

# Introduction: Nation promotion and the crisis of neoliberal globalisation

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## Abstract

This themed section seeks to initiate a debate about the changing nature of what we call nation promotion. That is, promotional practices aimed at creating, communicating and managing versions of national identity to advance economic or political goals. These practices—badged as ‘nation branding’, ‘public diplomacy’, ‘country branding’ or ‘soft power’—emerged more than two decades ago, in a context characterised by the proliferation of digital communication technologies, the intensification of globalisation and international cooperation, and the shift in the balance of power from states to market forces. However, as we outline in this introduction, nation promotion operates today in a very different environment, marked by a crisis of neoliberal globalisation, the changing communication environment and mounting global challenges. The three articles that make up this themed section tackle the changing practices of nation promotion by focusing on the impact of at least one of these structural shifts, offering conceptual and analytical tools for making sense of these transformations.

## KEYWORDS

globalisation, nation branding, public diplomacy, soft power

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The seeds of this themed section were sown in March 2019, during the symposium ‘Promoting the Nation in Troubled Times’ at Loughborough University. As scholars interested in the relationship between nationalism, media and organisation, we wanted to initiate a debate about the changing nature of what we call *nation promotion*—that is, promotional practices aimed at creating, communicating and managing versions of national identity to advance economic or political goals. The exact nature and boundaries of these practices—badged as ‘nation branding’, ‘public diplomacy’, ‘country branding’ or ‘soft power’—are disputed (Fan, 2010; Ingenhoff & Klein, 2018; Szondi, 2008) but largely refer to strategic communication initiatives targeted predominantly but not exclusively at foreign audiences, which disseminate and safeguard ‘new’ or ‘improved’ versions of national identity to entice tourists, attract investment or prevent conflict, among other objectives (Aronczyk, 2013; Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2022; Kaneva, 2023).

As the histories of propaganda and psychological warfare evidence (Taylor, 1997), state-sponsored activities aimed at managing national identities are not new. However, while early initiatives of this kind were concerned with supporting or avoiding armed conflict, nation promotion emerged in a context where the proliferation of digital communication technologies, the intensification of globalisation and international cooperation, and the shift in the balance of power from states to market forces made the previous focus on managing *inter-national* conflicts appear obsolete. The aftermath of the Cold War gave way to an apparent global victory of neoliberalism, with former communist nations in Central and Eastern Europe adopting radical reforms to embrace capitalism (Varga, 2020), and Latin American countries leaving behind dictatorial pasts to follow the prescriptions of the Washington Consensus (Love, 2019). At the same time, although nationalism continued to drive conflicts in the Balkans, the former Soviet Union and Latin America (Beissinger, 2002; Pankov et al., 2011; Radcliffe & Westwood, 1996), politicians stressed the arrival of a new era, with wars fought against local and transnational terrorism rather than other nation-states (Kaldor, 2004). It is significant that nation promotion was posited as the solution to the challenges faced by neoliberal globalisation, such as persistent power inequalities between nation-states and terrorist threats. Governments all over the world hired marketing consultants to develop national brands able to capture transnational flows of financial capital (Aronczyk, 2013; Kaneva, 2023), while events such as 9/11 gave a new impetus to the practice of public diplomacy in order to prevent globally mobile terrorist threats (Zaharna, 2004).

However, by the time of our symposium at Loughborough University in early 2019, nation promotion operated in a radically different context. First, public confidence in the superiority of neoliberal globalisation had been undermined (Sparke, 2022; Walter, 2021). This was partly a consequence of the 2007–08 global financial crisis, which challenged the dominance of the market economy and prompted demands for inward-looking economic measures and national protectionism, undercutting policies pushing for the free movement of goods, capital and labour, and therefore weakening some of the main justifications behind nation promotion. This was also accompanied by a decline in the global dominance of liberal democracy, with populist and illiberal movements and leaders making significant electoral gains, as it was the case with Donald Trump in the United States, the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil (Mylonas & Tudor, 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019). Many of these populist leaders became staunch critics of neoliberal globalisation, arguing that the nation was under threat by global forces and elites, and that a more protectionist political and economic status quo was required (Bonikowski et al., 2019; Brubaker, 2019; Joppke, 2021).

Second, the rise of digital and social media changed the communicative environment where nation promotion takes place. On the one hand, this new environment enabled greater participation and diversification of the voices and interests claiming to act and speak on behalf of the nation. This has, for instance, made it possible for citizens themselves to become more involved in promoting the nation abroad (Gómez Carrillo, 2018), while also contributing to a greater visibility of social movements seeking to reform the state in the name of the nation (Gerbaudo, 2017). At the same time, new communication technologies enabled greater fragmentation and polarisation, with a mutually reinforcing relationship between the rise of illiberalism and populism, political polarisation and the new information environment (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). Paradoxically, although digital technologies gave individuals a

greater potential to reject or subvert official nation promotion initiatives, they facilitated narrower approaches that reduce the nation to a community of economic actors interested in selling and/or consuming particular skills and products, rather than citizens with diverse cultural, political and social interests and needs (Castelló & Mihelj, 2018). Most recently, the growing monopoly of digital platforms is enabling states to reassert control over the national imagination, while also allowing other (non-state) actors to interfere in the process (Mihelj, 2023).

Third, the crisis of neoliberal globalisation and the rise of a new communication environment coincided with mounting pressures on nation-states to respond to global challenges, including climate change, migration, pandemics and wars. Unlike what earlier theorists of globalisation speculated (e.g., Beck, 2000), these pressures did not result in a demise of the nation-state. On the contrary, as often noted on the pages of *Nations and Nationalism*, the continuing social significance of the nation became even more salient. Nationalism is for instance at the core of the current war in Ukraine, with Russia's imperial nationalism denying the existence of Ukraine and Ukraine's response being driven by the principle of national self-determination (Breuille & Halikiopoulou, 2023). Even a global threat such as the Covid-19 pandemic was framed as a predominantly national affair, with nation-states closing boundaries to protect their citizens while competing to communicate their national successes in fighting the virus (Antonsich, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2020).

It remains to be seen how nation-states will address these global challenges in a context where international alliances are increasingly undermined by war, protectionism, isolationism and anti-globalisation rhetoric, as exemplified by the challenges faced by international organisations such as the European Union, the World Trade Organization or the World Health Organization (Walter, 2021; Woods et al., 2020). Yet it should be noted that, even in this radically different context, nation promotion has not disappeared. Concerns about national images remained during the Covid-19 pandemic, with governments engaging in 'vaccine diplomacy' to boost their overseas reputations (Lee, 2021), as well as promotional campaigns targeting foreign audiences during lockdowns (Kaneva, 2023). Moreover, 2 months after the beginning of Russia's invasion, Ukraine launched a nation branding initiative focussed on bravery, with the same consultants previously hired to do nation promotion put in charge of communicating the Ukrainian perspective of the war (Bolin & Ståhlberg, 2022; Kaneva, 2022).

## 2 | THE THEMED SECTION

The existing corpus of academic research on issues relevant to nation promotion—including nation branding and public diplomacy—has so far eschewed the transformations outlined above or addressed them in a partial manner. This themed section therefore brings together some key authorities in nation promotion, along with other scholars active in this area, to develop a fresh perspective. The contributions examine how the practices of nation promotion have changed in the current context and offer conceptual and analytical tools for making sense of them. They aim to engender a holistic, multifaceted conversation that cuts across the disciplines, specialisms and concepts that have analysed nation promotion so far, from nation branding and public diplomacy to soft power.

With this common goal in mind, the three contributions tackle the changing practices of nation promotion by focusing on the impact of at least one of the structural shifts outlined earlier—namely, the crisis of neoliberal globalisation, the changing communication environment and mounting global challenges. They are based on presentations at the symposium held at Loughborough University in 2019 and engage with different theoretical approaches through empirical evidence from Europe, the Americas and Asia.

The first contribution from Aronczyk critically examines eco-nationalist responses to climate change as nation promotion. Climate change is commonly associated with imperatives for global responses and a decline in nation-state sovereignty. However, as Aronczyk explains, nation-states and non-state actors are increasingly mobilising climate change for national promotion efforts that are grounded in nativism, racism and illiberalism. Aronczyk shows how these instances are diverse. Fossil fuel emitting nation-states enrol UN climate policies to project an image of climate sensitivity to accrue geopolitical power. Conservative politicians turn to environmental law to militarise

border security. And killers in mass shootings evoke environmental narratives decrying overpopulation and ecological damage by racialised minorities to justify their atrocities. Aronczyk argues that what unites such eco-nationalist promotional work is that they leave intact both the circuits of capital and hierarchical power geometries that have fuelled planetary ecological destruction. The result is that collective responses to climate change are undermined, and planetary ecological collapse is exacerbated. Aronczyk's paper brings to the fore an important, if rather dispiriting, paradox: crises in and around global neoliberalism increasingly appear as both the cause and effect of national promotion efforts.

Although recent research, including Aronczyk's contribution, has drawn attention to the role of non-state actors, nation promotion remains largely associated with state actors, pursuing geopolitical and economic interests and agendas. The second contribution by Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea directly challenges this methodological statism by exploring the role of protests within national promotion. Examining national and international media responses to three protests in Brazil, Romania and Chile, they explain how the relationship between protests and nation promotion can be analysed in three ways. First, protests can threaten the power of political-economic elites, evidenced in media responses deriding protesters as unrepresentative of the nation, chaotic and damaging to wider economic interests. Second, protests can appear in the media as offering more authentic national representations, opening up possibilities to present alternative national identities, including those that reinforce or contest neoliberal ideologies. Third, protests can draw on promotional and media logics to articulate messages in national and transnational media that contest prevailing narratives of nation promotion. Taken together, these frames for exploring protests offer one empirical path away from the paradox given in Aronczyk. Protests are one site where elitist and exclusive nation promotion efforts, and the crises of global neoliberalism they respond to or exacerbate, can be variously contested, and negotiated.

The third contribution from Kaneva also repeats the turn away from methodological statism. Kaneva undertakes a critical discourse analysis of how media and promotional discourses inform two contrasting post-national utopias founded on a rejection of the nation-state and nationalism: the Islamic State's Caliphate declared in 2014 and The Good Country, a virtual state founded in 2018 by Simon Anholt, a British consultant considered the 'father' of nation branding. Both cases have remarkable similarities, including their criticism of nationalism and the nation-state system. The Caliphate's critique stems from an imperative to dismiss secular modes of government and their professedly corrupt and destructive political-economic interests. The Good Country proposes a virtual country, where decisions are made via artificial intelligence rather than traditional nation-state voting systems, tackling crises associated with neoliberal globalisation, including environmental destruction and economic chaos. Both cases also rely upon promotional efforts emphasising the immediacy, attractiveness and accessibility of their post-national utopias. Leaving aside commitments to violence and Islam, the Good Country shares with the Caliphate imperatives for voluntary commitments to join a diverse population to transform a global (neoliberal) order. Similarly, both the Caliphate and the Good Country employ promotional tools where communications are instrumentalized to generate actions to join; messages are highly personalised; and signs are used to refer to not yet materialised places and subjectivities. Kaneva's contribution thus returns us back to the paradoxical relationship between crises in and around global neoliberalism and nation promotion. Both the Good Country and the Caliphate emerged as responses to crises associated with global neoliberalism, yet they also relied on elitist, instrumentalist and commodifying promotional tools that worsened these crises.

The three contributions emphasise that it is not possible to tackle global challenges and crises associated with neoliberalism simply by revising the ideological content of national or post-national promotional efforts. This is because promotional work often remains market-driven, elitist and instrumentalist, such that regardless of content, it persists in reproducing neoliberal ideologies. Conversely, if promotional work is organised differently, progressive alternatives to neoliberal ideologies become possible. As Jiménez-Martínez and Dolea explain, promotional work within protests might exemplify such an alternative but so perhaps might some post-national utopias, or even particular eco-nationalist projects. What is important is not just that alternative images of the nation are promoted but whether those images are articulated, circulated and consumed through alternative ways of organising. This demands

more than simply the use of new digital and social media. Parker et al. (2014a) explain one way of evaluating alternative ways of organising to neoliberalism is how they balance imperatives for individual autonomy, solidarity with others and responsibility towards the future. Artistic cooperatives, intentional communities, communes, worker cooperatives and countless other non-state groups are similarly concerned with alternative ways of organising and often engage in national or post-national promotional work. Future research on nation promotion might explore such groups to open up the neoliberal 'black boxing' of how promotional work is usually organised. These efforts would benefit immensely by engaging with multi-disciplinary studies of alternative organising (Parker et al., 2014b).

Some may question whether the term 'promotion' remains useful to describe all work to communicate with or beyond the nation. Etymologically, 'promotion' has its origins in the Latin *promotionem*, referring to 'a moving forward, an advance'. In consequence, perhaps there is no better word to critically address how diverse peoples, employing varied work, can not only imagine but also move together towards a more inclusive and prosperous future in the face of immense global challenges.

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