

Groupism and the Gallop: Non-state nation branding in the Székelyföld

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Abstract

This article outlines a framework for understanding the non-state nation in a way that is distinct from the existing Nations and Nationalism literature as well as the contemporary Nation Branding scholarship. It argues that minority national groups can be seen both as if they were brands, and also as groups which collectively construct and pursue nation-branding. It explores brand identity, strategy, agents, communication, equity and architecture as lenses via which national identification and groupness can be deconstructed and understood. The article draws on observations made at one specific national event – the Székely Vágta (Szekler Gallop) – as a means of illustrating its theoretical premise.

Keywords: nation branding, national identity, Transylvania, Székelyföld

Introduction

*Who knows where destiny takes us
On a rough road on a dark night.
Lead your nation to victory once more,
Prince Csaba, on the stars' path.*

(Kriza, 2003)

This, the first verse of the Székely national anthem, could – by its caliginous and victory-centric substance – quite easily be the anthem of almost any national group in the world. As Hobbes argued in *Leviathan* (1676: 63-66), it is in the very nature of man to seek

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success over failure, and, buoyed by shared goals, this desire grows only stronger within a collective. Yet the form of these goals, the shape of the imagined victory: these things change from nation to nation. What, or who, are these nations? What, or who, defines their victories and their losses? How are their agendas set? And what strategies do they follow in pursuit of their goals?

A tendency exists in the Nations and Nationalism scholarship to compartmentalise such theoretical enquiry and to address each area of the field using a unique lens or framework. This inclination has led to the presentation of case studies in which the analysis of many divergent parts does not adequately represent the whole, or does not paint a more broadly applicable picture. This article challenges such a perspective, suggesting a way of moving forward from the sequestering of Nationalism Studies and presenting an overarching nation-brand framework of analysis.

In demonstrating the applicability of this framework, the article utilises one specific national event – the Székely Vágta (Szekler Gallop)² – as a clearly defined analytical unit. It describes the way in which both nation-states and non-state nations can be viewed as constituting, or, with emphasis on agency, as constructing and pursuing their own distinct brand. Using the existing literature as well as original interview data from the 2015 Székely Vágta, the article suggests that the strength and motivation of different nationalisms can be better tracked using a marketing-inspired framework.

Ultimately, the article concludes that national groups can be seen as brands because they a) try to maximise the loyalty of existing consumers, b) try to differentiate themselves from other nation brands, c) use symbolism and the marketing of selected national values, and d) are built and sustained by a range of agents, from brand ambassadors to everyday consumers.

The analytical framework

Although the author concurs with many of the arguments put forward in Rogers Brubaker's various works on national identity, nationalism, and more specifically the nationalism of Hungarian minority groups in Transylvania, it is his separation of national categories and groups that is at the heart of this study – a concept which the author seeks to counter. One of the central arguments of Brubaker's study (2006: 7) of national/ethnic

² An annual horse race and community festival of the Hungarian Székely minority held near Sfântu Gheorghe (Hungarian: Sepsiszentgyörgy) in now-Romanian Transylvania.

relations in the Romanian city of Cluj-Napoca is that the city's inhabitants (specifically „the Hungarians” and „the Romanians”), should not be considered in „groupist” terms. Yet Brubaker's solution – to separate „nationalist politics” and „everyday ethnicity,” and „national groups” from „national categories” – is to impose impossible demarcating lines on far more permeable issues (Brubaker, 2004).

This study seeks to challenge the idea that those who participate in national identity branding are always political elites or just a minority of the overall national population. Though ordinary residents of Cluj-Napoca may resist involvement in the messy and heated nationalist political rhetoric pursued by those in the political sphere, this cannot be said to warrant a non-groupist reading of nations and their nationalisms. Nor does the unique situation of the Cluj Hungarians warrant the blanket application of such a dichotomy across all national studies.

Few countries in the contemporary era feel any need to deny that they engage in nation branding (Aronczyk, 2013). Though it might be argued that such campaigns are merely the selective presentation of existing aspects of a state's cultural identity, this author argues that such selectivity and promotion actively contributes to the construction and/or embedding of particular national or state ideals. Seen in this way, nation branding is not only the presentation of the nation for external consumption, but the moulding of national ideals for the consumption of all.

Whilst non-state nations do not (typically) pursue high-level marketing campaigns as do state governments, their collectiveness can nevertheless be thought of as a brand. Although non-state nation branding is perhaps not as conscious or, rather, as explicit as state-driven campaigns are, the elements that make such national groups identifiable through a branding lens are all perceptible: brand identity, brand ambassadors, brand loyalty, brand communication, brand equity, and brand architecture. Because these characteristics of a „marketable entity” are all so clearly defined, and so clearly correlated to the agents and processes of nationalism, it is highly salient to view the expressions and interactions of both nation-state and non-state nation groups through this branding lens. By seeing the nation as brand, this article argues, the entire machine of nationhood can be understood – both in its wholeness, and in the complexity of its many cogs and levers. When we think of the nation as brand, we can pinpoint the mechanics who tend to the machine, and the systemic „physics” which allow for its very existence and functionality.

Brand identity and strategy

The key concept when speaking about identity is, of course, identification. To have a national identity, one must identify with a nation. In order to identify with a nation, that nation must be identifiable. And in order to be identifiable, the nation must demonstrate distinctiveness. Symbols, aesthetics, history, religion, music, literature, myths, language, culture: these are all building blocks of distinction, and it is from this pool of markers that the nation brand is built.

A range of these identity markers are observable at the Székely Vágta, each contributing to the construction of the Székely brand. The Székely flag, for example, is a central aspect of „Székelyness” at the Vágta, as it gives the event an incontrovertibly national stamp. Vexillologist Whitney Smith (1969: 94-95) has explained that

„with the rise of nationalism as a main current in world politics over the past two hundred years, flags have come to occupy one of the positions in the very front ranks of symbols utilised by actors in the political system.”

Horses are also a significant facet of Székely culture, and whilst the running of a horse race may seem a common and innocuous affair, there is more national signalling that occurs in this realm than meets the eye. A 19th century British encyclopaedia, for example, declared that in the Székelyföld, „the rearing of horses and other live stock is one of the most important branches of national industry” (Ramsay M'Culloch, 1842: 801).

Other markers of the Székely brand include the *rovásírás* script, which is at least centuries old and which has been harnessed by both Székely and Magyar nationalists as a symbolic specimen of, ironically, both nations’ uniqueness and of their rich and mysterious history or histories. Alexander Maxwell (2004) has studied „enthusiasts” of this writing system, and notes that „interest in *rovásírás* is highly correlated with a specific ideology of Hungarian history and culture, characterized by extravagant claims to Hungary's antiquity and glory” (*ibid*, p.164).

Traditional Hungarian instruments are another source of great national pride both in Hungary-proper and in the Székelyföld, and they can also be seen as brand markers of the nation. These instruments include the specifically Székely *ütőgardon*, the *tárogató*, the *koboz*, the *cimbalom*, and the zither (*citera*). Though like the ancient *rovásírás* script these instruments may seem banal, there is undoubtedly an element of the political to them. For example, in his book titled „Focus: Music, Nationalism, and the Making of a

New Europe”, Philip Bohlman writes (2011: 17) about the relationship between Hungarian nationalism and Hungarian folk instruments, arguing that

„just as nations put music into museums, they employ music to 'museumize' the nation-state – in other words to preserve and present the very elements needed to realize nationalism through performance in the course of an ongoing history.”

To one survey participant at the 2015 Székely Vágta, a 34 year-old man from Miercurea Ciuc (Csíkszereda), the Székely Vágta was the best place to come to see the qualities and attributes of the Székely and/or Hungarian nations spelled out in their strongest forms: „It represents the traditions, culture and lifestyle of the ancient Hungarian people,” he said of the event (Vágta interview, 2015[b]). „The conquest, the wandering out of Asia [...], the lifestyle itself, the beliefs - every characteristic of this nation” (*ibid*).

Another man, a 37 year-old from Sfântu Gheorghe (Sepsiszentgyörgy), claimed that:

The main reason that so many people come here is not because of the shopping possibilities, but because people are a bit exhibitionist, and they need to appear at an event where the word 'Székely' is mentioned. Then it doesn't matter if it is a gallop or a gathering. It just has to contain the word Székely.... These sort of events create a kind of group spirit". (Vágta interview, 2015[a]).

These identity markers are used in the marketing strategies of both nation and non-state nation brands. From the marketing literature, Douglas Holt (2004) highlights four main elements of commercial brand strategy – the way in which brands attempt to fulfil the motivations behind them. First, there must be some evidence of the success of the „product,” or it must be seen to be of some degree of quality (*ibid*, p.63). Second, a meaningful brand story must exist, constructed by „cultural insiders,” which is seen as genuine by consumers (*ibid*, p.189). Third, there must be a kind of tension between existing ideology and societal perceptions and undercurrents. In other words, consumers must see a difference between the way that they are, and the way they wish to be (*ibid*, p.41). Finally, Holt argues that elites and consumers alike must actively participate in the myth-making process in order to ensure that the brand is maintained and strengthened. Just as each of these elements contributes to the success of a commercially branded product, so too do such strategies lead to the strength or weakness of a nation brand.

Brand equity

The extent to which a nation brand is said to be strong can be measured in terms of brand equity. Nation brand equity has become an increasingly popular topic among scholars as well as nation-branding practitioners (Anholt, 2010). In the case of non-state nation brands, it is first and foremost the in-group perception which matters when measuring equity, rather than external perceptions. Measures might include, but are not limited to, the strength of specifically „national” institutions, the media, and political representatives, as well as the levels of saturation or the promotion of national symbolism and the „reach” of national „champions” or „ambassadors.”

A comparable brand in the Romanian state which brings to light the concept of nation brand equity is that of the Hungarian minority living in and around the city of Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár). Unlike the Székely, who have organised themselves as an ethno-political nation, the Cluj Hungarians lack both key situational circumstances as well as the political drive to set themselves apart as a distinct national group of their own. Theirs is, as Srivastava (2006: 181) terms it, a „piggybacking brand” whose key source of identity and image stems from a parent brand – in this case, the Hungarian state.

An opinion piece which appeared in the Hungarian daily newspaper *Szabadság* in 1996 demonstrates and bemoans the weak collectivity of the Cluj Hungarians when compared to the Székely. To illustrate this weakness, the writer points to the lack of Hungarian-language bookshops in Cluj-Napoca at the time: „In Odorheiu Secuiesc there are two bookshops where if a person goes in, they may feel as if they were in Debrecen or Kecskemét.... And why do we not have this ourselves in Cluj?” („Ó, Szerencétlen Kolozsvári Magyarok”, 1996). The writer concludes that „As I see it, there is no problem with our talent or cleverness. There is a problem with our faith: we do not trust enough in our own power” (*ibid*). Ultimately, the writer determines that the Cluj Hungarians simply do not band together as effectively as the Székely: „We know that suitable emphasis is necessary to bring this to our town elders’ attention, but first we must ourselves see the Cluj Hungarians as a human community with great internal potential” (*ibid*).

Brand audience, brand ambassadors, brand communication

The primary motivation of a minority nation brand is to build itself up as much as possible with the support of as much of the national population as possible. Only when the nation brand is strong within the „hearts and minds” of „members” can the brand effectively be transferred to and promoted in the external sphere. The extent to which a non-state nation

brand exists to an international audience depends on the strength of the brand and the motivation of brand agents in projecting the voice of the nation (Dinnie, 2008). Only once a national in-group invests in their own nation's brand can that nation have the power to sell the brand internationally. This can explain why national minorities who seek autonomy or secession are often perceived as stronger groups with greater legitimacy on the international stage – because the in-group has a high degree of loyalty and unity and this helps to propel the brand further afield.

Not every member of a nation brand audience, however, is equal. It is here that Brubaker's groups/categories distinction becomes relevant. Whilst Brubaker argues that we should not view national categories in groupist terms, this article argues that, by-and-large, we can in fact do so. With the exception of a small segment of the population who totally reject all connection with the national label ascribed to them by others, every other „member” of a nation reinforces the national brand on a daily basis, simply by identifying with it.

By arguing that national groups and categories have a real analytical distinction, Brubaker quite ironically places almost all the agency of nation-building and nationalism in the hands of political elites. There is certainly truth to the idea that some actors within the national group have greater interests in promoting nationhood and the nation brand than others. Political elites, contemporary national „heroes,” sports stars, cultural celebrities, and those with a vested interest in the economy of the territory and the political unit are typically much more active „brand ambassadors” than the everyday audience of the nation brand. These brand ambassadors are not, in the case of non-state nations, on a payroll, and many would not even be aware of their heightened role in shaping and promoting national identity. Yet they can be identified as such because their status and reach in the community prompts others to look up to and emulate them in many matters, including in their national self-identification.

„Everyday people” are agents of the nation brand too. Without them, without their constant telling and re-telling, consuming and re-packaging, and their social stoking of every bit of kindling which makes up the nation brand, the brand would cease to exist. Just as a product brand dies out without consumers, a nation cannot exist without an audience. To this end, brand communication is a central facet of the nation-branding framework developed by author.

One of the most common methods of brand communication in the commercial field is word-of-mouth, and this holds true for communicating the nation. The relaxed

atmosphere of the Székely Vágta makes informal, inter-personal pollination and the consumption of the nation brand simple and palatable for all attendees. Even the audience members themselves noted the casual nationalism of the event, with one interviewee, a 15 year-old boy, describing the Vágta as „a tradition-keeping event where people can have fun and relax as much as they like” (Vágta interview, 2015[e]). When asked about the type of people attending the event and the type of conversations had by the attendees, the young man offered a most philosophical answer: „The majority of people come here to have fun, but of course every topic comes up while drinking a glass of wine” (*ibid*).

Another attendee, a 63 year-old Székely man from Sfântu Gheorghe, gave a similar account of the way in which the Székely nation brand was communicated at the Vágta:

„[The Székely Vágta] is worth paying attention to, it is worth coming to, because one can only learn from it, and this way they will get to know what kind of traditions this nation has, which were born here and stay here, and which traditions they are now trying to bring up to a higher level. It is worth to come here and participate.” (Vágta interview, 2015[i]).

His statement is an explicit demonstration of the way in which national identity is constructed and branded, and also how members of the national group happily buy into and reconstruct that brand. Not only does the interviewee wish to attend the event to find out about „what kind of traditions this nation has,” but he also accepts that other actors within the nation are playing an active role in bringing certain aspects of the culture „up to a higher level” (*ibid*).

Brand architecture

The final aspect of the nation branding framework developed by this thesis is the idea of „brand architecture.” This is a marketing concept not previously considered in relation to Nation and Nationalism Studies or the analysis of nation branding. In its conventional usage, the term refers to products owned by the same parent company, and considers the brand relationships existing between them (Kapferer, 2012). This same concept can be applied to the analysis of nation brands, though in this context the term should be understood as the architecture of the international system – the relationships that exist both between states and between national minority groups. The reason for this inclusive definition of the international system is this: while non-state national groups may not have

an official voice in the international system of state and non-state actors, they can nevertheless have an external, international impact – however insignificant – and this impact must be seen as separate from the containing or parent state. In other words, when Székely political leaders project their voices, their ideals, and their domestic power externally, they are clearly acting for the national group in the international system, regardless of their lack of statehood.

When speaking of a „brand architecture” in the context of the Romanian state, a vast web of national relationships and interactions beg for consideration. The most obvious is the Romanian nation brand, which is the product of both implicit branding, like that of the Székely, but also of explicit marketing, in the form of international cultural institutes, cultural diplomacy, and place branding and marketing (Lambrea, 2014). Given the Székely's majority in the Covasna, Harghita and Mureş counties, however, the Romanian brand largely defers to that of the Székely at the Vágta (held in Covasna county).

The more significant relationship within the branding architecture evident at the Székely Vágta is that of the Hungarians and Székely. Possible to view as both clashing and complementary, the manifestation of the core Hungarian nation brand is unmistakable at the event. How the Székely and Hungarian brands relate at the Vágta can tell the observer a great deal, not only about the Székely brand itself, but also about the umbrella nature of the Hungarian nation brand, the equity of the Székely brand, and the implications of the Hungarian/Székely relationship for Romanian national identity, unity, and security.

The divergent perceptions of attendees of the Székely Vágta regarding the relationship of their national brand to that of the Hungarians offer fascinating insights into brand architecture. Such a divergence of perceptions is natural, this article argues, but the extent of the variance does have implications for the strength of the Székely brand. Notably, when asked „What are the differences between the Székely and Hungarians?,” even those participants who had answered in the affirmative to „A Székely is a Hungarian” found plenty to discuss.

Many responses followed similar themes. One man claimed, for example, that „the Székely are a little more inventive, because they lived in harder circumstances and destiny forced them to learn to do everything” (Vágta interview, 2015[I]). This inventiveness was reiterated by a 66 year-old woman, who claimed that „Székely people are stronger, more inventive, more determined, they reach their goals. Hungarians learn a lot from us when

they visit us here” (Vágta interview, 2015[n]). A similar answer was given by a 31 year-old woman from Covasna, who believed that Székely people were „a bit more pointful, we have to fight harder to keep our Hungarian identity. We are a bit more 'defeated by destiny' than the Hungarians.... We are also a bit sadder than the Hungarians” (Vágta interview, 2015[k]). Some interviewees, however, saw little or no difference between the two national groups.

To the Székely themselves, the intermingling of Székely and Magyar national symbols at the Vágta is familiar and innocuous. To the researcher's eye, however, the relationship between the two nation brands is fascinating and demonstrates a great deal about national identification, brand competition, and particularly about nation brand architecture.

Concluding remarks

The author's qualitative research at the 2015 Székely Vágta found that viewing the nation as brand was helpful in each of the following areas:

Identity – Allowing the nation's overall image and the manifestation of that image to be identified as if it were a product with associated brand elements.

Strategy/Motivation – Allowing for comprehension of the national group's strategy in promoting that product, and their motivation for doing so.

Agents – Helping to pinpoint those who contribute to the construction and maintenance of the nation brand, as well as the hierarchical variance in their contributions.

Communication – Identifying the channels via which agents and audience communicate and receive information about the nation brand.

Equity – Assisting researchers in comparing disparate outcomes in Nationalism Studies by viewing nations as if they were competing brand products of varying values.

Architecture – Facilitating a more structured analysis of inter-national relationships, by understanding the international system as something of a „parent company” in which each brand has a unique relationship to those around it.

It is the conclusion of this study that when viewing „nation” through these sub-frames of a nation-branding lens, its inherent „groupness” becomes apparent. If a nation exists, the author argues, then it is because it has been built by the people. Although not

every national is a nationalist, „the nation” and its associated brand must be conceptualised in groupist terms. Without such a groupist intellection, without some trust in the existence of a „general will,” all social-scientific analysis would be reduced to the tedious and ultimately unhelpful surveying of individual sentiment. Every product brand in the world has a different outcome thanks to the diverse strength of communicated brand messages, the reach of ambassadors, and the product's position within a brand architecture. Nations, both state and non-state, are no different.

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