

THE INFLUENCE OF NATION BRANDING ON TOURISM – HOW SLOVAKIA COMPARES TO AUSTRIA IN NATION BRANDING

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Abstract. Nation branding is one of the tools by which countries may positively influence their international reputation. Tourism has a huge impact on how a country is perceived and its support directly contributes to creating a positive nation brand image. The purpose of this paper is to present a comparison between Austrian and Slovak tourism and propose recommendations for its improvement. Furthermore, this paper utilizes lessons learned and best practices from the Republic of Austria that could be applicable in Slovakia in the context of tourism to improve its nation branding. Based on the objective and subjective secondary data, the paper compares the position of Austria and Slovakia in nation branding indexes. Data are extracted from the following three indexes: Bloom Consulting Digital City Index, Good Country Index, and the Future Brand Index. The paper points out the close connection between Austrian nation branding and tourism, while data from Slovakia do not indicate such connection. All the above-mentioned indexes are highly and significantly correlated, despite the fact that they use different approaches, methodologies, and data.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are many definitions under the word “brand”. Jay Baer defines a brand “as the art of aligning what you want people to think about your company with what people actually do think about your company. And vice versa” (Baer, Naslund, 2013). According to Leo Burnett, a symbol is “anything that leaves a mental picture of the brand’s identity” (Cohen, 2011). To further explain the issue, we would prefer the definition of a Business Dictionary (2020), which says the brand is the “unique design, sign, symbol, words, or a combination of these, employed in creating an image that identifies a product and differentiates it from its competitors. Over time, this image becomes associated with a level of credibility, quality, and satisfaction in the consumer’s mind.” According to the American Marketing Association, a Brand is a “name, term, sign, symbol, design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or a group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of the competition” (Keller, 2003). The country brand can be defined as a unique, multi-dimensional mix of elements that the state provides due to its cultural background and its differentiation from other countries, as well as relevance for all target groups (Dinnie, 2015).

Destination branding is a relatively new marketing concept. From the perspective of tourism and the creation of the country’s brand, it is crucial to raise a country’s brand awareness. Undoubtedly, we are seeing that travel and tourism are becoming the fastest growing global industry. For many countries, tourism is an important factor in their economic stability - mainly due to their geographical location - for example, access to the sea is a key factor in choosing a holiday destination. Today, however, we can see that the countries without access to the sea or mountains have also become attractive tourist destinations. As Ielenicz and Simoni underline, it is because tourism is a complex and multidisciplinary field of study and practice (Ielenicz, Simoni, 2013). According to Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002) “place branding” (or destination branding, place promotion) is a relatively recent *umbrella approach* of country branding, region branding and town branding.

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We must understand that at the beginning of the 21st century, geographical location ceases to be a key factor in choosing a destination for tourism. Destination branding is coming to the forefront and countries are trying to build their image and brand on positive promotion and presentation. According to Morgan, Pritchard and Piggott (2002), “the battle for the customer in tomorrow’s destination marketplace will be fought not over price, but over hearts and minds- in the territory of brands.”

In the context of tourism, the World Tourism Organization acknowledges that there is a tendency to see destinations as a “fashion accessory” in the sense that the destination is viewed in the same way as it is possible to define the identity of a person or company (UNWTO, 2001).

Destinations that behave like a brand meet the basic criteria and are required to comply with the needs of tourists. People decide to travel to a specific country based on their desire for special features such as the country’s climate, equipment or cultural attributes. Even if a country has a strong international presence, current political events may create or change the image of the country and its identity. In this sense, creating a coherent picture of the country is challenging because people react uncontrollably to political events (Kóňa, 2017). One of the main sources of information about the country is foreign media, which are the disseminators and, to a large extent, the creators of the country’s brand. For this reason, the perception of the destination may be different in each country (Kóňa, 2017).

It is obvious, that tourism is closely connected to culture, which is one of the corner stones of nation and state building efforts, which further lead to nation branding. Some extremely promising results on cultural tourism derive from the international project “SPOT – Social and Innovative Platform on Cultural Tourism” (SPOT, 2020), especially the data set they are working on named Social Platform on Cultural Tourism Innovation Tool. Authors try to compare case studies from different European countries focusing on cultural tourism. How a country is perceived by citizens of another country may be defined also as nation branding. According to Tim Marshall, when people look at the flag, associations and impressions are created that illustrate the success or failure of that country in the world (Marshall, 2017).

The same principle works for products. If a country specializes in the production of a product, invests money in research, and produces quality products, the association will soon appear when the country is mentioned or when its flag is seen. If we mention Japan, we think of high-tech products; Germany - automobiles; Saudi Arabia – oil; or Ireland – whiskey. On the other hand, if we ask an American manager about Egypt, he or she will probably imagine a pyramid, a vacation and the sea. This country is associated with a suitable place for a vacation. However, Egypt is not just a vacation country, it produces up to \$ 547 million worth of men’s knitted suits a year, and 40,3% of that exports to the United States (OEC, 2018). The American manager does not have an association with suits. Egypt’s nation branding is not strong, and it focuses mostly on tourism. Each country has its own way of being perceived abroad. Its image may change because of its foreign policy, organizations or economic diplomatic missions. This is the way in which the United States can be seen as the worldwide defender of human rights in one country, the superpower of technological achievements in another country, and possibly, in a different country, a military threat. Sometimes these disparities in perception can be found within the same country.

This analysis focuses on the comparison of two neighbouring countries, Slovakia and Austria, in the area of nation branding connected to national tourism. Despite the differences in population structure, size, as well as national economy, the two countries share much more similarities than obvious at first glance. First of all, both countries are direct neighbours, sharing almost 400 years of common history within the Habsburg monarchy and Austro-Hungarian Empire. Most of today’s historical and tourist attractions in both countries have been built during that period. People-to-people contacts knew almost no barrier at that time as the German language was widespread among the population in the territory of today’s Slovakia, and economic ties were extremely strong as well. Secondly, the geographical proximity leads also to geographical similarities of the terrain of both

countries, including mountains – Tatras in Slovakia and the Alps in Austria, and (mountain) lakes, which are considered to be key elements and main tourist attractions. Finally, the author of the analysis pays special attention to the capital cities – Bratislava and Vienna, which are unique global phenomena when it comes to their geographical proximity – the closest capitals in Europe. Based on the comparative analysis of both cases, the author draws recommendations, lessons learned and best practices transferrable to the Slovak republic and its efforts in nation branding through tourism.

2. METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this research is to comparatively analyse the influence nation branding has on national tourism for two neighbouring countries, namely the Republic of Austria and the Slovak Republic. The main sources used in this paper are domestic and foreign scientific articles, official websites of measuring indexes of nation branding, their reports, and the census bureaus of the relevant countries. The qualitative research method alongside comparative analysis are prevailing tools utilized in this paper. We identified three nation brand indices and compared the data regarding the Republic of Austria and the Slovak Republic. Special attention was paid to those indices that include tourism as a factor in the countries mentioned. In order to illustrate the findings better, we use two tables that contain general data and the data specific to Slovakia and Austria in nation brand indices. This research uncovered lessons learned and best practices from the Republic of Austria that could be applicable in Slovakia in the context of tourism to improve its nation branding.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The geographical proximity, shared history and common cultural heritage between Slovakia and Austria, naturally attract the attention of, among many others, political scientists, economists and sociologists. The current research, encompassing and comparing Slovakia and Austria, and, in particular its capitals – Bratislava and Vienna, is vastly focusing on cross-border cooperation (Jaššo, Finka, Giffinger). Cross-border cooperation brings a lot of prospects on how to boost economic progress, people to people contacts and how to deepen the integration processes (De Sousa, 2013). The pioneering theoretical and empirical international project in our context is Interreg supported European region CENTROPE, which offers a unique dataset on interregional transportation, urbanization, water management etc. (CENTROPE Map, 2020). In order to contribute to this discussion, we have identified a distinguished approach to the comparison between Slovakia and Austria, Bratislava and Vienna respectively, which is not mainstreamed in the current discourse. We focus on the effects of tourism in the nation branding efforts, using three different dataset indices – Bloom Consulting Digital City Index, The Good Country Index and The Future Brand Index.

3.1. Bloom Consulting Digital City Index

This is an index that evaluates the attractiveness of 136 cities from the perspective of potential tourists. However, this index does not consist of questionnaires or publicly available information. The authors of the index use their own program called Digital Demand - D2 © to evaluate the strength of the city brand. Its algorithm works on the principle of processing the so-called big data, which is used to determine the digital demand for a particular city. In other words, it records how many times and under what circumstances people search for information about a certain city. The final output is in the form of a specific number of searches. These searches have their own principle. Under the category of tourism, the authors included 3 so-called “Brandtag” families, which include general information,

accommodation and tourist activities. Each of these families has 112 “Brandtags”, accounting for 140 million keyboard shortcuts, which is ultimately about 260 million valid searches (Bloom Consulting Index, 2017). Based on “Brandtag” families, we will discuss the rating of the capital cities of Austria and the Slovak Republic. Since some of the general information is not specified by the authors, it cannot be analysed. Therefore, we will go directly to accommodation and tourist activities. Vienna ranked 9th and Bratislava – 45th (Bloom Consulting Index, 2019).

If we look closely at the accommodation, we can notice the first difference and the logical reason why accommodation was searched for more in Vienna. According to Eurostat data, Bratislava has 247 accommodation options (it includes hotels, hostels etc.) (Eurostat, 2018a), while Vienna has 1735. It is therefore logical that Viennese accommodation was searched for more, but we must understand the basic law of supply and demand, in which the number of accommodation possibilities increases with more tourist arrivals. In 2018, almost 5.8 million tourists came to Vienna, while fewer than a tenth came to Bratislava, almost 508,000 (Eurostat, 2018b). In terms of nights spent, tourists spent a total of almost 13 million nights in Vienna and 1.7 million nights in Bratislava (Eurostat, 2018c). Naturally, cities are more attractive to tourists if there is a higher concentration and diversity of attractions. According to the data provided by the official Vienna tourist guide website, there are the 133 most important tourist attractions in Vienna (Wien, 2020). On the webpage of comparable sources about Bratislava, around 41 tourist attractions could be found (Visit Bratislava, 2020). Similar conclusions are drawn from the comparison based on the Vienna and Bratislava hashtags on Instagram. If an Instagram user shares a post with this hashtag, we can assume, based on empirical verification, that they will share photos of the parts of the city that they were impressed with. The hegemony of Vienna over Bratislava is shown in an example of Instagram hashtags. Over 515,000 (Instagram, 2020a) people shared their posts with the *Viennacity* hashtag, but only 91,900 (Instagram, 2020b) people shared the *Bratislavacity* hashtag. Thus, we can say that Vienna has more attractions that tourists visit, and of such quality that they want to share them on social networks. The leading position of Vienna compared to Bratislava in this index is not a result of the number of accommodation facilities but the number of quality attractions that can attract the same or bigger number of people than Vienna.

3.2. Good Country Index

The concept of the Good Country Index is relatively simple: to measure the extent to which individual states contribute to the common good of humanity and, to the contrary, what they take away given their size. Using a wide range of data from the UN and other international organizations, countries receive a questionnaire to clearly show whether they are the creditors of humanity, its burden or something in-between. The goal is not to pass judgement on them. What the index is trying to say about the “Good country” is how much it contributes to the greater good of the world (Good Country, 2019a). However, the aim of our work is not to assess contributions to world prosperity but to assess the tourism of countries. Austria reached 18th place in this index and the Slovak Republic 28th place (Good Country, 2019b). Therefore, both countries attract millions of tourists each year, who can rely on a unique cultural and nature-related experience, safety and tolerance in both countries.

3.3. The Future Brand Index

The Future Brand Index compares perceptions of 118 countries across the world. It applies the same principle as corporate brands – they are evaluated regarding their strength, which affects customers according to the assigned dimensions. The Future Brand Index is considered a pioneer in this approach, which implies that a country's brand can be seen as a sum of its identity and reputation (Future Brand Index, 2019).

The team of Future Brand collected quantitative and qualitative data from 2530 questionnaires from international tourists traveling for work or holiday in 17 countries, namely – USA, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Russia, Turkey, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates, India, China, Thailand, Japan, Australia. The questionnaire was created on the basis of the index authors' own model –the Hierarchical Decision Model (HDM) – to show the extent to which respondents perceive individual countries on a scale from country brand awareness to the decision to visit a country. HDM consists of six dimensions. Namely, awareness, familiarity, preference, association, consideration, and decision/visitation. For research purposes, we are focused mainly on the “association” dimension and its six attributes: the value system, quality of life, business potential, heritage and culture, tourism and “made in”. The authors of the index used a sample of the 2530 respondents on the basis of QualiQuant™ criteria. The respondent has to be on the scale from 21 to 65 years old, has to have awareness or acquaintance with the countries covered by the index, a positive attitude towards travelling abroad, has to have travelled abroad at least once a year (either for vacation or work). In terms of the structure of respondents, men and women have to be equally represented (Future Brand Index, 2019).

In these questionnaires, respondents were asked to answer questions such as: How well do you know that particular country? What do you think about when this country is mentioned? To what extent do you value the country? Would you visit this country? Would you invest in it? Would you buy a product from the country? The Future Brand Index does not provide a full report on the Slovak Republic, which is why we compared its data continuously with data from Austria.

In 2019 Austria ranked 9th, between Canada and Luxembourg, in the Future Brand Index. Compared to the 2014 result, Austria has improved its position from 10th place. Slovakia ranked 35th in 2019 and improved its position from 59th place (Future Brand Index, 2019).

The main focus of this paper is on tourism and despite the fact that the Future Brand Index has a special dimension focusing on tourism, we will discuss two other dimensions and their selected attributes. The reason for this is the belief that tourism is influenced by factors from other dimensions as well.

The first dimension is a value system that discusses political freedom, nature conservation and tolerance. In this dimension, political freedom and tolerance are the factors that most influence tourism. According to information from Eurostat, approximately 27 million tourists visited Austria in 2018, while Slovakia was visited by 3.2 million tourists, which is almost 9 times fewer (Eurostat, 2018b). One of the reasons for this result could be the political freedom in the country. If tourists consider the country to be politically unfree, they may be worried about protests and demonstrations on the streets. In this case it is not a forcible argument. According to Freedom House, both countries are considered politically free. However, Austria has a score of 93 while the Slovak Republic has a score of 88 (Freedom House, 2019).

Another dimension is heritage and culture, which consists of historical points of interest, heritage, art and culture and natural beauty. Tourists tend to visit cities and regions where they have the opportunity to get to know the culture of the country and its nature. This fact is also proved by UNESCO data in conjunction with data from Eurostat. Austria has 10 UNESCO World Heritage sites and these sites correspond directly to the intensity of tourism (UNESCO, 2020). One of the mentioned sites is the historic city of Graz, which attracted almost 2.5 million tourists to Styria (Steiermark) in 2018. Prehistoric pile dwellings around the Alps attracted 1.2 million tourists to Carinthia (Kärnten). Thanks to the Carpathian Forests, 1.6 million tourists also visited Upper Austria (Oberösterreich). Based on the aforementioned analysis, we may see these historic and natural places are an important part of the country's tourism. In spite of it, we know that a large number of tourists, especially young people, seek entertainment and the particular atmosphere of the city. We can see this difference even more significantly in the case of the Slovak Republic. In 2018 almost 0.508 million tourists came to the capital city, Bratislava, compared to those visiting the small village Vikolinec in central Slovakia, a UNESCO heritage site, that is 2 times more tourists – 1.231 million (UNESCO, 2020).

The dimension of tourism is most informative for this paper, and Future Brand defines it as a mix of attributes, which are: Value for Money, Range of Attractions, Resort and Lodging Options, Would Like to Visit for a Holiday, and Food. Referring to the attribute Range of Attractions, Austria offers tourists many types of relaxation opportunities, such as lakes, skiing, hiking, visiting major cities and exploring their culture and history. More than 45% of respondents perceive Austria as a country with a wide Range of Attractions, and in the world's social networks, Vienna is described as a city with unique architecture and a place that is worth visiting (Future Brand Index, 2019). Tourists may also be attracted to Austria because of composers such as Mozart, Schubert or Wagner. Referring to the attribute Resort and Lodging Options, there are 21,494 accommodation facilities in Austria, which is 3 times more than in Slovakia. Most of them are in Western Austria – 12,705. The Slovak Republic has the most accommodation facilities in Central Slovakia- 1179 (Eurostat, 2018a). The common denominator of these areas is that they offer tourists the possibility of skiing and hiking. According to the Future Brand Index, up to 55% of respondents answered they would like to visit Austria. According to information from social networks, they perceive Austria as a beautiful country mainly due to nature and cultural uniqueness.

Table 1

General Comparison: Bratislava and Vienna

| Factor | Bratislava | Vienna |
|---|------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Population (million)</i> | 1.91 | 0.669,592 |
| <i>Total area</i> | 367.6 km ² | 414.6 km ² |
| <i>Gender Equality</i> | 54.1 | 65.3 |
| <i>DigitalCity Index – Ranking by the number of the internet searches</i> | 45 th place | 9 th place |
| <i>Arrivals at tourist accommodation establishments by NUTS 2 (2018)</i> | 507,758 | 5,724,543 |
| <i>Nights spent at tourist accommodation establishments by NUTS 2 regions</i> | 1,724,222 | 12,887,502 |
| <i>Number of establishments, bedrooms and bed-places by NUTS 2 regions</i> | 247 | 1,735 |

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on a variety of sources.

Table 2

Branding Index Ranking

| Ranking | Slovakia | Austria |
|---|------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Bloom Consulting Index 2018</i> | 31 st place | 18 th place |
| <i>Global Innovation Index 2018</i> | 36 th place | 21 st place |
| <i>The Global Competitiveness Index 2017–2018</i> | 65 th place | 19 th place |
| <i>DO International Business Compass 2018</i> | 39 th place | 15 th place |
| <i>Good Country Index 2018</i> | 28 th place | 18 th place |
| <i>Future Brand Index 2014</i> | 59 th place | 10 th place |
| <i>Future Brand Index 2019</i> | 35 th place | 9 th place |

Source: Authors' own elaboration based on a variety of sources.

4. CONCLUSIONS/ IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE

The foregoing analysis has attempted to compare Slovakia and Austria as two neighbouring countries applying the data from existing nation brand indexes. Furthermore, the paper focused on comparing their capital cities, namely Vienna and Bratislava. The general finding is that Austria ranked better in all of the above-mentioned indices compared to Slovakia for several reasons. Firstly, as per the Bloom Consulting Index, the internet marketing and the usage of social media to its full capacity is managed better by Austria than Slovakia. The more targeted usage of the “hashtag” also contributed to a higher number of visits on its Facebook and Instagram pages. Secondly, the higher

number of tourist arrivals is also related to the number of attractions in the city. The more attractions, the more tourist arrivals, which leads to increased accommodation capacities offered by Vienna itself. Following this logic, it is necessary to exploit the full potential of the existing attractions and think outside the box in creating new attractions. Subsequently, that will spark the infrastructure building efforts, namely building and modernising hotels, hostels or campsites in Slovakia, following the example of Austria. From the results of the next index mentioned, “The Good Country”, we may see that Austria has confirmed its stronger position compared to Slovakia. Drawing from the information provided in the “Culture” category, we infer that Austria, and Vienna itself, are more attractive to tourists due to the diversity of its cultural and other attractions. Moreover, we assume a more successful Nation Branding of the whole country from the results of the given index. Despite the fact that both Slovakia and Austria are politically stable democratic countries, Austria has ranked higher in the category of “tolerance and political freedom” as per the Futurebrand Index. It may be the result of recent historical events, such as demonstrations and the investigations of political corruption in Slovakia.

Based on the findings, we specifically recommend to expand on and improve the nationwide internet promotion of Bratislava and the main tourist places of Slovakia by using social media, such as Instagram and Facebook. We recommend creating a team of young experts in the field of marketing. The team would use Instagram marketing tools at regular intervals, such as contests for followers, targeted hashtags and commercial photos to improve the promotion of Slovak tourist destinations. Slovakia is a culturally rich country comparable to Austria, which despite its wealth has not fully harnessed its tourist potential. One of the possible solutions to increase the number of tourists is to build a stronger nation brand.

This goal may be achieved by investing into advertising for our tourism and making information about travelling in our country more comprehensive and accessible, using official websites and social media. Better promotion encompasses improvements on our main Slovak tourist website regarding online searches and regular updates and the creation of a new modern design that would help capture the attention of its visitors.

Currently, we also consider it necessary to create a simple tourist app that will help the user to effectively plan their travel arrangements, and obtain any information needed. By defining how many days they plan to spend in Slovakia, what means of transport they choose, what kind of entertainment, recreational and cultural sites they prefer, the app will provide its users with tailored solutions from the given information.

Slovakia is attractive not only for the tremendous beauty of its picturesque natural landscape, but also for its wealth of historical culture. It is not necessary to create new attractions or build amusement parks. Slovakia just needs to use and boost its potential by seeking inspiration from our neighbouring country – Austria – on its journey to enhance its Nation Brand.

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