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IMAGES OF RUSSIA AND OF THE WEST IN THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE CITIZENS OF THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

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Rezumat

Imaginile Rusiei și ale Occidentului în reprezentările cetățenilor Republicii Moldova

Scopul primar al cercetării a fost studierea imaginii Rusiei la cetățenii Republicii Moldova. Analiza calitativă a interviului a arătat că respondenții, descriind imaginea Rusiei, după un șir de aspecte o comparau cu imaginea Europei. În articolul dat se descrie conținutul imaginii Europei după un șir de categorii, evidențiate din materialul empiric (interviu): experiența personală de aflare în Europa (migrația de muncă, odihna, ONG-uri, educația); limba engleză ca limbă internațională, limba modernizării; construirea perspectivei de viață și a imaginii viitorului la tineri; rolul proiectelor și a ONG-urilor finanțate de țările UE; un standard de viață mai ridicat și mai omogen, un nivel scăzut de corupție, funcționarea eficientă a instituțiilor; „prestigiul” culturii occidentale (procesul de occidentalizare, modernizare și „simplificare” a culturii); valori ale societății individualiste (venituri, concurență, proprietate privată, distanță interpersonală). Imaginea Rusiei și cea a Europei sunt reprezentate ca fiind în opoziție una față de cealaltă, iar elementele comparative sunt în favoarea unui sau altui vector. Imaginea Europei, spre deosebire de imaginea mai complicată și contradictorie a Rusiei este pragmatic pozitivă, fiind determinată de strategia de viață a cetățenilor moldoveni.

Cuvinte-cheie: imaginea Rusiei, imaginea Occidentului, reprezentările sociale, caracteristicile spațiului european.

Резюме

Образы России и Запада в представлениях граждан Республики Молдова

Изначально целью исследования было изучение образа России у граждан Республики Молдова. Качественный анализ интервью показал, что по целому ряду аспектов респонденты при описании образа России проводили сопоставление последней с Европой. В данной публикации рассматривается содержание образа Европы по ряду категорий, выделенных из эмпирического материала (интервью): личный опыт пребывания в Европе (трудовая миграция, отдых, НПО, образование); английский язык как международный, язык модернизации; построение жизненной перспективы и образа будущего у молодежи; роль проектов и НПО, которые финансируются странами ЕС; более высокий и однородный уровень жизни, низкий уровень коррупции, эффективное функционирование институтов; «престижность» западной культуры (процессы вестернизации, модернизации и «упрощения» массовой культуры); ценности индивидуалистического общества (доход, конкуренция, лич-

ное имущество, межличностная дистанция). Образы России и Европы представляются как оппозиционные друг другу, и элементы сравнения у респондентов приводятся в пользу одного либо другого вектора. Образ Европы в отличие от более сложного и противоречивого образа России прагматично позитивен, поскольку определяется жизненной стратегией граждан Республики Молдова.

Ключевые слова: образ России, образ Запада, социальные представления, характеристики европейского пространства.

Summary

Images of Russia and the West in representations of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova

The primary purpose of the research was to study the image of Russia in the citizens of the Republic of Moldova. The qualitative analysis of the interview showed that the respondents, describing the image of Russia, according to a number of aspects, compared it with the image of Europe. This article describes the content of the image of Europe according to a series of categories highlighted in the empirical material (the interview): personal experience of stay in Europe: labor migration, vacation, NGOs, education; English as an international language, language of modernization; project of life and image of future development in the group of youth; role of the projects and NGOs, sponsored by the EU countries; higher and more homogenous living standard, low level of corruption, effective functioning of institutions; “prestige” of Western culture (westernization, modernization, and mass culture “simplification”); values of individualistic society (income, competition, personal property, interpersonal distance). The images of Russia and Europe are viewed as opposed against each other, and the elements of comparison are presented by the respondents in support of one or another vector. Unlike the more complicated and contradictory image of Russia the image of Europe is a pragmatically positive one, for it is defined by life strategies of Moldova’s citizens.

Key words: image of Russia, image of the West, social representations, characteristics of the European space.

Our research of the Russia’s image was part of an international project “Perception of Russia across Eurasia: Memory, Identity, Conflicts” (ERA.Net RUS Plus, 2016–2017). Besides in the Republic of Moldova, the object was studied in the Baltic States, Poland, France, Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, and Finland with the purpose to cover post-Soviet, post-socialist and

West European space. The sample included two basic groups – experts and ordinary people (55 persons). The main research method was the semi-structured interview. The project aimed to identify some central properties of images of Russia and to search for possible ways of coping with conflicting narratives with a perspective to develop and strengthen inter-ethnic understanding. The empirical research revealed that more than a half of respondents described the image of Russia through its comparison with Europe by a number of categories. Therefore, our scientific interest constitutes in the development and coexistence of representations about two spaces in the collective consciousness of Moldovan citizens, taking into account the existence of the opposed vectors of the state development vision. Contrary to the other methods of data collection, the semi-structured interview method provides a possibility to find out the contexts where the image of Europe emerges spontaneously in the process of research of the image of Russia.

After the disintegration of the USSR, the Republic of Moldova found itself facing a choice between two political vectors of its future development – the Eastern and the Western. Despite years of independence, the country finds itself between two geopolitical centers of attraction and remains in the state of choice at the level of political elites and civil population. The strongest economic factor forming the attitude toward Russia and Europe is the massive migration from Moldova, labor migration primarily, in the context of visa-free regimes in both directions (according to the sociological data 25% of population stay abroad).

Historical memory is an important factor determining the attitude towards Russia in Moldova, for the former has been the source and center of modernization for the territory of Moldova for a long period. In the present time, this role is fulfilled by the EU and the USA. As a rule, one of the world languages mediates modernization and provides to a country an access to the global cultural, scientific spaces etc. (in the case of Moldova previously it was Russian, today – English). On this account, for Moldova Russia is a long-time partner, and Europe – an “old new acquaintance”. For our respondents Europe is a homogenous space with high living standard and culture, though inside EU itself there is a vivid state differentiation: “In case of an alternative – either Russia, or Europe, but in EU people ask themselves, what is to be understood hereunder. Relations with Russia are not to be started from scratch. I asked a student if the EU has a notion of a European feature. She said: yes, the feature of a medium level of

crappiness. So you need a precise indication of the country of origin” (expert, m, 58). Direct “personal” knowledge of Europe for the Moldovan citizens started relatively recently (USSR disintegration, obtaining of the country’s independence, opening the borders, signing the EU Association Agreement, visa-free regime with the EU, possibility to gain Romanian and Bulgarian citizenship). For instance, one of the experts notes: “The important thing is to gain a EU citizenship. Moldovans are adaptive enough and ready for integration in every society, they want to have citizenship. This is the way for the future integration. On the other side, the perception of everyday Russian practices – is a perception close to ours” (expert, m, 62).

Setting Russia and Europe against each other is typical not only for our territory and for this historical period. Thus, in his well-known work “Uses of the Other. The ‘East’ in European Identity Formation” the Norwegian anthropologist Iver Neumann analyses the genesis of the opposition East – West, first of all, in respect of Russia as the Other. He argues that Russia’s specificity as the Other for Europe is not only in spatial, but also in temporal measurement, because this country is perceived as being in permanent transitional stage of Europeanization. As Russia is the main liminal satellite of Europe, there is a temptation to underline Russia’s otherness on behalf of the integration of European I” [1, pp. 154-155]. Furthermore, the author asserts that the “East” loses its geographical ground zero and becomes a generated social marker in the European identity formation [1, p. 267]. His ideas were reflected in a number of works, for instance, I. Semenenko points out that the Western public opinion (even though unconsciously) views Russia as a deviant part of a common cultural area [4, p. 114].

The contents of the texts of interviews and their analysis allowed us to make a comparison of respondents’ representations about Russia and the West. In general, their attitude to the West and Russia largely depends on the personal history, everyday practices and family memories and only partially – on political discourses and the Media. Ordinary citizens of Moldova view both Russia and EU through their personal practices and interests: “Migrants are people who don’t care about the international context, what’s going on in Russia, Moldova. They are generally out of the informational space. Staying in Russia they get something through face-to-face contact (shops, compatriots), in the EU they hear something on TV, Internet, but there is no permanent interest. This is a multi-layered cake. Everyday practices influence their perception and behavior” (expert, m, 62).

Our preceding articles present a more detailed analysis of the image of Russia [3, 2], there, we identified and described such substantive categories as geographical space and nature, cultural context, historical aspect, political regime and policy, special features of Russian personality etc. However, the cultural aspect proved to be the most positive in the image of Russia and the political one – the most contradictory. The image of Russia appeared diffused, heterogeneous and segmented [3, p. 329].

Between the images of Russia and the West there exist both common features and drastic differences. Russia and Europe are both attractive for Moldovans due to their economic possibilities. For a small part of respondents, Russia represents a spiritual and cultural centre as well, what is not characteristic for the Western vector. The popularity of the Russian language in Moldova makes Russian culture accessible for a wide segment of population. Additionally, the knowledge of Russian has a pragmatic meaning for Moldovans. English, however, according to the young respondents, being “the language of the West”, modernization and technologies, will outcompete the Russian one.

The West also attracts the major part of the youth by the ideas of its prestige, “trendiness”, unlike Russia, that is “of little prestige”. Such representations form mainly under the influence of Internet and the Media, as well as because of personal experience in pro-European and American NGOs, Work&Travel programs, visa-free travelling across EU. Financial support from the Western countries also plays a beneficial role in the process of creation of its positive image. The Russian vector attracts through the ideas about a common Soviet and post-Soviet mentality, life style, apprehensibility of the Russian space, moral norms and values. Mostly, it is typical for the middle-aged and elderly respondents. Russia and Moldova resemble each other, according to respondents, in the problem of corruption, unlike the West, where law is respected.

A more scrutinized analysis of interviews showed that currently the image of Europe in Moldova is being formed under the influence of a number of factors: geographical, political, economic, emigrational etc. Moreover, practically every respondent, regardless of his/her age and ethnicity at least once, visited the EU, and most of them – three times or more. It is a trend that young people have never been to Russia, but have been to Europe. Besides, the West is deemed as a homogenous and equally attractive territory, whereas in Russia just big cities are viewed as attractive.

The following features of the European space opposing the Russian ones were identified during the interview analysis:

a) **personal experience of stay** in Europe: labour migration, vacation, NGOs, education;

“I was in Prague, in many cities last year, it was project-related, it was so nice at Christmas” (m, 24)

“Officially, work-related, I’ve been in many countries, Germany, Russia, Austria, Czech Republic” (m, 25)

“Romania, Germany – an advanced training for 6 days, Ukraine, Russia – on vacation. Bucovel and Moscow suburbs, Moscow. I have relatives there. In Romania – Brasov, Sibiu, Iasi – seminars” (m, 23)

“In 2010 I was in Italy during Easter – it was the most gorgeous impression” (f, 60)

“I visited not so many countries: Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Spain, Sri Lanca” (f, 29)

“Poland, Italy, Romania, Ukraine, Russia, United States, Spain, China, Germany, Austria, Thailand. These were business travels and just to see. In Romania I have a cousin, Ukraine – 2 days’ vacation, Italy and Spain – my friends live there, Germany – work-related” (m, 30)

“In 2008, I was in the USA through Work and travel; in Russia I was for a week, in Italy, Greece, Romania – travelling, business travel to London, in Lviv, Hungary, Austria – travelling. Italy impressed me the most, 90% of the world cultural heritage is there, you can just walk and watch” (m, 30)

“I like Italy, I feel myself there like at home, I like everything there, the food, climate, language. Finland impressed me as well” (f, 30)

b) **English as an international language**, language of modernization;

“I believe that those who don’t speak Russian should not learn it. You need English, French, European languages” (m, 64)

“Young people have interest in technologies, and it goes through English” (m, 31)

“The advantage of English over Russian is that at the level of engineering they have an advanced documentation. The country of origin doesn’t matter since the description is in English. That is what Romania has and Moldova does not – the English language, this is the highlight of development from an agricultural country into a technological one, and we need it” (m, 25)

“English provides possibility to work in foreign companies, languages are always an advantage. To know English for travelling and Spanish, just in case” (f, 30)

“We are more mobile. One should know Russian for one direction, Romanian, English or French – for another one” (f, 30)

c) **Project of life** and image of future development in the group of youth

“My son is a school graduate, he wants to study in Europe, to marry and live there” (m, 42);

“For example, my son says that he would like to work in Germany. Canada is also an interesting option. His friends visited it. It’s something new, it hasn’t been a reference point before” (f, 44)

“I will not be here in 30 years at the age of retirement – I don’t want to die from hunger. If to take into account CIS, I don’t see an alternative. Europe is a different pair of shoes. To Europe - with pleasure” (f, 30)

“I would surely move to a German area, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, I wish to visit Scandinavian countries. I also hope to get to America” (f, 30)

d) **Role of the projects and NGOs**, sponsored by the EU countries

“...in Warsaw... We saw how they managed to develop themselves, which projects were financed by EU, methods of capital raising, human resources management, how to build a strong team, we made comparisons between us and them” (f, 20)

“Europeans and Americans are catchier: if you come to us – we will give you millions, reforms, laws, visa-free regime, freedoms” (m, 22).

“I submitted applications for different English trainings, and I succeeded. You understand that you are able to do that if you want. Many things have to be reviewed in time. When you start to travel and see other life styles, another level – your ambitions change and the level of aspiration starts to grow. I was biased against the EU before, it’s a general attitude here in Gagauzia. Then I visited Poland through a program and so it goes till now” (f, 30)

“All kind of NGOs, in any case, are formed either by representatives of the majority or of minorities... Organizations that are in favor of integration with Europe have a negative image of Russia. It is possible to monitor their publications” (expert, m, 36)

e) higher and more homogenous **living standard**, low level of corruption, effective functioning of institutions

“Everything in Europe is more precise, logical, and comes one after another. Intelligent people think instead of you – just do like this. In Russia it’s not the same – one can get by oneself out of a situation” (f, 38)

“A feast for the eyes, everything is so delightful. It is clean, nice, people do not need money as much, there is no greed, people have good earnings, relax, do sports, eat healthy food” (f, 30)

“You see a life standard in other countries, the labor is evaluated differently. Not for peanuts. People afford to live, satisfying their basic needs (f, 30)

“We see the difference in terms of household arrangement after staying in Russia and the EU. Because

the level of civilization of respect of the householding in the EU is much higher. An example: a person came from Italy and at first built a warm WC inside the house, had the house connected to the hot water mains, installed a washing machine in the kitchen. And the one who comes from Russia does not do these, because their household style is close to ours” (expert, m, 62).

f) **“Prestige” of Western culture** (westernization, modernization, and mass culture “simplification”)

“It’s a progress in one’s own eyes: I am from Europe. And Russia is not prestigious. And it doesn’t matter what you do there. The West is successful in itself (m, 31)

“It is not bad that they go to Europe, it’s ok, now what is not Russian is a trend –” (m, 24)

“It’s interesting that the things that come from the West are simpler, more superficial” (f, 44)

“England had colonies, Australia, India, Southern Africa, and it left there a relatively high culture, not a regressive one” (m, 25)

“Surely, the German features – their mentality, approach to life, to tidiness, order, discipline – all these are very attractive for me (f, 30)

g) **values of individualistic society** (income, competition, personal property, interpersonal distance)

“The laws are strangulating for us; here the laws are aimed at collective decisions, committees, and in Europe decisions are individual. I noticed that the people who came from Europe come with a kind of fear – that they can lose their job, that there is competition and they need to save their face on account of their property” (m, 30)

“If I were to go to Germany, I would have needed to study the language and it’s difficult, and I felt that they are haughty; I speak a little English, but my neighbor there didn’t want to talk English with me” (m, 25)

“I travelled from the Baltic States to Switzerland. Riga struck me with its cleanness; I didn’t understand how people manage to keep it. When I went to Switzerland it was even more awesome, a land of fairy-tales. It is important to understand that the mentality is already formed in young people, in children” (f,30)

“The third generation of the national elite came here to power. Half of it studied abroad and their ideas are already liberal. Russian mentality means mutual assistance, help, collectivism. It is said that young people do not give up the seat in transport. They go away from the Russian mentality” (expert, m, 67).

Thus, while the aim of the research was to study the images of Russia, interview analysis provided enough narrative to describe the respondents’ rep-

resentations about Europe. Both spaces are viewed as opposed against each other, and the elements of comparison are presented by the respondents in support of one or another vector. The image of Europe unlike the more complicated and contradictory image of Russia is a pragmatically positive one, for it is defined by life strategies of Moldova's citizens. It is therefore important to note that our interest present not only those categories of comparison, which emerged "spontaneously", but also those, which were left on the periphery of conscience (f.e. culture, social sphere, regional characteristics etc.). It should be also pointed out that the results reflected in the present article do not pretend to a full description and analysis of the image of Europe in Moldova, but serve as a headstart for a future research of big spaces that demands another scale.

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