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Research Paper

Branding and promoting a country amidst a long-term conflict: The case of Colombia

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Colombia as a practical case of branding and marketing within the context of conflict-ridden destinations. It will examine the history and development of the country brand from the tourism development point of view, relating it to the terrorism that has hit the country for the last half a century. This enormously diminished Colombia's reputation in many ways, substantially lowering tourism arrivals. This paper presents an account of how Colombia has reacted to this situation: it will show the efforts put into brand building and tourism promotion that has succeeded, inter alia, in attracting more tourists to the country in recent years.

1. Introduction, context and goals: How a 'never-ending' conflict impacts on tourism

Among the cases of conflict-ridden countries, Colombia is an especially interesting one: this conflict lasted for more than half a century and was ongoing until very recently, as it was only in September 2016 that a peace agreement between the Government and the FARC rebel group was signed. The length, depth, regional, international, and multi-party implications of the conflict have made it the most enduring and complex in the Western Hemisphere (HIIK, 2016). The long-term, low-intensity and average figures of casualties categorize it as a civil war (Restrepo, Spagat, & Vargas, 2004), although in a very particular way.

Colombia has a long tradition of social and political violence. Some researchers (Galindo, Restrepo, & Sánchez, 2009; Restrepo et al., 2004) even go back to colonial times to argue that today's Colombian society was built by an upper class who imposed their world views and lifestyle first on the native Indians and later on the slaves brought over from Africa. The colonial period was marked by sharp social segregation, oppression of the lower classes and almost non-existent social mobility, all of which was carried over to the independent nation after the break with Spain in 1810 (Hoberman & Socolow, 1986). For the first half of the twentieth century, Colombia was in a state of almost permanent civil war, due to the political quarrels among liberals and conservatives. In fact, some authors state that the disputes between these two parties engendered the violent situation confronted by the nation in the second half of the twentieth century (Centro Nacional de

la Memoria Histórica, 2014; Restrepo et al., 2004).

The conflict with which Colombia is still struggling started out as a communist-oriented guerrilla rebellion, led by the armed group FARC, which mainly operated in rural areas, in a process similar to other Latin American countries. However, by the end of the 1980s, as the communist countries collapsed, the ideological factor started fading away and at the same time narcotrafficking clans came onto the scene and became another cause for terrorism. Soon, both types of terrorism would connect and intermingle. By that time, the conflict had mutated into an almost open war between the nation and the armed groups. The conflict continued to escalate and was at its peak in 2002, including some particularly harsh years, such as 1989 (González García & Diana Carolina 2010). During these decades, self-defence groups sponsored by different parties were established (González et al., 2014). Even the national government would sometimes prioritize violence as their preferred method of addressing difficult situations.

By the 2000s, the hard-line policy of then-president Álvaro Uribe, the so-called 'Seguridad democrática' ('Democratic security') policy, succeeded in lowering violence levels, albeit without completely stopping the armed groups' activities. In this context, a large campaign for national traveling was launched (cf. Section 3). In 2012, current president Juan Manuel Santos announced the beginning of peace talks between the government and the FARC rebels, which were held for four years in Havana, Cuba, mediated by the Cuban and Norwegian governments.

It is important to highlight that peace initiatives similar to the current one are not new in the Colombian political scene: on several

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occasions in the past, the nation's leaders have tried to achieve a solution with the rebels but it has never come about ([Centro Nacional de la Memoria Histórica, 2014](#)). As for tourism, soon it was seen as a 'balm' to soothe the wounds inflicted by terror in a hypothetically upcoming time of 'post-conflict' ([Colombia, 2000](#) and [Gómez Tobón, 2002](#)).

The figures of the conflict, which is not officially over yet, are frightening: some 220,000 officially recognized dead and, according to sources, 5–7 million people driven out of their regions of origin. Property loss (both public and private) and economic backwardness have been additional, less-visible consequences. Although this aspect is harder to quantify, we can say that the nation spends one quarter of the national budget on security, which is a much higher proportion than the amount spent on social services. Furthermore, several experts maintain that the loss in GDP per year because of the conflict is around 1.5–2% ([Kalmanovitz, 2012](#)). On a more general level, the Colombian economy throughout the last 50 years has not been strong enough to provide solid growth, thus preventing peace initiatives from being sustained.

Historically, the conflict can be seen as a big single cycle spanning over half a century, cf. [Fig. 1](#).

This graphic can be described in the following way, according to the National Center for Historic Memory:

By 1965 and until 1981, there was low-level but constant violence as the guerrillas grew stronger and started confrontations with the national authorities. Between 1982 and 1995, the tendency increased because of the expansion of the guerrillas' operations, the rise of the paramilitaries, the broadening of narcotraffic [...] and the national crisis. Between 1996 and 2002, the armed conflict reached its highest point as a consequence of military stronger guerrillas, the nation-wide expansion of paramilitary groups, the nation's crisis, the economic crisis and the reconfiguration of narcotraffic within the armed conflict. This period was followed by another one after 2003, which has seen the state's power growing, the marginalization process of the guerrillas and the partial demobilization of paramilitary groups.

[Centro Nacional de la Memoria Histórica \(2014, p.33\)](#).

We think it is highly relevant to compare the aforementioned cycle of terrorism with the promotion and branding of the country as well as with foreign arrivals throughout the last decades. The following template shows the country's tourism statistics grouping them into 'terrorism eras' as just described: ([Fig. 2](#))

[Quintero \(2009\)](#) offers the following diagram comparing Colombian arrivals (in blocks) with arrivals to the Americas (dotted line) using sources from national Colombian authorities and UNWTO data: ([Fig. 3](#))

It can be seen here again that the first phase of growth, from 1974

until 1982, was higher than the growth for the Americas as a whole. From there an irregular period can be seen, with highs and lows, and then from 1998 to 2006 an increasing gap between Colombia and the rest of the region can be seen, which has been closing only in recent years.

The goal of the present paper is therefore to study the origins and development of the country brand, as well as the promotional tourism efforts in Colombia. These will be related to the different phases of the Colombian conflict, focusing on the tourism implications of the brand-making and promotion policies at a national level.

The methodology used to achieve the goals listed above is mainly qualitative. Eleven actors related to the branding and tourism promotion of the country were interviewed, from academia and the public sector. The interviews were semi-structured and the rationale behind the choice of interviewees was their knowledge of or involvement in the tourism industry, specifically with Colombia's promotion as a destination or with the development of the country brand. In addition, secondary literature and data were reviewed. To put the Colombian conflict into a broader context, and to see what other countries have done about tourism and long-term conflicts, the next section offers a literature review of similar cases of terror-stricken countries.

2. Relating the Colombian case to other conflicts: literature review and discussion

This section will review some cases of countries that have been involved in a long-term conflict in order to see if they relate to the Colombian case. As noted above, the rise of left-wing guerrillas occurred in several Latin American countries, mainly in Central America. Therefore, a first source of comparisons could come from this region. In this context, El Salvador or Guatemala could provide a model for the Colombian conflict, especially the former as the settlement of its civil war included a comprehensive agreement between all parties, carried out by the 'Commission for the Truth' ([Montgomery, 1995](#)). However, despite close geographical and cultural ties, Central American countries can hardly be a model to follow for tourism development in post-conflict contexts: El Salvador, for instance, clearly favoured industrial development in the 1990s after the peace agreement was signed ([Barraza Ibarra, 2011:125](#)). [Acevedo \(2003\)](#), in his study of the economic development of El Salvador in the twentieth century, does not even mention the hospitality industry, notwithstanding its huge growth in the decade after the peace agreement. Furthermore, both the national brands of El Salvador and Guatemala rank quite low nowadays (cf. [FutureBrand, 2015](#)), which is perhaps a sign of post-conflict branding strategies that did not perform well. Finally, it must underscored that both countries went down a dangerous path of criminal violence years after the political violence stopped and they are nowadays among the countries with the world's highest

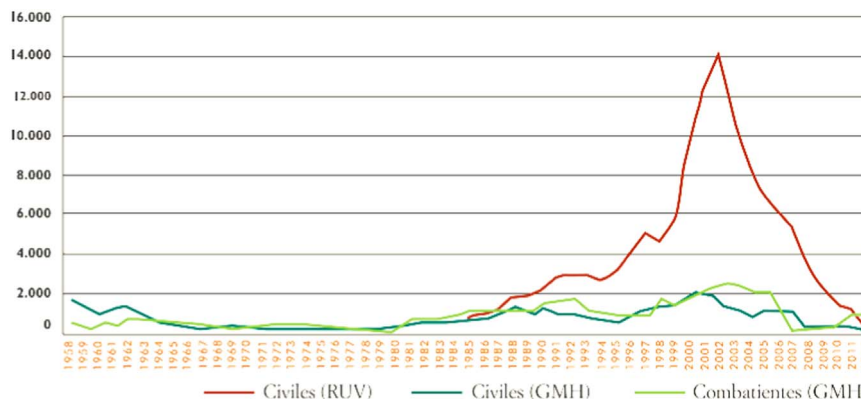


Fig. 1. Source: [Centro Nacional de la Memoria Histórica \(2014\)](#). The line with the highest peak shows the civilians' death toll officially recognized by the authorities, the other two lower lines are estimations of the casualties among combatants made by NGO's.

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