The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

On TikTok, Russia's Political Parties Court Voters Who Grew Up Under Putin

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September 18, 2026

Alexander Berkutov. **Alexander Berkutov / VK**

"Bandit on top of a bandit, thief on top of a thief!" teenager Alexander Berkutov says in a TikTok video, quoting the late ultranationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovsky.

Standing before a green screen, Berkutov imitates Zhirinovsky's eccentric, bombastic delivery as he rails against corruption and the everyday problems facing "ordinary people," including closed public restrooms in his hometown.

Berkutov's account is part of the online presence of the youth wing of Zhirinovsky's right-wing populist Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR).

Ahead of Russia's Sept. 18-20 State Duma elections, youth wings affiliated with the country's major political parties have ramped up their social media presence as they compete for voters who have grown up under President Vladimir Putin.

Their videos adopt the memes, slang and anti-establishment style popular among young Russians. Yet the political choices they offer are soundly within the Kremlin's limits, even as younger Russians show greater support than older generations for peace talks with Ukraine and opposition politics.

Russia had 27.2 million eligible voters ages 18 to 35 in 2021, or roughly one-quarter of the electorate, according to the Central Election Commission.

Young Russians remain among the groups most likely to hold anti-war views, according to the independent Levada Center pollster. Support for peace talks was higher among people under 24 than among older age groups.

Young people were also among the main supporters of Yabloko, the only party openly opposing the war, when the Supreme Court heard a case to bar it from the parti-list vote. Most of those who gathered outside the court were Muscovites under 30, including teenagers, the exiled news outlet Meduza reported.

A tribute to Zhirinovsky

Berkutov lives in Ochyor, a small city in the Perm region. Since he started posting videos on TikTok in eighth grade in 2025, he has amassed about 8,000 followers.

In early videos, he openly questioned the propaganda lessons taught at his school, praised Zhirinovsky and explained Russian politics through the online video game Minecraft.

"LDPR is top-tier and a sigma boy," he said while rearranging blocks in the game. "Sigma boy" became Russian slang for someone considered cool after a pop song of the same name went viral.

His most viral video, which criticized United Russia over rising taxes, has drawn nearly 1 million views.

"Bread is getting more expensive and shops are closing, while officials talk from podiums about oversight and concern," Berkutov says on camera, standing in front of a green screen. "Let's be honest, when was the last time United Russia built anything in Ochyor?"

In another video, he interviews Viktor Bout, the arms dealer who was convicted in the U.S. in 2012 and returned to Russia in a 2022 prisoner exchange. Bout joined the LDPR that year.

The video, in which Berkutov asks Bout what causes corruption in Russia, has received over 350,000 views.

Some commenters compare Berkutov to Zhirinovsky, while others warn him to be more careful about what he says.

"Bro, don't push it too far, or you'll end up like all the other opposition figures," one TikTok follower wrote.

The Moscow Times found at least 35 TikTok accounts affiliated with the LDPR. Teenagers who have built their own followings also run personal blogs.

What unites them is an admiration for Zhirinovsky, who founded the party in 1989 and led it until his death in 2022.

"Zhirinovsky was a very charismatic politician. He played this clown persona his whole life, and he's still playing it after death," said Leonid Spirin, editor-in-chief of the independent student media outlet Groza.

"That's at least fun, compared to the leaders of other parties. Nechayev and Davankov are just boring technocrats," Spirin told The Moscow Times, referring to New People politicians Alexei Nechayev and Vladislav Davankov.

"Dmitry Medvedev recently even called young people idiots," Spirin added.

'While you're shouting "six-seven," you won't have a pension'

Russia's political party youth wings have no uniform minimum age, with each organization setting its own rules. The Communist Party accepts children ages nine to 14 into its Young Pioneers.

The TikTok account of Komsomol Moskvy, the Communist Party's youth wing, is run by Olga Serikova, a former student at the Russian State University for the Humanities. She appeals to young people through memes, references to the Grand Theft Auto video game and pop songs.

"While you're shouting 'six-seven,' you won't have a pension," Serikova says in one video, invoking a viral catchphrase.

Komsomol Moskvy's account focuses heavily on entertainment content. Yet beneath its memes mocking rivals like United Russia and the LDPR lies a clear message: Political change should be pursued only through methods permitted by the Kremlin.

"Right now there are two ways to resolve the situation: either with a ballot or with a cobblestone; history offers no other option," the group wrote in one post. "The Communist Party fights for the people and for the future, not for capital and crisis."

The accompanying video shows Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov saying: "We are waging war for peace."

Komsomol Moskvy has also criticized protest movements outside Russia's tightly controlled political system, including by speaking out against supporters of the exiled anti-war band Stoptime.

"They're not even shy about supporting the Ukrainian Armed Forces and the RDK," Serikova says, using the abbreviation for the Russian Volunteer Corps, a unit fighting alongside Ukraine. "What do you think would happen to you in Russia for being in a chat like that?"

Young Communist Party activists also criticize the authorities' crackdown on anti-war Russians and opposition figures living in exile.

"Our task is not to earn a nice prison sentence for taking a nice anti-war position," Serikova says in one video. "It is to keep building horizontal ties, building the organization and

campaigning among the apolitical population."

In 2024, Serikova traveled with Komsomol Moskvy to Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine to meet local Communist Party youth activists.

She declined to comment for this article.

"Serikova is fluent in leftist discourse. She's probably read Marx, maybe Lenin," said Spirin, who has covered youth politics in Russia.

"She clearly likes the whole aesthetic, the hammer and sickle, calling everyone 'comrade.' It interests her. But is there a real political position behind it? I don't think so."

Politics, 'Simpsons' style

The left-wing A Just Russia party established its youth wing in 2020, with membership open to people between the ages of 16 and 35.

Its branch in the northwestern republic of Karelia has used AI-generated videos to attract attention on TikTok. The clips feature yellow-skinned characters who resemble those from "The Simpsons" — and mirror the yellow in A Just Russia's logo — as they confront regional problems like corruption, aging public transportation and high school cafeteria prices.

A video in which two students ask residents of the regional capital Petrozavodsk about lines at gas stations received nearly 200,000 views.

One of the students, who blogs under the name Nicole, recently became a party member. She studies law, works as a photographer and has about 2,000 social media followers.

Like activists in other party youth wings, she posts videos set to pop music, interviews residents and complains about local issues like potholes. The Karelia branch opened its TikTok account in May, several months before the election.

But although youth wing bloggers openly discuss real problems facing Russians, Spirin said such activity is ultimately far removed from meaningful political participation.

"When it comes to things that actually matter — the war or Putin — where are your left-wing views, your right-wing views? Any views at all?" he said.

"Here, it's purely an aesthetic preference. Someone likes the yellow, black and white [Russian Empire] flag. Someone likes the red [Soviet] flag. Someone likes calling people 'comrade,' and someone likes 'brother.' None of it is tied to any real political action. It's just a set of tags."

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