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Public and cultural diplomacy in European cities and states' branding

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Abstract

Article “Public and cultural diplomacy in cities' branding” is a try to set ideas of city diplomacy and idea of branding into theory of international relations. Also, analysis of two West-European and two East-European cities is a chance to analyze chances and threats that both states and cities can encounter during a process of brand building. The main questions that article is answering are “Can cities use their resources and connections to make public and cultural diplomacy?” and “What influence on that process has factor of being a city in post-soviet country or former Soviet Satellite state?” It can be said that cities are able to brand and rebrand itself and they are more flexible than states that cannot run away from some aspects of its identity. In case of difference between western and post-soviet states, the difference is none. In research, numerous rankings, articles and analyses were used as a primary sources in order to characterize how different are images of Italy, Germany, Hungary and Ukraine. Also, paper tries to determine, what is relation between states brand and branding of its cities.

Keywords: International relations, soft power, cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, city diplomacy, nation branding, city branding

Публичная и культурная дипломатия в брендинге европейских городов и государств

Аннотация

Статья представляет собой попытку вписать идеи городской дипломатии и брендинга в теорию международных отношений. Кроме того, анализ двух западноевропейских и двух восточноевропейских городов — это возможность проанализировать шансы и угрозы, с которыми могут столкнуться как государства, так и города в процессе построения бренда. Основные вопросы, на которые отвечает статья: «Могут ли города использовать свои ресурсы и связи для публичной и культурной дипломатии?» и «Какое влияние на этот процесс оказывает фактор принадлежности города к в постсоветской стране или бывшем советском государстве-сателлите?». Можно сказать, что города способны к брендингу и ребрендингу, и они более гибкие, чем государства, которые не могут избежать некоторых аспектов своей идентичности. Разницы между западными и постсоветскими государствами нет. В исследованиях в качестве первоисточников использовались многочисленные рейтинги, статьи и анализы, которые позволяют охарактеризовать, насколько различаются образы Италии, Германии, Венгрии и Украины. Также в статье предпринята попытка определить, какова связь между брендом государства и брендингом его городов.

Ключевые слова: международные отношения, мягкая сила, культурная дипломатия, публичная дипломатия, городская дипломатия, брендинг нации, брендинг города

Introduction

Public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, the diplomacy of cities, and city network are new fields in international relations research. All of them are an answer to the dramatic change in world politics that took place after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Until the Cold War ended, two important schools of thinking about international politics existed: neorealistic that believed only power and safety matters, and neoliberal, which referred mostly to the political and economic sense of profit. None of these were focusing on culture as a significant factor of international relations, or cities and people as actors (Wojciuk, 2013, p. 25-27). In an answer to this, social constructivism was created. That school of thinking re-defined actors of international relations. According to constructivists, international relations

are “exchanges and actions taken by human beings as agents of [...] state and non-state organizational entities”. Also, it considers the political system as shaped by cultural terms (Kauppi, Votti, 2012, p. 278).

If using the constructivist paradigm, the assumption that national cultures can be an important factor in international relations is not wrong. After all, culture is a human construct and in general understanding of constructivism itself, whole reality is a product of human actions (Taylor et al., 2007, p. 288). Music, commons, and even cuisine can be used by states to influence their position in the international system, or even to reshape the system itself. What is more, if in modern international relations an actor is a human being acting in the name of state or international organization, then that human being could be an agent of a city as well.

Main objective of this paper is to find an answer for a question: do cities use their resources and connections to make public and cultural diplomacy in a way states do it? If so, what are commons and differences between their strategies? Is it relevant to the process being post-soviet state or Soviet satellite state? The author’s hypothesis is that cities are able to brand themselves and to act in a frame of public and cultural diplomacy. The main difference is states and cities’ past or location that makes them to pursue some specific strategies. It also refers to being a part of Western or Eastern Block in the past.

In order to determine validity of the hypothesis research was conducted. Its objective was to analyze primary and secondary sources like city and states rankings, governments’ materials, websites of both cities and states and NGOs reports. To make a result of research specific, Europe was chosen to become a research area. First two research units are Western European states, Italy and Germany, with two of their cities, San Gimignano and Hamburg respectively; the second pair is Eastern European states of Hungary and Ukraine and their cities: Budapest and Kiev. Timeframe of analyzed data are years 1991–2021, from dissolution of the Soviet Union to modern day.

Author’s research tool was a set of questions that can be asked about states’ and cities’ actions in terms of branding. How states use its culture to advertise themselves? How significant is for them their history? What is the economy influence for state? How brands are influenced by states’ politics? What is relation between state brand and city brand? How city branding differs from state branding?

Definitions

This section will briefly describe what a state is and what a city is. Also, it will include an explanation of terms: place branding and marketing, public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy. Also, it will define post-soviet country and former Soviet satellite state for a need of the research.

According to the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of the State, a state is a person of international law that possesses: a population that lives on a defined territory, the government that rules it, and the capacity to start relations with other states (*Montevideo Convention...*, 1933). It is not a full answer to the question “what state is?”. This is why the great emphasis on the aspect of sovereignty was put in later years. In modern understanding, the state as an international actor is not only capable of any actions. It is sovereign and cannot be influenced by a more powerful entity (Heywood, 2011, p. 112–114).

According to Peter J. Taylor city is a “work in progress”, a process. City development opens new possibilities to its citizens and allows them to continue the development of their settlement (*Advanced Introduction...*, 2021, p. 5). In other words, one could say that city exists in two dimensions. One is physical that contains architecture, industry, and settlements. The second one is immaterial: it manifests the process of development. This is where one can put any actions that can be labeled city diplomacy, especially public diplomacy, and cultural diplomacy.

The easiest way that any kind of marketing can be explained is a form of a mindset used in business that can be used as a tool to make a success in branding of a product. Many researchers of marketing started to create definitions of *place marketing*, *state marketing*, and *city marketing*. For instance, it can be a set of any actions, strategic or technical, taken by governments, organizations, or businesses whose aim is to improve a region by new resources and customers in an ethical way (Wojciuk, 2013, p. 18). In the context of the city and state branding, it can be said that goal of these actions is branding, the creation of recognizable and distinctive features, and a positive image for the city or state (Hibbard, Grayson, Kent, Kotler, n.d.).

These programs and strategies can be public and cultural diplomacy. Public diplomacy is a form of the international dialogue between a state and an audience living in a different state. Its tool is mass media and goal

– improvement of sending state's image (Nakonieczna, 2013, p. 144). In the case of cultural diplomacy, researchers are divided. Some define it only as an exchange of ideas, pieces of information, piece of art to build mutual understanding in international relations. Others consider it as a form of creation of the state's image, just like public diplomacy. In this take culture is a tool in the creation of a state's brand (Michałowska, Schreiber, 2013, p. 144). Again, these actions and goals fit into definitions of branding presented in the previous paragraph, but the use of culture, the message of public diplomacy, and their goals have to be ethical.

In general understanding, post-soviet state is a state that was emerged or reemerged in result of collapse of the USSR in year 1991. There are fifteen states and seven of them are East-European states. Those are: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Ukraine Russia and Moldova. Only Baltic States are part of the European Union (Lieven, McCauley, n.d.).

Soviet satellite states or Eastern Block in short is a group of European and Asian states that were in the USSR's influence zone. In Eastern Europe those were East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Albania. In aftermath of political and social changes of the late 1980s and 1990, East Germany unified with western counterpart, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia desolated and more states were established. In case of Yugoslavia it was achieved on a way of civil war. Today, only Albania and some of post-Yugoslavian states are not part of the European Union (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, n.d.).

How do states and cities use cultural and public diplomacy?

Italy's position as a nation brand was worked on since ancient times. Apennine peninsula that is Italy's territory today was a home for ancient Romans. Obviously, Rome is a capital city for both Italy and Roman Empire back in the ancient times as well. Significant parts of Italian heritage are creations of fathers of renaissance, artists like Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and Rafaelo Santi, or writer Dante Alighieri who were Italians. Further ages let Italians add to that works of musicians and composers such as Giuseppe Verdi and Nicolo Paganini. Altogether, Italian history and culture are well known and influential abroad.

Thanks to culture, history, and climate, Italians can effort to base their branding merely on the name of the country. This is a case of website *Italia.it* (*Italian National Tourist Board*, n.d.). There is nothing more than old cities, eye-pleasing landscapes, and historical figures. The rest of the job makes a general imagining about Italy. It is cuisine, people, some of the biggest brands in the world: Gucci, Ferrari, and Fiat. It can be said that public and cultural diplomacy in the case of Italy is made itself, without the inference of government. On the other hand, one can say that brand of Italy as a country is being compromised by the poor condition of the country itself. For instance, the dramatic situation of Italians during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemics is proof of the government's incompetence (Pisano et al., 2020). In sum, Italy is a country that does very little in terms of public and cultural diplomacy because it is not needed but it does almost none in terms of fighting many struggles it has.

An interesting case of the City of San Gimignano shows the opposite. San Gimignano was in the middle-ages well-developing city in which the richest citizens were building very tall towers that were proof of their wealth. It was stopped by the 1348 plague that halted the growth of San Gimignano for almost six hundred years. Almost lost city started to gain popularity after World War II when its towers became an attraction for tourists. This is when the name "Manhattan of Middle-Ages" was created. In 1990 San Gimignano was registered in UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage and the city is visited by millions of tourists every year. Without towers, promotion in form of cultural diplomacy, and brilliant comparison to New York, San Gimignano today probably would be a ghost town (*Associazione Pro Loco San Gimignano*, n.d.).

A country with a more difficult task in nation branding is Germany. Because of its difficult past and negative stereotypes, it is hard to base public and cultural diplomacy on German nationalism, being proud of being German or German history. Also, German famous artists, musicians or philosophers seem to be "inconsistent in terms of image". Johann Sebastian Bach or Goethe is considered to be great artists. Yet, Wagner, Marx, Engels or Nietzsche is seen by many as controversial figures that cannot promote German culture.

Yet, it is noticed by researchers, that Germany is a country that does much to improve its image through a soft power (*The Place Brand Observer*,

2018). Because of its good economic performance, Germany is one of the best countries to living and this message is sent to the world. According to different indexes, Germans are very happy, rich and they live in an environment-friendly state. Those are very important pieces of information that create among other nations belief that Germany is a good place to live. This is a case of good use of public diplomacy. In terms of cultural impact and making diplomacy through culture, Germans are very keen to promote themselves through sports events. In 2006 Germany hosted Football Europe Championships with the slogan “A time to make friends” (*Germany Tourism*, n.d.). Another case is the world-famous beer culture that makes the impact of cultural diplomacy deeper.

The same thing was done by the second biggest city in Germany, Hamburg. It appears that in 2020 it was the strongest city brand in the whole country, more important than Berlin. It is because Hamburg was working on its city brand since 2004. It was the time when the city switched receiver of its message from tourists to even more groups like investors, students, workers etc. Because of that change, people started to consider Hamburg as an appealing place to live, a good place to study, or to make business (Rokou, 2020). It is clear that it was made by public diplomacy, not necessarily cultural diplomacy.

On the other hand, Hungary is a case of a state which branding is lowing because of politicians' actions. Since 2010, in that state rules Alliance of Young Democrats–Hungarian Civic Union (Fidesz) with its leader, Victor Orban as a Prime Minister. After that, Fidesz started to consolidate power over institutions independent from government. Additionally, it started to violate laws of journalists, NGOs and other people or think-tanks able to criticize Orban and his party. In other words, Hungary became an example of eroding democracy (*Freedom House*, n.d.).

Those facts find reflections in recent rankings and polls. It appears that according to Freedom House that Hungary is just “partially free state”. In 2021 report it pointed out that in year 2020 Victor Orban used COVID-19 crisis to give himself right to rule by decrees. In other words, he cannot be controlled by parliament anymore. Also, Hungary is criticized by European Union for holding asylum seekers in “transit zones” for way too long time and by new law harming directly rights of LGBT+ community in Hungary (n.d.).

According to Eurostat, general happiness of Hungarians is “medium”. Very few respondents of 2018 polls about finances are happy about its financial situation (49% of Hungarians claim their earnings are too low and 46% that they earn average amount of money), while in many fields it is state, that conditions in Hungary are “fairly good” or “medium”. Still, healthcare and overall society’s health is valued very high (n.d.).

One can say that concerning political tendencies and average standard of living are reflected in opinions of economic rating agencies. Moody’s, S&P and Fitch see Hungary as stellar state to invest in but its pace of development is rather slow in comparison to e.g. Poland (*Trading Economics*, 2021). In sum, Hungary is a state with rather weak nation brand that does not improve through the time. In 2021 Brand Finance ranking Hungary was 43rd Nation Brand for 100 counted in ranking. It is in the middle of the chart, yet higher than European states like Slovakia or Baltic States (2021, p. 5).

On the other side, there is Budapest, capital city of Hungary. According to Time Out magazine survey, this place is one of the best cities to live in the world. Ranking contains 37 best cities to live and Budapest is 29th, right between Paris and Abu Dhabi, beating such places as Rome, Istanbul or Buenos Aires. Responders mostly point out that it is beautiful city with great architecture and outdoors like restaurants or bars (Oliver, Medina, 2021).

Because of unsure political situation, Budapest brand is built mostly on heritage and localization. It is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe, so called “pearl of Danube” that loses in reputation especially because of Hungarian nationalism and Victor Orban’s politics. Still, even if it is diminishing, Budapest’s reputation is still high and in City RepTrak Chart it has strong 39th place between Los Angeles and Washington D.C. (*City RepTrak*, 2018).

Worthy of notice case of post-soviet state in Eastern Europe is Ukraine. According to 2021 report made by Brand Finance, Ukraine’s position as soft-power using state diminished lately. Yet, it is not because the state is not interested in nation branding at all. Decrease of Ukraine’s position in Brand Finance’s rating is caused by COVID-19 pandemics and development of soft-power in other countries (2021, p. 86).

Still, Ukraine is one of the states that are more and more interested in nation branding, even if its political situation is unstable. In year 2013, Ukrainians started to manifest their anger caused by then-president of

Ukraine, Victor Yanukovich who resigned on talks with European Union about tying-up relations between the state and the organization, in favor of stronger dependency on Russia. That led to series of protests in result of which Yanukovich lost his power in elections. That caused wide reaction of Vladimir Putin and Russian army, who started to support political unrests on Ukraine's Russian-speaking East and Crimea. On spring of 2014 Russian intelligence and troops took control over the peninsula and helped to hold referendum in result of which Crimea became independent republic and then it was annexed by Russia. Additionally, since that year, northern east of Ukraine is a warzone where Ukrainians and separatists supported by Russia fight over regions integrity and sovereignty of two more republics. Because of that, Ukraine appears in world news in context of Russia's military actions and its own problems with integrity (Ray, n.d.).

As Brand Finance points out, Ukraine is something different than another unstable or troubled country. It is noted, that Ukrainians are seen as friendly people who can offer e.g. high-level education to international college students. Also, Ukraine's economy is very open toward international trade and business. On the other hand, Volodymir Sheiko, Director General of Ukrainian Institute points out that Ukrainian culture is not exposed and advertised enough. It corresponds with Ukraine's overall decline in Brand Finance's ranking, that during pandemics, many international cultural events were switched online. This is a thing that should be fixed by Ukrainians in order to maintain strong position as nation brand (2021, p. 87).

According to research conducted by Dmytro Balashov, Kiev, Ukraine's capital city is not in such a favorable situation in term of city branding. Kiev is the biggest city in Ukraine that enjoys wide interest of tourists. Still, it is absent in many rankings and reports by valued research organizations that focus purely on tourism and conditions of living such as China Development Institute, Rockefeller Foundation, or Global Cities Index. It appears that German strategy of advertising through sport events was unsuccessful in case of Kiev, or it was wasted. 2012 European Football Championships and 2018 UEFA Champions League Final did not improve Kiev's image. What is more, Balashov noticed, that if Ukrainian capital city was noticed in rankings of cities popularity and branding, it was holding low places, usually below the half of a rank (2019).

Conclusions

This paper not only proves the hypothesis that cities can use soft power as it is understood by constructivists, but they have more liberty in it. It seems that in terms of soft power cities have more liberty than states. A city can choose wherever it wants to be known just as a cultural hub with unique historical features or to be attractive for new investors or do both. The state does not have that choice. In international relations state has to take care of the brand that lets to improve tourism and the general image of the country. Also, it has to make marketing or cultural decisions that in the future will fruit profitably. For instance, governments should advertise themselves as democratic, reliable, and stable because that creates its image as an important and good partner to make political agreements, attract investors, and rely on it in e.g. international organizations. In order to achieve that goal, connection of marketing and honest democratic potential is needed. As Graham Hankinson said, political and social instabilities can be harmful for any kind of place branding (Kavaratzis et al., 2015).

Culture in a wide understanding of that word can be used by both cities and states to appeal mainly to tourists. As examples of this paper show, the most attracting fields of culture are cuisine, sports and architecture. Still, they are common, but they do not guarantee a success, as case of Kiev shows. History has the same quality. It is good for states or even cities to build their brand on history, but it has to be distant or positive history. For Italy link with renaissance and ancient Rome is beneficial, but Germany cut from both history and historical figures and artists, because of dark, World War II notions or overall stark feel of certain elements of it. Still, a history and culture criteria seem to be more exclusive for western states that happened to focus on them since the mid-1940s.

Economy, trade etc. appear to be the most universal theme in nation and city branding because both Western and Eastern European states and cities rely on it. Especially states and cities of Eastern Europe depend on it in their desire to attract international investors and corporations to improve their economies. On the other hand, Italians transition their international companies' image on state itself.

Criterion of state politics and its relation to both state and city brands is more vibrant in the Eastern Europe. Hungary and Budapest is a case of two organisms that seem to have different opinions and features and one of them wants to differ from another as much as possible. That means, sometimes state's influence on city brand can be negative. It is because of its political decision that can be found unpopular in international community. In that context, international institutions holding headquarters in certain cities can also be significant political factor of city branding (Szpak et al., 2021).

It is also visible, that the difference between Western and Eastern states is almost none in terms of branding and use of soft power, though it exists in influence of central or federal government's image on local governments' brand. Still, it is worth noting, that everything depends on government belief in actual power of branding. In other words, being a state or a city from a former Communist bloc does not make great difference because chances and obstacles in globalized world of public diplomacy and branding are the same for all players. Even if states of Europe had different pace of urbanization during the Cold War, it had small influence on cities after all (Rozenblat, Pumain, Velasquez (Eds.), 2018). Liberal democracies and stellar economies are simply more favorable in this world, because of its economic reliance. Cultural factors are additional benefit. Yet, in both cases somewhat a man is in the center of it, as a citizen and a part of a city. That means statement from the hypothesis that cities and states' strategies depend on location or its past isn't true for analyzed states and cities in terms of their history from Cold War period.

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