

# **NATION BRANDING AND RUSSIA: PROSPECTS AND PITFALLS**

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## **Nation Branding and Russia – Prospects and Pitfalls**

*What are some most urgent purposes for nation branding for Russia?*

This is really a question that must be answered by the people and the government of Russia, rather than by outside observers. Russia, like any other country, will have its own strategic priorities and these priorities should guide the development of any nation branding efforts. Having said that, as an outside observer, I would imagine that the following issues are probably prominent in the minds of today's Russian decision-makers. First, in our age of instantaneous global media reporting and news coverage, what image does Russia wish to project to the rest of the world? To use a jaded term, what are Russia's 'brand values' in a post-communist era? Under Vladimir Putin's rule, Russia has rediscovered a desire and ability to assert itself on the world stage, but there appears to be a clear dichotomy between Putin's high level of domestic popularity and a less enthusiastic response from international audiences. Therefore a focus on building the strength of Russia's soft power may be required, rather than the flexing of military muscle. Second, Russia needs to start planning now to ensure that it gains the maximum possible benefit for its nation brand from its hosting of the 2014 Winter Olympics. Third, a strategic decision needs to be taken on Russia's attitude with regard to foreign direct investment. Does Russia welcome FDI, or would it rather maintain a high level of control by domestic corporations? A clear position on this issue would help guide any nation branding efforts in the domain of inward investment attraction. Although there are obviously many other potential purposes for nation branding, the ones outlined above are probably amongst the more pressing issues for Russia's nation branding.

*What are some discursive and practical techniques that can be used in branding Russia?*

Russia is already using many nation branding techniques. It has hired a Western PR agency to attempt to manage perceptions of Russia's leadership and national image; it has engaged in 'Church diplomacy', a form of diaspora mobilization in pursuit of nation branding goals; and it has established an English language TV channel called 'Russia Today', to put across a Russian perspective on world events. However, one technique that has possibly been under-used to date by Russia is the promotion of Russian branded exports to help build a more multi-dimensional image of Russia, beyond the grim and intimidating Cold War stereotype that probably persists in the minds of many people in the West. We have seen a limited number of beer and vodka brands penetrate Western markets, but there needs to be a more diverse array of Russian brands for Western consumers to be exposed to. In this respect, Russia could maybe look to Japan and the way in which positive perceptions of that country are based at least to some extent on great consumer brands such as Sony, Toshiba, Honda and so on. There is plenty of scope for Russia to enhance its nation brand through a greater commitment to export promotion.

*What steps are involved in the creation and communication of a nation brand?*

It is a fallacy to think that a nation brand can be created and communicated through a simple series of steps. A nation brand is not like a new product, where the

marketing department can pretty much decide what brand it would like to build and then apply the necessary techniques to achieve that goal. Nations, unlike commodities or physical product brands, come with a history and a culture and it could be argued that the culture of the nation *is* the nation brand. From this perspective, the nation brand already exists prior to any governmental desire to fashion it. However, this does not absolve government from the responsibility of ensuring that negative stereotypes do not damage the country's economic and social interests. To build a positive national reputation, almost all the evidence seems to suggest that government and the private sector need to work together. Ideally, civil society would also be supportive of such public-private sector nation branding initiatives, but this would appear to be an overly optimistic wish.

*What problems might exist for branding Russia?*

Every country faces problems in its branding. It would be more positive to see these in terms of 'challenges' rather than 'problems'. This is more than mere semantics, it is reflective of a mindset that sees nation branding as an imaginative, creative yet rational and coherent undertaking. Specific challenges facing Russia include the complexity faced by any large, diverse nation to unify its many different domestic elements into a coherent perceptual entity; the need to deal in an effective way with an often hostile Western media; the embracing of branding techniques in ways that are more tuned to individualist audiences than old-style political propaganda; and the need to achieve better coordination between the different state and private sector actors engaged in Russia's nation branding efforts.

*How can branding Russia work on rational and emotional levels?*

This is where there needs to be a clear focus upon who exactly is the intended audience. In marketing terminology, this refers to the concept of segmentation. In deciding whether to pursue a rational or an emotional branding message – or a combination of the two – the primary focus needs to be on what is required for the intended recipient of the message. Conventionally the belief is that an FDI audience would be more receptive to a rational message based on factual data related to the cost of labour, tax rates, and so on, whereas a potential tourist would be more receptive to an emotional message emphasizing hedonic benefits such as the pleasure of sightseeing, eating great food, drinking local wine, swimming in pristine seas, and so on. This is an area where any nation could benefit from adopting basic techniques of market research, profiling the characteristics of the intended audience and crafting an appropriate communication based on that profile data.

*How likely are Russians to 'live the brand', performing attitudes and behaviors developed by the brand strategies?*

It would be absurd to claim to have developed a nation brand and then expect the country's citizens to adapt their natural behaviour to fit an artificially created brand. Although there are undoubtedly significant similarities in some respects between nations and corporations, for example in terms of the existence of multiple stakeholders, nations and corporations also differ in important respects. One way in which they differ is that a corporation can try to impose a code of conduct on its people, but it is far more problematic for a nation to try and do the same to its citizens. Therefore, it is slightly

ludicrous to expect all Russians to 'live the brand'. In the wider world of nation branding, what you see all the time is nations changing their 'nation brand' each time a new party or leader comes to power – should you therefore expect the country's citizens to 'live the brand' when that 'brand' changes every few years? Obviously, that would be an unreasonable expectation. However, I think it would be reasonable to expect a nation's diplomatic corps, for example, to be aware of any official nation branding campaign and to adapt their behaviour accordingly. This is where the realms of nation branding and public diplomacy intersect, and there is little evidence of best practice available yet in this domain.

*Is there a danger for nation branding increasing the nationalist discourse in Russia?*

It depends totally upon the nature of the nation branding strategy that is employed. If there is an overtly militaristic tone to the nation branding campaign, focusing on power and military strength, then obviously that could kindle nationalist sentiment. But most nation branding campaigns are more benign and are aimed at seducing external audiences rather than scaring them away. Also, it would be mistaken to believe that nationalism in any country is a result of a mere nation branding campaign. There are deep political and social roots to nationalism, and whilst nationalist propaganda can enflame nationalism, that really has very little relevance to the contemporary conception of nation branding, with its clearly stated objectives in terms of tourism, export promotion, FDI, and international influence.

*How can nation branding be helpful for Russia's collective self-identification?*

The relevance of nation branding for domestic audiences is yet to be proved. The issue of collective self-identification is probably better left to sociologists, historians, and other cultural experts rather than to marketing and branding professionals.

*What are some things (if any) that nation branding cannot do?*

As with PR for corporations, nation branding cannot forcibly create a positive reputation for a nation if the reality of that nation is negative. Projecting a false image of a nation is probably worse than projecting no image at all, as any informed audience will feel that their intelligence is being insulted if, for example, a country enduring civil strife tries to project itself as a tourist paradise. But countries need to decide on a case-by-case basis what nation branding can or cannot do, given each country's own unique set of circumstances.