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## POLITICAL IMAGE OF MODERN RUSSIA IN THE ARAB WORLD COUNTRIES

*This article analyzes the image of modern Russia in the Arab world, identifies the main factors in the formation of the international image of the country, explores the question of the peculiarities of perception of the image of Russia by representatives of the Arab states. The article focuses on the difficulties of building a favorable image of Russia in the Arab world and ways to overcome them. The authors investigate the question of whether Russia, as the successor of the USSR, was able to maintain its image in the Arab states in connection with the events of the XXI century, including the Arab spring protests, the crisis in Ukraine and the conflict in Syria. There are also examples of the use of the "soft power" in connection with the formation of a positive image of Russia in the Arab world. Special emphasis is placed on the influence of the mass media as the main political and psychological mechanism of influence on the formation of the country's image.*

**Key words:** Russia, Middle East and North Africa, Arab countries, Russia's political image, international image.

Today it is quite difficult to find a country that would not be interested in building a positive image. A positive image helps to strengthen the geopolitical status, helps to create a more stable environment for the country's integration into the world space, and helps to build mutually beneficial economic and political ties. In the modern world, Russia has a great weight on the world stage, but does this allow it to maintain its positive image?

Creation of a positive image requires a lot of efforts, it is necessary to take into account the current trends in the formation of the global information and communication space, the expansion of the network of relationships at the interregional and interstate levels [6]. In this regard, it is important to take into account that the formation of the image of any state depends on the relationships with the state, acting in this role as a subject-prototype of the image of the country [11]. That is why it is important to take into account that the image of the USSR during the Cold War was perceived quite differently in the West and in the Middle East. In the face of confrontation, the West, especially the United States, tried to

resist the Soviet Union, creating in the world its political and social image as a tyrant state that prevents the spread of democratic rights and freedoms [5]. As for the Middle East, many Arab countries perceived the USSR as an ally that provided humanitarian and military assistance in conflict situations. In this vein, the USSR had a positive image in the minds of the Arab countries, despite the US statements about its “ideologization” [3. Pp. 50-57].

Subsequently, after the fall of the bipolar world and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was faced with the question of restoring a positive image in the Arab countries, but did it succeed at the proper level? What factors currently influence the formation of the image? How has it changed since the Cold War? What methods does Russia use to create a positive image in the Arab countries? How does the current situation in Ukraine and Syria affect the political consciousness of the Arab world? These and other issues need to be clarified, because the Middle East is a region that attracts special attention because of its strategic importance in the foreign policy of the Russian Federation.

**Does Russia have the positive or negative image in the Arab world?** Before analyzing the image of Russia in the Arab countries, it is necessary to pay special attention to the situation in each country. The attitude of the Persian Gulf countries to Russia has always differed from the countries of the so-called Al-sham and Maghreb. Russia has not aroused much confidence in the GCC countries since the Cold War, when GCC countries purposefully set a course for developing relations with the United States [4]. Such attitude is very import when we talk of the influence on the minds of the population of the Arab countries. Members of the Cooperation Council for the Arab states of the Gulf have created such TV companies as al-Arabiya and al-Jazeera which broadcast in almost all Arab countries. Given the negative attitude of the GCC countries to Russia’s support for the ruling regime of Syria, Russia is consistently described by the leading Arab media as “an opponent of the Syrian people, supporting the bloody tyrant Assad” [10]. These news channels also actively discuss the situation in Ukraine and the Arab side condemns the actions of Russia, describing them as a violation of the international law. Another stumbling block is the Iranian nuclear program, Russian attitude to which is more constructive than that of the Western countries. Given that the GCC countries see Iran as the main threat to their national security, Russia’s position is unacceptable to them, which significantly damages Russia’s image in the Arab world [2]. Al-Arabiya and al-Jazeera news agencies openly talk about Moscow’s support for the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah axis and stressing that Moscow provides them with humanitarian and military assistance, which cannot characterize Russia as a peacemaker and a reliable partner of the region [12]. In an interview with the Foreign Policy Agency, the Syrian writer Munzer Hallum said that Russia has a number of problems that prevent it from creating a positive image in the Arab countries. First of all, this is a developed relationship with Israel, which is traditionally perceived by the Arab public as an enemy. Sec-

ond, Russia is weakly involved in the regional agenda and does not develop Russian-Arab relations. Relations with Arab countries are based mainly on military cooperation, which is of little interest to the ordinary Arab people [10].

Despite the fact that in relation to the Syrian problem, Russia relies on the norms of international law, defending the preservation of its integrity and preventing external interference in the internal affairs of the country, the public of other Arab countries perceives it quite differently, associating Russia's actions with dictatorship and violence. This was also facilitated by Moscow's rather detached attitude to the Arab spring events. While the "Arab street" supported the need to overthrow the unwanted ruling regimes, Russia took a restrained position, trying not to comment on these actions and supported preservation of the ruling power [9]. Accordingly, the Arab public did not like it, which was one of the reasons for undermining Russia's authority. If in years 2000, the Arab countries had hoped that the successor of the USSR would return and render them financial, economic and military assistance, after the events of the Arab spring the Arab consciousness has changed in favor of the West, which strongly supported the fall of these regimes [7].

All of the above factors seemingly indicated to a negative image of Russia in the Arab countries. However, this is not the case. Despite the fact that the Arab public since the Cold War perceives Russia as a force opposed to the West, it does not bear a negative connotation. Studies have shown that Arab society does not fully trust the West and the Western media, which, in their opinion, are hostile to Islam and the Arab world. The level of trust declined after reports on Islamic terrorism and condemnation of migration flows from the Middle East and North Africa, which were highlighted as a destabilizing factor in the domestic politics of Western countries. In this case, Russia has managed to find a more favorable position, since all the statements of the leader of the state V. Putin and the speeches of Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke about tolerance and the need to protect religious interests. Indeed, at the political and psychological level, this has brought the countries of the Arab world and Russia closer together.

Nor can we ignore the events in Iraq in 2003. The American invasion was rather harshly condemned by the Russian side. Russia's compliance with the principles of international law and open challenge to American policy in the Middle East were perceived by Arab countries as a hope that their rights could be protected by an actor of external force, that Russia returned to the Middle East after the collapse of the Soviet Union [8]. These factors can not be perceived as positive for the image of Russia in the Arab world.

**Positive image of Russia – how to form and develop.** Many factors influence the formation of a positive image of the country, but one of the most effective is the use of "soft power." As is mentioned earlier, the image is significantly influenced by the media. But if al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya quite often present Russia in a neutral or even negative way, are there any TV channels where Russia is



presented in a more favorable light? Yes, they exist and moreover, they develop quite intensively. One example is the Arab division of the Russian TV company *Russia today*, which broadcasts throughout the Arab world. This TV channel broadcasts news about Russia and pays great attention to Russian-Arab relations. Of course, Russia's policy today is aimed at building a positive image of Russia in the eyes of Arab viewers. Moreover, in recent years, the Arabic division of the TV channel *Russia today* was able to gain popularity among the Arab population and overtake the Arabic-speaking European and American TV channels [1]. A similar TV channel is the developing company *Russia in Arabic* which pays a lot of attention to life in Russia and the destruction of existing stereotypes about it.

The Federal Agency Rossotrudnichestvo operates as one of the tools for building a positive image of Russia in such Arab countries as Lebanon, the UAE, Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco. In these countries, there are Russian centers of culture and science that pay attention not only to the humanitarian sphere, in particular the study of the Russian language and cultural events, but also to scientific cooperation and strengthening ties with the Russian Diaspora. Thanks to the RCCS, residents of Arab countries have the opportunity to form a more objective opinion about modern Russia and its material and spiritual potential. Moreover, the RCCS pay great attention to the promotion of educational services. Students who come to Russia have a significant influence on the representation of its image in their country. They return as highly qualified specialists to their countries and contribute to the development of economic and political relations between the states. On a subconscious level, Russia is close to them in spirit, such students know the mentality of its citizens, they are familiar with its features, which certainly can not but affect the further positive development of relations. Russia should pay special attention to the students from Arab countries specializing in international relations, economy and law, because they can later speak for or against any international decision of Russia. A striking example is Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who is a graduate of the Russian Peoples' Friendship University. It's obvious that the head of state can significantly influence the consciousness of his people and, if he has special relations with a particular country, it helps to establish relations in various fields of activity, something we note in the bilateral relations between Russia and Palestine. The presence of the RCSC in Palestine, the holding of joint events with the Russian and Palestinian sides, the number of Russian-speaking Palestinian specialists and diplomats, the number of students from Palestine in Russia-all this testifies to the mutual friendship and trust between the states. That is why the use of such "soft power" may well change Russia's image in the Arab world.

**Conclusion.** Summing up, it is important to note that at the moment the image of Russia in the Arab countries is in a rather precarious position. In the Gulf countries, where al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya TV channels mainly broadcast, speaking negatively about Russia's interference in the Ukrainian affairs, about the sup-



port for the Syrian ruling regime, about Russia's close ties with Iran and support for the Shiite organization Hezbollah, Russia's image is not positive; in the countries of Al-sham and the Maghreb the situation changed after the events of the Arab spring, local newspapers wrote about Russia's attitude in a very reserved way and even negatively. It is important to understand that Russia's image in the Arab countries may not be at the highest level however, Russia should not give up its geopolitical interests. It is necessary to find a balance in building its foreign policy and promoting the country's image. In this regard, special attention should be paid to the use of "soft power," development of the work of the RCSC in the Arab countries, attraction of foreign students to study in Russia, organization of joint cultural events and creation of new opportunities for the Arabic-language media in Russia.

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