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EASTERN EUROPE STRIKES BACK: THE „REVENGE” IMAGE CAMPAIGNS OF COUNTRIES FROM THE REGION

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Abstract: *The essence of country branding is the introduction of a specific place in a way that is attractive to tourists, investors, international organizations or even potential settlers. Most countries spend millions of euros each year on delivering their positive messages. But what can be done if a whole negative campaign against the country has been created? The Romanian, Polish, Hungarian and other responses mentioned in this article will show it.*

Keywords: *country branding, country image, revenge campaigns.*

Introduction

„We ask you not to come to the United Kingdom – it rains, there is not enough work, and salaries are low here.” True, this message would only be aimed at immigrants, that is, the citizens of Romania and Bulgaria, who can be employed without any restrictions in the United Kingdom from 2014.

But what can the countries concerned do about the campaign? It is natural that they ask for an explanation through diplomatic channels. But do they need to take any further communication steps? For example, should Bulgaria and Romania start a positive campaign about themselves in the island country, or an anti-British one in the countries concerned? In fact, in this case it is important to consider two important points. On the one hand, it is the worst possible reaction to take ourselves too seriously – it may be a task for diplomacy, but not for a country image campaign. On the other hand, we may only produce advertisements built upon the picture people have about the given country. Therefore completely new ideas should not be used; not even if they are based on real facts. At the same time we must grab all ‘hooks’ in the minds of the audience.

„Half of our woman look like Kate”

That is why the response series created by the Romanian newspaper *Gandul* was brilliant [1]. They did not start to make abusive comments about the British, but used means of humour instead. First of all, they asked readers to come up with things that could convince English people that they could go to live in Romania (and it may even be worth moving there). The best of these ideas were souped up with the help of copywriters so they could be published in the United Kingdom and Romania.

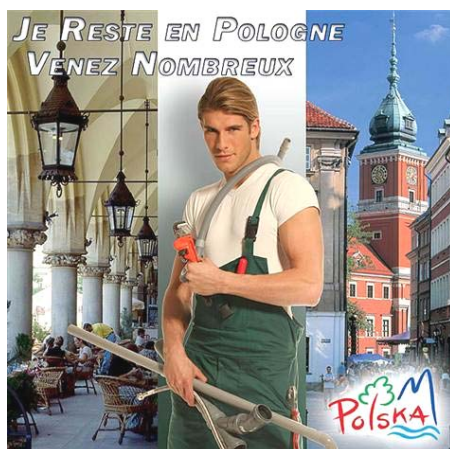
One of these slogans was „Half of our women look like Kate. The other half, like her sister”, referring to the princess and her sister, Pippa, also known for her shapely bottom. Other advertisements said „Here we have a tax on congestion, traffic jams and we believe that is enough punishment”, „Charles bought a house here in 2005. And Harry hasn't been photographed naked once”, „Our draft beer is less expensive than your bottled water”, or „We speak better English than anywhere you've been to France.”

The campaign was closed by the tagline „We may not like Britain, but you’ll love Romania” and the activation line „Why Don’t You Come Over?” The latter got so personal because in the meantime the website of the campaign asked its readers to offer their couches for couchsurfing, that is, host English people as this is the best way to convince them that Romanians are open and hospitable.

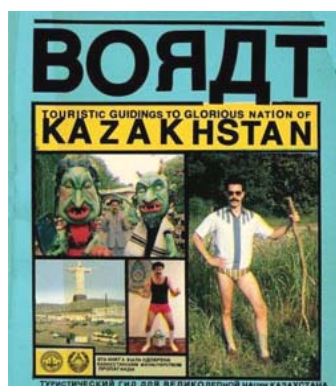


„I am staying i n Poland”

It was not the first time that a Western European country had threatened its citizens with Eastern European immigrants. When the European Union was enlarged with ten new member states in 2004, certain French politicians and media have targeted Poland, threatening French citizens that Polish plumbers would come and take away their jobs. As a response to the news the Polish National Tourist Office organised a press conference at the base of the Eiffel Tower where they literally introduced the Polish plumber. He was a handsome male model, who said smiling, „I am staying in Poland, do come over en masse” („Je reste au Pologne, venez nombreux!”) Then this handsome young man appeared on posters as well, and the campaign in France soon became a hot topic for offline and online media worldwide. [2]



The Polish displayed a great sense of humour and the French could not do much about the witty response. That is why it is important not to use a harsh response, even if it would be based on facts. When the movie *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* appeared in the movies, the country of Kazakhstan published four-page long adverts in *The New York Times*, *US News* and *World Report*, and video adverts about the country were aired on CNN and ABC as well. In the meanwhile, the president of the country, Nursultan Nazarbayev, complained straight to president George Bush, and he also sued Borat, that is, comedian Sasha Baron Cohen. [3] The harsh actions of the Kazakh president, however, resulted in a Boratish response. The actor responded in a video with the Kazakhstan flag in the background, saying „Since the 2003 Tuleyakiv reforms, Kazakhstan is as civilized as any other country in the world. Women can now travel on inside of bus, homosexuals no longer have to wear blue hats, and age of consent has been raised to eight years old. Please, captain of industry; I invite you to come to Kazakhstan where we have incredible natural resources, hardworking labour, and some of the cleanest prostitutes in whole of Central Asia.” President Nazarbayev and his diplomats were outraged, but he was allegedly dissuaded from further countersteps by his own daughter.



It was no better for the Austrians when they voiced their concerns about the movie *Brüno*, with Cohen appearing as a homosexual Austrian fashion reporter. Cohen's answer was „I want to live the Austrian dream of finding a partner, buying a dungeon and starting a family” – referring to cases stirring attention at the time, such as the story of Natascha Kampusch who had been held in a cellar for 3096 days. [4]

Hungarian responses

Hungary has also experienced situations when foreign news or campaigns mentioned it in a not-so-positive light. In March 2001, an advert by Amnesty International was published in Slovenia, which featured the bloody foot of a „39-year-old Hungarian policeman” and the caption „Imagine what the victim looks like.” They also added, „Stop the torture!” The ad spot was shown on four TV channels, but it earned even more publicity when it received prizes at advertising festivals. At the time there existed a state institution called Hungarian Country Image Centre, which also came up with a video in response: a beautiful leg of a woman was caressed with a yellow rose, and the text of the advertisement was „Human rights are based on love, honesty and appreciation. Hungary – you have the right to love.” [5]

In the case of naming the Northern M0 Danube bridge in Budapest, the response was much 'cooler' and therefore probably more effective, too. True, the starting point was also funny: the Ministry of Economy and Transport launched an online vote about the new name of the bridge, and the name Chuck Norris Bridge ended up in the first position. The news were mentioned in *The Colbert Report*, an American satire television show by Stephen Colbert, and in the second round of the voting Colbert asked his audience to vote for him.



He even invited András Simonyi, Hungarian ambassador to the United States, to take part in his show. The diplomat arrived with an 'official document issued by the the Republic of Hungary' which said that based on the votes the bridge would be named after Colbert. He said that according to Hungarian law, two minor requirements should be satisfied in order to complete the process: Colbert should be proficient in Hungarian, and he should be dead. The

audience had a blast, and the ambassador could even tell in the show that Hungary is the most amazing country in Europe, and if Colbert would make a visit, they could fix the two glitches mentioned above. [6] The runner-up of the voting was another US comedian, Jon Stewart, while Miklós Zrínyi (a Hungarian military leader in the 17th century) reached the third position. However, instead of following internet democracy, the Hungarian Committee on Geographical Names made the final decision that it would be named Megyeri Bridge as it connects Káposztásmegyer and Békásmegyer.

Romanians, get online!

We started our analysis with Romania, and we are also going to conclude it with Romania, because it was not the first time that this Eastern European country had received negative publicity. More precisely, negative publicity on the whole internet. At least that is what the rather peculiar autocomplete suggestions of „Romanians are” or the same text typed in Google in other languages suggested. Examples included (Romanians are) stupid, dumb, redneck, surly, prostitutes, chicken thieves, non whites, gypsies and racists. Results in Google image search were also shocking pictures. Interestingly, no one had noticed the problem before the ROM brand of national chocolate confronted bloggers and the media with it. Shortly it was a subject of discussion on all offline and online forums. But ROM also offered a solution: it created the website romaniansaresmart.com, and asked Internet users to search for the term „romanians are smart”, because if there are enough search requests for it, Google autocomplete suggestions would change as well. The campaign also asked them to write as much positive content as possible. T-shirts saying „Romanians are smart” became available, and Romanian celebrities such as Wimbledon legend Ilie Nastase defended the country; he even said that „Romanians are champions”. Other celebrities claimed that Romanians are witty, beautiful and family-loving. It all culminated on Great Union Day (December 1, a national holiday in Romania): TV news did not only cover the celebrations, but also followed the count of searches for the term „romanians are smart”. The story ended with a happy ending as the country could mobilize more than half a million citizens, and the autocomplete suggestions of Google became positive. Romania was the first country to change its image on the internet. [8]



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