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Identifying Altitudinal Change in Post-Conflict Scenarios and Pathways to Rehabilitation: Case Study of Japanese Students' Perceptions of Russia and Their Sources of Information in 2021–2022

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Abstract. Recent crises in international relations have created tensions in communication and hindered the achievement of understanding between societies. Under these complicated circumstances, young people are not only objects of public influence but also agenda-setting actors capable of learning and acting on the basis of knowledge about the international situation. This article focuses on how the Japanese students perceive their close neighbor Russia and examines how their views on the image of the neighboring country and its citizens have changed from 2021 to 2022. To examine the changes in perception, within the research project “Student’s representations of neighboring countries: Russia and Japan,” students from four Japanese universities were interviewed (online questionnaire). In the present work the results of the studies are analyzed in order to draw conclusions about the drivers of the change in the public perception of Russia. The author focused on university students for this study because it was assumed that they would eventually become part of the political elite of the country. The tendency for social and political advocacy among the youth was also a contributing factor that supported university students being the group favorably consider for this research. The university student population also provides a higher level of homogeneity among respondents, increasing the internal validity of the findings. Comparing the results of the 2022 survey with the results of the 2021 survey, we can observe some significant changes in the perception of Russia by Japanese youth. First of all, we can observe a shift in perception from the sphere of culture to the sphere of security. The quotes from students throughout this article should be taken into account when looking at the results and analysis. This research also confirms that negative and positive cognitive opinions about a neighboring country can coexist among Japanese youth.

Key words: images of states, surveys, student attitudes, perceptions

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Выявление изменений в постконфликтных сценариях и путях реабилитации: восприятие японскими студентами России и источников информации о ней в 2021–2022 гг.

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Аннотация. В последнее время сфера межгосударственных отношений переживает кризисные явления, что во многом создает эффект напряженности в общении и достижении понимания на уровне обществ. В такой непростой ситуации молодые люди являются не только объектами воздействия со стороны общества, но в то же время выступают в роли целеполагающих акторов, способных к познанию и действию, основанному на своих знаниях о международной обстановке. В статье основное внимание уделяется тому, как японская молодежь воспринимает страну, ближайшего соседа Японии, Россию, и анализируется изменение взглядов молодых людей на образ соседнего государства и ее граждан в 2021–2022 гг. Чтобы изучить произошедшие изменения в восприятии страны-соседа, в рамках исследовательского проекта «Представления студентов о странах-соседах: Россия и Япония» посредством онлайн-анкетирования были опрошены студенты четырех японских университетов. Для этого исследования автором были выбраны студенты университетов, так как предполагалось, что они, возможно, станут частью политической элиты страны. Тенденция к социальной и политической пропаганде среди молодежи также была фактором, который способствовал выбору студентов университетов в качестве подходящей для этого исследования референтной группы. Кроме того, опрос среди студентов университетов обеспечивает более высокий уровень однородности респондентов, повышая внутреннюю достоверность результатов. Анализируются результаты проведенных исследований с целью выявления факторов, определяющих общественное восприятие России молодыми японцами. Сравнение результатов опросов 2021 и 2022 гг. показало, что в восприятии России японской молодежью произошли некоторые показательные изменения, связанные главным образом со смещением восприятия со сферы культуры в сторону сферы безопасности. Приведенные цитаты студентов позволяют конкретизировать полученные результаты. Исследование также подтверждает, что у японской молодежи могут сосуществовать негативные и позитивные когнитивные мнения о стране-соседе.

Ключевые слова: образы государств, опросы общественного мнения, установки студентов, представления

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Introduction

The late Whitney Houston sang a song called *The Greatest Love of All*, and the opening lines were “I believe the children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way.” While most young people may not be familiar with the song, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2250 (2015) on

Youth, Peace and Security¹ reflects a similar belief. The resolution recognized that today’s generation of youth is the largest the world has ever known, and they often make up the majority of the population in countries affected

¹ Resolution 2250 (2015) / Adopted by the Security Council at its 7573rd Meeting, on 9 December 2015 // UN Digital Library. URL: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/814032?ln=en> (accessed: 14.01.2023).

by armed conflict. It further suggested that the youth could play a decisive role in conflict prevention and resolution, and is a key aspect of the sustainability and inclusiveness required for successful peace-building efforts. The UNSC resolution urges that youth be given a greater voice in decision-making at the local, national, regional and international levels, and that consideration should be given to establishing mechanisms that would enable young people to participate meaningfully in peace processes. If such an august task is to be assigned to youth, it is important to examine their capacities or proclivities to discharge the expectation. As such it is crucial to determine how do the youth currently view their counterparts in other countries, how they are influenced, and how informed or uninformed decisions are made about their counterparts?

In an attempt to answer these questions, a number of criteria were established for identifying future leaders, as called for in UNSC Resolution 2250 (2015). Education is a factor closely linked to the growth and development of a nation, strengthening social cohesion and active citizenship among youth. As such, this is why it was one of the several contributing reasons for choosing university students as the target group for our questionnaire/opinion poll, which aims to explore perceptions and attitudes towards the neighboring country, its people and sources of information about it. The use of students has also been justified in the literature (Burnett & Dune, 1986) since it provides a higher level of homogeneity among respondents, eliminating certain sources of error and increasing the internal validity of the findings. It is also expected that individuals with more formal university education have higher reading and comprehension abilities, which are essential for gaining knowledge on various issues. Moreover, university attendance tends to lower prejudice levels and increase global issue awareness. Again, the main reason for focusing on students

is that it is assumed that the university students would, perhaps inevitably, have first-hand contact or experience with political issues in the future.

The ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause throughout the history of mankind, and that suspicion and mistrust born of ignorance between the peoples of the world through their differences, have all too often resulted in war.² Most conflicts occur in countries with low capacities for intercultural dialogue, so if there is a desire to solve global challenges with trust and understanding, hindrances to cooperation across our differences must be understood and minimized. This paper seeks to understand how youth gather information and the resulting perceptions of their counterparts in order to outline a likely strategy for positive youth engagement and peaceful and productive foreign relations. The study therefore focuses on university students in Japan, as it is logically presumed that they will influence their country's future policies and international relations in the Asia-Pacific region.

Aim of the Study

This paper refers to a project that has its own "preface." In 2006–2007 (Zhilina, 2008) and 2012 (Zhilina & Podalko, 2013), the first and second series of studies on students' perceptions of neighboring countries (Japan and Russia) were conducted under the title "Students' representations of neighboring countries: Russia and Japan. Comparative studies"³ were supported by the Japan Foundation Fellowship Programs in 2007 and

² See: Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization // UNESCO. November 22, 2023. URL: <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/constitution> (accessed: 14.01.2023).

³ Surveys were conducted among university students of Japan and Russia. Sample size — 400 students per side (Japanese / Russian). The aim was to study the perceptions and attitudes of students towards the neighboring country — Russia / Japan.

2012. Since then, this project has been continued in 2021–2022.

The goal of the present survey is to explore Japanese youth's perceptions and attitudes towards Russia, Russian people, and to identify the main sources of information about their neighboring state at a particular point in time. In this paper, I will analyze Japanese students' attitudes and perceptions of Russia at the time of Russia's ongoing conflict with Ukraine, and the effect of a political event on the neighboring country perceptions by Japanese youth. For this purpose, I use data that was collected before (April–July 2021) and data collected during the special military operation (April–July 2022) in order to understand how this event influences the views of Japanese youth regarding their image of Russia and its citizens.

The overarching research question of the present study is “How do Japanese students perceive the neighboring state of Russia and its people?” This research question can allow for the exploration of socializing agents influencing youth perceptions of foreign countries, information channels which they access to get knowledge about them, perceptions and attitudes towards representatives of these neighboring countries that may help form sources' content related to creating of images of these countries, and for the formation of youth' tolerance towards cultural diversity and mutual understanding of neighboring countries' citizens. Ultimately, with the answers provided, this paper will lead towards an understanding of the creation and manipulation of soft power, which lies in the ability to attract and persuade, as referred to by J.S. Nye (2004).

Methodology: Study Design, Participants, and Data Collection

To achieve the goal of this research, I use empirical evidence to outline Japanese students' perceptions and attitudes towards the neighboring country and identify the main

sources and forming factors when it comes to forming opinions and attitudes.

Both the 2021 and 2022 surveys had the identical research sample size of 155. The surveys realized less Japanese participation⁴ than ideally hoped for. Nonetheless, we felt confident that the results represented a sufficiently stratified random sample to generalize about the youth population.

Due to the ongoing expansion of COVID-19 globally, the 2021–2022 surveys were conducted through online channels. The data collected through the online survey is a part of the 15-year research project “Forming of public opinion about neighboring countries: Russia and Japan in students' imaginations.”

In order to properly interpret the data on the attitudes and perceptions of young people, and for the purpose of comparison to identify and track variance, similar questions about the neighboring state, its people and sources of information about Russia were asked in both 2021 and 2022.

The online questionnaire was launched in April 2021 (students had the opportunity to participate in the survey until July 2021) and for the same period from April to July in 2022. The populations observed in this part of the project were Japanese students aged 17–24. In 2021, 59.4% were male and 40.6% female; while in 2022, 56.9% were male and 43.1% female. The Universities that participated in this study were *Kansai University*, *Takushoku University*, *Osaka City University*, and *Kobe University*. The Japanese students at these universities majored in political science, natural science, philology, history, foreign studies, law, economics, and global cultural studies.

As mentioned above, this study used an online questionnaire to examine the Japanese

⁴ The unwillingness to participate in studies has been a matter of concern for sociologists in Japan who recognize the circumstances under which social research is conducted in Japan have deteriorated and are now considered critical.

youths' perceptions and attitudes toward the neighboring country and its people. The questionnaire was divided into 3 closed-ended questions about sources of information on the neighboring country, and the sufficiency of the sources about the said state. Three open-ended questions⁵ focused on attitudes toward the country, its people, and the perception of the counterpart's traits.

Since the language of the questionnaire affects the way respondents answer the same question (Harzing & Maznevski, 2002), in order to overcome language barriers and reduce the risk of misunderstanding, the questionnaire was worded in Japanese and the respondents were to respond in their native language. The *Google-form* questionnaire was sent via the Internet. In addition, it is important to mention that the confidentiality of the data collected was ensured.

General Results: Sources of Information on the Neighboring Country

The image of a place may be formed through internal processes based on the individual's visit and previous experience with a place, or through external ones, by way of exposure to additional information. Thus, an image is created as a mental depiction of a place "on the basis of information cues delivered by the image formation agents and selected by a person" (Tasci, Gartner & Cavusgil, 2007, p. 414). Students' attitudes to events in Russia depend on the sources they rely on for news and information. This factor is more important than the region in which the respondents live. International tensions have had a significant

⁵ The open-ended questions assumed the narrative answer in the form of one or more words (in their own words — not fitting into limited categories) and provided the participants with more space and opportunity to express private opinions on the researched topics and allowed the collection of the maximum amount of information on the topic which was very important for this study. The variety of words chosen by the students was quite large and the codification of the responses was done by ranking the repeated words and analyzing them according to the recorded frequency.

impact on long-term trends involving popular trust in the accuracy of news information from different types of media outlets (Figure 1). In 2022, there was a sharp increase of 74% (an increase of almost 20% from 2021 responses — 54.2%) in students' trust in television, which most Japanese youth perceive as a source of "official information."

In recent years, the number of viewers and their level of trust in television news television news audiences and trust had been steadily declining. At the same time there was also a simultaneous increase — from 69.7% in 2021 to 73.2% in 2022 — in the level of trust in Internet news sources, which had in recent years been growing steadily. Therefore, we may conclude from the surveys that since the start of the conflict, the majority of Japanese students have more or less retained long-held news source preferences: most of them preferred to get their news from state-controlled television. Television continues to have a significant impact on Japanese youth despite reports that they are watching less in recent years. While traditional media, as represented by broadcast television and print newspapers is said to be fading as more and more people use social media, the survey results suggest that they are still considered a more reliable source of information.⁶ Similarly, while trust in official media has grown against the backdrop of the conflict, most young people get their news about Russia online.⁷ The number of students who got information about Russia from lectures decreased from 42.6% in 2021 to 35.8% in 2022.

⁶ Also see: Young Japanese Still Trust TV and Newspapers More than Online Media // Nippon.com. November 12, 2019. URL: <https://www.nippon.com/en/japan-data/h00577/young-japanese-still-trust-tv-and-newspapers-more-than-online-media.html> (accessed: 14.01.2023).

⁷ According to Statista.com, 44% of Japanese adults trust news media most of the time as of February 2022. See: Share of Adults Who Trust News Media Most of the Time in Selected Countries Worldwide as of February 2023 // Statista. June 2023. URL: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/308468/importance-brand-journalist-creating-trust-news/> (accessed: 14.01.2023).

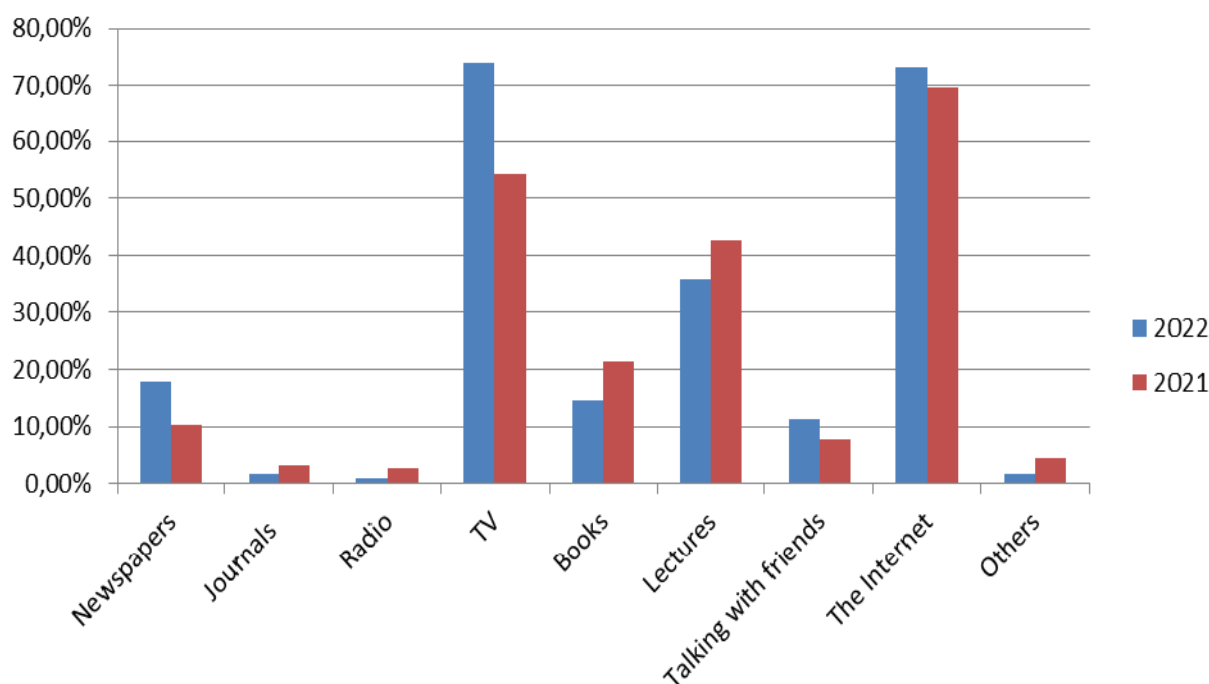


Figure 1. Mode of access to information/content about Russia for Japanese students, % of all students who took part in opinion-poll in 2021 and 2022

Source: compiled by the author.

In 2022, 14.6% of Japanese responded that books were the next significant source of information on Russia. This too has dramatically decreased since 2021 (21.3%). But there was also a sharp increase in the level of trust in newspapers as a news/information source (2021 — 10.3%, 2022 — 17.9%). In recent years newspapers have been steadily decreasing in circulation and relevance as a source of information due to many factors that are not relevant to this paper — merely the source. Newspapers in Japan are in the same situation as with television, which most Japanese young people perceive as a source of “official information” about Russia.

In 2022, 11.4% of Japanese youth believed that they critically analyzed information about Russia when they spoke with their friends. This was an increase of 3.7% of responses from 7.7% in 2021. The recorded increase suggests that talking with friends is actually likely to be one of the most important sources of

information for Japanese students and is instrumental in keeping track of the behaviors of individuals and groups in the social environment (McAndrew & Milenkovic, 2002). As such, knowledge or beliefs gained from talking with friends form the basis of many of the social beliefs (Sommerfeld et al., 2007). In 2022, journals and radio as sources of information about close neighbors were 1.8% and 0.8% of respondents’ preferences respectively (3.2% and 2.6% in 2021 for the same).

The proportion of respondents who mentioned that the available information on the respective countries had been “insufficient” for them changed from 71% in 2021 to 64.2% in 2022. However, in 2021, 7.1% of Japanese respondents were “satisfied with the volume of available information” — in 2022, the number of respondents who were satisfied with the amount of information about Russia increased dramatically (17.1%).

Neighboring State

The country image is conceptualized as an attitude towards a country (image of the country as perceived by foreign nationals), i.e. the attitude towards a country's territory, its history and traditions, its domestic economy, public culture, norms and values as well as its political organization. The image of a country also includes many elements: national symbols, colors, clothing, typical buildings, objects, tunes, pieces of literature, specialties of the political system, customs, historical heritage, and much more (Jenes, 2005). Perceptions are the basis for understanding the location, extent, characteristics, and significance. Throughout people's lives, culture and experience shape their worldviews, which in turn influences their perceptions of places and regions.⁸ And people's perceptions change as they have more life experiences and getting necessary information received through the various channels (Zhilina, 2015, p. 7). External perceptions of a country by members of the international community; specifically, how a country pursues its relations with others, and particularly, the behavior of its citizens at home and abroad, combine to determine the country's image. As such, a country's image comprises what people know (or think they know) about the different attributes of a country and people's general feelings towards the country (Buhmann, 2016, p. 43).

As it was noted by country-image experts, a country's standing in the international system, although dependent on some other factors, is highly dependent on the foreign public perception being positive or negative (Zimako, 2009). Images and perceptions of Japanese students' of Russia were gauged by asking them

⁸ Geography Standard 6: How Culture and Experience Influence People's Perceptions of Places and Regions // National Geographic. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230908104214/https://www.nationalgeographic.org/standards/national-geography-standards/6/> (accessed: 14.01.2023).

to name what they thought⁹ of when they heard the word "Russia" (Table 1).

Table 1
Associations that the word "Russia" evokes in Japanese students: Data from surveys in 2021 and 2022, %

Associations with Russia	Survey 2021	Survey 2022	Changes
Cold climatic conditions	18.7	10.3↓	-8.4
Geographical associations	24.7	21,8↓	-2.9
Historical and political figures (leaders)	19.3	14,6↓	-4.7
USSR, socialism, Communism, Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)	6.7	1.8↓	-4.9
Sports and athletes	6.0	3↓	-3
National cuisine	6.0	6.7↑	+0.7
Negative incidents and facts	5.3	18,8↑	+13.5
National dances, ballet, shows, culture	5.0	9,7↑	+4.7
National symbols	3.3	3↓	-0.3
Beautiful people (women) with white skin	2.7	2.4↓	-0.3
Northern territories	1.3	–	–
Particular color	1.0	–	–
Multinational state, nation	–	3	+3
Others	–	4.9	+4.9
No answer	–	–	–

Source: compiled by the author.

Geographical Imagination

Geographic imagination suggests that the way people see the world is influenced by many factors, including social class, education, and personal and political philosophies. The particular moments in history in which people live also play a major role in how they view the world around them, that is why the "geographical imagination" has a significant role in shaping much of the world's social and spatial thought (Gregory, 1994). Through the

⁹ There were no blanks in responded questionnaires in 2021. In 2022, 3% of respondents — "No answer."

geographic imagination, people (both individually and collectively) develop a sense of boundaries, which separate “our territory” from theirs. The geographical imagination of Japanese students is often taken up as a visual practice of representing space and place: “huge, beautiful country” with “wide territory” and “beautiful cities,” but with “terribly cold climate” and “severe nature.” Respondents also mentioned particular places: “Moscow,” “Kamchatka Peninsula,” “Siberia,” and “Vladivostok” — and all these imaginations could occur at different scales, and any place could be the subject of geographical imaginations (Kukkonen, 2011, p. 55).

Many scholars have also mentioned that spatial emotions can be identified in all aspects of politics, culture and geography (Crawford, 2000; Davidson & Milligan, 2007) and play a critical role in “geopolitical representations” (Dempsey & McDowell, 2019) and in the “geographical imaginations” of youth. In 2021, young Japanese described Russia not only in terms of civilization, but also politically and economically — that Russia is a “distant neighbor,” “neither European nor Asian,” “A country with a very large land area. It’s a country geographically close to Japan, but it doesn’t feel very close to me,” “The country is big and the military power is strong.” In 2022, students identified the neighboring state as “A big country and now there’s a war,” “It’s a close country, but I don’t know much about it!”

Political Leaders or Historical Figures?

The Japanese tend to equate the personality of the leader of a foreign partner country with the ‘identity’ of the country. The image of the leader is therefore extremely important as it is unconsciously projected on to the country as a whole. This circumstance has a special significance in the case of Russia due to the Japanese citizen’s relatively scanty knowledge about this country (Chugrov &

Streltsov, 2017, p. 33). In 2021, the list of mentioned by Japanese students’ political officials consisted of world political leaders, both contemporary and those regarded as symbolic figures that are familiar to most Japanese citizens: V.V. Putin, M.S. Gorbachev, V.I. Lenin, I.V. Stalin, Catherine the Great and Tsar Nicolas II (Romanov). According to the 2021 survey’s results (before special military operation), the Russian President was mentioned in connection with Russia by 78.3% of all Japanese students, who mentioned historical/political figures in connection with Russia. In 2022, 96.6% of respondents who mentioned political figures recalled only “Putin.”

Culture or Symbols?

Indeed, the terms “country” and “culture” are often used interchangeably. Russia’s image in Japan is influenced by the factor of one-off events, which can create fluctuations in public sentiment: performances given by Russian theater and circus companies or musicians draw full houses and are good publicity for the country (Chugrov & Streltsov, 2017, p. 34). Examples of associative words, mentioned by students, range from “cultural exports” like music (“cute music”), classical ballet (“There is a very good ballet troupe”), novels of famous writers (F.M. Dostoevsky) and artists to popular goods that become iconic and strongly associated with their country of origin — “matryoshka.” Song “Katyusha” (“Katyusha and Russian army”) and symbols — “Kremlin” and “the Red Square” were mentioned too. In comparison with 2021, in 2022 the number of Japanese students who associated Russia with cultural items increased from 5 to 9.7%. I may suppose that the 2018 year of cultural exchange between both Japan and Russia may account for an increasing interest of the Japanese public to Russian culture. In 2018–2019 the cultural exchange program included numerous

events which aroused interest in Russian culture in Japan, with many Japanese participating in or experiencing some aspect of the Russian culture during the festival. Looking at the responses to the survey, it can be said that interest in Russian culture is very high among Japanese youth.

National Cuisine (gastronomy)

National cuisine is part of a place's culture and may be part of country perceptions. Therefore, national gastronomy becomes a significant resource in country image-building, being part of the cultural heritage of the geographic areas. It should be noted that Asian countries pay special attention to the kitchen and food culture, elevating it into a kind of cult (Kim & Vasileva, 2017, p. 9868). 6% of Japanese students in 2021 and 6.7% in 2022 associated the national cuisine with the image of the country: most of all Japanese respondents mentioned "pirozhki" (pies) and "borsch." In 2021 33% of Japanese students who associated Russia with national cuisine, mentioned "vodka" — in 2022 this was unchanged ("vodka and Moscow," "bears and vodka," "vodka and pies," "the nature is severe, but the people are cheerfully and strongly drinking vodka").

Negative Incidents and Facts

As was stressed in the works of scholars, "negative information about various kinds of unpleasant incidents in bilateral relations, presented by the media in a certain way, is well received and corresponds to the existing Japanese public opinion" (Chugrov & Streltsov, 2017, p. 34). In this context, it seems important to see how Russia is perceived by Japanese respondents in context of the conflict with Ukraine context as the complex of culturally and historically situated geographical knowledge and understanding that characterizes a certain social group. In 2021 only 5.3% of Japanese students associated Russia with

negative incidents and facts — but in 2022 this number dramatically increased more than in three times to 18.8%.¹⁰

As the responses illustrate, in 2022 perceptions of Russia as "a military threat" sharply increased across Japanese youth and appear to be heavily influenced by geographical proximity to Russia. Japan, which is closer geographically to Russia, appears to be significantly concerned by Russia's aggressive behavior: "Sorry, but I have an image of a country that invaded Ukraine. It has nuclear weapons and it's putting pressure on Japan, which is scary." 100% of respondents who mentioned negative incidents mentioned "war with Ukraine," "incursion into Ukraine," "the country is in war with Ukraine now," "Russian army," "it has strong military power and a high international status after getting involved in the Cold War with the USA," etc. Here we can assume that certain conflicts and negative events may be magnified by the media, thereby giving meaning and interpretation to the incident (Hall, 2002), what in turns shapes Japanese youth's negative perceptions toward the neighboring state.

Neighbors

Most people hold beliefs about personality characteristics typical of members of their own and others cultures. These perceptions of national character may be generalizations from personal experience, stereotypes with a "kernel of truth," or inaccurate stereotypes. The perception of a nation in international relations is the perception of foreign nationals, and that said perception of the people of a foreign state is also partly a function of their political leaders' actions and character. Japanese students were also asked to share their perceptions of the Russian people.

¹⁰ In 2021 we could see the positive trend in 15 years (2007 — 7.5%; 2012 — 6.1%; 2021 — 5.3%).

In 2021 there were 12.9% “don’t know” responses and in 2022 it was about the same — 13%. As for the personality of the Russian people, identified by the Japanese respondents — according to students’ responses it is determined by “the cultural and social diversity of Russia and its people (nationalities)” generated by its historical background. The stereotypical image of typical Russians has not changed much: both in 2022 and 2021 respondents associated the Russians with words related to attitudes such as “friendly” and “kind” (2021 — 11.6% and 2022 — 8.9%↓) (“I think they are kind people. I was in Moscow and St. Petersburg two years ago and was very impressed”). Interestingly, in 2022 the youth seemed to be more focused on “patriotic” traits of the Russians (“There are many patriots”; “Actually I had the opportunity to talk to the Russians, I think they have a strong love for their country”) (2021 — 1.9%, 2022 — 8.1%↑) and named them “patient and enduring” (2021 — 2.6%, 2022 — 6.5%↑) while in 2021 respondents had more impressions based on such attitudes as “strong, great spirit” (2021 — 6.5%, 2022 — 1.6%↓) and “gentle and calm” (2021 — 6.5%, 2022 — 0%↓), “sociable, cheerful and easygoing” (2021 — 5.2% and 2022 — 4.9%↓) and “COOL” (2021 — 1.9%, 2022 — 0%↓) which, in turns, led to positive impressions of Japanese students. Youth’ positive attitude towards Russians is also associated with “their caring about their families and friends” and “their value of friends and families” (2021 — 5.8%, 2022 — 8.6%↑): “They value those they trust,” “Family bond is strong,” “Cherish family and friends.” Service to the family is viewed by Japanese youth as a significant component of the moral behavior of Russians.

In both 2022 and 2021, Japanese students noted that Russian people are “peaceful” and argued their responses with reasoning such as: “I think the Russians have peaceful thoughts, similar to the Japanese,” “Like the Japanese,

these people should not want war” (2021 — 2.6%; 2022 — 3.1%↑).

Traditionally, in volunteering perceptions of Russia, respondents mentioned words related to appearances such as “pretty”, “beautiful” and “white-skinned” — as respondents noted “personal charm, wit, and physical attractiveness” all contribute to this factor.

However, in 2022 some new determinations of traits of Russians such as “nation,” “unity of the nation” (5.7%). Students mentioned that “Russians have a strong sense of camaraderie and unity,” “Unity in one nation,” “I think the whole nation is one,” “Unity seems strong.”

Students’ responses also included some negative impressions of Russians such as “impatient,” “suspicious,” “greedy,” “scary,” “stick their noses up” (2021 — 2.3%, 2022 — 7.9%↑) and “unfriendly” (2021 — 1.5% but in 2022 — 6.5%↑). The strong image of the Russians as “drunkards,” “strong to alcohol” (“There are many people who love vodka! And resistant to cold!”; “Alcohol-resistant and patient people”) has not changed so much (2021 — 10.3%, 2022 — 8.1%).

To sum up, in 2022 conditionally negative character traits were mentioned by 25% of Japanese students (2021 — 25.7%) and conditionally positive character traits by 62% (2021 — 61.4%). Comparing 2022 with 2021, this rate has not changed significantly in general, but changed in some students’ assessments.

Discussion

People base their decisions and actions towards social entities on their cognitive representations (images) of those entities. The way individuals, organizations and countries can function in their respective social environments is greatly determined by their image among the people and groups that constitute these environments. For countries, this is the image among foreign publics

(Buhmann, 2016, p. 17). In the context of international public relations and public diplomacy, this requires knowledge of how the public in a given country perceive a foreign entity (organization or country) and how they behave towards it (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009). As we could see, the young perceive political reality through the lens of their “world view” and develop their attitude to international political events through their system of values (Zhilina, 2019, p. 66). In this connection I should mention, despite the obvious need for deliver more differentiated and comparative analyses of country images and perceptions among different groups (such as politicians, foreign political publics, experts, journalists, students), researchers have so far largely neglected the development of generalizable concepts of the country image that could be applied to comparative analyses of different groups (Buhmann, 2016, p. 20).

Sources

For Japanese youth, Russia-related information and content were mainly sourced through online media (the Internet). However, unlike the case in 2022, the results showed that in 2021 access to information through the Internet was relatively higher than through other sources for students. Interestingly, Japanese students in both 2021 and 2022 access more Russia related information and contents through TV compared to journals and newspapers. This could be interpreted as a result of the increase in Russia-related contents in traditional (official) media outlets in Japan, such as news programs and documentaries, current news, etc. So, information that flows through the “visual” media plays a crucial role in the process of representation of the foreign country, because visual representation is placed in the center of stereotypes’ structure that is accompanied by differences of different groups of people (McAuliffe, 2007). But as experts mention, in

addition to TV, radio and other purely informational services, a negative image of the country and its businesses can also be shaped indirectly through the education and public science systems, art and film, music, etc. (Degterev, 2022, p. 358). This is also reflected in the results of the survey.

Country

The results of the 2022 survey showed that 21.8% of Japanese youth (2021 — 24.7%) selected “geographical connections” as one of the top association with Russia. When talking about Russia, the majority of Japanese participants mentioned “vast territory” and “cold climatic conditions” (2021 — 18.7%, 2022 — 10.3%). This seems to reflect the weight and importance of the “geographical imagination” and “visual representation” that has a significant role in shaping the image of the country for Japanese youth. Other strong key associations selected by the youth are “negative events and incidents” (2021 — 5.3%, 2022 — 18.8%) and “political leader” (2021 — 19.3%, 2022 — 14.6%). Students also ranked “culture” (2021 — 5%, 2022 — 9.7%) and “national cuisine” (2021 — 6%, 2022 — 6.7%) as the most significant in the country’s representation. Another possible influence on what influences students’ positive perceptions of Russia could be personal experience (such as travel, language skills, and foreign news exposure) and experiences with Russian culture.

In 2021, the perception and image of Vladimir Putin’s among university students was mixed — “President Putin: Strong military power”; “Putin’s socialism”; “Putin, Soviet Union, Belarus.” Japanese students’ attitude towards the Russian state leader, moreover, showed statistical significance in 2022. The perception of the leader was more negative than that of the country as a whole, and this might be influenced by the current political rhetoric that argues for evaluating a government / leader

separate from the perception of the country itself. One respondent captured this statistically relevant fact as follows: “Before President Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, it was image of harsh nature where people drink vigorously and heavily. I believe that the invasion is not the whole nation, but the Putin administration, so the image of the nation is not aggressive, but the same as before.”

In connection with “negative facts” it is important to note that in 2021 the number of Japanese students who linked Russia with “territorial dispute” (Northern territories issue) was only 1.3% and 0% — none in 2022.¹¹ This may be a reflection of the focus in state media, but consequently there is no positive correlative data to suggest this may be influenced by positive images or considerations as was noted as the Russian cultural festival in Japan.

When analyzing the responses to the 2022 survey, there are some significant differences in the level of perceptions in comparison to 2021. In particular, in 2022 the students demonstrated a more negative perception of Russia than in 2021: as previously mentioned in areas pertaining to Russian society and relations with Ukraine. However, in 2021 the perceptions of Russian “culture” and “national cuisine” were observed to be lower than those in 2022. Likewise, in 2022 Japanese youth indicated a less positive perception of “relations with the neighboring state — Russia” in contrast to responses of the 2021 survey: perceptions of Russia as “a military threat” in the situation appear to be heavily influenced by geographical proximity to Russia. The results of the 2022 survey showed lower positive perceptions of Russia among young people compared to the 2021 survey, which may be due to the ongoing military conflict with Ukraine. This suggests that antecedents defined

2021 negative perceptions of Russia as “a threat due to proximity,” but there was no commensurate rise in the perception of Russia as “a threat” in this regard in 2022. There are a lot of inferences to be taken from this revelation as it pertains for foreign policy / soft power prescription. However, this paper will not address them.

As experts note, for countries that are subject to ongoing conflicts, if a person already possesses a negative attitude about the place, prior unfavorable memories will emerge, and the effect of the new harmful information or incident may act as reinforcement to this negative image (Heslop, Lu & Cray, 2008). In any case, Japanese youth perceptions of Russia in 2021 were quite favorable; however, more data and further analysis would be needed to identify the reasons behind such differences.

Based on discernible evidence, international events, terrorist attacks, and natural disasters all play a role in shaping the image of a country by changing the existing knowledge that a person may have about the area. Individuals may gradually become more knowledgeable about a place through their exposure to information (Stepchenkova & Morrison, 2008), either through planned communication activities, or through contact with movies, news or word of mouth.

People

The differences in responses between 2021 and 2022 could be attributed to the way that Japanese are more exposed to Russians in 2022. Japanese students are likely to receive most, if not all information about Russia in an indirect ways, such as through social media and television broadcasts or literature (“I feel that this is an honest nation. I haven’t read much in Russian literature, but there seems to be a lot of violent stories”), and this perhaps forms impressions of Russians, but generally the

¹¹ In 2012 the percentage of students who mentioned “Northern territories” increased from 2.8% (2007) to 5.2% — the figure was doubled.

survey suggests their impressions are formed based upon officials who appear on television. On the other hand, Japanese respondents are able to generate their impressions based on more direct interactions with local Russians such as friends and professors through their daily lives (“From the experience of communicating with my Russian friend, I can easily tell if he is good or bad”). For Japanese students, their impressions on Russian people centered on words related to “patriotism,” “value of family and friends” and “kind people,” as well as appearance-related associations such as “white skin tone,” “beautiful” and “tall people with beautiful blue eyes.” Japanese youth’s impressions of Russian people also included mixed perceptions, with both positive and negative impressions. Such impressions are formed through various channels and could be influenced by how youth encounter Russian people, such as when travelling to Russia or when interacting with Russian students at their universities. It is quite plausible that this could also be due to their limited understanding of and interaction with representatives of Russia.

The attitude to the Russian people, based on perceptions towards the country, leads to formulating a perception of the people in that country. As we can see, political incidents have a negative effect on the perceptions that Japanese youth have of Russia. However, it appears that respondents tend to be more sympathetic toward the Russian people. With only anecdotal correlative data at hand, the “sympathy effect” was linked to the contemporary political situation and expressed by some respondent in the 2022 survey (“As for the Ukraine invasion, I thought that not all of Russians supported President Putin, because many Russian soldiers refused to participate in the war in Ukraine”; “There is a very harsh climate, which makes people drink alcohol a lot and heavily”; “I believe that those who invaded Ukraine are not

the whole nation, but the Putin administration, so the image of the nation is not aggressive, but the same as before”). While we can only offer this as a speculation and it may be the question of further research.

In light of the above, it is critical to understand how international incidents and negative events, media reports, or other sources of information affect the country’s image and to determine whether this influence is temporary or has a more lasting effect in order to turn this data into an evidence-based policy tool. Some researchers also consider the length of time during a negative event will commensurately produce negative perceptions and attitude (Heslop, Lu & Cray, 2008). They concluded that the influence of a negative event is however reduced with time. In order to confirm or to refute this supposition (assumption) it is necessary to conduct a longitudinal study to analyze the influence of negative information on the image of a country, and to conclude if perception returns to a level similar to that before the incident, in the absence of new events that reinforce the negative image.

Conclusion

The current study was conducted on a sample of students with a relatively high level of political sophistication, as evidenced by their level of education and educational aspirations, and with a narrow age range of only 4 years (the time they spend at university). Japanese students’ answers have shown a deep influence of the “communication factor” on the perception of neighboring countries (and people), which in turn, this contributes to their political socialization. Many young Japanese do not have the opportunity to communicate with foreigners, so when they do, they tend to change their attitude a bit. In the 2021 survey, some images of Russia were based on stereotypes of the former Soviet Union. Although the stereotypical perceptions were noticeable, they should not be

overestimated, because such associations in the responses of Japanese students in 2021 were not statistically significant in 2022 (2021 — 6.7%, 2022 — 1.8%). These statistical anomalies and emergent facts that defy conventional wisdom, as captured by respondents' perceptions and attitudes towards Russia offers new scholarly understanding and may certainly be of interest to policy makers. On the one hand, their view of the other country is formed by the global networks that are influenced from outside. On the other hand, the respondents seem to be free from many perceptual barriers of the past.

Some new trends should be mentioned here.

In 2022, Japanese students are found to primarily utilize TV and the Internet to get information and contents on Russia, which is also consistent with the results of the previous survey in 2021. Such results are not very surprising, especially as data have shown how invasive the Internet and social media have become globally and certainly in Japan. While Internet and social media usage has grown exponentially in recent years (especially since the COVID-19 pandemic forced many to interact and communicate through digital platforms), this study identified a new trend in which 74% of Japanese youth trust television as a source of “official information.” In 2022, the proportion of respondents who mentioned that available information on respective country was “insufficient” for them decreased by 6.8% to 64.2% from 2021's 71%. Certainly, more in-depth research into why young people have a greater acceptance of official information in potentially turbulent times would be illuminating, but this survey was not designed to investigate this outcome, only to identify it as a consequence.

A comparison of the 2022 results with those of the 2021 survey reveals some fundamental changes in how Japanese youth view Russia, as impressions shifted from a “cultural aspects” perspective to a “conflict-centered” perspective based more on the

dominant mainstream media news that reflected the official state perspective. In 2021, Russia was perceived as “rich in resources,” “modern” and having a “rich culture,” but in 2022, the words that painted the images of Russia revolved mainly around terms related to “war,” “invasion in Ukraine,” and the “Russian army,” etc. Statistically, the answers showed a significant shift in the concerns of Japanese youth about Russia and a change in perception.

The findings also suggest that the growing popularity of Russian cultural content may have had a notable influence on Japanese students' impressions of Russia and Russian people. Similar “effects” could also be seen in the youth's 2022 impressions of the Russian people as words associated with state and social relationships such as “patriots,” “love their families and friends” and “unity” were more common and may be attributable to information that they viewed through Internet sources. This was particularly pronounced in the responses among youth in 2021 compared to 2022 that focused more on attitudes of Russian people such as “gentle and calm,” “friendly,” and “kind.” One reason for this may be that students in Japan in 2021 had more opportunities to interact directly with representatives of Russia through universities, and thus formed their impressions based on real interactions.

In addition, this research confirms that negative and positive cognitive opinions (the cognitive component of country perceptions includes awareness of the respective country, attitudes and beliefs that reflect conscious perceptions of the country) regarding a country can simultaneously exist. In this sense, Japanese young people have negative beliefs about the reputation, level of security, and respect for liberties and laws of Russia, aspects that shape its cognitive image. However, their opinions concerning Russia's level of culture, which is shown to directly and positively influence the intention to visit, are positive. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that Japanese

youth are ready to separate the actions of the state from those of the people. It is suggested that the positive attitudes towards Russia may have a similarly positive influence on Japanese students' decision to travel to Russia for studies, and that the experiences they may have after visiting Russia have a positive multiplier effect on perceptions for Russia. Perhaps this could be incorporated into further policy research to compare how Japan and Russia have managed their soft power.

The study proves an important contribution to the literature by providing a better understanding of image formation in the case of a country that has already suffered from a bad image due to an ongoing crisis situation. In addition, this research confirms that negative and positive cognitive opinions regarding a country may coexist.

Further investigation of such observations may be helpful in gaining important insights into how such situations could be addressed in the future. Russia's neighbors are painfully aware of the military imbalance between Russian forces and their own much smaller forces, and the need to redress this imbalance through NATO support. However, the surveys discussed in this paper do not support the conclusion that perceptions of the Ukraine crisis have irrevocably altered the world's security

perceptions of Russia, defining it for the foreseeable future as a competitor and potential adversary rather than a partner.

However, this study is not without some limitations that should be addressed through further research. First, it is not based on an ideal sample size to extrapolate to the broader national population. The investigative study questionnaire was not administered as and done an online, which has resulted in a lower response rate especially in Japan survey.

As I mentioned earlier, the university students would, perhaps inevitably, have firsthand connection or experience with political matters in the future and can influence the political views of Japanese citizens, so the results also possess a certain prognostic value. Therefore, further research should be carried out to fully understand the image formation and image change processes for those countries that suffer from a negative image and who are exposed to political conflicts and other incidents. The degree to which various levels of negative perceptions influence the country image is a fruitful area for future investigations, and authoritatively attempt to identify the factors that determine soft power and prescribe a means to actively assume command of it.

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