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Vigilante shows and law enforcement in 2010s Russia

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Abstract

Moral entrepreneurs who volunteer to enforce rules by themselves have spread in 2010s Russia. As “rule enforcers” they patrol the streets in order to catch offenders some with conflictual relations with the police and some in cooperation with the police. This paper aims at determining whether these initiatives reflect the development of vigilante justice in contemporary Russia. Two particularities of the Russian case are striking, at least at first glance. On the one hand, several citizens’ policing initiatives are *vigilante shows* aiming to generate a profit. Raid videos posted on YouTube and VK reach a large audience and provide popularity to these groups, especially their leaders. On the other hand, the development of these groups is not the simple effect of a powerless state, failing to maintain order or to fight crime. The paper will appreciate how these new forms of policing contribute, on the contrary, to strengthening state authority.

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Like elsewhere in Russia on this sunny Sunday, three friends share a picnic and some beers in a local park. This trivial scene is brutally interrupted by four young men, shaved heads, wearing tracksuits, who start taking the friends to task while filming the scene. After having reminded them that drinking alcohol is prohibited in the park they request with an outrageous politeness that they empty their bottles and their glasses or else they will call the police. The three friends protest and the vigilantes call their comrades: now they are a group of twelve, ready to fight. One of the men sharing the picnic asks, ‘but who are you guys precisely? Are you pigs (*musorskie*)? Because honestly the more I look at you the more you look like troublemakers (*bespredel’shiki*)’¹.

Moral entrepreneurs who decide to enforce rules by themselves and render justice in the name of ‘civil society’ have spread in 2010s Russia. As “rule enforcers” (Becker, 1963)², they differ from crusaders who engage in promoting prohibited norms (Gusfield, 1963; Lapointe, 2014). Rather, they patrol the streets in order to catch offenders through sometimes more and sometimes less conflictual relations with the police. Self-proclaimed rule enforcers do not fight with all offenders: depending on their specialty, they target for example badly parked cars obstructing pedestrian walkways, shops selling expired products, smokers and drinkers indulging in their vice in public places where this is prohibited by law, illegal-immigrant shelters, corrupt police officers, crooked public-transportation inspectors, drug dealers, prostitutes and their customers, pedophiles—and many more.

These forms of citizens’ contributions to policing do not correspond to police-citizen partnerships (Jobard & de Maillard, 2015, pp. 242-244) such as neighborhood watches (Bennett, Holloway & Farrington, 2006) or current *druzhiny* in Russian cities (Khodzhaeva, 2016 and 2019). Self-proclaimed rule enforcers all share the same modus operandi, consisting of an action in the street that would be meaningless if it were not filmed and spread via social media. They usually break the law to enforce rules, and often humiliate their “prey” during their “raids” and “safaris”, pushing them to their limits in front of the camera. Brawls often happen during these interactions, which probably contributes to explaining the popularity of some of these groups on the Internet. All the groups involved do not share the same political stance; some are linked with pro-government youth organizations and some are connected to an ill-defined far-right movement.

This paper aims at testing the hypothesis that these initiatives reflect the development of vigilante justice (Abrahams, 1998; Johnston, 1996) in contemporary Russia. Surprisingly enough, while the phenomenon that emerged in the mid-19th century in the US context has become global (Pratten and Sen, 2007), the term “vigilantism” is hardly employed in the Russian context (Galeotti, 2007)³. However, the general distrust in the police (Gerber &

¹ Lev Protiv, *Lev Protiv ne na tekh narvalis*’ (Lev protiv did not pick the right ones), YouTube, June 14, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot6UW68DcZQ>

² In *Outsiders*, Becker considers the police institution as the sole « rule enforcer ».

³ Since 2018, the NGO Public Verdict has developed a project to monitor Russian vigilante groups: <http://vigilant.myverdict.org/>

Mendelson, 2008; Taylor, 2011), still widespread in the 2010s (Semukhina and Reynolds, 2014), the development of moral panics and the “cheap form of law enforcement” (Pratten & Sen, 2007, p. 3) provided by the groups invite analysis of the relevance of the term – in spite of its fundamental ambiguities (Moncada, 2017) – in the Russian context. Such an ambition does not mean that Russian vigilantes are mere imitations of their European, American, Asian or African counterparts. On the contrary, this comparison will help to identify particularities, which in turn may enrich the general understanding of contemporary vigilantism as a social phenomenon.

As the paper will show, two particularities of the Russian case are striking, at least at first glance. On the one hand, several citizens’ policing initiatives are *vigilante shows* aiming at generating a profit. Raid videos posted on YouTube and VK reach a large audience and provide popularity to these groups, especially their leaders. On the other hand, the development of these groups cannot be understood as the simple effect of a powerless state, failing to maintain order or to fight crime. The paper will show that these new forms of policing contribute on the contrary to strengthening state authority. Indeed, a close examination of these mobilizations reveals different kinds of shifting configurations (Elias & Dunning, 1994), in which the vigilante groups sometimes have cooperative relations with the police force and sometimes have conflicting relations. Moreover, the authorities’ attitude to a given group can vary over time and space. Observation of these groups shows how the government actually controls the distribution of policing functions by allowing legitimate “civil society” representatives to exercise sovereign prerogatives, excluding from the field any initiatives considered “extremist,” and ultimately giving credit to the idea that maintaining order is a more legitimate goal than complying with the law.

To prepare this article, I have studied more than 15 Russian vigilante groups⁴ but do not claim to have been exhaustive; there are many local groups whose notoriety does not reach beyond a city’s younger population.⁵ Some of these groups conduct their activity in more than just one city. Groups as diverse as StopXam (the movement against badly parked cars) or Restrukt (managing the project Occupy Pedophilia before it was banned) have fueled the emergence of “copycat movements” (Gabowitsch, 2018) in dozens of Russian cities, as well as in some neighboring countries. These groups are usually short-lived (from three months to two years), but StopXam has been patrolling the streets since 2010. Their popularity should certainly not be overestimated, but their presence in the digital space is sometimes impressive. Several of these groups have their own YouTube channel, upload videos regularly and attract hundreds of thousands of subscribers. Moreover, these groups raise interest in the media; as guests in shows on crime fighting, they have fueled many a debate on the legitimacy of self-justice practices and on the boundaries of acceptable maintenance of law and order.

This paper is primarily based on sources supplied *by* the observed groups in order to communicate about their activity on the social media. I have archived since 2014 the videos they produce, showing how they present themselves during their “raids,” how they interact with one another, how they select what can be shown or not, how they subdue their prey and how

⁴ Antidiler (Antidealer), Datsik, Davidych na Okhote (Davidych on Hunt), Dvizhenie (Movement), Guestbusters, Khryushi Protiv (Piglets Against), Lev Protiv (Leo Against), Molodyozhny antinarkoticheski spetsnaz or MAS (Youth Anti-Drug Commando), Nochnoi Patrul (Night Patrol, in Kirov and in Samara), Okhotniki nad Golovami (Headhunters), Restrukt (Occupy pedophilia, Occupy Narcophilia, etc.), Sdai Pedofila (Turn In a Pedophile), Shchit Moskvyy (Shield of Moscow), Stop Nelegal, StopXam (Stop a Douchebag), Trezvyye dvory (Sober Courtyards).

⁵ As an example, in March 2016, when I was in the city of Tver, there were youngsters patrolling the city center’s streets to prevent people from siphoning gasoline from cars.

they justify their action. This archiving has allowed me to keep the videos that were later withdrawn from groups' official pages for legal or other reasons⁶. Added to this self-produced discourse are sources produced *about* these groups, in particular when certain actions give rise to local or national controversy, when mobilizations hostile to these groups develop locally, or when the authorities take explicit stands on them. I have also done ethnographic observation of several raids organized by Lev Protiv – a Moscow-based group specializing in fighting alcohol and tobacco consumption in public places - in 2017 and 2018.

I will first analyse the development of citizens' policing initiatives in Russia as a social phenomenon and will especially focus on their law-enforcement practices. Then I will determine the relevance of the concept of vigilantism in order to define them, before discussing two particularities of the Russian vigilante initiatives: their commercial goals and their heterogeneous and complex relationships with law-enforcement agencies.⁷

Rule enforcers

Without engaging in a genealogy of these phenomena, it is worth noting that the Soviet regime promoted the involvement of the population in policing and justice-making through *druzhiny*, *komsomolskie spetsotryadi* (youth squads patrols) or comrade courts (Gorlizki, 1998). The post-Soviet context has been marked by the development of citizen initiatives aiming at enforcing Russian law, especially against the use of drugs. Almost fifteen years before he was elected Mayor of Yekaterinburg (2013-2018), Yevgeny Roizman became famous locally for the crusade he launched against drugs when he was a businessman in the late 1990s. He not only opened controversial rehabilitation clinics, but also involved local gangsters from the Uralmash group in the surveillance and the repression of customers and dealers (Roizman, 2005). During the following decade, the Movement against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) not only voiced anti-migrant feelings, but also organized raids in markets and in workers' residences to flush out the *nelegaly* ("the illegals"). The punitive expeditions against migrants were already part of the repertoire of Russian far-right groups before the Internet was widely accessible in Russia (Shnirel'man, 2011, pp. 412-431). From the mid-2000s, the spread of the Runet has nevertheless given more visibility to these practices. In the late 2000s, skinhead gangs competed by filming their merciless racist attacks and showing them with complacency on the Internet. During the 2010s, in the tradition of DPNI raids, numerous far-right groups have continued to enforce by themselves the fight against illegal migrants, and against illegal accommodation providers, for instance The Shield of Moscow (Schit Moskvyy, in 2012-2013⁸) or Guestbusters (in 2013-2014⁹). Supported by The Shield of Moscow, StopNelegal (active mostly in 2013-2015) has particularly targeted illegal migrants working as drivers in taxis¹⁰.

⁶ It does not mean that these videos are no longer accessible on the Internet. As an example, since the liquidation of Restrukt, Occupy-Pedophilia videos have been considered as extremist, but they are still easily accessible on the Runet in January 2020.

⁷ I would like to thank the International Centre for Comparative Criminology (University of Montreal) for offering me a visiting scholarship during which I wrote the first version of this article, and also my colleagues Anthony Amicelle, Matthew Light, Erica Marat, Lauren McCarthy, Peter H. Solomon, Jr., and Samuel Tanner for their support and comments on earlier versions of this paper.

⁸ https://vk.com/board_of_msk

⁹ <https://vk.com/guestbusters>

¹⁰ <https://vk.com/stopnelegal>

The 2010s recurrence of citizen initiatives in the fight against deviance is taking place in a context that sharpens police distrust. Criticism of the police force as an institution has been a leitmotif during the late Soviet and post-Soviet era (Favarel-Garrigues and Le Huérou, 2004). Media, human right activists, businessmen and politicians have denounced its indifference, its corruption and its violence (Favarel-Garrigues, 2011). Under Vladimir Putin, in spite of significant institutional changes (Taylor, 2011), the police force has continued to suffer from a “lack of institutional trust” (Semukhina and Reynolds, 2014; see also Gerber & Mendelson, 2008). Many events in the late 2000s have reflected tensions between the population and the police force, as illustrated in the majority of the riots triggered by interethnic confrontation (for instance in Moscow in 2010¹¹ or in Biryulyovo in 2013¹²). The series of assaults in 2010 on police officers by the “Primorye Partisans,” a gang of young ultranationalists who took up arms to put an end to police corruption, showed that this form of action had support from Russian society.¹³ After a decade of disparagement, institutional reorganization, and incremental changes, a major reform of the Ministry of Interior was finally adopted in 2011, in the pre-electoral context. However, its implementation was immediately criticized, which led to the ousting of the Minister in 2012. The reform included procedures to incentivize citizens to help, cooperate with, and even monitor the police force suspected of indifference, incompetence, and venality, and to encourage denunciation of abuse by means of “hotlines”. In the early 2010s, many initiatives have attempted to frame volunteerism, as shown in 2015 by the call from the Union of Volunteers in Russia, relayed by governmental institutions, “to give citizens better training in the fight against terrorism.”¹⁴ The most significant example is the 2014 law on citizen participation in law enforcement, which regulates the activities of “*druzhiny*” - volunteers, often retired police officers, patrolling a district with a police officer for remuneration or not- and Cossack units (Khodzhaeva, 2016 and 2020). Such a background offers resources to support the development of policing initiatives within ‘civil society’. Three of the groups I have studied have found their place within this framework by winning calls for tenders designed to promote civic projects in this domain: Stop a Douchebag (StopXam), Piglets Against (Khryushi Protiv¹⁵) -against shops selling expired products- and Leo Against (Lev Protiv). They have received governmental grants for a few years in order to enforce rules that governmental institutions are powerless to deal with. As “activists” (*aktivisty*) and responsible citizens, they are then considered as good role models for the youth.

In the early 2010s Russian society also witnessed the launching of moral crusades. On the one hand, the most reactionary political elites - mainly deputies who are known for their deep-rooted attachment to values such as family or Orthodox faith - put pressure to legislate on sexual issues, by passing the 2013 law prohibiting propaganda of “nontraditional” sexual relations among minors.¹⁶ In this context, defending sexual order has become one of the main objectives of moral policing by Russian vigilante groups. Anti-pedophile hunting is the most competitive activity in this field, involving rule enforcers who use this cause to justify homophobic speeches. The Headhunters (Okhotniki Za Golovami), led by Sergei Zhuk, were the first to post

¹¹ On December 11, 2010, 5 days after a Spartak Moscow fan was killed during a clash with Northern Caucasus natives, football fans and nationalist youth gathered on Manezhnaya Square in Moscow, challenging the police and behaving aggressively against ethnic minorities in Moscow center.

¹² On October 13, 2013, in a district in Southern Moscow, a crowd of locals and nationalist activists attacked properties owned by immigrants in reaction to a murder.

¹³ See for instance: https://www.kommersant.ru/theme/2023?from=doc_tema

¹⁴ <http://president-sovet.ru/members/blogs/post/1824/>

¹⁵ On their YouTube channel, Khryushi Protiv propose to translate their name into “Piggy Against” but “Piglets Against” is more accurate.

¹⁶ The [Russian federal law](#) "for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values" was adopted in June 2013.

raids against presumed child sex abusers on social media starting in 2010. The Tesak-led Occupy Pedophilia project emerged a bit later in 2012, but was the most popular before the skinhead-activist was sent to jail in 2014 and his organization shut down. Dozens of local pedophile-hunters organized “safaris” under this name in their own city. After Tesak’s imprisonment, local groups, using the brand Occupy-Pedophilia, have continued to act, for instance in Rostov-on-Don. Other pedophile-hunting initiatives have been promoted by activists closer to the government, in particular Ana Levchenko’s project, Turn in a pedophile (Sdai pedofila) (Favarel-Garrigues, 2019). Other vigilante initiatives in the field of sex control have targeted prostitution, like Datsik’s raids in two Saint-Petersburg brothels in 2016¹⁷. After the law prohibiting propaganda of “non-traditional sexual relations” was passed, activists like Timur Bulatov became active in digital vigilantism, targeting LGBT activists and non-heterosexual teachers on Russian social media and shaming them¹⁸.

In addition to the defense of heterosexuality and traditional family values, the government has sought to limit the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, in particular among the youth, and to promote a “healthy lifestyle”. Furthermore, “rule creators” (Becker, 1960) also contributed to passing a law making swearing in public places an administrative offense. The various laws that result from these crusades are hardly enforced by the authorities, yet are invoked in order to develop self-policing initiatives. Many Russian vigilante groups justify their activity by their willingness to promote a healthy lifestyle (*zdorovy obraz zhizni* or *ZOZh*). The defense of this value leads them in particular to enforce the legislation concerning alcohol consumption. The Moscow-based group Leo Against (Lev Protiv, founded in 2014) is the most active and popular in this field, fighting alcohol consumption in streets and parks (initially also smoking, and today also swearing in public)¹⁹. Following this example, several local groups, also named Lev Protiv, have been observed in Russian provincial cities. A group based in Chelyabinsk and named Clean courtyards (Trezvye dvory, from 2014 to 2018), also met success at the national level with its videos²⁰. Other groups do not patrol in parks and streets, but check how alcohol-selling shops comply with the law, in particular whether they check the age of the purchaser and refrain from selling alcohol at night. At the local level, Alkostop in Nefteyugansk and Surgut, active mostly from 2015 to 2018 also use these tactics²¹. Other vigilantes fight against drug-trafficking and drug consumption. The Youth Anti-Drug Commando (Molodyozhny antinarkoticheski spetsnaz, or MAS), which existed between 2010 and 2013, remains a seminal reference in this field, due to its brutality, to its success among Russian youth, and to the proximity of its leader to the government²².

Some groups develop multifaceted action to promote a healthy lifestyle, including raids in alcohol-selling shops, but also inspections of pharmacies selling prescribed medications without prescription, and operations against drug-dealing. In 2020, Antidiler, a “Russian social anti-drug movement”, is the most active group in this field²³. Founded in Krasnoyarsk in 2013 by Dmitri Nosov, a sportsman and an Olympic medalist who became a LDPR deputy in the State Duma from 2011 to 2016, Antidiler claims to act in most of Russian regions, but according to observers exaggerates its territorial expansion²⁴. The promotion of a healthy lifestyle is a

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XsKnNhB9sbY>

¹⁸ <https://meduza.io/feature/2014/12/12/moya-orientatsiya-eto-amoralno>

¹⁹ See Lev protiv’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUBoIo2p7GSRMt1YcSswDEw>

²⁰ See Trezvye dvory’s YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGD7rj3a0lwn-lvoZZf_3ZA

²¹ See AlkoStop’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0e1uzP2v1ZMblDw3q800TQ/videos>

²² Their videos are still available. See for instance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CaaWLRz6Qw>

²³ See Antidiler’s VK page: <http://vigilant.myverdict.org/files/antidiler21>

²⁴ <http://vigilant.myverdict.org/files/antidiler21>

competitive sector within Russian civil society, in which both State-sponsored social projects like Sober Russia, founded in 2012 and organized raids take part²⁵. The few groups involved in consumer protection are also linked with health issues. The already mentioned state-sponsored project Piglets Against (Khryushi protiv), created in 2010 by a pro-governmental youth organization to check that markets and shops were not selling expired products, is the most famous among them²⁶.

Along with moral crusades dealing with sexuality and health issues, enforcing traffic laws instead of the police is another important branch of vigilante activity in Russia. Combatting badly parked vehicles and bad driving manners in Moscow and other Russian cities, Stop a Douchebag (StopXam), is the most famous, having its signature (the large stickers they place on car windows to shame bad drivers), its local chapters and its YouTube channel in English²⁷. Initially state-sponsored and linked with pro-governmental youth organizations, StopXam has been in trouble with the law since 2016. However, their channel still works, making this group the most durable in Russia²⁸. StopXam has inspired other initiatives like Stop a Jerk (StopZhlob, 2014-2015)²⁹, which have not met with the same success. Other vigilante groups are involved in road traffic policing, for instance Movement (Dvizhenie) in Moscow, recording road traffic offences since 2013³⁰. Vigilantes seek also to contribute to fighting drunk drivers, for example Night Patrol (Nochnoi Patrul, created in 2013) in Samara³¹ and in Kirov³², which patrols the streets and answers emergency calls reporting suspicious drivers. Road vigilantes also target corrupt traffic police officers: the most popular among them was Davidych, a test-driver who began in 2014 to set traps for corrupt officers and was jailed from 2016 to 2018 for embezzlement.

The texts and the videos these groups produce, as well as those shot by people assisting in their patrols - and that reveal the coercive means they use but try to hide – help us to understand the sociological profile of rule enforcers. First, all these groups are headed by a charismatic leader, whose face is associated with the project and who is sometimes popular among the youth (Marx & Archer, 1973). Despite variations concerning their level of education and their socioprofessional background, these leaders are usually young urban male entrepreneurs and biographical data about them are available. It is more difficult to learn anything about the rank-and-file ‘*aktivisty*’ who form the threatening posse around the leader, even if videos show that they are also young urban males, sometimes minors, able and ready to fight. Not that there are never women; the group Piglets Against is comprised of mostly women. Women also take part in StopXam actions and sometimes show up in anti-pedophile raids. Yekaterina Zigunova used to lead the Saint-Petersburg chapter of Occupy Pedophilia³³. In October 2013, an anti-pedophile hunter stabbed Alena Gorbushkova, nicknamed Alena SS, a member of the same group in Naberezhnye Chelny, to death³⁴. The rhetoric of young Russian rule enforcers is however steeped in the virility register: “You’re a girl! I’m telling you this publicly because you even can’t defend yourself,” hurled, for instance, Mikhail Lazutin, the leader of Lev Protiv, at one

²⁵ <http://www.trezvros.ru/>

²⁶ See Khryushi protiv’s YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCSdzksftzE7Tu2KAAZ4OvXQ>

²⁷ See the Stop a Douchebag channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMrKscEv_Ri1pvlRsLxsqJQ

²⁸ See also Road Control (Dorozhny control) in Voronezh : <https://vk.com/dk36ru>

²⁹ <https://vk.com/stopzlob>

³⁰ See Dvizhenie’s YouTube channel : https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5DWMY_XjL3v3VfLIZFZvpw

³¹ <https://vk.com/patrolsamara>; <http://нп63.рф/>

³² <https://vk.com/patrolkirov43>

³³ <https://meduza.io/news/2014/10/20/belaya-sotnya-nasledniki-tesaka>

³⁴ <https://www.mk.ru/social/article/2013/10/16/931745-pohoronyi-alenyi-ss-vyizvali-isteriku-sredinatsistov.html>

of his prey, a man old enough to be his father. The omnipresence of this register is part of another feature of Russian self-help justice-makers, which is their claim of living a healthy life. Defending a healthy lifestyle” is a shared obsession; not only does this value serve to justify certain fights as mentioned earlier, it is also embodied by the leaders of these groups, all of them athletic and muscular, and generally combat-sports enthusiasts, as shown in the innumerable fight scenes involving them that are peppered into the videos. Skills in use of force are sometimes of a quasi-professional level, and some leaders can be considered as “violent entrepreneurs” (Volkov, 2012): this is for instance the case of Alexander Volozhanin, the leader of the Chelyabinsk-based group Sober Yards (Trezvye dvory), whose nickname used to be “Yakuza” when he was a private security agent and a bodyguard in the 1990s³⁵. Because they are young, these “activists” have also mastered the art of staging themselves on the Internet and of publicizing their activity by producing more or less good quality videos of their “raids,” “safaris,” and other punitive expeditions. The care taken in communication (logos, signs of recognition, language, dedicated spaces in the social media) shows that all of these groups aim to gain notoriety among Russian web users.

Last but not least, activists present themselves as active citizens doing something concrete to protect the community, “outside of politics” (*vne politiki*). All their initiatives take the form of goal-oriented and accountable “social projects”, aiming at defending human rights and justifying crowdfunding campaigns – in 2020 Lev Protiv provides privileged access to their new videos for their premium donors. The “activists” justify their action by referring to a larger whole, that is, “the people” or “civil society.” Their use of the “civil society” label is significant; by claiming to depoliticize the action, it offers enrichment and career prospects. Such an appropriation is partly the outcome of a policy that in the 2000s sought to frame civil society by prompting NGOs to focus on socially useful projects (Cheskin and March, 2015; Daucé, 2013; Hemment, 2012). Even the neo-Nazi Tesak, involved in anti-pedophile safaris, used to present himself as a “human-rights defender” and as a social activist. However, the unanimous claim of being “outside of politics” should be considered cautiously; there are many strings tying these groups to politics, as I will show later.

“Raids” and “safaris”

Whether they fight illegal migrants, maintain sexual order, promote a healthy lifestyle or implement traffic laws, these groups – and the law enforcement practices they resort to - have much in common. Working as a team entails a role division that is not completely made public: a cameraman and a posse adopting a provocative attitude assist the leader. The “raids” and “safaris” provide content for videos, which are the tangible result of the action taken. Profit-making groups are the promptest in uploading new videos (on a weekly basis, sometimes almost daily) because this is how they are accountable for the use of the funds they are allocated – either by the government or through crowdfunding. The cameras used during the raids constitute a means of communication disseminating the vigilante’s point of view. Activists spend much time justifying themselves in front of the camera. The camera is also a means of coercion, a weapon that exposes non-consenting people (Trottier, 2017). By serving to provide proof of the offences committed, of the aggressiveness of offenders and of the appropriateness of activists’ behavior, the use of the camera shows that the raid is conducted in strict accordance with the law. This is in fact the argument used to justify its presence, for though the law

³⁵ <https://pasha-vidik.livejournal.com/14681.html>

prohibits filming someone without his or her consent, it does authorize recording an offence being committed. Moreover, the camera records any misdemeanor or abuse, which guarantees the “safety” of all, according to vigilantes. Such discourse on recording as legal proof and as an act of transparency seems rather dubious, however; the videos that are spread are carefully edited to justify the decisions made by the vigilantes and to give credence to the idea that they resort to physical violence only in situations of self-defense. It is nevertheless important to note that rule enforcers consistently refer to the law and cite exactly the articles according to which they have the right to do what they do: filming people, reminding them of the law, stopping an offence being committed, neutralizing an offender, and resorting to self-defense in case of aggression. During the Lev Protiv’s raids I have observed, I was surprised to notice that most verbal interactions between activists and their targets dealt with legal issues.

Russian activists show policing as a spectacle. They have created a new genre, the *raid video*, which turns their civic involvement in law enforcement into a vigilante show. The spectacle of vigilante justice is ruled by a singular economy of violence. The popularity of the raid videos seems to be closely related to the level of conflict at work in the filmed interactions. How these groups attract the odd web surfer by associating the videos with an image and a title intended to make people want to view them, is eloquent in this respect. Lev Protiv, for instance, selects stills of face-to-face altercations, weapons, and aggressive faces, underscored by sensationalist captions such as “Attack on the activists” or “They blow their smoke in children’s faces.”³⁶ The videos give the viewers the pleasure of a transgressive spectacle, where scenes of destruction of property (cars or stores, as for MAS, the Youth Anti-Drug Commando), brawls (Lev Protiv), and sadistic submission (Occupy Pedophilia) get the most “likes”, views and subscribers. The word that summarizes this thirst for adrenalin among the youth is “*ekshen*”, borrowed from the English “action.” Hunting terminology is all-pervading: “safaris” are “hunting” scenes in which “live bait” is sometimes used to “catch prey.” The editing of the videos takes the audience’s expectations of “*ekshen*” into account; some of them follow a formatted script, in which the interactions, increasingly conflictive, lead to a climax of physical confrontation. The music selected for these videos is fast and noisy, like that of a trailer for an action movie.

However, the groups cannot show all the violence they resort to if they want to avoid criminal prosecution. Some of them partially elude the violence by hiding scenes considered non-presentable while revealing their existence to the public. When the anti-pedophile vigilantes of Kurgan strike their prey, for instance, they hide the image behind a “Stop violence” insert but leave the explicit soundtrack. As paradoxical as this may seem, even Tesak, the leader of Occupy Pedophilia, whose ingeniousness in sadistic behavior toward his “prey” on the screen seems limitless, has had to put some of his disciples, in a city named Kamensk-Uralsky, back in line when in the heat of the moment they punched the alleged pedophile and thus discredited the action³⁷. Tesak makes constant efforts to present himself as a professional hunter and not a hooligan, following a precise set of rules in a competitive turf (Favarel-Garrigues, 2019).

In several cases, the contrast is striking between the level of violence that these groups can resort to and their apparent courtesy during the interactions. Taking great care to present themselves as civilized and polite, they make a point of using proper language when addressing to their prey, and most of all, of not resorting to using dirty slang (*mat*)³⁸. By referring to the law prohibiting swearing in public – which is impossible for the police to implement -, they

³⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/user/lionversusSmoking/videos>

³⁷ <https://lenta.ru/articles/2013/07/05/kamenskuralsky/> ; <https://meduza.io/news/2015/10/14/v-kamensk-uralskom-posadili-uchastnikov-dvizheniya-okkupay-pedofilyay>

³⁸ See for instance Trezvye dvory’s raids: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCGD7rj3a0lwn-lvoZZf_3ZA

impose on the interaction a language register that enables them to qualify as “inadequate” (*neadekvatny*) any deviant behavior or strong language, which in their eyes testifies to the “abnormal” nature of the person they are speaking to. Combined with means of coercion such as an aggressive use of cameras and flashes, or the mass effect produced by a mob of virile and athletic young men, this apparent courtesy is aimed at pushing the person to his or her limits so he or she can then be accused of blowing his or her top. As a weapon, this polite aggressiveness is not limited to young rule enforcers: during a famous altercation between Alexei Navalny and Kuban Cossacks, the blogger and opposition leader, having just been sprayed with water and milk, reacted by insulting one of his attackers and then was reprimanded by the Cossacks for his use of *mat*.³⁹

The subtle use of violence at work in these groups makes it possible to further grasp the ambiguous relationship that they keep with the law. As I have already observed, the activists are not legal nihilists, showing a complete disbelief in law’s virtues; on the contrary, they apparently display a scrupulous observance of the law, reminding for instance a presumed offender which legal rule he has broken and showing conspicuously a perfect knowledge of their rights. They nevertheless consider it legitimate to break the law in order to enforce it. The activists thus impose, by force, their own hierarchy of standards, where fighting against pedophilia, drug dealing, or prostitution warrants committing criminal offenses. These latter include damaging property, arbitrary arrests⁴⁰ and acts of hooliganism. Imposition of this hierarchy is also based on conjuring up innocent victims. The emblematic figure of the victim is that of the child, used not only by the anti-drug and anti-pedophile vigilantes, but also by those fighting people smoking and drinking in the public space. The child, sometimes filmed in slow motion as if it were lost in a world of savages, does not need to express itself to prove its innocence. It is in its name that justice is delivered.

This being said, techniques of investigation, policing and punishment depend on the group. All of them go to great lengths to prove the prey’s guilt (*dokazatel'naya baza*, or “evidence base,” in Tesak’s words), for example by performing “purchase checks,” or stings (for drugs, drugs sold without a prescription, prostitutes) or by publishing the social-media messaging between an alleged pedophile and his “prey” to set a date. In such cases, activists present themselves as investigators. Once the guilt has been proven, nothing prevents the vigilantes, as far as they are concerned, from filming the rest of their operation. In the case of Lev Protiv, raids consist of reminding the offenders of the law and requesting them to stop their wrongdoing by emptying their bottle of alcohol or putting out their cigarette. If they do not obey, the activists do it in their place by confiscating their bottle or using water spray to put out their cigarette; they thus put an end to the offense, which is debatable from a legal point of view, since the offender is deprived of the possibility to simply continue “committing the offense” if he or she decides to, and pay the corresponding fine if caught by an actual police officer. In many other cases, offenders are neutralized; they can be surrounded by a band of young athletic males, tied to a post in the street (MAS), or trapped in their prey’s home (Occupy Pedophilia or The Headhunters - Okhotniki za Golovami –, that started to hunt pedophiles in 2010⁴¹).

Their fate then varies depending on the group involved. In most cases, after having noticed an offence, they call the police and film law-enforcement agents arriving at the crime-scene, arresting the offenders and taking them to the precinct. However, the offender is also frequently

³⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7gqi1p-Y>

⁴⁰ For instance, Lev Protiv and Trezvye Dvory restrain offenders until the police come; MAS ties alleged drug dealers to a pole until the police come.

⁴¹ <https://vz.ru/society/2011/9/21/524232.html>

subjected to the particular group's homespun punishments; the Youth Anti-Drug Commando covers some of its prey with paint and feathers, while Occupy Pedophilia takes advantage of a closed space to apply the greatest of sadistic inventiveness. During a typical interrogation, Tesak and his followers reveal the alleged pedophile's identity, force him to confess his deviance, force him to call his close relations to reveal to them the truth about his sexual preferences, shave his head, write "Fuck LGBT" on his forehead, make him take ridiculous postures, make him drink urine ("urotherapy"), etc. As put briefly by Tesak himself: "Occupy Pedophilia is a show. My intention is not to have someone put in jail; my intention is to completely destroy his life."⁴² Within the framework of another project named "Occupy Narcophilia", Tesak used to force dealers to eat the drug they sold. When the activist Datsik decided to cleanse Saint Petersburg of brothels, he forced the prostitutes and their customers to go to the police station naked and filmed them⁴³. Not all the observed mobilizations consist of pushing a punitive approach this far, but they all share the belief that a single person can all at the same time decide that there is a security need, implement the response to this need, and immediately punish the offenders without any trial. Being at the same time "auspices" and "providers" of policing (Bayley and Shearing, 2001), and also justice-makers, the Russian activists sometimes perform all the stages of judicial proceedings. This de-differentiation of the phases of a criminal investigation brings these groups closer to vigilantes observed in other contexts.

Vigilantes in Russia?

The Spanish term *vigilante* acquired common usage in the United States in the nineteenth century to designate groups that, on the pioneering fronts, took the law into their own hands in the place of institutions, which were simply absent or seemed ineffective (Brown, 1975). The word, along with the concept of *vigilantism*, soon acquired a derogatory dimension, raising concerns and controversies. Despite shortcomings in the definition (Moncada, 2017), the term then spread to other contexts and today raises new questions regarding its "globalization." (Pratten & Sen, 2007). Others underscore the rise of so-called digital vigilantism, considering how the Internet has changed the stakes involved in this form of policing (Trottier, 2017).

In order to appreciate the relevance of the concept in the Russian context, I will discuss the six classic features of vigilantism according to Johnston (1996). First, vigilantism is "a planned and premeditated form of action", excluding "spontaneous" collective reactions to the transgression of a norm. Second, a vigilante posse is a "private voluntary agency", which means that private security agencies, death squads and law-enforcement agents involved in social cleansing operations are not included. Third, vigilantes are autonomous citizens engaged in self-protection. They do not do it for commercial profit and they act without the state's authority or support. Fourth, they use or threaten to use force in order to fulfill their self-proclaimed mission. Fifth, they focus either on "crime control" or on "social control", including "the maintenance of communal, ethnic or sectarian order and values". Targeting not only delinquents external to the community but also, very often, the community's own deviants, vigilantes engage in crime fighting as much as in social control (Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1976). Finally, vigilantes act in order to offer assurances of security both to participants and to other members of a given established order. In other terms, they act in the name of a community. To Johnston's definition two remarks may be added. Firstly, vigilantes seek to be known to the public either because

⁴² Lenta.ru, September 18, 2012.

⁴³ In 2018 Datsik was condemned to 3,5 years of prison for his anti-brothel raids.

their activities are carried out publicly, in the name of a reference community, or because witnesses of the more discreet punitive expeditions spread the information and feed the group's reputation. Secondly, a vigilante group exists during a period of time, experiments with a sort of routine, but generally has a limited life-span (Favarel-Garrigues & Gayer, 2016).

The Russian case corresponds to five features of Johnston's definition. Private voluntary persons unquestionably premeditate the "raids" and "safaris" they conduct. They exert coercion by the use of force or by the threat to do it. They are involved in crime control or social control issues; they can defend legal or moral norms. These purposes are actually intertwined in certain cases, for instance when an offender belongs to a community that the vigilantes despise (ethnic or sexual minority). Finally, they act in the name of a community and protect an established order, based on moral values. The most problematic feature is the third one about autonomous citizenship, which is not very much developed in Johnston's argument (Favarel-Garrigues and Shukan, 2020). Vigilantes choose voluntarily to take the law into their own hands. This feature has two implications: on the one hand vigilantes are not motivated by potential commercial gains, on the other hand they are not supported by state authorities. I will show in the next part why these two assertions are debatable in the Russian case but at this point I would like to stress that such a definition may be contested by empirical research elsewhere in the world as well. In US history, vigilante movements have also often been connected with the local elite who, while abstaining from taking part directly in these groups' activities, give them financial support (for instance shopkeepers and landowners, the traditional "owners" of these groups) or political support (Rosenbaum & Sederberg, 1976). In a similar vein, contemporary "cow vigilantes" in India spread in a political context promoting Hindu nationalism and hate speech against Muslims (Jaffrelot, 2019).

Vigilantism and profit

"What do you do that for?" is one of the most common questions addressed to vigilantes during their raids and on the Internet. Endless discussions on social networks deal with the hidden motivations of the self-proclaimed rule-enforcers. Vigilantes who are suspected of making money with their activity are those who attract the most viewers on Internet, and in some case this suspicion corresponds to reality. The prospect, supported by the Internet and the social media, of individual retribution needs to be integrated into the analysis of vigilantism in order to keep at bay the discourse according to which these mobilizations are just answers to a security problem that no one else wants to deal with. By fighting crime, Russian vigilantes make themselves a name, build their reputation and expect to make a profit. They are initially not paid to patrol the streets –as a private security company for instance- but in some cases they progressively find sources of financing through grants or advertisements. Blossoming in the Internet age, Russian activists challenge the standard definition of vigilantism by intertwining in an innovative way citizenship, law enforcement and business venture.

The issue of personal retribution and remuneration seems to be a blind spot in the literature on vigilantism. The reasons to engage in this sort of activity are usually only examined at the level of a group. As a collective movement exasperated by crime or transgressive acts in its immediate environment, vigilantism is supposed to bring to each member a feeling of security and inclusiveness. However, an individual-based approach can prove to be productive (Fourchard, 2016). It is admittedly impossible to explain the reason why the rank-and-file participants take part in raids or safaris: do they look for the "sneaky thrill" of the transgression?

(Katz, 1988) Two sources of information make it possible, however, to appreciate the potential benefits of vigilantism: the first is related to the leaders, their career, and how they communicate about their activity; the second comes from critical investigations undertaken by bloggers and YouTubers on social media, seeking to prove that personal interests are hiding behind the façade of altruism (on controversies about Russian vigilantes, see: Favarel-Garrigues, forthcoming).

The concern for notoriety is manifest; the vigilante shows readily display the bystanders' many expressions of support to the leaders of the groups, which they have recognized. When I observed Lev Protiv raids, the number of fans willing to take a selfie with the leader impressed me. One of them came from a provincial city especially for the raid in order to reproduce the idea in his hometown. This popularity can be converted into income. Firstly, the pro-government groups enjoy public subsidies under programs of support to civil society, which over two or three years amounted to several million rubles granted to three of these groups: 10 million for StopXam (in 2013 and 2014), about 20 millions for Khryushi protiv (between 2013 and 2016), and 12 millions for Lev Protiv (in 2014 and 2015). Such subsidies are part of a more general policy, as illustrated by the attribution of "presidential grants" to patriotic NGOS such as Ofitsiery Rossii⁴⁴. Secondly, Russian vigilantes can expect to generate some revenue from their YouTube channels. Profit is difficult to estimate, but with more than 1.7 million subscribers on their main YouTube channels and almost 470 million and 270 millions of total views respectively in January 2020, StopXam and Lev Protiv are undoubtedly profitable brands (on StopXam, see: Gabdulkhakov, 2019). Both groups have opened a second channel to show more videos. In January 2019, their monthly earnings from the ad revenue of their main YouTube channel are estimated to reach more than 2,600 euros⁴⁵. Furthermore, this revenue does not include the remuneration for all the products or services advertised during the videos. For instance, Lev Protiv has his own advertisements in the beginning of their raids – for pizza delivery, sports betting or gyms - independently from YouTube-chosen ads, and calls viewers to sponsor their activity, which they present as work.

Who is the vigilantes' audience? Although it is impossible to know exactly who watches the videos, their authors can nonetheless be attributed intentions. Stating loud and clear that they are acting because they cannot be "indifferent" (*neravnodushnye*) to the cause they defend, the activists are addressing a public that spends its evenings on a couch ("*divanny plankton*," the Russian equivalent of "couch potatoes") and not in the streets helping to maintain order. Given that the YouTube economy is a potential source of income, the most visible groups seek to attract web users in general, particularly the urban young. The comments of the videos show clearly that male provincial adolescents are overrepresented and that the videos attract Russian-speaking youth abroad. However, only StopXam has reached beyond the borders of the Russian-language web by providing English subtitles for some of its videos on a special YouTube channel named "Stop a Douchebag", with considerable success.⁴⁶

Groups without any access to government subsidies may try to find other sources of financing. Tesak, the head of Occupy-Pedophilia project, is probably the most relevant example of making profit from his vigilante activity. Not only had he opened YouTube channels – before they were closed in 2014, but he also sold the right to attend a "safari", organized anti-pedophile parties,

⁴⁴ See TI-Russia's monitoring: <https://transparency.org.ru/projects/prozrachnost-nko/>

⁴⁵ According to <https://socialblade.com/youtube/user/stopxamlive>

⁴⁶ https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCMrKscEv_Ri1pvlRsLxsqJQ

wrote a book, gave lectures, and advertised for body-building gear and food. He even used his image to attempt to build a financial pyramid based on a Ponzi-type scheme⁴⁷.

Benefits are not strictly economic. A leader's popularity on the Internet may also constitute a source of political legitimacy. However, few cases correspond to this hypothesis. Before his run-ins with justice in 2016, the leader of StopXam, Dmitry Chugunov, formerly commissar of the pro-Putin youth movement Nashi, had been appointed member of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation from 2014 to 2017. However, he failed when he tried to be elected as a State Duma deputy in 2016. Anna Levchenko provides another case of possible connections between rule enforcers and political power. Also coming from Nashi, she became famous with her project Sdai pedofila (Turn in a pedophile). In early 2010s, she criticized violent anti-pedophile hunters and won several grants to support her project. She claims to have helped prosecute 164 pedophiles and shut down 150 websites with child pornography content. She was an assistant of the Russian Federation's ombudsman defending children's rights from 2011 to 2016. In 2018, she became an assistant of Senator Elena Mizulina to change legislation against pedophiles (Favarel-Garrigues, 2019).

Connections between vigilantes and politicians are also visible when political figures themselves take part in vigilante justice. Deputies from United Russia such as Milonov have shown themselves involved in anti-pedophile raids organized by "Parent's control" in Saint Petersburg in 2012⁴⁸. LDPR (Liberal Democratic Party of Russia) local deputies often show up in several videos, whether about denouncing drugstores in Moscow selling psychotropic drugs without a prescription or about joining a local initiative aimed at throwing smokers and drinkers out of building courtyards.⁴⁹ In Moscow, LDPR municipal deputy Andrei Andreyev has taken part in an Occupy-Narcophilia raid⁵⁰. Dmitri Nosov, the head of Antidiler, is not only a judo champion but was also an LDPR deputy in the State Duma from 2011 to 2016. In 2017, he was appointed member of the Public Chamber of the Russian Federation. At the local level, LDPR local deputies show their interest for vigilante activity by taking part in patrols (see for instance Trezvye Dvory in Chelyabinsk). As for the vigilantes hailing from the ultranationalist movements, their aim seems to be to gain recognition within these circles, as well as notoriety combined with a change in image, where the troublemaking skinhead becomes a vigilante do-gooder. It does not always work: after having organized raids against two brothels in Saint Petersburg in 2016, Datsik was arrested and condemned in 2018 to 3.5 years of prison for hooliganism, assault and home invasion.

Vigilantism and the State

Russian vigilantes raise one last problem with regard to the standard definition, which values "autonomous citizenship". Analyzing these groups' relationship to the state is a challenge to observers for several reasons. First of all, the Russian vigilantes are not homogeneous according to this criterion. Some of them are opposed to the Russian government (in particular because they support National Socialism or other far-right ideologies), while others, on the contrary, claim to support the Russian president (MAS) and are sometimes even funded by the government. This means that some groups are repressed, others ignored, and others explicitly

⁴⁷ <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/2013/09/11/5648257.shtml>

⁴⁸ <https://gazeta.spb.ru/778464-0/>

⁴⁹ <https://cheltoday.ru/articles/blogi/trezvye-dvory-bandity-ili-geroi-66925/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uZRINODkaKM>

encouraged and sponsored. In the second place, government support to a group varies over time, as emblematically illustrated by StopXam (Gabdulkhakov, 2019). Its longevity as well as its explicit government support did not prevent it from being dissolved at a time when its leader seemed less in official favor following a series of scandals, including a fight with the gymnast and Olympic champion Alexei Nemov in 2016⁵¹. However, despite two court decisions to shut them down, StopXam is still active on social media in January 2020. Similarly, the sudden imprisonment in February 2016 of the test driver Davidych—a popular vigilante tracking corrupt traffic-police officers from 2013 to 2016⁵²—seems related to his investigations into misappropriations by the Traffic Police in Moscow⁵³.

Finally, each of these groups develops a complex relationship to law-enforcement agencies. As mentioned above, despite the adoption of an ambitious reform in 2011, the police institution has remained highly criticized. The vigilantes have also joined the denunciation and included the police hunt in their missions, against officers who “dishonor the uniform.” They denounce less the state than the “state’s performance” (Abrahams, 2008, p. 423), and it is therefore possible for a group to challenge the police while claiming its support of the President and the regime. As a result, criticism of the inactivity, the laziness, and the formalism of the police is a permanent feature of Russian vigilante shows. A group like Lev Protiv revels in calling out police officers smoking in non-smoking areas with statements like: “Next time, go and smoke somewhere else”; “You should honor your epaulets by setting a good example”; or “Given your behavior, no wonder so many people say the police force sucks.” However, Lev Protiv is not repressed. On the contrary, in most of the cases, the police forces that the vigilantes call for enforcement backup come and arrest those they point to. Both even act in close coordination, as was the case for some Lev Protiv raids in the center of Moscow during the summer of 2019⁵⁴.

This complex panorama does not prevent distinguishing three configurations in the public authorities’ relationship with Russian vigilantes: explicit delegation, implicit support, and more or less stated rejection. Explicit delegation concerns the already mentioned three groups which were financed through presidential grants. In a context where the Russian government intended to increase the number of public-private partnerships in the field of law enforcement, its support of groups of young vigilantes comes as no surprise. Explicit delegation in the case of StopXam was displayed by a meeting with the president, and in the case of Khryushi Protiv by an official appointment with the Minister of the Interior. As previously indicated in connection with StopXam, this mode of delegation remains, however, ephemeral and basically fragile; supported at the federal level, the groups can be part of conflicts and scandals at the local level.⁵⁵

The Youth Anti-Drug Commando, Molodyozhny Antinarkoticheski Spetsnaz (MAS), provides a very enlightening case of implicit support. This group appeared in 2010 to fight against the devastation caused among youngsters by a new synthetic drug called “spice.” The authorities at that time seemed to be unable to stop its selling as the product was not included in the official list of prohibited substances. The raids carried out by MAS and filmed were particularly spectacular. Wielding pickaxe handles, hammers, and axes, the activists immobilized and destroyed the pushers’ cars while waiting for the police, forced them to leave their dealing areas

⁵¹ <https://gubdaily.ru/blog/strana/pochemu-na-samom-dele-zakryli-stopxam/>; <https://riamo.ru/article/126830/samye-gromkie-skandaly-svyazannye-s-dvizheniem-stopxam.xl?mTitle=&mDesc=&mImg=&mImgWidth=&mImgHeight=>

⁵² <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLyZrNBf9KMdqDgzWASwAiGrLQ--NAEUvj>

⁵³ See Davidych’s investigation : « <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XF-i9bba1nA&t=1609s>. Davidych was released in December 2018.

⁵⁴ <https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2019/06/15/80901-lev-lev-ozveret>

⁵⁵ <http://rk.karelia.ru/social/stopham-by-l-vynuzhden-zakryt-svoe-otdelenie-v-karelii/>

with smoke bombs, tied them up and splashed them with paint. Filmed and put on line, these raids were rich in “*ekshen*” and therefore very popular. No attempt was made to arrest the activists. No information was available about their funding, but they clearly had a budget, as shown by the quality of their videos. MAS was not officially state-sponsored but did not hide its proximity to power. Its leader, Arkady Grichishkin, used to show pictures of himself with Vladimir Putin, attended the pro-presidential International Youth Forum Seliger, and his political and moral stances on his Facebook page were always in perfect tune with the will to develop a healthy and patriotic youth. The Commando stopped its activity in 2013, however, as soon as “spice” was added to the list of the narcotics for which consumption is prohibited. Arkady Grichishkin is since devoted to charitable work, combat sports and the promotion of patriotism. He has attempted to start new projects dealing with the denunciation of scams (for instance fake diploma smuggling), but he has not met with the same success as with MAS.⁵⁶ He has taken part in the Antimaidan movement denouncing the American interference in the so-called “colored” revolutions that occurred in the post-Soviet space. The aim of Antimaidan was to prevent, through the use of force if need be, any attempt to destabilize the Russian political regime.⁵⁷ Contrary to other groups trying to use the legislative context to justify their activity, MAS intervened to bridge a legislative failure. This case shows the possibility of managing, indirectly and for a limited amount of time, a security issue by entrusting the mission to volunteer citizens. The striking illegality of MAS raids seems to have been covered up by the authorities. How else can it be explained that the police did not hold the activists accountable for how they had treated an alleged dealer?

Such forms of tolerance can be observed with respect to groups that develop forms of vigilantism focused on political or religious issues. Like Grichishkin, the National Liberation Movement (NOD), for instance, denounces foreign interference in Russian politics. This movement is not only hostile to liberal opponents like Navalny, but also to human right NGOs partially financed by Western funds. The group’s targets include the famous NGO Memorial, accused of serving US interests by painting a bleak picture of the Russian past, in particular by tarnishing Stalin’s record. Other groups, like Christian State (*Khristianskoe gosudarstvo*) and 40x40 (*Sorok sorokov*), have acted in the name of the values of the Christian Orthodox religion; they actively fight against abortion, “decadent” art, “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations among minors,” and blasphemy, and also join mobilizations intended to stop any social movement aimed at overthrowing the current regime. However, these reactionary groups question the frontiers of vigilantism, because their autonomy is dubious, they maintain more or less public ties with factions of the political elite, and they are closer to supplementary forces, like Cossack units for instance, ready to combat regime enemies⁵⁸.

Repression is mainly directed at those vigilantes who fight against police corruption and hunt down pedophiles. For a long time, the test driver Davidych denounced the corruption of traffic policemen by setting up traps; one of his favorite provocations consisted of pretending to be drunk while driving and filming the interaction, hoping that the police officer would try to get a bribe out of him. Very popular, these videos went on from 2013 to 2016, but his presentation of a more ambitious investigation, denouncing senior officials’ illicit enrichment (through license-plate trafficking), led to his arrest on charges of “large-scale fraud” in February 2016. Hunting down pedophiles is another area in which the most radical movements have been

⁵⁶ https://vk.com/antilohmsk?z=video-24199209_456254107%2F93a24cae322fec4c25%2Fpl_wall_-55037277

⁵⁷ See his VK profil picture on which he stamps on the American flag. He is interviewed on TV as an « Antimaidan movement activist » in February 2015 : www.5-tv.ru/news/94187

⁵⁸ The journalist Daniil Turovski uses the expression “off-line State” to deal with such groups: <https://meduza.io/feature/2015/09/22/stroiteli-oflayn-gosudarstva>

banned by the government, accusing them of “extremism”. The above-mentioned neo-Nazi agitator Tesak sought to use his notoriety in a variety of commercial projects supported by the organization Restruk. The most popular was Occupy Pedophilia, but other initiatives were adopted to fight against drug trafficking, alcohol consumption, etc. Tesak’s activity was initially welcomed: many talk shows were devoted to him, and his idea of rehabilitating his neo-Nazi image by facing the pedophile enemy was showing results. In some cases, his safaris led to real convictions for pedophile acts, as in the case of a Tax Administration top official in the Moscow region⁵⁹. There were nonetheless scandals as in the Kamensk-Uralsky case described above. Although Tesak’s most recent prison sentence – ten years, which he has been serving since 2014, was not directly related to his anti-pedophilia activity (but to incitement to racial hatred, robbery and hooliganism), Restruk as an organization was dissolved in 2014. This decision has not prevented, however, some local branches from continuing to spread videos on the Internet.⁶⁰ Whereas each vigilante project monopolizes a potentially profitable niche, the anti-pedophilia campaign encourages the formation of a competitive space in which moral entrepreneurs confront each other and seek to impose their definition of the frontiers of legitimate violence in the sector, as shown by the example of the State-sponsored *Sdai pedofila* project (Turn In a Pedophile, see Favarel-Garrigues, 2019).

Conclusion

In 2010s Russia, vigilantes show a particular combination of references to civil society, of law enforcement practices and of business venture in the age of Internet. For the most famous groups, commercial purposes take a central place in the enterprise. All vigilante groups share a common critique of the performance of Russian law-enforcement agencies, however this critique in no way destabilizes political order in Russia. On the contrary, Russian vigilante groups strengthen State legitimacy in two ways. Firstly, the groups I have scrutinized cannot anticipate or predict public authorities’ attitude toward them. Such a situation characterized by permanent instability shows an unbalanced configuration which institutional actors profit from since they can either spare a group of ‘useful activists’ or liquidate groups of “extremists”. These interactions draw a space in which the legitimate use of force is negotiated, including within the ruling elite. The opening of this space for negotiation echoes a governmental message according to which it can be legitimate to break the law to maintain order or to defend a right cause. In a context in which social movements as Antimaidan or National Liberation Movement (NOD) are ready to defend the country against any insurrection promoted from abroad, the preference for order is dissuasive indeed. Secondly, in these unbalanced configurations two visions of policing compete. Vigilantes expect the police to enforce the law in an uncompromising way. Whereas police activity is usually defined by its discretionary nature, the activists I have observed differ because they are intransigent: any offense they notice must be stopped and the end justifies the means. Paradoxically, this radical conception of policing may improve the legitimacy of law-enforcement agencies, as many comments under raid videos suggest. Any policeman who appears to be professional and law abiding will compare favorably to the vigilantes in action, who unintentionally contribute to humanizing the police, give credibility to the justice system and at the end of the day maintain political order.

⁵⁹ <https://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1201177/>

⁶⁰ The videos formerly produced by Tesak, mostly banned, nonetheless reappear regularly on the Internet.

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