

## Вперёд! Exploring the Dialectic between Continuity and Transformation in the Development of the Pro-regime Russian Youth Organisation *Nashi*

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Figure 7.1 Seliger 2008 [photo taken by the author, Maya Atwal]

Challenging our fundamental conception of transformation as the antithesis of continuity, this chapter contends that in the case of the Russian youth movement *Nashi*, continuity and transformation have enjoyed a symbiotic, albeit restricted, relationship. Despite *Nashi's* resolute objective of securing the incumbent regime and maintaining political stability in the face of the perceived 'orange' threat, the movement has simultaneously aspired to be an agent of socio-political change and called for a rejuvenation of the current elite. While petitioning for an overhaul of the existing set up without seeking to bring an opposition government to power or to incite political instability may be nothing extraordinary in itself, the fact that a Kremlin-sponsored organisation, which was established in order to prevent a Russian 'coloured revolution', has been able to challenge the existing political elite and attract young Russians inspired by the impact of the youth movement *Pora* during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, is nothing short of exceptional. This chapter examines how it has been possible for *Nashi* to practise a dual continuity-transformation strategy within the framework of Kremlin sponsorship and the repressive political environment in Russia. *Nashi's* achievements and limitations in pursuing its transformative agenda are considered as evidence of the success or otherwise of this dual strategy and ultimately of the relative advantages and disadvantages of state-sponsored participation in Russia more widely.

The research presented in this chapter is influenced by the author's own participation in *Nashi's* annual summer camp at Lake Seliger from 12-25 July 2008 and by fieldwork carried

out there.<sup>1</sup> As well as interviews with members of *Nashi's* leadership, observations and informal talks with participants at Seliger, this chapter draws on web-based primary sources including, but not limited to, archival material from *Nashi's* website<sup>2</sup> and the website of the State Duma of the Russian Federation.<sup>3</sup> The chapter consists of three parts. The first section introduces *Nashi* and explores the themes of continuity and transformation in the movement's development, examining their origins and manifestations in *Nashi's* ideology and strategy. It identifies the obstacles that *Nashi* faced in adopting a dual continuity-transformation strategy and attempts to explain how *Nashi* may have been able to overcome these obstacles in the specific context of the run-up to the 2007-8 electoral cycle in Russia. The second section builds on preliminary assessments of the relationship between continuity and transformation made in the first section by evaluating *Nashi's* overall ability to meet its dual strategy. It explores what the movement's results or lack thereof reveal about the nature of the dialectic between continuity and transformation here and ultimately about the power relations between *Nashi* and the Kremlin. Finally, the third section applies these findings to existing theory on the effects of state-sponsored participation. By drawing out the benefits as well as the limitations of state-sponsorship in the case of *Nashi*, it questions the common assumption that an 'active state' is an inherently corrosive force for the development of civil society.

### *Continuity and Transformation in the Development of Nashi*

*Nashi* was officially founded in March 2005 with state backing and its development was a direct response to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Kremlin's consequent fear of youth-sponsored instability during the 2007-8 electoral cycle in Russia. *Nashi* is a pro-regime youth movement, which supports the continuation of Putin's political course and has therefore sought to undermine any potential threat to the hegemony of the incumbent Russian regime. The movement's stated objective has been to facilitate Russia's modernisation, enabling her to become a global leader in the twenty-first century (Nashi 2005). According to *Nashi's* manifesto, accomplishing this ambition depends on the fulfillment of three key tasks: 1) preserving Russia's sovereignty, 2) changing the mentality of the ruling elite (for example, encouraging rejuvenation and innovation as well as demanding patriotism, competence and integrity), and 3) promoting the development of a functioning civil society and public accountability of power-holders. Taking *Nashi's* aims at face value, the parallels with *Pora*, the youth movement set up in 2004 in opposition to Kuchma's regime in Ukraine, are striking. National sovereignty, anti-corruption, the development of civil society and public accountability are common to both *Nashi* and *Pora's* goals. Although *Nashi* has mobilised around support for Putin and explicitly aimed to ensure the continuation of the existing regime in the face of the perceived American-sponsored 'orange' threat; at the same time the movement has successfully marketed itself as a pioneer of socio-political change: *Nashi* sought to reject the weaknesses of the incumbent elite and thwart foreign attempts to steal the elections and was thus able to attract many young Russians inspired by the power demonstrated by Ukrainian youth in the Orange Revolution.

[...] As far as I am aware, at the beginning at least, [*Nashi's*] sole task was to prevent an 'Orange Revolution' - to organise mass rallies and gather together large numbers of patriotic people, who support the current political course. But then there was so

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<sup>1</sup> This research was funded by the ESRC as part of a Centre for East-European Language Based Area Studies (CEELBAS) PhD studentship award.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.nashi.su/> last accessed 11/5/09.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.duma.gov.ru/> last accessed 5/5/09.

much power and energy, and bright young political personalities began to emerge from Nashi, that it became clear that this was not the organisation's only task. In Russia now, in my opinion, it is imperative to create something new....<sup>4</sup>

In the above quotation *Nashi* spokesperson and longstanding commissar, Maria Drokova, emphasises the development of the movement's transformative role alongside the imperative of securing the continuation of the incumbent regime. However, while *Nashi* is well-known for its mass actions and displays of patriotic fervour, its intimidation of the opposition and its fierce support for the policies of former President Putin, there has been little recognition of the considerable transformative elements of the movement's aims (e.g. see Schwirtz 2007, Vinatier 2007, Guillory 2008, or Heller 2008).

In earlier work, which sought to evaluate *Nashi's* sustainability by considering the movement's autonomy and the agency of its activists, it was noted that both of the dominant discourses on *Nashi* identified there failed to acknowledge the agency of *Nashi* activists.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, it was posited that this failure derived from their common misconception that the state has the unilateral power to direct the youth movement as it sees fit and to control the outcome of activists' participation (Atwal 2009a, 750). Perhaps this aggrandisement of the state's perceived power over *Nashi* accounts for the fact that the movement's transformative agenda is often ignored, because regard has been shown only for the designs that the state may have on *Nashi* as opposed to the objectives of *Nashi* leaders and activists themselves. The implication here is that the Russian state would not back the implementation of the kind of change advocated by *Nashi* and would use the movement for its own ends and consequently only in the capacity of supporting continuity, i.e. securing the preservation of the incumbent regime.

Alternatively, the emphasis on *Nashi's* role in supporting continuity alone rather than recognition of its dual continuity-transformation strategy may derive from the apparent conflict between these two aims. In other words, *Nashi's* declared aspirations of initiating radical change may have been disregarded by commentators because of the perceived incompatibility of such aspirations with the movement's anti-orange/pro-stability genesis and with the limitations of Kremlin sponsorship. Either way, regardless of the state's intentions or the ostensible tensions within the movement's dual strategy, this chapter contends that *Nashi's* transformative agenda should not be dismissed offhand, and considers the obstacles to *Nashi's* pairing of continuity and transformation on a conceptual and a practical level. In doing so, this chapter attempts to explain how *Nashi* may have been able to reconcile its ambitions to support both political continuity and transformation as well as garner Kremlin support for this dual strategy.

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<sup>4</sup> Author's interview with Maria Drokova, Lake Seliger, July 24 2008.

<sup>5</sup> The article referred to here categorises prevalent perceptions of *Nashi* into two dominant discourses. Firstly, the 'creeping authoritarianism' discourse, which 'views *Nashi* as an attempt by the Russian state to undermine the development of independent youth political movements. Variations on this theme are typical of those opposed to the Russian regime, including opposition within Russia as well as Western 'liberal democratic' commentary on *Nashi*'. Secondly, the 'defending Russia' discourse, which 'portrays *Nashi* as a legitimate response to external threats to the sovereignty of the Russian nation and is favoured by the Kremlin and those who support the incumbent Russian regime' (Atwal 2009a, 744).

## *Shifting Semantics*

The first obstacle that *Nashi* needed to overcome was a conceptual issue, and this was the seeming inconsistency between the movement's actions to preserve the incumbent regime by stamping out the seeds of 'coloured revolution' in Russia and its promotion of the need for extensive socio-political change on a par with many of the demands made by the opposition youth movement *Pora* during the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. Defying the usual juxtaposition of continuity and transformation, *Nashi* asserted that political stability was the necessary framework for progression in Russia and that change was essential for the continuation of the existing regime and the realisation of Putin's course:

The changes which we aim to make to the format of our country's development will be revolutionary, but revolutionary in content not in form. Our task is to achieve dynamic change, [...] our generation must replace the defeatists currently in power. But that does not mean that we should destroy the existing state. On the contrary, political stability is the most important condition for the development of our country (Nashi 2005).

The movement's ambition, as they put it, was to initiate a 'revolution in content, but not in form', in other words radically transforming the nature of Russian politics without overthrowing the incumbent regime. Thus, while making similar claims for socio-political transformation as *Pora*, unlike the Ukrainian youth movement, *Nashi* identified the regime rather than the opposition as the necessary vehicle for initiating an overhaul of the current polity. In this way *Nashi* attempted to reconcile broadly the apparent conflict between its pro-regime, pro-continuity ideology on the one hand and its pervasive criticisms of elements of the existing elite on the other.

It should be noted that in some philosophical circles a dominant ruling group is considered to be conducive to implementing major socio-political change. Dagnino notes that in Latin America in the mid 70s-80s, the particular environment in which Gramsci's work was received 'seems to have nurtured a strong emphasis on the progressive or "revolutionary" possibility of hegemony as a project for the transformation of society' in contrast to the European application of the term hegemony 'to an analysis of the maintenance of the status quo and dominant power relations' (Dagnino 1998, 39). The similarities between this notion of the 'progressive possibilities of hegemony' and *Nashi's* alignment of the preservation of the incumbent regime with the means of promoting socio-political change as well as the certain logic of such an approach are clear. The ability of a dominant regime such as in Russia, with little surviving opposition, a heavy concentration of power and a monopoly of administrative resources, to drive through far-reaching socio-political transformation at an official level is undeniable. Nevertheless, as we shall see in due course with *Nashi*, a dominant regime imposes its own limitations on the scope of possible change.

Closer examination of the three main tasks set out by *Nashi* in its manifesto reveals a recurrent theme to the movement's conception of the underlying problem in each instance and how it envisaged that each task should be fulfilled. Despite the transformational designs of the movement's aims to change the mentality of the ruling elite and develop a functioning civil society to hold the authorities to account, ultimately *Nashi's* plan of action across the board has rested largely on undermining the 'western-sponsored' opposition. Essentially, *Nashi* has sought to realise Russia's future potential simply by ensuring the continuation of Putin's course and denouncing democratic pretenders and other 'non-patriotic' elements, who allegedly seek to return Russia to the chaos of the nineties. *Nashi* thus shifted the target of its criticisms of the current polity from the regime to the opposition, retaining its pro-regime

credentials in spite of its inflammatory critique of the system. Effectively associating the opposition with backsliding and instability in this manner enabled pro-regime groups in favour of political continuity to claim the mantle of being progressive and dynamic and thus attract young Russians inspired by *Pora* in Ukraine. In this light, continuity was infinitely preferable to the alternative of a return to the instability of the nineties and, moreover, was deemed requisite for Russia's future progression and positive transformation.

### *Realpolitik*

The second obstacle to *Nashi's* pairing of continuity and transformation was the practical complications of petitioning for political transformation while maintaining the necessary benefits of Kremlin approval and support gained exclusively through political allegiance. In the contemporary political environment in Russia, where the emergence of any independent initiative is inhibited and its development institutionalised so as to disarm any potentially subversive activity, the scope for advancing political change is severely restricted. The formal political opposition is marginalised and powerless and the development of a functioning civil society is impeded through the introduction and selective application of legislation on monitoring NGOs, extremism and the right to assembly. In such repressive circumstances, with the overwhelming dominance of the regime and limited course for public accountability, there is simply no reason for the Kremlin to support the advancement of any organisation that seeks to challenge the status quo or for it to appease any calls for unwelcome change. Ordinarily, therefore, it would be difficult for any group to mobilise around an agenda for change let alone a pro-regime organisation in receipt of state support.

However, with the perceived threat of political instability in the run up to the 2007-8 electoral cycle the development of pro-regime youth organisations became pertinent to the Kremlin's critical interests and young Russians themselves realised their worth, as Drokova notes:

When the threat of the 'Orange Revolution' arose, after the events in Ukraine and Georgia, it became clear that youth is one of the most active political groups and that at certain points young people's actions can affect the whole country. The realisation of this by both young Russians and the government led to the creation of *Nashi*.<sup>6</sup>

With the regime in potential jeopardy, political stability became an active pursuit. Instead of being the constant, the continuation of the current political course became a goal in itself. This shifted the balance of Russian politics, effectively opening up a dialogue between the Kremlin and youth initiatives as the Kremlin sought to procure their support in maintaining political stability and securing the incumbent regime; a task hitherto achieved simply by shutting out alternative voices. Counter-intuitively as far as the restrictions associated with having Kremlin support are concerned, at this time adopting a strictly pro-regime stance and developing aggressive counter-orange measures became the key to giving Russian youth movements some degree of political influence and leverage to push through change otherwise unheard of in the contemporary environment. Thus *Nashi's* pro-regime credentials have been both an asset and a necessary counterpart to its transformative ambitions. At the same time, because of the nature of the 'orange threat', *Nashi's* progressive rhetoric has also found Kremlin favour by enabling the movement to divert young Russians' attention away from oppositional groups seeking to emulate the success of *Pora* in Ukraine. In this way, being pro-regime *and* pro-transformation was not only practically possible for *Nashi* in the specific

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<sup>6</sup> Author's interview with *Nashi* commissar Maria Drokova, Seliger, July 24 2008.

context of the perceived threat of political instability during the 2007-8 electoral cycle, but actually this combination was uniquely important to Kremlin support for the movement at this time.

In terms of the potential reasons suggested above for why *Nashi's* transformative agenda may have been neglected by commentators, it has been demonstrated that neither the movement's aspirations to promote continuity and stability nor the fact that it received Kremlin support would have necessarily prevented it from pursuing an agenda for change. In *Nashi's* case, continuity and transformation were not mutually exclusive on a conceptual or practical level and so the movement's transformative ambitions should not be dismissed on those grounds. However, what remains to be seen is whether it would have been correct to assume that the state could and would stifle any attempt at genuine transformation by *Nashi* despite its public support for the movement and thus whether or not it would have been justified to discount *Nashi's* transformative ambitions on that basis. This will be considered in the next section by assessing to what extent *Nashi* has managed to deliver on its aims of initiating far-reaching change in any meaningful fashion.

### *Evaluating the Success of Nashi's Dual Strategy*

I will now evaluate how successful the movement's dual strategy has been in practice. Given that *Nashi's* aim of preserving the incumbent regime and ensuring the continuation of the current political course has been widely acknowledged and that the movement's ability to achieve this goal with Kremlin support is neither contentious nor surprising, *Nashi's* success in executing its dual strategy will be measured in terms of the movement's ability to initiate its planned changes and to realise its transformative ambitions.

### *Transformation*

As far as *Nashi's* contribution to transformation is concerned, the key area in which the movement's success has been noteworthy so far is in changing perceptions of youth within Russian politics and society. Not least, the very fact that the 2007-8 electoral cycle was distinguished by the esteem in which politicians held young people represents a remarkable change from the legacy of fighting for pensioners' votes that has characterised post-communist politics in Russia. More specifically, *Nashi* has promoted the philosophy that young people need to be supported in their development and that the state needs to provide opportunities for youths' self-realisation. As *Nashi* seeks to underline, this is a significant departure from the 'free for all' of the nineties, which left young Russians to fend for themselves and shape their future, either by means of the education and connections that their family could provide, or for those from less fortunate backgrounds, by turning to crime and banditry:

A few years ago in Russia youth politics did not exist in principle, because there was simply no inclination for it and also because neo-liberalism was in vogue - the idea of 'help yourself', 'make yourself'. Either you managed to make something of yourself and were a winner, or else you failed and were branded a loser. But not everyone has the same capabilities or equal opportunities, some do not have the necessary technology. Even now, few people understand the concept of youth politics. For the first time [...] we are trying to get the message across that young people need to be provided with

opportunities, young people need to be connected, given the technology etc.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, by setting the political focus on young people and seeking to reach out to youths who previously found themselves on the margins of society, *Nashi* has encouraged the development of youth political efficacy.<sup>8</sup> The Kremlin's attention and Putin's personal interest in meeting *Nashi* activists and publicly endorsing the movement's efforts boosts young Russians' external political efficacy. Moreover, slogans such as '*VremYa Prishlo*' ('my time has come') reinforce *Nashi's* message (epitomised in the grandiose rhetoric of its manifesto – see below) that Russia's future depends on the actions of young people today and that every single young person has the choice to take an active part in determining their own future:

We live in difficult times. Freedom, justice, cooperation – that is how we envisage Russia in the future. But we live in a country where world history has been written and will continue to be written over the next ten years. We can make Russia as we would like it to be and in doing so we can make the whole world a better place. Not everyone has the chance to do that in their lifetime (*Nashi* 2005).

Through its work to promote youth initiatives *Nashi* has attempted to place the cultivation of young Russians' self-realisation at the forefront of securing Russia's future prosperity and global standing. In this way *Nashi* has endeavoured to ensure that the new status of youth in Russian politics and society becomes a lasting legacy by claiming an ongoing justification for continued state interest and support for youth work. The establishment of the State Agency for Youth Affairs (successor of the State Committee for Youth) is perhaps the greatest example of the movement's bid to consolidate the change in perceptions of young Russians among politicians and the society that it has encouraged, and in testimony to *Nashi's* particular influence here, the movement's founder Vasily Yakemenko was made head of the agency, with several other *Nashi* commissars receiving positions within the agency, as well as in the State Duma and the Public Chamber.<sup>9</sup>

However, while the progress made by *Nashi* in terms of advancing socio-political transformation is significant and although the movement has done much to attempt to ensure its enduring impact, simply outlining *Nashi's* achievements obscures analysis of the extent to which it has actually addressed the issues that it identified as being integral to Russia's development and the extent to which it has fulfilled its own objectives to this end. This level of assessment of *Nashi's* ability to implement its transformative aims is integral to our understanding of the relationship between continuity and transformation here, and ultimately of the power-relations between *Nashi* and the state. From this perspective, *Nashi's* overall success in terms of initiating its dual strategy has been poor. In terms of public accountability and elite rejuvenation, both detailed in the movement's manifesto as being imperative to

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<sup>7</sup> Author's interview with the head of one of *Nashi's* federal projects, Seliger, July 21 2008.

<sup>8</sup> According to Karaman, internal political efficacy refers to a person's perception of his own ability to understand and participate in politics, while external political efficacy refers to a person's perception of the ability of political institutions to respond effectively to and satisfy their needs (2004, 31–32).

<sup>9</sup> For example, *Nashi's* founder, Vasily Yakemenko, was appointed head of the State Committee on Youth Affairs which has since become the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs under President Medvedev; former head of '*Nashi vybori*' (Our elections) and significant figure in *Nashi's* ideological leadership, Sergei Belokonev, is a State Duma deputy and vice-chair of the former State Committee on Youth Affairs; long-standing *Nashi* commissar, Yulia Gorodnicheva, is a member of the Public Chamber; and *Nashi's* spokesperson and commissar, Maria Drokova, works for the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs.

ensuring Russia's future prosperity and global standing, *Nashi's* impact has been negligible. As alluded to above conceptually, in practice *Nashi's* demands of Russia's elite to possess certain qualities have not been extended to critique the integrity of Kremlin officials or United Russia members.<sup>10</sup> Instead opposition figures such as Kasparov and other 'non-patriotic' elements such as Anthony Brenton and Marina Kaljurand have been targeted by the youth movement.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, although *Nashi* declared elite rejuvenation (or to use *Nashi's* own term 'cadre revolution') to be of primary importance and despite the drive by *Nashi* and the Young Guard to get dedicated young people into power, they have achieved very little in the way of tangible results.<sup>12</sup> On 10 April 2006 United Russia announced the introduction of a youth quota, which meant that 20 per cent of United Russia's party list in all future elections should be comprised of under 28-year-olds (later this threshold was raised to under 35-year-olds for elections at a federal level). Yet, according to the lists submitted to the Central Electoral Committee, under 35-year-olds made up only 12.2 per cent of United Russia's party list for the 2007 State Duma elections and a total of 7.3 per cent of United Russia's elected deputies. To put this into context, the percentage of deputies aged under 35 belonging to the 'party of power' in the fourth convocation of the State Duma (2003-7) was 6.8 per cent.<sup>13</sup> Thus *Nashi* has not been able to instigate any significant increase in the proportion of young deputies in the State Duma.

On the basis of this reckoning of *Nashi's* achievements and shortcomings in realising its transformative ambitions it is fair to say that the movement did manage to improve attitudes towards young people in Russian politics and society as well as to change young Russians' perceptions of themselves. Nevertheless, when the movement's transformative achievements are evaluated alongside its original goals set out in its manifesto, it becomes clear that there are at least two key areas, namely public accountability and elite rejuvenation, where *Nashi* has not delivered on its declared aims. This chapter will now investigate why *Nashi* has been successful at initiating change in some areas but not others and explore what this reveals about the relationship between continuity and transformation in the case of *Nashi*. In seeking to identify what distinguishes *Nashi's* successes from its shortcomings this chapter hopes to finally resolve whether potential efforts by the state to stifle attempts at genuine transformation by the movement have limited *Nashi's* results here.

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<sup>10</sup> United Russia (*Yedinaya Rossiya*) is the 'party of power' and currently holds a constitutional majority in the State Duma of the Russian Federation.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Garry Kasparov, key opposition figure in the run up to the 2007-8 elections was repeatedly derided by *Nashi* for allegedly having an American passport. Furthermore, in May 2007, following the repositioning of a Soviet war memorial in Tallinn, *Nashi* activists picketed the Estonian embassy in Moscow and mobbed the Estonian ambassador, Marina Kaljurand until she left her post. Similarly, after speaking at a conference of the opposition coalition *Drugaya Rossiya* (Another Russia) in July 2006, British ambassador Anthony Brenton was repeatedly followed and harassed by *Nashi* activists in a prolonged campaign of intimidation that lasted more than four months before the Foreign Office finally replaced him.

<sup>12</sup> The 'Young Guard' (*Molodaia Gvardiia Yedinoi Rossii*) is the youth wing of the political party of power 'United Russia'.

<sup>13</sup> Author's own calculations based on material from the Central Electoral Committee of the Russian Federation, <http://www.izbirkom.ru/izbirkom.html> (accessed April 23 2009), and from the State Duma of the Russian Federation, <http://www.duma.gov.ru/> (accessed November 1 2008). For all calculations of ages of Duma deputies the age which they turned in election year is used, i.e. for ages of Duma deputies in the 5th convocation deputies age is simply 2007 minus their year of birth.



## *Leverage and Limitations*

It is useful to consider the interaction between continuity and transformation in the development of *Nashi* in terms of a trade-off between the Kremlin and *Nashi* according to what each could and would be willing to offer the other. On the one hand, the Kremlin had the means to bolster *Nashi's* bid to improve the status of youth in Russian politics and society and to rejuvenate the existing elite by procuring certain favours for *Nashi* in return for the movement's allegiance and support. On the other hand, *Nashi* had the potential to help secure the preservation of the incumbent regime by reinforcing regime legitimacy and allaying fears of the perceived threat of a youth-led revolution during the course of the 2007-8 electoral cycle. Characterising the interaction in this manner not only provides for the existence of countervailing forces and multiple agents, but also allows for the possibility that both continuity and transformation may take place simultaneously to some degree, albeit each at the expense of the other, and that it may be necessary to make concessions in one area in order to make gains in another.

Despite *Nashi's* affiliation with the Kremlin and the favourable environment in the run up to the 2007-8 electoral cycle, from the outset the relationship between them was not one of reciprocity on equal terms, but rather one of protracted negotiation stacked in favour of the Kremlin. Certainly, in 2006-7 the recent events of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and Putin's looming retirement as president combined to create a unique political environment in Russia that was advantageous to youth organisations as a whole. Moreover, at this time, pro-Kremlin youth movements were pertinent to the regime's critical interests and so could reasonably expect to gain the Kremlin's favour and, in view of potential services rendered to the state, to be able to exert some degree of influence over the Kremlin. Yet, taken on an individual basis, the value of a youth movement's worth to the Kremlin was greatly diminished by the fact that while having the state's support was the only means for youth movements to obtain vital resources, including budgetary allocated funding, access to media, protection from bureaucratic interference and such like, the Kremlin was not dependent on any one particular youth movement. This meant that although the security offered by *Nashi* was contingent on the Kremlin recognising the significance of young people and paying them due heed and attention, *Nashi's* ability to push for transformation beyond what the Kremlin was prepared to give was severely limited. For example, despite the fact that there was some discontentment within *Nashi* over United Russia's failure to meet its promise of 20 per cent youth quota on its party list to the fifth convocation of the State Duma, protest, if any, was muted, and certainly kept out of the public eye. This suggests that the imperative of securing the incumbent regime over the course of the 2007-8 electoral cycle took precedence over the movement's transformative ambitions.<sup>14</sup>

This subordination of *Nashi's* transformative aspirations to the overriding imperative of continuity and, by extension, the subordination of *Nashi's* aims to the Kremlin's interests is evident in the above assessment of the movement's achievements in meeting its planned socio-political transformation: for the most part, the changes that occurred were only those integral to *Nashi* establishing itself and being thus able to effectively secure the continuation of the incumbent regime, or those that would underwrite the legitimacy of the regime in some way and meet little resistance from the Kremlin, its allies or powerful elites. *Nashi's* key area of success, as noted above, has been in changing perceptions of young people, raising their

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<sup>14</sup> One of *Nashi's* leaders (who wished to remain anonymous) admitted that, although the youth quota was more an informal agreement and a declaration of intent than a formal commitment, the quota simply was not fulfilled and consequently there has been some degree of discontent about that within *Nashi*. Correspondence with this author, 25 March 2009.

political status and consequently their political efficacy. This 'transformative' success dovetails nicely with supporting the continuity of the incumbent regime by encouraging young people to participate in politics, thus getting out the youth vote and legitimising the regime. In terms of public accountability, where little progress has been made, the fact that *Nashi's* holding of existing authorities to account has been confined to the opposition is perhaps unsurprising given the potential repercussions of such a policy for regime legitimacy and stability. Similarly, the likely resistance to the implementation of United Russia's youth quota from the patrons of the party, whose intentions of installing their own representatives of big business in the State Duma on United Russia's ticket would come under greater pressure from the reduction in available places on the party list, would have made *Nashi's* plans for elite rejuvenation a costly, and thus, unviable transformation from the regime's perspective (Atwal 2009b).

This cuts to the heart of the dialectic between political continuity and transformation in the case of *Nashi*. While the two processes were symbiotic in nature in the run up to the 2007-8 electoral cycle, they were mutually restrictive: assisting the perpetuation of the incumbent regime opened up possibilities for influence and leverage otherwise unheard of for young Russians, but simultaneously limited the scope of any changes planned or introduced by *Nashi* to the confines of state sanction. In other words, given the contemporary Russian political environment, transformation could only occur within the realms of broad political continuity and Kremlin support and this considerably limited the scope and timeframe of any such attempt. As previous state-sponsored mobilisation efforts in the Putin era attest to, while the Kremlin cannot fully direct the course and outcome of participation, it can indeed prevent an organisation from using the benefits of publicity, representation and other resources gained from state-support to pursue its own agenda. Incidents of state persecution of the opposition are numerous and demonstrate the lengths to which the Kremlin will go to eliminate any perceived challenge to the regime. However, the obvious precedent in terms of repression of state-sponsored participation is *Rodina* (Motherland) – a political party allegedly set up by the Kremlin prior to the 2003 State Duma elections in order to siphon votes from the Communist Party.<sup>15</sup> When *Rodina* subsequently began to assert its own agenda, and thus by implication challenge the regime's hegemony, the Kremlin took action to tame all wayward elements associated with the party by forcing *Rodina* to merge with the Russian Party of Life and the Pensioners' Party in 2006 to form Fair Russia (*Spravedlivaya Rossiya*) and in the process sidelining its most controversial characters (in particular Dmitry Rogozin). With a ready supply of other politicians willing to take up the reins and play by the Kremlin's rules, as evident in the latest state-sponsored creation *Pravoe Delo* (Right Cause) which put an end to the Union of Right Forces (*Soyuz Pravikh Sil* - considered to have been Russia's main liberal-democratic opposition party), the Kremlin is able to go on in this fashion intimidating any potential challenges to its rule and picking up and dropping groups as it sees fit. Thus, with *Nashi's* leverage curtailed following the completion of the 2007-8 electoral cycle and the passing of the perceived 'orange' threat, should the movement persist in pursuing its own transformative agenda to the objection of the state, it would find itself debilitated and victim of the same fate at the hands of its former patron, the Kremlin, as *Rodina*.

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<sup>15</sup> Wilson refers to such parties, created by the state in order to divert support away from a genuine opposition party, as 'flies' (2005).

## *Theoretical Applications*

The above findings on the relationship between continuity and transformation in the case of *Nashi* have a clear resonance for existing theory on state-sponsored participation in general. The power-relations between *Nashi* and the state underwrite the tension between continuity and transformation that was discussed above, and have determined the trade-off between the two processes. The final section of this chapter situates these findings in their broader theoretical context and assesses their implications for the prevalent assumption that an 'active state' is an inherently corrosive force for the development of civil society.

## *Normative Ideals*

Systematic disregard for participatory spaces initiated or sponsored by the state to contribute to the development of civil society or even to allow for participants' autonomy and agency stems from the liberal ideal of the separation of the state and civil society embedded within Habermas's work. In the first section of his seminal work on the structural transformation of the public sphere (1989), Habermas presents the 'bourgeois public sphere' as an autonomous site of 'rational discourse' wherein private individuals formulate 'public opinion' to serve as a check on the state. From the liberal perspective, 'it is precisely this extra governmental character of the public sphere that confers an aura of independence, autonomy and legitimacy on the "public opinion" generated in it' (Fraser 1993, 24). In other words, in the Habermasian spirit, 'developing an autonomous public sphere outside the domain of the state is a precondition for citizen engagement that does not simply serve to legitimate the existing political system' (Cornwall 2002, 4). Although Habermas himself acknowledges the decreasing viability of such a clear demarcation of the roles of the state and civil society in the second section of his analysis, his conception of the classical public sphere being independent from the state is retained as a liberal-democratic normative ideal, which continues to inform contemporary understandings of the state-society dialectic (Hohendahl 1979 and Cornwall 2002, 4-5).

That is not to say that the role of the state in civil society has been ignored within the academic literature. The fact that the state often does adopt an active role in civil society has been recognised by scholars such as Stepan:

[The state] is the continuous administrative, legal, bureaucratic and coercive systems that attempt not only to structure relationships between civil society and public authority in a polity, but also to structure many crucial relationships within civil society as well (Stepan 1978, xii).

Moreover, Skocpol asserts that not only does the state play a direct interventionist role, but the influence of the state as a structure with its laws and frameworks also provides the context in which all societal developments should be understood, 'even such apparently purely socio-economic phenomena as interest groups and classes' (Skocpol 1985, 27). However, while the advantages and disadvantages of the 'active state' with regard to the economy have been fiercely debated (see Skocpol 1985) a similar debate on the potential benefits and limitations of state intervention in civil society or associational life has been non-forthcoming. It is here that the resonance of Habermas' lament of the disintegration of the classical model of the public sphere is most acutely felt. For example, recognising that state actions and the political environment affect participation by providing opportunities for or erecting barriers against collective action, advocates of a political process approach to collective action developed the

concept of ‘political-opportunity- structure’ (primarily Tilly 1978 and subsequently taken up by his associates McAdam and Tarrow). The concept of ‘political-opportunity-structure’ has since become part of an overarching framework, alongside ‘mobilising structures’ and ‘framing processes’ which has been widely accepted by scholars as a basis for studying social movements (McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996, 2). Yet, despite the more holistic approach adopted in the ‘political-opportunity-structure’ framework, its proponents do not go so far as to consider state-sponsored participation among their extensive work on collective action (for example, see Tarrow 1998, and McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996). Thus, although social movement theory has been developed to accommodate the perceived need to recognise the influence of the state on the development of civil society, the latent assumption that state influence on civil society is corruptive and inevitably impedes activists’ autonomy and agency remains tangible and therefore the tendency to disregard state-sponsored participation persists.

### *The Case of Nashi*

As has been demonstrated above, in the case of *Nashi*, continuity and transformation have enjoyed a symbiotic but mutually restrictive relationship. To apply this to the theoretical context here, *Nashi* has experienced both the benefits and limitations of state sponsorship. As far as the benefits of state sponsorship for *Nashi* are concerned, Kremlin backing and Putin’s personal endorsement of the youth movement were integral to establishing the movement and giving it credence among politicians, the authorities and young Russians alike. Indeed, as underlined earlier through recollection of the fate of *Rodina* and other civic and political organisations falling foul of the Kremlin’s approval, not having or losing state sponsorship in Russia severely debilitates an organisation’s ability to function. However, the limitations of state sponsorship in Russia are equally severe. The difficulties experienced by *Nashi* with regard to implementing far-reaching and enduring change noted above testify to the fact that state sponsorship indeed results in the subordination of societal demands to state interests. Nonetheless, while it is true that the limitations of working within the confines of state approval have been considerable for *Nashi* and will prevent the movement from pursuing its own transformative agenda in future, the benefits accrued by means of state sanction and support have been critical to the movement’s ability to push for socio-political change at all. Thus, in this context state sponsorship is correlated with the development of a youth agenda and giving young Russians a platform in an otherwise hostile political environment. In this way, the relationship between continuity and transformation in the case of *Nashi* highlights the necessary benefit of state-sponsorship for political and civic organisations in certain contexts and thus rebuffs the general assumption that the ‘active state’ has an entirely detrimental effect on civil society.

### *Conclusions*

In conclusion it is possible to say that *Nashi*’s combination of an agenda for change within a pro-regime, pro-stability framework was opportunistic in completely redefining the terms of play and taking advantage of the Kremlin’s fear of the potential threat of a youth-sponsored ‘coloured revolution’ during the course of the 2007-8 electoral cycle. In this unique political climate continuity and transformation enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, because supporting the development of youth initiatives and facilitating youth self-realisation were perceived to be vital to neutralising the potential ‘orange threat’ and thus ensuring the preservation of the incumbent regime, and, at the same time, adopting a pro-regime, anti-‘orange’ stance became

the means to securing Kremlin support and the political influence necessary to advance change. As a result, *Nashi* has made a significant contribution to political transformation in Russia within the framework of supporting overall political stability and continuity, most noticeably raising the status of youth among Russian politicians and society and increasing awareness of the value of supporting youth initiatives and the difference that young people can make.

However, while being essential to the realisation of *Nashi's* transformative ambitions, state sponsorship simultaneously placed limitations on the scope of change possible, in particular impeding any attempts to make changes that would directly impinge on the incumbent elite. Furthermore, with the threat of a Russian 'coloured revolution' assuaged and the regime's dominance consolidated in the 2007-8 electoral cycle, *Nashi's* leverage over the Kremlin has been curtailed and the opportunity to pursue its own transformative agenda (albeit already heavily limited) has passed. As such, the implementation of *Nashi's* dual continuity-transformation strategy in future will be strictly confined to those actions that directly support or coincide with the Kremlin's interests.

Finally, in response to the prevalent assumption that state-sponsored participation is inherently detrimental for the development of civil society and following from examination of *Nashi's* dual continuity-transformation strategy in this chapter, the critical question becomes not whether state-sponsored participation is a positive or negative phenomenon but rather, in the Russian context, whether state-sponsored participation is better than none. In the case of *Nashi*, whether suffering considerable limitations to its ability to pursue its own agenda in order to gain some influence and publicity is better than being confined to the margins of Russian politics.

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