

V.P. BABINTSEV, I.V. BOIARINOVA,
AND E.V. REUTOV

Leadership and Outsidership Among the Young People of a Region

The problem of the status of young people in today's Russia is being discussed vigorously in society, in the sciences, and in the mass media. Although the urgency of the discussions has diminished in the past few years, it remains topical and relevant, because it has to be counted as a key social and political problem. In explaining their views on the problems of today's young people, scientists, writers on public affairs, and politicians and bodies of authority on all levels. A key factor in addressing the problems of young

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Valentin Pavlovich Babintsev is a doctor of philosophical sciences and a professor in the department of social technologies at Belgorod State University. Irina Vladimirovna Boiarinova is a graduate student, and Evgenii Viktorovich Reutov is a candidate of sociological sciences and an associate professor in the same department.

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people, particularly characteristic of politicians, is covert or overt efforts to recruit allies, voters, members of the same political party, and so on.

In discussions concerning the position and role of young people in society, two polar opposite views have been formed, designated provisionally as the *pessimistic* and the *optimistic* point of view. In accordance with the pessimistic view, which is historically the earliest one, *young people represent one of the least-protected groups of the population*; those who favor the latter point of view regard *young people as a leading group of Russian society*. In 1998, A.A. Kozlov asserted that “our young people are the generation of the future. It is more and more apparent that it is a great deal more remote from the pleasing little pictures portrayed in the public’s consciousness (and not only on the ordinary level but also on the professional level) at the beginning of the current path a decade ago” [1, p. 239]. Time has multiplied the number of optimists. In an article in *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, one writer comments: “In a traditional society that ‘looks backward’ and reproduces tradition, a very high value is attributed to those through whom the tradition is transmitted, which is to say, the elders. . . . But today’s society has turned its face to the future. The value of tradition has become minimal, and conversely it is the new that is valued” [2]. Between the polar opposite points of view there are a number of positions that contain postulates that are not incontrovertible.

The transformation of the traditional cultural and civilizational archetype

It would be hard to dispute the thesis that today’s young people differ a great deal in terms of their status and role in society, their educational and cultural levels, their worldview, their tastes and opinions. We have had occasion to argue that the spiritual life of the young people of Russia is characterized by a complex dynamic of changes. The people who are entering active adult life are characterized by a vision of life and an attitude toward those around them and toward society as a whole that are different from the older generations. Studies have given grounds for asserting

that there is an ongoing, gradual transformation of the traditional archetype that existed in Soviet cultural forms, a transformation into various modifications. This transformation is taking place in extremely varied and inconsistent ways. Today's young people are characterized by an exceptional diversity of "spiritual worlds," the specific nature of which is determined by complex combinations of external and internal factors—demographic, professional, ethnic, sociocultural, ecosocial, and political factors [3, p. 42]. This diversity makes it difficult to define the status of young people in Russian society in an unequivocal way. There can be no doubt, however, that they are *potentially and subjectively disposed to leadership*. There are quite a few prerequisites in place for the realization of this role of leadership, the chief one of which, in our opinion, is young people's openness to new things, their ability to make nontraditional, innovative decisions. This renders them capable of engaging in constructive intercultural dialogue, without which leadership is impossible in principle.

But we must be aware that there are also signs of an opposite tendency in young people's development, namely a tendency toward *social outsidership*. "A world of social outsiders" is a special "world of young people," and unless we analyze it we will not be able to make a more or less accurate assessment of the status of those considered to be the new generation. While there is no doubt that such a world exists, its definition and evaluation are not clearly delineated.

We propose that there are two dimensions to young people's social outsidership: the *social and economic dimension* and the *spiritual dimension* (linked to the not entirely favorable actual conditions of their lives: poverty, lack of access to a good education, unemployment or the impossibility of finding a job in their specialty, and the lack of housing). There are a great many such problems, which persist although the situation of young people has stabilized somewhat in the past few years, owing chiefly to the state's increased ability to provide more financing for particular support projects.

In a sociological survey we conducted under the aegis of a grant from the Russian Foundation for the Humanities titled "Young

People's Social Outsidership as a Source of Dangers and Threats Under the Conditions of a Border Region,"¹ the social and economic outsidership of young people was confirmed with respect to a number of factors: the respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their income (39.68 percent); with the number of their possessions (33.47 percent); and with their guarantees of employment (25.05 percent), and the same percentage expressed dissatisfaction with the level of their ability to take part in the administration of society. One consequence of young people's poverty and lack of prospects for a social and professional career is that they "retreat into their shell," and this goes hand in hand with practices of personal self-destruction such as the use of psychoactive substances or their "immersion in the collectivism" of totalitarian organizations. On the macrosocial level, escapism is manifested in the abuse of narcotics and alcohol, social infantilism, absenteeism, evasion of military service, and so on. In a number of cases, the result of their social exclusion is aggression, which is directed at the social institutions in groups that represent the real or imagined "guilty parties" that are to blame for their social outsidership. As a way to relieve his social tension, the outsider's aggression is directed at everyone who is marked differently in social terms. To a large extent, social and economic outsidership is a consequence of young people's marginal status, which represents an immanent characteristic of that social-demographic group. Nonetheless, the extent of their social and economic outsidership should not be exaggerated. It characterizes the situation of a minority of young people in the region, and they do not view it as fatal. In our survey, only 1.6 percent of the participants between the ages of fourteen and thirty classified themselves as "having no prospects in life" or being "doomed to failure." A relative majority (37.88 percent) stated that have adapted well to the current situation and feel comfortable about themselves; 28.06 percent consider that they are "going through temporary difficulties but have good prospects in life" (see Table 1). According to the data of monitoring surveys by the Levada Center in 2006, 8–12 percent of the respondents (in the all-Russia sample) stated that they "were not able and will not be able" to adapt to present-day life [4].

Table 1

Of Which of These Groups Do You Consider Yourself a Member?
(% of respondents)

Highly successful young people, youth leaders	8.62
Young people who have adapted well to the present situation and feel comfortable about themselves	37.88
Young people who are experiencing temporary difficulties but have good prospects in life	28.06
Young people who are having a hard time but are working hard for their future	17.03
Young people who do not have any prospects in life and are doomed to failure	1.60
I find it difficult to answer	6.81

The survey results indicate that *in its social and economic dimension, outsidership is no longer as typical of young people* as it was in the early 1990s. The situation is more difficult in the sphere of spiritual development (the second dimension of the problem of social outsidership), which we designate as *dispositional*. For a substantial portion of young people, outsidership is manifested in specific *dispositions of values and goals, motivations, and internalized norms* characterized by particular features. First, neither now nor in the future are they capable of ensuring legitimate success in life. Second, it is not possible to see them as a realistic foundation for the individual's self-development. In the best case, these value motivation patterns make it possible to adapt to a reference community that is anomalous in its most important characteristics, such as adaptation to the criminal or semicriminal subculture. Third, they are maximally dynamic. At the same time, the entirely natural dynamic character of the young person's consciousness, which reflects its natural transitional character, becomes hypertrophied in the mind of the young person. All kinds of views and convictions become permissible, not as a consequence of respect for them but rather due to indifference or the inability or lack of desire to make a moral choice. Fourth, even these maximally dynamic components of consciousness take on the appearance of simulacra—artificially created constructs devoid of any objective foundation.

The plasticity of a person's normative value system, a feature that

is natural to individuals whose socialization is not yet complete, has become a significant factor fostering adaptation to and compensation for social exclusion in a situation characterized by the uncertainty and transformation of social structures and institutions. In our opinion, it is reasonable to single out a number of more or less explicitly diagnosable *indicators of dispositional outsidership*.

First of all, there is *young people's inability to make a realistic assessment of their situation in life and the chances that the life strategy that they have chosen will be successful*. This is not because they are unhappy with their current situation. Their level of satisfaction, on the contrary, is relatively high; only 12.42 percent of the respondents expressed unhappiness with their situation in life. Most young people are programmed for success. One gets the impression that it is older people who tend to have a bleak outlook when assessing the present and future of young men and women. It is possible, of course, to accuse the older generation of excessive alarmism and of attempting to extrapolate their own critical vision of the present onto the minds of young people. But it is also reasonable to suggest, with no less probability, that in many ways they are correct. One could say that *a substantial portion of young people are not able to arrive at a more or less appropriate assessment of their own situation in life*. Because they do not know any life that is organized and oriented differently, because they are constantly matching their own needs and interests against "the model of symbolic consumption" that has become established in society and is not only legitimized but is also capable of being realized, young people are convinced of their competence. And even though their notions about success are not in correlation with their actual status today, they are full of hope that this status will inevitably improve. Most young people of Belgorod oblast have no doubt that they will achieve success in life. A total of 18.44 percent of the respondents are confident that they are going to achieve their life plans in full, while 60.32 percent believe they will be basically successful. One other factor that they fail to notice is that many of them do not possess the necessary resources to achieve success. This is not only true of their self-assessments; judging from appearances, most of the respondents are not capable of perceiving life as full of myriad

risks and dangers. Young people fail to understand the reports about global instability and increasing risks; they stubbornly refuse to see the signs of present and future social and other disasters: only 10.62 percent of those surveyed are afraid that social injustice will get worse; 13.43 percent see ecological disasters the same way; and 14.83 percent are apprehensive about the spread of immorality and the cult of violence. Also noted was the noninstitutional, individual character of the ways that goals in life can be achieved: most respondents stated that the chief factors that will permit this are personal qualities such as purposefulness (65.53 percent) and industriousness (53.31 percent), while a good education was ranked next (52.51 percent).

Another noteworthy indicator of dispositional outsidership is that *young people's consciousness is becoming increasingly atomized*, reflected in their "withdrawing into themselves" and the declining importance of values of collectivism. Young people tend less and less to count on support from outside: 57.31 percent stated that they have confidence only in themselves, while only 1 percent have confidence in other people. In and of itself, young people's disposition to rely on their own powers is not a cause for alarm, but in actuality this attitude often accompanies their lack of trust in society. In the second place, experience has shown that the potential of the majority is not sufficient for the achievement of individual success in life by lawful means. However, young people's characteristic habit of *unreflective thinking* makes it difficult for them to realize that their own inadequacy is the main obstacle to achieving their plans in life. Even if they accept that there may be obstacles on their path to success, they associate these first and foremost with external circumstances. For example, 39.88 percent believe that the chief obstacle in achieving their plans is lack of connections. In this case, the young people are fairly realistic in their judgments, and they evaluate our society more correctly than many of their mentors do, who are inclined to idealize society and the state. The respondents are more likely to note their contradictions and problems.

A graphic contradiction is that young people are uncritical and unrealistic regarding the external and internal circumstances that

have (or can have) an impact on the realization of their plans in life. Their tendency to idealize is not in the spirit of romanticism traditionally attributed to youth; rather, it represents the formation of attitudes in full conformity with the spiritual state of postmodern society. This is in correlation with transformed forms of social reality and can be seen as evidence of *a high level of adaptiveness*. It makes sense to speak of *resonant thinking* that is a characteristic feature of dispositional outsidership. This is formed in two dialectically interconnected processes: the first process amounts to young people's organic assimilation of transformed thought forms produced by the postmodernist culture; the second process consists of the construction of simulacra that are adaptive to the specific youth subculture, based on their recognition of the relativity and provisionality of values and norms. The effect of the two processes is manifested in the *unconstructive thinking* of today's outsiders, who complain that they do not have connections. While this has some basis, in and of itself the complaint indicates shortcomings in the young person's personality.

In the young people's conceptions that have been formed in the framework of that disposition, success in life is associated with career. In particular, *the disposition to seek a career* turned out to be the leading one for 45.29 percent of the respondents, a very high figure that ranks below only the indicator of *a disposition to seek a happy family life* (64.73 percent). But it is not constructive to see the possibility of achieving success and career growth only as a function of connections and acquaintances. In the information society (postindustrial society) toward which Russia is moving despite all the difficulties, an individual's achievement of success in life must be guaranteed first and foremost by his capabilities of technological thinking and behavior. It is obvious, at the same time, that for young people in the regions *a disposition to master and systematically utilize social technologies in everyday reality is not typical*. A number of graphically manifested features of young people's consciousness make this difficult: a vague individual optimism and the feeling that "tomorrow (or some time) things will surely be better than they are today"; a refusal to engage in meticulous calculation of the positive and negative consequences

of decisions (in some cases, a failure even to allow the possibility of negative effects); a heightened degree of risk in the process of decision making, which, to a considerable extent, is the consequence of a failure to calculate scenarios of unfolding events adequately, an excessive reliance on intuition and common sense; a failure to appreciate properly the possibilities of social diagnosis and expert professional appraisal, as well as the professional approach to socially transforming activity as a whole, an overt or a covert encouragement of dilettantism; wasteful thinking; a low level of personal responsibility for the consequences of decisions and actions, the habit of shifting that responsibility onto external circumstances. Of course, these features do not characterize the consciousness of all young people. Young people (especially those in the megalopolises) who are acquiring a good-quality education tend to be actively involved and to take the rational approach to reality, but this is not typical for most young people living in the regions of Russia.

It is also necessary to classify as one of the indicators of dispositional outsidership a *contradictory mentality*. On the one hand, formally societal values are not rejected as long as they are discussed in general form without relevance to a specific situation; on the other hand, if it is necessary to evaluate a specific phenomenon the general humanistic attitudes are substantially adjusted, possibly replaced by directly opposite attitudes. In particular, 66.33 percent of the respondents stated that they are well disposed toward others, but almost one out of every four (24.65 percent) believe unlawful actions are acceptable in order to achieve one's goals. A.I. Shendrik offered this harsh characterization of today's young person: "On the moral plane he is reservedly aggressive. Typically he has a certain cruelty, which, from his point of view, is perfectly justified, because he is firmly convinced that 'it's a dog eat dog world' and that every service or favor that is done for him has been prompted by the interest of the person who renders such favors. . . . When it comes to solving any problems he counts only on himself, in the belief that most people only care about themselves and it is utopian to expect help from them" [5]. Today we can report that most of these characteristics have actually become more prevalent.

Dispositional outsidership is manifested the most explicitly in *young people's alienation from the state and from society*, as can be seen from their rising level of distrust in the basic state and public institutions. A total of 27.25 percent of young people trust only the president of the Russian Federation, while 6.21 percent have trust in the church, 3.21 percent have trust in the police, and 0.6 percent trust the political parties; 32.06 percent do not trust anyone. As a consequence of the virtually *total crisis of trust*, about one out of every three young people (31.46 percent) would be willing to move to a different country and take up permanent residence there. In addition, 17.03 percent do not have a firm opinion on this matter.

One more essential manifestation of dispositional outsidership, in our opinion, is *the rising levels of conflict and aggression*, which have both a behavioral and a mental character and can be manifested within the youth community itself and directed against other segments of society. Along with the traditional forms of young people's aggressiveness, such as crime and gang fights, we find in present-day society the increasing spread of "mobile violence," in which acts of aggression are recorded using mobile telephone cameras, or violence for the sake of amusement (hunting down homeless people and other outcasts, a practice that has become widely prevalent in the past few years in the United States, Western Europe, and subsequently in Russia). Another frequent target of young people's violence are other ethnic groups. According to the results of sociological surveys that were carried out in Kondopoga after the much-publicized attacks on ethnic non-Russians, 49 percent of college students and school students have negative feelings against people from the Caucasus [6]. Sociologists surveyed about 6,000 students in the tenth and eleventh grades in the schools of Toliatti and obtained the following data: 68 percent of the youngsters and almost 40 percent of their parents are convinced that only [ethnic] Russians ought to be allowed to live in Russia [7].

We increasingly find that young people are becoming the kind of individuals whose mind accommodates attitudes with opposing directionality, orientations, and ideas. Zh.T. Toshchenko defines this as "the birth of a unique phenomenon—the paradoxical individual": "Growing riper and persisting in the public consciousness

are orientations that are mutually exclusive and incompatible” [8, p. 4]. The paradoxical individual does not represent the kind of whole personality who is capable of reacting appropriately to the challenges of the “time of troubles,” who is characterized by “a specific way of organizing social ties, interactions, and relations among people under the conditions of uncertainty, where the reproduction of the conditions of life, the physical and spiritual powers of the individual, take on not a socially directed character but rather a primarily random, probabilistic character, crowded out by the production of risk itself” [9, p. 146]. Universal instability is more than just a fine phrase; it is a fundamental characteristic that applies not only to social relations but specifically to the value world, which is disordered to the maximum.

Given the realities of Russia today, the kinds of terminal values on which people agree with regard to desirable goals are, at best, supplanted by instrumental values, a hypertrophied sense of the importance of the means by which goals are achieved. At the same time, in the minds of young outsiders (and not only them), a goal is generally seen in its individual or corporate meaning. As a rule, the value patterns that were formed over several generations fall apart or are minimized. Instead, what is considered important is whatever at a given moment is beneficial to narrow groups that are united by situational interests, or to particular individuals who believe themselves to be above the norms of legality and morality. In and of itself, going outside of the boundaries of these norms constitutes yet one more specific manifestation of outsidership, because it signals *a refusal to follow sociocultural traditions, and it breaks the bond between generations*. A “time of troubles” will regularly provoke and encourage life strategies of this kind. Typical characteristics of such a society include: the discreditation of socially significant, consolidating ideas; an orientation by almost every status group toward its own “special truth”; an abnormal composition of individual and social consciousness in which there is simultaneous representation and accommodation of attitudes, orientations, and ideas that are opposite in their directionality; social desertion; illogical social thinking that, in its most extreme forms, can be led to the point of legitimizing the absurd; total negative

self-reflection and self-assessment, manifested in a typically masochistic denigration of one's own history and culture, in the denial of any social prospects; a diminished response to external factors, including factors that have a direct impact on the quality of life; mass social apathy and indifference; ideological victimhood—a potential readiness to become the victim of deception, to become the object of shameless manipulation of consciousness. These are features that are reproduced many times over in the consciousness of young people, making them incapable of coming up with realistic and constructive responses rather than mythologized and destructive responses to the challenges of the times.

Surmounting outsidership—acquiring the leadership potential of young people

In the contradiction between social, legitimate, and constructive endeavors and antisocial, illegitimate, destructive endeavors, we can discern *the chief prerequisite for the firm entrenchment of outsidership in the youth community*. Young people themselves, in most cases, are not capable of resolving that contradiction, if for no other reason than that they often suffer from illusions regarding their chances in life. These illusions serve as the cause of *the manipulation of young people by older cohorts for political and other purposes*. In particular, the political mobilization of young people, widely prevalent in the past few years for the purpose of achieving short-term effects, leads to a rising sense of frustration and distrust toward political institutions, and, as a result, an undifferentiated protest that goes hand in hand with violence. In the future, young people who have acquired primitive skills of political action and ideological principles, but lack the opportunity to realize their ambitions in other spheres, come to form the social base for extremist organizations. The negative consequences of bringing young people into the orbit of groups and ideologies of this kind entail more than just the acceptance and routinization of violence as the most effective or even the only means of achieving political goals. In the minds of young people, the real causes of persisting social problems, the exploration and interpretation of which re-

quire a certain cognitive effort, are replaced by quickly assimilated ideological fictions and other simulacra. Multifaceted social reality comes to be described in categories of simple solutions of the ethnic cleansing type that represent an all-purpose way to settle all kinds of problems, from interethnic conflicts to crime, rising prices in the markets, and unemployment, although experience has shown that the implementation of such decisions rarely solve the problem, while creating a multitude of new problems.

This is why well-founded, realistic measures rather than dramatic approaches are essential to eradicate the alienation of a generation of young people toward the state and toward society as a whole. It is extremely important to restore their trust in the authorities. The crisis of trust is a natural reaction to the failure to respect the opinion of the “ordinary individual” who has not been able to amass the kinds of resources (most often using unlawful means) that would secure the right to participate in the political market. The restoration of trust, moreover, supplemented by the formation of the individual’s desire to take part in solving the problems of the state and society, is one of the most essential and most difficult jobs that need to be accomplished in drafting and implementing programs of modernization.

We are convinced that unless the dispositions of a substantial portion of young people are changed, if young people are not incorporated in existing social institutions, society will not be able to provide the conditions necessary for the realization of the *leadership potential* of young people, and in fact it will doom this group of young people to the role of social understudies.

Note

1. The survey was carried out in Belgorod oblast in September and October 2006: $N = 499$ respondents, constituting a quota sample; the quota criterion consisted of the respondents’ age and area of residence, with the proportions of females and males being equal. The conclusions are limited, as the survey included young people in just one relatively specific region.

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