

REBRANDING GREECE: WHY NATION BRANDING MATTERS

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ABSTRACT

Nation branding is an emerging concept with increased practical activity but fairly limited theory. Politicians engage actively in branding practices for their countries. Why do governments utilize certain branding strategies and ignore others? How have politicians come to perceive nation branding as a successful foreign policy strategy? This article seeks to examine the political aspect of nation branding and clarify the concept as a subset of international relations, and more specifically, its connection to public diplomacy. Finally, the article analyzes the case of Greece and the current branding campaign pursued by its government. What has Greece done in the past to enhance its brand and how is it going to resuscitate its image? Is nation branding a phenomenon that increases during a crisis? Through analyzing the Greek government's policy choices, the article will assess the degree to which branding is one function of a nation's image enhancement.

INTRODUCTION

In late 2012, amid the financial crisis, the Greek Tourism Ministry launched a four-minute flash mob promotional video, "Greece Welcomes You," acquiring a total cost of 75,020 Euros.¹ The footage portrayed dancers performing the flash mob with the London Bridge in the background. Thus, the video was sharply criticized by Greek Internet users who argued that it was endorsing a multicultural London rather than a welcoming Greece. The controversial video was taken down, but the cost seems too significant to neglect the political choices behind this decision, particularly when the government decided to close eight Greek embassies and consulates due to financial challenges.² If similar nation branding practices do not matter for international politics, why have Greek politicians made the conscious decision to spend this significant amount of money for a promotional video? In particular, nation branding is a concept that has been embraced wholeheartedly by public relations firms but has yet to be recognized as an established area of study in international relations.³ However, politicians and ministries

1 "Tourism Ministry Takes Down Controversial Greece- Promotion Flash Mob Video," last modified November 20, 2012, <http://www.keeptalkinggreece.com/2012/11/20/tourism-ministry-takes-down-controversial-greece-promotion-flash-mob-video/>.

2 Anastasios Papapostolou, "Instead of Cuts, 8 Greek Embassies, Consulates to Close," *Greek Reporter*, October 23, 2012, <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2012/10/23/instead-of-cuts-8-greek-embassies-consulates-to-close/>.

3 Nadia Kaneva, "Nation Branding: Toward an Agenda for Critical Research," *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011): 120, doi: 1932-8036/20110117.

of foreign affairs around the globe engage actively in nation branding practices to ameliorate the image of their countries. Increasing globalization, technological innovations, and mass communication brought new challenges for countries that have to compete with each other to attract tourism, foreign investment, and talent, and promote their political interests. National reputation has been lately viewed as key to enhancing global attractiveness and ultimately a country's soft power. Nation branding can function as the new mechanism with which governments can develop, manage, and boost their country's image and reputation abroad. This article examines briefly the link between the concepts of nation branding and public diplomacy, as well as the nation branding campaign initiated by the Greek government to highlight the importance of nation branding as a policy choice in the global system of international relations.

NATION BRANDING AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

During the past decade, nation branding has become a popular concept in terms of practical activity and has been studied by experts from multidisciplinary areas that range from communication and marketing to international relations, political science, and diplomacy. Developing a link between the newly emerged concepts of nation branding and public diplomacy enhances the understanding of how states have come to perceive nation branding as one aspect of a country's image modification. Public relations firms are hired by governments to launch communication campaigns that will promote a favorable image of the country to international publics. Simon Anholt, who, along with Wally Olins, is considered the founding father of the nation brand idea, first introduced the concept of nation branding in 1996.⁴ Although there is no single definition, nation branding can be defined as "the process of applying corporate branding techniques to promote countries," having as a main objective to "build and manage the reputation of a state".⁵ Various authors have approached the concept from diverse perspectives and have provided definitions that involve⁶

Enhancing a nation's competitiveness (Anholt), embracing political, cultural, business, and sport activities (Jaffe and Nebenzahl, 2001) to promoting economic and political interests at home and abroad (Szondi) and altering, improving, or enhancing a nation's image and reputation.

Nation branding can be considered a special type of place branding and has been practiced by a number of states, including France, the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, New Zealand, the United Arab Emirates, and more.⁷ There has been an increase in smaller states' interest in engaging in nation branding as a way to boost their economies, their tourism industries, and trade and foreign direct investment opportunities by pursuing a favorable image in international markets.⁸ Private corporations are devoting a large part of their resources to branding with the goal of developing emotional connections with their customers that will ultimately lead to a long-term, loyal relationship between the brand and the consumer. By the same token, "smart states" can pursue their competitive advantage and develop strong brand loyalty by "building their brands around reputations and attitudes in the same way smart companies do."⁹ However, one has to identify the points of difference between a nation and a commercial product. Products can be "discontinued, modified, re-launched and repositioned or replaced by improved products," while nations are less flexible to manipulate their intangible offering.¹⁰

4 Nadia Kaneva, "Nation Branding: Toward an Agenda for Critical Research," 117.

5 "Chapter 4: Nation Branding: Country Specific Evaluation," *The Institute of Cultural Diplomacy, Cultural Diplomacy Outlook Report*, 2011, accessed May 10, 2013, http://www.culturaldiplomacy.org/culturaldiplomacynews/content/pdf/Cultural_Diplomacy_Outlook_Report_2011_-_04-01.pdf.

6 Ying Fan, "Branding the Nation: Towards a Better Understanding," *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 6 (2010): 97-103.

7 "Nation Branding: Country Specific Evaluation," 2011.

8 Gyorgy Szondi, "Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding: Conceptual Similarities and Differences," *Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'* (2008).

9 Peter Van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation," *Foreign Affairs* 80(2001): 2-6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20050245>.

10 Ying Fan, "Branding the nation: What is being branded?" *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 12(2006): 7, doi: 10.1177/1356766706056633.

Moreover, public diplomacy and nation branding are often placed under the same context, with some scholars viewing the two concepts as related but different, whereas other scholars view them as the same.¹¹ Although both concepts have been defined differently, depending on politicians' and scholars' areas of interest, the linkage is yet to be fully understood. Governments around the world are increasingly engaged in public diplomacy and nation branding campaigns in order to differentiate their countries from competitors. The two concepts have diverse histories but have recently converged as a response to pressures brought by globalization and mass communication. Governments are making the conscious political choice to utilize marketing techniques as a way to achieve various policy goals that range from boosting their economies to improving foreign relations. Thus, since the practical activity is not only present but also continuously rising, a stronger theoretical link between nation branding and public diplomacy can potentially persuade critics that nation branding matters.

Public diplomacy incorporates areas that go beyond traditional diplomacy and is defined by the Murrow Center at Tufts University as:¹²

The influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as between diplomats and foreign correspondents and the processes of inter-cultural communications.

Other definitions delineate the idea of promoting and persuading foreign publics aimed at "affecting their thinking and ultimately that of their governments."¹³ Drawing from these definitions, the two concepts can be associated together to understand why nation branding matters for international relations. Both concepts deal with communication practices that aim at influencing public attitudes and opinions as a means of impacting foreign affairs and policies as well advancing countries' economies and tourism. The emergence of the brand states is real, and as Peter Van Ham argued in 2001, "traditional diplomacy is disappearing and identity politics is becoming the main activity of politicians and states."¹⁴ Van Ham identified a shift in foreign policy, a move from "the modern world of geopolitics and power to the postmodern world of images and influence."¹⁵ Thus, the unbranded states will be in a difficult position to attract economic and political attention, making image and reputation significant "parts of the state's strategic equity."¹⁶

REBRANDING GREECE

The number of countries that engage in nation branding practices has been continuously increasing, and smaller states have been adopting such efforts as a means of enhancing their economies and overall position in international politics. Greece, a small state, has been facing serious image and reputation deterioration due to its economic and socio-political challenges. Amid the current financial crisis, the new government led by Prime Minister Antonis Samaras is launching a large rebranding campaign to restore the state's credibility with foreign audiences and global markets. Different countries initiate nation branding activities for different reasons—in the case of Greece, the government views nation branding with an emphasis on tourism and foreign direct investment, central to the state's economic recovery.

The Greek government has launched tourism campaigns to lure foreign tourists. The tourism industry accounts for 18 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP); more than one-fifth of the Greek workforce is

11 Nadia Kaneva, "Nation Branding: Toward an Agenda for Critical Research," 124.

12 "What is Public Diplomacy?" The Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy, The Fletcher School Tufts University, accessed May 1, 2013, <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Murrow/Diplomacy>.

13 Gyorgy Szondi, "Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding: Conceptual Similarities and Differences," 5.

14 Peter Van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation," 6.

15 Peter Van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation," 4.

16 Van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation," 3.

employed in tourism.¹⁷ The “Leave your Myth in Greece” campaign began in 2008 by the Greek National Tourism Organization (a public entity supervised by the Hellenic Ministry of Tourism) and included a series of videos that portrayed Greece as the ultimate destination.¹⁸ After the crisis hit and the country’s reputation was largely affected by negative portrayals in international media, the Ministry of Tourism launched the “You in Greece” campaign in 2010, aimed at highlighting various areas of Greece, hoping to surpass the negative reports related to the debt crisis.¹⁹ The campaign involved videos of visitors around the world who spoke about their experiences in Greece and showed footage of Greece’s beautiful scenery. At that time, Culture and Tourism Minister Pavlos Geroulanos revealed that the campaign would focus on new tourism markets, especially Asian countries, while enhancing efforts to reduce accommodation and transportation costs and provide easier access to visas for tourists from Russia and Ukraine.²⁰

The government of Samaras, which took office in June 2012, has placed nation branding high on the political agenda. The focus on rebranding Greece aims at enhancing year-round tourism and foreign direct investment that will provide an opportunity for economic recovery, ultimately restoring credibility in the global markets. First, Samaras created a separate Ministry of Tourism, which was part of the Development Ministry.²¹ In October 2012, Olga Kefalogianni became the Tourism Minister and acquired a significant role in the large nation branding campaign by the Greek government. In her opening speech as a newly appointed minister of the Greek Parliament, Kefalogianni stressed five main points that need to be immediately addressed in order to improve tourism in the Greece:²²

1. Endorse Greek tourism abroad and particularly in high priority markets such as Germany, England, and the Scandinavian countries.
2. Immediate establishment of the Crisis Management Committee to effectively protect the image and reputation of Greece in the international markets.
3. Activate social tourism programs.
4. Activate the governmental organization “Marketing Greece” (marketinggreece.com: Marketing Greece aims at creating destinations and products through strategic marketing) between the public and private sectors to share the costs of marketing practices and boost the country’s image abroad.
5. Immediate simplification of visa procedures for foreign tourists.

As soon as Kefalogianni took office, a high-profile delegation representing the Greek government attended the first Greek Investment Forum in New York to attract foreign investment in the Greek tourism industry.²³ Kefalogianni had been advocating for a “more upscale tourism product for Greece,” arguing that Greece has “relied too heavily on the sun and sand traveler.” She underlined “the need to extend our season. Other kinds of tourism give us a better chance to do that.”²⁴ The targeted sectors for expansion include the development of integrated resorts and residential real estate, golf courses, and other sports tourism; wellness and health tourism; upgraded and new marinas; conference centers; agro-tourism products; religious tourism; thermal spas and thalassotherapy centers; culinary tourism; and various thematic offerings related to Greece’s rich cultural and historical heritage.²⁵

17 “For a Sustainable Tourism Industry,” Hellenic Republic Embassy of Greece in the UK, accessed May 15, 2013, <http://www.mfa.gr/uk/en/about-greece/tourism/investment-and-growth.html>.

18 “Live Your Myth in Greece 2008,” Living In Greece, accessed May 10, 2013, <http://livinggreece.gr/2008/01/14/live-your-myth-in-greece-2008/>.

19 “Tourism Campaign ‘You in Greece,’” Hellenic Republic Embassy of Greece in Poland, June 9, 2010. Accessed May 10, 2013, <http://greeceinfo.wordpress.com/2010/06/09/tourism-campaign-you-in-greece/>.

20 “Greece Launches ‘You in Greece’ Tourism Campaign,” Xinhuanet.com, June 21, 2010, accessed May 10, 2013, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/travel/2010-06/22/c_13362848.htm.

21 “Samaras PM as coalition comes together,” *Ekathimerini.com*, June 20, 2012. Accessed May 1, 2013, http://www.ekathimerini.com/4dcgi/_w_articles_wsite1_1_20/06/2012_448183.

22 “Speech of Minister of Tourism in the Parliament”. *olgakefalogianni.gr*. July 8, 2012. [in Greek: translated by the author], http://www.olgakefalogianni.gr/page/articles/detail.asp?a_id=1024&c_id=3&sc_id=5

23 Christina Flora, “Kefalogianni Will Boost Greece at N.Y. Forum,” *Greek Reporter*, October 5, 2012, accessed April 23, 2013, <http://usa.greekreporter.com/2012/10/05/kefalogianni-will-boost-greece-at-n-y-forum/>.

24 James Ruggia, “Greece: A New Mindset for Tourism,” *TravelPulse*, October 14, 2012, <http://www.travelpulse.com/greece-a-new-mindset-for-tourism.html>

25 “Invest in Greece - Tourism,” accessed May 30, 2013, <http://www.investingreece.gov.gr/default>.

Additionally, the General Secretary of the Tourism Ministry, Nicholas Karahalios, commented on the lack of U.S. arrivals in Greece and specifically in Athens, which had dramatically decreased after the U.S. State Department issued a warning for American tourists to be wary in the capital due to the emergence of racial attacks and riots.²⁶ The series of New York visits aimed to spread the word that “Greece is safe and open to tourism.” Moreover, the government has been creating think tanks and engaging in extended market research to get more “out-of-the-box” ideas on how to resuscitate Greece’s reputation in the U.S. and reach a more targeted audience that will “create a new segment of the market.”²⁷ The Deputy Minister of Development, Notis Mitarachis, stated during his visit to New York that the Samaras government “views the image of Greece as something more comprehensive than an advertising campaign can address,” adding their plans to visit the Nation Branding Index while searching for a “longer and more comprehensive approach.”²⁸

In early 2013, Prime Minister Samaras, Tourism Minister Kefalogianni, and Foreign Minister Dimitris Avramopoulos met to discuss the possible ways to rebrand Greece within the current state of crisis.²⁹ According to the *Journal of the Abroad*, Samaras has been actively supporting branding campaigns that will enhance the country’s credibility abroad. Meanwhile, Kefalogianni, in close collaboration with the Foreign Ministry, has made plans for a rebranding campaign.³⁰ In most cases of countries that initiate nation branding campaigns, ministries of foreign affairs are almost always involved in the process. Thus, nation branding is clearly something more than just destination promotion and its political dimension deserves more attention. Additionally, the attraction of foreign direct investors and other business initiatives has been part of Greece’s image resuscitation. In mid-May 2013, Samaras met with several Chinese officials to attract more investments from Chinese businesses and to enhance bilateral relations overall.³¹ The ministers of foreign affairs, tourism, development, and the merchant marine as well as a group of 60 Greek businesspeople accompanied Samaras.³² During his four-day visit, Samaras invited Chinese companies over to a business forum in Beijing to invest in Greece and participate in the grand privatization plan that has been put forward by the government. Samaras anticipates that foreign direct investment is the most promising yield from all the investment plans that were initiated.³³

On a final note, the efforts of the Greek government could benefit from the rise of various citizen initiatives that aim to create a better image for Greece abroad. Brand strategist Peter Economides has been a major advocate of nation branding and has launched a major international campaign “Give Greece a Chance,” which involves the participation of Greek citizens.³⁴ In addition, a voluntary group called “Up Greek Tourism” has been raising funds through “crowd funding”—individuals assembling their money—to pay for billboard space in Times Square in New York City and Piccadilly Circus in London. In San Francisco, four young professionals have formed a group called Dopios that aims to pair visitors with Athenian locals.³⁵ Citizen initiatives that boost the image of Greece are continuously increasing, suggesting that the concept of nation branding is gaining more prominence among various publics.

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26 Johanna Jainchill, “Greece Ministry of Tourism Nicholas Karahalios,” *Travel Weekly*, October 29, 2012, <http://www.travelweekly.com/in-the-hot-seat/greece-ministry-of-tourism-nicholas-karahalios/>.

27 Jainchill, “Greece Ministry of Tourism Nicholas Karahalios.”

28 Ruggia, “Greece: A New Mindset for Tourism.”

29 “PM chairs meeting on ‘rebranding’ Greece,” Embassy of Greece in London, January 17, 2013, accessed April 20, 2013, <http://www.mfa.gr/uk/en/the-embassy/news/pm-chairs-meeting-on-rebranding-greece.html>.

30 “Greek Prime Minister: Marketing Genius?” *Journal of the Abroad*, January 19, 2013. <http://journaloftheabroad.wordpress.com/2013/01/19/greek-prime-minister-marketing-genius/>.

31 “Top Chinese Political Advisor Meets with Greek PM,” *Individual.com*, May 18, 2013, <http://www.individual.com/storyrss.php?story=176063994&hash=d5ef9ea3af355e63982887df75351de1>.

32 “Greek PM Antonis Samaras visits China in effort to boost economy,” *South China Morning Post*, May 16, 2013, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1238527/greek-pm-antonis-samaras-visits-china-effort-boost-ailing-economy>.

33 Zhao Qian, “Greek Prime Minister Seeks to Woo Chinese Investors,” *Global Times*, May 19, 2013. http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/782711.shtml#.UZ9_CWt5mSM.

34 Panos Kontogiannis, “Economides: Rebranding Greece Changing Country’s Image,” *Greek Reporter*, August 7, 2012, <http://greece.greekreporter.com/2012/08/07/economides-rebranding-greece-changing-countrys-image/>.

35 Theopi Skarlatos, “Give Greece a Chance, Say Tourist Business Owners,” *BBC News (Athens)*, June 9, 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-18277680>.

NATION BRANDING MATTERS

Although it is rather challenging to measure the effectiveness of nation branding initiatives, various governments have come to consider nation branding as one function of enhancing a nation's image as well as a successful foreign policy strategy. The link between public diplomacy and nation branding needs to be strengthened further to comprehend nation branding as a political choice with particular regard for states that are experiencing economic and socio-political crises. Troubled countries such as Greece have intensified efforts to restore their image and persuade international visitors that their country is now a safe travel destination.³⁶ The current Greek government made the choice to close down eight embassies and consulates as part of overall austerity plans, but decided to dedicate funds to launch a large nation branding campaign. Thus, it seems that for the Greek government, nation branding is perceived as the best option for the country to improve its image abroad and restore credibility in the international markets. The government has viewed the restoration of its reputation as a key to economic recovery and has been actively involved in rebranding the country to boost tourism, foreign direct investment, and ultimately its foreign affairs. Since the nation branding campaign is currently in development, it will be interesting to track Prime Minister Samaras' next policy choices on rebranding the country.

In conclusion, globalization, mass communication, and technological innovations have forced governments to find new ways of advancing their soft power, for which two-way communication with foreign publics is indispensable for attaining various policy goals. Reputation and image are central to acquiring credibility and gaining not just the approval of foreign publics but, more importantly, their admiration. The penetration of communication experts in the field of politics has provided states with innovative methods of communicating with populations both domestically and abroad. Efforts to impress, increase trust and credibility, and enhance interest and goodwill for nations are central to a country's image and reputation building, which can be attained through nation branding. Nation branding can also help countries to better communicate their unique competitive identity. Since nation branding is part of national policies pursued by states, the political implications of utilizing marketing and branding practices into national governance and international relations should be further explored. For now, one thing is certain: Nation branding is real and it matters.

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36 "Libya Hopes to Woo Tourist Despite Insecurity," *ITN Source* (Reuters), November 7, 2012, <http://www.itnsource.com/en/shotlist/RTV/2012/11/07/RTV071112163/>.

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