National identity lite
Nation branding in post-Communist Romania and Bulgaria

Nadia Kaneva  
*University of Denver, USA*

Delia Popescu  
*LeMoyne College, USA*

**ABSTRACT** This article examines the efforts of post-communist Romania and Bulgaria to reinvent their national images through the use of nation branding. After the collapse of communism in 1989, former communist nations experienced significant political, economic and cultural turmoil, accompanied by a deeply felt need for national self-redefinition. Nation branding programs were intended to articulate a new image for external consumption and, at the same time, to revive national pride at home. Adopting a critical interpretive approach, this article analyses comparatively the symbolism in two branding campaigns in Romania and Bulgaria. The analysis teases out tensions and contradictions in the advertising texts to generate insights about the politics of image creation and symbolic commodification in the post-communist context. The authors find that the campaigns appropriate national identity for the purposes of neoliberal globalization. This appropriation constrains national imaginaries within an ahistorical, depoliticized frame, resulting in a form of *national identity lite*. In this way, nation branding also serves to foreclose democratic avenues for national redefinition.

**KEYWORDS** Bulgaria  ● commodification  ● national identity  ● nation branding  ● Romania
In the past decade, the term *nation branding* has gained popularity in business, policy and intellectual circles. Under the pressures of globalization, numerous countries have invested in branding efforts in the hopes of producing images that point to a future of new possibilities. This trend is perhaps most visible in the fast-growing sector of international tourism, where catchy slogans and colorful logos represent India (‘Incredible India’), Malaysia (‘Truly Asia’), South Africa (‘Alive With Possibility’) and many others. Yet nation branding entails more than travel catalogues and websites. Its advocates argue that it may just be the new panacea for smaller, poorer countries in need of a competitive advantage in the global marketplace (Anholt, 2003, 2007; Dinnie, 2008; Olins, 1999; Papadopoulos and Heslop, 2002). Moreover, the ‘emerging’ economies of Central and Eastern Europe are identified as particularly suited to benefit from it (Anholt, 2003). Put simply, nation branding proponents explain global relations of power through the metaphor of market competition and argue that nation branding offers a market-friendly approach to governance that transcends politics (Anholt, 2007; van Ham, 2001).

In keeping with this view, much of the scholarly work on nation branding is done within the field of marketing and tends to stay inside a functionalist, apolitical paradigm. Generally, the marketing literature assesses the mechanisms of nation branding programs and makes recommendations for enhancing their effectiveness (e.g. Simonin, 2008; Szondi, 2006). National identity and culture are seen as fixed, independent variables that contribute to ‘the essence’ of a national brand – a dependent variable – and are not discussed in historical or political terms (e.g. Anholt-GMI Nation Brands Index, 2005).

However, a growing body of critical scholarship problematizes branding and argues that it can be understood as a new form of ‘information capital’ (Arvidsson, 2006), characteristic of the logic of post-industrial capitalism (Lury, 2004; Moor, 2007). Focusing specifically on nation branding (Aronczyk, 2007, 2008; Jansen, 2008; Volcic, 2008), critical scholars argue that its discourse is another iteration of neoliberal ideology, which presumes that, ‘it is impossible and unnecessary even to try to counter the project of a “universal mercantile republic,” as Adam Smith envisaged it in the late 18th century’ and according to which ‘the market and technology become “forces of nature”’ (Mattelart, 1999: 3). A few of these studies look at Central and Eastern Europe and examine the challenges of national redefinition through branding in the post-communist context (Aronczyk, 2007; Baker, 2008; Bolin, 2006; Dzenovska, 2005; Jansen, 2008; Kaneva, 2007; Volcic, 2008). Our study is situated within this critical tradition and seeks to contribute to it by focusing on the way Romania and Bulgaria have engaged with nation branding. We analyse the use of images and symbols in the narratives of nation branding campaigns in both countries. In keeping with a critical and interpretive approach, our goal is not to assess the marketing effectiveness of the campaigns. Rather, we are interested in gaining insights into these countries’ self-reflective efforts at re-imagining their national identities, as captured in the branding texts.
We begin with the recognition that national identities are always constructed (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 1983), and that ‘multiple and contested imaginations of the nation are possible’ (Dzenovska, 2005: 174). Thus, nation branding narratives reflect the particular choices of elites as they re-imagine national identity, and entail ‘certain presuppositions about the world-as-it-is and the world-as-it-should-be’ (Dzenovska, 2005: 174). Further, a liberalized media sphere allows brand narratives to reach both internal and external audiences, creating a loop of identity articulation within which commercial images, created for external presentation, also affect internal national imaginaries. To examine these articulations, we analyse government-sponsored nation branding campaigns produced by Romania and Bulgaria between 2004 and 2007. Adopting an interpretive approach, we focus on two television commercials included in the campaigns and offer a critical textual analysis of their symbolism, themes and implicit meanings. We view the commercials’ texts as the congealed outcomes of complex symbolic negotiations over national identity, which represent the choices of business and political elites involved in the making of the campaigns. Thus, a critical analysis of the texts gives us an opportunity to unmask the tensions between national realities and aspirations, as they are captured in the commercials. Our central question is: how do efforts to ‘brand’ the nation impact the post-communist national imaginaries of Romania and Bulgaria?

Although we discuss the campaigns more generally, the textual analysis focuses specifically on the television commercials for three reasons. First, these spots capture the key themes of the campaigns in stylized and symbolically rich narratives. Second, through placement in mainstream channels (e.g. CNN, Euronews) and circulation online (via tourism websites, as well as YouTube and other informal sites), the spots reach larger and more generalized audiences. Other campaign materials, such as brochures or posters, are distributed primarily at tourism expos and in tourism information offices and have a narrower reach. Finally, unlike other campaign texts, the TV spots garnered significant news coverage by Romanian and Bulgarian media and thus entered internal public discourses about national identity. In that respect, they clearly contribute to what we call an identity loop between external image projections and internal national imaginaries.

Romania and Bulgaria have been made unwitting historical ‘peers’ in the eyes of the European Union (EU), which grouped them in the same wave of candidates for accession. This was justified in Brussels by referencing the two countries’ similarly poor economies, problems with corruption, poverty and their need for legal reform. In this context, we ask: how did Romania and Bulgaria, which faced similar circumstances, address the need to create new images for internal and external audiences? As they engaged with nation branding, did their similar constraints and aspirations result in similar or different identity narratives? Furthermore, what may be the significance of such similarities and differences for our understanding of political and cultural transformations in Romania and Bulgaria, and in post-communist Europe more broadly?
National identity and nation branding in the post-communist context

When, in 2008, American celebrity chef and media personality Anthony Bourdain covered Romania on his show *No Reservations*, the collective gasp of the Romanian nation was heard all the way across the Atlantic. Bourdain, seemingly oblivious to cultural decorum, let himself be guided from one kitsch destination to another by a rather inept Russian ‘friend’. Romanians decried what seemed to be a chain of public insults: showing petty functionaries who asked for absurd sums of money to film historical sites, or the presenter sitting stoically for hours at the Bucharest restaurant of choice – Dracula-themed and featuring an exclusive, ridiculously extravagant, turn-of-the-century re-enactment – culminating in what was readily interpreted as a less than subtle slap in the face: visiting Romania, a former Soviet satellite, with the help of a Russian guide (Bourdain, 2008). The number of complaints and diatribes on Bourdain’s website reached a record 798, almost three times the number registered for the Hawaii episode, which held the previous ‘record’. Clearly, two decades after the anti-communist revolution, Romanians are quite sensitive about their national image.

Bulgarians, for their part, are convinced that the rest of the world only recognizes them for the poisoned umbrella that killed dissident writer Georgy Markov, or the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II. Various studies (Iordanova, 1995; MarketLINKS, 2005a, 2005b) suggest that Bulgarian media sensationalize negative international opinion by distorting and exaggerating the nature of foreign media coverage about Bulgaria. Yet the country’s purported negative image abroad is a mainstay of public discourse and is exploited by various groups for their own interests. In that sense, Bulgarians, just like Romanians, are quite concerned with their national image.

Nadkarni (2007: 612) points out that one of the ‘upheavals of transition’ was that it ‘dislocated the fixed symbolic system of the previous regime’. Romania offers perhaps the most striking example of the urgency to reject communist symbols as they related to nationhood. During the Bucharest street riots in December 1989, protesters cut out the communist coat of arms from the national flag, leaving a gaping hole in the center. The ‘emptied’ flag became a symbol of the new Romanian nation – one that no longer wanted to identify itself as communist and was, therefore, in need of a new emblem and a new mythology of national unity. Similar sentiments were expressed, albeit less dramatically, in other former communist countries, all of which made efforts to find new national symbols for representing themselves.

In most post-communist countries the figurative task of ‘filling the hole’ in the flag was a difficult one because 45 years of communist rule had left behind a host of compromised symbols. Ideologically, communist rhetoric had the double aim of actively reinventing the pre-communist past and of summoning the artifices of historical materialism infused with ‘revolutionary’ symbols in order to legitimize the right to power of the Communist Party.
Part and parcel of this reinvention of history was an active effort to establish a sharp East–West divide. The partition of 1945 enforced an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ rhetoric of competition and hatred. Socialism in Eastern Europe defined itself as the right road toward modernity, in contrast to the morally corrupt system of capitalist exploitation. Contrary to the antebellum aspirations of some Eastern European countries to become outposts of French (in the Romanian case) or German (in the Bulgarian case) civilizational traditions, the Cold War pitted East against West in a bitter fight for ideological supremacy. Thus, national identity in communist Europe was hijacked by an intricate web of party propaganda.

Society was rearranged into the powerful and the powerless, and identity discourses were recast in different terms: communist versus imperialist, bourgeois versus proletarian, religiously motivated versus historically materialist, to mention just a few binaries. We do not analyse these processes here, but we agree with Verdery (1991) that Romanian national identification – and, we would argue, that of other communist nations – was not merely erased by the communist regimes and replaced with a new, politically convenient narrative. Rather, the defining tropes of different versions of national identity ‘entered into battle with one another in the politicized world of Romanian culture and, in so doing, perpetuated a Romanian national ideology within an order claiming to be socialist’ (Verdery, 1991: 3). In other words, the end of communism did not open up a completely new debate on national identity but took the lid off of one that had been boiling underneath.

Against this backdrop, nation branding campaigns in former communist countries have greater significance than simply as tools for attracting investors or tourists. Rather, ‘the commercial practice of nation branding is closely linked to the deployment of narratives of globalization at the end of the Cold War’ (Jansen, 2008: 112) and taps into local struggles over the meaning of nationhood after communism. What distinguishes the branding efforts of Romania, Bulgaria and other post-communist nations from those of other countries is the presence of an ontological aspiration beyond the profit motive. Moreover, the connection of nation branding to ideas of globalization and capitalism gives it an almost radical veneer in the post-communist context, because it offers a way to think about nationhood without relating it to the discredited grand narratives of communism.

In sum, the 1989 anti-communist revolutions brought about a foundational moment: countries like Romania and Bulgaria were faced with the necessity of reasserting themselves in the world. This was happening in the context of long-standing European aspirations. The formerly sequestered East was eager to ‘emerge from the enclosure’ and, at the same time, was ‘tacitly acknowledging that the notion of civilization has always been perceived as belonging to the “proper”, “legitimate” Europe’ (Marciniak, 2006: 626). ‘Returning to Europe’ quickly became a slogan of post-communism, but in order to ‘assume their place in Europe’ the ‘new’ Europeans needed to demonstrate the sincerity and seriousness of their desire to break with the communist past. This required
two interconnected identity-building projects: one aimed at reconstructing national images for the outside world; the other inventing new narratives of national unity and purpose for domestic use. Nation branding promised to aid in both and, importantly, it offered a way to rethink national identity in post-political terms and in tune with the new mantras of marketization and globalization. Thus, nation branding was particularly appealing for post-communist national elites because it promised a highly visible and deceptively simple way to address the urgent need for rejecting communist identity markers and constructing renewed national subjectivities.

Nation branding projects in Romania and Bulgaria

Romania, the only communist country to suffer a violent revolution, made a dramatic splash as it entered the arena of national redefinition. Perched on top of friendly army tanks, victorious revolutionaries flew the red, yellow and blue flag stripped of its communist coat of arms. The ‘emptied’ flag was quickly followed up with a new country name, the Republic of Romania, and a new national anthem, ‘Wake up Romanian’. Bulgaria instituted similar changes in national symbols. In 1990 the official lyrics of the national anthem were purged of references to communism. The coat of arms used between 1948 and 1989, which featured a red communist pentagram, was abandoned and, after much political controversy, replaced in 1997. In addition, both countries initiated various efforts at recasting their international images, some of which were explicitly billed in public discourse as ‘branding campaigns’. In both countries, the most visible, government-funded branding campaigns were related to tourism development; these are the campaigns we focus on in this article.

By 2001, Romania’s branding efforts were under way with a project labeled ‘Made in Romania’, aimed at rehabilitating Romanian products. This was a short-lived campaign, to the disappointment of Romanian businessmen who had contributed millions to it (Badicioiu and Popan, 2007). The next effort, a wide circulation photo album entitled, The Eternal and Fascinating Romania, had an even shorter shelf life and ended with indictments of its promoters on charges of corruption and fraud (Enculescu, 2007).

In 2003 the Romanian government launched the country’s first long-term branding effort and retained the Bucharest branch of global advertising agency Ogilvy & Mather to administer it. The first installment of what was conceived as a comprehensive tourism campaign was a television spot with the slogan ‘Romania: Simply Surprising’. This slogan was criticized by Richard Batchelor, head of the consulting team for the World Tourism Organization, and a new set of five commercials sans slogan was released in 2004. Nevertheless, ‘Simply Surprising’ remained in use as a proxy slogan on Romania’s official tourism website (http://romaniatravel.com) until further notice. The result was a less than consistent campaign, meant to operate until 2013. Lucia Moraru, Romanian State Secretary for Tourism, defended this by
stating that ‘changing the tourism brand is a long and complex process’ (Ionita, 2007). In this article we focus on the second set of commercials, which have been in circulation since 2004. Overall, the campaign emphasizes four Romanian touristic ‘assets’: Bucharest, Transylvania, the monasteries of Bukovina and Maramures, and the Black Sea coast (Pol et al., 2006). It targets primarily EU audiences and, ironically, its €75 million price tag comes mostly from EU funds (Badicioiu and Popan, 2007).

In Bulgaria, state-run efforts at nation branding have been overseen by several ministries and government agencies. However, the main actor was the Ministry of the Economy (ME) and two of its executive agencies: the Bulgarian State Agency for Tourism (BSAT), and the Bulgarian Investment Agency (later renamed InvestBulgaria). One project carried out by the ME in 2003 was titled, ‘Promotion Bulgaria’, and resulted in the creation of a Bulgarian national logo. The logo has been used in various branding campaigns, including the materials analysed in this article. Between 2002 and 2005, a number of advertising materials, including brochures, buttons, catalogs and other items, were commissioned by BSAT. However, the first more visible effort at branding came in the form of eight television spots, created by the Bulgarian advertising and PR agency M3 Communications Group for BSAT in 2005. The spots featured summer tourism, winter tourism, cuisine, historical heritage and so on. The slogan for this television campaign was: ‘Bulgaria. Easy to Find’, and the commercials used the national logo, created under the auspices of the ME. The ads aired in 2005 on pan-European television channels, such as Eurosport and Euronews, but, despite their high visibility, they did not constitute a long-term branding effort similar to that of Romania.

After a political reshuffle following the 2005 parliamentary elections, BSAT, under a new executive director, posted a tender for an agency to create a new branding campaign for Bulgaria as an attractive tourist destination. In November 2006, Ido Style, a Bulgarian advertising agency, was announced as the winner, and in March 2007 a 45-second commercial produced by Ido Style began airing on CNN. The spot featured the slogan ‘Open Doors to Open Hearts’ and aired during four two-week windows during the year, timed to coincide with major tourism expos in which Bulgaria was participating (Georgieva, 2007).

In December 2007, BSAT published a five-year strategic plan for the sustainable development of tourism, which included as one of its goals the ‘creation and development of an easily recognizable and competitive commercial mark (BRAND) of Bulgaria as a tourist destination’ (State Tourism Agency of Bulgaria, 2007: 61, capitalization in original). This policy goal was set in spite of the ongoing ‘Open Doors’ campaign, suggesting that – like Romania – Bulgaria may be changing its tourism brand soon. While the processes and institutional frameworks for creating the new brand are unspecified by BSAT, the strategic plan stipulates a budget of BGN 109 million (approximately €56 million) over five years, which, as in Romania, would come from EU structural funds for regional development.
In sum, Romanian and Bulgarian efforts at nation branding in the tourism sphere remain contingent and transitional. Nevertheless, the very existence of these campaigns demonstrates these nations’ desire to dissociate their identities from the communist past. At the same time, the TV spots serve as illustrations of the lack of consensus over post-communist national identity, and feed the loop of external image projections and internal aspirations and imaginings. In the next section, we attempt to trace this loop of identity negotiations through a critically informed textual analysis. Our goal is not to assess the soundness or effectiveness of the campaigns in business terms. Rather, we focus on the politics of identity construction that is captured implicitly in the symbolism of the commercial texts.

Symbolism in the branding messages

The ‘Romania: Simply Surprising’ campaign consists of five television commercials: a ‘master-ad’ and four ‘explanatory’ ads. The master-ad compresses a fast-paced overview of select landmarks: Bucharest, the Danube Delta, the Romanian seaside, Bukovina’s monasteries, Dracula’s castle and the Romanian mountains (Omul Peak, to be specific). Four of these themes (Bucharest, the Danube Delta, the Black Sea and the monasteries) are picked up in four follow-up commercials that show more images of these landmarks at a slower pace. The main trait of the master-ad, besides its overwhelming pace, is a focus on deliberate aesthetic contradictions. The first few images offer a clear example. Opening the commercial is a long-haired woman twirling in the baroque, marbled lobby of what looks like the Romanian Opera House in Bucharest. She is playing the violin in a classical style hall, yet she is oddly dressed in what seems to be a ‘traditional’ outfit. Upon further inspection, the folkloric garb introduces additional ambiguity: the woman is wearing a long white dress with flowing sleeves, cinched with a broad leather belt and decorated with red tassels and cords draped over her skirt and chest. The chest piece is adorned with a few gold coins. This could well be a stylized version of a Romanian folk costume; after all, the gold coins around the woman’s neck are reminiscent of the Romanian salba.\(^4\) On the other hand, the suggestive combination of red tassels, flowing sleeves, gold coins, and long, unbraided hair brings to mind a stereotypical ethnic Roma image. However interpreted, the visuals suggest a main theme: the meeting place of high classical and traditional folkloric – two different facets of the same culture.

This metaphor is enhanced in the following frames, in which a larger-than-life young woman sashays around the old center of Bucharest. The oversized model, rising above the spires of old Bucharest, flaunts her latest fashion attire in a catwalk demonstration down Victoria Avenue. In her fashion trot, she gently blows under the wings of an old biplane flying above the city. The contrast between the old crenellated buildings, the interwar (by all accounts, romantic) plane, and her edgy, backless top are meant to send the viewer’s
imagination not so much to Bucharest as to a romanticized, nostalgia-laden Paris of the past. The combination of high fashion and neoclassical buildings revives the old reputation of Bucharest, dubbed ‘little Paris’ in monarchical, interwar times. The parallel is anchored in the modern history of Romania’s Francophile aspirations. The symbiotic overlap of Bucharest and Paris in the ad suggests not only that on the streets of Bucharest one will find fashionable people but, primarily, that Romania is historically connected with the West. Reviving the image of ‘little Paris’ is the symbolic reassertion of Western aspirations, meant to create recognition and sympathy in a Western audience. At the same time, it serves an important function in relation to internal audiences by drawing on familiar national myths and implying that Romanians are as European and as modern as the French.5

The commercial is purposefully crafted as an alternation of traditional and modern motifs that lend it a certain sense of timelessness: Bucharest (which is itself presented as a timeless distillation of trends and history) is followed by the image of an old fisherman throwing a traditional net in the hazy Danube. The bucolic Danubian scene is followed by pictures of a modern seaside, with a trendy young woman strolling among chaise-longues and parasols. After the modern seaside décor, the narrative transitions to the top of a mountain, where a peasant boy, dressed in a folk costume, shoots a burning arrow into the sky. His arrow sends us to the old Bukovina monasteries. There, a little girl opens the palm of her hand to reveal what is now known as Dracula’s castle.6 A crafty move of the ageless count’s cape and we are brought back to the interior of the Romanian Opera House, where we are greeted by another ever-smiling, modern young woman. The transition between old and new creates an imagistic antagonism that accentuates a ubiquitous theme in the Romanian social imaginary: namely, the idea of being located at the crossroads between East and West. This theme is also shared by other Eastern European countries, including Bulgaria, and we will return to it later in the article.

Bulgaria’s branding campaign features the slogan ‘Open Doors to Open Hearts’. The phrase itself is ambiguous and could be read either as a statement directed to external audiences (as in ‘our doors are open to those whose hearts are open to us’), or as an admonition towards the Bulgarian nation itself (as in ‘you have to open your doors to the world if you want the world to open its heart to you’).7 According to Ido Style, which produced the spot, Bulgaria’s ‘unique selling proposition’ is warmth and hospitality. Petia Kokudeva, creative director at Ido Style, explains that ‘the doors are the metaphor, the thread, along which [the agency] wanted to link everything conceptually’ (Stoilova, 2008). Aside from being a connective device in the commercial, the metaphor of ‘open doors’ can be seen more broadly as having a particular poignancy for internal audiences in a nation where international travel was severely restricted during the communist period. The ability to travel freely outside the country is one immediate and very visible sign of Bulgaria’s EU accession.

For the duration of its 45 dizzying seconds, the commercial visually sticks to its ‘open door’ idea and carries its viewers along by literally showing images of
various doors that open to reveal different scenes. The first image shows the ancient doors of a monastery, painted with Christian iconography. As the camera zooms in, past the dark silhouette of a black-robed monk, another old wooden door opens and we find ourselves in a wine cellar, zooming past smiling men in front of wine kegs. Yet another door, more abstract in shape and with a rose painted on it, opens to reveal a young woman lying in a round tub filled with water, rose petals falling over her. As the camera zooms in on her face, the young woman gets up, tosses her hair and we are transported on the scene of a beach dance party, where young people jump up in unison to the sound of club music with a folkloric motif. As the dancing crowd jumps up, the image changes into that of a skier caught mid-jump in the air. The backdrop reveals snowy mountains, then the skier lifts his ski mask and the camera zooms in on his eye, which serves as the portal to another image of a young man, opening the back door of what appears to be an SUV and pulling out a set of golf clubs. The swing of his golf club sends a ball flying into another door – the revolving glass door of a modern hotel, inside which we zoom past a formal concierge and a liveried porter to see a man in business attire walking towards the camera through another door. In the last frames of the commercial we see a young woman, with flowing hair standing under the arch of Roman ruins on the sea shore, gazing at the sunset. As she extends her arm to point across the water, the slogan ‘Open Doors to Open Hearts’ appears superimposed on the frame and is also read by a male announcer’s voice. Finally, the image fades out and we see a white screen with Bulgaria’s national logo and an announcer’s voice simply says, ‘Bulgaria’.

While the images in the spot are appealing, the overall symbolism is rather generic, offering a simple listing of Bulgaria’s tourism assets: monasteries, wine, beaches, mountains, skiing and golf, hotels and beautiful young people. Were it not for the logo at the end and the folkloric musical theme used as the commercial’s soundtrack, one could take this to be an ad for just about any country. Like the Romanian commercial, Bulgaria’s branding narrative combines references to ancient traditions (Roman ruins, Christian monasteries), natural beauty (beaches, mountains) and images of modernity and opulent lifestyle consumption (spas, skiing, golf, hotels). The juxtaposition of these elements captures the tension between a national identity narrative rooted in a pre-communist historical heritage and a new one expressed through the tropes of Western, capitalist modernity. In that respect, Bulgaria – like Romania – sees itself as a meeting place, a crossroads, or a bridge between past and future, tradition and modernity, East and West.

National identity lite or the limits of nation branding

Mosco argues that brands ‘tell stories, animate conversations and extend narratives’ that, ultimately, turn ‘the mantra into the myth’ (quoted in Jansen,
2008: 122). Both commercials we have examined attempt to rise to the level of myth-making. The Romanian spot is steeped in mysticism; the ebb and flow of present and past lends it a fairytale-like atmosphere. From the ambiguously aged Bucharest we glide to the waters of the Danube, enveloped in a golden, misty glow, where a fisherman throws a net from his wooden boat. One is tempted to guess that this is the same peasant who caught the mythical gold fish to grant him three wishes. Next, a burning arrow flies across the frames out of the bow of a boy in a folk costume to reach the Voronet monastery. These images are heavy with implied legends that would be meaningful to Romanian viewers, familiar with the iconography and symbolism of their cultural heritage, but may appear as a jumbled sequence of exotic fantasies to outsiders. Cramming interbellum Bucharest, Parisian fashion, Danube fishing, Dracula and monasteries into the same ad results in a confusing concoction of disparate myths. Importantly, this indicates the lack of internal consensus over the meaning of national identity in Romania.

Bulgaria’s branding narrative is less mystical, but equally dependent on a *bricolage* of disparate images. The ad makes visual references to some significant symbols in the national imaginary, but does so without connecting them to historical or mythical storylines. The doors of a Christian monastery appear without contextualization of the significance of religion or faith for the nation’s identity; the image of a woman bathing in rose petals references Bulgaria’s past glory as a major producer of rose oil used in the making of perfumes, but this fact would be unknown to most foreigners; the image of a Roman archway implies Bulgaria’s geo-political significance as a gateway to ‘the Orient’ but, again, it is not likely to be recognized by people unfamiliar with the country’s history and geography. In short, Bulgaria’s commercial exemplifies an accommodation between myths familiar to domestic audiences and consumer symbolism that may appeal to external ones.

Based on their brand narratives, both Romania and Bulgaria appear to be lost in time – vacillating between an idyllic, folkloric, pre-modern past and a glitzy, luxurious, modern future. In that sense, history has been evacuated from the national identity narratives in the commercials and replaced by a gallery of commodified heritage sites. Other markers of cultural identity are similarly reduced to ‘assets’ that may appeal to Western consumers – wine, nature, beaches, etc. In other words, the ads render Romania and Bulgaria suitable for global consumption; national identity is appropriated for the purposes of neoliberal globalization. This appropriation via commodification constrains national identity within an ahistorical, decontextualized, depoliticized frame, resulting in a form of *national identity lite*.

At the same time, the branding narratives must respond to the internal need for self-redefinition. This occurs through the reproduction of non-threatening, folkloric myths and motifs, which provide a sense of internal identification. More problematically, a sense of national continuity is achieved through the reproduction of long-standing meta-narratives about a desired West and an abject East. This is present in both ads through the theme of being at the
crossroads between East and West. Both ads rely on connecting visual devices (doors, shooting arrows) that carry the viewer from the traditional (monasteries, folk motifs) to the modern (spas, beaches, ski slopes), where the former imply ‘the exotic’ East and the latter imply ‘the civilized’ West.

Being located between East and West is a central figure in the rhetoric of national and regional definition, variously expressed through metaphors of crossroads or bridges. It has been documented by scholars of the Balkan region, who argue that this discursive construction contributes to a continued status of Eastern Europe, and the Balkans in particular, as the internal Other of the European continent (e.g. Bjelić and Savić, 2002; Todorova, 1997; Tziovas, 2003; Wolff, 1994). This has become the basis of a ‘Balkan globalization critique’ (Baker, 2008: 177), which recognizes that Eastern European cultural workers are complicit in the continued reproduction of stereotypical and exoticized national representations for the purpose of selling them back to Western audiences who find them familiar and comfortable (Ditchev, 2002; Volcic, 2005). Baker points out that presenting ‘something exotic and distinctive in an attractively modernized package’ (2008: 177) has been the main strategy of national representation employed by post-communist countries. The narratives in the Romanian and Bulgarian commercials reproduce this phenomenon. Clearly, the creators of the commercials for Romania and Bulgaria have stayed within the tradition of imagining national identity through a lens of ‘self-colonization’ (Kiossev, 2002).

An interesting paradox emerges from this analysis. On the one hand, the promise of nation branding to create new and unique identities for Romania and Bulgaria is undermined by a lack of internal consensus about who these nations are, which has opened up in the vacuum after the end of communism. In response, the branding narratives are based on expectations of what the Western eye wants to see. In that sense, our analysis confirms Urry’s (2001) thesis that consumption-oriented representations satisfy a ‘tourist gaze’ at the cost of aesthetic uniformity. On the other hand, democratic processes of national self-redefinition are undermined by a government-sanctioned focus on producing brand narratives. Widely publicized state-sponsored campaigns end up hijacking broader internal debates about national identity and efface the political nature of identity construction. In other words, the commercially driven logic of branding severely limits national imaginaries and may even be deepening internal identity crises. As Iordanova (2007: 47) argues, commercial attempts to draw in visitors force a choice of ‘attractions’ that are ‘often staged as representing the country’ but ultimately:

enhance the sense of split identity, the consciousness of a perpetual differentiation between an image of oneself one projects outwards and presents as ‘object of the tourist gaze’ and another ‘true’ self, mostly characterized by being different, not identical with what is being projected.

The obvious clash between the realities of life in transitional countries, still marred by serious political and economic problems, and the commercial
fiction of a Romanian and Bulgarian paradise comes across as intellectual dishonesty. When it comes to national self-redefinition and to building a new sense of national unity, it may be more useful to abandon the ‘utopian capitalism’ (Bourdieu, 2003) of branding and focus on developing participatory political solutions.

What, then, have we learned about the way nation branding impacts the national imaginaries of post-communist Romania, Bulgaria, and beyond? Our analysis has revealed a reductionist logic at work within the branding narratives. While the idea of redefining themselves through branding holds out an aspirational promise for post-communist nations, the actual branding messages narrowly circumscribe national imaginaries. The very genre of commercials – which relies on highly condensed, visual, fast-moving narratives – severely restricts the kinds of stories of and about the nation that can be told to either internal or external publics. More importantly, nation branding puts the power to articulate national identity into the hands of marketing and branding ‘experts’, and does not involve a wider range of participants from various social sectors in a democratic dialogue. By subsuming national symbols into a totalizing discourse of commodification and consumption, nation branding contributes to the depoliticization of national redefinition after communism and severely limits the range of national subjectivities that post-communist countries can imagine for themselves.

Notes

1 The number of international tourists has almost doubled between 1995 and 2008 to reach 9242 million in 2008, although the growth trend has been upset by the current global economic crisis (UNWTO, 2009).
2 It is beyond the scope of this article to review the extensive marketing literature on place and nation branding. For reviews of the marketing perspective see Kavaratzis (2005) and Papadopoulos (2004).
3 This information was obtained via email correspondence with Simion Alb, Director of the Romanian National Tourist Office – North America.
4 A traditional Romanian necklace made of gold, silver and copper coins, which can be short or long in different regions (Mellish and Green, n.d.).
5 The history of Romania’s affinity for France cannot be explored here, but it is worth mentioning that for reasons to do with Romanian nation-building aspirations in the 18th and 19th centuries, Romania found in France a cultural standard to imitate. French became the second language of the aristocracy; intellectuals studied in France and actively sought to fashion Romanian culture in a French image. This process was stymied by the 1945 communist takeover, but the idea of Romania as the Latin culture closest to France survives as one of the most enduring national myths.
6 For a discussion of the contested authenticity of Romania’s ‘ownership’ of the Dracula brand see Iordanova (2007).
The Bulgarian-language version of the slogan (‘отворени врати към отворени сърца’), which was publicized in Bulgarian media (Stoilova, 2008) corresponds to the first interpretation and lacks the ambiguity the slogan acquires in its English translation. Yet the double valence of the English phrase, perhaps inadvertently, captures the dual intent of nation branding efforts as intended for internal as well as external consumption.

Legend has it that after each battle medieval prince Stefan cel Mare (probably the greatest personality in Romanian history) would erect a church. Stefan would shoot an arrow from the top of a high mountain and the place where the arrow fell was chosen for a new house of God. The traditional interpretation of this gesture has been that it symbolizes a purging and redemption of war through artistic magnificence and faith. Building a place of worship was meant to re-establish the providential balance between good and evil energies (Neculce, 2001).

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NADIA KANEVA is Assistant Professor in the Department of Media, Film, and Journalism Studies at the University of Denver. Her research draws on critical theories of culture and communication to explore struggles over identities and power, with a focus on post-communist Europe. She is editing a volume titled, Branding Post-communist Nations: Marketizing National Identities in the ‘New’ Europe (forthcoming in 2011). Address: Department of Media, Film, and Journalism Studies, University of Denver, 2490 S. Gaylord St, Denver, CO 80208 USA. [email: nkaneva@du.edu]

DELIA POPESCU is Assistant Professor of Political Science at LeMoyne College, Syracuse, NY. Her work addresses totalitarianism, anti-communist dissidence, issues of justice, and political rhetoric and remembrance in the context of Eastern European post-communism. She is working on a book manuscript entitled, ‘The Responsibility of Resistance: Political Action in Vaclav Havel’s Thought’. Address: Department of Political Science, Reilly Hall 429, LeMoyne College, Syracuse, NY 13214 USA. [email: popescd@lemoyne.edu]