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SECTION 22. Policy. Innovations. Theory, practice and methods.

SOMETHING-STAN: THE STEREOTYPICAL REPRESENTATION OF KAZAKHSTAN IN INTERNATIONAL MOVIES VS. THE OFFICIAL NATION-BRANDING OF THE KAZAKH GOVERNMENT

Abstract: This article critically examines and compares the representation of Kazakhstan in the framework of international popular culture and in the official Kazakh nation-branding strategy. The first section of this article reveals how European and American movies have regularly depicted Kazakhstan through stereotypes and labels. The second section critically evaluates western audience reactions by assessing movie reviews published in the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). The third section analyses the strategy adopted by the Kazakh government for shaping a positive image of Kazakhstan abroad.

Key words: Republic of Kazakhstan, popular geopolitics, movie representation, audience reaction, nation branding.

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Introduction: popular culture and geopolitics

Popular geopolitics firstly emerged in the 1990s as a branch of critical geopolitics, but only in recent years this area of research gained a more widespread consensus and thorough consideration in the academic field.

Popular geopolitics examines the way in which the world is depicted in various manifestations of popular culture (like, for example, books, movies, and video-games) with the objective of analysing how such narratives “might either reinforce or contest geopolitical images and or representations” [1, p. 74].

According to Gallaher, “representation constitutes the manner through which ideas, beliefs, values and images are both produced and provided with meaning” [2, p. 308]. In many cases, popular culture provides a fictional representation of a place by assigning to a geographical space an exclusive set of imagined features and values. But, a “place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world” [3, p. 11]. Therefore, by creating a common sense that induces people to associate certain images and meanings over places, such representations have concrete implications on people’s interpretation of

real events and their perception of global political spaces. Thus, “popular culture not only reflects but also *constitutes* world politics” [4, p. 19].

Moreover, representing a place is also a process that reveals “how we describe the Other-the peoples and places that are deemed fundamentally different than “us” [5, p. 156]. For instance, the representation of the world according to simplistic bipolar categories (such as, for example, good/evil, civilised/barbaric and friends/enemies) is often part of a wider political strategy aimed to strengthen the sense of identity of a specific community through a radical distinction between ‘our’ (positive and desirable) values and ‘their’ (negative and undesirable) values. According to Said: “It is perfectly possible to argue that some distinctive objects are made by the mind, and that these objects, while appearing to exist objectively, have only a fictional reality. A group of people living on a few acres of land will set up boundaries between their land and its immediate surroundings and the territory beyond, which they call “the land of the barbarians.” In other words, this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is “ours” and an unfamiliar space beyond “ours” which is “theirs” is a



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way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary. I use the word "arbitrary" here because imaginative geography of the "our land-barbarian land" variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for "us" to set up these boundaries in our own minds; "they" become "they" accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from "ours" [6, p. 54].

For the recently independent countries of Central Asia, which are still wrapped in an aura of mystery for many people of the world, such representations have a strategic relevance. As stated by Stanley, "We live in a world where labels are powerful, whether used by citizens to identify themselves or to distinguish them from "others" around them" [7, p. 296]. Therefore, a positive image can strengthen the international political role of a country, support the development of new business opportunities by attracting foreign direct investments, and increase the number of incoming tourists. On the contrary, a negative representation risks to slow down its ambitious plans of development by holding it at the edge of the international networking.

The first part of this article aims to examine how Kazakhstan have been depicted in European and American movies of the last 20 years. Through the analysis of movies like "Air Force One" (1997), "The World Is Not Enough" (1999), "Rollerball" (2002), "The Cavern" (2005), "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan" (2006), and "Mercenaries" (2014), the goal is to understand what is the image of Kazakhstan fostered by these films.

But the relation between movie representations and audience reactions is sometimes controversial. As sustained by Dodds, "It is important to recognize that not only are films capable of being understood in radically different ways but also that different audiences exist in the first place" [8, p. 120]. Thus, the second part of this article extrapolates western audience reactions by critically assessing the movie reviews posted on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb).

The third part of this article briefly describes how the Kazakh political élites has progressively invested a consistent amount of resources in the development of a dynamic state-branding campaign aimed to improve the reputation of Kazakhstan in the world. Such process can be partially interpreted as a response to the stereotypical interpretation of Kazakhstan diffused by those movies mentioned above.

The last part summarizes key points and offers some critical conclusions.

The grotesque depiction of Kazakhstan in international movies

The international reputation of a country is the result of many top-down policies (how the government aims to promote its country "internally and externally") as well as bottom-up popular processes (the sum of all the representations offered in the various products of popular culture). In this section the attention will be focused only on one specific type of popular culture: movies.

Movies have the power to affect people's minds through the imaginative representation of places. Sometimes such representations are accurate and honestly reflect the core features of the depicted place. Other times, on the contrary, they offer more grotesque and stereotypical views. How to interpret such diversified outcomes is a complex issue because, as sustained by Ridanpää, "In many cases the products of popular culture contain political messages, but whether their intervening nature is acknowledged or not is a much more complicated issue" [9, p. 156].

In the last 20 years, few American and European movies have been set in Kazakhstan or have referred to the citizens of this country. Nevertheless, all of them have tended to offer a negative representation of this place.

The 1997 American political-thriller "Air Force One" follows a group of merciless terrorists who hijack the Air Force One to demand the release of Kazakhstan's authoritarian leader (General Ivan Radek), formerly arrested by a joint operation of US and Russian special forces. In one of the first scene of the movie, Kazakhstan is described by the US President (interpreted by Harrison Ford) as a war land where Radek's regime murdered over 200,000 people.

In the 1999 James Bond movie "The World is Not Enough" the plot is mostly set in Spain, Azerbaijan and Turkey, but for a while the action moves to Kazakhstan. In this short scene, the villain (Viktor "Renard" Zokas) easily steals a plutonium bomb from a former USSR military base in Kazakhstan, thus revealing a lack of security.

In the 2002 remake of the American science-fiction movie "Rollerball", the protagonist (Jonathan Cross, interpreted by Chris Klein) moves to Kazakhstan to play in the local team of Rollerball, a new extreme sport which combines handball, roller-skating and violent physical contacts. What emerges from this movie is a violent and corrupted society where few enjoy a luxury life, while most of local people live in poverty. The same sportive competitions are rigged by the owner-promoter of the Rollerball Championship (Alexis Petrovich, interpreted in the film by Jean Reno) to have spectacular accidents aimed to increase the levels of audience.

The 2005 horror movie "The Cavern" takes place in an unexplored cave of the Kyzyl Kum desert of Kazakhstan (but the movie was filmed in

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California) and narrates how a group of speleologists is hunted and killed by a “strange creature”. Although the references to Kazakhstan are limited, the evoked atmosphere is the one of an exotic location with dangerous-hidden mysteries.

In the 2006 British-American mockumentary comedy “Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan” the producer and actor Sacha Baron Cohen proposes an even more grotesque representation of Kazakhstan. The entire movie turns around the story of the Kazakh report Borat and his travel to the United States. In one of the first scene, the protagonist briefly present his native village (but the scenes were filmed in the village of Glod - Romania), introducing to the viewer the local rapist, showing the local kindergarten where babies play with rifles, presenting the mechanic who is also the abortionist, exalting his sister as the fourth prostitute of whole Kazakhstan and revealing the interior of his house partially occupied by a cow. In the rest of the movie the protagonist repeatedly adopts an anti-Semitic, sexist and barely civilian behaviour. Due to its unpolitically correct jokes this movie generated many controversies and it was banned in Kazakhstan as well as in the entire Arab countries (excluded Lebanon).

The idea of Kazakhstan as an insecure and unsafe country is revived in the 2014 movie “Mercenaries”. In this story a band of exclusively female mercenaries is formed to free the daughter of the US American president, who has been kidnaped by an insurrectionist group of Kazakhstan. In the movie, Kazakhstan is depicted as a failed state where violent warlords make money by selling weapons to Middle-Eastern terrorist groups and forcing local women to sexual-slavery.

In all these movies, the Republic of Kazakhstan is described as a decadent, dangerous and underdeveloped place. In these fictional representations, moreover, local authorities seem unwilling or incapable to face serious challenges like, for example, poorly controlled nuclear stocks, extreme social inequality and widespread violence. The citizens of these societies are sometime described as corrupted, cynical and opportunistic individuals, other times as caricatured figures still following a medieval style of life.

This speculative representation of Kazakhstan might be the result of multiple factors. First, this area of the world is still relatively unknown to many Europeans and Americans and, therefore, different movie makers have taken advantage of such condition for using Kazakhstan as background for different scenarios. Second, there are some common clichés about the Central Asian countries, including their “post-Soviet” label and a widespread (although deceiving) association between “-stan” states and war (diffused after the 2001 military intervention in

Afghanistan), that have been exploited to frame various action movies’ plots. Third, some movies have referred to concrete problems that have affected (or are still currently affecting) the Republic of Kazakhstan in the last decades. For example, the James Bond’s scene depicting Kazakhstan nuclear disarmament makes reference to a concrete geopolitical issue. After the collapse of Soviet Union, the newly independent Republic of Kazakhstan had to deal with the USSR nuclear warheads dislocated in its territory. The government of Kazakhstan, finally, decided to return such weapons to Russia, dismantle the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing site and remove hundreds of kilos of highly enriched uranium (Project Sapphire) [10; 11].

Whatever might be the logical explanation behind such negative representations, the fact is they anyway create a narrative which:

- contributes, by stereotyping the ‘others’, to the “articulation and reproduction of *national identities*” [1, p. 75]. In the theoretical framework of “we” (western countries) and the “other” (Central Asian countries), these representations reflect what European and US societies supposed not to be (backward, corrupted, vicious, etc.).
- reflects “contemporary anxieties among western strategic planners about the role of regions like the Central Asia in the aftermath of the 11 September attacks” [12, p. 127].
- risks to generate political and socio-economic controversies by shaping a misleading image of Kazakhstan. For example, Saunders have defined ‘irresponsible’ Sacha Baron Cohen’s verbal attacks against Uzbekistan during the marketing campaign of Borat [13, p. 73].

The international audience reactions on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb)

The section above provides a succinct overview of the representations of Kazakhstan in European and US movies. In order to understand how such movies shaped individual knowledge, however, this section examines the issue of audience reactions. The core objective is to realize what kind of message do people got watching these films being aware that, on one side, there might be multiple audiences [8, p. 123-124] and, on the other, the influence of media is conditioned by a range of personal and social factors (such as, for example, age, education and origin) [14, p. 98].

Addressing the audience reactions is a fundamental step in popular geopolitical analysis because “audiences have differing degrees and varieties of cultural capital, audiences create their own systems of meanings within a text, consciously and unconsciously, which may or may not overlap or

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reflect that which it was originally intended to convey” [15, p. 1669]. Such argument is further sustained by Dodds: “A word of caution is due when considering the interpretation of films and their possible cultural and political influence (even though analysis of audience reaction may well be possible through audience surveys and film media critiques): there is no guarantee that the viewing public will adopt the meanings the directors and politicians have anticipated” [1, p. 83]. In other terms, the same movie might provoke diverse reactions in different social groups and people.

Following the example of other authors (like Dodds and Ridanpää) the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) has been used as archive for collecting empirical evidences on audience reactions to the movies introduced in the previous section.

As sustained by Ridanpää, movie reviews offer two set of information: “First, film reviews represent multiform and multi-voiced reflections on how people conceive their political environments. On the other hand, and of primary importance as concerns this paper, all film reviews function simultaneously as ‘guide books’ for the audience, offering multiple ‘instructions’, essentially implicit orders, about how to dissect the film in question and thus how to understand the political meanings related to it” [9, p. 144]. IMDb reviews, however, offer data about a restricted category of audience because most of internet (and IMDb) users are young, educated people mostly living in North America and Europe [8, p. 121].

Almost one hundred fifty thousand people have assigned an average mark of six point four stars on ten to the movie “Air Force One”. Three hundred ninety-four IMDb users have also written a review for this film. Overall, many users have appreciated a good acting, but they have also raised many doubts about the credibility of the story (e.g. shootings and explosions in the airplanes do not cause sever damages, six terrorists defeat all US President’s bodyguards, but then the US President alone-interpreted by Harrison Ford-is able to overcome them, etc.). Assessing the IMDb’s comments also come out a certain confusion on the origin of the terrorists. Some users describe them as Russian, while others interpret them as Kazakh. The confusion is such that a user wrote: “for me the most glaring absurdities are in the geography: Kazakhstan is referred to as though it’s part of Russia, not a separate republic”.

Most of the geopolitical comments are associated with the stereotypical association “Russian language-bad guys” proposed in this movie. As a result, various users have defined this movie as a patriotic American film: “the entire thing seems to be a US propaganda movie, with the bad Russians and the good Americans”. There are, on the contrary, few comments on Kazakhstan, but two of them are

emblematic for this study. According to one reviewer: “A more interesting question is how did they pick up the villains? Kazakhstan rebels? A rouge group of Russians? This is rather retro stuff because absolutely nobody watching the movie knows or cares about Kazakhstan or its internal affairs. The simple fact is that viewers will see and hear the heavies speaking Russian and that will be enough for them”. Another reviewer, on the contrary, affirms that this movie “conveniently ignores political reality”, thus showing concerns about its oversimplification of world politics.

Around one hundred sixty-thousand IMDb’s users have evaluated the movie “The World Is Not Enough” assigning, as in the previous case, an average mark of six point four stars on ten. Six hundred eighty-five users have published a movie review. Most of the users appreciated this movie, but there are also several ones who have criticised the script as excessively “action-oriented” as well as the casting choices (for many, Denise Richards does not fit well with the figure of a nuclear scientist). Being part of a saga, many reviews refer to earlier James Bond movies and they often compare the acting of Pierce Brosnan (James Bond), Sophie Marceau (Elektra, the fake-friend) and Denise Richards (Dr. Christmas Jones, the “Bond girl”) to former interpretations.

Few and very shallow are the geopolitical comments of the IMDb’s movie reviewers. This outcome might be related to the producers’ decision to shift the scene in many different places with a resulting poor characterization of the explored locations. Still, a shared opinion among the reviewers is that the Kazakh scene and the Caspian setting were, overall, quite realistic. At the same time, as already explained by Dodds critically assessing James Bond fans, “there is clearly an expectation that James Bond will be *both* contemporary and also ‘timeless’. In other words, it was considered ideal if the film [Die Another Day, the Bond movie released after The World Is Not Enough] touched in the lightest way possible on real-life events without actually being clearly situated or inspired by particular events” [8, p. 125-126].

Over twenty-two thousand IMDb’s users assigned an average of three stars on ten to the sci-fi movie “Rollerball” and two hundred eighty-nine of them also published a movie review. Most of these comments are unenthusiastic criticisms to the film: the prevailing opinion is that this film is a pointless remake of the original 1975 movie “Rollerball”, being characterized by a poor storyline, a weak direction and a terrible acting. Less than 10% of the total comments provide remarks over the geopolitical representations included in this movie. Compared to the original movie, which was set in a distant future, the 2002 version is set in contemporary (2005) Central Asia. Many viewers have expressed serious

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doubts about such ‘bizarre’ choice and one of them interestingly stated: “This version is set in the present, but it tries to maintain its believability by locating the league in Southwest Asia, under the parochial assumption, I suppose, that that part of the world is every bit as alien, exotic and dehumanized as any hypothetical future society”.

Other users expressed some concerns on how the story deals with the hidden political message. Many believe that the violent and corrupted context of the story (mostly settled in Kazakhstan and Russia) was a captivating narrative device which, nevertheless, had to be examined in more detail. One user wrote: “There was a vague lawlessness that I would have really enjoyed learning more about... people “disappearing,” the criminal economy, the lack of respect for human life on the part of the Reno character...”. Another one supported such view, affirming: ““Rollerball” is supposed to be talking about the corruption of human beings by an oppressive government. That message is lost here”.

The general idea is that some of the problems revealed in this movie might be real challenges faced by Kazakh people. However, they are not examined enough deeper to get to any conclusion.

The horror movie “The Cavern” received an average rate of two point eight stars on ten and it was commented by eighty-nine reviewers. Most film reviewers harshly criticize several aspects of the movie: the story line is too simple, the actors are awful and the movie is, technically, shot badly. There are a few comments on the setting of the film in Kazakhstan, but all of them support a shared idea, which is well expressed by a user: “The movie opens with a suggestion that the scene is in the desert of Kazakhstan. I’m not sure why the picked Kazakhstan... But they should have just started inside the cave, because the outside was obviously not Kazakhstan”. This comment reveals a basic geographical knowledge, namely that the ‘jungle’ shown at the beginning of the movie does not fit well with the users’ image of Kazakh steppe.

The controversial movie “Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan” was rated by over three-hundred thousand IMDb’s users and it received an average evaluation of seven point three stars. The total number of users who commented the movie is one thousand two hundred one. These data reveal the massive public attention achieved by this film through its provocative, but well-structured marketing campaign. According to audience reactions, Borat is a movie that people loved or hated it. Some people saw in Borat the new frontier of comedy, while other have perceived it as an unsophisticated experiment based on “toilet” humour. As a result, over 90% of IMDb’s film reviewers are equally split in two categories. On one side, there are those who perceived this movie as

hilarious being able to break cultural taboo with an offensive, but smart humour. Generally, these people highly rated this movie with eight, nine or ten stars. On the other side, there are those who were shocked by the crude content of this movie and, therefore, defined it stupid, outrageous and disgusting. They poorly valued this movie with one or two stars. About the remaining 10% of users, mostly enjoyed the sense of comedy and timing of this movie, but they did not consider Borat a masterpiece or Sacha Baron Cohen a genius. Therefore, they rated Borat with six or seven stars.

IMDb’s users have also expressed contrasting opinions on the geopolitical representations of this movie. Most of those who loved it believe that Borat is much more a severe criticism to the USA rather than an offensive attack against Kazakhstan. In other terms, while the representation of Kazakhstan is clearly fictional and the character of Borat is intentionally grotesque, the reactions of US citizens to Borat’s racist and homophobic jokes reveal a genuine, but frightening image of US society. One reviewer commented: “The movie does not make fun of Kazakhstan, it makes fun of Americans, in a criticizing way. Kazakhstan is merely used as a platform to show the (of course exaggerated) contrasts between the advanced and ‘civilized’ America and the simplistic Kazakhstan and how a simplistic man, from such a simplistic place, such as Borat Sagdiyev (Sacha Baron Cohen) is capable of pinching right through the advanced and civilized Americans and puts his finger right on the spot”. Sacha Baron Cohen’s movie, therefore, does not really target Kazakh people but, as wrote in another comment, it simply exploits “the fact that average Americans don’t even know where Kazakhstan is”.

Still, several users have contested the decision to describe Kazakhstan in such paradoxical and ridiculous tones. Most of those who poorly ranked Borat (but also some of those who liked it) offer moral sustain to the protests of the Kazakh government against the release of this movie. These users remark the overall lack of references to real Kazakhstan: for example, the language spoken by the protagonist is not Kazakh, the village shown at the beginning of the movie is, actually, in Romania, and most of the stereotypical representations offered in the movie have no relations with Kazakh customs and traditions. Thus, one film reviewer asserts that “a make-belief country could have easily been done with instead of having to offend an already existing country”.

But the core question is whether Borat’s grotesque representation of Kazakhstan could be interpreted as realist by the audience. Once more, the opinions expressed by IMDb’s users are contrasting. One user, for example, writes that “anyone who knows and understands this film actually sees Borat as a character or anyone remotely real”, while

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another user argues that “Central Asia remains, for most people, not an identifiable place, but a blank space that can easily be filled with the fears, fantasies and prejudices of film-makers and audiences”. Critically assessing the IMDb’s reviews on Borat, it seems that a tiny minority (less than 1% of users) have interpreted the movie as a faithful representation of Kazakhstan and its citizens. IMDb’s users are, however, just a narrow and specific category of movie watchers. Therefore, the impact of Borat on people’s geopolitical imagination might be much more widespread. One Kazakh lady I personally interviewed, for example, told me that, during a research period in Europe, she was addressed as liar when she claimed to be from Kazakhstan because, according to the accuser who confidentially referred to Borat, “Kazakh people are not Asian”.

About the Kazakh official response, Dittmer reports that “when Kazakhstan protested its treatment as an anti-Semitic and misogynist country in *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) it was publicly scorned by the American public. However, the president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, paid for an advertisement in the *New York Times* and subsequently flew to Washington D.C. to meet with President George W. Bush in order to foster a more “authentic” image for his country” [5, p. xvii]. Nevertheless, after an initial aversion the establishment of Kazakhstan realized that it could be more beneficial to exploit the momentum because, although the movie offered a deformed and unrealistic image of Kazakhstan, still it placed ‘Kazakhstan on the map’ [16]. As highlighted by Saunders, “the ensuing controversy promoted tourism to Kazakhstan... Many young westerners realized that Baron Cohen’s Boratistan was purely a plot device for his strange brand of humour, and wished to learn more about the real Kazakhstan” [13, p. 70].

Finally, the movie “Mercenaries” received an average rate of three point eight stars and it was reviewed by twenty-five users. Mostly the movie is criticized for its low budget, the scarce acting and its unsophisticated plot. Essentially, it is interpreted as the mock buster version of the film “The Expendables”. But, in the view of different reviewers, the scenario is unbelievable and the representation of the Central Asian context is completely wrong.

Overall, most of the IMDb users seem to watch movies for pure enjoyment, without being particularly interested in the assessment of the political reality they show. Therefore, their comments are mostly focused on the credibility of the plot, the quality of acting, and the director’s technical skills. On the base of such parameters they tend to value the movie and compare it with other

titles of the same genre. The number of people who proposed some critical reflections on the geopolitical representations offered by these films is much more restricted. Most of them are rather able to distinguish between stereotypical and realistic narratives, but some viewers still have a predetermined and blurred image of Kazakhstan.

Moreover, although for each of the considered movies it was possible to identify a dominant interpretation, a diversified range of feelings and reactions characterized the IMDb movie-reviewers’ community. Such diverse response in front of the same product can be explained considering that “media is neither static as it is believed to be, nor the audience a fixed or passive receiver of messages” [17, p. 8]. In other terms, the cinematic experience of a viewer cannot be decontextualized from his/her educational background (here interpreted as the whole set of knowledge and memories gained, intentionally or accidentally, by a person during his/her entire life) and, therefore, “the same messages are “downloaded” and interpreted with different effects by different receivers in different settings” [18, p. 44].

The official response of Kazakhstan: re-shaping the international image of the country through nation branding

European and US movies have mostly offered a negative representation of Kazakhstan. But for newly independent post-Soviet countries the creation of a positive reputation in the international framework is a key asset that may “facilitate their entrance into favored economic or cultural alliances.” [7, p. 299].

Nation branding can be defined as “the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences” [19, p. 15]. In other terms, as sustained by the Kazakh Minister of Information and Communications, Dauren Abayev, “A country brand is not just a logo, but a state’s large-scale image strategy that is oriented at being positively positioned in the eyes of the international community” [20].

In the last twenty years, the government of Kazakhstan has attempted to create an appealing and trustworthy nation-branding, which might sustain its ambitious political goals. But, as stated by Saunders, “While older countries enjoy well-established national images at home and abroad, the past century has seen the emergence of roughly one hundred new nations that face a double challenge. They are charged first with crystallizing a coherent national image in the domestic realm, and second with transmitting a positive image of their country to the world community” [13, p. 65].

At national level, the Kazakh government faced many challenges in the development of a collective national identity as well as in the consolidation of

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state legitimacy. As for the other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan had “little history of independent statehood and even less experience of any ideological context that legitimizes a specific set of political arrangements, other than the discredited Marxist model of the Soviet system” [21, pp. 135-136]. In response to such difficulties, the other Central Asian countries have identified a sense of identity in the framework of ethnicity and religion. But, in a multi-ethnic society like Kazakhstan, such approach could result problematic. Therefore, the Kazakh government attempted to promote both an exclusive ethno-centric narrative as well as an inclusive civic Kazakhstani identity [22, p. 400].

At international level, the problem was to construct a new image of independent Kazakhstan. If with Borat many people in the world became aware about the existence of this country, the new challenge for the Kazakh government became to deconstruct such grotesque representation and promote a more realistic and welcoming reputation. For such an aim, the Kazakh government decided to operate on multiple fronts in order to target the “three broad groups of international audience: businesses, politicians and tourists” [23, p. 1125]. The embraced policy includes: accurate marketing strategies, massive investments in successful projects, international activism, local movies production, support to exchange programs abroad, and the progressive removal of barriers for travelling to Kazakhstan.

In the course of the years, the Kazakh government has elaborated an articulated marketing campaign with the aim to internationally promote Kazakhstan as a land of great opportunities. The Kazakh national slogan “Kazakhstan, the Heart of Eurasia”, for example, highlights the core geostrategic position of this country and its role as bridge between European and Asian markets. Another example is the reference to the “Eternal Land” (Mangelik Yel), which reflects the ambitions of Kazakhstan to preserve its independence, while further strengthening intercultural harmony in order to build “a happy country that allows its citizens to have fulfilling lives and to look at the future with faith” [24]. Likewise, the catchphrase of Astana, “where the dreams come true”, symbolically refers to the historical evolution of this futuristic city (Astana became the capital of Kazakhstan only in 1997, after a rapid and massive process of urban development) as well as to the multiple life prospects offered by this new Central Asian hub. All these labels intend to emphasize the fundamental values, beliefs and prospects of the Republic of Kazakhstan, such as interculturality, unity and progress. As the member of Majilis (lower house of the Kazakh Parliament) Talgat Yergaliev affirmed “We, Kazakh people like positive energy, believe in good names and title” [25].

The Kazakh government has also devoted many resources to the development of international top-leading institutions operating in various areas. Some examples are the Nazarbayev University (founded in 2010, this institution is nowadays one of the main educational center in Central Asia), Air Astana (since its foundation, in 2001, the main Kazakh airline has significantly grown so that the 2016 Skytrax World’s Top 100 airlines places it in 43rd position) and the Astana Pro Team (a professional cycling team that, since 2007, has won some of the most important international competitions included Tour de France, Giro d’Italia and Vuelta a España). In addition, large-scale investments have been directed to expand industrial innovation through the “2010-2014 National Programme of Forced Industrial and Innovative Development of the Republic of Kazakhstan” and the “State Programme of Industrial-Innovative Development 2015-2019” [26]. According to Aben, “the proactive position of the government is aimed at boosting economic development in order to provide a solid basis for its successful branding” [27].

In the last years, international activism has been the leading strategy to promote in the world Kazakhstan’s stable society and developing economy. Among the most important events hosted by Kazakhstan there are political summits (like the 2010 OSCE chairmanship), sportive competitions (such as the 2011 Asian Winter Games and 2017 Almaty Winter Universiade) and economic exhibitions (as EXPO 2017). As reminded by President Nazarbayev, “Kazakhstan is the first-Soviet country to chair the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and to host the OSCE Summit, and will now be the first to host EXPO 2017 – a world-class event” [28]. Such policy of active participation in the international framework has achieved its peak in January 2017, when Kazakhstan occupied a seat as non-permanent state within the United Nation Security Council.

Since the creation, in 2005, of the Kazakhfilm joint-stock (in which the government holds the largest share) movies have also been used in the nation-building process as well as in the international promotion of Kazakh nationhood. As sustained by Isaacs, “the constant repetition of ‘national’ signs through the medium of cinematic works can contribute to the shared imagination of history, tradition and nationhood which allows nation-states to sustain themselves over time” [29, pp. 138-139]. In general, Kazakhstan has disseminated “similar narratives for both domestic and international audiences” [23, p. 1123]. Governmental-sponsored movies have primarily sustained a binary representation of Kazakhstan: their goal was to strength the Kazakh national identity, meanwhile supporting the reputation of Kazakhstan as an open, friendly and multi-ethnic society. The blockbuster

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GIF (Australia) = 0.564	ESJI (KZ) = 1.042	IBI (India) = 4.260
JIF = 1.500	SJIF (Morocco) = 2.031	

movie *Nomad* (2005), for example, follows an ethnic narrative aimed to emphasize the historical roots of Kazakh nationhood and to strength the sense of patriotism, while the film *The Gift for Stalin* (2008) offers a more civic-line narration aimed to depict Kazakhstan as a tolerant and hospitable country [29, p. 146 *et seq.*]. Despite the parallel rise of counter-narrations in local independent movies, this strategy seems successful. A 2011 survey reveals that people of Kazakhstan identify with citizenship (56%) and nationality (26%) their most relevant affiliation, thus “nationality and poli-ethnicity can be laid in the foundation of formation of positive political brand of the country, because they are the basic elements of identification of the people of Kazakhstan” [30, p. 160].

The educational sector has also been considered as a fundamental asset to improve the reputation of Kazakhstan in the world. In 1993 the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, introduced the “Bolashak Programme”, a governmental scholarship awarded to those excellent students wishing to improve their skills through a studying/professional experience abroad. The scholarship fully covers all study related costs, but it requires that, after the completion of their studies, the awarded scholars would return to Kazakhstan to work for at least five years. To date, several thousands of students have made request and received this grant. Moreover, since 2005, the Kazakh government has increased the investments in this initiative and it has also extended the opportunity to receive the scholarship to government officials, academic and teaching staff, technical workers and medical personal. Overall, the “Bolashak Programme” primarily offers the opportunity to train Kazakh people in high-demands fields at world’s top universities. But, making travel out of the country the most talented people of Kazakhstan, it also “has a significant influence on the creation of a positive image of the Republic of Kazakhstan, both within the country and abroad” [31, p. 284].

Finally, in summer 2014 the Kazakh government has unilaterally removed the touristic visa requests for the citizens of different western countries. Such policy has been further strengthened in the last two years so that, since January 2017, the citizens of 45 countries now enjoy a 30 days’ visa-free regime (without considering those states like, for example, Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, which signed bilateral agreements with Kazakhstan for visa free-regimes up to 90 days). These measures should increase the tourist flows, especially in relation to EXPO 2017, thus allowing Kazakhstan to exploit more the word-of-mouth as mean of advertising.

Conclusions

Movies are powerful, but ambiguous tools for constructing geopolitical knowledge because they

risk to promote misleading stereotypical interpretations with direct consequences on real-life political actions. Perhaps, as suggested by Dittmer, “What we need is an entertainment industry that is merely socially aware, and does not resort to unsubtle processes of Othering and fear” [5, p. 162]. But, at present, this is a hardly achievable wish.

This article reveals that there is a huge gap between the image of Kazakhstan passed by European and American movies and the one officially promoted by the Kazakh government. International movies have depicted Kazakhstan as a dangerous land, where corrupted and cynical individuals take advantage over a poor and backward population. On the contrary, the Kazakh government has officially presented Kazakhstan as a stable, reliable and friendly country, which is rapidly evolving from a socio-economic perspective, but it is also deed in the preservation of its customs and traditions.

For Kazakhstan, the positive note is that IMDb reviewers have shown a certain awareness to distinguish between fictional and realistic representations. However, there are no evidence to sustain that this consideration might be extended to the whole audience and, in addition, there might be some undesirable side effects associated with a repeated negative representation (e.g. underestimation, misconception and erroneous pessimistic connotation of the country’s values). Further studies in this field are certainly required because “modern information and communication technologies open up new gates into the subject of ‘audience’ and necessitate new ways of investigating, contextualizing and interpreting audiences”. [17, p. 8].

The negative note is that the image of Kazakhstan abroad remains blurred and the Kazakh national branding policy is still far from achieving its ambitious goals. This evaluation seems confirmed by the 2014-15 Bloom Consulting Country Brand Ranking (Tourism Edition), which places Kazakhstan only in 85th position worldwide and 26th among Asian countries, the 2017 Bloom Consulting Digital Country Index, which places Kazakhstan only in 96th position worldwide and 29th among Asian countries, and the 2016 Reputation Institute’s Most Reputable Countries, which positioned Kazakhstan among the group of countries with a weak or vulnerable reputation [32; 33; 34]. Other consulting companies have offered a more optimistic assessment of the Kazakh national brand. According to the Brand Finance’s ranking “National Brands 2016”, for example, Kazakhstan is placed in 47th place (although it lost 3 positions compared to 2015) [35]. Still, Kazakhstan is ranked behind countries like Colombia, Nigeria and Bangladesh.

These results do not imply that the Kazakh official strategy has been unsuccessful. Nation

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branding is a long-term process that need to be regularly sustained and renewed before giving some relevant outcomes. Therefore, the measures adopted till now by the Kazakh government must be interpreted as the first steps in a long path. Nevertheless, there are at least two improvements that the Kazakh government should introduce in the next future. First, as sustained by Beyzhanova and Rysbaeva, “to date, Kazakhstan belongs to a few recognizable country brand. The main reason is the lack of systemic work on the formation and development of country brand in Kazakhstan” [30, p. 162]. Therefore, a more consistent representation of Kazakhstan, sustained and jointly supported by the different agencies of the Kazakh government, is a required step toward the affirmation of the Kazakh nation branding. Second, a successful national image “cannot be separated from the processes taking place inside the country” [23, p. 1128]. If the Kazakh government wants to improve its reputation as a stable and peaceful country than it must further proceeds with the recognition and enforcement of political rights at national level. Otherwise, news like, for example, the sentencing to five years’

imprisonment of Max Bokayev and Talgat Ayan for the organization of peaceful protests in April 2016, which has been recently condemned by the EU spokesperson, risk to drastically undermine the image Kazakhstan as tolerant state [36]. While the construction of a deep-rooted positive reputation abroad is a hard and time-consuming process, the blast of a scandal may be enough to reverse any efforts made in the previous years. This is especially true for the newly independent countries like Kazakhstan that still do not have a clear representation in the collective imaginary of the western world.

Still, if Kazakhstan will correct its nation branding strategies according to the suggestions here remarked, there are all the essential conditions to gain public recognition in the international context. This condition will not necessarily constrain the cinematographic representations of Kazakhstan in grotesque terms, but it will certainly make the audience more aware about the values and traditions of the Kazakh society.

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