

Current Trends in Russian Youth Policy

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Since the collapse of the USSR, the post-Soviet states have attempted to establish their legitimacy through a process of nation-building, involving the creation of new systems of social meaning and order. In Russia, this has also involved establishing market institutions, as well as resocializing the populace to behave like rational individualists. Naturally, the chief object of such efforts was initially the still-malleable generation of young people that came of age during perestroika or after the fall of communism. Increasingly, however, a wide range of objective indicators suggested that the country's youth was facing a veritable crisis of impoverishment, ill health, and alienation. By the mid-to-late 1990s, this led to mounting anxiety that Russia was truly on the verge of losing a generation, which in turn spawned a state-led effort to rectify the problems of youth. Unfortunately, achieving this was extraordinarily difficult, since the dislocation of young people happened to coincide with a sudden, massive exposure to globalization, as well as a general breakdown in social organization, economic function, and government capacity.

The result, under Russian President Vladimir Putin, has been an increasingly large-scale, systematic campaign to address all issues pertaining to youth. As such, youth policy under Putin represents part of a larger attempt to anchor state and society within a stable institutional framework marked by a mixture of delegation and centralization. This memo reviews the pattern of current youth policymaking in Russia, outlining the contours of the relevant legislation as well as the nature of the political process involved.

The Predicament of Youth

Russian youth is plagued by a number of major afflictions. Chief among these are: moral degradation resulting from systemic transformation and globalization; high levels of unemployment and underemployment; an estimated 40 percent rise in juvenile crime since the early 1990s; increasing rates of emigration among youth; rampant drug abuse, alcoholism, and sexually transmitted disease (including a sharply rising incidence of AIDS); high mortality rates associated with various risk factors in the 15-24 age group; and the lack of infrastructure necessary for participating in modernization, such as online interaction and value-added forms of entrepreneurship. These problems have been extensively documented by academics as well as various state bureaucracies. They are, moreover, frequently recited by authorities, who have called for a coherent new youth policy to address them.

The Institutional Framework of Youth Policy

The process of formulating a post-Soviet youth policy in Russia began to take shape under former Russian President Boris Yeltsin in the early 1990s, but the policy remained institutionally and ideologically underdeveloped. Following Putin's accession to power in 2000, the problems of youth, and the elaboration of an official policy, were accorded much higher priority. A new structure was swiftly established and charged with forming an organizational and legislative framework for youth policy.

Primary responsibility for this project was granted to the Ministry of Education (renamed the Ministry of Education and Science in 2004), which led the process of drafting a comprehensive federal program. Alongside the ministry there also exists a Subcommittee on Youth Affairs and a Youth Chamber, both under the lower house of parliament (Duma), which have at times been significant participants in debating various documents and proposals. In addition, an inter-ministerial commission was formed in order to respond to ideas drafted by the ministry and to coordinate issues relevant to youth affairs which fell within the purview of other ministries. Finally, the State Council, an advisory body composed of the heads of Russia's territorial units, has frequently commented on various aspects of youth policy. The wide range of institutions involved in formulating policy reflects the immense scope of youth policy, which straddles education, information technology, health and social welfare, employment, and cultural affairs.

The Substance of Youth Policy

The creation of the new policy structure was followed by a spate of new decrees and legislative acts. By late 2000, a draft program "Youth of Russia 2001-2005" was adopted, outlining a panoply of ambitious goals.

For the most part, however, the program's goals were not met, due to inadequate funding as well as clashing priorities at the regional level, where fiscal responsibility for implementation lay. In response, the Ministry of Education and Science has recently completed a new draft program, "Youth of Russia 2006-2010," which highlights a smaller number of key objectives, while also calling for massively increased outlays as well as a new system of institutional oversight. In particular, the new federal program identifies three overarching goals for youth policy:

- 1) "Informing the youth of potential developments in society and drawing them into social practice." The first component of this encompasses a number of measures (including interactive multimedia) designed to enlist young people in addressing the priority areas of policy. With regard to drawing young people into social practice, the government's plan is to fund (and, in doing so, to co-opt) youth groups involved in such productive endeavors.
- 2) "Fostering youth's innovative activity." This initiative is connected to planned improvements in education, especially through strengthening critical reasoning skills and increasing access to computers (in keeping with the federal "E-Russia" program). In addition to promoting Russia's competitiveness in such areas as science and engineering, the goal is to produce a new generation of market-oriented and information-savvy entrepreneurs.
- 3) "Integrating into society youths who are in difficult living situations." This broad category includes invalids, orphans, migrants, social deviants, addicts, ex-convicts, and young people living in hot spots (like Chechnya). While the specific means of achieving such integration vary from one category to the next, the common underlying assumption is that youth alienation may be diminished (and productivity enhanced) by giving young people a stake in society, through a combination of fulfilling work and involvement in politics.

Two other important thrusts of youth policy supplement these fundamental goals. The first is inculcating a healthy way of life, based on morality, rational individualism, social responsibility, and national identity. The second is strengthening the family, which consists of encouraging young married couples to have children (including the construction of adequate housing), as well as supervising their approach to childrearing. Whereas the former ideological project arises in response to cultural globalization and its attendant threat to national identity, the latter demographic project arises in response to the decline in Russia's overall population (and the falling share of ethnic Russians within it).

The urgency associated with these goals allows us to glimpse the depth of concern over the emergence of an asocial, apolitical, and

generally disaffected younger generation, with all that this implies for the future of Russia.

Underlying Debate

A degree of opposition to the new federal program for 2006-2010 has emerged, due primarily to the enormous increase in expenditures it entails. The government has requested a total of 12,980 million rubles over the next five-year period, approximately a 25-fold increase over the 96 million rubles in the 2005 budget. It should be emphasized, however, that the objectives of youth policy enjoy a high level of consensus, concerning both the need for a comprehensive policy and its general content. For example, public discourse about youth policy reveals widespread disgust over uncensored media content, including its allegedly pernicious effects on youth culture. The lack of meaningful and remunerative job prospects for young people is another broadly shared concern, as is the need to improve education and overcome youth cynicism and despair. Furthermore, one often detects an unmistakable note of anxiety about the potential for youth-sponsored political unrest, especially in the aftermath of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. Yet despite these shared concerns, the public debate on youth policy also reveals serious disagreements about the nature of democracy and the desirable role of government in society. Such disagreements bear on the limits of delegation in policymaking, as well as related questions of free speech, free association, and official ideology.

In the course of this public debate two opposing positions have been articulated, each representing a different institutional base as well as a fundamentally different perspective. The first, associated with the Ministry of Education and Science, seeks to foster independent initiative on the part of youth and thus to include young people directly in policymaking. Accordingly, youth participation in nongovernmental organizations (formally independent from the state yet systematically linked to it) is viewed not only as an indicator of social health but also as a means of contributing to effective governance. The alternative view (to quote from the State Council's 2002 "Doctrine of Youth of Russia") calls for "taking the process of socialization of youth under state control," through a combination of propaganda and centralized supervision. This would involve creating specialized media organs, making schools once more centers of moral instruction, and even forming a new federal service for socialization.

It is a measure of the still-unresolved nature of youth policy that both orientations may be encountered in everyday practice. Thus, while the ministry's draft program accords youth NGOs substantial autonomy and carefully avoids taking an overtly paternalistic stance, one can also detect efforts to manage youth activity from above. As already mentioned, this includes registering and funding youth NGOs, and establishing ties

between them and authorities at all levels of governance. It also involves creating official youth groups, youth camps, and umbrella organizations, which are intended to counter youth oppositional activity. Such efforts have often been traced to the presidential apparatus. Moreover, at the national and regional levels, various steps have been taken to reinstate Soviet-style youth rallies and construction brigades. The goal, then, is not so much to *depoliticize* young people as to *repoliticize* them, yet in a way consistent with the purposes of the state.

The ongoing debate over youth policy thus expresses a basic tension in Russian society today: on the one hand, a demand for civil society and democratic legitimacy and, on the other, a demand for control, stability, and a guaranteed normative order. Despite efforts to paper over this dispute in the form of a compromise document, the underlying divergence of views has persisted and, indeed, has been partly responsible for the failure to adopt a binding legal framework to date.

Conclusions

Analyzing the making of youth policy provides important insights into the interrelated processes of state-building and nation-building within the context of globalization. Obviously, a great deal is at stake, not only with regard to the specific features of youth policy but also with regard to the structure of policymaking institutions and relations between state and society as a whole. Although still evolving dynamically, and marked by a certain ambivalence and even overt dissension, the central pillars of youth policy seem fairly stable and clear. What we find at the level of state-building is a combination of centralization and decentralization so characteristic of political reform under Putin (often referred to as managed democracy). As a corollary, in the realm of nation-building, we find the construction of entrepreneurial and proactive citizens, who will nevertheless remain disciplined and loyal subjects of the state.

