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The perceptions of young Poles toward Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians: The results of focus group interviews.

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Abstract: *Three focus group interviews were carried out among Polish students. Participants were asked to reveal their opinions toward several nations and their respective states – Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. The results showed that the image of those states was shaped through their economic and political development, and was mainly associated with strikes, corruption, an oppressive political system, and poverty. The attitude toward the target nations was quite ambiguous. Participants revealed many positive and negative associations. Common personality traits between Poles and all of the nations under investigation were often mentioned. However,*

participants did not feel close to them - Western European countries were closer to Poland than Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

Keywords: association, attitude, Poles, Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians

Introduction

The human perception of “the others” is surely an important issue which influences the different spheres of people's life. The attitude of any nation toward other nations and countries, especially neighboring ones, is very important for various reasons. It affects national identity, interpersonal contacts, international relations, political and economic interests, migration policy, and other important issues. The attitudes toward other nations may directly or indirectly influence the national minorities and migrants from those countries living abroad. It could also be a reason for discrimination, exclusion, and national conflicts.

The theory of social categorization (Tajfel, 1970) suggests the formation of bias against foreign groups according to perceived differences and similarities in regards to the in-group and the out-group members. The attitude toward the in-group tends to be loyal and favorable, while the attitude toward the out-group tends to be more antagonistic or even hostile. Categorization allows people to shape and confirm their own self-esteem by favoring their own group. The methods and criteria of distinguishing between “Us” and “Them” have a cultural character. They form complex traits of socio-cultural features which specify the group

definition, thereby setting boundaries and symbolic borders between their members and strangers. Allport (1958, pp. 17-18) said:

“Everywhere on the earth we find a condition of separateness among groups. People mate with their own kind. They eat, play, reside in homogeneous clusters. They visit their own kind, and prefer to worship together. Much of this automatic cohesion is due to nothing more than convenience. There is no need to turn to out-groups for companionship. With plenty of people at hand to choose from, why create for ourselves the trouble of adjusting to new languages, new food, new cultures, or to people of a different educational level?”

The attitudes toward the other nations are shaped as well by national stereotypes. The term “stereotype” was first introduced to social sciences by Lippmann in 1922. It was defined as the “pictures in our head” which come to mind when thinking about a particular social group (Lippmann, 1946). According to Lippmann, all people have “mental images” of the outside world, which attempt to simplify the ambiguous information that comes from the outside environment. In other words, Lippmann described stereotypes as the human tendency to perceive people or objects as having similar attributes based on their common characteristics. Allport (1958, p. 187) defined stereotypes as “primarily rationalizers”: “Whether favorable or unfavorable, a stereotype is an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category.”

National stereotypes are structures containing some conviction relating to the certain national group which may or may not reflect reality. This

system includes beliefs concerning those properties of human beings that may vary across nations, such as appearance, language, food, habits, psychological traits, attitudes, values, etc. Stereotypes of neighboring nations have their specificity compared to other stereotypes, as they are formed under the direct influence of geopolitical factors and have an ethnical and political nature. Due to the geographic proximity and possibility of contacts, there are often much more stereotypes about neighboring countries than about distant ones. The proximity of the countries raises the specter of conflict between them, which in turn reinforces stereotypes and prejudices towards the neighboring states and their respective ethnicities. The intensity of stereotypes is directly dependent on the state of balance - the more it is disturbed, the greater are the stereotypes and prejudices. (Lazari & Rogińska, 2006). The history of the coexistence of the East Slavic states provides a very solid example of it. The lack of political stability in historical relations between Poland and Russia, as well as the dominant role of the Russian Empire towards Poland, served as a basis for a generally negative perception of Russians. Similar attitudes spread also on onto the Belarusians and Ukrainians, putting them into the same national group. That play an important role in the formation and expression of national identity and political interests.

Present research is decided to the attitudes of Poles toward their three eastern neighboring nations: Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. "Attitude" was explained by Jung (1971) as the "readiness of the psyche to act or react in a certain way". In present research "attitude" is understand as an expression of favor or disfavor toward a person. Attitudes are generally characterized by a relative stability over time.

The target nations - Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians - were chosen for different reasons. All of them, and especially Russians, have had rich historical contacts with Poland, during which conflict often occurred. Historically, those countries were part of the same political entities as Poland, either in part or in entirety. Sometimes their territories belonged to the Polish Republic, other times to the Russian Empire, or after World War II, to the same political bloc. Nowadays, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus are three different countries, but are often seen as very similar to each other (if not identical). Poland has quite a long border with Ukraine and Belarus on the east, and a bit shorter one with Russia on the north (Kaliningrad region). However, one can still find instances in the media, or hear from other people, that Poland has a border with Russia on the east, which are in fact is the border with Ukraine and Belarus nowadays - the former border with the Soviet Union. A large number of inhabitants from those countries live in Poland today. Another reason is their relative cultural and linguistic similarity with Poland, yet different political interests. The field of interest in the present research includes the generalized attitude toward representatives of three separated nations: Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian. The idea is to test if those nations are still seen as very similar to each other after more than twenty years of dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Systematic research conducted by public opinion research center in Poland shows that attitudes toward Eastern Europeans in Poland are, generally, rather negative, and worse than those regarding many other nations (CBOS, 2013)*. Among the nations most liked by Poles in 2013 were Czechs (51%), Slovaks, (48%), English (47%), and Italians (46% of respondents

declared their sympathy toward them). Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians were among the least liked nations in the list. Thus, 31 % of Poles declared their sympathy toward Russians and Ukrainians, and 30% toward Belarusians, which is only more than the sympathy expressed toward Egyptians, Jews (both 28%), Serbs, Chinese (both 27%), Vietnamese (25%), Palestinians, Turkish (both 24%), Romanian (21%), and Roma people (20%). However, in the perspective of the last twenty years, the attitude of Poles toward the majority of the nations under investigation has been changed toward a more positive meaning.

Invariably during the last two decades, Poles declared sympathy to those nations which provided them with a positive reference group, determined the level of their aspirations and ambitions, and represented the world to which Poles would like to belong. The friendly feeling of Poles rose to those countries whose level of economic and social development is higher than that of Poland. Additional factors include cultural proximity, historical and current events, the socio-political situation, and personal experience through the vacations and migratory work of Poles. The rich Western world comprised the group of nations which were viewed most favorably by Poles. However, several nations which had experienced communist regimes in the past also belong to this group – Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Croatians (CBOS, 2013). Greeks and Germans are in the middle of the attitude scale, which is probably the outcome of some economic problems (in case of Greece) and difficult historical background (in case of Germany). On the other hand, there are nations which are not as favorably viewed by Poles. They are generally characterized by lower socioeconomic

development than that in Poland. The majority of nations in this group belongs to post-communist states and/or is situated outside of Europe.

Regardless of the relative cultural and linguistic similarities between Poland and the target states, those nations are mostly portrayed in a negative light. They are associated with historical conflicts, the unwanted past of having belonged to the USSR, low socioeconomic development, low status labor migrants arriving from those countries to Poland, violation of democracy and human rights, and other similar characteristics from which Poles want to differentiate and separate themselves. The qualitative research has shown that Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians are mainly associated with being similar to each other in the following characteristics: lazy, poor, improvident, undisciplined, messy, with a lack of manners, uneducated, alcohol abusing, backward, dirty, and conservative (Błuszkowski, 2005).

Among the nations of focus in this study, a much more significant role in the Polish historical discourse belongs to the Russians than to the other two nations. While Russians were a well-known nation to Poles for centuries, Ukrainians and Belarusians appeared much later as separate national groups. However, due to their common origin, their belonging to the USSR, the usage of the same language and alphabet, cultural similarities, and other factors, they were mostly seen as “Russians” or “Soviet” people throughout the time of Soviet history and later. There were a lot of examples of such “generalizations” of the eastern neighbors of Poland in the past, and even nowadays there is a tendency to see Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians as similar or even the same nations. A major

difficulty in this study is the fact that a large number of Poles find these people indistinguishable and identify all of the inhabitants of the former USSR with Russians. Expressing opinions about Russians, many Poles really mean the inhabitants of the former USSR, especially those which are similar culturally and linguistically.

Demographical variables also influence people's attitudes toward the other nations. Thus, quite typically, in Poland the level of education of the respondents, as well as their income level, positively correlated with the level of sympathy declared toward the other nations. Men declared their antipathy toward the other nations slightly more often than women. Inhabitants of the rural areas less often declared sympathy toward the other nations, however their level of antipathy is similar to the average. Delving deeper, the research also showed an interesting correlation between the level of religious piety and the phenomenon of interest. Thus, those people who participate in religious practices several times per week, as well as those who do not participate at all, have a more favorable attitude toward foreigners than those who participate once per week. In the case of political orientation, a positive attitude is more often expressed by people identified with leftist parties, and less often by people who are politically indifferent. The perception of the other nations by different generations of Poles also varies. People under 65 years old more often declared their sympathy, as well as antipathy, toward the other nations (CBOS, 2013).

The attitude of Poles toward their eastern neighboring nations is of higher importance due to political and economic reasons. Poland's government

invests much effort in its relations with its eastern neighbors; the Polish mass media pays attention to the various kinds of interactions between those states and Poland. However, there is still some tension in terms of Poland's relations with each of the aforementioned states. Due to this fact, the research into the contemporary attitudes of Poles toward Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians is an issue of considerable sociological and crucial political significance.

Research questions:

- 1) What are the main associations with Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus and their nations?
- 2) What is the general attitude toward Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians?
- 3) Are there any differences (and, if yes, what) in the perception of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians?

Methods

Focus group interviews were chosen as a research technique to obtain information about the basic opinions and attitudes of Polish students toward Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. This method was first used in the 1940s by Merton and Kendall (1946) and was originally called "focused" interviews. Nowadays, focus group interviews are widely used in sociology, psychology, and other social sciences. A focus group is a technique of qualitative research in which a group of people are asked about their feelings, opinions, beliefs, impressions about some product, event, person, etc. The participants within the same group should have

some information about the topic of the interview, have similar socioeconomic characteristics, be in the similar age group, and feel comfortable about the topic of the interview. The advantage of focus groups is the fact that it provides rich and detailed information about the chosen issue in the participants' own words. Respondents may also bring up any other topics on their own volition, should they find it relevant toward the question at hand. The group dynamic and social interaction between the group members often allowed deeper and richer information than those obtained from one-to-one interviews (Thomas, et al, 1995). Focus group interviews were chosen as the method for the present research as they can produce a large set of rich and detailed data in a relatively short time, while findings may be applied in the design of further quantitative research. However, the results of focus group interviews are limited in terms of their generalization to a larger population.

Participants

In total, 19 participants, among whom were 9 female and 10 male students, took part in three focus group interviews. All participants were aged from 18 to 26 years old at the moment of research. Such an age limit enables one to obtain the opinions of the young generation of Poles who were raised in the post-communist context and do not have their own memories about World War II, the Soviet period in Poland, and other historical events which may influence attitudes regarding Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians in a negative way. Participants were recruited among Polish students studying at various universities in Warsaw. Participants were recruited from different fields of study, as it was supposed that all Polish

students, regardless of their field of study and interests, have some knowledge and opinions about their neighboring countries due to the geographical proximity of those countries, common history, mass media discussions dedicated to this topic, etc. In total, the interviews encompassed 9 students of the social and human sciences : philology (3 students), history (3 students), pedagogy (2 students), journalism (1 student); and 10 students of non-human or social sciences : biotechnology (3 students), physiotherapy (2 students), chemistry (2 students), computer graphic (1 student), logistic (1 student), informatics (1 student). It was supposed that the attitudes and opinions about Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians could differ between students of humanities and social sciences, and those of non-human or social science students (i.e. the exact sciences, medicine, etc.).

Procedure

Three focus group interviews were conducted from December 2012 through February 2013. Each group was composed of 4 to 8 individuals. In total, 19 participants took part in the focus interviews. The interviews were conducted in a special room equipped with an audio recorder. The moderator of the focus interviews was a Polish native speaker. The researcher (non-Polish native speaker) did not wish to influence the responses and discourse via nonverbal signals and was a facilitator of the moderator and observed the process. The information concerning the age, gender, and field of study was collected from the participants. Questions were asked from more general to more specific ones, and were ordered by their importance in the agenda of the research. The questions were

relatively open, such that participants could refer to any aspect of the asked issue. In total, 10 questions were asked (the list of the questions is available in Appendix I). The interviews were audio recorded and entirely transcribed. Transcriptions were supplemented with additional observational data obtained during the interview. All of the participants agreed to participate in the interviews voluntarily. Most engaged in the interview with interest. Some of them demonstrated their general interest in the interview topic and gave detailed answers; however, others were not so interested and gave either short answers or had no opinion about the questions posed. Respondents were not emotionally engaged in the topic of interview, and they remained rather calm during the whole procedure of interviewing.

Results

The majority of questions were related to the people, not to their given states. However, the participants mostly directed their answers to the states represented by those nations. For example, answering the question: "Which associations do you have with Ukrainians?" respondents answered: "I associate Ukraine with...", etc. That shows that the image of different nations is strongly connected and shaped by the image of their states.

Participants were able to list the majority of the nations of the former USSR. Participants mostly mentioned Russians as the first nation on the list and underline its importance in the Soviet Union. The most common answers were as follows:

“I mainly associate Russians with the former Soviet Union. They were the ones... generally speaking, most of the great Soviet scientists were the Russians. The Russian language was compulsory...”

After Russians, the most often listed were Ukrainians, Belarusians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, and Kazakhs. The first four countries are geographically close to Poland, while Kazakhstan is known for Poles as a destination for Poles deported during the Soviet times. However, some of the students of the exact sciences doubt the fact that Lithuania and Belarus both belonged to the former Soviet Union. Uzbeks, Tajiks, Georgians, Armenians, Azeri, Moldavians, Kirghiz, and Turkmen people were less often mentioned. Those nations are further geographically and were less known to the respondents. Participants also mentioned some nations which did not have a national state during the Soviet period, such as the Dagestani, Karabachos, Chechen, and Ossetian people, as well as the indigenous tribes living in the Far East. Some participants also associate with former Soviet Union Turks, Mongolians, Croatians, Czechs, and Slovaks – nations which respective countries did not belong to the USSR member states. Some of their represented countries were under Soviet influence, which may have blurred the differences between those countries and actual member states of the USSR. None of the participants associated Poles with the Soviet Union. Speaking about the Central Asian nations, respondents often mentioned one of the countries of the region and then said: “...and all other “stans”. One of the group respondents had difficulty creating an adjective for the Uzbek nationality in the Polish language. That shows that Central Asian nations are not well known for them, and do not arouse much interest.

The opinions of respondents were quite diverse when it came to the similarities and differences between the former USSR member states. The majority of the respondents agreed that those nations were similar to one another. They believed that before entering the Soviet Union, those nations were different, but after they became member states, they unified a lot in terms of their political and social systems, religion, common officially used language, and propaganda. One of the participants said:

“So, the Soviet Union was diverse, but became unified. To the extent that I think that at the end of its existence, the nations were unified.”

Some of the respondents underlined that especially for the older generation of Poles, the member states of the former Soviet nations were seen as very similar to each other, which was not exactly the truth:

“The generation of our parents believes that it is all very similar, so I've heard the opinion that “Russian” and “Soviet” people means the same, but, in practice, it looked a little different.”

Some of the respondents did not have an opinion about this issue, motivated by the fact that they did not live through that time and could not freely generalize about the past based on what they heard about it only recently. Nowadays, some of the former Soviet Union nations are still seen as similar to each other, however, to a much less extent than before. The majority also said that Slavic nations of the former Soviet Union are definitely different from the non-Slavic ones. The main factors behind perceived similarity between nations appeared to be geographical proximity as well as cultural and religious similarities. According to the

participants, the Eastern European countries of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus seem to be especially similar to each other not only during the time of the Soviet Union, but today as well.

“For me, Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians are very similar to one another. For me, they are actually one nation.”

Ukraine and Belarus were strongly associated with Russia, which was seen as the dominant power in the region. Here are the most often repeated answers of the participants:

“Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus... actually Russia is the main force there, and Ukraine and Belarus are still dependent to some extent on Russia. And the rest of the former Soviet states stay as if completely separated.”

Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus are also mentioned as an Eastern bloc:

“I think it was more similar to each other before, well, now it also seems as Belarus, Russia and Ukraine are under Russia, and the rest is definitely different. As before, it was the Soviet Union, well, most of the countries were similar to each other in those days. It is a little different now, times are changing, people are also changing for sure ... But Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, I think they are still like that in the Eastern bloc.” (smiling ironically)

The Baltic States are seen as similar to Scandinavia, while the Caucasus region countries are similar to one another. Following are the most typical responses by the participants:

"I know that similar are... Ukraine and Russia are similar ... and other countries like, I do not know - maybe Latvia and Lithuania, because they are next to each, these countries. Certainly Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are similar, and Armenia and Azerbaijan, because it is also next to each other, bordering countries". "All these "stans" ... all these Caucasus states, they are all Muslims and are associated for me with Arabs."

Quite frequently respondents did not speak about separate countries, but united them into regions and spoke about the region as a whole, which is especially visible in the case of the Caucasus region countries. Most probably this is connected with low knowledge about those countries and, as a consequence, a low ability to distinguish those nationalities from one another.

Further respondents were asked about their associations with each of the countries and their nation: Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia. In order to avoid the dominant "Russian" stereotype influence, the nationalities were presented starting from those less known to Poles (Belarusians), followed by the more known (Ukrainians), and then by the most well-known to Poles (Russians). The majority of the participants described the above mentioned nations one by one and prescribed them distinctive (even though similar) characteristics. However, some of them spoke about those nations as a whole and described all using common characteristics. Detailed analyses of the obtained materials allowed one to differentiate several groups of the main associations of Polish students with Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Those groups were the following: historical events/figures, contemporary political situation/figures, current affairs,

economics, characteristics of people, and others (detailed list of provided associations with Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians is available in Appendix II).

In the historical events category, Russia was associated with the Soviet period: "World War II and Stalin's attack on Poland in 1939", "Stalin's cult of personality", "Russians as perpetrators and victims of the Soviet regime." No historical events from the previous epochs were mentioned. Russia was also associated with its present political and economic situation: "superpower", "censorship", "strong division between social classes". Both positive and negative characteristics were attributed to Russians. They are seen as "sympathetic", "very nice and friendly", "alcohol-abusing", "lazy", "having a tendency to steal", "similar to Poles". Not only did participants see similarities between Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians, but they also saw similarities between Poles and Russians:

"The whole Russian mentality I like and dislike at the same time... But there are certain similarities between us and Russians."

Ukraine was associated with historical figures and events: "Bohdan Khmelnytsky", "Polish roots in Western Ukraine, especially in Lvov", "problems with Ukrainians in Volhyn and Eastern Galicia after World War II", "Ukraine in the USSR", and others. However, those historical events did not result in negative attitudes toward the Ukrainians nowadays. They are seen rather from the perspective of past events while, for present relations, economic and political cooperation is more important:

“Ukraine first of all reminds me of Bohdan Khmelnytsky. This is the first thought, I don't know why... And, as the previous speaker said, Lvov, there are strong Polish roots there. We are close to this nation. Well, we had some problems with them, generally speaking, especially after World War II, but somehow the Euro [Football Championship] brought us closer now”. “...I think that cooperation with Ukraine is going in the right direction...”

Ukraine was also associated with its present political and economic situation, which is less developed in comparison with Western Europe: “economically and mentally less developed than Western countries”, “do not have such possibilities as Russia”, “a little better than in Belarus”, “political repressions”, “political division of Ukraine between West and East”, “difficult to obtain Polish visa”, “working migration to Poland”. Ukrainians were oftenly described in terms of their connection with Poland in the past: “they have a lot of Polish heritage, but are not always friendly to Poles, especially those from Western Ukraine”, “similar to Poles”, “under Polish influence”. Ukrainians didn't gain many characteristics of their own personality, just “more talkative than Russians”, “physically very strong people”, “they can drink a lot”.

Belarus was not associated with any historical events or figures. It was most of all associated with its present political situation, which was described in such terms as “censorship”, “propaganda”, “political game”, “political repressions”, “autocracy”, “lack of freedom of speech”, “difficulties in obtaining a Polish visa” as well as “very poor”. The following personality traits were prescribed to Belarusians: “have personal characteristics similar to Poles”, “ready to persevere throughout political

and economic difficulties”, “family-oriented”, “calm”, “stuck to each other, do not integrate with Poles much”, “want to escape to the West”, “they make an impression that they are absent”. One of the participants said:

“But in general there are no major problems with them [Belarusians]. It is rather Poles who drink, fuss, while Belarusians ... you will not even notice them. These men do not actually interact more with the Poles, they are talking among themselves, and Belarusian girls, normally work and do not have much free time.”

However, some participants were not able to provide distinctive characteristics to each of the mentioned nations, but instead prescribed them some common features in general: “strikes”, “poverty”, “corruption”, “migration to more developed countries for work”, “Orthodox or atheist”, “definitely have a different mentality than the West”.

Further respondents were asked if they see any differences between Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, and whether it would be possible for participants to distinguish them from one another. The majority of respondents agreed that they will not be able to recognize representatives of those nations if they met them on the street. As well, they believe that Poles in general would rather not be able to recognize who is Russian, Ukrainian, or Belarusian solely from their physical characteristics or way of behaving. Here are some answers:

“When I think about the East, I do not think about separate countries – I think just about the East as a whole. I don’t have any distinctions between them.”

“These nations are definitely a blur for me. They are associated with the same things.”

About their physical appearance, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians were seen as similar to each other, as well as to Poles, as they are all Slavs and live in a similar climate zone. In regards to their psychological characteristics, they also seem to be similar to each other, as well as to Poles, and share certain common characteristics, yet have some different personality traits:

“Russians are dodgers, while Belarusians are ready to endure all the difficulties.”

“From my experience, Ukrainians are more open and talkative people. They identify themselves with Poles more than others... But, Russians, they are open too, but in another way.”

Furthermore, participants had a tendency to compare the target nations with Western European ones and to emphasize differences in economic and mental development. Thus, Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians were seen as inferior in terms of their development when compared with the Western states.

Language was mentioned as a distinctive feature of each of those nations. However, participants said that the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian languages have a common root and sound so similar to each other that it is hard to distinguish or recognize them. The majority of the participants agreed that they themselves, as well as Poles in general, will not be able to

distinguish between those languages unless they know some of them or have a linguistic talent. One of the students said:

"For me the languages are all the same. When I hear these languages, I always think it is Russian."

The opinions of respondents were quite diverse when it came to the feeling of being close or distant to those nations. Even though the majority of the participants mentioned similar personality traits between the target nations and Poles, only some of them feel close to Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians; most did not want to be associated with them. Regardless of the fact of relative cultural and linguistic similarity between Poles and Eastern Europeans, rich Western European nations with high economic and social development were definitely seen as closer to Poles. Answering the question: "Do you feel close or distant to those nations?" one of the participants said:

"No, I don't really feel close to them. I feel more close in relation to the West. Because I do not think in such terms that once we were very involved with Russia and so on, but I think in terms of what is happening now. We are in the Union [European Union], I actually feel European rather than Polish, and so on. I rather do not identify myself with Russians, Belarusians, and Ukrainians, and they are not particularly close. In the West, it is more fun."

However, the majority of participants feel closer to Ukrainians than to the other two nations and if they could choose a neighbor from among those three nations, they would rather choose a Ukrainian. They are motivated by geographical proximity, personal contacts with Ukrainians, and political

cooperation between the two states which is going in the right direction. Probably the fact that Ukraine has more potential than the other two countries as a candidate for European Union membership influenced the participants' decision. One of them said:

“I think, Ukraine, we are all close to each other, but to tell you the truth, Ukraine is probably our best neighbor... Ukraine is the closest country to the place from where I came from, and I also met Ukrainians. I never met Belarusians in Poland. I haven't often met Russians, just some tourists.”

Confirming expectations, personal experience is very important in the process of the evaluation of the other nations. During the answers, respondents often referred to their personal contacts and experience. The majority of participants had met Ukrainian students in Poland or even lived with them in the same apartment communities. Several participants met Russian students or Russian tourists in Poland. Only some of the participants had met Belarusian students. Experience with the target countries by participants was limited. None of the participants mentioned that he/she visited one of these countries. In contrast with the European Union states which can be visited easily, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus are not popular destinations for traveling, especially for young people. One of the reasons is the less attractive job market, as well as visa requirements for some of those states. However, the respondents would generally like to know some people from there and try to be open toward these “neighbors” despite the difficulties connected with the historical background:

“However, among these nations, I do not know anyone personally and it's hard to decide. I can say that I'm trying to adjust and to be open to each

nation. But the history, and culture, and all that... after all is very deep-rooted. And even if I would like to be completely open, I cannot. If I would meet those people personally, and know them better, then I will become a friend. And then I will know at least how the real situation is in those countries, and not that which is described by the media."

The main sources of knowledge about the target countries were media, history classes, and personal contacts:

"...from the experience of the apartment community, or... at school we had a bit of history, and we know what we had more or less in the past, and the rest from television. And from these the stereotypes arise and we know the stereotypes, we learn those stereotypes. And it seems to me that TV is a place where most of the things are learned about others".

As the conclusion, respondents were asked about common opinions, beliefs, or funny stories about the target nations. The majority of them did not provide any answer to this question. A few funny stories about Russians were mentioned. They were about the tension and rivalry between Poland and Soviet Russia, and portray Poles as brave fighters for their nation. Some other stories described Russians as people who have a tendency to steal. As a common belief, Ukrainians were seen as a very physically strong people. There were no funny stories about Belarusians. This nation is still less known for Poles, and is less shaped in terms of its national character.

Naturally, the students of the human and social science disciplines (such as history, journalism, pedagogy, etc.) were more easy and confident in

answering the questions and provided more detailed answers than those in more technical or scientific fields. However, there were no significant differences between those two groups of students in their attitude toward Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians.

Discussion

The results obtained from the focus group interviews revealed participants' opinions, ideas, and attitudes toward the states of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus and their people. The aggregated associations in connection with each of these were not so large, which suggests a rather low level of interest and knowledge of the participants. Definitely, there were many more associations with the countries than with their respective people. The image of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians was shaped through characteristics linked to their respective countries, especially the current economic and political situations therein. Those countries in general were seen as less developed than Poland, and were mainly associated with strikes, corruption, an oppressive political system, and poverty. Russians were seen as the dominant country in the region in terms of politics and economy, not only during the USSR period, but also nowadays. Ukraine and Belarus are also very strongly associated with the former Soviet Union. None of the participants associated Poland with the former Soviet Union. However, the interviewed students seemed to be quite free of the old national stereotypes which were so deeply rooted in Polish national history, especially regarding Russians. Some events concerning Polish-Russian and Polish-Ukrainian history were mentioned. Nevertheless, the participants did not have a tendency to perceive the

target nations through the prism of the historical events that happened between those nations and Poles in the past. In spite of the rich historical contacts of Poles with all of the nations under investigation, young Poles are rather thinking in terms of the future. There were no adjectives portraying Russians as aggressors, occupiers, rude, hostile, etc. Even though Ukrainians, especially those from the Western part of the country, were mentioned as not always friendly to Poles, they didn't gain any negative personal characteristics. No one nation under investigation was characterized as nationalistic or dangerous for Poland and Poles. This is probably the result of the national and international identification of young people. In the interviews, several participants mentioned that they identify themselves as Europeans rather than as Poles. They try to be open and friendly toward other groups, while historical memory and conflicts seem to be of secondary importance. The participants displayed significantly fewer associations with current events, society, and culture; the majority of their associations concern economic and political development.

The general attitude toward the target nations is not clear. Participants revealed many positive and negative associations. Russians were mostly seen as nice, sympathetic people who are able to drink a lot; Ukrainians – talkative, not always friendly toward Poles, and able to drink a lot; Belarusians – ready to persevere through political and economic difficulties. Common personality traits between Poles and all of the nations under investigation were often mentioned. However, participants rather did not feel close to them – Western European countries are closer to Poland than Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Respondents very often mentioned their personal experience with the people as the important

factor which creates their opinions about other nations. Personal experience enables direct communication and the obtaining of information about the country and people from a primary source. According to the participants, personal contacts seem to be a more influential source of information than mass media, history books, and other sources. Moreover, the majority of participants said that they did not have much experience with the nations under investigation.

The other tendency is that countries with more developed economic and political systems are seen in more of a positive light than less developed ones. Economic development seems to surpass cultural similarity as a factor influencing the formation of attitudes toward the other nations. The nations under investigation are characterized by economic and social achievements lower than those in Poland. Such a distribution of sympathy and antipathy is connected with an image of a rich and developed "West" contrasted with the poor, less developed "East". While the term "West" suggests distinctive countries and nations with a high level of political, economic, and cultural achievements, the term "East" is often used as a general definition of the countries which are less developed politically, economically, and culturally, and which also display relative decreases in democracy and human rights. The differences between them are blurred, as well as their geographical borders.

According to the participants, there are many more things that unite Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus than those which separately distinguish them. Some respondents said they see no differences between Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians at all, and think about them as a single entity in

general. However, there were some distinctive features prescribed to each of the nations. Russians abuse alcohol, but are nice and friendly people. Ukrainians are mostly associated with Polish heritage, and with the fact that they do not always have a positive attitude toward Poles. Belarusians were mostly described in terms of their relations to their political system - calm, loyal, persevering. However, Ukrainians were chosen by the majority of participants as the people with whom they would prefer to live next to. Ukrainians and Russians are definitely more known for Poles than Belarusians. In Polish history, Belarusians have appeared as a separate national group much later than Russians or Ukrainians. The image of Belarusians is still not well-shaped in terms of their national characteristics. In general, the differences between the target nations are blurred. The reason can again be attributed in part to the low level of interest in those countries in comparison with the European Union states. Additionally, Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus are not popular destinations for traveling, especially for young people. One of the reasons is a less attractive job market, as well as the visa requirements in some cases. As a result, these states lie beyond the primary interests of the majority of the participants in this research. The exception can be Ukraine, which is mentioned as a good partner for Poland in the future.

Remarks

* Results of the research report „Contemporary Attitudes of Poles toward Other Nations”, conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, CBOS) in 2013 on a representative random sample of adult Poles. The survey encompassed Polish attitudes toward

the following nationalities: Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, English, Spanish, French, Norwegians, Swiss, Hungarians, Swedes, Americans, Dutch, Austrians, Danes, Belgians, Irish, Japanese, Finns, Croats, Germans, Greeks, Lithuanians, Bulgarians, Georgians, Russians, Belarusians, Jews, Armenians, Chinese, Ukrainians, Egyptians, Serbs, Vietnamese, Turks, Libyans, Romanians, Roma, and Arabs.

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Appendices

Appendix I. Focus group interview questions

- 1) Which nations do you associate with the former Soviet Union?
- 2) Were the nations of the former Soviet Union similar to each other or even the same? In which sense, and to what extent?
- 3) Are they similar to each other nowadays? All of them, or only some of them? Do the Slavic nations of former Soviet Union differ from the non-Slavic ones (eg. Uzbeks, Armenians, Georgians, Estonians, and other non-Slavic)?
- 4) Which associations do you have with Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia? What are the personal features of Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians?
- 5) If you would meet them on the street, do you think it would be difficult or easy to differentiate Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians?
- 6) What are the differences between Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians?
- 7) According to you, how different are their languages? Could you recognize them?

- 8) Do you feel close or distant to those nations? If you could choose your neighbor among those three nations, whom would you choose, and whom would you not?

- 9) What are your sources of knowledge about Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians?

- 10) Is there anything else you would like to add about those nations – funny stories, beliefs, etc. about Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians?

Appendix II . Which associations do you have with Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus and their people?

Groups of associations	Russia	Ukraine	Belarus
Historical events/ figures	World War II and Stalin's attack on Poland in 1939 Stalin's cult of personality Russians were both perpetrators and victims of the Soviet regime	Bohdan Khmelnytsky Polish historical roots in Lvov Has a lot of Polish heritage Conflicts after World War II Belonging to the	Polish minority living in Belarus

		USSR	
Present political situation/ figures	<p>Censorship</p> <p>Propaganda</p> <p>Corruption</p> <p>Difficulties in obtaining Polish visa</p> <p>Geographically the largest country</p> <p>Plots, political intrigues</p> <p>Personification of Russia by Putin</p> <p>Big opposition groups in Russia</p> <p>Oppression of journalists</p>	<p>Censorship</p> <p>Political repressions</p> <p>Political division of the country between West and East</p> <p>Cooperation with Ukraine moving in the right direction</p>	<p>Censorship</p> <p>Propaganda</p> <p>Corruption</p> <p>Difficulties in obtaining Polish visa</p> <p>Political game</p> <p>Autocracy</p> <p>Death penalty is official</p> <p>Political repressions</p> <p>Oppression of journalists</p>
Other contemporary events	<p>Russian tourists come to Poland</p> <p>Arrest of punk group "Pussy Riot"</p>	<p>Euro Football Championship</p>	
Economic situation	<p>Huge possibilities</p> <p>Technical power</p> <p>Strong division</p>	<p>A little better than in Belarus</p> <p>Economically and</p>	<p>Poverty</p>

	<p>between social groups – one is either very rich or very poor</p> <p>Poor</p> <p>Rich</p>	<p>intellectually less developed than Western countries</p> <p>Doesn't have such possibilities as Russia does</p>	
<p>Characteristics of people</p>	<p>Want to live in Russia</p> <p>Drinking alcohol</p> <p>Russian mentality is similar to Polish one</p> <p>The whole Russian mentality is nice and not nice at the same time</p> <p>Nice people, but do not discuss politics much</p> <p>Very nice and friendly</p> <p>Lazy</p> <p>Having a tendency</p>	<p>Population is under Polish influence</p> <p>Western Ukrainians are not always positive toward Poland</p> <p>Physically very strong people</p> <p>Can drink a lot</p> <p>Leave their children and go for work abroad</p> <p>Talkative</p> <p>Don't know what to choose - the European Union or Russia</p>	<p>Loyalty to their government</p> <p>Stuck to each other, do not integrate with Poles much</p> <p>Rather not like Poles</p> <p>Want to escape to the West</p> <p>Have similar personality traits to Poles</p> <p>Ready to persevere throughout political and economic difficulties</p>

	<p>to steal</p> <p>Russians are closer to Ukrainians, but there are certain characteristics between Poles and Russians</p>		<p>Calm</p> <p>Make the impression that they are absent</p> <p>Have very light hair</p>
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