

Youth camps in Post-Soviet Russia and the Northern Caucasus: the cases of Seliger and Mashuk 2010

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Abstract: The organization of state-sponsored youth camps has emerged as a central feature of contemporary youth policies in the Russian Federation. This paper, based on field work conducted during 2010, analyses them focussing in particular on two cases: Seliger 2010, Russia's main youth camp, and Mashuk 2010, a regional camp specifically dedicated to youth from the Northern Caucasus. As will be seen, Soviet youth policies still serve as a fundamental point of reference in contemporary Russia. Elements of continuity and change, in particular in terms of patriotic education, inter-ethnic integration and the situation in the Caucasus, will be discussed.

Keywords: Youth; Post-Communism; Patriotic education; Youth camps; Caucasus; Russia

Introduction¹

The organization of state-sponsored youth camps has emerged as a central feature of contemporary youth policies in the Russian Federation. This paper analyses them focussing in particular on two cases: Seliger 2010, Russia's main youth camp, and Mashuk 2010, a regional camp dedicated to youth from the Northern Caucasus. In this paper, I will first describe some of the main features of contemporary public youth policies in Russia and point out some of the main changes in this policy area since the fall of the Soviet Union. I will then describe in detail two youth forums that took place in the Russian Federation in the summer of 2010, Seliger 2010 and Mashuk 2010. Seliger has become a symbol of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs (*Federalnoe Aгенство po Delam Molodezhi, Fadm*) and of public youth policies in Russia in general. The year 2010 brought an important "first" for the camp: for the first time, the camp had an international session with up to 1,000 participants from abroad. Mashuk 2010 was in itself an important new development: for the first time in the history of youth camps in Russia (or, previously, in the Soviet Union) this camp was dedicated to youth coming exclusively from all the territories of the Northern Caucasus and was specifically organised to support inter-ethnic peace among all nationalities of the region.

Finally, I will discuss elements of continuity and change that emerge from an analysis of youth camps in contemporary Russia. In particular, I will take into consideration the Russian state's attempts to take up some of the tasks that in Soviet times belonged to the *Komsomol*, the pervasive youth branch of the Soviet Communist party. These tasks include easing young people's transition to adult life, increasing integration among young citizens from distant corners of the country, and supporting patriotic education. In the northern Caucasus, the Russian state is for the first time trying to strengthen a "Caucasian identity", stressing the unity of all ethnic groups living in the region. For what concerns the northern Caucasus, the Russian state is, for the first time, trying to strengthen a "Caucasian identity" stressing the unity of all the ethnic groups living in the region.

The youth camps discussed in this paper are also good examples of some of the features and institutions that characterize contemporary Russia. These include the central role of the "national leaders" and the persistence of a blurred distinction between state institutions, the Putin-Medvedev ruling "tandem", pro-governmental youth organizations, and the ruling party United Russia (*Edinaya Rossiya*).

The research for this paper is based on field work conducted in the course of 2010. Field work included preliminary visits to Moscow, North Ossetia and Ingushetia in February

2010 and participant observation at the above-mentioned camps. I went to Seliger (Tver region) as a standard participant to the international shift of the youth forum from 1 to 8 July 2010 and I observed Mashuk (Pyatigorsk, Stavropol krai) as a visiting journalist from 23 to 26 August 2010. During my stay at the camps, I held frequent and informal conversations with participants and took daily notes of my observations. Both inside and outside the camps I interviewed camp organizers and managers, people responsible for youth policies at national or local level, and representatives of pro-governmental youth organizations.

Youth organizations and youth camps in post-Soviet Russia

Citizens of the former Soviet Union often remember the summer camps of their childhood and adolescence. The most deserving children, recommended by local Pioneer and *Komsomol* organizations, could go to *Artek* or *Orlenok*, two well-known resorts on the Black Sea coast. Leisure activities were accompanied by visits by famous guests including sportsmen, cosmonauts, singers and TV show stars. The camps also comprised educational moments meant to instil Soviet patriotism in the new generation and give children from all corners of the Union with different ethnic backgrounds the chance to get to know each other. Youth camps in the former Soviet Union were mostly reserved for children and people in their early adolescence (between 7 and 15 years of age) and *Komsomol* activists worked in these camps as educators.

The *Komsomol*, the youth branch of the Soviet Communist party which was directly responsible for running a large share of these youth camps, was disbanded in 1991, but some camps continued to operate. *Artek* (held in what is now Ukraine) and *Orlenok* operate to this day and host thousands of children every year. However, they have lost the prestige they once held. They still occasionally host events directly related to patriotic education but these camps are not at the forefront of youth policies any more.

While camps for children continued after the fall of the USSR, nothing comparable has taken the place of the *Komsomol*, whose members were between the ages of 16 and 28. The end of the *Komsomol* has had important consequences in areas other than political indoctrination. *Komsomol* provided services, jobs, and education to its members and gave some social mobility to upwardly mobile youth from all parts of the country.² Its disappearance contributed to what in the Russian public sphere is commonly referred to as “the lost generation”.³ This generation includes those who had a Soviet education imbued with Communist values but who, after the fall of the Soviet Union, had to live in the “neo-capitalist” environment of Russia in the 1990s, a time of deep economic crisis, without the support of established social networks. Indeed, *Komsomol* offered a fundamental opportunity to meet people with different backgrounds who could play a key role in determining one's political or work career. As argued by Lepisto (2010:435), “the loss of institutional infrastructure offered by a strong central state reduced the capacity of youth to build friendships and acquaintanceships” that were considered fundamental in having a smooth transition to adulthood.

During the 1990s in Russia, there were many sport and university organizations, but no significant political youth organization dedicated to social mobility was active. Things started to change after Vladimir Putin's arrival to the presidential office in 2000. Vladislav Surkov, widely considered to be one of the Kremlin's main ideologists and one of the designers of today's youth policies in Russia, emphasized in an interview with the German magazine *Spiegel* the idea that the state should take care of politically active youth:

We almost completely lost the youth of the Nineties. They had little interest in politics, and perhaps that was even a good thing. But now we are seeing a

growing desire among young people to become involved in politics - and this is something we must address (Klussman & Mayr 2005).

The rise in state support for youth organizations became more explicit after 2005, partly in reaction to the role played by the Ukrainian youth movement “It’s time” (*Pora*) during the “orange revolution” in Ukraine. A number of highly politicised pro-governmental youth organizations were established or increased their activities not only in Russia, but in other countries of the post-Soviet space as well, ostensibly to counter the spreading of “colour revolutions”.⁴ Increased interest in youth organizations in general in 2005 is also reflected in the number of books dedicated to this subject that were published in Russia in early 2006 (Danilin 2006; Mukhin 2006; Savel’ev 2006; Bomsdorf and Bordyugov 2006).

Edinaya Rossiya, the dominant party in Russian politics, launched a re-branding of its youth wing: *Molodezhnoe Edinstvo* became *Molodaya Gvardiya* (Youth Guard). Soon afterwards, the party proclaimed it would reserve 20 percent of the places on its party lists at every level (from local councils to the national parliament) to people younger than 28 and gave *Molodaya Gvardiya* a prominent role in the selection process of candidates (Comai 2007).

Vasilii Yakemenko, who later became head of the Federal Agency for Youth Policies, founded *Nashi*, soon to become the most well-known youth organization in Russia. *Nashi* proposed a “cadre revolution” which would entail a new moral, patriotic dynamic and prepare youth coming from the ranks of *Nashi* to replace the old, corrupt generation of employees and statesmen who sold out Russia during the 1990s. As is openly stated in the manifesto of the organization, “Working as a network of mutual support, our movement will make use of the ability of our members who obtained access to positions of power to support other new members.”⁵

It was precisely *Nashi* which revived and renovated the idea of youth camps in Russia. In 2005, it started its youth forum on the coast of Lake Seliger, located in the Tver region halfway between Moscow and Saint Petersburg.⁶ In its first year the forum counted 5,000 participants, but that figure increased to 40,000 in 2009 when the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs threw its official sponsorship behind the forum.

In these years, official youth policies underwent total restructuring and re-branding. For example, the Federal Agency maintained that those taking part in projects it supported “will understand that patriotism is nothing but the ability to be competitive, and talent nothing but the capability to do something new or something better, quicker, or cheaper than anyone else on the planet”.⁷ This is an explicit reference to a famous 2006 speech on “sovereign democracy” when Vladislav Surkov, claimed that “sovereignty is a political synonym for “ability to be competitive” (Surkov 2007). Such statements clearly outline how patriotic education, an established part of youth policies in Russia, has thus been reinterpreted in order to make it more coherent with the contemporary economic and political reality.

But the main innovation in the field of youth policies, and one that has quickly become the state’s most visible initiative in the youth policy area, involves youth forums, or youth camps.

While some experts consulted by the Agency for Youth Affairs expressed concern about the effectiveness of mass youth events like Seliger,⁸ others advocated increasing the number of youth forums in Russia. “One can only hope that this forum will follow the destiny of *Artek*; it took something from the scout movement, invented something new, refined the concept and the technology of working with youth, and then replied and multiplied the concept throughout the Soviet Union”, wrote a journalist of one of Russia’s most-read newspapers after visiting Seliger (Steshin 2009). In 2007, when Seliger was still a *Nashi* project, its then-leader Vasilii Yakemenko declared that, in the following year, there would be

more “tent cities” like Seliger for tens of thousands of people throughout the country.⁹

In fact, since 2010, more and more youth camps supported by the national or local authorities have appeared in many of Russia’s regions, including the northern Caucasus. Besides camp Mashuk, discussed later in this paper, a youth camp called *Kavkaz-2020* organised by *Molodaya Gvardiya* took place in Nal’chik, Kabardino-Balkaria. Between July 18 and 23 and between July 23 and 31, the Russian Congress of Caucasian Peoples¹⁰ organized a youth forum called “It’s Better Together” in Dombai, Karachai-Cherkessia. Although none of the state-wide youth organizations like *Nashi* or *Molodaya Gvardiya* is strong locally, such camps are still held, and, in the case of Mashuk 2010, have been largely organised and managed by people from other Russian regions.

1. Seliger 2010¹¹

According to the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs, Seliger is meant to help young people kick-start their careers by providing them with the support and contacts necessary to realise their business or social projects. All participants are supposed to come to the forum with a project they want to realise, such as commercialising an invention, creating a media start-up, or developing a socially useful project or business idea. At the forum, they have a chance to attend master classes, meet potential private or public investors, and create a network of people that might be useful in implementing their projects or in developing their careers. Representatives of some of Russia’s largest corporations visit the forum, as do top-level state officials as high as the prime minister or the president. A state-funded open contest awards grants and sponsorships to the best projects presented at the forum. The camp’s strong focus on the promotion of business initiatives, entrepreneurship and economic success marks a striking contrast with the values promoted in youth camps in Soviet times.

Youth forum Seliger 2010 took place between July 2 and July 28, 2010 and was divided into week-long thematic sessions. *Nashi* still plays a key role in the organization of the forum in Seliger despite the fact that the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs is the forum’s official organizer and sponsor. For example, many instructors and members of the organising team were *Nashi* activists and the flag of the organization was still part of Seliger’s logo.

All participants were divided into groups of about 20 participants (*dvadtsatki*) who lived together and shared daily menial tasks. Participants slept in tents (usually, three per tent). Every *dvadtsatka* had a big table for meals and meetings and a firepit where participants cooked for their peers, helped by an assistant provided by the organizers (often, a young student from a local institute for cooks and chefs). A “shower”, consisting of a nylon curtain and a pump-operated camp shower, and an axe to cut wood completed the picture.

All *dvadtsatki* camps were set up side by side with no visible line of separation. *Dvadtsatki* were generally composed of participants from different parts of Russia, but all *dvadtsatki* usually included more than one person from each region represented. The only significant exception to this rule was made by the Chechen delegation which was separated from the rest of the camp by a high wooden fence. The Chechen “village” was decorated with pictures of a renewed Grozny and futuristic images of buildings in construction that, according to projects, should rise on the skyline of the Chechen capital within a few years. Chechen flags featuring a portrait of the Republic’s president, Ramzan Kadyrov, were on show in the “village” and were always very visible during public meetings.

An “eternal fire” dedicated to Russia’s victory over Nazi Germany in World War II was established in Seliger and war veterans visited the camp. Participants took shifts day and night to keep the “eternal fire” burning at all times.

Not all of the camping area at Seliger was privy to a water system. Participants were supposed to transport their own water (for cooking, washing, and taking showers) with

barrels that had no proper handles from a water source (that stood at a distance of several hundred meters from some parts of the camp) to the place where their *dvadtsatka* was based. The same held true for the wood necessary to keep the fire going. Chemical toilets were located in a central location of the camp.

“We need people for whom living conditions do not matter”, declared head of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs, Vasilii Yakemenko, during an interview (Steshin 2009). This official approach was probably meant to stress the difference between Seliger and Soviet-era Pioneer camps. Participants at youth camps in late Soviet times slept on beds in concrete buildings and meals were cooked in a centralised canteen. More broadly, as Becker (1951:47) remarked discussing youth movements in a different context, rejection of comfort in favour of “hard primitivism” and “self-imposed rigour” stresses the break with the older generation and everyday life.

The organizers emphasized that strict rules and order should prevail at the camp. Alcohol was forbidden, as was the use of swear words and rough language. Smoking was limited to specific areas around the campfire and it was only possible to access leisure facilities or swim in the lake at certain designated times. All participants had to wear a personal identification badge with a picture at all times. Breaking any rule of the camp meant getting a hole in one’s badge. On the third infraction, participants were forced to leave the camp without getting back the 1,000 roubles deposit (about 25 Euro) that all participants had to pay upon their arrival.

The camp’s rough living conditions were supposed to offer a striking contrast to its technical, educational, and leisure offerings. The camp featured a computer laboratory and wireless internet connection in some areas. Leading lecturers from their respective fields were supposed to fill the educational programme. Leisure facilities abounded. Besides the Seliger lake, in itself a major attraction, the camp offered different free-time entertainment options including mountain biking, canoeing, sailing by catamaran, windsurfing, climbing walls, a shooting range (that could be used with rifles or bows), an open-air gym on the shore of the lake, and open-air disco dance floors at night.

The main stages of the camp were decorated with huge portraits of Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev that were more than five meters high. Posters of the two Russian leaders were on show in other locations of the camp, often accompanied by quotations from some of their speeches.

All participants were woken up by the Russian national anthem being played by loudspeakers at 8 a.m. After the anthem, Soviet-era children’s songs were played for about 20 minutes. At 8:30 a.m, loudspeakers switched to playing patriotic contemporary pop songs, some of them directly referencing youth and Seliger. These pop songs called participants to a daily mandatory meeting in front of the main stage. The lyrics often referred to great Russia and the key role of the youth in making it greater. For example, one of these songs, “Kto Esli Ne My” (“Who, If Not Us”), included the following lyrics:

We're building the projects of a great country / we remember the history of our
Russia / and we are building that history. / Defiantly, self-consciously, bravely,
logically / a common idea and true and right goals / it won't be easy, but this is
ok with us / our success is connected with the success of our country.

After an upbeat introduction during which the presenters rallied for, and often obtained, enthusiastic reactions from the participants, the heads of the different sections of the forum previewed some of the events of the day. The morning show ended with the male participants being invited to run for a few kilometres and the females being invited to stay in front of the big stage, adorned with portraits of Putin and Medvedev, to do some fitness

exercises to the sound of dance music.

After breakfast at 10 a.m, participants went to lectures. Lectures took place in large tents named after famous Russian artists, inventors, or heroes such as Yuri Gagarin, Andrei Tarkovskii, and Mikhail Kalashnikov. Participants were supposed to sit on the grass since no chairs or other kinds of furniture were provided. Lectures, conferences, meetings, and training sessions filled the daily schedule, with a lunch break between 1:00 and 2:30 p.m and free time in the late afternoon. At 8:30 p.m, an evening gathering in front of the main stage, not dissimilar to the one in the morning, formally ended the day, after which participants were free to walk around the camp site, watch a film, or go and dance at an open air disco.

In the afternoon, participants were also expected to work on their “project”. In theory, this was meant to be one of the main objectives of the Forum. Seliger participants were supposed to have a social or business project and use their time at the camp to find support for it by building a network among peers, finding business sponsors or investors, or obtaining the support of one of the funds represented at the forum.¹² The chance to meet and talk directly with high-level state officials, representatives of some of Russia’s largest corporations, and V.I.P. guests was often emphasized by the organizers of Seliger. Despite this, many camp participants simply did not have their own project, or had one only formally.

All participants also had the chance to talk directly with the head of the Federal Agency for Youth Policy, Vasilii Yakemenko, who then gave advice or recommendations for specific projects. During the camp, Yakemenko arranged a few occasions on which to meet with participants. Petitioners queued in front of a table set up in the camp and had 60 seconds to describe their project, state clearly what they would need to realise their project, describe time and cost estimates, etc.

The Kremlin’s passion for technical innovations was well-reflected at Seliger. There were different pavilions dedicated to inventions at the camp and the main path crossing the camp was turned into an exhibition of projects of new machinery or technologies invented by young Russians waiting for investors. These inventions included computer software, robots, and flying vehicles, but also objects as simple as a toothbrush with built-in toothpaste.¹³

Besides supporting entrepreneurship and youth ambition, a well-defined set of values was promoted at the camp. Gender-based role divisions were stressed and explicit references to the “fair sex” were common. For example, females were supposed to cook while males were supposed to help bring wood and water. In public speeches, respect toward females was emphasized, and there were instructions not to use swear words, particularly in the presence of females. Participants were strongly encouraged to marry *at the camp* - collective weddings took place during each session - and were reminded of the importance of building a family and raising children, especially in light of the demographic problem facing Russia. Considerable efforts were also dedicated to promoting healthy lifestyle choices such as practising sports and abstaining from drinking alcohol.

The camp agenda and objectives, as described above, remain basically the same during each session with only minor changes from year to year. The most significant new camp development was the international session the camp held in 2010 when the camp was opened to participants from abroad and used English as its official language. Excluding the decorations, no other overtly political propaganda action took place during the international camp session.

Director of the international camp session, Mikhail Mamonov, stressed that he strived to keep the part of the forum under his management strictly apolitical and not too explicitly pro-Russian, adding that Putin and Medvedev posters were simply a sign of gratitude towards the persons that saved Russia from the disaster of the 1990s. He suggested that the display of these portraits was a decision of the middle cadres, not the top leadership of the country, and that their presence was characteristic of this phase of Russia’s transition.¹⁴

In contrast, the following sessions open to only Russian participants featured strong political propaganda. Such propaganda included an event in which large portraits of opposition politicians, human rights defenders, and journalists were presented as anti-Russian liars and were enumerated among candidates of a mock “fifth column” prize and featured in an exhibition called “you are not welcome here” that included also foreign heads of state.¹⁵ Similar actions were especially common in previous years when the camp was run directly by *Nashi* according to reports by participant bloggers and information posted on the organization’s own website.

The state-controlled media has primarily given the Seliger camp positive coverage, helping the forum in its goal to spread the message that the state cares about its youth and offers young Russians generous grants and real opportunities for self-realisation.

The organizers of Seliger have tried to present an overtly positive image of the camp during press conferences and in the materials published on their website. On some occasions, self-promotion turned into a celebration of the forum’s virtues that went well beyond reality. This exaggeration is most noticeable in regard to Seliger’s international session and, more generally, the camp’s educational capacity.

According to the Russian-language version of Seliger’s official website, “the high quality and the intensity of the teaching programme makes it possible to compare one week at Seliger with one year of traditional learning”.¹⁶ The English-language version of the site conceded that “a week of lectures at the Seliger camp will hardly make up for six years of your first-class education”, but stressed the extremely high level of teaching at the camp.¹⁷ In spite of this assertion, at least during the international session, a 90-minute class in the morning could well have been the only lecture many participants attended during the day. This was the result of a combination of inelastic rules, organizational inefficiencies, and the sheer scale of the camp. In the morning, all the participants that declared their interest in one of the thematic sections of the camp were required to attend a lecture corresponding to that theme for half of the morning and spend the other half discussing it within their *davadtsatka*. Since no discussion sessions were officially organized and participants were not required (or allowed) to attend other lectures, the educational part of the morning usually ended early. In the afternoon, participants were supposed to attend conferences, but frequent programme changes and cancellations of events without prior notice made it difficult even for motivated participants to attend conferences and events regularly.

Nonetheless, at the end of the forum participants received a certificate from the prestigious Moscow State Institute of International Relations (Mgimo) that confirmed their participation in the forum and awarded them two European ECTS credits. According to the European ECTS credit system¹⁸, these credits should correspond to 50 to 60 hours of student workload and can count toward official academic credit at participants’ home universities.

Similar exaggerations were also made in reference to participants’ backgrounds. Organizers, while speaking to the press, writing on the official website, or speaking on stage at the camp stressed the fact that would-be participants would be selected on the basis of a highly selective admission procedure. Camp organizers made frequent references to international participants who were students “from Harvard”, “Ivy League students”, or from “leading universities” from all around the world. However, evidence indicates that there were fewer international applications than expected and that no real selection procedure was implemented. There was very limited participation from the countries of North America or Western Europe; the number of participants from these countries was almost always in the single digits if not close or equal to zero. The total number of foreign participants was less than half of the 2,000 initially planned for. It must be stressed, however, that the event was truly international and included participants from all continents (some of the largest delegations were from India, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Egypt).

The organizers declared that the goal of the international shift was to “form in foreigners’ minds an opinion of Russia as a country attractive for tourism, work, and life”,¹⁹ and to fight negative stereotypes about Russia. It seems, however, that the real goal of the camp was to improve the image of the country, its government, and of camp Seliger itself within Russia. The very fact that young people from abroad were coming to Russia for an educational summer camp was used to promote the camp itself within Russia, and more broadly to strengthen the image of Russia as a country that is held in high esteem internationally. As for the international impression, huge posters of Russia’s leaders with Russian-only text, strict rules, a low level of English proficiency among instructors, difficulties in obtaining a visa, and widespread disorganization, topped off with unreliable transfers to and from the camp, are unlikely to have helped fight negative stereotypes about Russia, no matter how beautiful the camp’s surroundings or how friendly the camp’s atmosphere.²⁰

The visit of Russian President Dmitri Medvedev to the international shift of Seliger in 2010 epitomises different aspects of the forum and the Russian political system in general. Organizers stressed the fact that the President’s personal visit was proof of the explicit support of the country’s leadership of youth initiatives. As soon as Medvedev entered the forum, he visited the pavilion of “inventors” and stressed the importance of innovations and high technologies for Russia. While talking from the camp’s main stage, President Medvedev said that “the fact that in this camp there are participants from 89 countries is just great because it demonstrates that Russia is an open society”, a message that was later replayed in news reports on state television. It is worth emphasizing the fact that Medvedev gave his speech from a stage decorated with his own larger-than-life portrait, paid for with public money.

Just hours before the President’s arrival at Seliger, international participants held a meeting, together with one of the foreign lecturers invited to the camp, to discuss Seliger’s shortcomings. The list of shortcomings, written on a board, included “too rigid and inelastic treatment of participants; top-down instructions and ‘orders’ given without proper explanation, justification or clarification; ‘forced’ participation in events or activities.” On the day President Medvedev visited Seliger, all leisure activities were forbidden, participants had to leave their tents, and, without prior notice, were forced to attend trainings unrelated to the topics discussed in their theme sessions. Group instructors gave participants orders to clean their tents and, in some cases, even to sweep their *dvadtsatka* camps, located in the middle of a pine forest, so that pine cones and needles wouldn’t be in sight when the president arrived. This is just an example of the widespread practice of improving the outlook of locations where an official visit of high officials is expected that, following in the footsteps of the legendary Potemkin villages, is widespread in contemporary Russia.

2. Mashuk 2010²¹

In 2010, for the first time, the Russian government organised a summer camp in the northern Caucasus specifically dedicated to young people coming from that region. Mashuk 2010 was clearly modelled after Seliger, with similarities not only in the general structure of the forum, but also in details like the Russian national anthem wake-up call at 8 a.m, the pop songs played afterwards, and the daily meeting and fitness exercises in front of a main stage adorned with Putin and Medvedev portraits. However, Mashuk had a much more specific target group and goals. President Dmitri Medvedev declared his administration’s open support for the organization of an “all-Caucasian youth camp, where young people from different republics will study, interact and have fun together” in a speech to the Parliament in November 2009.²² The forum was officially organised and sponsored by the Federal Agency

for Youth Affairs and by the administration of the federal district of the Northern Caucasus. Regional administrations covered travelling expenses for participants. Also in this case, *Nashi* activists had a prominent role in the organization of the camp and most staff members and instructors had previous experience at Seliger.



Gender dynamics at Mashuk 2010. All participants wake up at 8 a.m to the sound of the Russian national anthem. At 8:30, the organisers present the programme of the day from the main stage. Afterwards, women stay in front of the stage to do gymnastics exercises to loud disco music while men go for a run of a few kilometres. Photo by Giorgio Comai.

The forum took place in two sessions in August 2010 (8 to 17 August and 18 to 27 August) and was open to 2,000 participants between the ages of 18 and 30 and originally from one of the regions included in the federal district of the northern Caucasus (Territory of Stavropol', Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Chechnya, Dagestan) or from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two territories belonging to Georgia whose *de facto* independence has been recognised only by Russia and a handful of other countries. At least during the second shift when the author visited the camp, some delegations were almost exclusively composed of males. Like at Seliger, participants were expected to have their own project that they wanted to develop and were expected to take part in one of the two shifts according to their field of interest.²³



A group of participants from Ingushetia at Mashuk 2010. Some delegations had few female representatives. Photo by Giorgio Comai.

There was not a standardized procedure for applying to the event and different regions organised their delegations in different ways. For example, in Chechnya and Ingushetia there was no application procedure. Ministries autonomously selected participants who were expected to represent their republics in their own fields of competence.²⁴ In Dagestan, information about the forum was circulated through local committees for youth affairs and would-be participants could apply directly. Nonetheless, only about 250 participants from Dagestan took part in Mashuk in spite of the fact that the organizers fixed a quota of 400 participants from that region. While some claimed this was because the forum coincided with Ramadan, the real reason seems to have been limited and uneven circulation of information about the camp in Dagestan. There were sizeable groups of participants from small municipalities where youth committees were particularly active, highlighting the particular importance of publicity. An article published in *Novoe Delo*, a Dagestani weekly magazine, similarly explained the lower-than-expected number of participants and suggested that the authorities made no effort to inform or to involve people that have no privileged access to information in these kinds of initiatives (Magomedova 2010).

Overall, about 1,500 participants out of the 2,000 originally expected actually took part in the forum. Delegations from Abkhazia and South Ossetia simply did not take part in the forum. In a phone interview, a representative of the committee for youth policies in Sukhumi stated this was because of delays in the organization of the event and because of financial issues but suggested that an Abkhazian delegation might well join the forum in 2011. The idea of including South Ossetia and Abkhazia in a project dedicated exclusively to territories belonging to the Russian Caucasus are a clear sign of Russia's intention to integrate these break-away territories more closely with neighbouring regions and strengthen their sense of belonging to the Russian political space.

Living conditions were, in general, slightly better than at Seliger. There was a centralised canteen and there were showers with running water so participants did not have to carry around barrels of water or packs of wood like they did at Seliger. Leisure facilities

included a football field, ping pong tables, and an open-air gym. The educational part of the camp was structured in a significantly different way than that of Seliger. All participants had to attend lectures and trainings focussed on three main themes: inter-cultural interaction, project management, and effective communications.



Russian blogger Anton Korobkov (<http://korobkov.livejournal.com/>), gives a lecture at Mashuk 2010. Korobkov told participants they should be more active online in order to fight negative stereotypes of the Caucasus that are still dominant in Russia. Photo by Giorgio Comai.

The camp was organized taking into consideration the specific needs and peculiarities of all participants and to guarantee a high level of security. The camp was set up on the grounds of an abandoned Soviet pioneer camp located on a mountain outside of Pyatigorsk (a town known since the nineteenth century for its spas) that was recently made the administrative centre of the federal district of the Northern Caucasus. In spite of the fact that Pyatigorsk and its surrounding Stavropol' region are among the safest parts of the Northern Caucasus, the level of security at the camp was high. One had to pass through two checkpoints, one a couple of kilometres before the camp on the only road reaching it, the other at the entrance, before reaching the camp. All participants and guests had their luggage checked in order to make sure that no knife, weapon, or metal object (including forks or spoons) was brought into the camp. Security officers in military uniform armed with automatic rifles constantly patrolled the area around the camp. While there were no major security problems at the camp, there was an incident in down-town Pyatigorsk while the camp was under way: a bomb exploded in the central boulevard of Pyatigorsk, just a few kilometres from the camp, leaving forty people wounded.



Security at Mashuk 2010. Armed guards constantly patrol the area surrounding the camp. The luggage of all participants was thoroughly examined upon entry. Photo by Giorgio Comai.

Participants slept in tents and were divided into groups of twenty (*dvadtsatka*) and were divided by delegations. There were no mixed groups. This means that no one ever shared a tent or was in a *dvadtsatka* together with a person from another region. For example, a participant from North Ossetia would not have been in a group together with a participant from Ingushetia. Some of the delegations, like the Chechen and Ingush delegations, decorated their part of the camp so that it resembled a village with a clear entrance decorated with pictures of their region and of their current and previous presidents. Director of the forum Anton Volodin declared that the segregation of delegations would definitely change in future sessions of the camp and that participants from different regions would most likely live together.²⁵ The division of participants by delegations and the fact that many instructors came from central Russia also had other consequences. While Russian naturally served as a common language in mixed groups, ethnically homogenous groups of people from the Northern Caucasus tended to speak their own languages among themselves, creating a language barrier between those groups and the Russian-speaking group instructors from central Russia.



The Chechen village at Mashuk 2010. The entrance to the area where Chechnyan participant tents were located was decorated with a large poster of Akhmat Kadyrov, father and predecessor of Chechnya's president Ramzan Kadyrov. The text next to the picture stressed the fundamental and heroic role the late Kadyrov played in bringing peace and development to Chechnya. Photo by Giorgio Comai.

This division was also true for a considerable part of the trainings related to “inter-cultural interaction”. These trainings mostly took place within individual *dvadtsatka* and often among peers belonging to the same ethnic group. The trainings and lectures were meant to focus on discussions of stereotypes and the traditions and histories of the different ethnic groups represented, but these activities involved only limited direct interaction among participants from different regions. In spite of this, inter-ethnic dialogue nonetheless could take place, as while territories like Chechnya or Ingushetia are largely mono-ethnic, other territories represented at the camp were ethnically diverse, as were their delegations. Furthermore, difficult moments in the history of the region, including Stalinist deportations and the more recent Chechen wars, were not specifically discussed.

Despite this, participants from all regions shared the same spaces and could spend time together during leisure and sport activities. Therefore, in spite of the very cautious approach demonstrated by the organizers, participants undoubtedly had a chance to meet and get to know each other better, one of the main goals behind holding a camp targeted exclusively at participants from the Caucasus.



An opportunity to meet at Mashuk 2010. Two participants from North Ossetia and Ingushetia stand next to each other and watch a dance show. The two republics have had tense relations since the Ossetian-Ingush conflict of 1992, a conflict over the Prigorodnyj Rajon. Photo by Giorgio Comai.

Each day of the camp was dedicated to a different territory of the Northern Caucasus represented at Mashuk. On each territory's dedicated day, high-level guests from the given region would visit the camp, often including heads of the regional government. Special events also included the performance of regional dances and the preparation of regional foods.

The other main declared goal of the forum was to support youth entrepreneurship and youth economic and social initiatives through a system of grants. This was done mostly through the fund “National Perspectives” that organised a contest with clear rules for accessing grants. All participants could develop a business or social project according to the rules and instructions provided during the classes and then take part in a contest awarding grants to the best participants. Hearings were public and ostensibly transparent. Each participant had to present his or her project to five separate experts from the “National Perspectives” fund who would independently evaluate the project considering aspects related to both the applicant’s presentation skills and the quality of the project itself. The projects that obtained the highest overall rating would obtain funding. Other projects could still receive recommendation certificates that camp organizers said would help them in their search for funding from local administrations or private sponsors. Sixty-two projects were awarded grants that together totalled ten million roubles (about 250,000 Euro). Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, during a party conference dedicated to the Northern Caucasus, said the relatively small sum allocated for youth innovation grants would be increased tenfold by 2011 (Putin 2010).²⁶ The projects sponsored at Mashuk in 2010 were very diverse: a business union of bee-keepers of the mountainous regions of Dagestan, a free legal consulting centre in South Ossetia named after Dmitri Medvedev, youth business schools in various parts of the Caucasus, youth journals, a fashion house producing traditional clothing of different ethnic

groups of the region, tourist and mountain sport companies, non-governmental organizations to manage volunteer activities in various contexts, and others.

Organizers of the camp tried to accommodate the particular needs of Caucasus campers, for example by providing prayer tents for both Orthodox Christians and Muslims and pork-free meals. Nonetheless, heads of some of the delegations represented at the camp were rather critical of the organizers for multiple reasons. Because of organizational delays during the first days of the forum, many participants were left without tents and sleeping bags and had to deal with malfunctioning facilities. The head of the camp was fired after a few days and was substituted first by Ilya Kostunov, director of Seliger, then by a *Nashi* member from central Russia, Anton Volodin. Volodin was criticised by heads of regional delegations for failing to understand that running a camp in the Northern Caucasus requires an approach different from the one used in Seliger or in central Russia. The head of one of the delegations suggested, for example, that while tough and strict management of a camp in central Russia might have been acceptable, the Northern Caucasus was different. He said organizers should be more elastic and respectful toward people from the Caucasus who have their own traditions, and hinted that while a participant from one of the Northern Caucasus republics might respect orders from older members of his own family, he might be offended by orders given in a harsh tone by security staff from other parts of Russia, possibly even younger than himself. He also stressed that the particular implications for holding a camp during the month of Ramadan were not sufficiently considered, in particular regarding meal times and food quantity. He suggested that, in the future, a camp like Mashuk should be managed by persons from the Caucasus.

Lectures and meetings often included elements of patriotic propaganda that focussed on the idea that all participants, no matter their nationality, should feel a shared sense of belonging to Russia and should play an active role in making it a great country. For example, one of the lecturers ended his classes by leading his students in the chanting of the slogan "Russia Forward!". On a billboard inside the camp, participants were instructed to hang their pictures around the words "We Are Russia". A mirror installation shaped to form the word "Russia" decorated a dance floor in a central location of the camp so that participants could *literally* see themselves as part of "Russia". An "eternal fire" commemorating those who died fighting during World War II was painted on a desk. Next to it stood a board where participants wrote the names of their grandparents who died during that war. The idea was that the list would instantly demonstrate that people of all nationalities fought together during the war and that they were only able to defeat Nazi Germany by working together. It should be noted that the organizers felt that the Second World War, usually referred to in Russia as the "Great Patriotic War", was perceived as a unifying moment in the history of participants, in spite of the fact that those years are particularly controversial for people living in the Northern Caucasus. In 1944, the entire Karachay, Ingush, Chechen and Balkar peoples were deported to Central Asia and those who survived were allowed to go back to the Caucasus only after 1957.



The concept of belonging to Russia and the importance of taking an active role in making Russia a great country were frequently stressed during Mashuk 2010. On a billboard inside the camp (pictured), participants hung their pictures around the words “We Are Russia”. Photo by Giorgio Comai.

Even if no open demonstration targeting opposition representatives took place as it did at Seliger, the camp did include patriotic and party propaganda. Not unlike Seliger, huge portraits of Putin and Medvedev decorated the camp’s main stage. On one occasion, a so-called round table discussion on the topic of political clubs was openly used to present a “state-patriotic club” run by Russia’s dominant party *Edinaya Rossiya*. The round table discussants were representatives of *Edinaya Rossiya* and huge posters of the party’s club were hung behind the discussion table.



Following the example of Russia's main youth forum, organizers of the Mashuk 2010 camp decided to decorate the central stage of the camp with two huge billboards with the images of Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Photo by Giorgio Comai.

3. Why state-supported camps for young adults?

The organization of state-sponsored youth camps answers a need perceived by the Russian leadership at large to provide today's youth with some of the services and opportunities that, in previous times, were provided by the Soviet state. The goal is also to reinforce the state's influence in the upbringing of a new generation and in shaping the meaning of "motherland" through patriotic education.

Since the mid-2000s, political youth organizations like *Nashi* and *Molodaya Gvardiya* have been clearly trying to fill the void left by the *Komsomol* and, more and more openly, they are doing this in partnership with state institutions strictly connected with the country's leadership. As Blum (2006:104) put it, the building of a "semi-official (or pseudo-independent) movement to oversee youth activities on the ground" was meant "to essentially recreate the *Komsomol*, the pervasive youth organization in which all well-socialized and upwardly mobile Soviet youth were expected to participate". Besides contributing to the legitimization of the current leadership and possibly helping build public support for specific controversial policies like welfare reforms,²⁷ youth organizations like *Nashi* have a very well-developed service dimension.

Nonetheless, surveys indicate that these efforts appeal to a rather limited share of Russia's youth. According to polls conducted in July 2010 (Levada Centre 2010a; Levada Centre 2010b), only eight percent of Moscow's youth shares the goals of *Nashi* and only six percent said they might take part in one of its actions. Groups like *Nashi* seem to be particularly weak in a peripheral and complex region like the Northern Caucasus where they have limited presence and are looked at with suspicion as something exogenous. One of the members of the Ingush delegation at Mashuk, in an interview with the author, echoed this sentiment:

People are suspicious of *Nashi*. It is not active and it won't be active in Ingushetia because it is something artificial...it has been created only to wave flags and people here in the northern Caucasus sense its falsehood too acutely [to join a movement like this].

In contrast to political youth movements, formally apolitical summer camps like Seliger or Mashuk organised by state institutions such as the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs have proven to be more appealing than politicised youth organization. Youth camps offer good incentives for participation at basically no cost, a wide range of leisure activities that are normally not available in one's place of residence, and the chance to meet peers of the same age in an environment that enables contacts and provides the chance to get public support or job offers. The possibility to meet and interact with peers, including of the opposite sex, works as a particularly strong incentive for people from conservative societies where parents strictly control dating, as happens in some parts of the Northern Caucasus. Participants are thus not necessarily strong supporters of the current political system or of its leader, but rather are often simply young people hoping to benefit from the camp or just looking for some fun.



“The successful Caucasus female.” In the morning, participants at Mashuk 2010 take part in motivational trainings as well as trainings in inter-cultural integration and project drafting. During one of these trainings, instructors asked participants to “illustrate with a human statue the successful male and female Caucasian”. In the picture, the successful female Caucasian is represented with a child on one hip and a laptop in the other hand. Other teams gave more traditionalist answers, describing a “successful female” as one who is a “good mother and good housewife”. Photo by Giorgio Comai.

It is thus much easier to involve youth in summer camps that last ten days than trying to attract them to political organizations that do offer benefits but are much more demanding in terms of time and personal involvement. The camps' propaganda elements focussed on Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev serve the purpose of affiliating youth to

current political leaders and are unlikely to cause resentment in participants considering the fact that, as evidence suggests, a large majority of Russians aged 18 to 25 approve of both leaders. According to a poll published by FOM in April 2010, 75 percent of Russians aged 18 to 25 approve of Medvedev and 82 percent approve of Putin (Fom 2010).

As for patriotic education, both the country's legislators and the public said they felt it was not developed enough. According to a poll conducted in 2004, 89 percent of the respondents declared that more attention should be paid to patriotic education and 62 percent declared that this should be done modelled on the patriotic education of Soviet times (Vovk 2005:380).

Patriotic education has been a key element in public youth policies as the many legislative acts dedicated to the subject clearly reveal. "Establishing patriotism" was included among the key aims of a PYP resolution as early as 1993 (Supreme Soviet of the RF 1993). In both the special programme for 1998-2000 and for 2001-2005 (Government of the RF 1997; Government of the RF 2000), the need to support "spiritual-moral and patriotic education of youth" was enumerated first among the goals of the programme and reference was made to a 1997 presidential order "about the state support for organizations working on the military-patriotic education of the youth" (President of the RF 1996). Documents and laws approved in more recent years (Government of the RF 2001; Government of the RF 2006; Konceptiya 2003) keep patriotic education as a fundamental element of public youth policies.²⁸

However, most of these laws, documents, and programmes existed only on paper and remained "essentially theoretical exercises divorced from practical implementation" (Blum 2006:100). The creation of youth camps hosting tens of thousands of young people every summer represents an effort to actualize some of these policy goals.

One of the most noticeable differences between Soviet pioneer camps and youth camps in contemporary Russia is the age of participants. In late Soviet times, participants in such camps were younger than 15 and, at an older age, could only work there as instructors. At the time, people in their early twenties were expected to work, serve in the army, or have a family, all of which would have probably made participation in a youth camp focused on education and leisure unlikely and somewhat inappropriate.

Today's youth camps are open to people between the ages of 18 and 30 and have as their main target group ambitious and educated young people in their early twenties. These are people who study longer and enter marriage at an older age than they used to, even compared to the early 1990s.²⁹ In regard to military service, males born in 1990 benefit from recent changes in conscription laws that, starting in 2008, reduced the period of mandatory service in the army from 24 to 12 months. It is worth noting that conscription does not apply to full-time students; students make up the overwhelming majority of participants at the youth camps described in this paper.

The number of people enrolling in higher education institutions has also increased considerably in the last decades. According to statistics provided by the UNESCO/OECD World Education Indicators Programme (2005:136), this figure increased by 81 percent in the period between 1995 and 2005, by which time the rate of adults who had completed higher education was significantly higher than in late Soviet times.³⁰ Discussing the concept of youth in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Kirmse (2010:383) maintains that "'youth' has been lengthened under conditions of post-Soviet transformation" and that "'being a student' has become a common life phase", at least in part of the region.

4. Continuity and change

Visiting Seliger in July 2010, Russian president Dmitri Medvedev said that when he first saw the camp, it reminded him of his "previous experiences with camps" in his country,

clearly referring to Soviet pioneer camps. President Medvedev is not alone in making such remarks. General Director of Seliger, Ilya Kostunov, made an even more explicit statement:

In the Soviet Union, there were camps like *Orlenok* and *Artek*. 12-year-old people went there and, when they came back, they were already different and they achieved a lot of success in all spheres. It is possible to say that *Seliger* is simply like *Orlenok*.³¹

Ruslan Mustupaev, *Molodaya Gvardiya*'s coordinator for the Northern Caucasus, expressed a similar point of view:

In Soviet times there was a wonderful thing called *Artek*. We now say that we organise forums, summer camps, cultural exchanges... these are the things that we took from those days. We did not even need to look for them... such positive examples were simply there for us to take.³²

There are very important differences between Soviet pioneer camps and youth camps in contemporary Russia. At first glance, as previously discussed, the most visible differences are the age of participants and their accommodation in tents instead of dormitory rooms in concrete buildings. But while the focus is on a new form of patriotism based on competitiveness in which innovation and entrepreneurship mark a departure from the values of the past, there are clear elements of continuity with Soviet political culture.

4.1. National leaders and portraits

The blurred line between state institutions, the country's leadership, the ruling party and strongly politicised pro-governmental youth organizations clearly finds its roots in Soviet political culture and in a political system that was based on the party-state complex.

The fact that huge portraits of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitri Medvedev were used to decorate the main stages of the camps, both in Seliger and Mashuk, expresses a strong personalisation of the state, and of politics in general, and recalls similar Soviet practices of using leaders' portraits in public spaces. These figures are referred to not so much as elected representatives but as "national leaders". In a promotional video sponsored by the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs, Vladimir Putin is literally depicted as a cartoon super-hero, the man that saved Russia from the ruins of the 1990s.³³

A similar and even more pronounced depiction of Chechnya's president Ramzan Kadyrov emerged in an author's interview with Murat Tagiev, head of the Committee for Youth Affairs of Chechnya:

It is thanks to Ramzan Kadyrov that I could accomplish a lot as a person, as an activist, as a politician, as a state official. If it was not for his support and his will, this would not have happened to me, nor to many others. We do not think of him as a member of *Edinaya Rossiya*³⁴, we think of him first of all as a leader.³⁵

Neither Seliger nor Mashuk camps featured propaganda referring directly to Russia's ruling party. Still, according to the official website of Seliger, the forum was organised "with the participation of the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs, the presidential administration of the Russian Federation, the party *Edinaya Rossiya* and many other state structures".³⁶ The fact that *Edinaya Rossiya* is listed among "state structures" is, indeed, more than a typo.

The blurred line between the state's current leadership and the party *Edinaya Rossiya* makes it difficult to distinguish between generic patriotic rhetoric and political propaganda in favour of the current political elite. But the key role that *Nashi*, an overtly politicised organization, plays in organising these camps leaves no doubt about the political nature of the camp. The intertwining of politics and institutions reflected at the youth camps presented in this paper is a clear legacy of the Soviet political culture.

4.2. Change in the understanding of patriotism

Patriotic rhetoric is an evident feature of the youth camps discussed in this paper. This rhetoric includes and blends two different aspects of "patriotism" as it is currently understood in Russia: "traditional patriotism" and "patriotism as the ability to be competitive". A promotion of a "traditional" form of patriotism, understood as love for one's homeland, pride in its history, and readiness to self-sacrifice is clearly present at the camps discussed in this paper. This emerges, for example, from the national anthem being played in the morning, from the presence of an "eternal fire" dedicated to victims of World War II, the inclusion of Russian flags in the decorations, and the reference to greater Russia being made by speakers talking from the main stage during public meetings, as well as by some of the lecturers.

But more attention is dedicated to "patriotism" understood as the "ability to be competitive", an idea that has been explicitly promoted by the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs since the agency's founding. Youth camps organizers openly promote individualistic values, including the importance of being successful and of making a career. Individual success is presented as the best way to be a true patriot and to have a role in making Russia a great country, an idea that was also part of Soviet rhetoric.

While participants are still encouraged to volunteer more for the public good, to support elderly people, and to help those in need, the main focus today is on individual success. On the backdrop of the main stage at Seliger, the following slogan was written in big letters: "Seliger 2010: all tools for the development of [your] talent". Along the shore of Lake Seliger, there were big billboards with success stories (i.e. stories of previous Seliger participants who had actualized their business projects thanks to grants received at Seliger). The profit levels of the companies they created were presented as measures of their success.

The protagonist of an official promotional video clip, produced for the occasion of the "Year of the Youth", says that:

The goal of every single session [of the forum Seliger] is to make you happy, professional, successful, famous and rich. The goal of all the sessions together is to make our country great, as it was in the past and will always be in the future.³⁷

This quote summarises well the key declared goal of youth policies and youth camps in contemporary Russia.

4.3. Multi-ethnicity, patriotism and the Northern Caucasus

In the particular case of the Caucasus, including the Mashuk camp, the idea of individual success also had a prominent role, but patriotism was emphasized more there in order to deal with the ethnic diversity of the region. Considerable attention was dedicated to

the fact that people belonging to different ethnic groups, having different religions and traditions, were together and were united in their belonging to Russia.

Patriotic rhetoric at Mashuk also had another particularity in that it referred explicitly to the “small motherlands” of participants who were encouraged to take an active role in developing their own republics. In this respect, administrative units (e.g. Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria or Stavropol’ Territory), not ethnic belonging, were supposed to be the main points of reference. This idea was also stressed during the times that heads of the Republics of the Northern Caucasus visited the camp.

But Mashuk’s real novelty was its effort to strengthen a common sense of belonging to “the Northern Caucasus” as a common space. Accordingly, all those who live in this region were encouraged to be proud of it and take an active role in fostering a positive image of the Caucasus, both at local and at national levels. The lyrics of a song that a group of participants from the Territory of Stavropol’ sang at the closing ceremony of the camp stresses precisely this element:

Hail to you Northern Caucasus! / We live here and this is great / we live here
and this is just great [...] / our friendship is now and forever / how much
different / but friendly people / [...] proud of our native Caucasus.

In Soviet times, many initiatives, including pioneer camps, were realized at the level of constituent republics of the Soviet Union (e.g. Ukraine, Belarus, etc.), or at the level of administrative units within one of them (e.g. Leningrad Region, territory of Stavropol’, or the republic of North Ossetia within the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic), but nothing involving all the territories of the Northern Caucasus existed before. This trend is also confirmed by the creation of an “All-Caucasian Alliance of Youth” under the aegis of Aleksandr Khloponin, head of the Federal District of the Northern Caucasus, announced in October 2010.

In addition, it is worth noting that the Russian leadership chose to go beyond the borders of the Federal District of the Northern Caucasus and also include Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two territories whose independence from Georgia has been recognised only by Russia and a handful of other countries.

Certainly, self-identification as “Caucasian” is rather widespread in the region³⁸ but people in central Russia often tend to consider people coming from the Caucasus as a single group only in derogative terms. This approach is evident in the slogans of nationalist anti-Caucasian demonstrations that took place in Moscow in December 2010 and in the expressions commonly used in media reports to refer to people of the Caucasus like “*litso kavkazskoy natsional'nosti*” (person belonging to one of the ethnic groups of the Caucasus) (Manapova 2007:29). But a state-supported initiative aimed at strengthening cohesion among youth at the level of the Northern Caucasus is something that is hard to imagine happening either in Soviet times or during the 1990s.

As confirmed by the head of the Department for Youth Policies and Social Contacts, Boris Gusev, this is aimed at constituting a first step to counter the divisions that developed among the different ethnic groups of the Northern Caucasus during the 1990s and between them and ethnic Russians:

Since the conflicts in the 1990s started, the region has become much more closed. A new generation of young people that knows very little about Russia has grown up, and we in Russia don't know anything about people from the Caucasus. They tell them that we are the enemy, and we are told that they are bad. But now the situation has changed and it is fundamental that a new

process start with young people from the Caucasus and the other parts of Russia getting to know each other better. Mashuk is just a first step to stabilise the situation locally. First of all, we want tolerance and inter-ethnic harmony within the Caucasus region. But at the same time, we are trying to integrate them with the rest of Russia.³⁹

This approach seems to be in line with the official “conception of patriotic education” (Konceptsiya 2003) which prescribes that love for one’s motherland should develop in different stages. First, there should be love for one’s “small motherland” (*malaya rodina*), corresponding to one’s neighbourhood, village, city, and region, which should later develop “into all-country patriotic self-consciousness, into conscious love for one’s country”.⁴⁰ A distinct “North Caucasian” identity that stresses the region’s belonging to Russia is thus embraced as an intermediary step of self-identification meant to contribute to easing tensions, both in the Caucasus and in Russia as a whole.

After Medvedev’s arrival to the presidential office and, in particular, since the constitution of the Federal District of the Northern Caucasus in January 2010, the Kremlin has supposedly been trying to devise a strategy to counter terrorism that goes beyond repression. The holding of a youth camp in the Caucasus promoting entrepreneurship and inter-ethnic accord is clearly an expression of this new approach.

5. Conclusion

State-supported youth camps in contemporary Russia highlight important features of the political system of that country, including elements of continuity with the Soviet past. As this article has aimed to highlight, the state wishes to play an active role in youth upbringing even after their schooling and is doing so also by organising youth camps, both at national and regional levels. Youth camps are meant to take up some of the tasks that, in Soviet times, belonged to the *Komsomol* including patriotic education, easing young people’s transition to adult life, and increasing integration among young citizens from distant corners of the country. Clearly, the focus on entrepreneurship and economic success represents a strong change with the values promoted in Soviet times.

Participating in these camps, young people are offered significant benefits at different levels. They have a chance to obtain state support and grants in order to realise business projects and to meet people that might be fundamental in developing their business or political careers. They can freely access leisure facilities and have an opportunity to meet peers, including peers of the opposite sex, in a supportive environment far from the supervision of parents and relatives.

The fact that the state has organised a youth camp specifically dedicated to the Northern Caucasus is a sign of the change in Moscow’s policy focus in the region from repression to economic development that, at least officially, has been taking place since early 2010.

An important novelty lies in the fact that, for the first time, the Russian state is trying to strengthen a “Caucasian identity” encompassing all the territories of the “Russian Caucasus” understood as the Federal District of the Northern Caucasus plus Abkhazia and South Ossetia, two regions formally belonging to Georgia whose self-proclaimed independence has obtained limited international recognition. This approach stresses the unity of all the ethnic groups living in the region and their common belonging to Russia. In Russia, the idea of a united Caucasus is largely understood in opposition to Russian domination over the territory, following an established tradition that finds its roots in the 19th century Caucasian wars (when Imam Shamil united the peoples of the region to oppose Russian

conquest) that has been a point of reference for rebels in the region also after the fall of the Soviet Union. Instead, the Russian state is now promoting the idea that the Caucasus can be united not only to fight against Russia, but for the good of Russia as well.

Youth camps like Seliger and Mashuk are good examples of the contradictions of contemporary Russia. Verbal commitments to openness, innovation, and development, repeatedly expressed by both the organizers of the camps and the leadership of the country, clash with a reality characterised by the mythicisation of the “national leaders”, systemic inefficiencies, strong centralization, and a blurred distinction between state institutions, the Putin-Medvedev “tandem”, the ruling party, and pro-governmental youth organizations.

¹ This research has been made possible through a grant from “Fondazione Caritro – Cassa di Risparmio di Trento e Rovereto”.

² All leaders of the Soviet Communist party that came of age when the Soviet Union still existed (Brezhnev, Chernenko, Andropov, and Gorbachev) have been members of the *Komsomol* and came from the countryside or mid-sized cities far from Moscow. In the early 1980s, *Komsomol*'s membership included up to 65 per cent of youth between the ages of 14 and 28 (Riordan 1988:588)

³ Danilin (2006:21) includes in the “lost generation” those born between 1973 and 1979.

⁴ Such organizations could be directly connected with the ruling party, much like *Zhas Otan* in Kazakhstan, like *Ireli* in Azerbaijan (formally independent), or officially part of state-supported youth policies, like *Kamalot* in Uzbekistan. For the case of *Kamalot*, see in particular McGlinchey (2009).

⁵ 'Manifesto', Nashi, available at: <http://nashi.su/manifest>, accessed 9 February 2010.

⁶ A few dozen activists met for a summer camp in Seliger even earlier, but the camp became well-known and open to thousands of participants only in 2005.

⁷ Fadm, 'God Molodezhi' – Year of the Youth”, 2009, available at: http://project.godmol.ru/about_year accessed 5 October 2009.

⁸ Fadm, 'Monitoring gosudarstvennoi molodezhnoi politiki', 21 December 2009, available at: <http://fadm.gov.ru/agency/page.php>, accessed 5 February 2010.

⁹ Nashi, 'Promotional video documentary “Seliger 2007”', 2007, DVD.

¹⁰ The “Russian Congress of Caucasian Peoples” is an organization founded by members of different nationalities from the region in 2007 in order to guard the interests of people coming from the Caucasus that live in other parts of Russia, improve their image, defend themselves from discrimination but also to support the spreading of pro-Russian “patriotic” views among people coming from the region. See also Comai Giorgio, “For the good of Russia”, 31 March 2009, *Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso*, available at <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Regions-and-countries/Russia/For-the-good-of-Russia>, accessed 29 December 2010

¹¹ Author's pictures of youth forum Seliger 2010 are available at

- <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Media/Galleries/Seliger-2010-Giorgio-Comai>, accessed 30 March 2010
- ¹² The most important among these funds, the fund “National Perspectives”, will be described more in details in the section dedicated to Mashuk 2010.
- ¹³ Thousands of these projects are described on the state-supported website www.innovaterussia.ru
- ¹⁴ Mikhail Mamonov, interview with the author, Seliger, 5 July 2010
- ¹⁵ As reported on its website by state-funded Russia Today TV channel, “the exhibition called “You are not welcome here” [...] included 13 impaled heads of public figures’ mannequins, covered with Nazi caps. [...] Youth activists at the Seliger summer camp mocked the leader of Moscow Helsinki Group, Lyudmila Alekseyeva, journalist and member of the Public Chamber Nikolay Svanidze, former Yukos company head Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and opposition politicians Eduard Limonov, Valeria Novodvorskaya and Boris Nemtsov. Among foreign “enemies” were Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, some Estonian parliamentarians, former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and judges of the European Court who recognized Latvian WWII veteran Vasily Kononov as a war criminal.” Russia Today, “Youth at Seliger camp use Nazi symbols to portray ideological enemies”, 29 July 2010, available at <http://rt.com/politics/roar-seliger-installation-scandal/>, accessed 29 December 2010
- ¹⁶ Seliger, 'O forume Seliger 2009-2010', available at: <http://www.seliger2010.ru/>, accessed 17 March 2010.
- ¹⁷ Seliger, 'Seliger 2010 – FAQ', available at: <http://www.seliger2010.com/index.php?id=44>, accessed 17 December 2010
- ¹⁸ The European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) is part of the process meant to set standards across European universities (known also as the “Bologna Process”). Students may ask their institute to recognise exams or courses taken in other universities that work according to this system. One ECTS credit is supposed to correspond to 25 to 30 hours of class time (European Commission 2010)
- ¹⁹ RIA Novosti, 'Forum “Seliger-2010” soberet 25 tisyach molodych lyudei', 23 June 2010, available at: <http://www.rian.ru/society/20100623/249384985.html>, accessed 9 December 2010.
- ²⁰ It must be noted that this was the first time that an international session took place at Seliger and that many of the above-described organizational issues by all evidence did not occur in the Russian-only sessions of the forum that benefited from years of previous experience.
- ²¹ Author's pictures of youth forum Mashuk 2010 are available at <http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Media/Galleries/Mashuk-2010-Giorgio-Comai>, accessed 30 March 2010
- ²² Dmitri Medvedev, 'Poslanie Federal'nomu Sobraniyu Rossiiskoi Federatsii', available at: <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/5979>, accessed 22 December 2010.

- ²³ The first session (from August 8 to August 17) was open to young entrepreneurs, representatives of institutions of culture and art, journalists, bloggers and young teachers. The second session (from August 18 to August 27) was open to young leaders of public opinion, social activists and volunteers, sportsmen, and people with technical skills. For more information, see also the official website of the forum, ForumKavkaz.ru, 'O lagere Mashuk 2010', available at <http://forumkavkaz.ru/about/>, accessed 6 January 2011.
- ²⁴ In Ingushetia, the Ministry of Culture selected the participants for the first session, while the Ministry for Sport, Tourism and Youth Policies picked participants for the second session. In Chechnya, the Ministry of Information selected participants interested in media and journalism, the Ministry of Sport selected those who were interested in sports, and so on.
- ²⁵ Anton Volodin, interview with the author, Mashuk, 25 August 2010.
- ²⁶ Vladimir Putin, 'Predsedatel' Pravitel'stva Rossiiskoi Federacii V.V. Putin prinyal uchastie v mezhhregional'noi konferencii partii "Edinaya Rossiya" na temu "Strategiya social'no-ekonomicheskogo razvitiya Severnogo Kavkaza do 2020 goda. Programma na 2010-2012 gody", Official website of the Prime Minister of the RF, available at: <http://premier.gov.ru/visits/ru/11295/events/11301/multiscripts.html>, accessed 31 January 2011
- ²⁷ "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 [...] they are also inextricably linked to the push-pull of social welfare policies. [...] 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." (Hemment 2009, pp.37, 44)
- ²⁸ According to the "conception" of patriotic education published in 2003, "patriotic education must be systemic, continuous, planned in advance and a top priority among the state policies dedicated to educational activities." "Patriotism" is defined as "love of the Motherland, devotion to one's native land, yearning for serving its interests, and readiness to defend it, even if it means self-sacrifice. [...] Patriotism is inextricably connected with the idea of internationalism and is alien to nationalism, separatism, and cosmopolitanism" (Konceptiya 2003).
- ²⁹ In 1992, the average age at first marriage for females was 21.8 and for males age 24. In 2005, those ages had increased and the corresponding statistics were 23.3 for females and 26.1 for males and still increasing (Alich 2009:108). If people born in 1960 were to marry at an average age of 21 for females and 23 for males (Sergei Scherbov & Harrie van Vianen 2004:36), the corresponding figure for those born around 1990, the main target of the youth camps discussed in this paper, would be significantly higher.
- ³⁰ While by 2005, according to statistics, more than half of the adult population in Russia had a degree (UNESCO/OECD 2005:137), this was the case for less than 10 per cent of the population thirty years earlier (Jones 1978:524).
- ³¹ Nashi, 'Seliger promotional video', available at: <http://rutube.ru/tracks/1816341.html>, accessed 18 March 2010.

- ³² Ruslan Mustupaev, interview with the author, Moscow, 11 February 2011.
- ³³ Fadm, 'Robot of the Year of Youth', 2009, available at: <http://rutube.ru/tracks/1999454.html>, accessed 18 March 2010.
- ³⁴ Ramzan Kadyrov is member of the high council of *Edinaya Rossiya*.
- ³⁵ Murat Tagiev, interview with the author, Mashuk, 25 August 2010.
- ³⁶ Seliger, 'O forume Seliger 2009-2010', available at: <http://www.seliger2010.ru/>, accessed 17 March 2010.
- ³⁷ Fadm, 'Robot of the Year of Youth', 2009, available at: <http://rutube.ru/tracks/1999454.html>, accessed 18 March 2010.
- ³⁸ This generally includes both the northern and the southern Caucasus, see for example Abdulatipov (1995)
- ³⁹ Boris Gusiev, interview with the author, Mashuk, 25 August 2011
- ⁴⁰ The idea that patriotism should develop in progressive stages is also clearly outlined in books approved by the Russian Ministry of Education meant to help teachers introduce patriotic education in the school curriculum. For example, a book titled "My Native Home – Programme of moral-patriotic education for children under school age" (Arapova-Piskareva 2005), sums up as follows the development of patriotic education for young children. At age 4, a child is supposed to have a feeling of being part of his/her own family and to love it; at age 5, the child should feel the same (a sense of belonging and love) towards its kindergarten; at age 6, the child should develop such feelings towards one's own village, city and region (*malaya rodina*, "small motherland"). According to this book, at age 7 the child is mature enough to feel love for one's own "big Motherland", Russia, and express concepts like 'I am Russian (*rossiyanin*). I am a citizen of Russia. My home, my big Motherland, is Russia'. Besides, the child should feel proud of being Russian, and understand that its own plans for the future are connected with the future of Russia.

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