

The War in Ukraine: What Adolescents Know, and Where They Are Getting Their Information From

A current nationwide survey of 181 adolescents on the perception of the unfolding events in Ukraine shows that most adolescents are informed about the basic situation. They are getting their initial information on the events primarily from traditional media such as television and radio, but also from the internet, social media, newspapers and apps.

Munich, 25.2.2022 – On 23 February, one day before the attack, and on 24 February, the day the war against Ukraine started, the International Central Institute for Youth and Education Television (IZI) at the *Bayerischer Rundfunk* surveyed n= 181 adolescents (84 boys, 96 girls, 1 non-binary) between the ages of 13 and 17 on how they source information, and their knowledge and assessment of the current situation in Ukraine.

What adolescents know about the conflict at this point in time

Nine in ten of the adolescents studied are able to describe the conflict and the level of threat: “The Russians want to invade the territory of Ukraine” (boy, 14, 23.2.2022). On the day Russia started the war against Ukraine: “Ukraine is being threatened and attacked by Russia” (girl, 14, 24.2.2022). Over half of the adolescents studied had a rather simple understanding of the situation, limited to the fact that “Russia is attacking Ukraine” (boy, 13), a fourth wrote a more complex description.

Only half the respondents discussed the beginning of the attack as part of a school lesson

Although the level of threat was already clearly visible on 23.2, only just under three in ten respondents said it had been discussed at school. On 24.2 this figure rose to around one in two. Up to that point, only just over one in five adolescents had talked about it with family or friends. Many of the adolescents surveyed were left to look for information on the unfolding events themselves, so media played an important role in informing the respondents about the situation.

Most adolescents got their information from television, radio and apps such as BR24

45 % of the respondents got their media information from television often mentioned were the PB news *Tagesschau* and *ZDFheute*, but also the PB Morning Magazine (*MOMA*) or the PB children’s news *logo!* were mentioned. A quarter of the adolescents got their information “from the internet”, as the respondents somewhat vaguely put it. Just under one in five said they’d got information from the radio, whilst eating breakfast, for example. At this point in time, news apps (those mentioned included commercial channels like n-tv and the PB app BR24) were playing only a minor role; social media such as Instagram and TikTok were not yet relevant sources of information. The respondents were mainly consuming content from public service broadcasters such as the newspapers *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *Thüringer Allgemeine*. This shows that in this global political crisis, adolescents were looking to traditional media for initial information.

Medium of information	Percentage More than one answer possible
TV	45%
Internet	25%
Radio	18%
Social media general or specific reference Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, YT	12%
Newspaper	9%
Apps / smartphones	5%

What adolescents think of Putin

Most of the adolescents surveyed describe Putin as a bad, evil person with lots of power and many negative characteristics (dangerous, aggressive, power-crazed, greedy, arrogant, dishonest, brutal ...), as a “dictator who wants war” (boy, 16) or a “destroyer of democracy” (boy, 15). He is described as “dangerous and dishonest” (girl, 14) and as “an evil person and a dictator who kills people” (girl, 15). In their descriptions, many adolescents pathologise him, describing him as a “crackpot” or “disconnected from reality, a megalomaniac” (girl, 16), or they call him an “idiot”, a “power-hungry scumbag” or an “arsehole who thinks he can do anything he likes” (girl, 15). His actions are described as incomprehensible, which also instils fear: “He (is) a danger to the public, a person to be afraid of” (girl, 13).

In a few cases, adolescents use the history of Russian immigration to defend Russia’s aggression as the only way to prevent an ostensible genocide. One 16-year-old respondent (who attends a *Gymnasium*, a school that prepares pupils for university), for example, probably got this interpretation from a report he saw on Russian television. Some respondents admire Putin: “I think he’s very confident and he’s fighting for peace and justice for the whole world” (girl, 15, 24.2.2022), calling for respect for him because “he’s one of the most powerful people in the world” (boy, 15). In this context, some doubt that the reportage about him is balanced: “He’s always portrayed as a bad person here in Germany, but I doubt that’s all true.”

What adolescents want the German government to do

Almost all the adolescents surveyed want the German government to support Ukraine in this situation, “take a decisive stand against him (Putin)”, “defend Ukraine together with NATO” (girl, 15) and impose more severe sanctions on Russia. A few voices demand a hard, and certainly military, intervention. The majority think the German government should “keep trying for diplomatic talks with Russia” (girl, 14). A boy (15) suggests applying all possible peaceful sanctions “in order to deprive Russia of funds for the war.”

In a few cases, though, doubts are apparent, prompted by Vladimir Putin’s threatening gestures: “I’ve just heard Putin saying that anyone who stands in his way will regret it, and that’s definitely frightening.”

The study shows that most adolescents are broadly informed about the current situation and are unequivocally against Putin. They tend to get the necessary initial information about the situation from traditional media, but as the crisis goes on, this will probably shift to social media. “As events develop, it will become more and more important to educate adolescents in their media competence”, says media educator and head of the study Dr Maya Götz.

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