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Mechanisms of political apathy: powerlessness or indifference?¹

Dear PPW people,

This paper is based on a report written for the MYPLACE (Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement) project. The project was dedicated to historic memory and political participation of young people in 14 European countries. The issue of political apathy addressed in this paper is a side issue for the project, so I tried to summarize the findings in this paper. I would be very grateful for any suggestions how to develop the arguments of the paper or what I should change to make it interesting for the international readers. And I'm sorry for my English.

Thank you!

Anna

Studying non-activists - people not involved in civic activities - is a challenge for scholars of political mobilization. Obviously, at some point, non-activists can become activists who are the core of the social movements research, but studying these stages "before mobilization" is methodologically very difficult. To understand the reasons and mechanisms of becoming politicized it is important to look at the broader picture, people's social experiences and classifications of political, public, and private issues existing in their everyday lives. In this paper I will look at the (a)political worldviews of Russian young people from the perspective of such concepts as "personalization of politics", "depoliticization" and "the political". I will try to show that the boundary between the "political" and the "personal" is not fixed and can be reinterpreted according to the situation. This task becomes even more difficult, since it is hard to choose a reference definition of the "political" to evaluate the empirical findings. The definition of the political as public, collective action with a clear addressee is not applicable to the situations referred to in this paper, when the actions are taken on the individual level, but rather is better understood with reference to and in accordance with the actors' own ideas of the common good and of justice.

Thus, the political can be defined as public, but not necessarily collective action that communicates in the public sphere meanings and ideas about what is correct, just and moral (Habermas 1991). An action can be defined as political when the actor frames his/her action in terms of the common good. In the recent literature on perception of politics a new idea is gaining popularity: that the politics itself has

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changed, and therefore its mechanisms and empirical characteristics; the existing definitions of the political, its mechanisms and spheres of political action (social movements, parties and other traditional forms of contentious politics) are no longer adequate to describe political realities and behaviors. New forms of political actions, according to some authors, include “personalized politics” (Bennett 2012), do-it-yourself politics of the creative direct action (Douglas 2011) and other forms not fitting into the classical schemes of political contention. Ulrich Beck explains such changes in political engagement by general trends of individualization (Beck 2002).

In this paper, I will try to investigate whether these substantial changes in political engagements can be also observed in Russian social and political life: is it possible to say that individualization has led to new forms of participation, or the specific depoliticized context has made political engagement impossible because of social disintegration? The focus of this paper is the definition by the informants of the social (public) and personal issues; the situations when the issues are framed as personally important or not. I am interested in this moment of making the choice and in how people with diverse personal and political experiences make sense of these choices and explain them during the interviews. I will also look at the structural conditions that affect the political engagement (social trust, opportunities for public discussions of important issues with peers, etc).

The data used to analyze the political engagement of the Russian youth in this paper comes from the focus-groups and interviews conducted before (Fall 2011) and soon after (Winter 2012-13) the protest wave in Russia, which followed first the Parliamentary (December 4, 2011) and then Presidential (March 4, 2012) elections which were both perceived by the protesters as fraudulent. The protest episode was defined by the majority of media and scholars as the largest in the post-Perestroika era. The protest attracted many young people, who were previously often accused by the media as being apolitical and egoistic consumerists.

Individualization, Youth, and Politics in Russia and in the World

The fact that the “apolitical youth” became the driving force of the Arab Spring and the protests in Greece confirms the importance of studying the views and potential of young people who seem not to care about politics (Douzinas 2013, Cavatorta 2012). Patterns of political behavior among Russian youth, however, are different from those described in European countries. Svetlana Yerpyleva demonstrated, that, for instance, in Southern Europe, including, Greece, adolescents are becoming more protest oriented in the recent years, whereas Russian young people in similar situations are not (Yerpyleva 2014). She also notes that in Russia the interests of young people and adolescents are represented and defended by their parents (for instance, in various problems of school education). Russian sociologists have also studied the discourses on youth and have found that youth are often represented as an object of care or as a dangerous group, which, in either case, is not understood as an agent of action. Elena Omelchenko also shows that youth are objectified and exploited by youth-focused policies in Russia (and USSR) as well as in Europe (Omelchenko 2005). Such discursive construction affects young people’s perception of themselves and behavior: as Svetlana Yerpyleva shows in her recent work, young people think of themselves as ‘too little’ to have political opinions (Yerpyleva 2015). In Europe and North America the studies show the importance of protest activism as a characteristic of a life stage, whereas for the Russian youth political subjectivization does not appear to be an essential stage in the life trajectory.

There are, however, some similarities between Russian young people's political attitudes and those of the youth in Europe and elsewhere. First of all, the significantly lower interest in formal politics (party politics and elections) among young people than among older generations (The 2009 European Elections, 2008). However, as I have noted above, youth are one of the main driving forces of important political changes of the recent years (Collin 2007), which also means that voter turnout and party membership do not reveal actual political engagement. The seemingly apolitical and consumerist youth can quickly become politicized, and the usual instruments of measuring political activism do not adequately grasp what is actually happening with young people's political views and behaviors.

As W. Lance Bennett puts it in his article on Occupy Wall Street, this is because politics takes new shapes and becomes personalized: participation in collective action becomes unnecessary and impossible, but this does not signify the absence of political action. He defines features of the personalized politics: tolerance toward different viewpoints, existence of "personal action frames" with low barriers of identification since they do not require involvement in activist networks, and use of social media that "enables individuals to become important catalysts of collective action processes as they activate their own social networks" (Bennett 2012; 22). Moreover, the concept of personal freedom makes collective action more complicated. Personalized politics does not require building solidarities with collectives of protesters, and makes individual participation and individual demands possible (such as "Give me back my voice" slogans during the Movement for the Fair Elections). Technologies make it possible for the individuals to be involved in broad networks of like-minded people, which can be easily mobilized: thus, Bennett speaks of «connected action» instead of «collective action». Individual political action often takes place in the sphere of consumerism: such as ideological buy-cotts and boycotts of products.

Some similar tendencies to what Bennett described on the example of the OWS can be observed in the protest for fair elections in Russia. The form of the protests (not the agenda and demands) were similar to OWS: Occupy Abai and similar actions took place in Moscow and some other cities. This form, however, followed first attempts to protest in usual forms – rallies, which many participants criticized for being too boring and not interactive (characteristics that do not comply with the norms of the individualized egalitarian politics).

Personalization of politics is a part of a general process of individualization that is a focus of Ulrich Beck's book with the same name (Beck 2002). One of the book's chapters, «Freedom's Children», focuses on the specifics of young people's participation in political life. Beck sees youth as fundamentally apolitical, rejecting the system of formal politics as such because it does not comply with the demands of the time: young people hate organizations for being too formal and hypocritical, for not addressing the essential social issues, and therefore their response to politics is rejection – they "just stay at home" (Beck 2002: 158). Anti-political attitudes of young people can be interpreted as a conscious and informed choice, and not as laziness or lack of information. As Beck puts it, "young people are unpolitical, according to superficial impressions and in their own understanding, but in a very political way" (Beck 2002: 159).

It is also important to consider cultural explanations of political apathy that seem to be very important in the Russian case. Authors like Nina Eliasoph and Karie Marie Norgaard understand political apathy as a socially and culturally constructed routine. People do not make deliberate choices to stay

apolitical, but rather use the existing “cultural toolkit” which provides them with techniques and narratives of non-participation.

For Nina Eliasoph, the key to the understanding public participation is the presence of spaces for discussion, the public sphere, and shaping of the boundary between ‘close to home’ and ‘big’ problems, and problems worth “public-spirited” discussion (for Eliasoph this means that these problems become political). Therefore, political problems are shaped (or rather not shaped) on the micro-level of communication: “People implicitly know that some face-to-face contexts invite public-spirited debate and conversation, and others do not; in contemporary US society, most do not” (Eliasoph 1998: 6). Eliasoph also shows the flexibility of the boundary between close and distant problems: the same problems can become ‘personal’ or ‘political’ depending on the context of their public discussion and collective interpretation. “For volunteers, calling something personal was a way of making it seem smaller and more “do-able”; for activists, in contrast, ferreting out a problem's institutional origins did not make it less personal, but did make it feel more “do-able.” They expanded from personal feelings to structural solutions, instead of treating personal and political as opposite” (Eliasoph 1998: 176). Political avoidance is “a culture, not a strategy aimed at avoiding disagreement or any other conscious goal” (Eliasoph 1998: 47). According to Eliasoph, the institutional contexts in which people’s activities take place shape their decisions (to be unpolitical); it is not a deliberate choice. Kari Marie Norgaard in her book “Living in Denial” shares the vision of avoidance as culture, however, includes an element of strategic action, too: she refers to Ann Swidler’s concept of ‘cultural toolkit’ which is “used to construct “strategies of action” (Norgaard 2011: 7) by individuals: “Publicly available meanings facilitate certain patterns of action, making them readily available, while discouraging others” (Swidler 1986: 283). Thus, people have certain cultural instruments at their disposal, but they can strategically decide what they use.

In the paper, I will first, demonstrate the elements of the personalized politics in young people’s narratives, and second, show the differences and similarities in political views of the informants who claim to be political or apolitical. I will first focus on the political views and opinions of young people before and after the elections (attitudes toward the state, society, collective action, informants’ main sources of information, etc.). Showing the diversity of positions and levels of awareness of our informants of political and social issues, I will argue that classification of citizens in two categories – politically passive or active – does not make much sense, since political participation can take many different forms including the political disavowal as an extreme of this spectrum.

It is also worth noticing that at the time the study was conducted, the political censorship and repression of dissident political views was not widespread in Russia. Therefore, I will not consider the argument of actual political repression as one of the forces limiting participation. However, as I will try to show, the memory of previous state repressions in XX century transmitted to young people from older generations is sometimes part of the narrative explaining avoidance of politics.

Our interview and focus groups sample in the Russian MYPLACE study included young people from two North-Western cities (St. Petersburg and Vyborg) aged 16 to 25. Before the Parliamentary elections, in November 2011, we conducted 5 focus-groups dedicated to political participation and views of young people (circa 50 participants in two cities, the participants for the focus-groups in St. Petersburg were recruited among the environmental activists, student activists and volunteers, and in Vyborg among

students of universities and technical training colleges. For the second stage of the research, which happened at the same time as the late stage of the protest movement in winter 2012, we collected 60 interviews with representatives of the same age group in the same cities². This interview sample contained both activists and explicitly apolitical informants, which allowed us to observe the transformation of political views among different groups of young people and compare the views and political trajectories of informants in the context of political events of 2011-2012.

Apolitical Participation and the Value of Political Neutrality

Despite the fact that many informants claimed to be apolitical, the actual absence of interest, awareness and minimal experience with social and political institutions was a very rare case. Even those focus group participants who stated political avoidance was their principle, still were aware of and analyzed the political events in the country, and in the course of the group discussion remembered the episodes from their experiences when they participated in various forms of collective activities, sometimes even protests. However, the episodes of participation in actions, signing letters of support and solidarity and other forms of activism took time to remember. Interestingly, our informants did not classify such episodes as activism related to social or political issues: they were matters of personal interest or injustice. For instance, Roman who at first clearly stated he was unpolitical later came up with several examples of both collective and individual protest he participated in: a collective action of students against the living conditions in the dorm, public demonstrations against “ethnic crime” (right-wing rallies), and his personal struggle with a company that fired him in violation of the contract:

Why are you doing this, be quiet [they told me]. It was indeed very scary, because it was a big international corporation. The top managers were threatening me that they will come and talk to me in ‘a different way’ outside of the office building (Roman).

However, Roman did not give up, he was eager to defend dignity, an individualistic motive that forced him to enter the public struggle: “*It stung me, how so, why is that happening?*” (Roman). He started posting all his actions on social media, brought the case before court, and applied for help from various organizations, which helped him win the case and made him conclude: “*It is important not to be afraid, start doing something, and everything can be solved*” (Roman). The experience Roman gained during this struggle helped him achieve new skills that he used in his future social activism – volunteering in sport organizations.

Almost all of the focus group participants regardless of their identification shared the value of political neutrality activism. Social responsibility was not related to formal politics:

² The interviews and focus groups were conducted by a team of researchers: Anna Zhelnina, Guzel Sabiroba, Yana Krupets, Margarita Kuleva, Aleksei Zinovyev, Daria Litvina, Sergei Senatov, Natalia Fedorova, Anna Fomina.

They [a group of environmental activists] organized many actions, like collecting trash, but they never associated with any political parties and their propaganda. Only some companies were allowed to participate, those who were definitely politically neutral but still doing good things (Olessya).

The participants of the focus group with student activists almost unanimously accepted the strategy of rejection of politics. The ‘student activists’ in the Russian context usually organize student parties, trips, contests, etc, and have nothing to do with defending students’ rights or opposing the university administration. They opposed the “active life position” and public, political activism, and stressed that they are actively against participation in any sort of political activism and avoid knowing anything about politics. Despite such statements, most of them were very well informed about the political events in the country, and were quite critical about them; however, the only way of solving the existing political problems they could come up with was emigration. Most of the participants of this focus group claimed they would like to leave Russia.

In the focus group with environmental activists the majority of participants identified as activists, but demonstrated a diversity of forms of activist strategies: from the “start with yourself” strategy to the “educate your friends” strategy to the actual collective action in an environmental movement. Position of Konstantin who was involved in this form of activism was strikingly different from everybody else’s: he was aware of the political system and its structure and his own position in it: *“I think, if you live in this system and you use its advantages, you must also try to improve it, not remove yourself from it” (Konstantin).*

In the focus groups in Vyborg, which is a much smaller town than St. Petersburg, another position was popular that did not come up often in St. Petersburg’s groups: an extremely critical opinion about the country’s politics accompanied by a sense of helplessness. It was more often expressed by the students of the technical colleges (I could speculate that it is connected to the perception by the informants of his / her own life chances as less promising).

They [the government] only want our money. We are working, but they get all the benefits, and we get no improvement. They will make such conditions for us so that we can only be dumb, and work, and will degrade and won’t be able to think, so that they can have a country of vegetables, and they can only collect their harvest from them” (Mikhail).

Some of the participants of the focus groups in Vyborg characterized their opinion about the government with the phrase *“they are asking for it”*. This is an extremely critical position that correlates with the absence of opportunities to channel the discontent (evidently, the young people in Vyborg got their first opportunity to discuss political issues publicly in the focus group, and they talked about it with a mix of fear and excitement):

Dima: Someone should send tanks do the White House [residence of the Russian Government], people should just get there and burn it down.

Misha: *Yes, they are asking for it.*

Dima: *Burn it all down, bring the tanks, and just lay down our terms, and not theirs.*

All the attitudes toward the political sphere mentioned above represent various positions on the continuum, and demonstrate that the “passive/ active” dichotomy does not describe political views adequately. The existing positions vary from extreme discontent enforced by the lack of spaces where the discontent can be discussed, to various strategies of “doing what one can” (“starting with yourself”, addressing “doable” issues, involving in volunteering and other forms of individual activism), to joining a collective action, to rejecting politics and denying its importance.

Collective and Individual Political Action

Understanding attitudes toward collective action is key to understanding the specificity of young people’s mobilization. As I have noted above, personally important issues and tasks were not perceived by the informants as activism or socially relevant activity, even if these tasks were outside of one’s private life (helping children’s homes, following the environmentally responsible lifestyle to help save the planet, even involvement with organizations). Individual action with a common good in mind and that is guided by the vision of what is just and good for everybody is acceptable for most of the informants, but at the same time, many of them rejected the perspective of collective action.

Even among the environmental activists, the positions toward collective action were not unified. The majority of them described their interest in ecological issues as either a personal “craziness” or specialization requiring skills that regular citizens do not have: “*If you ask a regular person about it, who’s not crazy about eco, they won’t even know*” (Rita). One of the popular strategies for them was “start with yourself” strategy that did not require the ecologically conscious people to participate in any collective action, but to act responsibly on the individual level. This “entry-level” ecological activism could at some point be transformed into participation in collective action, but for many people it was enough. Unlike other critical groups, environmentalists found making sense of individual action easier: both collective and individual environmentally responsible action were legitimate alternatives to make change possible.

As many of the informants strongly opposed the state but not the “Homeland” (“*Rodina*”) (“I hate the state, but I love my Homeland” as a typical phrase to describe this position), they chose between different strategies to deal with the contradiction. Some of them, as many environmentalists, tried to start with doable tasks and change their own behavior in order to make a bigger change, while others chose to reject the state and politics altogether, minimizing contact with them and any reminders of their presence in their lives.

Such a rejection of the collective, but not the individual action can be one of the arguments in favor of the “personalization of politics” concept. The informants are still completely capable of evaluating and criticizing the political developments in the country based on their ideas of justice and common good, as well as (individually) acting in accordance with these ideas. Such position does not exclude a spontaneous

involvement in collective action when there is an opportunity (which happened to be during the protests against fraudulent elections). It is interesting, which conditions help young people make pro-collective action choices instead of rejection of politics.

The choice in favor of political avoidance seems to be rational: the discontented individuals choose not to do anything when the action requires significant changes in one's routine and the aspired goals are too global and do not seem doable. Our respondents in both the focus groups and interviews after the protest wave shared the perception that to achieve the positive changes in Russia's politics radical changes are needed, which is not a doable task; therefore, to escape the feeling of powerlessness (Eliasoph 1998), most of them preferred to be apolitical.

Thus, many young people are critical toward the state and its politics, but choose different strategies to deal with their discontent: some of them engage in collective action, while the majority prefers political avoidance. Individual action appears to be a more acceptable alternative, since collective action is impeded by distrust toward political as well as social institutions, and general distrust toward people outside immediate social circles.

The Problem of Trust and Obstacles for Mobilization

Characteristics of the social environment and the dominant image of political activity (as dangerous, senseless or efficient, prestigious or marginal) can shape the informants choices to avoid politics. Our focus groups and interviews have demonstrated that the discontented young people do not join any social movements or other collective forms of activism because they are not involved in any social networks that would be supportive of personal initiative and offer scenarios for collective action. Often young people who were critical and explicitly discontented with the social and political developments in the country simply did not know what to do:

Unfortunately, I was never involved with any social organizations. I might even have had the idea to create something on my own, but probably the fear that people just will not understand me took over (...) For me everything stopped with just thinking about it. There was no one near to help me out, to tell, what to do. Therefore, it only remained in my thoughts (Ekaterina).

Young people needed like-minded others around them, networks of support and approval, spaces for discussion and coordination. However, in the situation when not only the state, but also other citizens are distrusted, finding such networks and spaces is difficult, which makes the involvement in collective action very unlikely. Despite the huge popularity of social media among young people, they are not contributing to the formation of an "activism-friendly" environment and networks of trust.

Many young people, however, are active, and look for ways to apply their social ambitions and try to get involved with existing institutions: student councils, which exist in every college and university, but do not assume any political agenda and are controlled by the university administrations in most cases.

Many informants claimed that they were ready to participate in a protest street action in case "others would also do it". Taking into account that this is probably only a rhetorical construction used to explain

one's nonparticipation, it is still possible to conclude that trust is a key element of mobilization. However, social trust was missing from young people's experiences outside family and private relations. For instance, during a focus group in Vyborg the participants started discussing a recent conflict situation between students and university administration, which became resonant with many students and many people were strongly critical about what was happening, but almost none of them was ready to make their discontent public. Mihail, who tried to organize a collective action, had a negative experience:

In the end, it was only me and a few of my best mates, two or three people. Everybody else just dropped off. They didn't believe in their idea strongly enough. And after that we only had more conflicts. I mean, when the administration just said "no" for the first time, they started, like, "so what can we do? What is the point of going on?" But in such things, it is just like when you're driving on the crossroads – if you started moving, you should go ahead! I know what it is like, to have an important issue, to voice it, and all others will be like – no, no, we're not with him. (Mihail)

"Support" is an important category that informants used to describe their experience of collective action. Egor, for example, noted, that he was disappointed to learn that the number of people who joined an event (a rally against "ethnic crime") on a social media platform did not actualize in the streets when the event took place.

I've been there, because I have my views on the issues, and I decided to support those guys. And there were only 50 people. And the event on the Internet had more than 300 subscribers, who were saying they would definitely come" (Egor).

While expressing his disappointment in Russian citizens who are unable to turn their discontent into action, Egor brought up the example of the Arab Spring where the Internet could help mobilizing people:

People are apathetic, they know that everyone is passive, that no one is willing to do anything, and cannot do anything. They just exist. But we could do it, if just everyone would do the right thing. And they [in Egypt] just did it, they announced it on the social media, and just made a revolution. But in Russia everybody is just writing, posting, but no one does anything, and then people just get used to it and don't care anymore (Egor).

Despite declaring themselves apolitical, only a few of informants actually had no experience of activism whatsoever. Some had written and signed collective petitions, filed complaints to various governmental agencies. In most of the cases young people did not immediately remember they had such an experience; as I have suggested above, such "forgetfulness" can be caused by the fact that young people do not associate the "personally important" and subjectively valuable issues as part of "activism" and even less as a political activity. Even the most conformist to the regime "student activists" remembered conflict situations when they tried to take collective action:

We have a conflict right now. There is a person in the university administration who curates student activities. She always controlled everything. We had to tell her what we want to do, and

she would approve and give us money. But now she started to say we've become too independent. And we started something like a movement, which is called "Students for students", instead of "Student council", and the administration won't have any control over it. We'll just do what we want for the students. And it's sort of easy, because we're a group of 20-30 people, and we're moving pretty quickly (Olessya).

Olessya demonstrated that when a solidary collective was formed, it was possible to break the existing consensus and hierarchy in the university. The experience of acting collectively within the formal student council helped building this core group of activists, which could continue acting outside the existing structure. Offline collectives appear to be more reliable than the internet-based, since they allow building trust and cooperation networks.

It is interesting to compare the situation in St. Petersburg to Vyborg, where the informants have demonstrated discontent that was even more explicit, but had less spaces for public discussion of social and political issues. Informants in Vyborg would give more concrete examples of injustice from their families' and friends experiences. In a small town the information about such injustice would spread rapidly, however, but collective action never followed. As the informants explained, the fear of punishment, of losing the (already poor) job opportunities prevented the attempts. The discontent circulated as rumors, but never went into the open public sphere. The "power" (*vlasti*) was to blame for it:

No one has access to the power. The parties, they have power, they can push things forward in the administration and tell them, like, make it right for all of us. We pay taxes, we break our backs working. But the power ["vlasti", the officials] never do anything good in return (Ilya).

Vyborg students often remembered a conflict situation that was perceived as a chance for a collective action, but failed and disappointed the students in their social environment even more. A student during a meeting with the city administration asked a provocative question, for what she later was expelled from the university.

But there is no collectivity! We're all students. The girl asks that question. If I were in her group, I would speak up to protect her. If we'd be protecting each other, it could have had an effect. If there's a big group of kids, all these kids have adults, parents. This could be a big group of people! You couldn't expel such a group, right? But it didn't happen (Timofei).

The fact that there was no collective action to defend the student demonstrated our informants that in Vyborg discontent has no future. I should add that in 2011-2012 during the protest mobilization there were no protests organized in Vyborg, but some of the informants went to bigger cities to participate in the rallies of opposition (including the right-wing rallies). It is possible that not only density of networks is important for mobilization, but also their diversity; in a smaller town, there are no alternatives to the existing social networks. Finding activist networks and people was easier in St. Petersburg, which is a much bigger city.

Fear is also an important explanation of avoiding public action. It is hard to tell where this perception of threat comes from, since only a few informants could give examples of actual “punishment” or repression that followed expression of discontent. But, for instance, students were certain that “*even walls have ears*”:

In our university, we have several departments, and each department has a representative [in the Student Council]. And these representatives, they have their own leadership, but it is dangerous to talk about them, you know, even walls have ears (Raisa).

In some cases informants mentioned they were afraid of physical violence from the police during street actions, but often it was fear of punishment in other forms – among students the fear of losing their position in the university, of not getting a job was omnipresent (there were, indeed, a few cases widely discussed in oppositional media, when students were expelled from their universities for participating in the rallies of opposition). Police violence during street actions was expected, too, and prevented many informants from going to the rallies:

In our case, mobilization is impossible. Because people are afraid, that whatever they do, whatever their values are, they will be stopped with violent methods. And you can't know if this person comes back alive if he just went to the rally on Manezhnaya [a place popular for right-wing rallies] (Alex).

However, some informants would interpret fear as the only force keeping society together and preventing the collapse of the political system:

I can't see who else could do it. If Putin goes, everything will fall apart. He keeps it, by fear, but he keeps people together (Lisa).

Thus, low levels of social trust (outside the networks of close friends and family), lack of spaces for public discussion, where the communication and cooperation could take place, fear of the state repression prevent young people from considering public collective action as an option. Distrust and fear are not necessarily based on some evidence, but still exist in the perception of our informants, who adjust their behavior accordingly.

State and Formal Politics

The state and governmental institutions often appeared in the narratives of our informants in the context of explanations why political participation did not make sense. The attitudes toward the state remained the same in the sets of data collected before and after the protest wave of 2011-2012: informants tried to minimize the contacts with formal institutions, which they did not trust, and had no positive expectations about them. Some young people who were trying to make a difference in their environment did not rely on governmental institutions as a way to achieve their goals. Oftentimes they preferred alternative forms of action, which were easier to control and see the result. However, it was not always possible to avoid contacts with the state:

Sometimes I doubt it if it [activism] makes sense at all... Some things you just can't do without the state, because you alone just can't change anything (Albina).

Avoiding contacts with the state could be one of the reasons young people tried to avoid even thinking about socially important issues. Some of them speculated they would only consider protesting only if the cause related to their close personal interests (but the definition of what is “close” and “personal” varied):

If the question will be about the quality of school education for my child, like will he study only four subjects or seven like it is now, of course I will be against only four subjects. I will become interested, I'll be asking questions and I'll speak up that I want normal education. It is possible that it won't make any difference, but it will be easier for me to dedicate my time to this (Karina).

Most of the focus group participants found it difficult to see the connection of their individual actions and behaviors and social changes. In combination with the alienation from state institutions this led to an alienation from the public sphere and public issues altogether:

I know very little about it [political news and events], I can read something, but it is not interesting... I don't want to dig into this, because they are so far and irrelevant, I'm living my life and I'm doing what I like. I don't think my life is somehow related to politics. That's my position (Lina).

Thus, political avoidance is a conscious choice made by otherwise informed people. Kira summarized this split of “life” and the “state” as a common strategy:

Many people just live their lives. They know that the government is useless, they don't expect any help or support from it. I can't say I suffer from not doing anything political. I'm ok like that (Kira).

Having no hope for change reduces the likelihood the person would get involved in political action. This decision can be revisited; however, the reasons for breaking the established routine of political avoidance and apathy should be very serious. Interestingly, it happened in 2011 for some young people, in our sample – an absolute minority.

After the Protest

Mass mobilization of 2011-2012 did not change significantly the attitudes of our informants toward state and politics. Only three of 60 informants became actively involved in the Movement for Fair Elections.

Among these three people is a 19-years old student Matvei, defines himself as nationalist. He actively participated in the protest events in Moscow (being originally from Vyborg). The second, Semen, is 25 years old and moved from Vyborg to St. Petersburg to work as a software designer, and also participated in all protest events, including occupations of public space. Serafima, a 22 year old woman, worked as a sales manager, and also moved to St. Petersburg from a smaller town in another Russian region. She participated only in a few first public actions,

but then limited her participation to reading and circulating information online (she explained it by the fact she was afraid of the physical police violence on the streets). By the time of the interview she was still hoping for change, unlike Semen, who was strongly disappointed in the movement, described himself as “tired of politics” and reduced reading of the oppositional media. Only the most radical of the three, Matvei, still believed in revolution and expected civil war.

The attitudes toward politics among these three mobilized young people were different from those who had no experience of participating in protest activity. Serafima, answering the question about what is politics, talked about mobilization and online activism, while the majority of non-mobilized critical informants gave an alienated definition of politics, describing formal institutions, parties, state. Serafima claimed that her position in life is generally more open than positions of her parents and friends:

I just began to read more about it, when I registered on Twitter. I started reading members of opposition, and I felt like people talk about it all the time. But my parents, they watch TV, and they think that I have too liberal views. They even commented on me agreeing for this interview – one of my friends said, she’d never do it, she wouldn’t even open the door to you (Serafima).

She clarified, that her point of view was shaped under the influence of new friends in St. Petersburg, after she moved from her hometown. She started following oppositional media some time before the protests broke out. Despite describing her political views as liberal and participating in pro-democracy protests, Serafima expressed some unexpected opinions about democracy in Russia:

Serafima: Our country is just too big, we need strong hand to rule it. And we can’t have democracy, maybe we don’t even need it. We need our own way.

Interviewer: Like what?

Serafima: Well, we’ll have one leader, ideally. It could even be some kind of totalitarian regime. But we need freedom of speech. Well, totalitarian would be, like, administrative power, but we’d have free speech. People close to the president would elect governors and mayors, but we’d have free media and all that.

These references to the “strong hand” needed in Russia were very popular among the informants. It is, probably, a part of “cultural toolkit” of apathy in Russia – a usual opinion about how “it has always been and should be” in the country with “Russian mentality”. Even Serafima, who claimed she read a lot of political analysis, unexpectedly referred to the same idea.

Unlike her, Semen was more consistent in his views, and believed that only collective action and democracy could help achieve positive changes for the political system. Semen is interesting also because after a period of intensive participation in the protest movement he abruptly stopped doing it.

Semen's professional activity developed on the Internet, and most of the information he also receives online:

All my life and my opinions are shaped by the Internet and the information I get there (...) And you have power to choose what you know, because it is you who shapes the feed.

During the protest period Semen has politicized his feed and even started some accounts on Twitter to help coordinating protest rallies. At some point, however, he "cleaned" the feed by removing most of the political content:

It became a routine. Before it started, the preparation for elections and all that, I had no interest for politics at all. But when this wave came, I got interested, I started reading, tried to stay informed. But then it became boring and monotonous, and it was just the same as someone posting cats on Facebook. Cats and someone in jail again, and people are collecting money for him. It just got boring.

Semen links his unexpected interest for politics to certain events in his personal life, he needed to start something new: *"I needed to move on. Look for something new, for myself. And that fall [fall 2011, before the elections] I realized politics was interesting and important and worth paying attention to".* Thus, Semen puts more emphasis on *personal* importance of political activity, and his activism was mostly an individual action, he never mentioned new social networks and friends he got to know during the protests. Maybe it is one of the explanations for the abrupt ending of his political life stage. In the context of the "personalized politics" he gives an example of how this strategy of individualized participation is not sustainable. For him "political" became "personal" for a period of time, and it demonstrates that the boundaries between "close to home" and "not close to home" issues (Eliasoph) are flexible.

Semen stressed the "personal" importance of the protest:

I really was worried about all that was happening, and I asked all my friend to go and vote, for someone. It is your duty and all that, but also it is how one can defend his voice, his self, his right. It was so close to me, and I tried to make others aware that it was also important for them.

Semen also shared the belief in the "start with yourself" strategy that was popular among environmentalists. Nina Eliasoph interprets a similar strategy ("it all starts with the family") as one of the ways to fight sense of powerlessness and establish at least some control, which is especially important in the context of social distrust and distrust toward governmental institutions. For Semen, this strategy helped him after he became disappointed in the protest that did not achieve the desired result of democratic change:

The right thing is to start with yourself. Just don't do the things you don't like: don't exceed the speed limit, don't litter, don't bribe. I know it sounds Utopian, but if everybody will just do that, it's going to be ok. The system should function, though. There should be no choice for people between doing the right thing or not, it should punish the violators.

By personal feelings of shame and humiliation Semen explained his own mobilization, as well as mobilization of others.

I just know some people who came to the protest rallies not because their votes were stolen, but because they felt ashamed of living in a police state, where people get arrested and beaten up for nothing.

Unlike Semen and Serafima, Matvei had an activist identity, defined himself as an active citizen and member of the opposition. It is important, that Matvei became interested in activism and dissident groups long before the mobilization of 2011-2012 began. He was also more radical and ready to defend his views even with “weapons in his arms”. Despite such radical claims, Matvei was also experiencing fear of having problems in the university, and preferred to conceal his political views in public. He explained that he knew some people who had problems in school because of their membership in oppositional movements and parties. Still, Matvei went to all rallies, worked as an observer during elections, collected money for the arrested, etc. He spoke of these experiences as of adventures that were fun and made him feel cool.

However, in his attitudes toward the state and formal politics Matvei was not much different from the non-mobilized informants. He also felt the “state” and the “homeland” were unrelated things and the formal political participation made no sense:

I support the nation, not the state. I don't care about the state, I could say I am patriotic, though. But I don't care about what is going on with the state.

The analysis of data collected before and after the protest wave shows that ‘personal’ reasons are the most popular reasons for participating in any kind of political or social activism. ‘Personal’, however, can be defined flexibly: for some the unjust discharge from work is a private issue that is not part of a broader context of labor relations, for others defending personal dignity becomes a public issue requiring participation in a collective action. The link between the ‘personal’ and the ‘social’ is a feature of the narratives of those young people who had participated in collective action: seeing such a link and personal responsibility is one of the prerequisites of participation. Reinterpretation of personal in terms of the political is more likely when people have access to networks of likeminded people discussing public issues, supporting collective action, and helping to overcome individuals’ fear.

Conclusion

The analysis above has shown that the “political apathy” is not uniform and distinction between “active” and “passive” citizens is not an adequate way to describe the continuum of participation and avoidance strategies. Much in line with Ulrich Beck’s argument, the data shows that young people are not just “apolitical”, but unpolitical in several different ways: they can avoid politics because they are hopeless to make a difference, because they find many alternative ways for self-realization, or because they have no access to resources that would help them participate (activist networks, etc.). Maintaining and explaining the unpolitical position is also facilitated by the accessibility of a specific “cultural toolkit” of political avoidance (historical references to repressions, routinized fear and distrust, as well as attribution of political activism to older generations are parts of it).

The analysis of political views of the informants revealed the importance of the ‘personal agendas’ (dignity, freedom, making choices about one’s life) which relates to the concept of the ‘personalized politics’. Linking these “personal” issues to social processes can mobilize people, but it is more likely when people have access to support networks and discussion spaces. However, the mobilization on the ‘personal’ ground does not appear to be sustainable.

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