

FROM NATIONAL BRANDING TO ADMINISTRATIVE REBRANDING: SYMBOLIC LEGITIMACY AND PUBLIC IDENTITY MANAGEMENT IN SLOVAKIA

Tamás Darázs*

University of Ss. Cyril
and Methodius in
Trnava
Faculty of Mass Media
Communication
Trnava, Slovakia

tamas.darazs@ucm.sk

* corresponding
author

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ABSTRACT.

Background: Place and nation branding research increasingly links identity, participation, legitimacy, and public value, but less attention has been paid to the continuity between national branding campaigns and later symbolic interventions within the same national identity field. **Aims:** This article examines how selected top-down national branding and public-sector identity interventions in Slovakia construct, communicate, and institutionally support symbolic legitimacy. **Methods:** The study uses a qualitative case-study design based on document analysis and qualitative content analysis of official materials from 2016–2026. **Sample:** The corpus includes national branding and tourism communication materials, official documents on the new arrangement of the Slovak national anthem, legal and institutional materials concerning STVR, and an exploratory survey among 572 university students. **Results:** National branding appears broad and communicatively portable; the anthem intervention reveals limits of formal recommendation in a symbolically dense domain; and the STVR case shows that legal and organisational restructuring does not automatically stabilise public identity. **Conclusions:** Formal authorisation alone is insufficient for symbolically legitimate public identity management. **Implications:** Public identity interventions require cultural grounding, transparent justification, institutional continuity, and socially recognisable representational fit.

Keywords: country branding, place branding, public identity management, tourism branding, public-sector branding

JEL Classification: M31, Z18, Z32

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Introduction

Public identity is often managed through visible symbolic forms: names, logos, slogans, visual systems, campaigns, institutional narratives, and national symbols. In public-sector contexts, such changes are frequently introduced as managerial, communicative, or administrative interventions intended to modernise representation, improve recognisability, or strengthen the image of a country or institution. However, symbolic change does not automatically produce symbolically legitimate public identity. A new logo, slogan, institutional name, or symbolic arrangement may be formally approved and publicly communicated, yet the process through which it is justified, institutionalised, recognised, and connected to shared meanings remains analytically crucial.

This problem is especially relevant in the context of place and nation branding. Contemporary place branding literature has moved beyond the narrow understanding of branding as a set of promotional tools, visual signs, or slogans. Place brands are increasingly understood as dynamic formations shaped by identity, image, culture, participation, stakeholder interaction, and legitimacy (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). From this perspective, public identity cannot be reduced to the external image of a place, because it also depends on how meanings are constructed, communicated, stabilised, and institutionally represented. This is particularly important in nation branding, where the symbolic representation of a country affects not only external audiences but also residents, public institutions, cultural memory, and collective self-understanding.

Recent research confirms that these issues remain relevant across nation branding, place branding and public-sector branding. Nation branding continues to be discussed as a strategic activity through which governments shape national image and influence the perceptions of external stakeholders (Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2025). At the same time, public branding is increasingly understood as a governance-related process rather than as a visual presentation alone. Manoharan et al. (2025) show that public branding involves identity, communication, engagement and operational transparency, while Lock and Jacobs (2025) demonstrate that the reputation and legitimacy of highly visible public-sector organisations are shaped by citizens' perceptions, trust and mediated public evaluation. These studies support the need to analyse public identity interventions not only as symbolic outputs, but also as institutionally embedded and publicly interpreted processes.

Slovakia represents a suitable case for examining this tension. Since the second half of the 2010s, Slovakia has developed several national branding and communication frameworks, including Good Idea Slovakia, the Brand of the Slovak Republic, and later tourism-oriented communication built around the ideas of closeness, diversity, and surprise. These initiatives were not empty or meaningless; they worked with positive attributes such as creativity, authenticity, talent, attractiveness, diversity, and geographical proximity. At the same time, they raise the question of whether Slovak national branding constructed a stable symbolic core, or whether it primarily operated as a set of externally oriented communicative platforms. This question becomes more relevant when national branding campaigns are considered together with later public symbolic interventions, such as the new arrangement of the Slovak national anthem and the rebranding of Slovak public broadcasting.

The central problem addressed in this paper is therefore not whether individual campaigns, logos, or symbolic interventions were aesthetically successful, professionally executed, or publicly popular. Rather, the paper asks how selected top-down public identity interventions were constructed, communicated, institutionalised, and indicatively perceived in relation to symbolic legitimacy. This distinction is important. Rebranding may change the formal appearance of a public institution or symbol, but identity formation requires a more complex process of meaning-making. It involves not only communicative design, but also justification, continuity, institutional practice, cultural resonance, and the possibility of social recognition.

Existing literature provides a strong theoretical foundation for this discussion. Identity-based place branding emphasises that place brands emerge through the interaction between place identity and place image (Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013). Participatory approaches further show that place brands are not created only by managers, but also by residents, stakeholders, and public institutions (Braun et al., 2013; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). Other authors have warned against reducing place branding to logos and slogans (Govers, 2013) or disconnecting place brands from culture and lived meaning (Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2015). Recent scholarship also connects place branding with public policy, governance, public value, legitimacy, and institutional coordination (Hereźniak & Anders-Morawska, 2021; Lucarelli, 2018; Potapovs, 2024; Tøttenborg et al., 2023).

However, less attention has been paid to the continuity between national branding campaigns and later symbolic interventions in public institutions, especially in cases where both operate primarily as top-down communication, rebranding, or symbolic redesign. In other words, the literature explains why identity, participation, culture, and legitimacy matter for place branding, but it has less explicitly

addressed how symbolic legitimacy is constructed, communicated, institutionally supported, and perceived when public institutions repeatedly introduce symbolic changes from above. This gap is particularly relevant for countries where national identity is historically layered, institutionally fragmented, and still searching for a widely shared symbolic core.

The aim of this paper is to examine how selected top-down national branding and administrative rebranding interventions in Slovakia construct, communicate, and institutionally support symbolic legitimacy in public identity management. The paper also includes a supplementary exploratory perception layer, designed to indicate how selected public identity interventions are recognised and evaluated by a student sample. The empirical design, therefore, combines document analysis and qualitative content analysis of official materials from the period 2016–2026 with a short exploratory survey conducted among university students. The analysed material includes national branding frameworks, official communication on the Slovak national anthem arrangement, and materials related to the visual identity of Slovak public broadcasting.

The main research question is formulated as follows: How is symbolic legitimacy constructed, communicated, institutionally supported, and indicatively perceived in selected Slovak national branding and public-sector rebranding interventions? A complementary question is: Which features of these interventions appear to support, or limit their potential to become culturally grounded and institutionally stabilised elements of public identity?

The paper contributes to place and nation branding research by linking identity-based branding with public management and by conceptualising symbolic legitimacy as a necessary condition for public identity interventions to become institutionally stabilised and socially recognisable. It does not claim to measure representative public opinion. Instead, it analyses documented processes, meanings, and institutional conditions, complemented by an indicative student-based survey that captures awareness and perceived representational suitability of selected public identity interventions. This approach allows the paper to examine not only how public identity is formally constructed, but also where the limits of its symbolic legitimisation may become visible.

Theoretical background

Identity-based place branding provides the theoretical starting point for analysing public identity interventions. In this perspective, a place brand is not understood as a static communication output, but as a dynamic relationship between place identity, institutional representation and external image. Kavaratzis and Hatch (2013) argue that place brands should be interpreted through the interaction between place identity and place image, rather than as managerial artefacts that can be designed and imposed from above. This is particularly important for public identity management because countries, cities and public institutions do not enter branding processes as empty symbolic spaces. Their identities are already shaped by cultural memory, institutional practices, public expectations and historically accumulated meanings. Kavaratzis and Kalandides (2015) further emphasise that place brands are interactively formed through the participation, negotiation and interpretation of multiple actors. Public identity should therefore be understood less as a finished product and more as an ongoing process through which meanings are produced, stabilised and contested.

This distinction is especially relevant in nation branding. National branding often seeks to translate a complex country into a recognisable promise, but the symbolic identity of a nation is usually more layered than any campaign can express. The analytical problem is therefore not whether a country can produce attractive communication, but whether such communication is connected to a socially recognisable identity core. If national branding operates mainly as an externally oriented image-building exercise, it may produce a positive and communicatively efficient representation, but one that remains weakly embedded in internal meanings. Identity-based place branding thus makes it possible to distinguish between communicated image and public identity: the former may be strategically designed, while the latter requires cultural grounding, institutional continuity and social recognition.

A related body of literature criticises the reduction of place branding to logos, slogans and visual symbols. Govers (2013) argues that place branding is not primarily about logos and slogans, but about managing distinctive associations and meaningful perceptions. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2015) similarly warn against the disconnection between place culture and place brands, particularly when cultural elements are used selectively, superficially, or instrumentally. These arguments are central for analysing public symbolic interventions because national symbols, institutional names and public visual identities are not neutral design materials. They carry historical references, emotional attachments and

expectations of continuity. A symbolic intervention may therefore be visible, professionally executed, or formally authorised, but this does not mean that it becomes a legitimate element of public identity. Its legitimacy depends on whether the intervention can be connected to meanings that are culturally intelligible and socially recognisable.

Legitimacy is also closely connected to the role of stakeholders and residents. Braun, Kavaratzis and Zenker (2013) show that residents are not merely target audiences of place branding, but actors who live, communicate and evaluate the place. This implies that public identity cannot be assessed only through external attractiveness, because it also needs to be meaningful for those who are expected to identify with it. Zenker, Braun and Petersen (2017) demonstrate that simplified destination branding may be more acceptable to visitors than to residents, whose relationship with the place is shaped by more complex everyday experience. For public identity management, this means that a campaign, symbol, or institutional identity can be formally introduced, but its symbolic legitimacy depends on whether it can become recognisable and acceptable within the community it claims to represent.

The connection between branding and legitimacy is developed more explicitly in governance-oriented approaches. Eshuis and Edwards (2013) conceptualise branding as a mode of governance and distinguish between input, throughput and output legitimacy. Input legitimacy concerns who is involved in the process, throughput legitimacy concerns the transparency and quality of the process, and output legitimacy concerns the value and acceptability of the result. This distinction is useful because it shifts analytical attention from the final symbolic form to the process through which the intervention was initiated, justified, communicated and institutionalised. Eshuis, Klijn and Braun (2014) further argue that place marketing and branding can address the emotional dimension of policymaking, but also stress the importance of citizen participation. Top-down public identity interventions may therefore struggle to achieve legitimacy when formal authority is not accompanied by visible justification, participation, or public intelligibility.

Recent research strengthens this link between legitimacy, inclusivity and stakeholder recognition. Bisani, Daye and Mortimer (2024) argue that legitimacy in place branding cannot be separated from inclusivity and stakeholder engagement. This does not mean that every public identity intervention must be based on full public consensus, which would often be practically unrealistic. Rather, it means that symbolic legitimacy is weakened when the relationship between institutional decision-making, cultural meaning and stakeholder recognition remains unclear. In the context of national branding and public-sector rebranding, the relevant question is therefore not only what has been changed, but also how the change was justified, whose meanings were represented and whether the resulting identity can be recognised as appropriate by the publics it addresses.

The public-policy dimension of place branding provides another important perspective. Lucarelli (2018) interprets place branding as a form of urban policy, while Potapovs (2024) discusses whether place branding should be understood as public policy. This perspective is important because national branding, changes to national symbols and the rebranding of public institutions are not ordinary market communication activities. They are connected to public authority, public resources, public trust and collective representation. Hereźniak and Anders-Morawska (2021) similarly call for a public value-driven approach to place branding, shifting attention from external competition toward value for residents and society. From this viewpoint, a public identity intervention should not only attract attention, but also contribute to meaning, trust and institutional credibility.

This argument can be further refined through public management perspectives. Tøttenborg, Ooi and Hardy (2023) suggest that place branding should be supplemented by public management lenses, because participation, coordination and implementation are not only normative issues, but also institutional challenges. Public identity management therefore requires more than symbolic creativity. It requires institutional capacity, procedural clarity, continuity and long-term coordination. This avoids an overly idealised view of participatory branding. The issue is not that every identity intervention must be co-created by all stakeholders, but that public institutions need to demonstrate that symbolic changes are not arbitrary, isolated, or purely image-oriented. They should be connected to a coherent identity strategy, institutional practice and public value.

Recent studies further specify why this institutional dimension matters. Ripoll González et al. (2025) show that stakeholder involvement in place branding depends on network management and that top-down and bottom-up branding processes create different conditions for participation and coordination. Almeida (2025) similarly conceptualises territorial branding as a strategic element of public governance connected to decision-making, cultural identity, value creation and institutional representation. These perspectives are relevant for analysing public identity interventions because they show that legitimacy is not produced only by the final symbolic form, but also by the governance arrangements, stakeholder relations and institutional processes through which symbolic change is prepared, justified and implemented.

Public-sector branding literature also shows why this task is more complex for public organisations than for private companies. Wæraas (2008) argues that public organisations often struggle to function as coherent corporate brands because they represent multiple mandates, values and stakeholder expectations. They cannot simply define a distinctive market position and align all communication around it. Sataøen and Wæraas (2015) show that public-sector branding involves managing both similarity and difference: public organisations need recognisable identities, but their legitimacy may also depend on continuity, conformity and trust. Leijerholt, Biedenbach and Hultén (2019) similarly confirm that public-sector branding differs from corporate branding because public organisations operate within complex identity structures, institutional constraints and diverse stakeholder relationships. This is highly relevant for ministries, public broadcasters and state institutions, whose symbolic identity must remain credible across political cycles and public audiences.

On the basis of these theoretical perspectives, symbolic legitimacy can be understood as the extent to which a public identity intervention is not only formally authorised, but also culturally meaningful, institutionally supported, publicly intelligible and socially recognisable as an appropriate representation of the nation, place, or public institution concerned. The concept connects identity-based place branding with governance, public value and public-sector branding. It allows the analysis to distinguish between formal symbolic change and symbolically legitimate public identity. A campaign, logo, slogan, institutional name, or symbolic arrangement may become visible through administrative action, but it gains symbolic legitimacy only when it is supported by cultural grounding, transparent justification, institutional continuity and some form of social recognition. This theoretical distinction is central for analysing the Slovak case, where national branding campaigns, the new arrangement of the national anthem and the visual identity process of public broadcasting can be examined not as isolated communication outputs, but as public identity interventions whose legitimacy depends on more than formal introduction.

Methodology

The methodological objective of this study is to analyse how selected top-down national branding and public-sector identity interventions in Slovakia construct, communicate, institutionalise and indicatively reflect symbolic legitimacy. The study is designed as a qualitative case study of Slovakia, based primarily on document analysis and qualitative content analysis, complemented by a short exploratory survey. A case study design is appropriate when the aim is to examine a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context and to interpret the relationships between institutional action, public communication and social meaning rather than to pursue statistical generalisation (Yin, 2018). In the present study, the case study approach makes it possible to analyse selected interventions in Slovak public identity management as interconnected symbolic, institutional and communicative phenomena.

The dominant empirical layer of the study consists of official documents and institutional materials published between 2016 and 2026. The main documentary corpus was constructed purposively and criterion-based. Preference was given to official materials produced by state institutions, public bodies and official destination-marketing actors, because these documents do not merely describe particular branding or symbolic changes, but also frame, justify and institutionalise them. Only materials directly related to national branding, public symbols, or public institutional identity were included in the core analytical corpus. Earlier strategic and analytical materials concerning the development of the Slovak national brand were used as contextual background, while the core content analysis focused on documents that explicitly articulated official branding narratives, introduced symbolic interventions, or institutionalised public identity changes. The document corpus was structured around three main substantive cases. The first case concerns national branding and tourism communication and includes the official framework Brand of the Slovak Republic, the Good Idea Slovakia narrative and visual identity guidelines, Good Idea Slovakia Exhibition materials, and official Slovakia Travel materials related to Slovensko prekvapí and Slovensko: blízke a prekvapivé. The second case concerns the new arrangement of the Slovak national anthem and includes official materials of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, including the dedicated webpage with downloadable files and the official ministry FAQ. The third case concerns the transformation of Slovak public broadcasting and includes Act No. 157/2024 Coll. on Slovak Television and Radio together with official STVR materials related to the new logo and the announced process of building a new visual identity. In addition to the official corpus, selected media reports from reputable Slovak news outlets were used as

supplementary contextual sources. These reports were not treated as part of the core official documentary corpus and were not used to define the main analytical categories. Their function was limited to documenting the post-release public trajectory of selected interventions, especially where later developments, public controversy, or additional publicly available information were not captured in official materials. This distinction is important because the article primarily analyses how public institutions officially construct, justify and communicate symbolic interventions, while media sources provide only a contextual layer concerning their public circulation.

Table 1 presents the empirical corpus of the study, including the analytical status of each data layer, the analysed cases, data sources, time periods and analytical focus.

Table 1. Empirical corpus and analytical focus

Analytical layer	Case / data source	Period	Analytical focus
Core official corpus	Brand of the Slovak Republic; Slovakia Brand Visual Identity Guidelines; Good Idea Slovakia Exhibition; Slovakia Travel materials related to Slovensko prekvapí and Slovensko: blízke a prekvapivé	2016–2024	National branding logic, external vs. internal orientation, symbolic core, cultural grounding
Core official corpus	Official materials of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic related to the new arrangement of the Slovak national anthem, including the dedicated webpage and ministry FAQ	2024–2025	Symbolic intervention, public justification, continuity, institutional recommendation
Core official corpus	Act No. 157/2024 Coll.; official STVR materials on the new logo and the process of building the new visual identity	2024–2026	Institutional rebranding, continuity, public institutional identity, symbolic legitimacy
Supplementary contextual sources	Selected media reports concerning the post-release public trajectory of the anthem arrangement and the STVR identity process	2025–2026	Contextual documentation of public controversy, additional developments and non-official circulation
Supplementary perception layer	Exploratory survey among FMK UCM students	First half of April 2026	Awareness and perceived representational suitability

Document analysis was used because official documents can be treated not only as sources of factual information, but also as institutional representations of priorities, meanings and public justification (Bowen, 2009). The study does not approach these materials as neutral descriptions of reality, but as documents through which public institutions articulate their own branding narratives, explain symbolic interventions and define the intended meaning of public identity. Qualitative content analysis followed a theoretically informed interpretive logic aimed at identifying recurrent themes, symbolic frames, justificatory strategies and legitimising arguments across the selected cases (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The analytical framework was derived from the theoretical discussion of identity-based place branding, legitimacy, public value and public-sector branding. It was built around eight categories: identity core, external or internal orientation, cultural grounding, justification of the intervention, continuity with previous symbolic frameworks, visible stakeholder participation, institutionalisation and indicators of symbolic legitimacy. The category of identity core captured the central meaning, value, promise, or symbolic proposition articulated by the intervention. External or internal orientation referred to whether the intervention primarily addressed outside audiences, domestic publics, or both. Cultural grounding examined whether the intervention was linked to culture, history, national symbols, shared values, or collective memory. Justification referred to the explicit reasons and rationales used by institutions to explain the need for the intervention. Continuity examined whether the intervention built upon previous identity frameworks, modified them, or disrupted them. Visible stakeholder participation focused on whether the documents indicated the involvement of experts, stakeholders, citizens, or broader publics. Institutionalisation captured the extent to which the intervention was embedded in official practice, recommendation, law, organisational implementation, or long-term institutional process. Symbolic legitimacy was not treated as a directly measured representative public attitude. Instead, it was analysed as an interpretive category based on a

combination of documentary indicators and a supplementary perception layer. In the document analysis, symbolic legitimacy referred to the extent to which an intervention was framed not only as formally authorised, but also as culturally meaningful, institutionally supported, publicly intelligible and potentially recognisable as an appropriate element of public identity. The exploratory survey provided only an indicative perception-based complement by showing whether selected interventions were known and considered suitable within a clearly defined student sample. The analytical procedure proceeded in four steps. First, the official documents were collected, selected and organised according to the three main cases. Second, each case was analysed through the predefined analytical categories listed above. Third, selected media reports were used to contextualise post-release developments and public circulation, without replacing the official corpus as the primary data source. Fourth, the findings were compared across cases in order to identify recurring patterns in how public identity interventions were constructed, justified, institutionally stabilised and indicatively perceived. This cross-case synthesis made it possible to assess whether the selected interventions functioned primarily as communicative, symbolic, visual, institutional, or culturally grounded public identity interventions.

The second empirical layer of the study was a supplementary exploratory survey conducted in the first half of April 2026 among students of the Faculty of Mass Media Communication, University of Ss. Cyril and Methodius in Trnava. The survey was anonymous and voluntary and was carried out in accordance with the ethical principles applied at FMK UCM. The sample consisted of 572 students aged 20–22 years, with a median age of 21. Women represented 78% of the sample, men approximately 17%, and 5% of respondents did not wish to state their gender. The survey instrument was intentionally kept very short in order to minimise respondent burden and support voluntary participation. Its purpose was not to replace the document analysis, but to complement it with a simple perception-based layer. The questionnaire consisted of three closed questions. The first asked whether respondents knew the current tourism communication campaign Slovensko prekvapí. The second asked whether they considered the new arrangement of the Slovak national anthem to be a suitable representation of Slovakia. The third asked whether they considered the new logo and announced visual identity process of STVR to be a suitable representation of a public-service broadcasting institution. The response options were limited to “yes”, “no” and “not sure / unable to assess”, depending on the wording of the item. Survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics, specifically percentages and response distributions. Since the survey relied on a non-probability convenience sample, sampling error was not estimated. Convenience sampling is appropriate in exploratory research when the aim is to obtain indicative data from an accessible and relevant respondent group rather than to produce population-level representativeness (Etikan et al., 2015). The survey results are therefore interpreted only as indicative findings for the analysed student sample, not as representative public opinion data.

The strength of the overall methodological design lies in the combination of a dominant institutional-documentary analysis with a supplementary exploratory perception layer. The document analysis makes it possible to examine how symbolic legitimacy is officially constructed, justified, communicated and institutionally supported by public institutions. The survey adds an indicative perception-based perspective by showing whether selected interventions are known and considered suitable within a clearly defined student sample. At the same time, this design has limits. The survey does not explain why respondents answered in a particular way, and its findings cannot be generalised to the Slovak population. Likewise, document analysis captures official representations and institutional justifications, but cannot fully determine how symbolic interventions are interpreted by all relevant publics. The findings should therefore be understood as interpretive and analytically supportive rather than statistically representative.

Results

The analysis identified three connected, yet analytically distinct, arenas of top-down public identity management in Slovakia: national branding, symbolic intervention in a state symbol, and institutional rebranding of a public-service broadcaster. These arenas differ in the object of intervention, the mode of institutional support, the visibility of prior problem diagnosis and the degree to which they appear symbolically stabilised. The documentary corpus remained the dominant empirical layer of the study, while the exploratory survey among FMK UCM students was used only as an indicative perception-based complement. The results therefore do not evaluate whether the examined interventions were aesthetically successful, but how they were officially framed, justified, institutionally advanced and indicatively perceived as public identity interventions.

The first empirical pattern concerns national branding and tourism communication. The official Brand of the Slovak Republic text states that reflections on what Slovakia means produce “a wide range of responses” and that the country does not reveal “one strong, unifying IDEA” that would clearly override the others (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2022, paras. 1–3). Instead, the same document identifies a wider cluster of positive attributes, especially diversity, ingenuity, vitality and authenticity, as the basis for the country’s external presentation (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2022, para. 4). This indicates that Slovak national branding was articulated through a broad and transferable semantic framework rather than through a single dominant symbolic essence.

This branding layer is also the only analysed case in which the official materials explicitly refer to a prior diagnostic basis for intervention. The Brand of the Slovak Republic text states that its conclusions build on “completed professional studies, expert brainstorming, national and international evaluations and public perceptions” (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, 2022, para. 2). The Slovakia Brand Visual Identity Guidelines then convert this broader semantic field into a more condensed communication formula by stating that “Good idea Slovakia is both the slogan and the brand of Slovakia at the same time” and by presenting Slovakia as a country where ideas are born and turned into reality (Slovakia Brand Visual Identity Guidelines, n.d., p. 2). The Good Idea Slovakia Exhibition further frames the brand as part of “a long-term process of communication with both the domestic and foreign public” intended to increase Slovakia’s attractiveness and credibility (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, n.d., para. 1).

The current Slovakia Travel publication *Slovensko: blízke a prekvapivé* translates this logic into destination communication based on proximity, compactness, experiential variety and surprise. It presents Slovakia as a country that, despite its relatively small size, surprises by the diversity of what visitors can see, discover, taste and experience, and states that visitors are close to unforgettable experiences everywhere (Slovakia Travel, 2024). The analysed materials therefore do not suggest symbolic emptiness. Rather, they indicate semantic breadth: the state-supported identity of Slovakia appears communicatively portable across diplomacy, national branding and tourism, but less clearly stabilised around one culturally condensed and publicly singular symbolic proposition. In the exploratory survey, 43% of respondents reported awareness of the *Slovensko prekvapí* campaign, 37% reported no awareness and approximately 20% were unsure. This suggests partial recognisability of the communication platform within the analysed student sample.

The second empirical pattern concerns the new arrangement of the Slovak national anthem. In contrast to national branding, this intervention did not concern a campaign platform or visual formula, but a core national symbol. The official materials of the Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic show that the new arrangement was made publicly available through state channels in instrumental, played-and-sung and score form and presented as available for official use by institutions and citizens (Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, 2025). At the same time, the ministry’s FAQ formulated the intervention in a soft normative register. It stated that older arrangements could still be used after 1 January 2025, that the new version would be introduced gradually and that the new version was “odporúčaná ako oficiálna štátna hymna” [recommended as the official national anthem], while “používanie inej verzie nebude sankcionované” [the use of another version will not be sanctioned] (Ministry of Culture of the Slovak Republic, 2024, paras. 2–3).

This combination is analytically important. The intervention had high symbolic visibility and clear ministerial backing, but the official documentation did not construct it as an immediately exclusive or fully closed standard. The reviewed official materials explained how the new version would be distributed and used, but they did not provide a comparably explicit public diagnosis of a representational or functional problem that the new arrangement was designed to solve. In this respect, the official corpus made the rollout visible more clearly than the documented need for change. Supplementary media reports further indicated that the post-release trajectory remained open beyond the formal ministry release. After public criticism, additional versions were reportedly published by the composer, and one later report stated that uploaded YouTube versions were subsequently withdrawn (Špak, 2025; Žgrlíková, 2025). These media sources are used here only as contextual documentation of post-release circulation, not as part of the core official corpus.

The anthem case, therefore, combines strong symbolic ambition with weaker closure and a less explicitly documented prior diagnosis in the reviewed official materials. The exploratory survey adds an indicative perception-based contrast: only 11% of respondents considered the new arrangement a suitable representation of Slovakia, whereas 72% evaluated it negatively and approximately 17% were unable to assess it. These data cannot be generalised to the Slovak population, but they indicate that formal recommendation and symbolic visibility were not automatically accompanied by perceived representational adequacy within the analysed student sample.

The third empirical pattern concerns the rebranding of Slovak public broadcasting under STVR. This case differs from the previous two because the intervention was anchored not only communicatively, but also legislatively and organisationally. In formal terms, the relevant institutional frame was established by Act No. 157/2024 Coll. on Slovak Television and Radio, which regulates the status, mission, tasks and activities of STVR and thereby situates the identity intervention within a broader institutional transformation (Act No. 157/2024 Coll., 2024). The broadcaster’s own communication reinforced this processual interpretation. STVR described the rollout as an initial phase of a process intended to build a functional, modern and sustainable system of corporate identity, while also stating that the brief and the concept emerged from knowledge of the institution’s real needs (STVR, 2026b).

A second official STVR text states that the new logo was developed as an internal proposal, identifies Martina Flašíková as the author of the conceptual idea and logotype concept, and defines “signál” [signal] as the key element operating across all channels (STVR, 2026a). In contrast to the anthem case, the need for change is therefore articulated more explicitly, although primarily in managerial rather than research-documentary terms. The reviewed official materials justify the rebranding through institutional functionality, system coherence and multi-platform usability, but they do not disclose a separate public analytical document, audit, or published research report detailing these needs. STVR also specified that the visual identity project would take approximately 18 months and would include a design manual, further development of television and radio identities, selected external procurement, and rebranding of documents, printed materials and online products (STVR, 2026b). The official material therefore presents the STVR identity not as a completed symbolic object, but as a staged system under construction.

Supplementary media reporting suggests that the path to the eventually presented identity was not fully linear. Aktuality.sk reported that an earlier externally commissioned set of logo proposals by designer Daniel Zachar, reportedly costing almost EUR 10,000, was not adopted, while the broadcaster later proceeded with an internally framed concept (Žák, 2026). As in the anthem case, this media source is used only as contextual documentation of the public trajectory of the identity process. Empirically, the STVR case displays the strongest formal institutional scaffold of the three interventions, but also indicates that symbolic identity was still being staged, selected and operationalised rather than already sedimented. In the exploratory survey, 7% of respondents considered the new STVR logo and announced visual identity process a suitable representation of a public-service institution, 24% evaluated it negatively and approximately 69% reported that they were unable to assess it. In this case, the dominant result is not rejection, but high indeterminacy, which points to weak recognisability or incomplete symbolic fixation at the time of measurement.

Table 2 summarises the exploratory survey results. The table is included only as a descriptive overview of the supplementary perception layer and should not be interpreted as representative public opinion.

Table 2. Exploratory survey results among FMK UCM students

Survey item	Yes	No	Not sure / unable to assess
Awareness of the Slovensko prekvapí campaign	43%	37%	20%
Suitability of the new anthem arrangement as a representation of Slovakia	11%	72%	17%
Suitability of the new STVR logo and announced visual identity process as a representation of a public-service institution	7%	24%	69%

Table 3 synthesises the three cases according to the analytical categories defined in the methodology. It does not introduce a separate empirical layer, but summarises the findings derived from the official corpus, supplementary contextual sources and exploratory survey.

Table 3. Cross-case analytical synthesis of symbolic legitimacy indicators

Analytical category	National branding	National anthem	STVR
Identity core	Broad semantic field: diversity, ingenuity, vitality, authenticity, proximity and surprise	Core national symbol and ceremonial representation	Institutional signal, functionality and multi-platform public-service identity
External / internal orientation	Mainly external, with declared communication to domestic and foreign publics	Domestic and state-symbolic	Institutional and public-service oriented
Cultural grounding	Present, but broadly articulated across branding and tourism communication	Very high symbolic density, but weaker documented justification of the need for change	Primarily institutional and managerial rather than explicitly cultural
Justification of intervention	Explicit reference to studies, expert brainstorming, evaluations and public perceptions	Rollout and use explained more clearly than prior need for change	Justified through institutional needs, functionality and system coherence
Continuity	Relatively continuous across national branding and tourism communication	Gradual and non-exclusive official recommendation	Legal-organisational transformation and staged visual identity process
Visible stakeholder participation	References to expert and public-perception inputs, but limited procedural detail in the analysed materials	Limited visibility in the reviewed official materials	Internal proposal; limited public transparency in the analysed materials
Institutionalisation	Branding framework and official tourism communication	Ministerial recommendation and official distribution	Legal anchoring and organisational implementation
Indicative perception	Partial awareness in the student sample	Strong negative evaluation in the student sample	High uncertainty in the student sample

Taken together, the three cases do not indicate an absence of symbolic effort, institutional action, or communicative intent. All three interventions were publicly introduced, officially framed and institutionally advanced. What differs is the relationship between semantic construction, mode of institutional support, visibility of prior problem diagnosis and indicative perception. In the national branding layer, identity appears broad, portable and relatively continuous across diplomatic and tourism communication, and it is also the only analysed case in which the official materials explicitly invoke prior studies, evaluations, expert brainstorming and public perceptions as part of the basis for intervention. In the anthem case, the intervention concerns a symbol with much greater national and emotional density; it is formally recommended and publicly distributed, yet normatively softened by gradualism and non-sanctioned plurality, while the reviewed official materials foreground rollout more clearly than they document the need for change. In the STVR case, the intervention is institutionally strongest in formal terms because it is embedded in legal and organisational restructuring, while the need for intervention is articulated mainly through internal managerial language of functionality and institutional requirements rather than through a publicly disclosed analytical diagnosis.

The synthetic empirical pattern is therefore not that Slovak public identity interventions are meaningless, nor that they are uniformly rejected. Rather, the comparison suggests that formal symbolic intervention by itself does not appear sufficient to produce immediately consolidated public identity. Across the analysed cases, institutional authorisation generated visibility and procedural advancement,

but it translated into different levels of symbolic stabilisation, recognisability and indicative representational fit.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the Slovak case is best understood not as three isolated symbolic interventions, but as a layered architecture of public national identity management. Tourism branding, the new arrangement of the national anthem and the rebranding of a public-service broadcaster belong to the same field of identity representation, yet each operates through a different symbolic channel. Tourism branding externalises the country, the anthem condenses collective belonging into a highly charged national symbol, and public-service broadcasting reproduces public self-understanding through institutional practice. Read together, these layers show institution-led interventions that are formally connected to the nation, but uneven in cultural grounding, public intelligibility and symbolic stabilisation.

This interpretation is consistent with identity-based place branding, but also extends it. Place brands should not be reduced to slogans, logos, or promotional outputs detached from identity, but understood through the relationship between identity, image, culture and stakeholder interpretation (Govers, 2013; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Kavaratzis & Kalandides, 2015). The Slovak tourism-branding layer was therefore not identity-free. It articulated meanings such as diversity, surprise, proximity, attractiveness and authenticity, and it did so with a more visible diagnostic basis than the other cases. At the same time, this identity remained broad, flexible and externally legible. This may support destination communication and stakeholder perceptions (Vinyals-Mirabent et al., 2025), but it limits its capacity to function as a condensed basis of internal identification.

The anthem and STVR cases demonstrate why symbolically saturated domains require stronger forms of legitimacy. The anthem is a concentrated national symbol expected to carry dignity, memory and affective resonance. STVR is part of the institutional infrastructure through which public culture is reproduced. In both cases, administrative introduction, formal recommendation, or managerial functionality may initiate symbolic change, but they are insufficient to make it culturally convincing or publicly meaningful. This corresponds with scholarship linking branding to legitimacy, governance and public value, and with the argument that public institutions operate under different identity conditions than conventional corporate brands (Eshuis & Edwards, 2013; Hereźniak & Anders-Morawska, 2021; Leijerholt et al., 2019; Lucarelli, 2018; Sataøen & Wæraas, 2015; Wæraas, 2008). Recent research reinforces this interpretation: public branding involves engagement and operational transparency (Manoharan et al., 2025), the legitimacy and reputation of visible public organisations depend on citizens' perceptions and trust (Lock & Jacobs, 2025), and stakeholder involvement requires governance of top-down and bottom-up processes (Ripoll González et al., 2025).

A key contribution of the article lies in showing that continuity between national branding, national symbols and public institutions should be treated as an analytical problem in its own right. These layers do not automatically accumulate into one coherent symbolic regime. Rather, they coexist as unevenly stabilised layers of public identity: one stronger in communicability, another more symbolically dense, and another more central to everyday cultural reproduction. Institution-led interventions therefore differ in legitimacy potential depending on whether the need for change is publicly intelligible, whether the intervention is embedded in a recognisable framework of meaning, and whether it achieves culturally plausible representational fit. This supports the view of territorial branding as a public governance strategy rather than a merely communicative exercise (Almeida, 2025). Formal symbolic change may generate visibility and procedural advancement, but it is not sufficient to secure symbolic stabilisation, public intelligibility and perceived representational adequacy.

Conclusion

This article examined how selected top-down national branding and public-sector identity interventions in Slovakia constructed, communicated and institutionally supported symbolic legitimacy in public identity management. The analysis showed that Slovak public identity was advanced through interconnected layers of tourism branding, national symbolism and public institutional representation, but these layers differed in cultural grounding, transparency of problem justification, institutionalisation and indicative symbolic fit. The findings suggest that symbolic legitimacy does not

follow from formal change alone. It depends on whether the intervention is meaningfully embedded, publicly intelligible and recognisable as an appropriate representation of the nation or public institution concerned. The article contributes to place and nation branding research by showing that continuity between national branding, national symbols and public institutions is an important dimension of public identity management. At the same time, the study is limited by its single-country qualitative case-study design, its focus on official documents and the exploratory character of the supplementary student survey, which cannot be generalised to the Slovak population. Future research could include representative samples, more diverse respondent groups, interviews or focus groups, and comparative Central European cases to examine how different publics interpret symbolic legitimacy in public identity interventions.

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