Top results for the hashtag "90s" on TikTok.
Source: Screenshot TikTok, #90ые

#givemebackmy90s: Memories of the First Post-Soviet Decade in Russia on Instagram and TikTok

Mykola Makhortykh

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Thirty years have passed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In Russia's public sphere today, the decade that followed is remembered with ambivalence while politically, negative narratives of the 'rowdy nineties' dominate. The article examines how the 1990s are being represented on social media platforms, in particular on TikTok and Instagram, and to what extent the platform-generated grassroot memory practices differ from, or even oppose the official narrative about this period.

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On 2 June 2021, during a plenary session of the Russian parliament, the Chairman of the Russian State Duma and a close ally of President Vladimir Putin, Vyacheslav Volodin, declared that it was time to openly name those responsible for the disintegration of the Soviet Union. In his speech, Volodin referred to the first post-Soviet decade as the "lost era" and contrasted it with the years following the ascension of Putin in 2000, which were marked by "the collection of lands" and the "formation of the new Russia". By constructing such a contrast between the "bad" 1990s – also known as the 'rowdy nineties' (Likhie devianostye)[1] – and the "good" post-2000 years, Volodin highlighted the negative consequences of the political transition and the importance of both rallying around Russia's current leadership and sticking to its political course.

The instrumentalization of the 'rowdy nineties' as a memory bogeyman by pro-Kremlin politicians is not a new phenomenon. Intensively deployed by Putin himself, the first post-Soviet decade is usually portrayed as a consequence of "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century", which led to internal dissent within Russia and caused an unprecedented departure "from law, order, and morals".[2] Such statements are used both to consolidate public support among domestic audiences by emphasizing the benefits of a strong state apparatus, which supports order and economic stability,[3] and to justify Russian foreign policy, such as the military intervention in Syria, which was legitimized by the need to prevent the revival of the Islamic terrorism associated with the Chechen Wars of the 1990s.[4]

The Kremlin's negative stance towards the period is not completely detached from historical reality. While it was a time of unprecedented economic opportunities, and political and press freedom, the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union were tough for many Russians, who suddenly found themselves without the Soviet social safety net. The "shock therapy" many experienced – that is, the set of reforms intended to liberalize Russia's economy and shift it to a market-based system – led to an economic contraction of some 40 per cent and to massive unemployment, in particular among people over the age of 55. Together with the explosion in organized crime, this economic instability (further amplified by political upheavals, such as the first war in Chechnya or the 1993 constitutional crisis) resulted in a substantial drop in life expectancy, in particular for Russian men, which dropped from 63.8 to 57.7 years.[5]

The instrumentalization of the popular memory about this troubling period, and in particular of its traumatic aspects, has become more pronounced in recent years, which can be attributed both to the coming anniversary of the beginning of the 'rowdy nineties' and to the strengthening of the Kremlin's grip on the public sphere. The latter in turn has been amplified by the deterioration of relations with the West and the ongoing attacks on the extra-parliamentary Russian opposition and independent media outlets. Against this backdrop, the use of online media platforms, especially those powered by Western media companies, is seen as a form of resistance by those who oppose the official narratives. Less subject to censorship and less integrated into hegemonic memory relations, these platforms provide a space for constructing alternative narratives of the past. One example of this potential are 'memory marathons' – flashmob initiatives on Instagram and Facebook that call on people to post pictures from the 1990s. While many marathons are not explicitly political and often do not have a particular organizer behind them, they can still be understood as acts of resistance to the official discourse about the 1990s as a time of national humiliation and economic hardship.[6] This resistance can be found, for example, in the emphasis placed on a more nuanced and not exclusively negative picture of the period, or in highlighting

that while there was crime and poverty, there were also happy moments associated with friendship, freedom, and opportunities.

This dichotomy between state-shared memory hegemonies and platform-enabled grassroot memory practices can nonetheless be misleading for (at least) two reasons. First, Russian authorities are quite capable of using social media platforms to counter the counter-narratives and to reinforce their political and memory hegemonies.[7] Second, the exclusive focus on acts of memory resistance, such as memory marathons, can limit the recognition of the multiplicity of online memory practices dealing with, for instance, individual nostalgia or trauma, memory commercialisation,[8] or creative appropriations of the past.[9] While these practices are not always explicitly related to political uses of memory, they still can have substantial influence on how the past is perceived by the public and, thus, how (un)successfully it is instrumentalized.

The complex dynamics between uses and counter-uses of nostalgia and trauma on digital platforms related to the 1990s in Russia requires a more comprehensive assessment of online memory practices associated with the first post-Soviet decade. To this aim, this paper looks at how the memory of the 'rowdy nineties' is addressed and engaged with on two visual content hosting platforms, namely Instagram and TikTok. Not only are these two platforms very popular among Russian users, but they also occupy a special place within the digital media ecosystem, something I will discuss briefly in a later section.

The Nostalgia and Trauma of the First Post-Soviet Decade

Despite often being treated as opposing phenomena, nostalgia and trauma are both associated with a sense of radical discontinuity and rupture with the past that causes its intrusion on the present.[10] In the case of nostalgia, such an intrusion is usually attributed to strong positive feelings about the past, whereas trauma is often caused by past suffering that individuals or societies are unable to cope with in the present. In both cases, there is a strong emotional attachment to the past, which can serve as a powerful means of mobilization – both in the context of politics, where it can consolidate support for a certain agenda, or in the context of commerce, where it can drive consumption.

The potential for instrumentalizing nostalgia and trauma is particularly strong in Russia, which first experienced significant societal upheavals following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and then a growing turn towards authoritarianism in 2000s. These upheavals resulted in a deep longing for different aspects of a lost past ranging from greater political or media freedoms to the return of real or imagined social security. There are also multiple unresolved traumas in society today, in particular those that recall political repression and suffering, that cannot be sufficiently addressed by existing memory practices.[11] Russia's public sphere is thus significantly marked by nostalgia and trauma, both easily and intensively exploited both by a broad range of actors.

The first post-Soviet decade occupies a special place in this context, as it is associated with a complex amalgamation of nostalgic and traumatic experiences. While it is debatable to what extent the hardships associated with the first post-Soviet decade — including ethnic violence, the rise of organized crime, high unemployment and regional armed conflicts – can be understood as a form of collective trauma, for many Russians the nineties became associated with strong negative feelings. Against this backdrop, however, there is also a nostalgic longing for different aspects of life in the nineties, among them the fact that this was a brief period during which there was both a lack of censorship and an intensified

critical assessment of the Soviet past (including the removal of certain monuments to state terror). There was also an unprecedented degree of political and creative freedom, as well as new economic opportunities, that came with the fall of the Iron Curtain. Finally, this period demarcates the childhoods and teenage years of the first post-Soviet generation, which has now reached adulthood and has established itself as an active participant in social discourses. Members of this cohort, who are also, unsurprisingly, the most active internet users in Russia, also seem to share a particular emotional attachment to the nineties.

The complex mix of attitudes towards the nineties has amplified the ongoing contestation of memory about the first post-Soviet decade in Russia. The intense instrumentalization by the ruling elites as well as some opposition groups[12] of the predominantly negative aspects of the nineties has been met with opposition from parts of civil society, where this decade is viewed as an alternative to the shift towards authoritarianism pursued after 2000. Both of these processes are affected by a growing commodification of the memory of the nineties, which – similarly to Soviet nostalgia – has become an important factor in promoting different services and goods.

The rise of online platforms has had a substantial impact on these complex memory dynamics. By offering a space where the past can be discussed, challenged, and negotiated, platforms enable new possibilities for breaking trauma-related silences and processing the strong emotions associated with the intrusion of the past into the present. At the same time, it also creates new possibilities for manipulating the public, for example, by instrumentalizing sentimental feelings about the past for political or commercial gain and using a platform's reach to target a larger audience.

How to Search for the First Post-Soviet Decade on Instagram and TikTok

To examine how platform-based practices interact with the instrumentalization of memory about the nineties in Russia, this paper uses observations gathered on Instagram and TikTok. Established in 2012, Instagram is a major Western platform, owned by Facebook, that is used for storing and sharing photo and video content. With more than 56 million users in Russia, Instagram is one of the country's most popular platforms. TikTok, a platform owned by the Chinese technology company ByteDance, is less popular – over 22 million Russian users as of October 2020 – which can be attributed to the fact that it only became available to audiences outside China in 2018.

Both Instagram and TikTok share a similar functionality, namely the storing and sharing of (audio)visual content, through which they participate in shaping individual and collective memories. In the case of Instagram, both photos and videos can be shared (although photos are more present on the platform) which makes it usable as a form of digital photo album – making it particularly relevant to a study of nostalgia and trauma.[13] By contrast, TikTok is focused on short entertaining videos (also known as TikToks), which makes it less useful as a photo album than as an online creativity platform. However, this does not mean that it cannot be used for remediating nostalgia or for challenging hegemonic narratives of the past: TikTok's popularity among younger generations makes it particularly effective as a means of reaching out and mobilizing audiences that would otherwise be difficult to reach.[14]

Hashtags – user-selected keywords preceded with a "#" sign – play a crucial role in organizing communication on both Instagram and TikTok. They make content easily searchable and connect it to other pieces of similar content. On both platforms, there are multiple hashtags associated with the first post-Soviet decade, ranging from more descriptive ones, such as #nineties (#девяностые) or

#ninetiesyears (#девяностыегоды) to more emotional ones, such as #rowdynineties (#лихиедевяностые) or #givemebackmy90s (#вернитемнемои90). The current paper considers content related to the hashtag #90s (#90ые), as it is present across both platforms, lacks any clear emotional predisposition towards a more positive or negative attitude to the period (which is characteristic of some of the other possible hashtags) and is associated with a diverse selection of content.[15]

The Nineties on Instagram

The examination of Instagram content highlights the rather limited presence of content explicitly dealing with political aspects of the period or with the Kremlin's appropriation of the memory of it. Among the examined Instagram posts only a couple include explicit references to politics (e.g., a video showing an old interview with Boris Nemtsov), and none contains content which directly supports or debunks the hegemonic narrative of the 'rowdy nineties' as a chaotic period of economic despair and national humiliation.

Instead, similar to observations made on the basis of Facebook content,[16] Instagram content primarily deals with nostalgic aspects of the nineties. One type of such nostalgic content comes in the form of posts which express a yearning for the childhood and teenage years that coincided with the first post-Soviet decade. Similar to a reflective or personal nostalgia,[17] these posts rarely refer to specific political or cultural realities of the period and, instead, focus on individual experiences without embedding them into a larger context. Usually, such posts feature family photos accompanied by brief descriptions referring to family members (e.g., parents or siblings), often in the form of hashtags (e.g., #childhood or #withdad).

Another form of nostalgic engagement involves emotional references to specific cultural products associated with the nineties. Similar to the aesthetic form of 'Yugonostalgia',[18] such posts express a fascination with specific elements of the past (e.g., toys or popular songs such as Belye rozy) by supplementing the image of an item or event with an emotional commentary. In some cases, the posts show only an image of the item without much additional comment to stress their authenticity, as in the case of a post highlighting a photo of popular juices, Zuka and Yupi, accompanied just with the "90s" hashtag.

Beyond this mostly individualized engagement with the first post-Soviet decade, Instagram hosts many posts dealing with the commercialization of nostalgia. Similar again to the utopian form of Yugonostalgia,[19] where the past is utilized as part of a marketing strategy, these posts evoke nostalgic feelings about the nineties in the targeted generation by asking them if they are ready to play legendary games now available in online shops or dive into shared memories by dancing to their favourite hits of the 1990s during musical performances.

An interesting aspect of this nostalgic content on Instagram is that despite a lack of explicit political instrumentalization, these memory about the nineties can nonetheless be understood as a form of indirect political statement. By associating the first post-Soviet decade with an individual yearning for days past or a present commercial success, such posts effectively challenge the state-sponsored hegemonic narrative of the nineties as a time of misery and hardship.

This potential to challenge the narrative of the 'rowdy nineties' on Instagram is amplified by the rather

more limited presence of content dealing with traumatic aspects of the first post-Soviet decade. A few of the posts examined feature black-and-white images, usually of men,[20] that briefly refer to (primarily) economic hardships with statements such as "we earned money as we could" or hashtags referring to crime (e.g., #racket). The limited visibility of such traumatic, or at least negative, experiences can be explained by the difficulty of sharing traumatic experiences via public Instagram profiles.

One further form of engagement with the memory of the nineties on Instagram that partially engages with trauma-related content deals with the use of the past as a cultural reference. Such references usually deal with elements of lifestyle (e.g., clothes) utilized to reproduce a stereotypical image of a social group associated with the period. Many of these references relate to the criminal subcultures of the period, such as the 'New Russians' (high-ranking criminals distinguished by their luxurious, albeit often tasteless lifestyle). The majority of these references follow the same composition: a selfie of the Instagram user [wearing clothes typical for the post-Soviet decade](#), sometimes re-enacting an activity (e.g. pretending to participate in [a nineties-style party](#)).

While the presumed aim of such cultural references is for comic effect, it also has implications for remembering the nineties. The substantial presence of crime-related references highlights the central role of organized crime during the first post-Soviet decade, which subsequently becomes a prism through which the period is viewed by upcoming generations. Consequently, Instagram content leads to a reiteration of memory-related stereotypes that also reflect and reinforce the hegemonic narrative of the 'rowdy nineties'.

The Nineties on TikTok

Similar to Instagram, there is little explicit discussion of the political aspects of the nineties in the TikToks examined. Nonetheless, a couple of TikToks about the first post-Soviet decade are more critical towards the period than the Instagram posts. While doing so, they to a certain degree reiterate the Kremlin narrative about the period by focusing on economic hardships and the rise in organized crime. One example of such content is the posting of news reports about the economic crisis at the beginning of nineties accompanied with tags such as "#hungergames" and "#productdeficit".

The majority of the TikToks examined, however, tend to focus on nostalgic aspects of the nineties, albeit in a different way than observed on Instagram. While an intimate engagement with the past occasionally appears on the platform, as in the case of [a user posting a TikTok devoted to their parents' wedding in the nineties,](#) they are less common, a fact that can be attributed to the more public nature of the platform. Instead, the majority of the examined content reveals an aesthetic nostalgia related to specific places or cultural products. Usually, such TikToks show nineties' cityscapes (a theme which is largely absent on Instagram) or segments of popular series of the time (e.g., [Brigada](#)). Another common form of aesthetic nostalgia is a customized slideshow demonstrating photos of items (e.g., toys or cosmetics) accompanied by popular music from the nineties.

Another major distinction between the two platforms is the absence of content associated with the commercialization of nostalgia among the examined TikToks. There may be several explanations for this difference, starting with Russian online merchants' limited recognition of TikTok's potential and ending with the lesser popularity of commercial TikToks, which ultimately makes them visible on the platform known for its reliance on algorithmic curation.[21] Regardless, the absence of this specific form of nostalgic content on TikTok has important consequences for a representation of the nineties, which

are presented as less commercially successful and desirable than on Instagram.

The more ambiguous treatment of the nineties on TikTok is amplified by other types of content that appear on the platform. Whereas trauma-related content remains very under-represented – just like on Instagram, TikToks are more outspoken about discussing negative aspects of the period and relating them to the hegemonic tropes, such as the nineties as a period of national humiliation. As an example, some TikTok users exonerate chauvinistic attitudes towards Central Asian migrants by referencing the ethnic violence of the nineties, during which Russians were expelled from former Central Asian Soviet republics.

Such a critical stance towards the nineties is reflected in many TikToks, which creatively appropriate tropes from the period to make cultural references. However, even more than on Instagram, such TikToks tend to focus on references to the rise of organized crime or, in some cases, the poverty and lack of manners associated with the period. Usually, such references are made in the form of short videos showing teenagers or young people wearing clothes typical for the period, performing various activities to music from the nineties, such as dancing or applying "gangster wife" makeup.

Occasionally, TikToks make use of cultural references to comment not only on the nineties, but on the present day as well – for instance, when users post video recordings of advertisements from the nineties to make a meme and to jokingly comment on poor working conditions today. Such creative appropriations of the past tend to reinforce stereotypes about the period. Compared with Instagram, where crime-related historical references do occur, but are not prevalent, cultural references on TikTok put a stronger emphasis on negative stereotypes associated with the 'rowdy nineties' which – together with the more viral nature of the platform's content – can facilitate the formation of a rather one-sided negative view of the period.

Concluding Remarks

The examination of content related to the first post-Soviet decade on Instagram and TikTok highlights the complex relationship between media platforms and memory hegemonies in Russia. The limited number of posts that explicitly make reference to political issues about the nineties and their legacy raise questions about the degree to which platforms are actually used to challenge or reinforce dominant memory discourses. At the same time, many platform-based memory practices – such as posts of happy childhood photos, music or images from the period – still engage in an instrumental use of the past that either promotes a positive, nostalgic view of the period, not least for commercial purposes, or reiterates negative stereotypes about the first post-Soviet decade, usually with humorous intent. Together, these observations show that it is important to look beyond explicitly political uses of memory in online contexts and to take into consideration the multiplicity of digital memory practices and their potential impact on society.

It is also important to consider the limitations of the current analysis and their potential effects on the findings generated. In analysing only one of many nineties-related hashtags on TikTok and Instagram, it is hardly possible to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the many different ways in which the two platforms are used for remembering the first post-Soviet decade. Similarly, differences in data collection between the Instagram dataset (which featured posts from 2012-2019 that engage with the memory of the nineties) and the TikTok dataset (which was constituted from what the platform retrieval algorithm viewed as the most relevant content, primarily from 2020) are to be taken into account. While

the current study still provides useful insights into the similarities and differences between memory practices on the two platforms, future research can certainly benefit from a more coherent approach to data collection, as well as an expanded range of hashtags associated with nostalgia and trauma of the 'rowdy nineties'.

Despite these limitations, this analysis highlights the importance of a critical assessment of the relationship between online platforms, politics and memory in Russia. The surprising absence of coherent counter-narratives about the 1990s, which is also typical of so-called 'memory marathons' which often focus on explicitly non-political aspects of the period, could potentially be attributed to the unprecedented lack of interest in politics, in particular among young Russians (who are also most active online). However, it could also signal the need to re-evaluate existing assumptions about the pluralizing effect of online platforms on individual and collective remembrance. While social media platforms undoubtedly create new possibilities for ordinary citizens both in Russia and worldwide to express their views on the past and potentially counter official narratives, the degree to which this potential is actually realized remains unclear. In this context, the apolitical nature of engagements with the highly contested memory of the first post-Soviet decade suggests that the realization of this potential may have been overestimated, as well as stresses the need for further empirical research on digital memories and platforms.

Footnotes

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15. The data from Instagram was collected as part of a larger project looking at the history of engagement with the memory of the nineties on different platforms. Using Phantombuster, an automated programming interface (API) for Instagram, 10 221 Instagram posts published between 2012 and 2019 were collected. From this dataset, a random sample of 222 posts distributed equally between the years (with the exception of 2012 for which there was shortage of content) was selected for analysis. By contrast, TikTok data was retrieved using internal platform search mechanisms, with 70 top TikToks from 12 June examined. In both cases, close reading was used for the analysis.
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People gather to take down the monument to Feliks Dzerzhinsky on Lubyanka square in Moscow, 1991.
Photo: Dmitry Borko, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Protests against Yeltsin's economic reforms in October 1998.
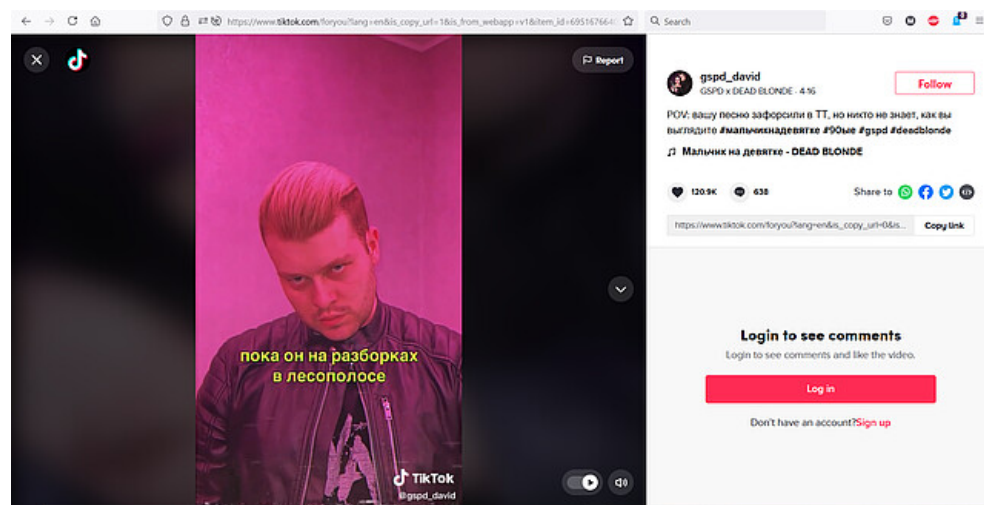Photo: Бахтиёр Абдуллаев, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

Referencing content on Instagram: re-enacting a nineties-style party.
Source: Snapshot Instagram, #90ые

Aesthetic nostalgia content on Instagram: a popular drink from the 1990s.
Source: Snapshot Instagram, #90ые

TikTok users post references to organized crime during the nineties.
Source: Snapshot TikTok, #90ые