(Re)Branding Destinations in Southeastern Europe: An Interdisciplinary Perspective

Foreword

It is my great pleasure to present to the interested public the special issue of the journal *Sociology and Space* entitled *(Re)Branding of Destinations in Southeastern Europe: an Interdisciplinary Perspective*. This is, to the best knowledge of guest editors, the first call on this topic launched from a Croatian based social science journal targeting the authors working in the countries of ex-Yugoslavia. Today, these countries are shaped by very different political and social realities and, undoubtedly, more favorable academic and research environments are correlated with the integration of a particular country into the EU. In such circumstances we, the guest editors, were aware of the possible asymmetric reception of the call. However, we were convinced that successful (re)branding of the "independent states that have put their Yugoslav and communist past behind them" is the sole way to "inspire confidence for investment in economic reconstruction" and to ensure "the projection of national identity", as Derek Hall put it in his seminal work "Brand development, tourism and national identity: The re-imaging of former Yugoslavia"[1]. In such circumstances we were interested in deepening the understanding of problems and practices relevant for branding activities in the South East Europe. Therefore, we launched this call in order to identify the authors, map topics and methods, look at literature consulted for different research purposes and designs and find out the scope of the analysis authors undertook when they examined the problems related to branding of nations, places and destinations across South East Europe. With these specific aims in mind guest editors were hopeful that the call would find its audience and that an adequate number of authors would respond to it.

Indeed this hope was fulfilled as authors from Croatia, Macedonia, Slovenia and Serbia contributed to this special issue by sending interesting and well-informed articles, raising important questions and discussing in depth some structural problems related to branding nations, places and destinations in South East Europe. A selection of seven articles which successfully passed a peer reviewing process were chosen for this special issue in order to present to the wider public the scope of topics that contributing authors considered relevant when responding to our call. We believe that these seven articles point to the problems that currently shape the process of (re)branding of nations, places and destinations in South East Europe as well as the scope of the analysis authors were willing/able to undertake.

Clearly, most of the authors regard Slovenian nation/destination branding practices better or generally more successful (when compared to practices developed within other newly independent states). Also, a number of articles presented in this special issue suggest that most of the place and nation branding activities undertaken in

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[1] The mentioned article appeared in 2002.

South East Europe (including Slovenia) are still using destination branding practices in order to achieve nation and place branding outcomes. This insight suggests that newly independent states tend to reach out for "quick fix" (re)branding solutions. Even though such a dynamics is probably driven by fierce global competition which urges governments of newly independent states to produce a positive image as soon as possible in order to couple the (re)creation of national identity with economic revitalization, it should nevertheless be interesting to further investigate whether such practices are driven only by this rationale and whether they will produce socially and politically responsible effects in nations that are channeling nation and place branding "umbrella" activities into destination branding practices.

Some of the articles published in this special issue clearly question the "quick fix" branding strategies and their authors are suspicious of the results achieved by such strategies and the accountability of decision makers that opt for such choices. The authors fear that destination branding practices are too often "site" and not "place" driven and are therefore "un-organic" because they are not connected with the social fabric of the very place they are branding. Ultimately, they suggest that "quick fix" branding practices are under-informed, non-transparent, non-inclusive and un-accountable to tax payers that finance their production. This is especially true in the case of Dubrovnik where the lack of "organic" branding transforms cultural heritage into the "tourist gaze" or Skopje, where city branding has a paradoxical effect on nation branding. Several authors suggest such practices should be reconsidered in a number of newly independent nations across Europe.

With regard to the scope of the analysis, it should be mentioned that the authors from Croatia and Slovenia tend to discuss relevant issues in a wider regional context while authors from Serbia and Macedonia analyze primarily their own national problems. This difference in the scope of the analysis can probably be attributed to the fact that branding practices in Slovenia and Croatia have reached a more stable phase, thus allowing the authors from these countries to devote their time to other interesting topics in South East Europe. On the other hand, authors from Macedonia and Serbia still evaluate their respective branding practices against national development goals, institutional capacities and good governance principles. However, it should be emphasized that differences in the scope of analysis do not imply the lesser quality of the articles published in this special issue. The readers will witness the fact that a smaller scope sometimes produces more robust methodologies and persuasive articles as is the case of the article discussing branding green tourism in Macedonia.

Last but not least, I would like to thank, on behalf of guest editors, all the authors who have responded to our call and Dr. Anđelina Svirčić Gotovac, Editor-in-Chief, for all the support provided by the journal Sociology and Space. It is my hope that this special issue will be an incentive to other colleagues to enlarge and deepen the cooperation in the research of nation/place/destination branding across the EU and all Europe for the benefit of new, independent nations.

In Zagreb, May 22, 2017
Dr. Saša Poljanec-Borić, Guest Editor