

RUSSIANS AND POLES: MUTUAL STEREOTYPES IN HISTORICAL PROJECTION

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Abstract: The present article compares how Russians and Poles view themselves and how they view each other. People of different cultures tend to develop general characteristics of other neighbouring cultural groups. These generalizations are usually regarded as stereotypes in both everyday discourse and in social science tradition. The content of stereotypical perceptions in Polish and Russian culture is the main focus of this work. The study analyzes the relations between these cultures by and explores their national characteristics using historical and literature sources as well as sociological data.

Keywords: stereotypes; national characteristics; Poles; Russians.

The topic of the relations between Russians and Poles is a complex one and it incorporates many historical issues. Obviously, one cannot list all the factors that have influenced the history of relationships between these two neighboring countries: some of these issues are controversial and some are minor. This approach tries to determine both the mutual stereotypes of Russians and Poles, and to find out the sources that contributed to the formation of these mutual stereotypes.

The territorial position of Poland between the East and the West has greatly influenced Polish culture in general and the construction of 'Polishness' in particular. This has been acknowledged by historians who have noted the significance of a geographical factor. Maria Bogucka, for example, stressed this notion by pointing out that throughout history

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Poland played the role of cultural bridge between the East and the West. From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance several important aspects marked the development of a cultural identity in Poland. The emergence of the Polish state in the fourteenth century and the subsequent increasing importance of the Polish language clearly indicated the growth of national awareness. These tendencies have resulted in the period of Polish Renaissance, which was greatly influenced by the contacts with Western culture (Bogucka 1994 : 53–57). Later on, during the Romanticism movement, the vision of ‘Polishness’ was formulated. A seventeenth-century Polish writer Szymon Starowolski gave the following description of the Poles in contrast to other nations: “We are not boastful like the Germans, or cruel like the Muscovites, or unscrupulous in using poison like Swedes, or used to robbing and stealing like Hungarians; neither do we despise foreigners like the English; nor do we have the vindictive temper of the Scots” (Starowolski in Kepinski 1995: 154). Note that the comparison of the Poles with other nations brought up in this citation begins with citing two neighboring nations – Germany and Russia – the nations that represent the influence of the East and West. This comparison suggests, once again, the importance of the territorial factor for the construction of ‘Polishness’.

What are the characteristics of ‘Polishness’? The Romantic ideologists of the early twentieth century described true ‘Polishness’ as ‘the quintessence of noble-mindedness, generosity, courage and sublimeness’ (Kłoskowska 1996: 88). The modern understanding of the Polish characteristics relies heavily on sociological surveys. According to a Polish public opinion, the Poles see themselves as community-oriented, patriotic, religious and giving priority to family over work. The study on the auto-stereotypes of the Poles was carried out in May, 2001 (CBOS Polish Public Opinion Poll 05/2001). Similar to the results was obtained from the study on the Russian sample. Also these findings, again, indicate the positive dimension of the auto-stereotype. Nevertheless, other studies present different results. The research conducted by Bartminski (1995) shows that there is no imbalance in favor of a positive perception. Poles described themselves as patriotic, religious, courageous, and intelligent but at the same time they have the tendency to abuse alcohol (Bartminski 1995: 257). Though some of the characteristics appear to be unstable and

therefore, subject to change, others can be regarded as constant. Evidently, such characteristics as being courageous and patriotic remain stable through certain periods of time as follows from the different sources.

What is the true image of the Poles and how it can be obtained? Does it come from the ideas expressed by Polish writers and historians or from the sociological surveys? The historical and literature sources, which are used in the process of mythologization and construction of an imagined community – the nation – demonstrate key aspects of national characteristics and surveys support statistically the features that belong to Poles. It seems that both resources help in sketching the Polish characteristics. Both approaches proved to be complimentary in understanding either ‘Polishness’ or the ‘Russian soul’.

The characteristics of both nationalities outlined above will be useful in comparing those nationalities. The analysis of interrelationship between Russians and Poles and the existing stereotypes toward each other are described below.

Cultural connections between these two societies have always been present but have weakened over time. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which marked the Polish Renaissance, are of primary importance. During this period the Polish language and culture were symbols of elegance among Russians (at that time Moscovites). Therefore, the defeat at the hands of the Russians in the nineteenth century was unexpected because Russia for a long time was seen as something outside civilized Europe (Milosz 1981: 130–131). Negative feelings toward Russians prevailed among Poles at that time and were clearly indicated by the Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz in his poetic drama *Forefather’s Eve*:

Yet I also know what it is to be free by the mercy of a Muscovite,
The scoundrels will remove the chains from my hands and feet
But will seize my soul – I shall be exiled! (Mickiewicz in Taras 1986: 80)

In the early 1980s the opinion that the relationship between these two nations has not changed a lot over time still existed. Polish novelist Kazimierz Brandys made the following observation: “Poles do not know how to think about Russians and Russians do not know how to think about Poles... Polish consciousness is still at the level expressed in *Fore-*

father's Eve. And Russian consciousness is still at the level of Dostoyevskiy's 'treacherous little Poles' (Brandys in Taras 1986: 181). In other words, the images presented in the Polish and Russian literature have-persistent over time, according to Russian and Polish writers. Indeed, the evidence of ambivalent feelings toward each other can be found in several sources from both Polish and Russian viewpoints. In 1886 Russian Slavophile Ivan Aksakov declared: "We do not feel the slightest hatred toward Poles". But earlier, in the same work, Aksakov wrote: "... it is impossible... to deal with the Poles, this unhappy, conceited, arrogant, frivolous tribe which in addition is permeated with Catholic-Jesuitical morals" (Aksakov in Rancour-Laferriere 2000: 119). The views expressed on the subject of Polish-Russian relations can be only personal opinions, however they signify the emotional side of the mutual stereotypes. These mutual stereotypes can take other forms as well. They can be found in ethnonyms which are popular among ordinary people. Consider, for example, such ethnonyms as the Polish "Moskal" and "Rusek", the Russian "Lach" (Rancour-Laferriere 2000: 120).

Research from the 90s indicated that Poles see Russians more in a negative light in the present-day situation. In one study Polish respondents attributed to Russians such characteristics as "wasteful", "backward", "undisciplined", "poor" and "dirty". Interestingly enough, the only positive feature noted was Russian hospitality. Another study conducted by Bartminski (1995) indicated similar results portraying Russians as poor, untidy, drunken, primitive, and aggressive. Nevertheless, another source of information, namely, national opinion polls (2002), reveal other tendencies that can shed some light on the issue of stereotypes. According to the CBOS report of the Public Opinion Poll (2002), the majority of Poles saw the future of the Polish-Russian relations as optimistic. In response to a question "Are friendly and equal relations between Poland and Russia possible?" eighty percent of the participants expressed a strong belief in the possible good relations between Poland and Russia. Yet, when considering the attitudes of the Poles toward Russians as the ethnic minority, the negative feelings still persist to some extent. This is supported by the results of another survey conducted by the Public Opinion Research Center (ref?) on the topic of attitudes toward ethnic minorities. Only twenty-four percent of the Polish respondents

agreed that they like Polish citizens of the Russian origin, while twenty-six percent expressed negative feelings. As one might expect, the Polish society is divided in relation to their attitudes toward Russians. After all, the positive view cannot prevail in this case due to the nature of the historical altercations between Poles and Russians.

Historical conflicts and religious differences have contributed to shared general negative stereotypes directed toward each other. Yet, it was not always the case. Despite anti-Polish views manifested by many Russian writers, the Polish culture has been influential in the Soviet era and was admired by many Russians. In mass culture, Polish films and pop-singers have been very popular in USSR. What is more, Poland has served as a gate to the West for one stratum of the Russian society, namely, the intelligentsia.

The collective consciousness of Russians does not include many stereotypical features of Poles. According to Dushenko (1995), the most frequent characteristic attributed to Poles is their drinking habit. The opinion that Poles consume almost as much alcohol as Russians is considered to be a positive characteristic by the majority of Russians. Apart from this, not much can be added about other typical features of Poles as viewed by Russians. It is interesting that, despite shared border and a long history of relations between two nations, Poles are almost absent from the Russian ethnic jokes.

Another illustration of the fact that Russians do not hold many stereotypical beliefs about Poles can be found in the findings of the opinion polls. In a survey conducted by the Public Opinion Foundation, fifty-four percent of Russians regard Poland as a friendly country, and only twenty-three percent consider Poland's policy to be unfriendly toward Russia (Public Opinion Foundation Survey, 2001). In the survey, respondents were asked to name some characteristics of a typical Pole, to which the majority of Russians (64%) were not able to give any answer to this question. Still, some respondents described a typical Pole as kind, patriotic, proud, hard-working, and well-mannered but at the same time cunning and boastful. However, the dominance of the positive over negative characteristics suggests that Russians view Poles more positively than Poles perceive Russians.

Overall, according to our review of the research conducted on the topic of Russian-Polish stereotypes, the auto-stereotypes of Russians and Poles are more positive than mutual stereotypes. As it follows from the analysis of the mutual stereotypes, Poles seem to have more negative stereotypes of Russians than Russians about Poles.

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