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# **JUST WORLD BELIEF AND THE IMAGE OF THE PERFECT POLITICAL LEADER: THE ROLE OF NATIONAL IDENTIFICATION**

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## **Abstract**

Political leaders need the support of other citizens to exercise their influence and perform their functions. According to the leader categorization theory, people give more support to the leaders which fit a certain prototype – the idea of a perfect leader. In this study we analyze the link between just world belief, Russian national identity and the idea of a perfect leader. We assumed that the more people believe in a just world, the stronger their national identity is. The more they identify with Russia, the more support they expect from their political leader, and the more power they award to him. Members of psychological and political groups in Russian social media have participated in the study ( $N = 294$ ). They filled out an online version of the survey, which included scales for measuring just world belief, Russian national identity and the idea of a perfect political leader. To test the hypotheses structural modeling was used. The results confirmed the hypotheses. At the same time, they show, that belief that the world is just towards other people plays a bigger role, than belief in the world being just towards one's self.

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**Keywords:** just world belief, national identification, political leader.

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Groups are characterized by an internal structure which is more or less hierarchical. Social hierarchy exists on various levels – from school grades and work groups in organizations to the society in general. People with more power have a greater impact on group decisions and the reaching of group goals. Social hierarchy is highly prominent in political life. Political leaders have a big influence on lawmaking and, as a consequence, on the life of a country in general.

However, the relationship between a leader and followers is a two-way street. For a leader to successfully fulfill his functions, he needs to trust and support of his followers. An important factor, which influences the attitudes towards a political leader, is his conformity to the in-group prototype. Leader categorization theory proposes that people have an image of the perfect leader – a leader prototype. It includes the attributes a leader must possess, and the actions which he should perform. The more an aspiring leader represents this prototype, the easier it is for subordinates to recognize and categorize that person as a leader and, consequently, the more favorable the responses toward that leader will be (Epitropaki & Martin, 2005). As a consequence, factors that impact the image of the perfect political leader are of particular interest. Among these factors is social identity.

**Image of a political leader and national identification.** Social identity is understood as a part of a person's self-concept, which relates to his or her awareness of belonging to a specific group or category and which has a certain value and emotional meaning. Psychological research has shown that

in-group identity determines their evaluations and behavior. In particular, psychological studies demonstrate that the stronger people identify with the in-group, the more positively they evaluate the group leader (Barreto & Ellemers, 2002; Martin & Epitropaki, 2001; Neves & Caetano, 2009; Platow & Van Knippenberg, 2001; Steffens, Haslam, & Reicher, 2014). This pattern is exhibited in laboratory groups (Barreto & Ellemers, 2002), real organizations (Castano, Paladino, Coull, & Yzerbyt, 2002; Martin & Epitropaki, 2001; Neves & Caetano, 2009), and also when evaluating political leaders (Steffens et al., 2014). As such, in most studies the link between ingroup identification and the evaluation of real leaders is researched. The question arises as to how in-group identification relates to the image of perfect leader.

We assume that the more a person identifies with the in-group, the more he or she shares the group's attitudes and values. In particular, the stronger a person's national identification is, the more they share the public opinion. Opinion surveys conducted in Russia show that there are two concepts of a perfect president: a wise, moral and benevolent "father of the nation" and an effective manager, who is competent in the economic field. However, recent studies show that people tend to lean more towards the image of the "father of the nation" (Public Opinion Foundation, 1997; Russian Public Opinion Research Center, 2008, 2012). Thus, we assume that national identification predicts the image of the perfect political leader: the stronger the Russian identification is, the more people expect that political leaders will act in the group's best interests (hypothesis 1a) and the

more power people are ready to grant them (hypothesis 1b).

**National identification and world beliefs.** The level of in-group identification is determined by the attitude of other group members. Psychological studies have shown that people who receive respect and support from their peers identify stronger with the group than those who encounter disrespect and rejection. This pattern emerges in both short-lived, experimentally created groups and long-term real ones. In particular, the more interest in a person's opinion and respect they are shown by the members of laboratory working group, the stronger they identify with the team (Renger & Simon, 2011; Simon & Sturmer, 2003). Employees who consider their employer's actions to be procedurally just and feel more attention and support tend to exhibit stronger organization identification (Blader & Tyler, 2009; Edwards & Peccei, 2010; Tse, Ashkanasy, & Dasborough, 2012). Finally, the more the government's actions are considered to be, the stronger the citizens' national identity (Tyler, 2009).

When evaluating group members attitude, people take into account both actions and their personal representations, which frame their perception of a situation. Among these representations is just world belief. The just world hypothesis was introduced by M. Lerner (1980). He thought that most people believe that the world is just, and events and outcomes are logical and predictable. In such a world people get what they deserve and deserve what they get. Such a perception gives meaning to a person's life. Thanks to that belief, a person may live and be sure that it is possible to predict events,

which would happen to him and the outcomes he may achieve.

Belief in a just world affects a person's perception of other people: the stronger a person believes in a just world, the more positive his or her attitude towards others is. Psychological studies have shown that the more inmates believe in a just world, the more just they consider legal proceedings, their interpersonal treatment by their corrections officer and the decisions on prison affairs (Dalbert & Filke, 2007; Otto & Dalbert, 2005). Possibly, due to such a perception, people who believe in a just world are less suspicious and more likely to believe that promises made to them will be kept (Dittmar & Dickinson, 1993; Zuckerman & Gerbasi, 1977); are more trusting towards their spouses (Lipkus & Bissonnette, 1996); are more keen to believe in the altruism of those who give to charity (Furnham, 1995); and also are more trusting towards social institutions and representatives of the government (Zuckerman & Gerbasi, 1977).

These results allow us to link a belief in a just world to national identification. Belief in a just world increases a person's belief that other people have a positive attitude towards him. That perception of positive attitudes increases the level of social identification. This primarily concerns large social groups, the representatives of which the person encounters regularly and which serve as prototypical examples of people. Consequently, we assume that belief in a just world predicts national identification: the more a person believes in a just world for himself and others, the stronger his national identification (hypothesis 2).

## Study

**Participants.** The data were collected with an electronic web-based questionnaire between October 2014 and March 2015. Participants were recruited through psychological and political groups in various social media. 294 people participated in the study, of them 207 were women and 87 were men, aged 18 to 65 years ( $M = 25.15$ ;  $SD = 9.27$ ).

**Method.** Participants filled out online questionnaires for measuring belief in a just world, national identification and attitudes towards political leaders.

*Belief in a just world.* Belief in a just world was assessed with a scale developed by Dalbert and adapted for the Russian language by Nartova-Bochaver et al. (Nartova-Bochaver, Hohlova, & Podlipnyak, 2013). The scale includes 13 statements: 7 of them form the JWB-self scale (e.g. "I believe that I usually get what I deserve") and 6 statements form the JWB-other scale (e.g. "I believe that the world in general is just"). Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with these statements using a 6-point response scale (from 1 – completely disagree to 6 – completely agree).

*National identification.* National identification was measured by the "Self-investment" subscale from the Russian version of the in-group identity scale by K. Leach (Leach et al., 2008) adapted by Agadullina and Lovakov (2013). The subscale includes 10 statements which represent three parameters of national identification: satisfaction (e.g. "I am glad to be a Russian citizen"), solidarity (e.g. "I feel solidarity with Russian citizens") and

centrality (e.g. "I often think about the fact that I am a Russian citizen"). Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with these statements using a 7-point response scale (from 1 – completely disagree to 7 – completely agree).

*The image of a perfect political leader.* To measure the concept of a perfect political leader, two factors were used: the expectation of support and care from the leader and the readiness to give him power.

To measure the expectation of support and care we used 12 statements that formed three subscales. Four statements represented the belief in the fact that political leaders take responsibility for citizens' economic well-being. Four represented the idea that political leaders seeks to protect citizens. And four other statements – that the political leaders must control the situation in the country (Appendix 1). Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with these statements using a 5-point response scale (from 1 – completely disagree to 5 – completely agree).

To measure the readiness to give power we used 8 statements that formed two subscales. Four statements represented the belief in the fact that political leaders may break the law if it benefits the country. Four other statements represented the idea that in the interests of national security the rights of some citizens may be limited (Attachment 1). Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with these statements using a 5-point response scale (from 1 – completely disagree to 5 – completely agree).

## Results

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations can be found in Table 1. The means suggest that respondents tended to evaluate justice of the world towards themselves higher than towards others. Apart from that, they expected political leaders to provide support and care, but to a lesser degree granted them power.

Moreover, in line with our hypothesis, the intercorrelations (see Table 1) show that both JWB-self ( $rs = 0.177^{**}$ ) and JWB-other ( $rs = 0.320^{**}$ ) were positively related to national identification. National identification, in turn, was positively related to the expectation of support and care ( $rs = 0.261^{**}$ ) and the readiness to give power to political leaders ( $rs = 0.324^{**}$ ). At the same time, the two components of the concept of a perfect political leader were positively linked ( $rs = 0.216^{**}$ ).

In terms of our analytical strategy, we tested some hypothetical models using multigroup structural equation modeling (SEM) in MPlus 7 (Muthen & Muthen, 1998–2012). First, we tested the initial model, which included five variables. JWB-self and JWB-

other served as independent variables, national identification as a potential mediator, expectation of care and support and readiness to give power to the political leader as dependent variables. Residuals among dependent variables were allowed to covary.

Results show a good fit of the model ( $\chi^2 = 77.197, df = 31, p \leq 0.01, CFI = 0.954, TLI = 0.934, RMSEA = 0.071, SRMR = 0.051, AIC = 27559.972, BIC = 27666.796$ ). As expected, national identification predicted the expectation of care and support, and the readiness to give power. Moreover, belief in a just world predicted national identification. However, JWB-other predicts better national identification, than JWB-self.

We created a modified model excluding paths between JWB-self and national identification (see Figure 1). Results demonstrated that the modified model had a better fit than the initial one ( $\chi^2 = 47.593, df = 24, p \leq 0.01, CFI = 0.976, TLI = 0.964, RMSEA = 0.058, SRMR = 0.048, AIC = 27557.997, BIC = 27661.137$ ). As expected, BJW-others predicted national identification. This result partly supported hypothesis 2. National identification, in

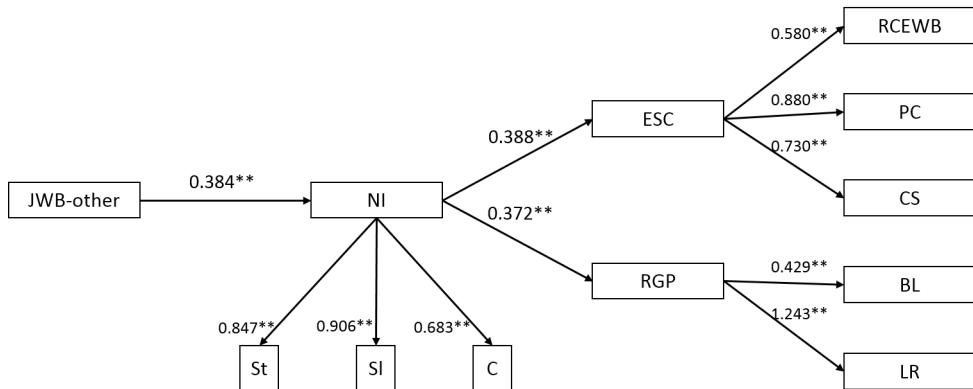
**Table 1**  
**Means and correlations for the main variables**

Scale	M	SD	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4
1. JWB-self	4.36	1.03	0.920				
2. JWB-other	3.42	1.14	0.847	0.411**			
3. National Identification	4.33	1.43	0.933	0.177**	0.320**		
4. Expectation of support and care	4.16	0.55	0.829	0.014	0.121*	0.261**	
5. Readiness to give power	2.66	0.89	0.859	0.001	0.277**	0.324**	0.216**

\*\*  $p < 0.01$  (2-tailed); \*  $p < 0.05$  (2-tailed).

Figure 1

## Modified path-model



Note. JWB – just world belief; NI – national identification; St – satisfaction; SI – solidarity; C – certainty; ESC – expectation of support and care; RCEWB – responsibility for citizens' economic well-being; PC – protection of citizens; CS – control of the situation; RGP – readiness to give power; BL – license to break law; LR – license to limit rights.

\*\* –  $p \leq 0.01$ .

turn, predicted the image of the perfect political leader. This result supported hypothesis 1a and 1b.

## Discussion

In this research we analyzed the link between just world belief, national identification and the image of the perfect political leader. We separated two components of the image of a perfect political leader – the expectation of care and support from him, and the readiness to give him power. The study results show that these components are linked. The more care and support Russian respondents expect from a political leader, the more power they are ready to give him. This result corresponds to the idea of leadership as a two-way dependence between a leader and his supporters. In such a case every

party contributes and expects a similar reaction from their partner.

At the same time, the expectation of support and care from a political leader is stronger than the readiness to give him power. Presumably, this happens because in this particular case only one aspect of power is considered – the one concerning breaking the law and limiting individuals' rights. Because a political leader already has sufficient legal power, giving him the power to break the law might have appeared to the participants to be a step too far. However, we think that the balance between the expectation of support and care and the readiness to give him power depends on the participants' political views and the recent events in a country.

However, the image of the perfect political leader depended on national identification. The stronger the study

participants identified with their country, the more support they expected from the political leader and the more power they were ready to give him. Presumably, this happens because people with a stronger national identification are more supportive of the perfect image of the political leader, as opposed to people with a weak national identification. A political leader who cares for certain citizens and punishes others conforms to the widespread idea of the “father of the nation”.

National identification, in turn, depends on just world belief. The stronger respondents believed in a just world, the higher their national identification. However, various components of just world belief have different influence. At first glance, these results conform to the results of other studies, which have shown that belief in a just world for one's self, and for others leads to different consequences. The differences that became apparent in this study turned out to be surprising.

In particular, previous studies have shown, that the more a person believes that the world is just towards him, the less he tends to dwell on injustice and tends to be less impulsive in his reactions, more likely to forgive offenders and less likely to pursue revenge. The more a person believes that the world is just towards others, the more he tends to dwell on the injustice committed towards him, the more impulsive his reactions are, the less likely he is to forgive offenders, and the more likely to pursue revenge (Lucas, Young, Zhdanova, & Alexander, 2010; Strelan & McKee, 2014; Strelan & Sutton, 2011). As such, we expected that people who believe that the world is just towards them, would have a stronger

national identification, as compared to people who believe the world is just towards others.

However, this study has shown, that the main predictor of Russian national identity is the belief that the world is just towards others. Presumably, this is caused by the fact that a person who believes that the world is just towards him can explain this through his own characteristics, and not these of others. At the same time, belief in justice towards others is connected to the perception of justice as a widespread phenomenon. Consequently, a person who believes in the world being just towards others has more positive expectations from his membership in the national in-group.

The study has a number of limitations. Firstly, the participants were people, who actively use social networking sites and are members of online communities dedicated to psychology and/or politics. This sample is not representative of the country as a whole. To overcome this limitation, studies must be conducted on a more diverse sample.

Second, we assumed that the respondents know which concept of perfect political leader is widespread in society, however, we did not control for that parameter. Consequently, in further studies not only respondents' personal perception of the perfect political leader should be measured, but also their perception of the way other people imagine the perfect political leader.

Third, this study is correlational in nature. This is caused by the fact that just world belief is traditionally perceived to be a relatively stable trait of a person. Consequently, the study results do not lead to the assumption of the existence of a causal link between just

world belief, national identity and the idea of the perfect political leader. To remove this limitation, experimental studies are required in which the degree of just world belief would be

varied. Such studies would allow for a more thorough research of the link between just world belief, national identity and the idea of the perfect political leader.

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#### Appendix 1

#### **Perfect political image scale**

##### The expectation of support and care from the political leader.

- The responsibility for citizens' economic well-being:
  1. Political leaders of the country should care about the economic well-being of the citizens.
  2. Political leaders of the country should make sure that every citizen has certain social guarantees.
  3. Political leaders of the country should guarantee a high level of income for every citizen.
  4. Political leaders of the country should guarantee a decent income for every citizen.

- The protection of citizens:
  5. Political leaders of the country should protect the citizens.
  6. Political leaders of the country should prevent the damage that the actions of particular citizens might do to the society in general.
  7. To prevent anarchy, people in charge of government political leaders of the country should keep a close eye on everything that is happening in the country.
  8. Political leaders of the country should minimize the damage from social conflicts, which can negatively impact the situation in the country.
  
- The control of the situation:
  9. Political leaders of the country should have a clear picture of what is going on in the country.
  10. Political leaders of the country should fully control what is going on in the country.
  11. Political leaders of the country should have a clear idea of what must be done in order to improve the situation in the country.
  12. The situation in the country depends primarily on political leaders of the country.

The readiness to give power to the political leader.

- The license to break law:
  13. In certain cases, political leaders of the country should be allowed to break the law.
  14. Political leaders of the country have the right to break the law if it benefits the country.
  15. In certain cases political leaders of the country may not be held accountable for breaking the law.
  16. In certain cases political leaders of the country have the right to go beyond their authority.
  
- The license to limit rights:
  17. In certain cases the rights and liberties of citizens may be limited in the interests of national security.
  18. The rights of certain citizens may be limited if they go against the national interests.
  19. Political leaders of the country can restrict the rights of individuals who pose a threat to the country.
  20. The national interests should be above the interests of individual citizens.

## **Связь веры в справедливый мир и образа идеального политического лидера: роль национальной идентичности**

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### **Резюме**

Политические лидеры нуждаются в поддержке граждан. Согласно теории категоризации лидеров, люди больше поддерживают лидеров, которые соответствуют прототипу – представлению о том, каким должен быть настоящий лидер. В данном исследовании была рассмотрена связь между верой в справедливый мир, национальной российской идентичностью и представлением об идеальном политическом лидере. Мы предположили, что чем больше люди верят в справедливый мир, тем сильнее их национальная идентификация. Чем больше они идентифицируются с Россией, тем большей поддержки они ожидают от политического лидера и тем больше власти ему предоставляют. В исследовании приняли участие члены психологических и политических сообществ в российских социальных сетях ( $N = 294$ ). Они заполняли онлайн-версию опросника, которая включала в себя шкалы для измерения веры в справедливый мир, национальной российской идентификации и представлений об идеальном политическом лидере. Для проверки гипотез использовалось моделирование структурными уравнениями. Результаты исследования подтвердили выдвинутые гипотезы. В то же время они продемонстрировали, что вера в справедливость мира по отношению к другим людям играет большую роль, чем вера в справедливость мира по отношению к себе.

**Ключевые слова:** вера в справедливый мир, национальная идентичность, политический лидер.