

THE POLITICS OF IMAGE AND NATION BRANDING IN POST-
COMMUNIST COUNTRIES. BRANDING POLICIES IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Branding represents a prominent topic of the media today and people tend to understand it as being equivalent to advertising, graphic design, promotion, public relations or propaganda, but the concept has many other meanings when applied in the context of images or representations of a country. The article sustains that for post-communist countries, besides the real necessity to conceive and develop new policies to ensure their economic growth, there is the necessity to elaborate new policies meant to define powerful nation-brands to promote their image on the international market. After the fall of communism, the process of nation branding has gained great popularity in Eastern-European countries becoming a focus of attention for their governments. In the past decade, these countries have engaged in branding campaigns which have been more or less successful.

Keywords: media, branding, nation-brand/branding, national identity

1. Introduction

Nation brand has become a pervasive phenomenon of the twenty first century and plays a highly influential role in the politics of a country's image both internally and abroad. In the past decade, national governments around the world have shown an increasing preoccupation with the construction or reconstruction of images of national identity. The article starts from the assumption that this effort at defining new identity/identities is all the more significant for post-communist countries which struggle to leave behind the heritage of communism and find themselves a place in a world of fierce competitiveness. The article argues that for post-communist countries besides the real necessity to conceive and develop new policies to ensure their economic growth, there is the necessity to elaborate new policies meant to redefine their national identity. For them, it is perhaps even more important, including for their economic welfare, to find their place within the frontiers of a Europe from which they have been separated by the Iron Curtain for too long. The battle is evidently one of gaining the international market through branding and

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territorial marketing, but also one of redefining the long sought after identity and sense of belonging to the wider European community of people and of shared social, political and economic values, ideals and realities. The article offers various definitions of the concepts used in the analysis and examines briefly the context – the post-communist phase – in which Romania makes efforts at finding and presenting to the world a better image(s) of its new identity. For this purpose, the article engages on a critical analysis of the various commercials about our country.

2. What is nation branding?

There is no doubt that the branding of a nation has become a worldwide phenomenon in the current context, having a great impact for already developed, economically and politically strong countries and less developed countries alike. Recent studies (Simon Anholt 1996, 2009, 2011, 2013; Keith Dinnie 2008, 2011; Melissa Aronczyk 2013) sustain that every country, city or region can build and manage its own brand image and that more and more governments around the world allocate resources for the elaboration and development of their nation brand.

These researchers offer various definitions of the concept. According to Simon Anholt, who coined the phrase ‘nation branding’ in 1996, ‘...the reputations of countries (and, by extension, of cities and regions too) behave rather like the brand images of companies and products, and they are equally critical to the progress, prosperity, and good management of those places’ (2013: 1). Although nation branding may be created on this model, it has too often been associated with the creation of a favourable image for a country through marketing communications. Anholt, who has deepened the study of the concept along years, has shown how important it is for all those interested and involved in developing nation-brands to understand that branding goes beyond a mere attachment of an image to a country. The author points out that:

Unfortunately, the phrase “nation brand” soon became distorted, mainly by naïve governments in willing collusion with ambitious consulting firms, into “nation branding”, a dangerously misleading phrase which seems to contain a promise that the images of countries can be directly manipulated using the techniques of commercial marketing communications (2013: 1).

While branding is a main topic of the media today and people tend to understand it as being equivalent with advertising, graphic design,

promotion, public relations or propaganda, the concept has many other meanings when applied in the context of images or representations of a country, region or city. Anholt calls attention to the fact that even though '...the usual context of brand theory may be buying and selling and promoting consumer goods, this is a thin layer that covers some of the hardest philosophical questions one can tackle: the nature of perception of reality...the phenomena of mass psychology, the mysteries of national identity, leadership, culture and social cohesion, and much more besides' (2007: xii). In his works, the author has repeatedly urged governments, branding consultants and scholars to abandon the naive and superficial interpretation of nation branding.

Along the same lines, several other researchers highlight the complexity of the notions of 'brand' and 'branding' when applied in the context of a country's reputation and image on the international stage. Melissa Aronczyk, for instance, in her influential study *Branding the Nation. The Global Business of National Identity*, firmly states that nation branding takes its cues, but is not the same as product branding. She insists on the concept's expansion '...the concept of the brand has escaped its corporate origins and now stands for an indeterminate range of political and cultural meanings' (2013: 8). According to her, nation branding goes beyond any simplistic marketing logic, since it means to use '...the tools, techniques and expertise of commercial branding ... as a way to help a nation articulate a more coherent and cohesive national identity...' (2013: 3).

In his turn, Dinnie emphasizes the differences between commercial brands and the role and functions of nation-brands. In his view, a nation-brand has a multi-faceted nature which necessarily integrates the dimension of national identity. In this sense, the concept may be defined as 'the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences' (2008: 15). At the same time, the author points out that the brand-building process has to be complex and has to be carried out over several years. 'Nations need to acknowledge this reality and adopt a long-term strategic view when building their nation-brand, rather than aiming for a quick fix short-term advertising campaign whose effects may be ephemeral'. The same idea is sustained by Anholt when he states that:

Only a consistent, coordinated and unbroken stream of useful, noticeable, world-class and, above all, relevant ideas, products and policies can gradually enhance the reputation of the country that produces them. I have often summarised this process as consisting of three main components: strategy, substance and symbolic actions. [...]

A single symbolic action will seldom achieve any lasting effect. Multiple actions should emanate from as many different sectors as possible in order to build a rounded and believable image for the place; they must also continue in unbroken succession for many years (2013: 2-3).

In the light of these definitions, it may be clearly stated that nation-branding goes far beyond the features of product branding and as such it proves to be a useful and important tool in a country's coordinated struggle to maintain a high position on the global market. In a world which looks much more like a huge all-encompassing market, governments seem to become more and more aware of the importance of finding new ways of looking at and defining assets like identity, reputation, fame, in order to remain attractive for both internal and external consumers. It becomes clear that a powerful brand can secure a favourable position in a competition where each country must fight for its share of the world's tourists, students, investors or international cultural events.

3. Nation-branding and the communist heritage

After the fall of the totalitarian regimes in South-Eastern Europe, the post-communist countries entered a new stage of their history in which they had to face all sorts of challenges and had to adjust continuously to meet the standards of the socio-political systems already existing in Western countries. For them, this new phase has been a very difficult one, given the radical transformations they have to undergo at all levels: economical, social, political. Adapting to the requirements and values of a democratic regime has been a tricky task for the majority of the former communist countries. Together with these new challenges, they had to go through a process of redefinition of their identity in order to address both internal and external audiences. This process has been reflected in various media used in branding campaigns that have been conceived and developed with the specific purpose of 'selling' their newly constructed image to their own citizens and perhaps even more to the citizens of the world.

Living behind the communist past and its heritage has been problematic and painful and forced post-communist countries to a series of choices that have not always been easy to make. One of these choices is related to the material marks left by the communist regime, like monuments, buildings and other constructions that can be seen everywhere

you go, from the countryside to the biggest cities. Many of these upsetting signs have been removed, as people who have been forced to live in the terrible conditions of a cruel regime wanted to forget and move on. But others, many others of these signs remained and are still in place. The choice that many of the post-communist countries had to make was to keep some of the most impressive marks of their past and change them into an element of their new brand-image in order to attract tourists who seemed to be interested in them. In the process of reconstruction of their post-whatever identities, the definition of a brand seemed all the more pressing, almost as pressing as the profound restructuring of their social-political system, as they have been suddenly thrown into an arena of brutal competition. It is interesting to see how some of them have chosen to totally banish from their branding process any reference to a painful and disquieting past, while others have chosen to keep traces of their communist heritage and show them to the world as constituent parts of their new, re-defined image. Perhaps, very good examples would be those of Germany and Hungary or Romania.

In Germany, the Berlin Wall has been almost completely demolished in an attempt at erasing any remnants of a monument that reminded people of the fate of their country after the Second World War and of the existence of a communist regime in the German Democratic Republic. Parts of the wall have been preserved as memorials and they seem to exert some form of attraction for tourists all over the world and for domestic nostalgic tourists alike. So, in Germany, the reaction or choice has been one of rejection as a result of an almost unanimous desire to consign the wall and its surrounding stories to the past. It is said that, from the Berlin Wall has remained less than from the Hadrian Wall (!) (Baker 1993).

In Hungary, the Statuepark in Budapest is still one of its most known tourist attraction. After the fall of communism, the city authorities of Budapest were faced with the dilemma over what to do with the very visible monuments left by the regime, namely the numerous statues built in memory of the communist heroes, both Hungarian and Russians. Certainly, there were voices sustaining that these had to be preserved, while others asked for their rapid removal so as no sign of communism be kept into place. Many of the citizens of Budapest seemed indifferent to the statues' fate. At the end of 1991, a compromise was reached, in the sense that the responsibility to decide what to do with them was transferred to the districts of the city. Finally, an architect was assigned the task of designing a statue park and his declared intention '... was to create something... politically and artistically neutral, neither celebrating, nor ridiculing the communist era'. The park is '... an open-air museum' that 'Western commentators have inevitably labelled a theme park' (Light 2000: 167). The

park displays many statues from the communist era and in a very typical postmodernist style it presents metaphors of state socialism in a sort of ironic re-construction of the past. The irony in fact is represented by the great number of tourists who gathered to see the park and are still interested in seeing it.

In Romania, the attitude towards the past is somehow different than in Hungary's case where citizens seemed more relaxed in dealing with the communist past. Romanians seem more eager to leave behind a very painful and oppressive historical time, but unfortunately the interest in the 'House of the People' – today renamed the Parliament Palace - that foreign tourists have shown along years determined its inclusion in the commercial materials about Romania. Although it is still reluctantly accepted, today, the 'House of the People' is considered a symbol of the city of Bucharest and a symbol of Romania itself. The building's almost enforced recognition as a symbol reflects the ambivalent status of the communist heritage and the clash existing between what the 'House of the People' represents for Romanians and what it represents for foreign tourists.

4. Branding Romania - present and future

Romania has made various attempts at constructing an impressive brand nation in the past decade. Its efforts at redefining its national identity and at reinventing an image that would place it in a favourable position on the international market has been somehow spoiled by the superficial understanding and dealing with this process of definition and branding. Apparently, the government and the other agents involved in the making of various commercial materials about Romania have failed to understand that branding is what Anholt calls a serious, persistent work that spans over years and consists of a series of concerted strategies, actions and symbolic actions (Anholt 2011). Marketing and branding campaigns in Romania have had unfortunately very little impact on both internal and external audiences.

The first branding efforts were made in 2001 with a project called 'Made in Romania' which did not last long and whose effects were very far from the ones expected. Afterwards, there was another short-lived and equally unsuccessful project taking the form of a photo album distributed under the name *The Eternal and Fascinating Romania*. In 2003, it was initiated the first long-term branding campaign by a 'wiser' Romanian government that seemed fully committed to the idea of creating a powerful nation-brand. The first stage of this campaign was a television spot presented under the slogan 'Romania: Simply Surprising'. This phrase was the target

of pointed criticism from Richard Batchelor, chief of the consulting team for the World Tourism Organization (Kaneva, Popescu 2011).

The consequence of this critique was that the following five commercials were released without any slogan in 2004. However, 'Simply Surprising' has remained in use on Romania's official tourism website for quite a while. In July 2010, a new branding campaign was launched under a new slogan, 'Explore the Carpathian Garden', and using a new, but highly controversial logo of a green leaf with a blue stem.

If we look at the television commercials from 2004, it may be remarked that the campaign focuses on Romania's most attractive touristic destinations, namely: Bucharest, Transylvania, the Black Sea coast, the monasteries of Bukovina and Maramures. The main idea that stayed at the basis of these commercials was that the country represents a very interesting blend of old and new, traditional and modern. At the same time, the spot highlights another symbolic representation of Romania deeply ingrained in the European imaginary according to which the country is a liminal space that stretches somewhere at the border between East and West, at the crossroads between Occidental civilisation and Oriental wilderness. This 'imagistic antagonism' is considered a 'ubiquitous theme' shared also by other Eastern European countries (Kaneva, Popescu 2011: 199).

The new 2010 branding campaign 'Explore the Carpathian Garden' proposes a paradisiacal scenery inviting tourists to discover the wonderful Romanian nature, cultural heritage, folklore and rural lifestyle. The commercials promote the return to nature, to authenticity and purity and to the warmth of the traditional home. The qualitative analysis reveals the fact that the promotional video is created around four myths: the myth of mysterious, mystical space, the myth of wild nature, the myth of rural space and traditions and the myth of deeply rooted religious beliefs (Cretu 2011).

From the analysis of both promotional campaigns, it results that the overall image of Romania is that of a mystical space full of legends, beautiful traditions, hospitable people and extremely varied and spectacular landscapes. The most powerful impression triggered is that of a fairytale like realm and a sense of timelessness. Thus, Romania is represented as a place

[...] lost in time – vacillating between an idyllic, folkloric, pre-modern past and a glitzy, luxurious, modern future. In that sense, history has been evacuated from the national identity narratives in the commercials and replaced by a gallery of commodified heritage sites. ... the adds render Romania suitable for global

consumption; national identity is appropriated for the purposes of neoliberal globalization. This appropriation via commodification constrains national identity within an ahistorical, decontextualized, depoliticized frame, resulting in a form of *national identity lite* (Kaneva, Popescu 2011: 201)

Certainly, the fact that any reference to a clear historical and political context is totally removed from these commercials is not bad in itself, but is indicative of the uneasy way in which Romanians are still dealing with matters relating to their identity. A sense of confusion and of inadequacy seems to prevent them from finding the appropriate ways to express their credos concerning identity.

5. Conclusions

In the past years, branding nations has become a worldwide phenomenon whose prominence has become more and more obvious for countries that find themselves on a highly competitive market where they struggle to attract trade, tourism and investment. For post-communist countries the process of redefining their image and elaborating significant nation-brands proves to be all the more important as they seem to be several steps behind countries that have already created and are famous for their strong nation-brands. Their governments should abandon the superficial understanding of branding as a simplistic practice of attaching an image or a series of clichés to their country and reconceptualise the whole process in terms of concerted and perseverant actions carried out over longer periods of time in order to obtain the desired results.

Romania seems aware of the great importance of nation branding and has made various efforts at finding its own brand-image as it may be seen in the various branding campaigns performed along the years (2001-2010). Despite its willingness to construct and present a better and more attractive self image, its attempts seem hindered by its own confusion over what strategies should be adopted in the elaboration of its brand. Another obstacle appears to be its reluctance to accept as part of its brand those symbols that are attractive to foreign tourists (like Dracula or the House of the People) because of the dissonance existing between what these symbols stand for Romanians and what they represent in the European and international imaginary about Romania and its people. In the future, adopting a more flexible attitude in matters connected to its identity and a very serious attitude towards the very sensitive topic of 'money spent - valuable and real results from the branding campaigns' would make perhaps its efforts more productive and rewarding.

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