National identity Remains a Critical Issue: Cultural Diplomacy, Nation Branding, and the Dilemma for Slovakia



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“The concept of interculturalism has been increasing its effect in the world and has continuously been turning into a more global aspect. Intercultural interaction has also started to use a silent and universal language to bring cultures together, make them stand side by side and face to face according to the present conditions.

The culture, which is weak in this intercultural interaction, is deemed to be lost or changed being defeated by the stronger ones.

Thus, cultural diplomacy emerges where it is necessary to avoid conflict or assimilation of cultures, and even to create a more dominant one.” (Okur et al. 2021)

Key Questions

- What is being represented in Cultural Diplomacy and Nation Branding efforts? And Why is it important?
- Is it possible to control the nations' image?
- How do we define national identity within and a part of Europe, especially among CEE nationals in a pan-European multicultural context?



- After 1989, Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries had to **reevaluate their ideological stances and restructure their policy frameworks**.
- Post-Soviet countries, including Slovakia, have faced significant challenges in cultural diplomacy and nation branding, **grappling with identity crises and multiple political regimes and name changes** over the past century.
- Historical oppression and underrepresentation popularly invoked **understanding of Slovak history as a struggle for freedom and independence** contribute to a lack of national pride and confidence (Steiger 2021).



- In contrast, larger post-colonial countries struggle with national pride due to **negative historical actions and globalism pressures**.
- The past three decades have seen democracy challenged in both Eastern and Western Europe, with the **resurgence of populism and nationalism reflecting a crisis in liberal democratic values** (Zielonka & Rupnik, 2020).
- Events such as Brexit, which briefly inspired CEE populists, illustrate European nations' disorientation and quest for unity. The erosion of the concept of the nation undermines current diplomatic and cultural relations, as modern democracy is built on nation-states.
- Addressing cultural and national identities and strengthening cultural ties across Europe are **crucial to avoid societal polarisation, which can fuel extreme nationalism.**
- Reconciling nationalism and globalism requires meaningful conversations about **the roles and representations of nations in the modern world** to **find a balanced approach** to international and cultural relations.

Methodology

- Mixed-method approach, which combined qualitative interviews with a quantitative survey
- **Interviews:**
  - Collection of primary data through semi-structured interviews with **directors of NCIs and cultural practitioners** – independent and NGOs that engage in international and collaborative projects that promote Slovakia abroad, either intentionally or semi-intentionally.
  - To obtain **in-depth personal views** rather than general perspectives from a broader audience.
  - Directors in the institutes of the **Visegrad 4 Group** countries (Slovakia, Czechia, Poland, Hungary), operating in various diplomatic "territories".
  - A total of **25 interviews** were conducted in **8 countries**, including the United Kingdom, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Austria, Israel, Belgium, France, and Italy.
- **Survey:**
  - Questionnaire survey exploring **perspectives on national identity** - provided both quantitative and qualitative data
  - Distributed among Slovaks in Slovakia, Slovaks living abroad, and people of Slovak heritage born abroad
  - A total of 306 respondents participated in the survey

National Cultural Institutes (NCIs)

- Traditionally established and funded by governments
- Main mission: present and promote national culture and language
- NCIs have a **greater role in constructing a contemporary image of their member states** and advancing its qualities which means they contribute to nation branding, country image and reputation. (Smits et al. 2016)
- National Cultural Institutes (NCIs) play a crucial role in shaping a country's image through cultural exports (Paschalidis, 2009).
- NCIs can observe and analyse foreign perceptions of their representative country and set guidelines for other actors contributing to nation image-making.
- The role of National Cultural Institutes (NCIs) and their network expansion is becoming increasingly significant, yet cultural policies are often underestimated domestically, extending to cultural relations and diplomacy in foreign policy.

Nation Branding: Crafting a National Image

- Precisely, nation branding is the application of “the tools of branding to alter, confirm or change the behaviour, attitudes, identity or image of a nation in a positive way” (Gudjonsson 2005, p.285).
- Nation branding shapes how a country wants to be perceived, which can differ from its 'real image' (Fan, 2006, 2010).
- Building a nation brand is crucial for raising awareness and influencing perceptions, which can modify stereotypical views (Hakala et al., 2013).
- Cultural diplomacy and brand marketing techniques present a managed, strategic national image (Mark, 2009).



- **National identity is an essential component for successful nation branding.** Lacking a strong national identity can lead to nation branding being perceived as mere superficial marketing rather than genuine representations of a country's cultural and value systems.

- **The development of a strong nation brand requires the coordination of numerous stakeholders**, including researchers, diplomats, governmental authorities, cultural institutions, and practitioners. Additionally, it necessitates comprehensive evaluations and subsequent actions based on these evaluations (Hyatt-Khan, 2024).

- Despite its current form since 1992, Slovakia only launched its first country branding campaign, "Good Idea Slovakia," in 2016 (Mzv.sk, 2021).

- In Slovakia, many citizens are not able to recognize branding initiatives, which frequently do not reflect their day-to-day experiences (Palovic, 2024).



Viewpoint: Cultural Diplomacy and Nation Image

- “Diplomacy has always been and will always be **the first point of contact with a foreign country**. The way in which diplomatic offices are managed abroad, **how they communicate and present themselves**, and what policy they foster in a particular country will always **shape the perception** of the country and its nation.”
- “Countries, cities, people or products are not seen as they present themselves as a part of their marketing but are **judged by the impressions they make**.”

- director of Slovak Institute in Prague

Results

- Directors of cultural institutions face many obstacles in defining and promoting national identity linked to nation branding, especially considering limited resources and the need for strategic adaptation.
- **Challenges**:
  - Financial and resource constraints
  - Strategic adaptation to local contexts
  - The impact of pan-Europeanism and globalism on local cultural engagement
  - Adapting to current trends
  - Evaluation and success metrics
  - Difficulties in measuring impact
  - Shared historical narratives
  - Cultural heritage and contemporary relevance

Strategic Adaptation to Local Contexts

- **The directors must adjust their strategies to resonate with local audiences while preserving the essence of national culture.**
- Liszt Institute Brussels emphasizes adapting cultural programs to the local Belgian audience while maintaining Hungarian cultural integrity (Oszkó-Jakab, 2022). This balance reflects the paper's discussion of the impact of post-nationalism and European integration on national identity.
- The director of the Slovak Institute in Prague remarked, ***"There is very little political discourse on how our history and cultural symbols should be integrated into our national identity. This lack of dialogue makes it hard to create a unified national brand."*** (Krénová, 2022).

The Impact of Pan-Europeanism and Globalism on Local Cultural Engagement

- The strategies employed by the directors reflect the influence of broader European and global trends on local cultural engagement.
- The Polish Institute Stockholm, for example, uses contemporary cultural phenomena such as the Witcher Series to attract younger audiences. This approach underscores the significance of adapting cultural diplomacy to contemporary trends in order to remain relevant.
- Slovak Institutes express the difficulty of defining Slovakia's contemporary identity while balancing modernity and tradition.
- The director of the Slovak Institute in Berlin acknowledged, ***"Many cultural practitioners do not recognize the significance of preserving a strong national identity. They perceive it as outdated in this globalized era, but it is essential for our cultural diplomacy efforts"*** (Hanuš, 2022).

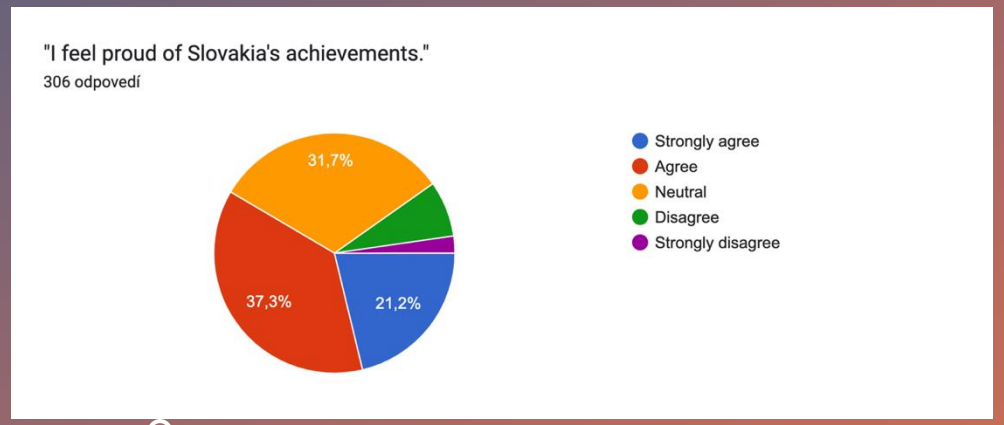
Shared Historical Narratives, Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Relevance

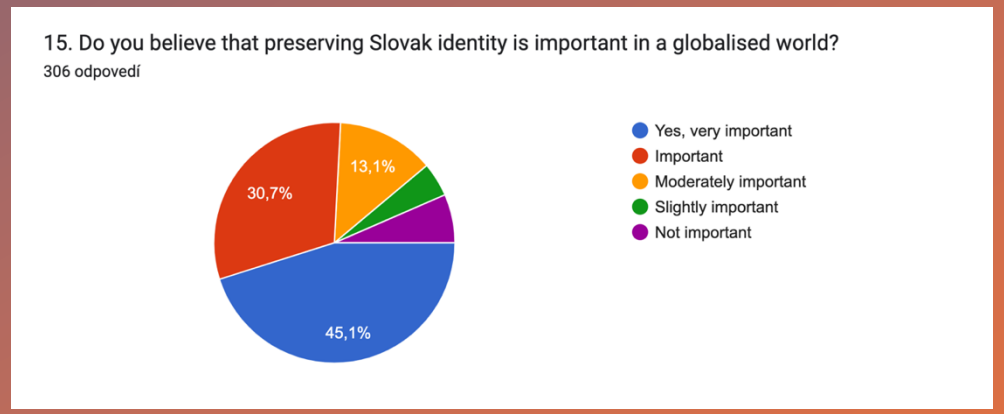
- Cultural diplomacy directors often use historical narratives to reinforce their efforts
- Polish Institute Stockholm highlights the acknowledgment of **Polish contributions to Swedish history, such as the role of a Swedish diplomat in the drafting of the Polish constitution** (Ruszkiewicz, 2022).
- These shared historical narratives foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of national identity. As the Director of the Slovak Institute in Paris notes, ***"Our cultural narrative has been suppressed for centuries, especially during the communist era. Now, we are attempting to reclaim and reimagine our identity"*** (Kňažková, 2022).
- Cultural diplomacy directors emphasize the significance of both cultural heritage and contemporary relevance in their programming.
- ***"We don't remain static in the past, but instead, we continue to progress and develop,"*** stressed Monika Koblerová, the director of Czech Centre in Bratislava (Koblerová, 2022).

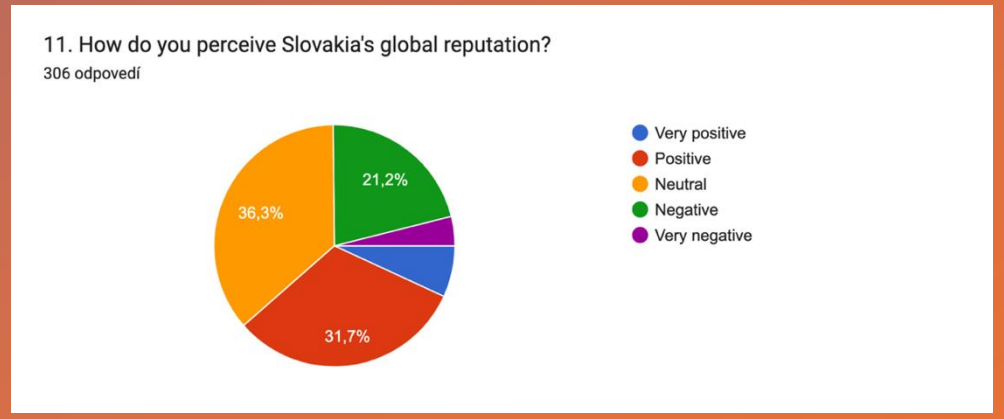
Survey Analysis: Viewpoints on Slovak National Identity

- 1. Among the **Slovaks who relocated abroad** and were born in Slovakia, there is a perceptible **sense of diminished pride** and heightened worry concerning the country's overall political situation, the way it is portrayed in international media, and its international image. These factors substantially affect their personal sense of pride and their relationship with Slovak identity.
- ***“Being Slovak has always been challenging in terms of obtaining employment and experiencing discrimination. Additionally, people in the UK automatically assume I am from Slovenia or Poland, and they are largely uninformed about Slovakia.”***
- 2. **Generations of Slovaks born in the United States** tend to be more enthusiastic about their heritage and Slovak identity. These individuals generally exhibit **greater optimism and idealism**, seeing potential in Slovakia and envisioning positive developments in the future. They also expressed enthusiasm for their connection to Europe through their Slovak identity.
- ***"We are Americans of Slovak descent. Our Slovak heritage is crucial to our identity, and we are immensely proud of it.”***
- 3. **Slovaks born and residing in Slovakia** tend to be more **sceptica**l of their country's future and national identity. While some respondents remained optimistic, there was also a significant amount of scepticism and negative sentiment, particularly in open-ended responses.
- This ambivalence reflects a complex relationship with national identity, influenced by current political and social dynamics.

Findings from the Survey

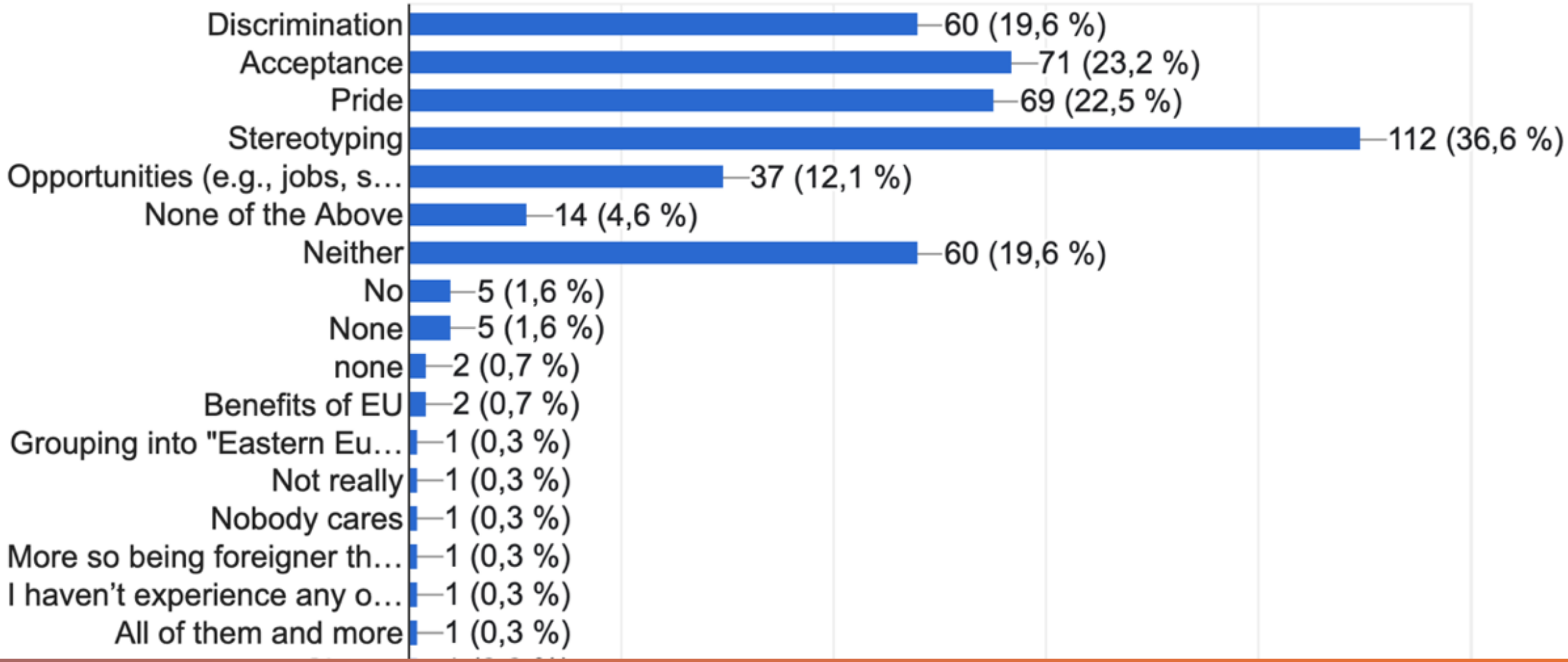






14. Have you ever experienced any challenges or benefits due to your Slovak identity? (Check all that apply)

306 odpovedí



Perspectives on Nationalism

- Nationalism is a multifaceted and often divisive notion, particularly regarding national identity and cultural diplomacy.
- The survey responses from Slovaks, whether residing in Slovakia or abroad, offer diverse viewpoints on nationalism, encompassing **sentiments of pride and cultural preservation as well as apprehensions about political extremism and xenophobia.**
- It was evident that there was a strong urge to maintain and commemorate their cultural legacy; however, there were also considerable apprehensions about the political implications of nationalism.
- Many individuals faced the obstacle of cultivating **a form of nationalism that was inclusive, modern, and consistent with global identity**.

Cultural Pride and Heritage Preservation, Family and Roots

- Nationalism was closely linked to the preservation of cultural traditions, languages, and values. Perspective that emphasizes the importance of maintaining and celebrating Slovak heritage as a source of pride.

"Slovak identity is something you are born to, something you inherit from past generations who lived on the same piece of land for thousands of years. It's a mindset and values one adopts from their parents and grandparents."

- Nationalism serves as a positive force that helps individuals maintain a connection with their roots and family history, especially when living abroad.

"To me, it means family background, culture, traditions. Since I have moved abroad, it is what I miss and what I would like to go back to, to the familiarity and safety of our culture and habits/traditions."

Ambivalence or Criticism Regarding Political Nationalism

- Respondents often emphasized their apprehensions about the political atmosphere in Slovakia, where nationalism can be connected to corruption and political extremism. Nationalism is tarnished by unfavourable societal attitudes and behaviours, leading to feelings of embarrassment rather than pride.

"To me, it signifies little, if anything, and I find myself embarrassed rather than proud of my Slovak heritage. The mentality of people is a significant contributor to this negative perception."

"One hopes that it will progress positively, but the present state of affairs in Slovakia is far from ideal. I am simultaneously grappling with the uncertainty of whether we can maintain our ground and prevent corruption from eroding our nation entirely."

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Slovakia chooses nationalism and elects Pellegrini President. PM Fico celebrates

The leader of the party that handed the government to the coalition of the far-right and Social Democrats after the 2023 legislative elections reversed the outcome of the first round and won with 53.12 percent of the vote over pro-European challenger Korčok. As of June 15, the executive will have a free field on controversial laws and pro-Russian positioning

by Federico Baccini @federicobaccini — 8 April 2024 in Politics



For Slovakia's Left, Welfare Spending and Nationalism Make an Awkward Match

BY
JAKUB BOKES

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Competition between National Identity and Global Identity

- Several respondents advocated for a form of nationalism that embraces cultural pride without crossing discriminatory or xenophobic territories.
- This perspective underlines the significance of cultivating an inclusive national identity that can coexist with a global one.

"I would hope that Slovaks would take pride in their identity while also becoming a part of a more global society. You know... proud without becoming right-wingy."

- The actions and policies of political leaders play a crucial role in shaping national identity. Negative political developments can lead to disillusionment and a weakened sense of national pride.

"My identity is decreasing because of the political changes, especially with the new government."

Conclusions

- There is ongoing significance of national identity and national culture in the field of cultural diplomacy and the difficulties in promoting a nation's brand in a globalized context.
- The directors' experiences illustrate the complexities of promoting national culture, the necessity for adaptive strategies, and the importance of both historical and contemporary cultural elements for successful cultural diplomacy.
- These insights provide a deeper understanding **of how cultural policies can be effectively designed to enhance national identity and cultural diplomacy in European Union member states**.
- The findings **underscore the need for a broader discussion of cultural policy in the context of national identity**, particularly in post-socialist countries like Slovakia.
- The results of our analysis offer understanding of Slovak national identity, emphasizing its profound **foundation in cultural legacy, family history, and personal values**.
- Although numerous individuals exhibit **pride and a strong sense of attachment**, others are confronted with **ambivalence or uncertainty about the future.**

Conclusions

- Additionally, it is vital to **strengthen ties with the Slovak diaspora** through cultural initiatives and community support; engage in political issues that impact national identity; promote transparency, good governance, and progressive policies; and cultivate a form of national pride that is inclusive and open to global integration.
- By addressing these aspects, cultural policymakers can help **preserve and promote Slovak national identity in a way that connects present and future generations**, ensuring that Slovak identity remains a source of **pride and unity in an increasingly globalized world**.
- Slovakia's nation branding efforts, exemplified by the "Good Idea Slovakia" campaign, reflect both the potential and the pitfalls of nation branding. By **learning from the insights of experts and practitioners, and addressing the identified challenges**, Slovakia can develop a more effective and inclusive branding strategy that genuinely reflects its national identity and aspirations.
- The integration of cultural diplomacy, genuine public engagement, and addressing regional disparities will be essential in creating a **sustainable and authentic national brand**.



Who we were, who we are, who we want to be?

Recommendations for Future Branding Strategies of the Slovak Republic

- **Inclusive Branding Processes**: Engage a broader cross-section of society in the branding process to ensure that the brand resonates with and is owned by the public (Kona, 2018; Steiger, 2021; Palovic, 2024).
- **Focus on Actions Over Symbols**: Prioritize real, impactful actions that enhance the country's reputation over the creation of visual symbols and marketing slogans (Anholt, 2024; Kona, 2018).
- **Promote Cultural Exchange**: Emphasize cultural relations and mutual cultural exchange to build genuine connections and enhance Slovakia's image abroad (Anholt, 2024; Kona, 2018).
- **Address Regional Disparities**: Recognize and address regional disparities within Slovakia to create a more cohesive and representative national brand (Anholt, 2024; Kona, 2018; Steiger, 2021; Palovic, 2024).
- **Broaden Public Debate**: Ensure a comprehensive and inclusive communication strategy that reflects the diversity of Slovakia, incorporating feedback from professional and public debates (Steiger, 2021).
- **Integration with Diaspora**: Better integrate the efforts of Slovak public and Slovak artists abroad with those within Slovakia to leverage the full potential of cultural diplomacy and representation (Kona, 2018, Palovic 2024).
- **Invest in Cultural Diplomacy**: Increase funding for cultural diplomacy initiatives to better showcase Slovakia's cultural assets and enhance its international reputation. This includes supporting cultural centres, arts, and heritage projects that can tell compelling stories about Slovakia's history and contemporary achievements (Hyatt-Khan, 2024).

“I have always been convinced that culture and art are the best ambassadors of a country. When something succeeds that attracts attention in the country of implementation, something so seemingly incomprehensible creates a **cultural identification of the nation and it then becomes memorable**. It is the same with negative experiences. When a case appears in a country, even a small one, that shakes the whole world, you will **remember it forever under this code**. It creates an image in your imagination that can be changed or **supplemented by another code**. ***I am convinced that everyone present will encode and memorize the current image of Slovakia as a developed cultural, artistic and globally socially aware country.”***

(director of Slovak Institute in Prague)

Thank you

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