



Managed Cyber-Vigilantism: StopXam between Collaboration and Competition

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Abstract

Digital vigilantism is one of the challenges of e-democracy. Many scholars recognize the threat of vigilantism to civil society. However, we believe it can also reinforce weak government institutions. We consider digital vigilantism as an alternative to e-participation tools. This study aims to determine a model of digital vigilantism in Russia based on the analysis of the social media activity of StopXam in the context of the development of alternative e-democracy institutions. Considering vigilantism as an example of an informal institution, we analyze vigilantism following Helmke and Levitsky typology. The case chosen for analysis is one of the largest Russian vigilant StopXam movement that can be compared with the government initiative Moscow Helper. To identify the model of digital vigilantism in Russia, we conduct a social network analysis in respect to five communities in Vk.com, a Russian social network: "StopXam", "StopXam Moscow", the official community of "Moscow Helper", the unofficial community of "Moscow Helper", the community of opponents of "Moscow Helper" application. The findings of this study suggest that vigilantism could be considered as an instrument of informal institutionalization, which can be used by political actors (primarily the government) as a tool for setting the rules of the game that correspond to established public values. The creation of groups that are ready to observe the general principles of the game's rules and impose common values with only minor, occasional violations of the letter of the law is becoming a working model of managed vigilantism. This model tends towards the routine practice of vigilantism, which limits the potential for online mobilization.

Keywords

Vigilantism; Digital Vigilantism; Cyber-Vigilantism; Informal Institution; E-Participation; Online Shaming; Manageability; Internet; Parking; Civil Society



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Управляемый кибервигилантизм: СтопХам между сотрудничеством и конкуренцией

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Аннотация

Одним из вызовов электронной демократии является проблема цифрового вигилантизма. Часто вигилантизм рассматривается как угроза гражданскому обществу, но в то же время вигилантизм может усиливать неэффективные государственные институты. Мы рассматриваем цифровой вигилантизм в контексте альтернативы инструментам электронного участия. Целью данного исследования является определение модели цифрового вигилантизма в условиях развития альтернативных институтов электронной демократии на основе анализа активности одной из самых крупных российских вигилантских организаций в социальных медиа. Рассматривая вигилантизм как пример неформального института, мы анализируем этот феномен на основе типологии Хельмке и Левитски. Кейс, выбранный для анализа – вигилантское движение «СтопХам», сравниваемое с государственной инициативой «Помощник Москвы». Мы проводим анализ социальной сети в отношении пяти сообществ в социальной сети «Вконтакте»: «СтопХам», «СтопХам Москва», официальное сообщество «Помощник Москвы», неофициальное сообщество «Помощник Москвы», сообщество противников приложения «Помощник Москвы». Результаты этого исследования позволяют предположить, что вигилантизм можно рассматривать как инструмент неформальной институционализации, используемый политическими акторами (в первую очередь органами государственной власти) в качестве инструмента установления правил игры, соответствующих конвенциональным общественным ценностям. Создание групп, готовых соблюдать общие принципы правил игры и навязывать общие ценности с незначительными, случайными нарушениями буквы закона, становится рабочей моделью «управляемого вигилантизма». Эта модель цифрового вигилантизма имеет тенденцию к рутинной практике вигилантизма, что ограничивает потенциал для онлайн-мобилизации.

Ключевые слова

вигилантизм; цифровой вигилантизм; кибервигилантизм; неформальный институт; электронное участие; онлайновый шейминг; управляемость; Интернет; парковка; гражданское общество



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Introduction

The digital space is attracting considerable interest due to opportunities for people to interact in order to protect public interests. In media research that studies the political and administrative aspects of digital transformation, the focus has always been on the development of e-democracy (Bremmer, 2010; Chadwick, 2003; Päivärinta & Sæbø, 2006), e-participation (Macintosh & Smith, 2002; Wirtz, Daiser & Binkowska, 2018), e-government (Fang, 2002; Gupta & Jana, 2003; Smorgunov, Popova & Tropinova, 2020), and programs for the formation of smart cities and the use of big data. However, the actors initiating joint actions of Internet users in order to achieve socially significant goals can be different, as well as the models of such interaction. Digital vigilantism is one of them.

There are some challenges involved in providing a generally accepted definition of vigilantism. The simplest definition is “taking the law into one’s own hands” (Rosenbaum & Sederburg, 1974, p. 542), which means “acts or threats of coercion in violation of the formal boundaries of an established sociopolitical order which, however, are intended by the violators to defend that order from some form of subversion” (Bateson, 2021, pp. 925–926). Vigilantism is considered as a type of self-justice that occurs when authorized agencies fail to cope with the functioning of the formal justice system and some groups in society take over the performance of those functions (Burrows, 1976). Digital vigilantism has also been called “Internet vigilantism,” “netilantism,” “cyber-vigilantism,” “online vigilantism,” or “digilantism” (Chang & Poon, 2017). It can be understood both in a quite narrow sense, as a result of moral outrage or a general sense of taking offense, typically towards an act that has been transmitted via online services (Trottier, 2017), and broadly, as any vigilante activity in cyberspace.

Although studies of vigilantism, in general, have been conducted for decades, research into the phenomenon of digital vigilantism has started since the late 1990s. Vigilantism is theoretically important for political science because it is closely related to core concepts like power and state-building (Bremmer, 2010). However, the research is currently mainly conducted outside of political science, for instance, in computer science or law (Chang & Poon, 2017).

There is a considerable amount of literature both on the conceptualization of vigilantism (Bremmer, 2010; Trottier, 2019) and on the study of individual cases (Chang & Poon, 2017; Gabdulhakov, 2018; Volkova & Lukyanova, 2020; Volkova, Lukyanova & Martyanov, 2021). The phenomenon of digital vigilantism is described in works analyzing both institutional vigilantism (Arrobi, 2018; Nivette, 2016) and specific manifestations of spontaneous vigilantism: cyberbullying (Smokowski & Evans, 2019), doxing (Douglas, 2016), online shaming (Skoric, 2010), and hactivism (Klein, 2015). The existing body of research suggests that the reasons for digital vigilantism lie in the relatively weak institutionalization of the Internet, which is perceived as the “wild, wild web” (McLure, 2000). This factor causes great risks



involved in the digitalization of vigilantism. For example, digital vigilantism is criticized for the fact that instead of strengthening social control, it contributes to making things more anarchic because activity on the Internet is too hard to regulate (Chang & Poon, 2017).

So far, very little attention has been paid to digital vigilantism as an alternative to e-participation tools or a potential substitution for formal institutions. This paper aims to identify a model of digital vigilantism in Russia (using the example of the StopXam movement) in the context of the development of alternative e-democracy institutions.

Relying upon a neoinstitutional approach, we explore vigilantism in the system of informal institutions. First, we formulate reasons for the emergence of vigilante groups and investigate the place of vigilantism in the institutional environment applying Helmke and Levitsky typology of institutions. Secondly, to determine the correspondence of Russian digital vigilantism to complementary or substitutive types, we study the audience of virtual communities associated with two institutional practices in Russia: StopXam movement and the Moscow government's "Moscow Helper". By examining these cases of competing institutions of vigilantism and tools offered by the government, we formulate features of the management of informal institutions in modern Russia.

Vigilantism as a Sign of Statelessness

Although in Russia, as well as throughout the world, cases of spontaneous, non-institutionalized cyber-vigilantism with the use of cyberbullying, doxing, and other methods are quite common, our research is aimed at studying those forms of cyber-vigilantism that are institutional in nature and act as a potential substitution for formal institutions.

The reason for the emergence of vigilante groups is the weakness or absence of formal institutions. Vigilantism occurs in "stateless locations" (Nivette, 2016, p. 142). The goals of vigilantes, as a rule, complement the goals of formal institutions, but vigilante groups can provoke insecurity, injustice and disorder, and form alternative rules of the game focused on techniques of violent self-help (Nivette, 2016, p. 143). The existence of vigilante groups usually provides evidence of ineffective, weak formal institutions that cannot provide security. The systemic dominance of vigilantism is a sign of failed states (Nivette, 2016, pp. 144-145; Schuberth, 2013).

Another factor of vigilantism is the lack of legitimacy, which is associated with the effectiveness of an institution but is not determined by it. The idea of statelessness can actually be only an interpretation of illegitimacy by a specific person. Such vigilantism does not complement formal institutions but denies them, and it can contribute to the replacement of formal institutions. In this case, the vigilantes question the right of the state to legitimize violence (Nivette, 2014). Wilkinson et al. give the example of the disadvantaged American Black youth, which does not see police as legitimate (Nivette, 2016, p. 146; Wirtz, Daiser & Binkowska, 2018).



Distrust and lack of legitimacy can become significant factors in the institutionalization of substitutive vigilantism. Vigilantism, in this case, calls into question the state's monopoly of physical force, which is a challenge to state sovereignty as a whole.

The place and role of vigilantism in the institutional environment

Vigilantism is considered a classic example of an informal institution (Bateson, 2021, p. 937), but the question of how this informal institution relates to formal institutions remains debatable. To demonstrate the place of vigilantism in the institutional environment, we turned to the well-known Helmke and Levitsky typology of institutions (Table 1) (Helmke & Levitsky, 2004).

	Effective formal institutions	Ineffective formal institutions
Convergent outcomes	Complementary	Substitutive
Divergent outcomes	Accommodating	Competing

Table 1. A typology of informal institutions by Helmke and Levitsky

Bateson underlines that vigilantism competes with a formal institution (Bateson, 2021, p. 937), but the goals of vigilantism and public institutions often coincide. We assume that in the typology of Helmke and Levitsky vigilantism cannot be labeled exclusively as competing. Competing institutions are possible when the state is actually absent, but modern vigilantism is also widespread in countries where public institutions are generally quite strong. When the actions of vigilantes and public institutions have similar results, vigilantism can be attributed to complementary and substitutive institutions.

In the state/civil society environment, vigilante groups are referred to either as intermediate institutions ('twilight institutions') or as 'non-civil society'. 'Twilight institutions' attempts to deal directly with 'offenders' (Arrobi, 2018). At the same time, if 'twilight institutions' assume governmental functions and thereby contribute to the normal functioning of the state and society, the term 'non-civil society' seeks to show the destructive nature of vigilantism. Functioning of the 'non-civil society' institutions can contribute to the formation of public values opposite to the existing ones. In the Helmke and Levitsky typology, 'twilight institutions' correspond to the substitutive type and non-civil society to the competing one. Both phenomena are characteristic of African politics (Lund, 2006).

Since vigilantism somehow presupposes an arbitrary redistribution of functions from public institutions in favor of public groups, it is hardly possible to speak of a full-fledged complementary type. In this case, it is more appropriate to talk about effective institutions of societal participation, new formal institutions, and the 'new regulatory state', in which police encourage private actors to assist in mini-



mizing disorder and preventing legal infractions (Walsh, 2014, p. 240). However, the boundaries between vigilantism and participation are sufficiently mobile and, therefore, blurred.

In the context of the implementation of neoliberal policy, efficiency improvement can be achieved through the involvement of citizens, and the state is ready to transfer some of its functions to public groups. Walsh identifies three types of interaction between government authorities and private citizens (Walsh, 2014). Deputization is institutionalized partnerships between government and citizens, contractual or legal relations compelling cooperation. Responsibilization encourages citizen participation through support on a voluntary basis. Autonomization involves participation without governmental solicitation (Walsh, 2014).

The interaction between public authorities and society will also include examples located somewhere between the theoretical types of informal institutions. Many of them demonstrate signs of complementary rules of the game rather than substitutive ones.

Case Description

For our analysis, we have selected two examples of institutional practices in Russia: StopXam movement and the Moscow government's "Moscow Helper" application.

Among Russia's numerous and various organizations, many were labeled by the mass media as vigilante. At the same time, the vast majority of such movements and organizations have faced problems, e. g., their virtual communities in social networks have been blocked. The case chosen by us, StopXam movement, on the contrary, received presidential grants for a certain period, and was supported by the government. Nevertheless, it lost the status of an organization through a court decision. The very emergence of StopXam movement, like some other vigilante groups in Russia, is associated with the transformation of the pro-government youth movement Nashi created to consolidate loyal youth. From the beginning, they faced criticism from Western-oriented media and politicians, who immediately labeled it with Nashism (Nashi and fascism). However, the movement positioned itself as anti-fascist. The organization split into several autonomous movements that dealt with specific problems.

StopXam that emerged in 2010, despite the lack of organizational status and funding from the authorities, continues its active functioning.

StopXam appeared to combat "rudeness on the roads" in Russia. Among the frequent actions taken by members of the movement in recent years, one of the prominent directions is fighting against illegal parking. Parking in the wrong places is a common practice in Russia. It becomes an informal institution, the expected rules of the game, which many motorists share. The absence of a system of strict sanctions on the part of the authorities institutionalizes such



behavior and forms a distorted model of public values ("I am free to park where I want and where it is convenient for me").

The development of e-participation tools has led to the emergence of a kind of competitor to StopXam: Moscow Helper application. This app was launched in 2015. With its help, citizens could photograph a violation of the rules and send a photo of the violator's car to the authorities. The authorities have to check the fact of the violation and decide on a fine for the vehicle owner. In turn, the activity of citizens using the app is encouraged by the government which provides them with discounts on travel, parking, etc. By 2021, the application has been downloaded by over 700,000 people.

At the same time, even the official application has encountered some legal difficulties. In 2019, the use of the application was actually suspended due to the decision of the Supreme Court, which made it impossible to involve citizens in reporting violations. The work was resumed after some changes in the legislation.

StopXam vs Moscow Helper: Complementary or Substitutive?

Let us try to determine the place of the StopXam movement in the institutional environment in Russia.

StopXam acts as an alternative to police. The goals of the police and StopXam are the same: to make drivers observe the rules. In this regard, StopXam can be either a complementary or a substitutive subject of institutionalization. Since StopXam's activists' actions involve both the group's sanctions and a call to the police, it is difficult to determine their role unambiguously. Therefore, the concepts of complementary and substitutive institutions should be seen as ideal types. StopXam, which received grants and acted as a little helper of members of the government, could of course be considered as a movement close to the complementary type. But the violations of the law that StopXam was accused of suggest that, in general, the vigilant nature of this group pushed it to the functions of a substitutive institution.

Some illegal actions taken by StopXam include unauthorized placement of stickers on cars, the use of violence, as well as shaming based on shooting videos of violators and publishing these materials on YouTube.

StopXam does not use radical methods of internet vigilantism. Although the publication of videos that condemn the behavior of drivers who violate the rules can be called shaming, it is more important that this shaming is not personalized. StopXam's goals are not naming (disclosing the identities of the violators), doxing, or bullying. The activities of the StopXam participants themselves are not anonymous, which is typical for cyber-vigilantes. StopXam participants and violators are potentially equal in terms of their identification. Therefore, both can become the object of criticism and attacks on social media, which usually do not happen. Thus, the Internet is used to promote public values and, as in the case of regional



organizations of StopXam, of earning money from advertising. In this sense, StopXam's activity resembles extreme bloggers, who are very numerous in Russia.

It is believed that a factor of vigilantism has lowered public confidence in police and criminal justice (Haas, Keijser & Bruinsma, 2014; Trottier, 2019), so it is essential to focus on the level of trust in the police and that of vigilante communities in Russia.

According to sociological research, trust in the police as an institution in Russia was estimated in 2020 at 36% ("fully trust" response), with the level of "completely distrust" position at 21% ("Trust in institutions", 2020). Surveys commissioned by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia record a positive trend in the growth of trust in police activities from 38.4% in 2016 to 44.9% ("Assessment of police activity in the Russian Federation in 2020", 2020).

The research data published in media on the support of the StopXam movement show the approval of the activities of these vigilantes. According to the study conducted by the Public Verdict Foundation which has a critical attitude towards the phenomenon of vigilantism in Russia, 52% of respondents support StopXam's actions of putting stickers on the windshield of a car and shooting a video of the subsequent events. At the same time, 39% of respondents supported the drivers. The phenomenon of vigilantism itself (i.e., the enforcement of order by some citizens against other citizens) was supported by 56%, while 34% recognized the monopoly of the police on enforcement of order (McLure, 2000).

Among StopXam's supporters, there are also some police officials; 52% of them positively assess the activities of StopXam (Laschenov, 2018).

However, it cannot be said that StopXam is an appropriate example of a neoliberal transfer of powers to a public movement that would handle detained culprits to the police (Trottier, 2019). The police, who do not always interfere in the actions of StopXam activists, usually acts as an arbitrator in the conflict between StopXam and traffic rules violators.

Thus, the phenomenon of vigilantism in Russia demonstrates a certain social divide. It is due to both an ambiguous attitude towards the police and the acceptance of the symbolic violence on the part of the vigilantes.

Of particular interest is that the StopXam movement was initially sanctioned by the Russian political elite and was supposed to play the role of a civilian police officer. Since the current vigilante movements often emerged in the way that is similar to StopXam, we can assume that Russia has a widespread model of "managed" (loyal) vigilantism that tries to remain within the framework of a complementary institute, rarely committing any actions of the substitutive institute in case of police inaction.

Despite the formal institutionalization of civil participation in the fight against violators of traffic rules, such as Moscow Helper application, StopXam movement continues to exist as an informal institution. In this regard, it is of great research interest to examine to what extent the social network's audience of StopXam and



Moscow Helper overlap. Are these initiatives complementary or substitutive, or do they exist in parallel?

Methods

Using the API (application programming interface) of Vk.com, we collected data on subscribers of five communities (Table 2): the "StopXam" group (<https://vk.com/StopXam>), the "StopXam Moscow" group (https://vk.com/StopXam_msk_official), the official "Moscow Helper" group (<https://vk.com/moshelperapp>), the unofficial "Moscow Helper" group (https://vk.com/pak_pm), and the group representing the opponents of "Moscow Helper" (<https://vk.com/netpm>). We formed a data set consisting of 415566 records which include basic information about subscribers, namely id, user-specified name, age, city.

Community	Number of subscribers
StopXam	406964
StopXam Moscow	3086
The official "Moscow Helper"	1104
The unofficial "Moscow Helper"	2961
The opponents of "Moscow Helper"	1451

Table 2. Number of subscribers in the selected communities

We deliberately included in the analysis the following groups: a) representing a geographic division, i.e., as in the case of StopXam, national versus regional; b) expressing different opinions: official-unofficial, supporters-opponents. We suppose that this sample provides an opportunity to conduct a comparative study of the links between communities united by common problems of interaction between motorists and pedestrians but differing in approaches to solving them.

To examine the presence or absence of the connection of the selected communities through subscribers, we conducted SNA (social network analysis) using the Graphistry program. The advantage of Graphistry is the ability to analyze data sets of unlimited size and explore big graphs. A social network representation has nodes for people and edges connecting nodes to represent relationships between them. Moreover, we used descriptive statistics to analyze users' demographic characteristics and identify hidden patterns.

Results

As a result of the network analysis (Fig. 1), it should be noted with great caution that all the selected groups are poorly connected with each other. Although StopXam is the common group for all represented, the number of persons who are



subscribers to different communities simultaneously does not allow us to conclude that there is a significant overlap of audiences. The only exception is StopXam Moscow, where a flow of the audience from StopXam can be noticed.

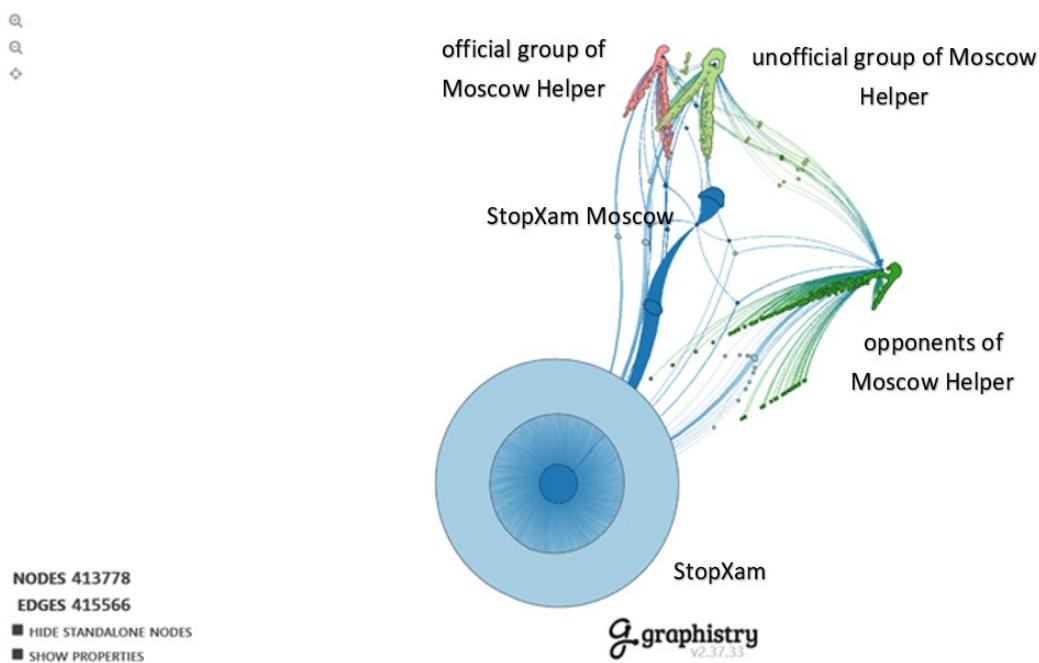


Figure 1. The intersection of the audience of selected communities. Light-blue circle – StopXam, dark-blue – StopXam Moscow, pink – the official group of Moscow Helper, light green – the unofficial group of Moscow Helper, dark green – opponents of Moscow Helper

The subscribers of the unofficial community of Moscow Helpers are twice (almost three times) as numerous as the subscribers of the official community; this can be explained by a tendency to avoid formal institutions and official information, even in the context of e-participation tools.

A certain closeness of the audience is observed between the official and unofficial groups of Moscow Helper, while the opponents of the Moscow Helper participate more in the unofficial group (Table 3).

An interesting result is demonstrated through the analysis of the gender composition of the studied communities (Table 4). In all the groups selected for analysis, there were more males among the members. The smallest disproportion is characteristic of the official community of Moscow Helper, while the largest disproportion is found in the Moscow StopXam community. We hypothesize that women are more actively involved in formal, well-established institutions, while men are more willing to join the activities of informal groups and monitor informal practices with the use of violence.



	StopXam	StopXam Moscow	The official "Moscow Helper"	The unofficial "Moscow Helper"	The opponents of "Moscow Helper"
StopXam	0	1444	54	110	104
StopXam Moscow	1444	0	15	18	4
The official "Moscow Helper"	54	15	0	61	12
The unofficial "Moscow Helper"	110	18	61	0	40
The opponents of "Moscow Helper"	104	4	12	40	0

Table 3. The intersection of the audience of selected communities (number of joint users)

Gender	StopXam, %	StopXam Moscow, %	The official "Moscow Helper", %	The unofficial "Moscow Helper", %	The opponents of "Moscow Helper", %
Male	85,6	87,3	52,6	67,7	81,0
Female	14,4	12,7	47,4	32,3	19,0
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Table 4. Gender distribution in virtual communities

The analysis of the age distribution did not reveal any significant deviations (Table 5). The most numerous groups, those aged 21-30 and 31-40, in the analyzed communities are also the most numerous in the Vk.com social network in general. But a significantly lower number of the audience aged 41-50 who usually have cars, may indirectly indicate that these communities attract the attention of a younger audience, which is characterized by more emotional and more aggressive behavior.



Age	StopXam, %	StopXam Moscow, %	The offi- cial “Mos- cow Helper”, %	The unof- ficial “Moscow Helper”, %	The oppo- nents of “Moscow Helper”, %
under 20	1,8	7,9	3,7	4,4	2,3
21-30	14,6	13,2	8,7	9,2	13,4
31-40	12,9	20,4	10,5	6,2	15,2
41-50	1,7	5,7	3,9	1,7	4,3
51-60	0,3	1,5	1,7	0,5	0,9
61-70	0,1	0,4	0,6	0,1	0,1
71-80	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,1	0,3
81-90	0,0	0,1	0,0	0,0	0,3
91-100	0,1	0,0	0,2	0,0	0,1
over 100	0,5	1,0	0,4	0,5	0,7
Not indicated	67,8	49,6	70,2	77,3	62,4
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Table 5. Age distribution in virtual communities

It is important to note that there are almost 50,000 Muscovites in the national community of StopXam. In contrast, the total number of participants in the Moscow community of StopXam is slightly more than 3,000 people (Table 6). This can be explained by the fact that users of the national community perceive StopXam more as a newsmaker, a type of an extreme blogger, a specific media, i.e., see it as entertainment. Most users of the national community probably do not support this movement or vigilantism in general. We assume they are just interested in watching the development of the conflict. This might explain the weak connections between the large community of StopXam and other groups.

This is also confirmed by the fact that the participants of other groups most often get together in the StopXam community, which does not coordinate the vigilantes but promotes their values and provides a general news feed on the issue. Since members of these communities rarely indicate their political views on social media profiles (StopXam – 5,9%, StopXam Moscow – 7,4%, the official “Moscow Helper” – 5.1%, the unofficial “Moscow Helper” – 2.2%, the opponents of “Moscow Helper” – 3.3%), the influence of vigilante groups might be an essential factor in shaping their values.



City	StopXam, %	StopXam Moscow, %	The official “Moscow Helper”, %	The unof- ficial “Moscow Helper”, %	The oppo- nents of “Moscow Helper”, %
Not indicated	34,9	24,4	38,1	72,3	26,3
Moscow	12,1	24,8	46,1	11,4	57,2
Saint-Petersburg	5,9	5,3	1,8	1,2	1,9
Other	47,2	45,5	13,9	15,1	14,6
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

Table 6. Distribution of followers by city

Conclusion and Discussion

The main goal of the current study was to determine a model of digital vigilantism in Russia in the context of the development of alternative e-democracy institutions based on the analysis of the social media activity of StopXam. Considering e-democracy only as a platform that creates a field of opportunities for the enjoyment of one's rights, with the weakening of the discourse of responsibility, leads to the fact that a part of civil society, such as vigilantes, takes on the functions of committing violence (including symbolic violence) to 'educate' another part of society. Even if this can contribute to public self-regulation in some cases, one must also consider the risks of taking over the civil society when cohesive minorities are able to impose their values on the majority, using fear and intimidation.

Nevertheless, vigilantism cannot be evaluated exclusively from a negative position. The findings of this study suggest that vigilantism could be considered as an instrument of informal institutionalization, which can be used by political actors (primarily the government) to set the rules of the game that correspond to established public values.

The current study has revealed that in Russia, vigilantism is allowed in the form of complementary or substitutive institutions. Vigilantes who seek to occupy the accommodating or the competing niche are subject to more consistent and decisive sanctions. Thus, compliance with public values is a factor of correspondence to the type of informal institution in Russia. The long existence of vigilante movements is typical for groups born as a result of the interaction between public organizations and the authorities. They act as 'twilight institutions' or entities of managed vigilantism. The existence of such vigilantes shows to the authorities that conflict situations are not resolved within the framework of formal institutions, which can, nevertheless, be temporarily resolved at the level of interaction between individual citizens. Creation of groups that are ready to observe the general principles of the game's rules and impose common values with only minor, occasional violations of the letter of the law is becoming a working model of managed vigilantism.



As monopoly on violent activity is a fundamental characteristic of the state, any claims of civil society to legitimate violence that deny such state monopoly are a very threatening trend for the state as such (Trottier, 2019). In this sense, managed vigilantism is a perilous game since the very existence of such groups illustrates the ongoing inefficiency of public institutions. The results of this study indicate that the lack of proper legitimacy of police which is associated, among other things, with its insufficient effectiveness, leads to the fact that the police (or an insufficiently strict system of sanctions) might be a negative factor for state legitimacy as a whole. As a consequence, some groups such as StopXam take over a part of state functions.

In addition, regular use of institutionalized vigilantism can provoke a wave of uncontrolled spontaneous vigilantism. As Bateson notes, “when citizens resort to self-help in one domain (ex: trash collection), they also appear to express greater desires for self-help in other domains” (Bateson, 2021, p. 937). The ongoing functioning of vigilante groups leads to the emergence of imitators who seek to transfer their experience to other spheres.

This study has found out that vigilantism forms a specific culture of action. The difference in the means of vigilantism and e-participation is in the role played by the citizen. If e-participation offers a person the role of an “informer”, then vigilantism attracts one offering the role of a self-proclaimed policeman, an actor entitled to symbolic or ordinary violence. As Bateson notes, “vigilantism is more than a reaction to crime; it is an exercise in power” (Bateson, 2021, p. 933).

It is interesting to note the transfer of vigilant practices to the digital environment. The role that the vigilantes from StopXam acquire in Russian social networks is more similar to the activities of bloggers. For instance, StopXam activists from Saint Petersburg insert advertising into their videos to earn funds for their campaigns. Such institutional vigilantism bears minimal resemblance in its consequences to the results of spontaneous vigilante activities. Institutional digital vigilantism tends to turn vigilante practices into a routine. It does not become a factor of spontaneous, violent, and intense mass attacks on one person, as it happens in cases of cyberbullying. The routinization of vigilantism contributes to the fact that the phenomenon with which it struggles gradually turns into a practice that, albeit disapproved, does not require intense symbolic violence. In this regard, institutional vigilantism has extremely limited opportunities in online mobilization.

The most remarkable result to emerge from the data is that the existence of such groups as opponents of Moscow Helper application, with a comparable number of subscribers, demonstrates a significant public divide on this issue and the weakness of the formal institution both in terms of action and in terms of values. The actual “non-civil society” in this sense is produced not by vigilantes but by opponents of the institutionalization of e-participation. Simultaneously, the weak intersection of the audiences of the five analyzed communities justifies that the problem of non-compliance with the rules does not cause such a strong reaction in society that would require the consolidation of all fighters against illegal



parking. Although this problem is of some interest, it is at the periphery of public attention.

We believe that the development of e-participation and effective changes in legislation can create an institutional environment that would drive out such informal institutions as vigilantism. When the signs of dysfunctions in the social system decrease, an actor fighting against the dysfunctions will not be wanted.

Another measure contributing to the disappearance of Russian vigilante movements aimed at combating road code violators is the introduction of stricter formal sanctions since Russian legislation in this area has been criticized for being too lenient.

Finally, a number of potential limitations need to be considered. First, the example of StopXam could not be extended to all vigilant communities in Russia, although some of them have a similar evolution and work in a similar institutional environment. Nevertheless, only a comprehensive comparative analysis can confirm the prevalence of the model of managed vigilantism. Secondly, network analysis as a stand-alone method can not reveal the degree of vigilante media impact on the audience. The use of qualitative methods for studying audience engagement (such as surveys) is required.

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