

DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

ADRIFT FROM POLITICS

Youth in Russia before the War

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Youth has been a key target of Russian politics for nearly two decades. Significant resources are mobilised to shape what young people think politically and their social values.



In late 2021, young Russians clearly expressed how disillusioned they are with their country's politics, the little value they attach to protests and how isolated they think Russia is internationally.



Since February 2022, young people are to be convinced that the »special military operation« is aimed at Russia's protection and Ukraine's denazification. However, young Russians ARE among those who have left the country in disproportionately high numbers since the outbreak of the full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022.

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FOREWORD

This study is published at a time when the long-term outcome of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is not yet clear – what will be the long-lasting consequences of this war for Ukraine, but also for the rest of Europe and Russia? Undoubtedly, however, this war will be a watershed for the youth of Russia, the subject of this study, changing the course of their country and their lives for decades to come.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), in cooperation with the Russian independent polling institute Levada Centre, already published a large-scale study on the goals and values of Russian youth in 2020. Our key findings back then already showed a youth that feels increasingly alienated not only from Europe and the political West, but also from its own government. Political disinterest and distrust of most institutions were widespread, while at the same time there was also a higher approval of democracy compared to the population at large.

In 2022, the FES wanted to repeat this study – simultaneously with studies in many other countries in Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus. How have the two years of the pandemic affected the youth, amidst disputed pandemic management in Russia, increasing isolation from the West, intensifying repression of civil society, and increasingly aggressive rhetoric towards Russia's neighbouring states, first and foremost Ukraine? Has disinterest and discontent increased? Has the generation gap widened? Or do young people agree with the government's course, given almost 20 years of growing propaganda?

February 24th of 2022 has made this study impossible. However, eight focus groups have already been conducted in October 2021 in two cities, St Petersburg and Samara. We decided to publish these findings, although they were only planned as a first step for this larger study, because they allow valuable insight into the thinking of Russia's youth just before the outbreak of the war. It could be one of the last focus groups for a long time conducted under reasonably free conditions.

In this study, Félix Krawatzek paints a picture of youth strongly influenced by propaganda, but still with a more complex set of understandings and opinions towards the state than many might expect. We hope that the study can contribute to understanding the mood in this country that may have facilitated the war. While on the one hand polls show that younger people are more likely to be against this war than older people, approval still seems to be high. And those who are against it often feel powerless and do not know how to oppose it. This Russia is marked by an increasing alienation between state and society, but also between generations. It is therefore particularly important to understand the younger generation, because, we must prepare ourselves to speak with this and the following generations again in a different Russia in the future. Although it is difficult to imagine now, this dialog and understanding remain essential in order to build a common understanding of a safe and peaceful Europe in the future.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Youth has been a key target of Russian politics for nearly two decades. Significant resources are invested in attempts to shape what young people think politically and the social values they express. In the same vein, as part of the current war against Ukraine, young people are to be convinced that the »special military operation« is necessary and aimed at Russia's protection and Ukraine's denazification. While many young people echo state propaganda, young Russians can also be counted among those who have left the country in disproportionately high numbers since the outbreak of the full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022.
- This report studies the political and social attitudes of young people expressed in eight focus groups conducted with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in October 2021. The more than 60 young people who participated in these discussions shed important light on views that exist among the younger generation and its attitudes towards Russian politics, helping us to think about the social and political atmosphere that may have facilitated the escalation of the war against Ukraine. To what extent do young people support or feel alienated by their government?
- The focus group discussions clearly demonstrate how disillusioned young Russians are about their political system. They feel neither involved in nor represented by politics. Rather, young people express a sense of betrayal, a sentiment for which Covid-19 has acted as a catalyst. Even if debates over the management of the pandemic have been sidelined by the war, they have contributed to more critical thinking about the Russian state.
- The sense of political disillusionment expressed by young people extends beyond the regime in place, affecting the very process of politics. Politics is not trusted, and young people in the focus groups fail to identify viable alternatives to the politics in place. Since they no longer have the impression that political change could bring improvements to their lives, young Russians have come to passively accept the status quo.
- Young Russians feel increasingly isolated from the West and particularly from Europe. Many state that they are not part of the European civilisation and speak about gaps in values and moral orientation. Parallel to this, Europe has become an abstract idea, a far-distant place to which, already by the end of 2021, young Russians no longer felt they belonged.
- The generally high level of trust in the military is echoed in the focus groups, in which the army is seen as a trustworthy institution, one that deserves to be honoured, since it is responsible for the protection of the country.
- In light of the little that public mobilisation has achieved over the last few years, the focus group participants frequently dismiss protests as being vain. They mention in particular the fate of Alexei Navalny. Moreover, protesters are accused of egoistically pursuing their own goals rather than the common good.
- The state has depoliticised large swathes of the younger generation, who, as a result, find it pointless to get politically involved. Across all focus groups, young Russians are united in their view that they are powerless to influence their country's development. They express a sense of helplessness when talking about the stream of events that surround them, and the larger political sphere is felt to be beyond their reach, a state of affairs that has only become more critical since February 2022.

YOUTH IN RUSSIA BEFORE THE WAR

INTRODUCTION

The young Russians who took to the streets to express their support for the opposition politician Alexei Navalny or who opposed the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 make headlines in Western and independent Russian media. Given the disruptive potential of youth, the Russian state has developed an increasingly coercive set of youth policies that aims to convert young people into loyal supporters of their country's status quo. The ideological control of teaching at all levels, a host of youth organisations, and the active involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church in questions of education are the most significant signs of the current attention the Russian leadership grants to its younger population.

This publication is part of the FES International Youth Studies series. The FES has conducted numerous youth studies across the globe since 2009. As of 2018, Youth Studies concentrate on Southern Eastern Europe, Russia, Central Asia, Eastern Central Europe, and the Baltic States. Additional studies are planned for the Middle East and Northern Africa, as well as for specific nations around the world. The International Youth Studies are a flagship project of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in its efforts to research, shape, and strengthen the democracy of the future.

This perspective explores the social and political attitudes of young people before the full-scale war against Ukraine made such research in Russia nearly impossible. It is based on an analysis of eight focus group discussions conducted among young people aged between 14 and 29 in the two cities of St. Petersburg and Samara in late October 2021.¹ Each group had eight participants, equally split between the sexes. A native Russian speaker moderated the groups based on a very detailed questionnaire developed by a team of researchers in close consultation with the FES. The questionnaire itself included prompts for the moderator to stimulate the discussion if required and a number of visuals were used to facilitate the discussions with young people. Each of the discussions opened with an exchange over how

young people assess the management of the coronavirus in their country to then explore the perception of domestic politics and the state of democracy, social inequality, views on the Soviet Union's collapse, and belonging to Europe. The group discussions were fully transcribed, then coded and analysed in MAXQDA using an extensive coding scheme designed by the researchers. The following discussion contextualises the focus groups in their wider political and social context in Russia.

A BRIEF POLITICAL AWAKENING DURING COVID-19

The management of the Covid-19 pandemic has challenged countries across the globe. The pandemic changed everyone's lives, irrespective of age or income; but it was also a moment that saw a rise in the level of political and social engagement, forcing people to take matters into their own hands. The disapproval of the Russian government's management of the pandemic was a theme connecting all focus group discussions. According to a Levada Center poll conducted at the same time as the focus groups, a third of the Russian population considered the pandemic to be one of the main problems facing the country (although inflation, poverty, and corruption were regarded as being even more pressing).²

When asked about the pandemic, focus group participants frequently mentioned that they were both concerned and afraid; only a few stated that they were proud of the way it had been handled by Russian leaders. Indeed, the pandemic has led to an increase in the already high levels of distrust in political institutions. Reflecting this lack of trust, several focus group participants were convinced that official statistics were being falsified, which only increased their critical stance towards state authorities in general.³ This is illustrated by the statement of an 18-year-old man in St. Petersburg, »I believe that the number of deaths was underestimated compared to the real figures. There were decrees from the re-

¹ A complementary reading for the present analysis is a FES youth study on Russia, drawing on survey data from 2019 (<https://www.fes.de/jugendstudien-russland>), and a comparative analysis including youth in Ukraine and Belarus (<https://www.fes.de/en/beltraege/comparative-study-youth-in-russia-ukraine-and-belarus>).

² Problemy obshchestva, Levada-Center, 21.10.2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/10/21/problemy-obshchestva-2/>

³ In Russia, Experts Are Challenging Official Pandemic Figures as Being Too Low, The Washington Post, 17.10.2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-covid-count-fake-statistics/2021/10/16/b9d47058-277f-11ec-8739-5cb6aba30a30_story.html

gional authorities that, when, for example, someone died of coronavirus in hospital, the cause of death should be put down as being flu. The cause of death was simply changed, especially for elderly people. The death rate from pneumonia is record-breaking.»

In Russia, as elsewhere, the government ordered school closures and distance learning, the precise implementation of which had to be managed by regional authorities. Even if the OECD finds that Russian schools, teachers, and students were comparatively well prepared to adapt to the digital education environment,⁴ the focus group participants unanimously criticised the way they had been treated since the start of the pandemic, complaining that the interests of young people have been ignored throughout the pandemic, an impression that was restated across the different age groups among participants in both Russian cities.

The pandemic has widened the gap between the political elite and the rest of society, contributing to the low vaccine acceptance rate. About one-third of Russians refuse to be vaccinated; the vaccination rate overall is at 50 per cent.⁵ In the group discussions, a distrust of the newly developed vaccines was prevalent. Young people were also less likely to accept vaccination, believing they did not run a high risk of an infection leading to serious complications, »It's not for us, it's for the pensioners. Even if we get sick, we'll cope with it easily. Why should we vaccinate ourselves, inject ourselves with something?«⁶

Mistrust of the authorities and their highly politicised vaccination campaign trumps fear of the virus. As a result, the decision of whether or not to accept a vaccine becomes a matter of political creed rather than of private medical choice. Such politicisation of private decisions is a common feature in the lives of many young people in Russia, reflecting increasing attempts by authoritarian states to control the everyday reality of their citizens. In the words of a 21-year-old woman in Samara, »No one trusts the government anymore, [...] because we don't have a single doctor in the state, on any [TV] channels, who is trustworthy.«

ISOLATION FROM THE WEST

While the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has brought Russia's isolation from the West to a new height, concerns about Russia's position on the international stage had already been expressed by the focus group participants in 2021. At that point, an open conflict with NATO was among the highest concerns, although it was not considered a prob-

able scenario.⁷ Be that as it may, isolation from the West has not necessarily led to greater internal criticism of Russia's political system; instead, the antagonism with the West has become a potential resource for domestic legitimacy.

Concerns over a potential escalation of international conflicts were particularly pronounced among older participants, whereas younger participants were more reticent about discussing international politics. Especially the group ages 25 through 29 in St. Petersburg brought up the situation in Donbas without prompting. A 29-year-old maths teacher observes that, »The citizens of Donbas were abandoned [to their fate] and have lived in this nightmare since 2014«. A 27-year-old nanny agrees with him, as do, in the course of the discussion, nearly all participants in this focus group, who finally come to the conclusion that, without Russian interference, there would be, »all these fascist initiatives [in Ukraine]«. The maths teacher further claims that Crimea would have followed the Donbas scenario had it not been incorporated into Russia – a statement opposed only by one participant, a 29-year-old who had shown a high level of interest in politics and voiced his concern over Russia's military activities in neighbouring countries on several occasions.

For some of the ordinary Russians that participated in the focus groups in late 2021, the use of the term »fascism« when talking about Ukraine had clearly become pervasive. Although the discussions in the groups show that young people operate with rather vague categories and interpretive schemata in their discussions of international politics, statements that align with the state propaganda are made openly in the semi-public setting of a focus group.

The fight against »Nazis« in Ukraine has become the key theme of the so-called special military operation. However, this language has long been used by parts of the Russian political class. Since the annexation of Crimea, the semantics of the Great Patriotic War have come to accompany statements about the government in Kyiv, serving the purpose of Russian identity construction.⁸ Such historically charged language was often encountered among focus group participants, even if it only became explicit in one group discussion.

FAR FROM EUROPE

With the escalation of the war against Ukraine in February 2022, the previous fissure between Russia and Europe seemingly became a civilisational gap. But whom do young Russians hold responsible for the separation of the two regions and what alternatives do they envisage? Although it seems tempting to associate the younger population – which grew

⁴ Country Note: Russian Federation, OECD, 2020, <https://www.oecd.org/education/Russian-Federation-coronavirus-education-country-note.pdf>

⁵ Koronavirus i lichnye kontakty, Levada-Center, 21.03.2022, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/03/21/koronavirus-i-lichnye-kontakty/>

⁶ Lyudi dezorijentirovani, Levada-Center, 25.10.2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/10/25/lyudi-dezorijentirovani-sotsiolog-denis-volkov-o-tom-pochemu-rossiyane-vse-eshhe-ne-she-privivatsya/>

⁷ »Esli zavtra vojna«: Kak vliyaet na nas novostnoj shum pro vtorzheniye, Levada-Center, 24.11.2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/11/24/esli-zavtra-vojna-kak-vliyaet-na-nas-novostnoj-shum-pro-vtorzhenie/>

⁸ McGlynn, Jade. 2018. »Historical framing of the Ukraine Crisis through the Great Patriotic War: Performativity, cultural consciousness and shared remembering«. *Memory Studies* 13(6):1058–1080.

up after the breakdown of the Soviet Union and is more mobile – with more favourable attitudes towards Europe, young Russians have been exposed for more than a decade to an increasingly intense programme of patriotic education.⁹ Indeed, control of universities has expanded over the last few years, only to increase with the full-scale war against Ukraine.

For many young Russians, Europe acts as a benchmark of cultural development, and therefore also as a source of (increasingly distant) expectations. When the focus group participants were asked to write down their associations with Europe, their overwhelmingly positive picture centred on better economic structures, a higher standard of living, respect for individual freedoms, justice, and tolerance. Only two participants associated Europe with sanctions, and another two mentioned the tense international climate. In other words, for young Russians, Europe overwhelmingly represents a nearby utopia, but one that their own country cannot be part of.

In addition, Europe triggers a host of non-political associations revolving around its architecture, museums, and history. This depoliticised view turns Europe into an abstract object of cultural nostalgia that relates more to tourism than to European political values and institutions. On the basis of this second set of associations, Europe represents for present-day Russia what Greece represented for the Romans.

»EVERYTHING IS DIFFERENT
THERE [IN EUROPE]. WE'RE ON A
DIFFERENT PART OF THE PLANET,
LIKE A SEPARATE PART
OF THE WORLD.«

The sense of a divide between Russia and Europe that transpires in the course of the focus group discussions mirrors the findings of a Levada Center poll conducted in early 2021, in which, compared with a similar poll carried out in 2008, almost twice as many Russians believed that Russia was not a European country.¹⁰ It is remarkable that the most pro-European age group is 55 or older. Among the oldest respondents, 58 per cent state that Russia is not a European country, compared with 71 per cent among respondents ages 18 through 39.¹¹ This sentiment is also illustrated by a 17-year-old student in Samara, who comments, »I don't know their [Europeans] language, but I'm still able to translate. But I still can't communicate with them because of our different mentalities – basically, everything is different.« And according to a 21-year-old participant in St. Petersburg, »Everything is different there [in Europe]. We're on a different part of the planet, like a separate part of the world.«

In attempting to explain the division, young Russians often refer to history, a reference that gives this division an essentialist, enduring character. A 17-year-old participant in Samara, who argues with an abstract, general view of history, states, »I don't feel like we are a part of Europe, because Russia is under some kind of dome. This dome is what distinguishes us from Europe quite strongly. And we also took different developmental paths. And maybe this is the reason why Russia and Europe are separated. They are different, and this has a long history, reaching back to antiquity – and the division has probably only increased over time.«

The memory politics of World War II has become a line of division between Europe and Russia, all the more so since Putin's third presidential term beginning in 2012, when the re-writing of history and an antagonistic historical discourse came to dominate the political landscape in Russia. A 17-year-old participant in St. Petersburg states to that effect, »For our older generations, most of the European countries participated in World War II against the USSR. For most of the older population, who are the more influential part of the electorate, [...] Europe is considered to be the enemy.« This participant was not especially political, but he still expressed an intention to leave Russia for good.

»WE HAVE LOST ALL
OUR FRIENDS NOW,
AND THE ONLY ALLY
THAT IS LEFT IS BELARUS.«

The gulf separating Russia and Europe is one that the participants are clearly aware of. Young Russians emphasise that their country is isolated in the international arena, and that Russia has even damaged its relations with former Soviet countries. Aware of their isolation, young people are left with a feeling of abandonment, and even the very young focus group participants, those ages 14 and 15, remark, »We have lost all our friends now, and the only ally that is left is Belarus.«

»IT'S HARD TO BE
A PART OF A COLLECTIVE
IN WHICH YOU DON'T FEEL
PARTICULARLY LIKED.«

»THEY CONSIDER US TO BE
A THIRD WORLD COUNTRY
ECONOMICALLY AND REGARDING
HUMAN RIGHTS, ETC.«

⁹ Sanina, Anna. 2017. Patriotic Education in Contemporary Russia: Sociological Studies in the Making of the Post-Soviet Citizen. Stuttgart: ibidem.

¹⁰ Proshchay, Evropa?, Levada-Center, 16.04.2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/04/16/proshhaj-evropa/>

¹¹ Rossiya I Evropa, Levada-Center, 18.03.2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/03/18/rossiya-i-evropa-2/>

The feeling that Russia has been betrayed, or at least abandoned, by Europe is a feature of all the focus group discussions, and responsibility for the division between Europe and Russia is attributed primarily to Europe. As a 23-year-old student in Samara says, »It's hard to be a part of a collective

in which you don't feel particularly liked.« Despite having a largely positive view of Europe, she also mentions a sense of distance, a sentiment that is not unique to the city of Samara; participants in St. Petersburg also expressed a feeling of being different, a sentiment that they took to be the result of Europe treating Russia as an underdeveloped region. An 18-year-old participant, who thinks that things in Russia are generally going in the wrong direction, still argues, »Most of the countries in Western and Central Europe think that Russia is a Third World country. This is their attitude, just like in America and the whole western hemisphere. This is a result of almost a hundred years of propaganda from their side as well.« And in the same group, a 19-year-old participant summarises, »They treat us like backward natives.« The only pride that a 20-year-old could still find was in scientific research, »They consider us to be a Third World country economically and regarding human rights, etc. But not in the scientific sphere. We're scientifically advanced.«

An unemployed 19-year-old participant, for whom the country was generally developing in a bad direction (expressing, for instance, a very harsh verdict on Russia's management of the pandemic), and who had positive associations with Europe, still claimed to feel distant from Europe. In the group discussions in Samara, he complains that European countries, »are always dissatisfied with something: they don't like Putin, then they don't like the vaccine, then there are some problems with Navalny.«

Since February 2022, Russia has turned into the existential Other and the most imminent threat to Europe. Whereas the first two post-Soviet decades were characterised by Russia's involvement as a potential partner in »European politics«, with Putin's gradual consolidation of power the incompatibility of the distinct Russian ideological and geopolitical path has become evident. Also for many of the Russians in our focus groups, a modernised Russia acting as a partner in Europe no longer seems to be an option or even a priority. And just as among large swathes of Russian society, the idea of a Europe stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok has become conspicuously absent in European political discourse too.

POLITICAL DISILLUSIONMENT

President Putin derives a part of his legitimacy by distancing himself from the era of the »wild 1990s.«¹² Institutes such as the Boris Yeltsin Presidential Center in Yekaterinburg strive to provide a more nuanced picture and to show that the trope of the »wild 1990s« ignores, for instance, the multifaceted culture that also characterised that era. But among the participants in our discussions, none of whom had any personal experience of this period, the distinction created by the current regime can be prominently encountered. Tellingly, a 29-year-old builder in St. Petersburg argues, »You could say that, compared to the 1990s, everything that is going on today, and

that even went on in the early 2000s, illustrates that things are changing in a positive direction. There are negative things; but still, I believe things are developing in a positive direction.«

»NO MATTER WHAT IS BEING SAID,
IN THE 1990s AND EARLY 2000s,
OUR COUNTRY HAD MORE
FREEDOMS BECAUSE PEOPLE
COULD SPEAK MORE FREELY.«

Such overt approval of the regime was nevertheless an exception among the focus group participants. In contrast, a 16-year-old girl in St. Petersburg states that Russians enjoy less freedom today than they did in the early post-Soviet years, »No matter what is being said, in the 1990s and early 2000s, our country had more freedoms because people could speak more freely.«

These two competing assessments of the current political regime and its narrative about the past shed light on the polarisation within Russian society, which is as strongly felt among young people as it is in the general population. A small share of the younger population is satisfied with and loyal to the authorities, not shying away from stating this openly among peers. And yet there is a sizeable part that has withdrawn from politics into the private realm, passively accepting the political status quo. The focus groups convey how disillusioned young people are with their political system. As a result, they are also more likely to perceive the »special military operation« and the resulting restrictions on human rights in Russia as catastrophic.¹³

Last autumn, the participants openly discussed shortcomings in infrastructure such as roads and public buildings, the legal system, the state of education, structural economic problems, political restrictions for citizens, and the lack of political choice. These problems were directly linked to Vladimir Putin's presidency. Nevertheless, a Levada Center poll carried out at the same time as the focus groups found that 32 per cent of young Russians ages 18 through 24 wanted to see Putin retain his presidency after the end of his current mandate in 2024, compared with 57 per cent of respondents age 55 and above.¹⁴

»PEOPLE CAN BE IMPRISONED
FOR NO REASON AT ALL.«

Describing their dysfunctional political system, young people immediately mention problems related to corruption. A

¹² Malinova, Olga. 2021. »Framing the Collective Memory of the 1990s as a Legitimation Tool for Putin's Regime«. *Problems of Post-Communism* 68(5): 429–441.

¹³ Banderovskaya shavka, *The New Times*, 05.05.2022, <https://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/212109>

¹⁴ Vladimir Putin, *Levada-Center*, 11.10.2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/10/11/vladimir-putin-10/>

16-year-old in Samara states, »Well, most of the people higher up in our government want more money and power, that's for sure.« Young people perceive the political system as self-serving and arbitrary. In the words of a 14-year-old in St. Petersburg, »People can be imprisoned for no reason at all. Different people might get different sentences for the same crime. People can be sentenced and get the same prison term for insulting religion, singing a song on the internet, or murder.«

However, the political climate in Russia, which is currently significantly more restrictive as a result of the full-scale war against Ukraine, is such that people see no space for an alternative. A 27-year-old woman in Samara argues, »Putin has been in power since 1999, and it's no secret to anyone that there's no alternative. [...] This is a huge disadvantage for our country, because, even with such a seemingly ideal portrait of the president, no one else is given the opportunity to express themselves and is allowed on the stage.« And a 23-year-old participant states that, »Any opposition is now being choked in our country, and we ordinary citizens have no choice.«

Under these conditions, the entire political process assumes the character of a theatrical performance. For young people, ritualised acts of participation such as voting or the annual press conference, provide merely a façade of democracy. An awareness of the theatrical dimension increases suspicion of even legitimate performative elements and corrupts the added value the performance itself might have. A 24-year-old woman in Samara remarks, »In the press conferences that are held directly with the president, the questions are staged before being asked. And if, God forbid, someone asks an unforeseen question, that person is immediately disconnected.«

»BUT IT IS AN ELECTION WITHOUT A CHOICE..«

Elections are largely dismissed as a failure to express the public will, since no space is given to alternative political voices. A statement by a 25-year-old woman in Samara is indicative of the prevailing mood across all focus groups, »But it is an election without a choice. That is to say, there were many videos immediately after the elections that all demonstrated that the results were rigged, that the majority of people voted for a completely different party, and not for United Russia. But again, in the end, United Russia holds the dominant position and will continue to pass its own laws, which basically go against the reality of people's lives. Some steps are being taken to help people, and everything else, but these are so minuscule that they basically don't provide any help at all.« Rare are the young people who believe that they have a genuine political choice. Nevertheless, this view is expressed by two participants in the very young age group, probably reflecting indoctrination at school.

The participants in the focus groups related their lack of trust in politicians to the 2020 constitutional amendments, which established several social and cultural norms and, following a proposal made by the famous Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova in March of that year, reset the limit of Putin's presidential term. The amendments allow Putin to re-run at the end of his current tenure in 2024, thereby revoking an earlier promise to limit the presidency to two terms only and to transfer power from the Kremlin to the Duma. The constitutional amendments would allow Putin to stay in power until 2036, when he will be 84 years old.

What young people retain from this episode is that one cannot trust statements made by politicians, as these statements have an extremely short shelf life. A 20-year-old man in Samara remarks, »When Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin took office, he said that he wouldn't change the constitution. This is the government lying again. Of course, it's nonsense.« While another 25-year-old woman, also in Samara, describes the constitutional changes as »the biggest mistake«, one that goes against his, »promise not to make these amendments«.

»I WISH WE HAD A PARLIAMENT IN OUR COUNTRY.«

Despite the intense state propaganda that they are exposed to, young people are twice as likely to say that things in their country are going in the wrong rather than in the right direction. The majority of the regime-critical participants want a structural change in their political system. A 16-year-old in Samara, for example, states, »I wish we had a parliament in our country [...] to limit the power of a single person. [...] This would eliminate the possibility of corruption. Well, corruption will always exist, but there would be much less.« Especially better educated young Russians would agree with such statements – and they are also more likely to have left the country after February 2022.

The participants also criticised the state-controlled media, which had turned into a propaganda machine for the Kremlin even before the escalation of the war against Ukraine. Participants in both cities criticise the lack of free expression, and a 25-year-old woman in Samara mentions the »very strong censorship« of TV, radio, and newspapers, »We have very few outlets where free authors can express themselves. In most cases, however, they are killed, removed, intimidated, and people don't write about what happens really.« Therefore, more than 50 per cent of Russians under 40 have turned to online outlets such as *Meduza*, *Mediazona*, or *The Village* to access political information – meanwhile, 70 per cent of Russians ages 18 through 24 rely on social networks such as VKontakte, YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook for political news.¹⁵

¹⁵ Rossiyskiy medialandschaft – 2021, Levada-Center, 05.08.2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/08/05/rossijskij-medialandschaft-2021/>

With the severe media restrictions accompanying the war against Ukraine, a VPN client is required to access most independent online media, which is not something young people routinely have access to. A Levada Center poll from April 2022 found that just over 50 per cent of young people aged between 18 and 24 and 64 per cent for the 25-to-39 age group rarely or never use VPN clients.¹⁶ Especially in the dogmatic media landscape that has developed as a result of the war against Ukraine, accessing independent political information demands significant efforts, and the information, if found, will be profoundly at odds with the patriotic messages circulating in state-approved outlets.

»I THINK THE MAIN PROBLEM IS THAT THE CONNECTION WITH THE NEW GENERATION IS LOST.«

The disconnection that young people feel with regard to the political system has an important generational component. The challenge of generational renewal is an existential one in every personalist regime, as the natural elite replenishment that one expects in democratic systems does not occur. Rather, generational change constitutes an existential threat to the system in place – in the eyes of the young generation represented in our focus groups, only older people participate in elections, and their main objective in doing so is to retain a sense of stability in a rapidly changing world. A 21-year-old woman in St. Petersburg expresses a feeling that is pervasive across all groups, »I think the main problem is that the connection with the new generation is lost. They [the government] aren't trusted. And it's getting worse.«

SYMBOLIC RESPECT FOR THE MILITARY

Different surveys confirm that the Russian army enjoys one of the highest trust ratings in society. The military has significant symbolic legitimacy, even if urban youth, in particular, tries to avoid being drafted. Young Russians – even those who openly criticise President Putin – reiterate how important it is for Russia to have a strong army for protection from external threats. The militarisation of Russian society began prior to the reign of the current president, but it has taken on a new dimension since 2012, with a more militarised patriotic youth education and the increasingly prominent display of military hardware during parades. An idealised and untarnished view of the military as a force for the protection of Russia has become an integral part of public discourse.

A 17-year-old student in Samara expresses the belief that the army »protects us«, even if he states that overall things

in Russia are going in the wrong direction, and a regime-critical girl of the same age in St. Petersburg agrees, commenting that other countries »should be scared«, so as not to attack Russia. The ability to defend oneself and high military spending are valued among a majority of the participants, especially the youngest, a finding that corresponds to the militarisation that has occurred in the educational system.

»NOW THE STATE IS ONLY ENGAGED IN FOREIGN POLICY, UNFORTUNATELY, AND OUR AUTHORITIES IGNORE HOW BAD THE PEOPLE FEEL – AND THEY DO FEEL BAD, SMALL BUSINESSES FEEL BAD, AND EVERYONE FEELS BAD.«

The picture becomes more nuanced among the slightly older Russians in the focus groups, who are more likely to disagree with the need for high military spending. Having more personal experience with the everyday lack of resources in Russia, they feel that money used for the military would be better spent on economic development and in other areas of domestic politics. A 24-year-old woman in Samara complains, »Now the state is only engaged in foreign policy, unfortunately, and our authorities ignore how bad the people feel – and they do feel bad, small businesses feel bad, and everyone feels bad. And they are only engaged in going somewhere, proving something to someone. Prove to your country, prove to your people that you should be in power; don't just prove how cool and tough you are in the international arena, so that everyone is afraid of you. Everyone already knows that you're cool. But help your country!« Nevertheless, in the same group, a 23-year-old woman maintains that Russia needs to preserve its status as a »powerful state on the world stage«, which requires significant military spending.

THE DANGER AND FUTILITY OF PROTEST

Young people are the most critical segment of Russian society, but when does criticism translate into public activity? Young people remain a key constituency in increasingly risky protests; the last large-scale mobilisations, related to Alexei Navalny, for example, involved a disproportionately high number of young people.¹⁷ Navalny's revelations of large-scale corruption around the former president Dmitry Medvedev in the film *He is not Dimon to you* in 2017 brought a large number of students onto the streets; and in January 2021, when Navalny was arrested immediately upon returning to Russia after recovering from being poisoned in August 2020, young people once again took to the streets: a

¹⁶ Internet, sotsialnye seti i VPN, Levada-Center, 11.10.2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2022/04/08/internet-sotsialnye-seti-i-vpn/>

¹⁷ Privedet li smena pokoleniy k modernizatsii strany, Levada-Center, 25.11.2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/11/25/molodezh-ot-moskvy-do-bryanska-privedet-li-smena-pokoleniy-k-modernizatsii-strany/>

mobilisation against arbitrary state violence rather than a demonstration of genuine support for Navalny's political programme.¹⁸

Navalny's arrest sent shockwaves through Russian youth, who feared becoming victims of arbitrary police violence themselves. A 23-year-old in Samara remarks that the police are simply »out of control«.

In an autocracy such as Russia, the symbols that are prevalent during and after a protest gain great importance. Sneakers, rubber ducks, white posters, and nail polish have all become symbols of resistance. Young people who are not directly involved in the protests acknowledge such innovative forms of resistance, commenting that they cannot simply be ignored forever, even if protests ultimately fail to impact Russian politics in the short run. A 15-year-old girl in Samara explains, »If people take to the streets... People passing by can only ignore them for now. Or a few can listen, digest the information and start doing something. But this will all be forgotten after a while.«

»THEY EITHER BEAT YOU UP
OR CATCH YOU, ARREST YOU,
FAKE A CHARGE, FINE YOU.
THIS IS WHY NOBODY GOES OUT.«

Even more drastic is the violence that protesters are exposed to. A 24-year-old woman in Samara explains why so few young Russians take part in protests, »They [the police] either beat you up or catch you, arrest you, fake a charge, fine you. This is why nobody goes out.« The climate of fear around protests reflects the real dangers of civic participation. A 17-year-old woman in Samara states, »We don't have the right of speech or the right to choose or any basic protection – even less than in Africa. [People] are imprisoned for anything.« And a 20-year-old man mentions the fear of economic consequences, »Nobody will go. It means immediate unemployment with consequences. Someone will not be able to get a normal job again.«

Young Russians tend to express cynical attitudes when it comes to protests and to question whether those who take to the streets believe themselves in the causes they are fighting for. Nevertheless, a Levada Center poll from March 2021 found that 38 per cent of young people express positive attitudes towards protests compared to 16 per cent of those age 55 and up.¹⁹ The distance that ordinary young Russians in the focus groups feel towards protests reflects the fact that protesters are seen as individual actors with little legitimacy to speak for anyone but themselves.

The dangers related to protests are mentioned in all focus group discussions, and Navalny's imprisonment is seen as a sign of the regime's determination to eliminate all forms of dissent. The strong impression made by his imprisonment was not only due to his fame and his huge online media presence; his arbitrary detention also shows how unconstrained the Russian regime is in dealing with deviant political opinions. As a response, young Russians exercise a form of self-restraint in relation to public activism – when communicating about protests, they speak euphemistically of »going for a walk«. On the other hand, a 24-year-old woman in Samara underlines, »If you go out to some protest here, if it is not approved for the number of people [...], right away you'll be taken straight to prison. Not only will they put you in jail, but they'll also convict you of terrorism, like for Navalny, and you'll be sitting there right next to him. That's why today I try to control my emotions and not go anywhere.«

An alternative and almost cynical view verbalised by young Russians is that the harsh police reaction must be a sign that protests by young people do matter. A 16-year-old politically involved student states, »If the police immediately target us [when we go out onto the streets] [...] this means that they are paying attention to us.«

But leaving aside such remarks, the Russian government has created an atmosphere in which the young today do not believe protests are useful at all – rather, not unlike society as a whole, young people are undecided about their judgments, and the participants of the focus groups believe that people should seek other forms of political engagement to express their opinions.²⁰ An 18-year-old woman in St. Petersburg, who otherwise believes that Russia is developing in a good direction, complains about the disturbance that protests create and states in relation to the Navalny mobilisation in 2021, »The whole of Nevsky Prospect was blocked by the crowds, and people literally couldn't get to work. They could be late. Ambulances could have been stopped in the traffic jam. I think those people harm others in this way.«

CONCLUSION

This report illustrates the tense relationship that exists between the Russian state and its society. Looked at through the prism of focus group discussions with young people in Samara and St. Petersburg in late 2021, it becomes clear that the quiet acceptance of the status quo in Russia depends on an extensive subjugation of society. The young participants openly express a diverse set of grievances vis-à-vis the political regime around them; at the same time, they feel helpless when faced with the seemingly unassailable and arbitrary state apparatus surrounding them. The discussions with young people illustrate a lack of any sense of

¹⁸ Vozvrasheniye Aleksey Navalnogo, Levada-Center, 05.05.2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/02/05/vozvrashenie-aleksey-navalnogo/>

¹⁹ Obshchestvo posle protestov, Levada-Center, 24.03.2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/03/24/obshchestvo-posle-protestov-neset-li-smena-pokolenij-modernizatsiyu-rossii/>

²⁰ Bolshinstvo na neytralnoy polose, Vedomosti, 13.08.2019, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/columns/2019/08/13/808641-bolshinstvo-neitralnoi>

agency when it comes to the political context in Russia, and this situation is reinforced by the knowledge that, for the time being, relations with Europe have worsened, a development that started long before the full-scale war against Ukraine.

The escalation of the war against Ukraine in February 2022 has fundamentally changed the relationship between the Russian state and its society. While surveys suggest that a majority of Russians support the »special military operation«, with a lower level of support among young people, it is too early to state what the war will mean for Russia as a whole and its younger generation in particular. The war has brought the propaganda targeted at young people to a new level, including manifold historical references to the Great Patriotic War and the need to repeat the historical mission fought for by the forbearers of today's younger generation. Whether the constant propaganda combined with harsh repression can compensate for the numerous unaddressed problems that young people discuss remains uncertain. For now, however, it is clear that it is especially the better educated young Russians from the larger cities that have left Russia since February 2022, with potentially far-reaching implications for the Russian economy.

The focus groups already reveal just how diverse young people are in their political views. Even more important than this, however, is the frequent mention in discussions of an intergenerational fracture. The generational bonds in today's Russia – if our focus group discussions are an indication of broader social trends – are largely broken. A 17-year-old girl in Samara comments on this generational divide as follows, »Today's generation is completely different. We think differently, we have new views, new goals, and at the same time, we are still being taught like our parents.« A particularly striking example of the broken bond is the accusation that the older generation desires a return to the USSR. One participant, for example, states with horror that his parents' generation »focus only on the past, on the USSR, which for them, was the best time«.

Most worryingly, in all the discussion groups, no discourse about the future emerges. There is no positive, forward-looking momentum, which already before February 2022 reflected the fact that people were not entitled to participate in the construction of an independent future beyond the official discourse. Each of the young participants in the focus groups certainly had different views on what an ideal future might look like, but most had the impression that they lacked the possibility to realise such a future themselves, both independently and in a broader social context. The youth of Russia were already affected by this situation before the war. And whereas some may see the war as a moment of national revival and strength, many of those that took part in our focus groups will feel increasingly isolated in a context they do not actively support, but also do not know how to oppose in an effective manner.

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ADRIFT FROM POLITICS

Youth in Russia before the War



The focus group discussions demonstrate how disillusioned young Russians are about their political system. The young generation feels neither involved in nor represented by politics. The sense of political disillusionment expressed by young people extends beyond the regime in place, affecting the very process of politics. Politics is not trusted, and young people fail to see that viable alternatives to the politics in place could emerge. Since they no longer have the impression that political change could bring improvements to their lives, young Russians have come to passively accept the status quo.



The state has depoliticised large swathes of the younger generation, who find it pointless to get politically involved. Across all focus groups, young Russians are united in their view that they are powerless to influence their country's development. They express a sense of helplessness when talking about the stream of events that surround them and the larger political sphere is felt to be beyond their reach, a state of affairs that has only become more critical since February 2022.



Young Russians feel increasingly isolated from the West and particularly from Europe. Many state that they are not part of European civilisation and speak about gaps in values and moral orientation. Parallel to this, Europe has become an abstract idea, a far-distant place to which, already by the end of 2021, young Russians no longer felt they belonged. Across the discussions, no discourse about a future emerges. There is no positive, forward-looking momentum and participants complain about the lacking possibility to realise a future they themselves desire. The youth of Russia were already affected by this situation before the war. And whereas some may see the war as a moment of national revival and strength, many of those that took part in our focus groups will feel increasingly isolated in a context they do not actively support, but also do not know how to oppose in an effective manner.

Further information on the topic can be found here:

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