

NATION-BUILDING À LA RUSSE

How Putin's government is educating the Russian elites of tomorrow

by **Kristiina Silvan**

The Seliger All-Russia Youth Forum is a camp that gathers tens of thousands of young Russians every year to learn more about how to make a difference in their own lives as well as in today's Russia. Last summer I spent ten days at the camp to learn more about young Russians' engagement in civic movements.

The forum was first organized in 2000 for the young activists of the pro-Putin NGO Walking Together (*Idushchie vmyestye*). Although it was organized annually in the first half of the two-thousand-aughts, it was still a very small-scale project. When Walking Together was reorganized as *Nashi* (Ours) in 2005, Seliger also began to grow in size and importance. Until 2009, it was organized as a summer training camp for *Nashi*. *Nashi* was a controversial mass youth movement that managed to bring together young, active Russians all over the federation to take part in diverse civic projects. It was founded and directed by Vasilii Yakomenko, the head of the Russian Federal Youth Agency, *Rosmolodezh*. The movement's *raison d'être* was to support Russia's development into a great world power in the 21st century. Its projects were designed to support Russia's unity and sovereignty, build a functional civil society, and promote the country's modernization. Moreover, the movement's leadership pledged support for Vladimir Putin and his political line. Because of such a strong political affiliation, many political commentators refused to regard *Nashi* as a "proper" civic society group. Indeed, it appeared to be a strange hybrid between the Soviet-era *Komsomol* and a Western-style youth organization. From time to time, *Nashi* organized daring and controversial activities. In 2007, after a series of anti-Estonian events in both Russia and Estonia, *Nashi* activists were banned entry into Estonia (and subsequently the entire EU).

From 2009 on, the forum has been open to applicants from all civil society organizations as well as individuals with innovative

projects. In 2013, the forum was divided thematically into four parts. I attended the civic week, designed for active young representatives from Russian NGOs, civic movements, and political parties. Although the forum officially welcomes representatives of all Russian NGOs and political parties, it is in practice only attended by civic activists from Kremlin-affiliated organizations and the youth wings of United Russia, A Just Russia, the Russian Communist Party, and the Russian Liberal Democratic Party. (To distance themselves from the forum, the opposition-affiliated organizations hold their own annual camp called *Anti-Seliger*. However, it has remained a small-scale protest project.) According to the director of *Rosmolodezh*, Sergei Belokonev, 26,000 young people applied to the forum in 2013, 15,000 of whom were invited to take part. The successful candidates were selected on the basis of their civic experience and pro-activeness. The state's share of the camp's budget was estimated at 240-250 million rubles (about 7 million dollars or 6 million euros), with an additional share provided by sponsors and private donors.¹

I successfully applied to participate in order to collect data for my undergraduate thesis, which sought to analyze the views of young Russians vis-à-vis civil society. I had heard about the camp for the first time in 2011 while studying in Russia. An acquaintance of mine, Dmitri, who had previously been an active member of *Nashi*, told me about the "brainwashing Pioneer camp" organized annually in the scenic setting of Lake Seliger. He had been disillusioned with the government in the run-up to the 2011 parliamentary elections and joined the opposition movement. Indeed, it was the political events of 2011 and 2012 that inspired me to choose the topic of my dissertation, and to choose Lake Seliger as the ideal place for data collection. In 2011, many Russian and foreign journalists, political commentators,



The Communist Party's tent in the Seliger forum village. The motto of the youth wing reads "Always Together!"

PHOTO: KRISTINA SILVAN

and sociologists interpreted the emergence of new political parties and civic movements as a sign of a blossoming civil society. A great deal of Western attention has been directed towards the new, non-Kremlin-affiliated NGOs that appeared at the time. The civic organizations that remained closely associated with the government of the ruling United Russia party were classified by the commentators as props of the "dummy civil society" with no real value. However, I myself was more fascinated by the mindset of the young, educated Russians who remained loyal to the Kremlin and to Mr. Putin in the aftermath of the 2011 mass protests despite the curbing of civil liberties, worsening corruption, and widespread electoral fraud. I soon concluded that Seliger was a place where I could meet and talk with such people and perhaps even learn to understand their motives and political viewpoints.

The forum's application process was fairly straightforward. All applicants were asked to perform some kind of civic task and share a description of it on the Internet, preferably using social media. Such a task could be anything that would help one's local community – anything from organizing a voluntary cleaning subbotnik in a local park, volunteering in an orphanage or elderly home, or organizing a charity event. Thus the organizers of the camp promoted concrete civic action and at the same time tried to inspire the participants' peers to do similar good deeds. This preliminary test also shed light on the type of civic activity that the Russian elites want to encourage.

Young communists with a variety of perspectives on the truth

I arrived at the camp on a bus from St. Petersburg together with a very loud delegation of the St. Petersburg *Leninsky Komsomol*, the youth wing of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. I recall a vivid conversation about the readability of Marx's

writings from the back seat. No wonder I was soon engaged in a conversation with them. I was pleased to see that not all the rumors were true: Seliger was also attended by those who were critical of Putin and his policies. As one of the young Communists said, winking, "We're the ones rocking the boat."² The young Communists responded to me with an amiable curiosity, complimenting the Finnish welfare system and giving me a copy of their party magazine. The delegation had come to the forum prepared: their aim was clearly to attract new blood to the party and promote their political agenda. However, as I later discovered, standing "in opposition" and being critical towards Putin may include a variety of perspectives on the truth. One evening I stopped by the Communist tent in the camp to listen to a lecture that was being delivered. To my surprise, the lecture was about the Katyn massacre, and the man delivering it was making a point that the Polish officers had in fact been executed by the Nazi forces, not the Soviets. No one in the audience questioned this new interpretation of the historic events, so I decided to keep quiet as well. This was, after all, not the first astonishing interpretation of a historic event at the forum.

Given the massive scale of the camp, the living arrangements were extremely well organized. Upon arrival, all participants in the camp were divided into "platoons", teams of about 20 people. Each team had its own tutor. Because I was on my own, I was assigned to a platoon that had participants from all over Russia: from Anadyr, Penza, Ivanov, and Vladimir. Most of my fellow platoon members were younger than me (18 or 19), but some were my age and older (24–26). There were only two Young Guard members; the rest were volunteers and local NGO activists: students or recent graduates. In just the first few days, I had established a genuine bond with everyone in the group, since we

The scale of the gathering is impressive. So many youngsters meeting in a peaceful way!

ate, slept, and attended activities together. Food was provided by the organizers and usually consisted of a salad we would make ourselves and a main course that two platoon members would bring from the food tent. Meals were always enjoyed together as a group. Sleeping was arranged in tents, with several people sharing. Some people who wanted more privacy had brought their own tents. Each platoon had also a shower tent and there were several toilet barracks around the campsite. In evenings we would sit around the fire and drink tea (alcohol was not permitted in the area), play the guitar and sing, or walk around the campsite. There were events, debates, film screenings, concerts, and games being organized all over the forum village. The pastime organized by the Cossack youth were perhaps the most popular: they had brought horses that people could pet and even ride, and they organized traditional Russian dances with live music as well as equestrian combat shows. Surrounded by an exciting, young crowd on a warm summer night, I felt more like I was at a music festival. There was a genuine feeling of belonging, shared by the vast majority of the forum's participants. Meeting young people from all around Russia who were happy to speak about their home regions and lifestyles was perhaps my favorite part of Seliger.

Dreams of empire: Placing Russia at the center of the world

The camp, an “educational forum”, is aimed at gathering the brightest young Russians in a place where they can get expert advice and support for their civic projects and get to know like-minded people from all over the federation. While the camp officially had no political agenda – it was open to supporters of all parties and civic movements – the pro-state and pro-Putin stance of the organizers was easily recognizable from day one. This was demonstrated by the curriculum of the lectures, the speeches delivered by guest speakers, and the lack of any open critique of the current regime. Putin was referred to as the “national leader”, and massive posters of Putin quotations decorated the campsite of the Seliger village. Indeed, the president won the title “Patriot of Russia” in a vote, beating Peter the Great and Joseph Stalin by a clear majority. The title of Russian “Anti-patriot”, on the other hand, was awarded to Boris Yeltsin, with Mikhail Gorbachev and the contemporary opposition leader Alexey Navalny following close on his heels. It is not difficult to understand the logic behind these results: the statesmen who consolidated the Russian/Soviet Empire were ranked highly by the young voters, and those who were seen as guilty of the state's downfall were punished. This is consistent with the forum organizers' agenda: to pull a strong, sovereign Russia out of the shadows and into the center of world affairs. There is no room here to address the complicated details of the Russian identity crisis, but I believe it is evident that Russians today suffer from a kind of inferiority complex vis-à-vis “the West”. It is as if they, the citizens of a former world superpower, are terrified of looking like the “losers” of the Cold War. National pride is, after all, one of the things keeping the multi-ethnic federation from falling apart.

In Seliger, I was able to peer into the core of contemporary

Russian nation-building. Even more interestingly, I could also observe how young, ardent Russians reacted to the values and ideas put forward by the organizers of the forum. Besides events that were designed to touch the hearts of the young patriots, such as the daily rock version of the Russian national anthem as a wake-up call and the festive ceremony of raising the Russian flag on the first day, the lectures were clearly aimed at rationalizing the necessity of patriotism in today's Russia as a force holding the federation together.

Four lectures were held each day. For our team, the first lecture was titled “Personal Efficiency”, and it sought ways for people to define their personal goals and achieve them. These lectures were free of political content. The day's second lecture was titled “Russia – The Image of the Future” and discussed the problems Russia faces today: everything from alcoholism, the low birthrate, and youth unemployment to the falsification of Soviet history in post-Communist Europe. According to the lecturer, the only things that all Russians have in common are citizenship in the Russian Federation, a shared history, and, to a certain extent, the Russian language. He warned us that studying history was extremely important because “if we do not know our history and if we have no feeling of belonging, we have nothing”. Some of the views expressed by both the lecturer and my fellow participants left me deeply concerned about the political worldview that these young Russians held. They spoke ardently about the Third World War, the “war of information” that had begun after the end of the Cold War, and were convinced that all Western media are controlled by the “enemies of Russia” and deliberately trying to ruin Russia's reputation both in Russia and abroad. Openly opposing these ideas took great courage; I remember a girl who admitted she didn't feel particularly patriotic being figuratively ripped to pieces by her fellow participants.

The third lecture of the day was delivered by a guest speaker (such visitors included the head of the Russian electoral commission, Churov; the leader of the LDPR, Zhirinovskii; and President Putin, to name just a few). I found some of these lectures shocking, such as the one delivered by Igor Borisov, a member of the Russian Federal Committee for the Development of Civil Society and Human Rights, in which he concluded that the videos showing blatant electoral fraud in the 2011 and 2012 elections were in fact staged by Russia's enemies to generate public discontent and encourage a coup d'état. According to him, independent electoral monitors were nothing but elements of a Western conspiracy, aiming to destroy the Russian state. Since I had previously worked in close collaboration with such NGO activists, who were, on the contrary, very committed to the idea of securing the development of the Russian civil society sector, I could not believe my ears. The last lecture of the day would move even further in the direction of outright political propaganda by discussing the techniques the West had employed in order to stage “color revolutions” in Yugoslavia, Ukraine, and Libya, and how a similar fate could be in store for Russia. What stood out the most was the complete lack of alternative interpretations of the events. Moreover, instead of heavy criticism, the speakers were usually

met with resounding applause and words of gratitude. This indicates that the young public – or at least, the most active part of it – must have shared the worldview presented by the lecturers. Those who did not chose not to raise their voice against the authorities and their ardent supporters.

Information, propaganda, and inner dissonance

The camp thus consisted of two elements: positive, fun team-building and very biased, serious, “hardcore” political training. These two aspects also reflect the two sides of identity formation. The internal side of the process consists of attempts to create a common identity within a group, whereas the external side involves the construction of a contrast with a “constituting other”. The reason I felt so uneasy about the lectures was because I recognized I myself represented the “other” that was being discredited in the eyes of my fellow participants. The feeling of inner dissonance I experienced while being bombarded with information that completely contradicted my personal weltanschauung lead to a minor nervous breakdown on the second day. It should be mentioned, however, that my fellow teammates were extraordinarily supportive and confessed they did not fully share the worldview of the lecturers; instead, my team leader quite lightheartedly patted me on the shoulder and told me to learn how to “filter” the information to which I was subjected. Moreover, he was convinced that the lecturers were simply acting out a role and that they didn’t fully believe in their conspiracies. Another campmate, an ethnic Bashkortani, felt almost as anxious and distressed by the lectures as I did because he felt they were undermining the role of Russian’s ethnic minorities vis-à-vis ethnic Russians.

I will not go into further details about the lectures. In any event, they all represented a similar viewpoint on Russia’s position in the world: young Russians would have to be vigilant and strong in order to stand against the “Western influences” that seek a weaker Russia in order to seize control of her natural resources. After the initial shock, I grew used to such a stance and even adapted the necessary rhetoric to establish good communication with my fellow participants. I was happy to dance and sing along with cheesy Russian patriotic pop and even felt a warm shiver while singing the Russian national anthem.

A turning point in my stay was the day President Putin visited the forum. There was a sense of mass euphoria: everything at the campsite had to be spotless and perfectly tidy, the girls made sure to wear their nicest clothes. We gathered in the big tent approximately two hours before the president’s jet landed on the lake. Unfortunately, my friends and I didn’t make it into the front row, but we were still close enough to see and hear the president. President Putin stepped out of the plane and walked straight to the small stage in the front, welcomed by thundering applause. He was wearing a casual mustard-colored shirt and beige jacket and sat down on the platform while smiling warmly. He crossed his legs in a relaxed manner and answered the participants’ questions, sometimes making witty jokes. The relaxed and frank



Young Cossacks listening to a speech at the main stage. Cossack participants at the forum proudly wore t-shirts with the text “A Cossack serves God and homeland”.



Banners with inspiring quotations were hung all around the campsite. This one is from Mr. Putin, and reflects the kind of civic control the authorities wish to encourage: “The cost of housing services is increasing not only due to an increase in prices of natural monopolies and housing service organizations, but also because of the appetite of the control companies. We need to establish a rigid control over them, and, if necessary, stop and punish the wrongdoers.”



Q&A session with the president.

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Watch out for the “othering”! An anti-West attitude there may create a reflection here.



Taking a group picture after the president's visit.

way he communicated with us softened my views regarding his policies, of which I had previously been rather critical (such as the power vertical model, the laws on LGBT propaganda and “foreign agents”, and so on). Both my fellow campmates and I felt truly grateful and honored that the president had agreed to visit the camp, that he had made the effort to come see us when he surely had many important state matters to attend to! If there was anything that disappointed us, it was the useless questions presented by some people. After the president had left, we walked back to our camp cheerfully, taking group pictures along the way, with the warm August afternoon sun caressing our backs. As cliché as it sounds, I knew that that day would be unforgettable.

After this experience, I was confused and couldn't make up my mind whether I had been brainwashed or enlightened. Because I had genuinely wanted to understand the young Russians who attended the camp with me, I had actively pushed away my former views and tried to absorb the new information as if my mind were a tabula rasa. This definitely helped me establish a rapport with my fellow participants. At the same time, however, I was constantly aware of the profound differences between our views of the world, especially in our interpretations of current world affairs. We interpreted events such as the Ukrainian Orange Revolution completely differently. My personal guess would be that this interpretation gap is the result of the constraints on national media – the young Russians I met at Seliger were exposed mostly to the official state discourse. One of the lecturers openly stated that the teaching of history at schools should not be designed to provide pupils with historical facts, but rather to inculcate patriotism.

Everyone I talked to at the camp emphasized that, in order to flourish, Russia would have to follow its own path of development. The official state discourse has thus managed to strike a sympathetic chord in the hearts of at least some young Russians. While the urban youth that joined the mass protests in 2011 and 2012 might not fall into this category, there seems to be a sizable share of contemporary Russian youth that is keen to reject or even actively fight against the alien Western influences that the Seliger lecturers warned them about. If these young people ended up constituting the pool of future Russian leaders, we might

indeed be facing a new Cold War. Alienation, suspicion, and even loathing were among the feelings the Seliger youth held for “the West” and “Western” organizations like NATO, the EU, and even the UN.

As I mentioned in the beginning, the aim of my dissertation was to map out the views the Seliger participants had on civil society. It was fascinating to see how these young people, themselves involved in some kind of civic activity, conceived civil society in today's Russia. The academic literature defines civil society as the space occupied by non-governmental groups and people, such as grassroots organizations and NGOs. A strong civil society has also been linked to successful democratic consolidation. However, the interviews revealed that the young Russians held a somewhat different view of civil society. For them, it was a utopian model of an ideal society, described by one of the respondents as a *goal* rather than an actual phenomenon that could already exist. Furthermore, there was a consensus among the respondents that only those organizations that supported the common Russian good should be encouraged. If we assume that Russian policy-makers, including President Putin, understand the term “civil society” in the same way, the administrative work aimed at shaping the public arena in Russia begins to make a lot more sense. When Putin says he wants to support the emergence of civil society in Russia, he does not mean he wants to promote the development of a diverse network of independent NGOs, but rather the development of the citizens' commitment to do what he sees as “good deeds”.

One more inspiring Putin quotation: “We need to act in keeping with to the famous Russian proverb: The eyes may fear, but the hands still work.” ❌

references

- 1 Rosmolodezh, <http://fadm.gov.ru/news/16719/>, accessed April 18, 2014.
- 2 In his 2011 speech, Putin asked the opposition to cooperate with the ruling party and not to “rock the boat”: http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/russia/2011/11/111123_putin_duma.shtml, accessed April 18, 2014.

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