

Russian Youth: Their Attitude to the Ruling Elite and Political Processes

by Denis Volkov

ABSTRACT

Young Russians are different from older generations. They are confident Internet users and thus have access to independent media and are exposed to free information and a variety of opinions. They show greater disillusionment with authorities, a greater degree of Westernisation of their tastes and more openness to the world. These differences are well observed in the results of the long-term sociological surveys undertaken by the Levada-Center, an independent polling centre in Moscow. Amidst the ongoing conflict between Russia and the West, Russian youth finds itself pressured between the Russian authorities on the one side, and sanctions from Western countries aimed at isolating Russia from the outside world.

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keywords

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by Denis Volkov*

1. Digital gap and freedom of information

Many researchers on Russian youth note that the most obvious difference between young Russians under 35 years of age and the older generations concerns the use of the Internet and channels of news consumption.¹ According to survey data, over the past decade, the use of television as a source of news in Russia has decreased by a quarter: from 90 to 65 per cent of Russians over 18 years of age.² On the contrary, consumption of news on the Internet has quadrupled (up to 40 per cent). This change is primarily due to young people who have mastered the Internet faster than older generations. Young Russians receive news mainly from the Internet: up to 70 per cent, compared to the older generations who predominantly use TV for these purposes. Young people in Russia are half as likely as older people to watch the news on TV and four times more likely to use social networks.

In focus groups, young respondents from large cities often admit that they hardly watch TV. Some do not have a TV set at home. Outside the biggest cities young people still continue to watch TV, but still less often than the older generations. Young respondents explain that television is uncomfortable to watch, and there

¹ Vadim Radayev, "Millennials Compared to Previous Generations: An Empirical Analysis" [in Russian], in *Sociological Studies*, No. 3 (2018), p. 15-33, <http://socis.isras.ru/article/7095>; Lev Gudkov et al., "Generation Z: Young People of the Putin Era" [in Russian], in *Vestnik obshchestvennogo mneniya* [The Russian Public Opinion Herald], No. 1-2 (2020), p. 21-121, <https://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/vom1-2020.pdf>.

² Denis Volkov et al., "Russian Media Landscape – 2021" [in Russian], in *Levada-Center Analytical Reports*, 5 August 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=26213>.

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are suspicions that TV channels cover what is happening one-sidedly, imposing a point of view that is beneficial to the authorities. For the young, television is “not cool”, “TV is for the elderly”. In general, young Russians trust news on the Internet and social networks much more than is true for the older generation, who are just beginning to master the global web and treat it with distrust.

The rapid spread of social media in Russia, especially YouTube and Instagram, has contributed to the emergence of popular video blogs (vlogs) and blogger (vlogger) influencers over the past few years. Today, more than a third of Russian citizens regularly watch vlogs. No wonder that the majority of the audience of these resources are young people who access them 5–6 times more often than the older generation. The growing popularity of platforms for creating visual content on the Internet has allowed these platforms to compete for viewers with federal TV channels.

In turn, this attitude on the part of young people has allowed new independent politicians, activists and journalists to gain national recognition by millions of viewers. The new public figures are able to address audiences directly, bypassing the filters of state-controlled TV channels.

As a result, the picture formed by Russian television and by the Russian Internet has differed more and more. Young people and older people are increasingly using different sources of information, and their understanding and assessment of what is happening often diverge.

Thus, the older generation continues to admire President Vladimir Putin, Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu or well-known hosts on federal television channels such as Vladimir Solovyov and Dmitry Kiselev. All these figures enjoy great confidence, especially among older Russians. At the same time, young Russians in recent years have acquired new heroes such as vlogger Yuri Dud, who currently has ten million subscribers on YouTube, opposition politician Alexei Navalny, who has 6.5 million subscribers, or a young communist politician from Saratov, Nikolai Bondarenko, who has 1.7 million YouTube subscribers. These new public figures gained recognition through the social networks and attract primarily a young audience.

However, it would be wrong to say that all Russian youth are in opposition to the authorities. President Putin remains the most popular politician among young people, although this support is two times lower than in the older generation. Besides, the majority of young Russians are much more interested in non-political stories and the heroes of non-politics. One indicator of fame and attractiveness can be the number of followers on these figures' Instagram accounts. The undoubted leaders among them are socialite Olga Buzova, who has 23 million followers on Instagram, fighter Khabib Nurmagomedov (33 million), socialite Nastya Ivleeva (18 million) and others. This is a reflection of the main interests of young people: music, cinema, sports and entertainment.

It is also worth noting that the primary sources of information that younger Russians use on the Internet are not the high-quality professional media, but news supplied by Yandex (news aggregator on the front page of a popular Russian search engine). In recent years Yandex was under criticism for giving in to governmental pressure to censor the news that is allowed on its frontpage.³ Russian authorities also tried for many years to curb the influence of the independent media on the Internet by putting many media and journalists into the register of foreign agents and by blocking Internet resources in Russia altogether. The latter process has only been exacerbated by the current conflict in Ukraine.⁴ In March 2022, after the leadership of Meta (Facebook and Instagram's parent company) decided not to block publications calling for the death of Russians, it was recognised as a terrorist organisation in Russia, and Facebook and Instagram were blocked altogether. After this was done the number of Russian users of these social networks began to decline.⁵ So even on the Internet the exposure of younger Russians to independent free media is limited by the efforts of the Russian authorities to curb the influence of the independent media, but also by the lack of interest on the part of many young Russians in political issues.

2. Political attitudes of Russian youth

Young people who are interested in politics are in the minority in their age group. Compared with the older generation, young people are half as likely to follow political news and discuss political issues with friends, and they participate in elections three times less often.⁶ Interest in politics usually awakens after the age of 30, when a person begins to live on their own and finds that they must solve everyday problems for themselves. However, among those young people who are still interested in politics, the ideas and assessments of what is happening have increasingly differed from the views of older Russians.

Only a few years ago young Russians were very loyal to the authorities, which is why they were often called "Putin's generation". But by 2018–19, a long decline in living standards and an increase in the retirement age led to rise of public discontent, disillusionment with the authorities and a willingness to protest. With younger Russians these changes took place faster, and disappointment in the authorities turned out to be stronger than among the older generations, apparently under the influence of free media and the independent politicians-video bloggers that we discussed earlier.

³ Denis Volkov et al., "Russian Media Landscape – 2021", cit.

⁴ Svetlana Reiter, "Toxic Assets", in *Meduza*, 6 May 2022, <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2022/05/06/toxic-assets>.

⁵ Reporters Without Borders, "Russia", in *2022 World Press Freedom Index. A New Era of Polarisation*, 2022, <https://rsf.org/en/country/russia>.

⁶ Levada-Center, "Internet, Social Networks, VPN", in *Levada-Center Press Releases*, 22 April 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=28029>.

Differences in the political views of young people and older generations first manifested themselves in 2018 in relation to Telegram blocking and criminal prosecutions for reposts in social networks, which Russian youth tended to condemn. By contrast, older Russians saw these bans as manifestations of state concern for the morality, morality and safety of their citizens. Today, history repeats itself: the current blocking of Instagram and Facebook is not supported primarily by young Russians.⁷ It is also reflected in attitudes towards the dispersal of the 2019 protests in Moscow, which were held in support of unregistered candidates for the elections to the Moscow City Duma. Opinion polls and focus groups in the regions then showed that younger Russians across the country were closely watching what was happening in the capital. In contrast with older generations, young Russians were much more sympathetic towards the protesters.

Again in 2020, the negative attitude towards the constitutional amendments that gave President Putin the right to be re-elected as president for two more terms was concentrated in the younger generation of Russians.⁸ On the contrary, it was the continued support for the regime among older people that provided the authorities with the desired result in the constitutional vote. The same year, young Russians were much more sympathetic towards the protesters in the Russian Far East⁹ and Belarus,¹⁰ than were the older ones; young people not only supported Navalny more often, but were also ready to believe that the Russian authorities were behind his poisoning.¹¹ In 2021, rallies in support of Navalny were also attended primarily by young people aged 20–35.¹²

In 2022, it was among young people from the largest Russian cities that disagreement with the “special military operation” in Ukraine was concentrated.¹³ Thus, young Russians today show unconditional support for the Russian “special military operation” in Ukraine two times less often than older ones (however,

⁷ Denis Volkov, “Disappointment without Consequences: Why Voters Are Not Interested in Duma Elections” [in Russian], in *Forbes*, 19 August 2021, <https://www.forbes.ru/obshchestvo/437461-razocharovanie-bez-posledstviy-pochemu-izbirateli-ne-zhdut-vyborov-v-dumu>.

⁸ Levada-Center, “Internet, Social Networks and Blocking”, in *Levada-Center Press Releases*, 27 May 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=28181>.

⁹ Lev Gudkov, “Who Voted for Amendments to the Constitution: Final Poll” [in Russian], in *Levada-Center Press Releases*, 7 August 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=23347>.

¹⁰ Denis Volkov, “Servant of the People: How Sergei Furgal Became One of the Presidential Candidates Suitable for Russians” [in Russian], in *Forbes*, 4 August 2020, <https://www.forbes.ru/obshchestvo/406349-sluga-naroda-kak-sergey-furgal-popal-v-chislo-podhodyashchih-dlya-rossiyan>.

¹¹ Denis Volkov, “Belarusian Mirror: Why the Events in Minsk Caused a Sharp Reaction in Russia” [in Russian], in *Forbes*, 7 September 2020, <https://www.forbes.ru/obshchestvo/408391-belorusskoe-zerkalo-pochemu-sobytiya-v-minske-vyzvali-ostruyu-reakciyu-v-rossii>.

¹² Levada-Center, “Navalny’s Poisoning”, in *Levada-Center Press Releases*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=24383>.

¹³ Aleksandra Arkhipova, Alexei Zakharov and Irina Kozlova, “Protest Mobilisation – 2021: Who Went to Protest and Why” [in Russian], in *Liberal Mission Foundation Expertises*, 7 September 2021, <https://liberal.ru/?p=31685>.

the overall support among young Russians is still high).¹⁴ Photographs from the few anti-war rallies in Russian cities, which invariably end in crackdowns, show a disproportionately high number of young faces. People from this social group made up a significant part of the Russians who fled abroad with the outbreak of hostilities.¹⁵

It is necessary to highlight that for all the noticeable opposition of young Russians towards the authorities, loyalists still quantitatively prevailed among Russian youth all this time. In addition,¹⁶ the violent crackdown on rallies in 2021–22, the removal of independent candidates from participation in the elections in 2021, the persecution of civil activists and the blocking of websites¹⁷ and social networks had a strongly depressing effect on young Russians. Young participants in focus groups said that they often feel powerless: “we can’t say anything”, “you have to sit, you have to be silent”, “you know that you can’t do anything”. Many have learned that participating in protest rallies can result in a heavy fine, administrative arrest or criminal prosecution. As one young respondent put it: for an open expression of protest “now mean[s] either a fine or jail”.¹⁸ Perhaps the same feeling of insecurity and powerlessness drove many young Russians to emigrate in the immediate aftermath of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in early 2022.¹⁹

3. Thoughts about leaving Russia

Young people in Russia were well known for their willingness to go and live abroad well before the current conflict. In recent years young Russians were several times more likely than older generations to wish to live abroad.²⁰ Among young respondents, residents of the capital and the largest Russian cities are most actively interested in moving to another country.

¹⁴ Denis Volkov, “Can You Trust Russia’s Public Support for a ‘Military Operation’ in Ukraine?”, in *Riddle*, 12 April 2022, <https://ridl.io/?p=14653>.

¹⁵ Levada-Center, “The Conflict with Ukraine”, in *Levada-Center Press Releases*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=27929>.

¹⁶ OK Russians, *Research: Anti-war Wave* [in Russian], March 2022, <https://research-march.okrussians.org>. See also Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation (ACCORD), *Russian Federation: Political Protests and Dissidence in the Context of the Ukraine Invasion*, Vienna, Austrian Red Cross/ACCORD, May 2022, https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/2073690/ACCORD-2022-05-Russian_Federation_Protesters_and_Dissidents.pdf.

¹⁷ RosKomSvoboda, More than 3,000 Websites Subjected to Military Censorship [in Russian], 5 May 2022, <https://roskomsvoboda.org/post/voennaya-cenzura-3000-saytov>.

¹⁸ Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov, “Will a New Generation of Russians Modernize Their Country?”, in *Carnegie Moscow Commentaries*, 4 February 2022, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/86355>.

¹⁹ According to some estimates, several hundred thousand people have left Russia since the beginning of conflict, and there were disproportionately many young people among them. See “RAEC Predicted the Departure of Up to 100 Thousand IT Specialists from Russia in April”, in *Interfax*, 22 March 2022, <https://www.interfax.ru/digital/830581>.

²⁰ Levada-Center, “Emigration Attitudes” [in Russian], in *Levada-Center Press Releases*, 6 April 2022, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=27902>.

However, it would be wrong to automatically turn all those thinking about life abroad into potential emigrants. Over the past three decades of regular sociological measurements, the number of people actually preparing to go abroad did not exceed 1 per cent of the country's population (at the beginning of observations, their number was closer to zero, in recent years it has been closer to 1 per cent; but among the youngest Russians it is consistently above 5 per cent). In other words, the desire to live abroad speaks not so much of the inevitability of departure, but of a person's fundamental openness to such an opportunity. Departure is considered as one of the possible life trajectories, which is not rejected in principle. Therefore, these sentiments should instead be interpreted as an indicator of the general openness of Russian society – primarily young Russians – to the bigger world.

Young Russians see Western countries as the main direction of their possible departure. In 2016, in answer to the open-ended question, young respondents named Germany, France, other EU countries or the United States as the most attractive destinations. The same countries were named as an attractive place for temporary work. And all that was in spite of sharp confrontation between Russia and the West, mutual reproaches and sanctions, and the conviction of the majority of the population that Russia should in no case succumb to outside pressure.

Young respondents are sure that in the West people live in abundance, have access to high-quality medicine and education, and are protected from arbitrariness. This image of a beautiful, well-fed and calm life is attractive to many young Russians. Of course, this happy image is in many ways just a mirror image of what Russian citizens do not find in their own country. Accordingly, respondents invariably cite "better living conditions abroad", "an unstable economic situation within their own country" and "the desire to provide children with a decent future" in the West as the main motives for a possible change of residence.²¹

For younger Russians, an important motive for thinking about emigration is their conviction that in the West there are more chances to build a successful career. Another motive that young Russians often voice is their concern about the political situation inside Russia and their confidence that in the West the rights of the ordinary people are observed better than in their own country.

A sympathetic attitude towards those who are going abroad is characteristic of many young people.²² Young respondents believed that "the most competitive people do not stay in Russia, but move to some other countries"; "there are more places where you can find a profession. In Russia it's very difficult to go to a good university or find a good job, because every good place is already taken"; "the more kilometres from here [the city of residence], the better – in a westerly direction". In

²¹ Ibid.

²² Andrei Kolesnikov and Denis Volkov, "Will a New Generation of Russians Modernize Their Country?", cit.

general, attitudes to those going abroad were positive. However, for a significant part of respondents leaving for the West seemed risky and not many were ready to undertake such a path themselves. This correlates well with the data of the cited quantitative surveys: alongside fairly common dreams of living abroad, there are invariably low rates of actual emigration.

The current wave of emigration from Russia, triggered by the start of Russia's "special military operation" in Ukraine, also includes a significant number of the young Russian urban middle class.²³ Many of those who left did not agree with Russia's actions in Ukraine, were afraid of persecution for their views, were afraid of general military mobilisation or considered themselves superfluous among the majority of Russians who support the Russian political regime and the actions of the Russian military. It is worth emphasising that those who went abroad were those who could afford it financially – who had a sufficient amount of savings or whose work is not related to staying in the office (such as most IT specialists). The ability to quickly travel abroad was a privilege that a limited number of young Russians could afford.

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict has not become an occasion for all young Russians to think about leaving. According to polls, the desire to leave the country amid the conflict has declined, including among the youngest. Two years ago, about half of Russians under 25 dreamed of moving abroad, but in March 2022 – only a quarter.²⁴ At the same time, there are still significantly more people among young Russians who want to leave than among representatives of the older generations.

It is worth noting that similar trends were observed in 2014, when at the height of the confrontation between Russia and the West, immediately after the annexation of Crimea to Russia and the start of the war in Eastern Ukraine, the views of young and old Russians on the issue of leaving converged for some time. The mobilisation of public opinion that has taken place has practically erased the differences that existed in society on many issues, including regarding attitudes towards America and Europe, and a possible departure abroad.

4. Attitude towards the West

The general rather positive attitude of young Russians towards the West is now being tested for strength against the backdrop of Western sanctions and attempts by the United States and European countries to isolate Russia. But even now Russian youth have a much more positive attitude towards the West than older

²³ The data in this study was obtained from a social media survey, which is not a representative survey method. However, to study a narrow hard-to-reach audience and to obtain an approximate composition of the studied audience, this method seems justified. See OK Russians, *Research: Anti-war Wave*, cit.

²⁴ Levada-Center, "Emigration Attitudes", cit.

generations. Thus, back in November 2021, about two-thirds of young Russians under 35 had a good attitude towards the United States and the European Union – three times better than Russians over 65 years old. Even now up to a quarter of young people have maintained a positive attitude towards Western countries (almost five times higher compared to the older age group).

As mentioned earlier, many young Russians are certain that in the West people live prosperously, protected from the arbitrariness of the authorities. When young people say in focus groups that they would like to live “like in the West”, “like in Europe”, they basically mean, first of all, material wealth and social security. The coveted image of a wealthy West is also a reflection of what young Russians do not find in their own country. In material well-being, legal protection and technological development, Russia seems to young respondents to be lagging behind the West. Only Moscow and, to a lesser extent, the largest Russian cities seem to them up to Western standards, but most of the country is not.

For young Russians, Europe and the United States are the source of fashion trends in clothing, music and cinema. For many of them, Western popular culture has become an integral part of their everyday experience. They are very familiar with Hollywood and HBO, and they watch Western TV series much more willingly than their parents do.²⁵ About a third of Russians under the age of 35 are fond of foreign pop music, hip-hop or techno, whereas the older generation prefers Soviet pop music and Russian folk songs.²⁶ Western culture has become an integral part of the identity of the younger generation in Russia.

However, more detailed conversations about Western countries in focus groups usually revealed very superficial and clichéd ideas that young Russians have about life in the West, about the socio-political structure and culture of Western countries. Moreover, interest in Western culture and lifestyle does not automatically translate into support for Western policy towards Russia. Distrust of the motives of European and US governments often was reflected in the words of a significant number of young participants in focus groups, especially outside the major cities. Every time international relations were discussed, there were always young people who said that “we need to be tougher” with America and Europe, because “they don’t understand otherwise”.

In 2014–15, during the first Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the confrontation between Russia and the West, most young Russians showed just as strong anti-Western sentiments as older generations. A significant part of young Russians then turned out to be just as inclined to patriotic mobilisation as the rest of the population (we observe similar sentiments today). But if the representatives of the

²⁵ Levada-Center, “Foreign Series” [in Russian], in *Levada-Center Press Releases*, 24 July 2019, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=21027>.

²⁶ Levada-Center, “Musical Preferences” [in Russian], in *Levada-Center Press Releases*, 18 February 2019, <https://www.levada.ru/?p=19866>.

older generations after 2014 for a long time retained a negative attitude towards the United States and Europe, young Russians began to show positive attitudes towards the West after just a couple of years.

However, even with their positive attitudes towards the United States and Europe in 2016–21, most young people believed that Russia should position itself as a “great power” and did not regret taking Crimea from Ukraine. Many young people welcomed improved relations between Russia and the West, but were not ready to apologise for their country’s actions or seek compromise with Western countries. Along with calls for cooperation with Europe and America, focus groups of young people often revealed opinions that Russia should remain an “independent”, “separate territory”, free from international structures and obligations.

This isolationist attitude is not due only to the effect of the narrative of state TV. At least in part, it is rooted in the opinion widely spread among young Russians that in the West “no one is waiting for us”; “they do not like us.” In the eyes of young people, rapprochement between Russia and the West is hindered by a sense of the backwardness and weakness of their own country. Many believe that if relations on an equal footing are not possible, it is better to stay apart.

5. Between two fires

Russian youth’s views often differ from those of the generation of their parents and grandparents. Young people in Russia have long mastered the Internet, they watch less TV, which means they are potentially less vulnerable to state propaganda and can be more independent in their judgment about what is happening. For the last three or four years, young people have been noticeably more critical of the Russian authorities and quite actively expressed their protest (though not all young people shared these sentiments). Young people in Russia are much more open to the bigger world, are interested in Western popular culture and generally have a much friendlier attitude towards the Western countries. Even in the context of acute geopolitical conflicts (as in 2014 and today), young Russians are friendlier to the West than older generations are.

In other words, in recent years, the views of young Russians on politics, relations with other countries and ideas about the West have increasingly come into conflict with the views of the older generation. At the same time, a large number of older Russians condemn the tastes and ideas of the younger generation. Ordinary older people in focus groups and Russian statesmen in their speeches increasingly say about their children and young people in general: “they are not like us”, they are “ill-mannered”, “mercantile”, “spiritual”, “unpatriotic”, “naive”, and therefore susceptible to the propaganda of the hostile West; they “do not understand life”, “have not matured yet”. After these complaints lamentations usually follow: “a little more and we will lose our youth”. Which means that they should be “reprimanded”, “re-educated” and returned to the “right track” as soon as possible, “before it is too

late”.

The solution is often seen to be re-establishing patriotic education, ideological pumping, the return of political information lessons to schools, the harsh dispersal of protests and the blocking of social networks. The broad support for such measures among the representatives of the older generation of Russians suggests that it is not only about Russian elites trying to retain power, but also about the anxiety of the wider public in this generational conflict.

With the beginning of the current conflict between Russia and Western countries that support Ukraine, Russian youth (at least its most Westernised part) found itself between two fires. On the one side there is pressure from Russian authorities, which has only intensified against the backdrop of foreign policy confrontation. On the other side there are Western sanctions aimed at isolating Russia from the outside world. The implications of these sanctions have yet to be explored, but it is already clear that young Russians will be among those who will suffer most.

The withdrawal of some Western brands from Russia, the inability to use Mastercard and Visa to travel abroad and shop online, and the cancellation of international educational projects will be the most painful, primarily for that part of the population that is most Westernised and most sympathetic towards the West – young Russians from the major cities. Particularly affected by these financial constraints will be those who fled abroad at the start of the conflict. For the majority of the country’s population, especially for older Russians who have never been abroad and who are suspicious of the West, these sanctions are likely to be less painful. Time will tell if this will lead to a reassessment of young Russians’ attitudes toward the West.

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