Who has the strongest brand? The position of the Visegrád Four in country brand rankings

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Abstract: Global brand rankings measuring the strength and value of various brands are popular in the world of products and services. Brands such as Apple, Google, Amazon, Microsoft or Coca-Cola usually top these lists. Similar rankings created with a rather complex methodology are also available in the case of countries. These are usually topped by countries such as Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Japan or the United States. The current article aims to provide a brief overview of the criteria of each ranking, and analyze the position of Visegrád countries in these lists. As it turns out, the rankings show that Poland has the strongest brand, followed by Hungary and the Czech Republic with a roughly equal position (with the latter leading slightly), and last, but not least, Slovakia usually occupies the last position among the four countries if it is taken into account at all.

Keywords: brand rankings, country branding, nation rankings, Visegrád countries, V4

1 Introduction

Brand rankings have been popular in the world of products and services for some time: top 100 global brand lists are published by Interbrand, Millward Brown BrandZ and Brand Finance. For example, the top five brands on Interbrand's 2018 list are Apple, Google, Amazon, Microsoft and Coca-Cola. The 2018 BrandZ ranking shows a similar picture, altough they also feature an IT brand instead the only non-IT brand (Coca-Cola) included in Interband's list above. BrandZ's ranking is: Google, Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Tencent.

In parallel with classic brand rankings, several top lists and lists of country brands have been compiled. Moreover, at least one new ranking appears almost every year. It would be impossible to discuss all of them, therefore we only put the most acknowledged ones under the microscope. These include Anholt Nation Brands Index, FutureBrand Country Brand Index, Bloom Consulting Country Brand Ranking (Tourism Edition and Trade Edition), Young&Rubicam Best Countries and Reputation Institute Country RepTrak.

The publication serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it systematizes the criteria of individual rankings, and on the other hand, it presents the position of Visegrád countries (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary) in those rankings and their relationship with each other.

At this point it is important to mention that the availability of information for each year is different in the case of individual rankings, therefore the comparison of their results may not be completely uniform. The latest (2018) versions of several lists were available at the time of writing this paper, but in a few cases, we could only rely on information from the years 2017, 2016 or 2015, or detailed public information was only available for these years. We also have to note that some research companies try to ”overtake” the others, thus they publish their ranking for each year at the beginning of that year. As a result, they gain greater media publicity, but it is obvious that the data published are not based on the year of publication, but rather the previous year.

Whereas, however, the results of such rankings show that the perception and image of individual countries rarely change radically. Therefore they have a steady position in rankings, so it is not a problem that not all lists are available for the year 2018 yet.

2 Methodological background

Let us face it, we tend to compare our own country with other countries. There are nations that stand on a lower rung of the *imaginary ladder*, and there are countries above us. Maybe this is also related to our superiority or inferiority complexes, but we can also find a marketing-based explanation in the background – namely the position of a country or a country brand on that ladder basically depends on the value or values we associate it with.

The question is, of course, whether it can be calculated and scientifically proven. Well, the creators of country brand rankings say that it can. Such lists are published from time to time – some of them can be disputed, but there are also lists that have become accepted in recent years, insomuch that foreign ministers and prime ministers of governments draw conclusions according to the results.

These lists include examples that are not specifically brand rankings, but are still worth mentioning because of their frequency of being cited. Such rankings include the *IMD competitiveness report* and the *World Economic Forum* global competitiveness report. As Péter Ákos Bod states in his article on the topic (2009, 32.), ”In a professional sense, we can consider these lists as beauty contest rankings that we do not have to agree with, and (as it often happens in beauty contests) a high ranking on the list does not always reflect the real values. However, a significant step backwards on these lists has a negative effect on the global perception of the country.”

Similar rankings are also regularly published by renowned journals such as *The Economist*, *Forbes* or *Euromoney*. Country lists by credit rating agencies such as *Moody's Investors Service*, *Standard&Poor's*, *Fitch-IBCA* or *Japan Credit Rating Agency* can be considered some kind of thematic rankings.

However though, this article aims to stay true to the theme and specifically discuss country brand rankings, not the abovementioned lists. The study therefore presents the methodologies and dimensions of the five best-known country brand rankings, and analyzes the position of Hungary and the other three Visegrád countries in these lists.

3 The most important country brand rankings

3.1 Anholt Nation Brands Ranking

This index launched in 2005 has had various complicated names. First it was called *Simon Anholt's Nation Brands Index*, then it was mentioned as *Anholt-GMI Nation Brands Index* and from 2008 as *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index*, then in 2017 it was finally named *Anholt Nation Brands Index powered by Ipsos,* its current name.

The research is conducted in 20 countries, and uses a representative sample to monitor the influence and attractiveness of 50 countries. This is also the most common reason for criticism regarding the ranking: on the one hand, only 50 countries are included (although, for example, Hungary is on the list), and on the other hand, the survey itself only takes place in 20 countries. However, as they say, if a research makes exactly the same mistake from time to time, the changes can be interpreted in the very same way, and that is the point.

The six indicators demonstrating *competence fields*, that is, the dimensions of the nation brand hexagon are (see: Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index 2016):

- *Tourism:* How likely a visit to the country would be if money was no object; Natural beauty; Historic buildings; Vibrant city life.
- *Export:* Science and technology; Product purchases; Creative place.
- *Governance:* Competent and honest; Rights and fair treatment; Peace and security; Environment; Poverty.
- *Investment and immigration:* Work and life; Quality of life; Educational qualifications; Business investment; Social equality.
- *Culture:* Sport; Cultural heritage; Contemporary culture.
- *People:* Welcoming; Close friend; Employability.

According to the the above criteria and the results of the survey, Germany had the best country brand in 2018, followed by Japan and the United Kingdom, then France and Canada. Italy and the USA finished in a dead heat for the sixth place.

3.2 FutureBrand Country Brand Index

The second best-known ranking following *Anholt Nation Brands Index* is related to *FutureBrand*, a global consultancy, and evaluates 75 countries. In their case, the dimensions under assessment were:

- *Value system:* Political freedom; Environmental awareness; Legal environment; Tolerance; Freedom of speech.
- *Quality of life:* Education; Health; Standard of living; Safety & Security; Employment opportunities.
- *Business environment:* Investment climate; Advanced technologies; Regulatory environment; Highly-skilled workforce.
- *Tourism:* The value of the currency; Attractions; Lodging options; Gastronomy.
- *Heritage and culture:* History; Art and culture; Authenticity; Natural resource.
- *Made in:* Products made in the country.

While the first three associations (value system, quality of life, business environment) define the country's so-called *status*, the other three (tourism, heritage and culture, made-in) define the (country) *experience*. Therefore, a separate ranking can be set up for each of the six dimensions, and a summary list can also be created based on them. The most recently published, 2014-2015 summary list is headed by Japan, which means that this is the best country brand according to the survey.

Furthermore, FutureBrand's research suggests that not all countries can be considered a country brand. Based on their result, only 22 of the 75 countries included in the survey qualify as a country brand. In addition, another three groups can be set up:

1. *"Countries"*: This group includes countries that have weaker than average perceptions overall against both status and experience dimensions, although there may be considerable differences between them. Russia and Taiwan sit at the threshold of country brands in terms of perception strength, therefore they can 'jump' to the strongest category from the weakest one. However, the perception of Nigeria, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Ukraine is extremely weak among the 75 countries studied. It should also be said that, according to FutureBrands, Hungary may also be included in the group of "countries", similarly to Poland and Slovakia. It is a country, but far from a country brand.
2. *"Status countries"*: Those countries with a perception bias in favour of attributes associated with quality of life, value system and business potential. The group only includes three countries: Belgium, Qatar and Bahrain. The brand development opportunity for these countries lies in the development of perceptions of heritage and culture, tourism and 'made in' – and of course in the development of reality itself.
3. *"Experience countries"*: Countries with a bias in favour of heritage and culture, tourism and 'made in'. The group mostly consists of places traditionally strongly associated with tourism, including Egypt, Thailand, Greece, Portugal and even Spain. The Czech Republic also belongs to this group according to the survey. The brand development opportunity for these countries lies in their perceptions of quality of life, value system and business potential.
4. *"Country brands"*: Countries with stronger than average perceptions relating to the dimensions 'status' and 'experience', and, as a result, measurable competitive advantage against their competitors. Of the 75 countries included in our survey, only 22 belong here. The top 10 list includes (in order of their ranking): Japan, Switzerland, Germany, Sweden, Canada, Norway, United States, Australia, Denmark, Austria.

The study also examined if "country brands" actually have advantage over the countries of the other three groups. Well, the findings of the research suggest that people prefer to recommend or choose a "country brand" as a travel destination or the target of their business activities. In addition, twice as many people would buy a product from a "country brand" than a "country".

3.3 Bloom Consulting Country Brand Rankings

Founded in 2003, Bloom Consulting is a consulting company specialized in nation branding, region branding and city branding, with headquarters in Madrid, and offices in Lisboa and São Paulo. The founder and CEO of the company is José Filipe Torres, who has provided advisory for the OECD, and lectured on country branding several times at universities such as Harvard. His ranking list is unique because it actually has three versions: one examines tourism, the other focuses on trade, and the third analyzes digital impact.

For the sake of brevity, we only discuss the methodology of the 2017-2018 tourism ranking, which is called *Bloom Consulting Country Brand Ranking – Tourism Edition*. The algorithm consists of four key variables, which are used to analyze the success of the 193 analyzed country brands and territory brands, as well as their relative performance as compared to each other:

- *Economic performance:* Average of total annual tourism receipts of international tourists within a country, and the average growth of these receipts.
- *Digital demand:* The total online search volume for tourism-related activities and attractions
- *Country brand strategy (CBS) rating:* The most popular brandtags for a specific country are compared to the brandtags most heavily promoted by that country's national tourism organization (NTO).
- *Online performance:* The website and social media analysis of the country's NTO.

Based on these four key variables the top 10 performers of the tourism ranking for 2018 were: United States of America, Thailand, Spain, Hong Kong, Australia, France, China, Germany, United Kingdom, Italy.

In terms of the trade ranking (*Bloom Consulting Country Brand Ranking 2017-2018 Trade Edition*), the top performer is also the United States of America, followed by the United Kingdom, Brazil, China, Hong Kong, Canada, Australia, France, India and Singapore.

3.4 Young&Rubicam Best Countries

Young and Rubicam (or Y&R, as used today), is one of the world's biggest advertising agency networks which has long been known for its research surveying and assessing brands called *Brand Asset Valuator (BAV).* In addition, the company also performs research to evaulate country brands called *Best Countries*, created in cooperation with recognized media outlet U.S. News and one of the best business and marketing universities, Wharton Business School.

In 2016, the first major round of the research examined 60 countries. One of the special features of their methodology is that they gather data from a survey of 16 200 opinion leaders, informed elites and business leaders from 36 countries. Another interesting aspect of the survey is that it covers hard and soft attributes as well, but the the weighting of the 8 dimensions is not equal, like in the case of most rankings with a similar purpose.

Namely, the dimensions with the greatest weight are innovation and entrepreneurship, quality of life, and citizens' rights and opportunities, with 19-19 percent each – this means that they determine 57 percent of the country brand altogether according to Y&R. These are followed by cultural influence (14 percent) and business-friendly environment (13 percent). The next dimension is power (political and economic influence) with 8 percent. This is followed by two dimensions associated with tourism: cultural heritage (4 percent) and adventure (4 percent). (Turizmusonline.hu 2016).

Based on these results, the overall winner, that is, the "best country" was Germany in 2016. The other two countries in the 2016 top three were Canada and the United Kingdom.

In 2017, Switzerland took the leading position. This is mainly due to the fact that (oddly enough) Switzerland was not included in the 2016 rankings, but another reason is that Germany's image deteriorated in terms of business-friendly environment, citizens' rights and opportunities, and quality of life. According to Y&R analysts the primary reason of this change was the situation evolved after the arrival of large numbers of refugees and acts of terrorism (Y&R 2017).

Therefore Germany dropped to the 4th place in 2017, also outperformed by Canada and the United Kingdom in addition to Switzerland. Similarly to Germany, the United States of Americal fell three places, dropping to the 7th place from the 4th. Similarly to Anholt Nation Brands analysts, Y&R's researchers attributed this downturn in image to the Trump phenomenon. However though, it can be seen that the USA tops the ranking in terms of the power dimension, closely followed by Russia, and China was ranked third in the list.

As Y&R examined 80 countries in 2017 (and 2018) instead of 60, this rearranged the list. For example, Norway and Finland, two Scandinavian countries appearing on the list, also perform well, that is, their international reputation is excellent in the abovementioned dimensions. (BAV Group 2018).

In the meantime, the eight dimensions have been supplemented with a ninth one called "movers". This category includes the most dynamically developing economies (that is, the ones with this percepction). The ranking of the 2018 list was United Arab Emirates, India, Singapore, China, Japan, Thailand, Egypt, Russia, Brazil and és Israel.

An interesting fact is that Switzerland is only 28th, the USA is 29th, and Germany is 35th in the same list. According to this dimension, Hungary is unfortunately the 79th, that is, the last but one, having only outperformed Poland. (US News 2018).

3.5 Reputation Institute Country RepTrak

Just like all other rankings presented above, the Reputation Institute Country RepTrak has its own characteristics. First of all, this study examines country reputation, although this is not much different from the term 'country brand'.

Another unique characteristic of the survey is that it only examines 55 countries, namely the 55 countries with the biggest GDP. The research itself is only conducted in the so-called G8 countries, that is, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, Canada, Germany, Italy, Russia and the USA. In these countries, a total of 58 thousand people are surveyed, who only evaluate countries that they know from the list of 55, or countries they know about.

The research examines 3 major dimensions: advanced economy, appealing environment and effective government. These include various attributes (Reputation Institute 2018):

- *Advanced economy:* High-quality products and services; Well-known brands; Contributor to global culture; Technology; Well-educated, reliable workforce; Values education.
- *Appealing environment:* Beautiful country; Enjoyable country; Appealing lifestyle; Friendly and welcoming people.
- *Effective government:* Business environment; Institutional environment; Social and economic policies; International participation; Safety; Efficient use of public resources; Ethical country.

Another interesting feature of Country RepTrak is its method of evaluation. The rating is similar to the Anglo-Saxon scoring and classification system. Countries that achieve a total score higher than 80 are classified into the category 'excellent'. Countries with a score between 70 and 80 are classified as 'strong', ones with 60-70 points are 'average', and ones between 40-60 are 'weak'. Countries that achieve less than 40 points are ranked as bad, or 'poor' if you like.

An interesting fact from the 2018 report is that the categories of excellent countries (Sweden, Finland, Switzerland, Norway) and 'failed' ones (Russia, Nigeria, Iran, Iraq) both included 4 countries. However, just as in the case of the other rankings, it is noteworthy that making it to the list of the 55 examined countries is already a big deal.

4 The position of the Visegrád Four in rankings

Having analyzed the rankings, it is worth examining where the Visegrád Four (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary) are located in each list, and understanding how good their brands are.

Although detailed information on the 2018 version of the *Anholt Nation Brands* ranking is not publicly available, we did have access to the detailed list for 2016. Based on those data, Poland was the best ranked, followed by Hungary, and the Czech Republic, having achieved the 26th, 28th and 30th positions. Slovakia was not featured in the list.

The 29th position of the Czech Republic in the 75-country ranking of the *FutureBrands* survey is rather surprising, especially in the light of the fact that in most of the other indexes the country achieved a similar position to Hungary. Poland finished 45th, Hungary 56th, and Slovakia 59th in the same ranking.

In *Bloom's lists on tourism and trade,* Poland is ranked best of the four Visegrád countries: it is 31st and 36th. Hungary and Czech Republic follow closely, and Slovakia fell behind in the ranking.

The latest (2018) *Young&Rubicam Best Countries* overall ranking features Poland in the 32nd position, while the Czech Republic finished 33rd. Hungary is in the 38th position.

Last, but not least, the Czech Republic (65.6 points) and Hungary (62.0 points) was ranked 'average' in the 55-country *Country RepTrak* list published by Reputation Institute. With those scores they achieved the 21st and 25th positions. An interesting fact is that France (ranked 18th with 69.3 points) and Germany (ranked 19th with 68.5 points) also belong to the 'average' category including countries having achieved a result between 60 and 70 points. However, Poland falls behind, and is classified as 'weak' with its performance under 60 – its 59.5 points is only enough for the 30th position, with Malaysia and South Korea as its two "neighbours". Slovakia is not included in this ranking, either.

After all this, it is worth comparing the results of the Visegrád countries in a summary table. It is clear from Table 1 that Poland triumphed in 4 rankings out of 6. The main reason of this is probably related to the size and economic weight of the country. For example, it is striking that the country finished in a remarkable 31st position in the Bloom trade ranking of 193 countries. The performance of the Czech Republic in FutureBrands' list was also an extremely positive surprise, and Hungarians were ranked in the middle of each ranking. However, Slovakia is not even featured in three of the lists (Anholt-GfK, Y&R Best Countries, Country RepTrak), and in the remaining three rankings they finished fourth in terms of a comparison of Visegrád Four countries.

This leads us to conclude that Poland's country brand is the strongest of the four Visegrád Countries, the Czech Republic and Hungary are more or less on the same level (although the perception of the Czechs is slightly better), while the perception of Slovakia's country brand is the weakest.

Table 1

The position of Hungary and the other V4 countries in country brand rankings

	Number of countries examined	*Poland*	*Hungary*	*Czech Republic*	*Slovakia*
Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands (2016)	50	26.	28.	31.	-
Futurebrands (2014-2015)	75	45.	56.	29.	59.
Bloom Consulting Country Brand Rankings (Trade) (2017)	193	31.	53.	48.	78.
Bloom Consulting Country Brand Rankings (Tourism) (2017)	193	36.	57.	58.	83.
Young&Rubicam Best Countries (2018)	80	32.	38.	33.	-
Reputation Institute Country RepTrak (2018)	55	30.	25.	21.	-

Source: Results based on the rankings presented above, edited by the author

Conclusions

The collection and analysis of country brand rankings provided added value primarily through the studying of their methodology. As a result of their different criteria and weighting, we can see differences in the countries' places on these lists, but the strongest brands and the top 10 countries are almost always the same.

Considering further lines of research, it may be worthwhile to compile a country brand ranking list with a Central and Eastern European focus. The exciting question is where the boundaries of mutual cooperation and competition lie. Is there a V4 brand? What may be its components? How could the four member countries be more competitive together and individually in country brand rankings?

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