

STRATEGIC PATTERNS OF NATIONAL POSTAL OPERATORS' INTERNATIONALIZATION: A NETWORK AND RESOURCE-BASED VIEW APPROACH

The paper builds on previous research about the importance of the international market for the development of national postal operators (NPOs) and the inter-organizational nature of their participation in international business and studies how they could further expand the latter. By integrating theories in the fields of strategic management and international business, in particular the resource-based view and the network approach to internationalization, the author outlines the relation “networks – resources”, thus highlighting the role of networks in terms of providing access to resources that facilitate the expansion of international operations. The theoretical foundations of the research serve as the basis for proposing a view on the internationalization of NPOs: a process of building positions in traditional and new networks through penetration as well as extension and integration, with access to resources available in these networks being at the heart of the process. Then, a framework for expanding NPOs' international activities is provided; it consists of three strategic patterns that represent combinations between the networks used and the international operations applied. Thus, the paper addresses the general lack of research concerning the internationalization of these companies, among other contributions.

JEL: F23; L32; L87; M16

Introduction

There is a great variety of businesses providing delivery services: national postal operators, private operators, courier and express delivery companies, parcel integrators, freight-forwarders and consolidators, fulfilment houses, companies offering green logistics solutions by using bicycles and electric vehicles, etc. Regardless of the existing differences, these services are to a large extent substituted, which results in an intensifying competition both nationally and internationally.

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National or designated postal operators (NPOs) are organizations that are legally obliged to provide the universal postal service, i.e. delivery of a range of postal shipments (letters, small packets, parcels, etc.) at affordable prices and in accordance with defined quality targets and frequency. These companies have distinct positions on their home markets and in the international business environment due to a number of reasons which differentiate them from the rest of the above-mentioned players. As a representative of the public sector and an instrument of national economic and social policies, they have played a key role in providing citizens, businesses and institutions with a basic and accessible means of communication. NPOs used to have a monopoly position on the relevant domestic markets, and today they have an obligation to provide a certain range of services, which is an expression of their traditional social functions. The interconnectedness of national networks has created a global network for delivery of various shipments, which adds crucial international dimensions to the activities of designated operators. Moreover, the postal sector is highly regulated and has a well-developed institutional framework, with the companies themselves being integrated into international organizations on a global and regional level. This determines the application of uniform rules for postal operators' activities and a high degree of standardization of the services provided.

Market reforms, the growth of international trade, technological development, competitive pressures and changing customer preferences, among others, challenge the traditional positions of designated operators. They alter their functions in terms of serving the relevant internal markets and facilitating the internationalization of national economies; they impact the balance between the pursuit of economic and social goals and bring to the fore new international business opportunities. This requires looking for patterns of further internationalization of NPOs in view of repositioning them in today's business environment and guaranteeing their sustainable development.

Objectives and Methodology

The aim of this paper is to propose a framework on how NPOs can expand their international business operations.

The following research objectives will facilitate the achievement of the aim:

1. To build the theoretical foundation of the research study by summarizing and integrating theories in the fields of strategic management and international business.
2. To present a view on the internationalization process of NPOs.
3. To outline the strategic patterns of expanding NPOs' activities abroad that constitute the framework.

The core proposition of the paper is that postal operators can follow different patterns to expand their international operations depending on the networks they choose to build positions in and the degree to which they integrate the resources available in these networks.

The importance of the research study is determined by the specific positions of NPOs both at home and abroad, as explained in the introduction; by the growing integration of the global

economy and the need to take into account the threats and opportunities stemming from the international market when formulating corporate strategies, plans; by the increasing diversity of participants in international business, including state-owned enterprises (SOEs), and the growing interest of researchers in the role of the state as an “entrepreneur” in international business. The research results can be used by various organizations involved in the postal sector in relation to the policies, strategies, plans, etc., that are developed and implemented.

Although various postal sector studies exist, and some of them touch upon the presence of operators on foreign markets, none of them adopts a general international business approach. They have been conducted by international postal organizations such as the Universal Postal Union (UPU), the Association of European Public Postal Operators (PostEurop), the International Post Corporation (IPC), or by the European Commission, etc., and focus on diverse aspects such as the evolution of the universal postal service market, regulations, employment, entry into new business lines and development of new services, remuneration systems for international mail, implementation of new technology, consumer attitudes, etc.

In view of the above, the starting point of the paper is previous research by the author, which demonstrates the inter-organizational nature of designated operators' participation in international business. In line with it, an assumption of this paper is that NPOs are SOEs. Despite the fact that there are privatized operators as a result of the ongoing postal reform, the number of companies that are 100% privately held is still small. For example, out of the 32 national operators of the member states of the European Union and the European Economic Area only 4 are 100% privately held, and 21 companies are 100% state-owned; the state is a minority shareholder in 1 operator and a majority shareholder in 6. At the same time, the European postal sector is considered as the most advanced from the perspective of the postal reform. Then, a theoretical perspective regarding this process is proposed on the basis of a literature review of applicable theories in the fields of strategic management and international business. The choice of the latter is influenced by the findings of Toteva (2019) about the basic model and postal operators' interaction with various market players in traditional and new networks and by existing papers that explore the importance of networks for providing access to resources that facilitate international operations, for example, Elango et al. (2007) and Chetty et al. (2003). Thus, the methodological basis of the research is shaped by the interdisciplinary and systematic approaches, and a number of methods of theoretical and empirical analysis are used, such as analysis and synthesis, abstraction and generalization, deduction and induction, comparison, classification, etc.

The paper is structured as follows. First, some key aspects of the international activities of designated operators based on previous research are summarized. Second, the theoretical foundations of the research study are laid. Third, a view on the internationalization process of NPOs is proposed. Fourth, the relation “networks – resources” is explored by offering a classification of the resources facilitating operators' internationalization. Fifth, a framework on how they can expand their international operations is presented. Finally, the main conclusions are summarized and suggestions for future research are outlined.

1. Basic Model for National Postal Operators' Participation in International Business

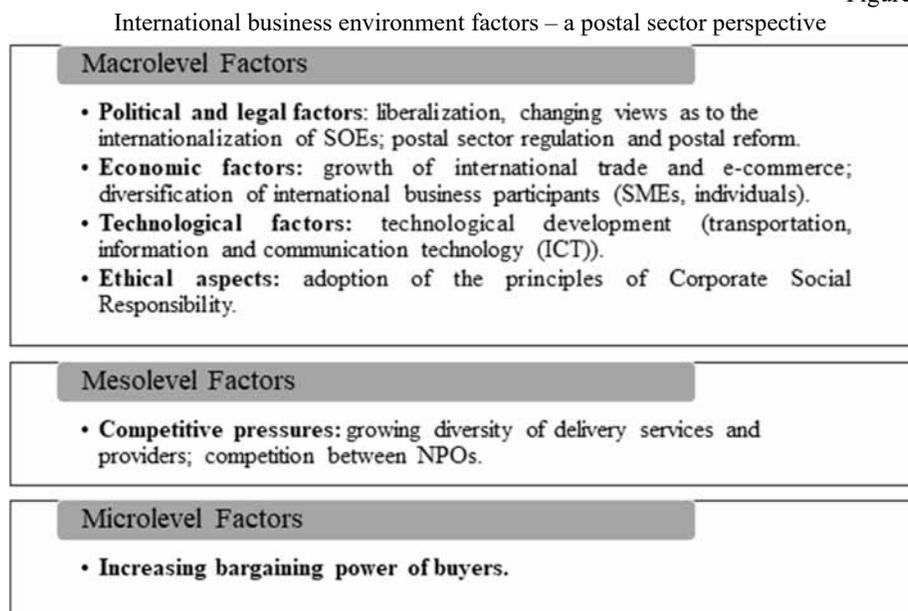
Toteva (2019) argues that designated operators' participation in international business is an inter-organizational phenomenon, i.e. the basis of this process is the interaction of operators with various organizations in traditional and new networks. The operations of NPOs have always displayed important international dimensions as they facilitate communications between individuals, businesses and institutions both at home and abroad. The *basic model* for operators' international activities, as defined by Toteva (2019), involves the provision of services for international delivery of shipments of various contents (documents, goods, samples, etc.), dimensions, weight or delivery times, and between diverse types of customers (C2X, B2X, G2X, where X stands for the recipient – individual customers (C), business customers (B) and governmental institutions (G)).

This model, which has contributed to establishing national operators as a key representative of the group of facilitators in international business (according to the classification by Cavusgil et al. (2012)), exhibits the following main features. First, NPOs focus on providing the described services to local customers while displaying a relatively passive attitude to foreign markets. Second, the model is shaped by the interaction between national operators as leading business partners in accordance with the regulations and practices negotiated within the global postal network. This interaction resembles relations between customers and suppliers, and is based on the principles of cooperation and non-competition. Access to markets abroad is indirect and is gained through the relevant designated operators. In view of the classification of international business operations into traditional and complex (Karakasheva, et al., 2005; Karakasheva, 2011), Toteva (2019) draws a parallel between the basic model and the international sale as a major cross border operation and intermediary operations as its variants. The latter implies a low degree of commitment between partners in the global postal network as they retain their legal, economic and production autonomy. There is a high level of standardization in terms of implementation procedures, documentation used, etc., with the risks that participants are exposed to being relatively limited.

Toteva (2019) argues that the basic model is influenced by two groups of factors. Historically, it has been shaped by the administrative heritage (as considered by Bartlett, et al., 2000) of NPOs. This relates to their participation in two *traditional networks* where the state is present – the system of state institutions in each country and the global postal network in its capacity as a business and intergovernmental network, and the interaction with organizations in them (foreign postal operators, state institutions, the UPU², etc.). Nowadays, a range of macro, meso- and micro-level factors of the business environment, as shown in Figure 1, create conditions for the expansion of NPOs' international operations, and challenge the basic model. Thus, further internationalization requires interaction with a wider range of market players (competitors, business customers, e-tailers, software developers, etc.), building new relationships and entering *new networks*.

² The UPU is a specialized agency of the United Nations. The organization is the main forum for cooperation between the various players in the postal sector, where they agree upon the regulations for provision of international mail delivery services. <http://www.upu.int/en.html> (accessed 31.08.2019).

Figure 1



Source: Toteva, 2019.

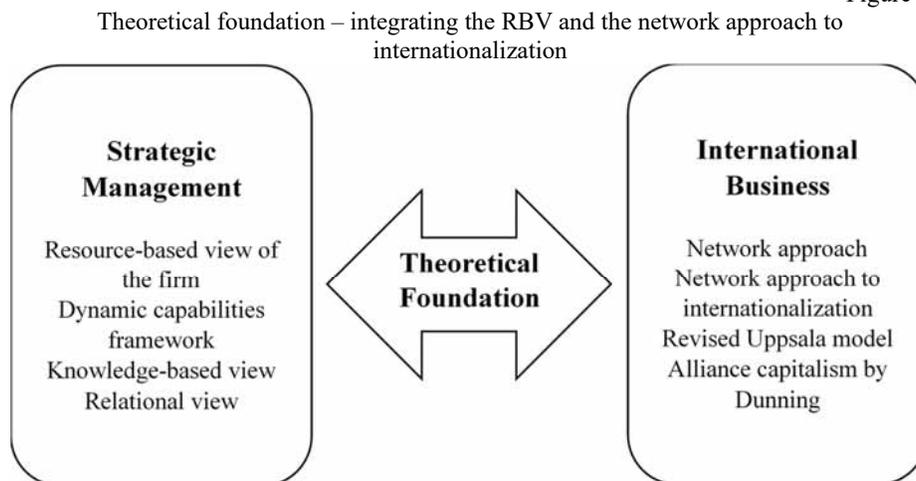
2. Theoretical Foundation: Resource-Based View of the Firm and Network Approach to Internationalization

This section contains the theoretical foundation of the research study, which is the basis for proposing a view on the internationalization of NPOs and the strategic patterns that they can follow to expand their operations on foreign markets. The author integrates applicable theories in the fields of strategic management and international business, in particular the resource-based view of the firm (RBV) and the network approach to internationalization, and outlines a transition from considering the internationalization process as an intra-organizational phenomenon to considering it as an inter-organizational one.

2.1. Internationalization as an intra-organizational process

Various theories in the fields of strategic management and international business consider a firm's competitive position from the perspective of intra-organizational conditions. The RBV and its variants (dynamic capabilities, knowledge-based view, relational view) describe the company as a collection of productive resources and study the dependence between firm performance and the resources it possesses (Barney, 1991; Lockett, 2005). A key assumption is resource heterogeneity which can persist for a long period of time as resources may not be perfectly mobile.

Figure 2



Source: prepared by the author.

Barney (1991) defines firm resources as “all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge, etc., controlled by a firm that enable the firm to conceive of and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness”, and identifies physical, human and organizational capital resources. According to Barney (1991), a firm resource must be valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and must not have strategically equivalent substitutes that meet the first three criteria to have the potential to create a sustainable competitive advantage. He puts the focus on resources already controlled by the company.

Some authors distinguish between resources and capabilities. Grant (1991) views resources as all “inputs into the production process”, and classifies them into 6 groups: financial, physical, human resources, technological, organizational and reputation. He defines capabilities, which are the foundation of competitive advantages, as what a company can achieve by bringing resources to work together. Moreover, other researchers distinguish between capabilities (“zero level”) and dynamic (“higher-order”) capabilities, with the former permitting the firm to work in the short term and the latter allowing it to develop and modify the zero level ones, thus enabling it to respond to the dynamic business environment in the long term (Lockett, 2005; Teece, et al., 1997). According to the dynamic capabilities framework (Teece, et al., 1997), the sources of a firm’s competitive advantage are “managerial and organizational processes, shaped by its (specific) asset position, and the paths available to it”, for example, assets that cannot be purchased on the market and are difficult to imitate (technological, reputational assets, etc.). The knowledge-based view identifies knowledge as a key resource, with the main aim of the company being to develop, protect and transfer it (Lockett, 2005). It argues that firms are better at protecting knowledge from imitation and expropriation compared to markets. Other research studies underline the

role of resources such as information technology, strategic planning, human resources management, trust, organizational culture, skills of top managers, etc. (Priem, et al., 2001).

Despite the diverse approaches, it is important to note that in a highly competitive environment and given the evolving customer requirements, a firm's competitive position, also internationally, depends on its ability to enhance its resource base, moving to more complex and specialized resources that are difficult to imitate (Grant, 1991).

In addition, theories of international business posit that having a specific or unique advantage underlies the internationalization process of the company, with many of these theories focusing on its creation internally. According to Hymer, the rationale behind international operations lies in the fact that markets are imperfect and companies are not homogeneous in terms of the resources they possess (Rugman, et al., 2011; Daneshka, 2012). He refers to those resources by the term "firm-specific advantages" (FSAs), and argues that they are created on the national market, and help the company to offset the liability of foreignness when operating abroad. Examples of FSAs are the ability to achieve product differentiation and vertical and horizontal integration, marketing and distribution skills, trademarks, access to raw materials, access to capital, economies of scale, patents, etc. (Rugman, et al., 2011). Kindleberger talks about monopolistic advantages, and Caves highlights the importance of intangible assets created as a result of a company's innovation capacity (Daneshka, 2012). Internalization theory explains foreign market entry with the ability of the company to reduce transaction costs by replacing inefficient arm's length transactions by internal ones, especially when it comes to transferring abroad intermediate outputs with a high share of tacit knowledge, etc. (Rugman, et al., 2011; Daneshka, 2012). Within the framework of the eclectic paradigm, Dunning (2000) identifies the following key ownership advantages: "possession and exploitation of monopoly power"; "possession of a bundle of scarce, unique and sustainable resources and capabilities, which essentially reflect the superior technical efficiency of a particular firm", and "the competencies of the managers of firms to identify, evaluate and harness resources and capabilities from throughout the world, and to coordinate these with the existing ones". The Uppsala model also studies the internationalization process from the perspective of the possession of resources, in particular experiential knowledge.

2.2. Internationalization as an inter-organizational process

Following the discussion about the importance of resources for a firm's competitive position at home and abroad, in this sub-section, the focus shifts to inter-organizational conditions, i.e. resources embedded in existing and potential networks.

Gulati et al. (2000) argue that the RBV does not provide a full understanding of the resource creation process as the latter should also be studied outside the boundaries of the firm. The ability of the company to build and maintain relations with other market players is studied as a resource in its own right by the relational view. The latter proposes a different perspective as regards the generation of economic rents and the creation of a competitive advantage in view of the widespread establishment of strategic alliances. This view looks at pairs or networks of companies and resources embedded in interfirm routines and processes rather than at those owned by a single company (Dyer, et al., 1998). The authors posit that

companies that choose to bring together their resources in specific ways can gain an advantage over competitors and identify 4 potential sources of inter-organizational competitive advantage: investments in relation-specific assets; interfirm routines for transferring, combining and creating specialized knowledge; combining complementary, scarce resources and capabilities to jointly create new products, technology, etc., and effective governance mechanisms that reduce transaction costs (Dyer, et al., 1998). Gulati et al. (2000) denote the set of relations that companies build with various organizations as strategic networks. These ties are long-term and can be in the form of joint ventures, strategic alliances, buyer-supplier partnerships, etc. According to Gulati et al. (2000), the network itself can be considered as a valuable, rare, hard-to-imitate resource with no substitutes, but at the same time, it provides the company with access to diverse (network) resources and capabilities. Despite the benefits that networks provide, Gulati et al. (2000) point out the potentially negative impact of a firm being locked in inefficient relations, thus preventing it from taking advantage of new business opportunities.

The network approach to internationalization offers new insights as to the importance of inter-organizational conditions for this process. Firms build relations, usually long-term, with other companies, and a big part of business exchange takes place within these relations (Johanson, et al., 2006). Johanson et al. (1987) define interfirm relations as “a mutual orientation of two firms towards each other” based on exchange and adaptation processes; each firm is ready to work with the other one and expects the same. Besides, both parties have mutual knowledge about each other (resources, strategies, needs, capabilities, etc.), and are willing to take into account to a certain degree the other party’s interests. The interaction between companies results in the creation of networks, with a firm being involved in a network of business relations (direct and indirect) with various organizations, e.g. customers, customers’ customers, suppliers, agents, consultants, competitors, state institutions, etc. (Johanson, et al., 1990). Therefore, companies work in “webs of connected relationships” called business networks (Johanson, et al., 2009). According to Johanson et al. (1987) and Johanson et al. (1990), bonds of diverse nature are developed: technical, economic, social, administrative, etc. Both relations of cooperation and complementarity of competition can be established (Leite, et al., 2015). Johanson et al. (1987) argue that networks tend to be stable over time, but they also evolve as new relations are built and existing ones are broken.

The rationale behind the creation of networks is that companies are not homogeneous (Johanson, et al., 2006; Johanson, et al., 2009). Johanson et al. (2009) view the establishment of relations as an investment, which takes time and effort. These relations are key assets, which provide companies with benefits such as access to resources, facilitation of product sales, reduction of production costs, development of knowledge of other firms, gaining control over them, etc.

Johanson and Mattson argue that the internationalization of a firm can be understood by studying the networks that it is engaged in (Chetty, et al., 2003). At first, the internationalizing company is part of a domestic network, and subsequently, it builds relations in networks abroad; this can be accomplished by international extension, international penetration and international integration (Johanson, et al., 1990). According to Johanson et al. (1990), a company’s existing relations can serve as bridges to networks on foreign markets, and sometimes such relations can force the firm to enter new networks.

These bridges, which can be direct or indirect, may facilitate the initial stages of the internationalization process or further expansion to new markets. Moreover, the internationalization process depends on the degree of internationalization of the company itself and on that of the networks it is engaged in (Gebert-Persson, et al., 2014).

The propositions of the network approach to internationalization led to the revision of the Uppsala model. The latter views the company as the main driving force of the internationalization process, while the network approach focuses on the diverse business relations it has established and the importance of the resources, activities and experience of its network partners (Björkman et al., 2000). Moreover, the majority of a firm's assets can be located on the home market, but nevertheless, it can be a key international network player, i.e. internationalization is not just a matter of moving production facilities abroad but also of using existing and potential relations internationally (Björkman, et al., 2000).

Therefore, Johanson et al. (2009) define internationalization as “a multilateral network development process” which requires a reciprocal commitment between the company and its partners, and introduce the “liability of outsidership” concept. A firm that is well established in a network is called “an insider”, which means that it has access to information about its partners as mentioned above and to the benefits that arise from that. A company, which does not have a position in a relevant network is called “an outsider”; when it attempts to enter an overseas market, it will be hampered both by the liability of outsidership and the liability of foreignness, with the latter making it more difficult for the firm to become an insider (Johanson, et al., 2009). This may have a negative impact on the internationalization process. However, if another company, which works on the relevant foreign market and has an established network position, requests a service from the focal firm, the latter will have the opportunity to join the network. According to Johanson et al. (2009), this will trigger the three groups of activities carried out in networks, which underlie business and international operations development: learning and knowledge accumulation, building trust and commitment, and identification and exploitation of opportunities.

The authors confirm the importance of experiential knowledge for the internationalization process, and additionally introduce the concept of “relation-specific knowledge”, which is created through the interaction of companies. It includes “knowledge about each other's heterogeneous resources and capabilities” but also knowledge about the development and coordination of international relations. Moreover, interaction results not only in acquiring existing knowledge from the other party but also in jointly creating new knowledge. Since each firm has business relations with other actors, it participates in a learning process that goes beyond direct partners. In contrast to the original Uppsala model, Johanson et al. (2009) highlight the importance of trust for building relations and networks as this contributes to predicting the behaviour of counterparts, sharing information and building common expectations. Trust results in commitment, and ultimately they “produce outcomes that promote efficiency, productivity and effectiveness”. Also, Johanson et al. (2009) put more emphasis on the opportunity development aspect; due to the partners' having privileged knowledge as a result of their interaction, they are better positioned to identify new opportunities in comparison to other players. The process can be unilateral, bilateral or multilateral.

An additional aspect that needs to be considered is that of cooperation and competition in business networks, i.e. vertical and horizontal networks, given the diverse competitors that NPOs are faced with. Chetty et al. (2003) and Leite et al. (2015) point out that vertical networks (relations with customers, suppliers, distributors) have been the main focus of research while horizontal ones, i.e. relations with competitors, have not been studied in-depth. According to Chetty et al. (2003), competitors can be a source of complementary resources and critical information in a dynamic business environment. Moreover, Bengtsson et al. (2000) and Leite et al. (2015) explain that literature on competitors' interaction has been directed either towards cooperation or competition but not towards a combination of both types of relations due to their contradictory logics, i.e. hostility stemming from conflicting interests as opposed to friendliness resulting from common goals. Competition is usually studied from the perspective of neoclassical economic theory and different market structures; it is considered to be the main driving force behind innovation and enhancing a firm's competitive advantage, with the pressure to improve performance relative to other actors increasing as the number of competitors grows (Bengtsson et al., 2000). However, strategic alliances research proves that relations of cooperation can also provide competitors with advantages such as improving production efficiency, new products development, entering new markets, reducing costs, transferring technology, better risk management, etc.

Therefore, Bengtsson et al. (2000) argue that a single relation between competitors can involve at the same time both competition and cooperation, and propose the term "coopetition". This complex interaction can be of diverse nature depending on the degree of cooperation and competition (Bengtsson et al., 2000). In some cases, the unique resources that a firm possesses allow it to meet customers' expectations better than competitors while in others these resources can be used more efficiently when combined with the resources of a competitor. Bengtsson et al. (2000) posit that a competitive relation brings together the advantages of cooperation and competition such as access to resources, knowledge, reputation, sharing the costs for product development, etc., while retaining the pressure to constantly improve performance. Building various relations is a prerequisite for preserving a firm's network position and thus achieving its strategic objectives.

Other theories of international business also recognize the importance of inter-firm cooperation, for example, the eclectic paradigm. According to Dunning (1995), the world economy has moved to a new phase of market-based capitalism called "alliance capitalism" (in contrast to "hierarchical capitalism") which "portrays the organization of production and transactions as involving both cooperation and competition between the leading wealth creating agents". He argues that in this new phase, the decision-making process is more likely to be based on consensus between the actors involved. The author revises the 3 groups of advantages of the paradigm to take into account the costs and benefits of interfirm cooperation, e.g. strategic alliances and networks, the possibility to organize activities more efficiently and to distribute related risks, the availability of "immobile local complementary assets" such as business districts, science parks, etc.

2.3. Relations with State Institutions and Access to Political Resources

In view of the participation of designated operators in the state-dominated traditional networks, access to political resources by means of building and maintaining relations with state institutions is considered. Li et al. (2013) argue that market capabilities are not the only success factor, especially when it comes to environments where markets and governments are of equal importance and underline the need to develop capabilities to manage government relations as well. They introduce the term “market-political ambidexterity” to embrace both groups of capabilities, which can be valuable, rare, and hard to imitate, thus creating a competitive advantage. In addition, Baron (1995) posits that a company’s external environment is composed of market and non-market components, with the latter increasing in importance when business opportunities are controlled by the government or are challenged by the public, the media or other stakeholders. Therefore, it should develop market and non-market capabilities and implement an integrated strategy to address both components. Oliver et al. (2008) argue that strategic political management can contribute to improving the performance or competitive advantage of a firm. Building dynamic capabilities for political management is a prerequisite for implementing various strategies in response to political requirements and expectations with the aim of creating or sustaining value. Peng et al. (2016) analyze the RBV from the perspective of SOEs, and challenge its focus on market-based resources and capabilities. Given the ownership of the capital and the executives’ connections with government officials, the authors argue that political resources and capabilities can be an important source of differentiation, promoting their reputation and legitimacy and increasing their bargaining power with state institutions and other stakeholders. Thus, it is the combination of both market and non-market resources and capabilities that promote SOEs’ growth and theirs building a competitive advantage in an increasingly dynamic global economy (Peng, et al., 2016).

Pan et al. (2014) study the impact of political factors embedded within the firm, in particular government ownership and political ties, on the internationalization process and integrate them with existing theoretical frameworks. Though they focus on the level of ownership in an overseas subsidiary from the perspective of transaction costs and risk tolerance, they posit that these factors provide companies with better access to resources and various tangible and intangible benefits that facilitate internationalization, for example, government incentives and assistance at home and abroad, participation in the law-making process, access to information, building networks of relationships, prestige, etc.

3. A View on the Internationalization of National Postal Operators

Further to the theoretical concepts discussed in the previous section, *the author views the expansion of NPOs’ participation in international business as a process of building positions in traditional and new networks through penetration as well as extension and integration, with access to resources available in these networks being at the heart of the process.*

Thus, several key aspects of the internationalization process of the studied companies can be highlighted from the perspective of the relation “networks – resources”.

First, ***the internationalization of operators depends on their ability to build positions in networks***. The opportunities for expanding the international activities of NPOs are considered in terms of developing and maintaining long-term relations with various market players as well as of the way in which the studied companies interact with organizations in traditional and new networks. Following the definition of the internationalization process proposed by Johanson et al. (1990) and depending on the use of both types of networks, the process of expanding designated operators' participation in international business can take place as follows:

- Penetration: strengthening the relations within traditional networks in a way that builds on the basic model (e.g. partnering with organizations that the operator has not worked with previously or has worked with only ad hoc, or use of new forms of cooperation).
- Extension and integration: working with organizations within traditional networks as well as developing relations with players from new ones.

Johanson et al. (1990) view extension and integration as independent internationalization paths, while this paper considers a combination of them for two reasons. First, NPOs continue to function predominantly as SOEs, but even in the case of private ownership, they retain certain social functions, thus preserving their relations with state institutions and access to political resources. Second, the global postal network as one of the two traditional networks is the backbone of the postal sector, and the development of NPOs' international operations does not exclude its use.

Also, Johanson et al. (1990) discuss the international dimension of these paths. In line with Björkman et al. (2000), this paper does not consider the process of building networks only in terms of foreign markets. Establishing relations with players on the home market can also contribute to expanding the international operations of the studied companies, for example, by developing relations with e-tailers or competitors and thus getting access to their networks abroad. Therefore, the degree of internationalization of partners and their networks is also important.

Second, ***NPOs have different positions in the two groups of networks*** in accordance with the “liability of outsidership” concept. They are insiders in traditional networks and benefit from the advantages and resources they provide. The existing relations between the organizations in these networks are the result of long-standing cooperation, commitment and reciprocity in relations, which is a prerequisite for further developing their international operations. NPOs are outsiders as far as new networks are concerned, which restricts their access to the resources available in them. Taking advantage of the new business opportunities, arising from the constantly changing environment, requires building positions in these networks as well.

Third, ***the above-mentioned view highlights the variety of relations that support designated operators' international business activities***. The expansion of the latter requires cooperation with organizations of diverse profiles, while the network approach to internationalization and the revisited Uppsala model emphasize the importance of business networks. Operators' administrative heritage and its role in establishing the basic model, as explained by Toteva (2019), require that account be taken of relations with state institutions and their evolution as

well. The business environment factors analysis made by Toteva (2019) testifies to the importance of horizontal and vertical business networks and the opportunities for cooperation with competitors, large business customers, software developers, etc., and that of developing relations, which involve cooperation and competition simultaneously. Moreover, relations between national operators within the global postal network traditionally resemble links between customers and suppliers, but nowadays, they evolve towards competition, as explained by Toteva (2019).

Fourth, *the internationalization process is driven by access to resources provided by traditional and new networks*. The diverse participants' profiles determine the heterogeneity of the resources that NPOs can use. Traditional networks provide access to resources that are fundamental to the operators' international activities, but the evolving business environment demands enhancing the resource base.

Fifth, the above-mentioned paths for expanding the international operations of NPOs underline *the varying degrees of commitment that may exist between partners*, as will be further explained.

4. Access to Resources in Traditional and New Networks and Lock-In Effect

In view of the relation “networks – resources” and the discussion about the RBV and its variants (namely, the resource groups by Barney (1991); the resource categories defined by Grant (1991) and further developed by Chetty et al. (2003); the concept of Teece et al. (1997) about organizational and managerial processes and asset positions, and the consideration of political resources as part of the RBV by Peng et al. (2016)), a classification is made of the resources available in traditional and new networks that facilitate the development of designated operators' international activities (Figure 3).

This classification demonstrates the complementarity between the two groups of networks and the resources they provide access to. Although traditional networks have played a fundamental role as to NPOs' internationalization, they may prevent them from taking advantage of new business opportunities and may have a negative impact on their competitiveness compared to other market players due to the discussed lock-in effect. The following sources of this effect from the perspective of the two networks can be identified:

- System of state institutions: an assured customer base due to the monopoly market position and reliance on budget financing in the past; lack of international experience and relevant experts resulting from the focus on home markets.
- Global postal network: a “myopia” situation in line with Levitt (1960), i.e. a relatively limited positioning of designated operators as participants in the postal sector which isolated them from the growing diversity of competitors for a long time; lack of sufficient customer orientation, with customers being considered merely as senders and recipients; compromised integrity of the global postal network and therefore of the quality of international delivery services due to the varying levels of development of the countries and their national postal networks as demonstrated by the UPU's Integrated Index for Postal Development (UPU, 2017); slow response to market requirements due to the

UPU’s lack of sufficient flexibility and slow decision making process (UPU, 2016); UPU’s inability to address a growing number of stakeholders (UPU, 2016); UPU’s difficulties in securing funds which poses risks to achieving the strategic goals of the Union and to implementing key projects for improving the interoperability of national networks.

Figure 3

Classification of resources in postal operators’ traditional and new networks

| | | | |
|---|----------------------|--|--|
| TYPES OF NETWORKS AND AVAILABLE RESOURCES | TRADITIONAL NETWORKS | System of state institutions | <p>Political resources: tangible and intangible benefits such as information not publicly available, participation in the legislative process and in formulating state policies, government funding, financial aid, support from embassies and commercial offices abroad, participation in major national and international projects, business opportunities in the framework of bilateral and multilateral cooperation, etc.</p> |
| | | Global postal network | <p>Organizational resources: agreed rules, procedures and practices within the UPU that underlie operators’ business processes and product portfolios and shape the interaction between operators and between them and other organizations (e.g. customs authorities, air carriers, etc.).</p> <p>Technological resources: software solutions developed by the Postal Technology Centre facilitating the provision of international delivery services.</p> <p>Business partners: a network of “natural” partners around the world, i.e. NPOs, built on trust, reciprocity and mutual adaptation.</p> <p>Reputation as a socially responsible member of the global community arising from the operators’ historical role to provide access to communication means and social services, and from the UPU’s commitment to economic and social development.</p> <p>Knowledge, know-how: covering a wide spectrum of areas (regulations, product development, new technology, etc.), with exchange being based on formal and informal mechanisms.</p> <p>Financial resources: project financing (quality of delivery services, financial management, disaster risk management, etc.).</p> <p>Political resources: political support for implementation of programmes and projects on an international level and its impact on national priorities, policies and legislation.</p> |
| | NEW NETWORKS | <p>Organizational resources: adopting partners’ procedures and practices to reorganize business processes and develop product portfolios in response to new market requirements.</p> <p>New markets: access to new markets and market segments (in terms of geographical locations, e.g. China; sectors, e.g. e-commerce; customer profiles, e.g. e-tailers, SMEs).</p> <p>Reputation as a market player aligned with new market trends as a prerequisite for repositioning.</p> <p>Technical and technological resources: access to partners’ software solutions or joint development of solutions.</p> <p>Financial resources: joint investments, access to favourable financing conditions based on partners’ reputation, etc.</p> <p>Mutual access to existing infrastructures resulting in cost savings and shorter periods for launching new products.</p> <p>Knowledge, know-how: covering a wide spectrum of areas (corporate culture, customer service, marketing, market research, ICT, etc.)</p> <p>Partnership experience and access to new potential partners and their networks.</p> | |

Source: prepared by the author.

NPOs can overcome the negative consequences of the lock-in effect and expand their international activities by building relations with market players outside the traditional networks, as this will provide them with access to the resources presented in Figure 3. Although the relations between the participants in traditional networks are evolving, the dynamic business environment requires that operators' resource bases are enhanced more speedily. Further to the analysis of the business environment factors made by Toteva (2019), a few types of organizations can be highlighted as key potential partners of operators. First, business customers, large as well as SMEs, can generate considerable mail volumes, especially companies involved in e-commerce and those establishing an online sales channel in addition to physical ones. Business customers influence the choice of delivery services on the basis of the ones they make available to end-users, but they also take into account the needs of the latter and transform them into requirements to their delivery partners. Second, competitors offering substitute services are important as gaining access to their existing networks can contribute to expanding an operator's international activities without considerable investments. Third, further to direct competitors, partnering with other organizations from the logistics field such as integrators, consolidators, companies providing warehousing services, producers of equipment, etc., is a prerequisite for developing new solutions. Fourth, given the importance of modern technology NPOs need to cooperate with software developers, startups, R&D centres, laboratories and others in order to test and implement innovative solutions.

5. Strategic Patterns of National Postal Operators' Internationalization

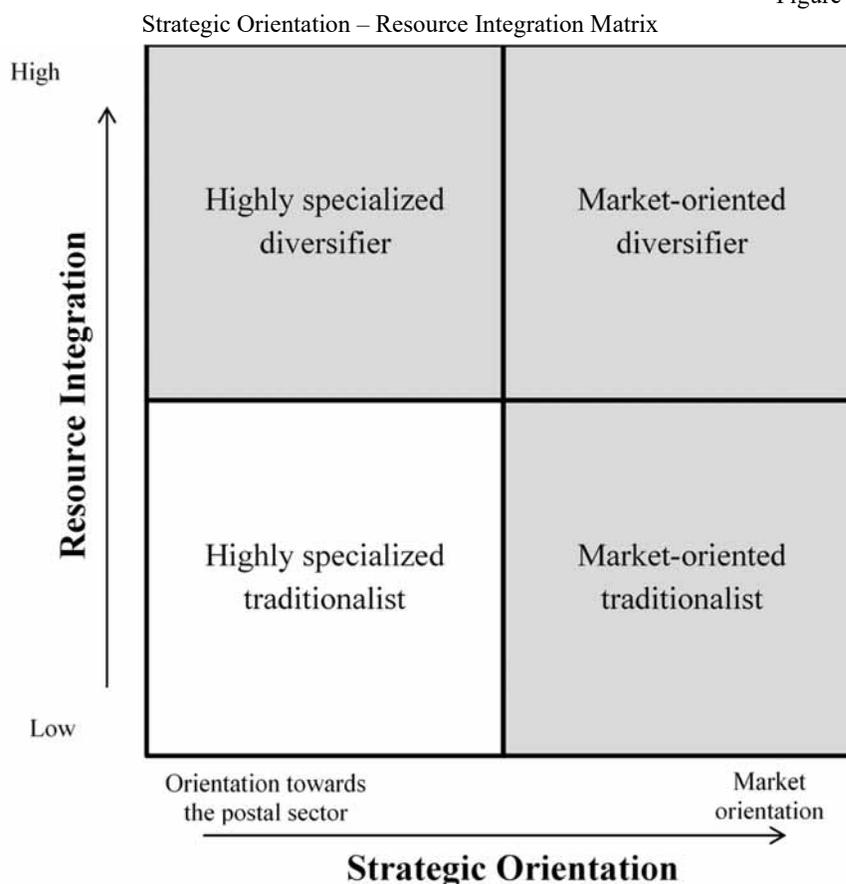
Designated operators' choice regarding the networks in which they build positions and the forms of cooperation, which determine the use of the resources available in them, are the basis for defining the framework on how they can expand their international operations. A matrix called "Strategic Orientation – Resource Integration" is created (Figure 4); it identifies 4 types of NPOs. The latter are 4 patterns of participation on the international market; the first one (the white box) is the discussed basic model, while the others refer to developing international operations beyond it. These three alternatives constitute the *framework for expanding postal operators' international operations*.

The matrix is based on two criteria which refer to the administrative heritage of the studied companies and the factors of the international business environment as analyzed by Toteva (2019). The first criterion, *strategic orientation*, expresses the operators' aspiration for expanding their international activities as part of traditional networks (*orientation towards the postal sector*) or by combining the latter with networks of market players outside the postal sector (*market orientation*). It highlights the internationalization paths presented earlier: penetration as well as extension and integration.

The second criterion, *resource integration*, refers to the extent to which national operators integrate into their activities the resources they have access to via the networks in which they participate as identified in the previous section. This criterion has two extreme values: *low* and *high integration* and identifies with the applied international business operations. The latter indicate varying degrees of interdependence between the participants and their

resources. The author adopts the classification proposed by Karakasheva et al. (2005) and Karakasheva (2011), according to which international business operations fall into two groups: traditional and complex.

Figure 4



Source: prepared by the author.

The choice of the types of international business operations as the basis for this criterion is explained by the parallel drawn by Toteva (2019) between the international sale as a major cross border operation and the basic model for postal operators' participation on the international market in the form of provision of international delivery services. Both are characterized by a low level of commitment between partners and a high degree of standardization in terms of implementation procedures, documentation used, etc. As partners retain their legal, economic and production autonomy, there is a low degree of resource

integration. In contrast, complex international business operations imply a higher degree of resource integration as a variety of relations between partners are developed: investment, production, commercial, technological, etc. These operations may be established on a contractual or capital basis and are of a long-term nature. In view of existing classifications of international business operations according to different criteria (Karakasheva, et al., 2005; Karakasheva, 2009; Karakasheva, 2011; Lozanov, 2015), of the environment factors, having an impact on the postal sector and of the identified partners in traditional and new networks, the following types of operations are considered of key importance: operations that involve the transfer of the right to use an intellectual product (a licensing agreement, a consulting contract, franchising) or a tangible product (international leasing), joint ventures, etc.

By combining the two criteria, the following types of NPOs, respectively strategic patterns of internationalization, are identified: a highly specialized traditionalist, a highly specialized diversifier, a market-oriented traditionalist and a market-oriented diversifier. They represent 4 extreme cases but also mixed ones can be distinguished, and over time operators may move from one quadrant of the matrix to another in case their strategic orientation or the applied international business operations change.

5.1. Highly specialized traditionalists

The group of highly specialized traditionalists comprises NPOs that carry out international operations by partnering with organizations in traditional networks. This type of cooperation resembles import and export operations; it is of a commercial nature and closer relations in other areas are not established. The companies' involvement in international business follows the basic model for the provision of international delivery services with operations being carried out with other national operators. Designated operators strive to serve customers on their home markets and are not present on foreign markets. Highly specialized traditionalists focus on the operational aspects of service provision and on adherence to the implementation procedures in accordance with established rules. Their innovative capacity is relatively limited, and product portfolios typically comprise the mandatory international delivery services adopted within the global network. It is expected that the described lock-in effect will have a strong impact on the development of their international operations.

5.2. Highly specialized diversifiers

The group of highly specialized diversifiers comprises NPOs that carry out complex international business operations and strengthen their cooperation with partners in traditional networks. Therefore, they follow a penetration strategy and achieve a higher level of integration of the resources they have access to in traditional networks. The operations can be carried out on a bilateral or multilateral basis, and sometimes they may be in the form of a higher level of cooperation with the UPU as the governing body of the global postal network and/or with relevant state institutions.

An example of a complex multilateral operation is the Interconnect programme of the International Post Corporation³. It is a strategic partnership on a contractual basis and aims to better position participating NPOs in the e-commerce segment by building on traditional delivery services in response to customer requirements. Examples of complex operations on a bilateral basis include Ascendia, a joint venture of the French and Swiss postal operators providing e-commerce, business correspondence and direct mail solutions as well as the merger of the Danish and Swedish operators striving for better positioning on the Scandinavian market. There are multilateral and/or bilateral programmes and pilots that testify to higher levels of cooperation with the UPU in relation to its social goals and with the relevant state institutions regarding the economic and foreign economic policy pursued. Examples include the Easy Export Programme facilitating the international expansion of SMEs and the ECOMPRO and Ecom@Africa programmes for e-commerce development promoted by the UPU.

Unlike the first group, highly specialized diversifiers strive to develop their product portfolios by providing not only the mandatory delivery services but also the optional ones as well as by expanding the field of applicability of traditional delivery services, for example, in terms of trade facilitation, social and financial inclusion, e-commerce, etc. They may also be present on overseas markets. Given the prevalence of state ownership in the sector, it is expected that NPOs will cooperate mainly on a contractual basis while capital operations would be more limited and of regional importance. Despite the use of new forms of cooperation, their international activities may also be influenced by the lock-in effect.

5.3. Market-oriented traditionalists

Market-oriented traditionalists also carry out traditional international business operations but they partner with organizations in both traditional and new networks, i.e. the internationalization process follows an extension and integration strategy. Thus, they show greater consideration for the factors of the business environment and integrate new resources into their activities. They build on the basic model and cooperate actively with market players of different profiles in their own countries and abroad in order to increase the volume of inbound, outbound and transit shipments. They create both horizontal and vertical networks. Like the first group of NPOs, they are not present on foreign markets. However, market-oriented traditionalists are more innovative. They provide traditional delivery services but also develop their product portfolios by adding new solutions based on modern ICT; they introduce new sales channels, etc.

An example of international operations expected to be applied by market-oriented traditionalists is found in Lithuania. The designated operator, Lietuvos paštas, strives to position itself in the e-commerce delivery segment by building vertical links with companies outside the postal sector. In 2014, the operator signed an agreement with CLEVY, an international logistics and transport company providing consulting services to Chinese

³ The International Post Corporation is an association of 23 NPOs. It develops solutions that strive to improve the interoperability between national networks and the quality of the services provided. <https://www.ipc.be/en/aboutIPC> (accessed 31.08.2019).

companies to develop their international operations. Under this agreement, Lietuvos paštas facilitates the delivery of shipments from Chinese e-tailers to end-users in EU countries, Russia and Belarus. It also signed a similar agreement with SP Express, an integrated express logistics service provider in China⁴. Thus, the Lithuanian operator gains access to the biggest e-commerce market in Asia and to the European one, to knowledge and know-how, experience in establishing new relations, etc., which is a prerequisite for revenue growth from international operations. Another example is the partnership between the Irish operator An Post and the logistics provider DB Schenker allowing Irish SMEs to export goods to business customers in Europe⁵. This is a horizontal type of cooperation whereby An Post targets a new group of customers and enters a new business line, namely logistics solutions for SMEs, gains access to the partner's network suited to the B2B segment as well as to their knowledge and know-how.

5.4. Market-oriented diversifiers

The group of market-oriented diversifiers comprises NPOs that carry out complex international business operations both within traditional and new networks, i.e. they partner with a wider range of market players in new ways and thus achieve a higher level of resource integration. They follow an extension and integration strategy to expand their international operations. They take advantage of both regional and global opportunities and engage in horizontal and vertical networks. Through strategic partnerships and mergers and acquisitions, these operators build networks that exist in parallel to the global postal network and offer services and solutions not typical of the sector, for example, global logistics solutions targeted not only at the B2C but also at the B2B segment; e-commerce fulfilment solutions; express services, etc. They are present on foreign markets where they compete directly with local NPOs acquiring part of their market share.

Examples of operations typical of market-oriented diversifiers are found in Germany. Deutsche Post DHL operates globally in the fields of express, logistics and freight-forwarding services. The development of its business activities was marked by a series of acquisitions: of the American express service provider DHL, completed in the period 1998-2002; of the Swiss logistics provider Danzas and the American service provider in the field of international airfreight, AEI, in 1999, and of the British logistics company Exel in 2005.⁶

Conclusion

Given the increasing importance of the international market for the sustainable development of NPOs and building on the conclusions regarding the basic model and the inter-

⁴ Website of AB Lietuvos paštas, <https://www.post.lt/en> (accessed 31.08.2019).

⁵ Postal and Parcel Technology International, http://www.postalandparceltechnologyinternational.com/awards_business_2017.php (accessed 31.08.2019).

⁶ Website of Deutsche Post DHL, http://www.dpdhl.com/en/about_us/history.html (accessed 31.08.2019).

organizational nature of their internationalization, the paper provides a novel framework on how these companies can expand their international operations.

To achieve the defined aim and to confirm the core proposition the following objectives are met. First, the author builds the theoretical foundation of the research study by integrating theories in the fields of strategic management and international business and outlines the relation “networks – resources”. The RBV and its variants view performance as dependent on the company’s possessing specific resources. In addition, theories of international business study the internationalization process from the perspective of having a specific or unique advantage. In both cases, the focus is put on creating such resources or advantages internally. The network approach to internationalization defines this process as establishing relations and entering the networks of other market players at home and abroad. Bringing together the two groups of theories contributes to highlighting the importance of networks in terms of providing access to resources that facilitate the expansion of international operations. The author further considers cooperation in business networks and access to political resources. Next, a view on the internationalization of NPOs is proposed, namely that this is a process of building positions in traditional and new networks through penetration as well as extension and integration, with access to resources available in these networks being at the heart of the process. Finally, a framework for expanding designated operators’ international activities is provided; it consists of 3 strategic patterns that build on the basic model and represent combinations between the networks used and the international operations applied. This framework is based on the “Strategic Orientation – Resource Integration” matrix which is an expression of the interplay between the operators’ administrative heritage and the business environment factors. Strategic orientation refers to the companies’ aspiration to expand their international activities by partnering with organizations within the traditional networks or by combining them with networks of players outside the postal sector. Resource integration is an expression of the extent to which NPOs integrate into their activities the resources they have access to via the networks, and identifies with the applied international business operations.

Therefore, it can be concluded that relations and networks are an instrument for enhancing NPOs’ resource base so that they can expand their presence on the international market. Both types of networks, traditional and new, provide access to resources of key importance for the internationalization process: political, organizational, technological, financial, business partners, knowledge and know-how, etc. The heterogeneity of the available resources requires developing a set of vertical and horizontal relations. However, the historical cooperation within traditional networks results in the lock-in effect which can be mitigated by establishing relations with organizations in the new ones. Further to this, operators can expand their international activities by establishing positions in the two groups of networks either by penetration or by extension and integration. Access to resources is at the core of this process as well as the extent to which they are used, i.e. the international business operations applied.

A number of contributions of the research study can be outlined. First, it addresses the lack of research concerning the internationalization of NPOs by proposing a view on this process and a framework on how they can expand their international operations. Second, the paper adds to the relatively scanty research on SOEs’ participation in international business, and

extends the field of applicability of the network approach in terms of the type of company studied, i.e. beyond SMEs and international entrepreneurship. Third, it offers a comprehensive perspective as to network participation by considering simultaneously the importance of business networks (vertical and horizontal) and networks with state institutions for the internationalization process.

Future research may propose a set of criteria so that the presented framework and the “Strategic Orientation – Resource Integration” matrix could be applied to real business cases to identify the internationalization patterns currently followed by postal operators and to provide them with guidelines for further development. Also, an internationalization “snapshot” of the global postal sector could be made by studying a sample of operators, and regional differences could be analyzed. Future research may offer a dynamic aspect of designated operators’ internationalization by studying the paths they follow over time, i.e. the movement between the quadrants of the matrix.

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