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Nashi, Youth Voluntarism, and Potemkin NGOs: Making Sense of Civil Society in Post-Soviet Russia

Julie Hemment

Russia needs a society brimming with love for the country, a civil society that would be such, not only in name, but in status, that would do its job, not just for money, but put its soul into efforts to right the wrongs.

—Vladimir Putin, Thursday, 18 May 2006

In the Putin era, Russian political elites have seized on the civil society concept, adapting it for their own ends and linking it to a project of modernization and national renewal. As Vladimir Putin's words make clear, this civil society is a corrective project, one that seeks to replace the old with the new. Here, the referent is the civil society brought into being during the 1990s by the international foundations that arrived to democratize post-Soviet Russia. In this view, the civil society installed by these western-identified agencies was false, ineffectual, and motivated by self-interest, oriented more toward the concerns of foreign states than those of Russian society. In contradistinction, Putin's civil society offers a vision of self and nation indivisibly linked, a vision of civil society coupled to state sovereignty. Beginning in 2005, the Putin administration placed constraints on existing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—particularly foreign-funded ones—while promoting more politically palatable alternatives. Indeed, borrowing from the repertoire of the international foundations it disparages, it launched its own "NGO boom," founding state-run organizations and creating an elaborate infrastructure of grants and funding for officially sanctioned organizations. Youth organizations have been prominent among these. Indeed, Putin's remarks that day were delivered to Nashi (Ours), a patriotic, pro-Kremlin youth organization, which is perhaps the most controversial manifestation of this new trend.

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I draw on data gathered in the course of a collaborative ethnographic research project conducted with scholars and undergraduate students at Tver' State University, 2006–2010. Research was made possible by a grant from the National Science Foundation (Grant No. 0822680), the National Council for Eurasian and East European Studies (NCEEER), and the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX). I am grateful for the input of my Tver' colleagues, Valentina Uspenskaia, Dmitrii Borodin, and members of the student research team and to Yulia Stone at the University of Massachusetts for research assistance. The epigraph is taken from ITAR-TASS, 18 May 2006, accessed via EastView database on 12 August 2006.

These moves have met with dismay in U.S. policy and scholarly circles. Putin-era civil society has been derided as false; the organizations it comprises have been portrayed as “Potemkin NGOs,” elements of a “virtual democracy,” fakes, or simulacra of their real democratic counterparts.¹ Nashi, the state-founded youth organization has caused especial disquiet, both because it resembles prior Soviet forms (the Komsomol) and because it is taken to signal a new authoritarianism. Nashi has been described as an ideological project that produces “Putin’s Generation,” young people who are xenophobic nationalists rather than open global citizens, hostile to the west and marching in lockstep with Kremlin policies; these youth are victims of “black PR,” who have been tricked out of authentic civil society into this false one.² The Putin-era civil society project is regarded as the debasement of democracy.

In dialogue with recent scholarship on Russia, postsocialism, and democracy promotion, this article offers an alternative to such representations by presenting an ethnographic account of Putin-era civil society.³ It focuses on some of those who participate in Nashi, drawing on data gathered in the course of a collaborative research project conducted in the provincial city Tver’ (2006–2010). The Putin administration’s appropriation of the civil society concept clearly advances a critique of foreign intervention; it can be located as part of a global trend of “backlash” against international democracy promotion.⁴ But this does not mean the rejection of all international influences; indeed, Nashi articulates a hybrid project that draws on the same terms, concepts, and technologies

1. Andrew Wilson, *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World* (New Haven, 2005).

2. Charlie Gillis, “Putin the Terrible,” *Maclean’s* 120, no. 34 (September 2007): 32–36; Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces Both Russia and the West* (London, 2008); Steven Lee Myers, “Youth Groups Created by Kremlin Serve Putin’s Cause,” *New York Times*, 8 July 2007, sec. 8. On “black PR,” see Wilson, *Virtual Politics*.

3. Dominant scholarly and journalistic accounts of Vladimir Putin and contemporary Russia bear the imprint of what Alexei Yurchak has called “binary socialism,” a term he uses to describe the problematic assumptions and binary categories encoded into scholarly and journalistic accounts of the Soviet Union, such as oppression/resistance; official culture/counterculture; state/people. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), 4–5. Recent scholarship questions the binary democracy/authoritarianism and prompts us to think about Putin and what he represents in more nuanced terms. In these analyses, Russian people are agentic, playful bricoleurs, who are not uncritical about the state-emanating narratives that are offered them. See, for example, Julie A. Cassiday and Emily D. Johnson, “Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 88, no. 4 (October 2010): 681–707; Graeme B. Robertson, “Managing Society: Protest, Civil Society, and Regime in Putin’s Russia,” *Slavic Review* 68, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 528–47.

4. Thomas Carothers, “The Backlash against Democracy Promotion,” *Foreign Affairs* 85, no. 2 (March/April 2006): 55–68. In Carother’s formulation, “backlash” is a global trend whereby local political actors (“Strongmen”) both denounce western democracy assistance as illegitimate and punish local groups who work with foreign identified actors associated with it. It is precipitated by the militarization of U.S. democratization aid and its aggressive coupling with U.S. foreign policy under the Bush administration (“freedom agenda”). Carothers sees Putin as one key Strongman.

that were disseminated by international foundations during the 1990s. In the aftermath of aid, its conceptual resources continue to circulate, often taking on unexpected and paradoxical forms.⁵ This article explores the circulation of internationally derived forms and concepts in Russia's state-sponsored civil society, interrogating the meanings that participants attribute to their activities and the goals they pursue. Ethnographic insights into local knowledge help demystify contemporary Russian youth movements, debunk some of the myths about them, and highlight continuities as well as change.

My research reveals that like their 1990s-era NGO predecessors, participants in Nashi are often sincere in their involvement. One such young person is Masha, a 21-year-old Nashi activist I met in May 2009. Masha joined Nashi when she was 16 years old. She swiftly moved up through the ranks of the movement and led Tver's welfare section (*sots napravlenie*) for two and a half years. Her main interest was in working with disadvantaged children, and she had led projects that focused mostly on children's homes. Masha spoke earnestly about the work she has engaged in and about the redemptive project Nashi conducts: a project to cleanse and correct both society itself and the individuals who participate in it. In words that strikingly recalled Putin's, she spoke of the need to replace corrupt officials with new people, "those who want to do good for real, people whose moral code won't allow them to live only for their own benefit." In her view, the most pressing problem facing youth was "indifference, to others and to oneself." For Masha, Nashi represented a site where she could contest this kind of citizen passivity and anomie, qualities she, like Putin, associated with the 1990s. Participation in the organization allowed her to assume a dignified subject position and to be able to pursue meaningful activities and goals.

My goals in this article are twofold. First, I first seek to account for Nashi and the Putin administration's civil society project more broadly by situating them within the changes that have taken place over the last twenty years. Dominant accounts view these formations through a culturalist lens, that is to say, as confirmation of Russian authoritarianism and as a form of democratic failure.⁶ I argue instead that, to comprehend them, we need to locate them in the context of twenty years of international development assistance in postsocialist states, and within global processes of neoliberal governance. Second, I seek to "reverse the flow" of these discussions, by examining how Putin-era civil society manifestations such as Nashi talk back to U.S. democracy promotion.⁷ Nashi owes much to

5. Jessica Greenberg, "There's Nothing Anyone Can Do About It': Participation, Apathy, and 'Successful' Democratic Transition in Postsocialist Serbia," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 41–64; Kimberley Coles, *Democratic Designs: International Intervention and Electoral Practices in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Ann Arbor, 2007).

6. Greenberg, "There's Nothing Anyone Can Do About It.'"

7. In his recent article, Douglas Rogers names three strategies contemporary anthropologists of postsocialism have enacted as they consider the post-Soviet context, twenty years on. While early studies examined the impact of things (concepts, technologies) that arrived in postsocialist space (unidirectional, viewing globalization as something that is

international democracy promotion initiatives; that is, it draws on both the conceptual resources of international democracy and development assistance and on the discontents it generated. In dialogue with recent scholarship on the region, I am interested in democracy promotion's unintended effects, particularly in the "reshuffling, recombining, and reinventing that occurs when technologies travel to other sets of social political and economic circumstances."⁸ Rather than dismissing this appropriation as false, evidence of "black PR" or "virtual democracy," I argue it makes sense to see it as an assemblage, or a combination of diverse logics and rationalities that responds to local perceptions of needs within this political economy.⁹

In the first half of this article, I situate the Putin administration's project by mapping the trajectory of the civil society concept as it has operated in post-Soviet Russia. I suggest that rather than viewing the Putinist appropriation of the civil society concept as the debasement of democratic ideals, it makes better sense to see it as the last in a long line of borrowings. Civil society is better understood as a contested political symbol than as an objective descriptor.¹⁰ It has long been deployed as an ideological signifier in post-Soviet Russia, and it has morphed considerably over the last twenty years. Once a sign of the free market, and liberalism's triumph, civil society became militarized in the post-9/11 era when it was linked to regime change by the Bush administration. The Putin-era rendition of civil society, linked to the conception of "sovereign democracy," draws on these circulating elements, providing further evidence of the instability and promiscuity of these forms and the unintended results of their implementation.¹¹ I then move to examine the empirical terrain of the

"done to" formerly socialist states), more recent accounts seek to reverse the flow or allow for diverse directions. Douglas Rogers, "Postsocialisms Unbound: Connections, Critiques, Comparisons," *Slavic Review* 69, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 1–15.

8. Coles, *Democratic Designs*, 7. See also Greenberg, "There's Nothing Anyone Can Do About It"; Keith Brown, *Transacting Transition: The Micropolitics of Democracy Assistance in the Former Yugoslavia* (Bloomfield, Conn., 2006); Julia Paley, *Marketing Democracy: Power and Social Movements in Post-Dictatorship Chile* (Berkeley, 2001).

9. Here I am in dialogue with scholarship that points to the complex amalgam of logics and rationalities advanced by the Russian state during the Putin and Putin-Medvedev administrations. Although Putin has been hostile to liberal democratic values and has staked his identity on being anti-neoliberal, he has advanced some of the same policies in a "liberal blend" of politics that defies easy description. This stems from the dual objectives of protecting Russia's sovereignty while enabling it to compete in the global economy. See Tomas Matza, "Moscow's Echo: Technologies of the Self, Publics, and Politics on the Russian Talk Show," *Cultural Anthropology* 24, no. 3 (August 2009): 489–522; Stephen J. Collier, "Budgets and Bio-Politics," in Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier, eds., *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems* (Malden, Mass., 2005), 373–90; James Richter, "The Ministry of Civil Society? The Public Chambers in the Regions," *Problems of Post-Communism* 56, no. 6 (November/December 2009): 7–20. Douglas Blum discusses how this ambivalence is manifest in policy discussions concerning youth. Douglas W. Blum, "Russian Youth Policy: Shaping the Nation-State's Future," *SAIS Review* 26, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2006): 95–108.

10. Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, 1996).

11. See Matza, "Moscow's Echo"; Coles, *Democratic Designs*; Greenberg, "There's Nothing Anyone Can Do About It." The concept of "sovereign democracy" was coined

civil society international agencies brought into being in Russia during the 1990s, pointing to its shortcomings and limitations before comparing it with the infrastructure the Putin administration has created.

In the second half of the article, I move to complicate our notions of what is going on within contemporary civil society projects by offering an ethnographic account of the pro-Kremlin youth group, Nashi. Nashi has been especially controversial, as I have noted. Founded and funded by Kremlin aides, it embodies the dual logic I have described: it uses the language of civil society both to stimulate and articulate new forms of activism and to condemn existing (often foreign-identified) civil society formations. Its public meetings—always pro-state and often with a pronounced anti-western or anti-liberal orientation—are permitted at a time when oppositional meetings are not. Commonly interpreted as confirmation of a troubling backlash against democracy in Russia, I see it instead as a curious hybrid. At the same time as it advances a trenchant critique of 1990s-era interventions and the model and paradigms that guided democratization, it draws on them too. Nationalist, exclusive discursive elements coexist with discourses of democracy, human rights, and tolerance. These resources are respun to articulate a robust national-interest alternative that is successful in ways that democracy promoters could learn from. Finally, drawing on interviews with Nashi activists, I show how this political technology project is not static but is adapted and negotiated by its participants, just as 1990s-era civil society projects were. As their NGO activist predecessors, Nashi komissars use the form presented by the state to pursue a variety of agendas, which may or may not overlap with what those projects' architects ideally imagine.

In order to undertake this task, I draw on a collaborative project conducted with long-term colleagues: Russian university teachers and civic activists associated with the Center for Gender Studies and Women's History at Tver' State University (TGU). This methodology has afforded me insights into the perspectives of diversely located youth: ardent activists, occasional participants, and the nonengaged young people who have remained determinedly aloof. Our investigation has brought not only difference but also commonality into view. In keeping with the anthropological project of cultural critique, my goal is to bring critical insights home in order to disrupt easy assumptions that render Russia as Other, irredeemably authoritarian, backwards, and dangerous.¹² At a time of antidemocratic

by Vladislav Surkov, President Putin's deputy chief of staff, in 2005. It articulates an argument about Russia's own distinct path and approach to governance. What is crucial to my argument in this article is that the concept signifies Putin's determination to seize control of Russia's path to democracy and his refusal to allow foreign states to either guide the process or dictate to him. The concept has now become part of official discourse; in James Richter's analysis it is the template for the Kremlin's efforts to "sharpen the boundaries between the legitimate public sphere and 'uncivil society.'" James Richter, "Putin and the Public Chamber," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 25, no. 1 (January–March 2009): 45.

12. George E. Marcus, *Critical Anthropology Now: Unexpected Contexts, Shifting Constituencies, Changing Agendas* (Santa Fe, 1999); George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago, 1986).

backlash within (and beyond) Russia, it behooves us to theorize, rather than simply vilify the hybrid civil society formations that have emerged in the wake of democracy promotion. This story surely has implications, not only for democracy promotion, but also for understanding the post-socialist world more broadly.

Civil Society, an Already Slippery Signifier: Putin-Era Politics in Light of the Anthropology of Democratization

In July 2005, President Putin stated in the context of a meeting with human rights activists that he “[absolutely] object[s] to the foreign funding of political activities. No self-respecting state would allow it, and we won’t either.” I was in Tver’ at the time, undertaking preliminary research on this project, and was able to discuss these remarks with my civic activist friends. Their response was clear: they viewed this as a troubling return to Soviet-era chauvinism and nationalism. As long-term activists invested in democratic-oriented projects for social renewal, they welcomed the foreign donor agencies Putin seemed to be referring to. Indeed, they had worked in successful collaboration with several of them until these agencies cut back their programs in Russia.¹³ My reaction was rather more mixed. While I was also alarmed at what Putin’s statement might signal, I was sympathetic to the critique of NGOs he advanced. Such a statement made sense when viewed from the perspective of many in Russia—including those who reject the narrative that the Cold War was “won” by the west and “lost” by the Soviet Union and that “democracy” as embodied by the United States is the ideal model to aspire to. In recent years, there has been an upsurge of patriotic sentiment in Russia; many welcome Putin’s project to reinstate national pride. Further, I was aware that the Putinist critique could not be so easily dismissed; my own scholarship has contributed to a critical literature that made many of the same arguments.

Critiques of Putin-era civil society rest on a set of assumptions: they presume that democracy and civil society entailed unquestionable social goods whose meanings were transparent and stable. A robust set of critical scholarship questions this by emphasizing instead the instability of civil society.¹⁴ As Jean and John L. Comaroff put it, civil society was the “Big Idea of the Millennial Moment,” an “all-purpose panacea” perfectly suited to the supposedly postideological age.¹⁵ It owed its rise to the velvet revolutions of 1989, where it functioned as a rallying cry, a banner under which

13. Here I am referring to two Tver’ based NGOs: the Center for Women’s History and Gender Studies, which was supported by grants from the Ford Foundation and the Open Society Institute, and the women’s crisis center Hortensia, which received grants from IREX, the American Bar Association, and the Open Society Institute. These grants dried up in 2004, when these agencies cut back substantially on their Russia programs.

14. Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*; Chris Hann and Elizabeth Dunn, eds., *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models* (London, 1996).

15. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, “Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” in Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, eds., *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism* (Durham, 2001), 1–56.

central European oppositionists united to express resistance to socialist regimes.¹⁶ By the mid-1990s, the concept had become mainstreamed into the agendas of international development institutions and was central to development aid in postsocialist states. By this time, its meaning had been transmuted. Whereas for oppositionists it signaled the project of anti-politics, an imagined “third way” between capitalism and socialism, it now articulated a neoliberal vision of development.¹⁷ Despite its post-ideological claims, this project was distinctively ideological, rooted in liberal democratic ideas of democratic participation and good governance and, crucially, linked to the development of the market.¹⁸

Critical scholarship has examined the deleterious effects of what Sonia E. Alvarez refers to as the “Civil Society Agenda” on the citizens’ associations and social movements it claimed to assist.¹⁹ It “demobilized” and depoliticized social movements by professionalizing them—all while claiming to do good in their name.²⁰ Some anthropologists have linked the concept of civil society and its components, NGOs, to an emerging system of transnational governmentality that is a neoliberal system of governance in the post-Cold War era.²¹ Here, NGOs play a crucial role in governing the conduct of populations. In these studies, “democracy is viewed not as a utopian dream following authoritarian or totalitarian re-

16. Classically defined as the sphere of public interaction between family and state, the concept reemerged as analytically and politically salient in the 1980s, by Central European intellectuals seeking to express resistance to the communist regimes in power. The concept of civil society was central to the project of “anti-politics,” an oppositional stance that opposed the socialist state by addressing the individual. It implied a refusal to comply with official rhetoric about civic duties to conform to the collective needs and a decision to invest in private life. See David Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics: Opposition and Reform in Poland since 1968* (Philadelphia, 1990); Hann and Dunn, eds., *Civil Society*; Timothy Garton-Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe* (New York, 1989). Indeed, at this time, civil society came to mean that which was not determined by the Communist Party; as such it made a happy transfer to the postsocialist period. For discussions of this, see Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (New York, 1992); Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals* (New York, 1994).

17. Ost, *Solidarity and the Politics of Anti-Politics*.

18. Mark Robinson, “Governance, Democracy and Conditionality: NGOs and the New Policy Agenda,” in Andrew Clayton, ed., *Governance, Democracy and Conditionality: What Role for NGOs?* (Oxford, 1994); Harry Blair, “Donors, Democratization and Civil Society: Relating Theory to Practice,” in David Hulme and Michael Edwards, eds., *NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?* (New York, 1997), 23–43; Hann and Dunn, eds., *Civil Society*.

19. Sonia E. Alvarez, “Beyond the Civil Society Agenda? ‘Civic Participation’ and Practices of Governance, Governability and Governmentality” (paper delivered to the Watson Institute, Brown University, 17 September 2008).

20. Steven Sampson, “The Social Life of Projects: Importing Civil Society to Albania,” in Hann and Dunn, eds., *Civil Society*, 121–42; Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, “Introduction: The Cultural and the Political in Latin American Social Movements,” in Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements* (Boulder, Colo., 1998), 1–25.

21. James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta, “Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality,” *American Ethnologist* 29, no. 4 (November 2002): 981–1003; Coles, *Democratic Designs*.

gimes but rather as an exercise of power in its own right," that is at times more effective in enacting control over populations than the regimes it displaces.²² Indeed, during the 1990s, democracy became "a vehicle with many other passengers" in Kimberly Coles's felicitous phrasing.²³ It was the vehicle via which neoliberal rationalities and technologies arrived in postsocialist space; the economic policy—shock therapy—that accompanied it led to major social dislocation and to the impoverishment of most Russian citizens.

So what of the terrain of "actually existing" civil society in 1990s Russia? International agencies such as the Ford Foundation, IREX, the MacArthur Foundation, and George Soros's Open Society Institute arrived in Russia during the early 1990s to promote civil society development.²⁴ To support democratic institution building, they sought out local associations and groups, using the civil society concept to put forth appealing ideas of citizen participation and energized associational life. They authorized very limited forms of organization and agendas, however. Despite their claims to be "grassroots" and to empower the local, the NGOs agencies sponsored were often narrow, professional, bureaucratic affairs.²⁵ They existed as a series of projects (*proekty*), temporary, short-lived enterprises that had less to do with grassroots issues than with the concerns of the elites who designed them. Suspicious of the state apparatus, these NGOs focused on pushing for reforms that would make the state more accountable to global norms, for example human rights, gender equality, and environmental issues.²⁶ However important, these issues seemed distant and irrelevant to most Russian people. At a time of increasing unemployment and an eroding safety net, as public health indicators plummeted and mortality rates went up, campaigns for abstract "rights" were easily dismissed as insubstantial, elite, and disconnected from the urgent crises facing the

22. Paley, *Marketing Democracy*, 3.

23. Coles, *Democratic Designs*, 8.

24. Sarah Henderson documents that in 2000 George Soros's Open Society Institute-Russia channeled over \$56 million to NGOs, universities, and other civic organizations (such as women's groups, human rights, and environmental organizations); between 1993–2001, the Eurasia Foundation allocated almost \$38 million to the nonprofit sector; between 1991 and 1998 the MacArthur Foundation approved over \$17 million in grants to support civic initiatives in the former Soviet Union. Meanwhile, the U.S. and European governments channeled generous resources into this project, too. According to Janine Wedel, the U.S. Congress devoted \$36 million to support "democratic institution building" in formerly communist states in 1990 and 1991. Sarah L. Henderson, *Building Democracy in Contemporary Russia: Western Support for Grassroots Organizations* (Ithaca, 2003). By 1995, the United States had obligated \$164 million to promote political party development, independent media, governance, and recipient NGOs. See also Janine R. Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe, 1989–1998* (New York, 1998), 85.

25. Wedel, *Collision and Collusion*; James Richter, "Evaluating Western Assistance to Russian Women's Organizations," in Sarah E. Mendelson and John K. Glenn, eds., *The Power and Limits of NGOs: A Critical Look at Building Democracy in Eastern Europe and Eurasia* (New York, 2002), 54–90; Julie Hemment, "The Riddle of the Third Sector: Civil Society, International Aid, and NGOs in Russia," *Anthropological Quarterly* 77, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 215–41.

26. Richter, "Ministry of Civil Society?"

nation. Further, they appeared suspiciously internationalist in orientation, to be subordinating Russian national goals to international norms and values. Indeed, western-funded NGOs and their donors unreflexively rejected state socialist formations; for example, they spurned associations stemming from “official” Soviet-era organizations (trade unions, women’s committees, veterans’ organizations), seeing them as compromised and somehow inauthentic.²⁷ This not only excluded vast swathes of the population, but it was counterproductive for the new organizations, too. Later scholarship showed how citizen-initiated NGOs that did not enjoy international funding were unable to sustain themselves without state support, making nonsense of the state/nonstate distinction.²⁸

The civil society concept continued to have salience for some in the region, particularly for people who were active in different forms of societal groups (*obshchestvennyi organizatsii*) such as my provincial women activist colleagues. They were able to use it and root it in local projects that had significance.²⁹ The concept and their work failed to gain broad legitimacy, however. In the context of dramatic economic dislocation and impoverishment, the general public regarded NGOs cynically, as vehicles promoting self-interest and elite advancement.³⁰ The idealized connection between this form of social organization and mass, democratic, grassroots empowerment did not gain currency, and few people were aware of the actual work undertaken by local activists.

International funding for civil society projects in Russia shifted substantially in 2001, reflecting the new strategic objectives of donor states. In the post-9/11 era, U.S. democracy promotion was recalibrated in keeping with national security concerns. To the consternation of many civic activists I was in dialogue with at the time, many of the agencies that had been pivotal in promoting NGOs and civil society development scaled back their budgets, diverted their funds to new kinds of projects, or moved out of Russia altogether.³¹

27. Ibid. As Richter points out, social science scholarship was complicit in this bias, either ignoring Soviet-era organizations or discounting them as in some way illegitimate.

28. Suvi Salmenniemi, *Democratization and Gender in Contemporary Russia* (London, 2008).

29. For example, for human rights activists, women, and environmental activists, the civil society concept proved flexible and open to translation. My early research provided insight into this, see Julie Hemment, *Empowering Women in Russia: Activism, Aid, and NGOs* (Bloomington, 2007). See also Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender after Socialism: A Comparative-Historical Essay* (Princeton, 2000); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, “Transitions as Translations,” in Joan W. Scott, Cora Kaplan, and Debra Keates, eds., *Transitions, Environments, Translations: Feminisms in International Politics* (New York, 1997), 253–72.

30. Hemment, *Empowering Women in Russia*; Armine Ishkanian, “Importing Civil Society? The Emergence of Armenia’s NGO Sector and the Impact of Western Aid on Its Development,” *Armenian Forum* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 7–36; Richter, “Evaluating Western Assistance to Russian Women’s Organizations”; Wedel, *Collision and Collusion*.

31. During this time, funds to Russia were redirected to new programs more in line with the Bush administration’s construal of democracy promotion. There were, however, some continuities between the priorities of the Clinton and Bush administrations. For example, the Russian Democracy Act of 2002 authorized \$50 million for democracy-building programs such as training investigative journalists and cultural exchanges, programs that

It was at this point that the Putin administration moved to appropriate the concept. In November 2001, Putin initiated the first Civil Forum in Moscow, a meeting between civic activists and state officials that aimed to bring about a public agreement to improve interactions between the state and NGOs. This civil society rhetoric increased in Putin's second term (2004–2008). He invoked the desirability of a strong civil society in his May 2004 state of the nation address, asserting that, "Without a mature civil society, there can be no effective solution to peoples' pressing problems." In the same breath, he spoke out forcibly against existing NGOs, denouncing some organizations whose goals, he claimed, are skewed by the fact that they receive funds from foreign or domestic foundations, finishing memorably, "they cannot bite the hand that feeds them."

In part, the Kremlin's civil society interventions were a response to the "color" revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005).³² Though celebrated in the west as the triumph of democracy, these movements were controversial in Russia. Commentators drew attention to the large amounts of foreign (especially U.S.) money expended in supporting them. Between 2004 and 2005, the Putin administration introduced new legislation that threatened to have profound implications for NGOs.³³ This constraining legislation was accompanied by a boost of support for new civil society institutions. In the fall of 2005, the administration established the Public Chamber (*Obschestvennyi Palat*), a new body charged with facilitating relations between executive authorities and civic groups; in addition to undertaking advisory work, it disperses federal grants to officially registered NGOs.³⁴

had received support through the 1990s. Funding to women's groups and the Russian women's movement was drastically reduced after 2001. In the perception of my activist interlocutors, some of these funds were diverted to issues of public health, such as HIV/AIDS prevention and drug abuse. Meanwhile, U.S. and other international agencies stepped up their investment in other newly independent states, particularly in Central Asia. According to statistics cited by Noor O'Neill Borbieva, the United States spent \$12 million on programs promoting democracy in Kyrgyzstan during 2004, and this increased to \$15 million in 2005. Noor O'Neill Borbieva, personal communication, Washington, D.C., December 2007.

32. This then is an argument about how Russian political elites took advantage of a kind of transitional phase in U.S. policies toward democracy promotion. I understand Putin's civil society project to have been prompted and enabled by two interconnected factors: partial donor withdrawal from the schemes that had predominated in the 1990s (and popular dissatisfaction with the "decade of democratization"), and popular concern about the new forms of democracy promotion that took place post-9/11 when democracy promotion was linked to military intervention. See also Carothers, "Backlash against Democracy Promotion."

33. One bill proposed amending the tax code, another sought to give authorities increased powers to monitor the activities and finances of NGOs. While the legislation influenced all NGOs, foreign NGOs were disproportionately targeted. Legislation was introduced in late 2005; it was rushed through the federal Duma, and deputies had very little time to consider it. Representatives of both domestic and international NGOs were quick to rally against it, predicting that it would have dire effects on third-sector organizations. When the law came into effect in April 2006, its implications were uncertain and it was still under debate.

34. As James Richter notes, the Public Chamber can be viewed as an institutional enactment of Putin's civil society insofar as it embodies his formulation of civil society in

Although many NGO workers—particularly those who successfully partnered with western organizations—vocally protested these new constraints, most Russians did not. By the time Putin came to office in 1999, “liberalism” was broadly discredited.³⁵ Those who did not benefit from this turbulent period—the majority—were sick of its claims and felt “discursively disenfranchised.”³⁶ Democratic discourses had come to signal power relations that many experienced as alienating.³⁷ In this context, NGOs could easily be cast as foreign and self-interested.

Thus, by 2006 when my Tver’ colleagues and I began to undertake this collaborative project, the field had radically changed. New Russian-based efforts to establish an alternative infrastructure for grants and funding had emerged, designed to stimulate the formation of new civil society organizations. Notably, this was a state-initiated project, launched by the federal and regional government authorities.

In sum, although international foundations withdrew from Russia, the concept of civil society continued to circulate. It remained an important ideological signifier that took on new meaning in the context of Putin’s project of national modernization and sovereign democracy and has continued to morph in the Putin-Medvedev era.³⁸ Once again, civil society is a project that has material components. It has brought into being a new infrastructure for grants and funding and facilitated the emergence of new civil society projects that Russian citizens, particularly long-term civic activists who have partnered with western foundations, strain to comprehend.³⁹ Under the auspices of this ideological project, the concept of civil

the interest of the state. It is not a representative body where members advocate particular interests but an “apolitical body of prominent individuals,” including television personalities, sports stars, journalists, and members of officially sanctioned groups such as Nashi. Richter, “Putin and the Public Chamber,” 39–65. It performs a kind of expert analysis, submitting recommendations to members of the Duma about socially important legislation, and it also acts as a kind of clearing house for federal funds, disbursing grants to officially registered (and approved) NGOs. The first grant competition was announced in 2006. In the 2007 competition, \$51 million (1.25 billion rubles) was disbursed. According to media reports, grants were disbursed to 1,225 NGOs in sums ranging from less than 100,000 rubles to several million. RFE/RL *Newsline*, 8 November 2007.

35. Youth slang played on the term *liberal values* where *La-Vê* became a slang term for cash; El’tsinism became *Elt-tsinizm* or El’t-cynicism. See Serguei Alex. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, 2009), 112.

36. *Ibid.*, 34.

37. See Greenberg, “There’s Nothing Anyone Can Do About It.”

38. President Dmitrii Medvedev was quick to embrace the civil society concept. Journalists seized upon his early statements as evidence of his inclination to support a more liberal democratic vision of civil society, in which organizations play an oppositional role vis-à-vis the state. For example, in his inaugural speech he spoke of “citizen’s rights and freedoms”; his April 2009 interview in *Novaia gazeta* also seemed to give credence to this interpretation, at en.novayagazeta.ru/data/2009/039/00.html (last accessed on 2 March 2012).

39. Assessments of these initiatives are mixed. While some local commentators and former dissidents have been consistently skeptical, more recent scholarship is varied. The primary beneficiaries of Public Chamber funding have been either pro-Kremlin organizations such as Nashi, or apolitical groups, notably social welfare and cultural organizations, but in recent years foreign-identified or human rights organizations have also been awarded grants. See Linda J. Cook and Elena Vinogradova, “Regional NGOs in Russia:

society articulates a specific set of national security concerns: suspicion about western intervention in Russia and its “near abroad” and the desire to contain the political ambitions of domestic actors.⁴⁰ Based on the principle of sovereignty (*gosudarstvennost'*), it advances a new vision of state/societal relations: civil society in the service of the nation or state.

Nashi

Nashi, the “Youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement,” burst onto the Russian political scene in the spring of 2005. Its inaugural mass rally, “Our Victory” (*Nasha Pobeda*) took place on 15 May 2005, *Den' Pobedy* (Victory Day). An estimated 60,000 youth from all over the Russian Federation marched in Moscow to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the Soviet victory over the Nazis (or “fascists” as they are more commonly called). Between 2005 and 2008 Nashi staged a large number of high-profile mass events, mostly in support of the Kremlin and always with a patriotic orientation and a high media profile. Nashi summer educational camps—held at the popular resort Lake Seliger—attracted tens of thousands of participants and were attended by high-ranking politicians and Kremlin aides. At its peak, during the 2007–8 election cycle, Nashi claimed over 300,000 members and had 50 regional branches across the federation. At the time our research began in 2006, Tver's branch of Nashi claimed 220 active members, with several active sections (*napravleniia*) including information (working with the mass media), mass action, and a section that provides forms of charitable support and humanitarian assistance, mostly to local veterans.

Nashi is an extreme exemplar of the dynamic I have sketched. Despite its claims of being independent, it was set up by top Kremlin aides and received various forms of state support.⁴¹ It is part of a broader state proj-

Charitable Foundations, Social Service, and Policy Advocacy Organizations” (NCEEER Working Paper, 16 March 2006); Richter, “Putin and the Public Chamber.”

40. Putin's civil society project responds to the activities, not only of foreign actors, but of domestic ones, too. In the late 1990s, some Russian “oligarchs” established their own civil society projects and set up their own foundations. The most notable example was the Open Russia Foundation, founded by Mikhail Khodorkovskii, president of the giant oil company Yukos. It disbursed funds to a number of liberal-oriented organizations such as human rights groups. Some of them began to enter into alliance with foreign foundations; for example, the British Charities Aid Foundation worked with the Open Russia Foundation, and George Soros's Open Society Institute also had close ties with it. In March 2006, the bank accounts of the Open Russia Foundation were frozen, following the 2003 jailing of Khodorkovskii. Although he was officially jailed for tax evasion, his arrest is widely thought to have been politically motivated—as punishment for having provided funding to oppositional political parties and having entered political life.

41. Nashi was founded by Vasilii Iakemenko, but the organization's ideological founder was Putin's aide, Vladislav Surkov. Nashi has always claimed to be an independent political movement, supported by private donations; it is clear that the support of the presidential administration played an important role, however. Nashi founder Iakemenko boasted of the Kremlin's support and of the leverage it gave the organization, effectively guaranteeing it the financial support of businesses. Thus, the organization is sustained by a new form of corporate philanthropy that is taking shape in Russia.

ect to captivate youth, in line with other federal youth programs.⁴² At the same time as it proclaims its civic purposes—training a new generation of leaders and engaging them in the civic life of the country—it is clearly hostile to oppositional movements and specifically seeks to thwart any pro-western mass movements of the kind that took place in Ukraine.⁴³

Nashi makes for an extremely challenging ethnographic object. Observers seeking confirmation of the most negative representations of Russian civil society will find easy fodder here by reading Nashi as a top-down project of extreme cynicism, as more evidence of the skillful manipulations of “political technologists” (*polittekhnologi*), that is the analysts and political advisors who work behind the scenes of Russian political life, and as an example of what Andrew Wilson has called “virtual politics.”⁴⁴ It appears to be the quintessential “ersatz social movement” that manages opposition, channels social discontent, and rallies support for the state.⁴⁵ Certainly, this is how skeptical commentators both in Russia and abroad frequently discuss Nashi. Critics draw attention to the Kremlin’s involvement, citing the vast amounts of money poured into the project and its campaigns and the public support of President Putin and other high-ranking Kremlin officials. They also focus on the motivation of Nashi youth themselves: the purported lack of conviction or self-interest among active members (who receive gifts of cell phones and T-shirts, free trips, and access to internships or higher education). Many critics take exception to its organizing style and strategies and its attack-dog pursuit of Kremlin opponents, patrolling the boundaries of the legitimate public

42. Blum, “Russian Youth Policy.” In 2001, the Kremlin launched the State Patriotic Education Program, which aimed to raise patriotic feeling among youth and involved several ministries: the Education and Science Ministry, the ministries of Culture and Media, and Russia’s “power ministries”—the Ministry of Defense, the Federal Security Service (FSB), and the Foreign Intelligence Service. A new federal agency, Russian State Military Historical-Cultural Center (Rosvoentsentr), was established to coordinate initiatives. While the first phase (or five-year plan) was relatively modestly funded, receiving 177 million rubles, the second phase of the program, which began in 2005, received more substantial funding; according to Valerie Sperling, 500 million rubles were devoted to it. Valerie Sperling, “Making the Public Patriotic: Militarism and Anti-Militarism in Russia,” in Marlène Laruelle, ed., *Russian Nationalism and the National Reassertion of Russia* (London, 2009), 218–71.

43. Nashi can be read as a response to internal discontent, too. A round of unpopular social welfare reforms initiated in late 2004 gave rise to widespread protests across the Russian Federation. While the majority of protestors were pensioners, the group most seriously disadvantaged by the reforms, youth were also involved. Indeed, some new oppositional youth organizations sprang up during the spring of 2005 in response to monetizing social welfare reforms; these included the online youth organization Skazhi-Net (Say No); Liudi v Kurse (People in the Know); Idushchiye Bez Putina (Walking Without Putin). According to the Nashi manifesto, the movement had three goals: to maintain Russia’s sovereignty and values; to modernize the country; and to form an active civil society. Nashi campaigns and materials frequently refer critically to the Orange Revolution.

44. Wilson, *Virtual Politics*. Wilson’s analysis focuses on the role of political technologists in contemporary Russian politics. Although he does not explicitly mention Nashi (his analysis predates the founding of the movement), he examines its precursors and his analysis pertains.

45. Robertson, “Managing Society,” 539.

sphere.⁴⁶ Both its supporters and detractors tend to presume that Nashi members are passive and that the organization is merely a puppet of the state, even likening it to the Hitler Youth.

Yet these dominant accounts fail to allow for the agency of Nashi's youth participants and obscure much of what plays out at the provincial level. Nashi activists engage in diverse projects beyond the controversial national-level campaigns reported in the media. In the course of this research I observed a number of socially oriented Nashi campaigns and actions, including a campaign prohibiting the sale of alcohol to minors, and an environmental cleanup campaign in which some of the komissars we interviewed were passionately engaged. Further, contra dominant representations, Nashi is not static but a moving target.⁴⁷ In tracking Nashi since 2005, I have found its priorities have substantially shifted, in response both to changing state priorities and to the interests of its participants, which are usually, but not always, in synch. Campaigns burgeon and proliferate, as my frequent visits to the Nashi Web site have made clear, some assuming directions that displease their Kremlin-based supporters.⁴⁸ Nashi engages in a constant rebranding and respinning, updating and rebooting itself in response to the changing times, and to keep its youth constituents

46. Richter, "Putin and the Public Chamber."

47. Some recent scholarship has sought to complicate dominant narratives about Nashi, by pointing both to the agency of youth participants and to the unpredictability of the movement. See Maya Atwal, "Evaluating Nashi's Sustainability: Autonomy, Agency and Activism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 5 (July 2009): 743–58; Jussi Lassila, "Anticipating Ideal Youth in Putin's Russia: The Web-Texts, Communicative Demands, and Symbolic Capital of the Youth Movements Nashi and Idushchie Vmeste" (PhD diss., University of Jyväskylä, Finland, 2011).

48. Although Nashi was launched by Kremlin ideologues in the administration's service, I view it as a political technology project run amuck. While many of its activities are in support of the Putin-Medvedev administration, it has a rogue energy about it that occasionally leads it into trouble. A series of anti-Estonian campaigns during 2007 (in response to the Estonian government's controversial decision to move a World War II monument commemorating Soviet losses) won Nashi some disapproval in the Kremlin; more recently, activists at Seliger 2010 antagonized some of the organization's high-ranking supporters with a controversial exhibit that depicted prominent oppositionists with their heads on stakes (among them, former dissident Liudmila Alekseyeva, Boris Nemtsov, and jailed oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovskii). Indeed, Nashi has fallen out of favor on a number of occasions. The year 2008 was a watershed for the movement; it was restructured after the federal elections, resulting in the closing down of the majority of regional branches. The liberal media, particularly the newspaper *Kommersant*, gleefully reported stern communiqués from presidential aides and Kremlin insiders and announced the organization's demise, however, Nashi reemerged as a number of "directions" later that year. Ethnographically, I have found evidence of this confusion. Organizers of the youth educational summer camp Seliger 2009 downplayed Nashi's presence and significance, insisting it was no longer a Nashi-run event. Unofficially, however, Nashi activists had a strong presence at the camp and the komissars I spoke to during the spring of 2010 jubilantly took credit for it. As this issue of *Slavic Review* goes to press, Nashi is again making headlines for the work it does at the Kremlin's behest. In the immediate aftermath of the contested December 2011 elections, Nashi activists organized pro-government demonstrations, going head-to-head with election fraud protestors. The organization has pledged to mobilize tens of thousands of youth to "protect" the March 2012 presidential election process from any "provocations" carried out by the opposition and their "foreign sponsors."

interested and lure them from other youth organizations that compete for their attention (the metaphor “reboot” is not a stretch, “Nashi 2.0” launched itself in summer 2010).⁴⁹

Our ethnographic interviews have yielded valuable insight into the meaning of participation in this movement and into the ways individual youth make sense of it through its various guises. Nashi shares much with the 1990s-era civil society interventions it disparages. In the discussion that follows, I account for Nashi by locating it within the arc of democracy promotion I have sketched, drawing attention to the ways Nashi strategies have been shaped by the western-led civil society project that preceded it and highlighting its use of the conceptual resources that project left in its wake.

Nashi and Democracy Promotion

Born of a specific moment in international democracy promotion (the militarization of assistance under the Bush administration, and the perception of U.S. meddling in postsocialist space), Nashi presents itself as a kind of counterinsurgency operation to international democracy promotion. One of the three goals laid out in the manifesto is to maintain Russia’s sovereignty and values. The organization adopts a military rhetoric, both in its own organizing strategies (active members are komissars), and in its descriptions of opponents (as “mercenaries,” who are in foreign pay). In the early days, Nashi placed great emphasis on undertaking mass events, or “securing the streets” as one komissar put it to me; accordingly, activists received training in technologies of mass action, as well as education in the arts of “political PR.”⁵⁰ In so doing, it borrowed the language and tactics of the foreign-identified interventions it disparages, bringing “orange”-like technologies to political organizing.⁵¹

49. Viktoriya Topalova, “In Search of Heroes: Cultural Politics and Political Mobilization of Youths in Contemporary Russia and Ukraine,” *Demokratizatsiia* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 23–41.

50. One komissar I spoke with explained to me that this was a new subfield, or area of study, that drew on psychology, public relations, and political science and aimed to provide a combination of skills, essential for a leader. By way of illustration, he told me that the course he attended had focused on images (*obrazy*)—the image of the enemy, the image of the hero, the image of the state—and on how to construct an image for a political organization. Another komissar I spoke with underscored how in the early days, the main goal was to demonstrate Nashi’s ability to control the streets. When I quizzed him about the meaning of one mass campaign I attended in Moscow in 2006 (a huge event where Nashi activists dressed in Santa suits met with World War II veterans), he told me that its significance was not based on any ideology and that even the veterans were beside the point. If they had wanted to do nice things for veterans, they could have stayed in Tver: Growing impatient with my obtuseness he shouted, “The point was that we could pull people together! One hundred thousand people—there’s been nothing like it since 1905! The point was—the very fact that WE COULD DO IT!”

51. See Atwal, *Evaluating Nashi’s Sustainability*. In Nashi mass meetings, as in the pro-democracy demonstrations in Kiev, music plays an important role. At the Nashi rally I attended in Moscow on 17 December 2006, sound systems pumped out music as thousands of youth danced; young people danced and sang along to Soviet wartime songs mixed to a techno beat.

Beyond these moments, Nashi materials speak their resistance to and critique of international democracy promotion. The 1990s—the decade of democratization—is a constant referent. These materials describe the Russian generation that permitted foreign intervention as “defeatists” (rather than bold democrats and reformers), morally corrupt, degenerate people who sold out the Motherland. The enemy or “other” it portrays is a complex amalgam of undesirable forces: Nashi proclaims its aim is to end the “unnatural union of oligarchs, anti-semites, Nazis and liberals”; it invokes a western-sponsored “liberal-fascist alliance” that seeks to interfere with Russia’s autonomy and strength.⁵²

Nashi materials paint an alarming picture of geopolitics where Russia is under siege from a rapacious west in a hostile world system. Mobilizing what Serguei Oushakine has called the “genre of national tragedy,” Nashi publications draw a parallel between the 1990s and other periods of national trauma—the Time of Troubles, and more frequently, World War II.⁵³ I had the opportunity to witness the presentation of some of these materials in May 2009 when a Nashi komissar and representative of the newly founded Federal Youth Agency screened a recruitment video for the summer youth camp Seliger 2009 to members of the research team at Tver’ State University. To a relentlessly pounding bass line, the video juxtaposed images of Russia’s former greatness with scenes that signaled its eclipse, communicating a sense of a great nation under constant attack by hostile external forces. It portrayed a threat from within the nation, too. This video focused on the person of a dissolute young man as he consumed and contemplated various forms of seduction: fast food, beer, flashy cars, an iPhone.⁵⁴ The video communicated a powerful critique of youth: materialist, morally degenerate, in thrall to empty, western promises, and devoid of any sense of civic duty, providing evidence of the nation’s biological crisis.⁵⁵ These images and depictions may appear

52. Ibid., 746. Nashi extends the epithet “fascist” to a wide variety of political foes—from National Bolshevik Party leader Eduard Limonov, to liberal democrats Grigorii Iavlinskii and Garry Kasparov. See, for example, the Nashi booklet, *Fashisty Vchera. Segodniia. Zavtra?* For analysis of this booklet, see Oleg Belov, “Nashi versus Nazi: Anti-Fascist Activity as a Means of Mass Youth Mobilization in Contemporary Russia,” trans. Dmitry Borodin, *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 26, no. 2 (2008): 48–55.

53. Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair*, 79. According to Oushakine, the “genre of national tragedy” started as a way to make sense of the Soviet period but was subsequently applied to the decade of the 1990s. The Time of Troubles (Smyty) refers to the turbulent period during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when Russian statehood was compromised.

54. Interestingly, the komissar described this film as the “forbidden commercial” by which he meant that Nashi had not approved it for broadcast due to its “harsh” message (other videos he screened that day were much more upbeat). I learned that it was screened frequently to potential recruits and that it circulated widely on the Internet via YouTube. It was well known to members of the research team. When I subsequently obtained an electronic copy of these promotional materials, I received confirmation that this was a distinctive marketing strategy: the two videos were saved within the same file, one marked “forbidden commercial” and the other “permitted commercial.”

55. Recent scholarship has explored the ways in which Russia’s contemporary national crisis is perceived in biological terms. Lilia Khabibullina’s discussion of international adoption explores the “losing genofund” discourse and the medicalized or geneticized reading of the demographic crisis it exhibits. Khabibullina, “International Adoption in

overblown, but it is important to recognize that Nashi does not invent them; the critique of the materialism and degeneracy of the west and the dangers it poses to Russia—particularly Russian youth—has deep historical roots in Russia.⁵⁶ Reanimated by the dislocations of the 1990s, this critique saturates public discourse today. Crucially, it is not limited to those who remember socialism but is embraced by young people as well.⁵⁷ They are exposed to it via the media, via the “academic nationalism” that pervades universities in the Putin period, or via their participation in other nonstate youth organizations, including those sponsored by the Russian Orthodox Church.⁵⁸ Indeed, while most of the students present at the screening that day were not persuaded—one member of the research team rolled his eyes when I later asked him about it, referring to it as “that deadly video”—they agreed with elements of the analysis it presented: youth are degenerate; the nation is dying; it is being undermined by a belligerent west.⁵⁹ Part of Nashi’s success stems from its ability to tap into and acknowledge these constructions, to recognize emotion that was denied by “the flattening mechanical functionalism of postcommunist neoliberal ideology” that prevailed during the El’tsin period.⁶⁰

Other campaigns specifically talk back to democracy promotion, thumbing their noses at foreign interventions. One example arose after Putin’s jibe against the election monitoring by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and his rejection of their efforts to “teach” Russia, in which he retorted, “Let them teach their wives to

Russia: ‘Market,’ ‘Children for Organs’ and ‘Precious’ or ‘Bad’ Genes,” in Diana Marre and Laura Briggs, eds., *International Adoption: Global Inequalities and the Circulation of Children* (New York, 2009), 174–89. See also Michele Rivkin-Fish, “From ‘Demographic Crisis’ to ‘Dying Nation’: The Politics of Language and Reproduction in Russia,” in Helena Goscilo and Andrea Lanoux, eds., *Gender and National Identity in Twentieth-Century Russian Culture* (DeKalb, 2006), 151–73.

56. As expressed, for example, in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s much cited 1978 Harvard address, his first public statement after arriving as a dissident in the United States, wherein he defied expectations by speaking, not of Soviet totalitarianism, but of the dysfunctions of western society and its rampant materialism.

57. Hilary Pilkington et al., *Looking West? Cultural Globalization and Russian Youth Cultures* (University Park, 2002); Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair*.

58. Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair*. As I have noted, Nashi exists in a crowded social field of youth groups. Beyond the small but well-publicized liberal oppositional groups such as Oborona and the youth wing of Iabloko, others exist, including groups sponsored by branches of the Russian Orthodox Church. Sofia Tipaldou, “‘Russian Is Orthodox, Orthodox Is Russian’: The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church to the Construction of an Orthodox National Identity” (paper delivered at the Sixteenth Annual Association for the Study of Nationalities World Convention, New York, April 2011).

59. Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca, 2008); Pilkington et al., *Looking West?*; Michele R. Rivkin-Fish, *Women’s Health in Post-Soviet Russia: The Politics of Intervention* (Bloomington, 2005).

60. Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair*, 85. In his rich ethnography of postsocialist Russian life, Oushakine presents the interpretive frameworks used by marginalized provincial subjects as they account for the dislocations they have experienced during the postsocialist period and discusses the nationalist oriented scholarship they draw on. One of the authors he profiles specifically mentions the civil society concept, arguing that it functions in a form of imperceptible domination (“programming”) to accomplish the atomization of people, or “atomization of the crowd.”

make cabbage soup.”⁶¹ Activists followed up on the president’s remark by presenting a cookbook to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. The gendered character of this retort is significant; it seems to be an implicit reference against western feminist agitating.

An important part of the “work” Nashi undertakes is to push back and to sternly articulate to foreigners what is no longer permissible, but Nashi offers its participants other registers or voices, too. As with other elements of the Putin “cult” (or “brand” as some authors prefer to name it), Nashi is a site of “role play, mischief making and experimentation.”⁶² Nashi offers a playful repertoire to its participants; its campaigns frequently contain an element of the carnivalesque—for example, a mass campaign where 60,000 youth dressed in Santa suits filled the streets of Moscow; the self-proclaimed “love day” at the Seliger summer camp. In ways that further suggest the rogue energy of this organization, these campaigns spill over into *stiob* on occasion, that is, into an overly earnest chastisement directed against the hectoring tone of an imagined always earnest western, or liberal, democratic interlocutor.⁶³

But beyond critiquing western-identified interventions, Nashi draws on this complex cultural material to articulate an alternative—a muscular national-interest rendition of civil society that provides young people with a dignified and forward-looking subject position (at the same time as it positions them as heirs to a glorious, if vexed and often blighted, history).

61. This did not mark a refusal to engage with the OSCE, but rather a refusal to accept OSCE’s terms. OSCE in Europe decided to boycott Russia’s 2008 presidential election because of Moscow-imposed restrictions. The OSCE had been arguing with Russia over the size and scope of the observers’ mission. Russia’s foreign ministry called the monitors’ decision “unacceptable.” The watchdog rejected concessions by Moscow aimed at averting a boycott.

62. Cassiday and Johnson, “Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality,” 706. Some have compellingly argued that Putin and Putinism is more appropriately viewed as a “brand” than a “cult.” Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin’s Russia and the End of Revolution* (New York, 2005), cited in Borenstein, *Overkill*, 226; see also Cassiday and Johnson, “Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality.” Nashi activists embrace the language of “branding” to refer to their projects and campaigns. Indeed, a true postmodern product, Nashi is in constant flux, niche-marketed to successive cohorts of young people.

63. Alexei Yurchak defines *stiob* as a form of irony performed through over-identification with the object of irony such that it becomes impossible to distinguish between complete sincerity and ridicule. He describes it as a widespread “late socialist cultural disposition” that has continued in the postsocialist period. In his analysis, people can apply this “stiob-based” set of relations to any kind of dominant discourse to which they become exposed, including market reforms or western feminism. See Yurchak, “Gagarin and the Rave Kids: Transforming Power, Identity, and Aesthetics in Post-Soviet Nightlife,” in Adele Marie Barker, ed., *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev* (Durham, 1999), 95. Nashi campaigns frequently exhibit stiob-like characteristics and other forms of irony. One example is the Nashi spoof of a 2010 *New York Times* online interactive feature, inviting Russian citizens to post videos discussing social problems. While the *New York Times* site features videos posted by citizens documenting serious abuses of power or official negligence, the Nashi site (entitled “Help Us, America”) consists of a series of faux-earnest posts from individuals who parody liberal subjects, identities, and sexual politics. See www.nashi.su/usa (accessed 20 May 2011; no longer available).

This is a version of civil society that exists in the interests of and in the service of the state. Unlike the civil society offered by western foundations and agencies, which posited that people would organize on the basis of “interests” (as women, as ecologists), this version offers a vision of self and nation indivisibly linked. In ways that resemble the “patriotic professionalism” located by Lisa Hoffman in her study of China, this conception links self and nation.⁶⁴ To quote from the manifesto, “Civil society—it’s the active part of the citizenry. One can say that regular citizens are passive, but civil society indicates an active people [*narod*], people who are the subjects of history, who build their own fate and the fate of their country.”⁶⁵ An interesting “creolization” takes place in Nashi campaigns where globalized icons and images mix with Soviet or Russian national symbols to create hybrid imagery.⁶⁶ Here, discourses of human rights and tolerance mix with Soviet-era symbols and values, providing further evidence of the paradoxical outcomes of circulating discourses associated with democracy promotion. At the same time as it advances an exclusionary form of solidarity (the name—Ours—belies its nationalist core), Nashi promotes cultural tolerance (remember, it is an *anti-fascist* movement). In Tver’, as elsewhere, Nashi activists hold *uroki druzhby* (lessons of friendship) with foreign students, social events where they get to know each other and share information and stories about culture and cuisine. This project both recalls Soviet internationalism (and the slogan *druzhba narodov*, friendship among nationalities) and the liberal democratic value of cultural tolerance.⁶⁷ Note that this fusion involves reconstituted symbols of the socialist state. Here, World War II, the USSR’s most sacred symbol, looms large.

As in the 1990s-era civil society projects, a central component of the Nashi project is education, more specifically, a patriotically oriented education. This involves a revisioning of Russian and Soviet history. Particular emphasis is placed on what one of my colleagues from Tver’ State University called the “rehabilitation of the Soviet period.” Twenty years after the dissolution of the USSR, many Russians are weary of hearing only negative accounts of the past.⁶⁸ This is particularly true for the first post-Soviet generation, Nashi’s constituency. Nashi materials address activists as leaders, as elite members of a promising new generation that can rejuvenate Russia. The manifesto urges, “Our generation must take the wheel from the defeatist generation ruling this country. Those people who neither believe in Russia’s future nor themselves.”⁶⁹ They encourage youth to draw inspiration from and model themselves upon their grandparents’

64. Lisa M. Hoffman, *Patriotic Professionalism in Urban China: Fostering Talent* (Philadelphia, 2010).

65. For the Nashi manifesto, see nashi.su/manifest (last accessed 2 March 2012).

66. Wilson, *Virtual Politics*, 63.

67. See Michele R. Rivkin-Fish and Elena Trubina, eds., *Dilemmas of Diversity after the Cold War: Analyses of “Cultural Difference” by U.S. and Russia-Based Scholars* (Washington, D.C., 2010).

68. Caroline Humphrey and Ruth Mandel, “The Market in Everyday Life: Ethnographies of Postsocialism,” in Caroline Humphrey and Ruth Mandel, eds., *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism* (Oxford, 2002), 1–16; Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair*.

69. For the Nashi manifesto, see nashi.su/manifest (last accessed 2 March 2012).

generation, the heroic generation that saved Europe from fascism. Indeed, Nashi materials exhort youth to see themselves as engaged in an analogous struggle, against a new foreign-identified threat (the “liberal-fascist alliance” Nashi brochures invoke). Nashi campaigns frequently reinforce this connection between generations by bringing young activists and veterans together.⁷⁰

Nashi training programs at once recall Soviet-era educational strategies as well as the strategies of international foundations and Khodkovskii’s Open Russia Foundation, which it displaced. The camps at Seliger simultaneously resemble Komsomol camps and the summer schools organized by the Ford Foundation during the 1990s. Indeed, Nashi adopts a similar format, inviting potential participants to its conferences and events to submit scholarly abstracts on specific topics.⁷¹

Like many of the civic projects funded by international foundations, the Nashi project provides opportunities for professional training and advancement. The most active Nashi members are granted internships (for example, in the media or in the presidential or regional administration) and the opportunity to travel to attend trainings in other Russian cities.⁷² Some lucky komissars are admitted with financial support to Nashi’s own Moscow-based higher educational institution.⁷³ Despite Nashi’s ostensible difference from 1990s-era training and education programs, it deploys elements of the same entrepreneurial logic. Indeed, in the six years of its existence, Nashi’s priorities have substantially shifted. From its beginnings as a riotous and militant counterinsurgency movement, determinedly opposed to foreign-identified liberal interventions in postsocialist space, in the Putin-Medvedev era Nashi has adopted a more “civil” face. Here, the apolitical qualities are prominent and the entrepreneurial dimension is more pronounced. As one komissar explained to me in May 2010, Nashi’s

70. Nashi’s inaugural mass rally of May 2005 involved a group of veterans passing a baton of love and loyalty to Nashi activists. At the mass rally I attended on 17 December 2006, the gift was reversed, as youth made gifts to World War II veterans.

71. This competitive system is extended to potential teachers as well as to youth participants. Although the format is similar, the content is quite different. The Nashi Seliger 2007 recruitment poster I saw posted in the political science department at Tver’ State University invited teachers to submit abstracts for lectures on topics such as: “The Modernization of Russia”; “Russia—Global Leader of the Twenty-first Century”; “Sovereign Democracy”; “The Orange Revolutions and Their Consequences”; “The Course of President Putin”; “The Role of Youth in the Preservation and Development of Russian Statehood.” This nationalist orientation was partly displaced at later Seliger camps; the 2009 camp placed a much greater emphasis on entrepreneurship, as I have noted, stressed the desirability of improving Russia’s status in the global marketplace and was much less hostile to foreigners. Indeed, the Russian federal government offered partial funding to encourage youth from different countries to participate in special international sessions at the Seliger camps in 2010 and 2011.

72. I spoke with one Nashi komissar who had recently completed an internship in the Tver’ regional administration; interestingly, however, rather than feeling more supportive of the authorities, he was more disenchanted than ever and complained that they had not paid his proposals any attention. His internship had confirmed his sense of the incompetence and inefficiency of local bureaucrats.

73. Natsional’nyi institut Vyshaia Shkola Upravleniia, at www.vshu.ru/ru/ (last accessed 2 March 2012).

new priorities are “the economy, technology, technical creativity.” At the youth forum Seliger 2009, which I attended, this entrepreneurial dimension was striking. Indeed, this camp pitched itself, not as a Nashi event, but as an educational event open to all “talented” youth. It resembled nothing so much as a giant job fair; its slogan: “commodify your talent!”⁷⁴

To sum up, Nashi draws on the conceptual apparatus of democracy promotion using hybrid elements. By offering a renewed ideological reading of the 1990s and of foreign intervention, the movement provides youth with a dignified subject position based on national pride. It also promises social mobility, integration, contacts, and networks. But what of its reception by youth?

From the Participants' Point of View

Our interviews conducted between 2006 and 2009 revealed a wide range of identification among Nashi participants. While some—the occasional attendees—were ironic about the organization and saw it just as a means to travel or party *na khaliavu* (at someone else's expense), others were more earnest. Crucially, although anti-Americanism circulated then as it does now, these young people seemed moved less by what Nashi organized against (Nashi's “Others”) than by its claims to do good. Our interviews revealed that many young people were drawn to the movement by its message of cultural tolerance; several participants expressed their distress at recent hate crimes toward foreigners and people of other nationalities. Others spoke candidly about their desire to obtain internships or other forms of reward. Clearly, the movement presents a national network and infrastructure for professional development and upward mobility that is particularly appealing to youth from the provinces.⁷⁵

But Nashi offers its provincial members not only a path to upward mobility but also a venue to channel their energies and concerns about society, as Masha's case reveals. Nashi clearly presents itself as a corrective project that seeks to “right the wrongs,” as Putin put it, not only by turning to history, but by addressing contemporary instances of injustice as well. In addition to targeting purported “fascists,” Nashi directs itself against people whom it deems corrupt: bureaucrats and business leaders who have purportedly conspired to sell off the Motherland in concert with malign foreigners and foreign states. My interviews with Nashi members reveal that this aspect of its work has deep resonance. Youth are profoundly

74. This entrepreneurial element has long been present, as some have noted. In 2008, Nashi activist Antonina Shapalova launched her own clothing line under the auspices of the organization. Her product line contains a strongly pro-Putin orientation and includes bikini-pants with the slogan, “Vova, ia s'toboi” (Vova, I'm with you), alluding to Vladimir (Vova) Putin. See Lassila, “Anticipating Ideal Youth in Putin's Russia.”

75. Nashi directs itself predominantly at educated youth from the provinces: ambitious young people aged 18–25 who lack the networks necessary for upward mobility. Our research suggests that many of those who are most active (komissars) are young people who do not have a secure foothold in cities; for example, recent migrants from other republics of the former Soviet Union or from the countryside.

dissatisfied with the inequities of contemporary Russian society and those deemed to have improperly profited during the tumultuous post-Soviet period. Masha, the activist introduced earlier, spoke with feeling on this topic. The people she wished to see replaced were corrupt officials she claimed were profiting from their position as bureaucrats in social service agencies (by misappropriating funds from international adoption services). Finally, as I have noted, Nashi encourages its participants to undertake diverse forms of philanthropic projects. Many young people were attracted by this element. After communist youth groups were dismantled in the 1990s, youth had no place to put their socially oriented energies; many of the young people I spoke with expressed concern about this.

In sum, Nashi is a site of meaningful activities where young people can express their concerns about the nation, their desire to contribute to its improvement, and, simultaneously, develop themselves. Like their U.S. counterparts (youth involved in U.S.-based NGOs), Nashi komissars are engaged in a complex choreography of doing good in the world while improving their own opportunities for upward mobility. Masha's case exemplifies this well. Her narrative about her work with children was shot through with an account of what the movement had given her: training sessions that had helped her to develop professional skills and enabled her to formulate new projects focused on supporting children in children's homes and encouraging a foster system. On the basis of the work she had done (her volunteer portfolio, as it were), she rose through the ranks and was ultimately invited to lead the Tver' delegation to the voluntarism session ("Technologies of Kindness") at Seliger 2009.

Igor', 25, is a komissar who has been involved in Nashi since the very beginning. He participated in Nashi's first mass action, *Our Victory* (2005); he was also closely involved in Seliger 2009 and worked as an organizer for the Tver' delegation. Igor' told me that the movement had been a major "stimulus" in his life. Disenchanted with his formal education, he had left the university and devoted himself to Nashi. His passion was information technology, and he was particularly interested in the scope and potential of social networking technologies; Nashi had offered a venue for him to pursue these interests. Indeed, he told me the movement had helped him to think about social issues and problems and to find a way to make links between them. "You need a system, or logistics. The movement taught me how to think about this systematically and to be able to analyze situations," he said. It was clear to me throughout the interview that Nashi had presented him with an opportunity for a particular kind of advancement—not the cynical pursuit of his own self-interest or career advancement, but the construction of self and the pursuit of meaningful activities.

In fact, although we had ostensibly met to talk about Nashi, Igor' barely made mention of the movement. Rather, his emphasis was on the confidence and sense of agency it had fostered in him and the process of self-actualization that it had permitted. When I noted this and asked him about Nashi and his relationship to it, he said, "You understand, the movement is a tool that helps me; it's like a car that takes me somewhere."

True to the hybridity I have noted, his interview was peppered with

references to diverse sources: the Nashi manifesto (which, he explained, expresses his values and orientation); *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*, a financial advice book in the self-help genre written by American authors (which he told me offered an “analogue” for his own experience); and *Crisi\$: How Is It Organized*, a conspiracy-theory-ridden detective novel by the Russian author Nikolai Starikov (which he pressed into my hands as he left).⁷⁶ I was intrigued that he embraced such seemingly contradictory texts and that he could refer to them so comfortably in the course of one conversation. While the self-help manual promotes a kind of neoliberal logic and subjectivity, the other two advance an alternative understanding of capitalism/globalization that views it as a hostile political program launched by a rapacious west.⁷⁷ Yet Igor’ drew on all these texts to advance an internally coherent narrative about himself and his place in the world.

By way of illustrating what he meant, he referred to Facebook. “You know the story of how Facebook was founded, don’t you?” he asked. When my face registered inquiry, he went on to explain: it was invented by a student in his dorm who wanted to connect with his friends nearby. What struck me was that this Nashi komissar included no national identifiers in this account; Mark Zuckerberg’s nationality (USA) and institutional affiliation (Harvard) were irrelevant to him; he was simply recalling the actions of a peer. Facebook was exemplary of a form of agency he identified with; it signaled a mode of operation, a way of thinking and operating in the world that he found attractive and that characterized his own life.⁷⁸ Finally, the “projects” he named, which the movement had helped him devise, were analogous to Facebook insofar as they made use of Internet technology and social networking to meet local needs. “Imagine,” he said, “there’s an old lady in her apartment who can’t get out to buy bread for herself. She knows her neighbor is not at home. . . . And you’re sitting in your apartment in a neighboring building. You can form an organization through the movement that will liaise with such old ladies so they can contact you and tell you what they need!” He was developing his own project to take to Seliger 2009, a plan to create an online carpooling system. “If you look at Russian roads,” he said, “you’ll see most cars are empty. Maybe

76. Robert T. Kiyosaki with Sharon L. Lecter, *Rich Dad, Poor Dad: What the Rich Teach Their Kids about Money—That the Poor and Middle Class Do Not!* (New York, 2000); Nikolai Starikov, *Crisi\$: How Is It Organized* (St. Petersburg, 2009). *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* was a *New York Times* best seller that offers individuals strategies to achieve financial independence in the new millennium via investing, real estate, owning businesses, and using strategies to protect your finances. Igor’ recalled the book as he reflected on his own trajectory and the lessons he had learned through Nashi. He explained that he was speaking, not about wealth, but about success, and how to define it and strive for it; the book exemplified a form of agency and taking control of one’s destiny that he identified with. An author and blogger who has published a number of historical and political novels, Starikov is also the organizer of the “Goebbels Award,” which is awarded to those who purportedly lie about, slander, or vilify Russia. One recipient is journalist and Public Chamber member Nikolai Svanidze, see nstarikov.ru/category/gebbels (last accessed 2 March 2012).

77. Pilkington et al., *Looking West?*

78. Igor’s constructions recall the findings in *Looking West?* where youth embrace the “West” in terms of what it offers them in lifestyle or material well-being, but reject it in terms of “being”—that is, morally, spiritually. Pilkington et al., *Looking West?*

it's dull to be alone; perhaps a neighbor in the next house is also looking to travel to this place. You might not be able to get there by train, and it's cheaper by car." There were additional benefits, too, he explained, "*obshenie* [contact, communication] and a kind of mobilization of people."

At the same time as Nashi is undoubtedly a top-down project, the work of sophisticated political technologists, my research suggests that it also has considerable purchase on its participants. It both resonates with young peoples' anxieties and fears and simultaneously empowers them to imagine themselves as agents of change. From 2006 to 2009 the organization appeared to be a site where youth could imagine and envision their role and potential contribution to society and position themselves vis-à-vis the authorities. Interviews with Nashi komissars revealed their passionate engagement in its stated goals; they viewed the movement (and themselves) as a force with the capacity to cleanse Russian society of its dysfunctions (both those associated with the Soviet past and those associated with the market) and to bring about positive change. As these two portraits reveal, youth responses to Nashi are highly individualized. It became clear to me that the "state-ness" of these state-run organizations is not determining; young people are able to personalize and domesticate them. Echoing Yurchak's work on the Komsomol, these young people are able to entertain multiple models and rationalities within this state-run organization and do not necessarily experience them as contradictory.⁷⁹ They also have a critical distance on them, distinguishing between what is meaningful and what is pro forma, maintaining a sharp sense of their own priorities as they serve the state. Indeed, in ways that international foundations would surely approve of, many of the youth I have interviewed have gained skills, taken what they wanted from Nashi, and moved on. In May 2010 I learned that Masha had left the movement to pursue alternative professional strategies. Rather than viewing Nashi as a form of "virtual politics," "faking democracy" (a reconstituted Bolshevik project, as Wilson would have it), it makes better sense to see it as evidence of something new and distinctive—a "post-modern mixture of old school methods and new political technologies," where we can see evidence of considerable agency and polyphony.⁸⁰

According to the Cold War binary logic that currently prevails in western commentary about Russia, youth movements such as Nashi mark the apotheosis of post-Bolshevik political culture. I suggest it is more profitable to consider them within a "broader political geography," that is, within the context of twenty years of development assistance in postsocialist states and within global processes of neoliberal governance, welfare restructuring, and shifts in governmentality in the post-9/11 era.⁸¹

Easy dismissals of contemporary state-sponsored civil society organi-

79. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*.

80. Robertson, cited in Cassiday and Johnson, "Putin, Putiniana and the Question of a Post-Soviet Cult of Personality," 76.

81. Gal and Kligman, *Politics of Gender after Socialism*, 4; David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford, 2005).

zations in Russia fail to acknowledge the very real problems with the civil society of NGOs brought into being by western governments and agencies during the 1990s. They also fail to acknowledge the depth of disenchantment about the so-called transition period western governments and international foundations had a hand in creating. As has been well documented, the decade of the 1990s was a period of intense economic and social dislocation. In addition to the material hardships people encountered, they grappled with a deep sense of loss in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's passing, leading in turn to disappointment and disillusionment with the promises of market democracy. Any analysis of contemporary Russian civil society must be mindful of this and appreciative of the extent to which this emotion is productive, capable of shaping political outcomes.⁸² Putin-era civil society projects, exemplified by Nashi, respond to and channel this sense of loss. Indeed, their genius has been to recognize the saliency of emotion, something liberal democratic interventions largely disregarded.⁸³

Russia's youth policies certainly provide evidence of the statist turn and the emergence of a "managed" civil society.⁸⁴ Clearly there are strong points of resemblance between Nashi and prior Soviet-era organizations and forms of practice. At the same time, hybrid elements circulate within it. Nashi articulates and promotes neoliberal notions, too, but with a sovereign democracy spin: "commodify your talent"—for the sake of the nation. These Putin-era state-run organizations are implicated in articulating a composite form of citizenship, where civic organizations are expected to be both self-reliant and auxiliaries of the state.⁸⁵ They advance a trenchant critique of the democratizing interventions of the 1990s at the same time as they draw on its conceptual apparatus. Rather than taking them as confirmation of the debasement of civil society/democracy, or their cunning perversion ("black PR"), we should take this as further evidence of "the flexible promiscuity, discursive power, and political life" both of neoliberal techniques and of the rhetoric, methods, and technologies of international donors.⁸⁶

Insofar as the Putinist civil society project arose from the ashes of the western sponsored democracy promotion, I maintain that we have a lot to learn from it and that we need to be attentive to the cultural forms it engenders. Indeed, there are striking similarities with its international foundation-sponsored precursor. This highly controversial state-run youth "movement" is not so very different from the NGOs it displaces. Indeed, if we back away from the ideal type and pay attention to "actually

82. Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair*; David Ost, *The Defeat of Solidarity: Anger and Politics in Postcommunist Europe* (Ithaca, 2005).

83. Ost, *Defeat of Solidarity*.

84. Suvi Salmenniemi, "Struggling for Citizenship: Civic Participation and the State in Russia," *Demokratizatsiia* 18, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 309–28; Richter, "Ministry of Civil Society?"; Linda J. Cook, "Oil Wealth and Welfare in the Russian Federation" (paper presented at the conference, "Redefining the Common Good after Communism," Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, 1 May 2009).

85. Salmenniemi, "Struggling for Citizenship."

86. Matza, "Moscow's Echo," 494.

existing civil society," Nashi quite closely resembles some of the organizational forms that were encouraged into being by international agencies. Like the internationally sponsored NGOs that preceded them, Nashi activities are less ideological campaigns than "projects," short-lived themed activities that are niche-marketed to youth. Indeed, they often have a built-in expiration date. For example, as the 18-year-old leader of one newly founded Nashi project "Stal'" (Steel) explained to me in May 2010, this project was to last for two years, until the next election cycle. Despite the non-state rhetoric, foreign-sponsored NGOs were ushered into forms of partnership with Russian state organizations. They were "governmentalized," assuming responsibilities for the task of governance as the state outsourced to them.⁸⁷ Indeed, in many countries, including many liberal democratic ones, the state is the primary source of funding for NGOs. With this in mind, the state-run Nashi looks a little less exotic.

Nashi's trajectory reveals similarities as well. Since its inception, Nashi has morphed considerably and, in so doing, has behaved like an archetypical NGO. It has undertaken a conscious rebranding that repositions it in accord with the state's interests in the Putin-Medvedev era: the need to modernize, innovate, and compete globally, and in such a way as to make it attractive to youth. Unlike the Komsomol, Nashi exists in a crowded field of youth organizations and competes for youth attention.

I do not wish to diminish Nashi's unsavory elements, nor the import of the anti-western notions it propagates. Indeed, my recent work confirms that these highly critical constructions circulate widely among youth; clearly, we need to take this seriously. But here too, reflexivity pays. If we locate Nashi within the global backlash against democracy promotion that Carothers points to, its seemingly exotic elements (militarism, belligerent nationalism) become more comprehensible.

Our project has brought, not only difference, but also commonality into view. It is not only in Russia that youth are targeted; as the Comaroffs point out, "youth" has emerged as a charged category in many "neoliberal nation-states currently in difficulty."⁸⁸ In the United States also, civil society discourse is implicated in shifting disciplinary tactics. Here too, youth voluntarism and other privatizing initiatives are promoted against a backdrop of economic neoliberalism and concerns about national security.⁸⁹ Youth voluntarism has long been promoted on college campuses in the United States under the auspices of "service learning." Over the last decade, service learning has increased exponentially; indeed, its mainstream acceptance has caused many of its practitioners disquiet. Rather

87. Coles, *Democratic Designs*; Paley, *Marketing Democracy*.

88. John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, "Reflections on Youth, From the Past to the Postcolony," in Alcinda Honwana and Filip de Boek, eds., *Makers and Breakers, Made and Broken: Children and Youth as Emerging Categories in Postcolonial Africa* (Oxford, 2005), 268.

89. Youth were implicated in some of the intense cultural debates of the immediate post-9/11 period in the United States. For example, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), founded by Senator Joseph Lieberman and Lynne Cheney made a series of pronouncements about the import of stressing U.S. values via history teaching that were markedly similar to Putin's initially exotic-sounding project of patriotic education. See Henry A. Giroux, *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* (Boulder, Colo., 2007).

than challenging students to engage in the critical thinking that proponents of voluntarism envisaged, service learning simply directs students into docile forms of charity work, and in this way depoliticizes them.⁹⁰ Via service learning, student-volunteers take on the responsibilities of the retreating welfare state. This looks very similar to the activities many Russian youth movements encourage. Although the charitable dimension of Nashi's work is less pronounced, the other youth movements I surveyed in the course of this project have a very pronounced charity focus. Although little noted, these state-run youth organizations emerged alongside a radical restructuring of social welfare benefits.⁹¹

I have been concerned to investigate the perspectives of the youth who participate in these projects, those frequently homogenized as "Putin's Generation." International aid and technologies did not determine the activities of activists who accepted foreign assistance, nor do Putinist projects.⁹² As Wilson acknowledges, virtual politics is never total.⁹³ Indeed, my ethnography has shown that a diverse range of identification is possible among Nashi activists. Participants draw on Nashi's components selectively, in contingent and unpredictable ways. As Masha and Igor's cases reveal, they maintain a sharp sense of their own priorities at the same time as they serve the state. In my early analysis of these movements and their members, I am struck again by what unites, rather than divides young people in Russia from those in the United States: a common set of concerns and anxieties about politics, citizenship, and social responsibility in times of globalizing neoliberalism.

Our collaborative research has thus far facilitated a critical comparative investigation of the restructuring of social welfare provision, citizenship, and neoliberal governance that will be of interest beyond the specific locality where it is taking place. The terrain it has uncovered provides further evidence of the interplay between "old" and "new" that characterizes the postsocialist period.⁹⁴ At a time of transition, where the significance of youth is (once again) being reconstituted, this project examines young peoples' understandings of voluntarism, politics, and social responsibility and explores how they envision their own lives, roles, and civic responsibilities.

90. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Susan Brin Hyatt, "Service Learning,' Applied Anthropology and the Production of Neoliberal Citizens," *Anthropology in Action* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 6–13.

91. Law 122 came into effect in January 2005; under this reform, social benefits to low-income people were "monetized," that is, formerly free services were replaced by small cash payments. These policies once introduced resulted in large-scale social protests in Moscow and many provincial cities, including Tver'. In response, the federal and regional governments introduced amendments to this legislation and backed off from some of its most severe measures. I theorize the connections between this restructuring of social welfare and the emergence of youth organizations elsewhere. See Julie Hemment, "Soviet-Style Neoliberalism? Nashi, Youth Voluntarism, and the Restructuring of Social Welfare in Russia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 56, no. 6 (November/December 2009): 36–50.

92. Hemment, *Empowering Women in Russia*.

93. Wilson, *Virtual Politics*.

94. Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery, "Introduction," in Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery, eds., *Uncertain Transition: Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World* (Lanham, Md., 1999), 1–17.