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NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES' IMAGES: PERSISTENT STEREOTYPES OF THE RUSSIAN STUDENT YOUTH*

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Abstract. The article presents the results of the comparative study of the neighboring countries' images in the perception of the Russian student youth. In the first part of the article, the authors emphasize the importance of public opinion as one of the key social institutions in the contemporary society though it is often manipulated by state and political organizations to ensure the public support of ambiguous decisions. There are two basic mechanisms to form social representations including the images of different countries in public opinion: spontaneous and purposeful (when officials and media use special techniques to create an image of either a dangerous enemy or the best geopolitical friend). Today in Russia the former seems to dominate for except the key geopolitical powers other countries seem to attract the state attention rather sporadically, which is supported by general political indifference, wide dissemination of information technologies, and freedom of travels all over the world, etc. The second part of the article focuses on the methodological consequences of thus developing images in the Russian public opinion. The authors explain the thematic structure and techniques of the questionnaire developed for the study of the images of China, Kazakhstan and Serbia in the Russian student youth' worldview, which were applied in the sociological survey of 2010–2011 in the project supported by the Russian Foundation for Humanities, and then again in 2016 for the comparative analysis. The last part of the article presents the results of these surveys in the comparative perspective and focuses on a few indicators to reconstruct the persistent stereotypic elements of the neighboring countries' images in the student youth worldview though there are some changes that are difficult to interpret.

Key words: comparative study; (generalized) images of neighboring countries; (persistent) social stereotypes; China; Kazakhstan; Serbia; student youth; public opinion

In the XX century, the public opinion repeatedly proved its decisive role in the domestic policy and was used by the state and political forces to mobilize people for protest or support actions in their interests. In the foreign policy, the role of public opinion is insignificant or only declaratively important as a 'basis' of ambiguous government decisions that allegedly meet the public expectations. Therefore, the dominant social stereotypes about neighboring countries are formed either spontaneously (for instance, as a result of mass tourism to the country that is not a geopolitical/economic/cultural partner of the state) or purposefully (when the state seeks public support of its decisions or actions in foreign policy, and strives to ensure a certain public perception of the situ-

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ation). In the latter case, the official political and media discourses use different techniques to create an image of either a dangerous enemy (to justify war aggression or economic sanctions) or, on the contrary, of the best geopolitical friend (to justify financial or other aid to some countries at the expense of taxpayers).

It is believed that the purposeful formation of social representations is typical for democratic countries (primarily the United States) because their governments prefer legitimate actions and decisions, i.e. accepted and approved by public opinion [4]. Certainly, there is a reason though authoritarian regimes also rely on the purposeful formation of necessary social stereotypes and have many means to do it effectively. The things become more complicated regarding the images of neighboring countries for the type of mechanism used to influence the public opinion strongly depends on the interests of the state and current geopolitical situation. Thus, the state never ignores discursive-ideological work when it comes to its key international partners or its desirable image, i.e. the government prefers a purposeful influence on public opinion; while for all other countries beyond the state interests, the government allows and accepts the spontaneous formation of generalized images and social stereotypes.

Unlike the Soviet period with the absolute dominance of the purposeful mechanism, the last decades of the Russian history demonstrate pros and cons of various combinations of purposeful and spontaneous mechanisms. Except the key geopolitical powers like China and the United States, other countries attract the state attention rather sporadically, that is why the spontaneous mechanism plays a leading role in shaping the images of neighboring countries in the Russian public opinion. Its decisive role is supported by the phenomenal in scale political indifference of population, wide dissemination of information technologies that allow different organizations and individuals (for example, travel agencies and popular bloggers) to promote their own perception and ‘images’ in social networks, and freedom of travels all over the world that generates tons of public photos of ‘exotic’ and famous elements of other countries social and natural landscapes. In other words, the (geo)political picture of the world in mass consciousness usually differs from the real situation in the international arena. Today’s world with its rapidly developing tourism and communication technologies increases the amount of information about other countries but deteriorates the quality of knowledge, thus, expanding the opportunities for dissemination of superficial, stereotyped, fantastic or mythologized ideas among both ordinary people and public politicians.

Another important factor of the spontaneous mechanism dominance is that public opinion in the countries with a successful (either negative or positive) geopolitical positioning (considered the main players in the global political arena even despite economic problems or military campaigns) usually focus on internal affairs except under global crises or if the news contradict the traditional picture of the world (for instance, when the ministry of foreign affairs does not recommend its population to travel to their favorite resorts). Countries with no geopolitical role and with serious economic-social problems do not have resources to play image games and focus on internal affairs. However, they can use the purposeful mechanism to benefit from the imaginary external threat factor (some dangerous malicious power), i.e. to mobilize its population or to distract public attention from failures of the government.

The above-described logic of forming the images of countries in the public opinion has predictable consequences. First, it is the mythologems that increasingly determine the public perception of the global geopolitical order as legitimate or wrong, which makes public opinion a subject of fluctuations after unexpected events, political decisions, or information campaigns that break previously as if infallible stereotyped image of the country and change it to the opposite. Secondly, we must admit that sociological studies ‘measure’ only stereotypes of the public consciousness determined by media and political manipulative technologies. Such measurements reveal a simplified core image of the country (consisting of different elements and taking into account both ‘objective’ geopolitical status of the country and its international relations in the past and present) and are necessary for assessing the current state of public opinion and its possible changes under different foreign policy scenarios.

For instance, in the early 2000s, the Public Opinion Foundation started a ‘Geo-project’ as a series of surveys about the Russians’ perception of about 40 leading powers and other countries [4]. Already in 2000—2001 these surveys proved that the Russian public opinion is monolithic and focuses on geopolitical features when considers the leading world powers (for example, China is believed to be a gigantic country with a growing role in world politics and economics), while the images of small countries with insignificant geopolitical role are very diverse (for instance, the image of Greece is a bizarre mixture of historical and mythical facts supplemented by information about tourist locations and imported food products). This is only one example proving the importance of studying the images of different countries in the Russian public opinion; there is an impressive tradition of the sociological monitoring of the geopolitical picture of the world in public opinion.

In 2010, the Sociology Chair of the RUDN University in cooperation with its Serbian, Chinese and Kazakhstan colleagues expanded the questionnaire of the comparative study of the student youth’s worldview in the capitals of four countries with a series of questions aimed to identify the images of neighboring countries in the younger generations perception (the additional block of questions was small and simple so as not to ‘overload’ the questionnaire, not to make the survey procedure too long, and to identify stereotyped images of neighboring countries in the non-sensitive way). In the questionnaire design we took into account that, first, political rhetoric and media selection and coverage of events inevitably form a certain stereotyped image of the country and of its typical representative in public opinion; secondly, once formed this image becomes a social stereotype that makes our everyday life easier and predictable in identifying unfamiliar objects.

Thus, we relied on the traditional definition of the stereotype introduced by W. Lippmann — as a means of understanding and ‘mapping’ social world to make it comprehensible and convenient for personal and collective orientation. “The world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined. Man is no Aristotelian god contemplating all existence at one glance. He is the creature of an evolution who can just about span a sufficient portion of reality to manage his survival, and snatch what on the scale of time are but a few moments of insight and happiness. Yet this same creature has invented ways of

seeing what no naked eye could see, of hearing what no ear could hear, of weighing immense masses and infinitesimal ones, of counting and separating more items than he can individually remember. He is learning to see with his mind vast portions of the world that he could never see, touch, smell, hear, or remember. Gradually he makes for himself a trustworthy picture inside his head of the world beyond his reach” [5. P. 27]. In other words, until a person has a relevant personal experience (of participant observation) and makes efforts to gather information about the country, he lives in a (happy) captivity of stereotypes about the country and its typical representatives.

However, if this captivity ensures him peace and confidence in the future, no personal experience will ever destroy his stereotypes. Moreover, even if stereotypes were shaken, there is still a ‘spiral of silence’: “People ...live in perpetual fear of isolating themselves and carefully observe their environment to see which opinions increase and which ones decrease. If they find that their views predominate or increase, then they express themselves freely in public; if they find that their views are losing supporters, then they become fearful, conceal their convictions in public and fall silent. Because the one group express themselves with self-confidence whereas the others remain silent, the former appear to be strong in public, the latter weaker than their numbers suggest. This encourages others to express themselves or to fall silent, and a spiral process comes into play” [10. P. 218—219].

In 2010—2011 we received interesting results [9; 12], and in 2016 we conducted another survey aimed at comparative analysis of two sets of data to prove the persistent stereotyped images of neighboring countries in the student youth worldview (we used similar samples of 1000 Moscow students from different universities representing only the educational profiles — social sciences and humanities, technical sciences, natural sciences). Certainly, we admit the limitations of such a comparison determined by the problems of comparative analysis. On the one hand, “the importance and utility of comparative research are as old as the discipline itself...; it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts”. On the other hand, “although comparative research flourishes within the discipline, persistent methodological problems remain” [7. P. 619]: ambiguous ‘status’ of the comparative research; unclear dividing line between ‘comparative studies’ and ‘cross-cultural research’; implicit character of comparison as a necessary attribute of sociological work not always mentioned in the title of projects; researchers’ implicit tendency to treat their culture as the norm and all others as variations, i.e. to use seemingly objective figures to support ethnocentric argumentation [11. P. 7]; ‘seeking and examining non-existing phenomena’ due to the imposed theoretical framework and techniques that are not relevant for other cultural values [1. P.171], etc. However, without comparative analysis one cannot claim the persistent character of stereotypes under study. Moreover, there is a long tradition of comparative studies in sociology, which proves that opinion polls are applicable for testing preformulated hypotheses [3] (such as the persistent character of the stereotyped images of neighboring countries) and ‘harmless’ for they are ‘ascertaining rather than evaluative’ [11. P.10] especially in different time points.

There is a general belief that the more standardized technique we use, the more valid and reliable data we get. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with standardization

per se, but “standardized instruments or indices are available for only a small number of variables” [2. P. 5] not including the stereotyped images of neighboring countries. First, we added a small thematic block on the perception of China to the questionnaire on student value orientations, because the image of this country is definitely more unambiguous in the Russian public opinion, compared to Kazakhstan and Serbia, due to its ‘rootedness’ in the Russian history, state discourse, political agenda and media rhetoric. It is obvious that the image of Serbia is less clear due to its small territory (and, therefore, insignificant geopolitical role), rare Serbian agenda in the Russian media, and lack of scientific and journalistic interest in Eastern and Central Europe in general not to mention the image of these countries in the Russian society. On the contrary, the images of China and the Chinese in Russia are a constant topic of research [8] though most works consider the regional dimension of China’s image as primarily important for Eastern Siberia and the Far East bordering the country [6].

The questionnaire on the image of China (and Kazakhstan) consisted of the following questions: a series of closed questions on the sources of information about China; an open question about three Chinese famous public figures; a request to choose 5 most relevant descriptions of the Chinese from the given 21 characteristics; a request to select from the list of countries three most positively evaluated; closed questions to assess the respondent’s desire to travel to China and his perception of the Russian-Chinese relations; a series of statements about China to express one’s consent or disagreement with; a closed question about the desire to learn Chinese. The questionnaire on the image of Serbia was modified in the following way (other questions remained unchanged): the series on the sources of information was shortened for Serbia is much less present in the Russian media; a question on associations with ‘Serbia’ and a request to assess one’s awareness of Serbia were added. Compared to the questionnaire on China there were also changes in the list of countries to select the most positively perceived from: China was in the list in all surveys, while Kazakhstan and Serbia were added only in their ‘own’ questionnaires. Another change was in the survey procedure: in 2001, we used three questionnaires; in 2016, we combined them, which, we hope, did not affect the results.

Further, we compare the results of two surveys focusing on basic indicators for identifying the persistent elements of the countries’ images. Thus, the generalized image of China in the perception of the student youth is determined by mass media in both 2010 and 2016: primarily the respondents learn information about China in different media (84% and 88% respectively), watch Chinese movies (74% and 69%) and search for information in the Internet (57% and 80%). The growth of importance of the Internet hardly indicates the increase of interest in China, rather the increasingly significant role of the Internet itself. However, the number of students that visited China also increased — from 15% to 26%, while the share of respondents wishing to travel to China stayed the same — 40% and 37%.

In 2010, the most famous Chinese public figures named by the Moscow students were Mao Zedong (71%), Confucius (33%), Hu Jintao and Jackie Chan (15% each). In 2016, the situation changed in numbers and the list of public figures. We identified

two groups consisting of both political leaders and media persons: (1) Mao Zedong and Jackie Chan (about 30% each); (2) Confucius, Xi Jinping and Bruce Lee (in average 14% each), which proves a kind a diversification of students' awareness of China that is no longer limited to the historical past. However, the stereotyped image of the typical Chinese has not changed much: a hard-working, disciplined patriot (these indicators grew), collectivist, familial, easily trained (this indicator also grew), honoring science and well-behaved (unambiguous and positive image) (Table 1).

Table 1

In your opinion, which of the following characteristics correspond to the mentality and behavior of the Chinese?

Characteristics (only the most frequent)	2010	2016
Hard-working	64%	70%
Collectivist	56%	54%
Patriot	50%	64%
Disciplined	50%	68%
Familial	41%	45%
Easily trained	25%	43%
Honoring science	22%	26%
Well-behaved	19%	21%

The generalized image of China is also positive. The students believe that its global role increases (54% in 2010 and 78% in 2016, which is definitely the result of the objective situation and the students' better awareness of it) due to the rapid economic growth surpassing the Russian rates (58% in 2010 and 64% in 2016, which also reflects the objective situation) and successful reforms (48% and 54% respectively); every fourth respondent in 2010 and every third in 2016 supposes that Russia should learn from China. However, there is still some ambiguity in the student youth perception of China: 20% (28% in 2010) believe that the rapid development of China threatens the Russian national security, while 75% (a tremendous growth compared to 44% in 2010, which can be interpreted as a significant improvement of the image of China) believe that the Russian-Chinese union will play an important role in the global geopolitical structure.

The generalized image of Kazakhstan is also determined primarily by mass media (54% in 2011, 63% in 2016), and there is a tremendous increase in the number of respondents searching for information on Kazakhstan in the Internet — every third in 2011 and about 70% in 2016, which can be explained by the desire to become more aware of the globalizing world especially of the key partner of Russia among the former USSR states. Media is still as important source of information about Kazakhstan as one's Kazakh friends, and the latter indicator even grew (from 52% in 2011 to 61% in 2016). There is still a striking awareness of Kazakhstan cultural 'artifacts' — films and songs: about a third in 2011 and 40% in 2016 claim to have learned about the country from its movies and songs. However, the majority of respondents have never been to Kazakhstan (about 90% in both surveys).

In 2011, an absolute leader among the Kazakhstan public figures named by the students was the President Nursultan Nazarbayev (80%), while other well-known public

figures were named by only 5—7%. Among them not only Abai (Kunanbaev) (7%) — a poet, philosopher, founder of the Kazakh written literature, but also Chingiz Aitmatov (5%) — a Kyrgyz writer, which proves the unclear students' identification of the nation/country of key public figures of the Soviet and earlier periods. In 2016, Chingiz Aitmatov was named only by 1 respondent, while the President Nursultan Nazarbayev still heads the list (though only with 33%) followed by Abai (12%) and Roza Rynbaeva (5%) — a Soviet and Kazakh popular singer.

The stereotyped image of the typical Kazakh has not changed over the last five years: he is considered a familial and hard-working patriot; every third respondent believes he is a disciplined and peaceful collectivist, every fourth — that he is freedom-loving and honest, every fifth — that he is a well-behaved and easily trained romantic optimist. Thus, the image of the typical Kazakh is 'blurred' due to the excessive number of elements but definitely positive like the image of the country. Kazakhstan (and Belorussia) headed the list of the most positively perceived countries (by every second respondent) though we must remember that it was included in the list only in the survey on Kazakhstan; more than 80% (we are talking about two time moments) believe in the positive impact of relations with Kazakhstan on Russia. Although many respondents admit that they know little about Kazakhstan (60% in 2011 and 47% in 2016, i.e. students awareness increased, at least in self-estimates), about 40% believe that the Russian-Kazakhstan union will play an important role in the global geopolitical structure, obviously thanks to Russia for only 17% admit the increasing role of Kazakhstan in the world, only 20% — that it chose the successful path of reforms, and only 10% — that it develops rapidly and will quickly catch up with Russia. However, at the same time more than 60% disagree that Kazakhstan is a poor backward country and that it threatens the national security of Russia, i.e. the image of Kazakhstan is definitely positive though slightly ambiguous.

Predictably, the stereotyped image of Serbia is also determined mainly by media (80% in 2011 and 70% in 2016; the youth increasingly prefers the Internet — 54% and 64% respectively). As with China, the number of respondents that visited Serbia increased significantly — from 11% in 2011 to 26% in 2016, which is probably due to similar languages, low costs and visa-free regime of travels to Serbia. The students estimate their level of awareness of Serbia as extremely low, which apparently corresponds to the real state of affairs, though the situation improved: in 2011, every third respondent did not know what kind of country Serbia is and where it is located (16% in 2016), 58% had only the most general idea about Serbia (68% in 2016), i.e. the students admit that their answers to the questions about Serbia represent the persistent stereotypes of the Russian public opinion about this country.

The low awareness of Serbia determines the key associations with this country though there are some changes compared to the previous survey. In 2011, the respondents considered Serbia primarily from the geographical perspective — as a state in the Balkans; the second most frequent associations were 'geopolitical', reflecting official and media narratives — a country constantly involved in ethnic-political conflicts with

former Yugoslav states, and a people close to the Russians by the common Slavic origin and Orthodox faith; the last group of associations (mentioned by almost every fifth respondent) included ‘geopolitical’ (most friendly to Russia in Europe, a very patriotic people) and tourist (a good place for vacations, beautiful nature) clichés. In 2016, the ‘rating’ of associations slightly changed: primarily it is considered a country with the people close to the Russians by the common Slavic origin and Orthodox fate; second dominant association is geographical (a country in the Balkans); the third group of associations (about every third respondent) consists of ‘geopolitical’ (complicated ethnic-political relations with former Yugoslav states, friendly to Russia) and geographical (beautiful nature) clichés; and about every fifth respondent mentions its constant political conflicts, a very patriotic people and tourist attractiveness (Table 2).

Table 2

Students’ associations with Serbia

Associations	2011	2016
A country in the Balkans	47%	44,3%
A country with complicated ethnic-political relations with former Yugoslav states	33,7%	37,5%
A people close to the Russians by the common Slavic origin and Orthodox faith	33,1%	53,4%
A country constantly involved in political conflicts	31,1%	23,9%
A country with beautiful nature	21,8%	32,4%
The most friendly to Russia European country	18,7%	39,2%
A nice tourist place	17,7%	20,5%
A country with famous cultural traditions	15,2%	18,8%
A very patriotic people	15%	22,2%
A country with original cuisine	12,5%	13,1%
Other	7%	1,7%

Such political and ‘recreational’ accents in the perception of Serbia manifested also in the list of the famous Serbian public figures named by the Moscow students. In 2011, the leaders of the list were Slobodan Milošević — a Yugoslav and Serbian politician (8%), Boris Tadić — a politician and a President of Serbia from 2004 to 2012 (5%), Emir Kusturica — a filmmaker, actor and musician (4%), and Vojislav Koštunica (3%) — a politician. In 2016, this list changed but stayed mainly political: Emir Kusturica and Vasa Staić — a Yugoslav philosopher and public figure of the past (8% each); the second group (5—6% each) consists of Petar Kočić (a Bosnian Serb writer and politician) and Slobodan Milošević; the third group (3—4% each) — of Nikola Tesla (a Serbian-American inventor and electrical engineer), Aleksandar Vučić (a politician, now the President of Serbia), Tomislav Nikolić (a politician, a former President of Serbia), and Zoran Tošić and Dušan Tadić (football players).

The stereotyped image of the typical Serb has not changed much: first, a patriot (more than 50% in both surveys), then a freedom-loving familial man (every third respondent), honest and hard-working, peaceful, well-behaved and disciplined realist (more than 20% each). There are some changes in this image in 2016 compared to 2010: less respondents mentioned that a typical Serb is collectivist (9% instead of 28%); at the

same time more respondents describe him as warlike (33% against 22%) and faithful (25% against 18%), wild (16% against 10%) and optimistic (19% against 13%). Thus, the image is contradictory, which probably resembles both the low personal awareness of Serbia and its various estimates in the Russian official and media discourse. Nevertheless, the generalized image of Serbia is definitely positive for the student youth evaluate the relations of our countries as friendly (42% in 2011 and 62% in 2016), and the share of respondents that found it difficult to estimate Russian-Serbian relations declined (from 46% to 22%); the majority of students (about 75%) believe that the relations with Serbia are beneficial for Russia.

The results of the sociological evaluation of the images of neighboring countries in the comparative time perspective are very difficult to interpret for we cannot be certain about the contextual determinants of the changes except for the influence of the official rhetoric, media discourse and objective reality. We are pretty sure that these are the key factors, which is obvious, but we cannot reconstruct reliable direct relationships between them and indicators' variations. Certainly, we admit that our data are too sketchy, simplified and schematic, but any other comparative perspective or survey questionnaire for assessing the generalized images of neighboring countries would be even more criticized.

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ОБРАЗЫ СТРАН-СОСЕДЕЙ В ВОСПРИЯТИИ РОССИЙСКОЙ СТУДЕНЧЕСКОЙ МОЛОДЕЖИ: ЭЛЕМЕНТЫ УСТОЙЧИВОЙ СТЕРЕОТИПИЗАЦИИ*

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В статье представлены результаты сравнительного анализа образов стран-соседей в восприятии российской студенческой молодежи. В первой части статьи авторы подчеркивают важность общественного мнения как одного из ключевых социальных институтов современного общества, хотя его значение нередко определяется возможностями манипулирования им государственными и политическими структурами в целях обеспечения общественной поддержки неоднозначных решений и непопулярных мер. Фактически сегодня сосуществуют два механизма формирования социальных представлений, включая образы других стран: спонтанный и целенаправленный (когда официальные лица и средства массовой информации используют различные приемы конструирования образа страны как опасного врага или, наоборот, лучшего друга). В России часто доминирует первый механизм, если речь не идет об основных геополитических игроках, поскольку остальные страны редко привлекают внимание государства; не менее важны общая аполитичность населения, широкое распространение информационных технологий и свобода путешествий. Во второй части статьи обозначены методологические последствия сосуществования двух механизмов формирования образов стран в общественном мнении, которые определили тематическую структуру и особенности инструментария анкетирования российских студентов для определения обобщенных образов Китая, Казахстана и Сербии в молодежной картине мира. Впервые опрос был проведен в 2010—2011 годах на выборке московского студенчества в рамках проекта, поддержанного РГНФ; в 2016 году было проведено повторное анкетирование с аналогичным инструментарием. Заключительная часть статьи суммирует результаты сопоставления образов стран-соседей в восприятии студенческой молодежи по ряду базовых показателей, позволяющих реконструировать устойчивые стереотипные элементы этих образов, хотя выявленные различия крайне сложно интерпретировать.

Ключевые слова: сравнительный анализ; (обобщенные) образы стран-соседей; (устойчивые) социальные стереотипы; Китай; Казахстан; Сербия; студенческая молодежь; общественное мнение

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