

**ICEST 2021****II International Conference on Economic and Social Trends for Sustainability of Modern Society****PSYCHOLOGICAL DETERMINANTS OF THE IMAGE OF  
RUSSIA UNDER COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

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**Abstract**

The article presents the results of an empirical study of the image of Russia during the "first wave" of the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to the psychological characteristics of its inhabitants (anxiety, hardiness, indicators of psychological and political stability). Seven main factors of assessing the image of Russia were identified, explaining 69% of the total variance: "state potential", "political aggression", "economic and political security", "sympathy for the country", "political stability", "internal tension", "national cultural specificity". In the context of the coronavirus pandemic, Russia is assessed in terms of economic, military and political parameters that determine the stability and safety of the population. Despite the presence of negative trends in assessments of the image of Russia, the general attitude towards the country remains positive. Respondents with low personal anxiety are inclined to a higher assessment of the Russian economy, observance of human rights in the country, and the effectiveness of foreign policy; with high personal anxiety - to the formation of negative ideas about the economic and political development of the country; with high situational anxiety - to a more pronounced assessment of Russia's military power, as well as the presence of serious internal conflicts in the country. Respondents with high levels of hardiness, involvement and control show signs of conservatism, adaptability and creativity, as well as less rivalry.

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## 1. Introduction

The study of the image of the state, as well as the factors of its favourable or negative assessment, remains an urgent problem. As Galumov (2003) notes, in the process of the evolutionary development of the state as a complex multifactorial subsystem of the world order, a complex of interrelated characteristics (economic, geographic, national, cultural, demographic, etc.) is formed. The effectiveness of the interaction of these indicators determines the general trends in the perception of socio-economic, socio-political, national-confessional and other processes in the country.

Based on the results of many years of cross-cultural research, Petrenko and Mitina (2018) identified a categorical system of perception of the country's image: industrial production, secularity, advanced technologies, politics, culture and historical heritage, people, investment and immigration, tourism. The authors define the image of the state as a subjective construction generated by public consciousness on the basis of objective economic reality and subsequently exerting a significant influence on it.

In many works it is noted that recently negative tendencies in the perception of Russia are intensifying. In world public opinion, this is actively supported by foreign media, which continue to shape the media image of Russia as an aggressive, totalitarian country with a weak resource-dependent economy (Gromova, 2016). The Russian state is presented as a poorly organized space, an evil empire with great-power ambitions (Melnik & Vinogradova, 2018).

The image of the state is becoming especially vulnerable against the backdrop of the global crisis caused by the novel coronavirus infection (COVID-19) pandemic. In these conditions, it is strategically important to maintain stability and inform about events taking place in the world and the country. The experience of a state of uncertainty becomes typical for many people, which in a high-risk situation violates the boundaries of an individual's sovereignty and deprives a person of the usual means of adaptation (Harlamenkova et al., 2020). "The presence in the current pandemic of such factors as threat to life, invisibility of threat, uncertainty of the future, inability to control the situation, makes it possible to compare it with previously studied traumatic events, such as observation of a natural or man-made disaster, participation in hostilities, etc." (Boyko et al., 2020, p. 1).

Aggravating factors include increased interest in tracking information about COVID-19, exposure to high-risk areas, negative coping styles, and low levels of social support (Yu et al., 2020). An immediate psychological response to a pandemic can be anxiety, uncertainty, fear, concern (Harlamenkova et al., 2020).

## 2. Problem Statement

The main problem of the study was to study the image of the state in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, taking into account the psychological specifics of its formation and representation in the minds of the country's citizens. An empirical study was carried out during the period of the "first wave" of coronavirus, characterized by the introduction of self-isolation measures and a number of restrictions on the territory of the Russian Federation (April-June 2020). The features of assessing the various components of the image of Russia (economy, politics, history, culture, etc.) were studied in conjunction with the psychological characteristics of its inhabitants (hardiness, anxiety, social subordination and social

aggressiveness as indicators of psychological and political stability). The results obtained indicate the possible reasons for people's reactions to current socio-political changes and situations, and make it possible to explain and smooth out the dissonance of mass perceptions, including in the international media space.

### **3. Research Questions**

In this study, the following questions were posed:

- What are the main characteristics of the image of Russia in the conditions of the “first wave” of the COVID-19 pandemic? What are the factors of attractiveness of the state or its negative assessment?
- Is there a relationship between the assessments of the components of Russia's image and such psychological characteristics of respondents as anxiety and hardiness?
- How does the image of the state affect the indicators of psychological and political stability?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of the study was to study the image of Russia and the psychological characteristics that determine its formation and transformation in the minds of the country's residents in the context of the spread of a new coronavirus infection (Covid-19).

### **5. Research Methods**

The main research method was a questionnaire survey. Several sections were included in the questionnaire, which made it possible to study the image of Russia and the psychological characteristics of the country's inhabitants. To obtain general information about the respondents, a socio-demographic block was provided in the questionnaire, including questions about gender, age, education, city of residence. Next, we will describe the techniques presented in the questionnaire in more detail.

#### **5.1. Studying the image of Russia**

To study the image of Russia, we used the “Country Image” method (Petrenko & Mitina, 2018), aimed at studying different components of the state image (economy, culture, politics, people, etc.). From the original text of the methodology, 28 indicators were selected, evaluated on a 7-point scale. The average values obtained from the assessment of each indicator of the country's image and not exceeding 3.4 points were interpreted as inappropriate for Russia; in the range from 3.5 to 4.5 points - as uncertain, causing difficulties in the assessment; in the range from 4.6 to 7 points - as typical for Russia. The statements used in the validation study are presented in Tables 2-5.

#### **5.2. Diagnosing anxiety and hardiness**

To diagnose anxiety, the Spielberger-Khanin method was used, which contains 40 statements that measure the level of situational (reactive) and personal anxiety and define it as low, medium or high. After

processing the results, the respondents were divided into three groups in accordance with the level of anxiety according to the methodology key.

To diagnose hardiness, the hardiness test of S. Maddi was used (adapted by D. A. Leontyev, E. I. Rasskazova). Hardiness is a self-reported measure of a person's ability to cope with stressful situations while maintaining internal balance and not impairing performance (Maddi, 2005). It is a key personality variable that mediates the influence of stress factors (including chronic ones) on somatic and mental health, as well as on the success of activities. The text of the methodology contains 45 questions and includes 3 relatively autonomous components (subscales) - commitment, control, challenge, as well as a general indicator of hardiness (Leontiev & Rasskazova, 2006).

Hardiness affects not only the assessment of the situation, but also the activity of a person in overcoming it. The test results allow us to assess a person's ability and readiness to actively and flexibly act in situations of stress and difficulties, or his vulnerability to experiences of stress and depression. The hardiness test is a reliable and valid psychological diagnostic tool, the results of which do not depend on gender, education and regional residence of a person.

### **5.3. Diagnostics of the degree of satisfaction with life in the country**

We used an express method for diagnosing social subordination and social aggression, developed by Samuylova in 2020 based on Yuriev's approach to the psychological and political stability of society (Yuriev, 2006). The methodology consists of two blocks, 4 statements in each, with which it is necessary to express the degree of agreement on a 5-point scale (a total of 8 statements). An instruction was formulated for the respondents: "Please, indicate how much you agree with the following statements about your country" (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The main indicators of the express methodology for diagnosing social subordination and social aggression

Parameter name	Statements in the questionnaire
Indifference	1. I am not interested in what is happening in my country.
Conservatism	2. Life in my country suits me perfectly - it is no worse than in other countries.
Adaptability	3. I support the changes that are taking place in my country.
Dependency	4. The problems existing in my country can be successfully solved without my participation.
Initiative	5. I try to actively influence what is happening in my country.
Radicalism	6. For life in Russia to improve, radical changes are needed.
Rivalry	7. My country should be developed in a completely different way than it is doing now.
Creativity	8. I have ideas on how to improve life in my country and unlock its potential.

The study was conducted remotely in April-June 2020, using special forms created and posted on the Internet (Google Forms service). Participants were involved in filling out these forms through a link to the study posted on the VKontakte social network (www.vk.com) or distributed by the authors of this article through a network of personal contacts in instant messengers. Participation in the study was voluntary and did not involve any payment to respondents. The average filling time for all forms was 15-20 minutes. The processing of the data obtained, the calculation of the results and the statistical analysis were carried out

using the methods of mathematical statistics (descriptive statistics, the analysis of variance (ANOVA), factor and correlation analysis) included in the Microsoft Excel 2019 and IBM SPSS Statistics 22.0.0 software.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Leading Factors of Russia's Image in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Factor analysis (principal component analysis) made it possible to identify 7 main factors in assessing the image of Russia in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, explaining 69% of the total variance. The leading factor was the “assessment of the country's potential”, which explains 35.1% of the total variance. The indicators for assessing the image of the state included in this factor are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** The factor of "assessing the country's potential"

Statements	Factor weight	M	SD	Typical for Russia
7. Economically independent state	.729	3.23	1.62	No
9. High level of development of science and technology	.725	3.51	1.59	?
19. The country has a high international prestige	.698	3.68	1.73	?
8. Country with a predominance of agriculture in the economy	.670	3.22	1.40	No
5. High level of spiritual culture	.637	3.48	1.52	No
11. Democratic state	.626	2.89	1.59	No
18. The country has a high standard of living	.549	2.38	1.29	No
12. The country has a totalitarian regime	-.541	4.38	1.68	?
24. High level of education	.517	3.77	1.45	?
6. Great power	.507	4.44	1.72	?
10. Carries out a peaceful policy	.479	3.31	1.65	No
26. Human rights are respected in the country	.464	2.97	1.53	No

*Note.* M is the mean; SD is the standard deviation; ? - the sign is not defined.

Most of the statements of the "Country Image" method included in the first factor are assessed as not typical in Russia during the "first wave" of the COVID-19 pandemic. Russia is perceived as an undemocratic state with a dependent economy, a low standard of living and spiritual culture, conducting a non-peaceful policy and not respecting human rights. The greatest difficulties for the respondents were caused by the assessment of the country's international prestige, the level of education and the degree of rigidity of the political regime.

The second factor, describing 9.3% of the total variance, was called the “political aggression” factor (Table 3). According to the data obtained, during the introduction of a number of restrictive measures, Russia is perceived as a militarized, undemocratic country pursuing an aggressive policy with signs of imperialism and totalitarianism.

**Table 3.** The factor of "political aggression"

Statements	Factor weight	M	SD	Typical for Russia
22. Militarized country	.835	4.51	1.36	Yes
23. Carries out an imperial policy	.824	4.39	1.44	?
17. Conducts an aggressive policy	.769	4.56	1.61	Yes
10. Carries out a peaceful policy	-.532	3.31	1.65	No
12. The country has a totalitarian regime	.507	4.38	1.68	?
11. Democratic state	.470	2.89	1.59	No
20. Nationalist state	.444	3.37	1.41	No

*Note.* M is the mean; SD is the standard deviation; ? - the sign is not defined.

The third factor, describing 5.4% of the total variance, included assessments of the Russian economy, the degree of its openness, military power, observance of human rights, and the level of education (Table 4). In this regard, this factor was conditionally called the factor of "economic and political security". It should be noted that the respondents could not determine their assessments of the education, economy and openness of the country, but pointed to a strong military component characteristic of Russia.

**Table 4.** The factor of "economic and political security"

Statements	Factor weight	M	SD	Typical for Russia
21. State with a market economy	.765	3.98	1.3	?
23. Open country	.722	4.03	1.68	?
16. Militarily powerful state	.588	4.9	1.47	Yes
26. Human rights are respected in the country	.425	2.97	1.53	No
24. High level of education	.405	3.77	1.45	?

*Note.* M is the mean; SD is the standard deviation; ? - the sign is not defined.

The factor of "political stability" (4.7%) included indicators of the image of the state, including an assessment of the policy towards representatives of different nationalities, as well as the degree of religiosity of the country's inhabitants (Table 5).

**Table 5.** The factor of "political stability"

Statements	Factor weight	M	SD	Typical for Russia
4. Religious population	.746	4.03	1.61	?
3. State with a planned economy	.584	3.26	1.48	No
20. Nationalist state	.527	3.37	1.41	No
2. Politically stable state	.446	3.31	1.61	No

*Note.* M is the mean; SD is the standard deviation; ? - the sign is not defined.

The factor of "internal tension" (4.2%) included the respondents' perception of the presence of serious internal conflicts in Russia ( $r = -.748$ ) and non-observance of the rights of citizens of different nationalities ( $r = .452$ ). In addition, we note that despite the identified negative trends in the perception of Russia during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the indicators of positive attitude towards the country remain quite high (the factor of "sympathy for the state", 4.9% of the total variance): respondents sympathize with Russia ( $r = .839$ ,  $M = 5.6 \pm 1.5$ ), would like (could) live in it ( $r = .839$ ,  $M = 4.8 \pm 1.6$ ).

In our opinion, the identified factors are a consequence of the introduction in Russia of strict restrictive measures to combat the spread of coronavirus and demonstrate a grouping of indicators of the state image that are influenced by situational variables and associated with the leading orientation of the political consciousness of citizens.

Correlation analysis showed that the assessments of Russia by the factors of “Political aggression” and “Political stability” are related to the age of the respondents ( $p \leq .01$ ;  $r = -.25$ ,  $r = -.28$ ). Consequently, older citizens are more inclined to view Russia's policies as aggressive and authoritarian, as well as insufficiently stable. An assessment of Russia as a politically stable state is more typical for respondents who support the country's political course ( $p \leq .01$ ,  $r = .53$ ) and do not want radical changes ( $p \leq .01$ ,  $r = -.35$ ). The respondents who are not satisfied with the changes taking place in Russia ( $p \leq .01$ ,  $r = -.34$ ) believe that the country should develop in a different way ( $p \leq .01$ ,  $r = .37$ ).

## **6.2. The relationship between assessments of the image of Russia and the psychological characteristics of respondents**

According to the analysis of variance (ANOVA), in groups with different levels of personal anxiety, there is a statistically significant difference ( $p \leq .05$ ) in assessments of international authority, military potential, level of economic development, and democratic potential of Russia. Thus, respondents with a high level of personal anxiety rate Russia according to these indicators significantly lower than in groups with a low and medium level. This group is also not entirely satisfied with life in Russia. Respondents with low personal anxiety give higher ratings to the economic indicators of Russia, the observance of human rights in the country, and foreign policy indicators. Consequently, personal anxiety can be associated with the formation of ideas about the economic and political development of the country. Respondents with high reactive anxiety rate Russia more as a “militarily powerful state” and also as a country in which there are serious internal conflicts.

The higher the level of hardiness, control and involvement of the respondents, the higher they rate the observance of human rights in Russia ( $p \leq .05$ ,  $r = .19$ ), the greatness of the state ( $p \leq .01$ ,  $r = .22$ ), international authority ( $p \leq .05$ ,  $r = .21$ ), military potential ( $p \leq .01$ ,  $r = .26$ ) and economic independence ( $p \leq .05$ ,  $r = .19$ ) of the country, the less inclined to believe that there are serious internal conflicts in Russia ( $p \leq .05$ ,  $r = -.19$ ). When assessing life in Russia, respondents with a high level of hardiness show signs of conservatism ( $p \leq .01$ ,  $r = .30$ ) and adaptability ( $p \leq .01$ ;  $r = .22$ ), and respondents with a high level of control are additionally inclined to show less rivalry ( $p \leq .05$ ,  $r = -.182$ ) and more creativity ( $p \leq .05$ ).

## **7. Conclusion**

An analysis of the results of the study allows us to conclude that during the period of the “first wave” of COVID-19, Russia is assessed primarily in terms of economic, military and political indicators that determine the stability and security of life of the population. Despite the general positive attitude towards Russia, the majority of respondents do not support the changes taking place in the country and believe that it should develop in a different way. Russia is perceived as a militarized, undemocratic country with a dependent economy, low standard of living and spiritual culture, conducting an aggressive policy with signs

of imperialism and a tough regime. The obtained data correlate with the conclusions of a number of authors about the general negativization of the image of Russia formed in the international media space (Gromova, 2016; Melnik & Vinogradova, 2018) and allow us to conclude that these characteristics showed particular vulnerability against the background of the “first wave” of coronavirus. Many indicators of Russia's image have not received an unambiguous assessment and found themselves in a zone of "uncertainty." This may indicate the potential mobility and dynamism of these characteristics in the minds of citizens in crisis conditions and require additional attention in terms of internal regulation and subsequent external positioning.

Given the threat to the life and health of the country's population, the characteristics of the image of Russia are determined by the anxiety and hardiness of its inhabitants. Respondents with high situational anxiety give a higher rating to the military power of Russia, as well as the presence of serious internal conflicts in the country. Respondents with high personal anxiety tend to form negative ideas about the economic and political development of the country. Respondents with low personal anxiety give higher ratings to the economic indicators of Russia, the observance of human rights in the country, and foreign policy indicators.

The data obtained can be explained by the fact that for people with high anxiety, feelings of confidence and success are important; they can be outwardly demanding and categorical, requiring a meaningful understanding of activities and clear planning. As a state, anxiety is characterized by such subjectively experienced emotions as stress, anxiety, concern, nervousness. The state of situational anxiety is unstable in time and has a different intensity depending on the strength of the impact of a stressful situation. High personal anxiety correlates with emotional breakdowns and psychosomatic diseases. Highly anxious individuals tend to perceive threats to their self-esteem and life activity in a wide range of situations and to plunge into negative states. Low-anxious people require more motivation and responsibility. Indicators of anxiety can affect a person's ability to perceive and learn new rules and patterns. Severe anxiety reduces the individual's desire for innovation and can lead to the formation of inappropriate responses (Burikova et al., 2009).

The high level of modern dangers and risks, as well as the uncertainty of the situation, can have a destructive effect on a person. Hardiness is a significant ability of a person, society and state to survive and develop in difficult conditions of unpredictability and anxiety (Shirshov, 2019). Its development promotes active overcoming of difficulties, despair, feelings of helplessness and loss of meaning (Maddi, 2005). To deal with stress and increase psychological stability, techniques are effective aimed at overcoming feelings of uncertainty: planning, conscious appeal to known positive facts that indicate safety (Harlamenkova et al., 2020).

As further research, we can note such promising areas as:

- 1) the dynamics of the state's image in the context of global changes in the country and in the world and media influence;
- 2) study of the influence of psychological characteristics on the perception of media content and the formation of the image of the state;

- 3) possibilities of mobilizing the psychological resources of the country's inhabitants in difficult socio-political conditions;
- 4) comparative analysis of the components of the image and media image of the state;
- 5) analysis of the possibilities of positioning the image of the state in the media space in the context of ensuring national security.

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