Slovakia as a Good Idea[1]

The Politics of Nation Branding and the Making of Competitive Identities

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INTRODUCTION

This article examines the semiotic construction of the brand Slovakia which was introduced and put into practice by the Slovak government in 2016. The information and multimedia policy of nation branding, with its promise of international reputation management and potential to steer the discourse on national identities »at home«, has grown in global presence and importance over the last three decades. Nation branding, capable of offering new motifs and icons of identification, has recommended itself as a contemporary medium for the on-going negotiation and re-articulation of national identities in countries of central and eastern Europe that have undergone a process of political and economic transformation relatively recently. Drawing on empirical material and political discourse, I track the joint efforts of the governments of Slovakia and its elite to recast some of the established narratives and the symbolic repertoire of the nation via nation branding. I argue that a re-narration of the Slovak nation with its origins in the Romantic movement has been introduced to establish an image and auto-stereotype of Slovakia as a modern and progressive country. As illustrated by the brand programme *Good Idea Slovakia,* the inner and outer boundaries of belonging suggested by this type of mobilization of nation are no longer merely defined along the lines of ethnicity. Instead, it is the capacity for competitiveness in its various forms that a »good« citizen is expected to show. As multiple research suggests, the case of Slovakia is not an exception. Contrary to that, the competitiveness of national identity is internationally assumed to serve as a premise and normative demand inscribed in the practice of nation branding. It is, therefore, argued, that nation branding should not be reduced to what it merely claims to be – a marketing strategy

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1 | This article is part of the research I have been conducting for my PhD project at the Institut für Volkskunde/Europäische Ethnologie, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, under the supervision of Professor Irene Götz and the kind support of Schroubek Fonds Östliches Europa. In it, I have been looking at the performative and discursive aspects of identification as observed in multiple contexts and fields in the nation building project in Slovakia.

targeting the attention of tourists and investors. Rather, nation branding, employed by governments worldwide as a set of practices and beliefs, should be understood and studied as a transnationally practiced programme of neoliberal identity politics that operates within both national and global discursive frameworks. This testifies to the »polyvalence«[2] of the fields in which the national, as a theme and strategy, can be observed nowadays.

Nation Branding as Ideology and Practice

Echoing the spirit of the World's Fair – a famous showcase of the technological, economic and cultural achievements of states – the last decade of the 20th century has given birth to yet another way by which the symbolic capital of the nation-states[3] is being construed, manifested and employed in the era of globalized communication. The novel marketing strategy for states came to be known as nation branding and refers to the idea that countries need to manage and cultivate their images if they want to forward their interests successfully and create demand for their commodities and services on the global market. The emergence of academic disciplines and privately sponsored international charts[4] measuring image attractiveness of states soon followed suit, and helped to institutionalize nation branding as a legitimate art of governance. What is more, despite the fact that the practice of nation branding and what it encompasses exactly remain notoriously contested in academia and among the marketing experts themselves (Kaneva 2011), governments from countries as diverse as Macedonia, Germany, and South Africa[5], to name but a few, have embraced the idea that »competitive national identity« (Anholt 2007) is something to be honed and marketed. Nation branding is, meanwhile, conceived of in many countries as indispensable to the exercise of modern diplomacy – a tool of soft power (Bátora/Gyelnik 2012).

Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that nation branding, promising to serve as an international reputation management capable of attracting investors and tourists, appeared especially apt to the political elite of the post-socialist states seeking economic stimuli (Kaneva 2012). Not least, many of the states in transformation con-

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2 | The argument of »polyvalence« of the fields in which the national is deployed and can be observed nowadays is discussed in Götz (2011b).

3 | I have opted to speak of nation-states rather than nations or states where the symbolic capital is concerned. The reason for this decision is that the terms »nation« and »state« are often used and understood interchangeably in the context of nation branding.

4 | See, for example, Anholt-GfK Nation Brands Index.

5 | See Muari (2011), Götz (2016) and Graan (2016).

sidered nation branding as a chance to narrate the story of their country anew – to the world and their own citizens.[6]

This has been the case with Slovakia, a young state and EU member, which has, since 2009, invested considerable efforts into developing a branding strategy, making it one of the targets of the government's 2012–2016 work programme.[7] The new brand entitled *Good Idea Slovakia,* that aimed to offer a fresh narrative of the nation was eventually introduced in spring 2016. In it, Slovakia casted away its image of a rural country and presented itself as modern and progressive.

In order to elucidate the narratives and symbols that inform this emerging concept of the Slovak nation, empirical material, media and political discourse will be analysed and historical, political and cultural arguments upon which the present brand is built, delineated. The reception of the brand in the media will be touched upon briefly to better illustrate the context and the atmosphere in which the brand has been set. Institutions and actors involved in the making of the brand Slovakia will be mentioned to complete the picture. These have been essential for legitimizing the branding project and reveal the nature of the mechanisms through which the modern programmes of identity politics are enlivened. By way of conclusion, I will briefly discuss what some of the nation branding projects have in common and will explain the ways in which they operate not only in the national, but also in the global discursive framework. Despite its growing global influence, the marketization of »nation« exercised and sponsored by the state in the form of various strategies and campaigns has been, so far, with a few exceptions,[8] a neglected phenomenon in the critical studies of the nation (Kaneva 2011). However, nation branding is worth analysing empirically as this new way of governance might be indicative of the future trends in identity politics.

When political scientist Joseph Nye spoke about what he famously believed to be the soft power of states, he recalled the Florentine, Niccolò Machiavelli. According to a maxim of the amoral father of politics, it was wiser to be feared than to be loved. Nye, contrary to him, claimed that it might be more tactical in the present world to be both – loved and feared. Not only did he identify the non-coercive instruments of states to influence the international *opinio communis* by positive perceptions of the state's culture, political values and policies. He was also among the first advocates of soft power as a more effective way than hard carrots and sticks.[9] He suggested promoting and advancing states' interests by making them desirable to and desired by

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6 | See, for example, the case of the reunified Germany in 1999 when British advertising agency Wolff Olins was tasked with reinventing the image of Germany, which – after reunification – underwent a process of transformation. A massive campaign was launched to turn the image of a traditional and conservative country into a modern, creative destination that was no longer boring, but brimming with inspiring people and innovative goods (Götz 2011a: 209–215).

7 | See the Programme of the Government of the Slovak Republic for Years 2012–2016.

8 | See, for example, Meyer (2005), Götz (2011a), and Graan (2016).

9 | Punishments and rewards.

others (Nye 2004). This power of a favourable image arising from positive perceptions of a strong economy and an attractive culture, could be interpreted, in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu, as the symbolic capital of nation-states (Bourdieu 1986).

Theoretically, nation branding is based on two premises. Firstly, the symbolic capital of nation-states has been imagined as a traditional property of distinctive and essentialized culturally bound national identity. Secondly, in the era of global capitalism, nations, understood as immanent cultural entities, are subject to a normative request to cultivate and perform »competitive identities« (Anholt 2007). On the one hand, they seem to be contested by the overall global influence and, on the other hand, promise – when strongly promoted – to offer a visibility and distinctness on an international market.

Empirically speaking, the endeavours that fall under the scope of nation branding are usually, at the very least, commissioned, but often also, to different extents, sponsored by the state. They may involve media campaigns, interventions in public space, production of visual artefacts or other practices for that purpose. Although these activities are frequently justified as means to attract tourists, highly qualified migrants and investors, and, therefore, suggest that they are outward-oriented, this is not the whole story. In order to make the brand effective, as marketing experts argue, its messages have to be initially internalized by the members of the imagined community (Anderson 2006) and, ideally, to even conceptually inform state policies (Dinnie 2007). This condition is widely shared among the architects of national brands and has also been considered when designing the brand Slovakia. The Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MFEA) defines nation branding on its website as:

»a process by which the brand of the country is created and the most fitting and specific attributes of the country are identified and expressed in an attractive and trustworthy manner and delivered to the target groups. Its aim has been to create and introduce […] a set of attractive, trustworthy messages, including their graphic representation, with which relevant domestic actors will identify and which will help to create a positive image of Slovakia abroad. A quality presentation identity of a country helps to create better conditions for attracting foreign investors, to increase […] attractiveness for the tourists and to support the export of Slovak products onto the world markets« (MFEA n.d.).

Therefore, nation branding, as argued by Andrew Graan (2016), should be understood as a tool by which normative demands on the performance of citizenship are organized, namely through semiotic regimentation of public communication. As an inward-oriented exercise, nation branding works through an intertextual dialogue with members of the imagined community, shaping the established themes and opening up new fields of identification. Through the encouragement to identify with the brand (and, hence, with the nation it represents), subjects are deliberately called upon to perform aspects of identification chosen for them by the marketing gurus. This is at the heart of a slow process of negotiating identities with repercussions for the imagined community that are far from imaginary. Consequently, nation branding

should be conceived and studied as a specific form of identity politics. Nadja Kaneva (2011) proposes that it is both practice and ideology.

Hence, although this article recognizes the outward-directed dimension of nation branding, it focuses mainly on how the brand Slovakia has tried to engage those who identify themselves as members of the imagined community (including the diaspora).

SLOVAKIA AS A *GOOD IDEA*[10]

A key element in communicating the brand messages to the public in Slovakia has been a video spot introduced by Miroslav Lajčák, the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, at a press conference in April 2016, with the following words:

»I believe it is [the brand, P. S.] the beginning of a story that will help us to improve the visibility of our country abroad and will help us strengthen our image, of which we often say that we are missing it. In order to achieve this, it is, understandably, important that we all internalize it, that we approach it positively and that we start applying it in real life: state institutions, business, the creative sector, just everybody. I believe the concept fulfills every criterion for our citizens to be able to identify with it«[11] (Lajčák 2016).

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10 | The sources examined for the purpose of this paper are official materials available online at the website of the Slovak Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs (MFEA). The materials comprise, apart from the branding video and the website itself, four research papers that the MFEA commissioned between 2011 and 2013: The Anholt-Gfk Roper Nation Brand Index Report, produced for the government agency for tourism in 2011 to assess how Slovakia had been perceived abroad, and the results of two structured surveys on nation branding. Two of these research papers are concerned with the analysis of the existing narratives of the nation in Slovakia and propose possible themes for the future brand creation. Another two papers deal with the image of Slovakia as perceived abroad and examples of the successful branding strategies of Norway, Sweden, and Finland, respectively. The Anholt-Gfk Roper Nation Brand Index asked 20.000 respondents in 20 countries about their knowledge of Slovakia. The results have been revealing, especially regarding the recommendations made to the Slovak government and its subsequent way into its branding programme. Lastly, there are the results of the two surveys made available on the website of MFEA. The first was intended as a public discussion that took place in the form of a semi-structured questionnaire from July to December 2014 on a website www.BrandingSlovenska.com designed by MFEA especially for the purpose. Out of 8000 visitors of the website, 500 took part in the survey. Although the questionnaire at issue is no longer available, the results suggest that the questions were asked in a way to reflect the proposed themes and concepts from the research papers mentioned already. The second representative survey commissioned in 2015 produced answers to questions whether Slovakia should invest into the creation of a brand, preferred ways of presentation and enquiring about the attributes of Slovakia and its inhabitants selected, thus, being a formal exercise to legitimize the process of making the brand. The brand concept that was eventually presented in the form of a video spot was the winner of a public procurement and selected by a committee of experts nominated by the ministry.

11 | All translations in the text have been done by the author.

Arguing with Stuart Hall that images »constantly construct us through our phantasy relationship to the image in a way it implicates us in the meaning« (Hall 2006), in what follows, I offer my reading of the video on the »brand Slovakia«. As somebody who considers herself part of the imagined community at issue (by socialization and choice), my perspective is both auto-ethnographic and reflexive.

The opening of the two-minute spot makes you indeed wonder what comes next: »Presentation of Slovakia abroad. A good idea is wanted.« reads the text featured prominently on the screen, attended by a beat reminiscent of a Western-style movie. If you happen to be at least remotely familiar with the country, in what follows, you will be watching an evocative sequence of cliché-ridden national symbols: a folk-style flowery ornament, swiftly replaced by a contour map of Slovakia with a heart beating at its centre, superseded by the iconic Kriváň peak of the Tatra mountains and, to complete the set of simplistic graphic sketches, a violin. If these do not ring a bell, no need to worry – a voiceover explains: »Beautiful and diverse, the very heart of Europe. Beautiful landscapes, multifaceted culture, unique folklore.« What might justifiably appear to an uninitiated observer as yet another Romantic-inspired national imagery will possibly (although not necessarily) call to mind more semiotic layers among those who have been spoon-fed these images. One might think, for example, of the lavishly embroidered colourful costume your grandmother used to put on before going to church on Sundays; school trips to the Tatra mountains or the alleged centre of Europe near the town of Kremnica; the multiple articles in the media that occur with every anniversary of the »Czechoslovak divorce« and represent Slovakia as the emotional heart of the former federation. The trained ethnographer of the region (and surely anybody who has ever paid attention to the discourse of and on the nation in the country) might further think of the well-received myth of a peasant-plebeian nation[12] or the popularly invoked conception of Slovakia as a geographical, hence cultural, bridge between East and West.

Luckily, before one gets the chance to delve too deeply into the national sentiments (or not), the *raison d'être* of the video and its main message is revealed. As the sun illuminates the slopes covered by the shadows – stressing the novel aspects of an »enlightened« country which is going to leave its past behind – the voice, in a some-

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12 | The most prominent proponent of what is today referred to as »the plebeian myth« was the Slovak author, journalist and essayist Vladimír Mináč (1922–1996). In his book *Blowing on the Embers* [Dúchanie do pahrieb] the convinced socialist – by way of cultivating a regime-affirmative class consciousness – asserted that if history was a history of kings and aristocracy, hence violence and exploitation, Slovaks had no history. But if history was measured by labour, Mináč maintained, Slovaks indeed were a historical nation, namely a nation of builders. His interpretation worked well with yet another, much older, auto-stereotype of Slovaks as peasants. These came to be represented, during the Romantic ethnization of culture, through the depiction of shepherds in high art (Krekovičová 2002). As Eva Krekovičová (2002) documented, the auto-image of a peasant nation remains valid until today and is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, it is negatively connoted as representative of poverty, on the other, celebrated as authentic. Thus, it is more often found in »official culture« than spontaneously invoked by people.

what liberating manner, promulgates that »Slovakia is no longer in need of its beaten path«. To accentuate the message, the authors make use of two easily comprehensible representations: The spreading light as a trope of coming progress and mountains as (and not only in the Slovak context) an established and widely recognizable symbol of the national territory. But the 19ᵗʰ century Romantic tradition offers yet another way to interpret the scene, namely, as one in which nature symbolizes the beacon of premodern authenticity and the home of a rural way of life. Coming back to the mountains: one might wonder if the authors had thought about the national anthem called *Lighting over the Tatras?* In addition to that, mountains represent, in different cultures, an elevated wisdom achieved on an arduous journey »to the summit« (Biedermann 1996). Are we watching a self-reflexive moment of a country, enlightened by its past experiences, stepping out of its primordial shadows? Possibly – at least the movie seems to suggest so at this point.

When the voice pronounces that »We are writing a different and modern story«, a way is being opened for new narratives, symbolically leaving behind the established images of a national self. If you doubt, keep on watching and become convinced by a car leaving a garage to fly off into the sky (fig. 1)! The flying car – a creation by Slovak designer Štefan Klein – lends itself well as a demonstration of the country's quirky inventiveness. One can spot here a wish and a call to move away from what has often enough been represented as and by the »Gellnerian Ruritania«.[13] Paradoxically, the idea of emancipation that is present in much of the 19ᵗʰ century accounts of the birth of nations serves here to communicate the idea of breaking with the Romantic past, in a genuinely Romantic, culturally-bound way when traditional images, such as the forest and the mountains, are recalled and the idea of a »rebirth« of the national spirit is reshaped in a modern fashion. The oblique intertextual hint about writing a new and modern story betrays yet something else. The video clearly addresses those who consider themselves part of the imagined community and not only potential investors for, it refers to received and implicit knowledge about the country and its history as anchors for further identification with the country.

The spot does not shy away from more controversial topics either. As the Roma band[14] *Devil's Violin* bows to its audience after a concert (fig. 2), the voice continues: »A story about a forward-looking and inviting country.« In the light of the notorious Roma poverty and racial stigmatisation,[15] and the country's rejection of a common EU quota scheme on the allocation of refugees, one suspects a wish to assure the viewer, despite all odds, of the country's inward and outward »cultural openness«. This is not necessarily a contradiction to the state's immigration politics, for, when it comes to attracting highly qualified migrants, culture does not usually play a decisive role. And it is the highly-skilled that Slovakia is interested in: »Appealing country, being

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13 | An image of a region trapped in the »backwardness« of nationalist passions.

14 | The representation as musicians is possibly the most often invoked »positive« and, hence, reductive stereotype of Roma.

15 | See Sebők-Polyfka in this volume.

Fig. 1 (right page, top down): The flying car ready to take off into the sky. Screenshot of the campaign's website.
Fig. 2: The band Devil's Violin *bowing to its audience after a concert. Screenshot of the campaign's website.*
Fig. 3: Ecocapsule as shown on the video. Screenshot of the campaign's website.
Fig. 4: An image of a celebrating crowd. Screenshot of the campaign's website.

able to attract talent and investments«.[16] Showcasing yet another successful domestic design – a transportable energy self-sufficient house known as *Ecocapsule*[17] (fig. 3) – a message about a country that is home to innovative thinking is being sent out.

As the sun rises above the horizon and spreads its warm light again, the imagined community is reminded: »We are a small country not abounding in mineral resources. That is why we have to sell ideas.« Progress and emancipation are evoked yet again: A humanoid known from the banners of Slovakia's ESET antivirus provider – a true symbol and icon of the international start-up success of Slovakia – is transported through a Star Trek-like ray tunnel into an unknown place full of bright light. When a door opens and the humanoid walks out, the voiceover asserts: »If there is something we can be really proud of, it's the power of ideas.« It is the desire to articulate a distinctive object of pride common to most nation-building projects that the video aims to address at this point. At last, it seems, the gap has been closed.

The camera then follows an old train, metaphorically reminding the viewer of Slovakia's journey. As it travels through the rural landscape, it is magically transformed into a high-tech one, moving fast forward. »So let us introduce Slovakia to the outside world as a country where ideas are both born and turned into reality.« The message that is being sent out could not be clearer: Slovakia, a country with the highest number of cars produced per person in the world, has, so far, been known and perceives itself as the workshop of Europe. Now, it is ready to become a knowledge-based economy as well.

A presentation of two more of the »good ideas« from Slovakia follows: a snapshot of the open-air music festival Pohoda and of the Sygic navigation system. The

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16 | Part of the government strategy to attract highly-skilled persons currently missing on Slovakia's labour market consists in trying to attract highly qualified diaspora. Under a recently adopted scheme, young Slovak graduates of elite foreign universities who return to Slovakia are eligible for substantial non-returnable financial support. The NGOs, too, have worked to address the consequences of the massive brain drain that has occurred in recent years in the wake of the country's transformation to a market economy and new freedom of movement. The NGO LEAF, for example, is almost solely devoted to attracting young Slovak graduates and professionals who studied abroad to return to Slovakia, by mediating them high-quality jobs and internships, many of which are offered by government institutions (for more information, see www.leaf.sk).

17 | Ecocapsule represents a product of one of the locally better known successful start-up companies and hence lends itself well as domestically recognized symbol of entrepreneurship and progressivity.

voice encourages: »Let us present a country of good ideas.« The patriotism evoked here through technology and the capacity to think in a specific way is, in fact, nothing new on the market (recall, for example, Germany's nation branding slogan »Land of Ideas«, see Götz 2011b). What these reflect is the move to a service-oriented and experience-based capitalism of post-industrial societies. Digging still a little deeper, the capacity to fuel technological progress, providing control over nature, lends itself well as a powerful mythological narrative of the nation. Technology, as a symbol of taming the unpredictable powers of nature, has been used and abused to answer the deepest human fears.

To wrap up, the »nation« and its »good ideas« are at last celebrated: a merry mass of people in front of the stage at a concert is shown (fig. 4). In a quasi-religious ecstasy, they raise their hands synchronously and release a sea of balloons. The voice joins in the party: »Because Slovakia is a good idea.« The viewer is subconsciously reminded that it is the collective body that gives rise to a nation.

Finally, we learn who the authors aim to speak to: »Good Idea Slovakia. A simple, powerful idea being able to inspire the world as well as Slovaks themselves. Good Idea Slovakia is both the slogan and the brand of Slovakia at the same time.«

The new logo appears against a background of the night sky with stars (common to all nationalist projects has been a perspective that places them in the centre of the universe). The only allusion to official state symbols is a playfully deconstructed slim tricolour stripe at its side. The voice comments: »Multilayered typography created by applying a type face by the world famous Slovak designer stands for the variety and richness of ideas.« Suggestions of how and in which contexts the logo should be used follow by showing its possible, flexibly employable headings: Travel in Slovakia, Invest in Slovakia, Culture and Slovakia, Sport and Slovakia, and Ideas from Slovakia.

The concluding text then lists the »stars« of the video – the new symbols of Slovakia and its modern identity: »Our gratitude goes to the following partners from Slovakia: *ESET* – a worldwide antivirus software manufacturer, *Aeromobil* – a progressive flying car from Slovakia, *Sygic* – the trendsetter in mobile navigation and travel, *Ecocapsule* – the winner of the public award at the StartupAwards.SK 2014, *Pixel Federation* – one of the fastest growing companies in Central Europe, *Viva musica!* – a non-traditional festival of top-class classical music performers and *Festival Pohoda* – the largest multi-genre festival in Slovakia.

It is, above all, regarding these, that one learns what exemplary citizenship ought to look like. The companies listed tell not only stories of individual start-up successes or innovative ways of thinking, but also define who the new elites of the nation are. It is then equally interesting to ask who has been left out of the narrative. While the video clearly addresses the »native« audience, what strikes one is how rarely people appear in the video. In fact, they do so only as crowds. This shows a new grammar and hierarchy of belonging, namely between the entrepreneur »elite« and the rest.

However, people and their stories are not completely left out of the branding concept of Slovakia. Shortly after the brand was introduced, the first »ambassador« of the »Good Idea« (the »pantheon of national heroes« should be extended in the future) was

named by the Foreign Minister. Peter Sagan, the world champion cyclist from Slovakia whose star has been rising in the last years, had been chosen for the task. The internationally acclaimed sportsman as the first »ambassador« is no surprise. Not only are successful sportsmen and -women the heroes of modern nations, waging symbolic battles on their country's behalf on the global stage of sport arenas, but as performers of the body, they are also the incarnation of the symbolic strength of the nation and embody the imagined capacities within the reach of its members. Thus, they are personas *exempla virtutis*, whose performance is to be emulated. Exuding a sense of discipline, power and competitiveness, what they represent comes in handy to the neoliberal ethics of the »survival of the fittest«. At the »inauguration« ceremony, Sagan was introduced as a miracle boy from a modest family, who had been a great influence on the young. His story, resembling the »American dream«, had been employed as a lesson: it pays off to work hard and that »miracles« are indeed possible. The rooftop of the National Bank of Slovakia, as the news reported, was picked for the ceremony to show symbolically that nation branding will have a positive impact on the economy and stimulate growth and the gross domestic product GDP. The bank – worshiped as the modern temple of prosperity – was further announced to be the storage place of the decrees of the ambassadors-to-be. This showed yet another face of the enterprise of nation branding, namely that of economic nationalism.

On the Reception of the Brand – a »Good Idea«?

It should be pointed out that however ambitious the authors of the brand Slovakia had been, the brand presentation attracted attention mainly from the media and the marketing experts which had continually accompanied the process of its making. The liberal part of the elite particularly applauded. The business weekly, *Trend*, for example, commented:

»Slovakia presents its new brand today under the slogan Good Idea Slovakia. It is a culmination of a process that had stretched over several years and for which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was responsible. Compared to states with strong narratives and personalities, it was, namely, at first necessary to define, with the help of experts, how Slovakia actually perceives itself in the 21st century. Understandably, not every citizen desires to be represented by a marketing shortcut. But there exist more reasons why Good Idea Slovakia is a good idea. Image of a country, namely, arises spontaneously too, and many people surely are not happy when confronted by a romanticizing image of a shepherd nation with modest intelligence and cultivated taste for alcohol. The absence of positive examples these days, moreover, hunts people to xenophobe ›protest‹ groups, what, aside from political standstill, brings the country unfavourable reputation. Apart from that, to say that Slovakia is a country of good ideas is not plain imagination. The media is full of evidence these days that the coming generation means to use its head and not only to wear a hipster hat on it, and that it actively tries to promote and realize its projects« (Garaj 2016).

A well-known marketing expert from Bratislava, Martin Bajaník, said of the new brand in an interview for the liberal daily *Denník N*:

»Czechs could have built on the First Republic,[18] we practically constantly reject something. We have rejected the Kingdom of Hungary, we reject the First Republic, the Slovak state,[19] socialism and mečiarism,[20] of course with self-reflection. It is difficult to build our story on history, and so it is probably good that the concept ›Good Idea‹ looks into the future.[21] […] finally, we have left folklore and the image of a rural country and moved more towards what we call a knowledge-based economy. Subconsciously, we attract other types of investors, not only the ones who want to, at best, build a fabric here« (Mikušovič 2016b).

But there were also sceptical reactions. The presentation of the brand came out at the same time as the school teachers' strike for an increase in wages. The striking teachers commented ironically on the new brand slogan with posters such as »Saving on education, Good Idea Slovakia«.[22]

Igor Kupec, the Slovak graphic designer and copywriter, also reacted to the new brand by offering his own »rebranding of Slovakia«. In it, he spelled out the problems that should, according to him, be addressed by the government with the following slogans:

»Slowakia. We are not slow. We just don't hurry. We don't hurry with tolerance. We don't hurry with health. We don't hurry with poverty. We don't hurry with highways. We don't hurry with ecology.[23] We don't hurry with corruption. We don't hurry with transparency. We don't hurry with education« (Mikušovič 2016a).

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18 | The Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) – the first common democratic state of Czechs and Slovaks. The author of the quote refers to a popular conception according to which the state was centrally run from Prague, leaving less autonomy for the at the time predominantly non-industrialised Slovak part of the federation.

19 | The Slovak Republic (1939–1945), a satellite fascist state of the Third Reich.

20 | Vladimír Mečiar was the first prime minister of the Slovak Republic after Czechoslovakia split up. His style of politics was described as authoritarian in Slovakia and abroad and is believed to have postponed Slovakia's invitation to join the EU and the NATO until after the end of his premiership in 1998.

21 | The »rejection« of history refers to the popular idea that until 1993, when Slovakia became an independent state, its destiny had been determined by »foreign« powers. The year 1993 is often represented as the beginning of the modern Slovak history.

22 | Discontent School-Teachers' March Through the Streets of Bratislava: People Applauded, Many Have Even Joined Them, http://www.pluska.sk/spravy/z-domova/07/foto-protest-ucitelov-bratislave-je-velkym-sklamanim-silne-transparenty-mizerna-ucast.html (last time accessed on 30. 4. 2017)

23 | This slogan reflects the wide-spread criticism of the government's focus on foreign investments in the car industry on the grounds that Slovakia should strive to attract more highly skilled industries and think more about the environmental impact of car production.

Fig. 5: »Re-branding« of Slovakia as ironically proposed by designer Igor Kupec, criticizing the country's focus on investments into car industry.

One of Kupec's graphics, *SlovaKIA,* for example, alludes to the Korean car manufacturer, KIA, based in Slovakia (footnote 23 and fig. 5).

The reactions to the brand are representative of the multitude of discourses and perspectives on the »nation« and what it represents. The different views are symptomatic of the tension between the country's liberal elite (mostly living in Bratislava) and »the rest«. These arise from the dramatic regional and societal inequalities pertaining to the distribution of opportunities, the living standards, wages and education.

THE »INVISIBLE GOVERNMENT«[24] AND THE MAKING OF THE BRAND SLOVAKIA

As has already been suggested in the introduction, the »brand Slovakia« has been in the making since 2009. Contrary to what one might expect when thinking about the complexity of nation branding as an ideology and practice, the motifs behind the first steps to institutionalize mechanisms of the presentation of the country reflected the practical needs of the economy. Since the inception of the young state in 1993, the state-owned agencies in charge of tourism and investment had employed diverse communication strategies and visuals. In those, Slovakia was often portrayed as a rural country with various accompanying narratives. According to the government of Slovakia, the lack of a coordinated approach regarding the country's presentation

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24 | I borrowed the term from E. L. Bernays's book *Propaganda* (1928). The author suggested that a great deal of the ideas that determine the way we think about society had been produced by people we will never know or be aware of.

at international fairs and occasional re-emerging criticism from the public and the media as to the quality and cost of such endeavours, called for hands-on solutions.[25] Although pragmatically motivated in the first place, the diversity of national representations perceived and the need to coordinate them revealed at least two things: The negotiation of identities, symptomatic of the years following political ruptures (in the case of Slovakia, the emergence of the new state and transition to a market economy), and the search for stabilizing narratives supporting the new status quo. The »presentation of Slovakia abroad« provided a mere context for these.

As evidenced by a lot of documents and studies commissioned by the Slovak MFEA,[26] it was during the debates on how to approach the theme of the country's presentation abroad that nation branding, as a complex strategy suitable for the task, was identified and began to be developed. It is only understandable that such an endeavour had to, sooner or later, encounter the question of representation and to reopen the discussion on national identities.

This negotiation took place predominantly among the network of groups of the liberal elite appointed by the government with a view to elaborating the conceptual base for the forthcoming brand. Although the public had been involved in the process by using representative surveys, these were framed in a way that had reflected themes predefined by the expert team in its research papers. Hence, I argue that the involvement of the public had served merely to legitimize the process.[27] Most of the conceptual work on the brand had already been done by the experts. This makes Slovakia's nation branding project – as has often been the case in the history of nationalist movements – an elite undertaking through and through.

The Semiotic Programme of the Brand and the Reconstitution of Narratives and Stereotypes of the Nation[28]

It is precisely the understanding of the elite of the nation and the dominant auto- and hetero-stereotypes, as observed in the research papers commissioned by the MFEA, that one has to look at to understand the vantage points and conceptual background that informed the *Good Idea Slovakia*. By suggesting a working definition, I refer to these ideas as a »semiotic programme« of the brand Slovakia. In my reading, there are at least two thematic areas that constitute the programme: what nation branding is and what it should deliver in the Slovak context, and the reconstitution of the narratives and stereotypes of the nation.

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25 | A Brief Overview of the Steps Undertaken Thus Far, https://www.mzv.sk/znacka-slovenska/strucny -prehlad-doterajsich-aktivit (last time accessed on 7. 4. 2017).

26 | See footnote 10.

27 | See footnote 10.

28 | See, above all, MFEA n. d.

As far as the first aspect is concerned, nation branding is understood as a theoretically informed creation, measurement and management of the reputation of a country, while accentuating its intrinsic symbolical value. Although it is acknowledged that the reputation of a country cannot be controlled by marketing devices, the authors of the programme seem to be convinced (or aim to convince their audience) that the image of a country can be changed, namely through a systematic strategy. Such a conceptual strategy, according to them, should involve products, services, policies and initiatives that will become the hallmark of the brand. The search for key attributes unique to Slovakia is, thus, conceived as an adequate framework of shaping strategies for the country's future. This, among other things, has involved an essentialized and essentializing concept of national identity: »The goal was to find a base for the modern identity of Slovakia and to draw attention to its potential for all areas« (MFEA 2011).

The second, more complex part of the programme consists of the discussion of some of the key narratives of the national history and established and proposed images of self and others. It is the understanding and interpretation of the national history, including »lessons« derived from it, I argue, that provide legitimacy for the branding programme and open up new fields of identification.

To start with, the interpretation of the Slovak history unfolds from two main lines of argument.

The first affirms and is justified by the myth of the plebeian nation. It asserts that Slovakia had no history of its own prior to 1993; the history that had been played out on its territory before it emerged as an independent state »belongs« to other nations.[29] The argument originates from an ethnical-cultural interpretation of class consciousness and understanding of who held the power in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy and Czechoslovakia. Framed as power asymmetry between foreign aristocracy and native peasants where the Austro-Hungarian monarchy is concerned, and between foreign intellectuals and bourgeoisie, and the native rural population with respect to Czechoslovakia, the historical nations are, in this account, Austrians, Hungarians, and Czechs, respectively. The notion of to whom the history »belongs«, therefore, is derived from an understanding of a nation as a state-forming and state-running entity.

The second interpretation of the past embraces history prior to 1993. It refers, above all, to the »totalitarian regimes«, lumping together and with little nuanced reflection, real socialism and the period of the neo-fascist Slovak State. The underlying narrative is that of a victim nation, not unlike in other post-socialist states. What, however, gives the »victim« narrative of Slovakia its own twist, is the aforementioned conception of a nation as a state-running community. Under this aspect, it is often

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29 | If one takes the Macedonian project »Skopje 2014« to be an attempt at nation branding (see Graan 2016), its basic strategy would be the absolute opposite of the Slovak one: it makes the (largely constructed) »ancient national history« the one and only element of branding the young Balkan nation (see Klaus Roth's paper in this volume).

argued that the totalitarian regimes were a foreign »import« of the Third Reich and the USSR.

What is common to both these accounts of the past is a popularly invoked understanding of »Slovak history« as a struggle for freedom and independence (echoing an older narrative of a thousand years of suppression under the Hungarian rule). Part and parcel of the narrative of »struggle« is the recourse to events that constitute a stable part of the »national« historical canon. To name but a few: the 1944 anti-fascist uprising that took place in Slovakia during the Second World War, the Prague Spring and the 1968 occupation of Czechoslovakia, the 1989 Velvet Revolution or the 1993 split-up of Czechoslovakia.

It is the notion of »struggle« that is further developed by the »semiotic programme« of the brand and is subsequently transported into the latest history of Slovakia. One of the discussion papers, for example highlights the argument by the Slovak historian, Roman Holec (Gyárfášová/Bútora/Bútorová 2012). According to him, the story of Slovakia (that is, post 1993) is that of a country that started from scratch and »struggled« its way through to become a member of the elite clubs of the EU and NATO. Membership to these organizations symbolized not only prosperity and the freedom so much desired, but also belonging to the wider family of European nations. Although the victim narrative still persists, according to Holec, the country was partially able to free itself from it, as demonstrated by its ambitious take on the challenges of transformation (Gyárfášová/Bútora/Bútorová 2012). The fairy tale-like story of the EU, NATO, and Eurozone accessions that were eventually achieved despite Slovakia's starting position as an underdog of the region, constitutes one of the newer struggle-emancipation myths of Slovakia. However, as the excitement of the momentum was gradually fading and losing its immediate power to offer positive identification narratives, the elite started to pose the question of what the future vision of the country should be, and how Slovakia ought to imagine itself in and for the future. The vacuum that followed the »golden years« needed to be filled with new visions. Nation branding, as a project in the making, presented the necessary platform and legitimacy for articulating such novel ideas.

The consensus among the creators of the brand was that it should not focus on the history prior to 1993, with its many controversies, but that it should build upon the success story of the integration years. The idea of a progressive country was born out of this premise. Key to the concept of a »country with potential« was the construction of four defining attributes of Slovakia that, to different extents, rearticulate and reactivate existing auto- and hetero-stereotypes. The four attributes are individuality, diversity, vitality, and inventiveness.

In the account of the brand architects,[30] »individuality« has been chosen to reflect the conservative aspect of the Slovak culture rooted in tradition and heritage. It should also refer to the »turbulent past« and »short history« – clearly, the first taking place before and the second after 1993. The formulation of this attribute can be seen as

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30 | MFEA n. d.

an acknowledgement on the side of the liberal elite that »ethnos«, as a conception of a nation in Slovakia, is around and is difficult to ignore. »Vitality« has been delineated from the country's »historical capacity to survive« (tapping again into the narrative of struggle). In the background of »vitality« stand naturalist ideas, such as »original power, health, authenticity, and originality«. The vital country, according to the brand authors, is full of energy, opportunities, and interesting people. In an ideal case, such attributes are best fitted to unfold the creative potential of society (and make it marketable). Lastly, Slovakia is described as a »diverse« country full of contrasts – naturally, culturally and socially (the last being a euphemism, considering the persisting regional inequalities in the standards of living). What is described as »diversity« and a »laboratory of central Europe« (one immediately thinks of the neoliberal market reforms of the 1990s) should become the basis for the future capacity of the nation that lies within »innovation«.

CONCLUSION

As can been seen from the above, the brand programme of Slovakia has made use of multiple streams of thoughts and ideas. In its attempt to formulate »trustworthy« identifications and narratives, it has combined an essentialist-cultural conception of nation with naturalist properties, such as »vitality«. Hence, the *Good Idea Slovakia* that came of out these and tells a story of breaking with the Romantic past is based, to a great extent, on some of the very ideas it rejects. What is more, the Romantic narratives are redressed through naturalist interpretations in a way to make them »attractive« on the global market of »competitive identities«.

As the studies of the nation branding of Britain, Germany, and Macedonia show (Meyer 2005; Götz 2011a; 2011b; Graan 2016), there are at least two factors that they and Slovakia have in common and that, I believe, should inspire further questions in thinking about nation branding. Firstly, in all the cases mentioned, nation branding is a policy organized and financed by the state. Although there is no denying the fact that nation-building has always been a project of the elite, the democratic legitimacy of such a practice ought not to remain unquestioned. Not only does it postulate prescriptive ideas of nation and citizenship, but its practical aspects often rest in the hands of »invisible governments« of unelected marketing experts. Secondly, while nation branding is based on a premise of a world that consists of nation-states (including the illusion of their alleged power), its practice testifies to the fact that the nation-state, as an actor capable of defining conditions under which it conducts its policies, is ever more depended on external factors. While the symbolic power of the national experiences its discursive revival, the nation-state is on decline and becomes ever more challenged by an unequal competition in respect to the global flows of investment, purchasing power and »brains« (Götz 2011b).

Central to the functioning of the global economic system has been the idea and ideology of competitiveness. As has been shown by the Slovak case, the imperative of

global competitiveness has, on the one hand, legitimized the production of a distinctive market-affirmative narrative of »national identity« through nation branding. On the other hand, competitiveness has informed the semiotic construction of the brand in a way that provides normative prescriptions of a citizen. How and to what extent this utilitarian conception of man and society will become internalized, remains to be seen. Nevertheless, it seems not farfetched to suggest, even at this point, that a marketing logic applied to and by politics of identity will further fuel the inequalities within and among the states.

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