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## Image Characteristics of the Regions of Kazakhstan (based on the results of a sociological research)

The article analyzes the image characteristics of the regions of Kazakhstan formed in the minds of Kazakhstan citizens. Based on the data obtained through expert interviews and questionnaires, the authors found that the economic component prevails in people's ideas about the image. In addition, the main image characteristics of regions in people's perceptions are identical to those of administrative regions of the country. In most cases, a region is synonymous with a province. In particular, the main representatives of the region are cities or regional centers, the image of which extends to the image of the entire region. Cities of regional significance often retain the image characteristics of the industrial Soviet past.

*Keywords:* Kazakhstan; region; image, social representations; perception of territories, associations.

### Introduction

Today, regional positioning becomes an important rational and emotional criterion in solving various issues in all spheres of society. With the independence, the regionality of Kazakhstan has become more distinct and expressed. Regional identity began to compete with the leading sign of the identity of modern society — belonging to the professional community. It is regional positioning that is largely dictated by image representations which are often simplistic, sometimes distorted stereotypes. This fact, of course, requires research into the content, the formation of the image of the regions of the country, the conclusions and results of which will make it possible to develop recommendations for an effective image-based regional policy.

The international expert in the field of country image S.Anholt, as a result of numerous studies conducted in more than 200 countries, came to the conclusion that the image holds the immense importance for all spheres of life, from politics to everyday needs of a modern man. The quintessence of results in the international research of S.Anholt is the following statement: «If you are Swedish or Swiss, it is much easier for you to live, because you are made in Sweden or Switzerland». This means that the country or region of origin, having a positive image, provides additional opportunities, both to people and to the sphere of goods and services. This statement refers to any territorial spaces — the country, the region, the city, the countryside.

Regions of Kazakhstan also have their own image characteristics and with the prevalence of positive image features they have non-material advantages (which can be transformed into physical profit — tourism, investments, etc.). The predominance of negative image characteristics, on the contrary, leads to certain losses. Consequently, the presence of a positive or negative image can affect the economic, political, professional lives individual groups of individuals and communities.

In the era of digital society, the phenomenon of the image becomes an important capital that determines the competitiveness of society and the country. Countries, regions with a positive image are more likely to become successful and competitive.

The pioneers in studies of the problems of image formation are Western scholars. Among them F. Kotler [1, 2], K. Boulding [3], D. Burstin [4] and others made a significant contribution to the study of the image and brand of the territory. The work of N. Caldwell [5], a tourist image — the work of S. Pike [6] and J. Hunt [7].

In the post-Soviet space, the theme of the image is most actively explored by Russian scientists. Theoretical issues of studying the image, territorial image are devoted to the work of Russian researchers I.S. Vazhenina [8], E. Galumova [9], D.N. Zamyatin [10], N.Yu. Zamyatina [11], A.A. Graver [12] and others.

Especially note the author D.N. Zamyatin who appeals to the term «image of the country» and notes that its structure consists of a core image and as a matryoshka it is «hidden» inside several «packages» [13; 107].

He revealed the phenomenon of capital(ism) of geographical images [14], outlined the contours of the new scientific field — geonomy, which studies space as an image and transaction [15; 129].

In the constructivist key there are works of E.V. Golovneva. In her works she gives a theoretical analysis of the concept of «region» in academic discourse [16]. Having examined the concept of «region» through the prism of social constructivism, E.V. Golovneva notes that this is a «dynamic, hybrid, heterogeneous, discursive structure» [17; 120].

In recent years, image research has become more active in Kazakhstani studies. In the vast majority the researchers study not regional, and country image. This topic is in the research field of specialists in various fields, in connection with which various aspects of the image are considered. Thus, the problems of the image of the country are studied by political scientists, journalists, economists, philologists, etc.

The main problem we faced in analyzing the growing number of studies is that they are very diverse and there is no consensus around the conceptualizations of the basic concepts of «image» and «region». The research of the latter is mainly of an interdisciplinary nature. Among the many works on analyzing the image of the territory, we were primarily interested in the formation of the image of individual regions. In the study of the problems of image formation scientists are shifting to the comprehension of the sociocultural component of the image of the regions.

#### *Methodology and research methods*

In order to study expert presentations on image characteristics of the regions of Kazakhstan, in 20 expert interviews were conducted (2015). Experts were scientists, teachers, employees of government bodies, whose scientific interests allow them to be experts in matters of regional image. They are representatives of the following organizations: Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KISI), Institute of World Economy and Politics (IMEP), Al-FarabiKazakh National University, E.A. Buketov Karaganda State University, Kazakh-German University, East Kazakhstan State University, South Kazakhstan State Pedagogical Institute and regional akimats.

The guide developed for the expert interview included issues of a profound nature that were combined into blocks: Region, Image, Economy, Culture, Politics, Channels. The main hypotheses of the expert interview were: 1. The images of the regions of the country are based on stereotypes and simplified schemes — associations; 2. The images of regions are mainly based on economic indicators; 3. The main representatives of the image of the regions of Kazakhstan are cities of regional importance.

Experts point out that the economic component prevails in people's perceptions of the image. Most often people paint a picture of regions in conjunction with economic parameters — oil, gas, coal, grain, fruit, livestock, etc. However, this does not mean that the regions are not constructed in any other way.

The image is formed not one decade. And the inertia of the Soviet image in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is quite natural. The creation of new images takes place against the backdrop of well-established patterns of image. The post-Soviet formation of the images of the regions of Kazakhstan is taking place against the background of the image indicators that sometimes do not correspond to reality. However, modern market conditions, of course, cannot but make their own adjustments. The image from the state resource turns into a kind of «commodity», which more depends not so much on production as on consumption.

When analyzing the image of regions, the most interesting aspect is the phenomenon when certain territories do not cause exact associations in people's perceptions, the so-called non-symbolized spaces («non-places»). Experts noted that some territories do not have pronounced associations, that is, they are so-called non-symbolized spaces.

It can be assumed that such a phenomenon is most often present in countries with extensive territories. In countries with a small territory, this situation cannot occur, since the highways that densely cover the whole country allow residents to communicate intensively and, therefore, better know other regions. When a country has a vast territory, the phenomenon of non-symbolized space is explained by objectively prevailing circumstances, which in the future can be leveled if various directions of the transport system are actively developed.

As a result of sociological survey, such answers are quite common. For example, when asked about the friendliness of the people of Pavlodar region, every fourth respondent in Almaty chose the answer «I can't say anything».

Astana and Almaty have become cities of attraction of large flows of people with the aim of obtaining higher education and job search, they represent places of «meeting» of the regions. People from almost all

regions of Kazakhstan live in these cities, and its residents have a wider understanding of other regions, as personal contacts enrich their ideas.

In the framework of the interview, we also asked experts to reproduce on their geographical map of Kazakhstan their own vision of the main regions of the country. The expert regionalization of the country was presented in the form of map- schemes.

The experts presented different variants of regionalization:

- (1) Kazakhstan has 5 regions (north, south, west, east and center);
- (2) Kazakhstan has 4 regions (north, south, west, east);
- (3) Kazakhstan has 3 regions (north-east, south, west).

From the proposed options for regionalization, it can be seen that experts include different regions in the composition of regions. Most experts distributed the regions of the country as follows:

South Kazakhstan — South-Kazakhstan, Kyzylorda, Zhambyl and Almaty regions;

Western Kazakhstan — West Kazakhstan, Atyrau, Mangystau, Aktobe regions;

Northern Kazakhstan — North Kazakhstan, Kostanay, Akmola, Pavlodar regions;

East Kazakhstan — East Kazakhstan region;

Central Kazakhstan — Karaganda region.

In expert assessments, the current spatial structure of Kazakhstan is multilevel and heterogeneous, one can see not only economic regionalization, but also cultural, historical, geographical, etc. Simultaneously with economic associations in expert regionalization there are such images as «southerners» and «northerners», «capital» and «peripheral», «traditional» and «modernized», «urbanized» and «agrarian», «polyethnic» and «monoethnic» and etc.

The main channel through which the image of a certain region is usually transmitted, is the urban space — the city, here one should note another important social fact as internal migration and the trends of which are unidirectional — from village to city. Migration leads to a significant change in the ethnic picture of the city, making it more mono-ethnic. «Currently the Kazakh language's success is noticeable in the development of urban space... One thing is clear: the migration flow from village to city will increase, and it is in a multi-ethnic urban space that «new forms of life» are emerging [18; 46]. Of course, «new forms of life» will affect the image characteristics of cities, which will gradually change with the city.

Experts note that the role of the subject (individuals, social groups) in the design of regions and their image is very significant. The region depends on the content of the notions about it and is the product of the process of social construction. The image of the region is based on sociocultural, subjective, media, reflexive attributes, meanings and symbols. The region does not exist outside consciousness. In other words, if we abstract from consciousness and representations, we will not find the object itself. The region in this sense is conventional, that is, it is the result of social agreements.

Expert assessments illustrate familiar images of regions that have become organic image formulas. A certain image of the territory may prevail for a long period, but over time, under the influence of various factors, on purpose or without any intervention, it may change or undergo adjustment.

In addition to expert interviews, the authors of the article conducted a sociological study in 2016. Through a questionnaire survey in 17 cities in Kazakhstan, 1,020 respondents were interviewed. These cities are Astana, Almaty, Aktobe, Atyrau, Aktau, Karaganda, Kokshetau, Kostanay, Kyzylorda, Pavlodar, Petropavlovsk, Semey, Taraz, Taldykorgan, Uralsk, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Shymkent.

The choice of cities is based on the results of expert interviews, in which most informants noted that the main representatives of the image of the regions are cities — regional centers. Agreeing with the opinion of experts, we decided to find out image associations among city residents. As for the city of Semey, we also recommended that the city be analyzed separately, because for a long time it was a large regional center of the Semipalatinsk region and has ethno-demographic and socio-cultural characteristics in comparison with the present regional center of the East Kazakhstan region.

Respondents of two age categories were interviewed using the questionnaire method. The first age group is from 17 to 25 years (born in the post-Soviet period) and the second age group is older than 40 years (born in the Soviet period). The sample included those respondents who have lived or worked in the city for a long time. We did not claim that we would recreate a reliable image in the mass consciousness, but the data we obtained allow us to make a number of assumptions based on the homogeneity of the groups under study.

The authors developed their own toolkit, which includes questions that contain the main indicators of the image identified by the world expert of the image of the countries by S.Anholt's.

A number of questions were devoted to revealing the image characteristics of the city in which the respondent resides.

The fame of the city is an important image component. In this regard, it was found out thanks to which the city is famous, than it is famous. According to the answers of respondents of two age groups, we can conclude that the «historical heritage» is famous for the city of Taraz, Uralsk, Atyrau city, Semey city. «Natural conditions» make Almaty, Kokshetau, Petropavlovsk city known. Famous for the «industrial potential» of the city of Karaganda, Ust-Kamenogorsk, Pavlodar and Aktobe. «Good people» glorify Mr. Taldykorgan, and «multinational» — Karaganda. Here, for the most frequently selected answers, the positions of both age groups coincided. And according to the cities of Astana, Aktau, Kostanay, Kyzylorda and Shymkent, the answers of the respondents of two age groups (up to 25 and over 40) turned out to be different. So, Astana is known for the first group with its «architectural sights» and for the second group — «high probability of employment». The city of Aktau is famous for its «historical heritage», «industrial potential», respectively. The city of Kostanay is famous for its «good people», «multinational». The city of Kyzylorda is also famous for its «good people», «historical heritage». The city of Shymkent is known for its «natural conditions», «multinationality».

In addition to identifying common parameters that make cities known, we set the task of finding out the key image indicators of the cities studied. In this regard, we tried to identify which symbols created by the residents themselves are the pillars of the city's self-image. To this end, the respondents were given the following task within the framework of the questionnaire: «Offer a variant of your city's brand name or association words related to your city». Analyzing the answers of the respondents, we moved towards building generalized territorial images. Each individual is in turn a bearer of those images of the city that are socially formed.

For us an important parameter for comparing the self-image of cities was the frequency of mentioning of various characteristics. According to K. Lynch, the focus of our attention was «the degree of imaginability» (level of imaginability) [19]. Imaginability is the aspects of a material or intangible object that evoke strong images in the mind of an observer, a kind of recognition, readability and visibility of the subject environment.

Determining the degree of imaginability, we will fix the number of references to the same place, object or any image in the descriptions of informants. Therefore, the more often (conditionally every second, third or fourth informant, depending on the sample), the same objects are mentioned, the higher the degree of imaginability. Based on this, we can conclude that is dominant in the image characteristics of the city / region.

Below we will present a picture of the main image indicators of the cities of Kazakhstan. The most positive image is Astana, which is the *city of the future*. Almaty is *a city of apples*. Taldykorgan has the image of a calm and peaceful small city — *a city of silence*. Karaganda has a pronounced industrial image: Karaganda is *the miners' capital*. Kokshetau is a «natural» city: Kokshetau is *Kokshetau — Blue Mountains*. Kostanay is represented by the bread-growing city — the *bread-making land*. Pavlodar has a purely industrial image: Pavlodar — *industrial, a city of factories*. Petropavlovsk has agricultural, natural and ecological characteristics — *bread, grain, clean air*. Ust-Kamenogorsk has the image of an industrial-developed city, which led to environmental problems — *industry, metallurgy, ecology*. Semey is the *birthplace of Abay*. Aktau causes the following associations — *oil, sea*. Atyrau has an unambiguously formed image — *the oil capital*. Aktobe has an industrial image — *chrome, oil*. Uralsk is a *city of green, historical*. Taraz is the only city that is actively associated with the historical and cultural context — *the spiritual and historical center, the warm, Zhambyl, Silk Road*. Kyzylorda identified a basic image element — *rice*. Kyzylorda is also associated with *Korkytata*. Shymkent is a *sunny city, green*.

According to S. Anholt, the components of the image are such indicators as attractiveness, quality of management, friendliness of people and quality of food products. According to the answers of the two age groups, cities like Astana and Almaty are the most attractive. According to the answers of respondents under the age of 25, the least attractive are Mangystau and Kyzylorda, and according to the answers of respondents over 40, Kyzylorda Oblast. The quality of management of both age groups was highly appreciated by the cities of Astana and Almaty, and by the low — by the Zhambyl region. When asked about the affability of people, both age groups almost gave equal answers in all areas, except Astana and Almaty, where the most affable people live. The quality of food products in the answers of respondents under the age of 25 does not significantly differ, except for the cities of Astana and Almaty. And respondents of the older age group gave

a wider range of estimates. They gave high marks to products from Almaty, Almaty region and Astana, low — from Mangystau region.

The toolkit also contained questions related to the self-image of the region. As well as identifying regional images, respondents were asked to assess the area in which they live according to the five-point system. These estimates formed the basis for determining the self-image of regions (regions) on the continuum — negative / positive. Respondents rated their region according to such indicators as «popularity of the regional center of the region», «environmental situation», «medical care», «urban transport work», «friendliness of the region's residents to visitors», «security», «places for recreation», «theaters, museums, exhibitions», «conditions for entrepreneurship», «architecture», «receiving additional education», «conditions for sport», «improvement of streets and yards», «restaurants, cafes, canteens».

According to the answers of the two age groups, cities such as Astana and Almaty are most famous. The next known regional centers of the regions for respondents under the age of 25 are Shymkent, and for respondents over 40 years old — Aktau. A low score in both groups on the criterion of popularity of the regional center of the region was received by the city of Petropavlovsk, the regional center of the North Kazakhstan region.

The environmental situation as a whole in all regions has not been rated higher than good. The lowest «environmental» estimates for their region were given by respondents in the East Kazakhstan region. The ecological picture of the Zhambyl region (for respondents under 25 years old) and the West Kazakhstan region (for respondents over 40) is more favorable.

By the criterion of «medical care», no region gave a high rating. Young respondents from Kyzylorda oblast and respondents from the older age group of the North Kazakhstan oblast gave an assessment of the average medicine in their region.

«The work of urban transport» is most satisfied with the respondents of Kostanay region. The youngest respondents in the Zhambyl region and respondents older than 40 in the Kyzylorda oblast gave the lowest estimate.

«Architecture» of Almaty, Astana and Mangystau oblast are well estimated by respondents of two age groups.

«Friendliness of the region's residents to visitors» from the respondents' point of view is rather well manifested among the inhabitants of the southern and western regions of the country. Respondents of both groups note the affability of Mangystau and Zhambyl oblasts. In the north of the country, the respondents from the Kostanay region have shown good affability for their region.

Respondents of western Kazakhstan — Mangystau oblast, Atyrau and West Kazakhstan, highly assess their region on the «safety» parameter, and the East Kazakhstan region turned out to be the most «unsafe» territory.

The best «places for recreation» in the opinion of respondents younger than 25 years in the south of the country are South Kazakhstan oblast and Almaty, and in the north Kostanay region. Respondents over 40 years old, except for Almaty residents, representatives of western regions — Western Kazakhstan and Mangystau region — appreciate their places for recreation.

The intellectual-aesthetic space «theaters, museums, exhibitions» was well appreciated only by respondents. Almaty and Astana, Mangystau, West Kazakhstan regions.

In Mangystau oblast, «the conditions for entrepreneurship» are positively assessed by respondents of both age groups. The respondents of Kostanay and Karaganda oblasts are least satisfied. The other regions average the opportunities of their region for business organization.

Respondents of two age groups also agree in the evaluation of «receiving additional education.» The Almaty respondents believe that there are good opportunities for receiving additional education in Almaty. As for the «conditions for playing sports», Almaty residents also rate them quite high. Among young respondents, Kyzylorda people were satisfied with sports conditions.

It should be noted that in respect of «improvement of streets and yards» across all regions, respondents are given low marks. The diamonds of both ages and young respondents from Kyzylorda appreciate their streets and courts more highly.

The food infrastructure «restaurants, cafes, canteens» are highly estimated by respondents (two age groups) in Almaty and Zhambyl region.

### Discussion

A formed image is a result of perception and a product of observation. The closer the object to the observer, the more specific and deeper the idea of it. The observer is more aware of the territories that are closer to him. Therefore, the further the observer is from the object of observation, the more abstract his perception will be. It should be noted that almost all experts focused on the positive image of the capitals of Kazakhstan. Capitals are the main image resources and channels of a positive image. They represent a kind of «window case» of a separate region, and the country as a whole.

The overwhelming majority of experts noted Astana and Almaty as special cities that have a different meaning (than just the official / administrative status of a city of national importance) on the map of the country. Expert interviews revealed that Astana and Almaty in the mental perception form separate regions. Capitals are the main channels of a positive image and represent a kind of «showcase» of a separate region and the country as a whole. Experts in relation to the capitals used such definitions as «capital», «driver», «central cities», «center», «special place». As can be seen, they contain ideas that indicate the special territorial status of the city. Astana and Almaty. This vision forms a heterogeneous and hierarchized structure of the country's regions.

An expert poll showed that there are clear ideas about regions with a positive and negative image. On the continuum of «positive-negative», the most positive image is respectively. Astana and Almaty. Negative image of the regions consists of various aspects. Most experts noted the ecological state, economic level and behavior patterns of people. The overwhelming majority of experts associate negative characteristics of the image with real problems of the regions.

Analysis of the self-image of the regions of Kazakhstan on the proposed indicators shows that respondents in the central and northern regions of the country are more critical about their regions. In contrast, respondents from the western and southern regions of the country estimate their areas higher. Except for the criteria of the environmental situation, medical care, urban transport and security for the rest of the positions, Almaty is leading.

### Conclusion

It should be noted that according to the results of the study we found that the weak side of the image of the regions of the country is that the most exploited are the economic and natural-landscape images, less often — historical and spiritual-cultural. It is the last images that have been formed for more than a decade and require the spiritual modernization of the regions and the country as a whole. Positive cultural, moral, spiritual images are the most effective binding mechanisms in the process of consolidation of society. The country and society face a long-term task of spiritual modernization of the country. From the institutions of society — the state, the family, education, culture and the economy in general and, in particular, from each individual, the process of forming a positive image of the regions of the country depends, which in turn will strengthen the integration and consolidation of Kazakhstan society.

Summing up the empirical part of the study, it can be noted that in most cases the region is synonymous with the province. In turn, the «face» of the region are the city-regional centers the image of which is translated as the image of the entire region. Cities of regional significance often retain the image characteristics of the industrial Soviet past.

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### **Қазақстан өңірлерінің имидждік сипаттамалары (әлеуметтік зерттеу нәтижелері бойынша)**

Мақалада қазақстандықтардың санасындағы қалыптасқан Қазақстан өңірлерінің имидждік сипаттамалар талданған. Сараптамалық сұхбат және сауалнама жүргізу арқылы алынған деректерге сүйене отырып, авторлар адамдардың имидж туралы ұсыныстарында экономикалық құрамдас бөліктен басым екені анықталған. Бұдан басқа, өңірлердің негізгі имидждік сипаттамалары елдің әкімшілік облыстарының сипаттамаларына ұқсас. Көп жағдайда аймақ облыс синонимі. Әсіресе, өңірдің негізгі репрезентаторлары Облыс орталықтары — қалалар болып табылады, олардың имиджі бүкіл өңірдің имиджіне таралады. Облыстық маңызы бар қалалар көбінесе өткен кеңестің индустриалдық имидждік сипаттамаларын сақтайды.

*Кілт сөздер:* Қазақстан, облыс, имидж, әлеуметтік түсінік, аумақтарды қабылдау, ассоциациялар.

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### **Имиджевые характеристики регионов Казахстана (на основе результатов социологического исследования)**

В статье проанализированы имиджевые характеристики регионов Казахстана, сформировавшиеся в сознании казахстанцев. Опираясь на данные, полученные с помощью экспертного интервью и анкетного опроса, авторы установили, что в представлениях людей об имидже превалирует экономическая составляющая. Кроме того, основные имиджевые характеристики регионов тождественны характеристикам административных областей страны. В большинстве случаев регион синонимичен области. В особенности, основными репрезенторами региона являются города-областные центры, имидж которых распространяется на имидж всего региона. Города областного значения зачастую сохраняют имиджевые характеристики индустриального советского прошлого.

*Ключевые слова:* Казахстан, область, имидж, социальное понимание, представление регионов, ассоциации.

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