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Georgia's political brand in the European Union: building the political product and the political brand

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Abstract

We live in a world full of brands, where the names, symbols, and logos of big corporations, such as McDonald's, Adidas, and Coca-Cola are extremely recognizable. Nowadays, in the era of globalization, the product development and marketing strategies that were the domain of private companies and corporations are being taken over by the public sector. This unusual exchange of roles causes the state to enter the branding space, and to create an offer that includes the goods and services of national businesses, government, and non-governmental organizations, and also to create a brand. The brand of a state consists of three equal components: a national brand, country brand, and political brand.

Georgia is a "model democratic state" in the South Caucasus, which cooperates consistently with the European Union. The multi-level specificity of this state and the implemented model of systemic transformation, directed the foreign policy and created the state brand towards the West.

The aim of the paper is to present the construction of one of the components of a state brand, the political brand, and to analyze the strategy of political branding in Georgia's foreign policy created towards the European Union. The author will answer the question of how the political, and economic institutions of Georgia are building the political brand.

Keywords: Georgia, brand, political brand, state brand, branding, political branding, state branding, the Eastern Partnership

Политический бренд Грузии в Европейском Союзе

Аннотация

Мы живём в мире, полном брендов, где названия, символы и логотипы корпораций, таких как McDonald's, Adidas и Coca-Cola чрезвычайно узнаваемы. В настоящее время, в эпоху глобализации стратегии развития продуктов и маркетинга, которые долгое время были областью частных компаний и корпораций, принимаются также в государственном секторе. Этот необычный обмен ролей означает, что государство входит в пространство брендов, которые включают в себя товары и услуги отечественных предприятий, правительственных и неправительственных организаций.

Бренд государства состоит из трёх частей: национального, политического и бренда страны. Грузия является «демократическим государством» на Южном Кавказе, которое последовательно сотрудничает с Европейским Союзом. Многоуровневая специфичность страны и реализованная модель системной трансформации направляет внешнюю политику государства и брендинг в западном направлении.

В статье представлен один из компонентов государственного бренда – политический бренд, и проанализирована политическая стратегия брендинга во внешней политике Грузии, направленная на Европейский Союз. Автор пытается ответить на вопрос, как политические и экономические институты Грузии строят политический бренд.

Ключевые слова: Грузия, бренд, политический бренд, государственный бренд, брендинг, политический брендинг, государственный брендинг, Восточное партнёрство

Introduction

In a world of brands, where the names, symbols, and logos of big corporations, such as McDonald's, Adidas, and Coca-Cola are recognizable, the product development and marketing strategies, which were the domain of private companies and corporations, are being taken over by the public sector. First of all, this unusual exchange of roles forces the state to enter the branding space. Corporations and, above all, multinational corporations are joining the social sphere, which has so far have been reserved only for the

state, and it is entering, the state is entering the marketing sphere, creating an offer that includes, inter alia, the goods and services of national businesses, government, and non-governmental organizations, and also creating a brand for these products. The brand of a state consists of three equal elements: a national brand, country brand, and political brand.

The aim of the article is to present the construction of one of the components of a state brand, the political brand, and to analyze the strategy of political branding in Georgia's foreign policy created towards the European Union. The author will try to answer the question of how the political, and economic institutions of Georgia are building the political brand. To answer the question the author used two main research methods, such as analyzing Georgian, Polish, and English literature, and conducting interviews among scholars of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University.

The article was made as part of the "Georgia's Political Brand" project. It took place in December–January (2016–2017) in Tbilisi, Georgia. It was financed by the Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw. It was made in cooperation with Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. While the scientific project the author visited Georgia and Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University to conduct the research.

The first method used was desk research. The author used the Parliament Library's and the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University Library's collections, and the articles the articles and books about the national brand, and about the current status of politics and economy in Georgia.

The second method used, method for qualitative research, was based on interview technique. The interviews were made during the author's visit in Tbilisi. The author chose mainly the scholars of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, and the political activist and cofounder of the OC Media.

Building the political product and the market-oriented political brand of Georgia in the European Union

In the times of global transformation, the political and economic changes in the international arena are noticeable. The transitions in societies and on the world market are due to the rapid growth of educational, commercial,

and cultural exchanges. Globalization as an intense, deep, and multilevel process has forced “political actors” to change their approach to the creation of image and reputation of a state in micro- and macroeconomic terms and, above all, in the political sphere. The globalization process is influenced mainly by emerging new links and dependencies on the international stage and changes in the potential and arrangement of the political and economic forces of individual states. Globalization brings forth new phenomena and processes that enhance the competitiveness of countries that have become particularly important in recent years. The unpredictability of globalization processes have led to closer regional ties and the awakening of patriotism. Progressive globalization has also affected post-Soviet Georgia, which at the border of Europe and Asia, has politically, economically, and culturally directed its foreign policy towards the European Union.

When, in the process of globalization, the state enters the marketing space, it becomes a product that needs a strong brand of the so-called, state brand. The variety of views in defining the brand itself made it difficult to create one universal brand concept, just as in the case of a state brand. Brand is built to distinguish a product or service on the market. There are two basic definitions of a brand: from the entrepreneur’s point of view and from the consumer’s point of view. The first defines a brand as a name, a term, a symbol, a pattern, or a logo given by the company to attract a customer. From a consumer’s point of view, it is not an entrepreneur who builds a brand image; it is created solely in the minds of consumers as they receive and process many of the signals associated with it. The brand owner does not create an image of the brand but defines the identity that contributes to it (Kall, 2006, p. 96).

The concept of a brand has evolved and a comprehensive brand classification has emerged. One of them is typology based on the strategy of action criteria, which distinguishes brands such as: family brand (given to a group of products within a certain kind of products e.g. cosmetics; positive associations with good quality of a particular brand make one more eager to refer to another product of the same producer’s); individual brand (giving one brand to one product within the same manufacturer); combined brand (combination of family and individual brand) (Garbarski, 2001, p. 342). There is also a division of brands due to the geographical coverage criteria.

It includes the global, national, local, regional (*Marka, klasyfikacja marek*, n. d.), and “eurobrand” (Rojek, 20017, p. 36).

The global brand is linked to the development of modern economy, which means that products and services are available globally. These kinds of brands are popular in all regions of the world and often are adapted to local markets due to different cultures or stages in technological evolution. Global brands have no significant competition on the global market from national, local, and regional brands. Typically, a global brand becomes so-called, a “brand-icon,” a recognizable world brand, which is a symbol of consumerism or a specific type of product (Holt, 2004, p. 221). An example of the iconic brand is the German Adidas company producing sportswear and footwear. Adidas brand is available globally and is now used as a synonym for sports shoes. A brand-icon creates its own brand identity, becoming a functioning symbol of a particular product group. Other iconic brand is Coca-Cola as the US symbol, promoted in the 1950s as a product that meets the need for equality and individualism in the American society. Currently, the Coca-Cola brand symbolizes consumerism and globalization. The state brand is striving to become a brand-icon. As in the case of the United States of America, which symbolizes freedom and the famous “American dream.”

New globalization phenomena and dynamic transformations in political and economic competitiveness have influenced the formation of a nation-state. This idea has intensified particularly in recent years and has strengthened nationalist attitudes, where the state maintains the interests of society in political and economic spheres. This great care of reputation of a state caused the emergence of national, country, and political brands. The concept of state branding is derived from the general notion of building brand awareness. Thus, national branding is about creating and perpetuating a positive image of the national brand of a given nation (as in the case of a multinational state, several national brands “under the umbrella” of a state brand), and political branding in the narrower sense – a politician or a political party, and a broader one – the state itself. Similarly, country branding is about creating a country brand, independent of the number of nations and ethnic groups. These three brands make up the state brand (Skiert-Andrzejuk, 2017, 242–243).

The success of branding in the world of corporations, resulted in an increasing number of cities, regions and states which are attempting to brand or even re-brand themselves. Governments use the state brand to create links with corporations, and encourage them to set up factories in their countries and attract investors, but also tourists to spend their holidays there. They want to make or re-make their image in the world to achieve certain political goals. Branding also creates a certain level of control over an identity. Corporations take an active steps in making sure that their products are branded properly, and they also take active role to change “incorrect” images (Olins, 2002, pp. 247–248). Branding involves a conscious creating a state’s identity and international image. It can have economic consequences for the state, as follows also political.

One of the components of a state brand is a political brand. It is an important element of political marketing, which is defined in many ways. It is often referred to as a set of social practices and methods to persuade citizens to support a politician or a political party (Albouy, 1994, p. 157–160). But it can also be referred to a state.

According to the Tbilisi State University professor Valerian Melikidze, it is hard to define the role and the way of understanding of the political brand in Georgia, especially that the government does not exactly know what it wants from the European Union. The Professor did not notice any improvement of the political brand in recent years, he underlines that the current political ideology of Georgians is focused on creating external Western brand (Melikidze, personal interview, January 10, 2017). It results in Georgia’s attempts to copy the European countries’ brands, such as the national brand of the Netherlands (for example in case of drug-tourism, which is currently slowly developing in Georgia) (*Constitutional Court Rules that Use of Marijuana Should Be Decriminalized*, n.d.). This mixture of multilevel national identity and the modern understanding of the state, gives a significant hybrid brand, which is not European, not Asian, but something between, it is the brand created on the platform of the historical background connected with Russian occupation, fighting for freedom and independence, and the clash of two major ideologies: modern (which comes from the West), and traditional (which is grounded in Georgians identity).

The brand can be product-oriented (oriented only on creating the brand), sales-oriented (oriented only on selling the brand somewhere, does not matter where), market-oriented (oriented on selling the brand to specific country or market, for example the European Union) (Lees-Marchment, 2001, p. 174–180). According to Professor V. Melikidze in case of Georgia, the political brand was market-oriented towards the European Union, but currently it is not improving, it is slowly becoming a sales-oriented brand (Melikidze, personal interview, January 10, 2017). Dominic Cagara, a journalist, civil society activist and co-founder of the OC Media (the South Caucasian analysis website), also claims that Georgia's political brand was aimed towards the West, it was strictly market-oriented. Nowadays, the brand is directed towards China and Russia, to show that it is getting stronger and more recognizable internationally (Cagara, personal interview, January 8, 2017). Professor Sergi Kapanadze, Georgian parliament member of the Movement for Liberty – European Georgia, opposition party, and a professor at the Tbilisi State University, argues that the lack of strategic vision among the leaders, the Brexit issue, and migration crisis damaged Georgia's political brand. Before 2012 Georgia was a market leader in the South Caucasus region, and now the brand is being sales-oriented, building the political product is focused on the investments and financial stability (Kapanadze, personal interview, January 11, 2017).

A general definition of a product is what we offer to the consumer. It has external values such as appearance, quality, guarantee, and internal, such as benefits. In the case of a political brand, the narrower product is a politician, a political party, and a broader is a state or a group of states. The ideal product is one that has a strong electorate, which means that it is competitive on the market and attracts “buyers” (Klepka, 2012/2013, p. 48; Skiert-Andrzejuk, 2017, 242–243). In case of Georgia, considered as a product with a pro-European brand, it is worth to underline its aspirations to bring Europe closer. The idea of Europeanism in Georgia became popular in the 18th century, and in the 19th century a well-known Georgian writer and journalist, Iakob Gogebashvili, wrote that “(...) since the eighteenth century the whole nation feels the need to bring Europe closer” (Chedia, 2010, p. 19–21). In 1918, after Georgia detached itself from the Russian Empire, it chose Germany, as its ally – but only to discover that this alliance was too fragile to exist. The

Germans did not help in the fight against the Soviet occupants. Georgia lost, for many years to come, the chance of improving along with Europe (Chedia, 2012). Additionally, a significant connection of Georgia and Europe is its religion – Christianity. The Christian faith created the direction of Georgia's external policy. Christianity has been and still is an important part of social and cultural life of Georgians.

Soviet geographers avoided considering Georgia as a European part of the USSR. The South Caucasus was not marked on maps as a part of Europe. However, until the collapse of the Soviet Union, the problem of the borders of Europe never appeared. The subject began to function as soon as the new states formed after 1991. Placing on the political map of Europe became the goal of Georgia's government (Chedia, 2012).

After 1991 Georgia has been recognized as an independent state on the international scene, however, the Georgians were not considered by the European Union as a nationality group with a visible European identity. In 1992 German Foreign Minister G.D. Genscher visited Tbilisi, and he said: "From now on, Europe will never betray Georgia, a country always oriented towards Europe. Two times she was disappointed when the expected help from us did not come. For the third time this will not happen" (Chedia, 2010, p. 19–22). In 1992–93 the conflict between Georgia and the region of Abkhazia began and it distinguishes itself as one of the bloodiest and most unresolved conflicts. The absence of any reaction from Europe has left Georgia alone with the Russian troops. The country was forced to join the Commonwealth of Independent States, which was created to remain a modern kind of USSR (Antonenko, 2005, p. 205–207).

Georgia's first step to get closer to Europe was joining the Council of Europe in 1999. Second step was made in 2003, when the European Union established the European Neighborhood Policy program, which initially covered all countries having borders with Europe, except for Russia and the Caucasus. Later on, the growing importance of the Caucasian region caused the extension of the program, it covered Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia (*Delegation of the European Union to Georgia*, n.d.). However, Georgia is not a potential member of the European Union. This situation is not connected with Georgia's visions and aspirations. After the Rose Revolution, this vision became a part of Georgia's official foreign policy (Fairbanks,

2004, p. 115–124) and its inspiration to create significant pro-European political brand.

In 2008 during Russia's armed intervention in Georgia, the European Union has been the mediator in resolving the conflict. Next year in 2009, an agreement was signed in Prague between the European Union and six post-Soviet states – Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Ukraine. This agreement formed the Eastern Partnership initiative, established by Poland and Sweden. Georgian political leaders considered this program as a way to gain membership and to create a strong European-oriented political brand (Kapuśniak, 2010, p. 40–41). Additionally, the Eastern Partnership became a main distribution channel for Georgia's brand in the European Union sphere.

One of the activities to establish Georgia's brand in the EU through the Eastern Partnership is the educational cooperation carried out within the framework of the People-to-People Platform. The Eastern Partnership in the field of education and science carries out scientific and research mobility programs that allow young people, students, and staff to cooperate with partner universities (Ananicz, 2009, p. 1–2).

“Youth in Action” is one of the Eastern Partnership programs. It is aimed at young people aged 13 to 30 and young researchers involved in youth education. This program was inaugurated in 2006. As part of the initiative, young people go to partner schools, and academics have access to training and seminars. The main objective of the program is to broaden the knowledge of the countries of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Young people, through contact with youth from other countries, increase intercultural awareness and have a chance to learn languages. The initiative was called “Eastern Partnership Youth Window” (*Youth in Action*, n.d.).

Another initiative promoting Georgia in the Eastern Partnership is the Erasmus Mundus WEBB educational program. It is based on international co-operation between universities and the mobility of students and staff. Its origins should be sought in the guidelines of the Bologna Strategy. This document, signed in 1999, launched a European-wide project to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The aim of the undertaken actions was to develop methods of cooperation between European universities, which would give on the one hand comparability of the achieved learning

outcomes as well as improvement of its quality. The Bologna Process was meant to bring Europe to the point where European higher education would represent the highest global level and Europe would have the chance to build a competitive knowledge-based economy (*Erasmus Mundus*, n.d.). As an example of the European integration process, the education was recognized as a priority area, and for this purpose, the Bologna Process has been adapted in Georgia as a part of building its brand based on European standards.

Building the political product with the pro-European political brand was and still is (not so strong anymore) the essence of Georgia's state branding. This unique brand connected with the international cooperation as a member of the Eastern Partnership, considered as a link between Europe and Asia, have important, political consequences that go beyond attracting tourism and investment. Shaping the particular branded identity of the state creates Georgia's foreign policy and helps to achieve certain international political goals, like free-visa for Georgian citizens to the Schengen area.

Crisis of Georgia's political brand in the European Union

A number of actions aimed at integrating Georgia into the European Union have been undertaken by the Georgian political leaders, such as M. Saakashvili. Currently, many political decisions became a source of concern to both, European and Georgian politicians, it resulted in the crisis of Georgia's political brand in the Union.

In contemporary Georgia, political apathy visible among Georgians has led them to avoid political commitments and reject acting politically. According to Professor Valerian Melikidze, young Georgians are no longer active in the political sphere (Melikidze, personal interview, January 10, 2017). This stagnation creates "the playground" for political and business elites, who follow their own elitist program. Additionally, it shows the tendency of the "elitisation" of politics in the South Caucasus region. The background of this problem is the lack of diversification of the political scene, too little opposition, the lack of new players, and lots of parties – but none of them could cross the electoral threshold. This apathy generates anti-political and anti-European tendencies. The growth of anti-European sentiment heated by conservative nationalist parties, including members of the leading Georgian

Dream coalition undermines the political brand, resulting in a significant brand stagnation.

According to Professor V. Melikidze current ways to improve political brand, like improving gambling businesses, and shining the spotlight on same-sex marriages issues, create anti-European sentiment, especially that according to social attitude questionnaires, homosexuals remained one of the most disliked groups in Georgian society (Lomsadze, 2011). Quantitative research performed in 2016 showed the negative attitudes towards LGBT group. The homo/bi/transphobic attitudes are determined by respondents' perceptions of traditional gender roles, and religious fundamentalism (*From prejudice to equality*, n.d.). The clash of Georgian traditional cultural identity and modern Western visions, create unhealthy interest around mentioned topics, and the wrong understanding of Western ideologies. This anti-European sentiment among the society weakens Georgia's political brand.

The Georgian Euroscepticists are also concerned about the Brexit situation in the European Union. Even when Georgians have got finally granted visa-free travel in the Schengen area, on March 28, 2017, still the European crisis remains unclear, especially about the future of the Eastern Partnership (*Visa-free Europe Coalition*, n.d.). Before the Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga on 21–22 May 2015, questions about the future of the EaP program began to emerge (*European Council*, n.d.). The key issue remains whether these members of the EaP, who have finalized the association process with the EU, will be able to apply for full membership in the Union.

According to Dominic Cagara image management of state is important. The government in Georgia led by Mikheil Saakashvili favored the US investments. In the United States, the conservative elites believed that Georgia would be liberal and that the country would continue its steady development. The present Georgian government's dream has hit the mark. The political brand is influenced by alleged political prisoners and alleged concessions to Russia. The opposition accuses the current government that the actions towards the West have been halted and that the government's actions are pro-Russian (Cagara, personal interview, January 8, 2017). Brand building is about creating the right brand, which consists of brand awareness and consumer loyalty – the growth of anti-European sentiment and the pro-Russian accusations, became a source of concern among the Europeans,

as “consumers” they do not bond emotionally. This situation can be the beginning of the crisis of Georgia’s political brand.

Conclusions

In the era of globalization, the state enters the branding space, it becomes a product that needs a strong state brand. This exchange results in creating an offer that includes the goods and services of national businesses, government, and non-governmental organizations, and also creating a brand for these state products. The state brand consists of three equal elements: a national brand, country brand, and political brand. The political brand is an important component of political marketing, it can be referred to the state. Creating the unique brand has important political consequences that go beyond attracting tourism and investment. Shaping the particular branded identities of the states create their foreign policy and international political goals. Research on political branding as a component of the state branding is still in its infancy.

Georgia as a “model democratic state” in the South Caucasus, which cooperates consistently with the European Union, directed its foreign policy and created the state brand towards the West. Perhaps more than any other country in the South Caucasus, Georgia had primarily oriented its political brand towards the European Union. This brand orientation towards the European market is rooted in Georgia’s history, culture, and the implemented model of systemic transformation. Georgia’s market-oriented brand towards Europe is changing to sales-oriented, because of the lack of strategic vision among the leaders, the Brexit issue, and migration crisis. The background of this problem is the lack of diversification of the political scene, too little opposition, the lack of new players, and lots of parties – but non of them could cross the electoral threshold. This apathy generates anti-political and anti-European tendencies, and undermines the political brand, resulting in a significant brand stagnation. In addition, a political brand must be made by political actions, not stagnation, to be an effective tool. In Georgia’s case the lack of vision and the lack of orientation consequences are visible. If the political brand will not develop, it will completely disappear on the international stage.

A state is always a part of the international community, it cannot “hide” when it attempts to re-tool its orientation or find a more effective branding strategy. Georgia’s political brand is at an early crisis stage because of re-orientating the brand: from market to sales. Georgia cannot change the situation after Brexit, but it can find a new branding strategy towards the European Union. The political brand of Georgia did not give lately a competitive advantage internationally.

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