

Sport and soft authoritarian nation-building

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Abstract. Authoritarian regimes have long taken an interest in promoting elite and mass sport, deploying it as both a nation-building strategy and a tool to elicit respect and legitimacy on the global stage. However, authoritarian regimes do not equally engage sport for these ends. Rather, as I argue, it is characteristic of ‘soft’ authoritarian regimes, i.e. those that rely less on overtly violent tactics of maintaining power (‘coercion’) and more on seemingly ‘positive’ tactics (‘persuasion’). Through the example of sport in Kazakhstan, and specifically the Astana Professional Cycling Team, I argue that nation-building through state promotion of sport illustrates the ways that soft authoritarian regimes such as that of Nursultan Nazarbayev perpetuate their rule. Adding nation-building as the sixth tool in the Schatz’s (2009) ‘soft authoritarian toolkit,’ I demonstrate through discourse analysis and focus group research, how the nationalist performances surrounding elite sport are fundamental to allowing ordinary people to see their everyday practices and support for the ‘nation’ as something ‘objective,’ rather than intimately tied to the system of unequal power relations perpetuated by the ruling regime.

Keywords: sport; nationalism; authoritarianism; Kazakhstan; cycling; focus groups

Introduction

Anssi Paasi (1996: 98-99) once argued that, “owing to its emotional expressions and nationalistic symbolism sport should have a key place in general research into nationalism and national culture.” More specifically, there is a certain political geography to the degree of state-scale promotion of sport as a dimension of nation-building. Historically, authoritarian regimes have taken a strong interest in promoting both elite and mass sport. The aim of this article is to hone in on those authoritarian regimes that employ the strategy of using sport in nation-building. I do so through the example of Kazakhstan, where the Nazarbayev regime is exceptionally preoccupied with its project of transnational image-making and has poured resources into an elite sport agenda. This has taken the shape of such things as providing major cash rewards for Olympic medalists (US \$250,000 went to gold medalists in 2012), constructing a range of hypermodern stadia, and sponsoring a UCI (Union Cycliste Internationale) ProTour cycling team named for the country’s new capital, Astana. While this cycling team, Team Astana, is the focus

of this article, elite sport in general is a productive site of analysis because it calls into clear focus the interface between elite and popular nationalist discourses, and how these underpin authoritarian modes of government. As I argue here, the power of the Team Astana strategy, like nationalism more generally, is that it allows ordinary people to see their support for the ‘nation’ as something ‘objective,’ i.e. detached from the deeply political system that is the condition of its possibility.

The soft authoritarian toolkit

Not all authoritarian regimes employ the same tactics in maintaining their power. While political scientists have produced myriad qualifiers for the ‘authoritarian’ label in order to address this issue, I find it most productive here to simply employ the loose classification of ‘soft’ versus ‘hard’ authoritarianism. A ‘soft’ authoritarian regime is one whose methods of government rely less on ‘naked coercion’ or force, and is more ‘rationed’ than in its hard authoritarian counterparts (Schatz, 2008; Schatz and Maltseva, 2012: 46). It is important to note, however, that this is merely a spectrum, for regimes on opposite ends of the continuum will still employ more ‘benevolent’ and more ‘violent’ tactics respectively, and may in fact become ‘harder’ or ‘softer’ over time.

In a 2009 article in *Comparative Politics*, Ed Schatz outlined five distinctive strategies of soft authoritarian regimes – their ‘toolkit.’ First, the authoritarian leader has a core base of supporters, a large portion of whom are ‘true believers.’ Second, the leader can mobilize non-believers through material enticements and/or blackmail. Third, the leader manages opposition through only an *occasional* and *targeted* use of force. Fourth, the leader does not seek a monopoly on information flows, but manages them effectively. Lastly, the leader is successful at

discursive preemption, typically through using agenda-setting tools (Schatz, 2009: 206-207). Although Schatz's typology is admittedly designed to understand the nature of elite politics in these regimes, he poses two very important questions at the outset of his article, which demand attention to non-elite politics: "Why does one soft authoritarian regime succeed where another fails? What allows a nondemocratic system that does not rely centrally on coercion to perpetuate itself?" (Schatz, 2009: 203).

In this article, I argue that in order to answer such questions about authoritarian regime resilience and popularity – perennial themes in political science but comparatively ignored in political geography – it is essential to also consider the role of nation-building strategies in the soft authoritarian toolkit. Although nationalism is largely about 'territorial bonding' (Herb 2004), i.e. an affiliation with an abstract spatial unit defined as the 'homeland,' the homeland is not always defined at the state scale. Thus, nation-building is also often about what might be called 'statist bonding,' i.e. an affiliation with an abstract political structure defined as the 'state.' While the strategies involved here also draw on the territorial nationalism that Herb (2004) analyzes, they are more about celebrating the existence of a ruling regime, which is inextricably connected to the very existence of the state-cum-homeland. In places like Kazakhstan, North Korea, or Cuba, the leadership tends to promote a certain 'civic nationalism' that is deeply interwoven with a personality cult that glorifies the paternalist regime. According to the logic of this nationalist script, there would be no homeland without the regime and its visionary prowess (or it would be in shambles).

For these reasons, I propose to add a sixth tool to Schatz's (2009) soft authoritarian toolkit: the leadership sets in motion a nation-building project that successfully links the people to a homeland (territorial bonding) and to the state (statist bonding). Adding this sixth element

challenges us to take a less elite-centered approach to understanding authoritarian regime resilience, insofar as it assumes a key role of the general population in the practices of state-building project. As Schattschneider (1975: 2) once observed about the nature of politics, the ‘audience’ (here the disenfranchised and thus seemingly ‘passive’ citizenry) “is never really neutral.” Although nation-building strategies may be initiated by elites or ‘ethno-political entrepreneurs’ (Brubaker, 2004), nationalist projects rapidly become a broader social force as they take on meaning and material significance for ordinary people, for whom they become instrumental to performing and reasoning about one’s self and one’s role in the world (Billig, 1995; Brubaker, 2004). At its core, an effective nationalist project abstracts various feelings, desires, and motivations to a geographical imaginary of the ‘state’ as an ‘objective,’ ‘natural’ territorial entity. This allows people to see their actions as supporting something beyond the elite, who have captured (constructed) the ‘state’ and its territorial and social body (Gramsci, 2008). Thus, when people come to interpret their own actions as supporting some broader, moral order (like nationhood or statehood), these actions are likely to *support* authoritarian state-society relations, regardless of the fact that this frequently entails supporting their own subordination.

What makes soft authoritarian regimes unique, as noted above, is their reliance on state- and nation-building projects that tend to have a more ‘positive,’ and less violent character – such as promoting sport. Not only do sporting victories in world championships serve as a convenient venue to measure ‘progress’ internationally, but sport is also a convenient mechanism of performing regime-articulated values through the bodies of the masses. Though the role of mass sport is not a focus of this paper, it is important to note that it has historically been used for these purposes under various authoritarian regimes, such as North Korea (Lee and Bairner, 2009), Indonesia (Moser, 2010), the German Democratic Republic (Grix, 2008), fascist Italy (Cardoza,

2010), and the Soviet Union (Keys, 2003) – but Gagen (2004) also notes a similar theme in physical education reform in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Where sport is appropriated by nationalist agendas, ideological narratives are mapped onto the bodies of citizens (of the masses and/or world-class athletes) and ‘broadcast’ for international consumption. Nationalism in general is an international ideology (Billig, 1995), but as the sixth tool of the soft authoritarian toolkit, it tends to be more strongly articulated through the language of international ‘prestige’ and ‘ranking,’ when other sources of legitimacy are lacking. In this article, I will give the example of Kazakhstan, where the Nazarbayev regime has made ample use of the strategy of promoting sport as a means to simultaneously increase nationalist sentiment and international prestige (and thus popular legitimacy). Through this discussion, in which I jointly consider elite and popular practices and discourses, I aim to provide a fuller answer to the question posed above by Ed Schatz (2009: 203): “what allows a nondemocratic system that does not rely centrally on coercion to perpetuate itself?”

Sport and transnational image-making

Large-scale sporting events like the Olympics or the World Cup have long been ascribed the symbolic power to put a place ‘on the map’ (Eisinger, 2000; Maenning and du Pleiss, 2009; Modrey, 2008; Müller, 2011; Ren, 2008). Athletes’ performances at international events have also historically been framed as a way for a nation to ‘broadcast’ itself to the world (Cardoza, 2010; Hobsbawm, 1990; Jutel, 2002; van Hilvoorde et al., 2010; Wong and Trumper, 2002). Success at international sporting events frequently factors into nationalist myths, as well as their performance in geopolitical ‘primacy’ narratives (Agnew, 2003). During the Cold War, for example, sporting victories were seen as advertisements for the superiority of the political system

that produced the athletes, ostensibly working to win support for communism or capitalism elsewhere in the world (Caldwell, 1982; Keys, 2003, Riordan, 1991, 1999). In the USSR, so important was success that “Soviet sportsmen were not permitted to enter into international competition without reasonable expectations of victory” (Caldwell, 1982: 182). Yet the notion of sporting events being a dimension of states’ international ‘self-promotion’ raises a number of questions about precisely who is broadcasting what, to whom, and why.

As I have already noted, although nationalism is fundamentally an international ideology, some nationalisms are more ‘outward-looking’ than others; some regimes are more concerned with international prestige and ranking than others. This heightened fixation with a state’s place in the hierarchy of states is particularly common under authoritarian regimes (though not exclusive to them). Some have argued that sports are an ideal strategy for achieving international legitimacy and/or recognition for those states falling outside hegemonic moralizing narratives about political economic norms (Grix, 2008; Lee and Bairner, 2009; Riordan 1991), which, at present, revolve around democracy and (neo)liberalism. In this line of reasoning, rulers like Nazarbayev, who cannot achieve international validation through praise for their liberal democratic virtues (being absent), tend to seek it in other realms, such as sports, economic prosperity, or geopolitical strategic significance:

Where other channels have been closed, success in sport would seem to have helped such countries as the USSR, China, Cuba and the GDR as well as many other states of the developing world to attain a measure of recognition and prestige internationally, both at home and abroad. The German Democratic Republic is perhaps the prime example. Boycotted for so long by the West and its athletes refused visas by NATO states to travel to international tournaments, it quite demonstrably poured funds into sport to establish itself as a world power to be recognised and reckoned with. (Riordan, 1991: 138)

In addition to sport, in nondemocratic settings, ruling regimes have long found that the opposition stemming from such moralizing discourses can be skirted (both internationally and

domestically) through articulating ‘development’ as a higher goal – and regimes that do so also have an uncommonly high fixation with international status. This is because, in today’s statist system, ‘development’ must always be measured against another ‘equivalent’ unit.

‘Developmental regimes’ are those motivated by narratives of overcoming backwardness and achieving ‘progress,’ defined in terms of growth, productivity, and international competitiveness rather than in terms of welfare (Olds and Yeung, 2004: 511). The pervasive sense of ‘being late’ or ‘lagging behind’ is constructed as the ‘problem’ that development seeks to ‘solve’, and developmental regimes stake their legitimacy in being able to materialize progress (Ferguson, 1990; Li, 2007; March, 2002; Zhang, 2006). This makes it essential, then, for these regimes to broadcast the state’s newly acquired modernity – necessarily defined in relation to the international community, “which itself needs to be imagined every bit as much as does the national community” (Billig, 1995: 83). Developmental regimes’ progress narratives are based on a fundamentally statist vision of global space, and thus mold their nationalist projects around this ‘outward’-orientation.

But developmental regimes must have the necessary financial resources to materialize their agendas. Possessing the material resources to implement ‘positive’ nation-building agendas, ‘soft authoritarian’ regimes are where developmentalism and authoritarianism come together. Frequently having a paternalistic ruling head (e.g. Atatürk, Suharto, Nazarbayev), soft authoritarian cults of personality construct these leaders as ‘fathers of the nation,’ and attribute the (successful) development/modernization agenda to their uniquely benevolent and nurturing spirits. This benevolence is projected onto the state apparatus as a whole, which becomes a “magnanimous sorcerer” (Coronil, 1997: 5) that draws subjects into a state of dependency and stimulates the feelings of gratitude that are fundamental to what I have termed ‘statist bonding.’

Accordingly, progress-oriented regimes typically do not open fire on their citizens, but instead employ a more diffuse, systematic, and ‘positive’ set of governmental ‘technologies’ (Koch, 2012a). Sport is just one example of the various strategies used by such regimes to promote a positive image of the regime and to stimulate the nationalist sentiments of the masses. Sporting spectacles, like spectacle more generally, “allow the state to mobilize citizens in ways that create an illusion of participation, without allowing any actual citizen input into the process” (Adams, 2010: 96). Whether passively spectating or actively performing physical feats, the general population is given a venue to perform their patriotism, to participate in the ‘nation,’ without actually being involved in the rigorous labor of self-determination (which is also often quite dangerous in authoritarian contexts).

Sport and nationalism

A casual observer can easily note that sporting spectacles share the same ‘symbolic repertoire’ with nationalist politics; that is, the very same flags, colors, and anthems are deployed during national team sporting events as in ostensibly more ‘political’ realms (Billig, 1995; Fox, 2006). Of course, the use of nationalist rhetoric during sporting events is just as ambiguous as in any other realm: “If national flags were unambiguously national, then it might seem that those waving them were unambiguously nationalist. But not all fans wielding national symbols at football matches wield them in other domains of their lives” (Fox, 2006: 228). In his study of student spectators at sporting events in Cluj, Fox (2006) argues that the use of national symbols, such as the Romanian flag, does not necessarily make these spectators ‘nationalists’ or translate into a sense of ‘belonging’ to the Romanian state (Fox, 2006: 228). In fact, he finds that the students were “largely indifferent to the concerns and claims of nationalist politics: they do not

mobilize around nationalist issues, support nationalist politicians, or even talk about nationalist politics in the course of their everyday lives” (Fox, 2006: 228).

While I agree with the sentiment of Fox’s arguments here, I challenge the division on which this argument is predicated: that nationalist performances at sporting events stand in contrast to some ‘more real’ form of nationalism, i.e. nationalist politics. Rather, in a practice-centered analytical framework, which stresses the ‘performative’ nature of identity, it is argued that “nationalism is actualized in nationalist practices, for example, but also that national persons themselves are formed by the speech and embodied acts associated with nationalism” (Wedeen, 2009: 89). From this perspective, waving a flag at a Romanian football match is not qualitatively different from waving a flag at a Romanian nationalist rally; both are practices of subjectification that are part of producing the imagined community of the ‘nation’ (Anderson, 1983). Thus, the important questions we need to ask are, how is nationalism reproduced and what power relations do the implicated practices sustain? This approach eschews the search for hidden motives ‘behind’ practices, treating this as a problematic construction insofar it separates practice from consciousness (Mitchell, 1990; Veyne, 1997; Yurchak, 2003). From a practice-based perspective, it matters less if the flag-waver is doing it because it simply because everyone else is, or because he or she believes it to be a true expression of their love of their country – the effect is still to inscribe the flag-waver as a citizen of a reified ‘homeland’ or ‘state,’ which the flag is imagined to represent.

Nationalism as a force is only meaningful insofar as it is reproduced through these practices, regardless of the supposed motivation – and it is crucial to note that actors themselves may not even know what ‘motivates’ their practice (Bourdieu, 1977; Giddens, 1979). After all, how many Americans or Germans or Kazakhstanis consciously decide to cheer for their

homeland during the Olympics? Do they even consider cheering for their neighbors in Mexico, Poland, or Uzbekistan instead? Surely some immigrants might, but the point is that the practice of cheering for one's homeland becomes so naturalized, that it is unthinkingly reproduced – albeit deeply rooted in certain emotive geographies. As Anssi Paasi (forthcoming: 21) has recently pointed out, “A lot of emotional bordering and ‘othering’ may be hidden in flag or independence days and other national celebrations, military parades, international sports events, nationalized and memorialized landscapes and other elements of national iconographies.” For him, “the key *location* of a national(ist) border does not lie at the concrete line but in the manifestations of the perpetual nation-building process and nationalist practices, and the roots of these manifestations have to be traced to the histories of these practices and iconographies” (Paasi, 2010: 22). What makes sport such a fruitful site of analysis is that we can see how these nationalist borders are constructed in and through the language of international competition on the athletic field, and how they contribute both to ‘national’ subject formation, as well as to territorial and statist bonding.

Sport in soft authoritarian Kazakhstan

Popularly considered the father of the modern Kazakh nation, Kazakhstan's president Nursultan Nazarbayev is more accurately described as the father of modern Kazakh(stani) nationalism. One of the central images of his nationalist repertoire is the snow leopard (*Panthera uncial*, ‘bars’ in Russian), which he frequently refers to as a metaphor for the Kazakhstani nation. In his text on the ‘Kazakhstan-2030 Strategy,’ Nazarbayev (1997) writes of the snow leopard: “However, any time when his freedom, habitation or descendants come to be threatened, the animal would defend them with all its might. The animal must be wiry and springy, it must

not suffer from obesity and laziness for otherwise it would hardly survive in severe environment.” In this imaginary, physical prowess and defense of the territory and interests are intimately connected. Like one of his primary models, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Nazarbayev has consistently underscored the role of sports and health in fostering the ‘health’ of the young nation. And like Mussolini, who was constructed as “the living embodiment of the ‘new fascist man,’” and constantly pictured engaged in sport (Cardoza, 2010: 368), Nazarbayev’s website has an entire photo gallery dedicated to documenting him ‘at leisure.’ There he can be seen skiing, horseback riding, hiking, golfing, lifting weights, and otherwise looking pensive in the outdoors (Akorda, 2012).

So too has the ‘Leader of the Nation’ (a title he was accorded in 2010) prioritized the development of large-scale sports facilities and the hosting of international sporting events. In January 2011, Kazakhstan hosted the 7th Winter Asian Games jointly in Astana and Almaty. Twenty days prior to the start of the Games, a ‘Torch Relay’ (of a torch lit from the ‘fire of the Asian Games’ in Kuwait City) traveled through 16 cities in Kazakhstan and was finally paraded in Astana prior to the event’s opening. One of the torchbearers in this final segment was Timur Kulibayev, Nazarbayev’s billionaire son-in-law, presidential hopeful, and then-president of Kazakhstan’s Boxing Federation. He told reporters that hosting the Asian Games provided a ‘great opportunity’ to show the world Kazakhstan’s achievements, adding that “thanks to the Asian Games we have new beautiful sports facilities in Astana and Almaty” (AOW, 2011). Early reports suggested that the Government of Kazakhstan allocated US\$726 million for the construction and renovation of facilities, but this figure is likely a gross underestimation and some have suggested that US\$2 billion is more accurate (but this is an elusive number because of secrecy surrounding funding) (Sports City, 2009).

Just as there is a political economy of nationalism (Wong and Trumper, 2002), there is also there a political economy of sport – and one that demands extensive material and ideological resources that are not accessible to every regime. These resources are an important element to allowing authoritarian regimes to use the sixth tool in the toolkit; that is, to implement an effective nation-building project resulting in both territorial and statist bonding. As a developmental regime sitting on enormous oil, gas, and uranium reserves, Kazakhstan's leadership has long articulated a goal of becoming one of the 50 most competitive countries in the world (according to the World Economic Forum's rankings, where it is currently ranked 51; WEF, 2012). But these leaders are also aware that 'image is everything' in today's global capitalist system.

Largely seen in the West as an 'obscure' country in the 'backwaters' of the Eurasian continent, Kazakhstan already had a reputation to efface upon gaining independence from the USSR. Yet a new and unexpected obstacle presented itself to the Nazarbayev regime in 2005: a British comedian, Sacha Baron Cohen, announced the pending release of a film on the basis of a fictional character in his television show *Da Ali G Show*. 'Borat' was said to come from Kazakhstan, and he iconized the backwardness and intolerance Westerners associate with 'obscure' and 'pre-modern' hinterlands of the world. Not ideal, but relatively innocuous in the TV show, the Borat character was launched to global popularity through the Hollywood film, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006). The film was widely successful, and put Kazakhstan 'on the map' for hundreds of millions of Westerners, for whom Borat was frequently their first encounter with the place 'Kazakhstan.'

The Borat fiasco was a major blow to the regime's efforts to foster an image of Kazakhstan as a 'reformed,' 'modern,' and 'engaged' new country, ideal for investment; "Baron

Cohen's alternative rendering of Kazakhstan suggested that every aspect of the official rendering was off base" (Schatz, 2008: 56). The fiasco also severely bruised the nationalist sentiments of ordinary Kazakhstanis, and especially the supporters of the Nazarbayev regime, who were "palpably proud of what they considered to be their country's achievements—in preventing interethnic conflict, in generating economic growth, and in providing political stability" (Schatz, 2008: 55). Kazakhstani officials were furious and their loud international complaints only flamed the fire (Saunders, 2007; 2008; Schatz, 2008). Largely seen as an over-reaction in the West, the government's response to the Borat film has mostly been welcomed in Kazakhstan. Inheritors of the Soviet 'Great Power' brand of nationalism, both ordinary citizens and elites have a definitive expectation that governments are to provide their citizens with a high degree of international respect. (It is for this reason that there is a common trope throughout the post-Soviet space, in which people first lament Gorbachev's 'weakness' and the shame he brought to their homeland, and second to praise Stalin for his 'strong hand' and the glory he achieved for the USSR.) Not only did Borat's portrayal of Kazakhstan jeopardize its perception among international investors, and thus the foundation of the regime's economic development agenda, but it also jeopardized its own nation-building project and popular legitimacy.

In the intervening years since the film's release, the Nazarbayev regime has redoubled its efforts to promote a more positive view of the country through what is popularly known as the '*imidzh proyekt*' ('image project') (Koch, 2012c). This sprawling campaign includes a relentless array of 'place-branding' tactics (Govers and Go, 2009), from television and newspaper advertisements to hosting an array of international conferences and events to sponsoring a ProTour elite cycling team. Like any discourse, the nationalist *imidzh proyekt* has since been mobilized by a diverse range of actors, and consists of a dense web of agencies, egos, and

material interests. Among elites, the project serves many purposes, including but not limited to nation-building and popular regime legitimation, attracting international investment, and building up the prestige of President Nazarbayev himself. But it has also entered into the popular lexicon and takes on varied meanings for ordinary Kazakhstanis. In the remainder of this article, I will consider the example of the Astana Professional Cycling Team (hereafter ‘Team Astana’), which clearly illustrates the co-constituting elite and popular nationalist discourses. Set in motion by a handful of individuals, the cycling team is an important aspect of the Nazarbayev regime’s *imidzh proyekt*, but the effectiveness of which we cannot understand without considering how ordinary citizens interpret and work with the discursive resources it has made available (Dittmer and Dodds, 2008). To this end, I weave together the more or less ‘elite’ story of Team Astana with data from my focus group research in Almaty in October 2010.

Although I present only a narrow subset of the data collected from 2009-2011 as part of a broader study on state- and nation-building in post-Soviet Kazakhstan (Koch, 2012b), I will say a few words about the methodologies used in the focus group component of the study, which were conducted at the Al’-Farabi Kazakhstan National University. They included four mixed-gender groups and one female-only group, and included 4-8 participants each for a total sample size of 36 participants. The targeted recruiting did not control for ethnicity (89 percent identified as Kazakh, versus a 65 percent national share) or home region/*oblast’* (16 came from Almaty, 3 from Aktobinsk, 3 from Kyzylorda, 3 from South Kazakhstan, 3 from Zhambul, 2 from East Kazakhstan, 2 from West Kazakhstan, 1 from Atyrau, and 1 from Pavlodar). All participants were between 18 to 25 years old. As part of the first generation to grow up in the independent state, younger Kazakhstanis might be expected to express more national pride than older generations. Although this hypothesis does not hold up on the country-wide scale, the

participants in my focus groups did have stronger than average nationalist sentiments (with 92 percent claiming to be proud or very proud of their nationality, versus a 77 percent countrywide average). The participants were shown approximately eight ‘trigger’ images, to which they were asked to respond freely and when conversation did not flow naturally, the moderator had a set of questions for each image. These pictures covered a range of themes, from the urban landscape of Astana to maps of the country. Given the relevance, quotes for this article are only drawn from discussions about one particular prompt: a photograph of the famous Kazakhstani cyclist Alexander Vinokourov in a Team Astana kit. Though seemingly a narrow sample, I found the group discussions to be largely representative of wider narratives in the country, which I heard constantly in the course of informal exchanges in my extended ethnographic study (Koch, 2012b).

I have chosen to focus here on Team Astana because the tactic of sponsoring this cycling team is representative of the broader character of nationalist projects in Kazakhstan. That is, they all tend to operate through the master metaphor of synecdoche (the part standing for the whole). The Nazarbayev regime’s development of a new capital city, Astana, has been fore among these projects, and it has allowed Nazarbayev to use the city as a ‘showpiece,’ indicative of reforms and transformations in the *entire* country – it is to be “face of the country (*litso strany*), figuratively speaking, its business card (*visitnaya kartochka*)” (Nazarbayev, 2006: 351). Likewise, the success of the cycling team, for example in the Tour de France, is framed as being indicative of the top-notch state of sport in all of Kazakhstan. As we shall see, this is not the case, but projecting this image through buying top international athletes is much quicker than building up minimal domestic skill. It is also important to note that Kazakhstan does not *host* cycling races. This is no doubt because this would broadcast some extremely unflattering views

of the country and the state of its infrastructure, just as was the case in the early days of the Giro d'Italia stage race (Cardoza, 2010: 360). Although there are reportedly some efforts to host ProTour races in Kazakhstan in the future, the only current exception to this is also a metonymic tactic: the recently completed velodrome in Astana, which can host track cycling races (among other events). A stadium such as this allows for an extremely directed gaze into the country, while preventing that gaze from wandering elsewhere at the broader state of infrastructure in the country. The viewer is thus supposed to assume this window into one technologically-advanced site applies to the rest of the country. But the velodrome is very new and, in the world of cycling, 'Kazakhstan' is still primarily made present in Western eyes through Team Astana.

Elite nationalism: Team Astana

Aside from the Olympics and other international championships, the sport of cycling is not organized around national teams. Instead, 'trade teams' are developed with the support of corporate donors, with the team name typically coming from the lead underwriters. For example, some of the 2012 pro tour teams (ProTeams) include RadioShack-Nissan, Rabobank, Team Sky (for BskyB), and Liquigas-Canondale. This predominantly corporate structure has not always been the case: for two periods between 1930-1961, and 1967-1968, the Tour de France was organized around national teams (Jutel, 2002: 201). But even today, cycling trade teams often have a certain national affiliation, giving preference to riders of one nationality (though rarely comprised of one group only). So, RadioShack-Nissan has a US affiliation, Rabobank with the Netherlands, Team Sky with the UK, and Liquigas-Canondale with Italy.

Among the 18 ProTeams, there are a three exceptions to this general trend, three teams that are framed more explicitly as 'national teams.' The first is Euskaltel-Euskadi, which is

corporately sponsored by Euskaltel, a Basque telecom company, but also receives funding from the Basque Government in Spain and unofficially operates as a Basque national team. With the exception of three individuals, all riders since the team's first iteration in 1994 have been of Spanish nationality and come from the Basque Country. Those three non-Spaniards, Unai Etxebarria (Venezuela), Romain Sicard (France), and Pierre Cazaux (France), were eligible because they had Basque heritage (Etxebarria) or were born in the French Basque Country (Sicard and Cazaux). The second exception is Team Katusha, which is a product of the 'Russian Global Cycling Project' (RGCP). Established in 2008 at the initiative of three Russian oligarchs, Alexey Miller of Gazprom, Sergey Chemezov of Russian Technologies, and Igor Makarov of ITERA, the RGCP's agenda is to encourage the growth of cycling in Russia and "lays special emphasis on promoting Russia as a powerful sports country, one of the leaders of world sports community" (Katusha Team, 2012).

Team Astana (named for Kazakhstan's new capital city) is the third exception. The team apparel mirrors the color and images of the Kazakhstani flag, and is loosely framed as Kazakhstan's national team, despite its international roster (currently including 12 Kazakhstanis, 6 Italians, 2 Slovenians, 2 Russians, 1 Croat, 1 Czech, 1 Estonian, 1 German, 1 Swede, and 1 Ukrainian) and management (the team manager Giuseppe Martinelli is Italian and the four *directeurs sportifs* include 1 Kazakhstani, 1 Russian, 1 Italian, and 1 Slovenian). But all along, the team has been treated like a 'national' team by Kazakhstani bureaucrats (as well as by ordinary citizens, as we shall see below). This became especially clear when the chairman of Kazakhstan's sovereign wealth fund Samruk-Kazyna, Kairat Kelimbetov, assumed the presidency of the National Cycling Federation, and explicitly argued that Team Astana's mission was "to promote the country abroad and inspire its people at home," "enhancing the country's

image worldwide” (Kelimbetov, quoted in Fotherington, 2010: 155). Kelimbetov, who also served as the Minister of Economy and Regional Development (and is currently the Deputy Prime Minister), also penned the ‘about us’ description on Team Astana’s official website, where he refers to Kazakhstan as the team’s ‘Motherland’ (PTA, 2011).

The team was started at the initiative of Alexander Vinokourov (‘Vino’), a Kazakhstan-born professional cyclist, who had been living and racing in Europe since 1996, and who won a silver medal in the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. Speaking of this achievement, Vinokourov has commented, “My silver medal win was a huge turning point for my country [...]. Everyone became much more interested in professional cycling. The administrators saw what was going on and they realised that they could have a professional team as well” (quoted in Fotherington, 2010: 152). In fact, the silver medal was also a turning point for Vinokourov himself, who was rewarded in Kazakhstan with a captain’s rank in the army, was received as a ‘national hero’ by Nazarbayev, and established a friendship with then Prime Minister Danial Akhmetov, who later became president of Kazakhstan’s National Cycling Federation (Fotherington, 2010: 152). Kazakhstan’s ambassador to Britain, Erlan Idrissov, was also effusive about this talented bike rider: picking up Nazarbayev’s favorite ‘snow leopard’ metaphor, he applied this to Vinokourov, whom he also compared to Alexander the Great and noted that despite the fact that he is derided in the Western media as a ‘dark horse,’ “For the Kazakhs, this is a good thing. In our culture, horses symbolise independence and strength” (quoted in Fotherington, 2010: 155).

In 2006, when Vinokourov’s trade team, Liberty Seguros, lost its sponsors just prior to the start of the Tour de France (due to a doping scandal), he went to find sponsors in Kazakhstan (Fotherington, 2010: 152). Thanks to his new political connections since the Olympics, combined with the Borat-induced climate receptive to ways to increase Kazakhstan’s

international prestige, he was immediately successful. Since then, the Astana Professional Cycling Team has grown to a full-fledged team with an international group of riders and staff, and from 2007 was sponsored by Kazakhstan's national rail and air companies, as well as state-owned mining, oil, and gas companies. In 2008, these companies were all consolidated into one national holding company, the 'National Welfare Fund "Samruk-Kazyna,"' which was then signed on to finance the team until 2012 (Fotherington, 2010: 155). It is now also sponsored by the 'Astana Group,' an umbrella company for Astana Motors (foreign car import and sales), Grain Industry (grain and food production), and Mega Development (shopping and entertainment center development).

According to Vinokourov, the sponsors' connection with the team is not about money – their agenda is ultimately about promoting the image of Kazakhstan internationally:

Samruk is a state foundation that draws together the main natural resources of the country. It stands for Kazakhstan's economic power and it supports projects that have national significance. The Astana team is one of those projects that has a huge influence on the way our country is seen throughout the world. It is inconceivable that a cycling team that is flying the national flag could not be backed by the state. It's a matter of national pride rather than business. The men who run the economy don't need a cycling team to do business. (quoted in Fotherington, 2010: 155)

While it is no doubt true that Samruk-Kazyna does not 'need' to sponsor a cycling team, this explicit effort to differentiate economic motives from nationalist motives is enlightening for the fact that it points to precisely the opposite: that is it never quite clear where one ends and the other begins. This blurring is especially apt coming from Vinokourov: his vocal nationalism has been the very *instrument* of his financial success.

Born and raised in Petropavl, a town in Kazakhstan's north, Vinokourov has not actually lived in Kazakhstan since 1996, when he moved to France, and later Monaco. Like many global celebrity athletes who frequently live abroad, VINO's "ambiguous territorial presence and

citizenship are overlooked in the political deployment of his success” (Wong and Trumper, 2002: 181). Known throughout the cycling community as a staunch nationalist, Vinokourov tends to frame his career decisions in the language of nationalism. Like other athletes who are effectively “corporations in and of themselves,” and who “sell themselves and their names commercially” (Wong and Trumper, 2002: 176), Vino has profited both in terms of economic and social capital through his cycling career. Just as some elite athletes advertise their sponsors’ brand, Vinokourov advertises the Kazakhstan brand. In the context of ‘post-Borat’ Kazakhstan, the political economy of nationalism in Kazakhstan cannot be underestimated: the careers of ‘public’ bureaucrats and ‘private’ individuals alike are made through furthering the Nazarbayev regime’s *imidzh proyekt*.

As with any discourse, nationalist or otherwise, the *imidzh proyekt* is perpetuated and derives its momentum from being mobilized by individuals pursuing rather narrow ends, such as making a living from professional cycling, as in Vinokourov’s case. Perhaps more important than these actors’ ‘real’ motives in activating a nationalist project, is the effect they have. As we shall see below in the case of Team Astana, this has largely been one of increased national pride among ordinary Kazakhstanis – or at least, the opening of a discursive platform on which to express these sentiments. Kazakhstanis, like all nationalists or dedicated sports fans, relish the opportunity to brag about their team’s success. As noted above, the practice of nationalism in the context of sport is not at all separate from some ‘more political’ expression of it: it is all connected to the emotive process of territorial bonding, and part of the daily, banal preparation for sacrifice for the ‘homeland.’ As Billig (1995: 125) notes in his discussion of newspaper sporting pages, when that time comes, “The call will already be familiar; the obligations have been primed; their words have long been installed in the territory of our pleasure.” Through the

seemingly banal discursive practices surrounding institutions like Team Astana, affinities are channeled to the ‘nation’ and ‘homeland,’ which stimulates people to interpret their own actions as supporting these abstract, moral entities, rather than a particular power vertical.

Popular nationalism: “Now the whole world knows us”

The particular discursive environment that results from these nationalist practices tends to reinforce itself, as evidence in the way that ordinary Kazakhstanis talk about Team Astana as ‘our’ team. When I conducted my focus group research in October 2010, Astana rider Alberto Contador had just won the Tour de France for the third time (although he was stripped of the 2010 title in February 2012 for doping; Pucin, 2012). I had heard the comment constantly in my wider ethnographic research, but it was generally remarked in the focus groups that ‘we’ won the Tour de France, or that ‘Kazakhstan’ won the Tour de France – Contador being a Spaniard notwithstanding. The focus group participants uniformly answered in the affirmative to the moderator’s question about whether they were proud of the success of Team Astana: “Because its success raises up (*podnimaet*) our country in the eyes of others” (focus group 5, participant 5; hereafter ‘FG5P5’). The following flurry of comments was typical:

Moderator: Are you proud of the success of Team Astana?

All: Yes!

FG2P9: Of course we are proud.

FG2P5: Yes.

FG2P9: Now the whole world knows us.

FG2P2: The world knows us.

FG2P1: So because of them, the whole world found out about Kazakhstan (*uznal Kazakhstan*).

This sort of repetition was common to the groups, but the unanimity about Team Astana raising international awareness of Kazakhstan was unmatched across the other discussion points. What Billig (1995: 107) has famously called the ‘deixis of homeland,’ the seemingly banal references

to ‘us’ are fundamental to constituting the imaginary of the ‘nation,’ and constantly situate the speaker as a subject and member of that community: Team Astana represents ‘us.’

The imaginary of ‘the whole world’ is also notable here, for it implies that ‘the whole world’ attends to the developments of professional cycling – or at least the results of the Tour de France. Of course, global interest in cycling comes nowhere near that of football (soccer), for example, and it is a decidedly elite and Eurocentric sport. That it would be a stretch to call it part of the global ‘mainstream’ notwithstanding, in this popular imaginary, the whole world really is watching the Tour de France, and those viewers unfamiliar with the Astana cycling team actually made the connection with the state of Kazakhstan. The fact that these are false assumptions is less important than what it says about Kazakhstanis’ imagination of what constitutes ‘prestige’: here it is seen as success on the ‘global’ stage. These comments about Team Astana’s success are significant in how they reflect a naturalized statist imagining of global space, working to reify ‘Kazakhstan’ as a thing. The state becomes a ‘natural’ object, “a sort of freestanding unit, lined up in physical space alongside a series of similar units” (Mitchell, 2002: 230).

The team’s international composition, despite appearing to destabilize this imaginary, did not keep participants from seeing Team Astana as working in the service of the nation. In the words of one participant:

FG4P9: They created this cycling team to improve sport in our country and most on the team are foreign cyclists. Germans, Brazilians, Spaniard – and everyone in order to raise up the brand Astana. It’s just so that the entire world comes to know that we are Astana. We won the Tour de France and they found out about us.

In these discussions about the foreigners riding for Team Astana – ostensibly a ‘national’ or ‘domestic’ team, in the popular imagination – the participants are, in effect, *creating* the border. In the contemporary statist order of things, borders as expressions of territoriality are crucial to the “discursive landscape of social power,” which Paasi (2010: 22) defines as “a construct that

has become institutionalized in a society in the long term and manifests itself in material landscapes, military commemorations, ideologies and nationalist performances all over that society's territory." Not only do these rhetorical bordering practices effect a particular territorial imaginary, which simultaneously imagines and creates a 'domestic' space as separate from a 'foreign' space ('where I am'), but they also imagine a 'national' subject as opposed to foreign others ('who I am'). There are, of course, many other avenues besides sport, in which ordinary Kazakhstanis articulate these nationalist identity scripts, but it is simply more clear in the case of sport given that Team Astana consists of many foreign athletes.

Few saw the presence of foreigners as problematic, but some were aware that it came at a price. When the moderator commented about Contador that "a Spaniard also races for Kazakhstan," one participant jibed, "It means they paid him well!" (FG1P3). Though subdued due to its political sensitivity, discussions about foreign athletes reflected an acute awareness of Kazakhstan's lack of equivalence in terms of its domestic skill. Few would openly deride Kazakhstani athletes, but in all the groups, it was remarked that 'Kazakhstan' needs to invest more in improving the quality of its 'own' athletes. Speaking of ethnic Kazakhs such as Asan Basayev on Team Astana, one participant remarked: "But they are weak sportsmen, and that's why they use foreigners: to improve our own" (FG4P9). This was echoed by another: "It seems to me that because we don't have such strong cyclists in our country, we invite them from other countries. So that maybe we can win and glorify Kazakhstan" (FG2P6). Indeed, the general consensus across the groups was that domestic athletics in Kazakhstan was in a comparatively poor state, and most felt that it required more investment from the state. However, this did not ultimately change the fact that people saw the team's foreign racers as representing the country in a positive way – in itself a desirable thing given the state of affairs: "After all, they still

represent our country. When Americans, Russians, or even Uzbeks can be there to represent, it's okay (*eto zhe normal'no*). So why not? [...] We can't put in a Kazakh who has trained for just one year against someone who has spent their entire life training" (FG5P4).

This attitude was subject to some contention, however, and in another group, when the moderator asked if it mattered that Team Astana was comprised of mostly foreigners, participants in one group responded:

FG2P9: It's not desirable.

FG2P6: It would be better to have our own.

FG2P1: The Chinese don't invite anyone [to their sports teams]. It is only Chinese.

FG2P6: But in every sport, we invite [foreigners]. Suppose we win a tennis tournament, they invited a Russian woman. There are no Kazakhstani tennis players.

This last participant was not just exaggerating or giving a groundless example here. Indeed, in a Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty report on Kazakhstan's foreign-born Olympians, it is noted that, "Five Russian tennis players switched over to Kazakhstan in 2008 [...]. Two more Russian players, Ksenia Pervak and Yulia Putintseva, relocated to Almaty in 2011 and 2012, respectively" (Bigg, 2012). In that same report, Bigg (2012) notes that four Chinese-born weightlifters were to compete for Kazakhstan at the London Olympics – all of whom have taken 'Kazakh-sounding' names and Kazakhstani citizenship. Speaking of two of these potential medalists, Kazakh sports journalist Rauan Okas is quoted as saying, "Even if Chontai and Kharki win gold medals, the fans will not recognize their victory, because they are foreigners to us" (Bigg, 2012).

While these 'outward-looking' nationalist scripts tend to homogenize the 'nation,' discussions about Team Astana have also provided a platform for challenging and asserting certain divisions *within* the 'nation.' The tension between ethnic nationalist and civic nationalist scripts comes out in the confusion of terms 'Kazakh' (the ethnic identity) and Kazakhstani (the

civic identity) in the following exchange about whether Kazakhstan should be represented by Kazakh/stani athletes:

FG1P3: No, it's not important [that there be Kazakhs on Team Astana].

FG1P1: It *is* important! Very important. I think we need to develop sport so that Kazakhstanis join. [*A cacophony of yeses and no's*]

Moderator: So the question is: should there be *Kazakhs* [i.e. as differentiated from Kazakhstanis] on the team?

FG1P8: There should be.

[...]

Moderator: Why should there be Kazakhs?

FG1P8: I'm of the opinion that we have to break down stereotypes. Why shouldn't there be Kazakhs? There should also be Kazakhs!!

It is not clear what 'stereotypes' the woman was referring to in the last comment, but it is most likely that Kazakhstan's athletes are almost uniformly Russian, and that ethnic Kazakh athletes are stereotyped as being 'weak.'

"He's not Kazakh!" blurted one young man from Taldykorgan (FG3P7), when the photo of Vinokourov popped up on the projector. His reaction was immediate, loud, and meant only partly in jest. After all, he had previously confessed to owning some Kazakhstani nationalist underpants. An equally nationalist Kazakh woman understood his sentiment: "He's not Kazakh [...]. He's Russian, but he's a patriot and he represents Kazakhstan" (FG3P1). The language here is telling: he is Russian, *but* he is a patriot – the implication being that not all Russian Kazakhstanis can be assumed to be patriots. Each of the group discussions followed a similar pattern in which Vinokourov's ethnicity was remarked upon, as if a footnote to the more important matter: that "he represents us" (*on predstavlyaet nas*). The 'us' in these conversations was, at times slightly more or slightly less, an ethnicized us. As we see with the comment about Vinokourov being Russian, 'but' still representing us, 'us' does not always include non-Kazakhs.

Like most of Kazakhstan's top athletes, Vinokourov is ethnically Russian. At first brush, it would appear that sport is best understood as a 'civic nationalist' tactic, for its malleability and

the fact that, especially in the absence of other non-ethnic national symbols, “it can also be more effectively insulated from particular ethnic cultures” (Houlihan, 1997: 123-124). But many scholars have challenged the notion that sport is always ‘unifying,’ noting instead that it can often provide a space to articulate various social divisions, such as ethnic and class divides (Danforth, 2001; Grix, 2008; Shapiro, 1989) and regional disparities (Cardoza, 2010; Houlihan, 1997), as well as gender-based practices of exclusion (Billig, 1995; Tervo, 2001). In Kazakhstan, the practice of sport is underlain with significant ethnic and class disparities, which become most apparent in the predominance of Russian athletes in elite sport. Everyone in the country is well aware of this broader trend, though few will discuss it openly because the ‘nationality question’ (i.e. about the political status of Russians in Kazakhstan) is one of the most dangerous subjects in the independent state.

The official government line is that all groups in Kazakhstan are equal, and any allusions to their inequality are taboo. Ethnic Russians could never publicly remark on their over-representation in elite sport because this would likely offend Kazakhs, who have a heightened sensitivity to language reminiscent of the Soviet narratives in which they were belittled as ‘backward’ and the ‘younger brother’ of Russians (Northrop, 2001). Further, any such discussion would necessarily raise issues of widespread poverty and unequal access to resources during the Soviet times – and its continuation today. Few will openly discuss how these various inequalities persist in Kazakhstan, not only because it touches on the sensitive ‘nationality question,’ but because it could easily be construed as a critique of the Nazarbayev regime’s development policies. This being dangerous territory, the focus group participants carefully observed the unsaid rule of refraining from public criticism of the Nazarbayev regime. Instead, they emphasized the positive features that are valorized in the country’s nationalist discourse: all

stressing how proud they were that Kazakhstan was being represented well on the international stage, sometimes remarking on the presence of foreigners on Team Astana as a sign of the government's economic prosperity. Yet, when it came to the deplorable state of Kazakhstan's own athletes and infrastructure, critiques were largely muted as suggestions that this domestic sector needed more investment, though specific actors responsible for this investment went unnamed.

Whether this balance of critique and praise was conscious or not is less important than the fact that performing these nationalist discourses and upholding taboos, contributes to the speaker's subjectification as a proud, obedient, and grateful citizen of the state – even if this supports their own subordination. As Gramsci (2008: 327) once wrote, “Self-deception can be an adequate explanation for a few individuals taken separately, or even for groups of a certain size, but it is not adequate when the contrast occurs in the life of great masses.” The considerable popularity of the Nazarbayev regime, despite its well-documented human rights violations and authoritarian tendencies, pushes us to look for a more widespread phenomenon that mobilizes popular attachments – that helps people to overlook these ostensibly unjust practices. That, I have sought to illustrate here, is the sixth element to the soft authoritarian toolkit: an effective nationalist agenda, which is reproduced in these mundane discussions about the Astana cycling team and Kazakhstan's ‘place’ in the world.

Conclusion

Just as not all authoritarian regimes are created equal, not all nation-building agendas are equal. As the sixth tool in the soft authoritarian toolkit, nation-building will consist of those strategies that support the prevailing nondemocratic order. Promoting sport is a popular tactic

among soft authoritarian regimes because, like spectacle, it “has properties that enable elites to close opportunities for input from below, but without making the masses feel left out” (Adams, 2010: 3). Eric Hobsbawm once wrote:

What has made sport so uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feelings, at all events for males, is the ease which even the least political or public individuals can identify with the nation as symbolized by young persons excelling at what practically every man wants, or at one time in life has wanted, to be good at. The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people. The individual, even the one who only cheers, becomes a symbol of his nation himself. (Hobsbawm, 1990: 143)

As noted at the outset of this article, the Team Astana project is representative of the broader nature of nation-building in Kazakhstan through operating on the basis of a synecdochic imaginary. Synecdoche here “stresses a relationship or connectedness between two sides of an equation, a connectedness that, like a road, extends in either direction” (Burke, 1941: 428), and it is important to note the generally ‘passive’ role of the national body in this equation.

Like being born into a ‘nation,’ citizen-spectators do not actually have to do anything to make the national team ‘theirs.’ It makes no difference that the spectator undergoes none of the physical exertion of those athlete-representatives; their mere spectating validates them as supporters and members of the community. This passive role of spectating in elite sport is comfortable and easy – just as many in Kazakhstan find the nondemocratic nature of the Nazarbayev regime to be comfortable and easy. As many of my informants have stressed to me over the years, as long as people have dignity and can be made to feel proud, sitting on the sidelines is generally easier – and safer (Koch, 2012a). Given the inherited Soviet strain of ‘outward’-looking nationalism, and in the wake of the Borat debacle and its continuing effects today, Kazakhstanis have been highly receptive to such projects as the Astana cycling team, which returns to them the sentiments of national pride that have been lacking since the end of the

Soviet Union. Of course, nationalist discourses like the *imidzh proyekt* take on a life of their own, and are mobilized for vastly different ends. Yet, the overarching effect is one of naturalizing the ‘homeland’ and the ‘nation,’ and promoting the effects of territorial and statist bonding.

While the Astana cycling team example is seemingly benign, this impression is precisely what soft authoritarian leaders seek to cultivate in their nation-building projects. Operating on the basis of diverse emotions, egos, and material interests, their ‘benevolent’ nation-building agendas are far from neutral. Not only do they naturalize paternalist state-society relations in which citizens are actively assigned the role of passive spectator, but they are more broadly put to work in legitimating the unequal distribution of power and wealth. In the case of the Nazarbayev regime’s *imidzh proyekt*, this is particularly apparent in the elitism of its prestige projects. The tens of millions of dollars being used yearly for Team Astana, which come from the country’s sovereign wealth fund, only reach a limited group of individuals. The only profit that ordinary Kazakhstanis reap is that of national pride. Likewise, a plethora of lavish spectacles and architectural projects are said to be ‘for the people’ (*dlya naroda*), but rhetoric aside, they do not actually serve a redistributive function. Rather, they are like the ancient Greek and Roman practice of *eurergetism* (socially-proscribed acts of giving) classically explored by Paul Veyne (1990). ‘Bread and circuses,’ he argues, were more about allowing the sovereign to prove that he shared popular feelings (*popularis esse*), and “was not contemptuous of the plebs” (Veyne, 1990: 403). So too do soft authoritarian leaders critically rely on these nation-building projects to cultivate this aura of benevolence, and thus promote statist bonding.

To return to Ed Schatz’s (2009: 203) question posed at the beginning of this article – “What allows a nondemocratic system that does not rely centrally on coercion to perpetuate

itself?” – we can see by adding nation-building as the sixth tool, that soft authoritarian leaders critically rely on these nation-building projects to cultivate an aura of benevolence and encourage popular feelings of pride and devotion to an abstract ‘homeland,’ in case this paternalist luster is lost on some. By considering the popular mobilization of nationalist discourses through sport I have thus sought to ground questions of regime resilience in the agency of ordinary citizens, recognizing that ‘mundane obedience’ simultaneously “demonstrates and reproduces the regime’s power through the actions of citizens” (Adams, 2010: 189). Rather than search for the precise ‘motives’ that drive speakers to employ certain nationalist tropes, I have instead sought to emphasize the effect of these practices. In Kazakhstan, like so many places around the world, sport does not just provide a repertoire of metaphors and images of international competition and difference, but it is an important venue for the performance of identities and differences, as well as for the inscription of a certain synecdochic imaginary in which the ‘team’ stands for the ‘state’ and the ‘nation,’ and the state and the nation stand for the team. This metaphor does not just establish a relation; it calls these very things into being.

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