

## COMPARISON OF PERCEIVED AND PROJECTED IMAGE OF SLOVAKIA AS A STARTING POINT FOR A COUNTRY IMAGE BUILDING STRATEGY

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### Abstract:

Countries have been associated with certain products, peoples, and landscapes from the ancient times. Nowadays, the active managing of country image has become an important tool of international marketing for the countries around the world. Nation branding as a modern, comprehensive and systematic approach helps to build the image of the country. It is currently applied in many countries, among which also Slovakia gradually ranks. When developing image building strategy for a country, it is important to know the perceived and projected image of the country. The paper briefly describes the nation branding. It is mainly focused on analyzing of primary and secondary data which describe perceived and projected image of Slovakia. Finally, these data are compared in order to define the possible ways and procedures for image building strategy of Slovakia. As the country started to build up its image in 2012, this is clearly a topical issue.

**Keywords:** *nation branding; image building strategy; perceived image; projected image; Slovakia*

## COMPARACIÓN DE LA IMAGEN PERCIBIDA Y PROYECTADA DE ESLOVAQUIA COMO PUNTO DE PARTIDA PARA UNA ESTRATEGIA DE CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA IMAGEN DEL PAÍS

### Resumen:

Los países han sido asociados con ciertos productos, gentes y paisajes desde los tiempos más remotos. Hoy, la gestión activa de su imagen se ha convertido en una importante herramienta de marketing internacional para todos los países del mundo. El enfoque moderno, comprensivo y sistemático de la marca nacional ayuda a construir la imagen del país. Se aplica actualmente en muchos países, entre los cuales también se posiciona Eslovaquia. Al desarrollar la estrategia de construcción de imagen de un país, es importante conocer la imagen percibida y proyectada del mismo. El artículo describe brevemente la marca nacional. Se centra en particular en analizar los datos primarios y secundarios que describen la imagen percibida y proyectada de Eslovaquia. Finalmente, estos datos son comparados para definir las posibles formas y procedimientos para la estrategia de construcción de imagen de Eslovaquia. Como el país comenzó a construir su imagen en 2012, se trata de un tópico de clara actualidad.

**Palabras clave:** *marca nacional; estrategia de creación de marca; imagen percibida; imagen proyectada; Eslovaquia*

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## 1. Introduction

Countries have been associated with certain products, peoples, and landscapes from ancient times. As the pressures of globalization have increased the production and movement of goods, services, investment, and talent, active managing of country image has become an important tool for the countries worldwide. Access to capital, talent, ideas and consumers get today ever easier. If a country wants to win in competition for share of mind, share of income, share of talent and share of voice, it should have a positive and well-known image. However, like companies, countries must have their own identity; they must be competitive and resilient in order to be successful on domestic and foreign markets. Image is a set of beliefs, ideas, thoughts, perceptions and emotions associated with the place. It can be created by the external and internal environment and these environments can influence image in various ways under or without control.

Image can be influenced by the history, natural beauties, possibilities for relax and tourism (Vaňová 2000), the economic cycle (Vaňová and Petriková 2012) and so on. Due to this reason, it is important for a country to define, communicate and then analyze its image, building it comprehensive and systematically. Nation branding as a modern, comprehensive and systematic approach contributes to build the image of a country. It is currently applied in many countries, among which also Slovakia gradually ranks. When Anholt defined the term “*nation brand*” in 1996, many countries started to build up their nation branding strategies in order to be known to the target audiences. Nation brand was defined as a sum of people’s perceptions of a country across six areas of national competence (tourism, exports, governance, culture and heritage, people, investments and immigration), which contribute to the economic and social development of the country (Anholt 2007). Nation branding has also been described as a concept which helps to remodel national identities, to enhance a nation’s competitiveness (Anholt 2007; Lee 2009), to embrace political, cultural, business and sport activities (Jaffe and Nebenzahl 2001), to promote economic and political interests at home and abroad (Szondi 2007), and to alter, improve or enhance a nation’s image (Gudjonsson 2005; Fan 2006). When comparing the image of selected states in the European Union in 2010 with their gross domestic product per capita and rate of unemployment, a link was found between these variables in 67% of cases (Štefčková 2012). The aim of nation branding is to create and promote a distinct self-image and international reputation of a country, which will serve national interests most effectively. According to Anholt (2007), image building strategy and nation branding are especially suitable for developing countries. They may change quickly but their image lags behind by years or decades. In this case, strategy of nation branding can help them to communicate their new image to the world and change people’s perceptions of this country. Nation branding provides also a way for smaller countries to establish and broadcast their cultural, social and historical identity.

In order to present a country and its image in a comprehensive and complex way, its image building strategy should consist of five steps in which is necessary to secure commitment on the highest management (political and business life) to research how is the country viewed on domestic and foreign market, to form brand identity and image of the country, to prepare operational plans and to measure results after the image building strategy was implemented. According to the theory of nation branding and image building strategy of the country (Olins 2002; Anholt 2006 and 2007; Moilanen and Rainisto 2009), basic assumptions for defining image of the country are surveys which reflect how the country is perceived in the domestic and foreign markets.

As stated by Vaňová (2006), the image of the territory should be able to attract the attention of customers with originality, uniqueness and interchangeability. When talking about image of the country, it is necessary to distinguish between perceived and projected image. On the one hand, the *perceived image* describes the image of the country on foreign markets. It is important in order to know which elements of the country’s image on the international market are perceived positively and negatively, which should be strengthened and which should be weaken. There are many indexes which help to describe the image of the country from the view of foreign audiences. The most popular indexes are the *East West Global Index 200*, the *Country Brands Index* and the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index*. This paper is focused on the image of the country as a result of the last one of these indexes.

On the other hand, the *projected image* is the image a country wants to present to the world. It reflects the efforts of the country to shape the national image for foreign audiences. The projected image of the country should be based on the real situation in there and so it is important to identify this image according to the relevant assumptions. The projected image of the country should also link the image of

the country among its residents. This is the best base for developing an image building strategy. People living in the country are considered to be “ambassadors of the country’s image”. They help to develop and communicate the image of the country. When people living in the country accept, embrace and support a country’s image, this country has a possibility to be well known on the international market. It is therefore important that the broadcast image of the country, which will be further distributed, should correspond with the image of the country among its inhabitants (Anholt 2007; Hains 2009; Dzureková 2009). To make it as easy as possible for them, projected image of the country should be based on how the country is perceived by its residents. The survey on the image of the country on the domestic market should therefore form the basis for further definition of the projected image of the country.

## 2. Research data and methodology

According to the intended goal of the research, primary and secondary data were used to determine and describe the perceived and projected image of Slovakia. The *perceived image* of Slovakia was analyzed according to the results of *The Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index* for Slovakia in 2011. Meanwhile, the *projected image* was analyzed according to the findings from an own research in 2012. It was assumed that the image of Slovakia among residents did not link the perceived image of Slovakia abroad.

The research that provided primary data on the image of Slovakia was conducted during December 2012 through a questionnaire survey on a representative sample of 300 respondents over 18 years old. Respondents were chosen according to the demographic characteristics of the Slovakian population, such as age, gender, highest level of education and the region from which the respondents come (at level NUTS 2). The questionnaire on the basis of Anholt’s theoretical and methodological postulates (Anholt 2007) and GfK methodology (GfK 2011), which is described below. The aim of the questionnaire was to find out the perceptions with the image of Slovakia through the six elements which create image of the nation brand, just in order to determine which element should be dominant and should present Slovakia abroad. The questionnaire evaluated the components of the image of Slovakia according to these field areas of *exports, tourism, culture, governance, people, and immigration and investments*. Questions were evaluated in a Likert scale ranging from 1 (*best*) to 5 (*worst*). According to these areas we were able to analyze the image of the country from the view of its inhabitants. The results of research were analyzed with statistical program SPSS and then indexes for the individual elements of the country image were calculated. On the basis of so calculated indexes, a *Nation Brand Hexagon* was depicted, reflecting the perception of the image of Slovakia by the residents in the country.

Secondary data were the results of survey on the image of Slovakia in foreign markets conducted in 2011 by GfK Roper Public Affairs & Corporate Communications. Anholt, the world-known expert on the issue of nation branding and image of the country, developed in 2005 the *Nation Brands Index* as a way to measure the image and reputation of the countries, and to track their profiles as they rise or fall. Conducted annually since 2008, the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index* measures the image of 50 nations. It is one of the world’s most respect indexes for measuring the image of the countries and nations. Every year some 20,000 adults aged 18 or over are interviewed in 20 core panel countries. The index evaluates the components of the image of the country according to above mentioned six dimensions or fields. Each of these fields is evaluated according to the questions, just as they are presented in the next section of the paper. According to these results, another *Nation Brand Hexagon* was depicted, in this case reflecting the perception of the image of Slovakia in foreign markets.

## 3. The perceived and projected image of Slovakia

Starting in 2011, some activities in Slovakia have focused on the issue of nation branding and image building strategy of the country. The aim of these activities has been to project the image of Slovakia and communicate it in a purposeful and systematic way. In 2011 Slovakia joined the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index* in order to find out how it is perceived on the foreign markets. The results of this index were used as secondary data in order to depict the perceived image of Slovakia in foreign markets. However, Slovakia joined this index only in 2011, later on there was no money to finance this activity. Even more, up to date the results of the index for Slovakia have not been used effectively in order to define the main attributes which could settle the basis to build the image of the country. In Slovakia there is missing a research on how the country is viewed from its residents (Štefčková 2013). In 2012 we tried to fill this gap and analyzed primary and secondary data which describe the perceived and projected

image of the country. Later on, these data were compared in order to define the possible ways and procedures for an image building strategy in Slovakia.

As above stated, the basic assumptions when defining the Slovakian image were provided on the basis of findings from previous surveys reflecting how the country was perceived in domestic and foreign markets (Olins 2002; Anholt 2006 and 2007; Moilanen and Rainisto 2009). In this section of the paper we describe and compare primary and secondary data describing the perceived and projected image of Slovakia. In selected questions we recalculated these data with proportional numbers in order to compare the data from the primary research with those data from the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index*. Data were grouped accordingly to the above mentioned six dimensions of the *Nation Brand Hexagon*.

### 3.1. Exports

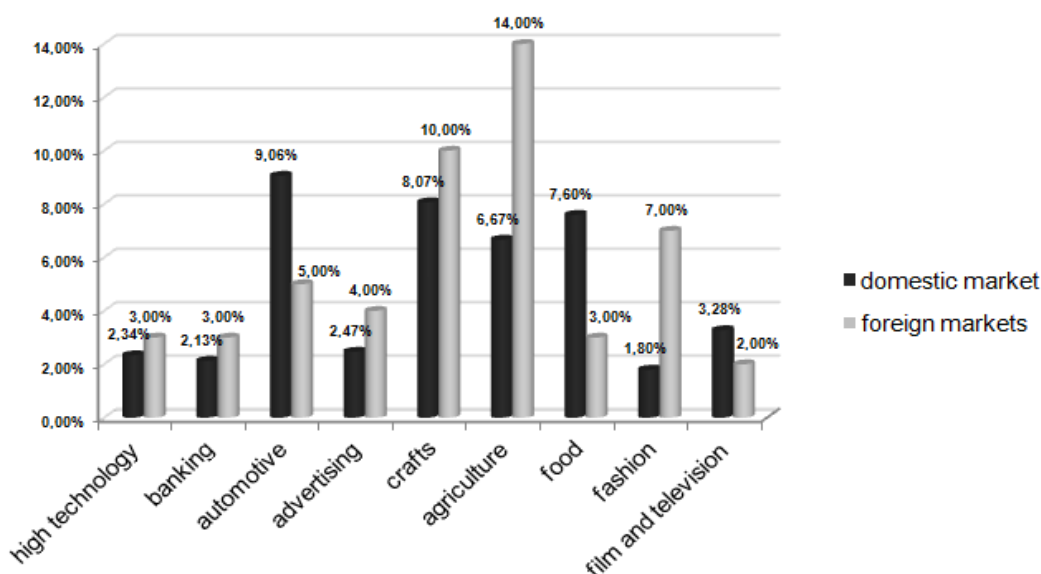
Regarding *exports*, respondents expressed their opinion on whether Slovakia is a country that contributes to innovation, science and technology. They were also asked to express if Slovakia is a creative landscape with new ideas and thoughts, and if they have a good sense of Slovakian purchase products and they have determined which of the products and services they associate with Slovakia.

According to the obtained results on domestic market, the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index* was estimated in 2.74, which is average. Regarding the image abroad, Slovakia ranks the 38<sup>th</sup> position (tied with Egypt) on exports (index value 3,8) of the fifty countries. It is the fourth-best index for Slovakia.

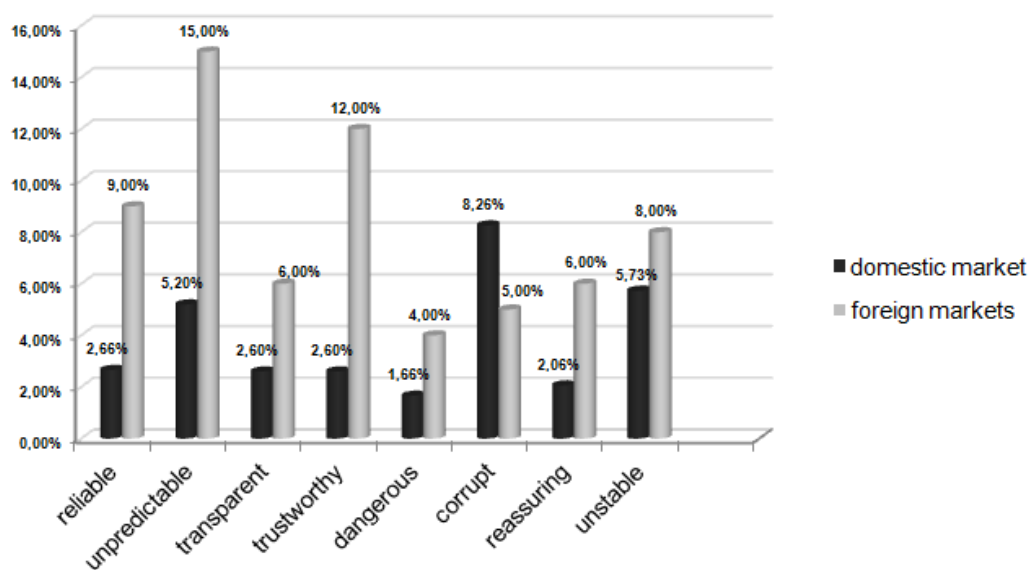
The “*feel good about buying products*” question ranked Slovakia in the 38<sup>th</sup> position in the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index*. Compared to the results of the research on Slovakian citizens, a worse evaluation was perceived, as Slovaks (90.7%) had a very good feeling about buying Slovakian products. On the foreign market, Slovakia ranked 38<sup>th</sup> on creativity, although it did a few positions back on science and technology. According to the results of the research on domestic market, 37.3% of Slovaks claimed that the country contributes to innovation, science and technology. The proportion of those respondents who considered Slovakia as a creative country (40%) was the same as the proportion of those who thought just the opposite. The opinion on this question was similar on domestic and foreign markets. The last question was focused on the products and services associated with Slovakia.

As shown in Figure 1, associations on the domestic and foreign markets are different. In foreign markets Slovakia was the best known for “*agriculture*” and “*crafts*” followed by “*food*” and “*automotive*” goods, though none of these areas is signature strength for Slovakia. Meanwhile, in the view of the domestic market Slovakia was associated with “*automotive*” and “*crafts*”, followed by “*food*” and “*agriculture*”.

**Figure 1.** Comparison of the associations to the Slovakian export goods and services



Source: own research and GfK (2011)

**Figure 2.** Comparison of the characteristics describing governance in Slovakia

Source: own research and GfK (2011)

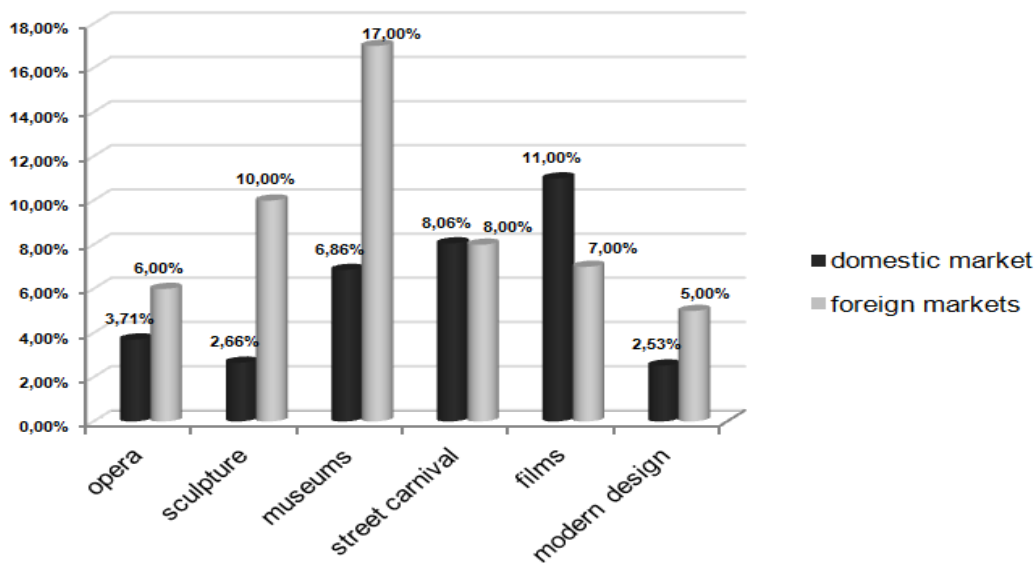
### 3.2. Governance

In terms of *governance*, Slovakia ranked the 26<sup>th</sup> position (index value 2.6) in the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index*. It was its strongest index. Slovakia's profile was exceptionally balanced on governance. Based on the results of a questionnaire survey on domestic market, a 3.18 index was estimated. This value can be considered as a mean value (taking in mind that the index can reach values ranking from 1 to 5). However, governance was ranked worst by Slovakian respondents. Slovakia ranked highest on the foreign markets (25<sup>th</sup> position in both cases) for "*responsibly protecting the environment*" and "*helping reduce the world poverty*", while on domestic market ranked middle in these fields. The country ranked lowest on the foreign markets on "*behaving responsibly in areas of international peace and security*" (27<sup>th</sup> position).

At any case, the 26<sup>th</sup> ranked position on the *Governance Index* was also due to the country reputation for being "*honestly governed*" and "*respecting the rights of citizens*". However, in Slovaks' view, the country was not honestly governed (93.4% of answers), did not respect the rights of its citizens (74% of answers) and it was not responsible in area of international peace and security (56%). When talking about words which could characterize governance in Slovakia, on foreign markets Slovakia was viewed firstly as "*unpredictable*" but also "*trustworthy*", followed by "*reliable*" but also "*unstable*" and less "*reassuring*" than other countries. In the domestic market, respondents chose as defining characteristics "*corrupted*", "*unstable*" and "*unpredictable*", that clearly pointing to a more negative perception of the country (Figure 2).

### 3.3. Culture

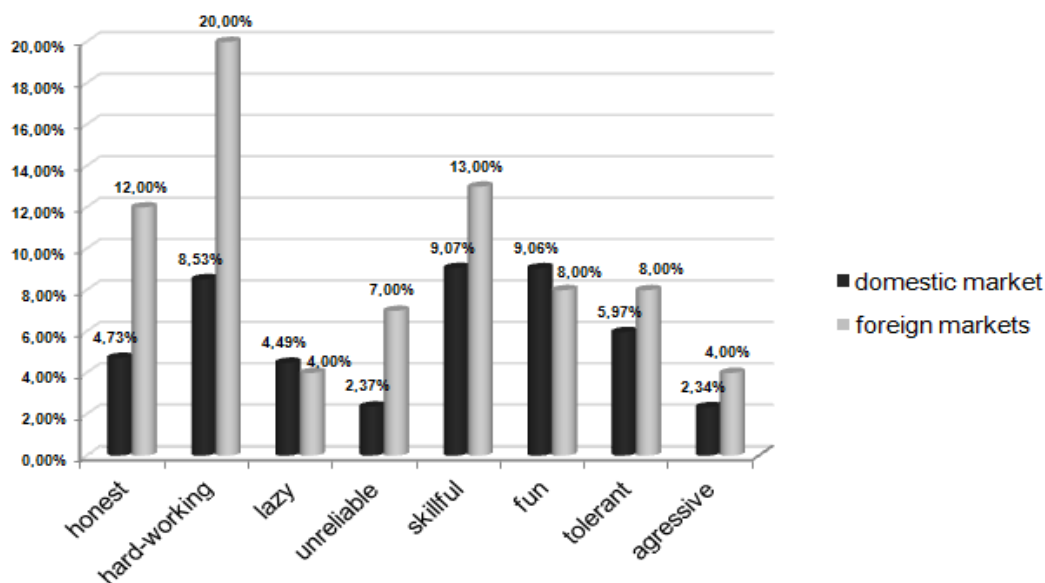
Slovakia ranked the 37<sup>th</sup> position (index value 3.7) in the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index*. It was the third-best index according to the results on foreign markets. According to the results of the internal research Slovakia obtained an index 2.51 in culture. This value was the best when comparing with the others. When talking about interesting and exciting place for contemporary culture such as music, films, art, and literature, half of Slovakian citizens thought that Slovakia is a place with these characteristics. Respondents asked in research on foreign markets placed Slovakia on the 40<sup>th</sup> place. As we can see, opinions on these characteristics for Slovakia are different on the domestic and foreign markets. Slovakia ranked especially well on sporting excellence on the domestic market, but also on the foreign markets. On the foreign markets Slovakia was most associated with "*museums*", followed by a second tier including "*sculpture*", "*street carnivals*" and "*films*". Associations of Slovakian citizens to the culture of Slovakia were "*films*", "*street carnivals*" and "*museums*". A comparison of the associations to the Slovakian culture can be seen in Figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Comparison of the associations to the Slovakian culture

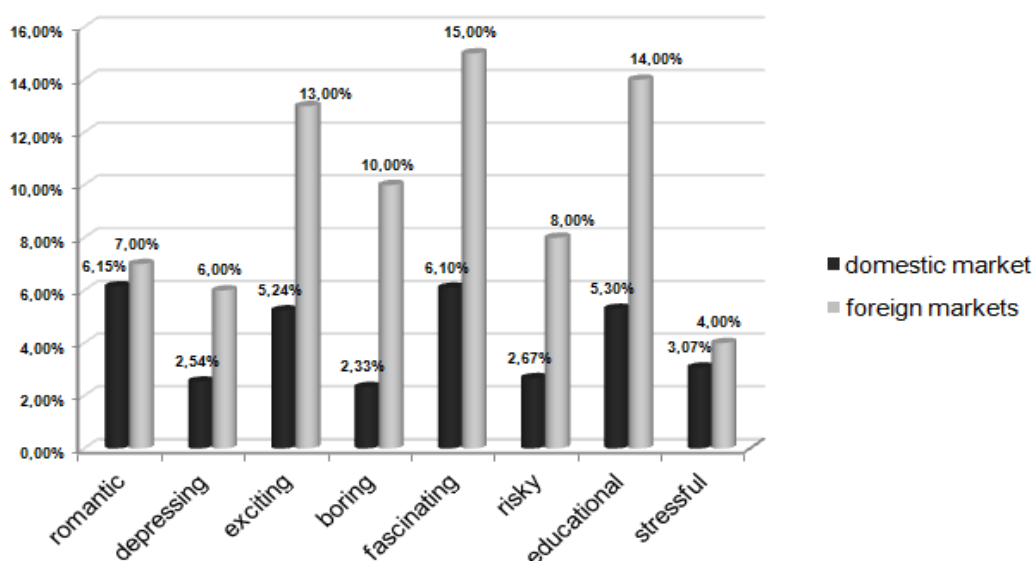
Source: own research and GfK (2011)

### 3.4. People

Regarding *people*, Slovakia ranked the 40<sup>th</sup> place (index 4.0), that is, the second weakest dimension according to foreign markets. People Index based on evaluating from Slovakian citizens was the second strongest index and it is 2, 64. In foreign markets Slovakia ranked best on having well-qualified employees, though its people ranked suffer with lower ranks on perceptions of warmth and friendliness of the Slovakian people. This evaluation is similar to the evaluation by Slovakian citizens. Foreign respondents found Slovakian people “*hard-working*”, and then “*skillful*” and “*honest*”, all positive characteristics. The third tier of descriptors for Slovakia included “*tolerant*” and “*fun*”. Characteristics chosen by Slovakian citizens were similar (Figure 4) who evaluated themselves positive so confirming Anholt’s theory (2007). As he found when giving respondents the task to place their home country according to its image in a ranking from 1<sup>st</sup> to 35<sup>th</sup> position, respondents from the countries considered as those ones with a strong and positive image, placed their home countries as number 1. Anholt’s findings highlight that individuals have a tendency to evaluate themselves more positively.

**Figure 4.** Comparison of the characteristics describing Slovakian people

Source: own research and GfK (2011)

**Figure 5.** Comparison of the characteristics describing Slovakia as tourist destination

Source: own research and GfK (2011)

### 3.5. Tourism

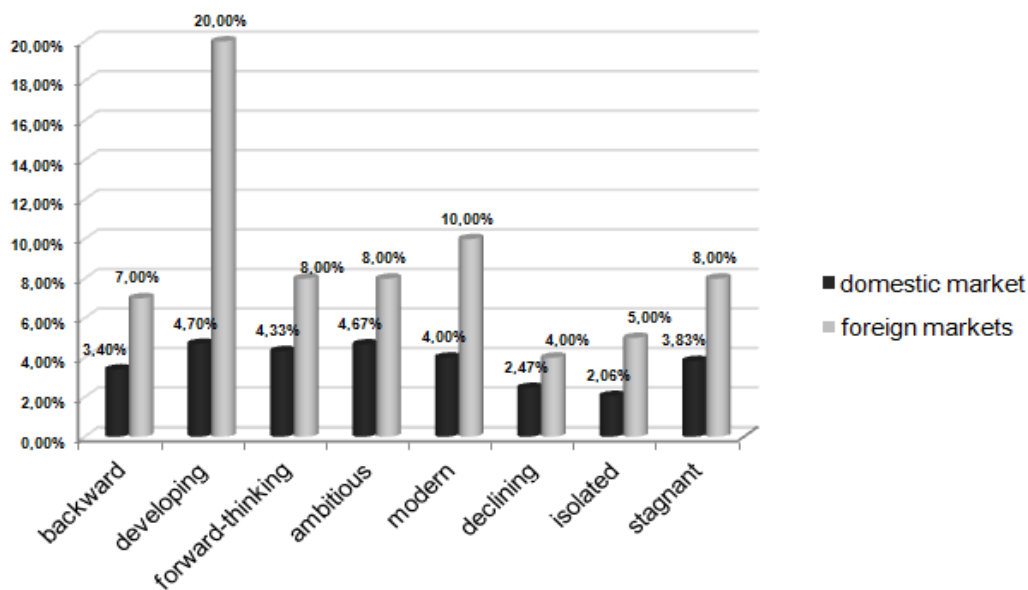
When talking on the dimension of *tourism*, and according to the results of the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index*, this is the lowest place for Slovakia. The country ranked the 42<sup>nd</sup> position in the view of foreign markets (index value 4.2). Based on the results from the research in the domestic market, the “internal” value of this index would be 2.73.

On the foreign markets Slovakia received the highest values in the tourism rank regarding the question about “*historic buildings and monuments*”, while Slovakian citizens ranked highest natural beauties. If money is not an object, almost 50% of foreign respondents would like to visit Slovakia. On the contrary, only 38.7% of Slovakian citizens chose Slovakia as a place for the holiday. More than 50% of Slovakian citizens stated that they would like to visit other countries while Slovakia was not for them very attractive as a tourist destination. A range of foreign respondents described Slovakia with a range of superlatives as “*fascinating*”, “*educational*” or “*exciting*”, but also as “*relaxing*”, “*boring*” and “*risky*”. Meanwhile, when describing tourism in their country, Slovakian citizens chose characteristics as “*spiritual*”, “*calming*”, “*romantic*”, “*fascinating*”, “*informative*” and “*exciting*” (Figure 5).

### 3.6. Immigration and investments

In the dimension *immigration and investments*, Slovakia ranked the 31<sup>st</sup> place (index value 3.1). This was the second best index for Slovakia according to the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index*. in terms of the domestic market, a value of 2.95 was estimated for this index.

Although Slovakia has attracted on the foreign market considerable business investment recently, for example in the automotive and electronics sectors, it ranked the lowest on the item “*it has businesses I’d like to invest in*”. Slovakia ranked middle when talking about willingness to live and work for a substantial period in this country, high quality of life, equality in society and assumptions to be a good place to study for educational qualifications. However, Slovakian citizens had other opinion in chosen questions, as they indicated Slovakia to be a very good place to study for educational qualifications, but with a poor chance for investing in. Quality of life and equality in society were ranked lowest from the Slovakian citizens view. In the last question, respondents were asked to catch characteristics associated with Slovakia when talking about the dimension *immigration and investment*. Respondents in foreign markets indicated Slovakia as “*developing*”, “*modern*”, “*forward-thinking*”, “*ambitious*” and “*stagnant*”, and Slovakian citizens chose similar characteristics (Figure 6).

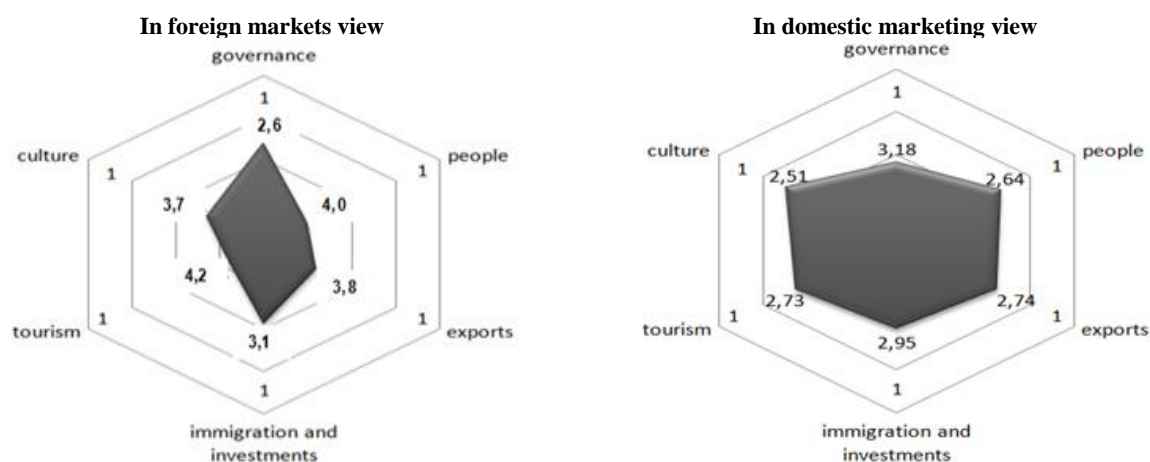
**Figure 6.** Comparison of the characteristics describing Slovakia as a country suitable for investments

Source: own research and GfK (2011)

### 3.7. The Nation Brand Hexagon for Slovakia

The results of the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index* suggest that Slovakia's reputation is somewhat uneven, with Index ranks ranging from the 26<sup>th</sup> (*governance*) to the 42<sup>nd</sup> position (*tourism*) in 2011. The subsequent *Nation Brand Hexagon* shows the elements that comprise the global image of the country. The alternative *Nation Brand Hexagon* for Slovakia according to the image of the country in the Slovaks' view is also presented in Figure 7. The findings match with those of researches by the *World Trade Organization*, the *Institute for Public Affairs in Slovakia*, the *Martin Prosperity Institute* and so on.

Comparing the two figures, we can see that *governance* and *immigration and investments* were ranked highest in foreign markets, while they ranked lowest in domestic markets. According to the results of the index, *people* and *tourism* appear as the weakest elements in the Slovakian image abroad, but in the domestic market they are placed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> position. *Culture*, which was considered the strongest element from the view of Slovakian citizens, was placed in the 4<sup>th</sup> position according to foreign markets. *Export* was ranked equally inside and abroad. As it was assumed, the projected and perceived image of Slovakia in the internal and the external markets are different. In case of the domestic market an average value of 2.79 was calculated for the considered index, while this value was 3.57 in the view of foreign markets, which also confirms the assumption on the existing differences.

**Figure 7.** The Nation Brand Hexagon for Slovakia according to the country image in foreign and domestic markets

Source: GfK (2011) and own research

#### 4. Conclusions and recommendations for image building strategy in Slovakia

Different activities have focused on image building for Slovakia since 1995. Among them, the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs promoted in December 2011 the document entitled “*Slovakia - a country with the potential: ideological concept for presentation of Slovakia abroad*”. The document was the starting point for the development of a comprehensive image building strategy and it was approved by the Slovakian Government in the same December 2011. Thus designing an image building strategy for Slovakia was emphasized as a priority area of foreign policy.

Later on, in March 2013 a Working Group for Uniform Presentation of Slovakia was designated by the Minister of Foreign and European Affairs, at the purpose of contributing to the formulation of a credible and attractive image of the country, defining the messages and values that it wants to communicate to the world. Important tasks of the Working Group are to achieve an effective use of the state resources, to create synergies, and to achieve cooperation among subjects operating in field of image building strategy, in order to avoid duplication of activities. According to these evidences, we can say that basic assumption for creating of image building strategy is fulfilled. However, after 2011 Slovakia was not incorporated in the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index*, so the country image should be built on the basis of the findings reported for this year. These findings were supplemented with primary data from Slovakian citizens, which is a key issue, as people living in the country and their opinion are one of the most powerful ingredients of a successful country image (Anholt 2007; Dzureková 2009; Hains 2009). Country citizens help to communicate the country image and only when people accept, embrace and support the country image, it has the possibility to be well-known in the international sphere. Due to it, we outline possibilities for image building strategy of Slovakia according to the opinion of the Slovakian citizens.

The above mentioned document offers eight suitable ideas for nation branding of Slovakia. According to its content (Bán et al. 2011), Slovakia could be promoted as: i) *a country in development* (thus offering opportunities to participate on its future); ii) *a peculiar country* (an original country with a specific history, people and culture, which creates an original story of the country); iii) *a country of paradoxes* (contradictions existing side by side, but also a country with the ability to turn a negative stereotypes into a positive), iv) *a concentrate of Central Europe* (in terms of history, nature, culture and lifestyles); v) *a country of innovation* (the birth place of ingenuity, inventions and reforms); vi) *a country which is able to adapt to difficult conditions*; vii) *a country with accumulated energy* (youth, vitality, a country full of today and future changes); and/or viii) *a country of interesting people* (creative individuals, high human potential).

On the basis of the content of the document by the Slovakian Government, the results from the *Anholt-GfK Roper Nation Brands Index* and the results from the internal research that was conducted, we suggest some possibilities to build the image of Slovakia. So, when having a look on the projected image of the country and its strengths according to the opinion of Slovakian citizens, we realize than Slovakia could be promoted as a peculiar country of interesting people with specific history and culture, creative individuals, human potential, peculiar nature and traditions. Nevertheless, these characteristics appear to be opposite to those linked to the image of Slovakia abroad. Taking in mind the perceived image of Slovakia in foreign markets, it could be promoted as a country in development, but we should remember that people living in the country and their opinion are one of the most powerful ingredients of a successful country image. From data comparison we can appreciate quite a big difference between the perceived and projected image of Slovakia. Nowadays the country is promoted under the slogan “*Slovakia - Little Big Country*”, which refers to the possibility to promote it as a country of paradoxes. Looking on the Slovakian history, its image could be also built as the image of a country which is able to face and adapt to difficult conditions.

In our opinion, projecting the image of Slovakia as a country of paradoxes is adequate. This could also apply to the comparison and differences in perceived and projected image of Slovakia. Talking on a country of paradoxes can mean that Slovakia is a modern country, attractive for foreign investors and a country with memberships in important organizations, but also that Slovakia is a country with peculiar culture, people and history.

As above mentioned, a Working Group for Uniform Presentation of Slovakia was established in March 2013, but it did not present any result for three months. As a next step in the process in the design of a image building strategy, we suggest to transfer suitable ideas for promoting Slovakia abroad (according to the decision of the coordinating authority of the nation branding process) into communication messages

and to visualize it as a logo for Slovakia. It is necessary to implement the required policies and actions according to the selected idea of nation brand in order to support such idea at national level and to promote it abroad by using tools of international marketing. Many bodies from different fields and areas are present in the Working Group. due to it, it is required to generate synergies and to achieve cooperation between subjects operating in this field in order to avoid duplication of activities.

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