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SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE STATE IN RUSSIA

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Analysis

Russia's "Nashi" Youth Movement: The Rise and Fall of a Putin-Era Political Technology Project

By Regina Heller, Hamburg

Abstract

The Russian Nashi (Ours) youth movement is the best known and most successful of the government-friendly youth organizations that sprang up in Russia in recent years. However, Nashi, mainly known for its headline-grabbing events and aggressive behavior towards the opposition, is not a grassroots youth movement, but a Putin-era political technology project. Nashi was founded in response to the "Color Revolutions" in the post-Soviet space in order to foster "anti-orange" sentiment among Russian youth and to prevent mass mobilization for the Duma and presidential elections of 2007/2008. Putin adviser Vladislav Surkov apparently guided the movement from the Kremlin. In order to enhance Nashi's mobilization potential, the government provided considerable administrative and financial resources. The strategy was successful as Russia's political leadership steered safely through the turbulent election period. Now the authorities are looking for ways to return the genie to the bottle.

The Nashi Youth Movement

About half a dozen government-friendly youth movements have emerged in Russia in the past few years. These groups have managed to bring young people onto the streets in droves and mobilize them for their political ends. Their attraction is remarkable, given that the majority of Russian youth are considered to be politically disinterested and apathetic. Among these political youth organizations, the pro-Putin Nashi (Ours) youth movement, founded in March 2005, has doubtlessly experienced the most rapid success: Within only three years, its membership figures grew to over 120,000, and the number of sympathizers is likely even higher.

Nashi garnered publicity through headline-grabbing events and mass rallies that were staged in a media-friendly format and attended by an average of several tens of thousands of young people. Their activities so far have been directed mainly at the political opposition in Russia, but Nashi has not shied away from protests against Western countries either. The group gained international attention in spring 2007 as mass protests against the relocation of a Soviet war memorial in the Estonian capital of Tallinn turned violent, with street fighting and physical attacks on the Estonian ambassador to Moscow.

A Political Test-Tube Baby

Considerable evidence suggests that Nashi was founded by political strategists advising then-president Putin in response to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in order to foster "anti-orange" sentiment on Russia's streets and to prevent possible mass mobilization against the political regime ahead of the Duma and presidential elections of 2007/2008. The "Color Revolutions" in the post-Soviet space sowed fear among Russian government representatives that similar upheavals could spill over into Russia. This fear was stoked in particular by Vladislav Surkov, Putin's longtime adviser, chief ideologist, and deputy head of the presidential administration. Against the backdrop of the Orange Revolution, Surkov had claimed that the liberal opposition and Western countries were trying to start a revolution in Russia as well and undermine the state's authority. In this situation, the perceived pressure on the government to take measures preserving the political status quo in Russia was increasing.

Political strategists were particularly attentive to the role of young people. Events in Ukraine had shown that youth organizations critical of the regime were instrumental in convincing the public to take to the streets against the government there, and had thus made an essential contribution to the change of power. Also, activists from Ukraine, Georgia, and Serbia – some of them financed by Western NGOs – had begun to export their knowledge and practices to other countries in the post-Soviet space, including Russia. Both of these factors are likely to have contributed to the creation of Nashi in March 2005 as a counter-movement to the youth organizations critical of the regimes in the post-Soviet space.

Vladislav Surkov: Pulling strings in the Kremlin

There can be little doubt that Kremlin strategist Surkov is the creator of Nashi. The author of such concepts as "directed" and "sovereign" democracy has been linked

frequently with the youth organization; he has repeatedly made public pronouncements on Nashi and its activities. Surkov is also a longtime acquaintance of 36-year-old Vasily Yakemenko, the official founder and, until recently, head of Nashi. Their relationship goes back to the early Putin years, when the up-and-coming Yakemenko was briefly a staff member in the presidential administration. It was also Yakemenko who, during this period and presumably with the backing of Surkov, founded the first youth organization loyal to the Kremlin, Idushie Vmyestye (Walking Together). Even then, Surkov was already actively supporting the creation of government-friendly youth organizations and emphasized that the government needed the support of the street in order to prevail in the country's political battles.

While the first Kremlin-friendly youth organizations had no definable agenda beyond a strong fixation on Putin's personality, and instead were noted for erratic stunts that were occasionally highly controversial within Russian society, Nashi was strongly oriented towards battling the "orange peril" and designed to create, as quickly as possible, an "anti-orange" sentiment among Russia's younger generation. To this end, the organization was bolstered with a patriotic-nationalist ideology that guides its program. Nashi supports Putin's political goals and regards itself – in line with Surkov's idiom and purpose – as a bulwark against all who might conspire against these objectives. In its manifesto, the organization refers to an "unpatriotic coalition of oligarchs, anti-Semites, Nazis, and liberals" who want Russia to descend into crisis and who must therefore be stopped. Nashi was committed to the task at hand by Surkov himself. At its founding congress in February 2005, he urged the young people: "We will not allow the revolutions in Georgia, Serbia, and Ukraine […] to be repeated in Russia."

State Resources Increase Mobilization Potential

While the maneuvering space of groups criticizing the government was successively cut back by the Putin administration, the government-friendly youth organization has evidently been given easy access to state resources. Nashi's strong mobilization potential in recent years has been made possible not least by massive financial and administrative support from the Putin administration. It is estimated that the government has been spending several hundreds of thousands of US dollars a month on financing Nashi and other youth organizations that have proved themselves to be regime stalwarts. The annual Nashi summer camps at Lake Seliger alone are alleged to cost between US$6 and 7 million. Financial support has been extended both directly and indirectly, i.e., the government has supplied funds of its own, but has also encouraged state-controlled corporations, such as energy giant Gazprom, to support Nashi's activities financially.

The ability of Nashi to mobilize young people has been further strengthened by giving the organization privileged access to state-controlled media. This intense media presence has catalyzed the dissemination of its issues in all Russian regions. Public attention was drawn to Nashi by means of shrill, loud, and provocative action, while opposition voices and concerns were dislodged from public perception. Another factor that is certain to have favored mobilization was the overt proximity of Nashi to then-president Putin and his political entourage. On more than one occasion, influential presidential advisers Surkov and Gleb Pavlovsky as well as the deputy prime ministers at the time, Sergei Ivanov and Dmitry Medvedev, visited the summer camp and considerably raised the status of the organization and its activists in the public consciousness. Even Putin himself met with select Nashi representatives on several occasions.

After Putin: What Next For Nashi?

The end of the Putin era seems also to mark the end of Nashi's success story. As early as 2007, there were rumors circulating among the public that the government was aiming to rid itself of its youthful street fighters. This change in fortune was indicated by plans to shut down at least 45 of Nashi's 50 regional branches and to merge the movement with other pro-Kremlin youth organizations. Perks such as free mobile phones for Nashi commissars have been cancelled, and the allocation of financial resources is being subjected to greater scrutiny. Events were called off, and even the leadership of the organization has dispersed in recent months: Leonid Kurza, the head of the St. Petersburg branch, has taken up studies abroad, while Yakemenko was appointed to a government position in early 2008. He is now in charge of the state commission for youth affairs.

Evidently, the aim is not so much to dissolve Nashi completely, but to reduce the organization's capacity to act. This tactical approach can be best explained by an abatement of the "orange panic" in government circles after the Russian election marathon: The Kremlin's favored parties and candidates were shepherded safely through the critical election phase, the regime's political continuity is assured, and mass protests have failed

to materialize in the streets of Russia. Thus, Nashi has fulfilled its purpose and is no longer required as the extended arm of the government in combating the "orange peril." Also, a new sense of self-confidence, combined with a new political style, seemed to be spreading in the Kremlin in the first months after the presidential elections, mainly represented to the outside world by Russia's new President Medvedev: a civilized Russia promoting itself as a friend and partner of the West. The yobbish hooligans of Nashi who have been ranting equally against the liberal opposition and the West in the streets of Russia did not fit this new image.

In the meantime, the first results of the taming of Nashi are being seen: A recent protest outside the European Commission's delegation in Moscow, directed against the EU's early 2008 entry ban for 11 Nashi activists and organizers of the mass protests in Estonia, was uncommonly measured in tone and only managed to mobilize a handful of youths on the street.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay

About the author:
Dr. Regina Heller is a research assistant at the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg. She studies Russian domestic and foreign policy as well as relations between the EU and Russia. Her recently published dissertation "Normensozialisation in Russland – Chancen und Grenzen europäischer Menschenrechtspolitik gegenüber der Russländischen Föderation" deals, inter alia, with the relationship between civil society and the state in Russia.

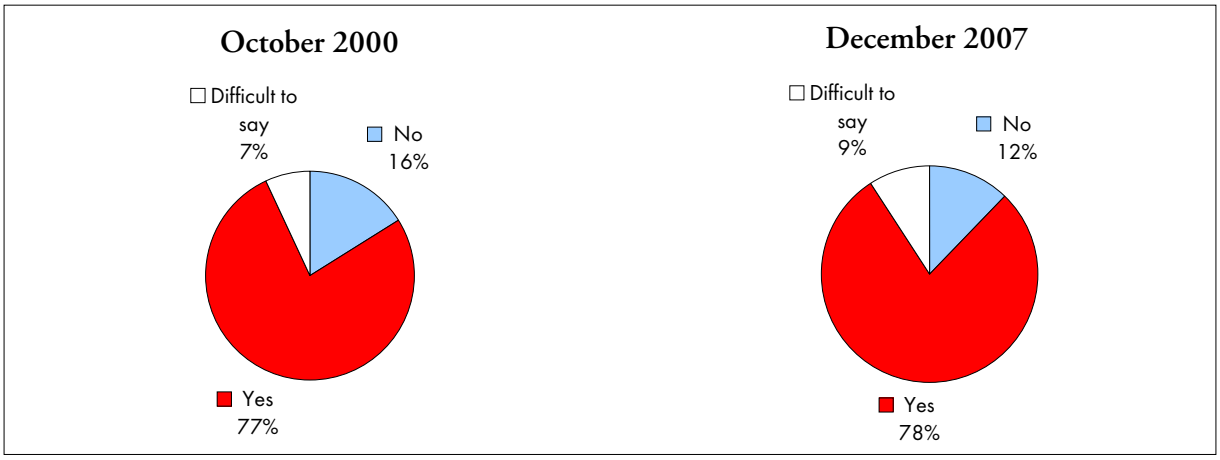
Further reading:

- Douglas Robert Buchacek, "Nasha Pravda, nashe delo: The Mobilization of the Nashi Generation in Contemporary Russia," *Carolina Papers in Democracy and Human Rights*, no. 7, Chapel Hill 2006.
- Viktoriya Topalova, "In Search of Heroes: Cultural Politics and Political Mobilization of Youths in Contemporary Russia and Ukraine," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 14 (2006), no. 1, pp. 23–41.
- Michael Schwirtz, "Russia's Political Youths," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 15 (2007), no. 1, pp. 73–85.
- Thane Peterson: "A Talk with Putin's Inside Man," *BusinessWeek*, 21 October 2002, http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/oct2002/nf20021021_0216.htm

Opinion Poll

"Nashi" and Patriotism

Do You Think That You Are a Russian Patriot?



Source: opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center on 21–24 November 2007 http://www.levada.ru./press/2008012101.html

In Your Opinion, What Does It Mean To Be a Patriot?

	October 2000	December 2007
To love your country	58%	66%
To believe that your country is better than other countries	17%	18%
To believe that your country has no deficiencies	4%	4%
To defend your country from any attack and accusation	24%	21%
To speak the truth about your country, no matter how bitter it may be	12%	10%
To work and act for the good and wellbeing of your country	35%	27%
To seek to change the state of affairs in your country in order to ensure a worthy future for your country	23%	21%
Other	3%	3%
No answer/difficult to say	10%	6%

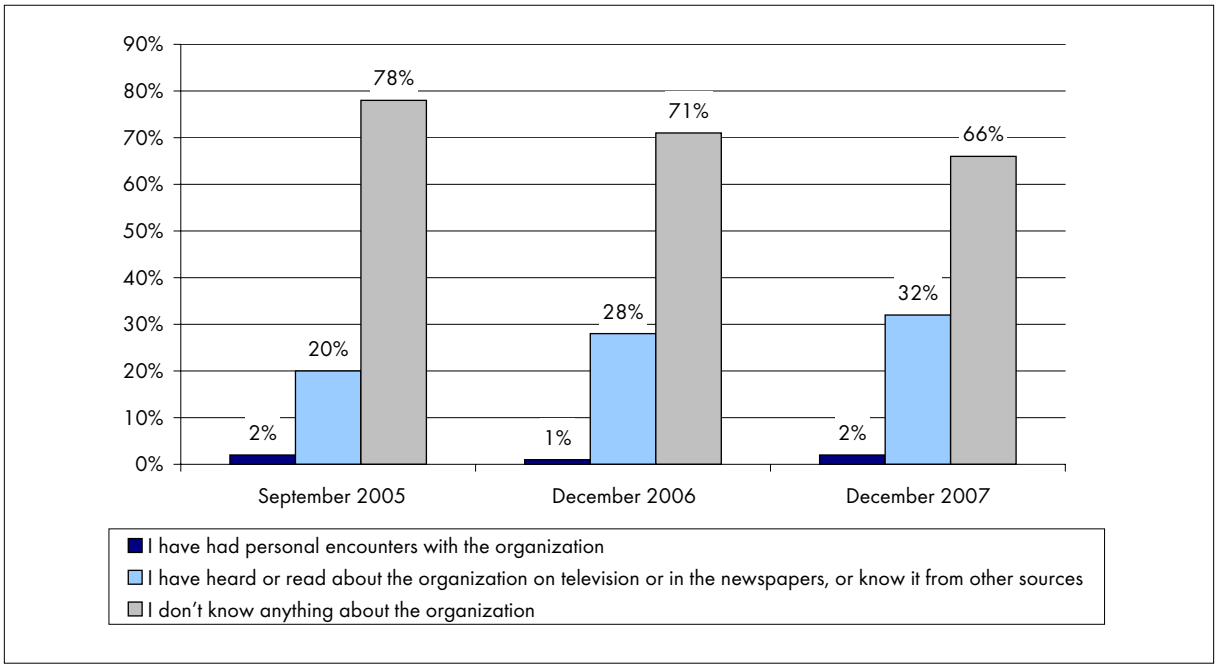
Source: opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center on 21–24 November 2007 http://www.levada.ru./press/2008012101.html

Which Political Youth Movements and Organizations Do You Know?

	October 2005	December 2006	December 2007
Nashi (Ours)	10%	23%	26%
National-patriotic youth movements (skinheads and others)	32%	33%	12%
The youth organisation of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation	13%	17%	10%
National-Bolshevik party (Limonovtsy)	25%	24%	10%
Idushchie vmeste (Those Who Go Together)	13%	11%	8%
Molodezhnoe Yedinstvo (Young Unity)	12%	17%	8%
Molodezhnoe Yabloko (Young Yabloko)	11%	15%	7%
Sokoly Zhirinovskogo (Zhirinovsky's Falcons)	12%	11%	7%
The youth organisation of the Union of Right Forces	12%	13%	6%
The movement DA! (YES!)	4%	4%	4%
Idushchie bez Putina (Those Who Go Without Putin)	3%	3%	2%
Avangard krasnoi molodezhi (Vanguard of Red Youth) (AKM)	2%	4%	1%
Oborona (Defence)	1%	1%	1%
Pora (It Is Time)	2%	2%	1%
Revoliutsionny kommunistichesky soiuz molodezhi (Revolutionary communist union of youth) (RKSM)	7%	4%	1%
Others	1%	1%	1%
There are no such organisations	27%	19%	27%
Difficult to say	21%	28%	30%

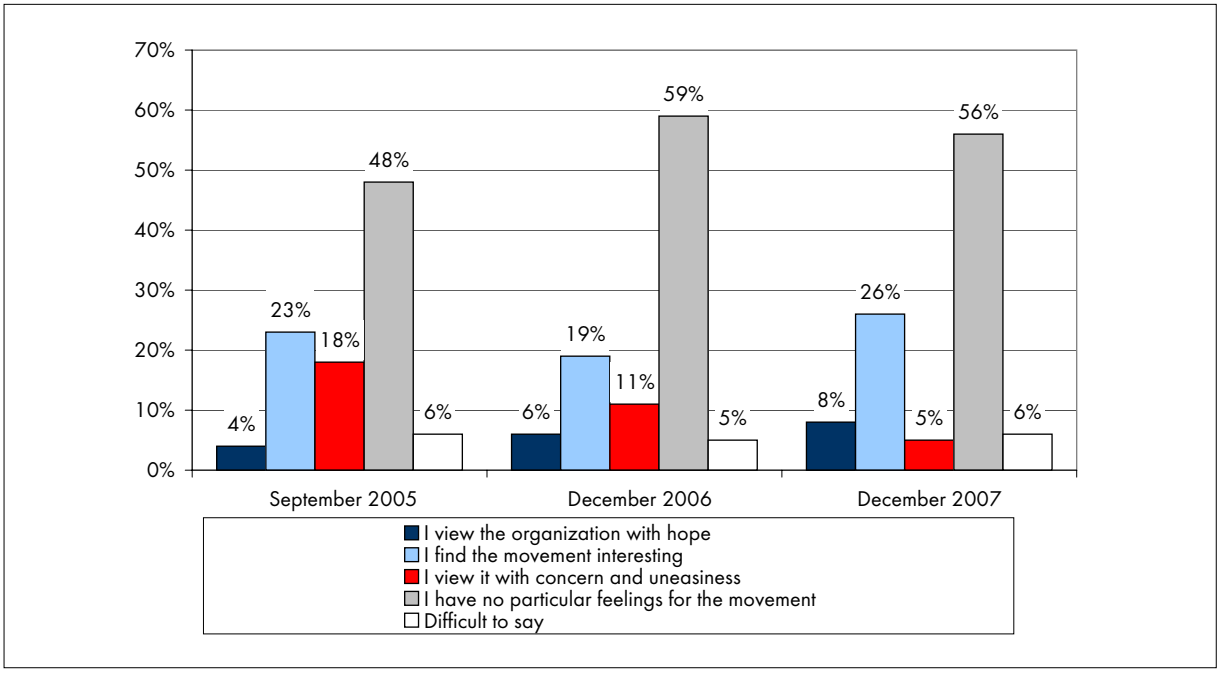
Source: opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center on 21–24 November 2007 http://www.levada.ru./press/2008012101.html

Do You Know the Movement "Nashi"?



Source: opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center on 21–24 November 2007 http://www.levada.ru./press/2008012101.html

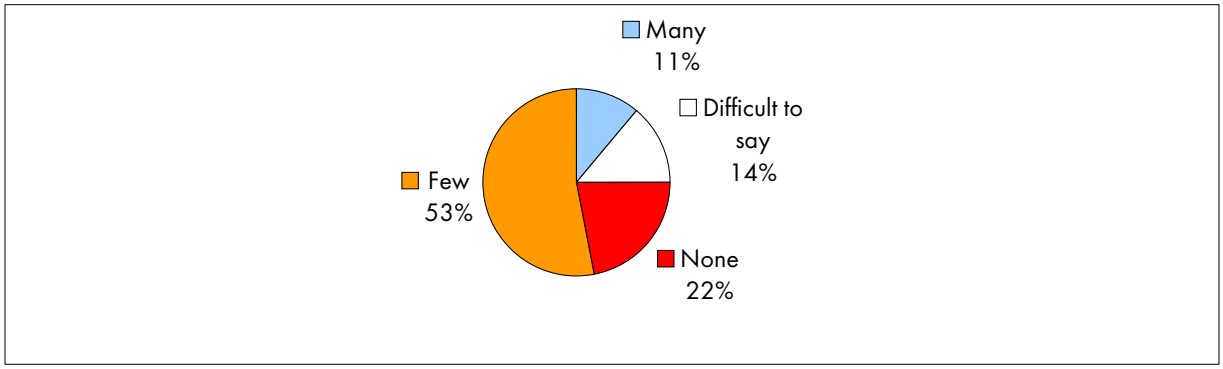
What Is Your Attitude towards the Movement "Nashi"? (This question was not posed to respondents who knew nothing about "Nashi")



Source: opinion polls conducted by the Levada Center on 21–24 November 2007 http://www.levada.ru./press/2008012101.html

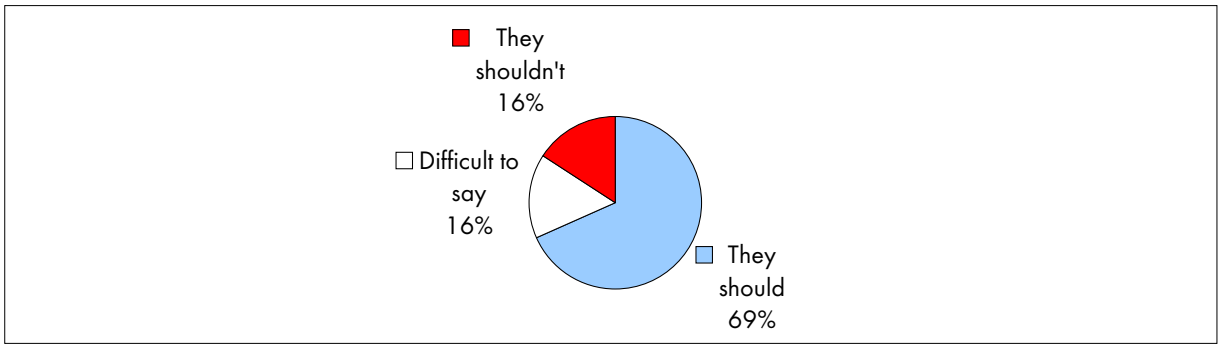
Participation of Young People in Politics

Are Many, Few Or No People Younger Than 25 Years Nowadays Interested in Politics?



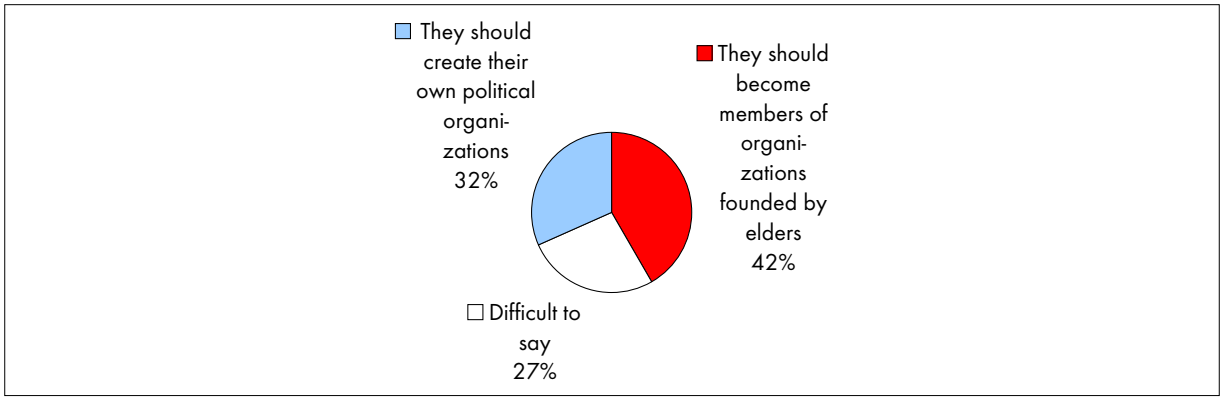
Source: opinion polls conducted by the "Public Opinion Foundation" (FOM) on 17–18 May 2007
http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024

Should Young People (Not Older Than 25 Years) Take Part in Politics and the Political Life of the Country?



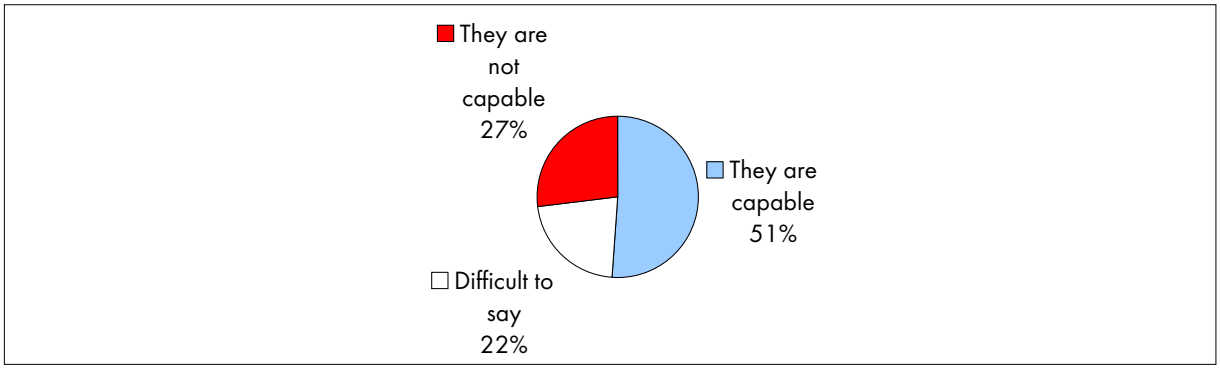
Source: opinion polls conducted by the "Public Opinion Foundation" (FOM) on 17–18 May 2007
http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024

In Your Opinion, What Is Better and More Correct: That Young People Become Members of Political Organizations Founded by Their Elders, Or That They Create Their Own Political Organizations, Separate From the Elders' Organizations?



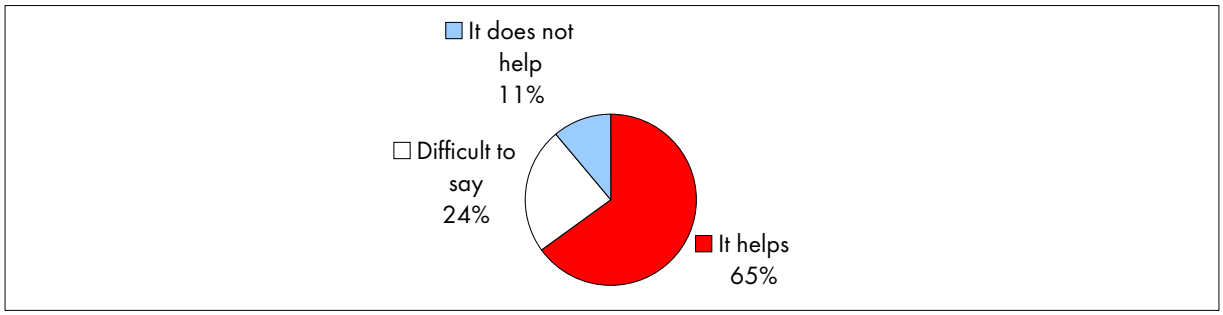
Source: opinion polls conducted by the "Public Opinion Foundation" (FOM) on 17–18 May 2007
http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024

Are Today's Young People (Those Not Older Than 25 Years) Capable Or Not of Creating Their Own Political Organizations and Movements?



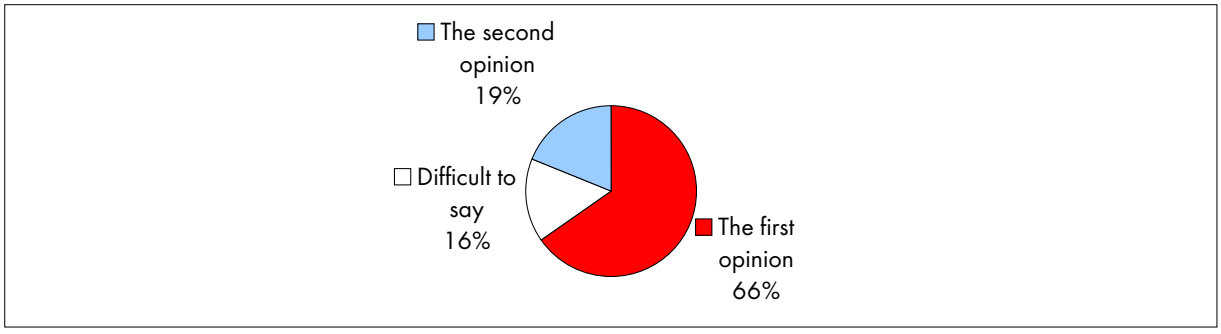
Source: opinion polls conducted by the "Public Opinion Foundation" (FOM) on 17–18 May 2007
http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024

Does Participation in Politics and Political Life Help Young People Attain a High Position in Society Or Not?



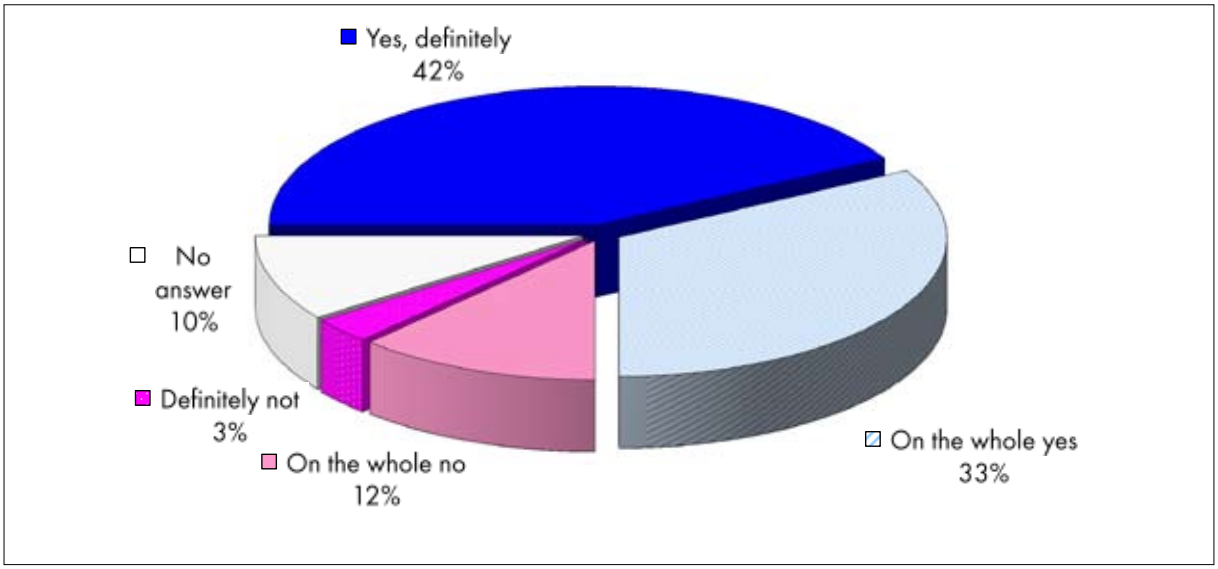
Source: opinion polls conducted by the "Public Opinion Foundation" (FOM) on 17–18 May 2007
http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024

Some Think That the State Should Help Youth Organizations, Others Think That the State Should Only See To It That Youth Organizations Act Within the Law. Which Opinion Do You Agree With, the First or the Second Opinion?



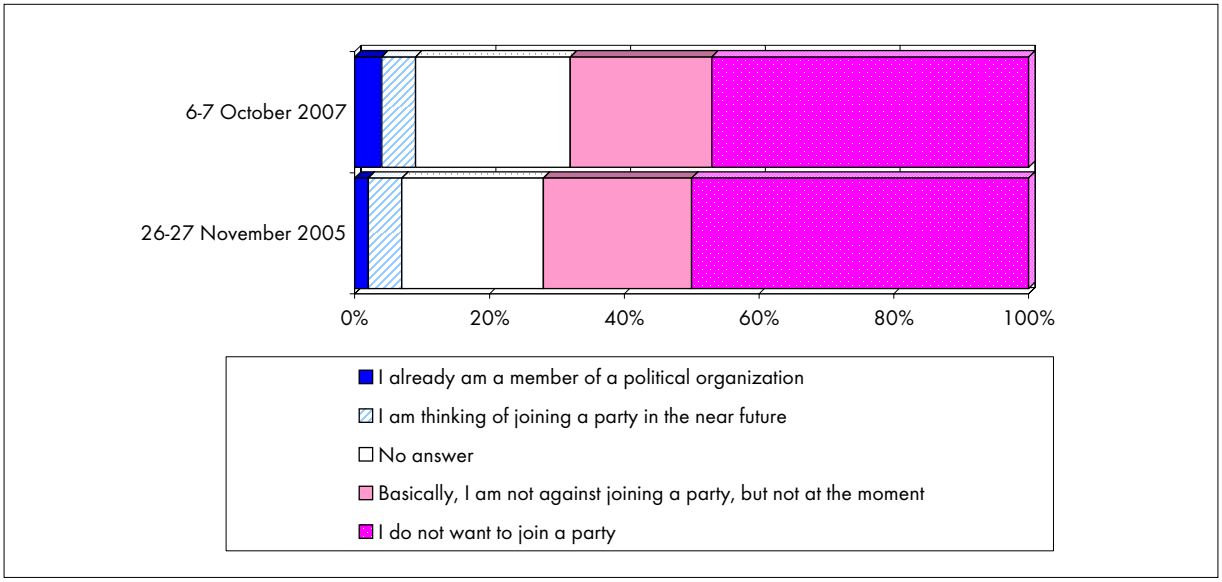
Source: opinion polls conducted by the "Public Opinion Foundation" (FOM) on 17–18 May 2007
http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024

Should Young People Be Persuaded To Participate in Political and Social Life?



Source: opinion polls conducted by VTsIOM on 6–7 October 2007
http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/9047.html

How Would You React To an Offer To Join a Political Youth Organization? (Percentage of Respondents Under 30 Years of Age)



Source: opinion polls conducted by VTsIOM on 6–7 October 2007
http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/9047.html

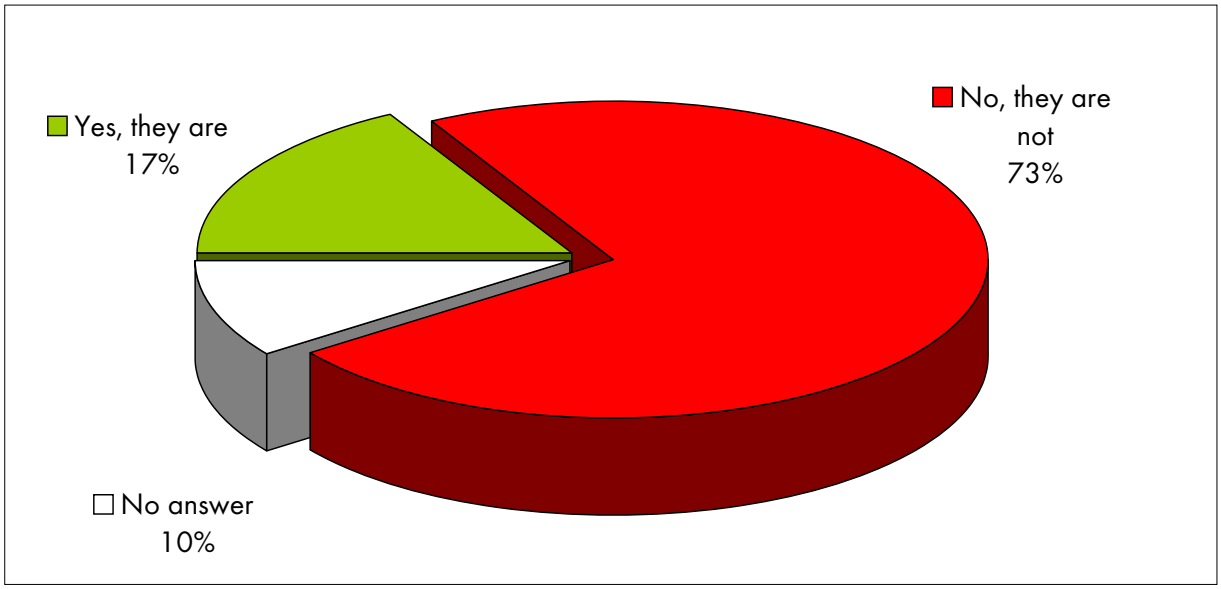
The Sixteen-Year-Olds of Today

Which of the Concepts Listed Below Are, In Your Opinion, the Most Important Concepts for the Sixteen-Year-Olds of Today?

	Total	Men	Women	Age 18 to 35	Age 36 to 54	Age 55 and above
Prosperity	59%	58%	59%	58%	65%	51%
Success	39%	41%	38%	42%	42%	31%
Liberty	35%	36%	34%	41%	36%	28%
Property	29%	33%	26%	27%	34%	24%
Family	23%	21%	25%	26%	21%	21%
Human rights	21%	17%	24%	25%	21%	15%
Strength	19%	22%	16%	18%	22%	17%
Peace	19%	17%	20%	19%	19%	18%
Security	19%	18%	19%	23%	16%	16%
Stability	18%	16%	19%	22%	16%	14%
Dignity	12%	12%	12%	14%	12%	9%
Justice	11%	9%	13%	12%	11%	10%
Protection	10%	8%	12%	13%	10%	6%
Law	10%	11%	8%	11%	10%	8%
Work	9%	9%	8%	11%	7%	8%
Democracy	8%	8%	8%	8%	9%	8%
Order	7%	7%	7%	8%	6%	7%
Conscience	6%	6%	6%	7%	6%	5%
Patriotism	5%	6%	4%	6%	5%	4%
Strong Will	4%	4%	5%	7%	3%	2%
Spirituality	4%	5%	4%	4%	5%	4%
Religion	3%	3%	3%	3%	2%	3%
Tolerance	2%	2%	2%	4%	2%	2%
Superpower	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%
None of the concepts listed above	3%	3%	2%	1%	2%	4%
No answer	10%	9%	10%	7%	7%	17%

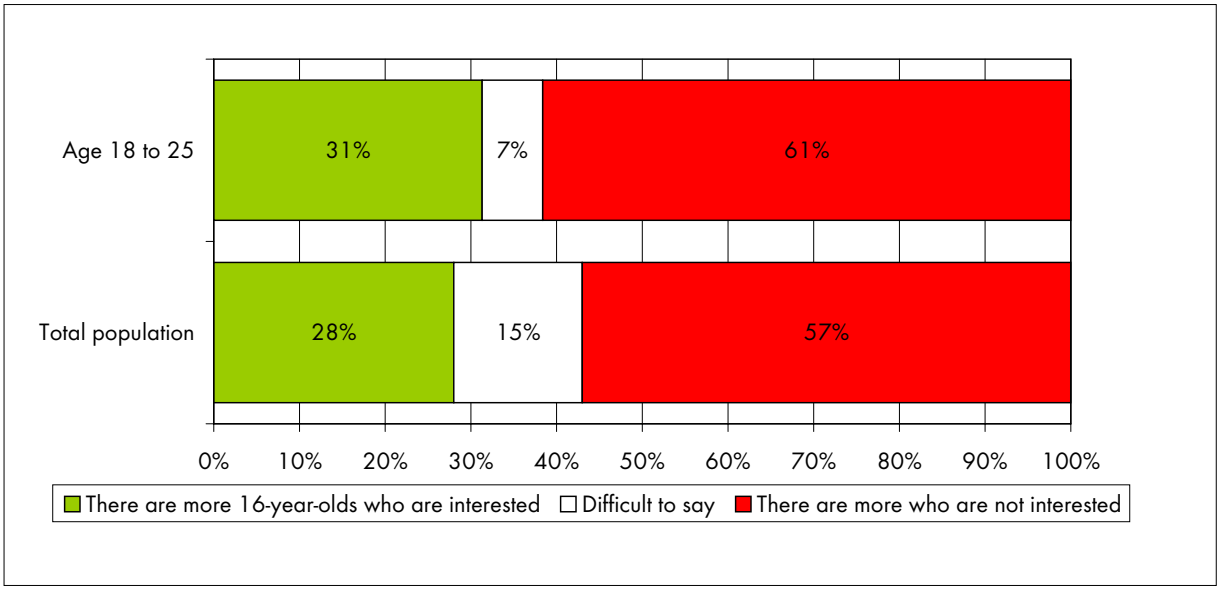
Source: opinion polls conducted by the "Public Opinion Foundation" (FOM) on 14–15 June 2008
http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0824/d082422

Are Most Sixteen-Year-Olds Today Prepared to Live on Their Own?



Source: opinion polls conducted by the "Public Opinion Foundation" (FOM) on 14–15 June 2008
http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0824/d082422

Are There More Sixteen-Year-Olds Who Are Interested in the Situation in the Country, or Are There More Who Are Not Interested?



Source: opinion polls conducted by the "Public Opinion Foundation" (FOM) on 14–15 June 2008
http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0824/d082422

Analysis

The Web That Failed: How the Russian State Co-opted a Growing Internet Opposition Movement

By Floriana Fossato, Geneva

Abstract

Barack Obama's presidential campaign demonstrated how sophisticated on-line strategies can mobilize a broad offline electorate. Many optimists had hoped that the Internet would similarly energize people living under authoritarian governments to come together for the sake of advancing democratic reforms. That outcome has not been achieved in Russia so far. A case study of Svoboda Vybora, an association of automobilists that effectively used on-line organizing techniques, demonstrates how the authorities can neutralize potentially powerful opposition movements through the use of subtle co-optation.

Obama on-line

With fresh memories of the November US presidential election, American and European commentators have been writing in amazement and awe about a political campaign that, in the words of the *New York Times* "has rewritten the rules on how to reach voters, raise money, organize supporters, manage the news media, track and mould public opinion, and wage – and withstand – political attacks, including many carried by blogs that did not exist four years ago."

According to accounts of the Internet strategies used by the two US presidential candidates, it is clear that President-elect Barack Obama's campaign first and foremost has been extremely successful at motivating and mobilizing Internet users, particularly bloggers, to play a volunteer role that has enabled them to participate actively online, through Obama's social networking site, MyBarackObama.com and offline, helping to make possible the impressive November 4th election turnout in favor of the Democratic Party candidate.

In the words of Mark McKinnon, a senior adviser to President Bush's campaigns in 2000 and 2004, the Obama campaign's use of the Internet allowed for the electoral paradigm to be "turned upside down" truly becoming "bottom up instead of top down." This grassroots strategy worked well in the framework of a campaign centered on "Change" and "Yes, We Can" messages and energized the more active section of the electorate, while also managing to inspire many young people, who are often considered indifferent to political messages, to vote for the first time.

Although television remained the most prominent source of campaign information for the electorate, polls indicate that 49 percent of 18–29 year olds and 37 percent of 30–49 year olds turned to the Internet for political information. Data published immediately after the vote showed that 66 percent of 18–29 years old, 53 percent of 30–44 years old and 49 percent of 45–59 years old, as well as a remarkable 69 percent of first time voters, voted for Obama.

Unlike Obama, Republican candidate John McCain chose to run an Internet campaign with a traditional top-down approach. Researchers at the Columbia School of Journalism found that McCain's campaign used blogs profusely and often helped to raise their visibility, but only "as an echo chamber for channeling mostly anti-Obama attacks into the mainstream media, in order to create an impression of grassroots on-line support."

The Internet and Autocracy in Russia

Perhaps imagining this kind of experience, conventional wisdom has long asserted that the Internet would play a major role in opening up authoritarian societies because the regimes would be unable, or unwilling, to quarantine their societies from the vast resources of the Web. Ultimately, the hope has been that the right grassroots strategies applied to the Internet would lead to the extensive volunteer mobilization that we have observed in Obama's electoral campaign.

But the picture is more varied than expected, particularly since political cultures and societal factors have a strong impact. Recent research on the political influence and practice of the Russian Internet, conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, reveals a hard fact about the Russian Internet world, a fact that unfortunately is often ignored in the generally optimistic accounts of the Net's unique features: While political and citizens' groups seeking to operate independently have started to use the Internet, they have so far failed to establish a strong, attractive and accessible web presence, develop a democratic in-

ternal structure that fosters self-regulation, and reduce the risk that the state will ultimately manipulate and co-opt their movement.

Russia is a particular case of free media suppression because the authorities do not achieve their goals through overt censorship or police raids. They only partially rely on legislation and state registration requirements. For the most part, democratic groups seeking to utilize the Russian Internet are outmaneuvered and outspent by the authorities and their allies. The activists are rendered at best only partly effective by their limited public and political skills, difficulty in fostering productive discussion among themselves, and inability to overcome the widespread lack of trust among users.

As part of a larger research project, my colleagues and I studied the online activities of the Svoboda Vybora (Free Choice) motorists' movement at the height of the Russian parliamentary and presidential electoral season from September 2007 to January 2008. Svoboda Vybora provides material for a particularly interesting case study because it was a true grassroots movement with enormous potential for mobilization, based entirely on Internet communication.

The Free Choice Motorists' Movement

Svoboda Vybora was created as a reaction to a proposed government ban on all right-hand-drive cars in early 2005. Many Russians drive such vehicles, typically imported as used cars from Japan, because they are relatively inexpensive and more reliable than domestic models. The motorists' movement "started with a spontaneous, geographically and demographically broad-based challenge to a specific policy initiative of the Russian government. But over time the challenge broadened in scope, calling into question the policy-making legitimacy of the authorities," as former Moscow Carnegie Centre expert Sam Greene noted.

Following a series of successful protest actions in 2005–2006, when thousands of motorists invaded the streets of Moscow and other cities, Svoboda Vybora evolved into one of the country's largest grassroots organizations, tackling issues well beyond the right to drive on the "wrong" side of the car. It became a genuine social movement.

The Reuters Institute research team selected Svoboda Vybora for its study also because it is genuinely Russian and financially self-sufficient, inoculating it from accusations that it takes money from Western sources, Russian oligarchs or Kremlin authorities and is therefore dependent on their guidance.

Taking to the Web

The organization set up a website (http://www.19may.ru/index.php?page=about) to coincide with its first action on May 19, 2005, when motorists protested in Moscow and 48 Russian regions, to the astonishment of an unprepared police force. Since its inception the movement has used the Internet as a platform for information, logistics and mobilization. The website is at the core of Svoboda Vybora's activity and its public presence: the organization exists entirely on the Internet. It has no offices, although it has active regional chapters, whose members meet in forums hosted on the website.

The website of Svoboda Vybora has a news section, complemented by a number of forums on issues proposed both by the movement's leader Vyacheslav Lysakov and by organization members. These forums are its most interesting feature: through them, Lysakov said in an interview with researchers, he very quickly established a network of regional volunteers.

There were nine active chapters (Moscow, Moscow region, Samara, Kaliningrad, Tyumen, Chelyabinsk, Krasnodar, Yakutia, Magadan) at the time of the research. Volunteers participated in discussions on a regular basis, and more or less active members of the organization could also be found in 32 other regions. Twenty-eight regional chapters had their own forums. The movement was registered as a Russian non-commercial organization in April 2006, following the government's adoption of new regulations on NGO activities.

The forums, strictly moderated by Lysakov and by two other moderators, had some 8,000 registered users and 2–3 times more guests who did not write, but read actively, at the time of research. Members of the movement did not generally use blogs to enhance the impact of their activity and attract new supporters.

Unlike many other non-governmental organizations, Svoboda Vybora has enjoyed steady and positive mainstream media coverage since 2005, thanks to the efficiency of the movement's leader. The website www.19may.ru occupied the second place in terms of popularity in the Yandex.ru Cars and Legislation section during research monitoring. The website was the fifth most popular in the same category in another much-used Russian portal: Mail.ru.

Going from Online to Offline Action

In 2005 and 2006, Svoboda Vybora mobilized enough support to conduct some half dozen successful protests and three successful actions, including one aimed at

preventing price increases for gasoline and one for the transport tax.

One action in particular had great resonance in Russia and contributed to the consolidation of Svoboda Vybora. On August 7, 2005, Altai Governor Mikhail Yevdokimov was killed in a car accident. His government car, travelling at high speed according to official instructions, collided with another car, then ran off the road and hit a tree. Yevdokimov's driver and bodyguard died along with him. The driver of the car that collided with the governor's, Oleg Scherbinsky, was convicted of breaking traffic laws with fatal results and sentenced to four years in a penal colony.

Following Scherbinsky's conviction, Svoboda Vybora organized motorist protests and demonstrations all over Russia on February 12, 2006. A month later, on March 23, 2006, Scherbinsky's conviction was overturned and he was released.

This action helped to consolidate trust in the image of the organization as a dynamic defender of the rights of drivers against the arrogance of the authorities, represented in this case by Yevdokimov's government Mercedes. The issue is extremely important for drivers in Russian cities. Bureaucrats at all levels, as well as rich and well-connected individuals, routinely block roads, cause traffic jams, and provoke fatal accidents, but only seldom face prosecution. In contrast, corrupt traffic officers frequently stop and harass regular drivers.

Moving from Protests to Providing Advice

Following that action, however, Svoboda Vybora's activity changed radically. An in-depth interview with Lysakov and daily monitoring of discussions taking place on the forums of the organization's websites during the period October – December 2007 showed that while the forums continued to stimulate dialogue among members and played an important civil society and educational role (for instance with an active campaign in support of the use of safety belts for drivers and passengers, as well as of children's seats) the potential to cultivate political conversations, create political alliances and ultimately support mobilization had sharply decreased – largely as a result of the highly personalized structure of the organization around its leader.

What had happened?

Lysakov told researchers that he coordinated an Advisory Council in charge of steering the organization. However, he said he did not feel obliged to report all his activities to the members of the council and ask their permission before starting new initiatives, particularly concerning public relations strategies. Lysakov's habit of acting on his own, before or even without discussing with the organization's council the nature and implications of his public outreach for the movement, gave the authorities an opportunity to co-opt him – and thereby ultimately defuse the protest and civic potential of Svoboda Vybora.

The actions of 2005/2006 had attracted the authorities' attention. In April 2006 State Duma deputies first asked Lysakov to consult with them about transportation issues. Then they requested that he create an expert group to provide more formal advice.

Lysakov told researchers that he and seven of his closest associates helped the lower house of Parliament draft transportation legislation in 2007. He described this development as a "qualitative metamorphosis" – in which the organization switched its focus "from protesting against government actions to working with the government from the inside." He said that his cooperation with the Duma was proof of the authorities' willingness to submit to a degree of civil control.

Indeed, the Russian lower house's legislative initiatives on transportion have profited from Svoboda Vybora's expert advice, definitely a positive development. However, these consultative activities coincided with a notable decrease in the number of protests organized by Svoboda Vybora. The last such action took place in May 2006.

From May 2006 to January 2008, when the research ended, "Svoboda Vybora" did not organize any protest actions. Members of the movement repeatedly voiced their concern about the organization's inactivity in forum discussions, especially when high-profile violations of the Highway Code by government cars caused deaths or otherwise harmed motorists.

State Co-optation

In the case of Svoboda Vybora and its leader, the authorities seem to have implemented a very simple and effective co-optation strategy, aimed at drawing on the expertise, network and trust potential of the movement, while at the same time neutralizing its protest potential, or at least putting it under a certain degree of control. The high level of personalization in the movement's leadership significantly simplified the task.

This outcome does not mean that the organization has become ineffective. Among the useful social initiatives it recently organized is a round-table discussion on car safety. Lysakov said that more than 1,000 children die every year in car accidents in Russia, and 25,000 suffer various concussions in accidents, due to the lack of regulations requiring children to wear seat-

belts. The general presentation of the website is, however, presently misleading, since it still emphasizes the protest activity of the movement.

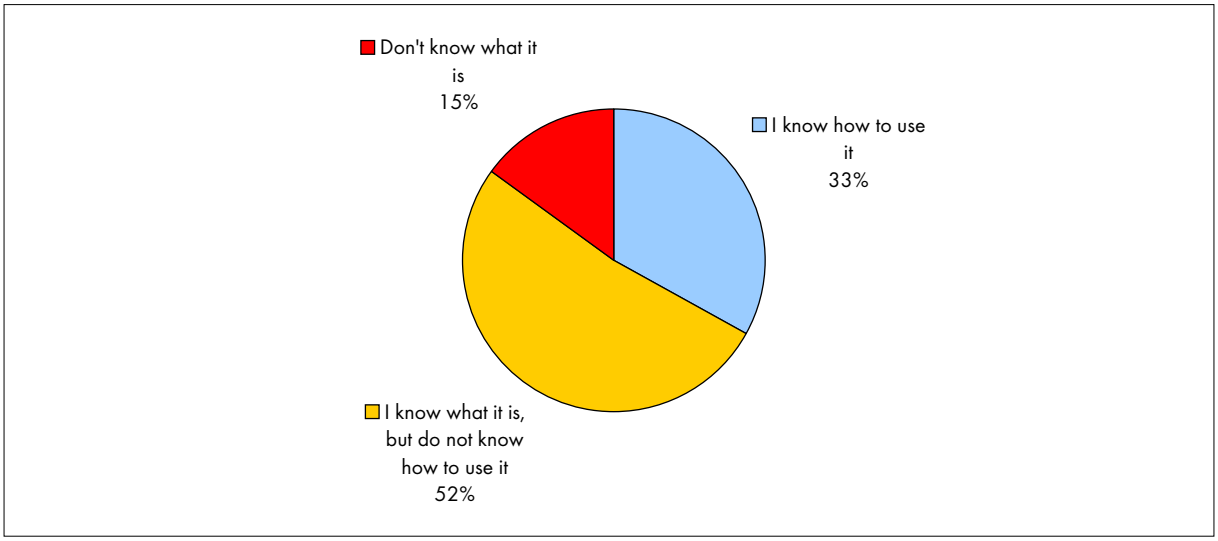
Sociologist Boris Dubin says that "the hopes of those who expect civil society activities in Russia to increase and have a significant impact on the offline world seem quite naïve. Since the Internet is essentially a horizontal communication network, a corresponding vertical network of existing institutes, whose functions are sometimes obstructed, but whose existence is nonetheless respected by society and by the political leadership, is needed for the creation of ideas that can translate into offline activity and mobilization."

Svoboda Vybora's story is an important one at this stage in Russia's political development. The Internet is, as is often attested, the least controllable of media because of the power to communicate and link up that it puts in the hands of anyone with access to a computer attached to a network and a modicum of expertise. However, it *is* being controlled – not by an army of censors and watchers, as in China – but by a political culture which has as yet not produced a stable basis for competing parties, and a central political authority with strong popular support which is capable of blocking oppositionist messages and is careful to do so.

About the author
Floriana Fossato is a research associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford.

Recommended Reading
Floriana Fossato and John Lloyd with Alexander Verkhovsky, *The Web that Failed: How opposition politics and independent initiatives are failing on the internet in Russia,* Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2008, http://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/publications/the-web-that-failed.html.

Do You Know What the Internet Is, and Can You Use It? (November 2007)



Source: representative poll of the Russian population conducted by the Levada Center, http://www.levada.ru/press/2008071701.html

About the Russian Analytical Digest

Editors: Matthias Neumann, Robert Orttung, Jeronim Perović, Heiko Pleines, Hans-Henning Schröder

The Russian Analytical Digest is a bi-weekly internet publication jointly produced by the Research Centre for East European Studies [Forschungsstelle Osteuropa] at the University of Bremen (www.forschungsstelle.uni-bremen.de) and the Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich (ETH Zurich). It is supported by the Otto Wolff Foundation and the German Association for East European Studies (DGO). The Digest draws on contributions to the German-language Russlandanalysen (www.laender-analysen.de/russland), the CSS analytical network on Russia and Eurasia (www.res.ethz.ch), and the Russian Regional Report. The Russian Analytical Digest covers political, economic, and social developments in Russia and its regions, and looks at Russia's role in international relations.

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Founded in 1982, the Research Centre for East European Studies (Forschungsstelle Osteuropa) at the University of Bremen is dedicated to socialist and post-socialist cultural and societal developments in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

The Research Centre possesses a unique collection of alternative culture and independent writings from the former socialist countries in its archive. In addition to extensive individual research on dissidence and society in socialist countries, since January 2007 a group of international research institutes is participating in a collaborative project on the theme "The other Eastern Europe – the 1960s to the 1980s, dissidence in politics and society, alternatives in culture. Contributions to comparative contemporary history", which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation.

In the area of post-socialist societies, extensive research projects have been conducted in recent years with emphasis on political decision-making processes, economic culture and the integration of post-socialist countries into EU governance. One of the core missions of the institute is the dissemination of academic knowledge to the interested public. This includes regular email service with nearly 20,000 subscribers in politics, economics and the media.

With a collection of publications on Eastern Europe unique in Germany, the Research Centre is also a contact point for researchers as well as the interested public. The Research Centre has approximately 300 periodicals from Russia alone, which are available in the institute's library. News reports as well as academic literature is systematically processed and analyzed in data bases.

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The Center for Security Studies (CSS) at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zurich) is a Swiss academic center of competence that specializes in research, teaching, and information services in the fields of international and Swiss security studies. The CSS also acts as a consultant to various political bodies and the general public.

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In its teaching capacity, the CSS contributes to the ETH Zurich-based Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree course for prospective professional military officers in the Swiss army and the ETH and University of Zurich-based MA program in Comparative and International Studies (MACIS), offers and develops specialized courses and study programs to all ETH Zurich and University of Zurich students, and has the lead in the Executive Masters degree program in Security Policy and Crisis Management (MAS ETH SPCM), which is offered by ETH Zurich. The program is tailored to the needs of experienced senior executives and managers from the private and public sectors, the policy community, and the armed forces.

The CSS runs the International Relations and Security Network (ISN), and in cooperation with partner institutes manages the Comprehensive Risk Analysis and Management Network (CRN), the Parallel History Project on NATO and the Warsaw Pact (PHP), the Swiss Foreign and Security Policy Network (SSN), and the Russian and Eurasian Security (RES) Network.

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