

Between the Past and the Future:

Comparing the Political Outlook of Young People in Central and Eastern Europe

Nota bene: This short paper presents a first attempt at understanding a small part of three new datasets generated at the Centre for East European and International Studies in Berlin (ZOiS) about political and social outlooks of young people in Belarus, Poland, and Latvia. In its current form, it looks at a number of key topics that we address in the survey and puts some results of the different surveys in a comparative perspective. It is a largely descriptive paper and I would be grateful for comments on any aspects of the findings that seem particularly worthwhile for further exploration.¹

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Young people across Eastern Europe have figured prominently as one key symbol for the democratic aspirations of countries in the region. Today's young people in Eastern Europe mark the first cohort without a direct experience of communism, one for which the free market, and in some countries also democratic opportunities, have come to be the norm and which in its consumption of social media and desire to travel internationally resembles to many young people in the West. At the same time, the practice of young people's political involvement and their political outlook have not yet received the attention they deserve (Schwartz and Winkel 2016, Walker and Stephenson 2016). With the aim to gain a better understanding of the political and social outlooks held by young people, the Berlin-based Centre for East European and International Studies commissioned an online survey in three countries focused specifically on young people. The surveys took place in Poland, Latvia, and Belarus; three countries that have taken different paths of transition after the breakdown of communism, influencing the upbringing as well as the educational, labour-market and political opportunities of youth.

Unlike existing studies, this research does not only enquire into those young people that are potentially agents for political change but also wants to understand the more subtle forms of potential politicisation and the political and social views of those who are not politically active in any noteworthy way. The silent majority is bound to be ignored in many studies and the large surveys that we have been able to conduct therefore provide an important complement to the

¹ Many thanks to Nadja Sieffert and Ana Karalashvili for assistance with preparing the datasets and Dominika Tronina with additional research support.

existing studies of student and youth activism in the region (Burean and Badescu 2014, Junes 2015, Nikolayenko 2015).

The surveys were conducted roughly in parallel, running from late February to early March 2019.² We set quotas on the sampled population to ensure a representative distribution in terms of age (ranging from 16 to 34) and an equal distribution of gender. We also set quotas for the cities, surveying youth in the largest Belarussian (Minsk, Brest, Vitebsk, Grodno, Gomel', Mogilev), Latvian (Riga, Daugavpils, Jelgava, Jekabpils, Jurmala, Liepaja, Rezekne, Valmiera, Ventpils), and Polish (Warszawa, Lodz, Krakow, Poznan, Wroclaw, Gdansk, Szczecin, Bydgoszcz, Lublin, Katowice, Bialystok) cities. In Poland we were also able to include a random set of people living in towns with 100-250k inhabitants. In all countries the number of respondents per city is proportional to the size of the city's population.

Biographical and socio-economic foundations

Across Latvia and Poland, roughly one third of respondents indicates that their marital status is single with the remaining people splitting between those who are married or cohabiting. The relative share of married young people is interestingly enough higher in Latvia than in Poland. In Belarus, however, there are few young people (20%) who indicate that they are cohabiting. Instead, the highest value is reported for being married (43%), followed by being single (41%) (Figures 1). The majority of respondents in all three countries report that they do not have children (59% in Belarus and Latvia, 69% in Poland).

Regarding the employment situation the picture looks largely similar across all three countries. Asked "Which of the following best describes what you were doing in the last week?," the highest proportion of respondents indicate that they were working full time, followed by being full-time student. In Belarus, the category looking after the home or the family also received a high score and also the proportion of those who are studying full-time is a little higher than in the three other countries (Figures 2).

Regarding religion, in Belarus around two thirds declare themselves Orthodox with a small share of Roman Catholics and a bit less than one quarter indicating that they are not religious. In Latvia, the most frequent response is that no religion is followed (40%) and the remaining respondents divide between Lutherans, Orthodox, and Roman Catholics (18-14%). In Poland, close to 70% indicate that they are Roman Catholic and around 20% that they follow no

² Belarus to 14 February to 3 March, Latvia 18 February to 4 March, Poland 15 February to 27 February.

religion.³ Nevertheless, the religious practice might be more revealing than the token religious identity. We therefore asked those respondents who indicated a religious affiliation, how frequently they visit their respective place of worship (Figures 3). In Latvia and Belarus, the active worshipping is rather infrequent. In both countries around 85% state that they only go to their respective churches for important holidays, if at all. In Poland, on the other hand, there is a noteworthy split amongst the young generation between those who indicate that they visit church once a week or more (37%),⁴ and those who worship for important holidays, if at all (51%). When it comes to mass attendance, the younger Polish generation does therefore not behave in a way different to the pattern across society overall, but a lower share self-identifies as Catholic than in the wider population.

A longing for pasts never experienced?

In the literature on young people in post-communist societies, their longing for certain elements of the Soviet past has frequently been highlighted (Kapczynski 2007, Nikolayenko 2008, Omelchenko and Sabirova 2016). A Levada poll in Russia recently caught attention with the Soviet-nostalgia index rising also amongst young people.⁵ Another poll showcased that also young people have increasingly positive memories of Stalin.⁶ How does that apparent Russian nostalgia for certain Soviet elements compare with how youth in Central and Eastern Europe assess their past? To get a sense of the mood of young people in that regard we asked, amongst a number of questions, in each country “Some adults and older people think that life was better in the past. In your opinion, in which era was it best to be a young person like you in [country]?” (Figures 4).

At first glance it is evident that young people assess their own times as being the most desirable ones to live in, a pattern that holds across all three countries. In particular in Poland this response is the most frequent one, given by about 68% of young people. Nevertheless, in Poland also around 22% of respondents chose the time before the country’s EU accession as the potentially best era to have been a young person. No Polish respondent chose not to answer this question or to indicate that they do not know which period to select. In Latvia, however, nearly 24% indicate that they do not know which period to choose but only a rough 11% indicate the time

³ The value for young Poles is thus lower than for the overall population if compared with 2015 data from the Pew Research Center which states that 87% self-declare an affiliation with the Catholic Church

<https://www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/>

⁴ Around 37% of the overall population tends to attend weekly mass in Poland: <https://zenit.org/articles/poland-church-statistics-for-2016/>

⁵ <https://www.levada.ru/2018/12/19/nostalgiya-po-sssr-2/>

⁶ <https://www.levada.ru/2019/04/16/dinamika-otnosheniya-k-stalinu/>

before the country's EU accession. As for Belarus, less than 60% mention the present time, whereas around 22% state that they do not know which period to select. 8% state after the breakdown of communism.

Somewhat similar in all three countries, it is those with a greater self-reported socio-economic status and the younger ones who have a statistically significant higher likelihood to select the present era. In Belarus and Latvia living in the capital moreover significantly predicts the likelihood to select the present era. Education only matters in a statistically significant way in Poland and Latvia, whereas there is no difference in all three countries when it comes to gender, having children, and being in a partnership or not.

Pursuing this question of how the present is benchmarked against the past, we asked "Thinking about the last decade or so, have things generally got better or worse for the average person in [country], or have things stayed much the same?" (Figures 5). The high frequency at which young Poles chose the present period as the best to live in is mirrored by the fact that more than 55% of the overall sample also mention that things got in general better for the average person and (only) around 22% state that things got worse. In Latvia, however, young people are very much divided on that question. A bit more than one third thinks that life got better, another third that it got worse; another 22% think that it stayed the same. In Belarus, a very different picture emerges, with around 57% stating that things generally got worse for the average person in Belarus. Around 15% think life got better or stayed the same. Across the three countries, higher socio-economic status relates to a positive assessment of the last decade whereas education only matters in Latvia and Poland. Women have more positive views in Poland and living in the capital matters in a statistically significant way in Poland and Belarus. The high number of negative assessments in Belarus is particularly driven by people with a lower socio-economic status.

Looking specifically at the situation of young people (Figures 6), the trend is confirmed insofar as Polish youth has the highest score for the statement that things got better, albeit at a lower rate than for the population in general (46%). Meanwhile, around 27% of young Poles state that things got worse for young people. Latvian youth, despite their rather negative view on how life has developed in the country in general, are more positive about how things have developed for youth. Similar to their peers in Poland, around 45% state that things got better for young people and around 28% that things got worse. In Belarus, the general negative assessments of the last decade persist and a very similar picture to how things have developed for the average

person emerges; if anything it is marginally less negative for young people but not in any noteworthy manner.

Going into more detail of these evaluations of the last decade, we asked those who stated that things got worse about the specific ways in which it did in their opinion. We decided to ask this as a closed questions with five options and the possibility to state that one is undecided (Figures 7). Across all three countries a very similar picture comes to the fore with respondents feeling that their financial situation and their life chances as well as the quality of life has deteriorated. Being less respected in society broadly and by politicians specifically is less often chosen, although these values are a little higher in the case of Poland, relating to the trust values that are displayed by young people (see below).

Knowing about and participating in protest

A further set of questions evaluated the view respondents held on protests; whether they know about protests that took place in their country and whether they participated in them (Figures 8). Knowledge of protests that took place are relatively highest in Poland and Latvia, where almost 90% and more than 70% respectively know about protests. In Belarus, on the other hand, nearly half of the sample had not heard of any protests in the country. Nevertheless, also in Belarus a number of (smaller) protests took place related to local economic issues or the traditionally large opposition mobilisation on the occasion of Freedom Day, the anniversary of the independence of the Belarusian People's Republic on 25 March 1918.⁷ Protests in Latvia and in particular in Poland have received ample attention in the media, so the high score also reflects this visibility in the public sphere.

Looking a little deeper, a first regression analysis points out that in Poland older male respondents who live in the capital are significantly more likely to report knowledge about protests. Self-reported socio-economic status or education, however, have no statistically significant impact on knowledge about protest. In Latvia, to the contrary, it is the younger respondents who are statistically more likely to report knowledge about protests and also those who report a lower household income. Gender, living in the capital, and education have no significant impact in that regard. As for Belarus, knowledge about protests is predicted strongly by gender with male respondents being significantly more like to know about protests that took place in the country over the last 12 months.

⁷ Although it should be noted that the government authorised the marches for the 100th anniversary <https://news.tut.by/economics/586230.html?crnd=83086>

Enquiring into their participation in protests, as other research has shown, protest participation is generally low within the overall population (Figures 9). Nevertheless, the knowledge displayed about protests in Poland is also mirrored by the fact that nearly 10% state that they participated in protests (in Latvia it is a mere 5% and nearly 30% skipping this question and in Belarus 1.5% report protest participation with more than half of the respondents skipping the question). Looking at what sets those who report participation in protests apart from their peers, in Poland, a higher socio-economic status and living in the capital stand out as statistically significant features. Age, gender, and education do not predict participation in a significant way. Meanwhile in Latvia, lower socio-economic status characterises those who report that they participated in protests and in Belarus, knowing that the value is very low, male respondents with higher education tend to be more likely to have participated in protests.

Getting to know the world

A key resource for how young people make their political minds relates to the media they consume (Figures 10). Our data in that regard confirms the importance of online media. In Latvia and Poland, Facebook is the first source for political information, in Belarus it is vKontakte. Regarding the use of Facebook in Poland, even within the young cohort surveyed here, a statistically significant age effect can be identified with younger people being more likely to use Facebook as a first source of information; meanwhile, lower socio-economic status predicts higher usage of Facebook, an effect which disappears, however, once the frequency of religious practice is taken into consideration (less frequent participation in mass relates to a more frequent use of Facebook). Similar in Latvia, within the young cohort it is the younger ones that are more likely to use Facebook. Furthermore, women in Latvia report a higher likelihood to use Facebook and those who live outside of the capital. Belarussian youth that tends to rely on vKontakte as first source of information is, according to our data, (in a statistically significant way) younger, reporting lower socio-economic status, less likely to live in the capital and goes less frequently to church.

In Belarus, the media is almost completely state-controlled, including TV stations and newspapers. In that regard, the use of online resources provides one of the only tools for less controlled communication, although the Belarussian government has also been introducing legislation to filter opposition websites.⁸ But Belarussian youth further mentions a diversity of sources to get information about political affairs – including Belarussian national and regional TV or radio as well as newspapers which are all primarily used as second choice. YouTube

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17941331>

scores remarkably high amongst Belarussians, being less used by Polish and hardly at all by Latvian youth.

Beyond that, young Poles media usage is rather varied with Polish national and regional TV being important, as well as specific Polish web portals such as www.onet.pl and www.wp.pl.⁹ There is also a noteworthy set of respondents that indicate a response to the open-ended other (internet sources) – these responses still need to be analysed. Although Polish media remains diverse, the conservative government in place has been criticised strongly and Reporters Without Borders maintained in 2018 that “public media ... have been transformed into government propaganda mouthpieces”.¹⁰

In Latvia the media usage is a little less diverse with Latvian TV and the online portal www.delfi.lv (which exists in all three Baltic countries) being the most prominent sources. Russian TV and radio, even amongst Russian speakers, are not being used very frequently (instead, a first impression of the open-ended comments brings to the fore a number of very negative comments about Russian outlets). This questions the frequently stated linguistic and cultural split between Latvian and Russian speakers, at least with regard to their media consumption.

Expectations and Trust

Latvian and Belarussian youth both share in the view that the most urgent task for their respective governments is the fight against corruption (Figures 11). And this task is also a frequently mentioned second choice in both countries. Beyond that, Latvian youth has markedly diverse views on what they expect from the government – strong leadership inside Latvia, the improvement of living standards, structural economic reforms or maintaining the status quo are all indicated frequently as first and/or second choice.

In that regard, responses given by Belarussian youth look different as maintaining the status quo is the second most frequent first expectation from the government. Given that Belarussian youth was also the group that most frequently assessed that things have gotten worse over the last decade, this may point to fear about further decline. The other frequent responses all relate to (vaguely) economic aspects (improvement of living standards, structural economic reforms

⁹ It is in both cases difficult to get a precise idea of the political orientation of those portals. A first impression suggested that wp.pl tended to be slightly more critical about the government and the Church, although both portals but little emphasis on politics as such and foreground lifestyle, sports, business topics.

¹⁰ <https://rsf.org/en/poland>

or guaranteeing equality of chances) expressing a pressure on the government to deliver in socio-economic matters.¹¹

Polish youth overwhelmingly selected the improvement of living standards as its first choice, despite the continuous rise of economic indicators of living standards in the country (overall unemployment, for instance, is at 6%, the lowest over the last three decades). This is followed by more democratic aspirations such as guaranteeing the equality of chances or protecting democratic principles and basic personal security. The last point raises the question of the extent to which young people in Poland might feel threatened or anticipate their personal security being at risk in the future.

Which institutions do young people trust the most (Figures 12)? The army achieves high values across all three countries, in particular in Poland and Latvia. Similar to trust scores in Western European countries, the army scores high, maybe because it is seen as an actor independent of the everyday political struggles and it tends to be visible in commemorative marches and festivities across Eastern Europe. In Poland and Latvia also the police and NGOs gain very high trust scores. The media scores comparatively well in Latvia and Belarus, where it is largely state-controlled. Media evaluations are more negative in Poland. The polarisation of Poland's media and the at times aggressive language (such as around the killing of Paweł Adamowicz, Gdansk's mayor, earlier this year) might be reflected in these assessments. Furthermore, the very negative evaluations of the Church stand out in the Polish case. It is clearly the institution with the lowest trust scores, a finding that certainly relates also to the success of the film "Clergy" by the director Wojciech Smarzowski.¹² The film about the issue of child abuse in the Church was a huge success across Poland late last year and has visibly left an imprint on what young people make of the institution, although it is not reflected in Church attendance. Meanwhile, the Polish Church is also a politicised actor which is actively involved in political and societal debates (also through the radio station "Radio Maryja"). In Belarus, inversely, the Church gets the highest trust value.

In terms of political institutions, Parliaments in Latvia and Poland do get extremely low trust scores by young people and also the respective presidents are evaluated in a rather mixed or even negative way. Whether this should be interpreted as a healthy scepticism of the institution

¹¹ Official unemployment rate is at 0.3% and youth unemployment at 1.1%, see <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SLUEM1524ZSBLR>, compared with 18% youth unemployment in Latvia, see <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SLUEM1524ZSLVA> and 15% in Poland <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/SLUEM1524ZSPOL>

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/08/arts/poland-clergy-movie.html>

and representatives or maybe more worrisome doubts about the value of democratic deliberation cannot be determined at the moment and will be further assessed by looking more at other political and democratic values expressed by young people. The Belarussian president scores slightly better than his peers in Poland and Latvia but nevertheless no clear picture emerges here.

Conclusion

The three surveys in Central and Eastern Europe enable various insights into the different political and social considerations of young people in three countries that have undergone profound transitions over the last thirty years. All three countries have experienced distinct regime trajectories, therefore a direct comparison of all variables might not be meaningful when pursuing this research, but for this first attempt at getting to know the data, it seemed useful to express all three countries in direct comparison with one another. The focus was on some of the key political sentiment variables that stress the evaluations which young people have made out of political events around them and to understand what they expect from those in power.

Further research into the political and social outlook of youth in Eastern Europe seems important because the presently living young generation is the first one without direct experience of communism. Nevertheless, research on legacies has clearly shown that the effects of post-communism persist over time and that also parts of the younger generation display nostalgia for the pre-1991 past. One should therefore be careful not to extrapolate into the political futures of these countries, the outlooks of young people are contingent and never directly imprinted onto the future but instead remade as politics evolve further.

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