Russian Youth and Corruption.

NEW EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE ON ATTITUDES TOWARDS CORRUPTION AMONG RUSSIAN STUDENTS

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Introduction

The widespread participation of young people—and in particular the youngest age cohort—in the anti-corruption protests organized by the Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) in 2017 came as a big surprise to political scientists and sociologists, who usually consider Russian youth to be politically indifferent and apathetic. Thanks to the heavy involvement of high school students, these protests earned the nickname “schoolchildren protests,” while FBK leader Alexey Navalny gained a reputation as a politician who knows how to speak to the Russian youth. The presence of young people in anticorruption protests prompted some observers to suggest that young Russians are less tolerant of corruption than the older generation and that an anticorruption agenda would be capable of mobilizing Russian youth to engage in civic and political activism.¹

Do young Russians view corruption differently, and if so, how exactly do their attitudes toward corruption differ from those of the older generation? How active are young people in their rejection of corruption? Can a new generation become a social force capable of demanding political changes that would reduce corruption in the country?

These questions were the focus of the project “Fostering Intolerance Towards Corruption among Young Russian Professionals,” conducted by IERES GWU in collaboration with the Center for Independent Social Research (St. Petersburg) and Transparency International (Russia) in 2019. We also wanted to find out how young people assess the effectiveness of state anti-corruption measures and public anti-corruption initiatives, including Aleksey Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation, and—more generally—how they position themselves in the web of relationships between the state and society in today’s Russia.

The object of our study is the so-called Generation Z, which is often referred to as “generation Putin” (Foy 2020) or “puteens” (The Economist), meaning young people born at the turn of the 2000s that grew up under the presidency of Vladimir Putin. The Russian Generation Z is particularly interesting, since the early socialization and maturation of these young people took place against a background of authoritarian consolidation and rapid growth of corruption.²

The research was conducted in three Russian cities—St. Petersburg, Kazan, and Rostov-on-Don—with university students aged 18-23 who were studying law, economics, or engineering (mostly at the undergraduate level). All three cities have a population over one million and are included on the list of the 10 Russian cities with the highest-quality higher education.³ Our informants therefore represent the young professionals who will shape Russian business culture in the near future.

We conducted nine focus groups, three in each city. The discussions included questions about students’ awareness of the scale and consequences of corruption and its different manifestations;

² From 2001 to 2006, the volume of corruption transactions increased from $ 40 billion to $ 300 billion (Zhuravlev, Yurevich 2012). The average size of a bribe from the late 1990s to the end of the 2000s increased 13 times; the average scale of “kickbacks” in the early 2000s accounted for 5-10% of the order in the mid-2000s - 30%, and up to 70% in the late 2000s (ibid.)
³ Reiting vuzov na 2020 god http://vuzoteka.ru/%D0%B2%D1%83%D0%B7%D1%8B
assessments of anti-corruption measures undertaken by the state and public anticorruption initiatives; and their personal willingness and readiness to confront corruption. In addition to direct questions about corruption, the students discussed hypothetical situations that presented a choice, either to resort to corruption to solve a difficult problem or to remain with the unsolved problem but without violating existing rules and laws.

The students in the sample were recruited by friendly university professors. Importantly, the groups included not only the most advanced and active students, who usually willingly express their opinions, but also less talkative young people, whose thoughts the professionals who moderated the discussions were able to draw out. As a result, the statements of the focus group participants reflect the opinions not only of the active minority, as is often the case with voluntary recruiting, but also of the “silent” majority, whose views often do not coincide with those of the “activists.”

The qualitative nature of the study and its focus on university students do not allow direct extrapolation of the research results to all Russian youth. The focus group participants represent a well-educated part of the younger generation that is supposed to form the future Russian business and professional elite. However, their opinions and attitudes may differ from those of young people with different educational backgrounds. Additionally, the age of participants means that they are going through “emerging adulthood,” when values and normative systems are just beginning to form, so the attitudes of young people in this age range might be different from those of other age cohorts.

The report starts with a brief overview of the contradictory features of contemporary Russian youth. The second section outlines ideas about various aspects of corruption and anti-corruption in Russia that were expressed by young people during the focus group discussions. The main focus of the third section is the peculiarities of young people’s perceptions of corruption and their readiness to participate personally in anti-corruption activism. The third section also considers attitudes to the state and diversification of the young Russian generation.

4 Conclusions and findings are illustrated by quotations from the focus group transcripts. The quotations are given in italics, followed by information about the gender, age, and academic focus of the narrator, as well as the city in which the focus group took place. The name of the university is not given in order to protect the anonymity of focus group participants.
Executive Summary

- Our focus groups have demonstrated that young people’s attitudes toward corruption are similarly ambiguous to those of older generations. At the normative level, they condemn corruption as a cause of the most pressing problems facing Russia, while at the practical level corruption is accepted as a necessary instrument for solving daily problems. Remarkably, young people understand the duality of their perceptions of corruption: the discrepancy between their normative statements about the destructive nature of corruption, on the one hand, and their readiness to use it for personal benefit, on the other hand.

- The participants in our focus groups recognize the inevitability of using corruption to solve everyday problems. They also expect to be involved in corruption in their future professions, particularly if they specialize in law or economics. Expectations of being involved in corrupt interactions are especially high among those who plan to work in the budget sector.

- Young people do not think there is any real prospect of reducing corruption in Russia in the foreseeable future. The general view is that it is impossible to defeat corruption without state involvement, but the state itself is seen as totally corrupt. There is less of a sense that countering corruption is impossible without help from a strong civil society and free public media.

- Young people in our focus groups believe that in order to eliminate corruption, it is necessary to make fundamental changes to the political and governance systems, but “this will be already a revolution,” which young people do not accept and indeed fear. Fundamentally, they do not see any alternative to the existing political system (“we will destroy everything and what then?”) and consider themselves subordinated rather than active participants in their relationship with the state.

- The state fight against corruption is seen as ineffective or else effective only at the lower levels of government. The arrests of top-ranking officials on charges of corruption do not attract much attention from students and are seen mainly as an “imitation” of the fight against corruption or as an “internal struggle” within the upper echelons of power.

- Respondents are skeptical about public anti-corruption initiatives. Students know almost nothing about public anti-corruption efforts; few participants have ever heard of Transparency International. Public anti-corruption initiatives are associated almost exclusively with protests, while protests are linked to Aleksey Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK). While young people generally appreciate anti-corruption investigations that inform people about the scale of top-level corruption, attitudes toward the protests organized by the FBK are rather skeptical, as young people do not see any practical results from these actions.

- Our focus group participants do not see public protests as an effective form of struggle against corruption and are not ready to join the protests. Since the authorities do not react to protesters’ demands and official media hush up information about protest actions, the students consider participation in protest actions to be a waste of time. Another reason is that participation in protests is increasingly risky, posing a serious threat to students’ personal lives and future careers. Young people would be willing to join public actions only if they “[felt] safe in protesting,” “if other people started to fight,” and if the fight had visible results.

- Of the various types of anti-corruption measures, punishment and repression are seen as the only ones that are effective in the Russian context. Focus group participants agree that it is necessary to harshen the punishment for corruption. Some students went so far as to suggest that the death penalty should be imposed for corruption, but this was a minority position that did not find support among the bulk of focus group participants. Students see anti-corruption education as an important step, but only for future generations. Young people see themselves as a generation that grew up in a corrupt society and therefore has already accepted the rules and norms of corrupt behavior.

- Although young people are generally concerned about the problem of corruption (at least at normative level), they have neither the ability nor the “internal desire” to fight it personally. The only way young people believe they can participate in fighting corruption is “not to give or to take bribes...”
themselves.” However, even this is seen as unrealistic.

- Young people generally understand the pervasive and systemic character of corruption in Russia and its destructive economic and social consequences. At the same time, they also recognize their practical inability to change this situation. In the absence of effective tools for fighting corruption, rising awareness of the massive scale of corruption does not mobilize young people for anti-corruption actions but rather leads to growing frustration and cognitive dissonance. As a result, young people prefer to ignore the issue of corruption and/or seek exit strategies.

- The focus groups reflect young people’s high level of dissatisfaction with state-society relations. When asked about the main and most urgent problems facing Russia, political problems came in second behind economic problems, with “the lack of dialogue between the people and authorities” most frequently cited as problematic.

- The focus group discussions revealed that young people have extremely low trust in the state and lack the paternalistic orientations that were typical of the older post-Soviet generations. At least at this point, young people do not expect any help from the state in their future lives and prefer to rely on themselves alone. The recent pension reform is repeatedly used as an example of the instability and inconsistency of state social policy.
**I. UNDERSTANDING RUSSIA’S YOUNGER GENERATION**

Russian youth remains the least studied part of Russian society, an unpredictable “black box” (Milov and Khvostunova 2019) that is still not fully understood either by scholars or by the Kremlin political technologists. The features of the younger generation, as they appear in sociological studies and surveys, are vague and often contradictory. According to some scholars, young Russians are fundamentally different from older generations. They adapt better to technological and social challenges, actively use the Internet and social networks, and rely primarily on digital information sources (Radaev 2018). Like their peers in other countries, young Russians are not in a hurry to become adults and have more indifferent attitudes toward sex. They are passionate about travel, prefer a healthy lifestyle, and are less interested in consuming alcohol and tobacco, which makes them quite different from the older generation.

At the same time, sociologists note a surprising absence of the value conflict between young people and their parents that typically marks intergenerational relationships in post-industrial societies. The results of sociological research indicate more similarities than differences in value systems and social memories between Russian youth and older generations (Pipiya 2018). The so-called generational gap between “fathers and children” is manifested in practices rather than in values (Volkov 2018). Indeed, the core values of young people in Russian society remain quite traditional (‘Molodezhnyi’ protest 2017). Family and work retain their primary importance among the core values, while differences appear with regard to instrumental values: young people, for instance, place a higher value on self-realization and accord less importance to high salaries than their counterparts in older age cohorts (Yakovleva 2018).

Scholars agree that the younger Russian generation lacks a consistent worldview, a reality that is usually explained by the absence of any coherent state ideology for almost thirty years. Studies of Russian youth find that their ideologies are increasingly polarized and heterogeneous, in stark contrast to those of older age cohorts. For instance, Yakovleva (2018) finds that since 2008, the share of “patriots” who believe that it is necessary to work for the sake of the country has been growing—but so has the share of individualists who take the opposite view.

Data on young people’s political moods and aspirations are no less contradictory. Russian youth are usually seen as a politically indifferent and passive social group (Gudkov et al. 2011). According to Levada Center polls, young people are not much different from older age cohorts, demonstrating high political loyalty and low protest potential. However, it can also be argued that young people are rejuvenating political protest in Russia by engaging in political activism. Some scholars argue that the 2011-2012 protests galvanized that politicization of Russian youth at the local level (Erpyleva 2019; Erpyleva 2013). While data on public actions do not show a fundamental change in the role of youth in public protests since 2011-2012—with young people continuing to comprise around one-third of protest participants (‘Molodezhnyi’ protest 2017)—the 2017 anti-corruption protests organized by Aleksey Navalny’s Anticorruption Foundation were marked by the high participation of young people, including high school students.

This diversity of political attitudes and participation in civic activism continues when we look specifically at Russian university students, an educated segment of Russian youth. According to a recent survey conducted by the Institute for Applied Political Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russian students are highly supportive of the political regime and loyal to the president, Vladimir Putin (Sorokina and Kasamara 2020). Students around 20 years old have never known any president but Putin and often describe themselves as the “Putin generation” (Foy 2020; Sorokina and Kasamara 2020). They are not interested in politics, remain passive, and prefer not to leave their “comfort zone” for any reason. This picture is in line with a study
of students’ activism (Osipian 2016) that concluded that Russian students are interested in fighting for their economic rights and universities’ fulfilment of contractual obligations, yet remain politically inactive. Other studies (Nikolaenko 2019), however, counter that that the level of mass mobilization—and specifically participation in anti-corruption protests organized by FBK—is directly correlated with the size of the university student population in a given city. The recent unprecedented solidarity of HSE students with Egor Zhukov, who was arrested during the Moscow electoral protests, also supports the narrative that university students in Russia are increasingly politicized.

The contradictory features of Russian youth reflect not only the highly diversified and fragmented culture of this social group (Omelchenko 2013) but also significant distinctions between different age cohorts that fall under the umbrella term “youth.” Usually, the term refers to a rather wide age range, from 14 to 30 years; the definition employed by Russian legislators in some cases is even more broad, encompassing those up to the age of 35. However, youth as a statistical group may not mesh with the notion of generation. According to generation theory (Mannheim 1970; Strauss and Howe 1991; and others), a generation is characterized by a specific set of shared life values, beliefs, and behaviors that were formed under the influence of jointly experienced historically significant events or in certain social and historical contexts. To determine whether a generation has been created, it is important to consider not only the year of birth, but also the period of active socialization (formative years or emerging adulthood), usually meaning ages 17-23, when the most essential system of norms and values is formed. Among the historically significant periods shaping generations in Russian society, scholars usually consider the Second World War period; the period of political thaw after Stalin’s death; the period of stagnation; the “perestroika” and liberal reforms period; and the period after 2000, sometimes referred to as the “period of stabilization” (Radaev 2018:39). Contemporary Russian youth includes representatives of at least of two generations: Millennials, whose formative years fell at the beginning of the new century, and the so-called Generation Z, or young people born around 2000, who are now experiencing their formative years. This later generation of young people, and specifically students at Russian universities, is the focus of this study.

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5 See «Osnovy gosudarstvennoj molodezhnoj politiki Rossijskoj Federacii na period do 2025 goda» on the site of Federal Agency “Rosmolodezh” https://fadm.gov.ru/agency/about (last accessed 02/22/2020)
II. HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE VIEW CORRUPTION?

Corruption among the most pressing problems

Each focus group started with a brainstorming discussion in which the participants were asked to name the 10 most pressing problems currently facing Russia and to rank corruption among these problems. While the discussion was primarily intended to “break the ice,” it turned out to be quite informative, revealing a multifaceted picture of students’ ideas regarding the problems facing Russia today. It also proved that, at least at the normative level, young people understand corruption as a major cause of other problems.

The issues mentioned in the discussions can be grouped into several thematic categories: 1) socio-economic problems, including problems with economic development, infrastructure, and living standards; 2) problems related to the Russian political system, including state policy, rights and freedoms of the population, and the relationships between state and society; 3) social problems related to the social sphere and demography; 4) problems of state governance; and 5) other (miscellaneous) problems.

Over one-third of all issues listed fell into the category of socio-economic problems. Of these, concerns about poverty and low (even “catastrophic”) living standards were mentioned in almost all focus groups (“many people still live in barracks and go to the toilet outside” (F 21 Kazan Tech)). In addition to poverty issues, low wages, especially in social sector (doctors and teachers) were repeatedly mentioned by the students. Poverty is associated with a high level of social inequality, (“there are many people who live below the poverty line, while someone over there [above] takes everything” (M 20 Kazan Tech)). Young people show a lack of confidence in official information on living standards: “In fact, we have a very poor population. It’s [only] said that everyone has such salaries there, and everyone lives so well, but in fact, it’s not” (F 21 Rostov Ec). Among the other problems associated with low living standards are unjustified increases in prices, the constant rise in the cost of housing, and increases in communal services tariffs and taxes.

Some students mentioned the continued dependence of the Russian economy on the export of raw materials, as well as the problematic state policy of import-substitution, which leads to a general decrease in economic efficiency because “Russian technologies are inferior to Western ones” (M 22 St. Petersburg Tech). The underdevelopment of small business is also seen as a problem, associated, on the one hand, with the “lack of state support for small business” (M 19 Rostov Ec) and, on the other hand, with “underdevelopment and insecurity of the institution of private property” because “at any moment they can knock and take away your business” (M 24 Kazan Ec). Participants also mentioned the problem of bad roads and the generally poor condition of the transport system, including the high cost of commuting, which is especially significant for students who come from remote towns and cities (“transportation prices constantly rise, but the quality only deteriorates” (F 20 Kazan Ec)).

Political problems appeared to be mentioned almost as frequently as socio-economic problems, which was quite unexpected given the apolitical image of Russian youth. According to Levada polls, young people in Russia under 25 are not interested in politics, yet the majority of our focus group participants were aged 18-22. Among political issues, the lack of dialogue between the authorities and the population and the general problem of state-society interaction were mentioned most frequently. Concerns that “the government does not hear the population,” “does not respect the people,” and “neglects rights and freedoms of citizens” were expressed not only in St. Petersburg—where they might be expected, given historically higher political activism in this federal city—but also in Kazan and Rostov-on-Don. The lack of state-society dialogue and the opacity of the decision-making
processes at the upper levels of state governance are seen by some students as a reason for the inefficiency of public administration:

“... there is no transparent connection with the government. That is, they single out for themselves some problems that, in fact, are not as important as they consider ... but they don’t consider what ordinary citizens really care about” (F 22 Kazan Ec)

Young people also turned out to be worried about the “excessive emphasis of the head of state on foreign policy, to the detriment of domestic policy,” “Russia’s participation in military operations abroad,” and the associated “unjustifiably high military spending in the state budget.”

The “low level of political culture of the population” was repeatedly noted as a problem, along with weak participation in political life and in elections. Low political activity is associated with the historical legacy of “Soviet political traditions,” as well as with the “crisis of democratic institutions in Russia” (M 19 SPb Law). The “irremovability of the president’s power” and the lack of real elections were also frequently cited as issues.

The lack of freedom of speech is likewise seen as a significant problem: “the dependence of mass media on the state,” “censorship in the media,” and the “low possibility of self-expression” were mentioned in focus groups in St. Petersburg and Kazan. In Rostov-on-Don, students indicated that the “adoption of laws restricting Internet freedom” was problematic.

An interesting problem voiced at the focus group with law students in St. Petersburg was the lack of a “national idea” or “long-term strategy for the development of Russia” among the political leadership:

“All decisions made, it seems to me, are based on the current situation; there is no plan specifying where are we going in the long run” (M 19 SPb Law).

The corruption of the judicial system and its dependence on the government were described as a problem by the economics and law students in St. Petersburg. According to them, the judicial system “does not work for people, but for the state.”

Social problems attracted considerably less attention in focus groups than economic and political ones. The most frequently mentioned social problem is the quality of professional education: students cited the “low level of teaching” and the “low competitiveness of education” in Russia, noting that “even the best Russian universities occupy the lowest positions in world rankings.”

Another problem is the poor quality of free medical care, which is seen as a result of the underfunding of the healthcare sector and the low salaries of doctors.

Governance-related problems identified by students include the excessive bureaucratization of public administration, the low professionalism of civil servants, etc.

Among other problems that do not fall into any of the above-listed categories, ecological problems were mentioned frequently, as were alcoholism and drug addiction. The primary environmental problem cited by students was the issue of garbage disposal, a reality that we are inclined to attribute to intensive press coverage of mass “garbage” protests during the months preceding the study, such that the protests could not escape the attention of these young people. Students also mentioned the issues of gender inequality, domestic violence, a deficit of technical specialists, the legal illiteracy of the Russian population, and bad attitudes toward stray animals.

The discussion about the ranking of corruption among these problems unfolded almost identically in all focus groups. At first, corruption was designated as the greatest or one of the greatest problems facing Russia. Although issues such as state-people relations, low political culture, and popular “inertia” (inability to perceive the new) were sometimes ranked as more harmful than corruption, the problem of corruption never fell below third place:
The authorities’ lack of respect for the people should be put in first place, and corruption is a subset of that... because disrespect comes from the lack of freedom of speech and a few more points [previously mentioned problems on the list]. (M 20 Rostov Tech)

I would put corruption in first or second place, along with the inertia of our population. (F 20 Kazan Tech)

In further discussion, however, participants gradually came to the conclusion that corruption is a sort of “connecting element” that is simultaneously the cause and the effect of all the mentioned problems:

I would not single out corruption in some ranking. Corruption is a connecting element between all these points. And if we consider every problem in our country, almost any, 90% of all problems, then corruption is involved in any given issue, whether directly or tangentially. (M 24 Kazan Ec)

It seems to me that everything stems from corruption, that money either disappears somewhere or is misallocated; it is not distributed to education, health care, or the social support of the population. (F 19 Rostov Ec)

**Manifestations of corruption**

The dominant opinion in all focus groups was that corruption in Russia is pervasive and endemic (“everyone pays and everyone takes”; “everything is bad with corruption”; “everything in this country is decided through the money”). Similarly, there are no doubts about the total corruption of the higher echelons of power. Corruption is seen as a well-established system deeply entrenched in all governance structures. When talking about the systemic character of corruption, the students mention that it has become one of the “rules of the game,” a condition for getting into power and maintaining power. Some students claim that corruption has become part of the “essence of the state”:

All people who take bribes on a particularly large scale, they are in the government. They were all there already because of bribes, for the most part. And there it’s already difficult to be a person who does not give bribes. (F 19 St. Petersburg Law)

In fact, it seems to me that such a system has been created in our country that everyone in it should be a criminal...... At each level, some kind of bribe is given, and every man, God forbid, a successful one who has at least a little money, he is in any case tied to some kind of small economic crime, some small other crime. This is a great lever of pressure over society. (M 19 Rostov Law)

At the same time, there is a general feeling that no one is aware of the true extent of corruption because—in the eyes of many participants—that information is only available to people in authoritative structures and not to ordinary citizens:

I, as an ordinary person, can’t even imagine the whole scale of corruption at any level. Because I don’t even know what amounts are spinning there. There is only a small group of people who really know. (F 20 Kazan Tech)

When talking about corruption as one of the most pressing problems in Russia, the students were referring to so-called “grand corruption,” meaning the abuse of power by high-level officials. However, in answering a direct question about how corruption manifests itself, our informants rarely mentioned high-level bribery or stealing from the state budget. Instead, students’ examples usually centered on the everyday level. Corruption is associated almost exclusively with bribes and largely with interactions with low-level officials. In each focus group, participants repeatedly mentioned “traditional” examples of corruption, such as paying the traffic police; extortion of bribes in driving schools, hospitals, and kindergartens; giving bribes to avoid military service; and the extortion of
money or gifts by teachers in schools and universities (usually in the context of friends’ experience: “I didn’t personally encounter [bribe extortion], but my friends did”).

Non-material manifestations of corruption, such as nepotism or patronage, were more often mentioned in Kazan and Rostov-on-Don, where family ties and kinship relationships have historically been anchored in power structures:

[Corruption is] when relatives get good jobs (how is it called?) (M 19 Kazan Tech)

Of the various forms of corruption, young people are least aware of political corruption (“this is all closed ... and it doesn’t concern us,” “I never thought about it,” “this doesn’t concern us, we don’t have a clue what is going on there”). Students are not interested in political corruption because they view politics as something that has nothing to do with everyday life:

I believe that administrative corruption concerns us more; as for political [corruption], we can talk about it in a way that somewhere on the upper levels someone is stealing money, but not from us! Whereas administrative corruption we see here and there, literally, in education, and in medicine upon receipt of any certificate. (F 19 St. Petersburg Ec)

Many focus group participants had difficulty formulating their views of corruption. Some students admitted that they had never thought about the problems associated with corruption before. These issues are not discussed with family, with friends, or at the university:

I did not think about this until 11th grade. These problems never arise in our conversations, and in our family, we do not discuss politics in such a way that it would have made me think about it. That is, I never paid attention to it. (F 19 St. Petersburg Ec)

This may be why some respondents tended to attribute to corruption any injustice that they faced in their lives. For example, requiring visitors to hospitals to purchase shoe covers from the hospital in order to enter the building is regarded as “legalized corruption,” while efforts to collect money from parents for needs that are not covered by school funding may be stigmatized as “bribes.”

When comparing corruption at different levels of state governance, the popular view is that there are more cases of corruption at the lower levels but that the scale of corrupt deals is greater at the upper levels of power. Some students believe that higher-level corruption is rooted in petty corruption, which they think turns bribes into a custom, a norm of behavior, that is later transferred to the professional sphere and spreads to the upper levels of governance. Others see the pervasiveness of corruption instead as a top-down process, with corruption at the top level becoming a pattern that is followed by lower-level officials. In any case, students generally recognize the greater importance of corruption at the upper echelons of power:

If there is corruption where they use power, adopt laws, then it seems to me that this is a bigger problem than giving a bribe to some traffic police officer. (M 18 Rostov Tech)

The higher the state ladder, the greater is corruption there. More money—more corruption. Yes, there are not so many people over there, they are just a different sort of people. (F 21 Rostov Law)

**Corruption in future professional and personal life**

Speaking about the impact of corruption on their future professional and personal lives, the students primarily addressed everyday clashes with corruption rather than its large-scale effects. The general impact of corruption on economic development and, eventually, on everyone’s well-being was mentioned only twice and only in the focus groups in St. Petersburg:
Corruption generally harms our state. Every day, our living standard will tend to become worse and worse (M 19 St. Petersburg Tech)

How will this corruption affect us personally? Like politics. It affects absolutely everyone, and this is absolutely in all areas of life. The same thing happens with corruption (F 19 St. Petersburg Law)

Almost all students anticipate personal involvement in corruption in their future lives. Most of our participants are sure that they will have to resort to bribery to solve everyday problems such as placing children in kindergarten, acquiring various certificates and permits, getting medical help, etc. While nobody is happy about that, the necessity of using informal payments is taken for granted, since our informants do not expect any changes to the corruption landscape in the foreseeable future.

With regard to their future professional lives, the main concern is the unfair competition that students expect to face in the job market after graduating from the university. The common belief is that only those who have “connections” get good jobs. These concerns were most often mentioned by students in Kazan and Rostov:

Those who have connections will be pushed through, but those who don’t ... they will be set aside. (M 18 Kazan Law)

In any case, there are certain situations where, for example, two people who are equal in terms of education compete for a job, but one of them is informally “agreed” and another is not. They will, of course, take the one on whom they agreed. There are quite a lot of such banal situations. (M 19 Rostov Law)

Additionally, the future economists and lawyers in our focus groups expect involvement in corruption if they get a job in the budget sector, where they believe you need to pay your boss in order to get a promotion:

In many budget organizations, the system works this way ... Either connections or money [...] to become director, a person must pay or somehow use his network. (F 20 Kazan Econ)

My uncle works as an officer in the NKVD [the Ministry of Internal Affairs] and he had to buy a higher position. It costs money: he was told directly, if you want it, pay the money. He paid, and now he is a major. (F 21 Kazan Law)

Law students were the most likely to expect corruption in their future careers, seeing involvement in a system of informal exchange as a necessary condition of entering the legal community.

I never liked it [bribery] but I understand now that corruption is very much related to judicial activity—especially if you want to work in government agencies. People at the higher levels take bribes and will prompt you to do the same. (F 21 Rostov Law)

In any case, if you want to be a lawyer you need to join the system, whether you like it or not. If you go against the system, it will crush you. This is like a person who jumps into a motor. What will happen to him? It will flatten him. You always have to make compromises. (F 18 Kazan Law)

The dominance of informal networks and corrupt interactions is perceived as part of a well-established system that an individual cannot change or challenge. The students in our focus groups see no other way but to follow the established rules and integrate into the system.

Anti-corruption measures and their efficiency

The discussion about effective anti-corruption measures revealed that students had low awareness of existing anti-corruption instruments. The only anti-corruption measures of which respondents seemed to be aware and consider effective were punishment and prosecution. Surprisingly, none of
the law students mentioned testing new laws for corruption risks or corporate compliance as anti-corruption measures. The improvement of legislation to eliminate the gaps facilitating the emergence of corruption was mentioned only once, by tech students in a St. Petersburg focus group.

The prevailing view is that to make anticorruption measures work in Russia, it is necessary to increase the punishment for corruption. Students in our focus groups believe that existing penalties are not strong enough to frighten potential corruptionists and are inadequate to counter the economic harm caused by corruption:

*There just have to be substantial fines, some kind of more severe penalties. Then they will think 100 times [before taking a bribe].* (F 19 Rostov Ec)

*Nothing would stop people except for punishment.* (F 18 Kazan Law)

*If legislation had much tougher punishment with regard to corruption, then they would not have taken it [bribe] and would not have given it.* (M 23 Kazan Ec)

*If, maybe, some real sanctions were applied to people, and not like “a-ta-ta,” threatening with a finger, maybe then something would change.* (F 19 St. Petersburg Ec)

Some students even spoke of imposing the death penalty for corruption. Although this measure is seen as an extreme option and did not win the support of most participants, the leitmotif of all focus groups is that “in Russia, only punishment can have an effect”:

*I think for such amounts [of money], they deserve execution. That is, I do not think that these people are, in principle, worthy of being in prison, no matter what the conditions ... they, in principle, have already done everything to show that they hurt this country, this state, this people. Accordingly, in principle, they already ... well, at least, should be ostracized, deprived of citizenship. As a maximum, the death penalty.* (M 20 St. Petersburg Law)

*In general, the legislation needs to be changed so that such people should be executed. I am not saying that it is humane. This is not humane, but it is effective.* (M 21 SPb Ec)

In almost every focus group, the students used China and/or Singapore as examples of a successful fight against corruption, although the anti-corruption measures used in these countries are seen as inapplicable to the Russian cultural context. However, many agreed that such measures as “higher fines,” “total confiscation,” “public censure,” and “deprivation of citizenship” would be effective in Russia.

Another highly popular anti-corruption measure is education. Young people demonstrate understanding that corruption is in fact “in people's minds” and it is impossible to solve the problem of corruption through punishment alone.

*If a person is simply afraid of punishment, he still feels in his heart that he can give a bribe. And if he has the opportunity to evade punishment, to ensure that there is no punishment, he will take a bribe. Whereas a person who was raised with a negative view of corruption will not do it under any circumstances.* (M 19 Kazan Tech)

According to our informants, the focus of anticorruption education should be on the younger generation because “What is the point of persuading people who have almost outlived their lives, have their own well-established views, when you can influence people who are only just beginning their lives?” (M 19 Kazan Ec). There is also a consensus that anticorruption attitudes should be fostered from a very young age; many discussion groups mentioned introducing anticorruption education to schools.

At the same time, the forms of anti-corruption education that are currently offered in schools and universities—such as drawing competitions, quizzes, anti-corruption commissions, and “hotlines”—are perceived more as formal rituals than as real instruments for fighting corruption. Students
described the existing forms of anti-corruption education in schools as ill-fitted to the young age of students ("what kids can know about corruption?") and excessively burdensome for children:

In general, I think that at the age of seven, it is generally not worthwhile to bother a child with the issue of corruption in the country. To write it–to teach to consider ... (F 20 St. Petersburg Ec)

In other words, while the necessity of anti-corruption education is acknowledged by everyone, it is unclear how to make it truly effective.

Surprisingly enough, when they say that the younger generation should be the object of anti-corruption education, our informants do not mean themselves, but rather some future generations of Russians, specifically their future children. As for their own generation, the students consider it lost to anti-corruption education because they “grew up in a society where everything is totally corrupt” and everyone is already accustomed to living “not according to the rules”:

In principle, our generation has already been educated about the possibility of giving bribes. We understand this at the subconscious level (M 19 Rostov Law)

We grow up in a system where adults are already used to doing this [corruption], and it’s some kind of custom that is passed on to us (F 20 Kazan Ec)

When speaking about education, we are waiting for generational change. Maybe even 2-3 generations. Only after that it will start working (M 23 Kazan Ec)

It seems to me that we are already used to living the way we live- Moderator: And how do you live? - not quite according to the rules. We live in a certain system that has already been established. This way is easier. But probably it is wrong (M 20 Rostov Law)

There is a common understanding among focus group participants that no anti-corruption measures can be effective without state participation. The extreme version of this view is that fighting corruption is the responsibility of the state and the government:

All that we can do, specifically we, is simply to educate the next generation normally, which will be much tougher on corruption. And everything else depends on the state and on the people, who sit up there (M 21 SPb Ec)

**Does the state fight corruption?**

Those who believe that the Russian state is fighting corruption are a clear minority. Most of the participants in our focus groups shared the opinion that the state “pretends” to fight corruption instead of taking real action to eliminate this phenomenon ("this is a kind of myth," “it pretends to be fighting,” “rather, imitates the struggle,” “it’s fighting only for good statistics.”)

Even those who believe that the state fights corruption agree that progress is seen only at the lowest level. For example, cameras have been installed in the offices of state officials and in the cars of the traffic police, new rules for passing exams in driving schools have been introduced to frustrate corrupt interactions, etc. As for the upper levels of governance or the political system, there is no visible struggle taking place, according to students:

If the state is fighting [against corruption], then it is doing so only at the lower level. But the top officials...even if they are trying to fight corruption, they themselves are corrupt. This is the problem. (F 20 Kazan Ec)

The popular opinion among those who positively assess state-led anticorruption efforts is that the state actually fights corruption, but does so secretly, such that ordinary mortals simply do not know about it:
The state is fighting against corruption, we just can’t know everything about it. All data, all materials, they are all classified under the stamp of official secrets, state secrets. (M 20 Rostov Law)

Often, a positive assessment of the state’s fight against corruption is aspirational, based on patriotism, faith, and hope, rather than grounded in facts demonstrating the effectiveness of the state’s anti-corruption policy (“Since I am a patriot of Russia ... I want to believe in the country and in the authorities,” “I want to believe the authorities and their statements,” “this existing struggle may turn out to be the beginning of something real,” “the president gave a hint in his speech that this is the end of the era of corruption”). For the future lawyers, the evidence that the state is fighting corruption is the large number of corruption convictions in courts:

How can we be sure that the state is fighting against corruption? We can go to the website of any court and look at court decisions that have been passed on a particular article of the criminal code ... To be honest, I haven’t watched it myself, but it seems to me that there were a lot of cases (M 20 Rostov Law)

However, using court decisions as an indicator of the fight against corruption is disputed by the students themselves, since a large number of anti-corruption cases may demonstrate that the government is trying to bump up the statistics without actually fighting against corruption (“all those who work in law enforcement know very well that there is such a sad thing as statistics”). In the course of discussions, those who stated in the beginning that the state fights corruption gradually moved from this opinion to expressing more doubts as to whether it really does so.

In recent years, there has been a burst of arrests among top-ranking state officials, including governors, ministers, and senators. Minister of Economics Uliukaev and Senator Arashukov are among those who have been accused of corruption. However, these arrests did not arouse much interest among young people. The students in our focus groups do not pay much attention to media reports about anticorruption arrests. The dominant opinion is that these high-ranking officials are actually prosecuted due to an internal political struggle within the power circles or to fight the opposition: “it’s their internal squabble,” “they [the governors] were arrested because they didn’t share,” “this is a tool to get rid of an unwanted person,” “to remove those who fight for justice ... it’s also difficult to deal with them.”

The seeming contradiction between the desire to harshen punishments for corruption, on the one hand, and indifference toward the arrests of top-ranking officials, on the other hand, can be explained by respondents’ confidence that despite the anti-corruption measures that have been taken, the real corruptionists will remain unpunished:

The “special people” who are close to the ruling cliques—that is, to the President, to the prime minister, to the governors—[remain untouched], they will never remove them, these people will remain in their places. Or they will move them somewhere to a more profitable place. (M 19 St. Petersbg Law)

The low interest demonstrated by students in our focus groups in the arrests of top-ranking officials reflects the attitudes of the general public revealed in polls conducted by the Levada Center (Levinson 2019). Frequent media reports about the arrests of top-ranking officials have turned such events into a sort of informational background to which young people no longer pay attention because these occurrences do not lead to any visible changes for them:

The fact that [rotation] occurs does not affect us in any way. They can install another person, and life will continue the same way. (F 19 Rostov Ec)

The fight against corruption is ongoing, but the fact is that ... new ones come in the place of old corrupt officials. (F 20 Rostov Law)

They show arrests on TV, it flows into your head and similarly flows out because this news is constantly running, but we understand ourselves that there is not much sense in all this... Therefore, we do not
really remember what happened. If there was any result from this, then maybe we would remember. (M 22 Rostov Tech)

Anti-corruption policy is also criticized for its selective nature: punishments serve the power vertical, in which the threat of anti-corruption disclosures supports the loyalty of lower-ranking officials to the upper levels of power:

We have such a system that .... all corruption deals [by the officials], they are, in principle, known to the security forces. But this is used as such an instrument for maintaining loyalty, an additional measure of control over the political environment in general ... Roughly speaking, they allow you to steal certain amounts in exchange for your political loyalty ... If an official becomes completely impudent, or he tries to play some kind of game of his own and gets out of control, then, as we can see, this compromising material is made public, and some kind of criminal process, prosecution begins. It can be accompanied by wide coverage in the state media and so on. (M 19 St. Petersburg Law)

Since corruption is seen as firmly rooted in the governance system, anti-corruption measures cannot be effective because those who are supposed to fight against corruption are themselves corrupt:

The government can fight corruption, but not with itself! (M 19 SPb Tech)

All people who take bribes on a particularly large scale, they are in the government. They mostly get there because of bribes. And it is difficult to be a person who does not give bribes there. (F 19 St. Petersburg Law)

Those who fight, they are the main corruptionists ... (M 23 Kazan Ec)

This leads to the idea that in order to overcome corruption, it is necessary to fundamentally change the system of governance, but this step is associated with revolution and violence, which young people fear and resist:

Effective methods, even if carried out, will destroy the whole society ... So all this is useless ... Revolution is absolutely harmful. (M 18 Kazan Law)

But there is already a riot, there is already a revolution, there is already ... again “sunset.” (m 19 Kazan Tech)

Young people find themselves caught in this “logical trap.” They do not see any alternative to the current political regime (“we destroy everything and what next?”, “I have no idea, how to restructure the society, I do not see how it can be different from what we have now”) and do not accept the idea of revolution, as it would lead to total chaos and destruction.

Public anticorruption initiatives

Young people in our focus groups know almost nothing about public anti-corruption initiatives (“they do not exist”). Most of them have never heard of Transparency International or any other anticorruption NGO. Public anticorruption activism is associated almost exclusively with popular protests and with the name of opposition politician Aleksey Navalny and his Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK).

Attitudes toward Navalny are mixed and not nearly as supportive as might be expected. Unlike Transparency International, Navalny—with his anti-corruption investigations and especially his investigation of former Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev through the “On vam ne Dimon” project—is highly recognizable among focus group participants. The students generally appreciate the positive effect of FBK investigative projects because they undermine the state monopoly on information and attract public attention to the problem of corruption:
The effect of FBK is information. I mean, those who watch them [FBK] get some additional information that will be not shown on TV. (M 20 Rostov Tech)

I think that the effectiveness is only in the fact that more people learn about a problem, about a specific one. At least some publicity is given to this, and they are trying to show that there is still a problem, and we need to fight it somehow. (F 20 St. Petersburg Law)

Whereas the FBK’s investigative projects are generally viewed in a positive light, most informants were neutral and even skeptical about the protests organized by the FBK. They argued primarily that these protests have brought about no visible results: “We heard about the [Navalny] rallies, but they seem to have been so ineffective that they should not be remembered.” (F 21 St. Petersburg Tech)

The authorities ignore protesters’ demands and either do not support public anti-corruption initiatives or support only initiatives against low-level corruption. This makes participation in protests a useless waste of time in the eyes of our informants:

What is the point in protesting if it does not reach [the authorities], and if it does, then it will be decided by 50%? And then it will be forgotten, and why is this all? (F 20 Kazan Ec)

In fact, these measures do not work now. That is, people go to rallies, but the authorities don’t hear them, they simply disperse them. (M 18 Rostov Tech)

I believe that public measures are stupid ... Anyway, they [authorities] do not even look at this. (F 20 St. Petersburg Ec)

The government does not support any attempts by society to fight corruption; those rallies held by Mr. Navalny, of course, are not very effective. (F 19 St. Petersburg Law)

Public initiatives to combat corruption are possible, it seems to me, up to a certain level. That is, at some grassroots level, when individual inspectors take bribes or against those corrupt officials who do not have a roof.” But it seems to me that at the highest level, when they begin to examine the property of a federal politician .... This, of course, it seems to me, will not be supported, and we cannot anticipate efficiency there. (M 19 St. Petersburg Law)

The most skeptical focus group participants consider participation in anti-corruption protests to be a peculiar fashion among young people, one which some young people use “to stand out from the crowd”: “They would go to a rally, take a picture for Instagram, but this is their maximum.” (M 18 Kazan Law)

At the same time, students noted the unusually high intensity of protest activity in recent years, which is associated not with corruption itself, but with its consequences:

A lot of [public] initiatives in fact fight not against corruption, but against its consequences—such as, for instance, the rezoning of a public green zone as a housing construction zone. It is clear that the rezoning took place for a bribe, but people are less concerned about what was done for the bribe than about the fact that they are losing parks and squares. (19 St. Petersburg Tech)

Participation in protests, even those sanctioned by the authorities, is perceived by young people as extremely risky. The majority of focus group participants are not ready to protest, since they see it as a serious danger to themselves and their families and a threat to their future professional careers:

If I felt safe, if I knew that I were going to a rally like in a civilized country, and would not be put into a “monkey cage” for three days or beaten, then I would definitely have participated... But today I’m not ready to spend 3 days of my life [on this], I have a lot of work [to do] (laugh). (F 22 St. Petersburg Tech)

It’s somehow very dangerous .... and many are afraid. Even these petitions, just standing in pickets. It’s also dangerous, actually. (F 19, Kazan Ec)
Schools hold meetings to warn students not to go to these rallies ... when I was in my first year, several guys were expelled from the university because they went to the [FBK] rally. (M 20 Rostov Tech)

Some students mentioned growing political pressure, saying that any public activity, even if not directed against the government, is prosecuted by the law enforcement agencies if it is not sanctioned by the state:

I know that all public activity these days is being smashed. That is, even some small gatherings, circles, including concerts where some political groups can perform ... It doesn’t matter whether they are left or right, they crush everyone... (M 20 St. Petersburg Law)

It’s just impossible to express your point of view now ... All these laws on fake news, Internet restrictions, and so on, they all restrict freedom of speech, you cannot say anything. (M 18 Rostov Tech)

Against the background of citizens’ limited ability to mobilize and openly express their discontent, as well as federal TV’s failure to report on these protests, the Internet is seen by young people as a more effective and safer means of expressing discontent than open protests.

These days, it’s easier to go to the Internet than go out to the streets, because nobody will show you on TV. There are a lot of cases where thousands of people march and this is not shown by a single federal TV channel. (F 23 Kazan Ec)

It seems to me that these days it is, in fact, only video bloggers who work effectively. Everything else, including rallies, it seems to me, is not particularly effective. There are few who go, few who organize...public sector employees will not go there, because they may be scared that they will be fired, their family will be threatened, something like that. (F 20 Kazan Ec).

The students in our focus groups are not eager to protest against corruption because they do not see any positive effects from protesting, even as participation in protests is increasingly risky. If they plan to express their discontent about corruption-related issues, they would rather do so online than through open protest action.
III. READINESS TO FIGHT CORRUPTION

Ambiguity of attitudes

According to studies conducted by the INDEM Foundation and the Levada Center since the 1990s, the post-Soviet Russian generation is characterized by the duality and ambiguity of its attitudes towards corruption (Satarov 2013). This is manifested, in the first place, in a striking contrast between normative and practical perceptions of corruption. Genuine outrage with pervasive graft and the impunity of corrupt officials paradoxically coexists, in the minds of the Russian people, with a pragmatic tolerance toward corruption when it comes to solving everyday problems. An understanding of corruption as an evil that generates major problems and hinders economic development is combined with fatalistic perceptions of corruption as something inevitable and ineradicable that it is impossible either to change or to challenge.

The participants in our focus groups generally reproduce the duality of attitudes typical of the older generation. The discussions demonstrate an obvious contradiction between normative negative views of corruption and actual pragmatic tolerance of this phenomenon in everyday life. Just like the older generation, young people in our focus groups combine aggressive condemnation of corruption with acceptance of it as a “natural” part of the reality and a necessary instrument to adjust to this reality.

The ambiguity of attitudes toward corruption is manifested in narratives that distinguish between corruption “in a bad sense” and corruption “in a good sense”:

*Corruption in a bad sense, for example, is when you buy an apartment or invest in a house under construction, and they are never built. In a good sense, the simplest example is medical certificates. Instead of going through all these medical tests, you just put 3000 rubles on the table and get your medical “book” right away. That’s it! Go to work! (F 20 Kazan Ec)*

Corruption can be an important tool to protect—and even promote—one’s interests in a competitive environment:

*Well, I’m not so radical against corruption. I don’t think it is such a big problem ... If someone else gave a bribe to the judge, you can also give a bribe, and here is a situation when you need corruption... You are against corruption if it does not play in your favor ... (F 21 SPb Ec)*

*I can participate in corruption to get some profits for myself. (M 19 Kazan Tech)*

However, the open approval of corruption expressed in the last two quotations was the exception to the rule in focus group discussions. Most respondents consider their probable participation in corrupt interactions to be forced upon them rather than an offensive strategy.

Tolerance of corruption

The experts at Transparency International usually distinguish between the “bribe of survival” and “the bribe of comfort.” The bribe of survival is paid when a person has no way to get a necessary service but to pay for it. The bribe of comfort is used when a person wants to speed up the bureaucratic procedure to make it more comfortable and less time-consuming. Whereas a bribe of comfort is initiated by a recipient of bureaucratic services, a bribe of survival usually implies bureaucratic extortion. To use this typology, the tolerance of corruption that we observe in our group discussions relates to “survival” rather than “comfort.” Our informants mostly justify the possibility of personal involvement in everyday corruption by reference to the pressure of objective circumstances, which leave a person with no choice but to pay a bribe:
Corruption is a system and “the essence” of the Russian state; if you live in Russia, you have to play according to these rules and integrate into this system:

*There is already a certain established system where you come and you cannot influence it.* (F 21 Kazan Ec)

*I also had situations in my life when you had nothing left to do except to come to terms with this. Because while you are taking [anti-corruption] measures, 10 years will pass.* (F 20 Kazan Ec).

*Because corruption has already become the essence of the state in our country, it always has been. ... We always have the unlimited power of some and the complete lack of rights of many. So it has always been, and nothing can be done about it.* (M 18 Kazan Law)

A resort to corruption is seen as justified in critical situations, to avoid serious harm to the life, health, and well-being of yourself and your loved ones:

*When it comes to life and death, especially of your loved ones, you don’t think about anything.* (F 21 Rostov Ec)

*The feeling of love for relatives is more important than a civic duty.* (M 20 Kazan Tech)

Since institutions work poorly and many public services are not provided properly, corruption creates parallel opportunities, helping to solve the problems:

*... I was surprised that [one of my acquaintances] did not leave Russia. He often goes on business trips abroad, he knows that life is better there and all that. And he told me that when you move there, you don’t know where to go if something happens. And here you know to whom and how much to give.* (F 19 St. Petersburg Tech)

*The whole problem is that we do not have normal [bureaucratic] processes; we can’t do anything quickly. It is all very long, so everyone wants to make their life easier.* (F 19 St. Petersburg Ec)

*if you pay for a medical certificate... you do not pay it because you like to do so, but because the bureaucracy is terrible. It does not depend on us, I think.* (M 22 Rostov Tech)

Another group of arguments refers to the “specific,” historically-anchored Russian culture and mentality. In this context, corruption appears not as a deviance but as a normal behavior. Corruption is an intergenerational phenomenon, part of the knowledge that children learn from their parents:

*But this is again about our mental tradition, I don’t know how to explain it. The mentality is laid down for us Russians, “We must give, we must bring.”* (M 20 Rostov Law)

*Embezzlement has been known in Russia since tsarist times. In fact, I believe that this is the mentality of the Russian people. It’s already in our genes.* (M 19 Rostov Tech)

*We grow up in the kind of system where adults are used to doing this, and they shift some of their customs onto us.* (F 20 Kazan Ec)

Another belief that helps to justify involvement in corrupt interactions is that petty corruption will not harm anyone as long as it is limited to the participants in the corruption deal:

*Of course I’ll pay [a bribe to the traffic police inspector]. Without consequences, it will not make anyone worse off; everyone is happy, myself and the inspector.* (M 19 SPb Ec).

Respondents’ pragmatic attitude toward corruption became apparent when they discussed situations in which they faced the choice of paying a bribe or suffering with an unresolved problem. In these discussions, it was not the moral issue that was weighed when assessing different options, but the pragmatic one: which way is cheaper? Is it worth the risk of being caught? Is it worth the money needed to pay? For example, the decision to give or not to give a bribe to a traffic police officer...
primarily depended on the consequences for the driver: if this was just a fine, then the participants preferred to pay a fine instead of giving a bribe. If the driver was threatened with losing his or her driver’s license for several years, then a bribe was accepted as the only possible solution to the problem.

At the same time, corruption causes outrage among young people, primarily because it creates a feeling of injustice. Corruption generates inequality by providing advantages to those who have money or connections:

*You have been striving for your dream all your life—for example, to get some good job. You study hard, do everything, submit a resume, and then you are not accepted. But you failed to be accepted not because you studied poorly or did something wrong, but simply because ... [another] person got this position through connections. He did not study, he was not necessarily engaged at all during his studies, but he got the job through connections alone.* (M 19 Kazan Tech)

Impunity for corruption is another painful cause of indignation that was mentioned in all focus groups:

*Even if they catch an official [taking bribes], if he is at the top they will not put him in jail. Even if they imprison him, then his life will not change in any way, everything will be fine with them.* (F 21 Kazan Ec)

*In principle, any rich person can pay to avoid punishment.* (F 20 Rostov Law)

*A person, for example, when he takes a bribe, he does not feel that he is responsible for it, he feels the power in himself, that no one will punish him for this.* (F 18 St. Petersburg Tech)

The young people in our study demonstrated essentially the same attitudes toward corruption as the “Soviet man,” a specific personality type described and explored by Russian sociologist Yuri Levada and his research group (Levada 1993; Gudkov 2007). The “Soviet man” was formed under the influence of the Soviet repressive regime and the state authoritarian institutions and was expected to disappear after the reforms of the 1990s. The features of the “Soviet man,” the scholars indicated, included doublethink (bifurcation), hypocrisy, and cynicism; non-participation in politics, paternalistic expectations, and dependence on the state; and “willingness to criticize the existing system (the party, or mafia, or the state) or corruption—while being not ready to take decisive steps to deny the system and inability to determine one’s active place in the new structure of social relations” (Levada 1993:46).

While the “Soviet man” personality developed in response to the Soviet authoritarian regime, many of the young participants in our focus groups reproduced this personality when expressing their attitudes toward corruption. Interestingly enough, they are well aware of the duality of their views and reflect on (or even make fun of) the discrepancy between their normative statements about the dangers of corruption, on the one hand, and their readiness to engage in corrupt practices in daily life, on the other hand. Notably, these young people diverge from the “Soviet man” in the sense that they are less paternalistic in their outlook and do not expect state support in the future.

**Readiness to counter corruption**

The participants in our study are quite pessimistic about the possibility of defeating corruption—at least in Russia—in the foreseeable future. This may be the reason that adaptive strategies dominate over active ones. While improvements are more than desirable, young people prefer to wait for them to happen rather than to initiate changes themselves. Their first reaction to a question about personal involvement in anti-corruption activism is “we can do nothing,” “we are small people,” and “nothing depends on us.”
It’s simply not in our power, we won’t be able to overcome corruption, because corruption can disappear only when the power in the country changes, because everything comes from there, from the very top, and then everyone adjusts and goes along this ladder. (M 20 Rostov Ec)

What is the use of it if we go, complain, but no one will hear us? (F 18 Kazan Law)

But this will not depend on us. Where are we and where are they? This level is very different. Nothing depends on us principally. (M 22 Rostov Law).

The only action that young people feel they can take against corruption is not to take or give bribes themselves. Statements such as “you should start with yourself” or “in order to change the world you should change yourself first” were made regularly in all focus groups. However, the ways in which these statements were made and the reactions of other participants raise serious doubts that the students themselves take these words seriously or that they genuinely believe that the principles they rhetorically espouse can be implemented in practice:

I believe that yes, I can fight, according to the principle “neither give nor take.” But this is for the time being, unless some vital situation happens. Because the system will not change, you will have this situation, and you will have to pay a bribe. (F 20 Kazan Ec)

Until you come across it [corruption], you don’t know whether you will give a bribe or not. That is, I can now say that I am ready to fight it, but, as Lena said, you will go, they will stop you, and you have the option either to sit [without license] for three years or give a bribe of 5,000 rubles. Here the choice is obvious. (M 18 Rostov Tech)

Against the background of systemic corruption, when bribery and exchange of informal favors are taken as normal, open countering of corruption looks like deviation and senseless heroism. Young people in our focus groups are skeptical about the effects of such behavior:

Let us say, we have brought up some socially responsible citizen who is genuinely against all corruption, and then he came to work for the authorities. They would consider him a fool, no one would listen to him. What can he influence? (F 19 Kazan Ec)

From the pragmatic perspective, participation in anti-corruption activism is seen as a waste of time, if not of one’s whole life. The most pessimistic view of participation in the fight against corruption is best illustrated by the quotations below:

One person is not a warrior against the state system. This is unrealistic. We can say, “Start with yourself”... But how? ... You can, for example, wake up one morning and say, “I will fight against corruption.” What will you do? For what? What for? Miss some years of your life? We only have one life; each of us is 20 years old now, and if we engage in fighting against corruption, it will take no less than 15-20 years. How do we know that in 40 years we will defeat it or achieve something? We will remain poor, unhappy, and alone until the end of our days. Why then? What a waste of life! And no one will even remember that you were some kind of fighter for justice, a fighter against corruption... (M 19 Rostov Law)

Some students admit that they have no desire to enter a fight against corruption even if they see opportunities to do so:

I believe that a person has an incredible number of opportunities to fight corruption. He just needs to start learning, and to want this, and just move. As for myself, I just don’t want to do it, I don’t have any movement inside myself that would tell me to counteract corruption ... (M 19 Kazan Tech)

Since young people equate the “fight against corruption” with participation in protests, it is inevitably associated with high risks to one’s personal and professional life. Young people see that “these days, the state does not support public initiatives” and instead suppresses anti-corruption protests. Young
people are not prepared to openly express their discontent until the state stops prosecuting participation in protest actions:

*When I understand that I am safe ... Not that I am in a comfort zone, namely, if there is no direct threat to me or to my family, then I think I will be ready [to protest]. (M 19 St. Petersburg Law)*

They justify their unreadiness to fight corruption by the fact that others are not fighting either. If a mass struggle had been launched, then by all means, they would take part in it. In the meantime, the participants of our focus groups prefer to wait for changes rather than to initiate changes themselves:

*If, at least, a significant part of society is ready to do something, then I am ready to join this. (M 21 St. Petersburg Ec)*

*If the system is corrupt and you are against it, it will be difficult for you. If there are many of us, it will not be difficult in time. This is a matter of time, not a person. (F 19 St. Petersburg Law)*

The discussion about personal involvement in anti-corruption activities again revealed the duality of students’ views. Alongside the “normative” attitude that takes for granted the need to fight corruption, an alternative pragmatic position that called into question the necessity of the anticorruption struggle was also voiced. What is the point of fighting corruption if it “plays in your favor” or if you can solve your problems quickly with a bribe?

*It all depends on the situation. If, let’s say, this corruption activity hurts me, then it’s better to fight it and refuse it. If, on the contrary, it somehow helps, as in a kindergarten, for example, then if I fight, my child will never get there .... (F 19 Rostov Ec)*

*If you want to achieve something, and you understand that you can’t do it without giving a bribe, and you know that you need to do it now, it’s easier for you to give and to get it than to sit and say, “I’m fighting.” In the event of a threat to your life, or your child, and so on, you will not have much choice: go to fight in the square or give a bribe to solve everything quickly. (F 23 St. Petersburg Tech)*

The feelings of helplessness and inability to influence the authorities, against a background of outrage with corruption, mirror the generally passive role of young people in state-society relations. On the one hand, they consider themselves a comparatively advanced and independent generation:

*Our generation is less dependent already, we generally do not watch TV. I think this is a big, big plus. And because people are starting to travel abroad more, looking more at other countries, talking to other people in different languages, it is becoming more difficult to maintain this system. (M 19 Rostov Law)*

On the other hand, young people demonstrate strategies of adjustment and adaptation to the existing system that make them similar to the older post-Soviet generations.

**Encouraging anti-corruption activism**

It is commonly believed that in order to mobilize young people for civic anticorruption activism, it is necessary to provide them with more information about the real scale and pervasiveness of corruption in Russia. This is the logic behind the FBK anti-corruption investigations. Our study suggests that better awareness of the real scale of corruption will not necessarily lead to anticorruption action and can even bring about the opposite result.

The focus groups demonstrated that our informants are well aware of the systemic and pervasive character of corruption in Russia. They understand its destructive influence on the Russian economy and society. They are convinced of the utter corruption of the governance system and top officials and believe that the major “fountainhead” of corruption is the top echelons of power, from which it spreads to the lower levels of the governance system.
At the same time, young people do not see any effective ways of countering corruption. There is a lack of working institutional anti-corruption instruments (or at least the students with whom we spoke do not know about them). The state’s struggle against corruption is believed to be non-systemic and even fictitious, at best taking place only at the low level of governance while the top establishment remains intact. Selective arrests of top-ranking officials are not seen as a real anti-corruption measure but rather as a struggle within political circles that does not lead to any changes either in the system or in people’s lives.

Similarly, young people do not see any effects from public anticorruption initiatives. They cannot imagine anti-corruption activities other than protesting, which is widely seen as ineffective and dangerous. Since the state does not support public anti-corruption initiatives, participation in protests bears serious risks to an individual’s personal and professional life. There is an understanding that in order to defeat corruption, it is necessary to change “the whole system,” but such wholesale change is associated with revolution and violence, which young people do not accept and in fact fear.

In this context, young people’s reaction to their increasing awareness about corruption is not—as many might expect—to mobilize in protest, but instead to become increasingly frustrated by their helplessness and inability to change the situation. Indifference and distancing themselves from the problem of corruption, as well as shifting responsibility for the anti-corruption struggle to the state, can be seen as a defensive reaction to these frustrations:

I am talking about those things where we can influence something. Because this probably distinguishes a rational person from others, since he takes an action where he can influence the situation. And where he cannot influence, we must accept this fact. This is human psychology. (M 24 Kazan Ec)

I really don’t care, I don’t want, and I can’t change it in any way. … Nothing would change this country at the moment, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. (F 21 Kazan Ec)

We can’t do anything with high-ranking plenipotentiaries … (laughs) I mean, with the people who are sitting up there at the top, and, roughly speaking, we can say that we are being manipulated by them, and all this goes on and on. Therefore, we, in fact, can’t do anything direct to solve this problem. (F 20 St. Petersburg Law)

It follows from the focus group discussions that providing more information about corruption without giving people real tools with which to deal with it would not lead to mobilization, but rather to distancing from the problem. In the words of some informants, rising awareness about corruption is good, but it “does not show a way out.” Young people are faced with the choice of either participating in protests and then going to prison or not fighting and accepting corruption. For those who can neither fight nor accept corruption, the only choice is to leave the country. The emigration option can take different forms and seems to be the most attractive of the three for those who can afford it:

When awareness [about the real scale of corruption] happens, you begin to understand one thing: that it is extremely difficult to solve, that you will never solve it alone... and another thought comes to your mind—maybe it’s better to flee? So, the problem is kind of illuminated, but the exit is not shown. … Because, in the end, it feels as if you are faced with a choice: either you accept it, or you fight and then you go to jail, or you go abroad because you don’t accept it and you can’t fight. (F 20 St. Petersburg Law)

In the words of focus group participants, “if Russia wants the brains to remain in the country, then the system needs to be changed.”
Low Trust in State

The focus groups demonstrated that students have an extremely low level of trust in the state and state institutions. There is a background understanding of the Russian state and the whole governance system as profoundly corrupt and ineffective; public officials are believed to work for their own interests, not for the interests of the society. A lack of confidence in state institutions and in state social programs was also expressed indirectly, during the discussions of hypothetical situations. Specifically, while discussing situations where the students were offered a choice between low but official ("white") salaries or better salaries "in the envelope," the overwhelming majority of students—regardless of their area of study or city—chose gray salaries. The main (and in fact the only) argument for that choice was that paying taxes to the state pension fund or healthcare system is a waste of money since the state cannot be trusted and would never give it back. The recent pension reform and the sudden increase in the pension age, which was rapidly adopted by the government and the State Duma without any public discussion, were repeatedly mentioned by students as an example of the shiftiness and inconsistency of the state’s social policy. Young people believe that they can survive without state support and consider saving money for healthcare, education and retirement on their own to be more effective than relying upon state social programs and the pension system. At least at this point, young people do not expect any assistance from the state in their future lives and seem to rely only on themselves. This corresponds to the general trend in state-society relations in Russia, and specifically with the destruction of the paternalistic social contract.

This does not mean, however, that young people welcome this change and see a lot of opportunities to be independent from the state in their future. The change in the social contract is not a matter of choice but a necessity. Young people are disappointed with the state's irresponsibility and inability to take care of its citizens. They want the state to be responsible and strong and specifically to take responsibility for fighting corruption. Focus group participants share the opinion that people themselves cannot defeat corruption without the participation of the state.

Diversification and Polarization

The study demonstrated fewer regional differences in young people’s attitudes than we expected. Students in St. Petersburg, Kazan and Rostov-on-Don seem to be concerned with similar problems; they are equally aware of the scale of corruption and demonstrate similar mistrust of the state. We were expecting that young people in the regions would be less concerned about political issues than those in St. Petersburg which is known for its traditionally high civic activism and oppositional moods. However, our study did not confirm these expectations. When naming the most acute problems encountered by Russia, the students in the regional focus groups highlighted the same political problems as their counterparts in St. Petersburg. The involvement of young people in social networks and their use of the Internet as a major source of information moderate interregional contrasts that were immanent to the older Russian generations. The difference between the cities, however, is that in Rostov and Kazan corruption is more often associated with nepotism and informal networks, likely reflecting the specific features of corruption in these regions.

We can also hypothesize, based on our empirical data, that the differences between the universities are more stark than those between the regions. The students from universities that enjoy more academic freedom and are known for a high quality of education demonstrate more concern about and better awareness of the problem of corruption, as well as a more informed understanding of how the Russian state and the political system function.

The diversity and polarization of views among the Russian younger generation manifested itself in the diversity of views and positions expressed during the focus group discussions. In almost every
group, there were one or two “active” students who were more aware of the situation with regard to corruption and demonstrated more interest in political issues than the rest of the group. In some groups, these students were the opinion leaders; in other groups, they found themselves in opposition to the dominant opinion. While the number of these “active” students is small, their views and attitudes were similar across the regional and professional boundaries. They seemed to be concerned about the same political problems and took a more active civic position during group discussions. Given this diversity within the student groups, we can assume that the contradictory assessments of the political attitudes of Russian youth—where some scholars consider young people to be politically apathetic while others see them as increasingly politicized—are actually not so contradictory: while a small group of “active” young people are becoming more politicized, the “passive” majority is increasingly politically indifferent.
References


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