

COUNTRY BRAND BUILDING: STRATEGIC OPTION OR NATURAL SOLUTION? THE CASE OF BULGARIA

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ABSTRACT

One of the assumed priorities by the Central and Eastern Europe countries in the last years was creating a consistent country brand. This option was chosen both from the natural need of capitalization of some natural and historic advantages to grow the added value at national level, and the objective desire of attractive positioning in the „concert of European Union’s countries”. The paper presents the main characteristics of the creation and development process of the country brands in Central and Eastern Europe and then focuses the elements which contributed to the „Bulgaria” brand improvement. So the vectors that decisively contributed to the built of a successful brand for the neighboring country are analyzed (offer, promotion campaigns, logo and slogan) and the efficiency of the investment efforts for its realization is synthesized. Also the continuity elements that would generate the efficacy of the new development strategy of tourism on the horizon 2009-2013 are presented, as useful and probed in practice tools for improving a successful brand.

KEYWORDS: *Brand, city brand, brand strategies, tourism, advertising campaigns, strategic development.*

1. The context regarding the country brand in Central and Eastern Europe

At national and local levels, the creation of a new image after the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe was determined by the desire to demonstrate a „European character” that would comply with the requirements of accession to the European Union and to project a stable environment, non-hazardous and welcoming for foreign direct investments and international tourism. The branding of this region’s destinations is accomplished among the development and marketing of tourism niche products, that represents an answer to the change in the global demand for tourism and to the necessity of raising receipts from tourism.

In this context of change, diversity and differentiation, an important place is occupied by the review of ways in which national identity is used in branding and tourism promotion in the countries from Central and Eastern Europe, as well as by the evaluation of relations between restructuring processes, the appearance and reappearance of national identities and tourism marketing.

International tourism was important in the countries under the communist regime and, in a lot of cases, even after its fall. Until the late 80’s (except Yugoslavia) international tourism was administered directly through the state’s monopolistic organizations: tourism bureaus, chains of hotels, transport companies and guidance services. Usually, domestic tourism was available to city workers and their families. The growth of international

tourism was intended to help create a positive image of the country and the region. In some cases, this goal couldn't be reached because of the existence of bad infrastructure and deficient services, bureaucratic restrictions and inflexibility. With the exception of Yugoslavia, a major part of international tourism came from ex-socialist countries, and this fact determined the perpetuance of low quality services. The brand meant only an ideology, and the foreign language of marketing utilized was often grammatically "fractured" and semantically ambivalent.

In the late 80's and early 90's, the development of tourism was integrated in the economic, political and social restructuring process. Such relations and processes reflected the liberalism of prices, the privatization, the creation of an institutional capacity, infrastructure development and the convertible currency. These Central European, post-communist countries (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Serbia, Bulgaria), placed in a good position, especially and structurally, for the integration to the EU, have uncovered numerous touristic „treasures" in the last few years.

After this, international tourism has experienced significant rises during the 90's. The Baltic States recorded significant rises in receipts levels in the last years with the preparing of accession to the EU. But in different ways, tourism and its economic impact in the relatively unstable countries from Southeastern Europe had tended to stagnate and even to suffer a decline. In these countries, in which the sub financing of the private sector represents a problem, the weak development of the infrastructure continued to pose a disadvantage.

Most of the countries in the region are still in the early phase of developing a coherent and strategic country brand. Behind a country branding strategy can be found either a government or a ministry, the National Chamber of Commerce, an agency or all at the same time. Central and Eastern European brands seem to just appear rather than being „invented", imposed and controlled by a single organization (Szondi, 2007). Crucial in the branding process have been especially the debates, the discussions, the brainstorming, the multidisciplinary cooperation rather than the result.

The branding from Eastern and Eastern Europe is confronting according to D. Hall (2004), with:

A. Three constraints:

➤ Primarily, the lack of adequate financing for supporting a marketing campaign has been amplified by the limited experience on global markets and by the lack of appropriate expertise.

➤ Secondly, those who deal with the promoting of touristic destinations can be put under strain to bring short-term results, while long-term investments are necessary for building a consistent brand. Such a dilemma can be reflected by the inconsistency of the message.

➤ Thirdly, while the relatively authoritarian, centralized regimes can impose a certain control and coherence of some components that make up a destination's image, in the market economies is much more difficult to develop a brand for the destinations that are composed of diverse products and environments (Morgan & Pritchard, 1998).

B. Three problems:

➤ Firstly, the immediate post-communist period (1989-1992) imposed some new and relatively different images of the countries and regions, being developed a substantial transformation process. In five years however, the biggest part of this factor was removed (except for the towns of Prague and Budapest who maintained some strong identities), and the weak long-term competitive advantage appeared to have been won, often through a confused, contradictory and even absent image representation.

➤ Secondly, the Central and Eastern European countries have been associated with a limited series of low-quality products. Undifferentiated marketing implies this fact in an optimistic manner: „Moscow is now a cosmopolite city, and the shoppers can be

surprised by the variety.” Cheap in some aspects (food, transportation, attractions, shopping) it is still celebrated in some mass-market brochures. A sense of undifferentiated destinations perpetuated, with a high level of costs, but low-quality accommodation conditions in the hotels.

➤ Thirdly, the countries that wanted to join the EU had to align their institutions and political, legislative and economic practices to those in Western Europe and to ensure compliance with the requirements of the “*acquis communautaire*”. While the accession to some Euro-Atlantic institutions represented a success for the transition process of some countries, this course has not been an easy one, not even for the relatively advanced states like the Czech Republic.

The European economic and political convergence and the continuous search for new experiences and products have favored a wide series of opportunities regarding branding, segmentation and touristic marketing in these countries. Nationwide, a number of promoting strategies have been adopted for the creation of the desired image: uniqueness, accessibility, security.

Even though the conditions of branding in the Central and Eastern European countries are very different, some common factors suggest the importance of projecting a strong brand image. Among these it distinguishes the „European character”, the creation of customer loyalty trough repeated visits and the rise in receipts levels per tourist.

Thus, even though the relative importance of factors varies from country to country, branding must respond to:

- the new and continuous change of market demands, including the impact of EU enlargement;
- the growth of market differentiation;
- the need of dissociation from the past;
- the desire to (re)define a new national image;
- the need to dissociate from regional instability.

2. Bulgaria’s country brand



Analyzed from the perspective of the aspects considered important in the orientation of persons towards a certain destination, Bulgaria’s country brand gained ground in the last years, more and more tourists preferring the more attractive objectives of Bulgaria. So, even if Bulgaria does not have a very well known nation brand, it must be mentioned that the last years were illustrating for the image of this country in Europe, a fact sensed in the increase of the incomes

from tourism. The seaside resorts (like Golden Sands, Sunny Beach, Albena) or the mountainous ones (Borovet and Basko) made Bulgaria one of the most attractive touring destinations, an important advantage being also the fact that this country has the cheapest tourism in Europe.

2.1. Presentation of Bulgaria’s country brand

A. Logo

The logo was realized by painter Emil Valev and represents a rose painted in yellow, orange and red, growing from the field, to which the inscription „Bulgaria” is added written in Latin with gradually dark and light colors on a white background.



Figure 1 Bulgaria's logo

The rose was drawn as a scroll and the position and colors could symbolize a sun rising above the earth. The right line of R letter represents a part of the flower's stem and the horizontal line under „Bulgaria” symbolizes the earth¹.

Slogan

2007: Open doors to open hearts

The message of the developed campaign under this slogan was obvious: receipt with open arms of the tourists willing to discover this country.

The campaign proposed to convince both the Bulgarians, and the foreign tourists to choose for their holidays, destinations from Bulgaria. So this campaign aimed the promotion of the country:

- ✓ on the internal market, permitting the Bulgarian tourists to rediscover the country, benefiting of an offer increase and diversification;
- ✓ on the external market, inviting the foreign tourists to visit Bulgaria and to spend here a dream holiday at reasonable prices.

2009 - Nature welcomes you

The message transmitted through this campaign considers the important potential which Bulgaria has regarding the nature and biodiversity, the protected areas representing 34% of the Bulgarian territory.

Until 2009, 90% of the Bulgarian tourism concentrated on the watering and climatic centers, ski, SPA complexes, culture and business.

The Tourism State Agency from Bulgaria hopes that, emphasizing on the eco-tourism and the rural tourism, to permit the country to diversify the offers and to obtain a new image. It is desired that on long term the eco-tourism to become a tool of rebirth of the mountainous and rural areas, a large part of them being neglected.



Figure 2 Rural tourism promotion

B. Implied actors

The main implied actors in the promotion of Bulgaria are:

¹ In Annex 1 we widely presented the symbolism of the logo.

- *The Ministry of Economy, Energy and Tourism of Republic of Bulgaria* which decided to bring a plus of image to the Bulgarian tourism;
- *The Tourism State Agency*, which has responsibilities regarding the tourism policies, marketing and promotion of Bulgaria abroad, registration of the tourism companies and the classification of touring locations.

C. The offer of Bulgaria

The cultural patrimony. The tourists are invited to discover the magnificent Thracian treasures, the 40.000 cultural monuments from different historic ages, over 160 orthodox monasteries that were built there, 330 museums and art galleries. From these 7 historic monuments are included on the list of UNESCO Patrimony.

Nature. Bulgaria invites the tourists to discover the weird rock formations and mysterious caves, sunny shores of the Golden Sands, majestic mountains with ablaze peaks, ice lakes and shady forests full of perfume.

Traditions. The tourists will hear in an unique rhythm, the song and harmony of the voices and the popular Bulgarian songs, the heart will feel in a jolly atmosphere of rituals and festivities. The traditions will be identified in the beauty of the handicraft objects, the fine textures, in the ceramics and wood sculptures. The natural beauty of Bulgaria is a contrast between the cold mountain peaks and the small villages. Here the tourists can expect at a worm receipt besides a warm fire. The charm of rural Bulgaria will carry the tourist to the antique villages.

The tourists are invited to experiment Bulgaria from a hut in the Rila or Pirin Mountains; a farm of ostriches, in a camp in the rural environment or near the sea.

Seaside holidays. The Black Sea coast invites the tourists to discover the fine beaches, the golden sand, the small harbors and the underwater caves. There are possibilities for practicing yachting, surfing, nautical ski, diving's, underwater archeology and other water sports.

Winter sports. In the last year Bulgaria won popularity as one of the most promising winter touring destinations in Europe due to the excellent natural riches, convenable infrastructure from the mountainous resorts, modern hotels, according with the European quality standards of quality and quality services. The biggest ski resorts in Bulgaria are: Bansko (Pirin Mountains) which is considered the most modern ski center in South Eastern Europe, Borovets (Rila Mountains) and Pamporovo (Rodopi Mountains).



Figure 3 Bulgaria's offer

(Source: http://www.bulgariatravel.org/eng/view_rubric.php?r=tour)

Watering resorts and SPA centers. Almost each type of mineral water which exists in the world can be found in Bulgaria. There are numerous special programs offered by the

Bulgarian SPA hotels, the most common watering and SPA procedures being the mineral baths, aromatherapy, treatments with maritime algae, with mud, honey, wine, chocolate.

The business tourism. Bulgaria is a modern European country, having hotels of 5 and 4 stars, congress centers, fairs and conference halls. Sofia is considered the biggest center of conventions in South Eastern Europe.

Gastronomy and wines. The Bulgarian wines offer an excellent way of visiting the touring objectives. The tourists are invited to taste the famous Melnik wine from South Western Bulgaria.

E. Target groups

The main aimed group is the one of tourists from Germany, United Kingdom, Scandinavia, Romania, Hungary, Russia, Greece, France, Italy, India, Japan and China.

2.2. Promotion campaigns of Bulgaria

The secrets of Bulgarian tourism are consisting both in the German model adopted and totally respected, and in the quality of services and sincere hospitality of the personnel.

In 2007, Bulgaria emphasized on the promotion of internal tourism. This consisted in the broadcast of some advertising spots at the most important TV channels in the country, they had 30 seconds and based, especially, on the Black Sea coast¹, but also on other aspects, such as the cultural and historic tourism, the beauties of nature. In the campaign it was emphasized the fact that the summer season in Bulgaria extends also in September.

In 2008, the promotion of Bulgaria was realized through more channels:

➤ *Brochures* still represent the most important communication way towards the public in the tourism industry. They are not substituted, but completed by other communication ways, especially the Internet. Bulgaria's E-brochure² was realized by CNN and included a mix of images and sounds.

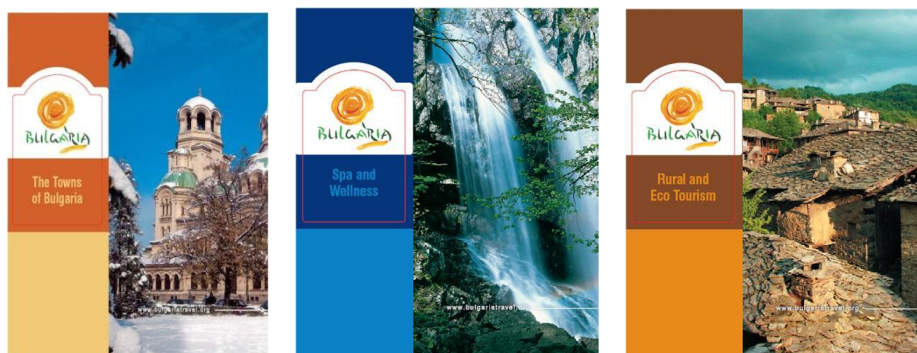


Figure 4 Presentation brochures for Bulgaria

(Source: http://www.bulgariatravel.org/eng/view_rubric.php?r=tour)

➤ *The press.*

¹ According to SAT, in the year 2007 Bulgarian tourists made up the biggest share in the total number of tourists on the Bulgarian seaside.

² www.sightsandsounds.tv/bulgaria/



Figure 5 Promotional posters

➤ *TV commercials.* Starting from the 13th of March, 2008, CNN broadcasted three spots for the promoting of Bulgaria¹. One of the clips focuses on the casinos and the beaches, promoting Bulgaria as a destination for entertainment. The other two spots underline the opportunities offered by ecotourism and cultural tourism. These three spots (the first with a duration of 40 seconds, the other two 20 seconds each) were developed by CNN at the request of and using the materials provided by the State Agency for Tourism. The three clips were broadcasted for 8 weeks during the months of March, May, June and September.

➤ *The Website.*

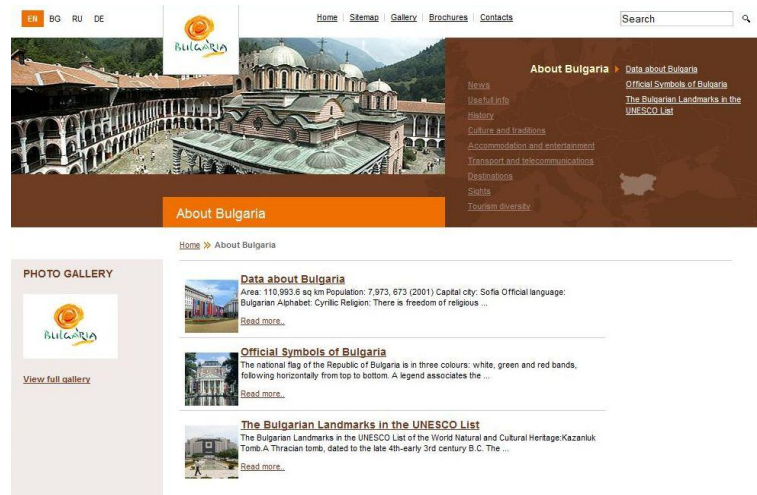


Figure 6 Bulgaria's official promotion website

(Source: http://www.bulgariatravel.org/eng/view_rubric.php?r=abu)

The investments in the promoting activities accounted for approximately 240.000 Euros.

In 2009, The State Agency for Tourism allocated 2.5 million euro for promoting Bulgaria as touring destination (Popa, 2008). It was appealed at:

¹ The advertising spots were realized by Ido Style Ltd. at the demand of the Bulgarian State Agency for Tourism.

- ✓ TV commercials (*Nature welcomes you, Magic lives here, The journey begins. Are you ready?*);
- ✓ Advertising in different publications;
- ✓ Unconventional commercials (for examples, images on milk boxes, soft drinks and bread wrappers).

Also, the Tourism State Agency allocated a million leva (over 500.000 euro) to promote the resorts from the Black Sea.

The popularization campaign of the Bulgarian resorts started at the beginning of July and ended in September.

The aimed target groups regarded the EU countries whose citizens traditionally prefer to spend their summer holidays in Bulgaria, and also India.

2.3. The effects of Bulgaria's marketing activity

The efficiency of Bulgaria's marketing activity had as results the attraction of a large number of tourists, their number growing from one year to another. Benefiting of a touring diversity well put forward by the promotion campaigns (rural tourism, eco-tourism, watering-tourism, cultural tours, business tours, ski, seaside etc.), Bulgaria managed to convince a large number of Europeans that this is their perfect destination.

So it was pointed out that:

✓ For **2005**, the incomes from the international tourism for the period January-July were increased with 10,2%, than in the same period of 2004 (according with the Culture Minister). A total number of 2.7 million foreign tourists spent their summer holiday in Bulgaria, until the end of July 2005, with 7% more than in the same time of 2004. In the same time, almost 52% of the foreign tourists were from EU. The aggregated incomes from the international tourism were of 706 million leva (1\$ = 1,63 leva) at the end of July, with 9,2% more than in the same period of 2004.

The Bulgarian resorts on the Black Sea coast had an occupation of 100% until the end of August.

The haunting tourism was also desired in Bulgaria, where, in 2005, about 3.044 people haunted, from which about 46% were Bulgarians. The 4 million leva registered in 2005 represent only 50% form the annual incomes realized by Bulgaria from the haunting tourism in the 80s. In 2005 Bulgaria got about 4,2 million leva from the haunting tourism, an increase of 500.000 leva from the year before.

✓ According with the National Institute of Statistics in Bulgaria, in **2006**, the touring sector increased with 6,6 percent than 2005.

✓ In **2007**, the evolution of the tourism in Bulgaria was positive, the statistic dates confirming that this country is on an ascendant trend regarding the number of tourists that choose to come here. So, there were registered 5.158.117 million visitors, an increase of 8,91% of the tourism, than in 2006. The incomes from this sector growing with 17,8% from the same period in 2006 and the medium sum spent by a tourist in this period was of 320 euro.

The main tourist generating countries in 2007 were:

- Romania (1st place) with 1,36 million Romanians who arrived in Bulgaria, a rise of 40% in comparison to the same period of the year before (January-September 2007).
- Germany (2nd place): the number of those who came from Germany recorded a growth of 17%, reaching 730.000 visitors, of which 520.000 Germans spent their holidays on Bulgarian territory.

- The United Kingdom is situated on the 3rd place, from here a number of 410.000 visitors went to Bulgaria in the first nine months of the year, which meant a rise of 7% from the year before.
- Hungary: the number of Hungarian visitors rose with 90%, reaching 120.000 tourists.

Bulgarian tourism in 2007 accounted for 12% of the country's GDP, situation that resulted in:

- the economic growth of the whole country;
- the development of the banking sector.
- ✓ Bulgaria was visited in **2008** by 5.779.828 foreign tourists which represents an increase of 12,2%, comparing to 2007. The summer season was a successful one for Bulgarian tourism, because the number of tourists increased with 17,03%. As for the incomes, there were registered collections of 1,454 billion euro, with 12,3% more than in 2007.

The main countries generating tourists in 2008 were those of EU. So, Bulgaria was visited of 4.240.828 million Europeans (with 13,6% more than 2007). The chart after number of tourists is the following:

- Romania: 996.716;
- Greece: 843.547;
- Germany: 580.381;
- United Kingdom: 363.671;
- Russia: 291.183;
- Poland: 156.939;
- Czech Republic: 155.014;
- France: 121.996;
- Denmark: 115.038.

Depending on the practiced tourism, it can be said that the tourists from Germany, Romania, Russia, Scandinavia, Holland and United Kingdom prefer the seaside resorts, while the ski resorts are the favorite destination of the British and Irish tourists.

✓ In **2009**, to counteract the effects of the economic crisis, the hotels and restaurants from the ski resorts offered the tourists packs at prices with over 20% smaller than on the winter of 2008. Nevertheless, the reservations came from the tourists from United Kingdom and Russia for the winter season decreased in 2009 with 6,5%.

Also, at the seaside, the economic crisis has left hundreds of projects unfinished. Villas, blocks and even luxurious hotels were abandoned by the owners (most of all from Germany and United Kingdom) which either they rent them very cheap, or sell them with one euro, under the condition to be paid the dues accumulated in time.

The cultural tourism was one of the few sectors which was not affected by the economical crisis. So, the number of tourists which visited the historic areas from Veliko Tarnovo increased with 2,5% than 2008.

3. Conclusions

In 2009, the Bulgarian government elaborated a development strategy of the tourism for the period 2009-2013. The main objective is that in 2013 Bulgaria to eliminate the tag of summer destination (for the seaside area) and winter (for the mountainous resorts) and to become a destination for the entire year and in the same time the main touring attraction from the region (Popa, 2009).

For this, Bulgaria will apply a complex development program of many types of tourism: cultural, rural, eco-tourism, watering-climatic, SPA, sport (with accent on golf), haunting and business. A special attention will be given to the „Premium” segment,

following to promote the construction of golf fields, haunting spaces, beauty clinics, SPA services and not at least, five star hotels.



Figure 7 SPA centers promotion

The transformation program of the tourism will cost 7,9 billion euro. It is expected that in five years time, the medium expenses made by a tourist in Bulgaria to grow from 58 euro/day at 108 euro/day, and the incomes from tourism to sum about 10 billion euro.

The benefits of creating a strong country brand for Bulgaria can be summarized as follows:

- the rise in notoriety and visibility of the tourism potential of Bulgaria worldwide;
- the positioning of Bulgaria as a first-class destination in the region;
- the diversification of tourism markets;
- the development of the touring sector;
- the rise of investments in tourism.

The example of Bulgaria proves the fact that brands have the ability to change the world, perceptions and the way we think. They may influence us in the choice of destinations when we travel.

Thus, one can say that in recent years, Bulgaria is a successful place, being aware of the importance of reputation, acting deliberately for the construction and growth of a good name, an effective country brand.

The effectiveness of the country brand brought Bulgaria the image of a nation that opens its door to new opportunities, attracting ever more tourists from neighboring countries, and even from those more remote, gradually reaching to lie at the same level with famous tourist destinations such as Greece or Croatia.



We smile in the same language™

Figure 8 Bulgaria's promotion from King International UK perspective
(Source: <http://www.bulgariantourism.com/conference/6conference/presentations.php>)

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Annex 1

The logo symbolist



- **Rose.** The rose symbolizes the perfection, the cup of life, soul, heart, love and thus, implies emotions, artistic abilities, spiritual and physical beauty. In the Christian iconography the rose is the symbol of Christ's wounds. As an association with the spilled blood, often it is associated with the resurrection. For Bulgaria, the rose represents a personification of an old cultural technology which is emblematic for the country and that is the extract of rose oil. In the draft of the logo, the rose was drawn as:

- **Scroll** which represents the power of nature. It means increase and development based on the analogy between the rise and the set of the moon and sun.
 - **Sun** which is the supreme cosmic force, the heart of the cosmos and the center of existence.
- **The colors symbolist:**
- **Yellow** is the color of eternity, as the gold is the metal of eternity and suggests the cultural-historic richness of Bulgaria. Yellow is, also, the color of fertile soil.
 - **Orange** (combination between yellow and red) represents the symbol of life beginning.
 - **Green** is the color of plants and water. The nymphs and gods of seas were described in green. Also, in the Christian symbolism, green is the color of hope, and the orphic tradition green is the light of the spirit.