

## ***CITY BRANDING AT THE STATE FRONTEER. A COMPARATIVE VIEW ON ROMANIAN AND RUSSIAN EXPERIENCES***

**Mariana Cernicova-Bucă, Assoc. Prof., PhD, Politehnica University of Timișoara;  
Ekaterina S. Zhuk, Assoc. Prof., PhD, Southern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don,  
Russian Federation; Alexandr A. Zhuk, Prof., PhD, Southern Federal University,  
Rostov-on-Don, Russian Federation**

*Abstract: Place branding and in particular city branding is a top priority currently in the preoccupation of both practitioners, involved in the development strategies for administrative territories, and for scholars, advising or observing the phenomenon. A special attention is given to cities which are situated close to state borders and make dare attempts to overcome historical handicaps by clever branding efforts in an increasingly globalizing context. The paper looks comparatively into the results of branding efforts in Timisoara (Western part of Romania), and Rostov-on-Don (Southern capital of Russia), which share similar characteristics, adopted independently, similar strategies and promise to conquer for themselves a place in the constellation of globally visible cities. However, specific challenges are still to be met and the paper suggests some possible solutions, among which using the feature of university cities may prompt paths less explored so far in city branding strategies.*

*Keywords: city branding, positioning, global events, local government, strategy*

### **City branding – a powerful trend in the globalized world**

In the contemporary world distances, frontiers and time limitations drastically lose relevance. This feature challenges cities and territories to rethink their roles, places and relationships with other territories of the same kind, with socio-economic actors and stakeholders, with decision-makers around the globe. The sense that the world is flat and leveled as a playground for all (Friedman, 2005), the digital revolution, the new forces of competitions absorb cities and regions into the vortex of global processes, out of which, for the purpose of the present study, we focus on the process of city branding. Place branding – of cities, regions and even countries – gains

momentum as a tool for enhancing the competitiveness of the local/regional unit, in order to ensure its (future) development and sustainability.

Territory branding is viewed, starting with the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the precondition for granting the competitiveness of economy, creating/maintaining the demand for its products in the global, national, regional markets, providing a favorable investment climate and attracting social, labor, financial and other resources. Urban territories need to find integrative strategies, to ensure their capacity to properly respond to the many challenges they face (Murzin and Anopchenko, 2014). Hence the urgency to approach city branding not only from the point of view of managerial actions in societal practices, but also to develop appropriate theoretical and scientific frames of analysis, to rationalize the sometimes highly emotional debate in the public sphere, to create a corpus of case studies and build expertise, enabling the stakeholders to find anchors and inspiration for furthering their efforts towards success.

Both scientists, and image-making practitioners struggle with the question whether city branding falls into the same patterns as product branding or not. And while territories are not “products” in the same series with goods and services, many of the lessons drawn from the earlier started branding strategies of the latter categories can be applied to the newly discovered necessity of image-building, impression-orienting and brand management for contemporary cities. The “flattening” of the world and the abundance of available information can easily suffocate the receiver, challenged to make choices and select among products, services, places and names, both in the real, material world and in the virtual one as well. Quite often this abundance leads to developing resistance and/or indifference towards the functional characteristics of products, compensated or counterbalanced by the imagistic and emotional dimensions of the products (in the largest possible meaning). This is the reason behind the global interest cities and places on all continents take in developing and putting to use branding strategies. It is not merely “the fashion of the day” (although there are numerous cases when municipalities select only the surface signs of branding, without the depth of brand-building processes). Positioning on the regional, national, international and even global levels, careful and clever designed branding strategies can prevent contemporary cities from becoming phantom cities – as it happened throughout history, when settlements lost their usefulness and attraction to their inhabitants, to (potential) visitors and/or to decision-makers.

**This study aims** at proposing an approach regarding city branding for two cities that

share similarities on a large number of criteria. The comparative view of the cities of choice, which do not benefit from prior strong notoriety on the global arena, supplemented with a theoretical and applied approach, hopefully contributes to identifying aspects that can make the difference between simple image exercises and effective branding policies in cities with similar tasks at hand.

Keeping in mind the above, it is necessary to find appropriate paths of action, among which the authors of this study select the following, as being most salient:

- 1) Develop mechanisms for city branding which have applicability to territories sharing similar core;
- 2) Identify similarity strategic features, based on a comparative analysis of the key local characteristics;
- 3) Identify the key areas of interventions, leading to city positioning and formulating the concept of the brand.

The object of research are the cities Rostov-on-Don (Russia) and Timisoara (Romania). The subject of research are the marketing tools and technologies that enable the formation of the concept of brand territory, and activate the process of identification of cities in the global economic space.

### **Literature review**

The issue of brand and branding is the topic of research for numerous scientists in a variety of fields. Marketing, management, philosophy, communication sciences find food for thought and ample areas of uncharted waters, waiting for appropriate frames of interpretation. Currently, there are several approaches to the understanding issue of city branding. The first approach aims to create a brand image of the city through the consolidation of the territory in the minds of consumers, by using existing tangible and symbolic values (Zenker and Broun, 2010, Moilanen and Rainisto, 2009, Meshcheryakov, 2011). In the second approach, place branding focuses on the identification of its internal functional, emotional, and material elements and the highlighting of the associations among these elements (Anholt, 2007, Kavaratzis and Ashworth, 2005, Kavaratzis, 2004 Vizgalov, 2011). The third approach looks at the topic through the lenses building the city/place brand identity (Anholt, 2007, Rainisto, 2003 Vizgalov 2011). For example, Rainisto notes that place branding presupposes the introduction of additional attraction for the area, in order to construct the brand identity of the territory. The regional product in such

a case is a kind of mix offer which helps present the territory for its customers. A final approach to defining the essence of place branding implies that city branding is part of the marketing of a territory, a tool in its algorithm, which becomes powerful in postmodern societies, in conjunction with the corresponding concepts of economies of “events”, “experiences”, “images” and “symbolic” exchanges. (Meshcheryakov, 2011 Popov, 2010)

The analysis of these approaches to defining the essence of city brands and place branding reveals that all of them are legitimate constructions, helping to understand the issue at hand. The knowledge of urban space, elements of space, and the vision of the constitutive elements - each contributes to detecting and generating the internal identification elements from which stakeholders can benefit. All of these elements must be secured in the consumers’ consciousness through material and symbolic values, using marketing tools and technologies.

For the authors of this paper the focus of research deals with an in-depth understanding of the elements constituting the internal identification criteria, which can be incorporated in drafting the concept for city branding and in highlighting those specific, unique features that help differentiate one city brand from another.

### **Methods for branding frontier cities**

Quite late in social sciences frontier cities were treated as disadvantaged territories, due to their remoteness from the center of power and the relative neglect of the economic and even social wellbeing of state frontiers. The acceleration of globalization and the digital revolution, however, change the perception of frontiers, which become more permeable, more transparent. European discourses after the fall of the Berlin wall, in 1989, made way for a highly popular phrase, stating that frontiers need to be turned from barriers into bridges. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century scientists rightfully highlight the complex, networked status of frontiers, the advent of a new spaciality, and a re-negotiated relationships between state and society (Rumford 2006). In the case of the two analyzed cities, their historical past as outposts on frontiers is only briefly mentioned in the narratives of the city evolution, because multiple further layers made the geographical frontiers obsolete. The feature that remains powerful and is used recurrently in the descriptions and marketing of these cities is their multiculturalism, owed to the numerous waves of colonists that helped build and develop the city, and a more subtle frontier of mentalities, Timisoara being the interface between the Balkans and Central Europe, and Rostov-on-Don between Europe and Asia. These discourses bring us to the issue of city positioning, as part of

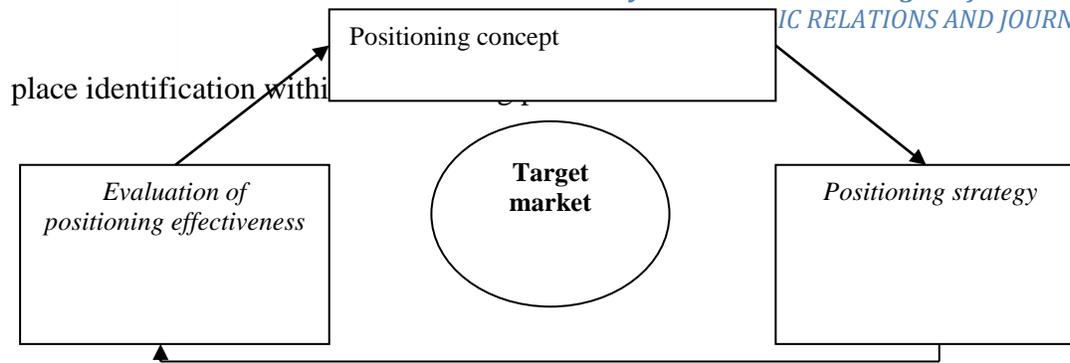


Figure 1: Stages of positioning process

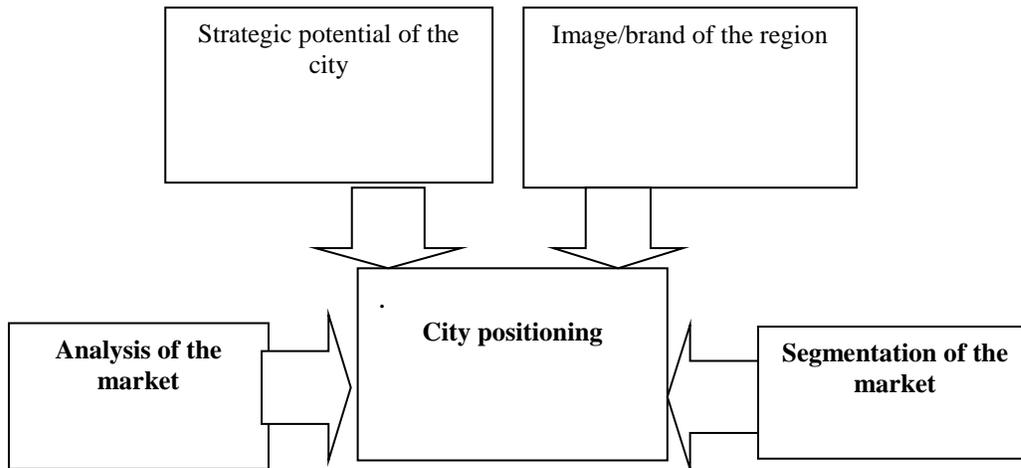
Positioning unleashes in the minds of consumers chains that help the identification of a product, service, company, idea or event. It is based on observing the distinctive features of the brand that allows one brand to differentiate itself from others and resist change. Figure 1 presents the stages of the positioning process: the development of the concept of positioning, positioning strategy formation and evaluation of the effectiveness of positioning (based on David Cravens, 2003). It also reveals the relations between these stages, opposite the target market, which needs additional clarification in the case of place branding.

The formulation of the concept on (city) positioning is based on the information gathered from the following areas: 1) the strategic potential of the brand owner, 2) the results of the analysis of market for the city (capacity, degree of monopolization, trends, actions of the main stakeholders), its development trends and other conjunctural factors; 3) market segmentation and identification/selection of the intended target audience (What? Who? When? Where? Why?).

Having in mind the fact that city brands are under scrutiny, additional information is needed from other relevant, connected sources, such as the image of the region, the brand of the region where the city is placed, the potential of the city to breed new products, services, realities to underpin its positioning efforts.

The interdependence of these processes – region/place branding – city branding – product branding is highlighted by figure 2.

Figure 2: Model of the process for positioning the region and the city



Cities resort to branding strategies in order to obtain one, more or all of the following effects:

- Attracting new investments;
- signaling security and stability in the eyes of investors;
- increasing political influence in the country (national) and outside (international);
- securing more effective global partnerships with other cities, public and private research organizations (for-profit, non-profit or public);
- triggering the effect of "the city of origin" for products and services;
- attracting tourists;
- fostering the pride of the city inhabitant.

Therefore, one must keep in mind that brand is a multilayered concept, which has to appeal to various audiences: investors, authorities, inhabitants, visitors, consumers. In short, the brand needs to respond to the definition "one message – multiple audiences". Although the city branding concept is relatively new, cities with a historically powerful image already capitalize on their prior acquisitions. Thus scientific literature identifies, in postmodern societies four major categories which systematize city brands, according to the most salient feature:

1. Capital: headquarter cities, centers of finance and business service centers.
2. Knowledge: college towns, knowledge cities, science cities and high-tech centers.

3. Mobility: logistics hub, hospitality city, conference city and MICE (meeting, incentive, convention, and exhibition) cities.
4. Pleasure: cultural city, tourist center, creative city, shopping city and service city.

Journals and magazines all over the world publish city rankings, according to multiple criteria, from the capacity to ensure the quality of life to that of producing high revenues on investments, attracting tourists or events. Most often such rankings include capital cities or cities with prior notoriety (such as Milan – the fashion capital, Cannes – the home of film festivals, Las Vegas – the gambling city, Dubai city – the shopping in style etc.). To modern audiences, places associated with blockbuster films also have a strong appeal, although at the time of filming branding strategies were not applied to cities. Such is the case of Casablanca, for instance. Prior to films, literature had (and still has) the same (branding) effect: visitors crowd to see the balcony of Juliet in Verona due to Shakespeare’s talent, Parma is known because of the novel written by Stendhal and the list may continue.

A special word should be given to the literature analyzing science cities (Anttiroiko, 2004), both real and virtual, since these are hubs of knowledge and branding is associated with the projection into the many possibilities of the future. However the features identified in this literature is not necessarily helpful for the case study, since neither city made claims towards this status. At most, Timisoara tries to assess itself as a “smart” city ([www.mysmartcity.ro](http://www.mysmartcity.ro)), i.e. one allowing for an intensive use of digital technologies in the public space, but it is not a feature unique or distinctive enough in the context of the present study.

### **A tale of two cities**

The literary Dickensian allusion in the title of this section is intentional. The cities selected for comparison are not linked among themselves in any way, other than the interest of the researchers for the topic of city branding. Each of them, independently, but in the mainstream of world preoccupations, struggle to position themselves in the most attractive possible manner, using the generally accepted tools: city narratives, networking (through the very fashionable town-twinning agreements, at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also by harboring diplomatic missions of other countries), display of city symbols, fostering branding through “city (region) of origin” marked products, tourism branding, branding through events. The one major difference between the two cities has to do with the size and number

of inhabitants: Rostov-on-Don is a mega polis with over 1million inhabitants, while Timisoara, although ranks in top 4 cities of Romania, has approximately one third of Rostov's population, according to the last census. Other than that, here are listed (in an order that does not bear taxonomic intentions) the similar features that have been extracted from the websites of the local authorities', local media, and from the Wikipedia articles on the cities – a showcase of basic information for the digital audience:

- **Geography:** cities in the plain, far from recreational resort potential (mountains or seaside), on former marsh lands, with a river that needed “taming” through hydrographic systematization, temperate climate (4 seasons), close to the national border;
- **Politics:** former communist regimes, with centralized economies left a strong imprint on the urban landscape and partially on the urban infrastructure. The liberalization policies and the free market model force municipal authorities to look for resources outside their area, to maintain, modernize and develop local infrastructures. In addition, global competition and the realities of the postindustrial, postmodern society left many local businesses behind and strategies for attracting (new) major/strategic investors had to be operationalized. Also new relationships had to be established with the national capital cities and authorities;
- **History and culture:** cultural institutions (museums, theaters, arenas, festivals) are well developed, but mainly for local and/or regional levels. They have faithful audiences and gather, most of the times, full houses, but not enough to become emblematic on larger scales. Despite the efforts of municipal authorities and society to brand Timisoara as an Open art city or City of Festivals, the fame of the events did not lead to massive fluxes of tourists (domestic or foreign). Similar attempts made by Rostov-on-Don also had modest results. However, both cities attract an addition of at least 10% of domestic population from outside their borders, due to the existence of a hundred-year old university tradition. The student population represent a special type of visitor, because it is a long-term consumer of goods and services, a potential for increasing the number of stable inhabitants and a link to the outside world, urban or rural, domestic or foreign;

- Display of **visible symbols of the city**: both cities revived the tradition of coat of arms and flags of the cities and use these to identify official residences, documents, promotional materials sponsored by local authorities. However, the public lost the competence of “reading” heraldic symbols and while jealously guarding that these symbols be used in official events, if asked few members of the public could explain the meaning of the symbols, differentiate coats of arms, if displayed without the explicit presence of the name of the city or invoke the symbols, without looking at the material sign carrying it.
- **“City of origin” for products**. Both cities, as capital cities in their respective regions, fostered the development and implementation of marketing strategies for adopting the “made in...” labels – Made on Don, respectively Made in Banat. The process of label development had an impact mainly on local producers and did not (so far) bring tangible benefits in terms of consumers’ preferences. By contrast, international brands make little efforts and have high revenues in these cities (McDonald’s, Starbucks, Auchan etc.).

Special attention should be given to the effort of local and regional authorities to help brand the cities by attracting European and/or global events. It is a common understanding that such an event has a major impact on developing the local and regional infrastructures immediately after a competition for hosting such an event is won. Sibiu – the European capital of culture in 2007 showed, to Romanian audiences, the full benefits of such a status and it is no wonder that Timisoara mobilized all stakeholders to express (and sponsor, and promote) the claim for the same title, in 2021. At the time of publishing this paper, the competition was still open. Romanian authorities still had to choose among the four semi-finalists: Baia-Mare, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca and Timisoara. ([www.capitalaculturala2021.ro](http://www.capitalaculturala2021.ro))

Rostov-on-Don already won the possibility to brand itself through a major event, the city being among the Russian hosts for the 2018 FIFA World Cup, alongside with other cities, some of them indulging a stronger image appeal such as Moscow and Sochi, both of which previously acted as Olympic cities. The preparations for the world football championship brought major resources for building a new stadium, development and modernization of transport infrastructure, a 5-star new hotel and other facilities for prospective visitors. To the moment of this paper presentation, however, Timisoara already had a tourist information center, with promotional

materials and guidance for city guests, while Rostov-on-Don only planned to create such an image vector.

Both cities developed, in connection with the prospective events, tourist logos, largely commented by the local population and not necessarily in positive appreciations. The stories told during the logo presentations were accepted on a rational level, but did not produce the acceptance which local authorities intended to obtain. Timisoara opted for a black-and-yellow solution, under the form of a star-shaped representation of light, on a yellow background, with the slogan “Shine your light – Light up your city!” The bid document clearly points at the branding intention beyond the cultural dimension, by incorporating such elements as green economy, civic engagement and IT-based industries. The tourist logo promoted by the municipality of Rostov-on-Don tries to render the symbol of the river incorporated in the name of the city, against an urban landscape containing recognizable local buildings. Comments on the web-pages of local media, presenting both logos did not place highly either of the logos, mainly because they play with elements already employed in branding other cities, which already have high visibility in the global competition.

### **What is the city but the people?**

The quote belongs to William Shakespeare (Coriolan) and hints at the basic assumption of the present paper: positioning mechanisms and brand strategies need to involve people, speak to them and be embraced by them. Also, since the task of brand construction is such an enormous project for cities that, although have a regional and national reputation, still need to make efforts to draw the attention to their offer and opportunities, in order to ensure the sustainable development trend, the authors of this study select one feature which is not exploited to its full potential. This feature is the identity of both cities as major university towns. Leaving aside the difference in the number of higher education institutions and students schooled in each of the two cities, they share similar strategies for recruiting students from a larger area, building relationships with alumni, networking with social partners for common projects which ease the transition from school to work, and communicate with employers and investors on a multiple number of topics. Skilled, (continuously) renewable human capital is a very valuable asset, triggering other positive phenomena in the social, cultural, economic and imagistic areas of urban life. Many new investors from advanced economies seek access to such urban areas, looking not only at policies, facilities or physical infrastructures, but at the possibility to gain

quick access to this human capital, at costs quite often more reduced than in the country of origin. The two analyzed cities are lucky enough not to bear the burden of mono-structures in education or economy. They have higher education institutions of a large variety, from comprehensive to specialized (polytechnic, medical or agricultural studies), from big to small, traditional and new, public or private. Therefore, the diverse student population can serve for apprenticeship, project or recruitment for temporary or permanent jobs. Additionally, facing the changes in the education financing of the postmodern societies, universities and colleges are eager to meet demands for specialization, research and/or study programs explicitly required or proposed by the labor market. Students can (and should be) used as brand ambassadors not only for their alma mater – as it is the case in the current situation of the higher education institutions in the two cities – but also as brand ambassadors for the cities. Curiously enough, local administration makes little effort to using this valuable and attractive human resource. Seen as temporary visitors already integrated into the city life due to the academic efforts and procedures, students rarely gain visibility in the branding discourse of the city. At most they are called upon as volunteers for event management or as one out of many focus groups for public decision making. Much more energy is put in seducing short-term visitors to the cities, although the outcome of their interaction with the city life is, for obvious reasons, more superficial.

### **Conclusions and limitations**

The paper analyzes the major trends in city branding literature and practices and contributes to furthering knowledge about city branding by proposing a comparative view on cities that do not belong to the mainstream analytical literature. The authors draw their findings on literature review, on practical work with various initiatives for branding their respective cities, on personal discussions with major stakeholders (mainly from the business sector) and personal (participatory and non-participatory) observation, as well as and from open sources such as local and regional media. While notable efforts have been undertaken in the two cities, towards city branding, the brand concept for the analyzed cities seems fuzzy and lacking sufficient differentiating elements. The paper proposes a closer look at the human capital asset of the two cities, hinting at the student population can be a generous provider of brand ambassadors not only for their alma mater, but also for the cities that harbor them for a significant part of life. Efforts aimed at developing student-friendly policies and working with students as brand ambassadors could differentiate the analyzed cities from – alas! - many other cities of the same

kind. Further research should deepen the analysis of the potential of young, educated, flexible people to serve as city brand ambassadors. Also, while understanding that positioning strategies are more complex than presented in this paper, the authors focused on a seemingly untapped source for brand building. The paper opens a discussion which is important to researchers, educators, decision makers but also to practitioners, called upon to help build strong city brands, capable of appealing to the modern minds and hearts.

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