

Wally Olins

**Viewpoints**

Poland and National Identity

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No country in the world can provide a better example of the long-term staying power of national identity than Poland. Poland's history as a nation is so extraordinary that if you were a novelist you couldn't make it up.

It has been carved into chunks, put together again and carved up again; its frontiers have moved about restlessly; it has lost some cities and regions, gained or regained others; it has lost its heterogeneity, emerged with homogeneity and somehow or other through all this has retained its sense of self and its idea of Polishness. But while some people in Poland may be fairly clear about what Poland is, what it stands for and what it represents, most of the rest of the world isn't.

As I point out in this book, most people in most countries know little and care less about countries other than their immediate neighbours; and even then their feelings are often a mixture of prejudice and ignorance. Of course a few countries are very well known. Everybody has heard of the USA, China, Russia, Japan and some of the bigger and older European countries, but even here attitudes are based around myth, hearsay, fleeting and frequently misleading experience – and so on. But most people in most countries know practically nothing about most of the countries in the world – including Poland.

Poland, however, has an additional problem; it is a former communist country. There is in the west, at any rate, a presumption that most former communist countries are the same – or at least similar. There's not much awareness about size, about annual growth rates, about the balance between industrial and agricultural activity, and certainly very little awareness of the cultural achievements and differences between one former communist country and another. Very few people would be aware that Poland has much the largest population of any country in Central Europe.

Well, so what. Does it matter? As long as Poles know who they are, what difference does it make what the rest of the world thinks?

Well it matters a lot. Nations are engaged in permanent and fierce competition with each other, for tourism, for inward investment, for exports and for political and cultural influence. All of these issues are very important; they have a direct impact on the standard of living, growth rates and the way of life of people in each country. But much more important than that is the simple issue that when the reality of a nation changes the image has to change with it. It's bad for the national psyche when its reality is misunderstood, when changes in reality are not matched by changes in perception.

Poland, as anyone who has regularly visited it over the last 10 years or so knows, has changed dramatically. Although Poland's core culture is the same, in many respects the country is barely recognizable. There is, in my experience, an analogy with Spain, which after Franco's death in 1975 transformed itself from a backward, inward looking dictatorship into a sophisticated, outward looking democracy without losing its essential Spanish character and personality. Spain is now a respected member of the European Community; its political and cultural weight is recognised in the world. Its politicians have a major influence, its cultural and sporting achievements are respected; its big businesses are as good as the best anywhere in the world. Spain attracts talent and investment. I refer to this in the text of this book. The catalyst for change in Spain was dramatic movement in the political arena and the entry into the

European Union, which opened Spain to a new political, social, economic and cultural world.

And it appears to me that a very similar situation applies in Poland. If Poland really wants to take advantage of everything that the EU offers in terms of political, economic, cultural and social activity; and that means inward investment, tourism and export, Poland has to present an image of itself that corresponds to its emerging reality. Its films, music, art; its businesses, its cities and its landscape have to be presented to the world, so that Poland can gain from the world and the world can gain from Poland and so that Poland can achieve an appropriate position in world affairs.

This demands a well planned identity programme. I am not simply talking about superficial or cosmetic gloss – what is so often called spin – but I am talking about a coherent, consistent, well-planned effort to present the new emerging Poland to all of its audiences both internal and external. Put simply, it is in everyone's interest for Poland to tell the emerging truth about what it is and what it is becoming. Poland needs a brand.

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