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RUSSIAN YOUTH POLITICS, OR LACK THEREOF: PART 2 OF 2

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1. (C) SUMMARY. This is the second part of a two-part message describing Russian political youth groups. Russia's youth is overwhelmingly apolitical, and youth groups in general have very little impact on political life in Russia. The small bit of political life that does exist is restricted to the margins or co-opted by the Kremlin. The political youth groups, driven by idealism, can be divided into the democrats, the communists, and the nationalists/skinheads. The skinheads are most numerous, but generally unorganized. The Kremlin fears the emergence of an "Orange" movement, and systematically moves to diffuse grassroots youth movements using either carbon-copy groups or harassment and intimidation. Kremlin fears of a democratic uprising are unfounded, as the democratically-oriented youth groups are paralyzed by infighting and the overwhelming apathy of Russia's youth. END SUMMARY.

Russian Youth Interests: Sex and Money

2. (U) According to our contacts among politicians, journalists, and academics, the overwhelming majority of Russian youth are simply not interested in politics. This

large non-political group can be subdivided into three parts: those who simply do not care about politics, those who do care but think that fighting the system is pointless, and those who fear the consequences of participating in political organizations. Yevgeniya Zubchenko, a Novaya Izvestiya reporter who covers youth politics told us, "Young people here care about sex and money, they care about finding a good job. They know there is money now in Russia, and they want a piece of it."

3. (C) Ilya Yashin, the head of the Yabloko party's youth movement, cited the difficulty he has both recruiting and keeping people in his organization because they feel that the powers-that-be are too strong and too entrenched for any youth movements to make a difference. This difficulty has only grown with time. Some who have been involved in politics have been frightened away by threats from the security services or their academic institutions (see paras 9-11 below).

Attack of the Clones

4. (U) The Kremlin-backed groups, Nashi ("Ours") and Mestnye ("Locals"), have mounted a coordinated effort to co-opt grassroots political movements among Russia's youth. Most youth groups use political protests to express themselves, to win attention from the media, and to attract members. The Kremlin-backed groups rarely attack grassroots groups head-on, but instead mimic them while emphasizing their own loyalty to the president and to Russia. For example, following a Yabloko protest against the military draft, Mestnye staged a larger counter-protest. They claimed that they were also in favor of some military reforms, but in general, they supported Putin and the Russian army.

5. (U) The Kremlin-backed groups also mimic nationalist movements. Following the nationalist Russia March on November 4, Mestnye parroted the better-known Movement Against Illegal Immigration (DPNI) and adopted an anti-immigration attitude. On November 26, it sponsored a protest by a reported 6,000 youths at Moscow-region farmers markets and conducted spot checks on market workers' work permits. Mestnye members turned over to the militia 73 workers who lacked proper documentation. According to Yashin, these tactics successfully siphon away support from the grassroots organization by dividing and confusing potential supporters.

6. (C) Kremlin-backed youth groups are often used to reinforce Russian foreign policy by staging protests at

foreign embassies. Mestnye has recently been used to conduct protests at the U.S. and Georgian embassies. Nashi has been staging a continuous harassment campaign against British Ambassador Tony Brenton following his appearance at the "Other Russia" conference in July. The British Embassy told us that they had appealed to the MFA for increased diplomatic security following an altercation between an embassy guard and a member of Nashi at the Ambassador's residence.

7. (U) According to several sources, Nashi and Mestnye both pay people to participate in their protests. Nashi

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reportedly pays protesters 100-300 rubles, and Mestnye sometimes pays with McDonald's vouchers. Zubchenko told us that when she covered one Mestnye protest, most people there did not know what they were protesting; they were there for the money.

Electoral Success and Failure

8. (U) Not all activity is focused on the streets. Molodaya Gvardiya has been successful in actually helping young people become active in politics. During the last year, Molodaya Gvardiya has held a series of contests called Politzavod ("Political Factory") to find and develop candidates. In this successful combination of entertainment and politics, contestants participate in a "Survivor"-type contest where they organize public events and compete in speech contests before a voting audience. United Russia offers winners a position on their legislative party lists. In the October regional elections, United Russia fulfilled its pledge to fill 20 percent of its regional party lists with candidates under age 28 by using the winners of Politzavod, and 31 United Russia candidates between 21 and 28 years of age were elected. Molodaya Gvardiya leader Andrey Turchak was nominated by United Russia as a replacement Federation Council member from the Nenets Autonomous District following the forced resignation of his predecessor. He was also recently mentioned as a candidate for membership in United Russia's Supreme Council.

9. (U) In contrast, opposition youth movement leaders have been stymied in their electoral bids. Mariya Gaydar ran for State Duma in the Fall of 2005, Ilya Yashin ran for Moscow City Duma (winning 17% of the vote), but both were defeated. They have since resorted to small protests and the occasional stunt. Gaydar and Yashin were arrested on November 23 for

hanging a large banner from a Moscow bridge that read "Return the Elections to the People, Bastards!" They were protesting the recent changes to the electoral law that removed the minimum voter turnout requirements. Gaydar told us that this did not mark a change in tactics for DA!, but was a specific response to a specific government action.

Government Monitoring and Intimidation

10. (C) The government has used police and legal means to harass and intimidate participants in youth movements. Yashin told us that after two of his colleagues from Yabloko were arrested last year, an FSB agent approached him and said, "Your girlfriend will be next, and it will not be pretty for her in jail." The agent reportedly offered to help Yashin's girlfriend avoid jail if Yashin would meet with him two times a month to tell the FSB about what he was planning and what Yabloko was doing. "So, I met with him. What else could I do? But I didn't tell him anything that wasn't on our website, and after a few meetings, he stopped calling." Yashin said that many people would be scared off by the possibility of arrest.

11. (C) Yashin also said that many of his members have been harassed at home and at school. For example, police have visited students in their dormitories to question them about their membership and activities, police officers have warned parents to keep their children out of trouble, and school officials have threatened members with expulsion or poor grades if they continued to participate in youth movements. Gaydar told us that the press secretary of "Other Russia" (who is a Moldovan), was warned by the FSB that she would not be able to finish her final year at MGU if she continued her political activities. When DA! attempted to hold a debate between DPNI Chairman Belov and Duma Deputy Vladimir Ryzhkov at a Moscow nightclub, the authorities threatened to cut the club's electricity, and the club canceled the event. (Note: Since previous DA! debates had not faced problems, it appears that this action was aimed at DPNI, not DA! End Note).

12. (SBU) According to Pribylovskiy, there are nearly 100 young people in prison for political actions, mainly from the National Bolshevik Party, who are serving terms of five or six years for participating in protests that involved the storming of government ministries.

Comment

13. (C) Youth movements have stagnated or declined in strength and influence since we last reported on this topic

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(reftel). Russian youth are politically apathetic (the military draft is the sole issue that seems able to mobilize them) because they believe that the issues do not affect them or that they cannot affect the issues. Those groups that attract our attention because they are daring or outspoken are the exception. The few genuinely democratic youth groups are being hastened to irrelevancy by a well-funded and organized government effort intent on avoiding the orange- and rose-colored revolutions of its neighbors. The nationalist groups, should they grow in strength, would likely also face a campaign of intimidation and harassment.

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