

Analysis

Russia's "Nashi" Youth Movement: The Rise and Fall of a Putin-Era Political Technology Project

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Abstract

The Russian Nashi (Ours) youth movement is the best known and most successful of the government-friendly youth organizations that sprang up in Russia in recent years. However, Nashi, mainly known for its headline-grabbing events and aggressive behavior towards the opposition, is not a grassroots youth movement, but a Putin-era political technology project. Nashi was founded in response to the "Color Revolutions" in the post-Soviet space in order to foster "anti-orange" sentiment among Russian youth and to prevent mass mobilization for the Duma and presidential elections of 2007/2008. Putin adviser Vladislav Surkov apparently guided the movement from the Kremlin. In order to enhance Nashi's mobilization potential, the government provided considerable administrative and financial resources. The strategy was successful as Russia's political leadership steered safely through the turbulent election period. Now the authorities are looking for ways to return the genie to the bottle.

The Nashi Youth Movement

About half a dozen government-friendly youth movements have emerged in Russia in the past few years. These groups have managed to bring young people onto the streets in droves and mobilize them for their political ends. Their attraction is remarkable, given that the majority of Russian youth are considered to be politically disinterested and apathetic. Among these political youth organizations, the pro-Putin Nashi (Ours) youth movement, founded in March 2005, has doubtlessly experienced the most rapid success: Within only three years, its membership figures grew to over 120,000, and the number of sympathizers is likely even higher.

Nashi garnered publicity through headline-grabbing events and mass rallies that were staged in a media-friendly format and attended by an average of several tens of thousands of young people. Their activities so far have been directed mainly at the political opposition in Russia, but Nashi has not shied away from protests against Western countries either. The group gained international attention in spring 2007 as mass protests against the relocation of a Soviet war memorial in the Estonian capital of Tallinn turned violent, with street fighting and physical attacks on the Estonian ambassador to Moscow.

A Political Test-Tube Baby

Considerable evidence suggests that Nashi was founded by political strategists advising then-president Putin in response to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in order to foster "anti-orange" sentiment on Russia's streets and to prevent possible mass mobilization against the political regime ahead of the Duma and presidential

elections of 2007/2008. The "Color Revolutions" in the post-Soviet space sowed fear among Russian government representatives that similar upheavals could spill over into Russia. This fear was stoked in particular by Vladislav Surkov, Putin's longtime adviser, chief ideologist, and deputy head of the presidential administration. Against the backdrop of the Orange Revolution, Surkov had claimed that the liberal opposition and Western countries were trying to start a revolution in Russia as well and undermine the state's authority. In this situation, the perceived pressure on the government to take measures preserving the political status quo in Russia was increasing.

Political strategists were particularly attentive to the role of young people. Events in Ukraine had shown that youth organizations critical of the regime were instrumental in convincing the public to take to the streets against the government there, and had thus made an essential contribution to the change of power. Also, activists from Ukraine, Georgia, and Serbia – some of them financed by Western NGOs – had begun to export their knowledge and practices to other countries in the post-Soviet space, including Russia. Both of these factors are likely to have contributed to the creation of Nashi in March 2005 as a counter-movement to the youth organizations critical of the regimes in the post-Soviet space.

Vladislav Surkov: Pulling strings in the Kremlin

There can be little doubt that Kremlin strategist Surkov is the creator of Nashi. The author of such concepts as "directed" and "sovereign" democracy has been linked

frequently with the youth organization; he has repeatedly made public pronouncements on Nashi and its activities. Surkov is also a longtime acquaintance of 36-year-old Vasily Yakemenko, the official founder and, until recently, head of Nashi. Their relationship goes back to the early Putin years, when the up-and-coming Yakemenko was briefly a staff member in the presidential administration. It was also Yakemenko who, during this period and presumably with the backing of Surkov, founded the first youth organization loyal to the Kremlin, *Idushie Vmyestye* (Walking Together). Even then, Surkov was already actively supporting the creation of government-friendly youth organizations and emphasized that the government needed the support of the street in order to prevail in the country's political battles.

While the first Kremlin-friendly youth organizations had no definable agenda beyond a strong fixation on Putin's personality, and instead were noted for erratic stunts that were occasionally highly controversial within Russian society, Nashi was strongly oriented towards battling the "orange peril" and designed to create, as quickly as possible, an "anti-orange" sentiment among Russia's younger generation. To this end, the organization was bolstered with a patriotic-nationalist ideology that guides its program. Nashi supports Putin's political goals and regards itself – in line with Surkov's idiom and purpose – as a bulwark against all who might conspire against these objectives. In its manifesto, the organization refers to an "unpatriotic coalition of oligarchs, anti-Semites, Nazis, and liberals" who want Russia to descend into crisis and who must therefore be stopped. Nashi was committed to the task at hand by Surkov himself. At its founding congress in February 2005, he urged the young people: "We will not allow the revolutions in Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine [...] to be repeated in Russia."

State Resources Increase Mobilization Potential

While the maneuvering space of groups criticizing the government was successively cut back by the Putin administration, the government-friendly youth organization has evidently been given easy access to state resources. Nashi's strong mobilization potential in recent years has been made possible not least by massive financial and administrative support from the Putin administration. It is estimated that the government has been spending several hundreds of thousands of US dollars a month on financing Nashi and other youth organizations that have proved themselves to be regime stal-

warts. The annual Nashi summer camps at Lake Seliger alone are alleged to cost between US\$6 and 7 million. Financial support has been extended both directly and indirectly, i.e., the government has supplied funds of its own, but has also encouraged state-controlled corporations, such as energy giant Gazprom, to support Nashi's activities financially.

The ability of Nashi to mobilize young people has been further strengthened by giving the organization privileged access to state-controlled media. This intense media presence has catalyzed the dissemination of its issues in all Russian regions. Public attention was drawn to Nashi by means of shrill, loud, and provocative action, while opposition voices and concerns were dislodged from public perception. Another factor that is certain to have favored mobilization was the overt proximity of Nashi to then-president Putin and his political entourage. On more than one occasion, influential presidential advisers Surkov and Gleb Pavlovsky as well as the deputy prime ministers at the time, Sergei Ivanov and Dmitry Medvedev, visited the summer camp and considerably raised the status of the organization and its activists in the public consciousness. Even Putin himself met with select Nashi representatives on several occasions.

After Putin: What Next For Nashi?

The end of the Putin era seems also to mark the end of Nashi's success story. As early as 2007, there were rumors circulating among the public that the government was aiming to rid itself of its youthful street fighters. This change in fortune was indicated by plans to shut down at least 45 of Nashi's 50 regional branches and to merge the movement with other pro-Kremlin youth organizations. Perks such as free mobile phones for Nashi commissars have been cancelled, and the allocation of financial resources is being subjected to greater scrutiny. Events were called off, and even the leadership of the organization has dispersed in recent months: Leonid Kurza, the head of the St. Petersburg branch, has taken up studies abroad, while Yakemenko was appointed to a government position in early 2008. He is now in charge of the state commission for youth affairs.

Evidently, the aim is not so much to dissolve Nashi completely, but to reduce the organization's capacity to act. This tactical approach can be best explained by an abatement of the "orange panic" in government circles after the Russian election marathon: The Kremlin's favored parties and candidates were shepherded safely through the critical election phase, the regime's political continuity is assured, and mass protests have failed

to materialize in the streets of Russia. Thus, Nashi has fulfilled its purpose and is no longer required as the extended arm of the government in combating the “orange peril.” Also, a new sense of self-confidence, combined with a new political style, seemed to be spreading in the Kremlin in the first months after the presidential elections, mainly represented to the outside world by Russia’s new President Medvedev: a civilized Russia promoting itself as a friend and partner of the West. The yobbish hooligans of Nashi who have been ranting

equally against the liberal opposition and the West in the streets of Russia did not fit this new image.

In the meantime, the first results of the taming of Nashi are being seen: A recent protest outside the European Commission’s delegation in Moscow, directed against the EU’s early 2008 entry ban for 11 Nashi activists and organizers of the mass protests in Estonia, was uncommonly measured in tone and only managed to mobilize a handful of youths on the street.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay

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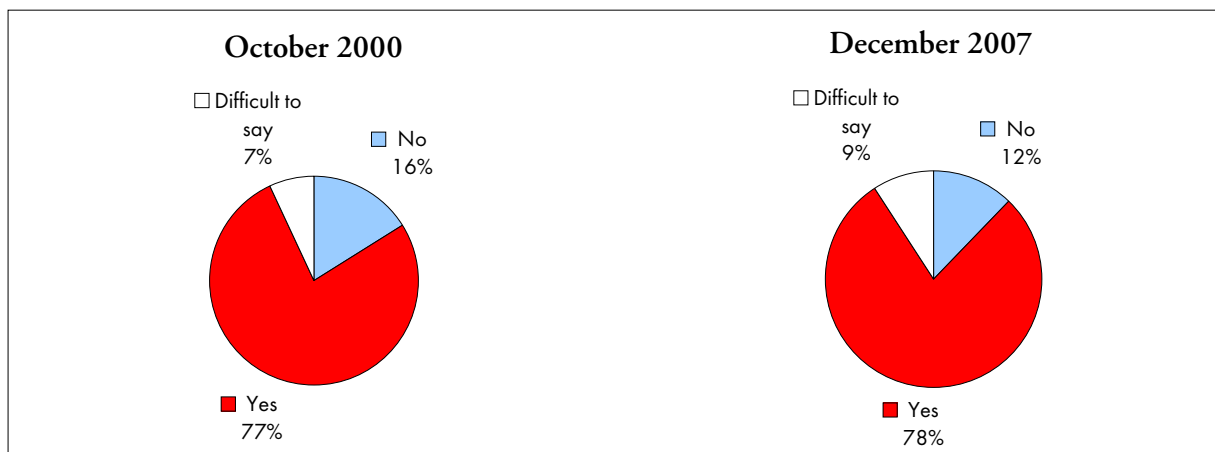
Further reading:

- Douglas Robert Buchacek, “Nasha Pravda, nashe delo: The Mobilization of the Nashi Generation in Contemporary Russia,” *Carolina Papers in Democracy and Human Rights*, no. 7, Chapel Hill 2006.
- Viktoriya Topalova, “In Search of Heroes: Cultural Politics and Political Mobilization of Youths in Contemporary Russia and Ukraine,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 14 (2006), no. 1, pp. 23–41.
- Michael Schwartz, “Russia’s Political Youths,” *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 15 (2007), no. 1, pp. 73–85.
- Thane Peterson: “A Talk with Putin’s Inside Man,” *BusinessWeek*, 21 October 2002, http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/oct2002/nf20021021_0216.htm

Opinion Poll

“Nashi” and Patriotism

Do You Think That You Are a Russian Patriot?



Source: opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center on 21–24 November 2007 <http://www.levada.ru./press/2008012101.html>