

“This is a conflict between grandchildren and grandfathers”

Young Russians are caught in protest debate

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Amidst a new protest wave, Russian youth - school students and young adults - have found themselves at the centre of public debate once again.

“Our children are being manipulated!”, “They are not children anymore!”, “They’re being used as cannon fodder!”, “Young people have the right to decide what kind of country they want to live in!”

As Russia’s new protest wave kicks off, there is no hotter topic than the participation of schoolchildren and students in the protests started by opposition politician Alexey Navalny.

While bloggers on TikTok and Instagram post videos urging young people to take to the streets, Russia’s schools and universities have threatened their students with expulsions - or, conversely, lured them with promises of sports events and examination retakes. Russian state agencies, it seems, are ready to do everything to keep the “children” at home, preferably together with their parents: *take a photo session, cook your favorite dish, sit still!* admonished Russia’s Ministry of Education ahead of a nationwide protest on 23 January. As a result, panic broke out in parents’ chat groups and online groups, with rumours spreading that “Putin had ordered police to fire on protesters”.

The politicisation and political subjectivity of young people in Russia has become an increasingly debated topic in the country in recent years. But when Russia’s Education Ministry introduces a new position to be created in the country’s schools - an adviser to discuss politics and memes with children - and law enforcement releases an expose film about the risks of protesting, it’s clear something is up.

To understand this current “generational conflict” and the reasons for this public panic, we talked to sociologist Zhanna Chernova, an expert on Russian family policy and a leading researcher at the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

The participation of “children” - or those who are now called “children” - in the new protests has become a topic of controversy between the Russian government and the opposition. At the same time, statistics show that among the participants in the rallies on 23 January, minors were less than 10%, and that the average age of protesters is around 30. What’s at stake here, where did this focus on “children” come from?

In this case, of course, we are dealing with a moral panic. One important thing that must be understood here is that Russia’s conservative turn, the imposition of so-called “traditional family values” - these are not only about the rejection of gender equality.

If we try to understand what this “tradition” means not only in terms of gender relations, but also generations, we see that “tradition” also presupposes a father’s power over his children. Not only women, but also children find themselves in a subordinate position in this scheme: they are deprived

of subjectivity, since they must honour the father's authority, follow his instructions.

Parents understand that threats from educational institutions - schools, universities - could ruin a child's chances at life

This aspect of the "traditional family" has become especially noticeable in light of recent appeals to children in Russia as unreasonable beings who must be guided and protected. All this, of course, fits perfectly into the structure of an authoritarian state, which restricts the rights of not only women, but also children and young people.

At what age are people designated "children" in Russia today? This category seems to include people of all ages - from kids at nurseries to school graduates and even students.

Last year, the official age of youth was extended: the State Duma decided that people from 14 to 35 are officially classed as "youth" [which gives them access, among other things, to potential state benefits and support].

You need to understand that this younger age cohort, on the one hand, is growing demographically, but on the other, it is becoming more and more politically active, as, for example, the research by the Levada Center shows. This age group is turning into a potential subject of political action, but in the "traditional" worldview of power and family no one needs this subject. On the contrary: this group is needed as an object that can be manipulated and inscribed in power relations.

At the same time, even taking into account all the features of the "second demographic transition" [a demographic situation entailing sub-replacement birth rates, longer life expectancy and higher degrees of diversity in family status], you need to understand that people who are 35 are, of course, adults. If we take the traditional markers of adulthood - the completion of post-secondary education, autonomy from the parental family, employment, the presence of stable partnerships and the birth of our own children - then we are talking about adults. This "stretching" of the category of "youth" to 35 also affects very young people, who see that political subjectivity is denied even to older people, even in general, already adults - not to mention minors.

The Russian state has concerns about this age group, which is becoming more widespread and more visible: just take the Arab Spring, where this cohort played a decisive role. This is not the case in our country yet, but in Russia, nevertheless, there was also a period when the birth rate increased, and the "early Putin" generation of children who were born at the start of the 2000s - there are a lot of them today.

Therefore, the Russian authorities have many reasons to play on the fears of parents and create moral panic. It is not the first time that Alexey Navalny has been accused of "bringing school kids out into the street" or "hiding behind children".

This moral panic turned out to be especially prevalent among people who, in the late 1980s and mid-1990s, were still teenagers, but were already actively participating in informal associations and various forms of protest during perestroika.

Why are yesterday's free thinkers so terrified by the idea that their children can be independent, including politically?

This generation of "parents" has experience of youth protests in the broadest sense of the word, not only political ones. But also they grew up during Russia's economic reforms, which at the very least they had to respond to. As a result, we got a middle class that is burdened today with a large share of responsibility for the well-being of their families, their children, including the transfer of their

class position.

Considering Russia's entire social, political and economic context, these people are, in effect, pragmatic - if not political - stabilisers of the regime. They disown the political component; they already know how to build professional, business strategies within the existing system and they would not want to lose their current positions.

We're talking now about people who took out mortgages to build nice apartments. Who worked hard for their children to study in prestigious schools. Who can generally provide a prestigious middle-class lifestyle - with trips abroad at least once a year, and so on. This economic pragmatism plays a big role here. This group's life experience of experiencing rapid reforms in the 1990s, the experience of observing the results of these reforms, the experience of how social lifts work - it is very similar to the late Soviet period.

Parents understand that threats from educational institutions - schools, universities - could ruin a child's chances at life, especially for a boy, who will immediately be conscripted by the army [if they lose their formal status as students enrolled at university]. Parents will have invested resources for a long time to ensure that their child enters a good university, maybe even built a trajectory with emigration to the West - and then all this can be crossed out? These are child-centered families, where everything is done for the good of the child, and the stakes are especially high here.

The well-being of one's own family is of much greater importance here than some abstract things like social justice, changes in the political system. Deep down, many people agree with these ideas, but they cannot put them into practice.

Today's "parents" are also the so-called "sandwich generation" - they also bear responsibility for their elderly parents - which makes them partly hostages of the current situation. For completely pragmatic reasons, they don't also want any sudden changes for their children

There are some very real reasons for parental fears. In the summer, in the wake of constitutional amendments, the MP Elena Mizulina tried to make a number of amendments to Russia's Family Code [the main framework for family law in the country].

These amendments were criticised and have so far been sent back for revision. But among other things, these amendments suggested that parents can have their parental rights removed if the parents are involved in public and protest activities. This is an old Soviet technique: to put pressure on parents via their children. Anything can be described as "public activity". Fortunately, these amendments have not yet been adopted.

In addition, today's "parents" are also the so-called "sandwich generation" - they also bear responsibility for their elderly parents - which makes them partly hostages of the current situation. For completely pragmatic reasons, they don't also want any sudden changes in relation to their child.

At the same time, it's hard to say that children in Russia are not political subjects. Minors, for example, were prosecuted as part of the "New Greatness" investigation.

Why, then, are Russian parents, who really don't want their children to "be used", coming out against Alexey Navalny - but not against the authorities?

This generalisation is also unfair. Our colleagues in Samara managed to conduct an express survey on students; they were carried out in other cities, and there were children with their parents at the rallies. Parents who feel more competent attend protests in order to protect their children: for

example, to do something if the child is detained..

For its part, the Russian state is also trying to influence the political subjectivity of “children”. It sees children as an object that needs to be ideologised and indoctrinated in the ideologically correct manner. In December 2020, a new concept for Russian official youth policy was adopted, which was not passed for a long time. That is, the state is beginning to worry about this group a lot. (You can recall all these patriotic education initiatives, amendments to the law on education.)

Russian parents, by contrast, view school primarily as an educational institution, as a place where children gain knowledge, and who still remember their pioneer and Komsomol past. They have distanced themselves as much as possible from all this.

After all, these families are bourgeois and conservative in their ideology - not in terms of gender ideology, but values. And not in the sense that officials understand them, but, for example, in the sense of maintaining close trusting relationships with children. It is unlikely that these families can be actively involved in protest; rather, they are ready for some kind of adaptive strategies, the so-called “weapons of the weak”. If, in addition to official exams, some kind of new “Komsomol membership” is introduced in Russian schools, parents will simulate some kind of activity for their children in order to fit into the new strategies.

Are we observing the kind of conformism typical of the late Soviet period?

Yes, but with one important difference, which, it seems, was first noted by political scientist Ekaterina Shulman: this is not the classic conflict of fathers and children right now. What we are seeing is a conflict between grandchildren and grandfathers.

Navalny’s meme about Putin being an “old man locked up in his bunker” shows the generations which are currently divided. It is not between parents and children, but between people of the so-called “third age” and young people - they do not coincide in their values, practices or ideas about the structure of the world. And “parents” are more oriented towards children, but due to high stakes they are more likely to adapt to the rules of the game set by the “grandfather”.

The inbetween generation’s demand is for stability, and this is stability understood in socio-economic terms, rather than politically

If we look at the age composition of the state political establishment, officials, big business, then this is not a generation of fathers, but grandfathers. Putin recently increased the age of appointed officials by decree - that is, these people can remain in power further, almost forever.

That is, there are two politically active generations right now in Russia, and they are on opposite sides of the barricades? Very young - and elderly people? And middle-aged people, the most able-bodied and economically active, do not feel that they can realise their political demands? They are pressed from both sides by two “extreme” generations?

The inbetween generation’s demand is for stability, and this is stability understood in socio-economic terms, rather than politically.

The “Velvet stagnation” or the beginning of the Putin period is all about the construction of a private sphere, building a home in the broad sense of the word. We spent so long building our lives, and then we finally built something - and we want to preserve it! This is a significant thing that you cannot easily give up. Still, now we can talk about the emergence of a second generation of the Russian middle class. Young men and women who are now 20-35 years old - they grew up in relative prosperity, which they do not want to lose at all. This distinguishes them from very young people. For

them, self-realisation as a value is really higher than “survival” (no matter how critical we are about this concept, in this case it is useful).

A study by the Levada Center shows well how civic activism, feminism, environmental issues have become an important agenda for this group. They are less interested in bread or tights or getting a Finnish toilet for their apartment. Instead, they want to volunteer and be active.

P.S.

This is an abridged translation of a fuller Russian interview.

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