

Name of the student:	Thomas D.R. Curran
Title of the thesis:	Competition and Tradition: Divergent Approaches to Nation Branding in Estonia and Latvia
Reviewer:	Eliška Tomalová

1. KNOWLEDGE AND CONNECTION TO THE FIELD

(relevance of the research question, research objective, literature review)

The student proposes a clear and relevant research objective seeking to “identify the points at which the national branding strategies of Estonia and Latvia interact with broader regional identities” (p.9), with a special focus on Baltic and Nordic elements. In the context of existing academic literature on nation branding and competitive identity, both the comparative approach and the inclusion of the regional dimension represent a rather minority strand, offering thus an interesting perspective on the topic.

Moreover, the choice of the two countries for the analysis of their respective branding strategies is well done and explained in the thesis, as Latvia and Estonia represent divergent approaches in the context of regional identity elements active nation branding.

The author offers an extensive literature review of academic work on nation branding and competitive identity in general (p.18-26), including an interesting analysis of the classification of relevant academic literature. However, a deeper analysis of specific works on regional elements in national branding and of primary documents (other than the main conceptual documents that served as basis for content analysis) is missing.

2. ANALYSIS

(methodology, argument, theoretical backing, appropriate work with sources):

From a methodological point of view, the thesis represents a comparative case study based on qualitative analytical methods. It is not grounded in big theories, the author rather opted for the instrumentalization of the conceptual framework developed mainly by Simon Anholt, Melissa Aronczyk and Wally Olins.

Both the way how the author works with main concepts and how he structures the case analysis is very loose, a more structured comparative framework would make the analysis clearer.

The author works mainly with the main conceptual documents that define Estonian and Latvian nation branding strategies – these are certainly the most relevant primary sources, but other crucial primary documents are missing, such as foreign policy priorities and other strategic documents that define nation branding strategies in different regional contexts.

3. CONCLUSIONS

(persuasiveness, link between data and conclusions, achievement of research objectives):

In his thesis, the author achieved the main objective in depicting the main instruments of Latvian and Estonian nation branding strategies and pointing at the regional identity elements.

(N.B. Due to the COVID situation, he was not able to pursue his initial objectives and had to work with the documents he had access to.)

4. FORMAL ASPECTS AND LANGUAGE

(appropriate language, adherence to academic standards, citation style, layout):

The author adheres to academic standards (however, in the introduction, the reference to academic literature are missing, they are mentioned in the following section in the literature review). The citation style is consistent, the layout is appropriate.

5. SUMMARY ASSESSMENT

(strong and weak point of the dissertation, other issues)

The thesis presents an extensive case study on the interconnection between the regional and national identity in nation branding. It offers also a valuable insight into the contemporary history of the two countries – Latvia and Estonia.

I appreciate how the author pointed at the main conflictual and consensual elements of competitive identity in the Baltic states and how he analyzed not only topics, but also instruments that may per se include identity elements (as digital instruments in Estonian public diplomacy – p.58-59). In this regard, the study offered interesting elements that transcend the topic in a narrow sense.

The weak points of the thesis are: not a clear and structured analytical framework in the two cases that would make the comparison clearer, the missing reference to other supraregional identities (EU) and a limited set of primary documents (foreign policy documents, skype interview with stakeholders, etc...). I would also appreciate an explanation if the two countries were facing internal struggles and if there have been competing narratives in nation branding in the two countries. Last but not least, the question of different message for different foreign audiences has not been opened in the thesis (do the two countries have special country specific strategies?).

Grade: B (Prague)

13 July 2020 Eliška Tomalová