

YOUTH AS A RESOURCE FOR POSSIBLE POLITICAL CHANGES IN RUSSIA

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Abstract

The study of the value and political orientations of young Russian citizens today is important, since young people should determine the direction of society in the near future. It is necessary to understand whether Russian society will sooner or later be able to get out of the crisis and continue moving towards universal and democratic values.

The results of our study of Russian youth's social ideals and expectations are based on the data of sociological monitoring of university students (N=2000) and a survey of political activists (N=300) in a large region of Russia - the Urals.

Monitoring of student youth in the Urals shows a certain increase in interest in politics among young people, which occurred from 2016 to 2020, as well as a decrease in trust in the main political institutions.

According to the survey data, we see that the most popular guidelines for the development of the country for young people are: achieving a high standard of living, economic well-being, respect for human rights. At the same time, the expectations of young people are mostly negative - young people expect that prices are likely to rise, inflation, lower living standards, political unrest and protests and conflicts.

Key words: youth, values, social ideals and expectations, resource for changes

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Introduction

In the near future, trajectories of development in the Russian society will be determined by a new generation of young Russians; thus, today, it is crucial and relevant to study their values and political orientations. It will help find out if Russia is going to handle its crisis and if there is hope for a new turn towards universal human and democratic values in the Russian society.

Since the 1980s, many researchers have focused on the role of changing generations and values in historic and political changes (Lissoviski, 1998), (Inglehart, 2008). For example, R.

Inglehart divided values into materialist and postmaterialist and argued that a shift to democracy is more likely to occur in those countries which are beginning to be dominated by postmaterialist values - human rights, freedom, religious, ethnic, and sexual tolerance (Inglehart, 2013). According to Inglehart, a steady economic growth contributes to the promotion of these liberal values, whereas economic crises, on the contrary, give rise to authoritarian regimes and strong leaders (Inglehart, 2016) and they even may lead to the establishment of a fascist regime.

In this regard, we see that a brief period of democratic reforms in Russia occurred in the beginning of the 1990s stumbled into a severe economic downturn and, thus, created favourable conditions for increasingly authoritarian orientations (Gudkov, 2017), (Grigoryev et al, 2022). A following economic growth improved subjective well-being and life satisfaction indicators (Loubser & Steenekamp, 2017), but, ultimately, that was not enough to foster liberal values of people.

Today's generation of Russian students, though, was born after the 1990s crisis; they did not witness the economic recession and grew up in the relatively stable and prosperous 2000s. Recent sociological studies advocate for an emerging generational split between the younger and the older generations of the Russian society in terms of, firstly, the way of obtaining information and digitalization, and secondly, their priorities and lifestyle (Radaev, 2018).

Additionally, some studies prove that being aware of rights and liberties reinforces democratic values most strongly among those generations born in the post-Soviet era (Look, 2020).

Therefore, we hypothesize that a "firm hand" concept is not supported by the youth - or at least their overwhelming part; on the contrary, freedom and tolerance are more popular, while this group of young people is the most politically and socially proactive. In the long-term perspective, it is this group that will become the most probable agent of democratic changes in the country. Thus, it would be of interest to study developmental priorities identified by young students, their expectations and social well-being as well as to compare their ideas to the opinions of the politically proactive youth.

1 Data and Method

The results of studying social ideals and expectations of the Russian youth are based on the sociological monitoring of university students (N=2000) and on the survey of political activists

(N=300) conducted in a large Russian region - the Urals. To select students, we used a quota-nested sample with the nests being universities and quota indicators being the gender and respondents' major (humanities, socio-economic sciences, natural sciences, engineering). Third year students from thirteen universities were surveyed through Google Forms; in total, we received 2300 questionnaires and randomly selected 2000 out of them.

To select young political activists, we used a target sample. Respondents were divided into two groups according to their political stance. The first group included those actively engaged in pro-governmental organizations and parties; the second group involved those devoting themselves to oppositional and persecuted - to varying degrees - organizations and parties.

2. Results

Student monitoring results show that between 1999 and 2003 young people somehow lost interest in politics; the following period was dominated by an indifferent or neutral attitude towards political processes in the country. Political experts characterize the period after 1999 - which ushered in the presidency of Vladimir Putin and the so-called "social stabilization" - as a freezing of the Russian political space. However, between 2016 and 2020, the young people's interest in politics grew from 2% to 11%, whereas a share of youth indifferent to the political agenda decreased from 38% to 27% - for the first time since 2003 (Table 1).

Tab. 1: Dynamic of young students' attitude to politics, %

Attitude to Politics	Year						
	1999	2003	2007	2009	2012	2016	2020
I have a strong interest, belong to a party or a movement	2	4	3	4	7	2	11
I keep up with the political agenda but do not actively participate in it	64	49	54	56	51	50	51
I am indiferent to politics and do not maintain a political stance	28	42	35	31	30	38	27
I have a negative attitude to politics and try to stay out of it	6	5	8	9	12	11	11

Source: authors calculations

In addition, the monitoring showed a decrease in trust in major political institutes expressed by students in 2020 as compared to 2016 (Table 2). Since 2003, the trustworthy index of the president has been mostly positive; it insignificantly decreased only in 2012, when young people were dissatisfied with the Medvedev-Putin tandemocracy amid the decreasing standard of living, which resulted in, inter alia, infamous protests on Bolotnaya Square in Moscow (Volkov, 2015). In Russian regions, though, these sentiments were not widely supported at the time. By 2016, the trustworthiness index of the President had dramatically rose, which embodies an ideological consolidation of the Russian society around the President in the context of Crimea events and a successful attempt to shift youth’s attention from domestic problems to foreign affairs.

Tab. 2: Dynamic of students’ trust in major political and social institutes, index*

Social and Political Institutes	Year						
	1999	2003	2007	2009	2012	2016	2020
State Duma	-0.56	-0.62	-0.66	-0.46	-0.58	-0.30	-0.40
Political Parties, Movements	-0.57	-0.83	-0.68	-0.66	-0.56	-0.58	-0.40
Russian Government	-0.40	-0.29	-0.04	-0.02	-0.34	+0.06	-0.32
Russian President	-0.48	+0.31	+0.32	+0.18	-0.26	+0.44	-0.26
Media	+0.04	-0.43	-0.38	-0.52	-0.42	-0.62	-0.52
Church	-0.12	-0.26	-0.02	+0.02	-0.04	-0.32	-0.54

Source: authors calculations

*to assess youth’s trust in major political institutes, we calculated indices as a total of positive (yes, I trust; +1) and negative (no, I do not trust; -1) evaluations/100

Still, by 2020, youth’s trust had fallen not only in the President (from +0,44 in 2016 to -0,26) but also in all other political institutes, especially for the government and, interestingly, in the church (Table 2). We argue that a sharp drop in the orthodox church authority among young people may be due to the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church has always demonstrated quite a solid support for the government; therefore, an increase/decrease of trust in state institutes is in line with trust in the church.

From our data, we can conclude that there has been the increasing discontent among the younger generation of Russians with the existing agenda and a strive for change. It is also proved by independent sociological centres (e.g., Levada Center) and by a number of sociological studies exploring the problem of trust in governmental institutes (Latova, 2021).

To find out the exact reason of youth's discontent and what they would like to change, we measured, firstly, their social expectations, and secondly, their social ideals - desirable directions of the Russian society's development. We measured social expectations through students' estimations of how likely positive (e.g., successful economic and social reforms or innovative and scientific development) and negative (e.g., conflicts, deteriorating relations with other countries) events are to occur in the short term. Table 3 outlines the hierarchy of these events according to students' evaluations of their probability.

Tab. 3: Hierarchy of events which are most likely to occur in the short term in students' opinion

In your opinion, which events are most likely to occur in the following 3 years?	Students, % *	Ranking
Growing prices, inflation, decreasing standard of living	66	1
Ecological accidents, deteriorating environment	57	2
Political unrest, protests	48	3
Conflicts, deteriorating relations with other countries	41	4
Adoption of an authoritarian or totalitarian regime	20	5
Innovative and scientific development	19	6
Increasing informational transparency and social freedom	17	7
Increasing bureaucratization and formalism	16	8
Adoption of laws and programs to foster business and entrepreneurship development	12	9
Successful economic and social reforms	4	10

Source: authors calculations; The total number of responses exceeds 100% because a respondent could choose several options.

Table 3 shows that top positions of the hierarchy are occupied by negative social expectations and social phobias with the most important for students being expectations of the decreased standard of living and increased prices, deterioration of the ecology; in 2020, young people also held strong expectations of political unrest and protests in the country. Positive events were expected by an extremely low number of students; the most anticipated positive event is innovative and scientific development (expected by less than 20% of students), successful economic and social reforms (expected by only 4%).

The same question was addressed to young political activists (Table 4).

Tab. 4: Hierarchy of events which are most likely to occur in the short term in young political activists' opinion, average points*

In your opinion, which events are most likely to occur in the following 3 years?	Political Activists	
	Pro-governmental	Oppositional
Restriction of rights and liberties, adoption of a totalitarian regime	2.85	4.55
Deteriorating relations with other countries, isolation of Russia on the world stage	3.14	4.34
Growing unemployment, decreasing standard of living	2.89	4.28
Increasing number of conflicts in the society and protests in the country	3.07	4.10
Arriving at the social consensus	2.93	2.04
Innovative and scientific development	3.23	1.67
Growing freedom in the society, enforcing legal ground of the country	3.07	1.63
Economic growth	2.87	1.45

Source: authors calculations; In this survey, respondents evaluated the probability of events in points - from 1 to 5, where 1 implies the very low probability and 5 the very high one.

On comparing students' answers with political activists' ones, we found that all young people - irrespective of their political activity - evaluate the current economic and political course of the country rather negatively. Certainly, the most radical position is held by the politically proactive youth involved in oppositional parties; however, mostly negative expectations are also expressed by politically neutral young people and, to some extent, by pro-governmental

activists (Table 4). For oppositional activists, the major threat expected is the restriction of civil rights and liberties because they face this issue themselves, as opposed to other categories of the youth. What both pro-governmental and oppositional activists share is that they see a high probability of worsening relations with other countries and Russia's isolation on the world stage; however, we suppose that they have different reasons for that (which should be further verified, though).

If we are to compare social expectations of the youth with their social ideals (desirable directions of the social development), there is a distinct conflict between them - the high standard of living and democratic regime as priorities for development and the decreasing standard of living, restriction of civil rights and liberties, Russia's isolation and worsening relations with other countries as expectations. It is this conflict that predetermines the discontent of the Russian youth.

Tab. 5: Social ideals of different groups of youth, %

In your opinion, what our country should strive for in the future?	Students	Political Activists	
		Pro-governmental	Oppositional
High standard of living and economic well-being	75	62	73
Protection of civil rights, democratic regime	58	51	68
Equality and justice	45	48	32
Effective market economy	37	40	64
Tolerance, respect for minorities' rights	27	15	35
Remarkable development of high technologies and IT	27	44	64
Society worth being reckoned with by other countries	20	23	9
Strong political power	15	41	2
Promotion of humanistic values	15	17	30
High value of traditions and intergenerational experience	12	17	5

Source: authors calculations; The total number of responses exceeds 100% because a respondent could choose several options.

On comparing social ideals of students and activists' opinions, we can observe the following. Students and oppositional political activists share such values represented in their social ideals as economic well-being and the high standard of living (which seems to be the value which integrates all young people), tolerance, democracy, and human rights. What students have in common with pro-governmental activists is an orientation towards equality and justice, respect from other countries, and traditions. It is evident that there appears to be two directions of youth's political aspirations - firstly, quite a substantial share of liberally oriented young people, and secondly, more conservative ones with more ambiguous orientations, which demonstrate both a strive for economic well-being, socialist ideas of equality and justice, and imperial ambitions to be respected by other countries. We believe it is the first group that is going to be the object of the struggle over "winning hearts" between political powers (pro-governmental and oppositional). Also, strong political authority, traditions, and order actively promoted by the Russian state as values are not widely popular among the youth - apart from, probably, the most pro-governmental activists.

Conclusion

On analysing data about students and political activists, we conclude the following.

There is a certain growth in students' interest in politics amid their increasing discontent with the situation in the society and negative social expectations. Young people's pessimism most evidently extends to the economic development and civil rights and liberties in the country.

We identified a conflict between social ideals of youth and their expectations. The most popular benchmarks for the country's development cover the high standard of living, economic well-being, respect for human rights, democratic regime, and justice. At the same time, youth's expectations are mostly negative - growing prices, inflation, decreasing standard of living, political unrest and protests, conflicts, worsening relations with other countries.

The conflict predetermines the discontent and lower youth's trust in major political and social institutes. The monitoring found a significant decline in trust - in the President as well - expressed by students in 2020 as compared to 2016.

At present, values of strong state power, traditions, and order, which are so heavily promoted by the state, are not widely shared by the youth.

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