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Upper-Grade Students' Attitudes Toward Social Problems

Survey data on students in Russia show that they have widely differing views of how Russian social problems should be dealt with.

Russian society finds itself in a state of dynamic transformation. It is developing intensively and becoming more complex in its structure against the background of an increasing diversity of cultures and forms of interaction among people, along with economic differentiation, national and religious differences, and so on. These factors give rise to social problems, social tension, and various kinds of confrontation, see [1; 2]. It is important to know the public's opinion about these problems and phenomena that have such an influence on people's value guidelines, views, and sense of social well-being.

It is of particular interest to study the attitudes of *young people in school*, in particular upper-grade students, their attitudes toward solutions to social problems and the social changes that these

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solutions can lead to; see [3; 4]. They will be living in the future society as they achieve their positions in life, their beliefs and values in the form of specific actions, whether active or passive, tolerant or harsh.

The age of the students is very important, as it is in their school years that they form the foundations of their values in interaction, their dialogue with the world around them. In that period the basics of their way of life become firmly established and the scope for their priorities in life, preferences, and civic position takes shape; see [5; 6]. This period is marked by the individual's intensive ability to engage in reflection and become conscious of his inner world. During this interval the individual maps out and develops his perception of his own self: "I think that . . .," "I believe that . . .," and so on, which become the embodiment of the individual's conscious position in life.

The empirical material for the analysis consisted of primary data from a sociological survey, on a nationwide scale, of upper-grade school students (404 questionnaires), that was carried out in 2005 by the Memorial Center in a number of cities and in rural areas among students in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades. We studied the students' opinions only on the basis of the portion of their sample aggregate of Russian Federation oblasts whose questionnaires were available in the archives: Moscow oblast (Moscow), Leningrad oblast (St. Petersburg), Kaluga oblast (Kaluga and Bebel), Rostov oblast (Novocherkassk and Zernograd), Pskov oblast (the communities of Pliusa and Orekhovka), the Republic of Karelia (Petrozavodsk), Kaliningrad oblast (Kaliningrad), and Riazan oblast (Riazan).

A lexical and semantic analysis was made of students' answers, making it possible to characterize some of their attitudes, such as what they consider to be social problems and which methods of overcoming social tension they see as effective and meriting priority.

It seems to us that the retrospective approach in the study of the values of today's younger generation is a productive one, because it makes it possible to look at that generation's behavior through the prism of the ideals that they selected as their guidelines in life

during their years in school and are now reproducing in their activity. It is possible to assert, with a substantial degree of confidence, that the values that the youngsters formed in that period have an influence on their behavior in their later life as well. For this reason, the results of the survey can to some extent be extrapolated onto the characteristics of older groups of young people.

Let us look at some results of our analysis. Through axial coding of answers to the open question “If you were a leader in your town or region, what would you do first and foremost to solve social problems?” we were able to determine and characterize values on the scale of attitudes toward social changes and methods of solving social problems. We also assessed the degree of tolerance reflected in these attitudes: the students’ answers made it possible to determine their civic positions with respect to tolerance toward different social groups involved in the occurrence of problems and social tension. Our semantic analysis of their answers made it possible to determine the central societal problems in their perception of the world. Below we present a *classification of attitudes* that serves as the basis of students’ key convictions and ideas about ways to solve social problems and overcome social tension, their ideas about instruments for achieving social changes. The attitudes served as the basis for putting together a *typology of groups of school students* (see Table 1). Let us look at their characteristics in more detail.

“*Ostriches*” (21 percent). Their position can be characterized as detached or alienated, passive, inert, and lacking initiative, reflecting the younger generation’s “complacent, do-nothing,” adaptive, just go along, apathetic attitude toward social problems. The “ostrich” metaphor embodies the principle of not getting involved, a low level of reflection, the method of “hiding one’s head in the sand,” keeping to oneself, running away from reality, shrugging one’s shoulders, or just giving up. Their answers express their *passive attitude* toward current problems and the vectors of their own actions. Here are a number of typical statements that reflect their orientations: “It doesn’t make any sense to try anything,” “Everything is useless and in vain, we do not have the power to change anything,” “I never will be a leader,” “I don’t know,” “I haven’t thought about it,” and “I find it difficult to answer.”

“*Tanks*” (10 percent). The “tank” metaphor characterizes the students’ value and behavioral position as one of aggression and hostility. Their statements provide evidence of their fears and worries about their own safety and the well-being of their families, city, and country.

The suspicion and hostility that these students exhibit graphically in their answers are a reflection of their unreadiness to accept the present with its multiple differences in the form that they exist right now. Very often the answers resonate with assertions about the unsatisfactory behavior of “outsiders” who, supposedly, are not willing to accept the values of the society that they have come into. Adolescents who share this position are irritated by the behavior of these “outsiders,” seeing it as rude, impudent, and challenging, representing competition for resources (e.g., in the labor market).

The inclination to share the radical position of “our people” and “those people,” the position of “us” versus “them,” characterizes the orientation of this group of students as *belligerent and confrontational*. Among their answers we note the following semantics: “We need to restrict ‘guests’ and people from ‘problem’ countries from coming into Russia and living here”; “Migration has to be rigidly controlled”; “Outsiders, foreigners (in terms of nationality and religious belief) ought to be kicked out of the country/city/village.”

“*Prosecutors*” (26 percent). They hold the conviction that it is necessary to regulate social problems by legal, harsh, and radical (in many cases, repressive) measures designed to wage battle against social disasters, violations of the law, and public disorder. The “prosecutor” metaphor is an embodiment of the supremacy of the law and justice, an uncompromising system of punishment for violating social harmony and order, and to a large extent it reflects a healthy view of the world that is associated with obedience to the laws. Here are a number of the positions expressed by members of this group: “Apply harsh measures of punishment against criminals by revising the laws and the criminal code,” “Put them all behind bars! They belong in prison!” “Cleanse society of the gangsters!” In the minds of the respondents of this type there is a clearly expressed hostility toward criminals and a demand that

Table 1

Classification of Students' Dispositions with Respect to Ways to Solve Social Problems, and Typology of Groups of School Students

Key conviction	Ways to bring about social changes	Disposition	Groups of students
Any action or attempt is in vain. Nothing can be changed	Inaction, resignation, alienation	Inert, passive	"Ostriches"
Kick out all the "outsiders," those who "act different." Don't let them in. Limit how long they can stay	Confrontation, conflict, standoff between "us" and "them"	Socially hostile	"Tanks"
Strictly enforce the law, punish every dangerous kind of crime	Obedience to laws, an uncompromising system of punishments for offenses	Defensive, strength oriented	"Prosecutors"
Provide people with a decent standard of living and basic material needs to satisfy necessities, according to their merits	Jobs, objects of social infrastructure, basic material goods	Social material	"Bestowers of good things"
Be sensitive to other people's misfortunes, provide social assistance to the needy (the destitute, the sick, those in despair). Cultivate morality, tolerance, respect, mutual responsibility, and mutual assistance	Subsidies, transfers, charity, material, spiritual, and psychological help. Education, good upbringing, enlightenment, propagation of humane, universal human values.	Social ethical	"Humanists"
It is not a matter of reforms or leaders but people themselves. Only people themselves can change anything	One's internal locus of control, a mature outlook, a sense of personal responsibility	Reflexive philosophical	"Philosophers"
It is necessary and possible to solve all social problems	Radical measures. Thorough reforms and transformations. Revolutionary acts are not to be ruled out	All-encompassing idealistic	"Maximalists"

they be harshly punished. “Impose harsher punishment for immoral behavior and the violation of the moral norms of public order” (the students listed prostitutes, drunks, narcotics abusers, etc.). The kinds of punishments that the “prosecutors” have in mind are correctional measures and a harsh system of penalties. “Step up police patrols and strengthen preventive measures to reinforce law and order.” The students assign a special role to measures of ensuring safety that will *prevent* deviant behavior, and they suggest, rightly, that it is easier to prevent a social ailment than to fight its consequences. “Punish dishonest office holders and representatives of state authority,” “Restore order, clean out the various departmental organizations, including the ranks of the cadres of the Ministry of Internal Affairs [the police], and the state apparatus.” Such statements reflect low trust in official authority and the ruling elite, an attitude of no leniency, and dissatisfaction with the performance of state employees. The predominant thesis is install ruling authority that is effective and honest, carry out necessary reforms. “Do away with nationalistically inclined movements that foment nationalistic propaganda, strife, and so on,” “Ban sects and gangs.” As we can see, some students favor harsh measures to stop to social movements that act illegally and stir up pockets of potentially dangerous conflicts.

“*Bestowers of good things*” (12 percent). The members of this group emphasized that the ways to solve social problems are to be found in ensuring that people have a decent life, getting rid of poverty and lack of material, consumer, and economic protection; in the future these efforts will open up possibilities of higher motivations in the hierarchy of social values: “Provide people with a decent standard of living,” “Carry out social and economic reforms, fix the social infrastructure,” “Improve people’s well-being, raise wages and salaries so that they are able to meet their most basic needs (including police, doctors, schoolteachers).”

“*Humanists*” (23 percent). The “humanists” metaphor reflects the values associated with humanistic ways of eradicating social problems via dialogue. The students in this group have a positive take on the diversity of the world around them (the fact that there is a diversity of ethnic groups, religions, lifestyles, etc.) and they lean

toward the social-political perception of relations among people. A constant theme are words relating to mutual social assistance and the acceptance of both “our people” and “other people,” the need to render aid to those who are lost, demoralized, and in despair. The most attractive and effective ways of achieving these goals, as they see it, include education, moral enlightenment, and, in many cases, propaganda. This approach exhibits the possession of a mature level of civic-mindedness and a high level of moral self-awareness. Among the typical answers we can single out two. The first one reflects a pitying, condescending, attitude: “Provide social assistance to the needy, to the poor, the sick, and the lost.” The second one reveals the respondents’ moral and enlightened attitude: “Enlighten people, raise their level of moral and spiritual self-awareness, educate them, cultivate a sense of civic-mindedness, tolerance, and mutual support.”

“Philosophers” (1 percent). This very small group (in a sense a subgroup of the “humanists”) can be considered a separate group, since those who belong to it can be called contemplators, free-thinkers, “sages.” These adolescents have a pronounced mature internal locus of control; they talk about the priority of personal responsibility and say that no external factors (in the form of reforms, laws, and the threat of punishment) can change one’s inner nature: every individual must start with himself. Their judgments are based on this thesis: “There is a great deal that does not depend on leaders but on people themselves.”

“Maximalists” (7 percent). The statements by members of this group characterize their position as meta-theoretical and idealistic, in a certain sense revolutionary (as if they were ready to hurl themselves on the barricades in their defense of what is right). “If I were a leader I would do away with all problems!” “I will solve all problems!” “I will impose order everywhere!” This position provides evidence of a positive, optimistic view, not confined by restrictions or barriers or burdened by social stereotypes about what is possible and impossible, what is achievable and unachievable. It is reasonable to suggest that the students whose answers included sentences such as “I will do away with all problems!” expressed a maximalist idealization that is perfectly healthy for that age group, a

sense of the fullness of their power to eradicate social problems.

The results of the study make it possible to single out two levels of the life positions of upper-grade students. First, the overwhelming majority take an active position with respect to the array of social problems that have been touched on (the number of those who are *actively inclined* stands at 79 percent, and all types except for the “Ostrich” group can be assigned to them). A majority of respondents openly state their personal opinions and declare their own ideas about ways to overcome social tension, about the instruments that are necessary to bring about social change of the kind that they see as appropriate, effective, and preferable. At the same time, a fairly large group of respondents (21 percent) were unable to come to a decision with respect to their civic identity as regards the array of problems.

Second, in regard to ways to solve social problems and bring about social changes, it is possible to single out the following types (provisionally, as they do not occur in pure form): (1) Mild methods (humane, tolerant), 36 percent, characterize “bestowers of good things,” “humanists,” and “philosophers.” (2) Harsh methods (radical and tough), 43 percent, characterize groups such as the “tanks,” “prosecutors,” and “maximalists.”

Thus, the ratio between mild and harsh methods of overcoming difficult social situations and social tension is characterized by the proportion of 4 : 5, respectively (the “ostriches” can be assigned to a separate group). The evidence, I believe, can give explicit form to the attitudes held by the younger generation of Russians when it comes to solving social problems and bringing about social change in society. The study of this array of problems was carried out during a period in which Russian society was becoming stabilized. Further studies will be needed to determine the tendencies brought about by the crisis.

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