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Criticism of Moral Policing in Russia: Controversies around Lev Protiv in Moscow

Gilles Favarel-Garrigues

Introduction

During the first half of the 2010s, vigilante groups have increasingly appeared in the streets and on the Internet in Russia. Acting in the name of civil society, the 'activists' (*aktivisty*) patrol the streets in order to find badly parked vehicles (StopXam), inspect shops to check whether they sell expired products (Khryushi Protiv), or hunt and trap alleged paedophiles (Occupy Pedophilia), amongst other things. In spite of the diversity of their targets, Russian vigilantes share a common modus operandi, intertwining physical and digital practices. They remind people of the law, fight with alleged offenders and call the police, but they also film everything they do in order to create content, which they then spread on the Internet (Favarel-Garrigues, 2018; Favarel-Garrigues & Shukan, 2020). They therefore expose and shame on social media the offenders they meet face to face (Trottier, 2017). Their digital activity is sometimes hectic: they manage their own YouTube channels and webpages and renew the content they offer at least on a weekly basis (Gabdulhakov, 2018). Many are able to edit their films professionally, and they select the most spectacular moments during raids and patrols in order to attract viewers to their channels. The most famous vigilante groups, including the one studied in this chapter with more than 1.7 million subscribers to its YouTube channel, earn a regular income from

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their initiatives. The existence of an audience therefore plays a crucial role in the activity of these groups.

However, studying this audience from a sociological perspective is difficult for two reasons. Firstly, the literature on vigilantism does not address this issue. Scholars focus on the attitudes of vigilantes, of their victims and of law-enforcement agencies, but not on the audience in whose name laws and moral values are enforced. Secondly, in the specific case of online Russian vigilantes, the identities of the audience, mainly anonymous viewers and commentators, are hidden. Nonetheless, even though people often do not use their real names when commenting on the work of self-proclaimed law enforcers, they do judge it, often either agreeing or disagreeing strongly with the vigilantes' activities and points of view.

This chapter focuses on public debates about Russian vigilante groups and the controversial issues surrounding their activity. Who voices the public criticism and what exactly is being criticised? The discussions encompass issues such as the legality and morality of vigilantes' acts, their retributions, their social usefulness and their efficiency. But do vigilantes care about these criticisms? How does criticism affect their activity? The theoretical framework of this chapter is influenced by pragmatic sociology, particularly the analysis of controversies, which emphasises the role of the audience in public disputes (Boltanski et al., 2007). Cyril Lemieux defines controversies as triadic structures involving "situations where a difference between two parties is brought before a public, which is in a third place and therefore in a position to judge"[1] (Lemieux, 2007, p. 195; see also Smadja, 2012). What are the controversial issues that the audience is led to judge concerning Russian vigilantes' activity?

As a case study, this chapter focuses on a particular group named *Lev Protiv* (Leo Against) and embodied by its leader, Mikhail 'Lev' Lazutin, born in 1995. Founded in 2014 and based in Moscow, this vigilante group presents itself as a 'social project', whose mission is to patrol train and metro stations, commercial areas and public gardens, urging smokers, drinkers and partygoers to respect the law. Lazutin gathers a team to conduct these operations, or 'raids': between five and ten people patrol

1 "des situations où un différend entre deux parties est mis en scène devant un public, tiers placé dès lors en position de juge."

with him, including sportsmen. They promote a healthy lifestyle and claim to act as role models, showing Russian youth the ravages of alcohol. Most of the time, the raids conclude with a fight. Like all vigilante groups, Lev Protiv justifies its involvement in law enforcement by denouncing the passivity of the police (Abrahams, 1998; Johnston, 1996; Pratten and Sen, 2007; Favarel-Garrigues & Gayer, 2016). Alongside outcasts, homeless people and punks, indifferent and unprofessional policemen constitute one of the main targets of the group, which includes 'civic monitoring' of law enforcement agents in its missions.

From a methodological point of view, I use the data I have gathered on Lev Protiv since 2015, particularly the 150 videos that I have archived (which have often been removed from the activists' channel) and also the commentaries (which have also often been removed). I have created a database of the comments from 59 videos posted until 2018, allowing me to understand which words are used most frequently and which topics are the most controversial. I have also undertaken ethnographic observation of six of the raids by the group in 2017 and 2018, and interviewed people who have relationships with Lev Protiv (as victims, observers, detractors and fans), but I do not use these sources in the present paper, except when the observation helps to understand the group's popularity.

I first focus on the popularity of Lev Protiv and present the information available about the audience of this project. I then turn to the emergence and development of the criticism of the group, and show that the main controversial issues surround the group's focus on economic, legal, social and ethical arguments. While it may not hold true for all groups, in the case of Lev Protiv, the use of the Internet, particularly YouTube, not only allows them to expose their targets but also enables their critics to exert pressure on them to be more accountable to the public they claim to protect.

A Popular Vigilante Show

Lev Protiv offers a regular vigilante show, an impressive spectacle uploaded on YouTube at least once a week. Counting the exact number of videos edited and posted by Lev Protiv since its creation is probably impossible for several reasons. The Moscow branch does not keep all

edited videos on its channel. Some of them disappear suddenly for legal or commercial reasons, for instance if an activist commits a punishable act or if the video is not as popular as expected. The main YouTube channel of the group is cleaned on a regular basis, as shown in archives available on the Internet.[2] In 2015 and 2016, the title of each edited video included a number used to classify all the videos on the channel, but this classification system was given up after the 130th episode in October 2016. The opening of a second channel in 2015 has complicated the calculation further.[3] Moreover 'copycat movements' have spread in Russian cities, taking over the brand of Lev Protiv and imitating the style of the Moscow activists (Gabowitsch, 2018). However, in January 2019, 230 videos were accessible on both YouTube channels. It is reasonable to estimate that the Moscow group has produced more than 300 videos since its creation in 2014.

Most of Lev Protiv's videos correspond to a genre, the 'raid show', and generally follow a set scenario. In the beginning, some unproblematic interactions are shown, in which offenders willingly allow Lev Protiv to remind them of the law, and sometimes express support for the group. These sequences prove, according to Lazutin, that a norm is shared by most Russians and that those who do not comply are 'abnormal' and behave 'inadequately'. Then follow interactions in which a discussion takes place without a fight: for example, the activists grab bottles of alcohol and empty them in front of their owners. However, the conflict at this point is limited to a tense and more or less cogent dialogue. Lazutin spends a significant amount of time justifying himself, explaining his motivations and goals in front of the alleged offenders and the audience. Lazutin calls the police when an offender is caught drinking twice or answering with obscene language (*mat*) in public, which is forbidden by the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offenses (article 20.1 on 'petty hooliganism'). The video usually ends with a dispute provoking physical confrontation, with Lev Protiv members getting involved in brawls and sometimes using pepper spray. The need to resort to force is thus shown as a necessary alternative when other forms

2 See, for instance, the Internet archive Wayback Machine (first capture of the front page of Lev Protiv's YouTube channel in June 2014): https://web.archive.org/web/* https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUBoIo2p7GSRMt1YcSswDEw

3 See https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjkqm5yS4HGjxPFEl1vc4Ew/videos

of interaction have failed. This option is supposed to underline, on the one hand, the uncivilised nature of the offenders who are not willing to comply with the law, and, on the other hand, the consequences of an absent or indifferent police force. Together with images that show the ravages of alcohol, the fight scene is the principal marketing ploy prompting users to click on the video. The offenders are, however, neutralised and handed over to the police when they arrive on the scene. Some raids end up at the police station, where Lazutin finishes performing his duties by writing his deposition.

Although Lazutin's image is intimately tied to these raid shows in the public space, it is important to note that he also posts other content to his YouTube channel, in which he develops a saccharine and compassionate discourse, a far cry from the aggression we see in the raids. Like other vigilante groups,[4] Lev Protiv likes to portray itself in its videos as a group of do-gooders. Disguised as Santa Claus, Lazutin hands out New Year's gifts to children, offers to buy medicine for the elderly at a pharmacy,[5] distributes hot drinks and food to the needy,[6] and speaks out against animal cruelty. One of the most popular videos, seen more than six million times by September 2018, features a wounded cat found in the street and saved by Lazutin.[7] Among the first videos posted in 2019, along with new violent raids, Lazutin shows himself saving dogs and distributing gifts to children living with mental illness. The avenger is also a philanthropist. However, violent images are generally more attractive to viewers than compassionate ones. In January 2019, two videos were released almost at the same time: "We Save Dogs from Death"[8] and "Brutal Raid".[9] After a week, the second one had been viewed twice as many times as the first one (230,000 views for the raid video, 117,000 views for the other one as of 7 February).

Lev Protiv is popular in Russia and Lazutin is a well-known public figure, among young Russians at least. In comparison with other Russian

4 Davidych is a good example. As a famous test-driver and street-racer, he began to 'hunt' corrupt traffic police officers while organising charity runs by visiting orphanages. He was arrested in February 2016 and released in 2019.

5 Lev Protiv 64, Helping Pensioners (*Pomosch pensioneram*), 12 November, 2015.

6 Lev Protiv 72, Help the Needy (*Pomogai nuzhdayushimsya*), 19 December, 2015.

7 Lev Protiv, Saving a Kitten from Death (*Spasenie kotenki ot smerti*), 30 September 2015.

8 Lev Protiv, Saving Dogs from Death (*Spasaem sobak ot smerti*), 27 January 2019.

9 Lev Protiv, Brutal Raid (*Zhestkii reid*), 30 January 2019.

vigilante groups (including local initiatives[10] and forbidden groups),[11] Lev Protiv seems to be the most popular project in Russia after Stop-Kham, which was created earlier and is devoted to stopping traffic violations.[12] Both projects have a lot in common: they were initiated by pro-Putin youth organisations and received grants from governmental programs supporting the development of civic initiatives (Hemment, 2012; Rukov & Chesnokov, 2015). In the beginning of Lev Protiv, Lazutin took part in several Stop-Kham raids. Stop-Kham raids in which he participated used to feature on Lev Protiv's main channel.[13]

As shown in Table 5.1, since the creation of the first channel in April 2014, the audience has grown continuously and by 2019 one and a half million people had subscribed to the channel. Yet, the audience of the videos on this main channel is even bigger. In January 2020, the channel had attracted more than 280 million views. Each of the thirteen most popular videos had been watched by more than three million viewers. The most popular video had reached almost 10 million spectators in two months![14] In 2018, a video was typically seen more than 100,000 times after one day, 200,000 times after three days, and about 300,000 times after five to seven days (see Table 5.2). The most appreciated videos are still being viewed two or three years after they were posted on the Internet.

Table 5.1: Progression of the number of subscribers on Lev Protiv's main YouTube channel.

Date	Number of subscribers
July 2015	250,000
July 2016	680,000
July 2017	900,000

10 See for instance the Chelyabinsk-based project Trezvye Dvory, which existed from 2014 to 2018.

11 See for instance the Occupy Pedophilia project, which was banned in 2014. For more about this group, see Favarel-Garrigues (2019).

12 See https://www.youtube.com/user/stopxamlive/about; In February 2019, more than 1.5 million people had subscribed to the channel, which is comparable to Lev Protiv's audience, but the total number of views was far greater (390 million for Stop-Kham against 214 million for Lev Protiv).

13 https://web.archive.org/web/20140612084540/http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUBoIo2p7GSRMt1YcSswDEw

14 Lev Protiv, *Lev protiv skinhedov-natsistov* (*perepalka*), 24 November 2018.

September 2018	1,200,000
January 2019	1,500,000
December 2019	1,700,000
June 2020	1,800,000

Source: Lev Protiv's main YouTube channel.

Table 5.2: Progression of views, likes/dislikes and comments for a video posted on July 16, 2018.

Date	Views	Likes	Dislikes	Comments
17.07.2018	127,131	9700	486	273
18.07.2018	193,000	12,000	678	418
19.07.2018	222,000	13,000	828	479
24.07.2018	290,000	14,300	1040	712
31.01.2019	536,000	21,000	1800	1068
15.06.2020	591,000	23,000	1900	1080

Source: Lev Protiv, *Udushayushchii* (Asphyxiating), 16 July, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WvZ6r-_qAU

Lev Protiv's second channel, opened in 2015, started to become popular in 2016. Called "Lev Protiv Live" until 2018, it is now named "Lev Protiv 2nd Channel" (*Lev Protiv 2 Kanal*).[15] Whereas Lazutin leads the operations in the videos on the main channel, other members of Lev Protiv post videos of raids they conducted by themselves on the second channel. Their videos are successful, even in the cases when Lazutin does not personally take part in the raid. More than 500,000 people had subscribed to the second channel by January 2020. Videos had been watched more than 100 million times, which is more than a third of the total number of views for the main channel. Only four videos had been watched more than three million times, but one of them had reached 10 million views in two years.[16] A third channel, called "Mikhail Lazutin", was begun in 2016: in 2020, 218,000 people have subscribed to it and videos have been viewed more than 22 million times.[17] As we will see further on, these figures are significant enough to generate regular income.

15 See https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjkqm5yS4HGjxPFEl1vc4Ew
16 Lev Protiv, Pathetic Cockerels (*Zhalkie drachuny*), 2 November 2016.
17 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjkqm5yS4HGjxPFEl1vc4Ew

As a showman on YouTube, Mikhail Lazutin is a popular public figure. Several interviews with him are available elsewhere on the Internet.[18] Major newspapers have written articles about his project (Sher, 2015). In each raid I have personally observed, I have noticed the presence of fans, asking Lazutin for a selfie, shaking his hand, waving at him or expressing support for his initiative. Such positive opinions are, however, far from being universal. As we will see further on, criticism is widespread on the web and several investigations of Lev Protiv are easily available. The name 'Lev Protiv' also appears in the media each time a brawl gets out of hand and creates severe damage.[19]

In Search of an Audience

All interactions shown in Lev Protiv videos are observed by a third party (the audience), who are supposed to support Lev Protiv's civic stance. The inclusion of this third party is imposed by members of Lev Protiv on the people they confront, evident in the conspicuous presence of a camera, which has at least some relation to the hostility incurred by the group. What is it possible to know about the audience of Lev Protiv? The issue of the audience is a blind spot in the general literature about vigilantism. The comments sections of the group's YouTube channels give little insight: most of the commentators use pseudonyms and almost none of them can be considered as constant contributors to the discussion. This means that there is no core group of identifiable followers. However, the language used in the comments confirms clearly that the audience is young and that male adolescents prevail among the viewers. The audience is at least national (many comments start with "Here in my city…") and seems sometimes to include Russian-speaking people living abroad, notably in other post-Soviet states. It is interesting to note that Lazutin constantly marks himself as an "activist", as distinguished from "those who are indifferent", "passives who do nothing to improve

18 See his interview by the blogger Kolhoznik at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50RGJSC6C9U

19 In Moscow, Lev Protiv activists beaten during an operation at Kiev Station (*V moskve izbili aktivistov dvizhenia "Lev protiv" vo vremya aktsii na Kievskom vokzale*), *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 20 November 2016; Mass Brawl on Bolotnaya Square Started because of a Bottle of Water (*Massovaya draka na Bolotnoi ploschadi nachalas' iz-za butylki vody*), *MK*, 9 September 2018.

the world in which they live", "couch potatoes surfing the Internet" who constitute probably the biggest part of his audience.

The comments sections also show that Lev Protiv videos are deeply controversial: they are sometimes disliked by a high proportion of viewers and always highly commented upon. The contents provoke discussions and clashes between viewers. Some fans not only support the initiative, but also express their willingness to join the group. In some cases, they provide help by searching and giving the name, or the VKontakte (VK) page,[20] of the smokers or drinkers involved in fights with the Lev Protiv team: "For you, Lev, the links of these bastards",[21] writes one of them in July 2018.[22] But Lazutin also has vocal opponents, both on the spot during encounters and on the Internet.

Reactions to Lev Protiv's raids are sometimes violent. When vigilantes appear in Bolotnaya, a square where revellers gather once a week, they are met with insults. On a few occasions, young people targeted by the group at Bolotnaya have used violence against the activists; in one video they can be seen bearing down on the group menacingly chanting "Healthy lifestyle sucks!" (*Zozh sosyot!*).[23] Sometimes the activists are taught a lesson by adversaries who are greater in number and better organised than expected. In October 2015 at Bolotnaya, one member received an injury to the head during a brawl.[24] Lev Protiv appeared in headlines again in November 2016, when an altercation between youths and the activists degenerated into a brawl in front of a Moscow shopping centre.[25] In September 2018, the Lev Protiv cameraman was doused in pepper spray during a raid. According to Lazutin, all these events reflect the aggression and dangerousness of a population that the police should manage.

The number of available videos *about* Lev Protiv on social networks (especially VK) and on YouTube is also impressive. These videos

20 VKontakte (VK) is the most popular Russian online social media and social networking service.

21 They have been recognised because in the video they name the rock band they play in together.

22 Lev Protiv, Filthy Herd on Bolotnaya 1 (*Merzkoe stado na Bolotnoi 1*), 3 July 2018.

23 Lev Protiv, Lev Protiv is Brutally Attacked by a Drunken Crowd (*Zhestokoe napadenie pianoi tolpy na Lev Protiv*), 7 October 2015, 11'08.

24 Lev Protiv, Fight on Bolotnaya Square (*Draka na Bolotnoi ploschadi*), 6 October 2015.

25 Lev Protiv, Assault at Shopping Mall "European" (*Napadenie u TS "Evropeiskii"*), 18 November 2016.

help to identify controversies surrounding Lev Protiv's activity. They voice the criticism of Lev Protiv, which forces Lazutin to answer and to justify himself. Three main groups of authors can be distinguished: individual victims, anonymous collective accusers and well-known YouTubers or bloggers. It should be noted that major Russian human rights organisations have not taken part in this criticism, except Public Verdict, which offers legal assistance to the victims of law enforcement bodies in Russia.[26]

Lev Protiv victims sometimes try individually to raise the awareness of the general public about the danger posed by the group. For example, they create webpages or VKontakte pages in order to inform others about the group and to collect testimonies. However, sometimes these individuals find it difficult to gain support. In June 2018, during a raid that I observed, a man fought against the activists, fell down, could not stand again and was taken by ambulance to a hospital. Two days later, he opened a page on Pikabu[27] called "Lev Protiv Activists Broke My Leg", which gained a huge audience.[28] More than 1,600 comments were published in three weeks; however, most of them were critical towards the self-proclaimed 'victim', suspected to have broken the law and provoked the activists. Victims' threats to sue Lazutin seem to have produced no effect so far.

Anonymous accusers include observers filming Lev Protiv in action in order to prove that they commit offences during their raids. Several videos showing how Lev Protiv members behave during their raids are available on YouTube. These videos show the hidden means used by activists in order to put pressure on alleged offenders: the aggressive use of floodlights, the disciplining of aggressive members in the group by other group members and the occasionally intimidating aspect of some of the members. During one of the raids I observed, a photographer familiar with Lev Protiv activity was following the group in order to publish potential abuses and wrongdoings committed by the group

26 See http://vigilant.myverdict.org/

27 Pikabu is a Russian social news aggregation website.

28 How My Leg Was Broken and What To Do Now (*Kak mne slomali nogu i chto teper' s etim delat*), 29 June 2018, https://pikabu.ru/story/kak_mne_slomali_nogu_i_chto_teper_s_yetim_delat_5998252.

on social media. Anonymous accusers sometimes give legal advice to smokers and drinkers stopped by activists.[29]

More structured communities of opponents also exist on Russian social networks. The VK page "Boris For[30]" (*Boris Za*), with around 2,800 subscribers in January 2019, gives "instructions for communicating with activists" and explains the rights of the activists and of their targets.[31] Recommendations include being polite to the activists, obeying their instructions if alcohol is indeed being consumed and filming them in order to prevent aggressive behaviour. Two other pages have been created to criticise and mobilise against Lev Protiv: "The Tiger For" on VK had nearly 2,500 subscribers in January 2019,[32] and "Anti Project (*Proekt*) Lev Protiv", gathered around 600 at the same date.[33] However, as the figures of popularity show, none of these initiatives reach the scale of the audience for the vigilantes themselves.

The most significant impact on Lev Protiv's reputation comes from the videos devoted to the vigilantes posted by famous bloggers and YouTubers. Some bloggers treat this topic in a humorous way,[34] but most of the time the tone is serious, even alarmed. Public figures of the Russian Internet began to worry about this subject in 2016, and have sought to reveal who these vigilantes are, how violent they can be and how their projects are funded. As we will see, they play a significant role in fueling controversies surrounding Lev Protiv.

The first to post videos on the subject, a series of three, was Adam Timaev. Born to a Chechen family, the blogger lives in Moscow. Around 74,000 people had subscribed to his YouTube channel and his videos had been viewed more than 6 million times by April 2019. Timaev shows himself to be an investigator able to reveal the hidden truth about institutions (including Sberbank and the army), as well as popular projects on the web. Lev Protiv is clearly one of his main targets. His first video on this issue appeared at the end of 2016 and had been viewed almost 1 million times two years later. In January 2019, Timaev released

29 See, for example, the comments for one of the first articles on this subject: at http://seofuck.ru/kak-obojti-zakon-o-kurenii-ili-lev-protiv
30 Boris stands for Boris Yeltsin and his alleged taste for alcohol consumption.
31 See http://vk.com/wall-98572404_766
32 See https://vk.com/tiger_za
33 See https://vk.com/public70622974
34 See https://vk.com/ugarhiki

two videos in which he publicly offended Lazutin and suggested they fight.

The Timaev initiative inspired one of the most popular Russian bloggers, Nikolai Sobolev. Born in 1993, Sobolev started his career on YouTube with pranks and "social experiments" (*Rakamakafo*), then turned to the analysis of trends on YouTube ("YouTube's Life"), before starting a new channel under his own name.[35] His critique has reached a far larger audience. Since 2015, the videos on his YouTube channel have been viewed 467 million times. With 4.6 million subscribers, he is a Russian YouTube star who is fond of youth culture. His videos deal with famous rappers and bloggers, reality shows, extrasensory perception and sects, sports issues and the regulation of the Internet, among other topics. He often posts follow-up videos on particular topics, most of the time because his target has responded publicly to his initial video. Sobolev started to edit videos about Lev Protiv in February 2017. Two years later, they had been watched more than three and a half million times. While this is not a considerable number for Sobolev (this video is not one of his thirty most popular), it does give a large audience to Lazutin's activity. As in the case of Adam Timaev, Sobolev's videos prompted video replies from Lazutin and ended in a tense meeting in the street, where the two YouTubers settled their scores in a non-violent fashion in the presence of a camera and witnesses, including Timaev.[36] This confrontation, which was widely commented upon when a video of it was posted on the web, shows on the one hand that denouncing Lev Protiv has become a noteworthy activity. On the other hand, Lazutin himself interacts with famous bloggers in order to benefit from their popularity.

This was especially the case when the gamer Panda FX, renowned for his videos about football videogames, criticised Lev Protiv on his channel in September 2018. Lazutin reacted by filming a video where he approached Panda FX in the locker room of a football stadium and asked him to dress in order to settle their scores in the street. This video was widely discussed on the Russian web as a fight between two public

35 See https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCNb2BkmQu3IfQVcaPExHkvQ

36 https://yandex.ru/video/search?text=%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B7%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD%20%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B2&path=wizard&noreask=1&filmId=8659422307530055862

figures. Lazutin was criticised by his own fans for being a hooligan and for adopting a provocative attitude. He finally apologised for having been unable to repress his anger and removed the video from his channel. These repeated public confrontations with famous bloggers and YouTubers may help to explain the rapid increase of Lev Protiv's audience during the second half of 2018. Whereas it took two years for the group to pass from 500,000 subscribers to a million (from April 2016 to April 2018), it took only nine months to attract 500,000 more by February 2019. And whereas it took several years to reach 100 million views by April 2018, it took only seven months to reach 100 million more.

Controversies Surrounding Lev Protiv

Lazutin's popularity has put him under ever-growing scrutiny, and there have been many efforts to reveal the true methods and objectives of the Lev Protiv project. As a "social interaction likely to have an audience" (Lemieux, 2007, p. 195; Smadja, 2012, p. 2), controversy leads the public to judge the relevance of the arguments of the two parties. In the case of Lev Protiv, this judgement depends on the identity of the accusers, on the relevance of the accusations and on the robustness of self-justification by Lazutin. The four main controversial issues regarding the activists deal with their earnings, the legality of their methods, the efficiency of their activity and the strength of their reputation.

Through its connections with other pro-Putin *aktivisty*, Lev Protiv used to have access to a rare resource: funding granted by the Civic Chamber in support of the development of civil society in Russia (Daucé, 2014, p. 15). Lev Protiv is thus peculiar in that it used to be state-sponsored. In 2014, the Lev Protiv project received over five million rubles from the Civic Chamber via "The Nation's Health League". The funds were paid to a non-commercial organisation called "Multinational Country", registered in the town of Lyubertsy.[37] In describing itself, the project insisted upon the legitimacy of the work that these "social *aktivisty*" carry out "conjointly" with the police, in order to implement the ban on smoking in public places. In 2015, the project received 7 million rubles via the "Russian Union of Youth", but the funds were paid to

37 See https://grants.oprf.ru/grants2014-2/winners/rec2471/

the organisation "Young Talent", also based in Lyubertsy. The project proposal stated at that time that offenders would be reprimanded and handed over to the police.[38] The grants stopped in 2016. Like Stop-Kham, Lev Protiv are not a group of reservists unconditionally devoted to the powers-that-be; they are young people who negotiate their potential support and who aim to preserve a certain degree of autonomy.

The first controversies that emerged around questions of money date back to 2015 and reveal that a lucrative business is hiding behind the group's charitable acts. Are they zealous activists or mere crooks? One of the most common criticisms of Lev Protiv in 2016 dealt with the allocation of State subsidies in 2014 and 2015; "where are the 12 million?" was at that time an oft-repeated question on the lips of the group's detractors.[39] In response to this criticism, Lazutin often replied that he never even saw the money, and that he was the victim of an orchestrated swindling operation organised by corrupt 'officials'. Be that as it may, the controversy puts emphasis on the question of the oversight of government funds granted to non-commercial organisations, at a time when cracks in this system are being reported (Transparency, 2016). What is more, it is thought that receiving government subsidies gives "ordinary kids who yesterday were still sitting in class" an "illusion of impunity" (Alexandrov, 2015).

The denunciation of the profits realised by Lev Protiv also includes the financial rewards from Lev Protiv's digital activity. Firstly, the group makes money through its YouTube channels. It is unfortunately impossible to know the exact amount, and websites devoted to estimates are hardly reliable, since they show large disparities in their estimates and vary on a daily basis. In January 2019, SocialBlade (a website that tracks statistics and analytics for social media sites) estimated Lev Protiv's earnings from their main channel to be no less than 3,800 euros per month. Estimated earnings from the second channel reached no less than 778 euros per month. A minimum estimate of the profits reached about 4,500 euros per month in January 2019. In June 2020, however, this estimate was far lower (about 600 euros per month).[40] Besides

38 See https://grants.oprf.ru/grants2015-1/winners/rec4173/

39 Bloggers Timaev and Sobolev have contributed to the diffusion of this information.

40 This estimate includes three channels: Lev Protiv's first and second channel, and also Mikhail Lazutin's own channel.

earning money from the advertisements on YouTube, Lazutin often promotes a product in the beginning of the videos: for example, for a particular pizza delivery service or sports-betting organisation. These sources of profit help to explain a shift in the terms used by Lazutin to present the group's activity: whereas it used to be a "social project", now it is "work".[41] The commercial dimension of the project fuels the denunciation of the hypocrisy of the alleged do-gooders. This accusation has also been taken up by leaders of provincial copycat movements (Gabowitsch, 2012), disappointed in a leader who is not the slightest bit interested in their work at a local level, and who in their eyes "only cares about his YouTube channel".[42]

Another concern deals with the legal or illegal nature of the methods the group employs. In the videos, as well as during the observations I carried out, speeches about rights prevail in dialogues between activists, smokers, drinkers and onlookers. All parties claim that they are acting to protect their rights. The constant use of a camera is controversial and the focus of many objections on the part of targeted individuals. "You do not have the right to film me": asking not to be filmed is a classic reaction of those who are targeted by the group. The activists respond with an irrefutable argument: according to the Constitution of the Russian Federation, they have the right to film an offence being committed. This is also how they justify using a powerful floodlight at night, blinding their targets and exposing them to harsh light. The legality of the other methods employed by the activists is also constantly questioned. In the beginning of the raids, Lev Protiv used to use a water spray in order to extinguish the cigarettes of those who were refusing to cease smoking in forbidden places. The spray was at that time the signature of the Lev Protiv brand. Facing accusations of spoiling others' property, the group stopped acting in this way. However, seizing the open beer can of an offender raises a similar question. If it is right to remind someone that they are contravening the law against drinking in certain public places, is it right to stop the offence by confiscating alcoholic drinks? I have

41 See for instance Lazutin's interview at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=50RGJSC6C9U

42 For instance, this was the case in Krasnoyarsk. In March 2016, the leader of the local chapter declared that he had decided to stop his activities, disappointed by Lazutin's search for glory and money. See http://www.prima-tv.ru/news/society/41892-dvizhenie_lev_protiv_samoraspuskaetsya

already mentioned the raid I observed in June 2018, during which a man fighting with the activists fell down and claimed to have had his leg broken. After having posted his story on Russian social networks and in front of critical comments, the victim had to justify himself. Not only did he show proof of his broken leg and say that he had offended Lazutin because of his anger, but he also insisted on his right to break the law as long as he is ready to assume the consequences — which in this case, would have been a fine. However, this argument has hardly convinced his video's audience and many commentators have criticised his cynical vision of crime and punishment. Contrary to other complaints publicised by his victims, Lazutin did not even answer to this accusation in order to justify himself.

A third concern over the actions of the vigilante group deals with the use of coercion. As discussed earlier, violence occurs in most of the raids. Do activists have the right to incapacitate offenders? In their videos, the activists take pains to show that they are not responsible for the escalation to violence, but that they use violence in response to aggressive behaviour. During one raid, I heard Lazutin, in front of the camera, warn a man just before the fight started: "according to the legislation on self-defence, I have the right to hit you if you hit me". But the activists' justification of the use of violence with the need to defend themselves does not convince those who argue that the activists frequently provoke drunk people in order to infuriate them, to push them to their limits in order to guarantee bankable images of a fight. As argued in a critical paper about Lev Protiv: should criminal offences committed by people fighting against administrative offences be tolerated (Alexandrov, 2015)?

The efficiency of the activists is also criticised. Many commentators note that Lev Protiv does not prevent people from continuing to meet up at Bolotnaya square or around train stations. According a typical comment, the group would be better advised to fight "against the causes, and not the consequences of the problem". In response, Lazutin asserts that his goal is not to help the drunkards he meets because, according to him, they are already lost. They are "cattle" (*bydlo*), i.e. dehumanised. Therefore, the main objective of constant brawls with 'the cattle' is to show a good example to the youth watching the videos throughout the country. As Lazutin puts it during an exchange with one drunk individual: "You show a bad example, and I show a good one.

There is good and there is evil".[43] This self-presentation as a role model fuels another widespread criticism. By giving free reign to their violent impulses, Lazutin and his band are a far cry from being role models. Is it morally right and socially useful to justify the use of force to fight against tobacco and alcohol consumption? Is this permanent readiness to fight in order to enforce the law a good example for Russian youth? Is it right to provoke a fight in front of those children that the activists pretend to defend? Are they then law enforcers or hooligans? As put straightforwardly by one man taken to task by the youths: "Who are you guys precisely? Are you pigs (cops)? Because honestly the more I look at you the more you look like troublemakers"[44] It is, moreover, surprising that Lazutin's advertisements for gambling, hardly compatible with a role model for young people, are not more criticised.

Another area that receives little criticism is Lev Protiv's vision of political order. Controversies around the group deal more with its hidden financial goals and questionable methods of fighting than with the political meaning of the spontaneous involvement of men, including athletes, in law enforcement. Although rarely mentioned, the argument has nonetheless been made that Lev Protiv would be well able to join, if needed, the army of "Putinist red guards", in reference to the group's early ties to Nashi, and the creation of Anti-Maidan collectives, eager to come to blows to defend the regime against the risk of revolution in all its forms. This is apparent in some of the terminology used to describe the "*aktivisty*", referred to as the former Communist Party Youth Organisation ("*komsomols*"), "*timurovtsy*",[45] and even the Chinese Red Guard ("*khunveibini*"). However, this argument is partially refuted by Lazutin's critical stance towards the regime since 2016, i.e. after governmental grants ceased. Lazutin's credo is order, and he judges politicians by this criterion: he always insists on the fact that his raids occur "near the walls of Kremlin" in order to show that ruling elites are

43 Lev Protiv, *Udushayushchii* (Asphyxiating), July 16, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8WvZ6r-_qAU

44 Lev Protiv, *Lev Protiv ne na tekh narvalis'* (Lev Protiv did not pick the right ones), YouTube, June 14, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ot6UW68DcZQ

45 *Timurovtsy* refers to early Soviets who undertook charitable acts; the term comes from a book by Arkadii Gaidar, *Timur and His Crew* (*Timur i ego komanda*), published in 1940, in which a group of young adolescents secretly helped the needy and fought petty criminals. In one of its most famous scenes, Timur and his friends prevent a gang from doing harm by exposing their activities to the villagers.

powerless. He used to quote Vladimir Putin when he was financed by governmental funds (from 2014 to 2015), but this is less the case since 2016. In an interview, Lazutin confessed his interest in Navalny's anti-corruption investigations, but disapproved of his calls to take part in unauthorised demonstrations, believing that he was encouraging the youth to wreak havoc.[46]

What, then, is Lazutin's ideology? Some critics describe the activists, not without a certain social disdain, as stupid brutes, and compare them to the ultra-nationalists that participate in the "Russian March" parade (Alexandrov, 2015). It is true that before starting his project against alcohol and tobacco consumption in public places, Lazutin, at that time aged seventeen to eighteen, was a fan of prominent neo-Nazi activist Tesak, organising his own "safaris" against alleged paedophiles and sharing the neo-Nazi beliefs of his idol (Favarel-Garrigues, 2019; see also Kasra, 2017). However, five years later, it would be wrong to associate Lev Protiv with Russian neo-Nazi activists for several reasons. Firstly, in 2019, as a young father, he distances himself from the mistakes he made when he was younger. He develops the image of a responsible Christian, quoting Jesus Christ and calling for love.[47] Secondly, many adversaries mock Lazutin's patronym, Dzhemalovich, which is not ethnically Russian. Indeed, Lazutin's father is half Kurdish, half Georgian.[48] In one video, activists beat a man who had previously called Lazutin a *khach* (darky), an offensive and demeaning term used by ethnic Russians against Caucasus people. This terminology echoes offensive criticism that is regularly formulated on the web: Lazutin has no legitimacy to clean Russian society because he is even not ethnically Russian. In fact, white supremacists feature among the subcultures drinking in Bolotnaya park during Lev Protiv raids. Lazutin and his friends denounce the intolerance and the hatefulness of these nationalists. One of Lev Protiv's most popular videos is named "Leo Against Skinheads and Neo-Nazis".[49] But as Marlène Laruelle has shown, nationalist speech is plural in today's

46 Mikhail Lazutin, Answers to questions (*Otvety na voprosy*), 17 April 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8hXTGfBVQXs

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Lev Protiv, Leo Against Skinheads-Nazis (Brawl) (*Lev Protiv skinkhedov-natsistov* (*potasovka*)), 24 November 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJJaD8966Pc&t=65s This video had reached 10 million views after two months.

Russia (Laruelle, 2017). Besides a healthy lifestyle and strict obedience to the law, Lazutin promotes patriotism and a form of nationalism based on belonging to a multi-ethnic and multi-faith country. Such a post-Soviet vision of nationhood, which is for instance celebrated during Second World War commemorations, corresponds to government rhetoric in Russia, valuing all components of the Russian ethnic mosaic.

Conclusion

More than four years after its creation, criticism and controversy have had no detrimental effects on the popularity of Lev Protiv so far, unlike in the case of other vigilante initiatives such as "Occupy Pedophilia" or "Davidich on the hunt" (*Davidych na okhote*). On the contrary, they have fuelled the group's success: Lev Protiv gained further subscribers when popular bloggers started to relay the various criticisms. In fact, as the producer of a vigilante show, Lazutin has included the management of criticism in his work. He spends a significant amount of time answering to his critics and justifying himself. He has perfectly interiorised the idea that accountability is a fundamental feature of the neoliberal grammar of 'projects' in the development of civil society (Daucé, 2014).

This case study suggests the need to examine more generally how vigilante groups gain audiences and how they strive to be accountable, whatever the context. Firstly, in order to appreciate and explain the popularity of a group like Lev Protiv, it would be useful to watch new YouTube content from the group and from their critics, and to do so with the vigilante channel's subscribers, to observe as well as discuss their reactions. Such a method would help to explore the audience's expectations, disappointments and criticisms toward the group, and how these evolve over time. Secondly, we may inquire how vigilante groups build their accountability in reaction to criticisms and controversies. By resorting to violence in order to maintain order and/or to implement the law in the name of a community, vigilante groups are controversial by nature and always have to justify themselves. However, the use of the Internet, especially YouTube, to publicise their activity places contemporary vigilantes in front of a permanent audience that scrutinises them, points out controversial issues and puts pressure on them to react to criticism on time and be more accountable. This constant

pressure to keep viewers watching videos might constitute a specific feature of vigilante groups using digital media, compared to those using classic forms of vigilantism.

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