

PERCEPTION OF POLAND'S TOURISM BRAND IN THE OPINION OF STUDENTS IN SELECTED COUNTRIES

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Abstract: The aim of the undertaken research is to determine the knowledge of future specialists in tourism geography, tourist values and the tourist brand of Poland. A research hypothesis was also established according to which, the influence of Europeanization in the Russian-Soviet version, may influence greater knowledge about Poland. The work uses the classic method of survey research in the social sciences with the use of a standardized questionnaire. The study involved students of tourism and geography from universities in Astana (35), Bishkek (32) and Karabük (43). The results of the research allow us to define the awareness of Poland as a tourist brand as moderately good in Astana, weaker in Bishkek, and poor in Karabük. The largest number of correct answers concerned the capital of Poland and well-known Poles (Copernicus, John Paul II, Chopin), and among athletes, footballers (Lewandowski) and ski jumpers (Stoch, Małysz). The fewest correct answers concerned Poland's tourist attractions. In the perception of the students participating in the study, Poland is one of the countries of Central Europe that are attractive in terms of tourism. It can also be concluded that the influence of the heritage of Russian Europeanization on students' knowledge of Europe is still visible.

Key words: nation branding, tourist brand, tourist values, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Poland, Türkiye

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism, which experienced a decline during the COVID-19 pandemic (Karabulut et al., 2020; Korinth and Wendt, 2021; Korinth, 2020; 2023), is gradually witnessing a marked increase in the post-pandemic era. This situation has resulted in increased competition among individual tourist regions in attracting more tourists. One of the fundamental factors influencing the increase in the number of incoming tourists is undoubtedly the recognition of the tourism brand of a region or country (Pike and Mason, 2011; Marczak, 2018) or actor operating in the tourism business (Chivandi et al., 2020; Kuseni et al., 2021; Abouseada et al., 2023). More broadly, it is the marketing orientation of entities within tourism (Panasiuk, 2021). Territorial marketing of countries is of fundamental importance, the research of which already has a rich history, encompassing theoretical contributions (Fan, 2006; Klein et al., 2019; Gertner and Freire, 2018; Cavalcante et al., 2021; Freire et al., 2022; Pahrudin et al., 2022), selected values (Im et al., 2012; İlieş et al., 2015; Wendt et al., 2019) and specific case studies of countries (Anholt, 2000; 2002; Florek, 2005; Loo and Davies, 2006; Dinnie, 2009; Tran et al., 2020).

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Territorial marketing is considered a component of nation branding, particularly concerning places that attract foreign investors or serve as highly recognizable tourist destinations within a country (Obrębalski, 1998; Szromnik, 2008). It implies that the principle of EU subsidiarity applies in shaping the national brand. In this context, subsidiarity signifies the involvement of local communities in enhancing the overall attractiveness of the country to its foreign partners.

The building of Polish nation branding dates back to the political roots of Poland's efforts to join the European Union. At that time, multiple ministries simultaneously worked on unifying and making the country's image abroad more distinct. Among them, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs took the lead, while the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy played auxiliary role in relation to migration policy, and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage focused on cultural diplomacy. Among domestic entities in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Polish Chamber of Tourism and the Polish Brand Institute stood out as the most active in creating national branding (Szmytke, 2021).

Key reasons for the necessity of building Polish nation branding included the aspirations to lead in Central Europe, the imperative to redefine the image from a socialist state, the new identity as a member of NATO and the EU, and the reinforcement of a modern state image, drawing selectively from valuable historical traditions (Szondi, 2007). It is worth noting that the Baltic republics of Latvia and Estonia were pioneers of nation branding among post-Soviet states in the early 20th century (Endziņa and Luneva, 2008; Same and Solarte-Vasquez, 2014).

One of the failures of the mature Polish brand image campaign was the promotional campaign accompanying the 2012 Poland-Ukraine European Football Championship. In the 2022 report, Poland maintained its 26th place out of 60 ranked countries held over a decade earlier. The selectiveness and inconsistency of the Polish authorities in the field of migration policy (the construction of a wall on the border with Belarus with the simultaneous aid campaign for Ukrainian refugees) does not increase the recognition of Poland and can be treated as one of the key factors blocking progress in creating a positive international image. In recognized scientific journals dedicated to nation branding, like 'Place Branding and Public Diplomacy,' there has been a lack of analysis regarding Poland's image policy in the context of recent key challenges such as COVID-19 and the Russian-Ukrainian war. This may prove that Poland is not recognizable as a settlement area and may bode poorly for the growth of the country's tourist attractiveness.

Therefore, bearing in mind the importance of territorial marketing, research was undertaken to study the recognition of Poland as a tourist brand among a selected group of respondents including students in the last years of studies majoring in tourism and geography. Because there is already a substantial body of literature on tourism brand recognition in EU countries (Endziņa and Luneva, 2008; Konecnik and Go, 2008; Same and Solarte-Vasquez, 2014), this analysis focuses on statements made by students from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye. These countries have a considerable communication distance from Poland, which helps minimize the influence of students' personal experiences and allows for an assessment of their level of interest and knowledge about Poland based on their formal education.

The aim of the research undertaken is to determine the competences of future specialists in the field of tourist geography, tourist values and the tourist brand of Poland. A research hypothesis was also established according to which, despite the passage of more than thirty years since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the influence of Europeanization in the Russian-Soviet version, along with all the typical superpower rhetoric, may influence greater knowledge about Poland. More knowledge is expected, given that Poland (part of the Soviet world until 1989) is of historical interest. This knowledge should be more visible, especially at the universities of Astana and Bishkek, where experienced professors, educated in the former Soviet Union, likely imparted a deeper understanding of this historical context. The Polish minority, descendants of Polish exiles to Kazakhstan, may have a similar impact on knowledge in Poland.

On the other hand, awareness of the Polish brand, assessed in Karabük, a city in the north of the country and home to one of the 17 universities established in 2007, will primarily depend on how Turkish students perceive it and their level of interest in European countries. Poland began to build its brand, including the tourist brand, relatively late, similarly to other post-socialist countries in Europe (Kleinová and Ůrgeová, 2011; Kaneva and Popescu, 2014). Since the 1990s, along with the deepening globalization of the economic exchange of goods and services, the general knowledge of the cooperating countries about partner countries has been growing. It was favored by the increase in the mobility of the population, expressed in the general availability of private and business trips in connection with the growing readiness to practice tourism, as well as the increase in the level of wealth of the inhabitants of a growing group of countries in connection with the rise in the readiness for individual and organized tourist trips. The influence of liberal trade on the policy of countries undergoing political transformation and the development of modern digital technologies (ICT) contributed to the dissemination of a new concept of building a narrative about countries attractive for investment, settlement or tourism: the idea of the state brand (Dinnie, 2009). Its creator is usually considered to be Simon Anholt, a marketing expert who in 1996, popularized the assumption that the reputation and image of a country abroad is a commercial product subject to the rules of marketing and promotion (Anholt, 2005; 2011). The key components of the brand include the guiding idea, i.e., the parameters of brand recognition or identifiability and the image that is created in the sphere of perception of the recipient (Anholt, 2007). The latter component is subjective, individualized, and dependent on experiences, memories, expectations, stereotypes of recipients, media messages, and general knowledge derived from the educational system (Fan, 2006).

The Anholt IPSOS Nation Brands Index (NBI) was created in 2005, considering the parameters of measurability of success in the field of nation branding. The components included in the ranking are the level of positive opinions about products and services exported from the surveyed country, the level of interest in the country as a place of natural and anthropogenic tourist attractions, the impact of the domestic culture, art and sport sectors on the global development trends of these industries and the lifestyle standards of the recipients interested in them, opinion about the quality of administration and public services, the attractiveness of settlement for immigrants, and finally – positive stereotypes regarding social attitudes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

There is relatively little research literature on the Polish brand (Kubacki and Skinner, 2006; Kozak and Mazurek, 2011). Previous studies have highlighted, above all, the weakness of the Polish marketing policy conducted by government institutions (Hereźniak, 2011; Maćkowska, 2012). Therefore, the study used the results of surveys conducted among students of tourism and geography at three universities in Kazakhstan at the L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University (35 questionnaires), in Kyrgyzstan at the Kyrgyz National University of J. Balasagyn (32 questionnaires), and in Türkiye at Karabük University (43 surveys), 110 people in total.

The tests were carried out on January 15, 2023-January 15, 2023. The research was divided into three stages (Figure 1). The survey included students studying in the last year of bachelor's studies or the first year of master's studies. These universities from the respective countries were chosen because it was believed that the significant communication distance, the general lack of direct contact or personal experience in Poland, combined with their interest in tourism, would enable a relatively objective perception of the Polska brand based on its image rather than personal experience (Ilieş and Wendt, 2015; Wendt and Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2018b).

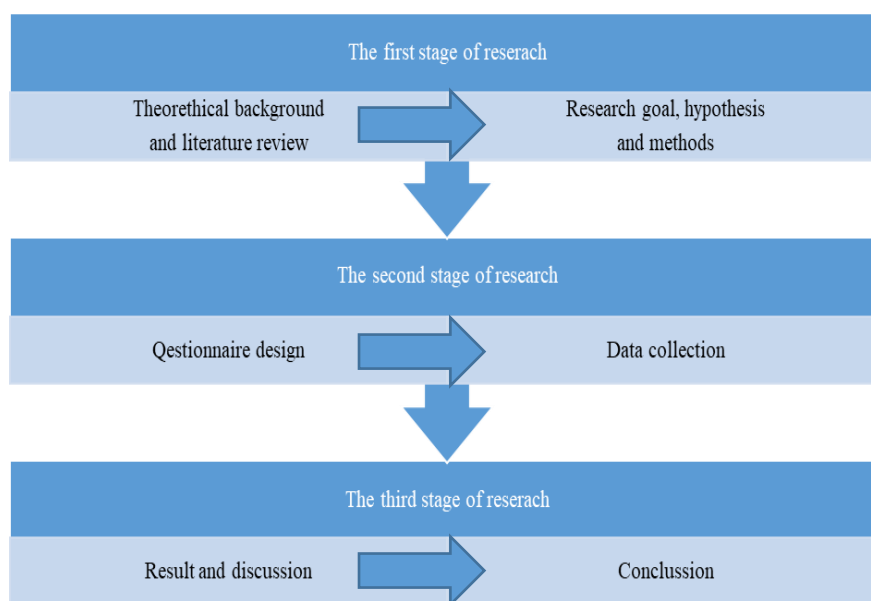


Figure 1. Flowchart of the research methods (Source: own elaboration)

The choice of universities from these countries also results from the fact that their inhabitants belong to the Turkish language group, and Islam is the dominant religion. Notably, the inhabitants of each of them, in historical terms, had the opportunity to visit Poland and meet Poles. In Kazakhstan, we have a Polish minority, descendants of Polish exiles; in Kyrgyzstan, we have a secondary migration of Polish exiles from Kazakhstan. Türkiye and Poland had a rich history of rivalry in the Balkans in the past. In the research and description of the Polish brand, qualitative research methods and statistical analysis typical for social sciences were used (Wendt et al., 2016; Wendt and Bógdał-Brzezińska, 2018a).

Respondents were asked to answer several groups of questions. In the beginning, they were asked to answer the question about staying in Poland (Q1). The next questions (Q2-Q7) concerned general geographical knowledge about Poland. The next group covered the tourist values of the country (Q8-Q10), and in the last one, examining the brand of Poland, the respondents were asked about Poles known to the respondents from the world of culture, science or sport (Q11-Q12). Some of the surveys end with a question about students' associations with Poland (Q13) and about the ranking of five Central European countries in terms of tourist attractiveness (Q14).

The obtained research results are only an image of the Polska brand during the research in a selected group of students. The obtained results present only the perception of Poland as a tourist brand by selected groups of students during the survey. Complete research, allowing for the generalization of results, requires a significantly larger sample and, above all, its representativeness. Therefore, the obtained results should be treated as the results of pilot studies, which can be used to discuss the need for further, in-depth research.

This does not reduce the cognitive value but does not allow generalization of the results. The more so that they were conducted on a selected social and age group, which includes students and potential specialists in the field of tourism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first question about staying in Poland (Q1) showed that unlike the respondents from Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye, who had never been there, only five students from Kazakhstan visited Poland. It allows us to conclude that the answers to the remaining ones will be almost entirely based on the brand of the country existing in the minds of students. As the research results by A. Borek (2018) show, staying in Poland allows you to shape a completely different image of the country, which is known from everyday life. The next questions (Q2-Q7) concerned basic information about the country. They are

presented as follows: (Q2) Mark in which region of Europe Poland is located; (Q3) Tick 5 of the given countries that have a land border with Poland; (Q4) Indicate what range in terms of area (thousand sq km) is Poland; (Q5) Indicate what range in terms of the number of inhabitants (million) is Poland; (Q6) Does Poland have access to the sea?; (Q6.1) If you answered YES for Q6, enter its name; (Q7) Give the name of the capital of Poland (Table 1). The obtained results are broadly consistent with the results of previous studies (Fedyk et al., 2014; Piątek and Kobylińska, 2019).

Table 1. Share (%) of correct answers to questions Q2-Q7 (Source: own calculation)

Questions	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Türkiye
Q2	100.0	43.8	55.8
Q3	14.3	43.8	67.4
Q4	77.1	6.3	39.5
Q5	100.0	9.4	39.5
Q6	25.7	81.3	62.8
Q6.1	25.7	50.0	9.3
Q7	100.0	96.9	25.6
Number of students	35	32	43

As the survey results show (Table 1), students coped best with the answers to the question about the capital of Poland (Q7) and its location in Central Europe. About half of the respondents (the average of all answers from the three universities) correctly answered the questions about access to the sea (Q6) and population (Q5). A slightly smaller number (approx. 41%) of correct answers concerned Poland's neighbors (Q3) and its area (Q4). The most difficult question turned out to be the question about the name of the sea on which Poland is located (Q6.1). The Baltic Sea was mentioned by only a quarter of students from Kazakhstan, half from Kyrgyzstan, and 9% from Türkiye.

The analysis of the answers to the questions asked by universities (Figure 2) allows us to conclude that the students surveyed have a relatively poor knowledge of basic information about Poland. The average of correct answers (for Q2-Q7) at the university in Astana is the highest and amounts to 63%, at the university in Bishkek 47%, and in Karabük 43%.

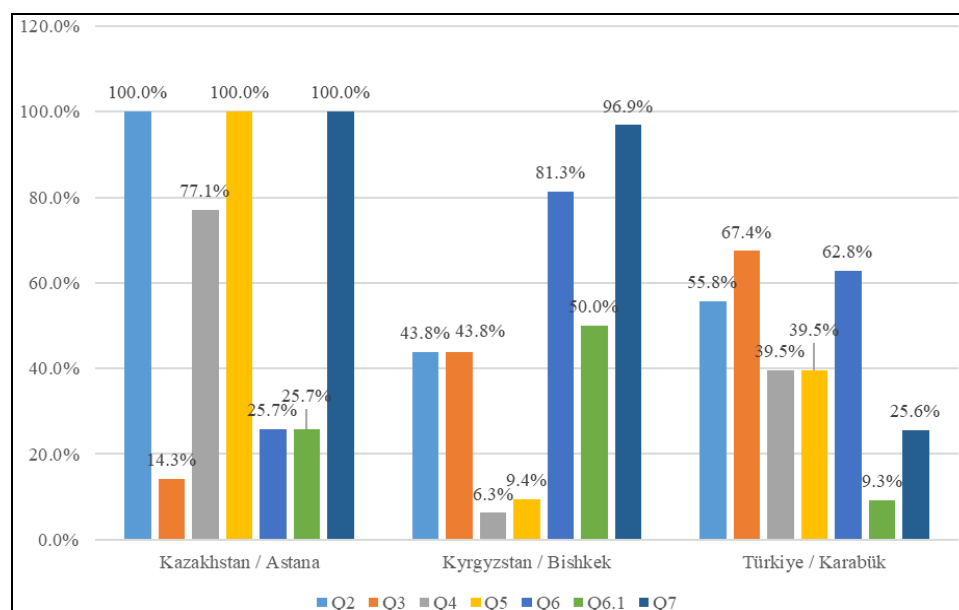


Figure 2. Answers to Q2-Q7 questions by university / country (own elaboration)

Students from Astana were the best at answering questions about the location of Poland, the number of inhabitants, and the name of the capital. Most students from Bishkek gave correct answers to the question about the capital city and Poland's access to the sea, and from Karabük to questions about Poland's neighbors and access to the sea. The least correct answers in Astana concerned Poland's neighbors, in Bishkek the size of the country and in Karabük the name of the sea over which Poland is located. The next group of questions included questions related to tourist values. Among the most famous and exciting cities in Poland (Q8), respondents from Kazakhstan indicated the most, and respondents from Türkiye the least. The most notable were Warsaw and Krakow in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which were mentioned by 25 students from Astana and 24 (Warsaw) and 11 (Krakow) students from Bishkek, respectively.

In Karabük, four students indicated Warsaw and only two students in Krakow. In addition, in the case of Kazakhstan, several indications or single indications also concerned Lublin and Gdańsk, in Kyrgyzstan, Lublin, Wrocław, Białystok and Olsztyn were indicated, and Poznań in Türkiye. Based on the students' answers, it can be concluded that the students from Bishkek knew the most cities and those from Karabük the least. The responses received are consistent not only with the stereotypical perception of Poland through the prism of its current and former capital but also with the already-known results of research on the perception of the Polish brand (Lemanowicz, 2017; Piątek and Kobylińska, 2019).

Questions about natural and anthropogenic tourist attractions of Poland (Q9, Q10) caused most problems with correct answers for all students. Only single indications were given to the Białowieża Forest, the beach in Sopot and the Vistula and Odra rivers. Unfortunately, the surveyed students were unable to indicate anthropogenic values, although in the previous questions, the answers included castles in Krakow and Malbork, as well as several cities, well-known tourist centers. It is an interesting issue because similar research conducted almost ten years ago also highlights the weakness of the perception of Poland as a tourist destination and the weakness of its brand and promotion of the country's image (Johann, 2014; Kiryluk and Glińska, 2015). Therefore, it should be concluded that recent years have not brought any positive changes in promoting Poland as a tourist destination. The efforts undertaken and the implemented ministerial programs (Lusińska and Żeleźnik, 2017) did not affect the recognition of Poland as a tourist destination.

Compared to tourist attractions, significantly better answers were given to questions about famous Poles (in general; Q11) and famous Polish athletes (Q12). Among the well-known Poles, the most frequently repeated figures in the polls in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were Nicolaus Copernicus, John Paul II, and Fryderyk Chopin. In Bishkek, students also mentioned Lech Wałęsa; Józef Piłsudski, and interestingly, also Polish writers: Adam Mickiewicz, Henryk Sienkiewicz and Ryszard Kapuściński. On the other hand, in Karabük, as it seems, well-known Poles, such as Mickiewicz, Chopin or John Paul II, received only single indications. Significantly more answers were received to the question about famous athletes (Table 2). The surveyed students in Kyrgyzstan also mentioned (1-3 indications) Agnieszka Radwańska, Kamil Stoch, Kamil Glik and Marcin Gortat, and in Karabük - Łukasz Jarosz. Compared to previous studies (Florek, 2005; Lemanowicz, 2017), changes in the list of recognizable Poles are visible. Although Nicolaus Copernicus, Fryderyk Chopin and John Paul II are famous beyond time, among the athletes, next to Adam Małysz, Robert Lewandowski, Robert Kubica, Kamil Stoch and Justyna Kowalczyk appeared very well in the media. The last two survey questions concerned the association with the name "Poland" (Q13) and the ranking of Central European countries in terms of their tourist attractiveness. At the Kazakh and Kyrgyz universities, the first associations concerned architecture, which received five and eighteen indications, respectively. In second place in Astana were footballers, a high level of education and a "well-paid" job, and in Bishkek the "White Eagle" award, national costume, castles, "polka" (dance) and beer. At the university in Karabük, students are unable to identify associations with Poland, and single votes concerned the economy and football. The ranking of tourist attractiveness indicates the lack of a clear favorite or the lack of weakness in the functioning of the brand of the assessed countries in the minds of students of individual universities (Figure 3). With some approximation, with the previously presented reservations and limitations of the research, based on the respondents' indications, it can be said that Hungary and Poland were considered the most attractive (the sum of the scores for each of these countries was 12). Austria and Slovakia ranked lower with eight points, and the Czech Rep. received the lowest marks.

Table 2. The most famous athletes from Poland (Q12)
 (Source: own calculation)

Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Türkiye
Lewandowski Robert (90%)	Lewandowski Robert (25%)	Lewandowski Robert (12%)
Kubica Robert (30%)	Kowalczyk Justyna (16%)	
Stoch Kamil (30%)	Kubica Robert (13%) Małysz Adam (13%)	

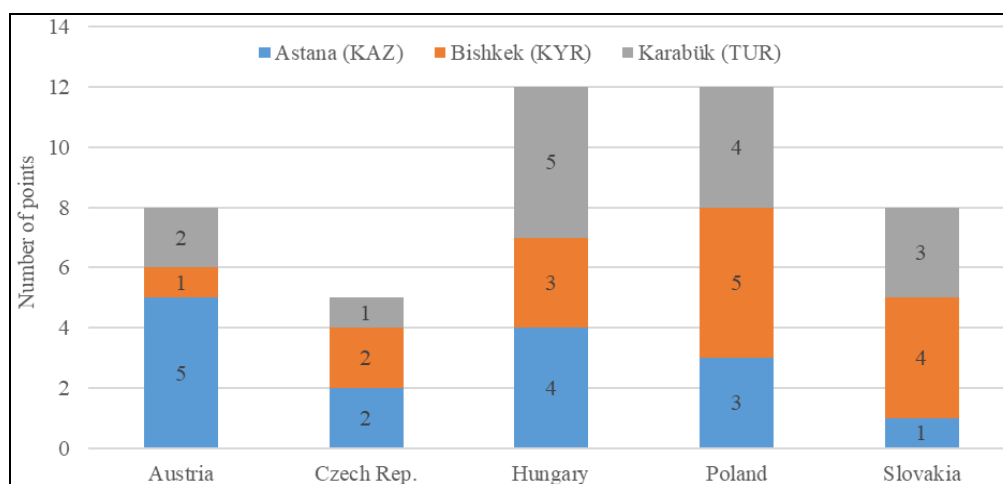


Figure 3. Ranking of tourist attractiveness of Central European countries (Q14); from 1 point – the least attractive; to 5 points – the most attractive (own elaboration)

CONCLUSION

The answers to (Q1) made it possible to exclude the influence of the experience of students from Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye on the perception of Poland's tourism brand. And in the case of Kazakhstan, only five students were to visit Poland. Subsequent questions (Q2-Q7) showed average (Astana) to poor (Kyrgyzstan and Türkiye) knowledge of Poland's location in Europe, its access to the sea, the name of the sea or countries that border Poland (Table 1, Figure 2). Just like questions about the size of the territory or the number of inhabitants. The only question that most of the respondents from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan answered correctly was the question about the capital of Poland. Again, the responses of Turkish students were relatively poor.

Questions about the natural and anthropogenic tourist attractions of Poland (Q8, Q9, Q10) caused the most problems with correct answers for all students. Many of the respondents did not give any explanation, which may indicate a lack of knowledge or interest in Poland among the respondents. In the group of questions about famous Poles (Q11, Q12), as might be expected, Nicolaus Copernicus, John Paul II and Fryderyk Chopin received the most responses. Like predicted answers about athletes. The most frequently mentioned are Robert Lewandowski, Robert Kubica, Kamil Stoch, Adam Małysz and Justyna Kowalczyk (Table 2). The most commonly indicated associations included architecture, football and economy (Q13). The ranking of tourist attractiveness (Q14) brought interesting cognitive results. As shown by the data (Figure 3) of the Pole and Hungary, they were defined as more attractive in tourism than other countries (Austria, Czech Republic, Slovakia).

From the point of view of achieving the research goal, which was an attempt to determine the knowledge of future specialists in the field of tourism and tourist geography in the field of tourism values and the tourist brand of Poland, it can be concluded that Poland as a tourist brand is poorly recognized at all the surveyed universities.

On the other hand, taking into account all the results of the study, in which students from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan gave relatively the most significant number of correct answers to questions about the geography of Poland, it can be concluded that the thesis about the impact of Europeanization in the Russian version on more excellent knowledge of Poland presented in the work has been positively verified. However, the issue of the influence of the Polish minority in Kazakhstan requires in-depth research with the participation of students of Polish origin.

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