

EDUCATION: PROBLEMS AND WAYS FOR MODERNIZATION

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International youth exchanges: a sociological analysis

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Abstract. International youth exchanges are one of the most relevant forms of international youth cooperation and an important aspect of state youth policy. This article attempts to draw public attention to the subjective aspect of youth exchanges by pointing out specific demands and requirements of modern generation students, who act as the main consumer of international youth programs. The Russian-speaking academic community generally lacks research on international youth exchanges and, specifically, on the youth's demand for such exchanges. This article aims to characterize the current situation and to determine how the demand for international youth exchanges will develop in the longer term. This study also answers the question of who and why needs youth exchanges, and how to ensure that international programs are in demand. Finally, the study correlates opportunities for exchange development offered by the state with the youth's demand for such exchanges, and examines the impact that exchanges have on young people. This work focuses on youth exchanges as a part of Russian state youth policy and on its youth cooperation with other countries. The emphasis is placed on students of St. Petersburg, one of the centres of international youth exchanges in Russia. The data was collected in January 2020 via an online survey in the social networks VKontakte and Facebook, as well as WhatsApp and Telegram messengers. It included 424 respondents aged 18 to 25. The study has revealed what students expect from and how prepared they are for international exchanges, as well as what possible risks and motivations are related to such exchanges. The obtained data has been correlated with the opportunities offered by the state. Based on the results of the study, a number of recommendations have been made. They

can be useful for legislative and executive authorities, who are responsible for the legislation on exchanges, and for both for- and non-profit organizations, directly involved in organizing certain exchange programs.

Keywords: sociology of youth, international youth exchanges, youth policy, youth cooperation, intercultural communication, survey, youth attitudes, recommendations to state authorities.

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, various international relations are gaining more and more importance and go beyond political and economic state contacts, expanding in the direction of humanitarian, social, educational, and cultural cooperation, maintaining horizontal mobility and interpersonal communications in the widest possible spheres. The widespread use of *international youth exchanges* (hereinafter IYE) is a significant part of these global processes. The variety and multidirectionality of the IYE programs is growing, there is a numerical increase in participants and an increase in the availability of programs for Russian students. However, when developing the direction of IYE, it is necessary to take into account the opinion and expectations of student youth as a subject of globalization and international integration, as they are the main consumer of IYE programs.

International youth exchanges are part of the state youth policy (hereinafter SYP) of the Russian Federation. The term is found in the legislation of the federal [3] and regional (St. Petersburg) [7] levels, as well as in international treaties with Russia's collaboration. The state is interested in exchanges. The level of the regulatory framework for exchanges is low in comparison with European counterparts. Developing a Russian system requires the information about the demand for exchanges in the Russian Federation among young people, their motivation, and the characteristics of potential participants. However, at the moment, there is a lack of full-fledged research on IYE, which does not provide an incentive for the development of a regulatory framework. Our work aims to fill in this gap.

In the Russian-speaking environment, there is no unambiguous interpretation of the term *international youth exchanges* (IYE). There are several ways to evaluate them from a theoretical point of view. The legislative aspect is also not given sufficient attention in comparison with the countries of Western Europe. A number of studies, as a rule, talk about the implementation of specific exchange programs; they discuss exchanges not from the side of sociology, but from the aspect of other related sciences, e. g., considering exchanges from the point of view of an instrument of soft power in international relations.

This work differs from others in that it focuses on exchanges through the lens of sociology. The focus is on the social characteristics of the participants in ex-

changes and the attitude of young people to exchanges. Appropriate sociological methods are used.

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO RESEARCH

First, it is necessary to define what international youth exchanges are. Structural-functional and institutional approaches will be used for a full, versatile understanding of IYE.

IYEs are primarily at the center of the study of academic mobility of students. This poses two main concepts of IYE: the first connects exchanges to academic mobility, the other distinguishes them as two independent phenomena.

In Russia, the interest in studying academic mobility arose after Russia joined the Bologna Declaration in 2003. In parallel with the implementation of the European system, the number of publications on this topic grew also: according to eLibrary.ru, in 2003-2010, there were 278 articles published, while a decade later — 2,712.

In this work, we adhere to the second concept: we single out IYE as an independent social institution. Let us consider the basic definitions of exchanges.

In the Russian legislation, the only definition of youth exchange is found in the law of St. Petersburg dated 27 June 2013 No. 425-62 “On the implementation of state youth policy in St. Petersburg”:

“Youth exchange is the implementation of international and interregional relations by organizing mutual visits to the subjects of the Russian Federation and foreign states in order to develop cooperation in the field of youth policy, exchange of experience, study of the diversity of cultures and historical heritage of other subjects of the Russian Federation and foreign states” [7].

Exchanges serve as a tool for the socialization and self-realization of young people. In general terms, this option determines the way the participants are organized and the purpose of the phenomenon itself. However, this and similar documents on the SYP speak of international youth exchanges only as an institution that needs to be developed: they do not name the functions of the IYE nor do they define in more detail its target audience.

It is possible to supplement the definition based on the experience of foreign colleagues. Exchange agreements between Russia and European countries define the potential exchange participants — they are youth organizations of various orientations, young specialists from various fields, students, volunteers, people working with the youth, as well as the representatives of state and municipal authorities. Various goals are highlighted: language cooperation, tourist, and cultural study trips, participation in volunteer projects, sports development in the framework of exchange between sports organizations.

In sociological literature, there are various interpretations of IYE. The following definition by G. A. Moshlyak seems to be the most appropriate:

“International youth exchange is understood as a project of cooperation of youth groups that promotes intercultural communication, mutual understanding and fostering respect for representatives of other cultures, which is developed and organized directly by young people on a specific topic. In this case, youth exchanges are understood as extremely limited in format, predominantly project-based youth activities based on informal teaching methods” [6].

Here, the author identifies the target audience, functions, types, and the time frames of exchanges.

Combining the normative and theoretical versions, we can give the following definition of the most widespread short-term youth exchanges: this is direct communication between organized groups of young people from different countries of the world for a short time, in order to discuss the problems of interest to them and to get acquainted with their history and culture.

Such youth exchanges, as a rule, are carried out with the provision of full or partial compensation for all costs (travel, accommodation, meals, etc.). The main organizers can be various universities, non-profit or youth organizations. IYE is a social institution that performs the functions of socialization and self-realization of youth, the development of tolerance, intercultural communication, knowledge, practical skills, and the expansion of political influence.

We see R. Robertson’s theory of globalization as a theoretical model of such a study, explaining the integration processes of society both at the micro and macro levels [2]. Robertson notes that globalization is a two-way process and interprets it as movement from above and movement from below.

The macro-level of globalization is supported by national and international structures that ensure the implementation of international youth exchange programs. The position and actions of these structures in relation to IYE programs are clearly manifested in the regulatory legal norms. In the Russian Federation and St. Petersburg, this is the legislation of the state youth policy, on the federal (Fundamentals of the state youth policy of the Russian Federation for the period until 2025) and regional (St. Petersburg — the law of St. Petersburg “On the implementation of state youth policy in St. Petersburg”) levels, as well as interstate agreements between the RF Government and the governments of other states in the field of youth cooperation or youth exchanges: bilateral — with Belarus, Germany, Italy, Ukraine, France, and Japan; multilateral — within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Council of Europe, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The micro-level of globalization is provided by the direct participants in the IYE. For many IYE programs, the target audience is the students from St. Petersburg universities aged 18 to 25.

Considering the wide range of normative documents concerning the institution of exchanges, it can be concluded that the state is interested in the development of exchanges and assigns them a certain role. However, it makes no sense to develop a regulatory framework or a product as such if there is no demand for them. There-

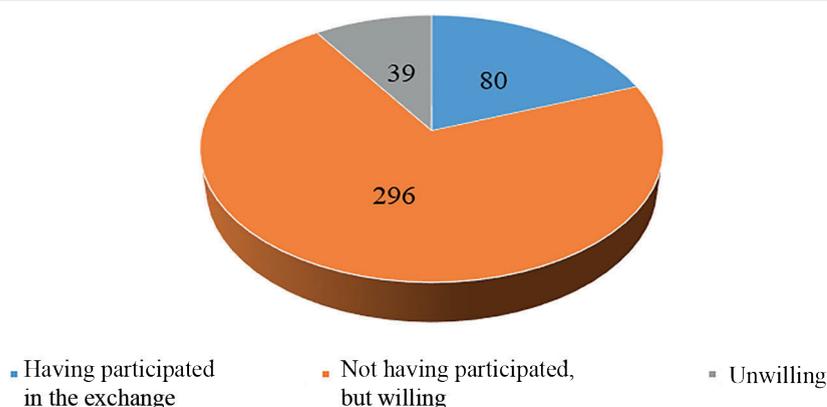
fore, this work is focused precisely on describing and explaining the demand for IYE from young people, which seems relevant in the light of the government's attention to the development of youth policy in general and youth exchanges in particular; it also contributes to an objective assessment of the transformations and initiatives taking place in the field of IYE.

METHODS

Within the framework of the scientific study of the sociological portrait of the IYE participant, a sample sociological survey of students of St. Petersburg universities was carried out. The sample is not randomized, formed according to the principle of "available case". According to the official statistics, in the 2018/19 academic year, there were 296.3 thousand students [14] in state and non-state universities in St. Petersburg. The sample size was $n = 424$. The sampling error was 5%. The sample structure consisted of three quotas. The first quota is the students who have participated in international youth exchange programs one or more times (80 people). The second — the students who did not participate in exchanges before, but intend to take part in the future (296 people). Finally, the third quota — the students who are not in any way interested in participating in IYE programs (39 people; Fig. 1). The age of the respondents is limited to 18-25 years.

The obtained quantitative data have been processed using the statistical package IBM SPSS Statistics 20 using univariate and bivariate distributions with the calculation of statistical tests (chi-square and lambda). We have used factor analysis of scale assessments of value judgments about IYEs with the calculation of the Kaiser — Meyer — Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) and the significance coefficient.

Fig. 1. Shares of the main categories of respondents



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Let us consider the characteristics of each of the groups presented.

Group 1. Students who participated in the IYE one or more times

Socio-demographic portrait of the 1st group. The following socio-demographic portrait of the group was determined by gender, educational background and material status. As a rule, girls participate in IYEs more (81%). The peculiarity of educational training is that it includes the study of a second foreign language (40%). These are usually the following areas: international relations, political science and philology, linguistics, and translation studies. The financial situation corresponds to the level of meeting daily needs (44%). As a rule, study and work are not combined (64%).

Information channels about IYE. The most popular channels of information about IYEs are specialized online resources, the university community, and IYE program sites (Fig. 2).

Directions of the IYE of the 1st group. The total number of IYE countries (if we count the CIS as one direction) was 30.

The most popular (selected 3 or more times) were the directions shown in Fig. 3. These are the CIS, Germany, France, and the USA. In the Asian direction, China is most in demand.

Fig. 2. Shares of channels for informing about exchanges among exchange participants

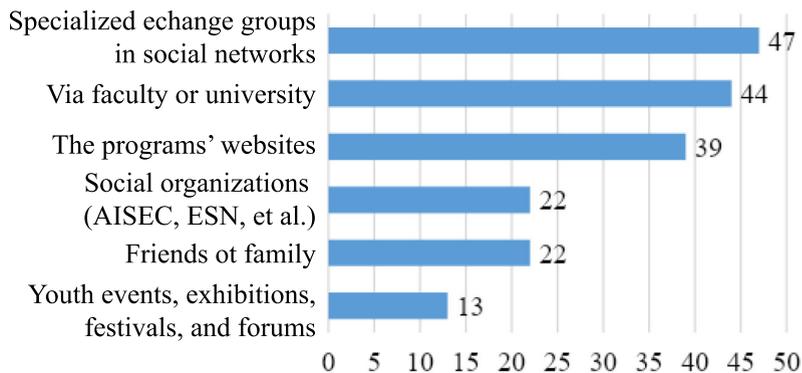
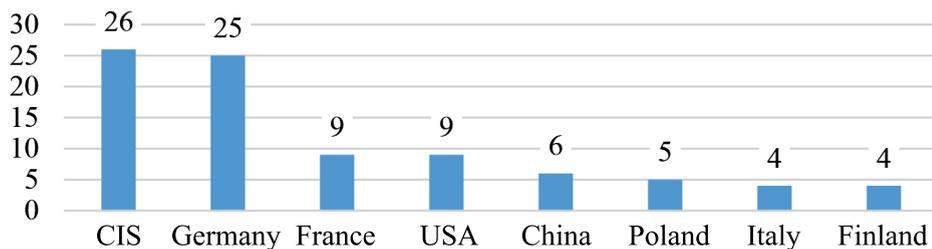


Fig. 3. The main directions of exchanges among students



Themes of the IYE programs. The students who participated in the IYE programs told what aspects the chosen exchanges were devoted to (Fig. 4). The priority is humanitarian issues. The minimum attention in IYE programs is paid to economic topics.

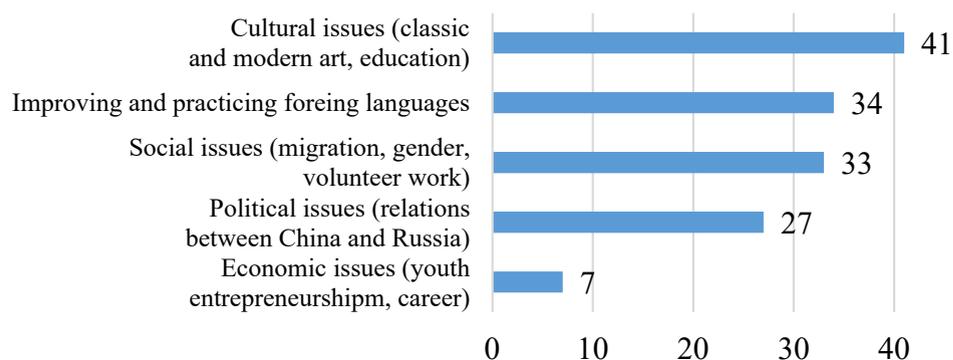
Target values of IYE for students of the 1st group. We have considered the target values to be the values, the achievement of which provides a feeling of satisfaction from participation in the IYE program [8]. Target personality-based values of the participants may not coincide or overlap with the goals stated in the program.

As a result of factor analysis of scale estimates, the following components were obtained (KMO 0.535; significance coefficient 0.023). Each component is given a name, which, in our opinion, reflects the target value of participation in the IYE program.

The first component with an arbitrary name “Language learning” includes the following variables with factorial weights: “Practicing foreign languages” (0.675); “Discussing interesting social or political topics” (–0.711). This component reflects the desire of students to study foreign languages within the framework of IYE programs, figuratively speaking, in a pure form. The students’ expectation in this case is the language practice of everyday topics.

The second component, tentatively named “Skills of self-presentation in new environments” includes the following variables with the indicated factor weights: “Development of skills (communication, self-presentation, etc.)” (0.786); “Visiting new places, tourism” (0.620); “Supplementing your own portfolio, getting a diploma” (0.526). This component reflects the expectations of students, aimed at knowledge and communication, which will be reflected in the educational portfolio. Such students can be characterized as maintaining a balance between education and career on the one hand and leisure time on the other.

Fig. 4. Shares of exchange topics



The third component, which has been given the provisional name “Study of migration opportunities”, includes three variables: “Getting an internship or work” (0.821); “Exploring the possibility of moving to another country” (0.539); “Communication with representatives of other cultures” (-0.548). The target values consolidated in this component reflect the migration intentions of the participants in the IYE programs. At this stage, the conditions of relocation are being investigated for various reasons. This is a temporary move in order to build a career, and, possibly, a change of place of residence.

Finally, the fourth component, which we called “The study of culture”, includes the variables: “Introduction to the culture of ancestors” (0.843) and “Finding new friends” (0.585). This component brings together participants interested in learning about the culture of a particular ethnic group. Most often these are trips to Germany, the CIS countries, sometimes to Israel.

Summing up the factor analysis, it is worth noting that an acceptable factor model was built. All 10 considered variables were reflected in it. These ten variables, based on automatic calculations, were grouped into 4 factors that determine the desire to participate in international youth exchange programs: linguistic factor, self-presentation factor, migration factor and cultural repatriation factor.

In fact, these 4 factors reveal the characteristics of the target audience of IYE programs. On this basis, it is possible to differentiate IYE programs to attract interested participants and adjust them in the interests of the state.

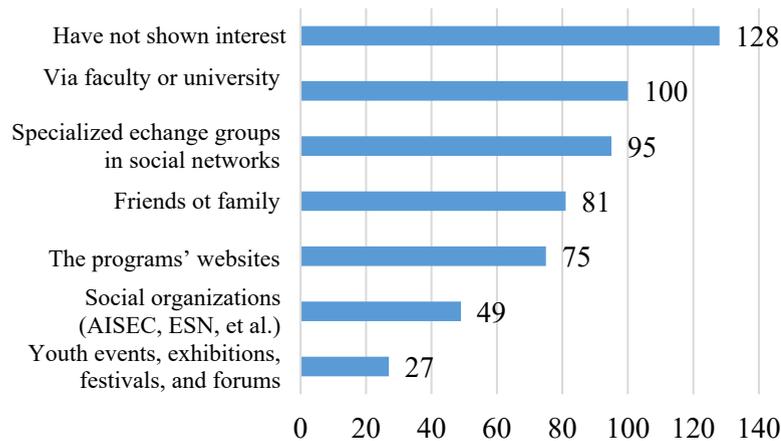
Group 2. Students who did not participate in the IYE, but intend to participate in the future

It should be noted that 47% of the IYE participants took part in exchanges two or more times. We can say that a certain relatively constant category of exchange service consumers has formed. Therefore, the influx of new members can be difficult. However, interest in IYEs is high.

Socio-demographic portrait of the 2nd group. So, as a rule, potential participants with the following socio-demographic characteristics are interested in IYE: these are girls (75%), studying in the areas of social and psychological sciences (21%), as well as political sciences (42%), not working (70%), everyday material needs, as a rule, are provided (76%).

Information channels about IYE. As we can see, information is most effective through the environment in which the student spends a lot of time, ie, universities and social networks (Fig. 5). Note that youth fairs, exhibitions, forums are either uninformative or not popular among students. In any case, the efficiency of their activities in St. Petersburg should be increased.

Fig. 5. Shares of channels for informing about exchanges among exchange participants



Group 3. Students who have not participated in the IYE and do not intend to participate in the future

Finally, the 3rd group of respondents includes students who do not consider their participation in the IYE. This group turned out to be the smallest (<10% of the entire sample).

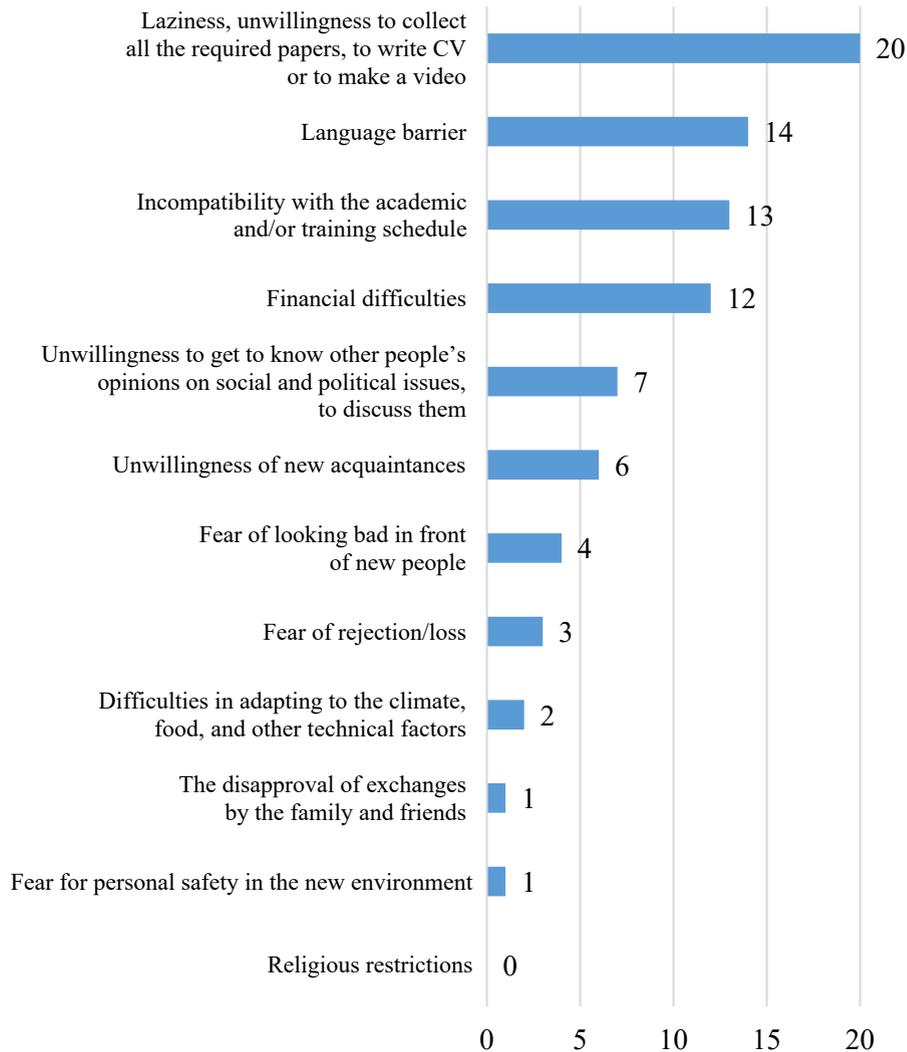
Students were asked about the reasons for not participating in exchanges. Fig. 6 shows the results of frequency analysis.

As you can see, the refusal to participate, first of all, is caused by the unwillingness to collect the necessary documents to participate in the competition (20). The language barrier (14) and the incompatibility of the trip with the work/study schedule are also significant (13). Since we know that universities, as a rule, provide a combination of travel under IYE programs with an academic schedule, then in this case we are probably talking about the need to combine the trip with the work schedule. Moreover, the next significant reason for refusing to travel is the financial constraints (12).

CONCLUSION

We can say that a certain level of development of the social institution of international youth exchanges has formed in Russia. The state, to a certain extent, creates conditions for the development of the institution, and young people have a wide need for exchange programs. However, international agreements on youth cooperation between the government of the Russian Federation and other foreign governments do not guarantee Russian youth demand for IYEs with these countries. Only Germany and the CIS countries host a large number of Russian participants. The intensity of exchange with France, Italy, and Japan is noticeably lower. The choice of this or that country is determined by other factors. Existing bilateral agreements already form a wide list of provided exchanges, but not all of them are equally in demand.

Fig. 6. Shares of non-participations factors in exchanges



Together, this is an incentive to improve exchanges with the Russian youth in the future.

Most young students are interested in participating in IYE programs. A number of activities are required to attract talented students and expand the competitive list of participants, as well as to improve the effectiveness of participation in IYE programs.

It is important for the organizers of IYE programs:

- to update information support and consultation on documents preparation;
- to develop awareness of youth through various communication channels, to increase the coverage of youth organizations and youth forums, festivals,

exhibitions; to emphasize the attraction of participants without IYE experience, to simplify the selection process;

- to develop a legal framework for youth exchanges at the federal and regional levels; to expand bilateral youth cooperation with other countries to form sustainable exchanges with them;
- to take into account the needs and interests of students when planning programs; to develop exchange programs on specific topics and forms that are in demand among young people, and introduce new specialized forms that are in demand among narrow audiences.

Students need personal commitment and initiative to recognize and pursue opportunities during their studies. It is also important to be able to combine the proposed content of the IYE program with individual interests, ensuring that the target value is achieved both through participation in the program and through learning and personal development in general.

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