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Threats, truths and strategies: The overlooked relationship between protests, nation branding and public diplomacy

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Abstract

Although protests are an essential part of modern politics, scholars in nation branding, public diplomacy and soft power have had very little to say about these episodes. Discussions in the field have only marginally addressed dissent and disruption, falling into a methodological statism that emphasises what states do to construct and legitimise specific versions of national identity. Debates on nation promotion consequently overlook how individuals and organisations outside the state and outside national boundaries can be equally important in the construction and communication of national images. Drawing on domestic and foreign news coverage of protests in Brazil, Romania and Chile, we propose three frames to analyse the relationship between protests and nation promotion: (1) protests as threats, (2) protests as expression of the true nation and (3) protests as strategic communications. These frames shed light on how bottom-up efforts contest—overtly or covertly—state-sponsored versions of national identity and how protests are visibility arenas where competing discourses about the nation are communicated. Protests should therefore be acknowledged not as mere disruptions to national images or reputations but as another expression of the contingent,

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multifaceted and shifting nature of nationhood, particularly in highly mediatised contemporary societies.

KEYWORDS
Brazil, Chile, media, nation branding, protests, public diplomacy, Romania

1 | INTRODUCTION

'Chile looks like an oasis', stated then-Chilean President Sebastián Piñera in the *Financial Times* on 17 October 2019 (Stott & Mander, 2019). With these words, Piñera summarised the perceived reputation among locals and foreigners that, unlike the rest of Latin America, Chile was a stable and prosperous nation (Jiménez-Martínez, 2017; Miño, 2022). As he stressed throughout the interview, Chile was ready to embrace a higher international profile, hosting the 2019 APEC Summit—with anticipated attendees to include Donald Trump, Xi Jinping and Justin Trudeau—as well as the United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP25. Only 2 days later, however, the oasis proved to be a mirage, when massive demonstrations—both peaceful and violent—spread throughout the country. The authorities responded with intense police repression, curfews and even the deployment of the army, the latter for the first time since the end of the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in 1990.

Originally triggered by an increase in public transportation fares, the protests soon escalated and targeted broader issues, making visible a deep dissatisfaction among Chileans with the prevailing neoliberal model of the country (Canales, 2022). Significantly, despite early assurances to the contrary, the government cancelled both the APEC and COP25 summits, arguing that they had to focus on guaranteeing law and order, as well as finding solutions to the demands of the Chilean people. These cancellations, and foreign news coverage on the unrest, led local politicians, businesspeople and economists to express concern that Chile's international reputation had been badly damaged (Barria, 2019; Jara et al., 2019). Moreover, although authorities and elites stressed the social, political and economic implications of the protests—which only decreased with the start of the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020—discussions about the impact of demonstrations over Chile's 'image' continued (see Catena & Faundez, 2022; Luna, 2021).

The Chilean case is not the exception. Similar debates about national reputation at times of unrest can be found in other settings, such as the 2014 'Umbrella Revolution' in Hong Kong (Loh, 2017), the protests that preceded the 2013 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games in Brazil (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020), the Gezi Park demonstrations in Turkey (Zaharna & Uysal, 2016), the Euromaidan revolution in Ukraine (Ståhlberg & Bolin, 2016), the transnational mobilisations against Norway's Child Welfare Services (Haugevik & Neumann, 2021), the 2017 anti-corruption protests in Romania (Mercea, 2022) and the 2020 Black Lives Matter in the United States (Ashford & Kroenig, 2020). In all these instances, politicians, economists, brand experts, diplomats and journalists have struggled with how to make sense of protests from the perspective of their different state-sponsored national 'brands', 'images', 'soft power' or 'reputation'.[1]

Despite concerns expressed by practitioners, it is noteworthy that most nation branding, public diplomacy and soft power scholars have remained silent.[2] As Pamment (2021) notes, studies in the field have only addressed dissent and disruption marginally, focusing instead on the viewpoints and interests of the state. Debates on nation promotion consequently overlook that individuals and organisations outside both the state and national boundaries can be equally important in the construction and communication of national images (Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Hutchings, 2022; Orgad, 2012). Furthermore, they gloss over how the interests and aims of governments, non-state actors and inhabitants of a nation do not always align and that clashes and adversarial relationships may also happen (Hutchings, 2022; Popkova, 2020; Yun, 2022; Zaharna & Uysal, 2016).

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In this article, we focus on the overlooked relationship between protests and nation promotion. Conceptually, we broaden debates on nation branding, public diplomacy and soft power, incorporating scholarship on nationalism and the media as well as constructivist approaches to international relations. Empirically, we examine protest news coverage by local and foreign outlets, in the context of promotional efforts of Brazil, Chile and Romania. These nation-states have been selected not only due to personal linguistic and historical familiarity but also because they demonstrate the global influence of nation promotion. Despite their geopolitical, economic and social differences, these nations have an autocratic past in common and have subsequently embraced nation branding and public diplomacy practices, enticed by promises of economic success, greater political weight and identity reset in an attempt to leave behind perceptions of exoticism, dictatorial governments, failed economies or pre-modernity (Aronczyk, 2013; Dolea, 2015b; Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Miño, 2022).

While these nation-states constitute interesting case studies on their own, we propose three frames through which to analyse the relationship between protests and nation promotion across them: (1) *protests as threats*, (2) *protests as expressions of the true nation* and (3) *protests as strategic communications*. Each of these frames emphasises not only a specific way to look at social unrest but also how particular actors communicate these episodes. Hence, we shed light on how bottom-up efforts contest—overtly or covertly—state-sponsored versions of national identity and how protests are visibility arenas where competing discourses about the nation are communicated. When people take to the streets, they demand changes to the political, economic and symbolic conditions that structure national belonging, as well as the promised, albeit rarely accomplished, social horizontality over which nationalism is predicated (Greenfeld, 2020). Protests should therefore be acknowledged as another expression of the contingent, multifaceted and shifting nature of nationhood, particularly in highly mediatised contemporary societies.

2 | NATION PROMOTION, THE MEDIATION OF NATIONHOOD AND METHODOLOGICAL STATISM

Although the employment of persuasive practices aimed at communicating overseas a specific image of a nation-state is not new, previous efforts such as propaganda or psychological warfare were mostly concerned with supporting or avoiding armed conflict (Buchanan & Cantril, 1953; Taylor, 1997). In the 21st century, however, trends such as the spread of neoliberal globalisation, the proliferation of digital technologies and the adoption of promotional logics by the public sector led governments to embrace corporate techniques and to hire specialists to advise on how to manage national images (Castelló & Mihelj, 2018; Dolea, 2015a; Volcic & Andrejevic, 2015). Nation branding and public diplomacy are the most visible of such practices. Their exact definition is disputed (see Fan, 2010), but they generally refer to a set of media-centric initiatives, which draw on strategic communications to construct, disseminate and safeguard 'new' or 'improved' versions of national identity to advance political or economic goals (Aronczyk, 2013).

The rise of nation branding and public diplomacy has been followed by a growing corpus of research in cultural studies, marketing, international relations and, especially, media and communications. In an oft-cited article, Kaneva (2011) categorises these works into *technical-economic*, *political* and *cultural*. The first two categories, which comprise most works, look at nation promotion as a field of practice, arguing that states operate within a competitive global environment and advance their interests by managing the reputations of the nations that they claim to represent. These works advise states how to identify and mobilise the 'essence' of a nation to accomplish economic and political goals. *Cultural* approaches conversely have a more critical perspective, noting that nation promotion limits identities, treats nations as units of economic production and as communities of consumers rather than citizens (Aronczyk, 2013; Castelló & Mihelj, 2018; Kaneva, 2011).

At the core of these discussions is a debate about power, more concretely, about the drivers and resources shaping the 'mediation of nationhood', that is, how nations are made tangible, communicated and contested in and through the media (Mihelj, 2011). Technical-economic and political approaches—termed *instrumental* in this article—

advise practitioners how to restrain an apparent diffusion of power over this mediation of nationhood. They see nation promotion as a tool of control for states in the context of a competitive global economy (e.g., Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008). Cultural approaches—termed *critical*—conversely denounce a concentration of power, warning how nation promotion masks diversity and conflicts by constructing fairly homogeneous versions of national identity (Aronczyk, 2013; Jansen, 2008; Lossio Chávez, 2018) (Figure 1).

When looking at nation promotion through the above prism, three interrelated shortcomings of instrumental approaches emerge. First, concerns about a diffusion of power drive practitioners and advocates to fall into a *methodological statism*, that is, to focus on what states do, sometimes with the help of private consultants, to construct and legitimise specific versions of national identity. Instrumental approaches, partly as a reaction to decreasing political support for public and cultural diplomacy at the end of the Cold War (Cull, 2012; Dolea, 2018), depict nation promotion as a necessity for governments (e.g. Anholt, 2007; Olins, 2002). Furthermore, they emphasise top-down viewpoints and portray non-state actors as either target audiences or part of the environment where states operate (Melissen, 2005; Zaharna & Uysal, 2016).

Second, a concentration of power over the mediation of nationhood is justified to facilitate mutually beneficial relationships between states and non-state domestic and overseas actors. To some extent, this has been an attempt by scholars and practitioners to distance nation branding and public diplomacy from propaganda in the aftermath of 9/11 (Snow, 2020). Conflict and potential hostilities are thus rarely acknowledged. The emphasis is instead on dialogue, engagement and collaboration (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 2007; Melissen, 2005), with political elites being portrayed as sharing similar goals with the inhabitants of their respective nation-states (Aronczyk, 2013; Yun, 2022). Scholarship in the field is therefore 'built on the premise or goal of a positive relationship between the state and publics' (Zaharna & Uysal, 2016, p. 111) and relies on outdated linear models of mass communication (Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Pamment, 2021), as well as international relations theories that emphasise cooperation and interdependence (Moravcsik, 2010).

Third, nation promotion assumes that a concentration of power over the mediation of nationhood facilitates identifying the 'essence' of a nation, an essence that can in turn be used to achieve political or economic goals. However, as nationalism scholars have long argued, nations and nation-states are characterised by conflict and transformation (Aron, 2019; Beissinger, 2002; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). As Billig (1995) notes, '[the] voice of a nation is a fiction; it tends to overlook the factional struggles and the deaths of unsuccessful nations, which make such a fiction possible' (p. 71). Instrumental approaches consequently neglect the greater participation and diversification of voices within the nation or perceive this diversification as a threat (Lossio Chávez, 2018). They also overlook that states do not act as fixed and coherent entities but draw on an array of roles and responses, particularly during crises (Haugevik & Neumann, 2021).

FIGURE 1 Instrumental and critical approaches to nation promotion.

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Recent studies on nation promotion have addressed some of the above points, observing that national brands can be deliberately 'brandjacked' by non-state actors or other states (Gilboa, 2020) and that the public can become a problem for diplomats at times of disinformation, social conflict and global healthcare crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Dolea, 2022; Manor et al., 2021). There has not however to date been a consistent and robust research agenda examining dissent, disruption and contestation with regards to nation promotion (Pamment, 2021). This is all the more surprising, considering the rich literature on nations and nationalism examining conflict and contestation (e.g., Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008), as well as constructivist scholarship on international relations that looks at non-state actors and domestic social practices shaping national reputations (Hopf, 1998).

3 | PROTESTS: EXPOSING THE CONTINGENT AND SHIFTING NATURE OF NATIONHOOD

In recent decades, works on nations and nationalism have emphasised how individuals and organisations draw on competing discourses about the supposed 'nature' or 'essence' of a nation in order to justify diametrically opposed causes (Aron, 2019; Beissinger, 2002; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008). Transnational corporations, supranational bodies, ranking agencies, NGOs, the media, migrants and many other individuals and organisations express their agendas and objectives in national terms, sometimes questioning or undermining the role of the state as the sole or main representative of the nation (Popkova, 2020; Saunders, 2015). As Beissinger (2002) observes, 'nationalism is not simply about imagined communities; it is much more fundamentally about a struggle for control over defining communities, and in particular, for control over the imagination about community' (p. 18). That does not mean that all these actors are equal. States continue to have significantly higher material, symbolic and legal resources to control the mediation of nationhood, yet their versions of national identity are only one among often contradictory accounts (Mihelj, 2011; Yun, 2022).

Episodes of uncertainty may challenge the material and symbolic status quo supported by states (Beissinger, 2002) and expose the contested nature of the nation. Protests are one of these episodes. Through them, individuals bypass official channels—especially with the help of digital media—and direct attention to grievances through contentious actions such as peaceful or violent demonstrations, marches or strikes (Gerbaudo, 2017; Johnston, 2011; Zaharna & Uysal, 2016). These expressions of dissent may emerge when individuals perceive that the promises of equal membership underpinning nationalism have been undermined by those in power (Greenfeld, 2020). It is therefore unsurprising that protesters often claim to act on behalf of the nation, carrying flags, posters, national football t-shirts or other symbols, in order to make visible alternative versions of what the nation supposedly is or can be (Benwell et al., 2021; Itzigsohn & vom Hau, 2006). Even pro-independence or separatist movements embrace the national framework, seeking the creation or recognition of new nations or nation-states, rather than alternative forms of social organisation (Mylonas & Tudor, 2021; Wimmer, 2013). It is also noteworthy that many authoritarian or democratic regimes violently suppress protests using the excuse of national defence (Doran, 2017).

Many protests in the twentieth-first century have had a transnational character, such as the anti-globalisation movement of the early 2000s or Black Lives Matter, which tackled planetary concerns like climate change, austerity policies, women's rights or structural racism (Cammaerts, 2018; Gerbaudo, 2017; Shahin et al., 2021; Tarrow, 2005). In the last decade, however—and despite having often been triggered by *global* financial, environmental or health crises—several protests around the world have been driven by domestic rather than transnational agendas. Targets have been national governments rather than multinational corporations or transnational organisations such as the International Monetary Fund. Demonstrators have sought to transform rather than reject the nation-state, national news coverage has been deemed to be key to increase support and participation has been justified through explicit appeals to national identity (Gerbaudo, 2017; Jiménez-Martínez, 2020).

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Contemporary national protests do not however happen in a vacuum. They are also staged for, and witnessed by overseas audiences, particularly international and transnational news media (Cottle, 2011). Claims that the world is watching 'us' are a staple of present-day dissent, due to the ease of production and circulation of contents through digital media, as well as the belief that international pressure can have an impact on the domestic outcome of demonstrations (Keck & Sikkink, 1997; Orgad, 2012). This 'world' gaze is perceived as particularly relevant in nations such as Romania and Brazil, where the lack of resources to establish transnational broadcasters makes governments dependent on securing positive coverage by overseas news organisations (Dolea, 2018; Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). This need to be recognised by others is nonetheless not limited to 'emerging' or 'developing' nations. The recent spread of populism across the West has also promoted debates about images or reputations among 'developed' nations, as demonstrated by Brexit in the UK or the Swiss mass immigration initiative (Dolea et al., 2021).

Voices from 'below' as well as from outside the nation have thus the potential to disrupt the symbolic monopoly that states claim to have over the nation. States have responded to these challenges by 'correcting' alternative voices, as France did through state-sponsored transnational broadcasters in the aftermath of its 2005 riots (Orgad, 2012), or by censoring dissent in their media environments, as the Russian authorities have done during the invasion of Ukraine (Satariano & Hopkins, 2022). Notwithstanding state responses, acknowledging these other voices is crucial to escape the methodological nationalism that often pervades nation promotion (Kaneva, 2021).[3] Protests should therefore be taken into account because they shed light on the contingent and shifting nature of nationhood. When people take to the streets, they demand an expansion or contraction of the political, economic and symbolic boundaries determining who belongs and who does not belong to a nation, as well as the conditions of such belonging. In the words of Gerbaudo, they make the nation 'a central battlefield and source of identity' (Gerbaudo, 2017, p. 117).

4 | STUDYING PROTESTS AS DISRUPTORS OF NATION PROMOTION

States therefore never achieve complete control over the mediation of nationhood, regardless of attempts at imposing stability, and developing a façade of unity. Yet tensions between the state and other actors are rarely addressed by instrumental approaches to nation promotion, which portray the nation-state as homogeneous and harmonious (Yun, 2022), and its inhabitants as acting in partnership with their governments as potential 'citizen diplomats' (Sharp, 2001) or 'brand ambassadors' (Anholt, 2007). What happens however when people question, doubt or openly oppose their government?

A shift in perspective is needed to address this question. Instrumental and even critical approaches perpetuate a focus on the state, either by advocating attempts to control the mediation of nationhood or by warning against the dangers involved in such control. Non-state and overseas actors conversely not only challenge the state but also construct and communicate equally valid versions of national identity, as researchers proposing a much more nuanced understanding of nation promotion identify (Hutchings, 2022; Popkova, 2020; Saunders, 2015; Zaharna & Uysal, 2016). Mediated protests should therefore be approached as communicative episodes that may attract the attention of overseas audiences, disrupting official discourses, proposing alternative versions of the nation and potentially gaining control over the mediation of nationhood (Figure 2).

We tested these ideas empirically by looking at protests in Brazil, Romania and Chile. The 2013 Brazilian 'June Journeys' were originally triggered by an increase in public transportation fares but ended up voicing a broader dissatisfaction with the state of public services in Brazil and with the amount of money spent on global sporting events. The Romanian 2017 Rezist protests were the largest mass mobilisation since the fall of Communism in 1989, prompted by a series of legislative acts aiming to decriminalise abuse in office. The protests aimed to fight the endemic corruption of political elites but also targeted the governing Social Democrat Party (PSD) and its leader, barred from serving as prime minister because of a suspended jail sentence. The 2019 Chilean 'social outburst' was set

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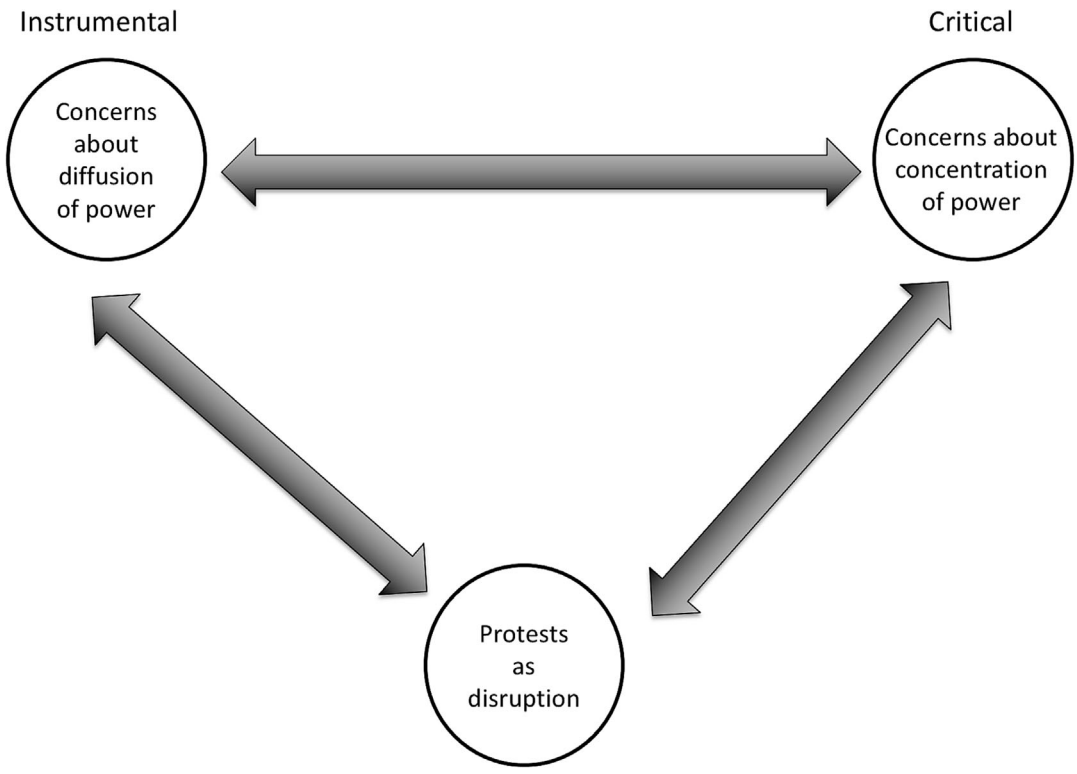

FIGURE 2 Protests as disruption of power within the mediation of nationhood.

off by an increase in public transportation fares but vented broader frustrations with the political and economic status quo of the country. Despite their differences, these three episodes were covered by national and international media, as well as by lone individuals and organisations producing alternative narratives (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Mercea, 2022; Scherman & Rivera, 2021).

We examined debates about national 'brands', 'images' or 'reputation', as well as potential representations of protests as a manifestation of nationhood, in national Brazilian, Romanian and Chilean media. We also studied selected media from the United States and Western Europe, given that nation promotion in these countries is usually targeted at audiences of these regions rather than, for instance, Africa or Southeast Asia (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Miño, 2022). We conducted our research using the Nexis UK database as well as monitoring companies TreeWorks (Romania) and NexNews (Chile), searching words and phrases such as 'protests', 'demonstrations', 'international image', 'reputation', 'nation brand', 'soft power', 'nation' and 'country', along with translations or language specific terms in Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish. The diverse nature and development of protests in each country meant that timespans differed. In the case of Brazil, the focus was on 3 weeks between 6 June and 1 July 2013, dates when the protests coincided with the Confederations Cup, an international football tournament. For Romania, we looked at the news covering the days with the largest street protests, between 18 January and 27 February 2017. For Chile, we examined news between 18 October and 15 November 2019, which included the outbreak of the protests, the cancellation of the APEC and COP25 summits and the signature by political elites of an agreement for social peace and a new constitution. After eliminating repetitions and unrelated articles, the final corpus comprised a total of 203 entries for Brazil, 155 for Romania and 123 for Chile ($n = 481$) (Table 1).

Drawing on seminal works on social movements and the media (Gitlin, 2003), framing (Entman, 1993) and framing in the construction of national images (Entman, 2008), we aimed to identify, first, the various actors that

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TABLE 1 Data collected across Media for Brazil, Romania and Chile.

Nation-state	News media	Total entries
Brazil	National: *Folha de Sao Paulo* and *O Estado de Sao Paulo* International: *BBC World News*, *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*	203
Romania	National: *Hotnews.ro*, *StirileProTV.ro*, *Digi24.ro*, *Dilema Veche*, *Republica.ro* International: *Euronews*, *BBC World News*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*	155
Chile	National: *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera* International: *The New York Times*, *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Times*	123

were granted visibility and, second, the frames that each actor tried to impose about the protests and/or the nation. This methodological approach allowed us to gather an overview of viewpoints by authorities, media pundits, foreign observers and occasionally activists, as well as to capture symbolic power struggles. We summarise our findings in three frames: (1) *protests as threats*, which refers to the viewpoint of state and local elites; (2) *protests as an expression of the true nation*, which emerges from foreign and sometimes domestic news organisations; and (3) *protests as strategic communications*, which was the perspective followed by some demonstrators. These frames are ideal types. Although for clarity purposes we stress their prevalence in particular settings and with specific actors, they intersect, influence and sometimes compete with each other. In addition, they are not meant to be an exhaustive typology, given that further frames could be identified in other contexts. They are nonetheless a useful starting point from which to introduce further complexity to the study of dissent and disruption within nation promotion.

5 | FINDINGS: THREE FRAMES TO EXAMINE PROTESTS AND NATION PROMOTION

5.1 | Protests as threats to nation promotion

The first frame depicts protests as threats to the international 'brand', 'image' or 'reputation' of a nation. This frame was more commonly found among representatives of the state, as well as members of political and economic elites. It was also most evident when protests occurred close, or in parallel, to high-profile events aiming to communicate a positive version of national identity. For instance, a few days after the beginning of the series of protests known as the June Journeys, Brazilian newspapers published articles wondering how protests would affect the upcoming World Cup (*Folha*, 16 June 2013) and quoted a Brazilian minister anxious about their potential effect on the image of the nation. Similarly, on 31 October 2019, the main story in *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera* newspapers was about how politicians and businesspeople argued that the cancellation of the APEC and COP25 summits had damaged Chile's international image. Although the 2017 Rezist protests did not coincide with a high-profile event, Romanian governing parties still framed them as threats, because they could undermine the overseas reputation of a post-communist nation strengthening its anti-corruption efforts (*Digi24.ro*, 20 January 2017; *Hotnews.ro*, 20 January 2017).

It is noteworthy that members of political and economic elites stressed that people had the right to take to the streets. While the aforementioned Brazilian minister expressed his hopes that 'the real image [of Brazil] as a democratic country would remain', he clarified that a democratic country was one where 'demonstrations can be organised and where order is guaranteed and secured' (*O Estado de São Paulo*, 18 June 2013). Likewise, despite different views regarding the long-term effect of the protests on the image of Chile, former ministers and

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businesspeople declared that the government had to listen to the demands coming from the streets (*El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*, 31 October 2019).

This emphasis on democracy should be contextualised. The overseas perception of Brazil, Chile and Romania has been tainted by history and the fact that all three had dictatorial governments until the late 1980s (Dolea, 2015b; Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Miño, 2022), with authoritarian governments repressing the right of assembly and free expression. Although inevitably referring to the recent past, the above statements also shed light on some deeper, problematic issues. The need to control the mediation of nationhood, as suggested by nation branding and public diplomacy advocates, contradicts the fact that protests are generally recognised as a human right (Fenwick, 1999). Hence, democratic governments, or those claiming to be so, struggle with how to convey episodes of social unrest from the perspective of nation promotion. In Brazil, promotional efforts ignored the June Journeys until early 2014, when a campaign aimed at increasing popular support for the 2014 World Cup was launched (Nery & Coutinho, 2014). Likewise, the Image of Chile Foundation took almost a week to reference the protests, when it tweeted a photo of the national flag accompanied by a statement praising the resilience and capacity of dialogue among Chileans.[4]

State responses were nonetheless expressed in other, more dramatic ways. While the Rezist protests unfolded with only isolated clashes between demonstrators and the Romanian Gendarmerie (*StirileProTV.ro*, 20 January 2017), the authorities in both Brazil and Chile fostered police brutality, advocating the use of tear gas and rubber bullets that severely injured hundreds of demonstrators. Additionally, some state representatives and domestic media originally framed the protests as unrepresentative of the national character or even as foreign interventions. That was notable in Chile, where President Piñera stated in an infamous discourse that Chileans were 'at war against a powerful enemy', implicitly blaming non-nationals for destabilising the country (*El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*, 21 October 2019). Likewise, the head of the PSD in Romania accused unspecified dark forces to be behind the demonstrations, stressing their supposedly marginal character and suggesting that these were not expressions of the 'real' nation (*The Guardian*, 5 February 2017). Although no similar statements were voiced in Brazil, journalists emphasised at the beginning of the protests that demonstrations were characterised by chaos, destruction and vandalism, implying that hardworking, ordinary and therefore more 'representative' Brazilians were not on the streets (*Folha* and *O Estado de São Paulo*, 7 June 2013).

In the context of neoliberal globalisation, the perception of protests as 'threats' also referred to their potential economic effects. Articles in the business sections of Brazilian and Chilean newspapers (*Estado* on 18 and 24 June 2013; *La Tercera* on 22 and 31 October 2019; *El Mercurio* on 22, 27, 30 and 31 October 2019) emphasised not only reputational aspects, but also diminishing foreign investment, negative evaluations by credit rating agencies, as well as lost income due to event cancellations. Underpinning these articles lies the neoliberal ethos that supports nation promotion, which encourages stability as long as it brings economic growth, and pictures the inhabitants of a nation as consumers rather than politically minded citizens (Aronczyk, 2013; Castelló & Mihelj, 2018).

Perceptions that protests are 'threats' were also voiced through reports about how 'the world' was looking at 'us'. Newspapers ran stories focused on how other governments, transnational organisations such as Human Rights Watch or the EU, and especially foreign news media, narrated and evaluated the demonstrations. For instance, in mid-June 2013, Brazilian journalists described how Italian, French and Spanish media were astonished at the size and level of inflicted damage of the 2013 protests, as well as how the events appeared on the front page of *The New York Times* (*Folha*, 19 June 2013; *Estado*, 21 June 2013). Likewise, Chilean journalists described the surprise of overseas news organisations such as *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Financial Times* or The *Economist*, which pointed out that Chile used to be known as a prosperous and stable nation (*El Mercurio*, 20 and 21 October 2019; *La Tercera*, 21, 22 and 27 October 2019). This interest on what 'the world' says corroborates how national images are shaped through a continuous tension between inward and outward-looking gazes, which we further explore in the next two frames (see also Ståhlberg & Bolin, 2016).

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5.2 | Protests as expressions of the 'true' nation

The second frame portrays demonstrations as expressions of the 'true' nation. We predominantly—but not exclusively—found this frame across foreign news organisations, especially when journalists contrasted the events on the streets to the carefully state-constructed and managed depictions of national identity. Early coverage of the June Journeys referenced stereotypes of Brazil as a 'soccer-mad' (*The New York Times*, 19 June 2013) and 'famous for carnival' country (*BBC World News*, 18 June 2013) but argued that the protests 'exploded a nation's fun-loving image' (*The Times*, 23 June 2013). Likewise, accounts about the social outburst in Chile claimed that this episode had 'shocked the world' (*The New York Times*, 3 November 2019), because it unveiled the deep inequality and precarity of what otherwise appeared to be a 'stable' society (*Financial Times*, 21 October 2019). Mobilisations were consequently framed as expressions of the 'real' nation, which had remained concealed behind nation promotion initiatives.

The surprise was accompanied by a largely celebratory tone. Journalists stated that Brazil experienced a 'social awakening' (*The New York Times*, 20 June 2013), that 'Chile woke up' (*The New York Times*, 3 November 2019) and that 'people power' in Romania succeeded 'a quarter of a century after it brought down communism' (*Financial Times*, 5 February 2017; see also *BBC News*, 5 February 2017). Foreign correspondents thus largely narrated these demonstrations as democratic exercises that brought to the fore the everyday struggles of a nation. When doing so, journalists were not simply reporting about Brazil, Romania and Chile but were actually evaluating them. This has been observed in other settings (e.g., Kantola, 2010), with overseas news media praising other nations when they follow market oriented models or adhere to values considered 'universal', such as freedom of association, universal suffrage, anti-corruption or respect for minorities.

It is noteworthy that in some of these accounts, the state was portrayed as disloyal to the nation, concerned with defending the interest of elites rather than its citizens (*The New York Times*, 25 June 2013; *Financial Times*, 5 February 2017). In contrast, protesters were depicted as the embodiment of the nation, willing to sacrifice themselves—especially when facing police brutality—to draw attention to the hopes and dreams of the 'authentic' national community. That was done linguistically, either through collective references to 'Brazilians', 'Romanians' or 'Chileans', or through a polyphony of voices of supposedly average citizens which contextualised the demonstrations as an episode of *national* unrest. Hence, *The New York Times* asked Romanians to share their personal experiences of corruption (9 February 2017), while *The Guardian* extensively quoted Chileans explaining their reasons to take to the streets (30 October 2019). These representations of the nation were also visual, with images of crowds waving national flags, wearing football t-shirts and painting their faces with national colours, as well as carrying banners that claimed to speak on behalf of the nation (*BBC World News*, 18 June 2013; *The Guardian*, 5 July 2017; *The New York Times*, 1 November 2019).

Occasionally, protests were interpreted as part of a global wave of dissatisfaction. The June Journeys were sometimes framed as expressions of a revolt by technologically savvy, middle-class individuals across the world, with similar episodes happening in Turkey, Israel, Spain and the United States (*The Guardian*, 23 June 2013; *The Times*, 23 June 2013). The 2017 Rezist demonstrations were situated in the context of a global spread of populism, with the Brexit and the Trump presidency as its most obvious manifestations (*Euronews*, 4 February 2017; *The New York Times*, 5 February 2017). Likewise, Chile's social outburst was compared to demonstrations in Hong Kong, Colombia and Lebanon, which were depicted as mobilisations by young, urban individuals, tired of austerity, stagnant wages, social inequality and corruption (*The New York Times*, 23 October 2019; *The Guardian*, 25 October 2019). It is however significant that overseas news organisations never adopted a cosmopolitan or transnational outlook. Although the protests were portrayed as sharing a similar global background—of financial crises, political polarisation and the affordances of digital media—the triggers, solutions and ultimate responsibility for the unrest were framed in national terms.

Just like in the frame of protests as threat, domestic media also reported overseas news coverage but stressed more positive undertones. Romanian news organisations emphasised for instance the supposed uniqueness of the Rezist demonstrations, stating that American newspaper the 'Washington Post asks what it means to protest like a

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Romanian' (*Republica.ro*, 27 February 2017). They also held that, because of the attention paid by foreign journalists, Romania had become a 'symbol of European hopes' (*Dilema Veche*, 16 22nd February 2017). In Brazil, national newspapers emphasised that, although outlets such as *The New York Times*, *CNN* or *Le Monde* expressed surprise, they also communicated enthusiasm and satisfaction with the events on the streets (*O Estado de Sao Paulo*, 16 June 2013; *Folha*, 18, 21 and 23 June 2013).

It is significant that these stories about what 'the world' says about 'us' were focused on a very specific set of American and Western European media—like *BBC*, *CNN* or *The New York Times*—rarely including outlets from Asia, Africa or even nearby countries. Inferred in the coverage is therefore a hierarchical view of the world, with 'emerging' nations depicted as in need of attention and approval from the West. Still, positive perspectives were not limited to overseas media. At the end of the first week of demonstrations in Chile, national newspapers framed the gathering of one million people in downtown Santiago—nicknamed 'Chile's biggest march'—as an expression of democracy, good civic behaviour but also national encounter, with Chileans peacefully and proudly communicating grievances while carrying a giant national flag (*El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*, 26 October 2019). Hence, despite the perception among political and economic elites that protests can be episodes of disruption, other actors may frame them as events that positively project the nation—although not necessarily the state—directing attention to a more progressive, politically engaged and egalitarian version of national identity.

5.3 | Protests as strategic communications

While the previous frames focus on the viewpoints of political and economic elites, as well as foreign and domestic media, the third frame sheds light on the role of demonstrators as active agents in the mediation of nationhood. Following literature on social movements and the media (e.g., Cammaerts, 2018), this frame acknowledges that protesters can draw—sometimes instinctively—on *strategic* communications, taking advantage of media and promotional logics to question dominant narratives and produce their own versions of what the 'real' nation is. Here, we draw on Manheim's understanding strategic political communication as the 'purposeful management of such information to achieve a stated objective based on a sophisticated knowledge of underlying attributes and tendencies of people and institutions' (Manheim, 2011, p. ix).

Although we have noted the significance of domestic and legacy media, it is impossible to grasp these episodes without considering the role of digital technologies as well as their interactions with legacy media. In Brazil, Romania and Chile, social media were central to coordinating and communicating collective action. NGOs, alternative media collectives, community media, but also lone individuals, relied on platforms to mobilise people, gain visibility for grievances and produce counter-narratives. Facebook in particular was a crucial tool—albeit not the only one—to announce events, denounce police brutality, stream videos and share photos (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Mercea, 2022; Scherman & Rivera, 2021). Twitter hashtags, visualised on this platform but also on banners and posters, were also important to give visibility to protests and discursively construct demonstrators as powerful actors speaking on behalf of the nation. Collective calls were made to resist the authorities (#rezist) (Adi & Lilleker, 2017; Mercea, 2022) and challenge power relations between the people and the state, along with statements that the nation had 'woken up' (#ogiganteacordou, #chiledesperto and #neamtrezit) (Jimenez-Yañez, 2020; Peruzzo, 2013).

These expressions were not unnoticed by legacy news organisations. Foreign journalists reported them, either as alternative sources of information or as expressions of the national 'people' (*The Guardian*, 20 June 2013; *The Times*, 23 June 2013; *Euronews.com*, 6 February 2017; *Financial Times*, 5 February 2017; *The Guardian*, 29 October 2019). Furthermore, demonstrators actively fed national and transnational media flows using sound and visual bites. Along with giving interviews, they employed banners and graffiti—both in English and local languages—to communicate grievances and catch the attention of overseas photographers (see *BBC News*, 18 June 2013; *BBC News*, 5 February 2017; *The*

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New York Times, 21 June 2013; *The Guardian*, 25 October 2019). Some of them even directly engaged with legacy media, as in the case of Romanian activists writing opinion pieces between 3 and 8 of February 2017 in *Euronews.com*.

Beyond social media, demonstrators relied on other approaches to communicate their grievances and publicly question the authorities. Wall projections in Chile visualised sentences such as 'We are not at war', which was projected onto one of the main buildings in Santiago (Tucker, 2019) as a response to the aforementioned speech by President Piñera. Likewise, demonstrators in Romania used wall projections of the sentence 'Don't be afraid', laser shows, and the light of their mobile phones to create a Romanian and a European Union flag (*BBC News*, 12 February 2017). Although the above messages aimed to communicate the national character of protests, they sometimes drew on transnational cultural references from television and movies—such as Batman, Spiderman, Chuck Norris and Pokemon—songs, books and even phrases from promotional adverts (Dumitrica, 2021; Fontenelle & Pozzebon, 2019).

In most cases, protests did not explicitly intend to construct and communicate a specific version of national identity. However, they sometimes attacked official nation promotion efforts in order to draw attention to their grievances. That was true for Brazil, where protesters expressed their opposition to the hosting of the 2014 World Cup, even though many of their social and political viewpoints were unrelated to this event (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020). Relatedly, although demonstrators in Chile did not explicitly question the APEC and COP25 summits, newspaper *El Mercurio* justified the cancellation of these events by arguing that they could have been co-opted by activists wanting to 'transmit an image of chaos to the world' (31 October 2019).

To some extent, the actions of demonstrators resembled those of nation branding advocates and public diplomats. By claiming to speak on behalf of the nation, they implied that the national 'essence' could be identified and mobilised to achieve their goals. They also tried to influence foreign publics—including news organisations—to advance specific political and sometimes economic agendas. Hence, and despite their radically different aims, protesters' behaviour was not too dissimilar from nation promotion practitioners or what Aronczyk (2015) terms the 'transnational promotional class'. Perhaps that is because many demonstrators in Brazil, Romania and Chile belonged to an urban, university-educated and middle-class segment of society (Canales, 2022; Dumitrica, 2021; Jiménez-Martínez, 2020). It is likely that they possessed sufficient cultural capital to have a know-how of media and promotional logics in order to try to shape the mediation of nationhood in their favour, maximising local and overseas coverage and weaponising the state's concern about foreign perceptions of the nation.

6 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION: REFRACTING THE MULTIFACETED NATURE OF NATIONHOOD

Our interest in the relationship between protests and nation promotion was sparked by the observation that episodes of social unrest are only discussed marginally in scholarship on nation branding, public diplomacy and soft power. This is an important gap. Protests can be high-profile events, coordinated and communicated in and through domestic and overseas media due to the highly mediatised nature of contemporary societies (Cammaerts, 2018; Cottle, 2011). Not all protests challenge the state, and episodes of crises can sometimes strengthen rather than weaken it (Neumann & Sending, 2021). However, many recent protests have had a marked national character with people carrying national flags and other symbols, targeting local governments rather than transnational actors, and claiming to take to the streets on behalf of the nation (Gerbaudo, 2017). Some of these protests have directly or indirectly disrupted official versions of national identity, challenging governments' attempts to control the mediation of nationhood. Protests, and state responses to them, have consequently become another parameter to evaluate the 'image', 'reputation' or 'brand' of a nation.

After examining the 2013 June Journeys in Brazil, the 2017 Rezist demonstrations in Romania and the 2019 Chilean 'social outburst'—episodes that happened in parallel to nation branding and public diplomacy efforts—we suggest three interrelated frames to capture the relationship between nation promotion and unrest: (1) protests as threats, (2) protests as expressions of the true nation and (3) protests as strategic communications. Although these

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demonstrations did not always oppose nation promotion initiatives or had as an explicit aim the projection of alternative versions of national identity, the above frames shed light on how individuals and organisations outside the state, as well as outside national boundaries, may still contest official versions of national identity and disseminate, even if unintentionally, alternative images of the nation.

Protests consequently illuminate at least three problematic aspects of nation promotion. First, nation promotion is underpinned by a methodological statism, which emphasises the viewpoints and concerns of the state. From this perspective—often voiced by authorities, diplomats and communication strategists—protests are a threat to manage, especially when they are covered by foreign news media (Jiménez-Martínez, 2020; Loh, 2017). This approach contradicts the belief that protests are a human right (Fenwick, 1999) and ultimately seems to confirm that nation promotion is mere propaganda (e.g., Jansen, 2008). Significantly, it also reveals the fragility of practices such as nation branding and public diplomacy. As seen in Brazil, Romania and Chile, these initiatives seem to only work when there is order and stability and not in the context of social unrest (see also Ståhlberg & Bolin, 2016).

Second, nation promotion and the structure of global media supporting it are underpinned by a hierarchical view of the world. National images are often targeted at actors in the West (Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Miño, 2022), the very same actors that can sometimes interpret protests—as long as they happen 'elsewhere'—as democratic expressions of the 'authentic' nation. Hence, foreign governments, diplomats and news organisations may celebrate overseas demonstrations as manifestations of a civil society seeking the support of Western publics (Zhang & Fahmy, 2015) or as 'citizen diplomacy' (Huijgh, 2019). These approaches however perpetuate the primacy of the Western gaze. Actors based in the so-called Global North—including American and Western European media—implicitly or explicitly attribute to themselves a position of superiority, which allows them to label foreign mobilisations as positive or negative, while portraying 'emerging' nations as lacking agency, and in need of approval and assistance.

Third, protests highlight the problematic relationship that the practice and theory of nation promotion have with individuals and organisations outside the state. Despite claims of listening to or engaging with the public, diplomats, politicians and communication strategists consider the people as either a source of soft power or a problem to manage (La Cour, 2018; Manor et al., 2021). Nation promotion thus emerges as an elitist project that approaches the inhabitants of a nation as resources to exploit in order to benefit those in power. People of lower classes, indigenous groups or even intellectuals outside the state do not seem to have any opportunities to play a meaningful role within official nation promotion initiatives, beyond being used as tools and resources.

Protests can consequently be framed as disruptive events or indicators of democracy depending on *who* labels them (the social actors and their power status), *where* they happen (the context) and *why* (the agenda). They should consequently neither be ignored nor seen as mere glitches to national 'images' or 'reputations'. On the contrary, protests are a crucial component of the mediation of nationhood, rejecting, subverting or negotiating state-sponsored versions of national identity, especially in the context of highly mediatised societies (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). Furthermore, they blow up the fantasy, nurtured by nation promotion advocates (e.g., Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008), that states can construct, project and manage stable and harmonious national 'brands' or 'reputations'.

This has important implications for scholarship in the field. Theoretically, studies in nation promotion should further engage with debates in nations and nationalism, as well as constructivist discussions from international relations, in order to acknowledge the power struggles that make nationhood dynamic, unfixed and chaotic. National brands or public diplomacy campaigns claiming to project the 'real' nation should therefore be understood as only temporary versions trying to be imposed—either by consent or coercion—on a nation-state. Analytically, scholars should also broaden their perspectives to escape the methodological statism that pervades the field. Individuals and organisations inside and outside the state, as well as inside and outside national boundaries, should be recognised as equally relevant actors in shaping the mediation of nationhood, across different types of media, platforms, genres and languages. Consequently, protests—and other types of disruptive events—should be brought to the core of the study of nation promotion. Like a prism that splits white light into a rainbow, these disruptive events refract official versions of national identity into negotiation, conflict and contestation, making visible the multifaceted, shifting but ultimately richer nature of nationhood.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Concerns among practitioners are not only reflected in the growing number of case studies. After presenting some early ideas at an academic conference, the authors of this article were contacted by public diplomats seeking solutions for resolving episodes of social unrest.

[2] Debates about the definitions and boundaries between nation branding, public diplomacy and soft power have never settled. In line with this themed section, we have categorised all of them as manifestations of 'nation promotion'.

[3] Critiquing methodological nationalism does not mean—as it is often interpreted—abandoning the study of nations altogether but rather recognising the heterogenous and shifting nature of the latter. As Chernilo states, '[w]e need a deeper appreciation of the nation state's key features so that we can theorize it rather than naturalize or reify it' (Chernilo, 2006, p. 112).

[4] See https://twitter.com/MarcaChile/status/1186436563439378432

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