

Constructing National Reputations in Post-Communist Europe: A Comparative Analysis of Romania and Poland

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Abstract

The present article explores the notion of national reputation, emphasizing the economic, political, and cultural elements that contribute to an individual nation's global image. The study utilizes a comparative analysis of Romania and Poland, two post-communist Eastern European nations. It investigates how macroeconomic indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, unemployment rates, and perceptions of corruption influence a country's reputation. Furthermore, the role of non-coherent power—that is, cultural diplomacy and global influence—is explored as a key element in shaping the national image. The analysis underscores how Poland's enhanced economic performance and political stability have contributed to a more favorable reputation, while Romania's reputation has undergone a transformation as it enhances governance and combats corruption. The article under scrutiny herein underscores the intricate nature of national reputations and the multifaceted interconnection of economic, political, and cultural factors in shaping global perceptions.

Key words: national reputation, GDP, global image, performance, corruption

J.E.L. classification: E01, F63

1. Introduction

When talking about a country's reputation, we put into perspective the collective perception of how a country behaves and values itself in the international arena. It is a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses not only the economic, political, and social aspects of a country, but also the cultural factors. A country's reputation is not only determined by its external actions. It is also about how it manages its internal affairs and how these solutions are viewed by the rest of the world.

National reputation has emerged as an important concept in international relations and is increasingly viewed as a strategic asset influencing national economic performance, diplomatic influence, and soft power capacity (Anholt, 2007, p. 171-172; Buhmann and Ingenhoff, 2015, p. 62-80). It represents a multidimensional construct, shaped by the interplay of economic indicators, political credibility, and cultural influence, all of which work together to shape how the world perceives it. In today's interconnected global environment, the management of a country's image has become a critical concern for governments that seek to enhance their international standing (Szondi, 2008, p. 5-6).

While there is an expanding corpus of literature addressing the concepts of nation branding and reputation management, comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the specific reputational dynamics of post-communist Eastern European states. It is evident that these countries confront distinctive challenges, as their present-day identities continue to be shaped by the repercussions of centralized governance and the disparate progression of democratic and financial reformation (Kaneva, 2011, p. 118–120). The present article addresses this gap by undertaking a comparative analysis of Romania and Poland—two post-communist nations that share historical and regional commonalities yet diverge in their global image trajectories.

The central research question guiding this study is which macroeconomic indicators and soft power strategies contribute to the construction of national reputation in post-communist Eastern Europe. The article posits that Poland's enhanced reputation is associated with its sustained economic performance and relative political stability. In contrast, Romania's evolving international image mirrors the nation's endeavors to enhance governance and curtail systemic corruption.

The present analysis employs a comparative case study methodology, drawing on key macroeconomic indicators such as real GDP growth, unemployment rates, and corruption indices, in combination with a qualitative examination of soft power strategies, including cultural diplomacy and international cultural engagement. While the study's primary focus is at the institutional and policy levels, it does not encompass media discourse or international public opinion analysis—areas that may be considered in subsequent research.

By centering on the case studies of Romania and Poland, this article aims to foster a more profound understanding of the processes through which national reputation is shaped in transitional contexts. The text underscores the significance of incorporating the economic, political, and cultural dimensions into the study and practice of national image construction in a globalized world.

2. Literature review

The notion of national reputation has become increasingly intertwined with the broader discourse of nation branding. In this paradigm, states are seen as being similar to corporations. They need to manage their image in order to be competitive in a global environment (Anholt, 2007, p. 1-4; Dinnie, 2008, p. 13-15). The concept of national reputation is different from branding because it focuses on longer-term recognition and reflects a synthesis of present reality mixed with accumulated historical associations (Buhmann and Ingenhoff, 2015, p. 62-80). The reputation of a country has the ability to influence a wide range of international relations, such as foreign investment, trade, tourism and international cooperation (Passow, Fehlmann, & Grahlow, 2005). Negative perceptions can lead to reputational risk, stigmatization or diplomatic isolation.

Despite the prevalence of targeted campaigns in branding strategies, extant literature emphasizes that reputations are primarily earned, rather than invented. The concept of national identity is shaped by tangible performance in the economic, political and cultural spheres (Anholt, 2010, p. 6). Accordingly, the concept of nation branding transcends the confines of a mere marketing exercise, exhibiting a pronounced synergy with the domains of public diplomacy, institutional trust, and international legitimacy (Szondi, 2008, p. 12; Wang, 2006, p. 92).

Joseph Nye's (2004) seminal work on soft power, defined as the ability to influence others through attraction rather than coercion, has assumed a central role in discourses on state reputation management. According to Nye (2004, p. 11–12), culture, political values and foreign policy coherence are considered to be fundamental sources of soft power. For nations undergoing a transition from an autocracy to a democracy, soft power functions not solely as a means of projecting national identity; rather, it also facilitates a strategic distancing of the present regime from the authoritarian legacy of previous eras (Cull, 2009, p. 22). Cultural diplomacy is therefore a vehicle for rebranding national narratives and for asserting geopolitical relevance (Melissen, 2005, p. 9).

As several scholars have observed, participation in EU integration and international organizations plays a reputational role in post-communist states, signifying alignment with liberal democratic norms (Kaneva, 2011, p. 120-122). It is fundamental that this alignment with EU norms is a key factor in these states' accession to the EU. Nevertheless, the successful implementation of soft power is frequently dependent on domestic credibility and institutional capacity, rendering it indistinguishable from political and economic circumstances.

Beyond the concept of soft power, the macroeconomic performance of a nation is often identified as a fundamental contributor to its national reputation. The economic indicators such as the real GDP growth, low unemployment, and stable inflation are widely considered to be reliable signals of progress, even so more in the context of emerging economies (Fan, 2010, p. 100). Concomitantly, corruption, rule-of-law deficiencies and political instability have the capacity to severely compromise external perceptions, irrespective of branding initiatives (Maor, et al, 2013, p. 234).

Research conducted on Eastern Europe has demonstrated that perceptions of corruption and governance quality frequently exert a comparable influence to that of economic growth in shaping external perceptions. For example, Poland has been frequently cited as a post-communist success story on account of its economic resilience and alignment with the European Union (Ivanov, 2016, p. 470). By contrast, Romania has faced greater reputational volatility, partly due to persistent governance challenges.

Despite the proliferation of research on nation branding and soft power, there remains a gap in studies that have examined how exactly the variation of macroeconomic indicators and soft power strategies collectively influence national reputation in post-communist Europe. Furthermore, the majority of extant studies regard Eastern Europe as a homogeneous bloc, thus overlooking intra-regional variations that could potentially elucidate variegated reputational outcomes. The present article addresses this gap by means of a comparative analysis of Romania and Poland, with a view to offering insight into the manner in which economic governance, political credibility, and cultural diplomacy interact in the construction of global perceptions.

3. Research methodology

The present article employs a comparative case study methodology to examine the factors that shape national reputation in post-communist Eastern European countries: Romania and Poland. The selection of these cases is predicated on two shared contextual factors: regional and historical. These include the transition from communism, the accession to the European Union, and the economic transformation that occurred subsequent to 1989. The cases also diverge in terms of international reputation and perceived soft power.

The present analysis is guided by a qualitative, explanatory research design, integrating a small-N comparative logic. In the context of post-communist legacies and EU membership, Romania and Poland are frequently studied due to their similarities. However, a notable distinction emerges when examining their reputational profiles in global indices and discourse: these two countries exhibit starkly contrasting reputational profiles in these areas. The present design facilitates the identification of pivotal economic, political, and cultural variables that may explain reputational divergence.

The study relies on secondary data drawn from multiple reputable and official sources. The data analyzed vary from macroeconomic indicators such as real GDP growth, unemployment rate, and foreign direct investments, drawn from the websites of the World Bank, OECD and Eurostat. In the analysis, there should also be measured the governance and corruption metrics like the Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the World Governance Indicators (WGI), and EU monitoring reports.

The reputation and branding indices are also of interest when analyzing a nation's reputation. We mention here the Nation Brands Index (NBI), Soft Power 30 Index, and data from the European Commission's Eurobarometer. We can also use academic literature and policy documents on national branding, public diplomacy, and Eastern European identity construction.

These data are supplemented by qualitative analysis of national strategies for public diplomacy and cultural projection, drawn from government documents, policy briefs, and prior scholarly work.

The analysis employs a dual approach, integrating both descriptive and interpretive methodologies. The utilization of economic and governance indicators serves to establish an empirical baseline for the purpose of conducting a comparative analysis of performance-related reputational inputs. These phenomena are then interpreted in relation to each country's cultural diplomacy initiatives, international positioning, and image strategies.

This integrative approach is informed by a number of theoretical models, including Anholt's (2007) model of competitive identity, Nye's (2004) theory of soft power, and Buhmann and Ingenhoff's (2015) public relations-based framework for country image construction.

The analysis proceeds in three stages:

- Economic and governance comparison: using time-series and cross-national indicators (2004–2023).
- Soft power mapping: analysis of cultural diplomacy efforts and international engagement strategies.

- Interpretation of reputation outcomes: drawing on external rankings, regional press coverage, and scholarly evaluations.

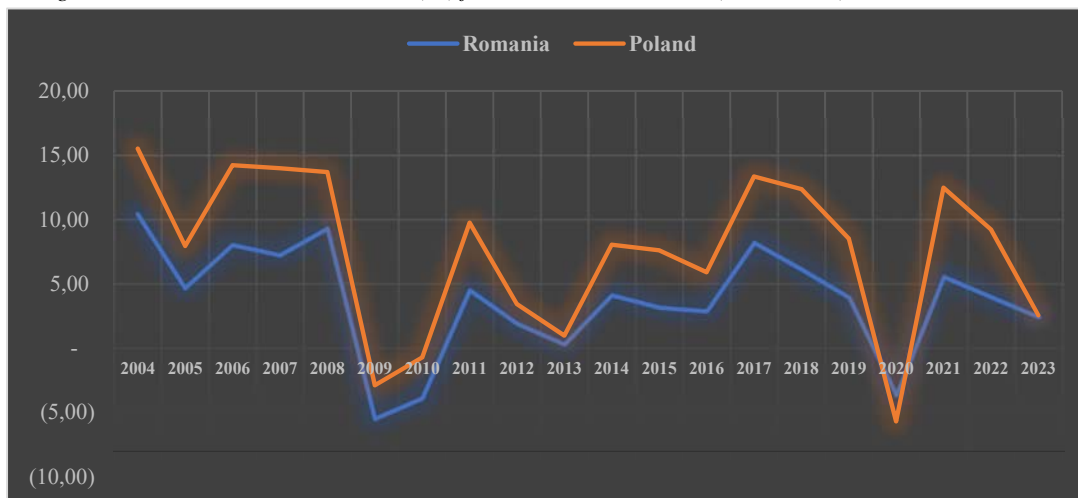
Furthermore, the international reputation of a nation is inherently multidimensional and influenced by global events that are beyond the nation's control. Consequently, the analysis places significant emphasis on structural and institutional drivers while acknowledging that reputational narratives are also influenced by external actors, including media entities and foreign publics.

4. Findings

This section presents the empirical findings regarding the reputational profiles of Romania and Poland. These findings are based on macroeconomic indicators, governance measures, and soft power strategies. An examination of the available data indicates not only a convergence in structural development but also a divergence in international reputation and image management.

Poland has consistently demonstrated stronger macroeconomic indicators compared to Romania, particularly in the post-EU accession period. Between 2004 and 2023, Poland kept an average GDP growth rate of approximately 3.83%, weathering the 2008 financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic with relative resilience, as seen below in figure no. 1. In contrast, Romania's GDP growth has been more volatile, averaging 3.68% over the same period, with deeper contractions during crisis years (World Bank, 2024). For 2024 and 2025, the prognosis for Romania is still not favorable considering the political tensions that characterized these years, following the annulled presidential elections in November 2024 and retaking the elections in May 2025. Even though Poland also is about to pass through elections of their own, its stability over time is hinting at an easier impact on the economy.

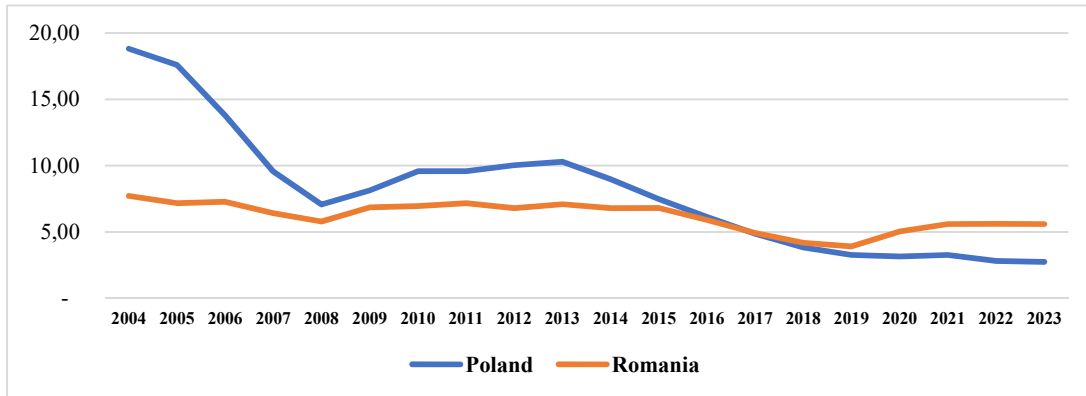
Figure no.1. Real GDP Growth Rates (%) for Romania and Poland (2004–2023)



Source: chart compiled by the author using data from the World Bank

Unemployment in Poland has steadily declined, reaching 2.74% in 2023, one of the lowest in the EU, considering the fact that Poland in 2004, as seen in figure no. 2, had an unemployment rate of 18.82%. Romania also saw improvements, but unemployment remained higher, at 5.59% in 2023 (Data World Bank, 2024); however, Romania did not start from such a high level as Poland, as the unemployment rate in 2004 was 7.72. These disparities influence perceptions of economic stability and policy effectiveness. If the GDP evolution was in Poland's favor, regarding the unemployment rate, the statistics show that Romania is better positioned than its sister country.

Figure no. 2 Unemployment (% of the total labor force) for Romania and Poland (2004-2023)



Source: chart compiled by the author using data from the World Bank

The perception of governance quality further differentiates the two countries. Poland has historically received higher rankings in the World Bank's Governance Indicators, particularly in categories such as Government Effectiveness and Rule of Law. However, recent political developments, particularly concerns over judicial independence and media freedom, have caused a reputational dip since 2016 (Freedom House, 2023).

Romania, a country with a historically significant burden of perceived corruption, has demonstrated noteworthy progress in this regard. According to the Corruption Perceptions Index, Romania's score increased from 38/100 in 2012 to 46/100 in 2023. Meanwhile, Poland's score experienced a slight decline, dropping from 58 to 53 during the same period (Transparency International, 2023). This suggests that while Romania is making progress in its economic and political development, its reputation is still undergoing a process of adjustment to the new reforms.

Figure no. 3 Corruption Perceptions Index for Poland (2012-2024)



Source: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024/index/pol>

From figure no.3, we can see that Poland has had quite a roller coaster of evolution regarding the corruption from within the country. We can attribute these highs and lows to its complicated past and similarly complicated transition to the democratic world. Even though Poland had been a member of the EU three years prior to Romania's, recent years have seen both countries struggling with people distrusting the political system and wanting other perspectives, especially due to the corruption persistent in the country and the political people not doing anything towards improving the situation.

Figure no. 4 Corruption Perceptions Index for Romania (2012-2024)



Source: <https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024/index/rou>

According to the above-mentioned source, the Corruption Perception Index works between the range of 0 and 100, with close to 0 meaning that the country has a very corrupt system, while being closer to 100, the situation is better and the country is closer to winning the fight against corruption. So, from figure no.3 and 4, we can assess that both countries are somewhere in the middle of their fight against corruption. With Poland being a little higher on the leaderboard than Romania, having addressed more strictly the subject of corruption with more powerful reforms and laws.

Both countries have engaged in strategic cultural diplomacy, but with differing scope and effectiveness. Poland has invested in institutions like the Adam Mickiewicz Institute, which promotes Polish culture internationally through film, literature, and art. Poland's soft power is also enhanced by its active role in EU policymaking, NATO operations, and support for Ukraine.

In contrast, Romania has initiated a series of measures that are both more recent and less deeply institutionalized. Initiatives similar to the Romanian Cultural Institute, along with campaigns that promote the nation, such as Discover Romania, are indicative of an effort to modify the country's image.

Nonetheless, the efficacy of these endeavors remains limited. Media discourse frequently focuses on issues such as corruption, migration, and underdevelopment, indicating a state of reputational inertia.

In global indices, Poland generally exhibits a more robust brand and higher visibility. According to the Nation Brands Index (2022), Poland ranked 24th, surpassing Romania, which ranked 37th (Anholt-Ipsos, 2022). A similar phenomenon is observed in the Soft Power 30 Index, where Poland is consistently included, while Romania is frequently absent.

Furthermore, Eurobarometer surveys indicate that the level of public trust in Polish institutions exceeds that of their Romanian counterparts on both a domestic and an EU-wide basis (Eurobarometer, 2021). An analysis of the extant literature reveals that Poland's favorable reputation can be attributed to two principal factors. A robust correlation exists between positive structural performance metrics and sustained engagement in international platforms, underscoring the importance of strategic integration of technology and internationalization in contemporary business operations.

Table no. 1 Comparative Summary of main macroeconomic indicators

Indicator	Poland	Romania
Avg. GDP Growth (2004–2023)	3.83%	3.68%
Unemployment (2023)	2.74%	5.59%
CPI Score (2023)	55	46
NBI Rank (2022)	24th	37th
Cultural Diplomacy	Institutionalized (e.g., Adam Mickiewicz Institute)	Fragmented (e.g., Romanian Cultural Institute)
Global Soft Power Index Presence	Frequent	Absent

Source: table compiled by the author using data from the World Bank, CPI index, NBI Ranking

These findings confirm that while both countries have made significant progress since EU accession, Poland has maintained a stronger and more consistent international reputation. Romania, though improving, continues to face challenges in translating structural reforms into reputational gains.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined the multifaceted determinants of national reputation, focusing on Romania and Poland as comparative case studies for post-communist Eastern Europe countries. It has demonstrated how macroeconomic indicators, such as GDP growth and unemployment rates, interact with political stability, governance quality, and soft power elements to shape how nations are perceived globally.

Poland's robust and relatively stable economic growth, averaging approximately 3.83% between 2004 and 2023, and a sharp decline in unemployment from over 18% to under 3% have boosted its international credibility. These achievements reflect successful policy reforms, EU integration, and a consistent commitment to economic modernization. Furthermore, Poland's soft power—enhanced by cultural diplomacy, academic engagement, and a proactive EU role—has further reinforced its national image (World Bank, 2024, p. 5).

In contrast, Romania, while achieving a strong average GDP growth of 3.68% over the same period and reducing unemployment significantly, has faced more volatility and institutional challenges. Nevertheless, in recent years, Romania has made meaningful progress in areas such as judicial reform and anti-corruption, which have improved both its EU standing and external perception (IMF, 2023, p. 7–9). Despite these efforts, its international reputation remains somewhat hindered by perceived governance deficits and lower visibility in international cultural and diplomatic arenas.

The findings underscore that national reputation is shaped by a dynamic interaction of economic performance, institutional quality, and soft power capabilities. While Poland currently enjoys a stronger reputation, Romania is gradually converging through structural reforms and improved governance. Reputation, in this context, is not a static attribute but a reflection of sustained performance, credibility, and engagement in global affairs.

Looking ahead, both countries have considerable potential to enhance their reputations, particularly in light of ongoing EU development priorities and global economic trends. Romania is expected to continue growing steadily, with the European Commission (2024, p. 3) projecting GDP growth of around 3.3% in 2025, supported by EU Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funds and investment in digital and green transitions. However, persistent governance challenges and political instability could undermine these gains.

Romania for the future years should definitely prioritize deepening institutional reforms, especially in judicial independence and public administration efficiency (IMF, 2023, p. 10–12). Also, the anti-corruption mechanism and transparency in public procurement should be strengthened, and the cultural diplomacy and international academic presence must be expanded in order to enhance soft power in the international context.

Despite recent geopolitical tensions and some concerns over rule-of-law disputes within the EU, Poland remains a regional economic leader. The World Bank (2024, p. 6) projects a rebound in GDP growth to 3.5% in 2025, driven by strong domestic demand and EU cohesion funding. To maintain and improve its reputation, Poland should strongly recommit to judicial independence and democratic norms to preserve EU alignment and investor confidence (European Commission, 2024, p. 4).

If Poland wants to maintain and strengthen its position as a Central European tech hub, they should strongly accelerate the digital infrastructure and innovation policy. In order to further reinforce its global recognition, they must continue to leverage its cultural and academic platforms.

Both countries face shared external challenges, including energy security, demographic decline, and the pressures of geopolitical realignment in the region. How they respond—through cooperative EU action, climate policy implementation, and inclusive governance—will strongly influence their reputations going forward.

As global perceptions become more sensitive to transparency, inclusivity, and resilience, national reputation will depend increasingly on the ability to navigate uncertainty with strategic clarity and consistent reforms.

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