

„WELCOME TO THE EUROPEAN UNION” – CROATIAN COUNTRY IMAGE IN HUNGARY*

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Abstract

In our globalized world more and more experts are dealing with investigation of country image, and number of countries, trying to shape consciously their country brand, is increasing. Present study is dealing with a reasonably actual field of marketing through an example of a special country image. Croatia proclaimed its sovereignty in 1991, which also meant the beginning of the Yugoslavian war causing enormous human, cultural and economic devastation. At that time Croatia, coming out from Yugoslavia put itself on the map independently, and its success is not only proven by its being one of the most famous destinations of the Mediterranean but as well by its new chapter heading the EU, leaving its history's storms behind. Now the new challenge for Croatian country image is to find its place in the European Union. The paper aims to demonstrate the present Croatian image in Hungary based on primary research.

JEL Classification: M30

Keywords: Croatia, Hungary, country image, country brand

1. Introduction

“It would not be necessary to highlight but for safety's sake: the collocation ‘Croatia and the EU’ is not the same as ‘Croatia and Europe’, as EU has no right to monopolize this term. Balkans are also Europe irrespectively of the manner how Croatia located itself in it or how it is perceived from the outside. Croatia is Europe, not only from geographical but from cultural aspects alike, regardless from the fact that it is still behind Western-European cultural standards.” (Kušar; 2006) Present study investigated this idea. Why is it so important? Croatia, being in the anteroom of EU, faces a rare opportunity – however, it already had a similar one

* This research was realized in the frames of TÁMOP 4.2.4. A/2-11-1-2012-0001 „National Excellence Program – Elaborating and operating an inland student and researcher personal support system”. The project was subsidized by the European Union and co-financed by the European Social Fund.”

in 1991. First step of leaving the Balkans' pejorative characteristics behind was the birth of independent Croatia and the last more than two decades, characterized by fighting the negative effects of war and development of a strong touristic image, seems to be fruitful. We still cannot state that this process was entirely successful. With the accession new changes are coming, Croatia has to find its place in the EU. The study focuses on the nowadays reasonably popular field of country image which is today extremely actual in the everyday life of Croatia. It also investigates a small and specific slice of the reception of Croatia in the European Union along with the Croatian image in the minds of neighbouring Hungarians.

2. The Croatian country image

In recently published marketing papers (and also in our everyday conversations) some kind of destination image often appears, along with specific country image, which is defined by Kotler as the sum of different views, beliefs and opinions that people have about a country. (Kotler et al.; 1993) The notion of country image can be found in professional literature dating back to the 1960s, at that time primarily from the aspects of the so called country of origin effect. However, the latest papers investigate country image as a brand value, as a result of which the process of country branding shows up. Every country has a continuously changing image, varying spontaneously or in a managed way (Papadopoulos & Heslop; 2002), and as all image types, it is a multidimensional concept. (Sándor; 2003) As a result of the independence of colonies, the breakup of the Soviet block and Yugoslavia, there are around 200 countries competing in our globalized world, and the role of country image is highly prominent in this battle. According to Anholt (2005) a good country brand means "soft power" in this competition, and in Kotler and Gertner's (2002) opinion it is specifically a competitive edge. Simon Anholt, being the first to write down the concept of "nation branding" in 1996, called country image as competitive identity in 2007 connecting it to national identity, as country brand is the material, strong, communicated form of it. (Anholt, 2007) Papp – Váry (2009) says that the goals of country image are primarily economic; enhancing tourism, supporting investments, export and improvement of the country's judgment in foreign policy. These are true for the investigated country as well, but it also has to be taken into consideration that the history of its past century is not only marked by the typical processes of transitional countries, but also by a dominant war. Croatian image is now facing more challenges; it has to become competitive in the battle of countries, moreover, accessing a new group of states it must strain strongly after

getting the negative consequences of its history over, since still today it is frequently associated with the war, war crime, home of barbarian people, corruption or the dark Balkans. The conflict between attraction towards and loathing from the foreign political, ideological and economic influence is one of the permanent elements of the history of the Balkans (Jelavich; 1996), including Croatia. Its past is characterized by linkage to different nations: after the Romans conquered the Illyrians, Avar and Slavic tribes appeared in the region. The country entered a personal union with the Hungarian crown, hence after the Tatar and Turkish invasion it became part of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the first and second Yugoslavia, later led by Josip Broz Tito in which six countries were kept together along a so called Yugoslavian identity. (Bali & Kolutác; 2006) After Tito's death Yugoslavian member states proclaimed their independence one after the other – Slovenia and Croatia were the first in June 1991. The Yugoslavian War broke out. More than 20 years have passed since Croatia became a sovereign and internationally recognized state. Austria and Germany were the first supporting Slovenia's and Croatia's secessions, carefully adding to the later that it could expect a long and tough path. (Juhász et al; 2003) According to Vukadinović (2000), forming the independent state of Croatia showed a range of peculiarities since it used to be one of the countries possessing the strongest economy in former Yugoslavia that could not benefit from it as it got involved in a war. The independent Croatia, getting the image of a “victim” after its international recognition in 1992, had outstanding opportunities for economic recuperation and for creating a positive image in tourism, as a result of which its marketing activity was mostly focused in this direction in the following years. Croatia's victim role was soon destroyed by the Croatian acts committed (or not committed) during the war. Disappointment of Europe is dated between 1995 and 1999. (Skoko & Jurilj; 2011) The war slowed down the democratization process as well, hereby the Croatian image was really facing a difficult fight. Governmental change in 2000 brought a new step in the process of joining Europe, soon the accession negotiations began at the end of which everyone concerned could heave a sigh of relieve, Croatia is accessing the EU on 1st July 2013. (Ištaković; 2012)

3. Methodology

Aim of the study was to provide a small insight into what Croatia's image can expect from the accession. Besides the fact that the investigation cannot be considered representative regarding neither the EU nor Hungary, the results may be noteworthy because of the large sample. The research was carried out by an online

questionnaire in March 2013, collecting the answers by snowball sampling. 681 valid questionnaires came back within a two-week-long period. During the design the main aim was that the respondents in the beginning cannot recognize the focus of the investigation since principally their overall associations were expected. According to this, in the first few questions Croatia does not appear independently, and guiding the respondents' thoughts, like by showing the word "tourism" in the beginning, was tried to be avoided. The questionnaire strived to investigate what image Hungarians associate Croatia with nowadays, not long before the EU-accession. The sample consists of Hungarian citizens, 59% of which are women and 41% men, with the average age of 29, 70% possessing BSc or MSc diploma, 56% working and 43% living in Baranya County, while 23,5% living in Budapest or Pest County. It is worth mentioning that as a control question they were asked to answer whether they have national connection to Croatia, the result of which was 12,6% and their answers were not decisively differing others. They were also asked how many times they have visited Croatia so far (53,5% three or more times) that aimed to examine the rate of building their opinion on own experience.

4. Results

In this chapter the summarized results, a basic insight is shown, taking no notice of the methodological sequence of the questionnaire design.

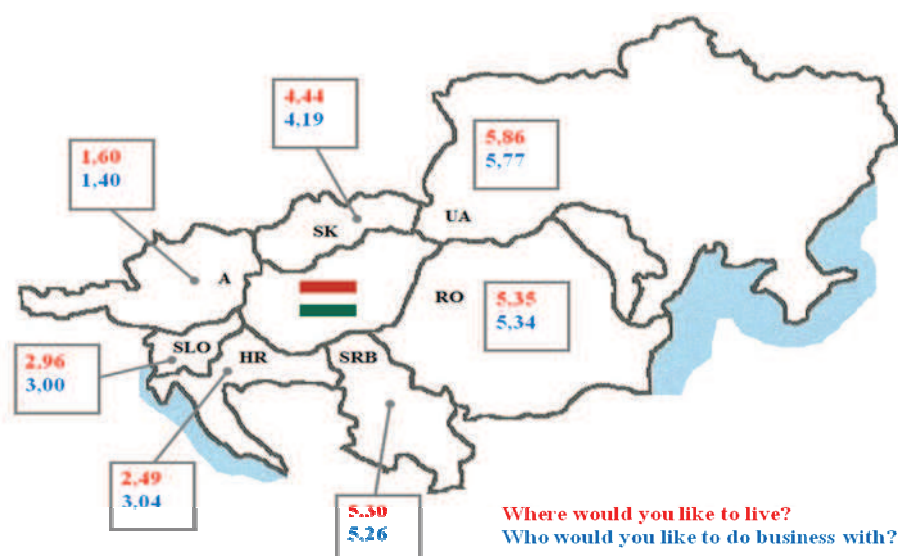
4.1 Toolkit of country image

Because of (and through) its tourism, Croatia created its slogan, logo, used colours early, that all showed up in the received answers. Regarding Croatia, 84% of the respondents associate on some word in connection with the seaside tourism such as the sea, seaside, the Adriatic Sea, holiday or the tourism itself, and similar results came regarding the symbol of Croatia, as 42% associate on some emblematic things of sea or tourism but many answers (18,5%) mentioned the red-white chessboard, the flag (10%) and the coat of arms (5%). 71% of the sample associated the blue colour with Croatia and 13% the red, while beside 13% of "I don't know" answers 59% think it would be a male if being a person. By giving a Croatian settlement it can be observed that besides the capital (16%) holiday resorts were mentioned, in a relatively higher rate Split and Zadar (11%), Dubrovnik (9%) and supposedly because of its location near the Hungarian border, Osijek (7%).

4.2 Allocating Croatia within the neighbouring countries

First two questions of the questionnaire asked to allocate Croatia within the neighbouring countries of Hungary. It was asked to rank the seven countries where one would choose to move and to do international business with. Results are shown in Figure 1 presenting the average position of each country based on the mentioned two viewpoints.

Figure 1: Average position of neighbouring countries regarding moving and doing international business



Source: Author's calculations

Hungarians would prefer moving to Austria at first place, at second to Croatia, then to Slovenia, followed by Slovakia, Serbia, Romania and Ukraine. The ranking is the same in case of doing business with a neighbouring nation as well, except for the position of Croatia and Slovenia, the reason of which could be the years-long Slovenian EU-membership and the probably evolved practice during these years, moreover, when moving people may prefer a beautiful place at the seaside. Besides, Slovakia has also been an EU-member for several years, Hungarian people still do not desire that country and far not Romania. Though not by a higher percentage, but Hungarians still chose Serbia before Romania. The aim of these two questions was to show the supposed difference between countries situated to the west and

east from Hungary, and Croatia's judgment not independently but compared with other neighbouring countries.

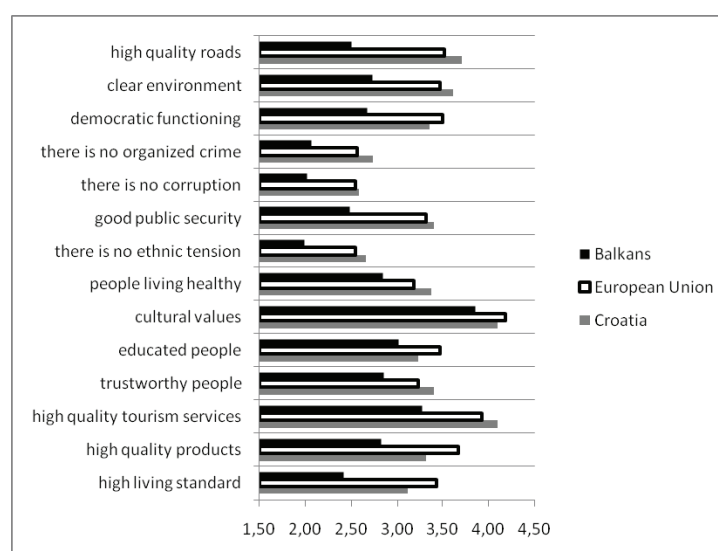
4.3 The EU-accession

Two questions were designed to see how Hungarians, as neighbouring nation, are aware of Croatia's EU-accession and whether they agree with it. It is hopeful that based on open answers almost 350 people knew the exact date of accession (2013) although besides a few extremities 2014 also got big number of responses. Moreover, 186 think that Croatia is already an EU-member. Even so, the average guess was 2012. Besides 13% of no answer, 76,5% agree with Croatia's EU-accession. It is interesting to mention that 59% of respondents having Croatian roots agree and every third person belonging to Croatian minority in Hungary would say no.

4.4 "European Union or the Balkans?"

It is a frequent dilemma worldwide to allocate the former Yugoslavian states on an imaginary line between "Europe" and the "Balkans". It is extremely difficult to define these terms since people would rather only feel the developed world and economic wellbeing behind "Europe" and pejorative characteristics behind multicultural geographical unit often called the "dark Balkans". In the questionnaire an attempt was made to present Croatia's position on this imaginary line with three questions. In these three questions there were four groups of characteristics regarding the environment, legal-political, social and economic aspects. In question 8 the respondents were asked to rate these on a five-point scale regarding how much each characteristic is true for Croatia (where 1: not at all and 5: absolutely), and later in question 13 the same was asked regarding EU and in question 14 the Balkans. The results (average rating of each characteristic) are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Characterization of Croatia, the European Union and the Balkans



Source: Author's calculations

Considering that the aim of the survey was investigation of the image-associations, it was not a goal to explain what the terms “European Union” and “Balkans” mean. The expectation was rather to see whether Croatia is nearer to one or the other. Besides the fact that rating on the five-point scale tends to move towards the centre, there is a tendency showing that Balkans got smaller values in all cases than the EU and Croatia. Croatia is usually positioned between the two others, although there are some surprising results as well. Croatia is allocated even above the EU regarding both the quality of the roads and the cleanliness of the environment. Croatia is averting the EU also in case of the quality of tourism services and some social characteristics as well, according to which Hungarians consider Croatian people to live a much healthier life and to be more trustworthy than EU-citizens. There are surprising results in the legal-political block as well, since, although Croatia does not reach the EU in its democratic functioning, public security is better and there is a lower degree of corruption, organized crime, and even ethnic tension (being in the block of social questions). These show favourable results for Croatia as during the accession negotiations and also in the international press these peculiarities have been often mentioned as weaknesses. It can also be easily concluded that Balkans are far away from getting good evaluation and Croatia seems to be separated from

it. Considering all the three territories (including the Balkans as well), the highest rates were given to cultural values. In its entirety it can be concluded, taking also in consideration the obscurity of the concepts mentioned above, that according to the Hungarian respondents Balkans decisively lag behind the European Union and Croatia is far not Balkans. Furthermore, in many aspects it even precedes the EU. Referring to the beginning, the aim of these questions was to reveal what a Hungarian person means by “Balkans” and “European Union”, and how Croatia is evaluated compared to them. The reason of the methodology was that a country image basically develops this way: opinions are not weighed based upon rational arguments, but rather leaning on individual impressions, experiences and feelings.

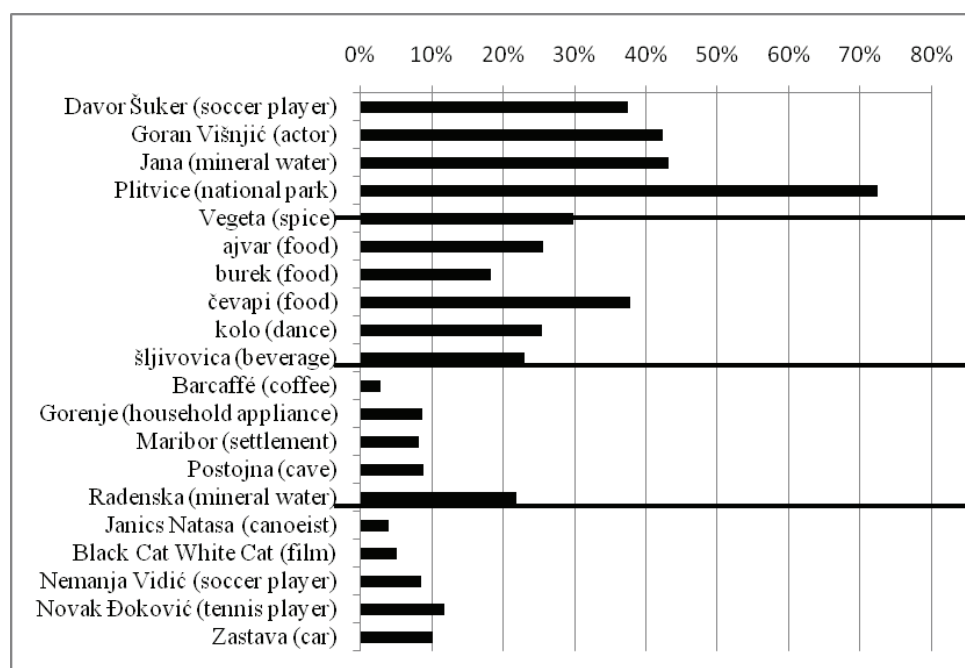
Following these questions, as a test, the respondents were asked whether Croatia was considered rather to be “part of” Balkans or Europe, based on their feelings. Beside 9% of “I don’t know” answer 69% think that it is more a European country. This question was a control to the results presented above and, although there is a high percentage of Balkan answers, people think three times more (taking everything in consideration) that Croatia is a European country.

4.5 Croatian, “Yugo”, Slovenian or Serbian?

Based on subjective selection of the Author, a bunch of five Croatian, five Serbian, five Slovenian and five, in the region today also existing former Yugoslavian products, famous persons, concepts, places, food, beverage or film was shown. (see Figure 3) The group called Yugoslavian (in Hungary still often called “Yugo”) refers to items not necessarily selected based on their origin but with the reason to see whether the respondents were able to separate the brands they are familiar with. The respondents saw the elements in alphabetical order and in contrast with the other questions, giving an answer was not compulsory.

They were asked to mark the items which they thought was for sure Croatian, unaware of the numbers belonging to each group. 609 respondents marked at least one Croatian brand, out of which 164 only chose Croatian and Yugoslavian one.

Figure 3: Croatian, “Yugo”, Slovenian or Serbian?



Source: Author's calculations

119 marked only Croatian item and only 11 managed to find all the five ones. Total number of marks of each items (sequentially: Croatian, “Yugoslavian”, Slovenian, Serbian) is presented in Figure 3. All Croatian items were marked by at least 30% of the respondents; principally Plitvice was recognized and the least of all was Vegeta. Goran Višnjić is “beating” Davor Šuker but Jana is highly considered to be from Croatia. The second highest values are given to the Yugoslavian group where for instance the čevapi got higher mark than Vegeta but the ajvar, kolo or šljivovica are also considered to be only Croatian. Radenska mineral water is emerging from the Slovenian group although it did not get as many marks as the really Croatian Jana. Serbian group got a bit less votes than the Slovenian one, however it is surprising that not only the tennis player Novak Đoković achieved good position but many people think of our really well-known Olympic champion and at the same time Serbian Janics Natasa that she is Croatian. Aim of this question was to see how much are the Croatian brands recognizable among the respondents in Hungary and according to the results, although they sometimes mix them up with

the Serbian and Slovenian brands, all in all half of the sample recognized what was Croatian. However, it is noteworthy that still too many people are confused by the distinction between Croatia and “Yugo”.

5. Conclusion

Although, the results presented above cannot be regarded as representative it also has to be mentioned that Hungary cannot be regarded as Western Europe. Hungarian answers could demonstrate much different views about Croatia than the responses of other nations situated more to the west would. From this point Croatia is a touristic paradise, proven by the associative questions since our first thoughts about the country are in connection with the sea. However, it is surprising that although 43% of the respondents live in Baranya County near the Croatian border, and hence could have been touched by the wind Yugoslavian war, the potential role of war in country image did not appear in the results. Respondents could distinguish between the subjective concepts of the “Balkans” and the “European Union” for the benefit of the later, and they did not only consider Croatia far away from the Balkans but in several cases even positioned it high above the EU. If Hungarians would have to move they would prefer Croatia right after Austria and they would rather do business with Croatian people than Slovakian, Serbian, Romanian or Ukrainian. The Croatian EU-accession is seemed to be supported by Hungarian people. All in all it can be concluded that independent country image development of the past more than 20 years, focusing on tourism and the EU-accession was definitely successful among Hungarians. To forget the concept of “Yugo” in everyday small talks by Hungarians may still require some time; probably a new generation which will not see the remains of bullet shots on the walls of houses anymore, will respect the nation that defended its country and will also know that not every food ordered from the friendly, patriotic and hospitable waiter in the seaside restaurants is originally Croatian.

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