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Citation for final published version:

Jimenez Martinez, Cesar 2018. P Surowiec, Nation branding, public relations and soft power: Corporatising Poland [Book Review]. *Media, War and Conflict* 11 (4) , pp. 489-491.  
10.1177/1750635218801720 file

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1750635218801720>  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1750635218801720>>

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## **Book Review**

### **Surowiec, P., *Nation Branding, Public Relations and Soft Power: Corporatising Poland*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017**

Whilst the practice and discourse of nation branding emerged in the late 1990's, it is only in the last ten years that a consistent set of critical perspectives has materialised. Early literature on this subject was dominated by instrumental approaches, aimed at strengthening nation branding as a field of practice as well as offering guidance to policymakers (Kaneva, 2011). Nonetheless, in recent years the number of critical studies in nation branding has increased, with insights from fields such as sociology, geopolitics, international relations, promotional cultures, cultural studies and media and communications. These works have, amongst other findings, questioned the alleged success of nation branding campaigns, have highlighted how nation branding commodifies national identities and have observed that nation branding perpetuates inequalities on a local and global level.

Pawel Surowiec's book *Nation Branding, Public Relations and Soft Power: Corporatising Poland* is a recent addition to this critical literature. Rather than focussing on the phenomenon of nation branding on a global or regional level, or on specific campaigns, Surowiec's work provides a holistic and detailed account of the introduction and dissemination of nation branding in Poland during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through the examination of documents, media artefacts and almost 50 interviews with civil servants and private consultants, the book examines 'why newcomers to this area – nation branders – became leading voices on the governance of soft power and the management of Poland's reputations' (p. 2).

The book presents a theoretical framework based on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, in order to examine what Surowiec calls the 'field of national images management' (p.6). He defines this as the state-coordinated attempts to manage the reputation of a state or nation, as well as the soft power resources to exert influence. With this approach,

Surowiec sheds light on the array of public and private organisations competing to construct, project and manage a specific version of Polish national identity aimed at predominantly foreign audiences.

The examination of the *habitus* and discourses of these different actors, together with the political economy of nation branding in Poland, offers a nuanced perspective on how nation branding occurs in practice. Nation branding emerges as a set of procedures characterised by continuous friction between corporate and public interests, from within the country and overseas, rather than as an orderly site of coordinated and controlled narratives about national identity, as claimed by some of its advocates. These factions both compete and form alliances at various moments to mobilise a specific version of Polish identity to advance specific agendas. Significantly, the book demonstrates that nation branding is far from being a *post-political* activity. Indeed, political and economic considerations marry to form an ideological discourse that serves to impose and ‘legitimise the dominant neo-liberal social order’ within the Polish state (p. 188).

The most significant and provocative argument posed by *Nation Branding, Public Relations and Soft Power*, comes towards the end of the book. The author observes that, whilst different marketing campaigns were scrapped or abandoned –sometimes due to political considerations– and branding companies failed to position themselves as key players in the field of national images management in Poland, the local political class ultimately embraced the *idea of the nation brand*. Despite the apparent disappointments of particular campaigns or branding companies, nation branding has become a metaphor that Polish political and economic elites exploit to ‘reinvent nationhood as a form of economic corporate collectivity’ as well as ‘further embed Polishness within neo-liberal political economy’ (p. 177).

This phenomenon, termed *corpo-nationalism* (p. 177) by Surowiec, may have important implications beyond the Polish case. Although nation branding advocates have justified this practice by claiming that it may be useful to attract investment, entice tourists, boost exports and consolidate political aspirations of nations from all over the world, it is

subject to increasing scepticism given its failure to fulfil most of these promises (Aronczyk, 2013). Nonetheless, it appears that the *discourse* of nation branding has had a performative effect that serves to justify and naturalise the adoption of an economic approach to evaluate the legitimacy of state institutions, the increasing use of public funds to support private interests, as well as the dominance of economic practices as markers of nationhood.

Alongside the work of Bourdieu, the empirical observations made by *Nation Branding, Public Relations and Soft Power* are underpinned by an exhaustive revision of concepts such as nation branding, public diplomacy and propaganda, and of the various paradigms in nationalism studies and their relationship with promotional cultures. Whilst this level of detail serves to advance critical theoretical observations, it also risks distracting the reader from the main argument of the book. In addition, it may prove challenging for undergraduate students or those with less familiarity with this area of study.

With its high level of theoretical engagement, it is surprising that the book barely examines the concept of soft power. This is a significant shortcoming. Critical examinations of what soft power is and the implications of its use remain limited, despite its widespread adoption by policymakers. Indeed, the concept has become ‘a kind of catch-all term to describe how nation-states engage the global political landscape’ (Hayden, 2012, p. 6). Due to the dominance of American and Western European views on the subject, a deeper theoretical examination on how soft power is understood, articulated as well as exploited in the Polish context could have strengthened two of the stated aims of this book, namely, contributing to the ‘De-Westernisation’ of soft power studies (p. 189) and advancing current debates in the field of International Relations (p. 4), area in which nation branding has received narrow attention.

Despite these limitations, *Nation Branding, Public Relations and Soft Power* is a welcome contribution to the literature on nation branding and public diplomacy, as well as to the study of International Relations, political communication and promotional cultures. It will definitely appeal to researchers, teachers, and postgraduate students with

interests in these areas as well as regional experts focussed on Central and Eastern Europe.

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