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Anthony D. Castaneda
Portland State University

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Why Are Russian Youth Less Supportive of Democracy than Older Generations?

by

Anthony D. Castaneda

Faculty Mentor:

Lindsay J. Benstead

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Abstract

What explains support for democracy among Russian youth? Studies in political socialization conducted in the early 1990s, incorporating generational change, suggest that Russia's main obstacle to the consolidation of democracy was nostalgia for the Soviet Union. The passing of time now allows for the inclusion of the post-Soviet generational cohort, also referred to as the Putin Generation. The post-Soviet youth are a byproduct of political instability and economic turmoil with little or no direct personal experience of the Soviet period. These developments allow for new theoretical mechanisms related to government legitimacy to be included in the analysis. Drawing upon 2011 survey data conducted by the World Values Surveys, this article seeks to advance our understanding of why generational change affects attitudes toward democracy. It extends the literature in two ways: firstly, by adding a new political generation; and secondly, by incorporating government legitimacy into the analysis explaining support for democracy.

Keywords: Russian Youth, Post-Soviet Generation, Generational Change, Generation Effect, Cohort Effect, Modernization, Government Legitimacy

Introduction

Literature on political socialization, specifically, generational change, conducted in the early 1990s suggest that Russia's main obstacle to the consolidation of democracy was nostalgia for the Soviet Union.¹ Conventional wisdom suggests that younger generations are more inclined to express support for democracy. Previously surveyed Russian populations were unique in that they came of age under two different socioeconomic and political systems during the nation's transitional period. One study conducted at the turn of the century, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, found that younger Russians held a more favorable view of democracy and capitalism than older Russians.² The elapse of time now offers the post-Soviet generational cohort for consideration. This article places emphasis on the Putin Generation³, those who have come of age during Putin's presidency (or those born between 1980 and 1992), that is living under the new sociopolitical and economic system. In the matter of a decade, the notion of youth in modern-day Russia as a subject of government policy is quite different from that of the Soviet Union. Unlike their parents, young Russians in the twenty first century do not have an established career trajectory. The new Russian youth are a byproduct of political instability and turbulent free-market transition with little or no direct experience of the Soviet era.

Drawing upon the political socialization literature, this article seeks to improve the current literature's understanding of the attitudes of the post-Soviet cohort and how the period in which they came of age has shaped their outlook on politics and society. Understanding the political consciousness of the Putin Generation, which emerged out of political and economic turmoil, and how that consciousness was formed gives researchers insight into what kind of citizens young Russians will be. This will be the next generation that will occupy various occupations within the government, vote in elections, work in the private sector and become academics; they will also share their views and opinions with future generations. Additionally, considering Russia's one-year of service obligation, these young men and women are currently or will be active military men and women of the state.

Using the 2011 World Values Survey, this article seeks to understand the extent to which generational change is affecting demand for democracy. The present analyses, using two OLS regression models, reveal that age positively predicts satisfaction with government and demand for democracy in only one instance – the Brezhnev Generation. Furthermore, by incorporating government legitimacy as a variable, the study reveals that better perceptions of government performance positively impacts demand for democracy.

Who are the Post-Soviet Youth?

How have the events of the early 2000s affected the political orientation of Russia's youth? Though there may be debate as to the relative importance of specific developments, the period between the late 1990s through the 2000s has been a transformative period. A young Russian born in 1980 would have been 18 years of age at the time of the financial meltdown of 1998 and 20 years of age when Putin became president in 2000 after launching the Second Chechen War. At the other end of the post-Soviet cohort, a Russian born in 1992 would have been 12 when Mikhail Khodorkovsky, liberal opposition and oil billionaire, was arrested and put on trial. Those born in the early 1980's spent their formative years hearing about the Russian state and Chechen separatist. Further, due to rising oil and natural gas prices, the country experienced significant GDP growth throughout the 2000s. The broader context of the latter half of the transition period provides an interesting case

¹ Olena Nikolayenko, 2008

² Michael McFaul, "Generational Change in Russia," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, no. 11 (2003): 64-79.

³ Mendelson and Gerber, "US and Them: Anti-American Views of the Putin Generation," *The Washington Quarterly* (2008).

study to determine how highly visible political and economic events affected the political orientation of Russia's youth.

According to the CIA Factbook, Russian youth (those between 15 and 25) today make up nearly 11 percent of the population. If combined with the preceding cohort of young Russians, who have yet to come of age, the total is 27 percent or one-fourth of the population. The largest age group is made of those between 25 and 55, which accounts for roughly 46 percent of the population. If generational change is occurring, those values and beliefs may be reflected in future populations.⁴

The post-Soviet cohort is the first generation to truly harness the power of the internet, utilizing social media sites, such as Vkontakte and Odnoklasniki. 40.8 percent of individuals, in a study carried out by Diuk (2010), responded that they use the internet during their leisure time.⁵ While computer utilization has increased, with respect to news source, more than 90% reported that they gather news from television.⁶ The higher percentage suggests that young Russians are formulating opinions based on the news controlled by the Putin regime. The means by which young people receive their news is likely to affect their attitudes.

Generation Effect

The Russian youth, or generational change, have been considered the "beacon of hope" for democracy in Russia.⁷ Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was the sight of one of the world's most profound sociopolitical and economic transformation in modern history. Conventional wisdom suggests that younger people are inherently more progressive than older people in terms of their sociopolitical values and beliefs. Generation effect theory suggests that the formative period in which an individual comes of age under unique circumstances has the potential to shape certain attitudes of a generation; the studied phenomenon is described as a "generation effect" or "cohort effect."⁸ Further, in developing countries, such as Russia in the early 1990s, periods of dissatisfaction with government performance may affect political system preference,⁹ and/or undermine the political efficacy of a democracy.

Mendelson and Gerber (2008), drawing upon survey data from the 2000s, argue that the Putin themes, which are resonating with youth, may be acting as an ideological barrier to support for democracy.¹⁰ Further, the scholars argue that an authoritarian political culture may be developing among Russian youth.¹¹ While some evidence of generational change has been found,¹² even more speculated that the initial optimism about democracy and capitalism would be squashed by disappointment.¹³

The study of political generations and generation effects is contentious. Only highly visible and frequently discussed events are likely to resonate with young people. The post-Soviet cohort, as noted, came of age during a historical period of Russia's transition. The socialization literature also notes that attitudes have the potential to change over time, especially passes through various

⁴ CIA Factbook, 2015.

⁵ Nadia Diuk, *The Next Generation in Russia, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan: Youth, politics, identity, and change*, Plymout, UK: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2010.

⁶ Diuk, "Next Generation."

⁷ McFaul, "Generational Change."

⁸ Mark Tessler, Carrie Konold, and Megan Reif, "Political Generations in Developing Countries Evidence and Insights from Algeria." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, no. 68.2 (2004): 188

⁹ Tessler, "Political Generations," 191.

¹⁰ Mendelson and Gerber, "Anti-American Views of the Putin Generation," 132.

¹¹ Mendelson and Gerber.

¹² McFaul, "Generational Change."

¹³ McFaul, Duik.

stages in life, including college, employment, marriage, child-rearing, and retirement.¹⁴ The most promising area of study on generation effects is in countries that have undergone a period of sociopolitical and economic instability.

Those born between 1980 and 1992 constitute as a political generation.¹⁵ This cohort passed through their formative during a period of nation building, the curtailment of political rights, and military conflict. More importantly, the Putin Generation came age during an economic rebound. There is reason to believe that the combination of these events have shaped the attitudes towards democracy.

Modernization

At the turn of the millennium, nearly a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia began its rebound from the economic meltdown of 1998. Likely due to the rise in oil and natural gas price, between 1999 and 2008 the national GDP grew at an unprecedented rate, with the average at more than 7 percent.¹⁶ For Putin's first 8 years in office, Russia had one of the world's fastest growing economies and real wages more than tripled.¹⁷ Furthermore, the national unemployment rate dropped from 12 percent in 1998 to 6.5 percent in 2011, with the lowest being 6 percent in 2007.¹⁸

Classical modernization theory argues that economic development, greater affluence, and urbanization foster support for democracy.¹⁹ In this study four indicators of modernization theory are considered: size of town²⁰, education level,²¹ social trust²², and interest in politics.²³ Schools, namely institutions of higher education, no longer follow the strict teachings of the Soviet doctrine, transforming curriculums; therefore higher levels of education may correlate with higher support for democracy. Further, the expansion of cities and the migration of people from rural areas to the city lead people to adopt new beliefs, facilitated by increasing education level and global awareness.²⁴ The aforementioned indicators of modernization diffuse the necessary conditions for complex, intelligent social interactions between citizens.

Government Legitimacy

In 2004, Russia's freedom rating changed from "partly free" to "not free," according to Freedom House. While most attention has been given to the antidemocratic tendencies of the Putin regime, little attention has been given to how government legitimacy impacts demand for democracy in Russia. In a learning module approach, in contrast to modernization theory and generation effect theory, Mattes and Bratton (2007) argue that demand for democracy is contingent upon the perceived supply of democracy rather than affluence and or generational change.²⁵ Data collected in 2010 revealed that Russian youth possess more material wealth than any preceding generation cohort.²⁶ When asked whether they believe they have the ability to change their circumstance, 72

¹⁴ Cooper and Denner 1998; Staudinger, and Lindemberger 1991; Magnusson, Bergman, and Rudinger 1991, as cited in Tessler et. Al 2004

¹⁵ Diuk,93.

¹⁶ Guriev and Tsyvinski, "Challenges Facing the Russian Economy after the Crisis." 9-10.

¹⁷ Guriev and Tsyvinski, 9, 12.

¹⁸ International Monetary Fund

¹⁹ Lerner, Traditional Society; Lipset, "Social Requisites"; Inglehart and Norris, "True Clash".

²⁰ Lerner, Traditional Society; Lipset, "Social Requisites".

²¹ Almond and Verba.

²² Lerner, Traditional Society.

²³ Lipset, "Social Requisites"; Lerner, Traditional Society

²⁴ Lerner, D The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East (New York: Free Press, 1958

²⁵ Mattes and Bratton, "Learning about Democracy."

²⁶ Diuk.

percent responded positively.²⁷ Due to the benefits reaped by the increase in national GDP between the years of 1999-2008, Russians may attribute material wealth and economic rebound to government policy directed by the Putin regime,²⁸ affecting their perceived supply of democracy. Satisfaction with household financial situation is also used as an indicator of government legitimacy.

Throughout the 2000s, despite the curtailment of political rights, Putin has enjoyed high approval ratings, suggesting that the general population has approved of the government's performance.²⁹ In a comparative study from the MENA region, Benstead and Atkeson found that positive perceptions of governance (or supply of democracy), in the form of cracking down on corruption, within authoritarian regimes also positively relates to demand for democracy.³⁰ If democratic regimes cultivate and sustain democracy, it is reasonable to believe that Putin's authoritarian regime is producing similar results, in spite of findings that have found low support for democracy in Russia.³¹

Methodology

Using 2500 interviews from the 2011 World Values Survey, developed by Inglehart at University of Michigan, the present study seeks to explain what is affecting demand for greater democracy among Russian youth.

Dependent variables, in this study, are a series of sociopolitical attitudes relevant to Russia. The first dependent variable, government legitimacy, is measured by gauging confidence in the (1) government in the nation's capital, (2) parliament, and (3) civil service. Another dependent variable, support for democracy, is measured by asking respondents how important it is for them to live in a country that is democratically governed. Respondents are asked to rate the importance of democracy on a scale from one to ten, with higher scores denoting greater importance.

Independent variables are dummy variables representing the imagined generation cohorts. Adopting a lenient model to test for generation effects employed by Tessler (2004),³² the "formative years" are defined as 18-25. Every respondent is assigned to an age cohort that corresponds to the historical period based on their age at the time of the 2011 World Values Survey interview. For example, the Generation Putin cohort consists of individuals born between 1980 and 1993, who were between the ages of 18 and 31 at the time of the survey in 2011. With the exception of the young Russians born after 1987, six or more years were spent within the hypothesized formative period. Generational cohorts can be identified by having shared depositions or collective memories that are durable and have the potential to outlast the periods in which they were formed, thus shaping the behavior and attitudes of an individual for a lifetime.³³ In other words, the impact of social and political events experienced during the formative years has the potential to define a generation's outlook on politics and society.

The number of respondents in each age cohort is as follows: Generation Putin, 1998 - 2011, N= 641; Generation Gorbachev, 1985 - 1997, N= 542; Brezhnev, 1964 -1984; N= 928; Khrushchev, 1946 - 1966, N= 389.

²⁷ Diuk, 14.

²⁸ Diuk, 9.

²⁹ Mendelson and Gerber, 136.

³⁰ Benstead and Atkeson, "Why does Satisfaction with an Authoritarian Regime Increase Support for Democracy?"

³¹ Inglehart, "Mass Support for Democracy".

³² Rather than dropping respondents who do not fall into a designated eight year historical period based on age, I extend the limits of the age cohorts, capturing all attitudes available in the sample.

³³ Tessler.

Six additional independent variables are also included in the regressions. For the purpose of control, gender (male coded as 1) is included in the regression. To test modernization theory, four variables are included: education level (no formal education through university, with degree), size of town (measured by population size, 0-2000 through greater than 500,000 inhabitants), interest in politics, and social trust. Lastly, satisfaction with financial situation of household (1 indicates low satisfaction and 10 indicates higher satisfaction), All variables are statistically significant in either one or both models. Lastly, A dummy variable (public sector =1) for sector of occupation is also included in the regression.

In model 1, the effect of age cohorts on the dependent variable – confidence in government – is examined. In the proceeding model, the dependent variable is support for democracy – importance of democracy, with the “confidence in government” variable introduced into the regression as an independent variable. This will allow us to examine the effect that government legitimacy has on demand for democracy.

Findings and Implications

Generation Effects

Table 1 presents the results of the regressions in which “confidence in the government” and “importance of democracy” are the dependent variables. Examined through the lens of generation effect theory, the relationship between generational cohort and confidence in government, and between generational cohort and support for democracy, reveals that Russian youth are not more inclined to be more supportive of democracy than previous generations. The findings contradict conventional wisdom that suggests that youth are inherently more progressive than their parents in terms of embracing democracy.

The table shows that confidence in government and support for democracy is only statistically significant related to cohort membership in one instance. Members of Brezhnev generation, or those coming of age during the height of the Cold War, are less likely to express confidence in the government and more likely to support democracy. This is likely due to the breakdown of guarantees offered under the Soviet system. For example, controlling for other factors, the Brezhnev generation is .092 units lower in predicted government legitimacy than the Putin cohort and the effect is statistically significant ($p < .05$). In other words, the cohort effect is only discernible in the case of the Brezhnev generation. Furthermore, the regression also shows that Russian youth take a neutral position with respect to support for democracy. Against that backdrop, though some democratic practices have been institutionalized, the fact that many fundamental institutions of the Soviet state had not changed may hinder demand for democracy.³⁴ The findings suggest that democracy is not in high demand among youth but not necessarily rejected.

Modernization Theory

When concerned with government legitimacy, in the form of confidence in the government, model 1 shows that government legitimacy is statistically related to two variables: social trust and interest in politics. Both are positively related to government legitimacy. The result from Model 1 shows that the perception of government performances presented by the main media outlets has

³⁴ Diuk, 8.

been positive, increasing confidence in the government. Speculation is informed by Diuk's findings which found that Russian youth gather nearly 90% of the news from the television.³⁵

Model 2 presents the relationship between support for democracy and modernization, controlling for generation and other independent variables. Importance of democracy is positively related to education level, size of town, and interest in politics (model 2). However, an inverse relationship exists between satisfaction with household-income and support for democracy. A one unit increase in education level and population density, support for democracy increases .1 and .08 on a scale of 1-10, respectively, when controlling for all other factors. The rise in national GDP could explain patterns of migration from rural areas to larger cities. In examining the effect of education, as education increases by one unit, predicted support for democracy increases .069, all else being equal ($p < .001$). Among Russian youth those who reported having some college-level education or obtained a college diploma were more likely to express a preference for a democratic political system. With recent reforms to primary education, only 17.7 percent of young Russians describe themselves as students in 2010, 3 degrees lower than 2003 levels.³⁶ With the decrease in secondary schooling and college enrollment, support for democracy may also decrease.

The information is consistent with previous studies examining the relationship between education and city size, suggesting that both variables are indicators of support for democracy. However, modernization theory weakens when considering satisfaction with the financial situation of the household. Those who positioned themselves higher on the scale are less likely to stress the importance of democracy.

Government Legitimacy

The results, in model 1, show that Russian youth express higher levels of confidence in the government than the Brezhnev age cohort. The positive perception of the Putin government, which is credited for the stabilization of the national economy, may be due to Russia's first experiment with democracy during the transition period. It is possible that Russian youth heard the horror stories of the "crazy 90s" and now draw a connection between a strong leader and a stable economy. As expected, size of town and education are not statistically related to confidence in government.

In model 2, Russians, who reported being satisfied with the financial situation of their household, were less likely to demand democracy. This demonstrates support for the status-quo in Russia. In other words, the turbulence of the late 1990s may be affecting demand for democracy. Additionally, for those who reported that they work in the public sector, predicted support for democracy decreased .22. The findings support an informed speculation about the connection between public sector employees and lower support for democracy, seeing that many fundamental institutions from the Soviet Union remain intact. While a negative relationship exists between satisfaction with financial situation and importance of democracy, the regression reveals a positive relationship between regime legitimacy and support for democracy. The more confident a respondent was in the government, the higher they position themselves on the importance of democracy scale. This is evident in model 2, as confidence in government increases by one unit, predicted support for democracy increases .24 on a scale of 1-10. This supports claims that positive perceptions of government effectiveness correlates with demand for democracy.

³⁵ Duik, 13.

³⁶ Diuk, 2.

Conclusion

This present study presents evidence that, in contrast to conventional wisdom, age is not a strong predictor of support for democracy. The data shows that Russian youth do not hold more progressive views, with respect to democracy, than previous generations, specifically the Brezhnev generation. In model 1 and 2, generation effects are discernible in the attitudes of only one age cohort. In both instances, the respondents in the Brezhnev age cohort reflected attitudes that set them apart from other political generations.

The findings demonstrate how government performance, in form of higher confidence levels, has the potential to foster support for democracy in authoritarian regimes. While uncertainty remains as to whether Russian youth will continue to be ambivalent about democracy, government performance is likely to increase the demand for democracy if the regime is viewed as legitimate.

Since 2011, when the survey data was collected, the Russian people have been experiencing a defining period in their nation's contemporary history. Briefly, and most notably, Putin returned to presidency in 2012, further consolidating power, and is expected to remain in power until 2024. Domestically, the Putin administration has clamped down on civil society and independent news agency, passing more laws that restrict their activities. Abroad, Russia annexed the Crimean peninsula following the overthrow of the pro-Russian government in Kiev, Ukraine in 2013 and is suspected of providing military support to pro-Russian separatist. Additionally, with an approval rating in the 80 degrees, Putin's rhetoric has become aggressively reminiscent of the Soviet era rhetoric.

Additional research is needed to determine whether regime legitimacy/government performance will continue to have a positive impact on attitudes toward democracy. Furthermore, research is needed to test whether Russia's political culture is, perhaps, in organically, shifting towards authoritarianism, which is not tested for in this investigation. As the current regime expands its reach across the social space of civil society, additional attitudinal and behavioral data, specific to Russia, could potentially shed light on political, economic, and social beliefs and actions of Russian youth. Evidence of generation effects can plausibly emerge if emphasis is placed on other areas sociopolitical and economic life. This is essential to understanding whether regime legitimacy, the supply of democracy, will continue to lead to greater demand for democracy.

The focus of the study is to test for generation effects in attitudes towards democracy, as well as to introduce the government legitimacy variable. Although age alone does not explain variance (and only modestly in one case) in support for democracy, the analysis reveals that post-Soviet youth are moderate on support for democracy and government legitimacy, in the case of Russia, is positively related to support for democracy.

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Table 1	Model 1 (OLS) Confidence in Government	Model 2 (OLS) Importance of Democracy
Constant	2.113 (1 through 4)	5.736 (1 though 10)
Generation Effect Theory		
Generation Putin (<i>Cohort= 0</i>)		
Generation Gorbachev (=1)	-.015 (.049)	.090 (.168)
Brezhnev (=1)	-.092* (.046)	.361** (.157)
Khrushchev (=1)	-.087 (.065)	.207 (.222)
Modernization Theory		
Size of town	-.008 (.006)	.106*** (.022)
Education level	-.016 (.010)	.069*** (.033)
Social trust (<i>Trust= 1</i>)	.153*** (.038)	-.060 (.130)
Interest in politics	.068** (.022)	.233*** (.082)
Regime legitimacy		
Satisfaction with financial situation of household	.036*** (.007)	-.066*** (.026)
Sector of occupation (<i>Public= 1</i>)	.071** (.038)	-.215* (.129)
Regime legitimacy	N/A	.243*** (.081)
Gender (<i>Male= 1</i>)	-.061* (.035)	-.183 (.121)
Number of observations	1752	1659
R-square	.037	.036
Adjusted R-square	.032	.030

Note. – Standard errors are in parentheses; dummy variables are marked.

* Significant at the .10 level.

** Significant at the .05 level.

*** Significant at the .01 level.

Appendix

Generation effect

- Putin Generation (=0), Generation Gorbachev (=1), Brezhnev (=1), Krushchev (=1)

Modernization

- Highest level of education attained. No formal education [=1]/ Incomplete primary school [=2]/ Complete primary school [=3]/ Incomplete secondary school: technical type [=4]/ complete secondary school: technical type [=5]/ Incomplete secondary school: university-preparatory type [=6]/ Complete secondary school: university-preparatory type [=7]/ Some university-level education, without degree [=8]/ University-level education, with degree [=9]/
- Size of city. Eight-point scale, with "under 2,000 [=1]" at the lowest point and "500,000 or greater [=8]" at the highest.
- Social trust. "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people? Most people can be trusted [=1]/ need to be very careful [=0]."
- Interest in politics. "How interested would you say you are in politics? Not at all interested [=1]/ not very interested [=2]/ somewhat interested [=3]/ very interested [=4]."

Government legitimacy

- Satisfaction with household income. "How satisfied are you with the financial situation of your household?" Ten-point scale, where 10 is the highest.
- Sector of occupation. Are you working for the government or public institution [=1], for private business or industry [=0], or for a private non-profit organization [=0]?
- Government legitimacy, independent variable for model 2. "How much confidence do you have in the government (in your nation's capital), parliament, and civil service? None at all [=1]/ not very much [=2]/ Quite a lot [=3]/ A great deal [=4]."