



**2013 -2014 TITLE VIII RESEARCH SCHOLAR PROGRAM  
FINAL REPORT**

Hannah Chapman  
PhD Candidate  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

*From Apathy to Activism: The Unintended Consequences of State-Sponsored Youth  
Mobilization*

May 2, 2014 – August 17, 2014  
Moscow, Russia

**Research Abstract:**

This research project asks the question: What are the consequences of state-sponsored mobilization on political engagement in non-democratic regimes? Evaluating government intervention in political and social mobilization, the project employs both a quantitative large-N analysis of media coverage, official rhetoric, and policy reform as well as qualitative interviewing to identify national trends, spatial variation, and specific mechanisms linking government mobilization and cooptation efforts and political engagement among young people in Russia. Existing research on government cooptation focuses on how cooptation efforts are successfully used by non-democratic states to limit political opposition and engagement. In many ways, Russia defies conventional expectations: Instead of limiting the influence and engagement of potential oppositional forces, government cooptation efforts, ironically, led to an increase in political and social participation and engagement among young people. How and why state cooptation efforts resulted in these unintended consequences—genuine political engagement among youth—motivates this research.

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**Research Goals:**

I had two primary research goals for my research trip to Russia. First, I intended to gather newspaper articles on the national, regional, and local levels from 1992-2012 in order to examine the development of government attention to and media coverage on youth issues and, in particular, the development of state-sponsored youth organizations. These data would then be stored in an original database that will be used for both qualitative and quantitative discourse and content analysis. In particular, the data will be used to trace the development of state-sponsored youth organizations over time and between localities and to examine how the relationship between young people and the state has changed over time.

In addition to the collection of newspaper articles relating to youth politics, I also intended to locate and examine scholarly work on youth politics in Russia by Russian scholars and researchers. While some scholarly work has been published on youth organizations and politics in Russia by foreign researchers, the vast majority of research on this topic—conducted by academics and researchers in Russia—is not widely available outside of the country. Consequently, one of my primary goals was to locate existing research on the topic, information that will be used to provide additional background and situate my study more firmly in the existing literature. The final part of data collection for my text-based analysis was to gather information about the manifestos, activities, and workings of youth organizations. Some of this information is available online; however, detailed information, particularly about the individual events and “actions” of the organizations, are only available in print form in various libraries and

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archives in Russia. Data would be collected in three national archives and libraries located in Moscow: the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Russia's primary archive for newspapers and government documents from the 1990s-2000s and the Russian State Library, home to one of the largest collections of national and local newspapers in Russia and extensive scholarly work on youth politics.

In addition to this text-based analysis, I also intended to conduct interviews with scholars of youth politics, youth activists, and government officials in youth affairs. While text-based analysis is an important component of my dissertation research and will allow me to examine youth politics across time, qualitative interviews are essential to understanding the purpose and intent behind the development of state-sponsored youth mobilization. Text-based analysis can establish the facts behind this development but is not ideal for examining individuals' motives for joining organizations, their perceptions of these organizations, or the government's motivation for organization establishment. Consequently, these interviews are a critical, if not the most important, step in testing the effect of state-sponsored mobilization on youth political engagement and establishing policy recommendations.

**Research Activities:**

The majority of archival and library research was conducted in the Russian State Historical Library. This library houses one of the largest collections of local and national newspapers in Russia during the contemporary era. It also houses numerous books and articles related to youth politics from political science, sociology, and anthropology. Finally, this library

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makes available to its readers PhD dissertations and Masters theses written by Russian students in a variety of fields. Primary research activities involved collecting newspaper articles related to state-sponsored mobilization and other participatory technology strategies from the top fifteen most popular newspapers and media sources in Russia (including the regions) from 2000-2014. These newspaper articles were then compiled in an original database that will be used as a primary source of information for the background portion of my dissertation as well as for an in-depth quantitative and qualitative media analysis.



*ID card to the  
Russian State  
Library.*

Due to the wealth of information concerning youth politics available at the Russian State Library, I also spent a substantial amount of time familiarizing myself with prior research on the subject conducted by Russian researchers and scholars. As mentioned earlier, the library houses both academic and policy books as well as unpublished theses not widely available outside of Russia. These materials provide in-depth analyses of various government policies concerning youth mobilization, the evolution of youth politics in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the defining features of the relationship between the state and young people over time. Additionally, due to a recent effort by the library to digitize information and make the

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digitized copies available to library members, I have been able to identify articles and theses that can be accessed outside of Russia, thus allowing me to continue this research following the end of the grant period.

While the majority of archival research was conducted at the Russian State Historical Library, I also conducted research at various other libraries and archives in Moscow, including the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History. The Russian State Library primarily houses academic articles and theses, books concerning government policy, and newspapers; these other archives contain primary documents from state-sponsored youth organizations. These documents include but are not limited to organization manifestos, correspondence between members of youth organizations and across organizations, information about particular organization activities (e.g., the location, activities, and number of participants of particular projects and events carried out by youth organizations), and brochures and propaganda circulated by these organizations. These primary materials have been instrumental in tracing the development of youth organizations overtime and examining how the focus and activities of these organizations have changed under the Putin government.

Research activities also included unofficial meetings with local and international scholars and participants in youth politics in multiple localities (i.e., Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Tver). While conducting official interviews, one of the essential components to the research, was restricted, these unofficial conversations served a number of purposes. First, it allowed me to make contacts with scholars of youth politics and with members and leaders of both pro-state

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and oppositional youth organizations. These meetings have been critical in expanding my network of contacts and with gaining more thorough understanding of the rapidly developing political situation in Russia. They have also introduced me to various youth organizations and activities of which I was hither to unaware, thus expanding the scope of my analysis. Finally, these individuals have been extraordinarily generous at providing me with materials not made available to libraries and archives, including materials published by various organizations (e.g., event brochures and programs, books on the philosophy of these organizations, etc.) and books and research materials collected by the scholars (e.g., surveys and focus groups carried out in the regions concerning youth knowledge of and participation in youth groups and volunteerism, interviews conducted with leaders of youth groups). As much of this research was conducted during the height of youth organization activity in the late-2000s and, indeed, would have been impossible for foreign scholars to pursue by themselves, this material will constitute a critical component of my dissertation analysis.

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*Grantee Hannah Chapman with source material provided by youth scholars and activists in Russia.*

**Important Research Findings:**

The 2000s have been characterized by a significant shift in the relationship between the state and young people. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, young people as a whole were characterized as apolitical and disinterested in engaging with politics or society as a whole (Pilkington et al. 2002; Riordan et al. 1995). Some scholars have even gone so far as to characterize the 1990s as one of “atomized youth,” presenting a “vision of youth with neither future nor present” (Pilkington et al. 2002: 192). The relationship between youth and the state was one of mutual distrust and disinterest. However, following the colored revolutions in former communist countries in the early- to mid-2000s and the central role played by young people during these protests, the relationship between young people and the state was fundamentally

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transformed. Due to (largely unwarranted) fears that the colored revolutions may spread to Russia, the country's increasingly authoritarian state attempted to preempt a revolution by setting up "ersatz social movements" in support of the regime (Robertson 2010).<sup>1</sup> These movements, exemplified by the organization *Nashi*—with its 300,000 plus members and substantial funding—characterized the relationship between the state and young people for most of the 2000s and fundamentally changed the face of political engagement in Russia.

Until this point, government efforts had been focused on appeasing pensioners, the most politically active group, and largely dismissed young people as politically unviable players (Topalova 2006). That is not to say that young people were completely ignored by the state before the advent of the colored revolutions and the reemergence of youth as key political players. During Putin's first term as president (2000-2004), programs for youth socialization were deemed necessary by the state; yet attempts by both the regime and the opposition to engage young people were generally unsuccessful. Why did *Nashi* succeed while these earlier youth movements fail?

*Nashi's* success cannot be attributed to one factor. While increased financial support and government attention to youth issues undoubtedly contributed to the viability of post-colored revolution, pro-state youth movements in Russia, to assume that the formation and development of participatory organizations is contingent solely on the ability and desire of the government to

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<sup>1</sup> At this time, only three percent of young Russians (age thirty and younger) supported Orangist sentiments while more than seventy percent indicated that they did not want an Orange Revolution in Russia (Mendelson and Gerber 2005).

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invest in these groups ignores the agency and will of participants to engage in political and social activism. Indeed, as one activist relayed, the colored revolutions served not only to cause the state to fear revolutionary activity among young people but also awakened young people to their political salience. That is not to say that *Nashi*'s hundreds of thousands of members, and them scores of participants in various other youth organizations around the country, joined and participated purely for idealistic reasons. One of the keys to *Nashi*'s success—and ultimate downfall—was its commitment to training and funding young activists of all political stripes. Although *Nashi* was most well-known for its large pro-Putin and anti-fascist rallies, the majority of *Nashi*'s activities took place at a more local, individualized level. Many members participated for pragmatic reasons: either to gain a foothold through which to launch careers in politics or business (personal discussion with youth activist), take advantage of educational and occupational development (personal discussion with youth scholar), or to fund activism projects of interest (personal discussion with youth scholar; see also Hemment 2012). The number and scope of state-sponsored “youth activities” increased substantially. Instead of enticing participation through the distribution of free t-shirts or trips to Moscow, the post-colored revolution organizations thrived through the promise of personal and professional development, through the promise of a forum through which young people could have their concerns addressed and take an active part in transforming their society. Similarly, it was the failure of the state to follow through on these promises that led to its downfall.

Just as numerous factors led to the success of state-sponsored youth organizations, so did numerous factors lead to their ultimate failure. As rumors of illegal activities and violent actions

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against opponents plagued *Nashi*'s headquarters, many members came to the realization that the implicit promise of financial, organizational, and professional development in reward for participation in pro-state movements and loyalty to the state was not to be fulfilled (conversation with youth activist). Funding competitions for activism projects disproportionately benefited extravagant projects at the expense of those that addressed concrete concerns and issues; only a few members were awarded any sort of position in the government apparatus. Young people slowly became disillusioned with the notion that the government was actually concerned with the issue and concerns of young people and that large-scale activism and participation in organizations would have any results (conversation with youth scholar). With the threat of a colored revolution safely behind Russia and an increasingly negative image of state-sponsored youth organizations, *Nashi*, the flagship of this participatory initiative, quietly closed its doors.

What is the current state of youth engagement in Russia? While large-scale youth organizations are firmly a thing of the past, it does not necessarily mean that political engagement among this demographic has similarly ended. In particular, as overt political activism has become increasingly difficult due to government restrictions on protest and assembly, there has been a reemergence of volunteerism among young people (Molodozhnie... 2009). Instead of focusing on large-scale projects with few concrete effects, youth activism today is centered around local and regional initiatives that seek to make concrete, incremental improvements in society (conversation with youth activist). This fundamental change in the character of engagement emerged for two primary reasons: lack of funding for groups and projects that do not directly benefit the regime or its goals and disenchantment with large, state-

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sponsored organizations that failed to fulfill its promises of change and advancement (conversations with youth activists and scholars). As the Russian state continues to increase restrictions on personal freedom and liberty, the engaged members of the younger generation must continue to find alternative avenues for activism and service.

**Policy Implications and Recommendations:**

Disenchanted with formal organizations and structures has encouraged the emergence of small, grassroots forms of activism. In particular, volunteerism has flourished in recent years among young people, eschewing grand attempts to bolster support for the government and focusing on specific, concrete tasks such as improving orphanages, cleaning up the streets, and improving the civic education of young people. While many may interpret these activities as a step backward from previous forms of engagement in Russia, policymakers should encourage forms of activism by advocating for public service campaigns and educational programs that increase civic knowledge. As scholars have often argued, grassroots activism is often the starting point of more advanced political activity (see Putnam 2000). Furthermore, such activism improves or seeks to improve the political knowledge and awareness of young people and to teach them how the political system works in their country (conversation with youth activist). One of the most difficult challenges facing these organizations is not lack of genuine will and drive, but lack of funding for projects and activities. In order to improve the prospects of these groups and individuals, policymakers should invest in the future of these activist projects through the administration of grants that would finance activities and give activists the opportunity to

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engage with fellow civically-minded individuals. By investing in young people and their opportunities for improvement, we are investing in the future of Russia.

**Co-Curricular Activity:**

During the grant period, I frequently participated in events held by the Foreign Historians Congress of Moscow (FHC), a group of foreign scholars conducting research on Russian history, culture, and politics. These meetings were instrumental in gaining contacts and making connections with fellow researchers. Through my interactions with these scholars, I was also made aware of additional sources of primary and secondary materials that have been useful in further illuminating the progression of youth movements in Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. Additionally, I had the opportunity to meet with some of Russia's leading sociologists and anthropologists on youth studies. These meetings provided important insights into the rapidly evolving relationship between the state and society and Russia as well as the feasibility of doing research in an increasingly restricted political environment.

**Conclusions:**

The reemergence of young people as politically viable players and the “vanguards of the nation” was a critical component of Russia's political landscape for much of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Young people have repeatedly taken to the streets both as proponents and in protest of an increasingly oppressive state. Voter turnout among youth has nearly doubled. Youth organizations have sprung up around the country in support of education, social activism, and other youth-related issues. Young people have gained greater representation in government

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institutions; the number of young people in parliament has increased. However, the increasing authoritarian orientation of the Russian state and the resulting closure of the space for political participation have led to a dramatic decrease in political activism among all segments of the population. As a result, young people have sought alternative avenues through which to express their views and concerns, as evidenced by the increase in volunteerism and a shift to a focus on concrete, realistic goals and activities. However, as democratization scholars have argued, this type of activism can contribute to greater democratization (see Putnam 2000). Consequently, efforts to increase the prospects for democratization should focus on the education and development of this vital group.

**Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications:**

Data collected during the course of the Title VIII Research Scholar Program will be used as the basis of my dissertation on the use of participatory technologies in Russia from 2000-2013. These findings will be presented at political science and area studies conferences in the USA and abroad, including the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association, Midwestern Political Science Association, and the Association for Slavic, Eastern European, and Eurasian Studies. Findings will also be presented at the University of Madison's Comparative Politics Colloquium in preparation for publication. Articles based on the findings of data collected during the course of the grant will be submitted for publication to a number of political science and area studies journals.

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