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From Singalongs to Spheres of Influence

How Russia Exports Patriotic Military Education to Post-Soviet Youth

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Since 2015, Russia has reinvigorated a campaign of military education programs, including military-oriented youth groups, summer camps, competitions, and day programs. These programs serve a dual purpose: to teach military skills and inculcate school-aged children and young adults with pro-Russian worldviews. Russia has a history of youth initiatives designed to instill patriotism. However, this new wave of programs extends this model to contested zones and neighboring countries, expanding Russia's web of influence over youth abroad. Russian influence is more organized where possible and flexible where not, creating a model for Russia to expand its use in the future. With this new era of youth military education, Russia will shape the political role of post-Soviet youth and disadvantage U.S. partners and allies.

Introduction

Zlatibor, lying in mountainous western Serbia, is a popular European destination. The area is usually swamped with tourists hiking, skiing, and enjoying the stunning views. But in the summer of 2018, the region hosted a different kind of visitor. Almost four dozen participants, aged 12 to 23, from Serbia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Montenegro attended a summer program with close ties to the Russian government.¹ Russian and Serbian war veterans taught at the camp, which was supported by the Russian embassy, visited by a Russian attaché, and run partially by members of a radical nationalist private military company with ties to the Russian government.² The young participants were taught first aid and physical fitness and trained with knives and guns.³ Once the public learned of the camp, widespread complaints led the Serbian government to shut it down in August, citing “possible abuse of children.”⁴ In the aftermath, the camp’s organizers did little to quiet public fears, saying that the purpose of the camp had been to teach its participants to “become real men and warriors in order to defend their country.”⁵

The summer camp in Zlatibor was unusually transparent about its aims and received atypical publicity.⁶ Nonetheless, it is but one example of a growing Russian government effort to promote the political and military education of youth. In 2015, President Vladimir Putin’s government emphasized patriotic education as a goal in the ‘Russian Movement of Schoolchildren.’⁷ This initiative seeks to encourage teenagers and children to adopt “the system of values inherent in Russian society.”⁸ In the years since the initiative’s adoption, the government has supported a number of efforts to inculcate young people with patriotic values and teach military skills. While critics have disparaged these initiatives as ‘Putinjugend,’ the programs have been well attended.⁹ Youth groups like Yunarmiya and annual summer camps draw large numbers of participants, even during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰ The Kremlin is intent on influencing how the next generation thinks about the world and encouraging future participation in the military.

These programs reach beyond Russia’s borders. The rise in youth political-military education within Russia parallels a proliferation of similar programs in contested regions bordering Russia

and to a lesser extent in Eastern Europe.¹¹ These programs take the form of summer camps, youth groups, and day events. They share three elements: ties to the Russian government, militarism and patriotism, and pro-Kremlin values.

Through this initiative, the Kremlin seeks to shape the attitudes of young people at home, in contested regions, and in its near abroad. These programs attract young people by promoting appealing values and offering fun activities, then confront attendees with pro-Russia, anti-western worldviews. If successful, these initiatives could change how post-Soviet children and teenagers view geopolitics and their attitudes towards Russia, shaping their political role both now and for years into the future. Moscow is laying the foundation for the emergence of a pro-Kremlin generation that has the potential to expand its sphere of influence.

Russian Outreach to Post-Soviet Youth

Since the mid-2010s, Moscow has revitalized patriotic youth military education. These programs seek to give children and teens military skills and promote the military as a possible career path, while inculcating them with an anti-western worldview. While Russia has a long history of similar programs, the current wave of education programs presents unique threats—Moscow aims to export this model abroad, particularly in contested regions.

The Kremlin's efforts to export political military education can be thought of as a series of concentric circles (see Figure 1). At the center is patriotic military education in Russia, where the initiatives are most pervasive, widespread, and formalized and include the Ministry of Defense's Yunarmiya and state and private-run military-related summer camps and day programs. These programs have the largest attendance and likely have the most significant effect on the attitudes of young people. In the next ring are formal initiatives, like Yunarmiya detachments, and copycat programs and programs run by Russia sympathizers. These are found largely in contested regions with heavy Russian influence or military presence, namely Crimea, Donbas, South Ossetia & Abkhazia, and Transnistria. Finally, in the outer ring are smaller or one-off programs in the near broad, mainly in East and Southeast Europe, which rely more heavily on activists with ties to Russia. While currently small compared to efforts inside Russia, the proliferation of pro-Russian youth education in contested regions and the near abroad represents a vanguard of likely future initiatives to shape the minds of youths in areas Moscow seeks to incorporate into its sphere of influence.

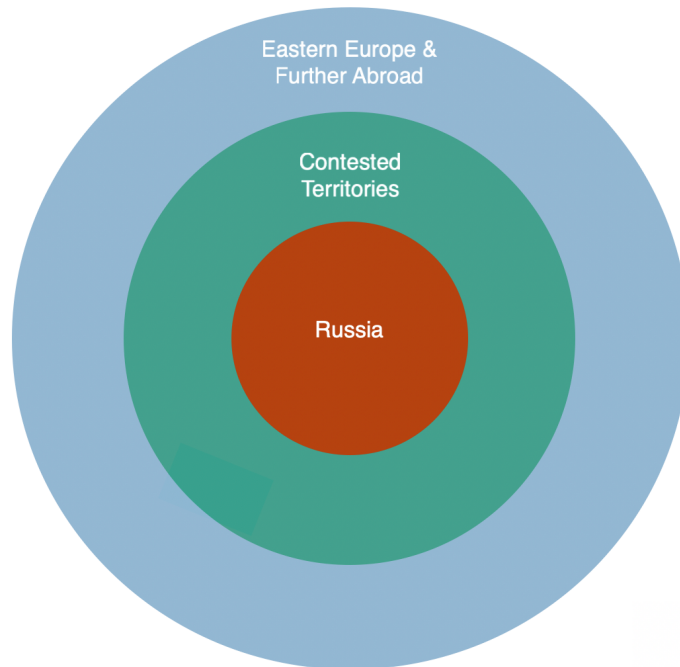
The next sections explore these concentric circles, examining how these programs reach youth at home and abroad, assessing their potential for expansion, and highlighting their commonalities.

Patriotic Youth Education in Russia and Yunarmiya

In 2015, new federal initiatives revealed the Kremlin's increased focus on promoting youth patriotism. Funding for programs to instill patriotism rose to approximately \$35 million USD, roughly double the amount allocated for similar efforts from 2010 to 2015.¹² The growth in funding

accompanied additional funding for the construction of venues like Patriot Park near Moscow (costing a reported \$330 million) and larger budgets for military education organizations like the Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy (DOSAAF).¹³

Figure 1: Concentric Circles of Influence



One of the most significant initiatives is the Young Army Cadets National Movement, or Yunarmiya. Controlled by the Ministry of Defense and based in schools, Yunarmiya provides patriotic education and military-style drills to schoolchildren aged 8 to 18.¹⁴ While its membership is self-reported and unreliable, Yunarmiya boasted more than 775,000 members as of early 2021.¹⁵ Yunarmiya represents a widespread phenomenon that outpaces earlier initiatives in Russia. Even at its height, the mid-2000s youth movement Nashi reported around 200,000 participants in its events.¹⁶ While Nashi collapsed in the early 2010s, Yunarmiya continues to grow and become more entrenched in the education system. Recent Russian laws have enshrined patriotic ‘upbringing’ as a goal of the education system and restricted extracurricular activities not approved by the government.¹⁷

Yunarmiya seeks to sway Russian youth opinion in the Kremlin’s favor and boost military recruitment. Activities include military training, lessons in patriotism, parades, and commemorations of Russian history.¹⁸ In the summers, these lessons are reinforced when thousands of children and teens attend military-oriented summer camps at Russia’s four federal-level youth centers, smaller regional camps, and privately run camps—all of which organize similar activities.¹⁹

Pro-Russian Patriotic Youth Education in Contested Regions

Yunarmiya in Russia is the center of the Kremlin's influence over youth patriotic military education. The next ring of the concentric circles comprises initiatives in contested regions, like Crimea and Transnistria, which are occupied by Russia and under Moscow's thumb. In these areas, both Yunarmiya and aligned groups provide pro-Russian patriotic education to children. These programs involve Russian actors, mimic Russian military educational themes, and seek to indoctrinate children with illiberal, Kremlin-approved ideologies.

Moscow's strategy to promote patriotic military education in contested zones has the following characteristics:

- 1. Inducting foreign youth.** Yunarmiya has recruited large numbers of foreign youth directly into its ranks in contested regions, including Crimea, South Ossetia, and Transnistria.²⁰ Crimea has hosted its own Yunarmiya detachments since 2016, and the Russian Ministry of Defense reported having 70 Yunarmiya groups and 8,000 members in Sevastopol alone in 2019.²¹ A reported 1,600 Transnistrian children and teenagers were recruited into Yunarmiya in the year 2017.²² These groups operate as an extension of Yunarmiya, participating in local military parades, maintaining local memorials, and conducting military drills.²³

While breakaway governments have cooperated with Moscow in organizing local Yunarmiya detachments, de jure governments have expressed concern, even outrage, over their activities. In June 2020, the Russian Defense Ministry released photos of ten Transnistrians taking the Yunarmiya oath, a move that drew criticism from the Moldovan government.²⁴ Moldovan news sources referred to this incident as part of a campaign of "propaganda," and the Moldovan Ministry of Foreign Affairs described the induction as a violation of Moldova's "independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and permanent neutrality."²⁵

- 2. Establishing Yunarmiya detachments.** As early as 2017, Yunarmiya established detachments to serve the children of Russian military and embassy personnel living abroad.²⁶ Detachments are attached to embassies and military bases in contested zones, including Transnistria and Abkhazia, and further abroad. However, detachments provide political cover for facilities and programs that are also used by local non-Russians. Russian military bases in Abkhazia and Transnistria have sponsored the creation of Yunarmiya summer camps that welcome local youth, and Abkhazia's patriotic park features an obstacle course and shooting range that Abkhazians can use alongside Yunarmiya cadets.²⁷

These programs draw non-Russian children and teenagers from contested zones not already involved in Yunarmiya. Additionally, the case of Transnistria reveals that these detachments can easily pivot to recruit beyond the ranks of the children of Russian soldiers and officials.²⁸

- 3. Creating copycat programs.** In areas where Yunarmiya is not active, copycat programs fill the gap. In 2019, the Head of the Donetsk's People's Republic—a Kremlin

proxy republic in eastern Ukraine—announced the start Young Guard Yunarmiya, named after both the present-day Russian youth group and a WWII-era Soviet youth resistance group. The group then began operating in the Luhansk People’s Republic—another Kremlin proxy in Ukraine.²⁹ Young Guard Yunarmiya was initially formed by consolidating 35 other nationalist youth groups but has since expanded. By February 2021, the Young Guard Yunarmiya reported having almost 2,500 members in Donetsk.³⁰ It claims to be expanding further, with 60 events planned for 2021—almost as many as the previous two years combined.³¹

Young Guard Yunarmiya closely mirrors the structure of Russia’s Yunarmiya in mission, symbols, and activities. According to the organization’s head, its mission is to promote ‘military patriotic upbringing’ and ‘military historical education’—a clear parallel to its Russian namesake.³² In addition to these ideological links, Young Guard Yunarmiya shares symbols with Yunarmiya: their uniforms feature a similar red beret and tan uniform, and its own social media posts often simply refer to the organization as ‘Yunarmiya.’³³ The Young Guard Yunarmiya’s activities also echo Yunarmiya, including military training activities, commemorative rallies, sports competitions, and parades.³⁴ These similarities are indicative of not only the connections between Yunarmiya and its copycat, but also their shared purpose. Both try to convince local populations of the virtues of the Kremlin’s rule. Through this copycat organization, the Russian youth patriotic education model is able to extend its reach, even without the formal presence of Russia’s Yunarmiya.

- 4. Coordinating with aligned actors.** Cadet groups, military patriotic groups, and Cossack groups support the Kremlin’s effort to deliver patriotic military education to children in contested regions.³⁵ In addition to organizing offering classes and building a new military patriotic center, Cossack formations will open a school in Crimea in 2021, which will purportedly focus on Christian Orthodoxy, horse-riding, and the use of light weapons.³⁶ In Donetsk and Luhansk, activities are organized in collaboration with the Russian proxy Donetsk People’s Republic (DPR) government, namely the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Tourism and DPR-associated military organizations, such as the Union of Afghan War Veterans.³⁷ Relying on aligned actors allows for a more flexible model of Russian military patriotic education that can be tailored to appeal to youth in contested regions.

Pro-Russian Patriotic Youth Education in the Near Abroad

In the outermost ring of circles is a mixture of proxy groups and official government programs that offer pro-Russian patriotic youth education to children and teenagers in sovereign countries in the near abroad, namely Eastern Europe and Eurasia. These areas include the unoccupied zones of nearby countries (e.g., Moldova and Ukraine) and countries without occupied territories (e.g., the Balkans and Eastern European countries). The programs (1) organize summer camps abroad, (2) recruit foreign youth to attend summer camps and programs in Russia, (3) engage in international outreach and Kremlin-friendly international charity projects, and (4) form partnerships with foreign youth groups. These activities not only extend Moscow’s influence, but also create a versatile model that Moscow can export elsewhere in the future.

- 1. Exporting Russian-style summer camps.** A number of one-off youth education programs operate in the near abroad without local government support or official ties to Yunarmiya. These programs are run by overtly Kremlin-linked actors or by aligned groups, such as summer camps overseen by Russian military detachments deployed abroad.

One example is a camp held on the Russian military base in Abkhazia in August 2017. While Abkhazia is a contested territory in the second ring of influence, the program reveals the tools Moscow uses to spread military education efforts further abroad. Dubbed the “ABC of Security and Survival,” the event hosted about 200 boys and girls aged 12 to 17. While located in Abkhazia, the camp also included participants from Armenia, South Ossetia, and Russia.³⁸ Campers completed obstacle courses, learned to handle AK-74 assault rifles, and attended a “social and state training class.”³⁹ The program was repeated in 2018 and drew an even younger crowd, with participants as young as 8, and appears to have become an official Yunarmiya camp in 2019.⁴⁰

One important aspect of the “ABC of Security and Survival” program is the variety of actors involved. The event took place with the support of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Russotrunichestvo, the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Abkhazia, and unnamed ‘public organizations and veterans unions.’⁴¹ The significant buy-in by local and regional actors points to a larger trend. A camp held in Zlatibor in 2018 was also supported by a diverse cast of characters, including E.N.O.T. Corp (a nationalist private military company), local veterans, and the local Russian embassy. According to reports, Russian Orthodox Churches have recruited teens for paramilitary camps, and Russian embassies have handed out invitations for summer camps.⁴² This ‘whole of government’ approach to youth education means that even when Russian troops cannot host youth programs, associated actors fill the void.⁴³ The coordination of aligned groups creates a model that is flexible, difficult to track, and easy to export.⁴⁴

- 2. Importing post-Soviet youth.** Non-Russian children in the post-Soviet space are recruited to attend summer camps and youth programs in Russia. Participants come from a wide swath of countries in the near abroad, and even ones further afield like France and Syria.⁴⁵ International youth may attend private or publicly run summer camps—both offer similar activities. Yunarmiya’s “Army 2019” hosted teenagers from Armenia, Belarus, Greece, Iran, and Kazakhstan, while one of E.N.O.T. Corp’s privately run camps near Moscow attracted youth from Belarus, Donetsk and Luhansk in 2016.⁴⁶

These summer camps are particularly useful for reaching children who live in countries with governments that are less friendly with Russia, like Estonia and Latvia.⁴⁷ Moreover, when youth participate in these summer camps, they form a connection with the institutions of Russian patriotic military education that can lead to repeated attendance. By recruiting foreign teenagers to participate in Russian programs and summer camps, Moscow is able to extend the reach of its military educational initiatives far outside its borders.

- 3. International outreach & charity.** Yunarmiya engages in international events, competitions, and politically relevant charitable projects as outreach to foreign children and teenagers. First, members of Yunarmiya will occasionally travel to war memorials

abroad, such as a 2019 excursion to Norway that commemorated the 75th anniversary of the arrival of Soviet troops in Finland.⁴⁸

Second, Yunarmiya detachments abroad participate in activities that bolster Russia's soft power. Yunarmiya has detachments in Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, Transnistria, Italy, Greece, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Angola, and even the United States. These groups frequently engage with local armed forces, participate in war memorials, and perform community service, particularly by donating educational materials to local children.⁴⁹ Yunarmiya also engages in international charitable work around present-day conflicts and crises in which the Kremlin wishes to be seen as helpful. Yunarmiya donates school supplies and backpacks to children in Syria and has made similar donations to children in Nagorno-Karabakh.⁵⁰ At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, Yunarmiya members based in Italy created drawings thanking Russian doctors for their role in helping ease Italy's crisis.⁵¹ These charity programs focus on politically relevant issues of the day and seek to reenforce a pro-Russian worldview among participants and improve Russia's image with youth abroad.

- 4. Partnerships abroad.** Yunarmiya pursues partnerships with youth movements abroad that share its political values. Detachments of Yunarmiya abroad are put under the jurisdiction of Russia's Yunarmiya, integrating them into the overall organizational structure.⁵² This practice, for example, ensures that the Yunarmiya detachment in Angola is closely tied to Yunarmiya's central organization.

Yunarmiya also reaches out to similar patriotic youth movements in other countries. In 2018 Yunarmiya signed a formal agreement of cooperation with Zhas Sarbaz, a new youth military patriotic movement in Kazakhstan, pledging that the two groups would cooperate on youth initiatives and participate in joint military patriotic events.⁵³ Further, while never signed, it also discussed a similar agreement with Rodina, a youth patriotic group in Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁴ These partnerships, allow Yunarmiya to extend its influence further abroad.

Shared Elements of Russian Youth Military Initiatives

Russian and Russia-backed youth initiatives have four common elements. They: (1) are run by actors linked with Russia, (2) are attended by a similar demographic of impressionable youth, (3) feature similar militarized activities, and (4) promote pro-Kremlin values.

Leadership

Programs in and outside of Russia are overseen by a similar set of actors—the Russian government, the Russian Orthodox Church, governments of contested territories with close ties to Russia, and Kremlin-affiliated private military companies and nationalist groups.

- **The Russian government.** The Kremlin directly sponsors a wide variety of youth initiatives. Yunarmiya is a subsidiary of the Russian Ministry of Defense, and the government funds many of the venues they use.⁵⁵ The Ministry of Defense also oversees organizations like DOSAAF, a veterans' organization that has traditionally engaged in youth military education and has aided in the expansion of Yunarmiya across Russia.⁵⁶ Other groups tied to the Russian government, like the Cossack formations, have been instrumental in providing military education in Crimea.⁵⁷
- **Orthodox Church.** The Moscow Patriarchate is increasingly active in these youth initiatives in and outside of Russia. An Orthodox priest is an almost constant feature of inductions in Yunarmiya and Young Guard Yunarmiya, and the Russian Orthodox Church frequently sends church leaders to speak at summer camps within Russia.⁵⁸ More importantly, the international reach of the Patriarchate allows it to help spread pro-Russian youth military education. The Russian Orthodox Church has autonomous branches with varying degrees of independence in Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Moldova, and Ukraine, and claims jurisdiction (albeit disputed) over all Orthodox Christians in the former Soviet Union.⁵⁹ Church branches promote pro-Russian educational initiatives in their area—for instance, the Belarusian branch reportedly recruited youth for paramilitary camps in Belarus.⁶⁰ More broadly, the Russian Orthodox Church collaborates with other groups engaging in youth education. For instance, the Ukraine branch of the Moscow Patriarchate has given logistical and ideological support to Cossack formations in Ukraine's occupied territories.⁶¹
- **Aligned actors.** Actors unofficially linked to the Russian state have also enabled the spread patriotic military education to post-Soviet youth in contested zones and foreign countries. They are harder to detect, easier for the Kremlin to disavow, and a useful foundation for more organized initiatives in the future. Cossack formations, long involved in providing military education, have been linked to a number of initiatives outside Russia, both in organized efforts in Crimea and one-off programs like a 2016 summer camp near Kyiv.⁶² E.N.O.T. Corp, a Kremlin-tied nationalist group turned private military company, made headlines for its youth education programs held in Russia and Serbia that aggressively recruited international youth. Other nationalist groups, active in recent conflicts and aligned with the Russian government and Orthodox Church, have assisted in expanding Russia's model of youth initiatives to contested zones. Indeed, many youth groups, including Young Guard Yunarmiya, were built on earlier youth groups run by nationalists.

Attendees

The youth who are drawn to Russian military education have a similar profile and motivations for attending. They are the population most susceptible to indoctrination and most likely to sympathize with the values promoted by Russian youth military education programs, namely military values, pro-Russian values, or conservative values.

The participants are young. They are mostly between 8 and 18 years old, but some may be even younger.⁶³ In programs that either take place abroad or draw in youth from abroad, participants' family background may drive their attendance, including Russian heritage or speaking Russian at home.⁶⁴ Together, these characteristics may make participants more vulnerable to the sales pitch made by Russian youth programs, with its emphasis on military skills, conservative values, and shared history.

In places under greater Russian government control, participants are exposed to more aggressive recruitment tactics. Yunarmiya used heavy-handed appeals to achieve the recruitment goal of one million members by 2020.⁶⁵ Membership in Yunarmiya was reportedly offered to children as young as six, and Yunarmiya students were promised a better chance of university admission.⁶⁶

Military parents likewise face pressure to enroll their children. Estonia's intelligence agency found that there is an "informal obligation" for children of Russian military personnel, public servants, and defense industry members to participate in Yunarmiya.⁶⁷ This finding was supported by a leaked Russian Ministry of Defense communique from 2019, which informed members of the military that "the absence of officers' children" from Yunarmiya represent a misunderstanding of state policy on patriotic upbringing.⁶⁸

The Russian government also targets vulnerable children at home and abroad. Programs like 'Yunarmiya Mentorship' in Russia and Crimea seek to connect orphans and 'difficult' teenagers with Yunarmiya mentors.⁶⁹ This tactic suggests that not all youth are drawn into these programs voluntarily.⁷⁰

Activities

Youth groups, summer camps, and day programs across Russia and Eastern Europe all organize similar activities: militarized activities involving guns and knives, drills and activities explicitly or implicitly focused on particular enemies, and events that memorialize history.

- **Military activities.** Children and teens participate in activities reminiscent of military operations from the outset. Inductions into Yunarmiya and Young Guard Yunarmiya frequently feature demonstrations of weapons and often the opportunity for youth to handle these arms. After induction, many participants view or participate in drills that simulate combat or military activities, from proper posture when parachuting to tactics used by police against protestors.⁷¹ Similar activities occur at non-Yunarmiya summer camps in and outside of Russia. Copycat and one-off summer camps have been noted for allowing participants to practice with knives and guns and can also feature military-style drills, such as a simulation of clearing a building when searching for terrorists.⁷²
- **Implied enemies.** Military-inspired activities also focus on combatting enemies of Russian government. In 2017, Russia's military-themed Patriot Park constructed a miniature Reichstag for reenactors to storm.⁷³ Elsewhere in the same park, youth participate in 'battles' on a simulated road in Afghanistan or view an exhibit about Russia's

involvement in the Syrian conflict.⁷⁴ Russian programs also identify adversaries in more subtle ways. A 2019 demonstration in Yekaterinburg for youth about to be inducted into Yunarmiya displayed the tactics police use to suppress protestors. The ‘protestors’ in the exercise were described as young, civilian, and armed with sticks and Molotov cocktails, and they were accused of engaging in “staged riots” near a military facility to gain access.⁷⁵ The image of protestors as young, violent, and using protests as a pretense to undermine the government seems particularly pointed in the aftermath of Russia’s 2018 protests, in which young people participated in significant numbers.⁷⁶

- **Participation in the memorialization of history.** These programs also share a common emphasis on activities memorializing history. Youth participating in pro-Russian youth military education efforts are often most visible when marching in parades celebrating anniversaries of famous battles or landmarks in World War II. These events reinforce a Russian view of history, ignoring inconvenient facts like the Nazi-Soviet Pact. This emphasis on history glorifies the Soviet era and creates a sense of shared Soviet, anti-West, “antifascist” heritage.

Ideology and Values

Pro-Russian youth education programs share an emphasis on patriotism, traditional and illiberal values, and reverence for war memory. The promotion of these values is evident in the activities promoted by youth programs, such as patriotic parades and maintaining war memorials. Alternatively, they can infuse activities that are not, on their face, ideological, like the presence of Orthodox priests at Yunarmiya initiations.⁷⁷ These values are touted by programs across the post-Soviet space.

- **Patriotism.** Youth programs champion ideas of patrimonial heritage and the ‘Russian world.’ Organizers frequently discuss the need for young men and women to serve their ‘motherland’ or ‘fatherland.’ Children in Yunarmiya swear to prepare “for service and the creation for the good of the Fatherland.”⁷⁸ In youth education legislation, the DPR avowed its desire to instill reverence for the “symbols and monuments of the Fatherland.”⁷⁹ The language of patriotism, fatherland, and specifically the virtue of sacrificing oneself for one’s homeland resonate throughout the youth programs.
- **Illiberalism.** Youth programs advance traditional conservative values, particularly those espoused by the Orthodox Church, and are often explicitly religious.⁸⁰ Youth programs also often reinforce existing gender norms. Participation in Russian military summer camps can be predominantly male, and youth programs tend to place a heavy emphasis on traditional gender roles.⁸¹ Young women are more likely to be encouraged to participate in beauty contests—young men, in military competitions.⁸² Finally, programs target the idea of liberalism more generally.⁸³ Even when not explicitly religious or regressive, youth programs systematically oppose values deemed progressive.

- **Reverence for shared war memories.** Youth programs emphasize shared memory, particularly of World War II or, what they term, the ‘Great Patriotic War.’⁸⁴ While celebrating World War II is a useful pedagogical tool to infuse seriousness and drama into the activities undertaken by youth, it is also important ideologically.⁸⁵ The idea of the Great Patriotic War taps into a myth of Russian greatness and the value of sacrifice to one’s country. Moreover, it serves a specific purpose in the post-Soviet space. Russia shares war memories with many of the countries into which it would like to expand its youth programs and influence.

This agenda appears to serve two purposes. First, an alignment with values, such as patriotism or religiousness, that youth or their parents already espouse increases the attractiveness of programs. Second, these values align with a pro-Russian, anti-Western world view. One particularly blunt perspective describes Yunarmiya as the alternative to “the LGBT community, religious fanatics, radical nationalists, and various sects.”⁸⁶ Edward Basurin, who announced the creation of Young Guard Yunarmiya in Donetsk, stated that it was important “to not only bring up youth more patriotically, but to fight against the falsification of history which the mendacious Kyiv authorities are currently involved in.”⁸⁷ In other words, the values taught by Russian youth programs are almost as anti-West as they are pro-Russia.

Contrasts with Other Youth Military Programs

Contrasting Russian and Kremlin-backed youth military education programs with military youth programs in the United States underscores the danger posed by the Kremlin’s strategy.

Military education programs in the United States, including ROTC and JROTC, offer opportunities for youth to engage in military-style activities and learn about military service. They are associated with increased levels of accession into the U.S. military and serve as a major recruitment tool.⁸⁸ Moreover, they are widespread in the United States, broadly targeted, highly organized, and well-resourced. However, when compared to Russian programs, they are fundamentally different in their activities and aims.

1. **Partisanship.** Youth military programs run by the U.S. government are non-partisan. JROTC and ROTC emphasize the Constitution as the basis for civic mindedness, rather than any specific set of political or cultural values. By contrast, Russian military education tends to focus on promoting values that benefit the Kremlin and the Putin regime.
2. **Age.** U.S. youth military organizations recruit older participants than Russian military youth education programs. The youngest JROTC participant is 14 years old, while Yunarmiya’s youngest members are 8 years old—and participants in demonstrations and military parades can be much younger.⁸⁹ This difference in ages reflects the fact that JROTC aims mainly to prepare students for a military service, while Russian programs aim to inculcate pro-Kremlin political values from a young age.

- 3. Reach.** The Kremlin’s recruitment efforts focus on recruiting and indoctrinating youth abroad. The effort to involve youth from contested territories and the near abroad puts it in stark contrast with the United States, which does not recruit abroad and does not allow non-citizens to complete the ROTC program.⁹⁰

Russian patriotic military youth education efforts are a clear departure from Western programs. Designed not only to create future soldiers, but also to infuse political ideals, Russia’s programs aim to advance the Kremlin’s domestic political—and geopolitical—agenda.

Activists or Assets: Why Moscow Thinks Investing in Youth Will Pay Off

“Komsomol is not only politics, it is true friendship and love, student years and the romantic appeal of new roads, common goals and dreams, and what is most important – it is being part of the fate of your homeland,”

—Vladimir Putin⁹¹

The Kremlin has sought to promote the idea of a Russian World or ‘*Russkiy Mir*.’ While originally understood to refer to a community of Russian speakers in the post-Soviet space, the term has evolved.⁹² Putin has been quoted saying that the Russian World united “all those spiritually connected to Russia and who consider themselves carriers of Russian language, culture, and history.”⁹³ This definition of the Russian World relief on self-identification, which leaves its borders usefully vague.⁹⁴

This view of Russia’s sphere of influence allows Moscow to justify meddling in the affairs of its neighbors, including its annexation of Crimea in 2014.⁹⁵ While the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine have made its neighbors more wary of a Russian World, the idea remains an active and potent tool in Kremlin’s efforts to influence contested regions and states in its near abroad.

Youth are central to creating the Russian World—and Moscow’s current efforts to influence the beliefs of young people are not new. The lineage of the current wave of youth initiatives can be traced to Soviet programs like Komsomol and Nashi, a youth group formed in the early 2000s. A closer examination these past programs—both their successes and failures—illuminates the motivation for and the unique dangers posed by Russia’s latest youth military education push.

The following programs have influenced Russia’s current youth education initiatives:

- **Komsomol, Young Pioneers, and Little Octobrists.** Under Soviet administration, the Komsomol, or Communist Youth League, served youth aged 14 to 28, while the Young Pioneers and Little Octobrists catered to younger children. These programs recruited youth across the Soviet Union, and they often served as vehicles to teach Soviet ideology and values.⁹⁶ While they collapsed with the fall of the Soviet Union, Komsomol and related organizations loom large in Russian political memory as a tool of ideological and political unity.

These organizations shaped the mission of current youth programs. Putin specifically lauded the Komsomol, using its 95th anniversary to commemorate how it represented “not only politics,” but also “being part of the fate of your homeland.”⁹⁷ The Putin administration then announced the creation of Yunarmiya with a decree published on the 97th anniversary of the creation of Komsomol.⁹⁸

- **Nashi.** In the late 1990s and early 2000s, pro-democracy youth groups sprang up in the post-socialist space and participated in the Color Revolutions. These groups, including Otpor in Serbia, Kmara in Georgia, Pora in Ukraine, and KelKel in Kyrgyzstan, took inspiration from each other and in some cases directly collaborated and shared tactics.⁹⁹

The rise of these pro-democracy youth groups was greeted with fear by many regimes. Belarus and Azerbaijan’s governments suppressed youth movements before they had the chance to gain strength, and Kyrgyzstan created a pro-government imitation youth group, also called KelKel.¹⁰⁰ Whether or not youth groups had a chance to take root, they were perceived as influential in the Color Revolutions. Nashi was developed in direct response to these youth-led nationalist, democratic movements.

The Color Revolutions prompted anxiety in Russia and were blamed in part on the West for funding anti-government movements.¹⁰¹ This anxiety was heightened by the emergence of pro-democracy groups within Russia and the perception that Russian youth were anti-Russia.¹⁰² In response to these pressures, the pro-government youth group Nashi was created under Vasily Yakemenko, the notorious founder of an earlier pro-Putin youth movement—“Walking Together.”¹⁰³ Nashi emphasized patriotic, anti-Color Revolution and anti-fascist ideas.¹⁰⁴

Nashi targeted older youth, organized activities like the restoration of memorials and volunteer work in orphanages, and mimicked the civil-society tactics of the pro-democracy youth groups it responded to.¹⁰⁵ Through these actions Nashi sought to channel the youth away from pro-democracy groups towards a less threatening outlet.¹⁰⁶

Russian memories of Komsomol led to a deep appreciation for the role of youth organizations: children eventually grow up, and youth groups can influence the attitudes of adults in ways that reverberate for decades. Experiences with Color Revolutions heightened fear of the power of pro-democracy youth movements. And Nashi demonstrated the potential to co-opt modern youth.

These experiences prompted the Kremlin to view youth as essential political actors, susceptible to revolutionary impulses, and educational programs as a key tool to shape their behavior.

The Kremlin’s Youth Problem

In contemporary Russia, youth political attitudes present a significant challenge to the Putin regime. Recent polling data suggests that young Russians are more pessimistic about their country’s future and increasingly less supportive of the Putin regime.¹⁰⁷ The Russian government fears the possibility of youth activism, particularly as opposition figures like Alexei Navalny

attract a young audience and new technologies provide outlets for youth voices.¹⁰⁸ For example, a video released by the Russian Federal Investigative Committee negatively portrays the protests against Navalny's imprisonment in January 2021 and features a psychologist calling TikTok a "recruiting office" that lures gullible youth into activism.¹⁰⁹ Legislation will prohibit extracurricular educational activities that could expose Russian children to "anti-Russian propaganda" beginning in June 2021.¹¹⁰

At the same time, polling data reveals that younger Russians are likely trust the military more than other government institutions.¹¹¹ Furthermore, there has been an increase in support for military service since 2015. In 2019 the Levada Center found that 60 percent of respondents agreed with the statement that every 'real man' should perform military service, an 18 percent increase since 2015.¹¹² This trend is evident not only in Russia, but also in some of the areas Russia has targeted with patriotic youth military programs abroad. Polling in Serbia in 2018, for instance, found high levels of trust among young people in the military and the church—much higher than their trust in Western institutions.¹¹³ These trends suggest programs like Yunarmiya are well targeted—they take advantage of youth attitudes towards military service to increase their legitimacy and attendance.

A Piece of the Puzzle: How Patriotic Youth Advance Russian Strategy

Programs in Russia, contested regions, and further afield have the potential to draw in youth who might otherwise not experience similar levels of Russian disinformation, influence the worldviews of participants, and improve military recruitment. In so doing, they threaten to produce a more pro-Kremlin youth on Russia's periphery who will support Moscow's policy goals.

- **Attract new audiences.** Youth programs offer comradeship, the chance to attend a well-resourced summer camp, the opportunity to shoot a gun, and preference in university admissions. More abstractly, the fusion of conservative values, ties to the Orthodoxy practiced by the Moscow Patriarchate, nostalgia for the Soviet era and glory through war, and nationalism has the potential to appeal to parents and children across Russia and the post-Soviet space. This programming has significant benefits for the Kremlin. Initiatives that draw youth interested in one element of patriotic military education (e.g., shooting guns) will expose them to a wide range of disinformation and messaging they otherwise might not encounter (i.e., pro-Russian propaganda). Thus, youth programs have the potential to attract and influence young people, even if Russian government initiatives are the subject of controversy and cynicism in some circles.
- **Influence youth worldview.** Youth programs promote pro-Kremlin values and ideas. These values can be celebrated heavy-handedly, through speeches at inductions, lessons dedicated to patriotism, and quizzes on Russian historical achievements.¹¹⁴ However, they can also be delivered more subtly, through military exercises against a Russian enemy, the idealization of military power, and politically targeted charity and community service projects. These values have the potential to frame how youth view the world, particularly because the conservatism, nationalism, and reverence for history that youth programs

traffic in are frequently paired with anti-Westernism. Emphasizing the divide between Russia and the West is not unique to youth programs—it is one of the key features of Russian World narratives.¹¹⁵ The participants in patriotic military education are young, relatively malleable, and not necessarily politically engaged. Introducing youth to politics in an environment where Russian values are prized and the West is the antagonist has the potential to impact their political future—either by making them more pro-Moscow or channeling their political energy away from anti-government activism. Changing youth attitudes in Russia, contested regions, and the near abroad may make pro-Kremlin worldviews more common and anti-Kremlin movements less likely.

- **Increase military capability.** Russian youth initiatives encourage youth at home and abroad to join the military. Indeed, in its 2020 intelligence report, the Estonian Foreign service highlighted that the “broader purpose” of Yunarmiya and similar initiatives was to “increase military capability.”¹¹⁶ Russia has suffered from population decline in recent years; a trend that is only expected to accelerate. A 2019 Rand report predicted that population decline would shrink the conscription base, making recruitment more expensive and lowering standards for recruits.¹¹⁷ Youth programs within Russia can help address this problem by increasing the capabilities of conscripts and improving public opinion towards the military to enable more military spending.¹¹⁸

Educational programs abroad encourage youth to defend the idea of fatherland. They may even, as several countries in the region have worried, increase the likelihood that the Kremlin can use militarized groups sympathetic to Moscow in times of conflict—as a sort of fifth column. Alternatively, youth programs can serve as an instrument of Russian soft power that blunts the need for the use of military force.

A worldview that can be tailored to attract a wide range of audiences and disinformation focused on memory and geopolitics are hallmarks of the larger Kremlin agenda to influence populations in contested territories and the near abroad. However, employing these approaches in the context of youth groups is particularly threatening to the United States and its allies. This strategy draws in a new audience of young people and has the potential to alter their worldviews for years to come. In addition to promoting pro-Kremlin attitudes, an increased military capacity will challenge the United States and its allies in the region as they continue to confront the threat of Russian military power in Ukraine, Belarus, and beyond.

Options for Confronting Youth Programs: Cautioning and Mitigating

Russian youth military education is international in its reach, but the responses of affected countries are uncoordinated, if they are responding at all. By supporting the legislative efforts of partner countries, raising awareness about the Kremlin’s youth agenda, and documenting the spread of pro-Russian youth military education, the United States can help reduce the threat of this new wave of initiatives.

Restricting Participation Through Legislation

One way to prevent youth from participating in Kremlin-backed youth programs outside of Russia is by prohibiting participation. After young Latvians traveled to military summer camps in Russia, Latvia passed a law in 2018 banning its youth from taking part in military-style activities or programs in non-NATO or EU countries.¹¹⁹ It is unclear which educational initiatives fall under the law's jurisdiction, whether or how the law would be enforced, and what punishments for violations would be. However, its passage underscores the fact that many U.S. partners are wary of Russian youth programs and are willing to act.

The United States could support the development of legal codes for countries wishing to ban or limit participation in militarized youth programs. Legal restrictions have benefits: they create a barrier to participation, raise public awareness, and give legislators a platform to discuss the negative aspects of youth initiatives. This approach does, however, come at a cost. It is unclear whether a law can prevent or punish youth participation in summer camps in Russia, especially if there is no clear definition of what constitutes a 'military-style program.' Further, not every country has the political will and resources of Latvia. This approach is thus best suited to countries where Moscow's activities are well known, and the governments are willing and able to respond. Ideally, by supporting legislative action the United States can coordinate the responses of partners and more effectively limit youth participation.

Raising Awareness

Another option for reducing wider participation in youth programs is to publicize their activities. Nashi collapsed in part because embarrassing details about the organization were aired and public opinion turned against the program. These details included the involvement of a leader in the beating of one journalist and the revelation that some supposed 'activists' had in fact been paid for their participation.¹²⁰ These revelations divided the public and increased opposition to the group.¹²¹

This case suggests one path forward for the United States and its partners: advertising the abuses of Russian youth programs. By tracking and publicizing the dangers of Russian youth programs, the United States and its partners can decrease the willingness of parents to allow their children to participate. This strategy could reduce youth participation in countries that may be unwilling or unable to address the problem at the national level.

Tracking Progress

Within Russia and contested territories little can be done to mitigate the spread of youth military programs because the United States and its partners have limited leverage over Kremlin-controlled areas. However, documenting Russian youth militarization and supporting NGOs that track youth militarization can serve several purposes. First, increased reporting on Russia-controlled areas can give a clearer picture of the Kremlin's wider activities, enabling governments in non-Russian-controlled areas to make better-informed decisions about whether and how they should respond. Second, tracking can give lawmakers in the region a sense of the seriousness of the threat and the

influence Russian youth education programs can have when these initiatives are given free rein. Finally, tracking can inform policymakers who hope to reclaim contested areas where pro-Russian youth programs are currently active of the challenges that await them if they succeed.¹²²

Conclusion

The Russian government's efforts to influence youth—both at home and outside their borders—are concerted, coordinated, and dangerous. The Kremlin's patriotic military education initiatives exhibit a high level of organization, promote activities that appeal to a wide audience, demonstrate an ability to harness the energies of pro-Kremlin actors, and reveal an assertive posture in contested and foreign territories.

The implications of this threat are only beginning to emerge. In the coming years we will have more insight into the effect of these initiatives on youth in the former-Soviet space, but it may be too late. In order to avoid a long-term shift in attitudes in favor of the Kremlin and the expansion of Russian military capabilities, the United States must work with partners in the region to push back against this rising tide of pro-Russian militarized youth education across the post-Soviet world.

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