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Outside the Ballot Box: A Case Study on Youth Political Activity During the Putin Administration

1. Putin's Russia

Vladimir Putin’s initial consolidation of power began just weeks after his first presidential inauguration in 2000, when the regional leaders lost their places in the Federation Council. One year later, Putin instituted a law according to which “[political] parties now had to jump through numerous bureaucratic hoops at both federal and regional levels to establish themselves; at any point, their registration could be denied because of minor mistakes or irregularities in their legal paperwork.”\(^1\) This subsequently led to a rapid decrease in the number of parties that could participate in the country’s politics, thus minimizing the number of opponents to Putin’s United Russia party. Furthermore, in 2003 the Federal Protective Service gained control over the election system in Russia. As a result, “all information about eligible voters and flows of election results was now managed by the secret service that was closest to the president and was not under civilian control.”\(^2\) The Kremlin became responsible for counting votes and distributing results to election commissions, opening Russia’s election system to distrust and accusations of fraud.

Russia experienced some economic growth during Putin’s first decade in power, but it could not be sustained. The 2007 annual GDP growth rate in Russia was 8.535 percent, while in 2017 it amounted to only 1.546 percent.\(^3\) The Putin era has also been defined in part by the Russia’s various armed conflicts at home and abroad. Consequently, Russia spends large portions of its budget on sustaining its military might and acquiring the latest technology. Indeed, the country’s

\(^{1}\) Aleksashenko, 154.
\(^{2}\) Ibid, 155.
\(^{3}\) See World Bank Group.
military expenditure continuously ranks among the highest internationally, accounting for 4.262 percent of the GDP spent in 2017. Most recently, Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and the subsequent ongoing war in the Donbas region of Ukraine, as well as with its military intervention in Syria, prompted more sanctions from the West and even stronger isolationist policies in return. Because of these sanctions, the value of the Russian ruble plummeted.

These factors have contributed to the resurgence of political activity among Russia’s youth, distinguishing the “Putin Generation” from previous ones. According to a 2006 survey conducted by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion, they “tend to be bolder than their parents, viewing aggressiveness as a manifestation of self-confidence and initiative.” The Kremlin’s multiple youth initiatives, particularly the pro-Putin organizations Nashi (Ours) and Set’ (Network), have capitalized on this generation’s desire to actively participate in their country’s politics. Since the contested 2011 legislative election, however, many Russian youths have turned their backs on Putin’s government, instead supporting the leading opposition figure Alexei Navalny.

Most recent research on youth political involvement in Russia is limited to discussions of Nashi as well as Navalny’s efforts to mobilize young people against corruption and authoritarianism. This article will update scholarship on the subject by discussing Set’, the youth organization that succeeded Nashi, and analyzing recent developments since the 2018 Russian presidential election.

2. Pro-Putin Youth Groups

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4 Ibid.
5 Petro, 23.
6 All translations are the author’s own, unless otherwise noted.
Vladimir Putin’s first presidential term followed a turbulent decade in Russia. He steered Russia out of chaos toward stability and relative prosperity. Compared to their parents, young people in Russia enjoyed far more opportunities and a higher standard of living. According to a 2005 survey conducted by advertising agency BBDO Worldwide, the “Putin Generation” gave the president credit for Russia’s growing economy, and nearly half of those polled expressed satisfaction with the way democracy was working in their country. In the 2007 parliamentary and 2008 presidential elections, the turnout among young voters was so high that the pollsters referred to them as “the Putin majority.”

The Kremlin decided to capitalize on the support it was receiving from the youngest generation of voters by establishing a pro-government organization in March 2005 called Nashi, which was focused on burnishing the image of Putin and his United Russia party.

Nashi was an immediate success, and by 2008 the organization had over 300,000 members. While researcher Julie Hemment “observed a number of socially oriented Nashi campaigns and actions, including a campaign prohibiting the sale of alcohol to minors, and an environmental cleanup campaign in which some of the komissars [...] were passionately engaged,” Anna Fournier has argued that “Nashi’s goals were to cleanse society of indifference, selfishness, and, more generally, of foreign influence, thus reversing the excesses of the 1990s.” Indeed, members ultimately transferred their attention and energy from acts of genuine civic engagement to those that benefitted the United Russia party exclusively. Moreover, the government’s agenda was barely concealed. The founder of Nashi, Vasily Yakemenko, was recorded at one of the

7 Petro, 24.
8 Hemment, 247.
9 Fournier, 46.
organization’s events saying, “I want everybody to understand that there is no authority for the movement except for the policy Putin and Medvedev stated in our manifest.”

For this reason, outspoken critics of Putin’s regime became enemies of Nashi by extension. In response to popular rallies organized by Boris Nemtsov—who would be assassinated in 2015—Nashi produced propaganda videos, created anti-opposition slogans, and even used violence to protect the Kremlin’s image. To thwart an opposition rally, Nashi would determine its time and place and then alert its members, who would swarm the intended location until no room remained for protesters. Nashi members also frequently showed up at these rallies with huge drums in order to drown out opposition leaders’ messages to the crowds.

Nashi faced its biggest controversy at the end of April 2007, when the statue of the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn, Estonia was relocated from the Old Town central square to the Military Cemetery on the outskirts of the city. This triggered Nashi’s weeklong protest outside the Estonian embassy in Moscow, resulting in the evacuation of Estonian diplomats and their families. At the time, it was reported that several members of Nashi wore military uniforms and tried to prevent the Estonian Ambassador Marina Kaljurand from exiting the embassy. Protesters threatened her, yelling “Get her!” and displaying “wanted” posters bearing her portrait. Kaljurand’s guards, in return, deployed pepper spray against the belligerent crowd. Commenting on the serious ramifications of Nashi’s aggressive campaign tactics, Ilya Yashin, a colleague of Nemtsov, warned, “The authorities may face serious problems; because all the young people whom they teach today, in whom they invest, whom they teach to organize mass actions, may find themselves in the real

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10 Putin’s Kiss.
11 See ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 See Finn.
14 Ibid.
opposition when they see that their interests are violated. Today they are loyal, but tomorrow they may become the opposition.”15 The political and social tension that immediately followed the Estonian embassy incident placed a significant amount of pressure on Nashi; several months later, Yakemenko stepped down as leader.

In 2012 the Kremlin abolished Nashi altogether. The group that ostensibly replaced it, Set’, offered a vastly different kind of support for the president and his party. Set’ was staffed by former activists from Nashi and another pro-Kremlin organization called Stal’ (Steel); eschewing the aggressive, sometimes violent campaigning methods frequently used by Nashi, Set’ fostered support for the Putin administration through more peaceful means. The prolonged protests that followed the 2011 election altered the political landscape in the country, and Set’ reflected this change. For this reason, one could describe Set’’s operation as reactionary. Although it reached out to lower-income youths in rural areas and small towns just as Nashi had, it focused primarily on outreach to progressive youths in urban areas, many of whom had participated in the protests.

Set’’s loyalty to Putin was never in doubt. The organization’s manifesto proclaimed, “The path laid by the father is not one of argument with him, but rather argument with the open world laying before us, an argument in which we are together with the father, at one with him. We don’t fight with the power of the father, we share it, we learn the power, we master the power, together with the father we direct its energy toward our present and future.”16 This glorifies Putin as a patriarchal figure of unquestionable authority, a mentality further expressed through a wave of discourse that tied the youth’s future prospects to the stability of Putin’s party. Set’’s priorities, however, notably diverged from those of its predecessor. Its headquarters in downtown Moscow

15 Horvath, 16.
16 Luhn.
were designed in a more urban and contemporary style than Nashi’s, which had emphasized the country’s rural character.¹⁷

*Set*’ created effective propaganda that highlighted the achievements of high-profile government officials and other notable members of the administration. For instance, it commissioned a series of murals to commemorate Putin’s birthday. One such work was *Vezhlivaia Azbuka* (Polite Alphabet), which associated each letter of the Cyrillic alphabet with something representative of Putin’s values. The letter A, for example, stood for “Anti-Maidan,” referring to the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution that ousted President Viktor Yanukovych, who had sought to bolster the relationship between Ukraine and Russia. In a similar display of anti-Ukrainian sentiment, the letter Ы stood for Crimea, but written in Russian rather than Ukrainian (i.e., “Крым” instead of “Крим”) in order to delegitimize the Ukrainian language and emphasize Russia’s claim on Crimea.¹⁸ Projects like this demonstrate that although *Set*’s members are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven, their outreach targets young children in order to foster a pro-Putin generation.

Another high-profile example of *Set*’s propaganda was the 2014 *Obrazy Rossii* (Images of Russia) fashion show, in which competing designers created fashion collections centered around patriotic themes. Guests included famous designer Vyacheslav Zaitsev, journalist and political consultant Anatoly Vasserman, State Duma official Alena Arshinova, and Julius Kacinskas, an American designer who would sell some of the designs in his New York pop-up store. *Set*’ thus “made it fashionable to work with the government.”¹⁹ The attendance of such esteemed figures showed young people of various spheres, even creative ones, that being aligned with Putin could

¹⁷ See VICE News.
¹⁸ Tarasov.
¹⁹ Whitmore.
lead to professional opportunities. The benefits of Set’ were thus similar to those of Nashi, which “provided opportunities for professional training and advancement. The most active members were granted internships (for example, in the media or in the presidential or regional administration) and the opportunity to travel to attend trainings in other Russian cities.”

3. Anti-Government Sentiment among the Youth

The increase of censorship and authoritarian practices under Putin has led to growing youth involvement in oppositional politics, and their discontent is often expressed through art, film, and music. Rapper Noize MC, for example, was jailed for ten days in 2010 for speaking out against police corruption. His concerts were cancelled in 2014 and 2015 after performing in Ukraine with a Ukrainian flag tied around his waist. The Russian media immediately labeled the him a traitor, and his anti-establishment lyrics only worsened his position. The government regularly bans performances by artists who disagree publicly with the regime in order to decrease their influence among young audiences, but this strategy often backfires and stokes the youth’s outrage. One Noize MC fan interviewed by Vice News argued, “This is wrong. We have democracy. We have freedom of speech,” and another wondered “why bands like AK-47 or Guf that sing about smoking weed and getting high and so on, have none of their concerts cancelled and aren’t persecuted. It’s because they don’t touch politics. And politics is important. Those fat deputies care more about politics than about ordinary people.” At the end of 2018, the government cancelled numerous Russian rap shows across the country. In Rapper Husky’s case the police in Rostov-on-Don turned off all sound and barred the audience from entering the venue. In response, Husky went outside, stood on top of a car, and proceeded to perform without any musical accompaniment. He was

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20 Hemment, 253.
21 See VICE News.
22 Ibid.
subsequently arrested. A fan recorded him and shared the video on Instagram, calling the incident “minuta demokratii” (a minute of democracy).  

Discontent among the youth is found not only in the arts, however; young people actively participated in the 2011 wave of election protests and in subsequent anti-corruption demonstrations. Alexei Navalny, leader of the opposition against United Russia, first rose to prominence that year, when he founded the Anti-Corruption Fund to investigate the wealth of corrupt members of the administration. His Anti-Corruption Fund blog became so popular that in 2013 he was named the most cited blogger in Russia. Navalny ran for president in 2018, and through his campaign was able to consolidate the opposition movement across the entire country. He visited almost fifty cities in fifteen months, attracting thousands of people to each rally, and in March 2017 he organized a huge wave of anti-corruption demonstrations throughout Russia. Because state-controlled television did not give Navalny any airtime, he chose instead to interact with his supporters through blogs and social media. According to him, “When we went online and I set up a blog, it wasn't because I dreamt all my life of become a blogger or I love writing. We did it because there was no other way of communicating, no other possibility to tell people about our [Anti-Corruption Fund] investigations.” Keir Giles credits Navalny’s sustained popularity, especially among the youth, to his alternative way of conveying information: “The fact that young people are the main social base for Aleksei Navalny’s political activism is linked with the fact that Navalny is practically the only politician, opposition or otherwise, who constantly and effectively interacts with his supporters—not only at electoral meetings but especially online through his blog

23 Zotova.
24 See Lassila, 118.
25 Vasilyeva.
and ‘Navalny Live’ YouTube channel.” Other YouTube shows run by members of his Navalny’s team include Kaktus (Cactus), Budet Khuzhe (It’ll Be Worse), Gde Den ‘gi? (Where’s the Money), Oblako (Cloud), Shtab (Headquarters), and Yurfak (Faculty of Law). These programs, according to Giles, serve as vital alternatives to the state’s propaganda: “Measures that have been put in place to insulate Russians from unapproved opinions do not have an effect if those Russians are watching the Kaktus ‘morning political show’ on YouTube rather than the evening news on the television.”

In early 2018, the government attempted to block the popular instant messaging service Telegram after its creator, Pavel Durov, refused to decrypt users’ data for counterterrorism purposes. The backlash was swift, especially among members of the opposition who consider Telegram to be a safer means of communication than social network VKontakte. Navalny organized a march in Moscow on April 30, 2018 to urge the government to unblock the application, and twelve thousands protesters showed up with paper airplanes, the company’s logo. Giles has noted the role social media can play in strengthening the opposition: “Thanks to social media, the vastly increased number of individuals who are discontented and able to communicate with one another and mobilize to express their discontent could have a lasting impact in the future once this new generation gains influence and power.”

Also responsible for Navalny’s continued popularity are his official bases, which he established during his presidential campaign. Navalny’s team reports that eighty-one bases opened across Russia during his election campaign, and thirty-eight of these remain open. They are focused on solving regional problems, promoting environmental issues, and supporting

26 Giles, 135.
27 Ibid., 150.
28 Ibid., 151.
independent candidates for local elections. These bases are supported by funds from various sources, but some have survived entirely on voluntary contributions from the public. It was reported that only seven months into his presidential campaign, Navalny received ninety-eight million rubles from over seventy thousand people. Unsurprisingly, many of these donors were high school and university students.

4. Conclusion

As the Kremlin continues to weaken democratic institutions in Russia, the opposition movement is likely to grow stronger. According to Yulia Nikitina, “The reason for the opposition’s success in the ‘color revolutions’ lies in systematic errors by the government, in particular the authorities’ failure to establish ‘strong democratic institutions’ that would have guaranteed democratic procedures and stability. These systemic mistakes result in the government being distanced from the society and losing its trust, which allows the opposition to take its place.”

Sonia Bondarenko, a nineteen-year old resident of Barnaul explained her participation in the opposition, saying, “I’m not afraid, and neither are my friends. My generation has no self-preservation instinct and no fear. None of us are afraid of saying what we think. That was never encouraged before. Now at least we have a semblance of freedom of speech. If you want to speak, you can. Though I do wonder where I’ll be at the end of March: in jail or in class?”

Voter apathy remains the greatest obstacle in the opposition movement’s path to success. In polls ahead of the State Duma elections in 2016, “over half of respondents said their family and social circles did not discuss the elections at all—and of those who did, one-third said they had

29 See Shtaby Naval'nogo.
30 See Smirnova.
31 Nikitina, 89.
32 Economist.
witnessed discussions but did not participate in them themselves.”\textsuperscript{33} One source of these attitudes is the widespread belief that ever election since 2011 has been fraudulent. A different poll conducted in 2016 demonstrated that “almost three quarters of Russians were ‘sure that they have no influence on the situation in the country,’ and (perhaps as a result) 64 percent felt no responsibility for it.”\textsuperscript{34} This suggests that if the Russian people were offered legitimate candidates and a meaningful vote in local, federal, and presidential elections, they could be persuaded that participation in the political process is a worthwhile endeavor.

\textsuperscript{33} Giles, 130.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
Works Cited


