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IMAGE OF CHISINAU IN ITS RESIDENTS' REPRESENTATIONS: URBAN VERSUS RURAL

DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4438001

Rezumat

Imaginea Chișinăului în reprezentările locuitorilor săi: urban sau rural

Rezultatele cercetărilor empirice a identității urbane ale chișinăuienilor, realizate de către autor, au demonstrat relevanța componentei rurale pentru imaginea orașului. În articolul de față se analizează caracteristicile urbane și rurale ale imaginii Chișinăului, evidențiate în materialul empiric (interviuri): stilul de viață, comportamentul, cultura, practicile vizuale referitor la spațiul urban, identitatea urbană și problema formării acestuia, socializarea urbană și transmiterea experienței de a locui în mediul urban, problema coexistenței celor două „centre” ale orașului – a unui urban și a unui rural. Relevanța acestei opoziții pentru discursul urban poate fi explicată prin abateri de la o anumită imagine ideală a orașului care există în reprezentările locuitorilor cu o identitate urbană pronunțată. În general, opoziția urbanului și a ruralului față de Chișinău prezintă un continuum de diferite forme și corelații ale caracteristicilor lor tipice. Aceasta este o problemă complexă cu următoarele cauze principale: particularitățile procesului de urbanizare în Republică, stratificarea socială după destrămarea URSS și migrația internă intensivă din cauzele socio-economice caracteristice perioadei de tranziție. În absența unor reprezentări pozitive și agreeate despre oraș, trebuie de acordat o atenție specială pentru a evalua și a dezvolta capitalul lui simbolic, astfel încât, în paralel cu schimbările active în aspectul orașului și al infrastructurii lui, să crească și atractivitatea acestuia pentru rezidenți.

Cuvinte-cheie: imaginea orașului, reprezentările locuitorilor, urbanizare, ruralizare, mediul urban, mod de viață.

Резюме

Образ Кишинева в представлениях его жителей: город или село

Результаты проведенных автором эмпирических исследований городской идентичности жителей Кишинева выявили значимость сельской компоненты в образе города. В данной статье рассматривается сопоставление городских и сельских характеристик в образе Кишинева, выделенных из эмпирического материала (интервью): образ жизни, поведение, культура, визуальные практики обращения с городским пространством, городская идентичность и проблема ее формирования, городская социализация и передача опыта проживания в городской среде, проблема сосуществования двух «центров» города – городского и сельского. Актуальность данной оппозиции в городском дискурсе может объясняться отклонениями от некоего идеального образа города, существующего в представлениях жителей с выраженной городской идентичностью. В целом оппозиция города и села относительно Кишинева представляет собой континуум

разных форм и соотношений их типичных характеристик. Это сложная комплексная проблема, основными причинами существования которой являются особенности процесса урбанизации в республике, резкая социальная стратификация после распада СССР и интенсивность внутренней миграции вследствие социально-экономических причин, характерных для переходного периода. При отсутствии согласованных позитивных представлений о городе особое внимание следует уделить оценке и развитию его символического капитала, чтобы параллельно с активными изменениями облика города и его инфраструктуры повышалась его привлекательность для жителей.

Ключевые слова: образ города, представления жителей, урбанизация, рурализация, городская среда, образ жизни.

Summary

Image of Chisinau in its residents' representations: urban versus rural

The results of an empiric research of urban identity, carried out by the author among the residents of Chisinau, showed the importance of the rural component in the city image. The present article deals with the juxtaposition of urban and rural characteristics in the image of Chisinau, selected from the empiric materials (interviews): life style, behavior, culture, visual practices of dealing with urban space, urban identity and the problem of its development, urban socialization and transmission of experience of living in an urban space, the problem of coexistence of the two city “centers” – an urban and a rural one. The relevance of this opposition for the city discourse can be explained by deviations from an ideal city image, existing in the representations of the residents with an expressed urban identity. In general, the given opposition represents a continuum with different forms and correlations of their typical features. It is a complex problem with reasons lying in the particularities of the urbanization process in the Republic, the harsh social stratification after the USSR disintegration and the intensive internal migration as a consequence of socio-economic reasons, typical for the transition period. Under the conditions of lack of coherent and positive representations about the city, special focus should be placed on the estimation and development of its symbolic capital, so that parallel to the active change of the city outlook and its infrastructure, its attractiveness for the residents could also be strengthened.

Key words: city image, representations of local dwellers, urbanization, ruralisation, urban environment, life style.

The problem of rural component in an urban area appeared in the course of analysis of Chisinau

residents' representations of their city (Ivanova 2020). It also reflected a permanently reproduced discourse of a reductionist presentation about urban and rural antinomy in terms of higher or lower level of culture (behavior and speech practices, appearance of population).

Scientific sources traditionally divide urban and rural life styles, starting with Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life" (2002), where he points out some antagonisms between cities and villages: life tempo and speed of impressions change (stable mode of life in the village and diversity of impressions in a fast city tempo), sense and emotions (dominating intellectual type of mental life in the cities, rational attitude toward people and objects comparing to villages), detachment and openness (short social distance in the village and detachment in the cities) (Зиммель 2002). In the classical works of Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Oswald Spengler, and Fernand Braudel village is set against the city as a very different sociocultural continuum (Горнова 2010: 34).

Some of the researchers point out that the given antinomy is based on the duality "nature versus culture". The main opposing pairs here would be collectivism and individualism, tradition and innovation, dependence and freedom, irrationality and rationality, stability and mobility, naturalness and artificiality, etc. Much attention is paid to the difference in the perception of time. Rural time is natural and cyclic due to agricultural works, while the urban one is rationalized and does not depend on the natural rhythms (Горнова 2010: 37). These differences define another important feature – social network and individual space, which tend to be more stable and proximate in the countryside (Самошкина 2009: 120), and mostly impossible in the anonymous and individualistic relationship of the big cities. It should be stressed that the strongest connection with the place of residence correlates with the formation of "primordial" complexes of kin and neighboring interactions (Карлова 2015: 26) typical for countryside and small towns.

Thus, scientific sources operate a general opposition between urban and rural lifestyle and identity, the village being associated with tradition and economic self-sufficiency, and the city – with globalization and modernization (Săgeată 2010). A number of researches show the existence of corresponding stereotypes in residents' representations about urban and rural areas. For example, Moscow students pointed out such typical features of villagers as unanimity of values (forming naturally in a common axiological space), dependence on public opinion inside their site, apartness and minor dependence on the other groups. They also ascribed to the urban dwellers a minimum of contacts with the other people, predominance of in-

dividual values, insignificant dependence on one's immediate circle and major dependence on the society in general (Баранова 2012: 80-81).

Nevertheless, nowadays the "urban – rural" opposition is not always so clear. Besides some transitional forms (suburbs and summerhouses) recent socio-economical processes gave rise to such phenomena as deurbanization and ruralisation of urban spaces, typical in particular for the post-soviet area. Some of the authors argue that contrary to the global processes of urbanization – that is gentrification (reorganizing central parts of the cities according to the new requests of the rich residents, moving from suburbs) and suburbanization (urban dwellers' migration to the suburbs and countryside with consequent spread of urban level and quality of life). Russian cities and towns went through ruralisation (reproduction of rural daily life elements in the urban area) (Гавриляченко 2008: 12). It could be explained by asymmetrical change in spatial-time organization of life – depending on social strata and type of the area. E. Petrova argues that dominating groups in Russia live in a network society, characterized by the absence of time as such, whereas the majority of population still lives on the territories with a tempo set by chronological and biological time (Петрова 2016: 81). Her research showed an important feature for our case, which is typical for the rural population after their migration to cities – an extremely low interest for the arrangement of surroundings outside their own dwelling. The indifference of such people to the life of their city is a sequence of their attitude to the space – they feel it not as their own, but as a transitional one (Петрова 2016: 85).

Thus, the opposition of urban and rural represents a continuum with different forms and correlations of their typical features. In the case of the Republic of Moldova, there are two main reasons of the existing "urban – rural" correlation. First, urbanization in the post-soviet area differed from the Western one, where it went gradually due to socio-economic development. Here, urbanization was massive and short-termed due to the idea of industrialization of the Soviet administration. The urban population grew driven by natural change, transformation of rural localities into towns, internal and circular migration and influx of population from the other republics, for the major part of industry was concentrated in the cities (История народного хозяйства 1978: 113). Fast tempo of urbanization however would not necessarily mean creation of urban identities in the incoming population. Such process needs time and resources of integration, specifically a stable urban construct and numeric predominance of its bearers. After the disintegration of the USSR, many industrial plants closed, changing the labor market and giving rise to the new

waves of migration, both internal and external. Intensive internal migration, predominantly to the capital city, is the second reason of ruralisation of the urban area. According to the last census data (2014), less than half of Chisinau residents live here since their birth (Население по продолжительности... 2014).

Ruralisation of Chisinau is obvious thanks to many visual practices of its residents: extensions of apartments, unauthorized garages, vegetable gardens at multistorey blocks, henhouses, etc. S. Parvu (2016) compares it with Belgrade, which reflects the “transitional” period with its contrast between new multistorey houses and degrading old buildings. The author argues, that rural elements of the city (“from metropolitan agitation to pastoral atmosphere, from carefully planted linear boulevards to countryside courtyards, from regular multistorey facades to patched-together shacks and fences; the random growth of trees and bushes; the asphalt eaten away by grass; the appropriation of public space and filled with furniture, clothes and other objects belonging to the intimate sphere; and the makeshift extensions and fences made of various materials”) have both social (Chisinau is still predominantly constituted by urbanites keeping strong ties with the village they come from) and architectural-historic (vernacular architecture) reasons (Parvu 2016: 30).

The first stage of our research of urban identities, carried out in 2017 and based on questionnaires, showed a considerably fragmented image of the city. Despite the existence of a coherent touristic “façade”, Chisinau proved to lack its brand image. Further research in focus groups and during semi-structured interviews showed a pronounced problem of urban and rural dualism for the Chisinau residents with a positive urban identity. Although it was not so clearly stressed during the interviews, our material revealed some points of rurality in the respondents’ representations of the city.

For example, when talking about their favorite places, most of the respondents described parks and promenades, free time zones typical for urban characteristics. Among most unpopular places they reported **the Central market**:

“Because of the crowd. It is always dirty, those smells... I don’t like it. It is very noisy” (f, 27);

“My attitude is that I don’t have an alternative. It is strange, that they have counters, but no places to put the bag, when it is muddy” (m, 67);

“The central market and the zone near the bus station – is a totally different world, terrible” (f, 28);

“Those out-of-town visitors... you can feel it. I don’t like walking in that area, although my bus stop is near there. It’s always a stress, the way they behave themselves, so loud, they come to eat, to buy something” (f, 43).

It is of interest to note that some of the respondents argued that it should be replaced:

“I have mixed feelings. I would prefer it were moved from the center, but in its original appearance. It is a place of interest, also for the tourists... But it should be removed from the center to disburden it” (f, 45);

“I also believe that the city center and a market is kind of absurd. The city was built around the market place. It could be replaced somewhere” (f, 23).

Placed at several bus stops from the central parks and the administrative buildings, the Central market and the surrounding neighborhoods form a distinct cultural ensemble, including the bus station, cheap diners, small shops, and exchange offices. During the summer lockdown (2020), the city administration evacuated numerous kiosks and illegal tradesmen from the streets around the market. It was quite difficult to walk on these streets before.

Taking into consideration that many villagers come to Chisinau with different purposes, including the matters connected with the issuance of the Romanian passport, this territory can be extended to Ismail street and include the Consular section of the Romanian Embassy in Chisinau. Not very far, there is another bus station, connecting Chisinau with the North of the Republic. Therefore, Ismail Street becomes an extension of the “rural” city zone, which together with the Central market area covers all the basic needs of incoming population (food, clothes, documents, medicine etc.):

“I agree that Chisinau is a big village, I see it. I go to work up Ismail Street, and if there is a holiday, the pizzeria there is full of villagers – numerous bags, children... I feel discomfort; the culture and faces differ. They are not strange; just I don’t want to see this every day. One can see they come for paid work... There are many of them. Maybe the road is like that: two bus stations, the market, and the Romanian embassy – a concentration” (f, 46).

Taking into consideration that the city center around Pushkin Street, including parks, old parts of the city, administrative buildings is traditionally noted as a positive part of the city image, there tend to be two parallel city centers – an urban and a rural one, which differ in many aspects. Even the city noise differs: the market zone maintains the tradition of using touts not just for selling their stuff, but also at bus stops to indicate directions to newcomers. In general, the rural center is pragmatic; it is organized around several major hubs, becoming a multifunctional zone for the incoming population. The urban center lacks this straightforward pragmatism: it serves as a free zone for going out, spending the free time, visiting some shops or coffeehouses. Although much criticism is used in regard to the green zones, parking,

architectural heritage, esthetics and the other numerous problems, the city center keeps its functional role of an urban space. One of the respondents identified these two centers, when talking about her work place:

“It is a very big village. Why exactly it is difficult to say, it is more on the emotional level. People and everything goes round the central market... If my work were closer to Pushkin Street, people differ there. Now I feel as if my work were an appendix to the market. Life in Chisinau goes round the Central market, but this feeling comes because I work near it” (f, 40).

Talking with the respondents about Chisinau attractiveness, revealed another point of rurality in Chisinau – **artistic culture**. For example, one woman noted:

“There was always cultural life in Chisinau: theater, philharmonic, cinemas... but anyway I had a feeling of the provinciality of Chisinau, although I was in the capital. Maybe, because we travelled to Odessa and saw another city. The population was half-rural. 75% of my student-mates were from rural areas. There was always this feeling of rurality” (f, 69).

This comment is very important, for it reveals many aspects of the researched problem – culture, history, social processes, and comparison with the other big cities as cultural centers. Some of the respondents noted that they feel lack of artistic events in Chisinau, its diversity, characteristic of the world capital cities:

“When I was young, there were different subcultures with their clubs... It’s a pity, that they were closed... I would like we had more bars with live music... More various installations of different designs on the city holidays. These Easter bunnies are rural, not urban. I like street musicians, but even if someone performs here – it is something primitive” (m, 37).

Many of the respondents mentioned, that Chisinau is becoming a big village because of blurring the lines between rural and urban life styles. It has economic and social reasons:

“I think that Chisinau changed a bit after building many new dwellings. The villagers won some money, bought apartments and live here, though remaining villagers inside. There are a lot of them in recent time, so someone can say that Chisinau is a big village. However, it is the capital city... If to talk about the people, not the infrastructure, in general – it is a big village. If to remove the center, then it will really become a village” (m, 38);

“I think, that there are many residents that come from the countryside, but it (Chisinau) remains a city. We develop gradually. A coffeehouse with cats opened. The Komsomol’skoe Lake stairway was repaired” (f, 26);

“Now the difference is very small. Sometimes those, who come from villages, feel themselves more confident, than urban dwellers” (f, 69).

“Chisinau was always a big village. It is a constant process – urbanization is inevitable, new technologies substitute manual labour, and the villages do not need so many workers. I have recently noticed that people prefer to settle abroad instead of in Chisinau” (f, 45).

The last comment brings us to the problem of **urban identity continuity** that is the transmission of urban practices to the newcomers. As mentioned above, the intense migration after 1991 led to different changes, including to the mixture of Chisinau population. Elderly residents make retrospection to some earlier times, linking industrialization and Chisinau ruralisation:

“Chisinau started to change in the 70-s. The new-comers are foreign for me. Plants were built, new work places appeared, while in the villages, the population grew, and the employment remained low... At the instrument-making plants there worked only a small proportion of villagers. Maybe they came, worked in an urban environment and got adapted. And those, who clustered together in one facility, kept their mentality” (m, 67);

“I would not say it (Chisinau) is a big village. Probably it is said so, because many people come from villages and the manners decreased a bit. Moreover, who will teach the rural people? The urban dwellers go abroad. Why should I make an observation to a child, if his parents do the same? They walk and spit around, throw garbage... As my father told me: cleanness means no littering rather than brooming” (f, 67);

“I see that many young people came from different districts. I doubt that we could teach them. Maybe they will advance... or simply raise children of their kind. This is lack of manners. I don’t know my neighbors, that we stopped communicating with our neighbors is bad. I see new residents, who came from rural areas, shouting from balconies,.. in the courtyard they chop and chisel something. I understand, that he or she had lived on the land and now they got to the city. If we are indifferent and don’t show what is wrong... Not all of them are like this... If they had good teachers in the country, who taught them to respect someone’s labor and cleanness, you can’t distinguish them (from the urban dwellers). Although it is surely unpleasant” (f, 55);

“...In the city a young man (from a village) is left to himself in a foreign environment, he needs to adhere to a group... If he fails, he must brush up his education, behavior” (f, 69).

There is though no clear position in the comments about rural features in the city, the border being very subjective. First, the respondents ascribe villagers a low level of culture of **behavior**, thus reproducing a stereotype widespread in social Media:

“Chisinau became a village because of the uneducated people. For me a city is associated with something

special, with educated well-bred people. Villagers can be educated as well. I don't know why, but I wish to see the city as a more refined place" (f, 28);

"I had a friend from countryside, her parents were nice educated people. However, there is an uneducated group, I don't even know where they come from. Moreover, they spread this lack of culture... And there are many of them, especially in recent time, as people started to go abroad, a vacant space appears and they fill it. Maybe, they are abandoned children of those, who went abroad... I don't want to generalize, for there are well educated people in the countryside" (f, 28);

"First of all the lack of manners... An example: when I lived on the 2nd floor, those from the upper floors shook their rugs on our heads, threw garbage under our windows" (m, 37).

Life style is the most prominent characteristic of the difference between rural and urban areas, mentioned by the respondents. In general, they comply with the theoretical information provided above and include differences in time perception, labor, traditions, privacy and openness:

"Urban people are more detached... If neighbors come from a village, they will make more efforts to form relations, than the urban ones, which keep the distance... The level of education also has an influence. The villagers see the difference here... Then there are the traditions, for villagers the religious holidays are more important" (f, 45);

"Urban and rural life styles differ. For example, one must learn to use public transport, to get used to the urban life. In a village, you have more freedom. The urban habit is to live packed" (m, 66);

"First, they (Chisinau residents) consider they live a more civilized life. Maybe it is true, for they don't have to care about the household, garden, poultry and animals. It is a form of labor. In the city we have water, toilet inside. Third, people are distanced here. In a 5-storey house even people of rural origin, knowing each other well don't interfere in each other's life... And the countryside – it is an integrated body, you can't hide anything, your life is on display, you do everything mindful of what other people would say... Here it is to a lesser extent" (f, 69);

"Urban life style differs. It is easier to live here. All the shops are near. In the countryside you can't find everything, you need to go to the regional center or even to Chisinau. In the countryside, women work a lot, move a lot. You need to wake up in the morning, feed the chickens, the pigs, clean the room, and light a fire. Here everything is off-the-shelf... Men drink a lot in the countryside, don't respect women... That is the countryside. Difficult" (f, 42);

"In general here is another standard, other possibilities, people you can choose. In the village, everybody

knows you, you need to behave yourself in a certain manner" (f, 46);

"Personal space boundaries. They (rural population) have another perception of space. I feel that the city is entirely mine... And they come with these front gardens on the ground floors... Countryside is more homogenous, here everybody differs. Cities have another tempo. Countryside resembles somewhat the need to survive: what the nature gives, one cultivated and consumed. Cities provide other options" (f, 43);

"The village does not mean for me to go out, drink a coffee, and chat with friends. If one goes out there – then for a good reason. What goes beyond one's household? The same similar squares, bad infrastructure, pretty poor environment... In a city, one can meet any kind of people. In the countryside – just specific ones" (f, 43);

"It is much easier for us, urban residents. To wake up at 5, do something outside, tend animals, a garden – this is huge labor" (f, 55).

There is also a contrary view that rural regions get urbanized and more developed:

"I don't know what is to be meant here. Do people use horse-driven carriages here? Do they have 15 children, cows on the balconies? I believe that our villages started to resemble towns. I have friends in the town suburbs, they just own a territory, have some chickens, but you can't call them rural for that reason. When I read on the Internet that somebody saw one throwing a paper and concluded that was a villager. Everybody could do that if not well-bred, regardless of the birthplace. For example, someone parked incorrectly, and they write, he came from a village. But here the police parks on the pavement and doesn't care if a carriage could pass" (f, 26);

"Education, family of course, other values, esthetics... I communicate with different people and I think that it is a mistake to make categorical generalizations... there are people from very remote villages, but are morally educated. They can formulate their ideas, have an esthetic taste... It is connected with education, their parents could be teachers or doctors" (f, 45);

"There are well-dressed people, who look after themselves, even the villagers, who came, I think, if they make themselves look presentable, they look more Chisinau residents, than before they came" (m, 38).

Actually, we notice a convergence of urbanization and ruralisation processes, when gradual improving of living conditions still does not mean a corresponding change in behavior practices or mentality, forming a mosaic of different correlations between rural and urban features. As one can see, our respondents first tend to reproduce stereotypical views about rural and urban levels of culture, but arguing a while, they come sometimes to different points of view, for example when talking about educated people from

the countryside. Thus, the problem of existing behavior diversity, sometimes asocial, tends to be a complex one with deeper social and economic roots than simple rural-urban opposition. Our respondents, including the experts, argued that the economic crisis after the USSR disintegration, followed by a transition period, massive migrations and existing economic problems led to a social stratification, typical for all the former republics. On the one hand, it led to forming large marginalized groups – new poor, bums, social orphans etc., some of them with asocial behavior. On the other hand, new status criteria did not include culture or intelligence, which could have determined the adequate level of urban practices:

“People got an opportunity to gain money, and a brisk stratification occurred. New Russians appeared in all of the former republics. In the past, the villagers who came to Chisinau went to work, for example, at a plant. They procured accommodation, a bed in a boarding house. They could gradually get used, then get married, and after 10 years of waiting – get an apartment. It was not easy for one to be able to buy an apartment and a car at once. In addition, he sees these poor teachers and doctors. What can they teach him? Status acquires now some different criteria” (expert 1);

“A student can get an apartment even in the first year of education... An urban student lives with the parents, so the rural one has a higher material status... and he doesn't do anything to strive for” (f, 69);

“I have read a book by a French author, who wrote that Chisinau is a city, which is quickly transforming into a village... Usually the city (center) is compact, private houses being found in the suburbs. In Chisinau, we have them in the center and everywhere. This tendency appeared recently, when people got money and wished to live both in their own house and in the center, where everything is close... In Soviet times you couldn't get a plot of land, now... they cut a bit from a school stadium and build there three houses. They build houses in the green zones. It should not be so, of course” (expert 1).

It should be noted that ruralisation of urban space is not a modern phenomenon. The population on the territory of the Republic of Moldova was always predominantly rural, and the political and economic processes of XIX–XX centuries facilitated either the flourishing, or the decay of the cities. One of our experts attributes the dominating ethno-traditional culture of modern Chisinau to the *“so called rural mentality of the majority of population as a consequence of migration processes”*, for *“one becomes an urban dweller in the second generation... those who worked in Western countries plant out flowers, and the rural ones – vegetable gardens; this is the difference in mentality”* (expert 2).

Thus, the problem of dealing with Chisinau in terms of rural – urban opposition is a complex and

manifold one, including historical, socio-economic, political, ethnical and cultural aspects. It does exist in the urban discourse and is mainly connected with people's representations about “true urban” features and deviations from that idealistic image in reality, for example in the area of the Central market or the culture of behavior in general. It should be noted that Chisinau as a capital city reflects the tendencies of social and economic development of the whole country, being thus a “mirror” of a nation in transition. Difficulties of general instability are common for the post-Soviet area and should be considered as a major reason for lacking a coherent and positive city image. Whereas the city goes through a stage of intensive dynamic changes, special focus should be on the estimation and development of its symbolic capital and strengthening the attractiveness of the urban environment.

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