

Comparison of Destination Brand Management Systems: The Cases of the USA and Czechia

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Abstract:

Destination branding has become an essential tool for enhancing national competitiveness in a globalised environment. Tourism plays a central role, as it is one of the most visible aspects of a national brand and significantly shapes its international image. However, financing models for destination branding vary, influencing institutional frameworks, continuity, and the effectiveness of marketing activities. This paper compares two systems: Brand USA, responsible for the brand Visit The USA, and CzechTourism, which manages the brand #VisitCzechia. The paper aims to stimulate discussion on adopting international best practices to identify a suitable financing approach for the Czech context. The study is based on qualitative research using strategic documents and secondary literature. A descriptive analysis highlights differences in institutional arrangements and funding mechanisms. Brand USA operates as a public-private partnership, combining federal resources with private-sector contributions from the tourism

industry. This model ensures stability, long-term continuity, and active business engagement. In contrast, the Czech system relies primarily on direct state budget allocations through the Ministry of Regional Development, making it vulnerable to political cycles, shifting priorities, and fiscal constraints. Findings suggest that while Brand USA has established strong institutional legitimacy and broad partnerships, the Czech model suffers from fragmentation, limited coordination, and insufficient private-sector involvement. These factors affect sustainability and the ability to deliver consistent international campaigns.

Keywords:

Destination branding, Destination management organizations, Public-private partnership, Sustainable financing, Tourism governance

JEL Classification:

Z33, M31

INTRODUCTION

In an era of global competition and growing destination interdependence, nations increasingly recognise tourism as a vital driver of economic growth, international reputation, and soft power. As destinations compete for visitors, investment, and media attention, national tourism organisations play a central role in communicating a coherent image that links a country's identity with its global competitiveness (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008). The management and promotion of destination brands have therefore evolved from isolated marketing activities into integrated instruments of national policy.

Within this framework, destination management organisations (DMOs) serve as key institutional actors responsible for coordinating stakeholders, managing brand communication, and ensuring the financial and strategic continuity of the national tourism brand. However, the effectiveness of these organisations largely depends on their institutional design and funding structure. While some countries rely on state-led systems that ensure policy coherence, others adopt hybrid public-private models that emphasise co-ownership, innovation, and long-term sustainability (Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009; Hidalgo & Fernández, 2021).

This paper examines how different institutional and financial models influence the governance and performance of national destination brands by

comparing Brand USA, a public-private partnership (PPP) representing the United States, and CzechTourism, a state-funded public agency under the Ministry of Regional Development of the Czech Republic. These two cases illustrate contrasting approaches to national tourism branding: the former is characterised by decentralised, industry-led collaboration, and the latter by centralised administrative control.

The study employs a descriptive comparative analysis based on secondary data from legal and strategic documents, and policy frameworks. By examining governance structures, stakeholder participation, and financing mechanisms, the study aims to compare two institutional systems of destination branding governance and assess their respective strengths and weaknesses. Beyond the empirical comparison, the study contributes to broader discussions on destination branding governance, highlighting the importance of hybrid financing models and multi-stakeholder coordination in ensuring the long-term success of national tourism brands.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

Destinations or nations aim to build recognisable, credible, and attractive identities that influence stakeholders' perceptions, attract investment, and stimulate tourism. The growing interdependence between tourism performance and national image has made destination branding a strategic element of international competitiveness (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008). As tourism is often the most visible expression of a country's brand, it serves not only as an economic driver but also as a key instrument for reputation building and soft power (Kotler & Gertner, 2002).

1.1 Destination Branding and Competitiveness

Tourism destinations increasingly face the challenge of differentiating themselves by enhancing brand visibility, securing financial resources, and fostering visitor loyalty. As Ritchie and Crouch (2003) state, a destination's competitiveness relies on its ability to transform natural and cultural resources, along with infrastructure, into an attractive offering that meets the needs of international target markets. The destination brand thus serves as a visible and

tangible element of the broader national brand. The way a country is presented through tourism often constitutes its most prominent and frequently perceived dimension (Anholt, 2007). Consequently, this dimension becomes a crucial tool for projecting the national brand into public awareness, supporting the country's overall competitiveness in economic, cultural, and political spheres.

Destination branding has therefore become a pivotal instrument of competitiveness. A strong destination brand, supported by a clear governance system and sustainable financing, enhances recognisability and credibility, enables meaningful differentiation from competitors, and adds value to visitor experiences, services, and tourism products. Conceptually, destination branding integrates a place's identity and image, its core values, and distinctive attributes. Following Dinnie (2008), it can be understood as a "multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all target audiences." From the perspective of Ritchie and Crouch's competitiveness framework, branding is a strategic tool that transforms both inherited and created resources – natural assets, history, cultural heritage, infrastructure, and events – into competitive advantage (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003). Anholt (2007) further emphasises that destination branding should be embedded within a country's broader competitive identity, a coordinated approach in which tourism, culture, exports, and inward investment jointly shape international reputation.

Building a destination brand is a long-term, multi-actor process. It requires a coherent presentation anchored in clearly defined values and competitive advantages, ideally framed within the visual and communication system of the national brand. Effective coordination among public institutions, DMOs, the private sector, and local communities is critical for continuity and sustainability. In parallel, stable governance, institutional anchoring, and long-term financing are essential conditions that enable the brand to contribute not only to inbound tourism growth but also to broader economic prosperity and the country's reputation (Anholt, 2007; Moilanen & Rainisto, 2009).

1.2 Institutional and Financial Frameworks of Destination Branding

Therefore, successful brand stewardship depends not only on strategy but also on a stable and diversified funding model for the DMO as the brand's operator. Sustainable funding ensures continuity of market presence, image building,

and reputation management. In this sense, financing is a competitiveness factor in its own right: it determines the ability of destinations to create, maintain, and consistently amplify their brand internationally. As Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) argue, without durable and predictable financing, brand activities risk becoming isolated projects, leading to fragmented messaging and erosion of trust among international target audiences.

In terms of funding structure and sources, destination brand financing is commonly classified into three categories: public, private, and self-generated income, reflecting varying degrees of autonomy and stakeholder involvement (DMAI, 2015; FEMP, 2008, as cited in Hidalgo & Fernández, 2021). Public financing predominates at the national level, where marketing and management are delivered by state bodies or agencies funded by ministerial allocations, regional transfers, or EU funds. Its main advantages are stability and predictability, which support long-term planning and strategic continuity, though exposure to political and budget cycles is a known vulnerability (Hidalgo & Fernández, 2021). Private financing serves as a complementary or alternative source through membership dues, corporate partnerships, sponsorships, and co-operative campaigns, especially in market-oriented DMOs (e.g. Austria, Switzerland, the USA). It tends to strengthen market responsiveness and innovation but may introduce tensions between public and commercial interests if not well governed (Dinnie, 2008; DMAI, 2015, as cited in Hidalgo & Fernández, 2021). A third category, self-generated revenues, arises from DMO activities such as service sales, licensing, paid media inventory, merchandising, or operation of tourism facilities. This model bolsters autonomy and agility but requires high professional capacity and business discipline (Beritelli & Laesser, 2014; Hidalgo & Fernández, 2021).

In practice, hybrid models that combine all three sources are increasingly common. Countries with mature tourism governance (e.g., Austria, Canada, Switzerland) typically combine public funds with business membership income and own-source revenues. Such mixed systems not only create a more resilient budget environment but also improve resource efficiency by aligning public interests with market mechanisms. As Moilanen and Rainisto (2009) note, diversification of funding is fundamental to the financial sustainability and long-term viability of destination brands, while also promoting partnership principles and shared responsibility – factors that ultimately strengthen credibility and competitiveness (Ritchie & Crouch, 2003; Anholt, 2007).

2 METHODOLOGY

This paper employs a descriptive comparative analysis to examine two national DMOs: Brand USA and CzechTourism. The methodology adopts a case study approach, providing an in-depth description of both cases and subsequently comparing them to highlight key differences. The comparison focuses on their institutional governance structures and funding mechanisms, as these factors critically determine the sustainability, continuity, and effectiveness of destination branding strategies. The study aims to identify key differences between a PPP model and a state-controlled public agency, and to assess their implications for strategic management and brand performance.

The selection of the two cases was purposeful, reflecting contrasting governance contexts: the United States as an example of a decentralised system with strong industry participation, and the Czech Republic as a post-socialist country with a centralised, state-dependent model. This contrast provides a useful framework for exploring how institutional design affects the implementation of national branding policies in different political and economic environments.

The analysis relies exclusively on secondary data collected from multiple sources. Official legislative and policy documents, such as the Travel Promotion Act of 2009 for Brand USA and the founding charter and statutory decisions of CzechTourism, provide the formal legal and institutional context. Additional data were obtained from annual reports, and strategic documents published by both organisations.

3 RESULTS

The results of this comparative case study provide insights into how governance structures and funding mechanisms shape the strategic capacity of national DMOs. By examining Brand USA and CzechTourism, the analysis identifies key institutional differences that influence resource allocation, stakeholder engagement, and long-term brand sustainability.

3.1 Brand USA

Brand USA is the official destination marketing organisation of the United States, responsible for promoting inbound tourism under the global brand Visit The USA. It was established by the Travel Promotion Act of 2009, 22 U.S.C. § 2131 et seq. (2009), as a non-profit corporation legally registered as the Corporation for Travel Promotion. The organisation became operational in 2011, marking the first coordinated national effort to promote the United States as a single tourism destination.

Brand USA (2019) operates as a PPP designed to foster close collaboration between the federal government and the tourism industry. Its governance is entrusted to an 11-member Board of Directors, appointed by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce in consultation with the Secretaries of Homeland Security and State. This interdepartmental appointment process ensures alignment between tourism promotion, visa and border policies, and foreign affairs.

The Board consists of representatives from key sectors of the U.S. travel industry, including hospitality, food services, transportation (air, land, and sea), attractions and recreation, travel distribution, state tourism offices, and convention and visitors bureaus. This structure ensures broad private-sector involvement and diverse stakeholder representation. The Board's work is supported by specialised committees, such as the Governance and Nominating Committee and the Marketing Committee, which enhance strategic oversight and accountability. (Brand USA, 2019)

Brand USA's statutory mission is clearly defined: to promote inbound international travel to the United States. The organisation does not engage in domestic tourism promotion, which remains the responsibility of state and local DMOs. Brand USA's activities include integrated global marketing campaigns, public relations, cooperative advertising programmes, digital promotion, and research on international travel trends. This focus enables the development of coherent, long-term branding strategies aimed at strengthening the country's global competitiveness. (Brand USA, 2024)

The most distinctive feature of Brand USA (2019) is its hybrid financing system, which combines public and private resources through the Travel Promotion Fund. This fund is partially financed by the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) fee, amounting to USD 17 per traveller. Since 2013, federal contributions to Brand USA have been subject to a 100% matching requirement: for every dollar drawn from the federal fund, Brand USA must secure an

equivalent amount from non-federal sources, primarily private-sector partners such as airlines, hotel chains, and state DMOs.

This model effectively doubles available resources and incentivises strong private-sector engagement, ensuring that stakeholders who benefit from tourism also contribute to its promotion. It also strengthens accountability and reduces dependence on public finances. However, recent developments have posed significant challenges to this framework. According to Parkinson (2025), under new federal budget provisions, Brand USA's allocation will decrease from up to USD 100 million to USD 20 million annually, and the organisation will lose access to ESTA-derived revenues. These changes will increase reliance on private contributions and could constrain Brand USA's ability to sustain the scale of its international marketing operations.

Brand USA's key strengths include its diversified funding model, which combines federal resources with private-sector contributions, and its governance structure, which ensures broad industry participation. This framework provides financial resilience, operational flexibility, and strong stakeholder engagement, enabling long-term, market-oriented branding strategies. However, recent reductions in federal allocations and the loss of ESTA-derived revenue present significant challenges, increasing reliance on private contributions and potentially limiting the scale of global marketing campaigns.

3.2 CzechTourism

CzechTourism is the national destination management and marketing organisation of the Czech Republic. Established in 1993 by the Ministry of Regional Development of the Czech Republic (2015), it operates as a public contributory organisation under Act No. 29/1993 Coll. and Decision No. 138/2015 of the Ministry, which define its legal status and governance. The agency's mission is to enhance the competitiveness of Czech tourism through the development and promotion of inbound and domestic tourism.

Unlike Brand USA, CzechTourism operates within a centralised governance framework. The General Director is appointed directly by the Minister of Regional Development, and the organisation reports exclusively to the Ministry. While this structure ensures administrative control and alignment with national tourism policy, it limits formal private sector participation in decision-making.

CzechTourism (2024) operates a dual-brand system consisting of the international brand #VisitCzechia, which promotes the country abroad, and the domestic platform Kudy z nudy, which aims to stimulate domestic tourism and regional diversification. Balancing these two missions requires allocating resources between international visibility and domestic engagement, which can dilute strategic focus, especially during fiscal constraints or when short-term political objectives take precedence.

CzechTourism's funding relies almost entirely on allocations from the state budget, specifically through the budget chapter of the Ministry of Regional Development. The agency does not receive direct financial contributions from the private sector. Any collaboration with private entities, such as joint campaigns with airlines, hotels, or event organisers, must take place through public procurement procedures or cooperative marketing projects, both of which are subject to strict administrative rules and limited flexibility. (Established in 1993 by the Ministry of Regional Development of the Czech Republic 2015.)

Occasionally, CzechTourism (2024) enters into cost-sharing arrangements with regional authorities or other public institutions to coordinate communication strategies and optimise resources CzechTourism (2024). However, the absence of a formal PPP mechanism limits opportunities for long-term partnerships or co-investment from the tourism industry. Consequently, CzechTourism's financial stability remains closely linked to annual government budgets and political priorities.

CzechTourism's state-led model ensures clear accountability, policy coherence, and alignment with the national tourism strategy. The advantage of this system is its strong administrative control and ability to implement unified national objectives within a single institutional framework. Its integration within the Ministry of Regional Development enables consistent implementation of government priorities and coordinated national promotion. However, this centralised framework also introduces several systemic vulnerabilities. High dependence on public funding exposes the organisation to political cycles, shifting ministerial agendas, and broader fiscal austerity measures. The lack of diversified funding streams limits its financial flexibility and long-term planning capacity. Furthermore, limited private sector involvement constrains innovation potential, reduces responsiveness to market dynamics, and weakens stakeholder commitment to the national brand.

3.3 Comparison

While both Brand USA and CzechTourism function as national DMOs with the overarching goal of enhancing their countries' tourism competitiveness, their institutional and financial frameworks differ significantly. These differences arise primarily from their governance models, funding mechanisms, and the extent of public-private collaboration.

Brand USA operates as a PPP, balancing governmental oversight with strong engagement from the private sector of the tourism industry. Its governance structure, led by a board appointed by several federal departments and composed of representatives from key tourism sectors, ensures diverse stakeholder participation and accountability. The organisation's hybrid funding model, which combines federal resources with mandatory private-sector matching, provides both financial stability and strategic flexibility. This structure encourages shared responsibility, as stakeholders who benefit from tourism actively contribute to national promotion efforts. As a result, Brand USA enjoys greater operational autonomy and the ability to pursue long-term, market-oriented branding strategies.

From a financial perspective, the contrast is most pronounced. Brand USA's hybrid system leverages the Travel Promotion Fund, which until recently matched each public dollar with an equivalent private contribution. This approach doubled available resources, incentivised innovation, and reduced reliance on federal funding. In contrast, CzechTourism depends almost entirely on annual state budget allocations. The absence of formalised PPP mechanisms limits its capacity to attract additional private financing or engage in long-term co-investment schemes. Consequently, CzechTourism's operations are vulnerable to fiscal fluctuations, political changes, and short-term budgetary priorities.

Institutionally, Brand USA exemplifies a networked governance model that integrates national objectives with industry expertise. Its board composition, multi-agency coordination, and transparent accountability mechanisms align tourism promotion with broader federal priorities, including visa policy and international relations. CzechTourism's hierarchical governance ensures policy consistency but lacks the consultative and participatory mechanisms that enhance adaptability and stakeholder ownership. Table 1 summarises the institutional characteristics of Brand USA and CzechTourism.

Tab. 1: Institutional Framework: Brand USA vs. CzechTourism

Element	Brand USA (USA)	CzechTourism (Czechia)
Legal Basis	Travel Promotion Act (2009)	Act No. 29/1993 Coll., founding charter by CzechTourism
Organisational Form	Non-profit corporation (Corporation for Travel Promotion)	Public contributory organisation under the Ministry of Regional Development
Governing Body	Board of Directors (11 members); industry representatives	General Director appointed by the Minister
Governance Structure	Committees (Governance and Nominating, Marketing)	Direct control by the Ministry of Regional Development of the Czech Republic
Funding Model	Public-private partnership: federal matching funds and private-sector contributions	State budget (Ministry of Regional Development of the Czech Republic chapter)
Accountability	Reports to U.S. Congress	Reports to the Ministry of Regional Development

Source: Own elaboration based on the Travel Promotion Act of 2009 and Decision No. 138/2015 of the Ministry of Regional Development of the Czech Republic regarding the founding charter of CzechTourism.

4 DISCUSSION

The comparison between Brand USA and CzechTourism highlights two fundamentally different paradigms of destination governance and brand management. Brand USA operates with a decentralised, partnership-oriented structure, while CzechTourism remains closely linked to the administrative and financial framework of the Ministry of Regional Development. This institutional dependency affects almost every operational aspect, including strategic planning, budget allocation, stakeholder engagement, and innovation capacity.

As CzechTourism is fully funded by the state budget, its strategic planning horizon is limited by annual fiscal cycles and ministerial approval processes. Budget allocations are negotiated within broader political priorities, which may shift with each electoral term. This dependency undermines long-term

continuity in international promotion and limits the agency's ability to maintain consistent brand positioning.

The CzechTourism model, while providing policy coherence, restricts managerial autonomy and potential for innovation. Cooperative marketing activities with private partners are subject to rigid public procurement procedures, limiting flexibility and slowing responses to market dynamics. As a result, private stakeholders may perceive CzechTourism as an administrative extension of the state rather than a strategic partner. The lack of formalised mechanisms for PPPs reduces shared ownership of the national brand and weakens the collective engagement required for effective destination promotion.

In contrast, Brand USA remains a benchmark for institutional innovation in destination branding, despite recent fiscal pressures. Its governance structure combines governmental oversight with private-sector co-ownership, ensuring continuity beyond electoral cycles. The organisation demonstrates how a transparent PPP framework can mobilise diverse resources, maintain stakeholder trust, and deliver consistent, long-term promotion of a national brand. Through the matching-fund system, Brand USA links accountability with collaboration, encouraging those who benefit from tourism to reinvest in its growth.

Furthermore, the two cases support Ritchie and Crouch's (2003) assertion that destination competitiveness depends not only on inherited and created resources but also on the institutional capacity to manage them. Brand USA's decentralised structure enables agility, innovation, and rapid adaptation to global market changes, reflecting the advantages of network-oriented governance models that promote flexibility and co-creation. This model enhances autonomy and agility but requires high professional capacity and business discipline (Beritelli & Laesser, 2014; Hidalgo & Fernández, 2021). Conversely, CzechTourism's centralised framework prioritises bureaucratic control and compliance, highlighting the weaknesses of hierarchical models.

From a comparative perspective, Brand USA demonstrates how decentralisation and public-private collaboration can foster agility, innovation, and market responsiveness. Its diversified funding structure enables strategic continuity even during political transitions, while shared ownership enhances legitimacy and stakeholder trust. In contrast, CzechTourism's state-led model, although beneficial for ensuring policy alignment and national coherence, tends to prioritise administrative compliance over strategic innovation. This limits the organisation's ability to respond swiftly to global market trends and to develop partnerships that could extend its promotional reach.

The comparative analysis therefore suggests that, while the centralised system provides stability and coherence, it also risks bureaucratic inertia. Conversely, the partnership-based framework offers dynamism and inclusivity but relies heavily on sustained private sector commitment and stable external funding. The optimal governance model for national destination branding may therefore lie in balancing these two approaches, combining the strategic oversight of public administration with the flexibility and resource diversity of private sector participation.

To ensure the continuity and competitiveness of Czech national branding, a gradual transition to a hybrid financing model could be considered. Introducing mechanisms for voluntary private-sector participation, such as co-branded campaigns, membership schemes, or matching contributions, would align the Czech system with international best practices. Establishing a formal advisory board comprising representatives from key tourism industries, regions, and professional associations could also strengthen institutional legitimacy, enhance coordination, and foster collective ownership of the national brand.

The study is limited by its reliance on publicly available secondary data, which may not fully capture internal decision-making processes, informal networks, or political influences affecting each organisation's operations. While the present analysis provides a conceptual foundation, future research could address these limitations through semi-structured interviews with policy-makers, industry representatives, and organisational leaders to validate the findings and provide deeper insight into the mechanisms underlying institutional performance.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the institutional and financial frameworks of national DMOs through a comparative analysis of Brand USA and CzechTourism. Both entities share a common objective: strengthening the international competitiveness of their countries through coordinated tourism branding. However, their governance structures, funding models, and stakeholder engagement differ fundamentally.

The findings show that Brand USA's PPP model enables a greater degree of institutional innovation, accountability, and resilience. Its hybrid financing system, based on the Travel Promotion Fund and matching contributions, aligns

public interests with private incentives and ensures continuity beyond political cycles. This structure fosters co-ownership of the national brand, encourages active participation from the tourism industry, and creates a more dynamic and adaptive framework for international promotion.

In contrast, CzechTourism's centralised, state-dependent model provides policy coherence and administrative oversight but limits flexibility and stakeholder inclusion. Complete reliance on the state budget through the Ministry of Regional Development subjects the agency to annual budget negotiations and political cycles, restricting long-term planning and continuity. The lack of formalised PPPs further reduces the capacity to diversify resources, encourage innovation, and build shared responsibility among industry actors.

The Czech case demonstrates the need for gradual institutional modernisation. Introducing hybrid financing mechanisms, such as voluntary co-funding schemes, co-branded campaigns, or membership-based partnerships, could improve financial stability and align the system with international best practices. Establishing an advisory council comprising private-sector and regional representatives could also strengthen legitimacy, enhance coordination, and foster collective ownership of the national tourism brand.

This research used a descriptive comparative approach based on secondary data, allowing for a structured analysis of institutional and financial frameworks across two contrasting governance systems. While this design provides valuable conceptual insights, it also has certain limitations, particularly concerning the availability of internal operational data. Future studies should build on these findings through qualitative interviews and longitudinal analyses to better capture stakeholder dynamics, informal governance mechanisms, and the long-term effects of financing structures on brand performance.

Ultimately, the comparison demonstrates that the sustainability of a national destination brand depends on institutional balance – between public accountability and private engagement, and between strategic continuity and operational flexibility. As tourism becomes increasingly competitive and globalised, adopting diversified funding and inclusive governance models will be essential for maintaining visibility, trust, and long-term competitiveness in international markets.

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