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ORIGINAL SCIENTIFIC ARTICLE
doi:10.5937/ekonomika1802043C
Received: January, 03, 2018
Accepted: March, 05, 2018

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CREATING A STATE BRAND: A BRAND AND BRANDING SERBIA⁴

Abstract

The states make different attempts to attract more tourists, foreign investors, develop the international partnerships, stimulate export, make better position for their products and services, but also to position and impose itself more efficiently, meaningful and innovative, by the personally recognizable brands, to the international environment. Aiming at this, it is not only necessary to devote oneself to branding of a country, but to do it in a way that significantly differs from others, which initially favours the positive branding of the country. The subject of this paper is to analyse the significance of state branding and measuring the state position as a brand, as in the case of Serbia. For Serbia as a brand, there are characteristic numerous efforts on its positioning, but also numerous obstacles that are on that way.

Key words: brand, state, branding, strategies.

JEL classification: Z32, Z33, M30

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⁴ Acknowledgements - Paper is a part of research within the project no. 46006 III - Sustainable agriculture and rural development in the function of accomplishing strategic objectives of the Republic of Serbia in the Danube region, financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

КРЕИРАЊЕ БРЕНДА ДРЖАВЕ: БРЕНД И БРЕНДИРАЊЕ СРБИЈЕ

Апстракт

Државе чине различите покушаје да привуку што више туриста, страних инвеститора, да развију међународна партнерства, да стимулишу извоз, да што боље позиционирају своје производе и услуге, али и да се путем персонално препознатљивих брендова, што ефикасније, смисленије и иновативније позиционирају и на само себи својствен начин, наметну међународном окружењу. У том и таквом циљу, није само неопходно посветити се брендирању земље, него то учинити на начин који се озбиљно разликује од других, што у старту даје предност позитивном брендирању земље. Предмет овог рада је анализа значаја брендирања земље и мерења позиције земље као бренда, на примеру Србије. За Србију као бренд, карактеристични су бројни напори на њеном позиционирању, али и бројне препреке на које наилази на том путу.

Кључне речи: бренд, држава, брендирање, стратегије

Introduction

Increasingly harsh and merciless competitive struggle on the market is just one of the numerous consequences of a modern and complex business environment. In such, mostly harsh conditions, the competitive struggle takes place as at the companies' level, as well as at the level of the concrete states. Modern society in which prevail electronic media, social networks, fast and almost everywhere accessible internet, provides us freedom and makes the possibilities to present ourselves as better as possible through the virtual presentations, both as individuals and the state. We make a personal seal that brands us by choosing our wardrobe, faculty, a vacation location or a number of social networks we are attached to. We become our personal PRs by sharing certain personal information, who wants to present their „product” as better as possible. By branding ourselves, our city or our country, we present ourselves – a brand which we know the best.

When a certain person hears a word *brand*, he/she usually thinks about some world famous company, its logo, a trademark or the products that the company produces. The initial thought leads to identification of an individual's favourite brands (*Nike, Adidas, H&M, Zara, Mango, Coca-Cola, Nestle, Swatch...*). The products long since haven't fulfilled only their functional value, but have presented the companies that created them and people who used them, their way of life, cultural characteristics, beliefs and values. Branding a country in modern, already mentioned conditions and environment, which change continuously, is neither simple, nor easy task to achieve. The task cannot be approached lightly and cursorily.

The state brand represents a rather abstract concept, while it doesn't contain any concrete, „tangible“ offer. At the same time, it is very complex, because it encircles almost all spheres of life of the state: its population, history, culture, language, political and economic system, celebrities...The chosen strategy, in order the country to be better

branded in international conditions, is a key and determining factor. It is an imperative that it is sufficiently original, courageous, inspiring and surprising. If the strategy has satisfied all or most of conditions, than it is „only“ necessary to motivate and unite all interested around, and send messages properly and interact with the already defined goal.

The importance of the state, city, or a particular region brand is not only to attract tourists, but also in creating the image and the reputation of the state. In Serbia there are significant, yet still unused opportunities in tourism, which require a serious approach, knowledge, creating and commitment to the process of building identify and image of tourism destination (Vranić et al, 2014). It should distinguish between three concepts: the branding of the place, the nation branding and branding of destinations. According to the Novčić-Korać and Šegota (2017) Serbia has failed to develop a coherent platform for brand management of the nation at the highest strategic level, mostly due to poor or incorrect understanding of the concept as it is not separated from the branding destination and tourism marketing.

The aim of the research in our paper is to identify the positions of Serbia as a brand in regard to other countries and pointing out to the need for an adequate approach and active brand management of a country, which ultimately contributes both to companies and the entire society.

Identification and complexity of a state branding issue

The irrepressible process of the world globalization, which surrounds us, is so intensive that sometimes seems that the whole planet turns into a gigantic supermarket in which nations are treated as the shelf products, which desperately try to attract the customers' attention. It is completely clear that the states, as well as the regions and towns within, must fight "tooth and nail" for their place in the sun in this 21st Century cruel world. Therefore, it is absolutely clear that branding the nation is not a luxury, but on the contrary, it is an imperative.

Modern environment has caused a need to consider a brand at the completely level – the state level. In that sense, the state starts to be "a product" that should be offered on the market. Nevertheless, the state couldn't be observed as a conventional product, since it covers a wide range of factors and associations: location, tourist attractions, natural resources, local products, people, ethnical groups, history, culture, language, political and economic systems, institutions, infrastructure, celebrities and image. A term "branding a state" is still relatively a new term. "Nation branding refers to the overall image of a state, which includes the political, economic, historical and cultural dimensions." (Fan, 2006, p.8). This author also makes a difference between the concepts „the nation branding" and „the nation's brand“, and in this way considers that the nation has a brand, whether the branding activity realizes or not, and this is why it considers that „the nation branding cannot be observed as a cure for everything that is „not good“ in a country's image“ (Fan, 2006, p.11). It is absolutely clear that branding the state is an *exciting* and *complex* phenomenon. It is exciting, because there is a relatively modest theoretical coverage of this phenomenon, but also a significant amount of practical activities in the real world, while the complexity of the phenomenon reflects in the involvement in several levels, dimensions and disciplines, which exceeds the conventional branding

of a company and/or a product. Branding the state has undoubtedly three types of key impacts: on the position of a state in international policy, attracting foreign investments and tourism (Vranješ et al, 2014).

Taking into consideration everything the abovementioned, there can be concluded that the national branding is a complex process, which aims to differentiate the country from other countries in international environment, and also positioning the country in accordance with its specificities, in order to strengthen an image from the political, economic, social, historical and cultural point of view. The state is the one that should protect and supervise one country's brand, but it surely must be taken into consideration a fact that population of a country is the main carrier of the branding process. Simply, as Skoko (2009, p.10) stated, there must find the way to attract the attention of others and tell them the story of themselves in a way that will create followers, customers, lobbyists and friends among them, or at least reduce the number of enemies.

Measuring the position of a country's national brand

A brand of the country, which it tries to create, should make the perception on the country; provide the country's differentiation in regard to other countries, as well as more successful positioning. The country's branding process implies the formulation of the appropriate communication strategy that should make countries attractive to the target audience. One of the ways to measure the country's position as a brand was presented by the consulting house *Bloom Consulting*. The *Bloom Consulting*, which sees the country's brand as a property of the state population that should be managed, and it develops so called *Bloom Consulting CRC Brand Wheel*, which shows 6 different dimensions in branding countries, regions and towns: attracting investments (trade), attracting tourism, attracting talents, increase of pride, improving public diplomacy, increase of export (*Bloom Consulting Country Brand Ranking, Tourism edition, 2013*). Each of the mentioned dimensions has a different target audience with different needs, and therefore, it is necessary to develop also the specific strategies for each of them, in order to achieve the clear differentiation of the country. Traditionally, these dimensions were measured by public opinion, perceptions and interviews with experts. However, the *Bloom Consulting* improves the entire measurement process by using the adequate tools, i.e. an algorithm, on the bases of which define a rank of the certain countries' national brands.

In order for the state to have a better brand, it has to be better as well. We can define the state according to its roles, i.e. international and internal. At the international level, the state is sovereign. The sovereignty of a state makes its internationally recognized borders and the total power of the state within these borders. According to its internal role, the state is a coercive apparatus, which ensures that the state's population fulfil their legal obligations. There are more than 200 states in the world today, and it is logical that each of them tries to be recognizable. The key is to build a national identity based on the comparative advantages and the creation of a positive image on a country that will contribute to products from this country.

The concept of branding is mainly related to corporations and their products. Nevertheless, theoreticians are increasingly paying attention to a state brand, which doesn't only represent the opinion of foreigners about one country, but refers also to tourists,

investments, increase of export, increase of reputation, greater chances for lobbying. The state branding requires a serious approach to the problems, regardless whether the state will perform this activity independently or will engage the specialized brand building companies. Often, the term brand keeps confusing concepts with hymn or flag. From a marketing point of view, we can observe a flag as a country's logo. The state as a brand represents the combination of individual destinations, products, services, people, manifestations (events), processes, ideas etc. It is a feeling that occurs to an individual in the sense of a nation or state. National identity, simply said, is a sense of belonging to a state or nation. The creation of branding strategy is first of all a research work, because the contents we present to others must be found in our history, culture, way of life; otherwise, if the strategy doesn't agree with truth related to people and places, the state population are less likely to believe in it, and not to mention the rest of the world. While in branding of a company take part all of employees, in branding of a state the situation differ – there can always be an individual or non-government organization to inform the world that the situation is different. The conclusion is clear - if we speak about the state branding, we must start from the national identity, while the best example of the identity promotion is continuity, and there is no identity without continuity. The most common the countries are recognized by their people, events, gastronomy, architecture, while the media helps in it. If a state doesn't offer anything the abovementioned, it cannot become a brand. Considering that, in branding the state or some other destination, there should start from their geographic, personal, institutional and events branding. Events are very useful for the country that from the standpoint of finance, because it is estimated that her every dinar invested by foreign tourists back tenfold, and from the standpoint of improving the image. Necessity in a complex analysis of the marketing activity is caused by the necessity in making the right management decisions, its conditions and requirements for benefits and opportunities for improvement. In the sphere of performance criteria no generalized point of view of marketing activities (Ivanova et al, 2017). For instance, according to Hall (2004), location branding is a hot topic throughout the world, not least in the UK, principally as a key driver for tourism, inward investment and/or export revenue. International tourism receipts into the UK have been in long-term decline in an increasingly competitive market. The noted author analyses the question of how a highly diverse Britain should be cohesively positioned to meet the demands of the future and the changing visitor.

However, there is interdependence between a country of origin and a production brand when the essential characteristics of a particular product category are also significant associations to an image of a country of origin, which are based on the stated basic dimensions of that image. If there is no such connection, then we have a neutral relationship between a production brand and an image of a country of origin. Design and prestige can be very important characteristics when a consumer thinks about buying a car, TV, camera, watch, leather shoes, but also the relatively irrelevant characteristics if a consumer considers buying a product.

Interdependence between the image, and production brand and the country of origin image is present if the production-marketing dimensions of the image of the country of origin (innovation, quality, design, prestige, production skills) are also the important characteristics for evaluating a particular category of the production brand.

Favourable interdependence of the image of the country of origin and the production brand is present in case when a certain dimension of the positive image of the country

of origin considers as an important brand characteristic. Unfavourable interdependence is present when an important characteristic of the production brand is considered as a dimension of the negative image of the country of origin.

Serbia as a brand

In order that a country like Serbia would appear and distinguish itself in the global arena, it is necessary, first of all, to become “visible”. Besides, the problem is in numerous attitudes and biases that have become established, as well as the lack of a clear vision and an adequate strategy of Serbian national branding. The national brand of Serbia, observed from the ability to attract tourism point of view, has currently pretty unsatisfying rating in regard to countries covered by the *Bloom Consulting* rating. The positions of Serbia, as well as the other ex-SFRY countries, were shown in table below.

Table 1: Review of ranks of ex-SFRY countries as brands from the attracting tourism point of view

Country	Rank 2011	Rank 2012	Rank 2013
Serbia	87 th	77 th	96 th
Montenegro	100 th	102 nd	95 th
Bosnia & Herzegovina	88 th	91 st	113 rd
FYR Macedonia	122 nd	115 th	146 th
Croatia	29 th	19 th	27 th
Slovenia	55 th	46 th	48 th

Source: Table is a result of summarizing data of the *Bloom Consulting Country Brand Ranking (Tourism edition)* report for the years 2011, 2012 and 2013

As we can see in Table 1, there can be concluded that in all three years the best ranked country in the group of ex-SFRY countries was Croatia, and the worst ranked was Macedonia. Data concerning Serbia showed the trend of its national brand position by years.

According to the abovementioned data, relatively observed (taking into consideration a different number of countries comprised by ranking by years), we can conclude that the national brand of Serbia had increased its rating in 2012, and then had decreased in the year 2013. Serbia has the unsatisfying image in a global context. Excuses for a bad rating were looked for in the past, while the negative image of the country has been credited to the serious political and social-economic problems.

Domazet and Hanić (2012, pp. 600-605) point to the existence of major weaknesses in national branding Serbia among which are most important:

- Lack of systemic approach related to the development of the national brand of Serbia;
- Lack of a strategy for improving the national brand of Serbia;
- Lack of marketing and communication strategy of the national brand of Serbia;
- Underestimating the importance of national branding to improve the country’s economic potential (exports, inflows of foreign investments, tourism);

- Low level of financial investment in the national branding process;
- Inefficient institutional structure and coordination between individual institutions in charge of building a national brand;
- Insufficient cooperation between the private and public sector in the development of the national brand.

Exactly „the negative image and stereotypes have a bad influence already in the early stages of decision-making (i.e. intentions for searching data on a destination), owing to which is necessary to assess carefully the perception of potential tourist image, who would potentially visit the destination for the first time, and choose and implement the strategy of the destination re-branding.“ (Bosnjak, 2010, p. 327). In the process of re-branding Serbia, we shouldn't go in parallel with the negative image from the past. Exactly the opposite, Serbia should identify its key, specific values and build a campaign upon them. In that way, precious time, which can be used more efficiently, won't be lost. As a problem often appears the inadequate implementation of the country's branding process, which reflects in completely poorly designed and uncoordinated campaigns followed by an attractive logo and leasing expensive advertising space. In that case, the image of the country will not only be improved, but will be additionally violated. Therefore it is necessary to approach this long-lasting and demanding process in a serious and organized way. The first step to take is to form an action group that would actively direct the process at all levels – public sector, government institutions, companies, cultural and educational institutions, non-government organizations, public, etc. Only in this way it is possible to avoid the abandonment of the process to spontaneous treatment, which can significantly slow down progress, moreover, it will lead to a downturn. Before defining the vision and strategy of building the brand of the state, as well as in the case of a classical product or service branding, it is necessary to conduct some research of the target markets. It is necessary to interview population of the country, foreign tourists, investors, experts and the other stakeholders in order to get to know the current perceptions related to the country.

The role of tourism in branding Serbia

Tourism is often the most visible aspect of the national brand. As in modern world more money is spent on various tourist trips, it is understandable the desire of all countries to take as much of a cake as you can and to point out to natural beauties, geographic position and the wealth of cultural and historical monuments through ads, spots and other promotional campaigns (Manić et al., 2012). As one country is more attractive to tourists, it is better ranked, i.e. it has a stronger brand. The Republic of Serbia definitely has a good tourist potential although it has no access to the sea. Much of this potential is still unused. For example, it is also proved by the comparison of Serbian competitiveness in regard to countries-its main competitors. In the Tourism Development Strategy of the Republic of Serbia, the following countries are listed: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia. There should be emphasized that in every of these countries prevail the continental tourism, as well as in Serbia. In table below are shown the ranks of these five countries and Serbia as well according to the *TTCI*

index. According to Ubavic (2015), this index is a useful analytical tool, despite of some imperfections. Serbia should surely use the indicators of this index in order to compare itself with other countries as the tourist destinations, as well as improve its potentials and better show up as a brand.

Table 2: Competitiveness of Serbia in regard to the main competitors in 2015

Country	TTCI Index	Rank in the world	Rank in Europe
Czech Republic	4.22	37/141	21/37
Hungary	4.14	41/141	25/37
Bulgaria	4.05	49/141	28/37
Slovakia	3.84	61/141	31/37
Romania	3.78	66/141	32/37
Serbia	3.34	95/141	35/37

Source: Downloaded from *The Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report, 2015*, www3.weforum.org/docs/TT15/WEF_Global_Travel&Tourism_Report_2015.pdf.

If Serbia would like to change these parameters, it should create a redacted tourism development strategy, which would comprise business, urban, rural and mountain tourism, as well as the development of tourism on the Danube and the thematic circular tourist tours, like the Roman Emperors Route. In first seven months 2015, measured by a number of overnight stays, the highest turnover was recorded in mountainous areas (1,110,534 overnight stays), which was also the biggest increase (16.5%) in regard to the same time period in 2014. This trend is the result of a number of overnight stays increase, as domestic ones (953,522) for 16.0%, as well as foreign tourists (157,012) for 20.0%. In Belgrade was recorded the increase in total number of overnight stays (14.6%) in regard to the period January-July 2014, where domestic tourists (144,708) were recorded the increase of 9.0%, and foreign tourists (677,074) for 15.8%. According to the registered number of overstay nights, the domestic tourists were mostly stayed in mountain centres and then in spa resorts (974,547 overnight stays) etc. Foreign guests, who were recorded 1,339,502 overnight stays in the Republic of Serbia, in the period January-July 2015, have mostly stayed in Belgrade (677,074) or the increase of 15.8% (<http://mtt.gov.rs>).

The most significant place in the religious tourism is reserved for churches and monasteries from the time of the medieval Serbian state. At the same time, tourists have the greatest interest in them. Religious facilities on the area of Serbia have played a significant role in preservation and cherishing of the Serbian national identity and culture. Nowadays, these are the places of pilgrimage. Monuments of the medieval Serbian architecture have been created since the beginning of IX Century, all the way to XVII Century. In that huge time range, in all Serbian areas and regions under the rule of Serbian rulers, have been built several hundred churches and monasteries, of which many have been preserved to date, whether in their original or slightly changed appearance. They were built in different times and different styles, depending on influence – West or East, Byzantine or the influence of Sveta Gora. Gorgeous paintings, iconostases, frescos within these beautiful buildings were preserved. In some of them, the relics of some of the greatest Serbian rulers can be seen. Some of the most famous are Studenica, Sopoćani, Žiža, Manasija, Ravanica. These monasteries are generally a

real cultural and social immense wealth, and they represent a fine and cherished image on our religion.

Spa resorts in Serbia have a long tradition and have always been the favourite places for vacation. Spa centres in Serbia are located at the foot of mountains, surrounded by woods, protected from strong winds; they have a mild climate and are environmentally friendly. Serbia is very rich with thermo-mineral springs, whose waters by their chemical composition, temperature and other properties, allow treatment and therapy of almost all diseases for which spas are recommended. Tourism, vacation and rehabilitation are the perfect combination that can be offered to tourists. Most of spa resorts are in some of 53 thermal localities, which have been used as bathrooms since the ancient Roman times.

Many of Serbian mountains were proclaimed as the national parks, with a varied selection of the accommodation possibilities and their exceptional beauties and untouched beauties they were representing the exceptional natural potential of our country. In first ten months of the year 2016, the mountain centres were *recorded* 19.2% of total tourist arrivals in Serbia, while the overnight stays were *recording* 26.0%. Tourist traffic in the first ten months was increased for 17.5%, while a number of overnight stays was increased for 16.8% (<http://mtt.gov.rs>).

The Republic of Serbia is the country of extraordinary possibilities for vacation in the countryside. It is the preserved nature, clean air with a smell of hay, flowers, pine trees and pastures, clear river and streams. Guests here can really rest and enjoy the peace of nature or can be active all day long. Vuković and associates (2015) point out rural tourism development should be based on the rich pension and out-of-pension tourist offer. Presence of natural and human (anthropogenic) sources must be a marketing and management leading to achieve certain results. Alternatively, it is already known that numerous families in Serbia have employed their households in the purpose of rural tourism. Their purpose is to provide to strangers and also our businessmen to feel the difference between fruits and vegetables they buy in the markets (supermarkets), which are cultivated in greenhouses, and the ones they pick up in these ethno villages when they get up in the morning.

Manifestations (events) are one of the ways the state can attract both foreign and domestic tourists, ensure a new source of income, present its culture, values and contribute to the new image of the country in general. The assumptions are that tourists will recommend their friends to come to our country, and with the development of the Internet, he is given the opportunity to put pictures on his social networks that his friends will see. In the world, the manifestation tourism, since the beginning of the 1980s, is mentioned as a special industry (Bjeljac, 2006). In Serbia, manifestation tourism, as an economically prosperous type of tourism, is of importance only to the half of the first decade of the 21st century (Bjeljac, 2010). Particularly important is the fact that it is also the first time in strategic documents, especially in the Tourism Development Strategy of Serbia (2006), where this segment of tourism is seen as a great global market potential, which contributes to the return of Serbia to the international market, raising the level of competitiveness and creating a stronger base for marketing activities.

Almost 1000 events in Serbia are held annually and this is something we can boast of, and therefore it is logical a slogan – „Serbia, the country of events“. Modern tourists want to visit new destinations and get to know with the unknown cultures and acquire new experiences through these events. The Ministry of Economy of the Republic

of Serbia, more accurately the Sector for Tourism, points out the following advantages of Serbia: vicinity of Serbia to tourist markets, first of all the EU member countries, affordable prices for foreign tourists, attractiveness of tourist destinations, attractiveness and the global recognition of events (*Exit, Guča, Beerfest* etc.). It is interesting that Serbia is the only European country that could boast with the increased number of tourists (2%) in the year 2009 in regard to the year before. The reason for such success is exactly the traditional events, such as: *Guča, Exit and Beerfest*, but there shouldn't be neglected also the Universiade in Belgrade. These festivals have attracted a million and a half visitors, of which 10% foreign tourists.

Since Serbia is the country that is very proud of its food, while most of tourists praise Serbian tasteful dishes as well, so the events of this type are unavoidable. They always attract numerous visitors, for example *Leskovačka roštiljada (Leskovac Barbeque Event)*, visited by more than 150 thousands people. Besides, we must mention *Pršutijada (Prosciutto or Smoked Ham Event)*, *Slaninijada (Bacon Event)*, and *Kobasicijada (Sausage Event)*. Some of the events have a long tradition, like “*Dragačevski sabor trubača*” (Gathering of trumpeters in Dragacevo) (1961), “*Filmski susreti*” (Film encounters) in Niš, which have been held since the year 1966, while on the other hand we have very popular festivals, which have been established in 21st Century, such as *Exit* (2000), *Beer fest* (2003) and *Kustendorf* (2008).

The events are very useful for one country, as from the finances point of view (it is estimated that every dinar invested is returned ten times), as well as from the image improvement point of view. It is estimated that a tourist will recommend to his/her friends to come to Serbia, and along with the development of the internet, there is a possibility of uploading images on social networks, which can be seen by his/her friends.

According to Ivanović and Milićević (2009) the continental areas in Serbia need adequate tourist infrastructure construction for the dynamic development of tourism. It is necessary to determine the tactics for Serbian destinations to become highly respected destinations of preserved natural and cultural values. Serbia lacks well established brands, which means that we should start with the process of marking the different tourist products.

Conclusion

As in case of a classical product, the image of a country is being created for a long time. However, the image is easy to lose, and therefore should take into consideration a fact that branding is a permanent process, which requires continuous efforts in finding new development opportunities. There is plenty of room for improvement, such as the improvement of a tourist product, development of road infrastructure in order to attract tourists, etc. One of the first steps towards that goal is surely to know the dimensions of national branding, a target audience and their specific needs. However, branding of a country shouldn't be underestimated, but should be treated as a final moment. The efforts invested in branding a country alone cannot solve the problems. Positive change of a country and society will make the positive changes in its brand, and thereby also more favourable positions in global ranking. Thus, the national branding is not alone the goal. The strategy of branding Serbia in fact should be understood as the strategy of

its socioeconomic development, which results should reflect on its populations' general well-being.

The way to create a Serbian brand as a tourist destination is long and requires a lot of investments in those parts of the country, which could be attractive as to foreign, as well as to domestic tourists. It is important to determine some „designation“ from the very beginning according to which Serbia would be recognizable, and then make this „designation“ well known in as many countries as possible, in order to attract as many tourists as possible and bring higher revenues to our country. It is also important to organize intellectually a „logo“ as a positive association to the Serbian tourist offer and work further on its recognition. Maybe Serbia is a small country – in territorial sense of word, but it surely has much to offer, such as numerous beverages and specialties, for which it can be said that they are unique in the world. Besides, the Serbian national costumes are in great demand both of our people in the diaspora and strangers, because their quality is obvious. Institutional, personal and event branding are just parts of the state's branding. Besides many efforts of individuals to present their country as better as possible, like for example Novak Djokovic, who is currently the most famous Serbian brand, and besides the Serbian population efforts to invest in certain events and the production of Serbian traditional dishes, drinks and wardrobe, the state is the one that must play the main role in order to raise it to a higher level, while individuals can only start presenting the country.

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