BRANDING ROMANIA AS A "TECH COUNTRY". NATION BRANDING IN TIMES OF DIGITAL DISRUPTION

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Abstract: *In the age of "digital disinformation 2.0" (Bârgăoanu, 2018) and "digital deceit" (Ghosh & Scott, 2018), nation branding has become part of a new paradigm of strategic communication between states, trying to seduce various audiences. According to Korjus (2017), the next big industry to face digital disruption will be our nations. For instance, Estonia's brand image is based on the idea of a digital state, both for domestic and foreign audiences. In Denmark, Casper Klynge has become the first nation state ambassador to Silicon Valley, describing his job as "techplomacy" (Baugh, 2017). The nation-state is responding to the new communications environment by reinventing itself in the current climate of intercultural dialogue for Europe. An interesting case is to be found in contemporary Romania, ranked 46ᵗʰ in the world, in terms of digital competitiveness at global level (World Digital Competitiveness Ranking, 2019). Overall, the aim of our research is to investigate technology as a soft power (Nye, 2004) instrument for Romania and to analyze how journalists and public actors construct the topic of new technology as a competitive advantage. In doing so, our research revolves around 50 news articles, published in the Romanian quality press (Adevărul, Gândul, România Liberă), employing mixed methods such as framing analysis (Entman, 1993) and critical discourse analysis. The results show that journalists have an active role in constructing technology as a public issue in Romania, related to future policy-making and regulation endeavors, as well as the future of public diplomacy.*

Keywords*: nation branding; technology; soft power; media; tech country; digital diplomacy*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the age of "digital disinformation 2.0" (Bârgăoanu, 2018) and "digital deceit" (Ghosh & Scott, 2018), nation branding has become part of a new paradigm of strategic communication between states, trying to seduce various audiences. According to Korjus (2017), the next big industry to face digital disruption will be our nations. For instance, Estonia's brand image is based on the idea of a digital state, both for domestic and foreign audiences. In Denmark, Casper Klynge has become the first nation state ambassador to Silicon Valley, describing his job as "techplomacy" (Baugh, 2017).

The nation-state is responding to the new communications environment by reinventing itself in the current climate of intercultural dialogue for Europe. Many governments have concerns over digital misinformation campaigns (cyber propaganda) and the emerging relationship between technology and digital security. Nation branding should also be comprehended in the contemporary *fake news* phenomenon and post-

truth era, which puts an emphasis on fabricated content, aiming to generate maximum attention and, therefore, maximum profit. Products of nation branding campaigns are, in fact, *simulation nations*, understood as contradictory compendium of signs, flashing through global media circuits, and trying to seduce various audiences (Kaneva, 2018). The idea of the *simulacra* leads further to a situation of hyper-reality, where the distinction between reality and simulation is blurred. Content generated on the Internet, especially on the digital platforms, shapes public perception, offering a compelling vision of division, an "Us vs. Them" (Bremmer, 2018) rhetoric.

An interesting case is to be found in contemporary Romania, ranked 46ᵗʰ in the world, in terms of digital competitiveness at global level (IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking, 2019). The project "Romania Tech Nation" launched in 2019 aims to boost Romania's transformation through technology, involving both the Government and the private sector. In the media, Romania is framed as a European

destination for tech investors, an IT outsourcing destination with one of the best Broadband Internet speed, science-savvy workforce and women involved in scientific research. In this context, how does digital disruption change the goals, objectives, and purposes of diplomacy?

Recent worldwide events (i.e. coronavirus outbreak, Brexit etc.) force us to rethink the basis of public diplomacy, and whether this impacts the individual and the society. We live in a post-truth era or in a "truth-decay" era, understood as a set of "increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts and data" (Kavanagh & Rich, 2018), declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information. In this context, facts are secondary, and we experience the "democratization of truth", leading further to a semiotic war, with a potential struggle over meaning (Borțun in Olteanu et al., 2018).

Overall, the aim of our research is to investigate technology as a *soft power* (Nye, 2004) instrument for Romania and to analyze how journalists and public actors construct the topic of new technology as a competitive advantage. In doing so, our research revolves around 50 news articles, published in the quality press (*Adevărul*, *Gândul*, *România Liberă*) employing mixed methods such as framing analysis (Entman, 1993) and critical discourse analysis. The research questions underlying this study focus on two dimensions – the media representation of technology as a soft power instrument and the relationship between nation branding and technology: (1) How is the nation brand constructed in relation to technology? (2) How do the journalists frame the technological developments of Romania?

Our paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the current literature on technology and soft power, along with nation branding. Section 3 discusses the methodology, while section 4 presents the main results of the framing analysis. Section 5 is dedicated to conclusions and future implications of nation branding in times of digital disruption.

We will now adress the relationship between technology and public diplomacy, in order to understand how are new technologies shaping the communication between nation states.

2. TECHNOLOGY AS A SOFT POWER INSTRUMENT

In the age of "dataism" (Harari, 2018), communication between nation states is affected by the development of technology. The Internet has changed the context in which international relations play out, while new actors have been empowered by the new information communication technologies as well. The emerging challenge is that "we are grappling with the consequences of code through the many boundary cases of human experience and cultural work that trouble contemporary algorithmic culture" (Finn, 2018:192).

Artificial intelligence is expected to be one of the most disruptive new emerging technologies (Van de Gevel & Noussair, 2013). There is an Artificial Intelligence race between high-tech giants such as Facebook, Google, Amazon, Alibaba and Tencent, and the governments are involved in this. In fact, Artificial Intelligence (AI) has a big potential for governments, in order to analyze large amounts of data and to identify trends and insights. For instance, the American corporate landscape is dominated by five big companies ("The Big Five"): Facebook, Apple, Google, Microsoft and Amazon. According to Bârgăoanu (2018: 110) the Big Five is, in fact, the most powerful instrument through which the USA has projected its soft power. Conversely, in small states soft power is considered a handy tool, especially in the sphere of cultural, political, economic, and social (Peterkova, 2020: 2). The ability to innovate is one of the significant sources of soft power. An asset developed by countries is also the National Strategies on Artificial Intelligence, highlighting policy measures to gain competitive advantage in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI).

The nation-state is responding to the new communications environment by reinventing itself. Smith and Sutterland (2002) use the term "networked diplomacy", defined as major ICT-related factors that affect the practice of diplomacy. Nowadays we can talk about cyber diplomacy, understood as "the use of diplomatic tools and mindsets in resolving, or at least managing, the problems in cyberspace" (Shaun, 2019). Public diplomacy is important in cyberspace, especially in combating cyber information war and disinformation operations.

Soft power and public diplomacy are linked to international communication. Pamment (2014) proposes four public diplomacy models: output models, related to press clippings, outcome models, related to logic models and impact measurements, perception models, related to surveys, attitudes and favorability, and network models, based on hubs and multipliers, forming alliances and relationship

management. We believe that technology can be integrated under network models because relationships can be measured through linkages, exchanges and patterns of interaction. Technology helps to identify nodes in a network and to identify people that have a leadership position in their respective social sphere.

Public diplomacy refers to transparent ways of communicating to international audiences, in order to promote national interests and achieve foreign policy objectives. In fact, public diplomacy is understood as "government communication with foreign audiences", referring to *domestic publics* in two ways:

> either as the domestic input from citizens for foreign policy formulation (engaging approach), or explaining foreign policy goals and diplomacy to domestic public (explaining approach)" (Szondi, 2008:6).

Citizens have an important role in the debates over foreign policy, while the role of the nation is in perpetual reconfiguration.

The "imagined community" (Anderson, 1991) is now reconfigured to the logics of fabricated content, leading to the hybrid concept of "DIY citizenship" (Hartley, 1999), based on cultural identity and choice, and not on the relationship of people to territory.

Furthermore, the concept of public diplomacy is also connected to the new information technologies, with a special focus on the impact of non-state actors in international affairs. Cyber diplomacy is also connected to cyber-challenges such as cyberwar, cyberterrorism, cyberespionage or cybercrimes. In cyberwar, state and non-state actors penetrate foreign computer systems with the intention of damaging the systems, extracting sensitive information and using it for various purposes. Vickers (2004) believe that all the technological changes give rise to the "new public diplomacy", so that technology has the potential to shape the governance of soft power. He notices the increasing ability of citizens and non-government organisations (NGOs), from transnational pressure groups to transnational terrorist organisations to access and use these information and communications technologies (Vickers, 2004:183).

The "new public diplomacy" leads further to "data diplomacy", understood as "the harnessing of diplomatic actions and skills by a diverse range of stakeholders to broker and drive forward access to data, as well as widespread use and understanding of data" (Boyd *et al.*, 2019:3). In terms of data diplomacy, WikiLeaks has released more classified information that the whole rest of the world's media combined, compiling a database of more than 10 million documents. The leak consisted of US Army fields reports of the Iraq War from 2004 to 2009, being the biggest leak in the military history of America up to this point (Hehe, 2018). Therefore, new technologies can lead to moral implications (Susskind, 2019).

According to Van Ham (2001), one can talk about *brand states* as political players promoted aggressively by using power and national identity. Put simply, this shift in political paradigms implies a move from the modern world of geopolitics and power to the postmodern world of images and influence (Van Ham, 2001: 4). It is more and more difficult for governments to control, shape, and influence information and its distribution. More recently, nation branding has become part of a new paradigm of strategic communication between states, understood as "a social, cultural and political construct which defines a nation through national identity discourses and with the participation of the public sphere as a debate arena on national issues" (Cheregi, 2018: 97).

In ths broad context, the aim of this study is to investigate technology as a *soft power* (Nye, 2004) instrument for Romania and to analyze how journalists and public actors construct the topic of new technology as a competitive advantage. The soft power instruments must be able to use information and knowledge to set the terms of debate on issues, shaping them in ways that are advantageous to it. Even tough soft power does not consume as many resources as military power, it requires investments in technology, in order to be in line with the main leaders in cyberspace. The next section highlights the importance of nation branding in times of digital disruption.

2.1. Nation branding and "techplomacy". In the last few decades, nation branding has become an important yet contested topic in research, attracting an interdisciplinary interest, from areas such as marketing, international public relations, and public diplomacy, but also from schools of thought such as cultural studies and social constructivism.

One of the most important functions promoting the country image overseas is to communicate the idea of a nation. In this regard, Szondi (2007:11) argues that branding has had an important role in generating a discussion about identities, especially because it can help define a certain type of *country identity* that can be communicated to other nations.

Furthermore, the audience must identify itself with the brand, so the citizens should become "brand ambassadors" (Szondi, 2007:19). In fact, nations are "emotionally constructs that shape and construct identity qualitatively differently than other places" (Mordhorst in Berger & Fetzer, 2019:201).

Nation branding is seen as a panacea for small and under-developed countries, as a need to enhance the competitive advantage on the global stage (Anholt, 2003; Dinnie, 2008; Olins, 2002; Papadopoulos & Heslop, 2002). Romania is a post-communist country with a bad image internationally, that is why the nation branding phenomenon has the mission of improving the competitive advantage.

From a public diplomacy perspective (Calabrese, 1996; Jansen, 2008; Gilboa, 2008; Mosco, 1996; Murdock & Golding, 1991; Schiller, 1976; Szondi, 2008; Van Ham, 2001; Zhang, 2006), nation branding is a continuation of public diplomacy and a neoliberal project. Public diplomacy contributes to a nation's power by generating credibility, fostering values such as the belief in democracy, changing bebavior, and increasing goodwill through activities like broadcasting, cultural diplomacy and exchanges (Pamment, 2014:53).

In this globalized world, promoting the nation internationally is an effort driven by global capitalism. Public diplomacy is understood as the Government's use of *soft power* (Nye, 1990) in order to promote national interests to political actors, NGOs, and corporations. Nation branding is a postmodern mutation of diplomacy and represents an evolution of diplomatic practice (Van Ham, 2001). Globalization is closely linked to the development of nation branding, while commercial neoliberalism privileges market relations in articulations of national identity (Jansen, 2008:121). In this context, globalization has the power to articulate a country's aspirations for wealth, power and enhanced visibility (Cheregi, 2018:87).

However, there are few studies exploring the link between technology and nation branding. Pawel Surowiec and Magdalena Kania-Lundholm (2018) explore the relationship between social media and nation branding in a study on `Logo for Poland` campaign, run by a coalition of state and corporate actors. The results prove that "the practice of nation branding online is an ideological construct supported by the neoliberal ideology of the free market, embracing private interests, marketing goals and commercial techniques for self-promotion" (Surrowiec & Kania-Lundholm, 2018:173). Recent studies concentrate on analysis of Big Data that relate to countries' nation branding efforts (Cha *et al*, 2017).

Korjus (2017) believes that the next big industry to face digital disruption will be our nations. For instance, Estonia's brand image is based on the idea of a digital state, both for domestic and foreign audiences. In Denmark, Casper Klynge has become the first nation state ambassador to Silicon Valley, describing his job as "techplomacy" (Baugh, 2017). Techplomacy was presented as a foreign policy strategy for 2017-2018 as a priority for Denmark.

In Romania, the situation is a little bit different compared to the above-mentioned countries. According to the Nation Brand Index (Anholt, 2005), Romania was ranked 42 out of 75 countries. Anholt's Nation Brand Index focuses on studying the nation brand as the sum of citizens' perceptions about the nations, considering six dimensions of the brand image: tourism, export, diplomacy, investment and immigration, culture and heritage, along with people. In fact, the hexagon is a perception model that lacks the sense of cause and effect (Pamment, 2014: 56), but it also represents a holistic approach to nation branding, measuring the global image, perception and reputation of countries. On the other hand, technology is missing from Anholt's Nation Brand Index, even though it is an important competitive advantage for countries involved in the "global tech race".

In terms of digital competitiveness at global level, Romania is ranked 46th in the world (Figure 1). The ranking analyses the extent to which countries adopt and explore digital technologies leading to transformation in government practices, business models and society in general (IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking, 2019). The three main factors defining digital competitiveness are knowledge, technology and future readiness. Firstly, knowledge is understood as the know-how necessary to discover, understand and build new technology. Secondly, technology is related to the overall context that enables the development of digital technologies (for instance Internet bandwidth speed), while future readiness is the level of country preparedness to exploit digital transformation.
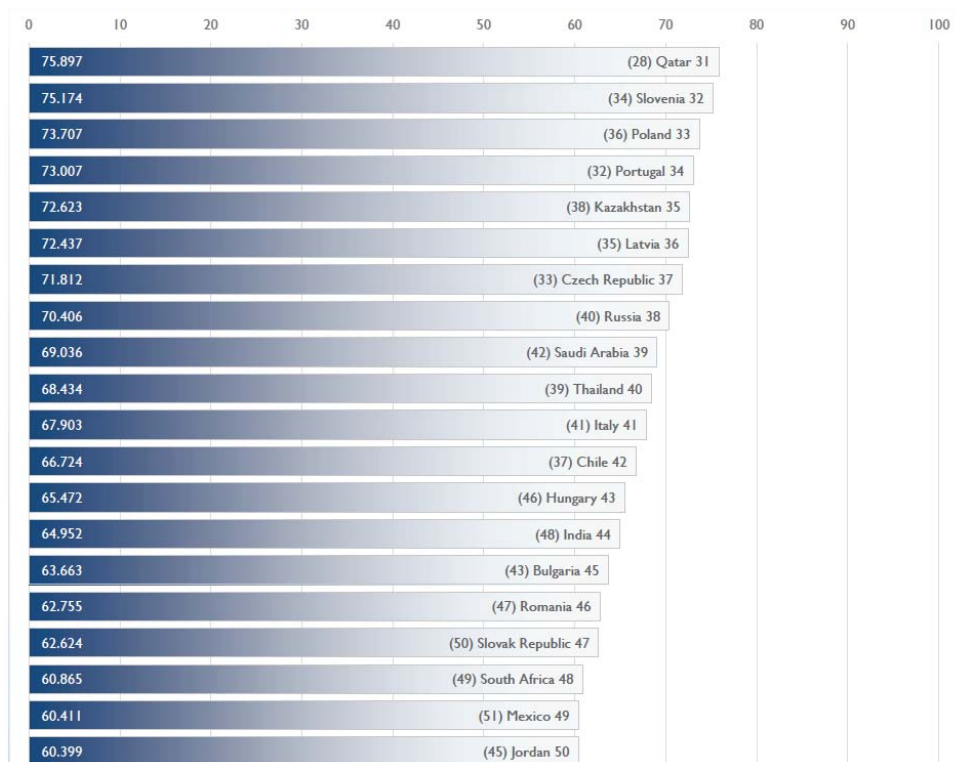
Fig. 1 IMD World Digital Competitiveness Rating (2019: 27)

Compared to other research on nation branding, our study moves the angle from nation branding campaigns to technology as a soft power instrument that contributes to the articulation of the nation brand.

The project "Romania Tech Nation" launched in 2019 aims to boost Romania's transformation through technology, involving both the Government and the private sector. Nations hold a soft power advantage when their culture and values match prevailing global norms when it has greater access to multiple communication channels that can influence how issues are framed in global news media (Nye, 2008: 96).

3. METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study is to investigate technology as a *soft power* (Nye, 2004) instrument for Romania and to analyze how journalists and public actors construct the topic of new technology as a competitive advantage. This aim is guided by the two above mentioned research questions. Our research revolves around 50 news articles, published in the quality press, employing mixed methods such as framing analysis (Entman, 1993) and critical discourse analysis.

Framing works as "schemata of interpretation" (Goffman, 1974), enabling the audience to locate

and perceive occurrences of information. Media frames are patterns of interpretation rooted in culture and articulated by the individual (Entman, 1993; Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes & Sasson, 1992: 384; Pan & Kosicki, 2003; Reese, 2007; Van Gorp, 2007). The journalists frame the issues and events in the form of a news story, presenting additional layers of interpretation. This impacts the audience as well, creating "echo-chambers" (Jamieson & Capella, 2008; Nguyen, 2018) that reinforce their beliefs, discrediting other relevant voices. For Couldry (2006), the credibility and the legitimacy of the message producing and the communication environment is important for the ways subjects will relate to those messages.

Research on framing nation branding come from different areas, such as international public relations (Li & Chitty, 2009), public diplomacy (Zhang, 2006) cultural studies (Volcic, 2008, Miazhevich, 2018), or from media and communication studies (Hyejung, 2007; Cheregi, 2017). For instance, Volcic (2008) performs a textual analysis of the official governmental websites of former Yugoslav states in order to see how they frame the nation as a brand. Miazhevich (2018) too uses the cultural studies lens to examine Russia's international broadcaster RT (formerly Russia Today), in the coverage of the Republic of Crimea in 2016, by drawing on a framing approach

based on Gitlin's (2003) process of ideological hegemony and on Entman's (1993) framing devices. Cheregi (2017) also uses media framing analysis (Entman, 1993) and qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012) to analyse 53 news articles on Romania's nation brand and on the national image building problem in four newspapers (*Adevărul, Gândul, Jurnalul Național, Dilema Veche*), published during January 2011 – March 2014. She proves that the Romanian journalistic discourse is built on evaluation strategies, insisting on political responsibility of Romania's nation brand.

Our study focuses on branding Romania as a "tech country", considering the fact that nation branding is a step in the process of discursively constructing the country image as a public issue (Cheregi, 2018). In order to see how journalists and public actors frame both textually and visually the topic of new technology as a competitive instrument in Romania, our research revolves around 50 articles, published in top quality newspapers such as *Adevărul, Gândul* and *România liberă* (brat.ro). In so doing, our analysis is based on Entman's (1993) framing model.

For Entman (1993:52), to frame is "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and made them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." Drawing on Entman's approach on news framing, the research examines the news media's coverage of technology as a competitive advantage for Romania.

4. RESULTS

Overall, Romania is framed as a European destination for tech investors, an IT outsourcing destination with one of the best Broadband Internet speed, science-savvy workforce, women involved in scientific research and a "pole of Artificial Intelligence around the globe" (*Adevărul*, May 2019).

The framing analysis on approximately 50 news articles published in top quality newspapers such as *Adevărul, Gândul* and *România liberă*, in the period October 2018 – March 2020, shows that there are four dominant media frames: artificial intelligence, the 5G technology, education and smart city. Firstly, the artificial intelligence frame refers to the adoption of Artificial Intelligence in Romania and to the National Strategy for Artificial Intelligence. The main indicators are digital economy, Romanian women involved in AI

projects and health. The second frame is the 5G technology, related to the effects of the development of 5G in Romania. The main indicators are political actors, national security, Internet of things, and protests (against the implementation of 5G technology in Romania). The third frame is education, related to the digitalization of the educational processes. Here, the main indicators are digital tools used for teaching, research in technology and level of nepotism in Romania. Finally, the fourth frame is smart city, understood as the digitalization of Romanian cities such as Sibiu, Oradea and Alba Iulia. The main indicators are tourism and level of citizen participation in local decision-making.

In *Adevărul* newspaper, the most dominant frame is artificial intelligence, presented in relation to contactless technology – "Romania, on the 5th place in Europe in adopting contactless technology: 2 out of 3 transactions are now contactless" (Dobrescu, September 2018, *Adevărul*), national strategy – "How can Romania become the most efficient center of Artificial Intelligence in the world. A national strategy" (Chirciu, March 2019, *Adevărul*), Romanian women participating at the first AI hackaton – "Alice envisions the future - the first AI hackaton in Romanian destinated to girls was a real laboratory for good ideas" (Brîndescu, October 2019, *Adevărul*) and facial recognition – "The legality of implementing facial recognition technology in Romania was contested (Dumitrescu, October 2019, *Adevărul*).

In *Gândul* newspaper, the most dominant frame is the 5G technology frame. An interesting fact here is that some news articles reveal the threat connected to the radiations produced by the 5G antenna - "What is the real danger of 5G technology? Can radiations produce cancer or not?" (*Gândul*, February 2020) - while others concentrate on 5G as a threat – `The 5G danger is real`, nor virtual. Hundreds of people from Craiova have protested against 5G technology (Paraschivu, January 2020, *Gândul*).

As for *România Liberă*, the most dominant frame is also artificial intelligence, presented in relation to investments – "Romania will have annual investments of 50 million Euros in Artificial Intelligence (Diac, February 2020), robotics – "Romania, champion in robotics in South Korea" (Dumitrescu, February 2020, *România Liberă*), and transport – "A factory from Sibiu works at developing the car of the future" (November 2018, *România Liberă*).

The main political actors mentioned in the Romanian press are the Romanian President Klaus Iohannis, the USA President Donald Trump, Alexandru Petrescu, the Minister of Communications and Information Society, the former Prime-Minister Viorica Dăncilă, Gordon Sondland, the ambassador of USA at the European Union, the Authority for the Digitalization of Romania, the European Union and NATO.

5. CONCLUSION

The results show that there are four dominant media frames emerging from the analysis: (1) artificial intelligence, (2) the 5G technology, (3) education and (4) smart city. The Romanian journalists have an active role in constructing technology as a public issue in Romania, related to future policy-making and regulation endeavors, as well as the future of public diplomacy. Furthermore, our article proves that the journalists construct technology as a *soft power* (Nye, 2004) instrument, insisting on technology as a competitive advantage for Romania.

We estimate that this trend towards constructing technology as a soft power instrument and as an instrument for economic development as such will continue, even accelerate in the post-pandemic world, in Romania and elsewhere. It is to be expected that the aftermath of the major disruptions going on right now as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic will be decided by technology, including advances in bio-technology and any other health-related breakthroughs. For Romania as well as for the entire European Union, it is important not to miss this new technology-driven race, which is likely to divide the world in technology-rich and technology-poor nations. Or just in rich and poor nations. For this, the importance of media actors and other institutional actors in raising awareness and articulating this problem as a public issue cannot be emphasized enough.

6. FUNDING

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