

YOUNG WORLDS?

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

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Young people's social outlook and political involvement in and beyond post-Soviet countries are diverse and sometimes contradictory. Some enjoy the opportunities of a globalised and borderless world, while others stay put, nostalgic for a past they have never experienced. Young faces are emblematic of the protest movements we are witnessing in countries such as Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. At the same time, young people are being mobilised in official movements aimed at stabilising the regime. This report sets out to assess our knowledge of young people's political and social attitudes by drawing on data obtained by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) from young people in Ukraine from July to August 2017, and in Russia from May to June 2019, as well as from several surveys undertaken by the Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) and other institutions.

What do young people make of politics?

- In 2017, the level of trust in core state institutions expressed by young Ukrainians – as well as by the broader population – was extremely low, with the army receiving the highest and political bodies – such as parliament or the national government – receiving the lowest scores. In 2019, trust in the same institutions in Russia was more divided, with the army – and in this case also the president – again receiving the most positive, and parliament and government the most negative score. This finding also holds for the broader population. While the level of trust elicited by an institution is indicative of the extent of its authority, trust remains a fragile commodity and, as the current Covid-19 context has shown, one that can be quickly eroded.
- Trust in international institutions is divided among young Ukrainians, and particularly negative among young Russians, exposing divisions in the underlying geopolitical orientation of both countries and important differences within Ukraine itself.

- Levels of interpersonal trust are highest for the immediate family, but markedly lower for extended family and friends. Here, the views of young people are very similar to those of the general population. Trust in people of other religions or nationalities, and in people with different political views, is neutral or negative. In both countries, trust in politicians is predominantly negative – one aspect of a general disconnect between young people and political leaders.
- Interest in politics is low in both Russia and Ukraine, with a plurality of respondents in both countries expressing no interest at all in political affairs, whether domestic or international. As illustrated by current events in Belarus, however, apparent acquiescence can rapidly give way to protest, given the right circumstances. In Belarus, the mishandling of Covid-19, a pre-electoral contest that politicised the entire population and blatant electoral fraud certainly contributed to young people's willingness to lead protests, while also encouraging broader parts of society to join in. Thus, the low levels of political discussion identified in surveys in Russia and Ukraine can quickly become volatile once a potential for change is sensed.
- One should also note the differences in young people's political engagement in Ukraine and Russia. Young Russians are more likely to have signed petitions and participated in civil society organisations than their peers in Ukraine. Around 8–9 per cent in both countries have changed their consumption behaviour for political or economic reasons, and a similar percentage of young Russians have participated in political activities online. Young people are politically involved in very diverse ways, challenging the idea of a disaffected generation.

How do young people connect with the outside world for social and political ends?

- Social media have become increasingly important in young people's lives, whether for socialising with friends, leisure time or political engagement. As internet use has spread, TV has become largely irrelevant for young people, a generational characteristic that distinguishes them from older generations and echoed in most countries across the globe.
- Alongside the internet's social function, young people also use it to obtain political information, a tendency that has increased dramatically over the past five years. In 2020, around 90 per cent of young Belarusians and 75 per cent of young Russians rely on national and international online media, irrespective of settlement size. This is a significant increase compared with 2019. Comparisons with the general population emphasise a profound generational divide here, too.

How mobile are young people?

- Young people are more likely to have travelled abroad than older generations, and have more positive attitudes to travel. This is particularly true of more affluent young people residing in capital cities, who are also more likely to express a desire to leave their country of residence, while also having the means to do so. The international contacts that mobility fosters have the potential to affect young people's political and social attitudes. In several post-Soviet countries, high levels of emigration have raised concerns about a brain drain and future labour shortages.
- Only a small fraction of young Ukrainians and Russians have studied or trained abroad, and only around 5 per cent have been away from their native country for more than six months. Young Ukrainians living in larger places of residence are slightly more mobile than young Russians; however, Russian-speaking Ukrainians are significantly less mobile. Short-term mobility is significantly higher. Nearly a third of young Russians and over 40 per cent of young Belarusians have been abroad in the 12 months leading up to the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020.
- The desire to emigrate is indicative of the extent to which a country provides young people with a compelling vision for the future. Around 60 per cent of young Belarusians stated a desire to leave their place of residence, both within the country and abroad – a value slightly higher than in Russia. Young Russians, on the other hand, are significantly more likely to desire emigration than their peers in Ukraine. Migration intention is generally predicted by younger age, and domestic mobility by lower wealth and residence outside the capital. EU countries, the United States and Canada remain attractive for young people across the region. Young Russians are also attracted by domestic mobility.

How do young people assess their education system?

- The education system should enable individual social mobility and prepare young people's entry into the labour market. In post-Soviet countries, the rapidly changing realities of the labour market have been accompanied by profound transformations in the education system. Overall, however, young people remain satisfied.
- Nearly 80 per cent of young Russians stated that they believed it was going to be (very) easy for them to find a job. In Ukraine, only around 60 per cent had such a confident outlook. Young people living in cities with fewer than 500,000 inhabitants are more concerned about their future job prospects. Given the far-reaching economic impact of the pandemic, confidence is likely to sink.

- Bribery is relatively frequent in higher education in several post-Soviet countries. It is something young people encounter when applying to enter higher education and throughout their university careers. The success of attempts to address endemic corruption remains unclear. A majority of respondents in Ukraine and Russia partially or fully agree that the buying of exam results – as one specific form of corruption – exists. Ukrainian respondents living in smaller cities in particular consider it to be a common occurrence.
- Education can give rise to significant levels of stress and anxiety about one's ability to transition successfully to the labour market. Economic difficulties exacerbated by Covid-19 are likely to amplify such concerns, with implications for young people's political assessments and mobility aspirations. When asked in 2017, a plurality of young Ukrainians stated that education was 'hard and stressful', compared with around a quarter who considered it to be 'easy and not particularly stressful'. In 2019, more than half of young Russians considered university or school to be easy.
- The stigmatisation of certain groups within societal discourse also affects the extent to which they are accepted within a community. Trends in Ukraine and Russia are similar in this regard, although homosexuals, Roma, ex-prisoners and drug addicts encounter more hostility in Russia than in Ukraine. Other groups – such as refugees, families from Western Europe, and students – are the objects of rather mixed views.

What do young people make of history?

- Young people have become the key targets of official historical campaigns that often subscribe to a nostalgic view of the Soviet era, notably the 'Great Patriotic War'. In these initiatives, less positive wartime experiences are usually whitewashed, and the war's memory is instrumentalised as a way to create continuity between generations and to transmit a sense of patriotism to the younger generation.
- Young people's views on the breakup of the Soviet Union tend to be even more diverse than those on the Second World War. Many have their own memories of the immediate post-Soviet era, and families have passed on diverse experiences. In Russia, over 20 per cent have (very) positive and another quarter (very) negative attitudes to the breakup. A plurality of young respondents have neutral views, while older and more religious respondents are more likely to have negative views. The picture in Ukraine is markedly different. Although a plurality have neutral views, more than a third see the dissolution as a positive event. A large percentage of young people have no clear opinion on the topic.

Young Belarusians, Ukrainians and Russians are a diverse and complex generation. Surveys about their attitudes help us to gain a better understanding of where they stand and to ascertain both similarities (social media use, low electoral turnout, high international mobility) and differences (political values, interpersonal trust, questions of identity) with young people in other parts of Europe. These insights help us to understand how political, economic and social developments impact on young people's expectations, hopes and fears.

What values and identities do young people express?

- The breakup of the Soviet Union and the ensuing political and social transformations have significantly affected identities and social and religious values. Young people identify first and foremost with their locality, region and nationality. More than two-thirds identify fully with these categories. Much less prominent is the idea of 'world citizen', chosen by around a third of young respondents. The idea of 'European citizen' received very low scores among Russian citizens, although around a third of young Ukrainians fully identify with this category.
- Among young Russians, the youngest group is more likely to select 'world citizen' or 'European citizen'. National/regional/local identities are generally selected by women or by older, more religious or less educated people. In Ukraine, religious affiliation, self-identifying as a Ukrainian speaker, living in a larger city and being younger predict identification as a European or world citizen, whereas living in a small city is linked with a national/local identity.
- Religiosity significantly divides the younger generation. Young people's religious views are significantly more varied than those of the older generation. Whereas some young people are very strongly attached to religion, others are very much opposed. On average, however, young people are slightly less religious than older generations.

FES YOUTH STUDIES

The “FES Youth Studies” is an international youth research project carried out in many countries in East, Southeast Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia. The main objective of the surveys has been to identify, describe and analyse attitudes of young people and patterns of behaviour in contemporary society.

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