

NOT FOR PROFIT? YOUTH VOLUNTARISM AND THE RESTRUCTURING OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS IN PROVINCIAL RUSSIA

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Executive Summary

In Russia, youth are the subjects of an emergent nationalist-oriented cultural project. Via Kremlin-sponsored political movements, as well as via local voluntarism promoting projects, they are courted by Russian political elites. As the above quotation reveals, they are the site of significant investment and some of contemporary civil society's most visible players.

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“Russia needs a society brimming with love for the country, a civil society that would be such not only in name, but in status, that would do its job not just for money, but put its soul into efforts to right the wrongs” (Vladimir Putin, meeting with the leaders of the pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi, Thursday May 2006)¹

In Russia, youth are the subjects of an emergent nationalist-oriented cultural project. Via Kremlin-sponsored political movements, as well as via local voluntarism promoting projects, they are courted by Russian political elites. As the above quotation reveals, they are the site of significant investment and some of contemporary civil society’s most visible players.

A lot of media and scholarly attention has been devoted to the topic of the erosion of an independent civil society in Putin’s Russia. Accounts have tracked the ways recent legislation has sought to constrain the activities of non-governmental groups, and independent media outlets.² Dominant tropes are of shutting down, preventing, stifling – these metaphors emphasize the negative workings of Russian state power.

What has been less discussed is that this project is also profoundly productive. The Russian state is not only curtailing the activities of existing structures, but it has devoted considerable energies and funds into bringing new ones into being. Since 2004, the federal government has created an elaborate new infrastructure of grants and funding; simultaneously, it has put considerable sums into sponsoring the creation of new civil society organizations and

¹Reported by ITAR-TASS, 5/18/06, accessed via EastView database 8/12/06

² See for example “Russian Civil Society will find it Harder to Breathe”, Liliana N. Porskuryakova, YaleGlobal 8 December 2005, http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display_article?id=6607 (accessed 3/13/07); a five-part NPR radio broadcast series by Gregory Feifer that aired in March 2007, entitled, “What Happened to Russian Democracy?”

movements. Youth have emerged as a particularly important site of these civil society interventions.

Particularly since the 2004 “orange” revolution in Ukraine, youth have been targeted for involvement in not only political, but also in volunteer-run civic projects. This move towards targeting youth is very visible at the national level; since it was founded in 2005, the pro-Kremlin youth movement *Nashi* (Ours) has captivated the media. At the same time, regional politicians have set up youth voluntary organizations in the regions. In ways that recall the Soviet era youth organization, the Komsomol, Russian politicians offer “voluntarism” as a means by which to morally educate (*vospitivat’*) youth, here, cast as a “patriotic education” (*patrioticheskoe vospitanie*).

In this Working Paper, I report on the findings of a pilot research project that has two main goals: (1) to study the logic behind the promotion of youth voluntarism projects in Russia; and (2) to explore these projects ethnographically. It is based on library-based research and a pilot collaborative research project conducted with scholars and students associated with the Center for Gender Studies and Women’s History at Tver’ State University. In engaging youth, this research provides insight both into young peoples’ understandings about voluntarism, politics and social responsibility, and into the new civil society organizations taking shape as international donors withdraw. In so doing, it provides valuable knowledge about emerging welfare regimes and the recreation of citizenship and state power in Russia.

Civil society: a slippery signifier

In July, 2005, President Vladimir Putin stated in the context of a meeting with human rights activists that he “(absolutely) object(s) to the foreign funding of political activities. No self-respecting state would allow it, and we won’t either”. In this same meeting, he made another curious declaration, “we have our own sources”. I was in Tver’ at the time, and the statement seemed absurd to my Russian civic activist informants and I. To people who had spent the best part of the last decade working outside the state, and latterly, who had been struggling to persuade local officials of the importance of the work of independent civil society organizations, this statement just did not ring true.

During the nineties, it was uphill work to get local officials to pay any attention to the work and activities of local non-governmental groups. Encouraged by the training they received from agencies such as the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Institute, they and other activists and civic groups sought to encourage local officials into forms of partnership and collaboration. Foundation-sponsored literatures encouraged them to envisage a cozy tripartite relationship between three sectors - the state, the private sector and civic organizations.³ However, *vlast*’ (members of the authorities) remained mostly aloof. There was very little support available for local non-governmental groups and activists had to work hard to cobble together even temporary alliances that would allow them to work. Which resources was Putin talking about?

Retrospectively, however, I came to see that Putin’s declaration was true to processes in motion. By 2006, the field had radically changed. Federal and regional authorities began to

³ For example, this is apparent in the model of the third sector. The term refers to a realm of informal groups or NGOs. It derives its name from its role in a triad, where the first is the state, the second is the private sector, and the third is the realm of citizens’ initiatives (Hemment 2004).

offer their own alternative infrastructure for grants and funding and established their own grant-awarding foundations, designed to stimulate the formation of new civil society organizations. Putin's July 2005 comments not only mark a sea change in the attitude of Russian politicians and executive officials, but they draw our attention to some of the complexities and ironies of the current moment in Russia, also. In the name of civil society revitalization, two logics are simultaneously intertwined: existing civil society organizations and movements are constrained, while new civil society organizations are promoted. A brief chronological discussion of the concept of civil society helps to contextualize these shifts.

The concept of civil society has been a key ideological signifier of the post-Soviet period. Classically defined as the sphere of public interaction between family and state, civil society came to mean that which was not determined by the Communist Party. It reemerged in the 1980s, popularized by Central European intellectuals as a means of expressing resistance to socialist states.⁴ The concept of civil society was central to the project of "anti-politics," an oppositional stance that opposed the socialist state by addressing the individual (Garton-Ash; Ost).

In the aftermath of the democratic revolutions of 1989, the concept of civil society came into a new vogue. Civil society now signified the triumph of capitalism and collapse of the

⁴ Following Garton-Ash, I refer here to the work of Vaclav Havel, Adam Michnik and Georgy Konrad to typify the civil society debates. While it would be problematic to homogenize their work, it can be seen to share a great deal and these authors were in dialogue with each other. See discussions by Garton-Ash (1990); Ost David Ost, Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990)., Gellner Ernest Gellner, Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals (New York: Allen Lane/Penguin Press, 1994)..

socialist alternative. In scholarly circles, the concept became something of a catchall. As Seligman put it, “it has been picked up in the West, used (and often misused) by writers on both the political right and the left to legitimize their own social programs and has entered academic discourse with a vengeance that is somewhat disquieting” (Seligman, 79). In the immediate post-Cold War period, scholars of democratic transitions came to regard civil society as a key ingredient of democratization.

Thus it was that during the 1990s in former socialist states, civil society became a project, something to be implemented (Sampson). Here, it was a distinctly ideological project; linked to the development of the market. Civil society was “central to western aid programs in Eastern Europe, linked intimately to privatization aid” (Hann and Dunn). According to Janine Wedel, the US Congress devoted \$36 million to support “democratic institution building” in Poland and other ex-communist states between 1990-91. By 1995, the US had obligated \$164 million to promote political party development, independent media, governance and recipient NGOs (Wedel, 85). Meanwhile the EU and private foundations also channeled funds to support NGOs and civil society.⁵

My earlier research (1997-2000) revealed to me the ways that Russian activists enthusiastically picked up the civil society concept to make sense of their work. These activists

⁵ Sarah Henderson’s study of western civil society aid to Russia maps these funding trajectories: in 2000 George Soros’ Open Society Institute-Russia channeled over \$56 million to NGOs, universities and other civic organizations; between 1993-2001 the Eurasia Foundation allocated almost \$38 million to the non-profit sector; between 1991-98 the MacArthur Foundation approved over \$17 million in grants to support civic initiatives in the former Soviet Union Sarah L Henderson, Building Democracy in Contemporary Russia: Western Support for Grassroots Organizations (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003)..

were mostly highly educated people who were struggling to make a living in the postsocialist period. They embraced the concept of civil society both because it resonated with their oppositional sensibility, and enabled them to articulate a new vision of a just social order, where people would pull together to make a difference (Hemment).

However, as they did so, they found themselves isolated. Although some individuals within the state apparatus were interested in this work and strove to support it, such initiatives were rare; Russian civic activists found themselves working mostly with the representatives of international foundations and donor agencies. Against their best intentions, their work remained largely misunderstood by most Russian people (Hemment 2004; 2007; Ishkanian 2003; Richter 1999; Sampson 1996; Wedel 1998).⁶

Beginning in 2001, the discursive field and political economic terrain began to change. In the aftermath of 9/11, the priorities of international donor agencies shifted. Donor states found themselves preoccupied with other missions in regions deemed more strategically important, such as post-Taliban Afghanistan and Central Asia. In Russia, at least, democratization aid began to peter out.⁷ To the consternation of many civic activists I was in dialogue with at the

⁶ As many scholars agree, the US and western European government-led project of civil society promotion had mixed outcomes. Though many successful initiatives were conducted, the project remained narrow and did not have broad legitimacy. Indeed, in the context of widespread dissatisfaction with the outcomes of democratic-oriented market reform (particularly after the economic crisis of 1998), many Russian people looked upon NGOs with hostility, and regarded them as self-interested and western focused.

⁷ While agencies cut back in Russia, they stepped up their investment in other formerly socialist states, particularly in Central Asia. For example, international support to Kyrgyzstan has not wavered; according to statistics cited by Noor O'Neill Borbieva, the US spent \$12 million on programs promoting democracy in Kyrgyzstan during 2004, and this increased to \$15 million in 2005 (Borbieva 2007).

time, many of the agencies, which were pivotal in promoting NGOs and civil society development scaled back their budgets, diverted their funds to new kinds of projects, or moved out of Russia altogether.⁸

As donor agencies began to withdraw from the project of civil society development, Russian politicians moved to appropriate the terrain and the concept. President Vladimir Putin began talking the talk of civil society shortly after assuming office. In November 2001, he initiated the first Civil Forum in Moscow. The stated goal of this meeting between civic activists and state officials was to bring about a public agreement to improve interactions between the state and NGOs. In his address, Putin spoke of his realization about the necessity for dialogue and partnership between the authorities and civil society. His statements echoed the message disseminated by international foundations and appeared to offer what civic activists had been waiting for, however, activists and international NGOs greeted them with considerable skepticism.⁹

Putin's civil society speak stepped up in his second term. He invoked the desirability of a strong civil society in his state of the union address, May, 2004, stating, "Without a mature civil

⁸ I do not wish to assert that funding was totally cut. Indeed, with the Russian Democracy Act of 2002, the Bush administration continued to direct funds to promote democracy in Russia. This act authorized \$50 million for democracy-building programs such as investigative journalism training and cultural exchanges. However, these funds have been redirected from the programs that were prioritized in the nineties. It could be that these reconfigurations effected women's groups disproportionately; certainly, funding to women's groups has drastically reduced since 2001.

⁹ During his address, Putin countered charges that the forum represented an attempt to impose civil society from above, insisting, "[civil society] grows independently; it has its own roots and it feeds on the spirit of freedom".

society, there can be no effective solution to peoples' pressing problems." In the same breath, he spoke out forcibly about existing NGOs, denouncing some organizations whose goals, he claimed, are skewed by the fact that they receive funds from foreign or domestic foundations and serve "dubious groups and commercial interests", finishing memorably, "they cannot bite the hand that feeds them".

Between 2004-5, Putin introduced new legislation that threatened to have profound implications for NGOs; one bill proposed amendments to the tax code, and another sought to give authorities increased powers to monitor the activities and finances of NGOs.¹⁰ While the legislation influenced all non-governmental organizations, foreign NGOs were disproportionately targeted; these moves were clearly motivated by the desire to curtail foreign involvement in Russia in the aftermath of the pro-democracy "color revolutions" in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgystan (2005).

¹⁰ Legislation was introduced in late 2005; it was rushed through the federal Duma, and deputies had very little time to consider it. Representatives of both domestic and international NGOs were quick to rally against it, predicting that that it would have dire effects on third sector organizations. Democratic-oriented activists including former dissident Liudmila Alekseeva made Internet appeals for "democratic countries' to help prevent Russia from "sliding into the totalitarian past". The law "restricts those who may form an organization in the Russian Federation, expands the grounds on which registration can be denied, and enhances the supervisory powers of the state over them" (Bourjaily 2006). The law came into effect in April 2006, however its implications are as yet uncertain and it is still under debate. I should add that while the scholarly consensus – at least amongst western scholars – is critical of this legislation, there are dissenting voices. See for example Nicolai Petro, who writes against the commonly asserted argument that President Putin is destroying democracy, and who insists that the NGO legislation is not only reasonable, but that it is helpful to NGOs ("Russia Through the Looking Glass", *Open Democracy*, February 2006; http://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/russia_3259.jsp).

This constraining legislation was accompanied by a new boost of support for civil society institutions. In the fall of 2005, Putin founded the Public Chamber (*Obschestvennyi Palat*), a new body whose task is to facilitate relations between the executive authorities and civic groups. It performs a kind of *ekspertiza* (expert analysis), submitting recommendations to MPs about socially important legislation, and also acts as a kind of clearing house for federal funds, disbursing grants to officially registered (and approved) NGOs.¹¹

At the same time, Russian executive authorities in the regions began to disburse their own grants and funding to local organizations. The governor of Tver' oblast', Dmitry Zelenin has been extremely active in this direction. Shortly after coming to office in 2004, he founded a charitable foundation *Fond Dobroe Nachalo* (the Good Start Foundation), and several other lavishly funded civil society initiatives. These moves have been met with considerable skepticism both domestically and internationally. Commentators and long-term civic activists have raised concerns that the new NGO legislation would "stifle" independent civil society, and that Public Chamber appointments would be made on the basis of *loyalnost'* (loyalty to the Russian state).¹² Many long-term human rights organizations and activists refused to participate in the Public Chamber; they have condemned these moves as an attempt to create a docile set of

¹¹ The first grant competition was announced in 2006. While the majority of grants went to Moscow and St. Petersburg based organizations, the regions were represented too. Several Tver'-based organizations received grants.

¹² One third of deputies are selected by the president; this group then establishes how the remaining (regional and federal) deputies are to be selected. My Tver' informants were dismissive of the deputies, pointing out that many of them were people from show business - singers, sportsmen, or TV personalities, and that only a few had the appropriate credentials and experience as public figures or NGO representatives.

officially approved NGOs at both the federal and regional level– a “Potemkin village” as one of my more critical interlocutors put it.¹³

In sum, as international foundations withdraw from Russia, the concept of civil society continues to circulate. It remains an important ideological signifier in post-Soviet Russia, but it has taken on new meaning in the context of Putin’s project of national modernization. Under the auspices of this ideological project, the concept of civil society articulates a specific set of national security concerns: crucially, suspicion about western intervention in Russia and its near abroad, and about the influence of domestic oligarchs who also began to launch their own civil society projects in the late nineties.¹⁴ Once again, civil society is a project that has material components. It has brought into being a new infrastructure for grants and funding and facilitated

¹³ It is important to note that this state infrastructure of grants and funding is emergent and that its logic is not yet clear. Some of my Tver’ informants complained that they did not have access to information about grant competitions. They suspected grants would be awarded on the basis of political “loyalty” (to the pro-Putin party *Edinaiia Rossiia*, the administration, the President). Others felt more sanguine and assured me that grant competitions are published in the local and national papers.

¹⁴ It is important to note that this was a response not only to the activities of foreign actors, but to domestic ones, too. In the late nineties, some Russian “oligarchs” established their own civil society projects and set up their own foundations. The most notable example was the Open Russia foundation, founded by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, president of the giant oil company Yukos. It disbursed funds to a number of liberal-oriented organizations such as human rights groups. Some of them began to enter into alliance with foreign foundations; for example the British Charities Aid Foundation has worked with the Open Russia Foundation, and the Open Society Institute has also had close ties with it. In March 2006, the bank accounts of The Open Russia foundation were frozen, following the 2003 jailing of Khodorkovsky. Although he was officially jailed for tax evasion, his arrest is widely thought to have been politically motivated – as punishment for having provided funding to oppositional political parties and having entered political life.

the emergence of new civil society projects that Russian people (particularly long-term civic activists) strain to comprehend. Youth civic and political movements offer a particularly interesting window onto these processes.

Youth

“Many parties are unable to work out their own direction. There’s a vacuum, and many young people go towards extremism. It’s important for those in power to help young people understand history. I would like to see some sort of social contract between the state and young people. That is what is most needed” (Dmitry Zelinin, governor of Tver’ oblast).¹⁵

In the Putin era, youth have been newly politicized as a site of intervention by the Russian state. During the Soviet period, youth embodied both the hopes and fears about the new society; they were simultaneously viewed as the vanguard of the construction of communism, and as bearers of vestiges of the old, bourgeois order (Pilkington 1994:54). As such, they were targets of state policy and moral education (*vospitanie*) via the Komsomol (Communist Youth League). Beginning in 1918 when it was founded, right through to the perestroika period, the Komsomol engaged youth in a variety of educational and “voluntary” projects – construction projects, agricultural work – through the institution of the *subbotnik* (voluntary day’s labor).

¹⁵ Quoted by BBC journalist Tim Whewell in his July 12 2006 Newsnight report, accessed from the BBC website.

During the perestroika and immediate post-Soviet period, state investment in youth waned. Indeed, youth were regarded as “a social metaphor for a collapsing society” (Pilkington, 90). During this period, there was great consternation about the state and the status of youth and their moral health. They were considered apolitical, apathetic and problematically self-interested; in many ways, they were perceived to embody the negative elements of transition to a capitalist economy. However in the last couple of years, particularly since the “orange” revolution, the significance of “youth” has been reconstituted. As I have explained, they are now considered to be an important political constituency. Particularly in the build-up to the 2008 presidential elections, both oppositional and pro-Kremlin politicians look upon youth as an important resource and have invested in them heavily.

President Putin signaled this shift not long after assuming the presidency, with the founding of the youth organization Moving Together (*Idushchie Vmeste*). An estimated 10, 000 youth attended a pro-Putin rally on the one year anniversary of his inauguration as President. Their high profile activities--large scale centrally orchestrated youth rallies, reminiscent of Soviet era *komsomol* activities, but involving youth wearing Putin T-shirts--captured the attention of both the independent Russian and international media. However this interest in youth really escalated in 2005, in response to two key events: (1) the Ukrainian “orange” revolution; (2) popular resistance to social welfare restructuring in Russia that began in 2005.

The “orange” revolution in Ukraine caused a great deal of consternation in Russia.¹⁶ Many commentators in Russia viewed U.S. support of the pro-democracy demonstrators as a naked act of aggression. Significantly for this discussion, a majority of demonstrators were youth. The orangists skillfully deployed media technology to assert their message; they engaged other kinds of cultural production (rock musicians played their part, performing on Independence square and sustaining the youth participants). Clearly, the orangists were successful in articulating a project of national unity that was persuasive to young people. Until the spring of 2005, youth weren’t taken seriously as a political force in Russia. As Topalova puts it, they were seen as “socially marginalized, ideologically disillusioned and politically infantile” (Topalova, 26). The revolutions changed all that. Beginning in spring 2005, youth came to represent something different: a potential site of radical political activity to be captured, or contained.

The second impetus was the unexpected response to the new law on “monetization” (law 122). In 2004-5, the federal government embarked upon a complex restructuring of social assistance programs: starting in January, 2005, benefits to low-income people were “monetized”, that is, formerly free services were replaced by small cash payments; in violation of a Soviet era social contract, a new round of housing reform allows the state to evict those who cannot pay

¹⁶ The so-called “orange” revolution was a series of protests and demonstrations that took place in Ukraine during 2004-5 in response to allegations of corruption and voter intimidation during the presidential elections. These demonstrations led to a run-off vote, where oppositional candidate Viktor Yushchenko defeated the incumbent Viktor Yanukoviych.

their bills. These reforms met with a round of unexpectedly aggressive political opposition and large numbers of people – including large numbers of youth- came out on the streets in protest.¹⁷

Both events drew attention to (and stimulated the development of) a fluorescence of youth activism and political engagement. Library-based research has revealed an ideologically diverse array of youth organizations: in addition to the far right groups which claim a disproportionate amount of Russian media attention, there are leftist and anarchist groups that are specifically opposed to the economic policies in motion (Topalova). These transnationally-oriented groups have been involved in recent international anti-globalization meetings or Social Forums, and organized a Russian Social Forum in advance of the 2006 G8 summit.¹⁸ Other oppositional youth groups explicitly invoke the orange revolution – for example, the movements *My (We)* and *Idushchiye bez Putina* (Walking Without Putin) (Topalova, 31). Although they may be marginal at present, they have a significant web presence and have issued Russian and English language commentaries on the processes I am describing.

The Kremlin reacted swiftly and decisively. By 2005, it was possible to trace the contours of a distinct and broad-based cultural-educational campaign that seeks to instill patriotic and civic values in youth and, simultaneously, to prevent their involvement in oppositional “color” revolutions. This campaign is manifest in two projects that were founded during the

¹⁷ Beyond this, the legislation had powerful ripple effects and threatened party unity. According to some leftist sources, regional branches of *Edinaia Rossiia*, the pro-Putin “party of power” were split as some of their representatives refused to support law 122. Resistance to the law also gave rise to some surprising moments of unity amongst opposition parties; the union of right forces allied with the communist party in Vladimir oblast. For discussion of its aftermath, see for example www.avtonom.org/eng/news/benefits1

¹⁸ See for example Alexander Buzgalin and Andrey Kolganov, “Russia Awakes: Social Protest 100 Years after the Beginning of the First Russian Revolution” (www.alternativy.ru/old/articles/2005/o6/en/russia_awakes.html).

spring of 2005 - the founding of pro-Kremlin youth groups, such as *Nashi* (Ours) and *Molodaiia Gvardia* (Young Guard)¹⁹, and a federal program of “patriotic education”, directed at youth and school children.²⁰ The two projects have a great deal in common; both expressly focus on educating youth, and on inspiring them to undertake patriotic forms of civic engagement (Borsiak).²¹

This research has focused on the first aspect of this youth-oriented cultural project – projects to stimulate youth civic and political engagement. Tver’ has proven to be an excellent site for this case study. As previously mentioned, governor Dmitry Zelenin has been very active in founding civil society projects and he has placed specific emphasis on projects that target youth. He has founded two projects that claim to engage youth in philanthropic projects in support of the needy – *Fond Dobroe Nachalo* (The Good Start Foundation) and *Tsentr Dobrovolcheskikh Initsiativ* (The Center for Voluntary Initiatives). In 2005, Zelenin launched an even larger and broader scale project; *Vazhnoe Delo* (Important Business) is a “program” that

¹⁹ *Molodaiia Gvardiia* was founded in November 2005 at a rally in Voronezh. The group’s leaders included TV celebrity Ivan Demidov, who stated that the party’s goals were “identical” to those of *Nashi* (*Moscow Times*, November 17 2005).

²⁰ According to media reports, the program was allocated a budget of \$17.4 million for the period 2006-10. The program will provide support for summer camps, competitions, games and military training. Other, related aspects of this program include patriotic TV and films that specifically target youth. For discussion of patriotic programming, see David Gillespie’s “Defense of the Realm: The “new” Russian Patriotism on Screen”, *The Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, Issue 3, 2005 (<http://www.pipss.org/document369.html>). This analysis of post-Soviet TV and film explores “the evolution of attitudes toward the ‘new’ Putin-era reality where business and capitalism are condemned as helping the ‘enemy’ at the expense of the ‘Motherland’”.

²¹ The orange revolution is a frequent referent of *Nashi* campaigns and materials.

undertakes a number of charitable campaigns and actions, in support of the elderly, children and the poor. Beyond this, Tver' has served as a hub for the *Nashi* movement. In part due to its proximity to Moscow, in part due to the energetic involvement of the governor, Tver' hosted the first three *Nashi* summer youth camps at Lake Seliger (July 2005, 2006 and 2007). Thousands of youth from all over the Russian Federation were bused in to attend these educational/training camps.

Collaborative research with faculty and students at Tver State University has afforded me access to young people who have connections to *Nashi* and other youth movements. Indeed, the university is a very interesting and productive site for investigating these topics. During research trips in September and December 2006 I noted that the university building was littered with flyers and announcements from the youth divisions of local parties. Clearly it is a recruiting ground for political parties and movements. *Nashi* has held several events at the university, inviting students and teachers to attend. Several members of the research team told me that they had attended one or more *Nashi* meeting; others had volunteered in local groups. One student in the team is an active *kommissar* in the *Nashi* movement. His participation in the project facilitated insights and acquaintance with other movement activists with whom it might otherwise have been extremely difficult to connect.

***Nashi* as case study**

Nashi, the “Youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement”, was founded in March 2005 by Vasilii Yakemenko, the original founder of Moving Together. It is officially an independent

political movement, supported by private donations; however, it is widely regarded to be a Kremlin creation.²² Although its members are predominantly members of the first post-Soviet generation (aged between 16-22), its founders and ideologues are members of what Yurchak has called the last Soviet generation. If there is one thing that unites its actions and proclamations, it is its staunch and unflinching support for President Vladimir Putin and his political modernization project. *Nashi* exhibits the dual logic I have described; it uses the language of civil society both to stimulate and articulate new forms of activism, and to condemn existing (often foreign-identified) civil society formations. At the same time as it proclaims its goals to be productive – to train a new generation of leaders, and to engage them in the civic life of the country - it is clearly hostile to oppositional movements, and seeks to thwart any pro-western mass movements of the kind that took place in Georgia and the Ukraine.²³

Since *Nashi* was founded, it has undertaken a number of high profile mass events, mostly in support of the Kremlin, and always of a patriotic orientation. Its inaugural mass rally took place on May 15, 2005, *Den' Pobeda* (Victory Day). An estimated 60,000 youth from all over the Russian Federation marched in Moscow to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Soviet victory over the Nazis (or “fascists” as they are more commonly recalled). These youth dressed in *Nashi* T-shirts stopped the traffic and caused a media frenzy.²⁴ Since then, the movement has

²² □ Putin's 41 year old Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov is *Nashi's* main □ ideologist. Indeed, he has attended many *Nashi* meetings.

²³ According to the *Nashi* Manifesto, the movement has three goals: to maintain the sovereignty and values of Russia; to achieve the modernization of the country; the formation of an active (*deistvuiushchego*) civil society.

²⁴ Since *Nashi* was founded, both federal and local TV and print media have granted it a lot of coverage. See Borsiak 2005 for further discussion.

grown; it claims an active membership of ten thousand youth (and many more supporters) and has regional divisions all over the Russian Federation.

Nashi literature exhibits the same hybrid features I have described previously. It draws on the same terms, concepts and technologies that were disseminated by international foundations. Like many western-identified foundations, *Nashi* exhorts youth to participation in civic projects, and civic life. Unlike them however, they do so in the name of a distinctly nationalist and anti-western project. For example, *Nashi* promotes cultural tolerance (remember, it is an *anti-fascist* movement), however, at the same time, the portrait of the enemy is pronounced. *Nashi* clearly articulates what David Ost calls an “exclusionary form of solidarity” (Ost). Here, the enemy or “other” is a complex amalgam of undesirable forces: *Nashi* proclaims its goals to be to end the “unnatural union of oligarchs, anti-semites, Nazis and liberals.” It adopts a military rhetoric, both in its own organizing strategies (active members are “*kommissars*”), and in its descriptions of opponents (as “mercenaries”, who are in foreign pay). It uses the epithet “fascist” to express opposition to a wide variety of political foes – from National Bolshevik Party leader Eduard Limonov, to liberal democrat Grigory Yavlinsky.²⁵

Nashi organizing technologies reveal a similar fusion. Its summer training camps at once recall Soviet era educational strategies, and the summer schools launched in Russia during the

²⁵ While the National Bolshevik Party (NBP) is the main enemy for *Nashi* activists, they extend the epithet “fascist” to all of those who are deemed to be “sympathizers”, or who share a platform with (or who attend meetings with) the NBP. See for example the *Nashi* booklet, *Fashisty Vchera. Segogniia. Zavtra?* (Fascists: Yesterday.Today. Tomorrow?). In recent months, *Nashi* has escalated the frequency of attacks against Kremlin opponents. See for example the highly-publicized hounding of British Ambassador Brenton, and pursuit of Estonian diplomats in Moscow during 2006-7.

nineties by international foundations such as the Ford Foundation (schools on gender studies and human rights that were designed for young scholars).²⁶ *Nashi* brings “orange”-like technologies to political organizing; indeed, these techniques of mass action are specifically taught at summer training camps.

In *Nashi* mass meetings, as in the pro-democracy demonstrations in Kiev before, music plays an important role. At the *Nashi* rally I attended in Moscow on December 17, 2006, sound systems pumped out music as thousands of youth danced; Soviet war songs were mixed to a techno beat and young people danced and sang along to Soviet war-time slogans. Other campaigns include an element of street theater, and recall the strategies of anti-globalization movements: for example a “dollar falling” act (activists dressed as dollar bills fell down in the streets), a campaign against public alcohol consumption (activists dressed as pigs walked through the city, drinking beer and dropping cans and bottles on the streets, depicting the form of anti-social behavior they sought to protest).

We can read *Nashi* as a top-down project of extreme cynicism, as more evidence of the skillful manipulations of “political technologists” (*polittekhology*), that is the analysts and

²⁶ Indeed, following the standard practice of international foundations, *Nashi* invites potential participants to its conferences and events to submit scholarly abstracts on specific topics. This competitive system is extended to potential teachers as well as to youth participants. Of course, while the format is similar, the content is quite different. The *Nashi* Seliger 2007 recruitment poster I saw in the Political Science department at Tver’ State University invited teachers to submit abstracts for lectures on the following topics: “The Modernization of Russia”; “Russia – Global Leader of the 21st Century”; Sovereign Democracy”; “The Orange revolutions and their consequences”; “The Course of President Putin”; “The role of youth in the modernization process”; “The role of youth in the preservation and development of Russian statehood”; “Russia on the eve of a Great electoral cycle 2007-8”.

political advisors who work behind the scenes of Russian political life, and as an exemplification of what Andrew Wilson has called “virtual politics” (1).²⁷ Certainly, this is how *Nashi* is frequently discussed by skeptical commentators both in Russia and abroad. Critics draw attention to the involvement of the Kremlin, citing the vast amounts of money poured into the project and its campaigns and the public support of President Putin and other high-ranking Kremlin officials.²⁸ They also focus on the motivation of *Nashi* youth themselves: the purported lack of conviction of members; self-interest of active members (who receive gifts of cell phones and T-shirts, free trips and gain access to internships or higher education).²⁹

Many critics take exception to its organizing style and strategies. Let’s make no bones about it; it’s a highly controversial organization. Many of my interlocutors in Tver’, including those who were active participants in other official voluntarism-promotion projects distanced themselves from *Nashi*, referring with distaste to the lavish budgets it commands, to its “provocative terminology”, and dismissing it as “just PR”.

But one of my goals in this research has been to get behind the polarized rhetoric about *Nashi* and explore both its local manifestation and the meanings it holds for its participants. Although it clearly doesn’t do all that it claims, *Nashi* is much more than a virtual organization. The Tver’ branch claims 220 active members, and has several active *napravlenie* (directions, or

²⁷ Wilson’s analysis focuses on the role of political technologists in contemporary Russian politics. Although he doesn’t explicitly mention *Nashi* (his analysis predates the founding of the movement), his analysis is entirely appropriate to this movement.

²⁸ See for example Masha Lipman in the Washington Post, July 25, 2005 A19, “Preempting Politics in Russia”.

²⁹ *Nashi* has its own institution of higher education, the *Moskovskiy Institut Vyshaia Shkola Upravleniia*.

divisions) including an informational direction (working with the mass media), a mass action division, and a socially-oriented division. During the weeks I was in the city, I encountered several *Nashi* campaigns and actions, including a campaign prohibiting the sale of alcohol to minors, and a clean-up campaign.³⁰ Ethnographic interviews undertaken by student-researchers and myself have yielded valuable insight into the meaning of participation in this movement, and into the ways individual youth make sense of it. Here, I summarize some of the most interesting findings.

First, my interviews reveal that many young people are drawn to the movement, by its message of cultural tolerance. In Tver', as elsewhere, *Nashi* activists hold “*uroky druzhby*” (lessons of friendship) with foreign students, social events wherein they get to know each other, and share information and stories about culture and cuisine. This project both recalls Soviet internationalism (and the slogan of “*druzhiba narodov*” -friendship amongst nationalities) and the liberal democratic value of cultural tolerance. My interviews show that many young people are deeply concerned about ethnic intolerance; several students expressed their distress at recent hate crimes towards foreigners and people of other nationalities. Several members of the research team spoke with appreciation for this aspect of *Nashi*'s work.

Beyond this, it seems to me that one of its most compelling aspects is what we might call its “action component”. *Nashi* not only brings youth out on the street in large and lavish demonstrations, but it facilitates face-to-face meetings and opportunities for youth. Youth are

³⁰ I collected media reports on other local campaigns, including: “anti-fascist patrol” (a campaign which prevents the desecration of graves); “lesson in courage”, commemorating the 65th anniversary of Tver's liberation from fascist forces; a project that brought a “civic-patriotic” character to Valentine's Day.

often drawn to the movement by invitations to take part in conferences and educational training camps.

“It’s important for those in power to help young people understand history.” (Dmitry Zelenin)

A central component of the *Nashi* project is education, more specifically, a patriotically oriented education. This involves a re-visioning of Russian and Soviet history. Particular emphasis is placed on what one of my TGU colleagues called the “rehabilitation of the Soviet period”. Here, the perestroika and early post-Soviet period is represented not as a heroic, democracy-embracing epoch, but as period of national collapse, shame, and humiliation. In *Nashi* materials, Mikhail Gorbachev and the “pro-democracy” reformers who succeeded him are represented as either opportunists, or “*porazhentsy*” (defeatists). It is clear that this has resonance; fifteen years after the dissolution of the USSR, many Russian people are weary of hearing only negative accounts of the past.

This is particularly true for the first post-Soviet generation, *Nashi*’s constituency. *Nashi* materials address activists as leaders, as elite members of a promising new generation who can rejuvenate Russia. They encourage youth to draw inspiration from and model themselves upon their grandparents’ generation, the heroic generation that saved Europe from fascism. Indeed, *Nashi* campaigns frequently enact this move, by bringing young activists and veterans together. *Nashi*’s inaugural mass rally of May 2005 involved a group of veterans passing a baton of love and loyalty to *Nashi* activists. At the mass rally I attended on December 17 2006, the gift was

reversed: here, youth participants symbolically gave back the 1945 new year's holiday to a group of veterans.³¹

*“Russia needs a society brimming with love for the country, a civil society that would be such not only in name, but in status, that would do its job not just for money, but put its soul into efforts to **right the wrongs**” (Vladimir Putin)*

Nashi clearly presents itself as a corrective project. It seeks to “right the wrongs” not only by turning to history, but by addressing contemporary instances of injustice. In addition to targeting purported “fascists”, *Nashi* directs itself against politicians or people who they deem corrupt. *Nashi* brochures selectively focus their attention on local politicians and bureaucrats who are considered to be corrupt, or who have purportedly conspired to sell off the Motherland in concert with malign foreigners and foreign states. My interviews with *Nashi* members reveal that this aspect of ideology has deep resonance also. Youth (as other Russian citizens) have a deep sense of dissatisfaction with state bureaucrats and the new rich.

Beyond this, once again, the *Nashi* project has an “applied” dimension. Through its well-developed reward system, the movement offers activists a means via which to interface with local officials. Russian powerbrokers have been extremely attentive of *Nashi* events; top Kremlin officials, governors, and the President himself have attended *Nashi* events and granted *Nashi* activists audience, as has been widely reported.

³¹ On December 17, a purported 100,000 youth traveled to Moscow by bus and train, dressed in Santa Claus and snow girl suits. I traveled with the Tver’ contingent and received a return train ticket, packed lunch, instructions, and snow girl suit with the rest of my cohort. Each group of 100 was to meet with a group of veterans and present them with a New Years gift (returning what had been snatched by the Nazis in 1945).

Beyond this, active *Nashi* members are granted internships (for example, in the media, in the presidential or regional administration), and the opportunity to travel to attend meetings and conferences in other Russian cities.³² In all, the movement clearly presents a national network and infrastructure for professional development and upward mobility. This is all the more compelling at a time of uncertainty; in Tver', even university graduates struggle to find well-remunerated employment positions.

But *Nashi* offers its provincial members not only a path to upward mobility, but a venue to channel their energies and concerns about society, also. Like Moving Together before it, *Nashi* has a fairly prominent service component and active members are encouraged to participate in it. “*Dobrye Dela*” (good deeds) was a national campaign that invited *Nashi* members to contribute pledges of good works.³³ At the regional level, it appears that most *Nashi* branches have a social “direction”. In Tver', various socially oriented campaigns have included environmental clean-up campaigns, campaigns against public alcohol consumption, and in support of veterans.³⁴ This resonates with many activists, who formerly had no place to put their

³²I spoke with one *Nashi kommissar* who had recently completed an internship in the Tver' regional administration; interestingly, however, rather than feeling closer to the authorities, he was more disenchanted than ever and complained that they had not paid his proposals any attention. His internship had ironically confirmed his sense of the incompetence and inefficiency of local bureaucrats.

³³ I should note that this was a campaign to collect service *pledges*. While the results were compiled and published in a booklet, I have no insight into whether or not these pledges were enacted.

³⁴ Unlike the work of other voluntarism promoting projects in Tver' however, these interventions are highly selective. *Nashi* campaigns are not directed at the needy, but at distinct sectors of the population: veterans. And they are made using the language of the *Komsomol* (Soviet Youth League). *Nashi* activists interviewed during the

socially oriented energies. Concern about the lack of opportunities to work on social projects has been a frequent topic of my conversations with Russian youth over the last few years.

In sum, at the same time as it is undoubtedly a top-down project, the work of sophisticated political technologists, *Nashi* does have considerable purchase on its participants. The movement appears to be a site where youth can imagine and envision their role and potential contribution to society, and position themselves vis a vis the authorities. My interviews with *Nashi* participants revealed their passionate engagement in its stated goals. One *Nashi* member spoke with great feeling about the need to work to resolve social problems, such as alcoholism, social irresponsibility, and garbage on the street, and expressed great concern about the ostensible rise of fascist groups. In his view, *Nashi* was working honestly to resolve these issues.

Conclusion

This research offers a valuable window into contemporary redrawings of civil society in Russia. As western foundations scale back their operations in Russia, the terms, concepts and technologies they disseminated (civil society, social partnership, tolerance) remain and continue to percolate. In recent years, democratic discourse has been consciously appropriated and deployed by Russian politicians in the name of a new, patriotic, anti-western and ostensibly anti-capitalist alternative. It is a complex borrowing that has a lot to do with national security

project use the terms *sotsialki* and *subbotnik* to describe their work, and eschewed the other terms I offered, such as “*blagotvoritel’nost’*” (charity).

concerns, particularly concern about foreign involvement in Russia's near abroad. This research maps this appropriation and the passage of these discourses and seeks to examine their hold.

My research into youth politics shows that these top-down creations have significant purchase on their participants. Ideologies have been skillfully crafted in order that they resonate with a range of discontents and desires. Youth – both activists in the movement and those who come into contact with it – readily adopt the discursive positions of the movement. However, this project of “virtual politics” is never total (Wilson). My research has yielded insight into considerable slippage and shifts in identification among movement activists. Even in the course of this pilot project, several of the *Nashi* activists I spoke to left the movement. At the same time, they continue to use the discourses and framings offered by the movement in their commentaries about Russian politics and society.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future goals are to trace the developments in youth politics, including relationships between the various youth movements. This pilot study suggests that despite their similarities in goals and objectives, participants in the different projects do not support or recognize each other. Is this still true? To what extent do they see themselves united in a common project of patriotic education? Is there overlap in the membership base of the different organizations? I am also concerned to trace the implications of the upcoming 2008 presidential elections. Analysts have predicted that investment in youth politics will increase during the pre-election campaign, and sharply decrease afterwards. Will this

prove to be the case, and if so, how will these shifts in elite investment influence the views of youth participants?

As important as it is to continue tracking elite investment in youth movements and the role of their “ideological producers” (Yurchak 2005), I consider it to be of paramount importance to continue to analyze the movements from the participants’ point of view. Following Yurchak, I am particularly interested in the ways youth interpret and make sense of these hybrid discourses and in tracking intersecting cultural logics in their narratives. I am concerned to probe the deeper anxieties that propel youth participation in these movements and that cause them to have resonance. Following David Ost’s analysis, we can view *Nashi* as a project that mobilizes economic anger, and organizes “exclusionary solidarities” to deflect attention from economic woes. In continuing to trace these hybrid forms, I link them to broader processes of economic stratification and social welfare restructuring.

Beyond the scope of this research proposal, this youth-oriented cultural project has significant gendered effects. Youth are the target of a new round of pronatalist demographic politics announced in 2006 (that grants extended benefits to mothers, and penalizes childless men) and of a ten-year youth program. There is a need to more thoroughly investigate the implications of these policies and how they intersect with youth voluntarism promoting projects. The next phase of my research will pursue these directions.

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