

## NASHI VERSUS NAZI: ANTI-FASCIST ACTIVITY AS A MEANS OF MASS YOUTH MOBILIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

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Russian youth movements nowadays constitute a real political force, which can be used by political parties and individual politicians to achieve their goals. The most remarkable example in this respect is the pro-Putin movement *Nashi* (Ours), which was founded in the spring of 2005 with Kremlin backing. Initially it was planned that the movement would comprise a new political force; quite amazingly, some movement activists expressed the belief that by the end of Putin's second presidential term they would form a new "party of power". Movement organizers planned to recruit as many as 200,000-250,000 followers. *Nashi* undertook a large number of high profile mass events during 2005-2007, and attracted a great deal of domestic and international media attention. Currently however, the movement's growth has slowed down and public interest in its activities is gradually wearing off.

The initial goals of the *Nashi* movement were the following: (1) to promote Russia's global leadership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, (2) to prepare a 'revolution of cadres' in Russia, (3), to educate a new generation of state officials, and (4) to oppose the threat of an "orange revolution" in Russia.<sup>2</sup> However, another key domain of activity claimed by the movement is its anti-fascist campaigning. Indeed, the full name of the organization is the "youth Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement, *Nashi*." The founder and former leader of *Nashi*, Vasiliy Yakemenko was often heard denouncing prominent Russian politicians as fascists. Thus, *Nashi* activists labeled Vladimir Ryzhkov, Irina Khakamada, Garry Kasparov and some other leaders of Russian liberal parties as fascists, claiming that all these politicians were fascist sympathizers. On the other hand, *Nashi* accused Grigoriy Yavlinski, of the moderate left-centrist party Yabloko, of fascist sentiments. Finally, Eduard Limonov, the ill-reputed leader of the radical

National-Bolshevik party has been presented as a one hundred per cent fascist. According to *Nashi* activists, all these people of different political backgrounds share at least one characteristic – they are overtly anti-Putinist. By the same token, the leaders of various opposition political forces have insisted that the *Nashi* movement itself is fascist; the word "*Nashisty*" is used to refer to *Nashi* members, which in Russian sounds similar to "*natsisty*" (Nazis). Although these mutual accusations seem to be poorly justified from a scholarly point of view, they are not futile in terms of political tactics: in Russia being marked as a "fascist" is tantamount to being eliminated from the political scene.

This article seeks to analyze the anti-fascist activities of the Tver' city branch of the *Nashi* movement. I rely mostly on data collected during my field research in Tver' (February-March 2008), under the auspices of the collaborative project, "Youth organizations, voluntary service and the restructuring of social welfare in Russia."<sup>3</sup> In the first stage I conducted ten semi-structured focused interviews with participants in the *Nashi* movement, using the snowball strategy to locate interviewees. I faced two types of challenges at this point. First of all, the current status of the *Nashi* movement in Tver' is unclear to an outsider, that is, it is not exactly clear whether the movement still exists. Research took place at a sensitive moment in the movement's history and the alleged movement activists could not (or were not willing) to give me a straightforward answer to the question whether the movement still existed in Russia in general and in Tver' in particular. The second challenge was to convince *Nashi* activists (current as well as former) to allow me to interview them. Their unwillingness to answer my questions was to a great extent caused by the uncertainty of

<sup>2</sup> 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. It ultimately brought down the Moscow-supported government and caused a great deal of consternation in Russia [JH].

<sup>3</sup> A collaborative research project conducted by Dr. Julie Hemment of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Dr. Valentina Uspenskaya and Mr. Dmitry Borodin of the Center for Women's History and Gender Studies at Tver' State University, and undergraduate students of the departments of Sociology and Political Science at Tver' State University, Russia.

the movement's status in Tver' described above. To compensate for my respondents' taciturnity, at the second stage of my research I had to resort to the analysis of published materials on *Nashi* as well as some materials (brochures, pamphlets) published by the movement itself.

### The uncertain status of *Nashi* today

Analysis of the mass media helped me shed some light on this problem. For instance, on January 29 2008, shortly before the presidential elections, the national daily newspaper *Kommersant* published an article entitled "Nashi became alienated".<sup>4</sup> According to the article, which quoted the newly appointed leader of the *Nashi* movement Nikita Borovikov, the movement was to undergo a radical re-organization. To start with, the number of regional branches was to be reduced; out of nearly 50 regional branches that had existed, the new management was planning to keep only 5 – those in Vladimir, Ivanovo, Tula, Voronezh and Yaroslavl. Activists from other regions were encouraged to participate in independent public projects associated with the movement. The list of these projects included but was not limited to "Our Army", "Volunteer Youth Public Order Patrol", "Orthodox Corps", "Lessons of Friendship", etc.

Besides, the *Nashi* movement was established as an overtly counterrevolutionary force, which was to be used for neutralizing the so-called "orange threat", that is, the possibility of youth engaging in opposition movements as in Ukraine. *Nashi* was originally envisioned as a political organization capable of carrying out mass youth public actions under anti-western slogans. Using the same tactics that had proven so successful during a dozen so-called velvet revolutions over the last 15 years, *Nashi* activists were expected to 'seize the main square', as it were, after the elections and to prevent revolution. Now [in the aftermath of the December 2007 Parliamentary and March 2008 Presidential elections, JH] that the "orange threat" seems to be gone, there is no need for the *Nashi* movement. Commenting on the forthcoming rearrangements, Borovikov observed that "as the threat once posed by the 'orange revolution' no longer exists, we can focus on other things."<sup>5</sup>

It should also be taken into account that because it was created from above, *Nashi* always depended on the Presidential Administration rather than on mass support. Therefore, as the administration cut back its support and changed its attitude towards the movement, *Nashi* was not able to retain all its regional branches. According to an anonymous official, the administration was no longer planning to use the *Nashi* to achieve its political goals: "During this election campaign no one would resort to *Nashi*'s services. Under the new political circumstances, given the anticipated election outcomes, no one needs these exuberant rowdies." As the political scientist Stanislav Belkovsky suggests, the reorganization of the movement was caused by Putin's growing annoyance with *Nashi* activists' belligerent actions (especially the ones directed at the British and Estonian embassies), which had still aggravated Moscow's relations with the "West".<sup>6</sup>

### Analysis of materials

I based my analysis on two *Nashi* brochures, "Anti-fascism" and "Fascists: Yesterday, today, tomorrow?" It is necessary to briefly describe these brochures and the method of analysis. As the brochures belong to a very specific genre of literature – the propaganda pamphlet, and are aimed at promoting the anti-fascist cause and the *Nashi* movement as a positive youth political movement fighting fascism, they did not interest me much in terms of their content. What primarily interested me was what the anonymous authors wanted to accomplish via their pamphlets and how they tried to achieve these desired results. The first question could be answered even after a superficial analysis of the brochures, since it was obvious that they were supposed to arouse certain feelings and emotions in their readers; they were intended to foster a negative attitude towards fascism and a positive attitude towards the *Nashi* movement. However, the second question required more attention. The authors used many visual representations, such as photographs and color contrast to illustrate their main theses. First, they reminded the readers that fascism (or Nazism to be exact) was the ultimate evil. Second, they warned the public that fascism was not dead, that fascists remain even in contemporary Russia, the country that had defeated fascism. Third, and most importantly, photographs of World War II German concentration camps

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=846635>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Nashi* activists have harassed British Ambassador Brenton for his alleged support for 'fascist-sympathizing' oppositional groups since he met with leaders of The Other Russia group; meanwhile, the movement has undertaken an intense campaign against the Estonian embassy after a Soviet war memorial was dismantled in Tallin. Both campaigns have attracted a great deal of attention in the international media [JH].

juxtaposed with pictures of meetings of the National-Bolshevik Party (NBP) and some other contemporary political groups left no doubt who the heirs of fascism were.

The first brochure entitled “Fascists. Yesterday. Today. Tomorrow?” consists of stories narrated by four commissars of the *Nashi* movement. Each story begins with a description of a commissar’s relative who was killed during the Great Patriotic War (the Second World War) defending Russia from the fascist invaders. Then come descriptions of the horrors of the concentration camps, of torture carried out by the Nazis, etc. After this, the brochure warns readers that nowadays fascism is being revived and popularized by NBP supporters. All arguments are supported by illustrations and photos, which are arranged in such a way to communicate the obvious similarity between German Nazis and NBP followers in terms of symbols, flags, posters, etc. The visual effect produced by the brochure is extremely important. The dominant color is black, the cover and the background of all pages is black, while the title is written in an intense red. It all creates a certain mood and brings about certain associations.

As for the question of who revives and propagates fascist ideas in Russia, the brochure insists that this is the leader of the National-Bolshevik Party, Eduard Limonov.<sup>7</sup> To support this claim the authors of the brochure quote from his book *The Hero’s Anatomy*, wherein Limonov asserts, “Yes, I am a fascist... we are using the fascist experience along with the other experiences, why not?” As a result the main fascist organization described in the brochure is the NBP; the followers of this party are correspondingly referred to as “beastly bastards”, “swastika-sleeved scum”, “degenerates”, “Limonov’s rump” and so on.

Besides the NBP and Limonov, the brochure mentions the once popular radical nationalist Dmitriy Rogozin and his party “Motherland” (*Rodina*), describing him as the most prominent nationalist in the country. They cite some of his slogans to illustrate his party’s political stance, for example, “Russia for Russians, Moscow for Muscovites!” As for other fascist movements and organizations which were not mentioned in the brochure, the authors felt the need to legitimize their choice: “Why did we allocate so space in our brochure to Rogozin and Limonov and did not talk here about other fascist organizations such as “Russian National Unity”, “Memory” and the like? Because such leaders as Limonov and Rogozin try to legalize fascism.”

Be that as it may, there is actually no information in the brochure about fascism as such: the authors never specify what kind of ideology it is, or what ideas or actions can be regarded as fascists. They simply multiply categories and negative images failing to explain what they mean: “Fascism is based upon racial intolerance, which is a twin sister of a different sort of fascism – nationalism”. It is not clearly defined who can be classified as fascist: “We can undoubtedly regard anyone who has yelled ‘heil’, who has worn a swastika (even if it is just a simulation), or who claims that there are bad ethnic groups, ‘Russia for Russians, Moscow for Muscovites’ as a fascist”.

Ironically, the brochure never mentions the notion of “anti-fascism”. The authors mention that Russia is a polyethnic state, speak about globalization and refer to the unavoidable character of migration. They also speak about patriotism and respectful attitudes towards migrants, but they never explain how to struggle against fascism.

The second brochure fills some of the above-mentioned gaps. It is to a greater extent devoted to the topic of anti-fascism and dwells on anti-fascist projects of the *Nashi* movement, hence its title, “Anti-fascism”. In terms of its design it follows the pattern established by the first brochure. To describe fascists and their crimes the authors use a black background and gloomy colors and utilize many photographs depicting World War II and Hitler’s Germany; at the same time there are photographs of present day NBP manifestations and rallies. In contrast, when the authors speak about *Nashi*’s anti-fascist projects and activities they use bright colors and pictures.

When discussing the term “fascism”, the authors of the brochure admitted that this word cannot be unambiguously defined and that depending on the time and political context it means many different things. Then they tried to trace the term’s origin: “Strictly speaking, the term itself is not precise. ‘Fascism’ derives from the word ‘fascio’ which meant ‘an axe in a bunch of rods’ – a symbol of power in ancient Rome. For Italian fascists, who derived their name from this word it stood for the nation united around one leader (Duce). Other attributes of fascism mentioned by the authors include:

- Extreme cruelty;
- Manipulation of the masses;
- Usage of various symbols which existed in Hitler’s Germany, for instance, the swastika;

<sup>7</sup> The controversial Eduard Limonov is a nationalist writer and novelist who spent many years in exile in the USA and France, where he fell in with the punk and avant garde scene. Since returning to Russia in the early nineties, he founded the National Bolshevik Party (NBP), a nationalist oriented party. The party, which never attained official status, joined The Other Russia oppositional alliance in recent years, advancing a searing critique of the Putin administration. As such, it has been subject to considerable state harassment [JH].

- The idea of natural inequality among peoples and races; the notion of the natural superiority of one nation and the inferiority of others.

The authors of the brochure admitted that all these indicators are disputable as some of them were characteristic of some non-fascist regimes and not all fascist regimes had all these features; besides some of the fascist regimes possessed other important characteristics such as etatism, militarism, anti-communism, populism, etc.

Despite the brochure's title, the authors never define the term "anti-fascism". Fortunately they clearly defined the goals and objectives of anti-fascist work: "The goal of anti-fascist work is to effectively oppose the spread of ideas of xenophobia, racism and neo-Nazism in Russia". The absence of the word fascism in this sentence is really remarkable.

The brochure sets four concrete objectives of anti-fascist campaigning:

1. Political, historical, psychological education of youth aimed at the prevention of the spread of neo-Nazi ideas.
2. Collaboration between various social groups and anti-fascist groups in society to resist neo-Nazi groups.
3. Implementation of steps to marginalize and isolate neo-Nazi and fascist groups and movements, in particular to prevent their cooperation with state officials, leading political parties and businesses.
4. Active and efficient blocking of neo-Nazi and fascist propaganda.

The brochure describes two basic methods of anti-fascist work. The first one is "public enlightenment", that is the distribution of information about the fascist threat. The second method is anti-fascist propaganda. The brochure thus asserts that the main way to fight fascism is through communication and information; physical violence is banned as an unacceptable method.

The brochure briefly describes the anti-fascist projects run by the movement:

- "Free zone." This project involves a struggle with existing fascist meeting places. Recommended actions include meetings, pickets, demonstrations, cooperation with law enforcement institutions and so on;
- "Youth anti-fascist committees of internationalists." This project involves creating committees that unite representatives of various youth

organizations and people of different ethnic groups;

- "Brown smoking" – the struggle against fascism in state institutions;
- "All faces of Russia" – organizing festivals of ethnic culture and peoples' friendship festivals, etc.
- "Cabaret Anti-fa (anti-fascist)" – staging anti-fascist plays;
- "The anti-fascist youth university" – teaching courses on fascism and anti-fascist propaganda.

## Interviews

The first few interview questions were formulated in such a way as to introduce me to the field and describe the movement in question. It turned out that most movement activists, as a rule, became involved in *Nashi* activities though some sort of personal connections – friends, classmates or even relatives. Speaking about the motives that had brought them to the movement, *Nashi* activists frequently mentioned a correspondence between the movement's declared goals and their own political dispositions (such as patriotism, a desire to make Russia a great power, demonstration of support for President Putin). It should be mentioned that at the time of its emergence, *Nashi* was the only youth movement propagating state patriotism as its ideology. Therefore it is not surprising that it managed to monopolize this ideological niche. Besides, thanks to state support, the *Nashi* movement provided young people with a unique opportunity to fulfill themselves through participation in collective action, and to undertake various group and individual projects. The *Nashi* movement bestowed certain privileges on its active members (such as educational programs and face-to-face meetings with top state officials, including President Putin). These benefits, coupled with indoctrination campaigns, persuaded many activists that they really would form the country's future political elite.

The declared anti-fascist character of the organization did not in any way affect respondents' decision to join the *Nashi* movement. Those activists who had been in the movement since the day of its origin, observed that there was initially no anti-fascist track in the movement; there was some awareness of the fascist threat, but this project took some time to institutionalize. As for those respondents who joined the movement later when *Nashi* had already taken off, they did not regard anti-fascism as the key feature of the movement either. The significance respondents ascribed to anti-fascist activities depended on whether or not they were currently (or had been previously) involved into these specific activities. For instance, a St. Petersburg-based commissar of the *Nashi* organization who is involved in anti-fascist activities spoke of this

work as really meaningful and important, whereas those respondents who were not directly involved in any anti-fascist projects, expressed much less interest in the issue.

In fact, I found that not a single *Nashi* activist was aware of the history of the anti-fascist projects currently run by the movement. None of the activists interviewed was able to tell me why, when exactly and in response to which events the idea of anti-fascist campaigning emerged in their movement. From what they did say, it became clear that the very first project of the *Nashi* movement, called "Our Victory" (held on Victory Day, May 15 2005) contained an anti-fascist message amongst other things.<sup>8</sup> Thus, activists insisted that the idea of anti-fascism was an innate characteristic of the movement, explaining that it simply took some time before it could materialize as a concrete project. However, no activist could tell me what were the reasons and purposes of choosing anti-fascism as one of the foci of the movement's activities. As one of the interviewed former activists (Elena, 21) put it, "You should ask [*Nashi* founder Vassily] Yakemenko". Therefore, rank-and-file *Nashi* activists do not have a clear idea why their movement presents itself as anti-fascist; it is likely that the movement leaders need this anti-fascist aura to achieve certain goals unknown to rank-and-file activists.

Curiously enough, I found that *Nashi* activists have rather vague ideas about fascism, the phenomenon they are supposed to fight against. At the theoretical level, none of the activists interviewed were able to differentiate between fascism and radical nationalism, or, let's say, between fascism and racism. In full accord with the Soviet tradition, *Nashi* activists frequently associate fascism exclusively with Hitler and the Third Reich, and are absolutely ignorant about the ideological and socio-political differences between the Nazi regime in Germany and fascist regimes in other countries. On the one hand, this misconception is very confusing for the rank-and-file movement activists; on the other hand, it allows the *Nashi* movement leadership to apply the notion of "fascism" to a broad range of political forces operating in present day Russia.

While interviewing activists I asked them to complete a list of the political movements and organizations they regarded as fascist. As I had expected, the National-Bolshevik Party was number one in most lists. Surprisingly, some respondents insisted that Yabloko – a moderate center-left party – was actually a pro-fascist organization eager to render assistance to Russian fascists. However, when asked to specify the criteria for including one or another movement, organization, or political party in the list, the interviewees were much less certain. There is no wonder then

that in some cases activists of the *Nashi* movement argued that fascism as such and, consequently, fascist movements and/or organizations did not exist in contemporary Russia. As one of the former *Nashi* activists put it:

"Currently there are no fascist organizations, at least not in Russia. Whatever there is, is different - it's chauvinism, or genocide at worst. These phenomena do not have anything to do with fascism or Hitler. Fascist salutes or swastikas are the only criteria we base our judgments on... In my view, the *Nashi* movement is dealing with nationalism and its various forms amongst youth... but they are just using this notion of 'anti-fascism' because 'fascism' sounds so familiar and everyone understands what it is right away."

Thus, according to some commissars, the *Nashi* movement just exploits people's attitudes towards certain socio-political phenomena, appealing to widespread public stereotypes. To put it bluntly, "fascism" is an extremely negative phenomenon, while "anti-fascism" is totally positive. Historically people in Russia regarded fascists as the worst enemies of the country and humanity, while anti-fascists were viewed as a righteous force.

The lack of clear distinction between fascism and National Socialism caused a lot of confusion among *Nashi* activists. Quite a typical view was expressed by one of the present day activists of the *Nashi* movement:

"Radical right organizations and movements that exist in the present day Russia do not qualify as fascist. It is possible that National-Bolshevik Party (NBP) and similar groups, such as Russian People's Unity, present themselves as fascists, but in fact they are not the ones. Their ideas are those of radical nationalism. The NBP have got an apparent leader – Eduard Limonov – there is a seeming resemblance to the fascist [*sic, DB*] party in Germany, but still it is incorrect to say that NBP is a fascist party; they are nothing but radical nationalists."

<sup>8</sup>An estimated 60,000 youth from all over the Russian Federation marched in Moscow to commemorate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Soviet victory over the Nazis, or fascists, as they are most commonly recalled [*JH*].

Another respondent tried to work out some criteria for defining the above-mentioned NBP as a fascist organization:

“Slogans, such as ‘Russia is everything, all the rest are nothing’, etc, the blocking of Nevsky Avenue in St. Petersburg... Sure thing, it’s not fascism, but these are quite radical actions. Propaganda posters... they just mindlessly copied fascist posters, slightly changed and presented as their own... Eduard Limonov wrote in his book, *It’s me, Edichka*, ‘I am a fascist and I am proud of it!’ And you can’t help following the leader’s example”.

Under these circumstances, respondents failed to explain why it was necessary to struggle against fascism in general and in contemporary Russia in particular.

It should be observed that the interviewed movement activists held different opinions on the question related to their cooperation with other anti-fascist forces. According to some well-informed interviewees, *Nashi* movement leaders do not seek cooperation with other anti-fascist movements or organizations. Moreover, as the above mentioned commissar from St. Petersburg remarked, “there was no need for such cooperation”. This attitude surely indicates the real political goals set by the movement leadership. It can be argued that their main priority is not to solve the problem of fascism in Russia (in this case they would seek alliances with other anti-fascist groups) but to launch an efficient PR campaign and to create a positive image of the movement.

Quite in line with the broad definition of fascism, *Nashi* activists used a very loosely defined notion of “anti-fascism”. As one of the interviewed movement participants put it:

“Anti-fascism is any disagreement and confrontation with the idea of fascism. Hence, anti-fascist idea and activities. It is necessary to teach people, especially the younger generation, that fascism is evil, that it is morally wrong, we should encourage people’s equality, consolidation and solidarity.”

In accordance with this understanding of anti-fascism, the major focus of *Nashi* activities is not confrontation with fascist groups per se, but rather prevention of the spread of fascist ideas in society. One of the interviewed activists put it explicitly:

“We should focus on working with the population, keeping in mind that 10% support fascism, 10% oppose it, and 80% do not think about it...the main goal of the anti-fascist campaigns of *Nashi* is to persuade those who do not care that they can’t treat this problem like that.”

The main anti-fascist goal of the *Nashi* movement is therefore to raise public awareness of the fascist threat and to overcome people’s indifference towards the problem. To achieve this goal the *Nashi* movement offers the following projects and campaigns:

“Lessons of friendship; reducing the impact of the fascist groups like NBP, for instance by keeping an eye on the distribution of propaganda literature, painting over walls where fascists have drawn symbols, slogans and other fascist stuff, or stimulating the owners of the buildings to do so, etc.; organizing patriotic events, or commemoration events. St. Petersburg is a very problematic case, as African students are constantly killed there. We guard dormitories where foreign students live (not on a permanent basis, of course), patrol public places on Hitler’s birthday, etc.”

Thus, the anti-fascist activities of the *Nashi* movement involve various non-violent methods. However, it’s worth noting that there are some complaints from NBP activists posted on the Internet, which accuse *Nashi* of using physical force against opposition movements. However, these have only been published in NBP online newspapers, and these accusations have not been verified by any serious media sources. Presenting their anti-fascist activities as a means of preventing the spread of fascist ideas, *Nashi* activists insist that they always comply with the law, avoid any extremist actions and try to use only humane methods of struggle. When asked if it is legitimate to use violence to struggle against the fascist threat, all respondents unanimously gave a negative answer. Still, most respondents believe that their projects are rather effective and all anti-fascist goals set by the movement’s leadership are achieved.

Despite activists’ optimism about the effectiveness of their projects, the public is often suspicious of the *Nashi* movement. It has become commonplace among Russia’s liberal-minded population and the media to portray the movement itself as a fascist organization. As I have already mentioned, to emphasize the analogy between the *Nashi* and youth organizations of

Hitler's Germany, critics often use the word "*Nashisty*"<sup>9</sup> to describe *Nashi* movement activists. The movement itself is often referred to as *Putinugend*, or Putin's Youth (the word coined by the liberal press to demonstrate the analogy with Hitler's youth organization, the Hitler Jugend).<sup>10</sup> *Nashi* activists have allegedly strenuously resisted this treatment. For instance, on March 4 2008 a group of young people picketed the headquarters of the Kommersant Publishing House in Moscow, distributing rolls of toilet paper among bystanders. The rolls were covered in fragments of articles published in the newspaper *Kommersant* (including an offending editorial). Simultaneously, similar acts of protest took place in many other areas of Moscow (mostly in crowded streets and near subway stations). The following day, March 5 2008, the *Kommersant* webpage experienced a massive hackers' attack. Although the style of the action is in keeping with *Nashi*'s tactics, movement leaders never recognized their involvement in it. On March 6, 2008 one of the movement's leaders, Boris Yakemenko (*Nashi* founder Vasily Yakemenko's brother), made a statement published in the newspaper *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*. He stated that both the picket and hackers' attack had been inspired by *Kommersant* itself, possibly as part of its advertising strategy.

Rank-and-file activists' attitude towards the anti-*Nashi* campaign launched by the liberal-minded media varies from being deeply insulted ("...to call a *Nashi* activist a fascist feels the same as if someone cursed an ordinary citizen with bad words; he is not going to like it either") to being totally indifferent ("This appellation comes back to *Kommersant*, to February 2005, to be exact. We do not give a damn about it (*nam pofigu*). I would be surprised if they wrote only good things about us"). However, the prevailing reaction of the activists is rather negative. They regard such comparisons as provocations aimed at defaming the movement. For example, one of the respondents believed that it was part and parcel of a well-planned campaign seeking to discredit supporters of Putin's cause: "I recall that it began after a newspaper publication, *Kommersant*, if I am not mistaken. They invented this name ('*Nashisty*') on purpose so that is sounded like Nazi".

However, the name *Nashi*, which became subject of an ongoing debate in Russia, was given to the movement by its own leaders. This name is actually older than the youth movement in question. It was initially used by the scandalous Leningrad journalist Alexander Nevzorov in 1991, as the title of his documen-

tary film. The film was devoted to the events in Vilnius (Lithuania, then part of the USSR), where Soviet forces clashed with the Lithuanian independence movement. The word *Nashi* (literally, the possessive pronoun "our") designated the side in the conflict that most of the TV audience was supposed to support. Later on, Nevzorov founded a patriotic political movement bearing the same name. The movement sought to defend the ethnic Russian population of the former Soviet republics and eventually to re-establish Russia's control over the lost territories. In the early 1990s, however, the movement did not get much popular support as its agenda seemed irrelevant to most people. In the 2000s, however, in a different political atmosphere, the appeal to the very basic principle of human identification "us versus them" seems to have found much more support among Russia's elite as well as among certain groups of youth.

One of the last interview questions dealt explicitly with this problem. *Nashi* activists were asked if there was any political message in the name of the movement, that is, since there was an "us", logically there had to be a "them", or an "other". Who were those aliens? The respondents held different views on this problem. Some activists were inclined to see their opponents as "them":

"It is not just 'supposed to be', there surely are! It was exactly because there are so many 'them' that we decided to confront them. 'Others?' well, they are people who want to do harm to Russia, move the country on the edge of chaos and lawlessness."

Others believed that the movement's name did not have any important message:

"Well, no! It is just Vasya's [Vasily Yakemenko – DB] imagination. Apart from this it's just a very proper word – 'our', 'our own', 'dear' and 'home.' It sounds good!"

Still others thought that there were no impassable barriers between "us" and "them":

"Read our manifesto! If you do not agree with it, then you are not one of 'us', but this does not mean you are an enemy of the people, that's your choice. If the manifesto does not

<sup>9</sup> The word "*Nashisty*" is a recurrent political label in post-Soviet political life. First applied to the patriotic movement organized by St. Petersburg-based journalist A. Nevzorov in the early nineties, it was used in Ukraine by opponents of the party "Our Ukraine" to refer to party members in 2001.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, "Obyknovennyi fashizm" (Ordinary Fascism) // *Kommersant*, 02. 21. 2005; «Putinugend» // <http://www.inosmi.ru/stories/01/05/29/2996/235818.html> 07.31.2007.

contradict your principles, then you are one of 'us', but this does not necessarily mean that you are obliged to join our movement. It is fairly simple – you can agree or disagree.”

As it has been demonstrated in this paper, activists at the regional level frequently know little of what is going on within the movement. Therefore there is some uncertainty among the activists as to why anti-fascist projects are central for the movement.