Case of Poland

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Poland entered the 20th century
As a mere historical concept.

It has entered the 21st as a confident, democratic nation
with no threat to its borders and a good
chance of a place at Europe’s top table

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After 20 years of freedom Poland still works at the own national brand. Even since
1989 Poland is a democratic country, foreigners have often seen it as a communistic one. In
spite of its size, culture and influence in European history, Poland is not known enough –
even amongst its immediate neighbours. Prejudices, misperceptions and stereotypes have
built an image of country, which is – put it delicately – not yearn from Polish people.

In my speech I do not describe results of researches how Europeans, Americans and
others see Poland. I would like to shortly describe institutional situation in Poland and big
mess in the national branding, which this situation caused. Then, I would like to present a
proposition of a core idea to brand and promote Poland. The most important of my
presentation will be the last part: I would like to consider how much national branding is a
process of communication “outside” and how much – if it is – “inside”.

Why Poland needs a brand? It is example of country whose reality has changed
significantly over the last 200 years, dramatically over the years since 1989. Not only Poland
borders changed backwards and forwards. Poland was a heterogeneous country over a
years, right now is more or less homogenous. As Norman Davies wrote: “Poland is not only
at the heart of Europe just in a geographical sense. It is a country where Europe’s ideological
conflicts are played out in their most acute form, as recent events have emphasized. By any standards, Poland's fate is of vital concern to European civilization as a whole”.

If Poland is so amazing, if needs of having national brand is so huge, why Poland is still working on its brand?

Through many diagnoses, the biggest problem is an uncoordinated institutions responsible for public diplomacy and national promotion of Poland. Coordination of national marketing is necessary, is crucial. The case of Poland illustrates how different actors from the same, governmental area send different messages. For example – when we focus on a logo of country. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Poland brands itself under a sign of a kite (what is unfortunate, cause in English verb ‘kite’ has got two meanings, the second one is definitely bad).

Logo of MFA of Poland.

Polish Tourist Organization brands their activities under a logo:

Another governmental actor in Poland is Polish Information and Foreign Investment Agency. It was responsible – among other things – for promotion Poland in BBC World, CNN International, Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, or Time Magazine and brand that action by a sign of heart of Europe:
MFA, Polish Tourist Organization or Polish Information and Foreign Investment Agency are just examples of main actors from governmental area. There are many others, like actors responsible for cultural promotion (for example Adam Mickiewicz Institute) or economy promotion (for example Polish Chamber of Commerce). To illustrate the lack of coherent communication on the symbolic level I just mention, that each Polish exhibitions on Expo is branded by different signs. For example:

To coordinate all institutions’ activities in 2003 Polish Chamber of Commerce hired a world known national branding expert: Wally Olins. After two years of research, he set up a diagnose for Poland. It was: creative tension.

As Wally Olins wrote: “even if you think you know Poland, you do not! What was here five years ago, two years ago, last year, is different and better today”. Creative tension is a concept which illustrate work in progress, Polish individualism, polarity and fact, that Poland faces the West and the East and could be a “bridge” between these two worlds. According to Olins’ team “creative tension” illustrates that Poland draws its personality, power and perpetual motion from wealth of apparently opposing characteristics: Poland is part of the West and also understands the East, Polish people are passionate and idealistic, but at the
same time practical and resourceful. These tensions create a restlessness unsatisfied with the status quo, and a boisterousness that’s stimulating and often astonishing. Indeed, this “creative tension” is why Poland produces so many artists, entrepreneurs, sportspeople. It is why Poland is constantly changing and evolving. It is why Polish people have always tried to achieve the seemingly impossible.

Because of institutional and bureaucratic complexity in Poland, Wally Olins did not continue his research. The concept of a core idea of national branding since 2005 is waiting for people who would like to make it useful. In my speech I do not consider how to improve Polish bureaucratic system. The main point of my speech is: is the “creative tension” appropriative concept for being a fundament for communication strategy and for whom it should be appropriative. As appropriative I do not understand what kind of benefits “creative tensions” gives and what kind of opportunities it opens or what kinds of risk it brings with itself. As appropriative I realize “well-defined”, “communicable”, “understandable”.

According to many analysis “creative tension” seems a good diagnose of Poland and Polish temperament. But – even Polish scientists, who have background and competitions – do not understand it without full explanation. During interviews with PhD students from social science I discovered that “creative tension” phrase seems to them as a negative description. “How can we be promote as something like that?!” – it was very often the first reaction from my short explanation. I am aware of no representativeness of a PhD students’ group. It is why I am wonder to know how average Polish people perceive idea of “creative tension”, how they understand it. My question under discussion is: is it important to examine how insiders perceive their brand? Is national branding an activity for foreigner or insider first, or both at the same time?

The problem of the perception of the national brand is seems important to me because one reason: a marketing strategy will not be effective if only few believe that what they are saying is true. How brand inside to brand successfully outside – it is my question.