# THE BRANDED NATIONAL IMAGINATION AND ITS LIMITS: INSIGHTS FROM THE POST-SOCIALIST EXPERIENCE[1)]

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## Abstract

This article traces the limits of branding as a tool for (re)constructing nations as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). Drawing on examples from post-socialist Eastern Europe, I analyse discourses and practices of nation branding from a critical perspective, rooted in the theoretical traditions of political economy and cultural studies. Focusing more closely on branding campaigns implemented by post-Soviet Ukraine and post-war Kosovo — two nations seeking to assert themselves as independent actors on the global stage — I consider the impact of nation branding on national identities and democratic governance. I identify three interconnected limits of the branded national imagination as a structuring discourse for nation building. First, the branded national imagination is structured through its subjection to a foreign gaze; second, it is heavily dependent on commercial transnational media; and third, it produces branded national subjectivities that contradict the lived experiences of national populations. I argue that while nation branding effectively depoliticises national (re)definition, it may in fact serve to reinvigorate ethnic nationalisms in the post-socialist region. Finally, I suggest that although we must be aware of local histories and legacies, the post-socialist experience can inform our understanding of the structuring limits of the branded national imagination in other post-conflict and post-colonial contexts as well.

# 1.  Introduction

Since the late 1990s, a set of ideas and practices popularly known as 'nation branding' gained significant attention in business, policy, and academic circles. Countries around the world began investing in various branding programs in the hopes of gaining a competitive advantage within a global marketplace. At the same time, nation branding was also touted as a tool for nation building; as brand consultant Simon Anholt claimed, "a proper national branding campaign can unite a nation in a common sense of purpose and national pride" (Anholt 2003: 139).[2] In this article, I aim to problematise particularly the nation-building promises of nation branders. Adopting a critical theoretical perspective, I trace several important limits of branding as a tool for (re)constructing nations as branded 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). In short, I set out to offer some answers to the following question: If nation branding claims to offer a new way of imagining the community of the nation, what are the particular characteristics of this process and of the branded imaginings that result from it?

In presenting my argument, I draw on examples from post-socialist Eastern Europe — a region that has undergone dramatic economic, political, and cultural transformations since the disintegration of the Soviet bloc in the 1990s. Ultimately, I argue that in the post-socialist context, nation branding has served to depoliticise efforts at national redefinition because it subordinated the articulation of national identities to market-oriented and outward-directed concerns. In other words, nation-branding programs were routinely designed to satisfy the expectations of a foreign 'gaze' (Urry 2002) associated with the needs and desires of tourists, investors, lenders, and foreign aid organisations. As I will illustrate, in some cases government-backed branding programs gave fuel to a nationalist backlash that has put into question the prospects of European integration and democratisation in the region. Importantly, although my examples are drawn from the post-socialist context, I suggest that they offer relevant insights for understanding the limitations of branded national imaginations in other post-conflict and post-colonial nations, including those on the African continent.

The rest of this article is organised in four sections. First, I discuss briefly the historical origins of nation branding and relate it to the rise of branding as a management discourse and a set of ideas about governance. Second, I offer a few theoretical coordinates that situate

my perspective within the current scholarly literature on nation branding. Third, I explore the limits of a branded national imagination as a mechanism for constructing and maintaining the nation. I draw primarily on examples of nation-branding activities conducted on behalf of post-Soviet Ukraine and post-war Kosovo — two nations that have claimed independent statehood relatively recently. I look specifically at programmes that were explicitly supported by national governments and were also tied to efforts at national (re)definition that spoke to domestic anxieties over national identity. In my analysis of these programmes, I identify and discuss three particular trends that limit the branded national imagination. I conclude by offering some directions for further critical research on this topic.[3]

## 2.    The origins of nation branding

Once confined to the realm of commercial goods and services, brands have infiltrated nearly every corner of contemporary capitalist societies and cultures. Political parties, universities, religious institutions, museums, artists, charities, and indeed entire nations have become accustomed to regular branding and re-branding exercises. This was not always the case. As sociologist Liz Moor documents in her book, *The Rise of Brands*, while brands had been around as markers of ownership for a long time, it was not until the 1990s that "a previously diffuse set of practices — product design, retail design, point-of-purchase marketing, among others — became consolidated into an integrated approach to marketing and business strategy known as *branding*" (2007: 3, emphasis added). During the same period, agencies that specialised in brand consulting began to emerge and brand management positions were established in various organisations. Moor notes that the mainstreaming of branding depended, in part, on consultants' ability to develop a new "conceptual vocabulary to describe the evolution of their own ideas and practice" (Moor 2007: 5). In that sense, branding was not merely a collection of particular marketing techniques and promotional tactics. Rather, it emerged as an instrumental process of rationalisation and management; its practitioners constructed abstract "generic models" that served as prescriptions for "the best way to run a business" (Moor 2007: 5).

As we consider the transposition of branding onto the nation-state, it is important to recognise these historical roots for at least two

reasons. First, as a management tool, branding was meant to provide a new form of organisational control or, put differently, a new 'technology of governance'. This approach reflected the neoliberal spirit of the new global order that emerged after the end of the Cold War and held the promise of a post-political, technocratic, and perhaps even globalisation-friendly nationalism (Van Ham 2001). That is why it is hardly surprising that, as the 21st century rolled in, branding became increasingly popular with national governments around the world. This was especially so in countries where there was a pressing need — often externally mandated by organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank — to show compliance with the principles of market economy and liberal democracy in order to receive foreign aid.[4] Post-socialist, post-colonial, and post-conflict societies were particularly well suited for inclusion in the category of nations 'in need of' (re)branding. Indeed, 'transitional' and 'developing' nations were promptly identified by brand consultancies, hailing mainly from London and New York, as potential clients for their services (Aronczyk 2013).

Secondly, entrepreneurial and charismatic brand consultants, including Wally Olins, Simon Anholt, and others, were instrumental in evangelising the ideas of nation branding as they sought to expand this field of practice and to gain new clients. Not only did they offer their services to national governments around the globe, but they also produced some of the early, programmatic texts on nation branding. In one of these texts, Olins (2002) argued with characteristic aplomb that nations had always been brands. To illustrate his point, he used the political history of France — transforming from kingdom, to republic, to empire — and equated the parallel changes in French national narratives and symbols with 'rebranding'. He ridiculed those who opposed the use of the vocabulary of branding in relation to national reinvention and attributed their reticence to "snobbery, ignorance, and semantics" (Olins 2002: 246). Olins held a degree in History from Oxford and could certainly toss around historical trivia with ease. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that his livelihood as a brand consultant to governments depended on his ability to sell his ideas to political bureaucrats and to national elites in the countries he advised.[5] In short, the early literature on nation branding was hardly scientific and was intended to support the efforts of branding practitioners to drum up new business for their companies (Aronczyk 2013; Jansen 2008; Kaneva 2011a).

These efforts appear to have paid off handsomely. Olins had pre-

dicted that, within the first decade of the 21st century, nation branding would become a "normal national practice" (Olins 2002: 248). Indeed, many countries have engaged in branding exercises that extend far beyond run-of-the-mill tourism- and export-promotion campaigns (see, for example, Aronczyk 2013; Hülsse 2009; Kaneva 2011a; Pamment 2015; Wählisch & Xharra 2010; Valaskivi 2016; Volcic & Andrejevic 2015). In some cases, the language of branding has been eschewed by governments in favour of more established and politically palatable terms such as 'public diplomacy' (Fullerton & Kendrick 2006; Leonard 2002). In other cases, governments have embraced the vocabulary and the managerial logic of branding and have institutionalised them by setting up organisations whose very names broadcast this stance. One such example is the government-funded agency Brand South Africa, which was originally established in 2002 as the International Marketing Council of South Africa — a Chief Executive Office (CEO) appointed by the President of the Republic of South Africa heads Brand South Africa. The organisation frames its goals explicitly through the language of branding. As one can read on its website, Brand South Africa was created "to help create a positive and compelling brand image for South Africa" and its "main objective is the marketing of South Africa" (Brand South Africa, undated). Many other nations have established their own nation-branding bodies, but Brand South Africa is one of the earliest and longest-running institutions of its kind in the world.[6]

What does this mean for scholars today who are interested in the applications and implications of nation branding for nations? One key point I want to reiterate is that the entire literature on nation branding, including its critical strands, has evolved 'in response to' the original claims of brand practitioners, expressed in their writings, speeches, and numerous public presentations. These claims were often metaphorical, overly enthusiastic, and frequently designed to bring in new business. Nevertheless, they were successful in establishing a dominant narrative about the power of branding as a neutral tool that governments can use to advance national goals and that narrative is still appealing to governing elites today. In later years, some brand consultants have sought to retract or augment a few of their earlier claims. For example, Simon Anholt who takes credit for coining the term 'nation brand' has written subsequently about the flawed nature of the concept, noting that nation branding may in fact be "a myth, and perhaps a dangerous one" (Anholt 2010: 1). Nevertheless, there is no evidence that interest in nation

branding is fading. In fact, its appropriations and interpretations continue to multiply. The sheer range of promotional and communication-based initiatives that are undertaken in the name of the nation by state and non-state actors makes them difficult to classify as 'genuine' branding or as some other form of national advocacy, promotion, or propaganda. Indeed, the politics of labelling certain practices, programmes, or institutions as 'proper' nation branding may constitute a topic worthy of scholarly investigation in its own right. To be clear, this is not the focus of this article. Yet, it is a point worth making because it highlights the highly contested boundaries of nation branding as a field of practice and of scholarly inquiry.

# 3.    Theoretical coordinates

In an article titled, "Nation branding: Toward an agenda for critical research" (Kaneva 2011b), I attempted to map out the fault lines within the literature on nation branding, offering one of the first interdisciplinary reviews of research on this topic. I had two main goals in this mapping exercise. First, I wanted to demonstrate the extent to which knowledge production on nation branding was dominated by marketing academics and branding practitioners. I hoped that by illustrating this I might provoke interest among scholars in other disciplinary traditions, including political science and international relations, media and communication, as well as the humanities. I believed then, as I do now, that multi-disciplinary perspectives could lead to more nuanced and comprehensive understandings of nation branding as a set of practices and ideas.
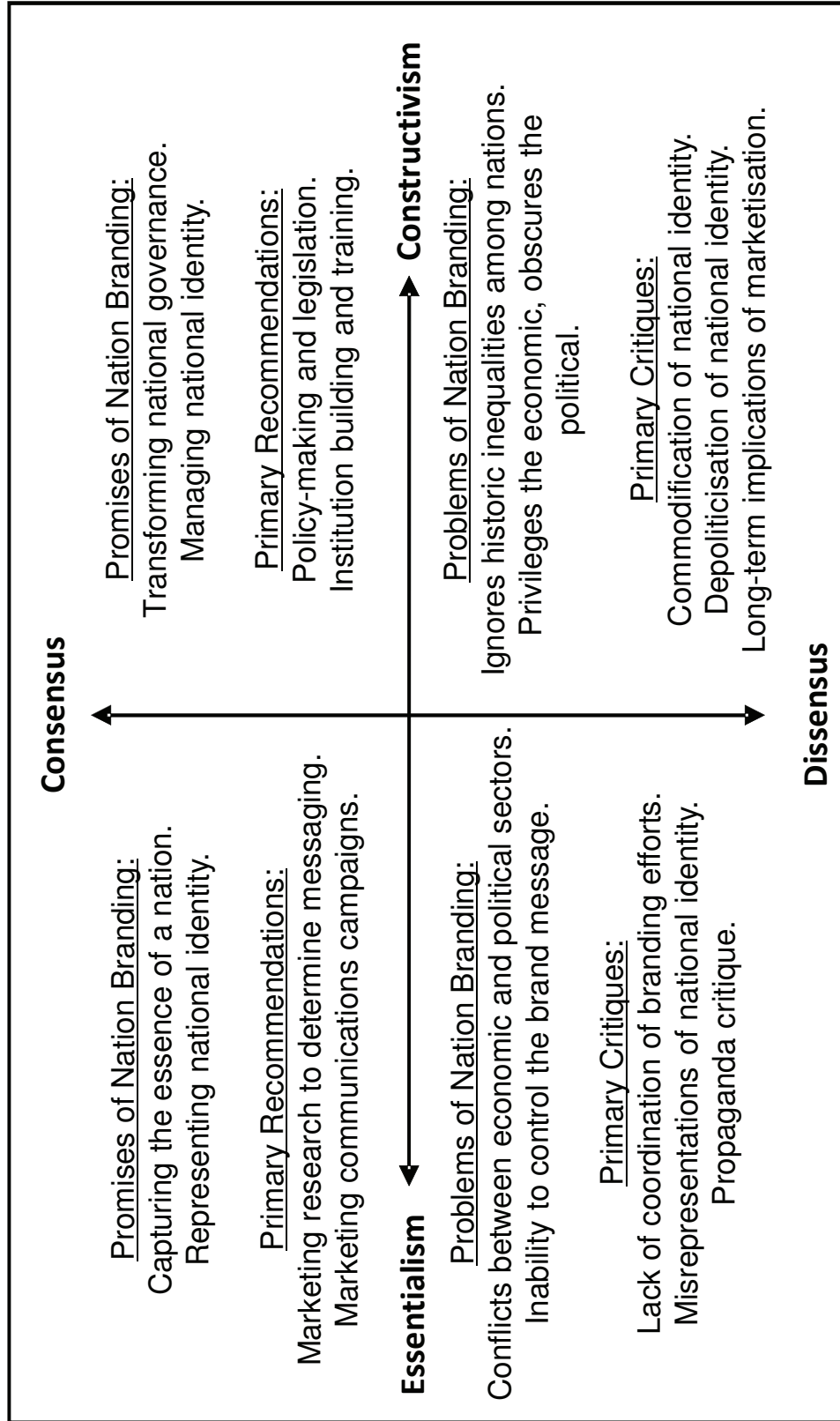
My second goal was to open up a space for critical and historically situated analyses of nation branding that might bring to bear concepts from social theory in order to move beyond descriptions of the applications of branding and toward explaining its political and cultural 'implications'. It seemed to me that to talk about (re)shaping national identities in a purely pragmatic, instrumentalist way — as marketing experts tend to do — obscured social relations of power and domination that operated within and among nations. I wanted to make these power relations visible so that they could be examined and contested. Drawing on constructivist theories of nationalism and national identity, my premise was that nation branding was never a politically neutral exercise because the (re)definition of national identities and cultures in history had often been accomplished at the expense of real or imagin-

ary 'others'. Furthermore, policing the boundaries of national identities involved various forms of symbolic and physical violence that sought to maintain social control. In short, I was interested in articulating a new perspective on nation branding — one that was not beholden to the instrumentalism of marketing and the self-serving logic of brand consultants.

I proposed a conceptual map of nation branding research, which consisted of four quadrants marked by two dimensions that reflected the key ontological assumptions of researchers (see *Figure 1*). Because the rhetoric of nation branding promised to merge ideas about the workings of 'markets' with ideas about the making of 'nations', I used those two concepts as the guiding dimensions of my map. The vertical vector of the map plotted research on a continuum of 'consensus/dissensus' where consensus-oriented studies viewed markets as natural and politically neutral, while dissensus-oriented studies saw markets as social constructions which were not immune to political processes and pressures. The horizontal dimension of the map was labelled 'essentialism/constructivism' and it reflected the assumptions of researchers regarding national identities. Essentialist-oriented approaches saw national identities as more or less fixed, while constructivist-oriented approaches assumed that national identities were perpetually constructed and contested. Studies within each quadrant on the map envisioned different possibilities and challenges for nation branding. Overall, the studies in the 'consensus' top half of the map viewed nation branding as necessary for contemporary nations that were said to exist in conditions of market globalisation. By contrast, studies in the 'dissensus' bottom half of the map were more interested in critiquing the practices and ideas associated with nation branding and questioning the consequences of marketisation more broadly (Kaneva 2011b: 129-130).

I situate my own research in the dissensus/constructivism quadrant of this conceptual map — a position that aligns my approach with critical theoretical perspectives. I view nation branding as a field of practice and an ideological discourse for re-imagining the nation. I am particularly interested in the ways in which business and political elites employ the language and practices of branding in their struggles to gain and maintain legitimacy. My approach towards marketisation is influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (2003; 2005) who understands markets as social constructions. Furthermore, my conceptualisation of nationhood is rooted in the constructivist tradition exemplified by the

**Figure 1: A conceptual map of nation-branding research**

**Consensus**

Promises of Nation Branding:
Transforming national governance.
Managing national identity.

Primary Recommendations:
Policy-making and legislation.
Institution building and training.

**Constructivism**

Problems of Nation Branding:
Ignores historic inequalities among nations.
Privileges the economic, obscures the political.

Primary Critiques:
Commodification of national identity.
Depoliticisation of national identity.
Long-term implications of marketisation.

**Dissensus**

Promises of Nation Branding:
Capturing the essence of a nation.
Representing national identity.

Primary Recommendations:
Marketing research to determine messaging.
Marketing communications campaigns.

**Essentialism**

Problems of Nation Branding:
Conflicts between economic and political sectors.
Inability to control the brand message.

Primary Critiques:
Lack of coordination of branding efforts.
Misrepresentations of national identity.
Propaganda critique.

(Source: Kaneva 2011b)

work of Benedict Anderson (1983). Anderson's famous description of nations as 'imagined communities' provides a specific point of departure for my analysis in this article. In introducing this concept, he points out that, "communities are to be distinguished ... by the style in which they are imagined" (1983: 6). Following Anderson, then, I explore the ways in which the discourse and practices of branding impose particular limits on the manner in which nations imagine themselves.

# 4.    The limits of the branded national imagination

I now turn my attention to the analysis of several examples from former socialist countries in Eastern Europe. I use these examples to outline three specific limits of the branded national imagination. First, I discuss how nation-branding campaigns are limited by concerns about outside observers' perceptions of the nation. Put differently, a central goal of nation branding is to respond to and satisfy a foreign 'gaze'. Second, by and large, nation-branding efforts rely on a network of global commercial media to disseminate their messages. In light of this, I illustrate how the political economy of global commercial media constrains the production and circulation of branded messages. Third, I argue that nation-branding campaigns produce narratives about the nation that are significantly at odds with the lived experiences of national populations and this leads to troubling and divisive social consequences. While the examples in this section are derived from the post-socialist context, similar trends can be observed across national contexts. Therefore, the three limits I present here can be used to conduct comparative analyses of nation-branding programs in other parts of the world as well. At the same time, these trends do not represent a comprehensive list of limits of the branded national imagination; rather, I offer them only as a starting point for a critical assessment of the way branded nationhood is being constructed.

## 4.1   Satisfying the foreign 'gaze'

In his book *The Tourist Gaze*, originally published in 1990, British sociologist John Urry points out that global tourists choose places as the focus of their attention "because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures" (2002: 3).

Urry's observation is a reminder that the tourist gaze constructs places in ways that aim to satisfy its own desire. In the contemporary context, this desire finds shape primarily through a consumerist sensibility and its anticipations are fuelled by signs circulated through globalised media networks. Although the term 'nation branding' was not widely used when Urry's book was first published, the practices of place branding can be understood as deliberate efforts to anticipate and satisfy the desires and fantasies of the tourist gaze. Indeed, place-branding initiatives are routinely justified as necessary because of their alleged potential to attract foreign tourists, talent, or investment (Anholt 2007; Govers & Go 2009). The preoccupation of nation branders with anticipating the desires of the foreign gaze and producing just the right images that respond to and satisfy these desires results in particular kinds of narratives about the nation. These narratives routinely employ generic conventions and formulas that extoll pristine nature, heritage sites, luxurious accommodations, youth and romance, regardless of the destination being promoted.

A typical example of this mode of imagining the nation is presented by a 30-second video commercial for Ukraine, which aired on CNN in 2011. The commercial was part of a campaign developed by Ukrainian strategic communications company, CFC Consulting, and was aimed at polishing up the country's international image in anticipation of the 2012 European Football Championship hosted jointly by Poland and Ukraine. At the same time, the domestic rhetoric around the campaign was very much linked to Ukraine's desire for a renewed sense of national unity. In a 2006 article, published by a Ukrainian business magazine, one CFC consultant argued that a concerted nation-branding effort would "not only contribute to establishing an international image for Ukraine, but will also work on establishing a national identity in Ukraine, a sense of a general purpose and national pride" (cited in Bolin & Ståhlberg 2015: 3072). Thus, the commercial video I discuss here — which was one of several associated with this campaign — was clearly addressed to both foreign and domestic audiences.

The commercial video strings together a rapid succession of images associated with luxury and leisure. The first scene shows a couple checking in at an upscale hotel; cut to a man hiking in the mountains; cut to a fashion model walking down a runway; cut to a romantic dinner for two at a stylish restaurant; cut to a group of friends walking on a beach; cut to images of dancing at a club; cut to scenes from a folk concert with

young women dressed in traditional Ukrainian garb. Throughout the fast-paced sequence, the focus remains on the viewer's desires and fantasies, which are verbalised through a voiceover that accompanies each brief scene with phrases such as: 'welcoming you', 'uplifting you', 'stylish you', 'friendly you', 'natural you', 'traditional you', 'entertaining you', 'inspired you'. In this commercial the experience of visiting Ukraine is not really about getting to know Ukraine. Rather, it is about the opportunity for 'you', the visitor, to express and satisfy your own desires and dreams of opulence. To reinforce this idea, the video ends with the tagline "Ukraine, all about U!" This tagline relies on a double entendre, where the letter 'U' is a signifier for Ukraine as well as a reference to the shortcut spelling of the word 'YOU' — in this case you, the viewer and potential visitor to Ukraine (cf Ståhlberg & Bolin 2016).[7]

This generic form of imagining the nation in branding campaigns — especially in tourism campaigns — is commonly used. A body of research by critical media and communication scholars offers ample examples of the ways in which nation-branding campaigns are driven by concerns about the perceptions of a given nation by external audiences (for example, Aronczyk 2013; Kaneva & Popescu 2011 and 2014; Ståhlberg & Bolin 2016). Nation-branding programs routinely begin with research exercises that aim to capture the existing perceptions of a particular nation among key stakeholders, be they tourists or investors. The second phase of campaigns entails the articulation and implementation of a messaging strategy that aims to address outsiders' perceptions in ways that reinforce or challenge them (Aronczyk 2013). As Delia Popescu and I have written elsewhere, this approach produces a type of narrative that "constrains national identity within an ahistorical, decontextualized, depoliticized frame" whereby a nation's cultural markers are "reduced to 'assets' that may appeal to Western consumers — wine, nature, beaches, etc" (Kaneva & Popescu 2011: 201). This kind of imagining the nation, which can be thought of as a form of "national identity *lite*" (Kaneva & Popescu 2011: 201), is motivated predominantly by outward-directed concerns and it has little to do with the daily realities of life as a citizen of a given nation. In short, generic commercial formulas, which aim to satisfy the consumerist desires of Western travellers, limit the types of stories of and about the nation that can be imagined and put forth as part of a nation-branding campaign.

Although tourism campaigns offer the most obvious and, perhaps, most familiar illustrations of this limiting effect of nation branding,

similar patterns can be observed in campaigns that are designed to attract foreign investment, aid, or to generate international goodwill (for example, Browning 2016; Volcic & Andrejevic 2011; Kaneva & Popescu 2014). The particular conventions of messaging in those types of campaigns may be different — rather than nature, heritage, and leisure, investment campaigns tout such 'assets' as cheap and plentiful labour, low taxation rates, ease of doing business, and other incentives for capital. In this case, the foreign gaze belongs to the global businessperson or corporate leader whose needs and desires are paramount. Nevertheless, the outward-directed focus of such efforts also limits the scope of the narratives of and about the nation, obscuring material realities, such as poverty or inequality, which are disguised by macroeconomic indicators (Kaneva 2015).

## 4.2   The political economy of global commercial media

A second important limitation of the branded national imagination stems from its reliance on commercial media networks to circulate campaign messages. Much of the literature on nation branding to date has treated the media as neutral carriers of nations' brand messages. Critics of nation branding point to enterprising brand consultants as the chief beneficiaries of branding exercises because they collect sizeable fees for their services and, in the process, syphon off scarce public funds (Aronczyk 2013; Jansen 2008 and 2011). While the role of consultants is certainly important, the profit motives of media corporations, who also generate significant revenues from nation-branding campaigns, should not be overlooked. More recently, scholars have begun to address this gap in the critical literature, documenting the self-interested actions of media corporations as participants in, and in some cases initiators of, nation-branding exercises (Bolin & Ståhlberg 2015; Kaneva 2015).[8]

Ukraine's 2011 campaign, which was introduced in the previous section, offers an apt illustration of these dynamics. Bolin and Ståhlberg (2015) describe the negotiations that led to the production of a series of promotional videos as part of the "All about U!" campaign. As these authors document, the campaign resulted from collaboration between the Ukrainian brand consultancy CFC and the CNN network, which produced the commercial spots that it later aired on its channels. Bolin and Ståhlberg also discuss the subsequent involvement of the BBC

whose sales team, after seeing the CNN commercials, approached CFC with a proposal to produce a similar campaign for Ukraine. To sweeten the offer, "the BBC offered to broadcast its commercials [of Ukraine] during a period when BBC News had a special focus on Ukraine, with about 80 hours of programming on the country" (2015: 3075). Ultimately, this resulted in four additional promotional videos for Ukraine, produced and aired by the BBC. As Bolin and Ståhlberg explain, "this is a common strategy of the broadcaster, and one that gives it a competitive advantage" (Bolin & Ståhlberg 2015: 3075) as it seeks to capture the advertising dollars of nations eager to attract positive attention.[9]

This example clearly illustrates the aggressive tactics used by global media corporations whose focus is firmly on their own bottom line. The BBC and CNN are not the only media organisations that engage in such activities. In fact, nation-branding campaigns frequently rely on a handful of transnational media outlets, which can deliver the elite audience of business and political leaders, and affluent Western travellers. Publications, such as *The Economist*, *The Financial Times*, *The New York Times*, and news networks, such as CNN, BBC, Bloomberg, and Euronews, are among the key beneficiaries of promotional spending by nations. Their advertising departments routinely approach and court government officials, offering to produce special advertising features for their countries. In that regard, transnational commercial media are not mere channels of dissemination for branded messages, but direct beneficiaries from nation-branding campaigns. Ironically, when countries like Ukraine appear in the news coverage produced by the same media organisations, the focus of news coverage tends to be on crisis and conflict. In other words, negative news coverage contributes to the very unfavourable perceptions that nation-branding campaigns are supposed to contest.

There is another dimension of the political economy of transnational media, which further curbs the branded national imagination. Namely, most branded messages appear in the media as paid placements and, therefore, a nation's ability to share its branded vision is limited by its spending power. Larger and more affluent countries can, and often do, outspend smaller and poorer ones when they seek to project their brand messages via transnational commercial media. For instance, when Germany ran a nation-branding campaign in relation to its hosting of the 2006 FIFA World Cup, it committed approximately US$30 million to the effort (Hülsse 2009). By contrast, when South

Africa hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2010, its nation-branding budget was only US$12 million (Brand SA, personal correspondence 2016). Examples of disparities in spending power abound, illustrating that the playing field of commercial media is far from even for nations-turned-advertisers. Countries with greater financial resources have a clear advantage in being able to get their branded narratives to be heard and seen by foreign media audiences. When nations and media corporations enter into transactional relationships as part of nation-branding campaigns, the market logic of these transactions places limitations on the manner in which nations are imagined. In short, within the current system of transnational commercial media, nation branding reproduces long-standing inequalities among nations in the international system and privileges the more affluent nations (Kaneva 2015).

## 4.3   Branded subjectivities *vs* lived experience

Finally, let us consider the tensions that emerge when branded national imaginations, which take shape in response to a foreign gaze, confront the lived experiences of the national communities they purportedly represent. This relates most directly to the alleged potential of nation branding to serve as a tool of nation building. I focus on the young nation of Kosovo, which emerged after a prolonged conflict between ethnic Albanians and Serbs that culminated in a bloody war in 1999. When Kosovo declared independence in 2008, it faced three main challenges: it needed political recognition by other nation-states; it needed ethnic reconciliation among its citizens; and it needed economic development after a war that had left its infrastructure and its economy in ruins. Notably, from the very first day of its existence as an independent state, Kosovo employed nation branding to tackle these challenges and, in that regard, its nation-building and nation-branding efforts are closely intertwined.

Historian Isabel Ströhle has analysed the struggles of post-war Kosovo to re-imagine itself as a national community while also redressing negative foreign perceptions associated with violent conflict in the Balkans. She identifies two symbolic projects in post-independence Kosovo as central to these efforts: the NEWBORN monument and the 'Young Europeans' campaign (Ströhle 2012: 228). These projects, both of which originated as nation-branding exercises, provide the basis for my analysis in this section as well. Both were designed to take max-

imum advantage of global media and to appeal to the foreign gaze. At the same time, both had an explicit inward-focused agenda that sought to unite the citizens of Kosovo within a shared national narrative and create a sense of shared destiny and future (Ströhle 2012; Wählisch & Xharra 2010).

The NEWBORN monument is a typographic sculpture, located on Pristina's main square, which was originally painted in a bright yellow colour. The sculpture was unveiled during the official ceremony of Kosovo's declaration of independence on 17 February 2008. The structure's meaning was further elaborated in outdoor posters, using blue and yellow to reflect the colours of the new Kosovo national flag, which displayed the following slogans: "NEW life is BORN", "NEW hope is BORN", "NEW future is BORN" and "NEW country is BORN" (New Kosova Report 2008; Ströhle 2012). The monument was conceived only days before the ceremony by advertising agency Ogilvy Karrota, the local subsidiary of global advertising giant Ogilvy and Mather. Led by Creative Director, Fisnik Ismaili, the agency pitched its idea to Kosovo's government, which decided to fund the execution of the project. Importantly, unlike most nation-branding projects, which are designed and implemented by foreign brand consultants, NEWBORN was a home-grown idea and was rooted in the desire of young Kosovo professionals, like Ismaili and his team, to leverage the attention of international media in an effort to re-brand post-war Kosovo in a new and positive light.[10)]

In a media interview, Ismaili explains the iconography of NEW-BORN in the following way:

> NEWBORN, intentionally in English, was the single word that could describe that special day: A birth of a new country, and the connotations of this word imply only positive things (birth, innocence, sincerity, love...). We were aware that all the foreign media will be (sic.) present on the day, so we wanted to give them an image that could be understood and mark that day. […] The yellow colour was intentionally used in combination with blue banners and supporting slogans to represent both [the] new Kosovo flag's colours as well as EU colours (New Kosova Report 2008).

Ismaili's statement demonstrates that the creative concept behind NEWBORN was very much informed by a desire to produce a symbol that would be legible and understandable for English-speaking, foreign

audiences and to present this symbol in a media-friendly format. In other words, the monument was designed to deliver a mediated sign that would meet the expectations of a Western 'gaze'. At the same time, the monument captured the hopes and aspirations of Kosovars, as the nation stepped out as an independent state, and articulated a new utopian vision for Kosovo.

This utopian vision — one rooted in youth, innocence, and hope — was extended even further through a comprehensive, multi-media nation-branding campaign under the slogan "Kosovo — the Young Europeans", which began in 2009. Kosovo's government commissioned the campaign only months after the declaration of independence. The contract was awarded to BBR Saatchi & Saatchi Tel Aviv — an Israeli branch of the global advertising agency. As the government's call for proposals stipulated, the goal of the campaign was two-fold: to place Kosovo on the map of nations and to build internal national cohesion and pride (Wählisch & Xharra 2010).

The strategic insight of the 'Young Europeans' campaign was that Kosovo's youth — as a nation and in terms of its population's average age, which was only 27 — was an asset that the country could build upon. In that sense, the 'Young Europeans' campaign expanded upon the NEWBORN metaphor and extended it through multiple media channels and executions. All campaign materials featured cool, hip, Kosovo youth who were portrayed as the future of the nation and its new face to the world. Importantly, the 'Young Europeans' campaign was not only disseminated to foreign audiences. Kosovo's citizens were also repeatedly exposed to its messages which aired on national television channels, featured prominently in outdoor billboards, and circulated through various online and social media platforms (Wählisch & Xharra 2010).

The central messaging strategy of the 'Young Europeans' campaign rested on projecting a particular type of neoliberal subjectivity that Kosovo's youth were supposed to embrace. The youth who were portrayed in the campaign materials were aspiring actors, musicians, graphic designers, or sports stars — that is, individuals in pursuit of independent, information-economy careers similar to the desires of many Western young people. In that regard, the campaign once again offered a narrative that would be legible to a Western 'gaze'. However, these portrayals were greatly at odds with the actual opportunities available to young people in Kosovo, the majority of whom are unemployed or

working in low-paying, precarious jobs. In 2016, unemployment among 15- to 24-year-olds, the age group featured in the campaign, was reported to be 57.7 per cent (UNDP, undated). Furthermore, Kosovo offers minimal welfare provisions; its economy has continued to struggle since independence, and the country's citizens are isolated due to severe travel restrictions. As a result, many Kosovars have begun to leave the country in droves, seeking asylum in Western European countries and adding to the numbers of economic migrants and refugees in Europe (Hehir 2016).

The harsh contrast between the branded subjectivities, constructed via Kosovo's nation-branding programs, and the lived experiences of young Kosovars has provoked an alternative kind of national imagination to reassert itself in Kosovo. This counter-branding imagination is rooted in ethnic Albanian nationalism and it has found political expressions in the activist movement *Vetëvendosje* [Albanian for 'self-determination']. The movement has solidified into a political party, which won some seats in parliament in 2010 and, in 2014, notably won the mayoral race in the national capital Pristina. Martin Wählisch and Behar Xharra (2010) have documented that, for the activists of *Vetëvendosje*, the 'Young Europeans' campaign provided a direct symbolic target against which they could articulate their own messages and grievances. Recently, Fisnik Ismaili, the creator of the NEWBORN monument who is now a Member of Parliament from *Vetëvendosje*, conducted another symbolic action. In 2016, on the occasion of the eighth anniversary of Kosovo's independence, he organised the repainting of the NEWBORN sculpture and its new appearance was striking: Its letters were coloured as a blue sky with white clouds but wrapped in barbed wire. The barbed wire represented Kosovo's isolation in Europe and the inability of its citizens to travel freely outside the country.[11]

What is particularly interesting in the emergence and evolution of the *Vetëvendosje* movement is that — even as its activists adamantly rejected the utopian vision of the national brand endorsed by the government — they continued to engage symbolically with that brand. Indeed, Ismaili, the original 'brander' of Kosovo, has deployed his branding expertise repeatedly in his new role as a member of the political opposition. In that sense, the national imagination of Kosovo's political opposition is also 'branded' and, therefore, similarly limited. What may be lost in the exchange of branded imaginings of the nation is a more nuanced, policy-oriented debate about the social challenges Kosovo

faces and the ways to resolve them. In short, the case of Kosovo illustrates the paradoxical effects of the branded national imagination. It appears that, although its limits serve to depoliticise national (re)definition, the branded national imagination simultaneously works to reinvigorate an ethnically based version of nationalism.

## 5.　Beyond the brand and back to the nation

What, then, can we learn about the limits of the branded national imagination by looking at the struggles of post-socialist, newly independent nations? To start with, the examples I have presented here show that — contrary to the technocratic claims of marketing and branding consultants — nation branding **is** a political project that reflects national anxieties and aspirations. At the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, the branded national imagination has a depoliticising effect because it reduces struggles over alternative visions of the nation to an exchange of media-centric, brand symbols. This is a reality that governing elites cannot ignore, especially in an age of transnational commercial media, where brand images that may be intended for foreign audiences circle back to domestic populations. This observation suggests two questions for further reflection and empirical investigation. First, what kinds of politics inform the decisions of state institutions and actors as they deploy various branding programmes? And, second, who stands to benefit the most from the implementation of such programmes?

　　　Another lesson that emerges from the examples I have presented here is that nation-branding programmes cannot succeed without genuine citizen engagement and support. More importantly, the imaginings of branding campaigns fail to produce a sense of shared destiny and community if they are not accompanied by policies that lead to real development opportunities and a sense of genuine progress among national citizens. Unlike the utopian visions of the grand ideological narratives of the past century, which were particularly powerful in the former Eastern Bloc, branded national utopias appear to have a much shorter shelf life, especially when they are visibly at odds with the lived experiences of national citizens. This may also explain why governments feel pressure to keep launching new branding campaigns all the time. At the same time, the ability of ethnic nationalism to appropriate the discursive technologies of branding suggests that we may not yet understand fully the ideological potential of branding as a technology of

governance. I would argue that to gain a better understanding of this ideological potential we need to develop a deeper, historical account of the role of the media and promotional industries in the making and remaking of the nation-state at different times and in different socio-political contexts.

One possible direction within this line of inquiry would be to situate nation branding in relation to the study of international propaganda with a particular focus on the ways in which propaganda serves nationalist projects. Within the post-socialist context, this type of inquiry would be unavoidably linked to the complex legacies of the Cold War. I would argue, however, that these legacies transcend the geographic boundaries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The post-socialist experience is interlinked with and reflected in post-colonial struggles for national (re)definition as well. To date, there is only limited research on the intersections of post-socialism and post-colonialism and this is an important gap to fill.

Finally, critical analyses of nation branding need to continue to problematise the relationships between the nation-state and the market as they co-evolve and influence each other. One specific direction to explore here would involve historicising the relationships between the nation-state and the corporation. Existing accounts of nation branding generally assume that marketing and branding techniques evolved independently in the private sector and were then applied to promote the nation-state. However, history shows that the private and public sectors have more complex relationships (for example, Ciepley 2013; Habermas 1989). The structural and ideological arrangements that obtain between the state and the market also influence the types of national subjects that are produced at different points in time. We have yet to understand fully how the interpellation of national subjects as 'citizens', as 'comrades', as 'consumers', as 'brand ambassadors' or in any other way changes their ideological and material bonds to the nation. We need to ask what has allowed the national form to persist and reproduce itself despite, or in line with, such changes in modes of subjectivity. We also need to remember that without maintaining those bonds, the national community cannot be imagined and sustained through time.  And, after all, without the nation, there would be nothing there to brand.

# Endnotes

1.　This article is based on a keynote address of the same title delivered at the Inaugural University Dialogue on the Nation Brand, jointly organized by Brand South Africa and the University of Pretoria. The Dialogue took place on 5 October 2016 at the University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa.

2.　In the same paragraph, Anholt notes in parentheses: "If badly done, [a national branding campaign] can prove exceedingly divisive" (2003: 139). I would argue that this is simply an example of *caveat emptor* — a disclaimer that allows consultants like himself to blame the divisive consequences of nation branding on improper execution, rather than on the limitations of branding as a tool for nation building.

3.　Some of the examples I use to illustrate my points in this article are also discussed in my previous work, as will be acknowledged throughout the text. However, here I attempt a synthesis of insights and arguments, which departs from previous publications while drawing on some of the same empirical material.

4.　For more on aid conditionality and its relationship to nation branding, see Pamment (2016).

5.　I had the opportunity to interview Wally Olins in 2005 and was greatly surprised when, without warning, he opened our meeting by asking me pointedly why he had not received any calls from Bulgarian officials interested in retaining his company's services. Apparently, having learned that I was Bulgarian, he could not pass up the chance to make inroads into another unexploited market.

6.　A prominent example of centralised nation branding is the GREAT Campaign in the UK, although it functions quite differently from Brand South Africa (see Pamment 2015). For more on nation branding in African nations, see Papadopoulos and Hamzaoui-Essoussi (2015).

7.　The video can be viewed on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pigu8RijfXk (last accessed on March 12, 2017).

8.　Simon Anholt (2010) also points out the economic self-interest of media organisations that profit from nation-branding campaigns.

9.　The commercials on CNN and BBC were funded by the Ukraine Economic Reform Fund, a private foundation representing Ukrainian business (Bolin & Ståhlberg 2015: 3075). However, the campaign was backed by the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was seen as part of a larger nation-branding strategy for Ukraine (Ukraine Watch 2011). Nation-branding media campaigns are often funded from state budgets or other public sources, including European Union structural funds for development. For examples of different funding mechanism used in campaigns see Bolin & Ståhlberg (2015); Kaneva (2015); Kaneva & Popescu (2014).

10. From a promotional point of view, NEWBORN was an unqualified success. Photographic images of the monument were featured in major international news outlets, including *The New York Times*, the BBC, CNN, and others. In addition, the brand concept has won numerous advertising industry awards (Karrota 2008).

11. I want to thank Bujar Aruqaj for his help in confirming this information through Albanian-language sources.

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