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Article

Media Control and Citizen-Critical Publics in Russia: Are Some "Pigs" More Equal Than Others?

Rashid Gabdulhakov

Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands; E-Mail: r.f.gabdulhakov@rug.nl

Abstract

Amid the intensification of state control over the digital domain in Russia, what types of online activism are tolerated or even endorsed by the government and why? While entities such as the Anti-Corruption Foundation exposing the state are silenced through various tactics such as content blocking and removal, labelling the foundation a "foreign agent," and deeming it "extremist," other formations of citizens using digital media to expose "offences" performed by fellow citizens are operating freely. This article focuses on a vigilante group targeting "unscrupulous" merchants (often ethnic minorities and labour migrants) for the alleged sale of expired produce—the Hrushi Protiv. Supported by the government, Hrushi Protiv participants survey grocery chain stores and open-air markets for expired produce, a practice that often escalates into violence, while the process is filmed and edited to be uploaded to YouTube. These videos constitute unique media products that entertain the audience, ensuring the longevity of punitive measures via public exposure and shaming. Relying on Litvinenko and Toepfl's (2019) application of Toepfl's (2020) "leadership-critical," "policy-critical," and "uncritical" publics theory in the context of Russia, this article proposes a new category to describe state-approved digital vigilantes—citizen-critical publics. A collaboration with such publics allows the state to demonstrate a façade of civil society activism amid its silencing; while state-approved participants gain financial rewards and fame. Through Foucauldian discourse analysis, the article reveals that vulnerable groups such as labour migrants and ethnic minorities could fall victim to the side effects of this collaboration.

Issue

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1. Introduction

Since 2010, in grocery store chains and open-air food markets across Russia, one can witness people wearing full-body pig costumes surveilling shelves and counters for expired products. Such raids tend to escalate into verbal confrontations and physical violence between merchants and amateur inspectors who film everything and share edited videos on YouTube and other social media platforms, making them available to wide audiences. Beneath the pig outfits are former commissars

of the pro-government youth movement Nashi (Ours) and other concerned citizens. Established in 2005, as a continuation of another pro-government organisation, Idushchiye Vmestye (Walking Together), Nashi, also known as Putin's Youth, was endorsed and sponsored by the state while actively supporting Vladimir Putin (see Hemment, 2012; Khalymonchik, 2016). Amid the decentralisation of Nashi and its consequent dissolution, several youth-led thematic activist formations emerged. One of the most prominent and still active projects among such groups is Hrushi Protiv. As per the group

itself, the title translates to "piggy against," although the literal translation is "piggies against." Transliteration from Cyrillic (Хрюши Против) into English can vary between *hrushi protiv*, *khrushi protiv*, *khryushi protiv*, and *khriushi protiv*; the name Hrushi Protiv will be used throughout this article based on the group's own use across its social media accounts.

In the case of Hrushi Protiv, retaliation turns into a form of entertainment, while participants acquire powers that turn them into grocery store reputation assassins. To conceptualise this form of citizen-led, digitally mediated justice provision, the article relies on the notion of digital vigilantism. Digital vigilantism can be defined as "direct online actions of targeted surveillance, dissuasion or punishment which tend to rely on public denunciation or an excess of unsolicited attention, and are carried out in the name of justice, order or safety" (Loveluck, 2019, p. 213). In digital vigilantism, visibility is the means and the ends of retaliation, as the very existence of publicity can have damaging effects when the names and locations of concerned businesses and the personal information of merchants are exposed to wide audiences. In this regard, being an entity with a unique online presence, Hrushi Protiv is not simply a case of conventional offline vigilantism being transferred to the online milieu; rather, it constitutes its own category of digitally mediated citizen-led justice—digital vigilantism.

Like Nashi, Hrushi Protiv is financially supported by the government and endorsed by Russia's top political leadership. On several occasions, Hrushi Protiv members have personally met with Vladimir Putin and former-president Dmitriy Medvedev, taking "selfies" and discussing social problems. Beyond verbal endorsements, the group has benefited from receiving as much as 21 million rubles (around 340,000 USD as per December 2019 conversion rates) in state grants (Public Verdict, n.d.). This intricate relationship of vigilantes and state leadership is especially intriguing given the wave of measures adopted by the government to regulate the digital domain (see, for instance, Lokot, 2020; Ognyanova, 2019; Vendil Pallin, 2016; Wijermars & Lehtisaari, 2021). Nevertheless, the liaison that the state has established with its loyal digitally savvy youth cannot be described one-dimensionally (Favarel-Garrigues & Shukan, 2019) and has been shown to be in flux. Some of the similar groups that emerged out of Nashi, such as the StopXam (Stop a Douchebag) movement, which counters bad parking, for instance, have had periods of both praise and condemnation by traditional media. Initially endorsed by the state in the same manner as Hrushi Protiv, StopXam may have crossed some boundaries of state trust when they started targeting important individuals. In 2016, for instance, the group publicly shamed and physically fought Russia's Olympic champion, consequently receiving a liquidation order issued by the Ministry of Justice (Gabdulhakov, 2019a).

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

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

2. Digital Vigilantism and Media Control in Russia

Connective actions, in which digital media serve as "organizing agents" for sharing "internalized or personalized ideas" (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, pp. 752–753), have become a global phenomenon, at times capable of instigating social change through such movements as #MeToo (Mendes et al., 2018) or #BlackLivesMatter (Carney, 2016). Yet exposure and public shaming on social media can be characterised by different power dynamics, rendering respective layers of immunity and layers of vulnerability to targets, while participation can be both empowering and harmful (Gabdulhakov, 2019b, 2020).

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

2.1. Digital Vigilantism in Russia

After decades of scant scholarly attention to the notion of vigilantism, the phenomenon has recently gained momentum in the literature, with conceptual and empirical contributions featuring cases of divergent socio-political realities. Trottier (2017), for instance, offers a theoretical discussion on the role and impacts of visibility weaponisation in denunciatory acts. Moncada (2017), in turn, presents a classification of the varieties of vigilante practices and proposes core definitional dimensions for understanding the notion. With the focus on Russia's far-right, Kasra (2017) addresses the role of networked images in humiliation and socio-political control mechanisms in vigilante practices. Favarel-Garrigues (2019, 2021) elaborates on the entrepreneurial affordances of participants and their relationship with law enforcement. Loveluck (2019) develops a typology of digital vigilantism, relied upon in this article. Furthermore, the role of traditional media in facilitating digitally-mediated retaliation and rendering the phenomenon meaningful has been addressed in the ongoing debate (Gabdulhakov, 2019a). Despite the richness and depth of these contributions, the phenomenon requires further and continuous attention as approaches, environments, affordances, and nuances develop and evolve in real-time. Therefore, it is important to understand specific rules of engagement, respective power positions, benefits, and side effects of vigilante actions while also considering the unique affordances of social media and digital tools.

Loveluck (2019, p. 217) addresses the modes of coordination in digitally mediated vigilante practices and categorises them as ranging from "ad-hoc and loosely coordinated activities" to "pre-existing networks" that engage in "rehearsed collective efforts." In the quest for a typology of "online self-justice," he identifies four ideal types of digital vigilantism practices, namely: "flagging, investigating, hounding and organised leaking" (p. 214). Loveluck argues that in the process of flagging, targeting of the specific person involved, is avoided. Instead, the "low intensity" cases are meant to alert social media users by bringing to their attention instances of perceived norm-breaching (p. 217). Flagging via text and images is a global practice shared across social media platforms and political contexts. Unlike flagging, investigating implies naming the concerned target and a "collective effort" being made to investigate cases ranging from theft to more serious crimes and terrorist activities (Loveluck, 2019, p. 223). In this case, citizen-investigators are compared to the "web sleuths" who can provide their "technical expertise" in a given case (p. 224). Loveluck illustrates a complex dynamic between authorities, media, and web sleuths in which crowdsourced investigations do not terminate at the level of assisting police with the identification of criminals but can further evolve into digitally mediated harassment. "Hounding" takes matters to yet another level, referred to by Loveluck (2019, p. 227) as "the epitomy [sic] of digital vigilantism" it combines punitive intentions with investigations and mobilises participants against a specific target. Discreditation and public humiliation are the central aims in hounding. Finally, Loveluck presents "organised leaking" where participation is highly institutionalised and centred around the "documenting of problematic situations" and "the disclosure of confidential—and potentially incriminating—information" (p. 234). Examples of such organised groups include Russia's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK), whose activists investigate state corruption cases and publicise secret transactions of state officials. Some of the loudest investigations of the FBK shared on YouTube include the 2017 exposure of Russia's ex-president Dmitry Medvedev (Navalny, 2017) and the revelation of Russia's current president Vladimir Putin's riches (Navalny, 2021).

Activities of the FBK can serve as an example of what Rosenbaum and Sederberg (1974, p. 548) categorise as "regime control" vigilantism. In the absence of an official control mechanism that can be applied to the ruling elites, citizens take these duties into their own hands. Another group that can be classified as an example of organised leaking is Dissernet, a collective of academic enthusiasts who reveal plagiarism in doctoral dissertations. Operating in Russia and other former-Soviet states, Dissernet frequently targets state officials.

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

2.2. Media Control in Russia

Digitally mediated vigilante practices are part of the larger system combining political culture, social structures, media landscapes, and legal frameworks. Thus, it is necessary to elaborate on the milieu in which Hrushi Protiv operate. With the focus on Russia, this article seeks to address a context where the state's watchful gaze and control ambitions create a system that endorses some forms of online activism while cracking down on others. Having established a nearly totalitarian control over its traditional media sector, the government went after the digital domain with new legislation aimed at service providers, professional content creators, and individual users.

The waves of media landscape transformation in Russia are concurrent with major socio-political transformations in the country. Current processes demonstrate a past-oriented focus in terms of the Soviet-style information control strategies taking place in the new media landscape. These strategies include putting

pressure on service providers to filter content and share user data with the government and amending the legislation to criminalise certain forms of online self-expression, leading to large-scale arrests of social media users (Gabdulhakov, 2020; Lokot, 2020). This tendency for increased control is ongoing and reactionary since the government, for instance, also intervenes in the otherwise automated/algorithmic process of generating news feeds (Wijermars, 2021), among other approaches.

In their canonical work *Comparing Media Systems*, Hallin and Mancini (2004) propose three ideal types of media systems: democratic corporatist, liberal, and polarised pluralist. Each of the proposed systems is composed of dimensions, such as media market structure, political parallelism in news reporting, professionalisation of journalists, and the role of the state. Given the limited, West-centric case focus of Hallin and Mancini's original conceptualisation, Oates (2007) suggests that none of the three models can be applied to Russia, instead proposing the term "neo-Soviet" for the country's media model. Amid the multifaceted components that inform this model, such as bias, censorship, state, and commercial influences, mass media law, free speech protection, funding, media harassment, and violence against journalists, Oates offers a unique perspective by focusing on the position and the demands of the audience. Thus, when another major transformative wave in Russia's political, economic, and social sectors came about amid the collapse of the Soviet Union, the audience did not necessarily embrace the accompanying role of the media as a state critic. Akin to the Soviet media, which broadcasted based on national values, "giving the audience a sense of contentment and pride in their society," audiences in post-Soviet Russia, with a much wider variety of products at their disposal, valued mass media "as an institution that guides (rather than questions or undermines) the nation" (Oates, 2007, pp. 1295–1296). Public surveys conducted by Moscow-based Levada-Center (2018) demonstrate that in spite of the growth of the internet's popularity, the majority of people in Russia still rely on television as the main source of information and tend to trust it more than the internet.

Litvinenko and Toepfl (2019) react to another major political event in Russia's recent history, namely, the massive 2011–2013 protests for "Free and Fair Elections" (also known as protests on Bolotnaya Square). Dissent-curbing measures that followed these events once again reshaped Russia's media landscape. To understand the nature of this shift, Litvinenko and Toepfl (2019) rely on "authoritarian publics" theory (Toepfl, 2020) with the consideration of participants, environment and discursive practices and propose three types of publics—leadership-critical, policy-critical, and uncritical.

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

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

vigilantism—citizen-critical publics. Digital vigilantes can operate and target other citizens as long as these citizens do not represent or are not in any way connected to the ruling elites.

3. Methodology

Amid the wide variety of content analysis methods, the article relies on qualitative discourse analysis in Foucauldian terms. Describing the approach as one that "clearly refuses formalization" and has "no set rules," Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine propose selecting a corpus of statements, problematization, technologies, subject positions, and subjectification in order to conduct a Foucauldian discourse analysis (2008, p. 91). The authors identify five non-exhaustive types of corpora of statements suitable for a Foucauldian discourse analysis, namely: spatiality and social practice, political discourse, expert discourse, social interaction, and auto-biographical accounts (2008, p. 100). Problematization may base itself on a response to the following questions: "Under what circumstances and by whom are aspects of human being rendered problematic, [and] according to what moral domains or judgement are these concerns allowed to circulate? What official discourses and counter-discourses render these problems visible and intelligible?" (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 101). In Foucauldian discourse analysis, technologies are a concept that focuses on "power and self"—a type of " 'truth games' in which participants engage in conflict, competition and power" (p. 102). Subject positions in Foucauldian discourse analysis have to do with the moral order and the structure of rights and duties. Finally, subjectification refers to instances in which individuals self-regulate to "transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (Foucault, as cited in Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 103).

Commonly used in geography and psychology, Foucauldian discourse analysis is useful in addressing the aims of this interdisciplinary study, which incorporates elements of media studies and political science, by virtue of focusing on digital media affordances for citizen-led justice as well as the role of the state in media system formation and regulation. Applying a Foucauldian discourse analysis approach to the case of Hrushi Protiv in Russia, the article investigates how social hierarchies (Toelstede, 2020) inform current vigilante practices in the country and assesses the role of the official state position in rendering such practices meaningful amid the ongoing efforts to impose strict control over the digital domain.

Since 2010 Hrushi Protiv uploaded over 340 YouTube videos (as of 28 February 2021). As its corpus of statements, the article selected 20 of the most popular episodes in terms of the total number of views. When it comes to spatiality and social practice, Foucauldian discourse analysis allows for reliance on personal observa-

tions and ethnographic approaches. Online visibility is a weapon (Trottier, 2017) of punishment that Hrushi Protiv uses to harm its targets while simultaneously building its own brand and position as a justice provider in society. Given the significance of online artefacts in such practices, the article relied on netnographic approaches (Kozinets, 2015, 2019), which involved continuous online observation of Hrushi Protiv activities and content analysis of videos shared on the original Moscow-based group's YouTube channel.

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

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

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

stage for digital vigilantism, enabling both access to wide audiences, and money-making opportunities.

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

4. Hrushi Protiv on YouTube and Beyond

4.1. Corpus of Statements

Hrushi Protiv runs a website and has accounts on YouTube, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, Facebook (the link to Facebook page provided on the official website and YouTube channel of the group was not functional in February 2021), Instagram, Twitter, Telegram, Live Journal, and TikTok. Social media profiles of Hrushi Protiv invite the viewers to support the project financially. Participants maintain an online store, where branded merchandise can be purchased. A separate website describing Hrushi Protiv as a "volunteer movement aimed at identifying trade in substandard products in stores" (Hrushi Protiv, n.d.) states that, in 2016, a branch was established in Belarus, making it an international group.

Most of the featured Hrushi Protiv episodes follow the same scenario in which activists equipped with video cameras enter stores and start loading the allegedly expired produce into shopping carts. Such acts lead to verbal and physical confrontations with store personnel which in some cases escalates into physical fighting. Content analysis revealed that violence (either featured in videos or promised in the titles) correlated with the popularity of these YouTube episodes. The most viewed episode was uploaded on 29.05.2019 and is called *Let's Step Outside*, a phrase commonly associated with an invitation to settle a conflict physically. Being 20 minutes and 15 seconds in length, it is one of the longer episodes of Hrushi Protiv with 3,665,938 views, 47,000 "likes," 11,000 "dislikes," and 21,439 comments (as of December 2019). In the episode, at least nine participants are shown entering the store. Grocery store personnel film participants with their phones while the latter raid the shelves. Verbal confrontations begin when personnel tell participants that filming is not allowed. Participants demand that targets explain the legal grounds for the prohibition of filming. The verbal back-and-forth con-

tinues for some time until the personnel give in and destroy the expired produce collected by the participants. Overall, 12 episodes out of 20 feature verbal and physical confrontation between participants and targets.

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

In 10 out of the 20 episodes analysed, Hrushi Protiv target non-Slavic minorities. In another six episodes, the targets are mixed and include both non-Slavic minorities and the Slavs. Four episodes make no explicit reference to the ethnic backgrounds of targets. Thus, in 16 out of 20 episodes, a direct link between non-Slavic merchants and unscrupulousness in retail is emphasised. Hrushi Protiv openly expresses its prejudice towards labour migrants in Russia. In 2013–2014, participants called on their audience to sign a petition barring migrants from working in retail, an act suggestive of nationalist biases in these state-encouraged vigilante practices. One of the analysed episodes, titled *Hostages at Moskvoretskaya Produce Base*, features participants stating that "non-Russian employees run away when the police arrive" (Hrushi Protiv, 2017), emphasising both the "foreignness" of unscrupulous retailers as well as the potential illegality of "police-fearing" migrant workers.

Each episode uploaded by Hrushi Protiv is given a media-headline-like title, some of which are openly biased in terms of the ethnic background of the merchants, for instance: *Asian Showdown*, *We Don't Speak Russian*, *Tajiks Are Indignant*, *Migrants Beat Up Piggies*, etc. Other selected episodes contain such titles as *Real Jigits* (in some Turkic languages and in the Caucasus, the term *jigit* is used to describe brave young men), referring to the non-Slavic backgrounds of the targets, or *Moya Magazin* ("mine store"), which has an intentional grammatical mistake in the masculine noun, suggesting the target has a poor command of the Russian language. Overall, seven episode titles make explicit references to targeted retail workers' foreignness.

Police are featured in 11 of the 20 selected episodes. On three occasions, participants call the police to the site. In four cases, it is the targets who make such calls, and in five instances, it is not clear whose call the police

responded to. Police officers are generally passive, they register the names of all actors in both parties, collect the appeals and leave. In one episode, the activists are featured calling Russia's chief sanitary inspector, Gennady Onishchenko. In the video, Evgeniya Smorchkova apologises to Onishchenko for "calling again" and asks for help with a particular store that is not compliant with the demands. The next scene features the arrival of police officers at the store. The scenario in which participants directly call such a high-profile official (on more than one occasion) and ask for help, indicates the administrative capacities of the group, state endorsement, and support of their activities, and points to the power advantage that participants have over their targets.

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

4.2. Problematization

The internet and smart mobile devices have transformed the process of socialisation and surveillance at state–citizen and citizen-to-citizen levels in Russia. Numerous citizen formations establish thematic vigilante forces which target fellow citizens over alleged and perceived offences, such as bad parking, drinking, and smoking in public spaces, paedophilia (an accusation to which sexual minorities often fall target), drug dealing, and other "violations" of legal and moral boundaries. In some instances, no action is needed to attract the retaliation of vigilantes; simply being female (Avramov, 2019) or an ethnic minority (Chapman et al., 2018) is sufficient. In these realities of instrumentalisation of perceptions of morality for control of social order, Hrushi Protiv fulfil the function of an extension of the state, rather than being a collective of autonomous citizens. Much like the nostalgia for the Soviet-era media that communicated a sense of pride for the society, state-supported vigilante formations in Russia resemble various concerned groups of the past, such as the Tzarist and, subsequently, Soviet citizen-led justice provision formation Druzhina (Sokolov, 2019), the all-union Leninist young communist league Komsomol, or the system of comrades' courts that addressed minor mischiefs in breaching both legal and moral norms (Gabdulhakov, 2018).

4.3. Technologies

The case of Hrushi Protiv demonstrates how a citizen-led organisation can acquire legitimacy, recognition, and powers not only akin to those of official con-

trol entities (such as Russia's state sanitation service *Rospotrebnadzor*) but which also go beyond these entities in their technological savviness and retaliation approaches. Hrushi Protiv activities, in this regard, do not merely *flag* poor behaviour of their targets and cannot be compared to regular and widely practised consumer reviews, which inform fellow citizens about a particular business or product. Hrushi Protiv positions itself as a force operating between consumers and businesses as the former can report on the latter to participants. This position raises questions related to the possibility of intentional reputation damage upon orders from competitors of raided stores. What could stop "business A" from directly employing Hrushi Protiv or similar formations to expose a competing "business B"? One can only rely on the "good faith" of participants in this regard. At the same time, even with the assumed incorruptibility of participants, issues of legitimacy and proportionality of retaliation remain in question.

4.4. Subject Positions

Unlike a privately paid fine to state-controlled services due to misconduct, exposure on social media due to citizen-led retaliation brings about long-lasting reputational damage. Edited video materials uploaded by participants have the power to subject non-Russian targets to further scrutiny by police and immigration authorities. Given that the three Central Asian republics of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan are highly remittance dependent (Bhutina, 2019), a labour migrant's job loss and/or deportation can lead to severe economic consequences for their families. The structure of power asymmetries (Toelstede, 2020) between participants and targets is informed by access to mass audiences on the one hand (and lack thereof), as well as social frustrations, ethnic, and national biases. Episodes tend to portray Hrushi Protiv and their targets as two fundamentally separate sociological clusters, with young participants being Slavic and grocery store or market personnel being comprised of non-Slavs.

4.5. Subjectification

Hrushi Protiv exemplifies a case where vigilant citizens acquire powers that give them wide social and media recognition. This visibly affords participants an almost TV persona stance. Hrushi Protiv even resembles the TV show, *Revizorro*, an adaptation of a Ukrainian show *Revizor*, airing on Russia's Pyatnitsa TV channel since 2014. The show's host exposes poor service provision practices in hotels and restaurants. The power of public exposure is so significant that businesses opt for collaboration with amateur controllers and sign agreements with Hrushi Protiv, promising to comply with imposed regulations (Hrushi Protiv, 2010) to avoid negative hype and reputation damage.

5. Discussion

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

Formations such as Hrushi Protiv are not threatening to the state unless they start targeting businesses that belong to the ruling elite. As long as certain boundaries are not crossed, the presence of such formations among the authoritarian publics allows for a display of an allegedly active civil society in realities where challenging state authority can carry large fines and lengthy prison sentences. Now in their 30s and having been engaged in the same vigilante practices for over a decade, some former Nashi activists have tried building political careers to various degrees of success. Perhaps the elites are allowing these citizen-critical publics to operate as a way of rewarding the once-loyal youth commissars for their support of the Putin–Medvedev tandem in the 2000s.

When it comes to motivation for participation in digital vigilantism, there are certain entrepreneurial interests (Favarel-Garrigues, 2019, 2021) as groups monetise YouTube channels, sell merchandise, advertise, ask for donations, and receive state grants to support their activities. In this sense, Hrushi Protiv is a formation with a hyper identity, simultaneously resembling citizen-led activism, a state-supported NGO, and a group of digitally-savvy entrepreneurs. Therefore, engagement in vigilante practices can afford participants financial and social benefits. Furthermore, endorsement by the state's highest authority affords legitimacy and provides a certain immunity when interacting with law enforcement.

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

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

Several important aspects come to the surface here. The first has to do with political regimes and internet governance. When pressure is put on platforms to moderate content, there is a threat that select voices challenging the political status quo will be muted, as is evident in the case of Russia. When the opposition-led FBK exposed Russia's deputy prime minister for accepting a bribe from a prominent oligarch, the government put pressure on platforms, and Facebook's daughter company Instagram complied with the requests to remove posts over privacy concerns (Nechepurenko, 2018). The fine line between the right to privacy and power abuse for covering up corruption is blurred in this case. This example demonstrates the spill-over effect of biased institutions on social media platforms and the selective application of the law. In this governance environment, both domestic and global social networking corporations can fall target to invasive state control aimed at serving the interests of the ruling elites.

Those with political and financial power seem to continue enjoying the privileges and immunities online, while the powerless, such as migrants, ethnic, sexual and other minorities, political activists, women, journalists, are vulnerable. The role of platforms in the facilitation of select hounding (Loveluck, 2019) practices and the power and logic of removal of undesired content need to be addressed at both analytical and policy levels. At the same time, an important question to ask is: Would critical publics in Russia benefit from any state regulation of platforms in a context where ruling elites are able to actively silence critical voices?

6. Conclusion

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

In Russia and elsewhere, digital vigilantism is practised and perceived as a form of entertainment akin to reality TV shows, with each episode carefully edited and professionally arranged with catchy titles, music, and other strategies, such as the featuring of celebrity guests. It is evident that vigilante activities constitute a reflection of on-the-ground societal frustrations and tensions. Traffic jams and poor parking, cheated customers, xenophobia, homophobia, labour migration, and other "hot" societal issues in Russia are picked up and instrumentalised by vigilantes who step in and turn battling against perceived injustices into a spectacle. In this case, the citizen-critical focus of YouTube videos is not only safe but is arguably beneficial for the ruling elites amid their strategy to discourage leadership-critical and policy-critical discourse.

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

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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About the Author

Rashid Gabdulhakov is an assistant professor at the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. Rashid received his PhD (cum laude) in Media and Communication from Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He holds a MA of Advanced Studies degree in International and European Security from the University of Geneva and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, Switzerland; and a Master of Arts degree in Politics and Security from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyz Republic. For more information and a full CV, please visit: www.plovism.com