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# Generation Putin

## Values, orientations and political participation

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# Summary

In spring 2017, many young Russians took to the streets of major cities like Moscow and St Petersburg in protest against the authorities. Since then, the generation that has grown up after the fall of the Soviet Union has captured the imagination of the general public, within the country and abroad. Researchers and journalists have been drawn to 'Generation Putin,' the generation that has grown up and come of age during Putin's rule and now is gaining the right to vote and entering the political landscape. The Levada Center, an independent research organization based in Moscow, has conducted quantitative and qualitative sociological studies aimed at finding whether and how young Russians differ from the other generations. This paper presents the most significant differences according to data available from regular surveys and focus-group materials produced by the Levada Center.

# Generation Putin: Values, orientations and political participation

## The digital gap between generations

The most obvious important difference between young Russians (aged 18–35 years) and their older fellow countrymen concerns habits/patterns of internet usage and news consumption. Over the past decade, the usage of TV as a source of news in Russia has fallen sharply (now about 70% among the population over 18 years of age, down from over 90%), according to Levada Center surveys. During the same timeframe, use of the internet and social networks as news sources rose, from about 10% to more than 30% of the population over 18 years of age, and the overall share of frequent internet users doubled, to 70% of the population. This is part of a longer trend of growing internet audiences and decreasing numbers of TV viewers, with young Russians at the forefront. In Russia as in other countries, it was the young people who were the first to start using the internet and social networks. Recent surveys show at least a ten-fold gap between young and elderly Russians as regards internet use. Russians under 35 years of age now get their news primarily from various internet sources: websites, social networks and video blogs. By contrast, the remainder of the population, especially those living outside of big cities, still rely heavily on TV as their main source of information. The older the individual, the less likely is he or she to read or watch the news online.

In focus groups conducted after 2017, many young Russian living in big cities said that they almost never watch television; some do not even have a TV set at home. When asked to name ‘important public figures’, people under 25 rarely mention television personalities, although young people over 25 still watch television parallel to browsing the web. Young focus-group participants in Russian cities often say that TV is inconvenient because of the scheduling: on the internet you get everything you want immediately, when you want it. Further, focus group respondents across the country expressed the view that television shows only what the government decides to show: coverage of events is one-sided, TV decorates or hides things, and imposes perspectives favorable for the government. Some young respondents added that TV is not ‘cool’: it is suitable only for elderly people.

By contrast, young respondents find the internet useful because there they can find news not covered by television. Younger Russians feel confident about searching the web for news: on average, they trust the internet and social networks much more than does the older generation. People over 40 years of age are starting to explore the internet, but they tend to think about online sources as a ‘big garbage can’ and feel insecure about browsing the web.

These differences in patterns of news consumption mean that young Russians of today are less exposed to state propaganda. Moreover, when there is a new story that interests them, they tend to search for additional information online. In turn, young people have greater chances of getting a broader, more nuanced picture than that offered on the state-run TV channels, whose viewers tend to belong to the older generations.

## Video blogging

The rapid spread of social networks in Russia, and especially YouTube in recent years, has fostered a new phenomenon: videoblogging. According to data from the Levada Center, about one third of Russians watch videoblogs regularly. Predictably, the young people report watching video-blogs five or six times more often than do members of the older generation. YouTube has become a new platform for mostly young politicians, activists and journalists to gain national recognition, with access to thousands of viewers around the country. Audiences are predominantly young, as with YouTube more generally. New public figures can address their audiences directly, bypassing the filters of the state-controlled TV channels. Several of the new figures of authority who appeal to young Russians are very different from the traditional TV-anchors. Also in this regard, the gap between younger and older generations is widening.

Who are the important public figures online in today’s Russia? The well-known opposition politician Aleksei Navalnyi, founder of the Anti-Corruption Foundation, has 3 million subscribers to his YouTube channel. Journalist Yurii Dud, who made a name for himself interviewing popular musicians, actors and politicians, has 6.38 million YouTube subscribers to his channel, vDud. He has recently produced two documentaries, one about Gulag and one about the 2004 Beslan tragedy—topics rarely covered on Russian state-run TV-channels. In the Levada Center’s open-ended questions asking people to name the politicians and journalists that they trust the most, Navalnyi and Dud are regularly mentioned among the top 10–15 names, especially among respondents under 35 years of age.

There are several other new names as well. The liberal politician Ilya Yashin has 136,000 subscribers to his YouTube channel (Ilya Yashin. Glava munitsipalnogo okruga Krasnoselskii) Although he has been an active politician for some time, he entered the spotlight during the protests in Moscow in July and August 2019. He had been the head of Moscow's Krasnoselskii municipal district, but was in July 2019 disqualified from running in the September 2019 elections for the Moscow City Duma. After this, he became one of the most highly visible protest leaders, was detained by the police and spent more than a month in a police cell. Another frequently mentioned figure is Nikolai Bondarenko, a young communist leader from Saratov, a city on the Volga River, who became a popular video blogger (517,000 subscribe to his YouTube channel Dnevnik deputata), speaking out against injustice and corruption at the regional level. Surveys show that these public figures are popular predominantly among young internet users—which in turn indicates that young people in Russia are now increasingly exposed to criticism of the authorities.

## Positive attitudes towards the West

Another distinctive feature of young Russians that emerges from the Levada Center surveys concerns attitudes towards the West, with a sizeable generation gap. Young people generally have positive perceptions of the West; older people are generally negative. Only for a few months during the 2008 Russo–Georgian war and the early phase of the 2014 Russian–Ukrainian conflict did the mood of young Russians approach that of the rest of the population. Then it rather quickly it returned to the initial positive mode. Today roughly 60% of Russians below 35 years have positive attitudes to the European Union and the USA, as compared with only 30% of those over 65. There is also a notable urban–rural gap here: young city-dwellers are more positive towards the West than are young people from smaller localities.

Surveys show that the ongoing disagreements with the West have had little impact on the attractiveness of Western countries for young people in Russia. For them countries such as Germany or the United States are in many ways models for the development of Russia. Such ideas are unlikely to be founded in deeper knowledge about the culture or political structure of Western countries, but they are quite stable. For young Russians, Europe and the USA are symbols of a high standard of living, with social and legal protection of citizens. They are convinced that people in the West live comfortably, have access to high-class medicine and education, and are protected from arbitrariness. Western countries have preserved this image of an attractive, well-fed and calm life, despite current conflicts and television propaganda. The West is seen as a place of progress, technological innovations, and fashion trends in clothing, music, and cinema. As examples of successful, wealthy and socially oriented countries, Germany and the Scandinavian countries are frequently cited in focus groups with young people and in surveys (Volkov and Goncharov 2019b). For many young Russians the West has become an integral part of their experience, as they grew up with Hollywood, Disney, and now HBO, unlike older generations.

This image of prosperous and successful society in the West is in many ways only a reflection of what Russian citizens do not find in their own country. In most of these areas, Russia is perceived as lagging behind the West. Only Moscow is seen by young Russians as being close to Western standards—the rest of the country is not.

It is true that on Russian TV or in statements by Russian politicians, the West is sometimes represented as a source of 'alien values' such as lack of spirituality, sexual licentiousness, and homosexuality. However, most young Russians do not automatically accept such descriptions, unlike the older generations. In focus groups with younger Russian such criticisms are occasionally raised, but often they are laughed at by the others. According to Levada Center polls, young Russians on the whole express greater tolerance towards LGBT people (about 60% of young people have 'neutral or positive' attitudes, as contrasted with only about 30% among people over 60 years) (Levada Center 2019a). Based on discussions in focus groups, it seems as those under 25 are still shy and try to laugh the matter off, but young Russians closer to 30–35 years speak more seriously and favor equal rights for LGBT people. However, even among younger Russians there are many who still do not accept gays and lesbians.

## Openness to the world

Many young Russians are considering leaving the country for a better life elsewhere. About one third of Russian young people say they are willing to go and live abroad (among those from big cities this figure is even higher—about 45%, compared to less than 10% among members of older generations) (Levada Center 2017). Main motives for emigration are described as follows: 'better living conditions abroad', 'the unstable economic situation at home' and 'the desire to provide children with a decent future'.

Young Russians from big cities also mention the 'political situation inside the country' as a reason for leaving the country. On this point, big-city youth demonstrate another significant difference from the majority of the population: for the ordinary Russian citizen, political factors are not very important. Political grounds for emigration (the threat of political persecution, government pressure on business, various kinds of discrimination) are cited or formulated by only a small share of the population. The majority of Russians who express a wish to leave the country consider doing so for non-political, 'economic' reasons.

For many young Russians, Western countries are the main possible destinations. Survey data from 2016 show that France, Germany, and other EU countries as well as Switzerland and the USA were mentioned as the most attractive countries for emigration, as well as for temporary work—despite sharp confrontations between Russia and the West, mutual reproaches and sanctions. Significantly, almost no respondents mentioned moving to Turkey, Egypt or Thailand (although these are holiday destinations), nor China, India or Japan, though many respondents consider them as countries with which Russia needs to cooperate against the USA and Europe.

The significant share of young Russian who say they consider leaving the country does not automatically translate into high emigration figures, however. Regular sociological surveys show that the proportion of those actually preparing to leave for permanent residence abroad has remained under 1% of population. The desire to leave the country does not mean that one will actually do so: rather, young people consider emigration as one of many possible life trajectories (that is, it is not rejected immediately as seems to be the case with older generations, who could not even think of emigrating).

The wish of young Russians to go and live abroad should rather be interpreted as an indicator of the general openness of the new generation to the outside world. Today's young Russians are indeed better equipped for such openness. They report knowing at least one foreign language (usually English) three times more often than older generation: about one-third versus one-tenth. Many have already been abroad; among young Russians living in big cities the figure is almost two-thirds, compared to only one-third of the population of the county as a whole. And of course, they are more exposed to the Western culture. About one-third of Russians under 35 enjoy foreign pop music, hip-hop or techno, whereas the older generations prefer Soviet Estrada and traditional Russian songs. Western culture has indeed become an integral part of the identity of the young generation in Russia (Levada Center 2019b).

## Mixed feelings towards geopolitics

Generally positive feelings towards the West among Russian youth do not mean that they are necessarily opposed to a more aggressive Russian foreign policy. Immediately after the Russian annexation of Crimea, the outbreak of war in eastern Ukraine and the crash of the MH-17—at the peak of the confrontation between Russia and the West—the attitudes of young people approached those of the older population. Even today, after the attitudes of young Russians towards the West have become more positive again, not much remorse is expressed about the county's foreign policy in 2014. The majority of young people (although less in big cities) still agree that Russia should position itself as a 'great power', and do not regret the annexation of the Crimea.

As is the case with the population in general, many young people would welcome an improvement in relations between Russia and the West. However, this does not translate into a desire for Russia to concede its international position, apologize, or seek compromise with Western countries. In focus groups with young people from big cities it was a recurrent

opinion that Russia should stay 'on its own,' 'as a separate space,' and remain independent of international structures. This isolationist trend cannot be due entirely to state propaganda, and probably has its roots in the opinion common among Russian young people that in the West 'no one is waiting for us,' 'they won't welcome us.' Further rapprochement between Russia and the West seems hindered by widespread feelings of Russia's backwardness and weakness, which impede equality in the relationship between Russia and the West. And if equality is not possible, it is considered better to stay apart.

## Disillusionment with the authorities

Another interesting change now evident within the young generation in Russia is diminishing optimism about the political system. This trend, characteristic of Russian society as a whole, has unfolded against the background of five years of decreasing living standards, and the introduction of the pension reform in mid-2018. However, the specific disillusionment among Russian youth has other sources as well.

Until summer 2018, Russian young people had for many years shown the highest rates of support for the political system. This is now changing: Russians aged 25 to 35 years are today among the groups most critical to the authorities. In 2019, focus groups have included discussions with young people about their demands to the authorities. Young respondents mention the pension reform, which has affected their parents in particular. On the whole, young people express increasing concerns about economic problems and the future of the country.

Many young people are displeased with recent restrictions on the Internet, such as blocking Telegram (Pavel Durov, the creator of this messenger, is a role model to many young Russians), criminal charges for reposts, and bans on certain material on the internet. Indeed, such bans look both unnecessary and hypocritical, as they can readily be circumvented. Prohibiting films and criticizing rap music also make the authorities less popular among young people. Members of the ageing political class look increasingly passé to the youth of today.

Further, the police crackdown on the 2019 protests in Moscow may have had a significant impact on public opinion, especially on the young people who were following the events through the social networks. In focus groups in large Russian cities at the end of the summer 2019, young people repeatedly mentioned the case of Dariya Sosnovskaya, who was deliberately punched in the stomach by a police officer; one of the videos capturing this moment has 700,000 views on YouTube. Surveys show that even for people not interested in politics and not inclined to sympathize with the opposition, such measures taken by the police were a sign that ‘something has gone wrong’ in Russia.

The protests in Moscow were perceived by many members of the younger generation as confirmation that the authorities ‘do not want to let anyone in,’ ‘they think only about themselves,’ and that ‘the people are considered second-rate’ by those in power. This contrasts with the opinions of elderly Russians, many of whom were following the TV coverage of the Moscow events, and eventually disapproved of the protesters. In other words, the story of the summer protests and their dispersal became a point of further alienation from the power of Russian society, especially by its active and young part.

## Youth as a driver of change?

As the surveys show, Russian youth differ noticeably from the older generations in many ways. Politically, however, this can lead to changes only in the long run. The influence of the internet and social networks on the political attitudes of youth is limited by their generally low interest in politics. The youngest follow the political news, discuss political issues with colleagues and acquaintances only half as often as older age group (people over 55 years old); they vote in elections three times less often. In Russia, as elsewhere, young people use the Internet primarily for entertainment and communication with friends.

Interest in serious issues and political participation usually awakens around the age of 30, the point at which young people begin to live independently and find that they must solve problems on their own. Until then, many uncritically borrow ideas about political and social issues from older adults, such as relatives and teachers. In everything related to socio-political issues, the internet and social networks prove to be tools for the future, when today's young people grow older and become more interested in analyzing what is going on. At present, their political views are still in the making. Young people who are interested in politics constitute a minority within their own age group—probably not a specifically Russian feature, but a more universal human characteristic. Further, in today's ageing Russian society, persons aged 18–35 comprise only about one-fifth of the population. Younger Russians today are relatively few in number, and most of them are still politically inactive.

Further deterioration in the economic situation may deepen the emerging estrangement of the young generation from the authorities. When resources are scarce, one has to prioritize. To those in power, the loyalty of the older generation—more numerous and more politically active—is far more important than the approval of the young people who do not usually participate in politics. This means that the authorities can largely dismiss the views of youth—for now. However, in such a situation, the interests of today's youth and the current government will diverge further; young people will increasingly feel estranged. It is only in 10–15 years, when today's young Russians have matured and acquired an interest in politics, that they may finally influence their development of their country.

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