“The phenomenon of Russian happiness”: studies of Bashkortostan students during the COVID-19

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Abstract. Studies of Russian youth in Russia, their values, life plans, and happy worldviews have always aroused interest abroad since young people are the potential of the future. They are at the epicenter of Russian domestic events. The study aims to formulate the algorithm of the “phenomenon of Russian happiness” in the regional student youth of Bashkortostan. Methods: an annual complex sociological study (on the sample of 563 respondents) and a focus-group ethno0gender study were conducted by the author in December 2019 – January 2020. The study respondents are the students of the major supporting oil university of the region aged from 19 to 30 years old. The novelty of the study lies in identifying the specifics of Russians’ perception of the “phenomenon of happiness” under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. A regional portrait of Russian student youth is compiled based on the study results. The happiness of youth is a value orientation that determines their social behavior. Happiness is a “social indicator” of self-control for the “satisfaction of their needs”. Family, health, love, peace, and patriotism remain the traditional values ensuring the happy life of Russians. A scientifically grounded synthesis approach is important for studying the “phenomenon of happiness” as it allows accounting for the ethno-gender, psycho-physiological, political and economic, and socio-demographic components. “The phenomenon of Russian happiness” in the 21st century is associated with traditional and successive fundamental values: “study-work-provide for the family”. Russian students prove to be “felicitous optimists”. The majority of them (70%) do not find themselves disoriented in the conditions of the COVID-19, they observe measures of personal safety. The students indicate “creating a family with children” and “professional and career advancement” in their postgraduate happy plans while in the present they “make money in their free time” and “read” professional literature.

Keywords: Russian students, values, happiness, ethno-gender studies.

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1 Introduction

Bashkortostan is a multinational subject of the Russian Federation with more than 30 nationalities. Russians make up about 36% of its population. Historically, Russian ethnos is a consolidating nation for all Russian regions. Russian students in Bashkortostan retain this continuity mission [1]. At the various stages of socialization, young people face specific problems to overcome: the choice of friends and first love; educational and professional activity, employment and career growth; recreation and traveling; creating a family and raising children, helping parents. Happiness is achieved by young people as these issues are resolved.

The happiness of youth is a value orientation that determines their social behavior. Happiness is a “social indicator” of self-control for the “satisfaction of their needs”. The object of the study is the Russian student population.

The scientific novelty of the study lies in identifying the specific features of the perception of the “phenomenon of their happiness” among Russian students from Bashkortostan under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The goal of the study – to formulate an algorithm for the “phenomenon of Russian happiness” in the regional student population.

Hypothesis: despite COVID-19, most Russian students retain “felicitous optimism”.

Objectives: To compare the value-felicitous orientations of students based on the results of a sociological survey. To establish the “phenomenon of Russian happiness” logically associating it with the traditional successive values (happiness in the family, happiness in studies, happiness in work) or with the liberal-market values-orientations (happiness in business, happiness in money, happiness in absolute freedom, happiness in emigration, happiness in fashion trends). To identify the social positions (optimists or pessimists) preferred by Russians under the conditions of the pandemic.

It is characteristic of young people to look into the future and strive to live happily. The category of happiness is studied in Russian scientific schools from different approaches. First, there is the political approach that interprets happiness as a civil and legal position and the self-realization of a subject within the boundaries of constitutional rights, freedoms, and obligations. Second, there is the economic approach. It associates happiness with financial well-being and living standards and the professional and career self-assertion of subjects. Third, the social approach defines happiness through the social status and mobility of an individual and their expected way of life. Fourth, the historical-value-cultural approach refers to the spiritual sphere that affects the harmonious and aesthetic perception of happiness, a person’s understanding of spiritual values, the world of beauty in the surrounding culture. Scientific literature presents the industry-specific specialized approaches. The physiological understanding of happiness is contingent on health, a person taking care of themselves and their appearance, and individual well-being. The linguistic interpretation of happiness dives into the world of verbal symbols and meanings introduced into the linguistic thesaurus of communication. Psychological interpretations of happiness are associated with individual satisfaction with interpersonal interactions and intrapersonal evaluations.

Synthesis-approach is appropriate for the analysis of the realities of the 21st century as it allows describing “the phenomenon of happiness” from a multi-factor perspective, for instance, taking into consideration the ethno-gender, regional and territorial, cultural-historical, psychophysiological, political-economic, socio-demographic, and other subjective components.

2 Methods and background

The peculiarities of Russian ethnogenesis in comparison with other communities at the turn of the century are explored in the scientific works of Russian experts. We shall proceed to briefly review them by year of publication. Researcher S.S. Savoskul focused on Russians in the post-Soviet space faced with discrimination and the realities of migration and resettlement that cannot testify to a happy life of migrants [2, 3]. I.A. Subbotina continued to study the topic of Russian youth (e)migrating in search of a happy life [4]. Several leading authors including Iu.V. Arutiunian, L.M. Drobizheva, V.I. Mukomel, L.V. Ostapenko, S.V. Ryzhova, I.S. Savin, I.A. Subbotina, K.S. Khallik, and M.F. Chernysh have conducted large-scale political-economic and socio-cultural ethno-research into the lives and attitudes of Russians and published a monograph on the issue [5]. In 2012, L.V. Ostapenko, I.A. Subbotina, and S.L. Nesterova investigated the status marginalization of Russians in the near abroad analyzing their “unhappy life” in the face of civil and political discrimination in the conditions of market instability [6].

Numerous regional studies have been devoted to the Russian topic. V.V. Pimenov and A.I. Elez conducted a review on the life of Russians in the region [7]. A historical and cultural review about Russians in Bashkortostan was published in 2003 [3]. In 2010, the financial and living conditions and needs of the Bashkirs, Russians, and Tatars were studied based on the ethno-social dimension [8]. Using quantitative analysis, A.S. Shcherbakov revealed positive and negative trends in the conditions of market relations and “happy” orientations of Russian youth [9]. S.Iu. Alekseenko conducted a regional ethnological study critically comparing the factors of the social life of Russians in a multinational community at the turn of the century [10]. I.V. Kuchumov described the Soviet and post-Soviet historiography on the study of Russians in Bashkortostan reflecting the continuity of schools and methodological ethnological approaches [11]. The actively interacting juvenology researchers E.A. Mikhailova, T.V. Cherkasova, and T.E. Petrova (2018, 2019, 2020) annually publish collective monographs reflecting the sentiments and social problems of youth in Bashkortostan and other regions of Russia in the publishing houses of Moscow [12–16]. At present, their works are devoted to actual institutes socializing happy young people of different nationalities such as volunteering, youth law, charity, and public associations [10–16].

In December 2019 - January 2020, we conducted a comprehensive sociological study and a focus-group ethno-gender study. The surveyed sample comprises 563 people. The respondents are the students of the major supporting oil university studying full-time and part-time in the commercial and budget-funded form and training in the socio-humanitarian and technical fields. The respondents live both in urban and rural areas. These young people are either financially dependent on their parents or work and financially support themselves. This selection of respondents allowed us to obtain an objective social image. Participants in the control focus-group ethno-gender study represent three mono-ethnic groups (Russians, Bashkirs, and Tatars). The students identify with the Russian ethnicity in the previous two generations – “my fathers” and “my grandfathers” with formal and informal attributes in the age group from 19 to 30 years old. This comprehensive study involves a clarification of the system of value priorities, understanding of the phenomenon of happiness, life plans, and social attitudes of student youth under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3 Results and novelty

The vast majority of Russian students retain orientation on the traditional family values(!). Moreover, the values of Russian young men important for a happy life are friendship, work, science and scientific progress, and the surrounding nature and fauna. Russian young women

indicate the values of creativity and volunteering. Bashkir women, for example, combine the traditional and market orientations: love, money, business, and peace and peaceful coexistence. A similar result is observed in young Tatar men: the top priority is health and appearance, next come friendship, the surrounding nature and fauna, business, and expensive antique items.

Thus, Russian young men choose traditional consolidating values with macro-influence (living happily in harmony with nature and progress). Russian young women indicate values-orientations necessary at the micro-level to normalize their happy interpersonal activities. The results within *the Russian focus group* show that both young men and young women *identically perceive* the fundamental values for the experience of happiness: in family, in health, in love, in peace, in patriotism for Russia. Russian youth maintains a continuous focus on spiritual priorities that have always been popularized by the institutions of family and education.

A young person's life is meaningful when they are guided by socially significant values shaping their personal perception of happiness. Russian young men interpret their altruistic happiness as "the opportunity to support the parental family" while the "primary" happiness for a young woman is "the opportunity to create a close-knit family and raise children". Bashkir young men and girls indicate happiness in the spirit of the market worldview – "first and foremost, one should have good health (physical and sexual) and take care of oneself, one's fashionable appearance".

Russians do not deny the material and economic conditions for a happy life but do not prioritize these reasons. For some Russian young men, creating their own business and getting rich means being happy. Young women indicate their own version of a woman's happiness – "to work in the profession, to have a high salary". Certain specificity is also demonstrated by Russian young men as they are indifferent to "traveling the world". On the contrary, Tatar young men and women and Bashkir young women report travel as an important happiness-related leisure and relaxation prospect for themselves. The regional model of Russian happy leisure is as follows: young men choose "I visit cinemas" and young women prefer cost-effective leisure – "I like to walk around the city". Within the Russian focus group, young women and men have similarities in the following positions: in their free time, they "work" and "read". Tatar young men and women state that they like to go out and listen to Tatar music and sing songs. Thus, the culture of happy recreation and leisure self-organization among young people demonstrates specific characteristics.

The exploration of happiness reveals paradoxical gender differences. Russian young men are touched by the alternatives of "happiness is to live in love/sex" and "happiness is to have many friends". Young women have different alternatives: "happiness is to live in a democratic society and enjoy civil rights and freedoms" and "happiness is to protect and defend our small motherland". Young women show a broader scope of priorities as they share the "masculine" civil-patriotic motives and legal aspects. Russian young men limit their interpretation of happiness to an intrapersonal and interpersonal framework.

Thus, the algorithm of the "phenomenon of happiness" presented by Russians comprises the stages "study-work-provide for the family".

The understanding of student happiness is associated with the opportunity to study at the university and improve one's intellectual level. University is a social elevator for students as it adapts them for a happy future. Along with this, Russians "are interested in other elevators – science, creativity, inventive activity". Russians set feasible postgraduate plans-orientations for a happy life including the educational and career and family and domestic issues. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russians show "felicitous optimism". Some report that they "live a good life" – 44.1% while others say they "live an excellent life" – 20.3%. Seven out of ten respondents are quite satisfied with modern life. They are optimistic and observe the anti-COVID security measures. A third of the respondents tend to rethink

the COVID-19 period because of psychological phobias, the consequences of illness, the death of loved ones, self-isolation, unemployment. Students who are pessimists and often COVID dissidents “negatively” assess their lives in the post-COVID period.

P.S.

The portrait of student youth is compiled based on the results of scientific research. Family, health, love, peace, and patriotism remain the traditional values significant for a happy life. “The phenomenon of Russian happiness” comprises “studying-working-providing for the family”. Russian students are interested in science, creativity, and invention. They are “felicitous optimists”. In the COVID-19 pandemic, they are not disorientated and plan for their “professional and career advancement” and “a happy life in a close-knit family with children”.

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