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Branding: why do we need it?

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Quite often we define ourselves not by who we are, but rather by who we aren't. We struggle to stand out in a crowd, raising our voices to be heard in the din, dressing differently than the masses (fashion, jewelry, automobiles and gadgets are intrinsically woven into the pattern). We outline our unique personality by being at variance with other humans, by creating our own “brand names”. Thus World Champions, renowned scientists, inventors, Oscar and Pulitzer-prize winners, chiefs of states and governments are formed.

This is not so with countries. Whereas an individual has no internal disagreement over how he or she wants to be perceived outwardly, there are as many opinions on what impression a particular country should give to the outside world as there are citizens. However, as the saying goes, the total is much more than the sum of its parts, and country branding is a much more complicated process than just collecting the individual ideas of 5+ million people. There are questions to ask and answer, target groups to define, key messages to create and communicate, insights to evaluate and benefits to understand.

My ministry has undertaken a difficult task of accelerating the process, which began almost two decades ago but has been lagging until recently due to a number of reasons. In the last two years we have achieved significant progress proactively engaging national experts and opinion makers, sociologists, media personalities, bloggers and the broader public into a discussion on two key questions: does Slovakia need its own brand, and if so, how should it be expressed both verbally and graphically? We have succeeded in generating the conceptual outlines and specific messages that could be used to promote Slovakia internationally. In July 2014, a new web portal was set up to be used as a public discussion forum – www.BrandingSlovenska.com. Its ambition is to become a hub for the exchange of ideas, a focal point for testing public reactions to the concepts and images generated in the process, and therefore to be a source of valuable feedback. Why? Because country identity may only be successful if the citizens identify themselves with it.

Thus branding has a strong national aspect defining our attitude towards the country we live in. Of course, there are more pressing issues pertaining to everyday life that have priority over branding: unemployment, healthcare, schooling, safety and security, etc. However, patriotism and affinity to one's homeland must be grown and cultivated at good times and bad, to help the nation move along and to rally around ideas and principles that it holds dear. Finding out which ideas and principles these are – that is one of the goals of the branding process.

But branding is not only our domestic affair – its goals are broader and much more ambitious internationally. The truth of the matter is that Slovakia remains a largely unknown country abroad. It's not that the public abroad has misconceptions, rather the problem is the absence of information or a picture when it comes to our country and its potential. Lacking the understanding of who and what, it is hard to imagine answering the how: how to bring more investment, how to attract more tourists, how to make made-in-Slovakia products competitive on international markets. The (country) brand helps support the quality of products and services it exports.

I have no ambitions to dictate how Slovakia should be presented abroad. To tell the truth, I am myself eager to learn the results of the public discussion, which will be ongoing until December 2014. Until then I remain committed to the concept of Slovakia as a vivacious and diverse country, which can successfully rely on the innovativeness and craft of its citizens.

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