



Jessica Gienow-Hecht

**Be the Dictator's Guest: Nation Branding in
Authoritarian States**

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Be the Dictator's Guest:

Nation Branding in Authoritarian States

Jessica Gienow-Hecht

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the image management strategies of more recent dictators and authoritarian regimes: How did – and how do – they market themselves? When and why are they successful? And how do their strategies differ from those of liberal regimes in the quest for global prestige and support? I examine states such as North Korea, China, and Russia, and various Middle Eastern states, occasionally glancing back at European dictatorships. Terms such as “undemocratic”, “nonliberal”, “authoritarian”, or “illiberal” are used to describe states that reject, subordinate, or strategically instrumentalise core liberal principles, including freedom of expression, individual autonomy, and the separation of powers. In doing so, these regimes pursue authoritarian objectives – most notably, the centralisation of power and suppression of dissent. A central argument is that the less political a national brand appears, the more successful it tends to become, regardless of how compromised its underlying political profile may be.

1 GRANDMA GOES TO ABU DHABI

The receptionist at my dentist's office in Berlin wants to emigrate to Abu Dhabi. Once retired, she says, she and her husband will buy an apartment in the city. She has explained to me that people there are friendlier, the weather and food better, and the cost of living lower. She has also observed that the rules governing Western women in Abu Dhabi are less restrictive than those for Arab women. The couple's situation is not unique. International websites serving as guidebooks, with headings such as “AbuDhabiDream.com” or “Emigrating to Abu Dhabi – Luxury Life with the Sheikhs”, list numerous attractive prospects, including a pleasant lifestyle, scientific institutions,

many international companies, and no income tax (AbuDhabiDream 2013).

Abu Dhabi is the largest of the seven United Arab Emirates (UAE). Its brand slogan reads “Spirit of the Union”. In the area of economic transformation, the country ranks 14th out of 137 on the Bertelsmann Transformation Index. Yet on the Democracy Index published by the British magazine *The Economist*, it ranks 125th out of 167, positioned behind Zimbabwe and ahead of Togo, placing it in the bottom quarter of the index, alongside other states assessed as authoritarian regimes. There are no political parties, and national politics are controlled by seven ruling dynasties. The press and academic institutions are subject to censorship, while political opposition is systematically suppressed. The country's most prominent blogger, Ahmed Mansoor Al Shehhi, was sentenced to ten years in prison in 2018 for advocating reforms and human rights (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024; Freedom in the World 2021).

The United Arab Emirates is not the only sun-soaked destination with political shortcomings that continues to draw Western retirees. From 2010 to 2014, the German public broadcasting service Norddeutscher Rundfunk (NDR) aired a three-part documentary series titled “Grandma Wants to Go to Thailand” (*Oma will nach Thailand*). The series follows Ute Schulz, a retiree from the North German town of Buxtehude, as she sets out to spend her remaining years in Southeast Asia. Her reasons are strikingly pragmatic: “Money is tight, the kids are gone, and eldercare is poor” (Luckfilm

2013). Thailand offers white sandy beaches, a mild climate, access to medical care, and “exotic” cuisine – a combination many find appealing. On international democracy indices, Thailand fares somewhat better than the United Arab Emirates, ranking 63rd on *The Economist’s* Democracy Index. However, it still does not qualify as a consolidated democracy. Thailand’s “fragile democracy” remains entangled in a continuing power struggle between the military and the monarchy, both of which are known for their forceful responses, particularly towards political protest and opposition.

For Ute Schulz, these political dynamics matter little. Her decision is driven by a desire to escape poverty in old age. “Sunny democracies” such as Spain, Portugal, or Greece are simply too expensive for her. Nevertheless, the decision to emigrate entails tangible political consequences, particularly for states with problematic governance structures. Retirees from the Global North like Schulz, along with influencers such as Fiona Erdmann and Max Stanton, known as “Max of Arabia”, and celebrities including Latifa and Lindsay Lohan, represent a dependable source of income for their host nations. Entire resorts and residential developments have been constructed to meet their expectations and lifestyles. At the same time, their presence confers a form of soft legitimacy on the host country. Each new arrival, and every shipping container functions as symbolic proof of the nation’s attractiveness and quality of life.

Today, it is well established that countries – large and small – as well as regions, and supranational unions, have long sought to present themselves as attractive brands (Gienow-Hecht 2025: ch. 2). State-run, systematic “nation branding” – defined as the ongoing governmental effort to shape a nation’s external image – emerged from the nearly accidental convergence of three distinct developments. First, between 1914 and 1918, major participants in the First World War institutionalised

state-orchestrated wartime propaganda. Second, during the 1920s, a new mode of commercial advertising prioritised the promise of a better future over descriptions of the actual product. Third, the emergence of fascism during the interwar period fused these two phenomena into a single strategy. In the name of the state, regimes in authoritarian countries such as Hitler’s Third Reich, Imperial Japan, and Fascist Italy devised sophisticated campaigns that packaged nations as recognisable brand icons. These campaigns combined orchestrated public spectacles, mass mobilisation, musical jingles, and large-scale advertising. Leaders such as Benito Mussolini were central to this branding, alongside artefacts including flags and badges, and audiovisual productions such as marches and ideological songs. These elements were endlessly repeated for both domestic consumption and international projection.

This paper, “Be the Dictator’s Guest”, examines the image management strategies of dictators and authoritarian regimes, both recent and past. It asks how did – and how do – they continue to market themselves? When and why are they successful? And how do their strategies differ from those of liberal regimes in the quest for global prestige and support? To this end, the analysis considers states such as North Korea, China, and Russia, as well as a range of Middle Eastern states, while occasionally referring to European dictatorships. The terms “undemocratic”, “non-liberal”, “authoritarian”, or “illiberal” are used to describe states that reject, subordinate, or strategically instrumentalise core liberal principles, including freedom of expression, individual autonomy, and the separation of powers. In doing so, these regimes ultimately pursue authoritarian goals – most notably, the centralisation of power and the suppression of dissent.

The central takeaway is that the less political a national brand appears, the more successful it tends to become – regardless of how compromised its

actual political profile may be. Since the early 2000s, a number of authoritarian leaders, notably in Asia and the Middle East, have sidelined explicit political messaging in order to attract foreign audiences. They intentionally avoid ideological or religious themes, and instead favor branding strategies focused on services, climate, cuisine, culture, tradition, and natural beauty. By adopting contemporary forms of public communication – often heavily bolstered by PR (public relations) firms based in Western capitals – they avoid any taint of propaganda. In contrast, nations that insist on covert or overt political messaging in their international communication strategies appear less effective in attracting tourism, foreign investment, skilled labor, and long-term political alliances.

2 APPEAL AND AUTHORITY

How do authoritarian leaders and illiberal states seek to market themselves internationally? These questions are both relevant and urgent. In recent years, established and emerging liberal states have faced significant pressure. Internally, this pressure has manifested in the rise of extremist parties, and externally, it has been driven by the growth and expansion of authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China. On a global scale, the number of liberal states is declining. In 2022, the Bertelsmann Transformation Index recorded, for the first time in eighteen years, a greater number of autocratically governed countries than democracies – seventy and sixty-seven, respectively (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024). In parallel, the Economist Democracy Index calculated that fewer than 15% of countries in the world qualify as full democracies. All remaining states are classified as either “flawed”, including countries like Hungary and Israel, “hybrid”, characterised by a mix of democratic and undemocratic structures and tendencies, such as in Tunisia, Peru, and Turkey, or authoritarian. The last category comprises 35.3%

of all states, including Russia, China, and Egypt (Economist Intelligence Unit 2022).

Populism, racism, antifeminism, a declining acceptance of democratic procedures and institutions, are among the many factors contributing to what a Berlin research consortium has dubbed “contestations of the liberal script”. These are the internal and external pressures facing liberal democracies globally from Brazil to Canada, Bulgaria to South Korea. *The Twilight of Democracy: The Seductive Lure of Authoritarianism* is the title given by journalist Anne Applebaum to her 2020 book, which paints a grim picture of the close networks and cooperation among illiberal regimes from Belarus to Myanmar (Applebaum 2022). A study from Harvard University’s Center for European Studies, released in autumn 2024, makes it crystal clear: brutal, assertive, and highly repressive dictatorships are once again on the rise worldwide. (Dasanaike and Ekiert 2024)

“Brother parties” and cross-border cooperation between authoritarian leaders, of course, are nothing new, and were notable during the Cold War (Bauerkämper/Di Palma 2011). Nevertheless, Applebaum’s argument is persuasive: thanks to new technologies, tightly woven interconnected networks, and an evergrowing drive for power – particularly among ageing male leaders – the influence of autocratic regimes is expanding worldwide. According to Applebaum and others studying authoritarianism, members of what has been called an “axis of autocrats” seem indifferent to how their countries are perceived or criticised internationally. They disregard criticism, freedom, the rule of law, human rights, and resolutions from the United Nations (UN) alike. Their focus lies primarily on accumulation of material wealth and the lifelong retention of power.

And yet, there is a glitch. Illiberal regimes also seek approval and recognition. Their international image is not entirely inconsequential,

on the contrary, most authoritarian regimes invest considerable resources in courting legitimacy and visibility beyond their borders. They allocate substantial funds to convince target audiences in other states – including tourists, investors, and international observers – of the purported “truth” about their countries, irrespective how implausible that narrative may be. This pattern is evident in the “Zimbabwe brand:” Zimbabwe is ranked 124th on the Economist Democracy Index. The country’s official website states that its marketing strategy aims to “eliminate all the negativity surrounding the country to restore trust in the people of Zimbabwe” (Brand Zimbabwe).

How do they do it? How do some undemocratic regimes manage to convince retirees like Grandma and Grandpa, influencers and stars like Bushido, and celebrities like French actor Gérard Depardieu – to say nothing of the large number of skilled professionals – not only to trust them but to relocate permanently? What makes these regimes so attractive?

First, it is not always easy to distinguish between liberal and illiberal regimes. The studies referenced above employ categories such as “flawed democracies” and “moderate autocracies” – classifications based on finely determined criteria and percentage points that measure the extent to which political principles and procedures are implemented within a given country. For example, the United States has been classified as “flawed” since 2016. In *The Economist’s* 2023 Democracy Index, the U.S. performs well in the categories of elections and pluralism, but presents significantly worse results in government functioning and political culture. The outcome of the most recent index remains to be assessed. Similarly, Turkey and Hungary call themselves “democratic”, yet their leaders seek to exercise overt control over educational institutions, the judiciary, and the media.

Additionally, there are countries seeking to distance themselves from an authoritarian past that remains embedded in global memory. This applies, for example, to South Korea since its democratisation in 1988, and to South Africa following the end of apartheid. South Africa is classified as a “defective democracy” in the Bertelsmann Transformation Index. Although liberal in theory and design, the country struggles to meet its own goals due to high poverty and inequality, weak institutions, political corruption, and mismanagement of public resources. Despite this, South Africa is actively attempting to craft a new post-authoritarian national identity under “Brand South Africa”, emphasising both its place in the international community and its unique national characteristics. The South African brand leans heavily on cultural and environmental assets such as its wildlife and the Cape Winelands region, which attracted international visitors even before the end of apartheid. However, nothing has shaped the country’s brand more profoundly than Nelson Mandela, leader of the anti-apartheid movement and subsequently President of South Africa. His diplomatic efforts in southern Africa and his commitment to peace and multilateralism significantly enhanced the country’s global visibility. A 2002 study found that Mandela was, at that time, the second most recognised brand in the world, surpassed only by Coca-Cola (Black/Van der Westhuizen 2004: 1197).

The analytical boundaries between “propaganda” and “branding” are often indistinct, as both involve the deliberate shaping of public opinion and the association of a desirable product with a specific individual or logo. While liberal states often emphasise values such as freedom, diversity, and individual self-determination, illiberal regimes more commonly emphasise security, order, and the paternalistic protection offered by an overarching government. Depending on their objectives, the latter frequently attempt to persuade foreign audiences – through traditional media and

digital platforms – of the legitimacy of their policies and perspectives. In some cases, they may avoid political topics altogether, including references to the state, administration, the private sector, or systems of control. Instead, they focus on apolitical themes centred on recreational opportunities, pleasant climate conditions, culinary experiences, historical traditions, natural beauty, local hospitality, unique regional culture and architecture, and, most importantly, inexpensive yet luxurious accommodation.

Package tourism and investment opportunities – particularly those linked to low-cost labor – often play a significant role in these strategies. Equally significant is the provision of Western-style services and cultural institutions. In 2011, for example, the Sultanate of Oman inaugurated a spectacular opera house in the heart of its capital, Muscat, featuring European-style productions. Similarly, China, Venezuela, and Iran have sponsored international tours for classical symphony orchestras. All of these reflect efforts which serve to market themselves as respectable participants in Western cultural life (Gienow-Hecht 2012: 17 – 28).

And it is not hard to see the rationale for this type of strategy. For years, authoritarian regimes – from Beijing to Tehran – have been consulting international and predominantly Anglophone PR and advertising agencies based within major cities of liberal countries. Companies like Bell Pottinger, Ketchum Inc., Weber Shandwick, Saatchi & Saatchi, and ImageDiplomacy play a central role in the strategic marketing of authoritarian regimes. In the mid-2000s, Russia engaged the U.S.-based firm Ketchum to attract investment and improve its global image. The company received millions of dollars from the Russian Federation with estimates ranging between USD 23 and 30 million. The partnership with Ketchum was temporarily suspended by Putin following the invasion of Crimea but resumed thereafter and continued

until Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Kotasova 2015; Marszalek 2022). The core expertise required of these agencies is always the same: to marginalise negative aspects of a country, identify and highlight its positive attributes, and develop strategies for their successful dissemination.

2.1 THE MIDDLE EAST AND SPAIN UNDER FRANCO

It is no easy feat to market an illiberal, authoritarian regime. In the Middle East, for example, positive image management efforts often falter due to political perceptions shaped by global media coverage. A somewhat homogeneous “Middle East brand” tends to dominate both the image of individual countries and that of the region as a whole. This image is associated with vague notions of authoritarian elites, extremism, and varied forms of oppression related to gender, religion, and class. Many governments lack the funding for cultural spending or for maintaining influential secular cultural institutions comparable to the Alliance Française in France or the Goethe-Institut in Germany. This results in a perception gap – particularly with regard to the Middle East – which continues to funnel money, tourism, and investment into the already wealthier countries in the region (Dinnie 2011: 79 – 80).

Of course, there are exceptions. In Egypt or Tunisia, for example, tourists often show little interest in the political situation of the country. Their markedly apolitical expectations of rest, recreation, enjoyment, and a bit of historical education (Carthago, the pyramids), tend to obscure the politically challenging realities on the ground. Moreover, many travelers prioritise cost over context, choosing budget-friendly package tours that confine them to resort complexes they rarely leave. The Arab Spring initially improved the international image of several Middle Eastern countries. However, the anticipated regional transformation failed to materialise, rendering it

especially difficult for the less well-funded states to present themselves as individually appealing, competitive, and – most importantly – unique.

After the turn of the millennium, wealthy authoritarian regimes in the Middle East began to adopt marketing strategies to improve their image and attract investment, trade, and tourism. In cooperation with Western tour operators, they assembled attractive vacation packages and began sponsoring major events and Western sports clubs through advertising partnerships. These efforts were aimed not only at gaining international recognition but also at reducing dependence on oil revenues and diversifying national economies. As noted above, many states in the region engaged Western advertising agencies to consolidate their brands. Saudi Arabia, for instance, retained the consulting firm BCGBrightHouse, an agency specialising in brand management (Clement et al. 2024). The budget allocated for this project appears to have been so substantial that the firm devoted a significant share of its resources to it. Similarly, ahead of the 2022 World Cup, Qatar initiated a global search for a suitable PR firm to market both the tournament and the host country internationally.

Meanwhile, the UAE successfully positioned Dubai and Abu Dhabi as global brands within a remarkably short period of time. Today, Dubai generates more revenue from tourism than from oil and has become a true economic magnet in the region. Abu Dhabi, the capital of the Emirates and the dream destination of my dentist's assistant at the beginning of this chapter, has transformed itself since 2005 from a petroleum exporter into an energy powerhouse and popular tourist destination. It has done so by focusing, among other things, on cultural development (Sim 2012: 83 – 98). Central to this effort is the new Saadiyat district, a 27-kilometer-long island that features several museums, including satellite branches of the Louvre and the Guggenheim, hotels, a New

York University campus, leisure and tourism facilities, and a marina. “We have a very clear target audience”, writes the Office of Brand of Abu Dhabi on its website. “We call them ‘Cultural Seekers’. They are people who see travel as a way to enrich themselves, always seeking new experiences in new countries and they have enough money to go wherever they choose” (Hashim 2012: 72 – 82).

Even Iran – widely portrayed in Western media primarily as a guardian state and repressive autocracy – has entertained elaborate tourism ambitions since the turn of the millennium. Most recently, after two years of preparation, the Iranian Ministry of Tourism unveiled a new national landmark in 2020: a colossal mythical bird named “Simorgh”, a figure of great wisdom in Persian legend. Alongside this, the former brand slogan, “Land of Flowers and Birds”, was replaced with a new one: “Majestic Iran: A Different Experience” (Tehran Times 2020). Through videos, press releases, and visual depictions of enamel art, Islamic architecture, and the bazaars of Tehran and Isfahan, both the previous and current campaigns attempt to reshape the globally dominant image of Iran. “Such qualities”, states the Iranian Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), “make Iran a perfect destination, despite what most people think based on international propaganda and political decisions” (Islamic Republic News 2020). Additionally, the cash-strapped theocratic government has supported a number of medical tourism companies offering nose jobs, hair transplants, vaginoplasties, mastectomies, and penile reconstructions (Baskar/Nikounazar 2025).

What becomes clear here is that modern authoritarian regimes hold a distinct advantage over liberal states in the realm of image management. They are able to implement unilateral decisions regarding new content and strategic direction swiftly and efficiently, thereby satisfying the demand for “quick results”. In contrast, the external cultural and information policies of liberal

democracies are continually constrained by protracted coordination processes, parliamentary oversight, and accusations of potential “propaganda”. Authoritarian regimes, by comparison, can remove political and legal concerns from their messaging agenda with a stroke of the pen.

This strategy is by no means new. Under Francisco Franco, the Spanish dictatorship developed an extensive promotional campaign in the 1950s and 1960s to market Spain to the liberal democracies of North America and Western Europe. The goal was to attract investment, foreign currency, and tourists to a country still perceived as premodern in its industrial and production methods, and internationally isolated due to its neutrality during the Second World War. Historians Neil Rosendorf and Carolin Viktorin recount how Franco actively sought contact with U.S. journalists and travel writers to attract elite tourism from the United States to the Iberian Peninsula. Particularly favorable reporters were even awarded medals in recognition of their work. Under the slogan “Spain is different” (*España es diferente*), the Ministry of Information and Tourism launched a far-reaching travel campaign in the 1950s, collaborating closely with the American airline TWA and hotel magnate Conrad Hilton. Central to this initiative was a state-sponsored film programme designed to bring Hollywood productions to Spain, supported by extensive advertising. From the 1960s onwards, these efforts began to draw large numbers of North American and Western European holidaymakers to the sunny coasts between Barcelona and Marbella.

A consistent thread across these activities – encompassing tourism, film, the press, and historical narrative – is that they appeared simultaneously apolitical and “exotic”, while remaining modern and enticing. Moreover, they were generally implemented rapidly and adapted on short notice, a flexibility rarely feasible, if at all possible,

within liberal political systems (Rosendorf 2014; Viktorin 2018).

The image campaigns of the Spanish dictatorship, the United Arab Emirates, and others reveal the key success formulas of authoritarian marketing: emphasis on a nation’s scenic beauty, cultural heritage, historical depth, favorable climate, culinary delights, and – above all – welcoming smiles and local hospitality. At the same time, these marketing strategies are almost always accompanied by a total suppression of political context and dissent.

2.2 CHINA, RUSSIA, AND NORTH KOREA

Like the Middle East, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, many illiberal regimes around the world – particularly China and Russia – recognised that they had a public PR problem. Both countries quickly became influential “players” in the realm of image politics. For example, the Chinese military’s brutal crackdown on students in Tiananmen Square during the summer of 1989 presented a substantial PR challenge to China’s international image at a time when the country was seeking greater global recognition and expanded trade. Consequently, very little information from within Chinese politics reached the outside world, and journalists who managed to speak with Chinese officials often reported unfriendly, dogmatic encounters.

Since the turn of the millennium, China and Russia have employed marketing and communication techniques to strengthen their national brands and win over foreign target groups. In both cases, the line between advertising their own countries and engaging in global propaganda to pursue political objectives has been fluid. Both also learned early on that people-to-people diplomacy is crucial for projecting their image outward – that it is important to communicate not only with decision-makers, but also informally and directly with

citizens in other countries. Initially, these campaigns focused on Western regions; more recently, they have expanded to many countries in the Global South.

Probably the most visible – and perhaps the most controversial – strategy of international self-representation by autocratic regimes in recent decades has been the hosting of mega-events. Since 2000, Russia and China, alongside Azerbaijan and Qatar, have increasingly staged major international events as tools of image management and international projection, particularly sporting competitions. This is not an original tactic: Fascist Italy, for example, constructed the “Foro Mussolini” between 1933 and 1938 in a bid to host the 1940 Olympics. Nazi Germany in 1936, the Soviet Union in 1980, and Yugoslavia in 1984 all used the Olympic Games for the purpose of “sportswashing”, staging sporting events to improve their international reputations (Chadwick et al. 2023). In that same tradition, the 2008 Summer Olympics and the 2022 Winter Olympics marked the launch and continuation of China’s campaign to promote its national brand image as modern, open, and impeccably organised, set against the backdrop of thousands of years of history and culture. In 2008, China reportedly expended over USD 40 billion on the Games – more than six times what Sydney spent in 2000.

Opening ceremonies of mega-events offer prime opportunities for national self-representation, both liberal and illiberal, often combined with timely political or cultural messaging. In Nagano in 1998, Japan emphasised the values of Shinto culture; Australia showcased Indigenous cultures during the Sydney 2000 Games; and the United States prominently displayed a flag recovered from the aftermath of the September 11 attacks at the Salt Lake City 2002 Winter Olympics. The opening ceremony of the Olympics in China, in 2008, in contrast, stressed socialist effort, national unity, social cohesion, and discipline, most

notably emphasised by mass choreographed performances with thousands of participants dancing in sync.

What makes the mega-events hosted by China and Russia particularly noteworthy is their sheer scale and rapid succession. Echoing the 1980 summer Olympics in Moscow, Russia hosted the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and the 2018 FIFA World Cup. China’s Olympic Games in Beijing in 2008 and 2022 were accompanied by the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, an event that reportedly attracted ten times more visitors than the 1998 Expo in Lisbon. Even foreign observers hailed the Shanghai Expo as the largest in its 160-year history. It sprawled over 5.3 square kilometres – roughly the size of the historic centre of Paris, attracting 70 million visitors, with an unprecedented number of pavilions showcasing innovative architecture and exhibition technologies under the theme “Better City, Better Life”. For China, the Expo and the Olympic Games served as showcases for a rising global power aiming to demonstrate what socialism with Chinese characteristics can ideally accomplish (Cull 2012: 99 – 101). In its most recent bid, at the Expo 2025 in Osaka, the People’s Republic pitched itself as “Green China” in opposition to its image as a global polluter, where decisive leadership can, with a single stroke of the pen, shut down sordid, rusty factories, clean up polluted waterways, and revamp the environment. This positioning acts as an invitation to consider the power of the authoritarian state as a saviour of the planet and its climate.

Behind this self-representation through mega-events lies a long-term strategic agenda. As early as the 1990s, Chinese leadership established new structures that aimed to improve the country’s international image and revised its portrayal as “negative” and “unfriendly”. During this period, the government in Beijing shifted away from rigid propaganda toward a greater focus on self-representation and the correction of what it saw as

“mistaken” Western assumptions. At the heart of all its campaigns was a clear message branding China – after a century of “humiliation” – as a great power of the twenty-first century: a socio-economic success story, an attractive travel destination, a reliable alliance partner, and more recently, a sustainable economy. This projection was accompanied by a new rhetorical framework, Chinese media and officials no longer referred to the “West” as an “adversary”, but rather as a “difficult challenge” for China’s *wai xuan* (international PR). Since the turn of the millennium, Chinese politicians have increasingly spoken of China’s “peaceful development” rather than a “peaceful rise” (Sun 2015: 125–138).

According to then-President Jiang Zemin, in office from 1993 to 2003, speaking at a “National Conference on Foreign Relations”, the country needed to “actively publicise its great achievements”, “explain the party”, “build a good image for our country”, and “change international public opinion” (Zhang 2008: 303 – 318).

Unlike China, Russia possesses a century-long history of international propaganda, beginning with the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the founding of VOKS (All-Union Society for Cultural Connection with Foreign Countries). This activity peaked during the information campaigns of the Cold War, and only remained dormant for a decade in the 1990s. Following the eastward expansion of the EU and NATO – by 1999 at the latest – Russian leadership once again engaged actively and officially in image management. In his widely noted address before a joint session of Congress, in February 2002, delivered predominantly in English, Vladimir Putin praised U.S. – Russian political, cultural, and educational relations, allowing his audiences to envision, at least initially, a conciliatory and cosmopolitan Russia.

Large-scale Russian disinformation campaigns began with the 2014 invasion of Crimea, although

warning signs had appeared much earlier. By that time, Moscow’s global image management was already precarious and overtly political, marked by the formation of new alliances with other authoritarian regimes including China, aimed at jointly projecting power and challenging U.S. hegemony. Public diplomacy and image management have played – and continue to play – a central role in this strategy. “Russia has a long tradition of ‘soft power’”, wrote Igor Jurgens, chair of the Institute for Contemporary Development, in 2011 in the *Rosiskaya Gazeta*, a publication which is effectively owned by the Russian parliament. Under the headline “The Hard Call of Soft Power”, Jurgens portrayed the country as a traditional protector of Slavs and Orthodox Christians, a mediator of European civilization on the Eurasian steppe, and a viable alternative to the West for leftist and national liberation movements during the Cold War (Simons 2015: 111 – 124). Since the 2010s, the official interpretation of Brand Russia has been that of a guardian of conservative and traditional values, standing against “moral decay”, “gender gaga”, and LGBTQ+ rights in the West. By 2013 at the latest, the Russian government had begun moving away from a partnership-oriented self-representation. One contributing factor was the extensive international coverage of a series of diplomatic incidents, including the September 2013 arrest of Greenpeace activists protesting Russian Arctic oil drilling. Countries such as Poland and the United Kingdom even considered suspending their cultural diplomatic ties with the Russian Federation over these events (Ociepka 2019: 50 – 59).

Beginning in 2014, in its coverage of Ukraine, Russian reporting tendentially shifted responsibility for various incidents onto external actors. The state-controlled foreign television channel RT, formerly Russia Today and banned in the EU since 2022, in particular, repeatedly emphasised the instability and alleged “fascist” character of the government in Kiev. In this manner, even prior to the 2014 invasion of Crimea, dedicated web

portals such as *Ukraina.ru* emerged, focusing on the purportedly dire conditions in the region (Simons 2015: 111 – 124). In parallel, a new form of tabloid journalism painted NATO member states in a predominantly negative light. Its main narrative was, and remains, the depiction of the U.S. as a puppeteer manipulating or obstructing other countries to maintain its hegemony. Journalistic commentary frequently contrasts what is presented as Russia's constructive role with the allegedly destructive actions of the West, especially in relation to Ukraine. RT in particular sharply criticised the “decadence” of Nordic countries. Reports covered topics such as the purported tragic fate of adopted Russian children in Norway, “immoral” educational practices in Danish primary schools, and “sex crimes” involving animals at the Copenhagen Zoo (Cull 2012: 27 – 28).

No matter how controversial or absurd these portrayals may seem, since the turn of the millennium both China and Russia have sought, through their brand-building efforts, to position themselves as alternative models to the Western sphere of influence on the international stage. Both states have developed similar strategies to attract favorable international attention. They have helped establish a range of alternative institutions intended to challenge the G7 and the UN. One example is the New Development Bank, a multilateral development institution representing the BRICS countries, which, alongside China and Russia, include the emerging economies of India, Brazil, and South Africa.

Moreover, both countries have strategically invested in specific regions. China has concentrated primarily on Africa and Latin America, and Russia on Eastern Europe and Central Asia. China, for example, allocated more than USD 6 billion in the first decade of the twenty-first century to boost its global visibility and enhance its image, with a particular focus on countering the dominance of Western media narratives (Sun 2015: 125 – 138).

These efforts include economic support for development projects, attractive loan programs, trade cooperation, and direct investments, especially in states in the Global South.

These predominantly economic and development-oriented initiatives are complemented by think tanks and cultural programmes. Russia, for example, has established several institutions modeled on Western counterparts in order to legitimise its own positions. Among them are the Valdai Club, a 2004 imitation of the World Economic Forum in Davos, and the Dialogue of Civilizations Research Institute, a Russian-funded and pro-Kremlin think tank founded in Berlin in 2016 and then discontinued in 2021. In China, comparable efforts include the tours of the Chinese National Orchestra since 2000 and the establishment and global expansion of Confucius Institutes, primarily targeting Europe and North America. By 2018 there were 550 Confucius Institutes worldwide. Since 2004, these institutes have promoted Chinese language and culture, although some host countries have closed them over concerns about academic freedom. Think tanks such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, founded in 1977, and the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies at Renmin University of China fall under the umbrella of “second-track diplomacy”. These institutions function as highly active, ostensibly semi- or non-governmental channels of Chinese influence and information (Li/Wong 2018: 36 – 46).

Over the past decade, China's brand promotion has increasingly focused on deepening engagement with the Global South. Notably, it has expanded its cultural diplomacy, resulting in visibly strengthened ties with several African nations. More than fifty Confucius Institutes are located on the African continent, including six in South Africa alone. Chinese officials also promote a rhetoric of noninterference in African affairs, and frequent high-level visits by politicians and bureaucrats appear designed to enhance China's standing

among African decision-makers. (Kalu 2021: 336 – 347; Monvae 2021: 221 – 234). Between 2014 and 2020, President Xi Jinping travelled to Africa ten times. Current foreign minister Wang Yi, visited nearly fifty countries on the continent during his first tenure in office, while his successor Qin Gang travelled to five countries, as well as to the African Union, within a single month in January 2023. Likewise, Xi's flagship initiative, the "New Silk Road", aims to foster trade and investment ties between China and the rest of the world and constitutes a central pillar of China's brand-building campaign.

Both China and Russia have heavily invested in shaping global public opinion to bolster their respective brands. Russia has primarily relied on the government-funded international broadcaster RT, while China has utilised its national broadcaster China Central Television (CCTV), which has operated since 1958, along with its international branch China Global Television Network (CGTN), and multilingual online platforms including Arabic-language content. RT and CGTN collaborate on joint programs, including "Xi Jinping's Favorite Classic Quotes", also broadcast in Russia in 2023. In addition, major Chinese media outlets such as CGTN now also produce programming in Russian (Soboleva 2023).

A comparison of the two countries' use of public media, however, reveals clear structural differences. RT sought early on to tailor its messaging to different regions. The Washington D.C.-based channel Russia Today America, active until 2022, for instance, employed several U.S. journalists among those former CNN news anchor Scottie Nell Hughes. According to its own figures, the channel's broadcasts reached 85 million viewers. China's various channels, by contrast, closely resemble one another – a markedly different approach from RT's. They explain political positions while simultaneously promoting Chinese language and culture. Chinese media consistently project a unified message abroad, regardless of whether it is

well received. This message emphasises that China is a longstanding great yet peace-loving power with a rich historical tradition, a rapidly expanding economy, the resolve to overcome any obstacles in its path, and most recently, very "green".

In addition to television, today both countries also rely heavily on social media – central to national self-representation and image control in nearly every country. For both Moscow and Beijing, the internet has evolved into a global instrument of power, marketing, and influence. National agencies like China's Cyberspace Administration or Russia's Roskomnadzor control, censor, and disseminate information on behalf of their respective regimes. Online portals such as the Chinese *People's Daily Online* are available in multiple languages and distribute content on the economy, finance, foreign relations, the military, and Chinese language and culture. However, they primarily present official political statements and positions. Domestically, these and other platforms restrict public access to information through state-controlled digital barriers. Abroad, in contrast, they aim to downplay dissent and circulate content that Western observers often view as questionable. They also facilitate the dissemination and control of information, as well as monitoring users in other authoritarian states such as Belarus, Cuba, and Iran by providing access to these same technologies (Dasanaike/Grzegorz 2024).

As in the areas previously noted, Russia and China's strategies in the digital realm differ significantly. Under the slogan "Explaining China to the World", Chinese websites such as the online platform of *China Today* magazine regularly emphasise China's supposedly peaceful and constructive role. On the African continent Chinese communication focuses on "understanding" and good relations, with the goal of securing access to raw materials. Government-controlled online channels are serve to present political conflict zones from

a Chinese perspective, including disputes in the South China Sea.

This narrative remains consistent across social media and state-affiliated television: China is portrayed as a harmony-oriented, cooperative, forward-looking, green and amicable nation whose leadership pursues a measured and respectful foreign policy. Chinese interests are peaceful and legitimate, and the country is said to respect nature, international law, and neighboring states. At the same time, Chinese platforms routinely question U.S. policies and emphasise that the South China Sea is not the Caribbean, implying that the western leaders should avoid interference in regional disputes.

While China's online communication is more akin to a one-way broadcast, Russian platforms appear to allow political discussion, though staged from the outset. Russia's close collaboration with the U.S. advertising firm Ketchum led to an early focus on social media, particularly services like Telegram and Twitter, now X. In 2013, the government launched a new online platform called "thinkRUSSIA" (Volkov 2013). The platform offers multimedia content dedicated to topics such as "global outlook", economics and business, politics, art, and culture. According to its own description, it is "an online platform that provides news and perspectives on Russia from global and national politics to the quality of life and the country's economic and social modernization" (Crunchbase thinkRussia). It has also explicitly invited women to participate in its discussion forums and contribute comments and analyses. Other state-funded international media projects such as Russia Now and Russia Beyond have emerged since the launch of thinkRussia, making use of blogs and other platforms like X to address political issues.

Unlike China, Russia has focused not only on censorship but also on the systematic dissemination of fake news. "Putin's army of trolls", as Finnish

journalist Jessikka Aaro has called them, refers to internet commentators who, sometimes voluntarily or out of economic necessity, "like" and retweet designated keywords in shifts around the clock, while also posting content on behalf of the Russian government (Aro 2022). Most of these "likers" are affiliated with Russian organisations operating under neutral-sounding names like the "Agency for Internet Research" (Agenstvo internet-issledovani) or the "Social Design Agency" (Social Design Agency 2023). The Kremlin thus orchestrates a complex network of intelligence operations, bots, troll farms, doppelgänger campaigns through typo-squatting, and other disinformation strategies on social media to successfully disseminate half-truths, clever lies, and conspiracy narratives. The primary aim is to shape perceptions of Russia and influence global public opinion. These information channels are systematically manipulated to whitewash Russian politics, promote political extremism, and destroy trust in democratic institutions – particularly, as Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven and Leon Erlenhorst argued in a 2024 study, in the Federal Republic of Germany (Erlenhorst/von Loringhoven 2024).

Chinese and Russian platforms thus exhibit both similarities and clear differences in how they present themselves in the media and address sensitive issues. Both countries align their branding and information policies with goals of increasing visibility, managing their image, and swaying foreign public opinion. Both use tools similar to those of Western countries, including news media and social platforms, but deploy them in distinct, purpose-driven ways for self-promotion (Cull 2009). Both also share a hierarchical structure in their strategies to manage how they are perceived and advance their cultural policies. Each presents itself as an ostensibly "peaceful" and "cooperative" actor, whether in relation to the South China Sea or Ukraine and portray the

United States as the “real aggressor”, accusing it of pursuing obscure or hidden agendas.

The most significant difference between the two countries’ strategies lies in their positioning of online resources. China disseminates one-sided, government-authored content via easily controlled websites, formulating clear messages and broadcasting them globally. Its communication structure is streamlined and centralised, with messages openly attributed to state sources. Russia, by contrast, supplements its web presence with social – i.e. interactive – media, which appear to offer two-way engagement, targeting individual regions and groups. The proliferation of manipulated “likes” and “followers” creates the illusion of international interest, recognition, and approval. While Russia attempts to tailor its image management to different audiences in a seemingly dialogic format, China can promote its brand more quickly and efficiently – albeit less specifically targeted to different audiences – thanks to its cohesive organisational structure.

3 MEGA EVENTS, MEDIA, AND MOBILITY

One might ask at this point: How effective are Russia’s and China’s efforts to shape their international image? In his 2007 book *Charm Offensive: How China’s Soft Power Is Transforming the World*, U.S. journalist Joshua Kurlantzick argued that China’s diplomacy and cultural self-representation had significantly influenced the global political landscape (Kurlantzick 2007). A 2005 study conducted by the British broadcaster BBC found that 48% of respondents across twenty-two countries viewed China’s role in the world positively (Zhang 2008: 303 – 318).

Since then, however, China’s soft power strategy has encountered a number of setbacks, particularly in relation to criticism of specific charm offensives. For instance, world expositions are now

often evaluated based on how their sites are developed and maintained after the event ends. Numerous cities have succeeded in making lasting use of former Expo sites or preserving iconic structures – Seattle’s Space Needle and Lisbon’s Parque das Nações are prominent examples. This was, for a long time, not the case in Shanghai, where visitors reported two years after the event that the former Expo grounds had become overgrown and neglected, resembling a no-man’s-land used for beginner driving lessons (Cull 2012: 99 – 101).

Moreover, while mega-events may temporarily project a sense of grandeur, they depend on spectators and international approval. In 1980, more than sixty countries boycotted the Moscow Olympics in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In 1993, Human Rights Watch – one of the two most prominent human rights organisations in the world – organised a large-scale campaign to prevent Beijing’s bid to host the 2000 Olympics (Keys 2018: 415 – 438). A 2017 opinion poll showed that most people in Western countries and Japan viewed China’s influence and global outreach negatively, despite the hosting of two mega-events. Even with central and forward-looking themes such as harmony, well-being, sustainability, and technological innovation, the World Expo and the Olympics in the early twenty-first century failed to establish a long-term attractive image of China in the West or to leave a lasting impression on visitors from Western countries (Dinnie/Lio 2010: 198 – 206).

More recently, CCTV has faced increasing difficulties in balancing adherence to the party line with the need to appear professionally journalistic and meet market expectations. Studies show that most of its viewers are Chinese nationals living abroad who can afford satellite TV. Similarly, the readership of the state-run newspaper *China Daily* was found to be unsatisfactory in a 2016 case study conducted in South Africa, partly because

the publication offered little content of local relevance. The fact that Chinese media have a global reach does not necessarily mean that they are successful in persuading or engaging foreign users and audiences (Li/Wong 2018: 36 – 46).

In short, while media control may have enabled China to craft and disseminate clear messaging, this same control negatively impacts the country's image abroad. In June 2012, several U.S. outlets, including *The New York Times*, reported on the wealth of President Xi Jinping's family. China responded by shutting down *The New York Times's* Mandarin service, blocking its website in China, and refusing to issue visas to its journalists. This case remains emblematic of the many instances in which foreign media outlets have faced surveillance or shutdowns, and their correspondents were expelled or even imprisoned. Such incidents directly harm the "China brand" and serve as stark reminders to tourists, investors, and politicians worldwide that, in the end, government control outweighs efforts to promote international harmony (Sun 2015: 125 – 138).

The situation is also ambivalent for Russia. What can the country offer the world in terms of contemporary appeal beyond aggression, war, and censorship? On the one hand, President Vladimir Putin's authoritarianism and anti-Americanism hold a certain allure in the West. Until 2022, Russia sought to position itself as a counterforce to a Western-dominated zone of influence, presenting itself as a defender of "traditional values", a reliable economic partner, and a stable guarantor of peace.

By contrast – and this is where Russia differs from both China and the Gulf States – it makes limited effort to market itself through the positive traits typically associated with a modern state. Its cultural self-representation leans heavily on historical cultural heroes and story telling, ranging from authors Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, as well

as composers Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky, to dreamy winter film epic such "Silver Skates," set in St. Petersburg around 1900 and funded, among others, by the Russian Ministry of Culture. Even mega-events like the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi or the 2018 FIFA World Cup failed to conceal the fact that, at least from a liberal perspective, Russia has yet to craft a coherent national brand or to present itself as the truly "attractive alternative" it claims to be. Instead, the country engages in global propaganda, frequently in the form of fake news, designed to discredit the West as a domain of moral decay, criminality, and social decline, while portraying itself as the guardian of enduring Christian and traditional Western values. There is little doubt that the war in Ukraine will continue to define the Russian brand more than any other factor in the years to come – for some observers, as a militarised bulwark against U.S. hegemony, and for others, as an imperialist and antiliberal aggressor.

Furthermore, unlike in China, dissidents in Russia have succeeded in establishing an alternative narrative that portrays the Russian national brand as deeply ambivalent. They advance a countervision of the country as one of "resistance against the odds." The late opposition politician Alexei Navalny, who died under unclear circumstances in a Russian penal colony, in February 2024, together with civil society organisations such as OVD-Info and the Open Russia foundation, created by exiled former oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, contribute to an image of diverse but high-risk dissent. These actors appeal to a different audience and are not uniformly perceived positively abroad. Nevertheless, the core issue persists: the stark internal contradiction between these "two Russias" – state and dissent – combined with the war in Ukraine, ultimately undermines the Kremlin's influence campaigns. The effort to project a coherent and, above all, positive brand identity is therefore rendered ineffective.

4 THE CASE OF NORTH KOREA

As a final point in this saga of authoritarian image management, there are smaller states that display only selective and episodic interest in positive branding. North Korea, for instance, has made targeted efforts to promote its image in areas such as sports, education, construction exports, and tourism. Events like the Arirang Festival, which feature massive choreographed spectacles of sport and dance, serve to showcase the country's excellence, glorify its regime, and promote patriotic and socialist values such as selflessness and solidarity. These efforts primarily target young audiences within North Korea itself, but also populations in African countries like Somalia, Uganda, and Guyana, which have at times mounted similarly styled mass games. Seung-hwan Ryu and Tycho van Hoog have noted that such campaigns were often accompanied by ideological and aesthetic branding. For decades, the North Korean leadership has promoted the so-called Juche ideology, centered on independence and self-reliance – particularly in Africa – as a model of post-colonial sovereignty. North Korean-funded visits, aid projects, and workshops have all contributed to this strategy, not unlike what many Western powers once did, although this ideology's appeal has waned considerably since the end of the Cold War. Since the 1970s, North Korea has also invested significantly in monument-building and urban design in several African states. Its state-run architectural firm, Mansudae Overseas Projects, based in Pyongyang, has designed and constructed numerous monumental structures. One notable example is the National Heroes Acre in Harare, Zimbabwe which includes the striking Monument to the Unknown Soldier (van der Hoog 2019; Ryu 2022: 1 – 11).

There is also activity in North Korea's tourism sector, though experts disagree on its significance. "Hotels, beaches and water parks, but where are the tourists?" was a CNN headline in September

2025 (Krebs/Ripley 2025) – a question posed with justification, as some of the most beautiful beaches in Asia are located in North Korea. The regime in Pyongyang is currently attempting to develop a form of "socialist tourism" aimed at attracting millions of visitors each year, in contrast to the present figure of 100'000, most of whom come from China, to climb Mount Paektu or sunbathe on the beaches of Wonsan Kalma (Bhutia 2024; Ouellette 2024: 55 – 81). Despite the construction of a new "international" airport and impressive development projects reminiscent of Benidorm along the Sea of Japan, these plans have thus far failed to materialise. It remains entirely unclear who can, may, or would even want to, travel to North Korea, and when.

At the same time, North Korea has consistently refused to present itself as globally likable. South Korean political scientist EJR Cho observes that leaders in Pyongyang use nation branding primarily as a threat and for its own survival. For decades, she contends – drawing on anthropologist Clifford Geertz – the country has staged itself as a "theater state", a ritualised form of politics characterised by an incessant cycle of national spectacles, birthday and military parades, and missile tests. These performances are intended to demonstrate deterrence, capability, and competitiveness, and to win the respect of those states seen as vital to North Korea's survival (Cho 2017: 594 – 622). The death of United States student Otto Warmbier in 2017, following his imprisonment in a Pyongyang prison, and widely condemned around the world, damaged the country's image more than any military confrontation with South Korea at Panmunjom or elsewhere. In short, North Korean nation branding seems unlikely to offer a model worth emulating – particularly not for states vying for foreign interest and appreciation.

5 CONCLUSION

From Fascist Italy and Franco's Spain to contemporary Russia and North Korea, authoritarian regimes have long played a central role in managing and controlling their national brand. In doing so, they frequently borrow from Western advertising strategies to exert political influence, build strategic alliances, and attract tourism and foreign capital. The success formula seems simple enough: the less overtly political a national brand appears, the more successful it tends to be. In the Middle East, especially, many illiberal regimes deliberately avoid ideological or political messaging, focusing instead on branding around climate, cuisine, culture, tradition, and natural beauty. In other words, they eschew overt political messaging, and thus the taint of propaganda.

This apolitical strategy appears to be effective: branding campaigns aimed at expatriates, foreign investors, and tourists in the Gulf oil states have demonstrably outperformed those of Russia, China, or North Korea. According to UN Tourism (formerly the United Nations World Tourism Organization, UNWTO), the Middle East recorded a 31% increase in tourism in 2023 compared to 2019, making it the fastest-growing travel destination worldwide and, alongside Africa which was up 7%, the only region to post net gains since the COVID pandemic (UN Tourism).

To be sure, political factors remain relevant to a nation's brand, especially when they signal stability and security for travel or investment. However, strategic or ideological messaging used to position a country as a rival power tends to have the opposite effect. In this light, the nonpolitical marketing strategies of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East stand out as relatively successful when compared with the more politically charged cultural campaigns of Russia, China, and North Korea. Still, all are vulnerable: unexpected events and challenges can swiftly damage or

dismantle a brand that relies heavily on tourism. After the September 11, 2001, attacks and the Arab Spring, many countries in the region lost significant tourism revenue. Social unrest in Bahrain in 2011 forced the cancellation of the Formula 1 Grand Prix (Freire 2012: 46-47). And a conflict that became public in 2021 cast negative international attention on the United Arab Emirates – particularly among prospective migrants: International influencers seeking to relocate to Dubai for tax reasons found themselves required to sign agreements pledging only to share positive content about the country and to avoid any mention of politics or LGBTQ+ issues (Business Insider Deutschland 2021).

Any form of overt political repression remains the Achilles' heel of international self-promotion for illiberal states. This vulnerability is still often compounded by anachronistic features of personality cults, such as oversized golden or marble statues, which tend to provoke discomfort or criticism rather than admiration. Symbolic gestures of goodwill likewise rarely succeed in reshaping such perceptions. A striking example was the 2010 European tour of the *Symphony of Peace and Friendship* by Iranian composer Majid Entezami, organised by Tehran. Audience turnout across Western Europe was modest. In Geneva, the Iranian consulate reportedly had to give away tickets to fill 300 seats in the vast Victoria Hall. "In the end", one journalist wrote, "protesters climbed onto the stage and announced – in Persian – that the flower bouquets they had ceremoniously placed on the conductor's podium were meant to honor those dissidents who had recently been executed in Iran" (Gienow-Hecht 2012: 17 – 28).

Tourists, retirees, influencers, celebrities, and skilled workers may not always pay close attention to the political reality behind a country's image. Perhaps they do not care as long as they themselves profit and are not the targets of this repression which is typically directed at minority

or marginalised groups, or at women. As foreigners, non-Arabs are often excepted from this treatment, and thus can keep going on living their comfortable lives of privilege while others suffer. And, of course, the success of nation branding cannot be measured by immigration, investment, or tourism statistics alone.

Still, sunshine, beaches, luxury, along with tax breaks, pension incentives, and affordability are powerful draws, ones that are often strong enough to overshadow negative headlines or troubling developments, at least for a time, at least in some areas of the world. But this is not true in every case or everywhere. The reality remains that most people, whether grandparents, movie stars, scientists, nurses, or office workers, are not lining up to spend their holidays, winter months, or retirement funds in North Korea, China, Russia, or Iran.

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