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Nation branding vs. nation building revisited: Ukrainian information management in the face of the Russian invasion

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Abstract

This article re-evaluates some of the previous assumptions made related to the communication practices and information management in Ukraine since before the Euromaidan revolution in 2013. We highlight two points where previous knowledge about nation branding and nation building must be rethought in light of the latest developments. Firstly, nation branding is no longer exclusively an activity that is directed to an audience of foreign investors and tourists, but also toward the international field of politics. Simultaneously, it is also clearly directed toward a domestic audience—the citizens of Ukraine. Secondly, this means that there may no longer be any sharp distinction between nation building and nation branding—at least not in times of an ongoing armed conflict.

Keywords Nation branding · Ukraine · Nation building · National identity

In Spring 2012, just before the finals of the European Football Championship EURO2012, a couple of nation branding videos were broadcast on CNN and BBC World. Riding on the back of the heightened interest from international audiences for this sports event, co-hosted by Poland and Ukraine, the videos announced a positive image of Ukraine. Having had a previous interest in nation branding in India and Estonia, we became curious about this campaign from what we thought of as a rather anonymous country in the eastern part of Europe. When visiting Kyiv, we soon understood that the orchestrators of the campaign also believed that the idea of Ukraine as a nation was very vague. Nobody, we were told, knew what a Ukrainian was nor how such a person could be distinguished from other people of Eastern Europe. This was a problem both domestically and internationally, claimed government officials, media professionals, and people engaged in civil society organizations. Foreigners, it was held, could probably not even locate the country on a map of Europe. The solution to this anonymity was, according to debates in business magazines and among our informants in the PR business, traditional PR and advertising in relation to big sports and entertainment events such as EURO2012 and

Eurovision Song Contest, but also through more mundane acts such as convincing Euronews to display more details of Ukraine in its weather forecasts.

What we had planned as a three-year project focusing on nation branding abruptly changed toward the end of 2013. Suddenly, we found our project rapidly turning into a study of information management during an uprising. With the Euromaidan Revolution and the following drawn-out war with Russia, we could conclude that Ukraine was no longer absent from the international news media. And since the full-scale Russian invasion of February 2022, the map of Ukraine is shown daily on international news. Today, people around the world can locate cities like Kyiv, Mariupol, Odesa, and regions such as Donbas or Crimea with ease. Furthermore, it seems increasingly apparent that Ukrainian national identity has been strengthened substantially. Iconic images of Ukrainian places, phenomena, or heroes flourish posted by our Ukrainian friends and acquaintances on Facebook and Twitter. The number of memes flooding social media is increasing exponentially. And importantly, the Russian army seems to have met people who are far from uncertain about their national belonging—and who are willing to fight to defend it.

In less than 10 years the idea of Ukraine has changed dramatically, both domestically and on a world scale. People in Ukraine do indeed identify with a nation, foreigners recognize, and predominantly also seem to sympathize with

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its cause—at least in Europe, North America, and Australia. This is a development that neither we nor our informants would have predicted when we started our study. It also goes right against two of our previous assumptions as scholars. Firstly, and based on our previous research on Estonia and India as well as our initial research in Ukraine, we argued that nation branding and nation building should be seen as two separate processes, which might use similar symbolic language but that differ on four important points: the agents involved, the media used, the relation to history, and the audience addressed. Nation building was conducted by politicians, artists, and intellectuals; they utilized literature, art, music, museums, and poetry; they were viewing history backwards to a golden past; and they directed themselves to a domestic audience—the “we” of the nation. In contrast to this, nation branding was conducted by commercial agents and PR professionals (and politicians); they utilized the media of branding (advertising, campaigning); they had a firm attention on the future (the anticipated profits of the campaigns); and they directed themselves to an audience of non-citizens who should spend money as tourists or investors (Bolin and Ståhlberg 2010; see also Bolin and Miazhevich 2018).

Secondly, and related to the above point of audience address, we argued that the nation as a collective, social identity was different from the image (brand identity) of a nation produced in nation branding. These forms of construction we thought of as logically and practically distinct. In 2016, we published an article discussing what forms of identity could possibly be at stake in nation branding campaigns, and how it was different from collective identity. We concluded that “if nation-states still depend on a certain sense of collective solidarity, nation branding does not offer the tools” (Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016, p. 288).

Considering the invasion of Ukraine it has become increasingly clear that our previous insights need to be rethought. In this short article, we reflect on how the Russian war on Ukraine alters our previous assumptions, and how it puts theory related to nation branding to the test. In the next section, we will discuss meaning management in Ukraine, with a specific focus on how practices of meaning and information management, developed during the Euromaidan revolution, have become reactivated during the Russian war on Ukraine. We will then discuss some questions related to branding and national identity. We end the article with some concluding remarks and suggested directions for future research.

Practices of meaning management: nation branding vs. nation building

The two forms of national imaginations that we insisted on as separate in our previous writings (e.g., Bolin and Ståhlberg 2010; Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016) have indeed evolved simultaneously in Ukraine—most clearly after the Russian invasion. Our previous standpoint—largely in opposition to some of the earlier nation branding research (e.g., Kaneva and Popescu 2011; Varga 2013; Volcic and Andrejevic 2011)—was based on empirical observations just before and after the Euromaidan Revolution (and in relation to our previous research on Estonia and India). Initially, nation branding was instantly interrupted when the revolution broke out. Practitioners involved in refashioning the image of Ukraine toward international audiences of tourists and investors engaged instead with activities more related to nation building. By that time, we were convinced that “no government would stage a branding campaign to win a war” (Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016, p. 279). History would, however, prove us wrong on this point. Today, we do indeed see a lot of PR skills from Ukrainian agents raising support for their nation, and we can also see our former informants engaged in media production, public diplomacy, and in actual diplomacy (one of our main informants is today the Ukrainian ambassador to a larger Western country). Even outright nation branding, aiming to attract foreign investors and tourists, reappeared during the drawn-out war. The most known PR campaign since the start of the 2022 invasion is perhaps the postal stamp “Russian warship—Go fuck yourself!” which has received widespread recognition internationally. Also, an image of Ukrainian farmers, towing away enemy tanks with their tractors, has become the second stamp in this campaign, and has also won widespread acclaim. The target audiences for these campaigns were not so much prospective tourists nor economic investors, but rather these campaigns were aimed to raise support for EU membership, arms deliveries, etc. It was branding that emphasized Ukrainian capability in terms of decisiveness, bravery, and responsibility. Furthermore, these communication initiatives also work toward domestic audiences, and they make the distinction between nation branding and nationalism less clear.

Our mistake was to underestimate the continuity in the shift of meaning-making activities after the Euromaidan Revolution. We have now noted that those new engagements during the war situation to some extent also included communication toward an outside (non-Ukrainian) audience and proceeded in new forms but with much the same skills as before. Furthermore, it has not only been the government



that has staged communication initiatives to get international support in the war situation. Also, private and non-governmental activities have flourished. In fact, the management of meaning in the post-Euromaidan situation was characterized by flexibility and new alliances between the government and two other actors: civil society organizations/NGOs and corporate PR business.¹ These alliances and the rapid reconfiguration of skills and resources have become reactivated in the wake of the Russian invasion in February 2022.

An example of such co-operations is the official website of Ukraine (Ukraine.ua), verified by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Until recently, it was a rather typical nation branding platform, promoting the country to foreign investors and tourists. It was designed and crafted by professionals in the PR business making use of aesthetics familiar in the international promotion industry. Ukraine was marketed as an attractive country with beautiful sights, friendly people, and exciting events. “Ukraine Now” was the country’s most recent slogan before the invasion and the condition of war in the Eastern part of the country was carefully avoided. Soon after the Russian full-scale invasion, the website changed shape and was refashioned to raise international support during the escalated war. The opening page now states that “On February 24, 2022, the ordinary life of Ukraine stopped, as did this website.” The visitor then has two options. One button leads to a page with information on the war, the other to the previous website. Each button gives a drastically different image of Ukraine—indeed, another dimension of the Janus face of public diplomacy. The former branding site shows images of festivities, leisure, and beauty. Slogans such as “Dynamic Ukraine Now,” “Innovative Ukraine Now,” and the slogan “Diverse Ukraine Now” are still alive on this page.

The button leading to the war site opens a page headlined “Russia invaded Ukraine” and shows a number, counting down the days that have passed since February 24. It also displays a dark version of the world map with Ukraine in yellow at the center, surrounded by Russia in red color. Further down on the page, there is a similar map, but with Ukraine surrounded by states of the world that “stand with Ukraine” in blue color. The button “Why” takes the visitor further, to a page with an extensive text explaining the war from a Ukrainian point of view. Interestingly, the design and aesthetic of the war website is rather similar to the previous home page, regarding colors, fonts, and layout. It is also designed by a Ukrainian PR bureau that previously worked with promoting Ukraine in more entertaining contexts, such as the Eurovision Song Contest. The messages, however, are

radically different. Two features stand out. First, presenting Russia as Ukraine’s “other” is explicit in that the site highlights the horrors of “Russian war crimes.” One of the more powerful features of the site allows the visitor to hear air raid signals warning Ukrainians across the country of an imminent Russian attack. Second, the war site portrays Ukrainians and their experience as defenders, heroes, and victims. In contrast, the former site presented Ukraine as a pleasant experience for others (visitors and investors). People and organizations that were working with a particular type of meaning management (such as promoting Ukraine to investors and tourists) could within weeks shift to a different form of managing meaning (promoting the Ukrainian view of the war). And although we could see these co-operations between government, corporate branding, and NGOs already after the Euromaidan revolution, for example, in the form of the Ukraine Crisis Media Centre (see Bolin et al. 2016), the forms of communication were not marked by branding discourse and rhetoric.

Identity politics

A few months into the Russian war on Ukraine, it has been repeatedly argued on social media that whatever Russia has achieved with its full-scale attack on Ukraine, two things stand out as clear. Firstly, the attack has led to a consolidation of the EU and NATO, including the rapid application for NATO membership by Finland and Sweden, and the even more rapid application for EU membership by Ukraine (and Moldova). Secondly, it has contributed to a solid Ukrainian national identity. Although it is a well-known fact that any social identity gets strengthened in the face of an external threat, the strength of Ukrainian national identity (domestically) is not entirely unrelated to the successful media campaigns aimed at winning sympathy abroad: the memes, the video clips, and speeches by Volodymyr Zelenskyy shown at international parliaments, the Cannes Film Festival, the Grammy Awards, NATO, and the World Bank. These memes and slogans are clearly articulating what it means to be Ukrainian. They repeatedly play on Ukrainian national symbols such as the Vyshyvanka shirt embroideries, sunflowers, the traditional flower wreath Vinok that young women wear as a crown for festivities, and, not least, music—the traditional Ukrainian hymn “Oi u luzi chervona kalyna” has appeared in a multitude of versions on social media, performed by flash mobs, national orchestras, and in a version by Pink Floyd.

While nation branding has often appropriated symbols of nationalism, branding campaigns have usually refrained from imaginaries that would challenge people of other nation states. Generally, the nationalist’s crucial distinction between “us” and “them” has carefully been

¹ The distinction between NGOs and corporate business is not always clear in Ukraine, but space does not allow us to elaborate on this here. They are, however, described and analyzed in detail in our forthcoming book *Managing Meaning in Ukraine* (Bolin and Ståhlberg forthcoming 2023).



avoided in branding campaigns. In line with this logic, previous campaigns promoting Ukraine never explicitly portrayed Russians as “the other” (Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016, p. 280). However, this changed after the Crimean annexation in 2014, and the following war in Donbas. Ukraine has in fact repeatedly been promoted with symbols that would provoke Russia since then. In the recent European soccer championship, EURO2020, the shirts of the Ukrainian national team showed a Ukrainian map that also included the Russian-occupied peninsula of Crimea and the war zones of Donbas. Furthermore, two slogans in Ukrainian, that had been used by protesters during the Euromaidan revolution, were printed on the shirt: ‘Slava Ukraini!’ (Glory to Ukraine) and ‘Heroyam slava!’ (Glory to the heroes).

Considering nation branding in its relation to identity politics, a previous assumption of ours needs to be rethought. In branding projects of later decades, internal diversity of the nation in question has usually been promoted as an asset (in contrast to nationalist ontology). This was clearly also part of Ukrainian nation branding projects before 2014. Ukraine was highlighted as an inclusive society, emphasizing “both-and” (Ståhlberg and Bolin 2016, p. 287). The religious, linguistic, and cultural variety of Ukraine was often emphasized by our informants. Occasionally it was discussed as a challenge, but always as a kind of fact. It was no wonder, they said, that the idea of Ukraine was vague because the internal diversity was a defining character of the country. That conviction seems to have vanished and heterogeneity is hardly upheld as a Ukrainian asset in the current war context. Today, it is an image of a homogeneous Ukraine that is attacked by Russia.

Furthermore, the Russian assault has seemingly backfired. It has repeatedly been pointed out that Putin and many in the Russian political power elite do not think of Ukraine as a real and sovereign country. Even before the Euromaidan revolution, political servants in the pro-Russian Yanukovich government that we interviewed explained the Russian attitude toward Ukraine:

First and foremost, there was a great process of disillusionment with Russia. A disillusionment in principle... for myself as well, I worked for two years in the Ukrainian embassy in Moscow. A disillusionment in the principal opportunity to get fair and equal treatment. We were always treated as second class. [...] As some artificial country. They still think that Ukraine appeared by some mistake. It's a historic aberration, not a natural thing. They think a state is like Sweden or Finland but not Ukraine, it's a part of Russia occupied by some strange people. [...] European integration is associated with progress, associated with developing the right way. It's a great impetus for self-esteem,

self-respect [...]. Today you can feel psychologically that no-one is satisfied where we are, or those who feel degraded, like we are moving back to the Soviet Union.

(High ranking official, MFA, 10 October 2013)

One could thus argue that the repeated denial of Ukraine as a country has provoked its opposite—a firm response in terms of the formation of a national identity, that has indeed become stronger in the face of an external threat.

Conclusion

We have pointed to two instances in our previous analyses of nation branding where we have had to revise our previous thinking. These analyses were, we insist, valid at the time of writing, but have not stood the test of time. The development in Ukraine has after the Russian invasion indeed put previous thinking around nation branding to the test. Firstly, nation branding is to a much lesser extent exclusively an activity that is directed to an audience of foreign investors and tourists. The direction toward the international field of politics is much more evident today, compared to what it was before (even if that was also a component in branding campaigns before Russia's attack). Most importantly, it is also directed toward a domestic audience—the citizens of Ukraine. Secondly, and following from that, this means that there may no longer be any sharp distinction between nation building and nation branding—at least not in times of an ongoing armed conflict. Whether this will be true also for more peaceful contexts and post-conflict situations remains for future research to explore.

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