Violent youth extremism in Russia: state and prevention

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the state of violent youth extremism in Russia, and discuss methods to prevent it. We present the results of a survey of experts (teachers, psychologists, social workers and police officers). Data were collected using a specific questionnaire that was developed with the help of experts. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used. We counted the frequency of answers choice. Textual information has been processed by means of content analysis. This study shows the behavioural patterns of youth extremism, its causes, and common methods of prevention. The psychological benefits of participation in extremist groups are discussed. The study provides evidence that current prevention is not based on an understanding of the roots of extremism. The findings are considered within the context of the current situation in Russian society and some directions for improved prevention are presented. Nowadays in Russia, there are enough institutions that constitute the system of violent youth extremism prevention, but goals of preventions, as well methods need to be changed.

Keywords: extremism, violence, youth, education, social work, prevention.

Introduction

One of the processes experienced by the industrialized world in the post-Cold War era is that of a rise in Far Right movements and related street violence (Richards, 2011). The street violence is mostly involving young people. Violent youth extremism is now recognised as a serious, widespread social problem that affects not only individual groups, but society as a whole. This topic is widely discussed by the Russian scholarly and educational community. One particular concern is extremism perpetuated by the indigenous population towards migrants. A number of researchers show that extremism has increased with the complicity of the authorities and because of a faulty education system (Worger, 2012). This may be true, especially with regard to politicians who count

on using patriotism, which is commonly very close to nationalism and xenophobia, to gain support for themselves. The violent discourse in Russian society and in the mass media also bears some responsibility for the rise of right-wing ideology and attitudes of extremism. While the language of law prohibits hostility to persons defined by their ethnicity, the day-to-day language of the politic and some mass media legitimizes hostility to the same persons defined by their home region (for example, Caucasus).

Currently, due to changes in laws, police are able to effectively use "hard" measures to counter extremist activities (e.g. dispersing mass actions, surveillance, intelligence gathering and policing of extremist groups and individuals). In spite of repression by governmental authorities, youth gangs continue to attack ethnic minorities and broadcast extremist watchwords. They have merely become more secretive by changing their appearance to demonstrate less Neo-Nazi or Skinhead symbolism and by carrying out fewer public events. In this context, the relevance of "soft" measures such as prevention of extremism through social work becomes critically important.

Most foreign journal articles about extremism in Russia focus on the public actions of nationalists, the relationship of extremist movements with political groups and the prosecution of extremists by the authorities (Kusche, 2013). However, is there a means to prevent extremism from arising? The problems of preventing extremism are discussed by Russian academicians and practitioners of social work. The focus of attention here is prevention with adolescents through social work. There are many articles in Russian journals, a number of handbooks and some PhD theses on this problem.

Currently, Russia has a developed four-level system of prevention that targets violent youth extremism. The first level is integrated in education. All schools and professional colleges have staff in charge of social work and prevention of deviant behaviour. At universities, this task is carried out by the departments of youth affairs. Work at this level includes surveys, helping young people to cope with troubles, education and

individual correction, helping them to keep in touch with family and organising social events. Usually, schools have special programs for the prevention of extremism. Teachers and social workers receive training to prevent violence and extremism through local courses at "methodical centres", which are in each district.

The second level of prevention is represented by local Commissions for Minors and Protection of their Rights. These commissions work on early identification of minors and families at risk of deviant behaviour to assist them in solving social and economic problems. Social workers also organize young people's free time; for example, they place them in sports or in holiday camps. If necessary, they place adolescents with strong antisocial behaviour in schools for special care.

The third level of violent extremism prevention in youth is with the police sub-departments for juveniles, which are responsible for working with minors who violate the law. These police officers usually have a degree in pedagogy, social work, psychology or justice. They identify local youth gangs, detect young people with anti-social behaviour on the streets, and look after teenagers from families at risk. They also help troubled teenagers individually and often participate in the meetings with school students.

Finally, the fourth level includes the various community organizations that work on the street (as well on the Internet) to organize teenagers' free time and train them to develop social adaptation and social perception. Teenagers who avoid dealing with police and teachers are more likely to share a common language with the young volunteers at these organizations. Organizations like the Moscow Centre "Perekrestok" ("Crossroad") may have their own small offices where they attract teens instead of criminal subcultures. Such organizations receive funding from sponsors and municipalities.

In fact, this system is very similar to the old Soviet prevention system, and it is criticized for low efficiency (Khukhlayev, 2011). One problem is that the methods used are out of date. Another problem is the question of whether educators and social workers

realize the true causes of extremism, in order to use the right methods to prevent it. For this reason, it is important to study the effectiveness of prevention, identify trends, inventory methods and evaluate them. To this end, was performed a survey of experts in charge of extremism prevention in youth.

Methods

A specifically designed questionnaire for the Expert Survey contained 6 formalized (semi-open) questions, and 13 non-formalized (open) questions. The experts were invited, and given instructions in person or over the phone. The questionnaire was subsequently administered by the online service. The survey was conducted in Moscow from May 2013 to January 2014.

The experts were teachers, psychologists, and social workers from Moscow schools, and police officers from sub-departments for juveniles. A two-stage selection of experts was carried out according to the following criteria: the experience in programs of violent youth extremism prevention, and appropriate education and self-assessment of competence. Fifty experts participated in the survey, of whom 16% were men and 84% women. The average duration of work experience for prevention of youth extremism is 10.1 years.

The collected qualitative data were processed using content analysis, and quantitative data were processed using frequency analysis.

Results and Discussion

Features of youth extremism in Moscow

The experts were asked to evaluate the dynamics of youth extremism in Moscow over the last two years (Figure 1). These data show that expert opinions on the state of youth extremism in Moscow are divided. 27.7% of the experts believe that the situation with the youth extremism in the last two years has improved. Almost the same number (25.5%)

noted some deterioration and 23.4% of respondents do not see any significant changes. However, 9 experts (19.1%) assessed the situation as having deteriorated markedly.
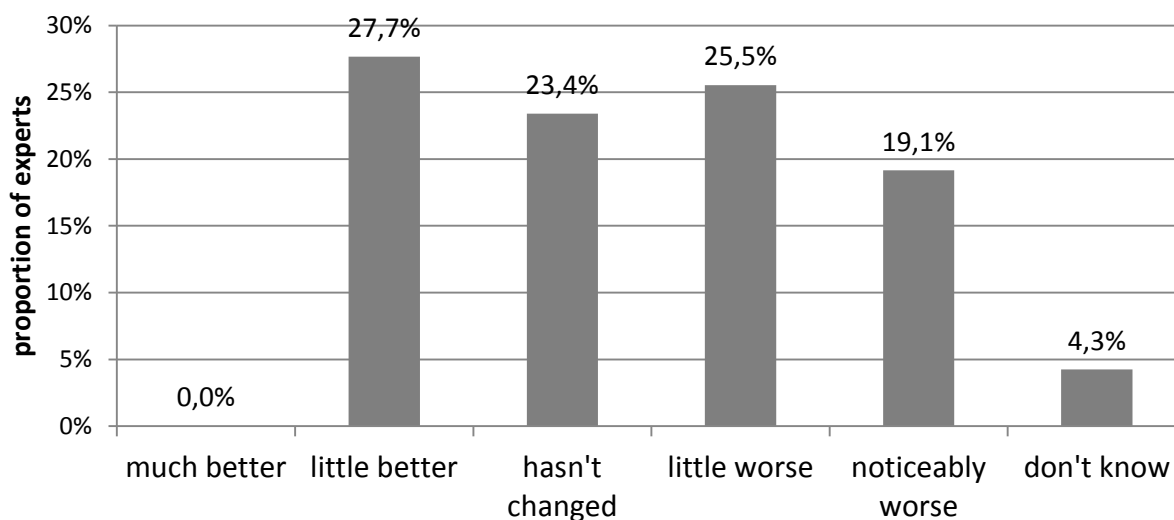

Figure 1. Experts estimate condition youth extremism in Moscow over the past two years (proportion of respondents).

In their comments, the majority of experts indicate that extremist ideas are quite common among students (including those from relatively wealthy families). According to experts, the members of extremist organizations or teenagers who want to join them are present in almost every school class. Surprisingly, they can be from long-time Moscow residents, as well from migrant families.

Many experts note that in recent years extremist movements have become less visible, and are less likely to use attributes. However, these movements continue to exist and spread their ideas. Some experts pointed out that, under certain conditions, an extremist may accept any youth movement. Extremist groups are very diverse, and some of them cannot be clearly attributed to extremist ideology. Some groups, for example, call themselves "football fans", while promoting right wing ideas.

As is often the case in the social sciences, there is no clear approach to the definition of extremism. It was asked, how experts, who have to counter extremist groups,

understand the concept of extremism. Free descriptions of extremism by the respondents were processed using content analysis (Table 1). Common behavioural manifestations of youth extremism are: aggression, physical, verbal and mobbing; lack of tolerance and negative attitudes towards certain social groups; propaganda of their ideas through media and Internet; the demonstration of symbolism such as Nazi, pseudo-Slavic and so on; their superiority; renunciation of social norms and values; breaking of laws; and the tendency to act in a group.

Table 1 Characteristics of youth extremism

Categories of content analysis	Frequency categories	Proportion of respondents
physical aggression	26	59,1%
verbal aggression	17	38,6%
bullying	5	11,4%
intolerance	20	45,5%
nationalism	17	38,6%
demonstration of superiority	6	13,6%
group trend	14	31,9%
demonstration of symbols	7	15,9%
spread their ideas	9	20,5%
desire for publicity	4	9,1%
rejection of social norms and values	5	11,4%
legal nihilism, breaking laws	3	6,8%
emotional liability	3	6,8%
internal aggression	2	4,6%
selfishness, indifference	2	4,6%
other	3	6,8%

According to the experts surveyed, the most common and noticeable youth extremist groups are skinheads, radical nationalists, football fans, religious groups (Wahhabis, Satanists, etc.) and criminal subculture ("hoodlums"). Among them, the most dangerous are skinheads (Figure 2).
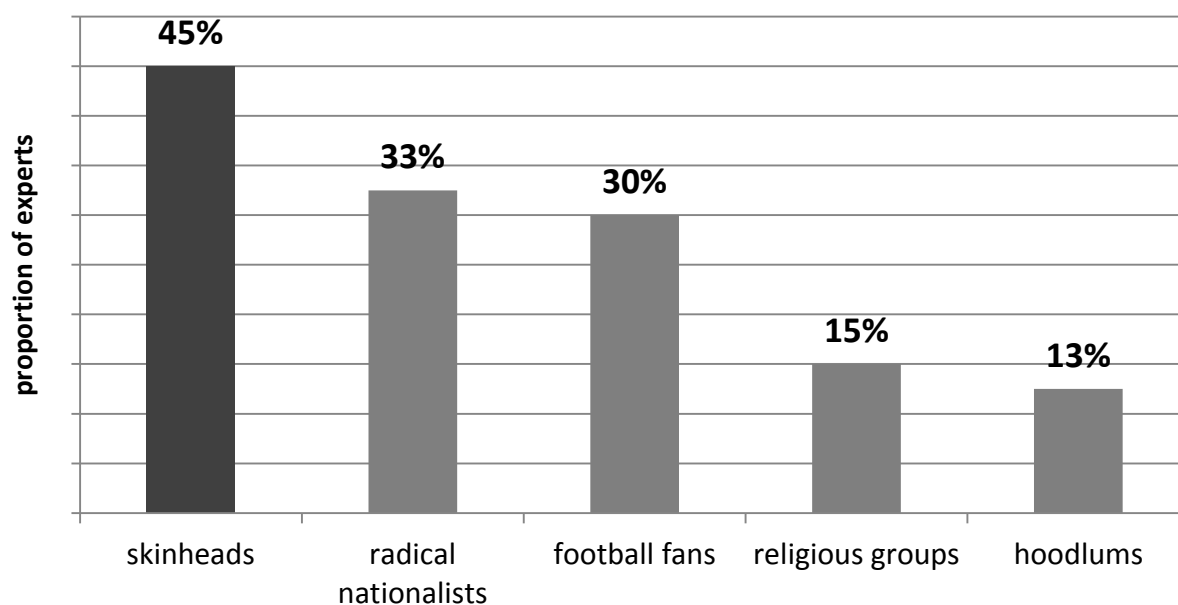
Figure 2. Expert estimates of the prevalence of youth extremist groups in Moscow (proportion of respondents).

The most common extremist ideas among teenagers are: racism, nationalism and superiority of some social groups, the "cult of violence" and radical "concern about the health of society" (Figure 3). The last one means an attack on alcoholics, drug addicts, homeless people and sexual minorities.
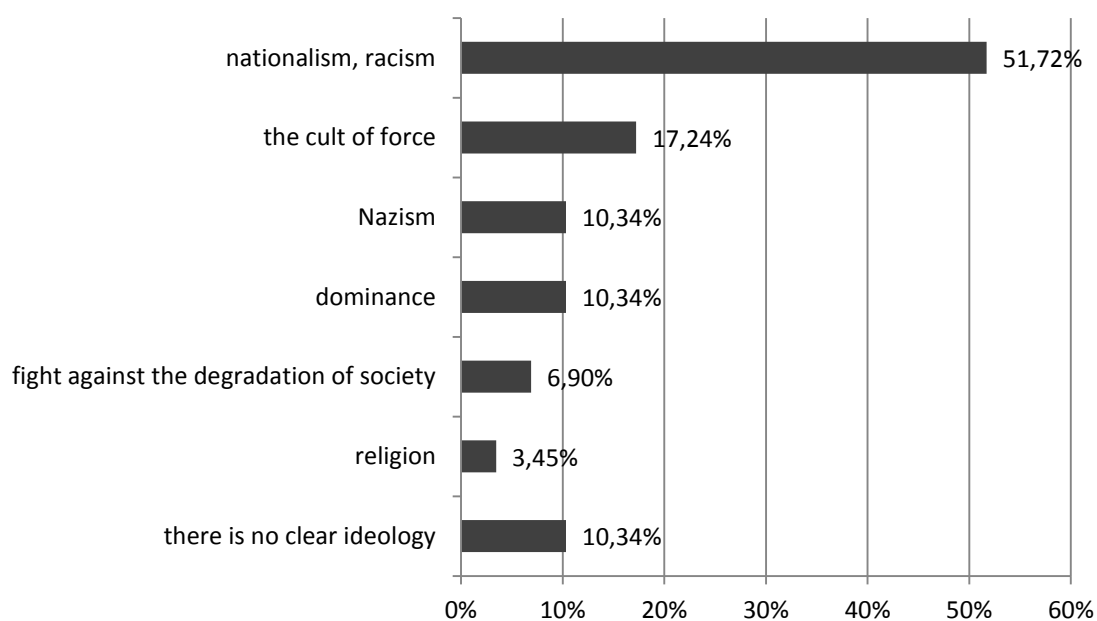

Figure 3. The most popular extremist ideas among youth (proportion of respondents).

Experts identified the most common reasons for youth violent extremism (Figure 4). The most important reasons identified were the presence of a significant number of migrants (40.4% of respondents), and the fact that these migrants ignore social norms (51.1% of respondents). Thus, experts tend to suggest that mass migration to Moscow from other regions and countries has had a main negative impact on youth extremism.

The second significant impact on youth extremism, according experts opinions, is an influence of extremist ideas that youth draw from extremist literature (44.7%) and the media (44.7%). Third among the most important reasons is the lack of attention from parents (44.7%) and deviant personality traits of some young people (34.0%). In addition, some experts believe that extremist behaviour is caused by an overly rigid (authoritarian) parenting style (10.6%), or the opposite, a too soft, laissez-faire parenting style (8.5%). It should be noted that only 17% of the experts chose the natural characteristics of young age among the causes of extremist behaviour.
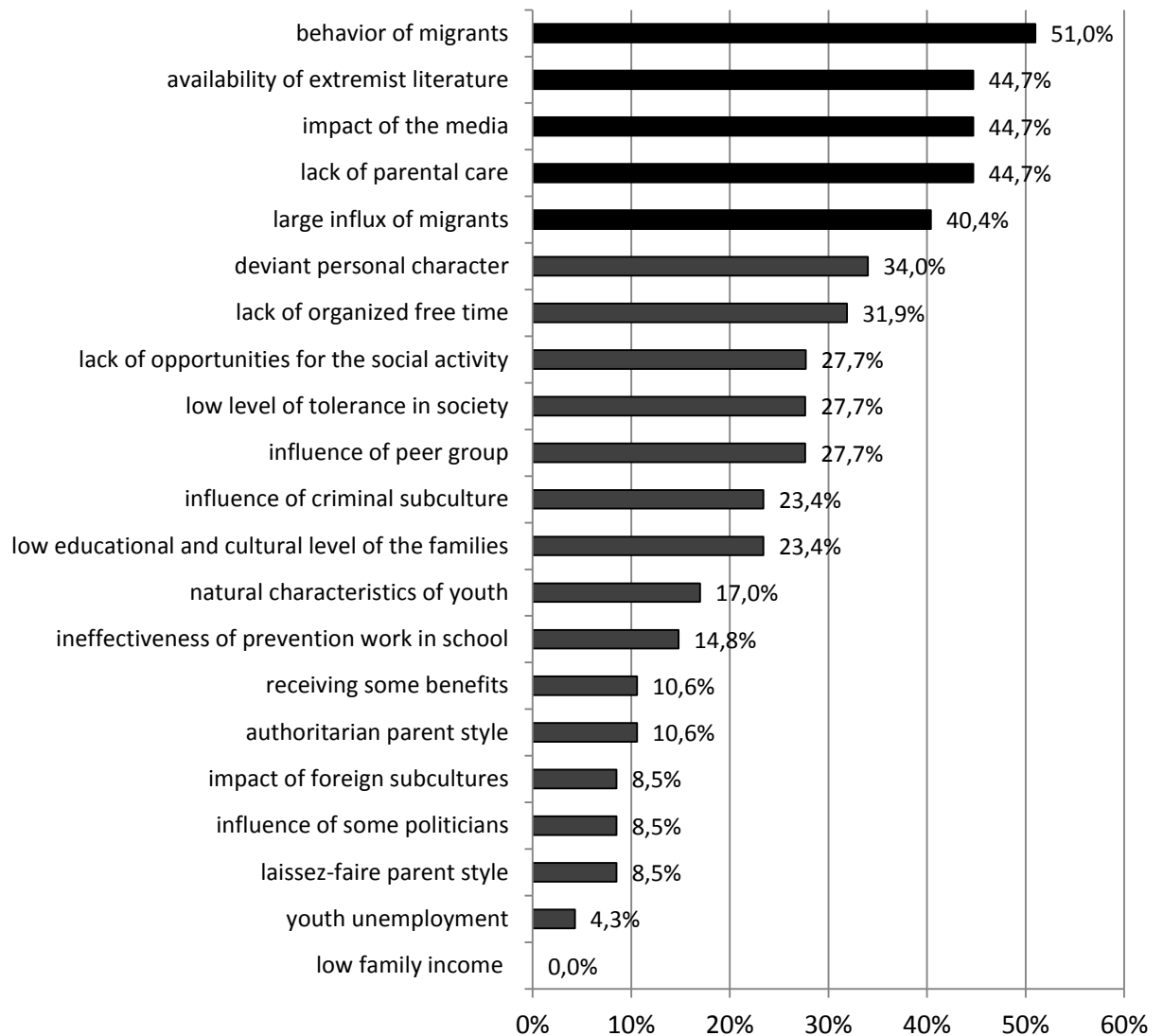
Figure 4. General reasons for violent youth extremism (proportion of respondents).

Content analysis of descriptions of typical families with teenagers with extremist attitudes shows that these youth come from various environments (Figure 5). This confirms that the financial level of the family was not a key factor of youth extremism.
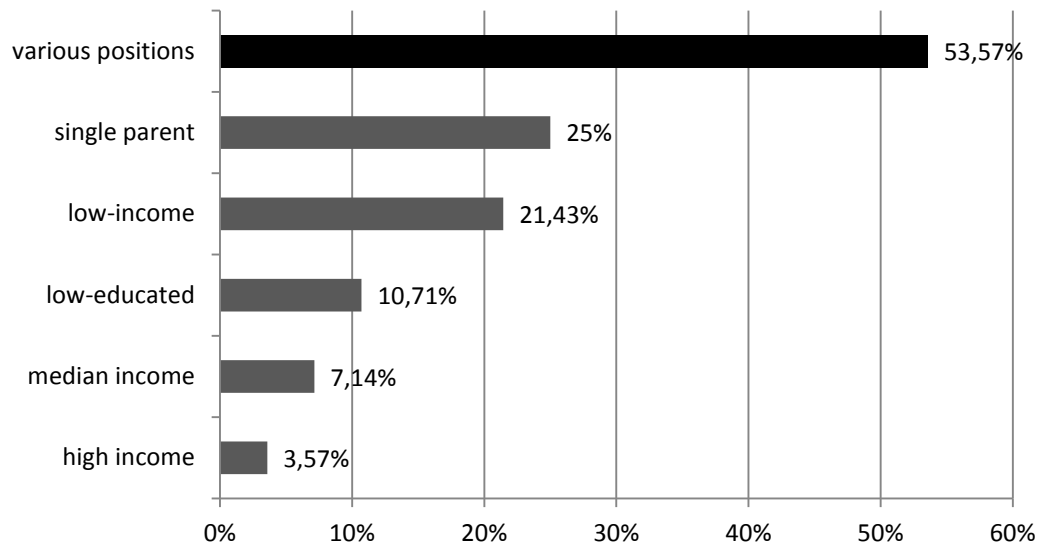
Figure 5. Types of families where the young extremists from (proportion of respondents).

In addition to the general factors that contribute to youth extremism, there are "psychological benefits" for young people who participate in extremist activities. In order to find out what attracts teenagers to extremist groups, experts ranked the importance of psychological benefits. This list of psychological benefits was based on an analysis of the scientific literature from the field of study (Davydov, 2013). These ranks are shown in Figure 6.
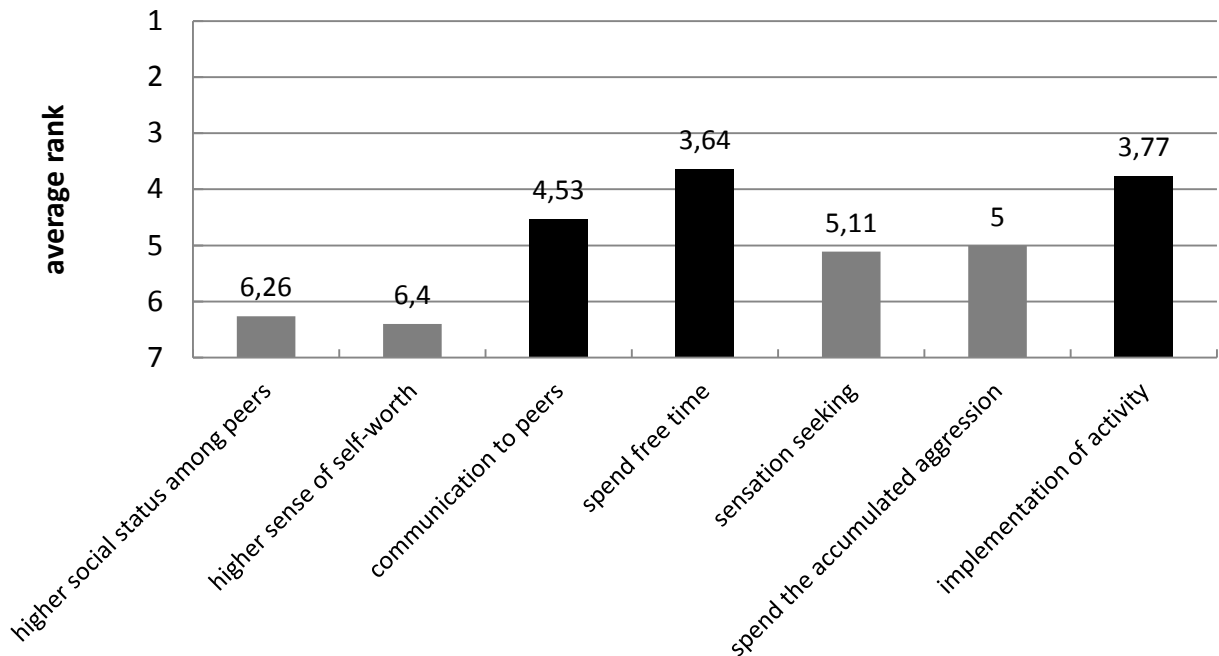

Figure 6. Psychological benefits of extremist activity (average rank by experts). The most important reasons have smaller ranks.

According to experts, the most important psychological benefits of extremist behaviour are "Spending free time", "Apply their activity", and "Communication needs"

(Figure 6). Understanding why young people get involved in extremist groups allows the implementation of preventive work. As one expert said, "The main problem with such teenagers is that they feel unnecessary to parents and educators. They have a lot of free time and feel that their potential is not needed for the society. If no one needs these teens, they will definitely be "taken in hand" by extremist groups with an exciting ideology".

Prevention

A number of survey questions were devoted to clarifying the methods and forms of prevention. Content analysis of the experts' responses showed that most activities occur through classroom interaction (e.g. class meetings, group discussions, lectures and meetings with the police). There are also workshops and role-playing, which are aimed at the development of tolerance and communication skills (Figure 7). Individual work with school students and work with their parents is not widespread.
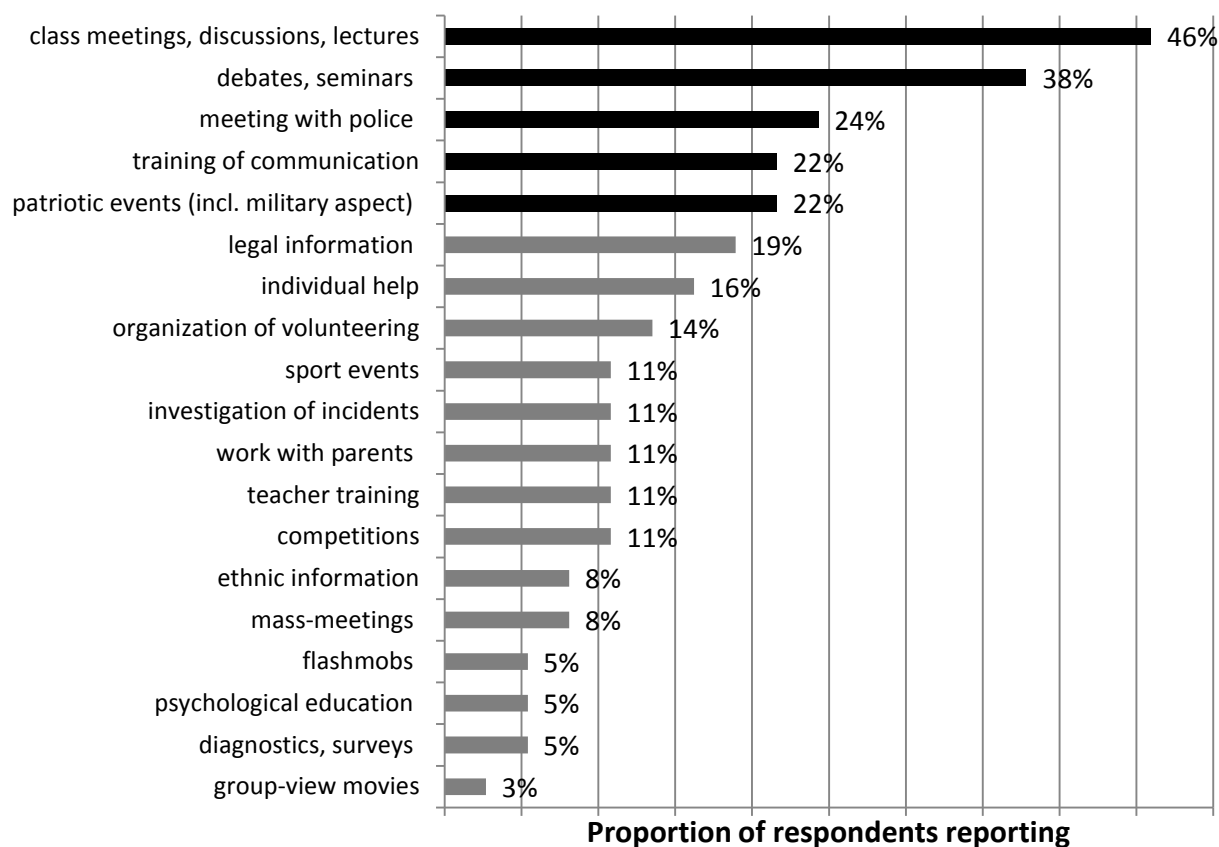

Figure 7. The common methods and forms of preventing young extremists in Moscow schools.

Preventive work in educational institutions in Moscow includes a fairly large list of activities. One important response that came up repeatedly was that efforts to prevent extremism must not be "number of events", but systematic work, which should be incorporated into all kinds of educational activities as well as outside of school life. As one expert stated, "special events are good for reports, but are useless or even harmful when there is no systematic social work and the staff competence is low".

Conclusion

The analysis of expert opinions on the prevention of extremism among Moscow students demonstrated the current state of contemporary youth extremism, showed the main reasons behind the adoption of extremist attitudes, and summarized the available methods and forms of prevention. There are many reasons for extremist behaviour, and they cannot be reduced to one or two factors. In the views of the experts interviewed, the main causes of extremism relate to a large number of migrants, their "bad" behaviour and the influence of extremist ideology. However, the analysis of the psychological benefits shows that extremist behaviour has less to do with the adoption of any extreme ideology, and more to do with the young people's need for "extreme activity". Such "latent" youth extremism is often discussed in the literature (Zubok & Chuprov, 2008).

This means that experts tend to rely on their understanding of so-called "common sense". Educators and social workers rarely suggest that extremism may be caused by the lack of tolerance in contemporary Russian society. Unfortunately, the experts did not mention the new approaches of prevention as moral disengagement theory (Aly, Taylor, & Karnovsky, 2014) or verbatim theatre techniques (Bartlett, 2011). Accordingly, it is important to move away from the current narrow focus on anti-racism to a broader framework of anti-oppression (Macey & Moxon, 1996). Social work practitioners in education and educators must work to cut out "violence language", to eliminate

authoritarian pedagogy, and to develop pedagogy of cooperation. Clearly, not enough attention is paid to the content of courses and textbooks, especially history.

In their descriptions, experts often pointed out such preventive methods as "raising awareness about the culture of ethnic minorities". However, according to the history of ethnic conflict and experimental studies (Fein, 1997), extremism is not due to unfamiliarity with these groups and their cultures. The causes of hostile prejudices should be sought in the threat to individual self-assessment and assessment of social groups, to which people belong. If families, schools, peer groups and society as a whole do not give individuals beneficial criteria for comparison, they may get them from comparison with "unworthy" social groups. Therefore, preventing extremism must begin with the establishment of a positive social identity.

In spite of the frequently mentioned "migrants problem", the educators and social workers rarely think about the need for their adaptation in the local community. Experts also do not mention the fact that migrants may feel threatened by the majority. It appears that the experts do not see the suspicion and the implicit hostility toward migrants of the majority group. The victims of extremism are left so far outside social work that this issue is rarely discussed. The effects of the "war on terror" (Guru, 2010) are also not recognized by social workers or educators.

There is no doubt about the role of counter-radicalization activity. Currently in Russia, there exists a system of prevention, but it needs a broader view, a deeper understanding of the causes of extremism and new working methods. In order to act effectively, traditional (in fact, from the Soviet era) approaches are inadequate.

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