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The impact of the image of Poland on the international competitiveness of Polish enterprises

The article concentrates on a presentation of the core of the country image and the country-of-origin effect as well as the influence of these elements on the building of the competitive advantage of business entities on foreign markets. The attention is focused on the example of Poland and Polish companies. The author tries to find out whether the image of Poland, as it is perceived abroad, may be a potentially problematic element in the expansion of Polish enterprises onto foreign markets. It seems that "Polishness" constitutes a rather neutral element of the export offer on the European market; some Polish enterprises even noticed a positive influence of the associations related to Poland. The author also submits a thesis that this rather disadvantageous perception of Poland and Poles based on the stereotypes rooted in the past is gradually improving. Upon writing this article, the results of surveys prepared by Polish institutions and universities as well as the results of an unpublished survey carried out by the author were used. Empirical research entitled "Foreign Expansion of Polish Foodstuff, Cosmetic, and Apparel Branches on German, Czech, Russian, and Ukrainian Markets" was carried out in Poland in the mid-2012.

Wpływ wizerunku Polski na konkurencyjność międzynarodową polskich przedsiębiorstw

Niebagatelne znaczenie dla każdego przedsiębiorstwa decydującego się na ekspansję zagraniczną ma wizerunek kraju, z którego pochodzi. Reputacja kraju macierzystego wpływa na wizerunek i postawy, a w konsekwencji także na sprzedaż towarów i/lub marek w nim wytworzonych. Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ukazanie istoty wizerunku państwa i efektu kraju pochodzenia oraz wpływu tych elementów na budowanie przewagi konkurencyjnej podmiotów gospodarczych na rynkach zagranicznych. Szczegółowej analizie poddano duże i średnie polskie przedsiębiorstwa funkcjonujące w branży spożywczej, kosmetycznej i odzieżowej, które z powodzeniem prowadzą działalność gospodarczą w Niemczech, Czechach, Rosji i na Ukrainie. Uogólniając wnioski płynące z obserwacji oraz przeprowadzonego w 2012 r. badania empirycznego można stwierdzić, że polskie pochodzenie badanych przedsiębiorstw raczej nie utrudnia im ekspansji na rynki europejskie. Wydaje się, że ewentualne negatywne skojarzenia są silniejsze w świadomości potocznej niż w środowisku gospodarczym.

Keywords: Poland, country image, country-of-origin effect, internationalization, competitiveness

JEL classification: D22, F23, L21, M21

Introduction

The image of the country of its origin has a substantial meaning for every enterprise which decides about its expansion abroad; its motherland's reputation affects the image and the attitude, as well as, in consequence, the sales of goods and/or brands manufactured therein [Peterson, Jolibert, 1995; Papadopoulos, Heslop, 2002; Phau, Prendergast, 2000]. Some countries have a "good" reputation, while the others have a "poor" reputation for particular products. For instance, people are likely to evoke differing impressions of cars manufactured in Germany, TV sets made in Japan and Malaysia, or men's shoes made in Italy and Poland [Knight, Calantone, 2000]. Country's good reputation may aid the carrying of business activity by domestic entities abroad and contribute to the building of their strong position on the market. On the other hand, countries unknown to the foreign purchasers or those associated with negative qualities may make the functioning of their enterprises on foreign markets difficult, by transposing those indifferent and bad opinions.

However, it should be noticed that in spite of a large body of research, consensus with regard to the importance of this effect has not been reached. Some experts argue that various studies describing this phenomenon often lead to divergent conclusions [Verlegh, Steenkamp, 1999; Brijs et al., 2006]. József Berács [Berács, 2003] adds that in different product categories the country-of-origin effect differs so much that it leads to confusion. That is why country-of-origin effects are only somewhat generalizable and that the phenomenon is still not well understood [Peterson, Jolibert, 1995]. Jean-Claude Usunier [Usunier, 2006] recently came to the conclusion that the relevance of country-of-origin cues is decreasing as a result of globalization of manufacturing and marketing operations and growing acceptance of products, irrespective of their origin.

The objective of this study is a presentation of the core of the country image and the country-of-origin effect as well as the influence of these elements on the building of the competitive advantage of business entities on foreign markets. A detailed analysis encompassed big and medium-sized enterprises from Poland, functioning in the foodstuff, cosmetic, and apparel branches, which successfully conduct their business activity in Germany, the Czech Republic, Russia, and Ukraine. Upon writing this article, the results of an empirical research carried out by the author were used.

1. Country image versus country reputation

The first empirical study of the impact of the country of origin on consumer behaviour was conducted by Robert Schooler [Schooler, 1965]. He found out that products identical in all respects except for the name of the country specified on a "made in" label were perceived by consumers differently. Since Schooler's paper, the country-of-origin effect has been the subject of a large number of studies.

Ingrid Martin and Sevgin Eroglu [Martin, Eroglu, 1993] define the country image as a total of all the descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs one has about a particular country. Philip Kotler, Donald Haider, and Irving Rein [Kotler et al., 1993] propose the following definition: the image of a place is the sum of all the emotional and aesthetic qualities, such as experience, beliefs, ideas, recollections, and impressions, that a person has of a place. In this definition, they stress that the way in which individual forms an image is based on is his personal frame of reference. According to Edward Relph [Relph, 1976], it is possible to establish the social image of a place, because individual images are constantly being socialized through the use of common languages, symbols, and experiences. Erik Nes and Pervez Ghauri [Nes, Ghauri, 1998] underline that the country-of-origin image is a short-term impression, but very dynamic, which under various stimuli is evolving in time in a long-term perspective.

In the purchaser's consciousness, the country image is being created under the influence of his resources of knowledge concerning a given country – the so-called cognitive components of the image [Bilkey, Nes, 1982; Steenkamp 1990]. The basic cognitive components of the image may include: factors related to geography, history, demography, and economy, as well as opinions on the culture of a given country and historically and culturally strong stereotypes relating to the inhabitants of a given country (it must be stressed that the widely spread stereotypes usually pass the truth by, sometimes doing harm to the country and its inhabitants).

Robert Wyer and co-authors [Hong, Wyer, 1989; 1990; Li, Wyer, 1994] showed that in addition to this, the country of origin has a symbolic and emotional meaning to consumers (these are the affective, i.e. emotional components of the image). This means all of the positive, negative, and mixed emotions, impressions, and feelings which a given country evokes in the minds of its own citizens and of foreigners. Ingeborg Kleppe, Nina Iversen, and Inger Stensaker [Kleppe et al., 2002] analysed an image complexity and distinguished vague, simple, and multifaceted images. A vague image is based on few general or wrong associations. There is no country equity. When an image is based on some generic associations with one country, it is called "simple". In this situation, country equity is built on one (strong) or several country-related intangible assets. A much more desired type of

a capital of the country which supports the sales of its products on foreign markets is the multifaceted image which follows from a broad knowledge of many associations and assets. It is also important for the country image to be uniform and clear for people in other countries.

It is worth underlining that the country image is subject to continuous changes, due to, among others, the information in the media, contacts with the citizens of that country and with the offer of goods and services imported from there, consciously and intentionally conducted promotion campaigns and other results of diplomatic service activities, as well as the work of politicians and institutions engaged in its promotion in the world. Such activities may be planned in advance, and when undertaken systematically, they contribute to managing the country's reputation, and this means evoking long-term positive impressions based on diversified short-term images. Moreover, the image is a core determinant shaping an attitude towards a country, because, besides the elements mentioned above – conditioned by one's knowledge, associations, and emotions – it is also created by behavioural (conative) factors which are related to the readiness to act [Bagozzi, 1979]. This is mainly about the attitudes towards the inhabitants of a given country and the stereotypes about them, which influence the intention of visiting that country and purchasing services and goods manufactured therein or associated with it, therefore affecting the decision-making process regarding trade contacts with the customers living therein or making investments there [Duliniec, 2007]. Of course, such attitudes may be both positive and negative. Usually, getting to know a foreign country during a tourist or business visit contributes to the increasing of favourable feelings and consumer preferences in respect of the products coming from that country [Ahmed et al., 1994].

2. The dependence between the country-of-origin image and the perception of products manufactured on its territory

According to Ravi Parameswaran and R. Mohan Pisharodi [Parameswaran, Pisharodi, 1994], the country-of-origin image refers to buyers' opinions regarding the relative qualities of goods and services produced in various countries. There are seven elements affecting the dependence between the image of the country of origin and the way of perception of products manufactured on its territory (product-country image, PCI). Three of them pertain to the country, and they are: the level of civilization development, attitude towards the inhabitants, and consumers' tendency to establish closer relations with the country. Four subsequent elements are product-related: evaluation of the product itself, its grading, presence on the market, and consumers' satisfaction of its usage [Papadopoulos, Heslop,

2002]. Country-of-origin image affects mainly the consumer's expectations toward the product price. It follows from the survey that the weaker the image of the country of origin, the greater the consumers' expectations as to the lower prices – when compared with similar products manufactured in a country with a better image [Jaffe, Nebenzahl, 1996].

As the literature related to product nationality evolved over the years, researches deemed it necessary to account for the multilayered character of images of products and brands conceived, designed, produced, and assembled around the world [Dmitrovic, Vida, 2010]. Due to the hybrid products offered by multinational corporations having global strategies and internationalized production, the country of origin is no longer easy to identify [Phau, Chao, 2008]. The reason of these complications are the currently existing intensified globalization processes as well as the functioning of enterprises of a global reach. Companies often change the manufacture place of their products, purchase raw materials from foreign suppliers, enter into mergers with them, and are parties to takeovers on an international scale. In view of these changing conditions, researchers began to study the effects of product nationality as a multidimensional construct by decomposing it into elements such as country of assembly, country of design, country of manufacture, country of brand, and so on [Cho, 1993; Han, Terpstra, 1998; Insch, McBride, 2004; Jo et al., 2003].

The country-of-origin effect may be defined as a phenomenon of a positive or negative evaluation of the product by the consumer, in the frame of which the product's perceived place of origin constitutes an essential criterion in the consumers' decision-making process. The relation between the image of the country and the image of the product/brand may take one of two forms – of a halo construct or of a summary construct. The halo construct appears when a positive image of the country evokes positive associations with its products, even if the consumer has no knowledge about the features and characteristics of the product purchased [Bilkey, Nes, 1982], whereas the summary construct is a result of the country image being built upon the consumers' accumulated experiences with products coming from this very country, even though the purchasers know nothing about the country itself [Han, 1989]. The country-of-origin effect is used on both international markets – mainly by the manufacturers from the countries the name of which is visible on the label – and domestic markets – as the promotion of native or local aspects appears to be an element of competitive advantage over foreign products.

It should be mentioned that what is essential in the survey of the country-of-origin effect is not so much the general image of the country but rather the image of the category of products coming from a given country. Due to this fact, some countries are associated by the consumers with specific groups of products or recognized brands [Roth, Romeo, 1992; Verlegh, Steenkamp, 1999]. The exam-

ples may be multiplied, e.g. apparel and cosmetics from France, footwear from Spain and Italy, cars from Germany, Swiss watches, Cuban cigars, modern industrial interior designing from Scandinavian countries, and many others.

Specialists studying the role of the country-of-origin effect say that the place of origin has a considerable impact on the attitudes towards brands as well [Bilkey, Nes, 1982; Jaffe, Nebanzahl, 2006]. From the point of view of the deliberations contained in the study, attention should be paid to the fact that the brand name does not only remind about sets of attributes characteristic of the branded product but it also evokes in customers many associations with its country of origin [Jaffe, Nebanzahl, 2006]. A brand is a certain value added to the physical product, which main purpose is to communicate with the surroundings, creating a positive image of the product, and building relations with the purchasers. What is important is that in the case of international enterprises, brand's country of origin is often different from the country of production [Hereźniak, 2011]. That is why in the literature one may often find the notion of the "country of origin of brand" or "country of brand" [Phau, Prendergast, 2000]. This differentiation becomes justified mainly because there are many countries which face the challenge of building their image on the international arena – as the countries of origin of high quality products. The existence of strong connotations of a given country with specified categories of products is extremely important, in particular from the point of view of building the country's strong competitive position. Groups of products associated directly with a certain country and brands accompanying them supported by efficient actions of the public sector and by a positive image of the country are given the chance of contributing to the building of the country's national brand; they can be its "ambassadors" on the foreign markets. According to Simon Anholt [Anholt, 2006], products and brands coming from a given country are in the era of development expressed through the consumption, the most important carrier of the country image, and the new generation of adolescents will identify countries mainly from the angle of brands coming from there.

3. The image of Poland in Europe

A potentially problematic element in the expansion of Polish enterprises on foreign markets is the image of Poland abroad. Existing prejudices, mistaken imaginations, and stereotypes have been creating a deformed image of Poland outside of it for many years now. It is very difficult to answer the question about what the image of Poland nowadays is. It must be noticed that there is no regular government monitoring system for the image of Poland. There are only partial results of surveys carried out by Polish institutions, universities, and scientist. First researches concerning the image of Poland and Poles in Europe were probably

conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs in 2003 [Kolarska-Bobińska, 2003]. At that time, Poland was perceived as an undeveloped, agricultural, and Catholic country with a bad organization of work, high-levels of corruption, and bureaucracy. This survey was followed by the work of a team of researchers guided by Wallace Olins for the purpose of the "Brand for Poland" project in 2004. They discovered that dominant associations with Poland are: Solidarity, church, Pope John Paul II, Lech Wałęsa, World War II, communism, potatoes producer [Olins, 2004]. Moreover, it should be mentioned that Poland is not a country widely known abroad, and is therefore being identified with other countries of Central and East Europe [Papadopoulos et al., 1993a; 1993b]. This opinion is convergent with the results of the monitoring of "Le Monde" and "Le Figaro" dailies [Nowak et al., 2010].

Recent studies concerning the image and reputation of Poland were conducted in 2006 at the behest of the Ministry of Economy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with the Polish Chamber of Commerce, and the Institute of Polish Brand, as well as in 2009 by the Marketing Department of the Institute of International Business at the University of Gdansk and, in the same year, by the Centre of Polish Language and Culture for Foreigners at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun [Nowak et al., 2010]. They confirmed the low level of knowledge about Poland. Respondents' spontaneous associations were scattered and lacked one dominant theme, e.g.: cold weather, snow, immigrants, World War II, strong food producers. However, the generalised image of a Pole is more favourable. According to the majority of the respondents, the Poles are: hardworking, disciplined, educated, well-organized, resourceful, and have an entrepreneurial spirit.

The fact that the image of Poles and Polish products has been slowly evolving within the last few years should be stressed. In the author's opinion, this process should be associated with certain recent events, such as Jerzy Buzek being elected the President of the European Parliament, good economic situation of the country in the era of the global crisis (so-called "green island") [OECD, 2010], Polish Presidency in the EU, and the organization of the Chopin Year and the European Football Championship Euro 2012. In future, two religious events, the canonization of John Paul II and the organization of the 29th World Youth Day in Cracow in 2016, may also make a great difference in altering the image of Poland abroad.

4. The research – methodology

Upon writing this article, a part of the unpublished survey results was used. Empirical research entitled "Foreign Expansion of Polish Foodstuff, Cosmetic, and Apparel Branches on German, Czech, Russian, and Ukrainian Markets" was carried out in Poland in the mid-2012 [Bednarz, 2013] on the total sample of 62 Polish big

and medium-sized enterprises, including 25 of the foodstuff, 25 of the cosmetic, and 12 of the apparel branch. In the case of the apparel branch, taking into consideration the sample selection criteria, a full survey was conducted (exhaustive), which means that all the entities belonging to the properly defined group were observed. These enterprises were selected using one of the nonprobability sampling techniques, such as the judgmental (purposive) sampling. It was based on the knowledge, experience, and the author's subjective assessment of the enterprises functioning on the European markets. A survey method applied was telephone interview, carried out by means of the CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing). The questionnaire was then sent out by emails to those of the enterprises' representatives who have expressed their willingness to participate in the research. The questionnaire was also available on the designed website.

The questionnaire used in the research was composed of two sections. The first part included 15 questions in total (to prepare this paper, the answers to two of them were used). The respondents cooperating with German, Czech, Russian, and Ukrainian partners were asked to answer whether their Polish origin has a positive, rather positive, rather negative, negative, or no influence on their commercial relationships. Then, the respondents who had decided to choose "negative" were asked to specify the reason of this situation on each of the foreign markets in question. In the second part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to provide demographic information. Their answers were analysed with the SPSS program.

5. The image of Poland and Polish enterprises in Europe – empirical findings

The opinion of the above-mentioned exporters that the adverse image of Poland does not determine the attitude of the foreign entrepreneurs towards Polish firms was proved by the results of an empirical survey conducted by the author. The Polish origin of economic entities is a positive and rather positive attribute, especially on the Czech market – as it was confirmed by 54% of the questioned enterprises. The remaining part of the respondents said that this fact is completely irrelevant (23%) or that it has a negative significance (also 23%). This advantageous situation can also be observed on Russian and Ukrainian markets – "Polishness" is said to have a positive and rather positive influence on commercial relationships between the parties (39% and 55% respectively), although, as much as 50% and 35% respondents respectively regard this aspect as meaningless. The most extreme opinions were expressed relating to the German market. On the one hand, the majority of the entities questioned (36%) said that the Polish origin has

no meaning at all as far as carrying the business activity in that country is concerned. On the other hand, it should be noticed that 32% of the respondents evaluated this fact as rather negative, whereas 24% as rather positive (see Fig. 1).

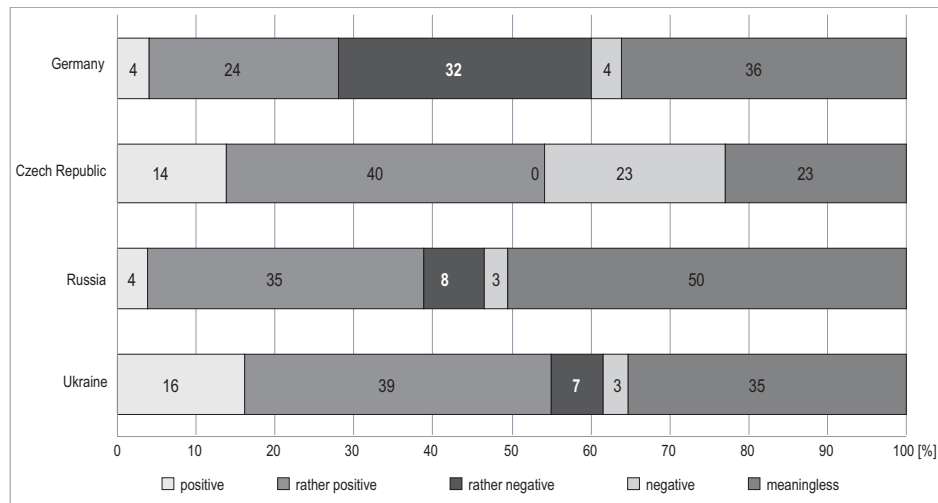


Figure 1. The meaning of communicating the Polish market identity by big and medium-sized enterprises on German, Czech, Russian, and Ukrainian markets

Source: Own elaboration, based on an empirical survey conducted.

In turn, the respondents who thought that the Polish origin of an enterprise negatively affects their activity on neighbouring markets argued that the reasons for this phenomenon are, in particular: the negative image of Poland and Poles, primarily the stereotypes rooted in the consciousness of foreign inhabitants, their perceiving Polish products/services from the angle of low quality (mainly in Germany), and cooperation problems of the official-administrative nature (the latter mainly concerns the Russian and Ukrainian markets).

Nevertheless, in the opinion of the respondents, neither such elements as the lack of knowledge about Poland and Poles, fear of Poland's and Polish enterprises' economic instability and of unpunctual realization of concluded contracts, nor their problems in communication with Polish enterprises have a negative impact on their image in Germany, Czech Republic, Russia, and Ukraine, where they have been successfully conducting their businesses for many years.

Conclusions

Generalizing the conclusions following from all the above observations and empirical research, one can conclude that the Polish origin of big and medium-sized enterprises of the foodstuff, cosmetic, and apparel industries does not make their expansion on the German, Czech, Russian, and Ukrainian markets more difficult, as it seems that the possible negative associations are stronger in the popular consciousness rather than in the economic surroundings. Exporters' experience shows that the adverse image of Poland does not determine the foreign entrepreneurs' approach towards Polish firms. "Polishness" constitutes a rather neutral element of the export offer on the European market and some Polish enterprises even noticed a positive impact of the associations related to Poland, which encourages the foreign contractors to commence the economic cooperation. The producers' Polish origin is an asset particularly in Ukraine, Russia, and the Czech Republic, as the respondents conducting their businesses there stated that its influence is positive or rather positive. At the same time, it should be underlined that they only very rarely reported a negative evaluation of this fact in those countries. The more controversial situations seem to take place in commercial relations with German partners. The producers' Polish origin can be treated as an asset or have no impact on the cooperation among economic entities, though it can also be assigned a negative significance.

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