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Evolution and Current State of Ukraine's International Image in the Context of Public Governance and Global Communications

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ABSTRACT

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The article presents a comprehensive analysis of Ukraine's international image from 1991 to 2025, accounting for political cycles, wartime challenges, and the digital transformation of communications. The relevance of the study is determined by the radical transformation of Ukraine's global image amid ongoing information wars, hybrid threats, and the growing role of reputational capital in public governance. The research reveals that a positive state image functions not only as a symbolic asset but also as an indicator of the effectiveness of political institutions, the transparency of communication, and the government's ability to sustain trust during crises. The purpose of the study is to analyze the evolution of Ukraine's national brand, identify key factors influencing its development, and substantiate an operational framework for its further enhancement. Methodologically, the paper adopts an interdisciplinary approach that integrates theories of nation branding, public and cultural diplomacy, and strategic communications. It combines content analysis of leading international media, comparative analysis of governmental and non-governmental case studies, and an indicator-based methodology drawing on the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index, Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index, FutureBrand Country Index, and Edelman Trust Barometer. The article systematizes the main stages of Ukraine's image formation in the international information space and identifies four key periods: 1991–2003 – a phase of low recognition; 2004–2013 – the rise of a democratic image following the Orange Revolution; 2014–2021 – the consolidation of Ukraine's reputation as a state defending freedom and European values; and from 2022 onward – the transformation of Ukraine into a symbol of resilience, bravery, and global leadership. The study demonstrates that the key determinants of positive change include public diplomacy, creative industries, volunteer initiatives, active digital communication through social media (Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube), and institutional collaboration between the state and civil society. The role of cultural diplomacy, educational projects, and national-patriotic practices is substantiated as a vital component of the country's soft power. It is concluded that Ukraine's image has evolved from a peripheral perception into a systemic factor of international positioning. Its effectiveness is ensured through the synergy of governmental, regional, and civic actors, the integration of communication into public policy, and reliance on measurable indicators of trust. The article proposes an operational model for state brand development – “policy-performance-messaging-perception-trust” – which connects institutional resilience, digital diplomacy, cultural representation, and behavioral metrics. The findings have practical significance for improving the effectiveness of state image policy, designing a unified national communication strategy, and strengthening Ukraine's reputational resilience in the global information space.

KEYWORDS

state image, nation branding, public diplomacy, strategic communications, social media, cultural diplomacy, reputation indices.



Еволюція та сучасний стан міжнародного іміджу України в контексті публічного управління та глобальних комунікацій

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СТАТТЯ

АНОТАЦІЯ

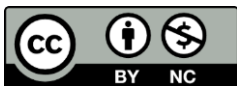
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У статті здійснено комплексний аналіз еволюції міжнародного іміджу України у 1991–2025 рр. з урахуванням політичних циклів, воєнних викликів та цифрової трансформації комунікацій. Актуальність теми дослідження зумовлена радикальною трансформацією міжнародного іміджу України, що відбувається на тлі глобальних інформаційних воєн, гібридних загроз і зростання ролі репутаційного капіталу у публічному управлінні. У статті розкрито, що позитивний імідж держави є не лише символічним ресурсом, а й показником ефективності політичних інститутів, прозорості комунікацій та спроможності держави підтримувати довіру в умовах кризи. Метою дослідження є аналіз еволюції міжнародного бренду України, визначення ключових чинників, що впливають на його формування, та обґрунтування операційної рамки подальшого розвитку. Методологічно робота спирається на міждисциплінарний підхід (теорія національного брендингу, публічна та культурна дипломатія, стратегічні комунікації), поєднує контент-аналіз провідних міжнародних медіа, порівняльний аналіз кейсів державних та недержавних акторів, а також індикаторний підхід на основі Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index, Anholt–Ipsos Nation Brands Index, FutureBrand Country Index та Edelman Trust Barometer. У роботі систематизовано основні етапи становлення іміджу України у міжнародному інформаційному просторі. Визначено чотири ключові періоди: 1991–2003 рр. – етап низької впізнаваності; 2004–2013 рр. – піднесення демократичного іміджу після Помаранчевої революції; 2014–2021 рр. – формування репутації держави, що захищає свободу та обстоює європейські цінності; з 2022 р. – трансформація України у символ стійкості, хоробрості й глобального лідерства. Показано, що ключовими детермінантами позитивних змін стали публічна дипломатія, креативні індустрії, волонтерський рух, активна цифрова комунікація через соціальні мережі (Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) та інституційна взаємодія між державою й громадянським суспільством. Обґрунтовано роль культурної дипломатії, освітніх проєктів і національно-патріотичних практик як складових м'якої сили держави. Зроблено висновок, що імідж України перетворюється з периферійного на системоутворюючий чинник міжнародного позиціонування. Його ефективність забезпечується синергією державних, регіональних і громадських акторів, інтеграцією комунікацій у політику публічного управління та опорою на вимірювані індикатори довіри. Запропоновано операційну модель розвитку бренду держави — “policy–performance–messaging–perception–trust”, яка дозволяє поєднати інституційну сталість, цифрову дипломатію, культурну репрезентацію та поведінкові метрики. Результати дослідження мають практичне значення для підвищення ефективності державної іміджевої політики, розроблення національної комунікаційної стратегії та зміцнення репутаційної стійкості України у світовому просторі.

КЛЮЧОВІ СЛОВА

імідж держави, національний брендинг, публічна дипломатія, стратегічні комунікації, соціальні мережі, культурна дипломатія, індекси репутації.

1. Introduction

The image of the state is an important indicator of its competitiveness and efficiency of public administration in the context of globalization, digitalization and the growing role of the information environment. In the XXI century, reputational capital is turning into a strategic resource that determines the international subjectivity of the state, its ability to cooperate and the level of trust on the part of citizens and external partners. A positive image provides the state not only with political advantages, but also with economic, cultural and humanitarian dividends, becoming an integral part of national security.

For Ukraine, the issue of forming an international image is especially relevant in the current conditions, since it is directly related to national identity, political subjectivity, international support and perception of reforms. It reflects not only the external perception of the state, but also the internal maturity of its institutions, the effectiveness of managerial decisions, communications and public diplomacy.

Since 1991, since the proclamation of independence, Ukraine has undergone a complex evolution – from the period of fragmented information policy to the creation of a modern system of state branding focused on trust, transparency and value sustainability. The current stage of development is characterized by the transition from episodic, quite often spontaneous image campaigns to a well-grounded systematic approach, where public diplomacy, public administration, cultural communication, digital technologies and analytical tools form a single communication ecosystem. In parallel with external reputation, the role of internal trust, a driving factor in state formation and a prerequisite for social stability and political legitimacy, is growing.

Scientific and practical research in this area testifies to the need for interdisciplinary understanding of the processes of forming the international image of Ukraine in the context of hybrid threats, information wars and rapid changes in communication paradigms.

2. Literature Review

In the scientific literature, the image of the state is considered as a multi-level system of interaction of cognitive, emotional and behavioral factors that form the perception of the state by internal and external audiences [1; 3; 4]. The classic concepts of national branding by S. Anholt define the state image as an integral construct that combines politics, communication, institutional behavior and the level of trust [1; 2]. Other scholars emphasize that strategic communications should be considered a component of national security policy and a mechanism for the state's internal and external legitimacy [3; 8]. K. Jagodzinski, as well as O. Sviderska et al. and S. Anholt, explore digital diplomacy, the use of social networks and big data technologies in the system of crisis communications and countering disinformation [1; 6; 12].

In the Ukrainian scientific tradition, the issues of state image, national identity and brand communications occupy an important place in the works of O. Chechel, O. Dziuba, T. Madryha, A. Rudnieva and Yu. Maliovana [3; 4; 8; 10]. Their research emphasizes that an effective image policy of the state should combine communication, institutional and security dimensions, based on systematic, evidence-based and measurable results [3; 10].

At the level of empirical research, international rankings – the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index and the Anholt–Ipsos Nation Brands Index, which record the dynamics of states' perception in the global context [7; 8]. According to the results of these indices, Ukraine demonstrates one of the fastest growth in reputational capital after 2022, which confirms the effectiveness of communication strategies and the growth of the level of international trust [5; 7; 12].

A significant contribution to the practice of state branding was made by the creative industry, in particular Banda Agency, which created the Ukraine NOW identity and the Be Brave Like Ukraine campaign – a successful example of partnership between the state and the private sector in the formation of a national brand [13].

Thus, the theoretical field covers three main areas: political and managerial (state branding strategy), social and communication (public diplomacy, culture, media) and digital analytical (online platforms, big data, media monitoring).

3. Problem Statement

The purpose of this study is to substantiate and develop approaches to the following tasks scientifically: to determine the key stages of the evolution of Ukraine's international image in 1991–2025; to analyze the current trends in the transformation of the state brand under the influence of war and digital globalization; to assess the role of state and non-state actors in the formation of the international image of Ukraine; to determine indicators of reputational capital and develop an operational framework for the development of the state brand – policy–performance–messaging–perception–trust.

4. Methods and Materials

The methodological basis of the study is a systematic and interdisciplinary approach, which combines the methods of content analysis, comparative analysis, indicator monitoring, structural generalization and analytical synthesis [1]. This approach is due to the specifics of public administration in the field of national branding, public diplomacy and information security [3].

The systematic approach is used to identify the relationship between state, public, creative and media actors in the process of forming the international image of Ukraine. This made it possible to consider the image of the state not as an isolated communication product, but as an integrated system of political decisions, communication practices and social effects that form the reputational capital of the state [4].

Content analysis of international media is conducted to identify the dominant narratives and interpretations of Ukraine's image in the global information space. The sample included six of the world's leading media – the BBC, CNN, The Economist, The Guardian, Le Monde, Deutsche Welle – for the period 2019–2025. The analysis covered the frequency of mentions, tonality, thematic fields, frames of interpretation and key metaphors that determine the information image of Ukraine in international discourse [1; 12].

The indicator analysis was based on the study of international reputational capital ratings – Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index, Anholt–Ipsos Nation Brands Index, FutureBrand Country Index and Edelman Trust Barometer [5; 7]. These sources provided an opportunity to assess the dynamics of international perception of Ukraine, identify the leading determinants of trust growth and increase brand awareness of the state. Particular attention was paid to the change in Ukraine's positions in global indices after 2022, which reflects the effectiveness of its communication policy.

The comparative analysis of state branding cases included the study of official communication campaigns Ukraine NOW (2018), Be Brave Like Ukraine (2022) [13] and the NGO Ukraine WOW (2025), which promotes the Ukrainian state and culture. The analysis was carried out according to the following criteria: strategic goal, key messages, target audiences, visual identity, measurability of effects and international reaction. This made it possible to determine the evolution of the state communication policy – from a marketing tool to a political mechanism for building trust [8].

The analytical synthesis of data from Hybrid CoE, NATO StratCom COE and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine provided an empirical basis for information resilience, strategic communications and countering disinformation [10]. As part of this phase of the study, a qualitative analysis of reports and recommendations from international organizations, including the Hybrid Centre of Excellence (2024) and the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (2023), which outline best practices in information defense and digital diplomacy, was conducted.

The material base of the study consisted of official documents of the Government of Ukraine, analytical reports of international organizations (UNDP, OECD, EUvsDisinfo), scientific works by Ukrainian and foreign authors (2015–2025), and open databases of global rankings of “soft power”.

The data obtained were summarized by combining quantitative and qualitative methods:

- quantitative methods (indicator and content analysis) made it possible to measure the dynamics of reputational indicators and information trends;

- qualitative methods (interpretive and comparative analysis) provided the disclosure of contextual factors and descriptive interpretations of changes in the international perception of Ukraine.

The combination of these approaches enabled the development of a comprehensive methodological framework for the study, which provides an objective understanding of the evolution

and current state of Ukraine's international image and determines the prospects for its strategic development in the context of hybrid threats and digital globalization.

5. Results and Discussion

The evolution of Ukraine's international image covers several successive stages, reflecting the transformation of its political culture, public administration system and foreign policy priorities. Since the proclamation of independence in 1991, the formation of the image of the state has taken place in conditions of uncertainty of identity, search for a strategic course and adaptation to global information processes [1; 3; 8].

The first period, 1991–2003, was characterized by the insufficiency of the national branding policy and the inconsistency of external communication. Ukraine was portrayed in international media as a post-Soviet state with low economic stability and high corruption risks [1; 7]. At that time, there was a lack of a single communication center that could coordinate the actions of state institutions in the field of international relations, public diplomacy and information policy. According to brand management experts, in such cases, the lack of a clear brand architecture leads to the loss of reputational capital, when the state's messages are perceived as fragmented and contradictory.

The emergence of the first wave of positive international attention after the Orange Revolution marked the period 2004–2013. For the first time, Ukraine was interpreted in the world media as a state of democratic aspirations, focused on European values [8; 11]. However, political polarization, the economic crisis of 2008 and the lack of sustainable institutional reforms reduced the inertia of the positive image. Euro 2012 became a symbolic project of repositioning the state, but, as Brand Finance analysts emphasize, the "campaign" nature of image initiatives did not allow converting the short-term image effect into long-term trust [5].

A new phase began after the Revolution of Dignity in 2013–2014, which transformed Ukraine's external perception from peripheral to European-value-based. Since then, the state has emerged as a subject that actively defends democratic principles and seeks integration into Euro-Atlantic structures [1; 9]. It was during this period that the Concept of Popularization of Ukraine in the World was launched and the first state identity, Ukraine NOW, was created [13]. This brand became a practical embodiment of S. Anholt's approaches to the fact that the image of the state is formed at the intersection of politics, institutional behavior and communication [1; 11]. At the same time, new mechanisms of cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges and volunteer initiatives were formed, which laid the foundation for the modern system of public diplomacy [11].

The period 2022–2025 became a turning point for Ukraine's international positioning. The full-scale invasion radically changed the global information context: Ukraine shifted from being an object of regional policy to a subject of global attention [1; 2; 6]. At this time, international media – BBC, CNN, The Guardian, Reuters, Le Monde, Deutsche Welle – formed a unified narrative of Ukraine as a symbol of bravery, resilience, and moral leadership. The "Be Brave Like Ukraine" campaign served as a conceptual continuation of the Ukraine NOW brand, shifting the focus from tourism marketing to reputational leadership in democratic values [13]. At the same time, digital diplomacy has intensified, with social networks (Twitter/X, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube) becoming key channels for external communication. As O. Sviderska et al. note, Ukraine's digital diplomacy demonstrates effectiveness through the combination of official messages and public initiatives, creating a sense of authenticity and trust [10].

The symbolic result of this stage was that Ukraine began to be associated not only with the war, but with the values of democracy, innovation and cultural resilience. Data from international rankings confirm this trend: Ukraine's position in the Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index has improved from 61st place in 2019 to 37th in 2023; in the Anholt–Ipsos Nation Brands Index, indicators for the categories of "government" and "people" increased; in the FutureBrand Country Index – by the parameters of "value" and "trust" [2; 5]. These results indicate the gradual consolidation of the national brand around the concepts of bravery, solidarity and responsibility.

Thus, the evolution of Ukraine's international image is a process of transition from reactive image management to strategic trust management. From peripheral status to reputation center, Ukraine has demonstrated that the state brand is formed not by advertising campaigns, but by a sequence of political decisions, ethical actions, and cultural authenticity.

The formation of the image of Ukraine is determined by geopolitical (resource, historical, security), social (identity, unity, ethics) and economic (macrostability, management efficiency) factors [1; 3; 8]. At the same time, the key problem for a long time was the lack of a coordinated strategy, the “campaigning” of image initiatives, and weak feedback from target audiences [7].

The formation and maintenance of a positive international image of Ukraine is the result of polycentric interaction between state institutions, civil society, creative industries and digital communities. This approach reflects the modern model of “co-governance”, in which horizontal coordination of actions by different actors is implemented within a single communication policy [1; 3; 8; 11].

Key state-level actors include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, the Ministry of Culture and Information Policy, the Ukrainian Institute, and communication units of executive authorities. On the part of the non-state sector, creative agencies play an essential role, in particular Banda Agency, which developed the brands Ukraine NOW and Be Brave Like Ukraine [13]; as well as NGOs, volunteer movements, diaspora, and digital influencers shaping authentic narratives on global platforms.

Since 2021, two key institutional centers have been established in Ukraine – the Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security (under the Ministry of Culture and Culture) and the Center for Countering Disinformation (at the National Security and Defense Council). Their activities are aimed at coordinating strategic communications, information counteraction to military aggression and forming a single narrative field in international media discourse [4; 10]. These institutions laid the foundation for the development of a comprehensive communication security system that integrates informational, diplomatic and cultural tools of state branding.

In modern conditions, digital platforms have become a key environment for shaping Ukraine’s international image and a tool for public diplomacy. Social media functions as a dynamic channel of “real-time diplomacy”, which allows state institutions to communicate directly with the global audience [1; 4]. The official Twitter accounts of the President of Ukraine, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Defense provide prompt information, mobilize international solidarity, and counter disinformation campaigns (#StandWithUkraine, #ArmUkraineNow). The Instagram and TikTok platforms perform the function of visual diplomacy, presenting the culture, resilience and humanity of Ukrainian society in formats close to young audiences. YouTube has become a digital archive of Ukraine’s modern history, containing documentaries, cultural initiatives, educational videos, and interviews with opinion leaders [4; 5].

At the same time, digital diplomacy faces several challenges: massive disinformation campaigns, “content fatigue” among global audiences, and algorithmic dependence on social networks create risks of losing attention. To minimize them, big data analytics tools, sentiment analysis, automatic detection of fakes, and targeted communication for key regions of the world are used [4; 10]. This approach allows you to adapt state messages to audience needs and ensure the sustainability of a positive perception of Ukraine.

Cultural diplomacy and sports are essential channels of public diplomacy and “soft power” aimed at strengthening the state’s international authority [5; 13]. Ukrainian cinema, music, visual arts, fashion and literature have become components of Ukraine’s creative brand, which demonstrates its cultural maturity and European identity. The participation of Ukrainian films in international festivals (Berlin, Cannes, Venice), victories at Eurovision, achievements in contemporary art and design have become reputational multipliers that expand the symbolic capital of the state. This also includes the popularization of the Ukrainian language and literature.

Sports diplomacy is another factor in the formation of a positive image: the success of Ukrainian athletes at the Olympic Games, World Boxing, Tennis, or Football Championships creates associations with the nation’s strength, endurance, and competitiveness. National-patriotic practices, in particular the Radio Dictation of National Unity and T. Shevchenko’ and P. Yatsyk’ language competitions, form rituals of cultural belonging, which at the same time perform the function of a reputational resource in the system of educational and cultural diplomacy.

An objective assessment of the effectiveness of the state’s image policy is possible through the analysis of international indices. The Brand Finance Global Soft Power Index data show Ukraine’s growth from 61st place in 2019 to 37th in 2023, demonstrating one of the fastest positive gains among all countries worldwide [5]. The Anholt–Ipsos Nation Brands Index and the FutureBrand Country Index recorded improvements in government, values, and trust, while the Edelman Trust Barometer indicates an increase in international audiences’ trust in Ukrainian institutions [2; 13].

These results testify to the systematic evolution of Ukraine from an object of international sympathy to a subject of global trust. The reputational capital of the state acquires the characteristics of a strategic resource that provides long-term legitimacy, investment attractiveness and international subjectivity.

6. Conclusions

Ukraine's international image has undergone a profound evolution – from fragmented and poorly controlled in the 1990s to strategically managed and value-oriented in the 2020s. Ukraine has turned from an object of external surveillance into a subject of the global agenda, whose voice shapes international discussions on security, democracy and freedom.

It is determined that the effectiveness of the state brand is ensured by the synergy of state, public, cultural, and digital actors who jointly implement the communication policy grounded in openness, authenticity, and evidence. An important role is played by modern technologies – big data analytics, digital diplomacy, social networks, and media monitoring – which enable you to respond quickly to changes in the international information environment. Cultural diplomacy, the volunteer movement, and creative industries act as multipliers of reputational capital, reinforcing trust in the state through humanitarian and value narratives.

The operational model “policy–performance–messaging–perception–trust” is proposed to reflect the logic underlying the formation of international trust in the state. It combines the policy's content, the quality of its implementation, communication strategies (messaging), audience perception, and the final level of trust. The model allows for quantitative and qualitative assessment of the effectiveness of image policy, based on international indices (Brand Finance, Anholt–Ipsos, FutureBrand, Edelman Trust Barometer), behavioral metrics and analytical indicators of social networks.

It is recommended to create an integrated system for assessing Ukraine's public diplomacy, which will include constant monitoring of media tone, the level of trust, the dynamics of social moods and institutional effectiveness. A promising direction is the development of a national “reputation dashboard” – a digital platform that combines data from sociological surveys, international ratings, and digital analytics to track Ukraine's image abroad systematically.

Further research should focus on analyzing the relationship between the state's external communication and international audiences' behavioral reactions, standardizing indicators for state branding, and developing crisis SOP protocols for strategic communications. This will increase the efficiency of reputation capital management and ensure the stability of Ukraine's international image amid global turbulence.

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