

# Patriotic Upbringing in Russia

## CAN IT PRODUCE GOOD CITIZENS?

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Over the last decade, the main trend of Russian government youth policy has been to encourage patriotic upbringing. Various official bodies, educational institutions, youth clubs, and pedagogical researchers have adhered to this policy direction. How have their efforts evolved? What pedagogic, social, and political priorities have been stressed, and which have been abandoned? Who has been positioned as “friends” for Russia’s patriotic youth, and who as “enemies”?

Patriotic upbringing in post-Soviet Russia was initially aimed mainly at raising the cultural level of Russian youth and preparing young males for military service. Since the middle of the last decade, the stress has increasingly shifted to the mobilization of young government supporters and to the indoctrination of pupils concerning “correct” views of recent Russian and Soviet history. Given that an emphasis on Russian past and present greatness is a core feature of mainstream patriotism, patriotic upbringing is not directed against all opponents of the current political regime, but rather those who are perceived as denying this greatness. At the same time, youth patriotism has failed to distance itself persuasively from rising radical nationalism and official corruption.

### **The Evolution of Patriotic Upbringing in Russia**

In the Soviet period, the promotion of a military-patriotic upbringing was based on Marxist-Leninist ideology and designed to strengthen the moral spirit of both current and prospective defenders of the motherland. After the collapse of the USSR, however, Russian pedagogy viewed patriotism in an unfavourable light, and severely criticized it as a chauvinism-provoking legacy of Soviet totalitarian ideology.

Pedagogical interest in patriotic upbringing began to revive in the late 1990s and was given full support after the rise of Vladimir Putin. In February 2001, a first federal program (“Patriotic Upbringing of Russian Citizens for 2001-2005”) aimed to prepare Russian youth to defend their country, but also to restore the wholesome influence of

Russian arts and education in order to counter youthful indifference, cynicism, and egoism. The basic means for fulfilling these aims included various militarized activities (events in military-patriotic clubs, military sports programs, events commemorating the heroic deeds of Soviet soldiers in World War II), the dissemination of propaganda in the mass media, the publication of patriotic literature, encouragement of relevant pedagogical research, and, above all, efforts to “actively counteract any distortion or falsification of national history.” The goals of patriotic upbringing were the sort that are ambitious but difficult to measure – “socioeconomic, spiritual, and cultural growth” and “social and economic stability.”

Unsurprisingly, the outcome of the program was not very successful. Coordinated by a “Government Commission for Social Problems of the Military, Dischargees, and Members of their Families,” its five-year budget was approximately equivalent to \$6.2 million. However, the program did help to establish patriotic upbringing as the main focus of official youth outreach activity.

The “color revolutions” that took place in the post-Soviet space between 2003-05 greatly impacted the course of the second program of patriotic upbringing (2006-2010). It was largely in response to these events that the pro-government youth movement *Nashi* was created in 2005, and funding for youth policy increased. The budget of this second program of patriotic upbringing was three times greater than the first; some activities, like the increasingly expensive annual gatherings of *Nashi* youth at Lake Seliger, were funded primarily from other sources such as government grants and business contributions. The second program’s goals, however, remained as abstractly ambitious as the first, although a list of quantitative control criteria, such as the number of people and institutions involved and scholarly works on the topic, were added. As before, implementation of the program was coordinated by a military-related body, this time the National Military Historical-Cultural Center.

During this second program period, patriotism became the dominant trend in youth policy and relevant pedagogical research. Many educational institutions, youth clubs, and pedagogical researchers adjusted their activities to this mainstream agenda. Among other things, this meant a rapid growth in research on patriotic upbringing: in 2006-2010, the number of dissertations on the topic was approximately twice the number of those that came out over the previous five years, while six times more monographs and edited volumes were produced. The quality of this work, however, was very low. In particular, only a small part of the literature referred to modern theories or publications originating outside of Russia. At this time, patriotism also increasingly became a criterion of acceptability for school textbooks, and the state launched a campaign against “falsifications of history” – non-conformist interpretations of sensitive topics in modern Russian history, such as World War II. Among other reasons, this attack was justified by the need to protect “naive” young generations against the destructive influence of “lies” discrediting their country, especially against “understating” the Soviet role in the WWII and “exaggerating” Russian and Soviet wrongdoings toward other countries or their peoples.

At present, we are into the third program of patriotic upbringing (2011-15). This program asserts that the endeavor to build a national program has already been successful. Its goal now is to contribute to the preservation of the existing order, in particular by “overcoming the extremist activities of some groups,” maintaining “social and economic stability,” and strengthening national security. The budget of the third program is equivalent to \$25.6 million, approximately one and a half times more than that of the previous program (while continuing to exclude related financing, including *Nashi*’s annual multi-million dollar retreats).

Probably the most ambitious project put forward was in 2010 by the governor of the Volgograd region, Anatoly Brovko, who proposed to establish a national “*Pobeda*” (Victory) center in his region. The core of this project was to be a national ideological center for the patriotic upbringing of Russian youth, inspired by the historic heroism of World War II defenders of Stalingrad. The plan envisioned the creation or reconstruction of historical and cultural sites, as well as the modernization of transportation and leisure infrastructure (the idea was also to attract many visitors to Volgograd). The project would have cost almost \$3 billion, equivalent to more than 100 patriotic upbringing programs, with \$1.8 billion provided by the federal government. This extravagant attempt to capitalize on the patriotic education program, however, failed to find support.

### **Typical Features**

As a response to the perceived moral degradation of Russia’s youth, patriotic upbringing was originally more about civic education than about propagating certain political views or demonstrating support for the ruling regime. At the same time, from the very start the patriotic resurgence was strongly influenced by the Russian military, which was seeking to restore a Soviet-like system of ideological training for conscripts. This military aspect typically outweighed the civic component of patriotic upbringing. At the same time, the idea of nurturing young patriots was strongly supported by conservatives and advocates of authoritarian stability.

Still, the content of patriotic education has been very eclectic. As various institutions and researchers tried to accommodate the new political climate and align their activities to the national program, some stressed moral training for military service and others the socialization of young Russian citizens. Still others tried to incorporate humanistic values, tolerance, and popularization of local ethnic traditions. Eventually, efforts to create a patriotism-based ideology for youth resulted in an ad hoc utilization of miscellaneous ideas: sovereign democracy, conservatism, loyalism, modernization, national greatness, geopolitical alarmism, anti-Westernism, and even tolerance and multiculturalism.

Despite (or because of) this ideological syncretism, patriotic upbringing has proven to be a poor remedy for serious social ills in Russia, including the rise of radical nationalist sentiments, the low value placed on integrity as an incentive for social behavior, and, relatedly, the persistence of corruption.

Most Russian pedagogical studies on patriotic upbringing emphasize tolerance as a principle and the unacceptability of hatred toward other ethnic and racial groups. However, not only do these often fail to find their audience, the search for external and internal enemies, which is intrinsic to many patriotic movements (see below), tends to provoke aggressive hostility toward visible ethnic minorities. Young radical nationalists overwhelmingly consider themselves patriots; their cry, "Glory to Russia!" is often used as a signal to attack people of "non-European" appearance. The danger of patriotism devolving into aggressive nationalism was mentioned as early as the second program for patriotic upbringing (2006-10), but such awareness has not resulted in new measures to address the problem.

While works on patriotic upbringing at least pay lip service to tolerance and diversity, they scarcely even address the importance of integrity as a core value in public life. In its stead, they propagate the notion of an "active civic stand." However, this rather vague, Soviet-sounding phrase is generally taken as advocacy for participating in loyalist activities, not for speaking out for the betterment of society.

Relatedly, though corruption has become a popular target in dominant political discourse, works on patriotic upbringing are practically indifferent to it. Aleksandr Dugin, a prominent far-right thinker and ideological leader of the Eurasian Youth Union, has even tried to provide a rationale for this by drawing a distinction between the patriotic "Eurasianist" corrupt (individuals who are not dependent on external forces and who invest money into the Russian economy) and their more dangerous "*comprador*" Atlanticist counterparts. According to Dugin, it is impossible to struggle simultaneously with these two groups, so the patriotic corrupt should be employed as allies until victory over the other group is achieved. On the whole, the poor attention paid to issues of corruption and integrity by advocates of youth patriotism can be explained to a large extent by their reluctance to contribute to the growth of non-conformist sentiments among young people.

### **Friends and Enemies**

Mainstream approaches to patriotic upbringing in Russia tend to divide society into patriots and non-patriots – the very name of the pro-government youth movement *Nashi* ("Ours") implies this division. At the end of the 1990s, "patriots" were often seen as consisting of supporters of traditional cultural values, while "non-patriots" were seen to be their liberal antagonists, who were contributing to a weakening of Russia by promoting Westernization, egoism, and immorality. The split later shifted to one between those who support a strong and great Russia and the agents of foreign influence, who, with the help of foreign funding, try to undermine political stability in Russia. Added to this, the so-called falsifiers of history also became increasingly central "enemies," disorienting the young generation through their lies about the country's role in modern history.

The extent to which patriotic upbringing can be used as a means to divert Russia's youth away from opposition movements and ideas has its limits, however. To be considered a young patriot or proper patriotic educator, it is not necessary to show

excessive “loyalty” to the ruling regime – just to support the idea of a strong Russian state and to be reluctant to acknowledge Russia’s wrongdoings. So while patriotic upbringing might inoculate youth against values like liberalism, pacifism, and cosmopolitanism, it is far less effective against communists and radical nationalists.

## **Conclusion**

Initially, the resurgence of state-promoted patriotic upbringing in Russia was aimed at raising the cultural level of young people and morally preparing future military conscripts. From the start, this resurgence had a strong anti-liberal and anti-Western flavor. As Russia’s political regime became more authoritarian, it began to use patriotic upbringing as a quasi-ideology for protecting itself against the potential threat of a “color revolution,” mobilizing young supporters, and strengthening state control over the teaching of social science and humanities.

Such attempts, however, have had only limited success. Even in official circles, a specification of what should be taught, and how, is vague. In addition, patriotic upbringing policies have proven to be of little help against the rise of radical nationalism, which stresses the idea of Russian greatness but rejects tolerance as a needless, and perhaps even harmful, element. Mainstream programs of patriotic upbringing also appear to be useless for the authorities’ well-publicized efforts at modernization, which requires not so much diligent loyalists, but honest people who are able to stand aside from the heavily corrupted system and, if necessary, be disloyal to its highest-standing representatives.