

THE BATTLE FOR KUSHTAU: SAVE-SHIHAN'S USE OF TELEGRAM AND VKONTAKTE TO ASSERT ENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS, EVOKE PATRIOTISM AND COMBAT FOREIGN INTERESTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how an environmental organisation in Russia, Save-Shihan, uses social media to construct its claims during grassroots mobilisation and compares the use of two platforms throughout this process. It also analyses how Save-Shihan constructed its claims during the mobilisation against the mining of a sacred hill (Kushtau) in August 2020, and compares its use of Telegram and Vkontakte (VK). The former platform stands against state censorship, whilst the latter was then owned by a Kremlin-friendly oligarch. The findings demonstrate that Save-Shihan employed the regime's narrative on acceptable mobilisation by presenting its claims as patriotic, legal and legitimate. Additionally, throughout the mobilisation both platforms were used to bring visibility to the conflict, coordinate activity, elevate local voices, display solidarity and for educational purposes. However, following the state's temporary blocking of Save-Shihan's VK account, the content posted there differed to Telegram, which resulted in some significant differences between the platforms' uses. The implications of this study are threefold. Firstly, it is empirically relevant because it provides insight into how the unclear boundary between state sanctioned and unsanctioned mobilisation is navigated during mobilisation and the framing of its aims. Additionally, although Save-Shihan is one group, it was part of a larger mobilisation process which ultimately was successful, meaning other groups can learn from this case. Secondly, it demonstrates that whilst VK and Telegram were broadly used for similar purposes, there are some significant differences. This contributes to the literature on Russia's social media landscape and shows that a platform's relationship with the state, and the state's actions in relation to it, influence how activists perceive and use social media during mobilisation. As will be later established, in the context of an increasingly repressed digital sphere, such differences are likely to become more important for activists. Lastly, this study brings visibility to an active and less-studied dimension of Russian civil society: grassroots mobilisation and informal organisations.

INTRODUCTION

To gain an understanding of Save-Shihan's activities, the introduction will firstly present the events surrounding the conflict; secondly, it will outline the context that civil society organisations and mobilisation operate in Russia; thirdly, it will highlight the impact of the government's increased control over the digital space and social media platforms.

The Shihans are ancient coral reef formations, which are estimated to be 200 million years old, and they are composed of limestone; the raw material used in soda production (Yagodina, 2020). The Shihan hills are geologically, archaeologically and biologically unique and historically and spiritually significant to the Bashkir people (Asafyev, 2015). Kushtau is one of three remaining Shihan hills located in Bashkortostan; there used to be four, however, Shakhtau has been destroyed by mining (Yagodina, 2020).

Bashkortostan is Russia's leading producer of baking soda, and Bashkir Soda Company (BSC) is the largest producer of calcified and baking soda in the country (BSC Chemicals, 2022). The Kushtau conflict was triggered by BSC's search for a new source of limestone. Originally, the company wanted to mine a different Shihan; however, it was legally protected, so, as a compromise, the region's governor, Radiy Khabirov, offered Kushtau in 2018 (Pavlova, 2018). This was heavily criticised and in December 2018, a petition with 35,438 signatures, addressed to Putin and Khabirov, demanded that Kushtau receive a protected status (Kashapova, 2018).

The conflict escalated in August 2020, when BSC's partner company started to cut down Kushtau's forest illegally (Yagodina, 2020). Residents set up a camp on the 4th August to prevent workers and equipment from accessing the forest

(Yagodina, 2020). Following this, Kushtau's defenders experienced detainments, as well as numerous instances of pressure from the police, BSC's private security, paid provocateurs and OMON, a special police unit tasked with a range of responsibilities including riot policing (OVD Info, 2020). On the 16th August, Khabirov declared that all work on Kushtau must stop until a compromise was reached (Yagodina, 2020).

Kushtau's events reached the federal level and the Russian President Vladimir Putin demanded that the General Prosecutor's Office look into the legality of BSC's privatisation (Gordeev and Burmistrova, 2020). Putin claimed that, due to the government's reduced stake in BSC, its priorities had changed and now it served as a means to enrich offshore benefactors (Gordeev and Burmistrova, 2020). Ultimately, BSC was nationalised in December 2020 because its privatisation was deemed unlawful, and Putin gave Bashkortostan a 50% controlling stake in the company (Tadtaev, 2021).

This conflict reflects the observed trend of growing environmental awareness and activism in the country (Davydova, 2021). A 2020 survey of Russians from across the country found that 35% of its respondents would be willing to participate in an environmental protest (Myhatemshina, 2020, in Davydova, 2021). This figure should be viewed in light of the direction that state-society relations have taken over the last 20 years. Russia's government has employed legislative, institutional and discursive methods to increase its control over civil society activity (Stuvoy, 2020). However, this has been an uneven process and civil society activities operate in different contexts depending on how the regime views it (Freik, Yakovleva and Bakhmi, 2019). Specifically, collaborative relations have been promoted with organisations that align to

regime interests whilst repressing those that threaten it (Gilbert, 2016). A similar trend can be observed when it comes to mobilisation activity. A key mechanism employed in the division between acceptable and unacceptable activity have been the passages of the 'Foreign Agents Law' (2012) and the 'Undesirable Organisations Law' (2015). The former requires organisations that participate in the loosely defined sphere of 'political activity' and that receive funding from abroad to register as a 'foreign agent', and the latter permits the Prosecutor's office to close organisations that it deems as threatening (Russell, 2022). This has stigmatised and delegitimised organisations that are labelled 'foreign agents' as they are viewed to act on behalf of a foreign, in particular Western interests (Stuvoy, 2020).

Additionally, following the 2011-12 anti-regime protests, the state adopted a nationalist framework which constructs the definition of Russian values and determines the types of activities that are permitted in accordance with them. This has entailed expanding the role of the Orthodox Church and promoting traditional values, which has resulted in issues associated with western values being presented as a threat to the country (Stoeckl, 2012; Stoeckl, 2016). Therefore, issues such as human rights have been constructed to be values that emanate from the west and are not only unpatriotic but employed by the west to further its interests in Russia (Gilbert, 2016). The protests also pushed the state to pass legislative and institutional measures to limit the possibility of oppositional activity and unrest (Barbashin and Irisova, 2020). This has also been an uneven process and has led to a distinction between acceptable and unacceptable mobilisation, which is differentiated by the activity's position in relation to the state and its established norms which regulate the types of issues that are permissible to contest (Cheskin and March 2015). This has resulted in the systematic repression of political mobilisation, which threatens the state and its interests, but it is less effective in suppressing non-political, local protests because such mobilisation typically does not gain national attention (Barbashin and Irisova, 2020).

In this context, environmental organisations and activism occupy an unclear position. This is because whilst environmental organisations are the second most frequently named type of group on the 'foreign agent' list after human right ones (Plantan, 2020), many organisations operate on a local and informal level, meaning they have no relations with the state, and thus can operate with a greater degree of freedom (Plantan, 2022). Typically, mobilisation is uncritical of the regime and occurs on a grassroots level, so it is in response to local issues and unconnected to other movements (Davydova, 2021). However, the cause of mobilisation frequently is linked to wider political issues, such as bad governance or corruption, thus it can be misinterpreted as being motivated by political causes (Plantan, 2020). There is evidence that such mobilisation is often met with excessive force. In 2020 alone, the Socio-Ecological Union (2020) recorded 169 incidents of pressure faced by 450 activists across 26 regions. These included a murder of an activist, physical injuries, property damage and criminal and administrative cases (Social-Ecological Union, 2020). Nevertheless, research by Flikke (2021) suggests that due to the local nature of the activism, the use of excessive force is harder for the government to justify as it cannot employ the idea that mobilisation is coordinated and acting on behalf of foreign interests. Therefore, grassroots environmental activism occupies an unclear position in the limited space for state-sanctioned mobilisation and raises questions as to how the blurry boundary between acceptable and unacceptable activity is negotiated.

Social media is a tool that has transformed state-society relations, which serves both governments and activists interests alike. In non-democratic contexts, social media can facilitate

mobilisation and act as a space free from state control (Howard and Hussain, 2013; Tufecki, 2017). However, this space can also be co-opted by regimes to assure its stability by using it to monitor public grievances and intervening prior their escalation (Gunitsky, 2015). Additionally, social media may be used for repressive purposes to survey activists (Lokot, 2018). For context, Russia's digital space has come under increasing state control due to the role that the Internet and social media played in the 2011-12 anti-regime protests (Litvinenko, 2020). This has resulted in numerous institutional, legislative and ownership changes that have increased online censorship, surveillance capabilities and control over online spaces in terms of the information that can be accessed (Enikolopov, Makarin and Petrova, 2020; Soldatov, 2017; Vendil Pallin, 2017). Social media platforms have responded differently to these restrictive measures, ranging from non-compliance to compliance. Recent research highlights that social media platforms in non-democratic contexts become agents during mobilisation and different platforms' reputations amongst activists can influence the purposes for which they are used (Wijermars and Lokot, 2022). Notably, Russia's social media landscape is diverse as it is made up of both Russian and international platforms each of which have responded differently depending on the platform owner's relationship with the Kremlin and whether it is foreign or locally owned (Bodrunova, 2021). Russia's most popular social media platform, Vkontakte (VK), has complied with state restrictions, whilst Facebook and Twitter have partaken in 'silent disobedience' and Telegram has been involved in 'active resistance' (Bodrunova, 2021, p.4).

This article will focus on the platforms VK and Telegram, the latter of which until recently was owned by a Kremlin-friendly oligarch whilst the former is viewed to be against digital censorship and repression (Wijermars and Lokot, 2018). In fact, research on VK shows that activists assume their posts are monitored on VK (Maréchal, 2017) and in certain cases individuals have been arrested for posting or saving content that is deemed extremist (Wolfe, 2021). On the other hand, Telegram's founder Pavel Durov (also VK's founder until he was forced to sell his shares and flee the country) markets the platform as a secure messaging service that values user anonymity and privacy (Akbari and Gabdulhakov, 2019). In 2018, the app was banned in Russia because Durov refused to comply with the 'Yarovaya Law', which required Telegram to hand over user data and chat encryption keys (Goncharov, 2018). This act of defiance contributed to the app's credibility with protesters in authoritarian contexts, like Belarus, Hong Kong, Iran and Russia (Akbari and Gabdulhakov, 2019; Urman, Chung-Ting Ho and Katz, 2021; Wijermars and Lokot, 2022). Therefore, it is important to examine whether different platforms' responses to the country's repressed digital space mean that those platforms are used for different purposes during mobilisation.

This article seeks to fill a gap in research in terms of understanding how a grassroots environmental organisation navigates the unclear boundary between acceptable and unacceptable mobilisation. Furthermore, it seeks to understand whether platforms are used for different purposes during mobilisation due to their different responses to the country's increasingly controlled digital sphere. To achieve this, a case study is employed. Specifically, a grassroots organisation's framing of its claims and use of VK and Telegram during the protest activity against the mining of Kushtau will be analysed and compared. The research questions structuring this study are: a) How does a grassroots environmental group use social media to present its claims during mobilisation? b) What purposes are social media platforms used for during grassroots mobilisation? c) What are the similarities and differences between the ways these platforms are used?

METHODOLOGY

The data collected for this research was used in my undergraduate dissertation. A qualitative case study methodology was employed and the case was selected using a four point rationale. The Kushtau conflict was included in the Russian Social Ecological Union (2020) annual report and to identify the environmental groups involved in the conflict, newspapers were consulted and key terms were searched in VK and Telegram. From this, the group Сохраним шиханы Торатау, Юрактау и Куштау! (Save Shihans Toratau, Yuraktau and Kushtau, shortened to 'Save-Shihan') was found. It is an informal organisation that does not receive any funding and has been active since 2009. Save-Shihan's VK page was set-up in 2009 and at the time of research had 26,710 members. The Telegram channel was set up as an emergency measure on 5th August 2020 and, at the time of research, it had 1,734 subscribers.

To create a manageable dataset, Save-Shihan's social media posts from the three key periods of repression as outlined in the news articles were collected. The sample was made up of posts from the 5-6th, 9-10th, and 15-16th August 2020. All the posts from each day were analysed unless it was a video. This is because videos were excluded from the sample due to time constraints. However, if a video was part of a post that also included textual information and/or images, it was included in the sample but not analysed. Also, user comments were excluded unless Save-Shihan publicly re-posted an individual's comment. Therefore, the data was collected without engaging with Save-Shihan or its subscribers; instead, the focus was on the group's posts and reposts, which included textual data, photos, documents, reports and posters. In total, the sample was made up of 164 posts from VK and 516 posts from Telegram (see Figure 1).

To analyse the data, Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2014; 2017; 2019) reflexive thematic analysis approach was adopted. The analysis was conducted in the following way:

1. I read the posts from each day and platform in turn and I pre-coded the data by underlining words or circling images that seemed significant;
2. I read the posts again and translated them from Russian into English and assigned descriptive codes to the data which related to either the main action, meaning or information in the post;
3. I read the posts again and developed categories which contained different codes that were used throughout the data; these went beyond descriptions and were more analytical;
4. I created a matrix for each day, which contained the categories, their definitions and corresponding posts from both platforms. This allowed me to compare the categories across the whole body of data;
5. I refined the categories over the course of four more readings and re-organised the coded data by colour, which corresponded to the emerging themes;
6. I checked the boundaries and definitions of the themes across the data to ensure their suitability and links to the original data.

FINDINGS

Legal, Moral and Information Battle

Save-Shihan presented the conflict as if it were a battle, thus framing its claims as combatting illegality, immorality and dishonesty. Save-Shihan challenged the violation of environmental legislation and criticised the weak upholding of environmental protection by employing scientific knowledge and emphasising international norms. The group circulated

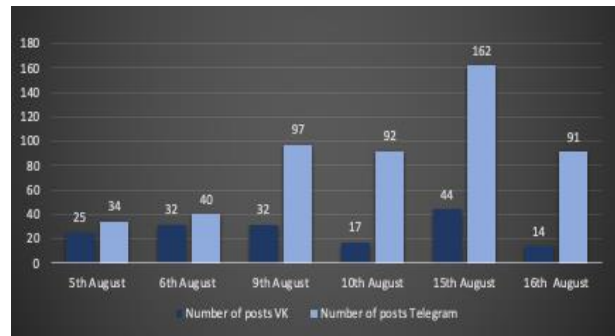


Figure 1: Breakdown of the number of posts per day by platform.

scientific reports that highlighted Kushtau's unique geological and biological properties and asserted the need to uphold and extend environmental legislation. Save-Shihan shared a quote from a report, which stated that: 'In current world practice, one does not come across instances of destroying unique geological sites for utilitarian use. Conversely, they are protected at all costs...' (saveshihan, 2020; save-shihan.ru, 2020). The group also emphasised Kushtau's international significance by naming groups that supported its conservation and likening it to other famous international monuments such as Uluru in Australia. Evidently such reports were initially dismissed by BSC who started work illegally with the support of local officials, and instead it was the activists who were criminalised. Additionally, as previously mentioned, despite all the other Shihans being protected and the local government being able to extend this status to Kushtau, it chose not to. This demonstrates the disregard of environmental legislation in favour of extracting cheap natural resources to further economic development. It also points to the underlying regime dynamic of political and business elites dismissing legislation to further their interests at the expense of wider societies (Newell and Henry, 2017). This can be interpreted as Save-Shihan constructing its claims by employing scientific knowledge to highlight Kushtau's environmental importance, offering an alternative to its mining and appealing to international standards to criticise authorities' inaction.

Furthermore, Save-Shihan utilised religious sentiments to present the activists' actions as moral and the BSC's and authorities' actions as immoral. Individuals' participation was linked to their moral standing, and it was claimed that inaction would follow them to 'Judgement Day', whereas those who participated were the few people who 'dared to protect the highest of values' by doing the right thing of defending Kushtau (save-shihan.ru, 2020). The activists' strength in spirit was emphasised as being more important than the security forces superior physical strength and that protecting Kushtau 'is a question of honour!' (save-shihan.ru, 2020). This was further compounded by presenting the security organs and BSC workers' honour, souls and actions as shameful. This idea of morality was particularly evident on the night of the attack on the camp (9th and 10th August) which was described as a 'real battle between Good and Evil' and the attackers were referred to as 'dark forces' (save-shihan.ru, 2020). The attackers were also described in animalistic terms such as 'oxen' (save-shihan.ru, 2020), thus presenting their actions as inhumane and reinforcing the idea of the activists' humanity and morality. In particular, the use of violence against a non-violent and peaceful movement can be viewed as further reinforcing the division between the activists and attackers. Research demonstrates that the use of violence can provoke a sense of injustice in the wider population and result in more widespread mobilisation on the basis of this sentiment (Shock, 2005, cited in Johnson, 2015).

The group also fought an information battle and combatted the omission of facts, disinformation and misrepresentation of the conflict in the mainstream media. There were instances when Save-Shihan uncovered information which BSC had been deceptive about and brought to the forefront their dishonesty. For example, Save-Shihan revealed that BSC had previously undertaken drilling work in prohibited areas, which undermined and delegitimised BSC's claim that the trees it had cut down on Kushtau, a protected land status area, was not in violation of the Forest Codex (saveshihan, 2020; save-shihan.ru, 2020). Furthermore, the group countered media misrepresentation by posting images, videos and livestreams of the unfolding events. For example, some mainstream media outlets did not report on the repression faced by activists; others accused them of being 'young skinheads' or being paid by BSC's competitors to take part in mobilisation (saveshihan, 2020; save-shihan.ru, 2020). Rumours also accused the group of collecting money, which they did not, and the group interpreted the allegation as an attempt to get them banned (saveshihan, 2020; save-shihan.ru, 2020). This demonstrates how social media was used to bypass traditional media and to build trust with the wider public by posting live and visual content (Lokot, 2018), whilst simultaneously being used to undermine the mobilisation and spread false information.

Linking Environmental Protection to Patriotic Duty

Save-Shihan framed its claims by linking environmental activism to patriotism by using national and regional historical memory. The group employed World War Two (WW2) rhetoric to link its local claims to the nation's shared historical memory by reminding people that their ancestors had fought and sacrificed themselves for this land: 'for what reason did our fathers and grandfathers fight and die for? Injured and tired they returned to the motherland and fell to the foot of their hill and gained strength... we will not shame our fathers and grandfathers, we will protect the hill!' (saveshihan, 2020; save-shihan.ru, 2020). From this, it is evident that the defence of Kushtau is associated with respecting their ancestors' actions in WW2 and linked to displaying true patriotism and heroism. During a standoff between authorities and residents at the start of the conflict, Kushtau's defenders chanted 'FASCISM WON'T PASS' (saveshihan, 2020; save-shihan.ru, 2020). This is interesting to consider in relation to the regime's ideology, which has politicised WW2 and given Russia's past a mythical quality (Domanska and Rogoza, 2021). In this context, Save-Shihan's use of WW2 to present its claims frames them as being legitimate and within the boundaries of the regime's ideology that categorises mobilisation on the basis of patriotism as acceptable and everything that threatens this as not. It also creates a distinction between protesters' actions as being heroic and justifying their actions on the basis of defending their motherland, whilst deeming oppositional actions as unpatriotic.

Furthermore, the group used the region's history to link the Bashkir identity to the conflict which connects the protection of Kushtau to the preservation of regional identity. Save-Shihan shared legends and people's personal relations to the Shihans to highlight Kushtau's sacred and cultural importance to the region and the need to protect it for future generations. The legends have been passed down generations and speak of the Shihans mythical qualities and emphasise that the destruction of Kushtau would 'start discord amongst people' (save-shihan.ru, 2020). Also, the destruction of the Shihan Shakhtau is used as a visual foreshadow to the destruction that Kushtau would face and the irreversibility of such actions. The campaign and protesters' chants were based on the idea that Kushtau needs to live, thus anthropomorphising the sacred hill and linking its survival to the continuation of the region's cultural identity. This was further displayed on 9th August, when people from across the region joined together in a flash mob and

formed a three-kilometre-long human chain, which was united by the display of the region's flag.

In contrast, BSC's foreign connections were emphasised, and its outdated production methods ridiculed. BSC's main shareholders live abroad, so Save-Shihan's posts criticised the oligarchs enriching themselves on local land, which negatively impacts locals and regional development. BSC was also frequently referred to as 'thieves', whilst the defenders were presented as the narod (people), thus entrenching the idea of a foreign interest threatening locals. It also soon became apparent that BSC's partner that oversees the extraction process and supplies the raw materials has links to the largest cement production company in Germany. This led to outrage on the basis that 'in Germany nature is highly valued and they like cleanliness, but our regional leader with a stroke of a pen gave away our Kushtau to be devoured by the Germans' (saveshihan, 2020; save-shihan.ru, 2020). This plays into the idea that foreign interests are prioritised over local and links to the wider regime narrative that presents the idea of foreignness as threatening.

Additionally, BSC's production techniques were challenged by appealing to the international discourse on climate change, highlighting the irony of Kushtau being destroyed to produce carbon dioxide, despite its clear overabundance, and the way this counteracts the global effort to reduce emissions (SaveShihan, 2020; Save-Shihan.ru, 2020). It also highlighted the need to adopt modern production practices, which would mean that alternative sources of carbon dioxide could be used. While this claim was aimed at BSC, it can be interpreted as a wider critique of authorities' bad governance and lack of commitment to environmental protection. This critique points to the tension between using BSC's foreign links to present it as a threat, thus proliferating a negative understanding of foreignness, yet also relying on climate discourse to support its claims. This unveils the extent to which ideas relating to foreignness are rhetorical tools used to provoke a reaction in people and justify action.

Use of Law and Institutions

Save-Shihan used existing legislation to clarify the boundary between legal and illegal action and used institutional weaknesses to its advantage, thus presenting its claims within the parameters of the legally available claim-making mechanisms. Notably, the group used the law to educate individuals about their rights and to highlight their selective application. For example, Save-Shihan's shared materials by OVD-Info, an independent human rights project which has several functions like providing legal assistance and advise, and posted information on what an administrative detainment is, also offering tips on how to act if detained. Furthermore, the group shared information on the right to conduct single pickets and how to do so within the boundaries of the law. By circulating simplified information on complex legal situations, Save-Shihan helped to empower citizens to assert their rights in a legal way and points to the mechanisms in place to support individuals in the case of the violation of their rights. Additionally, the group highlighted the uneven enforcement of law by posting information on BSC's two counter-mobilisations that violated Russia's protest legislation, although this was 'unlikely to catch the police's attention' (save-shihan.ru, 2020). This is contrasted with the repression that activists faced and clearly shows the selective application of legislation by authorities. Therefore, the group's posts demonstrate the duality of the legal system and the selective enforcement of laws depending on where authorities' interests lie. Also, by sharing simplified information on how to legally assert one's rights and what mechanisms are in place to support them if violated, it defines the unclear boundary between

legal/illegal action, thus potentially empowering people to act within the remit of the law.

Furthermore, Save-Shihan used institutions to its advantage by challenging them to fulfil their function and highlighting their inability to do so. The group urged subscribers to contact various local and federal governmental bodies, outlining step-by-step processes on what to do and to say. For example, activists contacted local and federal prosecutors, various investigative committees and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, amongst other governmental and legal bodies. Interestingly, even though the Council for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights (a government body) proposed a resolution and appealed to security structures not to use force against citizens, it had no enforcement power. This points to the impact that the centralisation of power in the president has had on institutions over the last 20 years and resulted in their near-total weakening of institutions (Gel'man, 2014; Sakwa, 2010). As mentioned earlier, Putin himself ultimately intervened in the resolution of Kushtau, which illustrates the degree of hierarchy and institutional inefficiency as this is an issue that should have been resolved on a regional level.

Finally, Save-Shihan effectively used the repression faced by activists to gain widespread support and condemnation of security organs' illegitimate actions. This was done by showing images and videos of people being beaten and intimidated by provocateurs and security forces, as well as by appealing to the *narod* to come and support them (save-shihan, 2020; save-shihan.ru, 2020). This resulted in widespread outrage and support for the movement ranging from local and federal political elites, famous figures and citizens across the country who condemned the violence (save-shihan, 2020; save-shihan.ru, 2020). This illuminates Flikke's (2021) point that it is much harder for the government to justify the use of violence if ordinary people participate in mobilisation as it challenges the idea that it is coordinated to further foreign interests. The use of visual imagery of locals supports this and demonstrates how Save-Shihan constructed its claims by using the illegal actions against Kushtau's defenders to gain support for its actions.

VK and Telegram Purposes: Similarities and Differences

In total, there were five overarching purposes both platforms were used. These were to bring visibility to the conflict, coordinate activity, elevate local voices, display solidarity and educate individuals. Within these, there were some significant differences and this is likely due to the state's temporary blocking of Save-Shihan's VK account between the 9-10th August, after which the group became more selective about what information it posted there. Also, some of Telegram's specific features (e.g. anonymous posting, quick and easy transfer of information from different groups, channels and people) meant that it was a better space to share certain information.

Both platforms were used to bring visibility to the conflict, which entailed providing updates, warnings and sharing visual content. This corroborates wider digital activism literature which emphasises social media's role in bringing attention to issues and bypassing traditional media channels to disseminate information (Surzhko-Harned and Zahuranec, 2017; Tufekci, 2017). Save-Shihan notes that it created its Telegram account as an emergency measure, which can be viewed in light of Lokot's (2016) findings on the tactical use of platform diversification to ensure that, in the case of state blocking, other platforms remain accessible. Both platforms had been used in similar ways until the blocking of Save-Shihan's VK account, which coincided with the attack on the camp, the night of 9th August. That night, only on Telegram were the attackers and security forces referred to as 'animals', amongst other derogatory terms, and information was shared regarding

provocateurs being armed and wearing white ribbons to trick people into thinking they were defenders (save-shihan.ru, 2020). Following that night, the content on Telegram became far more critical of BSC and authorities and Save-Shihan's posts on VK became more selective. For example, statements regarding the illegality of BSC's counter-mobilisation and updates on who was detained and where they had been taken were only shared on Telegram. By 16th August, the posts on VK were formatted as a brief timeline of key events. The shift from VK to Telegram had significant consequences due to the difference in the number of subscribers between the two platforms at the time of research, with VK having 26,710, and Telegram 1,734. Based on the literature, it could be assumed that this is because Save-Shihan became aware that it was under surveillance and so became more selective about what it posted on VK, thus engaging in some form of self-censorship to avoid being blocked again (Bodrunova, 2021, p. 4).

Additionally, both platforms were used to coordinate mobilisation and communication between different groups of people. The group shared e-petitions and information on which authorities and institutions to contact, as well as maps with the location of mobilisation activity. Save-Shihan also acted as a link between detainees and lawyers as well as coordinating the camp's material and physical needs with the outside world. This provided different opportunities for people to get involved in mobilisation, which is seen to widen participation (Bode and Makarychev, 2013). Again following the night of 9th August, there was a shift in the information shared on Telegram. It was used to coordinate evidence of the bodily injuries sustained by activists in the camp, which was then passed on to information outlets like SOTA.VISION, an independent media outlet that reports stories by using videos and images shared by people at the location, and defence lawyers in Moscow (save-shihan.ru, 2020). Whilst the posts on both platforms called for people to participate, the Telegram posts were more explicitly aimed at mobilising people from beyond the region, such as this post which stated 'those who are free should come, tell people from other regions to come...' (save-shihan.ru, 2020). This is necessary to consider in relation to Telegram's usership which is predominantly located in Moscow and St. Petersburg (Deloitte, 2020) and comparatively more political and anti-regime to other Russian platforms (Goncharov, 2018), suggesting that Save-Shihan used it to coordinate activity beyond the local area and engage with more politically active people.

Furthermore, both platforms were used to display other people's solidarity with Kushtau's defenders by sharing images and videos of single picketers as well as evidence of support from political elites, public figures and other movements. Throughout the conflict, Kushtau's defenders were described as 'people from different ethnic groups, belief systems, political views, standing together to protect their homeland's nature' (Save-Shihan.ru, 2020). This can be interpreted as Save-Shihan attempting to present solidarity and support for mobilisation in apolitical terms by highlighting the diversity of actors supporting their explicitly environmental cause. An important difference between the two platforms is that only on Telegram were posts shared from people abroad supporting mobilisation. Additionally, only on Telegram were an English-language Instagram account and petition circulated, both of which were created to raise awareness about the conflict abroad. This is significant as it suggests that Save-Shihan purposefully avoided posting information on VK that highlighted international support and its desire to raise further awareness about it further afield. Based on the literature, this is likely tied to the stigma and potential dangers that groups face in the aftermath of the Foreign Agents Law. It can therefore be posited that Save-Shihan avoided posting on VK because it was aware that it was under surveillance and this could have resulted in the group

being delegitimised because of its international support or banned from the platform.

Moreover, while posts on Telegram highlighted the support of protesters from Minsk and Khabarovsk, there was no reference to this on VK. It can be surmised that this is because both protests were political in nature: the one in Minsk against the fraudulent re-election of Lukashenko (Walker, 2020) and that in Khabarovsk against the arrest of the region's governor, who was accused of murder and attempted murder (Roth, 2020). Therefore, Save-Shihan may have chosen not to post about this on VK as this could cause mobilisation to be viewed as political or anti-regime.

Both platforms were used to re-share posts that spoke about local people's relationship to Kushtau and the environment, to propose alternatives to mining Kushtau and to present information that is not in the mainstream media, thus providing a space to highlight local voices. This relates to the digital activism literature, which emphasises social media's role in bypassing traditional media and providing a space for individual expression relatively free from state control (Tufekci, 2017). One notable difference between the platforms was that, on the night of the attack, Save-Shihan's Telegram channel was used as a space to share information from other groups and channels to try and determine who the attackers were. This entailed Save-Shihan re-sharing anonymous posts and screenshots from individuals who had information. This corroborates the research by Urman et al. (2021) into the Hong Kong Protests, which found that Telegram played an important role in linking different groups and channels together into one community and highlighted the significance of local group's role in providing relevant on the ground information. This suggests that Telegram's features facilitate a particular type of information sharing and the formation of cross-community links, which can be useful when citizens need certain information that is not reported in the mainstream media.

Finally, both platforms were used for educational purposes, such as informing individuals about their legal rights and digital tactics. As the conflict unfolded, Save-Shihan started to increasingly post information about malicious digital tactics being used against Kushtau's defenders and how to combat them. The group's posts asserted that these tactics sought to provoke, manipulate and confuse individuals and they shared information on how to spot and deal with paid bots and individuals who engaged in overloading the 'comments' section with unrelated information (saveshihan, 2020; save-shihan.ru, 2020). There were also posts that brought attention to accounts that were offering protesters money, which were seen as attempts to delegitimise mobilisation by claiming that the activists were paid. This supports literature on non-democratic regimes' use of social media tactics to confuse users and, in this case, also delegitimise mobilisation.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings demonstrate that Save-Shihan constructed its claims by employing the regime's narrative on acceptable mobilisation to present its aims and mobilisation as legitimate and therefore within the boundaries of accepted claim-making. This entailed presenting the claims in binary terms, framing Kushtau's defenders' actions as moral, patriotic and legal, and communicating BSC's and the authorities' actions as the opposite. Whilst some of these strategies can be viewed as problematic because they mirror the state's rhetoric, it is important to view them within the context that mobilisation takes place in the country. Furthermore, VK and Telegram played crucial roles throughout mobilisation to raise visibility, coordinate activity, bring local voices to the forefront, display

solidarity and educate individuals. It is evident that whilst VK and Telegram were broadly used for similar purposes, there were some key differences. Notably, in the aftermath of the blocking of the VK account, the group became more selective about what content it posted and from this point there were clear differences between the two platforms' purposes. Notably, Telegram was used to connect with organisations and lawyers based outside the region, raise awareness about and support for the conflict abroad, and highlight support from political protesters. Telegram's features facilitated these connections, which allowed for local and unconnected groups to link together and connect to groups and organisations on a national and international level.

The implications of this study are threefold. Firstly, it provides empirical insight into how a group frames its claims during grassroots mobilisation in a way that carefully navigates the unclear boundary between sanctioned and unsanctioned mobilisation. This contributes to the existing state-society literature and can be practically utilised by groups to present their claims in a non-threatening way to the state, which is significant in the country's current political climate. Secondly, it demonstrates that, although VK and Telegram are generally used for similar purposes, there are some significant differences. This adds to the literature on Russia's social media landscape and shows that a platform's relationship with the state and the state's actions in relation to it, influences how activists perceive and use social media during mobilisation. In the context of an increasingly repressed digital sphere, such differences are likely to become more important for activists.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study and areas of potential future research. Firstly, the temporal criteria used to limit the sample can be challenged on the grounds that it is not representative. It is acknowledged that by selecting key periods of repression, there was more likely to be variation between the use of both platforms as this was an assumption that was drawn from literature. Nevertheless, the purpose of this study was to establish whether there were any differences between VK and Telegram use, which is an under-researched area, so it seemed appropriate to examine a time period with the most likely variation to establish whether there are any differences. Furthermore, the generalisability of the case study methodology can be questioned, as can the applicability of the findings to other cases. To mitigate this, assertions from the case have been founded in and corroborated by previous literature. Also, the purpose of this study is not to make generalisations but to draw informed assertions based on the data and literature. Another limitation is that only social media data was used, meaning that neither Save-Shihan, nor anyone involved in the conflict was contacted to be interviewed or corroborate the findings. This would have been a useful exercise but could have also caused unnecessary risk for the individuals in question due to the dangers associated with being an activist in Russia.

This study could be taken further by comparing it to a different environmental organisation's claim construction and social media use during mobilisation. From this the findings of this study could be substantiated or challenged. Overall, it is critical to continue to pay attention to environmental issues, grassroots mobilisation and digital activism, as these are sites of resistance, which lay the foundations for future mobilisation. In the context of the current oppressive regime these are necessary to study to understand the available opportunities for citizens to present claims and how social media is used to bypass the decreasing space for free online speech.

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