

# Mechanisms underpinning perception

A theoretical base

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# Preface

The Swedish Institute (SI) is a public agency that builds interest and trust in Sweden around the world. If the world around us has a high level of trust in Sweden the conditions for trade, investment, tourism and cultural exchange are improved. This also make it easier to attract international talent and contribute to global sustainable development.

It is also part of our mission to analyze the image of Sweden abroad. The aim is to gather information about the possibilities and challenges to promote Sweden in different countries. In order to capture the image of Sweden we analyze different types of material. First of all we analyze how Sweden is perceived in different countries, in different target groups and in different thematical aspects. Secondly, we analyze how Sweden is portrayed in international news media, social media, blogs and forums. Thirdly, we follow how Sweden performs in international indexes and studies. Having said that, SI strive to continuously develop our analyses and the methods we use. As a part of that, we collaborate with researchers and other practitioners to gain theoretical, methodological and empirical knowledge within related areas.

This report is the first in a series of research papers aimed at highlighting different aspects of the research fields relating to our work. The focus in this report is how perception of a country is formed. With insights from this and other research collaborations we aim to, over time, build a unified analytical framework and understanding of the different methods and theories relating to our agency's mission.

The report was produced on behalf of SI, but written independently, by researchers at The Public-Policy-and-Management-Institute (PPMI) based in Latvia, who previously have been commissioned to analyze how the EU is perceived by non-EU countries.

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## CONTENTS

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1.	<b>A mechanism underpinning perceptions: the theoretical basis</b> .....	2
1.1.	Introduction.....	2
1.1.1.	Our understanding of perceptions .....	2
1.2.	<b>Stage 1. Information acquisition: the role of global, national, and individual factors</b> .....	4
1.3.	<b>Stage 2. Information organisation: social status, morality, values, and emotions</b> .....	6
1.3.1.	In-group and out-group favouritism: relative social status and identity reformulation.....	6
1.3.2.	In-group and out-group favoritism: morality and competence.....	8
1.3.3.	Values .....	8
1.3.4.	Emotions .....	9
1.4.	<b>Stage 3. Perception formation: stereotypes, causal inferences, historical analogies and the theory of social representations</b> .....	10
1.4.1.	Stereotypes, causal inferences and historical analogies.....	10
1.4.2.	Social representations.....	11
1.5.	Conclusions .....	12
2.	<b>Recommendations on methodology for studying perceptions</b> .....	14
2.1.	Recommendations on methodology .....	14
	<b>Bibliography</b> .....	17

## LIST OF TABLES

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TABLE 1. GLOBAL, NATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL FACTORS IMPACTING THE PROCESS OF INFORMATION ACQUISITION.....	5
TABLE 2. ATTRIBUTES DETERMINING A STATE'S SELF-PERCEPTION VIS-À-VIS THE 'OTHER' ..	7
TABLE 3. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FUNCTION OF VALUES IN SHAPING PERCEPTIONS .....	8

## LIST OF FIGURES

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FIGURE 1. OUT UNDERSTANDING OF THE MECHANISM OF FORMATION OF PERCEPTIONS .	4
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## LIST OF BOXES

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BOX 1. OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PERCEPTIONS .....	3
BOX 2. RECOMMENDATIONS ON METHODOLOGY .....	14

# 1. A mechanism underpinning perceptions: the theoretical basis

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## 1.1. Introduction

This paper presents selected theories from the fields of international relations, social psychology and widely understood cognition studies that explain a foreign country's perception formation considering global, national and individual-level factors. The paper is structured around the mechanisms that allow explaining perception formation in three stages: (1) information acquisition, (2) information organisation, and (3) perception formation. The paper relies on an extensive literature review (for a full list of references, see section Bibliography), PPMI [Analysis of the Perceptions of the EU and EU's Policies Abroad](#) (PPMI, 2015) and the experience of the authors of this paper whilst working on [PPMI Update of the Perceptions Study](#) (PPMI, 2021).

**WHEN EXPLAINING PERCEPTIONS AS THE MENTAL IMAGES PREVALENT WITHIN SOCIETY, THIS PAPER IDENTIFIES SEVERAL "LAYERS" OF THE MECHANISMS OF PERCEPTIONS' FORMATION (**

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Figure 1). The conclusions of this paper suggest that several key factors influence the process of a foreign country's perception formation. It emphasises the various elements informing the social cognition processes such as values, emotions, the moral foundation as factors that help organise the information of world affairs and reflects on country-to-country relations. When values between the two societies are shared, the perception of threat has the potential to decrease, increasing the likelihood of cooperation. Furthermore, the perceived similarity in the national interests can serve as a predictor of the opinion of foreign countries.

The paper is structured into two chapters. In the first chapter, we firstly discuss our understanding of perceptions studies in the field of international relations and explain the three-stage model of the perception formation (section 1.1.1). We then move on to break down the phase of information acquisition (section 1.2), information organisation (section 0) and perception formation (section 0). In the second chapter, we provide practice-oriented recommendations on the selected methods that can be employed to study perceptions, namely for public opinion polls, social media, and traditional media analysis.

### 1.1.1. Our understanding of perceptions

There are **two key theories** in the field of international relations that lay the foundation for perceptions study are the **image theory** and the **role theory**. **Image theory** explains what guides international decision-making. Accordingly, **cognitive perceptions of group relations** result from images and their associated responses. The theory explains that world affairs can be organised into images of well-defined cognitive elements. Images are **stereotypes** that justify the treatment of another nation. Stereotypes allow people to act on the **emotions** evoked by their understanding of the relationship. The stereotypes do this by presenting a cognitive picture of the situation that includes features that people believe release them from **the moral prohibitions** that would otherwise pertain (Alexander, 2005).

The other school of thought has tried to explain state behaviour by examining each state's various motives and perceptions through **role theory** (Hermann, 2013). Role theory focuses on the state's "self-conceptualisation", or the state's self-perception by its leadership (Holsti, 1970). Roles can be understood as social positions linked to the notions of 'self' and the 'other' mutually shaping images and expectations of actors, influenced by various factors (e.g. the perceived social status (section 1.3.1), morals and competences (section 1.3.2), values (section 1.3.3), and emotions (section 1.3.4). The perceptions of the 'other' can thus translate into positive or negative attitudes (PPMI, 2015). **Role conceptions** refer to actors' perception of their position vis-à-vis the other. The closer the interaction between actors, the more likely it is to identify the 'self' with the 'other' to reformulate (Peeren and Harstkotte, 2007). This may lead to a process of a new **identity formation** (see section 1.3.1 for more information on identity formation).

#### BOX 1. OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PERCEPTIONS

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Considering that contemporary perceptions studies are situated between social psychology and international relations fields, our understanding of perceptions is tied to both strains of these academic disciplines. For social psychologists, perceptions can be understood as **mental pictures (images)** formed based on an actor's accumulated knowledge about the surrounding world and beliefs about desirable behaviour (Vetzberger, 1990). According to international relations scholars, perceptions are **constellations of meanings** clustered together in a coherent way, focusing on the subjective notions of the 'self' and the 'other' that mutually shape the images and expectations of actors (Hermann et al., 1997).

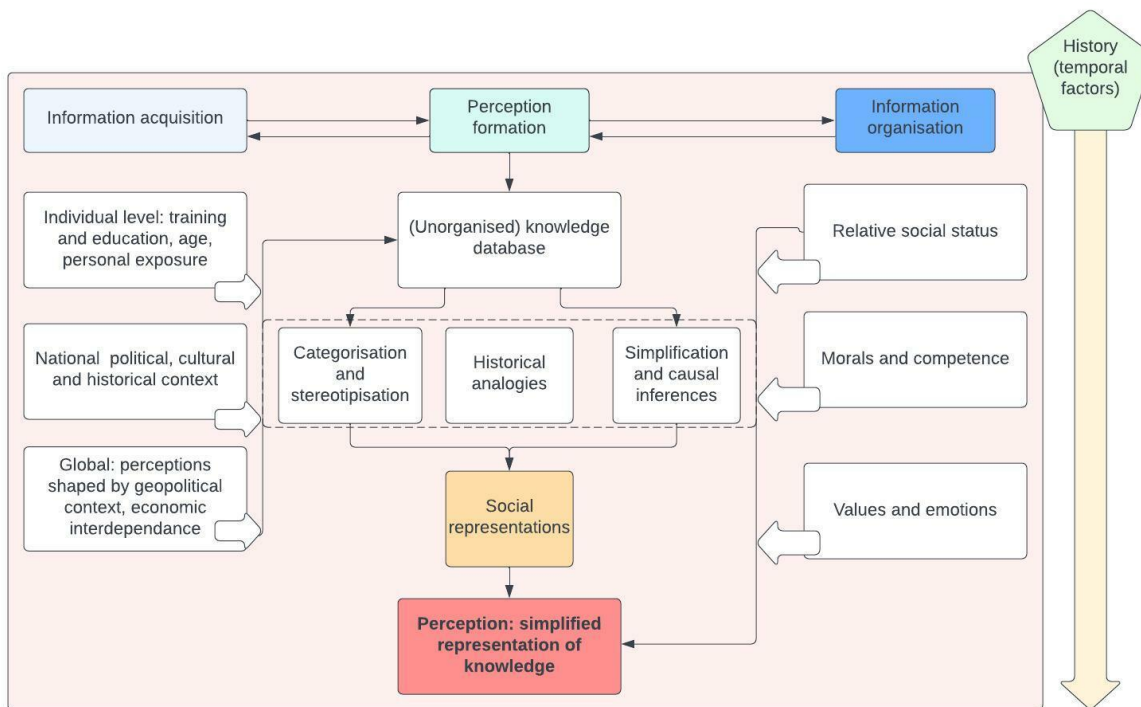
The **mechanism** which helps explain how a country's perception is formed can be presented in **three key stages**, which can be conceptualised as follows:

- **Stage 1. Information acquisition.** This stage of perception formation is founded by various sources including education, works of culture, personal experience, word of the mouth and media and social media channels as the main diffusion instruments for information.<sup>1</sup> It is closely connected to a number of intervening factors on the individual (e.g. age, education), national (e.g. cultural and political context) and global level (e.g. economic interdependence) that may affect the way the 'other' is perceived in the world affairs. In this paper we focus on the role of the traditional and social media in the information acquisition process.
- **Stage 2. Information organisation.** This stage employs theories focusing on the social cognition phenomena to propose explanation of social and personal moral foundations, values, emotions impact the perceptions of the other via relative social status and perceived competence evaluation of the 'other' and help to organise the information acquired in the process of social interactions to build a consistent image of world affairs and actors within it.
- **Stage 3. Perception formation.** This stage relies primarily on the theory of social representations that explains how individual and collective knowledge is formed. The process of perception formation is closely linked to three key components: (1) categorisation and stereotipisation, (2) causal inferences, and (3) historical analogies.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, PPMI 'Analysis of the Perceptions of the EU and EU's Policies Abroad' (2015) suggest that news outlets are the most important source of information about the EU in 10 countries under the study. Upon mutual agreement with SI, the paper does not take a closer look at the role of social media and traditional media channels.

**FIGURE 1. OUT UNDERSTANDING OF THE MECHANISM OF FORMATION OF PERCEPTIONS**



Source: Adapted from Didelon-Loiseau, Clarisse and Grasland, Claude, 'Internal and External Perceptions of Europe/the EU in the world through Mental Maps', in: 'Communicating Europe in Times of Crisis: External Perceptions of the European Union, ed. by Chaban, Natalia and Holland, Martin (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

In the next section, we explain Stage 1 of the mechanism underpinning the formation of perceptions: information acquisition.

## 1.2. Stage 1. Information acquisition: the role of global, national, and individual factors

The traditional news coverage and, more recently, social media coverage is the **most important source** of information/input providers for the foreign country image formation for the general public, specifically in terms of geographical distance between the two countries and limited personal contacts.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, traditional news coverage and social media news coverage can be considered the primary source of information acquisition. Dell'Orto et al. (2004) suggest that the "pure" news effect on the general public is the strongest in the case when the report covers an event or issue that the reader has

<sup>2</sup> EU Perception study conducted in 2015 suggest that News outlets are the most important source of information about the EU in 10 countries under the study. The 2021 study confirmed that finding simultaneously pointing to the raising role of the social media and streaming platforms as the source of information for the general public.

not personally experienced, the events do not target beliefs and are relatable to the audience's pre-existing knowledge of a familiar reality. However, the media coverage of the foreign countries is **selective and reflects the local priorities**. It can also have a **specific emotive charge** and focus on some aspects of the events, which local media representatives and their audiences find the most important.

This largely leads to the conclusion that perceptions are **constellations of meanings** (PPMI, 2015), which are closely linked to three levels of analysis: the individual, the national and the global. The three levels constantly **interact** and dynamically change the image and the role of a certain country through events such as major geopolitical shifts, and differences or similarities in political systems and culture (PPMI, 2015).

- Within the **global context**, the goals and policy actions, as well as capabilities of a certain state (e.g. the perceived relative capability of the actor, the perceived threat or opportunity represented by the actor, or the perceived mutual interests that are shared with the actor) will determine and actors perceived image and role (see, for instance, Chaban and Elgstrom, 2014). Two variables – the geopolitical context and economic interdependence – are particularly important to explain the setting in which perceptions of an actor are formed;
- Within the **national context**, the image and the role of a certain actor can be explained by endogenous factors (unrelated to what the actor is doing in a specific location), including political, cultural and historical aspects which serve as filters that will determine an actor's perception (see, for instance, Tsuruoka, 2008). Historical events may play a key role in how a certain actor is perceived (Dideon-Loiseu and Grasland, 2015);
- Within the **individual context**, variables such as training and education, personal exposure to the 'other' and age determine an actor's perceptions (see, for instance, Hermann, 1985).

Table 1 below offers a non-exhaustive list of specific factors which may positively or negatively affect the perception of a certain country on the three levels of analysis.

**TABLE 1. GLOBAL, NATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL FACTORS IMPACTING THE PROCESS OF INFORMATION ACQUISITION**

FACTOR	DESCRIPTION
<b>Global context</b>	
<b>Geopolitical context</b>	The geopolitical context influences perceptions. Geopolitical and geographical proximity plays a key role in explaining perceptions.
<b>Economic interdependence</b>	Interlinkages between the country carrying out a perceptions study can have a major effect on the perception, which may be heightened or lower positive or negative perception amid fluctuations in mutual trade or investment.
<b>National context</b>	
<b>Political context</b>	The political context is a key factor to assess before enacting any Public Diplomacy efforts. Several dimensions, such as the rule of law, strength of civil society and the political system, can significantly impact the positive or the negative perception of the 'other'.
<b>Cultural context</b>	Cultural differences or similarities might lead to a preference for/indifference towards/rejecting Public Diplomacy messages.
<b>History</b>	Historical ties might impact what (key themes, trends, etc.) is perceived and how (connotations, evaluations, etc.) it is perceived. The historic factor can relate to short-term, medium-term and long-term events, which may leave a different effect on the perception of a certain country: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— The history of a certain event – e.g. sudden war, revolution and crisis;</li> <li>— A conjuncture – links to longer periods and concrete changes in the course of politics, economy and security;</li> <li>— Events of long duration – linked to events such as colonialism or other types of cultural influences. The perceptions of long-term history are typically the hardest to change (Dideon-Loiseu and Grasland, 2015).</li> </ul>

#### Individual context

<b>Training and education</b>	Training and education can play a role in shaping perceptions. It includes an assessment of the general level of education and training.
<b>Personal exposure</b>	Personal exposure to the country and its people can play a role in shaping perceptions.
<b>Age</b>	There may be a strong correlation between people's age and their likelihood to regard the country in general and its leadership role in a positive light.

Source: prepared and adapted, based on PPMI' Study of EU Perceptions 2015'.

In the next section, we move to explain Stage 2 of the mechanism underpinning the formation of perceptions: information organisation.

### 1.3. Stage 2. Information organisation: social status, morality, values, and emotions

This section sets out the main aspects of information organisation mechanisms and concepts, including relative social status, morality and competence, and values and emotions.

#### 1.3.1. In-group and out-group favouritism: relative social status and identity reformulation

In Section 1.2, the paper details role theory and the global geopolitical conditions which may lead to **changes in the roles of an actor**, and a process of **identity reformation**, thus opening possibilities for actors to pursue Public Diplomacy efforts to achieve certain interests in a partner state.

**Social identity theory** explains that the **membership of a certain group** has a specific **value** and an **emotional significance**. Social identity broadly means that an individual is not only aware of belonging to a group (a nation, a race, or a gender) but is also attached to it. Once identification bonds have been established with a certain group, people perceive specific homogenising trends as stronger than they actually may be (Turner, 1975).

Social identity theory helps to explain how perceptions of the **relative superiority or inferiority** of the 'other' shape the approach and attitude towards it. Social groups tend to **compare** themselves with other groups, determining how comfortable individuals of a certain group are with their own social identity (Ibid.). Groups strive for **distinctiveness and positive identity** through differentiation (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). According to Ellmers (1993), **out-group favoritism** happens when other group members recognise its relative superiority in a certain dimension. On the flipside, members of higher status groups are likely to attribute superiority to their **in-group** on dimensions that reflect the nature of the **status differences** (Turner, 1975).

Blader and Chen (2014) argue that **the self-perception of a state's international status** depends on its ranking on various criteria. A country's status is a subjective judgment on the **relative worth of various attributes** (including relative economic, technological, normative, social, and cultural power; see a non-exhaustive list of attributes in Table 2).



**TABLE 2. ATTRIBUTES DETERMINING A STATE'S SELF-PERCEPTION VIS-À-VIS THE 'OTHER'**

MAIN ATTRIBUTE	BREAKDOWN
Economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finance and investment</li> <li>• Agriculture and food</li> <li>• Industry</li> <li>• Tourism</li> <li>• Sustainable economy</li> <li>• Digital economy</li> </ul>
Science, Research and Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• R&amp;D</li> <li>• Innovation</li> <li>• Intellectual Property Rights</li> <li>• Research Cooperation</li> <li>• Technology Transfer</li> <li>• Innovations in the health sector</li> </ul>
Normative actor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human rights</li> <li>• Democracy promotion</li> </ul>
Political	Internal <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human rights</li> <li>• Rule of law</li> </ul>
	External <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Security</li> <li>• Foreign policy</li> <li>• Effective multilateralism</li> <li>• Human rights (governance, democracy)</li> <li>• Mass migration and refugees</li> </ul>
Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aid/poverty alleviation</li> <li>• Disaster relief</li> <li>• UN SDGs</li> </ul>
Environment and energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Security of supply</li> <li>• Sustainability</li> <li>• Competitiveness</li> </ul>
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Multiculturalism, equality and diversity</li> <li>• Migration</li> <li>• Rise of the far right and populism</li> <li>• Climate change activism</li> </ul>
Cultural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visual and performing arts</li> <li>• History</li> <li>• Music</li> <li>• Heritage</li> <li>• Creative Industries</li> <li>• Lifestyle, values, norms</li> </ul>
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secondary education</li> <li>• Tertiary education</li> </ul>

Source: prepared, based on PPMI' Study of EU Perceptions 2015'.

Depending on the subjective judgement of another country, social groups may resort to **identity management strategies**. The strategies a social group may pursue are the following:

- **Social mobility strategy** emulates the values and behavior of a group considered of higher status (Van Knippenberg and Ellmers, 1993). Thus, a group may want to become more like the other group, losing the distinctiveness of its own identity (Tajfel, 1978). In international relations, **states emulate the values and norms of the higher-status states** if they consider this a gateway to some "clubs";

- **Social creativity strategy** involves (1) revaluing a negative characteristic as positive; or (2) identifying a new value dimension on which the group is superior. A state pursuing such a strategy may change the ranking system in international relations altogether. An example is a state's "**soft power**" strategy (Nye, 2005), where it employs diplomacy to create new international norms (Tajfel, 1978);
- **Social competition strategy**, whereby a group may try to surpass another group by acquiring a relatively higher status (Ibid.). This strategy is typically observed in international relations when one state tries to acquire control over the other.

### 1.3.2. In-group and out-group favoritism: morality and competence

Academic literature proposes a yet different model of in-group and out-group perception formation. Phalet and Poppe's (1997) competence and morality thesis states that attitudes to "foreigners" and external groups are formed based on **evaluating the perceived external groups' values and capabilities** against the groups' own perceived values and capabilities. Thus, **competence and morality** constitute separate evaluative categories in perception organisation.

According to Tims and Miller (1986), the formation of opinions toward foreign countries parallels the mechanisms of intergroup relations and the formation of interpersonal attraction. The key factors that define the attitudes to foreign countries are: (1) **perceived similarity** between the foreign country and the own country; (2) **shared interests** between the countries; (3) **the level of trust** and (4) **specific policy actions** as determinants of overall feelings of affinity toward a foreign country (Tims & Miller, 1986).

Wojciszke (2005) suggests that out-group members are evaluated based on the **group's values and perceived competencies and capabilities** (see section 1.3.3. for more information on the relevance of values informing individual and foreign policy perceptions). The closer the perceived values of the out-group and the higher are the perceived capabilities/competencies of the out-group to the own group, the more positive opinion is of the out-group.

### 1.3.3. Values

**Values** play a role in shaping the mass public's attitudes toward domestic politics and shape international relations attitudes. Values link closely to **emotions** (see section 1.3.4), as they activate feelings and guide the evaluation of actions, policies, people and events. Table 3 below summarises the main function of values according to Schwartz (2012).

**TABLE 3. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FUNCTION OF VALUES IN SHAPING PERCEPTIONS**

<b>FUNCTION</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>
<b>Values are beliefs</b>	Values activate feelings; people for whom independence is a significant value feel aroused if their independence is threatened.
<b>Values refer to desirable goals</b>	Some people prefer social order, justice and helpfulness and are motivated to pursue these goals.
<b>Values transcend specific actions and situations</b>	This feature distinguishes values from norms and attitudes, as they usually refer to specific objectives and actions (like workplace, school, or interactions with strangers).
<b>Values serve as standards and criteria</b>	Values guide evaluation of actions, policies, people and events.
<b>Values are ordered by importance</b>	Some people value certain attitudes or behaviors more than others.

Schwartz (2012) explains that the activation of specific values happens depending on the relevant **human needs**. On the one hand, societies need to **provide physical safety** to their members: to protect their group from internal and external threats. On the other, societies also need to **foster consideration for others and reciprocal exchange** to reap the gains of cooperation—even with others outside the group (Rathburn et al., 2016).

Values can also define certain **attitudes to foreign policy**. Specifically, those values that define individuals' relationships with broader groups and help coordinate behaviour within them play a more significant role in foreign-policy beliefs than values based purely on individual needs. **Two clear strands** of research can be identified. Firstly, **cooperative internationalism**. Authors claim that the orientation towards international affairs, in this case, is linked to a general willingness to pursue common goals (Chittick et al., 1995). **Universalism values** - the importance of community goals linked to a more inclusive identity and a sense of obligation to the international community - are strongly associated with cooperative internationalism. The importance of community goals is also linked to a more inclusive identity and a sense of obligation to the international community.

On the other hand, **conservation values** call for self-restraint and obedience to authority. Conservation values provide strong predictors of **militant internationalism**. In this worldview, lack of credibility and signs of weakness invites challenges by aggressive forces in a dangerous environment. The typical characterisation of foreign policy attitudes is "hawkish" or "dovish". Hawks embrace the "deterrence model," in which strength and the demonstration of resolve best achieve peace. Doves point out the often self-defeating nature of such displays, which risk inciting fear on the other side and escalating hostilities in such a way that leaves both sides worse off (Rathburn et al., 2016).

#### 1.3.4. Emotions

**Emotions** are physiological and behavioural responses to stimuli coming from the environment. Emotions incorporate bodily reactions, feelings, and cognitive elements as complex phenomena. (Coicaud, 2015).

Turner and Stets (2005) break down emotion as a phenomenon and present it as a process that is formed by five specific factors: (1) the biological activation body systems; (2) socially constructed cultural definitions and constraints on how emotions should be experienced and expressed; (3) application of the linguistic labels commonly used by society to the individual sentiments; (4) non-verbal emotions' expression through facial expression, voice tone and gesture; and (5) perceptions and appraisals of situational objects or events. They point to the existence of primary emotions, universal across different cultures and secondary, socially constructed emotions, reflecting the societal norms prevalent in a given society and the role of judgments in influencing people's emotions.

Emotions can be experienced **individually** as well as **by a group**. Hutchison and Bleiker (2014) point out that individuals' emotions are "intertwined with pre-existing social, cultural, and political contexts". In their view, "emotions become intersubjective when they relate to something social that people care about, whether power, status, or justice". Mercer (2005) proposes a definition of **social emotion** as "a feeling that has intrinsic importance to an actor in some relationship with an entity". He points out that a person's identity depends on social emotions. Mercer believes **diffusion and experiencing collective emotions** are rooted in **social interactions**. People in a group are most likely to interact with each other (then members of other groups), and their group members will be their key referent group and thus influence each other. Emotions can be "transferred" because members of one group can use the emotions

of their group members as a reference for their own emotions. Experiencing group emotion expresses the group identity, reinforces it and maintains the group. And group-level emotions can be more potent than emotions experienced individually. Hall and Ross (2019) propose a notion of "popular emotion" as a specific emotion purported to characterise a group. Mercer (2014) points out that group-level emotions can be more potent than emotions experienced individually as the individual reference group reinforces emotions.

Emotions are associated with and can be triggered by **beliefs and values** and motivate future actions (Coicaud, 2015). According to Turner and Stets, emotions are not formed until an appraisal of objects or events in a situation. People's feelings condition socialisation into culture and participation in social structures. Koschut (2020) points out that emotions occur in connection with individuals' values and beliefs and represent moral value judgments and thus underpin social relations.

Thus, emotions provide a **basis of cognition** and a **reference point** to the information stimuli processing by providing reference points for evaluating events and processes. As such, emotions are one of the principal factors impacting interpersonal and international relations dynamics. According to Prinz and Nicholas (2010), "Emotions arise in the context of moral judgment, and emotions can serve as moral "intuitions" (Prinz and Nichols, 2010).

Emotions as a phenomenon combining physiological and cognitive processes provide a basis for perceptions organisation. Emotional reactions to information about foreign countries are the inevitable component of the country's image shared by the given society. The character of the emotive reaction is defined by the perceived **morality and competence** of the actions by the foreign country's authorities or the people, as evaluated from the standpoint of the **values shared** by the given society and or perceived friendliness or positive attitude of the foreign country towards own country.

In the next section, we explain Stage 3 of the mechanism: perception formation.

## 1.4. Stage 3. Perception formation: stereotypes, causal inferences, historical analogies and the theory of social representations

This section sets out the main aspects of perception formation, first referring to stereotypes, causal inferences, and historical analogies that define the general image of the world-view of an individual. It then moves to explain how the theory of social representations can be used to analyse the consistent structure of beliefs and political ideas based on the values and practices that create consistent codes of living in given society.

### 1.4.1. Stereotypes, causal inferences and historical analogies

Social cognition consists of processes that **affect our decision-making** regarding the other's intentions and behaviours. A cognitive approach to studying international relations implies that **individuals** operate within their psychological environment. The decisions are mostly made subconsciously. Decision making is primarily based on **beliefs and personal constructs** about the physical and social environment. Thus, cognition produces "beliefs" and "constructs" (images) that allow individuals to make sense of the international environment (Alexander, 2005).

Cognition, built on images, makes it possible to **shape perceptions** of the world and other actors and explain why they diverge. The construction of reality is constituted of four key elements:

- **Cognitive structures of beliefs:** beliefs, or mental representations, are organised and internally structured;
- **Selective memory and perception:** the mind tends to be selective and incomplete in the process of shaping perceptions;
- **Causal inference:** people tend to make inferences about what happened and why based on their beliefs;
- **Cognitive stability:** certain internal beliefs on relationships become core to one's mindset (Alexander, 2005).

Based on the four core tenants of constructing a given reality, it is important to understand the main **patterns of forming perceptions**. The patterns can be clustered accordingly:

- **Categorisation and stereotipisation.** This tendency relies on the human mind sorting things into categories, which typically rely on stereotypes. Limited experiences with all group members create situations where such generalisation is necessary, making the complexity of the world manageable. This mechanism largely allows one country to uphold the image of the enemy of another country while seeing itself as a **benevolent force** (Alexander, 2005). Brewer and Cempbell (1976) suggest that the content of a country's perception is coded into **four types of "realistic" differences** (stereotypes). These stereotypes are from the country's socioeconomic position (Ibid.) and the nature of the relationship with the groups involved (Eagly and Kite, 1987). Stereotypes about politics and economics, culture and geography (Berrien, 1969) all play a role in **the social representations of countries** (for more information on the theory of social representations, see section 1.4.2.). Economic and political features mainly determine the attribution of **competence-related traits**, and the attribution of **morality-related traits** is related to the **nation's size**. At the same time, the attribution of deficiency is mainly determined by **perceived economic development**, degree of **industrialisation** and government services of the nation in question (Lissen and Hagendoorn, 1994).
- **Simplification and causal inferences.** This tendency allows the mind to categorise and stereotype things into clear images. Alexander (2005) notes that the mind relies on **attribution**, which enables people's biases when inferring the causes of human behaviour. The most common simplification tendencies are the following: (1) overestimation or underestimation of situational causes of behaviour; (2) overestimation or underestimation of one's importance; (3) overestimation or underestimation of the planned/centralised nature of the other's behaviour; (4) negative or positive bias (pessimistic and wishful thinking).
- **Thinking in historical analogies.** Considering the time constraints and the significant amount of information a person has to process, judgement is often passed, resorting to **common cognitive heuristics**. Using representative and available information (historical analogies), people provide likely explanations to detect patterns and causal links that can help understand the world. Individuals may learn from first-hand experiences, early personal experiences, generational effects, and major events (Ibid.).

#### 1.4.2. Social representations

Bauer and Gaskell (1999) refer to the earlier works of Serge Moscovici and propose the societal representations concept suggesting that **knowledge is transmitted** to us and that **beliefs are taught**. They underlie **societies construct societal and political issues** in a specific period. Societies can be unified through "collective meaning-making", thus forming organisations and groups. According to Moscovici (1988), "Social representations [...] concern the **contents of everyday thinking** and the stock

of ideas that give coherence to our religious **beliefs, political ideas and the connections we create** as spontaneously as we breathe. They make it possible to classify persons and objects, compare and explain behaviours, and objectify them as part of our social setting." Social representations theory explains **that values and practices acquire two functions: they establish a system of orientation that allows for harmonious work**, and they enable communication with a set system of codes for classifying and naming the lived experience.

Social representations theory discerns between the collective and the individual level of perception forming. According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001), the **individual** creates the social representations **between** oneself and the social structure. Whereas the individual has some autonomy, the social representation may modify them as both descriptive and prescriptive. Moscovici (1984) notes that "individuals are confronted with a great variety of specialised knowledge on the part of groups they belong to. Each individual must make their selection at a veritable open market of representations."

On a **collective level**, three types of representations can be distinguished: (1) **hegemonic representations** shared by most members of a society or a nation on a macro level which prevail in all symbolic practices (Moscovici, 1988); (2) **emancipated representations** pertinent to specific subgroups which use their autonomy and create their own codes of meaning, contrasting those of the general societal structure; and (3) **polemic representation**, which explains societies' big conversations and debates. They can serve as antagonistic and create categories of inclusion and exclusion (Ibid.).

**THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY SPEAKS OF THE VALUES AND PRACTICES THAT CONSTRUCT OUR LIVED EXPERIENCE. IT CAN SERVE AS A SENSE-MAKING INSTRUMENT OF WHY CERTAIN ASPECTS OF INFORMATION ACQUISITION (STAGE 1) AND INFORMATION ORGANISATION (STAGE 2) OF THE MODEL SET OUT IN**

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Figure 1 play a role individually and collectively.

In connection with the perception studies in the international relations, social representations concept is applicable to analysis of the perceptions related to the countries systematically and widely discussed in the country of interest. If the country perception of which we are interested is present in the public debate as a long standing partner, adversary or the commonly shared historical reference or cultural image, the perception of the country in question is less likely to be significantly changed by the current affairs events and more difficult to modify by the public or traditional diplomacy means.

## 1.5. Conclusions

**THE OVERVIEW OF SELECTED THEORIES RELEVANT TO THE PERCEPTION STUDIES SYSTEMATISED IN THE MECHANISM SET OUT IN**

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Figure 1, indicates that a country's perception is created in three stages: (1) information acquisition; (2) information organisation; (3) perception formation.

The overview of the theories presented in this paper is not exhaustive or exclusive. It aimed to expand the menu of theoretical work and applied studies the perception researchers reach for when analysing perceptions in international relations and developing relevant recommendations. Based on the theoretical works reviewed in this paper, perceptions as constellations of meanings reflect the common

knowledge shared by the given society. Local political dynamics, understanding of history and basic societal values are important determinants of perceptions of the 'other'. In practical terms, the perceptions in international relations thus can be understood as the reflection of the local context on the country whose perception one aims to study. It transpires also, that the views shared by the elites are likely to impact the popular perceptions of the foreign country, especially the countries distant and less accessible for the majority of the given society. To understand the country's perception in a given society, it is vital to be familiar with the local context. These will provide the insights to 'decipher' the data collected for the perception study and transfer the results into productive action.

## 2. Recommendations on methodology for studying perceptions

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### 2.1. Recommendations on methodology

The data collection methods toolbox employed in the perception studies includes the desk research and fieldwork methods such as literature review, content analysis, surveys, interviews and focus groups. Building on literature review and the PPMI [Analysis of the Perceptions of the EU and EU's Policies Abroad](#) (PPMI, 2015), as well as the experience of PPMI with the [Update of the Perceptions Study](#) (PPMI, 2021), this section offers targeted recommendations for conducting public opinion surveys, traditional media content analysis and social media content analysis (Box 2).

#### BOX 2. RECOMMENDATIONS ON METHODOLOGY

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##### Public opinion poll

- **The importance of cross-cultural differences.** Dolnicar and Gruen point to the presence of **noticeable cross-cultural differences** in the survey response patterns. The authors refer to Stening and Everett (1984), who argue "that it is more important in Asian cultures to be modest and respond cautiously, while Hispanics associate sincerity with the use of the endpoints". Dolnicar and Gruen (2007) then analysed the responses by the two categories of respondents – Australians and Asians, to the questions related to fizzy drinks and concluded that Asian respondents use the endpoints (*very good* and *very bad*) much less frequently compared to Australian respondents.
- **Limited comparability of statistical data.** Ariely and Davidov (2010) conduct the statistical analysis of the World Value Survey (WVS) responses to the questions measuring the support for democracy in 36 countries, concluding that the answers cannot be fully comparable across all the countries in the sample. Among the factors that can cause the differences in the respondents' answers, they name specifics of questionnaire translation and "differences in survey practice that affect the sampling coverage". Davidov, Muthen and Schmidt (2018) review different methods applied to analyse the cross-border data collected in the WVS framework, concluding that statistical analysis methods do not provide for the total comparability of the data but allow for certain explanations of the data's non-equivalence.
- **The importance of the local context and the volatility of public perceptions.** The experts working on the European Values Survey data interpretation point to the impact of the media reportage on the survey responses collected in the different countries and the need to develop a methodology to estimate the media impact on the survey results. (Menold et al., 2018). The cross-border survey results can be impacted thus by some circumstantial factors, which do not have to be culturally based. For instance, observations of the Russian public opinion survey results conducted by Levada Centre (particularly public attitudes towards the EU) suggest that



**public opinion in the country is highly volatile** and responsive to the state media agenda and the dominant narrative coinciding with the period of the given survey<sup>3</sup>.

- **Importance of qualitative interpretation of survey results.** Quantitative survey data interpretation, including cross-border data comparisons, should be cautioned. The qualitative data provide the insights that make the qualitative data interpretations possible and provide the basis for exploring the cross-border differences (PPMI, 2015; PPMI, 2021).

### Media analysis

- **Importance of traditional media in perception studies.** News media discourses are particularly persuasive in the formation of public opinion about foreign issues (see, for instance, Chaban, Bain, et al., 2006). PPMI' Analysis of the Perceptions of the EU and EU's Policies Abroad' (2015) suggests that news outlets are the most important source of information about the EU in 10 countries under the study. The PPMI' Update of EU perceptions study' (2021) confirmed that finding simultaneously pointing to the rising role of social media and streaming platforms as the source of information for the general public.
- **Importance of probing different societal groups through alternative methods.** Academic literature generally suggests that the intensity of the media coverage of a given country reflects the elites' interests and position in the country (Kariel & Rosenvall, 1984; Simon and Xenos, 2020). The media reporting also reflects the journalists' perception of the reported country and international relations' understanding by the public. Cotter (2015) suggests that media reporting reflects the "relationship between the news community and the "community of coverage" they serve". Therefore, it is key to probe other key target groups, including business representatives, the youth, civil society representatives, and the general public through alternative methods, including public opinion polls, focus groups, and interviews.

### Social media analysis

- **Importance of the potential of social media analysis for democratizing public perceptions studies.** The impact of social media on forming perceptions is based on **less strict hierarchies** of the information exchange than in traditional media. Social media influencers and other popular figures significantly impact public discussion via direct contact with the followers, in particular allowing the direct interaction with their content (commentaries) . Social media, thus, provide the technical possibility of public debates on the issues that are not pre-selected following the preferences of the elite and not curated by the media professionals. This could lead to a higher emotional load of the debate including the discussions of the foreign countries and more flexible news frames. Research conducted by PPMI (PPMI 2015; PPMI 2021) suggests that the thematic scope of social media debates on the issues related to the European Union differs from the thematic scope of the media reportage on the EU. The general tendency is that the social media debate dedicates more space for the human interests' themes and events that directly affect the lives of individuals and social groups. International events presented in the media report and social media debate will typically focus on different aspects. For instance, while the media presented COVID-19 as a crisis having economic and political implications, social media debate focuses more on the COVID-19 impact on the life of individuals.
- **Growing importance of social media.** The 'Analysis of the perception of the EU and EU's policies abroad' (PPMI, 2015) indicates that social media became the second most significant source of information on/about the EU for the audiences in the countries under study. This finding can be extrapolated to the information sources on individual countries. The public opinion survey conducted in 2021 (PPMI, 2021) indicated that social media has risen in importance as the source

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<sup>3</sup> Levada Tsentr. Otnoshenie k stranam. <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/otnoshenie-k-stranam/>

of information about the EU even more (and, by extension, about the countries in the EU and Europe). However, it remains less critical news source as a source than the established news organisations but is now the key discussion and framing space.

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