Social media and state repression: The case of VKontakte and the anti-garbage protest in Shies, in Far Northern Russia
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Abstract
This article analytically describes the digital technologies-embedded repression practices developed against a local grassroot environmental protest in Far Northern Russia. Unlike urban political opposition that uses United States-based social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter), grassroots movements mainly use VKontakte, the Russia-developed dominant social network in the country. They use it despite the potential privacy and security risks this platform has posed to users since 2014. By means of an ethnographic approach, this article focuses on government responses to online protest activities and counter-practices formulated by activists to circumvent limitations. Inhabitants have been fighting since July 2018 against a waste landfill project designed to ship vast quantities of garbage from Moscow to a remote site called Shies. A protest camp was set up and maintained to physically preserve the site, joined by people from all over Russia. This article shows that, even as it became a target of government surveillance, VKontakte remains a crucial tool for local activism.

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1. Introduction

Digital media and technology provide a diverse infrastructure for protest, that activists and concerned citizens can rely upon during mobilisation activities (Donk, et al., 2004; Earl and Kimport, 2011; Milan, 2013). As empirical cases have shown, the Internet reshapes activism, protest and participation (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Poell, 2014; Tufekci, 2017). Using the Internet is not merely about choosing a specific rational tactic among several that are available: these tools significantly and intangibly changed the ways that citizens learn, socialise, think, contribute to communities and protest.

1.1. Social networking platforms and activism
Among these digital tools, social networking platforms play an important role and are widely used by activists. Networked technologies extend, restructure and complicate publics; they amplify, record and spread information and social acts (boyd, 2010). However, technologies do not uniformly shape publics and individuals: attention must be paid to the cultural, social and geographical varieties and complexities of concrete users. These processes are analysed here in the frame of a specific case study: a technology-embedded social movement opposing the construction of a household waste landfill in Far Northern Russia, which was designed for shipments of garbage from Moscow to Shies railway station, in the Arkhangelsk Region, located some 1,200 kilometers northeast of Moscow. Residents of the Shies region have been fighting since July 2018 against the waste landfill project, setting up and maintaining a protest camp to physically preserve the site, where people from all over Russia have since gathered. The protest has become visible publicly: it was the fourth most discussed topic on VKontakte in 2019, ahead of Siberian wildfires, pension reform and summer election protests in Moscow [1]; it was also covered by several national and international media [2]. The Shies case is a valuable case study to investigate how concerned citizens and activists in far-off regions interact with digital media and technology in the context of a protest movement. State repression linked to digital activities, platform surveillance and activists’ behaviour and practices in specific regions and in the frame of social and environmental movements are less studied, and hence less understood, compared to highly publicised opposition rallies and elections in very big Russian cities. This article is thus a contribution to the study of civic transformation and development in contemporary Russia, by examining online activities and their repression.

1.2. Authoritarian practices in relation to digital technologies

Political regimes, their structures and economic allies make use of digital technologies to serve their own aims: to monitor and record online activities of dissidents, to spread propaganda and influence public opinion. These practices can be defined as authoritarian when they are realised by means of secrecy, disinformation and disabling voice (Glasius, 2018). State responses evolve dynamically with protest practices; governments and companies adapt to digital protest and try to disrupt, block, and police platforms (Akkari and Gabdulhakov, 2019). In Russia, the media landscape is not totally controlled by elites; indeed, Russia has a semi-free media environment (Stukal, et al., 2017; Kiriya, 2019) and national and regional independent (non-state) media represent a media niche available on the Internet and in print. In addition to surveillance and legal and extra-legal pressures, control is sometimes subtle: it has nested itself into the digital design of independent professional journalism (Daucé, 2020). Unlike China, the Russian government did not impose large-scale technological filtering measures, but is skillfully controlling and using the Internet to expand its communicative power, including small scales of specific local contentions. False and manipulative narratives play a role in marginalising the voices of protest movements.

After the 2011–2012 massive street protests in Moscow and others large cities against unfair elections, the Russian government adopted a new direction in Internet policy and off-line and online measures to discipline dissent: a tightening of Internet legislation, a transfer of ownership of media outlets and platforms (such as VKontakte), attacks and intimidations, and the creation of a “troll factory” dedicated to influencing several Russian and international political and social events by creating content (Lonkila, et al., 2020). The digital aspects of repression are often described in a general way or according to the perspective of liberal political opposition, including independent journalists (e.g., Stukal, et al., 2017; Urman, 2019; Hulcoop, et al., 2017); however, these represent a particular target of the regime and a limited group in terms of social background, geographical location and types of claims. There is a lack of studies exploring online repression in relation to the many and active protest movements taking place in contemporary Russia concerning, for example, housing, the environment, trade unions, road tax, municipal charges, pension reforms, health and education. This article attempts to fill this gap by analysing repressions processes in the Shies case — a specific struggle which takes place in a region far from Moscow, with a diverse population in terms of age, level of education, income and cultural background.

1.3. Online and off-line ethnography to understand repression as “situated practices”

Digital technologies have been accompanied by optimistic and pessimistic visions of how they change
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society and activism. In Russia, empirical studies show that social network sites, including VKontakte, are tools for both protest and state control (Konradova and Schmidt, 2016; Lonkila, 2016). Computing equipment, technical devices, and algorithms are shaped both as devices for meeting like-minded people, criticism and citizen mobilisation, and for repression and police surveillance, which is also a reflection of decisions and choices of engineers who design these artefacts. While studies are also needed on the motivations and values of engineers in the VKontakte case, as a social movement, I am primarily interested in understanding how people live and have to negotiate between the opportunities that the Internet offers and the consequences of digital surveillance on civic activities. I attempt to build theory from observations of these situated practices. Studying technology use in unstable conditions (high-risk activism in Russia) can highlight assumptions of use built into technologies and consider the implications of these assumptions (Shklovski and Wulf, 2018). To understand the experiences of social media users in their daily protest activities, I employ face-to-face and digital ethnographic methods, to examine how digital processes and infrastructures are ‘performed’ (Beyes, et al., 2017) during a protest. Infrastructures and publics are intertwined, and their relationship is dynamic and enacted in practice, particularly in the field of politics (Baringhorst, et al., 2019). On one side, infrastructures are material entities that have a background role supporting and shaping the practices of specific publics (Korn, et al., 2019). On the other side, protest practices can re-shape infrastructures (Treré, 2019).

I started to study the interaction between flows of knowledge, data and infrastructures related to Shies protest in VKontakte since early 2019 and I carried out my fieldwork in the summer of 2019 in Shies, Urdoma and Syktyvkar. Combining off-line and online qualitative observations (Sade-Beck, 2004; Hallett and Barber, 2014; Hine, 2015), I was able to analyse how mobile devices and Internet-related practices were incorporated into people and protest groups’ everyday lives. My research analysed people’s activities, information, stories and visual materials that they produced and shared; it also described the discussions that people led online while they struggled at the same time off-line. In the era of social media, users generate and share content, mixing text, sound, and video formats; activists are no exception in sharing a variety of media content. VKontakte profiles are hyper-linked to Web sites and other social media: YouTube videos (which hosts several channels related to politics), newspaper articles, TV broadcasts, etc. I accessed VKontakte groups in two ways. On the one hand, I joined online communities and I was included as a “friend” on the social network by participants during fieldwork. On the landfill site, people wished to connect with me after real-life conversations that I had with them; I then broadened my online network by connecting with “friends of friends” of these individuals, suggested by the VKontakte platform itself. For participants, we were all part of the same protest context and community. Most of the participants knew each other personally or had met many times in Shies, or during protest actions in their city and village. In other words, the main networked public here was not an invisible, imagined audience, but referred to a flesh-and-blood ensemble of people and to communicative interactions between them. In parallel, I further explored VKontakte and I subscribed to local, regional and national groups dedicated to the struggle. I actively participated in these groups, reading daily, “liking”, commenting, reposting contents and regularly publishing my own photos and reviews. This method of inquiry provided a rich and diverse ensemble of materials on the Shies uprising events and repression. Following a pragmatist approach, I considered that the public, political community and VKontakte infrastructure did not pre-exist in a singular form, but instead were shaped by the process of ‘citizen inquiry’ to understand and contest the landfill project itself.

2. Internet penetration, social media usage and protest in Russian regions: The Shies case

2.1. Internet penetration

In Russia, domestic Internet access has grown substantially over the last 20 years (from two percent in 2000 to 50 percent in 2011, and to 80 percent in 2019 for the population over 16 years old) [4]. The highest increases in the number of Web users occurred, in the past few years, in small towns and rural areas (like
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The diffusion of the Internet in some regions was greatly facilitated by the reduction of the cost of access and the rapid spread of mobile communication technologies (Nagirnaya, 2015). In the field of politics, the Internet is no longer a technology specific to a few professional activists, but it is used by a large number of citizens; however, its development is very heterogeneous across Russia (Kolozaridi and Dovbysh, 2020). Indeed, the Shies site is in a remote location in the middle of a forest, 800 km. south-west of the region’s capital, Arkhangelsk, and 300 km. east from the capital of Komi republic, Syktyvkar (90 km. in a straight line). The closest town is Koriajma (36,224 inhabitants), situated 110 km. away and connected to the site by a long, unpaved road. However, it is not an underdeveloped rural area; it is located less than a kilometre from pipelines which connect the gas fields of the Yamal Peninsula to western Europe. In the nearest, and very active, village, Urdoma (4,500 inhabitants, 30 km. from Shies), Gazprom’s Operation Centre has been employing many local people since the 1970s and attracted researchers and engineers to settle in the area. For these workers, access to computers and to the Internet was important for their working practices, while other residents, especially retirees, were unconnected a few years ago. Locals and activists have computer and IT skills, and Urdoma has good quality Internet connections. Furthermore, activists created a Wi-Fi Internet access point in the protest camp. This Internet-friendly technological context played an important role, as the territory involved in the Shies battle is immense, with communities and villages very far from each other. The Internet de facto weaved connections between these remote locations, and increased the quality and quantity of communication.

2.2. Social media usage

In the frame of the Shies protest, as elsewhere, social movement media practices took place in a dense media ecology (Poell, 2014; Treré and Mattoni, 2016) where digital and networked media were intersecting with each other and with more traditional media such as books, television, radio and local newspapers. Within this media landscape, social media became increasingly popular not only in everyday personal life, but in the field of protesting as well. In Russia, the largest social network is the native VKontakte (meaning InContact), which appeared in 2006. VKontakte and Facebook are very similar visually: like Facebook, VKontakte has personal profiles, a public message wall, a messaging service (to one person or to several people), events, groups and pages. A post can be ‘liked’, reposted and commented upon. VKontakte requires users to register with their real names, ages, telephone numbers and addresses. It draws its popularity from its great variety of free media files, including audio, video and tools of Web technology, which can be (illegally) loaded by users themselves; it is also simpler to use than Facebook, as the interface design of VKontakte does not change very often (as Facebook’s does), seeking to project a minimalist and stable appearance. VKontakte is not as overcharged with advertising as Facebook, aiming to be lightweight and fast to access.

Social networking platforms are now not only a means to find people and communicate with them, but also one of the primary information sources in Russia (Toepfl, 2013). They have become an alternative source of information from the first half of 2000s, initially with the Livejournal blogosphere, then with VKontakte, particularly on topics of terrorist attacks or natural disasters (Asmolov, 2020). The same occurred by the start of the 2010 for law-level events in various regions (Gusejnov, 2014). Social online networking communities spread then across the country, with a focus on finding practical solutions to local problems (Zvereva, 2012). This shift towards civic networking resulted in a great number of volunteer movements, such as those who have been fighting the fires in European Russia in 2010 or flash floods in Krymsk in Krasnodar region in 2012 (Roesen and Zvereva, 2014). Research has shown that social media penetration and the development of VKontakte facilitated also the participation in political protests in Russia during a wave of protests in Russia in 2011–2012 (Enikolopov, et al., 2020). VKontakte is more popular in remote regions than Facebook, Twitter and Telegram, whose users mostly live in Moscow and large urban areas, have a higher level of education and are interested in business, politics, technology and other spheres of culture. Well-known traditional oppositional groups use them as well and they focused their social media efforts on Western outlets. Uses also vary according to different kinds of activities. In the Shies protest, as in local grassroots movements in general, activists used VKontakte for community-building and communication. The most popular public Telegram channels spreading information about Shies had 3,300 and 1,300 members (as of August 2020), which was a lot less than VKontakte groups.
VKontakte has been widely used in other “waste riots” in Russia (Wu and Martus, 2020). For the practical coordination of their actions, activists preferentially used messengers, as WhatsApp, Viber and Telegram than VKontakte chats, because they were perceived to be more secure from Russian police services. These messengers represented ‘backstage spaces’ (Treré, 2019).

2.3. Shies protest

Since 2018, Russia has entered into what has been commonly called a “waste crisis”. Landfills from Soviet times have become insufficient for the growing amount of solid household trash, especially in the capital: 90 percent of waste was dumped in regional landfills, and only a tiny percentage was burned or recycled. Many landfill sites on the outskirts of Moscow have reached saturation and leaked contaminants and fumes, leading to environmental problems by air pollution and groundwater contamination, and provoking protests. Faced with popular uprisings in the Moscow region, the government sought to relocate the problem and associated risks by exporting waste to other, more distant, regions. The most controversial project was the one that planned to dispose of half a million tons of Moscow waste per year in a swampy area in Shies, 1,200 km. north of Moscow, for 20 years. For each trash-related protest, first in the Moscow periphery and then in regions, citizens have created groups on VKontakte. More broadly, this “waste revolt” is part of a recent history of local environmental conflicts in Russia (Henry, 2018; Wu and Martus, 2020). In recent years, conflicts have pitted inhabitants against local authorities over problems like nickel or copper extraction. Every new struggle was able to draw on the knowledge of previous groups; for years, experiences of local struggles have been accumulating and strengthening in Russia, and social networking platforms have been an important support for this dynamic.

At the end of July 2018, two local hunters accidentally discovered that forest areas had been cut down near Shies and a building site was under construction. On-site workers stated the reason for this was the creation of a huge landfill site that would receive Muscovite waste, which was confirmed by railway workers. The villagers were faced with what the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey called a ‘problematic situation’ that aroused perplexity and doubt (Dewey, 1927). Faced with this experience and to solve problems, they were prompted to stop and think about what was happening in order to plan their responses; they engaged in an ‘inquiry’ to understand the situation, including observation, evaluation, reasoning and intervention (Dewey, 1938). The modalities of this inquiry were, in part, shaped by the properties of networked technologies: lots of information could be accessed through search, then recorded, archived, duplicated and broadly distributed, due to properties of searchability, persistence, replicability and scalability (boyd, 2010). In that way, social media could continuously activate and reinforce the collective identity, between meetings and actions (Milan, 2015). On the evening of 26 July, messages began to appear on the VKontakte group “URDOMA Online” [9], created in February 2011 and dedicated to life in the Urdoma village. A group devoted to the struggle was created on 31 July: “We are against the landfill in the Lensky district!” [10]. The way that a group is created on VKontakte is somewhat similar to Facebook. Groups can be open to all visitors, closed (user must apply to join) or private (requests are sent by the administrators). All groups related to the anti-landfill protest were public. A group wall may be closed, restricted (user can comment on posts) or fully opened, so that users can publish posts. There are three types of group managers: administrator, editor and moderator [11]. For instance, the “URDOMA Online” group has a restricted wall, users can comment on published posts, and the group was managed as an extension of the village: the moderators ensured the quality of exchanges on the group [12].

Messages about the landfill project also appeared in other villages and towns groups: for instance, on “The Kotlas’s activist” group, which was created in March 2018 and on which locals discussed city life of Kotlas (60,532 inhabitants, Arkhangelsk region, 200 km. from Shies), often with criticism [13]; and on the “The Old Yarensk” group, devoted to local life in Yarensk (3,660 inhabitants, in the same district Lensky as Shies, 89 km.), created in December 2010. Community groups on VKontakte served, at the beginning and throughout the movement, as a primary source of information and as key platforms facilitating networks and collaboration among locals in different villages and towns. Very rapidly, VKontakte groups throughout the Arkhangelsk region were informed about the project. The group “Pomerania is not a dump!” was created in Arkhangelsk during October 2018 to bring together all of the activists in the region. Several
dozen local (city life or protest) groups became actively involved in the struggle: they were connected to large personal non-activist networks, unlike political opposition communities.

Since July 2018, VKontakte became a recognised tool for spreading news about the protests, debating, organising and coordinating activism (Gladarev and Lonkila, 2012). Everywhere, multiplicity of continuously interconnected online/off-line communication technologies composed the repertoire of the communication of the protest movements (Poell, 2014). In the Shies protest, smartphones equipped with wireless connectivity and good cameras were used by activists while on the move. VKontakte served as a tool to help the open sharing of information, public scrutiny and accountability, and environmental mobilisation. Activists produced and accessed wide varieties of contents and information, and their writing style could be trenchant. These arenas facilitated the development of a public voice on the margins of institutional power or against it. However, for several years, despite the remaining emancipatory potential of social media and VKontakte, the grip of corporations and government regulation strengthened over them, as social media such as VKontakte were increasingly mobilised as a means for activist repression.

3. Repression against online activities related to the Shies protest

The role of social media in uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa (the so-called Arab Spring), Europe (the Indignados in Spain) and the U.S. (the Occupy Wall Street protest) has received a great deal of attention from the Russian government (Nocetti, 2015). Other revolts in post-Soviet countries, such as Ukraine (2013–2014), Armenia (2018), and Belarus (2020), where social media played a prominent role, confirmed this trend. The Internet was, in these cases, considered as a way to circumvent state media monopoly. In Russia, the 2011–2012 anti-government protests (the biggest ones in the country since the fall of USSR) aroused an additional concern on this issue: opposition media and social platforms, including VKontakte, played a central role in the visual reports of electoral fraud, mobilisation and coordination of protest activities (Lonkila, 2012; Oates, 2013; Dokuka, 2014; Enikolopov, et al., 2020). As a result, authorities put pressure on VKontakte’s management to shut down opposition groups and protest events. During the same period, distributed-denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks, technically restricting access to online content, were organised against social media and media outlets that broadcast opposition views (e.g., Novaya Gazeta, Ekho Moskvy). Fake user accounts were also created for organised, automated or manual, spamming of blogs and of Twitter feeds using topics and hashtags utilised by protesters (Jaitner, 2013).

3.1. Surveillance laws and capabilities

After 2012, the regime started to more closely monitor online media and social platforms. It tested different strategies through a non-linear, experimental process, reflecting both the political struggles inside the regime and the distinctive challenges associated with the implementation of each of the options (Stukal, et al., 2017). On one side, government control of the Internet developed with changes in surveillance laws and capabilities (Nocetti, 2015). A series of legislative developments increased the power of the Russian Prosecutor General’s Office and federal agency Roskomnadzor (the Agency for the Supervision of Information Technology, Communications and Mass Media) to block or take down Web sites for a wide range of alleged infractions. The government exercised pressure on online media by forcing the replacement of editorial staffs. In 2014, with conflict rising in Ukraine, the crackdown against critical voices and opponents in Russia became even greater. Pavel Durov, the VKontakte founder, lost control of his company and left (with members of his team) the country because of political pressure [14]. Oligarch Alisher Usmanov’s Mail.ru group, with close ties to the Kremlin, bought VKontakte and since, the government has had no difficulty blocking groups or accessing personal data of site users. Surveillance and interception equipment, known as SORM (see e.g., Ermoshina and Musiani, 2017) was installed at telecommunications companies (Soldatov and Borogan, 2015). Users leave traces (in e-mail messages, social networking Web sites and Web browsing) that can be recorded, analysed, and used by private or public actors for repressive purposes. The government can use social networking platforms to assess the
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population and act upon these insights; as a consequence, platforms can contribute to political regime stability (Abu-Jawdeh, 2013), including Russia (Kabanov and Karyagin, 2018). Individuals were not notified if their profile content was being reviewed, screen-captured or downloaded by another user or through a software product; thus, a particular user’s “friend” could post evidence unintentionally (‘social creeping’) which could lead to the attention of law enforcement authorities.

On 7 July 2016, President Putin signed the “Yarovaya package”, which established the obligation for telecommunications operators to store all information transmitted by users for one year and to disclose the metadata and encryption keys to authorities on demand and without a court order. On their end, messengers, online forums and social media platforms had to save communications metadata for three years. Subsequent laws and regulations allowed authorities to filter and block Internet content automatically, without the cooperation of Internet service providers, thanks to the SORM equipment (Ermoshina and Musiani, 2017).

In the summer of 2018, several hundred cases were initiated due to posts, reposts, comments and likes in VKontakte (and some on Facebook; van der Vet, 2020). The defendants were accused of extremism and offense to “religious feelings” by means of their pictures and posts on the social network. A case needs to have been mediated by lawyers to be known: all statistics on information provision to government agencies are not open. By the end of December 2018, Putin signed a law partially decriminalising article 282 of the Criminal Code on extremism. Responsibility for reposting and meme now only come after repeated violations. These processes did not affect the Shies struggle directly, which was in its early stages and very local in summer 2018. Moreover, these repressions are often described with typologies and lists of repressions, but have not been studied by means of concrete and situated stories with real consequences on the lives of individuals and collectives — which this article does.

3.2. Authoritarian practices against the Shies protest

In the Shies protest, repression related to VKontakte either took place off-line and was meticulously documented online by activists in groups, or enacted entirely online. As for the first type, the most visible action of anti-landfill activists towards the construction site was to block the fuel supply by stopping trucks. Around these actions, conflicts with site guards regularly occurred, with injuries and arrests in the ranks of activists, which led to trials. Other cases of off-line repressions documented online were related to the meetings organised by activists, including those in Arkhangelsk. A number of activists received administrative fines which amounted to 6,000 euros. For the second type, repressions were carried out online, or related to the Internet directly: they included Internet shutdowns at critical moments, seizing activists’ audio, video and computing equipment, blocking, deleting or hacking groups and personal accounts, and carrying out legal trials based on material related to online groups. These repressions were not analysed in specific case studies in the Russian context; as a consequence, the quality and quantity of these repressions for specific groups could be better understood.

The government can carry out intentional Internet shutdowns. When facing organised protests facilitated by an ability to communicate through Internet-based systems, governments can restrict their use, minimising their effect by blocking cell phone service and network communications. Shutting down or limiting access becomes a technology-based, material demonstration of power (Vargas-Leon, 2016). On 23 October 2019, as early as 3 a.m., Urdoma village was without Internet and electricity, and mobile phones were working very badly. In fact, the village was blocked to allow a fuel company to deliver gasoline to the construction site. OMON (police units specialized in riots) from the neighbouring Komi republic were in charge of blocking roads to villagers, as authorities were afraid that the local Arkhangelsk-based OMON would not obey.

Furthermore, the authorities could seize the physical infrastructure by which activists operated on the Internet. Following the attempt by workers to force their way through an activist point on the night of 14–15 March 2019, police seized activist audio, video and computing equipment in Shies on 1 April, while on 19 April, they seized the wagon where the activists had installed a Wi-Fi Internet access point. Another type of repression is the permanent blocking of VKontakte group or personal pages (see Table 1 in the Appendix). In the Shies case, VKontakte received direct requests from the government (via the local office...
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The group blocking appeared especially around the coordinated protest actions across the Arkhangelsk region, in December 2018 and April 2019. The VKontakte administration blocked about a dozen activist groups. An alleged reason often put forward was: “Charitable fund-raising against the rules”. According to VKontakte’s terms of use, the receipt of money should be recorded in the community through screenshots and bank statements, and expenses should be documented by checks [15]. Organisers must report publicly on charges and expenses. However, activists did not want to show this type of information so as not to endanger people. The money collected was used to pay for the services of lawyers and fines for participation in unauthorised actions and to help the Shies camp. The VKontakte requests were a way of forcing group administrators to collect and publish data from benefactors for the purposes of police surveillance and intimidation. After the first blockings, which activists failed to appeal, activists created new groups, and started to collect money by others means (“from hand to hand” and on Telegram); however, group suppression continued. Group blocking can also be temporary; “URDOMA Online” was banned from publishing on 12–14 April 2019, with a written threat of permanent blocking in case of non-execution [16]. These group blockings concerned the Arkhangelsk region cities and villages, and not the Komi Republic, which hinted at an implicit political strategy.

Group or personal account contents can be blocked, deleted or hacked, including the accounts of the best-known activists. Early April 2019, the account of Arkhangelsk activist Olga Shkolina was deleted for “non-compliance” with VKontakte rules [17]. On 24 April, the account of Komi activist Viktor Vishneveckij was blocked for a day due to “suspicious activity”. In addition to legal sanctions, there are also extra-legal actions, the perpetrators of which are anonymous. The personal page of Dmitry Sekushin, an Arkhangelsk activist and administrator of the “Pomerania is not a dump!” group has been hacked several times since autumn 2018. Through his personal profile, unidentified hackers removed all the real administrators (so the latter could not control the situation) and posted provocative posts on the group. They also closed comments in the group, so that nobody could denounce the offenders. On 30 November 2019, the page of Arkhangelsk activist Elena Kalinina, administrator of the same group, was hacked; VKontakte announced that the page was corrupted and started a procedure for restoring access to the page, asking for a mobile phone number and requesting a SMS message with a code to create a new password. The SMS was no doubt intercepted by SORM (which is mostly the prerogative of law enforcement agencies). Even if the mobile phone is turned off, this technique allows an interception after the message is sent to a specific number. After that, 10,000 subscribers, all the records from the wall, discussions and videos were removed from the group.

Another case concerned the regional government elections in September 2020, when a coalition of groups against the Shies landfill decided to launch a primary campaign online with their own “People’s Candidate”. A site was created on 12 October 2019, but was hacked on 3 February 2020, 10 days before the closing of votes: as a result some of the votes disappeared [18]. These hacking activities were a massive strategy to neutralise dissent voices in Russia (Stukal, et al., 2017). They did not require any legal involvement of the state apparatus, they were more plausibly deniable, and they were less transparent for users than blocking from VKontakte moderators. These authoritarian practices enabled the government to escape accountability, and prevented access to information (Glasius, 2018).

“Bots” (algorithmically controlled accounts) and “trolls” (malicious humans, some of which are state-sponsored) certainly also exist in the groups I studied, but they were not obvious for users. They seemed to be much less focused on the Shies topic than, for instance, on liberal opposition or any elections. There were also few groups and some content in favour of the Shies landfill on VKontakte, but they were immediately denounced and mocked by hundreds of local activists so that their effect seemed negligible. In anti-landfill groups, any message that made conversation meaningless or divisive were suppressed or answered precisely. As a result, the reading of protest VKontakte groups provided the reader with a wealth of critical information, the possible reason being that it was not easy or appropriate for the government to implement a long-term, inexpensive solution to create massive pro-landfill content, either through automated generation or real human activity. Further studies should be conducted to determine the presence
and role of pro-government “bots” or “trolls” in generalist groups that are not frequented by activists, and more broadly speaking in grassroots movements in Russia.

Trials based on material found on online groups also contributed to repression. This happens in both “authoritarian” and “democratic” regimes around the world; several cases took place e.g., in the frame of the Yellow Vests movement in France. In Russia, sometimes trials take place several years after publication, even if the offending content has since been deleted by the user. Not everyone who created or shared a post will be prosecuted, but legal instruments are used when the authorities want to attack a targeted person (Gabdulhakov, 2020). Different laws were used against Shies activists. In February 2019, Anatoly Kazikhanov, a retiree, opposition and anti-landfill activist from Severodvinsk, was subject to an administrative charge (200 euros) under Article 5.26.2 of the Administrative Offences Code, accused of offending the religious feelings of citizens or defiling revered items, signs and world-view symbols because he reposted 30 atheist memes on his VKontakte page. At the same time, large quantities of atheist posts were posted daily on VKontakte groups, without being targeted.

On 18 March 2019, President Putin signed a new law criminalising online “disrespect” for Russian state, its organs and its symbols (Article 20.2.3). This new law is part of a group of amendments also including similar punishments for sharing “fake news”. Both were part of the larger legislative drive towards a “sovereign Internet” proposed by senator Andrey Klishas and Duma deputy Andrey Lugovoi in December 2018 [19]. On 16 May, the Arkhangelsk police crafted a report on Alexander Pushkin (real name) for the comment he wrote on 10 April within the group “Pomerania is not a dump!”. In the comment, he criticised the fines issued to people who had been arrested during a massive 7 April demonstration, and the judges who decided them. Alexander Pushkin contested the fine (433 euros, twice his monthly salary). The case (which was opened by a Justice of the Peace) was re-examined and canceled on 9 July by the Oktyabrsky District Court of Arkhangelsk, claiming that judging this type of offense was not the prerogatives of the Justice. A new episode appeared on 15 July, when the regional court sent a SMS to Pushkin saying that the prosecutor’s office was appealing the decision of District Court and referred the case to the regional court on 30 July. The latter finally cancelled the proceedings due to the time limit of the legal three-month period. This was the first case in the Arkhangelsk region and the third case in Russia when alleged infractions to the new law were prosecuted. We can see from this example that the courts and judges disagree among themselves over the interpretation of ‘disrespect’ and that lawsuits cause multiple twists and turns. Another case was opened against Elena Makarova, an Arkhangelsk activist, on 29 May (she made a comment under the same post as Pushkin: “They’re completely f****d up. Aren’t there any more judges or decent policemen?”). Other cases concerned Arkhangelsk region (see Table 2 in the Appendix).

In Arkhangelsk, the prosecutions came from police investigations themselves; investigators often found repostings, and individuals authoring them, through a keyword search. However, in Kotlas, it was a retired Russian teacher, Olga Ilyina, acting as a kind of spontaneous ‘digital vigilante’, who reported comments to the local police for the three cases (and many others ones), before the law came into force [20]. The authorities were using all of the contents (posts, reposts, comments), even those that predated the laws. Then, according to a document released by the head of human rights group Agora, Pavel Chikov [21], police were looking for comments to initiate administrative proceedings on three other active citizens. According to Chikov, the head of the Centre for Combating Extremism in the Arkhangelsk region asked the regional Ministry of Internal Affairs to provide information about persons who had created and administrated VKontakte groups, namely their phones, e-mail addresses and IP addresses [22]. In other words, the police forces were waging an assiduous online battle, whereas in the Komi Republic it did not exist at this level regarding the Shies struggle. The Arkhangelsk region has been designated by the Agora association as the leader in 2019 in the implementation of the law on disrespect. At the beginning of July 2019, of the 21 cases in the country, seven concerned the Arkhangelsk region. Most of them concerned publications on VKontakte. Fined people were ordinary people, not known activists. Others similar cases in Russia included also both activists as well as random social media users (Gabdulhakov, 2020). From July 2019, there were no more cases against Shies supporters concerning this law. According to news reports, the Kremlin asked the Interior Ministry to stop the mass application of the law on insulting state symbols and government agencies [23].
Another law, entered into force on 18 March 2019, introduced fines for individuals spreading “fake news” (Article 13.15.10 of the Code). Elena Kalinina was accused on 25 April 2019 of “fake news” because, on 26 March, she had posted an announcement on her page for a rally which was not yet authorised. Kalinina’s police report was submitted the day that she contested the deputies’ refusal to hold a regional referendum on banning the import of garbage from other regions. This was the first case related to this law in the region. The rally was held 7 April with 3,000 participants joining in; Kalinina had already received a fine on 15 April (€220) for calling for participation in this rally; the Constitution prohibits judging twice the same event. On 23 May, the Oktyabrsky district court in Arkhangelsk referred the case back to the investigators for further investigation. A resident of Plesetsk, an urban locality situated about 200 km. south of Arkhangelsk, Alexander Mironov, an anti-landfill activist, was also accused of “fake news” by the local deputy of the ruling political party United Russia, Mikhail Morozov, for saying in a post in the group “Pomerania is not a dump!” that it was time to “check the deputies for corruption”, after mayor Oholtsov tried to forbid an anti-landfill rally in Plesetsk. The complaint of the deputy was ignored.

Lawsuits may be brought against activists’ lawyers themselves. The flat of Oksana Vladyka, a well-known lawyer in Arkhangelsk who had defended many environmental activists arrested at Shies, was searched on 14 October 2019, by the police following allegedly finding pornographic materials on her social media accounts seven years ago (Article 242 of the Criminal Code). Her laptops, telephones and computer were seized. A few days later she was granted witness status in the case (which in Russia makes it possible to force people to collaborate with the police). The criminal case has now been suspended.

These blocking and trials did not lead to prison in the Shies case, but they entailed significant wastes of money, time and energy for activists, and frightened residents. They disabled voices, discouraged critical questions and intimidated questions and people asking them (Glässius, 2018). The threat of using the law can have a critical psychological and deterrent impact (Israël, 2020). In cases of seizure of computers and telephones, the police can access personal data in a direct way, that can be useful for the authorities in a mobilisation. The intensity of Internet-related repressions varies over time: they were particularly deployed during sensitive events as rallies (7 April 2019) or an active protest period (March–June 2019). They were co-constructed by the relationship authorities had with activists and locals: the police of the Arkhangelsk region were much more active in this respect than the police of the Komi Republic. In others words, Internet-based repression and the implementation of legislation varied according to regions. We also saw selectivity in the application of restrictive legislation: “select individuals face legal charges for their activities on social media, while other users face no consequences for the same engagements” [24]. Furthermore, these cases made digital surveillance more visible in peripheral, less studied regions, showing that it was massive and invasive, and that materials are stored for many years. All Internet users in Russia can be found potentially vulnerable to legal repressions (Gabdulhakov, 2020). Surveillance has both automated aspects (all data is systematically recorded on VKontakte accounts) and human-led aspects (denunciation by third parties, police raids and interrogations). Those repressions complemented other online activities as hacking and off-line legal action against activists and physical intimidation from police and private security guards. These different tools, both online and off-line, seemed to be used as a scare tactic. As mobile Internet penetration increased in Russian remote cities, towns, and villages (primarily due to the growing penetration of smartphones) during the past few years and became a principal source of information, its political effect was arguably being noticed by policy-makers and police services. These phenomena raised questions about repressive strategies and their effectiveness.

4. Awareness, circumvention of restrictions and activist countertactics

Routine, intense and intrusive online and off-line surveillance practices have become a pervasive part of citizen life in Russia. Control strategies are subtler in Russia and designed to shape and affect when and how the information is received by users, rather than denying access outright as in others countries such as
Specific groups including developers and professional activists are very attentive to surveillance and develop several resistance tactics (Ermoshina and Musiani, 2017). However, this is not the case for the substantial majority of ordinary citizens, even those who are physically on the front line of local struggles. Telecommunications, digital, and Internet surveillance is the norm and routine (Lokot, 2018). When they navigate and interact on VKontakte, active citizens normally know there are some privacy risks; since the change of VKontakte’s ownership in 2014, they do not trust the service to protect them from institutional or clandestine privacy threats. However, peer pressure and the perceived benefits of connectivity induce them to continue to use social media. Except for a few specialists, there is a lesser emphasis on privacy in Russia than in Western countries: the belief, inherited from the Soviet times, that ‘the State knows everything about everyone anyway’, is still largely accepted. In the Shies case, despite all the repressive mechanisms described earlier (and strong evidence of pervasive surveillance), individuals continue to publish critical content on VKontakte; thus, the effectiveness of the government’s efforts seems to remain limited. Security becomes a concrete problematic issue to solve pragmatically for activists when a user personally experiences privacy problems, but is not conceptualised as a social problem to be fight against.

During the Shies protest, activists developed different strategies to protect themselves from others users (social privacy; they generally accept “friends” they have met personally) or security services (institutional privacy) [26]. Few of them decided to become invisible surfing the Web. They used proxy servers to mask Internet activity or configured their computer to connect to another server capable to route and anonymise all of their network traffic (VPN). For browsers Firefox or Chrome, it was possible for users to install extensions (plug-ins) allowing them to bypass Roskomnadzor bans. A minority of users refused to give to platforms personal data, opting for aliases and creation of multiple accounts. However, even if users do not give their real name, it is often easy for security services or hackers to identify them. Thus, most activists gave their real information to VKontakte. A way to protect one’s social privacy (but not the institutional one) was to tinker with privacy settings, either to hide personal profile information or to restrict profile to ‘Friends only’. In this case, the information was only open to friends that were accepted within the user’s network. Some activists thus created narrower publics, shaped by an explicit affiliation. Others users regularly shut down their account, only to open another one in its wake.

After an initial moment of surprise derived from the first group blockings, the communities devised reaction strategies. At each blocking, a new group was created on VKontakte and activists intensively shared the link to others. After the group “We are against the landfill in the Lensky district!” was blocked in early April 2019 by VKontakte, a new group (“Defend Shies! Let’s Save the North!”) was created — and promptly closed in turn. A new group was then created, which is still working (12,900 members in August 2020) [27]. While the blockings endure, the number of subscribers has not diminished, which may indicate that this particular repressive technique is not very effective. Moreover, activists were making clones of VKontakte groups: the contents of “Pomerania is not a dump!” was copied simultaneously to Telegram and Instagram [28]. In other words, activists used two properties of networked technologies, persistence and replicability: online contents, made out of bits, are automatically recorded and archived and can be duplicated (see boyd, 2010; Milan, 2015). A minority of activists exit platforms that implement stricter surveillance regimes and technologies, moving, for example, to Telegram. But even so, most kept an account on VKontakte. In comments to the posts announcing group blockings, users’ mutual advice-giving abounded, and some activists developed new technical skills. Some were inviting others to change platforms, to go on Telegram or Facebook. They discussed the cause of closures and future threats of total blockages in the country.
Finally, in the activist sphere, another practice was to disconnect from the Internet (Kaun and Treré, 2020). Activists can deliberately disconnect from platforms permanently, but also for a certain period or for specific activities. Non-participation is, in these cases, a form of political action rather than of mere passivity (Casemajor, et al., 2015); researchers have argued that more attention should be paid to the negotiations and the tactical avoidance of the Internet, or of platforms, by activists (Croeser and Highfield, 2015). On the Shies camp, as elsewhere, there was a wide variety of Internet uses depending on the situation — ranging from a highly visible situation (a group photo session in the centre of the camp site or counter-surveillance practices operated by activists) to a totally off-line situation within a few meters and minutes. While capturing images and footage became part of the act of dissent itself (Milan, 2015), a great and strategic part of dissent often remained outside the digital realm. Activists established a visibility regime that leveraged social networking platforms to make a cause visible in a semi-free public space, but was also able to take new and varying shapes according to repression [29]: they also leveraged invisibility, disappearing completely from the Internet and online platforms for a period of time. Activists switched easily between online and off-line activities according to their needs and perceptions of ongoing issues.

5. Conclusion

On a daily basis, VKontakte’s infrastructure supported protestors’ efforts to organise the anti-landfill movement in Shies, Arkhangelsk region, Komi Republic, and to make it visible for the whole country. In addition, the platform constituted, within the framework of its technical constraints and possibilities, a vast user-generated archive of past and present struggles, and a forum of people and groups which amplified off-line processes. Users interconnected and learned from other similar struggles in the country or in neighbouring countries. For instance, in 2020, the online community gathering around the Shies protest became a hub of information about COVID-19. In the summer, it was a formidable centre of information, reflection and support for struggles in other Russian regions (e.g., a protest in Khabarovskyk against the arrest of the governor and against limestone mining at Kushtau hill in Bashkortostan) and countries (e.g., street protests against the Belarusian regime after the most recent elections). These processes, which took place partly on social networking platforms, strengthened and brought closer people and protest communities in their endeavour to support and build a sense of legitimacy and justice.

Why a country like Russia decides to leave essentially open such a rich and critical space is a yet-unanswered question. Is it to gather information on social movements and people, is it to leave a public space online where, at first glance, freedom of speech reigns, is it a lack of interest and anxiety towards movements that do not directly question the central authority and which are located in a remote region? The Shies case provided some answers: data was being recorded on VKontakte, the VKontakte administration suppressed groups and personal accounts for political reasons but without publicly justifying it in this way, targeted attacks took place anonymously against the best-known activists, the police and FSB sometimes used data collected in legal proceedings, particularly in the Arkhangelsk region. All of these repressions varied dynamically, depending on location, time, and police and justice representatives. Legal actions related to activities on the Internet did not lead to prison terms in the Shies case, but they were an additional obstacle for citizens in terms of time, money, and stress due to the expected high levels of arbitrariness of the repression. Faced with repression, activists operating in Shies are learning: they create new groups each time they are deleted, they copy content on Telegram, they refrain from using digital tools in some cases and occasionally resort to invisibility, they moderate content, they organise themselves off-line. They continue to use VKontakte to be visible in public space, and at the same time they deal with and respond to visibility. On the government side, protest repression tools are continuously experimenting, and their effectiveness analysed. Each protest case is an opportunity to test and search for effective technologies to block and filter out critical content. In Russia, as elsewhere, with varying forms and consequences, online repression and judicial repression based on online materials has been a global trend in recent years; these phenomena call for further empirical studies to advance our knowledge regarding their scope, conditions
Social media and state repression: The case of VKontakte and the anti-garbage protest in Shies, in Far Northern Russia

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Notes

1. “Shies” was mentioned 2.03 million times: https://vk.com/press/2019-highlights.


3. It should be noted again that my study focuses on the experience of VKontakte users and the visible capacities of control and repression; As a not-so-digital sociologist, I was unable to address the complexity of the code that underlies data models or algorithms of the VKontakte social network, which may be the focus of further research.


5. In Russia, Vkontakte has 83 percent of monthly population aged 16–64 in 2019. WhatsApp has 69 percent, Instagram 56 percent, Odnoklassniki (a Russian social network service for classmates and old friends) 54 percent, Viber 47 percent, Facebook 39 percent, Telegram 23 percent and Twitter 19 percent.

6. Vkontakte looks like YouTube, Pandora, and MySpace all in one.

7. According to a survey conducted in August 2020 by the Levada Centre, a non-governmental organization, more than a third of Russians obtain news from social networking platforms (https://www.levada.ru/2020/09/28/ggh/).

8. With the exception of the most prominent opposition activist Alexey Navalny, who in recent years has also based his media strategy on VKontakte.

9. https://vk.com/urdomaonline; 26,500 members in August 2020; its wall is restricted: you have to write to the administrator to post, reading and comments are free.


11. Administrator can manage the administrators and change the name and address of the group. Moderator can delete posts and manage the blacklist. Editor can write in the name of the group, manage the contents and change the main photo. The group creator can make these roles appear publicly on the group page. The user can also file a complaint on the page to the VKontakte administrators.

12. The rules are visibly stated: any message that is insulting, vulgar and provokes arguments is forbidden. Advertising is blacklisted for one month at the first warning and then forever the second time. The publication of advertisements, reposts and links is done by request to the administrators.


14. Durov subsequently (August 2013) created, with the collaboration of his brother, the secure messaging application Telegram, in order to develop a means of communication that could elude surveillance of the
FSB (read Ksenia Ermoshina and Francesca Musiani’s article in this issue).


17. I did not anonymize public figures and very public cases. In addition, the individuals and their lawyers have appealed to the European Court of Human Rights.


20. Existing literature has well-documented Russian state-sponsored vigilante groups: Gabdulhakov, 2020, 2018; Favarel-Garrigues, 2020.

21. Lawyers of this association based in Kazan are handling the digital freedom violation cases.

22. The Russian Government Anti-Extremism Center (Center E) was created on 2008 and is involved in monitoring of the digital domain.


25. Some works concern 'bots' on Russian Twitter (Stukal, et al., 2017).

26. About the distinction between social privacy and institutional, see Raynes-Goldie, 2010.


29. These findings align with Lokot’s (2018) recent study of Russian urban political opposition activists.

References


Social media and state repression: The case of VKontakte and the anti-garbage protest in Shies, in Far Northern Russia


Appendix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>VK group</th>
<th>Reason given by VK</th>
<th>Where</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 2018</td>
<td>Group dedicated to the organisation of joint days of action of 2 December 2018 (<a href="https://vk.com/protest212">https://vk.com/protest212</a>)</td>
<td>Charitable fund-raising against the rules</td>
<td>Arkhangelsk region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 February 2019</td>
<td>“Pomerania is not a dump!” (<a href="https://vk.com/pnp_arh">https://vk.com/pnp_arh</a>)</td>
<td>Charitable fund-raising against the rules</td>
<td>Arkhangelsk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 March</td>
<td>“We are against the import of garbage into the Arkhangelsk region” (<a href="https://vk.com/club170116381">https://vk.com/club170116381</a>)</td>
<td>Charitable fund-raising against the rules</td>
<td>Koriajma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31 March</td>
<td>“Pomerania is not a dump!” II</td>
<td>No explication (no funds had been collected)</td>
<td>Arkhangelsk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First days of April</td>
<td>“Pomerania is not a dump! Plesetsky District” (<a href="https://vk.com/wall-78268077_6284">https://vk.com/wall-78268077_6284</a>)</td>
<td>No explication</td>
<td>Plesetsky District (200 km. from Arkhangelsk)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“We are against the landfill in the Lensky district!” (20,000 Suspicious</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Type of lawsuit or conviction</td>
<td>Reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 April</td>
<td>members)</td>
<td>fund-raising</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(<a href="https://vk.com/svalka29urdoma">https://vk.com/svalka29urdoma</a>)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 April</td>
<td>“Defend Shies! Let’s Save the North!” (created after the previous one was deleted, 6,000 members) (<a href="https://vk.com/club177894418">https://vk.com/club177894418</a>)</td>
<td>No explication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Cases of legal repression of inhabitants in Arkhangelsk region for ‘disrespect’**.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type of lawsuit or conviction</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18 June 2019 (police report)</td>
<td>Dmitry Popperek (electrician, 47 years old)</td>
<td>The prosecutor’s office did not carry out any interrogations or other investigative actions. The district police called Popperek to “come for a chat”. The assistant prosecutor wrote Popperek once in VKontakte to delete one comment. Print-outs of hundreds of Dmitry’s posts were attached to the case. During the investigation his VK page was closed.</td>
<td>Popperek criticised Orlov and Putin in several publications in four Kotlas groups dedicated to city life, from April to June 2019.</td>
<td>The regional (Arkhangelsk) court closed the case on 26 July.</td>
<td>Kotlas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Fine</td>
<td>Comment</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 June</td>
<td>Svetlana Baksheeva (saleswoman)</td>
<td>400 euros</td>
<td>A comment in group “Overheard in Kotlas” (56,231 members) on regional governor Orlov.</td>
<td>Kotlas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early July</td>
<td>Svetlana Baksheeva</td>
<td></td>
<td>A comment against deputies who authorised the landfill project (she called them “idiots”).</td>
<td>Kotlas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2019</td>
<td>George Minyaev (had visited the Shies camp in May 2019)</td>
<td>200 euros</td>
<td>Video posted in May 2018 (i.e., before the law was promulgated) in which Putin drives a truck on the bridge linking the Crimea to Russia during its inauguration without having fastened his seatbelt. The villager commented and called the president an “idiot”.</td>
<td>Avnyuga, a remote village, 200 km. northwest of Kotlas (1200 inhabitants)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Editorial history**

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