

The Role of Political Youth Movements in the Democratisation Process of the Contemporary Russia

Görkem Atsungur*

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyse the role of political youth movements in contemporary Russia. The Russian political youth movements can be broadly divided into two categories: "Pro-Kremlin" and "Opposition groups". Moreover, most of the political parties in the Duma have youth wings. Recent studies show that most of the young people in Russia do not participate in elections. On the other hand, over the past decade, some of the youth movements start to use nonviolent methods of resistance against autocratic regime. Thousands of young people demand political change and take part of the demonstrations. This paper will focus on the implications of current political processes for youth politics in contemporary Russian political culture. It will try to figure out the main "strengths and weakness" of these groups in the democratisation process of the contemporary Russia.

Keywords: Youth Movements, Russia, Democratization, Political Culture, Power.

* Yeditepe University, Political Science and International Relations

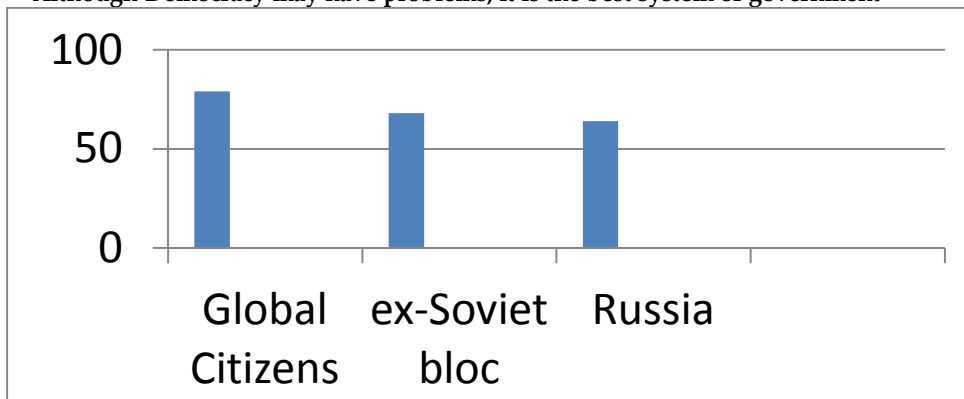
INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to analyse youth movements in Russia and their positions in the democratisation process.

No political concept is more used, and at the same time misused, than that the concept of democracy in World politics. Almost every political regimes today claim to be "democratic" but not all of them allow even the basic conditions of the democracy such as political freedom, free-fair elections and civil society. From Ancient Greece and Rome through the American, French and Russian revolutions till the modern time, the concept of democracy has always been discussed and will continue to be considered. Most of the distinguished scholars agree that Russia's transition to democracy is still incomplete and partial due to some reasons. According to them, the distribution of formal powers between the president and parliament is too much in favour of the president. Moreover, the political party system, civil society and rule of law are still underdeveloped. The war in Chechnya and terrorism threat Russian security, therefore, Russian army can use of force if it is needed and human rights in the Russian society does not develop so much like in the West. Although all these negative aspects, no major political force in Russia has an incentive to violate the basic norms of democracy totally in Russian politics.

Russia's current political institutions are initially the product of a series of political struggles that began in the late 1980s under Gorbachev and in the early 1990s under Yeltsin. According to Gallup International, Voice of the People survey, 79% of global citizens believe that although democracy may have problems, it is the best system of the government. In the former Soviet republics this ratio is 68% and in Russia, only 64% believe this statement.

Although Democracy may have problems; it is the best system of government



(Resource: Gallup International, Voice of the People Survey, <http://www.voice-of-the-people.net/>)

During the Putin period, the notion of “democracy” has evaluated as a “Western concept to stop Russian progress.” According to most of Russians, “democracy” is evaluated as a Western tool which tries to control the power of Russia. As a result of this, most of Russians start to not to believe in “democracy”. In 1991 more than half of the whole Russian population believed that democracy is the best type of political regime. Hence in 2005, this ratio sharply decreased more than half of that amount.

The survey which was done by Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) indicates the most important factors for Russians. Most of the young population believe that the most important factors are prosperity (58%), Success (42%), Liberty (41%), Property (27%), Family (26%), Human Rights (25%) and Security (23%). Only 8% of them believe the importance of democracy in their life.

The Most Important Concepts for Russians

	Total	Men	Women	Age 18 to 35	Age 36 to 54	Age 55 and above
Prosperity	59%	58%	59%	58%	65%	51%
Success	39%	41%	38%	42%	42%	31%
Liberty	35%	36%	34%	41%	36%	28%
Property	29%	33%	26%	27%	34%	24%
Family	23%	21%	25%	26%	21%	21%

Human rights	21%	17%	24%	25%	21%	15%
Security	19%	18%	19%	23%	16%	16%
Stability	18%	16%	19%	22%	16%	14%
Peace	19%	17%	20%	19%	19%	18%
Justice	12%	12%	12%	14%	12%	9%
Democracy	8%	8%	8%	<u>8%</u>	9%	8%
Religion	3%	3%	3%	3%	2%	3%
None of listed above	3%	3%	2%	1%	2%	4%
No answer	10%	9%	10%	7%	7%	17%

(Resource: <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082424>)

Especially, young Russian generation start to believe that they support “a strong leader” instead of “democracy.” This “choice” is one of the most distinguish sociological diagnosis from other Post-Soviet states. This “Revolutionary Generation” can be one of the reason why all the reforms cannot achieve and Russian transformation still remains “Unfinished project.” In this regard, it is vital to understand Russian young generation’s perceptions on “democracy” and “power”.

Political Youth Movements

Since the end of the Cold War, youth movements have been applying nonviolent methods of resistance against the authorities in the post-Soviet region. Braungart, R.G., Braungart M.M. (1986) define “Youth movements” as an “organized and conscious attempts on the part of young people to initiate or resist change in the social order.” Thousands of young people took to the street and they demanded for political changes. For instance “Otpor” (Resistance) in Serbia (2000), “Pora” (It’s Time) in Ukraine (2004), “Kmara” (Enough) in Georgia (2003), “Zubr” (Bison) in Belarus (2001/2006) and “Yeni Fikir” (New Thinking), “Yokh” (No) and “Dalga” (Wave) Movement in Azerbaijan (2005) are some of them in the region. Political scholars start to pay attention to the role of young people in the democratisation process. For example, Pora is successful to convince mass society to take actions against political regime. Moreover, the Western resources start to transfer their practices to post-Soviet states, including Russia. Over the past decade, the colourful revolutions took place in Russia’s “lebensraum” (living space) such as

Ukraine, Georgia and Kyrgyzstan. It produces similar fears in Kremlin for potential resistance of educated urbanized Russian Youths.

According to Gene Sharp, who has extensive writings on non-violent resistance, *"power is not monolithic."* For him, power ultimately derives from the subjects of the state. Therefore, power structure relies upon the subjects' obedience to the orders of the ruler. If subjects do not obey, leaders have no power in political arena. For Russian leaders, whether he is Putin, or Medvedev, or any predecessor such as Yeltsin, power is the most important concept due to Russian Political Culture. As Putin mentioned that *"A weak state is a threat to democracy in no less a degree than a despotic power."* As a result of this, political obedience is a crucial factor in Russian politics as Sharp explains.

Political Youth Movements in Russia

During the Soviet period, young people were the "symbol of progress" and the "guarantee for socialist future." All young groups which were emerged at that time had to work through "Komsomol", therefore, young people directly controlled by the Communist Party. In the late 1980s with "Glasnost" and "Perestroika", Komsomol was disintegrated and young people start to lose their interests in new politics.

After the collapse of communism, Russian people, especially Russian youth start to be considered to be politically disinterested and apathetic. Recent poll, which was done by FOM on 17-18 May 2007 in Russia indicate that more than half of the young generation (53%) ignore elections and 36% of young people participate in the elections. 24% of 18-35 ages respondent "never" votes, 24 % of them "seldom" vote, 17% of them "often" vote and only 19% of them "always" vote. This "always" ratio is incredibly low in comparison of other ages groups (above 55 ages more than 55%, 36-54 ages almost 40% vote always).

Are Younger Than 25 Years Nowadays Interested in Politics?

Few	Many	Difficult to Say	None
53%	11%	14%	22%

(Resource: <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024>)

Russia is also relatively low in the youth participation of voting behaviour in Europe. For example, Italy has 95%, Germany 83%, Austria 80%, Slovakia 72%, France 62%, UK 47 % and Russia is only 41%.

Youth participation in General Elections in Europe

Italy	Germany	Austria	Slovakia	France	UK	Russia
95%	83%	80%	72%	62%	47%	41%

(Resource: <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024>)

Moreover, more than half of Russians cannot name any youth organisation in Russia. In Russia, total estimated number of young political and civil activists is less than 1 % (i.e. 100.000) of the young generation. Opinion Poll, which was conducted on 21-24 November 2007 by the Levada Center, indicates the knowledge of political youth movements in the Russian mass society.

Which Political Youth Movements and Organizations Do You Know in 2005-6-7?

Name of Youth Organisations:	October 2005	December 2006	December 2007
Nashi (Ours)	10%	23%	26%
National-patriotic youth movements (skinheads and others)	32%	33%	12%
The youth organisation of the Communist Party	13%	17%	10%
National-Bolshevik party	25%	24%	10%
The youth organisation of the Union of Right Forces	12%	13%	6%
Vanguard of Red Youth (AKM)	2%	4%	1%
Oborona (Defence)	1%	1%	1%
Revolutionary communist union of youth (RKSM)	7%	4%	1%
Others	1%	1%	1%
There are no such organisations	27%	19%	27%
Difficult to say	21%	28%	30%

(Resource: <http://www.levada.ru./press/2008012101.html>)

According to the FOM; these ratio starts to change in 2010, but still most of half of the respondent continue not to know of any youth organisation.

Which Political Youth Movements and Organizations Do You Know in 2010?

None of them	Young Guard	Nashi	Young Russia	National-Bolsheviks	AKM	Oborona	Difficult to Answer
54%	25%	15%	15%	10%	2%	1%	5%

(Resource: <http://www.levada.ru./press/2008012101.html>)

On the other hand, Russian politicians are conscious of the role of youth movements in the neighbouring countries. As a result of this, Kremlin start to

pay attention on creation of political youth movements who would support their policies and agendas. Putin and Medvedev have shown strong interests in promoting the participation of young people. In terms of democratisation and modernisation, Russia needs to increase youth organisations. Also, the majority of the mass society support young generation taking part in politics.

Should Young People Take Part in Politics and the Political Life of the Country?

They should	They should NOT	Difficult to Say
69%	16%	16%

(Resource: <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024>)

Russian youth has been less homogenous in their political ideologies in comparison with other post-Soviet states. It is very diverse and wide in its ideology, forms, and content. Developments in 1990s affect negatively young generation. All major political parties and blocs in Duma have had youth organisation for a long time, specifically, the Union of Right Forces (SPS), a Youth Communist League of the Communist Party of Russian Federation and youth wings of the Liberal Democratic Party of Russia. Indeed, many of them are elitist in their nature and they use bureaucratic methods of party politics. SPS and Yabloko Youth are good examples of this kind of organisation. If these youth movements are built on their political parties' ideology, they cannot provide distinguished contribution to the democratisation process. Moreover, one of the main problems of the youth movement in Russia is based on mainly in big cities such as Moscow. Their influence is so limited. As a result of this, still many people do not know any important youth organisation. Also, Skinheads are important problem in Russian youth culture. For instance, in Moscow there are Skinlegion, Blood and Honour, United Brigades and Russian Aim skinhead groups. In St. Petersburg Russian Fist and White Bears in Yaroslavl and North Group in Nizhniy Novgorod Nazis groups. These Nazis groups take more attractions rather than legal youth organisations. Even though these Nazi groups are also segmented, they all provide Russian nationalism, anti-communism, anti-liberalism, anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism.

Political Youth Movements in Contemporary Russia

Pro-Kremlin Groups:	Opposition Groups:
Nashi (Ours)	AKM (Avant-Garde of Red Youth)
DMD (Youth Voluntary Squad)	SKM (Union of Communist Youth)
Mestnie (Locals)	Levie Front (Left Front)
Molodaya Gvardiya (Youth Guard)	Hourra
	Pobeda (Victory)
Rossiia Molodaya (Young Russia)	Movement against Illegal immigration (DPNI)
ESM (Eurasia Youth Union)	Narod (People)
	Young SPS (Union of Right Forces)
	Oborona (Defence)
	Narodno-Demokratichnie Soyouz
	Young Yabloko
	Smena (Shift)
	NDSM (People's Democratic Youth Union)
	Nazbols (National Bolshevik Party)

In Russia, the political youth movements can be mainly divided into two groups; Pro-Kremlin groups and Opposition groups. Relatively, Pro-Kremlin groups can be named as Nashi (Ours), DMD (Youth Voluntary Squad), Molodaya Gvardiya (Youth Guard), Rossiia Molodaya (Young Russia), Mestnie, ESM (Eurasia Youth Union), etc. And some of the Opposition groups are Oborona (Defence), Smena (Shift), NDSM (People's Democratic Youth Union), Nazbols (National Bolshevik Party), AKM (Avant-Garde of Red Youth), SKM (Union of Communist Youth), RKSMB (Revolutionary Communist Youth Union), etc.

Nashi, Youth Voluntary Squad, Mestnie and Molodaya Gvardiya are Kremlin Loyalist movements. These pro-Kremlin youth movements dominate the streets and the "civil society" in Russia. They use effective political propaganda.

<u>Name:</u>	<u>Founded in</u>	<u>Leadership:</u>	<u>Members:</u>
Nashi	2005	Vassili Iakomenko, Nikita Borovikov	10.000
Mestnie	2005	Unclear	5 active members

Molodaya Gvardiya	2005	Divided leadership- Alexandre Borissov, Andrei Safronov, Andrei Tourchak	15.000
-------------------	------	--	--------

Nashi is the largest, best known and most successful of the government-friendly youth organisation in Russia. It was founded in response to the "Colour Revolutions" in post-Soviet region in order to promote "anti-orange" sentiment among Russians. Vladislav Surkov, Putin's adviser, claimed that the West would try to start a revolution in Russia soon. As a result of this, they need to take measures preserving the political status quo and support pro-government movements in mass society. They are benefited enormous support by the government. They provide loyalty Putin, nationalism and statism in Russia. In Nashi's manifesto, the organisation declares "unpatriotic coalition of oligarchs, anti-Semites, Nazis, and liberals". They claim that "they are anti-fascist" and provide "sovereign democracy" in the contemporary Russia. They use mass rallies, media-oriented actions and physical assaults on opposition movements. They also organise summer camps, social modernisation programs and training education. This youth organisation gained international attention in 2007 against mass demonstrations in Tallinn, Estonia about Soviet war memorial. They attacked on the Estonian ambassador in Moscow. They try to prevent mass mobilization for the Duma and Presidential elections. But their main motivations are money, personal development and career instead of pure ideology. So many people start to describe Nashi movement not a youth movement, but a Putin's political technology project. Youth Voluntary Squad (DMD) is a Nashi's division. They use physical counteraction against opposition movements, especially to Nazbols. Gladiator's soccer fan clubs are one of their members. Mestnie is another pro-Kremlin movement. Even though this movement is prepared under the authority of the Moscow governor M. Grobov, the leadership of the movement is not clear. Even though it has only five active members, there are around thirty thousand young adults ready to be mobilized. Molodaya Gvardiya is a branch of United Russia party. Their main goals are attract Russian youth to the party and they help to fight against oppositions with street actions and political campaigns. Like Nashi, the main motivation of the members is based on career.

Rossiia Molodaya and Eurasian Youth Union are more radical movements. Rossiia Molodaya is a radical pro-Kremlin youth group and they are anti-opposition. It has not so many members. Their ideology is based on nationalism and statism. They are provocative and discredited opposition's movements. Eurasian Youth Union is an eccentric group inspired by Alexander Dugin. Their ideology is based on mixture of semi-fascism,

nationalism, imperialism, anti-Americanism, Orthodox Christianity, and Paganism. It has several dozen members. They are more active in South Ossetia, Ukraine and Moldova rather than Russia in general.

The main strengths of the pro-Kremlin Youth groups are that they are supported by Kremlin, therefore, they enjoy benefited from huge resources. They have also opportunity to use media for their propaganda. On the other hand, the main weaknesses and obstacles of these groups are that they have weak ideological motivation and they are more pragmatic to use resources and materials for their self-interests such as increasing their career. While they depend on centralised funding, they do not have luxurious to act independently, thus, they do not promote enough position in the democratisation process.

Contrary, there are some important opposition youth movements in Russia which are close to Communist, Social Democrats and Liberal groups.

Name	Founded in	Leadership	Members
Avant-Guardia Krasnaia Molodaia (AKM)	2005	Serguei Oudaltsov	1.500
Union of Communist Youth (SKM)		Guenadi Ziouganov	2.500
Left-Levie Front (Left Front)		Ilya Panamarev	
Hourra	2007	Serguei Chargounov	10.000
Pobeda	2007	Dmitri Goudkov	50.000
Movement against Illegal immigration (DPNI)	2002	Alexandre Belov	4.000
Narod	2007	Alexis Navalnie, Serguei Gouliave, Piootr Miloserdov, Zagar Prilepen	
Young SPS (Union of Right Forces)		Oleg Kozlovsky	

Oborona	2005	Ioulia Malachoca, Nastia Karimova, Alexandre Khomoukaev, Micha Mourachov	1.000
Narodno-Demokratichnie Soyouz	2006	Narodno-Demokratichnie Soyouz	1.000
Young Yabloko	1995	Ilya Iachine, Alexandre Chouchev and Olga Vlassova	
Smena	2004	Stanislav Iakovlev	50
Da (Yes)	2005	Maria Gaidar	
NDSM		Russian People's Democratic Union.	1.000
Nazbols		Eduard Limonov	

There are some left-wing opposition groups which are close to Communist Party. Communist Party in Russia is the second largest political party in the Duma and in the last election in 2011, they took 20% of the votes and they have ninety two seats. Avant-Guardia Krasnaia Molodaia (AKM) is a non-partisan radical left youth movement and they are active in Moscow popular protests. Their partisan affiliation is National Bolshevik Party of Eduard Limonov, who is the most important financial sponsor of the movement. The movement tries to mobilize and unite Russian leftist under the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. Union of Communist Youth (SKM) is a radical left movement. Left-Levie Front (Left Front) is against majority nationalist tendency in the communist Party of Russia.

There are some social-democratic loyalist movements such as Hourra and Pobeda (Victory). They are loyal to "A Just Russia" political party which has sixty-four seats out of four hundred fifty seats and received 14% of the votes in the last election on 4 December 2011. It is a social democratic party. Some of the old party Rodina are members of Hourra. They use street actions, media campaigns and summer camps. Hourra seems to be relatively isolated. Pobeda organise discussion forums.

There are some nationalist opposition youth movements in Russia. Movement against Illegal immigration (DPNI) are monitoring and denunciation of illegal immigrants. They have free services in social aid.

This movement is close to Velika Russia party which was founded by Dmitri Rogozine.

There are some liberal opposition movements. Young SPS (Union of Right Forces) is divided between partisans in favour of negotiation with the Kremlin and those who refuse it. Oborona is an independent non-partisan youth movement. Many young SPS militants joined this movement. They use non-violent resistance and civil disobedience. Their main goal is to establish a more democratic political regime with respect of rule of law and civil society. They have no partisans' affiliation. Narodno-Demokratichnie Soyuz supported Mikhail Kassianov presidential campaign in March 2008.

There are some democratic opposition movements. Young Yabloko has weak capacity for mobilization. They support electoral campaign for Yabloko. Grigori Iavlinski provided financial matters. Smena is a pro-democracy youth group. It is one of the first youth movements after the collapse of the communism in Russia They have no formal leadership. It is a horizontal movement without directive organ. But Stanislav Iakovlev is an influential person. They organise street demonstrations against the government. They attend marches and other joint opposition activities. Garri Kasparov supports this movement. Most of the members attended demonstrations in Ukraine. Da (Yes) movement depends on the commitment and network of Maria Gaidar. NDSM is a youth branch of Russian People's Democratic Union. They actively support popular protest against Moscow construction policy. Even two members of the organisation were elected in Moscow municipality.

Nazbols' members have wide range of ideologies from semi-fascism to left-wing nationalism. They target mass repressions. But they use more radical nonviolent protest actions. They have around three thousand members. But this organisation was banned by authorities due to its extremist ideologies.

The main strengths of the Opposition groups are that they have clear ideology and some of them support the idea of democracy, rule of law and freedom of thoughts and speech. Also, they have strong internal motivation of activist and ability to work in difficult situations. On the other hand, the main weaknesses and obstacles of these groups are that they have limited resources, restricted access to Russian media in order to expand their ideologies and promote their advertisements. They have also face with severely harassment and persecution.

Despite the fact those obstacles and strength of these youth movements, most of answers from survey (42%) support the idea that young people

should become members of political organisations founded by their elder rather than (32%) support the idea that they create their own political organisations.

What Is Better and More Correct?

They should create their own political organisations	They should become members of organisations by elders	Difficult to say
32%	42%	27%

(Resource: <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024>)

Also, only half of the participants in the survey believe that young people have capacity to create their own political movements and organisations.

Are Today’s Young People Capable or Not of Creating Their Own Political Organizations and Movements?

They are capable	They are NOT capable	Difficult to Say
51%	27%	22%

(Resource: <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024>)

Most of the members of pro-Kremlin groups think that to take active role in such organisation will provide good career for them. In this survey, it is clearly seen.

Does Participation in Politics and Political Life Help Young People Attain a High Position in Society Or Not?

It helps	Difficult to Say	It does NOT help
65%	24%	11%

(Resource: <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024>)

In the same survey, most of the respondents (66%) think that state should help youth organisations.

The Role of State in Youth Organisations

The State should help Youth Organisations	The State should only see to it that Youth Organisations act within the Law	Difficult to Say
66%	19%	16%

(Resource: <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024>)

In the Opinion poll, this was conducted by VTsIOM on 6-7 October 2007, shows that most of the participants think that young people should participate in political and social life in Russia.

Young People Participation in Political and Social Life

Yes, definitely	On the whole Yes	On the whole No	No answer	Definitely No
42%	33%	12%	10%	3%

(Resource: <http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/9047.html>)

In the same opinion, most of the young respondents answered that they do not want to join any youth political organisations.

Perceptions of Youth Organisations by Young People

6-7 October 2007	I already am a member of a political organization	I am thinking of joining a party in the near future	No answer	Basically, I am not against joining a party, but not at the moment	I do not want to join
	5%	5%	25%	25%	40%

(Resource: <http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/9047.html>)

Conclusion

Youth movements in Russia are still so weak. Young generation as potential future political elite and decision makers should play crucial role in the democratisation process. They need to include themselves into politics. They should not alienate from the political system. When they are interested in politics, they should do this for a better future, not for their personal career interests. Most of the Russian young who are actively interested in politics, they want to include in the system for establishing their good future. In Russia, youth movements can be divided mainly into two categories: pro-Kremlin and anti-Kremlin groups. Both these two groups do not have strong beliefs on their ideologies. While they support Kremlin's politics, they are subservience. On the other hand, while they criticize Kremlin's politics, they totally get up against Kremlin. Both of them are highly polarized. And even in some youth events, the crime between these two groups can be seen. As a result of this, the current system made them more radicalised than they are. Then, the main aim of youth movements – to create better future and peacefully participation cannot be established. According to the statistics, most of young people even do not care the importance of democracy. They need to realise the importance of democracy for the society. In order to do this, Russia should encourage her young people in politics. While more than half of the young generation are not interested in politics, it will be so difficult to engage for young people into the political system. Kremlin should not only encourage its supportive youth movements. All youth

movements should benefit from the governmental funds at the same level for Russia's future.

REFERENCES

Braungart, Richard G. and Margaret M. Braungart. 1986. "Youth Problems and Politics in the 1980s: Some Multinational Comparisons" *International Sociology*, 1, (December 1986).

Gallup International, Voice of the People Survey
<<http://www.voice-of-the-people.net/>>

Gene Sharp. 2011. *Sharp's Dictionary of Power and Struggle*. Oxford University Press.

Public Opinion Foundation (FOM) Survey on 17-18 May 2007
<<http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/dominant/dom0820/d082024>>

Yuri Levada Analytic Center Survey about "Nashi" on 21-24 November 2007
<<http://www.levada.ru./press/2008012101.html>>

Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM) on 6-7 October 2007
<<http://wciom.ru/novosti/press-vypuski/press-vypusk/single/9047.html>>