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International Positioning of Serbia in the Era of Pax Americana²

Abstract

In this paper, the author deals with the concept and practice of nation branding, which he perceives as one of the media used to preserve the economic and political predominance by world's leading power. In the first part of the paper, the focus is on the concepts of identity, image and propaganda, commonly associated with branding. Further on, the author suggests a value frame in which the actors of liberal capitalism utilise nation branding in order to pursue their interests and demonstrates the evolution of values in Serbia at the turn of the century, as a precondition of nation branding.

Keywords: branding, image, identity, propaganda, values, liberal capitalism, Pax Americana, Serbia.

One of the critical points in the communication of actors on the international political stage is their positioning. It is the preference of states for a behavioural model that promotes the importance of image, trust and reputation and situates communication and promotion at the centre of overall strategic thinking (Slavujević 2009: 97). It is an intention for the recognizable lodging of the subject within the multi-dimensional sphere of the international economy and politics in broader terms, or the formulation of such goals and means for their achievement that make the subject recognizable for its its long-term development pursuits. In modern political communication, this insis-

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tence on one's distinction from competitors is termed branding (nation branding). Nation branding is central to the image of a country or an organisation; it is a premise of their visibility and attractiveness. For a modern state, it's a postulate of prosperity, or the achievement of its long-term economic, but also political and social objectives. In this paper, we will attempt to answer the question of Serbia's posture abroad and of the overall perceptions of the country in foreign publics. The answer, first of all, warrants a thorough insight into the meaning of the terms „image“ and „branding“ in politics and then also their links with other associated terms.

Nation Branding and Associated Concepts: Image, Identity and Propaganda

The concept of image has been developed within philosophy, individual and social psychology, in communicological research and in public opinion polls. Its definitions range from the most general ones, including that given by Lippman in 1922 that image is “a picture of the political world“ that the individual/voter “has in his head“ (Lipmann 1922). For W. Scott, it represents “a totality of attributes that the person recognizes (or imagines) when he contemplates an object“ (Scott 1965: 72), while according to D. Nimmo, a political marketing theorist, it is “a quality concept that people associate with an object, product or person“ (Nimmo 1970: 144). It appears that words such as “picture“ and “perception“ capture in fullest the meaning of this term. Z. Slavujević suggests that it is a perception/picture about a certain object that is at the same time general and fragmented, structured, or multi-layered and diffuse (Slavujević 2009: 97). Therefore, it is a perception that does not capture all but only some features of an object, selected by the subject's interests. Although incomplete, image is the overall impression in that the selected features of an object become its characteristics in general – it is a “general qualification“. In addition, it's a structured, multi-layered perception with coordinated but variably combined, both in degree and manner, cognitive, emotional/affective, evaluative and motivational elements. Image is a multi-layered impression also in that it contains a relatively small set of elements that are in the focus of attention and a greater number at its periphery. The former are invoked by mention of the object's name and the latter by association, through general or selective message prompts (Ibid.: 98).

Since the term of „image“ itself lacks sufficient definition, so do its links with other associated terms. It is most commonly related to identity, construed in terms of objective features of some phenomenon, event, collectivity or person (image being a perception of these). Political identity, generally speaking, is hard to distinguish strictly from social identity since, like the latter, it represents a complex structure of intertwined components – cultural, territorial, ethnic, socio-demographic and others. Yet, it is important to view it separately since it is the reflection of a specific sphere in which major social processes are articulated. Contemporary authors commonly define it through a modern, sovereign state. In simple terms, political identity of individuals and groups is generally defined by the state they belong to. Considering that humans can hardly understand something without a picture or perception (a point of view shared by social psychology, cognitive theory, numerous political culture theories, voting behaviour theories, etc.), it could be concluded that subjects in politics in general, and thus also in international relations, communicate by image, or perceptions about phenomena, events and other subjects and that their political persuasion strategies are, in fact, conducive to appropriate image-building. Hence, the international image–construction by a state, just as the image-building of a political party, leader or some other political subject, would involve the creation and dissemination of a specific notion about the objectives of the state concerned, its activities, organisations, leaders etc. However, the purpose of the creation and dissemination of this “notion“ is not to offer basic information about that country that aims to satisfy elementary curiosity of the public audiences in other countries, but rather, this “notion“ has an explicit and implicit interest structure and agenda based upon it, with a hint of the possible realisation of these interests, a notion that persuades in the reality of these possibilities and aims to frame an intention to engage people in its accomplishment (Ibid.: 178). This is what M. Butler suggests in his definition of public diplomacy as a medium for achieving the so-called soft power in modern international relations and global information society.³

3 This former UK Permanent Representative to the European Union defines public diplomacy as an activity whose main purpose is to “influence opinion in target countries to make it easier for the British Government, British companies and other British organisations to achieve their aims“, adding that „the overall image of Britain in the country concerned is of great importance“, but that the essence of public diplomacy is not reduced to this „persuasion factor“ (Leonard 2002: 1).

The concept of “soft power“ was introduced in political science and practice by the former Harvard professor and Pentagon official J. Nye in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. According to this author, in contrast with „hard power“ by which actors in international politics are induced, by use of military clout or economic

The observation that images of states in the modern global marketplace function similarly to images of companies and their products led the guru of nation branding, Simon Anholt, to coin this phrase at the end of the 20th century. Although, in his own words, the term competitive identity “better communicates the fact that managing the reputations of places has to do with national and regional identity and the politics and economics of competitiveness...” (Anholt 2008), nation branding has prevailed in debates about the positioning of modern states in the global economic and political marketplace in the last fifteen years or so. Conceding that: “...we are far from reaching any consensus on what such an operation might involve...” (Anholt 2009) he maintains that “...the need for proper understanding in this area is crucial” (Anholt 2008). In his reply to remarks that: “such questions about the images of countries are simply trivial when compared with the harsh facts of economical survival, and that the whole business of understanding and managing public perceptions is a luxury that can only be afforded in times of growth and prosperity” (Anholt 2009) he argues that: “We live in a world where perceptions regularly trump reality – the economic crisis itself is surely proof of that – and today it’s all about the survival of those perceived to be the fittest.” (Ibid.) Consistent with the logic of modern economic and political marketing, he puts public opinion at the centre of the branding process - “Places get their brands from public opinion, not from marketers or governments” (Anholt 2008).

Not only because of its relation to image as proposed, among others, by Anholt, public opinion, in the context of this paper, is particularly significant in that it constitutes a link between image, or branding, and another element of social conscience – values. Unlike public opinion, which lies at the „periphery“ of public conscience and is subject to change, values are close to the „core“ and make a very stable part of public conscience. „Valuable“, or „values“ are referred to as an aspect of public conscience that has historically and currently gained desirability in a society. This „desirability“ contributes to the communicological interaction and social integration of individuals within an appropriate social group and to the formulation of an interpretative frame in which they understand and evaluate/appraise reality, developing their attitude towards occurrences and events. Values, or the underlying conscience about what is desirable, also facilitate an individual’s adjustment to the

benefit, to act against their will, “soft power“ denotes a country’s ability to convince others to follow it, by using the appeal of its political and cultural values (Nye 1990).

social reality and help him develop an image or perceptions of reality, including a perception of self and the group he belongs to, but also perceptions about other social groups and their members (Pantić and Pavlović 2007: 51).

While the importance of values will be further discussed in this paper, the focus on public opinion remains, given its specific treatment in debates on the subject. Namely, the unreserved framing of the whole marketing concept on the idea of “public opinion rule“ sets the ground for contrasting nation branding with the notion of propaganda and activities involved. According to most Western authors, unlike propaganda, typically used by political subjects to persuade publics that their positions are acceptable and their actions justified, marketing offers the publics what they themselves want done. In other words, while in propoaganda the public has the status of object, in marketing in has the status of subject (Slavujević 2009: 97). Therefore, lest they make any mistake about what used to be known as foreign propaganda and is today associated in the West with closed, undemocratic and totalitarian societies, the theorists of soft power relinquish the exclusive role of government in nation branding and insist on citizens’ or private business participation in the promotion of a country abroad.⁴ The role of private business is reduced to accessing the international marketplace where terms are dictated by existing global economic brands, or large companies and financial organizations, mainly US-based.⁵ In this way, private business indirectly promotes the country it comes from, while, simultaneously, state governments also attempt to „sell“ their good reputation to these global economic and financial “players“. Both operate in the global marketplace which functions by the rules of the system that Eric Louw refers to as the Pax Americana, in which branding is apparently no more than a means of preserving the economic and political dominance by the United States.

4 Thus, in his answer to the question about what China and Russia don't understand about soft power, its creator Joseph Nye argues that: „Russia makes the mistake of thinking that the government is the main instrument of soft power“ (Kosović 2013: 268).

5 At the beginning of the last decade, 108 global economic brands originating from just 14 states were registered in the world, as follows: USA (64), Great Britain (8), Germany (8), Japan (6), France (5), Switzerland (4), Sweden (3), Italy (3), the Netherlands (2), Korea (1), Ireland (1), Finland (1), Denmark (1) and Bermuda (1) (Leonard 2002: 176).

What is Pax Americana?

E. Louw describes the Pax Americana as a key phenomenon of the post Cold War world. It is an informal American empire whose tenets lie in the global capitalist trading system which, in the aftermath of the Cold War at the end of the 20th century reached across the globe (Louw 2010: 1). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US became the only nation with global hegemonic reach and soft power ("being attractive to others") is a major contributor to America's global hegemonic capacities (Ibid.: chap. 10). Louw observes that, while in early 1990's, Joseph Nye dealt only with the role of soft power in achieving the US economic and political goals, "it did not take long for others to realize that if soft power was valuable for the USA, then maybe "attractiveness" was a resource that other nations could also seek to build. This resulted in a number of governments pouring resources into their public diplomacy machinery with a view to building soft power... It also resulted in the emergence of an industry of (non-governmental) nation branding marketing-consultants who now hire themselves out to governments across the globe as experts in the arts of building attractiveness (Louw 2013: 141). Then, since liberal capitalism became a global hegemon after the fall of the Soviet Union, a vast majority of contemporary states have no other option but to compete for access to capital, by becoming attractive to investors, bankers, tourists, students etc (Ibid.). Finally, since the core feature of the Pax Americana is a multilateral system of global governance, "participation in this system requires all states to seek partners and allies to promote their objectives in the plethora of multilateral organizations. This alliance-building work requires the construction of positive nation brands and attractiveness..." (Ibid.). Bearing this in mind, the positioning of the former communist bloc states, including Serbia, in the system of the Pax Americana, or their direct attractiveness to the United States of America, becomes particularly important for their economic prosperity.

The advocates of nation branding assert that, not only does it contribute to attracting investors, bankers, tourists, students etc., i.e. to the economic prosperity of a country, but also to its political stability. The idea that a small-sized, relatively unknown country committed to nation branding, or country with no economic, military or political clout, should be governed by the marketing principles, is expounded by S. Anholt. He states that: „If the world's governments placed even half

the value that most wise corporations have earned to place on their good names, the world would be a safer and quieter place than it is today“ (Anholt 2008). This is particularly marked in countries like Serbia, with its recent war past. In these cases, the promoters of nation branding view it as an alternative to political violence. Zala Volcic and M. Andrejevic echo van Hum’s expectation that “economic competition might replace political violence”⁶ as well as S. Anholt’s who takes a step further and „outlines the advantages of an allegedly ‘post-political’ marketplace of nations”⁷, concluding that the message sent by branding is essentially that the historical forms of national identification and therefore also cultural identification in broader terms are anachronistic threats to contemporary economic interest. In other words, “the market can dissolve archaic forms of collective cultural conflict by disaggregating collectives into self-interested individuals and reassembling them into branded communities.” (Ibid.) This reassembling into branded communities, or nation branding, works as a well-known marketing trick, to accommodate the human need to unite and assemble, but also the need of a socialized individual to receive incentive and command. It is how they will respond to the demand of their government for support, as it stokes up patriotism internally so that it could, through the selective use of national identity elements, appeal to the key actors in the global marketplace, seek to attract investments and achieve the paramount value – prosperity, their ultimate objective. Therefore, a bare domestic promotion of the national and its special „packaging“ to target consumers abroad serves the government’s promised fulfillment of the „shared“, „national interest“ – a better life of every individual. This is what recent literature on globalisation terms as commercial nationalism, a phenomenon that evidently contributes to the preservation of existing forms of economic and political preponderance in international relations.

6 „The brand state’s use of its history, geography, and ethnic motifs to construct its own distinct image is a benign campaign that lacks the deep-rooted and often antagonistic sense of national identity and uniqueness that can accompany nationalism. By marginalizing nationalist chauvinism, the brand state is contributing greatly to the further pacification of Europe (Volcic and Andrejevic 2011: 606).

7 The market-based view of the world, on which the theory of place branding is largely predicated, is an inherently peaceful and humanistic model for the relationships between nations. It is based on competition, consumer choice and consumer power; and these concepts are intimately linked to the freedom and power of the individual. For this reason, it seems far more likely to result in lasting world peace than a statecraft based on territory, economic power, ideologies, politics or religion. (Anholt 2006: 2).

Serbia and Pax Americana: Serbia Accepted the Rules of the Game

Serbia's activities in promoting the country abroad are a good indicator of the above. Mired in civil war and economic troubles of the 1990's and reputed as a country that insisted on retrograde values of the crumbled communist bloc, Serbia was unacceptable for membership in the Pax Americana. It simply did not meet the set criteria. Although the US and some European countries' national interests played an important and probably decisive role in this, the negative image of Serbia cannot be attributed only to them. Already in the early 1990's, factors contributing to the shaping of the negative image of Serbia abroad were identified. Z. Slavujević claims that Serbia was searching for its identity at the time. Its powerful identification with Yugoslavia was the reason why it paid virtually no attention to its own identity on which it could build a global image. In the context of deep changes within Yugoslavia and the countries of the communist bloc, Croatia and Slovenia were building their own anti-communist, anti-totalitarian, anti-Yugoslav identity and image, the image of victims and vulnerable nations in a centralist and undemocratic system. At the same time, Serbia kept insisting on being the "motherland", the "legitimate successor of the federation" and so it absorbed elements of identity and image derived from the negative traits of the federation – communism, totalitarianism and centralism... (Slavujević 1992: 83-84). In addition to this, the negative image of Serbia was exacerbated by the absence of a wide consensus on fundamental issues as a basis of its identity. Hence, while in developed Western states, political consensus was usually broader in the sphere of foreign than of domestic policy, Serbian regime and opposition were each pursuing a „double-track diplomacy“. Finally, the institutional underdevelopment of the system for the promotion of Serbia abroad and the lack of any theoretical and empirical research in this area were also remarkable („Srbija u medijskom ratu“: 81-82).

Today, fifteen years from internal political changes and from the point when it embraced the rules of the Pax Americana, Serbia ranks among a large number of countries which, from the global perspective, do not wield economic, political, military, or even soft power.⁸ However, all governments of Serbia since 2000 have pledged, at least in principle, their commitment to work on improving the country's soft

8 For further reading on how big Serbia's soft power is, its bearing points and tendencies that may lead to its future rise or decline see Kosović 2013: 295 – 322.

power score in order to achieve the common good – economic prosperity. The ultimate good, or medium chosen for its achievement, has remained the same – membership in the European Union. It seems that such developments, the substantial shift in values or the nature of the promotion of patriotism in internal politics, in preparation for the “external” branding of new members in the Pax Americana club, are clearly resonated in election campaigns conducted in Serbia since the break-up of Yugoslavia.

In the beginning, the pursuit of economic progress was contingent on resolving “the nation’s existential issues” – first on preserving the state unions that Serbia was a member of and whose parts were populated by Serbs and then by preserving its own territorial integrity. From 1992 onwards, national and state interest yielded a context for all other issues on the agenda of that and the following year’s election campaign, not only political in the narrow sense (such as the development of democracy, state organization, rule of law etc.), but also economic and social issues. The unsuccessful promulgation of the ruling party’s conviction that the resolution of the Serbian state and national question was impending (and the rallying of several opposition parties around this and several other issues) in a relatively short timeframe, in mid-1990’s, initiated a trend of an apparent decline in the importance of this key issue on the election campaign agendas. Ever since, resolving people’s concrete needs has been the acknowledged top national interest and its fulfillment a pledge for securing a better life, as the ultimate objective. Preservation of the state’s territorial integrity still features on election campaign agenda, but only as a secondary issue. Thus, in the 2012 and 2014 parliamentary election campaigns, key issues were those of economic recovery, standard of living improvement, or unemployment reduction and salary and pension increase. Participants in these campaign addressed themselves to the so-called rational voter, by providing him with incentives to vote for those who offered the most favourable answers to the problems he faced. In the 2012 campaign, great, emotionally charged national issues were not opened, at least not until the second round of the presidential elections. Hence, Kosovo remained the „forgotten“ topic. Serbia’s European integration was not a highest priority issue either for citizens or political party representatives. However, the difference in approach to this topic and the Kosovo issue in the election campaign was that the stance on EU created a backdrop for all other issues, as their pretext or a genuine precondition

for overcoming deep economic, financial, social, institutional, political but also moral crises. Therefore, the pursuit of the national interest is contingent on an modern and economically strong Serbia within the EU – a common theme underlying all other issues.

Isn't a government that wins elections on the basis of these values prepared for nation branding in a manner described above? Indeed. Post-2000 Serbia governments would argue that there was no other option anyway. Opponents of such positioning of Serbia on the international stage see the alternative in economic and political orientation towards Russia and China. However, they are not represented in the Serbian parliament today. But, important international developments, such as the crisis in Ukraine or the question of Serbia-NATO relations, demonstrate that their position is not so weak, at least not as it may transpire from the composition of the Serbian parliament. In short, Serbia, as during the 1990's, is still facing the lack of a national consensus on fundamental issues as the overall framework for positive image-building. This is mirrored by public opinion polls showing that Russia enjoys an overwhelming popularity in Serbia compared to the EU. Still, Serbian citizens do aspire to the Western living standard and do not perceive Russia as an economic power figure with a lifestyle that could feature as an asset for them. For this reason, the overall positive image of Russia does not seem sufficient for Serbia, both as a society or as individuals, to „steer“ towards it (Атлагич 2014: 165). The market-based view of the world with the „free“, or financially powerful individual as portrayed by S. Anholt, is evidently a „recipe“ that works. This is definitely confirmed also in the case of Serbia. Whether there are any other worldviews that could seriously challenge the present one or whether the change of the world hegemon at some point is the only conceivable scenario is the question that remains to be answered in the time ahead.

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