

MOLODAYA GVARDIYA – THE YOUNG GUARD OF RUSSIA'S ELITE

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Introduction

In this paper, I will try to describe the main characteristics of a new player on the Russian political chessboard, the youth movement *Molodaya Gvardiya* ("Young Guard"). Political youth organisations have gained more attention in Russia after a youth movement, *Pora* ("It's time"), played an important role during the Ukrainian "orange revolution". A number of pro-presidential and opposition youth organisations appeared in early 2005, with *Nashi* ("Ours") and *Oborona* ("Defence") being respectively the most famous results. But already in late 2005, it was clear that the opposition had not any chance to gather enough support to become a destabilising factor, while *Nashi*, thanks also to the support it obtained by the presidential administration and consequent massive financing, had not only established local branches in most of Russia's regions, but already staged some of the biggest demonstrations Moscow has seen since the collapse of the Soviet Union. By all evidence, at this point, leaders of Russia's main party and PR experts supporting president Putin, started to feel the need for something qualitatively different. Not simply a mass youth movement strong enough to defend the Kremlin in case of unlikely massive demonstrations staged by the opposition, but a youth organisation capable of bridging the evident generational gap (social, ideological and political) that present day Russia inherited from the 1990s; a unitary movement, less dogmatic in its ideology¹ but faithful to the governmental line; a group of people interested in promoting a coherent and unifying "national idea" and caring about its country; and crucially, a network of people coming from all regions of Russia willing to be involved in politics, and ready to become the cadres of a new Russia.

2. Where does Molodaya Gvardiya come from?

When *Molodaya Gvardiya* was founded in 2005, it could already count on the vast structure of *Molodezhnoe Edinstvo* ("Youth Unity"), the former youth branch of Russia's main party, *Edinaya Rossiya* ("United Russia")². As of 2005, *Molodezhnoe Edinstvo* officially counted 70,000 activists and 86 regional headquarters covering almost all the regions of this vast country³. In spite of these considerable numbers, this organisation did not play a significant role in Russian politics, and its activities were mostly limited to "good deeds" in favour of elder people, war veterans, invalids and orphans, or educational campaigns against alcoholic drinking and smoking among the young, and occasional patriotic street demonstrations.

¹See also this declaration by Ivan Demidov, one of the people involved in the creation of the organisation, released before the official foundation of *Molodaya Gvardiya*. «I think the country needs a responsible political movement not dividing people in "ours" and "the others"; in *Molodaya Gvardiya*, just as in *Edinaya Rossiya*, all political tastes and factions will be represented, from the liberals to the conservatives and pravoslavny. Therefore, the motto "Who is not against us, is with us" is perfectly applicable to our organisation.» See Devidov prevratit 'Molodezhnoe Edinstvo' v "Moloduyu Gvardiyu", «lenta.ru», 24 October 2005 <http://lenta.ru/news/2005/10/24/demidov/>; <http://tinyurl.com/m9ckn>.

²*Molodezhnoe Edinstvo* was founded in April 2000, as youth branch of the party *Edinstvo*, and kept its name after the latter merged with *Otechestvo* to form *Edinaya Rossiya*.

³A. Mukhin, *Pokolenie 2008: nashi i ne nashi*, Moscow, Algoritm, 2006, p. 164.

As the concurrence among youth organisations grew, the quiet “good deeds” policy of *Molodezhnoe Edinstvo*, while socially acceptable and approved, could not attract young Russians as much as other comparable movements. Realising the potential of a strong youth section, the leaders of *Edinaya Rossiya*, started a massive operation of restyling and rebranding. The new movement, *Molodaya Gvardiya Edinoy Rossii*, officially held its founding congress on November 16, 2005, in Voronezh, where about 5,000 young activists were gathered. The presence of television anchorman Ivan Demidov and film director Fyodor Bondarchuk⁴ among the members of the newly established council of coordinators, the highest organ of the organisation, was meant to interest the youth and increase attention in the media.

While at first the whole operation seemed nothing but a change of façade imposed from above on a sleepy and substantially unchanged organisation, *Molodaya Gvardiya* demonstrated soon not only to be significantly different from its predecessor, but also to have unique features that could make of it the one of the most influential Russian youth organisations, even more so in a medium- to long-term perspective.

3. What is Molodaya Gvardiya's main asset?

The main goal of the members of this organisation is, admittedly, “get to power”. According to their own claims, they are not so much interested in expressing their opinion in massive street demonstrations, or to express their love for Russia in similar manners, but quite ambitiously, they want to become the ruling cadres of their nation. And they have a big brother, *Edinaya Rossiya*, ready to support them not only thanks through its network of connections, but also to provide them with a basic resource: places in its electoral lists.

According to a poll held at national level in late January 2007, 28 per cent of those interviewed said they would cast their ballot for *Edinaya Rossiya*, if they were to vote for the national *Duma* the following Sunday. Considering that according to the same poll the second party would be Zyuganov's Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF) with only 7 per cent, and other opposition parties would gather very limited support, it seems that *Edinaya Rossiya* might win much more than 50 per cent of the seats at the next national elections, and a consistent representation in regional and local councils as well⁵. In April 2006, *Edinaya Rossiya* decided to reserve 20 per cent of the places on its party lists at every level (from local councils to the national parliament) to people younger than twenty-eight, and unsurprisingly gave a prominent role to *Molodaya Gvardiya* in the process of selection of the young candidates. Even if officially these candidates do not have to be members of the youth branch of the party, it was widely understood that most of them would come from among the activists of *Molodaya Gvardiya*⁶.

⁴Fyodor Bondarchuk is author of *Devyataya Rota*, the film earning the highest box office revenues in Russia's history.

⁵ Poll conducted on January 27 and 28, 2007, with 1,500 respondents located in different Russian regions. 28 per cent declared they find it difficult to answer, and 25 per cent they would not go voting. See the results in detail on the website of the Moscow based Public Opinion Foundation, <http://bd.fom.ru/report/map/d070501>; <http://tinyurl.com/2qpbqe>.

Considering that according to the current electoral law representatives are elected on a proportional basis, with a 7 per cent threshold, these figures are even more telling.

⁶Among others, Konstantin Kostin, deputy head of the central electoral commission of *Edinaya Rossiya*, expressed this feeling to the journalists. See N. Melikova, I. Rodin, A. Samarina, “Molodaya Gvardiya” rvetsja v elitnye kabinety, «Nezavisimaya Gazeta», 11 April 2005. <http://www.ng.ru/printed/66943>; <http://tinyurl.com/32bf0h>.

The selection procedure, called *Politzavod* ("Political factory")⁷, was meant to be as spectacular as possible and had some elements in common with TV shows casting. To participate to the first level of selection, would-be candidates simply had to complete an application form and record a forty-five seconds video presentation at one of *Molodaya Gvardiya's* offices. The commissions picking the twenty applicants that would participate to the second stage were composed by members of *Molodaya Gvardiya* and *Edinaya Rossiya*, as well as some representatives of local youth organisations. To pass the second round of the contest, the participants have first to gather at least 500 signatures, and then hold at least three street demonstrations and three meetings with their potential voters. All candidates that successfully accomplished their tasks can participate to a final meeting, when they will present their initiatives and hold debates; only at that point, the same commission and regional representatives of *Molodaya Gvardiya* will choose which candidates will be included in the actual electoral lists.

Politzavod was soon put into practice, and in the summer of 2006 the concourse took place in the eight federal entities that were to hold elections the following autumn.

It was clear from the beginning that in a proportional system based on party-lists, the placing in electoral lists is the only thing that matters, and inclusion by itself is not significative. It must be stressed, moreover, that part of the regional legislative organs are chosen through voting in single member constituencies. The complexity of the system, while supposedly known, was never explicitly referred to on the websites of *Molodaya Gvardiya* or *Politzavod*, nor was it mentioned in statements by leaders of *Edinaya Rossiya*⁸. Accordingly, high expectations among the public at large and *Molodaya Gvardiya* activists might have been disappointed when the results of the first regional elections including candidates chosen through *Politzavod* were made public. On October 8, 2006, elections for the local legislative organs took place in nine entities of the Russian Federation⁹. *Edinaya Rossiya* obtained altogether 244 deputies, which corresponds to more than half of the seats at stake in those elections¹⁰. According to the official website of *Molodaya Gvardiya*, only nine winners of *Politzavod* were actually elected, and not even one in Tuva and Primorskiy Kray¹¹.

All considered, it must be recognised that nine deputies correspond to almost 10 per cent of the number of deputies elected by party lists, which is a comparatively good result and in line with fair expectations¹²;

⁷This kind of contest took place in summer 2006 in eight subjects of the Russian Federation due to hold regional elections, and in other thirteen the following winter. In this paragraph I will briefly describe the guiding lines of this contest; *Politzavod* was actually conducted in different ways in the regions. The main elements of *Politzavod* are described in a document available from the official website of the project: http://www.politzavod.ru/materials/pz_v_voprosah_i_otvetah.doc; <http://tinyurl.com/3b7vvl>.

⁸*Edinaya Rossiya* party leader Boris Gryzlov stressed that young candidates should be placed proportionally in the list, one each five candidates but his suggestion has not been taken uniformly in all regions. See O. Kashin and I. Skorvcov, *Zavyshehnyye ozhidaniya*, «globalrus.ru», 13 October 2006. <http://www.globalrus.ru/comments/783207/>; <http://tinyurl.com/2ddxtf>.

⁹In the Karelian and Chuvash Republic; the Tuva and Primorsky Krai; the Astrakhan, Novgorod, Lipetsk, and Sverdlovskaya Oblasts; the Jewish Autonomous Oblast.

¹⁰See *Bol'she poloviny deputatskikh mandatov v regionakh budet prinadlezhat' edinorossam*, «lenta.ru», 9 October 2006. <http://lenta.ru/news/2006/10/09/veshnyakov/>; <http://tinyurl.com/yq3orn>.

¹¹See *Nashi molodye deputaty*, «molgvardia.ru». <http://molgvardia.ru/news-item.php?id=784>; <http://tinyurl.com/2225wt>.

¹²*Molodaya Gvardiya* on its website considered fourteen candidates chosen through *Politzavod* (out of thirty-two) as potential mandate winner, given their place in the party-lists. See <http://www.molgvardia.ru/news-item.php?id=433>; <http://tinyurl.com/37o8uw>.

besides, people under the age of twenty-eight did make up more than 20 per cent of the candidates of *Edinaya Rossiya* to those elections, which means that the party leadership indisputably kept its promises (at least formally). At the same time, nine deputies in seven regions does not seem to be a completely satisfying result for a campaign that lasted months, had about one thousand participants and a lot of advertisement¹³. Similar results are to be expected in the elections taking place on March 11, 2007, in fourteen entities of the Russian Federation (including Moscow and Leningrad regions), while interestingly *Politzavod* winners will have more chances to be elected in the national parliament (*Duma*)¹⁴, since it is elected completely by a proportional system based on party lists.

4. What are Molodaya Gvardiya's ideals and aims?

Molodaya Gvardiya does not have a clear-cut ideological platform, not unlike its elder counterpart *Edinaya Rossiya*. Stability, growth and national unity were and still are the keywords of both the main party and its youth wing. "Patriotism", understood as loving one's country, remembering and being proud of its historical achievements and defending it from destabilising forces (e.g. "colour revolutions") and from undue external influences (menaces to Russian sovereignty), is one of the values kept in highest esteem by *Molodaya Gvardiya's* activists.

According to *Molodaya Gvardiya's* manifesto, Russia's youth should take responsibility upon itself for the future of the country, and all young Russians interested in doing something to improve Russia's future can join the organisation¹⁵. Unlike other youth organisation, *MG* is not against the system as such; on the contrary, *MG's* activists want to get into the present structure of power, and use it to make a number of positive changes, for the people of Russia, and for Russia vis-a-vis other countries. Basically, the message that this organisation is giving to the youth is: «We can offer you a chance to have a say where things are decided; if you are interested in changing things for the best of our country, stop wasting your time with street demonstrations or mumbling complaints by yourself... come and change things from inside!». In other words, *MG's* activists should become the backbone of Russia's future ruling elite.

Still, *Molodaya Gvardiya* is probably not as inclusive as it suggests it is. The concept of "sovereign democracy", elaborated by the famous Kremlin ideologue Vladislav Surkov¹⁶, should clearly serve as a guideline for all activists of *Molodaya Gvardiya*; there might of course be ideological discussions, but within a given framework.

I think it is worth stressing another element of *MG's* basic ideology: its civil (or territorial) understanding of nation. Recently, ethnic violence has been repeatedly and increasingly reported in the media¹⁷. Great

¹³For a critical view of the first Politzavod and its results, see O. Kashin and I. Skorvcov, *Zavyshehnyye ozhidaniya*, «globalrus.ru», 13 October 2006. <http://www.globalrus.ru/comments/783207/>; <http://tinyurl.com/2ddxtf>.

¹⁴Of course, if they receive comparable places in the electoral lists.

¹⁵See *Molodaya Gvardiya's* manifesto on the official website of the organisation. [http://www.molgvardia.ru/about.php?id=1](http://www.molgvardia.ru/about.php?id=1;); <http://tinyurl.com/248j8v>.

¹⁶It is beyond doubts that deputy-head of the presidential administration Vladislav Surkov has played a role that is by no means secondary in the formation of pro-presidential youth organisations such as Nashi and *Molodaya Gvardiya* itself.

¹⁷The small city of Kondopoga, where in early September mass race riot took place, has become a symbol of this growing problem. See also Russian town hit by race violence, 4 September 2006, «BBC News», <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/5312078.stm>; <http://tinyurl.com/27aq8j>. For a brief account of racial violent crimes in Russia between 2004 and 2006, see *Russia: A Timeline Of*

Russian nationalists fight not only the presence of illegal immigrants from the non-Slavic republic of the Soviet Union in the Russian heartland, but also the domestic migrations of Caucasians and other non-Slavic citizens of the Russian Federation¹⁸. *Molodaya Gvardiya* clearly promotes a unifying, *rossiyskiy*, “nationalism”¹⁹. Interestingly, Ivan Demidov, one of the leaders and founders of *MG*, has been chosen by *Edinaya Rossiya* in early February 2007 to start a new project completely dedicated to the definition of what “Russian” means²⁰.

While not explicitly stated, one of *Molodaya Gvardiya's* main functions is definitely to promote a unifying national idea and an acceptable understanding of Russia's recent past among the youth²¹; during the 1990s, too often the family, the media and politicians offered opposing historical narratives, contrasting descriptions of the present and unclear propositions for the future, and such a situation not only hindered the development of unified and constructively minded national movements, but also made it difficult to have serious political debates.

5. Some final considerations

The founding congress of *Molodaya Gvardiya* took place in an old Soviet holiday resource dedicated to Dzherzhinskiy, in Southern Russia (Voronezh), and speeches of the movement's coordinators and political supporter, followed by a concert of the traditionalist band “Lyube” marked the occasion²². Little more than a year later, the second congress of the organisation showed some of the changes: it took place in a fancy club in Moscow, and besides political discussions and the elections of the new guiding committees

Recent Racial Incidents, «RFE/RL», 3 April 2006, <http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/04/7519d643-4b94-4a1f-856c-83324e05520f.html>; <http://tinyurl.com/3b6h4v>.

¹⁸The most famous example is the ultra-nationalist “Movement against illegal immigration” (DPNI), which has gathered a consistent number of supporters and organised the nationalist “Russian march” on November 4, 2006.

¹⁹In English, there is not a proper translation of “rossiyskiy” (basically, citizen of the Russian Federation, or sometimes just member of the Russian cultural world), as opposed to “russkiy” (which, strictly speaking, means ethnically Russian). I will briefly mention an intervention made by Andrey Tatarinov, a leading *MG* activist, on December 12, 2006, during a demonstration on the Day of the Constitution: “I am a nationalist! [...] Nationalism means love to one's homeland! Russia - it's Russians and Chechens, Tatars and Germans – all the peoples that live in Russia. Russia – it's Ivan, it's Andrey, it's Ruslan. Russia - it's you! Russia - it's me!”. See Andrey Tatarinov's blog on *MG's* official website, Chernym po belomu, <http://www.tatarinov.molgward.ru/>, and its interview to the website «kreml.ru», A. Sadov, “Molodaya Gvardiya” vospityvaet novykh preemnikov, «kreml.ru», 14 December 2006, <http://kreml.org/interview/136604325>; <http://tinyurl.com/3954a9>.

²⁰The main idea is that once stabilisation is obtained, and “sovereign democracy” has been accepted as the path of development for Russia, Russia's main party must give its answers to basic questions concerning Russian national identity; with this aim, the initiators of the project made a list of ten questions, like “Russia for Russians?”, “What is the Russian nation?”, “Russian world in the post-Soviet space?”. Demidov's blog has soon become a place where such issues are being intensively discussed. See <http://ivan-i-demidov.livejournal.com/>; See also Irina Romancheva, Vse o russkom proekte, «Vzglyad», 7 February 2007, <http://www.vz.ru/politics/2007/2/7/67530.html>; <http://tinyurl.com/3646lx>.

²¹With this aim, Vladislav Surkov released in December 2006 a thirty-page paper, providing a “correct” understanding of the events of the 1990s and their causes, and what should be the path to bring Russia “from stabilisation to growth”. See V. Yu. Surkov, Osnovy tendencii i perspektivy razvitiya sovremennoy Rossii, Moscow, Sovremennaya Gumanitarnaya Akademiya, 2006.

²²See E. Popova, Zachem nas sjuda privezli, «Moe!», 22 November 2005. <http://www.moe.kpv.ru/view/text.shtml?15634>; <http://tinyurl.com/2d3c28>.

of the organisation, it also featured comedy shows, disco music and beautiful hostesses dressed in *MG* branded clothings²³. For a youth organisation, appearance does matter, and *Molodaya Gvardiya* has been relatively successful in turning its image from the youth branch of a party of old bureaucrats interested only in keeping their privileged positions, to an innovative youth movement promoting political activism and positive changes from inside the system.

It is definitely too early to assess the effectiveness of *Molodaya Gvardiya*; the organisation has been in existence for less than two years, and it remains to be seen if the young politicians promoted to local parliaments, the national *Duma*, or other influential offices thanks to *MG* will keep a network among themselves and with the former comrades of the movement in the long term.

If this happens, *Molodaya Gvardiya* might, in certain aspects and with due limitations, play a role similar to that of Soviet *Komsomol*. The youth organisation of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, among other things, promoted a clear understanding of the past, present and future of the USSR and claimed a central role for the youth in this project. It organised its activists of good will in making actions of support for the elder and the less fortunate. It provided the youth with political education, and notoriously helped in building networks of support to start a career in adult life. Moreover, a successful career within *Komsomol* was probably the best way to get a good position in the main party²⁴.

In any case, I think the active presence of an organisation like *Molodaya Gvardiya* on Russian soil is potentially an indicator of some long-term elements and tendencies of Russian politics.

In particular, it highlights the will of a part of *Edinaya Rossiya*, but probably also of other elements of the Russian political establishment, to increase the role of political parties in Russian politics²⁵. The creation of *Molodaya Gvardiya* pushes all other parties to strengthen their youth policy, and give more importance to their respective youth wing. For example, *Spravedlivaya Rossiya* ("Fair Russia"), a party created in October 2006 in order to become an alternative to *Edinaya Rossiya* in the pro-presidential camp, announced on February 21, 2007, that starting with next April it will have a youth wing called *Pobeda*

²³See O. Kashin, *Modnaya Gvardiya*, «Re:Akcija», 21 December 2006. <http://www.reakcia.ru/article/?1402>; <http://tinyurl.com/yqlenj>.

²⁴Let me stress that I am not implicating any ideological affinity between *Komsomol* and *Molodaya Gvardiya*. I am just suggesting that *Molodaya Gvardiya* is trying to take over some important societal functions accomplished by the *Komsomol* organisation in Soviet times that were inherently important for Russian society but were neglected by the ruling elites of the 1990s. Nonetheless, this aspect undoubtedly foments critics suggesting that most *Molodaya Gvardiya* activists are nothing but young careerists, and do not really care about their homeland.

²⁵Of this opinion, by all evidence, is also the already mentioned ideologue Vladislav Surkov. For example, in June 2006 he declared that political parties should become an avant-garde of civil society, and that the fact that the Russian president does not belong to any party is one of the "costs of the struggle against communism". See V. Pechko, *Iyun'skie tezisy Surkova*, «Vzglyad», 29 June 2006. <http://www.vz.ru/politics/2006/6/29/39513.html>; <http://tinyurl.com/2z4aeo>. In another occasion, Surkov stated explicitly that he would like Russia to have another serious party, that in the long-term might contest the supremacy and the right to govern to *Edinaya Rossiya*. See *Vstrecha gruppy deputatov ot rossiyskoy Partii Zhizni s zamestitелеm rukovoditelya administracii prezidenta...*, Official website of the Russian Party of Life, <http://www.rpvita.ru/activity/opinion/5009.html>; <http://tinyurl.com/28tpcs>.

(“Victory”)²⁶. Earlier, party leader Sergey Mironov, plainly stated that he personally likes the idea of *Politzavod*, and that his party could organise something similar, giving even more space to the youth²⁷.

This might be the beginning of a long story. Between March 2007 and March 2008, Russia is going to have three important electoral turns (regional elections in 13 regions, parliamentary and presidential elections), and other Russian youth movements might show up with much more clamour than *Molodaya Gvardiya*. Nonetheless, political observers should take into consideration this new movement, trying to push Russian youth into party politics instead that into lousy street demonstrations.

6. Bibliography

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MUKHIN, A., *Pokolenie 2008: nashi i ne nashi*, Moscow, Algoritm, 2006.

7. Internet Resources

<http://www.molgvardia.ru/>; *Molodaya Gvardiya* official website

<http://www.mia-info.ru/>; Youth news agency

<http://www.fom.ru/>; Public Opinion Foundation website

<http://www.livejournal.com/>; Blog host

<http://www.akzia.ru/>; Website of a printed youth magazine

<http://www.reakcia.ru/>; Website of a printed youth magazine

<http://www.vz.ru/>; *Vzglyad*, on-line newspaper

<http://www.regnum.ru/>; News agency

<http://www.lenta.ru/>; News agency

²⁶See I. Romancheva, U “Eserov” budet svoya “Pobeda”, «Vzglyad», 22 February 2007.

<http://www.vzglyad.ru/politics/2007/2/21/69463.html>; <http://tinyurl.com/2kouk8>.

²⁷See this interview with Sergey Mironov, leader of Spravedlivaya Rossiya, and speaker of the Federation Council My partiya naroda, a ne partiya vlasti, «Tribuna», 9 February 2007, <http://www.tribuna.ru/ru/text.aspx?divid=95&tid=7197>;

<http://tinyurl.com/3dcpq>.