

## Political and Legal Consciousness of Young People in the Region (a Case Study of Jewish Autonomous Region)

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### ABSTRACT

The paper deals with particularities of political and legal consciousness of young people in view of a region against the background of the general standpoint of the Russian citizens and Russian youth in questions of the political and legal spheres. The opinion of the young people and citizens of the country as a whole is evaluated based on the results of authors' sociological questionnaire surveys conducted in Jewish autonomous region and questionnaire surveys of the population of Russia conducted by Levada-Center and the Public Opinion Foundation. The political and legal consciousness in a social relations subject is formed under the effect of the entire complex of factors and is determined by the historical, political, economical and other conditions of the subject's life activity. In it, both the emotional and the rational, experience and traditions, moods and stereotypes are interweaved. While performing a number of regulatory, communicative etc. functions, the political consciousness is a kind of indicator that allows understanding, estimating the place and role of this or that subject (population as a whole, a social group, an individual) in politics. Legal consciousness is the most closely associated with the political one. It reflects political and economical interests, knowledge and evaluations of the laws, standards, social relations regulators accepted in the society.

### KEYWORDS

Political consciousness, legal consciousness, youth, social movement, rights and liberties

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## Introduction

On the one hand, political and legal consciousness reflects the actual situation in the country or region, it as if mirrors the political and legal system, social existence. Meanwhile, it influences essentially the development of the political and legal situation. The legal consciousness is a system of rules, prohibitions and permissions learnt by the subject of social relations (Stuart & Lido, 2011). A healthy legal consciousness and respect for laws not only regulate the citizens' behavior but also adds stability to the state as a whole (Utami,

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Bangun & Lantu, 2014; Rajwani & Liedong, 2015; By & By, 2008). In this sense, it is essential that it is social subject who is the carrier of political and legal consciousness. The political consciousness reflects the political existence, it is an estimation of the opportunity to become a participant of political processes and events and the potential ambition to take part in them (Ward, 2012). Here the ideas about political rights and liberties, understanding of their being guaranteed and of the opportunity to use them can also be referred (Singleton & Straits, 2010). This is a view of the political system as a whole, unlike the legal self-consciousness which is determined by the legal regulation of social relationships (Peacock & Sherman, 2010). The political and legal consciousness influences the regulation of social processes (Spence, 1980) and promotes consolidation of the society members on the basis of ideas and values prevailing in the social consciousness.

From the viewpoint of social and demographic characteristics, the political and legal consciousness is a unique phenomenon (Bryman, 2012). It begins to form at a rather young age and is prone to change throughout the social subject's life (Biguenet & Schulte, 2010). Certain demographic characteristics associated with this process can hardly be identified, yet, nevertheless, it is youth that is a special social and demographic group in this case. The political and legal consciousness of this group is most actively being filled with images, values and attitudes due to the age-related particularities (Baker, 2011). At this age, the main task is the rise of identification, including the legal and political one. Against the background of separation from the parental family and ambition to be independent, the susceptibility to the ideological "noise" becomes dramatically stronger. Actually, a young person just cannot but accept whatever ideas – this is their critical need. The entire question lies in what sort of ideas and to what actions they are going to push the youth (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). On the other hand, the more passive and indifferent the modern youth will be to the political processes in society, the fewer chances the society has for development (Schilder, 1975). It is the young people that are the powerhouse of the future. This is why the authors turned to analyzing the political and legal consciousness of youth within this study.

### Literature Review

In such a rapidly changing political situation as that of the world level (Wealthall, 2009), as well as directly in the Russian society, the political and legal consciousness of youth as the most socially active part of the society reflecting the entire range of evaluations, active or passive stance, the young Russian citizens' participation in political processes is of special interest (Levitskaya & Fitterman, 1976). All the more so as the results of the research conducted by the Russian sociologists in the recent years showed that youth was a politically passive group of population: the majority of the young people were not members of political associations, political parties and trade unions, and were little interested in politics.

The particularities of political and legal consciousness of the youth can be revealed through their attitude to politics and perception of laws and norms of society (Goetz, 2014), through the direct participation in political and legal processes of the society – such as membership in party, youth and other organizations influencing the political sphere or acting on it otherwise,

participation in elections, as well as through identification of the civic stance of the young generation of the Russian citizens.

Political consciousness is known to have a concrete historical character (Fuchs, 2006). This distinctive feature determines its changeable nature (Betekhtina & Olukhov, 2012). With regard to this, it is not only the historical stages that matter in this case but also the area of residence, which is directly associated with the development of economy, social sphere, features of culture and other regional particularities (Giddens, 1995). This has determined an additional aspect of this research.

The political and legal consciousness of youth in the regional section (Mason, 2015) is of special interest against the background of the general standpoint of the Russian citizens and Russian youth on political and legal issues in the country, which seems to be possible to consider by turning to the authors' sociological questionnaire surveys conducted in Jewish autonomous region and to questionnaire surveys of the Russian population conducted by Levada-Center and the Public Opinion Foundation.

### Research Methods

Judging by the sociological questionnaire surveys of 2014, the major part of the Russian citizens (85 %) as a whole shows nihilistic moods as for their participation in politics. The question "Can such people as you influence the state decision making?" was answered as "Rather no" by 38 % of the Russian citizens, as "Definitely no" – 47 %. In particular, from the respondents answering the question in the negative, it is only 19 % that are prepared to personally take a more active part in politics. The answer "Definitely yes" was opted for by 2 % of the respondents, and the "To some extent yes" option was chosen by 17 % of the respondents.

According to the data of 2014 questionnaire survey, the Russian citizens' unwillingness to participate in politics was first of all explained by the fact that the Russian citizens do not consider themselves as an active subject of politics at all. So, 32 % of those answering the question "Why do you not want to actively participate in politics?" mentioned that "Politics is not for ordinary citizens, politics is what the authorities are busy with". A part of the Russian citizens when answering this question demonstrated disbelief in their opportunities of influencing the politics again by choosing the answer (23 %) "Anyway you cannot change anything...". For one fifth of the respondents, the cause of unwillingness to participate in politics is lack of consciousness (20 % chose the answer "I am busy with my daily affairs..."), and almost for the same quantity of the questionnaire survey participants, the cause was lack of knowledge (18 % of answers – "I do not understand anything in politics...") (see Table 1) (Bazhenova & Lutsenko, 2016).

Russian youth also steps back from the political sphere. 37 % of the young people are interested in politics while 62 % do not show any interest for it. The most apolitical group is those aged 18 to 29. A comparatively high interest in politics is shown by the young people having a higher education and financially provided for, they discuss the political events with their peers more often. Therefore, the high resources groups of youth perceive the political information more frequently than the low resources ones, as well as they convey and interpret it in their circles. There were no significant differences discovered



between the working and studying youth in their perception of politics, but both categories are more included into the information space of politics as compared to ones who neither work nor study.

**Table 1.** Distribution of answers to the question " Why do you not want to actively participate in politics?" (in percent from the quantity of ones not willing to take part in politics)

Answer options	Quantity of answers, %
Politics is not for ordinary citizens, politics is what the authorities are busy with.	32
Anyway you cannot change anything, "a whip cannot stand up to an axe".	23
I am busy with my daily affairs and I do not have time for politics.	20
I do not understand anything in politics, I do not know how the authorities work.	18
Politics is a dirty business, one does not want to get sullied.	16
I do not want to stand out among others: most people are not interested in politics.	7
I am scared of persecution on the part of the authorities, it is better to keep away from politics.	3
Other causes	3

On the contrary, the young citizens of Jewish autonomous region (JAR) show an interest for the political sphere. So, the question "To what extent are you interested in politics?" was answered in the positive by 37,3 % of the respondents. They are actively interested in the political problems and they follow the development of the political situation. 14,6 % of the respondents showed an interest in politics from time to time – they sometimes listen to the information about politics on the TV and radio. 21,4 % of the respondents said that politics was interesting for them and they think it possible in the future to take part in elections as a candidate while 26,7 % of the respondents participate in various level elections.

The opinion of the young citizens of JAR about politics as a whole is not so positive. The greater part of the region youth (48,6 % men and 39,8 % women) have a negative attitude to politics believing that politics is an activity of people and groups for obtaining the access to the power. 38,8 % men and 39,8 % women understand by politics a complex of measures and actions for achievement of welfare of the entire society. 21,4 % of all the surveyed ones were not sure to define the term "politics".

The direct participation of the Russian citizens in politics is clearly seen by their party activity and expression of will in the electoral process. According to 2014 questionnaire survey of Levada-Center, as compared to 40 % of the Russian citizens demonstrating an active interest for the political events, it is only 2 % that take an active part in the activity of a political party or are keen to support it (Table 2). In particular, when answering the question about the opportunity to influence the authorities, the Russian citizens are skeptical about the social activity on the whole as well as to participation in protest campaigns. For instance, only 5 % of the respondents think that the citizens of Russia can have their problems solved via their activity in parties, trade unions and other public organizations, and only 4 % believe this can be achieved through meetings, marches and strikes (Table 3).

**Table 2.** Distribution of answers to the question "Which of the following statements is most up to your attitude to politics?"

Answer options	Quantity of answers, %
I take an active part in the activity of a political party / group or I am keen to support it.	2
I am interested in following the political events in Russia but I do not participate in the activity of any political parties / groups.	40
I am rather indifferent to the political life in Russia, I care little about it.	30
I do not like politics and I am not going to worry about it.	23
I am not sure.	4

**Table 3.** Distribution of answers to the question "How can the citizens of Russia get their problems solved in the quickest way today?"

Answer options	Quantity of answers, %
By supporting during elections the political forces prepared to tackle their problems	10
By active participation in the social activity (that of parties, trade unions and other public organizations)	5
By participating in protest campaigns: meetings, marches, strikes	4

As for the Russian youth, judging by the questionnaire survey conducted by POF, 12 % of the young people having taken part in the research do not exclude for themselves a possibility to become activists of a party, while 81 % excluded such a possibility and 7 % of the respondents were not sure to answer. Meanwhile, just 3 % of the young people aged 18–30 were really members of a party in the recent year or two (see Table 4). Although other age groups show a low level of involvement into the party activity too, the index of participation of 3 % is yet the lowest one.

**Table 4.** Distribution of answers to the question "Please say if you have happened or not to be a member of a political party in the recent year or two?"

Answer options	Groups of the respondents				
	Population as a whole	aged 18-30	aged 31-45	aged 46-60	older than 60
I have	5	3	5	6	5
I have not	95	97	95	94	95
I am not sure	0	0	0	0	0

Judging by the results of the questionnaire survey, the regional youth is more keen on the party activity. The data of the research conducted have shown that some 23 % of all the surveyed ones are members of parties or movements.

The youth of JAR has got an interest for and need of being active in public youth associations and they place high hopes on the associations (38,9 %). Yet at the same time the young people are poorly informed about the public youth associations and they do not see the results of their activity clearly enough. As the questioned ones believe, the improvement of life of youth depends on: the public youth associations – 38,9 %; the federal authorities – 36,0 %; the local authorities – 25,8 %; the youth themselves – 22,4 %. Further, the opinions were divided downwards: from the political parties down to business structures –



12 %. As of today, 42,6 % of the respondents are ready to enter a public youth organization.

## Results and Discussion

One of the indices of the population's political and legal consciousness and their civic stance is the attitude to the political elections and participation in them (Ritzer, 2012). While the institution of elections has been functioning at a civilized society level in Russia for several decades already, the Russian citizens are still skeptical towards aggregation and articulation of the citizens' interests by the political forces via the latter taking part in the electoral process. So little as 10 % of the Russian citizens think political decision making can be influenced by supporting during the elections the political forces who are prepared to tackle their problems.

A sociological survey conducted in 2014 revealed that the opinions of the regional youth are more positive than those of the Russian citizens on the whole. The question "How often do you participate in the elections?" was answered in the positive by 54,5 % of all the young people questioned, aged mainly 26–30.

26,2 % of the young citizens of JAR who took part in the questionnaire survey think their participation in elections is likely to influence the political situation; 16,7 % of the young people are sure that the correlation of political forces in the country depends on their personal participation in elections. 26,6 % of the respondents believe their going to elections rather cannot influence the situation in the country and the correlation of political forces, with 19,6 % being completely sure their voices could not change anything.

The attitude of the population to the basic notions "right" and "law" is the expression of their legal consciousness. According to the data of the questionnaire survey conducted by Levada-Center, the attitude of the Russian citizens to the RF Constitution and its role has improved over the recent years. Nevertheless, a significant quantity of the Russian citizens still do not attach a great importance to the constitution as the principal law of the country. Only 12 % remember the content of the constitution well and 41 % have never read it (Table 5) (Bazhenova & Lutsenko, 2016). One of the highest figures of those "having not read" the country's principal law in the group is youth aged under 25, the index making 44 %.

**Table 5.** Distribution of answers to the question "Have you ever read our constitution and do you remember what it refers to?"

Answer options	Quantity of answers, %
I remember it quite well.	12
I remember it rather poorly.	24
I have read it but I do not remember anything.	24
I have never read it.	41

The role of the constitution in life of the society, according to the Russian citizens, is debatable (Osman, 2010). Less than 40 % of the respondents answered that the constitution guarantees the rights and liberties of the citizens, with students and learners sharing this opinion the most frequently (60 %) and on balance the Russian citizens of under 25 years old (48 %). A quarter of the population thinks the constitution maintains order in the activity

of the state (26 %). As for the opinion of 16 % of the survey participants, the constitution does not play a significant part in the life of the country as hardly anyone reckons with it. 14 % of the respondents were not sure with the answer to this question.

The Russian citizens' failure to perceive the constitution as the principal law of the country can also be traced in the answers to the question about the authorities' adherence to the constitution. Only 9 % of the Russian citizens believe that the authorities mainly observe the constitution (see Table 6) (Bazhenova & Lutsenko, 2015). In the groups, it is the students, learners and the Russian citizens aged under 25 (55 %) that more than others think that the constitution is mostly adhered to by the authorities.

**Table 6.** Distribution of answers to the question "Do you think the Russian authorities adhere to the country's constitution?"

Answer options	Quantity of answers, %
To the full extent	9
Mainly	39
Just in part	36
They completely do not	7
Not sure	9

Given the background of less than 40 % of the Russian citizens thinking rights and liberties are guaranteed for them by the country's constitution, the opinion of the young citizens of JAR is curious enough. The studies have shown that the most significant rights and liberties for the regional youth are the following: the right for life (13 %), freedom of speech (13 %), security of life and residence (11,8 %), the right for free of charge education (9,1 %), the right to own property (8,7 %), the right for free of charge medical assistance, provision in the old age and in case of illness (8,4 %).

Meanwhile, the greater part of the young people (46,4 %) feel quite free, with 36,8 % of the respondents feeling a certain limitation of their freedom. The subjective evaluation of the level of freedom rises considerably as the young person's level of income increases: only 30 % of all the questioned ones feel quite free when earning less than 2,5 thousand rubles while with the level of income ranging from 5 to 10 thousand rubles the quantity of the young people opting for this answer reached 53,9 %.

Unlike the ambivalent standpoint and skeptical attitude of the Russian citizens in their evaluation of politics, their own participation in it etc., the attitude to their country – Motherland – in the citizens of Russia is distinguished by unambiguousness (Table 7). Almost 80 % of the population of Russia, according to the data of Levada-Center surveys, believe that it is better for them to be citizens of Russia than of any other country of the world. 38 % of the respondents chose the answer "I completely agree" and 40 % – "I rather agree".

The majority of the Russian citizens are proud of living in Russia (see Table 8) (Bazhenova & Lutsenko, 2016): 37 % – "Definitely yes" and 49 % – "Rather yes". 69 % of the citizens of the country are proud of today's Russia.

The regional youth is unanimous in this question too. According to the results of questionnaire survey in JAR, most young people (43,5 %) have positive





feelings and emotions ("motherland", "home", "pride" etc.) to words "Russia" and the "Russian Federation". For 22,5 % of the respondents, these words are associated with the authorities: "strength", "power", "army", "dignity" and the like.

**Table 7.** Distribution of answers to the question "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement "It is better for me to be a citizen of Russia than of any other country of the world"?"

Answer options	Quantity of answers, %
I completely agree	38
I rather agree	40
I neither agree nor disagree	15
I rather disagree	4
I completely disagree	1
I am not sure	4

**Table 8.** Distribution of answers to the questions about being proud of one's country

Question options	Answer options				
	Definite-ly yes	Rather yes	Rather no	Definitely no	Not sure
To what extent do you agree or disagree with the statement "Are you proud of living in Russia?"	37	49	5	2	8
Are you proud of today's Russia?	22	47	13	5	12

The notion "Motherland" is determined by the young people as a certain value (Gao, 2008) enabling them to identify their place in the world and feel involved in the great historical events. The notion is mainly associated with "the country where I live" – 34,0 %; the wish "to love motherland" – 26,8 %; "readiness to defend it" – 24,4 %; and 15,0% single out the "involvement with the past and the present".

The regional youth are proud of their Motherland, first of all of the country's natural resources (82 %), of victory of the Great Patriotic War (79,9 %), cultural heritage (74 %), armed forces (46 %), the history of Russia (42), and of the special role in the world (38,4 %).

## Conclusion

Thus, the regional youth looks more idealistic against the background of the Russian population's (youth included) overall understanding of political and legal situation. The young people of the region under study evaluate politics in our country with slightly more optimism and demonstrate an active interest in it and a wish to be involved. They actively participate in the work of political parties and social movements and they believe to a higher extent that the electoral system is a real tool of their will expression. By contrast to the Russian citizens' skeptical attitude to the constitution as a guarantor of rights and liberties of citizens, the youth of JAR clearly distinguish for themselves their main rights, including the political ones, and points at liberties being guaranteed and absence of liberties limitation cases for the most part. As for the



question of attitude to their country, the opinions of the Russian citizens, Russian youth and the young people of JAR coincide completely. The Russians are proud of their country and have positive feelings and emotions towards their Motherland.

Yet, on balance, speaking about the political and legal consciousness of population and young citizens of the country, the traditional steadily expressed trend of making distinction between the notions "state" and "Motherland" should be pointed out. Notably, although positive change is registered in the consciousness of the Russian citizens and Russian youth in their attitude to the electoral system, constitution, legal guarantees and the like, there still are questions, displeasure and skepticism towards the structure of state, while the attitude to the Motherland is definitely positive.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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