



## СОВРЕМЕННОЕ ОБЩЕСТВО: АКТУАЛЬНЫЕ ПРОБЛЕМЫ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ РАЗВИТИЯ

## CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: THE URGENT ISSUES AND PROSPECTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

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### Family attitudes of university students in terms of extremism risks\*

Zh.V. Puzanova, V.M. Filippov, T.I. Larina, M.A. Simonova

RUDN University,

*Miklukho-Maklaya St., 6, Moscow, 117198, Russia*

(e-mail: [puzanova-zhv@rudn.ru](mailto:puzanova-zhv@rudn.ru); [president@rudn.ru](mailto:president@rudn.ru); [larina-ti@rudn.ru](mailto:larina-ti@rudn.ru); [simonova-ma@rudn.ru](mailto:simonova-ma@rudn.ru))

**Abstract.** Youth extremism continues to be relevant considering the fluid and changeable character of the contemporary world: new risk factors emerge while social institutions designed to provide social stability malfunction. The article aims at presenting the family attitudes among the youth which are connected to the problem of infantilism (social-psychological maturity), the attitude towards non-traditional gender relations, to the infidelity in romantic relationships, and how the media and TV series may contribute to an increased risk of extremism among the younger generations. The article is based on the data from six original studies on the above-mentioned issues conducted at the RUDN University in 2017–2019 with different sociological methods (questionnaire survey, focus groups and content analysis): a 2017 survey of RUDN students titled “Personal freedom through the eyes of young people” (N = 470); content analysis of four episodes of four Russian TV series in 2017; validation results for the method “Diagnostics of social immaturity in young people” (N = 500); four focus groups on the “Transformation of the contemporary social image of the Russian woman” in 2019; two focus groups with female students on the “Infidelity in romantic relationships” in 2021, and a 2021 survey of Moscow university students on extremism. The broad scope of topics covered in the study in the frame of up-to-date relevant research allowed for several findings which clarified the aspects that should be stressed when implementing the youth and family policy: the conscious parenting training for young families, systematic monitoring of social immaturity of young people in family and everyday life, restoration of the educational

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system to its former esteem as a counter to the present service sector. Some gradual changes can already be observed in the clear policy on same-sex relationships and attention to the media content at the government level.

**Keywords:** family; education; immaturity; extremism; same-sex relationship; content analysis; family values

The family as a primary socialization agent shapes young people's ideas of what is proper, what is allowed and what is not. It is wrong to think that only children whose parents are inclined to antisocial behavior and live on the fringes or single-parented children are prone to be engaged in terrorist activities [2] since the influence of other factors (such as the Internet, etc.) has grown recently. However, we cannot deny the role of the family in the young person's perception of extremism. That said, gender, religious identity, or belief in Sharia law, despite general belief, have no strong connection to the inclination towards extremism [1].

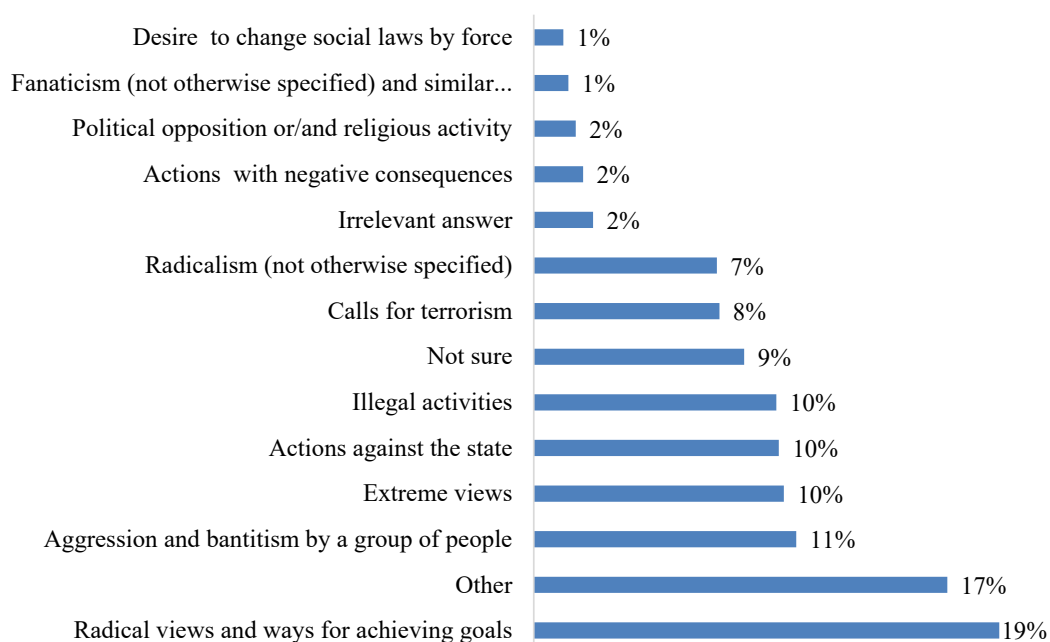
Extremist threats related to young people's involvement in criminal activities tend to grow in the contemporary world. The family as a social institution also evolves together with the family attitudes of young people (towards liberalization) [15]. Major drivers of youth extremism include intergenerational differences; disruption of continuity and bonds between younger and older generations; the cult of violence and promotion of disvalues in the mass culture; young people's focus on individualistic values; widespread infantilism; desire to assert themselves with adults, etc. [4; 10].

The article aims at reviewing the original studies' results to identify the way certain aspects of youth family attitudes impact extremism risks. The article is based on the results of several original empirical studies:

1. Survey of Moscow university students on extremism in 2021. The quota sample comprised Russian students from three classic Moscow universities — the Moscow State University (MSU), the Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), and the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University). The sample population was selected based on the following criteria: field of study (social sciences and humanities, natural sciences, engineering and medicine), course (bachelor's or master's program). A sample of 478 RUDN students (N = 20248) specializing in engineering, social sciences and humanities, natural sciences, and medicine participated in the survey. The RUDN sample was biased towards students specializing in humanities and social sciences. At the MSU, 446 students were surveyed, specializing in engineering, humanities and social sciences, and natural sciences (N = 38150; sample error less than 6 %). At the HSE, 436 students were surveyed, specializing in engineering, social sciences and humanities, and natural sciences (N = 39671; sample error less than 4 %). The questionnaire consisted of 47 questions.
2. Survey of the RUDN students "Personal freedom through the eyes of young people" in 2017 (N = 470). The survey used quota sampling with quotas applied for the year of study and department. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions.

3. Content analysis of four episodes of four Russian TV series in 2017. Two of the shows — “Sklifosovsky” (season 6, episode 4) on Russia 1, and “Particle of the Universe” (episode 2) on Channel 1 — target mass audience while the other two — “Junior Team” (season 5, episode 3) on STS, and “Crisis of Tender Age” (episode 1) on TNT — appeal to a younger audience (up to 39 years old), and are interesting to analyze given their direct influence on the youth. The episodes for analysis were selected randomly by a random number generator.
4. Validation results for the method “Diagnostics of social immaturity in young people” (N = 500). The method has a form of a questionnaire of 26 items and was validated in the student community.
5. Results of four focus groups on the “The transformation of the contemporary social image of the Russian woman” in 2019.
6. Results of two focus groups involving female students of the RUDN on the “Infidelity in romantic relationships” in 2021.

*University students’ perception of extremism.* According to the 2021 survey of Moscow university students, about 47% of replies were close to the scientific definition of extremism, while 50% gave a wrong answer. The answers corresponding to the definition include radical views and ways of pursuing a goal (19%), aggression and malicious mischief performed by a group of people (11%), extreme views (10%), radicalism (7%) (Fig. 1).

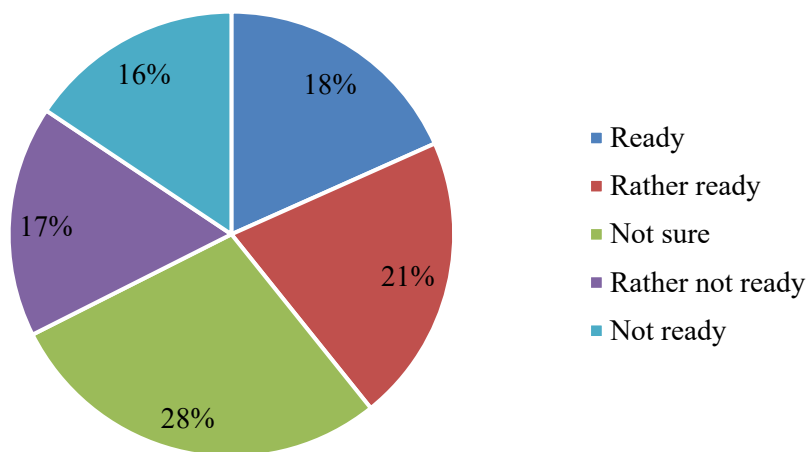


**Fig. 1.** Answers to the question about the definition of extremism

The second question regarded the antinomy of conservatism and liberalism. Students were offered a choice between citizenship of two countries: a conservative one (N) with heavy-handed law enforcement, or a liberal one (L) with more freedoms and a policy of all-permissiveness. Half of the students (52 %) preferred the country L which implies a lack of apparent inclination towards either liberalism or conservatism.

Another question was whether respondents consider the actions of a student who made a performance dressed as Jesus Christ in front of the Federal Security Building [18] to be extremist. A quarter of students (24 %) answered “yes, I do”, 21 % chose “never heard about it”, and 16 % chose “not sure”.

Students were also asked whether they were ready to help law enforcement officers fight extremism. Most of the respondents were not ready to help law enforcement officers (Fig. 2). Possible explanation can be that students do not have a clear understanding as to how they can help, are afraid of responsibility, or distrust law enforcement.



**Fig. 2.** Students’ readiness to help law enforcement officers fight extremism

The last question concerns the Protest Activity scale in accordance with the violent extremism dispositions method [5] and healthy personality categories. About 60 % of students fell into the category of moderate protest activity, about 14 % — low activity, while 26 % appeared to be at risk, meaning their protest activity was high.

*Social immaturity.* If we consider the key trends in the state and position of the Russian family [7], we can single out the following elements: the majority of the population still considers marriage important, but it has become a milestone signaling a conscious choice rather than a way to legalize relationship according to social expectations; divorce is not seen as something

condemnable or reprovable. The change trends are observed in the whole population, but there are also some youth-specific aspects due in part to the above-mentioned immaturity.

In the field of family and relations, social immaturity manifests itself in twisted family norms and roles. Examples of this type of social immaturity include cases of shifting family statuses, roles, and hence obligations. The problem stemming from the social immaturity manifestation in the family field regards children socializing in such social units where they acquire vague ideas of standards of behavior and roles that they have to perform after growing up. The individual has no behavioral compass to guide them in their future family. Not being able to find answers in their present family, the person starts to dig into themselves, abstract their mind trying to “find their identity”, or sometimes grow reserved without trying to resolve their inner questions and problems as they can even be unaware that such questions and problems exist.

The family factor, for its part, influences immaturity too. In the best-case scenario, the child mimics the behavior of a harmonious couple applying examples of relationship norms and behavior to their own lives. In the worst-case scenario, the child struggles to identify their future family and social life. Distortion of identity leads to the immaturity of men and women who are unable either to allocate roles in the family in the right way or properly raise their own children and the new generation.

The study to validate a diagnostics method for measuring social immaturity level [13] showed that about 20 % of students are characterized by a high-level infantilism in the family field (according to answers to questions on decisions to live together with other options available), meaning they are highly dependent and not adapted to the realities of everyday life, unwilling to set up their own home.

*Non-traditional relationships and types of marriage.* To describe youth attitude towards non-traditional gender relationships, let us consider the 2017 survey of RUDN students (N = 470). Male and female respondents were asked similar questions with the only difference being the change of gender according to the responder’s gender. The question for male students: “Imagine that your male friend plans on marrying a man in a country where such marriages are allowed. What your reaction will be? 1) I will definitely be against such an alliance, will cut ties with the friend; 2) I will be against such an alliance, but will comfortably keep in touch with the friend; 3) I won’t be against it, but it will be awkward to mix with him; 4) I won’t be against it, I will totally support him; 5) Not sure”. A third of male students (31 %) were not against such a marriage. Almost a quarter (23 %) said they were against such an alliance, but would not cut ties, 22 % were definitively against, while 19 % are not against but wouldn’t be able to continue to keep in touch because of awkwardness. A similar question was offered to girls: a third of respondents

(34 %) were absolutely not against such a marriage, 26 % were against but ready to continue to keep in touch. A quarter of female students were not against the marriage but would not feel comfortable to continue keeping in touch, while 15 % were definitely against it. The students in general were socially open to such relationships. There was no great difference in attitude towards same-gender male and female couples.

To describe youth attitude towards different types of cohabitation, let us take a look at the question: “What do you think your family members, friends, and teachers think about such relationships? 1) Approve; 2) Consider acceptable; 3) Rather disapprove; 4) Strongly oppose such a type of relationship; 5) Not sure”. Every second respondent (55 %) said their families strongly oppose such relations, a fifth said their families rather disapprove. The percentage of the families that believe it acceptable or definitively approve was 7,5 % and 8,3 % respectively. Same-sex marriages find opposition among students and their social circles but students’ attitude is less radical. Meanwhile, students have a tolerant attitude to common law marriages.

*Gender expectations from marriage partners.* While female respondents put masculine characteristics as priorities and feminine as secondary but definitely inherent in women’s nature, young men want to see feminine psychological characteristics as predominant, but highly appreciate the strength of character, willpower, and determination. The root cause for female respondents’ accent on strong traits in women lies in the lack of confidence in men and desire to be financially independent. Students want to see masculine and feminine qualities integrated into the woman’s nature with men students wanting to see feminine features as predominant and female students prioritizing masculine qualities. Representatives of both sexes acknowledged that women should be visually attributable to the corresponding social gender.

The traditional gender distribution of social roles still exists among young people, but young men no longer want to have a passive, obedient partner. That’s why they are ready to support women’s professional ambition as long as it doesn’t jeopardize her obligations as a wife and mother. The prevailing number of female respondents highlighted the value of social rather than marital success. Girls greatly appreciate personal independence and self-sufficiency. The contemporary woman is expected to harmoniously combine multiple social roles and a number of social statuses that are important and interesting to her. Girls’ and young men’s expectations towards the image are different, sometimes even completely opposite which potentially can be the driver of social problems in the families and a big percentage of divorces in Russia.

*Family attitudes in Russian TV series.* The summarized results of the study conducted with content analysis of TV series are the following: the overwhelming majority of families represented in the film constructs are nuclear families with one child. Larger families are mostly associated with

problems in film discourse. TV show producers see adultery as the main problem potentially leading to divorce and dissolution of the family. The function of transferring family experience and the household function are not represented as important in the discourse of Russian TV series. The “closed nature” of the family as a social unit is questionable in the contemporary Russian TV series: family members are obliged by the script to spend more time within external circles rather than in the family ambience. Still, the communication within the family as shown in the episodes is more positive in comparison to the communication in the external ambience in general. The communicative function of the family is represented as the most important in the discourse of Russian TV series.

The family shown in Russian TV series acts primarily as a communicative system with the communicative function at the heart of it, but the “closed nature” of the system is very limited. The family structurally represented in the TV series is predominantly nuclear, with few children, while the issue of family preservation in the discourse of the Russian TV shows appears to be adultery. The image is quite uniform: the family representations in the TV series for young adults and the general audience do not differ much.

*Romantic relationships and infidelity.* Romantic relationship as a form of interpersonal communication is based upon mutual liking, affection and sexual attraction. People entering romantic relations and/or marriage expect certain things from each other, including fidelity. That’s why studying the phenomenon of adultery goes in close connection with such categories as trust, faith and fidelity. The results of the study showed that most girls associate adultery with betrayal, lies, breach of conditions and agreements existing in the couple (more often unspoken). When discussing different cases of cheating the female participants used such phrases as “an ugly deed”, “unfair to the other partner”.

The girls drew a distinction between adultery and some “non-traditional” romantic relationships. If people entering a relationship or already being in a relationship agree to have one more (or multiple) partner(s) the female respondents did not call it adultery. When asked about their personal life, the girls answered that were not ready for such scenarios as polyamory, open relationship, etc. and tend to stick to traditional romantic relationships. Most of the girls declared a negative attitude to the adultery believing it unacceptable in many cases offered for discussion. The cheater’s actions were viewed positively only in one case — when cheating was a way to save yourself and escape an abusive relationship with violence. The majority viewed the adultery in the negative light even when there were no extradyadic sexual relationship and ‘mitigating’ circumstances.

Discussion participants suggested that any adultery case would lead to breaking up and getting out of relationships. Summing up what they said during the discussion, we can identify the main reason for such decision which is loss of confidence in

the partner, negative association, an unpleasant aftertaste in the relationship with the cheater. Therefore, it becomes impossible to renew the relationship, or it may become possible in certain conditions and with a mutual desire to save the union.

Young people aged from 18 to 35 years account for 31,7 million in Russia, more than half of whom — 22,2 million — live in their own apartments or houses, according to the joint report of the DOM.RF and the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (WCIOM). In particular, 13,4 million young people (almost 43 %) live in their houses on their own, while 8,8 million (40 %) live with their parents. The share of homeowners living independently is low among the youth: 15 % people aged up to 25 years and 54 % aged up to 35 years. Young people tend to leave their parental home later and take life more lightly [16]. Some researches show a connection between psychological immaturity and a possible inclination towards extremism [8: 9].

When it comes to the results regarding the attitude of university students towards types of relationships unusual for the Russian discourse and the influence such attitude may have in the context of extremism, we would like to highlight a peculiar paradox of the contemporary society: a combination of tolerance to LGBT people with strong homophobic movements that goes beyond social and cultural confrontation and becomes a political and legal conflict. The rise of protest activities in the LGBT communities and the heterosexual society lead to the expression of extremism and reciprocally fuel each other [16]. The difference is more evident in comparison, for example, to the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), where safe environment is created for students with different identity characteristics [3].

Another study conducted by Russian researchers [18] shows that a dysfunctional family significantly influences a child's deviant behavior regardless of moral development, acceptance of social norms and emotional make-up.

Considering the type of screen characters popular in the present-day Russian society, the danger of deformation of TV audience's mind, which can lead to extremism in certain circumstances, becomes obvious [12]. Today the television lays the minimal basis for extremist sentiment, and, if we develop the idea, the family image shown in the TV series adds to this basis. Building on this reflection by analyzing Western media content, including TV series encouraging or secretly promoting polygamy or same-sex relationships, we can say that young people, whose idea about the family will be shaped by such content, may become latent extremists in the context of family policy in the Russian Federation.

We would like to conclude the article with several recommendations: it is necessary to teach young parents the basics of conscious parenting in order to avoid distortion of family roles and pandering to infantilism; a systematic monitoring of immaturity signs is needed, especially when it comes to domestic immaturity; the role of education in influencing extremism risks should not be denied [11] — educational institutions should regain their status of “the realm of science” and “mentor” instead of a service agency on order not to cultivate



an integral infantilism of the youth; it is essential that the government pursues a clear and consistent policy towards same-sex relationships that leaves no room for propaganda, including in the media (TV series), but doesn't push LGBT individuals to extreme measures; the media sphere as a transmitter of relationship scenarios should be controlled by the government. Parental control over the content consumed by children is also needed since many icons and popular TV series convey an indirect destructive message, implying easiness and 'consumerism' in relation to things and people. The same is true for the videogames, the influence of which on the mental health of the youth has been repeatedly demonstrated.

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## Семейные установки студенческой молодежи в контексте экстремистских рисков\*

Ж.В. Пузанова, В.М. Филиппов, Т.И. Ларина, М.А. Симонова

Российский университет дружбы народов

ул. Миклухо-Маклая, 6, Москва, 117198, Россия

(e-mail: [puzanova-zhv@rudn.ru](mailto:puzanova-zhv@rudn.ru); [president@rudn.ru](mailto:president@rudn.ru); [larina-ti@rudn.ru](mailto:larina-ti@rudn.ru); [simonova-ma@rudn.ru](mailto:simonova-ma@rudn.ru))

**Аннотация.** Проблема молодежного экстремизма — тема, не теряющая своей актуальности в силу текучей изменчивости современного мира: появляются новые факторы риска, а социальные институты, которые должны работать на стабильность общества, дают сбой. Цель статьи — рассмотреть возможное влияние семейных установок молодежи, которые связаны с проблемами инфантилизма (социально-бытовой и психологической зрелости), нетрадиционными гендерными отношениями, изменами, влиянием медиа и сериалов на рост экстремистских рисков в молодежной и подростковой среде. Были использованы результаты шести авторских исследований, посвященных вышеперечисленным проблемам и реализованных в период с 2017 по 2019 годы в Российском университете дружбы народов разными социологическими методами (анкетирование, фокус-группы, контент-анализ): опрос студентов в 2017 году на тему «Свобода личности глазами молодежи» (N = 470); контент-анализ четырех серий четырех отечественных сериалов, вышедших в 2017 году; валидизация авторской методики «Диагностика социального инфантилизма среди молодежи» (N = 500); четыре фокус-группы на тему «Трансформация современного социального образа российской женщины» в 2019 году; две фокус-группы со студентками на тему «Измены в романтических отношениях» в 2021 году; опрос московского студенчества на тему экстремизма в том же году. Благодаря широкому охвату проблематики в контексте релевантных современных исследований был сделан ряд выводов, показывающих необходимые акценты в реализации молодежной и семейной политики: обучение молодых семей осознанному родительству, системный мониторинг социального инфантилизма молодежи в семейно-бытовой сфере, возврат системе образования былого авторитета в противовес нынешней модели сферы услуг. Авторы полагают, что предложенные изменения постепенно начинают происходить благодаря четкой политике в сфере нетрадиционных отношений и вниманию к медиаконтенту на государственном уровне.

**Ключевые слова:** семья; образование; инфантилизм; экстремизм; нетрадиционные отношения; контент-анализ; семейные ценности

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