

PORTRAIT OF THE Next Generation

Fifteen independent states were born from the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Yet, the ruling elites of most of these countries (with the exception of the Baltic States—Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia—and now, Georgia) are still firmly rooted in networks of the old Soviet State. The upcoming generation, however, is waiting in the wings and growing, both in numbers and sophistication.

by Nadia Diuk

Who are the members of the next generation of the countries in the former Soviet Union? What are their aspirations? Will they strive for justice, freedom and equality? How much do they trust the government and its institutions? What effect has independent statehood had on the youth in the various republics, and how far have they diverged from each other? How much has the past influenced their values and expectations?

To address these questions and to compile a comparative portrait of the next generation in three leading post-Soviet states—Azerbaijan, Russia and Ukraine—I conducted a poll in Russia and Ukraine in November 2002 and in Azerbaijan in spring 2003 using an almost identical questionnaire. This article presents a summary of select findings (focusing on those from Azerbaijan) about how the next generation views their future prospects in economic and political terms.

Financial Well-being. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of the younger generation are adjusting better to the new economic conditions than their parents, and are often financially better off. This phenomenon is relatively new for countries where, under the Soviet system, parents were generally better off than their children, and the family budget was planned around this certitude.

In this poll, the question was posed: “Is your monthly income more, or less, than that of your parents?” 17.8% responded affirmatively and in the 30- to 34-year old range, 29% said they earned more. Although this figure is not high, this is likely the first time in generations that a considerable number of young people are earning more money than their parents. The psychological effects of this reversal may affect social attitudes and political behavior in the future.

The best way to assess income across three countries is to look at purchasing power, since the currency and social support infrastructure are different. Russia’s youth were better able than Ukrainians and Azerbaijanis to comfortably afford more day-to-day items. In Azerbaijan, the largest number—47.2%—indicated that they had “enough for food, but not for clothing.”

Government as “Big Daddy.” The Soviet view held that the State should take care of the individual “from cradle to grave,” and that each citizen should have confidence in the wisdom of the State and its institutions, even though in practice, the level of state-provided services was rarely satisfactory.

When asked about the level of intervention by the State in the economy of the country, young Azerbaijanis demonstrated fairly liberal thinking: 8.8% supported the idea of a completely free market economy with no government intervention (5% in Russia; 11.6% in Ukraine). But when the question was posed in a more specific way—“What should be the relationship between the government and its people?”—young Azerbaijanis showed themselves to be more paternalistically oriented than their post-Soviet colleagues: 68.2% opted for the response: “Government should care for all of its people” (Russians polled 64.3%; Ukrainians, 62.6%).

Political Parties. Even though Azerbaijan does not yet have a full liberal democratic system, this is still the first generation that has had the opportunity to experience real politics. But how interested are young people in politics, and what do they understand by that term?

In Azerbaijan, 39.8% did not indicate a political party preference, although 9.8% were interested in political parties with an ecological inclination; social democ-

racy attracted 5.2%; and 14.8% opted for a national-democratic preference. A surprising 9.8% expressed support for a communist ideology, and 4.4% for a political inclination that was “religious.”

Which Freedoms? More than a decade after communism, what are the values and beliefs that lie at the heart of the next generation’s view of the world? Young people were asked to choose which values they considered most important out



of the following list: (1) freedom of speech, (2) freedom of movement, (3) freedom of conscience, (4) the right to a defense against unlawful arrest, (5) the right to work, (6) the right to a home and (7) the right to education.

Azerbaijanis differed from their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts on these questions. The top four choices made by Russian and Ukrainian youth were the same: (1) the right to work, (2) the right to a home, (3) the right to education and (4) freedom of speech. In Azerbaijan, the list was (1) the right to work, (2) freedom of speech, (3) the right to a home and (4) right to an education.

Another question measured how far youth have moved from the Soviet ideal that valued equality over freedom. They were asked to make a choice between two formulations of the question: "Freedom and equality are both important, but if it were necessary to choose between them": (1) "I choose freedom as the more important because people should live as they choose without limitation," or (2) "I choose equality as the more important because social differences between people should

not be too great and nobody should be able to take advantage of undeserved privileges."

In Azerbaijan, 53.8% opted for equality, while 43.4% chose freedom. Men chose freedom more often (47.4%) than women (39.6%). Differences in Azerbaijan also depended upon age and level of education: the 18- to 24-year old group broke down evenly at 48.1% between freedom and equality, while those older more often chose equality. Those with higher education were also more likely to choose freedom (62.2%).

In this instance, Russians come out differently from Ukrainians and Azerbaijanis: 52.6% of Russian youth opt for "freedom" and 42.4% for "equality." In Ukraine, more than half of the young people express a preference for "equality," 52% overall, with 44% preferring "freedom."

Ethnic Tolerance. The survey attempted to determine attitudes towards different nationalities. After decades of trying to cultivate the notion of Soviets as the same nation, it might be expected that these youth would hold tolerant attitudes toward

one another. The data showed significant differences. Each nationality was asked to specify how it views the other two: (1) "with sympathy and interest," (2) "calmly, without any particular feelings," (3) "with irritation and hostility" or (4) "with mistrust and fear."

Young Azerbaijanis viewed Russians and Ukrainians as rather benign and friendly. But the level of tolerance by Russians and Ukrainians towards Azerbaijanis was much lower. Among young Ukrainians, 71.9% viewed Azerbaijanis with interest or without particular feelings, while 11% had a hostile attitude and 10.2% viewed them with fear.

Young Russians had an even less favorable view of Azerbaijanis: 50.2% viewed them without particular emotions (among those, only 2.6% indicated any sympathy and interest), 28.1% viewed them with hostility, and 17.3% with fear.

Significance of the Poll. Many of the statistics from this survey could have been predicted. Some came as a surprise. The high number of unmarried youth should be of some concern for the future, as well as the high number of unemployed. The relatively large number of young people ready to leave their country should also cause policymakers to pay attention to this generation's needs. Statistics also show something that is obvious through casual observation: there is a marked discrepancy between Baku and the rest of the country on many issues.

In terms of how the young people of Azerbaijan compare with the youth of other post-Soviet countries, the survey indicates that all of them are still under the influence of some Soviet-style assumptions of their parents' generation. But, in general, even though the youth of Azerbaijan are less well-off financially than their Russian counterparts, their responses were not so very different from those of their post-Soviet neighbors. **END**

This article is adapted from "Former Soviet Union: Portrait of the Next Generation," Azerbaijan International 11:4, Winter 2003 (available online at www.azer.com). The polling for this article, conducted two years ago, gave very little indication that youth would be the moving force behind the Ukrainian "Orange Revolution." In fact, Ukrainian youth fell between the Russians—who were better off financially and had joined the middle class in greater numbers—and the Azerbaijani youth, who were at the bottom of the economic scale in their country.

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