

53. TikTok political participation in supporting Alexey Navalny during the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia

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Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 and ensuing lockdown increased the popularity of TikTok among Russian people, who in January 2021 transformed it into a space for political expression, following the arrest of opposition politician Alexey Navalny. This chapter explores the state of participatory politics on Russian TikTok from the arrest and the subsequent nationwide demonstrations in Navalny's support. The research data includes 200 most popular TikTok videos with #navalnylive and #23january that were largely used by Navalny's supporters. The videos' content was analysed and assigned to one of the five core practices of participatory politics (investigation, dialogue and feedback, circulation, production, and distribution). The results revealed that despite being engaging in all five practices, the majority of people participated in circulation of information, thus supporting Navalny without voicing their opinions directly.

Keywords: TikTok, participatory culture, politics, Russia, Navalny

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 had reached Russia by late January 2020, when the first two cases were reported, and by April 16th, the infection was recorded in every single region. On March 30th the country's borders were officially closed, while numerous regions had announced lockdowns. Distance working and learning became a norm, public spaces were closed, and people were encouraged to stay in their homes. In total, the lockdown lasted for six weeks, ending on May 11th. These restrictions resulted in an increase of digital activity and use of social media (Tagiev, 2020).

Among different popular social media (Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte (Russian alternative to Facebook), Instagram), it was TikTok that had experienced a massive growth in numbers of Russian users during the COVID-19 pandemic (Williamson, 2020; Iqbal, 2021). One of the reasons for such popularity could be its uniqueness in presenting intrapersonal connection, that is informed by and directed toward the individual user (Bhandari & Bimo, 2020), especially considering "For You" page, which is algorithmically determined auto-play feed unique for each user (Vijay & Gekker, 2021). Not to mention an extensive music library, video effects and such unique features as duet, that allows users to film alongside someone else's video (Escamilla-Fajardo, 2021). Another reason for TikTok popularity especially in Russia, is that it allowed people from far corners of such a vast country, outside of major cities, to become Internet-famous and gain some following (VC, 2019). All in all, TikTok encourages people from different places to produce, consume and react to content with its various features, unique feeds, and a chance of Internet fame.

The pandemic increased the user base of TikTok worldwide (Su, 2020), and Russia was not an exception. For a while, Russian TikTok mostly featured dancing and funny videos, however, it was changed, due to Alexey Navalny. Navalny is Russia's leading opposition politician with a strong Internet-presence (he is followed by 4 million on Instagram, 2,1 million on Twitter and

790.5 thousand on TikTok). On January 17th, 2021, he was arrested in Moscow airport following his return from a recovery to a poison attempt in Germany. Soon his team announced nationwide demonstrations in his support on January 23rd and released a two-hour-long investigation of an actual palace secretly built for Vladimir Putin, which by June 2021 has 117 million views on YouTube. The arrest and the investigation, as well as the call for demonstrations were immediately referenced on TikTok, where #navalnylive, #23january and #freedomtonavalny started trending with the clips that promote the protests, increase an awareness of the investigation, or share videos of Navalny in court (Svitsova, 2021). Thus, in few days, TikTok was transformed into a space where Russians upload their political content.

The Russian government financially threatened the app and ordered it to delete videos that called to participate in pro-Navalny protests, which TikTok did (Zverev & Tétrault-Farber, 2021; Deutsche Welle, 2021). TikTok also witnessed an influx of anti-protest videos, ordered by so called public organization for youth's rights, that shared #notorevolution and identical statements about danger of protests and just imprisonment of Navalny, however most of these videos were soon deleted by their creators (Leizarenko, 2021). Thus, witnessing the rise of political expression on TikTok, the Russian government moved to regulate the app.

This chapter views political expression of Russian people through the prism of participatory politics, which is a political dimension of participatory culture, in which people have opportunities to build communities, express themselves artistically, collaborate, and circulate relevant information (Jenkins, 2009). As a social media, TikTok is designed to stimulate participatory culture: it supports creative and artistic production of content, as well as its circulation, by showcasing the content to those users, who, according to the algorithm, would be interested in it. While hearts (similar to likes) and comment sections develop a social connection, the duet supports a unique to the app form of collaboration.

Theoretical Framework

The participatory nature of TikTok provided its users opportunities for a new type of political engagement. After analyzing the political expression on TikTok during 2020 United States presidential election, Medina Serrano et al. (2020) concluded that TikTok users do not just share and comment on content, they become the content, since they are active presenters of political communication, externalizing personal political opinion in pursuit of a wider audience. Hence, participatory politics on TikTok combine politics and entertainment, encouraging users to be active participants.

In general, social media has offered more opportunities for participatory actions and stimulated political engagement online (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013). It allows users to publicly exert their voices on political issues with no regard to age, education, or citizenship. At the same time, users may create and distribute political information with greater independence from traditional gatekeepers of information (Cohen et al., 2012; Lee & Chan, 2015). Thus, social media provide an opportunity for marginalized people to influence and participate in politics, however the level of this participation can be regulated by the state, such as the case in Russia.

In December 2011, motivated by dissatisfaction with the fraud in parliamentary elections, Russians took to the streets in what became a series of the biggest anti-government demonstrations. These protests were marked by an active use of social networks to unite, discuss, and coordinate the protests (Nikiporets-Takigawa, 2013; Spaiser et al, 2017). Information, videos, and opinions circulated on YouTube and Twitter, while demonstrations were organized on VKontakte and Facebook (White & McAllister, 2014; Enikolopov et al., 2020).

Following the protests, the government began tightening Internet legislation (Denisova, 2017; Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019), punishing selective Internet users and spreading false information online (Lonkila et al., 2020). Despite that, Russian Internet space has remained semi-free, since keeping it as such provides some benefits for the regime, such as citizen feedback and illusion of democracy (Litvinenko, 2020). While the pandemic increased the popularity of TikTok, the semi-regulated Internet control allowed participatory politics to take place on this relatively new and, thus, not strictly monitored app.

There are several ways that people can be engaged in participatory politics: spreading or reacting to information or recruiting like-minded people. Joseph Kahne et al. (2015) include these five practices as defying acts for participatory politics:

1. Investigation (collection and analysis of information, for example, its veracity),
2. Dialogue and feedback (discussions and engagement with others),
3. Circulation (sharing information or content with political impact),
4. Production (creation of original content to advance one's perspective),
5. Mobilization (rally others to accomplish political goals).

This set of actions constitute participatory versions of agenda-setting, opinion formation and action-taking, which are at the core of all political life (Ibid., 2015). This chapter uses these five actions to analyze the state of participatory politics on Russian TikTok during Navalny's arrest and subsequent demonstrations in his support. Overall, the chapter's main research question is How Russian people engage in participatory politics on TikTok in support of Alexey Navalny? To answer it, the study aims to analyze which of the five actions of participatory politics are the most common on Russian TikTok and how these actions are manifested.

Although TikTok was started as a playful platform with music and dances, in recent years it gradually transformed into a place of political expression. The researchers have studied the political content of American, Lebanese, and Indian TikToks (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020; Lujain et al., 2020; Vijay & Gekker, 2021). The app was also analysed as the place, where users advocate for a social change, increasing an awareness of climate change (Hautea et al., 2021), or spreading public health information and promoting the use of masks (Unni & Weinstein, 2021; Basch et al., 2021). The current chapter contributes to this research by exploring the political expression on Russian TikTok and the state of political participation stimulated by Alexey Navalny's arrest.

Method

This research gathered 200 most popular TikTok videos (based on the number of hearts) produced between January 17th (Navalny's return) and February 4th (suspension of protests in Navalny's support announced by his team). The research focuses particularly on two hashtags: #navalnylive and #23january with 100 videos representing each, since they were reported to be the most popular ones among Navalny's supporters (Svitsova, 2021). By June 2021, #navalnylive has 104 million views, while #23january - 690.5 million views.

The data was collected on June 11th, 2021. The videos were searched for using the hashtag, and then analyzed based on the number of hearts. The videos that used both hashtags (n=3) were counted only once for #navalnylive, since it was browsed the earliest. The table below (Table 1) provides some descriptive information about the collected data, including the ratios and mean average for hearts, comments, and shares.

Hashtag		Hearts	Comments	Share
#navalnylive	Ratio	6547 – 859.9K	49 – 30.6K*	10 – 24.1K

	Mean	48302.77	1266.87	1085.73
#23january	Ratio	75.4K – 908K	365 – 22K	114 – 37.9K
	Mean	196952	4164.47	4877.79

*Two videos had comments disabled.

Table 1. User Engagement with the Collected Videos

As seen from the table, the collected videos were very engaging for TikTok users, gathering, on average, tens of thousands of hearts, thousands of comments, and shares. The following table (Table 2) presents the political spectrum of the videos gathered.

Political Leanings	Number of Videos
Supportive of Navalny, his investigation and pro-Navalny demonstrations	191
Against Navalny, supportive of the current government	5
Other (no relation to politics)	4

Table 2. Political Spectrum of the Collected Videos

The majority of the videos were supportive of Alexey Navalny; however, 5 videos were either critical of him and pro-Navalny demonstrations or supportive of the current Putin's government. Other 4 videos, although used the hashtags, were not political: one with #navalnylive suggested being herbalist for a summer, while another with #23january was a sketch with a pee joke.

These 4 videos were excluded from the content analysis, during which each of the remaining 196 videos was assigned to one of the five actions of participatory politics: investigation, dialogue and feedback, circulation, production, and mobilization. The small size of the dataset means that the analysis is not exhaustive, but representative of major trends in participatory politics on TikTok during the specific timeline of Navalny's case. Additionally, it is important to remember that TikTok had deleted some of the videos in Navalny's support in January 2021 on the government orders, therefore the collected data represents only the remaining videos on the app.

Results

The results of the data analysis are shown in Table 3, which presents the number and proportion of videos that corresponded to each of the five core acts of participatory politics. The table is followed by a closer analysis of how each of the acts manifested itself on the app, starting from the most common one.

Act of Participatory Politics	Number of the Videos	Proportion
Investigation	19	9,5%
Dialogue and Feedback	14	7%
Circulation	76	38%
Production	63	31,5%

Mobilization	24	12%
Other (no relation to politics)	4	2%

Table 3. Number and Proportion of Videos Corresponding to the Core Acts of Participatory Politics

Table 3 showcases that the two most common acts of participatory politics include circulation (sharing various information with a political impact) and production (creation of original content to advance one's perspective). The least common act is dialogue and feedback (discussion and engagement with others) however it might take place in the comment sections of various TikTok videos or in communities outside of the app. Nevertheless, Russian people were engaged in all five acts of participatory politics.

Circulation. The advancement of digital media made the practice of sharing information to a wide public quicker and easier (Rundle et al., 2015). Users can distribute the information through social media tools, by giving likes, retweeting, sharing, or, in the case of TikTok, broadcasting a remixed clip, edited differently from the original and/or having a new soundtrack. From January 17th till February 4th Russian people were mostly engaged in circulating the existing information on the app. Such information includes:

- Footage from the pro-Navalny demonstration on January 23rd, recorded by media outlets or other participants, showcasing a great number of people gathered, individual acts of resilience, and instances of police brutality.
- Countries and celebrities that support Navalny's release.
- Videos of Navalny's speeches at various political rallies, as well as snippets from his old interviews to independent cable and online channel TVRain.
- Snippets of Putin's palace investigation.
- Videos of Navalny in court, especially the footage of him drawing a heart in the air for his wife, Yuliya.
- And compilations of short videos of Navalny and Yuliya, that showcase their support for each other.

Overall, these videos can direct people to the investigation, attempt to create a personal connection to Navalny, or showcase the horrors of police brutality to instigate an outrage; however, together, they are evident of the support for Navalny and his cause.

Production. Producing allows TikTok users to actually exert their voices and agency on political issues, by recording themselves either expressing their own opinions out loud, through the text or in their actions. The majority of the videos showcase anti-government sentiment or support for Navalny, however there are 4 (out of 60) videos, which express loyalty to the current political regime or criticize Navalny and his supporters.

There were several similar videos made by different creators, where a person stands next to an empty chair with their Russian passport. When they toss the passport away, the image of Navalny appears in the chair. This type of video can be interpreted as a person deciding to stand by Navalny, even if it means going against the motherland. This pattern was also used in a pro-government and the only duet video collected, where a person catches the tossed passport and has an image of Putin appear in the chair next to them.

There were several videos recorded from the demonstrations, showcasing other participants nearby. Two different people published their original songs in Navalny's support,

while another person presented a drawing, inspired by Navalny's investigation. Apart from serious videos there were also humorous ones. For example, in one video a person jokes that Putin is like a mandarin, in the beginning it is very beneficial, but if eaten a lot, it will provoke an allergy. The punchline is delivered with a cut to the person's face with an allergic reaction. Another humorous example is where a TikToker put faces of Navalny, Yuliya and Putin on characters of popular children cartoon *Dora the Explorer*, so that it seems that Navalny and his wife tell "*Swiper, no swiping*" to prevent Putin from stealing.

Mobilization. Out of 24 videos assigned to this category, only one was done by Putin's supporter, who attempted to gather like-minded people. The rest encouraged participation in pro-Navalny demonstrations. Usually, TikTok users would provide their reasons for participating in demonstrations, and then close the video with a call to join them. For example, there were three videos with a similar pattern, where a person would face the camera, while the text appeared on the screen: "*Get out on the streets, don't be afraid. Let us fight for our future*". There were also other three videos, in which people, presenting themselves as children of policemen, express their willingness to participate in the demonstrations and encourage others to follow.

Investigation. Digital era allowed for a wide range of information to be available online, which can be collected, analyzed, and distributed by Internet users independently of traditional gatekeepers of information (Kahne et al., 2016). In the current case, there were three ways of doing an investigation among 19 assigned videos:

- Collecting information on various achievements and deeds of Navalny and his team and presenting them in a digestible way with pictures and music.
- Providing examples of corruption and politicians lies to its citizens (e.g., about not raising the age of retirement),
- Questioning the accuracy of official information about the number of protestors and the behavior of police.

To give an example, one user shows their face with a text: "*news: National Guard was protecting people and serving them tea*", and then cuts it with footage of police brutality, intending to contrast the official narrative with what actually happened. One example is a TikTok video that provides information about Putin's corruption simply with white text against black background. However, it is important to note that all videos assigned to this act lack mentions of their sources, while presenting the information as factual.

Dialogue and Feedback. In 14 videos that were assigned to this action, people would usually respond to some question or comment that would be visible on screen. In an interesting example, one user, whose content is related to divination by tarot cards, was asked to tell the future of the protests, to which they replied. Another person noticed that others ask online what exactly Navalny offers. They put the question as a text in a video and then provided a response.

Discussion

While the COVID-19 pandemic increased the popularity of TikTok in Russia, it was the arrest of Alexey Navalny and subsequent demonstrations in his support that transformed TikTok from the app with sketches and dancing videos to a place of participatory politics. This transformation was also assisted by semi-regulated control of the Internet by the Russian state that for a while did not impose any restrictions over the app. The data analysis revealed that although TikTok users were engaged in all five acts of participatory politics (investigation, dialogue and feedback, circulation, production, mobilization), the majority of them participated in circulation of relevant information without directly voicing their opinion online.

By circulating various types of information, including footage from demonstrations, videos of Navalny and snippets of his investigation, Russian TikTok users were celebrating the protest and cementing an image of Navalny as a truth-teller politician, who is also a caring husband sharing an incredible bond with his wife. However, this image was a simplified version of Navalny's political views, personal life, as well as the whole case. Kahne et al. (2016) warns that one of the potential risks of circulation as a core practice of participatory politics is simplification of information in order to distribute it quickly and broadly. For example, Navalny's political views and the agenda of his party were reduced to only a few slogans.

At the same time, it is hard to measure the actual impact that circulation and other types of participatory politics actions had on other app users. Since TikTok "For You" page is based on each user's preferences, how common pro-Navalny videos would be among the feeds of those who oppose him, and vice versa? Circulation can limit one's exposure to alternative viewpoints and information sources (Conroy et al., 2012), and TikTok algorithms may stimulate that.

Nevertheless, the pandemic supported the acceleration of political participation on TikTok since many people were isolated at home with their digital devices. The app allowed Russian citizens not only to express their political opinions, but also to share political information that could be censored by the Russian government, such as investigation of Putin's palace, footage from pro-Navalny demonstrations and various examples of corruption. The case of the unjust arrest and trial of Alexey Navalny provoked the Russian public to be vocal about their political opinions, and TikTok proved to be a great place for doing that, since it was relatively new, but already popular social media in Russia.

Overall, TikTok was able to politically empower Russian people, by providing digital tools and the outlet for sharing, creating, discussing political information, and expressing their own views. Hence, social media can be an important tool for political participation especially in the oppressed states, and TikTok with its short audio-visual content provides a fresh and engaging way of doing so.

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