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► **To cite this version:**

Françoise Daucé, Benjamin Loveluck, Francesca Musiani. Preface to the English-Language Edition. Françoise Daucé, Benjamin Loveluck, Francesca Musiani (eds.), *Digital Authoritarianism in the Making. Repression and Resistance on the Russian Internet*, The MIT Press; The MIT Press, pp.xi-xv, 2025, <10.7551/mitpress/15798.003.0003>. <halshs-05367574>

HAL Id: halshs-05367574

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-05367574v1>

Submitted on 16 Nov 2025

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Preface to the English-Language Edition

Françoise Daucé, Benjamin Loveluck, and Francesca Musiani

This book tells stories of digital coercion, of digital resistance, and of the network of actors and tools that address, counter, or foster them in Russia. It is the English translation of a book released by Presses des Mines in the French language, in mid-2023, with the title *Genèse d'un autoritarisme numérique. Répression et résistance sur Internet en Russie, 2012–2022*. This book was itself the result of a five-year research project funded by the French National Agency for Research, ResisTIC (*Internet Resisters. Criticism and Evasion in the Face of Digital Coercion in Russia*), conducted between 2018 and 2022. As this translated and revised version of the book sees the light in 2024—and, we hope, will find an international readership in 2025—this preface briefly seeks to introduce why the reach of this work needs, in our view, to be extended to English-speaking audiences and provides some details on what is “revised and expanded” in this English-language edition.

BRINGING THIS WORK TO ENGLISH-SPEAKING AUDIENCES

The focus of this book is how online repression and online resistances interact, and of the effects—both intended and unintended—that related practices have on Internet sovereignty, fragmentation, and freedoms. The phenomena we have examined for five years in Russia within the ResisTIC project provide further evidence of one of the core tenets of digital policy studies today, that is, that digital policy is much more capacious than laws and regulations, to include other structures of power and influence such as private ordering, technical design, and last but not least, user practice—and must be

examined through a multidisciplinary lens. Our willingness to bring this work to broader, English-speaking audiences worldwide stems from the recognition of its potential usefulness to address these core issues of information policy studies, but also of the fact that the digital facets of the Russian regime are a yet-understudied but increasingly central research subject for scholars—as well as a puzzling and deeply disquieting enigma for the citizens of the world.

With this book, we have attempted to tackle two topical issues—namely, the recent evolutions (including the digital ones) of the Russian regime and society, on the one hand, and the various and novel ways in which internet infrastructures are leveraged in order to achieve political ends, on the other.

What we consider to be one of the strongest suits of the book, and one we hope will be most useful for its readership, is the patient and detailed fieldwork that forms the basis of most of its chapters. We have sought to shed light on a set of phenomena that to our knowledge are still understudied; the book was prepared jointly by leading specialists in the political sociology of the Internet and experts in contemporary Russian politics and society. It draws on this in-depth dialogue to contribute to a better understanding of both contemporary Russia and global digital practices.

A SCHOLARLY GOAL, A “CITIZEN’S GOAL”

Of course, we hope that the book will be of theoretical and methodological interest to scholarly audiences, filling an interesting niche with its main focus on online resistance and on yet-understudied social and technical practices used to circumvent constraints. In this sense, the book is bound to spark some discussions on how to study and understand digital resistance in authoritarian regimes. Indeed, we hope that its mix of multifacetedness and multidisciplinary may provide inspiration for scholars who seek to study similar developments in today’s internet governance landscape.

We admittedly have a “citizen’s goal” as well with this book: we think that any individual concerned about the future of the internet or their individual rights online, about internet fragmentation, internet sovereignty, surveillance and censorship, or the role of infrastructure and intermediaries

in constraining or promoting online civil liberties, could be interested in this book, and we hope that at least a few will indeed be. Also, the book—despite its clearly delimited recent-history span—aims at shedding light, more broadly, on the political trajectory of contemporary Russian power and in this sense can transcend its focus on the “digital.” At a time when massive war is raging in Ukraine, it offers keys to understanding Russia’s political trajectory, from peace to war, through the prism of digital practices.

WHAT WAS THERE, WHAT IS NEW

This is a translated work, and as such, we have made the deliberate decision not to revise the book to the point of turning it into something fundamentally “other” than its original version. However, since the end of our fieldwork in 2022, and even more so since the publication of the original book in mid-2023, so much has happened in Russia, and to the world because of Russia, that cannot be entirely set aside.

Thus, we are updating the translated version of the book with (some of) what has happened in between, making this book a “revised, updated, and expanded edition” alongside a translation. In addition to the preface you are currently reading, the English-language version includes a dedicated new conclusion that presents a synthesis of the findings of the book and acts as an overture toward current and future research on the book’s themes, first and foremost on the relation between warfare and digital sovereignty. We have also made minor changes to the introduction and revised the chapters for clarity and a few factual updates where needed. All of this was done while keeping in the “translation mode”: thus, no substantial revisions of the approach or of the method have been conducted, and no substantial additions to the empirical material has been made.

WHAT 2022 (AND ONWARD) HAS CHANGED IN THE FIELD, AND FOR RESEARCH

Due to funding and organizational constraints, the fieldwork subtending this book concluded in early 2022, just as the world was about to be stunned

and horrified by Russia's massive invasion of Ukraine. Thus, the different stories of coercion and circumvention told by this book still belong, in some way, to a "pre–full scale war" phase in Russia's construction of its own authoritarianism and coercive strategies—a phase when the Putin regime was still displaying a formal, albeit de facto already empty, appearance of democracy to the outside world, while strengthening internally (and often opaquely) its authoritarian grip. Yet all these stories, especially if drawn together, help shed light on the set of preconditions that have, eventually, made the massive invasion of Ukraine possible—and on the sociopolitical, economic, and technical premises of the Putin regime's "crossing the next line" into authoritarianism. In this light, it is our hope that this work, regardless of (and perhaps because of) the precise time span it addresses, will see its value remaining intact across the years, as it offers a varied analysis of a set of primary historical documents and has the potential to be leveraged as a methodological model.

One last point needs to be made on the conditions in which research could, can now, or can no longer, be conducted in today's Russia. While—most importantly and dramatically—the life of Ukrainians in the field has drastically changed with the February 2022 invasion, the work of researchers attempting to study these transformations has changed in depth as well. Notably, it is no longer possible to physically go to Russia or Ukraine on fieldwork missions, and a set of new constraints and precautions is needed to attempt interacting with on-site actors, even those with whom we had previous, and carefully nurtured, established collaborations. Thus, this book might be, for a while, one of the last contributions gathering several original ethnographies in/about Russia, shedding empirical light on digitally supported authoritarianism in the twenty-first century.

It is knowing all this—humbled as scholars by the tasks facing research today, and profoundly worried as citizens by the political context that frames and fuels this research—that we propose this book to you. We hope that you will find it of interest.

Paris, July 2024

The book coeditors

NOTE ON THE AVAILABILITY OF SOURCES

As this field of study evolves, so does the status of several of our online sources. In this book, we would like to acknowledge two issues that are particularly relevant to us from a research point of view as well as a readership point of view:

1. Links to many official websites (generally from the Russian government or its governmental agencies) are not accessible from outside Russia without the use of a virtual private network (VPN). However, the URLs we have provided remain valid.
2. Several media outlets have either closed or been taken down, resulting in two configurations. Some websites are no longer accessible at all. In such instances, we have provided the original URL with a “last accessed” date. Wherever possible, we have also provided an alternative URL via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine.

We have also acknowledged these issues at each endnote where a URL is cited.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/15798.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/15798.001.0001)

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Francesca Musiani**

Citation:

*Digital Authoritarianism in the Making: Repression and Resistance
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DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/15798.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262385312

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2025



The MIT Press

The MIT Press
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
77 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02139
mitpress.mit.edu

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The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Adobe Garamond and Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk by Westchester Publishing Services.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-0-262-55367-4

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