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# **THE QUEST FOR AN IDEAL YOUTH IN PUTIN'S RUSSIA I**

Back to Our Future!

History, Modernity, and Patriotism according to *Nashi*, 2005-2013

With a foreword by Jeronim Perović

*ibidem*-Verlag  
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*For Jessy*



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## Preface

My interest in Nashi began with the organization's first demonstration in 2005: the fact that a youth organization had used the commemoration of the Great Patriotic War to mobilize young Russians was very surprising to my Western European mind. Young people in Switzerland are more soporific than energetic when discussions or lessons in school turn to historical issues.

In Russia, however, war memory is held sacred by a vast majority of the population and continues to serve an important societal and political function. That a state-sponsored youth movement would use this memory as the basis of its identity is thus less surprising than it first seemed. The goal of this book is to show the role that war memory played for Nashi and its link to various aspects of the movement's identity concepts and ideology.

I developed *Back to Our Future* out of a Masters thesis at the University of Basel, submitted in 2010. Since then, I have revised and translated the book, added a chapter and new materials. I did research for this book in St. Petersburg, Moscow, at Lake Seliger, at Stanford University, in Zürich, Bern and Basel.

After finishing the book in August 2012, the opportunity arose to publish a second, revised and extended edition of the book in late 2013. The new edition includes current developments, some minor corrections and an improved index at the end. By covering Nashi's development from 2005-2013, the book now contains the organization's entire history, as it was disbanded in early 2013. Other state-sponsored youth organizations have taken Nashi's place, and new ones will undoubtedly be founded when the need arises to demonstrate unity and youth support for the Putin regime. It is my hope that this book – in conjunction with the parallel volume written by my colleague Jussi Lassila – will also continue to contribute to a better understanding of youth politics in Russia in the future.

I first want to thank my Russian friends and colleagues who have helped me understand Russian politics better. Danila Korogodskii hosted me in St. Petersburg and provided me with an astute and critical view on his country. Alla Lapidus guided me through the challenges of working in the Russian National Library, and Sergei Simonov, editor of *politgramota.ru*, took a lot of time to explain the intricacies of Russia's youth politics to me. I want to thank the two Nashi commissars, who spoke to me so openly, for their valuable insights into the organizations inner workings. This book would have been much less rich without my participation in the «International Youth Forum Seliger 2010». In spite of all its problematic aspects, I want to thank the organizers of the forum for inviting international students to the beautiful shores of Seliger. It was, however, the Russian volunteers who acted as unpaid mediators and translators between internationals and Russians who deserve the highest praise. I am particularly grateful to Dima, Masha and Polina.

I did a lot of work on this book during my year as a Visiting Scholar at the Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies at Stanford University (CREEES). I am grateful to Professor Emeritus Abbott Gleason and Professor Norman Naimark for making this year possible, and to Rob Wessling, Bob Crews, Karen Haley and Van-Anh Nguyen for the continued support at the Center.

The graduate students at CREEES and in Russian and Eastern European History made sure I felt welcome on campus. I want to thank Markian Dobczansky and Dan Heller for reading drafts of chapters. Jussi Lassila read the entire manuscript and gave me very useful feedback. Anna Whittington did a tremendous job editing the book «European style» and making sure my German did not get in the way of readable English prose. I am also grateful for series editor Andreas Umland's formatting work.

This project began and ended in Switzerland. Professor Emeritus Heiko Haumann was a great first reader of my MA-thesis, and Professor Jeronim Perovic deserves thanks for being a second reader and writing the foreword. Last but not least, Dr. Philipp Casula has for the past five years been a wonderful colleague and critic of my work.

At different times, this work absorbed me heavily. I therefore want to thank my family. My parents Daniela and Pete read early drafts of the thesis, and my brother Remo was an amazing study partner during the summer of 2009. My wife Jessy, finally, not only read multiple drafts of the English manuscript but also made sure I could focus on my work *and* not get too absorbed by it. Without her, life would be much less fun.

*Ivo Mijnsen*  
Zürich, January 2014



## Foreword

On 7 May 2012, Vladimir Putin was inaugurated as President of the Russian Federation, reclaiming the office he held from 2000 to 2008 and resuming the mantle of power that he had never fully relinquished to Dmitry Medvedev. Looking back at past achievements, he declared in his inaugural speech that we «strengthened our country and returned our dignity as a great nation», so that the «world has seen Russia risen anew». The new Russia Putin intends to build is a Russia looking back. The dignity restored means a correction of past errors, the biggest of which Putin sees in the decision to dissolve the Soviet Union, an event that he once described as the «greatest geopolitical catastrophe» of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Putin recognizes that a return to Soviet times is impossible, he promised in his inaugural speech to make Russia the «leader and centre of gravity for the whole of Eurasia». He has the country's «great past» and its «hundreds of years of history» in mind, thus, if not explicitly, holding up the imperial era as a model for the future.

Russia's still considerable military, political and economic weight, as well as its crucial importance as an energy supplier to Europe, mean that the West cannot afford to ignore developments in this country. Either way Russia turns will affect stability and security on the Eurasian continent. Russia's actions in the recent past, repeatedly cutting energy supplies to customers west of its borders, invading Georgia in August 2008 with disproportionate use of force, suppressing free media, and cracking down on political opposition all clearly point toward a less cooperative Russia when dealing with the West, a more aggressive Russia when defending interests in its near abroad, and a more authoritarian system domestically. Yet if most would agree that Russia has become more assertive under Putin's leadership, few understand the ideological and sociopolitical underpinnings of this development. If official rhetoric and behavior tell only half of the story at best, then it is necessary to take a deep look into society itself.

Ivo Mijnsen chose to do precisely this when he examined the Russian youth organization called The Democratic Anti-Fascist Youth Movement 'Nashi'.

Nashi, which means «Ours» in English translation, was founded in 2005 and claimed several tens of thousands of members in dozens of Russian regions at the peak of its existence during 2005-07. Although a large organization, it is certainly not to be compared with Soviet youth organizations, such as the «Young Pioneers», or «Komsomol», with memberships in the tens of millions. In fact, many Russians are not even aware of Nashi's existence, as opinion polls show. Yet because Nashi is an organization initiated and founded directly by the Kremlin, as is widely acknowledged today in the literature, looking into its organizational structure, slogans, manifestos, and actions help to better understand state ideology and goals. What politicians like Putin might not find suitable to utter publicly, the leaders of Nashi, the so-called «commissars», never hesitate to do.

Nashi was founded with a clear purpose: To prevent a Russian repeat of Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution. Nashi's task was to mobilize youth in support of the government, ensuring that people loyal to Putin controlled the streets, thus preventing a scenario in which a mass movement was able to overthrow the existing regime. Nashi draws its legitimacy from Russia's heroic past, namely the war against Nazi Germany, or what Russians call the «Great Patriotic War». Nashi sees itself as a defender of homeland and history. Nashi defines all of what it considers Russia's foes today, be these international organizations, NGOs, individuals, states or internal opposition groups, to be «fascist», equating them with the Soviet Union's enemies in WWII.

Over two decades have passed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. To an entire generation of young people, this mighty empire seems already a thing of a distant past. A majority of young Russians in Moscow, St. Petersburg or Nizhny Novgorod profess similar values, and share the same interests as young people in Rome, Paris or Berlin. Most are apolitical and seek to pursue their individual happiness. Yet, as the example of the youth movement Nashi demonstrates, the Russian state under Putin has long recognized the vast strategic resource that young people represent in building a new Russia, and the government has put considerable effort into forming a «patriotic» youth with visions similar to those of Putin's strong and united country over the past decade. In fact, since the founding of Nashi in 2005, Russia has seen other

state-initiated efforts to create youth organizations. It is in these organizations where some of the new leaders of tomorrow's Russia are being formed. And it is thus essential to understand these organizations better, if we are to understand the Russia not only of the present, but also of the future.

Ivo Mijnsen's book is the more fascinating since it not only includes an analysis of existing literature and various types of documents but also the author's own experience as a participant in a Nashi summer camp in 2010 on Lake Seliger. The author thus traveled a long road, physically and figuratively. What he started in 2008-09 as a MA-thesis at the University of Basel, he now presents in a much enlarged and revised version in book-form. I thank Ivo for taking the extra time and effort in order to make his results available to a larger audience. The Western reader will enter a world largely unknown, and I am sure he will appreciate it as he will gain much needed insight into the way Russia «ticks» on many different levels.

*Jeronim Perović*  
University of Zurich



# I Introduction

«History is the succession of generations. Each generation is faced with the choice of either disappearing unnoticed or changing the world. Today, we, the generation of young Russians, are facing this choice.» (Nashi 2005a)

On 15 May 2005 a new organization appears in the spotlight of Russia's political stage: the Democratic Anti-Fascist Youth Movement (*Molodezhnoe Demokraticeskoe Antifashistskoe Dvizhenie*) Nashi (*Ours*). Founded just one month earlier, Nashi gathers 60'000 young people shortly after Victory Day, in a show of solidarity with the veterans of the Great Patriotic War<sup>1</sup> – and with Vladimir Putin. The demonstrators have a clear message: Russia's youth is patriotic and values the country's historical achievements. Russia's youth is loyal to Putin and ready to take on the challenges facing the country. Two weeks later, Putin receives a delegation of Nashi-«commissars» – the organization's cadres – in the Kremlin. The meeting demonstrates the president's blessing for the youth movement. Putin appears to support Nashi's aim of carrying out a «revolution», a revolution that will put a patriotic new elite in power, one that «believes in the future of Russia» (Nashi 2005a).

Fortunately for the Russian government, Nashi's revolution is with, not against Putin. Since he stands for returning Russia to its rightful status as a global great power, Nashi argues, he deserves the support of Russia's patriotic youth. Only a powerful and modern Russia can maintain its sovereignty in a globalized system of ruthless competition and safeguard the freedom of its people, writes Nashi. Russia must be an open and innovative country that buttresses its position not by military might, but because of the «attractiveness of Russian culture, its way of life, its political, economic and social system» (ibid.).

---

1 This name is used in Russia to designate World War II. World War II started on 1 September 1939 with the German invasion of Poland, whereas the Great Patriotic War began on 22 June 1941 with the German invasion of the Soviet Union (Operation Barbarossa). Both ended with the German surrender on 8/9 May 1945.

Despite the clear affinity between the Kremlin and the patriotic-minded youth organization, both go to great lengths to avoid the impression that the organization is state-run, presenting it instead as a grassroots initiative (Kashin 2005c). Nonetheless, the relationship between Nashi and the authorities is close from the start. The organization was able to make large-scale use of the government's «administrative resources»: mass demonstrations in Russia did not take place without official blessing in 2005.

Nashi-founder Vasilii Iakemenko was a former official in the Presidential Administration with a history of founding pro-Kremlin movements: his previous project was the organization *Idushchie Vmeste* (*Going Together*). Another early driving force was Vladislav Surkov, architect of Sovereign Democracy, which discursively combines Russia's democratic development with a strong emphasis on safeguarding the country's national sovereignty.

The Kremlin's willingness to mobilize tens of thousands of young Russians shows that the authorities took the threat of an Orange Revolution very seriously. Nashi was only the largest of a number of newly founded pro-Kremlin youth organizations.<sup>2</sup> Political scientists disagree on the extent to which the Ukrainian events endangered the Putin regime. Robert Horvath believes that Russia faced a potentially revolutionary situation in 2005 (Horvath 2011: 2). Viktor Eremin argues that Nashi's demonstrations were merely meant to show to the opposition the mobilization potential of pro-Kremlin youth groups (Eremin 2007: 3).<sup>3</sup>

Nashi was founded to stabilize Russia's political system and to take back the streets from opposition demonstrators. Journalist Maksim Sokolov called Nashi the Kremlin's «Iron Soldiers» (*zheleznyi front*) (Sokolov 2005), and Ivan Bol'shakov, political scientist and liberal politician, termed them «storm troopers» (Bol'shakov 2006: 120). These polemic descriptions of Nashi nonetheless pinpoint a major problem of the organization – the propensity for violence among parts of its activists. However, they are neither analytically profound, nor do they account for Nashi's ability to attract large numbers of youth

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2 Other organizations founded in 2005 included the Young Guard (*Molodaia Gvardiia*), founded by the party of power United Russia (*Edinaia Rossiia*), and the Locals (*Mestnye*).

3 The Russian government defines youth as the age group between 14 and 30 years (Pravitel'stvo Rossiiskoi Federatsii 2006). This corresponds to the Soviet definition. Young Soviet citizens joined the Komsomol at 14 and left it at 30.

or its longevity. Nashi played an important political role long after its main goal – the prevention of an opposition coup during the presidential elections of 2008 (Nashi 2011b) – was fulfilled.

A more analytical line of research sees Nashi as a vehicle for official youth politics. As the Putin administration has traditionally kept a tight lid on political expression, these authors maintain, Nashi serves as a kind of valve to channel popular discontent in a controlled fashion (Robertson 2009: 545). Sergei Balmasov defines Nashi as a «puppet youth movement» (Balmasov 2006: 21) of the Kremlin, and Sergei Gavrov considers their actions to be political theater (Gavrov 2006: 353). Philosopher Pavel Gurevich writes that Nashi is an «imitation» of youth politics (Gurevich 2005: 24). This strand of research argues that the Russian government is unable or unwilling to provide youth with avenues of upward social mobility and political participation. The authors place the emergence of Nashi in the context of Russian politics, without, however, conducting an in-depth investigation of this context.

Aside from promising upward social mobility, Nashi directs potential aggression among youth against real and imagined enemies that block activists' – and Russia's – success. These «enemies» were repeatedly the target of verbal and physical attacks by Nashi. Dmitrii Andreev conceptualizes this channeled discontent as «managed passion» (*upravliaemaia passionarnost'*):

«For the impassioned (*passionarii*), some kind of an enemy is absolutely vital. Or not even so much an enemy as some kind of a negative example, an object of anti-imitation (*ob''ekta antipodrazhaniia*), a strong idea of what one does not want to be under any circumstances.» (Andreev 2006: 50)

«Ours»' sense of shared identity thus relies to a significant extent on a shared opposition against those who are «not us».

Only a handful of scholars have published more profound analyses of Nashi. Liubov Borusiak was the first to scrutinize the organization's ideological foundations (Borusiak 2005). Ulrich Schmid focuses on Nashi's political function. He points to the discursive connection between war memory and the fight against a vague «fascist» enemy (Schmid 2006: 14). This connection plays an important role for the analysis in this book as well.

Douglas Buchacek's MA thesis on Nashi (Buchacek 2006) focuses on Nashi's mobilization mechanisms and ideology. He convincingly analyzes Nashi's early publications but rarely contextualizes them further.

All of these publications came out within a year of Nashi's foundation. Since 2006, interest in the movement has waned considerably, with some scholars predicting the organization's inevitable decline as early as 2008 (Heller 2008). The important exceptions are Maya Atwal and Jussi Lassila, who wrote their dissertations about Nashi.<sup>4</sup> Both negotiate the tension between its status as a vehicle for the promotion of official policies in the youth sphere and the organization's independent maneuvering space. Atwal's article tracks Nashi's development since 2008 and provides an important framework for understanding the movement's continued existence. According to her, Nashi refocused its activities in the economic realm and achieved a modicum of independence from the government (Atwal 2009: 756). Lassila believes that Nashi has to fulfill a difficult balancing act between propagating a government platform and providing its activists with a means of expression appropriate to the youth sphere. He highlights the importance of Nashi's performative acts in creating emotional attachment to official ideology among youth (Lassila 2012a: 110ff.). As an important actor in the sphere of youth politics, Nashi conveys a government-sponsored political identity to young Russians. This book analyzes Nashi and its ideas in the context of Russian politics and youth politics in particular, tracking the organization's development from 2005 to 2012. The book principally analyzes Nashi's discourse at three specific points in its history, localizing it in the political environment of contemporary Russia. These three «focal points» (Hansen 2006) include Nashi's founding in 2005, its actions in the «memory wars» with Estonia in 2007, and the «International Youth Forum 2010» at Lake Seliger.

The foundation of Nashi and its discursive underpinning, I maintain, cannot be understood separately from the values and worldviews of the Putin government. Nashi reflects government-sponsored efforts to stabilize the field of politics and official values following the 1990s and the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> The most important demands in this official discourse are a strong

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4 Atwal's dissertation is as of yet unpublished, her published article is discussed below. Lassila defended his PhD-thesis in 2011. The ibidem-Verlag published it in a revised version along with my book (see Lassila 2012b).

5 The assumed existence of a hegemonic project under Putin means neither that he alone articulated this project, nor that it originated with him. Instead, the Putin regime coopted various discourses and demands. Moreover, there is considerable continuity between the politics of Yeltsin's second administration and Putin's (Bacon

Russian state anchored in its heroic history, a modern economy, global great power status, and a society united against its enemies. Nashi conveys these demands to a youthful audience.

Nashi thus offers to its activists a political identity, a historical genealogy, a sense of belonging to a community, and, possibly, a career. An idealized narrative of the Great Patriotic War plays a crucial role as a discursive template to make sense of the current situation in Russia. It has contributed significantly to state-sponsored attempts at consolidating youth politics and Russia's national identity. As will be shown, its mobilizing power is considerable, especially in times of perceived threat.

However, the most important moments of Nashi's discourse remain in tension with one other – particularly with regards to Russia's position in the world: warlike imagery of the world suggests an exclusive focus on defending the country, while a modern economy demands a degree of openness. Moreover, Nashi promises its supporters self-realization and simultaneously demands submission to a highly hierarchical system. These contradictions are a great problem for Nashi's professed goal of turning Russia into a country that is internationally competitive. The contradictions in Nashi's discourse thus threaten to undermine its goals. At the same time, the variety of goals and demands in Nashi's discourse – and in the ideology of Sovereign Democracy on which much of it is based – is the precondition for mobilizing a broad cross-section of Russia's youth. The analysis of the effects of these contradictions thus plays an important role in this book.

*Background and Context*, the first chapter, provides the methodological and theoretical framework of analysis. This includes the basic terms of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's discourse analysis and of the politics of history and memory. I then discuss Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's concept of securitization, complemented by an analysis of the historical background of the Putin regime, which focuses on the government's attempts to stabilize the political situation after the Soviet collapse and the chaos of the 1990s.

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et al. 2006: 183). Putin has articulated and embodied these efforts in the most consistent and convincing fashion.

The second chapter, *Russia's Youth, the Orange Revolution, and Nashi*, turns to Russia in 2005. Nashi's founding occurred as a direct consequence of Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution, which deeply affected Russian politics. The analysis in this chapter shows that official discourse presented the Orange Revolution as threatening the stability of Russia's political system. Government agencies and Russian political scientists wanted to safeguard the patriotism and political reliability of a young generation often perceived as exposed to harmful (Western) influences and in need of guidance. The stabilization and *securitization* (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998) of the youth sphere through the foundation of Nashi became a crucial political task.

The promotion of an idealized, mythologized narrative of the Great Patriotic War was a key component of programs for the youth's patriotic education. Nashi presented itself as standing at the forefront of a struggle to build a Russia anchored in its historical identity and ready to face present and future challenges. The war myth became a template through which to interpret the ambitions and obstacles on Russia's path to great power status. Drawing on historical parallels, Nashi identified enemies that threatened Russia's statehood and subsumed them under the signifier «fascist». Combined with Vladislav Surkov's ideology of Sovereign Democracy, the war myth provided a hegemonic response to the political instability of early 2005.

The conflict over the removal of the «Bronze Soldier » in Tallinn, Estonia is the subject of chapter three, *Remember! Nashi and the Bronze Soldier*. The riots after the Estonian government's removal of the Soviet war memorial from downtown Tallinn on 26 and 27 April 2007 were one of the few instances in which conflicting interpretations of World War II turned violent. In the aftermath, Nashi picketed the Estonian embassy in Moscow and attacked the ambassador.

Analysis of Nashi's online publications reveals the role the war myth played as a template for interpreting the political conflict with contemporary Estonia. Nashi discursively equated the supporters of the National Socialists in World War II with the contemporary Estonian state and thus evoked a sense of immediate threat to present-day Russia: both were subsumed under the term «fascist». This threat perception led to the securitization of memory, which legitimized drastic measures by Nashi.

In chapter four, *The Foundry of Modernization*, the focus shifts to the International Youth Forum Seliger 2010, which the Russian government and Nashi organized. Seliger is a further «focal point» for Nashi. Nashi calls the camp its «foundry of modernization» and has steadily extended both its size and the scope of participants.

The organizers first opened the secretive camp to foreign participants in 2010. As a participant observer, I was able to study the manner in which official Russian identity concepts were conveyed to an international audience. The war myth and the moment of unity against Russia's enemies played a smaller role than the themes of modernity, international cooperation, and Sovereign Democracy. Nonetheless, the organizational structure of the camp and unofficial documents still revealed strong securitizing moments: the demand for openness and modernization was undermined by a perceived need to maintain control.