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Soviet-style neoliberalism? Nashi, youth voluntarism and the restructuring of social welfare in Russia

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A Soviet-style neoliberalism? *Nashi*, Youth voluntarism and the restructuring of social welfare in Russia¹

Former Russian President Vladimir Putin presided over a sustained mood of backlash against democracy promotion and the international interventions of the nineties. He came to office on the heels of the Yeltsin era, now remembered as something of a shameful free for all, where neoliberal reforms resulted in the pillaging of the country and the emergence of an oligarchal class. Putin consistently distanced himself from the policies of international agencies; his formulation of “sovereign democracy” appeared to signal a break with international institutions and their directives and the models that prevailed during the nineties. A striking feature of his rhetoric has been the resurgence of socialist sounding claims and the prominence of social welfare issues. This is a remarkable thing for those of us who worked in Russia during the nineties, when the language of materialist claims and social justice seemed consigned to the dustbin of history. However, in this article, I show that something more complex is afoot: beneath this ostensible rupture, there has been a great deal of continuity. The Putin administration advanced liberalizing reforms at the same time as it rhetorically distanced itself from them. These contradictions were particularly manifest in the sphere of social welfare. Between 2001-2006, Putin succeeded in accomplishing a degree of liberalization his predecessors only dreamed of, passing a series of liberal-oriented reforms that were blocked during the nineties, in pension and social benefits reform (Chandler 2004; Cook

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2007). Simultaneously, he advanced certain benefits and greatly increased state spending – for example on “maternity capital” and youth projects.

This article investigates these uneven policies and the hybrid social formations that they give rise to. In dialogue with recent anthropological scholarship, I am concerned to examine the ways neoliberal technologies and practices interact with local ideologies, moralities and subjectivities (Ong 2006; Tsing 2005). In contradistinction to some studies, for example the work of David Harvey,² some anthropologists analyze neoliberalism not as a coherent hegemonic project, but as a more uneven and contradictory process (Ong 2006).

Russia offers a particularly interesting case because of its trajectory of the last decade and a half: it moved from being a “laboratory” for liberal economic reform, to assuming a demonstratively hostile stance vis-à-vis liberal policies during the Putin era. My ethnographic vantage point on these processes is provincial campaigns promoting youth voluntarism, a site where the interaction between neoliberal technologies and local ideologies is particularly dynamic and interesting. In focusing on these, I draw links between two seemingly disparate spheres: state social welfare policies and youth policies. State-run youth organizations are a striking phenomenon of the Putin-era landscape. While they have mostly been considered in terms of their political role, specifically, in terms of their role in preventing an oppositional “color” revolution from breaking out in Russia, I maintain that they are inextricably linked to the push-pull of social welfare

² I use David Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism as a starting point in this article, to refer to deregulation, privatization and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provisioning (2005). While never consistently enacted, it does exist as an ideal type. Harvey traces the steady ascendancy of neoliberal economic philosophy from the 1970s, through the Thatcher and Reagan administrations, to the point where they achieve hegemony (and have global reach) in the postsocialist period. Although inconsistently implemented, they are certainly manifest and traceable in the plans and blueprints of the IMF/World Bank and their ambitions for the region.

policies also. Youth organizations such as the controversial pro-Kremlin *Nashi* (Ours) and lesser known provincial organizations such as the Tver'-based *Vazhnoe Delo* (Important Deeds) first appeared in the spring of 2005, the very same time as widespread protests against welfare reform rocked the Russian political establishment. They offer forms of social service to needy populations, working in concert (sometimes explicitly in "partnership") with state social welfare institutions. In examining them, I pose the following question: to what extent can we see these youth organizations as an instance of Soviet-style neoliberalism? While clearly implicated in a form of neoliberal restructuring where civil society organizations take on the responsibilities of the state, these organizations contain hybrid features that both confirm and baffle our expectations. At the same time as they "soften" the effects of reform (by providing services), they bear resemblance to Soviet-era youth organizations such as the Komsomol, thus reassuring some of the populations most directly affected by liberal reform: veterans and the elderly, many of whom are nostalgic for prior cultural forms. Simultaneously, I suggest they perform an important interpretive role in purchasing consent for possible ongoing liberal restructuring. Despite their distinctively nationalistic orientation and anti-neoliberal stance, they draw on elements of the conceptual apparatus of international democracy promotion that transformed Russian society in the nineties. Not quite state, not non-governmental, they offer a compelling ethnographic window onto the ongoing restructuring of social welfare provision and the redrawing of state/societal relations in Russia.

The paradox

My ethnographic starting point in this research project was two seemingly disconnected events or phenomena that I witnessed in Tver' in 2005: (1) the fallout from the “monetizing” reforms of January 2005 and (2) the emergence of youth voluntarism promoting projects at the federal and provincial level.

Item 1: monetization

When I arrived in Tver' in March 2005, I found people up in arms. In January 2005, new federal legislation took effect with sharp social consequences: the “monetization” of benefits (*monetizatsiia*) – that is, the replacement of social benefits with cash payments for vulnerable members of society, and the introduction of fees for formerly free services. In the context of rising prices and galloping inflation, cash is not a secure entitlement. This legislation gave rise to extreme social discontent and the first large scale protests since Putin assumed office. I was taken aback by the degree of anger and discontent I was hearing (striking even in comparison with what I heard expressed during the nineties).

Russia looked like a tinderbox in early spring 2005, and yet by the summer, it was clear that things had subsided. The state had somehow succeeded in dampening these demands and in quieting the population. Although levels of anger and dissatisfaction remained (and still remain) high, it seemed clear that the issue no longer had political traction. Instead, something else had emerged that channeled political energy and aspirations: state-run youth voluntarism projects.

Item 2: youth voluntarism projects

Beginning in the spring of 2005, the Kremlin set up a number of national youth organizations, including *Nashi* (Ours) and *Molodaia Gvardiia* (The Young Guard).³ I was very much aware of this activity in the summer of 2005, when national newspapers reported the first *Nashi* youth camp. Thousands of youth from all over the federation were bused in to attend this camp, funded by generous allocations from the federal budget. Youth participants were given branded gifts - T-shirts with the *Nashi* logo on front, and the Russian national anthem on the back. This activity was visible at the regional level, too, as local politicians began to set up youth-oriented associations. Via these organizations, Russian politicians offer “voluntarism” as a means by which to morally educate youth, here, cast as a “patriotic education” (*patrioticheskoe vospitanie*). Understanding the energetic (and financially generous) promotion of these organizations – in the context of such extreme social dislocation and economic disinvestment- became the puzzle I have sought to unravel, and is the question this article addresses.

My discussion draws on data gathered in the course of a collaborative project conducted with Russian scholars and youth in Tver’, a provincial city of half a million located 170 km outside Moscow. Tver’ offers an interesting vantage point on these processes, since there, the two themes come neatly together. The governor, Dmitry Zelenin has been both an enthusiastic proponent of welfare reform and one of the most ardent promoters of youth voluntarism. Tver’ oblast (region) has been one of the “leaders” and most enthusiastic implementers of Putin-era liberal-oriented welfare reform (Aleksandrovna and Struyk 2007). Simultaneously, it emerged as a trailblazer for youth voluntarism programs. Since summer 2005, Tver’ oblast has hosted the annual summer

³ Kremlin interest in youth projects predated the monetization reforms. The first national youth movement, Moving Together, was founded in 2003. However, it never gained traction in the way that *Nashi* did.

camp of the national pro-Kremlin youth organization *Nashi* at Lake Seliger. Further, it has a flourishing set of youth movements of its own. Prominent among these is *Vazhnoe Delo* (Important Deeds), which was founded by the governor shortly after he assumed office in 2004. During each of my trips to Russia between 2005-2008, I became more aware of these new youth voluntarism promoting projects. Walking down the main pedestrian street, I have frequently encountered groups of youth engaged in various civic campaigns, such as environmental clean-up campaigns, campaigns against the sale of alcohol to minors and officiating at patriotic holidays. All of these are quasi-state organizations, established with the support of the local regional or municipal authorities and supported by grants from the local administration or local businesses. All share the following characteristics: they have a pronounced nationalist-patriotic orientation, and they engage youth in the provision of voluntary service to vulnerable populations.

Social welfare reform in Russia

In order to understand the confluence of these two trends (social welfare restructuring and the emergence of state-run youth organizations) and the specific moment this research investigates, it is necessary to provide some background on the history of social welfare in Russia. Despite the ascendance of neoliberal models of economic development in the region in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, the Russian welfare system remained relatively untouched. Indeed, Russia is something of an outlier even amongst CIS countries (Wengle and Rasell 2008).

The Soviet state social welfare system rested on a system of “categorical benefits”, whereby certain categories of citizen received in-kind benefits (*l'goty*), such as free or subsidized public transportation, steep discounts on residential utilities, free local

telephone service, free medication, free annual treatment at sanatoriums and health resorts, free artificial limbs and wheelchairs for invalids, guaranteed employment for the disabled. Crucially, these benefits were not awarded on the basis of material need, or to alleviate social hardship (Cook 2007). In the officially egalitarian Soviet Union, there *was* no poverty; full employment, free education and healthcare supposedly guaranteed basic living standards to all. Benefits were instead channeled to those who were unable to work, to those with exceptional needs (for example, large families), or awarded on the basis of merit, here meaning service to the state (Cook 2007; Wengle and Rasell 2008).

This system came under threat with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In keeping with their general “shock-therapy” orientation the World Bank and IMF prescribed radical measures for so-called transitioning states. Soviet style welfare systems were considered to be unwieldy, inefficient and beyond the means of these economies. They were also considered anathema to free market principles, insofar as they fostered dependency amongst recipients. The solution proposed was a radical restructuring, and the implementation of a so-called “liberal” welfare state model (based on the US model). The liberal model signals what Lynne Haney has called “the materialization of need”, that is, a shift from across the board social entitlements, to means testing, and a poverty focus (Haney 2002). Here, scant state resources are redirected to those with reduced economic circumstances – “the needy”, or the poor.⁴

Haney’s case study provides us with important ethnographic insights into the ways Hungarian people experienced these changes. Her account makes clear that equally

⁴Although this process remained nuanced and differentiated across the region, by the mid-to-late nineties, most Central European states had embraced the liberal welfare state. However, recent studies show that welfare reform did not play out in the textbook way it was presumed to. See Read and Thelen (2007); Caldwell (2007); Kay (2007).

as traumatizing as the loss of material benefits was the loss of social recognition. The materialization of need entailed what she calls an “interpretive narrowing”, that is to say, as the state switches its attention solely to material need and defining “the poor”, a long list of categories and experience (veterans of war, labor, length of service, participation in specific battles) cease to matter (2002). Through observing interviews and interactions between case workers and clients, Haney found that clients were distressed by the fact that their experience as a mother, a wife, a worker was ignored and discounted in the new system. People (clients) experienced this new welfare regime as a denial of aspects of their identity and as a loss of social solidarity (2002).

For a number of reasons, in Russia these reforms stalled. Ironically, as robber baron capitalism took shape, and oligarchs consolidated their power, the sphere of social welfare remained relatively intact. Indeed, as economic conditions worsened for the majority of the population, the system of social benefits burgeoned. During the nineties, both the federal and regional governments awarded additional *l'goty* to offset hardships. Although the sums in question were miserly and fell well short of peoples' needs, the system grew. That welfare reform failed in Russia during the nineties was not for want of trying; it certainly had enthusiastic proponents. The so-called young reformers that presided over the usual package of deregulation and privatization drew up a series of ambitious plans and programs that closely followed World Bank prescriptions. However, these never came into effect. During the nineties, communist parties had strong representation in the state Duma; together with powerful interest groups and coalitions, they were able to block the executive from following through on these policies (Cook 2007). Some suggest that these reforms were not strenuously pursued, due to concern

about the potential political fallout. One thing is clear: despite the inefficiency of the system and the paucity of benefits granted, people were very attached to them. To this day, the Soviet welfare system has an intense symbolic significance. Benefits (*lgoty*) not only rewarded service to the state, but they were associated with meaningful and deeply traumatic periods of Soviet history (Chandler 2004; Cook 2007). They were awarded to honor military service during the Great Patriotic War, labor during the five-year plans, or were granted in recognition of suffering incurred at the state's hand (repression, Chernobyl). *L'goty*, or the events or status they marked were thus a source of pride. Thus, *l'gotniki* were not stigmatized (as "welfare recipients" are in liberal welfare states), but dignified under this system.⁵ Neither were they marginal; on the contrary, the system was so widespread that it embraced most families; according to estimates, by 2003, more than one quarter of the population was eligible for some form of *l'goty*.⁶ Ironically, it was Putin who came to unravel it.

Vladimir Putin came to power in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 1998, a crisis that crystallized popular discontent and disenchantment with "democracy", market reform and the foreign agents who prescribed them. He made political capital by acknowledging the anger, social dislocation and sense of national humiliation experienced by many Russian people during the traumatic decade of the nineties. Empowered both by calls from constituencies that favored the extension of the state, and by oil revenues, he undertook a series of remedial type measures designed at correcting past market excesses. One of his first moves as President was to pay the state's social

⁵I do not wish to assert that this was unanimous or unchanging. Indeed, resentments towards veteran-*l'gotniki* were apparent during the early 1990s when social resentment ran high (Tumarkin 1994). However, *l'gotniki* remained dignified in official discourse.

⁶Ovcharova and Pishnyak 2005:7, cited in Wengle and Rasell (2008:742)

debts and to eliminate arrears in wages, pensions, and social benefits (Cook 2007:150).

At the same time, he aggressively distanced himself from the politics and prescriptions of international lending institutions. However, despite these rhetorical and political moves to constrain the influence of foreign identified agents, Putin drew upon the same World Bank models that had guided policy during the Yeltsin-era (Cook 2007:147). Beginning in 2000, he embarked on some radical liberal-oriented reforms that had much in keeping with the plans that preceded them. For example, he succeeded in passing pensions reform and introduced the liberalization of housing and utilities fees. In 2004, he turned his attention to the Soviet-era system of social benefits.

Monetization: the “limits of liberalization”⁷

Law 122, commonly known as the law on monetization, was a hastily implemented Federal reform that took the Russian Federation by storm. It passed quickly into law in the fall of 2004 after only three readings and came into effect in January 2005. The law sought to bring an end to the Soviet era benefits system, by replacing in-kind benefits (such as free or subsidized public transportation) with fixed cash payments. Further, it sought to regulate and reorganize the division of labor between the federal and regional governments. Whereas formerly, the federal government had borne fiscal responsibility for most benefits, law 122 passed much of this responsibility to the regions. While the “most socially meaningful” categories of *l’gotniki* (notably military veterans and the disabled) remained the responsibility of the federal government, responsibility for

⁷ Here, I am borrowing Linda Cook’s formulation (2007:122).

the majority (mostly pensioners, also veterans of labor, including those who labored on the wartime home-front and victims of repression) was shifted to the regions.⁸

Law 122 granted the regions a great deal of latitude in devising their response. For example, although regions were strongly encouraged to monetize the benefits of those they were responsible for, they were permitted to decide both details (including the sum of monetary compensation) and timetables for implementation.⁹ Regional governors did so according to their means - the economic resources at their disposal - and their proximity to the Kremlin. As a result there was a wide divergence across the Federation. While most regions (including Moscow) opted to maintain and even extend existing benefits, a few pushed hard for liberal reform. Tver' oblast proved to be one of the more radical; it was one of three regions that undertook "complete monetization" (Alexandrova and Struyk 2007).¹⁰ Although governor Dmitry Zelenin did undertake some "softening" measures (and certainly proclaimed his largesse in so doing in the local papers), he opted to monetize all benefits.

Although extremely radical, law 122 was something of a hybrid. Unlike in the rest of Central and Eastern Europe, it did not seek to "materialize needs" fully; that is, it did not seek to introduce means testing or to move to a poverty focus. Soviet era categories of *l'gotniki* remained unchanged and the legislation did not seek to monetize

⁸ According to figures cited by Wengel and Rasell, the regions became responsible for the majority (2/3) of *l'gotniki*. The most numerous categories were labor veterans and pensioners (approx. 30 million people). The federal government retained responsibility for 16.7 million people, of whom 69.8% were disabled; 8.9% Chernobyl sufferers; 6.1% military vets; the rest were orphans or second world war veterans (2008:744).

⁹ Wengle and Rasell state that the regions were only required to monetize *l'goty* in the transport and healthcare sectors and could decide about other in-kind benefits themselves (eg. housing and utilities).

¹⁰ According to these authors the other two regions were the Republic of Tatarstan and the Yamalo-Nenetsky autonomous area (2007).

all benefits.¹¹ However, its import was huge; it was a “watershed” for welfare reform and “marked a fundamental break with the past” (Wengle and Rasell 2008:748). In opening the door to monetization, it was a clear step in the direction of a liberal welfare state. Crucially, it introduced “key aspects of neoliberal governmentality”, including the logics of “cost effectiveness, accountability and transparency” to the social benefit system (2008:748). Law 122 contained an “individualizing logic” also insofar as it clearly implied that the burden of responsibility had shifted from the state to the individual, who now had to internalize these values, to calculate how to spend cash benefits and meet her own needs (2008:753). Further, it paved the way for the extension of these policies at the level of the regions, specifically encouraging the introduction of standardized means testing.

The legislation targeted huge numbers of people, since the ranks of the *l’gotniky* were very wide. According to Linda Cook, these reforms were to effect the most vulnerable quarter of the population of the Russian Federation - mostly pensioners and veterans, but also the disabled, single parents and those with large families, by eliminating benefits, services, subsidies and protections (2007). Crucial to note, it unfolded at the same time as other dramatic reforms, such as the liberalization of housing and utilities fees, which resulted in dramatically increased bills for people.

The political fall out was dramatic. Protests broke out throughout Russia to contest this “anti-people” (*antinarodnyi*) reform.¹² Some of the largest and most publicized took place outside Moscow, where thousands of protesters succeeded in

¹¹ Under law 122, federal *l’gotniky* maintained in-kind benefits via the so-called *sotspaket* (social package) system, which they could choose over monetary compensation.

¹² According to data cited by Wengle and Rasell, 55 protests took place across the Russian Federation in January 2005, half of which comprised over 1,000 people (2008:745).

blocking the roads. Although under-reported in the local media, protests took place in Tver', also.¹³ Accounts affirm that they were initially spontaneous, grassroots, and not led originally by any political parties. Furthermore, they had an explicitly anti-Putin orientation; protesters denounced him and represented him as a successor to the nineties-era economic reform that he ostensibly opposed.¹⁴ The ripple effects spread quickly throughout the federation; Communist and other oppositional parties quickly jumped on the bandwagon and the protests even threatened party unity within the "party of power" *Edinaiia Roissia* (United Russia).¹⁵ Taking place as they did a few short months after the protests associated with the so-called "Orange Revolution" in the Ukraine, they represented a serious threat to the Putin administration, which was increasingly jittery about the possibility of analogous challenges to the status quo.¹⁶

The protests had broad resonance and moved people not usually given to political action to get involved. They also brought about potential alliances between groups of people who formerly had no perception of common cause. One of the most striking alliances – and most threatening from the Kremlin's perspective – was between the elderly and youth. Both pensioners and students found themselves demoted to the second-tier category of being regional *l'gotniki*, structurally united by law 122. Indeed,

¹³ The official oblast' newspaper *Tverskaia Zhiz'n* does not contain a single report of local (or national) protests during the period January 10-March 30 2005. However, the Internet project Skaji.net, reported large-scale protests in Tver'; on 15 January (2,000 people); on January 22 (2-3,000 people), March 25 (1,000 people in a Communist-led protest); September 30 (2-2.5,000 people in a protest led by military pensioners). Accessed from the archive of www.skaji.net, October 15, 2006.

¹⁴ According to one leftist source, banners did not focus narrowly on monetization, but denounced Putin more broadly, with slogans such as: "Down with Putin!", "Down with the government!", "Down with the regime of plundering" <http://www.avtonom.org/eng/news/benefits.1.html> (accessed July 27, 2006).

¹⁵ Online sources reported that members of the liberal Yabloko party, the left-wing Rodina and communist groups attended and gave addresses at anti-monetization protests during January 2005. See for example, <http://www.avtonom.org/eng/news/benefits.1.html> (accessed July 27, 2006)

¹⁶ The so-called "orange" revolution was a series of protests and demonstrations that took place in Ukraine during 2004-5 in response to allegations of corruption and voter intimidation during the presidential elections. These mostly youth-run demonstrations led to a run-off vote, where oppositional candidate Viktor Yushchenko defeated the incumbent Viktor Yanukovich.

journalistic reports testify that while pensioners (including veterans) comprised the most numerous and vocal in protest, they were joined by large numbers of students. I picked up further evidence of this cross-generational solidarity in the course of ethnographic research. Lena, one of the student research team members, recalled the angry scenes she had witnessed on public transport during January and February 2005 and the anger and sense of abandonment that older people expressed when the bus companies refused to recognize their bus passes.¹⁷ She shared their sense of anger, since she had also lost free bus pass privileges as a student. Beyond the sense of common cause generated by shared fate, my ethnographic research pointed to another dimension of this coalition: empathy. One of the teachers at Tver' State University shared with me that her students at the time had been extremely upset about the reforms; this was an anger experienced by a generation of "grandchildren", who were angry on behalf of their grandparents.

The loss or erosion of in-kind benefits was of course of material significance; people were concerned that contrary to the government's claims, cash payments would not be commensurate to the value of in-kind benefits they had lost.¹⁸ However, my ethnographic research confirms that as in Haney's study, people were as deeply distressed by the symbolic implications of the reform. Because benefits were associated with intensely meaningful episodes of Russian history, they were not only of material significance, but a matter of crucial importance to peoples' identity. Although law 122 did not totally discount the experiences these benefits were awarded to honor – as in

¹⁷ Testimony to the confusion of the times, Tver' bus companies refused to reach a deal with the governor. While the tram and trolleybus company signed a deal with the governor and allowed *l'gotniki* to retain their free transport privileges, bus companies did not. Indeed, they posted signs in their windows that announced, "No benefits" (*Bez l'got*). Local newspapers also reported angry altercations between passengers and conductors during this time.

¹⁸ The law included what Aleksandrova and Struyk call a "non-worsening ideology", that is, a clause according to which the cash compensation was not allowed to represent a lesser value than the in-kind benefits (2007).

Haney's case study — it certainly undermined them. Here too, a form of “interpretive narrowing” took place. Law 122 interrupted the symbolic order upon which the benefits system rested. Firstly, it did so by implying that money could provide recompense for service to the state. In the course of talking to people, I gained the strong impression that many people felt that cash payments trivialized their life experiences. Secondly, and crucially, it did so by introducing new hierarchies amongst *l'gotniki*. The legislation introduced new hierarchies amongst groups of people who had formerly been united and treated equally. This was most striking in the case of veterans of war and veterans of labor (including those who had labored during the war on the home front). These categories had formerly been united and treated equally. Law 122 changed all that. While the former remained under the jurisdiction of the federal government, the latter were passed on to the regions to administrate. Since the regions had less money, and since the policies were not yet in place, this amounted to a demotion. Those who had long stood shoulder to shoulder, occupying the dignified positionality of veterans by virtue of their contributions during the “Great Patriotic War” were now disaggregated. While the law advantaged military veterans by virtue of excluding them from the logic of monetization, it disadvantaged their home-front peers (sometimes their spouses), who were exposed to it. This interplay or articulation between categories of the population had the effect of, “crystallizing ethical dilemmas and “threatening to displace basic values of social equality and shared fate” (Ong 2005:4). Archival research of both federal and regional papers confirm that this was a major source of discontent during the spring of 2005; debates in the Duma raged and the newspapers were full of readers' letters

expressing distress, confusion and anger. Labor veterans—as all regional *l'gotniki*- now perceived themselves to be “second-class citizens”, as one of my informants put it.

The regionalization aspect troubled people too. During the war, people were highly mobile and served where they were needed; now, their regional location determined the amount of compensation they received. My ethnographic research gave me insight into how troubling people found this; the uneven extension of neoliberal logics ruptured peoples' sense of fairness and equity and undermined the very notion of citizenship (Ong 2005).

As Linda Cook has put it, law 122 marked the “limits of liberalization” (2007:122). The Putin administration had signally failed to win legitimacy for these policies. It had not undertaken the requisite project of persuasion to secure consent for the reforms. Shaken by this unexpected political fall-out, the Kremlin took rapid steps to distance itself from the law. *Vlast's* (the authorities') self-diagnosis was not that the policy was wrong, but that it had been poorly implemented and crucially, poorly explained. Indeed, the necessity for reform was emphatically stressed. In a clever twist, much of the blame was placed on the Yeltsin period, when *l'goty* burgeoned and spun out of control. In the weeks following law 122's implementation, Putin made a series of pronouncements that blamed both the Duma and previous (Yeltsin-era) administrations for their haste in drawing up the legislation. The media-based research I have undertaken confirms that Tver'-based politicians went into explanatory overdrive, also.¹⁹ The reasons given were always technocratic (stressing the objective necessity of reform, and the

¹⁹ The local daily *Tverskaiia Zhiz'n*, which serves as the official media organ for the regional administration, was full of bulletins from the governor's press center during this period, seeking to demonstrate his willingness to dialogue, and his responsiveness to peoples' concerns.

intrinsic problems of this Yeltsin-era system), and accompanied by declarations of concern for the people.

The federal government's strategy combined persuasion and explanation with steps to "soften" (*smiagchit'*) the reform, for example by raising pensions and extending benefits in some cases. Regional governors followed suit. Even in Tver', initially celebrated as one of the regions most successful in passing and implementing the reforms, the governor undertook a number of "softening" measures (*smiagchaiushchiemery*), for example by extending free transport privileges. Indeed, amendments to law 122 are still being debated today; in February 2008, the federal parliament voted to reinstate victims of state repression and home front workers to the ranks of Federal *l'gotniky* and introduced a series of steps to increase their compensation.²⁰

My case of law 122 so far confirms that neoliberalism articulates in uneven, often contradictory ways (Ong 2006); specific local histories and conditions influence the extent of neoliberal restructuring and the way it plays out in particular places (Collier, Hoffman and DeHart 2006; Ong 2006; Tsing 2004). Law 122 did not attempt to fully "materialize" need; indeed, it was a hybrid policy that retained elements of "exception" to neoliberalism and upheld Soviet categories and formations (Ong 2005). However, it introduced key elements of neoliberal technologies and paved the way for a fuller restructuring. It upset the symbolic universe by messing with categories and devaluing the experience of veterans. Finally, it brought about unlikely forms of solidarity between different categories of the population. The protests that ensued prompted the state to roll back some of these measures. Indeed, in the aftermath of the fallout from law 122, the

²⁰One newspaper reported that House Speaker Mironov publicly regretted his original support for law 122 and the humiliation it caused World War Two veterans to feel (Mikhailov 2008).

Putin administration launched new programs that significantly extended forms of social welfare: four so-called National Priority Projects (Health, Education, Affordable Housing and Agriculture), and the pronatalist “maternity capital” system. Some analysts consider this moment mark a distinct policy shift from neoliberalism to more statist forms of social welfare interventions (Cook 2009). However, at the same time, elements of neoliberalism persisted; the state extended neoliberal technologies via civil society organizations. This amounts to an extension of state control and a blurring of state/societal boundaries, as we shall see.

I now turn to make sense of the youth voluntarism promoting projects that have proliferated in Russia since 2005. As noted above, I argue that they are in some way implicated in Russia’s transitioning welfare regime. But how? In this next section, I attempt to make sense of their relationship to monetization, the ensuing protests and the “softening” measures that followed.

Youth voluntarism promoting projects: Nashi and Vazhnoe Delo

The literature on neoliberal welfare reform in Western Europe and the United States offers some clues as to the relationship between these phenomena (state social welfare policies and youth policies). Scholarship has traced the ways that as restructuring took place, responsibility for welfare was taken from the state and placed upon the individual. Here, local associations and non-governmental groups emerged as vehicles for citizens to take on these responsibilities from the state (Harvey 2005; Hyatt 2001).

Russian youth organizations can be seen through this lens, too. At a time when the state is reconfiguring its support to populations, youth volunteers are encouraged to step up to take on some of this responsibility. However, there’s something more complex

afoot. Although they respond to law 122 and the reconfigurations it stimulated, the relationship is not so direct as this formulation might suggest; they do not take over the state's functions, but work in conjunction with the state as it goes about redrawing categories of the population. As in the U.S., these "non-governmental" organizations are not separate from the state, but instead, intimately entangled (Cruikshank 1999; Harvey 2005; Hyatt 2001; Lyon-Callos 2004). First, I contend that in both the cases of service provision through youth voluntarism that I will now consider, the material service rendered is less important than the symbolic recompense these organizations provide. I argue that these campaigns undertake important interpretive work that attempts to heal some of the rifts wrought by monetization. Second, I suggest that they can be viewed as forms of governmentality that are directed primarily at the volunteers who participate in them. Insofar as they inculcate new forms of subjectivity and advocate new state/societal relationships, they are engaged in a project of persuasion that aims to purchase consent for the possible extension of liberal oriented reform. First, I introduce the two youth groups I have considered: *Nashi* and *Vazhnoe Delo*.

Nashi

Nashi, the "youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement", was founded in March 2005 and has been the most visible and controversial of the new state-run youth organizations. It claims to be an independent political movement, supported by private donations; however, it has received substantial financial and symbolic support from the Kremlin. If there is one thing that unites its actions and proclamations, it is its staunch and unflinching support for President Vladimir Putin and his political modernization project.

Since *Nashi* was founded, it has undertaken a number of high profile mass events, mostly in support of the Kremlin, and always of a patriotic orientation. Its inaugural mass rally took place on May 15, 2005, *Den' Pobeda* (Victory Day). An estimated 60,000 youth from all over the Russian Federation marched in Moscow to commemorate the 60th anniversary of the Soviet victory over the Nazis (or “fascists” as they are more commonly recalled). These youth dressed in *Nashi* T-shirts stopped the traffic and caused a media frenzy. Between 2005-2008, the movement grew; in its heyday it claimed an active membership of ten thousand youth (and many more supporters) and had regional divisions all over the Russian Federation.²¹

Much has been made of *Nashi*'s similarities with the Soviet-era youth organization, the Komsomol. However, the comparison is usually made to suggest the ideological role of the organization. In dominant press and scholarly accounts *Nashi* has predominantly been viewed in terms of its political role: it has been viewed as an organization that creates “Putin's generation”, a project to capture the political sympathies of youth and to prevent “color” or oppositional political movements from breaking out in Russia. I do not mean to dismiss this aspect of its activities and functions; indeed, *Nashi* materials are quite explicit in stating its anti-orange intent. However, in this article, I point to a different dimension of the movement that has been less noted. Like the Komsomol before it, *Nashi* has a pronounced service dimension, also.²² That is to say, *kommissars* (leader activists) are required to undertake different forms of service

²¹ 2008 was a turbulent year for *Nashi*. The presidential administration distanced itself from the movement, following a number of controversial campaigns and it began to disintegrate. That this took place in the aftermath of the 2007 State Duma and 2008 Presidential elections confirms that its role was primarily political, to shore up support for Putin's course amongst youth.

²² Service, forcibly appropriated via the institution of the *subbotnik* (voluntary day's labor) was central to the Komsomol's identity. During the Soviet period, youth were enlisted to undertake a number of projects for the state.

(including ecological/clean-up campaigns, or working with veterans). Most regional branches of *Nashi* have a social “direction”. Most of these projects have either a strongly didactic focus, as in campaigns against underage drinking, public alcohol consumption and littering, or articulate forms of support for vulnerable populations. Unlike the work of other voluntarism promoting projects (including *Vazhnoe Delo*), these interventions are highly selective. *Nashi* campaigns are not directed at the needy, but mostly address a distinct sector of the population: World War Two veterans. And they are made using the language of the *Komsomol*. *Nashi* activists interviewed during the project use the terms *sotsialki* and *subbotnik* to describe their work, and eschewed the other terms I offered, such as “*blagotvoritel’nost’*” (charity).

Vazhnoe Delo

Vazhnoe Delo (Important Deeds) is a “long-term social program” that undertakes a number of voluntary campaigns and actions. It was founded in 2004 by the governor of Tver’ region. This program engages youth volunteers (mostly school children and university students) in the provision of services to the “socially unprotected” (*sotsial’no nezashchishchennym*), mostly elderly people living by themselves, orphans and the poor. *Vazhnoe Delo* volunteers provide physical assistance (carrying water, chopping wood, delivering medicine and groceries), and organize events and excursions. According to its director, it has 31 branches in the oblast’ and engages more than 4,500 volunteers.

In contradistinction to *Nashi*, *Vazhnoe Delo* has an explicit social welfare orientation and is overtly linked to the restructuring associated with law 122. It was launched in December 2004, just before monetization was implemented, significantly before the protests broke out. Its original statement of goals make it clear that it is very

much in synch with the goals of 122. It proceeds from the assumption that the state cannot, indeed, should not be responsible for resolving all social problems. In stunning accord with the third sector technologies that were introduced by western foundations during the nineties, it advocates a “social partnership” between three sectors – the state, business and civil society. Its goals, as stated in its founding documents are (1) to bring together the strengths of society, the administration and business to offer support to the socially defenseless, and (2) to support and develop the voluntary movement in Tver’ oblast. However, the work it engages in is also highly political and ideological as I will go on to show.

In their different ways, both *Nashi* and *Vazhnoe Delo* are Soviet-neoliberal hybrids, that is, they contain an interesting fusion of Soviet era symbols and categories and the technologies and symbols associated with the neoliberal reform of the nineties. While in many respects they bear resemblance to Soviet-era predecessors – in their use of uniforms and mass actions, both visibly recall the Komsomol- these new youth organizations also draw on elements of the conceptual apparatus of international democracy promotion that transformed Russian society in the nineties. In this discussion, I seek to show how they respond to the stirring up and shifts and changes in population categories and the symbolic order associated with monetization that I have earlier described.

The symbolic salve

It’s my contention that youth voluntarism movements and campaigns – such as *Vazhnoe Delo* and *Nashi*- play an important interpretive role as the state goes about restructuring social welfare. They do so by affirming the symbolic universe that

liberalizing/neoliberal reform threatens. As I've noted, all the youth movements and projects I've surveyed so far have one thing in common: they affirm the importance of Soviet era categories and identities. In their different ways, both organizations attend to the symbolic order that law 122 disrupted. *Nashi* does so by being attentive to military veterans. Many of its campaigns have a strong nationalist-patriotic element and many involve honoring Soviet history, specifically the Great Patriotic War. As I have already stated, the primary targets of its service-oriented campaigns are military veterans. More broadly, *Nashi* honors the Soviet period via its educational and ideological work. At *Nashi* summer camps at Lake Seliger, youth attend lectures on Russian history by nationalist scholars and publicists. They are encouraged to draw inspiration from and model themselves upon their grandparents, the heroic generation that saved Europe from fascism, in contrast to the "defeatist" Gorbachev generation that presided over the USSR's demise.²³

Further, *Nashi* also enacts a form of connection or solidarity between the two generations. Indeed, *Nashi* campaigns frequently enact this connection by bringing young activists and veterans together. *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 December 17, 2006, the gift was reversed: here, youth participants brought presents to a group of veterans.

Although *Vazhnoe Delo* does not have such an explicit (or belligerent) nationalist-patriotic orientation as *Nashi*, it too is attentive to the symbolic universe that was so

²³ *Nashi* seeks to "rehabilitate" the Soviet period, as one of my research informants put it. They accomplish this in part by disparaging the events of the nineties (now remembered by many as a time of "national discreditation") and the generation that permitted them. *Nashi* activists commonly refer to this generation as "defeatists" (*parazhentsy*).

disrupted. *Vazhnoe Delo* volunteers also participate in patriotic events, for example, officiating at patriotic holidays and arranging events for military veterans.²⁴ It too is explicit in stating its aim of bringing about solidarity between generations - here though, not narrowly focusing on World War Two veterans, but on elderly people more broadly. *Vazhnoe Delo* is attentive to the most numerous, though less “socially significant” group of *l’gotniki*: pensioners and veterans of labor, those who were demoted to the regions. Indeed, *Vazhnoe Delo* goes one step beyond *Nashi* insofar as it actually engages this generation in its campaigns – not as recipients but as volunteers. While the organization officially has a youth profile, its director and the governor himself proudly proclaim that pensioners (or often, “grandmothers”) are numerous in its ranks. The organization has an official agreement of cooperation with the Tver’ branch of one of the largest and longest standing independent pensioners organizations, the Pensioners’ Union (*Soiuz Pensionirov*) and undertakes frequent joint campaigns with them. In these ways, *Vazhnoe Delo* addresses the symbolic rupture of monetization through demonstrating *vlast*’s care and concern for the people.

Making over volunteers

My second argument is that the main subjects of these interventions are not the veterans, or the socially undefended – but the volunteers themselves. *Nashi*, *Vazhnoe Delo* and other state-run youth organizations operate as a form of governmentality, inculcating new forms of subjectivity in their participants and advancing a new and distinct set of state/societal relations. This is perhaps particularly clear in the case of *Nashi*, as the following ethnographic example reveals.

²⁴ *Vazhnoe Delo* activists were visible at two patriotic city events I witnessed: an event that celebrated the 65th anniversary of the expulsion of the German army from Tver’, and at the 2007 Day of the City holiday.

On December 17, a purported 100,000 youth traveled to Moscow by bus and train, dressed in Santa Claus and snow girl suits. I traveled with the Tver' contingent and received a return train ticket, packed lunch, instructions, and snow girl suit with the rest of my cohort.²⁵ Each group of 100 was to meet with a group of veterans and present them with a New Years gift that they had especially prepared (symbolically returning what had been snatched by the Naziis in 1945). As the day progressed, it became increasingly clear that what mattered most in this highly mass mediated event (there were TV cameras everywhere) was the symbolic impact of the campaign. As we congregated on Three Stations square, young people danced and sang along to Soviet wartime songs mixed to a techno beat, while they watched images of themselves projected back onto giant screens, against a backdrop that portrayed cartoon-like graphic images of young people meeting smiling veterans. Four hours later, I left the event to return to Tver' having caught no glimpse of a live veteran. I subsequently learned that far from all of the participants actually made contact with their designated veteran. One student reported having seen all the gifts thrown into a car and driven away. My impression was bolstered by a subsequent interview with the komissar who had invited me to the event; in response to my questions, he replied impatiently, "if the point had been to assist veterans, we could have stayed in Tver'!"

If in *Nashi*, the recipients of assistance are positively phantasmagoric, this is less the case with *Vazhnoe Delo*. The latter organization is after all more explicitly oriented to the provision of assistance to the needy. However, my analysis of *Vazhnoe Delo* materials and interview transcripts persuades me that the primary subject is the volunteer

²⁵ I was invited to attend the event by one *Nashi* komissar, a Tver' State University student who worked with us on our pilot project during Fall 2006.

his or herself. The organization is less oriented around the provision of material assistance, than assisting to develop the person and a new set of state/societal relations. Via *Vazhnoe Delo*, volunteers encounter an array of technologies that instruct them to be a certain way (Rose 1999). As the director emphasized to me, one highly original (and celebrated) feature of the organization is its professionalism and developed set of technologies. In an interview published in one of the *Vazhnoe Delo* bulletins, the director stated, “Most think that voluntarism is a spontaneous process, but this is not so. In this sphere as in any other, there are rules and laws. Our kids take a leadership training program, psychological trainings, get involved in the design of social projects (*zanimaiutsia sotsial’nym proektirovaniem*), fundraising”.

When I interviewed him in December 2006, he was eager to explain this dimension of the organization’s work. Interestingly, here, he focused on the role of the elderly within the organization. While one goal was to attract volunteers and organize these volunteer projects, they were also interested in “activating” pensioners and people in general in order that they help themselves. He informed me that they had created 80 clubs for pensioners in the oblast, working with the already-existing organization, Pensioners’ Union. This organization, he explained, is made up of younger people, those who didn’t live through the war and who have fewer benefits: “Our goal is to activate these people, to stimulate them in order that they don’t sit around waiting for support from the state, but rather, help themselves and each other. It’s the principle of mutual support (*vziamopomosh’*).”

Vazhnoe Delo is controversial in the city. Although the project has the support of most social work staff and public officials, I picked up numerous skeptical accounts of

Vazhnoe Delo's activities, many voiced by people long active in *obshchestvenny* organizations (those involved in what was then called the "societal movement", as opposed to the "voluntary movement" that the state now encourages).²⁶ From their perspective, it is the beneficiary of a new system that systematically disadvantages them. Further, it is far too "close to power", that is, associated with the regional administration, to be afforded respect. The most common complaint leveled against it is that it is "just PR". As evidence, the people I spoke to pointed to its high profile in the media, the frequent appearances of volunteers with the governor, and the branded paraphernalia worn by volunteers (T-shirts, baseball caps).

Vazhnoe Delo truly is an exercise in public relations. And I do not mean by that statement to denigrate or downplay its efficacy; beyond the formulation of "just PR", *Vazhnoe Delo* seeks to educate people and propagate the messages of transparency, and of the responsiveness of the state. It seeks to convince the people that it cares, and to persuade people of the efficacy of belonging or "playing the game" of social partnership. Let's consider. According to the official version of events, *Vazhnoe Delo* was founded in social dialogue, when the governor responded to the demands of the community. At the so-called Social Forum of December 2004, representatives of three sectors – the administration (*vlast'*), the business community and non-governmental organizations – came together to respond to this call and pledged to work together to resolve some of the oblast's most pressing social problems. It is clear however, as with the workings of other new and ostensibly transparent federal organs such as the Federal Public Chamber, that participation in this dialogue was by invitation only (Richter 2008). Invitees were

²⁶ For a discussion of the early post-Soviet era societal movement (*obshchestvennoe dvizhenie*), see Hemment 2007.

predominantly members of the administration, prominent members of the business community who have close ties with the administration, and a few selected members of civil society organization. The message of transparency however has been consistently attached to it. For example, frequent announcements issued from the governor's press service during the spring of 2005 emphasized the degree to which he was in dialogue with various sectors, working publicly and transparently to resolve thorny issues. Finally, it is less community-based than it claims; although it engages volunteers in its campaigns, it is run by a professional team that has its roots in the regional administration.

Conclusions

Putin came to power riding a wave of popular discontent about liberalizing reform. He sought to distance himself from the foreign-identified interventions and policies of the nineties; indeed, he made political capital out of that discontent and used it to secure his own legitimacy. Nonetheless, he advanced policies that were remarkably similar to those his nineties-era predecessors enacted. The Putin administration presented social welfare reform as apolitical, technocratic and objectively necessary. In fact, it was a highly political process (Cook 2007); the fact that the legislation was rushed through the federal Duma signals Russian politicians' awareness of how controversial it was likely to be. As Linda Cook points out, in Russia, welfare reform did not take place out of economic necessity. Rather, these reforms were passed during a time of increased *prosperity* in Russia (2007). This suggests that it was part of a conscious restructuring of state-societal relations and the redrawing of citizenship. Transitioning social welfare regimes are about much more than social welfare, but signal different systems of governance and political economy (Haney 2002).

So, let us return to the two phenomena – state social welfare policies and youth policies - and the question of what connects them. As we have seen, protests against monetization represented a crisis for the Putin administration, the first waves in what had previously been a rather very smooth process of undertaking liberal reform. Monetization and the withdrawal of in-kind benefits were just too much for people to accept (“the limits of liberalization”). My argument is that the youth voluntary movements and the broader cultural program of which they are a part represent a response to this crisis. We can view organizations such as *Nashi* and *Vazhnoe Delo* as a renewed attempt to win legitimacy for these reforms and to purchase consent for the possible extension of neoliberal oriented policies.²⁷ Beyond this, they act as a specific kind of governmentality that emerges at this time. *Vazhnoe Delo* unites the two populations who were the most vociferously opposed to law 122, and who have the most political clout as a potential voting bloc: pensioners and youth. Indeed, it directly engages and instructs them, channeling their energies into state-sanctioned projects of social renewal.

Russia’s recent social welfare politics are illustrative of the uneven processes associated with neoliberalism. Law 122 did not mark a straightforward process of state withdrawal, as prescribed by the World Bank model of economic restructuring. It was a hybrid, maintaining elements of the old at the same time as it introduced neoliberal logics and rationalities. At the same time, I would argue, the reassertion of the state and the subsequent shift to statist forms of social welfare (as in the National Priority Projects, or

²⁷ Andrea Chandler makes a similar argument in her analysis of pensions reform in Russia between 1990-2002. She shows how pension reform stalled as long as politicians denied its historic and symbolic significance. In her analysis, Putin’s genius was to acknowledge this, specifically the symbolic import of welfare to veterans (also, to create the appearance of social dialogue).

“maternity capital” program) does not in fact imply an overturning or outright rejection of neoliberal policies. In Russia, these reconfigurations are complex; as James Richter has argued, at the same time as Putin has sought to strengthen the state, he has pushed for the state’s withdrawal from areas of the economy where it is not justified and to “activate” the citizenry (2007). While *Vazhnoe Delo* and *Nashi* certainly provide evidence of the statist turn and the emergence of a “managed” civil society (Cook 2009; Richter 2009; 2009; Henry 2009), neoliberal elements continue to circulate within them. They are implicated in articulating a composite (Soviet/neoliberal) form of citizenship, where civic organizations are expected to be both self-reliant and auxiliaries of the state (Salmenniemi, forthcoming).²⁸ Putin’s welfare policies can be viewed as a dynamic and complex fusion: Here prior cultural forms associated with the Soviet state are resurrected (Read and Thelen 2007) and at the same time the state is actively engaged in engineering new approaches to citizenship, new expectations of citizen involvement, new models of docile subjects willing to take on social responsibilities. Viewing this as Soviet-style neoliberalism helps us to see how past and present are entwined and mutually constituting.

The Russian case speaks back to the literature on neoliberalism in really interesting ways. Most strikingly, we see how the anger engendered by the neoliberal reforms of the nineties has been consciously mobilized in these youth voluntarism projects. As I have mentioned, the decade of the nineties is a constant point of reference for *Nashi*, and for President Putin himself. This is perhaps what’s so interesting about his own neoliberal fusion – it is propelled (or, consent for it is propelled) by using anger

²⁸ Salmenniemi shows how neoliberal and Soviet elements merge in the authorities’ conceptions of citizenship. They at once view civic organizations as auxiliaries of the state and urge them into self-reliance (n.d.).

about prior interventions. This is a form of neoliberalism that both is attentive to the symbolic/cultural forms neoliberal reform threatens, and that mobilizes anger *about* prior neoliberal reform to energize it.²⁹ Neoliberalism as usual does not persuade in Russia (unlike in the USA and the UK, in Harvey's analysis). Neither does it work when associated with external, foreign agents, such as the World Bank and IMF (or with domestic foreign identified reformers, such as Chubais, Gaidar). But when undertaken partially, by a popular domestic actor and coupled with nationalist and collectivist goals and projects and articulations, it can be successfully implemented.

²⁹ Ong notes the paradox whereby Asian publics and politicians are at once deeply hostile to neoliberalism, which they understand to mean US domination, and simultaneously implement selective neoliberal reforms (2005). In Russia, the paradox is yet more complex. "The nineties" is discursively deployed to evoke a time of disaster, and to mobilize people to support Putin's policies (which ostensibly oppose them).

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