

ROMANIA TRYING TO BE AN EUROPEAN BRAND

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Abstract. *Building a coherent country branding program at international level requires a strong coordination between the government, the business sector, the decision makers from educational and cultural sector, the civil society and, the mass media representatives in any country.*

The paper presents the main efforts Romania has done to build a country image with a significant impact at international level. It focuses on the main policies and programs applied by Romania in the specific field of the national branding, offering a good analysis on the institutional framework and experience in promoting the country's image internationally.

The paper presents also the results of a research conducted with different local authorities (based on personal interviews) involved in the construction and promotion of a national brand abroad. The findings of the study provide opinions on the implications of the role of Romania's country image in the European Integration process. A SWOT analysis on the Romania's policy for building a European country brand completes the conclusions and the perspective on this particular issue considered to be important for a European Union integrating country.

Finally, the paper makes proposals for creating a positive country image for Romania, a country that is in the process of redefining its position and its image at international level. Romania's image will be considered from the perspective of the four dimensions defining a country image (tourism, exports, foreign direct investments and foreign policy), as well as from the perspective of building an integrated image abroad.

Key words: Country branding, country image, policy making, European integration.

1. Country branding – conceptual considerations

The image that one has about another country shows how one sees that country as a tourist destination, as a place to invest or as a source of goods. Therefore, country branding becomes part of a self-perpetuating cycle: as country promotes its brands, those brands will promote the country. As Anholt¹ put it, image and progress go hand in hand, as a positive image is the consequence of progress, rather than vice-versa and when the two of them are carefully managed in tandem, they help each other along and create an accelerated change. A country's brand can profoundly shape its economic, cultural and political destiny, as well as international competitiveness.

Creating a country image (through country marketing) consists of using strategic marketing to promote a country's image, products, tourism and foreign direct investment. Even though the country marketing concept has been established internationally in 1990's, the subject is not completely new. Numerous countries promoted their images over the years in order to attract foreign tourists and numerous studies have been conducted in the last 40 years in order to identify the COE (the country of origin effect) for their products and services.

The research in the focused domain of country image has been developed in the 1990's with works of Philip Kotler: *The Marketing of Nations* (1997), *Marketing Places in Europe* (1999), *Marketing Asian Places* (2002) and *Marketing for Hospitality and Tourism* (2005) or Eugene Jaffe and Israel Nebenzhal with *National Image and Competitive Advantage* (2001), Peter Van Ham with his article *The Rise of the Brand State* in the *Foreign Affairs* publication (September 2001). In April 2002, *The Journal of Brand Management* designated a whole special edition to the topic of country branding with contributors from the academic world (Kotler, Papadopoulos, Gertner, Heslop, Gilmore), consultants (Anholt, Olins) and practitioners.

Creating a country image has been defined by Nworah (2004) as being the process through which a country is actively looking to create a unique and competitive identity with the purpose of positioning the country both internally and externally as a good destination for trade, tourism and investment. Practically creating a country image has to take into consideration more aspects as there are more audiences that we address.

Different authors have mentioned different dimensions of country branding (Brymer, 2003; Roberts, 2004; Kyriacou and Cromwell, 2004; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002), and these can be synthesized as Placebrands' place branding hexagon that comprises: tourism, export brands, intern and external policies (or public diplomacy), investments and immigration, culture and history and people.

After defining branding as a means of differentiating one particular product from its competitors, one may extrapolate the rationale and credit country branding with a similar powerful impact on a country's capacity to gain from competing internationally. "Principles of branding apply in equal measure to countries as they do to corporations" (Interbrand 2003) seems to be a central tenet in the branding industry. Both theoretical arguments and evidence picture instead a more complex causation.

To sum up, country branding may be instrumental though not by necessity in reinforcing a country's competitive position. In the absence of either a good market performance, or a sympathetic attitude a country should primarily sort out its deficiencies along the value chain of its foreign economic engagements. Branding initiatives become effective only beyond a certain level of competitive performance.

The elements to be considered when creating country images are aspects such as tourism, export, foreign direct investments, public diplomacy and culture, sports and people. They play an important role in a country's international competitiveness being the main aspects with which foreign customers come in contact.

According to Brymer (2003) conceiving a program for the creation of a country image involves an integrated activity of these dimensions and the ability to speak and act in a coordinated and repetitive manner about motivating themes that can differentiate the country from others. Such coordination is required by the involvement of a large number of actors in the creation of a country image. To increase its chances of success a program for the country image creation should involve the government and its institutions, the private sector and the civic society.

2. Methodology

The *main objective* of the presented study was to analyze the current situation of Romania's efforts to create and to promote its own country image, focusing on the domains such as: exports, tourism, foreign direct investment, public diplomacy, sports and culture. In this respect was done an *analysis of the efforts made up to present by governmental agencies* (The Agency for Governmental Strategies, The Romanian Agency for Foreign Investment, The Romanian Trade Promotion Centre), and *by professional organizations* involved in the creation of a country's image (The National Authority for Tourism). The research was focused on the activities of the agencies playing an important role in tourism activities, in the promotion of Romanian exports, in the attraction of foreign investments and in Romania's diplomacy at international level.

The research methods used to attain this objective were:

- *documentation*, by studying the official documents and materials of different organizations;
- *creation of a database with public and private institutions* with potential role in building the Romania's image;
- *running interviews* in 2006 with specialists from the four main organizations with an important role in creating the image of Romania, namely The Agency for Governmental Strategies, The Romanian Agency for Foreign Investment, The National Authority for Tourism (dismantled in the meantime) and the Foreign Affairs Ministry regarding their efforts to create Romania's image.

Aspects such as the basic ideas regarding the building of a successful country image, the main actors involved in this process, the planning of activities, the co-ordination of the programs proposed or performed by these organizations were analyzed in order to identify strengths and weaknesses and to formulate viable alternatives. Accordingly the study ended with a SWOT analysis for the country image building.

3. Romania's experiences in country branding

The issue of country branding in Romania reached in 2004 a considerable enthusiasm, when the famous Wally Olins came to Bucharest and explained the importance of country branding. A short period after, the Workgroup for Romania's image abroad was established, having as members Government representatives, Opposition's representatives and cultural personalities. The Committee performed several ad-hoc meetings, but lacking organizational structure, ceased its activities.

Continuing the trend, the year 2005 was of an extraordinary effervescence regarding the subject of country branding. By contrast, 2006 was very discreet in terms of the concept's publicity in media. Nowadays, the subject moved with priority on the internet, thanks to a website (www.brandingromania.com) and a discussion forum managed by Grapefruit, a branding agencyⁱⁱ.

Management & Marketing

The main initiatives for building Romania's country image in the last years are presented on the types of activities.

Tourism was the main domain that attracted the most controversial campaigns in the past years experience.

In 2001, Romania launched its first promotional campaign at international level with the declared scope of improving its image abroad and attracting foreign tourists. We are referring to „*Romania, simply surprising*”, a TV broadcasted campaign and outdoor displays, produced by Ogily&Mathers Romania. The campaign was severely criticized due to its high cost (around \$20 million) and to its connections with PSD government, although it enjoyed a correct media planning: it was broadcasted on European TV stations, during vacation period.

1. Targeting medium-level educated Europeans with ages between 30 and 55 years, „*Romania, simply surprising*” campaign aimed to change foreigner's perception about our country and to announce that things have improved in Romanian tourism. Currently the campaign was abandoned without making public its final results.

Other projects focusing on Romania's image as a destination for tourism were: the photo album „*Eternal and Fascinating Romania*” (1996), framed by a huge political scandal in which PSDR Parliament members were accused of taking bribes and of abusing their authority and *Imagine Romania*ⁱⁱⁱ (2005), an initiative of several youth associations reunited under the name of The Initiative Group for Promoting Romania's Country Image. Its purpose was to organize seminars and workshops aiming to debate over Romania's image with the finality of initiating projects to promote our country's image.

At the end of 2005, *The Agency for Governmental Strategies* (AGS) took over the problem of country branding, and in spite of a small budget and an insufficient organizational structure overloaded with various other responsibilities, it realized several steps forward by ordering studies on Romania's image that were performed in Spain and Germany.

Concomitantly, *The National Authority for Tourism* (NAT) ordered several studies to discover Romania's image as a destination for tourism, studies conducted in countries like: Austria, Germany, Italy, Finland, Hungary, Norway, Sweden, United Kingdom, Spain, France and Denmark. One of the main conclusions was that the majority of foreigners' travels to Romania are a sort of vacations with the purpose of visiting friends and relatives, rather than a typical vacation. By contrast, Turkey and Hungary are typical destinations for tourism.

Creating Romanian's loyalty for Romanian brands comprised several measures undertaken in order to improve Romanians' perceptions and consumption of national products. In this category we can easily include the „*Made in Romania*” campaign, launched in 2000 as a result of the continuous decrease of the internal production. The program proposed a unitary and coherent promotion of the products and brands in order to achieve continuity of activity for national producers; but it failed as sales of the participating firms did not increase as expected.

The Romanian Chamber of Commerce initiative called „*Produced in Romania*” went alive almost at the same time, creating confusion on the market.

Other *sectoral initiatives* regarding the creation of „common brands” were undertaken in the IT sector or in the wine production sector.

Promoting Romanian exports

It took one decade after the opening up of the economy until Romanian authorities began noticing that state funds could be channelled towards country branding built on one country's most successful export items. When deciding what products deserve being promoted internationally because of their reputation, national authorities like the Department of Foreign Trade (DFT) choose a range of hand-made or natural products (e.g. wines, mineral waters, rural tourism, organic food) plus, a notable exception, the information technology (IT) sector. Their reasons, as presented for example by Lianu (2005), are well-grounded: these are domains where the sensitive issues of quality control and uniqueness of competitive advantage are more easily tractable. Nevertheless, the fact that no item of the targeted products has any exemplary export performance is indicative of the difficulties ahead.

A source of problems resides in the lack of experience with the market economy functioning of various professional organizations. One laudable initiative to promote *ARC* as a quality trademark of the Romanian Meat Association (ARC) ended in acrimonious disputes over whose interests are actually supported. A lack of preparedness in jointly defining what interests may or may not be perceived as common, and malfunctioning intra-industry dialogue (Lianu 2002b) became lessons in dealing with further sectoral initiatives.

Finally, a national policy of country branding is severely constrained in its product selection. *Auro* is a DFT-sponsored program of export brand recognition which focuses on just two sectors, i.e. wine and IT. These sectors' own schemes dating back in 2002 seem to stand for the only criterion of choice. Foreign models (e.g. Germany, Italy, Spain, and South Africa) and financial support (e.g. GTZ of Germany, USAID of the US) concur in underpinning the national efforts. That may represent a positive contribution to the national brand, but only after the previous two challenges are tackled and virtuously integrated into a coordinated national design.

Foreign Direct Investments are promoted by ARIS, The Romanian Agency for Foreign Investments and by fiscal measures applicable to foreign investments in Romania.

The Romanian Agency for Foreign Investments (ARIS) initiated its most important project aiming to attract foreign investments in our country: “Romania, an attractive destination for foreign investments”¹. The *project* aims to change the Romanian business environment, in order to reduce the restrictions the foreign investors

¹ <http://www.arisinvest.ro/level1.asp?ID=331&LID=2>

Management & Marketing

have to face. In this respect, the promotion in target countries of the Romanian investment environment is to be organized.

The “Local Investment Priorities”² project considers making a study aimed at inventorying those economic objectives, which need foreign capital in order to improve and modernize the existing capabilities, according to existing traditional sectors, the economic development strategies and comparative advantages, on a county, regional and national level.

Foreign Policy

In the close past the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs envisaged the promotion of the Romanian cultural phenomenon, both through its historical component, of traditional values, and through its contemporaneous component, of movements of ideas and artistic trends asserted during the past decades. Therefore, the process of creating Romania’s image outside the country, through the promotion of the various components of the cultural phenomenon can be considered as being part of the political foreign affairs strategies.

The concern regarding the elaboration of a framework project of *sustainable cultural development* was materialized at the National Culture Forum, when two major projects were launched (2005):

- the modern organization abroad of the *Romanian Cultural Institute*, according to well established models from the countries having a long tradition in this field. The *Cultural Institutes and Information Centres* within the structure of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs promote and disseminate Romanian culture abroad. Such Romanian Cultural Centres abroad are in Berlin, in Rome, in Venice and Budapest, Paris and New York. In addition to these, new Institutes have been established in Athens, Beijing, Belgrade, Istanbul, Lisbon, London, Madrid, Moscow, Prague, Stockholm, Tel Aviv, Warsaw and Vienna.
- **The Romanian Culture Decade** conceived as a comprehensive framework for the display and reflection of the cultural phenomenon, through thematic cultural actions (Eminescu, Brâncuși, Caragiale years).

„*Romania’s fabulouspirit*” is the new campaign initiated by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote the country’s image in the European Union. The concept was launched in March 2007 and it has already raised many controversies. The advertising agency that „won” the project is Gav Scholz and Friends. The agency was chosen for its results in promoting Sibiu as „the cultural capital of Europe”.

According to MFA representatives, the campaign will last several years, period in which Bucharest needs to communicate positive messages, not only defensive messages such the ones for dismantling critics and stereotypes. MFA will order perception studies in order to evaluate the results of the campaign.

² <http://www.arisinvest.ro/level0.asp?ID=234&LID=2>

According to Lucian Georgescu^{iv}, partner at Gav Scholz and Friends, „Fabulouspirit” represents a brand of Romania, a speech which aims to break the silence about the Romanian spirit”. In Georgescu’s opinion, „fabulouspirit” (the words of „fabulous” and „spirit” merged together) can be understood as „a disc inserted into the computer which is self-executable, and runs by itself”. In spite of the fact that the name of the campaign is seen as sounding better in Romanian than in English, branding specialists consider that there is potential in this campaign through which, if successful, Romania can show part of its soul to the world^v.

4. Experts’ opinions – interviews with local authorities

In order to better understand Romania’s efforts for building a country image, a number of interviews were conducted with officials from organizations dealing with issues related to the country image. They had different opinions on the matter, but few common aspects emerged: there are a number of aspects for which Romania’s image improved in the last years (such as the investment environment), some efforts were done for building an image for Romania, but there were fragmented and lacked co-ordination; Romania needs further and more integrated efforts for building a consistent country image.

For instance, a superior counsellor from The Romanian Agency for Foreign Investments (ARIS) explains (October 2006) how Romania is perceived by foreign investors:

“Romania’s image as a host country for foreign direct investments has improved in last years due to objective changes: a) the macroeconomic stability increased as reflected by the ratings given to Romania by agencies such as Standard&Poor’s, Moody’s, Japan Credit Rating Agency, b) negotiations for Romania’s accession to European Union have been finalized illustrating a higher economic stability, c) Romania’s accession in 2005 to the OECD Declaration for foreign investments and transnational companies - Romania is not a OECD member, but it is an observer on committees and working groups, d) a decrease of the inflation rate resulting a lower financing cost and others. There are also a number of negative aspects still present: bureaucracy and corruption. However, it was noticed that generally speaking the foreign investors’ perception changes for the best when entering in contact with the Romanian realities. For instance, the large supermarket chains reported profits higher than expected.”

Respondents from other institutions commented on the up to present efforts for building a country image, pointing out the deficiencies on the one hand and offering suggestions on the other hand.

The ex-president of the National Authority for Tourism (September 2006) commented about Romania’s country branding: *.....starting 2-3 years ago became very fashionable Romania’s branding, but we have to ask ourselves’ ”the branding of whose Romanian products? Romania is not a product”.... An inter-ministerial club for country branding was formed and paradoxically the National Authority for Tourism was not included in the club. Besides that fact, the public representatives in charge live*

in a different reality. If this activity had been externalized to a specialized company, the elements/products that identify Romania could have been much easier identified. But even such identifying elements are differentiated according to the country we are addressing to and they can vary from sports to culture, to tourism, etc..."

He also considers that: „The creation of a country image has to be initiated by central authorities, but to an equal extent to its formation contribute also Romanian companies operating at home and abroad, foreign companies operating in Romania and ourselves.”

On the other hand, the president of the Agency for Governmental Strategies (October 2006) commented about the to present country image building efforts: „Last year it was a huge discussion about the committee that will be in charge with Romania’s country building. It was a large meeting where the political factor was more important than the technical one. The committee was a diverse and strange group from which for instance the National Authority for Tourism was not part of, many of the members never showed up to the meetingsFinally they came up with a task book for country branding that has been reduced to the level of a task book for creating an advert”.

His suggestions for future actions are: „If we want a country brand, it has to be an institution in charge with the co-ordination of this activity, which we do not have at present (the AGS is in charge of just a small part of the external promotion activity). The newly created structure for this special purpose should be sustained by the public diplomacy, by tourism, by investments (Commercial Chambers of Trade and of Industry). Practically, a network able to support the institution in implementing the strategy should exist.”

The Foreign Affairs Ministry’s representatives (from the Economic Diplomacy Direction) (October 2006) also see an improvement of Romania’s image abroad and offer their view about who should handle the country image building issue:

“Lately foreign business people started to have a correct image about Romania, as the situation improved and they are better informed now.”

and

“The institutions that is advisable to be involved in the creation of the country image for Romania are: the Romanian Presidency, the General Secretariat of the Government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Romanian Parliament, the specific national agencies and NGO’s and even private companies”.

5. Building Romania’s country image – strengths and weaknesses

Based on the documentary study and on the interviews conducted with authorities and agencies involved in the country image building there are a number of strengths and weaknesses of the process that are presented in table no. 1

Table 1

The SWOT analysis for Romania's country image building

Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EU integration - the accession to other international structures (Euro-Atlantic) - Romania's image evolved from non-existent to a certain image 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - future higher expectations from a EU member country - the existence at international level of a rather negative image of Romania - the lack of agreement of all institutions involved on the country image, contributes negatively to decisions in entering/investing/visiting Romania
Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the start of some governmental initiatives for country image building as opposed to the previous period when those were inexistent - studies conducted by almost all institutions (ARIS, NTA, ASG, FAM) to find out Romania's image abroad - efforts made to identify the most attractive products/services to offer, with the purpose to sustain them (ARIS) - the identification of a number of target countries towards which to focus Romania's promotional efforts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - there are no concrete specific policies for the improvement of Romania's image abroad - the budgets designated to such activities are very reduced, almost non-existent - the personnel is numerically insufficient as well as untrained for such specific activities - singular and sporadic actions for the promotion of the country image - the lack of coordination of the efforts done by different institutions - lack of communication of all factors involved and lack of attention and involvement of all institutions supposed to be in charge

We can conclude at a general level that in the recent years, Romania randomly promoted various aspects such as tourism, products and others. Each ministry promoted its own activities at its best, by itself, and Romania's image campaigns lacked the minimum elementary coordination.

6. Instead of conclusions: future considerations

As far as Romania is concerned, there is the need for creating and repositioning of its image abroad. A required element of a strategy to connect the competitive potential to *tangible* benefits derived thereof should consist in taking advantage of the existence of a space of trust in favour of Romania. As is the case, the EU Member Countries represent the obvious target for exports, tourism and investments. The task is compounded by the European public perception of Romanian values.

According to frequent surveys of the EU population, Romania enjoys trust and has to confront distrust from the part of distinct groups of Member Countries. Romania is welcomed in the EU space by 45% of the member countries' citizens surveyed in May-June 2005^{vi}, but mean deviations are obviously indicative of various groups of interest. Romania's accession is underpinned in greater proportion by the reception extended by the New Member States (NMS) (Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Lithuania,

Latvia, Estonia and Malta), which with 50-60% of supporting answers form a robust backing group compared to the EU-15 (43%). Even individually the surveys are equally illustrative. The greatest shares, at almost two thirds of the respondents, are registered by close countries, like Greece, Cyprus or Slovenia, and considerably high percentages are characteristic for countries like Bulgaria and Croatia. As regards the EU-15, one interesting point is revealed by the polarized opinions about Romania in inversed relationship with the geographical distance: strong support from remote countries like Sweden, Denmark and Norway, but the least important encouragement (15-30%) comes from Austria and Germany.

The clarity of figures, but still more important the revealing image discrepancies are without doubt indicative of the existence of „a space of trust” to be taken advantage of. Building the future European position on country branding may be part of the required strategic actions, though it will always be object of subjective appraisals. Proper consideration at various levels – political, cultural and economic – of the existing embrace of Romanian values and images should hold instead the centre stage of strategic policy initiatives.

One way of approaching the creation of an integrated country image is to look back to our origins, to try to express who we are, as a people’s origin legitimates it and is in conformity with the truth.

Another way would be to capitalize on the positive images already existing abroad about Romania (with which also the Romanian people identifies itself) and in this context Nadia Comăneci, Gigi Hagi, Constantin Brâncuși, Eugen Ionesco, Mariana Nicolesco, the Romanian beautiful women and maybe the People’s House and Dracula Castle should be used as Romanian symbols to promote Romania abroad.

Complementary, new images can be created, images in accordance with the Romanians’ identity, the way Romanians see themselves and how they wish to present themselves outside the country. Features such as hospitality, cultural heritage, sociability, enjoyment, friendship and outspokenness can represent Romanians inside and outside the country.

Obviously, all the negative heritage needs to be combated and those images to be replaced with new ones, closer to reality and emphasizing on the positive side of Romania and the Romanian people.

As was already debated a country’s general positive image has a great contribution and a huge role in the reinforcement of all specific actions in promoting tourism, products and investments and this is also what Romania needs, now in the period when its redefining its role at international level.

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Notes

ⁱ Simon Anholt, Branding places and nations in Brands and Branding, 2004, The Economist, Bloomberg Press, p. 216.

ⁱⁱ Grapefruit was founded in Iasi as a small creative partnership by Marius Ursache, Stefan Liute and Laurian Gridinoc. The company was the first in Romania to tell and do many things about corporate and brand identity, naming, brand manuals and websites. Grapefruit creates and supports brands for clients across the world.

ⁱⁱⁱ www.imagine-romania.ro

^{iv} http://www.gandul.info/articol_32036/

^v Ioana Manea, branding specialist at Loco, branding and communication company, lecture at the Romanian-Canadian MBA Program, 31 March 2007.

^{vi} TNS CSOP, *Eurobarometrul 63.4. Raport național România*, primăvara 2005, pp. 23-24.