

Conference Paper

The Dynamics of Youth Values in the Conditions of Social Instability: Case of Contemporary Russia

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to the analysis of the dynamics of Russian youth values in the circumstances of moral and ethical instability of Russian society in 2012–2018. The central focus of the research was inspired by the idea of analytical extrapolation of R. Inglehart's theory of intergenerational value change in the context of contemporary Russian society. The period between 2012 and 2018 was accompanied by complexities in international situation and difficulties in social and economic development of Russian society. These new challenges changed the context of the growing up and socialization of Russian youth. Implementation of R. Inglehart's theory helps to formulate a hypothesis about the essence of influence of these changes on the values of youth. It is possible to say, that complication of the circumstances of growing up and socialization created a favorable basis for popularization of materialistic values among Russian youth. This hypothesis was tested by the author by comparison of youth's surveys data, conducted in Yekaterinburg, Russia in 2012, 2015, 2017 and 2018. The survey has shown that the evolution of youth values between 2012 and 2018 was noticeable. It should be noted that materialistic values are not the key ones for Russian youth. Situation of new risks and challenges made young Russians even more indifferent to these values.

Keywords: youth, values, beliefs, the dynamics of values, a change in values, a value query, socialization

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1. Introduction

Diagnostics of young people' life values can hardly be attributed to new or poorly studied areas of Russian sociological analysis. Numerous research projects and publications devoted to the analysis of values of young people indicate both the stability of the interest of Russian academic sociology in this area and the deepness of this interest. However, despite the regularity and thematic variety of studies in this area, at least one side of the question still often remains outside the scope of analytical attention. The prevailing practice of youth studies in Russia tends only to situational, current diagnostics of values of young people. At the same time, the dynamics and changes in these values often remain outside the attention of researchers. Meanwhile,

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understanding of such a dynamics of youth values now has a significant importance for social science.

Over the past years, Russian society has faced several economic difficulties that have caused a slow but steady decline in the quality of life of the population. Young people are sensitive to such fluctuations in socio-economic process. Due to the unpredictability of career paths, the instability of income and the absence of safety financial resources, many young people are very vulnerable to any, even minor difficulties in socio-economic development. In addition, the situation of economic difficulties is not familiar for most of them. Their childhood and early adolescence happened in a period of progressive development of the Russian economy and the rising standard of living of people. Most of them do not remember a painful experience of 1990s and do not imagine the real look of economic difficulties. And some researchers believe that this fact makes many of them unprepared for difficulties in the economy [14]. Of course, intuitively, we can assume, that difficulties in Russian economy could have a strong impact on attitudes of young people and could stimulate an increase of their pessimism and anxiety. But it is obvious that a deeper assessment of this issue requires special diagnostics. This paper is one of the steps in clarification of such questions. It is devoted to an empirical analysis of the dynamics of the values of Russian youth in 2012–2018.

2. Methods and Methodology

The remarkable interest of researchers and managers to the matter of youth values looks logical. Although the original concept of values is used in a number of branches of social and humanitarian science, its common scientific meaning is quite stable. Most often, word "values" in social science indicates a certain system of beliefs that characterize the relative importance that a person or a group ascribes to various life goals and ideals [3]. Of course, the details of understanding of values in social science are still debated in various theoretical discussions. For example, the debates often concern the question of boundaries between the concept of "value" and the related terms "norm" [13], "morality" [7] or "need" [9]. The stable pluralism of views on the mechanism of the values formation is also notable [10]. Nevertheless, although such discussions are sometimes relatively acute, in our opinion, they affect only the small details of understanding of values and do not concern the basic possibility of defining them as a certain system of beliefs. Understanding the values in this way, we can determine the key reason for the steady scientific interest in the area of analysis of values of youth and suggest the possible features of the changes that can occur in them over time.

We can find two research traditions in the analysis of possible changes in the values of people. The first of them is rather conservative: it relies on the classical concepts of values and denies strong changes in their existence. In the papers of E. Durkheim [2], V. Pareto [11], T. Parsons [12], values were described as external imperatives, which do not depend on wishes and feelings of person and stay relatively stable over time. The second research line was based on a kind of polemic with this point of view and was based on understanding of values as a very flexible and unstable phenomenon. This analytical tradition was formed by the papers of F. Kluckhohn and F. Strodtbeck [8] and M. Rokeach [15]. These researchers described the values as a very flexible phenomenon and assumed, that values can be a reflection of the particular culture in which they arise. Such an understanding of values not only helped explain the difference in value preferences among representatives of different cultures, but also made it possible to conclude that values can change under the influence of culture within which they exist. Therefore, from the point of view of modern sociological analysis, values certainly represent a variable phenomenon that is sensitive to fluctuations in the social context.

In our analysis of the Russian youth's values dynamics we will rely on the theoretical approach of R. Inglehart, which inspires the international research project "World Values Survey" and has been repeatedly used in the analysis of values of Russian society [4]. R. Inglehart's theory is based on two conceptual assumptions characterizing the variability of values under the influence of the social context. According to the first of them, the "scarcity hypothesis", people tend to ascribe a high significance to the goals and ideals, which they feel rare in society. The second assumption, "socialization hypothesis" assumes, that changes in social context can stimulate only slow transformations in people's values, because they have only little effect on the strong beliefs of adults and mainly affect the values of only the youngest individuals [6]. The total idea of these two assumptions is that changes in the social context cause changes in people's values, and young people are more sensitive to such changes than other age segments of society. Changes in the social context affect the subjective perception of people about what is scarce in the society and what is not. As a result, according to the scarcity hypothesis, changes of the social context create a favorable ground for transformation of people's views on what is important and what is not. Moreover, if the socialization hypothesis is true, the most obvious transformations occur precisely in the values of young people, because the values of adults are much less subject to fluctuations.

Here we should pay attention to another conceptual idea proposed by R. Inglehart. He divided the whole set of values that a person or group can potentially have, into two

groups: the materialistic values and the postmaterialistic ones. The first group of values emphasizes the importance of physical and economic security. Post-materialist values, in turn, include freedom, self-expression, and quality of life to the forefront [5]. In other words, the typical values of the “materialist” are distinguished by a distinct request for security and equality, while the basic values of the “post-materialist” more likely reflect a request for freedom and self-realization. The tendency of people to prefer materialistic or post-materialistic values was considered by R. Inglehart as socially determined variable. He think, that the importance of materialistic values could progress under the influence of social problems and deprivation of people. The converse logic was also true: a long period of stability and economic growth could reduce the relative importance of security for people and stimulate their demand for post-materialistic values. Of course, it is important to consider that people’s values are a complex construct, and such a binary gradation is somewhat arbitrary. But nevertheless, the idea that fluctuations in the development of society can change the values of people, in our opinion, is true.

The extrapolation of R. Inglehart’s ideas to the context of contemporary Russian society allows us to formulate a basic assumption about the dynamics of youth values. We assume that the specifics of the socio-economic development of Russia over the past years favored a shift in the value preferences of youth from post-materialist values to materialistic ones. Such a shift, in our opinion, could happen under the influence of the obvious transformation that the social reality of modern Russia experienced after 2014. The stable and relatively calm period of the progressive development of society at this moment gave way to the stage of socio-economic difficulties and the aggravation of the problematic background. Adhering to the scarcity hypothesis, we assume that dramatical changes in Russian society in recent years could stimulate the spread of negative emotions and growing demand for security and social protection among the country population. Basing on the socialization hypothesis, we think, that if such changes indeed happened in Russian society, they could affect the values of young people and change their opinion about the basic values of society. Therefore, we assume that in the past few years, the values of Russian youth could have shifted precisely towards materialism.

An empirical test of this hypothesis requires comparing data on the attitude of Russian youth to the same values in different time periods — before the expected moment of the value shift of 2014–2015 and after it. Moreover, in order to provide correctness of this comparison and minimize the probability of uncontrolled errors, it is necessary to compare data of the researches, based on a similar data collection procedure and comparable sampling criteria. In our analysis, we will rely on a comparison of the data

of four such sociological polls conducted by the author in Yekaterinburg, Russia in a period from 2012 till 2018.

The first of the sociological polls was carried out in March-April 2012 as part of the preparation of the PhD research of the author and was devoted to the political culture of young Russians who grew up in the 2000s. The second poll was conducted in November–December 2015 and was aimed at assessing the current political mood of the Sverdlovsk region’s residents on the eve of the 2016–2018 election cycle. (of course, during the study, representatives of the youth of Yekaterinburg were also interviewed). The third poll was carried out in Yekaterinburg in June-July 2017 and focused on the analysis of youth social activity. The fourth, most recent, poll was implemented in March–April 2018 in Yekaterinburg and focused on assessing the general social moods of young people and their relationship to the urban environment.

The principal comparability of the data from these surveys is provided by the similarity of approaches to sample organization. In all these researches, the selection of respondents was carried out according to a quota sample based on the criteria of gender, age and area of residence of the respondents, the size of quotas was determined on the basis of official statistical information on the age and gender and district structure of the population of Yekaterinburg. Table 1 presents the general characteristics of the samples on which the compared studies relied. It can be noted, that the size of the sample in all the researches was very similar.

TABLE 1: Sample of the compared research projects

Year of the research	Age of respondents	Number of respondents
2012	18–30	304
2015	18–30	389
2017	18–30	304
2018	18–29	411

In addition, although all these polls were devoted to different topics, each of them included the same questions aimed at diagnosing the current values of the respondents. During each of these surveys, young people were asked two identical multivariate questions: “On the basis of what values should an ideal society be built?” And “What values, in your opinion, are most expressed in Russian society now?”.

The principal similarity of samples and diagnostic tools turns these studies into some kind of monitoring, which allows us to trace the specifics of changes in the values of young people in a period of six years. Therefore, these data become a reliable empirical basis for assessing the dynamics of youth values.

3. Findings and Discussion

Firstly, the analysis has shown that Russian youth is quite stable in its opinion, that Russian society is not perfect and bases on a “wrong” system of values. The specificity of the questions that were used in the compared studies allows us not only to compare the attitude of young people to various moral ideals, but also to trace the dynamics of their assessments of Russian reality. A comparison of answers over six years has shown that the attitude of young people to specific values has changed. However, the basic feeling of contrast between Russian society and the ideal society continues to be reproduced. Those values that the majority of respondents attributed to the foundations of an ideal society were rarely mentioned as features of modern Russian society. And at the same time, those values that the majority of respondents called the most presented in Russia, were rarely attributed to an ideal society. The stability of this contrast, apparently, indicates the consolidation in the minds of most young people of the deep-rooted attitude towards Russian society as an imperfect, obviously different from the perfect social reality they imagine. In other words, even though contemporary young Russians understand perfect social reality in other way, than young people in 2012 or 2014, the basic feeling, that Russian society differs from it, remains strong and stable.

Another circumstance is indicative. The analysis has shown, that young people are stable in their feeling of scarcity of law and justice in Russian society. The shares of those who felt these values in Russian society in all four researches were significantly less than the shares of those who attributed them to the foundations of an ideal society. Perhaps, there is nothing extremely new in this fact. The tendency of young people to assess Russian reality as unfair, dishonest and disrespectful to people has been revealed in Russian youth studies before [16]. However, in this case we see not only the fact of the existence of a contrast between the estimates of the ideal and the observed reality. It can be noticed, that feeling of contrast between Russian society and perfect society has increased. As can be seen in Figure 1, in 2012, the gap in the shares of those who consider the law an integral part of an ideal society, and those who feel its manifestations in Russia, was 44.6%, but by 2018 this gap reached 57.2%.

Similar dynamics was manifested in relation to justice — the difference between those who would like to see it in an ideal society and those who see it in Russia also increased: as can be seen from Figure 2, the gap increased from 64.3% in 2012 up to 75.2% in 2018. It is important to note that there was no tangible increase in percent of those



Figure 1: Law in an ideal society and in Russian society: dynamics of responses between 2012 and 2018 (% of total number of respondents, by years)

who would like to see law and justice at the heart of a perfect society. However, the proportion of those who feel manifestations of this values in Russia has declined.



Figure 2: Justice in an ideal society and in Russian society: dynamics of responses between 2012 and 2018 (% of total number of respondents, by years)

We believe that the noted trends are indicative and informative in the context of assessing youth reactions to the current instability of Russian society. According to these data, it can be said that young people tend to assess Russian reality as morally imperfect. Moreover, in these moods we see something more, than just an emotional negativity. The feeling of a lack of justice and law in society that has become popular among young people, indirectly indicates, that many of them have doubts about the fairness and the legitimacy of the established order of things. But no less important is the fact that the growth of these indicators in 2012–2018 was not huge. According to our data, the sense of value imperfection and the sense of a deficit in justice and the law were traced among young people back in 2012 and they became stronger in 2018. But the changes in the opinion of young people in this area were not radical.

So, using these data we can say, that a pessimism is really traced in the dynamics of youth moods. But the deterioration of the socio-economic situation in the country, which began in 2014–2015, apparently had only a limited impact on such moods of youth.

The analysis has also fixed that the value of force becomes a clear irritant for young people. The situation of the complication of the socio-economic situation created favorable conditions for exacerbating the youth's demand for force. It seems to us that the deficit of law and justice in society, felt by young people, could stimulate an increase in its subjective significance. However, the data show that the assumption of an increase in the subjective significance of force is not true. The value of force throughout all measurements was indicated by the majority of respondents as a too important for Russian society. The proportion of those who feel the manifestation of force in Russian society, in the course of all research projects, turned out to be significantly higher than the proportion of those who would like to see it as the basis of an ideal society. Moreover, the gap between these shares is progressing. As can be seen in Figure 3, in 2012, the gap between those who felt force as the foundation of Russian society and those who would like to see it in an ideal society was 42.1%, then by 2018 this gap reached 71.2%. Such fluctuations in the relation to force are indicative in two meanings. Firstly, the feeling of a normative vacuum that is widespread among young people (as evidenced by the feeling of a deficit of law and justice) does not transform into the loyalty for force and "right of the strong." Secondly, it indicates, that our initial hypothesis about the attraction of youth to materialistic values may be wrong.



Figure 3: Force in an ideal society and in Russian society: dynamics of responses between 2012 and 2018 (% of total number of respondents, by years)

Another characteristic trend, in our opinion, can be considered as the preservation and even strengthening of freedom for young people. According to the analysis, the deficit of freedom in Russian society has been felt by young people for a long time. As

can be seen in Figure 4, in all the compared researches, the proportion of young people who felt the high importance of freedom in Russia was inferior to the percentage of those who would like to see it in an ideal society. But it is characteristic that until recent times the percentage of those who wanted to see freedom in an ideal society, only slightly exceeded the share of those who felt its manifestations in Russia: in 2012 the difference between them was 14.5%, and in 2015 it was 11.3%. A sharp increase in this contrast occurred between 2015 and 2017: during this time, it reached almost 50%. Moreover, this change can hardly be explained solely by situational and one-time fluctuations in youth sentiments: the sharpness of this contrast in 2018 turned out to be less, but by it remained. Such an attitude of youth towards freedom, in our opinion, casts doubt on the initial assumption that after 2014–2015, the values of youth could lean toward materialistic values. A clear increase in emphasis on freedom, on the contrary, indicates that the mood of young people at that moment was even more post-materialistic, than it used to be before.



Figure 4: Freedom in an ideal society and in Russian society: dynamics of responses between 2012 and 2018 (% of total number of respondents, by years)

A similar picture is shown by the dynamics of youth attitudes towards another value — equality. If we assume that in 2014–2015, the values of Russian youth could shift towards the materialism, it is logical to conclude that equality could become more important value for young people. The deterioration of the socio-economic situation that underlies this supposed shift created quite substantial grounds for exacerbating youth's demand for equality. However, as can be noted in Figure 5, a clear change in the attitude of youth towards equality has not occurred.

Comparing the data for different years, we can note that young people feel a steady lack of equality in Russian society, but basically perceive it as a normal phenomenon. It is important to consider that equality cannot be included into the list of values that most



Figure 5: Equality in an ideal society and in Russian society: dynamics of responses between 2012 and 2018 (% of total number of respondents, by years)

youth representatives consider obligatory for an ideal society. In none of the compared studies, the proportion of respondents attributing equality to the value foundations of an ideal society did not exceed 40%. The sustainable inequality characteristic of Russian society, therefore, is seen by most young people not as a pathology, but as a norm. The initial assumption is that in 2014–2015, youth's demand for equality could arise, is not confirmed by the data.

The limited size of the article does not allow us to focus on the description of young people's specific attitude to each of the possible value parameters. However, even dwelling only on the key trends identified during the analysis, we can note that the proposed shift in the values of Russian youth towards materialistic values does not find an empirical confirmation. In general, the analysis showed that the evolution of youth values between 2012 and 2018 turned out to be noticeable. However, the alleged shift of youth values towards materialism did not happen. As we can see, contemporary young Russians ascribe importance to the postmaterialistic values even more often, than it used to happen in 2012.

Two versions can be suggested that explain this result. First of all, probably, we can say, that changes in the society has no influence on youth's demand for stability and security at all. Another idea is that we see only the first and frustrated reaction of young people on negative trends in society. Probably, they feel something wrong, but have not decided on their attitude towards the problems they see and have not changed their mood and attitudes. The second version seems to us more likely.

4. Conclusions

The initial impulse that inspired the writing of this paper was our desire to trace the dynamics of the values of Russian youth in the context of the unstable development of Russian society in recent years.

Our analysis has demonstrated that the values of Russian youth have significantly changed over the past six years. Moreover, our analysis has confirmed the conclusion, that has been already mentioned in some recent researches of other specialists: the strongest changes in the moods of young people occurred in a specific period, at the turn of 2015 and 2017 [1]. However, the analysis has shown that the changes that occurred in the values of young people are rather contradictory. The supposed aggravation of the youth's demand for materialistic values did not happen. On the contrary, during this period, young people began to be more sensitive to the value of freedom, the subjective significance of which, in the conditions of socio-economic difficulties, as we assumed, should turn out to be low.

The presence of changes in the values of young people indicates that changes in society have not gone unnoticed for them. The contradictory nature of these changes in values, in our opinion, indicates that the general moral and ethical turbulence of Russian society and the situational negativity of the socio-economic context have led young people into a confusion. In any case, in our opinion, there is no reason to speak of a clear value shift in Russian youth to materialistic values.

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