

I Went Undercover in Putin's New 'Pioneers'

The Movement of the First aims to engage children and teenagers in a worldview “based on traditional Russian values.” Its carefully crafted image is far different from reality.

By [The New Tab](#)

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The Movement of the First / VK

Seven teenagers are chatting on a large square near the youth center in Penza, in central Russia. All but one are wearing red T-shirts with the number one in white printed on the chest. They look no older than 16. The youngest, Daria*, is 14. Daria has come here as a volunteer.

What exactly we will be doing — weaving camouflage nets, packaging humanitarian aid, writing letters to Russian soldiers, making trench candles, or watching a documentary about Russia's “special military operation” against Ukraine — neither she nor the other volunteers

know yet.

Judging by what they say, these teenagers are usually invited to do something to help the Russian army.

“Listen to useful information about the world,” is how our “mentor,” Anton*, described the goal of our meeting.

After saying hello, Anton counts how many people are here, writes down our names on a piece of paper, takes out his phone and silently takes a group selfie.

“Do you need it for a report?” one of the volunteers asks Anton. He does not answer.

A huge army

The Movement of the First is the Russian government’s newest youth organization. Set up after Russia sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022, the Movement aims to engage children and teenagers in a worldview “based on traditional Russian spiritual and moral values” — a priority for the Kremlin as it seeks to shut down dissent and put Russian society on a war footing.

Indeed, President Vladimir Putin [suggested](#) changing the organization’s name to “Pioneers” as it launched in December 2022 — a throwback to the Soviet-era youth movement of the same name.

At its core, the Movement brings together kids across Russia for state-backed volunteer activities: educational lectures, visits to animal shelters and hospitals and amateur concerts. The Movement is particularly active in Russian schools and universities, which are trying to recruit people to join en masse: teachers are reportedly forced to invite children to join the organization and pressure their parents to do so.

Yet the Movement is also active in drumming up support for Russia’s war on Ukraine. Children are encouraged to write letters to Russian soldiers at the front, and collect humanitarian aid for the Russian army. In autumn 2024, a veteran of Russia’s war against Ukraine named Artur Orlov became the Movement’s leader. Putin has even [called](#) the Movement of the First “a huge army.” According to its former leader, in 2023 the Movement cost [the Russian state](#) more than \$190 million — or 1.4% of the state’s total education [spending](#).

But, as I found out, only a few Russian kids actively join in. After observing the Movement of the First for more than a month, I came to the conclusion that its image, carefully crafted by Russian officials and the media, is far different from reality.

Everyone understands everything

The youth center is quiet as Anton leads us along the long, empty corridors.

We finally reach the right door and find ourselves in a spacious room. A net with patches of grey-green fabric is stretched over a large wooden structure in the far corner. On a small table next to the entrance is a bottle of potassium permanganate used to paint patches of

camouflage nets a dirtier color. In the middle of the room are two long tables in two rows, and chairs with soft black upholstery are carefully pushed in. Opposite is a whiteboard on which streaks from a marker are visible.

At a table by the door sits a large, menacing man of about 50, with a clean-shaven face and short-cropped hair. He introduces himself as Nikolai Alexandrovich*, a military safety teacher at one of the city schools.

“You and I are similar in some ways. You have been working for the welfare of our homeland since your teenage years, helping, as far as I understand,” Nikolai Alexandrovich looks at Anton, who nods to him. “You’ve been helping the elderly, animals, soldiers...” the teacher swallows the last word and thanks those gathered.

Nikolai Alexandrovich falls silent, looks at us, then turns around and writes three words in a column on the board with a black marker: terrorism, nationalism, extremism.

“Does everyone understand everything?” asks Nikolai Alexandrovich. “No need to explain?”

“Everyone understands everything,” one of the schoolchildren answers him.

“Now, without understanding the situation in the world and the situation in the country, you can't get anywhere. That’s why I suggest you listen to... a lecture,” Nikolai Alexandrovich takes the marker again and starts writing on the board, “on countering extremism and terrorism. I wrote the word ‘Nationalism.’ You are adults. Adults, right?”

“Yes,” the volunteers answer him in chorus.

“Then perhaps you understand the connection between these things now, and a little later, after listening to the lecture, you will understand it too.”

Related article: [Kremlin Revives Soviet-Style Youth Indoctrination as It Eyes ‘Forever War’ With Ukraine and the West](#)

Nikolai Alexandrovich approaches a laptop, turns its monitor towards us and turns on the video. For about 15 minutes, the screen talks about terrorist attacks that have occurred in Russia since the early 2000s.

“Do you have any idea where terrorism comes from today?” Nikolai Alexandrovich asks us after watching the video.

“Well...” the guy in the front row thinks and starts listing, “Ukraine, Syria, Iran, maybe...”

“Not quite,” Nikolai Alexandrovich takes a deep breath and moves to the window.

“We’re talking about Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland. Proxy terrorism comes from the USA, Great Britain. I don’t have any examples for clarity, but if you read the news, then you know that all our politicians [who are in the opposition] are traitors! They organize so-called meetings in these countries... where they discuss a number of issues.”

The teacher picks up the marker again and writes on the board: "The collapse of the Russian Federation / Terrorist acts within Russia / Political assassinations."

Nikolai Alexandrovich's lecture lasts a little over an hour. At the end, he advises us to write more letters to soldiers and asks us to come and weave camouflage nets with him (this time we only listened to the lecture). The man names the days when he will be at the youth center and bids goodbye to us with a wink.

We say goodbye to Anton on the same square where we met. One of the girls asks him if they will count their attendance at this lecture as volunteer work (which can be counted towards a university application). Anton answers that they will.

Benefits

These kinds of lectures are practically a weekly routine for teenagers who join the Movement of the First and are a priority for the Movement's employees. Almost every event and educational course [has](#) a "working education program" that mentions patriotism and a "close-knit collective."

Indeed, with the advent of the Movement of the First, a new position was introduced in Russian schools: an advisor on educational work. Most often, it is these advisors who create and manage local Movement of the First chapters.

We discussed one of the events where we were invited as volunteers at school, where a separate room was allocated for the primary department of the Movement of the First. When meeting with pioneers, education advisor Vera Alexeievna* always hugs them and smiles broadly. According to the schoolchildren, she has several "favorites" and usually ignores other children.

Related article: [Children Are Political Prisoners in Putin's Russia](#)

In addition to tea parties with sweets and trips to universities, schoolchildren receive other benefits from participating in the Movement of the First.

First of all, preferences from teachers, says Pavel*. Most teachers, he says, treat those in the Movement more leniently than other children — but only those who participate in all Movement events and are in good standing with the director's education advisor.

"If you just signed up for the sake of it, it won't work. They might forgive you for some [uncompleted] homework or something else if you're a volunteer," the teenager explains.

'We are doing a good thing'

The teenage volunteers I spoke with often criticize the Movement. Some dislike the pressure to participate in school events and competitions; some are completely uncomfortable with the ideology of patriotism that is imposed on them inside the Movement.

What everyone likes is the opportunity to skip classes when they are called to official events.

Pavel recalled one episode in October when some teenagers from grades 9–11 were taken out of classes to an assembly hall, where a middle-aged man in police uniform was waiting for them — Anatoly Gennadyevich*, a junior lieutenant of the Russian Interior Ministry.

Anatoly Gennadyevich said that he came to the school as part of the Movement's Ticket to the Future program — which helps young people with career opportunities — and was going to talk “about such a profession as...” the man paused, “defending the Motherland.”

“Right now, one of your opportunities for further development is to enter the University of the Interior Ministry,” the policeman continued. “It's a proud profession, and most importantly...” the man waits for an answer from the teenagers, but judging by the surprise on their faces, they don't know it.

“It's highly paid,” jokes one of the school's employees.

“And prestigious,” adds the junior lieutenant.

During the lecture, Anatoly Gennadyevich's assistant, an employee of the Interior Ministry, walks between the rows and distributes brochures with the conditions for admission and study at the universities of the Russian Interior Ministry: free accommodation and uniform, a stipend of about 18,000 rubles (\$175), social guarantees, work experience — from the first day of study.

Teenagers admit that they do not like events where they simply sit and listen to the lecturer because it is boring. Many teenagers prefer to “just help.” One of the schoolchildren happily recalls the summer of 2024, when the pioneers, together with Vera Alexeievna, the director's advisor for educational work, went to an animal shelter to bring food to homeless dogs.

Decorations

“F**k. I came here, but I could have slept in,” Vasilisa*, 16, complains to me. It takes about an hour to get from her house to the school where we are volunteering that day. It's Sept. 7, election day in Russia for a number of regional administration and parliamentary positions.

Since no one at the school met us as promised and we have no instructions, I ask the girls what we should do. Vasilisa doesn't know: “They just told us to stand here.”

Later, a school employee comes up and explains that our job is to approach people coming into school, ask who is going to the elections, who is going to the school concert, and whether they need to be accompanied to the voting station. Most people are surprised when they hear our questions and say they will get there themselves.

“Why are we doing this? Our vote doesn't matter anyway,” Vasilisa says, perplexed.

Vasilisa is humming a patriotic song. This year she is finishing 11th grade and after school, she dreams of leaving the region — to study at one of the Interior Ministry universities. Vasilisa is afraid that she will not pass the entry exams well enough, so she is standing here — for the sake of additional points for university admission.

“We're like decorations here, right?” I ask Vasilisa.

“Yes,” she answers and starts laughing nervously.

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