

Russian youth forums: Sites of patriotic upbringing or youth empowerment?

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Paper presented at the ASN 2019 World Convention, 3 May 2019

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Introduction

The format of youth forums is successful and adequate. It is an improvement from the earlier model that was focused on building youth movements and recruiting activists.¹

In summer 2019, Russian Federal Agency of Youth Affairs *Rosmolodezh'* is planning to organize one hundred youth forums across the country. Although the forums differ in their scope and thematic focus, together they form the “forum campaign”, the biggest trend in Russian youth policy in the post-*Nashi* era. According to official statistics, 360.000 Russian 18 to 30 year olds participated in the forums in 2016.² In 2018, the figure was up to 800.000.³ As this article argues, the government sees these young people with an “active civic stance” as the potential vanguard of future development and the forums as a site where they can be steered to the right direction. An ideal citizen of Russia portrayed at the forums is patriotic not just in words but also in deeds: innovative and proactive, and genuinely committed to meeting the challenges faced by Russia today and in the future. Unlike in the 1990s when youth policy was overshadowed by other policy areas, in Putin’s Russia youth policy

¹ M. Remizov (president of the Institute of National Strategy, a Russian government-affiliated think tank). (2015) Quoted in *Vzglyad*, 28.8.2015. Accessible at: <https://vz.ru/politics/2015/8/28/763272.html>

² Отчет об итогах деятельности Федерального агентства по делам молодежи в 2016 году и планах по реализации государственной молодежной политики на 2017 год. (2017). Confirmed 10.05.2017. Accessible on the *Rosmolodezh'* website: <https://fadm.gov.ru/docs>.

³ Отчет об итогах деятельности Федерального агентства по делам молодежи в 2018 году и планах по реализации государственной молодежной политики на 2019 год. (2019). Confirmed 26.02.2019. Accessible on the *Rosmolodezh'* website: <https://fadm.gov.ru/docs>.

scores relatively high on the government agenda.⁴ In order to make this youth policy goal attainable, the federal and local governments invest millions of roubles into the organization of the forums.⁵

This paper seeks to explain the rise of the youth forum phenomenon as the primary instrument of youth policy. In addition, it asks what kind of state–youth interaction takes place in the contemporary forums and what is the relevance of the forums for the Russian society today and in the years to come. Empirically, the paper draws from participant observation data collected by the author at five different youth forums organised in different regions of Russia between 2013 and 2018, as well as interviews with the organisers, instructors and participants of the annual federal forum *Territoriya smyslov* (n=15).

The findings of the inductive study of Russian youth forums contribute to the literature on youth policy that argues that in order to be effective, youth policy must maximize youth agency. Although the forums are managed spaces, young people do not seek for more autonomy but rather aim to adapt to the rules of the game by aligning their interests and behavior to the organizers' wishes. Does this prove the effectiveness of the youth forums? When I asked the interviewees about the success of the forums, one of them suggested that perhaps it is thanks to the forums that there has not been a "Russian Maidan".⁶ While it is true that anti-government protest activity among the youth has not become widespread, controversially the findings of this study suggest that in addition to highlighting the importance of civic obedience, the forums can also provide the young participants a toolkit of grassroots activism, which has the potential of turning into a double-edged sword. The mantra of the "active citizen" can prove dangerous if taken outside the state-endorsed "patriotic" context.

Theory: Effective youth policy through participation

State youth policy is broadly defined as a course or principle of action adopted by state organs to target young people. Studying state youth policy is meaningful because it puts forth a portrayal of an ideal citizen envisioned by the current political establishment. The national youth policy strategy of the Netherlands, for example, states this explicitly: "It is important for every democratic society to familiarise the younger generation with democratic values and practices [...] and thus prepare them for their active participation as citizens".⁷ Policy makers across the world look at the young generation with both hopes and fears. While in the past youth policy would focus on control and upbringing,

⁴ Blum, D. W. (2006). Russian Youth Policy: Shaping the Nation-State's Future. *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 26(2).

⁵ Отчет об итогах деятельности Федерального агентства по делам молодежи в 2016 году [...]; Отчет об итогах деятельности Федерального агентства по делам молодежи в 2018 году [...]

⁶ Author's interview with Lena, a *Rosmolodezh'* employee working in the sphere of forums. Moscow, 31.5.2018. Most names of interviewees have been changed to secure the anonymity of the respondents.

⁷ Neatherlands IR, p. 30, quoted in Howard Williamson (2002) *Supporting young people in Europe: principles, policy and practice. The Council of Europe international reviews of national youth policy 1997-2001*, p. 18.

contemporary research suggests that youth policy is more successful and effective when young people are actively involved in the policy process rather than when they appear as just passive objects of policy measures.⁸ However, research also shows that genuine agency is rare; many young people feel like their participation in “tokenistic” and that youth policy still has a distinct top-down character.⁹ Yet the participatory paradigm has become mainstream in the arena of public policy, including youth policy.¹⁰

Also in Russia the importance of youth engagement has entered the policy documents jargon. However, due to the country’s Leninist past and authoritarian present, the emphasis on (patriotic) upbringing has overshadowed the narrative on the importance of participation and agency ever since the early 2000s.¹¹ *Rosmolodezh*, the federal agency of youth affairs, implements youth policy operating directly under the auspices of the government. The role played by young people in the 2011-2012 demonstrations in Russia, in the 2014 Maidan protests in Ukraine as well as the 2017 “schoolchildren’s rallies” for the opposition leader Aleksey Navalnyi have convinced policy makers that upbringing ought to remain high on the youth policy agenda. If the government is concerned that it could be ousted by a popular uprising of the youth, it does not come as a surprise that there is not much room for youth agency.

However, policy makers are painfully aware that sustainable economic growth –one of the top priorities of any country– cannot rest on the oil and gas revenues alone. What Russia needs is innovations to function as the engine of modernization and eventually economic growth. Innovations, for their part, grow out of opportunities and agency.¹² Here is where the current contradiction in the youth policy arena emerges: although *Rosmolodezh* manages the youth policy arena, individuals and organizations supported by the federal agency are allowed and even encouraged to be proactive. The young participants of youth forums like *Territoriya smyslov* are aware of this and are able to follow their own interests by engaging in state sanctioned youth programs. Although the forums are constructed by the authorities to function as sites of patriotic upbringing (one of the top priorities in contemporary Russian youth policy that is also closely linked with the general development goals of the Russian state, as this article demonstrates), they can also drive youth empowerment, especially if young people are able to frame their civic activism in a way that is in line with the state’s agenda.

⁸ See e. g. D. Cutler and R. Frost (2002) *Taking the Initiative: Promoting Young People’s Involvement in Public Decision-making in the UK*. London: Carnegie UK Trust

⁹ Williamson p. 90

¹⁰ P. Bishop and G. Davis, G (2002) Mapping Public Participation in Policy Choices. *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, 61: 14-29.

¹¹ K. Silvan (2019) Youth Policy Practice in Post-Soviet Russia and Belarus: Past and Present. *Mir Rossii*, 28: 161-171; Blum

¹² A. Sanghi & S. Yusuf. (2018). Russia’s Uphill Struggle with Innovation. *World Bank Opinion*, 17.9.2018. Accessible at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2018/09/17/russias-uphill-struggle-with-innovation>.

The key question this paper tries to answer is whether the forums can actually promote the development of a civil society in Russia despite their top-down character, or whether they are successfully serving as a platform for bringing up young Russians loyal not only to Putin's government but to the current authoritarian state system as a whole. Paradoxically, the activities at the forum in fact provide a toolkit for civic activism. Furthermore, the statements of the participants and forum instructors suggest that the young participants are skeptical of the current regime. These findings of the study let us conclude that despite the controlled and explicitly pro-government environment the forums create, they *do* provide space for youth empowerment and civil society activism.

Development of the forum concept

The 100 annual summer youth forums did not emerge in Russia overnight. Instead, their roots are in the infamous training camps of *Idushchie vmeste* activists and *Nashi* commissars, organised at Lake Seliger from 2000 until 2008. From 2010 until the last forum at Seliger in 2014 participants of different organizations and movements were admitted; however, current and former *Nashi* activists and were still present in great numbers.¹³ Following the perceived success of Seliger, regional (youth) policy makers replicated the forum concept and started to organize their equivalent annual summer camps for young people supportive of the regime. For example, "Baltic Artek" youth forum has been organized by the Youth Affairs Agency of the Kaliningrad *oblast'* since 2010, while in Altai *krai* the local youth forum *ATR (Altai. Tochki rosta)* has had a focus on business and management since its inception in 2009.

The contemporary annual youth forum "campaign" was first organized in 2015.¹⁴ It was developed by Sergei Pospelov, the new head of *Rosmolodezh'* who wanted to update the Seliger concept to the post-*Nashi* era.¹⁵ Unlike his predecessors Vasilii Yakomenko and Sergei Belokonev, Pospelov had not been a *Nashi* activist in the past but had made a career in the Young Guard, the youth organization of the United Russia party-in-power. One of the people involved in the project of drafting the new youth forum concept recalled that in 2014 the plan was to preserve the best elements of Seliger but to de-politicize the forum concept by focusing instead in the development of professional communities. Tatiana Baranova suggests that the new outlook was dictated by the new "Foundations of state youth policy of the Russian Federation for the period until 2025"¹⁶, issued by the federal

¹³ K. Silvan (2014) Nation-building à la russe: How Putin's government is educating the Russian elites of tomorrow. *Baltic Worlds* 7 (2-3), pp. 22-26.

¹⁴ *Moskovskiy komsomolets* (2014). Росмолодежь проведет форум, посвященный проблемам Арктики. 20 November.

¹⁵ Author's interview with Maria, a former *Rosmolodezh* employee. St. Petersburg, 2.5.2018.

¹⁶ Tatiana Baranova (2016) Молодежные форумы – профессиональные сообщества или место для «тусовки»? *Molodezhnye edinye vedomosti*. Published online 10 October. <https://tymolod59.ru/7872>

government in November 2014. According to the decree, the aim of Russian youth policy was “to unlock young people's potential for the future development of the Russian Federation”¹⁷. Instead of loyalty to the current political elites and prevention of a color revolution, the educational program of the forums would now be tied to the challenges of Russian modernization project.¹⁸

Since 2015, *Rosmolodezh'* has standardized the forum campaign. Every spring the agency publishes an updated version of a document titled “Methodical recommendations on the planning and organization of (educational) youth forums in the framework of the forum campaign” that provides the reader with practical recommendations on how forums ought to be organized. The document also lists federal youth policy objectives and how they could be brought to life at forums. For example, the 2018 document lists attracting youth to volunteering, attracting youth to innovation activities, career-counselling assistance, patriotic upbringing, promoting a healthy lifestyle – and eleven others.¹⁹ Furthermore, the application process to the forums is organized in a centralized manner through *Rosmolodezh'* online application platform that keeps track of an applicant's application and participation record. As a result, youth forums across the country have become increasingly like one another. According to Vadim²⁰, one of the young forum participants at the forum *Territoria smyslov*, the similarity of the forums is their greatest weakness. “This is my third forum, and I am not sure I will apply again next summer. It's all the same, it's boring”, he recalled.²¹ Matvei Navdayev, the director of one of the organizing committee of *Territoriya smyslov*, also said that the biggest challenge for the forums was to come up with new innovative approaches to working with youth.²²

Although the forum organizers like Nadvaev recognize that there are some shortcomings related to the forums as a youth policy tool, today's youth policy makers still consider the forums a successful platform. The next section will analyze the forums from the perspective of the policy-makers, as a tool of patriotic upbringing.

Forums as sites of patriotic upbringing and advancing Russian modernization

There has been a boom of literature analyzing “patriotic upbringing” (Rus. *patrioticheskoe vospitanie*) in Putin's Russia. Sergei Golunov is right to point out that “[o]ver the last decade, the main trend of

¹⁷ Основы государственной молодежной политики Российской Федерации на период до 2025 года. Confirmed by the decree of the government of Russian Federation № 2403-р from 29 November 2014.

¹⁸ A more detailed discussion of these will follow later in this paper

¹⁹ Методических рекомендаций по организации и проведению молодежных форумов в рамках Всероссийской молодежной форумной кампании 2018 года. Accessible at rscenter.ru/upload/iblock/a89/a89a2c0ff71d26eec2ebe07e51e5d084.pdf. Accessed 2 April 2019.

²⁰ All names have been changed to protect the identity of the respondents

²¹ Noted in the author's field diary, 3.7.2018

²² Author's interview with M. Navdayev. Moscow, 29.5.2018.

Russian government youth policy has been to encourage patriotic upbringing.”²³ Writing in 2011, he was also correct in arguing that although the concept of patriotic upbringing is so vague that it can be used to mean anything and everything, the policy-makers often tend to use it to describe the production of young people with an “active civic stance”.²⁴ Anna Sanina’s study of patriotic upbringing in the grassroots level arrives in the same conclusion.²⁵ As this section argues, the present day youth forum boom is undeniably linked with the rise of patriotic education policy agenda.

One should not expect quick results from youth policy in general and youth forums in particular, claimed Sangadji Tarbaev in a 2015 interview for *Kommersant*. Rather than yielding quick returns, he viewed the new federal forum, *Territoriya smyslov*, as a policy instrument for cultivating “active people” that would take the lead of a transformative part of the society in the 2020s.²⁶ Lena, one of the policy makers interviewed for this study, argued that while *Nashi* helped the Russian state to avoid a youth-run colour revolution, the contemporary youth forums are designed to tackle another threat: the slowing down of Russian development in the wide meaning of the word.²⁷ In essence, the young forum goers are supposed to become the vanguard of a Russian modernization 2.0 campaign. Content analysis of the interviews and participant observation data yield six development goals of the Russian government that the forums are design to tackle.

Political development goal: Continuation of the authoritarian status quo

Although not as high on the political agenda as during the early 2000s, the forums (still) aim to contribute to the continuation of the current political status quo. In addition to portraying the Russian opposition as evil and dangerous²⁸, the invited speakers would talk in length about the democratic and fair character of Russia’s political system. If the young people in the audience become convinced about the fairness of the political struggle, they would consider the current regime legitimate and would not participate in anti-government rallies.²⁹

Economic development goal: Keeping the brightest minds in the country

It is no coincidence that a new federal forum launched in 2018 bears the name “Russia – a land of opportunities”. Brain drain remains one of the major challenges for Russian modernization today: because of corruption, lack of rule of law and other factors, talented and already successful Russian citizens continue seek opportunities abroad rather than at home. According to a 2017 study,

²³ S. Golunov. (2011.) Patriotic Upbringing in Russia: Can It Produce Good Citizens? *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo, No. 161*, September 2011. p. 1

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3

²⁵ A. Sanina. (2017.) *Patriotic Education in Contemporary Russia: Sociological Studies in the Making of the Post-Soviet Citizen*. Ibidem Press.

²⁶ *Kommersant*, 13.3.2015, p. 3

²⁷ Author’s interview with Lena.

²⁸ See, for example, author’s interview with Maksim, a 2017 forum participant. Moscow, 9.5.2018

²⁹ Author’s field notes,

compared to Russian students as a whole, *Territoriya smyslov* forum participants are more inclined to stay in Russia rather than to emigrate³⁰. This supports the forum organizers' argument that the forum is a successful tool for patriotic upbringing, since Russians view the decision to stay in the country rather than leave (for good) as a patriotic deed.³¹

In addition, mirroring the mainstream view in economics that human capital and innovations drive economic growth,³² Russian youth forums try to create a platform for fostering critical thinking and innovations. Usually this is done by providing small grants for the organization of either business or civil society projects (the idea is that forum participants come prepared) or by designing dummy projects during the forum. In 2016, I was surprised to find that the primary motive for participation among my 15-member team at the forum *ATR* was to secure funding for their projects back home.³³ In contrast, projects that participants were instructed to design in teams at *Territoriya smyslov* in 2018 was just a thought exercise.

Societal development goal: Constructing a "safe" civil society

In an authoritarian state like Russia, the challenge policy makers face is how to build a civil society that does not backlash, i. e. provide a breeding ground for anti-government rallies that could potentially grow into a coup d'état. As argued by Sarah Henderson and many others, Vladimir Putin's state has been aiming to manage the sphere of civil society by restricting the work of some non-governmental organizations and promoting the work of others.³⁴

The desire to support the development of a "safe" civil society is well pronounced at the youth forums. The participants are described as young people "with an active civic stance", which one of the forum participant interviewees explained meant being involved in improving the world around them.³⁵ In the forums' centralized online application portal a prospective participant is asked to provide detailed information about their extracurricular activities. One of the *Rosmolodezh'* interviewees explained that due to scarce resources, it made sense to invest in those young people that had already demonstrated their "active civic stance", as they could potentially spread the knowledge they would gain in the forum in their local regions afterwards.³⁶

³⁰ V. Kasamara et al. (2017.) "Portret uchastnika "Territorii smyslov". Kno oni i chego khatyat?" *Presentation for Rosmolodezh'*.

³¹ Omelchenko, D., Maximova, S., Noyanzina, O., Goncharova, N., & Avdeeva, G. (2015). National identity and patriotism among russian youth: representations, feelings and actions. *Asian Social Science*, 11(6), p. 34

³² Alexeev, M. 2018. "Institutions, allocation of human capital, and economic growth in Russia." In T. Becker & S. Oxenstierna. *The Russian Economy under Putin*. Routledge, 124.

³³ Author's field diary. Belokurikha, 30.6.2016.

³⁴ Sarah L. Henderson. (2011.) *Civil Society in Russia. Problems of Post-Communism*, 58(3); Leah Gilbert (2016) "Crowding Out Civil Society: State Management of Social Organisations in Putin's Russia". *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68(9). See also O. Zakharova. 2016. Vladimir Putin Loves Civil Society (As Long As He Controls It). *Foreign Affairs*, 12 October.

³⁵ Author's interview with Yana. Moscow, 27.4.2018.

³⁶ Author's interview with Yurii. Moscow, 10.5.2018.

Development of a Unified Russian Nation

Several *Rosmolodezh'* affiliated interviewees pointed out that it is no coincidence that many of the youth forums are organized at the borders of the Russian Federation, such as in the annexed Crimea or the disputed Kuril islands.³⁷ Moreover, there are regional quotas for each of the federal forums to make sure that young people from all around Russia are present and get to know each other.³⁸ Enabling youth to connect with their peers from across the country was argued by one of the interviewees to be a powerful tool generating the sense of belonging to a unified Russian nation.³⁹

Russian unity is performed at the youth forums in various symbolically powerful ways. Since the days of Seliger, forum participants wake up to the sound of the Russian national anthem (back in 2013 forum organizers preferred the rock version, in 2018 they had gone back to the standard arrangement).⁴⁰ Another old classic is the passing of the Russian tricolor flag in the crowd at the opening and/or closing ceremony of the forum.

Development of a healthy nation

“Over the past few years, the Russian government has focused much attention on the physical health of its population and tries to encourage people to increase their participation in sports” writes Alexandr Gorobets in *The Lancet*.⁴¹ It does not come as a surprise that improving the physical well-being of the citizens is of utmost importance in today’s Russia. This goal is addressed at the youth forums, too. Alcoholic beverages are forbidden in all of the forums, and sport is heavily featured in the forums’ programme, providing spaces for physical activity for the participants (e. g. an outside gym at *Territoriya smyslov*) as well as talks by top sportsmen.

Development in regions

There is a wealth of literature on the nature of Russian regions and their relationship with Moscow. The youth forum concept seeks to contribute to the development of Russian regions by ensuring that there are competent future cadres in all spheres of the state and society. In the ideal scenario, a young person returns to their home region and passes on the skills and knowledge they have acquired at the forum. Moreover, the desire to invest in the future of the region is what drives Russian regions to organize youth forums on their home turf.

³⁷ Author’s interviews with Andrei, Yurii and Lena. Moscow, 28.4.2018, 10.5.2018 and 31.5.2018 (respectively).

³⁸ Author’s interview with Vladimir. Moscow, 1.6.2018.

³⁹ Author’s interview with Andrei.

⁴⁰ Author’s field diary from *Seliger 2013* and *Territoria smyslov 2018*.

⁴¹ A. Gorobets. (2015.) Promotion of sports, physical activity, and a healthy lifestyle in Russia” *The Lancet*, 385 (9986), p. 2459

Forums as sites of youth empowerment and personal growth?

Given the fact that youth forums are designed as a policy instrument able to solve all of Russia's challenges, it is not surprising that they have become so immensely popular in a relatively short time. However, in order to provide a full picture of the forums I will now turn to examine them from the perspective of the young participants. As this section demonstrates, despite the managed nature of the forums, they do offer relatively free spaces of interaction, which makes them popular among (at least one segment of) Russian youth.

Firstly, it is important to understand what motivates the young people to take part in the forums. My field work confirms that while there can be major differences between forums, most participants are motivated by both "business" and "pleasure".

The 2017 study conducted among *Territoriya smyslov* participants found that 12 % of the respondents had decided to apply to the forum in order to "travel and have something interesting to do in the summer holiday" while 49% stated they wanted to meet new people and learn from each other.⁴² Although the forum participants are required to pay a participation fee, their attendance is heavily subsidized by the state – usually with both the regional government and the federal government via *Rosmolodezh'*. Moreover, conversations with forum participants at the forums suggests that typically the participation fee and the cost of travel would be covered by one's sponsor back home, whether the university or state or non-state association the person represents. For example, back in Seliger in 2013, the participation of ten members of my team from the Russian Far East had been supported by the Department of Education, Culture and Sport of the Chukot autonomous *okrug*. For young people, many of which are first and second year students,⁴³ forum participation equals with a free trip where they can meet like-minded people, chill out away from parents, and enjoy things like chatting until 4 a.m. and attending concerts of relatively well-known Russian pop and rock artists.⁴⁴ However, my personal interpretation supported by the interview with Grigoriy, a former *Nashi* commissar that has been attending youth forums since the early 2000s is that during the Seliger era more people would participate in the forums just to hang out.⁴⁵

When asking my interviewees and fellow forum participants in 2017 and 2018, most would suggest that participants were motivated by their self-actualization drive (Rus. *samorealizatsiya*). In *Territoria Smyslov*, I recorded in my field diary that during the opening lecture "[a]nother guy from

⁴² Portret uchastnika "Territorii smyslov". Kno oni i chego khatyat?

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ For example, in 2018 *Territoriya smyslov* featured a gig of the pop star Yulianna Karaulova. Author's field diary entries, 28.6. and 2.7.2018

⁴⁵ Author's interview with Grigoriy. Moscow, 24.5.2018.

Rosmolodezh' was telling us what awaits us (networking! trend sessions!) and just told us to be present and active. The word "samorealizatsiya" was mentioned around 50 times." In this sense, young Russians do not seem to differ from their millennial peers in the West.⁴⁶

While the participants want to learn new things because it makes them happy, they are also aware that engaging in the educational programme at the forums could translate into pros in the labour market. Two of the participants of *Territoriya smyslov* that are enrolled as students in the prestigious Higher School of Economics in Moscow pointed out that some young people from the Russian regions really valued the opportunity to attend lectures and seminars led by professors the country's best universities.⁴⁷ One of the *Rosmolodezh'* employees claimed that forum participants who had openly went to talk with the so-called "VIP speakers" had managed to get internships in Russia's leading firms.⁴⁸ For the young NGO entrepreneurs I met at the forum *ATR* in 2017, establishing connections with representatives of the local administration and getting advice on how to file a successful grant application was crucial for their career development.⁴⁹

Although the forums are spaces managed by the state-affiliated organizers, I have been surprised to observe how freely participants have felt they could express their skepticism towards the current political elites, sometimes even the president himself. One of my interviewees, a sociologist and a lecturer at *Territoriya smyslov*, talked in length about how she had expected to meet young people "blinded by loyalty" to the government but instead was surprised to find bright young people thinking critically about the world around them.⁵⁰ Her representation of the forum participants generally mirrors my observations in *Territoria smyslov*. However, as the following excerpt from my field diary suggests, participants' criticism seemed to have its limit:

Reflecting on general interaction between the participants, I would argue that while they are critical thinkers, they have excluded high-level politics from the topics they discuss. [...] Yes, I sometimes feel like Putin is an elephant in the room – one that people might think about but see no point in discussing. Instead, local politics and policy mistakes on local level seem to be not an issue at all.⁵¹

Does the finding suggest that young forum participants support Putin's presidency? Not necessarily. Instead, it means that they believe that the shortcomings of the authoritarian system needs to be "fixed" on the local level rather than engage in anti-government protests. Surprisingly, this also

⁴⁶ Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, S. M. (2012). Who are the Millennials? Empirical evidence for generational differences in work values, attitudes and personality. *Managing the new workforce: International perspectives on the millennial generation*, 152-180.

⁴⁷ Maksim and Olga interviews. Moscow, 9.5.2018 and 23.5.2018, respectively.

⁴⁸ Andrei interview.

⁴⁹ Author's field diary. Belokurikha, 6.6.2017.

⁵⁰ Author's interview with Tatiana. Moscow, 30.5.2018.

⁵¹ Author's field diary. *Territoriya smyslov*, 31.6.2018.

seems to be the message of at the forums in general. The real question is whether young people with an “active civic stance” have the potential to generate democratic change in today’s Russia.

Conclusions: The Dilemma of the Youth Forums

This paper has provided an overview of educational youth forums, one of the main forms of implementing state youth policy in the 2010s Russia. It has traced the roots of the contemporary youth forum campaign in the annual training camp for the activists of the government-organized youth movements *Idushchie vmeste* and *Nashi*. I have argued that the contemporary youth forum concept has been designed to prepare a vanguard of young people to meet all the major challenges Russia is facing today and in the years to come, whether in the sphere of politics, economics, or society. In the context of the youth forums, the term “patriotic upbringing” means not just words but deeds for the greater good of one’s motherland.

Encouraging young people to have a proactive stance to improving the world around them and to seek innovative solutions for problems is crucial for future development. However, these qualities also drive civic activism. The question is whether policy makers are able to ensure that the activism is channeled to areas that do not challenge the present day authoritarian status quo. For example, Meri Kulmala has demonstrated that the activities of Russian “social” NGOs that have a loyal and consentful attitude towards the current government and thus constitute a part of the “safe” civil society are surprisingly “political” if analyzed in detail.⁵² In essence, the Kremlin is facing a dilemma: *not* promoting an “active civic stance” risks its future development, which might lead to a growing dissatisfaction among the citizens, especially the youth, while empowering people to take initiative to improve the functioning of the authoritarian system might generate not only loyalty but also further demands for accountability.

For the time being, it seems like the Federal Agency of Youth Affairs, a state body operating directly under the government, is managing its task for bringing up loyal citizens. However, the forum concept has also its shortcomings. Matvei Navdaev, the director of *Territoriya smyslov* who I interviewed in summer 2018, admitted that the contemporary forum concept needed to be adjusted to better respond to the views and preferences of generation Z, perhaps by introducing more peer-to-peer interaction.⁵³ Several forum participants echoed this view, arguing that the similarity of the forums made attending them boring after a while.⁵⁴ Providing young participants more agency might help, but is the government ready for it?

⁵² Kulmala, M. (2016). Post-Soviet “Political”? “Social” and “political” in the work of Russian socially oriented CSOs. *Demokratizatsiya*, 24(2)

⁵³ Navdaev interview.

⁵⁴ *Territoriya smyslov* field diary, 2.7.2018; Maksim and Grigoriy interviews.