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The challenges of immigrant descendants' integration in Europe

Competencies and experiences of young immigrants as a challenge for social system and education in Germany: young mal violent Russian immigrants as an example

The background

Young male migrants play an important role in public alertness about youth crime in Germany. They are pretty fast under suspicion when a crime has happened, rather than Germans of the same gender and age. The demand of media and politicians for hard response, repression or extradition is quite popular.

And in youth prisons migrants are over represented.

A quick view into statistics shows that this group is not more burdened with crime than Germans of same age and gender.

Although Germany has become an immigration country educational or pedagogical support for young migrants is not very developed. The elaborated social support system is aligned with German youth, methods and strategies are German and most social pedagogues and teachers are German. They have low knowledge and information about the background and the needs of young migrants. They are expected to assimilate with the German society and to feel and behave like Germans do.

The interest in the cultural, social and national background of migrants to develop targeted pedagogical approaches, for kindergarten, school or social work, is not well developed. Slowly migrant professionals are meanwhile included in education and support. But mistrust between professionals with different cultural background is still an obvious fact. This might be another interesting story to tell.

What we did

Our Centre explored in narrow cooperation with colleagues from the Russian federation the background of young immigrants from former Soviet Union, we did field research in Russian Kindergartens, schools, social institutions, police and justice. We interviewed practitioners, researchers, politicians, parents and youth in Russia. And we had Russian educational experts researching social projects for young Russian immigrants in Germany.

By the way, the Dutch Ministry of Justice started a similar procedure to find solutions for how to deal with difficult young male migrants from Morocco and we will continue our work next year with Turkish experts.

Competencies and experience with violence

During the last 15 years far more than half a million children and youth have come from the countries of former Soviet Union to Germany. Lots of them got immediately German passports by descent but still feel as Russians.

Russian boys have the reputation of being violent and brutal – although this applies only for a very small group of them. Predominantly they are integrating into the German society. School and youth work have difficulties to get into contact with the small group of violent boys.

There are manifold reasons for violent behaviour but one thing is of importance for the difficulties of German professions: The knowledge about background, experiences, expectations and needs of these young boys is on a low level, prejudice are much stronger.

Russian boys come to Germany with the experiences of totally different life conditions and traditions. All young Russians (that's the way they call themselves) have experienced violence before entry to Germany as everyday behaviour. Violence is accepted by parents, neighbours, friends and even professionals in education system. In a pre democratic society violence is one of the most used instruments to distribute benefits and positions in hierarchy. Every young boy trying to deal with goods and making small business – and that is what most of them do - has automatically come in contact with Russian Mafia. So they experience that crime and violence is an accepted way to organise a society.

Lots of parents in Russia are proud when their sons became strong young men. So they will be able maintain in the streets and will not be under risk of being heavily mistreated or tortured by the elder soldiers (grandpas) in the army. The grandpa tradition in the Russian army is famous for being cruel to young

recruits. Since a couple of years even Russian military leaders are complaining about this in the public and the case of one young recruit with cruel injuries was at least making headlines in Russia and Germany early this year.

In peer groups violence is the main regulation for allocation and fixing positions as well. The rules connecting with violence are quite easy and well known by all young Russian boys; he who is strong is top.

Challenges for social and education system

For these boys traditional masculinity is far more relevant as it is for young Germans.

Russian boys grow up mainly in streets and in public.

Surviving under conditions of rough surroundings is hard.

Regulation within the peer groups is violence.

For young Russians the peers and these are mainly from the same nationality, constitute the important frame of reference and define the norms.

This is different from what German boys experience.

German social and educational institutions and professions focus on German boys.

From that point of view young Russians behave strange and produce heavy problems.

Compared with “German” behaviour “Russian style” is hard to deal with.

Violence is banned and condemned – body is part of sports but not of every day life.

Professionals can not classify and understand the behaviour.

German reaction is not suitable.

Ignorance and misunderstanding are basic for the co production between these two groups.

School

In the countries of former Soviet Union school is more authoritarian than the German school.

It is shaped mainly by top down teaching.

Cooperative organised lessons are seldom, pupils are not used to this type of teaching.

Parents expect the teachers to be experts in education. They expect strict and direct statements and want to get instructions how to deal with problems.

Hesitating of teachers and debating with parents make them feel insecure and produce mistrust into teachers’ competencies.

Parents and pupils expect control and strict instructions during the lessons, parents allow teachers more repressive reactions as German parents ever do.

Pupils are confused by teachers with attitude of partnership, they are not used in cooperative studies, and they refuse sensible teachers and look for authority. Sometimes very quick the respect against teachers gets lost. Pupils do not follow instructions and loose discipline.

These pupils are refused by German teachers and pupils because of behaviour and language problems, so they hang around with other Russian pupils build groups as they did in Russia and a circle of exclusion has started.

Youth work

School ends in Germany about 1 p.m. and so social pedagogues offer programs and projects in the afternoon which are likewise not connecting with the needs of these youngsters.

Violent behaviour is one of the two most important reasons for excluding juveniles from offers (second is drug abuse). Without understanding (does not mean: accepting) the special and different role of violence for these boys youth work reacts as if the target group were German boys.

Youth work is mainly tailored for German youngsters. Interests like fishing or campfire or just hanging around with a beer is not part of programs.

Young Russians have strong interest in a shaped body, they want to appear as strong, but this often frightens German professionals. Lots of them are coming from middle classes, have no experience with fights, and are afraid of being hurt. They refuse the traditional masculinity and so they refuse the boys.

Social work methods are different from Russian experiences. A typical German counselling situation between social worker and young boy is a face to face interaction. This seems for young Russians as a sort of grilling (like examination by police). The Russian style of counselling will take part in everyday situations, often by chance. Those are windows of opportunity, missing those means losing a chance of connecting to the boys.

Specialisation within the support system for children and youth (and for families as well) is in the beginning inappropriate for Russians. They need confidants, people who accompany and support in different settings.

Social workers or teachers can not only make appointments with special services, she or he has to accompany. But this task is not arranged in the German system.

And when the boy or the parents cannot deal with the request of acting unaccompanied they are experienced and judged as unwillingly and ignorant.

Cultural and language differences lead to a bulk of misunderstandings and support exclusion. Russian boys experience refuse and contempt; they react with the loss of will to be part of the game.

In some cases youth office is seen as control and not as a partner for reducing difficulties and offering support. So in some cases NGOs take the part of the offices and run programs and projects for Russian immigrants. One risk is: this can lead to a structured separation and exclusion from “German” regular services and hinder integration. This development is discussed in Germany.

Police

Corruption is an experience with police in the countries of former Soviet Union. These have been complained in meetings in Russia.

Money solves problems and without money youngsters have often faced police with violent methods.

Compared with these experiences democratic police is weak and as a result not well respected.

In contrary to Russia German police is not corrupt.

Justice

For some young male Russians Justice in Germany is weak.

Punishment in Russia has been harder than it is Germany.

Youth Criminal Law and the situation in Jails in are not comparable to Germany.

Youth Criminal Law with the focus on education is totally different to Russian experiences.

The treatment of imprisoned elder boys or young men (mainly 16 – 21) is different.

Conclusions

The background of delinquent behaviour in case of young migrants is of importance for their behaviour.

Knowledge about the background will hinder professionals from misunderstanding and the risk of excluding youngsters.

Knowledge will open understanding of action and accepting of some sorts of behaviour for the beginning of cooperation.

This will led both sides (youth and professionals) to a gentle and acceptable change into the new society.

Knowledge will open an opportunity to rethink the approved approaches and develop new ones.