

Xenophobia in Russia

Are the Young Driving It?

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Since the mid-1990s, human rights groups, scholars, government agencies, and the media in the Russian Federation have documented a rising wave of individual and group acts of violence, destruction, or intimidation targeting ethnic and/or religious “others.” In addition to massive brutality in Chechnya, Russia in recent years has witnessed skinhead riots and street raids by chain-and-rod wielding thugs; torchlight marches and attacks on mosques and synagogues; murders and beatings of foreign residents and diplomats; desecration of Jewish cemeteries; and intimidation of Chinese traders by whip-cracking Cossack gangs. In 2000, the Moscow Helsinki Group reported an average of 30 to 40 assaults a month by local gangs targeting darker-skinned individuals in Moscow alone. According to hate crime expert Aleksandr Tarasov, chair of the department of youth studies at the Phoenix Center for New Sociology and the Study of Practical Politics in Moscow, the number of skinheads in Russia grew from about 20,000 in 2001 to 50,000 in 2003, and it was projected to reach 80,000 by the end of 2005.

After a spectacularly cruel murder of a 9-year old Tajik girl in St. Petersburg by a neo-fascist gang in February 2004, Russia’s then acting interior minister, Rashid Nurgaliyev, acknowledged that “acute manifestations of extremism” against minorities had become a serious and growing trend posing a security threat to Russia. The same concern was voiced by Russian President Vladimir Putin in his televised responses to questions from Russian citizens in late September 2005.

The Role of Youth Culture

Since most hate crimes in Russia appear to be the work of extremist youth groups, analysts have pointed to what scholars have termed a “racist youth subculture” that encourages violence toward outsiders through peer pressure and group norms. Tarasov’s research revealed, for example, that the first Russian skinhead groups (Skinlegion, Blood and Honor, and United Brigades 88) formed around counterculture magazines and rock music, and that most skinheads who attacked Armenian schools and Russian citizens in Moscow in the spring of 2001 were between 13 and 18 years old. Patterns of anti-foreigner violence in Russia appear to resemble those in Germany, where attacks have been collective, unplanned, and related to drinking. Rebellious in-group pride is combined with extreme out-group hostility. One tenth grader from the city of Vologda, in a 2002 interview cited by the Moscow Helsinki Group, linked the alarming spread of red-brown dress and communication codes in her school with extreme hostility toward non-Russians:

In our class, approximately half the boys are skinheads and National Bolsheviks. They walk around, wearing all black, in high combat boots. They greet each other with a fascist salute....People who are not in their organization they call ‘vegetables.’ Our school is painted with inscriptions: ‘Russia is everything! Everything else is nothing!’, ‘Beat the Caucasians,’ and other things like that. In my district, there are inscriptions ‘Only for whites’ on pay phones and benches.

A New Survey

To probe the broader social dynamics behind these sad and alarming examples, I designed a study of ethnoreligious hostility and violence in the Russian Federation. The study includes a mass opinion survey on ethnic attitudes in Russia. The survey was conducted by the Levada Center (formerly the All-Russian Center for the Study of Public Opinion) in the summer and fall of 2005. It was based on multistage probability sampling. The survey combines population samples representative of the Russian Federation as a whole, as well as samples representative of six federation subjects (Moscow City, Moscow oblast, Krasnodar krai, Volgograd oblast, Orenburg oblast, and Tatarstan).

The survey data makes it possible to examine whether xenophobic and exclusionist proclivities are more typical of Russians aged 18 to 25 than of Russians aged 40 and over. The latter cohort was culturally and politically socialized during the Soviet period, in the days of Marxist-Leninist indoctrination that explicitly denounced racism and interethnic hostility. Closed to mass immigration from outside its borders, the USSR also placed restrictions on the internal movement of people, thus limiting the prospects of ethnic groups rapidly coming into contact in large numbers at the neighborhood or city/district level. It is also worth remembering that

the Soviet government imposed tight restrictions on information coming into the country through media censorship, policing, and import regulations. In contrast, the 18-to-25 age group are those Russians who reached their teenage years after the USSR collapsed and social taboos on racism and xenophobia weakened. Political priming of the Russian public for military campaigns in Chechnya could only further undermine these taboos. This cohort not only became socialized at a time of rapid exposure to global youth subculture, including violent extremism, but this was also a time when Russia emerged as a major destination country for migrants. Moreover, at the same time that non-Slavic ethnic groups became increasingly visible in Russian cities, towns, and counties, Russia's Slavic population core experienced a demographic decline on a scale not observed since World War II.

For these reasons, it appears plausible that the 18-to-25 cohort in Russia is likely to hold stronger xenophobic and exclusionist attitudes than the 40-and-over cohort, regardless of other factors such as education and income. From the survey's multiple measures of xenophobia and interethnic hostility, I selected three for this report. Two of these deal with support for coercive, violent action directed against ethnic others, and one deals with a major agent of violent action. They are based on survey questions asking how strongly respondents agree or disagree with the following statements:

- 1) "Russia for the Russians' is a sensible, good idea";
- 2) "All migrants, legal and illegal, and their children should be sent back to wherever they came from";
- 3) "Skinheads do not pose any threat to interethnic relations in Russia"

Of these three questions, the first two are more indicative of general xenophobic proclivities, while the third relates to specific agency and behavior more directly associated with youth. To see if negative perceptions are inversely related to positive ones, I also analyzed how the age difference related to support for granting all migrants and their children permanent residency rights in Russia.

General Xenophobic Proclivities: A Weak Case for Age Difference

Distribution of responses on these questions by age group in the nationwide Russian Federation sample (N=680) revealed little systematic relationship between age differences and support for the two general measures of xenophobia (see graphs below).

Approximately 60 percent of respondents 18-to-25 and 57 percent of respondents 40-and-over expressed complete or partial support for the "Russia for the Russians" slogan. Complete agreement was registered

among 30 percent of the 18-to-25s, and 31 percent of 40-and-overs. These differences are well within the statistical margin of error for the sample.

Controlling for education had little impact on this relationship. Conventional wisdom suggests that xenophobic proclivities are likely to be stronger among respondents with lower levels of education (i.e., those with secondary education or less). Within the lower educated category, support for “Russia for the Russians” was higher than in the general survey, but again the difference between older and younger respondents remained within the margin of error. Approximately 62 percent of 18-to-25s and 65 percent of 40-and-overs supported this slogan, with approximately an even split across these age groups between those who supported it completely and those who supported it partially.

The statement that all migrants, legal or illegal, and their children should be sent back to their places of origin was completely or partially supported by approximately 36 percent of respondents 18-to-25, and 43 percent of respondents 40-and-over. Thus, on this key measure of xenophobia (the question replicates one regularly asked in the Eurobarometer surveys), respondents 40-and-over scored higher beyond a margin of error. Muddying the waters, however, is the data on complete support for the wholesale deportation of migrants. This was expressed by about 27 percent of 18-to-25s, compared to 22 percent of 40-and-overs (just on the cusp of the margin of error). The scores were a few percentage points higher, but distributed along exactly the same pattern, among respondents with no college education in both age groups.

An examination of correlation coefficients revealed that almost no combinations of age difference (18-to-25 vs. 40-and-over) and education level (secondary vs. post-secondary) yielded a significant association with support for “Russia for the Russians” and for wholesale deportation of migrants and their children. Nor did I find any relationships stronger than chance between age-and-education clusters and support for granting migrants permanent residency rights in Russia. The sole exception to this pattern was that the older Russians had more xenophobic proclivities than the younger ones: being a lower-educated Russian 40-and-over was non-randomly related to support for deportation of all migrants and their children.

Where the Young Differ: The Skinhead Factor

Correlation analysis showed that age in general was related non-randomly to respondents’ perception of skinheads in Russia. The older the respondent, the more likely they are to disagree with the statement that skinheads pose no threat to interethnic relations in Russia. This is a strong indication that younger respondents are more likely to deny that skinheads are a social problem in Russia. While this is not indicative of direct support for violent groups, it is cause for concern. Denial of an

extremist threat from skinhead groups is consistent with a sense of normalization of violence and, hence, a social climate in which inter-group violence is more likely.

Looking at the distribution of responses to the skinhead question, close to 25 percent of respondents 18-to-25 agreed completely or partially that skinheads posed no threat of interethnic violence. In contrast, only about 15 percent of respondents 40-and-over shared this view.

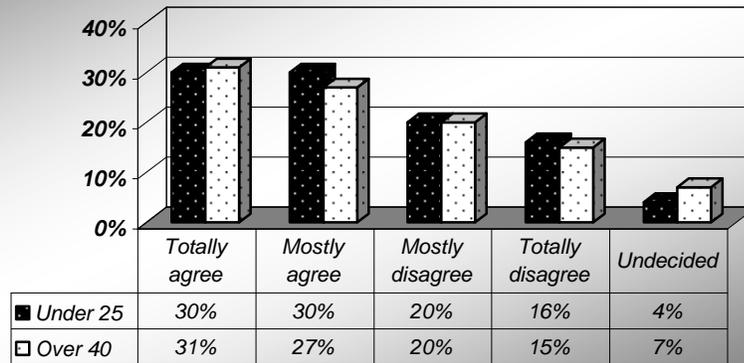
When controlling for education, these age cohorts also exhibited a marked difference on the skinhead question. Among the 18-to-25s, respondents without any post-secondary education were approximately twice more likely to deny the skinhead threat than respondents with more than high-school education (29 percent to 15 percent, respectively). Among the 40-and-overs, respondents without any post-secondary education were only about *half* as likely to deny the skinhead threat as respondents with more than high-school education (12.5 percent to 20 percent).

Among regional survey samples, I tested these relationships in Krasnodar krai—arguably one of the regions where xenophobic behavior and attitudes have been most strongly manifested in the last decade or so. The general pattern is largely the same as I reported for the Russian sample, except that the tendency of younger respondents to deny the skinhead threat was found to be more pronounced.

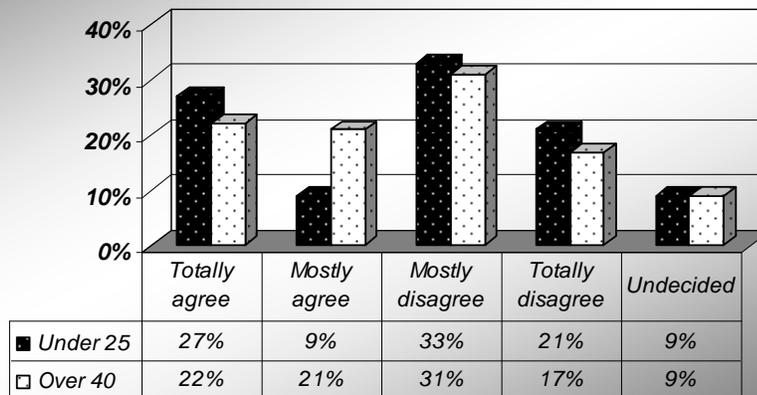
Some Policy Implications

While the first truly post-Soviet generation, the 18-to-25s, exhibited general proclivities for xenophobia and interethnic hostility typical of all age cohorts in Russia, the well-pronounced tendency to downplay extremist group threat is a cause for concern. The findings indicate strongly that the Russian government can help significantly to alleviate these threats to society, especially in view of Russia becoming inexorably more ethnically diverse since Soviet collapse, by making major investments in public education. Beyond that, the Kremlin can also address this problem by relaxing its stated suspicions of nongovernmental organizations such as the Moscow Helsinki Group and Memorial and working with them to raise public awareness of the risks to Russia's social cohesion stemming from xenophobic extremist groups. Such stated suspicions are likely to feed, intentionally or not, into a social climate that promotes the normalization of violence, in the same way that the denial of a skinhead threat does among younger Russians.

"Russia for Ethnic Russians!" ("Россия - для русских!")
NSF/MacArthur survey, Aug-Sep 2005, N=680



"Deport All Migrants, Legal and Illegal, and Their Children"
NSF/MacArthur survey, Aug-Sep 2005, N=680



"Skinheads Are Not a Threat to Ethnic Relations"
NSF/MacArthur survey, Aug-Sep 2005, N=680

