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Wealthier Moscow Teenagers More Inclined to View U.S. as Russia's Enemy

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

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Nearly half of Muscovite teenagers in relatively well-off family circumstances currently view the United States as an enemy of Russia, a view that less than one-quarter of the poorest and most disadvantaged members of that age share, according to a new survey conducted by researchers at Moscow's Higher School of Economics.

That finding is based on interviews with 300 young people, half of whom were in sufficiently stable family circumstances to be attending schools and half were "children of the streets," calls into question the widespread assumption that rising incomes by themselves will promote positive international images.

Instead, the researchers suggest, these attitudes reflect the power of the electronic media to form the opinions of those most heavily exposed to it &mdash children in relatively well-off circumstances &mdash as opposed to the power of personal experience, which tends

to explain the more negative attitude of street children to immigrants with whom they are in contact and competition.

Anna Sorokina, one of the investigators, said her group had been struck by the fact that members of the two groups both had overwhelmingly positive assessments of their own country, with 80 percent of those in school and 60 percent of those on the streets giving it high marks (http://www.infox.ru/authority/mans/2009/06/17/politichyeskiye_vzgl.phtml).

But the two groups diverged significantly in terms of their views about Russia's enemies. Forty-eight percent of those in school told the interviewers that the United States was the "main enemy" of their country, 23 percent said that Russia has "no enemies" and 19 percent said that Georgia was an enemy.

Among the street children, often referred to as "bezprizorniki" in Russian, only 23 percent named the United States as Russia's "main enemy, with 19 percent pointing to Georgia. The researchers concluded that these findings point to "the influence of the mass media on all young people, independent of their social level."

But life experiences appear to explain two other attitudes of the street children. On the one hand, the competition some of them face from immigrants explains the greater hostility of "bezprizorniki" toward such groups. And on the other, school memories help to explain why some of these children are inclined to say "the enemies of Russia are the fascists."

Despite these differences, members of both groups were inclined to give "similar and frequently aggressive answers" as to how Russia should struggle with its enemies, the investigators said. Some said that it was necessary to "replace English," to "push the United States off its pedestal" or even to "wipe America from the face of the earth."

The researchers also asked what qualities the two groups of young people would like to see in an "ideal" Russian president. Twenty-nine percent of both groups said that the ideal president should be kind and tough, with the children of the street slightly more inclined than their better-off counterparts to stress kindness as a desideratum.

According to Valeriya Kasamara, another one of the researchers, such attitudes, which reflect "the good tsar-bad boyar" tradition in Russian thought, reflect the "underdevelopment" of political ideas of this age group, as does the tendency of both to dismiss intelligence as important in a national leader.

Of those Russian leaders currently on the horizon, the teenagers in school identified Vladimir Putin and LDPR head Vladimir Zhirinovsky as their top choices. Those on the street "had heard" of Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, and they gave their support to them, although in the next two places were two others they had heard of — Stalin and showman Vladimir Turchinsky.

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