*Edited by*
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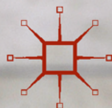

Eastern European Youth Cultures in a Global Context

# Eastern European Youth Cultures in a Global Context

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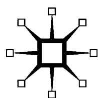

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# Introduction

*Matthias Schwartz and Heike Winkel*

In early 2015, about one year after the overthrow of the old regime in Kiev, after the Russian annexation of the Crimea and the outbreak of war in Eastern Ukraine between separatists supported by Russians and Ukrainian troops, a significant youth initiative arose in Ukraine: students from universities and colleges all over Ukraine compiled a video message for their fellow students at universities in Russia. The widely distributed video contained a number of scenes, each showing several student groups gathered around different speakers giving short speeches. In an effort to oppose the narrative of a Ukrainian 'fascist' threat which dominates the public discourse in Russia, the speakers in the video evoked the spirit of the Maidan protests, presenting themselves as revolutionaries. They called on their Russian contemporaries to not rely on Russia's official mass media reporting on the events taking place in Ukraine, but instead to be critical and seek objective truth about the situation. It did not take the Russian studentship long to answer the public address in the form of similar video messages, and more groups from other Russian and Ukrainian universities joined them, with video clips in support of or in opposition to the official Russian media perspective pouring in from Crimea, Lugansk, Lviv and Moldova. All of these video messages were recorded in the same manner, designed in the same style and presented different perspectives on the events.[1]

Of interest here is the ways in which these video messages function as means of youth intervention and youth self-representation in the Russian–Ukrainian propaganda war. All of the young people shown in the clips are dressed casually and neatly and make an engaged, assiduous, cheerful impression. In their appeal, the pro-Ukrainian students conjure a long-established Soviet-style notion of youth, stating that students in both countries stand for 'progressive motions, the strength and future of a nation', and that they were counting on their fellow students' solidarity.[2] In the Russian video, this motif is taken up to underscore the idea that students are their nations' 'best representatives'.[3] In terms of content, each side represents the official version of the conflict supported by its respective government,

while the emphasis on youth was meant to grant their statements a specific authenticity.

However, a closer look at the clips reveals that the ideal evoked in these messages is ambiguous. The Ukrainian students appear to be the heirs of their fellow students who fought for democracy in the Orange Revolution in 2004. Back then, after the collapse of the socialist societies in the region, many had hoped that the young people would at last complete the political transformation into a better world for which their parents had fought. Yet these political upheavals failed in one way or another, and in comparison to the diverse rebellious crowd at the Maidan, with its self-organised units and sectors, improvised armour and weapons, highly imaginative disguises, and uncompromising deeds, the young students in the video look as gentle as lambs.

Moreover, these staged and thoroughly planned video messages present a progressive youth that is totally conformist to political strategy, managed by policy-makers on both sides of the conflict. There is no spirit of rebellion or self-assertion against an older generation, against state institutions or other authorities present in these statements. We see young adults acting as agents of political mainstream and civil affairs rather than a generation of youth that is willing to think and act differently than their parents' generation. This is not only symptomatic for the role that young people played during the 'revolution of dignity' in Ukraine 2013–2014, which was originally initiated by students who were soon pushed aside by other social groups and activists, but also of great significance in a broader perspective. These video messages shed light on the fact that the notion of youth itself has undergone substantial change over the last decades.

The book takes precisely this finding as a starting point in order to take a closer look at the meanings of youth cultures in Eastern European societies. It operates on the assumption that the conformist youth who appear in the videos and present themselves as loyal to their respective government might be seen as exemplary for the broad majority of young people in post-socialist countries, despite the fact that the videos are obviously staged. Therefore its focus is not on scandals with public appeal initiated by rebellious youngsters, on dissident counter-cultures or artistic breakings of taboos, carried out by what seems to be a very small minority. Radical art collectives such as Voina and Pussy Riot or the women's rights advocates from Femen may be impressive examples of young activists who gain attention worldwide, but they are not representative of the cultural practices, political engagement, public belongings and social networks – of the distinctive self-images, codes, fashions and imaginary communities – that most young people in Eastern Europe are part of. In order to achieve a closer understanding of Eastern European youth cultures today, we want to suggest a focus on everyday routines and imaginary belongings that incorporate and transform regional, transnational and global influences and tendencies.