YOUNG PEOPLE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN RUSSIA: PARADOXES AND CONTROVERSIES

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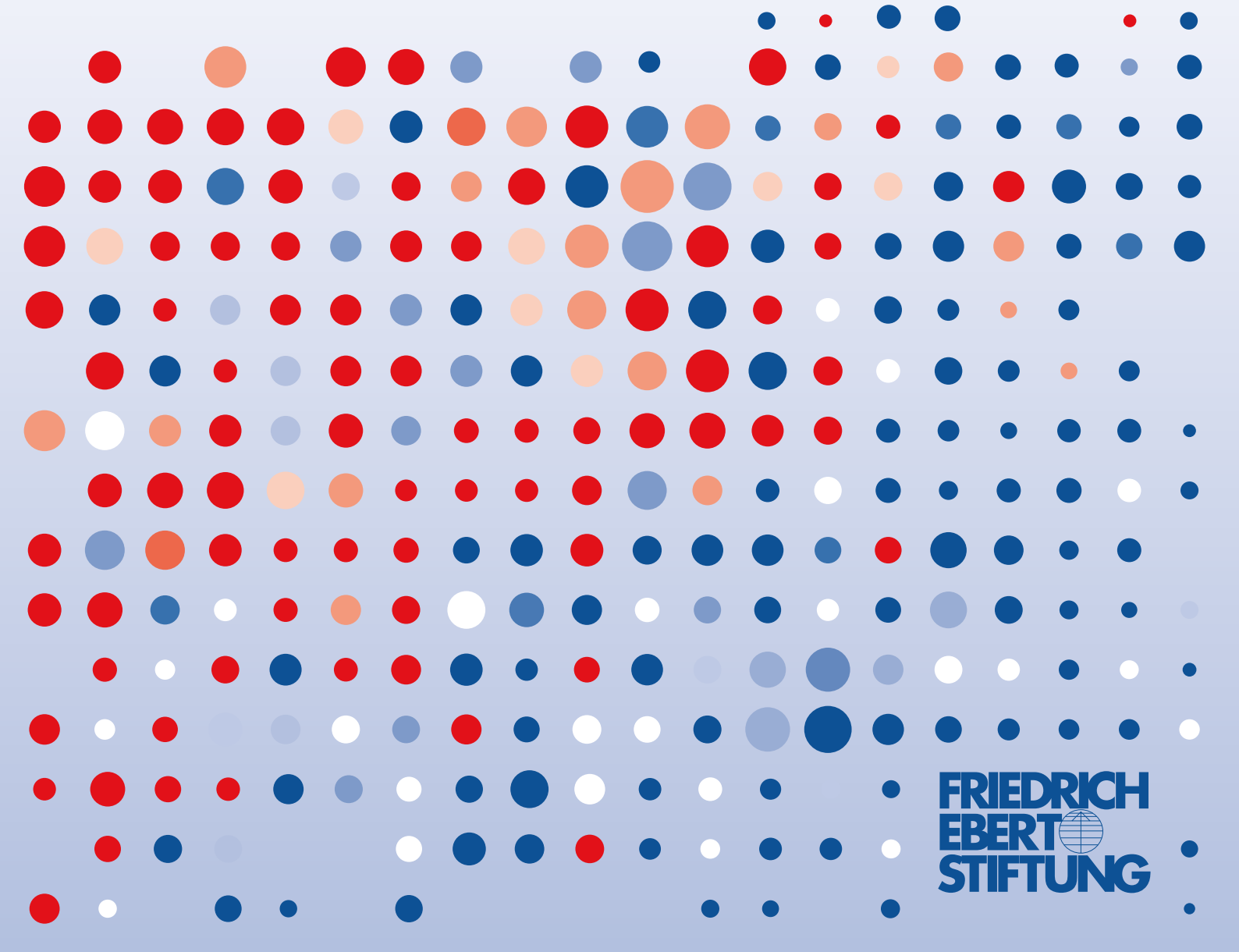

FRIEDRICH EBERT STIFTUNG

A large-scale representative survey has been conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation jointly with Russia's Levada Center targeting the Russian youth. A total of 1500 young people aged from 14 to 29 years old responded to a questionnaire; and a number of focus groups were organized to address its questions. When asked to name a value that matters most to them, the youth collectively answered that it was human rights. As many as 42% of the respondents selected human rights as their top value, and 76% included human rights in the top three values of their choice. This essay seeks to identify the reasons behind that choice.

In general, one way to describe the assessments given by the Russian youth to the country's social and political situation, as well as their perceptions of their own place in it, is to say that they are quite controversial, even paradoxical. On the one hand, it seems that the registered perception of life in general is typical of young people full of optimism. As many as 87% of the respondents said they were very happy with life, and 81% said they see a bright future for themselves and for the country. Another factor that seems at work here is the influence exerted by the long-term state propaganda on the young minds. Due to this influence, a lot of young people show a high level of trust for the president and the army, acceptance of traditional family values, support of the state's official position on the Ukrainian conflict, and intolerance towards the LGBT community, convicted offenders and substance abusers.

Registered attitudes towards the West appear controversial too. On the one hand, one could say that the attitude in general is negative. Only 20% of the respondents support Western values, and just over 50% believe that a genuinely friendly relationship with the West is possible. On the other hand, many respondents are considering emigration as a desirable future scenario for themselves. Cumulatively, 42% expressed a moderate, strong, or a very strong desire to emigrate. The respondents listed Germany, France and the United States as the top three most attractive countries; so it appears that while the youth are not willing to openly support Western values, they do prefer to actually live in one of the leading democracies of the West. Certainly, we should make some allowances for such factors as the degree of trust the respondents might have felt for the interviewer and/or their possible fears of repercussions for speaking their minds freely.

In this essay, we would like to focus on how public opinion and state propaganda influence the youth. Last year, our organization produced a report under the title, Society vs. Authorities: the Difficulties of Voicing Public Concerns[1]. In it, we talked about how society in Russia has been finding ways to make the state notice and listen to serious public concerns and analyzed how perceptive the general public is to a formalized public opinion. Our conclusion was that yes, it is very perceptive, that the general public can produce active or passive response [depending on circumstances], has a tendency to trust [the authorities] and does not always think critically. In this report we looked at how society has been making progress over the past 10 years in getting human rights issues on the publicly discussed agenda. We looked at the success cases when the public managed to get the issues noticed or even addressed by the state, as well as at the role of mass-media in this process. Our conclusion was that while the state and state-affiliated mass media do not pursue the human rights agenda of their own accord, their involvement is critical to give legitimacy to the human rights issues voiced by grass root activists. Any problem has dim prospects of getting noticed and supported by the general public unless it is first voiced by the media and gets a response from the authorities. In other worlds, concerns of any group of people are likely to be ignored by the general public until they manage to get attention of the state — in which case, the public support is also likely to follow.

AUTHORITIES AND AGENDA

It is a long-standing tradition that in Russia, key opinion leaders are its government leaders. The public agenda is therefore traditionally produced and shaped by the state. This is why the methods employed by the state to channel its agenda to the public can be at times quite sophisticated, but they can also be very crude. Aggressively imposed stereotypes, such as a 'strong leader of the nation' and 'traditional values' obviously come from that playbook. Even though 84% of the youth get their news online and consider television only a secondary source, state propaganda has learnt to target its audience online as well.

It is typical of the young people here to be less experienced and skilled in critically assessing different sources of information and the information itself. This determines the youth's somewhat naïve and inconsistent view of the world. It might seem that the effect should be the opposite, given the large number of different sources available in public domain. However, we would argue that access to information does not necessarily

1 https://agora.legal/articles/Doklad-Mezhdunarodnoi-Agory-Obshestvo-vs-vlast-Vliyanie-vopreki/21

translate to rising levels of critical thinking. In the 1990s, one of the goals pursued by the democratic world was to ensure access to information for people living in non-democratic states. With the advent of the Internet, the goal was also expanded to include access to the Internet. However, looking back at the 2000s and the 2010s, we can say that having access of either kind did not translate to rising critical thinking levels among the public. Right now, we live in a world of information overload. Back in the Soviet times, when only the state propaganda was allowed, access to alternative information indeed stimulated critical thinking and awareness. But this no longer works today. There are so many narratives, views and opinions out there, that the first order of business is to learn to filter the incoming flow of information and to critically assess the entire range of voiced opinions. One has to be able to see what is true and what is fake; to see propaganda and manipulation – and to see solid professional reporting and conclusions backed by science.

Today's problem is no longer with having access to information as such, but with the people's capacity to analyze it and produce their own opinion based on an array of different viewpoints and facts that can often be at odds with each other. This capacity is developed with time and experience, usually in well-educated people who are often part of the academia or are professional reporters. Another factor at play here is that non-democratic governments seek to actively employ new technologies in their propaganda campaigns and through that take advantage of the fact that young people have unrestricted access to the information channeled through various state-controlled agencies and organizations, such as university administrations and state programs for the youth that are feeding them manipulated narratives. All this, coupled with the state-sponsored paternalism, translates to the state's manipulation of the youth. The authorities deliberately promote immaturity among the young people instead of stimulating them to develop critical thinking and independence.

Another interesting finding where we see a certain inconsistency is the following. On the one hand, young people seem to agree that they have no prospects of making a political career in today's Russia, where for decades, key posts are occupied by the same ageing politicians who go out of their way to make young people, especially those who are part of the opposition, unelectable. They are not wrong about this. However, on the other hand, these same young people did not rank civil freedoms, such as freedom of speech and freedom of assembly, as their top choice on the questionnaire. Instead, they voted for the right to life, freedom from violence (including torture) and personal safety. This most likely reflects the fact that young people feel unprotected and unsafe. Safety needs are among the basic needs in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Young people fear to be violated by the police and thrown into prison while being innocent of any crime. This is also supported by the survey's conclusion about the high level of anxiety experienced "by women and the youngest groups of respondents (14 to 17 years old) with no experience of living on their own, young people in smaller towns, especially those with low level of education". Let's also factor in young people's readiness to emigrate to democracies that offer more safety and stability.

All this together is sending us a signal that young people do not feel safe in Russia as a state whose government, comprised of ever-ageing leaders, leans heavily on the military and law enforcement. Young people in Russia have no clear understanding of what had led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union; neither do they appear to be able to critically approach the issue of persecution of members of the LGBT community – and all that is the state's doing, because the state deliberately pushes certain important topics out of the public discourse. Young people are encouraged not to reflect on historically important events or global human rights issues. All this happens thanks to lack of proper education, state censorship and the transition to a new political agenda made by the Russian authorities in the early 2000s.

Nonetheless, there are some issues of the global agenda that seem to be of concern to the Russian youth, despite the state propaganda efforts. These are environmental concerns and domestic violence. Of course, Greta Thunberg and #Metoo have made such huge headlines globally that the youth in Russia, among others, couldn't help but pay attention. This can explain why they are so worried about the environment and why there is a widespread gender-related fear of violence. Every second young woman considers physical violence a real threat she might face. As for the male respondents, only every fourth young man shares this fear. Of course, feminism and environmental activism are trending globally these days, which why young people in Russia are exposed to the ideas. But we would like to emphasize that fear for one's own safety and fear of violence indicate that people do not feel safe, and that is a basic need for every person, as we mentioned before. It is all the more interesting that today, Russia reports lower crime rates, including street crime rates, compared to the USSR and the post-Soviet Russia after

the dissolution of the Union. The reality is that today, citizens of Russia have a much smaller chance to become victims of violence than ever before in the recent history. However, heavy use of the rhetoric of war, endless talk about external and internal enemies, highlighted by the human rights organizations may be the reason why young people feel unsafe nonetheless.

Let's take a look at how whistleblowers' activity might contribute to enhancing this feeling. We have observed that human rights issues in Russia often undergo the following process. One group of people (such as activists and friendly media outlets) tries to promote public awareness of a problem, often by means by exaggerating it. At the same time, the opposing side, such as the local authorities, government and the media they control try to play it down, make it look less of an issue than it is. As a result, when people see alarming headlines and reports of, say, police violence almost every day, they tend to believe it's true because they do not trust the authorities saying it's not really a systemic problem, but rather a few cases that are an exception to the rule.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND PROTESTS

Yet another area where we notice that the survey's findings may be at odds with the reality concerns young people's involvement in politics. The survey's conclusion was that less than 20% of the respondents express any interest in politics, where as 57% do not. It seems to us that this lack of expressed interest in politics may be explained by the respondents' assumption that involvement in 'politics' should mean working for the governmental institutions and participating in the elections, which is something that young people strongly distrust today. The reality we observe shows that young people are getting increasingly politically active in Russia.

On March 26, 2017 massive protests against corruption took place across Russia. Most of the protesters were young people. One day earlier, it became known that in some of Russia's regions, students were advised by their schools not to participate in these marches that were "unapproved" by the authorities.

Mass-media went on to circulate the opinion of Vladimir Putin's press secretary[2] that whoever organized of these protests (most likely referring to Alexey Navalny) were allegedly manipulating underage individuals into participating in illegal protests by promising them "some rewards" but in fact were putting them in harm's way.

After every large-scale protest that followed (June 12, 2017; January 28 and September 9, 2018), the government paid particular attention to high school students and college students. Teachers and police officers tried to 'talk sense' into them. The recordings of these talks were immediately posted on social media with sarcastic commentary, which prompted a new round of discussions on whether or not smartphones should be banned in schools and universities.

The Russian government also clearly intends to create a control mechanism to oversee online activity of secondary school students. We regularly hear proposals to gather information on their social media accounts.[3] In some parts of the country, school management and departments of education have already made it mandatory[4] for homeroom teachers to monitor online activity of their pupils, but so far it's been done only sporadically and haphazardly.

The database on pupils, parents and teachers is envisaged to contain not only report cards, certifications and ID details, but also links to social media accounts and information about out-of-school activities, behavior and contacts.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND CORRUPTION

Another point that young people consider important and that comes from the public agenda is corruption. Politically engaged youth who side with the opposition follow the actions of key Russian politicians, and corruption has been an important point on the agenda for years. When it comes to their everyday life, young people see proof that the problem exists and note corruption happening in their immediate environment, mainly in the schools and universities they are attending. The survey results are in line with that. While previously, petty corruption was to a certain extent tolerated, today people have grown more sensitive to it. This again proves that civil society can effectively and successfully influence the public agenda.

HOW THE GOVERNMENT SEES YOUNG PEOPLE

Since the Soviet days, the Russian state has been treating young people as part of its public policy rather than

2 https://www.rbc.ru/rostov/25/03/2017/58d6a7ee9a79477e911e690f?from=main

3 https://ria.ru/20170327/1490868201.html

4 https://habr.com/ru/news/t/401733/

participants of social and political processes. It is paternalistic in its essence. For the state the youth are but naive, foolish young people who are like a herd that needs to be guided and protected against the enemies of the state who are always trying to use them for their own nefarious purposes. Typically, in laws and regulations you'll find something like this: "There have been more cases of extremist organizations recruiting minors, since they are not only more susceptible to ideological and psychological influence, but also in certain circumstances exempt from criminal prosecution".[5]

Apart from extremists, there are also criminal groups and the so-called AUE subculture that glorifies the criminal world. Young people should be shielded from them, in view of the state, as well as from the destructive influence of public pages and social media phenomena like the Blue Whale suicide challenge, protest organizers and so on and so forth.

This has become a vicious circle. The government is actively protecting young people, while also manipulating them, shaping their opinions and views and stifling critical thinking. It results in immaturity, which in turn makes it easier for the aforementioned destructive forces and radical religious movements to win them over. The government then uses this to justify its growing paternalism and influence over the young generation. Using repressive mechanisms, the government deals with those destructive forces, opening new criminal cases and adding new articles to the Criminal Code. Part of the government policy is aimed at discrediting these movements in the eyes of the youth. Changes are made to the curricula, and students are once again being told what's right and what's wrong. Moreover, now the "right" thing to do is to join youth projects and organizations like the Young Army (as a member of which you can even get additional points in the Unified State Exam), youth parliaments, volunteer groups that help law enforcement agencies, public chambers and other Komsomol-style activities.

The survey we're analyzing was conducted in summer 2019. According to the Federal State Statistics Service[6], at that time there were 32,634,000 Russians under 19 y.o. (about 25% of the population), while 50 million people fell into the 'young people' category (aged 29 and younger).

These groups are the most active social media users. According to a Brand Analytics research study[7], 77.5% of users that publish content on VKontakte (a popular Russian social network) are younger than 35. A year prior, that number was even higher[8] – 80.6%. Young people watch less TV than any other age group: 38% of Russians aged 18-30 turn the TV on less than once a week or don't own a TV at all.

In 2014, the Russian government adopted[9] the Foundations of the State Youth Policy of the Russian Federation for the period until 2025. The document highlights the danger of "destructive informational influence on young people" and the need to "forge the understanding of the precedence of national and state identity, as well as develop a sense of pride in their Motherland."

Following that, there was a spike in government spending on various youth programs and the Federal Youth Affairs Agency. The latter was initially a tool for loyalty propaganda among young people and diversion from participation in opposition movements, but step by step, it has acquired more functions.

In the course of ten years since the Federal Youth Affairs Agency was established its budget has grown 13 times, from 560 million[10] to almost 8 billion rubles.[11] It has also gained a higher status: while it used to be overseen by the Ministry of Sports, Tourism and Youth, and later by the Ministry of Education and Science, in 2018 Vladimir Putin made it accountable[12] directly to the Cabinet.

One of the main threats listed in the 2016 Information Security Doctrine[13] is "growing informational influence <…> first and foremost aimed at young people, in order to erode traditional Russian moral and spiritual values."

In March 2019, Head of the Security Council Nikolay Patrushev made a surprising statement[14] about there being a task force in the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs that works on measures to counter possible manipulation of minors through social networks. This same task force was apparently also "in charge of sending minors predisposed to committing offences to military and patriotic camps in 2019."

5 https://muksun.fm/article/general/05-07-2019/kto-sledit-za-akkauntami-shkolnikov-yugry
6 http://www.gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/ru/statistics/population/demography/
7 https://br-analytics.ru/blog/socseti-v-rossii-osen-2018/
8 https://br-analytics.ru/blog/sotsialnye-seti-v-rossii-leto-2017-tsifry-i-trendy/
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12 http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57475
13 https://www.garant.ru/products/ipo/prime/doc/71456224/
14 https://tass.ru/obschestvo/6209292

NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS AND VOLUNTEERING

The survey also indicated that there was a notable difference in the level of trust that young people have for civic organizations and volunteering projects. The support for the former was much lower (2.85 points on average) than for the latter (scoring 3.36 on average, compared with 3.6[15] points for the President). At the same time, the survey found that over 75% of the respondents had not previously taken part in any kind of social work; while 23% said that only volunteering as an important public activity. There are at least two reasons for that. One of them is more generic by nature and has to do with the overall low level of trust in any institutions, which is indicated by the results of the survey. Government institutions enjoy a low level of public trust and support, and that includes the parliament, courts and political parties. The lack of trust in institutions is projected on NGOs as well. The second reason has to do with what has been happening to the third sector over the last ten years. Independent NGOs have been severely pressured and discredited with the help of the new 'foreign agent' law; and leading civic organizations suffered from targeted blows to their public image and the trust they had built up. As a result, they lost their social capital, public support, political influence and financial footing. Even major human rights groups and other civic organizations have started transforming from traditional structures into informal associations and networks that engage volunteers and young people, promoting various projects to educate and raise awareness that target a wide audience, as well as developing crowd funding platforms. As a result, civic initiatives are now targeting the general public, particularly its most active segment – the youth. For NGOs, that's another signal saying they should make changes and adjust to the environment they operate in and the public demand, because the more traditional corporate approach to operation is no longer viable. Young people are willing to participate in social work, but they need to be offered the opportunity in the formats they'd be could relate to.

WHAT'S NEXT?

This article was written as the COVID-19 lockdown measures were being lifted. This unprecedented global challenge will undoubtedly have a significant impact on social, political and economic processes in many countries, Russia included. It will deeply influence the agenda and priorities of the young people as well. The focus will almost certainly shift towards social benefits and labor rights in the light of increasing unemployment and changes in the labor market, a potential rise in crime leading to more policing and government surveillance. In June 2020, police brutality again entered the global agenda on a wave of large-scale street protests. These issues will definitely have an effect on what opinions young people might express in future surveys. We should pay attention to that. Our assumption that young people might want to disapprove of police brutality is also in sync with the survey's finding that young people generally agree that "the state shouldn't use violence or other authoritarian methods to resolve issues."

State youth policy in Russia basically rests on three pillars: control over information and communications, promoting engagement in state-sponsored youth movements and fostering loyalty. Moreover, the "protect our younger generation" argument is widely exploited to ban undesirable topics and create ever multiplying repressive methods to censor the Internet and curtail protests, opposition movements, and so on.

Just like during the Soviet era, and even before that, in imperial Russia, the Russian state of today perceives any unregulated activities of the young generation to be outside the law. Only the ideologically encouraged activism connected to the Russian Orthodox Church, as well as patriotic, conservative and reactionary outlook provoke no negative reaction and persecution from the government. At the same time, the state is trying to involve the loyal youth in law enforcement activities by, for example, delegating censorship and policing functions to volunteer cyber teams in the regions.

15 See p. 57 of the study.

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