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# THE PERCEPTION OF NEIGHBOUR COUNTRIES IN BULGARIA

Empirical study

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## **Keywords**

Neighbour countries image,  
Psychosemantics,  
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## **JEL Classification**

D03, D81, F16, F41, F60

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## **Abstract**

*The image of the country can be influential in various buying decisions, especially in cases where there is a strong competition among market players and if price is not the factor of the utmost importance in demand. In a psychosemantic experiment with a repertory grid, we aim at assessing of how Bulgarian citizens build their image of other countries, especially of the neighbour ones. We find that “market dimension” and “power dimension” are the major factors in the perceptions. We find also that Bulgarian respondents consider globally important economies as more significant for the Bulgarian economy, despite the proximity vicinity of neighbour countries and their economies.*

## Introduction

The image of the country can be influential in various buying decisions, especially in cases where there is a strong competition among market players and if price is not the factor with the utmost importance for demand. In our experiment we aim at assessing of how Bulgarian citizens build their image of other countries, especially the neighbouring ones.

We focus mainly on Balkan countries, but in order to allow for plausible comparisons we include in the study also the "big regional players" – Germany and Russia.

The main goal of the paper is to assess the image neighbour countries have in Bulgaria. With the help of the psychosemantic approach and instruments, we make a reconstruction of the semantic space of the respondents.

Psychosemantic studies of attitudes toward countries are known for the interesting results they deliver, but are rare for our region. This paper extends the literature in this direction (field). We analyse the image of foreign countries within a broader framework of attitudes towards demand for imports.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows: section two describes the experiment, section three contains the results and discussion, section four presents the conclusions.

## The experiment

In our experiment we ask the respondents to assess eight countries – Greece (GR), Turkey (TR), Serbia (SR), Macedonia (MK), Albania (AL), Romania (RO), Russia (RU) and Germany (DE) with the help of 32 descriptors. The respondents are asked to score the countries between -3 and +3 (from "does not correspond at all" to "fully corresponds").

We make use of the notion of 'semantic differential' (see Osgood et al., 1957) and personal constructs (Kelly 1963). The instrument itself is the grid used by Petrenko (2010) in studying Russian attitudes towards foreign countries.

The image of neighbour countries is of utmost importance in assessing the possibilities to enhance international ties, broaden cultural and economic relations and extend trade and tourism, as well as to organize common political actions.

Besides the neighbours, other important countries are the 'major players' in the region. In our case these are Germany and Russia.

Our respondents are 285 Bulgarians, males and females, aged 25-60 from 38 towns and villages in Bulgaria. The aim was to involve the economically active population of the country in the study.

All calculations are made within R 2.15.1 software environment (The R Foundation, 2012) by implementing principal components analysis (PCA, see Fabrigar et al., 1999). Prior to the application of the above procedure, data was centred and scaled.

The Kaiser criterion (Kaiser, 1958) and *scree plot* were used for selection of the number of significant factors. As a result, there appear to be two important factors. Eigenvalues could allow the use of even more factors, but according to the *scree plot*, two are sufficient. The parallel analysis (*paran*) technique (Horn 1965, Dinno, 2009) also suggests retaining of two components, corresponding after *Varimax* rotation respectively to 50.2% and 32.1% (total 82.3 %) of the total variance.

## Discussion of results

The first factor (50.2% of variance) comprises the following descriptors (with their loadings):

*Country with high international authority/respect 0.736*

*The government of the country has a friendly policy to Bulgaria 0.799*

*High level of development of science and technology 0.805*

*Country friendly to the USA 0.824*

*Country with a high standard of living 0.852*

*High level of education 0.856*

*I sympathize with that country 0.868*

*I could (would like to) live in that country*  
0.886

*Country with a market economy* 0.892

*Democratic country* 0.961

*Open country* 0.961

*Citizens of all nationalities enjoy equal rights* 0.97

*Country with a peaceful policy* 0.981

*Human rights are respected in the country*  
0.987

Most important aspects within this factor (50.2% of the variance) are human rights, openness and peacefulness of the country. Market economy, high standard of living and the level of development of science and engineering are also significant.

Often the respect to human rights is linked to the total development of the country – countries with high living standards and stable democracy maintain also higher standards in relation to human rights respect and vice versa – respecting human rights (and personal liberty) has traditionally been regarded as a major driving force behind economic development.

Although to a lesser extent, the international image of the country is also of certain importance in this factor. Relations with Bulgaria (the domestic country of our respondents) and the USA (the most powerful country), as well as the overall importance of the country in the world, play a substantial role in shaping the international image of the country.

We name this factor "*Market dimension*", it reflects mainly the economic development of the country. The market economy itself is based on the notions of freedom, prosperity, respect of the rights of all participants and political decision making through negotiations and deals, in a peaceful way.

The second factor (32.1% of total variance) includes:

*Religious population* 0.719

*Country with planned economy* 0.724

*Economically independent country* 0.771

*Country with totalitarian rule* 0.775

*Military powerful country* 0.823

*Nationalist country* 0.854

*Country with aggressive policy* 0.876

*Militarized country* 0.953

*Country with imperial policy* 0.967

This second factor contains mainly descriptors linked in one way or another to aggression. Most loaded are the descriptors of imperial, militarized and aggressive policy, followed by the descriptors of military power, totalitarian rule, planned and independent economy.

All these descriptors are somehow linked to the notion of "planned economy" and Soviet predominance in Eastern Europe (for most of the second half of the 20th century).

The factor describes how closed the country is and how coercive government rule is. Historically this has been the situation during the preindustrial era, so it is no surprise that "*religion*" also appears in the factor.

This factor could be labelled "*Power dimension*". Force, coerciveness and refusal to negotiate are typical for the way state and government function. Even in democratic countries, once the deal about forming a government is struck, policy decisions are taken by the respective policymakers in such a manner.

The positions of the countries in the semantic space formed by the two factors are shown on Figure 1. There is a very clear division of the countries in consideration. More important countries (economically and politically) are situated in the right upper corner – in our case these are Germany and Russia. Logically, Germany is considered by our respondents as more important than Russia in "economic" terms (has stronger loading within the first factor) and Russia is regarded the more powerful state in political (and military) terms.

On the other side of the graph are Albania and Macedonia – both of them small, "periphery" countries, with a minor political importance, even for the region. Nevertheless, Macedonia is regarded a country with a slightly better economy.

Somewhere in the middle are the rest of the Balkan countries – Turkey, Romania, Greece and Serbia. Within the scope of the first factor these countries lie very close to

each other, with Serbia regarded as the least developed in the group, and Romania seen as the country with the biggest economic potential, ahead of Turkey and Greece. It seems that the role of the economic crisis cannot be neglected – Greece is a much more developed country than the rest of the Balkan EU members. In the case of Turkey, perhaps the candidacy for EU membership plays a certain role. The country can be regarded even as one of the "global players", but our respondents do not attribute such a status to it. EU members appear to be more important for the Bulgarian economy.

Politically, within the "Power dimension", Turkey is regarded as far more powerful as the rest of the Balkan countries, and this corresponds to the political facts; the country is an "outlier" among Balkan countries.

The countries close to Bulgaria – Romania, Greece and Serbia, all of them EU members or candidates, form a cluster in the lower part of the graph.

This place corresponds to the facts for these countries – as economic and political achievements.

Given the composition of the factors, demand for imports in Bulgaria is likely to match the economic importance of the country of origin; regional goods should not be expected to be preferred over goods from big economies.

### Conclusion

Trade and economic relations can be expected to develop according to the gravity theories of international trade – globally more important economies would tend to be

also more important for the Bulgarian economy, despite the proximity of the neighbour countries.

Perceptions of Bulgarian respondents comply with economic facts about the respective country. There are no big distortions in the existing attitudes.

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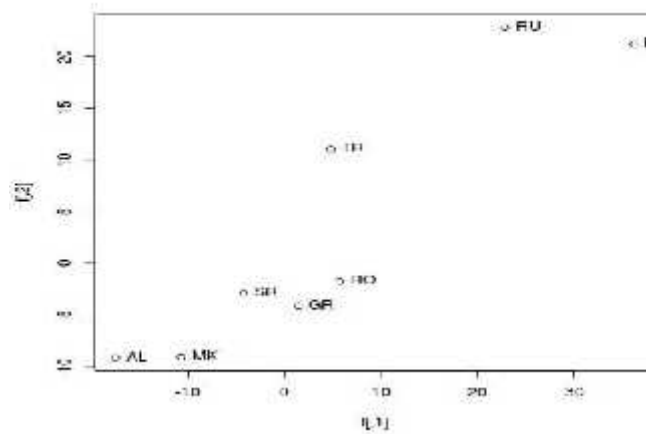


Figure No. 1 Countries by major factors.

Appendix A Descriptors used in the study

- Country with deep historic roots
- Politically stable country
- Country with planned economy
- Religious population
- High level of spiritual culture
- Great country (High power)
- Economically independent country
- Country with agriculture dominant in the economy
- High level of science and technology
- Has peaceful policy
- Democratic country
- Country with totalitarian rule
- A country friendly to USA
- Country with a market economy
- High level of criminality
- Citizens of all nationalities enjoy same rights
- Military powerful country
- The government of the country has a friendly policy to Bulgaria
- Has aggressive policy
- Country with high living standards
- The country has high international respect/authority
- Nationalist country
- Open country
- Militarised country
- Has imperial policy
- High level of education
- In the country there are serious internal conflicts
- Has close economical ties to Bulgaria
- Human rights are respected in the country
- The country is spiritually, culturally and historically close to Bulgaria
- I sympathize with that country
- I could (would like to) live in that country