

The youth movement *Nashi*: contentious politics, civil society, and party politics.¹

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Abstract

The youth movement *Nashi* was established in Russia with the support of the Putin regime in 2005. The success of anti-regime demonstrators in Ukraine's 'Orange Revolution' in 2004 had been noted in Moscow, and *Nashi*'s role was to serve as a pro-regime force to be mobilised against opposition. Its focus was the contentious politics of the street. *Nashi* represents an interesting theoretical case from the perspective of contentious politics and its relationship with civil society and formal party politics. *Nashi*'s role has developed to include facilitating young people's engagement with party politics and business. Its early centralised control has been ameliorated somewhat by a reorganisation focused on local action. Nonetheless, *Nashi* exists with state support. Its continued role in contentious politics in support of the Putin regime, for example, countering opposition demonstrations in Moscow in December 2011, makes problematic its identification as a component of democratic civil society.

Keywords: Russia; civil society; contentious politics; parties; youth movements; *Nashi*.

Introduction

This article explores the dialectic between 'street politics' and 'party politics'. In particular, it focuses on the role played by the pro-Kremlin youth movement *Molodezhnoe demokraticeskoe anti-fashistskoe dvizhenie Nashi* ('Democratic anti-fascist youth movement Ours' – hereafter referred to as *Nashi*). Although *Nashi* is not formally linked to any political party, its creation was supported by key Kremlin aide Vladislav Surkov, the movement explicitly adopts a pro-Putin stance, and some of its members have gone on to become parliamentary deputies for the 'party of power', United Russia. State support for *Nashi* comes in various forms. Government officials, including Presidents Putin and Medvedev, visit the youth movement's annual summer camp, and Vladislav Surkov – number two in the

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presidential administration until December 2011 when he became First Deputy Prime Minister – ‘holds regular meetings with activists from the Nashi youth movement’ (Beluza 2011). In financial terms, although there is no ‘expenditure on Nashi’ item in the state budget, the youth movement is supported by donations and grants and Nashi’s closeness to the state has benefits in this regard. Former Nashi leader, Vasilii Yakemenko, noted in 2005 that support from the Kremlin helps the movement to elicit support from businessmen for Nashi’s ‘national project’ (Buribaev 2005). In 2012, having reached the position of head of *RosMolodezh* (the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs), Yakemenko did not deny reports that government grants to Nashi amounted to around 200 million roubles (\$ 6 million) in 2010 (Azar 2012).

Nashi demands attention when considering party politics in Russia for three particular reasons. First, the closed party system that has developed in Russia since Putin became president in 2000 has forced marginalised opposition parties out onto the streets to engage in contentious activity. Nashi was created as the Kremlin’s instrument to counter such engagement. This growth in contentious politics has extended the scope for considering the primary activities of political parties to include areas other than the formal political arena. Second, the Putin years have seen an increased focus in Russia on youth participation by political parties, partly in recognition of the role played by youth movements in the ‘coloured revolutions’ in the Ukraine and Georgia. As such, analysis of Nashi’s place in Russian politics and its influence within the formal political arena extends the literature on Russian party politics to incorporate this new focus on youth participation. Third, the growing significance of ‘street politics’ as an alternative space for political struggle demands a reconsideration of the relationship between political parties, contentious politics, and (un)civil society in contemporary Russia. This alternative political space is contested not only on the street, but also in theoretical debate over the nature of civil society in Russia.

Half a dozen years ago Edwin Bacon posed the question whether civil society under Putin was:

‘settling into a more Russian form, where the role of the state removes a degree of independence, but nonetheless distinct groups and movements remain, with a voice, a legal identity, and – not universal but nonetheless real in a number of cases – political influence?’ (Bacon 2006, pp. 111-112; Evans, Henry, & Sundstrom 2006, p. 319).

In answer to this question, the case of Nashi exemplifies the limitations on the stretching of the concept ‘civil society’, which would already in most definitions exclude political parties. From one perspective, Nashi is, to use the definition of civil society developed by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan, a group operating in the political arena which has a relationship with the state but does not aim to occupy it (Linz & Stepan 1996). For those who would echo Antonio Gramsci’s insistence on an antithetical relationship between the state and civil society, such a proposition already stretches the concept of civil society too far. Not only does Nashi receive support from the state, but the Putin regime instigated its very formation. Debates concerning the nature of civil society, however, are not limited to technical questions over sources of funding and other forms of support. Normative concerns for democratic development also colour the study of civil society, for example, in Robert Putnam’s work on the relationship between social capital and democratisation (Evans et al. 2006, p. 4; Putnam, Leonardi, & Nanetti 1993). Some would argue that from this perspective Nashi can be seen as doubly damned. First, it engages in contentious politics, direct and occasionally physical actions against adversaries, and as such represents ‘uncivil’ rather than civil society. Second, Nashi fights on the side of the state. Cas Mudde argues, however, that the theoretically problematic distinction between civil and uncivil society very often comes down to what side a group is on in relation to the state or to international opinion. With regard to most political positions, this represents a subjective judgement which is difficult to

justify empirically (Kopecký & Mudde 2003, pp. 160-161). In the case of Nashi, for example, its 'civil' anti-racist stance clashes with its more 'uncivil' role in closing down the political space available to opponents of Russia's ruling regime.

This article's analysis of Nashi adopts Petr Kopecký's stance that arguments over who is 'in' and who is 'out' in terms of civil society should give way to a focus on associational life in a country as a whole (Kopecký & Mudde 2003, p. 15). From this perspective we argue that although Nashi has some of the traits of a civil society organisation that might be seen to promote gradual democratisation, such as the mobilisation of young people and their engagement in political activity, at present the closeness of its links to a semi-democratic regime and willingness to serve as the regime's instrument in street politics undermine any such pro-democratic traits. The article begins by exploring the development of the pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi from the perspective of the political behaviour and associated norms cultivated by the youth movement. It examines the resurgence of street politics in Russia following the 2004 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine and tracks Nashi's political activity from 2005 to 2011 in order to build up a profile of the forms of political participation promoted by the youth movement. We then consider Nashi's turn towards more formal politics following the election season of 2007-08, noting the movement's role as a source of recruits into formal party politics. Finally, we return, in the light of recent events including the anti-regime demonstrations of December 2011, to our consideration of Nashi's place in relation to civil society and the state, arguing that the movement's role supporting the regime 'on the streets' in contentious politics remains a defining characteristic as long as Russia's democratic deficit persists.

Nashi and Contentious Politics

Several analyses of politics in Russia since Nashi's formation in 2005 have drawn attention to the rising significance of contentious politics (Byzov 2007; Schwirtz 2007; Yashin 2007). For example, Ilya Yashin (a leader of the opposition group *Solidarnost* 'Solidarity') asserts that young political leaders today need to be 'street orators', able to lead people onto the street and to stand in front of police cordons (Yashin 2007). The origins of the rise in street politics at this time appear to be straightforward. First, their engineered exclusion from the formal political arena has forced some opposition groups onto the streets in an attempt to support their cause, and the pro-Kremlin youth organisations have followed as a counter-measure sponsored by the incumbent regime. Alexei Mitrofanov, State Duma deputy for the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, offered a provocative commentary on street politics in contemporary Russia noting, in relation to the leading role of Mikhail Kasyanov (Russia's Prime Minister, 2000-2004) in anti-systemic opposition protests, that, 'in normal countries a person runs around on the street for 10 to 15 years and then becomes prime minister, but [in Russia] we have someone who used to be prime minister and now runs around on the streets' (Byzov 2007).

Second, the example of the potential power of people taking to the streets *en masse* during Ukraine's 'Orange Revolution' set a precedent for mobilisation that proved instructive to the opposition and the Kremlin alike. In a demonstration of its power and resources Nashi launched its mass actions with a 50,000-strong gathering in Moscow on 15 May 2005, called *Nasha Pobeda* ('Our Victory') and designed to symbolise the young generation taking on from Russia's war veterans the task of maintaining the country's independence. Since then the youth movement has regularly staged such mass actions. On 4 November 2009 Nashi organised a 'Russian March' to celebrate National Unity Day in Moscow, which attracted around 30,000 participants (Nashi 2009a) and the movement has also continued its annual 'Our Victory' rallies, gathering more than 65,000 young Russians to commemorate the 65th

anniversary of Victory Day in May 2010 (Nashi 2010). In December 2011, when the western media widely reported anti-regime demonstrations in Moscow following flawed parliamentary elections, Russian television gave as much, if not more, weight to pro-regime rallies organised by Nashi (Sulimina 2011).

Contentious political phenomena include mass rallies and public demonstrations complete with slogans, posters, symbols and other theatrical elements. Recent examples in Russia would include pensioners' protests against the monetisation of welfare benefits in January 2005. However, with regard to youth politics in contemporary Russia, and more specifically the role of pro-Kremlin groups such as Nashi on the street, it is the physicality of the battle between the opposition and Kremlin loyalists that stands out. Contentious politics in this setting alludes to the rough, no-holds-barred politics of the street compared to the columned halls and privileges of party politics. Head of the analytical department of All-Russia Central Institute of Public Opinion (VTsIOM), Leonti Byzov, identified the purpose of street politics for pro-Kremlin groups to be combative and destructive:

If we analyse which political forces benefit from holding marches then it becomes evident that for [regime party] United Russia, for example, such marches are not necessary. However, [United Russia] has combat youth brigades such as Nashi, which are able to specialise in precisely that which United Russia is unable to. Mostly, though, their slogans are negative – always trying to deal someone a blow. (Byzov 2007)

Thus, the essence of Nashi's role in street politics in Russia has been its more contentious activities when the movement has pursued a strategy of direct conflict with and intimidation of the opposition.

Street Politics

Under the heading of ‘developing a functioning civil society’ in Nashi’s manifesto, the following statement reveals Nashi’s explicit strategy of intimidation:

We must set an example of social solidarity. Every oligarch or civil servant, street punk or member of a totalitarian organisation that raises its hand to one of our members should know that tomorrow he will have to deal with all of us. (Nashi 2005)

Infamously, after speaking at a conference of the opposition coalition *Drugaya Rossiya* (‘Other Russia’) in July 2006, British ambassador Anthony Brenton was repeatedly followed and harassed by Nashi activists in a prolonged campaign of intimidation over a period of a year and a half. In Nashi’s view ‘Other Russia’ was made up of ‘fascists, totalitarians and thieves’ and so should not be considered a part of civil society. Nashi demanded an apology from Brenton for apparently ‘insulting Russia’ by meeting with these opposition groups (Nashi 2007). In a similar incident, in May 2007, Nashi activists staged protests outside the Estonian embassy in Moscow and harassed Estonian ambassador Marina Kaljurand. Protestors tore down the Estonian flag from the embassy building, forced entry in to a hall where the Estonian ambassador was speaking, and bombarded her car.

In addition to the campaigns against specific individuals carried out by the youth movement in reaction to particular incidents, Nashi also formed two groups – *Dobrovol’naya Molodezhnaya Druzhina* (‘Voluntary Youth Militia’ – hereafter DMD) and *Molodezhnoe Patrioticheskoe Dvizhenie - Stal’* (‘Youth Patriotic Movement - Steel’) – dedicated to combatting the opposition on the streets. DMD is a splinter organisation of Nashi, established by Nashi under Vasily Yakemenko’s leadership in 2005, though formally a separate entity. Ostensibly created to work with law enforcement agencies in order to reduce crime, DMD activities have included patrolling the streets with police officers and engaging with disaffected gangs of youths to help them to turn away from drugs and crime. Unofficially,

DMD acts as Nashi's muscle providing security and maintaining order at Nashi's mass actions and major events. At Nashi's summer camp 'Seliger 2008', DMD, tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that everyone was following the rules, patrolled the camp with uniforms bearing the slogan 'I see that you are not working!'. DMD has been at the centre of numerous allegations of provocation and violence carried out by Nashi against the opposition. Nashi patrols were apparently mobilised by the authorities to counter opposition activity on the streets in the run up to the 2007-08 electoral season. More significantly, according to Moscow city law Nashi's patrols were legally empowered to use force as a last resort should a lawbreaker be 'actively disobedient' (Nowak 2007).

Stal', which is Russian for steel, is a fiercely patriotic group that views patriotism as a 'matter of national security' and demands that such patriotism should be active not passive (Stal 2008). According to the movement itself, Stal' is dedicated to using all methods and technologies available to 'control street politics' and thus secure Russia's future as a global power and world leader (Stal 2008). Commissar of the Estonian division of Stal', Mark Siryk, was arrested by police in Tallinn in April 2007 on charges of inciting disorder. The charges related to the riots that took place in Tallinn known as the 'Bronze nights', 26 to 28 April 2007, when ethnic Russians protested against the decision to relocate a Soviet war memorial and burial site in the city. However, Siryk was subsequently acquitted in court in January 2009 on the grounds that there was insufficient evidence that the defendant had been involved in organising the riots.

Cyber attacks

In addition to physical street politics, Nashi members have been linked to cyber attacks on those deemed unsympathetic to the youth movement's cause. Following an article

published by Kommersant in January 2008, the leading daily newspaper suffered from a cyber attack which crashed its website for five hours. The article in question had suggested that Nashi was becoming an embarrassment for the Kremlin and had outlived its purpose (Savina, Taratura, and Shevchuk 2008). The attack on Kommersant's website in March 2008 was combined with the distribution of rolls of toilet paper printed with the Kommersant logo, quotes from the newspaper article in question and the phone number of one of the article's authors, leading Kommersant to accuse Nashi of responsibility for hacking into its website. Although Nashi denied any involvement in these incidents, according to a leaked internal email allegedly written by Nashi's press secretary Kristina Potupchik, Nashi apparently called on its activists to 'block [Kommersant's] work' and to 'psychologically and physically pester them' (Guillory 2008; Walker 2008).

In May 2007, the work of the Estonian government was impeded by a sustained attack on the country's internet network. The websites of government ministries, parliament, prominent media distributors and banks were all disrupted by the cyber attack, which followed the repositioning of the Soviet Bronze Soldier war memorial from central Tallin to a local cemetery. Estonian officials blamed the Russian government itself, which had been vociferous in condemning what they considered to be the desecration of the Soviet war memorial and burial site, but such accusations were repeatedly denied by the Kremlin. A NATO spokesman confirmed that the organisation pledged its political support for Estonia and considered the matter to be 'an operational security issue' (NATO 2009). NATO sent at least one expert to help the efforts of the Estonian government to repel the attacks and in May 2008 set up the Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence in Tallinn. According to later reports, Nashi commissar and Duma deputy aide, Konstantin Goloskokov, claimed to have organised the Distributed Denial of Service attack as an 'act of civil disobedience' together with a network of loyal sympathisers and without the knowledge or support of Nashi

and the authorities (Reuters 2009). The Kremlin and Nashi deny any involvement in the cyber attack on Estonia.

Contentious politics in this electronic form has emerged on the scene only relatively recently, and to be effective requires online co-ordination amongst a relatively large number of activists. Goloskov's use of the term 'civil disobedience' to describe this action seems intended to echo the vocabulary of anti-state activists the world over, and in doing so to position the action conceptually alongside the contentious political acts of (un)civil society groups acting together against the policy of a state. Similarly, the creative 'toilet roll protests' against Kommersant would not be out of place in the contentious street politics of many youth-oriented political movements.

Nashi and nationalism

Nashi officially calls itself a 'democratic, *anti-fascist* youth movement', nonetheless its critics have compared it to radical far-right groups and at times referred to it as a fascist group itself. While Nashi is known for its aggressive campaigns against 'non-patriotic elements', it is not a racist organisation. Under the heading of securing Russia's sovereignty in the movement's manifesto, Nashi declares:

Cultural diversity is Russia's greatest asset in the modern world. Religious and ethnic cooperation empowers our country to develop further ... Our generation's task is to prevent the spread of fascist ideas, aggressive nationalism, religious intolerance and separatism that threatens the unity and territorial integrity of Russia. (Nashi 2005)

On 4 November 2009, Nashi staged mass anti-fascist rallies in Moscow in honour of National Unity Day. In a significant show of strength around 30,000 young Russians came

together in Moscow for Nashi's 'Russian March' in defiance of right-wing and extreme nationalist organisations marching under the same banner elsewhere in Moscow. According to Nashi, the march underscored the youth movement's commitment to defending human rights in Russia by undermining extreme right-wing groups that it alleges have been overlooked by human rights watchdogs. Nashi is keen to dispel any suggestion that it is a far right movement and, as noted below, has taken legal actions against those who make such allegations.

The confusion over Nashi's credentials in terms of tolerance becomes apparent not so much in the area of racial politics, where its position is theoretically and actually inclusive, but in relation to alternative political ideas. Nashi's declared strategy of tackling fascism by increasing the dominance of its ideas among the younger generation further exemplifies:

Only by spreading our ideological influence over the younger generation can we prevent young people from being drawn into extremist organisations of a fascist and liberal tendency [...] We must fight fascism in all its manifestations and support ethnic, religious and cultural unity for the good of our common home – Russia. The war on fascism is part of the fight for Russia's integrity and sovereignty. (Nashi 2005)

Conflating extremism with fascism and liberalism, and indeed any political opposition to the regime, Nashi's anti-fascist drive becomes primarily a campaign to shut out any alternatives. 'A closer look at the rhetoric of the leaders of Nashi shows that anti-orange and anti-fascist definitions are often used in their arguments as synonymous' (Topalova 2006, p. 33). This is no mistake, and indeed the twin threats to Russia identified by the Putin regime from its outset have been, externally, interference from the West, and internally, the rise of the far right. At the same time as seeking to promote inter-ethnic tolerance and cooperation within Russia, Nashi's brand of anti-fascism denounces foreign influence.

Nashi's apparent efforts to quell radicalism and extremism sit uneasily alongside attempts to deliberately play on nationalistic sentiment in order to attract and inspire young Russians to its cause. In this way, Nashi taps into and cultivates nationalism, despite the danger which it acknowledges chauvinism among youth to present to Russia. Nashi is not, however, by any means on its own in treading such a path. Perhaps the leading critic of the Putin regime during the protests of December 2011 and beyond in Moscow, blogger Alexei Navalny, has been criticised for several times joining nationalist demonstrations, including the 'Stop Feeding the Caucasus' rally in October 2011 (Balmforth 2011). Academics such as Pilkington, Topalova, Smith, Zorkaia & Diuk and others note the development of a radical youth sub-culture in Russia, with an increasing propensity for aggressive nationalism and susceptibility to militaristic rhetoric (see Topalova, Pilkington with Starkova 2002, p. 113; Zorkaia and Diuk 2004, p. 4-27). According to the State youth policy, 51% of 18-35 year olds said that they would support evicting certain ethnic groups from their region (Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation 2006, p. 2). Moreover, according to crime statistics for Russia, radical nationalism is exhibiting the potential to develop outside of the Kremlin's control. Perhaps because of this real threat, Nashi consciously courts nationalistic sentiment. The youth movement's combined effort with the United Russia youth wing, Young Guard, to counter the series of opposition 'Dissenters' Marches' in 2007 was entitled 'Russia for the Russians', which although representing the movements' desire to keep out foreign influences on Russian politics and to associate the opposition marches with Western sponsorship, is also a slogan employed by far right groups.

A Turn Towards Formal Politics

With the completion of the elections to the State Duma in December 2007, accompanied by Vasily Yakemenko's resignation as Nashi leader in order to take up his new

post as head of the newly created State Committee on Youth Affairs, there seemed to be an opportunity for Nashi to retire from contentious politics and for its more prominent members to graduate to the formal political arena. Indicative of the manner in which Nashi was rewarded by the Kremlin with positions of power at a federal level, Robert Shlegel (Nashi commissar) and Sergei Belokonev (Nashi ideologue and former head of *Nashi vybori* – ‘Our Elections’ – the Federal Youth Association tasked with combating accusations of electoral fraud) were elected as State Duma deputies in December 2007. Belokonev went on to become vice-chair of the Duma’s Committee on Youth Affairs. Furthermore, in addition to Yakemenko, who was appointed head of the agency, Nashi spokesperson and commissar Maria Drokova was awarded a position at the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs. Although neither Nashi nor the Young Guard ultimately proved able to instigate any significant increase in the proportion of young people in the State Duma or regional assemblies), they did demonstrate the relative influence of Nashi and the Young Guard on the formation of United Russia’s party lists. Of the nineteen new young United Russia deputies elected to the State Duma in December 2007, six were members of pro-regime youth organisations and the others were mostly celebrities.

It is evident then that Nashi can serve as an ‘escalator’ for young activists to enter formal party politics in Russia, and in this sense can be seen as a positive component of civil society, promoting engagement with political activity and developing social capital. However, Nashi’s closeness to the state, and its move towards competing for political power via engagement with the ‘party of power’ of an at best dubiously democratic regime, undermine the notion of Nashi being a democratising civil society organisation. Speaking to a group of Nashi activists at the movement’s summer camp in July 2008, newly elected Duma deputy and Nashi ideologue Sergei Belokonev urged his audience to be on the alert for any elections

in their regions so that the movement and *RosMolodezh* (the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs) could assist them in their endeavours to be elected.¹

Around the same time, at the end of January 2008, new leader Nikita Borovikov announced Nashi's reorganisation. This involved replacing all but five of the movement's 50 regional branches with nationwide projects developed around key priorities, such as the economy, education, and modernisation. The reorganisation, just before the presidential election, was largely dismissed as an attempt to position the movement in line with regime priorities beyond the 2007–2008 electoral season. Yet, whilst it is true that the changes that took place in Nashi during 2008 were reflective of the changing political environment and the shifting priorities of the Kremlin, they hold further significance pertaining to this analysis of Nashi's methods and political role. Borovikov's announcement marked the beginning of a period in which Nashi would seek to diversify its activities and seemed set to leave behind the contentious politics of old.

First, Nashi's restructuring was a deliberate decision on its part to prevent the movement from being over-organised by the state. The new structure signified the youth movement's decentralisation. Borovikov's interview with the leading daily *Kommersant* explained how, as a result of this 'radical reorganization', Nashi would 'no longer be a centralized federal organization and [would] be split into independent public groups' (Kommersant, 2008). This represents a move away from the state, in organisational terms, and nearer to the classical concept of civil society. Prior to the movement's restructuring in 2008, Nashi was a highly centralised force geared to the rapid mobilisation of masses of young people. The youth movement's activities were coordinated from Moscow and its leaders recruited bands of sympathetic young people from university campuses, sports clubs and other youth venues to be bussed to the capital to participate in Nashi's mass actions.

Nashi's reconfiguration drastically scaled back the role of the central leadership in order to facilitate local initiative and stimulate local level activity.

Second, Nashi's new emphasis on modernisation, enterprise, and innovation indicated a less contentious approach. It now sought to provide support for the government's plans for modernisation in a constructive manner through promoting the development of innovative new business ideas. Nashi commissar Maria Drokova sums up this shift in her assessment of the youth movement's changing purpose: 'At the beginning Nashi's sole task was to *prevent* an 'Orange Revolution' ... Now in Russia it is imperative to *create* something new.'² While Nashi's summer camp at Lake Seliger in 2007 was infamous for its hard-line stance regarding the opposition, one year later the primary focus of Seliger 2008 was on finding sponsors to support the development of youth enterprise initiatives. For example, the project *Molodezhnaya Shkola Predprinimatel'stva* ('Youth School of Enterprise') secured funding to enable it to begin training 100,000 young people in business planning and to assist business start-ups (Nashi 2008). The adoption of a more consensual approach is associated with the transition from contentious politics to the more classical notion of civil society operating in the formal political arena.

Nashi, civil society and the state

Although Nashi has some of the traits of a civil society organisation that might be seen to promote gradual democratisation, such as the mobilisation of young people and their engagement in political activity, at present the closeness of its links to a semi-democratic regime and continued willingness to serve as the regime's instrument in street politics undermine such democratic traits. In recent times there have been several incidents which indicate that, despite Nashi's apparent reorientation towards more constructive activities and

desire to present itself as a reliable political force suitable for entry into the formal political arena, on occasion Nashi has sought to revert to the contentious politics practised by the movement in the run up to the 2007-08 electoral cycle. The protests surrounding the Duma and presidential elections of 2011-12 demonstrated both a continuing need for the Putin regime to pay attention to the challenge of contentious politics, and the changing role of Nashi in terms of meeting that challenge. At the same time, however, there is some evidence of a decline in the authorities' ability to control and willingness to support Nashi in a number of cases.

In early October 2009 Nashi launched one of its infamous campaigns against individuals whom it deems to be unpatriotic. The target of the campaign was journalist and human rights activist Aleksandr Podrabinek – author of a controversial article published online in *Ezhednevnyi Zhurnal* ('Daily Journal'), which criticised what it saw as the authorities' glorification of the Soviet period. Nashi viewed Podrabinek's article as offensive to war veterans, and the youth movement's ensuing campaign against him was condemned by human rights watchdogs for amounting to harassment and physical intimidation. The Kremlin's own Human Rights Council issued a statement criticising Nashi's campaign against Podrabinek and accusing the movement of violating four articles of the Russian constitution. Despite calls for Ella Pamfilova to be dismissed from her post as chair of the Council on Human Rights, President Medvedev refused to sack Pamfilova on the basis of the council's investigation into the legality of Nashi's activities. Nonetheless, Pamfilova did herself resign the following year, after continued pressure from Nashi. Then in March 2009 a solitary protest outside the Estonian embassy in Moscow by Mark Siryk, the Estonian commissar for Nashi's 'Stal' programme, was stopped by police and Siryk was arrested. In a break from previous practice the Kremlin, under President Medvedev, did not openly support Nashi's actions and apparently sought to quell the youth movement's excesses. Such a partial

distancing of the regime from Nashi was evident again in April 2011, when Minister of Finance Alexei Kudrin refused to fund a two million rouble 'Youth of Russia' programme, proposed by former Nashi leader Vasily Yakemenko in order to promote the core Kremlin priorities of patriotism and modernisation. Nonetheless, as Kudrin pointed out, the decision not to fund this programme stemmed partly from the fact that so much state money is already spent on youth programmes (Sulimina 2011).

Perhaps in response to changes in the political environment in Russia after the presidential election of 2008, Nashi also adopted a new strategy of seeking to legitimise the movement's activities through formal legal procedures. Although Nashi previously sued the newspaper Kommersant in 2006 for publishing inaccurate information, the use of litigation against unsympathetic media outlets became more significant in 2009. In November 2009 Nashi won its case against Gazeta.ru for allegations published on its website that Nashi activists were involved in a physical assault on the prominent liberal opposition leader Boris Nemtsov. A qualitative shift in the use of litigation then came in the aftermath of the Podrabinek affair, when for the first time Nashi filed lawsuits against Western as well as Russian media for their coverage of the youth movement's campaign against the journalist. Having brought cases against Russian media (broadcaster Ren-TV, newspaper Novaya Gazeta, and the website Polit.ru), Nashi filed a lawsuit against four European newspapers seeking damages from Le Monde, Le Journal du Dimanche, Frankfurter Rundschau, and The Independent for 'insults to the dignity and honour' of the organisation (Oliphant 2009).

In the election season of 2011-12 Nashi's focus returned increasingly to contentious politics, rather than the formal politics of the campaign. Early in 2011 allegations flew back and forth concerning possible collaboration between the security forces and Nashi with regard to discovering the sources of financial support for key opposition blogger, Alexei Navalny. In later summer 2011, it was reported that a 'background information' document

published on a web-based discussion list set out the need for Nashi supporters to counter the attempts of oppositionists allegedly set on overthrowing the regime and allowing Western influence to dictate who rules Russia. The focus was on opponents such as Navalny and Boris Nemtsov, members of the non-systemic opposition – those whose political parties or movements had not been granted access to the formal politics of elections (Guillory 2011). This arena represents standard Nashi territory, as such figures instead engaged in the contentious politics fought out online and on the street. As noted earlier, in December 2011 Nashi provided substantial numbers of demonstrators for the pro-regime marches which took place to counter the massive anti-regime demonstrations following the elections.

Conclusions

It would be hard to call these pro-regime demonstrations of December 2011, and Nashi's role in them, an unqualified success. Formed in 2005 in order to prevent the seeds of an 'Orange Revolution' from developing in Russia, Nashi's founding purpose was to ensure that the streets would not be ceded to the opposition. In December 2011, and into 2012, however, massive anti-regime demonstrations took place, permitted by the authorities, in Moscow and other major cities. Nonetheless, Nashi did retain a role in such contentious politics. First, it was central to the mobilisation of supporters to similarly massive pro-regime demonstrations. Second, it had noted months earlier the dangers to the regime of anti-systemic opposition, and had strengthened its capacity to engage in contentious politics on behalf of the regime. In its early years Nashi contributed to the development of street politics in contemporary Russia. In a bid to counter opposition voices, Nashi's tactics revolved around intimidation of particular individuals or organisations, as well as on broader action against all political opposition. Despite taking the opportunity to gain influence in the formal political arena as a reward for their loyalty to the incumbent regime in 2007-08, Nashi has not

eschewed contentious politics. Yet, this should not be perceived as indicative of the movement's rejection of the formal political arena or of its failure in terms of party politics, but rather as further evidence that Nashi's strength and relative influence originates from its power on the streets. Nashi's function has been and continues to be to engage in activities that are not open to United Russia due to the constraints of operating within the formal political arena.

Nashi does have some of the traits of a civil society organisation that might be seen to promote gradual democratisation. It provides, through its summer camps and other initiatives, education and opportunities for young people wishing to enhance their involvement with political and economic life. It serves too as a pool of recruits into formal politics, notably into United Russia, at all levels. However, considering associational life in Russia as a whole (Kopecký & Mudde 2003, p. 15), Nashi has been able to flourish almost solely because of the support it has received, from its founding initiative onwards, from the regime and the state authorities. Whether it be financial support, without which Nashi would not be able to fund participants across its range of contentious and more formal activities; whether it be support from the forces of law and order in its conduct of contentious politics, which facilitate such actions; or whether it be support from members of the regime at the highest level, which contributes to the setting of Nashi's agenda; at present the closeness of Nashi's relationship with a semi-democratic regime must colour our view of the movement in terms of its contribution to the development of democratic civil society. Nashi's role supporting the regime in contentious politics remains its defining characteristic as long as Russia's democratic deficit persists.

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1 Author's observation of a meeting between Sergei Belokonev and leaders of the Nashi projects,
22 July 2008, Lake Seliger, Moscow.

2 Author's interview with Maria Drokova, Lake Seliger, 24 July 2008. Emphasis author's own.