

Nation Branding in Central Asia: A New Campaign to Present Ideas about the State and the Nation

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RELAXING IN A LUXURY HOTEL ROOM IN PARIS, WORLD TRAVELLERS are exposed to TV commercials for Kazakhstan, a ‘land of democracy’ located in the ‘Heart of Eurasia’. Similar advertisements have been featured since the 1990s on CNN, the BBC, and ABC, in the pages of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist* and other Western mass media outlets. During their public speeches Kazakhstan’s diplomats distribute hundreds of leaflets about the latest economic developments and political achievements in their country. Such public relations campaigns aimed at building an international identity pose a new public policy challenge in post-Soviet states. This goal has not yet been met, but the governments of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are seeking to make the world more aware of their countries.

This essay examines the national images that Central Asian states are trying to present to international audiences. Since 1991 all Central Asian states have created national ideologies, but only three—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan—have programmes in place to capture the attention of foreign businessmen, politicians and tourists. Following the pattern of crafting national ideologies for domestic audiences in all three states, the ruling elites have led the effort to create a unique national ‘brand’ identity for their country. The process has become a means of public diplomacy for embassy officials, as ruling elites seek to raise their country’s prestige, primarily among international businesses and the global political community. Indeed, the creation and promotion of nation images serve as a new form of communication among countries, marketing to the needs of the globalised economy and international politics. It is a highly politicised activity involving stakeholders, usually national governments and local businesses interested in allocating funds to promote the brand (Akutsu 2008, pp. 209–11).

Using three case studies, this article discusses the international experience of the nascent process of nation branding, outlines emerging academic debates in the field, and analyses a few existing nation brands. The three Central Asian countries differ in the way they propagate their messages. While Kazakhstan disseminates similar narratives for both domestic and international audiences, the Uzbekistani regime

filters messages presented abroad and at home. In both countries, images are developed and circulated by ruling elites and diplomats under the government's strict supervision, but both employ different persuasive techniques abroad. In Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, the process of communicating images about nation and state is less centralised, with the Ministry of Culture taking charge of most activities, while public diplomacy abroad is loosely coordinated by the regime. Importantly, however, the activities of the three countries increasingly resemble standard international practices for promoting nation brands. Indeed, representatives of these countries are gradually adopting the vocabulary and techniques used by the international nation-branding industry.

National brands, old and new

Most countries have an international image that is fairly stable and consistent over time and space. Some countries, such as Great Britain, Japan, Germany and Australia, have more enduring images, with stable sets of symbols associated with them, such as tourist attractions, signature export products and unique cultures. These international images developed quite passively, without any specific or consolidated effort by local actors. However, once they have solidified, such images have been largely reinforced by national businesses and governments, as well as individual citizens of these states who travel internationally. In the past decade states like India, Malaysia and Turkey have launched active campaigns to boost their international images and attract tourists and investments. None of these countries has an image as famous as Japan's or Germany's, but the slogans 'Incredible India' and 'Malaysia—truly Asia' have already taken root. These brands were developed by New Delhi and Kuala Lumpur with the help of the business community and they have been extensively transmitted through international mass media (Dinnie 2008, p. 35).

The concept of 'nation branding' emerged in the mid-1990s, describing the practice of constructing and communicating a unique image about a specific nation to the rest of the world through public diplomacy, trade, exports promotion and tourism (Anholt 2007, p. 3). A nation brand reflects the complex reality of a country by encapsulating its culture, history, peoples, government and business in a short motto or image (Anholt 2007, p. 405). According to marketing experts Thomas Cromwell and Savas Hadji Kyruacou, who take a more conservative approach toward the concept, numerous countries may currently seek to establish their brands, but none has yet developed a successful one. However, they believe Singapore and Spain have been able to promote comparatively more successful brands through subtle and coordinated communication of their positive traits, such as services, tourist attractions and products to the international audience.¹ Nation branding is, in turn, a process of creating an international reputation about a state and its people, but this reputation is also often contingent on various historic or cultural events that altered the external perception of the nation.

¹Author's interview with Thomas Cromwell and Savas Hadji Kyruacou from East-West Communications, Washington, DC, 6 January 2009.

For instance, the Rose Revolution in 2003 helped Georgia to be seen as a developing democracy, while the government's violent suppression of riots in Andijan, in 2005, tarnished Uzbekistan's international reputation. Georgia and Armenia have also devised a somewhat coherent promotion strategy. Georgia, aside from its claim to be the 'cradle of wine', is spreading its red and white flag with five crosses in Western outlets, including *The Economist* magazine. Armenia, in turn, emphasises its Christian identity, proclaiming 'Noah's Route, Your Route'. Both countries hope to do well in the annual Eurovision song contest to confirm their rightful place in Europe. Azerbaijan, in turn, bought a number of commercials on CNN that feature colourful national dresses, food and dances.

Central Asian leaders are making their first attempts to promote their own nation internationally. Through authorised publications, films, speeches and cultural events both the embassies of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan advertise their countries' potential, embellish its achievements and conceal negative developments. New narratives about the state and the nation are created in the process, with Kazakhstan typically presented as a geopolitical crossroads and Uzbekistan as a cultural gem. These narratives are often tailored specifically for the international—usually Western—public.

Unlike the domestic public, the international audience is difficult to define precisely, but it can be divided into three broad groups: businesses, politicians and tourists. In their efforts to create an international image, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have actively used public diplomacy to communicate with specific representatives of the business and political communities, as well as mass media to target a broader audience. Potential tourists, on the other hand, are harder to reach for most states. Partly because the wider international audience is so diverse, the messages produced by Central Asian states are quite haphazard, often lacking a single unifying idea. They rather serve as a means and medium for communication between diplomats and foreign actors. Therefore, such images of state and nation represent the ideas of the diplomats and the ruling elites, not the collective of people living in their respective countries. They also reflect the commercial or political interests these diplomats seek to attract.

Among the numerous messages promoted in the international media about economic growth, rich cultures and democratic development, 'Kazakhstan—the Heart of Eurasia' stands out. This message highlights the country's geostrategic advantages, revealing the Kazakh government's efforts to achieve international recognition of the country's vast territory (the ninth largest in the world), its natural resources and political weight. Uzbekistan, in turn, promotes its cultural treasures and tourist destinations, sometimes presenting itself as a 'Crossroads of Civilisations'. The Kyrgyz government has been less pretentious in choosing a slogan, navigating between 'Kyrgyzstan—a land of wonders' and the rather curious 'Kyrgyzstan—a land of Santa Claus', an offhand remark spontaneously picked up by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Culture. Unlike the Kazakhstani and Uzbekistani regimes, which have been actively targeting international audiences to build positive country images, Kyrgyzstan's information campaign is conducted mostly within the country to attract international media.

Images prepared for an international audience are not necessarily intended to maintain the national identity at home. The international images are not burdened



Source: <http://baurzhan.kz/wp-content/uploads/smal.jpg>, accessed 15 January 2009.

FIGURE 1. 'THE HEART OF EURASIA', A STATUE IN ZHASTAR SAYABAGY PARK, ASTANA, KAZAKHSTAN

with the task of creating a nation or reinforcing patriotism, because the attributes of a country's international image might or might not resonate with domestic ideas about the nation. The government of Uzbekistan, for example, has created an external image about its state and people that is different from the one promulgated at home. While Uzbekistan's external emphasis on its cultural richness resonates with the images promoted domestically, public diplomacy leaves out the Amir Timur heritage that is central to Uzbekistan's national identity. The Kazakhstani leadership, in contrast, promotes similar sets of ideas about its central location in Eurasia both internationally and domestically. Uzbekistan's focus on Amir Timur supports President Islam Karimov's authoritarian state power, while Kazakhstan's focus on Eurasia offers a more general idea about Kazakhstan as a member of the international community.

In both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the ruling regimes have monopolised the process of creating and spreading images of the nation and the state both domestically and internationally. The countries face little challenge from domestic audiences when framing images for international consumption. Their regimes, therefore, tend to promote themselves more than represent the sentiments of the people. State leaders use activities associated with nation branding to justify political and economic decisions and explain political achievements. Kazakhstan's OSCE chairmanship is the most notable example of a national image that is closely linked with government achievement. Most justifications for seeking the chairmanship were explained through

the prism of Kazakhstan's geopolitical location and Kazakhstani President Nursultan Nazarbaev's zeal to peacefully accommodate multiple ethnicities, given the country's geographic location between Europe and Asia. In other words, the OSCE chairmanship confirms that inter-ethnic peace has been realised thanks to the Nazarbaev regime.

These two cases show that although states have limited control over the information spread about them abroad, state leaders nevertheless actively seek to frame discourse in their favour. Images and symbols promulgated by these countries for foreign consumption shore up the identity of the rulers and grow out of existing narratives promoted for the domestic public. They downplay some parts of the story while inflating others. For instance, cultural events organised by Uzbekistan's embassies never bring up such negative issues as child labour or human rights abuse, which experts believe exist inside the country. While positioning Kazakhstan as a harmonious multicultural and multiethnic nation, its leaders gloss over its ongoing inter-ethnic confrontations at the village level and rampant nepotism in state structures. Kyrgyzstan, with its more liberal political culture, abandoned political image-making altogether, concentrating instead on reaching out to tourists.

On a national level, leaders can embrace political symbols that ignore daily reality and 'externalise' domestic problems, such as economic hardship (Edelman 1985, p. 8). The leaders' hegemonic narratives often act as a means of persuasion for the domestic public, complementing their coercive strategies.² In the Central Asian context, the governments' political symbols might not always be popular among the masses, but ruling regimes promote their own rigid ideas about the nation and the state despite ambivalent public perceptions. Furthermore, countries face greater competition in formulating an image on the international scene compared with the ideas and symbols circulated domestically. Whereas national ideologies are often imposed coercively through education and public events, governments and businesses cannot manipulate or coerce foreign audiences. International competition for tourists and investment takes place in an uncontrolled space, and therefore governments must use considerably greater resources and be more creative in promulgating their images, whereas at home governments are able to control mass media, holiday celebrations, and public institutions such as education, culture and the military. Ruling elites have limited leverage as to how they present their country for an international audience, as those narratives are much more transparent and will be scrutinised by sceptical tourists and investors.

The recipe for a successful international brand is not straightforward. Unlike national flags, emblems and anthems—the standard components of sovereign identity—a country's international image can be formed in a variety of ways. Scientific innovations, tourist destinations, historic and cultural attractions, famous persons, literary works, nature, movies and important political events are just a fraction of the possible ideas. Because of the wealth of possibilities from which to form an appealing image, the states must approach their international PR campaign strategically.

²For an insightful analysis of the power of persuasion in soft authoritarian regimes, see Schatz (2008).

But regime leaders are ready to face the challenge, as communicating images of the nation has a strong political value for them. By finding ways to embellish their countries, they seek to persuade international political leaders and businesses of their own achievements. Improving a country's reputation also has commercial value in terms of attracting more people and capital to the country. Like other states, the Central Asian countries are aware of the influential tags assigned by international organisations,³ such as political and economic country ratings, or endorsements, such as Kazakhstan's long but successful quest to hold the OSCE chairmanship in 2010. These international factors inevitably influence the way countries are perceived by international businesses, governments and potential tourists. States can unexpectedly benefit from unplanned images created through films, appealing cultural artefacts and captivating historic writings. Alternatively, their images can suffer from negative cultural connotations or violent events taking place within their borders.

Accidental brands emerged for some former Soviet states. The democratic Orange Revolution in Ukraine and the Rose Revolution in Georgia quickly ascribed recognisable symbols to these countries. At least in the international policy world, the colour orange and the flower are now closely associated with these two states. Western debates about the genocide of Armenians have drawn international attention to the Armenian state and diaspora. The Andijan massacre in Uzbekistan attracted negative attention to President Islam Karimov, defining him as just another dictator. Finally, *Borat*, the comedy film featuring Sacha Baron Cohen, became an accidental international brand for Kazakhstan. The Kazakhstan portrayed in the comedy had little resemblance to the actual Kazakhstan and its native culture, but as one of the most successful films of 2006 it did bring name recognition. A successful national image, therefore, cannot be separated from the processes taking place inside the country.

Likewise, there are already a few passive brands for each Central Asian state. These have developed independently of the efforts of the political elites and business communities. For instance, Kyrgyzstan's celebrated writer Chingiz Aitmatov is a recognisable name in Europe and the former Soviet states, where his books were especially popular. The city of Samarkand is internationally associated with Uzbekistan. The eccentric regime of the late Turkmen leader Saparmurat Niyazov makes Turkmenistan an intriguing place to visit. The Tajik government's ideological project on Aryan identity has also attracted some international public attention. To date, Central Asian states are far from enjoying internationally known brands similar to those developed by, for instance, Germany, Japan and Sweden, but a combination of domestic factors such as the business interests of local companies and political processes that might affect the country's image, as well as the '*Borat effect*', encourage the new independent states to consciously burnish their international reputations.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan

Both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan promote themselves as crossroads of civilisations and cultures. While the governments of both states monopolised the construction and

³For instance, Transparency International, Freedom House and the World Bank.

dissemination of national images, the methods and media for communicating these messages have varied. Kazakhstan's efforts to place itself on the global map have involved the use of mass media, commemorative books, conferences and public events at its embassies abroad. Uzbekistan, on the other hand, has mostly relied on personal communication between diplomats and international political and business circles at its embassies' numerous public events.

Kazakhstan

After gradually eliminating his political opponents, Nazarbaev increasingly relied on the power of persuasion to argue for the legitimacy of his regime at home (Schatz 2008). The president portrayed Kazakhstan as a rapidly emerging economic and political power with a peaceful and harmonious society. Kazakhstan's location between Russia and China served as the main justification to label the country a crossroads of civilisations in Eurasia. Kazakhstan's diplomats employ a similar technique utilising the same symbols. Since the 1990s, Kazakhstan has been investing large sums of money to ameliorate its international images, and Astana produced a tremendous amount of publications and organised numerous conferences and cultural exhibitions specifically to improve its image abroad.

The contest for the OSCE chair played an important role in transmitting Nazarbaev's vision for Kazakhstan to domestic and international audiences. During the campaign for the OSCE chairmanship, Astana emphasised the country's multicultural and multiethnic society. Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs commissioned an international advertising campaign to point out that 'Kazakhstan is located right at the crossroads of civilizations and for this reason it blends away, in a most harmonious way, all the contrasts between the East and the West'.⁴ This line of branding is consistent with Nazarbaev's ambitious plan to construct a 'Palace of Nations' in Astana that would house a mosque, an Orthodox church and a Buddhist temple all under one roof.

In 2005 Nazarbaev published a monograph, *V serdtse Evrazii [In the Heart of Eurasia]*, that outlined the rationale behind moving the national capital from Almaty to Astana (Nazarbaev 2005). The president explained that Astana can rightly be called the centre of Eurasia, since it is located between Europe and Asia and thus has soaked up the cultural heritage of both West and East for centuries. Since this book was published, Kazakhstani officials regularly use the 'Heart of Eurasia' slogan in their speeches. Nazarbaev personally took his slogan to major Western cities, mentioning it during his speeches and presentations of books about Kazakhstan.

At the 2005 Eurasian Media Forum in Almaty, Kazakhstani officials discussed following Croatia's very successful lead and creating a special Ministry for International Branding (Danayeva 2005). Instead, the government formed a special Department of International Information under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in May 2007, with an official responsibility to create and promote Kazakhstan's image abroad. The Department of International Information worked closely with various PR companies to counteract the bad publicity brought by *Borat*, and helped create

⁴Country advertisement of Kazakhstan, *The Economist*, 13 December 2008.

numerous 'infomercials' in Western and Russian media to promote the 'Heart of Eurasia' message (Verhotunmov 2007).⁵ Kazakhstan's diplomats took an active part in countering the racial and religious slurs made by the character in the movie. Kazakhstan's Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Erlan Idrissov, was especially eloquent, publishing an opinion piece in *The Times* requesting readers to 'please understand why our laughter [about the film] is selective. I suspect that when you know more about the real Kazakhstan, yours will be too' (Idrissov 2006).

Significant financial resources were spent on a public campaign promoting the slogan in *The New York Times*, the BBC and CNN in 2006–2007 in order to divert attention from Cohen's movie. In 30-second 'infomercials' on various foreign TV channels, Kazakhstan presented itself as a country 'committed to freedom and democracy' and as the 'Central Asian leader and a reliable strategic partner of the United States'. The advertisements also emphasised Nazarbaev's achievements in economics, international security and politics. Furthermore, at the May 2007 international PR Forum in Almaty, the Kazakhstani government announced plans to spend more than \$10 million over the next few years towards creating a positive international image of Kazakhstan.⁶

For the years 2009–2011, along with the 'Heart of Eurasia' campaign, Kazakhstan has developed another programme with a catchy title that aims to firmly link the country with Western states, entitled 'Road to Europe'. The programme is designed to increase Kazakhstan's cooperation with European states in technology, energy and transport, improving national legislation to attract international investments, and preparing Kazakhstan for the OSCE chairmanship. The government tried to counter particular foreign perceptions about Kazakhstan, such as claims that the country is authoritarian and corrupt. Leaflets distributed by the government to foreign guests emphasise that Kazakhstan is a stable country with strong property rights granted to its citizens. Along these lines, Kazakhstan's evolving democracy is described in leaflets as having an 'extraordinary degree of political freedom ... [achieved] without any violence at all'.⁷ The multitude of slogans and media campaigns involved in Kazakhstan's promotions reflects the lack of a cohesive government strategy. Several ministries and agencies, including far-flung Kazakhstani embassies, simultaneously seek to improve the country's image, leading to overlapping and contradictory activities.

Kazakhstan's slogans are reinforced by numerous events organised by the government, both at home and abroad. For example, Kazakhstan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs sponsored the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions and a meeting of foreign ministers with the theme 'Common World: Progress through Diversity'. Kazakhstan, furthermore, entered the contest to host the

⁵Countries occasionally find themselves affected by accidentally negative images. For instance, the *Hostel* movie is comparable to *Borat* in its effect, as is *Transsiberian* in the case of Russia.

⁶Boratu-brata? Pravitel'stvo Kazakhstana vydelyaet \$10 mln na sozдание imidzha strany za rubezhom' ['Brother for Borat? Government of Kazakhstan is Allocating \$10 Million to Create the Country's Image Abroad'], available at: www.ktk-tv.kz, accessed 29 December 2008.

⁷'Common Misconceptions in the West about Kazakhstan', a handout distributed during the presentation by Kazakh Minister of Foreign Affairs Marat Tazhin, *Kazakhstan in a Globalizing World* at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1 October 2008.

2014 Winter Olympic Games in Almaty. Although Kazakhstan lost to Russia, no other Central Asia country dared to enter. Finally, Kazakhstan's government has commissioned Western analysts to write a series of favourable reports about the country's economic and political developments. These reports embellished some events in the country, while overlooking criticism of the regime. Several local, private PR companies also sought to contribute to Kazakhstan's positive image by announcing nationwide contests to create an attractive commercial about the country to be broadcast abroad.

Kazakhstan has been so aggressive in promoting its 'Crossroads of Civilisations' and 'Heart of Eurasia' brands that neighbouring Central Asian states would risk charges of plagiarism if they adopted a similar slogan. Kazakhstan's monopoly over the 'Heart of Eurasia' slogan is comparable to Uzbekistan's 'monopoly' over the Amir Timur heritage. Internationally, however, the 'civilisation' slogan may be trivial. Dozens of countries and regions have proclaimed themselves to be the crossroads or gateways to one region or another.⁸

With active campaigns to herald Kazakhstan's political achievements and economic freedoms, Astana is, in fact, promoting an image that is still forming. Nazarbaev's Kazakhstan-2030 Strategy, announced in 1997, promises to achieve security, economic prosperity and political stability by utilising Kazakhstan's geostrategic location, natural and human resources, and historic heritage (Nazarbaev 1997). But most Western research and policy papers tend to view Kazakhstan as a petro-state with an authoritarian political system, as Nazarbaev's presidency faces no term limits, while opposition forces are muted across the country.⁹ The premature announcement of its political and economic 'democratisation' was probably a ruse to bolster the government's efforts to chair the OSCE.

Uzbekistan

While Kazakhstan seeks to position itself as a powerful geostrategic actor, Uzbekistan seeks to accentuate its ancient traditions and modern culture by organising celebrations of its major public holidays and staging fashion shows of traditional clothing at embassies. Frequent cultural events at Uzbekistani embassies keep Uzbekistan's cultural brand on public display despite the regime's poor political image. The Uzbekistani government essentially promotes two differing national images, one for domestic consumption and another for the international community. Holiday celebrations, such as *Navruz* and Independence Day (1 September), are carried out differently inside Uzbekistan and at Uzbekistani embassies. When embassies organise dinners, fashion shows, exhibitions and concerts, reference to Amir Timur is minimised in favour of traditional artefacts and modern paintings depicting Uzbek culture. The events promote national ceramics and *suzani* (embroidery), accompanied by traditional cuisine. Images of the blue domes of Samarkand's historic sites regularly decorate official leaflets, books and websites about Uzbekistan. Although embassy officials are

⁸'How Countries Compete to Look Good', *The Economist*, 9 November 2006.

⁹According to Freedom House, the overall democracy score in Kazakhstan was 6.39 (with 7 being the worst) (Dave 2008).

loyal supporters of President Karimov, his name is rarely mentioned at foreign cultural events. By contrast, Karimov is the central figure in cultural celebrations inside Uzbekistan, and he personally visits many of the festivities.

Following the government's violent suppression of protests in Andijan in May 2005, Uzbekistan drew fierce criticism from the international public and the EU imposed travel sanctions on some Uzbek officials. However, according to the Uzbekistani embassy to the USA, the frequency of cultural events such as photo exhibitions and fashion shows organised by them has continued apace since then, and attendance rates in Washington, DC—usually 600–800 people—have remained level.¹⁰ The embassies collaborate closely with the Ministry of Culture, but do not have a special budget for such events.¹¹ The Uzbekistani embassy in Washington, DC, for instance, organises cultural events on a monthly basis seeking funds from its own budget. Uzbekistani officials also cooperate with a number of influential Western academics who depicted the Andijan events in a favourable way.

Furthermore, Tashkent has focused on promoting tourist attractions such as Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva, as well as other historic places, directly or indirectly through events in Uzbekistani embassies and various publications. According to their government data, tourism has increased by between 15% and 20% each year since the early 2000s.¹² As Uzbekistani officials maintain, Uzbekistan's cities attract tourists interested not as much in the political situation in the country, but curious about religious and civilisational history.¹³ Fortunately for Uzbekistan, its major tourist sites have long been popular in the West, even during the Soviet period.

Kyrgyzstan

Unlike his Central Asian counterparts, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev has not been interested in formulating a national ideology or an external image. The president has paid little attention to structuring public diplomacy abroad, preferring to concentrate on mostly coercive methods of limiting freedom of speech and curtailing domestic opposition. Kyrgyzstan's efforts to build a country image were not directed by the government or president, but initiated by separate individuals from government structures acting on their own enterprise, as well as by opposition forces and private companies. Actors, such as the Ministry of Culture or PR agencies, lack the funds needed to access international mass media or organise events abroad. Most events to attract international attention, therefore, are held inside Kyrgyzstan.

Under Bakiyev, the Ministry of Culture tried to develop the slogan 'Kyrgyzstan—a land of wonders', which captures the country's natural beauty and dynamic political situation, but few government bureaucrats were enthusiastic about the slogan. Beginning in late 2007, officials began to link Kyrgyzstan with Santa Claus. The idea originated in Sweden, when the SWECO logistics company casually noted that

¹⁰Author's interview with Abdusattor Mukhamedov, Uzbekistani Embassy in Washington, DC, December 2008.

¹¹Author's interview with Uzbekistani official, Washington, DC, December 2008.

¹²Author's interview with Abdusattor Mukhamedov, Uzbekistani Embassy in Washington, DC, December 2008.

¹³Author's interview with Uzbekistani official, Washington, DC, December 2008.

Kyrgyzstan would be the most logical place for Santa Claus to operate, since the country is located in the centre of Eurasia and is mostly mountainous (MacWilliam 2007). The idea, however, was quickly picked up by the Kyrgyz Ministry of Cultural Affairs, which organised thematic events to attract more tourists, such as arranging for several mountaineers dressed in various costumes representing international equivalents of Santa Claus to climb mountains near the Issyk-Kul Lake.¹⁴



Source: <http://morrire.livejournal.com/tag/santa>, accessed 15 January 2009.

FIGURE 2. WORLD SANTAS UNITE AT LAKE ISSYK-KUL, FEBRUARY 2008

The image of Santa Claus is not used to reinforce Bakiyev's legitimacy either domestically or abroad. The project is the result of Kyrgyz government and business structures' realisation that the tourist industry's potential must be explored in the country. Furthermore, the idea of developing a national brand to develop the tourist industry has been actively discussed by local mass media outlets and PR agencies for the past few years. Kyrgyzstan did not have its own Borat to advertise the country to a wide range of international viewers but the image of Santa Claus might become a national emblem to reach out to international tourists.¹⁵ The idea of accommodating Santa Claus, in turn, is humorous and unexpected, but such positive associations have the potential to attract curious tourists to ski resorts in Kyrgyzstan and resorts in Issyk-Kul.¹⁶

According to Ryskul Borombayev, director of the National Cultural Centre in Bishkek, Kyrgyz officials acted fast during January 2008, shortly after SWECO's

¹⁴The various images included Russian 'Ded Moroz' (Ice man) and Kyrgyz 'Ayaz ata' (adopted from Russian) dressed in a Kyrgyz ethnic outfit. In January 2009 a new website was launched to support the idea: see www.kyrgyzsanta.org/en, accessed 7 April 2009.

¹⁵Some Kyrgyz experts dealing with brands regretted that Sacha Baron Cohen did not choose Kyrgyzstan, but there were, of course signs of relief among Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Turkmen and Tajik citizens that the film was not about their country.

¹⁶'Propishitsya li Santa v Kyrgyzstane?' ['Will Santa be a Resident in Kyrgyzstan?'], *Moya Stolitsa—novosti*, 11 January 2008.

comment. Over 200 soldiers from the National Guard (a unit mainly used for military parades and celebrations) dressed in Santa Claus costumes to perform a theatrical play in the mountains.¹⁷ They were joined by a multitude of ‘Santas’: the Russian *Ded Moroz*, Danish Santa Claus, Iranian *Haji Feruz*, Uzbek *Karbobo* and Kazakh *Ayaz Ata*. The event was hastily organised and *ad hoc*, lacking any follow-up or future planning but the campaign still proved to be fairly successful, since several Western mass media outlets, including the BBC and Fox News, as well as numerous European, Russian, US and Central Asian news agencies, picked up the story. And, the event piqued the curiosity of many in Kyrgyzstan.

Thanks to the relative freedom in organising celebrations such as the Santa festival, Kyrgyz officials responsible for cultural affairs invented their own explanations of how the character, despite his Christian heritage, fits into Kyrgyz culture. ‘Santa Claus, *Ded Moroz* and *Ayaz Ata*—are all the same man’ argued Brombayev.¹⁸ Interestingly, however, ‘*Ayaz Ata*’ is a direct translation of Russian *Ded Moroz*, and it was actually the Soviet regime that brought him to Central Asia. Overall, the image of Santa Claus, who became widely known in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union due to the spread of Western culture, is meant to personify the idea of Kyrgyzstan as an international hub.

After the popular Santa Claus shows in early 2008, the Kyrgyz government allocated additional funds to organise similar celebrations in the winter of 2008–2009. One phase included building a central Santa’s post-box, where people from across the world could send their Christmas wish lists. A similar winter festival was staged in February 2009 with even greater publicity and a greater number of Santa Clauses visiting Kyrgyzstan from around the world. During December 2008 and early January 2009 public transport workers in Bishkek dressed in Santa Claus costumes. A number of similar events involving Santa Claus were organised across Kyrgyzstan simultaneously. Both the government and tourist firms sponsored the events.

Unlike in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyz opposition leaders are able to challenge the government’s narratives presented to the international public. Political opposition activists provided another venue for image making, as they sought international contacts to help their cause. For instance, opposition leader Alikbek Jekshenkulov promoted the slogan ‘Kyrgyzstan is a country of edelweiss’. He collected and distributed an extensive photo album (over 1,000 pictures) of Kyrgyzstan’s places, peoples and traditions and presented copies of his album at his various meetings with US and EU representatives. Importantly, Jekshenkulov’s campaign focused on two audiences: foreign leaders and the Kyrgyz public, to approve his presentation of the image abroad as part of his party’s political platform.

In sum, Bakiyev’s lack of interest in controlling the domestic or international discourse through inventing official narratives has opened up space for more spontaneous interpretations of what Kyrgyzstan’s international image should be. Competition among government representatives and opposition members on the appropriate content of Kyrgyzstan’s international image continues. For the

¹⁷*Moya Stolitsa—novosti*, 11 January 2008.

¹⁸‘Propishitsya li Santa v Kyrgyzstane?’ [‘Will Santa be a Resident in Kyrgyzstan?’], *Moya Stolitsa—novosti*, 11 January 2008.

government, the image is less important. The political opposition, however, attempts to present its own image of Kyrgyzstan to the international public.

A glimpse of the past, a look into the future

The Soviet past is still used to identify the modern Central Asian states. The 'post-Soviet' label is frequently applied to the states by international media and academics, as well as tourist agencies. For many international travellers, Central Asia is a quaint former Soviet outpost where daily life, urban architecture and people's behaviour are still heavily influenced by its communist heritage. Such an image may raise the curiosity of investors and tourists, but it also makes the region appear less culturally distinctive and attractive in its own right. One of the positive impacts of the *Borat* film was the realisation by Kazakhstan and its neighbours that a knowledge gap existed among the international public about the region and its countries. Today, the Central Asian states have a unique opportunity to promote themselves in a positive light by developing their individual brands, either political or cultural, as well as by devising a joint regional brand. In the mid-2000s the post-Soviet Baltic states launched such a double strategy, promoting each nation as well as the region as a whole. The Central Asian states will benefit from similar international exposure.

One of the challenges these states face is to convince the international public that communism no longer influences their homelands, which today are flourishing, independent countries. In particular, the Central Asian states will need to be creative in communicating their national images. The conventional technique of emphasising a country's pre-Soviet history may prove to be counter-productive, as it is likely to blur differences between the states. Contemporary borders are a Soviet construct and delving into lengthy explanations of pre-Soviet history might require more work than a tourist cares to pursue. To say the least, such complex arguments on the historical development of the states may be hard for the international public to grasp. Highlighting the contested borders between the states, in turn, could drive away tourists and businesses.

To a large extent, Central Asian governments have improvised national brands for international audiences. Kazakhstan reacted to *Borat*; Uzbekistan's cultural events are diffuse and contingent; while the Kyrgyz Ministry of Culture seized upon a throwaway comment by a business organisation. This *ad hoc* reaction to creating new state brands sharply contrasts with more systemic and coherent national ideologies developed by ruling elites. According to Cromwell and Kyruacou, the problem of emerging democracies is that they celebrate their progress in terms of their history, a gauge that may not interest outsiders.¹⁹ Former Soviet states claim great success in democratic development but that, however, is of little relevance to investors or tourists from established democracies. Instead, Central Asian elites and businessmen would find more success in choosing their distinctive traits from post-independence times, be it in the form of products, people or places. The stakeholders must think beyond the national borders and choose qualities that are most appealing across countries and continents, such as technological developments, new services, ecological movements or

¹⁹Author's interview with Thomas Cromwell and Savas Hadji Kyruacou from East-West Communications, Washington, DC, 6 January 2009.

trends in education. Like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan must think beyond their present historic memory.

Central Asian leaders made their first attempts at nation branding in the 2000s specifically to present themselves favourably to the international public, not just to improve the image of the country in general. There was an upsurge in the production of national ideology in the 1990s up until the mid-2000s, but the ideas and symbols used to identify Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in particular, are mostly efforts by political elites to attract more tourists, international donors and investors. Uzbekistan seeks to be seen as a culturally rich country, while Kazakhstan stresses its economic potential, important location and ethnic diversity. Another significant difference between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is that Astana relies more on catchy slogans, as opposed to the more holistic cultural approach pursued by Tashkent. Kazakhstan also follows a more coherent, integrated strategy, combining political and business resources into distributing the 'Heart of Eurasia' slogan. Kazakhstan relies on a slogan that is more likely to resemble international propaganda funded by abundant economic resources than an attempt to create a nation brand. Kazakhstan's brand clearly links the country with the ruling regime, the president and his decisions.

Finally, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have produced new symbols to brand their nations internationally. Uzbekistan, conversely, has relied on the symbolic resources it inherited from the Soviet Union, namely, its famous cities and cultural artefacts. This comes as a contrast to Uzbekistan's national ideology, which centres on the much older image of Amir Timur. Kazakhstan's one-party system, control of mass media and corruption rates inevitably undermine the government's attempts to build a positive image abroad. But by focusing on culture, the Uzbekistani government has attempted to divert international attention from autocracy, poor human rights and international isolation.

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