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A new nation brand strategy? Global Ireland 2025 and the UN Security Council campaign

Madeline Boughton
School of Communications, Dublin City University, Ireland

Abstract

This article seeks to add to the growing body of research into government-led nation branding initiatives by examining a specific case study as the driver of a new nation brand strategy for Ireland. Drawing on interviews with senior government officials, policy advisors and brand marketing executives, the author examines the 'Global Ireland 2025' initiative and Ireland's campaign to win a UN Security Council seat. The findings indicate that some important building blocks of a new nation brand initiative have been put in place, most notably around government policy, leadership and resources. But in the absence of meaningful citizen and stakeholder engagement, the author questions the authenticity of the new nation brand strategy. This article argues that without meaningful collaboration, Global Ireland 2025 risks losing the opportunity to be more than just another promotional exercise.

Keywords: Nation branding, Ireland, public diplomacy, soft power, reputation

Introduction

The Irish state's official centenary of the Easter 1916 Rising, entitled 'Ireland 2016', was judged to have delivered an inclusive programme of events that engaged with the wider public. In assessing the centenary programme, one newspaper concluded that '2016 has

provided a template for how multiple, often conflicting narratives and interpretations can be embraced in a spirit of learning, rather than the affirmation of previously held beliefs' ('Reinventing the rising', 2016). The then Taoiseach, Enda Kenny (2017), referenced how the centenary programme allowed people to talk about identity, citizenship and community in a meaningful way: 'It was a year of debate without division and argument, without rancour. We all walked a little taller as a consequence. We belonged and we were proud to belong. We told our children; This is Ireland. This is you. Us.'

The opportunity to frame a new nation brand, to reimagine the national narrative 100 years on from Easter 1916, was capitalised upon by Ireland 2016 and articulated in the legacy initiative as an ambition to 'unify our global reputation' (creativeireland.gov.ie). In this regard, it is fair to conclude that Ireland 2016 had unwittingly managed to achieve one of the most difficult objectives of a nation brand strategy, namely to 'unite a nation in a common sense of purpose and national pride' (Anholt, 2003, cited in Szondi, 2008, p. 12).

Widely credited as the architect of the concept, Anholt has described a nation brand as 'national identity made tangible, robust, communicable and above all, useful' (cited in Aronczyk, 2009, p. 294). In its simplest form, nation branding is about reputation – building, maintaining, reframing, protecting and, potentially, exploiting it as 'a deliberate capture and accumulation of reputational value' (Anholt, 2010, p. 52). In the same way that an organisation's or brand's reputation would be considered an important intangible asset, a well-managed nation brand can be of enormous benefit to a country and its citizens (Newburry & Song, 2019).

Building on the momentum of Ireland 2016, the Irish government subsequently published a new nation brand strategy in 2018, entitled 'Global Ireland 2025'. This article examines the origins of Global Ireland 2025 as a new all-of-government strategic initiative with a specific focus on Ireland's campaign to win the UN Security Council seat. With Ireland dropping five points in the Global Soft Power Index (2021), and just about holding on to its position in the top thirty (see brandfinance.com), the campaign to win the seat appeared both pressing and challenging.

The first section examines the wider international literature on nation branding, before consideration is given to the Irish case. The evaluation of the Irish campaign to win a UN Security Council seat draws on semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders. A total of eleven participants, seven male and four female, were selected for

one-to-one interviews through purposive sampling. Interviewees were selected based on their direct role or expertise relating to this study. They included senior government officials, civil servants, policymakers and brand consultants. Interview data was coded and analysed, drawing on Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory approach, where the researcher has foregrounded the contributions of the interview participants to inform the discussion and analysis. The interview material allows for wider consideration of Global Ireland 2025 as a nation brand strategy, and for exploring how the initiative can enhance Ireland's influence and impact abroad.

What is nation branding?

Nations under the leadership of elected or even unelected governments have long invested in building relationships of influence and creating alliances with other countries for mutual benefit. In an increasingly globalised world, nations must develop a 'competitive identity' (Anholt, 2007) to promote their brand exports, entice foreign direct investment, attract tourists and demonstrate their influence. Viktorin et al. (2020, p. 1) characterise nation branding as the 'deliberate collective effort by multiple constituencies to generate a viable representation of a geographical–political–economic–social entity'.

While nations have for centuries actively advanced their political and economic agendas, the origins of the concept of nation branding is attributed to two British brand specialists, Wally Olins and Simon Anholt. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, both were instrumental in their role as advisers to over fifty presidents, prime ministers and governments on how to develop, manage or recalibrate their nation brand.

In a comprehensive overview of over two decades of research on nation branding, Kaneva (2011) observed the range of disciplines in the literature, from marketing and brand management to public relations and, more recently, public diplomacy. For the purposes of this article, the concept of nation branding draws on Anholt's (2008, p. 22) definition as 'the systematic process of aligning the actions, behaviours, investments, innovations and communications of a country around a clear strategy for achieving a strengthened competitive identity'.

It is perhaps understandable why the association of the consumer term 'brand' causes a 'visceral antagonism' (Olins, 2002) when applied

to the complexity of national sovereignty, culture and identity that constitutes a nation. While the appropriation of a country's national assets for the purposes of attracting international tourists might be perceived as a form of nation branding (Clancy, 2009), attempts by governments to construct and manage a nation's image (Fan, 2010), in the same way as a breakfast cereal or car is marketed to consumers, reinforce the perception of the practice as a neo-liberal construct (Jansen, 2008). Nonetheless, for many nation brand initiatives, the ultimate purpose is how to market your nation better than your competitor.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Bush administration appointed a Madison Avenue executive to elevate 'Brand USA' overseas. The writer Naomi Klein astutely observed that 'unlike strong brands, which are predictable and disciplined, democracy is messy and fractious, if not outright rebellious'. For Klein, the task of polishing up a nation brand 'is not only futile but dangerous' (Klein, 2002). In a related vein, Kaneva (2011, p. 131) also depicts nation branding as 'an ideological project which reinterprets nationhood in relation to neo-liberalism'. A country's ability to differentiate itself and compete for inward investment, tourists or influence, whether in Europe or the UN, requires them to function effectively in a commodified global marketplace where nation branding is a core competency.

Described in one study as the 'aggregate of stakeholders' images of a country' (Passow et al., 2005, p. 311), measuring a country's reputation and its nation brand remains an elusive science. Newburry & Song (2019), for instance, identify eight global mechanisms to measure a country's reputation on an axis of indicators, from the hard performance indices of exports and foreign direct investment to the more elusive values-based measurement of a country's contribution to the 'global good'. Fombrun's Country RepTrak™ and the Anholt-GfK Nation Brand Index are two of the most established frameworks which attempt to rate a country's performance against a set of indices. Brand Finance publishes an annual report listing the top nation brands each year based on a complex matrix of statistical data and brand sentiment indicators. While Anholt's Good Country Index might appear a little less economics-focused, its measurement of 'what each country contributes to the common good of humanity, and what it takes away, relative to its size' (goodcountry.org) is rigorous, and offers a more holistic, less market-driven analysis of each country's brand strength.

The use of branding and marketing techniques has undoubtedly contributed to some of the scepticism around the practice and purpose of nation branding as a PR exercise for 'spinning away the nation's faults' (Dinnie, 2022, p. 246). Nonetheless, carefully monitored and evaluated data-led promotional strategies such as the post-Brexit 'Scotland is Open' campaign, with 25 million completed video views expressing over 90 per cent positive sentiment (Leaver, 2022), or Ireland's 'Origin Green' model, which drove targeted buyer awareness of Irish food from zero to 86 per cent in Asia (Fitzgibbon, 2022), demonstrate the very tangible impact of framing and promoting a nation brand.

While public diplomacy and nation branding might be described as 'sisters under the skin' (Melissen, 2005, p. 19), there is still considerable tension and debate within the two fields of practice and research as to their pedigree and importance (Anholt, 2003; Kaneva, 2011; Melissen, 2005; Wu & Wang, 2019). Anholt (2010, p. 94) describes public diplomacy as a 'subset of competitive identity', a concept he developed as 'a new model for enhanced national competitiveness' (Anholt, 2007, p. 3) to counteract the superficial interpretation of nation branding. For a country to be successful in its efforts to build its international reputation and influence, it requires 'coordination with the full complement of national stakeholders as well as the main policy makers and all are linked through effective brand management to a single, long-term national strategy' (Anholt, 2010, p. 99).

When asked to give their opinion on which country has the strongest nation brand, two Irish brand strategists, who were interviewed for this article, were in agreement with Anholt (2020) that the Nordic countries come out top of the list. Nation brand scholars commend the Nordics as a case study in 'best practice' for stakeholder collaboration (Pamment, 2016, cited in Zhang & Golan, 2019), while also noting their emphasis on 'green, inspired and civic values' where 'the most important difference is the brand performance of distancing from *branding itself*' (Anderson et al., 2021, p. 362). The strength of the Nordic supranational brand does not impinge on the success of their individual nation brand strategies, as evidenced by the inclusion of four Nordic states – Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland – in the 2021 twenty strongest nation brands, with three of them featuring in the top ten (brandfinance.com).

Melissen (2005, p. 14) makes the point that public diplomacy has evolved from skilled salespeople 'peddling information to foreigners

and keeping the foreign press at bay' to creating opportunities for intercultural dialogue and engagement with a community of global citizens. Increasingly, governments also recognise the power of new media to communicate with diverse foreign publics and are operationalising social media channels in a new form of 'digital diplomacy' (Pamment, 2016, cited in Zhang & Golan, 2019, p. 203).

Nation brand strategies are often considered to be more broadcast than dialogue, something that differentiates them from the traditional public diplomacy model, which ostensibly recognises the value of two-way communication and feedback. In his influential writings on the emergence of the 'brand state', van Ham (2001) contrasts the traditional approach to international relations and geopolitics with the new approach to public diplomacy, which in turn draws on the tactics and tools of corporate branding and reputation building. In the increasingly crowded global marketplace, diplomats and politicians are adopting the role of brand managers for their country while 'engaging in competitive marketing, assuring customer satisfaction, and most of all, creating brand loyalty' (van Ham, 2001, p. 6).

Ireland and nation branding

The concept of nation branding is not new for Ireland. As Clancy (2011, p. 281) observed, 'the [Irish] state has carefully engaged in a sophisticated campaign of branding the country as a tourism destination'. While nostalgic images of a 'windy, green island full of freckled, red-haired children' (van Ham, 2001, p. 2) appealed to the Irish diaspora (Henry, 2022), strategic campaigns such as IDA Ireland's 'Young Europeans' in the 70s and 80s and Bord Failte's 'Brand Ireland' in the 90s positioned Ireland as one of the first countries to consciously manage its brand image (Fanning, 2006). The idea of a coordinated nation brand emerged at the inaugural Global Irish Economic Forum in 2009, where, in the wake of a deepening recession, the idea of harnessing the strength of Ireland's cultural profile and educated workforce to reposition Ireland as 'the innovation island' gathered momentum. Attendance at high-profile global think-tanks and networking events such as the Davos Forum, which inspired the Irish event, formed part of Ireland's reputation rebuilding strategy.

Henry (2022, p. 81) argues that, rather than inhibiting Ireland's success, 'the adoption of sectoral branding approaches have proved fit for purpose in driving standout growth'. With annual marketing

budgets of €40–60 million, it is no surprise that individual agencies such as Tourism Ireland are reluctant to sign up to the coordinated communications approach proposed by Global Ireland. Fanning (2011) advocated a hybrid approach, which retained the expertise and established networks of export agencies, but under the leadership of a senior coordinating group, strategically based in the Department of the Taoiseach or the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). This group would focus on 'internal actions designed to align strategy with substance rather than any external communications campaign' (Fanning, 2011, p. 29).

There are significant challenges for a relatively small country like Ireland to compete in the nation brand stakes when compared with the global 'superbrands' of the US, France and Spain, amongst others. As one interviewee observed: 'The biggest single weakness that a small country has in its brand image or in its competitive identity, is that nobody's ever heard of it, it doesn't get mentioned, it's too small, it's irrelevant' (Interview A, 19 March 2021).

Nonetheless, Ireland's high cultural profile and the strength and recall of Irish arts and artists have enabled it to 'punch above its weight' in terms of brand awareness. In his article 'Beyond the Brand', Anholt (2013, 2) described the Irish government's decision to introduce a generous tax exemption scheme for creative artists in the late 60s as an important symbolic act, which 'proved the state's respect for creative talent'. This illustrates the importance of strategic policy change supported by substantive action as being critical in the context of developing nation branding. In 2022 Ireland became the first country in the world to pilot a basic income for the arts. This represented a deliberate policy shift with significant impact for Irish citizens and the arts but, despite being an objective of Creative Ireland, somewhat surprisingly it did not form part of a nation brand strategy, and was not referenced in any way by Global Ireland.

The role of government is of course central to building a nation brand. As one Dublin-based brand strategist observed: 'The creation of a nation brand image is not about marketing communications. It's about what governments do' (Interview A, 19 March 2021). There are three particular challenges which face governments pursuing a more interventionist approach to nation branding. The first challenge is resistance from agencies already operating in the international arena to what they perceive as a 'top down' strategy which devalues their expertise, distinctive missions and target audiences. The second challenge is around the notion of aligning behind a 'unified narrative'

and imposing a unified image. The final challenge is around authenticity. If a nation brand is to have any relevance beyond a slick marketing campaign, governments must find a balance between crafting and managing the brand and incorporating what has been described as the 'manifold and uncontrollable contributions of stakeholders such as individual citizens' (Dinnie & Sevin, 2020, p. 137).

In an Irish context the primary responsibility, including maintaining connections with an extensive Irish diaspora, has traditionally rested with DFA. With a network of over 160 embassies and consulates located in key territories, DFA works alongside statutory agencies, including Bord Bia, Tourism Ireland, IDA Ireland and the Culture Ireland division, all of which are located in different parent departments. One government official observed that 'one of the challenges we have in Ireland at the moment is that you have a whole load of players on the pitch who are to some extent or other promoting Ireland, or promoting some concept of Ireland' (Interview B, 22 January 2021).

Interestingly, given these latter comments around the dangers of too many players not cohering effectively enough, Irish governments have more recently been taking a more hands-on approach to both coordinate and oversee the range of nation brand initiatives in order to identify and deliver coherent overarching strategic objectives. In terms of Ireland's nation brand strategy, the government has adopted Global Ireland as its official policy initiative to build and maintain Ireland's influence and impact abroad. Although Global Ireland is an all-of-government initiative, several departments and agencies are involved in the realisation of the overall strategy. As a senior government official confirmed, 'the policy is signed off by the political system … but then the executive authority, like Ireland's governance structure is quite distributed, these different departments and agencies and so on. And so you need realignment there … it's a lot of work. It's now policy to do that and you say whose job is that? Within that, it's Foreign Affairs' (Interview B, 22 January 2021).

In the context of a strategy such as Global Ireland, the tone and messaging of individual agencies and government department campaigns are developed specifically to engage their target audiences. But experience from various countries shows that multiple competing campaigns can result in a fractured and confused narrative which, while achieving short-term goals, can also at times help to undermine the longer-term strategic reputational work of a nation brand. But this is not the only issue. In the case of Ireland, as a government official

pointed out, 'it's a contested space' (Interview B, 22 January 2021). A similar point was made by a brand strategist with knowledge of recent Irish campaigns: 'it's not just the target market that's the big bugbear or obstacle. It's the fact that you have four or five different organisations all competing for funds, kudos and basically fame … nobody's prepared to give up their little patch' (Interview A, 11 December 2020).

In response to the challenge around managing the complexity of multi-stakeholder ownership, one approach is to focus on 'a narrative of inclusion, relevance and value' (Interview C, 11 December 2020). This approach speaks to the idea of having a nation brand which functions as a vessel or framework, providing coherence and structure, but which is open enough to allow each stakeholder find their place within it. For example, Creative Ireland, the legacy initiative of Ireland 2016, aims to facilitate, support and enable citizens' participation in creativity as a core driver of national wellbeing. This value-based public policy initiative is broad enough to encompass a diverse range of cross-sectoral partners, from the arts to companies and organisations working in tech, social justice, climate science, sustainable development, architecture, and urban living and health. Although Irish creativity features strongly in Global Ireland, it was dropped as a value in the UN Security Council campaign, only to re-emerge in Ireland's EXPO, 'putting creativity at the centre of human experience' (ireland.ie/expo). This lack of consistency in a values-based nation brand approach serves to undermine its coherence and effectiveness.

Another difficult aspect in creating and managing a nation brand is the constant tension between authenticity and managing brand expectations. This is especially the case for Ireland. The challenge, for instance, of 'selling both the old and the new Ireland simultaneously' (Clancy, 2011, p. 304) is echoed by a policy advisor who described the promotion of Ireland as 'a bit of low taxation but high education, high productivity, good services, good university back up … and at the same time then we tried to attract tourism through trying to pretend that none of that has happened … the tension of the old and the new is there all the time. We've been trying to have it both ways' (Interview D, 11 December 2020).

This tension also extends beyond tourism to the perception of Ireland within international relations and diplomatic circles, where the excessive familiarity and friendliness of the Irish is sometimes at odds with a track record of not always following through on commitments. This creates a challenge in the construction and promotion of a nation brand between what has been described as 'the envisaged and the

enacted' (Interview C, 11 December 2020). There are also reputational issues for Ireland around its perception as a tax haven, which has gained traction in international media and political circles, not least through criticism from influential academics such as Gabriel Zucman (2017), who described Ireland's tax regime as 'theft'. While the Irish government has strongly rejected these pejorative labels, a report by the European Union Tax Observatory in September 2021 concluded that Ireland was the 'biggest tax haven in the world' (Paul, 2021).

Background to Global Ireland 2025

The Global Ireland 2025 initiative was launched by the then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, in 2018 as an all-of-government strategy, which aimed to 'double Ireland's influence and impact in the world by 2025'. As Varadkar noted at the time, 'Ireland is emerging from what has been a lost decade for many of our citizens, and it is clear to me that we are emerging with a greater sense of self-confidence and ambition for what we can do as a country. That national self-confidence requires that we always be ambitious, visible and active in promoting the interests of our nation on the international stage' (Government of Ireland, 2018).

The origins of Global Ireland can be traced back to Creative Ireland, a legacy initiative of Ireland 2016. Located within the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Creative Ireland was initially managed by the same project team who delivered Ireland 2016. The primary objective was to build on the momentum of the 1916 centenary initiative, with a specific component of the all-of-government programme focusing on an international audience. The first action of this strand was the establishment of Ireland.ie, an online 'shop window' modelled on platforms such as Sweden.se and Estonia.ee, including the popular 'invest, study, live and work' strapline.

The Global Ireland Division was established in DFA in 2018 under the directorship of John Concannon, a former director of marketing with Fáilte Ireland and director of both Ireland 2016 and Creative Ireland. Established to oversee the implementation of Global Ireland 2025, an all-of-government structure was adopted as the operating system. It also assimilated the international agenda of Creative Ireland.

For the first time, the Irish government put in place a unified policy and a single coordinating mechanism, to work with a diverse group of

semi-state agencies and line departments in order to advance Ireland's interests abroad. While not directly responsible for individual department and agency strategies, the Global Ireland Division was tasked with establishing cohesion and agreeing shared priorities and objectives. It was also tasked with avoiding duplication and eliminating mixed messages with international audiences. Six regions were identified as priority territories, including Europe, the Americas, Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, alongside adopting eight 'thematic perspectives'. The latter incorporated priorities of existing agencies and departments under broad themes, including 'Bringing our Culture and Heritage to the Wider World' and 'Team Ireland – Supporting Tourism, Trade and Investment' (Government of Ireland, 2018).

Within government, there was a recognition of the challenges – in terms of resources and measurement – with the overall strategy embodied in Global Ireland. Most incisively, one government official noted that the objective 'is not about doubling necessarily trade or tourism, although we'd like that to happen, but it's more our overall footprint and impact. We are doubling down on our identity as an outward-looking, engaging, international actor, a good global citizen' (Interview E, 8 June 2021).

The shift in tone from overtly promotional to one of mutuality is evident in recent Global Ireland videos where traditional images of Ireland are replaced by personal stories of empathy and impact from Irish doctors, scientists, engineers and peacekeepers across the world. This approach was reinforced by a senior government official in his clarification that 'nation branding and Global Ireland isn't just about what we can get from everybody else … it's also about what we can give to the world' (Interview F, 22 January 2021). The notion of being judged by your actions and contribution to the needs of people and the planet strongly connects with what Anholt (2020) characterises as 'the diplomacy of deeds' – but with his important caveat, 'it doesn't need promoting'.[1]

[1] Global Ireland 2025 identified culture as its first thematic priority and recognised the value in creating a 'compelling and imaginative proposition about Ireland … to enhance our international reputation and increase our influence in the world' (Government of Ireland, 2018). However, the explicit connection between creativity and wellbeing as a core value proposition, which emerged in Creative Ireland, was not explicitly carried forward into the UN Security Council Campaign. It re-emerged in Ireland's EXPO narrative, also coordinated by the Global Ireland division, which seeks 'to frame the issue of human creativity in terms of the future wellbeing of mankind' (Ireland.ie).

Much of the Global Ireland strategy focused on outputs, including increased investment in embassies and consulates, the appointment of cultural officers and the creation of Ireland Houses – specially designed flagship buildings where export agencies will be co-located, alongside exhibition and performance spaces – in key territories of interest and influence. Critically, it also put in place a new structure of cross-agency collaboration under the leadership of the Department of the Taoiseach. With so many players on the international pitch, the move to frame the work of multiple agencies and departments within the overarching ambition of the Global Ireland strategy ensured 'cross-government coherence, taking the big picture, trying to make sure that the priorities in one Department's area of work are consistent and coherent with priorities in another area' (Interview E, 8 June 2021).

The importance of collaboration and joined-up thinking was seen as critical to the modus operandi of the new strategy. As a senior government official noted: 'So a core piece of Global Ireland is to bring an integrated approach to how Ireland presents itself internationally' (Interview B, 22 January 2021). The emphasis on inter-agency collaboration was very much in keeping with Dinnie's (2016) ICON framework, where he proposed a model of nation branding that is 'integrated, contextualised, organic and new'.

Critically, within the policy objectives of Global Ireland was the development of a 'coordinated across departmental multi-agency approach to communicating Ireland internationally' (Interview B, 22 January 2021). However, despite this policy shift, Irish export agencies continue to produce individual campaigns, without any Government of Ireland brand architecture, which is an indication of the level of resistance to a coordinated approach.

But, unlike Creative Ireland and Ireland 2016, both of which involved extensive citizen engagement programmes, the new strategy abandoned this grassroots model. Instead, a 'top-down', policy-first, communications-led approach was adopted, and the opportunity to invite citizens to collaborate on an authentic nation brand narrative for a twenty-first-century Ireland was lost.

The UN Security Council campaign

The challenges faced by the UN Security Council in delivering a mandate to 'maintain international peace and security' (unitednations.org) are well documented, including the unwieldy veto

system of the permanent members (Martin, 2020, cited in Pay & Postolski, 2021). For the ten non-permanent members, elected on a two-year rotation, the ability to demonstrate real impact is equally challenging. Despite these issues, however, the Security Council is still regarded as 'the most powerful body of the international community' (Pay & Postolski, 2021, p. 1). Having a seat at the UN table allows elected members to 'play an important and sometimes even crucial role in the Council's decision-making' (Pay & Postolski, 2021, p. 17). Although considered by some as 'an expensive vanity trip' (Boyd, 2017), for a small island on the edge of Europe, it nonetheless offers a unique opportunity to influence and shape human rights policy and actions on a global scale and to flex its 'soft power' (Nye, 2004) muscles.

Three weeks after the announcement of Global Ireland 2025, Ireland's bid to win the seat on the UN Security Council was officially launched 'as a central element of this strategy' (Government of Ireland, 2020, p. 16). In justifying Ireland's candidature, the then Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney, explained that 'we believe in a strong UN and we want to be at the centre of it, advocating for our core values' (Carswell, 2018). The timing of the 2018 campaign was also nationally significant, given the ongoing uncertainty arising from the UK's decision to leave the EU.

Although originally announced in 2005, the campaign to win the UN Security Council seat began in earnest at the UN's headquarters in Manhattan in 2018 with the support of former President Mary Robinson and U2's Bono. The campaign lasted for two years – Ireland ultimately achieved the two-thirds majority required and the crucial 128 votes to win the seat. (Lynch, 2020). In the words of one senior official, 'we left nothing on the pitch' (Interview F, 6 July 2021), meaning every asset and resource available to them was utilised for the successful campaign.

Ireland had served on the UN Security Council three times, most recently in 2001–2, where the campaign strategy to win the seat became the blueprint for the 2021–2 bid. Ireland's colonial past, its commitment to multilateralism and its unbroken history of peacekeeping were once more central in the messaging. Ireland was positioning itself in the language and messaging of the UN campaign as a country 'prepared to be a bridge, prepared to reach out, to bring leadership' (Irish Foreign Ministry, 2018). As in 2001–2, the tactic of forensically seeking every vote by vote, while a team of diplomats and ministers lobbied key countries, coordinated from the campaign

headquarters in Iveagh House, was deployed to persuade influential countries to vote for Ireland.

While Ireland's first two terms on the UN Security Council 'hadn't produced any memorable achievement' (Gillissen, 2006, p. 32), the impact of 9/11 and the subsequent 'War on Terror' overshadowed the 2001–2 term. While its support of Palestine caused some friction within UN diplomatic circles, amidst rising tensions in the Middle East, Ireland leaned on its experience of peacebuilding and dialogue as a constructive approach to addressing conflict resolution. Despite its economic reliance on US investment, Ireland regularly opposed key US policies, including several relating to Palestine. Contrary to speculation that this damaged the brand, Ireland's consistent call for a human-rights-based approach strengthened its position and stance on a 'declared, multilateral world order' (Doyle, 2004, p. 101).

The decision to position the 2021–2 campaign within the framework of Global Ireland was significant and meant that, unlike previous bids, the Department of the Taoiseach had direct oversight and input into the campaign strategy and implementation 'to ensure cross-government coherence' (Interview E, 8 June 2021). It also differed from previous campaigns in its use of digital marketing, amplified by an extensive diaspora and activated through a cross-agency 'Team Ireland' approach, to communicate Ireland's brand values of 'Partnership, Empathy and Independence' (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2018).

One senior brand strategist stressed the importance of taking a values-based approach to building a nation brand: 'I would come at it from the point of view that if you are going to build a nation brand … is that its built on values … and there are three ideas at the heart of branding. Is it credible, is it differentiated and is it motivating to the people you are trying to connect with?' (Interview C, 11 December 2020).

The three core themes of 'Partnership, Empathy and Independence' were considered clear values that separated Ireland from Norway and Canada, the two rival countries for the seat. Among those involved in the brand strategy, there was a view that the narrative presented to voters 'had to be authentic and authenticity is the number one thing in nation branding' (Interview B, 22 January 2021). There was consensus that Ireland had a positive international profile on which to build a campaign, but that the status quo was not going to be sufficient to secure victory. As one official observed: 'You got that reputation. You've got that brand ... that gets you to the

starting line, but it doesn't win you the race. There is the next strategic element of our work which is how do we persuade those who are well disposed to us that we're still worth voting for because we bring something to the table' (Interview F, 6 July 2021).

Whereas the 2001–2 campaign focused on the African and Arab states, the 2021–2 strategy targeted the Small Island Development States, a group of fifty-eight countries, including thirty-eight UN member states. These nations face unique social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities, and specific events were organised to engage with them on shared issues of concern. Each country campaign deployed similar tactics, including climate change conferences (Norway and Ireland), celebrity concerts (Canada and Ireland) and symbolic visual emblems – pink socks with hearts depicting Norway's theme of Women, Peace and Security. Alternatively, Ireland opted for a reimagined tricolour shamrock with a dove replacing the white leaf. These types of activities reinforce the view that winning a UN Security Council seat is a high-stakes game of 'elaborate affairs with slick promotional materials and plenty of wining and dining' (Murphy, 2020).

Both Ireland and Norway had indicated their respective intentions to seek a UN seat well in advance of the 2020 vote – Ireland announcing its candidacy in 2005 and Norway in 2007. Canada had lost out to Portugal in 2010, but its declaration to try again in 2018 was perceived as too late to influence the ultimate outcome. Individual national deals – and vote swapping – are commonplace but negative campaigning was ruled out by Ireland early in campaign discussions.

> But we were very clear, we didn't want to disparage the other two because they are our friends. We're not going to get involved in that. We never deviated from that. We always felt that was the best way. But when Canada said 'Canada is back' we simply said, that's great. We never went away. (Interview F, 6 July 2021)

There is always considerable interest from the media regarding the cost of these types of campaigns. In response to a Freedom of Information request, DFA (2020) confirmed the cost as 'approximately €860,000', compared to the £1.2 million spent on the 2001–2 bid, and significantly less than competitors 'Norway (estimated €2.8 million) and Canada (estimated €1.5 million)'.

The reputational bounce for a country in winning the seat is apparent in the positive media coverage but, equally, losing out has

the potential to be damaging to a national brand image. After the result was confirmed, *Time* magazine observed of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau: 'It's really the biggest embarrassment he will suffer in his prime minister-ship in Canada, particularly on international affairs' (Bolangaro, 2020). Whether the winning of the seat impacts public opinion is debatable. A senior public official observed that 'most (Irish) people, if asked, would say it is a good thing for us to be doing as a global citizen and they would like to see us there at that table and would like us to be using the voice we have there to good effect for the things that matter for Ireland' (Interview E, 8 June 2021).

For the government officials who spearheaded the UN campaign the victory was an important milestone for Global Ireland. Losing the seat would not just have been a huge PR setback; it would have cast a doubt on the new strategy, given its critics a reason to voice their reservations and very likely halted its momentum. Instead, following a very challenging and competitive campaign, a tangible and 'big, big exercise in ticking the box around influence' (Interview B, 22 January 2021) had been achieved. Another government official summarised the outcome in these terms: 'Regardless of whether Global Ireland is there or not, reputation is going to remain key for Ireland abroad. And there has to be some sort of command and control rather than it drifting' (Interview F, 6 July 2021).

Conclusion

The success of the UN Security Council campaign remains a tangible achievement of Global Ireland's mission to advance Ireland's values and increase influence abroad. But for a nation brand initiative to succeed, it has to move beyond a single campaign, target audience or marketing plan. The strategy must embrace the complexity of a nation and its identity, which is constantly evolving and changing. Rather than aiming at a fixed point of tourism bed nights or an increasing multinational footprint, a starting point is the transition to a narrative which is grounded in a collection of values that speak to the lived reality of a community of people who call themselves Irish.

Nation branding is often viewed by public officials as propaganda or 'spin' which is nothing to do with the serious work of foreign policy or geopolitics. It can also be seen as a political tool of a particular party in power and therefore susceptible to delivering short-term goals in order to be considered effective and worth the investment. Global

Ireland survived the transition from one administration to another in 2020 – and remains official government policy. Implementation, however, depends not just on leadership in government but also the willingness of key stakeholders to actively support the strategy. A 'top down' strategy which does not take into account key stakeholder objectives and target audiences risks losing momentum and becoming just another promotional campaign in an already densely populated marketplace.

While the 'Team Ireland' rhetoric features in Global Ireland documentation and stakeholders, such as IDA Ireland and the GAA, appear in promotional videos, there is little evidence of cross-sectoral co-creation of the nation brand, a tactic which the Nordics optimised very effectively in their nation brand approach.

There also remains the challenge of the disenfranchised and marginalised voices within civil society, who for whatever reason are outside of 'official Ireland', and have not been offered the opportunity to have their voices heard. If the nation brand values of 'Partnership, Empathy and Independence' are to be more than empty declarations, a more nuanced and collaborative approach is needed, involving key non-governmental organisations and civil society. The ambition to include a more diverse range of voices and perspectives in Global Ireland was signalled by one senior official, who recognised the 'value to having a wider conversation and including wider members of the public who mightn't fall into any of the groups that get consulted by the Departments. I think what we do internationally is very important to Irish people' (Interview E, 8 June 2021).

A truly authentic and effective nation brand strategy must be grounded in the lived experience of all its citizens, and 'not just civil servants and paid figureheads' (Anholt 2005, p123). If Global Ireland is to have a lasting impact which 'unites a nation in a common sense of purpose and national pride' (Anholt, 2003), it must create opportunities for meaningful collaboration and co-creation. The inclusive approach of Ireland 2016 was proof that not only is it possible for citizens to create and own a new national narrative, it is essential if we are to understand and communicate what it means to be Irish today, and to reflect and embody Ireland's aspirations for the future.

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Department of Foreign Affairs, and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, as well as a number of policy advisors and nation brand strategists familiar with Ireland 2016, Creative Ireland and Global Ireland 2025. These interviews took place in Dublin between December 2020 and July 2021.

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