rises As Approval Ratings Fall

Amid the fuel crisis and the ongoing Ukrainian campaign of drone strikes on Russian regions, both of which, according to the independent Levada Center[21], were the events Russians remembered most in June — 22% and 24%, respectively, compared with just 7% for the Special Military Operation — public discontent has sharply intensified.

According to the same data, the share of respondents who believe "the country is going in the wrong direction" rose by a full 10 p.p. from May to June, from 25% to 35%, while positive assessments fell from 61% to 52%. Compared with the start of the year, the share of respondents reporting tension, irritation, and fear has also grown, from 20% in January[22] to 29% in June.

The Kremlin-controlled Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) **reports the same trend**[23]: a 17 p.p. rise in anxious sentiment from a January low of 38% to 55% in June. The state-run Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTsIOM)[24], for its part, has stopped publishing some of its ratings and survey results, with the exception of critically important indicators such as trust in politicians, state institutions, and party ratings; for example, the most recent available data on approval of the authorities or on the public mood dates back to April.

A high and stable demand for an end to the war in Ukraine also persists: according to Levada Center data[25], **at least 64% of Russians support the start of peace talks**, a figure that rose by 4 p.p. from May to June and has not fallen below 60% at any point since at least April 2025.

This is also confirmed by rare public statements from members of the Russian establishment: on June 30, German Gref, head of the state-controlled Sberbank, Russia's largest bank, said,

> "I don't think there is a single person in this country whose concerns extend beyond the swiftest end to the hostilities. That much is obvious"[26].

The crisis of public trust in the authorities is deepening, and according to every polling organization it is weighing on Putin's approval ratings. The Levada Center shows a 10 p.p. drop since the start of the year (84% versus 74%); VTsIOM[27] shows a 7.6 p.p. drop (80.9% versus 73.3%); and FOM shows a 10 p.p. drop (80% versus 70%).

It is worth noting that the independent Levada Center recorded a rapid 5 p.p. drop in a single month, from May to June, while VTsIOM and FOM, both controlled by Russia's Presidential Administration (PA), showed Putin's ratings stabilizing around the turn of May and June, though their most recent reports show the decline resuming.

The ruling United Russia party's rating is also showing a persistent negative trend: after falling during the first four months of 2026, largely due to the authorities' tightening of restrictions on the internet and the messenger Telegram, the party's ratings stabilized in May and June, partly because of the start of the active phase of the State Duma election campaign and a broad pro-party propaganda effort.

However, the ratings resumed their decline once the fuel crisis began. According to independent pollsters Russian Field and the Levada Center, United Russia's current rating stands at 30%[28] to 31.5%[29], while polling by the Kremlin-aligned VTsIOM and FOM puts it at 32.6%[30] to 37%[31].

The PA-linked Telegram channel Nezygar, citing sociologists who work with the Kremlin, states:

> "These results are a sign of a qualitative shift in public sentiment. The public consensus around the hostilities that took shape in the war's early years is gradually being exhausted, while anxiety and discontent in society are growing.
> **If negative economic trends**, including problems in the fuel market, persist, **the decline in support for the authorities could continue into July as well**. At the same time, sociologists note that the political system's high degree of manageability is still being maintained. Increasingly, however, this is being sustained through administrative and security-force mechanisms rather than public support"[32].

This analysis focuses on June and early July 2026. For later polling releases and longer-term trends, see the Kremlin Ratings Tracker.

The Fuel Crisis As A Direct Driver Of Rising Discontent

The fuel crisis, which began in mid-June and was caused by the Ukrainian campaign of strikes on oil and gas facilities — at least 194 successful strikes since the start of 2026[33] — **has affected every region of Russia**[34] except Chukotka, reaching as far as the Far East: **88 of Russia's 89 regions, including the occupied Ukrainian territories.**

In its response, the government has applied a dual logic of restrictions[35]: in some regions, fuel-purchase limits have been introduced officially, while in others they have been imposed informally through gas station network operators. Closed filling stations, lines at the pump — in some cases patrolled by the police and other security services[36] — and officials being served without waiting in line[37] have become defining features of the moment.

Social media users have posted large numbers of videos with negative comments and criticism of the situation, and tensions in the lines have been rising, with more frequent conflicts and fights, sometimes involving weapons[38].

According to independent economists[39], "a further consequence will be an acceleration of inflation across almost every sector of the economy [...] and a deepening of the budget crisis," given fuel's importance to Russia's domestic logistics; rising prices are seen as the most acute problem by 55% of Russians (Levada Center, May 2026[40]). According to the PA-linked channel Nezygar,

> "the gasoline crisis is heightening social anxiety and becoming an additional factor in the erosion of public trust in the authorities and the rise in social tension"[41].

With the September State Duma elections approaching, the deepening crisis has become an acute problem for PA strategists and Russian officials. To level out public sentiment,

the authorities have moved to censor negative coverage, requiring controlled media outlets not to publish the consequences of Ukrainian strikes and instead to "show more of the successes" of Russian strikes on Ukraine[42].

Yet the scale of the problem has been such that **Vladimir Putin** himself **was forced to acknowledge it**[43], setting the frame that "**the situation is normal**" for propaganda narratives:

> "We are currently seeing a certain shortage, but it is not critical,"

describing the strikes as

> "a part of an information operation aimed at splitting Russian society and forcing Russia to halt the advance of our troops."

This narrative became the central theme in Russian domestic propaganda coverage. In his program on July 5, leading Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov criticized[44] pro-war Z-bloggers who had been mocking Putin's remarks, stating:

> "The government holds meetings on a daily basis. Everyone genuinely understands the situation that has arisen. This is under the direct control of the president, it is under the control of the head of government, and it is under the control of the deputy prime minister. No one is trying to hush it up or downplay the scale of the threat. The enemy is counting on a repeat of 1916-17: it is trying to destabilize the situation from within.
> As for the military bloggers who keep dragging in the Ukrainian Nazi talking points, 'Oh, just stop it!', 'Oh, we weren't even there!', 'Oh, we didn't take it!', who are you working for, you scum? I'll just ask you straight out: who are you working for?"

The same narrative was echoed by Margarita Simonyan, a guest on Solovyov's program and RT's editor-in-chief. However, despite

the topic's presence in the broader information agenda, domestic propaganda covers the fuel crisis in a fairly limited way and has kept it out of prime time.

For example, on July 5, the fuel crisis was not mentioned a single time in the weekly Sunday news roundups of the country's three main nationwide broadcasters — Channel One, Russia-1, and NTV.

Some propagandists deny the crisis's real causes altogether. Karnaukhov, part of Vladimir Solovyov's media network, blamed pensioners for the fuel crisis:

> "The crowds are made up mostly of old folks who drive around in circles, filling up, coming back, siphoning off fuel, and reselling it to lazy VIPs, then coming back again. [...] In the end, this is what's called panic buying.
> It can't be beaten, because these are the same people who used to stand in line for salt and buckwheat, then for beer, and now they'll stand in line for gasoline too. There is no other cause of the 'fuel crisis'"[45].

Against this backdrop, a number of State Duma deputies have voiced sharp criticism of the situation. On June 26, Sergei Mironov, leader of the systemic, pseudo-opposition party A Just Russia, said: "An artificial fuel shortage has been created at Russia's gas stations, even though there is enough gasoline to meet demand. [...] I am saying this officially: there is gasoline in the country. Someone just wants to make easy money"[46].

Later, on July 2, Nina Ostanina, a State Duma deputy from the Communist Party, accused the government

of concealing the fuel crisis and warned the ruling party of defeat in the elections:

> "Why won't the responsible deputy prime minister honestly admit that almost a third of the country's oil refineries are out of action, and why isn't he, or the other relevant deputy prime ministers and ministers, introducing emergency measures? [...] After all, the country could be left without bread, which, given the international sanctions, would be tantamount to death. [...]
> I am confident that people will think hard about whom to entrust with their future in September. And no remote electronic voting or three-day voting periods will help certain people"[47].

All of these episodes should be read in light of the upcoming State Duma elections: PA-controlled criticism from the systemic parties serves as a pressure valve for public discontent, allowing it to "let off steam."

The Communist Party, for instance, **continues to use escalating criticism in its campaign messaging:**

> "Where are the statements from United Russia, the LDPR, and New People about the causes of the crisis, the responsibility of officials, the nationalization of a strategic industry, or the protection of agriculture? Where is even an attempt to honestly explain to people what is happening? [...]
> This is no longer a matter of party competition. It is a matter of who is even willing to talk about reality, and who prefers not to notice it"[48].

Z-Bloggers: The Counter-Narrative On Ukrainian Gas Stations And Criticism Of The Leadership

The current fuel crisis has revealed a fairly successful, targeted messaging effort within the Z-community: channels close to the security bloc, or belonging to war correspondents[49,50] at official propaganda outlets, while acknowledging Russia's current fuel problems, **have simultaneously promoted a counter-narrative about an effective campaign of Russian armed forces strikes on Ukrainian gas stations**, catering to the pro-war audience's demand for retaliation.

Rybar, one of the central Z-channels and one linked to the Ministry of Defense, published several posts on the theme of "gas stations as a vulnerable link, with a series of strikes on Ukraine's fuel network being recorded"[51] and "for a second day running, Ukraine is ablaze under massive strikes by the Russian army, with gas stations and logistics facilities being hit"[52].

Two Majors, a Telegram channel close to the security bloc, echoed this, warning:

> "Forbes: around 100 gas stations belonging to various chains have been attacked in Ukraine over the past month. [...] We've found their weak point; now we need to increase the number of strikes, wipe out critical elements of their gas stations, and finally move on to destroying major oil depots (in Odesa, for example), as well as oil-loading port and rail terminals. Creating a fuel crisis in Ukraine is far easier than it might seem"[53].

Even here, criticism was not entirely absent: the same Two Majors channel published a post addressed to the military leadership:

> "Strike planners, take note: fuel is not stored in filling stations themselves, it's piped in from a storage facility nearby, and hitting an administrative building or its roof won't stop the fuel supply for long. There's no need to waste expensive precision munitions on a report that just looks good"[54].

Another security bloc-linked channel, Svarshchiki, openly criticized the counter-narrative about strikes on Ukrainian gas stations: "Contrary to the psycho-neurotic, entirely misleading euphoria and the handful of videos from lines at border-area gas stations, we report the following: there is no fuel shortage whatsoever in either Odesa or Kyiv, let alone lines. In Odesa, people haven't even heard of this. We continue working; so far, no results"[55].

It is clear that the fuel crisis is a source of concern for nearly all pro-war Z-bloggers, regardless of their affiliation. The **key narrative** used to explain the scale of the crisis is that it represents "**an attempt to destabilize society through everyday anger**"[56], drawing **parallels with the February Revolution of 1917** in the Russian Empire.

Some critics emphasize the authorities' inaction and delayed response. MiG of Russia writes directly:

> "People keep complaining to us about local authorities' failure to bring order to the fuel lines. [...] Dear officials, mistakes can be forgiven, but you can't just sit on your backsides!"[57]

and

> "The fuel shortage is in fact a very serious challenge to social stability, one that both local and federal authorities need to address. Neither the problem nor the lines will simply resolve themselves"[58].

The Z-channel Fighterbomber points to a systemic lag in Russian air defense and expects the situation to worsen: "We simply have to accept that, with the resources currently available, we cannot defend such easily hit targets as oil refineries and fuel storage tanks. We should assume in advance that the enemy will smash the repaired refineries to hell again and again. [...] So we need to rethink our existing approach"[59].

Two Majors likewise indirectly acknowledges the sluggishness of the Russian military's command system: "Building a 'low-altitude' air defense system against drones requires extraordinarily fast, extraordinary, and non-bureaucratic measures. The enemy will not stop and will keep increasing strikes on oil production and oil storage facilities"[60], and "no matter how many times we repair the oil refineries, new strikes, in the absence of more serious air defense (including technologically advanced systems), will burn through all the effort and resources invested"[61].

Even so, all Z-bloggers acknowledge the gravity of the situation and are calling for retaliatory escalation. Z-analyst Yuri Kotyonok, for instance, writes:

> "The enemy is not hiding its intentions: through methodical strikes at the tactical, operational, and strategic depth, it aims to 'lay waste' to Russia's economy and cause devastation, widespread discontent, and chaos.
> But this is a game that can be played by two sides, and it's here that our own options against the svidomites [a derogatory term for Ukrainians] look promising"[62].

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