

# Russian children's everyday life in 2022

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**From the perspective of a critical Russian citizen, the author provides an insight into current educational policy guidelines in Russia, propagandistic media coverage and historical misrepresentations and describes the consequences of this for the everyday life of Russian children.**

For millions of people all over the world, life is split into a time before and a time after February 24, 2022 – also for Russians and especially for Russians. This paper is composed by a Russian citizen, a mother of 2 sons, who is grateful to have the chance to speak up, to pronounce the concerns and to describe the worrisome reality. The generation born after the year 2000 was born and raised in a hypocritically called “democratic”, but clearly totalitarian system and will probably die in it. Vladimir Putin is the only president, the only history, the only motherland this generation knows. Summarizing the trends into one short paper, it can be sadly assumed that the Russian children of today are brainwashed, misled, forced and torn between the oppositions.

## Extensive manipulation

Manipulation has a long tradition in Russia. Meanwhile, manipulation has become so extensive that one could even speak of brainwashing. Patriotism is, no doubt, a worthy value to teach, but in Russia, it flows into every stage of education over war-related themes – from nursery to the last years of high school. Since September 1, 2022, Russian schools, without exceptions,

“are strongly recommended” to begin each week with a school assembly in which the children attend a solemn flag ceremony, sing the national anthem, and dress up in a military parade way. In all the hallways and classrooms hang portraits of Vladimir Putin and new obligatory lessons on state symbols as well as lessons explaining the necessity of “the special operation in the Ukraine” are introduced. The students of the final grade (11<sup>th</sup> class) began their school year 2022-2023 with a discussion titled “Ways of self-realization in our native country”. However, this does not mean that the teacher is supposed to suggest serious ways of the young people's personal future preferences or even discuss prospects of their self-implementation in some other “unfriendly countries” (at the moment, they are 48). The document published on the Russian Ministry of Education website says: “The goal and the results of such lessons are to make the students understand that DNR and LNR<sup>1</sup> citizens are Russian people and it is essential to help them return to the Russian territory. Russian army soldiers are heroes.” Teachers' and activists' communities already expressed their disagreement and called on parents to sabotage those lessons, invoking the Federal Law of Education (of December 29, 2012) according to which “political propaganda is forbidden at schools”. At the same time, a teacher's refusal to conduct such a lesson will result in immediate dismissal; a student's refusal to participate in such a lesson will lead to serious problems for the child or high-school student, as well as for their family.

## Indoctrination

From early years on, Russian children are misled by false associations and taught to have patriotic feelings about the “Great Patriotic War” of the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany in 1945. Kindergarten kids are dressed in military uniforms of the last century (Ill. 1), proudly photographed, made to sing war-time songs and otherwise participate in numerous war-topic events which take place several times a year to celebrate every prominent battle, Navy Day, Independence Day, Fatherland Defender Day etc. The Russian army, its colours, attributes, mottoes are promoted on every TV channel, every street banner, in every museum, exhibition, local event, as well as spread by everyday social latent opinion: “You are not a real man



Ill. 1: Russian children often wear military uniforms from World War II during military ceremonies

if you shirk military service and prefer higher education to it.” Overall, there are more than 3,558 cadet and Cossack specialized schools in Russia plus separate military clubs present in almost every other non-specialized school. Children in those schools and teams wear military uniforms to school, the main part of their specific curriculum comprises weapon usage training, lectures on war might and heroes, parades and guards of honour participation and other “patriotic activities”. Numerous volunteers who are now participating and losing their young lives in the recent fratricidal “special operation” are young uneducated people brought up in this misleading “war, not peace-oriented” context.

### Intimidation and force

Children of all ages, as well as actually adults, are forced to keep their opinion to themselves and to accept the state doctrine silently; they are threatened and promised to get a criminal sentence for any critical post on the internet, a frank chat with friends, participation in a regime-critical demonstration, a signature on a disagreement document. The posters on school and university walls with the “Z”-symbol<sup>2</sup> are encouraged while the staff is instructed to regularly and seriously advise their students that they are very likely to risk expulsion if any of them gets seen, filmed or recognized at a regime-critical demonstration. The only way teachers can disobey and remain true to their personal beliefs is to avoid talking about the issue at all and to make the subject taboo in their class unless it is required that the “talks about essential matters” are recorded (formally, it is against the law to videotape youngsters without their parents’ written permission) and reported. Within the home environment, children are normally excluded from the war context, especially if the parents’ position towards it is negative. They do not discuss this topic with

their kids and prohibit further discussions beyond home — this situation is shameful, unclear and dangerous. If the parents support the war, they present the Russian military expand, paradoxically, as a “forced” move made to save the Russian and Ukrainian people from the Nazi occupants which, again, the younger generation refers to the Second World War, a safe and well-known context in which Russia is undoubtedly a hero and world saviour. This perception is generously supported by all the government-controlled media which illustrates the events visually and verbally in abundance. Literally, those Russians who want to protect their children from panic, depression, anxiety and other emotions which every healthy individual would experience in times of war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, turn off the TV and refuse this source of information completely. What is more important, however, is that television is also refused by those who do not want their children to experience false pride, fake patriotism, and unacceptable willingness to participate, to “run and save them all”.

### Inner and family conflict

The children and adolescents are torn between the contrasting opinions of their adult family members because Russia is, without exaggeration, experiencing a mighty civil war in which discussions within families on any theme lead to an argument about politics. In the end, family members either shout at each other at the top of their voice day and night or stop talking to each other all together, thus breaking with the eternal basic principle of the Slavic society: extended family bonds. The children have to observe this sudden and relentless local tragedy on the background of heated political TV news rhetoric – unclear and unexplained to them. It is impossible to ignore the Russian children abroad. They are Russian too – involuntarily and for different reasons brought by their parents

from their native country to a foreign country. In the last decades, the scale of emigration from the Russian Federation has been enormous, unprecedented. Emigration is the second option out of 2 to express civil opposition against the regime. Still, like representatives of all other world cultures, Russians want their children to develop love for their home country, yet with an adequate dose of patriotism which is necessary to add to one’s identity, sense of belonging and pride. They preserve their native language, teach children human values and customs – national cuisine, music, traditions, architecture, art, celebrations –, tell them about those many achievements of their people beside war, which contribute to the cultural heritage and which children should know about. Those children are torn and shaken even more by the present dreadful situation, its bipolar media representation and shaky social attitude towards them as representatives of this nation. They need support to carry this stigma through these hard years, to bear this responsibility, to answer their peers’ questions and to form their own personal opinion about this unbelievable tragedy of this century. ■

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> DNR is an abbreviation for Donetsk People’s Republic, LNR for Luhansk People’s Republic.

<sup>2</sup> The letter Z is painted on military vehicles of the Russian Armed Forces to help distinguish their forces from other forces. It also became a symbol used by Russian civilians to signal support for the invasion.

### THE AUTHOR

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