

SOME CRITICAL REMARKS ON THE BRANDING OF COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

In the past two decades, 'country image centres' and 'country brand councils' have been created throughout Europe and the world. Their task is the same everywhere: to position the country, distinguish it from 'competitors', create a uniform brand strategy, and coordinate the various messages about the country in a certain sense. Politicians also tend to mention country branding or nation branding, and the term appears in the news media and tabloid press more frequently. In short, country branding is actually nothing else than the technical application of branding for countries in order to improve the reputation of the country, thus attracting more tourists and investors, improving export, etc. – in other words, resulting in greater competitiveness and more money. The topic is very exciting, but also extremely complex, and quite often divisive, generating emotions in many cases. It is no coincidence that the opposition of country branding is just as large as its support, and critical voices continue to strengthen. We present these aspects in our article as food for thought – not necessarily in order of importance. Thus, a total of 25 critical remarks on country branding are discussed including the opinion that a good national image cannot be built according to a plan, with the precision of an engineer. It can only be earned, also because it is impossible to coordinate so many things at a time, not to mention that consistent branding is basically impracticable because of successive political cycles. The article also discusses that if a country has a 'country image centre' or 'country brand council', it does not necessarily mean that the country has a better brand image. The cause of the problem is often that many people still identify country branding with logo design and a catchy slogan, although country branding is much more than that. In addition, there is no country branding without a country strategy – in other words, there is no country brand building without country building. Last but not least, we should remind ourselves that countries are primarily not brands but countries.

Keywords: *country branding, nation branding, country image, country reputation*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE AIMS OF COUNTRY BRANDING

Country branding is a rather unique field: although parallels may be drawn between the branding of countries and that of products, services and companies, it also has its characteristics and unique features. One of these is that while a country brand may look like a simplified cliché, stereotype or even a caricature from outside, we can see that it is actually complex with many dimensions and layers if we look at it closely. In a historical sense, the first person to mention the concept of 'nation brand', or country brand was British expert SIMON ANHOLT, back in 1996. (see ANHOLT 2011, FEINBERG and ZHAO 2011, SUBRAMANIAN 2017). His article Nation-brands of the twenty-first century published in the Journal of Brand Management in 1998 soon became very popular among marketing professionals, and later in scientific circles. 'Country image centres' and 'country brand councils' were created shortly throughout Europe and the world. Their role is the same everywhere: the positioning of the country, that is its distinction from the competition, the creation of a uniform brand strategy, and the coordination of various messages about the country. We could also say that there is a new era in the competition of nations. Although military clashes are still quite common in certain areas of the world, in most places wars are not waged with traditional weapons, but marketing tools (see VAN HAM 2002: 265.). Moreover, the battlefield is nothing else but the consumers' mind (Ries and Trout 1997), where various countries would like to occupy as distinguished position and as big area as

possible, because this means tourists, investors, and more people buying the products of the countries. In this regard, we can say that globalisation almost provokes, certainly encourages nation branding (HANNA and ROWLEY 2008). But what are the areas where it is possible to increase competitiveness, and how can a good country brand help us in our 'battle' for our position in the consumers' mind? First of all, the primary aims of country branding are all economic. This involves three major aspects:

1. The promotion of tourism, the attraction of tourists to the specific country.
2. The promotion of investment coming into the country.
3. The development of export, and improved sales of the country's products on foreign markets. Besides the three aims above, we can identify two more equally important aims that are not economic, and have a positive impact in the long term:
4. A greater role in international organizations and foreign policy.
5. Improving the well-being of citizens and their pride of belonging to the nation/country.

If we think about it, the five points above suggest the same thing: they all aim the better competitiveness of the country. Country branding also serves the five aims mentioned above, which actually involves the application of branding for countries in a technical sense, thus developing the country's reputation. In addition, this kind of branding (in other words: brand building) is something than can equally be used by small or big, developing or developed countries. The topic is very exciting, but also extremely complex and often divisive, invoking emotions again and again. It is no coincidence that the camp of people opposing this activity has become at least as big as that of its supporters, and the critics are getting louder. In the present article, we present these critical aspects as food for thought – not necessarily in order of importance. Thus a total of 25 critical remarks on country branding are discussed, including the question whether country branding exists at all.

2. THE 25 LIMITS OF COUNTRY BRANDING

2.1. Countries are not brands, but countries

First, we should start with this item as we may think of another country as a brand – for example, when make a decision to spend the summer vacation by the sea in Spain, Italy, Croatia or Bulgaria. Nevertheless, this does not mean that people want to consider their own country to be a brand. Using the term 'branding' in terms of our own country or nation may seem arrogant or cynical. But what would people like to see? They want their country to matter, to be a front-runner internationally – be it any kind of competition. They want to be proud of their country. Therefore some experts suggest that politicians should use the term 'reputation management' instead of the expression 'country branding'. However though, the problem with the newly suggested term is that it makes even less sense to ordinary citizens than country branding.

2.2. People are not parrots

'The face of a country can be broadcast to the world successfully if all cities, institutions, citizens, politics and economy – each in its own way – broadcast the same thought, idea, or image. There may be a hundred colours and forms, but the multitude of messages converge in a way.' wrote Elemér Hankiss in the late 1990s (2000: 210.). In fact, this may be the essence of country branding, but let us be honest, this is a somewhat idealistic approach. In a democratic state, the system – fortunately – does not have control over every word and action of all the citizens. This is because people are not parrots; we cannot teach them what to recite. If we do so, it is propaganda. Of course this does not mean that it is impossible to provide some subtle guidance to people on what (and how) to communicate about their own country. Examples include Estonia and their brand.estonia.ee website for this purpose.

2.3. It is impossible to coordinate so many things

The realisation of the above quotation by HANKISS is complicated by the multitude of institutions communicating about the country. In the case of Hungary, the institutions officially entitled to communicate about the country are:

- the organ in control of tourism (currently, the Hungarian Tourism Agency)
- the organ promoting investments (HIPA – Hungarian Investment Promotion Agency)
- cultural institutes, Hungarian institutes abroad (Balassi Institute)
- dedicated organizations for the support of export (HEPA – Hungarian Export Development Agency)
- the ministry of foreign affairs (now called Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade)

Moreover, in most countries (including Hungary), several other bodies, government organs, ministries, special interest groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and companies promote what the country means to them. In addition, smaller units such as cities may also send messages in connection with Hungary – as suggested in the above quotation by HANKISS. As WALLY OLINS, British branding expert says (2004): 'Nations present themselves in a million way every minute, 24 hours a day.' It is almost impossible to coordinate all this, even if there were attempts of this kind in several countries. Individual 'country image centres' or 'country brand councils' may be more capable of taking on a supportive role and providing guidance on what to communicate regarding the country and how each organisation may adapt it. This may involve vision, positioning, value system, message system and the definition of some visual identity element such as a central logo. However though, this cannot be implemented in all cases: we hardly see a country whose tourism logo is the same as the one used for investment promotion. This is logical in a sense: while we must present our (cultural) heritage to the majority of tourists, we must offer some kind of a vision to prospective investors.

2.4. Operating a 'country image centre' or 'country brand council' does not mean that the brand image of the country will improve

Although we may assume that countries with this kind of central key body perform better (that is, they own a better brand), the numbers refute this view. Italy does not have such a 'country brand council', but its country brand is still viewed as one of the best, especially in terms of the dimensions of tourism and culture.

2.5. Branding is always narrowing, but countries are complex

In the case of classic brands, the branding activity is centred upon positioning – that is to say, upon the most important idea that explains why that specific brand exists, and how it is different from its competitors. The same questions can be asked of any country, and it is practical to ask them: Why does the country exist? What would happen if it disappeared from one day to the next? Why would people miss it? How is it unique compared to all other countries? Well, the fact is that it is hard to find a clear answer to these questions. The main reason is that usually 'even the smallest village is more complex than a large corporation' (ANHOLT 2010: 5). This is even more true if we consider a country instead of a village. The same applies to the consumers of the country: the priorities of tourists, investors and people living in the country may all be different. Moreover, there may be great differences within each group: the needs of a tourist used to 5-star hotels is different from the needs of a tourist team arriving for a bachelor party. In this respect, the question may be asked whether a country/nation benefits more from having a clear, simple image, or it is preferable to have a rich, complex, even contradictory image? (ANHOLT 2010: 38.). For example, the brand image of the United States of America is not at all that clean and simple. The perception of the country's government is very negative, but people like (or what is more: love) American products, brands, popular culture, music and

films. On the other hand, the image of North Korea is rather clean, simple and consistent. But does this make the country a better brand?

2.6. There is no country branding without a country strategy

It is not enough to create a new slogan, logo, advertisement or PR campaign. Communications cannot replace real politics, real strategy and real government. Poor, ambiguous policies lead to poor, ambiguous reputation. 'In every case, the country image is part of the country strategy, serving as a communication tool, expression, embodiment, face or part of it. If there is no country strategy, the country image is also 'hanging in the air', and in default of reasonability, understanding, comprehension and connection it can be overwritten by anyone at discretion, in any moment' (BÍRÓ 2009: 60.). Therefore we must examine and define where we are now, and what we want to achieve. Then we must provide proof of our country vision, because it is not enough merely to communicate it. Thus the strategy must be inspiring and realisable at the same time. To be honest, only a few good examples can be found in the case of countries, but Estonia's 'E-Estonia' vision (which has become a mission as well) serves as a good example.

2.7. 'Do good and speak about it'

This is a basic rule of PR (public relations) (see SÓS 2017). The examples below better contribute to the brand of the specific country than if they had run an advertising campaign:

- Artists, writers and poets living in Ireland do not have to pay taxes. With this measure, the state acknowledges creative talent.
- Slovenia is positioning itself by providing aid for Balkan countries (Albania, Montenegro, Macedonia) – thus demonstrating that Slovenia is not a Balkan country.
- Having built the Sydney Opera House, Australia demonstrates its cultural values – and the fact that their country is significantly more than a residence for descendants of convicts.
- The Netherlands is a bastion of law as the International Court of Justice is seated in The Hague. (Legalising same-sex marriage, Spain gives another clear indication that it has got rid of the conservative heritage of the Franco era.
- Estonia demonstrates its leading role in digitalisation by including in their constitution that internet access is a basic human right.

In this sense, branding is actually not about communication; it is about (national) policies. According to ANHOLT (2008), GOVERS and GO (2009: 15.), who are experts of the field, the two mottos are:

1. 'Actions speak louder than words.'
2. 'Don't talk unless you have something to say.'

If we only do something for the image itself, stating that something is already true before it has become true, it is called propaganda. Hungarian authors such as PISKÓTI et al. also point out the same thing (1997: 31.): 'If we only concentrate on communication tools, and break away from real tendencies, the efforts for change will not be credible, and the desired processes will not start. In such cases (...) schematic propaganda does more harm than good.'

2.8. There is no progress without innovation

One of the factors forming the basis for country branding is real change taking place in the country. Much the same as in the case of classic brands, innovation, novelty and excitement are needed – and these provide news value. In this context, ANHOLT (2007: 37.) thinks that 80% of country brand building is innovation, 15% is coordination and only 5% is communication.

2.9. Consistent branding is impossible as a result of parliamentary terms

A country positioning or repositioning process may take up to 10, 15 or 20 years to provide the desired results. However, politicians are often unable or unwilling to wait for them. This is because in most countries the mandate of governments lasts 4 years, and newcomers always wish to deliver quick results. Therefore they often engage in the creation of a new country logo or country slogan, because it is the easiest thing to do – and then it is where the whole activity begins and ends. There are only a few countries that follow the designated direction of their country branding consistently. Examples include the abovementioned country, Estonia and their E-Estonia concept (PAPP-VÁRY and ILIC 2018), but this country has not changed its government frequently.

2.10. You need to start developing your country brand at home, domestically

This is one of the remarks that critics fail to understand or do not accept, although even the most prestigious experts agree that first we should get our own house in order before entering the international market (MOILANEN and RAINISTO 2009: 25.). Or, as ANHOLT suggests (2010: 46.), first of all we must find the way to be true to ourselves instead of lying to others. It is impossible to build a brand without internal security, confidence, principles and identity. In addition, we must involve locals in the process of country branding and ask for their assistance. As KENNEDY said: 'Ask not what your country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country'. Of course what worked for KENNEDY in the United States of the 1960s has not necessarily been successful with other politicians in other countries and periods. Even in a workplace, you cannot always achieve that employees stand behind the brand vision, communicate and behave in accordance with brand values, or at least believe in them. It is even hard to motivate the workers of a company to actually make them 'live the brand', and this is especially true if we consider the whole population of a country who should represent it externally, at international level. This is especially true if a nation has a poor self-image, if it does not respect and admire itself (at least in part).

2.11. Good advertisements do not help bad products

'A great ad campaign will make a bad product fail faster. It will get more people to know it's bad', said BILL BERNBACH, founder of the DDB advertising agency. In such cases, ad campaigns result in that people try the product as soon as possible, but they are dissatisfied with it – therefore they are not willing to purchase the same product again, and they also share their bad experiences with others (LEVENSON 1987). First of all, a good brand definitely requires a good product. This is true for FMCG (that is fast-moving consumer goods) and services, and for personal brands as well. The case is the same for places including countries. A country branding campaign by itself is unlikely to save a country with bad reality. Let us take the example of Nigeria: when the country launched its first image campaign in the late 2000s, it was faced with incomprehension and even indignation. Locals claimed that they should rather deal with key problems such as poverty, diseases or the situation of education. Many people said that their campaign with the message 'Good People, Great Nation' was 'meaningless, stating that merely using slogans and eye-catching colour combinations will not change the image of a country where members of the government steal, falsify election results, and sometimes eliminate members of the opposition' (MARKETING&MEDIA 2009). In addition, the internet further worsened the not so bright reputation of the country through an online scam action called '419 Scam', promising quick wealth in exchange for the banking data of the victims. The lesson is that this kind of country branding is a waste of money. It is a naïve assumption that an advertisement or marketing campaign could change international reputation. It is as if a massage by itself would make us lose weight – however though, diet and exercise are required for that purpose (ANHOLT 2010: 31-32.).

In this context, ANDRÁS WERMER claims that 'it is wrong to believe that you can sell something just because you cover it with glaze. Marketing is not advertising, but a process that includes the construction of something we think will do good for the people' (MAGYAR HÍRLAP 2006). Therefore in almost all cases it is better to spend on the development of the place than on advertising. This is more powerful and more credible, and lasts longer (ANHOLT 2009: 66.). It is extremely hard to change the country image or country perception itself – and it is especially impossible to expect it from an advertisement. Let us ask a simple question: When was the last time the reader has changed his/her opinion as a result of an advertisement? And by this we do not mean countries, but any product. It is likely that there were no such examples lately (or possibly there have been no examples at all). In addition, the competition of advertising is fierce: the total amount of advertising stimuli affecting us is 3-5 thousand a day. There is very little chance that the advertisement of a country will affect us unless we have been (at least latently) interested in the country before.

2.12. Negative news is always more interesting and spread more rapidly

It is enough to open any kind of newspaper or switch to a programme on your TV to see that bad news spread much faster. This is an eternal truth about media: negative news is always more interesting. Modest progress, increasing stability and reasonable reforms are not too exciting in connection with a country (ANHOLT 2010: 74.). On the other hand, a national disaster, a crime, the collapse of economy, if the prime minister starts to behave like a dictator, or if they have 'lied night and day' in the country could be interesting news. And in the same way, it is much more interesting if we get a restaurant bill of 300 EUR after a modest dinner, or the toilet at the border crossing is in an awful condition. Accordingly, a 2008 research by LEBEDENKO concluded that in the case of Russia, only 17% of articles published in the Western media were positive or at least neutral/realistic. This is also important because negative news may build awareness, but positive news may also contribute to the building of an image.

2.13. You cannot build a good country image merely through plans and the precision of an engineer – but it can be deserved

'Distracting spontaneous image formation in another direction is a significant marketing challenge', wrote PAPADOPOULOS and HESLOP in 2002 (quoted by TÖRÖCSIK and SOMOGYI 2009). Well, the period since then has justified this. No matter how many planned and coordinated efforts were made, there have been no news of roaring success ever since.

2.14. Country branding does not have a standard formula

Of course we can create systems or guidelines including the most important steps of country branding. But this does not mean that there is a universal template or sample for nation branding strategies (see DINNIE 2008: 219.) Each country has its own purposes, circumstances and competences (ANHOLT 2007: xi.). Every country is different, therefore there is no magical formula that we could use. Of course we can create identity manuals or style guides for country brands including the logo and its possible applications. However, their most important aim is to distinguish the country, therefore they must not be too similar, using a one-size-fits-all approach.

2.15. It is hard to build a country brand, and it is easy to destroy it – but actually it is hard to destroy as well

This is a very important remark, maybe the most important of the ones listed here. There are people who disagree: 'There is a rule you cannot circumvent: the country image may easily change.' (BÍRÓ 2009, p.56.) But this is simply false – as various studies on country brands show, the image of most countries is exactly the same every year.

Even if a country decides to change its brand image and support it with conscious actions and communication, the change will likely take many years, and the process is neither easy, nor quick. It is a bit like the case of a marine tanker: it takes 5 miles to slow it down and 10 miles to change direction (see ANHOLT 2007). Other authors state that 'It is hard to build the image of a country, and it is easy to destroy it. (...) But statistics show that it is not that easy to destroy, either.' (SZANDTNER's interview with PAPP-VÁRY 2012). Many similar negative events have to take place in order to change the perception of that specific country. This is somewhat similar to driving a Mercedes. If for some reason it breaks down and we need to take it to the garage, we say 'oh, how unlucky we are as this is a great brand'. On the contrary, if we have a Lada and we have not had any problem with it, we say 'how lucky we are'. In most cases, image changes slowly – be it a positive or a negative change. Let us take Volkswagen for example. After their diesel scandal and the series of lies associated with them, it would have been no surprise if nobody in the world bought Volkswagens any more. But people keep buying the brand's cars. Returning to countries: warfare, terrorist attacks and natural disasters have little effect on country image, to be honest (see ANHOLT 2009: 54.). If these happen in a country with a good image, it is possible that the only thing the public says is 'It is such a safe place. How could all that happen?' The country image only changes if such events (for example, terrorist attacks) become a regular feature of that country.

2.16. Country image is nothing more than reality with some delay

As the previous item in the list suggests, a lot of converging events need to happen in order to change the image of a place. In the case of negative events, this change may be quicker, but this also takes some time. No doubt countries would like to improve their image. But we must understand that even if many developments and innovations are on their way in a country, the country brand will be slow to catch up with the change of reality. Moreover, a change in a country's image may be left behind as it usually takes place over decades not years (ANHOLT 2007: 27.). For many places, the real challenge is here: they need (marketing) communications to decrease the gap between reality and perception.

2.17. Each country gets the image it deserves

From time to time, the author of this article (also a consultant) is contacted by various product and service brands with the question 'Why is our image so terrible?'. In such cases the first answer is always a question: 'Can it be because the product/service is terrible?' The same rule holds for countries: if a country has a terrible image, chances are high that it is because the country itself is terrible. We must accept that problems of image are often problems of reality as well. In order to change that image, the country itself must change. Even if the image is relatively neutral, there is one question that should be asked: what was the last real news story in connection with the country? What was the most exciting thing (be it a product, service or celebrity) that has come from the country recently?

2.18. You can only plant a new idea in minds if you find connection with an idea that is already there

It is essentially impossible to convince people to change their thinking and especially their behaviour. This is even more true for their attitude to foreigners. In their mind, they are looking for familiar clues and associations. Therefore you must build on what is already in their mind (see DAY 1980). Thus it is important not to stick to the idea that traditional elements must be got rid of in country advertisements. If these traditional elements are well-known, we must present them, even if in a modernised form.

2.19. If the image of a country is in crisis, country branding is the least helpful thing

‘Many people believe that places particularly ‘in need of’ branding are ones that are in some crisis, and their economy, social and cultural situation are not stable enough. Already existing crisis situations may not be solved by means of branding as successful branding always is always the result of a longer period – quite often years or decades. Crises may only be staved off through determinant and highly targeted actions based on an already existing, strong brand identity’ GELDER (1998) says, quoted by TÖRÖCSIK and SOMOGYI (2009: 20.). Confirming once again what has been written above, the only thing that can result in long-lasting change in the image of places is long-lasting and comprehensive change in the country itself, including political, social, economic and cultural changes. Fighting negative perceptions with commercial communication techniques is like fighting terrorism with traditional weapons (ANHOLT 2010: 60.). In order to change the country brand, the country must change as well. Country brand management is always more than a campaign; it is a national policy (ANHOLT 2008).

2.20. Complex country branding is impossible, but sectoral branding (such as tourism promotion or investment promotion) can be successful

As stated above, SIMON ANHOLT the most renowned expert of the topic conducted several studies and concluded that ‘there has been no detectable correlation between changes in national brand value and expenditure on the so-called “nation branding campaigns”’ (ANHOLT 2010: 2.) There is not a single study justifying that general country branding campaigns change the country image. However, this does not mean that such campaigns are completely unsuccessful. They may be successful sectorally. For example, tourism campaigns may convince people to visit a certain place, but their primary focus is selling and promotion. The target group and messages are clearly defined, and travellers give their money and free time. ANHOLT remarks somewhat cynically that tourism promotion is a fool-proof thing. According to him, it is completely unnecessary to replace it with new terms such as ‘destination branding’, because the whole thing is quite simply about sales and promotion. Independent investment promotion (‘invest in’) campaigns are also possible, for example, to convince a well-known car brand to build its newest factory in the country. Maybe it would be exaggerating to say that it is a branding campaign, as it is much more about B2B (business-to-business) sales than marketing or especially branding. The excellence of Asian countries regarding their export products may also be considered a sectoral activity. In such cases, the image of the products influences the country’s image – although it is achieved years later, similarly to the case of Japan or South Korea. By contrast, general country brand campaigns fail to deliver the desired results. Of course there is a chance that the receivers of the communication can recall a slogan (but let us add that this is not the case usually). However, this does not necessarily mean that the people’s opinion about the country changes. Therefore we can state that campaigns for the promotion of tourism, investment or product sales are effective, but it seems completely needless to spend money (especially that of the taxpayers) on general image campaigns.

2.21. You should rather brand cities, regions and smaller units than brand countries

As early as in 2009, RÓBERT BRAUN wrote that ‘Hungary would succeed if the country would spend money on the support of the creation of local brands instead of the Hungary brand’ (BRAUN 2009: 48.) ‘In the future, the race of destinations, investments and places will not be decided by countries but cities, settlements, regions, clusters or districts, and these could and should be the foundations of a successful brand.’ (BRAUN 2009: 51) Moreover, he also added (2009: 49.): ‘A Hungary brand is unnecessary in the twenty-first century.’ Well, it is highly questionable that a Hungary brand would be unnecessary. However, it seems logical that it is more practical to spend money on the support of individual local brands, especially with regards to the fact that the awareness and image of the capital is much more favourable than those of

the country itself. This is not only true in the case of Hungary: Prague is more well-known and recognised than the Czech Republic, and the same can be said of the relationship between Amsterdam and The Netherlands, or Paris and France. It is also possible to think over the branding of the country and the branding of more significant cities, regions and attractions at the same time. As KÁDÁR says (2013: 22.), 'A country brand affects regions and settlements, but this is also true the other way round: each settlement or region represents the country and brings added value for the country brand. It would be reasonable to create regional and local plans in connection with the strategic plan and allocate resources to them. Settlements, regions, local brands, natural or built attractions and events may greatly improve the positive perception of the country. Therefore they contribute to the development of the identity and the country brand in a spontaneous way, followed by their systematisation and construction based on their common, synergic effect. It is no coincidence that several important articles by Hungarian authors have been published about the cooperation between individual destinations (SZIVA 2010, 2012, KULCSÁR and ZÁTORI 2011a, 2011b). Even if these writings approach the question from a touristic view, they can serve as an important basis for this concept.

2.22. Just as you need 'money, money, money' to wage war, it is also useful for country branding

The famous dictum by MONTECUCCOLI is partly true for the field of country branding as well: it is better not to start the whole thing without sufficient resources, preferably planned for five years in advance (MOILANEN and RAINISTO 2009: 79.). However, it must be also said that money may be at least partially replaced by ideas, creativity and innovation.

2.23. Many people still identify country branding with logo design – and some consulting companies skilfully benefit from this situation

The greatest misunderstanding in relation to country branding is the idea that this activity merely includes the creation of a new logo and/or the writing of a new slogan accompanied by a high-budget advertising campaign. To implement these items is definitely in the interest of consulting companies and advertising agencies: they can request great amounts for this purpose, and they have proficiency in this field. The problem is that the perception of places cannot be changed merely through direct communication. Changes must take place on a deeper level. (ANHOLT 2010: 31.)

2.24. Merely providing more information about the country does not help

The other communication-based approach is to provide as much information about the country as possible. These consultants propose that we make the advertising spots as long as possible and display everything that has anything to do with the country. But are these interesting for receivers? And what is the target audience in this case? An important attribute of consumer behaviour is that consumers only receive the information if they are actively looking for it – when they are right before (or after) the purchase decision. For example, if we want to buy a car, we start to see the chosen model on the roads after a while – although we have not noticed it despite their presence. Moreover, many people read the brochure about the model after purchasing the car itself, justifying their decision in a way. We react to countries pretty much the same way. Thus we can say that providing more information is not bad in itself – but there is a time and place for it. In most cases it is better to communicate less (and simpler) truths about the country instead of long lists of our attributes, and it is better to patiently wait for its 'reception'. Less is more, as we have realised again.

2.25. There is no country branding without country development

It must be pointed out that whatever the industry is, branding is not just about communication: it is also about the product and its development process. It is impossible to brand something without the involvement of the product itself. In that case it would only be communication – an advertising campaign in a worse case scenario, or a PR campaign in a better situation.

3. CONCLUSION

As the article pointed out, country branding as an activity can be criticised for various reasons. These are presented in the table below.

Table 1: The most significant critical remarks: limits of country branding

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1) Countries are not brands, but countries2) People are not parrots3) It is impossible to coordinate so many things4) Operating a 'country image centre' or 'country brand council' does not mean that the brand image of the country will improve5) Branding is always narrowing, but countries are complex6) There is no country branding without a country strategy7) 'Do good and speak about it'8) There is no progress without innovation9) Consistent branding is impossible as a result of parliamentary terms10) You need to start developing your country brand at home, domestically11) Good advertisements do not help bad products12) Negative news is always more interesting and spread more rapidly13) You cannot build a good country image merely through plans and the precision of an engineer – but it can be deserved14) Country branding does not have a standard formula15) It is hard to build a country brand, and it is easy to destroy it – but actually it is hard to destroy as well16) Country image is nothing more than reality with some delay17) Each country gets the image it deserves18) You can only plant a new idea in minds if you find connection with an idea that is already there19) If the image of a country is in crisis, country branding is the least helpful thing20) Complex country branding is impossible, but sectoral branding (such as tourism promotion or investment promotion) can be successful21) You should rather brand cities, regions and smaller units than brand countries22) Just as you need 'money, money, money' to wage war, it is also useful for country branding23) Many people still identify country branding with logo design – and some consulting companies skilfully benefit from this situation24) Merely providing more information about the country does not help25) There is no country branding without country development |
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Source: classification by ÁRPÁD PAPP-VÁRY

After all these critical remarks, it is also makes sense to find out how a country's perception becomes positive and what makes it a brand. In this context, it is worth calling upon SIMON ANHOLT, the most renowned international expert of the topic. ANHOLT withdrew for over a year and did nothing but study the results of his country brand ranking called Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index. It was no small task as his researches had gathered 3 billion (!) data points by that time – which made ANHOLT's survey one of the three largest social science research

projects in the world. ANHOLT primarily sought to find out what makes people think that a country is good. Well, his results outlined five drivers of national reputation (see ANHOLT 2016):

1. **Morality:** Is the country good or bad? 'Are they happy about its existence? Does it have a positive effect on the world? Does it act correctly? Or is it a bad, dangerous, or useless member of the international community?'
2. **Aesthetics:** Is it beautiful or ugly? 'If we think that a country is beautiful, we tend to believe several other things about it (...) People think that Canada is an eco-friendly country because it is beautiful.'
3. **Relevance:** What does this country have to do with me? How does it affect my life? 'Why would we expect that people around the world know and respect Hungary? Do we know and respect the countries of others?'
4. **Strength:** This is not 'soft' power as explained by professor Joseph S. Nye (2005), but 'hard' power. 'It means whether the country has real economic, military and territorial power, or a large population, and whether they can force their will on others.'
5. **Sophistication:** 'Are there smartphones in the country, or are they still plowing the land with oxen?'

Reading the five initials together, we may see the abbreviation MARSS – this is no coincidence, as ANHOLT was looking for something easy to remember. 'These are the five main factors in people's minds. When they think of foreign countries, these are the characteristics they consider in the fraction of a second. (...) When I analysed results, I realised that the first point was by far the most important. The most important aspect for people is how that specific country contributes to humanity. (...) This is the essence of discovery. People like good countries. Therefore, if we would like a better image, the only way to achieve it is to do something which makes people grateful for our existence. In other words, if we act for them' (ANHOLT 2016: 145-145.). It should be noted that strangely enough, ANHOLT's twenty years of research have led to the same conclusions as 'How to start your own country', a six-part comedy series by well-known British comedian DANNY WALLACE on BBC (2005). After the establishment of his own country (in his own flat) and 'much' consideration, WALLACE wrote the two-word constitution of his country: 'Be good'. Returning to ANHOLT's ideas and marketing: 'What is the first rule of marketing? The first rule of marketing is not to brag about how fantastic our product is. We must get to know our customers and their needs instead. The same applies to countries. (...) People are not interested in successes. They are only interested in what the specific country did for them that week' (ANHOLT 2016: 145.). This actually refers to nothing else than the classic WIIFM principle, that is 'What's In It For Me?' (see PEASE and DUNN 2001, and PAPP-VÁRY 2010). This is the thing that matters from the consumer side. We need to find the same features when we embark on country branding – which is clearly more than simply branding.

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