

## LIFE STRATEGIES OF RUSSIAN AND EUROPEAN FEMALE STUDENTS: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

### *ESTRATÉGIAS DE VIDA DE ESTUDANTES RUSSAS E EUROPEIAS: ANÁLISE COMPARATIVA*

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**Maria Eflova**

Department of Sociology, Kazan Federal University  
Russia  
[meflova@gmail.com](mailto:meflova@gmail.com)

**Elizaveta Matveeva**

Department of Sociology, Kazan Federal University  
Russia  
[matveyevael@gmail.com](mailto:matveyevael@gmail.com)

**Olga Maximova**

Department of Sociology, Kazan Federal University  
Russia  
[olga\\_max@list.ru](mailto:olga_max@list.ru)

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Contemporary society provides people with various ways of personality development. Young people are most susceptible to changes that occur in economics, politics, and technology. Different types of life strategies are formed and realized by young women and men, and they eventually transform public consciousness in general. The article is devoted to the analysis of life strategies and scenarios of female students living in Russia and European countries. For this purpose, a series of in-depth interviews with girls was conducted, as well as a visual analysis of the accounts of young women on the social network Instagram. Today, the process of westernization is observable – the adoption of Western European structures, practices, and lifestyles by non-European societies and countries has become a significant cultural phenomenon. Thus, based on the data obtained, it is possible to define a life strategy as a system of ideas and guidelines of the individual, aimed at the conscious design of the future. It determines and directs the behavior of individuals, reflecting the idea of the future and life path. A life strategy includes not only orientations, but also ways to achieve and realize certain goals and expectations.

**Keywords:** Youth. Gender stereotypes. Career. Family. Visual analysis.

## RESUMO

A sociedade contemporânea oferece às pessoas várias formas de desenvolvimento da personalidade. Os jovens são os mais susceptíveis às mudanças que ocorrem na economia, na política e na tecnologia. As mulheres e os homens jovens formam e realizam diferentes tipos de estratégias de vida, que acabam por transformar a consciência pública em geral. O artigo é dedicado à análise das estratégias e cenários de vida de estudantes do sexo feminino que vivem na Rússia e em países europeus. Para o efeito, foi realizada uma série de entrevistas em profundidade com raparigas, bem como uma análise visual das contas de jovens mulheres na rede social Instagram. Hoje em dia, o processo de ocidentalização é observável - a adoção de estruturas, práticas e estilos de vida da Europa Ocidental por sociedades e países não europeus tornou-se um fenómeno cultural significativo. Assim, com base nos dados obtidos, é possível definir uma estratégia de vida como um sistema de ideias e directrizes do indivíduo, que visa a concepção consciente do futuro. Determina e orienta o comportamento dos indivíduos, reflectindo a ideia de futuro e de percurso de vida. Uma estratégia de vida inclui não só orientações, mas também formas de alcançar e realizar determinados objectivos e expectativas.

**Palavras-chave:** Jovens. Estereótipos de género. Carreira profissional. Família. Análise visual.

## **Introduction**

In politics and social systems, norms of social regulation, including areas of political structure, human rights, social context of self-realization of the individual, religious life, ethnic and national tolerance, freedom of information, and creativity, are being transformed, which contributes to obtaining new values, ideals. As a result, every individual constructs social and personal identity in a complex way, resulting in the forming of goals, a vision of the future, and implementation scenarios (Alexeenko, 2009; Marinov, 2008; Naumova, 1995).

Student youth is the most dynamic, flexible, and active part of society, because this social group is the most subject to various social processes, including globalization and westernization. Students on the stage of building life strategies and personal values participate in communication and actively use its new forms and technologies (Zubok, 2020). Modern young people are increasingly focused on individualized scenarios and the realization of personal interests, not collective ones, which contribute to building life and career paths (Isupova & Utkina, 2016; Miheeva, 2014; Osipova & Enveri, 2016).

Global tendencies of democratization and liberalization in the last decades have caused significant transformations in the lifestyle of Russian people and their

values, and it has found a reflection in the construction of gender roles – changing the expression of marriage and family, former main priorities. However, besides new opportunities, there are a lot of new barriers that young people face, including the fact that young women have to resist certain difficulties and obstacles because of gender stereotypes.

Contemporary Russian society is characterized by a high degree of continuity of Soviet models, where a woman got the right to work and regulate reproductive scenarios on her own. Despite the extension of patriarchal values, the state is interested in gender equality, which supports certain gender contracts and imposes a double burden on a woman – caring for the family and self-realization at work (Kotomanova, 2013; Maksimova, 2007).

Undoubtedly, modern young people are already firmly integrated into market relations, and consumer practices, which links them with their Western peers. However, a special historical experience, the Soviet past, conflicting with the aggravated inequality of the post-Soviet era, creates a special ground for the formation of youth identity.

Thus, this study of life strategies of female students reveals the direction of life choices of named social group, as well as the features of constructing the future by female students of Russian and Western European cultures.

### **Life strategies: lines of theoretical research**

In the scientific definition, the concept of "life strategies" requires conceptualization and clarification. In its most general form, it is interpreted as a system of perspective ideas and orientations, as well as plans and value orientations that determine the individual's behavior and construct the future. There are several basic approaches to understanding and interpreting the concept of "life strategy" by Russian scientists. For example, K.A. Abulkhanova-Slavskaya believes that a person is an active self-regulating, and self-organizing subject. The life strategies of the individuals differ in how the conditions of life are changed and transformed by the

individual values. According to K.A. Abulkhanova-Slavskaya, each person's life path is constructed individually and therefore unique. I.N. Tartakovskaya also notes that a life strategy is a conscious behaviour of an individual, the purpose of which is to achieve life goals and realize interests and values. The life strategy is determined, according to the sociologist, by the individuality and the social background within which the life of the individual takes place (Maximova et al., 2018; Osipova & Enveri, 2016).

Researchers T.E. Reznik and Y.M. Reznik argue that life strategy is a dynamic category, which is characterized by a fairly built set of values, goals, and behavioral attitudes. Individuals realize personal guidelines through their behavior. The researchers emphasize that life strategy has two sides: subjective and objective.

The subjective one is expressed in uniqueness, originality, and supra-situation of individual meanings and goals, and the objective one is in the presence of culturally determined patterns, norms, and values acquired by the individual in the process of socialization. Researchers distinguish three types of life strategies: the strategy of well-being, the strategy of success, and the strategy of self-improvement. Strategies are identified based on several institutional features (Reznik & Reznik, 1995).

In Western sociology, the approach to the analysis of life strategies is different: there is a theoretical approach, called Life Course Theory, also known as Life Course Approach or Life Course Perspective, which was developed in 1960 to analyze people's lives within structural, social, and cultural contexts. The origins of this approach are considered to be pioneering studies of the 1920s, such as W. Thomas and F. Znaniecki's "The Polish Peasant in Europe and America" and Karl Mannheim's essay "Problem of Generations". This approach researches the history of a person's life and various events, which influence future decisions (for example, marriage, and involvement in crime). A life path is defined as "the sequence of socially defined events and roles that an individual plays over time". In particular, the approach focuses on the connection between people and the historical and socio-economic context in which these people lived.

G. Elder's work "Children of the Great Depression" (1974) is a classic study of this area, in which the author addressed the problem of the delayed influence of the Great Depression on the generation that grew up in its conditions, establishing a connection between the changing world and people's lives, abandoning the concept of socialization (Shanahan et al., 2004).

Within the framework of this article and empirical research, the author relies on the approach to understanding the "life strategies" of T.E. Reznik and Y.M. Reznik, in which strategies are defined as dynamic systems in which systems of value orientations and comprehended behavioral attitudes are built.

### **Methods and Materials**

Empirical research of life strategies of female students is based on semi-structured interviews, which helped to determine individual opinions of interviewees as representatives of the given social group, and content analysis of Instagram accounts of female students. The research object is women aged 18 to 26 from Russian and Western European universities. So, within the framework of interviews, conversations were held with 6 girls studying at universities in different countries of Western Europe, and 6 girls studying at Russian universities.

Table 1 – Description of interviewees

	Age	Country / City
<i>Informant 1</i>	26	Finland
<i>Informant 2</i>	19	Austria
<i>Informant 3</i>	23	France
<i>Informant 4</i>	23	Scotland
<i>Informant 5</i>	22	Belgium
<i>Informant 6</i>	21	Czech Republic
<i>Informant 7</i>	20	Russia, Saint Petersburg
<i>Informant 8</i>	20	Russia, Kazan
<i>Informant 9</i>	21	Russia, Novokuznetsk
<i>Informant 10</i>	19	Russia, Voronezh
<i>Informant 11</i>	18	Russia, Penza
<i>Informant 12</i>	21	Russia, Moscow

Thus, informants expressed various versions of the future they expect to have. According to analyzed interviews, it should be noted that the family still plays a very important role in lives of young woman, regardless of their country of residence: “family is an obligatory stage in life. ... relatives should be with you” (In.9); “it’s [family] on the top of my priority list” (In. 1).

Moreover, based on the results of interviews, we can conclude that, unlike European female students, Russian young women take marriage more seriously, believing that this is an important, sometimes mandatory, stage and a natural continuation of a successful relationship with a partner. Young European women do

not consider marriage as a mandatory stage, they believe that it is possible to live without civil marriage if the partner is really “your person”.

Girls are guided by the idea that romantic relationships and family are not always coherent. Even long-term romantic relationships are considered in the context of specific type of interactions, and not as a preparatory stage for marriage. However, there are also other opinions.

In terms of the topic of parenthood and the need for motherhood, experience is very diverse - unwillingness to have children at all, the possibility of having a child (children) out of marriage, the birth of a child (children) only within marriage. No unique scenarios regarding reproductive behavior relative to the country of residence have been identified.

Furthermore, when it comes to the partner, all the interviewed women are primarily looking for understanding, support, unity of goals and guidelines. Thus, it can be noted that in Russia the transformation of Soviet gender contracts, in which everyday practices of postponing motherhood for 10 years and the creation of a family were entrenched. And it is important to point out that the image of a partner in a romantic relationship is identified primarily with the role of a friend, a like-minded person, rather than a breadwinner and father. "In a long-term relationship mutual assistance, understanding, empathy are important ..., compromises are needed to keep the relationship in balance, ... and also a respect is needed" (In.12). "I think the same interests are important, although maybe even this is not so important, rather the same values and life guidelines" (In.1).

There are similar gender frames of young women in Europe and Russia, and, at the same time, a visible transformation of the scenarios of Russian women towards the pluralization of gender relations. If during the Soviet period the dominant contracts for women were “traditional” and “working woman”, then the results of the interviews point out the dominance of new female identities based on freedom of choice.

Opinions about the relationship between work and family in lives of female students differ. Some women believe that “balance is a difficult process, but

possible” (In.4), others note that it is impossible to achieve it in full, you need to choose a priority. For Russian women, life scenarios are less clear than life paths of Western female students: girls from Europe describe their future more specifically, they indicate the importance of the following aspects - self-development, travel, new acquaintances and gaining experience: “now I am looking for an internship in Belgium or Austria, so that later I can return to France with some experience”(In.3). There are reflections about the future of Russian girls with complete uncertainty: “I don’t have any plans, I don’t know what to do at all. I don't have any life strategy...I don’t know what will happen in a week.” (In.10)

According to interviews, Russian students are more focused on the strategy of well-being, which consists of a stable, full of necessary benefits, comfortable life. While European students are more focused on the strategy of success, which consists of an active, eventful life, including social events. It can be illustrated with quotes:

“I want to have a comfortable free life, with proper earnings, because I want to have my own house, me dream life, when you don’t count how much you spent on diapers, how much on milk. And at any time, I could afford everything I want, everything me children need” (In.8)

“The world is so big, and life is so short” (In.6)

In the following paragraphs, the data obtained by using the visual method will be analysed. As part of the study, attention was paid to the study of elements of life scenarios of female students, which they represent in the space of Instagram. The analysis of life models is revealed through the concept of visual sociology of Polish researcher P. Sztompka, according to whom the analysis of visual data, ordered in time, makes it possible to identify social representations, attitudes, behavior patterns and development of the community. Bodily activity, interactions, various objects used by individuals, communications, cultural attitudes, and differences - this is what photographs can register, according to the sociologist. That is why the study of visual data related to the accounts of female students on



Instagram made it possible to reflect the most significant value, semantic components of their life strategies.

Speaking about Russian female students, it is important to note that the most common strategy, which is illustrated on their Instagram accounts, is the strategy of well-being. The following trends can be distinguished:

Firstly, one of the most common indicators include romantic and family relationships, which indicates a strong orientation of young girls towards the family;

Secondly, friendly relations are also an important indicator, which outlines the strong social ties that exist in society, in particular within the younger generation;

Thirdly, social spaces in the field of nutrition and beauty, as places to satisfy needs, also take an important place in self-presentation on Instagram and in demonstrating well-being, which indicates the desire for personal comfort of young people;

Fourthly, such indicator as the space of the house in the context of its comfort and well-being is also quite often observed in the profiles of female students of Russian universities, which indicates the desire for a comfortable and stable life.

At the same time, the most common strategy of the Western European students has become the life-success strategy. Based on this, the following trends can be identified:

Firstly, the most obvious marker was traveling, which indicates the active life of European students;

Secondly, quite often European students, unlike Russian ones, post photos of the university, libraries, the educational process, which indicates a certain desire for competence and the importance of education in their lives;

Thirdly, European students more often demonstrate various achievements on Instagram: from sports in the form of competitions and awards for them, personal victories, conferences, diplomas, and certificates, which also speaks of the value of success in their lives.

The strategy of realizing oneself in public life in the field of social work is the least common in both subgroups. The most common indicators in this category include activism in the work of non-profit organizations, cultural events, and volunteering. In addition, an important component of this strategy is creativity (for example, painting or theatrical activity), spiritual practices (for example, yoga).

According to the provisions of T.E. Reznik and Y.M. Reznik, the distribution of certain strategies depends on the given society, its socio-economic and cultural development, the quality of life of the population, the presence of the rule of law, democratic rights and freedoms, and the influence of traditions. In addition to that, the authors argue that the choice of a particular strategy is due to belonging to a certain class. So, according to researchers, in modern Western society, the most common strategy is the strategy of success in life, which is explained by the spread of the values of individualism, individual freedom, developed competition and comprehensive pluralism. In such societies the most important values are various forms of activity, forms of social life, and personal initiative. It is most common among representatives of the middle class, scientific intelligentsia, politicians, businessmen, leaders. The results of a visual analysis of Instagram accounts of female students in Western European countries confirmed the opinion of the authors regarding the prevalence of the life success strategy.

In addition, life well-being strategies are more characteristic of traditional and crisis societies, determining a lower level of development of the production sphere, an economic crisis, and authoritarian forms of government. It is typical to a greater extent for manual workers or marginalized strata. So, in Russian society, which is in a state of socio-economic crisis, well-being strategies are indeed more common among female students. Self-development strategies are more common for educated strata of the post-industrial society: artists and cultural figures, the intelligentsia.

Thus, it was revealed that among the students of Russian and Western European universities, various and heterogeneous life strategies prevail. For

Russian women, the strategy of life well-being is more typical, and for European women, the strategy of life success is closer.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of the empirical study, which consisted of two stages: interviewing female students and visual analysis of their profiles on Instagram, both general discursive strategies, features and differences in the choice of life scenarios were identified. It was revealed that the prevailing life strategy of Russian women included the desire for a comfortable, stable life that satisfies all emerging needs, while for European students the strategy of active life and success has become more common, implying a life full of events, the desire for new discoveries and activities. Important components of the life strategies of Russian women are comfort, stability, financial well-being, satisfaction of basic needs and security needs. At the same time, female students from Europe focused on cognitive needs, travel, and creativity. The conditionality of such differences is more associated with the socio-economic and cultural environment of girls, which they are surrounded by.

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