

Mental Maps and Mediated Images of Europe – the case of the Baltic Sea region

Acronym: Mental Maps

Research Topic: New EU borders, new visions of neighbourhood

Abstract

With regard to the relations between the old and new member states as well as between the EU and its new neighbours, the proposed project tackles the link between the following core aspects: the people's perceptions and attitudes towards Europe as a whole and single European countries; and the images of Europe and of European countries as provided by the media. The project follows four main objectives: a) to develop a theoretical and empirical tool to assess people's "mental maps" of Europe; b) to examine the role of media coverage of Europe and other influencing factors for the creation and maintenance of these mental maps; c) to discuss the findings with regard to their consequences for European integration and new visions of neighbourhood within the EU and between the EU and its neighbours; d) to develop recommendations to support a constructive development of mutual understanding across old and new borders.

The focus of the project is on the Baltic Sea region, which is seen as particularly interesting since this region used to be a quite coherent cultural and economic space for a long time, before World War II and the cold war era split it up. Today, the latest step of EU enlargement and increasing co-operation with Russia provide new opportunities for this region. The project is strictly comparative, most of the research steps will be conducted in all eight countries around the Baltic Sea.

The project will develop "Mental Maps" as a core concept for the analysis of international and intercultural integration and neighbourhood. In our definition Mental Maps consist of a) cognitive or knowledge-related, b) affective or emotion-related, and c) action-related constituent parts.

Several modules are foreseen: a) "Objective Maps" will be analysed by a re-analysis of existing data on economic, political, social and cultural relations; b) "Mental Maps" will be analysed by a re-analysis of existing data (Eurobarometer), by qualitative focus groups in each country, and by quantitative surveys in selected countries; c) "Mediated Maps" will be analysed by content analysis and discourse analysis of the media coverage on an important European event, by an analysis of geographical maps (as used e.g. in weather reports) and by case studies on important entertainment programmes in television.

B.1 Scientific and technological objectives of the project and state of the art

[Describe in detail the proposed project's S&T objectives. The objectives should be those achievable within the project, not through subsequent development, and should be stated in a measurable and verifiable form. The progress of the project work will be measured against these goals in later reviews and assessments. Describe the state-of-the-art in the area concerned and how the proposed project will enhance the state-of-the-art in that area. (Recommended length –5-10 pages)]

Starting points

There are three starting points which motivate the consortium partners to propose this project:

(1) The process of European integration and enlargement creates **new borders and new neighbourhoods**; historically evolved relations between the nations and between their citizens change subsequently. A special challenge turns out to be the relationship within and to the former Warsaw Pact region. In Europe as a whole for centuries multiple relations and ways of exchange have developed. World War II and the cold war era brought a fundamental cut of these relations, that started to be reconnected after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. We are convinced that dedicated comparative research can contribute to a better knowledge of this on-going process and help to develop concrete instruments to further mutual understanding between European member states and their neighbours.

(2) Among the essential foundations and requirements of an enlarged Europe and especially for the new neighbourhood relations towards Central and Eastern Europe are the European **people's perceptions of the integration process, their attitudes towards the European countries, towards Europe altogether, and towards Europe's neighbours**. In order to actually grasp the characteristic of Europe as an attitudinal object, which is made up at the same time by single countries, by the relationships between them and by the concept of Europe as a whole, we believe it is necessary to develop a new analytical tool – this is what we shall elaborate as "Mental Maps".

(3) **Media** can be seen as one eminent factor shaping people's perceptions of Europe. In order to understand more deeply how mediated images of Europe influence the people's attitudes or mental maps, there should be a combined analysis of mediated images of Europe and the people's perceptions of Europe.

Against this background the project follows four main objectives:

- a) to develop a theoretical and empirical tool to assess people's "mental maps" of Europe;
- b) to examine the role of media coverage of Europe and other influencing factors for the creation and maintenance of these mental maps;
- c) to discuss the findings with regard to their consequences for European integration and new visions of neighbourhood within the EU and between the EU and its neighbours;
- d) to develop recommendations to support a constructive development of mutual understanding across old and new borders.

The focus of the project is on the Baltic Sea region and covers eight countries of the respective area. The decision to concentrate on this region was lead by several considerations: The pragmatic aspect is that covering all European countries would have been too large and complex for a STREP project. In addition, because we are setting out to develop a new concept, it seemed to be advisable to start with a smaller group of countries, and then to transfer it on the European level. An argument to take one coherent region – and not a selection of countries spread across Europe – was the objective to deal with neighbourhood relations. Finally there are several arguments to take this particular region: The Baltic Sea region can be seen as particularly interesting since this region used to be a quite coherent

cultural and economic space for a long time, before World War II and the cold war era split it up – today, the latest step of EU enlargement and increasing co-operation with Russia provide new opportunities for this region. In addition this region provides the opportunity to analyse three types of countries: “old” EU Members (Denmark, Finland, Germany, Sweden), “new” EU members (Estonia, Latvia, Poland), and a new neighbour (Russia).

In the following, the four objectives mentioned above will be discussed in more detail.

a) Mental Maps – a new tool

The project sets out to develop a new analytical tool for the assessment of the attitudinal basis of European integration and new neighbourhoods. The theoretical considerations started from two challenges: Such a tool should be integrative in terms of combining aspects of knowledge, emotion, and behaviour towards Europe and its neighbours. At the same time it should meet the fact that attitudes towards Europe include perceptions of the single countries, the relations between them and Europe as a whole. In order to cope with these challenges, we shall elaborate the concept of mental maps.

In the research literature the notion of “mental maps” is not used as an established term. Our understanding of this concept shall be clarified with reference to different adjacent and overlapping research areas. Firstly, mental maps are understood as a *psychological* construct, they describe a bundle of attitudes towards a group of objects; so starting point is the (social) psychological research on attitudes. In the systematic of psychological constructs, attitudes are conceptualised as situation independent orientations of the individual towards an object, as such they function as dispositions for the behaviour related to this object. These orientations consist of a) cognitive or knowledge-related, b) affective or emotion-related, and c) action-related constituent parts. Thus, dealing with mental maps requires a balanced approach to cognitive as well as affective, to “rational” as well as “irrational” aspects, since the basic idea is that all of them will be relevant with regard to concrete behaviour towards Europe and concrete activities on a European level. Attitudes are learnt and in this respect always object of further learning processes which can be accompanied by attitude changes.

Different from the core of the psychological attitude research outlined so far, the concept of mental maps, as it will be used here, includes several specific features:

- Mental maps refer to *bundles* of attitudes towards several equal-type objects and the relations existing between them. For example: Not only the attitude towards Poland and towards Russia and towards the European Union, but also the general model of the relations which arises from these attitudes is of interest. The notion of “maps” picks up metaphorically this pattern of relations: Maps show both the features of single countries and their position in relation to each other.
- The concept of mental maps also takes into account the potential differences between the individual attitude towards an object and the knowledge about the general standpoint on this object within the own population. The knowledge of stereotypes about countries and cultures belongs to the mental map – independently of the respective relationship between the individual attitude and the general stereotype towards certain countries and cultures.

In many studies single aspects of mental maps have been analysed either on singular or on a regular basis. The most comprehensive survey of attitudes in Europe turns out to be the Eurobarometer survey. It asks regularly for the opinions of EU citizens and citizens of candidate countries on the European Union and European politics. Generally spoken, this study focuses on *political opinion* and on the EU as a whole, but rarely on attitudes at a cultural or a social level. Another long-term study including all European countries is the European Values Study. It focuses on fundamental *values* (citizenship, family and work, religion and morality) and the result is a kind of cultural map of Europe which reveals

diversities and similarities in this respect. The results provide another interesting background for the concept of mental maps. However we propose a more differentiated approach to citizens' attitudes, which systematically includes all three levels of attitudes (cognitive, affective, conative) and the consideration of relational features as well as the potential differences between individual and socially shared attitudes.

In methodological terms, the objective of this project is to develop an instrument which allows to grasp different aspects of what people know, feel and do about other countries and their interrelations. In addition the task is to elaborate a tool for the statistical analysis and the visual presentation of maps. Mental maps will typically be analysed on the basis of proximity data, i.e. data on how close or how similar two countries are seen. As for presentation, the analogy to geographical maps shall guide the tool which has to be developed for the visualisation of the single countries and their shape and relative position compared to other countries.

In order to approach these objectives the project includes different empirical steps to analyse mental maps and to reveal the structure of relations and attitudes within Europe as a whole and for the Baltic region in particular. In a re-analysis of Eurobarometer data first outlines of mental maps shall be identified which will reflect the mutual perceptions and attitudes of the European citizens. The "maps" will include the three dimensions of attitudes and the perspectives in the different European countries (see WP2). On the basis of these first results the qualitative and quantitative studies will concentrate on mental maps in the Baltic Sea region. A closer look will be taken in focus group interviews on the characteristics and formation of mental maps (see WP3). The comparisons at intracultural as well as at intercultural level will reveal different kinds of mental maps within and between the countries. Common and diverse features of the maps and their formation will be identified. In a quantitative survey (data collection will be carried out by an internationally practising research institution like IPSOS) the structures of mental maps within the different countries will be analysed on the basis of representative samples (see WP4).

b) Media influences on mental maps

With the theoretical model of mental maps and the empirical analysis of mental maps in Europe we get a comprehensive picture of the attitudinal basis for European integration. In order to be able to make predictions on the development of mental maps and to identify the possible ways to intervene in the formation of attitudes, the influencing factors of mental maps need to be taken into account. In other words, for a better understanding of the incentives and barriers of cross-border co-operation in Europe it is necessary to identify factors which influence mental maps.

Figure 1: Influencing factors of Mental Maps

Background information: Objective relations			
Objectified and public discourse on Europe and the European countries			
		Own experiences with European countries, media use	
	Mental Maps of Europe		
	Individual orientations		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge • Stereotypes • Attitudes (cognitive, affective, action-related) 		

Knowledge about Europe and European countries is the first element to be analysed as part of mental maps. Exchange and co-operation between countries and the building up of transnational organisations and projects requires knowledge about each other. The main point here is to assess the relevant sources of knowledge and the images of Europe they provide. For example, people’s own experiences with other cultures, be it by personal contacts, vacations, professional links etc., will shape the knowledge structures related to Europe. In a re-analysis of existing data on attitudes of citizens towards the EU and its neighbours and in a qualitative analysis of focus group interviews these sources of knowledge will be analysed (see WP 2 & 3). Another important source of knowledge, which will be of particular interest for the project, is the media coverage on the European Union and European countries (see WP 5, 6, 7 & 8).

With regard to intercultural and cross-cultural communication in the enlarged Europe *stereotypes* play an essential role. For lack of own experiences with single countries and cultures hardly an alternative has left for Europeans than to take general stereotypes as orientation. Towards the countries and cultures the people have direct contacts with, they develop more subtly differentiated *attitudes*, which include experiences of one’s own and in which stereotypes – although still confessed and possibly also effective – are at least relativized. European exchange programmes aim at reducing the dominance of stereotyped views of other cultures by means of close direct contacts, since stereotypes are believed to be hurdles for intercultural and cross-cultural co-operation. In qualitative focus group interviews as well as in a quantitative representative survey the influencing factors for formation of attitudes will be analysed systematically (WP 3 & 4).

Thus, besides the knowledge of each other, intercultural *stereotypes* form another important starting point for the project. Stereotypes belong to the wider group of attitudes. Within these they are indicated by referring rather to abstract objects (e.g. to cultures or social milieus) than to concrete members of these cultures or milieus. They are shared by the large part of a certain

group and acquired less by individual experience, but rather by ways of collective experiences of the culture or nation. As a consequence they are relatively stable and resistant towards new information. As for attitudes in general, stereotypes include cognitive, affective and action-related aspects. At the cognitive level these are certain beliefs about the characteristics of a culture (e.g. the conscientious Germans, the melancholic Russians etc.). At the affective level there exist general likings and preferences for certain countries and cultures (e.g. – from the German view – Italy) or antipathies against certain other countries and cultures (e.g. Netherlands, Poles). And at the action-related level some countries are connected closely with the idea to spend the vacation or to speak the language in question or to care for personal contacts to people from the respective country.

As a theoretical link between experiences of one's own and general stereotypes, we can understand experiences which are mediated by means of mass media. Because it is possible only restrictedly in the end to find out the variety of Europe on one's own experience, the *media*, i.e. the images of Europe as drawn by the mass media, play an important role. As it seems to be controversial in how far the pictures conveyed in the media just reflect well-known stereotypes and as such further strengthen them, we propose a more subtly differentiated approach to this topic, which starts from a more ambitious concept of the media with regard to creating and shaping mental maps of Europe. Research steps will include the geographical images presented in the media (see WP 5) probably reflecting a general consensus or even influencing the perceptions of relations on a less conscious way. An important sphere of reflection as well as formation of stereotypes, attitudes in general and mental maps might be entertainment programmes. Popular TV formats like serials or entertainment shows, but also media events like the Eurovision Song Contest or sports events might take influence on mental maps and therefore shall be analysed by a programme observations and case studies (see WP 8). The core modules in this branch will be a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of attitudes and mental maps reflected in media coverage (see WP 6 & 7).

In addition to the media related steps the objective background for mental maps will be analysed; in a re-analysis of existing data (e.g. Eurostat) the economic, political and cultural/social relations in Europe will be identified and can serve as a background for the next steps of research (see WP1).

Given all this, the core objective of the planned study is to examine "Mental Maps of Europe" and how they are related to policies, cultural exchange and especially to the images of Europe as provided by the media. By analysing the influencing factors in the formation of mental maps on an intracultural as well as intercultural level the basis for a discussion on incentives for closer relations between the European neighbours will be provide. A central outcome of the project will be the identification of ways to provide a better relationship towards the European neighbours.