

# **NATION BRANDING: THE CASE OF ROMANIA. BRIEF HISTORY AND POSSIBLE REASONS FOR FAILURE**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION. HOW DID IT GET SO BAD?

At the beginning of the 1990s, Romania emerged from one of the most repressive forms of communism a deeply troubled and confused nation. The Romanian Revolution, by far the bloodiest of the Eastern Block, did not have the radical results initially hoped for - a clean break with communism - instead, a new hybrid system ensued that failed to live up to expectations both from within and from outside Romania.

As Simon Anholt explains in his latest book *Competitive Identity (2007)*, which deals with the practice of nation branding, a country's image changes when "the country changes" or when "the country does something to its people". Romania is perhaps a textbook illustration of that. The country and its people enjoyed a window of almost unconditional sympathy and support from the West for months after the 1989 Revolution - i.e. *when the country changed* (for the better, it was assumed). But this came abruptly to an end with the events of 13-15 June 1990 when the miners, instigated by the former communists desperate to maintain their grip on power, vandalized Bucharest attacking peaceful demonstrators, beating up civilians and destroying the headquarters of other democratic parties. In other words, *perception changed again when the country did bad things to its people*. This televised sample of government-endorsed cruelty dealt a long lasting blow to the efficiency of Romania's public diplomacy.

But it also further frayed the fabric of the Romanian society. There were people - especially the young, the educated and those living in the western regions of the country - who wanted more thorough and far-reaching reforms, including a ban on former members of the regime running for public office<sup>1</sup>. The majority of the population, however, was willing to support a more "humane" form of communism. Others still regretted the old system with a vengeance. Different historical regions developed different voting patterns. Ideological fights broke out in families. The first cracks appeared in Romania's self-image.

In order to consolidate their power, the communists under Ceausescu had cultivated nationalism. Every schoolchild had more or less internalized this idealized view of Romania as the most beautiful country on Earth, with a kind and most hospitable people, an unusually rich language, an outstanding culture and valiant forefathers that had taken the brunt of the fighting with the Turks in order to leave Western Europe intact. A lot of Romanians were sincerely convinced that, given these qualities, they would soon become the Switzerland of Eastern Europe. When that didn't happen and anxiety grew, people developed different strategies of dealing with this: on the one hand emigration, unconditional surrender to Western values, self-doubt; on the other nostalgia and an aggressive skepticism against capitalism and the West ("nu ne vindem tara"= we won't sell our country). This was amplified by the economic difficulties brought on by the liberalization of the markets - especially as this process was monopolized by the political elites and ordinary people became increasingly aware of their lack of access

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<sup>1</sup> *The Timisoara Manifesto (Proclamatia de la Timisoara)*(1990), Paragraph 5

and influence. A portion of the older generation found themselves unable to cope with the new requirements, lost their jobs, went into early retirement or were forced to return to their home villages where they eked out an existence with agriculture - thus becoming further alienated and disconnected from Romania's modernization parcours. Initially, Romanians directed their growing dissatisfaction at the political leaders, and in 1996 finally voted for political change. But as they tried out more and more different parties, the facts of their daily lives still failed to improve and dissatisfaction turned to hopelessness and anger. To distance and dissociate themselves from a disappointing reality, many started to blame their Romanian identity as a whole. Bad-mouthing Romania and all things Romanian became a national sport. Another important component of diplomacy, citizen diplomacy, was lost.

At the same time, underfunded and undermanned, the sports, the sciences and the arts, which until then had been exceptionally effective ambassadors of Romania abroad, began to falter. The Romanians had less and less medals in international competitions, were less and less present on the international stage. Again, this not only decreased Romania's standing in the world, it also eroded self-confidence within the country. Another pillar of reputation, cultural diplomacy, fell. According to Cynthia Schneider, a successful American diplomat, cultural diplomacy encompasses "the exchange of information, knowledge, ideas, values, arts and other aspects of culture with the goal of facilitating access and building dialogue, understanding and trust". If one equates culture with identity, it is clear why, when this aspect of Romania's diplomatic efforts became muddled and erratic, the nation's perception in foreign circles also went down the drain.

Bad governance, corruption, a decline in living standards and healthcare, and a restrictive visa system further added to the humiliation of being Romanian. Principles began to pale in the face of a sheer desire for survival and better opportunities. Illegal immigration of Romanians in the West flourished. Left to their own devices, many of the less educated resorted to stealing and violence, camping in the outskirts. Criminal networks developed. At the same time, there was a brain drain going on from Romania to the most famous universities in the world - but one which Romania failed to capitalize on. The nation's reputation became worse than ever. Instead of addressing the problem, both the Government and society as a whole, unable to cope, tried to sweep things under the carpet. The more the West was appalled by the *people* of the country and the way they behaved, the more Romania responded with pretty pictures of its *landscape*, failing to understand that, as a Romanian proverb says, "places are made holy by men".

## **2. FIRST ATTEMPTS AT REBUILDING A REPUTATION. BRIEF HISTORY - AGENTS, AGENDAS, VEHICLES, AUDIENCES**

It must be said up front that the term "nation branding" is rather inadequate for Romania. If a brand emerged, it was more the result of spontaneous forces than that of structured and consistent government action towards building and managing a reputation.

But what are the elements of a national reputation? Simon Anholt - the leading authority on managing national identity - suggests they form a hexagon which includes **tourism, export brands, policy decisions, investment, people and culture**<sup>2</sup>.

Outside the realm of classical diplomacy, most of Romania's branding efforts so far have focused on tourism and (elite) culture, with very limited and disorderly actions aimed at foreign investment, people, export brands, innovation and internal policy measures. This is like a table trying to stand on only two feet. Transparent and inclusive policy-making, stable legislation, good governance and a good education system were never taken seriously as reputation builders. Obsession with image has always trumped concern for the realities that had generated the image in the first place. Romania ended up concentrating on "saying" rather than "doing"<sup>3</sup>, and failed to recognize that different cultures have different expectations. Romania's obsession with its reputation issues led to a pattern of tardy, on-the-defensive communications which overshadowed and all but replaced well-structured and proactive attempts at building dialogue, understanding and trust - the core of cultural diplomacy.

### **2.1. Eterna si fascinanta Romaniae ("The Eternal and Fascinating Romania") (1995)**

The first attempt at an official version of "Romania's business card" abroad came in 1995, under then-President Ion Iliescu. The Romanian Government commissioned the publishing of a premium photo album about Romania, including maps and lyrical descriptions of the countryside to the French printing company Saintonge Edition, controlled by a Romanian expat, Adrian Costea. The contract cost 5.97 million dollars, financed by the Romanian Import-Export Bank BANCOREX, and was a total fiasco. Of the 97,000 copies that were supposed to be printed and distributed in 144 countries, only under 10,000 actually saw the light of day. The Romanian owner of the French printing company was eventually convicted, and several high-ranking Romanian officials were on trial under suspicion of fraud, with all but one being found not guilty. In the Romanian collective psyche the entire affair remained nothing but a scam to feed party cronies public money under the pretence of doing something good for the country. The advertising effort never got off the ground and did more evil than good. Within Romania, its wooden title became the subject of widespread jokes and ironic songs, and the credibility was lost forever.

**Agent:** Romanian Government with the support of the Romanian Presidency

**Agenda:** Allegedly, to attract foreign investors to Romania, although it is doubtful that a pretty photo album is the right tool for this. In a more general sense, the agenda was to attract foreigners to our natural beauties and to introduce our potential. Possibly, the agenda also included counterbalancing the barbaric images most people still held about Romania as a dark place of orphanages and miners, with that of an unspoilt, "vibrant and unique" place.

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<sup>2</sup> Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 25-26

<sup>3</sup> such as putting in place consistent and pragmatic exchange programs, transparent privatization and investment forums, knowledge-sharing networks with renowned universities abroad, professionalizing tourism, taking a proactive approach to our participation in international or regional organizations, etc.

**Vehicle**: Premium-quality photo album with pictures from around the country, descriptions and maps. To be distributed by Romanian diplomatic missions abroad.

**Audience**: Potential investors and tourists in 144 countries around the globe.

## **2.2. Fabricat in Romania ("Made in Romania") (2000)**

"Fabricat in Romania" was a public-private initiative launched in 2000 to stop the decline of the Romanian manufacturing industry, at a time when imports had a disproportionately large share of the internal market and Romanians themselves had a very negative perception of Romanian-made products. This was an internal branding campaign to showcase high-quality Romanian products and increase trust in them. "Fabricat in Romania" was a registered trademark applicable under certain conditions. It was meant to function as a quality seal. For instance, only companies that had implemented Quality Management ISO 9001, had won prizes in quality competitions or had carried the CE label could apply to get the "Fabricat in Romania" logo on their products<sup>4</sup>. It wasn't very successful, as Romanians gave more credit to foreign-based certification systems (TÜV, ISO, etc. still carry more weight to this day).

**Agent**: APPSR - Association for the Promotion of Romanian Products and Services - a not-for-profit organization made up of trade organizations, business operators, companies, local authorities, media, unions and opinion leaders.

**Agenda**: To fight and reverse the prejudice of Romanian consumers against Romanian products as having low quality. To offer its members a unified platform for the promotion of their products and services and thus ensure their survival and future growth.

**Vehicle**: Registered trade mark on products, quality certification, media campaigns, website fir.ro.

**Audience**: Romanian consumers of all ages.

## **2.3. Dracula Park (2001)**

Little more than an investment project for a large fun park, this was supposed to help Romania capitalize on Bram Stoker's popular vampire story. In theory, this project should have brought to Romania approximately one million foreign tourists per year. The initial plan was to have it built near Sighișoara, the birth place of Vlad the Impaler on which the legend is loosely based. Considered a kitch project, many locals who did not identify with vampire legends objected to this<sup>5</sup>. The location was then moved to Snagov, near Bucharest, Vlad's burial site. It never got off the ground for lack of funds and local support but it did end, once more, in prosecution. Over 13,000 people had invested money in the Dracula Park investment society, to no avail. In the summer of 2013 this idea was revived again by former Tourism Minister Dan Matei Agaton, currently leader of the Romanian Tourism Federation. However, it still appears to be inactive.

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<sup>4</sup> Quality certification protocol - see <http://fir.ro/certind/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup>It was also argued that it would actually diminish the value of Sighișoara as an authentic, still inhabited medieval citadel and that there wasn't enough infrastructure to handle it. Bucharest was seen as a more profitable venue in the end.

**Agent:** Romanian Ministry of Tourism

**Agenda:** To forge an indelible tie between Romania and Dracula and bring in approximately 1,000,000 foreign tourists to Romania each year. To promote tourism and income from tourism.

**Vehicle:** Amusement park offering various entertainment opportunities

**Audience:** Tourists, vampire aficionados especially from the Anglo-Saxon world - with a focus on the U.S.

#### **2.4. Romania, mereu surprinzătoare ("Romania, Always Surprising") (2004)**

This was probably the first destination branding project per se, with a specific logo and slogan that were used pervasively in Romanian tourism brochures, Internet pages, embassies, consulates and diplomatic missions. It also included commercials on Euronews, BBC and CNN. The campaign cost between 1.5 and 2 million euros and was later criticized by the World Tourism Organization for not communicating the essence of Romania. According to the UNWTO team of experts, Romania had no strong or clear image in the marketplace and the destination brand sent mixed signals.

**Agent:** Ministry of Transportation, Construction and Tourism

**Agenda:** To change the perception of Romania and the attitudes towards Romania, especially in the EU and USA. The message: Romania has changed and it can be a pleasant surprise.

**Vehicle:** Destination brand with logo and slogan; basically an advertising campaign in print and TV: commercial spots (1x day) on Euronews, Eurosport, Discovery, CNN, BBC.

**Audience:** Potential tourists between 20 and 55, from the EU and USA, with a medium income, informed, looking for new experiences, interested in culture and history.

#### **2.5. Romania - Fabulospirit (2006)**

After the criticism expressed by the World Tourism Organization regarding the previous campaign, in 2006 a new project was launched aiming to find what is typically Romanian. For the first time, the campaign focused on the country's people and their spiritual heritage, their lifestyle and personality. It had a budget of 5 million Euros, but it ended up costing only 110,000 Euros because it was quickly discontinued when the Minister in charge resigned on an entirely different issue (misunderstanding about the handling of a consular case in Iraq). Advertisers in Romania loved the "fabulospirit", but it is unclear if society as a whole would have rallied behind it, since it sounded a bit too sophisticated to be embraced by the regular citizen. (An unofficial poll on a blog for advertising professionals shows this campaign getting more votes than any of the previous or following campaigns, while another poll among non-professionals, organized by a regular newspaper<sup>6</sup> site, shows Fabulospirit ranking absolute last with only 1.85%)

**Agent:** Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE), in cooperation with its diplomatic missions abroad after an assessment of Romania's perception issues abroad. Whether the reformed Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR) was going to be involved and to what extent, is unclear. The

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<sup>6</sup> <http://ziare.ro>.

cooperation between the MAE, the Romanian Culture Ministry and the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR) has always been complicated<sup>7</sup>.

**Agenda:** To mark our accession to the EU and to present the Romanians as a "spiritual people, who like to enjoy life; (...) artistic personalities who like to tell stories, make jokes and with whom you'll never get bored". The idea was to forge an image for the Romanians as a spiritual people with a rich inner life, a concept that ideally would stick and immediately come to mind just as one immediately associates German with engineer; British with conservative, Greek with olives and Zorba, etc.

**Vehicle:** International print and outdoor campaigns, TV campaign, indoor and outdoor events, large live concert (never happened because Government team changed).

**Audience:** General publics in the EU.

## **2.6. Romani in Europa ("Romanians in Europe") (2008)**

This was a campaign launched in 2008 by the Romanian Government (through its Agency for Governmental Strategies) in order to improve the image of the Romanian people in the countries where there was a large Romanian immigration, particularly Spain and Italy. It was estimated to cost around 7.8 million Euros and included commercial spots such as "*Hola, soy rumano*" for Spain and "*Romania, piacere di conoscerti*" in Italy. According to the evaluations run by the Agency for Governmental Strategies in Spain and Italy, there was increasing reluctance to Romanian immigrants as a result of perceived criminality and a biased media coverage, but there was also enough positive sentiment among those Spaniards and Italians who had actually worked alongside regular Romanians. The Government therefore decided to capitalize on that "normality" and make Romanians known as an honest, hard-working people in search of a better future. The campaign included documentaries and invitations for local journalists to visit Romania and understand the context first-hand. The project was handled by Saatchi&Saatchi Romania but lost its credibility when it was discovered that the agency had used actors instead of real immigrants in its spots (apparently, the real immigrants' language skills were considered too poor.).

**Agent:** The Romanian Government, through its Agency for Governmental Strategies (ASG)

**Agenda:** To introduce a positive image of Romania and the Romanian people as a hard-working, honest people in search of a better future for their families. Make real Romania known and refute a

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<sup>7</sup> The ICR was set up in 2003-2004 as an autonomous administrative authority under parliamentary control. It was then widely reformed between 2005-2012 to gain more credibility both internally and externally, to become less focused on state propaganda and more on avant-garde cultural exchanges. The law under which the ICR came into existence dates back to 2003 and has been amended numerous times. Currently, the ICR's activity is regulated by at least four different laws, plus a couple of government ordinances and decisions. The appointment of ICR directors abroad requires the approval of the ICR President, of the Foreign Minister and of the Culture Minister (see declarations by Titus Corlatean, Jan.16, 2013 as reported by Mediafax). The ICR President is appointed by the Romanian Senate. Given that the ICR President has a rank similar to that of a secretary of state, one can derive that the ICR is in effect a governmental body. The relations and communication channels with other Ministries, the areas of competence, as well as the funding mechanisms have to be defined clearly, streamlined and simplified, to allow both for independence of value judgements in each institution's area of expertise, and for joint action.

negative image which was considered unfounded. (In my opinion, failing to tackle Romanian criminality, which increasingly became a very real issue, was a mistake.)

**Vehicle:** Commercial spots with positive stories about regular immigrants broadcast in Spain and Italy, documentaries filmed in Romania and Spain by famous Spanish director, invitations for leading Spanish/Italian journalists to come to Romania and get to know its realities and cultural context.

**Audience:** Public opinion in Spain and Italy.

### **2.7. Romania, Land of Choice (2009-2010)**

Another attempt at a tourism brand, with a rather equivocal slogan which is almost untranslatable into Romanian. The graphic design is still very similar to the previous "*Romania, always surprising*" campaign. The *Land of choice* campaign enlisted the help of some of Romania's best-known "unofficial ambassadors": former gymnast Nadia Comaneci, former soccer star Gheorghe Hagi, and former tennis player Ilie Nastase. The campaign consisted of several series of commercial spots done by ADDV. In one of them the wildest allegations about the country and its realities were made, in a funny storyline that was supposed to catch the eye, incite curiosity and tear down prejudices: "Romania, the only country in Europe where women have the right to marry four men at once", "Romania, where people ride zebras", "Romania, where fish grow in trees". The punch line was, "You really don't know anything about Romania, do you? So come and discover it." Another set of spots focused on what Romania really is, and tried to show potential tourists that there is a lot to choose from: Romania's quiet natural beauty and agro-tourism, its adventurous side (paragliding, mountains, nightlife) or its sun-and-beach component (Black Sea coast). The campaign cost 1,5 million Euros and again failed to build a consensus inside the country.



**Agent:** Romanian Ministry of Tourism

**Agenda:** To present and promote Romania as a diverse and attractive tourism destination. To function as a slogan for all of Romania's tourism campaigns until a country brand was launched. To mobilize Romanians within the country by means of a tourist "anthem" which was soon forgotten.

**Vehicle:** Media campaign worldwide (print, TV, Internet, outdoor).

**Audience:** Potential tourists, especially from English-speaking countries (US). Very little was done to make the message relevant to Europeans.

### **2.8. Romania. Explore the Carpathian Garden (2010)**

Romania's current nation/tourism brand was launched in 2010 at the Shanghai World Expo and almost immediately sparked a scandal. The Spanish agency that won the contract was accused of plagiarism: allegedly, its "leaf" is not an original creation, as requested by the Government, but taken from an image database and also used by other companies. The *Carpathian Garden* nation branding budget was set at 75 million Euros from EU funds for a period of three years (2010-2013). It consists of a media campaign, as well as websites for potential tourists ([www.romaniatourism.ro](http://www.romaniatourism.ro), [romania.travel](http://romania.travel))



which include a trip planner. For the purpose of this campaign, a research was conducted in Romania and in the eight most important markets which could supply tourists for the country: Germany, UK, Italy, Russia, Austria, US, France and Hungary (source: [www.romania-insider.com](http://www.romania-insider.com), July 29, 2010). As an addition to these efforts, a trilogy of documentaries titled *Wild Carpathia* was planned, with the generous support of the Prince of Wales (who works for the protection of pristine ecosystems and traditional lifestyles in Transylvania). The third part was completed recently. It must be said that, while Romanians mocked their new country brand logo and slogan, the *Wild Carpathia* series on Travel Channel became very popular and raised a lot of patriotic sentiment - probably also because it was perceived to be the impartial work of well-meaning foreigners. These documentaries address head-on some of Romania's tough issues, but always end on a hopeful, upbeat note. HRH Prince Charles' comments about the "remarkable and resilient" Romanians, who have made it through such horrible times, also helped. Perhaps this is a base that can be built upon, as it enjoys huge credibility both in Romania and abroad.

**Agent:** Romanian Ministry of Regional Development and Tourism (currently, the Agency for SMEs and Tourism within the Ministry of Economy and Commerce)

**Agenda:** Very specifically, to double the number of foreigners who can think of something unique and positive about Romania. To give Romania a clear identity and location in the minds of prospective tourists, to promote tourism. More generally speaking, to clarify and improve Romania's image abroad.

**Vehicle:** TV, print, Internet campaign, graphic identity. Not clear how it connects with other initiatives through the Romanian Cultural Institute, or the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

**Audience:** General public and potential tourists in the eight major markets: US, UK, Germany, France, Israel, Italy, Russia, Austria, Hungary.

### 3. STATUS QUO. WHERE ARE WE NOW? BRAND IDENTITY AND BRAND IMAGE



#### 3.1. Brand Identity.

In Simon Anholt's definition, brand identity is "the core concept of the product, clearly and distinctively expressed". Romania's current visual identity attempts to suggest the variety of its landscapes (mountains, hills, seaside) and makes references to primordial elements: earth, water, wild forests, adventure, sun, dynamism.

The market research conducted in the 8 countries plus Romania came up with 6 tourist products that have both appeal and a basis in reality. It was therefore decided to promote: rural tourism, wild nature, health and wellness tourism, adventure tourism, cultural circuits and city breaks. The colour green and the leaf

(for which there are numerous references in Romanian culture) emerged almost naturally. However, some analysts expressed criticism<sup>8</sup>:

- they are generic and not unique
- the colour green triggers strong associations with ecology and bio products, while Romania still has a lot of catching up to do in that department (even though the food may come directly from the peasant's garden, there is still a lot of litter everywhere)
- the font of the writing and the language used are neutral and remind us of a mass product rather than a niche discovery; they are rather bland
- the word "garden" brings to mind a man-made area, orderly and carefully trimmed, whereas Romania prides itself on being the last wilderness of Europe (again, perhaps one of the reasons why Romanians identify more with *Wild Carpathia*).
- the Carpathian mountains extend beyond Romania, to the Ukraine and Slovakia, so confusions are possible.

Since it is difficult to please everyone, and since results of market research are usually statistical averages, trying to catch everything in a brand is usually counterproductive as it delivers a mediocre result that very few will be enthusiastic about.

The suggestion from the World Tourism Organisation is to maintain the focus on the authentic rural experience, adventure tourism, mountains and city breaks, but to increase the duration of stay in order to raise more income. Unfortunately, our current brand still fails to address issues and misconceptions related to people and behaviours, which can be a huge barrier to visiting the country in the first place. It also fails to make a clear and concrete offer to potential visitors in terms of activities (by season and region) and things to expect - it leaves them with a rather vague feeling of the place. Not enough to spur them into action.

In the broader terms of *nation branding* there is another, more serious, problem. Romania's current brand identity completely leaves out the export (Dacia is currently a strong export brand), investment and policy aspects of the branding hexagon. Because of the problems mentioned (infrastructure, peculiarities of natural attractions, poor services, etc.), income from tourism is bound to remain low for years to come. Determining the effectiveness of Romania's nation brand simply in terms of tourism is bound to end in failure (especially if the country keeps up the irrational logging and deforestation!). However, the areas of **investment, education and exports have a huge potential** that has not yet been harnessed by any nation branding strategy.

As possible courses of action, I suggest following activities:

- In the field of **education**: high-standard partnerships between Romanian universities and serious universities or knowledge-sharing networks and programs in target countries (see Babes-Bolyai); introduction of Western quality standards and rankings in Romanian higher education;

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<sup>8</sup> For more details, see Mircea Iurcu, <http://mircea.iurcu.ro/2010/12/20/brand-ul-de-tara-al-romaniei-si-al-vecinilor/>, *Brandul de tara al Romaniei si al vecinilor ei*, 2010

strong participation in Erasmus, Leonardo and EUNIC; taking advantage of the alumni networks of returnees from American and European Universities; organizing important scientific symposia in Romania. Romania already enjoys a reputation as a generator of exceptional mathematicians, software engineers, physicists, etc. The education system has to be credible, up-to-date, and perform in a consistent manner, in order to keep supplying the labor market and the foreign investors with good quality, innovative employees. This is one way of keeping foreign investment in the country in the long term, even if salary levels rise. Qualified employees with good work ethics and nice Romanian personalities can go a long way towards building trust, enhancing mutually-beneficial dialogue and generating interest abroad.

- With regard to **investment and exports**, Romania needs to organize transparent privatizations with top investors, or joint ventures in association with well-known industrial brands; periodic surveys, polls and public debates with the business representatives of foreign countries to encourage feedback and suggestions for possible policy areas; free seminars with the purpose of clarifying the regulatory environment and its modifications; a system of grants for young entrepreneurs pitching innovative ideas; business forums; capitalizing on the success of Romania's famous export brands; simplifying procedures and helping local small businesses patent and promote traditional products; classy, dynamic and interactive participations in international trade and specialty fairs; organizing more high-quality international fairs in Bucharest; developing a support system and easy financing for exporters and tourism, etc.

### 3.2. Brand Image.

An enormous mismatch still exists between Romania's **desired brand identity** and its **actual brand image**. Brand image is "the perception of the brand that exists in the mind of the audience (...). It includes a range of associations, memories, expectations and other feelings."<sup>9</sup>

A recent doctoral paper by Moise Gheorghe Florentin, a student of Sociology at the University of Bucharest (2009), analyzes Romania's image in the Western press based on quantity and quality of news that have to do with Romania. Between 2007 and 2009, in the UK for instance, the most frequent Romania-related news in the tabloid press were:

- violence/crime, with a frequency of 0.5
- immigration, with a frequency of 0.2
- justice, with a frequency of 0.07
- unemployment - 0.06
- human rights - 0.04
- health and sports - 0.03 each<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 5

<sup>10</sup> Moise Gheorghe Florentin - *Imaginea Romaniei si a romanilor in Europa, Rezumat lucrare doctorat*, (Bucuresti: Universitatea Bucuresti. Fac. de Sociologie, 2009), pp. 36-37

An empirical analysis of Romania-related news and headlines broadcast by the more impartial BBC and Euronews in 2013 shows a rather more balanced distribution, with about 1/3 of the news being of a more urban and positive nature and involving either initiatives by the Romanian civil society (Rosia Montana, largest flag, flash mobs) or cultural successes (famous prizes for Romanian cinema, creativity). The bad news still includes problems related to the Roma minority, theft and beggars in the West, online fraud, strikes, failures to meet Schengen requirements, political turmoil.

Mr. Florentin's paper also looks comparatively at Romania's image as a country (place) and the image of Romanians as a people. In 2009, Romania's main characteristics as a country in the eyes of the Western audience were:

- poor, developing country
- corrupt country, with high level of crime
- former communist country, an insecure, dangerous place
- lots of orphans and street children
- beautiful scenery, picturesque landscape, forests full of wildlife
- country that keeps old traditions alive.

The Romanians, on the other hand, were perceived as hospitable, modest, hard-working, impulsive, tolerant, courageous, but also as backward, thieves, dirty and negligent. According to this research, Romania ranked last in the travel preferences of most Europeans. Regarding the awareness of Romania's tourist attractions, this was almost identical throughout Europe. The best-known tourist attractions in Romania were Bucharest, Dracula's Castle, the Danube Delta and the monasteries of Bucovina. The least attractive destinations seemed to be the ski resorts in the Carpathian mountains and the People's Palace. This study was conducted before the two most recent branding efforts, but it's likely that the perceptions have not changed very much in the meantime, as none of these campaigns focused very seriously on winter sports in the Carpathians or the insecurity/crime issue. Ironically, in reality, crime in Romania is quite low and usually limited to petty thefts. But at the same time, a single tourist killed by a stray dog in the heart of Bucharest can have a lasting and damaging impact.

How do Romanians perceive themselves? The same research asserts that they too seem to have quite negative perceptions: most Romanian respondents consider Romania a poor country (21%), corrupt (20%) and backward (15%). Most of the negative perceptions foreigners have about Romania are shared by Romanians themselves, which shows that some of these aspects are rooted in real experiences. At the same time, Romanians expect the government and the political institutions to take care of Romania's reputation, but they also see this as a responsibility of the Romanian citizens living abroad. With 33% of the votes, Dacia is considered Romania's most famous export brand.

### 3.3. Conclusions

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this:

- i. Despite the numerous branding efforts and the tens of millions of Euros spent, Romania's reputation remains bad/weak; erratic advertising campaigns are not an effective solution. A *destination* brand is by no means the same as a solid *nation* brand. The two concepts cannot be used interchangeably. A nation brand is much more than tourism and elitist culture. It needs to encompass everything the nation does, makes or stands for. It needs to be accepted internally, to be supported by the three pillars (public sector, private sector and civil society) and to permeate every official action at every level.
- ii. Romania's reputation suffers from two different ailments: in America and other parts of the world it is unknown, and needs to be *introduced*; in Europe, it is well-known but for all the wrong reasons. Some of these negative perceptions are unfounded, so they need to be *refuted, suppressed or ignored*. Many of them, however, are founded in truth, in which case, our branding strategy has to "*address* the problems and communicate that they are being addressed as soon as progress can be demonstrated"<sup>11</sup>, and then *contextualize or de-emphasize* the negative perceptions.
- iii. The country per se (the place) has relatively less problems than the people. Research shows that most Europeans already associate Romania with pristine scenery and a traditional rural way of life (this could be perceived as a success of previous campaigns). The objections they have to the place are actually objections they have to the people inhabiting the place (crime, violence, theft, insecurity, danger, abandoned children). Any future branding strategy has to address these issues at their root if it is to succeed.
- iv. Getting the private sector and civil society behind Romania's nation branding strategy is crucial and could work wonders for all sides involved. If Romania's image has improved at all recently, it is because of private initiatives, export brands or creative and dedicated individuals who have made positive headlines.
- v. Most of the negative perceptions plaguing Romania are confirmed by Romanian nationals, which means that some of them are based in reality. The only way to make them go away is by social change and by fixing the realities themselves. (Cultural diplomacy can help address these perceptions internally. Fair and inclusive dialogue can be sparked by civil society and the local public administrations. Good practices exchanges and debate forums among public authorities from different regions of Romania and with foreign regional partners can have a beneficial effect. City twinning with the introduction of positive models from abroad, cooperation with foreign funding agencies for local projects has been done (Timisoara, Sibiu) and should be done on a larger scale. Internal cultural diplomacy could start at local

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<sup>11</sup> Simon Anholt, *Competitive Identity*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 68

level, in the larger metropolitan areas, which should introduce transparent feedback and inquiry management systems for citizens, encourage citizen initiatives, etc. In cooperation with the private sector and civil society, local administrations should define local brands, local identities and local loyalties - things that people can be proud of locally. Later, these can be expanded at regional and national level (see Timisoara - a solid case for the power of local patriotism and city branding). Besides, it is much easier for people to get involved and hold elected officials accountable locally, in projects that affect their daily lives. When people love their city, it is less likely that they will hate the country.)

#### **4. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? POSSIBLE REASONS FOR FAILURE AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

Romania's poor image abroad remains one of the most unanimous laments of its perpetual transition. From the otherwise friendly interlocutor whose smile suddenly wanes when he hears you are from Romania, to the hotel clerk who scans you as if you're just preparing to make away with the silverware, to foreign investors who shun the country and to Romania's recent foreign policy failures (see Schengen), this bad image affects every Romanian citizen whether living and working in Romania or abroad. A lot of very nice people have to carry the stigma every day, having their efforts discredited by a perverted "country of origin effect", and trying to cope with the suspicion raised by their Romanian passports.

On the one hand, it is clear that Romania's nation branding efforts have been woefully ineffective. The reasons for this can be found by analyzing Romania's competitive identity strategies - or lack thereof - using Simon Anholt's criteria. It is easy to see what went wrong. First and foremost, as any country with a confused identity and unstable political institutions, Romania lacked a common sense of purpose. A common vision behind which all stakeholders can rally, and which remains in place as part of the essence of good governance regardless of who is in power. Too frequent changes of the brand, its logo, its slogan, its contents are bad for the national image, because a national brand has high inertia and needs time to create a distinct image. It needs to be stable, clear, visionary, sharp, well-managed and consistent. Romania has lacked both a strategic vision for the long term, and the right team with the right values for the tactical implementation of the nation branding program in the short term. In fact, it has failed to launch a serious investigation into itself and its true identity (or that which Romanians want to become). In Romania, the concept of identity has always been perceived as a link to the past, not a path to the future. Most of our "brands" have been little more than on-again-off-again advertising campaigns with no correspondence in institutions, programs, policies and packages on the ground. It would indeed be difficult to find one Romanian government which treated the nation branding effort as an integral and central part of its daily business and policy making. Instead, the brand has been a side dish for special occasions.

Another main reason why Romania's brand has not been successful so far is because it does not tackle the West's *real* objections, the deepest darkest corners of the West's perception of Romania (again, an area where the open dialogue of cultural diplomacy can help). And here one must ask oneself, where the bad image of Romania *really* comes from. It would soothe Romanian nationalistic sensibilities to assume that all foreigners are prejudiced or misinformed - however that would be incorrect. Many of the negative images floating about in people's heads when they think about Romania have at least a grain of truth in them. Some might be outdated, some can be put into context, explained and de-emphasized. But Romania should stop being the "villain/victim" who only *reacts* when bad things happen, and it should start *acting* with a little more foresight. It needs a clearly mapped development path, for its own sake. Only thus can it motivate its own people to join the effort. Branding *is* policy making! It means stable legislation, good governance, solid business ties and cultural diplomacy. Romania needs to face its shortcomings openly and honestly and it needs to focus more on doing rather than saying. Any expensive PR campaign abroad will be annihilated by the first glimpse of a dirty toilet at the border, by a decrepit train station, by the rumpled shirt of a customs officer or by a dishonest taxi driver charging foreigners ten times the normal rate.

In my opinion, a more favourable opinion of Romania must be founded on two main pillars:

- 1) building **credibility**, and only afterwards
- 2) constructing **image**.

As long as there is no trust and no credibility, any positive image Romania might project, will be immediately blocked by the collective subconscious. And trust is built on two levels: the individual level (where citizen diplomacy comes in) and the system level (where the government, private sector and NGOs come in, ideally in cooperation and synchronization, with cultural diplomacy a major pillar).

In most Western cultures, respect is earned, not given. If Romanians want respect, they first have to respect themselves, to act in a dignified and responsible manner that is consistent over time. Romania needs cohesion and solidarity both for its own good and for branding purposes. But it also needs to feel comfortable in its own chosen identity. The Romanian people is quite different from the cultures it is trying to impress. All too often it has tried to copy others and failed, instead of trying to be the best that *it* can be. A recent survey done by Interact<sup>12</sup>, a polling company based in Bucharest, finds Romania to be very high on Hofstede's Power-Distance Index (which is both an indication and a cause of corruption) and on the Uncertainty Avoidance Index. However, interestingly enough, Romania's desired level of PDI is much lower than the actual one - which means that, in theory at least, people would prefer a different type of society. This means there is room for improvement. However, Romania's collectivism and avoidance of individual responsibility paired with a very short-term orientation makes leadership, innovation and change very difficult. Romania is also a very feminine country, in that it prefers collaboration and good relations over results and efficiency. On the one hand, this is a good thing

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<sup>12</sup> Luca, Adina, *Where do we stand? A Study on the Position of Romania on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions*, (Bucharest: Interact, 2005), pp.1-21-

because it limits criminality to petty misdemeanours and makes more brutal kinds of violence typical of masculine societies a rare occurrence. On the other hand, it is tricky for management, because people actually would like to see a democratic environment where they are all consulted, but at the same time, after 50 years of forced consensus under communism, they can no longer agree on anything - so this usually pushes leaders to become autocratic. This is seen as a sign of strength at first (it frees individuals from their own anxieties), but gradually builds resistance due to perceived excess of authority. Past brands have failed also because they were perceived as the whimsical creation of an authority figure/party/interest group. They were not inclusive; the process of obtaining them was not transparent, democratic and inclusive. However, there are solutions, and managing the country forward is possible with the right leading style (the Interact paper suggests this should be a combination of British management style and German organization structure. US models and strategies are bound to fail because Romanians value leisure, family and life above work, efficiency and career.). However, we must keep in mind that steady development in Romania is a myth, especially in an area like branding, where tastes are highly subjective.

My suggestion for Romania's future efforts towards a competitive and positive nation brand would be to stick with whatever it's got in terms of graphic design long enough to be recognized, and to focus more on "technical" facts - policy, investment, export brands and general governance issues - such as:

- creating stable, competent and credible **institutions and laws**,
- creating a **friendly business environment** and a **competent and transparent administration** based on the principles of modern government; supporting an ebullient and innovative private sector that is well connected to the global economy and its current topics (more focus on reindustrialization and export brands rather than export of raw materials),
- building a **clean and competitive education system** and laying the foundation for a culture of openness and **innovation**, as well as support systems for Romanian brands and innovations in business and education (this can accelerate positive social change);
- building **international cooperation**, participating in multi-polar organizations and partnering with authorities from other countries on a variety of issues (trafficking, corruption, Roma inclusion, etc.). Romania's feedback needs to be fast and firm and it needs to honour its obligations 100%. Our representatives in international bodies should be the best and the brightest.
- **protecting the disadvantaged** at home and communicating the progress that has already been made in this area,
- investing in **cultural diplomacy** and facilitating more **exchanges on Romanian territory** (see Enescu Festival); getting the academia more involved in policy-making and governmental strategies, and the diasporas more involved in preserving the culture and in presenting a decent, hard-working, and civilized image,



- addressing the **human factor** issue in our brand communications and supporting personal endeavour, private initiative, grassroots projects and civil society as engines as development and innovation,
- **changing the way the country talks about itself** (self-vilification is not a virtue and is not appreciated by foreign audiences!); investing in regional branding efforts (Some Romanian immigrants actually dodge the question of where they're from by saying they come from Transylvania - this usually forces the interlocutor to shed all prejudice and think outside the box. If Romania immediately elicits bad images and negative labels, the regional approach often does not. It might be a smart idea for other regions to profile and position themselves within Romania and the EU with something distinctive to offer, and thus deflect the overall negativity.)

What's certain is that one cannot change the image of a place without changing the way one behaves. Communications alone cannot substitute real change. Romania has a dire need to make peace with itself. For this it needs to know itself as it is, and then gradually work out what it wants to become. There needs to be some agreement on common future goals, on a team of champions that can implement our nation brand and on the criteria the country itself decides to use as a benchmark for measuring its own improvement. It is counterproductive to import benchmarks from countries whose histories, cultures, levels of wealth and social development are entirely different. Romania needs to find its own identity that it can embrace. "It is both possible and legitimate for (...) countries to make themselves famous for what they are *going* to be, instead of what they *have* been", Simon Anholt says in his book *Competitive Identity* (2007). Whatever identity strategy Romania eventually comes up with, it needs to be at least two things: motivating for its own citizens, and relevant for the foreign publics it aims to convince.

Cultural diplomacy, that free exchange of ideas, information, knowledge, values, traditions and arts for the purpose of building and then sustaining relationships of understanding and trust can be of significant assistance in this. Cultural diplomacy fosters open, honest dialogue both internally and externally and is therefore an integral part of any nation branding strategy. Because it is only through dialogue that bystanders or perceived enemies can become partners who are able to reach and implement enduring, mutually-beneficial solutions.

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