

National



POLICYBRIEF



PROMISE POLICY BRIEF: RUSSIA (2 OF 4)

New pro-citizen activities of young Petersburgers for 'public morals and order'

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INTRODUCTION

PROMISE explored the ways young people with a history of stigmatisation or conflict participate in society.

In Russia our research focussed on young people who are engaged in civil initiatives, who are not indifferent and critical towards what is happening in society and who want to change the existing social order to a better one. We focus on exploring innovative forms of youth participation and emerging conflicts faced by young people who openly label their activities as civic or political engagement. We call them 'the new civic activists', and the primary reason for our interest in this group is that despite the general negative attitude towards politics, the lack of confidence in political institutions and the increased risks associated with one's participation in public rallies, these young people are not afraid to openly take part in various initiatives, therefore becoming a subject of civic and political engagement.

On the one hand, they use alternative channels to influence the state authorities and interact with them, and on the other hand, they try to change life in the city and in society as a whole at the micro level. Some of them are more focused on political activism – as participating in a democratic youth movement. Others aren't focused on politics and social order as much but want to preserve the moral order enshrined in the legislation of the Russian Federation. Members of these communities combat smoking and alcohol drinking in public places, which is prohibited by Russian law, and fight against the advertisement of prostitution and brothels. This is their way of showing interest in civic participation and striving to realise their civic potential. Both groups of young people, despite their differences, are not satisfied with the situation in society and want to participate in social change at their own level and in their own ways. They are activists and they oppose themselves to authorities and to 'the passive mass'.

According to the latest youth studies, institutionalised civic engagement and interest in formal politics are on the decline in most European countries, especially among young people (Norris, 2004; O'Toole et al., 2003). On the whole, young people are less involved in formal traditional political institutions and

processes – they do not vote in elections and they are not members of political parties. Young Russians also have little trust in political institutions and in the very possibility of social change via traditional channels (Trofimova, 2015: 77), especially if we take into account the widespread idea that political civic participation in modern Russia is meaningless and dangerous (Krupets et al., 2017). In this context it is especially important to support those young people who are still interested in civic engagement. Today young people are especially inclined to break away from ‘traditional forms of participation’ in favour of ‘special, contextual and specific activities’ (through new social movements, online activity, etc.) (Pirk, Nugin, 2016, Kim et al., 2016, Johnson et al., 2016). And sometimes such types of participation can be more effective for social change and improvement of the situation.

The media and the state rhetoric in Russia often describe ‘new youth activism’ as a serious ‘problem’, which has given rise to a new moral panic directed at young people. Currently, the main strategy for solving this ‘problem’ involves ‘prohibitive measures’ (the prohibition of minors’ participation in rallies) and preventive measures within the education system (the cultivation of ‘proper citizenship’ in school students). However, it should be considered not as the problem but as an opportunity to understand the motivation behind young people’s actions and to establish communication with them, to create legitimate platforms and opportunities for their interaction with the authorities – in other words, to increase young people’s civic and political engagement.

This policy brief is concerned with this problem of low civic engagement of young people and with the problem of effective communication between active young citizens and the government. Young people interested in participation in civil and political life of the country and who are critical towards the government sometimes are not seen by the state as a partner or as an agent of social change.

The policy recommendations are directed towards the improvement of the dialog between the state and young people, towards the growth of young people’s civic engagement and towards the development of their agency.

The aim of the recommendations is to make visible the perspective and the problem of young civic activists and to develop communication with them as the basis of social partnership and equality.

KEY FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Support youth self-organized initiatives

The research found that at the moment in St. Petersburg active youth quite effectively implements grassroots informal initiatives. Young people demonstrate high motivation and passion to make the world better. They are creative and effective in self-organisation. Young people realise the politics of ‘small deeds’ and believe that it can have a global significance for social change in the future (the change of moral and social orders). In the context of a general decrease of political engagement this is a good example of civil society development. Young people who are in conflict with the passive majority demonstrate the effectiveness of self-organisation even in the context of a hostile environment.

- It is recommended not to prevent young people from self-organisation, but, on the contrary, to support their initiatives in every possible way: to create comfortable conditions for their development (for example, to soften state control over the activities of NGOs), to develop the system of financial support (for instance, through the grant competition) of different civic initiatives, and to make sure that young people know about such possibilities and know how to participate in competitions.

Platforms for the presentation of young people projects can, for example, be organised in a frame of different youth forums or youth events, where various young people meet, who present their projects and have the opportunity to receive official state support. When young people are fighting for moral order and the participants say that they are acting in the frame of a Federal project, it is more calming for ordinary passers-by when they also receive support from the police. On the contrary, groups that are not affiliated with state structures are often perceived as troublemakers. However, the participants of these cases do not want to receive support from public authorities because of their distrust of officials and because of bureaucratic difficulties.

But it is important to allow freedom for young people, to let them decide by themselves what to do and how to do it. They should not be over controlled otherwise it will decrease their creativity and limit the benefits from self-organisation for the development of new competences. Access to these programs should be easy, without bureaucratic barriers. Young activists are already highly motivated for civic participation, but their motivation should be developed and supported.

Perceive young people as equal partners of social change and form their positive image

Young civic activists today are competent agents of social change, they are not indifferent to what is happening around them and want to work for the common good. They have experiences of realising different projects communicating with the authorities knowing the problem 'from below'. But quite often young activists are seen by the authorities as 'children'. State representatives can ignore young people, or see them as 'the problem', or overprotect them. Such approaches are not fruitful and effective because sometimes young people are even more qualified compared with some other civil actors. They are flexible and open to new innovative methods of civic participation.

At the same time society sometimes marginalises the activists (talking about ineffectiveness of their activity, insulting them, etc.). This is also the problem especially in the context of low civic engagement.

- In order to engage young activists into the common effective work over social change it is recommended to perceive them as equal partners and to avoid paternalistic attitude towards them. Public authorities can involve civil society activists in the joint solution of existing problems and conflicts, for example, at the city level, which will increase the overall efficiency of work, since the existing experience of activists, social capital, cultural capital and the vision of the problem "from below" are valuable resources that can be used in solving various issues at the local and Federal levels.
- Plus, young people engaged in social change often experience a negative attitude from society and certain population groups, therefore it is important to analyse how they cope with external stigmatisation, what tools they use to protect themselves, and how they present themselves in everyday interactions. A comparison of tools used in different cases can help to identify the most effective solutions and share them with other young people. It will help to redefine the image of the activist in the society and motivate other young people to participate in civic initiatives.

Create platforms for the development of skills and competences

Our research demonstrated that many different skills and competences of young activists are developing in the frame of their civic participation. These skills can be in demand in various fields and at various places of work, creating the innovative potential of this generation. From their participation in civic initiatives they know how to organise team work, how to create and implement a project, how to disseminate the results

on the Internet, etc. Regardless of what activists are fighting for they often share a common motivation (professional development, accumulation of capital – knowledge, social networks, and social change) and to oppose the passive majority.

The special demand is to know how to interact with the state authorities (see next recommendation). Activists have to work constantly on their competence in communicating with state authorities and the police. Moreover, activists try to influence not only the legislation related to the state's youth policy, but also other laws, and therefore it is important to identify their means of influence and their impact on the existing legislation.

St. Petersburg Open School of Human Rights is a group of human rights defenders, activists, educators and dreamers who gathered four years ago to find new supporters, allies and colleagues for whom freedom and justice are important. The school invites people who are open to dialogue, complex conversation and new approaches, who want changes in society, social institutions, in a separate city, country and that are ready to work on these changes themselves; who want to help public initiatives and projects; who are ready to work with them and help to develop their community.

- The authorities can also participate in the development of organisational skills of young activists, and first of all they should teach how activists can interact with the state effectively, how to overcome all bureaucratic procedures.

Create the conditions for a dialog with young civic activists

Our research found that one of the key problems of modern civic participation according to the young activists' is the distance and closeness of the authorities. Young activists do not trust the state, but at the same time want to be heard by the authorities and are looking for different ways to voice their problems and suggestions to state representatives. Activists are not scared of open conflicts with representatives of power structures. They are not trying to avoid these conflicts, moreover, they try to 'compel' the state structures to interact with young people.

The Youth Board of St. Petersburg is a collegial advisory body under the Governor of St. Petersburg. The composition of the Board includes 65 people, its leaders, members of youth organisations and active young citizens of St. Petersburg. The mission of the Board is to create comfortable conditions in St. Petersburg to attract young people to solve urgent social and economic problems of the city and to connect concerned and active people for the development of the city.

- Accordingly, it is necessary to work purposefully on the development of conditions for the possibility to build an open and accessible dialogue with young people. It is recommended to include young activists in the discussions held by various policy groupings, to create conditions for safe and regular communication of civic activists with the authorities, to develop virtual communication. Online activity is very important for young people, sometimes it is even more productive than offline engagement. The internet is completely incorporated in the life of activists, and dialog with the authorities should also take place not only offline but also online.

Promote the engagement of young informal activists to formal politics

Data analysis shows that civic participation of many activists stems from their desire to accumulate new professional competencies that may be used in making a career later on. Activism can become, for some young people, a part of their future professional activity. They may try to convert the received knowledge and social networks into the development of their career. We can also see that the boundaries between activism and professional life become blurred and problematised, often by the participants themselves, which results in an opportunity to convert skills and connections acquired in the process of civic engagement into economic or political capital.

- We would recommend to develop the possibilities of engagement of young activists into the employment schemes of state structures (for instance, in the form of fellowships). It can be very beneficial for the state – because the young activists could become motivated and highly qualified employees. At the same time it helps to develop the dialog with activists and can be beneficial for their future career.

RESEARCH PARAMETERS

This policy brief is based on 29 in-depth biographical interviews with 19 men and 10 women aged 18 to 39 who are participants of 5 organisations. The interviews were conducted at the same time as the participant observation; the researchers spent 6 months in the field (from October 2016 to March 2017). As a result 16 research diaries were written based on 52 hours of participant observation in the ‘moral order activists’ subcase. In addition to their offline activity, researchers continuously monitored the behaviour of group members on social networks.

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FURTHER READING	http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/New-pro-citizen-activities-of-young-Petersburgers-for-‘public-morals-and-order’.pdf