



## RUSSIAN YOUTH

### ■ ANALYSIS

The Putin Generation:

Attitudes towards Political Leadership and Perceptions of Russia's Future

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How Do Young People in Russia View Corruption?

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## The Putin Generation: Attitudes towards Political Leadership and Perceptions of Russia's Future

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### Abstract

This paper examines values and attitudes of Russian students towards their home country and federal and regional political elites. The study analyses the results of a quantitative questionnaire (N=6055) and 90 focus groups with students from across all federal districts of the Russian Federation. The majority of young Russian students describe themselves as the “Putin Generation” and perceive President Vladimir Putin as the ideal political leader of a nation-state. The students do not have a clear image of Russia's future. For them, Russia's future depends entirely on who will become the head of the Russian state.

### Introduction

The year 2020 will mark two decades since Vladimir Putin has de-facto been in power in Russia. Over the course of this period, an entire generation was born and has grown into adulthood. This generation grew up with Putin as president or as prime minister: “as far back as I can remember it was always Putin on the TV screen,” said one respondent. The young people we interviewed for this study often referred to themselves as “the Putin generation,” a phrase that has neutral connotations because it includes both those who support Putin (who make up the majority), and those who have a critical view of him. This generation's ideas about the future of the country and about their own personal futures will shape the course Russia will take, and how Russia's relations with other countries will develop.

This article is based on a representative Russia-wide survey conducted among the student population of Russia by the Institute for Applied Political Studies of the National Research University Higher School of Economics. The survey was carried out in February and March of 2017. The representative sample included 6055 full-time students enrolled at 109 Russian state universities (state universities, as opposed to private universities, comprise the vast majority of Russian higher education institutions). The respondents were between 16 and 24 years of age. In March–September 2018, 90 focus groups were also conducted in 24 regions of Russia, also as a part of this study.

### Attitudes towards the Political Elite and Political Leadership

The Putin generation has a very specific understanding of power. They have a heightened expectation of those in power, but they do not have the “feeling of duty.” If their grandparents were ready to participate in Komсомol building projects, change the course of rivers, construct the Baikal–Amur Mainline, then the Putin generation “will not strain” to do such things.

In general, the Putin generation has vague understandings of the contemporary political landscape of the country, of people who participate in public politics, of ideological and value-based lines of demarcation and debates, and of the institutional and substantive bases of the country's political system. Young people admit that they are not interested in politics, prefer not to watch news television, and do not read politics sections of internet media. As a result, young people are unable to comment at length on political processes, events, and politicians.

Young people can recall a relatively small number of public politicians—those who they can recognize in the media landscape. These are mostly people working for federal institutions of power, including Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and State Duma member Vladimir Zhirinovskiy.

The only figure in the Russian political landscape whom young people could comment on at length and in an articulate manner was President Vladimir Putin. For young people Putin is the “number one” political leader. He is synonymous with politics and the state (“speaking about politics” means “speaking about Putin”), and he is the first on the list of associations with people in the public sphere. It is important that in discussions about the president, young people not only know the name of the office held and the last name of the person who holds the top office in the country, but can also talk about the image and the character of the president.

The absence of a worthy successor to Putin in the presidency is a topic of common worry among participants of the study. During focus groups, students voiced their concerns about the inevitable transfer of power from Putin to the next president (“*no one among us is immortal*”). But since there is no clear candidacy for the future successor, many voice concerns that the new head of state will not be up to the high standards that the current president has set.

“If Putin does not clearly announce anything, does not leave a successor after himself, a *Tsarevich*, then another crisis awaits the country. When the good Tsar dies, then the Time of Troubles begins. The *boyars* [court nobility] begin to rebel” (male, Simferopol).

“He is not readily preparing a successor, and this is wrong. What about the Soviet leaders—when they didn’t prepare successors, look what happened—everything broke apart. You can’t think that you can eternally carry everything yourself and make it through” (female, Krasnoyarsk).

The majority of study participants perceive President Vladimir Putin as the ideal political leader of a nation-state. Students around the age of 20 often describe themselves as the “Putin generation.”

The majority of students who participated in this study spoke positively of Putin’s policies and his personal characteristics, often referring to the fact that he has to govern a large country.

The positive characteristics cited include intelligence, self-control, charisma, high levels of responsibility, love for the motherland, and high levels of confidence. According to study participants, confidence allows Putin to “stand up for what he believes” and “do what he wants.” Students view him as the most authoritative politician in Russia, who everyone listens to, including the students themselves.

Foreign policy received the highest praise from students. However, students noted that Putin has two weak characteristics: first, the focus on foreign policy has negative consequences for domestic policy, which study participants perceive as “weak” and “ineffective.” Second, study participants claim Putin has an ineffective administration. According to them, most people among Putin’s team are far less competent leaders.

“The only president who does not inspire shame” (male, Rostov-on-Don); “There probably isn’t a good team at the local level. Not everything he says should be done is carried out in the end. He can’t follow up with everything himself” (male, Nizhny Novgorod).

The main thesis that emerged in discussions often was the following: the future depends not on me, but on the political elite and the leader. The students themselves are not ready to take responsibility for the future of the country because they believe that due to how closed the system is, their chances to become part of the political elite in Russia are slim.

This passive position emerges also in relation to the rest of the state at large. Students expect the government to create the impulse for the development of the country, but at the same time they do not want significant changes that could take them out of their comfort zone. A super majority of 75% are certain that the

politics and economy of the country must be reformed, but in a way that would not disturb the lives of the students themselves. In other words, young people value their comfortable existence and are not ready to give anything up. For this reason, the government has a very intricate task before it: “to do good without disturbing anyone.” The ideal scenario for the Putin generation would include gradual change, but without significant transformations that could bring about social trauma (a decrease in jobs, a rise in unemployment, a constantly changing job market), as well as freedom for self-actualization and a welfare state.

### The Image of Russia and National Identity

There is no consensus about the image of the contemporary Russian nation-state among our respondents. Young people involved in this study would often use common expressions and stereotypes in their answers to our questions about national identity. Once such example is “Russia has two problems—idiots and roads” (male, Krasnoyarsk). Another example is “When I think of Russia, I think of the taiga, something vast” (female, Novosibirsk).

However, it was possible to decipher an overarching feeling of belonging to the Russian nation-state among students. This would become evident when the students spoke about international relations, or about the history of Russia. Most students claimed to be proud of “increasing the Russian state’s authority on the international arena,” and in this context would often use the word “we” to refer to a collective they feel that they are a part of: “Over the last ten years we have strengthened our army, and we finally have a professional army that is demonstrating its greatness in battles in Syria.” At the same time, those students who spoke positively of Russia’s foreign policy would usually do so in the context of Syria. The incorporation of Crimea, by contrast, was described with skepticism: “If I speak for myself, I have to say I didn’t feel any changes; whether I have Crimea or don’t have Crimea, I’m still all the way over here.”

A sense of national collective identity was also prevalent in answers to questions that had to do with perceptions of historical events, especially those events that students spoke of with pride. Study participants were especially proud of The Great Fatherland War (Russia’s role in World War II), the Patriotic War of 1812, and Yuri Gagarin’s space flight.

### Perceptions of Russia’s Future

The study showed that there is no concrete, coherent perception of the future among Russian students who participated in the study. This refers both to their perceptions of their own future, and their perceptions of the

future development of the regions in which they reside (with the exception of Moscow). Questions about their imagined futures in 15 years stumped study participants. Most respondents refused to participate in this exercise. They would usually give one of four reasons for this:

- 15 years is too long of a time frame, since within this period “everything can change many times over;”
- “it is too difficult to make predictions in Russia;”
- many “don’t look that far into the future” and plan their lives day by day;
- many said that “what happens right now or tomorrow” is more important than what happens in 15 years.

The image of Russia’s future, according to participants, depends entirely on the future president: “everything depends on the president—the country will be just like the person who leads it.”

We also asked study participants about their desired image of Russia in the future.

### Students’ Desired Image of Russia in the Future

Students listed several characteristics about the desired future for Russia:

- To acquire new technologies that will form the basis of a developed economy that moves away from selling oil, gas, and other natural resources towards selling Russian products;
- “To stop being a scarecrow on the international arena;” to “stop flexing military muscles” and boasting about past victories;
- To change attitudes towards people; to respect everyone, especially vulnerable groups;
- To overcome acute social and material inequalities, which could lead to clashes between different groups in society if nothing is done;
- To modernize infrastructure (roads, communications);
- To become attractive not only to the Russian population, but to other people from beyond Russia’s borders (“people should want to come here”);
- To improve the quality of education and healthcare;
- To get rid of any foundations for internal ethnic or religious conflict.

The Putin generation is a completely different generation that grew up in a more open society, and for this

reason takes for granted their integration into a united cultural and informational space of a globalized world. They have minimal barriers that can be considered to be serious hurdles on the way to realizing their ideas and desires, they generally are free from the “iron curtain.” An important trait of this generation is a non-militarized perception of patriotism. In 1985, according to a poll conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the USSR Academy of Sciences, 86% of young people thought that the main characteristic of Soviet patriotism was the readiness to protect the Motherland. The Putin generation does not want to “go to war” with anyone, and only 41% of those polled believe that a patriot should serve in the army. This generation is ready to be friendly with other countries, and during the focus groups participants discussed their desired image of Russia in the future in the following terms: a country that is actively building cultural and diplomatic ties and “does not scare anyone with its weapons and rockets.”

### Conclusions

The Putin Generation tends to associate politics directly with Putin rather than their own regional elites or other federal-level politicians. Putin, in turn, is often described in terms of his personal qualities. This conceptualization signals a high degree of personalization of politics in Russia. The focus groups did not indicate that there is any demand among Russian youths across the country for the de-personalization of politics, or for greater accountability of regional or local elites. The short planning horizon was also not described as a grievance to be dealt with politically or socially, but rather as an objective fact of life in Russia among our study participants.

The students do not have a clear image of Russia’s future. For them, Russia’s prospects depend entirely on who will become the head of the Russian state: “everything depends on the president; the country will be a reflection of the type of person who heads it.”

At the same time, the Putin generation is the first generation that finds militaristic rhetoric to be something completely alien to them. They are ready to communicate and to integrate, including in international contests. They want to travel a lot, to get to know the world, and they do not like aggressive rhetoric. In this way they resemble their foreign counterparts.

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## How Do Young People in Russia View Corruption?

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### Abstract

Using empirical data from nine focus groups with university students in three Russian cities, this article demonstrates that young people reproduce ambivalent attitudes to corruption typical for older generations, as well as skepticism towards public anticorruption initiatives. Rising awareness among young people about the real scale of corruption without access to effective tools to fight corruption does not increase the civic activity of young people. Rather these conditions lead to frustration and cognitive dissonance, which results in young people ignoring corruption as a problem and seeking exit strategies from Russia.

### Understanding Russia's Rising Generation

The wide participation of Russian young people in the 2017 anti-corruption protests organized by opposition leader Alexei Navalny surprised political scientists and sociologists who usually consider Russian youth to be politically indifferent and apathic. The presence of young people, and specifically representatives of the so-called Generation Z in anticorruption protests suggested that young Russians are less tolerant of corruption than older generations.

Does Generation Z perceive corruption differently than older cohorts, and is the corruption agenda capable of mobilizing civic and political activity among Russian youth? This article will address these questions using data gleaned from focus groups with university students in three Russian cities (St. Petersburg, Rostov-on-Don, and Kazan) conducted in spring 2019 by the St. Petersburg Center for Independent Social Research.<sup>1</sup> All three cities have populations exceeding one million people, and are in the top ten for the quality of higher education,<sup>2</sup> so the students in these cities represent the future Russian professional elite. In each city we conducted three focus groups with 8 to 12 students aged 18–23 studying in law, engineering, and economics.<sup>3</sup>

### Attitudes towards Corruption

According to focus group discussions, young people do not differ much from older generations in their ambiguous attitudes towards corruption. They are well aware of the real scale and systemic character of corruption in Russia and do not seem surprised by the findings of Navalny's investigations revealing extensive corruption among the Russian elite (*"I do not think it was a news*

*for anyone"*). While sincerely condemning corruption as a cause of Russia's most pressing problems, young people tolerate it as a convenient tool to solve the problems they encounter in everyday life (*"When funds allow—you pay [a bribe]. When you have no money—you do not pay."*)

This pragmatic approach does not mean, however, that young people encourage or approve of corruption. In justifying their future probable involvement in corruption, the leitmotif is that *"corruption is a system and it is impossible to fight against the system, you have to play according to these rules."* Some students believe that corruption can be a good thing in fighting an opponent who uses bribes against you or in order to promote your own interests (*"You are against corruption only if it is not on your side."*)

Almost all focus group participants assume that they will have to resort to corruption in their future lives to solve everyday problems, such as placing children in kindergartens, getting work certifications, and receiving health assistance. As for careers, the main corruption-related concern among students is about getting a good job after graduating from the university: job prospects were most frequently mentioned by students in Kazan and Rostov-on-Don. The common opinion is that there is no fair competition in the labor market and those who have "connections" usually get better jobs. The future economists and lawyers expect to be involved in corruption if they get a job in the public sector, where, they believe, winning a promotion requires paying off your boss (*"In many budget organizations, the system works this way ... Either connections or money"*)

The most frequent expectations for corrupt interactions in professional life is among the law students who

1 <https://cisr.pro/projects/vospitanie-neterpimosti-k-korruptsii-sredi-rossyskoy-molodezhi/>

2 <http://vuzoteka.ru/%D0%B2%D1%83%D0%B7%D1%8B>

3 The qualitative character of the study does not make it possible to extrapolate research results to Russia's entire younger generation. University students represent only a part of Russia's youth, and their views may differ from those of young people of different ages and educational backgrounds. We can, however, draw conclusions about the prevalence of certain views and opinions among young people if they were expressed in all focus groups. In this text, we use quotations derived from focus group discussions to illustrate major conclusions and statements.

see involvement in a system of informal exchange as a necessary condition for integrating into the legal community. *"I understand that corruption is very much related to judicial system activity [...]. People at the higher levels, they take bribes and they will prompt you to do the same."*

### Does the State Fight Corruption?

Those who believe that the Russian state fights corruption are in a clear minority. The dominating opinion in all focus groups is that the state "pretends" to fight corruption—*"this [idea that the state fights corruption] is a kind of myth," "pretends to be fighting," "rather, imitates the struggle," "it's fighting only for good statistics."*

Even those who believe that the state undertakes anti-corruption efforts agree that progress is seen only at the lowest level of governance. For example, students mentioned the decision to install surveillance cameras in the offices of state officials and in the road police cars, the introduction of new rules for passing exams in driving schools, and other efforts to make it more difficult to give a bribe. As for the upper levels of governance or the political system as a whole, no visible efforts to eradicate corruption take place, according to the students, because top officials are the first to be corrupt themselves (*...the "fighters" are those who are engaged in corruption themselves, and that is why corruption is not shrinking*).

The popular opinion among those who positively assess state-led anticorruption efforts is that the state actually fights corruption, but does it secretly, so that ordinary mortals simply do not know about it (*"The state is fighting against corruption, we just can't know everything about it because all data, all materials, they are all classified."*)

In recent years, there has been a burst of arrests among high-level state officials, including governors, ministers, and senators, who were accused of corruption. However, these arrests did not cause much interest among our informants. The dominating opinion is that the true reasons for the arrests are anchored in political battles within power circles or that they are just a consequence of a struggle over resources (*"the only reason is that they [the arrested officials] didn't share."*) Some students think that accusations of corruption are just another way *"to remove the unwanted persons or those who fight for justice"* from office.

Another explanation of the low interest in anti-corruption campaigns is the expectation that the arrest of individual officials will not change the whole system: *"this is only a drop in the ocean of the corruption problem."* Another common perception is that those who were arrested will be replaced by the same corrupt officials (*"All the same. Just with a different face."*)

### Attitudes toward Public Anticorruption Initiatives

Young people in our focus groups are skeptical about public anticorruption activism because they do not know much about it. In most focus groups, the participants never heard of Transparency International or any other anticorruption organization. Anticorruption activism is associated almost exclusively with protests and specifically, with the protests organized by Aleksey Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK). Young people's attitudes to participating in the protests are generally negative because they do not believe that protests in Russia could lead to any meaningful change. According to focus group participants, the state ignores public demands while TV and other official media hush up information about protests that do take place: *"...there is no use for protests because there is no answer from the state"; "what is the point of protesting if it does not reach the authorities?"; "people go to rallies, but the authorities do not hear them, they simply disperse the protests."*

At the same time, participation in protests, even sanctioned by the authorities, is seen as extremely risky. The overwhelming majority of focus group participants are not ready to protest, since they see protesting as posing a serious danger for themselves and their families and a threat to their future professional career (*"If I felt safe, if I had known that I could go to a rally, as in a civilized country, and I would not be put into a 'monkey cage' for three days or beaten, then I would have definitely participated..."*).

Some students mentioned growing political pressure in recent years, when any public activity, not even necessarily directed against the government, is prosecuted by the law enforcement agencies (*"...even some small gatherings, circles, including concerts ... It doesn't matter, whether they are left or right, they crush everyone."*)

Against the background of people's limited ability to express their discontent in open protests, as well as federal TV's failure to report on these protests, the Internet is seen by the students as a more effective and safe means of expressing discontent than protesting in the streets (*"These days, it's easier to go to the Internet than to the square."*)

Attitudes towards Navalny are mixed and not nearly as supportive as might be expected. Unlike Transparency International, Navalny with his anti-corruption investigations and especially the investigation of Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev through the "On vam ne Dimon" project, is highly recognizable among focus groups participants. The students generally appreciate the positive effect of the FBK investigative projects because they undermine the state monopoly on information (*"some additional information that will not be shown on TV."*)

However, the attitudes towards the protests organized by the FBK are mostly skeptical. The main argument here is that these protests have no results, they are ignored by the state, and can change nothing.

### Personal Participation in the Fight Against Corruption

Nobody who participated in our focus groups believes that it is possible to defeat corruption in Russia, at least, in the foreseeable future. Answering a question about readiness to personally engage in the fight against corruption, young people find themselves in a difficult situation. On the one hand, there is an understanding of the prevalence and systemic nature of corruption in Russia and the inevitability of one's own involvement in corrupt interactions in future professional and personal life. On the other hand, young people do not see any acceptable ways to counter this situation. Government measures are not effective or are simply for show; public initiatives, in fact, are narrowed down to protests, which are inevitably associated with high risks for personal and professional life. There is a common understanding among the focus group participants that *"you cannot eradicate corruption without changing the system,"* but *"then everything must be destroyed and this is a revolution,"* which young people do not accept and fear.

At the same time, the focus groups show a surprisingly high level of concern among young people about

political issues and dissatisfaction with state-society relations. In listing the most urgent problems facing Russia, political problems appeared to be the second most important category after economic problems, with the issue of *"the lack of dialogue between the people and authorities"* indicated in almost all focus groups. According to the focus group participants, the government *"does not hear the population," "does not respect the people," "does not even notice the people."* In some groups, students see the problem of disrespect for the people as more important than the problem of corruption.

In this context, the growing awareness of the extent of corruption hardly mobilizes young people to fight corruption; rather it increases their level of frustration and feelings of powerlessness to change something, which causes them to distance themselves from the problem and fall into indifference as a defensive reaction. As a result, the choice for young people boils down to the following: *"either you comply [with the corruption], or you fight and go to jail, or you go abroad because you don't comply, and you can't fight."* An alternative for those who cannot distance themselves from the problem of corruption and who do not want to take risks by participating in protests is emigration, which can take different forms. In the words of the focus group participants, *"if Russia wants the brains to remain in the country, then the system needs to be changed."*

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**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

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