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ARTICLES

Reshaping Russian youth: how Kremlin creates wartime influencers



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Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian state has dramatically **escalated** its efforts to shape the minds and loyalties of its youngest citizens. However, this battle for hearts and minds is not waged only on battlefields or through state-controlled television.

It also unfolds daily through carefully curated content shared on social media, where the state is able to engage young Russians with 24/7 messaging, participatory activities, and a stream of engaging content. The Kremlin is increasingly weaponizing everyday social interaction and digital culture to nudge young citizens into militarism—support for the military and Russia’s purported role as a defender against Western encroachment—while they are too young to realize what is at stake.

Since at least the early 2010s, the Russian state under Vladimir Putin has been recruiting and paying influencers — pop and rap stars, musicians, and other notable figures — to spread content online. Through its **influencer** program, the regime aspires to disseminate pro-Kremlin messaging throughout the “Runet,” reaching young “digital natives”: a crucial demographic that has

proven generally **skeptical** of official messaging and expresses a particularly low level of trust toward the state.

Influencers not obviously aligned with Putin's regime spread occasional and subtle pro-state messages through their feeds. The strategy may not have conquered the pre-2022 generation, but it normalized sharing pro-state positions in unexpected places.

However, in recent **research** conducted on the Telegram social media platform, we have shown that the state has attempted to create a new type of influencer by re-imagining the feeds of openly pro-state and state-aligned leaders as fun, entertaining, and engaging places of purportedly open discourse and participation. Since 2022, the state's influencer program has become more overt and more openly militaristic in its goals and content.

Examining over a thousand posts made by two social media influencers, Nikita Nagornyy and Olga Zanko, what we found is striking. Both Nagornyy and Zanko represent state-affiliated youth groups: Nagornyy, a 28-year-old Olympic gymnast with a legion of followers across social media platforms, headed the **Youth Army** (*lunarmiia*) and now is a part of the ruling committee of **Movement of the First**; while 34-year-old Zanko, a Duma deputy since 2021, founded **Victory Volunteers** (*Volontery Pobedy*). Starting up Telegram feeds just before the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, each now reaches audiences in the thousands.



Nikita Nagornyy signing autographs at the Youth Army event, 2022 / Photo: Youth Army social media

At first glance, their feeds appear benign. A wave of memes, selfies, interactive polls, and videos invite users to participate in the lives of Zanko and Nagornyy, whose every daily movement — from meetings with celebrities and politicians to glamorous dinners in restaurants — are detailed. But beneath the friendly façade lies a systematic effort to normalize militarization, sacrifice, and unwavering loyalty to the state. Young people are gently nudged toward attitudes and behaviours that mirror the Kremlin's aggressive policies toward Ukraine and the West.

Nagornyy is particularly adept at harnessing social media influencer (SMI) techniques. A four-time Olympic medalist, Nagornyy blends celebrity appeal with patriotic messaging, effortlessly mixing inspirational athletic posts — Nagornyy doing somersaults in the gym, riding his bicycle through sunlit Russian roads, or sparring with martial artists — with subtle, yet potent, militaristic content. His Telegram feed frequently presents patriotic duties as lifestyle choices: sporting achievements and self-improvement seamlessly intertwined with patriotic symbolism.

For instance, followers are encouraged to participate in fitness challenges for their health and in order to emulate Nagornyy himself. Take part and they too can acquire the enviable body and social status of Nagornyy. But being part of the collective, as Nagornyy puts it, turns ordinary followers into “great guys” Young Russians are thereby nudged to see civic responsibility and self-sacrifice as inherently desirable; and acting out those values is as easy as tapping a smartphone screen.

Olga Zanko lacks Nagornyy’s photogenic panache, relying instead on her status as a United Russia Duma deputy to lend authority and gravity to her patriotic appeals. Through posts laden with moral imperatives and emotional appeals, she explicitly frames patriotism around civic duty, collective sacrifice, and active participation in state-sponsored projects that purport to **help** displaced individuals from the Donbas.

In one Telegram post, Zanko praised a young Russian soldier named Dima, who spent his brief leave unloading humanitarian aid. This act, she emphasized, exemplifies “true patriotism” through individual sacrifice and collective solidarity. Dressed up in the eye-catching aesthetics of the social media feed, and couched in Zanko’s intensely personal, emotional responses to these events, this is streets away from the Putin regime’s stilted, increasingly gerontocratic TV **propaganda**.

Both Nagornyy and Zanko urge their followers to engage in humanitarian initiatives supporting Russia’s actions in Ukraine, characterizing such involvement as spontaneous and altruistic. Yet the choices available are strictly confined within state-approved parameters.

“Great guys” follow their leaders and join the crowd of those who like, share, and comment with zeal. They might reach out and tag Nagornyy or Zanko in their own posts, but real political agency—debate, dissent, or even neutral inquiry—is never an option.

Likewise, both influencers manipulate historical memory, especially regarding World War II, to reinforce loyalty and ideas of **heroism**.

The state's omnipresent references to the Great Patriotic War are echoed here as young people are encouraged to participate in memory projects like the distribution of St. George ribbons — now reshaped into the pro-war “Z” — or even simply to watch Putinist propaganda movies as acts of contemporary patriotism. Taking part in military-historical «fun» is re-written as a lifestyle choice for young Russians. In turn, that “fun” is weaponized to justify and normalize present-day aggression.



Olga Zanko in the State Duma with a St. George ribbon in the shape of the letter Z on her lapel. 2022 / Photo: er-gosduma.ru

Disturbingly, these Telegram channels portray militarized patriotism as inclusive, fun, and aspirational, yet they implicitly exclude anyone who might question or deviate from these rigid norms. Young people who do not participate, physically or digitally, in these patriotic rituals risk being implicitly categorized as outsiders or even — given the **aggressively** anti-“extremist” cleansing language of the state elsewhere — potential traitors.

This binary framing — good patriots versus unpatriotic outsiders — serves to suppress any nascent resistance or independent thinking

among Russian youth. The power of the crowd is manifested online in these spaces, where young people apparently see other young people striving to become “great guys” like their influencer idols. The Kremlin thus restricts Russian youths’ conceptual horizons. Political engagement becomes synonymous with state obedience, while independent thought is quietly marginalized.

Russia’s youth militarization strategy via Telegram reveals an evolution of digital authoritarianism. The subtle but persistent messaging normalizes military ideals, making martial themes seem natural, benign, and even desirable. In doing so, it creates a climate in which actual military service, when inevitably demanded by the state, seems a logical or even desirable extension of patriotic duties established in childhood.

Russia’s digital influence strategies do not merely extend the reach of propaganda — they aim to actively reshape young people’s identities, embedding authoritarian values into daily life. By blurring the boundaries between voluntary civic engagement and compulsory patriotism, suffusing its propaganda with a seemingly collapsed hierarchy where the language and aesthetics of online youth culture are deployed as tools of indoctrination, the state robs young Russians of genuine political agency and autonomy.

The fight for human rights in Russia today thus involves countering not just overt repression or highlighting abuses but tackling the insidious erosion of freedom through digital propaganda. The Telegram feeds of Nagornyy and Zanko illustrate a powerful mechanism of state control. By exposing and analyzing these strategies, we can better support Russia’s youth by exploiting the country’s relatively open digital space to offer alternative visions of civic engagement, critical thought, and genuine freedom.