VOLUNTEERS, ENTREPRENEURS AND PATRIOTS: YOUTH AS NEW SUBJECTS OF STATE POLICY IN PUTIN’S RUSSIA

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Executive Summary

In this working paper, author lays out the terrain and central themes of a research (and book) project that explores themes of youth, gender and nationalism in postsocialist space by interrogating Russia’s new state-run youth organizations. In Russia, youth have become the new objects of state policy. Since coming to office in 1999, President Putin has channeled substantial funds into youth via a national project of “patriotic education” and by founding new pro-Kremlin youth organizations. These organizations seek to energize and activate youth and encourage them into diverse forms of civic activity. These Putin-era organizations have been controversial in Russia and the West due both to their Soviet resonance and the nationalist projects they enact. Author’s research brought an ethnographic lens to these projects, examining them from the vantage point of their participants. In tracking them from their inception in 2004 to the Putin-Medvedev era, author considers the play of logics and technologies within them – (neo)liberal, nationalist, socialist- and examine their complex fusions. Attentive both to their governing logics and their reception by the youth they engage, author argues that these state-run projects were sites of unpredictability and indeterminacy.
Volunteers, Entrepreneurs and Patriots: youth as new subjects of state policy in Putin’s Russia

Introduction

(Lake Seliger, Tver’ Oblast, Russia, August 9, 2009)

We climbed out of the car a little uncertainly, stiff after the three hour drive from Tver’. Ahead of us we could see a checkpoint with a small marquee and red flags. I could make out billboards and tents dotted through the trees. This then was Seliger 2009, the high profile federal youth educational camp that brought thousands of youth to Tver’ oblast from all over the Russian Federation. I confess to the excitement I felt in this moment; it was the first youth camp at Seliger in 2005 that had piqued my interest in Russia’s youth policies. Now I was there, with my Russian university teacher colleagues – an invited guest, or “VIP” (veep). The earlier camps were controversial, organized by the newly founded pro-Kremlin youth organization Nashi (Ours), and attended by its participants. They drew a lot of critical attention from the national and international media, both as a result of their Soviet-era resonance, and because of the belligerent patriotism they articulated. I had tracked these camps via newspaper reports, drawn by the startling images of thousands of youth in red T-shirts doing mass calisthenics under posters of President Putin. Images such as these had won the organization the moniker “Putin Jugend” among Russian critics (literally Putin youth, recalling Hitler youth), and its participants “nashisty” (a play on fashisty, or fascists). This year’s camp was different, distinct from its predecessors, or so its organizers claimed. Officially at least, it had nothing to do with Nashi, but was a federal event. Co-organized this year
by the Federal Youth Agency and the Sports, Tourism and Youth Politics Ministry, it marked the climax of Russia’s Year of Youth events. It was not restricted to Nashi members, but open to “talented” youth across the federation. It invited youth to participate in sessions organized around a wide variety of themes, including leadership, entrepreneurism, and voluntarism.

Somewhat hesitantly, we made our way toward KPP #3 (kontrolno-propusknoi punkt), the entrance our contact Vitaly had directed us to. The security guard looked at us skeptically, five less than youthful people: my colleagues Valentina and Maria, their husbands and myself. In that moment, I was sure how this would end – we’d be thrown out, turned away, as previous critical interlopers at prior Nashi camps. But in a few minutes, the confusion was resolved; our contacts materialized and the guard handed us visitor tags, signaling we could pass. To my surprise, I recognized one of the faces in the group of youth tasked with showing us around; it was Olga, a student in the Sociology department who had attended one of our team research presentations in May. In fact, all of our guides that day were students at Tver’ State University where my colleagues taught.

As we walked, we split into two groups. Anton, a third year political science student who was an organizer at Seliger attached himself to me the foreign researcher, providing a clear and informative commentary, while my colleagues fell behind, lingering to take photographs and chat with some of the students they’d recognized. Anton explained that this session, Programma Territoriia invited youth who were interested in developing tourism-related business projects. We walked along a boardwalk past large tents; Anton explained that this was where lectures
took place, and where participants could meet with experts who could advise them on their projects, and with potential sponsors, too. These experts, he explained were representatives of businesses, and also representatives of the state; they were here to meet and to advise, but also, potentially, to fund projects. I spotted posters and logos of participating Russian companies – the cosmetics company Faberlic, and a sports equipment business. We passed various art installations, then on to the campsite itself. There were many things of note: the “Bank of Ideas”, a drop box, where Anton explained people could deposit brief descriptions of projects to be read and reviewed by “experts” at the camp, an art installation of an oil pipeline that made critical commentary about the United States. As we neared the campsite itself, signs of political ideology loomed large. We passed a giant sized poster depicting (Russian Prime Minister) Putin and (current President) Medvedev; my colleagues paused to pose with them for the camera, alarming me somewhat by playfully caressing their cheeks. As we continued, we saw large red banners with patriotic slogans and quotations from Putin, President Medvedev and other prominent politicians strung between trees punctuating our path. However, there was evidence of fun and relaxation, too. By the shore of the lake we saw a group of kayakers preparing to set off. Anton explained that while there were some mandatory activities and educational events, participants could choose from a menu of other activities to engage in: from themed workshops and Internet surfing, to sports (as well as kayakers, we saw kids mountain biking, rock climbing), and traditional crafts (weaving, ceramics, taught by older women wearing brightly colored, traditional woven dresses).
After our tour, Anton took us to the site he was in charge of; a cluster of tents where the group of twenty students he supervised resided. This dvadtsatka (group of twenty) was immaculate. The kids – all students from Tver’ - had claimed this space as their own. As groups from other towns, they had made a nice little fence out of reeds and installed it around the perimeter. The cosy interior was a hive of activity; while young women tended the wood fire, a couple of young men cut large pieces of wood into manageable chunks with axes and electric saws. We sat, content and relaxed amongst our own, eating the sandwiches and fruit that this group had kindly prepared for us. While my colleagues drank tea and chatted with their students, I interviewed a few participants.

At the end of the day when we’d taken leave of our hosts, we debriefed over our picnic on a grassy patch between the camp and the nearby monastery. Despite our considerable skepticism going in, we all liked what we’d seen. Maria remarked how strongly it recalled the Komsomol camps she’d attended in her youth, here, recalling them with fondness as opportunities to be outdoors with other young people and to be active. “What’s not to like?” said Valentina, who had evaded the Komsomol during her own youth – “fresh air, guitars, other kids.”

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In Russia, youth are the new subjects of state policy. In the Putin era (1999-2014), the state has channeled substantial funds into youth via a national project of “patriotic education;” it has devoted substantial energies and “administrative resources” to set up new pro-Kremlin youth organizations and projects and to make
events like Seliger 2009 happen. These projects sought to energize and activate youth and encourage them into diverse forms of civic activity. One ironic outcome of state socialism was the skepticism it instilled towards any form of mass action or political engagement; this skepticism was especially prevalent among youth. Public opinion poll after public opinion poll during the early post-Soviet period suggested youth were particularly apathetic, cynical and disengaged from political and civic life. In the Putin era, this appears to have been reversed. The success of events like the camp at Seliger suggests that during 2004-2011 the Putin administration undertook a successful “rebranding” of civic engagement and activism for youth.

In this Working Paper, I outline the broad contours of a research project that has explored themes of youth, gender and nationalism in postsocialist Russia by interrogating this Putin-era state youth project, focusing particularly on the new youth organizations it set up. Drawing on collaborative research that engaged provincial youth in the process of inquiry based in the city Tver’ (2006-2011), I interrogate these organizations ethnographically and consider their implications for the redrawning of state power and citizenship in Russia. My research traces the arch of Russian youth policies from 2004, when the state began to pay serious attention to youth, to 2011, the year of political protests when this state project began to unravel. It focuses specifically on the youth organizations set up by regional and federal politicians and state agencies, and the kinds of activities they engage in.

Russia's youth policies morphed considerably between 2004 when I first began tracking them and 2011. Whereas the first youth organizations Russian state officials set up—Walking Together, Nashi (Ours)—were determinedly, even
belligerently political, nationalist and hostile to the West, the later iterations were rather different. In the Putin-Medvedev era (or “tandemocracy” as Russian pundits coined it), youth organizations adopted a more “civil” face. Here, the apolitical qualities were prominent and the entrepreneurial dimension more pronounced. This tendency culminated during 2009, Russia’s Year of Youth and was especially manifest in its flagship event, the educational youth camp Seliger 2009. Here, the entrepreneurial logic was striking. Indeed, the camp’s slogan was, “Commodify your talent!” (prevrati tvoi talant v tovar!) Theoretically at least (although this was contradicted by what we learned that day), participation was competitive; youth were invited to submit social and business project proposals via the Internet. Promotional materials proclaimed that at Seliger young people would have the opportunity to network with potential sponsors—representatives of business and state officials.

These Putin-era youth organizations and projects have been controversial in Russia and the West due both to their Soviet-era resonance and the nationalist projects they enact. Commentators take them as evidence of Russia’s authoritarian turn and rejection of liberal democracy. Dominant media and scholarly accounts have emphasized the political role of these youth organizations— for example, portraying them as a renewed Komsomol (Soviet youth organization), that attempts to create a politically quiescent and docile mass of supporters loyal to the Kremlin, or “Putin’s Generation” (Myers 2007). While I don’t want to diminish this aspect of their activity, I am concerned at the assumptions these accounts encode—a set of binarized assumptions about (post) Soviet society Alexei Yurchak has called “binary
Moreover, I have been interested in tracking them from an alternative angle. I argue that – rather than mere Soviet throwbacks - they are prompted by a complex amalgam of forces, including Soviet-era nostalgia, the international democracy-promoting project of the nineties and the repercussions of Russia’s integration into the global economy. Indeed, these state-run organizations were curious hybrids; at the same time as they articulated forceful resistance to liberal logics and paradigms, they drew on them as well, combining (neo)liberal, nationalist and socialist categories in a complex fusion.

Analytically, I am interested both in the governing intention of these projects and their reception by the youth they engage. I examine Russia’s contemporary youth policies as a creation of the last Soviet generation, designed for the first post-Soviet generations. While their architects came of age in the 1970s and 1980s, the youth these state-run projects target were born in or around 1990 – one year after the fall of the Berlin Wall and one year before the USSR’s dissolution. How do youth who have no lived experience of socialism respond to the Soviet-era images and values that are offered them? How do these globally linked and tech-savvy Millennials make sense of nationalist-oriented state-run campaigns?

I locate these projects as a response to the painful dislocations of the postsocialist period, the result of market-oriented reforms and realignments of state/societal relations. The nineties was a decade of democratization – international agencies and NGOs brought models of civil society, decentralized governance and community participation to postsocialist states. In Russia, these interventions and
the neoliberal paradigm they rested on are now heavily criticized. Russia’s youth policies can be interpreted in large part as a retort to this.

Contra most scholarly representations, Russia’s state-run youth projects are not static, but in flux. Born of a moment of “backlash” against international democracy promotion and intervention in postsocialist space, state-run youth projects have morphed considerably in response both to shifting state priorities and the interests of their participants (which are not always in agreement). In tracking them from their inception in 2004 to the Putin-Medvedev era, I consider the play of logics and technologies within these campaigns and examine their complex fusions.

Russian commentators and Western observers alike commonly view state-run youth organizations such as Nashi as top-down projects of extreme cynicism, as more evidence of the skillful manipulations of “political technologists” (polittekhnology), as the analysts and political advisors who work behind the scenes of Russian political life are known, and as an exemplification of what Andrew Wilson has called “virtual politics” (Wilson 2005). Without denying this reading entirely, my research has shown that these activities are meaningful for their participants. These campaigns capture and captivate some youth, at least for the duration of their engagement. Further, youth draw on them selectively. Ethnographic research reveals a range of highly individualized responses to these top-down projects. I have come to appreciate that youth find diverse forms of meaning in them and that they harness the resources they encounter as they pursue individualized projects of self-realization.
As I saw that day at Seliger, the overbearing images of state power were casually disregarded by youth. Beneath the red banners and giant Putin-Medvedev posters youth were relatively free; within the confines of the curfew and wholesome regimen (no smoking, no drinking, lights out), they were able to run their own affairs and make their own choices, picking from an enticing menu of leisure options as well as educational programs. Our expectation of encountering Otherness was defied by the comforting experience of the familiar.

Projects

To provide evidence of the tensions that animate these youth projects and the play of logics that interests me, I offer a couple of snapshots dating from May 2009, when I visited Tver’ and the research team shortly before the summer camp at Seliger.

The first occurred during a presentation I was making to a class of sociology undergraduate students. My colleague Valentina had asked me to speak to them about cultural anthropology and the kinds of collaborative work we had engaged in to date. When I mentioned our research topic and noted that the Seliger 2009 camp appeared to mark a sea change in state youth policy, Andrei, a Masters student, a member of the research team who was employed by the regional Youth Committee and who happened to be sitting in on the class leapt to his feet. To my surprise, he took my characterization as an invitation and began to issue a recruitment speech. “Yes,” he said, signaling his agreement with my statement, “it’s a really historic event. It’s unprecedented! Go to the Year of Youth site,” he urged the group, “you can either register your own idea, as it were, or join one of the projects that’s
already established within the themes.” Andrei continued, eagerly, “the goal of this camp isn’t just to teach young people to write cool projects and launch them, it’s also to enable them to earn money from them. It usually goes like this: we have a terrific project, but we can’t enact it, because we don’t have any money for it. But at Seliger, the government is prepared to give you money to realize these projects. There’s going to be a huge number of VIPs (veepy), more than you ever dreamed of, from the President of the Russian Federation and Zhirinovsky,⁹ to Valentina Ivanovna (he nodded towards Valentina, who had indeed received an invitation to attend as a VIP guest. She bowed, with mock solemnity, prompting general laughter). Right now, all the participants of Youth year are drawing up a list of the VIPs they’d like to see...”. Looking around the room and realizing with some exasperation that the assembled first year students looked unmoved, he raised his voice slightly, his eyes shining, “It’s a really serious event, which will help you not only realize your projects and find good contacts, but it will help you to find work in the future, to find yourself a good employer.”

A few days later in the same room, I witnessed another recruitment device. This time, the event was our results sharing mini-conference where student team members delivered short papers on their research. The agent was Vitaly, the Tver’ representative of the Moscow-based Federal Youth Agency (Rosmolodezh), a new structure set up under the auspices of the Federal Ministry for Sport, Tourism and Youth Affairs and a Nashi komissar, or leader, active since 2005. He had learned about our conference from some of the student researchers who interned in his office and had pledged to attend. As promised, he had brought promotional and
recruitment materials for Seliger 2009: glossy brochures, flyers and a couple of video commercials (roliky) to screen. After giving his recruitment spiel, very similar to Vadim’s, and showing us a couple of upbeat commercials, he inserted a final DVD into his laptop. “This is the forbidden one,” he explained, “it’s not officially endorsed by Rosmolodezh, but you can get it on the Internet or YouTube.” Mildly perplexed, I sat to watch this contraband unfold.

Unlike the can-do tone of the other materials he’d shared, this commercial was bleak and forbidding and used scare tactics to compel participation. It underscored the negative consequences if youth failed to heed the call. It began upbeat enough. To a lilting melody, text scrolled across the screen: “The time has come, a time for change, your time.” As classic icons of Soviet era accomplishments drifted across the screen (cosmonauts, civil engineering, weapons), the text itemized Russia’s strengths - “The biggest country on earth. The richest cou The richest cou The richest cou

The best country on earth.” Then, as the soundtrack speeded up accompanied by an ominous pounding bass, it swiftly moved to condemn and alarm. Startling text flashed by: “But your country won’t exist...You don’t do anything; you just exploit it (the feet of a person lying in bed).

School is your plan. You work for so high. family? -not in your plans. The high adrenalin pounding continued: Everything is about you, you, you (an image of a young guy eating a Big Mac)... A

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this, the screen depicted a picture of a headstone with the caption “Was,” and dates
of “your” birth - 1990 - and death. Reeling a little from this sensory assault, I took a look around the room at the students assembled. These sociology and political science students were mostly sophomores and juniors; many of them, I imagined were in fact born in 1990 or even later. What did they make of this? The textual barrage continued, accompanied by the urgent pounding of the bass: “You’re a consumer, a battery, valuable?

worth nothing.” As images of Soviet-era accomplishments flashed past on the screen (smelting, Soviet soccer teams, Misha the bear, the mascot of the 1980 Soviet Olympics), the video insisted that this was all past tense. “Those who preceded you fought, built, innovated, fell, picked themselves up and carried on so that you would live. They built a great nation. And you? Are you an ungrateful brute, or one who could change the world? A nobody or a hero? The last or the first? Choose for yourself, but know this…

for you. There are two options for our nation: rebirth or oblivion. www.gomol.ru” (the Federal Year of Youth site).

I was stunned by what I had seen, struck both by the way the video portrayed Russia and by the severity of its address to youth. The Russia it invoked was a once great, but now mortally damaged nation, hemorrhaging under constant attack by hostile forces. It addressed youth as Russia’s potential saviors, yet the youth it portrayed were materialistic, cynical and morally degenerate, in thrall to empty, western promises and devoid of any sense of civic duty. Riveted by what I had seen and heard and scrambling to make sense of it, I looked around the room. I couldn’t
detect any particular reaction. The students sat, idly fiddling with their pens and their phones and passing remarks to each other; they appeared entirely unfazed, as they had done through Vitaly's recruitment speech a few days earlier. As I later learned, they had heard it all before. “I understand that this is a meeting of the best students,” Vitaly assured us seriously as he began to pack up his materials, “but 90% of students in the country don’t understand why they are getting an education. Having heard your presentations, I know you are different.”

I offer these two vignettes – events that played out within days of each other – to evoke some of the central tensions of these youth projects. As we can see, they are shot through with contradictory logics. On the one hand, these projects are upbeat and forward looking and seek to appeal to youth by offering them concrete, material and very contemporary rewards (jobs, skills, mobility, connections). On the other, they are belligerent and defensive. They hearken back to Soviet times to locate images of Russia’s greatness and to index the complex and ambivalent positioning of youth within it: Russia’s best hope and its greatest weakness as well.

The two sales techniques I have portrayed reveal competing elements that have animated state run youth projects since 2001 and which uneasily coexist: a forward-looking insistence on Russia’s path toward modernization, and its determination to become more competitive in the global economy (by training a new cadre of entrepreneurial leaders, encouraging “talent” and “innovation”), and a backwards-looking, belligerent xenophobia that is deeply suspicious of external, foreign forces and the consumption, markets and liberalism they represent. For it is in the name of this future that Russia’s Soviet past makes an insistent resurgence.
My research examines the ways contemporary youth make sense of this call to engagement and these appeals to the Soviet past, exploring the extent to which and the ways in which they heed them. For although they appeared skeptical of Vitaly and Andrei’s state-sanctioned message and subsequently reported their disdain about the promotional materials they deployed, several of them signed up to attend Seliger 2009.

In this complex context, what kind of self or individual does the Putin administration seek to create, and what is the “Other” contemporary Russian youth are urged to overcome? If in the immediate postsocialist period, the play was between socialism vs. flexibility, youth vs. the old, Putin-era youth projects reveal a different play. The central referent has shifted dramatically, as we have seen. The enemy, or the thing that is disparaged, that youth are invited to rise above and educate themselves out of is something quite distinctive; it is no longer the intractable socialist, but the degenerate beer swilling consumer, who isn't prepared to do anything for himself or for his country. This new negative persona is identifiably a creature of the transition and an example of the cynical, selfish, individuated selves it generated, who was permitted to come into being by the dislocations of the nineties (and by the “defeatist” generation who allowed perestroika to happen). He represents the extent of Russia’s degradation, often seen in biological terms as the degeneration of the nation (Khabibullina 2009; Oushakine 2009). A similar play is manifest in the more upbeat official promotional materials for Seliger. Here, the main opposition is between “indifferent” youth and “talented, innovative” ones that care deeply for the Motherland and who will not leave it.
Indifference (bezrazlichie) is a key word of the new youth campaigns. Here too, this negative (“indifferent”) persona serves or plays a role in a contemporary process of differentiation that has centrally to do with the remaking of state power and citizenship in the Putin era. This is a gendered process too. Against the specter of demographic decline (“crisis,” the “death of the nation”), low rates of marriage and catastrophic levels of emigration, young people are encouraged to stay, procreate and serve the nation.

Russia’s “New Youth Policies”

Largely ignored in the immediate post-Soviet (Yeltsin) period, youth became new targets of state policy during the first Putin administration (1999-2004). In 2001, the Kremlin launched the State Patriotic Education Program, which aimed to raise patriotic feeling amongst youth. The program was extended in 2005. The program involved several ministries: the Education and Science Ministry, the Ministries of Culture and Media, and Russia’s “power ministries”, the Ministry of Defense, the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Foreign Intelligence Service. A new federal agency, Russian State Military Historical-Cultural Center (Rosvoentsentr), was founded to coordinate initiatives (Sperling 2009). At the same time, the Putin administration launched new programs that focused on the younger generation. In 2001, Putin’s administration put its weight behind the first pro-Putin youth organization, Walking Together. These early state-run youth projects consciously invoked the Komsomol and capitalized on nostalgia for it.

Exemplifying the central tension of Putin administration’s policies more broadly, these nationalism-inflected patriotic programs were accompanied by a
slew of “modernizing” initiatives as well. A 2001 Ministry of Education decree sought to modernize the education system, designating schools as central to completing Russia’s democratic and market transition. The document refers to the “growth in influence of human capital” in “forming a new quality of economy and society” (Ministerstvo Obrazovaniia, Rossiisskoi Federatsii 2002:1.0, cited in Matza 2009:516). Thomas Matza identifies this as another significant milestone in the project to make Russian youth into “entrepreneurial subjects” (2009:516). The decree goes on to state that a “modernized” system should produce “moral, enterprising people educated in line with present-day standards who can make decisions independently in a situation of choice, can cooperate, who [are] distinguished by mobility, dynamism, constructive thinking, who are open for cross-cultural interaction, feel responsible for the destiny of the country” (Ministerstvo Obrazovaniia, Rossiiskoi Federatsii 2002: 1.2, cited in Matza 2009:516).

The main policy documents of this period – the Conception and the Strategy, a draft program worked out by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2005 - evidence the same tension as existed in Soviet times. They name youth both as the vanguard of democracy, Russia’s best hope, and its most vulnerable flank too. The “problems” of youth they identify –(problems both faced by youth, and posed by them as well) include ethnic intolerance, unemployment, low numbers of marriages, housing crisis, the demographic situation. They note as well the danger of youth apoliticism (apolitichnost’) –which leaves them vulnerable to political manipulation. In response, these state documents propose projects, campaigns and civic
engagement as the solution, pledging the state’s support in giving them a leg up, or “social lift.”

These decrees and frameworks evidenced the central ambivalence of youth policy discussions and Putin’s “managed democracy” more broadly: on the one hand, policy makers wanted to animate and “activate” youth, on the other, they sought to manage and control them (Blum 2006). As the Strategy acknowledges: “A return to the model of a single and unitary children and youth organisation is not possible: this idea is not popular among youth and youth organisations and is in contradiction to the changed conditions in society” (Levitskaya 2006). Setting the scene for the projects I describe, both the patriotic and the modernizing educational projects envision and make provision for extensive self-work. What were historically regarded as pedagogical tasks became psychological ones (c.f. Matza 2009).

Across their diversity, these state-run projects share some characteristics. They all target educated, but economically marginal young people who may have talent, and ambition, but whose futures are uncertain: the students of provincial gymnasiums and higher educational institutions. These are youth who do not have wealthy parents, or access to the elite educational establishments of Moscow or St. Petersburg and for whom Seliger 2009 offers a rare chance of vacation (they would otherwise be working for money, or helping their parents at the dacha, or country house). As Valentina put it, this is not for the zolotoaia molodezh’, or golden youth, the privileged children of the super wealthy. Neither is it for working-class or marginal youth. As the Komsomol, contemporary state-run youth projects offer a
place where sincerity and commitment will be rewarded. They promise a vanguardist role for the youth who actively participate in them, seeking and encouraging certain qualities: talent, goal orientation and industry (aktivnost').

Generation, class and agency

Originally devised by members of the last Soviet generation, these youth projects are consumed by members of the first post-Soviet generations as I've noted, those who were born after the fall of the Wall who have no lived experience of socialism. This play of generations indisputably animates these projects, yet not in any deterministic way. Anthropological investigations of agency and personhood during the late Soviet period cause us to question representations of these people as cynically pedaling formulae to innocent youth (Wilson 2005; Baker and Glasser 2005). They suggest instead a process that is more nuanced. Yurchak's formulation “the last Soviet generation” does not merely name a demographic, but offers an analytic lens through which to examine these architects, and clues as to how we might interrogate the projects they have created (2005). The Komsomol activists he profiled were bearers of a specific aesthetic and, additionally, a specific skills set: “entrepreneurial governmentality,” an ability to skillfully navigate and distinguish between what was meaningful and what was pro forma within state campaigns. They have a political sensibility that's at once urbane, smart, globally aware and ironic. But the movers and shakers of Putin era youth projects have not been elite urban former Komsomols; they have a rather more mixed pedigree. Class, as well as generation is at play.

Volunteers, Entrepreneurs and Patriots: youth as new subjects of state policy in Putin’s Russia
State-run youth policies have been highly controversial. In 2010, the centrist oppositional party Yabloko issued a press release to announce the following statement: “the Russian state has engaged in a discriminatory policy towards young people, and has given up on its social obligation to them. At the same time, the government is not interested in the civil development of young people, as it sees them as a threat to the existing authoritarian-bureaucratic regime.”

These views are widely shared by the liberal intelligentsia. Although many people I spoke with shared deep concern about higher education and agreed that reform and modernization was necessary, they did not find this “projectifying” mode of enactment (with its bling and show) sufficient.

My discussions with old acquaintances in Moscow and Tver’ offered an occasion to collect some of these critical views. Misha, a Moscow-based journalist had a lot to say about the people behind the “new youth policies” I was tracing. Indeed, his discussion focused on the personalities of the actors who masterminded youth projects – Vasily Yakemenko (founder of Nashi and director of Rosmolodezh), and Vladislav Surkov, the influential Kremlin political technologist who has sponsored him. He regarded Rosmolodezh and other state-run youth projects not as policy (conscious, coherent, worked out), but as the bastard output of the new and unsavory individuals who worked behind the scenes of Russian political life. In sum, he saw these projects and events as the output of bandity, ill-educated “violent entrepreneurs” (Volkov 2002), those with one foot in criminal circles, who owed their fortunes to ruthless determination, connections and naked ambition.
Misha’s narrative was very helpful to me in figuring out how to think about the new structures and the new agents of governmentality these projects enabled. His account helped me move from seeing them in purely generational terms (as products of the “last Soviet generation”), to understanding their relationship to class. Indeed, the class-based characteristic of critical commentary about state-run youth projects is striking.  

Misha invoked the Komsomol as a model as he spoke—although not usually at all nostalgic for the Soviet period, he invoked the Komsomol as a superior model, as something that was real, had integrity and was successful. “Surkov isn’t inventing anything new,” he told me. “By and large, this is an attempt to create a second-rate Komsomol (literally, past its sell-by date).” “Because you can not compare the Komsomol with its huge structure, with its huge reserves, with its enormous material capacity” with Nashi, he explained. While the Komsomol was a “huge structure that permeated the entire society,” Nashi, he told me derisively, “commands just 30,000 people on a bus!”

In sum, as many of my liberal intelligentsia acquaintances, he saw these youth projects as the cynical product of unscrupulous people intent on the pursuit of their own interests; while they were ostensibly designed for less advantaged youth, they promised mobility and advancement they could not deliver.

And yet youth were persuaded. As my opening vignette communicates, they participated in state-run projects in droves.

My research traces the ways youth responded to these projects and campaigns between 2004-2011. Many responded positively to the “rebranded” or
“revitalized” patriotism offered them. Against the purported “pragmatism” of the nineties, state-run youth projects offered a space where youth could enact meaningful work and express sincerity and an earnest desire to develop themselves. While they may have fallen short in keeping many of their pledges and promises – not everyone can be a leader - they did deliver one thing: they offered youth the opportunity to participate symbolically in the life of the nation.18
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Buck-Morss, Susan

Chari, Sharad, and Katherine Verdery

Hoffman, Lisa M.

Kipnis, Andrew

Lassila, Jussi

Matza, Tomas

Volunteers, Entrepreneurs and Patriots: youth as new subjects of state policy in Putin’s Russia
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1 This report draws on a collaborative ethnographic research project conducted with scholars and undergraduate students of Tver’ State University, 2006-2009, supported by the National Council for East European Research and the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0822680. I am grateful to the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research (NCEEER) for their support in providing funds for write up (2012). I would like to thank my Tver’ colleagues and the members of the research team, particularly Valentina Uspenskaya and Dmitry Borodin. At UMass, I am grateful to Yulia Stone, Nyudlia Araeva and Dana Johnson for research assistance.

2 According to media reports, a total of 200 million rubles ($6.8 million) were spent on the 2009 forum, including 75 million rubles ($2.6 million) from the federal budget. Because the forum was organized by the Federal Youth Affairs Agency Rosmolodezh instead of the pro-Kremlin's Nashi movement, it had state status and was eligible for financing from a state budget for the first time March 15 (RIA Novosti) http://en.rian.ru/russia/20100315/158199960.html

3 This research is structured around an account of the collaborative research project I undertook with Russian scholars and students associated with the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies in the provincial city Tver’ (2004-2010).

4 Education Minister Andrei Fursenko made similar pronouncements, once proclaiming “our goal is to educate qualified consumers!”

5 “Binary socialism” refers to the set of assumptions manifest in most media and scholarly accounts of the Soviet Union (more recently, Russia) that rest on the oppositions good/bad, authentic/inauthentic, oppression/freedom, the state/the people, reality/dissimulation.

6 A burgeoning field of scholarship grapples with the challenge of making sense of the complex social and cultural forms that characterize contemporary life both in the former East bloc and in "late socialist” China. These scholars have pointed to moments of resonance, fusion or mutation between socialist and liberal formations that confound exclusionary models and challenge the notion of liberalism and socialism as mutually exclusive and incommensurate (see for example Yurchak 2003; Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Hoffman 2006; 2010; Kipnis 2008; Song 2009). This scholarship suggests that we can view neoliberalism and socialism as utopian projects that have substantial points of commonality and overlap (Buck-Morss 2002; see also Bockman and Eyal 2002; Verdery and Chari 2009).

7 Consider some of the key ideologues of Putin's youth policies: Vasily Yakemenko, founder of Nashi, born in 1971; Vladimir Surkov, Putin’s “gray cardinal”, who is widely regarded as the key architect behind Putin’s youth policies, born 1964.
Volunteers, Entrepreneurs and Patriots: youth as new subjects of state policy in Putin’s Russia

8 Vladimir Zhirinovsky is the clownish and controversial founder and leader of the nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, founded in 1990.

9 In a focus group, Marina, a 21-year old activist who played a leading role at Seliger 2009 as Tver’s organizer for the “Voluntarism” session named “indifference” as the greatest problem facing youth today. This term, as well as its synonym ravnodushie were key words of Soviet era ideological campaigns.

10 While the first phase (or five year plan) was relatively modestly funded, receiving 177 million rubles, the second phase of the program received more substantial funding; according to Sperling, 500 million rubles were devoted to it (2009).

11 Blum takes this as evidence of “hybridization” manifest in many nations’ responses to globalization: “this strategy represents an attempt to absorb certain global (hegemonic) practices, while rejecting other ‘excessive’ or offensive ideas and asserting a unique, supposedly indigenous identity.” In Russia, he writes, this hybridization “includes the embrace of rationalist models, including market institutions and individualism, along with the promotion of a ‘quintessentially Russian’ cultural narrative.” (Blum 2007:103).

12 Jussi Lassila suggests this stratum of youth is targeted for political reasons. Educated youth have the most potential to contribute creatively and technical skills to the nation, yet they are amongst the most politically disengaged and skeptical of “the system,” a fact that is recognized by Russia’s political elite (Lassila 2012).

13 Yurchak provides insight into the lives of a specific subset of the last Soviet generation, Komsomol activists who, due to their relative privilege vis-a-vis the system, were able to partially disregard official, or “authoritative” discourse. This positionality permitted them kind of ironic detachment vis-a-vis the workings of power.


15 Yakemenko is an extremely controversial figure, whose purported past involvement in criminal gang activity has been exhaustedly discussed in the Russian media. The highest-profile scandal emerged when the newspaper Vedomosti reported his alleged involvement with criminal groups in the city of Naberezhnie Chelny.

16 The class-based component of critical commentary of Nashi is striking. Liberal commentators frequently describe the organization, its instigators and participants as “ill-bred” or poorly educated. For example, a controversial installation by the Nashi offshoot group Stal (Steel) in 2010 prompted prominent human rights activists to say, [it] “was made by ill-bred children” (TV journalist and member of the Public Chamber Nikolai Svanidze); the result of the “bad upbringing of its creators...” (former dissident Liudmila Alekseeva).

17 The Komsomol served as a “social lift” for its members. It explicitly sought to train a cadre of leaders and offered distinctive channels of (superior) education for dedicated activists.

18 Oushakine acknowledges that the Putin administration capitalized on the patriotism of despair, but never fully explores this point by examining Putin era state policies. As he puts it, the patriotism of despair “provided a key base of support for the resurgence of Russia’s national assertiveness that became so vivid during Vladimir Putin’s presidency....it was the shared memory of loss, along with the firsthand experience of living through the bespredel of the 1990s, that ensured the widespread positive reception of this revitalized patriotism in postmillennial Russia” (2009:7).