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[The Deep Roots of Russia's Young Protestors](#)



This year's anti-corruption protests first flared up over four months ago. But social media and traditional news media are still abuzz. What's keeping the conversation alive? Largely, a fascination with how young the protestors were. After the first photographs from the protests were published, the media were flooded with headlines about a revolution of 'schoolchildren.' However, [according to](#) Navalny himself, the average age of the March protestors was 18-30, while the prevalent age group was 18-24. Analysts [estimated](#) that men aged 17-30 and women aged 18-28 had planned to take part in the June 12 protests. It appears that representatives of two generations took part in both the March 26 and June 12 protests: those who have had President Vladimir Putin in power almost all their lives, and those born in the late 1980s/early 1990s, who have childhood memories of Russia under Boris Yeltsin.

Interest in this topic is further fuelled by politicians' attempts to influence these new rebels. Alexei Navalny is spending more time on social media, is more active on Instagram and YouTube, and openly supports satirical websites, including the ones that regularly satirise him. The authorities, meanwhile, organised a phone-in show with the president for youngsters, and deployed the rapper Ptakha along with various bloggers. Analysts have [slammed](#) these clumsy, cringeworthy attempts by the authorities to connect with young voters. Judging by how ill-thought through their online responses have been, the authorities have clearly been taken by

surprise.

Surkov's trap

Yet what is most surprising is that any of this is surprising. Most people seem to be overlooking that young citizens started to engage in politics over ten years ago. Vladislav Surkov was one of the ideologists responsible for working with young people at the end of Putin's first term and the start of the second. In 2005, the "Nashi" movement was created under his supervision, and later became an incubator for numerous youth organisations. The "Nashi" and "post-Nashi" movements aimed to solve social problems while coopting the most active youth.

Simultaneously, socio-political opposition movements started to form. Among the most active were "Young Yabloko" and "Oborona" [*"Defence"*], which organised not only political action, but also civic campaigns to defend students' rights and fight militia brutality. The main difference between those movements and "Nashi" was their decentralisation, which later had a positive impact on the development of other civic opposition movements in the regions. Those movements were not on such a large-scale as "Nashi", of course, due to their limited resources and because of hindrance by the authorities in virtually every phase of their activities. However, their publicity has had a much more important effect: Via the Internet, young people have learned that there are not only co-opted supporters of the authorities in Russia; there are also opposition activists, those who are prepared to risk being arrested by the militia or falling victim to provocateurs.

They told us that we were in charge here

It seems that two parallel processes have been going on in Russia since the mid-2000s. The authorities have tried to use young people to fight the "orange threat", and the opposition forces have mobilised activists to protest against the authorities' abuses of power. In this way, urban youth is increasingly interested in participation, and joining movements has become popular. At one of the Citizen Political Scientist project's [public lectures](#), sociologist Elena Omelchenko pointed out that this is linked to a range of new factors: solidarity, a new understanding of what it means to be a citizen, young people's Right to the City, and the fact that they are becoming active subjects in public life whose opinions must be taken into account.

By creating a pro-government public movement, Vladislav Surkov not only introduced many young people to participating in public life, but also made them believe they are entitled to create a new moral order. "Nashi" and its followers impaled dummy heads of undesirable public figures and politicians on stakes, blockaded the Estonian Embassy, and put stickers on cars that violated road rules; but a more distant consequence has been the creation of an aptitude for these sorts of rough and ready political tactics. Young people were given the power to decide what is right and what it means to be a Russian patriot. Subsequently, some movements tilted towards nationalism, others disappeared or underwent a transformation, but the results of their activities can still be observed today: representatives of the "Lev Protiv" or "Lvyonok Protiv" movements are tearing down flyers advertising prostitutes, the "Clean City" project is campaigning against drinking alcohol and smoking, and the president's aides are inspecting Makhachkala pharmacies to see whether they sell banned medicines. The young people gathering to protest on Tverskaya Street are also a result of the mobilisation of the 2000s, when this culture of civic activism we are seeing in full force this year was created and promoted.

Patriotic discourse

Few would doubt that the young people who went out to protest this year are patriots. This is how they regard themselves, which is also [supported](#) by in-depth interviews with young respondents. Sociologists believe that people live in their own narrow world, preoccupied with day-to-day problems, and are not really interested in geopolitical issues. However, TV channels and pro-government websites have long been promoting a patriotic discourse, creating an image of an enemy by dividing people into "us" and "them". This way the public is more likely to feel involved in what is taking place in Ukraine or Syria. They are starting to think not as separate individuals, but as members of a society who love, take pride in, and care about their Fatherland. This is what they have been taught. Even though youngsters do not watch Channel One, they are still under the influence of this patriotic discourse. Young people tend to keep strong ties to their families, which helps them become emotionally involved in the authorities' superpower agenda for two reasons: 1) parents are more likely to watch Channel One and will in turn pass on the news to their children during dinner-time conversations; 2)

parents like to recall their Soviet youth, harking back to a strong, fair country.

No matter how paradoxical it sounds, propaganda actually helps foster critical thinking. Constant references to the might of modern Russia in state media, films about Russian history, and in schools leave young people feeling that their country is great and deserves prosperity, and its citizens ought to have a good life. [Interviews](#) have uncovered a trend for a critical, rational view of patriotism. Instead of the “Crimean syndrome”, many young people have now come to understand the negative consequences of such foreign policy. So while state propaganda, following Schmitt’s advice, is trying to unite the people around a wise government, young people are realising something else – that their country deserves a good life.

The invisible citizen

So it would be incorrect to claim that a new youth political class was created on March 26 and June 12. The grass-roots politicisation of Russian society began long before. According to Carine Clément, an expert on protest movements, grass-roots public initiatives started to appear approximately after 2005, even in regional centres. They were often a reaction to abuses of power by the authorities and unresolved pressing issues. Public associations were created in order to deal with issues of communal services, the environment, and urban planning. They would operate for a limited time period, and in certain areas gained publicity on the Internet or (at best) local TV channels. The activists would cease their activity as soon as their problem was solved, but still set a precedent for their neighbours and people around them, demonstrating that collective action can actually bring results. So it would be incorrect to describe Russians as being passive – in addition to their main, paid occupation, people would also take part in public initiatives when they needed to defend local interests that were imperceptible to Moscow analysts.

The direct causes for the recent youth protests were the growing economic rift between common Russians and those in the circles of power, a crisis of confidence in the authorities, a heightened sense of civic awareness, and the mobilisation of an extensive network of grassroots public movements. However, young people were not apolitical before March 26th or June 12th. It was just that young people went out with their friends this spring and summer to show that they exist and know what is going on. Russia is their country, and they have felt it for a long time, except that nobody ever noticed or considered their civic attitudes significant before. Now we are observing their often desperate attempts to analyse and even fix this situation; but the authorities and the general public are somewhere up on the surface, while a youthful network grows in the grassroots beneath them, gathering strength and following logic that is very much its own.

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