

Negotiating History

Memory Wars in the Near Abroad and Pro-Kremlin Youth Movements

MARLÈNE LARUELLE

Abstract: Since the second half of the 2000s, political tension surrounding memory questions and their weight in relations between post-Communist states has increased. Memory stakes also occupy a key place in the strategies of pro-presidential youth movements—in particular the group “Nashi”—to establish youth identities that are both contestatory and recognized by the political authorities and public opinion. This article examines the role played by memory wars in the structuring of some youth movements—giving them a recognized status in society and providing their members with specific identity logic. It discusses the focusing of these memory wars on the Near Abroad and the high-level politicization of the youth historical debates.

Keywords: memory, nationalism, Russia, World War II, youth

Russian society is fragmented in terms of living standards, contact with the external world, access to information, and political and identity-based perceptions. It has very few elements with which to create a social bond or an ideological unity. In this context, the memory of World War II plays a key role as a driver of historical consensus. Polls conducted about this question are very revealing: in 1998, 70 percent of Russian citizens considered the victory of 1945 to be the most important event of the 20th century, and today that figure has reached 90 percent.¹ There is also a large unanimity in Russian public opinion concerning the notion that the neighboring post-Soviet states blame Russia for multiple evils and tend to undermine the Soviet version of 20th century history.

Marlène Laruelle is a Research Professor at the Institute for European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES), The Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University. She is the author of *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (2008) and *In the Name of the Nation: Nationalism and Politics in Contemporary Russia* (2009). Copyright © 2011 World Affairs Institute

Since the second half of the 2000s, political tension regarding memory questions and their weight in the relationships between post-Communist states has grown, in particular in the Russia–Ukraine–Baltic countries and in Poland—two of the zones that were most affected by the violence of World War II and the brutal (re)Sovietization that followed.

Memory stakes also occupy a prime spot within the strategies of pro-presidential youth movements, particularly the group “Nashi”—who are at the core of this analysis, though not exclusively—to establish youth identities that are both contestatory and recognized by the political authorities and public opinion. Youth activists have no direct memory of the Soviet past; instead, their identity is shaped by a more global cultural context, through textbooks, films, media, and official and familial narratives. They thereby advance a mimetic and consensual interpretation of these memory wars, one that is in sync with the mainstream, and simultaneously give off an image of themselves as bearers of a specific youth counter-culture, one rather critical of older generations. Two central references have made it possible to gain this paradoxical place within society as they elicit near total unanimity from public opinion and the ruling elites in Russia: first, the remembrance of the Great Patriotic War; and second, the engagement in the struggle against the so-called falsifications of history by neighboring states.

This article examines the role played by the memory wars in structuring some youth movements, giving them a recognized status in society, and providing their members with specific identity logic. It discusses the focusing of these memory wars on the Near Abroad and the high-level politicization of the youth’s historical debates. In conclusion, it inquires into the stakes of Russia’s Europeanness for the youth movements, the role of historical narrative in creating powerful mechanisms of mobilization, the political dependency of movements claiming youth autonomy, and the absence of ideological and organizational barriers between the official and the more radical movements.² This work is part of a several-years-long research project on youth politicization and youth memory of the Soviet Union that began in 2008. The studies are based on interviews with youth activists and observer participation in their activities, and the fieldwork has thus far been undertaken in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Petrozavodsk, and Vladivostok.

“Managed Democracy,” Managed History

Public Memories, or Public Memory?: Fighting Against a Pluralism of Remembrance

The positive reassessment of the Soviet past has been especially visible, since Vladimir Putin’s assumption of power, in the symbols of the Russian state (hymn, wreath, etc.), official commemorations, and public discourses, but the process had already begun during the second half of the 1990s.³ While the Perestroika years were enlivened by very contradictory debates on Soviet history, in the 2000s the accent was placed on the victory of World War II, Stalin’s repressions being discretely set aside. During Putin’s second mandate (2004–2008), the state tried to exercise stronger control over the memory debates and to silence dissident voices. In 2005, upon the 60th anniversary of the victory of 1945, a first memory policy appeared to take shape when Putin stated out loud what most Russians actually thought but did not say: that “the collapse of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.”⁴

In the following year, media sources close to the authorities and several official figures ferociously denounced the so-called falsifiers of history who, allegedly financed by

the West, dared to discuss or to qualify the Soviet contribution to World War II. They encouraged historians to write “objective” school textbooks; such an orientation is embodied by the textbook written by Filipov, published in 2007, which defends statism as a major axis of Russian history, and excuses Stalinist crimes in the name of the need to modernize the Soviet Union.⁵ In 2008, Memorial, a NGO dedicated to human rights, had its documents seized just as Gleb Pavlovsky, Kremlin’s longterm primary image-maker, accused the organization of having the self-ascribed goal of shaping public memory in Russia and of spreading a distorted view of national history—in particular of Stalinism.⁶

The authorities’ desire to exert their influence on historical narratives accelerated in 2009. Sergey Shoigu, the Minister of Emergency Situations and an important figure within United Russia, suggested that it should be considered criminal to criticize the Soviet victory. A few months later, the Regnum web portal announced that the deputies of the presidential party would table a bill on history in the Duma that made provisions for the creation of a civil tribunal to supervise the preservation of national memory; it also stipulated that amendments would be made to the penal code to punish with three-to-five-year prison terms rehabilitations of Nazism, accusations against the Allied Forces, and misrepresentations of the Nuremberg trials’ outcome.⁷

The bill’s text included several ambiguities and inaccuracies, which probably partly explain why it was not put to a vote in the Parliament. In the first place, the bill purported to be applicable not only to Russian citizens but to all citizens of the post-Soviet states, on the pretext that they were Soviet citizens on the day that the conflict broke out, June 22, 1941—which is legally impossible. Secondly, the bill does not target worldwide revisionism but focuses on relations between the post-Soviet states; the text seems to have been drafted by the Duma Committee for CIS affairs, led by Konstantin Zatulin, close to the then-mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov and known for his virulence against Russia’s “refractory” neighbors—namely, the Baltic countries, the Ukraine, and Georgia. Thirdly, the bill makes reference to the Nuremberg trials, but Moscow avoids discourses that deny the trials’ conclusions, since there exist only a few extremist groups that seek to rehabilitate the Nazi regime—and these groups are Russian as much as Baltic or Ukrainian. In addition, the judgment contains very harsh words against the German–Soviet pact of August 1939, although the Russian authorities are in denial in regard to this subject; they are content to explain it as a provisional tactical maneuver, and merely aim to quash debate on World War II.⁸

The bill on memory was not put to a vote of deputies, but the requests to modify the penal code were, with no success. On May 7, 2009, President Dmitry Medvedev announced on his blog that he had decided to create a “Commission to fight against falsifications of history to the detriment of Russia’s interests.” The commission, led by Chief of the Presidential Administration Sergey Naryshkin, contains 28 members, all of whom are appointed by the president, and only three of whom are historians involved with the Academy of Sciences. The commission has restricted powers in comparison to those envisaged in the bill that had preceded it.⁹ In addition, it provides no legal definition of the term “falsification”: the key element in its title is in fact not “falsification,” per se, but actions done “to the detriment of Russia’s interests.” The commission is therefore not designed to judge classical revisionism, such as that found in Western Europe (for example, the denial of the existence of the gas chambers), but “misleading” interpretations of the victory of 1945.¹⁰

Faced with international and domestic criticisms, Naryshkin defended the commission by recalling that it did not judge historical academic works and therefore had no censorship role, and that it only combated attempts to negate Russia's international prestige. Since its creation, the Commission has not made a show of much activism, a sign that it was essentially about creating a symbol and an instrument that could be activated whenever the authorities deemed it necessary to present ideological legitimization for a political decision. However, the administrative pressures that have been put on associations such as Memorial, or on the historians that work on the Gulag, are being brought to bear via other means than those of the commission. This was shown, for example, in the case of Mikhail Suprun, a professor of history at Arkhangelsk's university, who was briefly arrested for having investigated the fate of Soviet Germans and German soldiers imprisoned in Arkhangelsk gulags.¹¹

Attempts by the authorities to provide a single narrative about World War II have become increasingly frequent and take multiple forms. The main targets are public commemorations, the academic framework, and museology. These attempts are, however, well received by the large majority of public opinion: about two-thirds of those surveyed consider it normal that there be a single history textbook, are worried about the multiplication of contradictory narratives and their impact on the formation of the younger generations, and agree that those who "falsify" history should be pursued via legal means.¹² This unanimity of the interpretation of World War II can be explained by the role that it plays in the post-Soviet social consensus in Russia. In the 1990s, while many elements of Soviet culture were sharply questioned or rendered obsolete, the image of the war managed to survive these contextual changes.

Today, the war's international context has been partially erased. Not only are references to the allies less explicit, but claims about the strictly Russian character of the event are growing. The role of the other Soviet peoples is increasingly denied, with claims that almost exclusively Russians actually took part in the fight.¹³ In addition, the analysis of the massive Soviet losses has worked to reinforce the link between war and suffering. The loss of men allegedly reflects the heroism of the Russian people, and is thus exalted in spite of its human suffering. As the sociologist Lev Gudkov explains, the "Great Patriotic War" allows individuals to talk about themselves without referring to the state or the authorities— notions that today are perceived negatively.¹⁴ The extent of the casualties amassed during World War II is decreasingly associated with Soviet mismanagement and Stalin's lack of military preparation, but is explained by Russia having been surprised by "German aggression."

However, the situation is more complex than it first seems: despite the regular attempts to forgive Stalin—for example, the initiative of the Moscow town hall to put up portraits of the "people's father" in celebration of the anniversary of the victory in 2010—and the regular administrative pressure placed on those who study Stalin's repressions, the cult of rehabilitation has not fully taken hold. The Russian Orthodox Church, for instance, fosters an alternative memory in which the victims of the repression are sanctified, and even canonized—while simultaneously cultivating its ties with the political authorities.¹⁵ In 2007, for the 70-year commemoration of the great trials of 1937, Putin visited the site of Butovo, a major memorial site devoted to the victims of the Stalinist purges.¹⁶ In addition, since the election of Medvedev, more nuanced remarks have emerged

in public space: on May 7, 2010, on the eve of the commemorations, the Russian president tried to dissociate the victory of 1945 from Stalin—relation to whom is unambiguously negative. He used the term *totalitarianism* to define the nature of the Stalinist regime and stated that the massive organized crimes committed against his own people “cannot be pardoned.”¹⁷

The debates regarding the figure of Stalin must therefore be separated from the narrative about World War II; if the former give rise to contradictory statements, opinion around the latter is unanimous. However, the president’s use of *totalitarianism* potentially opens up the door to a debate on the date that this totalitarianism came to an end, and its coverage over part of Europe.

Memory as Part of Foreign Policy in the Post-Socialist World

The memory of the war displays an international facet that cannot be forgotten: the memory policy implemented in the countries of Central Europe attack frontally both the Soviet narrative and the Western one. The interpretation of World War II has, in fact, become one of the identity matrices of the Central European members of the European Union, who have sought for some years

to inflect the Western European-centered interpretation of the war that figures Russia as an ally and does not debate the transition from Nazi to Communist totalitarianism. A narrative escalation among all actors has intensified the radical character of some of the notions being espoused, and has transformed the debate into a component of foreign policy strategies.

From the start of the 1990s, Czechoslovakia and Poland set up so-called lustration policies and purged the administration of figures considered to be too closely tied to the socialist regime.¹⁸ The progressive criminalization of the Soviet Communist legacy deeply shocked Russian public opinion, which was by no means prepared for such polemics. The memory wars grew in magnitude with the entry of several former socialist states into the European Union, a sign of the intrinsic link between the assertion of European identity and a judgment on the totalitarian past of the continent.¹⁹ In 2004, Tallinn and Riga made an official request to Moscow for damages of several hundreds of millions of dollars for what they defined as the Soviet occupation, while the Estonian and Lithuanian presidents refused to participate in the commemorations of the victory in Moscow on May 9, 2005.²⁰ In the same year, a White Book was published by the Estonian State Commission on “Examination of the Policies of Repression,” and in 2007 the Polish minister of culture proposed removing all the statues tied to World War II that were erected during the Soviet period. The official remembrances of the anti-Soviet resistance movements—even when they were fought in German uniforms—have also risen in number. And, lastly, Ukraine has tried to have the Holodomor (the Ukrainian famine of 1932–1933) recognized internationally, not only as a crime against humanity but as genocide.²¹

The events surrounding a bronze statue in Tallinn in 2007 have played a leading role in the rise of Russian concerns about the interpretation of World War II.

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They resulted from a long process of reinterpretation of history by the Estonian authorities, as well as by Estonian nationalist associations, who push for those who combated the Soviet troops to be actively remembered. In 2002, a monument built to the Estonians who fought for the liberation of their country on the German side, therefore represented in Nazi uniforms, was erected in Pärnu, then taken down and moved to Lihula, where after an international outcry the authorities also ended up removing it. In 2007 when the Estonian government decided to remove the eternal flame that was burning in front of the “Liberating Soldier” and re-baptize it as the “Monument to Fallen Soldiers of World War II,” the Russian community of Estonia came out in numbers, deeming May 9 to be its celebration day.²² In order to avoid the bronze soldier becoming a meeting place for the country’s Russian speakers, the authorities decided to move it from the center of the town to a nearby military cemetery, giving rise to violent clashes between ethnic Russians and Estonian forces that led to the death of one person on the Russian side.

For Russia, the attempts to internationalize divergent interpretations of history are imbued with a political objective—namely, to undermine Moscow’s legitimacy on the international scene. The twists and turns of the Vassily Kononov affair—the only Soviet soldier to have been accused of committing a crime against humanity, sentenced by Latvian courts but acquitted by the European Court of Human Rights²³—heightened the Russian feeling that the Baltic countries, Ukraine, and Poland were working side by side to weaken Moscow’s position. In addition, after a bill was put forward by the Baltic countries, the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly decided in 2006 to vote on Resolution 1481, called the “Need for International Condemnation of Crimes of Totalitarian Communist Regimes.” The resolution asserts the equation between Nazism and Stalinism, and thus sharply undermines one of the central pillars of the Russian regime: for the Kremlin, supported by the majority of its citizens, fascism can by no means be compared to the Communist experience. In response to this internationalization of memory wars, Russia has sponsored UN resolutions opposing the resurgence of Nazism. In 2009, the General Assembly adopted a draft resolution, proposed by Russia (but refused by the USA, with the majority of European countries abstaining), to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance, including attempts to heroize the Nazi movement and former Waffen SS members and to desecrate monuments to the fighters against Nazism.²⁴ Russia had therefore hoped to create international legislation that it could draw upon in future memory wars with its neighbors.

These conflicts over memory, which are highly symbolic, have both domestic and international dimensions. The domestic component derives from memory’s shaping of the state identity—which is under permanent reconstruction—and the consensus within society. For Estonia, the gap between the informational worlds in which the Estonian and Russian communities live, within in the same country, is one of the key drivers of the conflict over historical symbols.²⁵ The international component comes from the fact that a commonly shared European memory is supposedly at stake here—which is, in fact, paradoxical. For Russia, the USSR cannot be accused of having accelerated Europe’s total war on the pretext of the German–Soviet pact: for Moscow, the pact is at best the equivalent of the Munich Agreement, but is not a Soviet–German alliance for carving up some European states. Similarly, in Russian public opinion, the totalitarian interpretations of the Communist regime, which place it in comparison to Nazism, are illegitimate, both in principle (the “nature” of the two regimes is not the same), and historically

(Communism combatted fascism, and paid a heavy price in terms of human lives); the entry of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union in 1939/1945 cannot be considered as an occupation subject to legal sanctions. Hence, in June 2010, the Russian lawmaker Konstantin Kosachev explicitly stated the fundamental contradiction of the Russian Federation, maintaining that it fulfills all the international obligations of the USSR as its successor state but does not recognize any moral responsibility or any legal obligations for crimes committed by the Soviet authorities.²⁶

For the Central European states, the conventional narrative on the “victory” of 1945—shared by both Western Europe and Moscow—entirely obliterates the lived experience of the region, which saw itself as being passed from one form of totalitarianism to another.²⁷ The states thus request to be recognized fully within the construction of European memory, and therefore raise the question of the place of Russia within Europe. By drawing a parallel between the Soviet experience and the Nazi regime, Russia no longer appears as the liberator of Europe, which both weakens the legitimacy of its claim to be able to participate in the affairs of the continent and opens up the path to a severe symbolic undermining of its Europeanness. Seen from Moscow’s perspective, these memory stakes are therefore crucial.

Shaping Domestic Memory: Bringing Up the Youth

These memory debates take place in a Russian domestic context that is more and more affected by the will of the authorities to control so-called civil society and to shape youth orientations.²⁸ During the Soviet period, the authorities regularly expressed concern about the lack of youth politicization. The youth was considered to be the least reliable of the regime’s age brackets, and the one through which Western influences were most likely to infuse society as a whole. In the 1990s, youth political movements were rare and seemed confined to the extreme fringes of far right or Soviet nostalgia: Zhirinovsky’s Falcons claimed to have nearly 30,000 sympathizers, the Communist Youth Union counted nearly 40,000 members, and the Avant-Garde of Red Youth had about 6,000 militants.²⁹ With the exception of the National Bolshevik Party, the other parties and movements were little interested in the youth, considering them apolitical.

This situation first changed during the 1999–2000 elections, when the Kremlin decided to found a presidential party and to assume more open control of associative groups. In 2000–2001, a movement called “Walking Together” (*Idushchie Vmeste*, i.e., with Putin) was formed whose ideological orientation consisted essentially in supporting the presidential figure. With the catharsis of the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004, Russian political circles reacted with alarm at the capacity of a peaceful social movement to topple established powers. The role of youth movements in the “colored revolutions” was widely discussed in the media and extensively analyzed by circles of political advisors.³⁰ Parties opposed to Vladimir Putin also came to think they might transform the youth into a force for change, basing their strategies on those of coalitions such as *Otpor* in Serbia, *Kmara* in Georgia, and *Pora* in Ukraine. Thus, movements were formed such as *Defense*, which gathered together the youth of the Union of Right Forces; *Change*, a group affiliated with the oppositional *Other Russia*; *Yabloko*; and various ecological and human rights associations.³¹

Having coincided with the “colored revolutions,” the promotion of a state-centered patriotism that specifically targets the youth is considered by the Kremlin to be a matrix

of political stability. Its patriotic agenda focuses on the three driving forces of consensus: first, the rehabilitation of symbols of the fatherland and of institutionalized historical memory, which in large part intersects, albeit not completely, with the memory of the Soviet Union; second, the instrumentalization of Orthodoxy to build symbolic capital; and third, militarized programs of patriotic education designed for the young. In 2001, the Kremlin instructed the Duma to vote on the first state program for the “patriotic education of the citizens of the Russian Federation for 2001–2005.” The text of the second program, whose mandate spanned from 2006 to 2010, hoped to “make the patriotic consciousness of Russian citizens one of the most important values, one of the foundations of moral and

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spiritual unity” and to make patriotism the “spiritual backbone” of the country.³² The third program was adopted at the end of 2010, and given a budget of \$25 million.³³ Like the two preceding programs, it focuses mainly on the memory of the Soviet Union—especially its involvement in World War II.

The Kremlin has also sought to take advantage of this dynamic to transform the youth into a resource for social mobilization, a tactic designed both to demonstrate that the younger generation’s apolitical posture has ceased

and to prevent its involvement in oppositional revolutions.³⁴ This was the role attributed to *Nashi* (Ours), which has become the most visible pro-presidential youth movement in the domestic and international arena; while the presidential party United Russia also formed its own youth movement, the Youth Guard (Molodaia Gvardiya), and other groups connected to local powers were structured at the regional or municipal levels—for instance, Young Russia (Molodaia Rossiya) in Moscow. *Nashi* reported to have about 100,000 supporters in 2008 (with about 8,000 regular activists).³⁵ Its aim has been to channel the youth’s desires for change and their growing feelings of generational conflict. The movement thus defines “Our revolution” (playing on the double meaning of *our*, as a possessive adjective and as membership in the movement) as a renewal of the political elite by youth starved of control of the country. *Nashi* maintains a virulent critique of politicians and deputies, including those of United Russia, but proclaims its unfailing loyalty to the president and the prime minister.³⁶

Taking the Komsomols as model, the movement organizes many social actions as part of what it calls a “politics of small acts”: visiting orphanages and retirement homes, bringing together children and aged persons, giving aid to the handicapped, providing recreational activities for adolescents in socially disadvantaged neighborhoods, participating in the restoration of churches, and giving aid to libraries. *Nashi* does not hide its moral conservatism. It has announced struggles against alcoholism, drug use, and “uncontrolled sex”; has launched campaigns against bikinis on beaches and abortions; has promoted marriage, heterosexuality, and large families; and has encouraged respect for social, religious and military hierarchies. But further still, *Nashi* organizes political lobbying in

favor of the youth and serves as a social elevator for its members, who gain possible career-development options through internships with major state-run companies and the administration.³⁷

The pro-presidential youth movements have been through many upheavals during their brief existences. Heavily instrumentalized during the 2007 election campaign, they were partially removed from media attention after 2008, as the authorities grew concerned by a lack of control over them and their contestatory character. Nashi was swiftly denounced, including by the official media, for engaging in “hooligan activities,” and underwent a major reorganization that limited its autonomy. Its main leaders, including Vassily Yakemenko, were nominated to the State Youth Committee, and its contestatory potential was defused. Today, these pro-Kremlin movements continue to occupy the youth scene, in a manner that is less ostentatious but perhaps more durable, thanks to their growing number of activities and increases in state financing. They remain in a grey zone, since they have privileged access to public financing, but are also under suspicion for being too radical in their anti-Westernism, which presents a problem for the brand that the Kremlin is trying to promote abroad.

Memory Wars in the Near Abroad: Russia’s Europeanness at Stake

Paradoxical Matrices of Youth Patriotism

A central component of the Nashi project is to develop a “nationally oriented civism”³⁸ among the young generations. It takes up, on its own behalf, the argumentation of the Kremlin, according to which the constitution prohibits all state ideology—but, nevertheless, there is no state without an idea of statehood/nationhood. Nashi’s narrative on Russian identity is thus built on three primary references: first, the friendship of peoples’ pathos; second, anti-fascism; and, third, World War II. Between all of these elements, the contradictions and paradoxes are numerous. The reference to the “friendship of peoples,” stamped by the Soviet tradition of essentializing so-called ethnic differences, is combined with xenophobic statements against the allegedly inappropriate behavior of migrants toward Russian culture.³⁹ The same ambiguities crop up with Molodaia Gvardiya, which has denounced the xenophobic violence of the skinheads but also orchestrated demonstrations against migrants.⁴⁰ As for it, “fascism” is used as a global term, not linked to historical fascism or even to Nazism, and turns out to be a defamatory catch-all category for Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, the nationalism of the other peoples of Russia, skinhead violence, and Vladimir Putin’s political opponents—ranging from Eduard Limonov to Gennadi Ziuganov, Dmitri Rogozin and Garry Kasparov.

The Nashi manifesto reveals other paradoxes, both in relation to the established elites and to history. The movement thinks of itself as future-oriented, since it holds that the new generation’s mission is to give life to what it calls “megaproject Russia,” consisting of making Russia the global leader of the 21st century.⁴¹ At the same time, several passages of the manifesto focus on history, whose interpretation is seen to clarify the present and create the future. Nashi’s interpretation of history is paradoxical, combining openness and closeness. It underscores three key periods, which are celebrated for the unity, stability, and great power they give to Russia: first, medieval Muscovy shut off from Western influence; second, the Russia of Peter the Great and Catherine the Second, opened

onto the world; and third, the Soviet Union from Stalin to Brezhnev, after the troubles of the 1920s–1930s and before those of the 1980s. Similar paradoxes emerge in geopolitical terms: Russia is celebrated as being the “geographical centre of the world economic system,”⁴² yet Nashi’s publications present a vision of Russia as a country encircled by external and internal enemies that are working in concert to destroy it.⁴³

Nashi’s manifesto claims that Russia has been a leader of world history on three occasions: in 1917, 1945, and 1991. Each occasion is defined in positive terms: the installation of a Communist regime is to have accelerated Russia’s modernization and the progression of socialist ideas in the world; the result of the Russian victory over fascism was “the idea of the right of each people to independent development”;⁴⁴ and the disappearance of the USSR has permitted a public recognition of individual freedom. Once again, the historical contradictions underlying interpretations of the Soviet past are overcome via the notion of a reconciliation of opposites. If individual freedom is glorified as the founding principle both of the new Russia and the Nashi movement, the manifesto also insists that personal freedom is possible only insofar as a state is free from external influence and sovereign democracy is established. The legal training that Nashi offers to some of its members contains a similar paradox: the program mentions not only some delicate subjects—such as the rights of army conscripts and the relationship between citizens and the security services—but also states that “it hopes to show to all the defenders of human rights ... that one can work without being subject to orders from the West, by looking for solutions that come from within Russia. [And that] subordination to external influence can be avoided by discarding cosmopolitan theories and cleaving to the experience of Russia and of the peoples living in it. Such is the sure path to decreasing Western influence and to preserving the country’s sovereignty.”⁴⁵

In keeping with the Kremlin’s curriculum of patriotic education, one of the movement’s priorities is quite naturally to facilitate reconciliation between the youth and the army. Its reconciliation campaign is conducted as part of a program called “Our army,” (*Nasha armiya*), which organizes a multitude of activities: leaflet-drops to relate details about army life; meetings between military personnel and youths of call-up age; and tactical paramilitary games designed to make the army attractive to young men by pointing up its access to technology, cutting-edge vehicles, weapons handling, and martial arts training. At Yaroslavl, the Nashi team has offered training sessions involving shooting at targets that depict the leaders of the Other Russia.⁴⁶ However, the movement remains conscious of the key problems that cause young conscripts to flee, as is shown in its plea, thus far refused by the armed forces, to establish Nashi cells in military units in order to counter hazing (*dedovshchina*). Some Nashi members also wish to promote Orthodoxy. However, the religion issue is a sensitive one: foregrounding Orthodoxy occupies a marginal place among the movement’s multiple activities and is reserved only for their professional activists. Nashi’s aim on religious matters is nevertheless clearly formulated: “To show to all those from 16 to 26 years of age that Orthodoxy is not the religion of the old and of losers.”⁴⁷ The religious education program offered by Nashi, validated personally by the Patriarch (first Aleksiy II and then Kirill), provides for a modernized presentation of Orthodoxy—one that does not get bogged down in holy texts, but shows that faith also permits social engagement and therefore professional success. Orthodoxy is valorized as an element of identity and not as a transcendental principle.

The Great Patriotic War: A Mirror for Today's Challenges

Nashi cultivates Soviet nostalgia. Its website is registered under the “.su” (Soviet Union) domain, and several organizational terms are borrowed from the Soviet register. For instance, those with positions of political responsibility in the organization are called “commissars.” The majority of patriotic activities offered are linked to remembrance of World War II: restoring soldiers’ tombs and monuments dedicated to the war organizing commemorations of the main battles, hosting regular meetings with veterans, making memorial trips to the sites of great battles, and so on.⁴⁸ Each year, the commemoration of May 9 comprises one of Nashi’s most media-driven events. Called *Nasha Pobeda* (Our Victory), it gathers several tens of thousands of activists, and in 2010 aimed to symbolize the passing of the flame from the war veterans with the central slogan “Remember the War, Preserve the Fatherland!”⁴⁹

The Great Patriotic War is endowed with a sacred character, and thought of as a total event, in the sense where no nuance of interpretation or partial reading is accepted without undermining the grand narrative. Nashi’s sacralizing of war is accompanied by the feeling of losing contact with the vital force of this remembrance—namely veterans, whose ranks are thinning. The attempt begun in 2010 to preserve the personalization of the war by filming the last remaining veterans will not make it possible to avoid a profound undermining, in the years to come, of the way in which the cult of the war is passed on to younger generations in Russia. The movement thus combines collective methods of action directly inherited from the Komsomols while trying to modernize the acts of public mourning at the level of technology.⁵⁰ The war is also conceived as the embodiment of the nation, hence the heavily symbolic activities organized by Nashi—such as the opening of a small World War II museum at Grozny in 2006, which is supposed to embody Chechnya’s “return” within the Russian nation.⁵¹

The war takes its place amid a historical conceptualization that is marked by strong generational conflicts. While the 1990s were largely decried by Nashi—which views the decade as a period of state failure, of non-defense of national interests, and of hypocrisy from the elites as regards the transition to the market economy and democracy⁵²—the war years, and more broadly the Soviet decades of the second half of the 20th century, are positively evaluated. One historical time is thus superimposed onto another, and enables a link to be drawn between World War II and Putin’s Russia by presenting the 1990s as a simple historical “parenthesis.” Indeed, Nashi insists on a parallel between World War II and the alleged threat of dismemberment currently weighing on Russia. This historical transposition is direct and unambiguous: with the mission to rejuvenate Russia, the younger generations cast themselves as part of the heroic heritage of the war veterans, while the enemies of contemporary Russia are cast as part of the Nazi heritage. Each year, *Nasha Pobeda* is thus accompanied by statements about the need to “continue the fight against those who want the downfall of Russia,” defined by Nashi as the “opponents of modernization, corrupted liberals, fascists, those media which publish lies and terrorist declarations, and the falsifiers of history.”⁵³

The tendency to amalgamate all opponents into a single category, creating the impression of an immense conspiracy with multiple ramifications both within the country and abroad, forms one of the underpinnings of Nashi political discourse. “Falsifiers of history” are accused by name: Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko; Estonian prime minister Andrus Ansip; Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili; Russian journalist human rights activist and editor-in-chief of *Prima* Alexander Podrabrinek, after he denounced the

Soviet past as bloody and shameful; and popular writer Viktor Suvorov (Rezin).⁵⁴ What emerges clearly from this list is the eminently political character of the “falsification of history” narrative. Targeted are those countries of the Near Abroad that are refractory to Russian influence and with which relations are difficult. Viktor Suvorov, denounced as a “traitor of the fatherland,” can also be added to this list of external enemies; a former Soviet military man exiled in Great Britain, he has published pop-history bestsellers accusing Stalin of having escalated tensions in Europe by providing economic and military support to Hitler, and has claimed that the USSR was just as responsible for the war as Germany was.⁵⁵

In 2010, the demonstrations of Nashi against the “falsifiers of history” called upon activists to come with the decried works in hand, and the event almost took on the appearance of a book-burning. The eminently demonstrative character of Nashi actions constitutes one of its strengths, as it has managed to capture media attention and its provocative acts have won over many young people. But it has also drawn concern from the authorities, whose leaders do not find such acts amusing.

The Near Abroad, a Battlefield for Memory

Remembrance of the Great Patriotic War has taken its place at the summit of a pantheon that is more political than historical, in which dominate the actions of Nashi against Kosovo’s independence, NATO’s eastward expansion, Georgia’s military operation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and so on. One of the matrix elements of this focus on war is the memory conflict with the Baltic countries that materialized around the bronze soldier statue in Tallinn. Nashi has tried to galvanize public opinion and the Russian authorities by means of highly symbolic and mediatic actions: a one-week blockade of the Estonian embassy in Moscow; the launching of a popular quest to finance the resettlement of the bronze soldier in front of the embassy; a request to rename the street where the embassy is situated after the young Russian who died in the Tallinn riots, Dmitri Ganin; a call to boycott Estonian products;⁵⁶ and the sending of young Russians in World War II uniforms to Tynismiaqi square to serve as “living monuments” to the memory of the war.⁵⁷ These events worked to confirm the heavily symbolic character of Nashi’s patriotism, which grants strategic importance to modifications of the urban landscape, architectural heritage, and toponymy. Thus, the debates have crystallized around questions of urban development (the question of moving of the soldier to another part of the town), relegating to the shadows the real historical polemics linked to the qualification of the 1939/1941–1991 period as a Soviet “occupation” or “invasion.”

All of the pro-presidential movements, Nashi and Molodaia Gvardiya in the lead, have concentrated on denouncing so-called Estonian fascism. Each of their websites devotes one of its pages to this issue,⁵⁸ and much wordplay has been crafted for the occasion—such as, for example, “eSStonian” and “Andrus AnSSip”—while expressions such as “state vandalism” or “state fascism” have become widespread throughout the rest of public opinion and gained a certain notoriety.⁵⁹ The communications strategies of the youth movements around this Tallin event have been rather successful, but have also had unforeseen consequences. The illegal entry of Nashi youth into Estonian territory in Soviet military uniforms merited their being arrested, expelled, and above all prohibited from having a Schengen visa for ten years.⁶⁰ Where the Kremlin flaunts pro-European discourses, Nashi’s contestatory behavior toward one of the EU member states has damaged the Kremlin’s

political correctness and contributed to the partial discrediting of the movement among the ruling elite.

The pro-presidential youth movements also distinctly target Ukraine, especially as the Orange Revolution played a key role in their structuring as “anti-orange movements.”⁶¹ Thus, the patriotic group *Stal’* (steel), a sub-branch of the Nashi that calls for more direct action on the streets and whose name alludes to Stalin, protested against the attempt of the Ukrainian authorities to declare Stepan Bandera, head of the Organization of Ukrainian nationalists during World War II, a national hero.⁶² Nashi set up a web page specifically devoted to the fight against the “falsification of history” in Ukrainian school textbooks: they protested not only against the image of a bureaucratic and criminal Russia—judged responsible for the famine of the 1930s—but also revived old historiographical debates about the identity of *Kievian Rus’*, disputed to be the first state of the Russians, the Ukrainians, and/or the Belarusians.⁶³

For a period of many years, Georgia has been decried for its anti-Russian geopolitical posturing and its attraction to NATO: during the conflict of August 2008, Nashi integrally reproduced the official version of events, just as did Russian public opinion, revealing its delight at Moscow’s military victory, at the “liberation” of the South Ossetians and Abkhazians in danger of “genocide,” and at the international discrediting of Mikhail Saakashvili. In 2009, the focus gradually shifted onto the question of memory. On December 21, 2009—the birthday of Saakashvili—the Georgian authorities destroyed the Memorial of Glory that was built in Kutaisi to commemorate the victory of 1945, officially for urban improvement. This event shocked Russian public opinion and both Nashi and *Molodaia Gvardiya* produced reams of commentary about it. The youth movements also criticized the Georgian historical narrative at the time of the erection of a monument to the 3,500 Georgians who died for independence: those who in 1918 fell in combat against the Red Army, those who fell in 1924 during the uprising against Soviet power, and those who fell in summer 2008 during the Russia-Georgia War.⁶⁴ In 2010, *Molodaia Gvardiya* attached great importance to the erection of a similar monument to that of Kutaisi in Moscow, intended to represent the memory war with Tbilisi.⁶⁵

In 2010, these memory wars shifted to Moldova, which had announced the creation of a Commission of Judgment on the Communist past.⁶⁶ The decision was made by the president of the parliament and interim president Mihai Gimpu, whose eminently domestic aim was to fight against the powerful Moldovan Communist party of Vladimir Voronin. Claiming that he remained in the framework of the above-mentioned Council of Europe resolution, Gimpu also decided to deem June 28 the “day of memory for victims of the Soviet occupation.” As a result, several representatives of *Molodaya Gvardiya* went to Kishinau to organize conferences about the “falsification of history.” Moldovan history textbooks were thus accused of glorifying the Romanian dictator Ion Antonescu, of valorizing the fascist groups of the 1930s, and of presenting Moldova as the fatherland since time immemorial of uniquely Romanian-speaking populations, with no room for Slavic ones. The suspicion was put forward that Mihai Gimpu’s unique goals were to gain entry to the EU, to have NATO military bases installed on Moldavian territory, and to mark his “first steps toward the repression of Russophile sentiments in the republic.”⁶⁷ The youth movements thus played an external support role for domestic political forces, the authorities of Pridnestrovie and the Russian Orthodox Church, all of which objected to these

rewritings in terms of identity. They also had the support of the Institute of the Diaspora and Integration, and were financed by the then-mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov.⁶⁸

In 2009, the 70th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact also incited Nashi and Molodaia Gvardiya to discuss this event. While Nashi remained very reserved in its remarks, United Russia youth movement went so far as to organize a conference with the aim of “preserving historical memory and countering attempts to falsify history.”⁶⁹ In doing so, its aim was to challenge the OSCE resolution, which the movement claimed was signed “under the dictates of the [same] countries that validated the Munich Agreement of 1938,” and to rise up in protest against the bill to make August 23 a day for honoring victims of Nazism and Stalinism. Molodaia Gvardiya’s point of view replicates the official positions of the Russian state. As such, its members also participated in the official commemorative celebrations in Katyn, recognizing that the massacre was organized by the Soviet and not the Nazi armies, a viewpoint that, for example, Communist youth continues to reject.⁷⁰

Discussing the Issue of Ideological Borders and Mobilization Mechanisms

Several elements of this analysis would merit further investigation, in particular the difficulty in perceiving the ideological borders and the differences in mobilization mechanisms that distinguish so-called extremist movements from official currents.

Nashi and the other pro-presidential movements share common traits with the most radical and self-avowedly anti-establishment movements. They share, for instance, mechanisms for direct street action and a passionate commitment to ideological struggle, yet they distinguish themselves in that they offer their members prospects for social promotion and political careers that the opposition movements cannot. This challenges prevailing assumptions about the organizational bases of extremist movements and their relationship to mainstream politics. A sociological analysis of transfers from one movement to another would likely reveal similar mechanisms of engagement; indeed, cross-belongings that, for example, go from the skinhead movements to Nashi, and vice versa, do appear to exist.⁷¹

Among the unifying themes shared both by the Kremlin-backed youth and oppositional movements, that of the “information war” being waged against Russia is extremely widespread. All the youth movements are sensitive to the role played by images and narratives in the construction of a Russian “brand,” and are convinced that the Soviet Union, followed by Russia, has lost the image war against the West many times.⁷² The fact that the countries with which the memory wars are the fiercest are also those that support NATO’s eastward expansion and militate for the European Union to be more offensive in relation to Moscow, heightens the feeling of geopolitical encirclement and containment in the name of historical interpretation. The youth movement Stal’ has, for instance, made its main objective to “develop pro-Russian networks abroad, with the goal of creating a positive image of Russia, and this will give us a strategic superiority. We will change the world, turning ignorance and incomprehension of Russia into respect and even into a fashion for it.”⁷³

The question of Russia’s autonomy is also central and experienced as an emotional commitment by all youth groups, regardless of their political positioning. The texts published by the youth movements about the “the falsification of history” elaborate at length on their feelings that foreign countries are interfering in the writing of history, a key element of national sovereignty that abides no presence from abroad. The financing of historical works thanks to Western foundations is therefore heavily criticized: for Stal’, the aim of this

financing is to “convince the whole world, including us, that our people is not autonomous (*nesamosostoiatelen*) and has no right not only to participate in global leadership, but not even to the autonomous development of its own freedom and its own natural resources.”⁷⁴ The equating of an eminently economic question—the Russian state’s control over its natural resources—and the interpretation of World War II reveals the prism through which history is viewed. As it is formulated by the Stal’ movement, “the victory in the Great Patriotic War is the foundation of the contemporary sovereignty of the Russian Federation.”⁷⁵ With sovereignty being understood as a driver of the Europeanness of Russia, the interpretation of history is therefore formulated in terms of state security and relation to Europe.

The complex relationship between the “imperial paradigm” and the “post-Yalta order” must also be questioned. If the end of World War II spelled the abandon—more or less consensual or conflictual—of the colonial system by Western Europe, for Russia the link created is more complex, and has considerable domestic implications. The world views promoted by Nashi reject any reinterpretation of the post-Yalta order and posit as unquestionable given the historical legitimacy of the USSR in its incorporating the Baltic states and Bessarabia into its borders and in instituting a socialist bloc of brother countries. Further, today it also denies the autonomy of the independent states to write their own history of the 20th century. The Nashi viewpoint, therefore, indirectly implies the illegitimacy of the new states’ sovereignty and of their historical narrative, and instead confirms Russia’s right to oversee them in the name of its former imperial domination. To deny the interpretation of 1945 as a victory would thus go hand-in-hand with some sort of contemporary political and identity illegitimacy. This parallel would merit further discussion in order to highlight the ideological articulations between exiting from the imperial tradition, shaping the memory of the continent in the 20th century, and articulating the Europeanness of Russia.

These youth movements are thus part of the mainstream—that of a political and discursive continuum linking them to more extremist youth movements, as well as to the Patriarchate, the secessionist movements in Moldova, Georgia or the Ukraine, and the commercial and corporate dynamics in force in Russian political life. They also reproduce the Kremlin’s own ambiguities: they express both the Russian state’s claims to Europeanness *and* its refusal to adhere to what it considers to be an EU dictate; its celebration of the emergence of the Communist regime *and* of the end of the Soviet Union; its appeal to human rights as the normative concept *and* its practice promoting an “autonomy of civilization” (sovereign democracy); its will for legality *and* its providing support to secessionist movements in the so-called post-Soviet “frozen conflicts”; a cult of personal commitment to an ideological goal *and* career strategies or defense of corporate interests.

Conclusion

The contradictions inherent to the youth movements, and to the narratives and strategies by which they insert themselves in public space, reveal their acceptance of the evolutions of the Russian social and cultural landscapes. Even as they endorse the importance of collective action, the young activists of Nashi and Molodaia Gvardiya deploy individualist logic pertaining to private self-realization, the quest for professional success, the link between personal happiness, and the pride of being Russian. Ambitions to change the world are directly articulated with the political and economic future of the country; the motto is that anything is possible provided one gives oneself the means to do it:

“We can create Russia such as we envisage it.”⁷⁶ Thus, these groups do not challenge the principles of the liberal reforms of the 1990s, but only the way in which they have been applied. The narrative they use to justify their social action even claims to be grounded in the idea that people should be independent of the state—that is, no longer be “assisted” by the former Soviet welfare state. These youth movements are therefore Soviet-neoliberal hybrids, as Julie Hemment has very rightly called them.⁷⁷

These youth movements are thus obliged to combine modes of action that are linked to counterculture protests (street actions, provocations, carnivalistic strategies, humor, sometimes passing over into illegality) and to support the authorities, who are themselves much more prudent and concerned to uphold “political correctness.” They promote an explosive mixture of Soviet nostalgia, focused on past greatness and the victory of 1945, with calls for Russia to assume a leading role in the 21st century and be at the forefront of globalization. Their actions against the “falsification of history” are almost entirely connected with the Near Abroad. They conduct very few debates about domestic “falsifiers,” who incite less mobilization among the youths than does the idea of a supposed threat to state sovereignty. Nashi is therefore continually grappling with the conflict between Russia’s international integration and the protection of its national autonomy. The apparent inconsistencies of its narratives reprise those of the Kremlin, and do not appear as a factor hampering political mobilization—to the contrary, in fact, since the multiplicity and flexibility of narratives makes it possible to speak to the vast majority of people. The interpretation of history is thus posited as a powerful mechanism of mobilization and of consensus, but the support of the authorities has also proven to be a central element, as these youth groups need both to cultivate their counterculture image and to receive the support of the Kremlin, without which they would probably not exist. They have to manage their dependency upon the political authorities, a dependency that they refuse to accept fully since they see themselves as the spontaneous expression of a youth culture.

Behind the question of sovereignty, which seems to constitute one of the matrices of youth-group narratives, resides that of Russia’s Europeanness. The discourses on the return of great power, the desire to become one of the world’s leaders of the 21st century, and the theme of “Orthodox/Slavic civilization,” are paradoxically part of a will to assert a specific form of Europeanness: its common cultural and philosophical references, its modern and developed society, the universalism of its values, and its right to have a say in the affairs of the rest of the world. However, this Europeanness is not that of the European Union and the normative character of this latter is refused. For the youth movements, the sudden competition over Europeanness with the former allies of the socialist bloc is comprehended as disloyal, and raises the specter of a backward, barbaric and dangerous Russia that has no place in Europe. By accepting the intrusion of narratives from Central and Eastern Europe that undermine the “victory” of 1945, the European Union is charged with adopting a Russophobic stance, such that Moscow seems to be alone in continuing to uphold the authentic European values contained in the “victory against Fascism.”⁷⁸

The recognition that the pluralism of memories does not undermine state legitimacy, or collective belonging, involves a long process of learning on which Europe has worked for many centuries. The growing circulation of national imaginaries and historical narratives presumes that the memories of World War II in Europe be recognized as multiple, even when the sentiment is dominant that two narratives stand in complete contradiction with one another, such as those of the Soviet regime as liberator and as aggressor.

An ambiguous successor of the USSR, the legitimacy of the Russian state in relation to its own public opinion—as well as to other countries—is founded on the fact of its being a liberator of Europe, not its aggressor. Resentment against Europe, which itself is nonetheless also valued positively in numerous everyday practices, is therefore a matrix for these young identities. Their Russian narrative on the *Great Patriotic War* comes into competition with a European narrative on *World War II*, which tends to distance itself from the Russian version to the extent that the states of Central Europe deflect in favor of making an equation between the two totalitarianisms of the 20th century. For the youth movements—and in this case, they are in sync with Russian public opinion and the Kremlin's strategies—the issue of historical responsibility cannot be raised if it means putting into question that narrative that shapes collective and individual identity. Moreover, they consider that Russian memory-construction is by no means obliged to adapt itself to the European framework—but that it does not aim to present itself as outside of it, either.

NOTES

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61. See the article by Jussi Lassila in the issue.

62. See http://madeofsteel.ru/news/cat/Aktualnie_kommentariy_100/nov_Stepan_Bandera_-_ne_geroy_Ukraini_147 (accessed January 26, 2011).

63. "Fal'sifikatsiya istoriy v ukrainskikh uchebnikakh istoriy," *Nashi*, available at nashi.su/fal-sificate/31655 (accessed January 26, 2011). The fact that official Ukrainian discourses depict the country as the main victim of the Second World War is obviously at the heart of the Nashi resentment. Viktor Yushchenko's proposal to create an international tribunal to judge communism for crimes against humanity also provoked fierce reactions on the blogs of the youth movements.

64. "Andrei Vorob'ev: Memorial Slavy—napominanie o nashem obshchem podvige," *Molodaia Gvardiya*, December 21, 2010, available at <http://www.molgvardia.ru/groupchanges/2010/12/21/24304> (accessed January 26, 2011).

65. "Putin otkryl v Moskve memorial pavshim geroiam," *Molodaia Gvardiya*, December 21, 2010, available at <http://www.molgvardia.ru/nextday/2010/12/21/24317> (accessed January 26, 2011).

66. "Moldaviya otkazalas' shchadit' proshloe radi otnosheniy s Rossiei," *Gazeta.ru*, January 15, 2010, available at <http://www.gzt.ru/topnews/politics/-moldaviya-otkazalasj-schaditj-proshloe-radi-/282479.html> (accessed January 30, 2011).

67. "23ogo fevralia 2010 g. v Kishineve sostoialsia kruglyi stol, posviashchennyi problem fal'sifikatsiy istoriy," *Molodaia Gvardiya*, February 23, 2010, available at <http://www.molgvardia.ru/mg/2010/02/23/14376> (accessed January 30, 2011).

68. "Fal'sifikatsiya istoriy—put' v nikuda," *Russkaya Liniya*, December 2, 2008, available at <http://rusk.ru/st.php?idar=113547> (accessed January 30, 2011).

69. "Molodaia Gvardiya o Pakte Molotova-Ribbentropa," *Molodaia Gvardiya*, August 23, 2009, available at <http://molgvardia.ru/mg/2009/08/23/8909> (accessed January 30, 2011).

70. "Kirovskie komsomol'tsy proveli aktsiyu protiv fal'sifikatsiy istoriy," *KPRF.ru*, December 12, 2008, available at <http://kprf.ru/actions/85398.html> (accessed January 30, 2011); and "Katynskomu memorialu ispolnilos' 10 let," *Molodaia Gvardiya*, June 29, 2010, available at http://www.molgvardia.ru/mg_regions/2010/07/29/19254 (accessed January 30, 2011).

71. Several young Nashi members confirmed that they have recruited members from among radical skinhead movements. They say that they recognize the flexibility of belonging for some youths, whom they had hoped to "set on the right path," but I have not yet been able to meet any of these "passers" personally.

72. Interviews with Nashi activists, Moscow, November 2007, and October 2010.

73. See <http://steelastra.ucoz.ru> (accessed January 18, 2011).

74. See http://madeofsteel.ru/projects/Borba_s_falsifikatsiy_istoriy_4 (accessed January 18, 2011).

75. *Ibid.*

76. "Manifest molodezhnogo dvizheniya 'Nashi'."

77. Julie Hemment, "Soviet-Style Neoliberalism?: Nashi, Youth Voluntarism, and the Restructuring Social Welfare in Russia," *Problems of Post-Communism* 56, no. 6 (2009): 44-45.

78. Richard Sakwa, "Russia and Turkey: Rethinking Europe to Contest Outsider Status," *Russie. NEI.Visions* 51 (May 2010).