

# Psychological State of Russian Student Youth in the Crisis: The Relationship with Cultural and Political Patriotism

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The analysis of markers and determinants of the current psychological state of Russian youth as a risk group with high probability of combined influence on its state of normative crisis of identity and complex external conditions is important and necessary. In the study we conducted a hierarchical regression analysis of the correlation between the severity of psychological trauma associated with the special military operation and with the perception of the future of Russia (dependent variables) and cultural and political patriotism and several control variables (predictors). University students from Moscow, Omsk, Penza, Saratov, Smolensk, Khabarovsk (718 Russian citizens ages 18 to 25,  $M=19,4$ ;  $SD=1,46$ , 21,6% of men) participated in the study. Data were collected in October 2022. We used the Russian version of “International Trauma Questionnaire (ITQ)” and questions from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP 2013). We found signs of psychological trauma in the third of respondents. The link between the psychological condition of students and cultural and political patriotism and some control variables has been revealed. Cultural patriotism, combined with a low level of political patriotism, has contributed to the psychological trauma of young people in the current crisis. Cultural patriotism combined with political patriotism is a factor of positive perception of the future of Russia. Based on the results, we presented a portrait of student who is in great need of psychological help.

**Keywords:** psychological state of youth; psychological trauma; cultural patriotism; political patriotism; ideas about the future of Russia; student youth; psychological support.

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# Психологическое состояние российской студенческой молодежи в условиях кризиса: связь с культурным и политическим патриотизмом

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Анализ маркеров и детерминант текущего психологического состояния российской молодежи как группы риска с высокой вероятностью сочетанного влияния на ее состояние нормативного кризиса идентичности и сложных внешних условий — важен и необходим. Представлены результаты иерархического регрессионного анализа связей выраженности психологической травматизации, ассоциированной со специальной военной операцией, и представлений о будущем России (зависимые переменные) с культурным и политическим патриотизмом и рядом контрольных переменных (предикторы) у российской студенческой молодежи. Выборку исследования составили 718 студентов вузов — граждан России в возрасте от 18 до 25 лет (21,6% мужчин;  $M=19,4$ ;  $SD=1,46$ ) из Москвы, Омска, Пензы, Саратова, Смоленска и Хабаровска. Сбор данных проходил с 7 по 31 октября 2022 г. Использовалась русскоязычная версия «Международного опросника травмы (ITQ)» и вопросы из программы Международного социального опроса (ISSP 2013). Полученные результаты продемонстрировали наличие признаков психологической травматизации у трети опрошенных. Выявлена связь психологического состояния студенческой молодежи с культурным и политическим патриотизмом и рядом контрольных переменных. Культурный патриотизм в сочетании с низким уровнем политического патриотизма положительно связан с психологической травматизацией молодежи в текущих условиях, а в сочетании с выраженным политическим патриотизмом — положительно связан с позитивными представлениями о будущем страны. На основе полученных результатов представлен портрет современного студента, особо нуждающегося в психологической помощи.

**Ключевые слова:** психологическое состояние молодежи; психологическая травматизация; культурный патриотизм; политический патриотизм; представления о будущем России; студенческая молодежь; психологическая помощь.

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**Финансирование.** В данной научной работе использованы результаты проекта, выполненного в рамках Программы фундаментальных исследований НИУ ВШЭ.

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## Introduction

Monitoring the psychological state of youth is an important task in the current crisis. Meeting this challenge is essential to maintaining young people's mental health. Sociological surveys and scientific researches confirm that the polarization of Russian society, caused by the start of the special military operation [3; 6; 9; 12; 24; 25], provokes the development of negative psychological states in people of different ages [2; 5; 18]. In this case, the risk group is young people because their psychological state can be affected by both a normative identity crisis and by complex external conditions. Modern Russian youth belongs to this generation with its distinctive characteristics [11; 14; 15; 21; 23; 26; et al.]. Despite the cultural diversity of youth groups in modern Russia [14], there are features that distinguish young people from other generations [11; 15; 21; 23; et al.]. This is the digital generation [26] with its own attitudes, goals, and values, including its understanding of ideas of citizenship and patriotism [13; 16; 31]. Despite the intra-group heterogeneity, modern youth is predominantly convinced of the complexity of the social world, seeks to think critically, trusts themselves, and takes into account a significant value of self-realization. At the same time, modern youth is quite sensitive and emotionally vulnerable, exhibiting a distinct request for psychological support. Sociologists note a fairly high demand for qualified psychological help among young people [4]. According to a survey conducted by the VCIOM (Russian Public Opinion Research Center) in November 2022, the demand for such assistance among modern Russian youth aged 18-24 was quite high — 35% of respondents said they needed it [4].

The events of the last three years, summarized as the period of global turbulence [8], contributed to the intra-group differentiation of Russian youth and significantly influenced young people's ideas about their generation and their own lives [19]. The relatively homogeneous youth biographical narratives of 2020 have been replaced by the hetero-

geneous narratives of 2022, which may be due, among other things, to the intra-group polarization of young people's opinions about the special military operation [24; 25]. Differences in the evaluation of the role that a special military operation played/did not play in changing the psychological state of young people were recorded by researchers of the agency Russian Field in a survey among students of Russian universities (N=1362) in June 2022 [5]. In this survey, 42% of respondents indicated that these events did not affect them at all, but 48% of respondents said that the events in Ukraine had a negative impact on their mental well-being (5% of respondents found it difficult to answer and 5% of students reported a positive impact). According to the VCIOM analysis, it is the young people, who between February and July 2022, began to seek professional psychological help more frequently [29]. However, experts note that a significant part of the Russian student youth had also experienced a need for qualified psychological assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic [18]. At the same time, the cumulative negative effects of the pandemic and the special military operation were not only felt by young people. Comparative analysis of the results of the surveys conducted by the Institute of Sociology of the Federal Center of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in March 2021 and March 2022 shows that "in 2021, 62% of Russians assessed the situation in Russia as a crisis or disaster, and in 2022 — 86%" [2, p. 50]. Experts emphasize that "the general reaction to the pandemic and the events of 2022 was a sense of uncertainty. However, in 2020—2021, people were more often confused, and they were shocked in 2022" [18]. If during the pandemic an important means of coping with stress was communication with relatives, then in 2022 this resource was blocked by the polarity of opinions regarding the special military operation [18]. According to a nationwide telephone survey conducted in June 2023 (N=1604), more than one third of respondents feel personally threatened

by the special military operation (36% of the sample, 38% in the 18—29 years old sample). This fear is more often experienced by women, as well as those who believe that official data on the course of a special military operation cannot be trusted and those who would like to stop it [27]. Respondents were almost equally divided in terms of confidence/mistrust of official data on the operation. Thus, 46% of respondents trust the official discourse and 45% do not (in the sample, it is 56% of 18—29 year olds), and the rest of the respondents found it difficult to answer or refused to answer [27]. The supporters of signing a truce are more numerous among young people and women [7; 27]. All the above confirms the relevance and importance of studying the psychological state of young people in the current crisis.

Psychological state, as a systemic characteristic of a person's functioning over a period of time, includes emotions, expectations, and "filters" one's perception and attitude towards reality and oneself [1; 10; 22]. In the current socio-historical context of Russia, when analyzing the psychological state of young people, it is important to assess the level of possible psychological trauma associated with the special military operation and to identify the youth's perceptions of the country's future as a marker of social optimism [17] and the factors influencing these perceptions («filters» perception). In the context of inter-state conflict, a civic identity can be an important predictor and filter of perception [17; 25; 30]. In contrast, under the current conditions of Russian society polarization [12; 24; 25], a differentiated analysis of the contribution of the two components of civic identity to youth's psychological state as separate predictors is justified. These components are cultural and political patriotism [30]. Political patriotism is associated with showing pride in the country's achievements in social, economic, and political spheres. This is often due to the expressed institutional trust [17]. Cultural patriotism is pride in achievements in science, culture,

art, etc. Therefore, here the connection to institutional trust may not be manifested.

The aim of our study is to analyze the psychological state of Russian student youth and their interrelations with cultural and political patriotism in the current crisis caused by the special military operation. We suggested that in the polarized Russian society, political patriotism may be negatively related to psychological traumatization associated with the special military operation, and positively related to the positive representations about Russia's future among Russian student youth. Regarding the connection between cultural patriotism and the psychological state of student youth, we did not put forward any hypotheses, but posed a research question: in the context of the polarization of Russian society, is cultural patriotism related to manifestations of psychological trauma associated with the special military operation and with representations of the country's future among Russian student youth?

### **Organization of Research and Methods Used**

The sample included 718 students of higher education institutions, citizens of Russia aged between 18 and 25 years (21.6% men;  $M=19.4$ ;  $SD=1.46$ ) from Moscow, Omsk, Penza, Saratov, Smolensk and Khabarovsk. We collected empirical data from October 7 to October 31 in 2022. This was seven months after the start of the special military operation and two weeks after the announcement of partial mobilization in Russia. The anonymous survey was organized in selected universities in groups of respondents with the personal presence of data collectors. Students who agreed to participate in the study by using mobile devices followed the link and filled out an online questionnaire posted on the platform anketolog.ru.

We used the Russian version of International Trauma Questionnaire (ITQ) to assess the severity of psychological traumatization associated with the special military operation [20]. According to the purpose of the survey, the respondents answered

the questions of the questionnaire based on the possible impact of the operation on their lives. We identified all markers of PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) and CPTSD (complex post-traumatic stress disorder) embedded in the questionnaire. In the hierarchical regression analysis, we used the sum of the indicators of three clusters of PTSD symptoms as a dependent variable: Re-experiencing (Re), Avoidance (Av), and Sense of Threat (Th).

We defined representations about life in Russia in the future using the question from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP 2013) [32]: “If we talk about the country as a whole, how do you think life in Russia will be better or worse than it is now?” (scale: 1 — much worse, 2 — slightly worse, 3 — same as now, 4 — slightly better, 5 — much better).

We also measured cultural (1) and political (2) patriotism using questions from the International Social Survey (ISSP 2013) [32]: (1) To what extent are you proud of Russia in the areas presented below? (achievements in literature and art; scientific and technical achievements; etc.) and (2) To what extent are you proud of Russia in the areas presented below? (political influence in the world; social protection system; etc.), (scale: from 1 — not proud at all to 4 — very proud).

The control variables were sex, age, economic status, distance from the special military operation (presence of relatives, participating/wounded/dead as a result of the operation), and the presence of rela-

tives who emigrated from Russia after the beginning of the operation.

We used SPSS Statistics version 23 for statistical analysis. We performed hierarchical regression analysis of socio-demographic factors and measured variables.

## Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the main variables of the study. According to the mean values in the sample of Russian students, cultural patriotism is expressed more than political patriotism (see Table 1).

According to the data obtained, 13.5% of respondents meet the PTSD criteria and 19% of respondents meet the CPTSD criteria. The total representation of psychological trauma in the sample is 32.5%.

We identified three groups of respondents with different ideas about the future life in Russia. The first group included those respondents who said in October 2022 that life in the country will not change in a year. They constituted 26% of respondents who chose the answer “same as now”. The second group included 39% of respondents. These were students who predicted an improved life in Russia in the future. Their answers were “much better” and “slightly better”. The third group consisted of respondents who predicted a worsening of life in Russia within a year. Such students constituted 35% respondents in the sample with answers “much worse” and “slightly worse”. Table 2 shows the correlation between the level of psychological trauma associated with the special military operation and the

Table 1  
**Descriptive statistics of the main variables of the study (N=718)**

Variables	Min	Max	M	SD
<b>Cultural patriotism</b> , Cronbach's alphas=0,75	1	4	3,36	0,60
<b>Political patriotism</b> , Cronbach's alphas=0,90	1	4	2,40	0,82
<b>Severity of psychological traumatization associated with the special military operation</b> , Cronbach's alphas=0,89	0	24	8,65	6,81
<b>Positive representations about life in Russia in the future</b>	1	5	2,91	1,19

representations about life in Russia in the future with cultural and political patriotism and with control variables. The predictors of psychological traumatization associated with the special military operation among Russian students are female gender, low economic status, minimum distance from the special military operation, and high level of cultural patriotism combined with low level of political patriotism (see Table 2).

The predictors of positive representations of future life in Russia are older age and high economic status, the absence of close relatives who emigrated from the country due to the special military operation, and high levels of political and cultural patriotism (see Table 2). The final models' predictors are related to 40% of the dispersion

of positive ideas about future life in Russia (model 4), and only 18% of the dispersion of psychological traumatization is associated with the special military operation (see model 2). At the same time, the contribution of cultural and political patriotism in the representations about life in Russia in the future is higher ( $\Delta r^2=0.31$ ) than in the manifestations of psychological trauma associated with the special military operation ( $\Delta r^2=0.05$ ).

## Discussion

As a result of the study, we confirmed the assumption about the connection of cultural and political patriotism with the indicators of the psychological state of Russian student youth in the current crisis. We also found differences in the predictors of

Table 2

### Hierarchical regression analysis of the correlation between the level of psychological trauma associated with the special military operation and the representations about life in Russia in the future with cultural and political patriotism and with control variables (N=718)

Predictors	Severity of psychological traumatization associated with the special military operation		Positive representations about life in Russia in the future	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$	$\beta$
<b>Control variables</b>				
Age	0,01	-0,01	0,02	<b>0,08'</b>
Sex ( $M = 1, W = 2$ )	<b>0,18***</b>	<b>0,18***</b>	0,00	-0,01
Economic status (1 — low, 4 — high)	<b>-0,11**</b>	<b>-0,07'</b>	<b>0,18***</b>	<b>0,07'</b>
Distance from the special military operation (1 — max, 4 — min)	<b>0,18***</b>	<b>0,18***</b>	-0,07	<b>-0,07'</b>
Presence of relatives who emigrated from Russia due to the beginning of the special military operation (no — 1, yes — 2)	<b>0,21***</b>	<b>0,14***</b>	<b>-0,24***</b>	<b>-0,09**</b>
<b>Basic variables</b>				
Cultural patriotism		<b>0,08'</b>		<b>0,08'</b>
Political patriotism		<b>-0,27***</b>		<b>0,55***</b>
$R^2$ (adjusted)	0,13	0,18	0,09	0,40
$F$	21,70***	23,05***	14,69***	68,27***

Note:  $\beta$  — standardized regression coefficients; statistically significant coefficients  $\beta$  are shown in bold; \* $p < 0,05$ , \*\* $p < 0,01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0,001$ ;  $R^2$  — explained variation;  $F$  — Fisher's statistic; the change of  $R^2$  in model 2 relative to model 1 and in model 4 relative to model 3 is statistically significant at level  $p < 0,001$ .



psychological trauma associated with the special military operation and the predictors of representations about life in Russia in the future among young Russians.

The strong cultural patriotism combined with the low level of political patriotism is positively related to the psychological traumatization of student youth along with such socio-demographic and contextual parameters as female sex, low economic status, minimum distance from the special military operation, and the presence of relatives who have left Russia. We constructed a psychological portrait of a young Russian student in need of psychological support under current conditions. According to our data, this is a girl who is proud of the country's cultural achievements, but not of its socio-economic and political achievements. She also has low socio-economic status, and her relatives include those who participated or have been injured or even died as a result of the special military operation, and those who have left owing to the start of the operation.

The results of the study show that the presence of close relatives who have left Russia because of the beginning of the operation and close ones who participate in it in the socio-psychological space of respondents can aggravate their psychological state.

The fact that almost one third of respondents meet the criteria of PTSD and CPTSD associated with the special military operation requires special attention to the psychological state of modern Russian student youth. Our data is correlated with the results of a study conducted on a sample of young people in Khabarovsk Krai (900 people aged 17-30), according to which "four out of ten respondents (42.2%) experience the overt stress in the form of anxiety associated with a special military operation" [28, p. 222]. Our results also correlate with a study conducted on a sample of university students from 15 regions of Russia in April 2023 (1,380 people aged 18 to 22) [25] describing the impact of the operation on stress growth among student youth. The study also showed that the special military operation "influences the

decrease of students' trust in social-political institutions and actors, as well as influences migration sentiment dynamics, increasing the percentage of young people who consider migration as a possible option for their life path" [25, p. 9]. These data, as well as the results of our research, emphasize the need to pay special attention to the psychological state of modern Russian student youth and provide them with timely qualified psychological help. The role of the university psychological support centers play a significant role in this, as well as in teaching students of mental states regulation [22]. The greatest manifestations of psychological trauma are found among young people with low socio-economic status. At the same time, as sociological surveys [5] show, the barrier that prevents young people from accessing paid psychological centers is the high cost of services. The barrier for addressing government facilities where psychological support is provided free of charge is low levels of trust among young people in these facilities. They doubt that they will receive qualified help and doubt that there will be a confidentiality policy. University psychological support centers, which provide qualified and effective professional psychological care, can become a platform where the identified barriers will be minimized. In addition, university psychological support centers have the opportunity to take into account and use data generated by contemporary research on the preservation factors of psychological health and well-being among young people in conditions of long-term atypical crisis.

It is worth paying attention to the portrait of a Russian student who expressed positive opinions about life in Russia in the future. The results of the study show that it is a student of older age, with high socio-economic status, and who possesses a high level of political and cultural patriotism without any close relatives who left Russia after the start of the operation. Political patriotism in the model of regression is a key factor in positive representations about the future of Russia. It might be a representation of the mechanisms

for maintaining social optimism, linked to the strengthening of civic identification, trust, and loyalty to the authorities in crisis conditions [17]. At the same time, the peculiarities of the connection between cultural patriotism and the psychological state of young people in the current crisis are not obvious, since the orientation of this connection depends on other psychological factors, for example political patriotism (and possibly the institutional trust of citizens). This in turn is consistent with the conclusions of Nestik, who emphasizes that “to support social optimism in the context of crisis, measures are needed to strengthen citizens’ confidence in their ability to influence their own present and future, values of compassion and mutual support, as well as trust in social institutions” [17, p. 16].

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## Conclusion

This study has limitations, such as non-representativeness of the sample and the use of data based on self-reports. In addition, it was conducted in a rather tense and emotionally charged period. However, despite these limitations, the results confirm the connection between cultural and political patriotism with such indicators of the psychological state of Russian student youth as the psychological traumatization, associated with the special military operation, and the representations about life in Russia in the future. We believe that further monitoring of the psychological state of Russian student youth and other social groups, including using longitudinal slices and additional markers of psychological state and their potential determinants is important and necessary.

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