

**Sport as an instrument for crafting national identity: a case of Kazakhstan**

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January 10, 2021

People have never underestimated the power of sport and its potential in politics. For hundreds of years, various sports events were organized to reach specific political goals. XX century provided many examples for this point: Hitler's Olympic in 1936 and the Argentinian junta's Olympic were aimed to clear the image of the bloody regimes organizing them. Another use of sport is promoting national identity – as Rubidoux points out in his article<sup>1</sup>, hockey and lacrosse were used as a tool in the national identification process. In this essay, we will consider the case of Kazakhstan, a country in Central Asia that gained independence from the USSR only 30 years ago. I argue that the Kazakhstani government employed sports to revive and incorporate separate Kazakh identity into a common “Kazakhstani” identity.

Kazakhstan gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. By that time, the number of non-Kazakh people in the country outweighed the number of Kazakhs, and most of the population could not speak the Kazakh language. Many of those could simply prefer using Russian. Many traditions were forgotten during Soviet times, and many people in the country embraced atheism. This situation, along with a lack of a strong army, failing economics, and Russia's direct proximity, was considered a threat to the existence of the newly established republic. Therefore, the leadership of the country wanted to resurrect the national identity of the population. To this end, the government undertook several measures. It authorized celebrating holidays such as Nauryz, which were banned in Soviet times, and many traditions were popularized through the state TV and media. Literature forbidden by the Soviet government was

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<sup>1</sup> Robidoux, M. A. (2002). Imagining a Canadian Identity through Sport. *Hockey*, 115(456), 209-225. doi:10.2307/j.ctt22rbkfw.12

introduced in the school curriculum. Students started exploring biographies of the prominent members of the national movement who were executed by the communists.

People started learning about Kazakhstan's history, and a big part of the curriculum was devoted to the continuous fight for independence conducted by the ancestors. Ballads about the heroic actions and the great strength of old warriors were taught in literature classes, and accounts of great battles with the Chinese invaders were studied in history classes. All of this led to a robust and persisting idea of “national strength,” and this idea and the image of strong *batyrs* (warriors) are quite popular. Two of the main avenues in the country's capital are named after Kabanbay batyr and Bogenbay batyr – two prominent warriors who fought in a bloody Kazakh-Jungar war. Their names and pictures can be found in school textbooks, unique books series, movies, and TV series about the country's history. Every celebration of a national holiday goes with young, strong men in warriors’ outfits, and the word batyr is considered a high compliment towards a man. As researcher Ulan Bigozhin writes

The myth of national strength, connected with Kazakhstan’s imagined bellicose past, is widely circulated. For example, during my field research in the Pavlodar region, in Kazakhstan’s rural steppe, in 2013–2014, local Kazakhs shared stories of the deeds of their heroic ancestors (often in the context of the Kazakh-Dzhungar wars)<sup>2</sup>

This process went along with an increasing promotion of sports, mainly combat ones. Boxing and wrestling are considered the most popular sports in the country. The government, which inherited an impressive number of sports facilities from the Soviet Union, is continuously increasing their number. Sports facilities are being opened everywhere: every regional center has

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<sup>2</sup> Bigozhin, Ulan. (2019). "Where is Our Honor?" Sports, Masculinity, and Authority in Kazakhstani Islamic Media. *Central Asian Affairs*. 6. (193)

one large facility allowing the practice of a wide range of sports. Even the remote villages have small sports centers. Almost every sports center provides wrestling and boxing sections.

Wrestling has a special place in Kazakhstan. There are two main types of it practiced in the country: The Greek-Roman one and the traditional *qazaqsha kures* (Kazakh wrestling). The government promotes Kazakh wrestling among the youth, heavily subsidizing wrestling classes throughout the country and organizing professional championships. One of the biggest competitions is the annual *Qazaqstan Barysy* (Kazakhstan's Leopard), which tends to follow ancient traditions of wrestling competitions. In this case, we can see the use of Eric Hobsbawm's "invented tradition" that "seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies a connection with the past." The show is popular in the country, and winners get a significant money prize.

Professional boxers are also enormously popular within the country: their photos are on banners on sports centers' streets and walls. They also receive extensive television and media coverage and significant financial benefits from the government in case of a victory. The republic's leadership publicly supports famous boxers: the first president of the country, Nursultan Nazarbayev, personally watched the fight of Gennady Golovkin, a prominent professional boxer, and called him later to congratulate him on his victory. Another example is Ilya Ilyin, a well-known heavyweight lifter and a winner of the London Olympics, who received support from the first president.

In conclusion, considering the presented cases, we can see a clear case of the application of Jeremy MacClancy's idea of sports as "a vehicle of identity." The government successfully used a high value for masculinity in society and managed to employ it in national identity revival. Support for traditional Kazakh forms of sport such as Kazakh wrestling and crafting

strong national warriors' image allowed it to accelerate the rejuvenation of Kazakh identity. Simultaneously, it used sport as a common ground to combine Kazakh and Kazakhstani identities: sharing the same values for masculinity and sport, people of the country share a common Kazakhstani identity. Speaking in Benedict Anderson's words, the "boundary" shapes the "limited" Kazakh identity, but it is the same "boundary" as the common Kazakhstani identity. In other words, the government was able to revive Kazakh national identity and successfully incorporated it into Kazakhstani one.

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