

Adolescents' knowledge at the start of the war in Ukraine

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In a study on February 23 and 24, 2022 and one week later, the IZI asked German adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 about their information sources, their knowledge and their assessment regarding the current situation in Ukraine.

In the early hours of February 24, 2022, on the orders of Vladimir Putin, Russian troops began their attack on Ukraine. On February 23 and 24, the IZI conducted, through the market research institute iconkids & youth, a study in which we asked adolescents (n=181) about the situation in Ukraine. Another study followed one week later, on the 7th and 8th day of the war of aggression, which investigated the adolescents' knowledge and emotions as well as what they wanted to know. Below is a summary of our core findings. The more detailed articles on both studies can be found in *TelevIZion digital* (currently only available in German).^{1,2}

STUDY I

What did German adolescents know on February 23 and 24, 2022 about the situation in Ukraine?

The questioning on February 23 and 24, 2022 shows that all the adolescent respondents had heard about the conflict and a good 9 in 10 could name the participating parties and the direction of the aggression. Here, the adolescents' understanding of the situation ranged from a superficial naming of



Ill. 1: 45% of the 181 participating adolescents (13-17) used television as a source of information (here: the German prime time news programme *tagesschau*, ARD)

the situation through to more complex images, numbers of military vehicles, economic links between Germany and Russia, and the role of NATO. In a few cases, the adolescents used invective language: "That sick bastard Putin has started World War 3!" (girl, age 14)

Increase in knowledge

In the early morning of February 24, 2022, Russian troops attacked Ukraine. Of the German adolescents who filled out the online questionnaire in the morning or over the course of the morning, one third (34%) had not yet heard about the events, giving answers that tended to be a reflection of the state of affairs on February 23. Around two thirds of the respondents had heard about the events that morning, or over the course of the (school) morning of February 24.

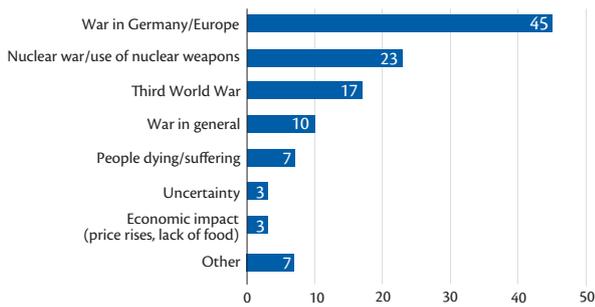
Where did the German adolescents get their information from?

Although the threat was already very apparent on February 23, only just

under 3 in 10 respondents said the events had been discussed in school. This figure rose to around 1 in 2 on February 24. On February 23, most said none of their family or friends were talking about the developments in Ukraine. By midday on February 24, only just over 1 in 5 adolescents were talking about it with family or friends. This means that many of the adolescents who participated in the study were left to their own devices in seeking information on the current events. Media therefore played an important role in adolescents informing themselves about the situation.

45% of the respondents used German public broadcasters as a source of information (*tagesschau* (ARD) was mentioned in particular (Ill. 1), but also *ZDF-Morgenmagazin*, *logo!*, *ZDFheute*³). One quarter got their information "from the internet", as the adolescents somewhat imprecisely put it. Just under 1 in 5 said they had heard the information on the radio, for example at breakfast. German news apps (n-tv and BR24, among others, were mentioned) were at this point still playing less of a role. Adolescents were mainly consuming content from the German public-service broadcasters and the major daily newspapers, such as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* or the *Thüringer Allgemeine*. The initial information on this geopolitical crisis situation came via traditional (brands of) media.

RESEARCH



III. 2: What adolescents are scared of (multiple answers possible, data given in percentages)

How adolescents understood the situation

The adolescents constructed the situation against the background of their own worldview and by means of the information they had acquired, at this stage, particularly from the media. Typical patterns emerged here:

1. Most of the adolescents who participated in the study personalised the situation and saw Vladimir Putin as an immoral or pathological person, a “dictator who is oppressing his people and is corrupt” (intermediate secondary school pupil, age 14). They therefore believed the German government should help those who were under attack secure their independence from Russia, and impose sanctions.
2. Some adolescents tried to understand Vladimir Putin’s motivation. This was particularly noticeable among adolescents growing up in Thuringia, a federal state in Eastern Germany. They believed Putin wanted to prevent NATO expansion to the east, Germany had gone too far down the American route, and the economic consequences for Germany would be severe.
3. A few – usually younger – adolescents clearly saw the situation from the point of view of self-interest. They asked the German government “not to intervene. I don’t want a war, because I love my parents.” (special education school pupil from Berlin, age 13)

4. A 16-year-old grammar school pupil with a Russian migration background represents a special case in this study, as he was getting his information from Russian television. He cited the “genocide of Russian people”

as the reason for the invasion. Accordingly, he wanted the German government to “bring the Ukrainian people to their senses”.

STUDY II

One week later, on the 7th and 8th day of the war of aggression, we asked n=206 adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 once again about their knowledge, their emotions and their expectations of news broadcasters.

Adolescents’ knowledge one week after the invasion of Russian troops

After a week of heavy fighting in Ukraine, all the adolescents had heard of the war taking place there. Misinterpretations of the direction of aggression and justifications of Vladimir Putin’s actions were

indicated in only 2 exceptional cases. Overall, in comparison with the study from the previous week, the adolescents’ sense of what was happening in Ukraine was considerably more detailed. When they described what they knew about the conflict, they mostly talked about fighting, in particular bombs and tanks. Most of them mentioned refugees and the fact that the civilian population was affected.

Other more frequently mentioned matters were negotiations and the hope that something helpful would come out of these. A few adolescents emphasised that the UN condemned Vladimir Putin’s actions and that almost the whole world was against him. The word “nuclear bomb” was also mentioned several times.

In this study, too, there were a few who offered justifications for Vladimir Putin’s actions, and in some individual cases respondents acknowledged that some people in Germany with a Russian migration background saw the situation differently.

Where were the participating German adolescents getting their information from?

This time, the main source of information among participants was parents, at 82%. A good 4 in 10 cited teachers as a source of information, and a good 3 in 10 cited friends.



III. 3: When the adolescents described what they knew about the conflict, they mostly talked about fighting, in particular bombs and tanks

The most important media were television and internet, with around double as many mentions as “social media” and “radio”. Only just under 2 in 10 mentioned daily newspapers as a source, and only just under 1 in 10 mentioned apps.

Overall, the participating adolescents got their information from both the internet and television, and above all they used the internet products of public service broadcasters, the private German news channel ntv, and the major daily newspapers in Germany.

The participating adolescents' emotions

In the first inquiry, shortly before and shortly after the start of the war, 4 in 181 adolescents said they felt afraid. After 7 or 8 days of the war, just under 9 in 10 adolescents said the current situation in Ukraine was making them feel afraid and concerned; the girls indicated this more frequently than the boys. In response to the question “What are you afraid of?”, almost 5 in 10 adolescents said they were afraid of the war spreading to Germany or the EU (Ill. 2).

Images of fear and images of hope

Images that increased the adolescents' fears were those that showed warfare in the form of bombs, bomb explosions and tanks (Ill. 3) as well as the damage to buildings caused by the war: destroyed cities and ruined houses (Ill. 4). In several descriptions of the fear triggered

by images, the image of bombed-out residential buildings was combined with dead bodies or injured people, as well as people hiding and fleeing. Images of crying children who had lost their parents and of people fleeing were also cited as frightening. These were accom-

panied by the sense that fundamental moral principles had been suspended. In response to the question of whether they had seen images in the media that had given them hope, not even 1 in 3 of the participating adolescents could answer in the affirmative at that point in time. Images of “other countries' willingness to help” (boy, age 15) and of worldwide demonstrations against the war gave them hope.

Which questions about the war do you want the media to answer?

A few adolescents cited a range of questions and requests for information, e.g. “Why is Putin behaving like this?” (girl, age 17) or “What the situation is on site, how quickly the Russians are advancing and how well the Ukrainian defence is holding up, what the risk of a Third World War is, and what I can do to protect and prepare myself” (boy, age 16). The most frequent question was:

“When will there be peace, when will the madness finally stop?” (girl, age 14, Ill. 5).

Overall, the study shows very clearly that adolescents want to be informed about the current situation in Ukraine, and that multiperspectivity and the veracity of the information are very important to them. They would like some reassurance that the war will end, but no one can offer this. What is possible, however, is for the media to provide



Ill. 4: Images that increased the adolescents' fears were those that showed warfare and what war leaves behind: destroyed cities

background information and a sense of orientation in the face of what is happening. It can also promote debate around questions such as:

“Why do people go to war? Why can't people live together in peace?” (girl, age 16) ■

NOTES

¹ Study I available at: https://izi.br.de/deutsch/publikation/televizion/Digital/Goetz_Holler_Der_Krieg_in_der_Ukraine_I.pdf [14.3.23]

² Study II available at: https://izi.br.de/deutsch/publikation/televizion/Digital/Goetz-Der_Krieg_in_der_Ukraine_II.pdf [14.3.23]

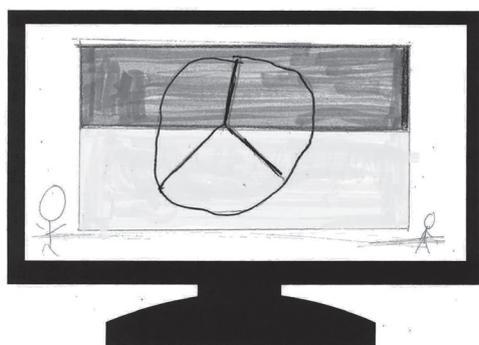
³ tagesschau is a German news programme for adults broadcast at prime time (ARD), ZDF-Morgenmagazin (ZDF) is a daily breakfast TV show that informs about current events from politics, society and culture, logo! (ZDF) is a children's news programme, ZDFheute (ZDF) is a news programme for adults. ARD and ZDF are public-service broadcasters.

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Ill. 5: What adolescents would like to know: “When will there be peace, when will the madness finally stop?” (girl, age 14)