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Research article

Features of the Russian-Egyptian cross-cultural communication: business and management dimensions⁵

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The article considers the importance of cross-cultural competence for the Russian-Egyptian economic and business interaction. A historical overview of bilateral relations is made with an emphasis on trade. However, in today's globalized world communication between representatives of such two different cultures as Russia and Egypt can no longer rely upon traditional approaches.

The choice in favour of the Russian-Egyptian interaction is determined by the following factors: 1) both countries are regional leaders – Russia is a locomotive of Eurasia and the leader of various political and economic processes at the post-Soviet space, while Egypt is both “heart and mind” of the Arab world, being a traditional architect of development in the Middle East and North Africa; 2) Russia traditionally has geopolitical interests in this part of the world, while Egypt has strong intention to diversify its international liaisons by including the Russian Federation into the circle of its strategic partners; 3) Russian-Egyptian relations enjoy a long and profound history; 4) Russian-Egyptian cooperation is currently being realized on a wide scale and includes political, military, economic, cultural, scientific, educational, social even religious spheres.

Psychological challenges of the Russian-Egyptian business interaction are illustrated on both empirical and theoretical material: the first is shown by the examples from the work of the Russian-Egyptian Business Council. The second level is represented by the two theoretical concepts: 1) of M-time and P-time cultures elaborated by the prominent American anthropologist Edward Hall; 2) Long-Term Orientation dimension suggested by famous Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede.

Keywords: cross-cultural, communication, glocalization, Russia, Egypt, business, management

The issue of globalization and its consequences has become a routine, but inevitable part of almost any discourse, be it public or academic. Indeed, the influence of globalization processes on the present day world situation can hardly be overestimated. Meanwhile it is necessary to emphasize that by globalization, which is often nicely defined as worldwide movement toward economic, financial, trade,

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and communications integration, we in fact mean westernization or, to be precise, Americanization of the non-western world. However, globalization has triggered mechanisms of self-preservation, especially in traditional non-western cultures making them activate localizing and regionalizing potential, facilitate the emergence of local cultural identities [1]. The situation of a simultaneous existence of both globalization and localization processes acquired a name “glocalization” appearing for the first time in the late 1980-es in the works of Japanese economists and later, in 1990-es was popularized by the English sociologist Roland Robertson, who defined glocalization as the co-existence of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies [2]. In other words, it is a paradox situation when macro-actors of cross-cultural communication seek a greater openness, while isolation trends are increasing [3, p. 169].

Glocalization definitely gives a much more appropriate explanation of the current state of global affairs than notorious globalization. Moreover, glocalization is very likely to continue prevailing in the visible future, resulting in expansion of human exposure to communication with the representatives of other cultures on the one hand, and preservation and increase of their cultural specifics on the other.

As a result societies lacking cultural awareness (which implies understanding and accepting cultural differences) would face severe challenges in intensified cross-cultural interaction, be it politics, business, management, science, sports, culture or inter-personal communication. At present, both countries under consideration – Russia and Egypt – are making first steps in introducing cross-cultural programmes, courses and lectures into their education systems as well as professional trainings.

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The dawn of the Russian-Egyptian relations dates back to the X century, when according to the Nikon Chronicle, Russian Prince Vladimir in 1001 has sent first ambassadors to Egypt. Further, Russians started visiting Egypt within the framework of religious pilgrimage to the Christian shrines of Palestine and Sinai. Christian Orthodox monastery of St. Catherine with its burning bush as well as Moses Mountain had been among the holy sites willingly visited by Russian pilgrims. Yet before going to the famous monastery, Russians were obliged to pass by Cairo in order to obtain a written permission for such a visit from the monastery’s representation. Archimandrite Agrifenyi made one of the earliest written mentions of Egypt

that dates back to 1370 [4, p. 9, 11]. Starting from XV century the number of Russian pilgrims to Egypt increased; some of them made unique and outstanding travel notes about the Land of Pyramids, the analysis of which, however, are out of our scope.

In the second half of the XIX century Russia and Egypt established diplomatic, cultural and trade relations due to increased interest for this mysterious country of many well-off Russians, who started actively travelling to Egypt via newly opened in 1858 direct naval route Odessa – Alexandria. Egyptians in their turn expressed warm feelings for Russians: Russian writer and translator Nikolay Berg noted that these people love Russians very much, not like all other Europeans, mainly because Russian's behavior towards them is simpler and more humane [5, p. 75].

The beginning of the XX century was marked by formation of the first Russian community in Egypt: in 1920 five Russian ships arrived in Alexandria port having around 4350 “white” emigrants on board, who were fleeing from the 1917 October socialist revolution. Later most of them would leave Egypt heading to other countries, but in the 1920-es their camp in Alexandria's Sidi Bishr had been substantial.

Amidst the WWII in 1943 Soviet Union and Egypt establish diplomatic relations and after Egypt's 1952 revolution a new page of bilateral relations opens. While Egypt launches nationalization politics of partially socialist ideology the strategic friendship with the USSR is proclaimed. Moscow views Egypt as its main partner in the region and commences tremendous industrial projects, many of which are still being part of country's economic stability, such as High Aswan Dam (often referred to as “Miracle on the Nile”), Helwan and Nag Hammadi metallurgical plants, Alexandria shipyard, as well as multiple training schools, medical and veterinary centers. In Egypt, on the basis of cooperation with the USSR, a modern efficient army equipped with the latest weapon systems was created, which ensured the defense capability of the largest country in the Middle East [6, p. 18]. Active cooperation in the sphere of science and culture was taking place. But in 1972 the new Egyptian leadership takes decision to terminate friendly relations with the Soviet Union and turns to its Cold war enemy – the United States. Bilateral projects were cancelled and around 20 000 Soviet military specialists as well as civil experts had been expelled from Egypt. In 1975 the Friendship Agreement between the two countries is officially denounced by Cairo. For at least a decade bilateral relations didn't exist and the collapse of the USSR in 1990 didn't contribute to their restoration. Russia's orientation towards the West in 1990-es with the parallel ignoring of Arab interests plus Chechen wars that had been perceived in the Arab world as Russian aggression against Islam has led to dramatic recession in bilateral relations. Gradual recovery began only in 2005.

When analyzing bilateral trade and economic relations it is necessary to stress that during the years of most intense cooperation (1957–1972) deals had been strictly government controlled: on behalf of the USSR, where private sector was non-existent, acted Ministry of foreign trade, on behalf of Egypt acted various ministries and a few state-supported businessmen. Consequently Russians and Egyptians did

not have neither tradition, not practice of business to business cooperation, which makes it today a challenging new experience. Meanwhile many European companies enjoy their presence in Egypt for decades: Siemens (Germany) made first contacts with Egypt in 1856 and opened a technical bureau in 1901; Barclays bank (Great Britain) has purchased Anglo-Egyptian bank in 1920 and entered the market; British Petroleum (Great Britain) is working in Egypt for more than 55 years now; Eni (Italy) is operating in Egypt for 50 years. Needless to say, that Russian managers are making their first steps in revealing Egyptian business environment compared to their Western colleagues.

Consequently, figures of bilateral trade relations differ greatly – export from Egypt to Western countries is usually significant: in 2017 export to Italy made \$2.198 bln., to USA \$1.328 bln., to Great Britain \$1.088 bln., to Germany \$582 mln., while to Russia only \$397 mln. As for the import of foreign goods to Egypt Russian position seems high: Egypt imports Russian goods at \$3600 bln., which is an impressive number if compared to \$4.192 bln. of Italy, \$3.896 bln. of the USA and \$1.593 bln. of Great Britain [7]. But these figures are deceptive: as much as 44% of the Russian goods to Egypt are cereals, another 18% are iron and steel [8] and these are deals carried out under the state supervision. As a result, Russia has 19th place in the list of Egypt's trade partners. And that can hardly be qualified as a positive achievement taking into account Russia's economic potential and complementarity of its market with the Egyptian one.

Similar picture is detected in trade and economic cooperation between Russia and other Arab countries: trade turnover of sixteen Arab countries (Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Sudan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen) with Russia in 2016 made \$14.504 bln., while trade turnover with Turkey alone the same year reached \$15.845 bln. [9].

Analysis of the current state of the Russian – Egyptian business interaction shows that cultural differences and lack of cross-cultural competence among business actors are among the main stumbling blocks for bilateral cooperation.

Cross-cultural competence is a complex of key knowledge about a certain culture, skills (cognitive, affectionate and behavioral) enabling to efficiently and successfully interact with the representatives of this culture as well as to feel psychologically comfortable in a foreign environment. Being a necessary competence for professional efficiency in the globalized world cross-cultural competence is among the top ten skills of the future workforce by the Institute for the Future [10, p. 9]. According to former Chairman and CEO of “Ernst & Young” James S. Turley, to succeed in this complex business environment, leaders will need to adopt a set of characteristics and traits that enable them to move fluidly across different cultures [11, p. 1].

Presently in many Western countries variety of cross-cultural tuition is tremendous and enjoys high demand. As early as in 1974 an interdisciplinary network for trainers and researchers in the area of intercultural and cross-cultural communication SIETAR had been established in the United States. Today it has regional

bodies in Argentina, Austria, Brazil, British Columbia, Bulgaria, Europe, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, USA; recently SIETAR Russia has been launched. Meanwhile in today's Russia interest towards cross-cultural programmes and trainings is just awakening: the leading universities begin to include cross-cultural communication courses into their curriculum, but local business community is still insensible of the crucial importance of cross-cultural competence, especially for exporters and companies aiming at global market. In Egypt the situation with cross-cultural education and training is even more pessimistic: neither universities, nor commercial companies are aware of the cross-cultural competence and its potential advantages for both professional and personal development.

According to the Russian-Egyptian Business Council at the Chamber of Trade and Industry of the Russian Federation (REBC), representatives of private sector from both countries are making constant attempts to approach each other, conduct negotiations, participate in professional exhibitions and fairs, pay business visits to potential partner companies, but the results leave much to be desired. REBC's main objective is to promote the interests of Russian private business in Egypt, to intensify and develop trade and economic cooperation between the two countries. In its activities, REBC leadership regularly observes difficulties that businesspersons from Russia and Egypt face during their direct communication. In overwhelming majority of cases Russians and Egyptians leave negotiations without visible intention to continue cooperation. The REBC leaders confirm that among main obstacles to bilateral cooperation between Russia and Egypt is cultural differences, of which the participants are utterly unaware. Indeed, much of our difficulty with people in other countries stems from the fact that so little is known about cross-cultural communication [12, p. 14].

An elementary example from daily practice – differences in oral/writing communication styles. Egyptian culture is oral, which means that most of Egyptians would prefer oral discussion of working issues with partners to business correspondence. In a pinch, it is possible to discuss professional issues by phone. Consequently, Egyptian managers will in every possible way avoid writing documents and letters, insisting on a verbal solution of all working matters. Their Russian counterparts as a rule would insist on formal style of business communication, where all agreements and questions are formulated and sent to partners in writing. Oral form of business interaction is considered unacceptable, and is seen as “not serious”. Thus, at the level of preliminary negotiations between potential Russian and Egyptian partners, there already emerge communication complications [13, p. 164–165].

Prominent American anthropologist Edward Hall has developed the concepts of monochronic/polychronic cultures as well as cultures of high and low contexts that are today among the main cross-cultural theories of high relevance. Various world cultures had elaborated two different solutions to the use of time and space as organizing frames for their activities: monochronic time (M-time) and polychronic time (P-time) cultures. M-time cultures emphasizes schedules, segmentation and promptness. P-time systems are characterized by several things happening at once,

stressing involvement of people and completion of transactions rather than adherence to present schedules.

Hall's classification reveals that people in M-time cultures adhere to plans, do one thing at a time, are well concentrated, prioritize work, take time commitments seriously, do things in turn and are used to short-term relationships. Representatives of P-time cultures on the contrary change plans easily (adjusting to the current situation), do multiple things at a time, are easily distracted and subject to interruptions, prioritize human relationships, take time commitments lightly, prefer to mix and combine things and aim at establishing life-long relationships. The majority of Western countries belong to the M-time type, which actually has been cultivated in northern European tradition: within the Western world the man finds little in life that is exempt from the iron hand of M-time [14, p. 17, 18]. Middle Eastern countries in their turn are surely associated with the opposite type of P-time culture. The Russian and Egyptian cultures are dramatically contrasting with each other in the current context: Russian culture is inarguably monochromic, while Egyptian is polychromic. Naturally, the process of dealing with a reverse behavior style inevitably arouses irritation and psychological tension – a typical reaction of Russians and Egyptians after joint business meeting or negotiations. Russian inclination to precision, punctuality, formal business manner and utmost concentration is seen by Egyptians as inhuman, rigid and extremely unpleasant way of doing things. At the same time Egyptian unpredictable flexibility (when plans and decisions are easily changed), irresponsibility and frequent distraction makes Russian partners conclude these people are unreliable and dealing with them is very unpromising. Although both sides might have a solid potential for cooperation being in fact perfectly trustworthy.

Another dimension – long-term orientation – suggested by Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede as part of his “Six dimensions of national culture” model will also significantly contribute to explanation of barriers in Russian – Egyptian communication. This dimension describes how different societies maintain links with their own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future; how they prioritize these two existential goals differently. For example normative societies, which score low on this dimension, prefer to maintain time-honoured traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion. Those, which score high, on the other hand, take a more pragmatic approach: they encourage thrift and efforts in modern education as a way to prepare for the future. According to Hofstede evaluations, Russia has a very high score of 81, which means it is definitely a country with a pragmatic mindset. In this kind of societies people believe that truth depends very much on situation, context and time. They show ability to easily adapt traditions to changing conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest as well as thriftiness and perseverance in achieving results. Egypt's very low score of 7 indicates that its culture is very normative. People in such societies have a strong concern with establishing the absolute Truth; they are normative in their thinking, showing great respect for traditions, a relatively small propensity to save for the future, and a focus on achieving quick results [15].

In business interaction difference in long-term orientation leads to discord in both pace and ways of the result achieving. Russian long-oriented culture would concentrate on persistence, structured problem solving and accepting delayed results of business cooperation, while Egyptian short-term culture would have chaotic problem solving and expect immediate or quick results. In case there is no cultural awareness of partner's specifics, the clash is almost unavoidable.

It is possible to make conclusion that in today's globalizing world communication between representatives of such two different cultures as Russia and Egypt can no longer rely upon traditional approaches and the only adequate way to overcome the above mentioned challenges in communication between Russian and Egyptian businesspeople and consequently bring bilateral relations to a higher level is to seriously consider obtaining cross-cultural competence as a strategic necessity and include it into professional education, and other forms of soft skills trainings.

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Научная статья

Особенности российско-египетской кросс-культурной коммуникации: деловые и управленческие измерения

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В статье приводятся доказательства необходимости освоения кросс-культурной компетентности для развития российско-египетского торгово-экономического сотрудничества. Дан исторический обзор двусторонних отношений с акцентом на внешнеэкономическую деятельность.

В сегодняшнем глобализирующемся мире коммуникация между представителями таких разных культур, как Россия и Египет, больше не может идти по традиционному пути.

Выбор в пользу российско-египетского взаимодействия обусловлен следующими факторами: 1) обе страны являются региональными лидерами – Россия является локомотивом Евразии и лидером различных политических и экономических процессов на постсоветском пространстве, а Египет – «сердце» арабского мира, традиционный архитектор развития в регионе Ближнего Востока и Северной Африки; 2) Россия традиционно имеет геополитические интересы в этой части мира, в то время как Египет намерен диверсифицировать свои международные связи, включив Российскую Федерацию в число своих стратегических партнеров; 3) российско-египетские отношения имеют давнюю и глубокую историю; 4) Российско-египетское сотрудничество в настоящее время осуществляется полномасштабно и включает такие сферы, как политика, оборона, экономика, культура, наука, образование, а также социальную и религиозную сферы.

На эмпирическом и на теоретическом материале показаны психологические проблемы, отмечаемые в ходе российско-египетского делового взаимодействия: эмпирический уровень демонстрируется с помощью примеров из работы Российско-египетского делового совета, теоретический уровень представлен двумя концепциями: концепцией монохромной и полихромной культуры, разработанной выдающимся американским антропологом Эдвардом Холлом, а также измерением «долгосрочная ориентация», предложенным известным голландским исследователем Геертом Хофстеде.

Ключевые слова: кросс-культурный, коммуникация, глокализация, Россия, Египет, бизнес, управление

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