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Testing the State by the courtroom or by the gun? An overview of mobilisations against police deviances in Russia

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“Riots and mobilizations against violent police deviances:
an international comparative perspective”

Work shop at Nanterre 21 june 2016

<p style="text-align: center;">Testing the State by the courtroom or the gun? An overview of some faces of mobilisation against police deviances in Russia</p>
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In April 2009, a police officer, D. Yevsyukov opened the fire at people in a Moscow supermarket, killing two and wounding several others. In March 2012, a young man died in custody after being raped with a champagne bottle in a police station of the city of Kazan. Soon after, the police reform, passed in March 2011, was considered as a “failure” by the newly appointed Minister of Internal Affairs Vladimir Kolokoltsev. Those two cases of police violence, far from being exceptional, are almost a part of the routine – though not always with such deadly endings - in many of police precincts in Russia and comprise a growing amount of the convictions against Russia at the ECHR.

These two particular episodes can serve as landmarks for what I would like to develop in this contribution, for the first played a starting point for building-up police violence and deviance issues as a public matter that further helped and pushed the State to undertake a reform, under the presidency of D Medvedev, and the second led to a kind of acknowledgement that the task was too huge, at the very moment when the coming back of V Putin as the President was sending down the issue from the political agenda.

In between, very diverse, vivid and sometimes at first glance paradoxical mobilizations against police violence, corruption and misbehavior have spread all over the country. Would they be NGOs helping victims of police violence to seek justice through court, provocative performances from art-groups or people taking arms against the police, these mobilizations

form as many cases of tests (*épreuves*) for the State in its capacity to exercise legitimate violence. (Linhardt, Moreau de Bellaing 2005). I will also try to understand to what extent J Scott's work on subaltern mobilization strategies could be applied to the cases I studied.

In my reflections, I will articulate direct observations and field work with documentary research on more radical/violent groups having taken action against the police. In Particular, I had the opportunity to observe forms of what is called "civic (or public) control" (*obshchestvennyj kontrol'*) - including such institutionalized mechanisms as ONK¹, Public monitoring commissions over detention facilities, but also other forms of individual or collective civic commitment aimed at exercising a kind of control on the police, field research was conducted from 2011 to 2014 in several Russian cities, interviews with NGOs working in the sphere of police violence, ONK members or former members, journalists and experts, some visits of detention precincts, observation of ONK work².

Russian police on the bench of trial

Criticism of police violence, misbehavior and corruption has been a commonplace for decades in late soviet and post-Soviet Russia (Shelley, 1996, Galeotti 1993, Favarel 2001, Favarel & Le Huérou 2004). It has become a matter of growing public concern at the end of the 2000s after highly publicized scandals opened the floor to a generalized out-cry of the police and pushed the authorities to undertake a widely discussed reform. In a country known for a rather low level of social and political activity, police has drawn a quite significant and multifaceted mobilization potential, starting with internet whistleblowing- - *Youtube cops* (Chistyakova, Robertson, 2013) from police officers to armed attack of police precinct in the Far-East region or violent demonstrations from nationalist groups targeting all together the police *and* ethnic minorities.

Meanwhile, the idea of resorting to law, both domestic and international, to obtain justice against police violence have gained weight in the public sphere and in the society and gave path to the growing knowledge and expertise among NGOs.

Police context in Russia differs slightly from other countries with several elements.

- ! To begin with, it is within the State that the police has been first on the bench of trial for decades. Among others, accusations of corruption have been a motto announcing firing and cleaning operations as well as reform announcement and denunciation of

¹in Russian *ONKobshchestvennyye nabljudatel'nye kommissii*

²For reasons of confidentiality it was necessary to observe anonymity on people and places. Author expresses deep acknowledgements to the numerous people that help to conduct this research and to understand a complex reality.

police deviance has for long played as a tool in the hands of the authorities, including its use to solve internal disputes inside the State apparatus.

- ! Police agents have also become one of the stakeholder of nascent capitalism in post-Soviet Russia during the 1990s and acted as a competing force of violence entrepreneurship, often using their position for having illegal economic activities or illegally using them (Kolennikova *et al.*, 2008 ; Volkov, 1999, Favarel 2011a)
- ! The submission to performance indicators and reporting and the weight of local hierarchies and loyalties have been a growing feeding factor forced confessions under torture which became a routine of police everyday work (Novikova, 2005, Gerber & Mendelson, 2008), targeting any possible suspects in order to fill statistics and bring cases to the court. This phenomenon, more than any others has constructed the whole police institution as a “rotten barrel” in many aspects (Chistyakova Robertson 2012).

Having said that, it's necessary to mention two more elements which are often the most salient in the description of police deviances and in the emergence of counter mobilizations and which are not central in the Russian case

- ! The first element is the relatively low relevance of public order police violence as a core issue of the police deviance picture. Use of coercion tactics in policing demonstrations or meetings is spread enough (Poupin, 2012) but at least until May 2012, when a demonstration at Bolotnaya Square in Moscow led to violent incidents, arrests and imprisonment of activists followed by dozens of judicial prosecutions, this is not the main focus of resentment and anger against the police.
- ! The second element, which I will only briefly mention here and which could deserve much more analysis and discussion, tackles the issue of policing of subaltern group, here mostly ethnic minorities or migrants.

The issue has been described and analyzed in details by scholars from St Petersburg and Kazan in a book dedicated to relation between Police and migrants and ethnic minorities (Voronkov, Gladarev, Sagitova, 2011³).

It would be without doubt a fruitful hypothesis to elaborate on the “colonial circulation” dimension of police socialization (Blanchard, 2008). There are a huge number of migrants easily transformed as a criminal category and as such targeted by the

³See in particular chapters by Gladarev (2011a, 2001b) and Khodzhaeva (2011b). for a review in English see <http://pipss.revues.org/3914>

police, would it be with collective raids against migrants working places or living places (markets...) in Russian cities⁴, or on the basis of day-to-day “ethnic profiling” in the streets (Open Society 2007), with police street agents extensively carrying identity checks, stopping, fining and detaining people, in particular Russian citizens from the North-Caucasus or labor migrants from Central Asia (Gladarev 2011a). Giving the global context of the war in Chechnya on the one hand and of the general State and media discourse on labor migrants on the other hand, this can be referred to as State driven policies of *internal enemy construction* with a strong colonial component as it is described in other cases (Rigouste, 2007).

As an addition, we could complete the picture with what has been described by articles, research and accounts as a “Chechen syndrome,” (Demos 2007, Gladarev 2011b, Le Huérou & Sieca Kozlowski, 2012) - calling to mind other individual and collective post-war traumas such as Vietnam or Afghanistan among the many ordinary policemen that have been sent in Chechnya for the “antiterrorist operations” and have been then sent back to their ordinary police functions elsewhere in the Russian federation. “Having been through Chechnya” both favors and authorizes acts of violence, and the Russian case combines a classical post-war syndrome with violent professional socialization before and after war experience (Le Huérou, 2014).

What seems to be slightly different however is the absence of a strong territorial component in these policing practices against a designed enemy, as it was described for other contexts as “territorialization strategies” (Jobard, 2001), to the first place because territorial distribution in Russian cities has very little to do with ethnic segregation⁵.

Another possible analysis of the day to day interactions between police and dominated groups can be found in bringing J. Scott’s “weapon of the weak” scheme, a scheme that has already been used to explain corruption practices in post-Soviet Russia (Olimpieva, 2010). When labor migrants in a neighborhood are repeatedly targeted by local police agents, because easy to find administrative law infringements and unlikely desire to complain are a perfect bribe windfall for policemen (Gladarev, 2011a), it has to be understood as a part of the global ordinary bribery system, which can apply to other individuals or social groups, such as entrepreneurs who could be

⁴Massive operations of documents verification in migrants major working places (big construction works for instance) are even codified as a regular routine of police work and receive the name of “prophylactic operation *migrant*”. They can lead to detention of hundreds of labor migrants. <http://rus.ozodi.org/a/migrant-2015-assymetric-aswer-for-umar-death/27320907.html>

⁵This point would deserve further discussion and probably needs to be nuanced with more recent tendencies than the ones described in research work undertaken in the 2000s.

constructed as a target category as well. In their day to day interactions with police agents who are interested in getting bribes for their own use, labor migrants have to negotiate and adapt in order to avoid abuse and violence. In the case of collective raids and mopping ups ordered by higher officials, they become the targets of a State discriminatory policy and would have few chance to negotiate. This last point also shows that the dominant/dominated relation can be easily blurred in the case of police/society interactions in the Russian case: entrepreneurs as a dominant group in the society happen to be dominated when bribed or abused by the police, but can regain their position if they find a higher protection or a good lawyer. This is hardly to happen directly in the case of labor migrants but is common to find in an indirect way even in Russia, when vulnerable groups are the “beneficiaries” of NGOs which took their defense as victims of State policies (FIDH-ADTs Memorial 2012).

“Scandal as a test”⁶: police reform agenda as a turning point

What has changed at the end of the 2000s is the extension of sources, forms and channels of police critique (Favarel, 2011), making clear that the whole society is concerned by police misconduct. Instead of the State legitimate armed hand policing the deviants, the situation is the one of a large deviant group, partly recognized as such by the State but still with full exercise of physical constraint, exercising illegitimate violence against people, any individual being possibly targeted. On the other hand, While policemen could experience that they were detaining and could exercise a “no limit” *bezpredel’* in Russian - power and resort to violence on anybody in almost complete impunity, they have been experiencing a growing feeling of hostility and contempt from the society (Gladarev and al. 2011, Gilinski. 2006, Beck and Robertson, 2009), to the point that a core State institution in a reputed strong State was experiencing a full-scale de-legitimation. .

In this respect, Evsyukov shooting case in April 2009 is revealing of the transformative capacity of scandals that “*reflect publicly expressed grievances which attract the support of a public. They rely on a unanimous reading of the facts as well as a shared vision of responsibilities*” (Favarel-Garrigues, 2011b). The case is clearly an “off-duty” one, not symbolic of the systemic character of police violence – i.e. intimately related to the penal chain work and to institutional and professional elements - .and thus far from summing up the phenomenon. However, it became the turning point to put forward the reform agenda: mass media were encouraged to report more and more on police abuse cases by *naming and*

⁶Borrowed from D. de Blic and Cyril Lemieux (2005).

shaming, the public was largely invited to participate and the highest authorities, including President Medvedev urged for police reform.

Evsyukov case may have played the role of the “right scandal” for the authorities. First, emphasizing this episode as emblematic of the readiness of the State to take action, it hides at the same time much more numerous cases of violence ‘on-duty’, which are protected by the very core function of the police. C. Moreau de Bellaing has shown in his work on prosecutions of police abuse in France by the police special investigation body that the majority of the convictions concerned off-duty cases and his conclusion that disciplinary sanctions against policemen do not condemn police violence but cases of violence committed by policemen, thus relieving the State from its responsibility and from the necessity to investigate more precisely into police discernment when using its prerogatives (Moreau de Bellaing 2009, 140). The second point is that it helped to construct an arena of consensus and unanimity which helped in bringing various social groups and institutions together, the scandal performing here a form of “multisectorial mobilization” as pointed out D. de Blic and C. Lemieux (2005), borrowing on M. Dobry sociology of political crises tools for elaborating further on scandal functions.

On the reform itself, quite a lot have been said about the process, its ending and its short comings (*Fond obshchestvennyj verdict*, 2011, 2014, Galeotti 2012, Le Huérou & Sieca-Kozlowski 2012, Taylor 2014). The new Law on Police - replacing a first post-Soviet law in 1991 was passed in March 2011, and received very soon a lot of criticism from experts, mass media, the civil society and from the State authorities themselves for being cosmetic and even for having worsened the situation⁷. Actually, one of the harshest critics of the police reform has been the current Minister of Internal affairs V. Kolokoltsev who replaced the long serving R. Nurgaliev in Spring 2012 after a new case of police violence in Kazan had spread a wave of protest⁸. After the return to power of V. Putin and From the academic point of view, in recent years, some new and more micro-oriented approach in police research in Russia led to focus on the interactions between the police and social groups (Gladarev, 2008, 2012, Voronkov and al. 2011) or to address the issues of the police as a profession (Novikova, 2005; Khodzhaeva, 2011). Those research have helped a lot to get a better understanding of police work at the street level as well as a part of the whole penal chain and to offer a more complex analysis than the mere confrontation of State violence against society.

⁷In particular in the case of *pereattestatsia* (re-qualification exam) which ended in firing a lot of good professionals and kept on duty corrupted agents loyal to local hierarchies.

⁸ Колокольцев признал провал первого этапа реформы МВД
<http://lenta.ru/news/2012/10/11/kolokoltsev/>

What I wish to introduce further here is an understanding of how the society mobilized against police deviance. In a context where any member of the society can be a potential victim of abuse, where, as said previously, there is no clear territorial neither social segmentation of the targeting, active mobilization - beyond the critique - is not the most obviously expected.

Civil society and “public control” over police activities and over police reform

The reform process has given an impetus and visibility to individuals and groups in the Russian society that were already active in defending rights of police abuse victims. Either independently or more in line with the government reforming agenda, they have promoted the idea of a “public control” (*Fond Obshchestvennyj verdict* 2012) over the police. It has to be mentioned that the idea of public- or civic - control over State institutions has been encouraged by the State itself since the beginning of the 2000s, with the creation of various consultative councils attached to ministries or public agencies with chosen and coopted members of civil society organizations or well-known personalities. The fanciness of the concept in the Russian context echoes with elements of Soviet administrative and political culture where could be given room to mechanisms of control from the society (Connor, 1972; Adams, 1977). Respective place and role of “State” and “Society” have without doubt dramatically changed since the end of the Soviet period: nevertheless, this kind of borrowing to the past can be relevant to explain present day practices and help to understand what kind of arrangements can be made by the society with the State, especially from the perspective of reforms it has been announcing or implementing and for which active participation of the citizens are required. “public control” developments It also illustrates the “managed civil society” promotion favored by the regime under V. Putin (Daucé, 2013).

I had the opportunity to observe during several field trips in Russia the work of profiled and specialized NGOs which provide legal and psychological assistance to people victims of abuse and violence from the law enforcement institutions, by using all possible legal procedures, from the local legislation to the ECHR mechanisms. Succeeding in a growing number of cases to prosecute and convict those responsible within the law enforcement agencies, these organizations have created more demands from the citizens to obtain justice. They also raise public awareness on the national and international level concerning these problems and gaining attention from the mass media, focusing on the necessity to rely on law and to use existing legal remedies. Their expertise on the issue has allowed them to act as listened –to a certain extent voices from the society for the authorities, and to establish a kind of partnership, even if this partnership is fragile and often hampered by many steps

back. Organizations such as *Public verdict* or the *Committee against torture* from Nizhnij-Novgorod both publish extensive online documentation including research material⁹. In particular, I collected first material on two forms of civic control and I intend to continue to work on that in the next future.

! *Voice and expertise : the raise of civic organisations working on police abuse*

In the 2000s, we witnessed the raise of a specific work on law enforcement agencies violence by some Russian civic organisations which became main experts in the field (Taylor 2006) and, to my opinion, contributed to a shift in the way we can look at State society relations. Being only local or having developed their activity in many regions, those organisations often follow a common scheme of activities:

- Providing legal and psychological assistance to people victims of abuse and violence from the law enforcement institutions, by using all possible legal procedures, from the local legislation to the ECHR mechanisms. Doing this and succeeding in some cases to prosecute and convict those responsible within the law enforcement agencies, these organizations – have generated more demands from the citizens to obtain justice.
- Raising public awareness on the national and international level concerning these problems and gaining attention from the mass media, focusing on the necessity to rely on law and to use existing legal remedies.

The mechanisms of “public” investigation (*obshchestvennoe rassledovanie*) can serve as an example of a two tier logic between substitution to the State functions and appealing to the State institutions for them to fulfil their duties.

Obschestvennyye rassledovaniya are conducted by special people in these organizations, i.e. investigators, who take the complaints of the victims and engage in an investigation including retrieving witnesses, medical documents,... in short establishing a whole case that they present in a second step to the official investigators, requiring from them to file a complaint and charge the policemen responsible for the abuse. One of the most striking element is the presence of former policemen or prosecutor office’s members in this job of providing legal assistance. And there it can be possible to establish a typology between those who quit the police to do the same job in a non-state organization (those frequently quit after some times) hoping for a better salary and better work schedule / those who are seriously concerned by police problems and are committed to do their job honestly.

The presence of former policemen or prosecutor office’s members in this job of providing legal assistance. And there it can be possible to distinguish various levels of justification -

⁹ See www.pytkam.net/web/files/sociology.doc

between those who quit the police to do the same job in a non-state organization (those frequently quit after some times) hoping for a better salary and better work schedule / those who are seriously concerned by police problems and are committed to do their job honestly and to convict responsible / those who have transformed in genuine Human Rights defenders.

To sum up, we can find among people in charge of this two key attitudes: feeling like performing their duty inside a non-profit organisation - demanding to act and to be recognised both as professional and civic activists although it can happen to result in conflicts with more outspoken activists or other stake holders.

State institutions response varies from reluctance to some kind encouragement that can be sometimes understood as a way of state function delegation to a non-state body which is considered as more effective and less embedded in the chain of hierarchical injunctions as well as in corruption schemes. Their expertise on the issue has allowed a number of civic organizations to act – to a certain extent - as listened voices from the society for the authorities, and to establish a kind of partnership, even if this partnership has been hampered by many steps back, if not partly destroyed since 2012.

Feelings of having being deceived were expressed even before the law was passed and more over after several months of its implementation especially regarding short comings on qualification re-examination (*pereattestatsia*), and above all the immense difficulties to obtain proper implementation of the *Special department of the Investigation committee*, a mechanism activists had demanded for years and that was finally adopted after 2012 Kazan case took the form of a new wave of scandal: This special division for prosecution of police abuse could have been a State response to civil society mobilization by giving guarantees that an independent body would be less reluctant to take actions against policemen. It could even have rendered the above mentioned procedures of public investigations led by NGOs useless and would have brought back a control from within. The scarcity of resources and the lack of institutional will have reduced the special department into a formal body which in the eyes of many appear to be a sign of the unwillingness of the government to go further in reducing police abuse¹⁰.

More than five years after the law was passed, the record for civic organisations to having succeeded in they advocacy work and participation into the legislation process has passed from mixed to rather pessimistic assessment. Some are still working at monitoring the reform implementation at the local level though they are considered as “foreign agents” under the new Law on NGOs. “Shamed” by the state for being reportedly the hand of Western

¹⁰Experts Interviews and observations, 2012 and 2013.

influence in the country, but strong enough and acknowledged by still reform-minded state agents, they can manage to receive presidential grants for the oversight of police reform and training of police officers. And prominent human rights defenders who don't hide public criticism of the reform shortcomings are still members of consultative bodies in charge of proposing new mechanisms for its implementation¹¹.

! *Public monitoring commissions of detention places: bring public scrutiny in?*

Public monitoring commissions (*Obchtchestvennye Nabljudatel'nye Komissii – ONK*) were introduced in 2008 after a long awaited law was passed in 2008. The idea to put in place an independent body to monitor prisons in Russia was first put forward by Valery Borshchev, a human rights activist and former Duma member. Following a visit to prisons in the United Kingdom in 1997, he took inspiration from the country's Prison Board of Visitors. Borshchev was a member of the Duma at the time and in 1999 first submitted a bill to the Duma. It took nearly 10 years and several restrictive amendments to the draft legislation before the public monitoring commissions (*Obchtchestvennye Nabljudatel'nye Komissii – ONK*) could finally be established after the vote of the Federal Law from 10 June 2008 N 76-FZ "On Public Control of human rights in places of detention and assistance of persons in places of detention".

ONK are now in place all across the country and are currently serving their third term (since 2013). They are made up of citizens - members of civil society organizations dealing with issues of human rights and detention conditions. They consist of not less than five and more than twenty members, appointed by the Civic Chamber. Their first mission is to visit (on request of detainees or on their own initiative) any place of detention, from the local police precinct to the long sentences detention center in a remote area in order to report both to the authorities and to public opinion, as well as formulating recommendations. In their official mandate, they are also required to establish relations of cooperation with detention places authorities.

Among challenging issues ONK have to face to fulfill their work are the issue of their nomination by the public chambers (which is not a formally independent body) and the absence of financial support especially to go to remote detention places. Nevertheless, field research and interviews over the last year, conducted in a changing global context of State/civil society relations, have showed that people involved strongly advocate the mechanism and try to promote its progress and even if it is sometimes by resisting the attempts by the authorities to control their membership and their work. By doing so, they still strongly advocate the idea of a genuine control by the society on the detention places and

11[□] http://president-sovet.ru/structure/group_corruption/

further on the law enforcement agencies, even if some experts have considered that the law was somehow out of date (Titkov 2012). The next stage - reforming the ONK and enlarging their competences – was also a revealing example of the evolution of the Consultative Council on Human rights which is supposed to supervise the ONK reform process, that leads to the emergence of new groups into the Council, whose radical forms of denunciation on social networks

In the eyes of the State bodies, ONK seem to be divided into two opposite camps: “constructive contribution” and “negative denunciation” and in the field we could observe three different configurations of relations between the ONK as an organ of public control organ and the institution to be oversight:

- “weak” or rather weak ONK with few members, and full or almost full loyalty to the institution, the ONK role being considered as an assistance to the penitentiary system or the police.
- what seems to be a “win-win” balanced attitude between ONK and the state bodies can be observed where ONK members belong to long lasting exert NGOs in the field, which already proved their effectiveness in combating abuse in police or penitentiary system and thus somehow helping institutions to improve their record and perform State injunctions.
- in some cases, very tough stance from the ONK towards Police or penitentiary institutions reveals a strong capacity of voice from the civil society organisations or from some individual (prominent journalists, bloggers...) to reveal problems and catch the attention of public opinion but strategy of confrontation does not always prove to be efficient given the rather weak instruments at the disposal of the ONK to force the institutions to change the situation.

This variety of attitudes can be observed in a larger public sphere, as we have observed several arena, often on the social networks or through blogs and internet sites, a competition between most prominent figures of the ONK system on their attitude to the state.¹² We should also mention the role of internet and social networks as an unlimited and uncontrolled public place of denunciation of police or penitentiary abuse, and as a main agent of public controversies.

This last point leads forward fully different forms of opposition that I would like to briefly develop in the last part of this contribution, i.e. some forms of “radical” mobilizations against

¹²One of the most outspoken critics of ONK and still partisan of civic control being the site and page gulagu.net and the site <http://onk.su/>. human rights organizations component in the ONK tend to regroup inside an association of independent observers <http://www.onk-ru.info/>, in order to distinguish themselves from what they considered to be too state oriented one under the Civic Chamber. <https://www.oprf.ru/1449/2133/1536/> Interesting discussions can be found on facebook group *развитие системы общественного контроля в местах принудительного содержания*

police. I will speak mainly about two of them, each being emblematic of mobilization potential against the police.

Challenging the State by derision

Voïna (*War*) was an art-group of young and radical artists/activists which has drawn the public attention and generated internet buzz on several occasions between 2006 and 2012, with quite spectacular and radical actions performed by very few people and challenging the political regime, elections, and especially targeting law enforcement agencies, police abuse and corruption¹³.

In November 2010, two leading members of the group were arrested after a street action called *Perevorot* in Russian, which means both “Palace Overthrow” and *reversal/overturn*: in fact they organize the overturn of seven police cars in front of the Mikhaïlovsky Palace in the center of St. Petersburg and in other locations over one night in September 2010. Before this episode, there had not been any prosecution of the group members, who have been even rewarded by a cultural public body for another provocative performance on a St Petersburg bridge in front of the FSB¹⁴. *Perevorot* action was preceded by other performances such as in 2008 coming in a policeman house to compliments him with Medvedev election¹⁵ (Zaytseva, 2012). In this episode, what requires attention is that *Voïna*, usually keeping at large any explicit demands towards the State, preferring art-performance and video circulation on the blogosphere as a mean of political expression, addresses explicitly the State asking to put police reform on the agenda. As said Kozlenok (One of the women *nickname*) said: “*The action was a harsh demand by Voïna for the immediate reform of the Ministry of Internal Affairs which the government itself has called for*”. In a certain way, *Voïna* was getting embedded in the general movement of attacking the police.

Primorskije partizany: an attempt of radical contestation of the State by radical groups

At the time when the process of police reform was launched and awaited and the effect of public awareness and discussion a new phenomenon has emerged. Several attacks and murders occurred against policemen and police stations that were not usual clashes between police and criminals but planned attacks motivated by resentment and revenge against previous police abuse. The most well-known of this attacks has been conducted in the small town of Kirovsk (*Primorie* region in the Russian Far East) in May 2010 by a group of young men who committed several assaults against police stations, killed policemen, hiding in far

¹³The group of young women who became the famous “pussy-riots” after having performed a punk prayer in the Moscow Cathedral came from *Voïna*.

¹⁴For a short screening and comment by official Russian TV Russia Today see

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJ7v5lrkT_4

¹⁵<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i80awcTO7GA>

East region forests for months. They rapidly gain outstanding popularity and claimed themselves to be *Primorskie partizany* taking revenge for all the abuse committed all over the country. When they got finally caught in June 2010¹⁶, two of them refused to surrender and committed suicide, an end that they suggested in their most viewed video, telling that they won't be caught alive¹⁷.

Leading experts of ultra-right groups in Russia from the Sova center have framed the episode in the category of politically motivated nationalist upsurge :“a *criminal group responsible for a series of brutal attacks offers the most compelling example of ultra-right groups ‘taking credit’ for terrorist acts Strong anti-police sentiment, characteristic for the Russian society in general, contributed to the popularity of the “Russian national avengers” version of the events, readily picked up even by respectable media outlets. Although the neo-Nazi motivation for the gang’s activity still remains unconfirmed, the ultra-right sphere increasingly uses Primorye Guerillas’ case to its advantage”* (Verkhovski, Kozhevnikova, 2011). True or not, this perception is far from explaining the popularity of the case, since a small group of people in a very far away region succeeded in branding their name all over the country and have tested the State by resorting to different registers of legitimation. Using the word *partizan* is significant since in the Russian imaginery it is positively connoted and mainly attached to the Great Patriotic War, while it can be also connected to rebel movements opposing the State in a partisan war.

In contemporary Russian the main threat is reputed coming from the North-Caucasus combattants. So when *Primorskie Partizany* referred positively in their video to rebel fighters from the region¹⁸, suggesting –most probably with the mere intent to strike and frighten the public – a possible rapprochement of different groups having the State and the police as a common enemy, the echo went far beyond criminal chronicle and brought experts and journalists to put forward a scary agenda of a possible “avengers unification” that could constitute the ultimate testing of the State capacity.

So this could be viewed as a sign of encouragement to further actions, all the more in a context of harsher and harsher critical coverage of the police by the media. The resonance was such that results of a local opinion poll about the case were not published, authorities urged mass media to call these people *bandits* and not *partisans*. Nationalist political leader V. Jirinovsky took stance for them in the Parliament, while referring warmly to *Primorskie*

¹⁶The remaining members of the group were sentenced to life or long term imprisonment in 2014. The appeal trial is being hold in Spring 2016.

¹⁷<http://mirror625.graniru.info/Politics/Russia/Politzeiki/m.249400.html>

¹⁷https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P32dYq4lW_Y

¹⁸<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/175461/>

partizany became a motto in demonstrations and meetings against police or judiciary¹⁹. Liberal journalist Oleg Kashin, who decided to help them raising money for their defense explained in an interview to the TV Channel *Dozhd'* (*Rain*) that *Primorskie partizany* were the most frightening case of mobilization against police and a real challenge for the State, much stronger than peaceful massive demonstrations of autumn-winter 2011-2012 after parliamentary elections²⁰. The linkage between

Manezh Square December 10: defying the State under the Kremlin walls

The case was used in the following months to call on to further radical actions, for some groups contesting the police or the judiciary especially in the nationalist circles, using a threatening narrative about potential similar action elsewhere in the country²¹. The successful binding ingredient in this somehow counterintuitive association of anger against police violence and nationalist narrative was the issue of ethnic minorities.

For nationalist groups' narrative, police corruption reinforces the domination of minorities over "ethnic Russians" for they always escape arrest or are quickly released by giving bribes, leaving honest "Russian" citizens defenseless. In December 2010, a few months after *primorskie partizany* were arrested, the case of two Daghestani suspected of murder during incidents with football supporters brought more than 5000 people under the Kremlin wall, shouting both xenophobic, nationalist and antipolice slogans²². This was totally unexpected for law enforcement forces and it took a few hours to see Special Forces evacuate the square and trying to protect by-passing people of non-Slavic origin, after two people were dead and several injured.

In this case, public sayings, publications, evidence from the trials that took place afterwards made clear that the general atmosphere of hostility towards the police is used as a tool in the hands of nationalist groups, which tried to catch audience far beyond their basic support circles. But the number of people in the streets – the biggest demonstration in Russia since perestroika – among them a lot of very young teenagers, the rather spontaneous character of the demonstration – police forces were really caught by surprise and can hardly be suspected

¹⁹As I could see during a local protest meeting in front of the Prosecutor's Office in Omsk in July 2011

²⁰https://tvrain.ru/teleshov/reportazh/primorskie_partizany_5_let_spustja_mozhet_li_eto_po_vtoritsja-392337/

²¹As I could see during a street meeting in front of the Prosecutor's Office in the Siberian city of Omsk in July 2010. Organized by the local branch of V. Jirinovski Party LDPR, the meeting gathered many citizens who had resent to express against abusive arrest or conviction, in particular small entrepreneurs, their family or lawyers who considered to be victims of dirty business settlements that illustrates collusion of law enforcement agencies with regional political élite.

²²<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/dec/13/two-dead-football-racist-riot-moscow> for a full video footage of the <http://grani-tv.ru/entries/1515/>

to have purposely closed eyes on such a march under the Kremlin wall –are converging elements which show that *Manezh Square* is a part of the State testing that was taking place during the years of reform process.

Provisional conclusion

Addressing police violence and abuse by resorting to law and raising of public awareness, unveiling problems and proposing alternatives, civic organisations have gained legitimacy in the last decade, in the eyes of public opinion as with respect to State bodies, thanks to their expertise and their ability to defend victims and obtain justice in many occasions. Civil society mobilisation has contributed on various levels to building arena of public discussion. Soon after the law was passed however, the State agenda moved on different political agenda in which the strengthening of control over organisations from the civil society and over mass media went hand in hand with a global restoration of State control over policing issues, as testified by the persistent weakening of independent human rights organisations in the ONK. Even when they were successful, peaceful and resorting to law and public awareness mobilizations are a part of the global critique and public trial of the police, and their agency in keeping an independent agenda of mobilization is hampered by their very embedment in institutional state/society mechanisms. With a more independent agenda, violent mobilizations have posed a challenge to the State which was without doubt taken seriously all the more so as they could feed and bring consistency to numerous but sparse nationalist groups and ideologies.

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