

## Students' Corner

# The country brand as a new challenge for Poland

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### Magdalena Florek

is a doctor of science in marketing and lecturer at the Poznań University of Economics, Poland, Department of Trade and Marketing. She is a specialist in place marketing with several publications and scientific papers produced, focused on the place marketing concept, its tools and places' images. She has been awarded with scholarships by the Polish-US Fulbright Commission at Northwestern University, Evanston, USA and the University of Pavia, Italy.

**Abstract** The main objective of this paper is to present in the case of Poland the complexity and multidimensionality of the branding process and how it differs from branding products and companies. This paper explains a number of reasons why Poland needs a strong country brand. The basis of a nation's strength in its brand is the creation of core brand identity, the basis upon which it is possible to build opinions and attitudes among prospective receivers. The author's example illustrates the importance of such a brand essence. The paper explains the tools as well as the determiners of country brand implementation. It concludes that in the case of Poland the most important challenges include coordination between organisations responsible for and influencing country branding, collaboration between private and public sectors as well as between particular territorial units, financial backing and finally the fulfilment of the Poland brand by the people of the country.

**Keywords:** *Place marketing, country branding, country image*

### WHY DOES POLAND NEED A BRAND?

The reason for writing this paper was not the growing fashion for transferring market concepts to government administration management that has begun to take hold in Poland, nor indeed the promotion of Polish achievements in the arts and sciences in this area, but rather the desire to share some observations on the subject of the obvious need for the creation of a brand and attractive image as far as Poland is concerned. Developing a country brand for Poland might be seen as the right

strategy, but at the same time it must be noticed that it is a long-term and complex process. Thus, many determinants have to be taken into consideration to make the brand successful.

The aim of this paper was also to present in the case of Poland the complexity and multidimensionality of the branding process, and how it differs in this context from branding products and companies.

The task of branding in each nation is the building of positive associations for itself, its inhabitants and products. In

**Magdalena Florek**  
Poznan University of  
Economics,  
Department of Trade and  
Marketing,  
al. Niepodleglosci 10,  
60-967 Poznan, Poland.  
  
e-mail:  
m.florek@ae.poznan.pl;  
magflorek@poczta.onet.pl

many instances, its primary task is spreading information about the country concerned, especially in those countries that evoke no or few associations. Often it is an activity that aims to change unfavourable opinions or stereotypes that no longer apply. But the ultimate, superior goal of the country brand is to contribute to the welfare of its citizens.

In the case of Poland, a number of reasons can be put forward as to why it needs a brand, a strong brand. Most of these are external and rather obvious: globalisation of the economy, challenges relating to Poland's accession to the European Union (EU), growing competition primarily from neighbours in the region and the related need for Polish companies and products to be competitive, for which new export markets are, and will continue to be, searched for.

The factors associated with Polish branding also include a negative perception and unhealthy stereotypes. On the one hand, Poland is associated with a successful transformation of the political system, thoroughgoing and courageous reforms, a developing democracy and membership of NATO and the EU, but on the other hand, opinions are based on negative stereotypes or cameo snapshots such as ignorance, corruption,<sup>1</sup> crime, cunningness and, at times, crudeness and dishonesty. The common image presents Poles as a religious and suffering people throughout their history. The overturning of communism, a Polish pope, Lech Wałęsa and internationally renowned artists — these are the few positive associations of Poland, which continues to be seen as a poor country from the East that is behind the times. In many targets there is a lack of any basic information whatsoever on Poland (eg in research by the Institute of Public Affairs, Poland, 50–70 per cent of respondents had no opinion on contemporary

Poland).<sup>2</sup> The high degree of ignorance and ambiguity, however, provides a great deal of scope for changing Poland's image, especially since its negative image is at the same time accompanied by a lot of goodwill shown to Poles as far as sharing country and workplace is concerned (Kolarska-Bobińska, 2003).

Owing to mistakes made, Poland lost the tag 'leader of transformation' — one on which new strong qualities could have been built. Among the countries of the former Russian bloc (often viewed as republics of the former USSR), Poland distinguished itself as the cradle of transformation, initiator of changes to the political system and responsible for the transformation of the economy. At present, however, its past individualism in the eyes of others has come to share the features now common for the remaining countries from this group.

Of equal importance are messages of an internal nature, national ones, among which the most important appear to be the need to increase feelings of national identity and the stimulation of Poles to become active. The bad economic situation in the country and weakening signs of optimism in the community as well as among entrepreneurs<sup>3</sup> are factors highly unfavourable for the advance of society's growth in Poland. There is a need therefore to mobilise Poles and to unite them around a common aim.

The image of a country as projected to the world at large will have its effect on the population of the country itself: just as corporate branding campaigns, if properly done, can have a dramatic effect on the morale, team spirit and sense of purpose of the company's own employees, so a proper national branding campaign can unite a nation into a common sense of purpose and national pride (Anholt, 2002).

One certain stimulus for commencing work in the area of national marketing is

the successful marketing activity of other countries which, similarly to Poland at present, had to overcome negative stereotypes and past difficulties in the economy (Spain, Ireland and Portugal). Further, those countries neighbouring Poland, with similar experiences, have begun work already in this area or at least recognise the need to introduce concepts used hitherto by private enterprises (such as Croatia and Slovenia).

The final deciding reason for the need for providing Poland with a brand is simply the lack of a coordinated strategy for promoting Poland, not to mention the lack of activity in the area of shaping a brand. Up to now, despite several attempts, a coherent concept of promotion of a brand in Poland has not succeeded. In total, almost \$25m is earmarked for this purpose in Poland (Reszka and Zdort, 2002) — a rather small budget and, moreover, one spent irrationally. Too many organisations engaged in promotional activity could not up to now effectively collaborate and, in some productive measure, use to effect the resources at their disposal.<sup>4</sup>

Three ministries (the Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Foreign Affairs) as well as several other independent institutions run their own campaigns, promoting Poland overseas. One example of the lack of coordination is the Polish logo, which has several versions, each from institutions such as the Convention Bureau of Poland or the Polish Chamber of Commerce, each of which concentrates on its segment of the market.

Each of these organisations places stress on chosen elements, values and characteristics in terms of the chosen operational instruments and the means to carry them out.<sup>5</sup> Their work up to now has been focused rather on the end stage

of implementing a marketing concept — that is, on promotion work, *de facto* meaning advertising campaigns. To a limited extent there was some application of the analysis of who previous and potential clients might be, and analysis of competitors, of their own factual features and possibilities; this resulted, however, in an inappropriate choice of instruments.

Work on the creation of a marketing concept for Poland was undertaken finally in the Polish Chamber of Commerce, which wanted to establish such a strategy so as to take over all hitherto attempts by Polish government departments and institutions and create a totally new direction. Thus Wally Olins, an expert in creating national brands, was engaged. Also involved in this project was the Institute of Polish Brand, the first organisation in the country to take up work on the rebuilding of a national branding culture. This entailed the initiation and development of corporation home brands, business and community brands, the Polonisation of world brands active in Poland and the building of a national brand.

It would appear that the year when Poland has entered the EU (2004) is one of the last opportunities to take up activity to create the Poland brand, for Poland will lose its lead very quickly over other countries from East Europe.

## **ELEMENTS OF THE POLAND BRAND**

There is a common opinion among Polish dissidents that the source of investment and tourism failure of the country, towns and regions can be found in a low budget, limited advertising and stronger competitors. The entire success of place branding, though, depends on the appropriate analysis of work ahead and a careful planning of the brand

structure, and then its relevant communication.

In the case of countries themselves, there exist therefore important limitations related to the possibility of using branding. First of all, the subject of any such activity is a particular product (that can be called a mega-product). If a country is to be treated as a product, it is then a complex combination of material and non-material products which are accessible there for various addressees. It is also a structure containing spatial products (particular regions, cities and districts) as well as functional ones (tourism, investment, sport, culture etc). The difference between the 'country' product and that of the company is that the former is an entity to a large extent shaped by history, location, customs, its citizens and leaders — and therefore one that does not easily lend itself to modification.

In the context of such a product, there also appear phenomena of a complementary and substitutional nature in between its respective elements. Thus the above product, otherwise than in the case of business assets, is one that to a large extent delineates potential customer sectors of interest. At the same time, on account of the fact that the 'country' product is so very diversified, it is most likely that its generalisation is necessary, which is achieved through the use of its brand and image.

The basis of a nation's strength in its brand is the creation of *core brand identity*, the basis upon which it is possible to build opinions and attitudes among its prospective receivers. The source of brand identity is the set of ideas, values, features, culture, words, images and so forth which produce in the receiver defined associations with the state. A correctly defined essence for a brand serves effectively to create an identity, which appropriately delivered will bring

results in the desired image among its receivers. Every task in this context therefore should have the aim of strengthening and supporting a defined and accepted identity.

In building the Poland brand, therefore, the following sequence ought to be followed:

- to search for the values, characteristics and attributes to be associated with Poland
- to decide upon the identity of the Polish brand
- to transfer this identity into a visible 'offer' for receivers in the form of services, products etc
- to communicate this identity in the appropriate way.

The main values defining the brand ought to be so chosen as to spread freely across its characteristics and, in the ensuing stage, provide specific offers for its receivers. The brand of a place might be seen as a correspondent to the *umbrella brand* or *endorsed brand* in a company (depending on the strengths of brands of functional and territorial products within the country). Whatever is more adequate in the case of a particular country, the core of the brand should be broad enough in its cognitive sense to enable a broadening of the brand into various areas. It should also be future oriented so as to lend itself to future contexts.

A place's brand image needs both tangible 'service' characteristics and the brand's personality, like corporate brands (Rainisto, 2003). Just as in the case of commercial products or services, the nation's brand can and should meet emotional and rational needs (functional or applied). The source of a brand's strength ought to be looked for not only in tangible resources, geographic location and attractiveness of nature but also in

the base of intellectual capital, motivations, attitudes and characteristics of its inhabitants. This search should be commenced from the present perceptions of the country, joining it with present-day facts and possibilities. In this regard, it should be borne in mind that the brand should offer something more, something unrepeatable that can provoke a strong emotional tie with the brand. The main issue and true challenge, therefore, is the creation of such an added value so that it is visible, accessible and distinctive — but first of all true to reality.

In searching for sources of Polish brand identity it is thus necessary to analyse hitherto perceptions of Poland and Poles (as well as neighbouring countries) to find what will constitute the key to the nature of the brand. As previously mentioned, this should connect many fields and be the basis for extending the brand into new areas.

In order to illustrate the concept of country branding in the case of Poland it will be proposed that such a characteristic and value referred to could be *nature* — understood in the broad and multidimensional sense (this is the personal view of the author). The basis of this concept is constituted by the real attributes of Poland in relation to those elements of how it has been understood thus far. In the opinion of the author this might be one of the few values that can be realised in accord with present-day possibilities.

Poland is a country that is relatively little industrialised, with many attractive areas of nature, some of which are exceptional and not encountered in other European countries. Unique villages and their immediate surroundings as well as a thriving folk culture offer a potentially large tourist attraction for Poland.<sup>6</sup> The openness of Polish people towards foreigners, and often their simple charm,

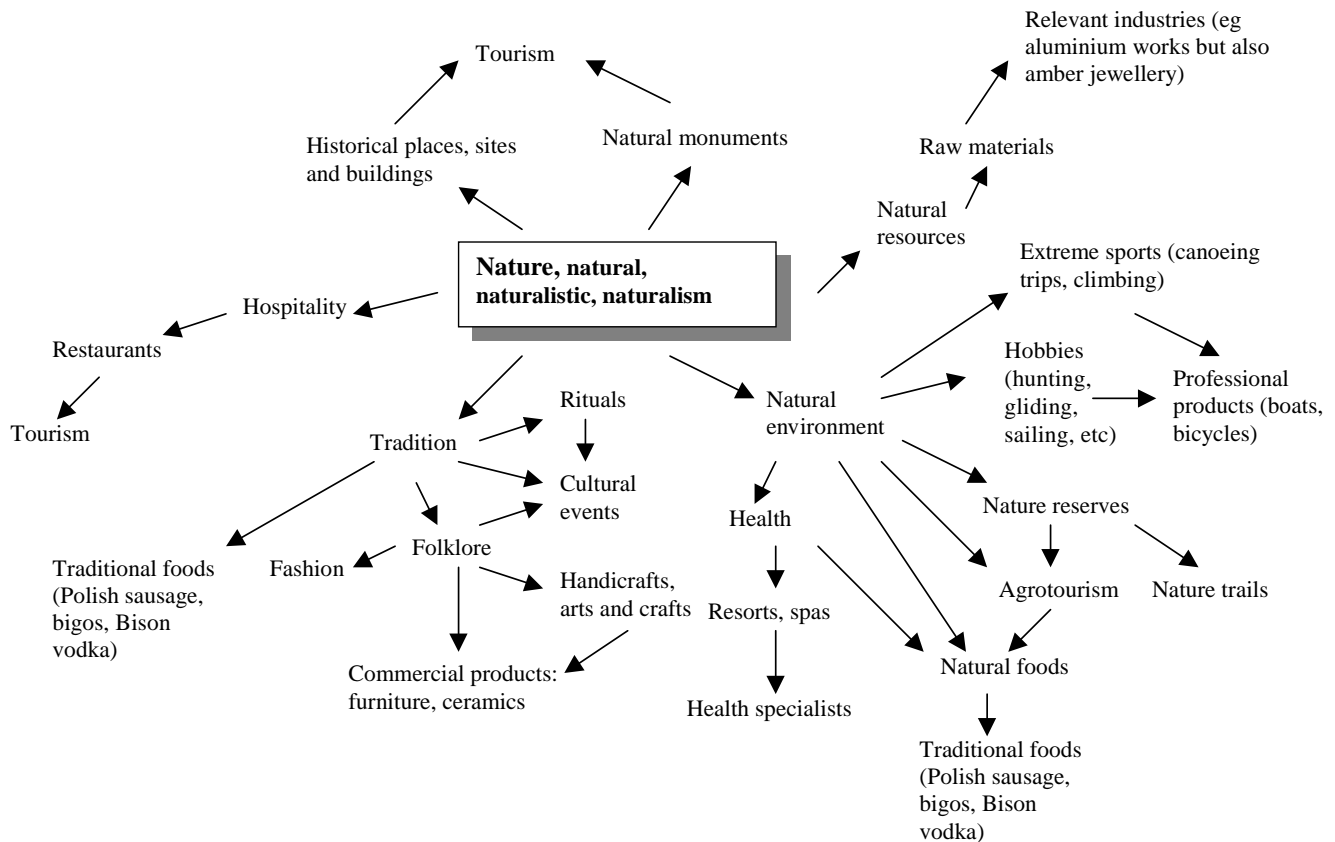
confirms the opinion that Poles are a hospitable nation,<sup>7</sup> possessing such *natural* characteristics. At the same time, nature, understood widely, gives excellent opportunities to provide many various fields with such an identity, a consequence of associations with such a base.

Also of great interest in this light might be the coupling of characteristics seemingly contradictory in theory: those that are conservative and tied to tradition, history, culture and natural resources with those that have modern attributes, which are dynamic and look to the future. Contrary to expectations, they may form a splendid partnership, complementing and mutually strengthening one another. Around one idea, therefore, it is possible to build many useful associations from various areas. Figure 1 presents such possibilities in relation to the main proposed pillar of the Polish brand.

The definition of fields and specific offers where Poland could confirm an established identity have to, down the line, result in an appropriate message. A visualisation of such an idea is thus needed in its choice of delivery and the matching of appropriate reference media. All activity in this context should serve the delivery of information from a common base and point of origin in values relating to the Poland brand.

## IMPLEMENTING IDENTITY — COMMUNICATING THE BRAND

The process of making the brand into something real is done with the help of all types of messages that the nation issues by way of many varying communiqués. As in companies, the communication of brand identity is made through the behaviour and work of the state, which may be termed *country behaviour*. This entails national policy,



**Figure 1:** The core brand identity of Brand Poland and the possibilities over which it could be extended

decisions and work undertaken by the leaders of the country and their departments. These are all the events that occur in a given country that are to do with politics, economics, science, sport or culture. This amounts to preserving the image of particular celebrities, people living there. The country's image is therefore created by persons known internationally (in the case of Poland, the president and known political figures, sportsmen such as Adam Małysz, well-known personalities in the arts such as Andrzej Wajda, Nobel Prize winner Wisława Szymborska, young and up-and-coming artists, fashion designers etc) as well as how Polish people lead their lives at home and abroad.

Reference modes of image are also specific places like large cities such as

Kraków, Warsaw and Gdańsk as well as small towns like Wierzbinek, today called 'the wicker village' where willow is used (local artists use wicker and it is also used as an innovative fuel for ecological stoves). In addition, historical sites such as the Wieliczka salt mine included in the UNESCO World Heritage List or nature reserves such as the bison reserve in the Białowieża forest are relevant in this regard.

Another medium can be found in particular enterprises and their products (ie Polish producers of vodka, or Bolesławiec Artistic Ceramic Cooperative — a world-class producer of Polish stone tableware with two centuries of tradition in stoneware manufacture). This example is particularly important in terms of the whole concept of creating the nation's

brand and producing a positive *country-of-origin effect*. The nation's brand therefore influences how its products are perceived — but it is worth noting that this is a two-edged sword. Thus also of particular use is the transfer of product image on to the image of the nation — and in fact, it is not possible to say which of these comes first (ie Nokia influences the perception of Finland, while German reliability influences the image of German cars).

In the case of creating the Poland brand, it is necessary to carry over the essence and characteristics of this brand to the image of flagship products that will be associated with Poland, those that will be a symbol of its distinction. In the age of globalisation, national products that have the chance to achieve this are those possessing features arising basically or exclusively from a particular environment and relevant natural and human factors. In this regard, the identity accepted should support the way products are seen and should at the same time enable the development and externalisation of these characteristics through a wide selection of products. Accordingly, a given offer or product that reflects the values of a brand should in a subsequent stage be directed to particular target groups that call for needs and preferences that are relevant to them.

The creation of a national brand occurs also through its *country design*. In this context, on the one hand there are elements that are relatively difficult to project such as the name of the country (the dilemma whether to use the country's name in Polish, that is 'Polska', or an international form, 'Poland'), the emblem, flag, national symbols (traditional as well as modern) and its landmarks. On the other hand, there are forms carried over from areas of projecting the brand of a product

understood traditionally: the logo, characteristic colours, website, but also common sets of road signs, landmarks, etc. A country's identification often occurs as a result of using its name or description as part of a name in commercial products.

The advantage of these types of measures is that they allow for a permanent and controlled presentation of the state, the result of which is that it contributes to increasing the degree of its popularity and the extent to which it is positively identified.

The final group of elements whose task is to create a brand is *country communication*, to which belong slogans, national themes, advertising, public relations, *country placement* (feature films and documentaries), websites etc.

The complex and not accidental implementation of brand identity elements has an undoubted influence on desired country image. One of the most important determinants is their proper selection, to strengthen the brand identity core continuously.

## THE POLAND BRAND — ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The successfully created Poland brand will make it possible to collect the scattered elements of the country as currently perceived and give it sense, thus reflecting the brand identity of Poland. This will allow the country to unite and coordinate all the fields as well as simplify their varied signals — in this sense the brand becomes all-embracing.

Several obstacles can be mentioned which can pose difficulties in the process. The most important are political and economic ones (equally as far as the image of the brand is concerned, as in its introduction). Regarding product/company branding such a determinant is no doubt of less

importance. It ought to be borne in mind that not all related activities can be foreseen. There are many factors beyond the planned and initiated brand strategy that can waste the entire effort of building it. Political decisions and even the activity of individuals can stymie or wreck for good the work undertaken. If this cannot be avoided, then it is possible and necessary to react according to the accepted identity of the brand.

In Poland there is also a lack of the appropriate financial backing for the running of a campaign, although due to the already initiated coordination it is possible to count on a more effective exploitation of the budget available, and perhaps its future funding.

The lack of coordination between organisations responsible for creating the identity of a brand is identified as one of the most important barriers in a country's branding process, which is particularly visible in Poland. The lack of collaboration is largely a result of problems related to securing adequate funding. No institution in this context wishes to lose influence over its own funding base.

The other problem lies in the fact that particular companies, corporations, non-profit organisations, cities, towns and regions may have different goals than the government and its agencies. They create their own images and brands. The problem is to gather these brands and the activities of all these entities together around one common goal and ensure mutual transfer of brand benefits.

At the introductory stage of brand strategy, collaboration will be necessary between the public and private sectors, which thus far has not appeared to be effective in Poland. Cooperation between local government and organisations is essential also at the national, regional and local levels, involving an integration of their aims, strategies and work

concerning a common brand (the question arises here of hierarchy — whether in providing information, emphasis should be placed on defined regions or specific cities etc).

The success of the country brand will depend also on how carefully the present situation will be analysed, which is to be the reference point for further decisions. In the case of every country, it is impossible to offer something that is simply not true. To make the branding process successful it is necessary to focus on contemporary, even if of minor significance, strengths. The very nature of the brand chosen on this basis has to have a kernel point sufficiently universal to allow it to be expanded into new fields, one that can still be relevant. The success of the Poland brand depends also on whether the brand will distinguish itself from its competitors, and present an appropriate dose of value added equally in the functional as well as the iconic sense. This distinctiveness must be noticeable, realistic and, foremost, sought after by its receivers (target markets).

The most important challenge, however, is the fulfilment of the Poland brand by the people of the country. Specialists can work out the brand concept but, in this instance, it is the Poles who have to make it work. An important assignment for the brand therefore will be the shaping of a strong identity from within and its communication inward. It is already possible to observe the first activities in this field, an example of which is the promotion campaign aimed towards Polish citizens to buy Polish products (issued before Poland's accession to the EU). Independent projects in this context have appeared which aim at the promotion of regional products. Work of an internal communication nature can, for example, be that of administrative and other organisations being highly



receptive to direct contact with their local residents, publications explaining the aims and work of dissidents and polls and referenda as a means of reflecting public opinion. Citizens' identification with their country's brand can be increased through trade fairs and exhibitions, competitions, sporting events, festivals and cultural projects; all allowing the brand to take advantage of local assets for a given area. Also necessary is increasing the extent of familiarity with the visual elements of the brand.

The people who live in a given country can be a great attribute and important element in its brand image. Ambitious, young and well-educated Poles can no doubt become natural ambassadors for brand identity. This is a valuable asset, which only thanks to a strong and attractive brand will be able to be an asset in the future, since the present internal image of Poland does not encourage active participation in its reform (close to half the students attending the largest Warsaw tertiary institutions wish to emigrate for good<sup>8</sup>). The phenomenon of loyalty towards the brand should not be taken lightly, particularly in the internal sector.

In comparison to branding products or companies, in the case of country branding there are highly differentiated client segments (its residents, tourists and investors from various regions) that have many different ways of perceiving a given country.

In contrast to the context of companies, such branding becomes very difficult in terms of choosing target markets and at the same time avoiding others. The multiplicity of sectors (including obligatory ones such as its residents, and ones the country wishes to gain as well as those it wishes to avoid) and the products offered results in the fact that the process of projecting,

establishing and communicating the brand is particularly complex.

Branding is not the sole warranted direction of achieving national goals. Controversies surrounding country-branding concepts are related to the long period of creating a brand as well as difficulties in ascertaining its effectiveness and efficiency. The outcomes of using a country's brand therefore contain both material and non-material elements, ones measurable and non-measurable as well as those that are short term and long term. The 'management' of a country is very complex and multidimensional but a clearly strong brand can assist and help in the process of creating a major, long-term aim that is the wealth of a nation.

For countries like Poland, having achieved core political and military objectives in the international sphere, a strong national brand appears as the new possibility of achieving its subsequent goals in the economic area. Poland still suffers from the lack of a transfer of international political success to its economy, which will provide for a high standard of living for its residents. National brand strategy is one of the solutions.

As history has proven, Poles as a nation are ambitious and able to meet national challenges. In May 2004, Poland became a member of the EU, a fact that will doubtless increase Poland's credibility.

The actual timing of Poland's entry to the EU is particularly propitious for a change in the country's brand image, because Poland for many no longer belongs to 'them' on the fringe, outside the Union, but advances to 'us', a member of the European family (Kolarska-Bobińska, 2003). It is a moment that needs to be exploited to create a strong national brand. The national marketing programme initiated in the Polish Chamber of Commerce

with the aid of world-class specialists is designed to increase the outside world's trust of Poland, improve its reputation and increase opportunities for its development as a society.

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- at the moment (January 2005) and its value was the highest in 1992 and rated at 112 points (Ipsos-Demoskop, available at: <[http://www.ipsos.pl/3\\_3.html](http://www.ipsos.pl/3_3.html)>, accessed 24th January, 2005). Also the self-image of Poles is negative (research of CBOS, May 2001 available at: <<http://www.cbos.pl/spiskom.pl/2001/kom062/kom062.htm>>, accessed 24th January, 2005 and OPTEM for European Commission, Ostoja-Ostaszewski, J., PAP, 2001–07–25, available at: <<http://www.e-gmina.pl/article.php?sid=394>>, accessed January, 2005).
- 4 Up to now the promotional activities were dispersed among Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Polish Information and Foreign Investment Agency (former Polish Foreign Investment Agency), commercial counsellor bureaus, business organisations, non-governmental institutions and foundations. For example, the effects of Polish tourism promotion abroad are poor, despite the fact that it absorbs as much as 90 per cent of promotional budget (Cielemęcki, 2000). According to advertising experts the entire sum already spent on promoting Poland abroad would be enough for an image campaign for the whole of Europe, addressed to local societies as well as to potential investors (Zdort and Reszka, 2004).
  - 5 One of the ideas related to the promotion of tourism, for example, included the broadcasting of advertising slots with Hollywood stars in the main role, with the caption 'Polska — adventures with a happy end' (presented on 29th November, 2000 by the Convention Bureau of Poland, presentation available online at: <<http://www.pot.gov.pl/foto.asp>>, accessed 24th January, 2005).
  - 6 According to the research of The Institute of Public Affairs, residents in Western Europe, if they know something about Poland, emphasise the difference between their country and Poland, its otherness, backwardness, Eastern Europe nature — a fact specifically related to Poland's tradition and culture; 12 per cent of Germans react to the word 'Polska' with images of beautiful landscapes (Falkowski, 2002).
  - 7 According to the research of The Institute of Public Affairs, people in Western Europe consider Poles to be good-natured, in most cases more readily than Poles themselves (approximately 45 per cent Austrians, French and English, 39 per cent Germans). To a surprisingly large extent, they would be willing to accept a foreign Pole in various contexts of their daily life (family, neighbours, work etc). A fact true to all types of social research. Respondents found it easier to accept a Pole as a friend, that is, on a personal basis but more difficult to do so in the public sphere. (Falkowski, 2002).
  - 8 Research provided by *Student News*, available at: <<http://www.studiu.pl/uczelnie/kursy/uczelnie.php?lp=420>>, accessed 24th January, 2005.

## Notes

- 1 According to the latest data from Transparency International, Poland presents the highest level of perceived corruption among countries entering the UE — 3.4 points, 67th position (available at: <<http://www.transparency.org/cpi/2004/cpi2004.en.html#cpi2004>>, accessed 24th January, 2005).
- 2 These characteristics are based on research of The Institute of Polish Brand, August 2002 and research of The Institute of Public Affairs (Falkowski, 2002 and Kolarska-Bobińska, 2003). This research has been conducted among respondents in Germany, France, England, Spain, Austria and Sweden.
- 3 Sixty per cent of Poles (November 2004) claim that the general situation in Poland is worsening and research shows that it has been decreasing with some fluctuations since 1998 (research of The Center of Public Opinion Research (CBOS), available at: <<http://www.cbos.com.pl/spiskom.pol/2004.htm>>, accessed 8th January, 2004). The Consumer Optimism Index rates for 91.53 points

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