

NATION BRANDING IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA

A semiotic approach

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1. Promoting the Country Image. Forms and Manifestations

“The countries that will dominate the world will be the ones that make us dream. There are not too many. Some have past and memory, others do not have language. Or they have too much.”

(Jacques Séguéla, 1983, p. 174)

Nations have always been preoccupied of managing their country image, even if the efforts to promote the image on the international stage were not always visible. The concern for a coherent and positive image is connected to the need for differentiation on the global stage, in order to gain power and influence. Since ancient times, the nations differentiated themselves from other nations through flags, specific colors, coat of arms, or through origin stories in order to maintain their supremacy. In doing so, the countries positioned themselves in relation to other countries and have used these symbolic instruments to express their power.

One of the most controversial topics in the Romanian media over the past few years is the country image. Soon after the fall of communism in 1989, this issue became part of the public debate about the international perception of Romanian people, about the ways in which Romania is depicted in the international press, or about the country's position in the process of Europeanization. In this context, the country image represents the unique and distinct value of a nation, communicated to an audience of potential investors, immigrants, diplomats or tourists, with the purpose of attracting economic and symbolic capital.

After the fall of communism, Romania started to promote its image in order to attract investors and tourists, since there was a free market and tourism that was not drastically restricted. One of the first efforts was launching the project “The Eternal and Fascinating Romania”, a wide cir-

culcation album associated with charges of corruption and fraud. Starting with 2005, the Romanian Government actively contributed to the nation branding's efforts. With the project "Branding Romania", initiated by the Agency for Governmental Strategies, the "theme of Romania's country image is the object of an institutionalization process" (Beciu, 2011, p. 110). Therefore, the Government was directly involved in promoting the nation brand, and mass-media started to debate about Romania's nation brand, raising the question of why a nation brand is needed.

To what extent is a nation being branded? In order to answer this question, this chapter will insist on the main theories on nation building to understand the relationship between nation and branding. Next, a special attention is given to the nation brand's forms and manifestations. The context in which the nation branding phenomenon is mentioned in Romania after 1989 is also important. Altogether, one can notice the process of redefining the national identity, in relation to the communist past (identity in communism vs identity in post-communism), but also in relation to the European Union (national identity vs European identity), as a direct impact of integration.

After being preoccupied with the country image issue, nations were interested in the manifestations of the country as a brand, through tourism, export, cultural diplomacy (the presence of the cultural institutes on the international stage), or through the participation at the Olympic Games (*olympism*), at the World Championships, or at Eurovision Song Contest. Besides this, one of the first forms of manifestation is given by the "made-in" brands, commercialized internationally. Researchers from the marketing approach name this form as *country-of-origin effect* (Schooler, 1965). In this context, the relationship between the products manufactured in a country and the country image on the global stage will be discussed. For instance, a brand like Nokia is linked to the telephones' quality and resistance, attributes transferred to the country-of-origin, Finland. In this way, nations are also known through the commercialized products.

Secondly, another form of manifesting the nation as a brand is *destination branding*, referring at promoting a country in order to attract tourists. The country image is presented through elements such as beautiful landscapes, monumental buildings, museums, local cuisine, folk cos-

tunes, music, or national dances. Another aspect presented in this chapters is the influence of destination branding on the country image, but also on how to promote a country through tourism.

1.1. Nation as a brand. A cultural approach

The modern European nations' formation process reached an important point in the nineteenth century, also known as the nation building century. In this context, the nation is seen as comprising an ethnic and homogenous community who speaks the same language, lives in the same territory, has permanent economic connections and shares the same religious identity.

1.1.1. Theories of nation building. From the traditional civic-ethnic dichotomy to modernism

The literature about nations and nationalism insists on the opposition between the civic and ethnic conceptions of nationhood (Kohn, 1944; Brubaker, 1992; Calhoun, 1997; Smith, 1991). Firstly, the civic conception is linked to the Western Europe's paradigm, based on unification, democratization, and freedom. This type of nationalism is oriented on the ideal of equal citizenship. On the other hand, the ethnic conception of nationhood is based around the idea of people sharing the same traditions, the same history, legends and origin. Contrary to the civic nations, the ethnic nations are built on the idea of national belonging, on culture/ethnicity, blood-relationships and place of birth. This conception originated from Germany and Russia during the Romantic era, and its purpose was to inspire nationalist movements in Eastern Europe.

When talking about the two types of nationalism, Kohn (2005/1945) distinguishes between "good" and "bad" nationalism. "Good" nationalism defines civic nations, while "bad" nationalism characterizes ethnic nations. Kohn's dichotomy had a great impact on the Anglo-Saxon studies about nationalism, and the binary opposition civic-ethnic appeared as a result of a critical discussion. The civic nationalism focuses on the idea of the social contract, while the ethnic nationalism puts an emphasis on education, propaganda, and national values. Moreover, the civic nation believes in the citizens' free choice, while the ethnic nation in-

sists on the fact that national belonging is dependent on objective factors, such as place of birth. Put simply, the nationalism built on democracy, liberalism, and civic spirit is situated at one pole, while the authoritarian and exclusive nationalism from Eastern Europe is situated at the other pole.

After 1980, the modernist perspective about nation (Gellner, 1983; Anderson, 1983; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) emerges. The modernists argue that nation-states are political and cultural units, and nationalism (in the sense of national consciousness and mobilization rhetoric) has contributed to the creation of the modern state. Compared to the civic and ethnic conceptions of nationhood, the modernist perspective focuses on the cultural dimension, considering how modern nations emerge and how they maintain their status as nations. The sense of belonging is achieved through cultural measure, and not through geographical arguments such as the place of birth. In this sense, the national media represents a primordial mean of cultural expression. The arrival of audiovisual media in the mid-twenty century provided the arena for modern political discourse. Furthermore, the development of media “creates new fields of action and interaction” (Thompson, 2005, p. 35) because an action or event can be made visible to people who are not present at the time and place of its occurrence. That is why television has become the “primary means of pursuing several national goals, such as building and reinforcing national identity” (Polonska-Kimunguyi & Kimunguyi, 2011, p. 510).

In this chapter, the discussion concentrates on the modern nation of the “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983). Culture is linked to the national imaginary process and mass-media legitimates the existence of the “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1983), which can be projected and built differently. Therefore, the nation becomes

“an imagined political community because the members of the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1991, pp. 5-7).

This idea is linked with the complexity of industrial societies, which makes it impossible for people to have a personal experience with the entire community in which they live. Therefore, the media help repro-

duce a sense of national belonging by encouraging people over large geographical areas to imagine fellow readers, viewers or listeners consuming the same media product at the same time. A nation can be imagined as a “deep, horizontal comradeship”, with a sense of fraternity that asks for sacrifices. The citizens’ attachment to the mother nation can be explained through the “political love” and their loyalty, but also through cultural products of nationalism, such as art, music, or poetry (Anderson, 1983, p. 143). Gellner (1983) also sees nationalism as a consequence of deeper social mechanisms, such as modern communications, or modern industry in capitalist development. The new industrial economies demand renewed skills and social development that could be provided by a public education system. In Gellner’s opinion, a public education requires resources and standardization, a single language, and a centralized political, economic and educational system.

The modern nation is also connected to the national identity dimension. In this regard, Billig (1995, 2009) believes that national identity may be reproduced in mediated discourse in ways that go unnoticed. He calls the process *banal nationalism* and suggests that national identity in the press does not necessarily need to be marked. It can also be unmarked, when linguistic deixis are used to locate readers within a national context. Furthermore, “the metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building” (Billig, 1995/2009, p. 8). The flag metaphor suggests the unobserved character of national identity, which is reproduced through communication on various forms like standardized languages or classified words. Moreover, national identity is a socially constructed classification, shaped and reproduced through discourse (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 221; Hall, 1992, pp. 292-293).

As for the national narratives, they are produced, reproduced and spread by actors in concrete and institutionalized contexts. That is why national identity discourses are “conceived as specific forms of social identities” and “are discursively, by means of language and other semi-otic systems, *produced, reproduced, transformed and destructed*” (Wodak et al., 1999, p. 153). Thus, “nationalist attitudes and stereotypes articulated in discourses accompany and also influence political decision-making” (Wodak et al., 1999: 150). Consequently, the state plays an official role in the construction of national identity.