

Digital Activism in Russia. The Communication Tactics of Political Outsiders: Sofya Glazunova, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, Xv + 211pp., £71.50 Ebook.

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It is a peculiar thing, reading work on the Russian opposition that was written before 24 February 2022. The launch of Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine confirms the most pessimistic predictions of Russian political development and highlights the failure to create meaningful alternatives to the authoritarian trajectory. In this light, Glazunova's *Digital Activism in Russia* reads less like the fine-grained analysis of oppositional communication that it is, and more like a post-mortem. It is to Glazunova's credit that her work has not been rendered irrelevant by the terrible events of 2022. Instead, reading with post-February hindsight, the book presents a valuable exploration of the shrinking spaces for political agency in Russia. It is a picture of the country on the eve of widespread domestic repression and all-out war.

Glazunova situates herself at the intersection of political science and communications. This interdisciplinarity is reflected in the book, which can also be understood as a kind of hybrid: partly a political history of Russian journalism, it also deftly covers the evolution and repression of Russian social media (including from a technological perspective), before focusing on the communicative specificities of Alexey Navalny and allies. Along the way, she includes a smattering of vignettes of digital repression and resistance in other non-democracies, thereby putting the Russian case into global context. Disciplinary purists may find an unsatisfying lack of depth in certain respects, but overall, the book is a good read for those interested in why political communication has been increasingly difficult in contemporary Russia, and in how some people from the non-systemic opposition carved out spaces for alternative expression.

Although the book reaches back to the fall of the USSR, it focuses mostly on developments in the Russian media landscape spurred by the mass protests in 2011-2012. Glazunova does well in synthesizing a great deal of information – some of it quite technical – into a text that is, for the most part, highly readable. She does not allow herself to get bogged down in convoluted post-Soviet histories. Rather, she displays good sense in choosing circumscribed examples to illustrate her broader points, while avoiding too much detail. Sometimes this results in perhaps not enough space for nuance or debate, but the larger goal is to focus on how opposition figures evade digital control. She does not lose sight of this goal, even though the bulk of the book (chapters two through seven) is dedicated to laying the historical and conceptual groundwork for the case studies at the end. She is consistent about tying this due diligence to her overall ambitions, so the book does not feel unbalanced. Still, more space for the presentation and analysis of other empirical material would be welcome.

In general, Glazunova's strongest contribution is in charting the practices of increasing state control over digital spaces in the aftermath of 2011-2012 protests, while concurrently tracing the establishment of Alexey Navalny's opposition movement and identifying the tactics by

which he and his contemporaries largely evaded repression. Though the text features Navalny heavily, this is no hagiography. She does not shy away from his failures or his less-savoury background. The reasons for her attention to him and his organization are justified and defensible: since participation in Russian politics is repressed and suppressed, other means of political expression must be found. Despite their inability to alter substantially the balance of power, Navalny and team have been remarkably successful in capturing domestic and international attention, and in organizing mass mobilizations in an environment that is extremely non-conducive to protest. Their tactics of communication deserve scholarly attention, which Glazunova ably provides.

Another strength of the text is in Glazunova's typology of populisms, theorized coherently and then applied to Navalny and associates. Glazunova has published some of this work in a separate article, but here in book form, she has more space to develop and engage. This is welcome, but other areas of the manuscript suffer from this kind of repurposing. I suspect that parts of Chapter 4 ("The 'Sovereign Internet' and Social Media") have been cobbled together from her other projects, as they feature some convoluted and redundant text that smacks of copy pasting. For instance, the text introduces Pavel Durov as a tech entrepreneur after already having discussed him as such. Similarly, YouTube is mentioned as a subsidiary of Alphabet Inc. twice within two pages. These awkward redundancies are not too problematic and they would be easily resolved with another edit, but they detract from the quality of the book and distract from Glazunova's more important messages.

Overall, however, this is a brisk and uncomplicated read, and it represents an important contribution to understanding the communication tactics of political outsiders in a specific period in Russian history. There is a tragic end to this story, of course. Glazunova does touch on the implications of Navalny's current imprisonment, and the flight of some of his compatriots, but she could not know the scope of domestic repression to be unleashed in the wake of the full-scale war against Ukraine. Since then, many of the state strategies of control explored in the text have come into even greater force, while the prospects for non-systemic opposition are all but gone. This perspective gives this book a rather grim overtone. Nevertheless, it is a valuable resource for researchers and students working on digital opposition in Russia or in conversation with other non-democratic contexts, and for those interested in how Navalny et al. managed a modicum of free political expression in an increasingly closed Russia.