

Research Article

The Perceptions of Students in Russia and Belarus About the Two Countries: An Ethno-Sociological Study

Irina Snezhkova*, and Natalia Shalygina

Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences

ORCID

Irina Snezhkova: 0000-0001-7247-4975

Natalia Shalygina: 0000-0001-8636-1262

Abstract. In 2018-2020, a sociological and ethnopsychological study of the image of Russia and Belarus from the point of view of students from the two countries was conducted in a number of universities in Moscow and Minsk. Given the current climate and sanctions pressure on Russia and Belarus, it was important to study how Russian and Belarusian youth react to the current conditions, how they perceive the image of Russia and Belarus, and what are the ethnic characteristics that the youth of the two countries ascribe to each other. In some cases, young people had a sense of pride and patriotism for their country. The features of the youth's ethnic identities in the two countries were also studied. The results showed that despite the difficult ethno-political situation in the world, the youth of Russia and Belarus demonstrated a positive attitude to their own nation and to their neighbor.

Keywords: the image of Russia and Belarus, ethnic stereotypes of Russians and Belarusians, pride and patriotism, ethnic identity of Russians and Belarusians

Corresponding Author: Irina Snezhkova; email: snezhkova@mail.ru;

Published: 11 February 2022

Publishing services provided by Knowledge E

© Irina Snezhkova, and Natalia Shalygina. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the KarRC Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

The three decades that have passed since the collapse of the USSR have highlighted many new problems associated with the search for mutual understanding and cooperation between the former Soviet republics. Today, the independent states are striving to build a long-term policy of good-neighborliness throughout the entire post-Soviet space. And, despite all the existing problems of a political, economic or socio-cultural nature, this process continues to develop in a forward direction, uniting the interests of today's sovereign states. A special role in this process belongs to young people, in whose hands the future of the world is. The social potential of young people, their labor contribution to the economic development of society, their mobility and activity in maintaining contacts with peers on a global scale are factors that can contribute to the establishment of international contacts [1].

In this connection, it seems important to look into the way the young people of various former Soviet republics see each other as representatives of different ethnic

 OPEN ACCESS

groups, what views and images they have of their respective peoples. The present article presents the results of a sociological and ethno-psychological study designed to compare the content of ethnic auto- and hetero-stereotypes of Russian and Belarussian youth; to find out the students' ideas about power and patriotism, as well as the sources and dynamics of a sense of pride in their respective countries.

The study was conducted during 2018-2020 in Moscow (400 respondents, students of the N. Bauman Moscow State Technical University; the Moscow Institute of Engineering and Physics, the Institute of Journalism and Literary Writing, the Russian State University for the Humanities; A.N. Kosygin Institute of Social Engineering of the Russian Humanitarian University, Moscow Finance and Law Academy, Moscow Technical Institute of Communications and Informatics, K.G. Razumovsky Moscow State University of Technology and Management) and in Minsk (400 respondents, students of the Belarussian State University).

2. Methods

In the present study an interdisciplinary approach was used that combines sociological, psychological and anthropological theories. Continuing broadening of the problematics studied in relation to modern youth demands turning to new scientific paradigms that can provide explanatory models for the empirical data accumulated over the last decades. With the increased dynamic complexity of the post-Soviet societies, theories of the so-called integral meta-paradigm turned out especially useful in sociology in the XXI c., explaining social development from the cultural pluralism perspective, and applying various, sometimes seemingly incompatible levels of analysis. Such non-linear principle of looking at social phenomena allows the post-Soviet sociology to offer convincing explanations of the complicated processes of the formation of new states on the territory of the former Soviet Union and the relationships between them

The main technique for this study was a questionnaire, which included 40 questions relating to such topics as auto-stereotypes and stereotypes of perception of a neighboring people, identification of symbols of the two countries, awareness of the similarities and differences between Russians and Belarussians, the degree to which students of Russia and Belarus are informed about each other's cultural features, assessment of historical events during the existence of both countries within the USSR, an understanding of the processes of formation of the image characteristics of the country, etc.

TABLE 1: Feelings related to ethnicity (%).

Feelings connected with belonging to one's own people	Russian youth	Belarussian youth
Positive (pride, calm confidence)	84	83
No feelings	12	7
Resentment, humiliation	4	2
Other	10	8

In addition, a modified M. Kuhn and T. McPartland's test "Who am I" was used as part of the survey. This test helps to find out certain features of personal self-identification of our respondents, including gender, social status and ethnicity. The use of M. Kuhn and T. McPartland's test contributed to the identification of the degree of tolerance / intolerance of Russian and Belarussian students in relation to each other as carriers of a different ethnicity. The free association method was used to characterize the perceived images of the two countries [2].

3. Results

3.1. Ethnic identity in the representations of the Russian and Belarussian youth.

Ethnic identity is the core of ethnic self. With undisturbed interethnic relations or in a mono-ethnic environment, ethnic identity is mostly not actualized in the minds of people, but at critical historical moments or during interethnic conflicts, it may take on greater significance. It is known that the most socially optimal ethnic identity is the one that is taking a positive attitude towards itself and other ethnic groups. Deviations from the norm can occur according to the type of hyper-ethnicity (ethno-nationalism) and ethnic indifference (ethno-nihilism).

The results of a survey of young people of the two countries showed that objective universal characteristics related to social status, family roles, gender, age, occupation, etc., are dominant for the youth in both countries, compared with national problems.

Nationality (ethnicity) as a value priority was noted in 18% of the Russian respondents and in 22 % of Belarussian respondents, but in the hierarchy of values of both Russians and Belarussians, it occupies the lower positions.

In general, with both Russian and Belarussian young people, belonging to their own people evokes predominantly positive feelings.

TABLE 2: Russian and Belarussian students' auto- and hetero-stereotypes

Russians' auto-stereotypes	Belarussians' auto-stereotypes	Russians' hetero-stereotypes of Belarussians	Belarussians' hetero-stereotypes of Russians
Strong Courageous Hard working Honest Strict	Calm Peaceful Friendly Kind Hospitable Secretive Ingenuous	Good Honest Hospitable Frank Patient Practical Clean Patriotic	Active Courageous Proud Honest Kind Sincere Of imperial mentality Aggressive

One's ethnic identity is often associated with one's language. In Russia, the vast majority of young people (including people of different ethnicity) speak Russian. In Belarus, the majority of young people also use Russian in various spheres of life, but a third of the respondents prefer to speak Belarussian (mostly at home, especially in rural areas).

3.2. Auto-stereotypes and hetero-stereotypes in the ethnic consciousness of Russian and Belarussian youth

A pronounced predominance in the answers of positive auto-stereotypes or of negative hetero-stereotypes speaks of a conflicting or rivalrous relationships between ethnic groups. However, the dominance of the evaluative component in the relationship between the two kinds of stereotypes (when increased attention to hetero-types prevails) indicates a disturbance in the positive identity of the group members and their blurred sense of "we". The stability of ethnic identity is the concurrence of auto-stereotypes and hetero-stereotypes [3]

The study of Russian/Belarussian ethnic stereotypes among the students spoke to the presence of balanced interethnic relations. Auto-stereotypes of Russians and Belarussians are mostly favorable, hetero-stereotypes are also predominantly positive in nature with a small degree of criticism, as is expected when describing the other. The stereotypes of Russians and Belarussians that recurred the most were as follows.

For a deeper understanding of the county images in which both kinds of ethnic stereotypes play an important part, the study used the method of free associations [4]. The respondents were asked to enter into the form of the questionnaire their associations related to the natural, geographic, historical, cultural, political and economic characteristics of Russia and Belarus.

1. (a) **Russian students' associations:**
- (b) **Russia:**

- 1) Nature: a birch-tree, taiga, the lake Baikal, Siberia, a bear.
- 2) Culture: the Kremlin, the Golden Ring (eight ancient Russian cities, tourist attractions), folk crafts (Gzhel china, Khokhloma wood painting), world-famous writers and artists.
- 3) History: victory over Napoleon, victory in the Great Patriotic War, Russian Empire, USSR, Russian Federation, space flights.
- 4) Politics: the flag, the anthem, the Romanovs, Putin, independent state policy.
- 5) Economics: oil, gas, space industry, agriculture, economic instability.

1. (a) **Belarus:**

- 1) Nature: Belovezhskaya Pushcha (national park), rivers, fields, bison, potatoes.
- 2) Culture: art festival "Slavianski Bazaar", Yakub Kolos (writer), rock-groups "Pesnyary", "B 2".
- 3) History: Belarus as part of the Russian Empire, the USSR, the Independent Republic; the Great Patriotic War.
- 4) Politics: Lukashenko, *bat'ka* (father, "gaffer"), authoritarianism, the Union State.
- 5) Economics: developed agriculture, collective farms, farms, heavy trucks "BelAZ" and "MAZ" (products of Belarussian automobile plant and Minsk automobile plant).

1. (a) **Belarusian students' associations:**

(b) **Belarus:**

- 1) Nature: Belovezhskaya Pushcha, forests, lakes, rivers, storks, bison.
- 2) Culture: castles, crafts, Yakub Kolos (writer), Francizk Skoryna (philosopher and writer), artists
- 3) History: Kievan Rus, Belarus as part of the Lithuanian principality and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Russian Empire, USSR, the Independent State
- 4) Politics: *bat'ka* (father, "gaffer"), Lukashenko, order.
- 5) Economics: plowed fields, farms, BelAZ, MAZ

(a) **Russia:**

- 1) Nature: birches, bears, natural diversity.

TABLE 3: Opinions of Russian and Belarusian youth about the most appropriate form of statehood for Russia and Belarus (% of the respondents).

Polity	Russians about Russia	Belorussians about Belarus
Independent State	87	95
Union State	38	27
Customs Union	10	30
European Union	5	20

Note: the total is not 100%, for the respondent could choose several answers to this question.

- 2) Culture: Pushkin, Lermontov, the Kremlin.
- 3) History: Russian Empire, USSR, Russian Federation, Union State.
- 4) Politics: powerful weapons, Putin, empire.
- 5) Economics: oil, gas, economics, instability.

3.3. Attitude of Belarusian and Russian youth towards the construction of the Russia-Belarus Union State

At present, Russia and Belarus declare the idea of building a union state and staying in a single customs union. The questionnaire item directly focusing the respondents' attention on this topic, made it possible to find out the following distribution of priorities:

As far as geopolitics is concerned, the youth of the two countries prefer to be part of their own independent state. However, the answers to the open question about specific forms of interstate relations between the two independent states showed that, in our respondents' opinion, both states should build their economic relations as members of the Union State and the Customs Union. At the same time, both Belarussian and Russian students believe that relations with the European Union should remain affirmative and constructive. The majority of Russian and Belarussian respondents regard today's relations with the United States as unfriendly for which the Americans are to blame, yet our respective countries should strive for peace.

3.4. Views of Russian and Belarussian youth on patriotism

Currently, patriotic feelings are quite pronounced in both countries. To the question "What is patriotism?" both Russian and Belarussian students answered that it was, first of all, "love for one's country", "pride in it," "faith in the state". However, the extended

version of the answer to this question showed that Russian and Belarussian students' ideas of patriotism differed in content.

Thus, with Russians, their patriotic feeling rests upon the country's success in the arena of international politics and the country's self-determined policy entailing the strengthening of Russia's sovereignty in the modern world. Russia's achievements in the fields of economics, sports and culture, too, make the foundation of patriotism. Almost all Russian students are proud of the victory of the USSR in the Great Patriotic War and they unambiguously correlate this historical fact with pride in Russia.

Belarussian students maintain that they feel pride in their country "because of its peaceful and balanced policy, in connection with the fact that the people are in accord with the leadership, and because order prevails in the country." When asked, "Has the feeling of patriotism recently increased in the country?" both Russian and Belarussian students gave an affirmative answer, which, we believe, may not least result from the mobilization caused by the extension of international sanctions both against Russia and Belarus [5].

4. Discussion

Relations between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Belarus from the very beginning of their acquisition of the status of independence in 1991 have been forming as friendly and oriented towards the creation of the Union State. However, the complexity of interstate relations at the present stage of their development creates a situation of tension that cannot but affect, in one form or another, various spheres of social life in both countries. And if the older generations, who were born and raised in the USSR, preserve the memory of the common history and common heroic past of their peoples, including not only the victory in World War II, but also the economic growth in the post-war years, the flourishing of Soviet culture, etc., the generations born after the collapse of the Soviet Union no longer possess such a historical memory. For 30 years, the youth of Russia and Belarus have been taught to perceive the neighboring country as a foreign state, living its own life, forming its own values, having the unconditional right to choose its own geopolitical purposes. A question arises of how and within what boundaries the new generations that have grown up in the conditions of "separation" are prepared to continue the integration policy that began more than three decades ago, and it is in view of this fundamental question that the present study was undertaken.

In Russia and Belarus, studies of the countries' images and perceptions began in the early 2000s, encouraged by the need for the countries to acquire the status of renewed states, reborn after the chaos and misrule of the 1990s.

Russian scientists, based in the Academy of Sciences' Institutes of Sociology, Political Science, Ethnology, Psychology, as well as at similar faculties at universities, have actively developed a study of the countries' images through the characteristics of the national mentality], the study of auto-stereotypes [6,7], ethnic self-awareness [8], interethnic relations [9,10], etc. In Belarus, numerous works are devoted to the country's civilizational choice between East and West [11,12], the socio-cultural potential of the youth in Belarus [13], influence of the media on the formation of the country image [14].

Unlike a number of other republics that were part of the USSR, Belarus has always been considered a calm and peaceful republic. Having achieved independence, she made this path almost painlessly and in a short period of time was able to quite confidently determine the vector of her development. To a large extent, this was facilitated by the high-tech scientific and industrial potential preserved after the collapse of the Soviet Union, developed modern agriculture, as well as such an important factor as the traditionally hardworking and law-abiding population. The situation changed in August 2020 during the elections of President A. Lukashenko, which were declared by part of the electorate to be conducted with violations and entailed mass protests. A new research needs to be designed and conducted to study the changes, if any, in Russian and Belorussian young people's attitude towards each other and their respective countries, following the dramatic events of 2020.

The results of the present study, however, showed a generally positive attitude of Russian and Belarusian youth to the political, economic and cultural situation within the country and in relation to each other. In our opinion, the results of the study are objective enough, as they are largely consistent with other authors' conclusions.

In the future, we believe, similar studies should pay attention to the degree of tolerance between peoples. Understanding how the youth of two historically close Slavic peoples, separated by the cataclysms of political events associated with the collapse of a single country and the formation of independent states, will be able to find a common language with each other in the new conditions seems highly promising for developing the strategy of further interaction between Russia and the Republic of Belarus in the new geopolitical reality. We, in this study, have found out that despite the existing differences, and taking into consideration the fact that international relations are largely built on a competitive basis in the field of economic and political dominance, rather than on the basis of common history and general human relations, young people

of Russia and Belarus find it extremely important that friendly attitude to peoples other than one's own should be maintained.

5. Conclusions

Judging by the results of our study, we can make the following conclusions:

1. The sense of ethnic identity among Russian and Belarusian students is marked by stability. The main thing is that there is no militant nationalism in it, which occurs among representatives of a number of states in the post-Soviet space.

2. Auto- and hetero-stereotypes in general speak to a positive perception of each other by the youth of the two countries, although, just as expected, in hetero-stereotypes (characteristics of the other) there are traits of criticism.

3. With regard to geopolitics, the students wished that their respective countries should maintain independence, but they welcome the creation of a single economic and customs union. At least 50% of young Belarussian respondents have a firm conviction in the profitability of cooperation with Russia in the economic and political spheres

4. The feeling of patriotism among Russians and Belarusians is quite pronounced, yet it does not change over to nationalism.

As an overall conclusion, we can state that despite the difficult political situation in Russia and Belarus, despite strong informational and sanctions pressure on both countries from the collective West, the youth of Russia and Belarus see each other in a positive light and anticipate a joint future in the interaction of the two countries.

References

- [1] Shalygina NV. Ys and Centennials: New mentality of Russian youth. *Power*. 2017;1:164-167.
- [2] Kuhn M, McPartland T. *Empirical study of personality attitudes towards oneself*. Moscow: Modern Foreign Ethnopsychology; 1984.
- [3] Stefanenko TG. *Ethno-psychology*. Moscow: Institute of Psychology, Russian Academy of Sciences; 1999.
- [4] Mukha VN. The image of the country and the image of the people: Russians about Belarus and Belarussians. *Theory and Practice of Social Development*. 2013;9:80-82.

- [5] Snezhkova IA, Shalygina NV, editors. Images of Russia and Belarus as seen by the youth of the two countries in XXI century. Moscow: Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences; 2020.
- [6] Lebedeva NM. Ethnic and cross-cultural psychology. Moscow: MAKS Press; 2011.
- [7] Soldatova GU. Psychology of interethnic tension. Moscow: Smysl; 1998.
- [8] Drobizheva LM, Ryzhova SV. All-Russian identity in the sociological dimension magazine. Bulletin of the Russian Nation. 2021;1-2(77-78):39-52.
- [9] Arutyunyan YV, Drobizheva LM, Susokolov AA. Ethnosociological. Moscow: Aspect Press; 1999.
- [10] Tishkov VA, editor. Ethnological monitoring and early conflict warning. Moscow: Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Sciences; 2006.
- [11] Lazarevich AA, Levyash IY. Belarus: Cultural and civilizational choice. Minsk: Belarusian Science; 2014.
- [12] Levyash IA. Belarusian idea in search of identity. Belarusian Dumka. 2001;11:22-38.
- [13] Kalacheva II, Snezhkova IA. The image of Russia and Belarus through the eyes of young people at the present stage. Journal of Contemporary Youth and Society. 2019;7:25-28.
- [14] Postalovskiy AV. Information channels for the formation of the image of the state in the youth's perception. Journal of Contemporary Youth and Society. 2019;7:45-51.