

The Great Branding of Nations

One thing¹

The bag is nice. Yes, it is. The font is nice, the photos are nice. The stones are groovy. The fact that we, in Estonia have 120 giant boulders instead of 60 – even more good stuff.

Another thing

The idea about nation branding emerged in the 1990s and is usually described as a marketing practice, growing out from the practice of place branding. The branding of the nations is clearly linked to the globalization narrative of the post-Cold War era.

Put it simply, the nation branding was seen as the next step in a social progression. The nationalism invented in the 19th century culminated at the of the 20th century in the horrible wars and the fragile balance at the verge of total nuclear annihilation; the neo-liberal hegemony of the new millennia was to replace warlike nationalism with a much more civilized free-market competition.

The history had ended. All legacy-ideologies, nationalism among others, were destined to surrender to superior ideas of liberal capitalism. It was an unavoidable consequence of progress that the flags were to be replaced with logos, hymns with slogans.

¹ Current writing is dedicated to the latest attempt to find a unified brand for Estonia. In 2017, the specially summoned design team presented so-called toolkit, including a font, photo collection and graphic elements inspired by boulders, one of the most distinguishing natural objects of an Estonian landscape.

The outcome was met with heavy criticism by both public and media. One proposed souvenir bag carrying boulder-pattern was deemed to be particularly ugly, and among other things, the investigative journalism discovered that whereas the brand concept was talking about 60 giant boulders, there is actually 120 of them in Estonia.

See also: <https://brand.estonia.ee/>

The evolution was led by the United Kingdom, which in 1997, under the leadership of young and dynamic Prime Minister Tony Blair, launched the COOL BRITANNIA campaign. The nostalgic Britpop and post-feminist Spice Girls conquered the world, and the campaign was considered a success. The formula worked.

There were also critical voices who saw danger in that neoliberal marketing will turn national identities into an intellectual property.² They argued that branding, which, as it were, should emphasize the novel characteristics of each state and nation, actually erases the distinctions: as all cultural texts were to translated into the language of marketing, all values converted into market value and all relations into a trade. Well, but this was exactly the point. The whole world was supposed to become the first world: neoliberal welfare society, based on shared values. *It's the economy, stupid.*

It is well-known in marketing, that the main target group for branded products is an internally insecure customer, desiring to improve one's status. In the 1990s, a number of nations emerged from central and eastern Europe: newly-liberated, hungry and confused, eager to integrate into the first world as quickly as possible. It was the true Eldorado for the nation branding which attracted both experts and charlatans.

As the first post-socialist state, the Republic of Estonia decided to let itself to be branded, Rest, of course, followed - yes, even Belarus - but Estonia was the first, and therefore its branding remains significant.³

At the beginning of the new millennia, the newly established Enterprise Estonia foundation (EAS), in cooperation with the British agency Interbrand, belonging to the United States based Omnicom Group, began to develop the brand for Estonia.

² See for example: Van Ham, Peter: *Branding Territory: Inside the Wonderful Worlds of PR and IR Theory*, SAGE, 2002

³ Estonia's brand WELCOME TO ESTONIA may not have grown into a wide recognition, but the branding as a fact in itself turned out to be remarkable- in the academic literature, Estonia's 2002 imago campaign is one of the most-referred examples of nation branding.

It was a good deal: Interbrand was an agency with reputation, and even better, it agreed to work for the rather modest prize. You see, for Interbrand, Estonia was a pilot project, a ground for testing and demonstrating one's abilities, a portfolio job in order to get a foot in the door of the true big business. This is how the WELCOME TO ESTONIA was born.

The *pan*-corporative thinking of the era is well illustrated by the fact that Simon Anholt, one of leading spokesman for the nation branding, proposed in 2003 that Estonia should focus on producing of hockey sticks.⁴ Something like: it is exactly the task that one small, snowy and forested production unit could handle.

WELCOME TO ESTONIA brand was launched in 2002 and already in the same year surveys showed that Estonia's worldwide recognition had remarkably grown. More and faster than expected. That was extraordinary, it was a success-story of nation branding. It proved that the formula really did work. In the following years, despite the active campaigning, Estonia's international recognition fell back into the oblivion. It is then plausible to conclude, that the reason for Estonia's temporary reputation-boost wasn't the brand-new brand but the 2001/2002 Eurovision Song Contest.⁵

Little is known that in that in 2008 EAS actually ordered the brand renewal from the British agency ASHA (founded by former Interbrand creative director). As a result, an international expert group completed a large, comprehensive manual.⁶ Creative director Marksteen Adamson optimistically told that it is just the beginning, as the manual will provide tools for enterprises and institutions to bring Estonia's international recognition to the next level. Estonia's new slogan was LET'S DO IT. The rest is history – *we didn't*. Instead, the financial crisis came and did. Still does.

⁴ Anholt, Simon: *Brand New Justice: How branding places and products can help the developing world*, Elsevier, 2003, p 79

⁵ Estonia won the Eurovision Song Contest in 2001 and hosted the event in 2002.

⁶ As any living language, the marketing language changes in time. Before there were toolkits, there were manuals.

We arrive now at the main argument of nation branding: the economic argument. There is a tiny problem with that, as it doesn't exist. No one really knows if the nation branding really has any economic effect. The international reputation, recognition, and position in different areas can be mapped,⁷ but it is virtually impossible to distinguish to what extent those positions are affected by national image-building campaigns, less to measure the economic return.

The alleged success-stories of nation branding have not been confirmed by independent experts,⁸ which is actually quite predictable, as the expected profit is so indirect, it becomes unprovable, and also – undisprovable.

It means that nation branding is ideologic rather than economic practice. Since the economic profitability of nation branding is neither verifiable nor falsifiable, the practice becomes to be a question about the faith.⁹

With a strong faith, one can move the mountains.

In 2014, the Republic of Poland presented its new brand, POLSKA: SPRING INTO (altogether with the whole toolkit of fonts, images, graphic elements), created in cooperation with leading British branding expert Wally Olins.¹⁰ The massive campaign followed, introducing Poland and Poles on the best billboards in the city of London. Today, the SPRING INTO Facebook website has already almost 8,000 likes, and in London the Poles are used to scare both children and grown-ups.

⁷ See for example <https://goodcountry.org/index/overall-rankings>

⁸ See for example: Sussman, Gerald: *Systemic Propaganda and State Branding in Post-Soviet Eastern Europe*, Routledge 2012; Jansen, Sue C.: *Designer-Nations: Neo-Liberal nation branding – Brand Estonia*, Routledge 2008

⁹ For example, during the #brandestonia launch, the chart was presented, showing that 50% of Estonian entrepreneurs believe that their businesses would benefit if Estonia had an official brand. It is not so important whether the glass was half full - as it was argued in the presentation - or half-empty, important is that the argument was built on *belief*.

¹⁰ Those who enjoy cultural masochism can watch how Mr. Olins educates a Polish journalist: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_F3FkoEWa0w

The British themselves didn't do better. 20 years after COOL BRITANNIA, the most recognised keyword associated with the UK is the *Brexit* - and it really doesn't matter in which font it is written.

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Should we conclude that the nation branding failed to produce any real effect? No, we shouldn't. It had a remarkable impact, but this impact was not what was expected or perhaps even wanted.

As it has been said above, the fundamental ideology behind the nation branding is a liberal globalization supported by consensus, which based on a popular promise of economic welfare. The economic growth was a vehicle for political liberalism because they seemed like one thing. This perception has been mercilessly slashed by the global economic crisis, looming through the past decade, making the millions of voters to ask about the promised prosper.

The rising populism in the western world, all those Trumps, Farages, and Le Pens, they do not build their arguments around nationality or race – no, nowadays populists talk about the economy. They promise to protect the local labor market, they agitate trade war against all these others who supposedly enrich themselves at expense of us, they are eager to abandon international cooperation in order to make a "great deal". The social identity, built on the economic promises – and nation branding did exactly that – has now opened the door for the politics which, through the same economic rhetoric, justifies isolationism and xenophobia.

When you build the toolkits, you never know who will end up using them.