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## **Putin and children**



Once again, the Russian state is going through a period of concern related to youth policy. President Vladimir Putin himself has already chaired not one but two “phone-in shows” this year. They have already become a tradition: for a couple of hours, once a year, Putin answers people’s questions and solves their local problems, live on federal TV channels. This year, for example, among other issues, the president personally closed a landfill in the town of Balashikha near Moscow, after complaints from local residents; all TV channels ran news from this landfill for a couple of days afterwards, and their reports were as expressive as news from the Syrian war zone, although, luckily, the landfill wasn’t bombed in the end. However, this pre-election year of 2017 is a year of innovation: some time after the Russia-wide “phone-in”, another was organised “for children”. Putin was talking to young people from the “Sirius” camp for gifted children in Sochi, and it was possible to ask him questions via social media.

High-ranking officials and federal politicians are now on tour, visiting summer camps organised by the federal agency for youth affairs. Previously, it was reported that a special programme had been set up to work with youth on the Internet, and the first - pathetic - fruits of the administration’s labours have appeared. For instance, a film published on YouTube “proving” that politician Alexei Navalny is no different to Hitler, and a couple of music videos from second-rate pop and rap performers calling for young people to stay away from opposition rallies.

### **The lost generation**

The reason for such concern is simple – it comes in response to the opposition rallies which took place all around the country on March 26 and June 12. Back then, sociology specialists and simple bystanders observing the street action noted that Russian protesters had got younger. There was even (completely unfounded) talk of a “revolution of schoolchildren”. The majority of the participants in rallies organised by Navalny were people of the twentysomething generation, who were previously considered apolitical in Russia, *i.e.* posing no threat to the authorities. Mostly young people work as volunteers and staff members at dozens of regional “campaign headquarters” set up by Navalny, who has declared himself a presidential candidate. This has created tension, and solutions to the new challenge need to be found.

The threat is, perhaps, massively exaggerated: even according to the organisers, no more than 25,000 people took part in the Moscow rally on March 26. That was a great success for the opposition, of course, but was it really so large for a city with a population of 13 million people? Navalny’s statements on his own YouTube channel sometimes attract up to 100,000 viewers, whereas truly popular vloggers talking about fashion, sports, computer games, and timeless issues of male/female relations reach audiences which are not just many times, but a whole order of magnitude [larger](#).

However, there is probably a reason for such alarmist sentiment: how many young people join anti-governmental rallies is not so important. What is important is that the majority of young people exist outside of the state propaganda machine’s range. They exchange memes via social media, watch Western TV series on the Internet, and read all kinds of media, including foreign ones (English has ceased to be a problem for young Russians). None of the state TV “specialities” – anti-Western hysteria, militaristic fervour, endless stories about the horrors of life in Ukraine – are aimed at them. Neither the set of values which the state is imposing on Russian people, nor the unstated but de-facto established ideology, actually reach those who will naturally inherit the country in the future.

Hence, there have been clumsy attempts to move online and talk to young people in their own language, such as the personal “phone-in for children” and other often blatantly comical steps by the authorities. Thus, for example, a meeting with top vlogger Sasha Spilberg (whose YouTube channel has about 5 million subscribers) was organised for State Duma deputies. Sasha, who attracts teenagers with stories about how to do make-up and why one should bathe in crisps, explained to the deputies that the new world demands more openness, and took the opportunity to condemn the opposition. Later, the Duma tried to establish a Council of Bloggers, but this idea [didn’t really work out](#), as not one single genuine YouTube star attended its first meeting.

### **Running round in circles**

The phrase “youth policy” became almost obscene in the noughties. Vladislav Surkov, who was responsible for home policy in the presidential administration at the time, was very impressed by the first Maidan in Kyiv, which led to Viktor Yushchenko coming to power (we should also note how strongly Russian politics depends on events in Ukraine). In order to confront possible street unrest, several pro-governmental youth movements were created at once. The most notable and famous of them was “Nashi”, led by Vasily Yakemenko, but there were also the ruling party’s “Young Guard of United Russia” (whose members would occasionally beat up opposition supporters right on the streets), the “Mestnye” movement, and a range of less notable organisations.

All these movements produced an endless series of scandals – “Nashi” in particular. Dressed in WWII uniforms, its members ran after Estonian embassy staff members to “fight the revival of fascism”, and stomped on portraits of opposition politicians and human rights defenders to show what young people think of the “fifth column” (by the way, it was them who brought this term back into the language of politics, and it has now literally become fashionable in Russia). A steady string of rumours followed – about banal theft related to supplying uniforms for the movement’s members (tens of thousands of young people dressed in identical jackets and hats participated in “Nashi” events in central Moscow), or the purchase of tinned meat for the famous “Nashi” summer camp on Lake Seliger.

The story of Surkov’s “youngsters” ended after he stepped down as first deputy chief of the presidential administration. Some heroes of bygone scandals continue to make careers behind the political scenes, but the majority have simply vanished as if nothing happened – no large-scale demonstrations, no derogatory “events”. But history has come full circle: the values that Vasily Yakemenko offered to young people at his summer

camps have become the core of the new Russian ideology. While creating “Nashi”, Yakemenko explained to his peers that their task was to “resist the unnatural alliance of liberals and fascists united in their hatred of Vladimir Putin”. Exposing internal enemies, confronting the outside world, and the quasi-religious cult of the Great Patriotic War are no longer for kids – these are conversation topics for mature adults on the TV screens and the parliamentary podium. They create a completely different image of young people, however.

The new summer camps set up by the federal youth agency are different from those on Lake Seliger. Firstly, there are several of them, the main one being the “Territory of Meanings” on the Klyazma River in Vladimir region. It is currently hosting a “political session”, in which prominent leaders of United Russia and other parliamentary parties are meeting with young people. But the “Tavrída” camp is also vitally important, simply because it is based in Crimea – one more way for Russia to emphasise its rights to the peninsula. There is also the “Baltic Artek” camp near Kaliningrad, and several other sites of regional importance.

There are no more “five-minute hate-a-thons” there, and young people no longer trample portraits of ideological opponents. Quite the opposite – everything is peaceful and focused on learning and using the latest technology. The format is cloned from the Soviet experience, which is naturally attractive to Russian rulers who grew up in the Soviet Union. The attention the Leader pays to the kiddies is strongly reminiscent of Soviet propaganda – suffice to recall the famous photo of Stalin with a little girl, or the importance of stories about Lenin’s love for children in the endless flow of books about that most human of all humans. We can also recall the mandatory young pioneers running to greet Leonid Brezhnev with flowers at every party-congress opening ceremony. Putin has broken Brezhnev’s record, by the way – he has now been in power for longer than the Soviet General Secretary.

On the eve of the elections, with the generation of 20-year-olds being drawn into the political struggle, the new youth camps are acquiring an additional, political-technological aspect. Provoking splits in society is a traditional strategy for the Russian authorities. Camps run by the federal agency for youth affairs (where talented children working for the country’s future meet prominent politicians) are a means of pitting the two “young Russias” against one another. The first Russia is represented by layabouts with “smartphones bought with their parents’ money” (as one popular TV presenter put it) who participate in illegal gatherings and mass disorder, misled by agents provocateurs from the opposition, etc. The propaganda machine has already released a set of stamps condemning the “revolution of schoolchildren”. The second Russia consists of young talents who write complicated computer software, build robots, break sporting records and, when they have some free time, listen enthusiastically to the president who has provided all opportunities imaginable for their important activities.

### **No common language**

The authorities’ problem, however, is that, while pursuing the new “youth policy”, they try to combine the incompatible. They wish to create a generation of builders of the future who are enthusiastic about the new opportunities afforded by the digital era (or at least convince themselves that such a generation exists – we must not dismiss the important psychotherapeutic effect of meetings between tired officials and young talents) but also to ensnare that generation in a web of archaic concepts essential for the current Russian state to function: the notion that “the country is surrounded by enemies”, the militaristic cult of war, and the officially declared hatred of anything different, which is sometimes entrenched in legislation (such as the “law banning the promotion of homosexuality to minors”).

There is no language suitable for such a task. It is no accident that the most quoted remark from the “phone-in” involving the president and children was not some political revelation (of which there were none), but Putin’s answer to a question about whether he had seen Oliver Stone’s recent film about him. “On cassettes”, Putin [replied](#) to his young interlocutors, who are unlikely to have ever seen a videotape. Skilfully, in just a couple of words, he outlined the unbridgeable gulf between the Russia of the past (which he represents) and the Russia of the future (which he is attempting to talk to).

Chiming in well with the new “youth policy” were the explanatory meetings organised at schools and universities following opposition rallies. Adults – perplexed people stuck in the past – were telling their students that “everyone lies” on the Internet, and that TV is the only truth, and even spoke of a “conspiracy of liberals” trying to bring Russia down at the behest of the British crown. Young Russia reacted in its usual

natural way - happily made fun of it, filmed it, and posted videos on the Internet.

The Russia of the past simply has nothing more to say to the Russia of the future. An imitation of dialogue may comfort the ageing rulers or look good on TV, but real dialogue is already impossible.

Incidentally, the broadcast of the president's meeting with children at the "Sirius" camp was only watched by several thousand people. This is a fiasco, even without comparing newbie videoblogger Vladimir Putin to the masters of the genre. Any 20-second video of a frolicking kitten would have been much more popular.

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