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Abstract

In the 2010s Russia, government-organized local, regional and national youth forums have become major sites for state-youth interaction. These typically weeklong summer camps are organized across Russia, attracting up to one million participants annually. Although the forums have diverse foci, they are all formal platforms of youth participation, aimed at young people engaging in 'compliant' forms of activism. Drawing from qualitative content analysis of official reports and media accounts combined with participant observation and interview data, this article analyses the forums as a case of youth policy in an authoritarian political setting. It finds that the government treats youth as a 'problematic resource'. Moreover, while the forums' agenda is defined by the policymakers, young people acquire and apply agency to navigate and negotiate the official agenda and re-signify it to respond to their interests. This process, it is argued, has an empowering effect regardless of the constraining authoritarian setting.

Keywords

Youth policy, formal participation, agency, Russia, authoritarianism, patriotic upbringing, compliant activism

Introduction

In summer 2019, the Russian Federal Agency of Youth Affairs (Federal'noe agentstvo po delam molodezhi, abbreviated Rosmolodezh') was 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 contemporary Russian youth policy. According to official statistics, 800,000 Russian

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18–30-year olds participated in the forums in 2018 alone (Rosmolodezh', 2019, p. 18). Selected in a centralized and competitive application process, the young participants are characterized by the policymakers by their 'active civic stance', which in practice signifies engaging in 'compliant' forms of social and/or political activism. At the forums, young people are provided with a formal and government-sponsored platform supposedly to develop their professional skills and interact with other young people from all over the country in an unofficial setting, living one week in tents and attending lectures and seminars as well as participating in leisure activities. Some people attend several camps in one summer, several years in a row.

This article analyses the youth forums both from the viewpoint of the government officials and the young participants. Situating the forums in the political environment of contemporary Russia, it asks how youth is ideologically envisioned within an authoritarian context and whether the youth forums can function as sites that empower young people while subjecting them to the youth policy measures of a non-democratic state. Qualitative content analysis applied to a triangulated set of data that consists of official reports, media accounts, interviews and participant observation data yields two key findings. First, the article demonstrates that the Russian policymakers approach youth both as a 'problem' and as a 'resource' for socio-economic development that would not jeopardize the current authoritarian political system. Second, I find that while formally accepting and reproducing the agenda and form of state youth policy at the forums, participants acquire and apply agency to navigate and negotiate the formal 'rules of the game' and re-signify the forums to respond to their own interests. Building on these two findings, the article argues that while the government's perception of youth as first and foremost as a 'problem' and only secondarily as a potential 'resource' curbs youth empowerment, youth forums as platforms of formal participation emerge as spaces where agency can be acquired and applied, thus generating young people's empowerment within the restricted authoritarian youth policy setting.

In addition to demonstrating how young people gain and apply agency in an authoritarian political context, the article also aims to provide hints about the 'compliant' civic activism practiced by 'normal' or 'mainstream' post-millennials living in today's Russia. Following Alexander Libman and Vladimir Kozlov's (2017) definition of compliant political activism, the concept is understood as the kind of grassroots level social or political activism that does not involve 'criticisms of the key elements of the regime (e.g., the way political leadership is formed)' (Libman & Kozlov, 2017, p. 195). The literature on contemporary Russian youth activism is rich in analyses of non-compliant (oppositional) and subcultural forms of civic activism (Lyytikäinen, 2016; Omel'chenko & Sabirova, 2011; Pilkington et al., 2010), as well as on the political activism of the notorious pro-Putin youth movement *Nashi*, active from 2005 until 2013 (Bacon & Atwal, 2012; Hemment, 2012; Mijnsen, 2014). In both popular and scholarly narratives, youth activists of both ends of the political continuum are juxtaposed with 'non-activists', the 'average' young Russians that are claimed to be a politically passive and disengaged segment (see, e.g., Podkhomutnikova, 2011). The forum participants analysed in this article are young people that due to their engagement in 'compliant' activism in the grassroots level (e.g., engagement in local state-affiliated NGOs or university councils of student representatives) have not attracted the interest of scholars applying

a narrow definition of activism. Yet if activism is understood broadly as ‘any type of individual or collective action performed with the purpose of creating political or social change’ (Sullivan, 2009, p. 6), young people catered by government-organized youth forums ought to be seen as youth activists regardless of their compliancy. In fact, this article suggests that applying a broad definition of youth activism is crucial in an authoritarian political context because the government strongly resents non-compliant activism. Failing to do so prompts one to overlook important practices that aim to change and challenge existing social and political institutions in subtle ways.

Youth Policy, Formal Platforms of Participation, and Agency

State youth policy can be broadly defined as a course or principle of action adopted by state organs to target young people across different areas of social policy (Furlong, 2013, p. 21). Youth policy is also inherently symbolic because it puts forth a portrayal of an ideal citizen envisioned by the political establishment at that moment in time (Edelman, 1964). The symbolic nature of youth policy is present in all modern states, but the portrayal differs greatly from one political, socio-economic and temporal context to another. The proclaimed aim of youth policy in a liberal democracy is, as explicitly stated in the national youth policy strategy of the Netherlands, ‘to familiarize the younger generation with democratic values and practices [...] and thus prepare them for their active participation as citizens’ (Quoted in Williamson, 2002, p. 30). In contrast, the aim of youth policy in a consolidated authoritarian state is to further young people’s acceptance and reproduction of the existing non-democratic political order (cf. Pohl et al., 2020, p. 1).

As many authors have noted, policymakers across the world have looked at the young generation with both hopes and fears. While youth policy has traditionally had a strong problem-oriented perspective and thus focused on control, support and upbringing (Denstad, 2009, p. 17), contemporary European youth policies usually portray young people as a ‘resource’ of society. The framing of young people as a ‘resource’ does not automatically generate greater opportunities for youth agency and empowerment, but since it promotes an idea of self-responsibility (primarily in the context of integration into the labour market), it envisions young people the role of active citizens (in-the-making) (Walther et al., 2020).

In authoritarian states, the problem-oriented approach to youth policy prevails over the resource-oriented one. To endorse youth agency and empowerment is problematic for authoritarian governments because of the perceived political threat of activism in general and youth activism in particular. As a result, young people’s participation in society is channelled to formal platforms while spaces and styles of informal participation are not just ignored but also actively resisted (Kasza, 1995; Krawatzek, 2018; Lüküslü, 2016; Yan, 2014). Building on the works of Smith et al. (2005) and Gordon and Taft (2011), Lüküslü et al. (2020, p. 68) define formal settings of youth participation as ‘explicitly concerned with and based on a clear understanding of youth participation, structured by predefined roles, rules and routines of access and use, and initiated and often led or at least accompanied and

supported by adults'. While many scholars maintain formal and adult-led settings tend to be exclusive, restrictive and unfit for genuinely empowering young people (Bessant, 2003; Gordon & Taft, 2011; Loncle et al., 2012), others argue that platforms of formal participation do have potential for young people's agency and empowerment, especially if they are seen as a continuum rather than as a zero-sum game (Hart, 1992; Lüküslü et al., 2020; Tsekoura, 2016). Drawing from the literature on youth participation in formal settings, agency in the framework of this article is understood as the power to navigate, negotiate and re-negotiate one's roles and responsibilities (cf. Tsekoura, 2016) and to choose how to engage and/or disengage with the official agenda by applying strategies such as re-signification (Bečević et al., 2020). Agency is seen as the prerequisite of empowerment through participation (cf. Tsekoura, 2016, p. 338), while empowerment is conceptualized as a process whereby young people gain the knowledge, power, self-efficacy and agency to bring about change in their own lives, their communities and the society at large (McMahon et al., 2020; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Russell et al., 2009).

State Youth Policy in Russia: Past and Present

Despite the non-democratic nature of the political system of the Soviet Union, Soviet authorities approached young people both as a resource for future socio-economic development and, due to their perceived immaturity and political naivety, a threat to it (Pilkington, 1994). In a political context where all political and social activity took place in organizations subordinated to the communist party, the official youth league (the Komsomol) had monopoly in exercising state policy in the youth sphere. It played this role by ensuring young people's ideological upbringing, labour mobilization, and recruitment of new political elites (Kassof, 1965; Riordan, 1989). The Soviet government's approach towards informal youth activism exercised beyond the auspices of the Komsomol was marked by concern and hostility (Pilkington, 1994).

Upon the collapse of the USSR, the Komsomol was dismantled alongside the communist party, and a new federal state committee of youth policy was erected. The committee was renamed and reshuffled several times before emerging as Rosmolodezh' in 2008 (Nekhaev & Nekhaeva, 2013). It was in the early 2000s when youth first emerged as an object of policy importance as a reaction to popular anxiety about youth. The 'problems' of young people that Russian policymakers assumed would have a negative effect in the society included not just racism, unemployment and falling birth rate, but also 'apoliticism', which was believed to make young people an easy target of political manipulation (Hemment, 2015, pp. 28–29). To tackle 'youth problems', the government (re)instated state programmes of patriotic education and forged new youth movements with explicit government support and management (Lassila, 2014, p. 41; Sanina, 2017, pp. 21–63).

The construction of government-organized youth movements and other platforms for formal youth participation, juxtaposed with the marginalization of informal and independent spaces, could be contextualized in the consolidation of an authoritarian political system in Russia during Vladimir Putin's first two presidential terms (2000–2008) (Gel'man, 2015; Gill, 2015; Hanson, 2007). For young people, the government's fear of 'colour revolutions' was of utmost importance. The 'colour

revolutions' were popular uprisings that succeeded in overthrowing entrenched autocrats in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005). Although the uprisings mobilized people of all ages, it was the youth movements and individual young people that 'energized' protests (Horvath, 2013, p. 6). When young Russians became more engaged in informal and oppositional forms of political and social activism in the mid-2000s, the Russian government interpreted the mobilization as a threat to the political regime's existence and responded by seeking to channel youth activism to formal platforms (Horvath, 2013, pp. 85–123; Lassila, 2014, pp. 257–258). Young people's participation in the anti-government demonstrations of 2011–2012 as well as the 2017 'schoolchildren's rallies' in support of the opposition leader Aleksey Navalnyi have not eased policymakers' perception of unleashed youth activism as a 'problem' for the stability of the authoritarian system.

Yet existing research suggests that the perception of youth activism as a 'problem' for Russia's political, social and economic stability coexists with an idea of youth participation as a 'resource' for overcoming challenges of future development. While Julie Hemment (2015) maintains that the aim of Russian youth policy is to produce (politically loyal) volunteers, entrepreneurs and activists; Félix Krawatzek (2018, pp. 85–128) finds that the discourse about youth as a 'resource' became especially prominent after 2008, when oppositional youth-based movements had been pushed to the margins of the political landscape. Moreover, analyses of Russia's patriotic education programmes point to the interwovenness of the deficit-oriented youth-as-problem approach and young people's resourcefulness: the aim of the vaguely defined policy is not only to produce a feeling of love, devotion, and a sense of attachment to Russia but also to develop an 'active civic stance', demonstrated in practical deeds to the benefit of the motherland (Rapoport, 2009; Sanina, 2017).

To sum up, Russian policymakers assumedly perceive young people both as a 'problem' and as a 'resource' for the country's social and economic development on the current authoritarian political track. However, we lack insight about how assumptions about young people's 'problematic' and 'resourceful' characteristics are translated into practical policy measures that aim to steer young people's behaviour in a government-endorsed direction. Moreover, few studies have provided knowledge on young people's responses to such policy measures in the post-*Nashi* era. The aim of this article is to address these gaps by conducting a case study of one of the most prominent instruments of contemporary Russian youth policy: the educational youth forum. In the 2000s, the forums were organized as political training camps for the activists of *Nashi* and other government-organized youth movements, but in the 2010s, they were transformed into platforms of formal participation open for all young people with an 'active civic stance' (Hemment, 2015).

Although annual summer youth forums were becoming popular across Russia already in the early 2010s, it was the introduction of the 'Foundations of state youth policy of the Russian Federation for the period until 2025' in 2014 that entailed the institutionalization and centralization of the forums into an annual 'campaign' run by Rosmolodezh' (Baranova, 2016). At the moment, the forums are explicitly designed to apply Russian youth policy objectives in practice. For example, the 'Methodological recommendations on the organization of youth forums as a part of the 2018 All-Russian Youth Forum Campaign' lists 15 policy priorities that ought to be reflected in the forums' agenda, such as 'attracting youth

to volunteering and innovation activities', 'career-counselling assistance', 'patriotic upbringing', and 'promoting a healthy lifestyle' (Rosmolodezh', 2018a). As a result of the standardization, youth forums across the country all fit into the same model, offering the participants both educational activities (lectures, seminars, workshops, etc.) and leisure (sports competitions, concerts, arts & crafts workshops, etc.).

Studying State-organized Youth Camps: Notes on the Methodology

The article applies qualitative content analysis to a diverse and triangulated research material collected at and about Russian contemporary youth forums, examined as a case study of Russian youth policy and state-youth interaction in contemporary Russia (cf. Ragin, 1992; Simons, 2009). One collection of data included in the analysis consists of official youth policy documents issued by Rosmolodezh' and the Russian government and media accounts, published online and in print. The dataset was collected by me based on their relevance to youth policy in general and youth forums in particular.¹

This material is complemented with primary research I have collected in Russia between 2013 and 2018. During this time, I conducted participant observation at five different week-long youth forums organized by Rosmolodezh' in five different regions of Russia: the federal level All-Russian Educational Youth Forum 'Seliger' in 2013, the regional business and management focused forum Altai. Tochki Rosta 'ATR' in 2016, the international World Festival of Youth and Students in 2017, the federal level innovation focused forum Russia—Land of Opportunities in 2018, and the federal level Territoria Smyslov—'Territory of Ideas' in 2018. The forums were chosen on the basis of access and their overall diversity. Due to my relatively young age and the goodwill of forum organizers playing the role of gatekeepers, I could join the forums as a regular participant. Although I am not a Russian citizen, my fluency in Russian allowed me to avoid many pitfalls of cross-cultural ethnography. In adherence to ethical guidelines, I explained to people that I was a researcher working on Russian youth policy and that I was attending the forum for data collection purposes. Some were curious about my work, but most were primarily interested about life in Finland and my views about Russia. In my relatively lengthy field diary entries, analysed for this article, I described the daily events, activities and interactions, as well as my initial thoughts on how they connected to my research themes.

A second type of primary data that this article builds on is a set of interviews I conducted with organizers, instructors and participants of the annual federal forum *Territoriya smyslov* ($n = 15$). The interviewees were sampled by snowballing through gatekeepers at Rosmolodezh' and the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow, where I was at the time affiliated as a visiting researcher.² The forum instructors and participants interviewed were all either teaching or studying at HSE, while the Rosmolodezh' interviewees were selected on the basis of their participation in designing and/or organizing the forums. The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Russian, and translated into English by me. I used pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of the interviewees and other participants of the study.

Upon returning home, I applied qualitative content analysis to reorganize and code the research material according to research themes that led my enquiry: the goals and implementation of state youth policy and young people's responses to it. I chose qualitative content analysis because it allowed me to look at the forums in depth, while still enabling the reduction of the material in a theoretically grounded way to distil results by coding and constructing categories (Mayring, 2000; Schreier, 2012). Thematic coding was undertaken manually with an abductive approach that aimed at remaining sensitive both to the concepts and meanings applied by the research participants and my scholarly interests (cf. Graneheim et al., 2017, p. 31). The codes included ones like 'free fun' (Rus. *khalyava*), 'patriotic upbringing' and 'Putin'. After coding, I manually grouped the codes under discursive categories that I constructed in order to examine the way ideas about youth were produced and reproduced by both institutional and individual actors (cf. Walther et al., 2020). The categories that feature in this article included ones like 'criticism of the political system' and 'career advancement'. After I completed the construction of categories I situated them to the relevant literature to provide answers to the specific research questions posed in this article.

In the first part of the following empirical analysis, I examine the approach to youth and young people's activism as a 'problem' and as a 'resource' in the official youth policy narrative, as constructed in the youth policy documents and youth policymakers' interviews. In the second section, I turn to analyse the forums from the young people's perspective, discussing the different forms of agency acquired and applied at the forums and analysing them in the broader political context. To protect the participants' anonymity, I use first name pseudonyms to refer to all individuals, unless they requested otherwise. While the study provides neither a representative nor a generalizable analysis of young Russians that attend the state-organized youth forums, I believe that the prevalence and typicality of the forums as a youth policy instrument combined with the multi-site design and triangulation does provide insights of people's experiences that can be expected to improve our understanding of the government-youth interaction in an authoritarian political setting more broadly (cf. Schofield, 2002).

Youth as a 'Problematic Resource': The View from Above

According to the 'Foundations of state youth policy of the Russian Federation for the period until 2025' (2014, p. 1), the aim of Russian youth policy is 'to unlock young people's potential for the future development of the Russian Federation'. Speaking on a similar note, Russian President Vladimir Putin reminded the participants of the forum *ProeKToriya*: 'It is very important that young people can find the place where they are needed the most, where they can achieve maximum results and self-actualise for the benefit of their family and the whole country' (Putin, quoted in TASS, 2019). Yet young Russians are not expected to 'find their place' on their own. As Lena, a high-ranking Rosmolodezh' employee with considerable experience in the organization of forums, asserted during our interview, youth needs to be 'managed' (Rus. *upravlyat*) and provided not only what it wants but also what it requires. The idea of young people's resourcefulness that due to the problematic

nature of youth needs to be harnessed and channelled by the state is a leitmotif of the official Russian youth policy narrative, analysed in detail in this section.

A problem-oriented perspective to youth policy portrays young people either as vulnerable and in need of protection through government policies or as troublemakers (Denstad, 2009, p. 17). In the Russian youth policy imagination, these two elements are intertwined: young people's inherent (biologically dictated) naivety makes them easy targets for (political) brainwashing, which, in turn, makes them behave as troublemakers. The head of Rosmolodezh' has said he is 'outraged' by the way young people are 'used as a weapon in a political battle' because 'children are sacred and must be left outside politics' (Bugayev, quoted in Dorofeyev, 2017).

Characteristics of the problem-oriented approach to youth were identifiable also in the interviews conducted with Rosmolodezh' employees. Harboursing critical political views towards the government was explained by the innocence of young people and their inability to grasp the opportunities offered by the state. After confessing that he, too, was once 'opposition-minded', Vadim, a mid-level Rosmolodezh' employee, explained:

A person is usually an oppositionist because he thinks that the world is unfair and does not know how to realize oneself. I think it is possible to self-realize in Russia. We just need to show these opportunities to young people. When they see it, their negative energy goes away, and they are ready to act in a constructive way. (Vadim, Rosmolodezh' employee [2018, May 28]. Interviewed by the author, Moscow)

As these examples demonstrate, minimizing young people's support to the political opposition remains a policy priority for the government. Young Russians are not necessarily more likely to participate in anti-government rallies than representatives of other age cohorts (Laruelle, 2019; Milov & Khostunova, 2019), but the symbolic value of youth makes them a logical target for political socialization efforts. Yet the interviewed Rosmolodezh' employees suggested that the nature of the threat to the Russian socio-economic development—and, as a result, the country's political stability—had changed since the early 2000s. While noting that originally the forums were explicitly designed to prevent a youth-run 'colour revolution', contemporary forums sought to strengthen young people's resilience. Lena explained:

The state is no longer collapsing as a result of street protests. [...] The country is instead being destroyed through the minds [of young people]. Foreign agents pour money to strange organizations, and youth is being attracted to their activities. Therefore, it is not necessary [for us] to bring people out to the streets. Instead we need to support young people's feeling of self-awareness: you are a citizen of your country, you believe in Russia, you don't participate in any murky initiatives, and you always say that Russia is more than vodka, bears and the Red Square. (Lena, Rosmolodezh' employee [2018, May 31]. Interviewed by the author, Moscow)

The 'feeling of self-awareness' that Lena describes is precisely the kind of patriotism that Russia's patriotic education programmes are designed to generate. What is more, patriotism in the understanding of Russian policymakers is what transforms young people from a 'problem' to a 'resource'. The state programme 'Patriotic education of the citizens of the Russian Federation for the period 2016–2020' (2015,

pp. 4–5) maintains that it is important to ensure citizens' 'patriotic consciousness' in the 'difficult condition of economic and geopolitical competition', because it 'consolidates the society for resolving the issues related to national security and sustainable development of the Russian Federation'. Moreover, the government is determined that young people do not develop a patriotic mindset autonomously, but rather as a result of 'systematic and purposeful work' of the state, civil society and families (Patriotic upbringing..., 2015, p. 2).

The fundamental idea that young people and youth activism requires adult management explains not only the distrust of independent initiatives but also the channelling of activities to formal platforms of youth participation, such as the youth forums. The fear of unmanaged youth activism lives on; as put bluntly by Vadim, '[i]n the mid-2000s, state youth policy was based on the idea that young people were the main threat to the country, which is why Rosmolodezh' received the necessary resources and authority to design projects that would ensure the internal political stability in the country'. As the following section highlights, forum participants can be aware of the political education efforts of the forums' organizers and feel uneasy about it.

The findings of this study suggest that in contemporary Russia, the youth policy approach that sees young people as a 'resource' supplements rather than replaced policymakers' understanding of youth as a 'problem'. Mirroring Minna Nikunen's (2017) finding that the youth policy documents of Finland and the European Union produce and reproduce divisions between those young people that have 'potential' and those that are in the risk of marginalization, Russian policymakers, too, perceive some young people as more 'resourceful' than others. The participants of the forums were described by the Rosmolodezh' interviewees as 'the most competent people', 'determined and effective', 'ones with leadership qualities' and 'extraordinarily talented' (Interviews with Matvei Navdaev, the director of the organizing committee of *Territoriya smyslov*; Vera, Rosmolodezh' affiliated youth policy freelancer; Vadim; and Lena; respectively).

When I asked why the forums were organized exclusively for 'resourceful' youth, Vadim explained the selection of participants from a cost-effective perspective:

We collect the best [young people] to the forums. [...] Since our funding and resources are limited, the only strategy that allows us to work effectively is to invest in those who deliver the most. If a person that comes to the forum is a member of a civil society organization, the message that we gave to him, that information and knowledge, can be passed on in his network at home. [...] This way we get the maximum multiplied effect of his participation. (Vadim, Rosmolodezh' employee. [2018, May 28]. Interviewed by the author, Moscow)

The 'message' that the state hopes the forum participants to internalize and disseminate consists of several elements, the exploration of which falls beyond the scope of this article. However, for understanding the potential empowering effect of the forums it is important to discuss the policymakers' attempt to harness young people's assumed self-actualization drive for the benefit of the country. In an unpublished presentation of *Territoriya smyslov* (Rosmolodezh', 2018b, p. 2) the desired result of the forum says: '[the participant] understands [...] the achievability of their goals (thanks to the opportunities that our country provides) and is ready to

participate in team work for resolving state tasks'. A core aim of the forums is therefore to direct young people's presumed self-actualization energy to a pre-defined and government-endorsed agenda of activism. The state's role as the overriding agenda-setter is a characteristic of the contemporary authoritarian Russia, the effects of which are not limited to the youth sphere. Since policymakers hesitate yielding youth the chance to influence the agenda, their agency and empowerment are restricted. However, at the youth forums, constructed as formal platforms of participation, young people are provided with some necessary tools for gaining agency and pushing for empowerment. At our interview, the forum organizer Matvei Navdayev listed 'soft' skills whose development is supported at the forums: 'intellectual development, emotional intelligence, communication and management skills, teamwork, critical thinking, media literacy, and analytical thinking'.

Qualitative content analysis of the government documents, published media interviews of youth policymakers and interviews conducted by myself with Rosmolodezh' employees finds that the assumption Russian youth policymakers have is that some young people transform into a resource for Russia's socio-economic development on the current authoritarian track once they internalize a 'patriotic' mindset. Once they become 'patriotic', the activism that stems from their assumed inherent self-actualization drive is no longer problematic, as it can be channelled to 'compliant' forms and avenues that have been set by the government. To quote the head of Rosmolodezh', young people know that they must 'develop themselves to the benefit of Russia' (Bugayev, quoted in Rosmolodezh', 2019). Youth forums are narrated as spaces where carefully selected 'resourceful' young people are developed to become an even more valuable resource for the government. Vadim elaborates: 'We really count on these young people who have gone through our forums to take the initiative into their own hands. We are ready to trust, help and provide resources, we are ready to decentralize our power relations. And we know that they will not let us down'.

Agency, Empowerment and 'Compliant' Activism: View from Below

In order to provide a fuller picture of the forums, this section examines them from the perspective of the young participants. It asks whether the youth forums can function as sites that empower young people regardless of their formal structure and the government's approach to young people as a 'problematic resource'. Qualitative content analysis applied to my ethnographic field diary entries and participants' interviews finds that despite the managed nature of the forums, they can operate as spaces where young people acquire and apply agency to navigate and negotiate the official ramifications and re-signify the forum space to respond to their interests. This process, I argue, has an empowering effect within the constraining authoritarian political setting (cf. Lüküslü et al., 2020). The findings are presented thematically around three categories: navigating the 'rules of the game'; applying re-signification; and voicing criticism to negotiate the official agenda.

In contemporary Russia, political and social agency is exercised in the framework of the 'rules of the game', a combination of formal rules and informal practices.

Vladimir Gel'man (2015, p. 4) stresses that formal rules like laws 'might be very different from informal institutional arrangements, and sometimes even less important than the latter'. Informal institutions and practices are prevalent on political, economic and civil sectors, including youth policy and youth activism (Aliyev, 2015). Civil society activists can successfully navigate the 'rules of the game' by aligning policy issues in the government-set agenda by applying strategies such as 'speaking in code' or using informal politics and personal networks to amplify their voices in policymaking (Bogdanova et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2016). The modes of agency discussed in the context of Russian youth activism, presented here, are therefore but one example of a wider local practice.

Participants of the youth forums are aware of the two tiers of the 'rules of the game' and know how to frame their activities in the state's agenda both at the forum and beyond. They know that forum is a formal platform of participation which comes with pre-defined formal and informal rules to be followed. Ilya, a participant of *Territoriya smyslov* in 2016, explains:

At the forum there is an education programme with quite a structured schedule. During the day you attend lectures and workshops [...] and they take almost the entire day. In the evening you have a bit of free time when you can do what you want. In addition, there is the system with projects, where the political and patriotic aspect was well noticeable, since the task was to design an educational project—some kind of workshop, game, online course or whatever—around the theme of the Great Patriotic War. (Ilya, *Territoriya smyslov* participant. (2018, 9 May). Interviewed by the author, Moscow)

The forum's patriotic upbringing agenda was mentioned by all interview participants. Anna, a participant in 2017, reflected on the state's ideological education efforts at length.

I did not know that the forum is in fact fully pro-governmental. If I had known it in advance, I would not have been surprised by the near explicit campaigning for the current government. [...] Nobody told me that they instil patriotism from 7 AM onwards or that all forums are organized by organizations that operate under state control, that they are a part of state programme. [...] For me it was weird to wake up to the sound of the national anthem, to show respect, to be told many times that the opposition is bad, to be urged to vote for the 'right' candidate at the presidential election rather than 'someone that could hurt the country'. I understand that from the government's perspective it is important, but I was not ready for it. Such a direct campaigning can be irritating. (Anna, *Territoriya smyslov* participant [2018, 23 May]. Interviewed by the author, Moscow)

Anna's words suggest that she developed her understanding of the 'rules of the game' about the forums during her time there. In contrast, those who had previous experience state-endorsed youth activism were already accustomed to navigating. For example, at the forum *ATR* in 2016, participants of the 'How to get a grant' workshop were brainstorming about how to 'code' their civic activities to the language of the official documents on patriotic education (Author's field diary, 8.6.2017).

Forums are also sites where the 'rules of the game' specific to youth policy practice could be raised and discussed. One of the instructors at *ATR* admitted that he had been asked to participate in a corrupt scheme: formally receiving a grant

worth a certain sum of money, but in reality only getting 10% of it, which he could pocket (Author's field diary, 8.6.2017). A young civil society activist participant later contended that most grants were allocated to fake projects, although other youth activists present at the time of this informal conversation did not agree (Author's field diary, 9.6.2017).

A process that accompanies learning about the formal and informal 'rules of the game' of Russian youth policy practice is what Bečević et al. (2020) call re-signification: the act of giving the forums new meanings in line with one's own interests. Anna, disappointed about the quality of teaching at *Territoriya smyslov*, recounted:

I started having a lot of fun after I understood that for me *Territoriya smyslov* was not an education forum but something else. I lived in a tent with fun people. As a child I used to go to summer camps, so I thought, great, why not, this could be a bit like that. (Anna, *Territoriya smyslov* participant [2018, 23 May]. Interviewed by the author, Moscow)

Re-signification features also in the forums' official reporting. A poll conducted among *Territoriya smyslov* participants in 2017 found that 12% of the respondents had wanted to attend 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 (Kasamara, 2017). As the previous section suggests, neither of these motivations explicitly contradicts the proclaimed aims of the forum. When I asked my interviewees and fellow forum participants about their motivation for forum participation, most would talk about their intrinsic self-actualization drive. The organizers seem to be aware of this desire of personal growth: at *Territoria smyslov* in 2018, I recorded in my field diary that during the opening lecture '[a]nother guy from Rosmolodezh' was telling us what awaits us (networking! trend sessions!) and told us to be present and active. The word *samorealizatsiya* was mentioned around 50 times' (Author's field diary, 18.6.2018).

The conceptual broadness of self-actualization generates room for re-signification. For example, self-actualization can mean acquiring new skills for better positioning in the labour market. Anna and Ilya, both students in the prestigious Higher School of Economics in Moscow, pointed out that youth from the Russian provinces see the forum as an opportunity to access higher quality education. Anna explained: 'For them it is a very good way to, first of all, talk with speakers that would never come to their small city [...] or to network with people who are members of parties or other structures that they would like to join'. Networking is indeed a crucial part considering the 'rules of the game' in Russia. For the young NGO activists at the forum *ATR*, getting to know each other and representatives of the local administration, as well as learning to write good grant applications were perceived to be crucial for their career development in the conditions of Russia's competitive job market where networks matter (cf. Bečević et al., 2020, pp. 122–124).

Recognizing these processes of agency and the interpersonal interaction that enables them, it seems likely that all actors that are involved in the forums—ranging from the young participants to the mid-level camp organizers and youth policy makers in the leadership of Rosmolodezh—relate to the 'rules of the game' and have certain assumptions on how the 'game' is 'played' by others. As a result, they are all complicit in playing the 'game' and accept a degree of agency from each other even if it crosses some officially set norms.

The third and final way discussed in this article about the way young people acquire and apply agency at the forums has to do with negotiating the official agenda on youth. Despite the compliancy of their activism, young people do not unequivocally accept the government's youth policy agenda but instead subject it to negotiation with the means of voicing criticism both towards the Russian youth policy as a whole and towards the forums in particular.

At the forums, youth voiced both implicit and explicit criticism towards practices that they found patronizing. For example, Ilya elaborated on the difference between what he called 'thin' and 'thick' forms of patriotic education:

[At the forum] my experience was that they had a thin, more pleasant approach to patriotic education. Instead of imposing on you a treatment designed to change you, they treat you like a thinking person. [...] And that was great. (Ilya, *Territoriya smyslov* participant [2018, 9 May]. Interviewed by the author, Moscow)

Participants were also vocal about their irritation over those speakers or practices that they interpreted demonstrated a patronizing attitude towards them or topics important to them. My fieldnotes from *Territoriya smyslov* feature several of passages where I reflect on the participants' critical attitude towards policymakers who spoke at the forum.

'Typical state official who has no idea about real people's problems!' one of the participants lamented [after the lecture]. In their opinion, the reason why the speaker was 'horrid' or why they had 'not gained anything new' was that she neither reflected on the process of how Moscow had become such a successful city nor spoken about future challenges. Moreover, people were annoyed by her disregarding claims voiced by students as 'myths' invented by the media and refusing to answer difficult questions by saying they were none of her business. (Author's field diary, 31.6.2018)

The format of the forums as platforms of formal participation did not strip young people from the space to voice their concerns or criticism. In another instance, a participant of *ATR* asked several controversial questions at a lecture on corruption, such as 'What do you advise us to do if the city mayor drives a BMW to a meeting where it is said that state officials cannot use the taxpayers' money to buy BMWs?' (Author's field diary, 10.6.2017). Furthermore, participants at the forums were constantly complaining about practical issues; top grievances featured the strict showering schedule, poor educational programme, unpalatable food, and the lack of free time. This criticism masks a clear message: young people, especially those at the forum, expect and deserve better. By voicing grievances to authorities, whether at the forums or outside them, they were, in fact, engaging in negotiations about their role.

Forum organizers were not eager to hear the participants' criticism, but they nevertheless tolerated it. It is not surprising, given that policymakers believe that awareness about societal ills fuels activism that due to the 'resourcefulness' of the young forum-goers is channelled to 'compliant' forms. However, compliancy is not set in stone: existing research from Russia and China suggests 'compliant' civic activism can easily become 'non-compliant' (Clément, 2008; Lianjiang, 2008).

Furthermore, there is a thin line between ‘compliance’ and ‘non-compliance’. Meri Kulmala (2016) demonstrates that the activities of Russian ‘social’ NGOs that engage in ‘compliant’ activism can be surprisingly ‘political’. While Russian youth policymakers must provide young people room for agency and empowerment to ensure the country’s socio-economic and political stability, empowering youth to take initiative in improving the functioning of the authoritarian system might generate not only loyalty but also further demands. From the point of the literature on youth participation and empowerment, this is the contradiction in the Russian youth policy: the government channels youth participation to formal settings where it exercises control; those who operate in these spaces are assumed to be patriotic and thus engaging only in ‘compliant’ activism, which, in turn, is why the government supports their agency and why they are encouraged to participate, which has an empowering effect.

Conclusion

This article has presented the findings of a qualitative study of contemporary Russian youth forums, analysed as case of youth policy instrument applied by an authoritarian government. It has argued that a problem-oriented approach still dominates the Russian youth policy, which is why young people’s participation is channelled to formal settings and only ‘compliant’ forms of activism are tolerated. Yet in parallel to European youth policy, youth, first and foremost those young people that engage in ‘compliant’ and ‘constructive’ forms of activism, is portrayed as a valuable ‘resource’ for the country’s socio-economic development on the current authoritarian path. Although the perception of youth as a ‘problematic resource’ curbs youth agency, young people are able to acquire and apply agency to a certain extent at spaces such as the government-organized youth forums despite their restrictive nature, which in turn has an empowering effect. This article has identified three ways of acquiring and applying agency at the forums: navigating the formal and informal ‘rules of the game’, applying re-signification, and negotiating the official youth agenda by challenging it through criticism.

What implications does this study have for our understanding of young Russians engaging in ‘compliant’ forms of activism and of youth-state interaction in an authoritarian setting? First, it suggests that young people acquire and apply their agency at formal platforms of participation in several ways. Second, it points to the potential unintended implications of youth policy crafted by an authoritarian state. Lena, a high-ranking Rosmolodezh’ employee, suggested that it could be thanks to the forums that there has not been a ‘Russian colour revolution’. While it is true that in recent years explicitly non-compliant activism among youth has been localized and sporadic, controversially the findings of this study suggest that the forums can provide the young participants with a toolkit of grassroots activism that, literature on the rapid and unexpected socio-political mobilization suggests (see, e.g., Clarke, 2014; Tarrow, 1991), can quickly turn from ‘compliant’ to ‘non-compliant’. Without applying a broad definition of (youth) activism in an authoritarian political setting, one can overlook critical social and political agency veiled in formal compliance in unexpected places.

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Notes

1. Media accounts were sampled using a keyword search in the Integrum Worldwide database, whereas relevant government documents were accessed on the website of Rosmolodezh' (<http://fadm.gov.ru>). Legislative acts underpinning state youth policy, listed in secondary literature (see, e.g., Sivtsev, 2019) are accessible in the Collection of Legislation of the Russian Federation database (<http://www.szrf.ru/szrf/index.phtml?md=0>).
2. I chose the snowballing method because forums organizers and instructors are populations that are hard to reach. Moreover, existing methodological research suggests that in Russia access to qualitative interview respondents is generally complicated due to a widespread suspicion towards foreign researchers and the hierarchical culture of organizations (see, e.g., Voldnes et al., 2014). Furthermore, I chose not to interview the forum participants at the forums for two reasons. First, conducting both participant observation and interviews at the same time would have been too labour intensive given the busy schedule of the forums. Second, I was concerned that taking on the role of an interviewer might have jeopardized the rapport among my fellow participants as well as promoted the expression of distortedly pro-government views, given that they were still physically in the official government-managed platform.

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