

(RE)BUILDING A NATION BRAND: GENERAL ISSUES ABOUT PROMOTING ROMANIA'S IMAGE AND IDENTITY

COTÎRLEA DENISA ADRIANA

*PH.D. STUDENT, “BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ NAPOCA,
E-MAIL: COTIRLEA.DENISA@YAHOO.COM*

Abstract

The purpose of the present paper is to provide an overview of the challenges posed by the multiple possibilities of promoting Romania's image and identity, both internally and externally-; at the same time, the present paper answers to some questions about building Romania as a brand, revealing to readers by whom this process should be initiated, to whom should it be oriented and why is it necessary. This topic was chosen because, in the present context, the country suffers from an image deficit and the current process of nation branding requires a real incentive in order to achieve its objectives. However, internal branding seems to be overlooked by those involved in the process of branding the country. In order to write this paper, the author reviewed the literature in the field, she's contributions consisting in finding answers that could bring Romania as a brand in the right direction in terms of nation branding: Why branding process is important, who should it be addressed to, which are the differences between communication and promoting the image of the country. Also, the author tried to highlight the conceptual differences existing between terms like nation branding and country branding, branding and rebranding process or "communication" and "promotion" in the context of these processes. At the same time, the author tried to provide information regarding the perception and identification of Romania as a brand and also to emphasize the relevant elements used for identifying the nation brand.

Key-words: nation branding, promotion, image, identity, Romania;

JEL classification: M31, M37, M39

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that the way a country is perceived may constitute the critical difference between failure and success in the business environment, with big influence on trade and tourism, on diplomatic and external cultural relations of the country etc. Considering the fact that the globalization tends to erode both the general inter-ethnic climate and the national identity through the intense "regionalization and ethnicization processes of social problems" [6] is understandable that this process is one that negatively affects the efforts made in order to preserve the national identity, value and status. Customizing on Romania and considering the unstable internal political environment, the struggle for power, the "prioritization" of personal-interest against the public interest, and also the reduced national feeling which animates all these, is easy to realize how difficult and arduous the path to success becomes, taking into account the need of promoting, affirming and developing the image and identity of Romania across borders.

Relating to the promotion necessary in the context of nation branding it can be stated, in short, that everything comes down to identifying, developing and communicating those parts of the nation's national identity that are conducive for attracting specific target groups. Drawing a parallel with product branding, in the process of nation branding is more difficult to achieve a fully integrated communication mix. David Gertner, professor at the Lubin School of Business at the University "Peace" from New York believes that "[...] production can be stopped, products may suffer several major changes, can be withdrawn, re-launched, repositioned or replaced with top quality products. Places (destinations, countries, nations) are not characterized by these attributes; problems related to image, in this case, require years to be resolved" [9].

Considering the context in which the process of branding Romania has been much talked about, but it had hardly been implemented something viable, by this article the author aims to answer some questions that should be placed at the foundation of promoting the national image and identity; therefore, will be approached the necessity of promoting Romania in the context of the (re)branding process, the importance of an integrated strategy for communication within this process, the players needed to be involved in promoting the national image and identity for ensuring the success of the (re)branding process, as well as the audience supposed to be addressed.

It will thus be seen that, although it is considered that the responsibility for nation branding and for promoting the national image and identity belongs to the government, it should be noted that "[...] the approach should be directed at the governmental level, but it has to be created together with the private sector, so only partially by the Government. Moreover, -sometimes- the country brand can be created against the and in opposition to the Government"¹.

These have been said, the present paper tries to answer to several questions about promotional mix in the context of branding and / or rebranding the nation processes, like who, what, why and for what do we need to promote the identity and the image of Romania; the paper also acknowledges the reader about the important role himself/herself plays in promoting his/her own national values.

2. Methodology

These have been said, by reference to the research methodology used for writing the present article, it can be said that -from the epistemological point of view-the paper is circumscribed predominantly to fundamental targeted research . Thus, the research methodology is mainly summarized to all appropriate methods and techniques used for collecting and processing empirical data and information, respectively to observing, sorting, correlating, categorizing, comparing and analyzing data so that it can be founded the addressed theoretical elements. Thus, in the center of the qualitative thematic research addressed in the present article lie general elements belonging to Romania's image and identity promotion.

Information base of the present paper is represented by the research results, by the performed studies and by other editorial sources exhibited in periodicals and in foreign and local authors' works. Thereby, perceived as some of the most representative works in the field -written by Romanian authors- "*Branding Romania: Cum (ne) promovăm imaginea de țară*" by Dolea A. and Țăruș A., along with "*De ce este România altfel?*" written by Lucian Boia represent two of the main references of the present article. Useful to its elaboration were also the interviews given by specialists in the field and published over time in online media. From all connoisseurs of the branding process, Wally Olins stands out through creativity, cheerfulness, efficiency and success. Also worth mentioning is the work written by Ying Fan, "*Branding the nation: What is being branded*", which offers a unique perspective on the concepts of nation branding and country branding processes. Taking into account the wide range of elements that are part of a brand, for writing the present paper the author reviewed the literature in the field, among which books situated at the confluence between marketing, communication, public relations and history.

3. An overview that enables the understanding of the approached concepts

In order to facilitate the understanding of the approached concepts, the emphasizing distinction between different pairs of terms used in this paper is considered to be auspicious. Therefore, we will approach the similarities and differences existent between the concepts of "nation branding" and "country branding" between branding and rebranding processes, and between communication and promotion in nation branding process. At the same time, for a better identification of the relevant elements used for building Romania as a brand, there will be presented -in synthesized manner- information regarding this country (given that some specialists believe that is quite prematurely to speak about Romania or to already perceive this country as a brand).

Romania – the brand. Romania's country brand, even if it contains many subcomponents, has mainly emphasized until now its touristic side, while the focus of efforts on attracting foreign investment, the development of public diplomacy processes, the determination of rate of exports' increase etc. have been almost ignored. In "*The BrandScience Guide for Destination Research*" is stated that "[...] a brand is more than a name, logo, or slogan and it is not built only through advertising. Genuine brand is the internalized sum of all impressions received by customers and consumers resulting in a *distinctive* position in their *mind's eye* based on perceived emotional and functional benefits". As stated by Wally Olins, one of the best-known specialists in branding, "brands mean identity" (Olins, 2006) –and so, in order to become a valuable brand, any country needs to have an attractive story to "tell". For this to be possible, is necessary that the traditions and customs, the language and history, the values and culture of that particular country to be well known and well-established, only in this way being possible to further communicate and promote them. Every citizen is, therefore, an "ambassador" of his own country, ignorance representing a major impediment in creating and building Romania as a brand.

For building and creating Romania as a brand, is needed a coordinated and structured process with long-term strategies, in which the main "actors" (the stakeholders) should work together in order to achieve a common goal. Is essential for the country to differentiate and to offer what it promises, from quality -in all its forms- to hospitality and memorable experiences. Romania must lodge the necessary efforts in order to become an unique and special personality among the countries that impose on touristic market -and not only-. As an authentic brand, the country should promote its values and its rich culture, its roots and religion, its own characteristics, its originality and its people. More than that, is necessary to remember the fact that "[...] place/nation/country branding enhances the development of a region or a place not only in terms of leisure and tourism, but also in terms of attracting inward investments, enhancing the existing culture and heritage, developing facilities for local residents, and welcoming new residents, employees and skilled migrants" (Hankinson, 2007).

These have been said, is necessary to take into account -in the nation branding process- the elements of differentiation that Romania owns and, also, the importance of visual and communicational identity in strengthening the nation brand.

Nation branding versus country branding. Nation, according to DEX [23], means "a stable form of human community, historically constituted, characterized by a common language, territory, economic life, politics and culture", while a country represents the territory which is inhabited by the aforementioned human community. Nation branding will address the aspects, elements and intangible values of a country -such as culture, politics and so on-, and could include a wide range of factors and associations (as, for example, customs and traditions, language, people, natural resources, tourist attractions etc.). Because there are "numerous cultural stereotypes and other associations concerning a nation's deep roots in centuries of history" (Dolea and Țăruș, 2009) and taking into account the fact that "the Romanian nation is, in its fulfilled form, a creation belonging to the nineteenth century" (Boia, 2012), is confirmed -even more- the necessity and the importance of using effective strategies in promoting Romania's image and identity abroad. It must be specified and understood the fact that "nation branding is, in fact, a way to understand the problems of a nation [...] and not a way to solve them" [31]. Considering country branding, as Dolea A. and Țăruș A. stated, it represents -in essence-, "the way people from all over the world think and feel about a particular country/state [...], the aim of this process being to create a simple, clear and distinct idea around several emotional qualities that can be perceived and understood by heterogeneous audiences in a variety of situations" (Dolea and Țăruș, 2009). Dimensions of country branding can be schematically represented through a hexagon of place branding that includes "tourism, export brands, internal and external policies (or public diplomacy), investment and immigration, culture, history, and humans" (Nicolaescu, 2009) and which was first drawn up by *Placebrands*.

Branding process vs. rebranding process. The field of country/nation branding is, in fact, relatively new, being situated at the interference of several areas such as marketing, public relations, communications, international relations etc. Although "nation branding process involves marketing and communication techniques in order to promote the image of a nation" (Fan, 2006), this process resumes actually at the projection of the image and the identity of a particular nation in both the mind and soul of different persons. Wally Olins speaks about the country brand attaching to it an emotional dimension, through which he understands "the deliberate actions of a nation with the aim of building prestige and reputation by designing identity in a consistent manner and respecting a certain ideology" [13]. These have been said, branding process can be perceived as an open system, in which the inputs (the country's image, the perception of its identity, the socio-politic and economic reality etc.) suffer "processing" and "remaking" in order for the output (the country brand, in fact) to have the desired impact - both at conscious and emotional level, in order to ensure the success and performance of a nation.

Considering the rebranding process, it resumes to the entire amount of activities developed in order to change the perception of a brand. Ștefan Liute, strategy director at Grapefruit, believes that "a serious process of rebranding mandatory includes a phase of brand strategy review, phase that is finalized with a plan that afterwards rules the implementation of the changes regarding the identity and the brand discourse, the internal and external communication and the evaluation of the rebranding process' results" [25]. Therefore, given the context where a nation wishes to be perceived as a real force in an area in which is traditionally less known, it becomes necessary for it to appeal the rebranding process and "to use all of the promotion techniques: advertising, exhibitions fairs, national weeks" (Olins, 2010).

Promotion vs. communication. The author considered necessary to review these terms because, often, there exists some confusion between country's image communication and its promotion during the nation branding process. Promotion, perceived as one of the four main pillars of the marketing mix (together with product, price and placement/distribution) has, somehow, a commercial connotation. Promotional activity has, as main objective, informing the target groups about the benefits of the acquisition of different goods and/or services with the final aim of convincing the consumers to buy them. In contrast, communication, seen as an exchange of information, feelings and ideas, allows the development of links between people, aiming at -besides informing- developing a positive attitude regarding a specific good, service, destination, organization etc.

Thereby, if the promotion is made in order to obtain recognition and profit, marketing communications aims non-profit objectives. These being said, promotion represents an important part of communication, but only promoting the image of a particular country in order to form a positive perception about it is not enough. In the process of nation branding is necessary, therefore, for the Romanian culture and values to be communicated both inside and outside the borders, a simple promotion process being considered insufficient.

4. The image and the (re)branding process of Romania: what do we promote and what do we communicate?

Given the fact that Romania is a country considered to be "[...] fragmented, atomized and that fails to identify its own profile" (Boia, 2012), it becomes a priority to reach to a national consensus on what is meant to be promoted and what is really representative for the country.

In order to facilitate obtaining a response, it is necessary to identify:

- 1) what actually Romania militates for;
- 2) which are the vision and the purpose of the country in the context of a branding campaign through which the country's image and identity need to be promoted;

3) know what the values of the brand Romania (in the context in which Romania can be approached as a "brand") are;

4) know what makes Romania and Romania -the brand- differentiate from other nations.

Because is desired to promote Romania as a brand that differentiates, promises and generates loyalty, among the elements likely to be promoted in the nation (re)branding process can be included the art, the culture, the cuisine, the architecture, the history, the wonderful landscapes and other unique features of this country. For example, attributes such as hospitality, sociability, dedication, citizenship, cultural heritage, landscapes etc. may represent a nation and can be associated with it. In Romania's case, for promoting several characteristics similar to those mentioned above, is necessary for the existing negative image to be combated and to emphasize the positive aspects of both Romanians and their country, in general.

Considering the fact that the image of a nation is rooted in its own identity, the creation and the change of Romania's image can be conceived only through a revision of the past, through a return to its own origins, in order to try to express who we really are and which are in essence, the representative elements of Romanian culture and civilization. However, taking into account the beauties and the tangible cultural heritage of the country, "[...] except the traditional village, there are not too many elements belonging to the typical Romanian civilization. The most beautiful cities in the country, those from Transylvania, bears the imprint of others; the Romanian Athenaeum, a symbol of the capital, is designed by a French man (and not according to any 'Romanian' style). Dracula -the national tourism hero!- came out from the pen of an Irish. Romania is an extremely eclectic country, made up of pieces of all kinds. In this eclecticism lies, basically, its charm [...] Bucharest, "Little Paris", is rather -because of its architectural disorder- , an anti-Paris" (Boia, 2012). The historian expresses in his book, "*De ce este România altfel?*" his opinion regarding the country brand "[...] perhaps this is the authentic brand of Romania: the fact that it has none" (Boia, 2012).

The problem consists, probably, in the lack of a promotion strategy for a unitary brand to which all actors involved in nation branding process should converge. Besides that they can be perceived as brands, nations can be also seen as "products" - especially when they choose to be promoted as tourist destinations. Unfortunately, in the tourism sector of Romania, "[...] that could be among the most profitable in the country, the disorder ruled, together with the inevitable personal interests prior the public interest" (Boia, 2012).

In the context in which Romania seeks to promote itself as a tourist destination, it is necessary for the country brand to serve as an "umbrella-brand". As Papadopoulos said, "[...] once a clear, unitary and well defined umbrella brand is established, each of its individual components can follow its own path, with no risk of transmitting and promoting inconsistent messages" [9]. These being said, we believe that -through a serious approach, performed with systematic efforts and in the conditions of the existence of an effective strategy-, Romania can become an efficient "product".

The choice, ultimately, is ours: do we choose to promote coastal tourism, given the context where Bulgaria offers superior services in terms of quality and price/quality ratio that we cannot cope? Do we focus on cultural tourism, bringing to everyone's attention the beautiful monasteries situated in the northeast of the country, but ignoring the museums and the other institutions of art and culture? Promotional campaigns carried out so far in order to form a strong country brand have promoted everything and obtained ... almost nothing.

Wally Olins, expert in branding field, believes that "[...] Romania is changing, but the perception of the country isn't [...]. You can have a national brand, and Logan, for example, is a good piece of it. There are very few countries in Eastern Europe which have such prestigious brands with such a good stateliness. Also counts the fact that you are in the European Union. But, as a nation, you have not done anything yet, maybe just to discuss a lot of things - but that is done everywhere. You must take advantage of this opportunity, or you will be overwhelmed. It takes will, a government that works together, someone from inside to especially deal with the process of branding. Public sector must work with the private one. Culture, sport should be involved in a long-term consistent program. However, I do not see anyone willing to do that, but maybe I'm wrong. Authorities need to talk to people who have done this before, who understand the process and know what to do. There are four or five this kind of people around the world, and I'm one of them" [26].

It is imperative, therefore, a strong promotion campaign for an umbrella-brand that summarizes all the cultural and spiritual Romanian values, the improvement of services' and exported products' quality (considering the fact that the products that come from a particular region bears, somehow, the place of origin's emblem and contributes to the formation of the image regarding the country/territory in question). Also, recommended is "the reshaping and the enhancing of the public diplomacy demarches for improving Romania's image and for increasing the degree of understanding and support of foreign policy among both Romanian citizens and international public opinion" [28], because only through a sustained effort Romania can achieve its pursued objectives in the process of nation branding.

5. To whom should the communication, promotion and nation (re)branding campaign address?

The campaigns conducted with the purpose of constructing a country brand should address to both Romanian citizens and foreign tourists. Although some actors that are involved in this process consider that it is necessary that

Romanian values, culture, natural and anthropogenic heritage, gastronomy, customs and traditions etc. should be promoted essentially to foreigners, to create or modify Romania's image outside its borders, specialists disagree. In the context in which “the brand is identity” (Olins, 2006), and “for a country to be a valuable brand, it must have the best story to tell”ⁱⁱ it is easy to understand that the inhabitants of a country must know their customs and traditions, language and history, values and culture so that they can communicate them further on. Every citizen actually is an ambassador of its own country, ignorance being an important impediment in the promotion of the real Romanian values.

At the same time, it should be pointed out that “[...] the way in which the residents are behaving in the direct interaction with foreigners leads to the formation of an authentic view” (Dolea and Țăruș, 2009). These being said, it is easy to see that obtaining the support of the Romanian people in the construction of a nation (and/or country) brand and correctly informing them represents the key to success in the branding process.

In this context, the actors that play an important role in the construction of the Romania brand must identify what the nation has “to sell” to those outside the borders and most importantly to make it credible to its citizens. James Grunig, one of the most important public relations specialists in the U.S.A., thinks that “the countries in which a large number of Romanians live can find out information about Romania straight from them” [32]. Thus, the construction of a Romania brand must start “at home” so that, afterwards, it would have the desired impact with foreigners. The emphasis put exclusively on the image and identity of Romania promotion campaigns outside the boundaries, the nonexistence of nation branding processes to the internal public and the lack of well-developed strategies constitutes the weak points of the processes carried out so far by the responsible actors (with the purpose to build the Romania brand).

6. Why is the nation (re)branding process important to Romania?

Following the international debates conducted to date, it became unanimously accepted the fact that the generally positive image of a country has a major influence on the consolidation of all the efforts made to obtain the nation's welfare. Thus, the positive image of a country significantly influences the exports, tourist numbers and emigrants, the level of investments and the confidence given to the nation etc. and can perform a major role in redefining the nation's role at an international level.

In the opinion of Wally Olins “[...] the nations that confront themselves with urgent problems are the ones formerly dominated by The Soviet Union, nations like Poland, Hungary, The Czech Republic, the Baltic nations, Romania [...]. It is profoundly humiliating for all these countries to be perceived as one compact mass, undifferentiated, anonymous and dull, when in fact they all have different languages, ethnic origins, religious beliefs and very different industrial and economic development levels.[...] Each of these Central European nations has an individual history and culture and each of them has a unique personality” (Olins, 2010). This being said, the importance of building the Romania brand consists in the fact that it is imperative that the country differentiate its self from the other nations with the goal to make its identity known thru a strategic nation image management, so that. In the end, the result of the process is to positively influence the evolution of tourism, export, investments, culture and history etc. indicators.

Thus, it is necessary that in the nation branding process the elements of differentiation that Romania hold and, at the same time, the importance of a visual and communicational identity are taken into account in consolidating the country brand. Furthermore, a new image can be created (or the existing one improved) considering the national identity, the manner in which the people perceives its nation and the manner it wishes to present its self of be perceived outside its boundaries.

7. Conclusions

The process of branding helps a particular place to define its identity, to promote itself, to draw attention and to differentiate from other places. It is certain that Romania requires the redefinition and repositioning of its image abroad. In the context in which the country benefited from “[...] an apparently impressive industry, sustained with large investments, but deficient regarding productivity, quality and adaptation to market requirements” (Boia, 2012), the creation of a space of confidence in Romania's favor is needed so that the nation can profit from the competitive potential that it has available and from the tangible benefits that result from the exploitation of it.

For a city to reach to have a strong brand, there are needed inhabitants who desire this thing. Thus, becomes critical that the upcoming promotional campaigns regarding Romanian identity, values and culture to be addressed – firstly- to citizens, a positive image of their own nation being very helpful for creating the nation brand across borders.

Generally speaking, behind building nation branding stay ambitious and visionary management bodies that perceive branding process as a strategic economic necessity. With the accession of Romania to the European Union, the E.U. member states are obvious targets for export, tourism and investments. But because “once accepted in the European Union, Romania has proven its self quite a blunt member, without personality and initiative” (Boia, 2012), the process of changing the manner in which Romania's identity and image are perceived, by creating a positive image

and by removing stereotypes is hampered (and may be even endangered) by the perception of the European community regarding the Romanian national values.

In this context, even if a nation can be promoted in several ways: as a tourist destination, as a trade or business center, as a quiet and safe place etc., it is necessary –for creating Romania –the brand- to identify the key attributes and strengths; other elements that can be taken into account target quality of life, unaltered nature, the open and tolerant spirit of the people etc.

What is important to remember is that places have to offer visitors a memorable experience that would impress in tourists’ minds a positive image regarding that particular place; from here will result, because of the high degree of satisfaction, the people’s trust in that particular brand –perceived as place or destination-. If the brand identity – expressed through culture, appearance, vision, personality etc.- and its image will coincide with (or exceed) tourists’ expectations, then the process of place marketing meets the expectations of the management system.

These have been said, it is considered, therefore, that “the promotion of cultural and spiritual national values, remodeling and intensifying the efforts on public diplomacy to improve Romania’s image, the degree of understanding and support of external policies by the Romanian people and the level of international public opinion” [26] are imperative. But, to facilitate the smooth conduct of these processes “[...] we need more than anything a critical and least indulgent approach: to separate ourselves from mediocrity and imposture of value” (Boia, 2012), because only in this manner the image of Romania will be improved inside and outside its boundaries.

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ⁱ Shashi Tharoor, ex-official of ONU, <http://www.frontnews.ro/social-si-economic/eveniment/fost-oficial-onu-catre-romania-branding-ul-de-tara-se-face-uneori-cu-opozitia-guvernului-10234>.

ⁱⁱ Shashi Tharoor, ex-official of ONU, <http://www.frontnews.ro/social-si-economic/eveniment/fost-oficial-onu-catre-romania-branding-ul-de-tara-se-face-uneori-cu-opozitia-guvernului-10234>.