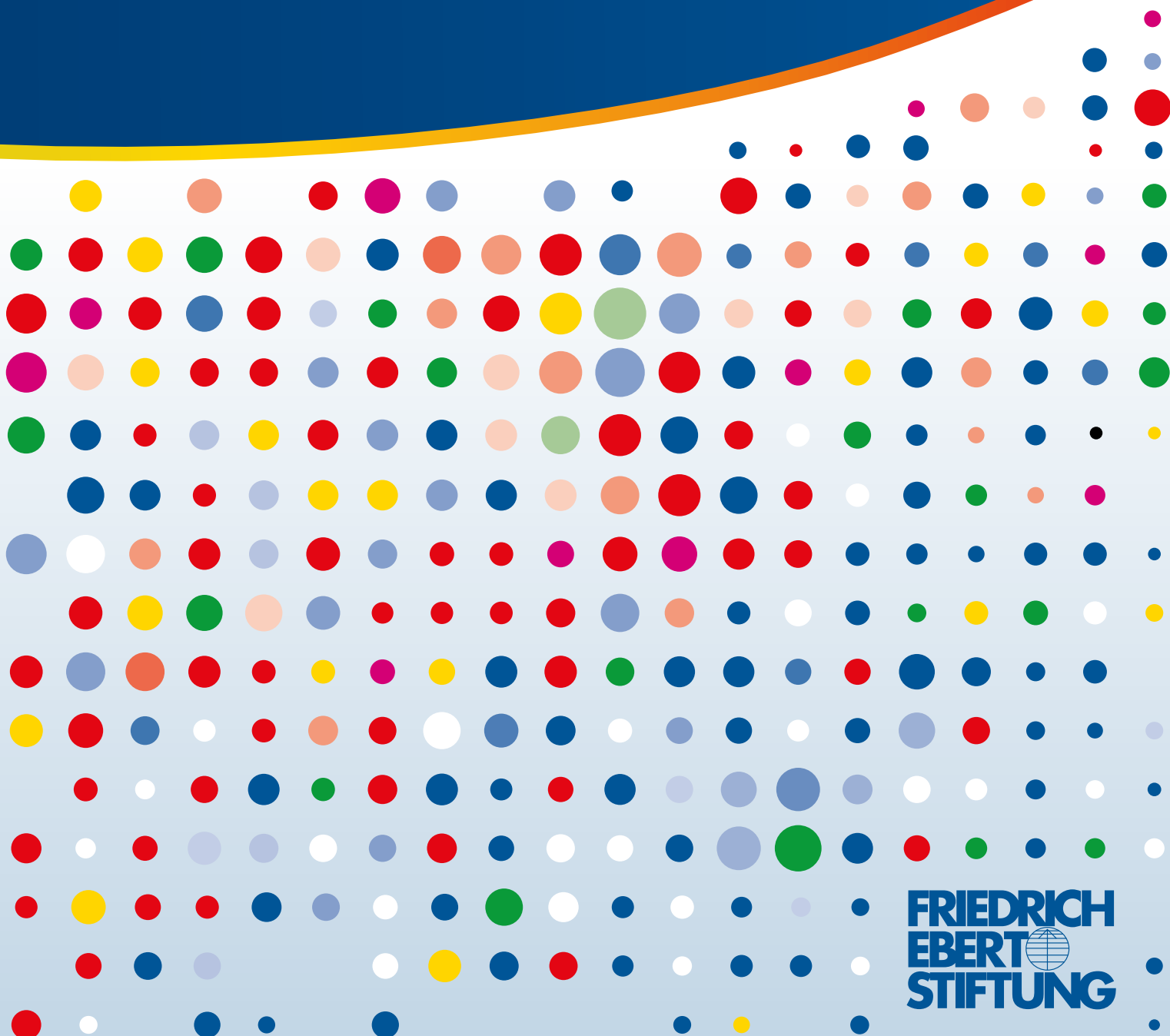


YOUNG WORLDS?

Political and social views
of young people in
Russia, Ukraine and Belarus



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YOUNG WORLDS?

Political and social views of young people in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus

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1

YOUNG PEOPLE IN POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES: WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

Young people in post-Soviet countries and further afield play a significant role in social and political change through their distinct outlooks on society and their political involvement. But young people's values and activities are diverse and sometimes extremely contradictory. Some enjoy the globalised opportunities of a world without borders, whereas others stay put and may express nostalgia for a past that they have not experienced themselves. As political agents, young faces define many of the protest movements we have witnessed in countries such as Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. But young people have also been mobilised in official movements aimed at stabilising their respective political regimes. Indeed, young people are often the target of government policies, including patriotic education,² the crafting of historical memory,³ and an increasingly restrictive teaching of history.⁴ Importantly, as the huge demonstrations in Belarus in 2020 have shown, the mobilisation of young people has the potential to inspire older generations – workers, musicians, pensioners and so on – to take to the streets and put pressure on governments, casting light on the profound disconnect between large parts of society and official state structures.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is, among other things, known for its studies of young people, enquiring into their lifestyles, mobility, social and political attitudes, as well as economic conditions. Following comparative studies on young people in Southeast Europe⁵ and Central Asia,⁶ and a wide range of country studies, it seems urgent to pursue this development further with a study of young people's attitudes in other regions. Russia, Ukraine and Belarus provide a promising comparative framework

as these three countries have taken somewhat divergent paths following the Soviet Union's breakdown, while sharing a substantial number of historical, social and economic links and similarities. Moreover, there is a high degree of educational and economic mobility between the countries, which also contributes to the spread of social values and political ideals.

This report draws on data obtained by the FES from young people in Ukraine from July to August 2017 (N=2,000) and in Russia from May to June 2019 (N=1,500).⁷ Results from several surveys among young people undertaken at the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) in Russia and Belarus complement these insights.⁸ Additionally, contextual information on political and social events, as well as the academic literature on survey methodology and young people's social and political attitudes in Eastern Europe were analysed systematically.

Before proceeding, we should mention a caveat about the available data. Given that the FES data come from two different moments in time, comparisons are to be undertaken with great care. Differences and commonalities might be due to genuine features of the countries, but they could also reflect trends over time that are not necessarily specific to any one country. Therefore, several comparisons that this report suggests are to be understood as raising questions for further inquiry and as pointing to noteworthy trends, but ultimately they can be addressed only through a set of simultaneously run surveys.

2

TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS AND IN OTHER PEOPLE

Young people's trust in their countries' institutions is a crucial component for understanding the extent to which they feel represented and even integrated. Therefore, trust values are a relevant indicator of the relationship between state and society. Levels of trust provide information about the extent to which any government can exercise political power and is seen as authoritative in its decision-making. It is also relevant for understanding the extent to which the population will follow political decisions, even in authoritarian contexts. Trust is extremely fragile, however, and the current Covid-19 context has exposed the potential for a significant erosion of trust even in short periods of time. The most recent data among young people in Belarus demonstrate (Figure 1), for instance, that the government's disregard for Covid-19 contributed to a marked decline in young people's trust in key state institutions even before the fraudulent elections.⁹

In Ukraine, in 2017, levels of trust in *core state institutions* were extremely low after the 2014 Euromaidan (Figure 2), which saw the end of the Yanukovich presidency and Poroshenko's arrival in power, but also the loss of Crimea and the outbreak of war in Donbass. Other polls conducted around that time confirm that Ukrainians in general expressed little confidence in their government, indicating the fading hopes created by Poroshenko after the Maidan revolution.¹⁰ As is often the case, the army received the highest trust values and political bodies such as the parliament or the national government the lowest. Trust in the different core state institutions in Ukraine was higher among slightly older people, those who self-identify as religious and the better off.

In 2019, the levels for the same institutions in Russia, however, were somewhat more divided, with the most negative trust expressed for the parliament and the government. The army and

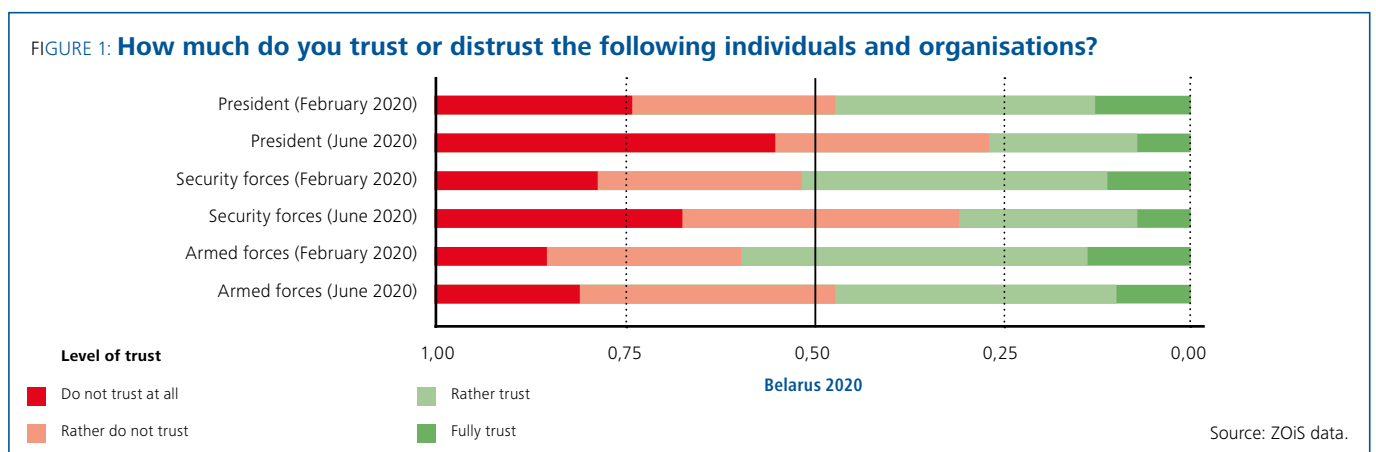


FIGURE 2: On the whole, how far do you trust the entities listed below? [state institutions]

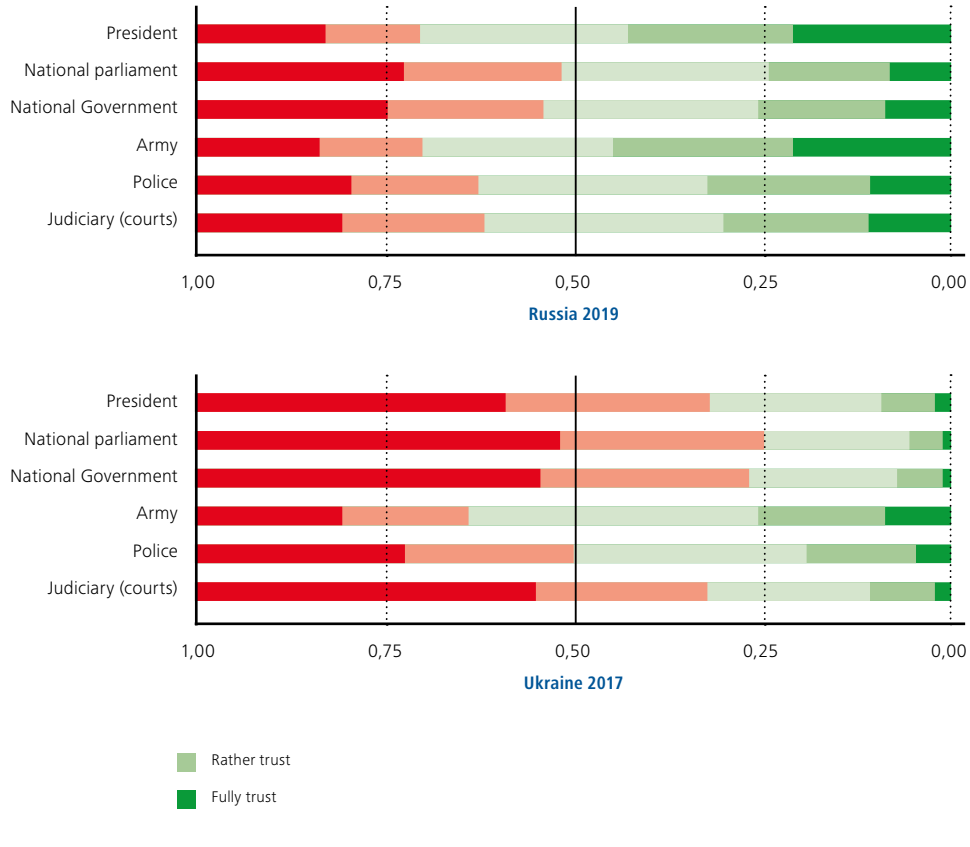
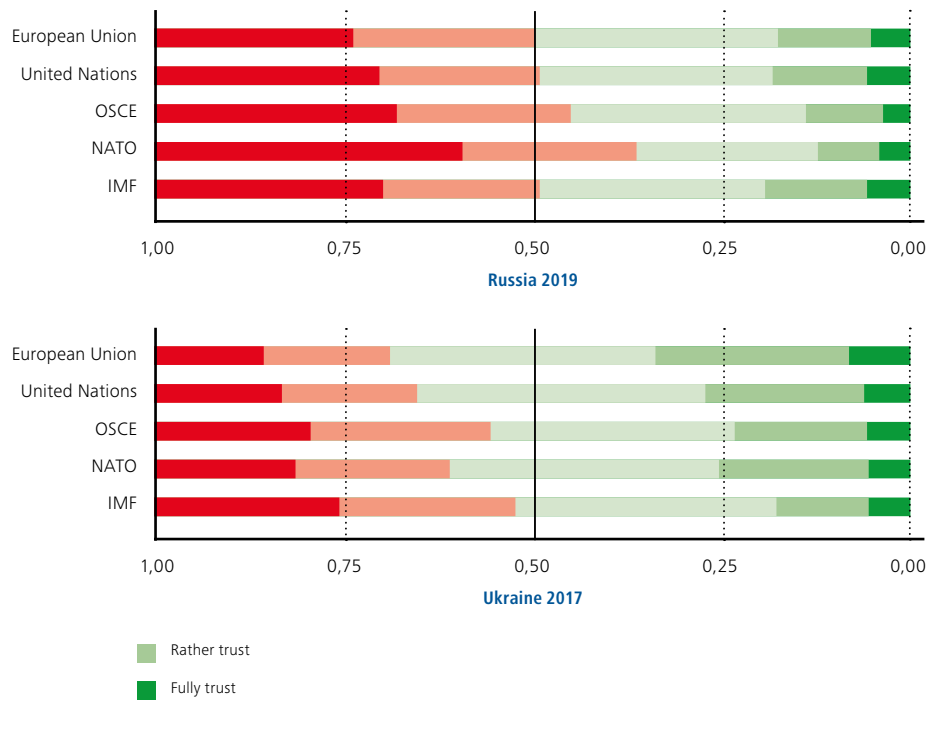


FIGURE 3: On the whole, how far do you trust the entities listed below? [international organisations]



the Russian president received the most positive trust scores, a finding that also holds for the broader population and is confirmed in other studies on young people.¹¹ Trust in state institutions in Russia is higher among the more religious, less educated

young people, and women. Despite a certain degree of trust in the president, however, other data from 2020 show that nearly two-thirds of young Russians think that the president should step back from power.¹² Indeed, trust – as a more emotional

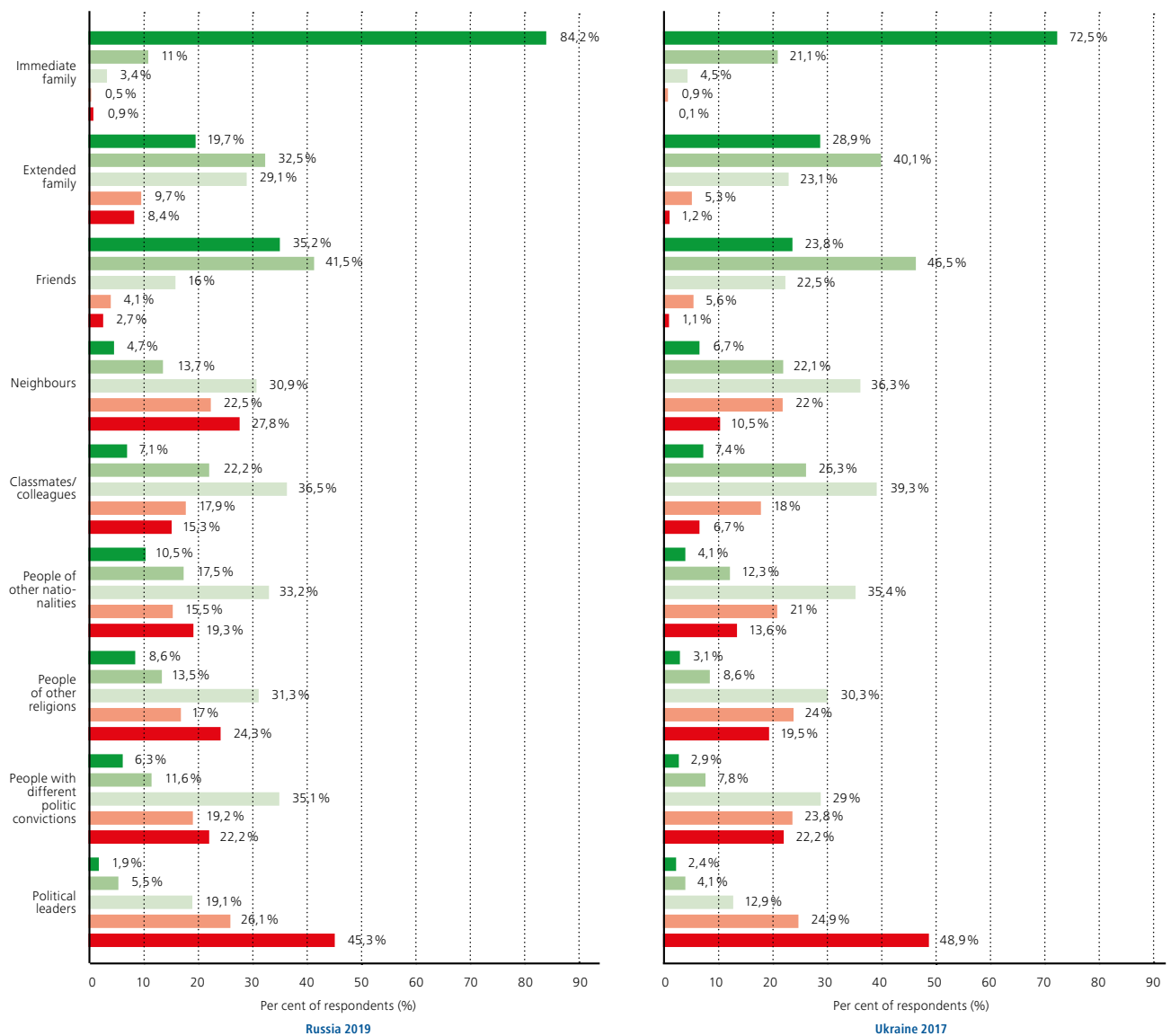
expression of support – tends to be lower than Putin’s personal approval ratings.¹³

When it comes to trust in *international institutions* it is striking that in 2019 young Russians had outspokenly negative views on all of them, whereas Ukrainians in 2017 tended to have more divided views (Figure 3). Although this could be related to the timing of the surveys, it also speaks to divisions in the underlying geopolitical orientation of both countries and important differences within different parts of Ukraine. In Russia and Ukraine, trust in international institutions is higher among younger people and those living in larger cities; in Ukraine specifically those who are more likely to speak Ukrainian (rather than Russian), express higher trust in such institutions. On this matter, views of young Russians do not differ from those of the broader population. Levels of

complete trust in organisations such as NATO and IMF tend to be below 4 per cent in the broader population, according to the World Values Survey, which corresponds to the level of trust young people express.

Alongside this, young people’s levels of *interpersonal trust* provide important insights into the extent to which they feel at ease with different segments of society (Figure 4). Such trust levels are highest for the immediate family, but already markedly lower for the extended family and friends. The values for young people are very similar to those of the general population, among which the highest trust – at about 85 per cent – is expressed for the family. Young Russians and Ukrainians show a similar dynamic in their views. All somewhat more distanced groups in society – such as people of other religions, nationalities, and those with

FIGURE 4: To what degree do you trust the following people?



Source: FES data.

different political views – are the objects of rather neutral or negative trust. Moreover, other data suggest that trust levels in Ukraine have been falling since 2017 to 2018, across the spectrum.¹⁴ Strikingly, in Russia and Ukraine, trust in politicians is predominantly negative and substantiates the significant gap between young people and political leaders also captured by the levels of institutional trust. For comparison, data from the most recent World Values Survey indicate that 75 per cent of the general population in Russia believe one needs to be careful when dealing with other people. In Germany, by contrast, about 50 per cent declare that one needs to be careful and in the United States about 60 per cent.

Looking beyond trust, the extent to which young people believe that their *views* are *shared* by other people living in their country is instructive. Among young Russians and Belarusians, ZOI data find a markedly high agreement with the idea that their values are shared, with nearly 80 per cent affirming such a statement when thinking about other people in their country. These numbers have been stable over time, although it remains an open question whether the shared experience of political mobilisation in the aftermath of the Belarusian presidential elections has affected these views. More generally, and not only for the three countries in question, it remains an open question how the diverging assessments of the pandemic and the costs of shutting down national economies has affected interpersonal as well as institutional trust in the medium term.

POLITICS: WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE DOING?

At first glance, young people in post-Soviet countries may appear politically uninterested. There is a generally low level of electoral turnout, alongside little political engagement outside of elections. Also, the levels of political interest seem small. The Belarusian mobilisation in the context of the 2020 presidential election, however, illustrates that a situation of apparent acquiescence can change once particular conditions are met. In Belarus, the mishandling of Covid-19, a pre-electoral period that politicised the entire population and blatant electoral fraud certainly contributed to young people's willingness to lead protests and encouraged broader parts of society to join in.¹⁵

In other words, even if surveys tend to identify, for instance, a low self-declared level of *political discussions* (Figure 5), it is important to keep in mind that such a value might shift profoundly if young people sense a potential for change. Among young Russians in 2019, a plurality stated they 'never' discuss politics; in Ukraine in 2017 most stated 'not often' or 'sometimes'. One key factor that sustains these values is settlement size, with lower levels of political discussions in smaller settlements. Moreover, in Ukraine, young women, and in Russia, young men, were more likely to discuss politics – in both countries, those who identify as religious are also more likely to state that they discuss politics. The level of political discussion is similar to levels identified in ZOIS surveys in Russia. The extent of political discussion in the context of the presidential election in Belarus significantly increased, as a survey in June 2020 revealed (Figure 6).

Elections are clearly important for the functioning of democratic political systems. Even in Western democracies, however,

young people have shown lower rates of electoral turnout than older generations, and in authoritarian systems these rates tend to be even lower, as elections do not offer a genuine choice. Nevertheless, even elections that appear to be merely a legitimising ritual have the potential for politicisation and cannot be entirely controlled by the incumbent. Most tellingly, one could observe this in Belarus in summer 2020. The FES survey assesses electoral behaviour by asking about parliamentary elections (Figure 7). The data show that in Russia, around half of the young people that *had the right to vote* actually participated in elections – the value is higher in Ukraine, in particular for residents of larger settlements. One should add that the parliament is not the key decision-making institution in most post-Soviet countries and turnout values tend to be slightly higher for presidential elections. Moreover, the data raise the question of the reasons for electoral (non-)participation, which one could explore further by extending the survey or undertaking qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of how young people assess their political circumstances.

There are substantial differences between Ukraine and Russia concerning the extent to which young people are *politically active* (Figure 8). Young Russians have signed petitions (22 per cent) and participated in civil society organisations (23 per cent) rather more than their peers in Ukraine. Around 8–9 per cent in both countries have also changed their consumption behaviour for political or economic reasons, and more recent Russian data reveal that 11 per cent have participated in political activities online. This indicates the diverse ways in which young people are politically

FIGURE 5: How often do you discuss politics with your family or acquaintances?

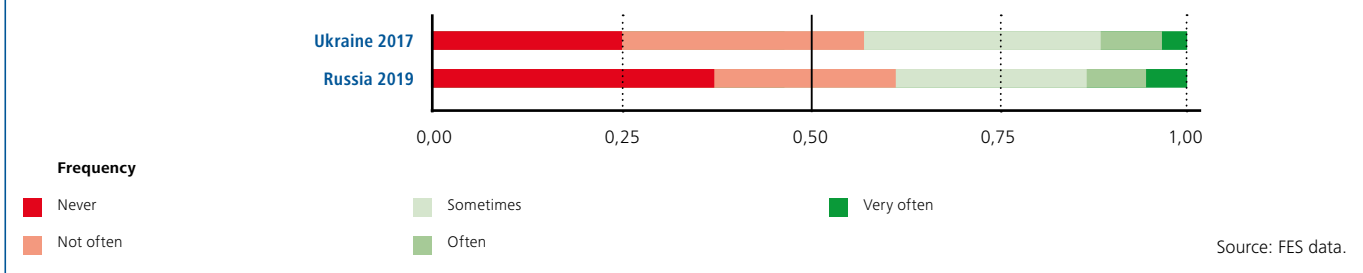


FIGURE 6: How often do you discuss political topics with your friends, classmates or those you work with?

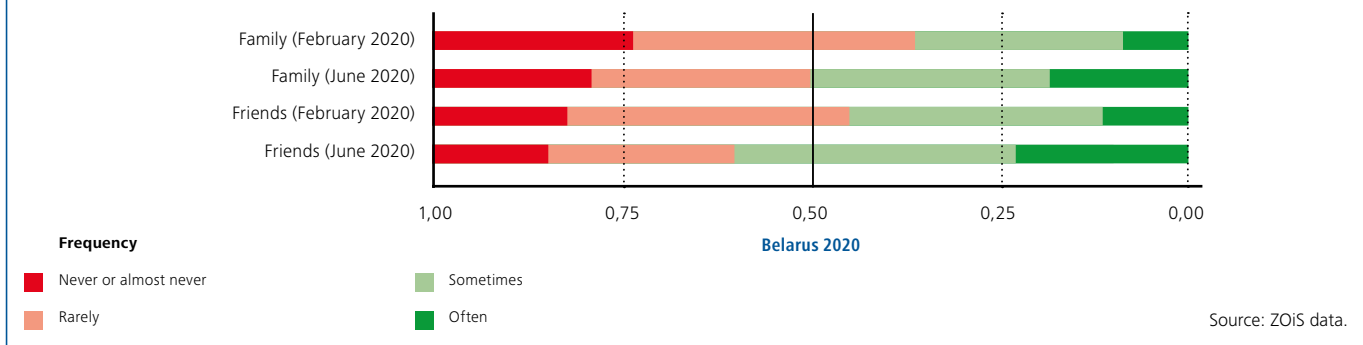
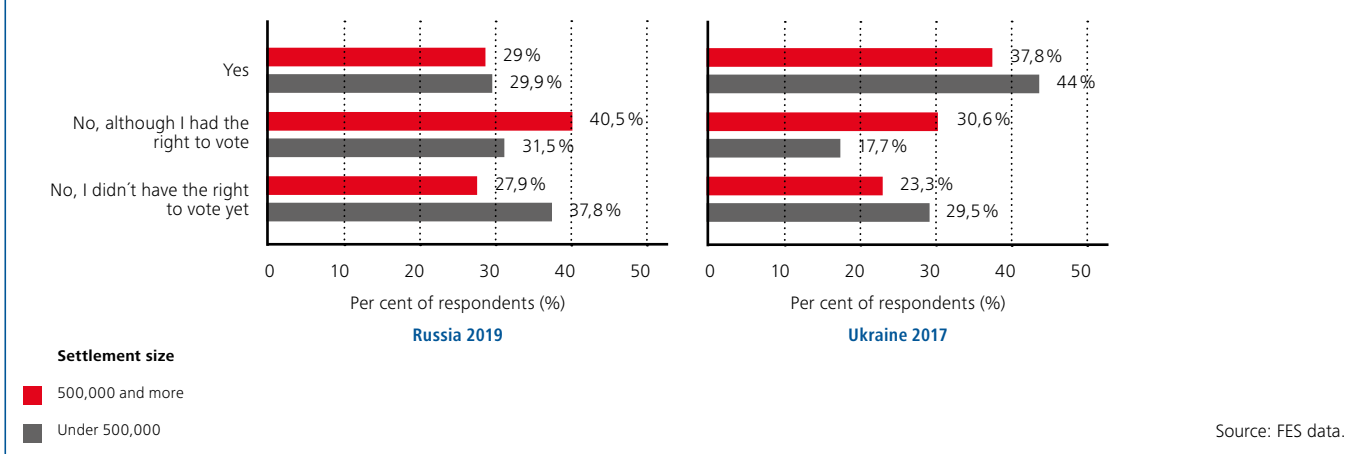


FIGURE 7: Did you vote in the last elections for the national parliament?



involved, challenging the idea of a disaffected generation. It also speaks to the importance of broadening our definition of the political when considering young people. Therefore, even though young people consider that they do not discuss politics, other research has shown that they are more likely than adults to engage in various civic activities such as signing petitions, getting involved in NGOs or participating in street actions. A higher education is a particularly strong predictor of such engagement.¹⁶

The question of whether or not young people are willing to take on *political functions* (Figure 9) reveals a very clear picture in both countries. A majority of respondents are opposed to taking on such a role, with slightly more young Russians somewhat undecided. The observation indicates the high extent to which young people consider their official political system as not providing the right forum for expressing their political views. Across both countries, more religious young people are more likely to

take on political functions. In Ukraine, wealth and being female moreover predict a person's willingness, whereas in Russia it is being male.

One last aspect that deserves more attention is the extent to which young people engage politically via social media. Not only in Belarus this summer, but also beyond, online forms of political participation have proliferated. Some young people post satirical comments regarding their government, express their support for oppositional leaders, use political hashtags, follow political leaders and re-post their statements, and they look out for information about political rallies online. Such activities have the potential to put pressure on incumbents and remain extremely hard to control for any political system, especially when online connectivity translates into offline mobilisation. We lack detailed and representative assessments of how young people engage politically with social media, however.

FIGURE 8: **There are different ways of showing your political opinions. Have you tried or would you try one of the following ways of political engagement?**

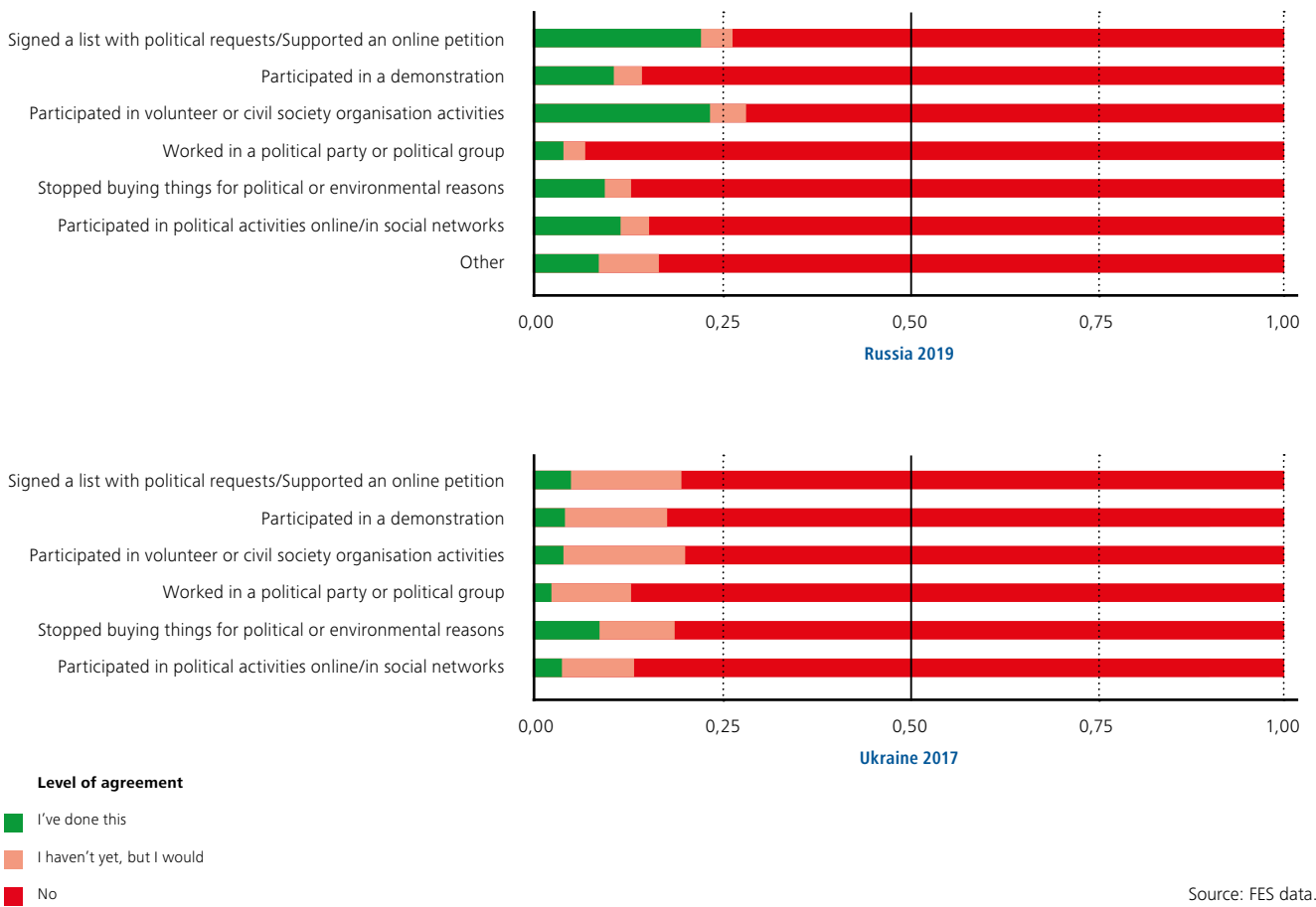
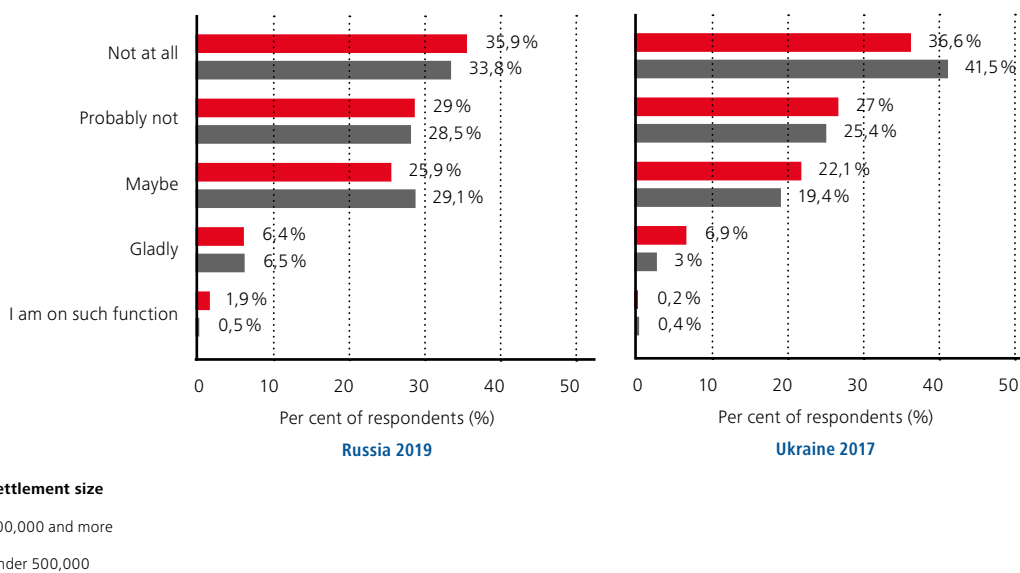


FIGURE 9: **Would you be willing to take on a political function?**



4

POLITICS: WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE THINK

The level of *political interest* (Figure 10) provides a baseline for understanding young people's self-assessed involvement in political issues. A plurality of respondents in both Russia and Ukraine expressed no interest at all in political affairs, irrespective of whether it concerns general politics or more specifically domestic or international politics. For context, based on the World Values Survey, around half of the Russian population overall expresses at least some interest in politics, a value that stands at nearly 80 per cent in Germany and 60 per cent in the United States. Compared with data from the World Values Survey, young Russians are clearly less interested in politics than adults. One way to explain such detachment from politics is the large extent to which young people feel that they are not represented in their country's politics. This view is also held in particular by older and less educated people in the two samples.

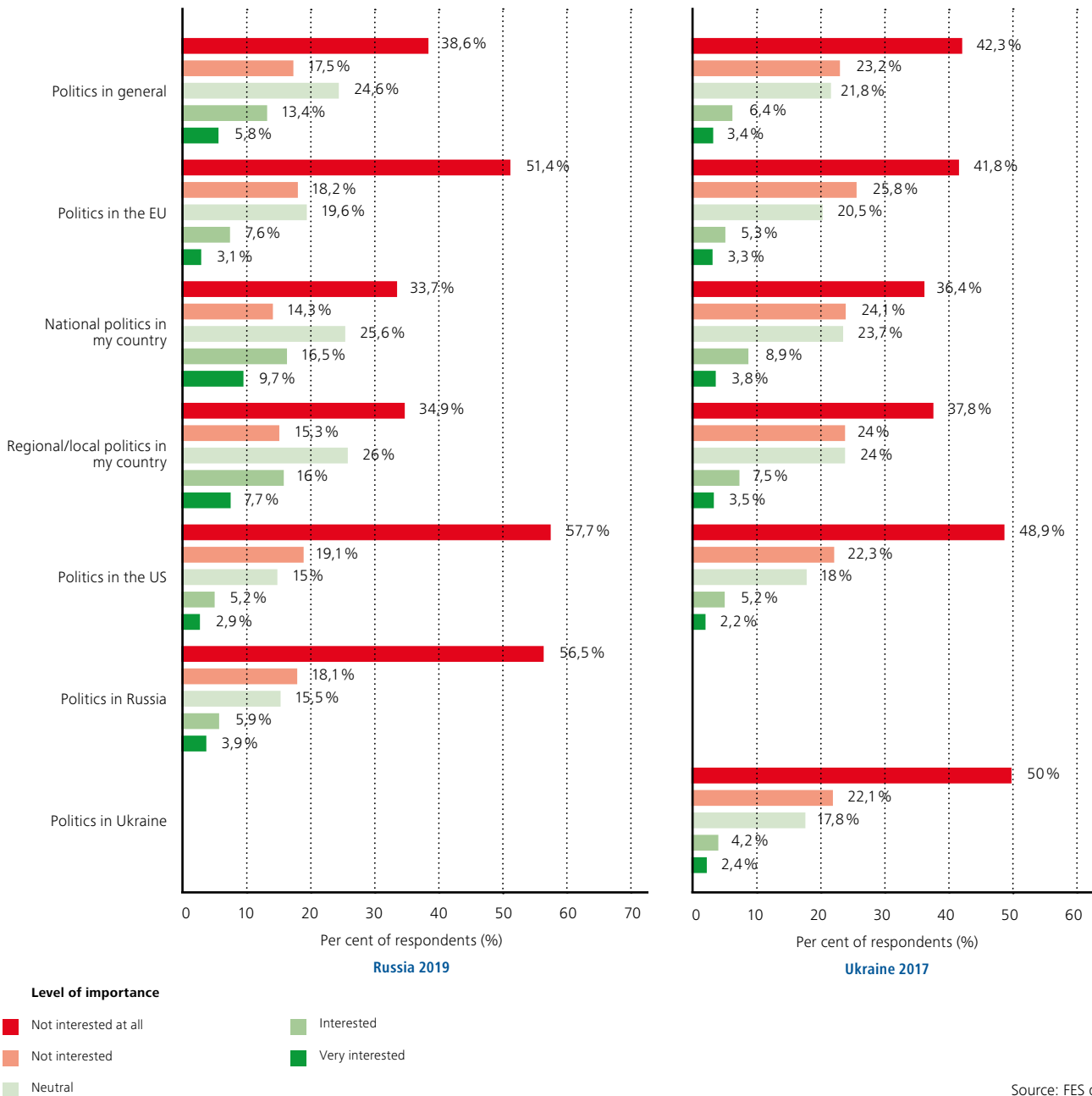
It should be noted, however, that the question of political interest is particularly volatile. It depends on current events and therefore the existence of reasons to be politically interested. Moreover it is sometimes hard to discern what young people have in mind when it comes to politics: is politics only about voting, is it about public debates, or does it include the ways in which social movements and NGOs play a role in public affairs? Political interest therefore requires careful unpacking.

Part of being young is the perceived need to position oneself within the political and social values of the parental generation. In that regard, the question of value transmission and intergenerational divides is particularly relevant, especially in the post-Soviet space, with its extreme political shifts of the past 30 years. Divides

between generations in terms of their political, social and cultural outlooks have been underlined most recently with regard to Belarus.¹⁷ At the same time, different outlooks exist among young people themselves, reflecting also the various ways in which they relate to the Soviet past and their experiences of present economic and political realities. Nevertheless, when asked directly, young Ukrainians and Russians believe that their own political views are somewhat similar to those of their parents (Figure 11). This view is particularly frequent among young Ukrainians living in smaller settlements.

The FES survey asks young Ukrainians to position themselves on a left-right scale from 1 to 10 (1 being left-wing). There is a strong prominence of right-wing views and somewhat moderate views (Figure 12). A self-declared left-wing position is rare, speaking to the discredited communist legacy among many young people across the region. Such measures of political space are extremely tentative, however, with scholarship itself divided on how best to conceptualise the (post-Soviet) political space and whether a left-right dimension can capture current political realities. In non-Russian post-Soviet societies, historical experiences with Russia often sustain political cleavages, alongside ethnic, regional or linguistic differences. Other cleavages, as in Russia, may centre on attitudes towards market liberalising reforms, opposing those who favour more traditional economic (and political) approaches with a more prominent role played by the state. In addition, diverging views on nationalism divide society, especially for non-Russian post-Soviet states. Lastly, cleavages across the countries differ importantly, with no single one cutting across the region.

FIGURE 10: How much are you personally interested in political affairs?



In Ukraine, for instance, the east-west divide remains an important factor, while in Belarus it is attitudes towards the president; in Russia a modernist-traditionalist divide plays a significant role.¹⁸

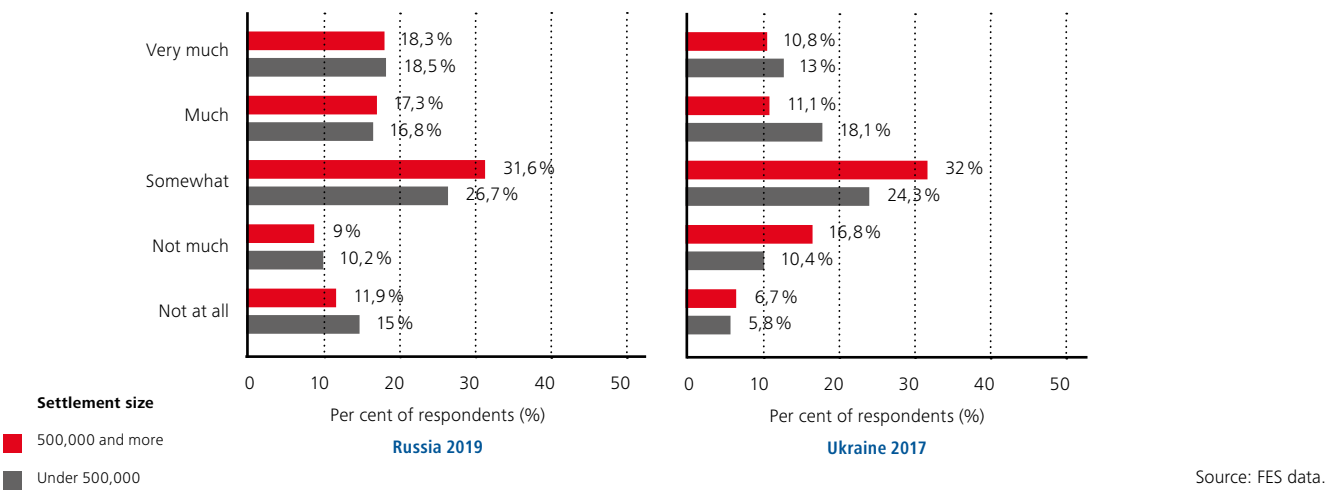
Reflecting on this challenge of measuring political space, the 2019 FES Russia survey includes a list of political ideologies, with which young people were invited to express their degree of political agreement (Figure 13). Some interesting features stand out in the data, such as the difference between settlement sizes. Approval of liberal views is much higher in larger settlements, whereas ‘patriotic’ attitudes prevail in smaller ones. Socialist and social democratic views score highest regardless of settlement size, raising the question of what political programmes young people associate with these ideologies and whether they think any politicians in their countries represent them. Understanding the

political space in post-Soviet societies remains a fascinating task that certainly deserves more attention.

Deeper insights into young people’s political preferences can be gained by exploring their views on various *political statements*, political priorities or views on specific social groups. In principle, there tends to be overall agreement with views favouring more equal distribution, the value of hard work and an expectation that the government take responsibility for social welfare. A similarity of *political views* among young people in Ukraine and Russia is also remarkable (Figure 14). Although responses are dispersed overall, indicating the important divides on political views within the younger generation, there is overall a positive view of democracy (more clearly pronounced in Ukraine), an agreement on the need for a well-intentioned leader and a strong party, slight disapproval of dictatorship, and an agreement with the idea that

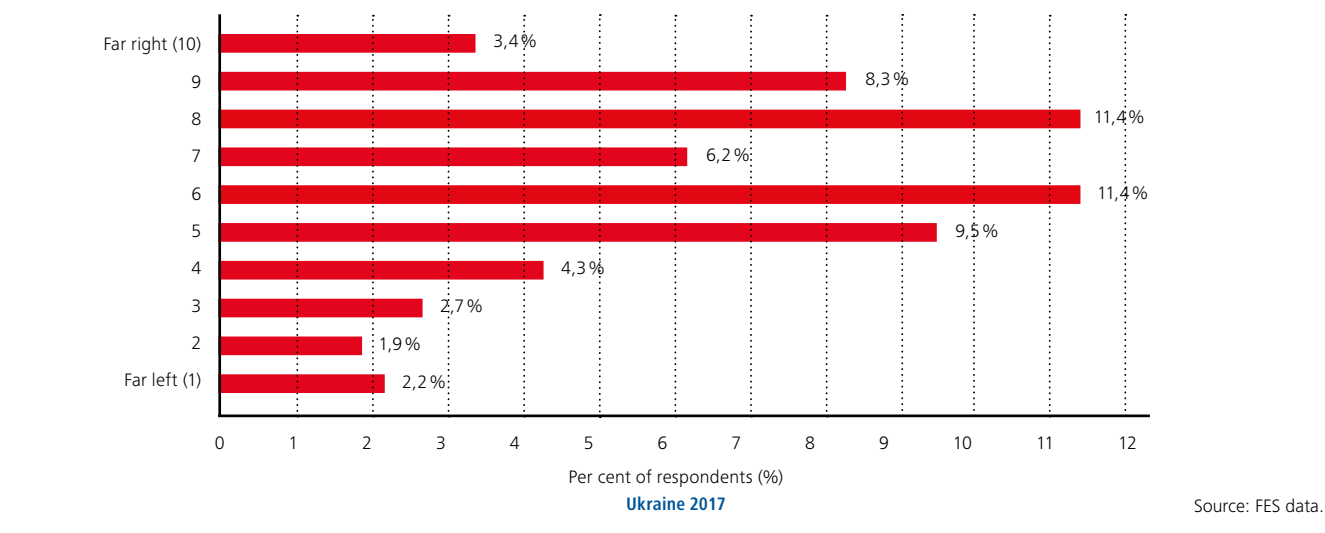
Source: FES data.

FIGURE 11: To what extent are your political views and beliefs aligned with those of your parents?



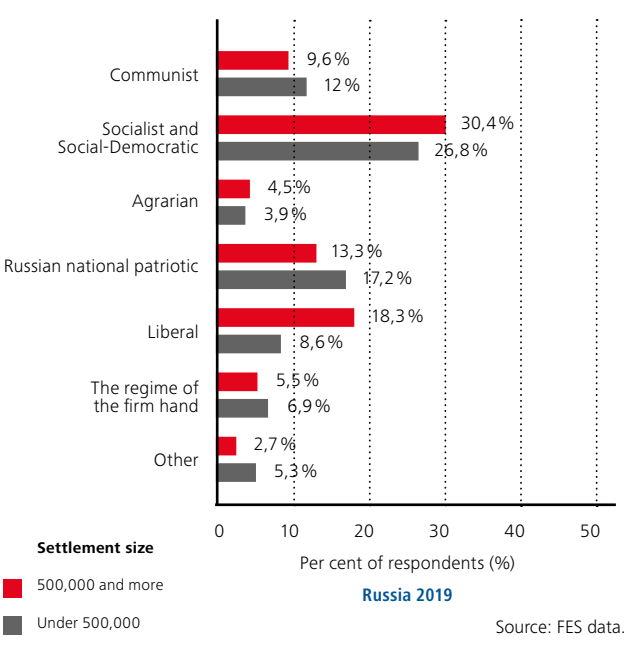
Source: FES data.

FIGURE 12: When people talk about their political beliefs, they mostly speak about left-wing and right-wing. How would you place your views on this scale from 1 to 10, generally speaking?



Source: FES data.

FIGURE 13: What political views do you hold today?



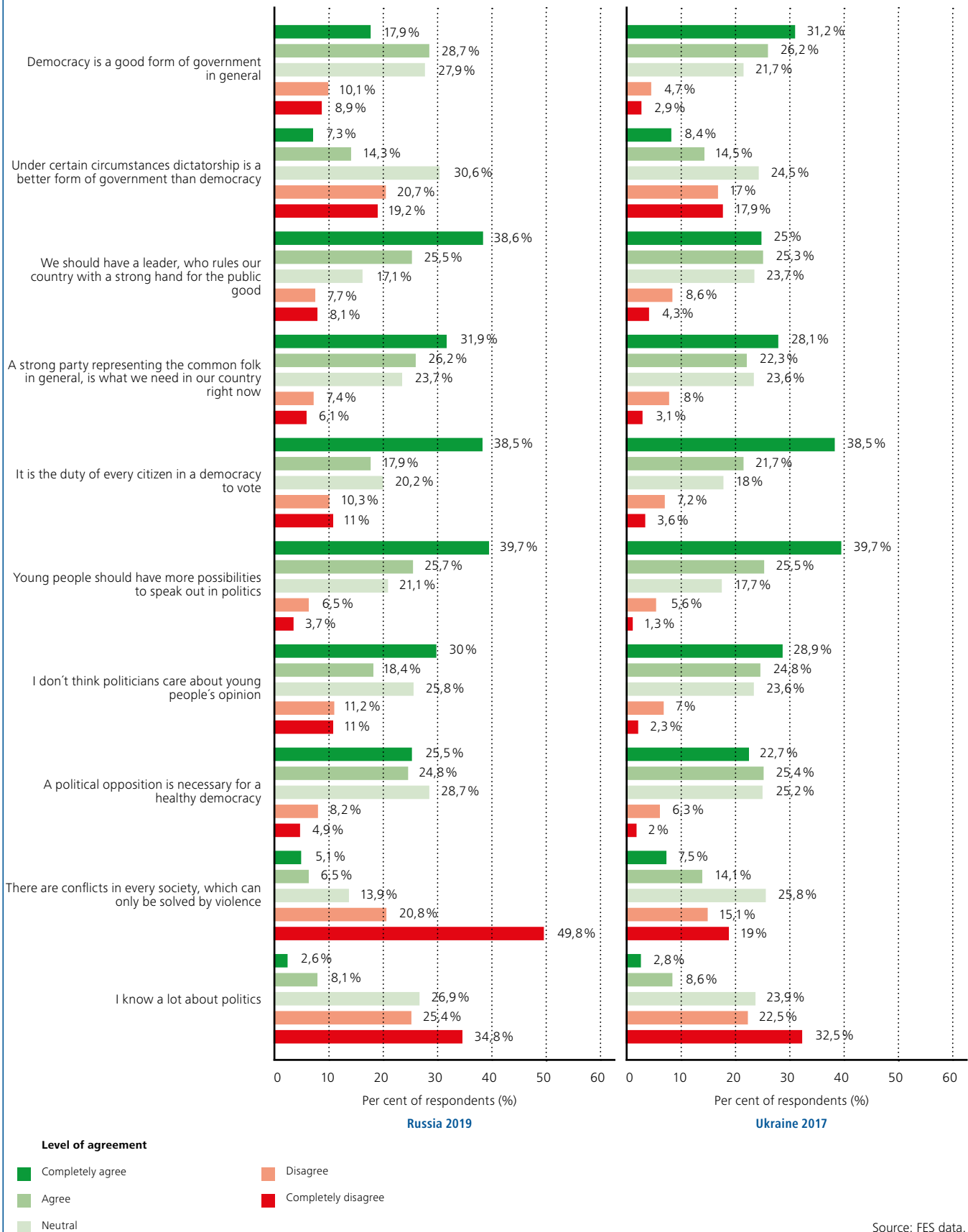
Source: FES data.

voting is a civic duty. There is a marked difference between Russia and Ukraine concerning whether certain conflicts require violence, with young Russians being much less likely to agree.

Furthermore, the topic of whether or not certain groups have *enough rights* is telling (Figure 15). Among the various social groups, young people single out only LGBT people as having too many rights. Views on the LGBT community are noteworthy because their rights in fact remain limited in many post-Soviet countries. Nevertheless, young people seem to have picked up on a societal discourse that accuses LGBT people of having too many privileges and excessive public visibility. The scores for women’s rights are also noteworthy. In both countries, more people claimed that women have ‘enough rights’ than for any other category, notwithstanding persistent gender inequality. Disabled and poor people, on the other hand, are generally seen as not having enough rights.

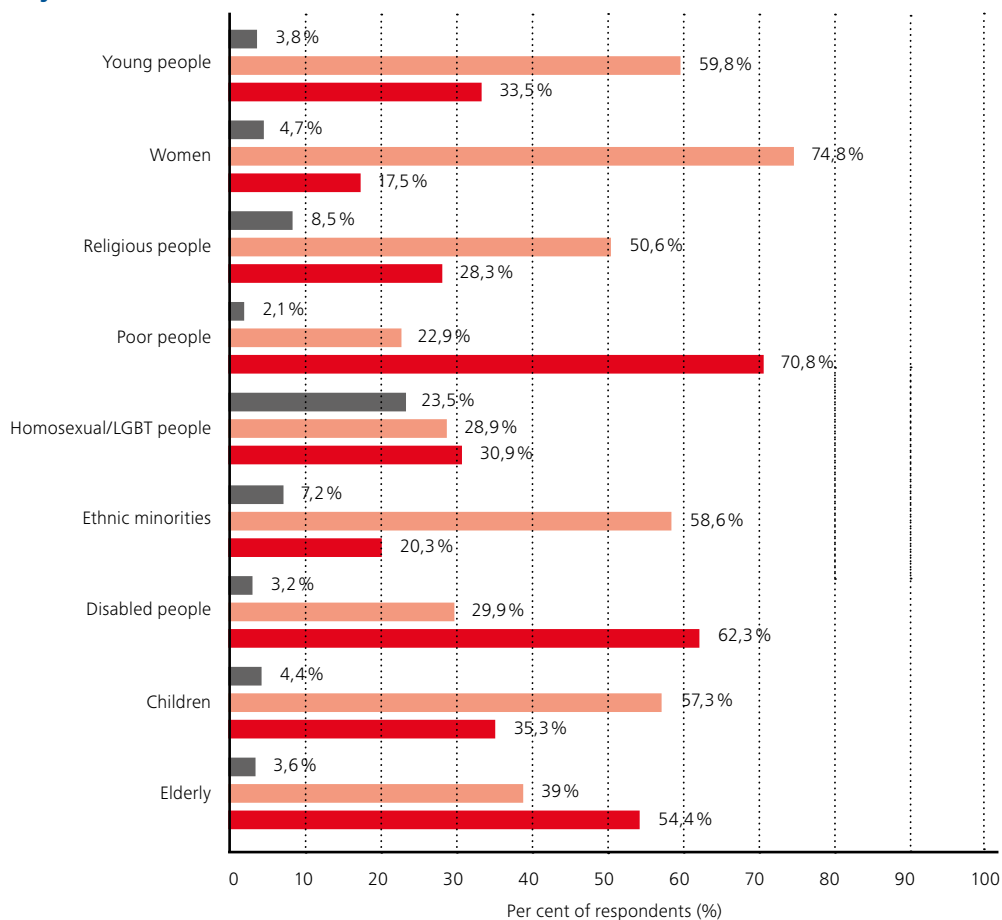
An interesting diversity can be encountered among the *international political statements* (Figure 16). In both countries there is a tendency to declare that no more refugees or immigrants

FIGURE 14: What are your views on the following statements?

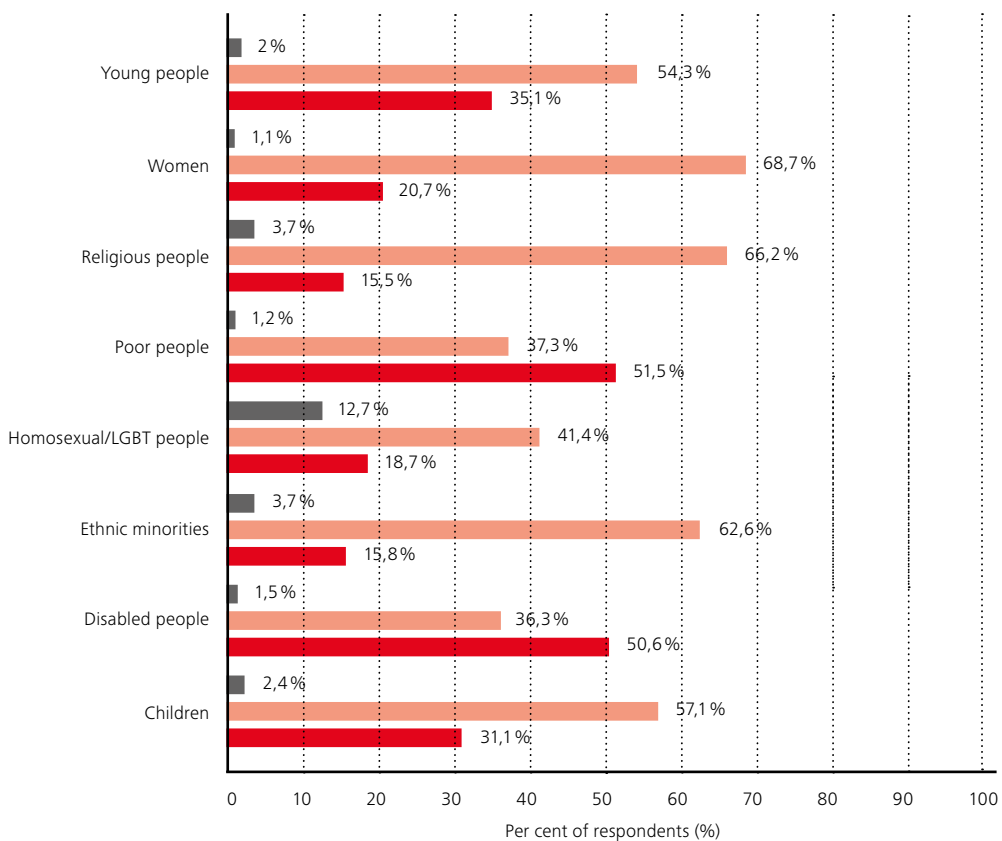


Source: FES data.

FIGURE 15: Please say whether, in your view, the following groups have not enough, enough or too many rights in your country



Russia 2019



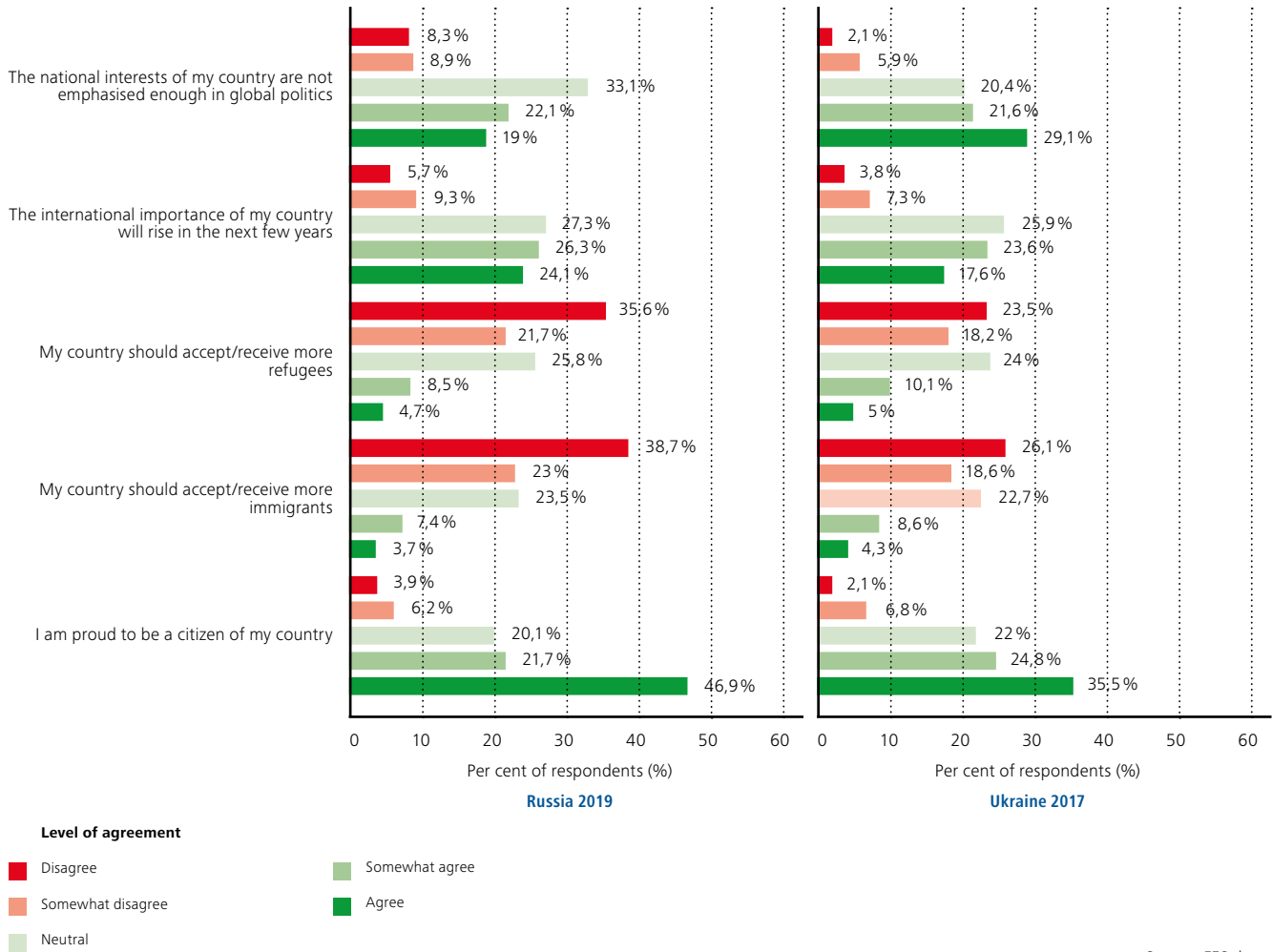
Ukraine 2017

Level of agreement

- Too many rights
- Enough rights
- Not enough rights

Source: FES data.

FIGURE 16: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?



should be accepted, although this was significantly more pronounced in Russia in 2019. Furthermore, young people tend to be proud of being a citizen of their country, a view that is again more pronounced in Russia. Compared with data from the World Values Survey, the broader population of Russians expresses slightly higher levels of national pride, with 90 per cent stating that they are quite or very proud to be Russians. By comparison, that value is at 70 per cent in Germany and 60 per cent in the United States.

The relationship between Ukraine and Russia has gone from bad to worse during the 2000s. The Russian annexation of Crimea

and the war in Ukraine’s Eastern territories led to sanctions being imposed on Russia by Western countries and increasing hostility between Ukraine and Russia. FES data reveal that young Ukrainians overwhelmingly (75 per cent) oppose the annexation, whereas 66 per cent of young Russians stated in 2019 that they would not support the return of Crimea, even if sanctions were lifted. Young Ukrainians do not, however, perceive the conflict with Russia as being an immediate threat to their own living conditions, however.

5

REMAINING CONNECTED FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ENDS

Social media have become ever more important in young people's lives, whether for socialising with friends, spending leisure time or being politically active. Covid-19 is likely to have increased social media's importance ever further, as a growing number of social interactions needed to be moved online, notably in Moscow, where the restrictions related to the pandemic were for some time particularly strict. Online socialisation might increasingly come to substitute for offline interaction with – at the moment – unclear implications for young people's lives.

Interaction via various social media platforms is facilitated by relatively good internet coverage across the region. Already at the time of the surveys, nearly all young Russians stated that they had internet at least daily, and more than 93 per cent of Ukrainians. Mobile internet in particular is today widely available, with some studies suggesting, for instance, that in 2019 nearly 90 per cent of Russians under the age of 45 had regular internet access.¹⁹ The value has usually been even higher in Belarus and Ukraine.²⁰ As the internet has spread, TV has become largely irrelevant for young people. The generation gap in that regard is considerable and raises questions about the extent to which it means that the young and the old live in separate worlds. For instance, a Ukrainian study found in 2018 that 90 per cent of people aged 51 or more use TV as their main source of information. Although 65 per cent of 18–35 year olds Ukrainians mentioned TV, they also stated that they use various internet sources alongside it, unlike the older generations.²¹

It would require a separate study to seek to understand how young people spend their time online. In the FES data, several

questions were asked in that regard (Figure 17). In 2019, over 80 per cent of young Russians and in 2017 around 60 per cent of young Ukrainians used the internet for social interactions 'often', defined here as at least once a week. Social interaction is the number one reason for using the internet and the frequency is likely to have increased since the survey was conducted. At the same time, given the increasing diversity of social media also for entertainment, it might be worth investing more time in that specific component of young lives. Interestingly, activities such as banking or online shopping received the lowest scores, but in the meantime these areas have evolved further, with the advent of delivery services, a variety of online shopping platforms and the facility of online banking.

In an effort to understand more deeply the relevance of internet use for social interactions, it seems promising to explore the role played by the various types of social media in specific areas of young people's lives. This encompasses such aspects as the consumption of news, shopping habits, communicating and socialising with friends, entertainment, and more. Moreover, social media is a key vehicle in facilitating the increasing polarisation of societies across the globe. Another important question concerns the extent to which young people are living in homogenous bubbles (so-called 'filter bubbles') on social media. Also, how often do they encounter conflicting views regarding their consumption choices, family and social views, and how do they deal with these frustrations? Another question concerns the extent to which the border between the online and offline worlds is fluid; to what extent do young people consider online contacts to be reliable

FIGURE 17: How often do you use the internet for the following purposes?

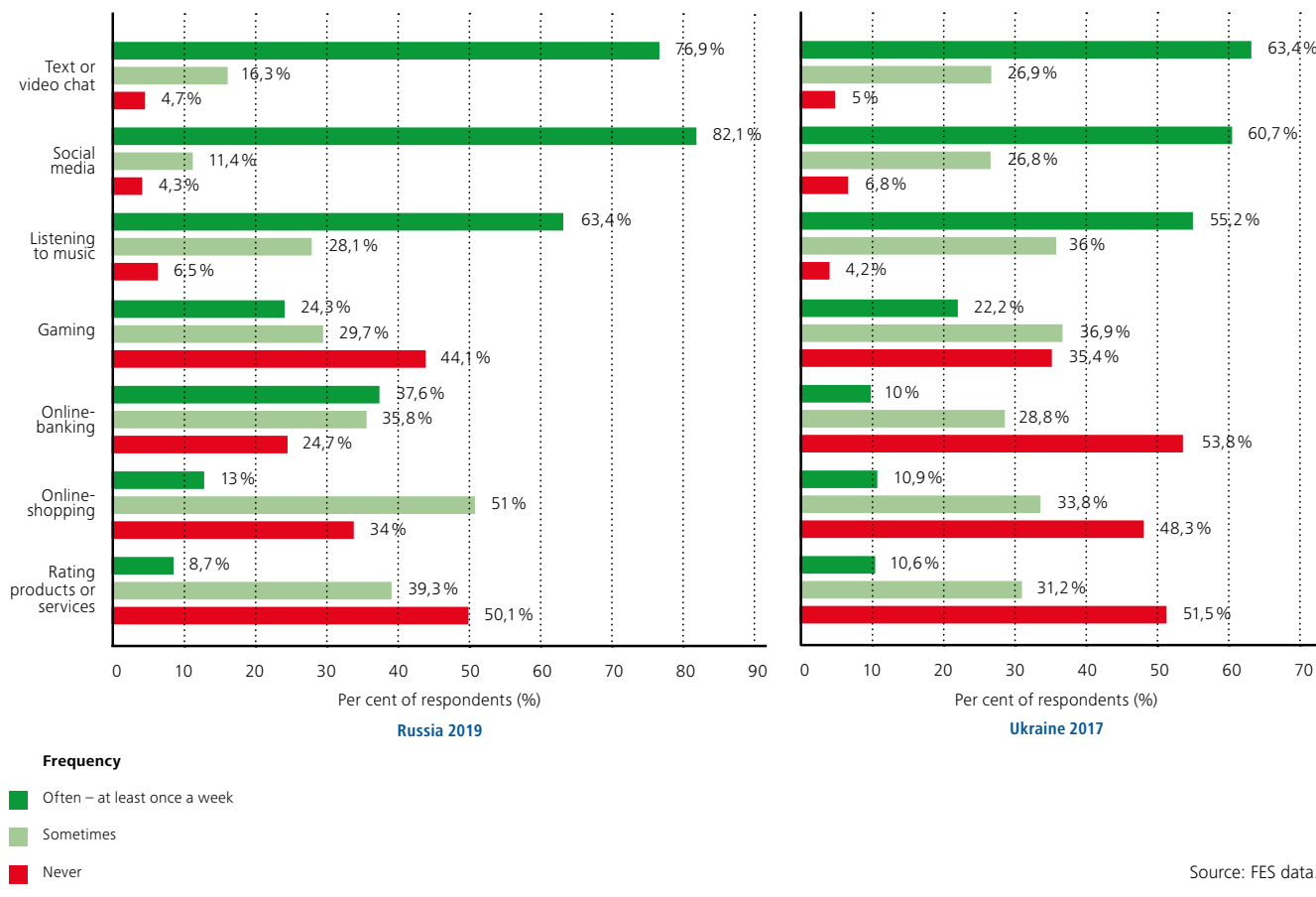
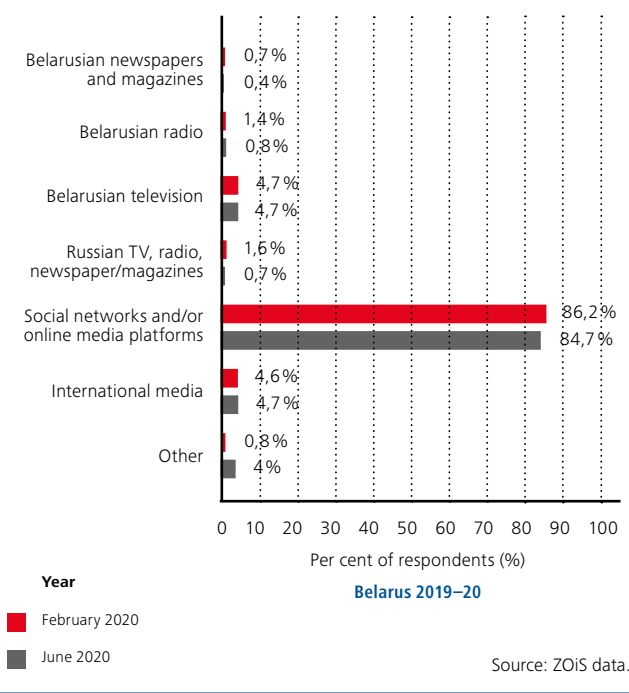


FIGURE 18: From what source of information do you most often learn about news, events from the life of your region, country, world in the first place?

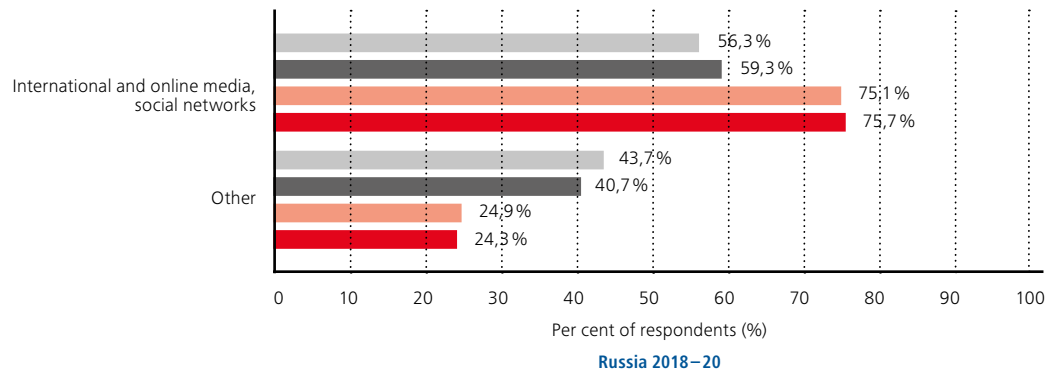


beyond the online interaction. Lastly, the world of social media platforms has also evolved rapidly in recent years. But it still remains somewhat unclear what kind of young people use which platforms and for what ends. This diversity of social media should receive greater attention in a study of young people in 2021.

Alongside its social function, young people use the internet for obtaining political information. The shift in that regard over the past five years is striking. Data generated by ZOiS among young people in Belarus and Russia convey that strongly. In Belarus, around 90 per cent of young people rely on *online or international* media, which is primarily the news portal tut.by, independent Telegram and Instagram feeds, but also YouTube (Figure 18). In Russia, the value stands at 75 per cent, with no difference between settlement sizes, but a remarkable increase from 2019 to 2020 (Figure 19). Compared with data from the World Values Survey, there is a pronounced generation gap in the use of social media for political information, with less than one-third of the Russian population using it for that purpose.

Media consumption is moreover an important component for understanding many other characteristics of young people. For example, those who still rely on TV express greater trust in state institutions and have more conservative social outlooks. At the same time, Russia in particular has caught up and is trying to create attractive web content for young people. It remains largely underexplored how far the state-controlled penetration of the internet goes and what young people make of it. But its existence

FIGURE 19: From what source of information do you most often learn about news and events from your region or country or the world in the first place?



Source: ZOI5 data.

raises the question of the extent to which young people tend to trust prima facie independent online media more than traditional media, and whether the strategic manipulation of web content might create an opportunity for autocratic regimes to exercise firmer control over their populations. It seems therefore promising to further explore the aspect of news consumption, trust in different outlets, but also how young people obtain information about the world around them. One way of doing this would be

to take a precise event that had occurred over the past six months and examine the extent to which young people had been following the topic via social media, using a four-point scale (a lot, a little, not much, not at all) and the different social media feeds that they used. A likely topic in that regard would be Covid-19, which has affected countries across the globe, has seen a significant amount of disinformation and would allow for a meaningful comparison.

6

MOBILITY: EXPERIENCES AND ASPIRATIONS

Mobility is a crucial issue that divides people both between and within generations. Young people are generally more likely to have travelled abroad than older people, and they have different attitudes to travel. In other words, both experiences and states of mind differ between young and old. Having said that, young people are not homogenous: better off young people residing in capital cities are more likely to have experience of going abroad and also more likely to express a desire to leave their country of residence. They are also the ones with the resources to move.

The topic of mobility deserves attention for at least two reasons. First, the international contacts that mobility fosters have the potential to affect young people's political and social attitudes. International contacts therefore have a transformative component also on those who stay put. Second, emigration has put huge pressure on several post-Soviet countries, raising concerns about brain drain and future labour shortages.

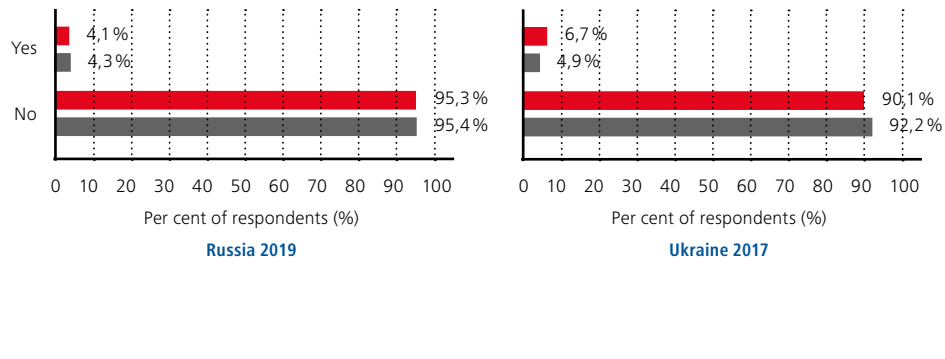
According to FES data, a small fraction of young Ukrainians and Russians have had international experience for learning or training purposes and only slightly more have been away from their native country for more than six months (Figure 20). Young Ukrainians living in larger settlements are slightly more mobile than young Russians, but Russian-speaking Ukrainians are significantly less mobile. The ZOIS surveys ask about any kind of international travel experience during the past 12 months and find that nearly one-third of young Russians have been abroad and more than 40 per cent of young Belarusians. Taken together, those young people who stay in their respective countries are therefore

remarkably mobile, but to date this is rather for short-term travel, such as holidays, visits to family members and seasonal labour.

The data raise the question of what kind of mobility young people engage in. In order to unpack the impact of different forms of mobility it would be necessary to know more about young people's travel destinations and the reasons for their travel. Spending holidays in Egypt or Thailand has a different impact on political or social attitudes than visiting friends studying in Poland or Lithuania. This in turn differs from visiting family members living in Germany or Great Britain.

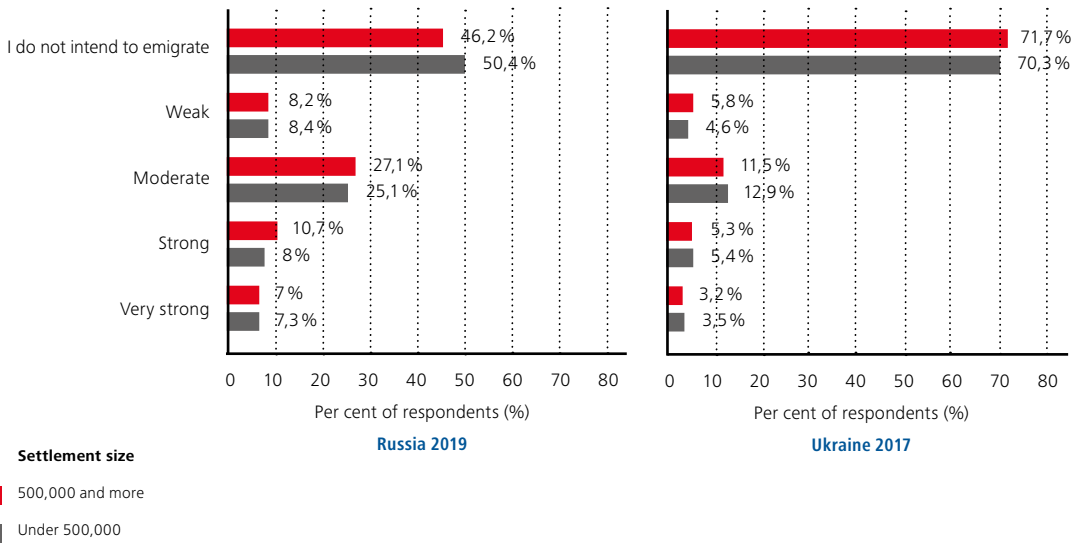
The desire to *emigrate* (Figure 21) is an invaluable indication of the extent to which a country has been able to provide young people with a compelling vision for the future. In 2019, some attention was given to the fact that the desire to emigrate from Russia was extremely pronounced among young people, with 44 per cent stating that they wanted to leave.²² The FES data similarly show that in Russia in 2019 only around 50 per cent of young people had no intention of leaving their country, in contrast to Ukraine, where the value was more than two-thirds for young people in 2017. Indeed, the FES data find that more than one-quarter of young Russians expressed a moderate and around 18 per cent a (very) strong desire to emigrate. For further comparison, the ZOIS surveys ask about respondents' desire to leave their place of residence (therefore including domestic mobility), and adds a question about place of destination. In Belarus, that value is slightly higher than in Russia, with around 60 per cent intending to move. Migration intention is generally predicted by younger age, and domestic mobility by lower wealth and living outside the capital.

FIGURE 20: Have you been away from your native country for six months?



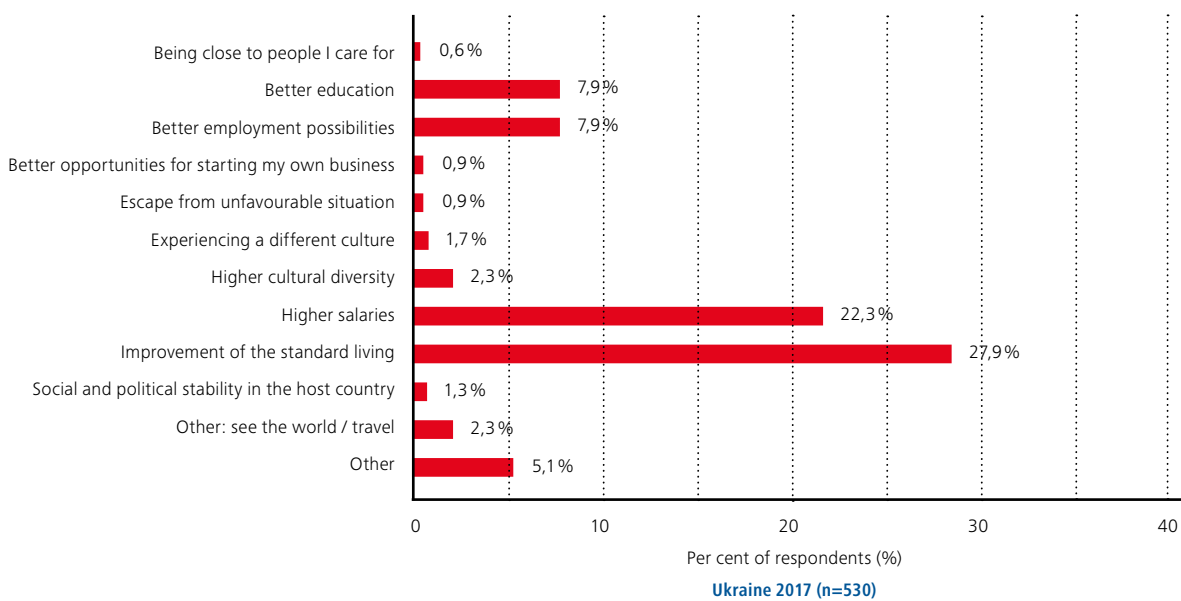
Source: FES data.

FIGURE 21: How strong is your desire to move to another country for more than six months (emigrate)?



Source: FES data.

FIGURE 22: What is the main reason why you would like to move to another country?



Source: ZOiS data.

ZOiS surveys conducted in Belarus and Russia show moreover the persistently strong attraction of EU countries and the United States or Canada for young Belarusians. Young Russians are somewhat more attracted by the possibility to move within Russia itself, which clearly indicates the differed possibilities available in these countries.

Knowing the reasons for potential emigration is important if one wants to understand present political and social shortcomings and strengths. This certainly is a somewhat broad and hypothetical question, and ultimately it remains difficult to gauge exactly what respondents have in mind. The question nevertheless provides important insights into what young people perceive as potential threats to their standard of living. A 2019 Gallup research project concluded that Putin's low job approval ratings were partly

to blame for the strong desire of young Russians to leave their country.²³ Along similar lines, a study by the Atlantic Council of young Russians who had left argued that young people with high cultural and social capital are increasingly emigrating. A growing number of those leaving also indicate political motivations, in particular since 2012.²⁴

In the Russian survey, FES offered a variety of reasons for *hypothetical* emigration and young people gave a diverse set of responses to factors related notably to education, as well as economic, cultural and political considerations (Figure 22). The answers in Ukraine were more clearly centred on economic aspects and the importance of socio-economic aspects is also what stands out most strongly in ZOiS surveys in Russia and Belarus.

7

EDUCATION: SATISFACTION AND FRUSTRATIONS

In principle, the education system should function as a critical force for individual social mobility. It prepares young people's entry into the labour market. Labour markets have been changing rapidly across the globe due to structural transformations and the as yet unknown impact of the pandemic. Moreover, education systems in post-Soviet countries have experienced profound transformations over recent decades and educational quality differs substantially within and between countries.

In addition to their social and economic roles, young people spend a fair share of their days in education. Their views on these institutions thus relate to an important part of their daily routine. The FES data include a variety of questions concerning the ways in which young people assess education, such as their *satisfaction* (Figure 23). This question reveals that young people were, on average, rather satisfied with their country's education, although a plurality of responses correspond to the medium level of satisfaction in both countries. A significant difference between small and larger settlements stands out, furthermore. In Russia, young people in smaller cities are more likely to be very satisfied, unlike in Ukraine.

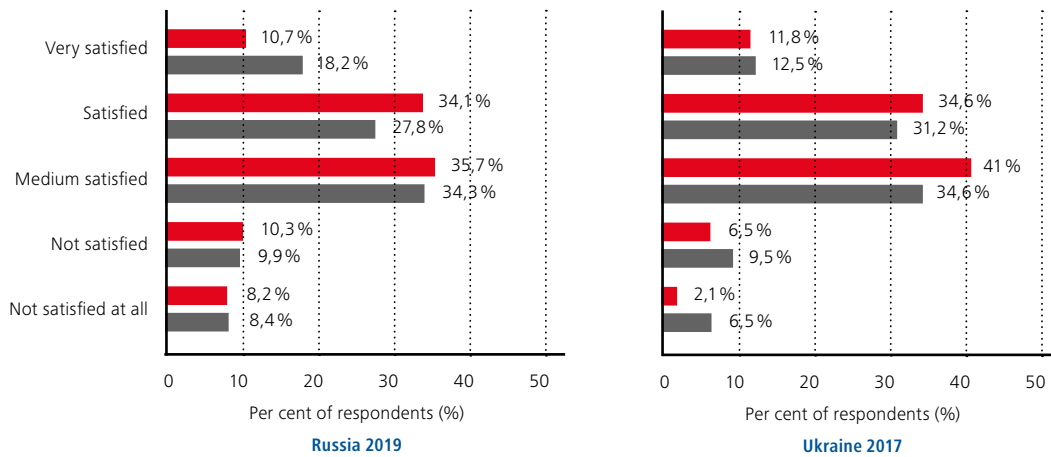
University education can also imply significant levels of stress and anxiety about one's ability to transition successfully to the labour market. Under the current and upcoming economic difficulties exacerbated by Covid-19, this aspect is likely to become a profound concern for young people, linking with their political assessments and mobility aspirations. When young Ukrainians were asked in 2017, a plurality of them expressed the view that education is rather 'hard and stressful to some extent' and around

one quarter that education is 'easy and not particularly stressful' (Figure 24). In Russia, in 2019, more than half of young people considered their university or school to be easy. The level of stress among young Russians is higher among those who have higher educational ambitions and who are more certain that they are going to achieve their professional goals. In Ukraine, it is those who spend more time studying who declare higher levels of stress.

Another noteworthy cross-country difference is the ease with which respondents expect to find a job. The FES data show that Russians were more likely to be positive about it. Nearly 80 per cent stated that they believed it was going to be (very) easy. In Ukraine, only around 60 per cent had such a confident outlook. Moreover, young people living in cities with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants are more concerned about their future job prospects, also pointing to the increasingly deserted smaller settlements across the region. Under the current conditions, these numbers are likely to have developed further and it seems important to further investigate young people's outlook on their own professional futures in the current economic context. Given that economic considerations are the key driver of mobility aspirations, the relationship between education systems and labour market opportunities are of the utmost importance.

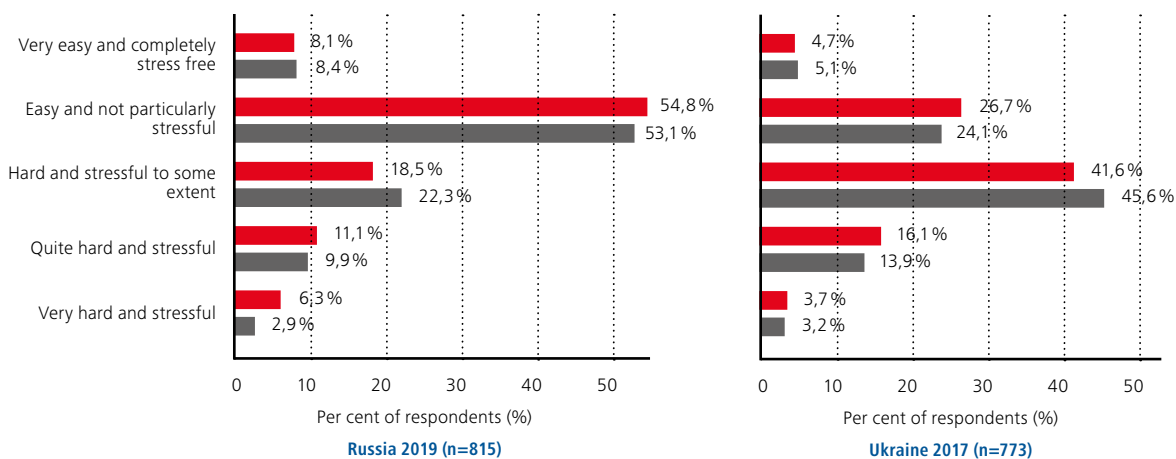
Bribery in various forms is relatively frequent in higher education in several post-Soviet countries. It is an experience young people encounter when accessing higher education but also during their university trajectory. In particular, one-on-one exams imply that oversight over how grades are given is relatively difficult.

FIGURE 23: How satisfied are you generally with the quality of education in your country?



Source: FES data.

FIGURE 24: In your opinion, what is everyday life in your school/university like?



Source: FES data.

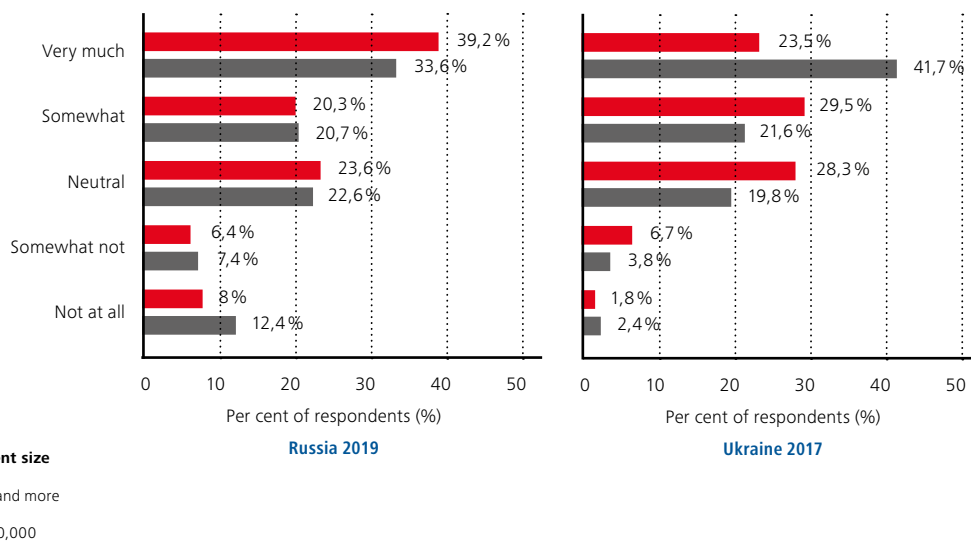
Degrees of corruption vary between countries, specific universities and subjects, but several studies show that students see the existence of bribery as a normal part of their educational trajectory.²⁵ In the early 2000s, corruption was concentrated in the university admission system. In response, Russia and Ukraine both introduced standardised state exams, but it remains unclear whether these have in fact decreased the level of corruption, given that the culture of corruption tends to be deeply engrained in an institute's ethos, which is not easily addressed through regulations imposed from above.

The FES survey enquired into the *buying* of exams as one specific form of bribery (Figure 25). A majority of respondents in Ukraine and Russia very much or somewhat agree that this takes place. In Ukraine, it is particularly those living in smaller cities who

consider it to be very much part of their educational experience, whereas in Russia there is hardly any difference by settlement size. In Russia, nearly 20 per cent of respondents think that it is only somewhat of a problem or even none at all. In both countries, better educated young people state that exams and grades can be bought, which might point to their more extensive involvement in higher education and therefore also their more likely contact with corruption.

A comparison of the attained and aspired-to levels of education in both countries reveals that more than 70 per cent of young Russians and Ukrainians desire some kind of university degree (BA, MA); only a small share see a PhD as desirable, or completing vocational school. In Russia, women tend to have a higher level of achieved and desired education, whereas in Ukraine, men stand

FIGURE 25: Do you agree that there are cases of grades and exams being 'bought' in institutes/universities in your country?



Source: FES data.

out in that regard. Also, higher household wealth relates to higher levels of education in both countries. Young Russians and Ukrainians are fairly certain that they will attain their desired

level of education. In 2019, particularly young people in Russia stated that they were (very) sure about realising their educational ambitions.

8

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUES

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, the arrival of market economies and international opening, social and religious values and identities have also been significantly affected. Identities have shifted profoundly and the FES survey enquired into several aspects in that regard, notably by providing a list of five possible *identity categories* (Figure 26). The national, the regional and the local dimensions are clearly the most relevant identity dimensions for young people, who tend – at more than two-thirds – to completely identify with these categories. Much less prominent is the idea of the ‘world citizen’, chosen by around one-third of young respondents; the category ‘European’ receives very low scores among Russian citizens, although around one-third of young Ukrainians state that they completely agree with it. Looking more closely, among Russian young people, the younger ones are more likely to select ‘world’ or ‘European citizen’. The national/regional/local identity markers are more often chosen by women, older, more religious and less educated people. In Ukraine, religiosity, self-identifying as a Ukrainian speaker, living in a larger city, and being younger predict that someone will see themselves as European or world citizen, whereas living in a small city is linked to identification with national/local identity. An analysis of the correlations of the different responses reveals that young people do not necessarily see these understandings of identity as contradictory and instead several identify with their locality, as well as with Europe or the wider world.

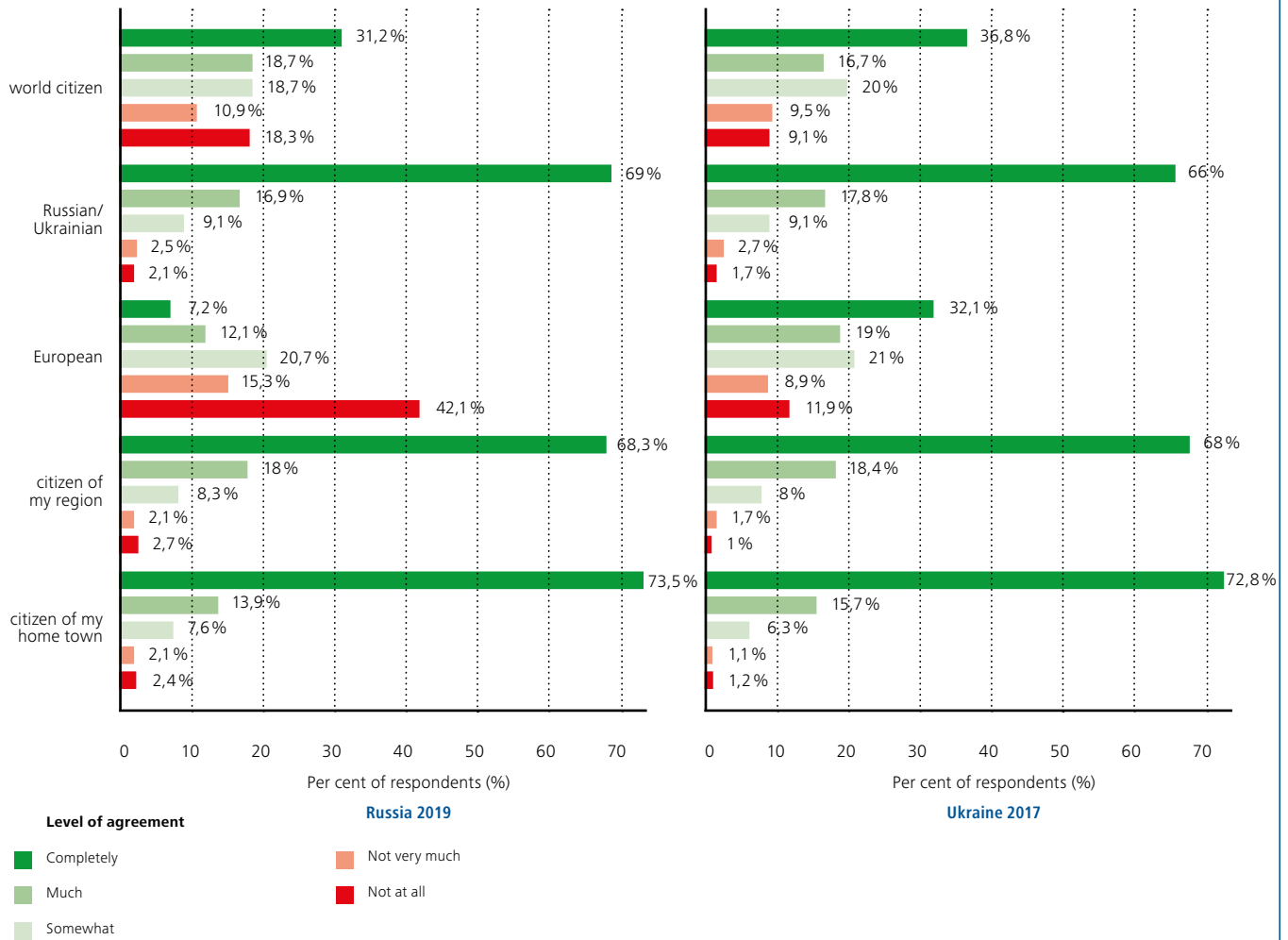
The ways in which young people in Belarus and Ukraine relate to Europe and Russia is moreover important for understanding what kind of foreign policy they find desirable. Research on Ukraine

since 2018 has identified that there are significant differences when it comes to the extent to which Ukrainians believe their country has more in common with Europe or Russia. The dividing line of geography has persisted, with people in the country’s West being significantly more pro-European and those in the South and East more pro-Russian.²⁶ Geographical differences in views on Russia and Europe are also important for young people in Belarus, although between 2019 and 2020 a marked shift occurred away from desiring closer relations with Russia to a desire for more cooperation with Europe.²⁷

Looking more closely and asking about the extent to which particular considerations are important for them personally, one can identify important similarities across the two countries (Figure 27). Young people attach significant importance to their personal relations (friends and family), but also value economic and more personal aspects, such as starting a family and having children. An analysis of correlations reveals a strong dependence between more individualistic values (looking good, being rich, branded clothes) and family-oriented values (marriage and having kids).

Looking at what kind of people are seen as desirable in a person’s *neighbourhood* is a revealing way of assessing the extent to which societal discourse stigmatises certain groups (Figure 28). The basic trends in Ukraine and Russia are similar, although there are remarkable differences in degree. Homosexuals, Roma, ex-prisoners and drug addicts receive far more negative scores in Russia than in Ukraine. Other groups – such as refugees, families (from Western Europe), and students – are the objects of rather mixed views. Some previous research has argued that notably outside

FIGURE 26: How much do you see yourself as a ...?



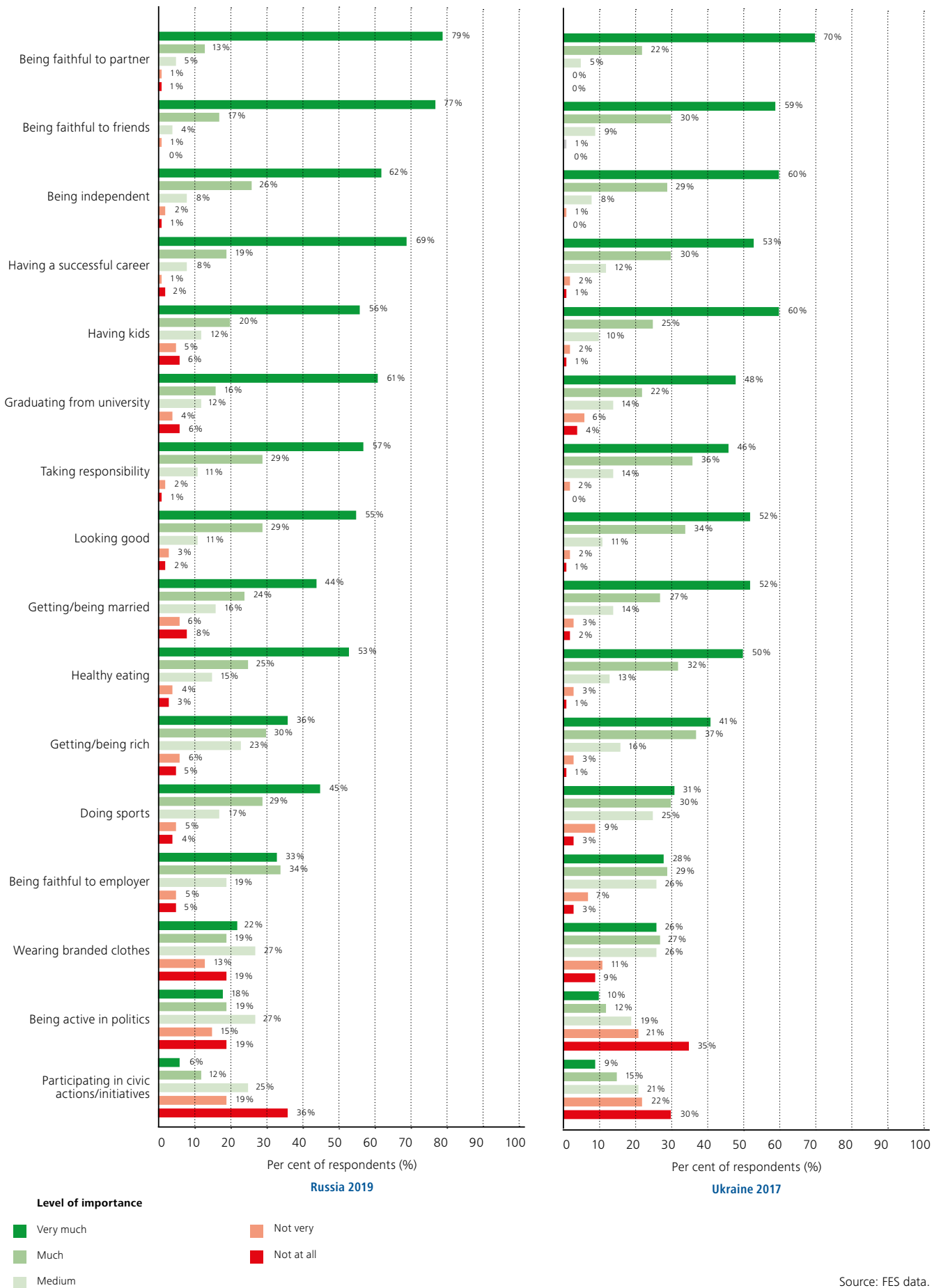
Source: FES data.

Moscow xenophobia towards internal ethnic minorities, such as Roma and Chechens, has declined slightly in the 2000s.²⁸ On that question the number of people who refused to respond is more-over indicative of the potential sensitivity of a topic. In Ukraine, around 11 per cent provided no answer regarding homosexuals, 7 per cent regarding Roma and 6 per cent regarding refugees, with a significantly lower non-response rate in Russia.

Religiosity is a key question that significantly divides the younger generation. The FES survey asked about the importance people attach to God on a 10-point scale, resulting in an average of

slightly lower than 6 in the larger settlements in Ukraine and Russia. The average value for smaller settlements in Ukraine is 6.9. The World Values Survey includes the same question and the average for the general population in Russia is 6.3, thus similar to that of the young. However, the views of young people are significantly more dispersed than those of the older generation: some are very strongly attached and others very much opposed to religion. In Ukraine, it is moreover male respondents who indicate a higher degree of religiosity, whereas in Russia, women are more religious.

FIGURE 27: How important are the following items to you?



Source: FES data.

FIGURE 28: How would you feel, if one of the following families or persons moved into your neighbourhood?



9

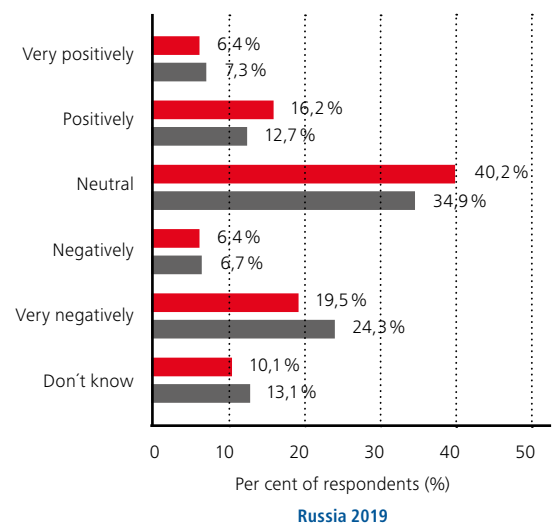
NOSTALGIA FOR THINGS GONE BY

Across the post-Soviet space and further afield, young people have become the key targets of official historical campaigns that are oftentimes nostalgic for the Soviet era, most notably the 'Great Patriotic War'.²⁹ In such government initiatives, less positive war-time experiences are usually whitewashed, for instance excluding local collaboration with the Nazis or anti-Semitism in partisan movements. Instead, governments in Belarus or Russia try to instrumentalise the war's memory to create a continuity between generations and transmit a sense of patriotism to the younger generation.

Views on the break-up of the Soviet Union tend to be even more diverse than those on the Second World War. Many young people have their own vivid memories of the immediate post-Soviet era and families have passed on a wide diversity of experiences, which makes these memories a topic of significant controversy. Belarusian and Russian politicians tend to see the break-up as a period of loss and a regrettable end to an era. The nostalgia generated at the political level can be identified among young Russians only to some extent, however. More than 20 per cent have (very) positive, and another quarter (very) negative attitudes towards the break-up (Figure 29). A plurality of respondents have neutral views, while older and more religious respondents are more likely to have negative views. Indeed, other research has similarly identified contradictory memories of the Soviet break-up among young Russians.³⁰

When it comes to Ukraine, the picture is markedly different. Although a plurality hold neutral views, more than one-third see the dissolution as overall a positive event, although a sizeable

FIGURE 29: What is your attitude to the break-up of the Soviet Union?



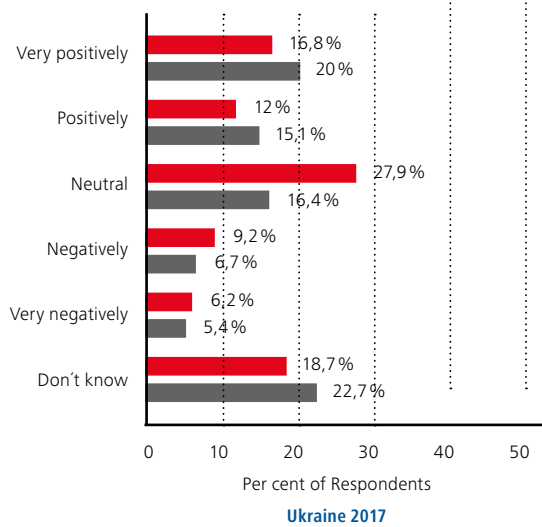
Settlement size

- 500,000 and more
- Under 500,000

Source: FES data.

share do not know what to respond (Figure 30). Other research similarly suggests a slightly more positive view among Ukrainian young people concerning the Soviet collapse and also claims that these views largely align with the population under 60 years of age.³¹

FIGURE 30: How do you regard the dissolution of the Soviet Union?



Settlement size

- 500,000 and more
- Under 500,000

Source: FES data.

Another way of enquiring into the extent to which young people might be nostalgic concerning the Soviet past is to ask them at what historical period they believe it was best to have lived. In 2020 and 2019, ZOiS data on young Russians show that roughly 40 per cent of young people find the present time as the most desirable era, with around 15 per cent selecting the period after the 'Great Patriotic War'. In general, men and older respondents are more likely to select the Soviet era. This potential longing for the allegedly stable and somewhat romanticised Soviet past seems, again, of particular interest in the current economic and political situation, which does not satisfy many young people. It might therefore be worth addressing in future surveys as young people's assessments of the Soviet past are likely to have evolved in recent times.

10

YOUTH IN TRANSITION: CONCLUDING REMARKS

What, in conclusion, can one say about where young people stand in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus? A number of concluding observations emerge from the above discussion.

Even if young people do not self-identify in surveys as being politically active or interested, they may at times take to the streets in unexpected ways and numbers. The frustration with the political class in their respective countries is significant and the levels of trust that presidents have still enjoyed over the past five years has more recently been eroding, or has become rather fragile. In the context of the global pandemic, political trust is important for young people everywhere and different experiences and consequences of the pandemic will leave their traces on how young people relate to their countries. Already before 2020, trust in key state institutions had decreased widely, and very often only the army remains a (somewhat) more positively regarded institution by a certain type of young person. Tellingly, the political views of young Ukrainians and Russians are on average rather conservative, which becomes clear notably in relation to views on abortion or LGBT rights. The differences within the young cohort are important, however, with significant divergence between rural and urban, levels of education, and also gender.

Social media, clearly, increasingly define young people's social and political views worldwide. While they connect young people from different places, they also create new borders as people engage mainly with like-minded social and political groups. The importance of social media for socialisation is significant insofar as the online and offline domains jointly determine how young people communicate and relate to one another, raising questions

about social media bubbles and concerns about new forms of exclusion and discrimination. But social media can also have an empowering effect on young people, who may gain information independent of state-controlled news outlets. Indeed, social media is central to the political worldviews of young people and many express great trust in it, perceiving it as more authentic, diverse and not profit-driven. The low quality of official media across the region only furthers this impression. However, states are not ignorant of the political importance of social media and one can expect increasing efforts to penetrate young minds with state propaganda diffused via Telegram channels and other means.

Young people are more mobile than the older generations, but among those who have not left yet, short-term mobility prevails. At the moment, few of those living in any of the three countries have long-term experience abroad, which might point to the limited extent of circular migration. Emigration is frequently desired, but this wish is much more pronounced in Russia than in Ukraine. It remains unclear how the events in Belarus will impact on the desire for international mobility there. Looking ahead, young people's mobility has become more challenging with Covid-19 – given the link between mobility and political attitudes, this reduced exposure to different worldviews will also leave its traces on the attitudes of the young generation.

In the education sector, corruption is a serious issue for young people and it seems difficult to change, despite various reform attempts. In addition, the levels of stress that young people declare are low and they express great certainty that they will find jobs. The increasing social polarisation in countries in the region, but

also the severe economic impact of Covid-19 might change those assessments, however, and it seems plausible that young people have more recently come to look quite differently on their personal prospects and their country's future. Young people in post-Soviet countries are unlikely to differ much in this respect from young people elsewhere, however.

When it comes to political engagement, young people tend to withdraw from the ritualised elections in their countries, but take an interest when there is a genuine choice to be made, as in Belarus in 2020. Young people are finding new forms of political involvement, however, and are more likely to sign petitions, to demonstrate and to be politically active online, for example, via social media. These changed practices of political engagement are a promising avenue for involving young people in public affairs

beyond the state, but they are also challenging the ways in which we understand the relationship between politics and society and how politicians can succeed or fail in the present period.

Young Belarusians, Ukrainians and Russians are a diverse and complex generation. Surveys about their attitudes can help us to understand where various types of young people stand and to appreciate commonalities between them and young people in other parts of Europe – such as in their social media use, their lower electoral turnout or higher international mobility – but also differences, such as political values, interpersonal trust or questions of identity. These views of young people are important for reaching an understanding of how political, economic and social developments impact on people's expectations, hopes and fears in society.

FOOTNOTES

- [1] The author is grateful for excellent research assistance provided by Taylor Whitstell. Opinions expressed in this paper are those solely of the author.
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From what source of information do you most often learn about news and events from your region or country or the world in the first place?
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Have you been away from your native country for six months?
- 28 FIGURE 21:
How strong is your desire to move to another country for more than six months (emigrate)?
- 28 FIGURE 22:
What is the main reason you would like to move to another country?
- 32 FIGURE 23:
How satisfied are you generally with the quality of education in your country?
- 32 FIGURE 24:
In your opinion, what is everyday life in your school/university like?
- 33 FIGURE 25:
Do you agree that there are cases of grades and exams being 'bought' in institutes/universities in your country?
- 36 FIGURE 26:
How much do you see yourself as a ...?
- 37 FIGURE 27:
How important are the following items to you?
- 38 FIGURE 28:
How would you feel, if one of the following families or persons moved into your neighbourhood?
- 41 FIGURE 29:
What is your attitude to the break-up of the Soviet Union?
- 42 FIGURE 30:
How do you regard the dissolution of the Soviet Union?

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