
Beyond Putin: Russia's Generations Y and Z

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Of Russia's 146 million citizens (if we include those in Crimea), 63 million—or 43 percent—are [under](#) 34 years of age. Of these, 30 million belong to Generation Y (millennials in their 20s and early 30s), 15 million belong to Gen Z (teenagers), and a further 18 million are part of the youngest generation (less than 10 years of age).² Russia's youth have recently become the object of Western media interest with articles exploring everything from their support for President Vladimir Putin to their musical taste. Yet questions about Russia's next generation remain largely understudied in Western academia (in contrast to its development in Russian scholarship), with only a handful of already [dated](#) analyses, a few [studies](#) on Russian students' geopolitical visions, a couple of think tank reports ([here](#) and [here](#)), and a comparative [book](#) by Felix Krawatzek.

The majority of these studies focus on interpreting the political role of Russia's youth: for or against the Putin regime? Yet this politicization of our reading of young Russians misses the most interesting points: that one can be simultaneously for and against Putin, and that life is much more than formal political positions. First, Russia's youth displays similar features to youth in other countries, chiefly its consumerism and social media savvy. Second, it is ambivalent on today's Russia, both embracing it and taking critical distance from it. Third, the youth cultural scene—and especially the hip hop scene—is blossoming, becoming one of the most vivid contexts for expressing Russia's evolving cultural norms and values.

Russia's Youth: A Sociological Portrait

Across the globe, Generations Y and Z share similar features. In many respects, members of these generations in different countries are far more similar to each other

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² Generation Y was born in the late 1980s and the 1990s, Gen Z was born in the 2000s, and the youngest generation was born in the 2010s.

than their counterparts in previous generations were. They are, for instance, all “digital natives” living in a [visual culture](#) where one communicates with images rather than with text; they are obsessed with immediacy and [community feedback](#); and they do not like planning for the future. They are environmentally aware, think globally, favor blending cultures, often do volunteer work, and embrace DIY (do-it-yourself) methods. Last but not least, they are politically indifferent; do not trust traditional institutions (from political parties to media); and believe in co-creative mechanisms. In these ways, Russian members of Generations Y and Z are no different from youth elsewhere.

As Levada Center sociologist Denis Volkov has shown in the Russian case, these generations are the first to get their news more [from the internet](#) rather than from television. They consider [family](#) to be their central value (Gen Y even more so than Z); they are neither rebellious nor angry in a “sons-against-fathers” way and insist, on the contrary, on their [happiness](#). They believe in [self-realization](#) more than career or any kind of institutionalized freedom. They have been raised in a post-Soviet culture that has [humanized childrearing](#) and are confident in themselves and their uniqueness.

Like their counterparts across the globe, young Russians are slightly less interested in politics than are older generations. But this may not be a feature of their generation so much as a reflection of their age: politicization typically grows in middle age and peaks with an individual’s career. They overwhelmingly [support](#) Putin: in May 2017, 88 percent of them were in favor of the Russian president, compared to 82 percent for older generations. They were also more favorable toward the prime minister, and the government in general, than their elders, a trend [noted](#) by the Levada Center as early as 2013. At the same time, young people are also openly critical of Putin: like older generations, very few youths (15 percent) think that the President serves the interests of “average people.”

Young people still like the same talk shows as their elders, such as those of Vladimir Soloviev, Andrei Malakhov, or Vladimir Pozner, even if they prefer to watch them online. They also follow new personalities, such as [Yuri Dud’](#), whose online interviews receive between 4 and 10 million viewers apiece. They do not trust traditional institutions and particularly [distrust](#) the mass media (65 percent of them do not trust it, compared to 35 percent who at least partly trust it).

The younger generations are also more polarized: urban students are more opposition-minded, more favorable to liberal parties such as Yabloko, and more supportive of Alexey Navalny than are older generations and rural youth. While teenagers were said to constitute a good part of the Navalny-backed [March 2017 protests](#), they are usually absent from workers’ demonstrations and statistically [protest less](#) than older generations. Even for those unsatisfied with the current elites, open rebellion remains a [minority stance](#). Their vision of politics is not nationwide and old-fashioned but rooted in local urban activism. The [best-known](#) youth movement (67 percent of young people

are aware of it), for instance, is [StopKham](#), a movement backed by Nashi and therefore blessed by officials, that polices roads by placing large stickers on cars that are parked in the wrong place and publicizes videos of traffic violations—followed by Lev Protiv, a government-initiated movement that promotes social norms such as not smoking in public spaces.

Younger generations are more resistant to anti-Americanism than their elders. While they have all been affected by a rise in criticism of the United States since the 2014 crisis, they remain largely [more positive](#) toward it than older generations. When asked, “How would you like to see Russia in the future?” 49 percent [answered](#), “Like developed countries in the West.” They [speak](#) more foreign languages (25 percent speak a foreign language, compared to 15 percent of their elders), have been abroad more often (24 percent have been abroad within five years, compared to 21 percent of their elders), and are more eager to emigrate (one-third have considered moving to another country). Even if they support Russia’s great-power aspirations and display a high level of patriotism, their preference goes to domestic issues over foreign policy ones.

That said, their focus on domestic questions does not mean that they are politicized in a sense Western pundits have been hoping for: they do not seek more democratic rights or increased citizen participation. In a 2017 FOM survey, 28 percent of young respondents [defined](#) their political views as socialist (a figure that reached 35 percent among 17-23-year-olds), 20 percent as liberal (students refer to liberalism more often than do other youth, at 33 percent), 13 percent as conservative, and 2 percent as anarchist, while fully 28 percent did not have an opinion. Young people are [less paternalistic](#) about themselves than are older generations—they declare that they do not need state assistance—yet they still believe in the welfare state, redistributive mechanisms, and state control [over](#) big enterprises.

Young people also react differently to their elders to the government-sponsored conservative values agenda. They are, for instance, [more tolerant](#) about individuals’ sexual orientations than older generations: 47 percent are against homosexuality, but 45 percent accept it. The level of acceptance is [higher](#) in student circles, at 61 percent. As noted by Margarita Zavadskaya at the Higher School of Economics, in less than three decades, the level of tolerance of homosexuality in Russia has [risen substantially](#)—from a very low level—across all generations, not only young people. Young people are also somewhat more tolerant [toward migrants](#) and North Caucasians than are their elders: 44 percent are negative and 12 percent positive, while 39 percent say it does not matter. Gen Z is [less religious](#) than Gen Y (those considering themselves as Orthodox Christians decreased from 60 to 54 percent between the two generations). As with the rest of the society, their relationship to the Church as an institution is polarized: 57 percent do not trust it, but 43 percent do.

The Berlin-based Centre for East European and International Studies (ZOiS) conducted a survey on values related to national identity. It [shows](#) that Russian youth prefer a so-called liberal understanding of nationalism (defined as the right for foreigners to integrate into society but following the established rules; everyone should have equal rights), followed by a conservative and more nationalist understanding (everyone should follow the same “Russian traditions”). The more Western-style multicultural citizenship (recognizing and promoting differences) does not win many hearts. Widespread support for a more nationalist definition of nationhood does not contradict their very [low level](#) of knowledge of history: among the 18-24 age group, 46 percent know nothing at all about the Stalinist repressions (compared to 20 percent for older generations).

Youth Cultural Scene: The Putin Regime and the Hip Hop Movement

While Gen Y vividly remembers their parents’ daily struggles to survive the dramatic changes of the 1990s, Gen Z has grown up accustomed to the relative material affluence of the 2000s. They worry less about the risk of losing their jobs, and because they feel more secure, they are [less](#) obsessed with material well-being than Gen Y (48 percent see it as important, compared to 71 percent of Gen Y). Urban youth know only a relatively well-off Russia, with its revamped downtowns, globalized consumerism, and ultra-connectivity. The [most popular](#) Russian YouTube blogger, Valentin Petukhov, who comments on IT innovations on his channel called “Wysalcom,” has almost seven million subscribers. He is [followed](#) by Yuri Dud’ with his YouTube channel “vDud’” that has almost five million subscribers. Both receive hundreds of thousands of dollars, sometimes over a million dollars, annually from advertising revenue.

In such a context, young people in Russia—like their counterparts around the world—have been developing an array of new, specific cultural products. As Elena Omelchenko at the Higher School of Economics [notes](#):

“The majority of youth—more than 70 percent—...identify themselves with a particular group [such as] gamers, bicyclists, board-game fans, football fans, anime fans, hip-hoppers, rappers, rockers, role-players, golden youth, tough guys, hipsters, active Muslims, active Orthodox, bikers, feminists, anarchists, re-enactment fans, graphic artists, anti-fascists, breakdancers, body-builders, emos, goths, and volunteers.”

This incredible lively scene has forced the authorities to take an interest in their lifestyles, especially one of its most developed and successful elements: hip hop. As early as 2009, then-Prime Minister Vladimir Putin agreed to [appear](#) at the televised rap contest “Battle for Respect: Start It Today” where he stated that rap allows participants to raise social issues and that breakdance brings with it a healthy way of life. In late 2018, following the brief arrest of Husky, a very popular rapper critical of the

authorities, and the cancellation of several youth concerts, such as [IC3PEAK](#), Putin [declared](#) that the state should support hip hop (“take charge of it”) and not suppress it. Even hard-liner Sergey Naryshkin, in his role as chair of the governmental committee for supporting literature, cinema, and reading, had to [propose](#) that presidential grants be awarded to rappers. That being said, Putin expresses concerns about rap’s supposed promotion of drug consumption and has made ambiguous comments about swearing as a degradation of the Russian language.

As analyst Maria Lipman has [commented](#), the regime remembers well the failure of the Soviet system to censor the rock music scene (which had a major role in the perestroika years), and it does not plan to repeat that mistake. Vladislav Surkov, long-time *éminence grise* of the regime for ideology, has never hidden his admiration for hip hop culture and especially American icon Tupac Shakur. Yet, as one of the leading authorities on the contemporary musical scene Alexander Gorbachev [explained](#), the regime does not control the hip hop world, which functions autonomously and with cultural codes too complex to be placed under the state umbrella.

This hip-hop scene opens windows into a new Russia in the making. As [studied](#) by Gorbachev, while largely depoliticized, it still hosts some groups that advance more ideological messages, combining an anti-state and anti-police narrative traditional for rap – one that glorifies breaking the law and using illegal substances – with an assumed patriotism. While the majority of groups fall within the genre of protest rap, others, such as 25/17, position themselves firmly “on the right” of the political spectrum and exalt conservative values and Orthodox spirituality.

The most successful blending can probably be attributed to Timati, among the five foremost Russian artists according to Forbes and among the top ten most-mentioned people on Runet. With 2.3 million subscribers to his YouTube channel and song hits such as “[Welcome to Saint Tropez](#)” (produced with famous DJ Antoine) peaking at 169 million views, Timati is a cultural phenomenon who embodies this Russian youth culture. In 2015, he released a song entitled “[My Best Friend Is President Putin](#)” (14 million views), in which he puts on a mask of the Russian president before performing music and dancing. Well-trained in U.S. marketing culture, Timati has built a commercial empire around his image and his Black Star logo; he owns a music label, a clothing line, an internet radio station, a burger restaurant, a barber shop, and a tattoo parlor.

Timati epitomizes many of the features described in the sociological portrait of Russian youth drawn above. For him, Putin is an iconic figure who personifies Russia: one [supports](#) him, but one also makes post-modern use of his image and thereby indirectly desacralizes him. Born to a Tatar father and a Jewish mother, Timati also embodies a new version of Russia’s century-long cultural *mélange*. By cultivating a North Caucasian look, he has made North Caucasian cultural clichés—clothes, beard, golden teeth,

food—trendy for young people. He is also an admirer of Ramzan Kadyrov, another post-modern figure, who [participated](#) in the opening of Timati’s Black Star burger restaurant in Grozny. Last but not least, Timati celebrates a pseudo-Afro-American heritage and presents himself as “black.” By associating being North Caucasian with being Afro-American as two discriminated-against cultures shaping a trendy counterculture, he offers a unique blend that confirms the transformation of values among Russia’s youth and the latter’s incredible plasticity in adopting and adapting to new cultural references.

Conclusions

In today’s Russia, social and cultural modernization has come mostly through consumption. It is the changes in modes of consumption that have most deeply transformed the social fabric. Many features of the younger generations, especially of Generation Z, remain difficult to interpret, as we do not know if they will persist once these young people enter active life; their current happiness and carefree perceptions could evolve. But they are certainly the first generation to have benefitted from both relative wealth and relative freedom, with lower governmental and parental oversight than their predecessors. While these young generations do share a form of Soviet nostalgia transmitted by their parents and the broad cultural environment, they have been raised in a totally different society in terms of consumption and media culture.

They display features that cannot be simplistically classified as pro- or anti-Putin. They are culturally the children of a Russia born in 2000 (not 1991), one in which Putin almost “naturally” embodies the nation and the state. That does not mean they will not challenge the current status quo once they enter active life, but they may also adjust to the political environment of the next decade—whatever it is—just as their parents did. They live mostly in a world far from politics, yet it still involves increased tolerance and various forms of co-creative engagement, such as volunteering and urban activism. Russia’s youth subcultures are the most vibrant layers of Russia’s cultural scene today, creating a new set of values and meanings that are largely globalized in some of their references and at the same time rooted in a local everyday reality. This opens up avenues for research: studying youth by transcending the conventional boundaries of political science and integrating cultural studies into it would allow us to refine our perceptions of Russian society and its ability to reinvent itself.