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Seliger Urges Patriotism, Not Politics

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A participant wanders through the camp back in 2010. **Alexander Bratersky**

When the pro-Kremlin youth movement Nashi announced its closure last year, it seemed the days were numbered for the Seliger camp, where the gathering of thousands of young Nashi members each summer prompted some to label it the headquarters of a brainwashing cult.

But rather than fade away, the camp has been reborn and rebranded by organizers, going from a youth event with an in-your-face political style to one that is subtly patriotic, with an emphasis on entrepreneurship and the importance of leading a healthy lifestyle.

The summer camp for Nashi was created in 2005 — the same year as the youth movement — and was located by the side of the picturesque Seliger lake some 350 kilometers northwest of Moscow. Throughout its tenure, the camp was paid visits by many top officials from the ruling United Russia party, including President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, both of whom were also present at the camp in the form of life-size portraits.

Such blatant displays of pro-Kremlin sentiment prompted many to denounce the camp as a propaganda machine.

The fact that the camp receives state financing has also contributed to disparagement. Seliger is partly funded by Rosmolodyozh, a state agency in charge of youth policy and headed by a former Nashi commissioner, Sergei Belokonev. Rosmolodyozh also organized Nashi and provided its funding.

Such criticism was also fueled in part by various anti-Western demonstrations, including the figurative placement of opposition leaders and Western leaders heads on sticks in 2010, in which U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, human rights activist Lyudmila Alexeyeva and former Yukos CEO Mikhail Khodorkovsky were targeted for "trying to destroy Russia."

And despite the camp's dramatic makeover since that time, it seems it has not yet shed the remnants of its pro-Kremlin past: During the final session this August, participants were asked to vote for Russia's most patriotic figure and least patriotic figure. Josef Stalin was among those voted most patriotic, while opposition leader Alexei Navalny was dubbed the least patriotic.

Despite the results of that voting, however, the camp's participants, all aged 18-30, show no outright affiliations with any pro-Kremlin youth group.

And as if to demonstrate the shift from politics to entrepreneurship, Vasily Yakemenko, the founder and leader of Nashi, attended Seliger this year not to lecture about politics, but to offer a cooking workshop.

Belokonev said the camp's changes were implemented to meet the needs of the time, not because Nashi had ceased to exist.

"If political activity was needed then, a healthy lifestyle and entrepreneurship are needed now," he said.

But Belokonev himself hinted that the camp would still have a political edge.

"Five thousand young people attended our civil forum, and they were all interested in the idea of what will make Russia a global leader in the 21st century," he said.

As part of that goal to make Russia a global leader, Rosmolodyozh positions Seliger as a social lift, helping young people to get investments into their projects and networking with people from businesses or public bodies.

But according to some, the "social lift" provided by Seliger may come with strings attached — namely, an adherence to conservative values.

Vladimir Lontratov, who has been working at the Seliger camp as a youth leader manager since 2005, said the kids who attend "are all the same" and that they are all still pro-Kremlin.

Alexander Bespoldyonov, a spokesman for Rosmolodyozh, said attendance is not open to everyone and participants must be selected by the camp's organizers.

"Traditionally, there are some Nashi folks here, but that is no longer the basis for them being here. Now, in order to get here, a young person has to have an interesting idea and know how to realize it," he said, adding that "we have conservative views and support the traditional values of Russian society."

There were three week-long sessions this year — youth projects, entrepreneurship and the civil session — all with a price tag of 250 million rubles in budget funds. Fifteen thousand and 500 people took part in all three sessions, but many more applied, according to Belokonev, who said Monday that 35,000 people total sought to participate.

Sergei Chuyev, head of the civil session, said the forum was "pluralistic, since the whole spectrum of political forces was represented at the forum."

No opposition politicians or activists were invited this year, however, unlike last year when organizers invited several of them.

Echo Moskvy journalist Denis Styazhkin, who spent a week at this year's civil session, voiced a different opinion, however, saying in his LiveJournal blog that the lectures were still full of ideological propaganda. According to him, the lectures were the worst thing Seliger had to offer to young people, because most of the lectures promoted the idea that the U.S. and the liberal opposition were major threats to Russia's stability and prosperity.

Inside the Camp

The first thing one sees when approaching the camp is dozens of banners with quotes from Putin and Medvedev stretched over thousands of blue and green tents. Some banners mention the importance of family, community and sports, while others cite priorities of national policy.

"Enhancing energy efficiency in housing and public utilities is our first priority," one banner says, citing Medvedev, while another says, "We need to deal with pipes, roads and roofs," quoting Putin.

The camp's perimeter is fenced off with a metal hedge. A sign at the entrance warns that camp-goers are not allowed to leave the area until the end of the week-long session, and police guard the entrance.

Those who break the camp's rules three times are thrown out, and violations of those rules include failing to attend workshops, drinking alcohol and swearing.

"It was difficult to introduce these rules back in 2005, but we had to because the camp was sometimes just overcome by mayhem," Lontratov said, adding that violations occurred very rarely now.

In keeping with the campaign for a healthy lifestyle, each day at the camp starts with participants singing Russia's hymn and doing morning exercises on a large field, both of which are also obligatory. Organizers announce the day's itinerary from a large stage on the field.

After that, three girls in dazzling pink shirts conduct a gymnastics lesson. And 10 minutes

later, hundreds of young participants run off, filling the air with dust in their wake.

Some participants take advantage of the brief time that is left to eat breakfast or swim in the lake, and soon after all the paths are filled with people rushing to lectures on everything from entrepreneurship to fashion.

Every tent where a lecture is held is named after an important figure in Russian history, like Pushkin or Alexander II, and each is full of various equipment: There's a photo studio in a tent for photography, glossy magazines in the fashion tent, large screens and fruit cocktails in a project showroom, and a man dressed as a robot inviting visitors into the engineering tent while dancing to a song by the American rock band the Yeah Yeah Yeahs.

With such an array of subjects offered, participants don't have much downtime, and for some, that is exactly how it should be.

"I like the atmosphere at the forum," said one participant, Anna Semidolina, a 21-year-old art history student at Altai State University in Barnaul who came to promote her project.

"People have fiery eyes, everyone is busy with something all the time, not only with their projects, but with extra activities as well," Semidolina said.

Next year, Rosmolodyozh aims to expand the duration of sessions and double the number of participants, and also create a new venue "somewhere between Seliger and Skolkovo," Belokonev said, adding that new venues would also be created on the Baltic Sea and in Vladikavkaz.

There is already a European Seliger in Strasbourg and American in Seattle for young Russian expats.

New Goals

The camp's overall budget is 250 million rubles ($7.55 million), 15 percent less than last year. Participants must pay an attendance fee of between 1,500 and 4,000 rubles, depending on which session they want to take part in.

But some say that is a small price to pay for the chance to network and seek investment for one's project.

According to Natalya Shulga, the forum's creative director, 22 projects presented at the camp this year are set to receive a total of 1 billion rubles in funding for further development.

Some former participants tell a different story, however, saying that promises to fund their projects never led to actual funding.

Several young Dagestani journalists who won a grant for their projects at last year's forum were later rejected, news reports said in March.

But Belokonev said that this was likely a misunderstanding and that grants were always paid.

"Maybe there were some individual cases when grants were not given, but that happened due

to a technical slip-up, or a participant rejected money because he or she realized that it was not possible to implement the project," he said.

Tatyana Smirnova, 17, and Yana Ivanova, 16, seniors at a high school in the Moscow region's Shchyolkovsky district, participated at Seliger for very different reasons, ones that not only show that a new generation of Seliger-goers has been born, but also that the camp has not lost its pro-Kremlin flavor.

The pair said they were sent to the camp by Molodaya Gvardia, a pro-Kremlin youth group that for a long time was a competitor of Nashi.

Although the girls were technically too young to attend the camp, "Molodaya Gvardia helped us to get in," they said, adding that they were taking part in social projects and demonstrations for Victory Day and Russia Day, as well as a rally in support of the ban on U.S. adoptions of Russian children.

"We don't want Americans to kill our children," they said, suddenly changing the topic to the popular singer Nyusha, who performed a concert at Seliger.

And when asked what it was about Seliger that they valued the most, the girls inadvertently confirmed the organizers' statement that the camp no longer revolved around politics.

"We mostly like Seliger because you can meet real stars here," they said, walking away in search of the popular rapper Timati, who was expected to visit that day.

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