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**How to Brand an International Organization.  
NATO Case Study**

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**Abstract:** Branding products and companies has always been associated with private enterprises and less, if ever, with international intergovernmental organizations. International organizations now have a long history behind them, a history often marked by contradictory events. In the last decade the international organizations developed their own public relations department in an attempt to communicate promptly and transmit the general audience their version of reality. Having this in mind we will try to briefly present in the current work the main reasons why we believe that the international organizations, NATO in particular, have started to see themselves as brand and to create a so called “commercial identity” by becoming a brand. By applying the conceptual and analytical framework used in analyzing the marketing strategies of the private companies we will try to see whether NATO is about to become a brand. Our starting point will be a 2008 statement of Jean-François Bureau, deputy general secretary responsible with NATO’s public diplomacy: “We have the green light to think about a **branding** policy for NATO”. Nowadays global society, perceptions tend to become more important than reality itself, and thus positive perceptions tend to become crucial. NATO has suffered an image decline in the last decade, therefore some new communication measures tend to impose themselves. The distinction between soft power and propaganda must be carefully analyzed when we speak about branding NATO. Thus we hope to bring some necessary clarifications in the area of NATO branding. Is there a brand? Is a brand going to be constructed? How does it differ from a commercial society? Does NATO need its own TV channel? Raising questions and offering a new perspective is, in the end, our primary goal, as a debate on this subject is a must that offers a new perspective in the area of theory of international organizations.

**Keywords:** NATO; branding; communication; change

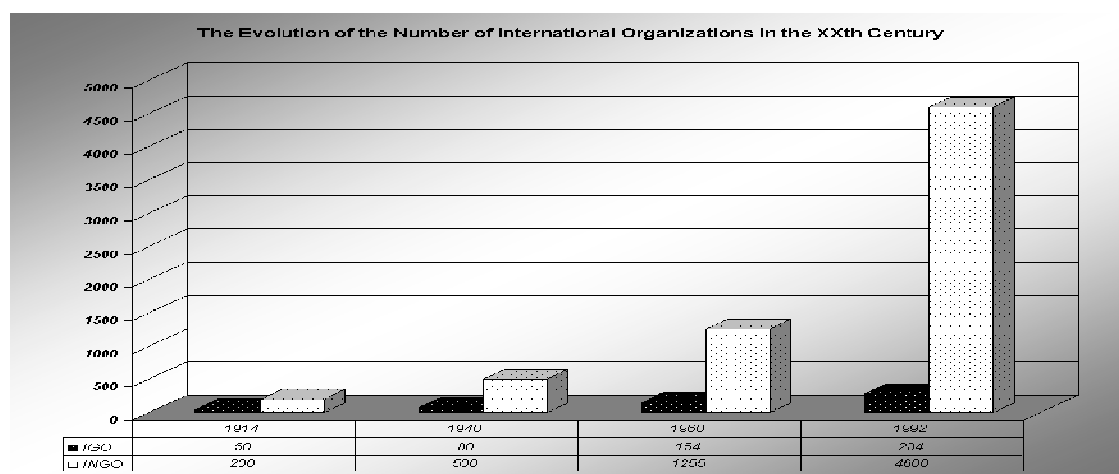
In order to define and comprehend the role of NATO we should first of all try to understand the role and the functions of an organization. Simplifying we can say that an organization “is a person or group of people intentionally organized to accomplish an overall, common goal or set of goals” (McNamara, 2011).

Having in mind this definition we can therefore identify a series of organization’s characteristics that define and influence its image:

- **Vision** (Members of the organization must have the image about how the organization should be working);
- **Mission** (An organization operates according to an overall purpose, or mission);

- **Values** (All organizations operate according to overall values)
- **Strategic Goals**
- **Strategies** (several overall general approaches to reach their goals)
- **Systems and Processes that (Hopefully) Are Aligned With Achieving the Goals** (McNamara, 2011)

An international organization is an organization that has members from various countries or which acts in several countries. They can be divided in mainly two categories: international intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs), depending on the characteristics of their membership.



- *The number of international organizations will know a continuous increase in the XXth century reaching to a total number of several thousands toward the end of the XXth century.* (Chart based on the information available in Dragoș Frăsineanu's paper, 2005, p. 167)

Thus in an international environment full of competitors knowing how to promote yourself thus becomes of outmost importance, in order to differentiate yourself from the others and to promote your organization's values. NATO came into being in 1949, in a difficult period when the West had to muster all its resources in order to defeat the communist treat that for many seems to have been the best form of national organization. Having to deal with an enemy skilled in propaganda tactics, NATO had therefore to develop its public relations skills.

The importance of communication has been obvious since the beginning of the North Atlantic Alliance as stipulated in the Article 2 of NATO Founding Treaty: "The Parties will contribute toward the further development of peaceful and friendly international relations by strengthening their free institutions, **by bringing about a better understanding of the principles upon which these institutions are founded**, and by promoting conditions of stability and well-being. They will seek to eliminate conflict in their international economic policies and will encourage economic collaboration between any or all of them." (The North Atlantic Treaty, 2011).

Having this in the Founding Treaty, and bearing in mind the importance of perceptions, it is not without relevance to notice the apparent decline of NATO, a polarity across the Europeans and North-Americans. One of the best indicators in that area is the annual survey done by German Marshall

Fund, *Transatlantic Trends*. The 2010 results show that approximately 60% of the Americans and 59% of the Europeans consider NATO to be essential to the security of their country. In the long run we witness a constant decline of NATO's positive image from a 69% of the Europeans that considered it essential to their security up to the current results (*Transatlantic Trends*, 2010, pp. 17-18).

NATO has undergone substantial changes in the last twentieth years. The end of the Cold War meant a dramatic shift of paradigm: an organization left without its arch enemy and seemingly without the reason of its existence. NATO's enlargement to the East of Europe, as well as the increasing number of asymmetrical threats (terrorism, digital warfare, etc.) meant that NATO had to rethink its entire communication strategy. The proof of power no longer resides in resources but in the ability to change the states behaviour. Thus the important thing for NATO is not whether it has started the 21st century as a superpower but rather whether it can control the political and media environment and it will be able to determine other countries to do what it wants them to do.

One of the obstacles NATO has to face for a better communication in the public space – beyond the secrecy that imposes certain limits – is the difference in nature between the military area and the communication area, either press or publicity or branding. Yet the Alliance is forced to find the optimum solution and not be afraid of propaganda, even though after the totalitarian experiences this concept received some rather negative connotations.

All the successful businesses contain three key ingredients: technical or professional competencies, financial skills and the ability to sell (Wally Olins calls it seduction, „although it is usually called marketing”) (Ollins, 2006).

No company can be managed successfully without a balanced combination of those three elements. The skills in the area of branding become the crucial ingredient. That means that if all the contestants are good, he who has the best reputation wins.

Although NATO is not a commercial society it must however keep in mind the basic principles that govern any business entity in its quest for new market and opportunities.

Regarding NATO's complex structure we partially proved that the treaty is very simple and direct, which proves once more, that the complicated things can be simply explained in a simple manner, but also that, for almost sixty years, NATO was not very preoccupied with the first articles of the treaty, articles surprisingly pacifists, for someone who had another image of the Alliance.

It is just due to this partially warrior image, the Alliance must use any other means than the hard power in order to impose itself. Moreover, in strategical terms, with an almost also invisible enemy, that hides within the civilian population, the propaganda, done professionally and listening to the demands of the target audience, may have an unexpected impact and without personnel or material losses.

The difficulty resides in the fact that branding means a complex, interdisciplinary approach, but also from the complexity of the envisaged institution. Basically NATO is an alliance, it is a result of the Second World War, functions based under military laws, but it is also an international organization, it works also under civil laws and with adjacent purposes to the military ones, economically or diplomatically.

NATO already uses modern communication means (NATO TV) but the way to change these platforms should be changed. This leads to more transparence, a concept difficult to assimilate by an institution that for decades hardly communicated with the outside world.

The one that sums up NATO's actual situation, and is in full accord with us, is Marshall B. Rosenberg's title to book he published in 2005, *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict*, with an appropriate subtitle: "What You Say Next Will Change Your World".

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