

Original Paper

KZ Generation: In Search of Cultural Identity

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Abstract

The relevance of article is caused due to the need for studying a problem of young Kazakhstani citizens cultural identification through a prism of the sociological theory of generations. The purpose of the article consists in scientific polemic with foreign authors in an assessment of values and a way of the younger generation life. Being guided by data of sociological researches of the last years, he analyzes structure of values of “mellenial” and “centenial” generations – “Nazarbayev generations” (M. Laruelle), or in author’s interpretation “KZ generation”. In article it is offered to consider features of sociocultural identification and socialization of young Kazakhstan citizens through a prism of a metalny dilemma “West-East”. It is proved that traditional values - the main characteristic of modern youth of Kazakhstan, do not prevent it to integrate into world information space. Article is intended for experts in the sphere of youth work and the state youth policy, teachers of an education system, scientists.

Keywords

youth, youth values, generations theory, “mellenial/centenial” generation, personality identification, Internet, sociocultural stratification, traditionalism, eurocentrism, cultural socialization

1. Introduction

The public rhetoric of recent years has given rise to many illusory myths about youth, either idealizing or frightening the older generations, giving rise to numerous “moral panics” in public opinion. Meanwhile, juvenological studies show that only a deep and comprehensive study of the interests and life plans, value orientations and way of life of the younger generation in specific historical and cultural conditions makes it possible to objectively assess the socio-cultural processes in society and predict the prospects for its development.

The cultural identification of youth as an object of sociological research attracted the attention of sociologists in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in connection with the formation of new types of

identities and cultural practices in the youth environment. Under cultural identification, researchers understood not only the process of self-perception within a particular culture, the experience of a sense of belonging to a national culture and the interiorization of its values (Teslenko, 2007), but also the construction of new types of cultural practices and “youth identities” (Omelchenko, 2010). Recent studies show that the interaction of the young generation with the socio-cultural environment goes along several development vectors: Western, Eastern and Eurasian (Youth of Central Asia. Kazakhstan, 2016). On the basis of fusion and interpenetration in modern society, the modernization of public consciousness takes place, the main locomotive of which is the youth.

In Kazakhstan, over the past two or three years, there have been dramatic changes on the political scene, first of all, the transfer of power by Nursultan Nazarbayev, a series of mass protests that made many experts talk about the place and role of youth in the social and political modernization of the country. The growing importance of the “youth issue” in the context of the transition of power and the formation of new structural and cultural positions of young Kazakhs actualized the need for a deep study of the processes of cultural identification in Kazakhstani society.

2. Materials and Research Methods

One of the first Kazakh studies in this area was the author’s work “Cultural Socialization of Youth: Kazakhstani Model” (2007), which analyzed the socio-cultural potential of the Kazakhstani society and proposed conceptual approaches to organizing the cultural space of youth at the stage of transit social development of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Teslenko, 2007).

Since 2001, a significant phenomenon in Kazakhstani sociological science has been the decision of the government to prepare annual National Reports “Youth of Kazakhstan”, dedicated to the analysis of the situation of young people and the state of the state youth policy. On the basis of sociological research, official statistics and data from other government agencies, the reports show the dynamics of value orientations, attitudes, interests and motives of Kazakhstani youth, characterizing them as a phenomenon of social life and a subject of social relations (Youth of Kazakhstan, 2020).

Of great interest for understanding the problem of cultural identification of Kazakhstani youth is the fundamental work prepared by Kazakhstani and German sociologists within the framework of the F. Ebert Foundation project in Kazakhstan. Based on the methodology of the well-known in Europe Shell Youth Study project, adapted to the conditions and characteristics of Kazakhstan, in 2014 the main areas of interest, life strategies and everyday tactics, values and ideas of young people, as well as the problems and risks that they face in the process of socialization were studied (Youth of Central Asia. Kazakhstan, 2016).

This work initiated a series of publications in Kazakhstani and foreign media, among which, in my opinion, the most interesting is the book of the director of the Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies (IERES), Professor of the J. Washington University Marlene Laruelle “The Nazarbayev Generation: Youth in Kazakhstan”, which prompted me to write this article (The

Nazarbayev Generation, 2019). In a scientific debate with a foreign author, I would like to identify the real features of the younger generation of Kazakhstanis, their values and way of life, so to speak, “from the inside”. This article is based on a secondary analysis of the sociological data of recent years.

3. Research Results

In our analysis, we will rely on the theory of generations, popular among sociologists, by American scientists Neil Howe and William Strauss, who proposed to operate not with age parameters in the study of generational issues, but with the deep values of a particular era (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Scientists have scientifically substantiated the cycles of the appearance of new generations every 20-25 years, values and models

In its original version, the theory was based solely on studies of American society; later, the principles of the theory of generations were also used to analyze generational processes in other countries, including the post-Soviet space. True, the watershed between the generations of the post-Soviet countries is shifted by 5-10 years compared to the United States, which is associated with more serious. The problem of generations is a question of identity, and identity is the correlation of oneself with others – other generations, other cultures, other ethnic groups. This kind of search for identity is deeply relevant for young Kazakhs. On the one hand, Kazakhstan is traditionally referred to as a Turkic proto-civilization (that is, not fully formed as a civilization), which did not create its own common civilizational values, except for some elements of a warlike culture and expansionist values; on the other hand, it is a Muslim country, but without strict religious regulation of social behavior.

If in terms of civilization Kazakhstan has always belonged to the Turkic-Muslim world, then culturally it is a Russian-Soviet community. The dominance of Russian culture as a donor culture in the Soviet period pushed the traditional culture and customs of the Kazakhs to the periphery of domestic life, to the rural backward hinterland, forming a split between Russian-speaking (urban) and Kazakh-speaking (rural) Kazakhs. In conditions of independence, these intercultural contradictions acquired new trends (Beysembayev, 2015, p. 196).

Kazakhstan, as a multinational and multi-clan formation, for more than a quarter of a century of independence, has formed a single cultural field in which representatives of different nationalities and social groups would have common values and guidelines, and would recognize themselves as a single people. Intercultural contradictions tear Kazakhstan into sociocultural poles: Eurocentrism and traditionalism. The Eurocentric pole of cultural development is guided by the values of industrial-urban civilization, liberalism, Western democracy and market economy. The pole of traditionalism is based on the traditions of agrarian nomadic civilization and the dominance of the patriarchal tribal (zhuz) paternalistic mentality of the rural environment.

Intercultural contradictions between the socio-cultural poles of society determined the parameters of the youth socialization models, determined by the ratio of the opportunities for harmonization and satisfaction of the basic, social and spiritual needs of young people in relation to the

civilizational-historical vertical or the opposition “village - city”. Generalized simulation results are presented in Figure 1.

First of all, there is a numerous traditional model of socialization inherent in a large part of the rural youth and urban migrants, the first generation of which was born in the Kazakh (or mixed) village (aul) with its traditional patriarchal culture, the authority of the elders, the priority of the clan, and, ultimately, state over the individual. Usually they finish the Kazakh school, they speak and think mainly in the Kazakh language, in relation to them, the Russian-European culture acts as a different ethnic, alien culture. When moving to a Russian-speaking city with its individualistic civilization and foreign language environment, they experience strong social and psychological discomfort and cultural shock. And although they are gradually mastering the urban way of life, new value orientations and habits, nevertheless, they do not succeed in getting rid of their marginality and traditional mentality.

The following model of socialization of Kazakhstani youth can be called mobilization. It is typical for Russian-speaking youth from rural areas and some of the Kazakh youth, located at the junction of two cultures - Kazakh and Russian-European, between rural and urban culture. Its distinctive feature is that it occurs under the influence of external, extreme factors, first of all, unequal starting conditions of socialization in comparison with urbanized youth. They are characterized by ethno-cultural and linguistic dualism (they are half Kazakh, half Russian), two main determinants are rural origin (civilization component) and Russian education (ethno-cultural component). They are more tolerant of non-Kazakh ethnic groups, organically absorbed both Russian-European and traditional Kazakh culture, speak and think in Russian as easily as in Kazakh, although not all of them speak the literary Kazakh language.

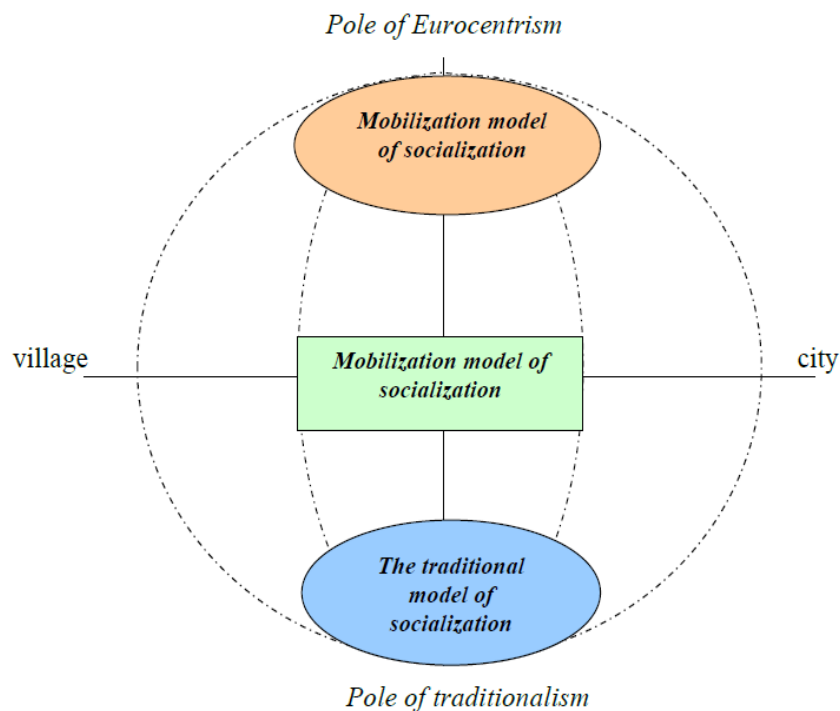


Figure 1. Socio-cultural Stratification of the Kazakhstani Society

Finally, the modernization model of socialization is characteristic of urban Russian-speaking youth, among which a small (less than 3-5%) group of people from families of Kazakh intellectuals of the second and third generation stands out. From childhood, they grew up in urban culture, in Russian-European culture, as if in their own element, and the Russian language is most often their native and only language. As a product of urban civilization, they are more receptive to an individualistic market outlook based on their own personality, and not on generic communal-collectivist or statist priorities.

On the basis of this socio-cultural stratification, let us consider in more detail the value orientations of two generational groups - millennials and centennials (in the interpretation of Marlene Laruelle “The Nazarbayev Generation”).

Millennials are young people aged 27-35 years old, before whose eyes, for three decades of power of N. Nazarbayev, Kazakhstan from a “post-Soviet republic” has developed into an authoritative subject of international relations, with a stable political system and a competitive economy. The proportion of this generation in the youth cohort is the highest - 39.7% (Youth of Kazakhstan, 2020, p. 131). This is the generation of “Bolashakovites” (the first graduates of the presidential program of foreign educational grants “Bolashak”) – ambitious young people aimed at career growth and quick enrichment in the conditions of the formation of a new national elite.

The transfer of the capital from Alma-Ata (1993) to Tselinograd (now Nur-Sultan) stimulated the long-awaited rejuvenation of public administration at all levels of government. This process activated, first of all, urban Russian-speaking Kazakhs from the group of “modernization” socialization. They are well educated, mobile and pragmatic. Higher education for them is only a tool for career growth and well-being. They tend to delay responsible adult life for the long term, which significantly differs from previous generations.

Sociologist Kathleen Shaputis called this phenomenon “*crowded nest syndrome*” (Shaputis, 2004), but I consider my own version of this phenomenon, “*bald boys*” (Teslenko, 2015), to be more accurate in the context of Kazakhstani realities. This common meme means “*Peter Pan syndrome*”. Young people, like the hero of the J. Barry’s novel, do not want to grow up and live in their own enchanted country, full of infantile charm.

“Y” is the first generation that has no heroes, there are only idols. The collapse of the USSR caused a very painful breakdown of cultural and value orientations, which caused a significant part of the youth to experience a state of culture shock and an age-related desire to “hide their heads in the sand.”

Marlene Laruelle rightly calls them conformists. “They believe in family values, material comfort, do not challenge the values of their parents, perceive higher education only as a way to get a good job, they believe that social ties will help them build a career and arrange a life” (The Nazarbayev Generation, 2019, p. 8). Recent studies (Omelchenko, 2010; McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2009) convincingly show approximately the same ratio of material and spiritual values in the system of value orientations of Kazakhstani youth. The summarized results are shown in the diagram in Figure 2.

Self-expression (self-mania, flash mobs, etc.) has become extremely important for this generation, to which the Internet and communication technologies have given a welcome boost. The desire to multiply one's "Me", to stand out from the crowd, to be individual, has become the cornerstone of youth culture in Kazakhstan, especially among the so-called "golden youth". "Generation MeMeMe" captures every step (FitBit), location (Foursquare) and genetic data (23 and Me). Narcissism as a personal characteristic of a person is three times more common in today's twenty-year-olds than in older generations. As they grow older, they receive so many incentive prizes for participating in various contests and competitions that 40% of them expect to be promoted every two years, regardless of success (Generation MeMeMe, 2019).

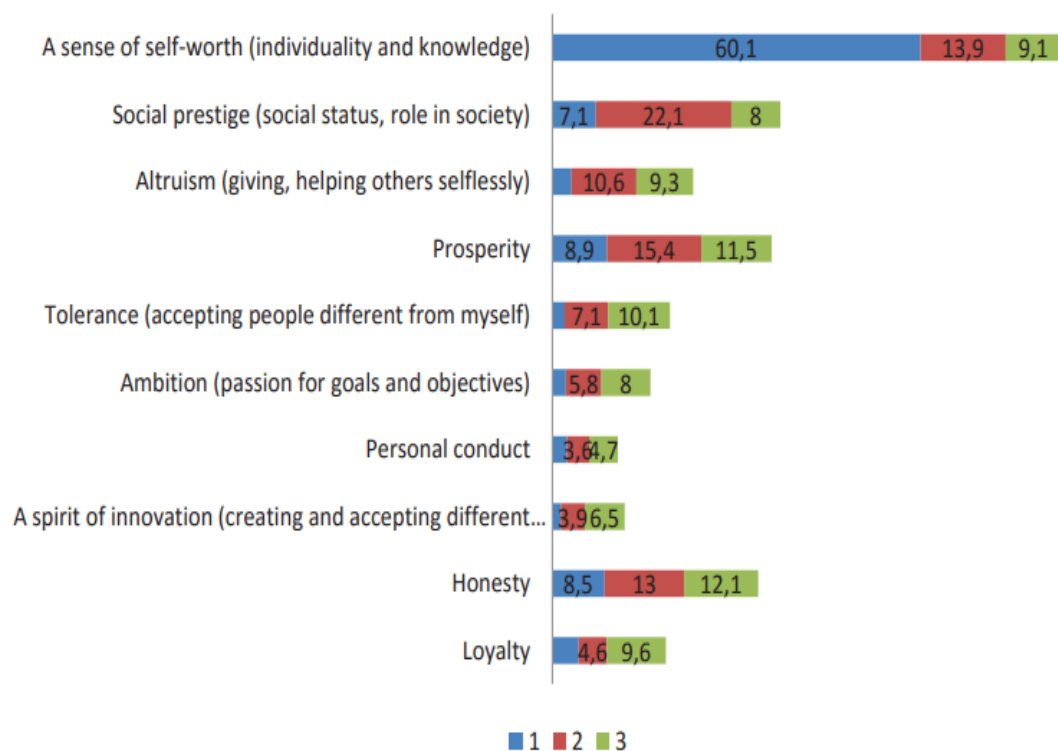


Figure 2. The Qualities most Valued by Kazakhs

"Y" interact with the world around the clock, but mostly through the screen. Meeting each other, they continue to write messages on the phone. 70% of them check their phone every hour, many experience phantom pocket vibration syndrome. Constantly looking for a dose of dopamine ("Someone liked my Facebook post!") reduces creativity. According to the Torrance tests, youth creativity increased from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. Then it fell - and collapsed sharply in 1998. Since 2000, there has been a similar drop in scores for empathy, which is necessary to be interested in other people and points of view. This is likely due to the rise in narcissism and the lack of face-to-face communication.

The Internet, urbanization, and Westernization of all aspects of social life have created a new generation of incredibly self-confident and self-obsessed people. Moreover, all this is no longer a

problem for the purely rich: the poor are even more narcissistic, materialistic and dependent on technology.

Millennials are more receptive to the ideals of Western democracy, humanism, liberalism, internationalism and universal values. But the dilemma “East - West” in their minds: European values - the rights and freedoms of the individual, the dictatorship of the law, free labor, humane treatment of women, technological progress, are nonetheless illogically combined with “Asianism”. As well-known Kazakh publicist Sergey Duvanov figuratively described the situation: “in our real behavior, a young Kazakhstani is likened to a man who says: “I’m going to take a shower, I want to wash off my Asianness!”, but at the same time he washes only his head, washes a little. This suggests that this dirt is pleasant to him, he is used to it”.

The marginality of consciousness and mentality is the main characteristic of the “millennial” generation, pushing many of them to search for their cultural identity. Often this search takes the bizarre forms of “reinvented traditions” and the mythologization of history. The so-called “Kazakh-speaking candidates of sciences” were especially distinguished in this, of which more than three hundred were stamped in a short period of the formation of the national education system. As a rule, these are people “who cannot find application for their “Kazakh brains” in a Russified society” (Beysembayev. 2015). Namely, the millennials from this cohort were active participants in the public discussion around the transition of Kazakh writing from Cyrillic to Latin. The deadline for completing the reform ends this year, but the main goals have not been achieved, creating only a host of new problems and difficulties, both in the educational field and in the information space. True, as a symbolic gesture demonstrating the departure of Kazakhstan from Russia, it took place.

Interestingly, an expert survey of the Council for Youth Policy under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2000 showed that 35% of young respondents considered the United States a worthy example for development, 49% believed that the EU countries should become such an example, and only 11% offered Russia as an example. and only 5% pointed to a unique model of the country’s development. A 2015 survey conducted by the Foundation. F. Eberta has already shown other moods of young people: 47% of young people identified Russia as a country on which Kazakhstan “should orient its development”, while 19% believed that the EU should be an advanced model, 10% - China and only 8% - USA (Youth of Central Asia, 2016, p. 166). What is this if not disillusionment with liberal values? However, liberal values are not only liberal capitalism, feminism and LGBT, but also a responsible social democracy that provides social services worthy of a person and protects his rights and freedoms. Millennials actively supported the policy of “enlightened authoritarianism” of Nursultan Nazarbayev and were active supporters of the cultural “Kazakhization” of all aspects of public life (in the terminology of Martha Breal Olcott, Sally Kamins, and others). Over the past few decades, the authorities have succeeded in this: Kazakhstan today is a country of Kazakhs, in which ethnic minorities represent a declining part of the population (Boonstra & Laruelle, 2014). The former cultural divide between the Russified urban world and the Kazakh-speaking rural world is being bridged by

internal migration from the countryside, thereby eroding urban culture with the traditional way of life and archaic cultural habits of the aul.

Centennials are young people aged 16 to 26, “children of the liberal economy” and consumer society. This is 27.1% in the structure of the population (Youth of Kazakhstan, 2020), young people who lived in a world of political stability and relative material prosperity, having developed a strong consumer culture. They were born “with a button in their finger” in the era of the all-accessible Internet, without which they cannot imagine their lives. Such a dense integration of centennials into the digital society has formed a number of basic psychological properties of the generation:

- 1) lack of a clear boundary between the real and virtual world;
- 2) visual perception of information;
- 3) “clip consciousness” and multitasking;
- 4) emotional depression;
- 5) low level of critical thinking.

The Centennials are the generation of independence, in the terminology of Marlene Laruelle, “the true generation of Nazarbayev.” Their level of conformity is off scale. They are far from a revolutionary transformation of the world: they do not challenge the values and lifestyle of their parents, they trust the family more than any other social institution (over 90%), they build their relationship with their parents on partnerships of trust (at the same time, parents do not always are authority). They oppose early marriages and approve of the ban on abortions (59.8%), dream of having at least two children (37.1%) and living in a family dominated by the father (82.4%), consider virginity an important quality of a girl before marriage (56.8%) (Youth of Central Asia, 2016, p. 105).

The generation of “centennials” are supporters of a healthy lifestyle: in the ranking of life values, healthy eating ranks first, 56% of respondents consider alcohol consumption unacceptable, 36% regularly use contraceptives.

Being constantly online, communicating with a large number of very different people without reference to race, gender, appearance or place of residence has formed perhaps the most tolerant generation of centennials. The only exception is communication with persons of non-traditional orientation: 58% declare that it is undesirable for homosexuals to appear in their close circle. At the same time, 4% of young respondents would not want to coexist with criminals, and 16% would not want to coexist with homosexuals and lesbians.

In conditions of economic instability, the value of religion is exacerbated, which allows young people to feel more stable. About 80% of the Z generation consider themselves believers, about the same number believe in the existence of heaven and hell, of which only 5% say that they observe all religious rites and regulations. Only 2% of young people adhere to an atheistic worldview. In a short historical period, the atheism that was spread everywhere in the Soviet period did not come to naught by chance. Traditionalism as a behavioral model of the Kazakhs was latently present throughout the seventy years of being part of the Soviet Union. The Kazakh ethnos never created its own proletariat. It

was mostly workers of non-indigenous ethnic groups who worked, it was they who created the enclaves of industrialization and urbanization, and 80% of the population were outside these zones.

The Centennials are an apolitical generation. On average, 40% are not interested in politics at all, and the same number are sometimes interested: 20% follow the situation in the CIS countries, 10% - events in the world (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2009, p. 135). At the same time, the majority forms their political views, focusing on the opinion of their parents (as a rule, generation X). Perhaps this can explain their positive attitude towards integration processes in the post-Soviet space: 90% of young Kazakhs approve of the creation of the Customs and Eurasian Economic Union.

Measurements of the political socialization of the younger generation show their loyalty to the current government. In the rating of political trust in the first place - the president and the government. But it should be remembered that a high rating of trust in the authorities does not at all guarantee a low level of protest mood among the youth. The protests of recent years have rather shown the activity of the "Millennials" than the "Centennials", but history teaches that it is not the youth who initiate the protest movement. This potential is rather possessed by the older generations ("baby boomers" and "X"), on which the younger generation focuses its political participation.

It should not be forgotten that the Kazakh society is deeply stratified, but not according to the principle of social groups, but ethnic ones. That is, it turns out a kind of pyramid, where at the top are ethnic Kazakhs, in whose hands are all state power and large financial structures, then - entrepreneurs, mostly representatives of various ethnic minorities, then - an intermediate layer in the person of the Russian-European ethnic group, and, at the very bottom - Kazakhs, deprived of everything and living in depressed, inaccessible regions (Boonstra & Laruelle, 2014).

The youth of this group, primarily the children of oralmans, act as a *mainstream generation*, which in public discourse acts as a nationalist opposition. In this regard, Marlene Laruelle's arguments about the political future of youth in Kazakhstan are not without foundation. The model of cultural identification and socialization that we built earlier does not change vectors, it only becomes somewhat radicalized along the ideological line: the nationalist pole (national-patriots) and the liberal-democratic pole. The first is more isolationist, looking to the past, the second is more cosmopolitan, globalized, looking to the future. They differ in terms of generations. The basis of the first group is made up of those who are over 40 years old (mainly generation X), and the second group consists of millennials and centennials.

Under the conditions of "Denazarbaification", in the terminology of Marlene Laruelle, the process of transferring power, the younger generation will be forced to clearly define their socio-political attitudes. First of all, we are talking about the increasing pressure of the nationalist minority on the processes of "cultural Kazakhization" and relations with Russia, as well as raising the status of Islam in the public space. The question is how realistic is this?

The younger generation of Kazakhs are multilingual, as a rule, Kazakh, Russian and English. Accordingly, thanks to modern IT technologies, they are more integrative: their potential for integration into any other social and ethno-cultural community is much higher than that of monolinguals. Bilingual

consciousness is more mobile. However, they are less manageable, or rather, they are more difficult to manipulate. The Kazakh language is just a way of identification for them, while Russian and English are tools for integration into world culture and science, without which it is impossible to become a competitive person.

The situation is approximately the same in terms of religious identification. Traditionally, to be a Kazakh means to belong to Islamic culture and the Muslim world. But in the context of the geocultural expansion of Anglo-American culture and Western living standards, religious principles are unlikely to become attractive to a generation fixated on digital interaction, where there is less human communication, more technogenic. It is already clear that children and adolescents are better versed in technology, in something material, than in human emotions and human behavior. This is reflected even in the communication of children with their parents: the communicative distance between them increases, and the chain of social inheritance, the transfer of experience is interrupted.

Separately, it should be said about the “Mellenials” children – the “Alpha” generation. According to the definition of the Australian scientist Mark McCrindle, the name “alpha” indicates that the old chronology of generations has been reset to zero and humanity is starting a new alphabet (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2009). These are the children of the coming era of artificial intelligence who will turn the world upside down. It is too early to talk about the values of this generation, but it is already clear that in order to compete with artificial intelligence, they will have to develop emotional intelligence (EI), which is not available to machines. So they need to acquire three basic competencies - adaptability, the ability to work with information and the ability to find psychological contact with any person. All these competencies do not fit into the framework of traditionalism, which means that in the future, as the Kazakh society develops, urgent problems in the field of cultural socialization of young generations will be addressed in line with global trends.

You can criticize or idealize the younger generation, try to fit it into some socio-cultural schemes, but scientific research shows that, despite the adherence to traditional values, in their development they are close to global trends. I am sure that generations of “millennials”, and especially “centennials”, are aware that their future is in their hands.

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