

Modern Forms of University Students' Extremist Behavior Depending on Cultural and Environmental Factors

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Abstract

Transformations in economic, political, social and cultural life of the modern society are causing an increase in extremist tendencies among the youth worldwide. Based on the anthropological approach, the study was aimed at identifying root causes (axiological, motivational, personal and socio-psychological) and a role of socio-cultural and environmental factors in the genesis of Russian students' extremist behavior. The study objectives were to evaluate regional environmental factors (economic, social and cultural), to reveal university students' personal and socio-psychological features, and to identify modern forms of the youth extremist behavior depending on regional specific features and young people's psychological characteristics. The study sample involved 813 university students from several regions of Russia.

It has been found that modern forms of university students' extremist behavior include ethnic, information and political extremism. The Internet has been revealed to be a dominant socio-cultural and environmental factor determining individual and group mind of the modern youth. The study results have shown that the university students' attitudes to extremism are affected by the regional factors, namely the region of their origin and that of studying. In addition, there is a region-specific combination of psychological factors determining the youth attitudes to extremism. Among the young there seems to be much more disbalance between the reality of social transformations and the readiness for accepting them. Thus, the results obtained enable to develop measures of psychological support for university students to prevent them from extremist behavior.

Keywords: extremist behavior, socio-cultural factors, attitudes to extremism

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Introduction

The problem of extremist behavior among young people is one of the direct threats countries are facing in the globalized world. Mostly, extremism ideology draws on nationalism attitudes, as Ghosh (2013) highlights. Current transformations in economic, political, social and cultural life in Europe are causing a considerable increase in communities' radicalization and confrontation among ethnic groups (Minkenberg, 2013). On the other hand, authorities and researchers, educators and volunteers have been seeking for possible ways to prevent young people from supporting violent extremism actively or passively (Smith, 2008). The work being done is essentially important for a deeper understanding of what actual extremist views are rooted in and how to strengthen youth's resilience to extremist behavior.

Russia is also involved in making efforts to prevent its residents from becoming and supporting extremists. Being multinational and multicultural as a result, the country constantly encounters the issues under discussion and the young is the group that is at risk of being engaged in extremist behavior. Meshcheryakova and Bocharov (2014) showed that religious, ideological, linguistic and cultural aspects are of importance by using content analysis when examining the Runet information space in its connection with the concept of *extremism*. Bocharov et al. (2015) have revealed that young people's attitudes toward extremism are region-specific, so socio-cultural environment factors should be taken into account in preventing youth extremism.

Thus, the paper presents a study focused on evaluating regional specific features and identifying modern forms of extremist behavior among young people with regard to their psychological characteristics.

Research Methodology

The study presented was made up of two stages. The study participants were surveyed first to reveal a group of young people experiencing ethnic tension and this was followed by a psychodiagnostic study aimed at identifying possible relationships between the participants' psychological characteristics and their attitudes to extremism in the group revealed.

The total study sample involved 813 university students aged from 18 to 26 years old. They were majoring in law, economics, psychology and pharmacy at the universities of Moscow, Saint-Petersburg, Tomsk and Yekaterinburg.

The research tools comprised a survey at the first stage and a set of questionnaires at the second one. These questionnaires were the following: 1) the Russian version of MMPI adapted by Zaytsev (1981) in its short mode; 2) the Self-Determination scale (Sheldon, 1995) adapted and modified by Osin (2010); 3) the Personality Motivational Sphere technique (Mil'man, 1990) and 4) the Culture-Value Differential technique (Soldatova, 1998).

Results and Discussion

As mentioned above, the first stage of the study was focused on revealing a group of young people experiencing ethnic tension. The participants, who were ethnic Russians, were surveyed using a number of questions. So, one of the questions was concerned with the respondents' negative attitudes toward representatives of other nationalities. 62 % of the study participants said that they did not have such attitudes, 22 % of the sample pointed out that they had negative attitudes toward some ethnic groups and 9 % of the respondents said *yes*. Another question examined the study participants' opinions on the possibility of peaceful co-existence of people diverging in their religious views. 72 % of the respondents answered *yes*, while 13 % of the sample said *no*. There was one more issue of research interest referring to the study participants' attitudes toward the growth in migration to Russia. 33 % of the respondents reported that they did not care of this, 22 % evaluated this process as beneficial to the country in the demographic and economic modes, 5 % of the sample had positive attitudes toward the situation in question, while 20 % of the participants felt negative. In other words, most of the study participants had positive attitudes toward diverse ethnic groups, demonstrated their readiness for living in peace with people differing in their religious tenets and viewed migration processes as a reality of the global world. Nevertheless, the first stage of the study enabled us to reveal a group of young people experiencing negative attitudes toward people with diverse ethnic, religious or cultural background.

The second stage of the study was carried out as follows. The data for correlation analysis were collected using the research tools described above and then statistically treated. The results obtained were analyzed in terms of this study participants' ethnic identity. There were four bipolar criteria for analysis, namely 1) *orientation to group* versus *orientation to self*; 2) *openness to changes* versus *resistance to changes*; 3) *orientation to interaction* versus *rejection of interaction*; and 4) *strong social control* versus *weak social control*. Correlation analysis showed that the parameter of *orientation to self* was related to the participants' low anxiety, unstable moral principles, low empathy, nonconformity, skepticism, egocentricity as well as avoidance of interaction.

The parameter of *orientation to group* was connected with the participants' orientation to interaction and strong social control. The parameter of *resistance to changes* was characterized by the participants' high anxiety, conflict avoidance and strong social control, while that of *openness to changes* was related to self-expression and orientation to interaction. In turn, the parameter of *orientation to interaction* was correlated with lack of self-confidence in the participants and their low activity. The parameter of *rejection of interaction* was connected with the participants' orientation to their own values, unwillingness to make new contacts and weak social control. The parameter of *strong social control* was related to the participants' decisiveness, self-confidence, low self-control, resistance to changes as well as orientations to their traditional cultural values and interaction. Finally, the parameter of *weak social control* was characterized by the participants' low motivation for achievement, lack of spontaneity, low anxiety, egocentricity, reduction of contacts.

One more objective of the study was to identify if there were any region-specific attitudes toward extremism among young people (the subsample included university students from Saint-Petersburg, Tomsk and Yekaterinburg). Cluster analysis revealed three types of attitudes to extremism, namely 1) *mixed and uncertain attitude*; 2) *tendency to chauvinism and extremism*; 3) *tendency to tolerance*. The results showed that young people studying in Siberia (Tomsk) were more prone to tolerance, as well as those who studied in Saint-Petersburg, while their counterparts from the Ural Federal District (Yekaterinburg) demonstrated a greater inclination to chauvinism and extremism. Meanwhile, young people who came from the Southern, Central and North-Western Federal Districts were more likely to reject the mixed and uncertain attitude to extremism as compared with other places.

In addition, cluster analysis revealed that the three types of attitudes toward extremist behavior were related to the participants' psychological parameters. For instance, the cluster of *tendency to tolerance* was interrelated with the participants' high self-determination, while those in the cluster of *mixed and uncertain attitude* and that of *tendency to chauvinism and extremism* demonstrated lower self-determination. They also showed higher emotional lability, rigidity, anxiety and egocentricity.

Conclusion

Thus, the study results have shown that university students' attitudes toward extremism are affected by regional factors, namely the region of their origin and that of studying. In addition, there is a region-specific combination of psychological factors determining the youth attitudes to extremism. Among the young there seems to be much more disbalance between the reality of social transformations and the readiness for accepting them. In addition, the results obtained enable to develop measures of psychological support for university students to prevent them from extremist behavior.

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