

# Perceived Inclusiveness of the Context, Identities and Acculturation of Russians in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia

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Kyrgyzstan and Estonia are two post-Soviet countries which, after the collapse of the USSR, chose different trajectories of ethnopolitical and socio-economic development, attitudes towards the Russian language, the Soviet period of their history, as well as interaction with Russia in the international arena. The focus of the article is perceived inclusiveness of the modern sociocultural contexts by Russians living in Kyrgyzstan or Estonia as well as its role in their identification and acculturation (N = 630). As a result of the path analysis, it was revealed that the perceived inclusiveness of the contexts of Kyrgyzstan and Estonia by Russians is positively associated with civic (Kyrgyz and Estonian) identity, the strategy of integration and assimilation, and is negatively associated with the strategy of separation. Moreover, the perceived inclusiveness of the Estonian context by Russians is negatively associated with ethnic and religious identity. These and other universal and context-specific patterns of relationships are discussed in the article through the prism of sociocultural contexts of Kyrgyzstan and Estonia.

**Keywords:** perceived inclusiveness of the context, ethnic identity, civic identity, religious identity, European identity, acculturation, integration, assimilation, separation, Russians, Kyrgyzstan, Estonia.

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# Воспринимаемая инклюзивность контекста, идентичности и аккультурация русских в Кыргызстане и Эстонии

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Кыргызстан и Эстония – две постсоветские страны, которые после распада СССР выбрали разные траектории этнополитического и социально-экономического развития, отношения к русскому языку, советскому периоду своей истории, а также взаимодействию с Россией на международной арене. В фокусе внимания статьи воспринимаемая русскими, проживающими в Кыргызстане и Эстонии, инклюзивность современного социокультурного контекста данных стран и ее роль в их идентификации и аккультурации (N=630). В результате путевого анализа выявлено, что если русские воспринимают контексты Кыргызстана и Эстонии инклюзивными, то у них довольно сильно выражена гражданская (кыргызстанская или эстонская) идентичность, стратегии интеграции и ассимиляции и слабо выражена стратегия сепарации. При этом русские в Эстонии, воспринимающие контекст Эстонии как эксклюзивный, имеют сильно выраженные этническую и религиозную идентичности. Эти и другие универсальные и контекстно специфические пат-

терны связей обсуждаются в статье через призму социокультурных контекстов Кыргызстана и Эстонии.

**Ключевые слова:** воспринимаемая инклюзивность контекста, этническая идентичность, гражданская идентичность, религиозная идентичность, европейская идентичность, аккультурация, интеграция, ассимиляция, сепарация, русские, Кыргызстан, Эстония.

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## Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the fact that about 25 million Russians outside of Russia suddenly became a political and ethnic minority in the newly independent states [18]. Thirty years have passed since the collapse, and today about 16 million Russians live outside of Russia in post-Soviet countries, they somehow adapt to the changing socio-cultural contexts of the newly independent countries. At the same time, each country of the post-Soviet space has chosen its own path of nation-building, attitudes towards the Russian language and the Russian population [18]. In this regard, Russians living in post-Soviet countries that have chosen different trajectories of development are of great interest for cross-cultural psychology.

For example, in Kyrgyzstan the percentage of Russians is small, only 5.6% of the total population of the country [10], while Russian remains the official language and more than 83% of the population of Kyrgyzstan speaks Russian. In addition, in Kyrgyzstan, an orientation towards interaction with Russia is clearly traced [12]. However, from an economic point of view, Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest post-Soviet countries, with a high level of emigration of the Russian and local population [11].

Of no less interest are Russians living in post-Soviet countries, where, after the collapse of the USSR, a wave of de-Russification rapidly passed [21], as well as alienation from Russia in the international arena and a revision of local majorities' attitude to the Soviet period of their history [2]. A striking example of such country is Estonia, which is home to about 25% of Russians [25] and which is one of the most economically developed countries of the post-Soviet space that entered the European Union [9].

The inclusiveness of the sociocultural contexts of post-Soviet countries perceived by Russians has not been studied yet. The relationship between the perceived inclusiveness of the context and the identities and acculturation of Russians living in post-Soviet countries was

also not studied. So, this study aims to fill this gap and to answer the following questions:

- What are the universal and context-specific consequences of perceived sociocultural contexts of post-Soviet countries which have chosen different trajectories of attitudes towards the Russian language, Russians and interaction with Russia (Estonia and Kyrgyzstan) for intercultural interaction of Russians and majorities and for identification of Russians?
- What social identities of Russians, depending on the context, can exhibit the functions of inclusion and exclusion?
- What acculturation strategies are preferred by Russians in intercultural interaction with the ethnic majority of these countries?

## Acculturation and sociocultural context

Most of the research, which aims at studying the individual factors of the process of acculturation and its results, often ignores the fact that these factors operate in the broader context of intercultural contact, and not in a social vacuum [13; 14]. This problem is solved by an “ecological approach” to acculturation, which is based on the concept of U. Bronfenbrenner (1977) on human development. According to this concept, human development occurs at various levels of “ecological systems” [17], ranging from microsystems in which people are directly involved, such as home, school or workplace, to the macrosystem. For representatives of an ethnic minority, culture, views, attitudes of the dominant society / ethnic majority constitute the macrosystem that influences their adaptation through various microsystems.

To study the role of the sociocultural context as a macrosystem, an approach based on perceived factors is promising [6]. This is due to the fact that “...people's subjective perceptions of reality constitute and become the reality that informs their psychological responses” [27, p. 173]. Therefore, meta-perceptions of the context acquire particular relevance, revealing how people per-

ceive the degree to which the dominant society supports the process of integration of ethnic minorities and migrants [19; 13; 6].

It is also important to note that, depending on the context, identities can exhibit the functions of inclusiveness and exclusiveness [7]. Therefore, this study is focused on the strength of ethnic, civic, religious and European identities among Russians in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan.

Acculturation in this study is considered within the framework of the theory of acculturation developed by J. Berry [15]. According to this theory, the process of entering the culture of the dominant society is associated with two main questions that a representative of an ethnic minority is trying to answer for himself: to what extent does he/she recognize the importance of preserving his cultural identity? and to what extent should he/she be included in the culture of the dominant society? Depending on the combination of answers to these two most important questions, four main strategies of acculturation formed: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. The focus of this study is on the first three strategies.

Based on the above, the following research questions are formulated.

1. What are the cross-country similarities and differences in the indicators of perceived inclusiveness of the context, social identities and strategies of acculturation of Russians living in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia?
2. What is the relationship between the perceived inclusiveness of the context, social identities and acculturation strategies of Russians living in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia?
3. Taking into account the differences in the socio-cultural contexts of Kyrgyzstan and Estonia, are there universal and / or context-specific patterns of the relationship studied?

### Sample

The study sample included 630 Russians living in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan. Table 1 shows the gender and age characteristics of the sample.

The socio-psychological survey was carried out with the help of colleagues from partner universities in

Estonia and Kyrgyzstan. In Kyrgyzstan, the survey was conducted in person, in Estonia using the online platform 1ka.

### Method

The study used scales from the MIRIPS questionnaire [16], adapted for the Russian sample [5]. Answers to almost all scales were given in the form of a 5-point Likert scale from 1 – absolutely disagree to 5 – absolutely agree.

*Perceived discrimination.* The scale included 5 questions, for example: “I was treated unfairly at work (promotion, benefits) or while studying because of my nationality,”  $\alpha > 0.79$ .

*Perceived multiculturalism* was measured using a descriptive version of the multicultural ideology scale. The scale included 6 questions, for example: “It is customary in [Estonia / Kyrgyzstan] to help ethnic groups to preserve their cultural heritage”,  $\alpha > 0.71$ .

*Perceived permeability of boundaries* [23]. The scale consisted of 4 questions, for example: “If a Russian person wanted to participate in social activities together with the Estonians/Kyrgyz, it would be ... for him/her to do so”. Answers are given from 1 – very difficult to 5 – very easy,  $\alpha > 0.86$ .

The construct of perceived inclusiveness of the context was created as a composite variable taking into account factor loadings such as perceived discrimination, perceived multiculturalism, and perceived permeability of boundaries. Indicators of confirmatory factor analysis are satisfactory and correspond to the recommended ones: CFI = 1.00; RMSEA = 0.04; PCLOSE = 0.48; sRMR = 0.03.

*Ethnic identity.* The scale included 4 questions, for example: “I consider myself Russian”,  $\alpha > 0.86$ .

*Civic identity.* The scale included 4 questions, for example: “I consider myself a citizen [of Estonia / Kyrgyzstan]”,  $\alpha > 0.85$ .

*Religious identity.* The scale included 4 questions, for example: “I consider myself a representative of my religion,”  $\alpha > 0.92$ .

*European identity.* The scale included 4 questions, for example: “I consider myself a European”,  $\alpha > 0.93$ .

Table 1

Gender and age characteristics of the sample

Group	N	Age			Sex	
		M	Min.–Max.	SD	Male	female
Russians in Estonia	330	37	18-80	16,6	151	179
Russians in Kyrgyzstan	300	36	17-65	17,4	104	196

Notes: N – total sample size; M – is the arithmetic mean; Min. – minimum age; Max. – maximum age; SD – is the standard deviation.

*Acculturation strategies:* integration – included 4 questions, for example: “I believe that Russians living in [Estonia / Kyrgyzstan] should both maintain their own cultural traditions and learn [Estonian / Kyrgyz]”,  $\alpha > 0.64$ ; the separation also included 4 questions, for example: “I prefer to have only Russians as friends”,  $\alpha > 0.68$ ; assimilation also included 4 questions, for example: “I prefer to have only [Estonians / Kyrgyz] as friends”,  $\alpha > 0.64$ .

## Results

Table 2 shows the means for the main variables of the study, as well as the results of their comparison using the Student’s t-test for Russians living in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan.

The data presented in table. 2, indicate that the perceived multiculturalism is significantly higher among Russians living in Kyrgyzstan than among Russians living in Estonia. Ethnic and religious identities are significantly more pronounced among Russians in Kyrgyzstan than among Russians in Estonia, while civic identity is significantly more pronounced among Russians in Estonia than among Russians in Kyrgyzstan. The strategies of integration and assimilation are more preferred by Russians in Estonia than in Kyrgyzstan, while the strategy of separation is more pronounced among Russians in Kyrgyzstan than in Estonia.

Multigroup path analysis of the relationship between the perceived inclusiveness of the context, identities and acculturation strategies of Russians living in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan showed a partial absence of structural invariance (our indicators – CFI = 0.03; RMSEA = 0.004 – were higher and equal to the recommended

ones – CFI < 0.01; RMSEA < 0.01). Based on this, we analyzed the links between the perceived inclusiveness of the context, identities and acculturation strategies of Russians in each country separately. The models showed good fitness indicators (Estonia: CMIN / df = 2.10; CFI = 0.97; sRMR = 0.04; RMSEA = 0.06; PCLOSE = 0.29. Kyrgyzstan: CMIN / df = 1.81; CFI = 0.97; sRMR = 0.04; RMSEA = 0.05; PCLOSE = 0.42).

The results of the path analysis presented in Figure 1 show that for Russians in Estonia, the perceived inclusiveness of the context is significantly negatively related to ethnic and religious identities and is significantly positively related to civic Estonian and European identities. At the same time, among Russians in Kyrgyzstan, the perceived inclusiveness of the context is significantly positively related only to civic Kyrgyz identity.

The perceived inclusiveness of the context is significantly positively related to the integration strategy and significantly negatively related to the separation strategy among Russians living in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan.

For Russians in Estonia, only Estonian civic identity is significantly positively related to the integration strategy, while for Russians in Kyrgyzstan, civic Kyrgyz and religious identities are significantly positively related to the integration strategy.

For Russians in Estonia, ethnic identity is significantly positively related to the separation strategy, while civic Estonian and European identities are significantly negatively related to the separation strategy. For Russians in Kyrgyzstan, ethnic, religious, and European identities are significantly positively related to the separation strategy, while civic Kyrgyz identity is significantly negatively related to the separation strategy.

For Russians in Estonia, ethnic identity is signifi-

Table 2

**Comparison of means of target variables**

Variables	Russians in Kyrgyzstan (n=300)		Russians in Estonia (n=330)		Group comparison
	M	SD	M	SD	
Indicators of the perceived inclusiveness of the context					
Perceived permeability of boundaries	2,84	0,84	2,86	0,79	$t = -0,28; p > ,05$
Perceived multiculturalism	4,36	0,59	3,24	0,58	$t = 4,18; p < ,001$
Perceived discrimination	2,09	0,94	2,00	0,87	$t = 0,30; p > ,05$
Identities					
Ethnic identity	4,30	0,78	3,99	1,03	$t = 4,18; p < ,001$
Civic identity	3,48	0,93	3,73	0,99	$t = -3,31; p < ,001$
Religious identity	3,22	1,29	2,79	1,38	$t = 4,05; p < ,001$
European identity	2,82	1,26	2,79	1,38	$t = 0,30; p > ,05$
Acculturation strategies					
Integration	3,98	0,68	4,28	0,69	$t = -5,34; p < ,001$
Separation	2,76	0,85	2,47	0,89	$t = 4,18; p < ,001$
Assimilation	1,51	0,49	1,79	0,80	$t = -5,24; p < ,001$

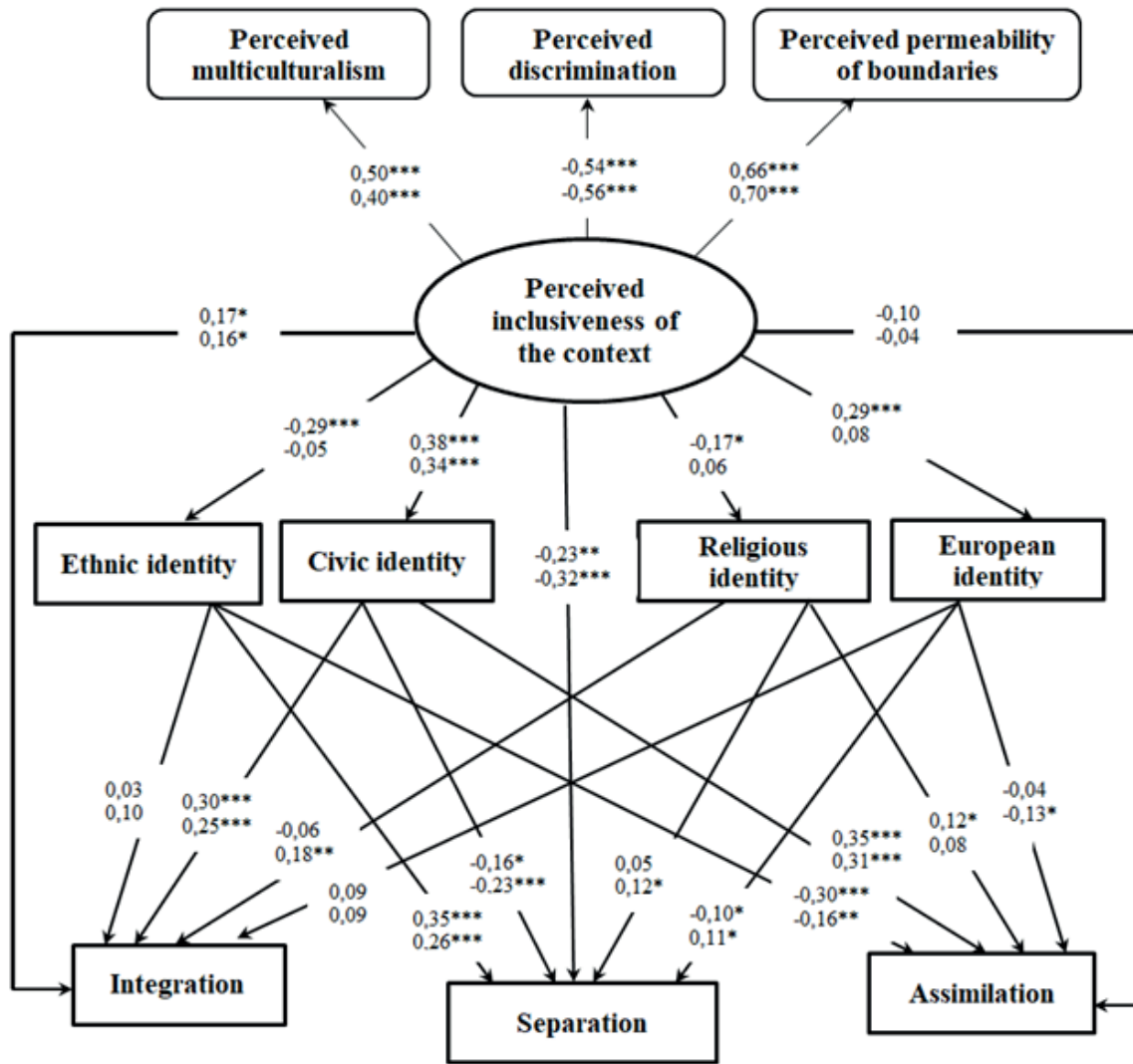


Fig. 1. A path model of the relationship of the perceived inclusiveness of the context, identities and acculturation strategies of Russians living in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan: the upper coefficients refer to the Russians living in Estonia, the lower coefficients refer to the Russians living in Kyrgyzstan; "\*" –  $p < ,001$ ; "\*\*" –  $p < ,01$ ; "\*\*\*" –  $p < ,05$

cantly negatively related to the assimilation strategy, while civic Estonian and religious identities are significantly positively related to the assimilation strategy. For Russians in Kyrgyzstan, ethnic and European identities are significantly negatively related to the assimilation strategy, while civic Kyrgyz identity is significantly positively related to the assimilation strategy.

### Discussion

Russians living in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan estimate that it is rather difficult to become included in the dominant society. In general, it is noted in Estonia that, for example, the labor market is ethnically segmented and ethnic Estonians have an advantage over non-Estonians in a number of areas [20]. Whereas in Kyrgyzstan, Russians are included in the category of the so-called "back-

ward" population – backward not by definition, but by the degree of remoteness from power and resources [11].

It is worth noting that the questions about the permeability of borders did not concern personal experience, but attitudes regarding their permeability for an abstract Russian person who symbolizes a group. When it comes to personal experience, for example, the level of personal discrimination among Russians in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan is rather weak. Probably, there is a phenomenon of discrepancy between personal and group discrimination, which manifests itself mainly in disadvantaged groups [22].

The perceived multiculturalism (real one) that Russians directly observe in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan is highly rated by them. At the same time, Russians in Kyrgyzstan believe that the multicultural ideology is implemented significantly more than Russians in Estonia. This difference may be based on the fact that



in Kyrgyzstan Russian is the official language of communication along with Kyrgyz, despite the fact that the number of Russians in this country does not exceed 6% of the total population of the country [10]. In Estonia, in this respect, the situation is more complicated, since de-Russification in the public sphere took place officially and rapidly [21], despite the fact that there are about 25% of total population are Russians in Estonia [25].

A comparative analysis of social identities showed that ethnic and religious identities are more pronounced among Russians in Kyrgyzstan than in Estonia. In general, the actualization of ethno-differentiating identities among representatives of ethnic and religious minorities in a culturally distant context has been noted in other studies. For example, Orthodox Russians living in the Russian region, where the main population is represented by Muslims, demonstrate a more pronounced religious identity than Russians living in the region where the main population is represented by Orthodox Christians [4].

Civic identity is more pronounced among Russians living in Estonia than among Russians living in Kyrgyzstan. This distinction has rather deep roots, which are still relevant today. So, for example, D. Furman and E. Zadorozhnyuk (2004) note that in Soviet times, for Russians the force of attraction of Western-type Baltic cultures was much greater than Asian cultures.

Regarding acculturation strategies, it can be said that the separation strategy is more pronounced among Russians in Kyrgyzstan than among Russians in Estonia. Whereas the strategies of integration and assimilation are more preferred by Russians in Estonia, than by Russians in Kyrgyzstan. In general, this was also evident during the Soviet period. So, for example, if in the Asian republics there was a "russification" of the local population [1], then in the Baltic countries the opposite process of "baltification" of Russians was going on [9]. The fact that Russians prefer integration in Estonia, or rather "critical" integration, is also evidenced by the results of a cross-cultural study of the socio-political integration of Russians in Estonia, Norway and Finland [24].

In summary, it should be noted that in Estonia for Russians, civic and European identities are inclusive (common with Estonians), and in Kyrgyzstan, only civic identity play inclusive role. Thus, the identification basis for inclusive strategies of acculturation (integration and assimilation) is higher for Russians in Estonia, which is confirmed by the higher rates of integration and assimilation among Russians in Estonia. For Russians in Kyrgyzstan, three identities (ethnic, religious and European) are exclusive, and in order to preserve them, Russians need separation, the preference towards which they demonstrate.

### **Perceived inclusiveness of the context and social identities**

The positive relationship between the perceived inclusiveness of the context and civic identity turned out to be universal for Russians in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan. In addition, among Russians in Estonia, the perceived inclusiveness of the context is positively related to another inclusive identity for this context – the European one. Thus, Russians in Estonia who perceive the context as inclusive have strong civic Estonian and European identities.

Quite interesting is the negative relationship between the perceived inclusiveness of the Estonian context by Russians and their ethnic and religious identities. It turns out that Russians in Estonia, who perceive the sociocultural context of Estonia as exclusive for them, have a pronounced ethnic and religious identity. This is probably due to the fact that the perceived exclusiveness of the context provokes among Russians a search for psychological protection of their cultural identity. Moreover, the obtained results may partly contain an answer to the question: why do Russians have a "blurred" ethnic identity in the post-Soviet countries, especially in the Baltic states? [18]. According to the results of the study, this may be due to the fact that it is precisely "blurred" ethnic Russian and religious identities that are associated with the perceived inclusiveness of the context.

### **Perceived inclusiveness of the context and acculturation strategies**

The perceived inclusiveness of the context is positively related to the integration strategy and negatively related to the separation strategy. These associations are universal, since they were found in Russians in both countries. The obtained results are consistent with the results of an earlier study on internal migrants in Russia, where the perceived inclusiveness of the social context by migrants was also positively related to the preference for integration and negatively related to the preference for separation [6].

### **Identities and Acculturation Strategies**

Civic identity is positively related to the strategies of integration and assimilation, while it is negatively related to the separation strategy among Russians in both countries. The negative relationship between ethnic identity and the strategy of assimilation, as well as the positive relationship between ethnic identity and the separation strategy, are also universal for Russians in Estonia and Kyrgyzstan. These connections were confirmed earlier in a sample of the Russian ethnic minority [8].

It is important to note that the religious identity of Russians in Kyrgyzstan, along with their civic identity, are positive predictors of the integration strategy. According to J. Berry's theory of acculturation, the integration strategy is characterized by the preservation of one's own cultural heritage and interactions with the dominant society [15]. Obviously, the preservation of cultural heritage among Russians in Kyrgyzstan is realized through the preservation of their religious identity, while interaction with the dominant society is fueled by a pronounced civic Kyrgyz identity.

The separation strategy is preferred by those Russians in Kyrgyzstan who have strong ethnic, religious and European identities and a weak civic identity. Whereas the assimilation strategy is preferred by those who have weak ethnic and European identities. In other words, ethnic, religious and European identities of Russians in Kyrgyzstan are exclusive ethno-differentiating identities leading to separation. At the same time, the religious identity of Russians in Kyrgyzstan can only be conditionally attributed to an exclusive identity (in terms of disunity), since it is a predictor of not only the strategy of separation, but also the strategy of integration.

For Russians in Estonia, European identity acts as a negative predictor of the separation strategy, while for Russians in Kyrgyzstan, European identity turns out to be a positive predictor of the separation strategy and a negative predictor of the assimilation strategy. The results prove its exclusive function in the Kyrgyz context and inclusive function in the Estonian context. At the same time, the re-

ligious identity of Russians in Estonia turned out to be a significant predictor of the assimilation strategy. However, it was previously noted that religious identity is negatively related to the perceived inclusiveness of the Estonian context by Russians. This chain of relationship is very interesting and needs to be verified in future research.

## Conclusions

This study made it possible to identify and analyze universal and context-specific patterns of relationship between the perceived inclusiveness of the context, identities and acculturation strategies of Russians living in Kyrgyzstan and Estonia. The positive relationship between the perceived inclusiveness of the context and civic identity and the strategy of integration, as well as the negative relationship with the strategy of separation, turned out to be universal for both countries. One of the context-specific relationships was the negative relationship between the perceived inclusiveness of the context and ethnic and religious identities among Russians in Estonia. This relationship makes one wonder whether the context can be perceived as inclusive, if at the same time cultural identities should be leveled? As we can see, the present research, possessing undoubted novelty, raises important issues of understanding the inclusiveness of the context and its measurement, contributing to the further development of context-oriented research in a cross-cultural perspective.

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