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New Doc 'Putin's Kiss' Looks at Ex-Nashi Activist

By Max Seddon

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Nashi was created after the Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2005 to back the Kremlin if protests came to Russia.

NEW YORK — "Putin's Kiss," a new documentary by Danish director Lisa Birk Pedersen, will disappoint those hoping to see the softer side of Russia's once and future president: Putin only appears briefly at the film's outset to receive a bashful peck on the cheek from Maria Drokova, then a star of the pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi.

Instead, the film aims to portray Russia's first post-Soviet generation through the meteoric rise and eventual disillusionment of Drokova, born in 1989. Her story, however, is hardly typical. After joining Nashi as a doe-eyed, buxom 15-year-old from Tambov, Drokova quickly sets her sights on the elite: She studies public policy at Russia's most prestigious university and is appointed Nashi's head of PR, which sees her rewarded with her own car, apartment and TV show.

Years of denouncing the West and westernizers alike eventually take their toll. Shortly after losing an election for one of Nashi's five federal leadership positions in 2009, Drokova falls in with a group of opposition-minded journalists headed by Kommersant columnist Oleg Kashin — themselves the targets of numerous Nashi campaigns. When one of her new friends burns a book by Kremlin ideologue Vladislav Surkov after a birthday party she attended, Drokova's Nashi superiors give her an "us or them" ultimatum. She chooses neither, leaving the movement to become a public relations professional.

Drokova's story is a classic tale of the naive provincial girl who comes to the big city and is seduced — intellectually or otherwise — by a series of charismatic and powerful older men. Putin, she says, is "the model for the person I'd like to spend my life with" after he awards her a medal. Her desktop background is a picture of them deep in conversation. Much of her relationship with Vasily Yakemenko, then Nashi's leader, is portrayed in staged scenes of Drokova complaining to friends about their minor squabbles, as if she were his demanding mistress.

Though she contrasts the open-minded liberal journalists favorably with the controlling Yakemenko, politics seems not to have been the deciding factor in her change of scene, since her views hardly change at all. Many of them suspect she is a Nashi honey trap set to distract them with her formidable breasts — the film's most enduring shot shows Kashin staring straight down Drokova's top as she bends forward to argue a point.

Far more interesting are glimpses of life inside Nashi, sometimes compared to the Hitler Youth, but here more akin to a religious cult. Yakemenko opens Nashi's annual summer camp by telling attendees their lives are about to change. Nashi members speak of their mission to rid Russia of "enemies" like liberals or corrupt politicians with devotional zeal.

These moments, however, are all too few and not particularly revealing. Sometimes this is because Pedersen fails to clue the viewer in on several key political points; at other junctures, the menace of Nashi is not effectively conveyed. Though Pedersen shows us CCTV footage of Kashin being brutally beaten by two men he claims were hired by Yakemenko, Nashi members are not shown doing anything more untoward than defecating on opposition politician Ilya Yashin's car.

Without a significant personal transformation from Drokova or a fuller appreciation of the machinations behind Nashi, the film works best as a piece of Russian history, frozen in time — but it won't be long remembered.

Nashi was already widely thought to be finished as a movement when

"Putin's Kiss" was filmed; recent revelations of payoffs to activists and bloggers after Drokova's successor's inbox was hacked suggest that the group struggles to inculcate genuine enthusiasm. Back then, the anti-Putin opposition, for its part, could only attract a few hundred protesters to hear the likes of Ilya Yashin. How things have changed.