

## Russia's jilted generation

*By Richard Wordsworth*

I like Sasha because she does her homework. My other Moscow students, as a rule, don't. One always turns up as late to our 90-minute English lesson as it takes him to write the essay he's supposed to have finished the night before (his record: 75 minutes). Another once boldly handed me a hastily-pruned Wikipedia article, with several "citation needed" tags still in place. I like them all, but Sasha is my only model student.

Sasha wants to be President. She's bright, engaged and critical of nouveaux riche teenagers who flaunt their parents' wealth. I have her type the word "spoiled" into Google Translate and when the translation comes back she nods, earnestly. She's also a bit of a girly-girl – I teach her in her room, which is overwhelmingly pink and decorated with pictures of horses. I ask her how she feels about the election fraud and corruption in her country's politics, and what she would do to fix it as President.

"I would call all the media, get the five most corrupt people in the country, and shoot them on television," she said.

I don't want to miss some nuance, so I have her type the word "execute" into Google Translate. She nods again.

Throughout my time in Moscow – picked to coincide with the March presidential elections - this sense of muted anger is pervasive. Moscow in winter has a way of making people huddle together, literally and metaphorically. On weekends our motley crew of teachers, au pairs and year abroad students take the illegal "gypsy" cabs from pub to club, chatting with varying levels of fluency to student-age Russians about the anti-Putin protests that are lead items on TV and in newspapers around the world. We expect vodka-fuelled tirades. We get shrugs. Of course they're angry about it; of course it's wrong. So what?

It looks like apathy. But it's not. Instead, it's a whole generation who have watched and learned that voting in Russia is not a way to effect change. Even if the election system worked, they know that their choices aren't just limited – they're non-existent. Bar Putin, only the Communist Party candidate broke double figures in the March election percentages – and, as Russia's first purely capitalist generation, none of them want to risk a return to the breadline days of their parents and grandparents. Their situation is such that they simultaneously have no vote and no one to vote for. It's a crude, but effective, piece of social engineering by Russia's ruling party – but it has a flaw.

When Putin said that the sentences for the three arrested members of Pussy Riot "shouldn't be too severe," very few people seriously thought that would mean no jail time. Popular peaceful protest leaders Alexei Navalny and Sergei Udaltsov are regularly tossed into the back of riot vans for spurious offences. In June, the Russian government passed a law upping the fines for "illegal protests" from around £40 for attendees to around £5,900. The message is clear and depressing: no matter what the Russian public think, no matter what the criticisms by foreign press and governments, those in power with vested interests will stamp out opposition wherever and however it dares to present itself.

But the next generation is still doing what it has done all its life – it is watching and it is learning. As hair starts to grey and jokes about Putin's alleged facelift continue to bounce around Twitter, as more and more of Russia's young people become aware through the internet, through TV and through foreign travel that democracy should work for them, the grip of those clinging on to power starts to weaken. Waiting is not the same as doing nothing. And sooner or later Russia's ruling elite will have to pass on the reins of power to a

generation that owes them nothing at all.