

Perceptions About Neighbouring Countries - Evidence from Bulgaria

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Abstract

Perceptions about various countries reverberate in attitudes about products, migration and investments originating from the respective countries, as well as in changes in demand for products, migration and investments. In our study we analyse the changes eventuated in the recent couple of years, extending several studies from previous periods. We apply the psychosemantics approach and the repertory grid as the main research methodology. The countries in focus are the neighbouring Balkan countries, as well as the two big European ones - Russia and Germany. Using correspondence analysis, we compare results from two samples from 2021 and 2023. Discovered is a major change in perceptions about Russia, accompanied with certain shifts in the composition of the main factors. We interpret these changes as reflecting some substantial changes in the political sentiments of Bulgarian society.

Keywords: country image, cross-country studies, psychosemantics, Balkan countries

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Introduction

The way how the public in one country perceives other countries, or the existing and incessantly recreated image of the other countries in the public opinion, reverberates in the attitudes of the local public about products, migration and investments originating from the respective countries. In addition, changes in demand for products, migration and investments do occur, and they are reflecting the changes in the assessments of the foreign countries by the local public.

In our study we are shedding additional light on the changes eventuated in the recent couple of years in the public opinion of Bulgaria, and this study is extending several studies from previous periods on the same topic. In order to explore the perceptions of the Bulgarian public, we apply the psychosemantics approach and we use the repertory grid as the main research methodology. The countries in focus are the neighbouring Balkan countries, as well as the two big European ones - Russia and Germany. We consider these countries as being the most important ones for the Bulgarian economy; the countries which are exercising the strongest influence on Bulgaria. Using correspondence analysis, we compare results of two samples dating from 2021 and 2023.

Given the importance of the topic, as well as the very dynamic changes of the political, economic and social environment, which inevitably influences the perceptions of the public, such a study is needed to contribute to knowledge and deepen the discussion in the field.

The rest of this paper is organised as follows - after a literature review and a description of the research methodology, results are presented and discussed, the last section concludes.

1. Literature review

Perceptions about countries are in a constant process of variation, depending on the shifts in public opinion, media images, generational changes, global and national political processes etc.

Economic ties depend not only on geographical, economic, political or cultural proximity, but also on views about the partners in consideration. In history, there are multiple examples of countries sharing very limited economic co-development due to adverse images in the respective public opinion.

Inappropriate images of the country can contribute to a contraction in mutual trade, or to a retraction of transport linkages, or to a shrinkage of investment. Adverse changes in the image of a specific country can lead to growing fears of detrimental political influence and their possible controversial effects both to the economy and society.

Local public opinion can be affected by economic, political and social incidents in the other countries, such as economic downturns, aggression to neighbouring countries, immigration problems, crime increase, population problems etc. Turbulence in other countries echoes back to the local economic and political conditions of the specific country, bringing alterations in local public conceptions and ideas. Not to be disregarded is also the fact that the image of other countries is always a subject of certain distortions due to the interpretation of the information delivered by mass media, especially in cases where the number of personal visits abroad is smaller.

Changing perceptions imply transformations in international economic ties, with possible consequences for both external trade and investment. Transport and trade restructuring also play important roles (Zaharieva et al., 2019; Iliev et al., 2016) as they can act as a backbone for the local economy or as they can enhance technology transfers and adoption of new practices and knowledge.

Countries with unfavourable economic and political image are regarded as less suitable or unable to provide sources for economic development, such as technologies in example, and as such their importance in the local economy structure is a subject of diminution. Cutbacks in trade and investment are in many cases the visual part of such processes. In contrast, in cases where the image of a specific country meliorates, there are improvements and refinements in the economic aspects of the relations between the countries, in addition to the potentially enhanced demand for goods, services and influence from the country in question.

Power and image of the country affect international trade and investment, and as they in the typical case change over time, economic restructuring is one of the outcomes. For certain countries and periods, such restructuring of the economy can be expressed in a painful process of reordering of the social stratification of the country and of inducing a redistribution of accumulated wealth and social and political power.

In the EU context, perceptions apply also to the integrating and disintegration tendencies as well as to convergence (for a comprehensive review on disintegration literature, see Boneva, 2020). Public opinion diverges over time and we attempt to evaluate the importance of the alterations. Since the participation in EU integration is the major driver for the economy of Bulgaria in the last decades, and the political outturns are also of utmost importance for the country, the study of these processes of migrating and converting images of the most important countries for Bulgaria proves to be of substantial importance both as of scientific interest and as practical implications for public policies and for assessing the trends in the conduct of economic actors.

2. Methodology and experimental methods

The psychosemantics exploration is technically based on the repertory grid as a methodology for collection and generalisation of raw data.

Repertory grids are conceptualised in Kelly (1955), as a tool to explore the personal constructs, describing that it is not some external truth, what matters, but rather what is true for the individual. Emphasised is the relationship between the individuals and their environment. The technique is closely related to "meaning" and "semantic differential", further developed by Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957).

The repertory grid is a means to codify the constructs space of the individual, it is used under formulation of semantic differential scales for application in attitudes studies (Wilson and Dover, 1975; Tan and Hunter, 2002; Fransella et al., 2004).

Among the strengths of this technique is that it has the potential to at least partially rebuild the personal construct as a possibly logic-tight and internally consistent structure.

Repertory grids make a snapshot in a specific moment of time, reflecting the momentaneous condition of the respective personal construct. As the most valuable in them is the consideration that they deliver relevant and valid information, prompting for relevant insights for the respondents (Neimeyer and Torres, 2015; Smith, 2000). The technique has been applied in various areas, including in business studies (Stewart et al., 1981).

Our research is based on the psychosemantics approach to political image and political space, developed by V. F. Petrenko (Petrenko, 1988; Petrenko, 1997; Petrenko, 2010), whose methodology we use. In this study, we step primarily on the ideas in Petrenko et al. (2003), but also in Petrenko et al. (1995) and Petrenko and Mitina (2017).

Technically, the repertory grid is presented as a table, in which cells are put the considerations of the respondent, according to the semantic scale.

In our case, we use a 7-level Likert scale (ranging from "totally disagree" to "totally agree") and for the two dimensions, respectively, "countries" (*Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Romania, Russia, Germany*, 9 countries in total) as the one dimension, and "qualifications of the country" (various characteristics of the country, such as historical past, political system, cultural importance etc., 31 questions in total - *country with deep historical roots, politically stable country, planned economy, religious population, high level of spiritual culture, economically independent, prevailing agriculture, high level of science and technology, maintaining peaceful policy, democratic country, totalitarian regime, friendly to the USA, market economy, high crime levels, citizens of all nationalities have equal rights, military powerful, the government maintains friendly to Bulgaria policy, maintains aggressive policy, high living standard, high international prestige, nationalistic country, open country, militarised country, maintains imperial policy, high level of education, existing severe internal conflicts, close economic ties to Bulgaria, human rights are respected, the country is spiritually close to Bulgaria, I sympathise with this country, I would/want to live in this country*) as the other dimension.

For the analysis the *correspondence analysis* technique (Neimeyer and Torres, 2015; Greenacre and Pardo, 2006; Greenacre, 2007) was used, all calculations were made using R 4.3.2 (R Core Team, 2023). Similarly to the usual factor analysis, under the correspondence analysis, individual answers are averaged into a collective repertory grid. Further the matrix is centred normalised. Next, row and column 'masses' are calculated and visualisations are made.

3. Results and discussion

We explore two samples, dating from 2021 and 2023. In both cases, our respondents were Bulgarian citizens, originating mainly from Northeastern Bulgaria and having either a secondary education or a university degree. Both samples broadly correspond to the average profile of active economic actors in Bulgaria.

The first, 2021 sample, consists of 126 respondents of both sexes (84 f, 42 m, aged 18-81), responses were collected in May 2021 with an online form.

The second part of our survey was conducted in May 2023, more than one year after the beginning of the war of Russia against Ukraine, and in our case this circumstance is potentially very

important, since it affects several neighbouring countries. Again, respondents are of both sexes (71 f, 28 m, aged 20-63), responses were collected in May 2023 with an online form.

Table 1. The samples

| | May 2021 | May 2023 |
|------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Gender | 84 f, 42 m | 71 f, 28 m |
| Age | 18-81 | 20-63 |
| Education | 76 secondary, 50 university | 75 secondary, 24 university |
| Residence | Northeastern Bulgaria | Northeastern Bulgaria |

Source: Authors' calculations.

The main factors (expressed along the main axes in the visualisations, calculated on the eigenvalues and denominated as "inertias" in the correspondence analysis terminology) discovered are roughly the same for both samples, and can be interpreted as follows.

The horizontal axis, as the strongest factor present, comprising over the half of the inertias (56.4% for the 2021 sample and 57.3% for the 2023 sample) can be plausibly interpreted as "political power" (with more emphasised "aggressiveness/military power/imperial aspirations" for the 2023 sample).

The vertical axis is respectively "internal political and social organisation of the country" (incl. the "democracy/autocracy" nexus as well as "approval/personal preference"). It comprises as a second factor 23.5% (for the 2021 sample) and 20.7% (for the 2023 sample) respectively.

Again, for 2023 the axis has to be interpreted slightly differently (with the development/aggressiveness nexus being gently stronger) and also (purely technically) inversely compared to the 2021 variant.

However, a reference has to be made that in the correspondence analysis technique both the "questions" and the "objects assessed" are interpreted simultaneously, therefore uniform axes for both possible interpretations are constructed. If other techniques are applied (i.e. the classical principal component analysis), potentially different results have to be expected. In our case, since we are interested primarily in the positions of the countries in the perceptions map of our respondents, these combined axes are in a condition to deliver satisfactory results.

The main patterns in the 2021 sample (see the visualisation in Figure 1) are as follows.

The basic opposition can be discovered in the dichotomy "Bulgaria - Russia/Germany/Turkey", interpreted both from a political and economic point of view. Characteristics such as "economically independent"; "military powerful"; "high international prestige"; "maintains imperial policy"; "friendly to the USA" enter as main cornerstones of the above dichotomy discovered.

Among the most correlated variables to the first dimension (factor) is also "friendly to the USA", which opposes the rest of the variables, and is supported by "I would/want to live in this country".

Bordering to Bulgaria countries (Greece, Romania, Serbia, Albania and Macedonia) are regarded by Bulgarian public broadly as a common group, although more sparsely clustered, with EU member countries (Romania and Greece) being closer to Bulgaria than the rest of the Balkan countries in question.

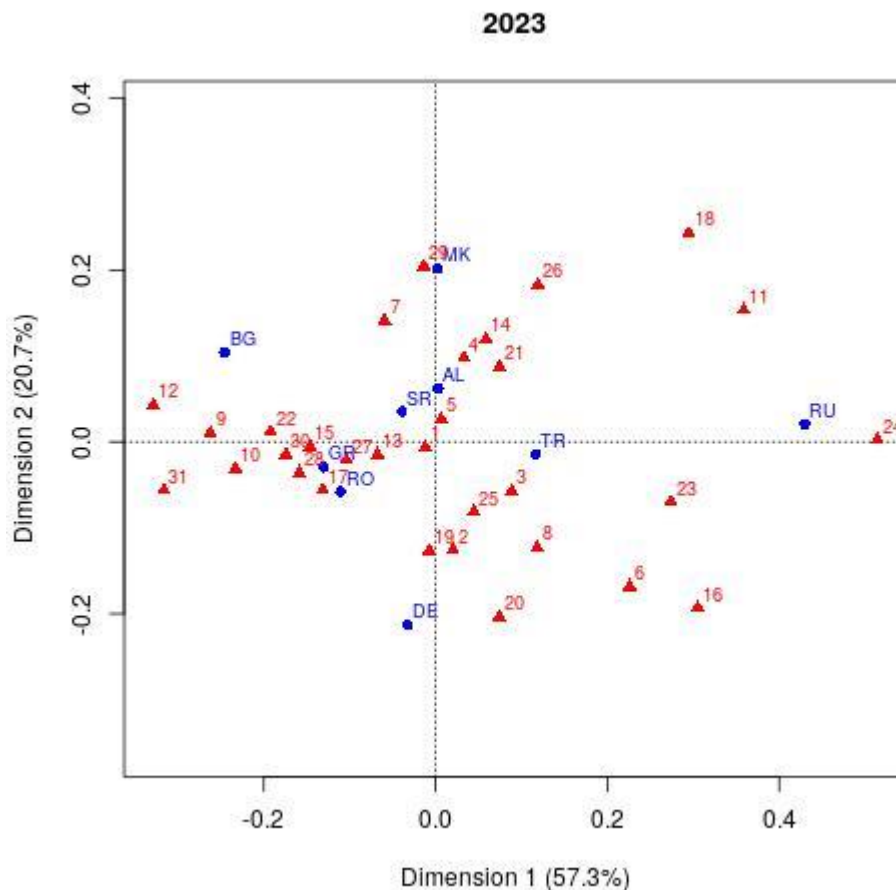


Figure 2. Two-dimensional map of year 2023 responses. *Source: Authors' calculations.*

Once again, there exists the dichotomy "Bulgaria - other countries", however, this time the dichotomy is much stronger expressed, mainly within the opposition "Bulgaria - Russia".

Related to the last country are significant loadings in variables such as "maintains aggressive policy"; "the country is spiritually close to Bulgaria"; "high international prestige"; "military powerful".

These changed perceptions can be regarded as a significant change from the previous period, since the distance between "Russia" and its nearest neighbours has increased substantially, compared to the previous sample. At the same time, distances between other countries have remained relatively unchanged, as a scale, and other countries have retained their previous positions, in general.

Conclusion

The last two years seem to have been decisive in turning up the perceptions of the Bulgarian public about important countries in the adjacency of Bulgaria. We discover substantially changing views both in the assessments of concrete countries, and in the intensification of the politics-economy nexus as the base for public's perceptions. The Bulgarian public takes up the changes in global politics, mainly the adverse actions of Russia, and reacts by invigorating the contrast among the countries studied, highlighting the more important ones.

Discovered in our study is a major change in perceptions about Russia, accompanied with certain shifts in the composition of the main factors. We interpret these changes as reflecting some substantial changes in the political sentiments of Bulgarian society. Some traditional ideas about Russia are being transformed and reconsidered in the course of some dramatic developments in the

political context. The perception of Russia as a superpower is changing, especially in its intrinsic meaning.

However, the short horizon of our research still does not allow us to judge the degree of strengthening and solidification of these already changed perceptions. In order to improve the conclusions, further research is needed.

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