

Anti-Gay Vigilante Groups Face Backlash

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August 18, 2013



Occupy Gerontophilia leader Filipp Ryazinsky, left, greeting Maxim Martsinkevich, leader of Occupy Pedophilia.

The video begins with the camera pointed down at a paved path in a snow-covered park, the cameraman walking unsteadily forward. A rap song plays in the background with a telling refrain: "Beat up the gays! Beat up the gays!"

Soon, the action kicks in: A boy runs up behind another boy on the path and grabs his arms, pinning them behind his back. A third boy tells the victim, who was walking beside a man in a skull cap, to take off his hood. The stunned teenager is put into a chokehold.

"What were you doing just now?" barks 16-year-old Filipp Razinsky as the camera zooms in on the victim's face.

"Going for a walk."

"With who? How old is this guy?"

Passers-by approach to see what's going on, and the rhetoric quickly escalates. "Why did you come here?" the victim is asked, and: "Do your parents know you're here?" Then: "Do you know what the Bible says to do with gays?"

The answer, Razinsky says, is "to stone them," while others from behind the camera shout "to burn them."

The scene is from one of more than a dozen videos that have brought Internet fame to a group of teenage vigilantes called Occupy Gerontophilia, whose stated goal is to "reform" gay teens who allegedly offer their bodies to older men for money by bullying and shaming them on camera. The group's name offers a taste of the juvenile humor often employed in the videos — "gerontophilia" refers to a sexual preference for the elderly.

Bullying of LGBT teenagers is a worldwide phenomenon, with studies having shown gay teens to be at higher risk of suicide and depression due to mistreatment. But activists warn that the problem has been made worse in Russia by recently passed laws banning pro-gay "propaganda" among minors, saying the legislation implicitly gives a green light to vigilantes for such activities.

At least one official has drawn attention to the potential harm being done by the Occupy Gerontophilia group. Federation Council Senator Konstantin Dobrynin appealed to Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin and Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika over the matter earlier this month, saying a probe should be opened to determine whether the group's leader and members could be held criminally liable for "coercion to perform acts of a sexual nature." The charge carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison.

Social networking site Vkontakte has also been responsive to the increasing public outcry over the group's activities, blocking its official page. And the group's branch in Lipetsk recently attracted the attention of police, who last Thursday announced that they were looking into a video of a 17-year-old being taunted after agreeing to meet with a 22-year-old man.

But critics are wondering why it has taken authorities so long to respond, considering the group has been operating for nearly a year. Some say the belated response suggests that the official reaction isn't sincere.

"It's pure PR," former Pussy Riot lawyer Mark Feigin said by phone. "The fact that the perpetrators are minors makes it very difficult to prosecute them."

Feigin added that the criminal charge Dobrynin called for would likely not hold up in court.

Razinsky, the 16-year-old leader of Occupy Gerontophilia, has made the same point, saying it would be absurd to charge him with coercing a minor into a sexual act, as Dobrynin suggested, since he himself is a minor.

"They're claiming that I ... I'm 16 years old and I perverted a 17-year-old teenager," Razinsky said in a recent video addressing criticism of the group's methods.

The standard setup shown in the "interventions" is simple: One of the group's members, usually Razinsky, strikes up a conversation with a teenage boy on a social networking site, posing as an older man seeking sex for money. A meeting is set up with promises of cash, but

instead of meeting an older man, the teenager is met by a group of teenagers holding a video camera. They proceed to humiliate the boy, demanding to know what he was thinking when he agreed to the meeting.

The group's leader then attempts to "reform" the teen, asking him whether his parents are aware of his sexual orientation and threatening to call them and "out" him.

In one episode, Razinsky forces a teen to wear a t-shirt that reads "I'm gay and proud" while walking to the metro. Most of the episodes end with Razinsky asking the teen: "What are you going to do now to atone for your mistake?"

Psychologists have warned that the tactics used by the group could be severely damaging to the victims, most of whom seem eager to appease Razinsky and spend much of the videos looking down at the ground.

"The child is made to understand that he doesn't have a right to exist in this world as himself. That's the worst thing! He will gradually just disappear, and maybe even not so gradually," Oksana Orlova, a child psychologist, said in an interview with LifeNews.

Razinsky has said the group's goal is not to bully teens for being gay, but to reform young prostitutes who are willing to sell their bodies for money.

The young vigilante may be receiving encouragement from his parents, with his father having called the movement a "noble cause" in a recent interview with Ren-TV, saying it was for the greater good of society to shine a light on the problem of child prostitution.

The video cited by Senator Dobrynin as possible grounds for prosecution represented what many saw as the group crossing the line from bullying to something more sinister. In the clip, Razinsky tells the teenager at the center of an "intervention" that if he gives him oral sex, the video won't be published.

Razinsky has denied that he was serious about the offer, saying it was a joke that people took too seriously. The video has since been deleted from the group's website.

'Occupy Pedophilia'

While many find Occupy Gerontophilia's videos disturbing, they're only the PG-13 version. The R-rated videos come from another, affiliated group called Occupy Pedophilia, which inspired the creation of Razinsky's group.

While Occupy Gerontophilia purports to target "gay teen prostitutes" in an attempt to reform them by "ruining their lives," Occupy Pedophilia goes after alleged pedophiles — and the various branches of the group don't usually limit themselves to verbal questioning.

The group is the brainchild of a neo-Nazi who goes by the nickname Tesak, or Slasher. Tesak, whose real name is Maxim Martsinkevich, first gained notoriety in 2007 after being convicted of inciting hatred of ethnic minorities. At the time, he was a driving force behind the ultra-nationalist group Format 18, a militant branch of the National Socialist Society that assaulted immigrants and uploaded footage of the attacks to YouTube.

Tesak's tactics focus heavily on social media and sites such as YouTube to develop a following, and the numerous branches of Occupy Pedophilia sprouting up in the regions, including in Saratov, Tambov, Lipetsk and the Urals, suggest he's been successful, though it is unclear to what extent they coordinate their efforts.

Just as the videos' in-your-face style has made them go viral in Russia, the same quality has thrust them into the spotlight in the West. The videos have been accessible for more than a year, but they only came to the forefront after the anti-gay propaganda law gained media attention around the world in recent weeks. The groups' videos have now been cited by activists in the West as another reason to boycott "all things Russian," including Russian vodka and the Sochi Olympics.

Within Russia, however, Occupy Pedophilia has largely been left alone by law enforcement authorities, and it claims to have public support for its activities.

"People have completely changed how they see me. ... Earlier they saw me as a skinhead supporting Hitler, but now that I am fighting pedophiles it's all fine," Tesak says in one video.

According to Tesak, the group's efforts have led to prosecutions, an assertion that could not be confirmed. But judging by the videos, it appears that utter humiliation of the targets is the main goal.

One of Tesak's favorite rituals is to pour urine on the alleged pedophile, and in some episodes he tricks the target into drinking it. Whatever the tactic — be it "urine therapy" or making the alleged pedophile perform dances or pose with sex toys — the target is mercilessly shamed on camera.

The Occupy Pedophilia branch that operates in Kamensk-Uralsky in the Sverdlovsk region has been particularly brutal in its treatment of alleged pedophiles, so much so that they were said to have caused a young man to commit suicide after beating him and forcing him to drink urine.

The rumor stemmed from a V Kontakte post on their 19-year-old victim's profile that featured a photo of a coffin being lowered into a grave, which many took as evidence that he had committed suicide. The story was widely circulated before a Lenta.ru journalist reported that the man, who was targeted by the group after agreeing to meet with a 16-year-old boy, was still alive.

The legal age of consent in Russia is 16, meaning the man was not in violation of any law.

Although that victim did not apparently go to police over the incident, three other people targeted by the group did, according to Occupy Pedophilia member Mikhail Krasnov, who said he and two other members, Lev Vychurov and Daniil Andreyevich, now face assault charges that carry a sentence of up to two years in prison.

For Krasnov, as with many other members of both Occupy groups, "pedophile" and "gay" are often synonymous, fueling fears that the Occupy groups are using the stated goals of fighting pedophilia and prostitution to cloak homophobic motives.

"I believe that all homosexuals are pedophiles," Krasnov said in a V Kontakte message. He said

it was just a matter of "crossing a fine line," one that would inevitably be crossed.

Vychurov echoed that sentiment in an interview with Lenta.ru, saying: "We don't like homosexuals either. If I had it my way, we would just kill them, but the state doesn't allow that."

'Pedophile Lobby'

Searches conducted at the Kamensk-Uralsky group members' apartments on Aug. 1 revealed something more dangerous than loaded rhetoric: Police found various weapons, including nunchuks, meat cleavers, a baseball bat and daggers.

According to a police statement released after the searches, 11 people were victimized by the group and four filed charges, resulting in the criminal case against three group members.

Images of the three members taunting one of their victims have already made the rounds in Western media, with a story headlined "Russian Neo Nazis Allegedly Lure, Torture Gay Teens in Dating Scam" appearing in The Huffington Post and the New York Post, among other outlets.

When asked to respond to that allegation, Vychurov said the group targets only pedophiles who had been documented carrying out conversations of an "intimate nature" with children.

He said the country's legislation regulating pedophilia makes it incredibly difficult to prosecute pedophiles, leading to a situation in which ordinary citizens are compelled to act.

"There is a highly developed network of pedophiles in this country, at the very top of which are high-ranking officials, resulting in a very sophisticated pedophile lobby," Vychurov said in a Vkontakte message.

As shocking as the allegation sounds, it's a theory that has been voiced by senior officials as well, including Investigative Committee head Alexander Bastrykin. In May, Bastrykin told officials at a Kremlin meeting that there was "strong resistance in some arms of the government, some lobby or mafia that allows many child-abusers to receive a minimal sentence and even to avoid justice."

Children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov in 2010 speculated about the possibility of "a pedophile lobby that simply finances [opposition to bills strengthening legislation] and opposes their passage," Interfax reported.

Vychurov said in one video that the group had caught a man with connections to law enforcement who agreed to meet with a 13-year-old boy.

It was immediately after that "catch," he said, that searches were carried out at the group members' homes "in an effort to scare [them]."

The group members currently face charges of assault, but both Vychurov and Krasnov said police were trying to gather evidence to charge them with a more serious crime: forced actions of a sexual nature, which is punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

They say that charge could stem from an episode in which they made one target strip naked and do push-ups as they sprayed him with shaving cream.

Despite facing criminal charges, the group seems to have garnered a loyal group of followers, as they received enough money in donations to hire lawyers.

Police have warned against allowing citizen groups to handle something as serious as pedophilia.

"Whether or not a person is guilty [of pedophilia] and what sort of punishment that person deserves should be left up to a court to decide, not criminal figures like Tesak and his allies," Valery Gorelykh, a spokesman for the Sverdlovsk region police, said in a statement.

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