

Article

Citizen-Led Justice in Post-Communist Russia: From Comrades' Courts to Dotcomrade Vigilantism

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a theoretical conceptualization of digital vigilantism in its manifestation in the Russian Federation where cases do not emerge spontaneously, but are institutionalized, highly organized, and systematic. Given the significant historical context of collective justice under Communism, the current manifestation of digital vigilantism in Russia raises questions about whether it is an example of re-packaged history backed with collective memory or a natural outspread of conventional practices to social networks. This paper reviews historical practices of citizen-led justice in the Soviet state and compares these practices with digital vigilantism that takes place in contemporary post-Communist Russia. The paper argues that despite new affordances that digital media and social networks brought about in the sphere of citizen-led justice, the role of the state in manifesting this justice in the Russian Federation remains significant. At the same time, with technological advances, certain key features of these practices, such as participants, their motives, capacity, targets, and audience engagement have undergone a significant evolution.

Introduction

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

—Russian Proverb

The spread of smart mobile devices and social networking has contributed to the emergence of digital vigilantism as a global phenomenon, where citizens take justice over fellow citizens into their own hands and retaliate using digital media. Russia's digital vigilantes address a wide set of offenses they find in their fellow citizens. Cases are diverse and range from battling traffic violations to busting alleged pedophiles. The phenomenon of public naming-and-shaming and the moralizing of citizens by other citizens is not a novelty for Russia. The state historically compelled citizens to vigilantism, denunciation, and collectivist justice during the Soviet period. Given the significant historical context of social justice that took place under Communism, the current manifestation of digital vigilantism in Russia raises questions about whether it is an example of re-packaged history or a natural outspread of conventional practices to social networks.

In its current theoretical conceptualization, digital vigilantism is described as a spontaneous phenomenon,

Gabdulhakov, Rashid. 2018. Citizen-Led Justice in Post-Communist Russia: From Comrades' Courts to Dotcomrade Vigilantism. *Surveillance & Society* 16(3): 314-331.

<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/index> | ISSN: 1477-7487

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whereas in Russia it is an institutionalized, highly organized, and systematic practice. In this regard, Russia's digital vigilantes constitute a unique research case where respective relationships with the state play a firm operational role. There is an intricate dynamic as, on one hand, digital vigilantes respond to "dysfunctions" of state actors by taking justice into their own hands, thus stressing the impotence of state bodies; on the other hand, some vigilante groups in Russia receive Presidential grants in support of their activities and enjoy formal and informal endorsements from the highest authority. This is taking place while the state attempts to impose tight control over social media through censorship, blocking, user-arrests, and by obliging telecommunication corporations to store and share user-generated data with security authorities upon demand. Use of "concerned citizens" by a controlling state to monitor other citizens largely resembles the Soviet totalitarian collectivist approaches to surveillance.

This paper aims to contribute to the theoretical conceptualization of digital vigilantism by analyzing the unique case of Russia with its Soviet-era pretext for citizens' involvement in justice matters and its institutionalized digitally mediated post-Soviet manifestation of this justice. It does so by addressing the following questions: What are the similarities and differences between conventional Communist and digitally mediated post-Communist vigilantism in Russia? What role does the state play in manifestations of mediated citizen-led justice in post-Communist Russia?

First, the paper conceptualizes citizen-led justice and its conventional as well as digitally mediated manifestations. It then focuses on the Soviet comrades' courts and elaborates on their structure, modus operandi, relations with the state and its agents, as well as motives of the state to involve citizens in surveillance and justice matters. The paper introduces prominent cases of digitally mediated citizen-led justice in contemporary Russia and compares them with Soviet-era citizen-led justice in terms of participants and their motives for engagement; the role of state authorities and collaboration between police and vigilantes; the nature of retaliation; targets; venues for retaliation; use of media; and the audience and its role. In doing so, the paper contributes to existing literature by spotlighting the unique case of Russia where the state had played and continues to play a significant role in the manifestation of citizen-led justice; where retaliation is systematic rather than spontaneous; and where a complex system of inter-relationships between the ruling regime, media and communication corporations, as well as active citizens brings to the surface scientifically significant discoveries for the surveillance field.

While the Soviet state was renowned for its surveillance practices, it is important to consider how these practices compare to modern-day approaches in Russia and to assess the role of digital vigilantes. In order to address its research questions, this paper focuses on the phenomenon of comrades' courts as a point of comparison. Indeed, Soviet manifestation of citizen-led surveillance and justice was diverse in its forms and intensity, depending on its positioning on the historical timeline, but comrades' courts are applicable to this study due to several nuances of their modus operandi. Comrades' courts instrumentalized naming-and-shaming and moralization as its methods of addressing offenses, much like digital vigilantes do when they expose their targets online. Comrades' courts resembled a disciplinary show, as the audience intensified shaming and moralization while being shown the consequences of deviation from the socialist order; mediated citizen-led justice too thrives on the presence of the audience, as the audience is fundamental to the effectiveness of retaliation, playing several key roles at once.

Trottier (2017: 56) defines digital vigilantism as a practice where citizens, collectively offended by other citizens' activity, respond through coordinated retaliation on digital media, including mobile devices and social media platforms. This paper applies Trottier's definition to digital vigilante groups working with the state, despite the state, and against the state in the Russian Federation. Namely, it focuses on two prominent pro-Kremlin groups: *StopHam* [Stop a Douchebag]¹ and *Hrushî Protiv* [Piglets Against]

¹ English translations of group titles are taken from their official websites and social media of these groups. Thus, orthographic nuances are preserved.

specializing in monitoring traffic violations and exposing “unscrupulous” merchants, respectively. These groups resemble the “many watching the many on behalf of the few” model set forth by Larsen and Piché where the public is engaged in “participatory surveillance,” extending the “effective gaze of the state” and doing so “beyond the boundaries otherwise posted by technology, resources, and law” (2009: 196).

Other cases, such as the ultra-right fascist group “Restruct,” as well as ethnic patriotic patrols among the Kyrgyz migrant diaspora in Russia, are addressed to illustrate scenarios where many are watching many despite the few. Activities of the Anti-Corruption Foundation watching the state itself are brought in to conceptualize the “many watching the few” scheme (Mathiesen 1997) where the state itself is monitored and exposed, although issues of power and immunity to exposure, afforded by certain privileges of the state, come into play.

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

Theoretical Background

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

Entrusted, Crowdsourced, and Lateral Surveillance

Social media and smart mobile devices with internet connection have made visibility global and widespread. Through social networks, but also by default of using digitalized services, users generate and make personal information public—a phenomenon of which intelligence services of the past could only dream (Morozov 2011). In light of global visibility and “the internet of things” (Ashton 2009), surveillance has transformed from a process into a lifestyle with “constant clustering and sorting of groups of individuals” (Lyon 2007: 183). Hand in hand with the demanded vigilance coming from the state “see something, say something” (Marx 2013; Reeves 2012), technological advances allow citizens to take “policing” and “spying” duties into their own hands (Andrejevic 2005), thus turning them into sleuths acting out of their own interests or as an extension of the “effective gaze of the state” (Larsen and Piché 2009: 196).

The very word “surveillance,” consisting of “‘sur’ (from above), and ‘veillance’ (to watch)” (Galič, Timan, and Koops 2017) implies the presence of a supervisor watching over subjects within some hierarchical system. Governments justify the ongoing data mining, storage of information, and clustering of individuals as a security measure (Posner 2008), while corporations explain it a business measure for customized experiences and advertising (Facebook 2016). “Ubiquitous computing” (Lyon 2007) at the backbone of modern existence resembles a new form of exploitation where smart devices must be regarded as exploitable devices (Hypponen 2014). Being a power monopolist, the state may warrant, demand, and/or hack access to big data gathered by corporations (Greenwald and MacAskill 2013). While the capacity of different actors ranges vastly between the users, the providers, and the sovereign, given

that “legal biases render citizens far more vulnerable under police surveillance” (Reeves 2012: 246), there is indeed a subject–object dynamic between them where a citizen is both “an agent of and a subject for surveillance” (Marx 2013: 58); but, theoretically, so are state agents and corporations, as their visibility can be weaponized too.

Lateral acts of social justice have existed historically. Witch hunting, lynching, and comrades’ courts serve as examples. In the modern context, such acts are afforded by the weaponizable visibility of other citizens (Trottier 2017). Convenience in generating and accessing information granted by the internet offers scenarios where “sharing may supersede reflecting” (ibid.: 58). This urge to share information fast and the idea that everyone is a sleuth (Nhan, Huey, and Broll 2017) can lead to waves of intense hatred in citizen-to-citizen relations, at times even directed at the wrong suspects (Volpp 2014). In digital vigilantism, there is a system of presumption of guilt as opposed to presumption of innocence as targets are deprived of a legal trial. Furthermore, the state and its agents can fall target to vigilant citizens. Footage of police brutality shared on social media, candidly recorded political conversations, citizen-led corruption investigations, and other acts of “many watching the few” (Mathiesen 1997) illustrate this dynamic. However, asymmetries of power (Monahan 2006) must be carefully considered in the instances where the state is “sousveilled” (Mann, Nolan and Wellman 2003) by citizens.

Despite making the sovereign more visible,² social media empowers the regimes themselves to exercise harassment over political opponents and investigative journalists (Pearce 2015). Even dictators join social networks, as opposed to censoring them, in order to be in tune with the discourses and in control of online conversations (Morozov 2011: 116); although censorship, blocking, and other forms of control over social media (Lokot forthcoming) are certainly extant across political and media systems. State advantages can be exemplified by Russia’s “anti-terrorism” telecommunication legislation, requiring telecommunications companies to “record and store all communications and activities of all users, and make stored records available to authorized government bodies at their request” (ICNL 2016). Therefore, ubiquitous visibility may on one hand denote vulnerability of the state when it comes to “sousveillance” (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003), while at the same time it provides new opportunities for surveillance and control. Citizens watch each other while they are also watched by the state through telecommunication corporations. At the same time, citizens can expose the state on these very platforms, though their capacities can be more restrained. These capacities are subject to asymmetries when it comes to generating, storing, spreading, and otherwise instrumentalizing information. While users can generate and share content, media corporations regulate this content in accordance with terms of use. The state, on the other hand, has legal and other resources to impose further control over information obtained by media corporations. Therefore, depending on the circumstances and capacity of each actor in a given case, respective advantages and limitations in control power will vary.

Visibility as a Novel “Spectacle of Punishment”

Foucault (1977: 12) argued that the role of the “spectacle of punishment” had withered away with the development of the “discipline society,” which transferred corrective and disciplinary measures behind curtains for the sake of punishing the soul as opposed to punishing the body. In digital vigilantism, the spectacle of offensive conduct and retaliation to perceived offenses is both the means and the end of practice as it relies on “weaponized visibility” (Trottier 2017: 68). Thus, in digital vigilantism “punishment of the soul” takes place through online harassment and damaged reputation; while “punishment of the body” takes place through embodied actions made visible online. The “spectacle of punishment” lives on in online retaliation, as weaponization of visibility a priori requires an audience.

Debord (1994: 12) defines the spectacle as “a social relationship between people that is mediated by

² A scheme initially addressed in Bentham’s Constitutional Panopticon as elaborated in Galič, Timan, and Koops (2017).

image.” There is, of course, a relationship between participants and targets as the former takes offense at the actions of the latter, but there is also a relationship with the audience. The audience is a significant element that has a relationship both with participants and targets of digital vigilantism. This dynamic raises questions over the definition of participation in digital vigilantism. It also raises questions over the motives, authority, and power of participants in response to perceived offenses, as well as the proportionality and nature of this retaliation, which can manifest in such acts as naming and shaming, moralizing, hacking, doxing, and broadcasting physical attacks.

Widespread connectivity granted by the internet brought about new modes of operation for citizen-led justice. Citizens can monitor and expose each other via social networks, while other users can participate through likes, shares, and comments. Information shared on social networks such as Facebook and YouTube (and on their Russian equivalents such as VKontakte [In Contact] and Odnoklassniki [Classmates], Moi Mir [My World], and Rutube [Russian version of YouTube]) “provide both a platform and a set of practices that render DV (digital vigilantism) meaningful and practical” (Trottier 2017: 61). Visibility is exploited by participants who access or produce and spread content related to their target. In this sense, digital vigilantism “can be framed in the context of online communication” (ibid.: 60) while “culmination” of this communication is “a coordinated mass persecution of a targeted citizen” (ibid.: 61).

Retaliation on digital media grants a wider set of affordances that distinguish it from conventional vigilantism. The audience observes retaliation and participates in it, while enjoying anonymity that was not rendered in comrades’ courts. If comrades’ courts culminated in a target’s repentance, digital vigilantism grants the audience capacities to intensify and prolong retaliation through likes, shares, and comments. Disciplinary elements are present in this digitally mediated spectacle as the audience is shown the consequences of offense. A large audience is a marker of popularity and relevance of activities of a given digital vigilante group. Thus, the audience is entertained by retaliation, the audience participates in retaliation, and the audience is disciplined through the “spectacle” of digitally mediated retaliation, with or without solidarity for the target that crowds expressed during public executions of the past (Foucault 1977: 64).

Much like executioners described in Foucault’s examples, digital vigilantes themselves fall target to vigilantism and retaliation from targets and audiences, thus illustrating a dynamic where complexity of agendas and interests clash in counter-narratives. However, questions concerning proportionality of offense and response, audience reach capacity, as well as the role of state endorsement, come into play when counter-narratives are addressed. In digital vigilantism, participants’ visibility can be a desired notion as this visibility can be instrumentalized. Visibility can lead to vulnerability for some and grant popularity and immunity for others. Where the Soviet state used the elderly and prominent members of the society to conduct public naming, shaming, and moralizing, in contemporary post-Communist Russia this role is taken on by young people active on social media. In fact, popularity and recognition can come as a result of engaging in mediated citizen-led justice.

Visibility granted by social media is the means, the end, and the structure in which digital vigilantism is taking place. Digital media (for example, social networks, websites, blogs) are both tools and platforms for participants to produce and share information that is intended to punish, shame, moralize, or otherwise expose and harm targets. Most importantly, mediated visibility resembles a Foucauldian “spectacle of punishment” (1977: 16)—a show that attracts an audience and serves as a warning for potential targets, thus becoming a disciplinary act.

Back in the USSR

In the Soviet Union, the state incessantly compelled its citizens to be watchful of each other. The intensity and severity of “many watching the many on the behalf of the few” (Larsen and Piché 2009: 196) varied

throughout the historical timeline of the Soviet state. Small collective comrades' courts were present since the early days of the Soviet empire (Barnett 2006; Fitzpatrick 1994; Gorlizki 1998; Kucherov 1970; Sieglebaum 1992). With the support of comrades' courts, the “father” of the Bolshevik Revolution, Vladimir Lenin, envisioned the eventual dismissal of legal coercion in “socialist democracy,” as people were expected to “act righteously not from fear of punishment but directed by rules of communist morality” (Kucherov 1970). Mediated tools of citizen-led justice and Soviet disciplinary measures included the so-called “boards of shame” and “boards of honor” (Bondarev 2012), displaying photographs of deviant community members and those to be admired, respectively.

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

Under Stalin's repressions amid the industrialization campaign it was important to show the power of the state as opposed to the power of fellow comrades over each other. Still, the identification of “enemies” was often carried out through anonymous accusations and reporting. A mere phone call or anonymous note commonly known in the Russian language as *donos*³ [snitching] could lead to a person's imprisonment and execution (Fitzpatrick 1994). Thus, the boundaries between secret police and citizens were blurred.

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

Having gained formal institutionalization, comrades' courts quickly spread across the Soviet Union. “From a few hundred mostly dormant agencies in the mid-1950s, the number of comrades' courts across the USSR swelled to 197,000 by the beginning of 1964, of which approximately 90,000 were in the Russian Republic” (Kazin, cited in Gorlizki 1998: 403).

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

³Anonymous reports by citizens on fellow citizens were submitted to higher authorities such as NKVD (The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) later transformed to KGB (Committee for State Security).



Figure 1: Comrades' Court. Photo by A. Nazarov (n.d.).

The Role of the State in Citizen-led Justice

The main proponents of the comrades' courts in Soviet Russia were professional jurists, who “saw in these lay agencies a constitutionally viable mechanism for diverting a large volume of troublesome business away from state courts” (Gorlizki 1998: 404). Despite the fact that the Communist Party was “omnipotent” in the Soviet Union, permeating “every aspect of Soviet life,” there is “no evidence” that comrades' courts were established to “strengthen Party influence” (Kucherov 1970: 192). Public opinion was, of course, influenced by the Communist Party and political cases were highly subjected to this influence. However, in instances where the Party “did not care to interfere,” the “pressure of [a] biased public” had the power to be exercised in comrades' courts (ibid.: 193). The main idea behind Lenin's statutes on comrades' courts, and their consequent reinforcement by Khrushchev, was that “all persons will learn to rule and will nearly independently control all the affairs of society” so that “the state” itself “may wither away” (ibid.: 170). While this indeed could have been the genuine desire of the proponents of citizen-led justice in the Soviet Union, the practical implication of this form of justice was accompanied by various defects, including but not limited to the “lack of knowledge of legal matters” by court members (ibid.: 196).

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

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

Participants

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

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

Digital Vigilantism in Post-Communist Russia

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

Nashi: Pro-state Digital Vigilantes in Russia

With demolition of the Soviet Union came political and ideological struggle. Under the system change and democratization of politics and market economy, known as “shock therapy,” the oligarchs emerged (Guriev and Rachinsky 2005) as a class while most of the former comrades were left with a broken state, collapsed economy, and abandoned ideals. Citizen-led participation in state life took on a form of patronage and racketeering. Comrades’ courts as they were known in the Soviet Union ceased to exist (Favarel-Garrigues and Le Huérou 2004: 17). Economic stagnation and public disenchantment with the state created a vacuum in legal social organization in independent Russia. This vacuum lasted until mid-2000s and was filled with state efforts taken by Russia’s second president, Vladimir Putin, as the society, especially the youth, were once again organized and mobilized.

The history of organized and institutionalized digital vigilantism in Russia was seeded in 2005 with the formation of Nashi [Ours] pro-Kremlin youth group which “played an important role in political socialization of young people” (Krivonos and Fedorova 2014). With Putin’s efforts for youth mobilization came the sentiment of the need to lift the Motherland “off its knees” (Kudors 2010: 8). Young people played a dual role in this process, as they were instrumentalized to support legitimacy of the regime, and while doing so, were averted from becoming a revolutionary force that could challenge or even tackle this very regime.

At the background of “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine, instrumentalization of youth in anti-revolutionary movements was a practical step for the Kremlin. Nashi were created to resist “unpatriotic coalition of oligarchs, anti-Semites, Nazis, and liberals” (Heller 2008: 3) and became agents of the state in response to behavior and actions that went against it or were suspected of going against it. Certainly, there were movements that questioned the ruling regime, however, pro-Kremlin groups received financial and

administrative support from the state, thus becoming “stalwarts” of the regime (ibid.: 3–4) with larger capacities.

As time went on, however, state interest in youth instrumentalization began to fade and Nashi experienced a downfall. Heller (2008) explains the decline of Nashi through change of interests in the Kremlin when Dmitry Medvedev came to power and attempts were made to re-load relations with the West. The “yobbish hooligans of Nashi” fulfilled their task in preventing a color revolution in Russia and did not suit the new image of Russia, which positioned itself as a “civilized” “partner of the West” (ibid.). Nashi’s failure to counter anti-regime protests and demonstrations in 2011 advanced the loss of interest in youth mobilization from the side of the ruling elite, and the movement ceased to exist in 2013 (Baunov 2017). At the background of confrontation with the West amid annexation of Crimea in 2014 and consequent sanctions imposed on Russia by Western democracies, the role of a civilized partner became less relevant, which may eventually result in resurrection of Nashi-like youth movements. However, the recent mobilization of Cossacks to assist the state in cracking down on protesters (Goble 2018) demonstrates that the Kremlin is leaning toward hard conventional forces in countering opposition, although hybridity of digital and conventional forces is possible. Nonetheless, starting from 2010 Nashi activists began re-branding the dissolving movement and under the Kremlin’s approval launched several vigilante groups with a specific offense-focus and social media instrumentalization in retaliation.

Stop a Douchebag and Piglets Against

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

Russia’s StopHam branch has two channels on YouTube, a Russian language channel and an English language channel where the “episodes” are uploaded. The group is also present on Facebook, Google+, Odnoklassniki, Twitter, VKontakte, and other social media. Members of StopHam are infamous for their brand stickers that read, “I spit on everyone, I drive where I want,”⁴ which they stick on windshields of noncompliant drivers.

Offense can be rooted in a wrongly parked vehicle, unauthorized stop, or driving on sidewalks. Confrontations with targets often escalate into conflicts and even mass fights (Stop a Douchebag 2015), thus attracting a wider audience. StopHam in Russia is essentially a brand, with numerous franchise branches across the country and in the neighboring post-Soviet states. Furthermore, some members of Russia’s StopHam founded their own movements, such as *Lev Protiv* [Lion Versus] in 2015 and *Stop Haram*⁵ in 2017 battling smoking and drinking in public spaces and behavior that goes against Islamic principles, respectively.

Hrushi Protiv operate in a similar manner to StopHam and engage in activities related to exposure and denunciation of unscrupulous merchants who sell expired products. Under their own initiative or upon receiving complaints from other citizens, group members wearing piglet suits enter grocery stores to survey product shelves. The entire process is filmed, and videos are edited and uploaded on YouTube with further dissemination across social media platforms. Much like StopHam, videos often feature violent content, cruel language, and physical confrontation (Hrushi Protiv 2017). The idea behind full-body piglet

⁴ A correct literal translation from the Russian version would read “I don’t care about anyone; I park wherever I want.”

⁵ “Haram” describes anything forbidden by Islamic canons. In this case, vigilantes target fellow Muslims and confront “non-Muslim” behavior.

suits is to demonstrate to the merchants that if they treat consumers as pigs, the pigs will retaliate. Hrushi Protiv have a website, an online store, and accounts on Facebook, Google+, Instagram, LiveJournal, Odnoklassniki, Periscope, Twitter, VKontakte, and YouTube. In 2016 Hrushi Protiv opened a branch in Belarus and became an international project (Hrushi Protiv n.d.).



Figure 2: StopHam sticker (Stop a Douchebag n.d.)

In their videos, Hrushi Protiv often feature merchants of “non-Russian origin” as unscrupulous. Among frequent targets are people from the Caucasus and Central Asia.⁶ Several videos produced by Hrushi Protiv called on the viewers to “sign a petition to legally ban migrants from working in retail” (Hrushi Protiv 2014a). This controversial call was made following Vladimir Putin’s proposition to reserve construction and some other employment spheres for migrants and leave retail for the Russian citizens (Kremlin 2013). This is an intricate situation where a citizen-led justice group can assist the state with a policy agenda. Furthermore, this situation raises questions concerning framing of targets in digital vigilantism. Participants possess editorial powers and maintain framing capacity, which can be further supported on traditional media platforms.

Framing of targets and other actors, such as police, can be instrumentalized in several ways including justification of and relevance to one’s own activism. While the Soviet state used the elderly and prominent members of society to conduct public shaming and moralizing, in contemporary post-Communist Russia this role is given to young people active on social media and participation can grant informal and formal powers as well as an income. Pro-Kremlin digital vigilantes receive state grants under the Presidential Program for NGO Support (Rubin and Rustamova 2014; Rustamova 2015), thus constituting a curious force supported and endorsed by the state. Meetings and selfies with Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev serve as additional legitimizing tools for pro-Kremlin activists, and they often emphasize these ties in their videos.

Not Ours: Digital Vigilantism Despite and Against the State

Kremlin-supported vigilantes aside, there are groups acting in spite of the state, although it remains unclear whether nationalist groups described below were not in control of the ruling elite. Nationalists operating under the umbrella movement Reconstruct illustrate a scenario where the state closed its eyes on openly criminal acts of mediated and embodied retaliation, but eventually responded in crackdowns.

⁶ Some of whom can also be Russian citizens.

Starting with an allegedly anti-pedophile movement “Format 18,”⁷ ultra-right nationalists formed issue-specific sub-groups and engaged in targeting migrant workers, foreigners, alleged drug dealers, ethnic and sexual minorities, and pedophiles (often using this facade objective to actually target sexual minorities). “Occupy Pedophilia” and “Occupy Narcophilia” are infamous branches of Restruct, specializing in busting pedophiles and drug dealers, respectively. Such criminal and openly fascist groups humiliate and physically abuse their targets while filming and exposing them online (Balmforth 2013). Retaliation conducted by Restruct members is characterized by brutality, humiliation, and degrading acts, such as forcing the target to drink urine on camera (Wong 2014).



Figure 3: *Hrushi Protiv in action (Hrushi Protiv 2014b)*

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

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

⁷ “18” evidently stands for Adolf Hitler, reflecting alphabetic positioning of his initials: A being the first letter and H the eighth letter.

Kyrgyz female with a migration background is a bullseye for several vigilante groups at once, including those in her own diaspora.

Anti-Kremlin groups use digital media affordances to get their message to the masses and expose the state itself. Among these is the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) led by an infamous public activist in opposition—Alexei Navalny. FBK describes itself as “the only Russia-based NGO that investigates, exposes and fights corruption among high-ranking Russian government officials” (Anti-Corruption Foundation n.d.). FBK is an example of mediated activism that works against the state. In this regard, the state, represented by the ruling regime, is likely to have interest in limiting and controlling digital media through censorship and passing of legislation limiting free speech on social media (Agora 2018). Amid recent FBK exposure of Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Prikhodko and accusation of corruption for informal contacts with oligarch Oleg Deripaska on a yacht in Norway (Troianovski 2018), the country’s Federal Service for Supervision of Communication [*Roskomnadzor*] ordered media corporations to remove content under the argument of privacy violation. Facebook complied with the orders and removed content on its daughter company Instagram (ibid.). This case illustrates the power that the state enjoys and instrumentalizes amid ubiquitous visibility in which citizens are theoretically capable of watching and exposing the state and its agents but are limited in capacities in practice. Privacy matters and other legal concerns come into play when high-ranking state officials fall target to exposure, thus challenging *sousveillance* (Mann, Nolan, and Wellman 2003) as an option for “the many” to watch “the few,” given that “the few” enjoy a greater set of tools for self-protection.

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

The Role of State in Digital Vigilantism

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

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

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

In this address, Russia’s President called on the Ministry of the Interior to involve citizens in crime prevention activities, leaving the spectrum of “serious and important issues” broad. This message provides a direct legitimization and endorsement of pro-Kremlin vigilante groups like StopHam and Hrushi Protiv.

These groups illustrate the scenario in which “many” are “watching the many on behalf of the few” (Larsen and Piché 2009: 196), where the state extends itself via citizen activists, resembling Lenin’s vision of a “socialist democracy.”

The state encourages citizen activism and participation in justice matters. While motives for participation in digital vigilantism are diverse, loyalty to the ruling regime can afford longevity, legitimacy, post-participation career opportunities, and financial resources in the form of state grants. Some former Nashi activists and founders of pro-Kremlin digital vigilante groups became members of Russia’s Civic Chamber,⁸ others serve as assistants to policymakers. Indeed, digital vigilantism is unique in the sense that it spotlights not only the target, but also the participant. In this case, participation can either be anonymous for the sake of protection of participants from legal retribution and/or counter-retaliation or, on the contrary, be purposefully open, so as to build a certain reputation and recognition in the society.

Comparing Comrades’ Courts and Dotcomrade Vigilantism

Table 1 compares the Soviet comrades’ courts and post-Communist digital vigilantism in Russia.

Table 1: *Comrades’ Courts vs. Dotcomrade Vigilantism*

| | Soviet Comrades’ Courts | Digital Vigilantism in Post-Communist Russia |
|----------------------------------|--|--|
| Audience | Colleagues, neighbors, townspeople | Global web users |
| Collaboration with police | Full collaboration | Instances range from direct and indirect collaboration, to working despite and against the police, to falling under police jurisdiction |
| Motives for engagement | Representation of the state, use of own status in the community as a respected member of the collective; entertainment; retaliation against colleagues and neighbors | Financial (monetization of social media presence), ideological, religious, political, and other motivations and aspirations |
| Participants | Prominent community members, targets’ colleagues, neighbors, veterans of war and industrialization, the elder generation | Youth activists. Theoretically anyone with a camera and internet connection. In practice, groups loyal to the state enjoy financial support, state endorsement, and censorship-free presence on social media |
| Retaliation | Public shaming and moralizing culminating in targets’ repentance; damaged reputation | Public shaming and moralizing, embodied retaliation, humiliation, damaged reputation |
| State role | Initiation, endorsement, provision of | Endorsement in some instances, |

⁸ “The Civic Chamber was established in 2005 under the Federal Law ‘On the Civic Chamber of the Russian Federation.’ Its purpose is to help citizens interact with government officials and local authorities in order to take into account the needs and interests of citizens, to protect their rights and freedoms in the process of shaping and implementing state policies, and to exercise public control over the activities of executive authorities.” <https://www.oprf.ru/en/about/>

| | | |
|---------------------|---|--|
| | legislative framework, provision of legitimacy | financial support through state grants to groups loyal to the state and legal control over groups working despite the state or against the state |
| Targets | People with “anti-socialist behavior”: hooligans, drunks, moochers, people with anti-Soviet ideology, negligent workers | Digital vigilante group-specific focus: drivers, merchants, smokers, drinkers, Muslims, women, “pedophiles” (usually, sexual minorities), ethnic minorities, migrants, drug dealers, and so on |
| Use of media | Displayed images on “shame boards,” coverage in a local newspaper | Retaliation is filmed and consequently disseminated online |
| Venue | Workplace, collective and state farms, club rooms, housing facilities | A variety of settings, from public spaces to targets’ or participants’ private property |

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

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

There has been a shift in use of special actors to represent the state in the society when it comes to mediated citizen-led justice. In the Soviet comrades’ courts, the role of a patriotic representative of collective values, empowered to shame and moralize those who fell off the right track, was given to the elder generation, to those whose achievements before the state were renowned through service in military and industrial fronts. In modern-day Russia, digital vigilantes are usually young people without any prominent stance in the community. In fact, popularity and recognition can come as a result of engagement in mediated citizen-led justice. Members of vigilante groups are known through their logos, stickers, costumes, and other identifying paraphernalia, essentially creating a brand-like image of self. Participants loyal to the ruling regime are in a privileged position in terms of endorsement and financial, administrative, and other benefits.

Digital vigilantes enjoy editorial capacities that allow them to frame targets and other actors, such as police. In this case, footage of retaliation is not accidental but an intentionally and systematically created product. Each video is accompanied with a catchy title and soundtrack. Systematically uploaded on

YouTube, and disseminated across social media, video material builds a name for participants and can be monetized. Both StopHam and Hrushi Protiv use YouTube video episodes of their activities as an opportunity to advertise products before displaying the acts of offense and retaliation; Soviet comrades' courts were certainly deprived of these commercial and media opportunities.

Thus, compared with Soviet times, in contemporary Russia the role of the state has shifted in the sense that citizen-led justice can be conducted despite the state or even against it. Nevertheless, the concept of "many watching the many on behalf of the few" (Larsen and Piché 2009: 196) is still present as groups loyal to the ruling regime enjoy greater space to maneuver compared to those targeting the regime or crossing the invisible boundaries of approved activities. Groups that get out of hand, such as Restruct, get shut down, though state response is slow. Groups or individuals who target the ruling regime are dealt with faster and with application of a vast set of tools including censorship, content removal, and arrests. Having loyal or controllable groups active on social media provides a sphere where people get to let some steam off and serves as a type of staged show to demonstrate that there is active citizenry present in the state.

If comrades' courts condemned and judged people with anti-socialist behavior—hooligans, drunks, moochers, and negligent workers, each digital vigilante group has its own specific targets—drivers, merchants, smokers, drinkers, Muslims, women, pedophiles (usually, sexual minorities), ethnic minorities, migrants, drug dealers, and so on would be included. The wide focus of digital vigilantes creates layers of vulnerabilities for citizens who fit several offense groups at once. A specific focus and media savviness allow for branding, as activities spread across and beyond the country in the form of franchise branches.

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

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

Concluding Remarks

Russia's unique case of digital vigilantism was selected due to its Soviet-era pretext for citizens' involvement in surveillance and justice matters and its state-encouraged digitally mediated post-Soviet manifestation. This paper provides a theoretical contextualization of digital vigilantism in the Russian Federation with an objective of addressing the complex relationship between digital vigilantes and the state. Practices of outsourced vigilance and judicial functions to citizens in the Soviet Union have been compared to modern-day citizen participation. Soviet comrades' courts were selected as a point of comparison with digital vigilantism due to several applicable features, including shaming and moralization of citizens by fellow citizens, state approval of such practices, and the role of the audience in Foucauldian terms of the "spectacle of punishment" in citizen-to-citizen and state-citizen relations. Given the significant historical context of collective justice that took place under Communism, the current manifestation of digital vigilantism in Russia raises questions about whether it is an example of re-packaged history backed with collective memory or a natural outspread of conventional practices to social networks.

Digital vigilantism in contemporary post-Communist Russia is a systematic and institutionalized phenomenon that indeed resembles practices of citizen-led justice widely present in the Soviet Union. However, digital media brought about new affordances that transformed participants, targets, and the audience. Unlike Soviet comrades' courts, digital vigilante groups in post-Communist Russia take offense on a wide range of issues and target individuals far beyond their own collectives and neighborhoods. Motives for engagement in citizen-led justice are wide and range from political to ideological, religious, financial, and other spurs. If Soviet citizen-led justice was entrusted to the hands of respected members of the community, mediated citizen-led justice in post-Communist Russia is in the hands of the younger generation. In fact, activists can build up a name for themselves through participation in digital vigilantism.

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

When it comes to visibility and exposure, the state is in an advantageous position in relation to other actors, such as media corporations and social media users, given that legal mechanisms, mainstream media, and other useful tools of control and self-protection are in the hands of the ruling elite. While the scenario of regime immunity to exposure may not be unique to Russia, as demonization of traditional media and social media surveillance are taking place in renowned democracies as well, the case illustrates a unique scheme where several mechanisms are simultaneously used as the ruling regime exercises direct control over traditional media and domestic social media, while allowing operation of foreign social media but pressuring it to comply with their own demands; it is providing favorable conditions for some digital vigilantes, while repressing others.

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

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) [project number 276-45-004].

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