

Putin's New Generation

Will Russia's
“Digital Natives” Change
their Country's Future?

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The Issue

The young people of today's Russia – those born since 1993 and sometimes called Generation Z or “Putin's generation,” – largely have known political life only under the current Russian president. Since many of them are actively joining opposition protests, this crucial demographic could hold the key to Russia's political development. Yet they also are one of the least understood groups in the society. Who comprises Generation Z, what do they want, what do they fear, and how do the answers to these questions provide insight into Russia's future?



Generation Z: Russia's "Digital Natives"

Russia's Generation Z surprised many observers in 2017 when parts of its ranks joined opposition leader Alexey Navalny's nationwide protests.¹ Recent evidence suggests that younger Russians more openly express their views through public protests than do other age cohorts.² This trend, however, dates back to at least to the protests in 2011-12, which were associated with Putin's return to the presidency.³ At that

time people under 25 years old constituted about a quarter of all participants according to polls by the respected Levada Center.⁴

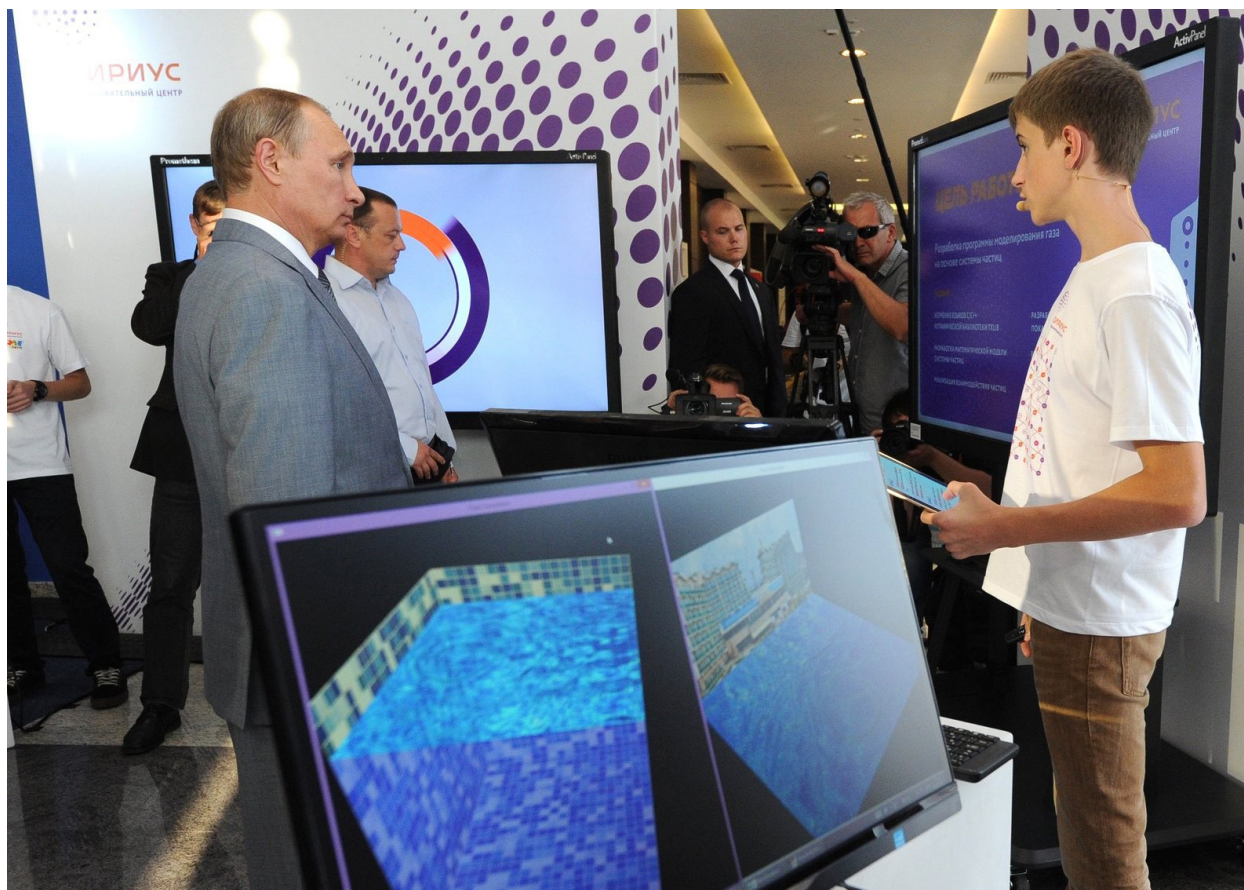
What factors pushed them into the streets?

The arc of this generation has shaped who they are and how they view the world. Members of this generation (and Russians just a little older), mostly have known only Putin as Russia's main leader. These people—who have also become accustomed to greater affluence than their parents and the Kremlin's increasing anti-Western orientation—are plugged-in but

apolitical, open-minded but unsure of their own belief systems. They often are keen to leave Russia if life does not improve.

One key difference that distinguishes Generation Z from the rest of the population is how they obtain information. Polls show that the internet is the main source of news for 70 percent of young people, as opposed to only 10 percent among the oldest group of Russians. In a 2017 study of 109 Russian universities and 6,055 respondents, political scientist Valeria Kasamara found that the main news sources for college students are social networks (VKontakte, 70.3 percent; Instagram, 42.5 percent; Facebook, 8.9 percent; Odnoklassniki, 7.7 percent), and online search engines (Google, 39.6 percent and Yandex.ru, 31 percent). Only 21.4 percent of respondents named TV as their primary information source. Younger Russians' easier access to information appear to drive the importance they assign to freedom of speech.⁵ Elena Omelchenko, a sociologist from National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE) who ran

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a series of in-depth interviews with young people in several Russian cities, calls this generation “digital-native.” In fact, among the people she interviewed, checking information for alternative sources has become a frequent habit.

Yet access to alternative sources of information does not guarantee better knowledge. Surveys consistently show a very poor grasp of history among younger Russians. For example, a recent national survey shows that the younger Russians are, the less they know

about Stalin’s political repression in the 1930s and 1940s. Among the 18-24 age group, 46 percent know nothing about these repressions at all.⁶ In private interviews, some even praise Stalin, since their grandparents remember “a lot of good things in Stalin’s time.” In this sense, Omelchenko points out, the younger generation directly inherits the problems of society at large, particularly its lack of a structured worldview and the disorganized values that characterizes Russian society in general.

Younger Russians are less interested in politics than are older generation groups. This age cohort is less likely than their elders to watch political programs or participate in political activities. About two-thirds of them cannot describe their political views (10-15 percent above the sample average). Only 20 to 25 percent follow such international topics as the Ukraine conflict, the war in Syria or Europe's immigration crisis. Just 3 to 5 percent follow lesser-known issues such as Brexit or the U.S. presidential election. Moreover, only 2 to 3 percent know about Russia's new restrictive domestic laws or the government's prosecution of the opposition.⁷

In line with these apolitical attitudes, younger Russians are also less inclined to vote. Only 30 percent of those eligible to cast ballots in the 2016 parliamentary election did so, compared to half of all voters and 70 percent of older groups.⁸

Their greater support for the opposition is demonstrated by the attitudes of young people toward the 2018 presidential elections. In a study of urban students in the 14-18 age bracket, only 32 percent would have voted for the ruling United Russia party while the liberal, social-democratic Yabloko party received 7.6 percent—substantially above its national average.⁹



According to the exit poll data collected by the Foundation for Social Research, in the Samara region 58 percent of 18-24 year olds voted for Putin, as opposed to 72-81 percent in other generational groups. Fifteen percent of younger Russians embraced the liberal opposition candidate Ksenia Sobchak, as opposed to 1-8 percent in older age cohorts.¹⁰

However, when it comes to their political preferences, an interesting data discrepancy emerges. While in nationwide polls younger Russians overwhelmingly support Putin, focused studies of urban college and high school students find them to be more liberal and opposition-minded than the rest of the population.¹¹ Despite Putin's popularity among younger Russians, only 15 percent of the 18 to 24 age group think Putin is serving the interests of "average people," while most think that Putin is looking out primarily for the interests of the security services and oligarchs.¹² Seventy-four percent in that age group blame Putin for the problems facing Russia while he has been in power.¹³

Sociologist Mischa Gabowitsch, who studies protest and social movements in Russia, argues the data discrepancy between support and criticism for Putin in this age cohort may be driven by ongoing polarization in this age group, with an active minority emerging in several Russian regions.¹⁴ Levada sociologist Denis Volkov points out that most students develop an interest in politics by the age of 25 or 30. This means that by 2024, today's opposition-minded twenty-year olds might grow to constitute a more serious political force.¹⁵

However, this dissatisfaction with the political situation among young Russians also contributes to the higher desire in this age group to leave Russia. HSE sociologist Lyubov Boryusyak, who ran a series of in-depth interviews with younger protesters at Navalny's rallies, says the common theme among those groups is: "If change doesn't come, we'll just leave Russia." Similarly, in nationwide polls, about a third of Russians aged 18 to 24 have considered moving to another country, while only 21 percent of those in the 25-39 age group have done so.¹⁶ Officially, about 100,000

people emigrate from Russia each year; of those, about a third leave to earn advanced degrees.¹⁷ Russian youth also speak more foreign languages than their older counterparts (25 percent versus 15 percent on average), which suggests they may have a greater openness to other cultures.¹⁸

Russian youth also are generally less paternalistic than their older counterparts. According to Levada's polls, only 27 percent claim they cannot manage without state support, compared to 70 percent in the oldest generation.¹⁹ Valeria Kasamara's study shows that students' views represent a mix of paternalistic, Soviet-style ideas about the state's social role and pro-market sentiments such as competition and private initiative. Two-thirds of young Russians agree that "fear should not guide the relationship between authorities and society." Young Russians also disagree that in their country "one should fear the authorities, otherwise they won't be respected." In Boryusyak's interviews, young protesters were far less afraid of being arrested than their parents.²⁰

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Such independence from the state, says Omelchenko, means that younger Russians are much more likely to involve themselves in different subcultures, communities, and movements. More than 70 percent identify themselves with a particular group such as gamers, bicyclists, board-game fans, football fans, anime fans, hip-hoppers, hipsters, role-players, bikers, feminists, anarchists, graphic artists, anti-fascists, breakdancers, emo, goths, and volunteers.²¹

It is likely that younger Russians also are beginning to feel alienated by the aging of Russia's elites and the current political stagnation, a matter of concern to the Kremlin. In the 2017-18 presidential campaign, Kremlin image makers, who saw Navalny's popularity with young people, initially tried to make Putin more appealing to them as well. They organized several meetings, for example, at which Putin spoke with Russian students and talented schoolchildren. Elena Shmeleva, a linguist who studies political speech, points out that Putin's failure with the children soon became apparent. He was unable to speak their language, had

little understanding of the internet, and used no electronic gadgets. Even his famous tendency to use vulgar language, something that made him so popular with older Russians did not appeal to Russia's youth.²² Eventually, the Kremlin had to backtrack and construct a different image for Putin, that of "grandfather of the nation."²³

Oleg Vedutov, a political technologist, says the old elites' outdated language and lack of vision make them look "not cool" in the eyes of the younger generation. This contrasts with Navalny, who is able to connect with young Russians through his video blogs, personal style, and modern language. But the emerging generational conflict is not just about aesthetics. Kristina Potupchik, former spokeswoman of the pro-Kremlin Nashi movement, also stresses its ethical basis: she says authorities have failed to build a dialogue with the younger generation based on a common value system. Instead, ultra-conservative groups have arbitrarily privatized a substantive share of this space, as evidenced by their active presence in public sphere.

These groups fight for traditional values and child protection, lobby for increasing restrictions on the internet, seek to raise the minimum age to access books and films, and promote spirituality on TV. They also spread outdated Soviet-type political information in schools and colleges. Many young people are much more sensitive to hypocrisy spread throughout Russian society: they get offended by lies and the lack of open, honest conversation in society. The picture of the country portrayed by state-run media radically contrasts with their idea of what is good.²⁴ Thus, Boryusyak finds that one of the major demands at Navalny's rallies is a demand for honesty and truth. This is one reason the younger cohorts find Navalny's anti-corruption investigations and slogans—such as his description of United Russia as a “party of crooks and thieves”—so appealing. This protest against the current political elites, their outdated language, and their policies is reminiscent of the disgust previous generations of the 1970s and 1980s had for the decrepit, hypocritical party apparatus of the USSR.

Boryusyak also finds that young Russian protesters regularly discuss politics with their circles, so at rallies they often feel at home and among friends. Those who get arrested are then cherished as heroes and are popular among their peers. In other words, protesting has become a social status. Such social factors are better predictors of likelihood of protest than are economic drivers. Since most of the protesters she interviewed come from well-educated, better-off families, the kind of demands they make—for political and civic freedoms, rather than for an increase in salaries or state benefits—reflect the non-economic protest of the new “unwhipped” generation.¹⁹ Rather than unemployment, the biggest job-related fear among the Russian youth is the failure to achieve creative self-fulfillment or self-actualization.²⁵ Gabowitsch argues that after the end of the USSR, young people were busy securing their livelihoods, and only the elderly—pensioners and those used to the Soviet welfare system—protested. Today, more people are better off, and protests are in line with global patterns, as younger

people unconstrained by family responsibilities attend rallies. This suggests that as today's young adults grow older, form families and start careers, they may become less inclined to protest, although a new generation of younger people might follow in their footsteps.

Youth and the dynamics of generational change in Russia are important considerations for any Western policymaker studying the future prospects for Russia's

political evolution. Since studies show that the Kremlin elites are more anti-Western than the rest of the population—particularly younger social groups—if current trends continue, the Kremlin may become increasingly estranged from the younger generation's desire for openness and change rather than stagnation and isolation from the West.²⁶ If left unaddressed by the regime, today's youth could in time become a potent threat to the Kremlin's hold on power.

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