

Urban boosterism in closed contexts: Spectacular urbanization and second-tier mega-events in three Caspian capitals¹

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Abstract. This paper presents a case study of urban boosterism in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan – three resource-rich states around the Caspian Sea. Boosterist projects are typically justified through the injunction of, “build it and they will come.” This cliché is a staple of how urban planners and elites seek to justify development schemes that lack an obvious demand. And while the logic underpinning urban boosterism hinges on a high degree of openness and freedom of movement – both for capital and people – it is a tactic increasingly being used in closed and otherwise illiberal states. Understanding the effects of this development is an important task as a growing number of urban planners in nondemocratic, but resource-rich, countries seek to develop spectacular new urban landscapes and position their cities as “world class” hubs for international mega-events – even if these are smaller, second-tier events. Exploring event-oriented urban development in Astana, Ashgabat, and Baku, we show how boosterist narratives are being re-deployed in closed contexts to promote the image of a benevolent and “magical state,” as well as solidifying authoritarian political configurations and a selective engagement with market capitalism.

Keywords: urban boosterism; spectacular urbanization; iconicity; mega-events; Central Asia; rentier state

Introduction

Urban boosterism is defined as the active promotion of a city, and it typically involves large-scale urban development schemes, including constructing iconic new buildings, revamping local infrastructure, and creating a new image for the city. Most analysts have focused on how urban boosterism works in liberal democratic settings, where the pro-growth logic of boosterist policies hinges on development not in response to demand – but out of speculation based on the cliché that “if you build it, they will come.” Furthermore, international observers typically critique urban boosterism for conveying hegemonic neoliberal modes of government and market capitalism. However, as a set of policies, urban boosterism is increasingly being used in countries that are neither democratic, nor firmly committed to the free market ideals of neoliberalism. Given that the logic of urban boosterism hinges on a freedom of movement, both for capital and individuals, then this raises a number of important questions about the political implications of how urban boosterism works in these other settings, which we term “closed contexts.” Through a case study of three post-Soviet cities – Baku, Astana, and Ashgabat – which are undergoing what Robina Mohammad and James Sidaway (2012) have termed “spectacular urbanization,” we ask how and why policy-makers in nondemocratic settings come to adopt the strategies and rhetoric of urban boosterism, while simultaneously maintaining strict hold on the actual flows of people, goods, and ideas in a manner that baldly negates its liberalist logic.

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It has become something of an orthodoxy within urban studies to assert the need for more explicitly comparative urban research (for a recent review, see Peck 2014), but as Jenny Robinson (2011) has noted, much of this work has focused on the spread of neoliberal urban planning and technologies of government. By privileging the question of how and why neoliberalism has become such a hegemonic approach to contemporary urban planning, scholars have given comparatively little attention given to the question of how and why neoliberal logics are negated in other contexts or, as in many authoritarian settings, strategically reworked to solidify prevailing power structures. In this article, we consider Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, which all rank among the non-free countries in Freedom House's classification system.² Aiming to better theorize what happens when neoliberal urban policies travel to closed contexts, we show why it is important to consider a state's prevailing governance system, i.e. how democratic it is or is not. In particular, we demonstrate how state-scale actors in less democratic settings use spectacular urban development to promote the image of a benevolent or "magical" state as part of their broader efforts to legitimate authoritarian political configurations and their selective engagement with market capitalism.

The cases in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus are an ideal place to consider this topic because an increasing number of urban planners in authoritarian countries, all around the world, are seeking to position their cities as "world class" hubs for international events, business, and entertainment, set in suitably spectacular urban landscapes. Indeed, the unprecedented \$51 billion price-tag for Russia's Olympic Games in Sochi is portentous of the trends we can expect as more and more nondemocratic states host these events. While Sochi has received much international attention, both by academics and the media, such ostentatious spending geared toward hosting mega-events is increasingly found in more peripheral states than Russia – and especially places where planners are keen to raise their country's international profile. Planners beyond the core, including those in the Caspian littoral states of Central Asia and the Caucasus, are actively learning from the logics and forces mobilized to implement boosterist agendas and are radically altering their cities for a mushrooming number of "second-tier" events. Even though such events receive much less media attention, as we show in this article, they nonetheless afford elites in closed contexts with a range of economic and political opportunities. Yet these can be somewhat different from those in more open settings. This is especially so in rentier states (those that derive their revenue predominantly from resource extraction rather than taxes), but also in polities where informal patronage networks prevail as a mode of government, such as Russia and much of the post-Soviet sphere (Ledeneva 2006).

While many post-Soviet cities have experienced significant decline since the 1990s, the capitals of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan stand out as regional exceptions in the years since the demise of the Soviet Union. What sets these countries apart is that each inherited significant hydrocarbon reserves in and around the Caspian Sea region upon gaining independence in 1991. Drawing on the wealth afforded by these natural resources, state planners have overseen ambitious urban development agendas in their capitals. The transformation of these cities has been costly and, centrally, none of the local decision-makers can justify them on the basis of popular demand. Rather, the dramatic growth in Baku, Astana, and Ashgabat is justified on the basis of the "build it and they will come" cliché common to urban boosterism around the world. Framing their capital city developments as advertisements of their newly capitalistic orientations in the post-Soviet era, planners have strategically used urban landscapes to broadcast to the world an image of these states as "reformed", "modern", "engaged," and "open for business" (Koch 2012: 2449). But far from a mere public relations campaign, the tremendous changes seen in Baku, Astana, and Ashgabat all bear testament to the priorities of the anti-democratic leadership, as well as the new opportunities afforded by their states' resource wealth.

² This is an admittedly political metric, but nonetheless useful for global-scale comparisons. Freedom House assigns each country two numerical ratings based on a 1 to 7 scale, with 1 being the most 'free' and 7 being 'not free' (for their methodology, see freedomhouse.org). The 2014 rankings for Azerbaijan are 6 for political rights and 6 for civil liberties. For Kazakhstan, the rankings are 6 for political rights and 5 for civil liberties, and for Turkmenistan, 7 for political rights and 7 for civil liberties (Freedom House 2014).

Urban boosterism and three Caspian capitals

Spectacular urbanization agendas are frequently justified on the basis of developmentalist thinking, which equates national progress and “modernity” with economic development, “defined for policy purposes in terms of growth, productivity, and competitiveness rather than in terms of welfare” (Olds and Yeung 2004: 511). Economic narratives thus become inextricably connected to a semiotic politics, whereby leaders aim to depict their locales as paragons of progress. Importantly, urban policy-makers and other elites acting in the name of the state are never operating in isolation – this being a key argument of the literature on urban policy transfer (McCann 2010; Pow 2014). State-based planners actively seek out and implement strategies employed elsewhere in the world, often guided by or with the support of private professionals. Together, they form what Leslie Sklair has termed the “transnational capitalist class,” who include heads of major transnational corporations and their local affiliates, globalizing politicians, bureaucrats, and professionals, as well as merchants and media (Sklair 2006: 24-25). These agglomerations of actors and interests have alternatively been framed as “growth machine” coalitions, and they have been a major force for advocating boosterist policies to revamp local economies “overnight” and put cities and states “on the map” (Boyle 1997; Short 1999; Valiyev 2014). One favorite tactic of the growth coalitions is promoting large-sale architectural projects, which are typically accorded iconic status.

Iconic projects are designed to be “different and unique, intended to be famous and to have special symbolic/aesthetic qualities” (Sklair 2006, 28). By drawing on the reputation of world-renown architects, elite actors often frame iconic architectural projects as an opportunity “to project a positive image of the city to other places elsewhere” (King 1996, 104). Indeed, iconicity in architecture – at any scale – is a “resource in struggles for meaning and, by implication, for power” (Sklair 2006, 21-22). Not only do star architects offer the potential of added prestige to an iconic building, but they themselves build their prestige through their international projects (Kanna 2011; McNeill 2009). The development of iconic architecture is frequently connected with hosting “mega-events,” such as World’s Fairs, the Olympics, or the World Cup, which are then used to legitimate these grandiose development agendas (Boyle 1997; Broudehoux 2007; Davidson 2013; Maennig and du Plessis 2009; McCann 2013; Modrey 2008; Müller 2011; Ren 2008; Sklair 2005; Smith 2008; Raco 2014).

In addition to the domestic economic benefits, such projects often have an important nation-building element – their grandiosity is said to be a necessity, if the nation is to be made proud while the “whole world is watching.” While a substantial scholarly literature suggests that the transformative expectations of boosterist projects are “generally misplaced” (e.g. Eisinger 2000), most of this work tends to linger at this moment of unmasking, while generally glossing the important question of why such projects continue across the globe today. Rather than focusing on the hallow promises of such boosterist projects, we suggest that we may learn more by asking precisely who benefits from them and by what means. While private, market-based elites may prevail in some settings, the state is still extremely important to understanding and explaining the forces of capitalism and its implications for cities today – and arguably more so in closed contexts than elsewhere. In brief, this approach demands that we take seriously the question of whether states where these projects unfold are characterized by democratic versus nondemocratic governance structures.

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan were all Union Republics of the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), but its dissolution did not signal a regional thrust toward democracy in the new states, as was hastily presumed in the West. While some Soviet successor states have developed more democratic systems, these three countries have been dominated by personalistic governments headed by a strong president, who is framed as being the “father” and uncontested leader of the independent nation. In Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev assumed this role, ruling from 1993 – 2003. He was succeeded by his son, Ilham Aliyev, who is the current president. In Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbayev has been at the helm since 1991, while Saparmurat Niyazov ruled in Turkmenistan until his sudden death in 2006. He was succeeded by Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, who has done little to alter the quixotic and oppressive policies of his predecessor.

In all three countries, the president has accorded the capital city a special role, setting in motion a particular economy of prestige promoting the presidential persona. The cities' development and splendor is thus framed as a symbol of the leader's personal traits: his creative vision, progressive foresight, and popular magnanimity. Indeed, the three are often described in official outlets as having a unique architectural vision and a special hand in shaping the development of these cities, frequently being pictured on construction sites, with architectural models, and otherwise overseeing planning in their capitals. President Berdymukhamedov, for example, holds the title of "Distinguished Architect of Turkmenistan," and has continued Ashgabat's famed white marble theme, initiated by and equated with the rule of Niyazov (Šir 2008; Koch 2015b). Nazarbayev, for his part, is often framed as the primary architectural visionary in the development of Astana (e.g. Dzhakysbekov 2008), and is often pictured on construction sites, with architectural models, and otherwise overseeing planning in the city – as is President Aliyev. Elites clearly recognize that, as capitals of sovereign states and proxies for the presidential agenda, Astana, Ashgabat, and Baku should achieve the *global* recognition and accolades befitting their leader's exceptional status. But so too do they recognize the power of promoting these development agendas to gain political and financial rewards. Under the guise of both agendas, the boosterist urban development agendas in the three case cities are both *made possible by* and *actively materialize* the prevailing elitist political systems of their host country.

In addition to their fusion with presidential personality cults, the development of Astana, Ashgabat, and Baku is consistently framed in the official rhetoric as a "gift" to the people *from* the state. Authorities have actively deployed proceeds from resource-wealth, officially and otherwise, to cultivate the credit for transforming the country and setting it on track for a new era of modernity. The end effect is to confirm the primacy of the state, and the paternalist president in particular, as the benevolent authority, transforming simple resources into progress:

By manufacturing dazzling development projects that engender collective fantasies of progress, it casts its spell over the audience and performers alike. As a "magnanimous sorcerer," the state seizes its subjects by inducing a condition or state of being receptive to its illusions—a magical state. (Coronil 1997, 5)

This centralization of investment also allows the "magical state" to concentrate large amounts of capital from resource rents outside of the vagaries of the global capitalist "market" mechanisms. To a large extent, this insulates the government from the capital flight and instability associated with "wild capitalism" (*dikii kapitalizm*) – which is a collective narrative about the conditions of the 1990s, when widespread disorder and social decay was associated with the shock therapy-style transition to the market economy across the post-Soviet space. Region-wide, it is seen as "normal" business practice for private companies to develop local infrastructure. In Astana, for example, the city's early construction was funded through various "contributions" that were solicited from various other oil companies, which were viewed as deal-sweeteners to win favorable terms in a new contract (Schatz 2004, 126).³

Overall, boosterist development projects in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan are linked to a set of (more and less official) patronage practices connected with the exploitation of the country's vast natural resource reserves. Typical of rentier states, one of the primary ways for state and urban elites to distribute patronage is through allocating large urban development construction contracts. Elites favor

³ In his 2006 book, *The Kazakhstan Way*, President Nazarbayev (2006, 355-356) thanks the governments of friendly countries and CEOs of foreign and domestic companies for contributing grants to the fund for the new capital – specifically mentioning Italy's Agip, the Saudi government, the Kuwait fund, the Abu Dhabi fund, the Oman government, TengizChevrOil, KazMunaiGas, Eurasian Group, and several other Kazakhstani firms. These investments are not confined to the capital, as Conway's (2011) report on Glencore's management of Kazzinc in Ust'-Kamenogorsk illustrates. There, the company spent millions of dollars on building or refurbishing schools, kindergartens, a tennis center, and a hockey rink. The call for these projects 'may come from the national or regional government, but Kazzinc agrees to finance those projects that will bring the company's profit line just below the excess profits tax threshold Kazzinc avoids a tax penalty and the government gets its sports center' (Conway 2011).

such projects because state funds are paid directly to large construction contractors, which the countries of our research, typically operate through a shell company headquartered abroad (e.g. Sembol in Kazakhstan; Polimeks in Turkmenistan; and DIA Holding in Azerbaijan). These companies are also typically overpaid for their services, while they simultaneously seek to maximize profits by developing the project at the lowest cost possible, cutting corners on materials, pay to laborers, and oftentimes not even completing projects once the façade is deemed acceptable.

While the boosterist icons we consider promote a rather narrow set of interests, local elites are clearly concerned with legitimating them to the general population and to mask these illicit political economic configurations. Dressing them up in nationalist and populist language, they are said to be “for the people.” In this narrative, the general population is imagined to benefit abstractly, with progress somehow diffusing to them from the overall economic development that a centralized project is said to initiate. These narratives reflect the effort of those in power to produce a “magical state,” and themselves as benevolent providers of impressive, shiny, and at times monumental new urban icons. For this reason, it is important not to lose sight of the symbolic dimensions of these boosterist projects: they offer important insights into how these elitist economic practices are popularly legitimated. Indeed, we contend that the symbolic and the political economic logics cannot be separated: each is the condition of possibility for the other.

The spectacular capitals of the Caspian

Highlighting both convergences and divergences, this section shows how planners in Astana, Ashgabat, and Baku have prioritized iconic developments, with a focus on (1) stadia and sporting complexes; and (2) cultural landmarks and entertainment facilities; and (3) business towers, hotels, and commercial centers. Although we do not consider them here, governmental buildings, residential landscapes, monuments, public parks and so forth have all played an important role in transforming these cities. But their potential as *internationally-recognized urban icons* has been emphasized far less than the three categories we analyze. Furthermore, the capitals’ new residential and governmental buildings constitute more or less “necessary” infrastructures—meeting an at least partial demand in their particular context (though their effectiveness in doing so is an entirely different matter). In the case of the three kinds of developments noted above, however, such a demand is far less obvious and many are explicitly developed with the idea that “if you build it, they will come.” It should also be noted that although we focus on contemporary developments, as part of the Soviet Union until 1991, each of these three countries have a historical experience with that country’s own boosterist agenda, which emphasized spectacular urban development to advertise the merits of the communist system (see especially Kotkin 1995; Stronski 2010). Still coming from the Soviet system, top decision-makers in each of the three countries are clearly working within today’s unique geopolitical context, but with the particular historical socialization under this similarly image-oriented Soviet “representational economy” (Koch 2012).

In the discussion here, we follow the spirit of Jan Nijman’s method of “multiple individualizing comparisons” to draw out the connections around a central node, since multiple comparisons can offer a richer understanding of the primary case (Nijman 2007: 93). Since we can only detail a handful of specific cases here, **Table 1** provides a wider list of examples to contextualize them as part of a broader phenomenon within the various cities. We will focus on three particular kinds of developments, with each subsection centered on one of the cities: **Astana** – stadia and sporting complexes; **Ashgabat** – cultural landmarks and entertainment facilities; and **Baku** – commercial hubs and hotels. This article distills the findings of empirical research by both authors in the three cities over the past eight years, which has included textual analysis, expert interviews, focus groups, and participant observation in all three countries, as well as a countrywide survey in Kazakhstan (for a full methodological discussion, see especially Koch 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2014, 2015a, 2015b; Valiyev 2013, 2014). Whereas interviews with urban decision-makers were possible in Astana and Baku, Turkmenistan’s near-complete closure to foreign researchers means that the data here comes only from discourse analysis of official documents and one author’s documentation of the built environment in Ashgabat.

Table 1. Select examples of the four kinds of iconic structures in the case cities.

	Cultural / entertainment	Business / commercial	Stadia / sporting
Astana, KZ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Palace of Peace & Reconciliation ▪ Youth Palace ▪ Khazret Sultan Mosque ▪ Nur Astana Muslim Culture Center ▪ Opera ▪ Shabyt Palace of Creativity ▪ Palace of Independence ▪ Nazarbayev University ▪ Kazakhstan Central Concert Hall ▪ National Library ▪ Khan Shatyr Entertainment Center ▪ Baiterek Tower ▪ Circus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ KazMunaiGaz Complex ▪ Astana Airport ▪ Transport Tower ▪ Arman Complex ▪ Astana Media Center ▪ Parkview Office Tower ▪ Astana Media Center ▪ Rixos Hotel ▪ Diplomat Hotel ▪ Radisson Hotel ▪ Okan InterContinental Astana 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Astana Ice-Skate Center ▪ Republican Velodrome ▪ Astana Arena
Ashgabat, TKM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ State Museum of the State Cultural Centre of Turkmenistan ▪ Turkmenbashi Museum of Fine Arts ▪ National Museum of Turkmen Carpet ▪ Oguzkhan President Palace Complex ▪ Bagt Koshgi Wedding Palace ▪ Turkmenbashi and Magtymguly Drama Theaters ▪ Alem Entertainment Center ▪ Turkmen State Puppet Theatre ▪ State Circus of Turkmenistan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ashgabat International Airport (under construction) ▪ Center of Public Broadcasting ▪ Central Bank of Turkmenistan ▪ Exhibition Palace (“Sergi kosgi”) ▪ Oguzkent Hotel ▪ Ashgabat Hotel ▪ President Hotel ▪ Misc. white marble company HQs along Bitaraplyk and Turkmenbashi Blvds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Multifunctional Ashgabat Stadium ▪ Turkmenbashi Olympic Village ▪ Turkmenbashi Kopetdag Sports Complex ▪ Sports Complex of Winter Games ▪ Ashgabat Hippodrome
Baku, AZ	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Heydar Aliyev Center ▪ Crystal Hall ▪ Heydar Mosque ▪ Old City restoration ▪ Carpet Museum ▪ Heydar Aliyev Palace (restoration) ▪ Gala Museum ▪ Buta Palace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trump Tower ▪ Flame Towers ▪ SOCAR Tower ▪ Flame Towers ▪ Hilton Hotel ▪ Jumeirah Hotel ▪ Marriott Hotel ▪ Four Seasons Hotel White City development ▪ Park Bilvar ▪ 28th Mall ▪ Plazas (Dalga, ISR) ▪ Khazar Islands 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Baku Olympic Stadium ▪ Gymnastics Complex ▪ Water Sports Complex ▪ Olympic Village

Astana in comparative perspective: Stadia and sporting complexes

Spectacular urbanization projects, as noted above, are frequently legitimated through the imperatives of hosting international mega-event. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, state planners have not yet succeeded in winning bids for such first-tier events – but this has not stopped them from building out of anticipation of, one day, hosting events like the Olympics. Overall, the mere aspiration of hosting large international events is arguably more important than how realistic this may be in actuality. This is seen in the way that planners in each of the case cities use this potentiality to justify mammoth investments in urban infrastructure for second-tier events, which are framed as a “stepping stone,” to showcase their suitability for future mega-events. Second tier or not, global events of any sort are considered desirable across the region for their the potential to spotlight and facilitate the diffusion images of the country’s most iconic new urban developments.

In Kazakhstan, for example, pursuit of hosting such events is indicative of the government’s long-term effort to develop the country’s international prestige – the regime’s so-called “image project,” which has been tied to the development of Astana as the country’s new capital (Koch 2012).⁴ This agenda is explicitly referenced when officials prioritize large, symbolic, and attention-grabbing projects, and they called on the “stepping stone” narrative to justify the government’s astounding investments in new sporting facilities developed for the 2011 Asian Winter Games, co-hosted by Astana and Almaty. Twenty days prior to the start of the Games in January 2011, 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, President 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, and “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 (Sports City 2009), but this figure is likely a gross underestimation, which some have suggested might be more accurately placed at around US \$2 billion. In Astana, these funds were put toward developing a new sporting complex cluster, located south of the city center along the main road to the airport (see **Figures 1-2**). The stadia, with price-tags in the hundreds of millions of dollars, are far more symbolic than functional. This is evident, firstly, based on the construction quality and, secondly, based on their highly limited use.

First, most buildings look fine from afar, but upon closer examination, they uniformly reveal serious flaws in design, engineering, workmanship, and materials. In the case of the Republican Velodrome, for example, when we visited in 2011, the site was in disarray with building materials strewn about and much of the exterior incomplete, and there were already concerns about whether the poorly-designed roof would withstand Astana’s heavy snow without immediate remediation (many of the exterior beams were already broken or falling down). While the exact reasons for this shoddy construction can only be the subject of speculation, it is well known that many of Astana’s projects are completed with cheap, unskilled labor – typically underpaid workers from the poorer Central Asian states of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan⁵ – and with sub-standard or inappropriate materials.

⁴ See Koch 2013a for more on the capital change, which is indeed a form of boosterism unto itself. The authors thank Ralph Clem for suggesting this point.

⁵ Like their counterparts in the Persian Gulf states, who have received far more international press coverage, these laborers have a tenuous, semi-legal existence in Kazakhstan: estimates suggest that 95 percent of migrants lack the required documents to work because there is no legal avenue for receiving the permission needed for long-term employment (Davé 2014).

Figure 1. Republican Velodrome, completed in December 2010 by Mabetex. Estimated cost was US \$82 million, with funds from the Administration of the President of Kazakhstan. Source: Natalie Koch.



Figure 2. Astana Arena (football stadium), 30,000 seats, completed in July 2009 by Sembol Construction and Tabanlıoğlu Architects. Estimated cost was US \$185 million, with funds from the Government of Kazakhstan. Source: Natalie Koch.



Figure 3. View from the Republican Velodrome: a metal barrier plastered with images of open nature to hide the poor migrant neighborhood behind it. July 2011. Source: Natalie Koch.



Although there is widespread awareness of the low construction quality among Astana residents⁶ – those who must live and work in these buildings – their opinion is clearly of little concern to decision-makers. Rather, developers and planners are far more preoccupied with the structures’ appearance from a distance, and its ability to deliver the desired degree of iconicity demanded by state procurement officials. Just as Astana is framed as “Kazakhstan in miniature,” the city’s glitzy new stadia are understood to index the country’s “modernity” – and are thus designed to metonymically project this image internationally. But as a spatio-rhetorical metaphor, metonymy operates by drawing the gaze to one central point and obscuring broader patterns. Like all metaphors, metonymy entails focusing on one aspect of a concept, and “keeps us from focusing on other aspects of the concept that are inconsistent with that metaphor” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 10). So as long as the photographs of these stadia from afar look nice, developers are positioned to make large sums of money by keeping construction costs down. This issue of the strategically-directed gaze is also bluntly illustrated by the metal barriers behind the velodrome, which are plastered with images of beautiful green pastures and blue skies, strategically placed to obscure the migrant-workers’ poor neighborhoods abutting the stadium complex (see **Figure 3**).

Second, Astana’s new sporting facilities must also be understood as more symbolic than functional based on their use – the highly limited extent of which could never justify, let alone recoup, the expense to build and maintain them. Astana Arena (Figure 2), for example, was said to allow “individual citizens” to “now, more than ever, participate in the success of their heroes and the fortunes of their national team” (Tabanlıoğlu Architects 2010), but is far from teeming with local spectators. Astana Lokomotiv team manager Loriya, in an interview with a German newspaper, lamented the fact that the stands of the new arena consistently remain empty: “We are trying everything in Astana, and in spite of free entrance usually not more than 1500 spectators come to the new arena. When I sit above in our box, it makes me very sad” (quoted in Fischer 2010). The image of 1500 people in a stadium for 30,000 is striking, but underuse is not uncommon for many monumental sporting facilities, nor indeed for sporting events in Kazakhstan more generally. Officials also struggled to get citizens to attend the 2011 Asian Games competitions, similarly enticing people with free tickets, but which also failed to attract the large numbers desired. Astana’s new stadia are, in short, planned without a clear popular demand. Rather, these expensive architectural icons are justified on the basis of the “build it and they will come” cliché. But the

⁶ This awareness is expressed in various ways, including regular commiserating among colleagues and friends, but also popular nicknames for certain buildings, such as the ‘Titanic’ for one building that was flooded due to faulty plumbing, and the ‘Lighter’ (*zazhigalka*) for another building that caught fire in the early 2000s.

elites responsible for their construction are neither impacted nor held accountable for the hollowness of this claim: their profits are already secured and they face no danger of being voted out of office.

Planners in Baku and Ashgabat have also pursued international sporting spectacles as a means to transform their capitals' landscapes. A latecomer to the game, Turkmenistan's urban planners are increasingly aware of the strategic role of iconic architecture in global discourses of modernity and international prestige, as well as for justifying new boosterist projects. For example, in discussing the country's plans to host the Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games in 2017, Turkmenistan's National Olympic Committee General Secretary Azat Muradov explained: "Under the vision of Turkmenistan's President, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, of using sport as an effective tool to improve the country's international reputation and build a healthy society, our nation's ultimate goal will be hosting the Asian Games in the future" (quoted in OCA 2013). Extending and materializing Berdimukhamedov's rhetorical fixation with promoting physical health, elites in Turkmenistan have thus prioritized large-scale sports facilities in their recent development agendas in Ashgabat (Tétrault-Farber 2015). This is most apparent in the city's multi-billion-dollar "Olympic Complex," under construction for the 2017 Games. The 157-hectare complex includes the expansion of the Ashgabat Olympic Stadium (built in 2003 for 35,000 spectators), as well as the construction of a velodrome, indoor and outdoor arenas and sports fields, a medical center, hotel, and even an artificial lake (OCA 2013). This project is being undertaken by the Turkish construction company Polimeks, which is responsible for a large number of Ashgabat's impressive, white marble structures, as well as numerous other iconic projects throughout Turkmenistan. Also involved is the British company Arup, an engineering, design, and consulting firm made famous by the Sydney Opera House in 1976, but more recently involved in other iconic sports stadia, including the Beijing's Water Cube and Bird's Nest and the Melbourne Rectangular Stadium. Ashgabat's new Olympic Complex is thus evidence of Turkmenistan's increasing effort to capture international attention (and talent) through boosterist development – the success of which planners hinge on employing internationally-recognized firms, such as Arup. But they also appear to have learned that big price tags are rarely justified without big names.

Even those sporting complexes without an international orientation in Turkmenistan are also built on the basis of the boosterist "build it and they will come" logic. This is seen in other high-capacity stadia, such as Ashgabat's Winter Sports Complex, with a little-used seating capacity of 10,000 (completed in 2011 for €134.4 million by Polimeks). The government has also invested heavily in building new hippodromes, which reflects the leadership's glorification of the Ahal Teke horse as a Turkmen nationalist icon, but which are also seriously underused. Although citizens are frequently forced to attend through a variety of measures, the lack of attendance was acknowledged by President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov in a televised government meeting in 2013, during which he fired the head of the state Equine Association, and bemoaned the fact that: "The horse sport complexes built in the *velayats* [provinces] are totally empty, there are no events taking place there" (quoted in Eurasianet 2013). Like the case of Astana, where the new stadia do have a certain functionality, these hippodromes operate primarily as monuments insofar as they serve as symbolic markers of nationalist ideals and identity narratives, built into the urban landscape (Koch 2013b). Since the state is funding their development without an eye to popular demand and income generating potential, contractors and other actors commissioning these projects are positioned to make a great deal of money by developing them, regardless of their illusory profitability.

Urban elites in Baku have also sought to position it as a major city, if not global one, by competing for command functions and world spectacular events. The city's recent and upcoming events roster is a testament: in June 2015, Baku hosted the first-ever "European Games," as well as European circuit Formula 1 car races from 2016, the Islamic Solidarity Games in 2017, and a handful of the Euro 2020 semi-final games. As in the other cities considered here, hosting sporting events in Baku are conceived of as having longer term boosterist potential: not just the site of global spectacle for a month, but also an ideal opportunity for the "growth machine" elites to promote their real estate development schemes and various other business interests. In fact, Baku's business elite has long maintained a tight grip on the country's Olympic Committee and other sporting organizations, which are seen as a rich

source of potential profit and international prestige. Some years ago, Azerbaijani authorities bid for the 2020 Olympic Games. Based on initial studies that put the hosting cost at \$20 billion, they suggested that it could be financed by oil revenues and private investment. By the time of the bid, Azerbaijan had already built 13 new sporting complexes to bolster Baku's candidacy, with 23 additional buildings underway and scheduled to be completed by 2012–2014. When Baku lost the Olympic bid to Tokyo in 2012, planners shifted their strategy to attracting smaller-scale events, ostensibly with the aim of improving the city's portfolio for another Olympic bid in 2024.

As with Astana and Ashgabat, these successful bids have been strategically narrated as evidence of Azerbaijan's modernity and its rise to international prominence – the magical state at work. Azad Rahimov, Minister of Youth and Sport, for example, spoke of the country's location at the crossroads of Eastern Europe and western Asia as a new “frontier” for Formula 1 racing: “Azerbaijan is a modern European country that has established a reputation as a centre of sporting excellence. The deal to bring Formula 1 racing to Baku is a very significant new chapter in our ongoing success to attract the world's largest sporting events to our country” (quoted in Benson 2014).

Most recently, the 2015 European Games brought 6000 athletes from 49 countries to Baku, as well as an estimated 65,000 visitors (BEGOC 2014). Initial appraisals placed the event costs at around \$1 billion, including the construction of a \$720 million Olympic Stadium that was inaugurated in June 2011 by Azerbaijan's President Aliyev, together with presidents of FIFA Sepp Blatter and UEFA Michel Platini (UEFA 2011). The construction is supposed to be complete by the beginning of the Games and will host Although preparations have concentrated on new construction, planners intend to temporarily repurpose some older Soviet-era structures, as well as the recently-built Crystal Hall.⁷ Again, like the cases of Astana and Ashgabat, all these initiatives are justified on the basis of a “build it and they will come” approach, with extraordinary sums of money being invested in second-tier events to serve as stepping stones for developing the infrastructure and gaining the experience required to compete for first-tier mega-events – albeit unsuccessfully as of yet.

Ashgabat compared: Cultural landmarks and entertainment facilities

The second kind of boosterism seen in the three case cities is the development of iconic cultural landmarks and entertainment facilities, which we understand as related to but nonetheless distinct from the sporting facilities discussed in the previous section. As indicated in Table 1, there are a wide range of such developments in Ashgabat, as well as Astana and Baku. As Sklair (2006, 37) has noted, the geographical scale of iconicity is not fixed: “Architectural icons can have local, national or global significance and recognition, or any mixture of these three.” In Ashgabat, leaders have recently been quite preoccupied with setting Guinness Book world records, including such feats as having the world's highest concentration of white marble buildings, the greatest number of fountain pools in a public place, the world's largest architectural star, and the world's largest indoor Ferris wheel. Whether “the world” is actually attending to these accomplishments is more imagined than real, but ordinary citizens are well aware of which Ashgabat buildings have received international recognition and this status alone accords them iconicity within the city (author's fieldnotes).

The indoor Ferris wheel, for example, was built in 2012 by the Fabbri Group of Italy and is housed in the Alem Cultural and Entertainment Center (shortened here to “Alem”) (see **Figure 4**). The Alem complex is discussed at length in a publication, available on the city's official website, entitled *Ashgabat – in the Guinness Book of Records*. There, the Guinness recognition is said to mean “that the world society pays attention to the great affairs of Turkmenistan on implementing the stable state reforms, especially, providing the happiest life for the young generation” (Mämmedow and Aşyrmämmedow 2013, 66). Indeed, the text includes many pictures of Turkmen youth, in full national dress, enjoying the

⁷ Specifically built for the 2012 Eurovision Song Contest, the venue was allocated about \$6 million for construction by the government of Azerbaijan. Although the final cost was never revealed, some estimates put it at around \$150-170 million. Since hosting the Eurovision Song Contest, the facility has come to be the site for all major “glamour” events, most recently hosting the concerts of Jennifer Lopez, Shakira, and Rihanna.

center's gaming hall and space museum. As with most official publications in Turkmenistan, this document is characterized by a great deal of poetic aggrandizement of the President, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov. Continuing the official presentation of the late president Saparmurat Niyazov (d. 2006), who is attributed with the sapient initiation of Ashgabat's emblematic white marble theme, Berdymukhamedov is also held up as an architectural visionary. The official treatment of Alem is thus a platform to illustrate his prowess: "The national Leader always makes an acquaintance with construction of new buildings which play [an] important role in his working visits to the capital city. Such visits show good results and this huge [Ferris] wheel may be the best testimony for it" (Mämmedow and Aşyrmämmedow 2013, 66-68).

Figure 4. Alem Cultural and Entertainment Center. June 2014. Source: Natalie Koch.



When Koch asked her government-sanctioned guide to visit Alem, she was refused on the grounds that, "it's very boring" and "most tourists don't like it." Although a personal visit was debarred, based on the general abandonment of most of the city's architectural behemoths, it is very likely that Alem is simply not open on a regular basis (perhaps only for the occasional photo opportunities on national holidays and official celebrations). The Ferris wheel complex is located in the southwest of the city, along the Archabil Highway, where the government has focused its most recent development efforts. Even compared with a sparsely populated city center, this region of the city was truly desolate – on the handful of occasions that Author 1 visited during regular business hours, there were no cars, pedestrians or other signs of activity in the entire area. These spaces of Ashgabat stood in contrast to the Soviet sectors of the city, where pedestrians and other signs of activity were readily visible. Here, by contrast, the gleaming white marble buildings appeared vacant and impressively meticulous new bus stops looked perpetually empty: they had been built but no one was coming.

Iconicity, Sklair (2006, 26) reminds us, "works and persists because the buildings in which it inheres are built by architects and teams of others to symbolize something (possibly several things) apart from the programme (functions) of the building itself." Like the stadia discussed above, Alem and Ashgabat's various cultural venues clad in white marble – palaces, theaters, museums and the like –

operate more as symbolic monuments than functional facilities. Although the scale of iconicity is arguably more domestic than international in the case of Turkmenistan, Ashgabat's boosterist development is part of the governmental apparatus" semiotic politics as much as it is about enriching bureaucrats and parastatal companies profiting from building that satisfies no broader need or demand (this is arguably the "function" of such buildings, more so than the labels on their facades). As with similar developments in Astana and Baku, these projects are framed as being "for the people" and are put forward as evidence of the state's benevolence. The Alem Center is no exception and the description of it in the publication discussed above ends thusly: "Our humanitarian government leads forward with the slogan "The State for the people!" which [...] emerged from deep wisdom of the esteemed President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, deep wisdom in order to create all necessary conditions for the generation[s] happiness and bright future" (Mämmedow and Aşyrmämmedow 2013, 69). Like the bread and circuses in ancient Rome, these urban icons allow the leader "to prove to his capital that he shared popular feelings (*popularis esse*)" (Veyne 1990, 398).

This theme equally pervades the development of Astana, which is deeply fused with the personality of President Nazarbayev (whose birthday is, after all, on the same day as the national holiday, Astana Day, marking the beginning of the city's capital city status). Various entertainment and cultural complexes around the city provide a unique platform to prove the leadership's *popularis esse*. Astana's recent developments such as the new Opera, the Khan Shatyr Entertainment Center, and the Central Concert Hall are all boosterist icons designed by prestigious foreign firms, but they all strategically framed as being "for the people," despite their tremendous price-tags in the hundreds of millions of dollars. National pride is one common way of justifying these inordinate costs. For example, in responding to such a criticism about a much smaller project many years ago, President Nazarbayev argued that:

[...] these objects are needed for our children and grandchildren – they are the most serious because young Kazakhstanis are going to be proud that they have in the homeland (*Rodina*) such wonderful things, and so that they can look at them and see that they don't have to travel to the end of the world to see them. He also argued that precisely such objects are used in judging the real civilization of the government. (Dzhaksybekov 2008, 247-248)

Likewise, in Baku ensuring a good image and international recognition is a major concern. Urban planners have considered it essential to have the impressive buildings and cultural complexes of signature architects, seen as characteristic global cities.

One of the most iconic such developments in Baku is the Heydar Aliyev Center, designed by world-famous architect Zaha Hadid. Full of undulating curves and large glass windows, the Center now serves as a venue for various exhibitions, cultural events, international conferences and symposia – as well as promoting the ideas and legacy of late president Heydar Aliyev (d. 2003). As with the discourses about Baku's new sporting facilities discussed above, planners have emphasized simultaneously Western and Eastern identity narratives about Baku's boosterist cultural landmarks, such as the new Carpet Museum on the Baku Promenade, renovations of the UNESCO-protected *Icherisheher* (Old City), and the recent expansion of the Bibi Heybat Mosque. On current President Aliyev's initiative, authorities have built a new mosque in Baku. Designed to be the largest in the Caucasus and called Heydar Mosque (after the late president Heydar Aliyev), it has four minarets, nine domes, and able to accommodate 4000 people. Given that authorities have actually shut down numerous small mosques in Baku since 2008, it is important to note that these monumental mosque projects are not built for the purposes of their primary functions, or to meet a massive popular demand. Rather, they are facilities of symbolism – sending a signal to the Muslim world that elites embrace their Islamic heritage, while simultaneously obscuring the many obstacles ordinary citizens face in free religious expression.

Baku compared: Commercial hubs and hotels

The influx of oil money has allowed for the flourishing of businesses whose interests are closely vested into the development of Baku's built environment, with most capital investments going into construction and tourism. Given that the city has managed to host a number of international and regional events, tourism numbers have been on the rise. In 2012, the number of people visiting hotels and hotel-type complexes in Azerbaijan increased by 22.5 percent compared to 2011 and amounted to 624,900 guests (ASSC 2013). While 57.3 percent of the country's total number of overnight stays was registered in Baku, its numerous hotels are plagued by low-occupancy rates – which hover around 15 percent (ASSC 2013). This notwithstanding, the city's hotel industry has recently undergone expansive growth: the number of hotel rooms jumped from 4400 to 7200 between 2009 and 2013, and forecasts these numbers will increase even more in coming years (Jones 2012). With the recent opening of top brand hotels such as Fairmont, Four Seasons, Jumeirah, Kempinsky, and Marriott, the city now boasts 17 five-star hotels – suggesting that the city is in danger of becoming “overhoted,” at least in the luxury category (Jones 2012).⁸

Given Baku's elevated hotel prices, unreasonable prices for entertainment in downtown, combined with Azerbaijan's stringent visa regime introduced in 2010⁹, the city is not an attractive tourist destination – especially for budget travelers. Since most of package tourists from EU countries and the US prefer lower-budget options, hotel owners clearly understand that foreign tourists would not come *en masse* to stay in five-star hotels. They have thus been major advocates of bringing in ever more government-sponsored conferences, events and tournaments – for which the government covers the costs (Eurasianet 2015). At present, this appears to be their only – if unsustainable – solution for achieving the profits they seek. In any case, the widespread problem with low-occupancy rates signals a clear lack of demand. Accordingly, Baku's luxury hotel developments are decidedly boosterist in nature – arising both from elite economic motives as well as the economy of prestige discussed in all the other projects above. Indeed, most of the new five-star hotels belong to businessmen, either working in the Azerbaijani government, or having close ties with it. On paper, all these new hotels are investments from abroad, but in fact the investments are unaccounted funds and money received from various operations inside the country. Hotel business is widely understood to be an easy investment and a lucrative enterprise. Furthermore, hosting brand-name luxury hotels is treated as a point of national pride, which is evidenced in President Aliyev's speech at the opening ceremony of the Marriott in April 2012:

It is a very significant day in the history of our city. A beautiful and majestic Marriott hotel is opening in Baku today. I heartily congratulate you on this occasion. This is a very important event for the development of our city. I am very pleased that the Marriott hotel meets all international standards. [...] I am sure this hotel will be one of the most beautiful hotels not only in Azerbaijan but also in the whole region. I have no doubt that the level of services will also be at the highest level because Marriott is a world famous hotel chain. The arrival of Marriott in Azerbaijan is also a sign of the development ongoing in Azerbaijan. (Aliyev 2012)

The president goes on to cite the hotel's opening as “a sign of investor attention to Azerbaijan” and not opposed to Baku's “historical beauty,” but as a further evidence that “the rejuvenating and modernizing Baku has already secured a rightful place on the world map” (Aliyev 2012). Far from a one-off, these

⁸ Although the government has justified these expansions by citing Azerbaijan's increasing number of tourists, official statistics are, in short, bogus. The Ministry of Tourism systematically inflates the numbers by including as ‘tourists,’ the mostly ethnic Azerbaijanis who live in Russia or Georgia and regularly cross the border. It is, of course, difficult to calculate real tourist numbers, but in any case, the number is certainly not as high as advertised by state officials.

⁹ Most travelers must receive a visa from an Azerbaijani embassy or consulate, but citizens of Turkey and Israel can get visas in the airport, and the visa regime is not applied to CIS countries. Tourist companies and hotels have been pressuring the government to improve the system, so a new e-visa system is now in place, allowing travelers to submit online applications and get visas at the port of entrance.

remarks are echoed, at points verbatim, in his speeches at the opening of the Jumeirah, Four Seasons, and other hotels in Baku.

Figure 5. The Flame Towers in Baku, as viewed from the Old Town. June 2013. Source: Natalie Koch.



Beyond the luxury hotels, local elites have also tried to construct as many iconic business buildings as possible. The Flame Towers, impressively overlooking Baku Bay from atop its northeastern hills, are a vivid illustration of this category (see **Figure 5**). Treated as iconic representations of the new Baku, the three tall buildings in the form of flames seek to capture the attention of international audiences. The Flame Towers are a project of DIA Holding – a contracting and investment company behind most of Baku’s new urban icons, operating almost exclusively in Azerbaijan but officially based in Dubai and Istanbul (DIA Holding 2014). As Sklair (2006, 43) has highlighted, “The nature of the built environment powerfully reinforces systems of values and the choice of what buildings and spaces become iconic is never arbitrary.” Ostensibly inspired by Azerbaijan’s long history with fire worshipping, these towers are more accurately iconic of the luxury consumerism prevailing in the city’s new built environment, for they house luxury residences, health and wellness units, commercial office space, and the five-star Fairmont Hotel. The same can be said of the new headquarters of SOCAR (State Oil Company of Azerbaijan Republic). Set for occupation in 2015, the SOCAR Tower is to be tallest skyscraper in the Caucasus at 173 meters, and strategically positioned to symbolize SOCAR’s regional might and financial power.

Astana and Ashgabat have undergone many similar developments in this third category of boosterist development encompassing iconic commercial sites – albeit with less focus on bringing in internationally-acclaimed, five-star hotels. Like Azerbaijan, strict visa regimes present a major obstacle to the tourism sectors in both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan – although the latter is an unusual case, not just regionally but globally. Ashgabat’s hotels thus face similar low-occupancy challenges, but this has not prevented elites from calling for “luxury” hotels – many of which long functioned as gambling and

prostitution hubs (until the state banned gambling in all the city's hotels except the Ak Altyn). At present, the "Sofitel Ashgabat Oguzkent" is Turkmenistan's only five-star hotel and, although the chain has revoked its affiliation, still bears the Sofitel name and is treated as a local icon of prestige. Perched on a hill in central Ashgabat and boasting a lavish interior, the hotel was built in 2010 by Bouygues Construction, a French firm behind numerous prestige projects in Ashgabat, and one of the few foreign companies active in Turkmenistan. But given the city's white marble theme, there are few commercial buildings or hotels that stand out as iconic unto themselves. Rather, planners focus on uniformity and the cost of doing business for foreign companies in Turkmenistan typically entails commissioning a white marble-clad office building on one of Ashgabat's thoroughfares. The Bouygues headquarters, for example, meets the official specification, as does that of the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). Together, though, these companies contribute to the effect of iconicity that planners seek through Ashgabat's *overall* urban landscape, and for which they have actively sought global recognition: the Guinness Book of Records has acknowledged Ashgabat for having the world's highest density of white marble buildings.

Aesthetically, urban planners in Astana have gone in the opposite direction. Instead of uniformity, which is deemed Soviet and old-fashioned, they have explicitly pursued an eclectic, "pastiche" image for the city's commercial centers and hotels (Dzhaksybekov 2008). Standing over the Astana Master Plan model, its chief Amanzhol Chikanayev, boasted about the diversity of design and national style represented in the various new business towers and shopping complexes in the new city center (the "Left Bank") (author's interview, 2011). Like the other cities, these developments have focused on the theme of luxury consumerism, with the most iconic examples – the Rixos Hotel, the Khan Shatyr Entertainment Center, the KazMunaiGaz Headquarters – all following a logic of, "the more expensive it is, the more prestigious it is." And yet with all these new office spaces and shopping centers being developed in Astana, there is far less demand than planners would seem to suggest in their justifications for yet another shopping mall, yet another high-end hotel. As with Baku, Astana's elevated prices make it too expensive for most budget travelers, while ordinary residents can rarely afford the steep prices at the city's luxury stores (with most middle class citizens preferring to travel abroad for shopping, typically to Turkey, China, or Dubai) (Koch 2014). Rather, as with all the boosterist projects considered here, these commercial developments are more symbolic than functional – justified by elites as vital signs to the international community that their countries are "reformed," "modern," and "open for business."

Conclusions

Part of a broader trend globally, the cases of Astana, Ashgabat, and Baku are illustrative of how nondemocratic states are also seeking to position their cities as "world class," through populating them with monumental new architectural icons and increasingly laying claim to first- and second-tier global spectacles. As citizens and their leaders in liberal democratic states around the world grow increasingly fatigued by – and intolerant of – the skyrocketing expense of hosting mega-events, leaders in authoritarian countries have been quick to pick up the slack and are beginning to win first-tier event bids (e.g. China's Olympics 2008; Russia's Olympics 2014 and World Cup 2018; Qatar's World Cup 2022). But rather than conveying neoliberal mechanisms, as is often assumed in the literature on mega-events, these events are rapidly proving to be a convenient platform to consolidate authoritarian systems and to promote a state-dominated, elite financial interests. Not only were the 2012 Sochi Games a case in point (Gronskaya and Makarychev 2014; Müller 2011, 2014; Trubina 2014; Orttung and Zhemukhov 2014), but as we have shown here, the simple *aspiration* of hosting first-tier international spectacles is being harnessed as a way to justify the "hyperbuilding" (Ong 2011) that is characteristic of rentier state political economies – not just in Eurasia, but also in the Gulf states and Africa (Barthel 2010; Gardner 2014).

While the case of Sochi's \$51 billion price-tag is extreme, in its extremity, it illustrates one major theme in the criticisms of urban boosterism: that the promises of economic stimulus and "overnight" transformation of a city are generally grossly exaggerated and, more often than not, result in financial loss rather than gain. Reflecting the dominant approach to boosterism, the Western press coverage of Sochi

fixated on the question of whether the Russian people would actually benefit from the state's investments related to the Olympics. This question, we suggest, is misguided in that it assumes that locales and citizens are necessarily the beneficiaries of boosterism development. While finances are a key part of the puzzle, we have shown that the cost-benefit questions that scholars working in more liberal settings tend to pose may need to be reconsidered when considering urban boosterism in closed contexts and rentier states. Here we are likely to get a much fuller picture of what is happening if we instead ask the more general question of, *who* benefits and *how*?

While a seemingly small point, approaching urban boosterism and spectacular urbanization with the question of who benefits and how demands more careful attention to the political geography of democracy and authoritarianism. As our study illustrates, what is happening in Astana, Ashgabat, and Baku is far more than an issue of financial capital, and cannot be separated from the aspirations of their country's national leaders. The intended outcome of urban growth is thus not restricted to the urban area itself, and can only be understood in the broader national context. The construction of luxury hotels in Baku, to take one example, is designed to transform the city into an international tourist destination; but that is only comprehensible as a component within the elevation of the national profile. In short, this account underlines the way in which it is possible to continue to apply the "urban growth machine" concept in settings much different than those originally envisaged by its creators. Yet it is also the case that the political economies that we witness in rapidly-growing countries as diverse as Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan offer a new and dramatic example of how the transformation of the urban fabric is implicated in the legitimation of the state itself. This does not point to the need to jettison all our existing templates for understanding growth, but it does indicate that there are many settings in which the sheer scale of economic growth and its implications for the urban fabric demand analytic approaches that are equally broad in their outlook. In this respect, retaining a focus on the dynamic set of *multi-scalar* relations is central to understanding how the urban scale (cities and their built environments) is produced through competing interests and identity narratives of actors ranging from local elites, large foreign firms, and the states' passive (pacified) citizenries.

But rather than seeing our case study of the "magical state" and spectacular urbanization in Central Asia and the Caucasus as inherently exceptional, as is often presumed (Koch 2012), a political geographic approach sheds light on how urban boosterism operates as a discourse that actors with variable strategic aims can mobilize in their unique contexts (Koch 2015a). Sometimes this may entail market-based actors consolidating their positions of power, but so too can it entail state-based actors consolidating authoritarian political systems. Honing in on these place-based specificities, and how they themselves are also strategically mobilized, opens up the possibility for a highly productive comparative agenda that is likely to find a great deal of relevance in contexts that avow democratic ideals. This is especially evident in the boosterist ideology itself, which is underpinned by the metaphor of spatial diffusion.

A staple of developmentalist discourses the world over, this imaginary depends on a modernist conception of "Euclidean" or abstract space (Sack 1986), whereby social benefits are thought to emanate from a central node, more or less evenly diffusing to the periphery. However, this geometric vision of space is also a depoliticized vision of space. It is but an imaginary – but it is far from neutral. Hinging on this point-based, spatial diffusion logic, the city planners' focus on hypermodern stadiums and large-scale architectural projects belies the fact that their benefits accrue disproportionately at the top level and seldom diffuse to the periphery. And even the one benefit the masses may have learned to value – national pride – is one that enlists ordinary citizens in the authoritarian states' effort to systematically overlook corruption, structural inequalities, and widespread poverty through a carefully guided presentation of their country's international "image." Not only does the point-based dynamic of urban boosterism shift attention away from this injustice, it also allows us to fixate on *objects* rather than the social and economic relations that produce the object (Williams 1973). A single stadium, luxury hotel, or Ferris wheel, for example, takes on the appearance of a singular entity, planted in the city's landscape – in and of itself not an obvious sign of troubling socio-economic relations – but strategically detached from the entire relational network of power, desires, and egos that channeled various material resources into

creating its material existence. This is the magical state's hat-trick – but it is certainly not limited to authoritarian or other politically-closed settings.

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