

Digital vigilantism in Russia

Citizen-led justice in the context of social change and social harm

Digital vigilantism in Rusland

Burger-gestuurde gerechtigheid in de context van
maatschappelijke veranderingen en maatschappelijke beschadiging

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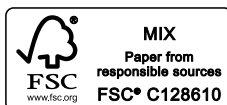
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*For Natasha and Arthur
You are my fairy tale*

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*"I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am.
The main interest in life and work is to become someone else
that you were not in the beginning."
– Michel Foucault*

Preface: The yin and yang of social justice

These four years seem to have lasted no longer than four months. From intense teamwork throughout 2017 focused on developing methodological and conceptual frameworks, to conducting the first phase of fieldwork in Russia in 2018, to participating in fascinating conference trips and research visits in 2019 and 2020, to hours of enlightening interviews held everywhere in between—this was an incredible research experience. As I began progressing with the project, the great puzzle of digital vigilantism and its manifestation in Russia began to unveil. I do not claim to have completed the full mosaic, but hope that my research has helped in identifying contexts, concepts, structures, approaches and experiences in digital vigilantism, which can improve the scientific understanding of the phenomenon and be of greater societal value.

In this preface, my task is to set the mood for the dissertation, to offer a condensed flavour of the phenomenon of digital vigilantism. Amateur justice provision, often informed by subjective morality and perceptions of right and wrong, inevitably leads to controversies and arguments for and against. Throughout this research journey, in conversations with friends, family, colleagues and acquaintances, I was often asked a question along the lines of “is this practice of vigilantism fundamentally good or fundamentally bad?” When confronted with such a question, the social scientist in me demands that I deliver a lecture of a few hours and let people draw their own conclusions; at the same time, the urge to maintain healthy relationships with people around me demands a more concise response. As a compromise, allow me to share two stories that can hopefully illustrate somewhat of an answer to this central question.

The only inmates inside the panopticon

On the night of 13 March 2020, having completed my Erasmus+ Teaching Exchange in St. Petersburg, Russia, I flew to my hometown of Namangan, Uzbekistan. I was going to be joined by my wife, Natasha, who was conducting fieldwork in neighbouring Kazakhstan and together we would fly back to Rotterdam shortly afterwards. So we thought.

On 15 March, Uzbekistan recorded its first COVID-19 case and announced the closure of its borders as of the next morning. This meant that no citizens of Uzbekistan (me) would be able to leave the country for an undetermined period of time. Foreigners (Natasha) would no longer be able to enter the country. Our small family was being separated by the pandemic. In a panic, I considered rushing to the nearest border town before borders closed at midnight and reuniting with Natasha in another country. Suddenly,

the phone rang. A neighbourhood clinic representative on the other end invited me for a checkup given that I had just returned from abroad, or in their words, “from Dubai”, where I, in fact, have never been. The checkup was mandatory in compliance with orders given by the country’s National Guard. I walked to the clinic where my temperature was recorded at 36.5°C, and I was put on house quarantine for 14 days with daily checkups by the nurses and the National Guard. The escape plan crumbled in one instance. The new normal was about to begin.

In the days that followed, a sign was glued to the front door of my parents’ house reading: “This household is on quarantine due to COVID-19”. At this point, information about the virus was still limited, and such a sticker on the front door in the best traditions of World War II-era ‘chalk marks’ was interpreted by the neighbours as “This is the ‘beehive’ of the virus”. They could as well have written CORONAVIRUS on our foreheads. In the meantime, rules and regulations were tightening by the hour. Movement between and within cities in Uzbekistan became restricted. An officer from the National Guard was then posted outside of our door. The man literally stood outside and stared at the front door from nine to five to make sure no one entered or left. As a surveillance scholar, I felt like we were inside of the panoptic prison and we were its only inmates.

After 14 days and no symptoms, I was told not to leave the house for an additional 14 days “just in case”. Such strict measures were accompanied by messages in the national media which framed COVID-19 as an “import” brought by those travelling around the world. Some reports even made a distinction between “imported” cases and local contamination by referring to the latter as “civilian cases”—thus framing compatriots who came from abroad as some sort of combatants. The sign, the officer, and the media quickly produced results, with strangers throwing rocks into my parents’ backyard at night. People saw us as a danger and retaliated. I felt flattened. I do not see any better word I could use here.

At that point of my life, I had been researching vigilantism for over three years and had read hundreds of stories of people who experienced citizen-led justice, public humiliation, shaming, unsolicited exposure, and other forms of collective retaliation and punishment. I was afraid of one day finding myself in the same position as the targets of vigilantism I studied. My case, however, was relatively tame compared to what other people experienced in terms of public shaming and online harassment. The so-called “patient zero”—the first person to have been diagnosed with COVID-19 in Uzbekistan—experienced bullying and death threats online. After diagnosed cases increased, measures were finally taken to protect the identity of those who tested positive. However, when ambulances would arrive at someone’s house to take them to the hospital, the neighbours would film the process on their phones and share the footage across social media channels revealing personal information such as the names and addresses of the “virus carriers”. Again, patients were not only haunted by the dangerous virus but also by a wave of accusations: “Because of you, we are all going to die”.

This experience at the end of my PhD trajectory underscored the significance and relevance of studying citizen-led justice. Public exposure and shaming are becoming widespread, gaining new approaches and modes with increasing access to mobile devices and social media. COVID-19 illuminated some of the existing and deeply ingrained practices. Targets accused of numerous delinquencies are exposed and publicly shamed. What is particularly alarming is that those that are vulnerable offline become even more vulnerable online, be they women, migrants, sexual minorities, ethnic minorities, political activists, or COVID-19 patients, etc. Seeking justice through legal channels after falling target to mob law is challenging, especially in the context of selective application of the law.

When we all thought 2020 could not get any crazier

Time Magazine proclaimed 2020 as “the worst year ever”, but for many places around the world the pandemic was not the only challenge. In October 2020, my second home, Kyrgyzstan, fell into turmoil. After a series of journalistic investigations into the criminal schemes of corruption and money laundering by the country’s politicians and power brokers, disenchantment in state leadership led to demands for change. Parliamentary elections that took place on 4 October 2020 confirmed fears that the status quo would prevail and the old establishment and its allies would maintain power. In spite of the use of biometric data aimed at preventing the usual practices of registering “dead souls” (voting on behalf of the deceased) or carousel voting (one person voting several times in different locations), the impoverished electorate was bribed by direct cash payments in exchange for votes.

On 5 October, protests against the election results erupted and on the night of the 6th led to the storming of the country’s “White House”—the state building shared by the parliament and the president. After the initial use of force which harmed over 1,000 people and took the life of 19-year-old Umutbek Altynbek uulu, law enforcement disappeared as everyone held their breath in the anticipation of Kyrgyzstan’s third revolution.

Previous coups in the country (2005 and 2010) resulted in mass looting and destruction of businesses and infrastructure. To prevent such events this time around, citizens gathered in key locations such as the city hall, markets, mass media headquarters, and telecommunication offices and formed live shields in front of these sites. During peak days of unrest, a channel on Telegram messenger devoted to resource sharing was overloaded with directions to safe houses for those needing protection, ride offers, people signing up to be the ‘city guards’, financial support offers, donations of tea, food, and clothes... The capital city, Bishkek, withstood the pressure of looting and lawlessness. In this case, vigilante actions demonstrated the most positive side of solidarity as civilians engaged in property protection.

To revisit the question of whether vigilantism is fundamentally good or bad, these two examples can perhaps demonstrate that, like most other forces and actions, vigilante formations constitute a *yin*- and *yang*-like dualism. On the one hand, mob law can be destructive, harming individuals and groups, leading to social degradation; on the other hand, in the absence of legal forces, vigilantes can serve the greater social good. Another important question to pose here is whether the positive forces are the exception rather than the rule.

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General Introduction

Summary

This chapter establishes research premises and presents the components of the current dissertation. Serving as a general introduction, the chapter identifies key conceptual frameworks surrounding digital vigilantism by elaborating on the existing studies and identifying the literature gaps that it aims to fill. In doing so, it highlights the scholarly contributions and societal significance of the dissertation. The chapter presents the main and supporting research questions. It introduces and justifies methodological approaches, case selection and ethical considerations. Furthermore, a roadmap for the dissertation is provided along with a brief description of the focus of each subsequent chapter.

“A problem well stated is a problem half solved.”

– John Dewey

1.1. Setting the problem

Imagine living in a society with no police. All matters of legal and moral boundary breaching are handled by fellow citizens acting as judge, jury and executioner. There are no fines to issue, nor are there any prisons. There is no due process, no presumption of innocence. Punitive measures are carried out by citizens and imply exposure and public shaming of fellow citizens for their mischief, be it the breaching of legal or moral boundaries. Sometimes, punishment is purely virtual, involving online shaming, memes, vitriolic comments and direct messages of death threats. Other times, it involves offline physical harm including acts of humiliation and sexual violence. This punitive process is often filmed, edited and made permanently available to the wide online audience. This dystopian approach to justice resembling a wild fantasy or a scenario from a TV series *à la* “Black Mirror” or “Love, Death and Robots” is, in fact, anything but fiction. Practices of citizen-led justice manifest globally and across various legal, political, socioeconomic and cultural contexts.

Amid the process of ubiquitous visibility that Haggerty and Ericson describe as the “disappearance of disappearance” (2000, p. 619), events, acts and speech can potentially be exposed on a mass scale and for prolonged periods of time when shared across social media platforms and picked up by news media. Alleged wrongdoings that spark collective citizen-led retaliation can range from a “stupid tweet” with a racist connotation (Ronson, 2015) to a university graduation speech deemed unpatriotic (BBC, 2017a) to paedophilia (DutchNews.nl, 2020).

These collective reactions to perceived wrongdoing can be spontaneous and reactionary, with no prior planning or institutional organising. In this case, taking offence is the uniting factor for people who otherwise do not necessarily know each other on- or offline and may be located in different parts of the world. On the other hand, citizens can form thematic collectives and proactively address specific offences, as is the case in Russia. Parking on a sidewalk in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other major cities, for instance, may not only lead to a police ticket, but can also result in public shaming by social media users, should concerned citizens film and expose the “road boor”, causing long-lasting reputation damage and potential job loss.

What could be the term to define this phenomenon of digitally mediated citizen-led justice provision informed by legal, moral and ideological motives; incorporating elements of (online) bullying/assault/harassment; and involving a plethora of retaliation approaches and ambiguous relations with the violence monopolist—the state? Can citizen-led justice be justified in some instances, while qualifying as an act of crime in others? To address the diverse cases and nuances in digitally mediated citizen-led justice, the current dissertation employs the notion of *digital vigilantism* in its conceptual

framework. What follows will address scholarly takes on both conventional vigilantism and its digital manifestation.

1.1.1. Vigilantism: In Search of a Definition

Etymologically originating from the Spanish *vigilante* [watchful], vigilantism has been addressed in scholarship with a degree of lengthy voids between moments of attention. Political scientists Jon Rosenbaum and Peter Sederberg were among the first to tackle the phenomenon and defined vigilantism as “simply establishment violence”, where the established sociopolitical order may be violated by participants in order to protect this very order from any subversion (1974, p. 542). Rosenbaum and Sederberg offer a typology of vigilantism with three varieties—*crime control*, *social group control* and *regime control* (p. 548). *Crime control* vigilantism concerns private person use of violence in response to law-breaking in contexts where the state is absent due to “inefficiency, corruption, or the leniency of the system of due process” (p. 548). *Social group control* vigilantism is described as establishment violence targeting “those who appear to advocate [for] significant change in the distribution of values” (p. 551). According to the authors, an example of such change advocacy can be the civil rights movement in the United States, where the Ku Klux Klan would exemplify a vigilante force. Finally, and rather intriguingly, the authors propose *regime control* vigilantism as a category where “the regime itself” may be targeted by vigilantes (p. 556).

In spite of the pioneering nature of their work, Rosenbaum and Sederberg raised fundamental questions that continue to be relevant in the digital age. These include the nature of the relationship between the state and vigilantes, as well as the consequences of order breaching for the sake of order protection accompanied by disproportional punishment and the potential for wrongful accusations (pp. 557; 660). Several cases presented in the current dissertation address the complex relationship between vigilantes and the state. Examples include citizens volunteering their help, police forces turning to private citizens for assistance, and vigilante acts being encouraged through public discourse and law-enforcement structures (see Chapter II). The dissertation also considers cases where forces critical of the state take on the task of exposing the ruling elites accused of corruption, illustrating the scenario of Rosenbaum and Sederberg’s *regime control vigilantism* (see Chapter VI).

Nearly two decades passed since this initial attempt to offer a definition and a typology of vigilantism before the phenomenon received further scholarly attention. In 1996, criminologist Les Johnston continued the quest for the conceptualisation of vigilantism. Critical of Rosenbaum and Sederberg’s conceptual “reductionism,” Johnston proposes six necessary features of vigilantism: (1) planning and premeditation; (2) voluntary involvement of private citizens; (3) a social movement of autonomous citizens; (4) (the threat of) the use of force; (5) a transgression threat to the established order; and (6) crime control through security guarantees (pp. 220-221). Johnston stresses the autonomous nature of vigilantism and challenges the preceding conceptual possibilities

for participants to act as an extension of the state. Furthermore, for Johnston, vigilantism is not necessarily legal or illegal, nor does it need to involve the actual punitive act since participants can prevent crime or threaten to use force without actually resorting to it (pp. 232-233).

Johnston's conceptualisation can be challenged on several levels, especially amid the prevalence of digital media affordances for vigilante practices. Vigilante acts can emerge spontaneously in response to a perceived offence when participants join in on 'the cause' and form a collective. The autonomous character of participants is also challenged amid state-citizen relations in vigilantism, illustrated throughout the current dissertation. The argument that the threat of using force is not a punitive measure in itself is rather unconvincing, as psychological impacts of such threats can be severe. Finally, security provision is a broad and subjective term given that vigilantism can be morally-motivated on the one hand, and hate-based on the other.

Another two decades passed and vigilantism once again regained scholarly interest (see conceptual contributions of Favarel-Garrigues & Shukan, 2019; Loveluck, 2019; Moncada, 2017; Trottier, 2017; 2019). Some scholars have focused on the digital incarnation of vigilantism and responded to digital media affordances for retaliation. Trottier, for instance, responds to Johnston's six necessary features by positioning vigilantism in the "broader media culture", where social media platforms allow for "amplification of peer-to-peer communication" granting previously impossible opportunities in access to- and circulation of people's personal information (2017, pp. 59-60). Trottier defines digital vigilantism as a "process where citizens take offence in other citizens' action and respond in coordinated retaliation on digital media, including social platforms and mobile devices" (Trottier, 2017, p. 56). In digital vigilantism, the urge to expose, judge and direct the virtual audience to observed and perceived wrongdoings often defies any critical analysis of the situation at hand. As the act of exposure goes viral, crowd reactions and responses become infused with a sport-like drive in which individuals offer their time, skills and creativity in target punishing.

1.1.2. Simply 'Vigilantism Performed Online' or a Distinct Category?

Several unique features that are informed by digital media affordances differentiate digital vigilantism from its conventional counterpart. Among these features is longevity of punitive measures, given that online exposure is near-permanent in nature (Trottier, 2017), as well as the extent of exposure to massive online audiences. If a given case goes viral, the target(s) of vigilantes can be shamed on a previously unimaginable scale. Contrary to Johnston's argument, the act of punishment is not only necessary but weaved into digital vigilantism since exposure is both the means and the end of retaliation. Akin to medieval public torture and execution practices, the punitive measures of digital vigilantism resemble a "public spectacle" that Foucault deemed obsolete (1995, p. 11). Unlike its conventional counterpart, digital vigilantism requires the presence and, in some cases, participation of audiences. The current dissertation responds to the role

of audiences in public punishment by first looking into conventional practices of comrades' courts and the power of peer-to-peer judgement (see Chapter II). The role of audiences is further assessed through the perspective of vigilante products aimed at attracting viewers to YouTube videos (see Chapter III), as well as the perspective of traditional broadcasters that frame the phenomenon and bring further visibility to cases (see Chapter IV).

Loveluck proposes the following four ideal types of digital vigilantism: *flagging*, *investigating*, *hounding* and *organised leaking* (2019). In *flagging*, retaliation can take place as an act of sharing an image or a video featuring the target, potentially revealing their identity and personal information such as address, phone number, place of employment, etc. Such exposure is usually accompanied by a description of the perceived wrongdoing. Retaliation can range from public statements resembling consumer reviews such as 'this person is a bad professional, do not hire them', to accusations of severe crimes such as 'this is a paedophile, lookout', or 'this person is a terrorist'. These practices can be directed and shaped to purposefully discredit select individuals and groups via accusations of committing serious crimes. In Russia, for instance, when it comes to regime critics, accusation of paedophilia has been used as a sentiment that triggers immediate resentment and public outrage (Coalson, 2019).

In the context of technological advances that increase visibility (be it CCTV cameras that flood modern cities, or digital traces that people knowingly or unknowingly leave behind), citizens have been encouraged by the state to exercise vigilance (Abrahams, 1998; Andrejevic, 2002; Marx, 2013; Reeves, 2012). They have effectively turned into an extension of the state's watchful gaze as a result. Police reliance on citizens is not a novel phenomenon, and it has been present across historical periods, geopolitical settings and in various crises to a greater or lesser extent (Reeves, 2012). In their operation, vigilantes can collaborate with the state or challenge its agencies and orders (Kirsch & Grätz, 2010, p. 29).

Loveluck (2019) suggests *investigating* as a term applicable to cases where online crowds are involved in identifying suspects. Thus, when taking on policing duties, citizen involvement can be solicited by state agents, or vigilantes can work in parallel to authorised forces based on their own initiative and without a direct invitation (Marx, 2013, p. 60; Reeves, 2012, p. 246). The existing social frustrations and biases tend to come into play in circumstances where citizens turn into sleuths. A tragic example of such involvement is the case of crowdsourced investigation and information consolidation on Reddit platform in the aftermath of the 2013 Boston marathon bombings, which led to widespread accusations based on racially biased perceptions (Nhan et al., 2017). Traditional media involvement assisted in the spread of misinformation and suspect misidentification. The case culminated in the fundamental questioning of the effectiveness crowd-sourced justice and Reddit issuing a public apology. A similar case took place in Russia following explosions in the St. Petersburg metro in 2017. Based on CCTV footage, a man (Russia's reserve army captain) with a beard and Islamic skullcap was

misidentified as a suspect and his image was widely shared across social and traditional media. In spite of the consequent proclamation of such reports as inaccurate, the man faced difficulty continuing with 'normal' life as he became recognisable in public. Even flying became impossible for him when terrified passengers refused to be on board with 'the terrorist' they had seen in the media (The Moscow Times, 2017a).

In case of *hounding*, which Loveluck describes as "perhaps the epitome of digital vigilantism" (2010, p. 227), a more proactive online approach can take place in combination with exposure since the target's personal data can be made public with the aim of intensifying punitive measures. Personal data, in this case, can come from open sources such as the history of a target's tweets; photos shared on other social networks; or information 'volunteered' by ex-partners, which may include intimate photos and videos (McGlynn, Rackley, & Houghton, 2017). Information can also be doxed or hacked in cases where technologically savvy users join 'the cause' and use their skills to access the target's personal information "often with the intent to humiliate, threaten, intimidate, or punish the identified individual" (Douglas, 2016, p. 199).

Online exposure and public shaming may accompany physical retaliation where degrading acts performed on the target's body are recorded for subsequent dissemination. Examples include the case of female labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan who fall target to male vigilantes in Russia (see Chapter V). Kyrgyz men find it offensive when ethnic Kyrgyz women date non-Kyrgyz men in Russia. Calling themselves "patriots", these men kidnap the women and perform degrading and criminal acts such as beatings and rape. The retaliation is filmed and shared on social media. In the videos, women are forced to reveal their identity and home towns or villages. This is done to ensure longevity and intensity of retaliation, given the context of collectivism and regionalism of the Kyrgyz Republic. A female who has been exposed in the nude is believed to have brought shame to her family and greater community, be it neighbourhood, village, town or country. Such exposure can make it impossible for the target to ever return home. Other examples of *hounding* in Russia are committed by groups such as Hrushki Protiv and StopXam, addressed in great detail in Chapters III and IV, respectively.

The fourth type of digital vigilantism proposed by Loveluck is *organised leaking* aimed at targeting institutions and organisations (2019, p. 234). In the Russian context, the abovementioned FBK serves as an example of an organised collective whose goal is gathering and disclosing information that could potentially incriminate the ruling elites. In this case, participants reveal cases of corruption and power abuse via investigative reports that sometimes come in the form of entertaining YouTube videos. Some of the most controversial investigations of the Foundation include the 2017 "Don't call him Dimon" video exposing the riches of Russia's ex-president Dmitry Medvedev, with 43 million total views (as of May 2021); as well as the "Putin's palace. History of world's largest bribe" investigation released on YouTube in January 2021, gaining over 100 million views in the first 10 days (Alexei Navalny, 2017; 2021).

Activities of FBK can serve as an example of what Rosenbaum and Sederberg categorised as *regime control* vigilantism. In the absence of official control mechanisms that could be applied to the ruling elites, citizens take these duties into their own hands. While visibility can bring a certain amount of power and capital to vigilantes (Gabdulhakov, 2018), being openly critical of the state can be potentially dangerous (Gabdulhakov, 2020). This forces participants to carefully negotiate their visibility and safety (for a detailed account of this negotiation see Lokot, 2018). In reaction to the vast popularity of FBK's investigative videos and the political ambitions of Alexei Navalny and his supporters, Russia's state Duma (the Parliament's lower house) adopted legislation banning members and supporters of extremist organisations from participating in elections at all levels. A; while court hearing scheduled for 9 June 2021 will likely deem FBK extremist (Meduza, 2021). Russia's digital media governance, social media user arrests and various counter-forces in the struggle for online freedom of speech and control thereof are addressed in Chapter VI.

1.1.3. Participation Motivations and the Role of the State

Motives for participation in vigilante acts are diverse and range from moral and ideological beliefs to hate-based drives. Furthermore, digital media brought about additional affordances for participants, such as monetisation of YouTube channels, advertisement and the sale of merchandise—a phenomenon Favarel-Garrigues refers to as “moral entrepreneurship” (2021). Sometimes, income can be generated through collaboration with the state. Contrary to Johnston's idea of vigilante autonomy, the state may have its interest in recruiting, encouraging and creating vigilante formations. Prior to moving further with the discussion of the role of the state, it is necessary to establish what is meant when the term “the state” is operationalised in the current dissertation.

Within the power hierarchy in Russia where the orders are handed in a top-down manner, “the state” as a compendium of official structures, actors and regulations is shaped by those at the top of the so-called “power vertical”, namely, President Putin and his inner circle (for further discussion of this power structure see Chaisty, 2012; Monaghan, 2012). The term “power vertical” was introduced by Putin in the beginning of his presidential career and is still used in his official speeches emphasizing the importance of stability that can only be guaranteed by strong executive power (see quotes in Interfax, 2020; Izvestia, 2020). When it comes to the implementation of the laws and regulations that radiate from Moscow, there are certain dysfunctions reflected in the desire of regional actors to serve the political centre on the one hand, and corruption motivated by the pursuit of individual interests on the other. Thus, when referring to “the state”, this dissertation implies a set of actors holding various amounts of official power and a structure where President Putin is the most powerful individual at the time of writing.

A unique state-vigilante relationship is observed in Russia, where select groups have demonstrated a close connection to the ruling elites, receiving formal financial grants

and informal endorsement. These complex relations are addressed throughout all five empirical chapters that make up the dissertation. Namely, the study addresses the role of the state in the creation, support, and instrumentalisation of vigilante groups. In this case, instrumentalisation can be understood as acts aimed at discrediting the opposition; attacking state critics; organising events in support of the political status quo; and creating a façade for active civil society in the context of its continuous suppression. Furthermore, the dissertation elaborates on vulnerabilities and immunities in public exposure. While already being in a precarious position offline, women, migrants, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, political activists, rights defenders and other vulnerable groups and individuals experience additional risks online. Sometimes these vulnerabilities intersect, since a single person can simultaneously be an ethnic minority, woman, migrant, political activist, etc. This individual can be the target to several vigilante formations at once. Beyond this, targets may be deprived of the right to seek legal justice after experiencing retaliation due to their vulnerable position in the host state, social stigma, police indifference/dysfunction/abuse, and lack of legal frameworks to qualify vigilante retaliation acts as criminal offences as opposed to mere hooliganism (see Chapter V for further discussion).

After shaming for a perceived mischief goes public online and gets picked up by traditional media, undoing the damage is a challenging task for the target, even in cases where innocence is proven in court. Having been exposed, a person can be identified as a wrongdoer over a long period of time. The accused targets can face hostility in their respective communities, leading to the inaccessibility of basic services such as getting a haircut, eating at a restaurant, attending public events, or using public transport. Interviews that inform this dissertation revealed that the situation is especially alarming in small towns, where disappearance from the public eye is impossible and public exposure on social media or television can lead to physical retaliation by village/town mates.

At the same time, there are individuals powerful enough to rebuffer online exposure and endure the consequences. Political elites pressure mainstream platforms to remove the compromising content, as was the case when Russia's former Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko was exposed by the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK)¹ (BBC, 2018). As such, this dissertation views social media platforms from the perspective of their functional affordances for participants, at the same time considering their complex roles in autocratic governance contexts where freedom of self-expression and suppression of critical voices are negotiated between users, censors, as well as global and domestic social media platforms (see Chapter VI).

1 Established by activist and opposition leader Alexei Navalny in 2011, designated as "extremist organisation" in Russia in 2021.

1.1.4. Responding to the Literature Gaps

This dissertation aims to make both theoretical and empirical contributions to the literature. In conceptual terms, in response to the need of further theorisation of digital vigilantism, the current work presents the unique features that differentiate the phenomenon from its conventional counterpart. It does so by comparing and contrasting Soviet comrades' courts with current incarnations of vigilante practices mediated by platforms such as YouTube. Furthermore, the role of audiences in punitive measures is addressed, given the character of punishment where exposure is the means and the end of retaliation. While literature on digital vigilantism tends to focus on the role of digital media (Cheong & Gong 2010; Kasra 2017; Smallridge, et al., 2016; Stratton, et al., 2017), this dissertation offers a unique insight on the powers of traditional media in this online phenomenon, also considering audience reach, target exposure and participant empowerment.

The available literature is still largely missing empirical cross-disciplinary studies on digitally mediated citizen-led justice. Studies addressing diverse sociocultural, economic, legal, media and political environments in which these practices take place are in demand. This dissertation aims to respond to these gaps by investigating the case of Russia, where digital vigilantism manifests in the environment of state support of select participants and simultaneous suppression of other forms of online self-expression.

The studies that make up this dissertation investigate the process of emergence and decay of vigilante formations and, in doing so, addresses the methods of and motives for participation. Experiences of targets and greater societal impacts of digitally mediated citizen-led justice are addressed. The dissertation elaborates on nuances of internet governance in Russia while exploring the role of platforms in the negotiation of what social media practices are allowed and condemned by the ruling elites and law enforcement. Social frustrations and biases are addressed along with various motives and modes for participation in digital vigilantism. Moreover, the phenomenon of increased influence of vigilante culture creation and business-like franchising of institutionalised vigilantism across and beyond Russia is presented.

1.2. Research questions

Social justice matters are complex negotiations of legality, morality, norms, cultures and perceptions of 'right' and 'wrong'. These negotiations, in turn, are influenced by social biases and frustrations, while social media can illuminate these societal features and make them more visible. Moreover, political, economic, legal and media contexts are significant in the manifestation of digital vigilantism. Johnston's (1996) logic of not qualifying vigilantism as necessarily illegal or extra-legal can be applied to social media and digitally mediated citizen-led justice. Can platforms and the practices that take

place therein be framed as fundamentally good or bad? Such categorical conclusions risk being a narrowly essentialist exercise.

Instead, it is necessary to consider motives for participation; the relationship between vigilantes and the state; the impact of vigilantism on its targets; as well as the legal, political, economic and cultural milieu where vigilantism is manifest. These and other nuances surrounding the phenomenon of digital vigilantism are addressed in the current dissertation through the following main research question: *How are practices of digital vigilantism in Russia manifested through state-citizen and citizen-to-citizen relations?*

To address a diverse set of nuances that inform digital vigilantism manifestation in Russia, the following supporting research questions are addressed:

SQ1: How is digital vigilantism in Russia informed by (1) historically situated practices of outsourced, crowdsourced, and volunteer-based citizen-led justice, and (2) the denouncing, shaming, and moralising of citizens by fellow citizens? (Chapter 2)

SQ2: How is visibility (including mediated shaming, moralising, harassment, and physical acts of retaliation) weaponised by participants? (Chapters 3; 4; 5)

SQ3: What motivates citizen participation in and state support of digital vigilantism? (Chapters 3; 6)

SQ4: How is digital vigilantism framed and rendered meaningful by state-owned and independent Russian media? (Chapter 4)

SQ5: How is digital vigilantism experienced by targets in relation to social inequalities, digital divides, social frustrations and biases? (Chapter 5)

SQ6: What are the legal and digital media landscapes in which vigilante practices take place in Russia? (Chapter 6)

1.3. Methods, case selection and chapter overview

Relying on the inductive principles of grounded theory where theoretical frameworks and conclusions are derived from the data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), a multi-method research design was utilised to address the interdisciplinary objectives of this dissertation. Namely, a literature review, field interviews, qualitative content analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013), online and in-person observations of vigilantes in action were employed.

Throughout the project, the author travelled to Russia on four occasions conducting interviews and field observations. While a significant amount of research artefacts

came from online sources, seeing vigilantes in action was crucial for understanding the setting and the dynamics of interaction in citizen-to-citizen retaliation. In the spring of 2020, the author made field observations of a bad-parking combating group (StopXam) during its raids on one of the neighbourhoods of St. Petersburg. Offline observations allowed for an understanding of activities in their 'raw' state, prior to being edited for YouTube episodes.

Since cases that take place in Russia are beginning to have greater cross-border impact, the project's fieldwork was performed in and outside the country. This implied conversations with former and current participants from Moldova (in-person interview in Rotterdam) and Peru (online interview), as well as with a political target in exile in Latvia (online interview). A case involving labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan required that fieldwork be done in that country, which was combined with academic exchange. In total, fieldwork consisted of 36 semi-structured in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, including participants (9), a target (1), media professionals (3), civil rights defenders (4), NGO representatives (6), academics (7), lawyers (2), and law enforcement authorities (4). Some of the approached actors refused to be interviewed. Among these are the Moscow-based StopXam group; the Moscow-based Hrushy Protiv group; the St. Petersburg-based Hrushy Protiv groups; the Google office in Moscow; and an anti-vigilante activist in Moscow. Some participants preferred the online mode of interview and this preference was accommodated. All conducted interviews were transcribed verbatim and, where necessary, translated from Russian into English by the author. See Annexe III for the full list of interviewees and Annexe IV for interview topics and questions. Interview data is used to support the argument and provide vivid examples, perceptions and insider perspectives throughout the work. Not all the interview material made it into the final dissertation, and the remaining data will be used further academic publications.

In addition to performing observations and conducting interviews, the author analysed 990 legal cases against social media users in Russia. This analysis helped in understanding the types of activities that can get people in trouble with the law as well as the nuances of pressing charges against social media users (see Chapter VI). Furthermore, the author collected and analysed 1,500 news pieces covering vigilante activities in Russia's state-loyal and independent media. Content analysis of 307 such news pieces covering StopXam vigilante formation is discussed in Chapter IV. Between 2017 and 2021, the author watched several hundred YouTube videos produced by vigilantes in Russia. Content analysis of top 20 YouTube videos (by number of views) of Hrushy Protiv vigilante group is presented in Chapter III. See Annexes I and II for further details on content analysis procedure.

Relying on these methods, the current dissertation responds to several conceptual elements of digital vigilantism. While chapters do not exclusively focus on a single theoretical element and are instead divided into themes. Namely, Chapter II addresses the idea of vigilante *autonomy* by considering historical premises in entrusting justice

provision matters to ‘private’ citizens. In this case, privacy is put in quotation marks, since according to Soviet ideology, all citizens were a default extension of the state. Chapter III considers *motivations* for participation and *social media affordances*. Chapter IV illuminates the role of the *audience* and the significance of *traditional media in target exposure*, discourse formation and rendering digital vigilantism meaningful. Chapter V exposes the complexity of the *layers of target vulnerabilities* and difficulties in seeking post-exposure justice. Chapter VI addresses the *legal environment* and media realities in which digital vigilantism is manifest. Furthermore, it considers various counter-forces in justice provision. Below, each chapter content is introduced in greater detail.

1.3.1. Citizen-led Justice: Past and Present

This research project began with the investigation of sociocultural factors and historical practices related to outsourcing legal matters to citizens in Russia and its impact on the current manifestation of digitally mediated citizen-led justice. It should be noted that the state has compelled citizens to exercise justice over other citizens since the early formation of the Soviet Union (Sieglebaum, 1992). Amid various public shaming practices was a phenomenon “known as ‘prorabotka’ (literally ‘working over’),” a type of character judgment meeting that disciplined representatives of various segments of society, from university students to mature Communist Party members (Stephenson, 2021, p. 114). *Chapter II “Citizen-led justice then and now: From comrades’ courts to dotcomrade vigilantism”* addresses Soviet-era delegation of certain legal matters to citizens. Such delegation of small judiciary duties to the masses required watchfulness of comrades over fellow comrades, while demonstrating the dangers of the “democratisation of justice” (Stephenson, 2021, p.130).

The involvement of citizenry in vigilante and judicial duties was institutionalised by the General Secretary of the Communist Party, Nikita Khrushchev, in the 1950s with a formal introduction of comrades’ courts (Gorlizki, 1998, p. 403). The courts aimed to “explore matters of everyday morality and address instances of improper behavior by those who depart from the norms of socialist community life” (materials from the XXI Communist Party Congress cited in Gorlizki, 1998, p. 424). The courts addressed minor mischief, poor performance at work, hooliganism, alcoholism, asocial behaviour and the like. As well, they were granted the power to assign and execute punishment or transfer the case to other state organs, should the severity of a given offence be outside of the scope of amateur judges, i.e., fellow comrades (Supreme Council of RSFSR, 1961).

Public shaming was practiced in the form of the so-called “black boards of shame” where photographs of deviant community members were displayed for the public eye. In fact, these boards of shame had an antipode in the form of “red boards of honor”, displaying hardworking communists (Bondarev, 2012). Such methods of public display and shaming resemble modern practices of exposure, where social media platforms serve as spaces for “flagging” other citizens (Loveluck, 2019). These systems in the context of the Russian social organisation provide a historical socio-cultural foundation

for organised vigilante groups to take collective action against a perceived offence and exercise moralisation and public shaming.

The role of the state (Russia's ruling elite and other structures in the hierarchy of the so-called *vertical of power*) is addressed as a traditional power and violence monopolist, as well as, in the case of Russia, a media superpower (Lipman, 2017; Orttung & Walker, 2013). Contrary to the perceived autonomy of vigilantes (Johnston, 1996), in Russia, successful vigilante movements are approved and supported by the state. The chapter investigates the nuances and complexities of this relationship, inquiring into the characteristics and practices that can grant state approval or spark counter-measures. Some aspects of Soviet-era collective justice indeed appear to have been reincarnated in the digital domain, such as shaming and moralisation. Other nuances, however, have either evolved or are unique due to social media affordances. For instance, in the Soviet era, seasoned members of society were granted participatory powers; in contemporary Russia, however, these actors had been replaced with digitally-savvy youth. Moreover, exposure in the Soviet times was limited to one's neighborhood or workplace, while in digital retaliation audiences are global.

The following questions are addressed in the chapter: What are the similarities and differences between conventional communist and digitally mediated post-communist vigilantism in Russia? What role does the state play in manifestations of mediated citizen-led justice in post-communist Russia?

1.3.2. Vigilantes, Their Media Products and Motives for Participation

Having addressed historical premises, the dissertation hones in on contemporary state-supported groups. The new era of organised and institutionalised vigilantism in Russia begins in 2005 with the formation of a pro-Kremlin youth group, 'Nashi' [Ours], which "played an important role in political socialization of young people" (Krivonos & Fedorova, 2014). After its dissolution in 2012, Nashi left behind federal-level movements with franchise branches across the country such as 'StopXam' [Stop a Douchebag], combating bad parking and traffic violations and 'Hrushi Protiv' [Piggy Against], specialising in detection of expired produce in grocery stores and markets. Both groups were founded in 2010 by former commissars and members of the Nashi movement. These groups have benefited from state grants under the Presidential Program for NGO Support (Rubin & Rustamova, 2014; Rustamova, 2015).

Both StopXam and Hrushi Protiv operate in similar modes: a group of participants approaches its target and confronts offensive behaviour while filming the process. Confrontation often leads to use of obscene language and violence, sometimes escalating into group fights. Videos are edited, uploaded on YouTube, and shared across various other social platforms. *Chapter 3: "YouTube as a stage for vigilantism and politicised citizen-led justice in Russia"*, features media analysis addressing how participants frame actors such as targets and law enforcement. Videos were analysed with regards to image and speech, with the focus on participants' self-portrayal; framing of targets

(often ethnic minorities and labour migrants); and portrayal of police forces (sometimes invited to the scene by both participants and targets) among other formal and informal actors (state officials and popular artists). For a detailed methodological approach see Annexe II.

The analysis revealed a bias towards merchants of non-Slavic descent, as the group frames people from the Caucasus and labour migrants from the former-Soviet Central Asian republics as those responsible for expired produce on the shelves of Russia's stores. In 2013, Hrushu Protiv called on its audience to sign petitions to prevent migrants from working in retail—an act suggestive of nationalist biases in state-encouraged vigilante practices. In this case, digital vigilantism is practiced and perceived as a form of entertainment akin to reality TV, with a reflection of on-the-ground societal frustrations and tensions. The more verbal and physical violence was featured in the videos or promised in the titles, the more viewers such videos attracted.

This chapter aims to enrich the current literature on digital vigilantism by addressing the motivations of participants, their relationship with the state, as well as platform affordances for vigilante practices. By focusing on the media products of Hrushu Protiv, the chapter investigates participants' framing of their targets and other actors, and in doing so, further contributes to literature by demonstrating the value and relevance of communication approaches and methods in studying modern digitally mediated vigilantism. The following questions are addressed in the Chapter: 1) How do Hrushu Protiv portray themselves, their targets, police, and other actors in retaliation videos? 2) What motivates participation in and state support of digital vigilantism in Russia?

1.3.3. Heroes or Hooligans?

After looking at the digital media products, the dissertation considers the role of traditional media in framing participants, targets, law enforcement and other actors. Media discourses surrounding the phenomenon of digital vigilantism more broadly are addressed in *Chapter 4: "Heroes or hooligans? The role of traditional media in rendering digital vigilantism meaningful"*. This chapter aims to expand theoretical frames of definitional dimensions of vigilantism by addressing the role of audience and traditional media in the digitally mediated manifestation of this phenomenon. It aims to do so by addressing the following questions: How are StopXam participants, their targets, and police forces portrayed in Russia's traditional media? What is the role of traditional media in rendering digital vigilantism meaningful? Motives for participation by groups and individuals as well as harm experienced by targets are evaluated in the context of social biases and frustrations that penetrate the digital domain and, consequently, re-enter offline discourses. This chapter focuses on StopXam and considers the portrayal of the group, its targets and police forces in Russia's pro-state and independent media outlets, investigating the role of traditional media in the manifestation of digital vigilantism.

The chapter draws its sample from Russia's top broadcasters: Channel One, NTV, Ren TV and Rossiia-24. State controlled media in Russia is a norm-setter that represents the position of the ruling regime on both domestic and international issues. Qualitative content analysis of reports on StopXam is used to shed light on the media perception of the role and meaning of digital vigilantism in the society. By looking at the eight-year coverage period between 2010 and 2018, the chapter illustrates the evolution in the coverage of StopXam and links narrative fluctuations to greater socio-political processes in the country. In addition to these state-loyal broadcasters, the study features TV Rain – an alternative voice that had to move all of its broadcasting online due to state pressure and inability to deliver content via cable.

All selected channels maintain websites with archived news blocks in the form of videos and transcribed text which were relied upon in the current study. News reports were sought by using variations of the group's name spelling in the Cyrillic alphabet: *CmonXam*, *Cmon Xam*, *Cmonxam*. Select results that featured unrelated topics were removed. A total of 307 news pieces were analysed in this research: 4 from Channel One; 48 from NTV; 149 from Rent TV; 98 from Russia-24; and 8 from TV Rain (for details on methodological approaches see Annexe II). Content analysis demonstrates the important role of traditional media in framing social justice and giving voice to its various actors. Whether StopXam members are heroes or hooligans is a contested view, and media analysis reveals that perceptions have changed over time.

1.3.4. Layers of Target Vulnerabilities

Hate-based movements in Russia target ethnic minorities, labour migrants and alleged paedophiles. Targets are identified through social networks and eventually fall victim to embodied confrontation and humiliation filmed on camera and shared online. Some groups exclusively target Muslim women and expose them to collective shaming and moralising. In the country's conservative regions such as Chechnya, this exposure can lead to physical abuse and even 'honour execution'.

Chapter 5: "Layers of target vulnerabilities in digital vigilantism" addresses the case of the so-called patriot groups composed of male Kyrgyz migrants who punish Kyrgyz women through 'honour beating' for interaction with representatives of other ethnic groups while in Russia.

By addressing the selected case, this chapter aims to further inform the scientific discussion, debate, and exchange on the role, benefits, and harms that digital media can bring into the lives of vulnerable groups such as labour migrants. The chapter considers the following question: How are the established social, political, and economic inequalities, as well as racial, ethnic, and other biases impacting social justice manifested in the digital domain? Capable of reinforcing "existing social relationships" (van Dijk, 2012, p. 243), these biases can re-enter the offline sphere and further influence the discourse where they "culminate in a coordinated mass persecution of a targeted citizen" (Trottier, 2017, p. 61).

The male ‘patriots’ undress women, beat them, shave their eyebrows off, and sexually assault them. The entire process is filmed and shared online. While filming, they force women to reveal their identity and home address and to say that they are sorry for interacting with non-Kyrgyz men in order to “send a message” to others (Beishenbek Kyzy & Bigg, 2012). The case of ‘Kyrgyz patriots’ illustrates hierarchies of vulnerability among targets as labour migrants are targeted by far-right anti-immigrant groups in Russia, while female migrants also fall victim to abuse by fellow male compatriots.

1.3.5. (Con)Trolling the Web: Internet Governance in Russia

After addressing the historical premises, contemporary cases, the roles of digital and traditional media and target experiences, it is important to take a few steps back and consider the legal and digital environment in which these practices are taking place. The aim of *Chapter 6: “(Con)Trolling the web: Internet governance in Russia”* is to inquire into the logic of social media user arrests in Russia. The chapter responds to the following questions: What is the logic behind social media user arrests in Russia? What specific online activities can lead to litigation? It concludes that ambiguity and monomania of social-media control structures in Russia make everyone potentially vulnerable. In such circumstances, social media users simply do not and cannot know whether or not they will face the law for their online engagements—a condition capable of stimulating self-censorship.

The research begins with the analysis of legal frameworks, as several criminal code articles have been amended and applied to online speech, leading to accusations of extremism and terrorism not only for expressed opinions, but even for ‘likes’. Furthermore, 990 cases of litigation against social media users were investigated to illustrate who is being targeted and over what type of online self-expression.

The chapter identifies state-loyal vigilante forces recruited to ‘snitch’ on fellow citizens and monitor the web for undesired content. It also presents citizen counter-forces to repressive state mechanisms and their operation tactics. Four types of charges against social media users can be identified based on the study: 1) *authentic*—real cases instigated over real hate-speech; 2) *tactical*—made-up cases targeting state critics; 3) *practical*—targeting people with limited financial and social capital for police to fill case quotas; 4) *random*—random persons facing the law due to vague definitions and broad interpretations. All four categories can be described as *invasive*, as in some cases citizens face the law for content shared in private photo albums on VKontakte. This level of invasiveness is an indication of a collaboration between law enforcement and the platform.

There are certain themes in social media posts that can greatly increase risk of litigation. Among these are posts challenging the ruling elites, calls for protests, posts concerning the Orthodox Church, World War II, xenophobic posts, and posts related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. The spectrum of topics is broadened with every new accusation and new legislation governing online speech. Sometimes there are

contradicting combinations, since both misogynist and feminist, religious and atheist posts can lead to litigation. Most of the analysed cases concerned posts shared or 'liked' on the VKontakte social network. Although nearly all other mainstream social media platforms are represented, VKontakte is the leader when it comes to legal cases concerning online content.

The applicability of the law is selective in Russia. This selectivity exemplifies a scenario where critics of the state can be punished for their off- and online activities. When a person is challenging the ruling elites offline, their online trace will also fall under scrutiny. Due to technical and financial inability to replicate a Chinese-style firewall, Russia's ruling elite opted for *trolling* the web through the spread of fear via repressive legislation, selective arrests, and regime-loyal citizens acting out in the manner that echoes the country's totalitarian past. Citizens can report on other citizens for personal reasons. Furthermore, equipped with quotas, police officers can use vague legal frameworks to arrest random users and fill their case-solving statistics. Citizen counter-forces are present but are weaker than the united forces of elites, law enforcement, recruited citizens and state-loyal/state-compliant social media platforms. Counter-forces are in a weaker position due to limited capacity, disproportionality of resources, and lack of unity.

1.3.6. General Conclusion

In conclusion, the dissertation revisits the primary and supportive research questions and elaborates on how the research project addressed them. Each of the six supportive questions is presented with a commentary based on the findings from various chapters of the dissertation. These commentaries are followed by the discussion of the overarching question of state-citizen and citizen-to-citizen control, surveillance, and retaliation in Russia. Recommendations for further research follow.

1.4. Ethical considerations

The methodology of this dissertation was evaluated and approved by the Ethics Board of the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication. A data management plan was carefully designed in consultation with supervisors, data protection and legal specialists at Erasmus University Rotterdam.

While conducting the fieldwork, as individual researchers and members of a greater team, we took conscious measures to limit potential harm to both informants and investigator(s). As such, we intentionally avoided meeting with some of the more radical groups and participants. Coming from Uzbekistan myself and meeting with Russia's ultra-right vigilantes who target Central Asians could potentially bring about undesired consequences.

Similarly, I did not seek contact with the vulnerable targets so as not to bring further harm into their lives. For example, when handling the case of female honour beating, I avoided meeting with female Kyrgyz migrants who fall target to male Kyrgyz migrants. As a non-Kyrgyz male, I could endanger the lives of female informants if I were to interview them. Instead, we opted for interviewing journalists who reported on the cases and who already met with the targets and possessed insider information.

Some of the interviews were intentionally held online, as the informants felt more comfortable meeting this way. All interview participants were introduced to the informed consent form, outlining the purpose of the research and its approaches in regards to handling their data and responses. Written or verbal consent was granted by each participant prior to the interview.

Other potential safety threats concerned political and legal environments in the field. Political confrontation between Russia and 'the West' sometimes resulted in labelling foreign researchers coming from European academic institutions as 'foreign agents' in Russia, leading to deportation at best and arrests at worst. During the three field visits, I sought affiliation with local academic institutions to avoid any legal misinterpretation of my scientific visits.

Other ethical concerns and measures implied cautious data handling. With consultations and training from Erasmus University's data protection officer, measures were taken to minimise risk when gathering, storing and handling data. All the data such as screenshots, videos, field notes and interview recordings were stored in the password-protected digital vault with restricted access for anyone aside from the author of this dissertation. All data will be destroyed in accordance with the data management plan.



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Citizen-led justice then and now: From comrades' courts to dotcomrade vigilantism²

2 This chapter is an adaptation of the following article: Gabdulhakov, R. (2018). Citizen-Led Justice in Post-Communist Russia: From Comrades' Courts to Dotcomrade Vigilantism. *Surveillance & Society*, 16(3), 314-331. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v16i3.6952>

Summary

This chapter aims to provide a theoretical conceptualisation of digital vigilantism in its manifestation in the Russian Federation where cases do not emerge spontaneously but are institutionalised, highly organised, and systematic. Given the significant historical context of collective justice under communism, the chapter reviews historical practices of citizen-led justice in the Soviet state and compares these practices with digital vigilantism that takes place in contemporary Russia. The central argument of the author is that despite new affordances that digital media brought about in the sphere of citizen-led justice, the role of the state in manifesting this justice in the Russian Federation remains substantial. At the same time, technological advances have caused certain key features of these practices such as participants, their motives, capacity, targets, and audience engagement to evolve.

Dwell on the past and you will lose an eye. Forget the past and you will lose both eyes.

– Russian Proverb

2.1. Introduction

The spread of smart mobile devices and social networking has transformed communication. Content can be generated and shared with the world by anyone in possession of these technologies. As social media users, we tend to share our human experience with others in the virtual domain, be it the food we eat, witnessed artwork, destinations visited, degrees obtained, relationship updates, or birth and death news. Virtual connectivity and practices of sharing with friends or with complete strangers defy the boundaries of conventional (offline) socialisation, as such modes of interaction are characterised by visibility, accessibility and unpredictability. *Visibility* is granted by the virtual non-existence of private interactions on social media, since anything one posts or shares in 'private' messages has the potential of becoming visible to the global audience. *Accessibility* can be described in dual terms: 1) access to the personal information of billions of other users, and 2) access to persons who otherwise seemed 'outside of human reach'—celebrities, politicians, royalty. *Unpredictability* is, perhaps, the broadest of the three and implies a wide spectrum of virtual socialisation characteristics. Among these is the idea of some events/photos/videos going viral and others remaining buried in the quicksand of the fragmented, chaotic and short-lived attention span of virtual audiences. Furthermore, there is a certain unpredictability in terms of what delinquency (alleged and genuine) of other users will be revealed to the thrill and consternation of the audience. Besides, one can never be certain that their own actions would not become subject to resentment, shaming and denunciation online.

From exposing a neighbour for leaving their trash bags by the front door for days to inviting the online audience to direct its fury towards alleged paedophiles or terrorists, virtual socialization is dominated by the pursuit of citizen-led justice equipped with the codes of perceived threats and violation of social norms and morality. Such practices of visibility instrumentalisation for the purpose of punishment can be referred to as *digital vigilantism*. In digital vigilantism, citizens take on the duties of police, jury and executioners and direct their collective punitive efforts towards fellow citizens.

While this is a global phenomenon taking place across political, cultural, social, economic and technological contexts, this dissertation focuses on the case of Russia, where social media users instrumentalise the digitally mediated pursuit of justice to reach a variety of objectives, from moral calls and ideological motives to entrepreneurial and political aspirations. The phenomenon of public naming-and-shaming and the moralisation of citizens by other citizens is not a novelty for modern Russia. The state has historically compelled citizens to vigilantism, denunciation, and collectivist justice during the Soviet period. Given the significant historical context of social justice that took place under communism, the current manifestation of digital vigilantism in Russia

raises questions about re-packaged history amid the spread of vigilante practices to social media. While the Soviet state was renowned for its surveillance practices, it is important to consider how these practices compare to modern-day approaches in Russia. Indeed, Soviet manifestation of citizen-led surveillance and justice pursuit were diverse in their form and extent depending on their positioning on the historical timeline. However, comrades' courts are applicable to the study due to several nuances in their *modus operandi*. Comrades' courts used naming-and-shaming and moralisation in reaction to offences, much like digital vigilantes do when they expose their targets online. Comrades' courts resembled a disciplinary show, as the audience intensified shaming and moralisation while witnessing the consequences of deviation from the socialist order. Digitally mediated citizen-led justice too thrives on the presence of the audience since the audience is fundamental to the effectiveness of retaliation.

While digital media brought about new affordances for participation in citizen-led justice, the Russian state maintains control over traditional media through censorship, repression, and other means of muting alternative narratives. The state attempts to spread this control over social media through website blocking and putting pressure on telecommunication providers to collect, store, and share user-generated data upon request (Meduza, 2018a). It also does so through demonstrative arrests and lawsuits where users are convicted for "shares" and "likes" on social media (Litvinova, 2016). Manifested in multifaceted hierarchical layers, the relationship between the state and vigilantes in Russia is complex and requires a nuanced analysis. On one hand, support and coordination of vigilante groups can grant the ruling regime control over their activities and can be instrumentalised in its interest; on the other hand, the state is essentially endorsing a force that can become criminal or turn against the 'feeding hand'.

As a phenomenon of collective online retaliation to perceived offences committed by individuals and groups, digital vigilantism can be both spontaneous and unpredictable in terms of how viral and long-lasting the case could become. Aside from challenging the notion of spontaneity, digital vigilantism in Russia is also challenging Johnston's (1996) idea of vigilante autonomy from the state. In this regard, Russia's digital vigilantes constitute a unique research case where organisational structures, systematic approaches, thematic focus and respective relationships with the state play a firm operational role. There is an intricate dynamic between vigilantes and the authorities as, on one hand, participants respond to dysfunctionalities of state actors by taking justice into their own hands, thus stressing the impotence of state bodies. On the other hand, some vigilante formations in Russia receive Presidential grants in support of their activities and enjoy formal and informal endorsements from the highest authorities. All the while, the state attempts to impose tight control over social media and online self-expression through censorship, blocking, user-arrests, and obliging telecommunication corporations to store and share user-generated data with security authorities upon demand (Akbari & Gabdulhakov, 2019; Gabdulhakov, 2020). As such,

the use of concerned citizens by a controlling state to monitor other citizens largely resembles the Soviet totalitarian collectivist approaches to surveillance.

Russia's digital vigilantes address a wide set of offences and tend to be thematically focused. There are groups that can be generally described as those collaborating with the state, those working in spite of the state and those targeting the state itself.

Collaborators tend to focus on topics of everyday frustration—shaming of road traffic and parking violators, exposure of expired produce sellers, confrontation with drinkers and smokers in otherwise alcohol and smoke-free public spaces, etc. Namely, it focuses on two prominent pro-Kremlin groups: *StopXam* [Stop a Douchebag] and *Hrushi Protiv* [Piggy Against]³ which specialise in monitoring traffic violations and exposing allegedly unscrupulous merchants, respectively. These groups resemble the “many watching the many on behalf of the few” model set forth by Larsen and Piché where the public is engaged in “participatory surveillance”, extending the “effective gaze of the state” and doing so “beyond the boundaries otherwise posted by technology, resources, and law” (2009, p. 196). Some pro-state formations engage in snitching on fellow citizens and report on content critical of the political status quo, protest activities and other content challenging the ruling elite.

Other cases of vigilante-state collaboration can be described as strategic partnership between corrupt law enforcement and football hooligans, criminal formations and hate groups. Such forces engage in attacks on alleged drug dealers, migrants, and ethnic and sexual minorities. Among these groups are the ultra-right fascist formation “Restruct”, which also incorporates other thematic groups such as “Occupy paedophilia” and “Occupy narcissophilia”.

Groups that operate in spite of the state can also be described as those violating the law for moral pursuit. Among these groups are various ultra-right nationalist and patriarchal formations, such as *Karfagen*, *The Male State* and *Kyrgyz Patriots*. All three groups engaged in practices of slut-shaming, virtual exposure and shaming of women and embodied harms such as beating, rape and other criminal, degrading and humiliating acts made visible online.

There are technologically-savvy groups that utilise social media to expose the ruling elites and their corruption schemes, police brutality, the dysfunctionality of state bodies and other wrong-doings conducted by authorities. Such groups include the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) and *Dissernet*, among others. FBK specialises in investigative reports shared across social media in which secret bank accounts, luxurious houses, apartments, private jets and other ruling elite-focused content is shared. Dissernet is a collective of academic enthusiasts who reveal plagiarism in doctoral dissertations. The collective's frequent targets are Russia's state officials. Activities of the FBK and Dissernet where the state itself is being watched are brought in

3 English translations of group titles are taken from groups' official websites and social media accounts. Thus, orthographic nuances are preserved.

to conceptualise the “many watching the few” scheme (Mathiesen, 1997) of monitoring and exposing the state. However, issues of power and immunity to exposure afforded by certain privileges of political power come into play.

This chapter aims to contribute to the theoretical conceptualisation of digital vigilantism by analysing the case of Russia with its Soviet-era pretext for citizens’ involvement in justice matters and the institutionalised, digitally mediated post-Soviet manifestation of this justice. It does so by addressing the following questions: What are the similarities and differences between conventional communist and digitally mediated post-communist vigilantism in Russia? What role does the state play in manifestations of mediated citizen-led justice in post-communist Russia?

First, the chapter conceptualises citizen-led justice and its conventional as well as digital forms. It then focuses on the Soviet comrades’ courts as examples of historical vigilante practices and elaborates on their structure, modus operandi, relations with the state and its agents, as well as the motives of the state for involving citizens in surveillance and justice matters. The chapter also introduces prominent cases of digitally mediated citizen-led justice in contemporary Russia and compares them with Soviet-era citizen-led justice. The two are compared in terms of participants and their motives for engagement; the role of state authorities and collaboration between police and vigilantes; the nature of retaliation; targets; venues for retaliation; use of media; as well as the audience and its role. In doing so, the chapter contributes to the existing literature by spotlighting cases where the state has played and continues to play a significant role in the manifestation of citizen-led justice. These cases demonstrate that retaliation is systematic rather than spontaneous, where a complex mechanism of inter-relations between the ruling regime, law enforcement, media and communication corporations, as well as active citizens establish a powerful surveillance and control system.

2.2. Theoretical background

This section provides theoretical grounds for further elaboration on citizen-led justice in the Soviet Union and its reincarnation in contemporary post-communist Russia. Theoretical frameworks address modern technological realities and capacities where visibility is ubiquitous and, therefore, new mediated forms and means of vigilantism are afforded.

2.2.1. Entrusted, Crowdsourced, and Lateral Surveillance

Social media and smart mobile devices with an internet connection have made visibility global and widespread. Through social networks, but also by default of using digitised services, users generate and make personal information public—a phenomenon of which intelligence services of the past could only dream (Morozov, 2011). In light of global visibility and “the internet of things” (Ashton, 2009), surveillance has transformed from

a process into a lifestyle with “constant clustering and sorting of groups of individuals” (Lyon, 2007, p. 183). Hand in hand with the demanded vigilance coming from the state “see something, say something” (Marx, 2013; Reeves, 2012), technological advances allow citizens to take “policing” and “spying” duties into their own hands (Andrejevic, 2002), thus turning them into sleuths acting out of their own interests or as an extension of the “effective gaze of the state” (Larsen & Piché, 2009, p. 196).

The very word “surveillance” consisting of “sur’ (from above), and ‘veillance’ (to watch)” (Galič et al, 2017) implies the presence of a supervisor watching over subjects within some hierarchical system. Governments justify the ongoing data mining, storage of information, and clustering of individuals as a security measure (Posner, 2008), while corporations define it as a business measure fundamental for providing customised experiences in advertising (Facebook, 2016). “Ubiquitous computing” (Lyon, 2007) at the backbone of modern existence resembles a new form of exploitation where “smart devices” must be regarded as “exploitable devices” (Hypponen, 2014). Being a power monopolist, the state may warrant, demand, and/or hack access to big data gathered by corporations (Greenwald & MacAskill, 2013). While the capacity of different actors ranges vastly between the users, the providers and the sovereign, there is a subject-object dynamic between them where a citizen is both “an agent of and a subject for surveillance” (Marx, 2013, p. 58), given that “legal biases render citizens far more vulnerable under police surveillance” (Reeves, 2012, p. 246). However, theoretically, so are state agents and corporations as their visibility can be weaponised too.

Lateral acts of social justice have existed historically. Witch-hunting, lynching, and comrades' courts serve as common examples. In the modern context, such acts are afforded by the *weaponisation of visibility* of other citizens (Trottier, 2017). Convenience in generating and accessing information granted by the internet offers scenarios where “sharing may supersede reflecting” (Trottier, 2017, p. 58). This urge to share information quickly and the idea that anyone can be a sleuth (Nhan et al., 2017) can lead to waves of intense hatred in citizen-to-citizen relations, sometimes directed at the wrong suspects (Volpp, 2014). In digital vigilantism, there is a system of presumption of guilt as opposed to the presumption of innocence as targets are deprived of a due process and legal trial. Furthermore, the state and its agents can themselves fall target to vigilante citizens. Footage of police brutality shared on social media, candidly recorded political conversations, citizen-led corruption investigations, and other acts of the “many watching the few” (Mathiesen, 1997) illustrate this dynamic. However, asymmetries of power (Monahan, 2006) must be carefully considered in the instances where the state is “sousveilled”, or watched from the bottom-up (Mann et al., 2002).

Despite making the sovereign more visible,⁴ social media empowers the regimes themselves to exercise harassment over political opponents and investigative

4 A scheme initially addressed in Bentham's Constitutional Panopticon as elaborated in Galič, Timan, & Koops (2017).

journalists (Pearce, 2015). Even dictators join social networks, as opposed to censoring them, in order to be in tune with the discourses and in control of online conversations (Morozov, 2011, p. 116); although censorship, blocking, and other forms of control over social media are certainly extant across political and media systems. State advantages can be exemplified by Russia's "anti-terrorism" telecommunication legislation, requiring telecommunications companies to "record and store all communications and activities of all users, and make stored records available to authorized government bodies at their request" (ICNL, 2016). Therefore, ubiquitous visibility may, on one hand, denote vulnerability of the state when it comes to "sousveillance" (Mann et al., 2002), while at the same time providing new opportunities for surveillance and control. Citizens watch each other while they are also watched by the state through telecommunication corporations. At the same time, citizens can expose the state on these very platforms. The state, on the other hand, has legal and other resources to impose further control over information. Therefore, depending on the circumstances and capacity of each actor in a given case, respective advantages and limitations will vary.

2.2.2. Visibility as a Novel "Spectacle of Punishment"

Foucault (1995, pp. 11-12) argued that the role of the "spectacle of punishment" had withered away with the development of the "discipline society", which transferred corrective and disciplinary measures behind curtains for the sake of punishing the soul as opposed to punishing the body. In digital vigilantism, the spectacle of offensive conduct and retaliation to perceived offences is both the means and the end of a punitive practice. Thus, in digital vigilantism "punishment of the soul" takes place through online harassment and damaged reputation; while "punishment of the body" takes place through embodied actions made visible online. The "spectacle of punishment" lives on in online retaliation, insofar as the *weaponisation of visibility* a priori requires an audience (Trottier, 2017).

Debord (2002, p. 12) defines spectacle as "a social relationship between people that is mediated by image". There is, of course, a relationship between participants and targets as the former takes offence at the actions of the latter, but there is also a relationship with the audience. The audience is a significant element that has a relationship both with participants and targets of digital vigilantism. This dynamic raises questions over the definition of participation in digital vigilantism, as even the act of watching certain media products can be harmful to the exposed targets. It also raises questions over the motives, authority, and power of participants in response to perceived offences, as well as the proportionality and nature of this retaliation, which can manifest in such acts as naming and shaming, moralising, hacking, doxing, and broadcasting physical attacks.

Widespread connectivity granted by the internet brought about new modes of operation for citizen-led justice. Citizens can monitor and expose each other via social networks, while other users can participate through (dis)likes, shares, and comments. Information shared on social networks such as Facebook and YouTube (and on their

Russian equivalents such as VKontakte [In Contact], Odnoklassniki [Classmates] and Rutube (a domestic YouTube equivalent)) “provide both a platform and a set of practices that render DV (digital vigilantism) meaningful and practical” (Trottier, 2017, p. 61). Visibility is exploited by participants who access or produce and spread content related to their target. In this sense, digital vigilantism “can be framed in the context of online communication” (Trottier, 2017, p. 60), the “culmination” of which is “a coordinated mass persecution of a targeted citizen” (Trottier, 2017, p. 61).

Retaliation on digital media grants a wider set of affordances that distinguish it from conventional vigilantism. The audience observes retaliation and participates in it while enjoying anonymity that was not possible in comrades' courts. If comrades' courts used to culminate in a target's repentance, digital vigilantism grants the audience capacities to intensify and (indefinitely) prolong retaliation. Disciplinary elements are present in this digitally mediated spectacle as the audience is shown the consequences of the offence. A large audience is a marker of popularity and relevance of activities of a given digital vigilante group. Thus, the audience is entertained by retaliation, the audience participates in retaliation, and the audience is disciplined through the “spectacle” of digitally mediated retaliation, with or without solidarity for the target that crowds expressed during public executions of the past (Foucault, 1995, p. 64).

Much like executioners described in Foucault's examples, digital vigilantes themselves fall target to vigilantism and retaliation from targets and audiences, illustrating a dynamic where the complexity of agendas and interests clash in counter-narratives. However, questions concerning proportionality of offence and response, audience reach capacity, as well as the role of state endorsement come into play when counter-narratives are addressed. In digital vigilantism, participants' visibility can be a desired condition because it can be instrumentalised. Visibility can lead to vulnerability for some and grant popularity and immunity to others.

Visibility granted by social media is the means, the end, and the structure in which digital vigilantism takes place. Digital media (i.e., social networks, websites, blogs) are both tools and platforms for participants to produce and share information that is intended to punish, shame, moralise, or otherwise expose and harm targets. Most importantly, mediated visibility resembles a Foucauldian “spectacle of punishment” (1995, p. 16)—a show that attracts an audience and serves as a warning for potential targets, thus becoming a disciplinary act.

2.3. Back in the USSR

In the Soviet Union, the state incessantly compelled its citizens to be watchful of each other. The intensity and severity of “many watching the many on the behalf of the few” (Larsen & Piché, 2009, p. 196) varied throughout the history of the Soviet state. Small collective comrades' courts were present since the early days of the Soviet empire

(Barnett, 2006; Fitzpatrick, 1994; Gorlizki, 1998; Kucherov, 1970; Sieglebaum, 1992). With the support of comrades' courts, the "father" of the Bolshevik Revolution, Vladimir Lenin, envisioned the eventual dismissal of legal coercion in "socialist democracy", as people were expected to "act righteously not from fear of punishment but directed by rules of communist morality" (Kucherov, 1970, p. 197). Mediated tools of citizen-led justice and Soviet disciplinary measures included the so-called "boards of shame" and "boards of honour" (Bondarev, 2012), displaying photographs of the deviant and admirable community members, respectively.

Comrades' courts were initially designed to enforce worker discipline by virtue of peer-to-peer monitoring and collective shaming of those who were not contributing their share to the common purpose of building communism. These courts experienced a downfall under Stalin's industrialisation programme which required strict labour discipline and consequently much harsher measures by the state and its agents (Kucherov, 1970, p. 167). This manifested in mass repressions across the Soviet Union. Millions of Soviets were subjected to Stalin's repressions as *vragi naroda* [enemies of the people] on accusations of treason, espionage, theft of state property, and other wrongdoings (Barnett, 2006). This came to be known as *The Great Purge*—comparable to "the Nazi destruction of European Jewry in the Holocaust" (Shatz, 1984, p. 1). Lenin's idea of socialist democracy had transformed into mass-spread fear, suspicion, denunciation, and snitching.

Under Stalin's repressions amid the industrialisation campaign, it was important to show the power of the state as opposed to the power of fellow comrades over each other. Still, the identification of 'enemies' was often carried out through anonymous accusations and reporting. A mere phone call or anonymous note, commonly known in the Russian language as *donos* [snitching],⁵ could lead to a person's imprisonment and execution (Fitzpatrick, 1994). Thus, the boundaries between secret police and citizens blurred.

With the death of Stalin, public participation in the administration of justice experienced a revival (Kucherov, 1970, p.168). Involvement of citizenry in state judicial duties was formally institutionalised by Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s with formal re-introduction of Lenin's comrades' courts (Gorlizki, 1998, p. 403). The comrades' courts aimed to "explore matters of everyday morality and address instances of improper behaviour by those who depart from the norms of socialist community life" (from the XXI Communist Party Congress cited in Gorlizki [1998, p. 424]). The courts addressed minor mischief, poor performance at work, hooliganism, alcoholism, asocial behaviour, and the like. They were granted the power to assign and execute punishment or transfer the case to higher state authority, should the severity of a given offence supersede their scope (Supreme Council of RSFSR, 1961).

5 Anonymous reports by citizens on fellow citizens were submitted to higher authorities such as NKVD (The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) later transformed to KGB (Committee for State Security).

Once formally institutionalised, comrades' courts quickly spread across the Soviet Union. "From a few hundred mostly dormant agencies in the mid-1950s, the number of comrades' courts across the USSR swelled to 197,000 by the beginning of 1964, of which approximately 90,000 were in the Russian Republic" (Kazin, cited in Gorlizki, 1998, p. 403).

Image 1 illustrates a hearing during the comrades' court session in one of the typical Soviet apartment block courtyards. As is seen in the image, a local police officer is present at the hearing, signifying full collaboration between "citizen prosecutors" and the state. The "judges" are seated at an improvised judge's bench and are dressed in ties, white shirts, and suits. The "defendant"—or rather the accused—is also dressed in a formal suit as one would when appearing in the legal court of justice. The audience, mostly the elderly and children, occupied front rows for the spectacle of comrade justice.



Image 1. Comrades' Court. Photo by A. Nazarov (2012).

2.3.1. The Role of the State in Pre-digital Citizen-led Justice

The main proponents of the comrades' courts in Soviet Russia were professional jurists, who "saw in these lay agencies a constitutionally viable mechanism for diverting a large volume of troublesome business away from state courts" (Gorlizki 1998, p. 404). Despite the fact that the Communist Party was "omnipotent" in the Soviet Union and permeated "every aspect of Soviet life," there is "no evidence" that comrades' courts were established to "strengthen Party influence" (Kucherov, 1970, p.192). Public opinion was, of course, influenced by the Communist Party and political cases were highly subjected to this influence. However, in instances where the Party "did not care to interfere," the "pressure of [a] biased public" had the power to be exercised in comrades' courts (Kucherov, 1970, p.193). The main idea behind Lenin's statutes on comrades' courts, and their consequent reinforcement by Khrushchev, was that "all persons will learn to rule and will nearly independently control all the affairs of society" so that "the

state" itself "may wither away" (Kucherov, 1970, p.170). While this indeed could have been the genuine desire of the proponents of citizen-led justice in the Soviet Union, the practical implication of this form of justice was accompanied by various problems, including but not limited to the "lack of knowledge of legal matters" by court members (Kucherov, 1970, p.196).

Comrades' courts were at times more frightening to the citizens than state judicial bodies. As cited in Kucherov (1970, pp.196–97), Gorshenin offers an example of a case where a slightly inebriated man was caught by a people's brigade and begged for any punishment, except for the transfer of his case to his own workers' collective. Being judged by co-workers was more terrifying than the legal court of justice. Comrades' courts, in this regard, fulfilled their core task of serving as an educational and prophylactic tool of worker discipline. They could be seen as a stage for the Foucauldian "spectacle of punishment", amplified not by atrocities of physical torture but by the shaming from fellow comrades.

Some Soviet citizens took on individual roles of sleuths, revealing their darkest side through *donos* on fellow comrades, neighbours, co-workers, and relatives. These people subsequently fell prey to the agents of the state: NKVD, KGB, and other secret police units. Citizens reported on other citizens, judged, and convicted their comrades. All the while, the state was in a way immune to challenges and criticism beyond the whispered conversations in the kitchens of Soviet workers (Levina, 2017). This atmosphere persisted until state-initiated reforms of *perestroika* [restructuring] and *glasnost'* [openness] came about in the 1980s.

2.3.2. Participants

In the country of the workers, society was in principle not permitted to remain indifferent toward its members. It had the obligation to care for and interfere in "how a person behaves on the street, in a club or at home, or to how he relates to his loved ones and to his comrades" (Gorlizki, 1998, p. 406). Comrades' courts were theatrical in their nature, with an interactive setting where all members of the audience could verbalise their opinion on the case. As Gorlizki describes, comrades' court members and chairs were usually prominent and high-ranking members of workers' collectives with remarkable experiences and achievements. World War II veterans, veterans of industrialisation, and the elderly who "adhered to a harsher prewar puritanical morality" were invited to moralise to the younger generation and while doing so, they could both shame the less experienced generation and "let off steam" concerning the vector of Soviet society (Gorlizki, 1998, p. 423).

In this regard, the older generation and outstanding workers were agents of the Soviet state in their respective communities. This affiliation and hierarchy worked both ways. On the one hand, the state was able to penetrate into the deepest folds of the social fabric and guarantee its continuous presence. On the other hand, this form of social justice gave regular workers a sense of participation in their otherwise limited say in state affairs.

2.4. Digital vigilantism in post-communist Russia

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation itself underwent a political, economic, and social transformation. Hand in hand with this transformation came new affordances for citizen-led justice granted by the internet and digital media. What has changed and what echoes the Soviet practices in mediated citizen-led justice in contemporary Russia? What role does the state play in the manifestation of mediated citizen-led justice in post-communist Russia?

2.4.1. *Nashi* [Ours]: Pro-state Digital Vigilantes in Russia

With the demolition of the Soviet Union came political and ideological struggle. Under the system change and democratisation of politics and market economy, known as “shock therapy,” the oligarchs emerged as a class (Guriev & Rachinsky, 2005). At the same time, most of the former comrades were left with a broken state, a collapsed economy, and abandoned ideals. Citizen-led participation in state life took on a form of patronage and racketeering, while comrades' courts as they were known in the Soviet Union ceased to exist (Favarel-Garrigues & Le Huérou, 2004, p.17). Economic stagnation and public disenchantment with the state created a vacuum in legal and social organisation of independent Russia. This vacuum lasted until the mid-2000s and was filled with state initiatives made by Russia's second president, Vladimir Putin. Society members, especially the youth, were once again politically organised and mobilised.

The history of organised and institutionalised digital vigilantism in Russia was seeded in 2005 with the formation of *Nashi* [Ours] pro-Kremlin youth group which “played an important role in political socialisation of young people” (Krivonos & Fedorova, 2014). With Putin's efforts for youth mobilisation came the popular sentiment that the Motherland needed to be lifted “off its knees” (Kudors, 2010, p. 8). Young people played a dual role in this process. They were used to support the legitimacy of the regime, and while doing so, were prevented from becoming a revolutionary force that could challenge or even tackle this very regime.

As the backdrop to the ‘colour revolutions’ in Georgia and Ukraine, the instrumentalisation of youth in anti-revolutionary movements was a practical step for the Kremlin. *Nashi* were created to resist the “unpatriotic coalition of oligarchs, anti-Semites, Nazis, and liberals” (Heller, 2008, p. 3) and became agents of the state in response to behaviour and actions that went against it or were suspected of going against it. Certainly, there were movements that questioned the ruling regime, however, pro-Kremlin groups received financial and administrative support from the state, thus becoming “stalwarts” of the regime (Heller, 2008, pp. 3–4) with larger capacities.

As time went on, however, the ruling elite's interest in youth mobilisation began to fade and *Nashi* experienced a downfall. Heller (2008) explains the decline of *Nashi* as a change of priorities in the Kremlin when Dmitry Medvedev came to power, attempting to improve relations with the West. The “yobbish hooligans of *Nashi*” fulfilled their task

in preventing a colour revolution in Russia but did not suit the new image of Russia, which positioned itself as a “civilized” “partner of the West” (Heller, 2008). Nashi’s failure to counter anti-regime protests and demonstrations in 2011 advanced the loss of interest in youth mobilisation from the side of the ruling elite, and the movement ceased to exist in 2013 (Baunov, 2017). The role of civilized partner became less relevant in the confrontation with the West amid the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and consequent sanctions imposed on Russia by Western democracies, paving the road for possible future resurrection of Nashi-like youth movements. However, the mobilisation of Cossacks (semi-military communities in Russia) to assist the state in cracking down on protesters (Goble, 2018) demonstrates that the Kremlin is leaning toward hard conventional forces in countering opposition, although hybridity of digital and conventional forces is possible. Nonetheless, starting from 2010 Nashi activists began re-branding the dissolving movement and under the Kremlin’s approval launched several vigilante groups with a specific offence focus and the use of social media in retaliation.

2.4.2. Stop a Douchebag and Piggy Against

Some of the prominent projects of former Nashi activists are the StopXam and Hrushi Protiv vigilante formations, specialising in monitoring traffic violations and exposing “unscrupulous” merchants who sell expired produce, respectively. The groups operate in a similar manner—approaching a target and engaging in often violent confrontation, shaming, and moralisation. The process is filmed, edited, and uploaded to the YouTube channels of these groups with subsequent dissemination across other social media.

Russia’s StopXam branch has two channels on YouTube, a Russian language channel and an English language channel where the episodes are systematically uploaded. The group is also present on Facebook, Google+, Odnoklassniki, Twitter, VKontakte, and other social media. StopXam’s signature trademark are stickers reading “I don’t care about anyone, I park where I want”, which they place on the windshields of noncompliant drivers.

Offence can be rooted in a wrongly parked vehicle, unauthorised stop or driving on sidewalks. Confrontations with targets often escalate into conflicts and even mass fights (Stop a Douchebag, 2015), attracting a wider audience. StopXam in Russia is essentially a brand, with numerous franchise branches across the country and in the neighbouring post-Soviet states. Furthermore, some members of Russia’s StopXam founded their own movements such as *Lev Protiv* [Lion Versus] in 2015 and *Stop Haram*⁶ in 2017, battling smoking and drinking in public spaces and behaviour that goes against Islamic principles, respectively.

6 “Haram” describes anything forbidden by Islamic canon. In this case, vigilantes target fellow Muslims and confront “non-Muslim” behaviour.



Image 2. StopXam sticker (Stop a Douchebag, n.d.a.).

Hrushy Protiv operate in a similar manner to StopXam and engage in activities related to exposure and denunciation of allegedly unscrupulous merchants who sell expired products. Under their own initiative or upon receiving complaints from other citizens, group members wearing full-body pig suits enter grocery stores to survey product shelves. The entire process is filmed, and videos are edited and uploaded on YouTube with further dissemination across social media platforms. Much like StopXam, videos often feature violent content, cruel language, and physical confrontation. Hrushy Protiv has a website, an online store, and accounts on Facebook, Google+, Instagram, LiveJournal, Odnoklassniki, Periscope, Twitter, VKontakte, and YouTube. In 2016, Hrushy Protiv opened a branch in Belarus and became an international project (Hrushy Protiv, n.d.).

In the videos, Hrushy Protiv often features merchants of non-Russian origin as unscrupulous. Among frequent targets are people from the Caucasus and Central Asia.⁷ Several videos produced by Hrushy Protiv called on the viewers to “sign a petition to legally ban migrants from working in retail” (Hrushy Protiv, 2014a). This controversial

7 Some of these people can also be Russian citizens.

call was made following Vladimir Putin's proposition to reserve construction and some other employment spheres for migrants and leave retail for the Russian citizens (The Kremlin, 2013). This is an intricate situation where a citizen-led justice group can assist the state with a policy agenda. Furthermore, this situation raises questions concerning the framing of targets in digital vigilantism. Participants possess editorial powers and maintain framing capacity, which can be further supported on traditional media platforms. Framing of targets and other actors, such as police, can be instrumentalised in several ways including justification of and relevance to one's own activism.



Image 3. Hrushy Protiv in action (Hrushy Protiv, 2014b).

Pro-Kremlin digital vigilantes receive state grants under the Presidential Program for NGO Support (Rubin and Rustamova, 2014; Rustamova, 2015), thus constituting a curious force supported and endorsed by the state. Meetings and selfies with Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev serve as additional legitimising tools for pro-Kremlin activists, and they often emphasise these ties in their videos.

2.4.3. Ne Nashi [Not Ours]: Digital Vigilantism Despite and Against the State

Kremlin-supported vigilantes aside, there are groups acting in spite of the state, although the nature of relations between, for instance, nationalist groups and the ruling regime remains unclear. Nationalists operating under the umbrella movement *Restruct* illustrate a scenario where the state closed its eyes on openly criminal acts of mediated and embodied retaliation but eventually responded in crackdowns on such activity.

Starting with an allegedly anti-paedophile movement “Format 18”,⁸ ultra-right nationalists formed issue-specific sub-groups and engaged in targeting migrant workers, foreigners, alleged drug dealers, ethnic and sexual minorities, and paedophiles (often using this façade to actually target sexual minorities). “Occupy Paedophilia” and “Occupy Narcophilia” are branches of Restruct, specialising in busting paedophiles and drug dealers, respectively. Such criminal and openly fascist groups humiliate and physically abuse their targets while filming and exposing them online (Balmforth, 2013). Retaliation conducted by Restruct members is characterised by brutality, humiliating and degrading acts, such as forcing the target to drink urine on camera (Wong, 2016).

Ultra-right nationalist vigilantes intentionally avoided collaboration with police and openly declared their motives to propagate nationalism and spread fear to prevent migrants from coming to Russia (Current TV, 2007). The voluntary visibility and outspokenness of Restruct leader Maxim Martsinkevich (better known as *Tesak* [Axe]) initially afforded him publicity and even air time in talk shows on Russia’s mainstream mass media, despite his radical nationalist views. Martsinkevich eventually faced charges for extremism, assault, and hooliganism, which led to his arrest and consequent extension of the sentence to ten years (Vesti, 2017a). Despite criminal charges, videos produced by Martsinkevich and his supporters were widely available across social networks at the time of gathering data for this publication in 2018.⁹ It is important to investigate nuances behind the initial indifference of the state to the activities of Martsinkevich and his supporters and eventual retribution.

Other cases include religiously motivated digital vigilantism where targets are confronted for their alleged deviation from religious obligations (Belsat TV, 2017). Some groups target Muslim women exclusively and expose them online for collective shaming and moralising. In the country’s conservative regions and republics such as Chechnya, this exposure can lead to physical abuse and even “honour execution” of targeted women (Mavromatis, 2017). Women fall victim to digital vigilantism in other instances. The so-called “patriot groups” composed of male ethnic Kyrgyz migrants punish Kyrgyz women through “honour beating” for interaction with representatives of other ethnic groups while in Russia (Recknagel, 2013). The case of Kyrgyz migrant workers illustrates subjection to layers of vulnerability. For instance, a Muslim Kyrgyz woman with a migration background is a target for several vigilante groups at once, including those in her own diaspora.

Anti-Kremlin groups use digital media affordances to get their message to the masses and expose the state itself. Among these is the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) led by a public activist in opposition—Alexei Navalny. FBK describes itself as

8 According to some online forums, the number “18” here evidently stands for Adolf Hitler, reflecting the alphabetic positioning of his initials: “A” being the first letter and “H”—the eighth.

9 On 16 September 2020, Martsinkevich was found dead in his detention cell. The official cause of death is suicide, which is contested by his lawyer and family.

“the only Russia-based NGO that investigates, exposes and fights corruption among high-ranking Russian government officials” (Anti-Corruption Foundation, n.d.). FBK is an example of mediated activism that works against the state. In this regard, the state represented by the ruling regime is likely to have interest in limiting and controlling digital media through censorship and legislation limiting free speech on social media. Amid FBK’s exposure of Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko accusing him of corruption for informal contacts with oligarch Oleg Deripaska on a yacht in Norway (Troianovski, 2018), the country’s Federal Service for Supervision of Communication [*Roskomnadzor*] ordered media corporations to remove certain content under the pretext of privacy violation. Facebook complied with the orders and removed content on its daughter company, Instagram (Troianovski, 2018). This case illustrates the power that the state enjoys and instrumentalises amid ubiquitous visibility in which citizens are theoretically capable of watching and exposing the state and its agents but are practically sanctioned for doing so.¹⁰ Privacy matters and other legal concerns come into play when high-ranking state officials fall target to exposure. This challenges *sousveillance* (Mann et al., 2002) as an option for “the many” to watch “the few”, given that “the few” enjoy a greater set of tools for self-protection.

Digital vigilantes are themselves watched by others engaging in revealing unscrupulousness, power abuse, and financial and political motives behind the operation of these groups, creating a clash of counter-narratives. Here, it is important to consider the role of social media platforms and pressure coming from the regulatory bodies of the state, as some bloggers voice concerns over counter-narrative videos denouncing that pro-Kremlin vigilante groups are being blocked, rated 18+, and otherwise restricted and deterred. The ruling regime has the capacity to provide favourable operating conditions and endorsement for some digital vigilante groups while censoring, legally charging, and otherwise controlling other groups. In doing so, the regime enjoys advantages in the capacity to protect itself and its agents from vulnerability to visibility.

2.4.4. Citizens as an Extension of the State in Digital Vigilantism

The state is a complex entity with respective layers of hierarchies and manifestation in society. It is important to be mindful of the fact that while being endorsed by some state representatives, digital vigilantes can be denounced by others. As seen above, citizens can be perceived as an extension of the state. Nevertheless, the state here is represented by the ruling regime in its legislative, judicial, and executive capacities, making it an important ground-setting actor adept at imposing particular rules of engagement.

10 FBK was declared “foreign agent” by Russia’s Ministry of Justice in 2019 and designated as “extremist organisation” by Moscow City Court in 2021.

In his meeting with the Interior Ministry Board on 9 March 2017, Putin emphasised the importance of collaboration between law enforcement and civil society activists in crime prevention efforts:

The force of the law alone is not enough to prevent aggressive behaviour on the roads and situations that endanger lives. This requires a principled stand by the whole of society. I, therefore, ask you [The Ministry of Internal Affairs] to develop more active partnerships with volunteer groups, public organisations and citizen activists. This concerns not just order on the roads, but also crime and corruption prevention, work with people who could be drawn into crime, and other serious and important issues. (The Kremlin, 2017)

In this address, Russia's President called on the Ministry of Internal Affairs to involve citizens in crime prevention activities, leaving the spectrum of "serious and important issues" broad. This message directly legitimises and endorses pro-Kremlin vigilante groups like StopXam and Hrushy Protiv. These groups illustrate the scenario in which "many" are "watching the many on behalf of the few" (Larsen & Piché, 2009, p. 196), where the state's reach is extended via citizen activists, resembling Lenin's vision of socialist democracy.

The state encourages citizen activism and participation in justice matters. While motives for participation in digital vigilantism are diverse, loyalty to the ruling regime can afford longevity, legitimacy, post-participation career opportunities, and financial resources in the form of state grants. Some former Nashi activists and founders of pro-Kremlin digital vigilante groups have become members of Russia's Civic Chamber,¹¹ and others serve as assistants to policymakers. Indeed, vigilante practices not only expose the target but also the participant. In this case, participation can either be anonymous for the sake of protection of participants from legal retribution and/or counter-retaliation or, on the contrary, be purposefully open so as to build a certain reputation and recognition in society.

11 "The Civic Chamber was established in 2005 under the Federal Law 'On the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation'. Its purpose is to help citizens interact with government officials and local authorities in order to take into account the needs and interests of citizens, to protect their rights and freedoms in the process of shaping and implementing state policies, and to exercise public control over the activities of executive authorities". <https://www.oprf.ru/en/about/>

2.5. Comparing comrades' courts and dotcomrade vigilantism

Table 1 below is intended to provide a brief list of similarities and differences between the Soviet comrades' courts and post-communist digital vigilantism in Russia.

	Soviet Comrades' Courts	Digital Vigilantism in Post-communist Russia
State role	Initiation, endorsement, provision of legislative framework, provision of legitimacy	Endorsement in some instances, financial support through state grants to groups loyal to the state and legal control over groups working despite or against the state
Participants	Prominent community members, targets' colleagues, neighbours, veterans of war and industrialisation, the elder generation	Youth activists. Theoretically, anyone with a camera and internet connection. In practice, groups loyal to the state enjoy financial support, state endorsement and censorship-free presence on social media
Targets	People with 'anti-socialist behaviour': hooligans, drunks, freeloaders, people with anti-Soviet ideology, negligent workers	Depending on the group: drivers, merchants, smokers, drinkers, Muslims, women, 'paedophiles' (usually, sexual minorities), ethnic minorities, migrants, drug dealers, etc.
Retaliation	Public shaming and moralising culminating in target's repentance, damaged reputation	Public shaming and moralising, embodied retaliation, humiliation, damaged reputation
Venue	Workplace, collective and state farms, club rooms, housing facilities	A variety of settings from public spaces to targets' or participants' private property
Use of media	Displayed images on 'shame boards', coverage in a local newspaper	Retaliation is filmed and consequently disseminated online
Audience	Colleagues, neighbours, townspeople	Global web users
Collaboration with police	Full collaboration	Instances range from direct and indirect collaboration to working despite and against the police to falling under police jurisdiction
Motives for engagement	Representation of the state, utilisation of own status in the community as a respected member of the collective; entertainment; retaliation on colleagues and neighbours	Financial (monetisation of social media presence), ideological, religious, political, among others

Table 1. Comrades' Courts vs. Dotcomrade Vigilantism

Comrades' courts were mostly limited to the audience immediately present at the scene. In digital vigilantism, platforms where the Foucauldian "spectacle of punishment" takes place are highly interactive, as participants can connect with their audience and vice versa. If comrades' courts culminated in a target's repentance before colleagues and neighbours, the global audience in digital vigilantism is a weapon in itself since exposure can be intensified and perpetuated by means of shares, (dis)likes, and comments on social media. In the process, the digital audience is both entertained and disciplined by example, much like the audience of the comrades' courts.

In the Soviet comrades' courts, collaboration with police was a given. At times, police officers were present at the hearings, while cases superseding the scope and capacities of comrades' courts were passed to higher legal entities. Citizen-led justice was exercised not out of the impotence of the police but due to the disciplinary power of collective shaming that, at times, had a more severe impact than the legal court of justice. In digital vigilantism, the police are often portrayed as dysfunctional or corrupt, thus justifying the activities of concerned citizens. Police can, in fact, by default contribute to the activities of digital vigilantes as most targets in Russia do not seek help from law enforcement, especially if they are sexual minorities or labour migrants. Police officers arriving at the scene of activities conducted by groups like StopXam and Hrushy Protiv have been conditioned to take the side of participants, since higher authorities including the president justify, encourage, and endorse such public participation of citizen vigilantes.

There has been a shift in the use of special actors to represent the state in society when it comes to mediated citizen-led justice. In Soviet comrades' courts, the role of a patriotic representative of collective values empowered to shame and moralise was given to the elder generation—those whose achievements before the state were renown through service on military and industrial fronts. In modern-day Russia, digital vigilantes are usually young people without any prominent stance in the community. In fact, popularity and recognition can come as a result of engagement in mediated citizen-led justice. Members of vigilante groups are known through their logos, stickers, costumes, and other identifying paraphernalia, essentially creating a brand image of self.

Digital vigilantes enjoy editorial capacities that allow them to frame targets and other actors, such as the police. In this case, footage of retaliation is not accidental but an intentionally and systematically created product. Each video is accompanied by a catchy title and soundtrack. Consistently uploaded on YouTube and disseminated across social media, video material builds a name for participants and can be monetised. Both StopXam and Hrushy Protiv use YouTube video episodes of their activities as an opportunity to advertise products before displaying the acts of offence and retaliation; Soviet comrades' courts were certainly deprived of these commercial and media opportunities.

Thus, compared to Soviet times, the role of the contemporary Russian state has shifted in the sense that citizen-led justice can be conducted despite the state or even against it. Nevertheless, the concept of "many watching the many on behalf of the few" (Larsen & Piché, 2009, p. 196) is still present as groups loyal to the ruling regime enjoy greater space to manoeuvre compared to those targeting the regime or crossing the invisible boundaries of approved activities. Groups that get out of hand (i.e., Restruct) get shut down, though state response tends to be slow. Groups or individuals who target the ruling regime are dealt with faster, using a vast set of tools including censorship,

content removal, and arrests. Having loyal or controllable groups active on social media provides a sphere where people get to let off some steam and serves as a type of staged show to demonstrate that there is active citizenry present in the otherwise repressive state.

Where comrades' courts judged people for anti-socialist behaviour—hooligans, drunks, freeloaders, and negligent workers, each digital vigilante group has its own specific targets—drivers, merchants, smokers, drinkers, Muslims, women, paedophiles (sometimes purposely confused with sexual minorities), ethnic minorities, migrants, drug dealers, and so on. The wide focus of digital vigilantes produces conditions of intersecting vulnerabilities for citizens who fit several target groups at once. Specific focus and media savviness allow for branding, as activities spread across and beyond the country in the form of franchise branches of vigilante groups.

Digital media brought about new affordances where transparency, accessibility of information, and the speed and distance with which it travels make a wider set of targets vulnerable to retaliation. This produces circumstances of “many watching the many despite the few” and “many watching the few on behalf of the many”. Vigilantes themselves can fall target to retaliation by other vigilantes, affected citizens, or the state. While capacities vary among these actors, Russia's ruling regime has an advantageous position in relation to media corporations and social media users with its tight control over political, economic, public, and media spheres.

In comrades' courts, some forms of mediated exposure were practised through boards of shame and articles in local papers. In digital vigilantism, traditional media also play a significant role since it can lend meaning to citizen-led justice by framing participants, targets, and other actors such as the police.

2.6. Concluding remarks

Russia's unique case of digital vigilantism was selected due to its Soviet-era pretext for citizens' involvement in surveillance and justice matters as well as its state-encouraged digitally mediated post-Soviet manifestation. This chapter provides a theoretical conceptualisation of digital vigilantism in the Russian Federation with the objective of addressing the complex relationship between digital vigilantes and the state. Practices of outsourced vigilance and judicial functions to citizens in the Soviet Union have been compared to modern-day citizen participation in vigilantism. Soviet comrades' courts were selected as a point of comparison with digital vigilantism due to several applicable features. These include shaming and moralisation of citizens by fellow citizens; state approval of such practices; and the role of the audience in the Foucauldian “spectacle of punishment” of citizen-to-citizen and state-citizen relations.

Digital vigilantism in contemporary post-communist Russia is a systematic and institutionalised phenomenon that indeed resembles practices of citizen-led justice

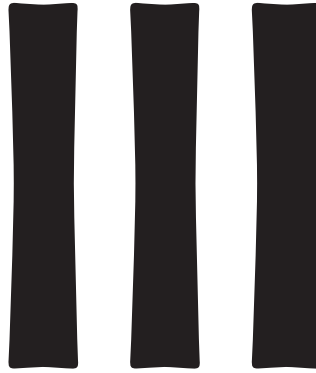
widely present in the Soviet Union. However, digital media brought about new affordances that transformed participants, targets, and the audience. Unlike Soviet comrades' courts, digital vigilante groups in post-communist Russia take offence on a wide range of issues and target individuals far beyond their own collectives and neighbourhoods. Motives for engagement in citizen-led justice are wide and range from political to ideological, religious, and financial among others. If Soviet citizen-led justice was entrusted to the hands of respected members of the community, mediated citizen-led justice in post-communist Russia is in the hands of the younger generation.

Theoretically, anyone equipped with a video recorder and an internet connection can engage in digital vigilantism and expose fellow citizens online. In practice, traditional media, police, policymakers, and other actors play a significant role in rendering digital vigilantism meaningful and in framing participants, targets, and state authorities among other actors. In Russia, the ruling regime plays a significant role in the longevity, legitimacy, and other aspects of citizen-led surveillance and justice participation. Controlled digital vigilante groups can serve as a façade to exemplify active citizenry and establish a counter-force to those unsatisfied with the status quo. However, while loyal to the regime, digitally savvy, and socially active youth constitute a convenient force to resist opposition, this very force can just as easily turn against its creators. Digital vigilantes can cross certain boundaries that the ruling regime would not tolerate, in which case the state can retaliate against them.

When it comes to visibility and exposure, the state is in an advantageous position in relation to other actors, such as media corporations and social media users, given that legal mechanisms, mainstream media, and other useful tools of control and self-protection are in the hands of the ruling elite. The scenario of regime immunity to exposure may not be unique to Russia. As demonisation of traditional media and social media surveillance are taking place in renowned democracies, the case of Russia illustrates a unique scheme where several control mechanisms are simultaneously used by the ruling regime to manage traditional media and domestic social media. This is accomplished while allowing operation of foreign social media but pressuring it to comply with the state's demands. Thus, the Russian state provides favourable conditions for some digital vigilantes while suppressing others.

Further research on the subject should address discourses surrounding mediated citizen-led justice in Russia with a focus on pro-state and independent media. Additionally, studies focusing on content analysis of video materials produced by digital vigilantes will allow for a nuanced understanding of the predispositions in vigilante-target relations regarding political, sexual, gender, ethnic, national, and other biases. The concept of franchising digital vigilantism should be carefully addressed considering monetisation, branding, and other motives and responses. Other areas for scholarly exploration could include target experience with digital vigilantism, police stance on active citizen participation in justice-provision, and counter-narratives among digital vigilantes.





YouTube as a stage for vigilantism and citizen-critical publics in Russia¹²

12 This chapter is an adaptation of the following article: Gabdulhakov, R. (in press). Are some pigs more equal than others? Media control and citizen-critical publics in Russia. *Media and Communication*, 9(4), X-X, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4233>

Summary

Amid the intensification of state control over the digital domain in Russia, what types of online activism are tolerated and even endorsed by the government and why? Some entities such as the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) exposing the state are silenced through various tactics including content blocking and removal, labelling the foundation a foreign agent and deeming it extremist. At the same time, other formations of citizens using digital media to expose 'offences' performed by fellow citizens are operating freely. This chapter focuses on Hrushy Protiv [Piggy Against]—a vigilante group targeting merchants (often ethnic minorities and labour migrants) for alleged sale of expired produce. Supported by the government, Hrushy Protiv participants survey chain grocery stores and open-air markets for expired produce. This practice often escalates into violence, the process is routinely filmed, and edited footage is uploaded on YouTube. These videos constitute unique media products that entertain the audience, ensuring the longevity of punitive measures via public exposure and shaming. Relying on the theory of "authoritarian publics" (Toepfl, 2018), the chapter proposes a new category of citizen-critical publics to describe state-approved digital vigilantes in Russia. A collaboration with such publics allows the state to maintain a façade of civil society activism amid the silencing of "leadership-critical" and "policy-critical" publics (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019), while participants gain financial rewards and fame. Foucauldian discourse analysis revealed that vulnerable groups such as labour migrants and ethnic minorities fall victim to the side effects of this collaboration.

“There is a face beneath this mask, but it isn’t me. I’m no more that face than I am the muscles beneath it, or the bones beneath that.”

– Steve Moore, *V for Vendetta*

3.1. Introduction

Since 2010, in grocery store chains and open-air food markets across Russia, one can witness people wearing full-body pig costumes surveilling the shelves and counters for expired products. Such raids tend to escalate into verbal confrontations and physical violence between merchants and amateur inspectors who film everything and share edited videos on YouTube and other social media, making them available to wide audiences. Beneath the pig outfits are former commissars of the pro-government youth movement *Nashi* [Ours] (also known as Putin’s youth) and other concerned citizens. Established in 2005 as a continuation of another pro-government organisation, *Idushchiye Vmestye* [Walking Together], *Nashi* was endorsed and sponsored by the state while actively supporting Vladimir Putin (for more on *Nashi* see Hemment, 2012; Khalymonchik, 2016). Amid the decentralisation of *Nashi* and its consequent dissolution, several youth-led thematic activist formations emerged. One of the most prominent and still active projects among such groups is *Hrushy Protiv*. As per the group itself, the title translates as “piggy against”, although the literal translation is “piggies against”. Transliteration from Cyrillic [Хрюши Против] into English can vary between *Hrushy Protiv*, *Khrushi Protiv*, *Khryushi Protiv*, *Khriushi Protiv*, etc. The option *Hrushy Protiv* will be used through this chapter based on the group’s own preferences for use across their social media accounts.

In the case of *Hrushy Protiv*, retaliation turns into a form of entertainment while participants acquire powers that turn them into grocery store reputation assassins. To conceptualise this form of citizen-led digitally mediated justice provision the chapter relies on the notion of *digital vigilantism*. Digital vigilantism can be defined as “direct online actions of targeted surveillance, dissuasion or punishment which tend to rely on public denunciation or an excess of unsolicited attention, and are carried out in the name of justice, order or safety” (Loveluck, 2019, p. 4). In digital vigilantism, visibility is “the means and the end of retaliation” (Gabdulhakov, 2018, p. 317), as the very fact of publicity can have damaging effects when the names and locations of concerned businesses as well as personal information of merchants are exposed to wide audiences. In this regard, being an entity with a unique online presence, *Hrushy Protiv* is not simply a case of conventional offline vigilantism transferred to the online milieu. Rather, it constitutes its own category of digitally mediated citizen-led justice–digital vigilantism.

Like *Nashi*, *Hrushy Protiv* is financially supported by the government and endorsed by Russia’s top political leadership. On several occasions, *Hrushy Protiv* members have personally met with Vladimir Putin and former president Dmitriy Medvedev, taking ‘selfies’ and discussing social problems. Beyond verbal endorsements, the group has

benefited from receiving millions of rubles (Around 340,000 USD as of December 2019) in state grants in support of its activities (Lvov, 2015). Group founders are loyal supporters of the political status quo in the country. This intricate relationship of activists and state leadership is especially intriguing given the wave of measures adopted by the government to regulate the digital domain (see, for instance, Lokot, 2020; Ognyanova, 2019; Vendil Pallin, 2016). Yet, the liaison that the state established with its loyal digitally savvy youth cannot be described one-dimensionally (Favarel-Garrigues & Shukan, 2019) and has been shown to be in flux. Similar groups that emerged out of Nashi, such as the *StopXam* [Stop a Douchebag] movement countering bad parking, for instance, have had periods of both praise and condemnation by traditional media. Initially endorsed by the state in the same manner as Hrushy Protiv, *StopXam* may have crossed some boundaries of trust when they started targeting high-profile individuals. In 2016, for instance, the group publicly shamed and physically fought a Russian Olympic champion, consequently receiving a liquidation order issued by the Ministry of Justice (Gabdulhakov, 2019a).

This chapter addresses the complex relationship between digital vigilantes and the ruling elites amid the process of tightening state control applied in the digital domain. In doing so, the chapter unveils various power hierarchies and webs of interests in state-citizen and citizen-to-citizen justice provision. Thus, the following questions are raised: Amid the ongoing crackdown on online self-expression in Russia, what types of citizen-initiated forms of online activism are tolerated and even endorsed by the government and why? In addition, the chapter relies on three supporting questions: What are the motivations for participation in digital vigilantism? What are the impacts of digital vigilantism on targets? What role do platform affordances and regulation play in digital vigilantism?

The chapter first offers an overview of scholarly discussions surrounding digital vigilantism and media systems in autocratic contexts generally, and in Russia specifically. It proceeds with a description of its methodology and presentation of the results of applying Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) on the 20 most popular Hrushy Protiv YouTube episodes. This is followed by a discussion of findings in reaction to the stated research questions. In conclusion, the chapter addresses theoretical implications and makes suggestions for future research.

3.2. Digital vigilantism and media control in Russia

“Connective actions” in which digital media serve as “organizing agents” for sharing “internalized or personalized ideas” (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, pp. 752-753) have become a global phenomenon, at times capable of instigating social change through such movements as #MeToo (Mendes et al., 2018) or #BlackLivesMatter (Carney, 2016). Yet exposure and public shaming on social media can be characterised by different

power dynamics, subjecting targets to various forms of both immunity and vulnerability while participation can be both empowering and harmful (Gabdulhakov, 2019b; 2020).

Citizen-led justice manifested online can imply resistance against injustices and oppression as well as retaliation against already vulnerable groups and individuals, such as minorities and migrants (Bjørge & Mareš, 2019). Furthermore, vigilantes might use a façade cause to justify their actions while pursuing a set of other motives, be they political, ideological, financial or other aspirations. Sometimes the motives are presented in bizarre combinations, such as the Serbian far-right nationalist vigilante group *Levijatan* [Leviathan], which claims to protect animal rights while engaging in “violent actions against Roma, LGBT and other ‘enemies of Serbs’” (Colborne, 2020). Social justice and mob laws raise a number of questions related to legality, morality, effectiveness, and proportionality of citizen-to-citizen retaliation, especially when it comes to situations where, for whatever reason, authorised state services are replaced (or assisted) by vigilante forces.

3.2.1. Digital Vigilantism in Russia

After decades of scant scholarly attention to the notion of vigilantism, the phenomenon has recently gained momentum in the literature, with conceptual and empirical contributions featuring cases of divergent socio-political realities. Trottier (2017), for instance, offers a theoretical discussion on the role and impacts of visibility weaponisation in denunciatory acts. Moncada (2017), in turn, presents a classification of the varieties of vigilante practices and proposes core definitional dimensions for understanding the notion. With the focus on Russia’s far-right, Kasra (2017) addresses the role of networked images in humiliation and socio-political control mechanisms. Loveluck (2019) develops a typology of digital vigilantism, relied upon in this chapter. Favarel-Garrigues, (2019) elaborates on the entrepreneurial affordances of participants and their relationship with law enforcement. Furthermore, the role of traditional media in facilitating digitally mediated retaliation and rendering the phenomenon meaningful has been addressed in an ongoing debate (Gabdulhakov, 2019a). Despite the richness and depth of these contributions, the phenomenon requires further continuous attention, as approaches, environments, affordances and nuances develop and evolve in real-time. Therefore, it is important to work towards an understanding of specific rules of engagement, respective power positions, benefits and side effects of vigilante actions while also considering the unique affordances of social media and digital tools.

Loveluck (2019) addresses the modes of coordination in digitally mediated vigilante practices and categorises them as ranging from “ad-hoc and loosely coordinated activities” to “pre-existing networks” that engage in “rehearsed collective efforts” (p. 5). In the quest for a typology of “online self-justice”, he identifies four ideal types of digital vigilantism practices, namely: “flagging, investigating, hounding and organised leaking” (p. 2). Loveluck argues that in the process of *flagging*, the targeting of a specific person involved is avoided. Instead, the “low intensity” cases are meant to alert social

media users by bringing to their attention instances of perceived norm-breaching (p. 5). Flagging via text and images is a global practice shared across social media platforms and political contexts. Unlike flagging, *investigating* implies naming the concerned target and a “collective effort” in investigating cases ranging from theft to more serious crimes and terrorist activities (Loveluck, 2019, p. 11). In this case, citizen-investigators are compared to “websleuths” who can provide their “technical expertise” in a given case (p. 12). Loveluck illustrates a complex dynamic between authorities, media and websleuths in which crowdsourced investigations do not terminate at the level of assisting police with the identification of criminals but can further evolve into digitally mediated harassment. *Hounding* takes matters on yet another level, referred to by Loveluck as “the epitomy of digital vigilantism” it combines punitive intentions with investigations and mobilises participants against a specific target (2019, p. 15). Discreditation and public humiliation are the central aims in hounding. Finally, Loveluck presents *organised leaking* where participation is highly institutionalised and is centred around the “documenting of problematic situations” and “the disclosure of confidential– and potentially incriminating–information” (p. 22). Examples of such organised groups can be Russia’s Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) whose activists investigate state corruption cases and make secret transactions of state officials public. Some of the loudest investigations of the Foundation shared on YouTube include the 2017 “Don’t call him Dimon” exposure of Russia’s ex-president Dmitry Medvedev, and “Putin’s palace. History of world’s largest bribe” revelation of the riches of Russia’s current president Vladimir Putin (Alexei Navalny, 2017; 2021).

Activities of FBK can serve as an example of what Rosenbaum and Sederberg categorised as *regime control* vigilantism. In the absence of an official control mechanism that could be applied to the ruling elites, citizens take these duties into their own hands. Another group that can be classified as an example of organised leaking is *Dissernet*–a collective of academic enthusiasts who reveal plagiarism in doctoral dissertations. Operating in Russia and other former-Soviet states, *Dissernet*’s frequent targets are state officials.

In the selected case study of Russia’s Hrushy Protiv, hounding as a practice in digital vigilantism is most applicable. Much like other similar formations, activists of Hrushy Protiv indeed combine investigative approaches with practices of targeting specific businesses and individuals. Retaliation takes place not only in the form of verbal confrontations, physical fights, and destruction of produce; targets and business that they represent can suffer from long-lasting or even permanent reputation damage.

3.2.2. Media Control in Russia

Digitally mediated vigilante practices are part of the larger system combining political culture, social structures, media landscapes and legal frameworks. Thus, it is necessary to elaborate on the milieu in which Hrushy Protiv operate. With the focus on Russia, this chapter seeks to address a context where the watchful gaze and control ambitions of

the state, create a system that endorses some forms of online activism while cracking down on others. Having established nearly totalitarian control over its traditional media sector, the government went after the digital domain with new legislation aimed at service providers, professional content creators, and individual users.

The waves of media landscape transformation in Russia are concurrent with major socio-political transformations in the country. Significant historical events, of course, include the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and nearly 75 years of totalitarian rule that followed. Such a lengthy period of state control of all domains tends to produce inertia that is capable re-packaging old practices despite the seemingly new political structures. The structures themselves demonstrate a past-oriented focus by applying pressure on service providers and amending the legislation to criminalise certain forms of online self-expression, leading to consequent mass-scale social media user arrests (Gabdulhakov, 2020; Lokot, 2020). This tendency for increased control is ongoing and reactionary, since the government, for instance, also intervenes in the otherwise automated/algorithmic process of generating news feeds (Wijermars, 2021) among other approaches.

In their canonical work “Comparing Media Systems”, Hallin and Mancini (2004) propose three ideal types of media systems, namely *Democratic Corporatist*, *Liberal* and *Polarised Pluralist*. Each of the proposed systems is composed of dimensions such as media market structure; political parallelism in news reporting; professionalisation of journalists; and the role of the state. Given the limited, West-centric case focus of Hallin and Mancini’s original conceptualisation, Oates (2007) suggests that none of the three models can be applied to Russia. Instead, Oates (2007) proposes the term “neo-Soviet” for the country’s media model. Oates offers a unique perspective by focusing on the position and the demands of the audience amid the multifaceted components that inform this model, including bias, censorship, state and commercial influences, mass media law, free speech protection, funding, media harassment, and violence against journalists. Thus, when another major transformative wave came about amid the collapse of the USSR, the audience did not necessarily embrace the accompanying role of the media as a state critic. Akin to the Soviet media, which broadcasted based on national values “giving the audience a sense of contentment and pride in their society”, audiences in post-Soviet Russia with a much wider variety of products at their disposal valued mass media “as an institution that guides (rather than questions or undermines) the nation” (Oates, 2007, pp. 1295-1296).

Litvinenko and Toepfl (2019) react to another major political event in Russia’s history, namely, massive 2011-2013 protests for “Free and Fair Elections” (also known as protests on Bolotnaya Square). Dissent-curbing measures that followed these events once again reshaped Russia’s media landscape. To understand the nature of this shift within the authoritarian public sphere, Litvinenko and Toepfl apply Toepfl’s (2018) “authoritarian publics” theory (with the consideration of participants, environment and discursive practices) to Russia’s case. As a result, they propose three types of publics—*leadership-critical*, *policy-critical* and *uncritical*.

Several strategies have been adopted to counter the *leadership-critical publics*, following the mass protests in Moscow. Among these measures, Litvinenko and Toepfl identify “reining in discursive practices” via adaptation of legal frameworks governing the digital domain and online self-expression; “shutting down environments” by blocking individual websites and platforms (blocking LinkedIn and attempting to block Telegram); and “intimidating participants” by limiting foreign media ownership, banning certain types of advertisement and replacing media owners with government-loyal elites (2019, pp. 232-233). Based on Schedler’s (2013) “institutional gardening” concept to describe control measures, Litvinenko and Toepfl explain that *policy-critical publics* came out of the process of reshaping or “gardening” of leadership-critical publics (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019, pp. 236). A vivid illustration of this reshaping is the metamorphosis of top leadership-critical news websites into policy-critical publics between 2012-2018 (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019, p. 235). Strategies shaping *uncritical publics* included recruiting civil servants, celebrities, active internet users and paid PR workers known as “trolls” to exude vivid support for the political status quo “in novel Internet environments” (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019, pp. 235-236).

The intensity of authoritarian gardening in Russia is increasing. During the 2011 meeting with his supporters among online activists, then-president Medvedev called the Internet “an open space” and stated that even “things immoral in nature” have to be preserved online (The Kremlin, 2011). The official rhetoric has shifted dramatically in one decade. During the 2021 meeting with the COVID-19 pandemic-countering volunteer movement “We Are Together”, President Putin called on the Internet to “obey not even just laws, [as] formal legal rules, but also the moral laws of society”, proceeding to label the Internet as a source of “child pornography, child prostitution, promotion [and] distribution of drugs”, and a space where adolescents are “being pulled to the streets in order to misbehave there, [and] to fight with the police” (The Kremlin 2021). Amid these shifts in perspective, state critics are forced to balance between reaching out to online audiences and managing personal risks that come along with such visibility (Lokot, 2018). At the same time, topics that can be subjected to public criticism are shrinking. By adopting strategic legislation and selectively applying the law, Russia’s ruling elites are continuously discouraging citizens from criticizing the government and its policies (Lokot, 2020). Discussing, commenting and even ‘liking’ social media posts featuring taboo topics such as, for instance, protests, Crimea’s annexation or Russia’s role in World War II, can lead to legal scrutiny, fines and prison sentences (Gabdulhakov, 2020). Yet in this set of *authoritarian gardening* mechanisms in Russia, it is still possible to engage in some forms of online activism, as is evident from the case of Hrushi Protiv. Building on Litvinenko and Toepfl’s (2019) conceptualisation of leadership-critical, policy-critical and uncritical publics, this article proposes another category to describe the acts of permitted digital vigilantism—“citizen-critical publics”. Digital vigilantes can operate and target other citizens, as long as these citizens are not representing or otherwise connected to the ruling elites.

3.3. Methodology

Amid the wide variety of content analysis methods, the chapter relies on qualitative discourse analysis in Foucauldian terms. While the approach is rather broad and built on the principles of non-formalisation, Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine (2008) propose the following methodological guidelines for conducting FDA: selecting a *corpus of statements*, *problematization*, *technologies*, *subject positions*, and *subjectification*. Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine identify five non-exhaustive types of corpora of statements suitable for FDA, namely *spatiality* and *social practice*, *political discourse*, *expert discourse*, *social interaction*, and *autobiographical accounts* (2008, p. 100). Per Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, *problematization* may base itself on a response to the following questions: “Under what circumstances and by whom are aspects of human being rendered problematic, according to what moral domains or judgement are these concerns allowed to circulate? What official discourses and counter-discourses render these problems visible and intelligible?” (2008, p. 101). In FDA, *technologies* are a concept that focuses on “power and self”—a type of “‘truth games’ in which participants engage in conflict, competition and power” (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 102). *Subject positions* in FDA have to do with the moral order and the structure of rights and duties. Finally, *subjectification* refers to instances where individuals self-regulate to “transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault, 1988, p. 18, as cited in Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 103).

Commonly used in geography and psychology, FDA is useful in addressing the aims of this interdisciplinary study, which incorporates elements of Media Studies and Political Science by virtue of focusing on digital media affordances for citizen-led justice as well as the role of the state in media system formation and regulation. Applying FDA approaches to the case of Hrushu Protiv in Russia, the chapter investigates how social hierarchies (Toelstede, 2020) inform current vigilante practices in the country and assess the role of the official state position in rendering such practices meaningful, amid the ongoing efforts of imposing strict control over the digital domain.

Since 2010 Hrushu Protiv uploaded over 340 YouTube videos (as of 28 February 2021). As its *corpus of statements*, the chapter selected 20 of the most popular episodes, in terms of the total number of views. When it comes to *spatiality and social practice*, FDA allows for reliance on personal observations and ethnographic approaches. Hrushu Protiv is an entity with a unique online presence, in the sense that it is not simply conventional offline vigilantism transferred to the online environment. Rather, it is its own category of digitally mediated citizen-led justice. Online visibility is a weapon (Trottier, 2017) of punishment that Hrushu Protiv uses to harm its targets while simultaneously building its own brand and the position of justice providers in society. Given the significance of online artefacts in such practices, the chapter relied on netnographic approaches (Kozinets, 2015; 2019), which implied continuous online observations of Hrushu Protiv activities and content analysis of videos shared on the original Moscow-based group’s YouTube channel.

Such observations were useful in understanding the nature and evolution of Hrushi Protiv raids. The author looked at the frequency of video uploads; the length of episodes; the number of views, comments, 'likes' and 'dislikes'; and titles of the episodes, often resembling click bait and yellow press headlines. In the initial phase, episodes were watched without a particular set of codes or categories in mind, and the main goal was to get to know the group and become familiar with its actions. As of 28 February 2021, the Hrushi Protiv YouTube channel had 332,000 subscribers with 91,022,156 total views of 340 videos, the first one of which was uploaded on 23 September 2010. Hrushi Protiv upload videos with varied frequency, but the practice is systematic with at least one video released per month. The shortest video in the sample is 2 minutes and 31 seconds long, and it is dedicated entirely to a fight between participants and targets at the *Moskvoretskaya* produce base. The episode begins with a display of a link to a petition calling for the ban migrants from retail work. The longest video is 26 minutes featuring a grocery store raid with ethnic minority employees. Out of 20 top videos, 11 were released in 2013, one in 2015, five in 2016, two in 2017, and one in 2019. This variation on the timeline of Hrushi Protiv activities suits FDA's spatial focus.

The analysis additionally accounted for political and expert discourses, as Hrushi Protiv and similar formations that came out of Nashi have been endorsed by the state, while other manifestations of online citizen activism experience heavy state suppression. Political artefacts, in this respect, are public speeches as well as formal and informal interactions between the government and participants. Expert discourses involve traditional media framing of participants and targets.

Social media affordances allow Hrushi Protiv to narrate their own autobiography, since it is communicated via online self-construction. The group and its members are relying on online communication modes in the process of defining the norms of morality and justice-provision methods while negotiating their own position in this equation. Inspired by methodological approaches of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017), this phase relied on an in-depth qualitative analysis (Altheide & Schneider, 2013) of Hrushi Protiv YouTube episodes with the focus on positioning of self and framing of targets, police and other actors appearing in the videos. YouTube itself constitutes a unique tool and stage for digital vigilantism, enabling both access to wide audiences and money-making opportunities.

The author made several attempts to interview the founder as well as former and current members of Hrushi Protiv in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Despite exchanging a few messages online, no agreement for an interview was given by participants after all. The author offered interview questions in written form, but the offer received no reaction. Why Hrushi Protiv members are reluctant to partake in an academic study is not particularly clear, but several reasons can be assumed. Perhaps, members were already approached by one too many journalists and are either tired of giving interviews or see no personal benefit in participating. The group is rather well-known already and can deliver any message they wish to communicate directly on their own social media pages and channels, without the involvement of third parties.

3.4. Hrushy Protiv on YouTube and beyond

3.4.1. Corpus of Statements

Hrushy Protiv runs a website and has accounts on YouTube, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook,¹³ Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, Live Journal and Tik-Tok. Social media profiles of Hrushy Protiv invite the viewers to financially support the project. Participants maintain an online store, where group branded clothing items, bags and mugs can be purchased. A separate website describing Hrushy Protiv as a “volunteer movement aimed at identifying trade in substandard products in stores” (Hrushy Protiv, n.d.b.) states that in 2016 a branch was established in Belarus, making the group international.

Most of the featured Hrushy Protiv episodes follow the same scenario where the activists equipped with video cameras enter stores and start loading the allegedly expired produce into shopping carts. Such acts lead to verbal and physical confrontations with store personnel and, in some cases, escalate into physical fighting. Content analysis revealed that violence featured in videos and/or promised in the titles correlated with the popularity of these YouTube episodes. The most viewed episode was uploaded on 29 May 2019 and is called “let’s step outside”—a phrase commonly associated with an invitation to settle a conflict physically. Being 20 minutes and 15 seconds in length, this is one of the longer episodes of Hrushy Protiv with 3,665,938 views, 47,000 “likes”, 11,000 “dislikes”, and 21,439 comments as of December 2019. In the episode, at least nine participants are shown entering the store. Grocery store personnel film participants with their phones, while the latter raid the shelves. Verbal confrontations begin when personnel tell participants that filming is not allowed. Participants demand from targets an elaboration on the legal grounds for the prohibition of filming. The verbal back-and-forth continues for some time, until the personnel give in and destroy expired produce collected by participants. Overall, 12 episodes out of 20 feature verbal and physical confrontation between participants and targets.

The signature trademark of Hrushy Protiv has been their full-body piggy outfit. The outfits are featured in half of the analysed episodes. Up until 2016, participants wore their piggy costumes consistently during the raids. Signature costumes made participants immediately visible and recognisable. In several videos police ask participants “where are the costumes?” indicating popularity and recognition of the brand. For unclear reasons, starting from 2016 wearing piggy outfits became less consistent. Sometimes, activists are seen wearing branded shirts and hoodies featuring a piggy’s head—the group’s brand logo. Such merchandise is also available for sale in the group’s online store. Other clothing items worn by participants include patriotic sports suits that read “Russia” across the back and hoodies with prints of Vladimir Putin in military uniform of the commander in chief, emphasising the group’s patriotic values and loyalty to the ruling regime.

13 The link to Facebook was provided on their official website, and the YouTube channel of the group was not functional in February 2021.

In 10 out of 20 analysed episodes, Hrushy Protiv target non-Slavic minorities. In another six episodes, the targets are mixed and include both non-Slavic minorities and Slavs. Four episodes make no explicit reference to the ethnic backgrounds of targets. Thus, in 16 out of 20 episodes a direct link between non-Slavic merchants and unscrupulousness in retail is emphasised. Hrushy Protiv openly expresses its prejudice towards labour migrants in Russia. In 2013-2014, participants called on their audience to sign a petition to condemn migrants from working in retail—an act suggesting nationalist biases in these state-encouraged vigilante practices. One of the analysed episodes, titled “Hostages at Moskvoretskaya produce base”, features participants stating that “non-Russian employees run away when the police arrives”, emphasising both the “foreignness” of unscrupulous retailers as well as the potential illegality of “police-fearing” migrant workers.

Each episode uploaded by Hrushy Protiv is given a media-headline-like title, some of which are openly biased in terms of the ethnic background of the merchants. Examples include: “Asian showdown”, “We don’t speak Russian”, “Tajiks are indignant”, “Migrants beat up piggies”, etc. Other selected episodes included such titles as “Real jigits” (in some Turkic languages and in the Caucasus the term *jigit* is used to describe brave young men)—referring to non-Slavic backgrounds of the targets, and “Moya Magazin” [Mine store]—with an intentional grammatical mistake in the masculine noun, stressing featured targets’ poor command of the Russian language. Overall, seven episode titles make explicit references to targeted retail workers’ foreignness.

Police are featured in 11 of the 20 selected episodes. On three occasions participants call the police to the site. In four cases it is the targets who make such calls, and in five instances it is not clear whose call the police responded to. Police officers are generally passive, they register the names of all actors in both parties, collect the appeals and leave. In one episode, the activists are featured calling Russia’s Chief Sanitary Inspector, Gennady Onishchenko (Hrushy Protiv, 2013). In the video, Evgeniya Smorchkova apologises to Onishchenko for “calling again” and asks for help with a particular store that is not compliant with the demands. The next scene features the arrival of police officers at the concerned store. The scenario in which participants directly call such a high-profile official (on more than one occasion) and ask for help, indicates the administrative capacities of the group, state endorsement and support of their activities, and points to the power advantages that participants have over their targets.

Hrushy Protiv episodes occasionally feature informal leaders, such as celebrities. In one of the raids in the selected sample participants are joined by a pop singer, a member of a famous Russian boy band, *Ivanushki International*. The artist does not engage in physical or verbal violence but is brought along to demonstrate the level of support and solidarity that Hrushy Protiv enjoy as citizen activists. Such informal endorsement once again stresses the unique capacities of participants and their ascendancy over targets.

3.4.2. Problematization

The internet and smart mobile devices have transformed the process of socialisation and surveillance at state-citizen and citizen-to-citizen levels in Russia. Numerous citizen formations establish thematic vigilante forces and target fellow citizens over alleged and perceived offences such as bad parking; drinking and smoking in public spaces; paedophilia (an accusation to which sexual minorities often fall target); drug dealing; and other ‘violations’ of legal and moral boundaries. In some instances, no action is needed to attract the retaliation of vigilantes, it is just enough to be a female (Avramov, 2019) or an ethnic minority (Chapman et al., 2018). The instrumentalisation of perceptions of morality for control of social order is a way for Hrushi Protiv to fulfill their function as an extension of the state, rather than being a collective of autonomous citizens. Much like the nostalgia for the Soviet-era media that communicated a sense of pride for the society, state-supported vigilante formations in Russia resemble various concerned groups of the past, such as the Tzarist and subsequently Soviet *druzhina* [volunteer militia formations] (Sokolov, 2019); the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League “Komsomol”; or the system of comrades’ courts that addressed minor mischiefs in breaching both legal and moral norms (Gabdulhakov, 2018).

3.4.3. Technologies

The case of Hrushi Protiv demonstrates how a citizen-led organisation can acquire legitimacy, recognition and powers not only akin to those of official control entities (i.e., Russia’s state sanitation service *Rospotrebnadzor*), but defying these entities in technological savviness and retaliation approaches. Hrushi Protiv activities, in this regard, go beyond mere *flagging* and cannot be compared to regular and widely practised consumer reviews, which inform fellow citizens about a particular business or product. Hrushi Protiv positions itself as a force operating between consumers and businesses as the former can report on the latter to participants. This position raises questions related to the possibility of intentional reputation damage upon orders from competitors of raided stores. What could stop “business A” from directly employing Hrushi Protiv or similar formations to expose a competing “business B”? One can only rely on the “good faith” of participants in this regard. At the same time, even with the assumed incorruptibility of participants, issues of legitimacy and proportionality of retaliation remain in question.

3.4.4. Subject Positions

Unlike a privately paid fine to state control services due to misconduct, exposure on social media as a result of citizen-led retaliation brings about long-lasting reputation damage. Edited video materials uploaded by participants have the power to subject non-Russian targets to further scrutiny by police and immigration authorities. Given that three Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are highly remittance dependent (Bhutia, 2019), a labour migrant’s job loss and/or deportation

can lead to severe economic consequences for their families. The structure of power asymmetries (Toelstede, 2020) between participants and targets is informed by access to mass audiences (and lack thereof) on the one hand; as well as social frustration, and ethnic and national biases on the other hand. Episodes tend to portray Hrushii Protiv and their targets as two fundamentally separate cultural clusters, with Slavic youth participants and grocery store/market personnel comprised of non-Slavs.

3.4.5. Subjectification

Hrushii Protiv exemplifies a case where vigilant citizens acquire powers that give them wide social and media recognition. This visibly affords participants an almost TV persona stance. Hrushii Protiv resembles the TV show “Revizorro”—an adaptation of a Ukrainian show “Revizor” airing on Russia’s Pyatnitsa [Friday] TV Channel since 2014. The show’s host engages in public exposure of poor service provision practices in hotels, restaurants and other spaces of public service. The power of public exposure is significant to the point that businesses opt for collaboration with amateur controllers and sign agreements with Hrushii Protiv, promising to comply with imposed regulations (Hrushii Protiv, 2010).

3.5. Discussion

Amid the intensification of state control over who can say what online in Russia, it is important to address the motives of the government in supporting digital vigilantes like Hrushii Protiv. These motives are a product of an evolution of the Kremlin’s youth policies and strategies that have undergone several overhauls. Nashi was formed as a national-patriotic movement with the aim of supporting the ruling elite and acting as a counter-force to the opposition. Given that Nashi ceased to exist in 2010, former commissars of the movement were in need of a new project and issue-specific vigilante formations came into being. Having active and digitally savvy youth in its ranks is a convenient scenario for the regime, as long as this force does not turn against its patrons. The anti-migrant narratives of Hrushii Protiv were handy in political campaigns constructed around the sentiments of threats coming from foreigners. In recent years, however, the Kremlin adopted a harsher approach to relations with its former youth commissars. Active citizens are expected to turn into entities resembling Soviet-era loyal citizen squads which extends the powers and omnipresence of the state.

Formations such as Hrushii Protiv are not threatening to the state unless they start targeting businesses that belong to the ruling elite. As long as certain boundaries are not crossed, the presence of such formations in the system allows for a display of an allegedly active civil society amid realities where challenging state authority can cost people large fines and lengthy prison sentences. Now in their 30s and having been engaged in the same vigilante practices for over a decade, some former Nashi activists

have tried building political careers to various degrees of success. Perhaps, the elites are allowing these citizen-critical publics to operate as a way of rewarding the once-loyal youth commissars for their support of the Putin-Medvedev tandem in the 2000s.

What are the motivations for participation in digital vigilantism? When it comes to motivation for participation in digital vigilantism, there are certain entrepreneurial interests (Favarel-Garrigues, 2019; 2021) and social media “financialization” (Elmer, 2018) affordances. Groups monetise YouTube channels, sell merchandise and receive state grants in support of their activities. In this sense, Hrushy Protiv is a formation with a hyper identity, simultaneously resembling citizen-led activism, a state-supported NGO, and a group of digitally-savvy entrepreneurs. Therefore, engagement in vigilante practices can afford participants financial and social benefits. Furthermore, endorsement from the state’s highest authority affords legitimacy and provides certain immunities in interaction with law enforcement.

What are the impacts of digital vigilantism on targets? Content analysis of the most viewed episodes shared by Hrushy Protiv on YouTube revealed ethnic and national biases in the group’s activities. In most of the episodes, non-Russian/non-Slavic ethnic minorities are framed as untrustworthy, unscrupulous, aggressive and violent. In fact, labour migrants are often in a fragile situation in terms of their legal status, difficult economic situation and scarce employment opportunities in their home state. In their host state, then, they are even more vulnerable to online vigilantes amid a culture of xenophobia, police abuse and a variety of other challenges. Sociological othering of non-Russian merchants might be a reflection of on-the-ground offline frustrations in the country, but such framing also creates discourses that shape and feed perceptions, leading to biased presumptions and stereotypes. In this regard, platforms such as YouTube become the central stage for such intra-citizen relations.

Beyond the questions of motive for participation and state support of digital vigilantes as well as the impact of such practices on individual and group targets, it is important to address platform affordances for digital vigilantism. Platforms such as YouTube allow participants to acquire a large following and generate an income via monetisation and advertising. Participants are able to create discourse through their own channels by editing videos and the comments beneath. As such, YouTube produces an environment in which digital vigilantism is manifest. Such manifestation, however, is taking place on uneven grounds and at the crossroads of various interests. For instance, citizen-critical content featuring inter-ethnic hostility, such as Hrushy Protiv’s calls for banning migrants from working in retail, can freely circulate the internet, while state-critical and policy-critical content is deemed extremist.

Several important aspects come to the surface here. The first has to do with political regimes and internet governance. When pressure is put on platforms to moderate content, there is a threat that select voices that challenge the political status quo will be muted, as is often the case in Russia. When the opposition-led FBK anti-corruption foundation exposed Russia’s deputy prime minister for accepting a bribe

from a prominent oligarch, the government put pressure on several platforms and Facebook's daughter company Instagram complied with the requests to remove posts (Nechepurenko, 2018). The fine line between the right to privacy and power abuse for covering up corruption is blurred in this case.

Those with political and financial power seem to continue enjoying the privileges and immunities online, while the powerless, such as migrants, ethnic, sexual and other minorities, political activists, women, journalists, etc., are experiencing multiple vulnerabilities. The role of platforms in the facilitation of select hounding practices and the power and logic of the removal of undesired content need to be addressed at both analytical and policy levels. At the same time, an important question to ask is, would critical publics in Russia benefit from any state regulation of platforms in a context where the ruling elites are actively silencing critical voices?

3.6. Conclusion

This chapter provided a detailed account of Hrushy Protiv activists operating across and beyond the country. Having addressed peculiarities of vigilante practices in Russia, the chapter demonstrated that the state plays a central role in (dis)approving digitally mediated citizen-led initiatives amid its strategies for *gardening* the publics (Litvinenko & Toepfl, 2019). Through the selected case, this paper offers a detailed account of how vigilante formations such as Hrushy Protiv weaponise *hounding* (Loveluck, 2019) to acquire financial, political, and other benefits from their activities. By being loyal to the ruling elites and not crossing the boundaries that could potentially harm these elites, formations like Hrushy Protiv are allowed to operate in the otherwise controlled digital and public domains. The government gains benefits from such citizen-critical publics. First of all, the blame is taken off the political elites and policies. Citizen-critical publics elevate on-the-ground unscrupulousness, as opposed to challenging the system itself. At the same time, amid the intensification of state control, the government may aim to appear less repressive than it actually is by demonstrating a façade of civil social activism in the country.

In Russia and elsewhere, digital vigilantism is practiced and perceived as a form of entertainment akin to reality TV shows, with each episode carefully edited and professionally arranged with catchy titles, music and other view-attracting strategies such as featuring celebrity guests. It is evident that vigilante activities constitute a reflection of on-the-ground societal frustrations and tensions. Traffic jams and poor parking, cheated customers, xenophobia, homophobia, labour migration and other 'hot' societal issues in Russia are picked up and instrumentalised by vigilantes, who then step in and turn battling against perceived injustices into a spectacle. In this case,

the citizen-critical focus of YouTube videos is not only safe but arguably beneficial for the ruling elites and their strategy to discourage leadership-critical and policy-critical discourse.

Further research on the subject could focus on comments left under YouTube episodes to measure audience perceptions of citizen-critical publics, although it should be noted that channel owners can mute and otherwise moderate reactions. Comparative studies focusing on formations similar to Hrushi Protiv in other sociopolitical and media contexts would help in advancing theoretical boundaries of the phenomenon of digital vigilantism and media system models.



IV

Heroes or hooligans? The role of traditional media in rendering digital vigilantism meaningful¹⁴

14 This chapter is an adaptation of the following article: Gabdulhakov, R. (2020). Heroes or hooligans? Media portrayal of StopXam [Stop a Douchebag] vigilantes in Russia. *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research*, 11(3),16-45. <https://doi.org/10.25285/2078-1938-2019-11-3-16-45>

Summary

StopXam [Stop a Douchebag] vigilantes, specialising in road-traffic and parking violations, confront drivers and retaliate by placing stickers that read “I don’t care about anyone, I park where I want” on targets’ windshields. The retaliation is often accompanied by verbal and physical fighting. This process is filmed, edited, and shared on YouTube, receiving millions of views. While digital media made such practices possible, traditional broadcasters maintain significance in rendering meaning to the phenomenon of vigilantism and in framing vigilantes, their targets, police, and other actors. As the existing literature on digital vigilantism is predominantly focused on digital media affordances, this chapter aims to address this gap through a qualitative analysis of traditional media coverage of *StopXam*. Media analysis highlights intriguing nuances of traditional media as a powerful actor and discourse setter in the digital age.

“Heroes are ordinary people who make themselves extraordinary.”

– Gerard Way

4.1. Introduction

Several state-endorsed vigilante groups spawned across Russia in 2010 as Kremlin’s *Nashi* [Ours] youth movement entered its period of decline and consequent dissolution (for more on Nashi, see Atwal & Bacon, 2012; Hemment, 2012; Mijnsen & Perović, 2014). One of the most successful projects to come out of Nashi is the *StopXam* [Stop a Douchebag]¹⁵ movement against rudeness on the roads. With branches across Russia’s major cities and abroad,¹⁶ *StopXam* specialises in the pressing issue of road-traffic and parking violations. Vigilantes use digital media to frame, expose, shame, humiliate, and otherwise punish their targets. Retaliation is achieved through embodied harm and the “weaponisation of visibility” (Trottier, 2017). *StopXam* participants confront the drivers and retaliate by placing stickers that read “I don’t care about anyone, I park where I want” on the targets’ windshields. The retaliation is filmed, edited, and shared on *StopXam*’s YouTube channels, receiving millions of views. As such, the audience plays a key role in digital vigilantism, as exposure is used in punitive terms and each new view, ‘(dis)like’, comment, and repost can intensify the impact of harm. While digital media made such practices possible, traditional media remains a significant player in rendering meaning to digital vigilantism and in the framing of participants, their targets, police, and other actors (Gabdulhakov, 2019a, p. 233). The audience is informed both by vigilantes through their media products and by traditional media outlets reporting on cases. Thus, traditional media coverage not only has the capacity to impact the perception of digitally mediated social justice by the public but also has the power to frame the very notion of justice amid social frustrations and biases—gender, ethnic, socioeconomic, political, and other—that come to the surface with each case. Beyond this, traditional media reports can afford popularity to vigilantes while harming the targets through additional exposure.

As conceptualised by Les Johnston (1996), vigilantism implies autonomy of participants from the state. For Johnston, autonomy is key to understanding vigilantism as it sets the practice apart from other forms of “responsible citizenship” that can be “sanctioned and sponsored by the state” (1996, p. 226). Digital vigilantes are not entirely autonomous but are asserting “new boundaries” (Trottier, 2017, p. 59) for establishing and negotiating relations with the state. In Russia, certain participants such as *StopXam* have been endorsed and supported by the government. Leaders of vigilante groups have not only taken selfies with key state leaders including Dmitry Medvedev¹⁷ and

15 Pronounced “StopKham”. While transliteration of the title varies between “StopHam,” “StopXam,” and “StopKham”, this article relies on the spelling “StopXam” and the translation “Stop a douchebag” as used by the group itself across its social networking profiles.

16 In Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and Peru.

17 Russian president in 2008–2012 and prime minister since 2012.

Vladimir Putin¹⁸ but also received state financial support for their activities (Gabdulhakov, 2018). In this regard, digital vigilantism in Russia is not taking place as a response to the absence of state authority but is instead approved by that authority, taking on an institutionalised form such that participants resemble government-organised non-governmental organisations (GONGOs).

As the existing literature on the phenomenon of digital vigilantism is predominantly focused on digital media (Cheong & Gong, 2010; Kasra, 2017; Smallridge et al., 2016; Stratton et al., 2017), the assessment of traditional media's role and power often remains outside of scholarly attention. Traditional media demonstrates a continual "influence in social media environments" (Meraz, 2016, p. 66), yet the current literature lacks empirical studies addressing the complex dynamics of relations between traditional media, digital vigilantes, and state/corporate actors, especially in a context where the ruling elite both controls the media and endorses vigilantism. In order to fill this scholarly gap and to investigate these boundaries, this chapter provides a detailed account of media framing of one of Russia's most prominent vigilante groups—StopXam. Guided by the methodological work of David Altheide and Christopher Schneider (2013), as well as Helene Starks and Susan Brown Trinidad (2007), the study carried out a qualitative content analysis of 307 news reports from Russia's four mainstream state-controlled television channels—Pervyi Kanal [Channel One], NTV, REN TV, Rossiia 24, and a non-state broadcaster Telekanal Dozhd' [TV Rain]. Furthermore, the study is informed by interviews with three StopXam participants. By looking at the coverage period between 2010 and 2018, the chapter illustrates the uneven framing of StopXam as a group that was endorsed by the country's leadership, shut down by court decision in 2016, rehabilitated six months later, and liquidated again in 2018.

This study makes a timely contribution to the literature surrounding digital vigilantism and aims to expand theoretical frames of definitional dimensions of vigilantism by addressing the role of audience and traditional media in the digitally mediated manifestation of this phenomenon. The chapter aims to do so by addressing the following questions: How are StopXam participants, their targets, and police forces portrayed in Russia's traditional media? What is the role of traditional media in rendering digital vigilantism meaningful?

The chapter first introduces StopXam as a movement and elaborates on the existing conceptual frameworks to address the phenomenon of digitally mediated social justice. It then provides a brief background on Russia's traditional media and the selected platforms, followed by a detailed account of StopXam's portrayal by these broadcasters. The chapter concludes that traditional media is a powerful actor and discourse setter that can justify and condemn targets, police, and participants in spite of the vast digital media capacities of the latter.

18 Russian president in 2000–2008, prime minister in 2008–2012, and again president since 2012.

4.2. StopXam background

One of the key figures behind StopXam is a former Nashi Commissar, Dmitrii Chugunov. According to his official biography listed on the website of Russia's Civic Chamber,¹⁹ of which he was a member between 2014 and 2017, Chugunov served in Russia's special police units—*Vitiaz'* and *Taifun*—in 2006–2008 and was deployed to Dagestan in 2007 as a sniper. Chugunov is the champion of the Eastern Regional Command of the Internal Troops of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in judo, sambo,²⁰ and rifle firing. As the leader of StopXam, Chugunov reported on its successes to Putin during personal meetings in 2011 and 2012. In response, Putin expressed his positive views of the movement:

You are doing a very important and good deed—fighting rudeness. Behaviour on the road is part of a person, and I very much count on the fact that you yourself, while doing your work, will be on top, and will not be like those people who behave ugly towards others. (NTV, 2013)

The signature retaliatory act of StopXam (the group itself and media reports refer to activities as “raids”) is a sticker placed on the target's windshield. The raids are often accompanied by verbal and physical confrontations between participants and the drivers. Targets' appearance in the edited videos subjects them to further shaming and exposes them in a manner that can harm their reputation. As Trottier (2017, p. 56) puts it:

The visibility produced through DV [digital vigilantism] is unwanted (the target is typically not soliciting publicity), intense (content like blog posts, photos and video evidence can circulate to hundreds of thousands or even millions of users within a few days) and enduring (the vigilantism campaign may be the first item to appear when searching the individual's name, and may become a cultural reference in its own right).

Indeed, several targets of the group, including high-profile state functionaries and their relatives, have lost their jobs following exposure on YouTube and in traditional media reports. Among the biggest cases are the dismissal of Chechnya's deputy presidential plenipotentiary in Moscow whose wife had a clash with StopXam, and the resignation of the head of Moscow's Mar'ino district, who appeared in a video where his wife was

19 The Civic Chamber was established in 2005 under the Federal Law on the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation. The Civic Chamber comprises prominent citizens of Russia, representatives of national, regional, and interregional NGOs (<https://www.oprf.ru/en/about/>). Chugunov's biography in Russian is available here: <https://www.oprf.ru/ru/chambermembers/members/user/1681?year=2014>.

20 Sambo is a form of martial arts and combat sport developed in the Soviet Union; the word “sambo” stands for “self-defence without weapons” in Russian.

confronted by the group (“Dos’e: StopXam”, n.d.). Such negative publicity of high-profile targets fuels the legitimisation, popularity, and power of StopXam participants. In a 2012 interview, StopXam’s former spokesperson Oksana Mitrofanova was asked if she could identify the moment that popularity came to the group. Mitrofanova came up with two cases: “when the owner of a *Maybach* [a German luxury car] was hit in the face” and the confrontation with the wife of Chechnya’s deputy presidential plenipotentiary in Moscow (Smimimi Russia, 2012). In the same interview Mitrofanova stressed the importance of visibility as a disciplinary tool, explaining that “those violating orders understand in their head that their actions can end up on YouTube” (Smimimi Russia, 2012).

When traditional media relies on “evidence” submitted by StopXam activists and provides links to their social media channels, it turns into a mediator of retaliation, linking “conventional” viewers to online content. Traditional media platforms increasingly use digital media for dissemination of their content, thus blurring the lines between offline and online news delivery. At the same time, vigilantes’ media products can enjoy an extra layer of legitimisation by virtue of being featured in official media. By reporting on vigilantism in a manner that justifies such practices, traditional media can set “a fashionable trend for young people” (A. P., 2018, para. 13), potentially inspiring new participants across and beyond Russia. As one former member of StopXam in Moldova explained:

We were thinking about starting our own initiative to fight against bad parking. However, Russia’s StopXam was already well known and we decided to collaborate with them and open a branch of StopXam as opposed to starting from scratch. (Interview with a participant from Moldova)

A global network of affiliated movements further boosts the significance, popularity, and recognition of the brand; Chugunov dedicated a special episode to presenting the steps necessary for establishing a local StopXam branch. In the YouTube video, Chugunov states that StopXam treats branches “very seriously” as “branches contribute to the impression of the movement as a whole” (StopXam, 2017). Chugunov suggests that viewers film a short video about themselves and their team and send it to the provided email. Approved branches are promised help with “all possible resources”, namely “expert advice, legal help, StopXam media resources, and help with the journalists” (StopXam, 2017). The last point underscores the importance of establishing relations with traditional media for the successful operation of a digital vigilante group.

As of 2016, StopXam is represented in Peru under the name *Mal Estacionado* [Badly Parked], which is a rare case of operation outside of the post-Soviet bloc. *Mal Estacionado* was inspired by StopXam and is endorsed by the original Moscow-based group:

I was watching YouTube one day and saw Stop a Douchebag videos. I thought, “wow, we need something like this here”. A friend helped me with the stickers and we made some videos. I was afraid they [original StopXam in Russia] would

not like it that I copy them. I contacted them and sent my videos and they said “go ahead, keep doing it”. They featured us on their channel. (Interview with a participant from Peru)

The group was featured on StopXam’s YouTube channel on December 30, 2018, as a “Peruvian branch” (StopXam, 2018). As of June 2019, Mal Estacionado is a small-scale operation, with six participants in Lima who hope to grow into something bigger:

It is hard to recruit people, they say “yes, I will come, you are doing a great job, I want to join” and then they never show up. I think the Russian movement is much larger, they have so many people. We are operating only in Lima and it is just six of us, while two people deal with cameras, so really, just four people. (Interview with a participant from Peru)

Members in Lima mentioned that besides their activism they hold full-time jobs and participation is a “side project”. During the conversation, they expressed satisfaction with the traditional media coverage of their activities in the country. Upon the advice of StopXam Moscow, Lima participants adopted the practice of placing English-language subtitles in their videos to engage a wider global audience. As of June 2019, Mal Estacionado’s YouTube channel featured 16 videos, 10 thousand subscribers, and 1.7 million total video views.

The original Moscow-based movement runs two YouTube channels, in Russian and English languages. Videos are uploaded on average once a week, with total views numbering in the hundreds of millions. As of June 2019, StopXam’s official Russian-language YouTube channel featured 216 videos, with 1,631,464 subscribers and 426,635,221 total video views (StopXam, n.d.a.). The English-language channel, Stop a Douchebag, featured 200 videos with 781,000 subscribers and 224,618,484 total video views (Stop a Douchebag, n.d.b.). The vast following and popularity of StopXam affords unique powers to participants, allowing them to widely expose their targets, monetise YouTube videos, sell merchandise, and acquire other forms of capital, including social recognition and status.²¹

In addition to these media capacities, StopXam has enjoyed the endorsement of the highest authorities in Russia. In 2017, President Putin called on the Ministry of Internal Affairs to collaborate with citizen activists, thus legitimising movements such as StopXam and ensuring their police protection (Gabdulhakov, 2018). As Chugunov has put it, through public endorsement, Putin essentially gave the project his “blessing” (Suzdaltsev, 2015). Registered as an NGO, StopXam received presidential grants in support of its activities. Media reports estimate these grants to amount to 21,000,000

21 For instance, membership in the Civic Chamber.

rubles (NTV, 2016c).²² Court decisions to liquidate StopXam as a legal entity in 2016 and 2018 made the group ineligible for state grants.

4.3. Conceptualising StopXam as a vigilante force

Although *vigilantism* as a social scientific category of citizen-led policing and social justice is rooted in nineteenth-century practices in the USA, *digital vigilantism* emerged as a global phenomenon amid the visibility and wide participation capabilities afforded by digital media in recent decades.

Among the very few other scholars, conceptualisation of vigilantism was initially developed by Rosenbaum and Sederberg in the 1970s. In their take on the phenomenon, Rosenbaum and Sederberg (1974, p. 542) proposed that “when individuals or groups identifying with the established order defend that order by resorting to means that violate these formal boundaries, they can be usefully classified as vigilantes”. After a lengthy pause in scholarly attention to the phenomenon, Johnston took on the task of conceptualising vigilantism by narrowing key definitions. For Johnston,

Vigilantism is a social movement giving rise to premeditated acts of force—or threatened force—by autonomous citizens. It arises as a reaction to the transgression of institutionalized norms by individuals or groups—or to their potential or imputed transgression. Such acts are focused upon crime control and/or social control and aim to offer assurances (or “guarantees”) of security both to participants and to other members of a given established order. (1996, p. 232)

In his definition, Johnston proposed six “necessary features” of vigilantism: (1) planning and premeditation; (2) private and voluntary participation; (3) autonomous citizenship constituting a social movement; (4) use or threat of use of force; (5) vigilantism “arises when an established order is under threat from the transgression, the potential transgression, or the imputed transgression of institutionalized norms”; and (6) vigilantism “aims to control crime or other social infractions by offering assurances (or “guarantees”) of security both to participants and to others” (1996, p. 220).

The quest for a definitional conceptualisation of vigilantism was further carried out by Trottier (2017, 2019) and Moncada (2017). Trottier focuses on digital media affordances for vigilante practices and defines digital vigilantism as “a process where citizens are collectively offended by other citizen activity, and coordinate retaliation on mobile devices and social platforms” (2017, p. 56). In the same article, Trottier

22 On the day of the NTV report release (June 21, 2016) this amounted to roughly 326,527 USD.

compares Johnston's six necessary features of conventional vigilantism with its digital manifestation, suggesting a layer of spontaneity to planning; possible links between vigilantes and state/corporate actors; new boundaries in "autonomous citizenship"; weaponised visibility in addition to embodied use of force; a "fusion of local and mediated norms" (p. 59) in reaction to crime; and "mediated" as opposed to localised policing in the attempted provision of personal and collective security.

Moncada defines vigilantism as "the collective use or threat of extralegal violence in response to an alleged criminal act" (2017, p. 408). He proposes five core definitional dimensions for the conceptualisation of vigilantism, namely: (1) social organisation: social ties shaping the "coordination and execution of vigilantism"; (2) targets: individuals who violate orders and thus commit formal (breaking the law) or informal (perceived) offences; (3) repertoire: lethal (for instance, hanging) and nonlethal (bodily harm, psychological torture) practices that vigilantes utilise to make their claims; (4) justification: legitimisation of vigilante behaviour in the public eye through claiming to act on behalf of the community; and (5) motivation: reasons for participation in vigilantism (pp. 407–408).

When applied to StopXam, Moncada's definitional dimensions fit in a rather straightforward manner. The group is a collective with identified targets—road-traffic and parking violators (formal offence); participants retaliate through a nonlethal repertoire of shameful stickers, as well as verbal and physical confrontation with the drivers, which is filmed and uploaded to YouTube leading to reputation damage and other undesired consequences (such as job loss) for the targets; and they justify their acts by framing the police as dysfunctional and explain their motives as a genuine struggle against "traffic rule violations and arrogance on the road" (Stop a Douchebag, n.d.). However, beyond the conceptual fit, there is a significant amount of nuance accompanying each dimension. Table 3 illustrates the application of Moncada's definitional dimensions to the case of StopXam. Building upon Trottier's *visibility weaponisation*, I propose a sixth dimension crucial to digital vigilante practices—the audience.

When retaliation is broadcast to mass audiences through the group's social media channels and through traditional media reports, *visibility* in itself becomes a *weapon* of vigilantes (Trottier, 2017), affording the "longevity and recurrence" of exposure and intensifying the harm (Gabdulhakov, 2019b, p. 231). The audience is, therefore, by default fundamental to amplification of harm experienced by targets. Platforms such as YouTube, in this regard, serve a unique role as the theatre for digital vigilantism and at times "tolerate or even cultivate such coordinated forms of social harm", given that the latter can be beneficial for the "business models" (Trottier, 2019, p.13). In a way, StopXam's YouTube channel operates as a professional entertainment program and not as an extemporaneous amateur product. Participants often interrupt their videos with homemade ads for hedge funds, video games, and other products and services. Targeting famous people helps attract wider audiences, affording positive visibility for participants and generating income through YouTube monetisation and advertising.

Moncada's definitional dimension	StopXam	Nuances
Social organisation	Initially endorsed by the state. New branches across and beyond Russia are approved by the original founders in Moscow.	Brand-like position of the original group allows for (dis)approval of similar formations across Russia and beyond its boundaries.
Targets	Targets violate formal orders—parking and driving on sidewalks. At times, informal violations enter the scene during the confrontation, as participants attack the target's speech, appearance, ethnic background, social status, and other actions and identity markers.	Among StopXam's targets are ordinary and famous people (and their relatives). StopXam has also targeted the police, who are depicted as dysfunctional. Targeting the elite socioeconomic caste driving expensive cars turns retaliation into a class struggle and collective citizen-led justice/order restoration phenomenon.
Repertoire	The infamous sticker, verbal and physical confrontations, exposure through edited YouTube videos.	Violence is a significant component of StopXam's repertoire. Videos with verbal and physical confrontation attract wider audiences and make sensational news pieces for traditional media, bringing greater recognition to participants and further undesired exposure to the targets.
Justification	Justification comes from underlining the dysfunctionality of police forces who are framed as indifferent at best and corrupt and fearful of approaching expensive cars at worst.	In spite of accusations in dysfunctionality and corruption, participants turn to the police in certain cases. The police can be called in to the scene; video materials are evidently sent by participants to the police (StopXam, n.d.a.).
Motivation	Participants claim moral motives for their activities, with the following mission statement of their official social networks: "We do not fight for the law. We fight for people to think about the rights and the convenience of others regardless of whether there is a police officer near them or not" (StopXam, n.d.b.).	Beyond the genuine concern for the situation on the roads, a set of capitals and benefits is afforded by participation, from YouTube content monetisation to receiving state grants to building political careers and acquiring other kinds of capital through publicity.
Proposed definitional dimension		
The audience	StopXam enjoys a significant following on YouTube, with total video views counting in the hundreds of millions. A YouTube channel with a massive following is a powerful tool in the hands of vigilantes, which grants them colossal comparative advantages in punitive exposure. With branches across and beyond Russia, context in featured videos is tailored to local realities. StopXam, however, is not limited to "the" channel; the group is turning into a recognised brand and method.	Digital vigilante groups such as StopXam (among similar vigilante formations in Russia are Hrushy Protiv, Lev Protiv, and others) are dependent on audience as visibility amplifies the harm experienced by targets. Furthermore, successful YouTube monetisation requires a vast audience. The audience can also support participants through donations and merchandise purchase.

Table 2. Eduardo Moncada's definitional dimensions of vigilantism and the case of StopXam

Here it is important to consider the role of the audience and potential sympathy or condemnation projected on participants and targets. In 2016, NTV conducted a Twitter survey where the readers were asked to express their opinions on StopXam's legitimacy by answering the question "Is StopXam activism legal or not?" The results showed that 35% of 6,767 respondents view the group's activity as legal; another 35% said "no"; and 30% said "no, but I support them" (NTV, 2016b). The image of StopXam participants as agents of social justice who work on behalf of the audience and in spite of police corruption/dysfunctionality (Favarel-Garrigues & Le Huérou, 2004; Oleinik, 2016; Wilson et al., 2008) is further supported by traditional media when participants are framed as public avengers bringing the "road boors" to justice.

4.4. Traditional media framing

Over the course of decades of empirical testing, the "agenda-setting theory" (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) has been divided into three levels. The first level "asserts that the public considers objects that are prioritised in the news as the most important"; the second level states that "properties or characteristics the news media use to portray a certain object will influence how the audience perceives that object"; and the third level, or the *Network Agenda Setting Model*, "asserts that the news not only tells us what to think and how to think, but also determines how we associate different messages to conceptualize social reality" (Guo 2016, pp. 3–4). The difference between agenda-setting and framing, as argued by Carroll (2016), is in the focus on explicit linkages (uniting objects, actors, and attributes as nodes) of the former and implicit linkages of the latter. As such, "salience for framing concerns intensity" while in agenda setting it concerns frequency (Carroll, 2016, p. 36).

Chong and Druckman define framing as "the process by which people develop a particular conceptualisation of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (2007, p. 104). Entman (2007, p. 164). takes the definition a step further suggesting that framing can be viewed as "the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation". Entman (2007) assigns an active element to framing by specific actors, beyond the passive development of a perception by the audience. In this case, when applied to StopXam in Russia, participants themselves can construct frames for self-promotion and mobilisation of supporters and new members. In turn, traditional media has the power of spotlighting a variety of voices, including those of the state, police, targets, and counterforces. With the help of mass media, a group of participants can appear larger than it is, as viewers can develop a sense that activists are omnipresent.

4.5. Russia's traditional media

Before elaborating on the nature of reports on StopXam, it is important to provide a basic overview of the state of Russia's traditional media and selected platforms. The current media landscape in Russia can be described as one controlled by "regime-friendly businesses" providing viewers "with an officially-approved version of what is happening in Russia and the world" (Orttung & Walker, 2013, p. 2). Hutchings and Szostek (2015, p. 184) argue that controlling the circulation of media narratives at home and abroad is a matter of national security in Russia. Being concerned with domestic narratives, this research focuses on broadcasters targeting domestic audiences. While some "alternative" sources of information are still available amid the intense media control in Russia, "critical voices have been increasingly stifled" (Hutchings & Szostek, 2015, p. 184). One example of such pressure is TV Rain. In this particular case, cable companies unplugged the broadcaster, forcing it to move into the online domain and rely on viewer donations to sustain operations (TV Rain, n.d.b.).

Oates (2016, p. 402) argues that any understanding of the Russian media landscape should be constructed around three fundamental points: (1) Russian media is diverse, but not on "key political topics"; (2) most media outlets do not challenge the state (especially on political topics); and (3) media in Russia is consumed with enthusiasm. In summary, state-sponsored media outlets and Russia's ruling regime present a strategic dynamic where regime-loyal narratives are a default necessity. These narratives, in turn, are expected to support regime stability. Of course, the level of audience trust in consumed media comes into play. Television remains the most popular source of news for 72% of Russia's population (Volkov & Goncharov, 2019). In 2009, this number was at 94% indicating a decline in television news consumption amid an increase in the consumption of news from online sources—a practice that saw an increase from 9% to 30% between 2009 and 2019 (Volkov & Goncharov, 2019). Viewers' trust in television as a source of news also experienced a decline from 80% in 2009 to 55% in 2019 (Volkov & Goncharov, 2019).

State-controlled media in Russia underwent several waves of restructuring and, as Tolz and Teper argue, these "major changes" in approaches to coverage can no longer be viewed from the standpoint of "neo-Soviet" or "neauthoritarian" models. Rather, there is an increase in political and "ideological messaging," which at the same time allows the broadcasters to maintain their position as "the chief producers of agitainment content" (2018, pp. 11–12). Tolz and Teper define "agitainment" as "controlled media output, alongside its systematic employment of specific global media formats to enhance its impact on viewers" (2018, p. 2). Thus, controlled state broadcasters in Russia appear to take on the roles of norm setters and official discourse articulators while entertaining the audience.

4.6. Methodology and data collection

This research draws its sample from the country's top broadcasters Channel One, NTV, REN TV, and Rossiia 24. In addition to these state broadcasters, the study features a non-state platform representing the scant independent media in the country—TV Rain. Selected broadcasters maintain websites with archived news blocks in the form of videos and transcribed text, serving as artefacts for the purposes of the current research. In the selected time period keywords *вигилантизм/виджилантизм* (vigilantism) and *вигилант* (vigilante) bore no results.²³ News reports were sought by typing in keywords, namely variations of spellings of the group's name in the Cyrillic alphabet: *СтопХам*, *Стоп Хам*, *стопхам*, *стоп хам*. Select results that featured unrelated topics due to algorithmic errors were removed. A total of 307 news pieces were analysed in this study: 4 from Channel One, 48 from NTV, 149 from REN TV, 98 from Rossiia 24, and 8 from TV Rain.

Data in the form of screenshots was collected directly from the archives available on the broadcasters' websites. The broadcasters were chosen with the aim of featuring the most prominent, regime-loyal platforms representing the voice of the state, as well as a nonstate voice represented by TV Rain. While the collected data is public, I refrain from directly revealing the names of targets in the text, so as not to confer any additional undesired publicity.

The data were collected with the awareness of the limitations of online archives. They are not guaranteed to be fully comprehensive due to the fact that broadcasters may not necessarily archive the entirety of their news products. As well, some digitally archived content is vulnerable to disappearance, as broadcasters tend to remove certain sensitive pieces from their otherwise open-access archives (The Moscow Times, 2019a). In spite of these limitations, 307 news pieces representing every year of the selected coverage period between January 1, 2010, and December 31, 2018, were gathered. The period was selected to comprehensively address media coverage since StopXam's formation in 2010 until initial liquidation in 2016; its subsequent rehabilitation by the Supreme Court; and the most recent liquidation in 2018. All the data in the form of screenshots was stored in the secure digital vault provided by the author's institution. The study utilised specialised software, Atlas.ti, to organise, code, and analyse the data. Data analysis involved a detailed study of every news piece for identification of recurring themes in the portrayal of actors involved: participants, targets, police, and so on. As per Altheide and Schneider (2013), the report-production phase of the chapter involved summarising each of the categories in short paragraphs, using illustrative materials where appropriate, and including descriptions and quotations. A detailed description of the protocol is available in the Appendix.

23 Only in 2019 was the term "vigilantes" used to address StopXam by Russia's parliament member Viktor Zubarev, as he was quoted across traditional media (Sokolov 2019).

4.6.1. Selected Broadcasters

With 98.8% domestic audience reach (Pervyi Kanal, 2016) and a global audience of “more than 250 million in 190 countries”, Channel One is “the most popular” Russian-language broadcaster (Channel One Russia, n.d.). The channel is owned by the Federal Agency for State Property Management as well as by the National Media Group, a private media holding (National Media Group, n.d.a.). Among other share-holders are the TASS news agency, Ostankino Technical Centre, and Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich (Dziadul, 2018). Reportedly, 47% of Russia’s domestic audience get their news from this channel (Volkov & Goncharov, 2019).

Founded in 1993, NTV was a prominent critic of the state until the ruling regime initiated a “purge” of the channel in 2001 (Traynor, 2001). Since the Russian government-owned Joint Stock Company Gazprom appropriated NTV, the broadcaster has transformed from a critic of the state into a loyal voice of the ruling regime. According to NTV’s LinkedIn profile, the channel’s audience across the former Soviet bloc includes 100 million people. Among the global satellite broadcasters, NTV is “the main Russian language channel” (NTV Broadcasting Company, n.d.), while 36% of Russia’s domestic audience get their news from this channel (Volkov & Goncharov, 2019).

REN TV was founded as a brand on January 1, 1991, and has been airing in Russia since 1997 (REN TV, n.d.). Like Channel One, REN TV is majority-owned by the National Media Group with 82% of the shares (National Media Group, 2016). The owners estimate that the channel is “potentially” available to 120 million people, while its website is “one of the most cited in the Russian market” with a reach of “2 million of unique visitors per day” (National Media Group, n.d.b.). REN TV is a source of news for 17% of Russia’s domestic audience (Volkov & Goncharov, 2019).

Launched in 2006, Rossiia 24 channel operates under the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK). According to its owners, the channel “has the leading position at the national broadcasting market, and is one of the leading producers of content” (VGTRK, n.d.). Specialising solely in 24/7 news delivery to an audience of 50 million people (Media International Russia, n.d.), Rossiia 24 is a sister channel of another influential channel owned by VGTRK, Rossiia 1. The online archive of Rossiia 24’s news program *Vesti* [The News] contained pieces that were aired both on Rossiia 24 and Rossiia 1. Rossiia 24 is a source of news for 31% of Russia’s domestic audience, while a reported 48% receive their news from Rossiia 1 (Volkov & Goncharov, 2019).

Founded in 2010, TV Rain is a unique phenomenon in Russian broadcasting that positions itself as a platform designed “for those who care” (TV Rain, n.d.a.). During the anti-Kremlin protests of 2011 and 2012 (Chaisty & Whitefield, 2013), TV Rain openly covered the events. Russia’s television providers unplugged the “liberal-leaning” TV Rain in 2014 amid a scandal surrounding a public poll that the channel carried out (BBC, 2014). TV Rain is currently limited to online streaming and much of its content is paid; in 2016 the number of registered paying viewers was 72,000 people (Sat-World.net, 2016).

Only 1% of Russia’s domestic audience gets their news via TV Rain (Volkov & Goncharov, 2019).²⁴

4.6.2. StopXam in Traditional Media

While this study employs qualitative approaches to media content analysis, some quantitative features such as the number and distribution of news reports featuring StopXam are helpful in illustrating the volume and frequency of coverage. As can be seen in Table 3, selected broadcasters differ in the frequency and volume of their reporting on StopXam.

	Channel One		NTV		REN TV		Rossiia 24		TV Rain		Totals	
2010	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	0.65%	0	0.00%	2	0.65%
2011	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	0.65%	0	0.00%	2	0.65%
2012	1	0.33%	6	1.95%	0	0.00%	20	6.51%	0	0.00%	27	8.79%
2013	1	0.33%	5	1.63%	0	0.00%	19	6.19%	0	0.00%	25	8.14%
2014	0	0.00%	7	2.28%	16	5.21%	5	1.63%	0	0.00%	28	9.12%
2015	0	0.00%	4	1.30%	28	9.12%	7	2.28%	1	0.33%	40	13.03%
2016	2	0.65%	17	5.54%	58	18.89%	32	10.42%	5	1.63%	114	37.13%
2017	0	0.00%	5	1.63%	43	14.01%	6	1.95%	1	0.33%	55	17.92%
2018	0	0.00%	4	1.30%	4	1.30%	5	1.63%	1	0.33%	14	4.56%
Totals	4	1.30%	48	15.64%	149	48.53%	98	31.92%	8	2.61%	307	100.00%

Table 3. News pieces covering StopXam per broadcaster, disaggregated by year

Table 3 illustrates the number of reports per each broadcaster disaggregated by year in the period between January 1, 2010, and December 31, 2018. The majority of coverage comes from REN TV with 48.53% of news pieces; followed by Rossiia 24 with 31.92%; NTV with 15.64%; and TV Rain and Channel One with 2.61% and 1.30%, respectively. The table also indicates that the coverage spikes across all platforms in 2016, the year when StopXam was initially liquidated by the decision of the Moscow City Court. The decision was overruled by the Supreme Court later that year, but applied again under the provision of the Moscow branch of the Ministry of Justice in 2018 (NTV, 2018).

Russia’s main broadcaster, Channel One, features four stories on StopXam in its online news archive. Two reports present the already mentioned sensational cases—a conflict that took place in Moscow between the “activists” and the wife of Chechnya’s deputy presidential plenipotentiary in Moscow, as well as the confrontation with the wife of the head of Mar’ino district of Russia’s capital. The remaining two pieces report on the court decision to shut down StopXam. The incidents involving politicians’ wives

24 The Levada Center report authored by Volkov and Goncharov (2019) does not specify whether the viewers access TV Rain content via the channel’s website or its mobile application.

were widely covered by all selected broadcasters, while only TV Rain faced legal issues over copyright violation of StopXam, as the channel featured original footage from the group's YouTube channel (SecurityLab.ru, 2012). StopXam's YouTube videos (edited by participants) often made it into the reports of other broadcasters serving as evidence of what happened on the ground. Numerous online reports of state broadcasters in over a hundred instances provided direct links to the original videos on YouTube and links to the group's VKontakte²⁵ page.

NTV, REN TV, and Rossiia 24 lead in the frequency of their reporting on StopXam. Despite the varying volume of the news items, these three broadcasters often report on the same cases and use similar language to describe, comment on, and frame the events. REN TV is the leader in coverage, with 149 news pieces responding to the majority of most notorious cases of StopXam's confrontations with drivers. Rossiia 24 has covered StopXam since the early days of the group's formation, with the first report dating back to June 2010. Rossiia 24's first report, dated June 22, 2010, quoted then mayor of Moscow, Iurii Luzhkov, describing StopXam as "useless". In this case, Luzhkov is somewhat of an outlier when it comes to representation of the ruling regime, as he was dismissed from his post in September 2010 over then President Medvedev's "loss of confidence" in his persona (Odynova, 2010).

In its modest scope, TV Rain's coverage of StopXam is similar to that of Channel One. The online archive features eight news pieces covering StopXam's confrontations with the police; the court's liquidation of the group; Chugunov's political ambitions; and a "Sharia patrol" project "Stop Haram".²⁶ Stop Haram is a curious case, as it was founded by former StopXam member Islam Ismailov and aimed to morally confront Muslims about life choices such as drinking alcohol and smoking. Chugunov denied any links between StopXam and Stop Haram, stating that several activists broke away due to "disagreements" and that Ismailov was "parasitically exploiting the brand" (Vesti, 2017b).

4.7. Media analysis

4.7.1. The Genesis of StopXam's Portrayal

All selected platforms referred to StopXam participants as "activists" and as members of a "public movement". Words such as "project", "organisation", "NGO", "volunteers", "youth", and "fighters" were used to describe the group. Several of the initial reports linked the "activists" to the pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi. In this regard, NTV and Rossiia 24 featured meetings between StopXam and Russia's political leadership, represented by Putin and Medvedev. In 2011 Rossiia 24 reported on then President Medvedev's meeting with the "non-indifferent" youth activists and internet users

25 Russia's analogue of Facebook.

26 "Haram" refers to things and activities forbidden in Islam.

(Skabeeva, 2011). During the meeting StopXam leaders gave Medvedev one of their infamous stickers, suggesting he put it on the windshield of a bad driver. Such endorsement on national television granted informal powers to participants, as their acts were by default legitimised by the country's highest authority.

As can be seen in Image 4, StopXam activists took a group photo with Putin in a “no tie” meeting. All but two participants are wearing branded StopXam sweatshirts and the stickers are displayed in the background. Wearing a long-sleeved shirt depicting the first man in space, Soviet cosmonaut Yury Gagarin, is StopXam’s leader Chugunov. The woman in a scarlet dress, not facing the camera, is the group’s former spokesperson Mitrofanova.



Image 4. Vladimir Putin with StopXam participants and founders.
Photo credit: Mikhail Kliment'ev/ITAR-TASS.

In the majority of the reports, coverage concerned Russia’s capital, the city of Moscow, and its second largest city and historical capital, St. Petersburg. News reports on NTV, REN TV, and Rossiia 24 covered StopXam “raids” across the country, namely in Bashkortostan, Chelyabinsk, Karelia, Khabarovsk, Omsk, Perm’, Petrozavodsk, Voronezh, and other locations. News pieces covering cases from the periphery, as a rule, implied coverage of the newly established StopXam branches, scandalous cases taking place in the regions, or both types of events in a single report.

4.7.2. Targets and Retaliation

Throughout the reports, targets of StopXam have included businessmen and businesswomen, singers, athletes, porn stars, politicians and their relatives (spouses, children, and grandchildren), and other famous and non-famous people. On several occasions, StopXam targeted police officers. All broadcasters except TV Rain have framed targets as aggressive, guilty, and/or rich.

Female targets have dominated the reports on the four state broadcasters. None of REN TV's 149 reports on StopXam covered in this research assumed the potential innocence of targets. In its reports, TV Rain emphasised the violence performed by participants and underscored the fact that targets' guilt was "alleged" and offences were "perceived". The remaining broadcasters framed targets as "potentially innocent" on a couple of occasions each. NTV, REN TV, and Rossiia 24 framed female drivers as "inadequate", referring to them as "*damochka*" [missy], "autolady", or "a blonde". Male drivers were not described in terms of hair colour or gender.

Image 5 illustrates a report by REN TV (2018) featuring female targets of StopXam. The report is titled "In Moscow Ladies behind the Wheel Have Aggressively Reacted to the Remark of 'StopXam' Activists". The subtitle states: "One of them started threatening with some powerful connections". The "catch" line in the first two sentences of the report states that "In Moscow, stubborn and vicious gals attacked side-walks with their cars. They responded aggressively to any inquiry made by social activists [StopXam]". The material is presented as "exclusive" and is accompanied by the tags "Moscow" and "activists". This particular report, like most REN TV reports, features footage taken and edited by participants.

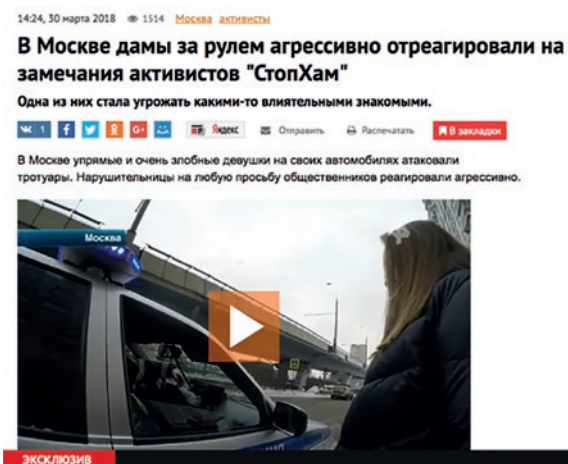


Image 5. REN TV report screenshot. Gender biases in the reports.

Presumption of guilt of the targets, exposure of their identity, and gendered commentary were also prevalent on Rossiia 24. Image 6 illustrates a report titled "The Blonde from around the Corner" (Blinnikov, 2013).²⁷ The report features footage from StopXam's YouTube channel and states the following:

²⁷ The title is an allusion to the 1984 Soviet romantic comedy *The Blonde around the Corner*.

She drove over a foot, gave a ride on the hood, and went on to a physical attack. All of this was performed by a heroine of a scandalous video that appeared online—a Saransk-native, 31-year-old [the report provides the target’s full name] owner of a snow-white Audi. In this very car, the fragile blonde tried to detour the traffic via a sidewalk.

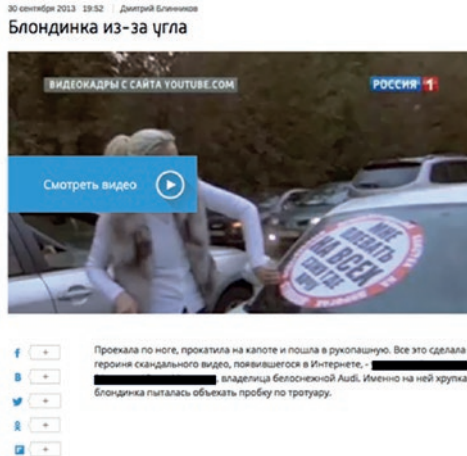


Image 6. Rossiia 24 screenshot. Target’s personal information disclosed (redacted by the author).

Beyond gender and appearance markers, the targets are described through the Soviet-era term of being owners of an *inomarka* [a foreign-made car], which underscores the higher socioeconomic status of the driver. Vehicles are described as being “expensive” and “elite”. Some reports describe the gender, socioeconomic status, and ethnic background of the target. NTV report titled “‘Nashi’ versus the Chechens: Scandalous Video Stirred Up the Internet” (NTV, 2012) sets up an Us versus Them contestation wherein the Chechens are framed as a group distinct from Russians, turning the parking violation into an interethnic matter. Once again NTV features video footage from StopXam’s YouTube channel, which contributes to further one-sided framing of the events, as the account is informed through the perspective of participants. The target is portrayed as an aggressive, rude, rich power abuser and is quoted to have threatened the activists. This particular case features the wife of Chechnya’s deputy presidential plenipotentiary to Moscow and was also widely covered by REN TV, Rossiia 24, and Channel One. As a result of this incident, the deputy plenipotentiary lost his job, while his wife was further shamed by the President of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, who accused the target of “acting in a manner not suitable for the Chechen mentality”. Kadyrov emphasised that “as a Chechen woman, she should have known that all this is contrary to our moral and ethical standards” (Vesti, 2012).

These cases demonstrate how, by entering traditional media discourse, the incidents are further framed from the perspective of participants and lead to reactions from state leadership. Female targets experience pressure of societal norms that still find it somewhat unusual to see that a woman is driving a car, hence the term “autolady”, as well as the pressure of having to conform to special moral and ethical standards.

16 июня 2013 21:35 | Аркадий Мамонтов

Народные мстители борются с педофилами, автохамами и наркомафией



Image 7. Rossiia 24 report screenshot. Maksim Martsinkevich (also known as ‘Tesak’ [Axe]), the founder of several hate-based vigilante formations, is featured on national television in the process of humiliating his target.

Whereas NTV, REN TV, and Rossiia 24 all report on the dysfunctionality and inactivity of law enforcement, Rossiia 24 is the only platform that quoted one of the youth activists accusing police forces of direct collaboration with criminals. As such, an article dated June 16, 2013, reported on “people’s avengers fighting paedophiles, road boores, and drug mafia” (Mamontov, 2013). The report lumped numerous vigilante formations in Russia, including anti-migrant and neo-Nazi vigilante movements²⁸ alongside Kremlin-supported groups, into a single force of “citizen-led justice”. Thus, traditional media provide a platform for openly criminal participants who use social media to “intimidate and humiliate their targets” (Kasra, 2017, p. 186) and express their views on national television. In the same report, a StopXam representative states that police are afraid of approaching cars with “cool license plates”.²⁹ Traditional media, therefore, provide justification for vigilantism when they frame police forces as dysfunctional and vigilantes as superheroes—“the avengers”.

28 For a detailed account of these groups and their entrepreneurship in vigilantism, see Favarel-Garrigues (2019).

29 In Russia, a licence plate with a specific combination of letters and digits can be a status symbol. For more information, please see <https://www.rbth.com/lifestyle/327032-hidden-messages-of-russian-license>

All platforms, except for Channel One, have reported on police becoming a target for StopXam. Image 8 illustrates a 2014 NTV report from Karelia where “a StopXam activist was detained for placing the sticker on a police car” (NTV, 2014).

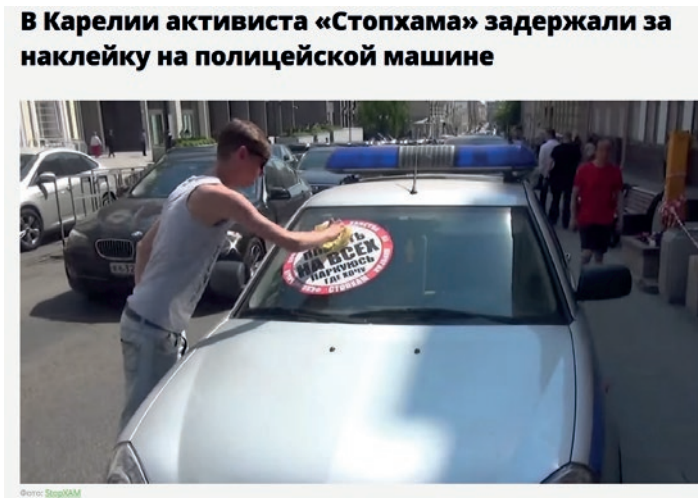


Image 8. NTV report screenshot. StopXam participant places the group’s sticker on a police vehicle.

NTV and Rossiia 24 reported on the “internationality” of the “movement” with branches established in neighbouring states. The stickers are mentioned as the main retaliation tool in almost all reports of all broadcasters. Rossiia 24 reported both on the fact that the stickers were easy to remove and on the fact that removal “takes time and effort”; indicating lack of objectivity in controversies surrounding this form of retaliation. The reports also mention “moralisation” and “online exposure” as part of the group’s activist repertoire. When it comes to physical confrontations and fights, the majority of coverage framed targets as the ones attacking participants.

4.7.3. Different Voices and Shifting Perspectives

As far as the granting of voice is concerned, of all actors involved, StopXam leader Chugunov was given the most chances to comment on incidents and processes surrounding the group. NTV and Rossiia 24 gave voice to the Ministry of Internal Affairs to comment, while only NTV featured an anti-StopXam citizen activist speaking up and communicating his views on the group amid the court decision to shut it down. StopXam’s voice was represented by Chugunov or other members who were interviewed or quoted from their social media posts and TV appearances. In the case of targets, their voices were presented in the form of quoted speech from videos produced and edited by StopXam participants. This means that in spite of the perceived presence of the targets’ voice, the message is subjected to manipulation by participants and broadcasters. When it comes to the voices of police officers, only Rossiia 24 provided a

platform for them. In these reports police communicated through official statements made by their press services. In all reports featuring such press statements, StopXam members were presented as the instigators of conflict.

It is curious to note that every report featuring lawyers as commentators and police as targets framed the participants as hooligans and inferred avaricious motives behind their activism. Rossiia 24 accused StopXam of removing a self-incriminating video (GTRK "Kareliia", 2015) and quoted Karelia's internal affairs minister accusing StopXam of hooliganism and damaging private property (Vesti, 2015).

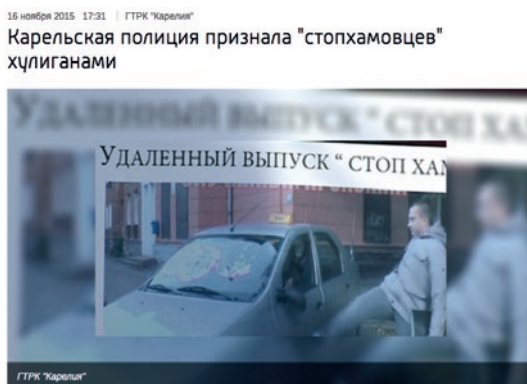


Image 9. Rossiia 24 report screenshot. Police in Karelia deemed StopXam as “hooligans”.

In this report the lawyers are quoted stating that StopXam participants violate the law, slander their targets, practice mob rule, and block the vision of drivers by placing stickers on their windshields. Beyond these accusations, the monetisation of YouTube videos featuring famous people is addressed in the report by NTV presented in Image 10: “StopXam is making tens of thousands of dollars on scandalous videos with celebrities” (NTV, 2016c).

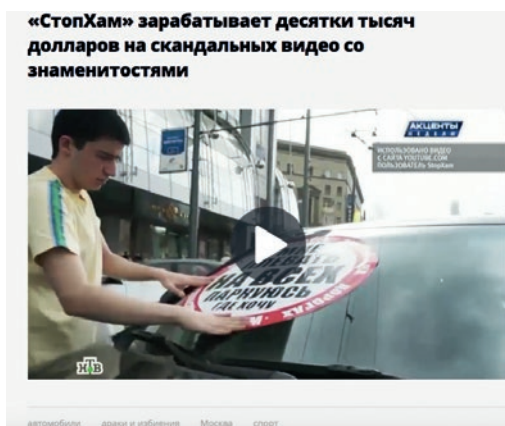


Image 10. NTV report screenshot. StopXam’s motives are questioned.

A lawyer featured in this report breaks down the nature of activities of this “organized movement” and is quoted next to “anti-StopXam” activists (NTV, 2016c). The report estimates that on YouTube alone participants make tens of thousands of US dollars per month on top of presidential grants. Subsequent reports continue to question StopXam’s motives and approaches, reminding the audience that StopXam was liquidated by the Moscow City Court and that its members are infamous for fights and aggression in their videos, especially when it comes to celebrities (NTV, 2016a).

4.8. Heroes or hooligans? Media revelations

The portrayal and framing of StopXam in Russia’s traditional media are rather inconsistent and fluctuate across time and among broadcasters. In 2016, StopXam received the most mentions in the news: it was the year the group confronted a prominent Russian athlete and Olympic champion. While other rich and famous people had been approached by participants in the past, the case of the confrontation with this athlete is distinct as athletes occupy an important niche in the process of authoritarian nation building (see, for instance, Koch, 2013). Mega sporting events and athletes’ achievements help Russia construct its image as a superpower, even though the price tag that comes along with this ambition is very high (Puddington, 2017). Thus, having put an Olympic champion on the ground during a fight, StopXam activists essentially assaulted Russia’s national pride. Such a bold move could have served as the trigger for scrutiny of the group that had otherwise enjoyed the endorsement and support of the state and its media. Having crossed this unspoken boundary, StopXam demonstrated that it might be more ferocious than the ruling regime hoped when it initially endorsed the group. In 2016 StopXam was liquidated as a legal entity. Although this decision was overruled by the Supreme Court six months later, liquidation was, nevertheless, reinforced in 2018. NTV, REN TV, and Rossiia 24 aired news on StopXam following the court decision, reporting that their “raids” and activities would continue in spite of the liquidation.

As per StopXam itself, it is unclear who specifically ordered their liquidation. Following the court decision, Chugunov gave several interviews where he spoke about the fact that StopXam had targeted public servants and parliament members, bandits, police, prosecutor’s office employees, and even the head of Medvedev’s secretariat. Chugunov mentioned that on several occasions StopXam was offered millions of rubles in bribes not to upload videos to YouTube but refused such offers. In the same interview, he denounced Russia’s ruling party Edinaia Rossiia (United Russia), announced his participation in the parliamentary election, and promised to open “new formats, new channels, new leaders” in a variety of directions countering “bores” (Pasm.ru, 2016). This interview was not featured on the news platforms covered by current research. Chugunov indeed ran in the 2016 parliamentary election but came in second to last in his electoral district, in tenth place. As of 2017, Chugunov no longer serves in the Civic Chamber.

In the most recent interview dated 29 January 2020, Chugunov answered the questions of several interviewers including Maria Butina (infamously convicted in the United States as an unregistered foreign agent), speaking about Nashi, StopXam, and his current life (Prekrasnaya Rossiya bu-bu-bu, 2020). Namely, he elaborated on his decision to leave Nashi in 2011 as he “did not want to take people to public actions not related to the organisation’s objectives” (Prekrasnaya Rossiya bu-bu-bu, 2020). Chugunov expressed concerns over the excessive paternalism of Russia’s ruling elite and the gap between the state and the youth, as the former redirected finances to other projects. He also stated that “if a person was not a revolutionary at the age of 19, he is a scoundrel, but if he remained a revolutionary at age 30, he is an idiot” and explained that he is a “happy person” since his departure from public and political activism (Prekrasnaya Rossiya bu-bu-bu, 2020).

4.9. Conclusion

This chapter has sought to achieve three objectives—to test the existing conceptual framework of digital vigilantism using the example of StopXam; investigate the nature of portrayal of vigilantes, their targets, and police forces in Russia’s state-owned and independent media; and evaluate the role of traditional media in digital vigilantism manifestation.

Having compared StopXam against the existing definitional characteristics of digital vigilantism, the chapter makes a contribution by demonstrating the significance of audience in mediated retaliation. Exposure to wider audiences amplifies the harm experienced by targets and can lead to consequences that conventional encounters with legal police forces would not necessarily yield. In this regard, traditional media plays an important role in framing cases and granting a voice to the actors involved.

Content analysis demonstrates the important role of traditional media in framing social justice and in giving voice to respective actors. In the case of digital vigilantism, where mediated exposure is at the core of retaliation, traditional media can be an important stage for targets to deliver their side of the story. Given their vast social media following, StopXam possess enormous capacities in exposing their targets. In such cases, if the target wants to tell their side of the story to the masses, traditional media is one of the few channels available to them. However, this channel is jeopardised when featured stories are delivered from a one-sided and biased perspective of StopXam participants.

When it comes to the framing of respective actors, StopXam’s portrayal neither consistent nor homogeneous. State leadership, represented by Medvedev and Putin, expressed support for StopXam and other similar groups that came out of the Nashi youth movement. Such endorsement, broadcasted on national television, granted informal powers to participants as their acts were automatically legitimised. While all broadcasters referred to the group as “activists” and a “public movement”, descriptions

such as “organisation”, “project”, “scandalous organisation”, “NGO”, “concerned citizens”, and “fighters” were also prevalent. Reports on all platforms peaked in 2016 amid the scandal involving StopXam’s retaliation against Russia’s prominent athlete. Following the incident, news reports began questioning the motives of StopXam participants, some openly accusing them of being avaricious and benefiting from large state grants and the monetisation of “scandalous” videos on YouTube.

TV Rain faced copyright issues with StopXam for featuring the group’s YouTube videos in its reports, while other platforms systematically featured the same footage and faced no issues. Furthermore, platforms such as YouTube play an important role in providing a stage for vigilantes and in allowing StopXam participants to generate income from their activities while the privacy of targets is violated.

Unlike TV Rain, broadcasters such as NTV, REN TV, and Rossiia 24 showed bias against female targets by highlighting their physical features, referring to them as “the blonde” or “a fragile gal”. The term “autolady” was used in reference to female drivers, hinting at the special circumstances of participants dealing with a female driver. Female targets were also portrayed as aggressive, scandalous, and incompetent at driving. Targets’ personal information such as full name, age, and license plates were systematically disclosed in the reports.

The “rich and powerful” of Russian society were framed through references to their social status—politicians, singers, athletes, prominent businessmen/women, or relatives of the above. Their vehicles were described as “expensive”, “elite”, “with special license plates”, and “foreign-made”. Some reports portrayed police as dysfunctional, which provided further justification for vigilantes’ role and acts of social justice. State media did not shy away from referring to targets by their ethnic origins such as “the Chechens”. Because in some cases confrontation with StopXam and subsequent media attention led to targets losing their jobs, the power of exposure in retaliation is once again evident. If violators are approached by police for parking in the wrong place, they would normally be issued a fine which they would then pay and go on with their lives. In mediated exposure, the price of parking in the wrong place is much higher. Digital vigilantism is a phenomenon where each wave of exposure can harm individuals.

Reporting on the road-traffic related cases through the frame of “anarchy exercised by elite citizens on expensive cars” is a scenario that speaks to the greater masses in Russia. References to “Chechens” and “inadequate female drivers” hold anecdotal significance in a society where gender biases and interethnic confrontations are familiar points of discussion. Perhaps, reports featuring young people confronting the “rich and famous” of society serve the purpose of presenting a sense of justice to the greater masses—so long as the confronted targets are not the ruling elite itself.

Explaining why selected state broadcasters framed actors in a specific manner in the specific period of time is a challenge that requires further investigation through interviews with journalists, editors, and other media professionals in Russia. What can be elaborated at this point is the fact that in the current state of Russian media

there are unspoken rules for what can and cannot be said on state television. At the same time, broadcasters enjoy a level of autonomy on certain topics. During the time when StopXam was openly endorsed by state leadership, most of the reports on state television framed the group as a volunteer formation of young activists. The narratives in state media shifted and started to question the motives of StopXam amid the deterioration of relations between vigilantes and the state.

This research contributes to current literature on vigilantism by addressing a case where a vigilante group has turned into a brand-like formation with branches across and beyond Russia. StopXam is a unique movement in the sense that it is in possession of the power to inspire and endorse similar movements around the world. Conversations with members and branch founders beyond Russia revealed that when launching their own initiatives, people feel the need for StopXam's approval. Furthermore, StopXam's success makes it a recognisable movement to the point that affiliating oneself with the existing brand appears to make more sense than founding a unique initiative. Whether StopXam members are heroes or hooligans is a contested view, and media analysis reveals that perceptions have changed over time.

Future research is needed on media portrayal of other vigilante formations in Russia and beyond. Comparative studies involving different groups nationally and internationally can shed light further on the role and place of traditional media in digital vigilantism. Other avenues for exploration could include qualitative content analysis of videos produced by vigilantes in order to identify their frames and biases and compare them with perspectives in traditional media. Relations between vigilantes and social media platforms require further investigation.

Interviewees

- Former StopXam participant in Moldova. In-person interview, May 2017.
- Mal Estacionado founders in Peru. Online interview, June 2019.





Layers of target vulnerabilities in digital vigilantism³⁰

30 This chapter is an adaptation of the following article: Gabdulhakov, R. (2019). In the bullseye of vigilantes: Mediated vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia. *Media and Communication*, 7(2), 230-241. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i2.1927>

Summary

Hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz labour migrants seek opportunities in Russia where they fall target to retaliation of vigilante citizens who find offence in the presence of alien labourers in their homeland. Vigilantism also takes place within this migrant 'community' where male Kyrgyz labour migrants engage in retaliation on female migrants over perceived offences such as dating non-Kyrgyz men. On several occasions between 2011 and 2016 videos featuring honour beatings of female labour migrants by fellow countrymen shook the internet. The selected case illustrates vulnerabilities experienced by migrants due to xenophobia and hostility of the host state, as well as additional layers of vulnerabilities linked to gendered biases that 'travel' across borders along with compatriots in migration. The study argues that offline structures, norms, biases, violence, and stigma not only reincarnate online where they culminate in vigilante acts, but consequently re-enter the offline discourse and go through further normalisation and justification.

“It is ugly to be punishable, but there is no glory in punishing.”

– Michel Foucault

5.1. Introduction

Social media and smart mobile devices brought about intrinsic changes to various aspects of modern life, including the process and experience of migration. Digital media provides unprecedented affordances for migrants, such as access to crucial information, on-the-spot translation, navigation tools, and other services conveniently accessible through a single device. As is evident from recent literature on the role of digital media in the lives of refugees, displaced people, and migrants—smart mobile devices, social media, and the connectivity that they afford can be positively instrumental during and after the migratory journey. From coordination with others in the community to maintaining contact with people back home, to document storing, smartphones provide a “sense of security” and help with “preserving memories” of the journey (Alencar et al., 2018, pp. 12–13). Social media is used by refugees for “acquisition of language and cultural competences” and helps with “contacting family and friends in the home country in order to obtain social and emotional support” (Alencar, 2017, p. 1600). At the same time, there are certain “information precarities” experienced by refugees and displaced people. Such precarities constitute instabilities and vulnerabilities to “misinformation, stereotyping, and rumors” (Wall et al., 2017, p. 240). While being an essential tool used by refugees, smart mobile devices can carry risk as they are used by governments and border control officers for surveillance purposes (Gabrielsen Jumbert et al., 2018). Yet further, as this chapter illustrates, digitally mediated threats can radiate from fellow migrants.

This chapter aims to make a scientific contribution by addressing mediated vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia who are pushed out of their home state by economic factors, and whose precarious status in the host state amplifies their fragility in the digital domain. In particular, the chapter inquires into how digital vigilantism affects female labour migrants in the framework of *digital divides* (Miller & Norris, 2016; Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2017; van Dijk, 2017; among others) that imply divergence across groups and individuals in their access to digital media, respective skills, as well as various capitals and benefits of using these media. By addressing the selected case, this chapter aims to further inform the scientific discussion, debate, and exchange on the role, benefit and harm that digital media can bring into the lives of migrants. The study considers how the established social, political, and economic inequalities, as well as racial, ethnic, and other biases transfer into the digital sphere, thus reinforcing “existing social relationships” (van Dijk, 2012, p. 243), where they “culminate in a coordinated mass persecution of a targeted citizen” (Trottier, 2017, p. 61) and then re-enter the offline sphere and discourse.

Falling target to vigilante citizens in the host state, labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan engage in mediated moral policing within their own perceived community. On several occasions between 2011 and 2016, videos of honour beatings of female Kyrgyz labour migrants by fellow countrymen shook the internet. Referring to themselves as ‘patriots’, men who do not reveal their own identity in the videos humiliate and punish women over perceived offences, such as being seen in public with non-Kyrgyz males. Having found offence in women’s behaviour, the ‘patriots’ capture and beat their targets, threaten them with knives, sexually assault them, film the process, and spread the footage online (Beishinbek Kyzy & Bigg, 2012; Botoeva, 2012; SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, 2012; Ibraeva et al, 2015; Lelik, 2016). Beyond the suffered embodied harm, the *visibility* of the targets is exploited (Trottier, 2017) as they are forced to reveal their names and home addresses on camera, which intensifies the harm and paves the way for further online and offline retaliation, shaming, and harassment.

Certain identity markers such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and gender as well as social norms and perceived obligations affect the subjection to and experience of digitally mediated citizen-led retaliation. The selected case illustrates vulnerabilities that migrants experience due to xenophobia and hostility in the host state, as well as gendered biases and violence inside of the migrant ‘community’. Such vulnerabilities are, of course, numerous and extend into economic circumstances, education, healthcare, employment conditions, immigration status, and so on. This chapter focuses on vulnerabilities associated with subjection to vigilante acts that instrumentalise embodied and digitally mediated retaliation.

After elaboration on its methodology, the chapter provides a theoretical framework for digital vigilantism and digital divides. In doing so, it covers related literature and the encompassing scholarly discussions. The chapter proceeds to elaborate on various threats and vulnerabilities faced by Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia amid the multitude of ‘offences’ that certain targets commit. Women are targeted by vigilantes in the host state and by compatriots in migration. In this case, there are vulnerabilities applicable to the general group ‘Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia’, as well as additional vulnerabilities experienced by women within the group. Beyond this, women experience barriers to seeking legal help, as sexual violence, shame, weak rule of law, and their uncertain legal status in Russia prevent them from being vocal. Appalling public solidarity with vigilante acts in the home state of Kyrgyzstan is informed by stigma, victim-blaming discourses, and the vulnerable position of women within the set social norms.

5.2. Methodology

While retaliation videos were freely circulating on various social media platforms, the author viewed them to gather an understanding of the nature of retaliation. Though scarce, the existing literature on the selected case assisted in constructing an

understanding of perceptions and public reactions to instances of digitally mediated vigilante retaliation. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (11) with a participant in vigilantism (1), human rights defenders (3), police (2), an academic (1), an NGO representative (1), and journalists (3), conducted in Russia and Kyrgyzstan in person and via Skype, have further informed this research. Interviews were conducted between April and June 2018. The option of interviewing targets of digital vigilantism was intentionally avoided due to ethical considerations and the *do no harm* approach of the researcher. All featured interviewees in the study are anonymised, which has no impact on the substance and quality of the data. Interview material particularly helped with the contextualisation of digitally mediated retaliation and its impacts on targets within the Kyrgyz migrant ‘community’. Interviews revealed instances of collaboration between law enforcement officers and vigilante citizens in Russia, disclosing curious nuances of acquired capitals and powers that allow media-savvy participants to apply pressure on the police. Furthermore, the informants helped shed light on the barriers that prevent targets from seeking legal help both in the host state and in their home country. A full list of interviews conducted during the PhD trajectory is available in Annexe III.

5.3. Digital vigilantism

Finding offence in other citizens, taking personal retaliation measures while filming the process, and subsequently disseminating the footage online is a rampant practise among various vigilante groups in Russia. In the majority of cases, participatory practices are group acts where citizens organise themselves around a selected offence theme, such as exposing and punishing alleged paedophiles, countering ‘unscrupulous’ merchants, shaming parking ‘violators’, or busting ‘illegal migrants’. This chapter relies on the concept of *digital vigilantism* to address such acts. Researching vigilantism through the prism of its *digital* manifestations should not be perceived as a phenomenon limited to hacking and doxing. Instead, digital vigilantism can be defined as “a process where citizens are collectively offended by other citizen activity, and coordinate retaliation on mobile devices and social platforms” (Trottier, 2017, p. 56). As such, embodied acts performed by vigilantes and broadcasted online are also regarded as acts of digital vigilantism. The element of *digitally mediated exposure* of targets can increase longevity and recurrence of the waves of harm that a sole physical assault would not be able to produce, thus intensifying and amplifying the impact of retaliation. Russia’s neo-Nazi vigilante group Occupy Paedophilia, for instance, engaged in intentional dissemination of the footage of their punitive acts “in order to extend the sexual humiliation and punishment beyond the actual physical assault behind closed doors” (Kasra, 2017, p. 185). While such “unwanted”, “intense” and “enduring” (Trottier, 2017, p. 56) visibility is forced on the targets, publicity can be the desired opportunity for vigilantes, granting them social recognition as informal justice providers. However, participants too can experience negative consequences of their own visibility.

Moncada (2017) proposes five core definitional dimensions of vigilantism, namely, social organisation, targets, repertoire, justification, and motivation (pp. 407–408). Here it is important to consider biases that might subject certain categories of people to vulnerability to retaliation in specific contexts. These include ethnic/religious/sexual minorities, representatives of a certain socioeconomic class, women, migrants, etc. As digital media brought about “dramatic increases in harassment, abuse, and threats targeting women” (Jane, 2017, p. 186), the very biology as an identity marker can lead to vulnerability. When it comes to citizen response to perceived offences, questions of motivation, legality, and proportionality of retaliation arise. These questions are, of course, also applicable to the authorised state forces such as the police and the Federal Migration Service. Unlike conventional vigilantes, who, according to Johnston (1996), constitute *autonomous citizenship*, digital vigilantism participants assert “new boundaries” (Trottier, 2017, p. 59) in their relationship with authorised powers. Political, ideological, and other convictions of vigilantes can be shared by members of the state apparatus, and other functionaries holding legal power and authority. Some vigilante groups in Russia have even received presidential grants in support of their activities (Favarel-Garrigues, 2018; Gabdulhakov, 2018) in exchange for loyalty.

5.3.1. Vigilantism in the Absence of Police

When migrant communities find themselves in the situation where they are reluctant to turn to the formal police due to brittle immigration status in the host state, resorting to informal policing within their own group is a way of maintaining unity and order. In his study on undocumented Mozambican migrants in Johannesburg, Madsen illustrates how internal migrant-over-migrant “policing produces the moral community and not the other way around” (2004, p. 174). As interaction with the formal police forces can lead to “harassment and deportation”, migrants rely on each other in the phenomenon which Madsen describes as “neither policing in the traditional sense nor vigilante activity, but rather, a form of communally effected non-violent policing” (2004, p. 173). Migrants develop a dependency on each other for moral policing where “social exclusion is a highly effective form of sanctions as survival depends on inclusion” (Madsen, 2004, pp. 188–189). Contrary to the case of Mozambican migrants in Johannesburg, actions of the so-called Kyrgyz ‘patriots’ largely fit the definition of digital vigilantism. Acts of retaliation are filmed and distributed online while shaming “serves as a moral justification in order to facilitate information sharing and socially harmful visibility” (Trottier, 2018, p. 171). The subjective moral motivations of the ‘patriots’ lead to acts of community policing.

Vigilante acts can be centred around offences that imply the breaking of the law—“formal legal orders”, as well as offences based on the violation of subjective social norms—informal “not legally codified” orders “established and enforced by a range of non-state actors” (Moncada, 2017, p. 407). Applying this scheme to the case of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia stipulates that unlawful employment and violation of immigration regulations resemble the breaking of the formal orders in the host state. At

the same time, migrants whose immigration status is in accord with the law still violate the informal orders in the perception of certain groups and individuals who view the very fact that foreigners live in Russia as offensive. In addition to this, the case illustrates that informal orders can be further violated within the target group, creating layers of vulnerabilities that subject targets to retaliation.

5.3.2. Image as Power

In their 2015 study on media discourses surrounding the case of Kyrgyz ‘patriots’, Ibraeva et al. conclude that “male migrants find themselves in a situation of identity destabilisation” amid the “loss of the normative role for a traditional society model of masculinity” (2015, p. 24). Furthermore, the authors discover that respective discourses in the Russian and Kyrgyz media have “framed violence as patriotic, truly male and ethnic” and “became the backbone for new legitimation of violence” (Ibraeva et al., 2015, p. 25). These findings raise concerns over frames and discourses that surround such acts of crime. Traditional media reports not only justify violence but can also aid the offenders in amplifying the harm of undesired visibility by revealing the identity of targets in the reports. In cases where online content would otherwise not be available to some audiences, traditional media reports assist in disseminating the message.

In its turn, social media enables spectators to participate in digitally mediated retaliation. As a result, the audience is not just a passive observer; it plays an instrumental role in retaliation, intensifying and surpassing the impact of embodied assaults. Members of the audience can take sides and express their position on the issue through ‘likes’, ‘dislikes’, shares, and comments. Some vigilantes in Russia maintain an active and systematic approach to uploading videos on YouTube, with respective viewings counting in millions. Although select videos can get removed by platforms due to violent content, the nature of file storing and sharing on social media enables their continuous circulation. Besides, legal frameworks, approaches and capacities for removal of harmful content from platforms vary across contexts. While each wave of circulation of media material exposing the targets brings about new waves of harm, the longevity of online availability of these media implies the longevity of their damaging impacts on the targets.

In mediated retaliation, traditional media reports play a crucial role as their coverage of a given incident can boost online searches and *hype* a particular case. Furthermore, traditional media frame cases, participants, and targets in their reports. If the victims are unable to speak up (out of fear of further retaliation, shame, or other reasons), their voice is missing. As is argued by Jane (2017), in *gendered cyberhate* there is a “silencing effect” that leads to self-censorship of female targets (p. 191). Meanwhile, vigilantes who have an interest in instrumentalising their visibility enjoy the publicity. On top of this, participants’ (in)formal collaboration with the police further limits targets’ options for seeking legal help, as dysfunctionality of the legal system and structural advantages of vigilantes prevail.

5.4. Digital divides... and unites

Scholars theorising the notion of digital divides (among others: Miller & Norris, 2016; Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2017; van Dijk, 2017) suggest a three-level distinction. The first level concerns physical and material access to electricity, the internet, and devices; the second level focuses on the character of use of digital media, respective skills and savviness of the users; while the third level of digital divides looks into different types of capital and benefits of using digital media. Within their definition of the digital divide, Miller and Norris (2016, p. 2) suggest that:

[S]ocial inequalities and power relationships that exist online at any given moment or in any given space shape, and are shaped by, access to and uses of ICT. To the extent that men and women are socialized differently and unequally, offline gender roles, responsibilities, and opportunities influence online behaviour and any corresponding benefits.

As such, at the third level, people's background and various types of acquired capital influence how they "reinvest valuable information in the social realm" (Ragnedda & Ruiu, 2017, p. 25). Certain discourses and acts can create *a sense of unity* for specific audiences in an *us vs. them* representation of targets, i.e., men versus women, migrants versus locals, sexual minorities versus majorities, drivers versus pedestrians, merchants versus consumers, etc. These unifying sentiments are constructed over the condemnation of perceived norm breaching. The "imagined" online communities (Gruzd et al., 2011) inform and inspire offline discourses and acts. Among the many examples, this dynamic can be illustrated by a vigilante group based in Chechnya where participants find offence in how some Chechen women dress. Vigilantes take pictures of their targets and make use of the images that targets share on social media. They expose women to digital audiences, but also provide addresses of targets and call on offline actions, urging the relatives to take measures such as honour murder for the perceived misconduct (BBC, 2017b). On their public platforms, participants warn the audience that only men can leave comments and that non-Chechens will be banned from the discussion. Such categorisation creates a sense of unity among participants and the audience. Online perceptions of unity are intertwined with offline contestations of norms and negotiation of Us and Them.

The discrepancy in the acquired benefits of social media use is evident in vulnerabilities and immunities of different users. The third level digital divide can be applied to mediated capacities of actors involved. Users with a social media following in the millions obviously have a greater audience reach than those with just a few subscribers. Respective traditional media framing and official endorsement can turn vigilantes into informal public leaders. In this regard, such publicity and endorsement can grant vigilantes greater respect and support from the audience than the official

state police could enjoy. Furthermore, traditional media and public discourses over viral cases of digital vigilantism can further inform collective perceptions and reactions to these events and practices, and in doing so, further inform social frustrations, biases, divides, and vulnerabilities.

In contexts where citizen involvement in justice matters is encouraged by the highest authority (in the case of Russia, by President Putin), the police are by default invited to collaborate with vigilante citizens (Gabdulhakov, 2018, p. 325). In this regard, the police can initiate *formal collaboration* with vigilantes by calling for public involvement in investigations and in the enforcement of legal orders through citizen-led surveillance, snitching, and denunciation of fellow citizens (The Moscow Times, 2018a). Such practices, however, are not limited to formal orders and formal collaboration. The police and vigilantes can engage in *informal solidarity* and patron-client relations. Beyond this, police officers are also subjected to the power of visibility and can be respectively framed by vigilantes and/or by traditional media. As a Moscow-based leader of a vigilante group explained:

Sometimes I blackmail the police. For instance, I made a critical post on Facebook and exposed the investigator, and so on and so forth. At first, I received a phone call from the assistant of the Head of the press service and he asked me to remove the post. I said, "I will not remove anything, you deal with it yourself". To this, he said, "how can I help you?" I said, "put the paedophile in prison, and I will write positively about you...[i]f you take action, I will tell all media outlets how great you are". (Participant I)

This case exemplifies different media capacities of actors involved, which further complicates the relations between vigilantes, police officers, and targets.

5.5. Migrants in the bullseye of the host state

Central Asian republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are large suppliers of labour migrants for Russia. This section of the chapter addresses vigilante acts where labour migrants are targeted by 'concerned' citizens in Russia. Described to be "the most violent country in the former Soviet Union for ethnic and racial minorities" (Arnold, 2015, p. 243), Russia presents a challenging environment for migrants as their perceived offence is being foreign and non-Slavic. Vulnerable status induced by corruption, lawlessness, legal bureaucracy, legal illiteracy, language barriers, and fear of deportation, subjects Central Asians to abuse and retaliation performed both by the police (Alekseyeva, 2013; Kaliyev, 2018; Kislov & Zhanaev, 2017; Sindelar et al., 2013) and by Russian citizens (Kimmage, 2006; Parkin, 2018; SOVA Center for Information and

Analysis, 2014; Yudina & Alperovich, 2013, 2014). As one researcher from a Moscow-based NGO explained, “In the past, there was a negative perception of people from the North Caucasus republics, now the focus has shifted towards people from Central Asia... they are now perceived in sociological terms as ‘the other’” (NGO I).

5.5.1. Kyrgyz Labour Migrants in Russia: A Brief Profile

Out of Kyrgyzstan’s 6.2 million citizens (The World Bank, 2017), state migration service estimates 800 thousand people to be living abroad (Interfax, 2018). Precise information on the number of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia is not available. While Kyrgyz State Migration Service officials declare this number to be 640–650 thousand (Interfax, 2018), Russia’s Ministry of Internal Affairs is suggesting “more than 800,000” (Hasanova & Kapushenko, 2018). Beyond this, Kyrgyzstan is leading globally in the share of remittances in the gross domestic product (GDP), with “nearly 40%” of its GDP comprised of the money transferred by labour migrants (Hasanova & Kapushenko, 2018, para. 20). International Federation for Human Rights reports that women constituted 40% of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia in 2016 (2016, p. 4). In comparison, female migrants to Russia from other Central Asian republics, such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, represented less than 20% in each case (International Federation for Human Rights, 2016, p. 19). Based on the data available for 2014, estimated 60% of all Kyrgyz migrants did not possess proper documentation “to comply with current migration rules of countries of destination” (International Federation for Human Rights, 2016, p. 6). These data illustrate several important factors. Contrary to the case of other labour migrant-supplier states in the region, where men dominate the composition of this labour force, migrants from Kyrgyzstan are nearly equally balanced in the representation of men and women. While there is a domestic dependency on income from labour migration, lack of proper documentation during the stay in the host state creates a fertile ground for exploitation and abuse by the police, employers, human traffickers, vigilantes, fellow migrants, etc.

5.5.2. Migrant-Focused Vigilantes

Among Russia’s numerous citizen groups who have taken justice into own hands and retaliated on migrants and other minorities are the nationalists, football hooligans, pro-Kremlin youth groups, and neo-Nazi movements. Migrant-focused vigilante groups include *Occupy Viselay* [Occupy Evict], *Mestnie* [The Locals], *Russkie* [Russians], Movement Against Illegal Immigration, *Scheet Moskvi* [The Shield of Moscow], and numerous other formations that are in the constant flux of appearing and disappearing across the country. In most cases, social media is used by these groups to coordinate activities with members and to spotlight these activities to the broader audience. Such visibility subjects the targets to greater retaliation and “further dehumanizes and relentlessly shames” them, while the punitive show is also used “to intimidate anyone who may have been watching and violating social rules” (Kasra, 2017, p. 185). Photo and

video materials produced by such vigilantes not only harm the targeted individual, but serve as tools for mapping and targeting the larger ‘other’—the alien group that these individuals represent, i.e., migrants, Central Asians, Muslims, non-Slavs, homosexuals, and other ‘deviants’.

Having peaked in the mid-2000s, Russia’s racist and neo-Nazi violence is experiencing a decline. As such, in 2008 Moscow-based SOVA Center reported that across Russia, “no less than 525 people were the victims of racist and xenophobic violence, 97 of whom died” (Kozhevnikova, 2009, para. 10). In 2010, “42 people died and 401 were injured,” while “23 people died and 154 received injuries” in 2011 (Yudina et al., 2012, para. 11). Preliminary findings for 2018 report on 57 victims of “racist and other ideologically motivated violence” and “at least 4” deaths (Yudina, 2019, para. 6). The precise number of attacks on migrants is difficult to acquire as targets avoid the police, while the “attackers, who used to brag about their ‘achievements’ online, have grown more cautious in the wake of more active law enforcement pushback” observable in the last few years (Yudina, 2019, para. 7). Russia’s vigilantes, thus, are manoeuvring between the benefits and the threats of visibility. Traditional media portrayal of events and actors further informs the audience. Framed as invaders and dangerous outsiders (Tolz, 2017), migrants have fewer chances for the compassion of the host state public in Russia. The respective legitimising framing of vigilantism, on the other hand, can inspire and attract supporters.

5.5.3. Solidarity of Police and Vigilantes

Until recent state-sanctioned crackdowns on the far-right groups and movements in Russia (Lenta.ru, 2017, 2018a; Petkova, 2017; Yudina, 2018), the police largely neglected cases of vigilante attacks on migrants and other minorities. Beyond this, a collaboration between vigilantes and the police was not an unusual arrangement. This collaboration concerned not only the pro-Kremlin youth groups but extended to the nationalists who joined the so-called raids and “were also going side-by-side with the police and UFMS [Federal Migration Service]” (Rights defender I). While one of the interviewed law enforcement officers in Russia explained that rogue vigilantes more often get in the way of the police, rather than providing real assistance, collaboration, nevertheless, was viewed as a plausible option.

If they [vigilantes] want to help us, they should turn to us; we will find a job for them. Therefore, I, in fact, propose acting in accordance with the principle in which the Soviet *druzhinas* [volunteer militia] functioned. They did not determine the area of their own work and own actions, but the police did so. The police determined where it needed assistance. This is exactly the key difference between the currently present movements and their help...although it is hard to even refer to this as help. There were *druzhinas* that were really of help for the police or the militia of that time. There is a huge difference between the two. (Police I)

Other interviewed law enforcement officers shared the sentiment of collaboration and stated that when it comes to law enforcement, “the police alone cannot manage, the society should be involved” (Police II).

Among the many disturbing acts performed by vigilantes targeting ethnic minorities in Russia were the so-called “white wagon” flash mobs, where the nationalists attacked “non-Slavic” people on a “train or subway car” (SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, 2014, para. 1). Sometimes in groups as small as five people, other times in mobs of 40–50 people wearing “knitted and medical masks” ultra-right groups committed hate crimes in public transport across Russia and while doing so, enjoyed “relative impunity” (SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, 2014, para. 10). Moscow-based rights defender further explains this police patronage over vigilantes as follows:

The main idea here is to have some fun, to beat someone up, and to have some coordinated relation in collaboration with the police. Without this link to the police, this activity would not be possible. No neighbourhood officer needs this amateur activity at all. This is only tolerated because there is some order for patronage from above. This is done to prevent mass fights. If they [nationalist vigilantes] are already going to be there anyway, it is better to take them under the patronage and to take their side as these are authorised activities, in a rather broad sense. (Rights defender I)

An academic specialising in Russia explains this relationship as a *grey zone* where state forces find some benefit in collaboration with vigilantes. “The state is not interested in completely eradicating this grey zone as there is always space for negotiation here. I don’t think the state is very much interested in protecting gay rights or protecting migrant rights” (Academic I). Beyond media savviness, vigilante citizens are savvy about the methods they use in the context of Russia’s legal system. When someone is murdered, a legal investigation has to be launched by default, but when someone is beaten and humiliated, the victim must first appeal to the police. “When the nationalists switched their methods and went from murder to beating and humiliating, it became even harder to keep them accountable, as no one files any complaints” (Rights defender II). Naturally, within the state-vigilante tandem and amid an array of other nuances and barriers, the process of seeking justice after subjection to retaliation is challenged. “If a person turns to the police, especially in a small town, they essentially bury themselves” – a Moscow-based rights defender explained (Rights defender II). Furthermore, “turning to the police would cause recurrence of trauma, as victims would have to face their perpetrators again” (Rights defender III). Thus, even if the police were willing to take measures against vigilante forces, technically they would be lacking legal grounds to do so. A journalist from Kyrgyzstan who extensively researched and covered the life of Central Asian labour migrants in Russia explained the absence of legal appeals to the police as follows:

There are several reasons why the targets are silent. One of the reasons is that whenever there are illegal activities performed affecting the target, the target cannot necessarily turn to the police, because many migrants are undocumented or have an illegal registration. If such a person turns to the police for help, they would have to present an immigration card, but they cannot. They cannot present one, because their employers do not register them. There is a violation on top of a violation. (Journalist I)

Even if the victim decides to turn to the police “in many cases the perpetrators are not arrested—and when some of them are, they are quite unlikely to be prosecuted for what their actions really consist in, that is, hate crimes” (SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, 2014, para. 10). These arrangements leave labour migrants with scant options for seeking justice. Gender biases, patriarchal structures and traditional masculinity accompanied by social frustrations in the host state, subject female labour migrants to yet another stratum of violence.

5

5.6. Female migrants in the bullseye of the home state

Female labour migrants are not only subjected to nationalism-based violence of host state vigilantes but also fall target to fellow compatriots. Weaponising the methods similar to those used against them by host state vigilantes, self-proclaimed ‘patriots’ target women for being “morally loose ‘traitors’ of the nation” because they establish relations with “men of other ethnicities (most often Tajiks)” (Ibraeva et al., 2015, p. 4). While the target is humiliated and exposed, vigilantes prefer to remain anonymous. One of the obvious reasons for anonymity is “the opportunity to avoid punishment”, yet it apparently also serves a purpose of symbolising “a de-personified category of ‘defenders of the fatherland, patriots’” (Ibraeva et al., 2015, p. 7). Expert interviews reveal that the ‘patriots’ are not a single or necessarily unified formation. Groups appear to be acting spontaneously across Russia. Much like in the case with anti-migrant vigilantes, after experiencing retaliation, targets are limited in their options for seeking justice and face the same barriers and obstacles that prevent them from turning to the police, i.e., fear, lack of proper documentation, shame, the unreliability of the legal system, etc.

5.6.1. Challenges in Being Vocal

Journalists covering the case hold an important role in their interactions with the targets. Sometimes, during their interviews with the targets, the journalists persuaded them to be vocal and to turn to the police with the hope that publicity of the case would scare the perpetrators and, as a result, would prevent future attacks. A journalist who worked closely with victims of the ‘patriots’ recalls: “One girl had written an appeal. I asked her to write it. She wrote an appeal to the police, to the local police [in Kyrgyzstan].

They started the case. They identified these men. But nothing happened. No one was brought to justice” (Journalist III). Sometimes the journalists covering the case are the only party the victim can rely on for assistance:

I found her [target of the ‘patriots’] phone number and I called her, and I talked to her. Another girl, she came back to Kyrgyzstan and I found her with the help of the local police. They found her for me, as she was living with her parents. Her mother died and they [the police] helped me find her. I went there and interviewed her. She told me everything. We helped her. We took her to the crisis centre; we helped her out financially. (Journalist III)

At the same time, there are also concerns about the manner in which the journalists, the experts, and rights defenders respond to the issue. “What is interesting is that the experts and rights defenders, while having the desire to express their own stance on the matter, they share the videos. They, thus, contribute to the dissemination of these videos” (Journalist I). The stance on the issue of harms caused by traditional media reports is contested among the journalists themselves:

On the one hand, yes, you can view it as a perpetuation of retaliation. But, on the other hand, you also attract the attention of the society to a given issue. Many people were sharing [these videos] not because they support such acts, but because they were disturbed by them. (Journalist II)

Having failed to find justice, targets prefer to stay out of the media spotlight and are reluctant to continue cooperating with the journalists or other parties interested in the case. One of the interviewed journalists who had extensively written on the targets of the ‘patriots’ attempted to write a follow-up story on a prominent case a few years after the initial coverage, but the victim refused to participate. “She does not want us to write about her, because she has children and they might read this material” (Journalist III). Additional harm results when media coverage does not lead to the accountability of the perpetrators and instead intensifies the suffering of targets.

5.6.2. No Support on the Home Front

The society in the home state was polarised in its stance on the issue of digitally mediated honour beating of women by their male compatriots. One of the interviewed journalists provided the following account: “Many were against the methods [of the ‘patriots’], but some were in support. This may sound wild, but some people were supporting [the ‘patriots’] and saying, ‘yes, this is right, our girls should not be dating others’” (Journalist II). The appalling supportive moods are also evident in the survey conducted by the United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], according to which:

A fairly large proportion of respondents (38% of women and 45% of men) believe that women in migration, working away from home, begin to lead immoral life. On this basis, 51% of women and 55% of men support the activities of nationalist organisations, who “follow/or trace” the moral image of women from the Kyrgyz Republic, stripping, raping them and uploading their photos and “punishment” videos for bad behaviour. (2016, p. 155)

While condemning broader violence, state officials provide further legitimisation of the activities of the ‘patriots’ by scrutinising the victims. Kyrgyzstan’s Ministry of Internal Affairs representative in Moscow, for instance, made the following statement on Facebook after the punitive videos spread online:

The view of knives and stun guns should scare anybody who has seen these videos. But naturally, as a brother and future father, I cannot support the lifestyle that some of our young women lead, which provokes a strong reaction amongst Kyrgyz countrymen. (International Federation for Human Rights, 2016, p. 38)

The official also added that “when they [Kyrgyz women] come to Russia in search of work, they cannot resist all the challenges they encounter, and they become the playthings of Kyrgyz, Tajik, Uzbek and Caucasian men, who take advantage them” (Lelik, 2016). These perceptions, moods and discourses constitute social realities where female targets of digitally mediated abuse are further blamed offline.

Beyond this, back in the home state, nationalist movements engaging in moral policing with the focus on women, sexual minorities, and foreigners are also prevalent. An example of such forces is the so-called *Kyrk Choro* [Forty Knights] movement claiming membership of 5,000 across Kyrgyzstan (Lelik, 2015). *Kyrk Choro* carried out several nightclub raids in the country’s capital of Bishkek where they have “lined up local women before a video camera” accusing them of prostitution (Lelik, 2015). Just like the Kyrgyz ‘patriots’ in Russia, *Kyrk Choro* members are concerned about Kyrgyz women dating foreigners and express anti-Chinese and anti-Uyghur sentiments (Chynybaeva & Najibullah, 2015). These cases illustrate contested morality and nationalism in the host state of Kyrgyz migrants and raise important questions about the perceived role and position of women amid these contestations.

5.7. Conclusion

Digital media is a source important affordances in the lives of migrants, providing the ability to connect with friends and family, store and access important documents, connect with people in the host state, and numerous other possibilities. Yet, it is evident that offline inequalities, biases, and divides transmit into the digital sphere. Groups

and individuals vulnerable offline are also vulnerable to online threats such as digital vigilantism, where visibility is exploited as a magnifier of embodied harms. Through the selected case study of Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia, this chapter illustrated how digital divides affect vulnerabilities across and within groups. Namely, the study presented a scenario where offline biases penetrate online and consequently re-inform the offline sphere. The study, in particular, demonstrated how within such a structure, women are subjected to multivector scrutiny, while their ability to be vocal and seek justice is jeopardised. Having crossed the Russian border, a female labour migrant from Kyrgyzstan is subjected to police abuse, retaliation by host state nationalist groups, and retaliation performed by male compatriots in migration. Falling victim to citizen-led retaliation in the host state, labour migrants are reluctant to turn to the police, as the police itself is an abusive force which engages in patronage over vigilantes. As such, turning to the police can lead to abuse and deportation, while the chances of bringing perpetrators to justice are minimal. Moreover, female labour migrants experience additional barriers to seeking justice in the home state due to social norms and biases that culminate in online and offline victim-blaming and shaming. Upon returning home, they are confronted by their relatives, domestic nationalist groups, and the greater community in their neighbourhood, village/town, and beyond. Digitally mediated retaliation, in turn, brings about globality and permanence of exposure.

Further cross-national empirical research is necessary for a nuanced assessment of the digital divides and vulnerabilities in the context of social change, benefit and harm that digital media can produce. Specific contexts can include variable political environments as well as divergent social dynamics, positions, and norms. Studies could look beyond South-North migration and address cases in South-South and North-South migratory scenarios.

Interviewees

- Academic I. Professor specialising in Runet (Russian internet). Skype interview in Moscow, Russia. April 2018.
- Journalist I. Extensively covered Central Asian labour migrants in Russia. Interviewed in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. July 2018.
- Journalist II. Extensively covered the case of Kyrgyz 'patriots'. Interviewed in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. July 2018.
- Journalist III. Has access to the targets of the Kyrgyz 'patriots' and extensively covered the case. Interviewed in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. July 2018.
- NGO I. Public opinion researcher in Russia. Interviewed in Moscow, Russia. May 2018.
- Rights defender I. Specialising in cases of xenophobia. Interviewed in Moscow, Russia. May 2018.
- Rights defender II. Specialising in legal aid for the victims of police abuse and vigilantes. Interviewed in Moscow, Russia. May 2018.
- Rights defender III. Specialising in legal aid for the victims of police abuse and vigilantes. Interviewed in Moscow, Russia. May 2018.
- Participant I. Paedophile buster. Interviewed in Moscow, Russia. May 2018.
- Police I. Lieutenant colonel. Skype interview in Moscow, Russia. May 2018.
- Police II. Moscow, Russia. Skype interview in Moscow, Russia. May 2018.





(Con)Trolling the web: Internet governance in Russia³¹

31 This chapter is an adaptation of the following article: Gabdulhakov, R. (2020). (Con)trolling the web: Social media user arrests, state-supported vigilantism and citizen counter-forces in Russia. *Global Crime*, 21(3-4), 283-305. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2020.1719836>

Summary

This Chapter applies Haggerty and Ericson's *surveillant assemblage* concept to the wave of social media user arrests that have been taking place in Russia in the second half of the 2010s. In doing so, it addresses the legislative frameworks applied to online self-expression; depicts the nuances of legal charges facing select social media users; assesses the role of formal law enforcement and vigilant citizens recruited to extend the state's watchful gaze; and elaborates on citizen counter-forces resisting the tightening state control over the digital domain. The Chapter argues that Russia's internet users appear to be *trolled* by the ruling elite through the use of obscure legal frameworks and the stampede of actors and practices where select individuals face legal charges for their activities on social media, while other users face no consequences for the same engagements. Such unpredictability stimulates self-censorship, making the system effective by virtue of its dysfunctionality. Methodologically, the study relies on desk research and field interviews.

“For my friends, everything; for my enemies, the law.”
 – Óscar Raymundo Benavides Larrea³²

6.1. Introduction

In November 2016, a regional coordinator of Open Russia Foundation³³ in Chuvashia, Dmitry Semenov, faced administrative charges for posts on his VKontakte page (Russia’s prototype of Facebook). The posts exposed Russia’s parliament member wearing a shirt with a sign “Orthodoxy or death” and were qualified by law enforcement as “production and distribution of extremist materials” (Meduza, 2017). While the police did not go after the politician who was the source of such “materials”, Semenov faced charges and was fined.³⁴ This is one of hundreds of similarly preposterous cases that took place across Russia following waves of amendments to the criminal code. The 2014, amendments incorporated online speech into offences governed by anti-extremism laws. Subsequently, the 2016 Yarovaya law package intensified punishment for such offences (Ozerova, 2018), and 2019 “anti-fake news” legislation made it illegal for citizens to express disrespect of those with political power. As the definitions of “extremism” (Kravchenko, 2018, p. 1) and “disrespect” remain open to interpretation, a mere ‘like’ on social media can lead to criminal charges, sentences and fines, making all internet users in Russia potentially vulnerable to legal repercussions. Indeed, there has been a steady increase in extremism charges in Russia, with most of the cases concerning online speech (Romashenko, 2018).

What is the logic behind social media user arrests in Russia? What specific online activities can lead to litigation? To answer these questions, the study identifies legal frameworks and investigates formal and informal forces serving the state’s web control, as well as the citizen counter-forces opposing these control measures. Among state actors are Centre E–Russia’s extremism-countering police involved in heavy monitoring of the digital domain (Meduza, 2019). In 2011, the state has established the Safe Internet League and recruited citizen Cyberguards to monitor, identify and report on dangerous online content. Other pro-state vigilante formations include *Je Suis Maidan* [I am Maidan]³⁵ and *SILOVIKI* [Security officers]³⁶ who engage in what Loveluck (2019) classifies as “hounding” by exposing protestors, opposition leaders and activists and calling on the followers to retaliate on these targets.

32 Quoted by “Lawyer I” during interview.

33 Advocating for democracy and human rights in Russia, founded by former businessman and democracy activist Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

34 Semenov was fined again in 2017 for a social media post about the outcome of this court case (see RFE/RL’s Russian service, 2017a.).

35 [I am Maidan] – evidently inspired by merging Je Suis Charlie solidarity movement and Ukraine’s Euromaidan demonstrations.

36 Little is known about this formation’s relationship with official state security forces. On several occasions SILOVIKI were cited in Russia’s traditional media (see, for instance, RT, 2019).

Counter-forces to the state include the civil analytics project Database, which specialises in exposing snitches (Kustikova, 2017) and “those responsible for human rights violations and corruption in Russia” (Beware of Them, n.d.); the Internet Protection Society, opposing censorship, excessive regulation, and administrative arbitrariness in internet governance (Internet Protection Society, n.d.); and Roskomsvoboda, a public organisation “countering Internet censorship and promoting the ideas of freedom of information and self-regulation of the Internet industry” (Roskomsvoboda, n.d.). While the analysis of select user arrests seeks to identify themes in ‘offences’ that cost users their freedom, mapping the actors and forces allows for an informed analysis of their capacities, interrelations, and the clashing interests in regulation of online self-expression.

The chapter relies on Haggerty and Ericson’s concept of *surveillant assemblage*—a compendium of surveillance practices where extra state institutions, machines, flows, and other components come together in *rhizomatic* practices that level surveillance hierarchies (2000). The concept is applied to the case of Russia where the ruling elite’s quest for securing control over online self-expression has led to the adaptation of strategic regulatory and punitive practices targeting users. A variety of methods and actors are instrumentalised by the state in this endeavour, leading to a rhizomatic multitude of motivations and approaches on the one hand and realisation of the central plan of the ruling elites on the other.

The current literature on surveillance addresses an array of issues related to Internet governance (Mueller, 2010), platforms (see, for instance, Surveillance & Society, 2019), authoritarian states (see, for instance, Surveillance & Society, 2017), and surveillance in post-communist societies (see, for instance, Surveillance & Society, 2018). However, the case of Russia requires further scholarly attention as the country represents a peculiar case of selectivity in the application of restrictive legislation. At the same time, strategic legislation adapted by the Kremlin faces challenges in implementation when actors struggle to serve-up to the state amid the vagueness of legal definitions. As a result, Russia’s digital domain and social media users appear to be trolled³⁷ by the ruling elite through the use of obscure legal frameworks and the stampede of actors and practices where select individuals face legal charges for their activities on social media, while other users face no consequences for the same engagements.

The author first elaborates on the methods and proceeds to introduce theoretical frameworks operationalised to address the Kremlin’s attempts to discipline social media users. After unpacking Russia’s *surveillant assemblage* and discussing its past-oriented governance measures, the author proposes and addresses three pillars for understanding current practices of online self-expression control in the country: (1)

37 To Troll – “to harass, criticize, or antagonize (someone) especially by provocatively disparaging or mocking public statements, postings, or acts” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/troll>.

legal frameworks; (2) targeted individuals/online speech; and (3) state-loyal vigilantes/citizen counter-forces. The discussion of key findings is followed by a conclusion.

6.2. Methodology

This chapter utilises desk research and field interviews. Desk research focused on the review of legislation and analysis of 990 criminal cases instigated against social media users in Russia. Semi-structured in-depth interviews (10) were conducted with a diverse set of informants, including lawyers working on internet-related cases (2), rights defenders (3), academics working on issues of internet freedom and online activism in Russia (3), a representative of an NGO working on public opinion analysis (1), and a law enforcement representative (1). Interviewees were selected based on their expertise in the domain of Russia's internet governance and were recruited with the aim of representing various clusters of actors. The informants were asked questions concerning online activism, vigilantism, and internet governance in the country. Interviews were conducted in 2018 and 2019 in-person and via online messengers. The author transcribed and translated content from Russian into English.

To protect privacy and safety of the informants, their names will not be disclosed in this chapter. Instead, a reference to the general position of informants will be made, i.e., academic, lawyer, rights defender, police officer, etc. Such anonymisation has no impact on the data and its quality. Legal cases addressed in the scope of this work are public and thus will not be anonymised. Interview materials are used throughout the text of the chapter in the form of short and extended quotations, providing expert and insider views and knowledge on given cases, notions, or practices.

6.3. Theoretical Background

Surveillance studies gained momentum in the second half of the twentieth century due to an increase in the "number and type of surveillance technologies" (Galič, Timan, & Koops, 2017, p. 10). Building on Jeremy Bentham's panoptical architectural design, Michel Foucault proposed the idea of a "discipline society" in which an individual is not only watched but is "carefully fabricated" (Foucault, 1995, p. 217). Taking the analogy of prisoners and the all-seeing yet discrete guard, Foucault views power structures and hierarchies in society beyond the prison cell in "the relations of discipline" (Foucault, 1995, p. 208). For several decades, Foucault's panopticism dominated scholarship as the canonical foundation for conceptualising surveillance practices (for a chronological overview of surveillance theories see Galič, Timan, & Koops, 2017). Yet, with technological advances, surveillance capacities and approaches have transformed vastly since the 1970s leading to the search for new theories and analogies.

Proposing not to overreach in applying panopticism to contemporary post-disciplinary-confinement surveillance practices, Haggerty and Ericson build upon Deleuze and Guattari's ideas of "a convergence of what were once discrete surveillance systems" in the societal shift from discipline to control (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). Instead, the concept of the surveillant assemblage is proposed (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000, p. 606). The authors describe the assemblage as a sphere where there is a "desire to bring systems together" (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000, p. 610), meaning that all separate clusters, institutions, mechanisms, machines, and so on are coming together in an all-seeing and all-tracing entity. Thus, being composed of various mechanisms, the modus operandi of the assemblage is no longer solely state-centric since it tends to incorporate "extra-state institutions" (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000, p. 610). As such, Haggerty and Ericson argue that surveillance is no longer carried out in a purely Orwellian top-down approach. Instead, rhizomatic practices allow for bottom-up scrutiny of the powerful by the wider masses and institutions through the levelling of surveillance hierarchies, thus bringing new groups which were "previously exempt from surveillance" under the watchful gaze (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000, p. 606). Escaping the gaze of the assemblage is a nearly impossible task, because the conglomerate of mechanisms, measures, and practices of control breeds the phenomenon of "disappearance of disappearance" (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000, p. 609), as social institutions are increasingly armed with far-reaching surveillance apparatuses.

In his "Postscript on the Societies of Control", Deleuze proposes to replace the concept of "individual" that was relevant to the Foucauldian *discipline society* with the concept of "dividual" (Deleuze, 1992, p. 5) as surveillance is no longer body-centric. Haggerty and Ericson further develop the idea that not only has surveillance moved beyond state institutions and towards a multi-actor assemblage, but it has also moved beyond the physical body and towards "a decorporealized body, a 'data double' of pure virtuality" (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000, p. 611). (In)dividuals, leave a constant digital trace by virtue of continuous scanning and storing of interactions, purchases, movements, expressions, habits, searches, etc.

While such turns in surveillance affordances certainly affect all social strata, *online vulnerabilities* can be directly linked to the offline precarity of persons in question (Gabdulhakov, 2019b). For instance, building his arguments on the example of intensified welfare monitoring in Canada, Hier (2003) demonstrates how by means of the surveillant assemblage social institutions intrude into the lives of already disadvantaged people with prejudicial evaluations and populist underpinnings. In the words of Eubanks (2018), inequality is "automated" in the system that puts "the poor" and disadvantaged people into further conditions of fragility.

Over the years, the scholarly thought surrounding surveillance has moved beyond Foucauldian panopticism. Instead, it proposes the idea of an assemblage where amid the near-impossibility of avoiding 'the gaze' due to the rhizomatic nature of its [the assemblage's] components, anyone can watch anyone. Here, of course, it is important

to consider various capacities of the actors involved. Beyond the departure from institutions and top-down surveillance, there is a departure from viewing the physical body as a sole subject amid digital traces that make up the digital twins of (in)dividuals. As per Haggerty and Ericson, “sub-assemblages” are groups, systems, and counter-forces that are “themselves multiple,” consisting of “different discrete assemblages” each with their own agenda, ambitions, and approaches (2000, p. 608).

6.4. Unpacking Russia’s surveillant assemblage: Towards the ‘digital iron curtain’?

Having secured control over traditional media (Becker, 2004), Russia’s ruling regime entered a battle with content shared on social media “to consolidate an information dominance over citizens” (Oates, 2016, p. 399). The online sphere poses several perceived threats for regime stability in Moscow, including counter-narratives to official propaganda (Oates, 2016, p. 399), dissent, activist resistance practices (Lokot, 2018), and coordination of potential revolutionary forces (White & McAllister, 2013). At the same time, digital media is not solely a challenge but an opportunity for the ruling elite. As is argued by Oates, it provides a set of “particular advantages to a repressive regime that can proactively shape the media narrative” (Oates, 2016, p. 399). Beyond direct control over broadcasters through ownership and indirect control over domestic social media secured through the loyalty of platform owners, Russia’s political elite does not tolerate competition when it comes to strategic discourse. As Oates puts it, “it is not so much about who owns or controls the media, it is more about who is constructing and disseminating the most compelling national narrative” (2016, p. 399). While traditional media adapts its pitching tactics amid the new challenges imposed by the online sphere, the regime finds itself in need of taking further actions to protect its monopoly on digitally-dispersed information.

Current actions and practices of control applied to the digital domain resemble an echo from Russia’s Soviet past. The concept of *post-communism* implies the state of “in-betweenness” where past legacies and “poor institutional performance and leadership” are preventing positive transformation in certain political contexts (Svenonius & Björklund, 2018, p. 273). During the period of transition which in itself does not bond to any specific time frame, the regime, while certainly adapting to new realities with new strategies, may, nevertheless, turn to familiar past practices such as censorship, showcase arrests, adaptation of punitive legislation, and recruitment of vigilante citizens.

Selective social media user arrests are a by-product of Russia’s surveillant assemblage, which is programmed to secure state-approved narratives at any cost and aided by strategic legislation. While appearing to be inspired by *The Great Firewall of China*, Russia’s approaches and capacities are different. As a Moscow-based rights defender explained:

Russia does not have the required resources to build a firewall, nor does it set such a task for itself. Russia's regulatory framework grounds itself on the idea of a broad definition of restrictions with their selective consequent application... It is quite obvious, as a thousand people can make the same post and only one will suffer the consequences. (Rights Defender III, Moscow, 2018)

Therefore, Russia's throwback to authoritarianism is accompanied by opaque conditions for understanding what is allowed and what is not in online self-expression. This lack of clarity influences the assemblage by making its function subjective and flexible in the hands of multiple sub-assemblages.

The term *Digital Iron Curtain* that appears in the title of this subsection is intended to illustrate this past-oriented motion in the Kremlin's aim to control the internet. It refers to the Soviet *Iron Curtain*, which worked to isolate the Soviet people from contact with the 'evil West'. In Russia, the internet is framed by the regime as a "CIA tool" (Goncharenko, 2018)—something that threatens national security and endangers users. Furthermore, the Kremlin is taking steps towards potential isolation of Russia's internet users from the World Wide Web by making the country's internet "sovereign" (Lindenau, 2019). The state justifies these measures as an intent to make the internet more stable and immune to external attacks, while rights defenders and activists are concerned that "sovereign internet" law would give the state more control and further jeopardise internet freedom (RFE/RL's Russian Service, 2019).

6.5. Legal frameworks applied to social media

The web of forces comprising Russia's surveillant assemblage certainly includes legislative frameworks targeting social media users. In the majority of cases, criminal code articles dealing with terrorism, extremism and xenophobia are applied to social media activity. "Nearly every day in 2017 and first half of 2018" criminal charges were being pressed against users over 'likes', posts, and other social media engagements (Gazeta.ru, 2018). In 2017, 460 social media users were charged under Article 282 Part 1 (Memorial, 2018a):

Actions aimed at the incitement of hatred or enmity, as well as abasement of dignity of a person or a group of persons on the basis of sex, race, nationality, language, origin, attitude to religion, as well as affiliation to any social group, if these acts have been committed in public or with the use of mass media. (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation)

Other users faced charges under Article 280 "public appeals for the performance of extremist activity" and Article 205 "act of terrorism" (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation).

User arrests based on Article 148 of the Criminal Code “incitement of hatred and insult to the religious feelings of believers” take root in the ‘offence’ committed by a protest punk rock band, Pussy Riot. In 2012, three band members performed a “punk prayer” in which they “danced around and shouted their song, ‘Virgin Mary, Get Putin Out’” (Denber, 2012). In their act, Pussy Riot simultaneously encroached on two untouchables in Russia– the Russian Orthodox Church and the president. Criminal code Article 213–hooliganism– was applied and all three members were sentenced to two years in a penal colony.³⁸ This incident was followed by amendments to Article 148 of the criminal code of the Russian Federation in 2013 “in the aim of protecting religious convictions and feelings” (The Kremlin, 2013).

In addition to Article 148, amendments were introduced to other criminal code articles, including the above-mentioned Article 282 and Article 205 that concerns terrorism and public security, defining the former as:

...the perpetration of an explosion, arson, or any other action endangering the lives of people, causing sizeable property damage, or entailing other socially dangerous consequences, if these actions have been committed for the purpose of violating public security, frightening the population, or exerting influence on decision-making by governmental bodies, and also the threat of committing said actions for the same ends. (Criminal Code of the Russian Federation)

When applied to the social media sphere, charges under Article 205 can be pressed for the “reposting of blogs or other online messages” (Roudik, 2018), creating uncertainty and confusion as ‘likes’ and shares on social media can be interpreted as an endorsement of terrorism.

A Moscow-based lawyer working on social media-related cases described these amendments as “reactionary”, stating that “any new event leads to the development of new articles and amendments to the criminal code” (Interview, Lawyer II, Moscow). The lawyer further explained that after the amendments that expanded its scope and made it applicable to online activity, Article 205 has been increasingly applied to social media cases. “First, 282, and now a trendy one is Article 205–terrorism. Terrorism implies long sentences. Terrorism is a trendy article” (Interview, Lawyer II, Moscow). While the scope of Criminal Code articles widens and punishment for offences gets harsher, the “officials” can “interpret a wide range of government opposition as ‘extreme’” (Smyth & Oates, 2015, p. 291). Even civil servants are interpreted as a “separate social group” (Memorial, 2018b), and criticisms of this group on social media can cost users their freedom.

In March 2019, Putin signed the law on “fake news” and “disrespect” of the

³⁸ Released under state amnesty in 2013, three months before the end of the sentence term.

government, making it a crime to “insult” the authorities (The Moscow Times, 2019b). A month later, the law was used against an internet user (Chudovsky District Court, 2019) over a social media post referring to Russia’s president in an obscene manner. Focus on the nature of offences in social media user arrests will further illuminate the themes that get users into trouble in Russia.

6.6. Targeted individuals and online speech

There is an intricate approach to reporting on litigation against social media users. On the one hand, media reports are an important tool in showcasing the type of activities that are not welcomed by the regime, thus disciplining users by letting them know about the consequences of certain online engagements. On the other hand, an abundance of reports may portray the regime as overly repressive. Not all cases of social media user arrests are reported on in the media or otherwise made public. Internet Protection Society (OZI) NGO maintains a database of cases concerning online speech across the country. OZI compiled a map of criminal and administrative charges, starting with 2015.³⁹ As of October 21, 2019, the database contained 990 cases coming predominantly from the archives of a Moscow-based NGO, SOVA. While OZI’s map desegregates cases by region of the Russian Federation, date, and platform,⁴⁰ it does not provide a thematic categorisation. The author seeks to expand the understanding of the types of targeted speech and individuals through his own analysis of the categories of charges. This classification should be regarded as a flexible structure, subject to expansion upon newly emerging cases.

Among the recurring themes in online speech that cost users their freedom, this study identifies xenophobia (including Nazism and anti-Semitism); calls for unsanctioned protests; faith and lack thereof; challenging state authority (ruling elite, police, judges); and the Russia-Ukraine conflict. This section of the chapter will provide several snapshots from the pool of cases to illustrate the above classification.

6.6.1. Xenophobia

Most cases of litigation against social media users concern xenophobia. The details of posts and activities that lead to charges, arrests and fines are not always provided by the police or mass media. As per pressed charges, this category of offences includes anti-Semitism, fascism, nationalism, Nazism, racism, ultra-right views, etc. Some cases concerned xenophobia targeting people from Central Asia and the Caucasus; other cases implied targeting ethnic Russians.

39 See <https://ozi-ru.org/proekty/internet-repressii/karta/>

40 Most of the charges concern VKontakte social network; however, cases also include activity on a wide variety of other platforms.

Following a period of tolerance towards neo-Nazi and far-right formations, Russia's domestic security apparatus cracked down on both in the last few years (Petkova, 2017). Amid the cultural and political significance of Soviet victory in World War II, the display of any Nazi attributes is considered to be an extremist act. As such, the situation with social media posts of Nazi symbols at times reaches absurd levels as users have faced the law over posts in which they condemn fascism (Torocheshnikova, 2018). Moreover, posts about Soviet victory in World War II displaying the surrender of Nazi soldiers in 1945 have also attracted the attention of the state (Lenta.ru, 2018b). Due to the vague definition of extreme speech, practically anyone can be arrested for virtually anything in Russia. A photo from a museum, or historical textbook, a research-related survey (Meduza, 2018b), or a screenshot from a movie or TV programme can get a person arrested or fined, while the source of the content would suffer no consequences (Meduza, 2017).

6.6.2. Calls for Unsanctioned Protests

Several cases of litigation over online activity involved calls for unsanctioned protests. Here, the assemblage reacts to the expected targets such as the opposition leaders and activists (Znak.com, 2017), as well as random internet users. One of such examples concerns a student in St. Petersburg, Oksana Borisova, who shared a post about an unsanctioned protest to be taking place in another city, Mineralnye Vody, on her VKontakte page. The next morning police came to her university to arrest her. Up to six officers were flown in from another region to capture Borisova, who was found guilty and served one day of administrative arrest (Novaya Gazeta, 2015).

6.6.3. Faith and Lack Thereof

Another recurring theme for charges pressed against social media users is centred around faith and atheism. Convicts are usually charged on the basis of a combination of several criminal code articles. Article 148 "Incitement of hatred and insult to the religious feelings of believers"; Article 282 "Incitement of hatred or enmity, as well as abasement of human dignity;" and later, Article 138 "Violation of the secrecy of correspondence, telephone conversations, postal, telegraphic and other messages" were used to press criminal charges and convict a 22-year-old blogger Ruslan Sokolovsky to 3.5 years of suspended sentence⁴¹ for playing Pokémon Go inside of a church (RFE/RL's Russian Service, 2017b). Evidence was produced by Sokolovsky himself as he posted his prank video on YouTube, catching Pokémon inside of the Russian Orthodox Church of All Saints in Yekaterinburg (Human Rights Watch, 2017). Commenting on the case, Sokolovsky's lawyer stated that such a harsh response is intended to "frighten and intimidate bloggers and other internet users in Russia and to prevent them from speaking freely online"

41 Reduced to 2.3 years of a suspended sentence upon appeal.

(Human Rights Watch, 2017). Sokolovsky's name currently appears among extremists and terrorists listed on the website of the Federal Financial Monitoring Service of the Russian Federation (n.d.).

In another case of incitement of hatred and insult to the religious feelings of believers, atheist Viktor Krasnov faced charges for denying God's existence on VKontakte social network (Agora, 2018a). Charges against Krasnov were eventually dropped, but his lawyer believes that those who initiated the case "were used by law enforcement to 'complete a plan' to produce a certain number of convictions" (The Moscow Times, 2017b). This practice of "plan fulfilment" implies that law enforcement authorities are assigned a quota for a certain number of cases on different offences, and "they have to find lawbreakers, even if the latter do not exist" (Interview, NGO employee, Moscow, 2018).

In the Siberian city of Barnaul, 23-year-old Maria Motuznaya faced charges for extremism and incitement of hatred and insult to the religious feelings of believers under Articles 282 and 148 of the criminal code of the Russian Federation (Agora, 2018b). Combined charges could have cost Motuznaya up to 6 years of freedom for the memes she posted in a private album on her VKontakte page (The Moscow Times, 2018b). Motuznaya appeared among extremists and terrorists listed on the website of the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (n.d.) and decided to leave Russia in 2018. The case against her was dropped in 2019.

Other cases varied thematically and included posts allegedly targeting Christians, Muslims, non-Christians, non-Muslims, etc. Given that Jehovah's Witnesses are deemed extremist in Russia since 2017 (The Moscow Times, 2019c), several charges targeted related content.

6.6.4. Challenging State Authority

Even before the law on "fake news" and "disrespect of authority", posts about civil servants, including the president, could lead to arrests. In 2018, Vladimir Egorov of Tver was convicted to "a two-year suspended sentence and three years of probation" (Meduza, 2018c) for a post on VKontakte where he referred to President Putin as "the main rat in the Kremlin" (Maetnaya, 2017). Egorov currently appears among extremists and terrorists listed on the website of the Federal Financial Monitoring Service (n.d.).

In March 2018, 10 people faced charges of extremism under Article 282 for establishing an "extremist" organisation called *Novoe Velichie* [The New Greatness] using social media (Memorial, 2018c). Two of the arrested are teenagers. The case received wide media coverage and resulted in numerous protests known as the Mothers' March (Gershkovich, 2018; Meduza, 2018d). The case of *Novoe Velichie* is surrounded by controversy and is believed to be an entrapment organised by law enforcement– "...they [police] developed all official documentation themselves and they rented an office for this organisation and they themselves turned this organisation in!" (Interview, Lawyer II, Moscow).

6.6.5. Russia-Ukraine Conflict

Russia-Ukraine conflict and the annexation of Crimea were recurring themes in internet-related charges and arrests. In 2015, VKontakte user Andrey Bubeyev faced charges under Article 282 for sharing a video which referred to Russia as a “fascist aggressor” (The Moscow Times, 2017c) in the context of the conflict in Ukraine. Convicted to 10 months and while in custody, Bubeyev faced new charges under Article 280 Part 1 for a different post on VKontakte, stating that “Crimea is Ukraine” (The Moscow Times, 2017c), which was interpreted as a threat to Russia’s territorial integrity (Agora, 2016). Bubeyev currently appears among extremists and terrorists listed on the website of the Federal Financial Monitoring Service of the Russian Federation (n.d.). Among several internet users who faced litigation over shared music is Roman Grishin of Kaluga, charged under Article 282 Part 1. On his VKontakte page Grishin shared a video clip to a song by Boris Sevastyanov “New hit from Kharkiv: This, baby, is Rushism”, which questions and criticises Russia’s presence in Ukraine (SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, 2017a).

What can be concluded about targeted individuals and online speech is the fact that cases can be categorised as genuine, tactical, practical and random. Genuine cases include litigation for actual cases of hate speech, although the proportionality of punishment is highly questionable. Tactical cases imply targeting people who are already ‘on the radar’, such as activists, opposition members and state critics. Practical cases concern instances where police officers prosecute people to fill in offence quotas with the aim of advancing own careers. Random cases are a side effect of the system in which definitions are vague and the application of the law is selective and subjective.

There is also a certain geographical context in the nature of police reactions to online activity. As an academic in St. Petersburg explained:

The application of anti-terrorism legislation is geographically subjective. What is possible in Moscow and St. Petersburg can cost users their freedom in, say, Tumen. It is not just about the laws, it is about the implementation practices. (Interview, Academic I, St. Petersburg, 2018)

A representative of a public opinion NGO in Moscow confirms this idea of differentiation between Russia’s two major cities and the rest of the country, and emphasises the lack of clarity in the interpretation and implementation of legislation:

People who get in trouble for their posts are selected based on their activism. Sometimes there are random arrests, of course. Many cases come from Russia’s regions and not from Moscow. Perhaps, people in Moscow are more cautious or more informed. In general, what is allowed and what is not allowed is not clear. It really is a gamble. (Interview, public opinion NGO, Moscow, 2018)

In general, litigation concerned thematically disparate topics and could target users simultaneously for homophobia (SOVA Center for Information and Analysis, 2017b) and gay propaganda (Mediazona, 2018) or hate towards women (SOVA, 2018) and radical feminism. Although partial decriminalisation of Article 282 at the dawn of 2018⁴² led to the suspension of several cases, the system is functioning in such a way that potentially any social media activity can lead to charges and sentences, if necessary.

6.7. Sub-assemblages: Authorised law enforcement and pro-state vigilantes

To proceed further in the pursuit of unpacking approaches to social media control, it is important to address forces and sub-groups in the overall assemblage. One such sub-assemblage is the Chief Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation for Combating Extremism, also known as Centre E. Established in 2008, Centre E constitutes an independent unit within the police force, and its mandate includes “development and implementation of state policy and legal regulation, as well as enforcement powers in the field of countering extremist activities and terrorism” (The Ministry of Internal Affairs, n.d.). Centre E is the main law enforcement body responsible for monitoring and reacting to extremism expressed online. In an interview to Meduza—a Latvia based online newspaper and aggregator of manually selected news, texts and podcasts in Russian and English languages—the Centre’s former agent explained that while some of the units “fight the true evil of our time” (Meduza, 2019). In principle, people are charged with extremism through two approaches: the first involves high profile “public figures who get charged after the government machine decides to ‘take them out’”, while the second is a product of the so-called “stick system”—police quotas for the number of crimes reported in a given area (Meduza, 2019). These revelations are illustrative of both the power in the hands of the ruling elite and its sub-assemblages as well as the danger of the system where police are assigned a quota.

In terms of collaboration between vigilant citizens and police, there is an intriguing link. As Daucé, Loveluck, Ostromooukhova, and Zaytseva explain it, there is a competition-driven tension in “the coexistence of several online citizen surveillance models”, including “expert investigators” (internet companies and security specialists) and “political cyber patrols” (state-loyal vigilantes) (Daucé et al., 2020, p. 67). At the same time, the evolving legislation is establishing a stage for “mutual vigilance between law-enforcement agencies and online surveillance volunteers” (Daucé et al., 2020, p. 67).

Areas of the intersection of sub-assemblages are not necessarily perceived as highly

42 The first offence would lead to a fine of 10 to 20 thousand rubles, or 100 hours of mandatory social service, or arrest for up to 15 days. For a repeated offence committed within a year, the law implies punishment of 2 to 5 years in prison (State Duma, 2018).

productive by either party. As one law enforcement officer put it, “at the end of the day, they [vigilantes] still turn to the state, but instead of helping the state they just get in the way” (Online interview, Law Enforcement, 2018). When asked about potential ties and resemblances between Soviet-era citizen involvement in matters of justice and contemporary vigilantes, the police officer expressed nostalgia for the Soviet times when police had greater control over citizen volunteer groups (Online interview, Law Enforcement, 2018). These insights led to questions concerning unity in the vision of different sub-assemblages. Is there a unifying vector or is the system a compendium of broad visions, interests and motivations that are handy for the regime as long as the regime itself is not targeted? As an academic in St. Petersburg put it:

You see, in order for the institutions to function, people who are part of these institutions should possess a respective motivation. This is related to the size of salary, discipline, organisational issues. When people are involved in crackdowns on demonstrations, they do not understand themselves what they are cracking down on, or why they capture these people. (Interview, Academic II, St. Petersburg 2018)

Thus, the assemblage appears to be functional within its dysfunctionality. Weak institutions, lack of professionalism, and absence of the rule of law lead to a scenario where no one is immune to retaliation, and this uncertainty is a significant motivator for self-censorship. At the same time, vagueness allowed for control over each sub-assemblage, as the diversity of motives for participation leads to diversity among actors willing or forced to join the assemblage without necessarily understanding its overarching objectives.

Sub-assemblage participants can be categorised into those generating counter-dissent content (pro-Kremlin bloggers, trolls) and those engaged in tracking and reporting on dissent content (kiberdruzhinas, anti-maidaners) (Quinn, 2015). This active citizenry can conveniently assist the ruling elite in muting repellent voices. Contrary to the traditional understanding of vigilantism, which implies autonomy of citizen actors (Johnston, 1996), in Russia, vigilant citizens can be recruited by the state (Gabdulhakov, 2018), sometimes representing a quasi-citizen-led force with a façade agenda.

In addition to the amended legal framework, new initiatives were passed to encourage reporting on crime. The previously “rare and unregulated” (The Moscow Times, 2018a) practice of financially rewarding citizens for their contribution to crime-solving was turned into an official plan by the Ministry of Internal Affairs on 6 June 2018 (parvo.gov.ru, 2018). Furthermore, under new provisions of the Yarovaya law package, failure to report on a witnessed crime can in itself be regarded as an act of crime which further encourages snitching. Beyond this, the law package has called on the telecommunication operators to increase their storage capacities “by 15 percent annually for the next five years” and “to store correspondence, audio recordings of conversations, videos” and other types of user

communications from 30 days to six months, depending on their type (Vesti, 2018). These regulations, however, are viewed with scepticism:

The Yarovaya law package will not be fully implemented, it is too costly to store all data in Russia and they will just not do it. As usual, there is the law, but no one is implementing it. (Interview, Academic II, St. Petersburg 2018)

There are several groups whose objective is to seek, expose and report on information and users that are perceived as dangerous. Among these groups is a collective that calls itself *Je Suis Maidan*. Based on the limited description available on its website and social media accounts, the group's objective appears to be the identification of "participants of opposition protests", and linking their faces to respective social media profiles through "various face recognition systems" (Je Suis Maidan, n.d.).⁴³ The website features people across Russia with links to their social media profiles. Visitors are encouraged to send in photos of "the heroes" to be listed on the website. This practice is not a novelty, according to a Moscow-based rights defender:

The nationalists used to do this around ten years ago. They would make a post with a person's full address and invite people to retaliate. There were cases when retaliation took place. (Interview, Rights Defender III, Moscow 2018)

It is unclear what is done or is expected to be done to protest participants exposed on Je Suis Maidan. The website can serve as a convenient source of 'evidence' for law enforcement and potentially encourage harassment of the listed individuals. Equally, it may simply lead to no outcomes. The very presence of such a platform, however, can potentially deter protest, assuming that having seen their own faces or other protesters' faces online, people would be discouraged from participating in such events. The impact and popularity of Je Suis Maidan appear to be marginal, given the mere 137 members on its VKontakte social network page (Je Suis Maidan, n.d.a.).

Another group, *SILOVIKI* [Security officers], describes itself as a "community of security departments of the Russian Federation" and enjoys a following of 65,865 subscribers on Telegram, 6,956 followers on Instagram, 2,990 followers on Twitter, and 660 subscribers on YouTube (data for December 2019). It is unclear who stands behind the group. *SILOVIKI* specialises in the exposure of activists, protestors, and opposition leaders. In some of the posts, they provide an image, full name, date of birth, address, phone number, vehicle description and licence plate numbers, names of parents and other relatives of the targets and openly call on their followers to "say hello" to the exposed person via the provided phone number or to "decorate" the target's car.

43 Website no longer exists when checked in May 2021.

The Safe Internet League was established in 2011 with the support of the Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media; the Ministry of Internal Affairs; and State Duma Committee on Issues of Family, Women and Children. The League's objective is to find and "eradicate dangerous content through community action by IT professionals, industry players, and regular internet users" (Safe Internet League, n.d.). Under the umbrella of the Safe Internet League there operates the *Kiberdruzhina* [The Cyberguard] which, per the group's Russian language version of the website, is a "cross regional public youth movement" consisting of "over 20 thousand volunteers from across Russia and the CIS" (The Cyberguard, n.d.a.). The League's English version of the website explains that *Kiberdruzhina* is inspired by the "Soviet-era druzhinnik neighbourhood watch units" who "helped the authorities maintain law and order" (The Cyberguard, n.d.b.). Such a reference to the past once again underlines the re-packaged nature of control measures in contemporary Russia. Unlike the Soviet times, fear of punishment for the failure of reporting and ideological convictions alone are not doing all the justice anymore. Financial stimulation is used as a tool. "In Tyva, they have announced this competition... to compete in reporting on suspicious online activity. The victor would receive 3,000 rubles" (Interview, Rights Defender I, Moscow). Such rewards can lead to false accusations and sabotage of deviant members of communities. Money is a unique variable, capable of overshadowing political, ideological, and moral motivations to snitch. "There will definitely be willing people, especially in the provinces, they will do this outside of any political interest, just to make money" (Interview, Rights Defender I, Moscow). Diversity of motives for becoming part of the assemblage further widen its scope of reach. While legally obliged reporting on witnessed crime, at the background of the vagueness of the definition of this very crime, can lead to ubiquitous snitching; financial rewards for reported crime in the system with a weak rule of law can turn snitching into a business. This comes hand-in-hand with police forces who are assigned a quota to be fulfilled.

At the same time, rights defenders specialising in working with vigilantes believe that Cyberguards are ineffective and that "the media blows their significance out of proportion" (Interview, Rights Defender I, Moscow), and further add that:

The Cyberguards are a completely dysfunctional entity. There is no functional activity. Russia's security apparatus is equipped with automated internet monitoring programmes and uses them where necessary. The only purpose of these Cyberguards entities is to educate the youth, to get them involved and to lecture them on the danger of certain ideologies.

Constituting sub-assemblages, formations such as Cyberguards, SILOVIKI and others, resemble a force of opportunists who can gain certain benefits from serving up to the state. At the same time, by recruiting such forces, the state fulfills several objectives at once—the watchful gaze seems to be omnipresent; citizenry appears to

be politically active on social media; and while searching for dangerous content online, technologically savvy and state-loyal vigilantes educate themselves on what is 'right' and what is 'wrong'.

6.8. Citizen counter-forces

At times, methods utilised in the assemblage work against the regime, as is evident from the case of the Cossacks (New York Times, 2013) whose involvement in the dispersal of a public protest on 5 May 2018 created a wide resonance. In this case, face-recognition systems were used by regime opponents to identify individuals who beat the protesters. A prominent example of a counter-force to the controlling assemblage is the civil analytics project Database, which publishes "free-to-use investigations based on open data" (bewareofthem, n.d.). The website maintains a list of provocateurs, propagandists, law enforcement officers, judges, snitches, and civil servants among other actors. It is not clear how this data can be used against pro-regime actors. The project itself describes the applicability of their investigations as follows:

A significant part of our work is done in closed mode and stored in encrypted form according to all national and international personal data legislation. Access to these data is granted individually on request from official authorities as part of the investigation. (bewareofthem, n.d.)

State support and incentives created for specific forms of vigilantism lead to inequalities in operation modes. As a researcher in St. Petersburg explained:

The difference between "allowed" activists and "not-preferred" activists is that the former enjoy access to state resources such as the FSB (Federal Security Service). Quite often they [vigilant audiences] post some data which is impossible to acquire without the assistance of special services, such as police and MVD [The Ministry of Internal Affairs]. (Online interview, Academic III)

Other citizen-led initiatives include the already mentioned Roskomsvoboda and Internet Protection Society (OZI). Both organisations counter online censorship and excessive internet control. While OZI is closely linked with Putin's main opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Roskomsvoboda has been invited to the advisory group of State Duma Committee on Information Policy, Information Technology and Communications (Expert Committee, n.d.). In countering repressive measures of the state, the largest problem for counter-forces is lack of unity. As St. Petersburg-based lawyer explained:

I don't believe that users can be unified in one way or another. In Armenia, we recently saw how the people collectively stood up in opposition to the state. This will not be the case in Russia because opposition or social movements will not be able to unite. They oppose the state from very different standpoints. (Interview, Lawyer I, St. Petersburg)

Thus, not only citizen counter-forces are scarce and inferior to the state in their capacities; they are also not necessarily unified. While technological affordances allow citizens to monitor and expose the “previously exempt” actors, immunities, asymmetries, and other capacities must be considered in this uneven landscape. In Russia, with the greatly defined and enforced vertical of power, the ruling elite is at an advantage despite any theoretical “leveling of the hierarchy of surveillance” (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000, p. 606).

6.9. Discussion

In the current understanding of surveillant mechanisms applied to the digital domain, the virtual other, or the “data-double” (Haggerty & Ericson, 2000) is constantly monitored and can attract institutional gaze towards the conventional self. In some cases, this dynamic is reversed as conventional ‘offences’ get tied to the concerned individual’s digital trace, leading to arrests and fines. In other words, a person facing charges for online speech can already be the focus of security forces for their offline activities. Amid the conveniently vague legislation governing online speech in Russia, for law enforcement authorities, it is a matter of linking one element with the other—offline activism with the digital trace. In such instances, contrary to the “data-double” theorisation, the physical person is selected first. As a Moscow-based rights defender explained:

It is quite obvious that a person is selected first, and then they select online content that could be attached to the case. It is just so easy to find something [in the content shared online] that violates the law. (Interview, Rights Defender I, Moscow 2018)

Therefore, the original author of a given social media post may not suffer any consequences, while those who shared or otherwise engaged with this content might face the law depending on the nature of their offline activities. The vagueness of definitions and police forces equipped with quotas establish dangerous realities where any user can face charges over any online activity.

Hand in hand with the legislative measures, the Kremlin employs and endorses activists who engage in vigilantism and snitching (Gabdulhakov, 2018). The line between authority and citizens blurs in this regard as vigilant citizens become an extension of the

state. Thus, amid the increasing control over the digital domain, the state is allowing regime-loyal citizens to be active online, creating an illusion of citizen-led participation in domestic affairs while reinforcing the fear of ubiquitous surveillance and the all-seeing gaze of the state. This dynamic opens a window of opportunity for actors willing to serve the state, while the actual effectiveness of such formations is questionable.

With legislative frameworks that are open to interpretation and regulations that criminalise failure to report on a crime (accompanied with measures that encourage snitching by offering financial and other rewards), it could be expected that user arrests would be counted in tens of thousands. Is Russia's surveillant assemblage weak, or is it simply selective? What is the role of state-recruited vigilante citizens in denouncing users? As a Moscow-based human rights defender explained, "what is taking place [in Russia] today with all these 'concerned' citizens is a joke. It is on such a primitive level, you wouldn't believe it". Their colleague adds, "our law enforcement system is too weak to carry out arrests on a mass scale, they only do targeted arrests" (Interview, Rights Defender II, Moscow 2018). Presumably, the logic behind this measure is the instigation of self-censorship. Having seen others arrested for a social media post, users are expected to think twice before sharing or even 'liking' similar content. As such, the repressive system is rather unpredictable. However, uncertainty and unpredictability of the assemblage can create fruitful grounds for self-censorship, making the system effective by virtue of its dysfunctionality.

The regime revealed itself as both devious and inconsequential. It is devious in the sense that it does not skimp on the entrapment of citizens or targeting teenagers and single mothers. At the same time, the regime is inconsequential in its selective response to online offences. As is evident from the cases, content that is deemed dangerous when 'liked' or shared by some users is not removed and continues to circulate online; rather, the regime removes select citizens who engage with this content.

Citizen counter-forces indeed represent a scenario where, as per Haggerty and Ericson, those previously exempt from surveillance also fall under the gaze. Citizens monitor and reveal cases of rights violations and instrumentalise similar "weapons" (Trottier, 2017) of exposure that are used against them. However, the state (represented by the ruling elite) is at an obvious advantage on account of its law enforcement apparatus, legislative framework and technological capabilities.

6.10. Conclusion

Despite the autocratic turn in its policies following the initial liberalisation in the 1990s and in contrast to the perceived omnipotence of its security apparatus, when put under the magnifying glass, Russia's surveillant assemblage indicates that the multiplicity of its components and their dysfunctions require the state to rely on a set of superficial measures designed to stimulate self-censorship. Among such measures are random

and selective arrests of social media users, as well as recruitment of vigilant citizens intended to assist the ruling elite in battling undesired online content.

Having unpacked Russia's surveillant assemblage, this chapter provided an overview of the types of online engagements that can cost social media users their freedom; it elaborated on the means of retaliation by focusing on legal frameworks applied to social media offences; and it unpacked the elements (sub-assemblages) that collectively, but not exhaustively, make up contemporary surveillance practices in Russia. The analysis revealed several intriguing nuances in the Kremlin's approaches to internet control. First of all, the adapted legislative framework creates an environment in which, if needed, virtually any online activity can be tied to repressive legislation. The applicability of the law, in this case, is selective. This selectivity exemplifies a reverse approach to the "data-double", as conventional behaviour of an individual can lead to scrutiny of their digital trace.

While the Kremlin has taken respective measures to mute, eradicate, discourage, and otherwise limit voices that challenge its authority, Russia's surveillant assemblage has a central goal but no central motivations that could unite all of its sub-assemblages. Motivation is a subjective concept inside each sub-assemblage, be it law enforcement, regional authorities, or vigilante citizens. Motives may also vary among citizen counterforces opposing repressive state measures; however, issues of unity and collaboration also come into play in this domain.

Social media user convictions in Russia are a by-product of the system where the desire to control defies a systematic approach. While this defiance may be interpreted as a weakness of the central structure, the ambiguity and monomania of the structure make everyone potentially vulnerable. Due to technical and financial inability to replicate The Great Firewall of China, Russia's ruling elite opted for trolling the web through the spread of fear via repressive legislation, selective arrests, and regime-loyal citizens acting out in a manner that echoes the country's totalitarian past. As Daucé, Loveluck, Ostrooukhova, and Zaytseva put it, Russia can be viewed as "a test laboratory for plural forms of citizen participation in online security" (Daucé et al., 2020, p. 67).

In the global perspective, current measures adopted by the Kremlin serve as examples of 'best practices' to other autocratic regimes, seeking to establish control over online self-expression. As international, regional and domestic governance of the World Wide Web is entering discourse at the level of the United Nations (UN News, 2019), an informed and sober outlook on the role and influence of political, legislative, social, and economic realities on internet governance is urgently needed.

Further research should focus on the role of international and domestic social media platforms, messengers, and content sharing outlets in Russia and beyond; enriching literature and policy through comparative analyses across governance approaches.

Interviewees

- Academic I. St. Petersburg-based. Specialising in Russia's online activism. Online interview, April 2018.
- Academic II. St. Petersburg-based. Specialising in Russia's online activism. Online interview, April 2018.
- Academic III. Finland-based. Specialising in Russia's digital media and online culture. Online interview, April 2018.
- Lawyer I. Lawyer specialising in Russian cases in the European Court for Human Rights. In-person interview, St. Petersburg. April 2018.
- Lawyer II. Specialising in internet-related arrests. In-person interview, Moscow. May 2018.
- Law Enforcement I. Lieutenant colonel. State penitentiary service. Online interview. May 2018.
- NGO I. Specialising in public opinion monitoring. In-person interview, Moscow. May 2018.
- Rights Defender I. Specialising in vigilantism. In-person interview, Moscow. May 2018. Follow-up interview online, April 2019.
- Rights Defender II. Specialising in vigilantism. In-person interview, Moscow. May, 2018.
- Rights Defender III. Specialising in xenophobia. In-person interview, Moscow. May, 2018.



VII

General Conclusion

Summary

This Chapter revisits the dissertation's six sub-questions and formulates a response to the main query. In doing so, the Chapter elaborates on key findings in respect to the historical premises for digital vigilantism in Russia. It considers the role and impact of online visibility for participants and targets as well as the power of traditional media in digital vigilantisms. The Chapter highlights vulnerabilities and immunities in digital vigilantism and provides an overview of the legal premises for the emergence and decay of vigilante formations. It responds to state-citizen and citizen-to-citizen relations in digital vigilantism. The Chapter revisits the empirical and theoretical contributions that each study that makes up the current dissertation has made, while also addressing international implications of these findings. Finally, it lists limitations of the studies while making suggestions for further research.

“Instructions for living a life: Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.”

– Mary Oliver

This dissertation set out to find answers to the following questions: 1) How is digital vigilantism in Russia informed by historically situated practices of outsourced, crowdsourced, and volunteered citizen-led justice, as well as denouncing, shaming, and moralising of citizens by fellow citizens? 2) How is visibility (including mediated shaming, moralising, harassment, and embodied acts of retaliation) weaponised by participants? 3) What motivates citizen participation in and state support of digital vigilantism? 4) How is digital vigilantism framed and rendered meaningful by state-owned and independent Russian media? 5) How is digital vigilantism experienced by targets in relation to social inequalities, digital divides, social frustrations and biases? 6) What are the legal and digital media landscapes in which vigilante practices take place in Russia?

Through the articles that make up its chapters, the current dissertation sought an answer to the overarching puzzle of the role and influence that social media may have on the relationship between the sovereign (the state) and its constituency (citizens), as well as the modes of socialisation among the latter within state-imposed structures and in spite of them. Thus, the main research question was formed as follows: How are practices of digital vigilantism in Russia manifested through state-citizen and citizen-to-citizen relations? Such state-citizen and citizen-on-citizen control dynamics are accompanied by complex webs of other inter-relations, negotiated through traditional and digital media.

7

7.1. Historical premises

The dissertation addressed historical premises, contexts and structures of control through delegated citizens in Russia. Having looked back at over 100 years of history, the dissertation identified waves of outsourcing justice matters into the hands of citizens. Some waves on the historical timeline can be described as radical and extraordinary in their intensity, specifically when it comes to such circumstances where citizens had power to execute other citizens over perceived offences.

Another characteristic of the historical context is institutionalisation of citizen-on-citizen surveillance and control. The culmination of such institutionalisation were the so-called comrades' courts which helped the state handle some of the minor mischiefs and take pressure off the traditional legal courts of justice. Among punitive instruments utilised in comrades' courts the central role was played by shame. Colleagues, neighbours and other 'concerned' community members engaged in public shaming of the delinquent target in question. As the review of historical accounts revealed, people preferred the legal court of justice over the court of comrades', as public shaming and humiliation were perceived as harsher punishment than fines or detention.

Historical structures of citizen-on-citizen control are also characterised by the ubiquity of surveillance—a phenomenon that can be referred to as the culture of control. Because the state encouraged and solicited deviant watch, such cultures led to obsessive practices. Denunciation cases, for instance, were wide-spread in the Soviet Russia and the culture of *donos* [snitching] was ubiquitous.

Having compared historical context to contemporary practices, this dissertation revealed some important similarities and differences. Among the reincarnated approaches, the dissertation identified the role of the state in support of select vigilantes and collaboration between these state-approved citizens and law enforcement authorities. At the same time, new modes of visibility allow watchful citizens to potentially turn against the ‘feeding hand’ and expose corrupt elites and abusive police. In this regard, the relationship between vigilantes and the state is not always smooth and, in the case of Russia, is characterised by waves of mutual endorsement and condemnation.

Among the differences between Soviet-era citizen recruitment and contemporary digital vigilantism in Russia, this dissertation points to the shift of central actors such as participants and targets. While in the Soviet times, members of the comrades’ courts tended to be well-respected in the society, with achievements in military service or labour; in contemporary Russia, state-endorsed vigilantes are young people with no particular prior achievements, aside for the demonstrated loyalty to the political status quo. On the contrary, participation in vigilante acts can grant these young people social, political, financial and other capital and advantages.

Informants interviewed in the course of the research recognised some Soviet-era traces in current vigilante practices in Russia, although perceptions were diverse. Some saw a positive side to active citizenry in the otherwise state-dominated public sphere. Others were less optimistic and worried about totalitarian turns in Russia’s governance practices that increasingly penetrate the digital domain.

7.2. Digital vigilantism and visibility

While visibility is instrumentalised to harm the targets, it can bring certain benefits to participants. Studies within this dissertation revealed that through participation, vigilantes can build a name for themselves and become influential informal leaders. Through the use of logos, stickers, shirts and other paraphernalia, participants develop a brand and can even approve franchise branches across and beyond the country. Large audience following can bring about several benefits (albeit, often temporary)—social recognition, political connections, financial benefits and legal immunities.

Through participation and consequent recognition, participants can gain social status. Sometimes, leaders of vigilante formations are invited to speak on national television in Russia as experts on a particular issue. In this regard, what can be observed

is an act of professionalisation of amateurs through a self-made vigilante repertoire. Political aspects imply formal and informal powers. Formally, some participants were able to build a name for themselves and run for official positions in the Russian government. Informally, participants who enjoyed endorsement by the ruling elite also benefited from such recognition both in cases of interaction with law enforcement authorities and in terms of media portrayal of their activities. From the financial standpoint, participants can generate income via various sources. Among these are state grants in support of activities, YouTube monetisation, advertisement, paraphernalia sales, brand sales, in some cases, blackmailing of targets can also be a source of income. From the legal perspective, visibility and recognition rendered certain immunities to participants. As interviews have revealed, some vigilantes were able to blackmail police officers by threatening to expose them online. In this case, a wide following on social media grants unique powers to vigilantes, sometimes exceeding those of legal authorities. In combination, recognition and political endorsement have granted certain immunities and privileges to participants. However, these benefits have shown to be temporary, and in Russia, highly dependent on the vision of the ruling elites.

When certain invisible lines are crossed and participants become a threat to the elites, visibility can be used against vigilantes. For instance, this can happen when they start targeting the political establishment and their relatives or attacking national symbols that render legitimacy to individuals in power positions. Video and photo material disseminated online to harm the targets can suddenly turn into pieces of evidence used against participants. Traditional media too can come into play by glorifying or condemning participation.

7.3. The role of traditional media in digital vigilantism

Traditional media has been shown to play several important roles in the manifestation of digital vigilantism. First of all, traditional media outlets in Russia have been acting as “norm setters” and, therefore, respective framing of vigilante activities potential has a strong influence on public perceptions. Traditional media can (intentionally or otherwise) assist vigilantes in building their brand and publicity by frequently reporting on their activities and by framing them as heroes fighting for the greater social good. While doing so, traditional media can bring further harm to the targets whose unsolicited online exposure is suddenly broadcasted on television and printed in newspapers. When measures to protect the identity and other personal data of targets are not taken, further harm through exposure can be brought upon them.

This dissertation identified an important quality of media powers in giving (or not giving) voice to the actors involved. When a case takes place and only participants are given an opportunity to comment via interviews, then only one side of the event is presented. Thus, while enjoying a large following on social media (sometimes counted

in millions of subscribers), vigilantes can also reach audiences that are not present online via traditional media.

At the same time, traditional media outlets can turn against select groups and individuals and use visibility in reverse to denounce and condemn their activities. These dynamics and such media powers are especially explicit in contexts of strict state control over media, as is the case in Russia. Regime-owned and regime-loyal broadcasters considered within the scope of this dissertation demonstrated that they possess influential framing powers. But beyond this, they demonstrated flexibility in terms of perspective change in their reports. Youth vigilante groups went from being framed as national heroes to being accused of hooliganism. Amid this perspective change, targets that used to be framed as guilty by default were not only given the benefit of the doubt but were suddenly re-framed as victims. In this regard, state-loyal media is a type of wind vane that reads the attitude of the ruling elites towards vigilante formations. At the same time, among the few remaining independent broadcasters in Russia, the selected outlet TV Rain maintained consistency in its reports that continuously questioned vigilante activities.

7.4. Vulnerabilities and immunities in digital vigilantism

While in some cases public scrutiny, exposure and shaming can have a detrimental effect on a target's reputation and well-being, in other instances targets enjoy relative immunity. This dissertation inquired into the nuances of immunities and vulnerabilities by considering several types of targets—migrants, female migrants, owners of luxurious cars, merchants, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, political activists as well as representatives of the political establishment. Depending on their offline positions, capitals and capacities, targets tend to experience online exposure and denunciation differently.

This dissertation demonstrated that those vulnerable offline, such as political activists, women, sexual, ethnic and other minorities, are also highly vulnerable online. Furthermore, this vulnerability can come in layers and from various directions at once. Given that numerous thematic vigilante groups operate across Russia, at any given time one can simultaneously fall target to several groups. In other words, a Muslim female migrant from Kyrgyzstan can fall target to groups targeting Muslims, women, migrants, Kyrgyz women and so on, in any combination.

After the exposure, such vulnerable groups and individuals experience further scrutiny and denunciation by their communities. As was demonstrated, a female migrant might not be welcomed in her hometown/village after being publicly humiliated. Furthermore, her life might be endangered back home if 'honour beating' or 'honour murder' are demanded by the community. The same alienation applies to sexual minorities, who cannot be open about their sexuality in the context of Russia

due to stigma and law banning “gay propaganda”.⁴⁴ Turning to the police can lead to deportation for migrants and legal repercussions as well as beating and blackmailing for sexual minorities. Again, if a person is vulnerable in several domains simultaneously (for instance, a female migrant who is an ethnic and sexual minority), they are also deprived of legal justice on numerous levels. From lack of legal knowledge, to fear, to lack of faith in the positive outcome—this research revealed numerous barriers on the path to legal justice pursuit for the targets. Vulnerable targets are left with few, if any options for restoring their good name and bringing the offenders to legal responsibility.

On the other hand, targets with various forms of agency and capital can experience minimal consequences from public exposure. The rich and powerful have several tools available to them, including media voice, their own large following and supporters on social media, financial capacities to hire top lawyers, as well as the so-called ‘administrative resource’ in the form of informal patronage by powerful people. Finally, when it comes to the very powerful among the elites, pressure can even be put on global social media platforms and revealing content can simply be removed on the grounds of privacy violation concerns.

7.5. Legal premises, emergence and decay of vigilante formations

Vigilante groups, formations and individuals that were considered within the scope of the current dissertation tend to be in constant flux of appearing and disappearing. The rise and fall of participants depend on several factors, among them is the type of activity that they engage in, their levels of popularity and their relationship with the state.

While the emergence of digitally mediated vigilantism in Russia can be attributed to far-right hate groups, many of the ‘original’ formations and their leaders are no longer around. Starting from 2014, openly criminal hate groups have been cracked down upon in Russia, in spite of the initial tolerance of their activities and even cases of their collaboration with police. There are several theories that informants (researchers, lawyers and rights-defenders) expressed concerning reasons behind the breaking of the relationship between the state and far-right movements. One theory is that nationalists were counted on in East-Ukraine operations but instead joined the contestant’s side. Another explanation is centred around the sudden clash of operationalised values. While the state relied on repackaged World War II history as a symbol of Russia’s glory and as a source of legitimisation for the political elites, far-right vigilante formations were too attracted to Nazi ideology; they were vandalising memorials and otherwise trolling World War II (In Russia referred to as The Great Patriotic War). Others believe that such sport events as the Olympic games and the world football championship played a

44 The Russian federal law “for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values” adopted on 11 June 2013.

role, since Russia's authorities did not want the country to appear barbaric and wanted to prevent local nationalist attacks on foreigners and football fan clashes. Perhaps, discovering the true motives is an impossible task. What is certain is that criminal cases against xenophobia and hate speech led to the prevalence of arrests in the ranks of far-right hate groups. It is important to note, however, that repressive legislation was also applied on state critics and random social media users.

There are several 'core groups' among the originally state-supported formations that have been around for over a decade since 2010 and continue their operations. Some of these groups, namely StopXam, experienced a downfall in their relationship with the state. The movement, once financially supported by presidential grants, faced lawsuits in the Supreme Court instigated by the Ministry of Justice. In spite of the court's decision to shut down StopXam (a decision that was overruled once, but eventually held), its members continue the raids in and beyond Russia but rarely appear in the mainstream media anymore. On those rare occasions that state-supported media report on the group, they tend to be presented as hooligans rather than heroes.

There can be several reasons behind this deterioration of collaboration between StopXam vigilantes and the state. One reason can be that participants crossed the boundaries that the ruling elites deemed forbidden. Numerous state representatives and their relatives appeared in the StopXam's episodes on YouTube. Such visibility can be damaging to the reputation of the elites. Furthermore, in one of the episodes, StopXam confronted Russia's famous athlete and four-times Olympic champion. An attack on the athlete of this calibre can be equated to an attack on Russia's national pride, as victories in sporting events are instrumentalised for regime support.

In general, the vision of state-vigilante collaborations has shifted. During the interviews, law enforcement representatives expressed their nostalgia and hopes that one day, numerous vigilante groups that operate across Russia would turn into the Soviet-era *druzhina* [volunteer militia formations]. In their view, groups such as StopXam only get in the way and true help would come if these groups were taking orders from law enforcement authorities. Indeed, the new generation of regime-loyal vigilante formations such as the Cyberguards are under the direct control and coordination of the police.

7.6. State-citizen and citizen-to-citizen relations in digital vigilantism

While the traditional top-down control and surveillance is challenged by bottom-up scrutiny, the power of the state, especially in autocratic contexts, is disproportionately greater than that of other actors. Such power advantages are manifested through the monopoly on violence, strategic legislation, and collaboration with platforms through applied pressure, formal ownership or informal loyalty. Furthermore, the example of

Russia demonstrates that political elites are extending their watchful gaze through citizen agents. As this dissertation demonstrated, motives for collaboration with the state can be multiple: 1) financial support and other material benefits; 2) informal support and endorsement, which can bring about social power; 3) political career aspirations; 4) genuine belief in the system and ideological loyalty to the rulers, etc. Sometimes, out of poverty, citizens can engage in vigilante activities on the promise of small gifts and relatively marginal income. For instance, the dissertation addressed the phenomenon of the Cyberguards who monitor the digital domain for content that is perceived as dangerous.

Ultimately, anyone can join the ranks of the Guards, and this amateur squad applies its subjective and unprofessional judgment to what content and users to report on. In exchange for the reported content, participants receive financial rewards. A game-like competitive environment where those who make the most reports receive gifts such as wrist watches and mugs stimulates snitching enthusiasm. Such environments of state-citizen control through citizen-on-citizen surveillance largely resemble Russia's totalitarian past, when comrades were keeping an eye on each other and any deviation from the communist standards (listening to Western music, wearing jeans, etc.) could result in the *donos* [a snitching report]. Sometimes these reports were made out of jealousy or revenge. Perhaps, some of the same reasons are still present amid the digitalised nature of socialisation and control.

7.7. Empirical and theoretical contributions

This dissertation attempted to make a unique contribution to literature by applying inter-disciplinarity to the study of digital vigilantism. Being at the crossroads of political science, criminology, media studies, cyber security studies and sociology—the phenomenon of citizen involvement in mutual surveillance and retaliation over perceived offences requires multi-contextual and comparative approaches. Empirical research focused on a diverse set of cases and actors, such as thematic vigilante groups specialising in retaliation against drivers, labour migrants, store merchants, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities and political activists.

Empirical studies that make up this dissertation relied on multiple methodological approaches and included qualitative content analysis of traditional media reports; qualitative content analysis of digital products produced by vigilantes; on- and offline observations; semi-structured in-depth interviews; and desk research of legal cases. These methods were often used in combination, or as a “blend” (for an example of netnographic blended methods see Fenton & Procter, 2019). Studies utilising content analysis as a primary method, for instance, benefited from interview data that further enriched and strengthened the empirical grounds on which analyses were constructed. Focusing on content produced by participants allowed for a detailed illustration of

the discourse in vigilante practices when it comes to target framing and justification of citizen-led justice. This analysis too was accompanied by netnographic (Kozinets, 2019) observations—continuous monitoring of various formations and groups in their online habitat. Such online observations allowed the researcher to present a multitude of nuances in group description sections, with the focus on various online platforms. At the same time, it was important to consider the role of traditional media in digitally mediated citizen-led justice and to make offline observations of participants in action. Such a combination of methods allowed for a comparison between the three domains—participation streamed online, broadcasted on television, and taking place in real-time offline. Online self-presentation of vigilante groups can make them appear greater and more omnipresent than they may be in real life. News media, in its turn, play an important role in lending vigilante practices meaning, be it justification, endorsement or condemnation.

Relying on the existing conceptual approaches to vigilantism and its digital manifestation, this dissertation contextualised the existing theories and contributed to their expansion by focusing on cases that had been missing in the literature. Namely, the dissertation demonstrated that the notion of autonomy in vigilantism is not categorical and can be challenged in some contexts. Furthermore, studies that make up the current dissertation revealed the phenomena of vulnerabilities and immunities to exposure and retaliation. By focusing on both traditional and digital media, this dissertation underlined the importance of the audience in online punitive acts. Without the audience, not only the intensity of retaliation is challenged but the very punitive act itself.

When it comes to audience, one may wonder about the difference between being an ‘innocent spectator’ and a participant by virtue of watching, ‘liking’, sharing, commenting on and otherwise engaging with YouTube videos shared by vigilantes. Audience members not only ensure that exposure is punitive, but they can also contribute to the severity of such punishment. In this regard, digital vigilantism as a punitive practice can be compared to Foucauldian “spectacle of punishment” where akin to the medieval times, the audience is present at the scene of public torture and execution. In the same way it was done centuries ago, some audience members may sympathise with the victim, but will they speak up in the victim’s defense? While spectating, the audience is taught a lesson that some behaviour can lead to punitive outcomes and that essentially anyone can be in the place of the tortured subject. Foucault argues that such public torture of the past focused on damaging the body, while punitive measures of the 20th century in the form of prisons and insane asylums damaged people’s souls. In digital vigilantism the two can merge. When a person is physically attacked—their body is in pain; when this attack is filmed and shared online for the global audience to see in perpetual manner, a person’s dignity and reputation are also destroyed.

While some may argue that in certain cases punishment of targets is justified because they committed serious crimes or breached moral and ethical norms for which

they would not face punishment by police, it is important to be reminded that in digital vigilantism due process is absent and presumption of guilt defies any presumption of innocence. Moreover, groups and individuals vulnerable offline tend to be even more vulnerable online.

7.8. International implications

While studies that make up the current dissertation were focused predominantly on Russia, there are several international implications to consider. First of all, there is a certain spill-over effect of Russia's institutionalised digital vigilantism, as branches and franchises of thematic groups such as StopXam and Hrushy Protiv emerge in other former Soviet states such as Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine, and far beyond, as was demonstrated by the case of Mal Estacionado in Peru. The franchising phenomenon demonstrates the international demand for digital vigilantism on the one hand, while it strengthens the position and further increases popularity of the original Moscow-based formations, turning them into a force that can potentially be perceived as omnipresent on the global scale. Furthermore, foreigners subjected to vigilante retaliation in Russia, such as labour migrants from Central Asia, may take on the practice and retaliate on other vulnerable individuals within their own 'community'. In this regard, people attacked by nationalists in the host state may in fact be nationalists themselves in the home-state context.

There are certain themes in digital vigilantism that appear to be globally present. Among these are paedophile-busting campaigns, anti-corruption investigations, and reactions to antisocial behaviour such as parking on sidewalks or littering. At the same time, the universality of such cases must be addressed with caution as contextual nuances matter significantly. In various contexts, paedophilia is often confused with homosexuality; anti-corruption campaigns may turn into an instrument in the hands of the ruling elites to get rid of political opponents; and acts perceived as offensive in one context may be taken as a norm in another. Thus, there are legal, political and sociocultural nuances at play.

A study that was conducted within the project but was not included in the current dissertation addresses recurring themes in digital vigilantism in the Russian, Chinese and Anglo-American contexts (Huang et al., 2020). While Russia's StopXam participants claim to be indiscriminate, they frequently target drivers of expensive cars with VIP licence plates. In Chinese cases of digital vigilantism and online public scrutiny, luxurious cars are also a frequent subject. Public reactions are often provoked on the grounds of class-struggle narratives. In both Russian and Chinese cases, scrutiny over road offences performed by people in luxurious cars leads to further denunciation. At the same time, in the considered cases coming from the Western world, where bad parking and other traffic violations are exposed, public scrutiny tends to disregard

socioeconomic and political structures affiliated with class awareness. As such, while digital vigilantism is a universal practice, nuances are subjective and do not necessarily translate across contexts. This observation indicates that legal and political structures as well as sociocultural perceptions can impact how cases of digital vigilantism emerge, how they are justified and how consequences are handled.

7.9. Limitations and further research

While the current dissertation theoretically and empirically addressed the phenomenon of digital vigilantism from an interdisciplinary and multi-method perspective, there are certain limitations to the study. From the theoretical point of view, counter-state vigilante formations require further conceptualisation that would help create vivid categorial differentiations between political opposition activities and Rosenbaum and Sederberg's "regime control" vigilantism. Would this categorisation depend on political context? Given the absence of other legal mechanisms to oversee the ruling elites and fundamental suppression of genuine opposition in a particular case, would watchful and digitally-savvy citizens exposing these elites be qualified as digital vigilantes as opposed to being just political activists? Or is this something that is practice-focused, where in spite of the political context, when opposition members weaponise visibility they can be qualified as digital vigilantes? Political science perspectives would be helpful in this pursuit.

In spite of the recent wave of scholarly attention to the phenomenon of vigilantism and its digital manifestation, there remain important nuances that require further empirical investigation. From the empirical point of view, more attention could have been paid to social media comments as important artifacts in measuring audience perceptions of vigilante acts. Digital cultures, practices and affordances are in a constant state of evolution and, therefore, further studies would also need to respond to new sets of vigilante repertoires. Research could focus on comparing various contexts to investigate participants and their motivations as well as audience feedback to these practices. What circumstances create entrepreneurial opportunities in participation? Studies on this subject could be beneficial for respective policy decisions, legal provisions and platform regulation schemes, which could work towards discouraging opportunistic and income-seeking practices that harm others.

Another important area that requires continued multi-contextual attention concerns targets and their experience with the impacts of retaliation. What are some best practices in helping targets cope with consequences of public exposure? In this domain researchers should seek collaboration with rights defenders, NGOs specialising in online crimes and, if possible, legislators. Per Foucault's "power of discourse", operationalisable definitions of (digital) vigilantism can not only be helpful in academic terms, but can also be of practical use in policy-making and in legal cases.

As platforms become increasingly powerful to the point that they can mute the president of the United States, their role in facilitating social justice must be addressed. In this regard, corporate powers in muting certain voices and giving agency to others require urgent scholarly attention. What precedents are created when people are muted? How will these powers play out in different political contexts and amid realities where domestic and regime-loyal platforms engage in silencing of critical voices?

In this rapidly-changing domain, researches should keep an eye on the future. As algorithms continue to penetrate all sectors of human interaction, perhaps exposure and retaliation too will eventually be taken over by artificial intelligence.

I urge researchers in different fields to address the phenomenon of digital vigilantism from interdisciplinary perspectives and utilising blended methods. This is a challenging, yet scientifically intriguing and socially significant phenomenon requiring a multitude of sociocultural, political, technological and other perspectives.

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Annexes

Annexe I. Content analysis guide for Hrushi Protiv YouTube videos

After the process of watching all episodes and performing open coding, the following questions helped construct axial codes and extract respective discursive observations.

Episode title

Any reference to violence in the title?

Any reference to targets in the title?

What other language nuance are observed in the title?

Date of uploading

Length in minutes and seconds

Number of views

Number of 'likes'

Number of 'dislikes'

Number of comment

Who is targeted? Store? Open-market?

What are participants wearing?

How many participants in episode?

How many targets?

Police present/absent?

Any 'guest raiders' such as celebrities?

What language is used by participants towards targets?

What language is used by targets towards participants?

What language is used by participants/targets towards police?

What language is used by police towards participants/targets?

Methodological guidelines for FDD by Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, pp. 98–99

BOX 6.1 Some Methodological Guidelines for Conducting Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

Selecting a corpus of statements

A corpus of statements are samples of discourses that express a relationship between 'rule' and 'statements'. Criteria for selecting statements might include:

samples of text that constitute a 'discursive object' relevant to one's research samples that form 'conditions of possibility' for the discursive object contemporary and historical variability of statements:

- i.e. how is the same object talked about differently?
- i.e. how and why do statements change over time?

Identify and collect texts:

- i.e. policy documents, intellectual texts, newspapers, semi-structured interviews, autobiographical accounts, ethnographic observations and descriptions, etc.

Problematizations

Problematizations are examples where discursive objects and practices are made 'problematic' and therefore visible and knowable. They often form at the intersection of different discourses and expose knowledge/power relations. Problematizations serve an epistemological and methodological purpose: they allow the analyst to take up a critical position in relation to research and they allow the analyst to trace how discursive objects are constituted and governed.

Technologies

Technologies are practical forms of rationality for the government of self and others. There are two kinds of technologies appropriate for psychological inquiry: power and self. Technologies of power seek to govern human conduct at a distance while technologies of the self are techniques by which human beings seek to regulate and enhance their own conduct. Technologies are also 'truth games' realized on a large political scale of among local specific instances of interaction – e.g. the rhetorical function of language.

Subject positions

Identifying subject positions allows the analyst to investigate the cultural repertoire of discourses available to speakers. Not only are they positions on which to ground one's claims of truth or responsibility, but they allow individuals to manage, in quite subtle and complex ways, their moral location within social interaction.

Subjectification

Subjectification refers to an 'ethics' of self-information. How do subjects seek to fashion and transform themselves within a moral order and in terms of a more or less conscious ethical goal – i.e. to attain wisdom, beauty, happiness and perfection? Through which practices and by what authority do subjects seek to regulate themselves?

Annexe II: StopXam in Traditional Media: Protocol for Data Collection, Coding, and Report Production

According to the selected method, initial questions are raised during the protocol stage, which consists of “a list of questions, items, categories, or variables that guide data collection from documents” and tend to be “fairly short, often having a dozen or fewer categories” (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 72). I formulated several questions: How are StopXam vigilantes represented in the news? How are the targets represented in the news? How are police forces represented in the news? Who is given the voice in the reports?

In addition to these questions, the following initial categories began to take shape and informed the protocol:

1. Broadcaster
2. Date of the report
3. Headline
4. Frequency of reporting by number of news pieces per broadcaster
5. Location of the event
6. Framing of participants
 - a. Activists/volunteers/hooligans
 - b. Doing the right thing
 - c. Not doing the right thing
 - d. Motivation
7. Framing of targets
 - a. General background markers such as: male/female/Slavic/non-Slavic/rich/famous/poor etc.
 - b. Guilty
 - c. Innocent
 - d. Consequences of retaliation
8. Framing of state bodies: (dys)functional?
9. Nature of retaliation
10. Voice given to: participants, targets, police, state representatives, other actors?
11. Images and other multimedia (videos, links) accompanying the report: provided by participants?
12. Miscellaneous codes
13. Summary of the initial observations

Coding

Altheide and Schneider are cautious about coding and using specialised computer software when it comes to qualitative data analysis, as these programs “cannot deal with meaning, but deal with only common words” (2013, p. 72). The current research is mindful of these issues and relied on coding software—but not out of a desire to find

repetitive wording in reports. On the contrary, the software helps to go beyond and apply the three steps of coding: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. As Starks and Brown Trinidad put it: “The objective of a discourse analysis is to understand what people are doing with their language in a given situation. Thus, the coding phase for a discourse analysis entails identifying themes and roles as signified through language use” (2007, p. 1376). In this regard, the coding phase helped identify themes and nuances in the analysed reports, while a thorough contextual analysis is supported by a compendium of markers such as tone of the reports as well as featured voices and portrayed parties.

Data Analysis

Altheide and Schneider describe this phase as one that “consists of extensive reading, sorting, and searching through your materials; comparing within categories, coding, and adding keywords and concepts; and then writing minisummaries of categories” (2013, p. 72). Indeed, the data analysis phase involved a thorough analysis of every document, which allowed identification of certain recurring themes and approaches to framing and portrayal of actors involved: participants, targets, police, etc.

Report

This step involved summarising each of the categories in a paragraph, using illustrative materials where appropriate, including descriptions and quotations. The author elaborates on general observations concerning StopXam’s portrayal within and across selected broadcasters and specific themes (supported by direct quotes from the reports). The report section features a year-by-year coverage of media analysis. The discussion section provides an account of observations made within and across selected media platforms.

Annexe III: List of interview participants

Interviews 2018	Actor	Actor location	Mode
1	Academic researcher specialising in online activism in Russia	St. Petersburg	Skype interview
2	Academic researcher specialising in online activism in Russia	St. Petersburg	Skype interview
3	Academic researcher specialising in digital media use, blogging, and journalism in Russia	Helsinki, Finland	Skype interview
4	Academic researcher specialising in Russian media	Helsinki, Finland	Skype interview
5	Academic researcher specialising in re-packaging of the Soviet past in contemporary Russia	Cambridge, UK/ Moscow, Russia	Skype interview
6	Federal penitentiary service of Russia	Moscow, Russia	Skype interview
7	Federal penitentiary service of Russia	Vladimir, Russia	Skype interview
8	Federal penitentiary service of Russia	Ryazan, Russia	Skype interview
9	Federal penitentiary service of Russia	Ryazan, Russia	Skype interview
10	Journalist covering 'honour beating' of female Kyrgyz migrants	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	In-person interview
11	Journalist covering 'honour beating' of female Kyrgyz migrants	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	In-person interview
12	Journalist covering 'honour beating' of female Kyrgyz migrants	Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan	In-person interview
13	Lawyer working on internet governance cases	St. Petersburg, Russia	In-person interview
14	Lawyer working on social media user arrests cases	Moscow, Russia	In-person interview
15	NGO	Moscow, Russia	In-person interview
16	NGO	Moscow, Russia	In-person interview
17	NGO	Moscow, Russia	In-person interview
18	Participant	Former member of StopXam Chisinau, Moldova	In-person interview in Rotterdam, the Netherlands
19	Participant	St. Petersburg, Russia	Skype interview
20	Participant	St. Petersburg, Russia	Skype interview
21	Participant	St. Petersburg, Russia	Skype interview

22	Participant	Moscow, Russia	Skype interview
23	Participant	Moscow, Russia	In-person interview
24	Rights defender specialising in vigilantism	Moscow, Russia	In-person interview
25	Rights defender specialising in vigilantism	Moscow, Russia	In-person interview
26	Rights defender specialising in far-right nationalism	Moscow, Russia	In-person interview

Interviews 2019	Actors	Location	Mode
27	Academic/Researcher	St. Petersburg, Russia	In-person interview
28	Academic/Researcher	Moscow, Russia	In-person interview
29	Internet-freedom NGO	Moscow, Russia	Skype interview
30	Social media user arrests monitoring NGO	Moscow, Russia	Skype interview
31	NGO	Moscow, Russia	In-person interview
32	Participant 'Mal Estacionado' (StopXam endorsed)	Lima, Peru	Skype interview
33	Participant 'Mal Estacionado' (StopXam endorsed)	Lima, Peru	Skype interview
34	Participant	Moscow, Russia	In-person interview
35	Rights defender specialising in vigilantism. Follow-up interview	Moscow, Russia	Skype interview
36	Target in exile	Latvia, Riga	Skype interview

Annexe IV: Semi-structured and open-ended interview topics and questions

Questions for Participants:

Intro

Greet, thank, gather consent

Focus on participant profile

How old are you?

What is your occupation?

How long have you been a member of (insert group name)?

Why did you join the group? (or establish the group, if speaking with the founders)?

Focus on group

How would you describe the focus of your group? Does it have a particular cause or goal?

How many active members are in the group?

How can one become a member of your group?

Focus on online audience

Tell me about your digital support (dotcomrades, online endorsers)?

How big is your audience?

How would you describe your audience? (age, interests, location, etc.)

Focus on relation with state

How would you describe your relationship with the state (policymakers, police, etc.)?

Can you describe any developments over time in terms of how the state/police has treated you, or how you have worked with them?

Under which circumstances does police seek cooperation with you/you seek cooperation with police?

Do you see any resemblance of the Soviet-era citizen-led justice in your activities, like comrades' courts?

What sources of inspiration have informed your group?

Focus on the use of social media and mobile devices

How do you use social media platforms for your cause?

How do you use mobile devices for your cause (this would depend on the type of group/activities)? Some may have professional camera crews, others may be more clandestine, or depend on citizens submitting footage/evidence through their own devices)?

What if it was no longer possible to use the internet and social media, how would you go about your activities?

Based on this scenario, how would you describe the function that social media and mobile devices serve in your activities/movement?

How are the videos that you upload on social media generated and processed?

Focus on other groups and counter narratives

What do you think about other groups involved in similar activities?

How would you describe your collaboration/partnership/relationship with this/these group(s)? Are there any 'fakes' (insert group name) that take advantage of your brand and if so how do you address sanctioned/unauthorized franchising?

What is your reaction to counter-narratives and criticism to your activities online/in the media/public discourse?

Are you satisfied with the way mass media represents your organisation?

Closure

How long do you plan on participating in this cause?

Where do you see yourself in the future (5 years, 10 years)?

Questions for Targets:

Intro

Greet, thank, gather consent

Focus on target profile

How old are you?

What is your occupation?

Experience

Would you please describe what happened to you?

How would you describe the video/photo/exposing material you were featured in?

When did the incident [confrontation or denunciation by group?] occur?

What were your immediate actions after the incident?

What were your immediate feelings after the incident?

Did you turn to anyone for assistance (relatives, friends, police, lawyers, NGOs, other groups, counter-movements, etc.)?

Did anybody come to assist you without you asking?

Perception of digital vigilantism

What is your perception of citizen-led justice in Russia?

Do you see any resemblance of the Soviet-era citizen-led justice in their activities, like the comrades' courts?

Why do you think people engage in digital vigilantism?

How did the media cover your cases/similar cases?

How reflective was it of what really happened?

Were you able to share your position on the event somehow (in mass media/on social networks)?

If yes, can you describe how this took place, and what your message was?

What was the reaction of state and its representatives to your case?

If you ended up in the same situation again approached by (insert group name) how would you act?

Questions for Police/NGOs/Journalists/Academics:

What is your professional or personal stance on citizen-led justice in Russia?

How do you perceive groups such as StopXam, Hrushi Protiv, etc.?

How did these citizen-led justice groups emerge in Russia? (any historical links to USSR?)

Have you ever dealt with participants/targets of digital vigilantism in your work?

If yes, could you share your experiences?

When did digital versions of these groups begin to be a factor in your professional duties?

Do you think digital vigilantism is a helpful tool for police or do these practices "get in the way" of your work?

Are there specific circumstances (ex: type of crime) that make vigilantism more acceptable in your view?

Are all groups participating in digital vigilantism similar (in terms of composition, aims, public perception), or are there variations?

Why do you think people engage in digital vigilantism?

In terms of social harms, in the case of digital vigilantism is there danger of wrong accusation/proportionality/legality of retaliation?

What about discrimination (against various categories of individuals and groups)?

What recommendations would you have for your organisation (or the government more generally, or other agencies perhaps in other countries) who may be dealing with citizens monitoring, denouncing and pursuing other citizens online?

What is your vision on the future of digital vigilantism in Russia?

What role does the internet and mobile telecommunication play in citizen-led justice.



English Summary

Digital vigilantism in Russia

Citizen-led justice in the context of social change and social harm

This dissertation attempted to find answers to the following questions: 1) How is digital vigilantism in Russia informed by historically situated practices of outsourced, crowdsourced, and volunteered citizen-led justice, as well as denouncing, shaming, and moralising of citizens by fellow citizens? 2) How is visibility (including mediated shaming, moralising, harassment, and embodied acts of retaliation) weaponised by participants? 3) What motivates citizen participation in- and state support of digital vigilantism? 4) How is digital vigilantism framed and rendered meaningful by state-owned and independent Russian media? 5) How is digital vigilantism experienced by targets in relation to social inequalities, digital divides, social frustrations and biases? 6) What are the legal and digital media landscapes in which vigilante practices take place in Russia?

Through the articles that make up its chapters, the current dissertation sought an answer to the overarching puzzle of the role and influence that social media may have on the relationship between the sovereign (the state) and its constituency (citizens) as well as the modes of socialisation among the latter within state-imposed structures and in spite of them. Thus, the main research question was formed as follows: How are practices of digital vigilantism in Russia manifested through state-citizen and citizen-to-citizen relations? Such state-citizen and citizen-on-citizen control dynamics are accompanied by complex webs of other inter-relations, negotiated through traditional and digital media.

Chapter overview

Citizen-led Justice Then and Now

This research project began with the investigation of sociocultural factors and historical practices related to outsourcing legal matters to citizens in Russia and their impacts on the current manifestation of digitally mediated citizen-led justice. It should be noted that the state has compelled citizens to exercise justice over other citizens since the early formation of the Soviet empire (Sieglebaum, 1992). Therefore, *Chapter II "Citizen-led justice then and now: From comrades' courts to dotcomrade vigilantism"* addresses Soviet-era delegation of certain legal matters into the hands of citizens. The following questions are addressed in the chapter: What are the similarities and differences between conventional communist and digitally mediated post-communist vigilantism in Russia? What role does the state play in manifestations of mediated citizen-led justice in post-communist Russia?

The involvement of citizenry in vigilante and judicial duties was institutionalised by the General Secretary of the Communist Party Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s with a formal introduction of comrades' courts (Gorlizki, 1998, p.403). The courts aimed to "...

explore matters of everyday morality and address instances of improper behavior by those who depart from the norms of socialist community life” (materials from the XXI Communist Party Congress cited in Gorlizki, 1998, p. 424). The courts addressed minor mischief, poor performance at work, hooliganism, alcoholism, asocial behaviour and the like; they were granted the power to assign and execute punishment or transfer the case to other state organs, should the severity of a given offence be outside of the scope of amateur judges, i.e., fellow comrades (Supreme Council of RSFSR, 1961).

Public shaming was practiced in the form of the so-called “black boards of shame” where photographs of deviant community members were displayed for the public eye. In fact, these boards of shame had an antipode in the form of “red boards of honor” displaying hardworking communists (Bondarev, 2012). Such methods of public display and shaming resemble modern practices of exposure, where social media platforms serve as spaces for “flagging” other citizens when they litter, deliver poor service, or otherwise commit perceived misconduct (Loveluck, 2019). These systems in the context of Russia’s social organisation provide a historical socio-cultural foundation for organised vigilante groups to take collective action against a perceived offence and to exercise moralisation and public shaming.

In the current dissertation, the role of the state is addressed as a traditional power and violence monopolist and, in the case of Russia, as a media superpower (Orttung & Walker, 2013; Lipman, 2017; Freedomhouse, 2017). Contrary to the perceived autonomy of vigilantes (Johnston, 1996), in Russia, successful vigilante movements are approved and supported by the state. The chapter, thus, investigates nuances and complexities of this relationship, inquiring into the characteristics and practices that can grant state approval or, on the contrary, spark counter-measures. Some aspects of the Soviet-era collective justice, such as shaming and moralisation, indeed appear to have reincarnated in the digital domain. Other nuances, however, have either evolved or are unique due to the novelty of social media affordances. For instance, in the Soviet era well-seasoned members of the society were granted participatory powers in moralising other citizens; in contemporary Russia, however, these actors have been replaced with digitally-savvy youth who can gain social recognition by participation.

Vigilantes, their Media Products and Motives for Participation

Having addressed historical premises, the dissertation zooms in on contemporary state-supported groups. The new era of organised and institutionalised vigilantism in Russia begins in 2005 with the formation of a pro-Kremlin youth group ‘Nashi’ [Ours] which “played an important role in political socialization of young people” (Krivonos & Fedorova, 2014). After its dissolution in 2012, Nashi left behind such federal-level movements (with franchise branches across the country) such as ‘StopXam’ [Stop a Douchebag] combating bad parking and traffic violations, and ‘Hrushki Protiv’ [Piggy Against] specialising in detection of expired produce in grocery stores and markets. Both groups were founded in 2010 by former commissars and members of Nashi movement.

These groups have benefited from state grants under the Presidential Program for NGO Support (Rubin & Rustamova, 2014; Rustamova, 2015).

Both StopXam and Hrushy Protiv operate in similar modes, a group of participants approaches its target and confronts offensive behaviour while filming the process. Confrontation often leads to the use of obscene language and violence, sometimes escalating into group fights. Videos are edited, uploaded on YouTube, and shared across various social platforms. Chapter 3 "YouTube as a stage for vigilantism and politicised citizen-led justice in Russia" features Foucauldian discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) addressing power positions between participants, targets and law enforcement. Videos were analysed with regards to both speech and images, with the focus on participants' self-portrayal, framing of targets (often ethnic minorities and labour migrants), and portrayal of police forces (who are sometimes invited to the scene both by participants and by targets) and other formal and informal actors (state officials and popular artists). This chapter, thus, raises the following question: Amid the ongoing crackdown on online self-expression in Russia, what types of citizen-initiated forms of online activism are tolerated and even endorsed by the government and why? In addition, three support questions are raised: What are the motivations for participation in digital vigilantism? What are the impacts of digital vigilantism on targets? What is the role of platform affordances and regulation in digital vigilantism?

Focusing on vigilante media products, the chapter contributes to literature by unveiling various power hierarchies and webs of interests in state-citizen and citizen-to-citizen justice provision. It offers a detailed account of how vigilante formations such as Hrushy Protiv acquire financial, political, and other benefits from their activities. By being loyal to the ruling elites and by not crossing the boundaries that could potentially harm these elites, such formations as Hrushy Protiv are allowed to operate in the otherwise controlled digital and public domains. The government gains benefits from such citizen-critical publics. First of all, the blame is taken off the political elites and policies. Citizen-critical publics elevate on-the-ground unscrupulousness, as opposed to challenging the system itself. At the same time, amid control intensification, the government may aim to appear less repressive than it is by demonstrating a façade of civil society activism in the country.

The analysis revealed a bias towards merchants of non-Slavic descent, as the group deems people from the Caucasus and labour migrants from the former-Soviet Central Asian republics responsible for expired produce on the shelves of Russia's stores. Via monetisation options, platforms allow participants to generate an income, acquire a large following, advertise, and create discourse through their own social media channels. As such, platforms enable an environment in which digital vigilantism is manifest. This environment, however, is subject to domestic regulation in the specific internet governance context.

Heroes or Hooligans?

After looking at the digital media products, the dissertation proceeds to consider the role of traditional media in framing participants, targets, law enforcement and other actors. Media discourses surrounding the phenomenon of digital vigilantism more broadly are addressed in *Chapter 4 "Heroes or hooligans? The role of traditional media in rendering digital vigilantism meaningful"*. This chapter aims to expand theoretical frames of definitional dimensions of vigilantism by addressing the role of audience and traditional media in the digitally mediated manifestation of this phenomenon. It aims to do so by addressing the following questions: How are StopXam participants, their targets, and police forces portrayed in Russia's traditional media? What is the role of traditional media in rendering digital vigilantism meaningful? Motives for participation by groups and individuals as well as harms experienced by targets are evaluated at the background of social biases and frustrations that penetrate the digital domain and, consequently, re-enter offline discourses.

This chapter focused on StopXam and considers the portrayal of the group, its targets and police forces in Russia's pro-state and independent media outlets, investigating the role of traditional media in the manifestation of digital vigilantism. The chapter draws its sample from Russia's top broadcasters: Channel One, NTV, Ren TV and Rossiia-24. State controlled media in Russia is a norm-setter that represents the position of the ruling regime on both domestic and international issues. Qualitative content analysis of reports on StopXam is used to shed light on the media perception of the role and meaning of digital vigilantism in the society. By looking at the eight-year period between 2010 and 2018, the chapter illustrates the evolution in the coverage of StopXam and links narrative fluctuations to greater socio-political processes in the country. In addition to these state-loyal broadcasters, the study features TV Rain—an alternative voice that had to move all of its broadcasting online due to state pressure and inability to deliver content via cable.

All selected channels maintain websites with archived news blocks in the form of videos and transcribed text. News reports were sought by typing variations of the group's name spelling in the Cyrillic alphabet: *CmonXam*, *Cmon Xam*, *Cmonxam*. Select results that featured unrelated topics were removed. A total of 307 news pieces were analysed in the frame of this research: 4 from Channel One; 48 from NTV; 149 from Rent TV; 98 from Russia-24; and 8 from TV Rain (for details on methodological approaches see Annexe II). Content analysis demonstrates the important role of traditional media in framing social justice and in giving voice to respective actors. Whether StopXam members are heroes or hooligans is a contested view, and media analysis reveals that perceptions have changed over time.

Layers of Target Vulnerabilities

Hate-based movements in Russia target ethnic minorities, labour migrants and alleged paedophiles. Targets are identified through social networks and eventually fall victim to embodied confrontation and humiliation filmed on camera and shared online. Some groups exclusively target Muslim women and expose them to collective shaming and moralising. In the country's conservative regions such as Chechnya, this exposure can lead to physical abuse and even 'honour execution'. *Chapter 5 "Layers of target vulnerabilities in digital vigilantism"* addresses the case of the so-called patriot groups composed of male Kyrgyz migrants who punish Kyrgyz women through 'honour beating' for interaction with representatives of other ethnic groups while in Russia.

By addressing the selected case, this chapter aims to further inform the scientific discussion, debate, and exchange on the role, benefits, and harms that digital media can bring into the lives of vulnerable groups such as labour migrants. The chapter responds to the following question: How are the established social, political, and economic inequalities, as well as racial, ethnic, and other biases impacting social justice manifested in the digital domain? Capable of reinforcing the "existing social relationships" (van Dijk, 2012, p. 243), where they "culminate in a coordinated mass persecution of a targeted citizen" (Trottier, 2017, p. 61), these biases can re-enter the offline sphere and further influence the discourse.

The male 'patriots' undress women, beat them, shave their eyebrows off, sexually assault them. The entire process is filmed and shared online. While filming, they force women to reveal their identity and home address and to say that they are sorry for interacting with non-Kyrgyz men in order to "send a message" to others (Beishenbek Kyzy & Bigg, 2012). The case of Kyrgyz 'patriots' illustrates hierarchies of vulnerability among targets as labour migrants are targeted by far-right anti-immigrant groups in Russia, while female migrants also fall victim to abuse by fellow male compatriots.

(Con)Trolling the Web: Internet Governance in Russia

After addressing the historical premises, contemporary cases, the roles of digital and traditional media and target experiences, it is important to also consider the legal and digital milieus in which these practices take place. The aim of *Chapter 6 "(Con)Trolling the web: Internet governance in Russia"* is to assess the state of media control in Russia by investigating the logic of social media user arrests. The chapter responds to the following questions: What is the logic behind social media user arrests in Russia? What specific online activities can lead to litigation? It concludes that ambiguity and monomania of social-media control structures in Russia make everyone potentially vulnerable. In such circumstances, social media users simply do not and cannot know whether or not they will face the law for their online engagements—a condition capable of stimulating self-censorship.

The research begins with the analysis of legal frameworks, as several criminal code articles have been amended and applied to online speech, leading to accusations in

extremism and terrorism not only for expressed opinions, but even for mere 'likes'. Furthermore, 990 cases of litigation against social media users were investigated to illustrate who is being targeted and over what type of online self-expression.

The chapter identifies state-loyal vigilante forces recruited to snitch on fellow citizens and monitor the web for undesired content. It also presents citizen counter-forces to repressive state mechanisms and their operation tactics. Four types of charges against social media users can be identified based on the study: 1) *Authentic* – real cases instigated over real hate-speech. 2) *Tactical* – made-up cases targeting state critics. 3) *Practical* – targeting people with limited financial and social capital for police to fill case quotas. 4) *Random* – accidental persons facing the law due to vague definitions and broad interpretations. All four categories can be described as *invasive* as in some cases citizens face the law for content shared in private photo albums on VKontakte (Russia's Facebook analogue). This level of invasiveness is an indication of a collaboration between law enforcement and the platform.

There are certain themes in social media posts that can nearly guarantee a vulnerability to litigation. Among these are posts challenging the ruling elites, calls for protests, posts concerning the Orthodox Church, World War II, xenophobic posts, and posts related to Russia-Ukraine conflict. The spectrum of topics is broadened with every new case of accusation and with new legislation governing online speech. Sometimes there are contradicting combinations as both misogynist and feminist, religious and atheist posts can lead to litigation. Most of the analysed cases concerned posts shared or 'liked' on VKontakte social network. Although nearly all other mainstream social media platforms are represented, VKontakte is the leader when it comes to legal cases concerning online content.

The applicability of the law is selective in Russia. This selectivity exemplifies a scenario where critics of the state can be punished for their off- and online activities. When a person is challenging the ruling elites offline, their online trace will also fall under scrutiny. Due to technical and financial inability to replicate a Chinese-style "Firewall", Russia's ruling elite opted for *trolling* the web through the spread of fear via repressive legislation, selective arrests, and regime-loyal citizens acting out in the manner that echoes the country's totalitarian past. Citizens can report on other citizens for personal reasons. Furthermore, equipped with quotas, police officers can use vague legal frameworks to arrest random users and fill their case-solving statistics. Citizen counter-forces to the state are present, but are weaker than the united forces of elites, law enforcement, recruited citizens and state-loyal/state-compliant social media platforms. Counter-forces are in a weaker position due to limited capacity, disproportionality of resources and lack of unity.

Conclusion

Having compared the historical context to contemporary practices, this dissertation revealed some important similarities and differences. Among the reincarnated approaches, the dissertation identified the role of the state in support of select vigilantes and collaboration between these state-approved watchful citizens and law enforcement authorities. At the same time, new modes of visibility allow watchful citizens to potentially turn against the 'feeding hand' and expose the ruling elites and the police. In this regard, the relationship between vigilantes and the state is characterised by waves of endorsement and condemnation. Among the differences between Soviet-era citizen recruitment for justice provision and contemporary digital vigilantism in Russia, this dissertation points to the shift of central actors, such as participants and targets. While in the Soviet times, state-recruited vigilant citizens tended to be well-respected members of the society with achievements in military service or labour; in contemporary Russia, state-endorsed vigilantes are young people with no particular prior achievements aside for the demonstrated loyalty to the political status quo. On the contrary, participation in vigilant acts can grant these young people social, political, financial and other capital and advantages.

While visibility is instrumentalised to harm targets, it can bring about certain benefits to participants. Studies within this dissertation revealed that vigilantes can build a name for themselves online and become influential informal leaders. Through the use of logos, stickers, shirts and other paraphernalia, participants develop a corporation-resembling entity with powers of (dis)approval of franchise branches across and beyond Russia. Recognition and following by large audiences can bring about several benefits at once—social, political, financial and legal.

In terms of their social status, participants can gain recognition through participation. Sometimes leaders of vigilante formations are invited to speak as experts on a particular issue on the national television in Russia. In this regard, what can be observed is an act of professionalisation of amateurs through a self-made vigilante repertoire. Political aspects imply formal and informal powers. Formally, some participants were able to build a name for themselves and run for official positions in the Russian government. Informally, participants who enjoyed endorsement by the ruling elite also benefited from such recognition both in cases of interaction with law enforcement authorities and in terms of media portrayal of their activities. From the financial standpoint, participants can generate income via various sources. Among these are state grants in support of activities, YouTube monetisation, advertisement, paraphernalia sales, brand sales. In some cases, blackmailing of targets can also be a source of income. From the legal perspective, visibility and recognition rendered certain immunities to participants. As interviews have revealed, some vigilantes were able to blackmail police officers by threatening to expose them online. In this case, wide following on social media grants unique powers to vigilantes, sometimes exceeding those of legal authorities. However,

these benefits have shown to be temporal and highly dependent on the vision of the ruling elites.

In this regard, when certain invisible lines are crossed and participants become a threat to the elites, for instance, when they start targeting the political establishment and their relatives, or attacking national symbols that render legitimacy to individuals in power positions, visibility can be used against vigilantes. Video and photo material disseminated online to harm the targets can suddenly turn into pieces of evidence used against participants. Traditional media too can come into play and can both glorify and condemn participation.

Traditional media has shown to play several important roles in the manifestation of digital vigilantism. First of all, traditional media framing of vigilante activities can influence public perceptions by frequently reporting on activities and by framing participants as positive characters fighting for the greater social good. Traditional media can also assist vigilantes in building their brand and expanding publicity. While doing so, traditional media can also bring further harms to the targets whose unsolicited and harmful exposure online is suddenly broadcasted on TV programmes and featured in newspapers.

By focusing on both traditional and digital media, this dissertation underlined the importance of the audience in online punitive acts. Without the audience, the intensity of retaliation is challenged. By virtue of watching, liking, sharing, commenting on and otherwise engaging with YouTube videos shared by vigilantes, audience members contribute to the severity of unsolicited exposure experienced by targets. In this regard, digital vigilantism as a punitive practice can be compared to Foucauldian “spectacle of punishment” (Foucault, 1995). Akin to the medieval times, the audience is present at the scene of public torture and execution, albeit a virtual one. In the same way as was centuries ago, the audience is taught a lesson that essentially anyone can be in the place of the tortured subject. Foucault argues that such public torture of the past focused on damaging the body, while punitive measures of the 20th century in the form of prisons and insane asylums damaged people’s souls. In digital vigilantism the two can merge. When a person is physically attacked—their body is in pain; when this attack is filmed and shared online for the global audience to see in perpetual manner—a person’s dignity and reputation are also destroyed.

While some may argue that in certain cases punishment of targets is justified because they committed serious crimes or breached moral and ethical norms, it is important to consider the layers of target vulnerabilities and to be reminded that in digital vigilantism due process is absent and the presumption of guilt defies any presumption of innocence.

Nederlandse samenvatting

Digital vigilantism in Rusland

Burger-gestuurde gerechtigheid in de context van maatschappelijke veranderingen en maatschappelijke beschadiging

Dit proefschrift heeft geprobeerd antwoorden te vinden op de volgende vragen: 1) Hoe laten digitale burgerwachten in Rusland zich kenmerken door historisch gesitueerde praktijken omtrent uitbestedde, door het publiek gefinancierde, en vrijwillige burger-gestuurde gerechtigheid, en omtrent het afkeuren, te schande maken en moraliseren van burgers door medeburgers? 2) Hoe is zichtbaarheid (wat onder andere gemedieerd te schande maken, moraliseren, intimideren en fysieke vergeldingsacties behelst) tot een wapen gemaakt door deelnemers? 3) Wat motiveert burgerparticipatie in- en staatsondersteuning van digitale burgerwachten? 4) Hoe worden digitale burgerwachten geframed en betekenis gegeven door zowel Russische staatsmedia als onafhankelijke Russische media? 5) Hoe wordt digitaal vigilantism ervaren door doelwitten in relatie tot sociale ongelijkheden, digitale scheidslijnen, sociale frustraties en vooroordelen? 6) Wat zijn de juridische en digitale medialandschappen waarin vigilantism plaatsvindt in Rusland?

Aan de hand van de artikelen die de hoofdstukken vormen van dit proefschrift, werd een antwoord gezocht op de overkoepelende puzzel van zowel de rol en invloed die sociale media kunnen hebben op de relatie tussen de soeverein (de staat) en haar burgers alsmede de modi van socialisatie van laatstgenoemde binnen de door de staat opgelegde structuren (of ondanks deze structuren). Dus de belangrijkste onderzoeksvraag werd als volgt vormgegeven: Hoe manifesteren praktijken van digitaal burgerwachten in Rusland zich in de relaties van staat tot burger en van burger tot burger? Dergelijke staat-tot-burger en burger-tot-burger controledynamieken worden vergezeld door complexe verbanden van andere inter-relaties, waarin traditionele en digitale media een bemiddelende rol spelen.

Hoofdstukoverzicht

Burger-gestuurde rechtvaardigheid toen en nu

Dit onderzoeksproject begon met een onderzoek naar de socioculturele factoren en historische praktijken die verband houden met het uitbesteden van juridische aangelegenheden aan burgers in Rusland en de impact van deze factoren en praktijken op de huidige manifestatie van digitaal gemedieerde burger-gestuurde gerechtigheid. Opgemerkt dient te worden dat de staat sinds de vroege vorming van het Sovjetimperium (Siegelaub, 1992) burgers heeft gedwongen om gerechtigheid uit te oefenen over andere burgers (Siegelaub, 1992). Om deze reden richt *Hoofdstuk II "Burger-gestuurde rechtvaardigheid toen en nu: van kameradenrechtbank naar 'dotcomrade' vigilantism"* zich op hoe in het Sovjettijdperk bepaalde juridische aangelegenheden werden

gedelegeerd naar burgers. De volgende vragen worden behandeld in het hoofdstuk: Wat zijn de overeenkomsten en verschillen tussen het conventioneel communistisch en het digitaal gemedieerd postcommunistisch vigilantisme in Rusland? Welke rol speelt de staat in manifestaties van gemedieerde burger-geleide rechtvaardigheid in postcommunistisch Rusland?

De betrokkenheid van de bevolking in vigilantisme en justitiële taken werd geïnstitutionaliseerd door de secretaris-secretaris van de Communistische Partij Nikita Khrushchev in de jaren '50 met een formele introductie van de kameradenrechtbank (Gorlizki, 1998, p.403). De rechtbanken wilden "... de zaken van alledaagse moraliteit verkennen en gewag maken van voorbeelden van oneigenlijk gedrag door degenen die afwijken van de normen van het leven van de socialistische gemeenschap" (materialen van het 21st Communistisch Partijcongres geciteerd in Gorlizki, 1998, p. 424). Deze rechtbanken behandelden kleine misdaad, slechte prestaties op het werk, hooliganisme, alcoholisme, asociaal gedrag en dergelijke; ze kregen de bevoegdheid om straf toe te wijzen en uit te voeren of de zaak over te dragen aan andere staatsorganen mocht de ernst van een gegeven misdrijf buiten de reikwijdte van amateurrechters zijn, oftewel andere kameraden (hoogste raad van RSFSR, 1961).

Het publiek te schande maken vond plaats in de vorm van de zogenaamde "zwarte raden van schaamte" waar foto's van afwijkende gemeenschapsleden werden getoond voor het oog van het publiek. In feite hadden deze raden van schaamte een tegenpool in de vorm van "rode borden van eer" die hardwerkende communisten (Bondarev, 2012) vertoonden. Dergelijke methoden van openbare vertoningen en het publiek te schande maken lijken op moderne praktijken omtrent 'exposing', waarbij sociale media-platforms dienen als ruimtes voor het "markeren" van andere burgers wanneer ze afval op straat gooien, een slechte dienst leveren, of bij het anderszins waarnemen van een vorm van wangedrag (Loveluck, 2019). In de context van de sociale organisatie van Rusland bieden deze systemen een historische sociaal-culturele basis voor georganiseerde vigilante-groepen om collectief actie te ondernemen tegen een waargenomen misdrijf en te moraliseren en anderen publiek te schande te maken.

In dit proefschrift wordt de rol van de staat behandeld als een traditionele kracht- en geweldmonopolist en, in het geval van Rusland, als media-superkracht (Ortting & Walker, 2013; Lipman, 2017; Freedomhouse, 2017). In tegenstelling tot de veronderstelde autonomie van vigilantes (Johnston, 1996), worden in Rusland succesvolle vigilante-bewegingen goedgekeurd en ondersteund door de staat. Het hoofdstuk onderzoekt dus de nuances en complexiteiten van deze relatie, en de kenmerken en praktijken die goedkeuring van de staat kunnen wegdragen of, integendeel, tot tegenmaatregelen kunnen leiden. Sommige aspecten van de collectieve rechtspraak uit de Sovjetperiode, zoals te schande maken en moraliseren, lijken inderdaad opnieuw te zijn gereïncarneerd in het digitale domein. Andere nuances zijn echter ofwel geëvolueerd of uniek vanwege de nieuwheid van sociale media. Bijvoorbeeld, in de Sovjetperiode kregen geautoriseerde burgers participatieve bevoegdheden bij het moraliseren van andere

burgers; in hedendaags Rusland zijn deze acteurs echter vervangen door digitaal bekwame jongeren die door deelname sociale erkenning kunnen krijgen.

Vigilantes, hun mediaproducten en motieven voor deelname

Na deze historische uitgangspunten te hebben behandeld, zoomt het proefschrift in op hedendaagse en door de staat gesteunde groepen. Het nieuwe tijdperk van georganiseerde en geïnstitutionaliseerde burgerwachten in Rusland begint in 2005 met de vorming van een pro-Kremlin-jongerengroep 'Nashi' [Onze] die "een belangrijke rol speelde in de politieke socialisatie van jongeren" (Krivonos & Fedorova, 2014). Na te zijn ontbonden in 2012 liet Nashi soortgelijke bewegingen op federaal niveau achter (met franchisevestigingen in het hele land), zoals 'StopXam' [Stop een Douchebag] die slecht parkeren en verkeersovertredingen bestrijdt, en 'Hrushi Protiv' [Piggy Tegen] gespecialiseerd in het detecteren van verlopen houdbaarheidsdata van producten in supermarkten en markten. Beide groepen werden in 2010 opgericht door voormalige commissarissen en leden van de Nashi-beweging. Deze groepen hebben geprofiteerd van staatsubsidies in het kader van het presidentiële programma voor NGO-ondersteuning (Rubin & Rustamova, 2014; Rustamova, 2015). StopXam als Hrushi Protiv werken in vergelijkbare modi: een groep deelnemers nadert al filmend het doelwit en confronteert deze met aanstootgevend gedrag. Confrontatie leidt vaak tot het gebruik van obscene taal en geweld, soms escalerend in groepsgevechten. Video's worden bewerkt, geüpload op YouTube en gedeeld op verschillende sociale platforms. Hoofdstuk 3 "YouTube als een podium voor vigilantisme en gepolitiseerde, door burgers geleide gerechtigheid in Rusland" bevat Foucauldiaanse discoursanalyse (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) en behandelt de machtsverhoudingen tussen deelnemers, doelwitten en wetshandhaving. Video's werden geanalyseerd met betrekking tot zowel spraak als beeld, met de nadruk op hoe de deelnemers zichzelf portretteren, het framen van doelwitten (vaak etnische minderheden en arbeidsmigranten) en het portretteren van de politiediensten (die er soms worden bijgehaald door zowel deelnemers als doelwitten) en andere formele en informele actoren (staatsfunctionarissen en populaire artiesten). Dit hoofdstuk roept dus de volgende vraag op: Welke vormen van door burgers geïnitieerd online activisme worden, te midden van het voortdurende harde optreden tegen online zelfexpressie in Rusland, getolereerd en zelfs onderschreven door de overheid en waarom? Daarnaast worden drie ondersteunende vragen gesteld: Wat zijn de drijfveren voor deelname aan digitale burgerwachten? Wat zijn de effecten van digitale waakzaamheid op doelwitten? Wat is de rol van platformmogelijkheden en regelgeving in digitaal vigilantisme?

Met de nadruk op mediaproducten van burgerwachten, draagt het hoofdstuk bij aan de academische literatuur door verschillende machtshiërarchieën en belangennetwerken in de rechtsvoorziening tussen staat en burger en burger-tot-burger aan het licht te brengen. Het biedt een gedetailleerd overzicht van hoe burgerwachten zoals Hrushi Protiv financiële, politieke en andere voordelen halen uit

hun activiteiten. Door loyaal te zijn aan de heersende elites en door de grenzen niet te overschrijden die deze elites zouden kunnen schaden, mogen groepen als Hrushii Protiv opereren in de normaal gesproken gecontroleerde digitale en publieke domeinen. De overheid heeft baat bij dergelijke burger-kritische groepen. Allereerst wordt de schuld niet bij politieke elites en het beleid gelegd. Burger-kritische groepen geven prioriteit aan gewetenloosheid op het niveau van het alledaagse, in tegenstelling tot het systeem zelf uit te dagen. Tegelijkertijd kan de regering, te midden van een intensivering van de controle, ernaar streven minder repressief te lijken dan ze is door een façade van activisme van het maatschappelijk middenveld in het land te demonstreren.

De analyse onthulde dat de groep bevooroordeeld is jegens koopmannen van niet-Slavische afkomst, aangezien mensen uit de Kaukasus en arbeidsmigranten uit Centraal-Aziatische republieken van de voormalige Sovjet-Unie verantwoordelijk worden geacht voor verlopen producten in de schappen van Russische winkels. Platforms stellen gebruikers in staat om een inkomen te genereren, een grote aanhang te verwerven, te adverteren en een discours te creëren via hun eigen sociale mediakanalen. Als zodanig maken platforms een omgeving mogelijk waarin digitaal vigilantisme zich manifesteert. Deze omgeving is echter onderworpen aan binnenlandse regelgeving in de specifieke context van internetgovernance.

Helden of hooligans?

Na het behandelen van digitale mediaproducten, gaat het proefschrift verder met het beschouwen van de rol van traditionele media bij het framen van deelnemers, doelwitten, wetshandhavers en andere actoren. Mediadiscoursen rondom het fenomeen van digitale burgerwachten in bredere zin worden behandeld in hoofdstuk 4 *“Helden of hooligans? De rol van traditionele media bij het betekenis geven aan digitale burgerwachten”*. Dit hoofdstuk heeft tot doel de theoretische kaders van definitiedimensies van vigilantisme uit te breiden door in te gaan op de rol van het publiek en traditionele media in de digitaal gemedieerde manifestatie van dit fenomeen. Het wil dit doen door de volgende vragen te beantwoorden: Hoe worden StopXam-deelnemers, hun doelwitten en politiediensten in de traditionele Russische media geportretteerd? Wat is de rol van traditionele media bij het betekenis geven aan digitale burgerwachten? Motieven voor deelname door groepen en individuen, evenals de schade die door doelwitten wordt ervaren, worden geëvalueerd tegen de achtergrond van sociale vooroordelen en frustraties die het digitale domein binnendringen en, bijgevolg, opnieuw in het offline discours terechtkomen.

Dit hoofdstuk concentreerde zich op StopXam en gaat in op hoe de groep, haar doelwitten, en politiediensten in Russische staatsgezinde en onafhankelijke media in beeld worden gebracht, waarbij de rol van traditionele media in de manifestatie van digitale burgerwachten wordt onderzocht.

Het hoofdstuk haalt haar voorbeelden uit de grootste zenders van Rusland: Channel One, NTV, Ren TV en Rossiia-24. De door de staat gecontroleerde media in Rusland zijn

een normbepaler die de positie van het heersende regime op zowel binnenlandse als internationale kwesties vertegenwoordigt. Een kwalitatieve inhoudsanalyse van rapporten over StopXam wordt toegepast om licht te werpen op de mediaperceptie van de rol en betekenis van digitale burgerwachten in de samenleving. Door te kijken naar een periode van acht jaar tussen 2010 en 2018, illustreert het hoofdstuk de evolutie in de berichtgeving over StopXam en koppelt het verhaalfunctuatie aan grotere sociaal-politieke processen in het land. Naast deze staatstrouwe omroepen, behandelt het onderzoek ook TV Rain - een alternatieve stem die al zijn uitzendingen online moest verplaatsen vanwege staatsdruk en het onvermogen om inhoud via de kabel te leveren.

Alle geselecteerde kanalen onderhouden websites met gearchiveerde nieuwsproducten in de vorm van video's en getranscribeerde tekst. Nieuwsberichten werden verzameld door op variaties van de naamspelling van de groep in het Cyrillische alfabet te zoeken: СтопХам, Стоп Хам, Стопхам. Resultaten met niet-gerelateerde onderwerpen die zijn verwijderd. In het kader van dit onderzoek zijn in totaal 307 nieuwsberichten geanalyseerd: 4 van Channel One; 48 van NTV; 149 van Ren TV; 98 uit Rossiia-24; en 8 van TV Rain (voor details over methodologische benaderingen, zie bijlage II). De inhoudsanalyse toont de belangrijke rol aan van traditionele media bij het vormgeven van sociale rechtvaardigheid en het geven van een stem aan de respectieve actoren. Of StopXam-leden helden of hooligans zijn, is een omstreden mening, en uit media-analyse blijkt dat de perceptie in de loop van de tijd is veranderd.

De gelaagde kwetsbaarheden van doelwitten

Door haat gemotiveerde bewegingen in Rusland richten zich op etnische minderheden, arbeidsmigranten en vermeende pedofielen. Doelwitten worden geïdentificeerd via sociale netwerken en worden uiteindelijk het slachtoffer van fysieke confrontatie en vernedering, gefilmd op camera en vervolgens online gedeeld. Sommige groepen richten zich uitsluitend op moslimvrouwen en stellen hen bloot aan collectieve schaamte en moralisering. In de conservatieve regio's van het land, zoals Tsjetsjenië, kan deze blootstelling leiden tot fysieke mishandeling en zelfs 'eervolle executie'. Hoofdstuk 5 *"De gelaagde kwetsbaarheden van doelwitten van digitale burgerwachten"* behandelt zogenaamde patriotgroepen bestaande uit mannelijke Kirgizische migranten die Kirgizische vrouwen straffen door middel van 'eerslagen' voor interactie met leden van andere etnische groepen terwijl ze in Rusland waren.

In het behandelen van deze casus wil dit hoofdstuk de wetenschappelijke discussie, debatten en uitwisseling over de rol, voordelen en schade die digitale media kunnen brengen in het leven van kwetsbare groepen zoals arbeidsmigranten stimuleren. Het hoofdstuk beantwoordt de volgende vraag: Hoe manifesteren gevestigde sociale, politieke en economische ongelijkheden, evenals raciale, etnische en andere vooroordelen die van invloed zijn op sociale rechtvaardigheid, zich in het digitale domein? In staat om de "bestaande sociale relaties" (van Dijk, 2012, p. 243) te versterken, waar ze "uitmondten in een gecoördineerde massale vervolging van een beoogde

burger" (Trottier, 2017, p. 61), kunnen deze vooroordelen opnieuw binnenkomen in het offline domein en het discours verder beïnvloeden. De mannelijke 'patriotten' kleden vrouwen uit, slaan ze, scheren hun wenkbrauwen af, en randen ze aan. Het hele proces wordt gefilmd en online gedeeld. Tijdens het filmen dwingen ze vrouwen om hun identiteit en huisadres te onthullen en te zeggen dat ze spijt hebben van de interactie met niet-Kirgizische mannen om een "boodschap te sturen" naar anderen (Beishenbek Kyzy & Bigg, 2012). Het geval van Kirgizische 'patriotten' illustreert hiërarchieën van kwetsbaarheid tussen doelwitten, aangezien arbeidsmigranten het doelwit zijn van extreemrechtse anti-immigrantengroepen in Rusland, terwijl vrouwelijke migranten ook het slachtoffer worden van misbruik door mannelijke landgenoten.

(Con)Trollen op het web: Internetbestuur in Rusland

Na de historische premissen, hedendaagse gevallen, de rol van digitale en traditionele media en de ervaringen van doelwitten te hebben behandeld, is het belangrijk om ook rekening te houden met de juridische en digitale omgevingen waarin deze praktijken plaatsvinden. Het doel van hoofdstuk 6 "*(Con)Trolling the web: Internetbestuur in Rusland*" is om de staat van mediacontrole in Rusland vast te kunnen stellen door de logica van arrestaties van gebruikers van sociale media te onderzoeken. Het hoofdstuk beantwoordt de volgende vragen: Wat is de logica achter de arrestaties van gebruikers van sociale media in Rusland? Welke specifieke online activiteiten kunnen leiden tot rechtszaken? Het concludeert dat ambiguïteit en monomanie van sociale-mediacontrolestructuren in Rusland iedereen potentieel kwetsbaar maken. In dergelijke omstandigheden kunnen gebruikers van sociale media eenvoudigweg niet weten of ze al dan niet voor de wet zullen worden geconfronteerd met hun online activiteiten – een voorwaarde die zelfcensuur kan stimuleren.

Het onderzoek begint met de analyse van juridische kaders, aangezien verschillende artikelen uit het wetboek van strafrecht zijn gewijzigd en toegepast op uitingen op het internet. Dit heeft geleid tot beschuldigingen van extremisme en terrorisme, niet alleen voor geuite meningen, maar zelfs voor het louter 'liken' van berichten. Verder werden 990 rechtszaken tegen gebruikers van sociale media onderzocht om te illustreren wie de doelwitten zijn en welke soorten online zelfexpressie worden vervolgd.

Het hoofdstuk identificeert burgerwachten die loyaal aan de staat zijn en gerekruteerd om medeburgers te verraden en het web te controleren op ongewenste inhoud. Het behandelt ook tegenkrachten van burgers, gericht tegen repressieve staatsmechanismen en hun operatietactieken. Op basis van het onderzoek kunnen vier soorten aanklachten tegen gebruikers van sociale media worden geïdentificeerd: 1) Authentiek – echte zaken die zijn ingegeven door daadwerkelijk haatzaaien. 2) Tactisch – verzonden zaken gericht op staatscritici. 3) Praktisch – gericht op mensen met een beperkt financieel en sociaal kapitaal zodat de politie de zaakquota kan vullen. 4) Willekeurig – toevallige personen die voor de wet komen vanwege vage definities en brede interpretaties. Alle vier de categorieën kunnen als invasief worden omschreven,

aangezien burgers in sommige gevallen met de wet worden geconfronteerd voor inhoud die wordt gedeeld in privéfotoalbums op VKontakte (de Russische tegenhanger van Facebook). Hoe verregaakend dit is indiceert een samenwerking tussen wetshandhaving en het platform.

Er zijn bepaalde thema's in berichten op sociale media die een ontvankelijkheid voor rechtszaken bijna kunnen garanderen. Hieronder vallen berichten die de heersende elites uitdagen, oproepen tot protesten, berichten over de orthodoxe kerk, de Tweede Wereldoorlog, xenofobie berichten en berichten over het conflict tussen Rusland en Oekraïne. Het spectrum van onderwerpen wordt verbreed met elke nieuwe beschuldiging en wetgeving omtrent online uitingen. Soms zijn er tegenstrijdige combinaties, aangezien zowel vrouwenhatende als feministische, religieuze en atheïstische berichten tot rechtszaken kunnen leiden. De meeste geanalyseerde gevallen hadden betrekking op berichten die werden gedeeld of 'geliked' op het sociale netwerk VKontakte. Hoewel bijna alle andere reguliere sociale-mediaplatforms vertegenwoordigd zijn, is VKontakte de leider als het gaat om rechtszaken met betrekking tot online inhoud.

De toepasselijkheid van de wet is selectief in Rusland. Deze selectiviteit is een voorbeeld van een scenario waarin staatscritici kunnen worden gestraft voor hun off- en online-activiteiten. Wanneer een persoon de heersende elites offline uitdaagt, zal hun online spoor ook onder de loep worden genomen. Vanwege het technische en financiële onvermogen om een "Firewall" in Chinese stijl te repliceren, koos de heersende elite van Rusland ervoor om het web te trollen door de verspreiding van angst via repressieve wetgeving, selectieve arrestaties en regime-loyale burgers die zich gedroegen op een manier die overeenkomt met het totalitair verleden. Burgers kunnen om persoonlijke redenen over andere burgers rapporteren. Bovendien kunnen politieagenten, uitgerust met quota, vage wettelijke kaders gebruiken om willekeurige gebruikers te arresteren en hun statistieken voor het oplossen van zaken te verbeteren. Tegenkrachten van de staat tegen de staat zijn aanwezig, maar zijn zwakker dan de verenigde krachten van elites, wetshandhavers, gerekruteerde burgers en staatsgetrouwe/staatconforme sociale media platforms. Tegenkrachten verkeren in een zwakkere positie door beperkte capaciteit, onevenredigheid van middelen en gebrek aan eenheid.

Conclusie

Na vergelijking van de historische context met hedendaagse praktijken, bracht dit proefschrift enkele belangrijke overeenkomsten en verschillen aan het licht. Onder de gereïncarneerde benaderingen identificeerde het proefschrift de rol van de staat ter ondersteuning van geselecteerde burgerwachten en samenwerking tussen deze door de staat goedgekeurde waakzame burgers en wetshandhavingsinstanties. Tegelijkertijd stellen nieuwe vormen van zichtbaarheid waakzame burgers in staat zich mogelijk tegen de 'voedende hand' te keren en de heersende elites en de politie uit te lichten. In

dit opzicht wordt de relatie tussen burgerwachten en de staat gekenmerkt door golven van goedkeuring en veroordeling. Onder de verschillen tussen het rekruteren van burgers uit het Sovjettijdperk voor justitiële voorzieningen en hedendaagse digitale burgerwachten in Rusland wijst dit proefschrift op verschuivingen van centrale actoren, zoals deelnemers en doelwitten. Terwijl in de Sovjettijd door de staat aangeworven waakzame burgers de neiging hadden om gerespecteerde leden van de samenleving te zijn met prestaties in militaire dienst of arbeid zijn in het hedendaagse Rusland de door de staat gesteunde burgerwachten jonge mensen zonder bijzondere eerdere prestaties, afgezien van de getoonde loyaliteit aan de politieke status-quo. Integendeel, deelname aan waakzame handelingen kan deze jongeren sociaal, politiek, financieel kapitaal en andere voordelen opleveren.

Hoewel zichtbaarheid wordt gebruikt om doelen schade te berokkenen, kan het bepaalde voordelen opleveren voor deelnemers. Studies binnen dit proefschrift hebben aangetoond dat burgerwachten online naam kunnen maken en invloedrijke informele leiders kunnen worden. Door het gebruik van logo's, stickers, shirts en andere parafernalia ontwikkelen deelnemers een op een bedrijf lijkende entiteit met bevoegdheden tot het toestaan of afkeuren van franchisevestigingen in en buiten Rusland. Erkenning en navolging door een groot publiek kan verschillende voordelen tegelijk opleveren: sociaal, politiek, financieel en juridisch.

In termen van hun sociale status kunnen deelnemers door participatie erkenning krijgen. Soms worden leiders van burgerwachtformaties uitgenodigd op de nationale televisie in Rusland om als experts over een bepaald onderwerp te spreken. Wat in dit verband kan worden waargenomen is professionalisering van amateurs door middel van een zelfgemaakt burgerwachtrepertoire. Politieke aspecten impliceren formele en informele bevoegdheden. Formeel waren sommige deelnemers in staat om een naam voor zichzelf op te bouwen en zich kandidaat te stellen voor officiële functies in de Russische regering. Informeel profiteerden deelnemers die steun genoten van de heersende elite ook van een dergelijke erkenning, zowel in gevallen van interactie met wetshandhavingsautoriteiten als in termen van mediaweergave van hun activiteiten. Vanuit financieel oogpunt kunnen deelnemers via verschillende bronnen inkomsten genereren. Hiertoe behoren overheidssubsidies ter ondersteuning van hun activiteiten, het genereren van inkomsten via YouTube, advertenties, de verkoop van parafernalia en merkverkoop. In sommige gevallen kan het chanteren van doelwitten ook een bron van inkomsten zijn. Vanuit juridisch oogpunt verleenden zichtbaarheid en erkenning bepaalde immuniteiten aan deelnemers. Zoals uit interviews is gebleken, waren sommige burgerwachten in staat om politieagenten te chanteren door te dreigen hen online te ontmaskeren. In dit geval geeft een brede aanhang op sociale media unieke bevoegdheden aan burgerwachten, soms zelfs meer dan die van juridische autoriteiten. Deze voordelen zijn echter tijdelijk gebleken en sterk afhankelijk van de visie van de heersende elites.

In dit opzicht kan zichtbaarheid tegen burgerwachten worden gebruikt wanneer bepaalde onzichtbare lijnen worden overschreden en ze een bedreiging worden voor de elites, bijvoorbeeld wanneer ze zich gaan richten op het politieke establishment en hun familieleden, of nationale symbolen aanvallen die legitimiteit verlenen aan individuen in machtsposities. Video- en fotomateriaal dat online wordt verspreid om de doelen te schaden, kan plotseling worden omgezet in bewijsstukken die tegen deelnemers van burgerwachten worden gebruikt. Ook traditionele media kunnen een rol gaan spelen en kunnen deelname zowel verheerlijken als veroordelen.

Traditionele media blijken een aantal belangrijke rollen te spelen bij de manifestatie van digitale burgerwachten. Ten eerste zou de traditionele media-framing van burgerwachtactiviteiten door frequent verslag uit te brengen over activiteiten, en door deelnemers te framen als positieve figuren die strijden voor het grotere sociale welzijn een grote invloed kunnen hebben op de publieke perceptie. Traditionele media kunnen burgerwachten ook helpen bij het opbouwen van hun merk en het vergroten van de publiciteit. Terwijl ze dit doen, kunnen traditionele media ook verdere schade toebrengen aan de doelwitten wiens ongevraagde en schadelijke blootstelling online plotseling wordt uitgezonden op tv-programma's en in krantenartikelen wordt vermeld.

Door te focussen op zowel traditionele als digitale media, onderstreepte dit proefschrift het belang van het publiek bij online strafmaatregelen. Zonder het publiek wordt de intensiteit van vergelding in twijfel getrokken. Door YouTube-video's die door burgerwachten worden gedeeld te bekijken, leuk te vinden, te delen, te commentariëren en anderszins te gebruiken, dragen kijkers bij aan de ernst van ongevraagde blootstelling die doelwitten ervaren. In dit opzicht kan digitale vigilantisme als strafpraktijk worden vergeleken met het Foucauldiaanse idee van 'spektakel van de straf' (Foucault, 1995). Net als in de middeleeuwen is het publiek aanwezig op het toneel van openbare marteling en executie, zij het virtueel. Op dezelfde manier als eeuwen geleden, wordt het publiek een les geleerd dat in wezen iedereen in de plaats kan staan van het gemartelde onderwerp. Foucault stelt dat dergelijke openbare martelingen uit het verleden gericht waren op het beschadigen van het lichaam, terwijl strafmaatregelen van de 20e eeuw in de vorm van gevangenis en krankzinnigengestichten de ziel van mensen beschadigden. In digitale burgerwacht kunnen de twee samenvloeien. Wanneer een persoon fysiek wordt aangevallen, heeft hun lichaam pijn; wanneer deze aanval wordt gefilmd en online wordt gedeeld zodat het wereldwijde publiek voortdurend kan zien, worden ook de waardigheid en reputatie van een persoon vernietigd.

Hoewel sommigen beweren dat bestraffing van doelwitten in bepaalde gevallen gerechtvaardigd is omdat ze ernstige misdaden hebben begaan of morele en ethische normen hebben geschonden, is het belangrijk om de lagen van kwetsbaarheden van doelwitten in overweging te nemen en eraan te herinneren dat een eerlijk proces ontbreekt en dat het vermoeden van schuld elk vermoeden van onschuld tenietdoet.



Portfolio

Publications made within the PhD Project:

Academic articles that make up chapters of this dissertation

1. Gabdulhakov, R. (in press). Are the pigs more equal than others? Media control and citizen-critical publics in Russia. *Media and Communication*, 9(4), X-X, <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i4.4233>
2. Gabdulhakov, R. (2020). (Con)Trolling the Web: Social Media User Arrests, State-Supported Vigilantism and Citizen Counter-Forces in Russia. *Global Crime*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440572.2020.1719836>
3. Gabdulhakov, R. (2020). Heroes or Hooligans? Media Portrayal of StopXam [Stop a Douchebag] Vigilantes in Russia. *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* 11(3).16-45. <https://doi.org/10.25285/2078-1938-2019-11-3-16-45>
4. Gabdulhakov, R. (2019). In the Bullseye of Vigilantes: Mediated Vulnerabilities of Kyrgyz Labour Migrants in Russia. *Media and Communication* 7(2):230-241 <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i2.1927>
5. Gabdulhakov, R. (2018). Citizen-Led Justice in Post-Communist Russia: From Comrades' Courts to Dotcomrade Vigilantism. *Surveillance & Society*, 16(3), 314-331. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v16i3.6952>

Academic articles published within the project but not included in this dissertation

1. Trottier, D., Huang, Q., Gabdulhakov, R. (2021). Covidiot as global acceleration of local surveillance practices. *Surveillance & Society* 19(1). 109-113. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v19i1.14546>
2. Gabdulhakov, R., Trottier, D. (2020). Between “filter bubbles” and community leaders: An exploratory study of Facebook groups for Russophones/Russians in the Netherlands. *Journal of Global Diaspora & Media* 1(1). 89-105. https://doi.org/10.1386/gdm_00006_1
3. Huang, Q., Gabdulhakov, R., Trottier, D. (2020). Online scrutiny of people with nice cars: A comparative analysis of Chinese, Russian, and Anglo-American outrage. *Global Media and China*, 1(14). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436420901818>
4. Akbari, A., & Gabdulhakov, R. (2019). Platform Surveillance and Resistance in Iran and Russia: The Case of Telegram. *Surveillance & Society*, 17(1/2), 223-231. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v17i1/2.12928>

Book Chapters

1. Trottier, D., Huang, Q., Gabdulhakov, R. (2020). Mediated Visibility as Making Vitriol Meaningful. In “Online Vitriol – On the History, Affect and Effects of Violence and Trolling on Social Media” (Ed. Polak, S., Trottier, D.)

Edited volumes

1. Trottier, D., Gabdulhakov, R., Huang Q. (2020). *Vigilant Audiences*. Open Book Publishers <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/product/1151>

Publications meant for a broad audience

1. Gabdulhakov, R. Lockdown (dis)connect. EU-Central Asia Monitoring. (7 July 2021). <https://eucentralasia.eu/lockdown-disconnect/>
2. Gabdulhakov, R. Why likes and shares can cost you freedom in Russia. (23 November 2020). <https://bitescience.com/articles/why-likes-and-shares-can-cost-you-freedom-in-russia/>
3. Gabdulhakov, R. The Avengers vs the Orcs: Social media nuances in Kyrgyzstan's (almost) third revolution. Oxus Society. (2020).
4. Gabdulhakov, R. Narrowing the digital divide in education: COVID-19 lessons for Uzbekistan. EU-Central Asia Monitoring. (31 August 2020). <https://eucentralasia.eu/2020/08/narrowing-the-digital-divide-in-uzbekistans-education-system-covid-19-lessons/>
5. Gabdulhakov, R. *Digital vigilan...what? Why and how I study online citizen-led justice*. (Blog). IBCoMagazine. (7 June 2020). <https://ibcomagazine.com/2020/digital-vigilantism/>
6. Gabdulhakov, R. *The FRRESH Take on Summer Schools*. (Blog). ERMeCC PhD Club. (11 September 2019). <https://www.eur.nl/en/eshcc/news/frresh-take-summer-schools>
7. Gabdulhakov, R. *A weapon in our hands or to our heads?* (Blog). ERMeCC PhD Club. (Available: 5 July 2019). <https://www.eur.nl/en/eshcc/news/weapon-our-hands-or-our-heads>
8. Gabdulhakov, R. *Two PhD Candidates team up to publish a paper*. (Blog). ERMeCC PhD Club. (8 April 2019). <https://www.eur.nl/en/eshcc/news/two-phd-candidates-team-publish-paper>
9. Gabdulhakov, R. *Collaboration with external partners: Why? How? What are the consequences?* (Blog). ERMeCC PhD Club. (Available: 27 March 2019). <https://www.eur.nl/en/eshcc/news/collaboration-external-partners-why-how-what-are-consequences>
10. Gabdulhakov, R. *Citizen-led justice?* (Blog). *Surveillance & Society*. (22 October 2018). <https://medium.com/surveillance-and-society/citizen-led-justice-dea2e5b7136d>
11. Gabdulhakov, R. *Diversity and inclusivity beyond the ivory tower: let's "make it happen"...together!* (Blog). ERMeCC PhD Club. (17 December 2018). <https://www.eur.nl/en/eshcc/news/diversity-and-inclusivity-beyond-ivory-tower-lets-make-it-happentogether>

Awards

Teaching award “Media and Communication 2020”, Erasmus University Rotterdam, Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication.

Media appearances

Current Time TV. (2020 September 9). *“Unizhennyye chuzhimi, oplevannyye svoimi”. Kak v Rossii migranty iz Kyrgyzstana okhotyatsya na zemlyachek [“Humiliated by strangers, spat upon by their own.” How migrants from Kyrgyzstan hunt compatriots in Russia.]* <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/kyrgyzstan-women-rights-migrants/30827794.html>

Courses taught during the PhD trajectory

2020-2021

1. MA Media Studies. MA thesis supervision. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (supervisor for one student; second reader for 10 students)
2. BA 3. Communication and Media. Thesis supervision. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (supervisor for 10 students; second reader for 10 students)
3. BA 2. IBCoM. Research Seminar: New Media, Culture and Entertainment. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (one group)
4. BA 1. IBCoM. Intercultural Communication. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (one group)
5. BA 1. IBCoM. Media Systems in Comparative Perspective. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (one group)
6. BA 2. IBCoM. International and Global Communication. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (two groups)

2019-2020

1. BA 2. IBCoM. International and Global Communication. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (two groups)
2. BA 1. IBCoM. Academic Skills. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (one group)
3. Erasmus Voorbereidend Jaar. New Media for Integration Course: Social Benefits and Social Harms of Digital Media. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands
4. Erasmus Voorbereidend Jaar. Social and Cultural Competences in the Digital Age. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands

2018-2019

1. BA 2. IBCoM. International and Global Communication. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (two groups)
2. BA 1. IBCoM. Academic Skills. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (one group)
3. BA 1. IBCoM. Media Systems in Comparative Perspective. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (two groups)
4. Erasmus Voorbereidend Jaar. New Media for Integration Course: Social Benefits and Social Harms of Digital Media. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands

2017-2018

1. BA 2. IBCoM. International and Global Communication. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (two groups)
2. BA 1. IBCoM. Academic Skills. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (one group)
3. BA 1. IBCoM. Media Systems in Comparative Perspective. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands (two groups)

Guest lectures

1. *Russia's digital media*. Summer School: Russia in Covid Times. 15 July 2021. Ghent University. <https://www.ugent.be/nl/agenda/summer-school-online-summer-school-russia-in-covid>
2. *Russia' traditional media*. Summer School: Russia in Covid Times. 14 July 2021. Ghent University. <https://www.ugent.be/nl/agenda/summer-school-online-summer-school-russia-in-covid>
3. *For the greater good? Surveillance in times of pandemic*. Webster University, the Hague. 24 March 2021.
4. *Media Systems "Beyond" the Western World: The Case of Russia and Central Asia*. Erasmus University Rotterdam, Guest Lecture IBCoM CM1008, Media Systems in Comparative Perspective. Online. 22 March 2021.
5. *Media Systems "Beyond" the Western World: The Case of Russia and Central Asia*. Erasmus University Rotterdam, Guest Lecture IBCoM CM1008, Media Systems in Comparative Perspective. 29 March 2019.
6. *The role of digital media in storytelling*. Erasmus University Rotterdam, Guest Lecture IBCoM CM2001 International and Global Communication. 30 September 2019.
7. *The role of digital media in storytelling*. Erasmus University Rotterdam, Guest Lecture IBCoM CM2001 International and Global Communication. 25 September 2018.
8. *Media Systems Beyond the Western World*. Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands, Guest Lecture IBCoM CM1008, Media Systems in Comparative Perspective. 23 March 2018.

Select online activities amid the COVID-19 pandemic

1. CERCEC, the Centre for Russian, Caucasian and Central European Studies. Paris, France (online). "Disciplining social media users in Russia: no crime but punishment". 9 April 2021.
2. Roundtable "Navalny and beyond: Assessing the protest in Russia". Gent University, 18 March 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2DhqfqdSDpg>
3. Public Lecture "Putin's media strategies and challenges in the digital age". Organised by Eastern European Student Association of Erasmus University. <https://www.eur.nl/en/eshcc/news/lecture-putins-media-strategies-and-challenges-digital-age-be-viewed-online>
4. Online course on "Digital Methods for Social Science". Produced with "Cabar.Asia" Media School. Language: Russian. <https://school.cabar.asia/ru/course/metody-socialnyh-issledovanij-onlajn/>
5. "Beyond the Headlines" Lunch Talk Series. Erasmus University Rotterdam. Co-Producer and host. Language: English. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iA783HtX7ow&feature=youtu.be>
6. Online course on "How to publish your work in academic journals". Produced with "Cabar.Asia" Media School. Language: Russian. <https://school.cabar.asia/ru/course/tonkosti-publikacii-v-nauchnom-zhurnale/>
7. Europe-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM). Online workshop on "Media Security". 20 October 2020.
8. The Institute for War and Peace Reporting. Cabar.Asia School of Young Analysts. Presentation title: "Producing effective policy papers". Online Workshop. 24 September 2020.
9. OSCE Academy in Bishkek. Interactive Workshop on Digital Tools and Challenges Amid the Global Pandemic. Online Workshop. 24 July 2020.
10. The Institute for War and Peace Reporting. Cabar.Asia Media School. Presentation title: "Digital Media and Security in Central Asia". Online Workshop. 3 June 2020. <https://school.cabar.asia/ru/video/rashid-gabdulhakov-cifrovye-media-i-bezopasnost-v-centralnoj-azii/>

Selected academic conferences:

1. St. Petersburg State University, Russia. Comparative Media Studies in Today's World 9th International Conference [Online] 20-21 April 2021.
2. Netherlands Flanders Communication Association (NeFCA), Etmaal 2021 [Online]. Popular Communication cluster. Presenter. 5 February 2021 <https://nefca.eu/etmaal-2021/etmaal-2021-popular-communication/>
3. RightsCon Online Panel moderator. "Digital Fights for Digital Rights? Investigating

- Privacy in the Global South". [Online] 27-31 July 2020. <https://www.rightscon.org/>
4. Internet Governance Forum. 25-29 November 2019. Berlin, Germany. <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/content/igf-2019>
 5. SEnECA Conference on EU-Central Asia Relations. "Central Asia and the EU: knowledge transfer, communication tools and awareness-raising". 14-15 November 2019. Brussels, Belgium. <https://www.seneca-eu.net/news/register-for-seneca-conference/>
 6. ECREA Conference Digital Fortress Europe. "Russophone Social Media Groups in the Netherlands: At Home Among the Strangers?" 30-31 October 2019. Brussels, Belgium.
 7. The 17th Chinese Internet Research Conference: Digital Cultures: Chinese Internet and Beyond. Presenter. 28 June 2019. Singapore.
 8. St. Petersburg State University, Russia. Comparative Media Studies in Today's World 7th International Conference. 16-18 April 2019. <http://cmstw2019.org/>
 9. Surveillance Studies Network (SSN). Presentation title: "Unsanctioned Hooligans or Endorsed Peoples' Activists? Discourses on Digital Vigilantes in the Russian Media". Aarhus, Denmark, 7-9 June 2018 http://conferences.au.dk/fileadmin/user_upload/SSN2018-program-online-3_small.pdf
 10. Cambridge University. British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES) Conference. Cambridge, United Kingdom. 13-15 April 2018 <http://www.basees2018.org/>
 11. Georgetown University's Seventh Annual International Conference on Cyber Engagement. Invited Expert. News, Alternative Facts, and Propaganda: The Role of Cyber in Influence Operations. 24 April 2017. Washington DC, USA. <https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/ltwmsza9jfbkfk48b73hz7qvh2stihf>

Co-organised conferences

1. Surveillance Studies Network, 9th biennial conference. Rotterdam, the Netherlands (postponed to 2022, due to COVID-19 pandemic).
2. International Symposium. "Vigilant Audiences: Scrutiny, Denunciation, and Shaming in Digital Media Use". Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication. 3-4 October, 2018.

Workshops

1. The University of Tokyo. Vigilant Practices in the Digitally-Mediated Public: A Global Perspective. Academic Workshop. Presenter. 2 July 2019. Tokyo, Japan. <https://ru.plovism.com/post/webinar-for-osce-academy-alumni-digital-tools-and-challenges-amid-the-pandemic>
2. Aleksanteri Institute. Media control as a source of political power in Central and Eastern Europe. Academic Workshop. Presenter. 2-3 September 2019. Helsinki, Finland.
3. Centre for European Security Studies/EU-Central Asian Monitoring. Media in Security Workshop. Lecturer. Rotterdam, the Netherlands. 16 October 2019. <https://eucentralasia.eu/>
4. Centre for European Security Studies/EU-Central Asian Monitoring. Media in Security Workshop. Lecturer. Rotterdam, the Netherlands. 12 October 2018. <https://eucentralasia.eu/>
12. Center for European Security Studies/EU-Central Asian Monitoring. Media in Security Workshop. Lecturer. Groningen, the Netherlands. 4 June 2018. <https://eucentralasia.eu/>
13. Lorenz Center. Data Sharing for Law Enforcement Workshop. Participant. Leiden, the Netherlands. 28-31 May 2018.
14. European External Action. EU Special Representative for Central Asia Workshop. Participant. Almaty, Kazakhstan. 25-26 April 2018. European External Action.
15. CERI Sciences Po, Paris, France. Digital Vigilantism in Russia: Methods. Workshop on interdisciplinary approaches to the study of digital vigilantism. 22 February 2018.

Academic exchanges

1. St.Petersburg State University, the Russian Federation. Erasmus+ Teaching Exchange. Guest Lecturer in the MA and BA programmes. March 2020
2. Sciences Po, Paris, France. Erasmus+ Exchange. Guest Lecturer in the MA programme. April 2019
3. Moscow Higher School of Economics, the Russian Federation. Visiting Research Fellow. April-May 2018
4. OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic. Guest Lecturer in the MA programme. June 2018; May 2019

Winter/Summer Schools

1. Second Lisbon Winter School on Media and Uncertainty. 7-11 January 2020. Lisbon, Portugal. <https://www.lisbonwinterschool.com/>
2. The Finnish Russian network in Russian and Eurasian studies in the field of social sciences and humanities (FRRESH). Summer School. Participant. 26-30 August 2019. Orilampi, Finland.
3. Research School for Media Studies (RMeS). Winter School and Graduate Symposium. 23-24 January 2018.

Memberships held and academic services performed during the PhD trajectory

1. Europe-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) Advisory Board Member
2. Research School for Media Studies (RMeS) PhD Council Member and Co-Chair
3. British Association for Slavonic and East European Studies (BASEES) Member
4. Surveillance Studies Network (SSN) Member
5. Surveillance in The Global South Network Member
6. PhD Club Blog Editor at the ESHCC's ERMeCC
7. Representative of Erasmus University in NeFCA PhD dissertation awards jury

Peer reviewing experience

International Journal of Press/Politics – 1 article
 Surveillance & Society (Canada) – 4 articles
 First Monday (United States) – 1 article
 Mediální studia/Media Studies (Czechia) – 1 article

Courses followed during the PhD trajectory

Course title	Institution	EC	Date
Ethnography and its varieties	EGSH	2,50	06-05-2017
Introduction to participatory action research	EGSH	0	May 2017
Cross-cultural awareness and communication	EGSH	0	August 2017
Making an academic poster that stands out	EGSH	0	September 2017
Work-life balance	EGSH	1	13-09-2017
Brush up your research design	EGSH	2,50	13-10-2017
Delphi technique	EGSH	1,50	04-12-2017
RMeS Winter School	RMeS	2	23-01-2018
Atlas.ti	EGSH	1	01-02-2018
Basic didactics	Risbo	1	02-02-2018
Qualitative data analysis	EGSH	2,50	04-10-2018
Great thinkers of the 20 th century	EGSH	2,50	12-02-2018
Teaching in International Classroom	TOP in collaboration with Community for Learning and Innovation (CLI)	0	November 2018
The dean's master class: "December Rituals"	EGSH	0	09-12-2018
Professionalism and integrity in research	EGSH	1	24-01-2019
How to construct open-ended questions	Risbo	0	February 2019
Summer School. The Finnish Russian network in Russian and Eurasian studies in the field of social sciences and humanities (FRRESH).	University of Helsinki.	5	26-08-2019
Lisbon Winter School for the Study of Communication	UCP Lisbon	5	07-01-2020
Communicate your PhD research	EGSH	1,50	26-10-2020
	Total EC	29	

Curriculum Vitae



Rashid Gabdulhakov (1986) is a lecturer in the Department of Media Studies and Journalism at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Upon completion of his PhD, he will become an Assistant Professor at the Research Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen. Rashid holds a Master of Advanced Studies degree in International and European Security from the University of Geneva and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Switzerland (2016). He also

holds a Master of Arts degree (2013) in International Security from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic (best MA thesis award). He received his Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from Whitworth University in the United States (2009). Between his academic studies, Rashid worked in the international development sector and carried out research for the United Nations, International Crisis Group, German Development Agency, and other international organisations.

In 2017 Rashid started his PhD trajectory in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam. In addition to research, Rashid taught courses in the International Bachelor of Communication and Media (IBCoM) programme. He has continuously supported IBCoM students beyond classroom activities, for instance, in their pursuit of content development for the independent student-run periodical *IBCoMagazine*, in which he served as an Advisory Board member. At Erasmus University, Rashid joined the enthusiastic colleagues and delivered workshops withing the “New Media for Integration” course offered for students with a refugee background participating in the Erasmus Preparatory Year programme, designed to help with assimilation in the highly digitalised society such as the Netherlands.

During various research visits and academic exchanges, Rashid gave lectures in master-level courses (in Russian and English) at the Sciences Po in Paris, France; at St. Petersburg State University in Russia; and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic. Rashid’s teaching skills have been acknowledged in student evaluations and in 2020 he received the Junior Teaching Award from the Media and Communication Department.

During his PhD trajectory, Rashid participated in numerous national and international conferences, workshops and winter/summer schools. In 2018 he co-organised the International Symposium on “Vigilant Audiences: Scrutiny, Denunciation, and Shaming in Digital Media Use” at Erasmus University. The Symposium resulted in the release of an open access edited volume *Introducing Vigilant Audiences* (2020), featuring state-of-the-art research from across socio-political and cultural contexts.

Rashid has been actively involved in representing his Department on national and international levels. He volunteered to launch and coordinate the PhD Club Blog at the Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and Culture (ERMeCC). This is a platform where candidates share their ongoing research and PhD life insights with peers, colleagues, prospective PhDs and the world beyond academia. He served as a PhD Council Co-Chair for the National Research School for Media Studies (RMeS). In this role he planned and organised events, and served as a jury member for grant competitions. For two consecutive years he was a jury member in the Netherlands Flanders Communication Association (NeFCA) PhD Dissertation Awards. These engagements aside, Rashid participated in the organisation of various social events at the Department intended for stimulating team spirit.

While pursuing a PhD in the Netherlands, Rashid maintained contact with his native region of Central Asia through research visits, via delivery of tailored workshops and courses for regional civil society leaders and aspiring researchers, and by spotlighting the region (which remains an academic *terra incognita*) and its media-related challenges in publications, lectures and conference presentations. Within this pursuit, he participated in several high-level EU-Central Asia policy conferences. In 2019 Rashid joined the Advisory Board of Groningen-based Europe-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM), and has designed and delivered media trainings for civil society activists from Central Asia within this collaboration.

Amid the COVID-19 global pandemic and respective lockdowns, Rashid actively engaged in delivering online courses and popular lectures. In 2020-2021 he designed, filmed and made freely available a course on the “ins and outs” of publishing in Western academic journals and a course on the basics of qualitative methods for aspiring scholars in Central Asia. These courses were delivered in collaboration with “CABAR.asia Media School” educational platform of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR)– an international non-profit media organisation supporting the development of local media, independent journalists and freedom of speech. Furthermore, in collaboration with EUR’s *Studium Generale* and along with his colleague and dear friend, Dr Etienne Augé, Rashid launched the “Beyond the Headlines” lunch-talks and delivered an episode on protests in post-Soviet states. In his spare time, Rashid enjoys cooking and painting.