

**Russian State Duma elections 2021
in social media**

Final Report

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MEMO 98

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I. Introduction and background

The elections to the State Duma (the lower house of the Federal Assembly), which were held from 17 to 19 September 2021, took place against a backdrop of the exclusion of genuine opposition candidates, the general absence of independent media, the elimination of civil society and the absence of credible international observers due to the restrictions imposed by the authorities. These were the first elections held after the 2020's referendum on changes to the Constitution which included enhancing the powers of the incumbent president, who can run for two more terms and can remove judges of the Constitutional and Supreme Courts. The changes introduced within the overall legal framework also included additional limitations on holding public assemblies and increased criminal liability for related violations, expanded the status of 'foreign agents' to private individuals, and further tightened media and Internet regulation.

Four hundred and fifty seats were contested in a mixed electoral system, with half of them elected in single-mandate constituencies under the first-past-the-post system and the other half from lists of candidates of political parties in one federal constituency. Fifteen political parties wanted to participate, and 14 were registered to contest the elections, but prominent opposition figures were banned or excluded from running. The elections were marked by a widespread allegation of fraud. The introduction of electronic voting, which was made available in 7 regions of the Russian Federation, was among the most criticized 'novelties'. The elections lacked credibility and were at odds with the international commitments to which Russia had committed itself.

The aim of the monitoring project was to map the communication of political actors on social networks in the pre-election period (from 19 July to 16 September). The analysis of posts by selected political actors (contesting entities) on the social networks Facebook, Instagram, VKontakte, and Odnoklassniki focused primarily on the stories (narratives) presented in these posts.

II. Executive Summary

When comparing the number of posts by political parties on the four monitored platforms, parties were generally more active on Facebook (FB), while the fewest posts appeared on Odnoklassniki (OK). They posted 1,735 posts on Facebook, 1,268 on Instagram (IG), 1,059 on VKontakte (VK), and 507 on Odnoklassniki.

Top Topics/Stories

The single most frequently presented story by parties was '*Election campaign activities*', with 239 posts dedicated to this story on FB. However, on all three other platforms, this

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story was not featured very often. The most presented story on each of the other three platforms was *'Social support'* with 179 posts on Instagram, 112 on VK, and 83 on OK respectively. On Facebook, *'Social support'* was presented in 73 posts (the seventh most frequently presented standalone story on this platform).

For stories directly linked with elections, the story of *'Withdrawal of candidates'* was frequently presented on VK and OK (5th place), while it was only 11th on Facebook and 14th on Instagram.

Another key stories were *'Covid-19 in Russia'*, which was the 2nd most presented standalone story on three platforms - FB, OK, and VK, while it was the 5th on Instagram. Also, *'Environmental protection'* featured high - the 3rd most frequently presented story on FB (82 posts) as well as on VK (51 posts), and 2nd on IG (90 posts), while on OK it was the 4th one (22 posts).

On Facebook, relatively frequently presented stories were also the following ones: *'Sanctions against Russian athletes'* (4th, 80 posts), *'Economic development, business support'* (5th, 77 posts), and *'Criticism of Russian elections'* (6th, 75 posts). On Instagram, while the above-mentioned story of *'Social support'* dominated, other frequently presented stories were *'Environmental protection'* (90 posts) and *'Covid-19 in Russia'* (88 posts). On OK, the frequently presented story (not mentioned above) was *'Formation of the right historical memory, cultural policy'* - 3rd most frequently presented single story, while on VK, *'Ensuring security'* ranked as the 4th most frequently presented story (41 posts).

Engagement¹

If we consider the stories that generated the most interactions on **FB**, it was *'Election campaign activities'* (239 posts, with over 17,000 interactions), followed by *'Sanctions against Russian athletes'* (which had a higher 'interaction' rate, with 80 posts generating over 10,000 interactions). Other election-related stories also gained a high number of interactions - *'Withdrawal of candidates from elections'* and *'Criticism of Russian elections'*.

¹ Facebook defines "engagement" as all public interactions (reactions, comments, and shares) plus clicks on the post. On Instagram, "engagement" or interactions are the total number of likes, comments, and saves on the post. On OK, the engagement rate is calculated as follows: the classes, comments and shares are added together, then multiplied by 100 and divided by the number of members in the group. On VK, the engagement rate is calculated as the average number of reactions per post. Next, the resulting value is divided by the number of subscribers in the account and multiply by 100. However, in our report, when we refer to 'engagement' on VK or OK, it represents a sum of comments, reposts, and likes.

On **Instagram**, '*Social support*'-related stories (179 posts) were most interacted to, followed by '*Renewal (turnover) of power*' (2nd in terms of interactions, and 1st in the number of views) -72 posts - and '*Criticism of Russian elections*', which was presented in 'only' 35 posts but was the 3rd in terms of interactions. '

In **Vkontakte**, the four stories that generated the highest number of interactions are as follows: '*Social support*' (11,800) '*Withdrawal of candidates*' (10,900), '*Criticism of Russian elections*' (9,550), and '*Covid-19 in Russia*' (8,850).

As for **Odnoklassniki**, a story of '*Social support*' was the dominant story (3,200), followed by '*Covid-19 in Russia*' related stories with (almost 1,000 engagements), '*Formation of the correct historical memory and cultural policy*' (650), and '*Criticism of Russian elections*' (530).

Political parties in social media

On **Facebook**, three parties published more than 300 posts each in the monitored pre-election period. Rodina was the most active one (386 posts), closely followed by United Russia (345 posts), and Yabloko (301 posts). A just Russia-For Truth, KPFR, LDPR, and Party of Growth, published between 140 and 100 posts. When it comes to engagement, United Russia and Yabloko were the two clear frontrunners.

The most presented stories in the Rodina posts were '*Relations with Ukraine, war with Ukraine*' (36 posts) and '*Economic development, business support*' (31 posts); these stories also attracted the most interactions, along with the third story in terms of the number of posts - '*Migration in Russia*' (29 posts). For United Russia, the dominant story presented was '*Covid-19 in Russia*' (45 party posts), followed by '*Sanctions against Russian athletes*' (37 posts), the latter one, however, attracted a much higher number of interactions. The most presented stories in the Yabloko posts were two election-related stories: '*Election campaign activities*' (67 posts) and '*Criticism of Russian elections*' (29 posts), together with a story about Environmental protection (also 29 posts). The two election-related stories also generated the highest number of interactions.

On **Instagram**, United Russia was the single most active party in the number of posts – with 401 of them. Yabloko (over 248 posts), New people (209 posts), and LDPR (161 posts) followed. A rather different picture was noted regarding interactions (engagement), as KPFR was the 'leading' party, followed by New people and then United Russia; New people dominated in terms of the number of views.

In the case of United Russia, the story of '*Social Support*' (77 posts) and '*Covid-19 in Russia*' (50 posts) were the most prominent. The most represented stories in Yabloko's posts were '*Environmental protection*' (28 posts) and '*Withdrawal of candidates from elections*' (22 posts). The third most active party in terms of the number of posts - New people – presented more frequently the following stories: '*Support of the Regions*' (28 posts), followed by '*The authorities need to hear the people*' (22 posts). KPFR's election-

related stories '*Criticism of Russian Elections* (18 posts) and '*Withdrawal of Candidates from Elections*' (13 posts) were the most prominent in this party's posts.

United Russia was the single most active party also on **OK**, with 121 posts, followed by the Party of Pensioners (78 posts) and Yabloko (over 55 posts). In United Russia's posts, '*Covid-19 in Russia*' (27 posts) and '*Social Support*' (24 posts) were the two most frequently presented stories (also most engaged with). For the Party of Pensioners, the most dominant topics were '*Social support*' (35 posts) and '*Renewal of Power*' (18 posts), with the first one being by far the most engaged with the story. Yabloko's most frequently presented stories were '*Environmental protection*' and '*Withdrawal of candidates*' (each of them ten posts) along with '*Protection of rights (political, labor, etc.)*' (9 posts); the latter one also got the biggest number of engagements.

On **VK**, again United Russia was again the single most active party with 171 posts, followed by Rodina (127 posts) and Yabloko (over 92 posts). In the posts of United Russia, the story of '*Covid-19 in Russia*' (29 posts) and of '*Social Support*' (25 posts) were the most prominent and got the highest numbers of engagements. For Rodina, '*Relations with Ukraine, war with Ukraine*' (20 posts) and '*Economic development, support of the business*' (10 posts) were the leading ones, while in Yabloko posts, these were '*Environmental protection*' (17 posts) and '*Withdrawal of candidates*' along with a topic '*Power is authoritarian, uses repression*' (each topic 16 posts); these stories in Rodina's as well as Yabloko's posts also generated high engagement.

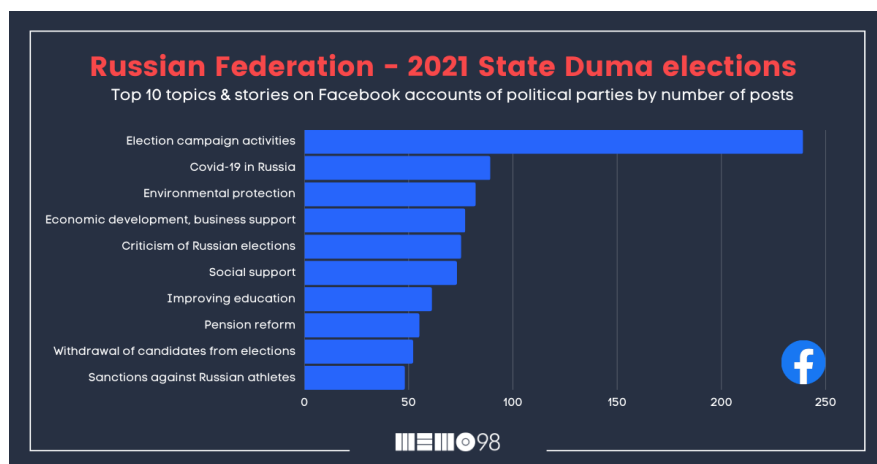
III. Findings

Facebook

A total of 1,735 posts with stories were identified in the posts of political parties. By far, the most frequently presented single story was as follows: '*Election campaign activities*' (239 posts). Election-related topics were mentioned relatively frequently also in relation to '*Criticism of elections*' (75) and '*Withdrawal of candidates from Elections*' (52).

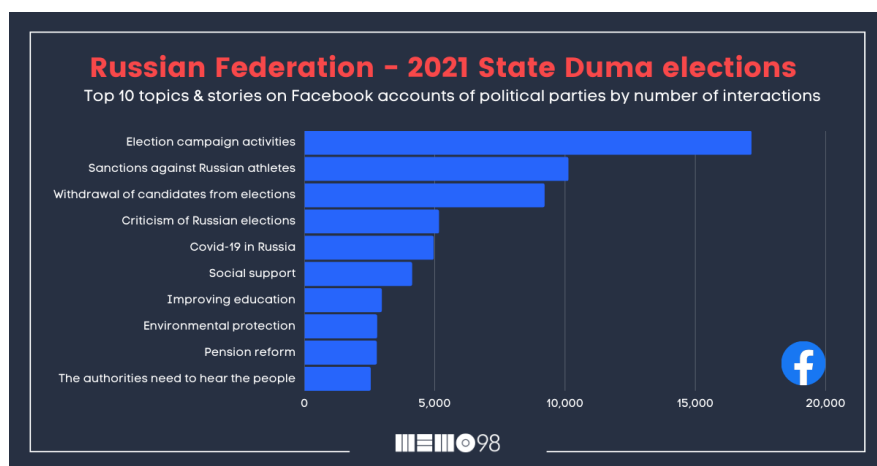
Other frequently presented standalone stories were '*Covid-19 in Russia*' (89 posts) and '*Environmental protection*' (82), '*Economic development, business support*' (77), '*Social support*' (73), '*Improving education*' (61), and '*Pension reform*' (55).

Figure 1 | FACEBOOK - Top 10 stories by political parties (number of posts)



When considering the stories that triggered the largest number of interactions, the most 'reacted to' standalone story was 'Election campaign activities' (239 posts, with over 17,000 reactions), followed by 'Sanctions against Russian athletes' (which had higher 'interaction' rate, with 80 posts generating over 10,000 interactions). Some election-related stories also gained also a high number of reactions - 'Withdrawal of candidates from elections' and 'Criticism of Russian elections'.

Figure 2 | | Top 10 topics & stories on Facebook accounts of political parties by number of interactions



On **Facebook**, regarding the number of posts and general activities of parties, Rodina (365 posts) was the most active one, followed by United Russia (315) and Yabloko (272 posts). A just Russia-For Truth, KPFR LDPR, and Party of Growth published between 140 and 100 posts. When it comes to the number of interactions, United Russia and Yabloko were the two leading parties.

Figure 3 | Number of posts published on Facebook accounts of political parties

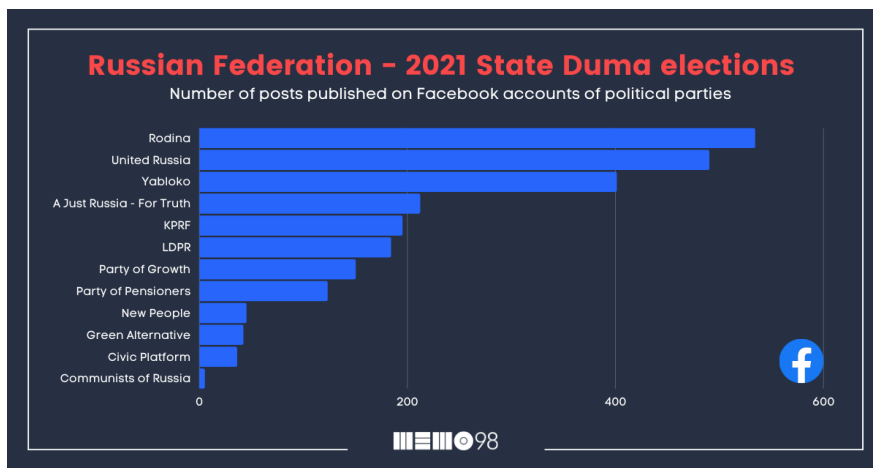
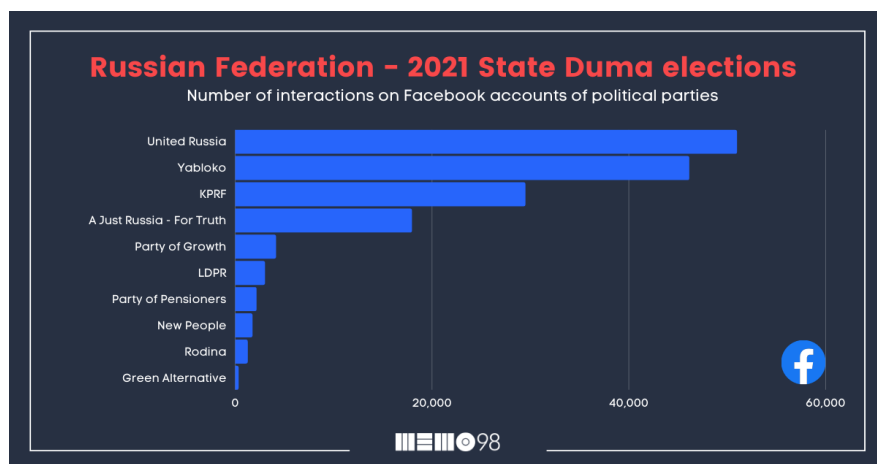


Figure 4 | Number of interactions on Facebook accounts of political parties



The most presented stories in the Rodina posts on Facebook were *'Relations with Ukraine, war with Ukraine'* (36 posts) and *'Economic development, business support'* (31 posts); these stories also attracted the most interactions, along with the third story in terms of the number of posts - *Migration in Russia* (29 posts). For United Russia, the dominant story presented was *'Covid-19 in Russia'* (45 posts), followed by *'Sanctions against Russian athletes'* (37 posts), the latter one, however, attracted a much higher number of interactions. The most presented stories in the Yabloko posts were two election-related stories: *'Election campaign activities'* (67 posts) and *'Criticism of Russian elections'* (29 posts), together with a story of *'Environmental protection'* (also 29 posts). The two election-related stories also generated the highest number of likes and comments.

Instagram

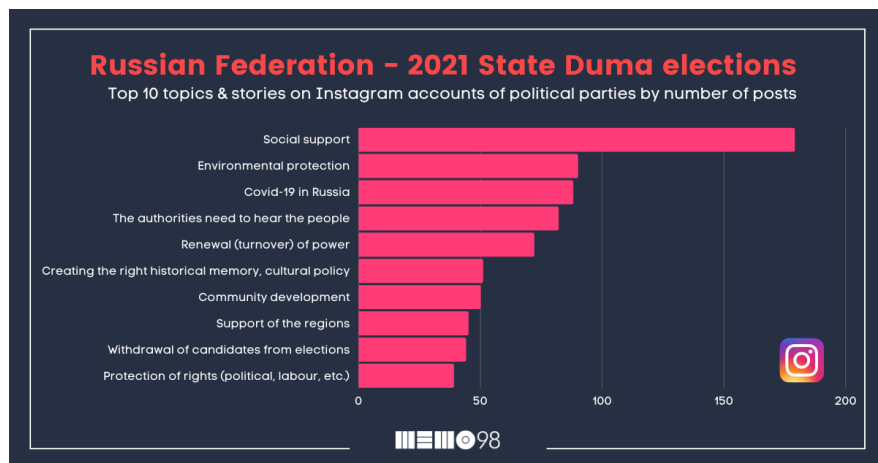
The picture of parties' posts on Instagram was somewhat different from the one shown on Facebook, as other stories were among the most frequently presented (except for the one related to Covid-19).

Out of a total of 1102 posts with stories by political parties in the monitored period, the following ones were the most frequently presented by parties overall: *Social support* (129 posts), *Covid-19 in Russia* (79 posts), *Environmental protection* (67 posts) and *The authorities need to hear the people* (63 posts).

The election-related stories - *Renewal (turnover) of power* and *Withdrawal of candidates from elections* followed and were each presented in 37 party posts; a story related to a *Criticism of Russian elections* accounted for 27 posts.

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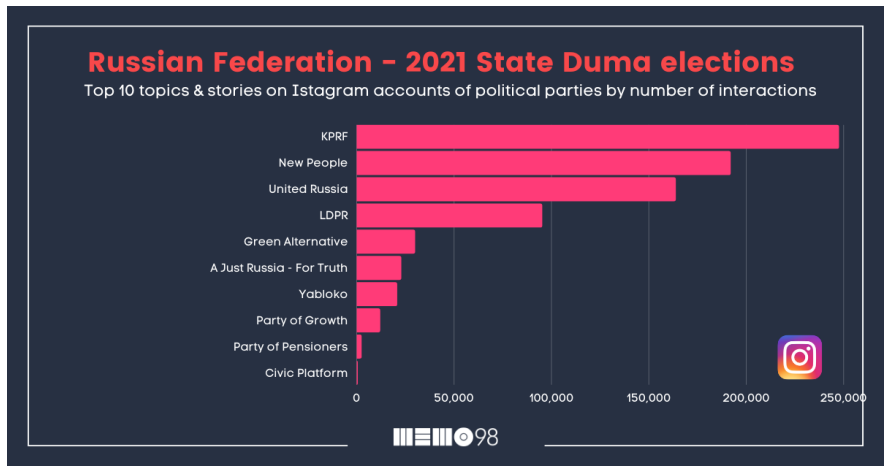
Figure 5 | Top 10 topics & stories on Instagram accounts of political parties by number of posts



On Instagram, the story of 'Social support' dominated, while other frequently presented stories were as follows: 'Environmental protection' (90 posts) and 'Covid-19 in Russia' (88 posts).

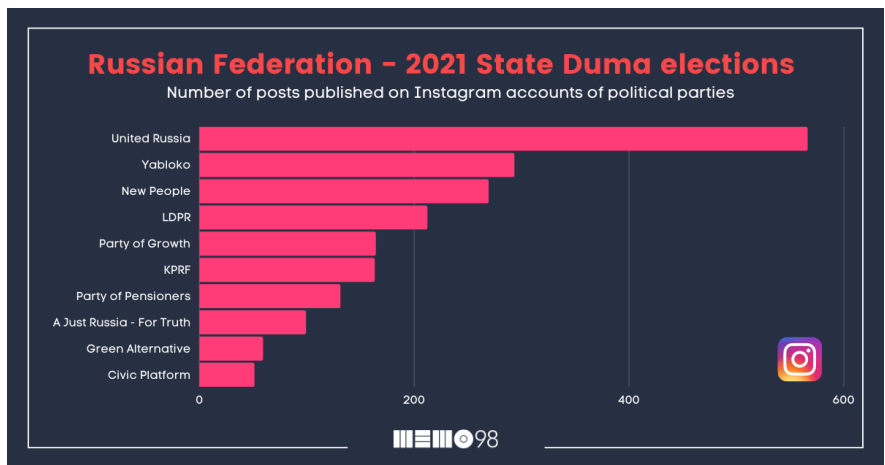
Among the top 10 stories, when it comes to interactions, the 'Social support'-related stories (179 posts) were the most interacted with, followed by 'Renewal (turnover) of power' (72 posts) and 'Criticism of Russian elections', which was presented in 'only' 35 posts but was the 3rd in terms of interactions. '

Figure 6 | Top 10 topics & stories on Instagram accounts of political parties by number of interactions



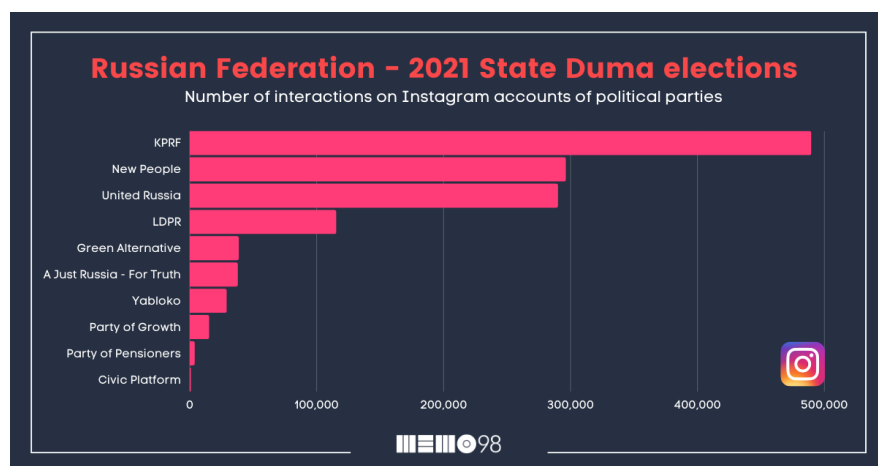
On **Instagram**, United Russia was the single most active party in the number of posts – with 401 of them. Yabloko (over 248 posts), New people (209 posts), and LDPR (161 posts) followed.

Figure 7 | Number of posts on Instagram accounts of political parties



A different picture was noted regarding interactions - where KPRF was the ‘leading’ party, followed by New people and United Russia.

Figure 8 | Number of interactions on Instagram accounts of political parties

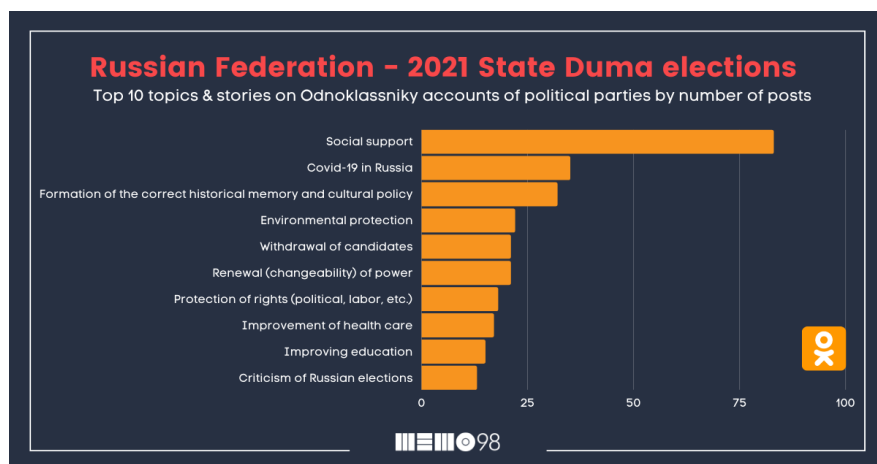


In the case of United Russia, the story of *Social Support* (77 posts) and *Covid 19 in Russia* (50 posts) were the most prominent in the party's contributions. The most represented stories in Yabloko's posts were *Environmental protection* (28 posts) and *Withdrawal of candidates from elections* (22 posts). The 3rd most active party in terms of number of posts - New people - presented more frequently the following stories: *Support of the Regions* (28 posts), followed by *The authorities need to hear the people* (22 posts). KPRF's election-related stories '*Criticism of Russian Elections*' (18 posts) and '*Withdrawal of Candidates from Elections*' (13 posts) were the most prominent stories in their posts.

Odnoklassniki (OK)

On OK, parties were less 'active' compared to other social networks, with a total of 507 posts with stories. Similarly, on Instagram, a story of *Social support* was the single most presented one, with 83 posts. Other relatively frequently presented stories were *Covid-19 in Russia* (35 posts) and *Formation of the correct historical memory and cultural policy* (32 posts). Over 20 posts were recorded in connection with the following environmental stories: *Environmental protection*, and *Renewal (changeability) of power*, as well as the election-related story of *Withdrawal of candidates* - the only story directly linked with elections among the top 10 stories on parties' OK posts.

Figure 9 | Top 10 topics & stories on VK accounts of political parties by number of posts



As for engagement, a story of *Social support* was the dominant story (3,200), followed by *Covid-19 in Russia-related* stories (almost 1,000 engagements), *Formation of the correct historical memory and cultural policy* (650), and *'Criticism of Russian elections'* (530).

United Russia was the single most active party also on OK with 121 posts, followed by the Party of Pensioners (78 posts) and Yabloko (over 55 posts).

In United Russia's posts, *Covid-19 in Russia'* (27 posts) and *'Social Support'* (24 posts) were the two most frequently presented stories (also most engaged with). For the Party of Pensioners, the most dominant topics were *Social support* (35 posts) and *'Renewal of Power'* (18 posts), with the first one being by far the most engaged with the story. Yabloko's most frequently presented stories were *'Environmental protection'* and *'Withdrawal of candidates'* (each of them ten posts) along with *'Protection of rights (political, labor, etc.)'* (9 posts); the latter one also got the biggest number of engagements.

Figure 10 | Top 10 topics & stories on Odnoklassniki accounts of political parties by engagement

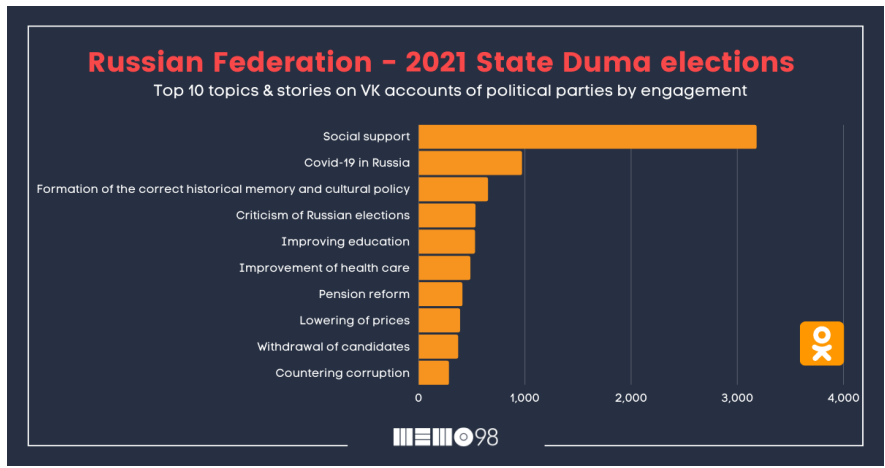


Figure 11 | Number of posts on V Kontakte accounts of political parties

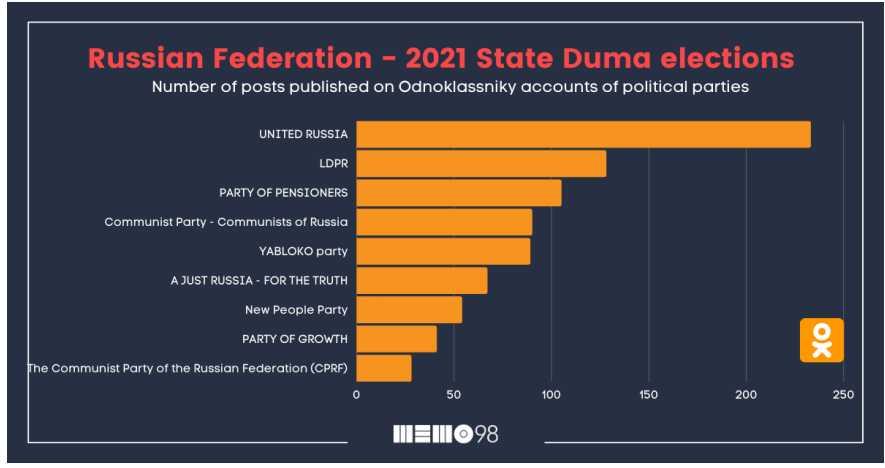
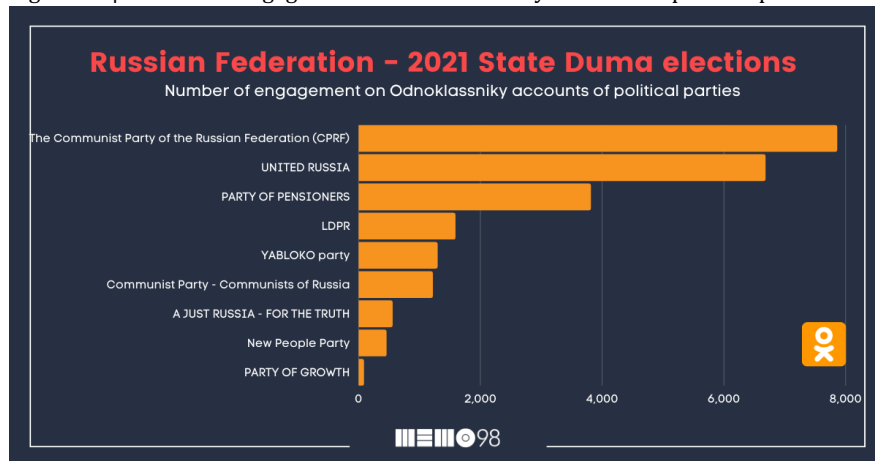


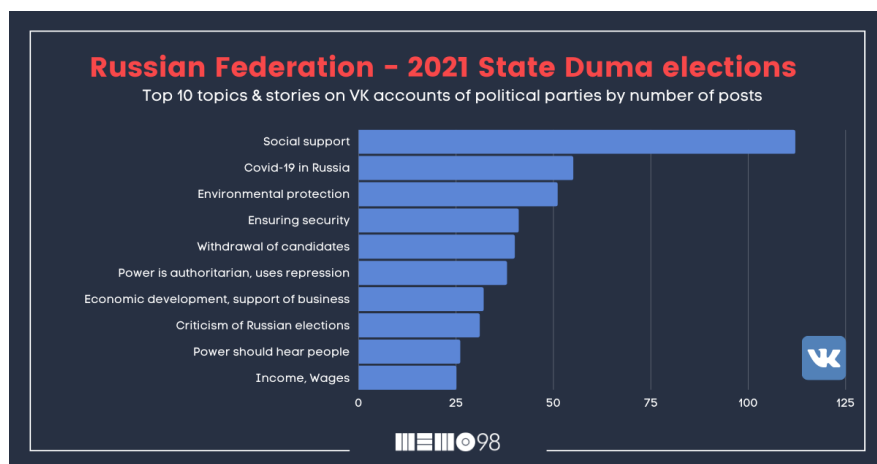
Figure 12 | Number of engagement on Odnoklassniky accounts of political parties



Vkontakte (VK)

Out of a total of 1059 posts, almost one third of them was dedicated to ‘other’ stories. Among the 740 posts in which monitors identified a relevant story, the single most frequently presented story was again the one dealing with *Social support* (112 posts), followed by *Covid-19 in Russia* (55 posts), *Environmental protection* (51), *Ensuring security* (41), *Withdrawal of candidates* (40) and *Power is authoritarian, uses repression* (38). More than 30 posts allocated to a story were also found for the following stories: *Economic development, support of business* (32 posts), and *Criticism of Russian elections* (31 posts).

Figure 13 | Top 10 topics & stories on VK accounts of political parties by number of posts



The four stories that generated the highest number of engagements are as follows: *'Social support'* (11,800) *'Withdrawal of candidates'* (10,900), *'Criticism of Russian elections'* (9,550), and *'Covid-19 in Russia'* (8,850).

Also, on VK, United Russia was the single most active party with 171 posts, followed by Rodina (127 posts) and Yabloko (over 92 posts). In the posts of United Russia, the story of *'Covid-19 in Russia'* (29 posts) and of *'Social Support'* (25 posts) were the most prominent and got the highest numbers of engagements. For Rodina, *'Relations with Ukraine, war with Ukraine'* (20 posts) and *'Economic development, support of the business'* (10 posts) were the leading ones, while in Yabloko posts, these were *'Environmental protection'* (17 posts) and *'Withdrawal of candidates'* along with a topic *'Power is authoritarian, uses repression'* (each topic 16 posts); these stories in Rodina's as well as Yabloko's posts also generated high engagement.

Figure 14 | Top 10 topics & stories on VK accounts of political parties by engagement

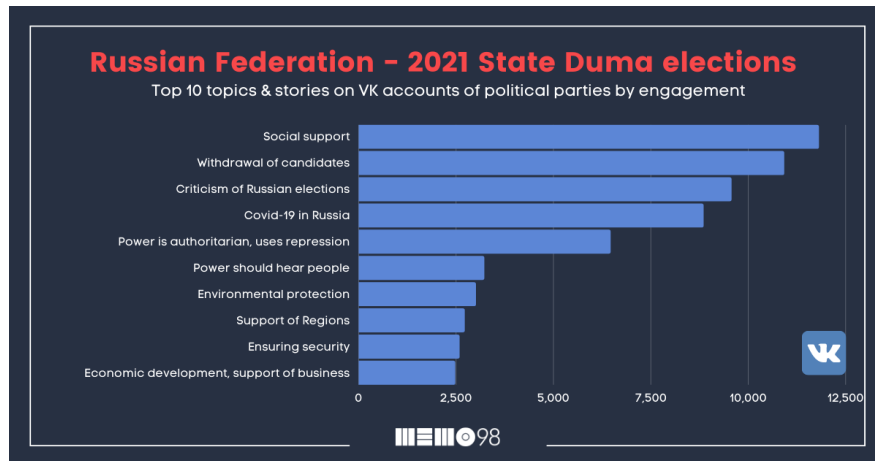


Figure 16 | Number of posts on VK accounts of political parties

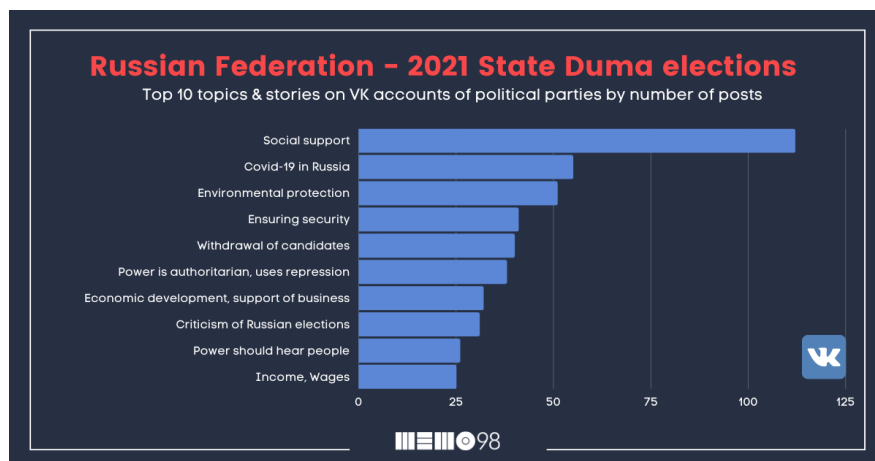
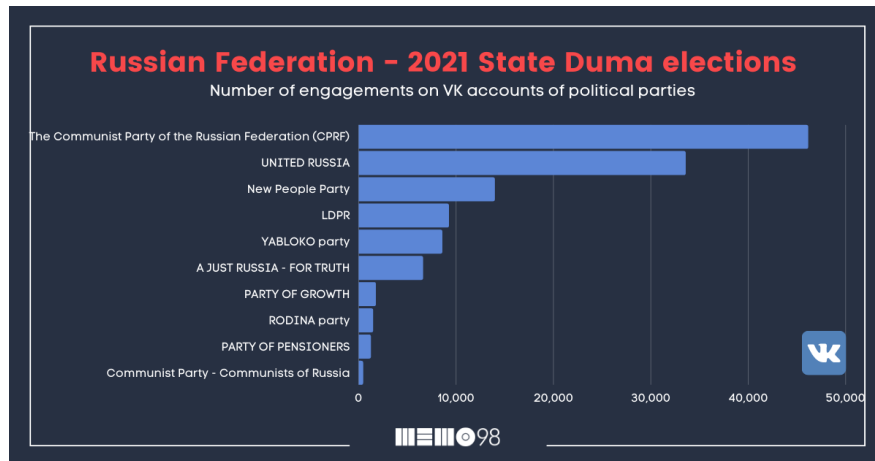


Figure 17 | Number of engagements on VK accounts of political parties

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IV. Methodology

The applied methodology consists of quantitative and qualitative analysis of the selected social media content. The quantitative analysis focused on the number of posts created by the selected actors on Facebook and Instagram using [CrowdTangle](#)². Posts on OK and VK were provided automatically by the “Scan Interfax” company. Social media posts served as a reference and monitoring unit, which was further analysed by monitors who identified those posts that were related to political issues or elections and classified the narratives presented in the posts of the selected actors.

I. List of monitored stories/narratives

² CrowdTangle (a social media analytics tool owned by Facebook) “tracks public posts on Facebook, Instagram and Reddit, made by public accounts or groups. The tool does not track every public account and does not track private profiles or groups, so this data is not representative of performance across the entire platform. The numbers shown here reflect public interactions (likes, reactions, comments, shares, upvotes and three second views), but do not include reach or referral traffic. It does not include paid ads unless those ads began as organic, non-paid posts that were subsequently “boosted” using Facebook’s advertising tools. Because the system doesn’t distinguish this type of paid content, note that some high-performing content may have had paid distribution. CrowdTangle also does not track posts made visible only to specific groups of followers.” The tool was applied on the published posts after three-days period so that the interaction generated by the post is relatively stabilized.

1 Другое (укажите)	Other
2 Противодействие коррупции	Countering corruption
3 Защита прав (политических, трудовых и т.д.)	Protection of rights (political, labour, etc.)
4 Проблемы образования	Educational challenges
5 Иные международные отношения	Other international relations
6 Отношения с ЕС	Relations with the EU
7 укрепление армии	Strengthening of the army
8 Поражение США в Афганистане	US defeat in Afghanistan
9 Поддержка села	Supporting rural areas
10 Улучшение здравоохранения	Improving healthcare
11 Обеспечение безопасности	Ensuring security
12 Проблемы здравоохранения	Health issues
13 Отношения с Украиной, война с Украиной	Relations with Ukraine, war with Ukraine
14 Улучшение образования	Improving education
15 Санкции против российских спортсменов	Sanctions against Russian athletes
16 Covid-19 в России	Covid-19 in Russia
17 Суверенитет, независимость страны	Sovereignty, independence of the country
18 Контроль за бизнесом, регулирование цен	Business control & price regulation
19 Отношения с США	Relations with the US
20 ЛГБТК+, однополые браки	LGBTQ+, same-sex marriage
21 Мировая пандемия Covid-19	The Covid-19 global pandemic
22 Навальный, ФБК, Штабы Навального	Navalny, FBK, Navalny HQs
23 Отношения с Беларусью	Relations with Belarus
24 Деятельность в рамках предвыборной кампании	Election campaign activities
25 Рост цен	Rising prices
26 Снижение цен	Falling prices
27 Критика российских выборов	Criticism of Russian elections
28 Защита экологии	Environmental protection
29 Благоустройство населенных пунктов	Community development
30 Пенсионная реформа	Pension reform
31 Миграция в России	Migration in Russia
32 Снижение долгового бремени	Debt relief
33 Защита религиозных (христианских) ценностей	Protection of religious (Christian) values
34 Доходы, зарплаты	Income, wages
35 Повышение качества ЖКХ	Improving the quality of the housing and utilities sector
36 Ремонт дорог	Repair of roads
37 Экономическое развитие, поддержка бизнеса	Economic development, business support
38 Традиционные ценности (семью и т.д.)	Traditional values (family, etc.)
39 Нормализация международных отношений	Normalisation of international relations
40 Оппозиция - экстремисты	Opposition - extremists
41 Умное голосование	Smart voting

42	Социальная поддержка	Social support
43	Снятие кандидатов с выборов	Withdrawal of candidates from elections
44	Обеспечение доступным жильем	Ensuring affordable housing
	Формирование правильной исторической памяти, культурной политики	Creating the right historical memory, cultural policy
46	Обновление (сменяемость) власти	Renewal (turnover) of power
47	Поддержка регионов	Support of the regions
48	Снижение налогов	Tax reduction
49	Фейк-ньюс о выборах	Fake news' about elections
	Реформа судебной системы или правоохранительных органов	Reform of the judiciary or law enforcement agencies
51	Федеральные программы	Federal programmes
52	Власть должна слышать людей	The authorities need to hear the people
53	Санкции против России	Sanctions against Russia
54	Власть авторитарна, использует репрессии	The state is authoritarian, uses repression
55	Прогрессивная шкала налогообложения	Progressive taxation scale
56	Избыток расходов Москвы	Excessive spending by Moscow
57	Развитие науки	Development of science
58	Поддержание стабильности	Maintenance of stability
59	Национализация отраслей экономики / предприятий	Nationalisation of industries/enterprises
60	Сокращение чиновников	Reducing bureaucracy

II. List of monitored actors in social media

1	Единая Россия	United Russia
2	КПРФ	KPRF
3	ЛДПР	LDPR
4	Справедливая Россия	A Just Russia - For Truth
5	Яблоко	Yabloko
6	Новые люди	New People
7	Гражданская платформа	Civic Platform
8	Зеленая альтернатива	Green Alternative
9	Зеленые	The Greens
10	Коммунисты России	Communists of Russia
11	Партия Роста	Party of Growth
12	Родина	Rodina
	Российская партия пенсионеров за социальную справедливость (Партия пенсионеров)	Party of Pensioners
14	Российская партия свободы и справедливости	Russian Party of Freedom and Justice
15	Российский общенародный союз	The Russian People's Union

Commented [MM1]: Zeleni v datach su, zlych tam nename, ucty zda sa napr. na FB maju vsetci:
1 strana Зеленые
https://www.facebook.com/greenparty.ru/?ref=page_internal
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2. Российский Общенародный Союз maju FB, ale prakticky ho nerouzivaju, takže Ok tiež
3. Российская партия свободы и справедливости ale zda sa ma aktivny facebook, nezda sa byt privatny,
<https://www.facebook.com/partypssitito>, neviem preco tym padon mie su v datach. - je mozne ze by ich monitori nerobili naschval? Alebo to nie je ich oficialny FB napr? co povies?

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ABOUT

MEMO 98

An internationally recognized, independent, and non-profit specialist media institution with 25 year-long of experience conducting media monitoring and research and assisting civil society groups. Using tested and approved methodologies and tools, we provide media analysis and media monitoring with tangible results, in particular during election periods. Having participated in more than 120 election observation missions and about 150 media & election-related projects and training in more than 60 countries (in the Commonwealth of the Independent States and the Balkan countries, but also in Africa, Asia, South America, and the Middle East), our experts provide assistance on media & electoral and other democratic arrangements.

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