

State-managed Youth Participation in Russia: The National, Collective and Personal in Nashi Activists' Narratives

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Abstract: The article explores the relationships between the state and youth through the narratives of activists in the Russian youth movement Nashi. The research is based on ethnographic fieldwork among young activists in St. Petersburg and Moscow during political rallies and in the annual educational youth camp Seliger. The article analyzes how major transformations in the pro-Kremlin youth movement, adhering to the political agenda of the state were subjectively interpreted and understood by young activists using the tools of narrative analysis. The article suggests that despite the high demand for loyalty to the state agenda, young people construct their own definitions and justifications of their state-managed political activism, reconciling and differentiating between national, collective and personal subject positions of the activism¹.

Keywords: youth, political activism, Russia, youth policy, narrative analysis, ethnographic field research

Introduction

I became a Nashi activist in a very interesting way. I was coming back from college, there were four of us, with a guitar on my back, I was passing by a fountain when smiling young beautiful girls stopped us. I remember it was the 15th of June. "Guys, do you know what is Seliger?" Really, then we didn't know what it was, we frowned: "What?" "Seliger, that is a lake, young people, *tusovka* (parties), celebrities..." They asked us if we wanted to go there. "Yes, we do". "Then come to our office, we will tell you more about it". The first man I met there... I could not even understand what people were doing there, why they were not staying at home. I thought, frankly speaking, they were weirdos. But when I entered the movement, there were four of us coming, a guy was talking to us and he was not stupid at all. He was so muscular, looking good, not that posh, but good. So if such a young man, good looking, representative, not stupid, not a weirdo is here, then it must be cool here, means I need to go to Seliger, I need to stay. We stayed. On the 21st we were already invited to the action. It was called "Memory's Watch".

This narrative is what proved to be a typical representation of a young man's experience of becoming Nashi activist. The excerpt represents a meaningful event in biography of the narrator, so that the actor of the narrative remembers the date and the small details of the day that changed his life.

Such narratives of individual histories are shaped by culture and social contexts speaking themselves into a narrative. In each personal story, one or several voices are heard, such as nation, group, and family, revealing by which viewpoints the narrative is governed (Czarniawska, 2004). In this article, I study the ways the Russian agenda on youth policy and the state-managed youth activism was interpreted by young people of a pro-governmental patriotic youth movement Nashi by the use of the tools from narrative analysis, which actively work with a concept of narrators' agency (Riessman, 1994).

Nashi is a political patriotic youth movement in Russia, whose creation was encouraged by the major figures in the Presidential Administration. During its existence from 2005 to 2012, the movement attracted considerable academic and media interest. However, such attention mainly tended to reinforce its image of the marginalized political movement and a state-managed puppet.

In my analysis, I would like to distance myself from the approach to the movement as a political construct that serves solely to the interests of the state, in favor for emphasizing with the participant's agency, showing the youth political movement through individual stories and "voices," (Stern, 1998; Mauther & Doucet, 1998) personal motives, career strategies, explanation and justification of participation. I argue that despite the rigid hierarchy of the movement and constant demand for loyalty to the state, which guarantees career promotion, pro-governmental activists are not passive recipients of the state agenda. Instead, they redefine demanded civil values and patriotism, finding the strategies of resistance to the marginalized image of the movement. Young people narrate about their political activism from different subject positions – national, collective and personal – which shows the struggle over the definition of state-managed youth activism.

In what follows, I briefly specify the context of the functioning of the pro-governmental project Nashi. First, I describe the main features of youth policy in Russia. Second, I outline the main trajectories of media representations of the movement. Thirdly, I introduce the main methodological tools for analysis and present empirical data. Finally, I reconstruct the narratives of my research participants deriving from the start of the project to their current (at the moment of 2012) positions in their careers.

Youth in Russia: Between the State and Personal Story

In the state official discourse, Russian youth has been treated as a particular group of society – which can be referred to as the "becoming" citizens, (Vromen & Collin, 2012) who are in need of special control and patronage. Modern youth policy in Russia has been criticized for its focus on the "correct" patriotic education perpetuated in moral and pragmatic objectives in official documents, political speeches and history textbooks. (Omelchenko, 2005; Blum, 2006) The Soviet tradition of regarding young people as the builders of tomorrow is still alive today, and youth is seen as a natural resource of creativity and innovations. The hopes of young people have turned them into an object – rather than a subject – of state policies. In this view, the youth should be brought up, moralized and guided. The focus of youth policies is mainly targeted on ensuring that young people remain loyal to the state and youth who are in opposition stay in the political shadows. (Omelchenko, 2006; Schwartz, 2007) Therefore, the discourse on youth morality and civil participation represents the relations of power, when young people are imposed certain political and civil identities. This leads to a conflict between the state-driven construct of youth patriotism, and subjective bottom-up initiatives and interpretations of young people themselves.

Despite the growing amount of literature, examining the shift from the institutional forms of participation to so called "politics of choice" in everyday life as well as irrelevance of state-based politics for young people, (O'Toole et al., 2003; Bang, 2005; White, 2007) state-managed youth activism remained an easily mobilized resource in the hands of the Russian government. Therefore, the aim of the article is to contribute with an ethnographic account to the debate on political youth participation and return to the question of its institutional and state-based forms.

The clash between the official discourse on youth participation and young people's subjective interpretations of it becomes particularly visible on the example of Nashi patriotic youth movement, connoted in a public and academic debate as a "Putin-era technology

project.” (Heller, 2006) Representing state-managed youth participation, Nashi show how the state’s patriotic education programs and youth policy have been interpreted and negotiated by pro-governmental activists. The movement emerged in the moment of political instability in 2005 as a response to a series of “Color Revolutions” in post-Soviet states. Nashi was created as a youth democratic anti-fascist movement that declared itself as democratic, anti-fascist, anti-oligarchic, anti-capitalistic and anti-liberal. The movement started with a mass rally “Our Victory” on May 9, 2005 in Moscow, commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Victory over the Nazis, with 60000 young people participating. Such a debut gave Nashi a sense of identity based on the hyper-exploitation of cultural memory, construction of foreign and domestic enemies, and commemoration of the Great Patriotic War. These discursive separations between “us” and “them”, the omnipresence of enemies, and the cultivation of the memory of the war represent Nashi’s nodal points as a hegemonic youth political identity. (Mijnssen, 2012)

During its existence, the movement turned into a brand of pro-governmental youth political activity with rather negative connotations. Indeed, despite the growing demand for a national idea and patriotism in Russia, the image of the organization has been persistently negative with only 8% of respondents having hopes for the movement (Levada, 2007). In a public debate, many doubt if young people involved in this movement actually represent politically engaged youth or rather a cog in the state machinery. Lassila (2012a) states that Nashi had a difficult task of combining a government platform and vehicle for official youth politics, with providing young activists with appropriate means of expression and communication. The author adds that Nashi’s political discourse can be regarded as a failed ritual-like strategy of creating a youth movement on the basis of emerging demand for patriotism. According to Lassila too, the movement failed, as it did not manage to reconcile its communicative demands between the state and apolitical youth (Lassila, 2012b).

In 2008, the movement was divided into several projects, one of which is Stal (“Steel”), known as the most severe successor of Nashi. The participants in my research belong to this branch of the movement, some of them having started their career earlier in Nashi. Like other branches of Nashi, Stal was used to mobilize young people to participate in political events - rallies supporting current political power during parliamentary and presidential elections, as well as rallies opposing the protests against election fraud. One of the most famous and provocative actions were "Shame of Russia" and "Pride of Russia," organized during a sanctioned "Russian march" (“Russkij marsh”) on November 4, 2010. The participants of the rally were holding banners called "Pride of Russia" depicting the portraits of veterans, mothers of large families, scientists and athletes; and "Shame on Russia" with pictures of oppositional leaders, human rights activists, oligarchs, and casino owners. The banners illustrating “Shame of Russia” were defiantly thrown on the ground and stamped on in front of the cameras. However, after elections and following up protests in 2011-2012, the political activity of the movement died out, which was reflected in the new format of the annual educational forum, Seliger in 2012, where oppositional youth voiced questions about change of power, freedom of speech, justice and judicial system. A series of scandals initiated by independent and oppositional media and multitude of representations of the movement, have generated a marginal image of the movement and public distrust in Nashi. In 2012, the leader of Nashi stated that the movement will be dissolved, having added that Nashi was compromised in the elections 2011-2012, when the movement’s activists were mobilized to oppress the oppositional actions against election frauds. Even though most of the branches of Nashi stopped functioning as institutionalized organizations, some of young people’s careers continued at the level of regional and federal administrations.

In academic research, Nashi invoked considerable interest; however, the movement has been mainly approached through the macro-political context of such themes as civil

society, youth policy, and Russian political youth movements. Many researchers raise the problem of equalization of the youth project with the Kremlin policies that eliminates young people's agency and identities (Atwal, 2009; Lassila 2012a; Hemment, 2012). Atwal (2009), talks about the problem of existing preconceptions in the studies of state-sponsored development in Russia, which ignore political autonomy of activists. The author adds that the movement is often analyzed through particular cultural lens as a confirmation of Russian authoritarianism and democratic failure. A negative public image of the group creates a bias in academic research, when observers of the movement seek the confirmation for the negative representations of Russian civil society. (Hemment, 2012) Ethnographic research by Gromov (2009) states that the movement managed to be so successful among young Russians since it corresponds to the certain demands of young age: professional socialization, interpersonal communication, search for a sexual partner, risky and extreme behavior. In my analysis, however, I would like to distance from a pre-given and essentialist understanding of young people's demands. Despite such an awareness of the possible "foreknowledge" in the research on pro-governmental organizations, activists' own biographies and understandings are mainly left silent while official documents, manifestos and media texts have been the main representation of the data for analysis. Participants' identities derived from this approach become given, self-evident and subdued to the hierarchy between the state and youth.

In the light of politization of the movement and a threat to get trapped in pre-conceived ideas and existing assumptions in the analysis, epistemologically I have conceived my research to a place where underrepresented and marginalized voices of activists may gain power. Taking into account a missing micro-approach to the movement, I offer an ethnographic and narrative account on the study of participant's subjectivity as the alternative to established public identifications.

Narrative Analysis of Young Activists' Careers in the Movement

I argue that the knowledge about the movement is dominated by "adult" voices of journalists and researchers, who see the movement in its unity, understanding it through provocative actions, official documents, manifestos and web-texts. In line with this logic, the aim of the analysis is to "create and recreate voices during the research process. Nowhere is it more evident than in studies of personal narratives." (Riessman, 1994: 16)

My analysis is based on 10 in-depth thematic interviews, which covered such topics as recruitment to the movement, relationships in the group, citizenship, historical memory, attitude to the politics and the state. In addition, I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in the annual educational camp Seliger, a federal educational youth forum and one of the central pro-governmental youth events, as well as at public campaigns and rallies in Moscow and Saint Petersburg organized by the movement. My interviewees were with four young women and six young men aged 19-23 living in St Petersburg, Tver, and Saransk. They were involved in the movement for different periods: from a couple of months to several years. Some activists experienced all the changes and transformations in the project since the first years of Nashi up to the closing of Stal in 2012. Others joined the movement later and did media or political jobs in the local and regional administrations. The narratives of my interviewees represent a concise history of the movement from the first response, to "Color Revolutions," to public manifestations against election frauds in 2011-2012. The stories of my participants - Marina, Andrey, Alexey and Pavel² represent the careers of the key actors of the movement who managed to gain recognition and positions in local administrations. Besides, in the structural political context, their narratives show the changes in the activists'

subjective interpretations from the faithful devotion to the project's ideas up to the development of personal political interests and ambitions.

One of the tools I use for analysis is focalization, or the structures of viewpoint, which reveals the standpoints, focuses, scope and phases of events. (Genette 1980) It helps recognize through whose eyes the action is perceived and represented.

Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's "Time and Narrative" (1990), I refer to the goal-oriented time of the *linear quest* and the *cyclical time* of imaginary travel that are both intertwined in the narrative. In mythology, a quest is a journey towards a goal where a hero overcomes obstacles to get the object of his or her quest (Propp, 1968). I see narration about state-managed political activism of my participants as a form of a quest, where the government dispatches a young man for a journey to reach certain goals and objects. Such an approach allows us to deconstruct the journey of youth political activism through the prism of the motives, goals, values of the participant, as well as his relationship with the state.

Political action in my analysis is approached as a whole "conceptual network" including goals, motives, agents, etc. (Ricoeur, 1990) Greimas actantial model (Greimas & Courtes, 1982) provides particular tools based on semiotic sociology to think of narration through subject positions, which can reveal the motives, goals, and obstacles of the action. Actants or participant roles (Herman, 2002) that form the narrative storylines describe a change of the state in a certain subject. (Czarniawska, 2004) According to this model, the relationship between the subject and object lie at the center of the narrative. The following actant positions are distinguished within the Greimas model: sender, helper, anti-subject, opponent and receiver. Törrönen & Maunu (2007: 367-368) use the model for the study of drinking habits of young people and elaborate each actant as following: positions of the sender and receiver describe necessities and obligations, which legitimate the subject's action. The helper, anti-subject and opponent articulate what kind of abilities, competencies and resources the subject needs in the quest. The helper reflects the subject's resources, opponent and anti-subject represent the hindrances of the action.

Approaching youth political activism as a form of imaginary travel and a goal-oriented quest, led me to the following research question: how is the public action focalized in the activist's biography and towards what kind of symbolic objects the does the quest aim?

The start of the "journey"

The narrative excerpt at the beginning of the paper is focalized from the first-person point-of-view and represents Andrey's acquaintance with the movement, which occurs almost accidentally. This experience can be regarded as a turning point in the young man's biography that signals the breakage between the real and ideal, the normal life flow and a start of a new adventure. This disruption of the 'ordinary' life flow as opposed to eventful and emotionally charged cyclical journey offered by Nashi is a *sender* to the activism, as expressed in Marina's evaluative narrative representing the personal and collective values of the movement:

When I lived in my own little world, like school, parents, friends, I could not even imagine that there was such a different world, where there are other people, they want to do something real and it turned me on. Then I immediately went to the rally in Moscow, we were on a train, it was so cool: young people, communication, new friends... then I went to Seliger - right after 2 months and it was all... such a "Boom"!

For some “regular” activists, who were not interested in the future political career, activism in Nashi went on being an eventful cyclical journey full of campaigns and rallies, representing governmental agenda. In this case, the state-managed nature of the project is not problematized and critically evaluated, as I found out in the bus going from St Petersburg on our way to the rally in Moscow, supporting Putin as a candidate for Presidential elections in March, 2012:

From the field diary: “My neighbor in the bus kept repeating how great it was that he was going to Moscow as, otherwise, he would just stay at home watching football. As it turned out, such motivation brought up together almost everyone in the bus, travelling to Moscow rally supporting Putin as a candidate for Presidential elections 2012”. (March, 4, 2012)

As seen from the excerpt, social ties and a free trip to Moscow are the values that guide the situational action of joining pro-governmental activism. Since career strategies in the movement are similar among such “regular” activists, I will further refer to the stories of the “leaders” of the youth movement, whose mobilization of different subject positions reveals the tensions and internal conflict of state-managed youth participation.

The turn for the goal-oriented quest

The cyclical time of the imaginary travel conditioned by a relaxed and eventful atmosphere of travelling and participating in the rallies, in a due course was transformed into the goal-oriented quest for career-oriented activists:

[T]hen I found out that there were some commissars³. Who are commissars? They explained just a little, they were saying: “When you get baptized, when you become a commissar, you will find out who they are. Meanwhile, we are not going to tell you anything”. So my goal appeared... to get to know this mystery. At the same time I already started supporting Putin. I started watching films, reading articles and then I understand that Putin really did something for the country. That is the truth with him and with us. It is not bad that we support Putin.

In this excerpt, Victor narrated about emergence of the goal that can be regarded as a new turning point in his career. Cyclical time is changed by the goal-oriented time: the imaginary journey in the movement is now having a goal – to understand the “mystery” of the movement. As seen from the narration, the closed atmosphere and secrecy around the movement, exclusive recruitment of its leaders (“commissars”) became an incentive to participation in the youth project in 2006. Indeed, for a long time Nashi was considered a closed community, same as Seliger forum, a visit to which an activist had to “deserve.” In contrast, today it re-brands itself as an open platform for young people regardless of their political views and distances from any belonging to Nashi.

With the emergence of the goal, a new subject position prevails: besides the subject as the narrator, the national subject position emerges. The concept of *truth* is mobilized, justifying Victor's loyalty to the state. Belonging to the youth political movement places Victor in the national continuity apart from the personal and group subject positions.

With the emergence of new political goals on the national level, young people, who can be described as “ladder climbers”, realized new opportunities for their personal development:

In September they opened a new project called “Pervichka” with a separate headquarters where we were recruiting new people. In our computer we had a database of 560 people with names and phone numbers. They were students whom we invited to the movement. We needed them for the rallies. We needed people for December presidential elections to bring them to Moscow. And there I got promoted really well, many people knew me. Already after three months of being there people knew who I was. Then I get baptized as an activist, because I was selected after this project. I was first really happy, when we were brought to another city to get baptized, and then I understood that that there were things that could be achieved for free. I never thought that you could go to another city for free, only for spending your time in the organization. I have visited a lot of cities thanks to it, and now I have friends almost in every corner of Russia.

New national and political context - Presidential elections in 2008 - puts up new challenges for the movement and opportunities for personal promotion. The narrator, Andrey, gained a new role in the group: from being a functioner - a common activist of the movement - he became the manager, recruiting other people for a pro-governmental rally in Moscow. This switch from the romantic fascination by the youthful atmosphere to the idea of the quest for the personal promotion found in the story of Andrey is a typical narrative for Nashi career-builders.

Other activists talk about their activism in a very pragmatic way, where the national is clearly seen as a *helper* for self-promotion. An alternative emergence of the goal-oriented quest is found in Pavel’s narrative, representing the younger generation of pro-Kremlin activists, where the object of the quest is clearly defined as personal career opportunities, which can be achieved through the loyalty to one of the state agendas – social memory of the Great Patriotic War and construction of the heroic past:

I personally made 160 films about veterans of the [Second World] war. You see, you can take any social problem and start your own campaign. It is very easy: you pick up a problem, write a project, go to Seliger, get a grant, support and start making yourself.

In both the narratives, the movement is focalized as a *helper* of becoming well-known and getting personal benefits. The narrators realize that the national - that is the political - and group activities can bring valuable capital for the personal future. The narrative introduces the tension between *having-to-do* and *willing-to-do*, when liability to the government is paid back by an opportunity of building a career, new social networks and public recognition. This tension between the demand for individual possibilities and loyalty to the strict national agenda represent the core strategy of the official youth policy in Russia (Blum, 2006). Non-material benefits are regarded as certain incentives in this youth political activity. Some researchers state, that besides social capital, social and youth movement’s activists perceive participation and the feelings of solidarity as a reward in itself (Byrne, 1997; Omelchenko, 2006, 2013).

The values of belonging to a group, solidarity, new social networks, possibilities to travel around Russia for free and self-realization are the *senders* of the action in terms of

actantial positions or the core values of the state-managed youth activism. Now, it is not only the nation, but also the activist himself is becoming a *receiver* of political participation. In this context, the movement's strategy to recruit young people from the regions of Russia – as opposed to bigger cities and the capital - is understood as a deliberate strategy of the state, taking into account fewer capitals and access to such resources outside the movement.

Collective manifesto through personal reminiscences

The Manifesto of the movement is one of the main texts for analysis in existing sociological research on Nashi. It is analyzed along with other documents of the movement and understood as a text representing ideas and goals of the movement on its own. The Manifesto expresses eclectic patriotic optimism highlighting an ambitious goal of the movement to prove Russia's leading role as a world-power. Analysis shows, that the text portrays the active young subject ready to contribute to the new ideology (Lassila, 2012a). In my conversation with Pavel, I was lucky to hear him starting a conversation about the Manifesto, - a topic organically positioned in the narrative about his activism. This allowed me to place an abstract text – which is usually deprived of any personal meanings in academic research - in the context of his biography, childhood and family, which frames the text with personal and romanticized meanings:

[B]y the way, what was also so close to me in its [Nashi] ideology... When I opened the brochure with the Manifesto and started reading it, it was all suddenly so familiar to me because... I had an excellent grade on History at school, I loved History, and that old blue textbook from the 9th grade... it was all shabby, I was reading it over and over again. I open the movement's manifesto and I see that it is exactly what I heard from my school teacher. I had a great teacher on History, I still love him and very grateful to him. I did not even need to learn the Manifesto because when I looked at it – I already knew it. Once I read it – it became mine, very own, native, personal. [...] Manifesto described the goals. The goal was “Russia as the global leader of the 21st century”. That should be done through the country's modernization and creation of the comprehensive civil society.

The narrative presents “poetic structures” that disclose emotional component of the narrative (Riessman, 1994). Narration is getting a nostalgic and metaphoric form, and reconstructing the connection between personal biography and public action. The national continuum mediated through the Manifesto is described through epithets like “very own”, “native,” “personal”. The movement's Manifesto – reflecting the collective and national continuum - is reconciled with the personal level through the *old shabby textbook* on History. The narrator keeps switching between two temporal and spatial contexts: the movement's manifesto, reflecting national goals, and his very private childhood experiences. Therefore, *having-to-do* - real, is merged with *willing-to-do* - ideal. In this biography, there is no painful clash between conformity to the movement and personal self-realization. The “truth” and “correct” understanding of history of Russia become the nodal point in the ambiguous relationship between the personal and the national.

National history and the way it is interpreted by the movement become the values that guide political participation in Nashi. I find this piece of narration particularly important because it shows hidden values that guide the action: support for the government is not always guided by the values of self-expression, career perspectives and new social networks. It represents another dynamic between the personal, collective and national as opposed to

social cynicism, which becomes the frame of relationship between the state and pro-Kremlin youth in the public debate. The ideological component and sharing certain understanding of the right citizenship, the role of young people and patriotism also plays a critical part in the activists' narratives.

Opponents and anti-subjects of the collective

As mentioned above, public pressure applied by oppositional movement and independent media have stigmatized the political youth project. Public support of the government and calling oneself a Nashi activist has become a challenge requiring new strategies of personal defense and justification. Resistance to stigmatization and engagement with risks of pro-Kremlin political participation are one of the key actants in the narratives of my research participants. After his narration on "Pervichka" project, Andrey starts talking about his activism in the Orthodox branch of Nashi, where he introduces an *opponent* and *anti-subject* of his political activism:

Our main task was to bring people from the regions to Moscow for the rallies. One of the tasks was to protect the Cathedral. There was a Diomide who was trying to persuade people that our Patriarch was an adversary and they wanted to rebel against him. We were there near the Cathedral holding posters "We are with the Patriarch! We are with the Cathedral!" while they were standing against us. You look in their eyes – they are obsessed, really obsessed! They were saying to us: "Take your clothes off! You have got bar-codes!" They were holding Orthodox icons. It was scary. We are orthodox and they are orthodox. It was scary because they were cursing us: "Guys, you are young; they are messing with your heads! Stop it!" They were even trying to fight with us.

Surprisingly, the actant positions of the *opponent* and *anti-subject* are not taken by oppositional movement, as it mostly happened in other interviews, but by those who could be described as the allies of the government and Nashi - Orthodox believers. Appeal and instrumentalization of Orthodox values is one of Nashi's patriotic agenda, which functions as accumulation of symbolic capital, clearly formulated in the Manifesto of the Movement. However, foregrounding Orthodoxy has occupied a marginal role among movement's activities and was mainly reserved for its professional members. Nashi's interpretation of Orthodoxy shows that faith provides people with social engagement and, therefore, personal success (Laruelle, 2012). The activist, having accomplished one of the main goals of the movement and political agendas - "prevention of the Orange Revolution in Russia," – was invited to a new project headed by Nashi called Orthodox Corpus. His activism starts having a form of the cyclical travel when he participates in the numerous minor political and civil campaigns, representing governmental interests.

The story shows the risks and challenges of public claiming of personal views supporting Kremlin even among seeming allies. Risks of civil and political activism among youth groups are understood by some researchers in a context of solidary activities and a price one has to pay for the belonging to the group (Omelchenko, 2013). Political solidary action is likely to presuppose such risks as breach of law or common patterns of behavior. At the same time, these risks refer to certain pleasures, like the feeling of belonging to "us" and opposing to "them", as well as a perceived heroic behavior targeted on the maintenance of the main values of the group.

Despite political motivations and state-driven nature of such short-term projects in which young people get involved, each public action is internally justified, explained and positioned in the personal biography. Pavel went on with the explanatory narrative about the values that drove him to join Orthodox Corpus:

I joined Orthodox Corpus because I am Orthodox myself, I read the Bible, children's Bible but still. But in my life as well, I once asked God for help and he did not refuse me. When I had a chance to participate in the project and serve to God, I thought why not - I am a believer.

Even though the position of Nashi activists in public pro-governmental rallies is mainly presented as strictly functional and technical, the activist's personal position is reflexive, internally explained and justified. In the situation when the movement is marginalized and confronted by most of the public, the activist is forced to construct personal subjective motivations and values. Through these reflections, *having-to-do* is reconciled with *willing-to-do*, the ideal finds a way out in the real. The logic and values of public action of Nashi is such that it is firstly driven by the governmental request for a certain political agenda, which is further reconciled with a personal agenda of the activists, which morally justify it and self-explain.

Another strategy of personal resistance to the marginal image is building up a clear-cut division between us – *real* actors of the civil society, building the future of the national - and them - opponents of the state, willing to destabilize the national order, like happened in Marina's case:

OK, let us take Putin away, what is next? They [opposition] cannot say, what is next. They live for the moment; basically, they do not have any tools and suggestions for efficient politics, while we are trying to create these instruments and work as a real civil society – what our country really needs and the state trying to build.

Through the clear-cut bordering of the group, the activist is reinforcing its identity as an actor of civil society. Despite the difference in moral and civil modalities in the two narratives presented, the argumentative trajectory is based on self-defense and justification of activism in a project subjected to public criticism by *opponents*. Such values as civil society or Orthodoxy, like in this case, are constructed as shared values shared by the nation, group and self, which reinforce personal conviction to Nashi.

Autonomy and own voice

Even though the three dimensions of activism are often inseparable throughout the whole journey of activism for many participants, "I" becomes clearly distinguished once the context concerns activists' own development and self-realization. In particular, this change in a subject position takes place after several months of participation in a project, when young people start understanding the benefits they may get for the loyalty to the state. By the end of the interview, Victor distances himself from the group and his own voice with clearly defined personal goals starts to dominate:

I am now going to join a political party. I want to do politics. It is just the party activities presuppose that sooner or later you are going to participate in

elections, and before that, you help people to solve their problems. To repair the buzzer in the house, someone's pipe leaking or a roof... That is a simple technology. With the use of the civil campaigns that we were taught we can annoy these enemies who do not want to repair anything. And by such campaigns I am going to come to power.

In contrast to the other phases of the quest, when the activists had to tune their own concerns to the national interests, here the own voice of the activist becomes clearly articulated, separated from the movement and the nation, and narration concerns solely personal career and aspirations. The methods of public campaigns, taught and used in the movement for the national goals, are thought of as pragmatic tools for reaching personal aspirations. The movement and the narrator are focalized from the civil society viewpoint, which is presented as a cultural code of publicly approved political behavior.

Throughout the narratives of young activists, subject positions and the goals are constantly reproduced, changed and focalized from different viewpoints: national, group, personal. Legitimizing own participation in the marginalized state-managed youth project, young activists negotiate their political engagement through the moral and social conformity to the values demanded by the state. Reflecting the aims of youth policy in Russia, the government is placed as a *receiver* of such youth participation, bringing up a generation of loyal and conformed young people. On the other hand, young people find their personal trajectories in the strict structural conditions of loyalty to the imposed agenda, when “I” becomes clearly defined in the context of the personal career building; the activist acts as *receiver*, pragmatically reflecting on the benefits of pro-Kremlin participation. Within the same narrative young people occupy and differentiate between different voices depending on the situation they focus on, like in case of “demanded” and “wanted” values, having-*to-do* and *willing-to-do*, culminating in Andrey’s narration:

Because you know, I am a very strong supporter of traditional society, that is, all has to be done for the community, for people, country, that is, you know, I do not like selfishness, when people care only about themselves ... though...not really...in fact, as I said ... I am a careerist, I am an strong careerist, right, first I make myself! No private life, no friendship, no travelling, parties, you must first make yourself.

Various subject positionings within the three dimensions reveals power struggles over the meaning of the state-managed youth participation and intersections of different identifications. Young people are places in the tension of conformity to the national values and personal career-oriented interests, which can be conflicting.

Conclusion

Using methodological tools of narrative analysis, I showed that activism in the youth political project Nashi is placed in the tension of the three co-existing subject positions: personal, collective and national, which are mobilized differently within the same story of political participation. The activists’ understanding of their activism should be approached from all subject positions and the meanings they presuppose. On the one hand, the object of the activists’ quest is the national leadership and support of the current political regime that represents the structural context of the state-managed youth activism in Russia. Nashi stayed loyal to the national goals imposed by the state youth policy, even though the project has proved its provocative and controversial nature. However, with the development of young

people's careers in the movement, the vague national goal, which turned into the timely agendas and demands for youth mobilization, was replaced by personal goals in the activists' own quests with a clearly defined personal subject position. Besides, public marginalization of the movement and the risks of the public political participation require strong subjective motivations, self-reflection and inner conviction in the personal position. The activists' narratives are, therefore, constituted by the moral duty of sharing the values of the nation, resistance to the negative image of the group they belong to, and personal demand for self-realization.

Despite the state-managed youth policy, pro-Kremlin activists are active, reflexive and pragmatic agents of their political activism, negotiating the imposed national agenda through personal understanding of the right citizenship, civil society, Orthodox values, love for Russian history and sincerity. The tension between the competing meanings of the national, collective and personal forces young people to create certain trajectories of self-defense and justification of belonging to the politicized project, when they mobilize the strategy of faithful conformism and internalization of the national values.

At the same time, young people's response to the youth policy is negotiated not only through conformism to the demanded moral values, but approached as an exchange of mutual rewards between the state and youth. Young people expect some gratification from the state for their loyalty and actively use the networks afforded by belonging to the group. In exchange, the state receives support of youth by providing pro-governmental activists with certain benefits. Therefore, the relations between the national and the personal in the state-managed youth activism can be described as a bargain, which reconciles *having-to-do* and *willing-to-do*. The activists' careers in the state-managed youth activism become embedded in the conciliation between self-realization, demands for submission to the hierarchical system and public request for constant justification and argumentation of marginalized pro-Kremlin activism. In the end, the aim of the youth policy to bring up a generation of patriotic and sincere youth acts in a perverse way, when this kind of policy leads to social cynicism, matching the demand for certain political behavior and a skillful tuning of personal values to the ones claimed by the state.

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Notes

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² All the names used in the article are pseudonyms.

³ "Commissars" are the leaders of the movement and can be literally translated as an "officer". Activists had to deserve this status, showing themselves as good managers and conveying their loyalty to the state. The word originally refers to the Soviet political officers.