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Radical Retirees

By Boris Kagarlitsky

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I was recently asked to participate in a discussion on the lack of a student movement in Russia. Participants called to mind Paris of 1968 and demonstrations in London and complained that Russian youth show little civic activity. But maybe we were looking in the wrong place for it. Surprisingly, Russia's retirees today come the closest to the social and cultural role that European youth in the 1960s and early 1970s played.

German philosopher Herbert Marcuse in his "An Essay on Liberation" argued that youth play a leading role in society. University-age students do not have a hand in perpetuating bourgeois society, they are not yet employed and beholden to a particular economic power, and they do not belong to any of the main social classes.

This enables students to place spiritual or ethical values higher than material interests. It also allows them to act as more objective, critical observers of the system, pointing out its shortcomings and opposing them on principle, not out of self-interest. In a cultural sense, students are the most progressive segment of society.

Unfortunately, Marcuse's general principle does not apply at all to modern Russian students. As the social welfare state disappears, the nature of university education is changing. The overwhelming majority of students — even those with full scholarships — must take odd jobs to make ends meet. Moreover, the university itself is changing from an institution devoted to the dissemination of knowledge to an organization concerned primarily with issuing diplomas affirming the qualifications and social status of its graduates.

Now consider Russian retirees, who for the most part are no longer part of the system, and who, as it turns out, are more radical in their views than the younger generation. Sociologists claim that the older generation holds less conservative social values than young people, who tend to give unquestioning support to the principles proclaimed by the Russian Orthodox Church and state officials. That mindset goes so far as to include what appropriate roles in marriage are, gender relations and so on. A Russian retiree is more likely to be an idealist than his or her grandchild.

The older generation faithfully goes to the polls and generally votes for the party of power — normally considered proof of conformity. In reality, the behavior of other age groups is no less conformist, but their conformism is expressed differently. What's more, the authorities can no longer take the loyalty of Russia's retirees for granted. Recall the mass demonstrations and unrest in 2005 that were composed mostly of older people. The authorities have no illusions about the problem and therefore try to avoid offending retirees by affording them more attention than they give to young people. It was this fear of retirees' ire that was a key factor in the 2005 decision of the authorities to retain the welfare state, despite their clear desire to gradually dismantle it. By contrast, officials constantly encroach upon the rights of young people without encountering any significant resistance.

Despite age and lifestyle differences, in a social and cultural sense Russian retirees have more in common with Western European university students than do Russian students. And if leftist radicalism ever were to take root among younger Russians, it is more likely to begin with school students who learned idealism from their grandparents than with today's college-age youth.

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