

Competing narratives: nation-building discourses in sport projects in Kazakhstan

**Master's thesis Russian and Eurasian studies
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1. Introduction

Having just marked its 25th year of independence in 2016, Kazakhstan proves to be a particularly interesting case to examine the process of nation-building. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the regime led by its first and only president so far, Nursultan Naerbayev, had to create a state on a territory where no independent state had existed before, and where – unlike other post-Soviet states – the titular nation was in a minority at the time of independence. Therefore, the regime faced a dilemma: on the one hand, it wanted to emphasize the primordial right of the ethnic Kazakhs to rule Kazakhstan, which literally means “land of the Kazakhs”; on the other hand, it had to create a common sense of belonging among all citizens and national minorities, in order to prevent ethnic conflict and trump secessionist movements. This problem has led to diverging nation-building strategies, and scholars have often discussed which discourse has been dominant in post-Soviet Kazakhstan: an “ethnic” conception of nationhood, a “civic” one. Until recently, there seemed to be a consensus among scholars that Kazakhstan’s nation-building project after independence had largely been a top-down process focused on ethnic identity (Isaacs 2015, 400).

In recent years however, scholars such as Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan (2013, 351) have argued that discourses related to nation-building do not have to be mutually exclusive, but can both be used by the regime as a form of “strategic ambiguity”. Similarly, Isaacs (2015, 400) has argued that nation-building trajectories can be “both competing and complementary”, and that nation-building is a “fluid and transgressive process”. This fluidity is especially prevalent between the ethnic and civic trajectories, as these concepts “represent the institutionalized tension within the regime-driven strategy of promoting both a nationalist and ethnic form of nationalism” (ibid). Other scholars have suggested that discourses focused on international prestige (Larulle 2014) or development (Koch 2013) had become dominant.

Literature on Kazakhstan’s nationhood process is seen as one of the main bodies of scholarly work on contemporary Kazakhstan (Laruelle 2016, xi). This thesis aims to contribute to this growing body of work by looking at the competing nation-building narratives that are presented through sport. Where most articles on nation-building in Kazakhstan focus on subjects like language policies, symbolism in monuments or

architecture, or history writing, sport is a less obvious choice. However, sport has long been recognized as an important means to construct and popularize nations (Arnold 2018, 3). Some even argue that sport, “owing to its emotional expressions and nationalistic symbolism [...] should have a key place in general research into nationalism and national culture.” (Paasi 1996, 98-99) Similarly, it has been argued that sport is a “vehicle” for the construction of individual, group and national identities (Cronin and Mayall 2005, 1-2). The choice for sport is also relevant because soft-authoritarian regimes like the incumbent regime in Kazakhstan are generally more fixated on their place in the international hierarchy. As those regimes fall outside international moralizing narratives concerning democracy and liberalism, they see sport as an ideal way to gain international recognition (Koch 2013, 43). This is also the case in Kazakhstan, where observers have noted a shift in the country’s PR strategy from politics to sport in recent years (Bartlett 2010). Nevertheless, the nation-building project in Kazakhstan is rarely studied by focusing on sports, as will be demonstrated in a later section.

Another reason to focus on sport is the fact that elites in Kazakhstan have initiated two interesting sport projects aimed at nation-building: the Astana cycling team, and a project aimed at promoting traditional Kazakh wrestling or “Kazakh kures”. Both projects gained prominence in the mid-2000s, in a time when Kazakhstan intensified its efforts to improve the country’s image. This so-called “image project” (“imidzh project”) is sometimes seen as a reaction to the PR-disaster caused by the film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (Koch 2013, 45). While the projects share some similarities, the differences seem even more striking. Where Astana seems to represent modern, 21st century Kazakhstan, the wrestling project seems to be aimed at reconstructing an ancient, pre-Soviet past. Therefore, these two projects seem to be perfectly suited to analyze the different interpretations of the nation that are promoted through Kazakhstan’s nation-building policies.

My personal experiences in Kazakh wrestling have also played a role in choosing to focus on this project. In the mid-2000s, I have competed in three international Kazakh kures tournaments in Kazakhstan and Russia. Even though I was not yet interested in the concepts of nation-building or national identity at the time, I did wonder why high-placed elites would invite sportsmen from all around the world to practice a sport they had never practiced (or even heard about) before, and pay for all their expenses.

Similar to Isaacs' study on Kazakh films and Dave's (2007) study on language and ethnicity, this examination of sport projects aims to demonstrate the fluidity of the discourses related to nation-building and to illuminate the hybrid nature of identities in post-Soviet Kazakhstan (Isaacs 2015, 400). The aim of this study is thus not to declare either project civic or ethnic, but to identify the divergent tendencies represented through the projects, because, as Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan (2013, 339) have argued, "It is the tension inherent in these divergent trajectories is of interest rather than any particular end state".

The thesis is structured as follows. First, the literature concerning (post-modern) nation-building, nation-building in Kazakhstan, and sport in relation to nation-building is examined. In a following section, the existing literature on sport and nation-building in Kazakhstan is discussed, followed by an introduction of the case studies and the methodology. Based on the analyzed literature, the most distinctive aspects of the various nation-building paradigms are defined. This "coding" provides the basis for a qualitative assessment and interpretation of the practices, symbolism, performance and narratives that are found in the data. Finally, the most important findings are presented in the conclusion.

2. Nation-building in Central Asia: constructing “imagined communities”

So far, the literature on nation-building in Central Asia has been dominated by the idea that nations are constructed from above (Isaacs & Polese 2015, 371). In this sense, nation-building is understood as the efforts to create, develop and spread or popularize the idea of the nation and the national community through politics and policies (ibid). An influential concept in establishing this post-modern idea of nation-building is Anderson’s (2006, 6) conception of the nation as an “imagined political community”: according to him, nationalism, nation-ness and the nation are imagined because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear from them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion”. Another prominent work that builds on the idea that nations are constructed, is Hobsbawm’s (2012, 1) book on “invented traditions”, in which he argues that nations emerge from an invented “set of practices [...], of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”

Understood like this, Isaacs (2015, 401) has argued, “the nation is constructed by modern elites and intellectuals as they deliberately select and rework old traditions, symbols, memories, myths, and narratives” for the population that has to accept them. Studies using this approach often link nation-building to regime-building and focus on the way national identity is imagined by the political elites (Isaacs & Polese 2015, 371). One of the most influential studies in this respect is Roger Brubaker’s work on “nationalizing states” (1996). Brubaker defines nationalizing states as states where dominant elites belonging to the titular nation promote an ethno-cultural national identity in a variety of domains, often at the expense of national minorities (Brubaker, 1996, 57). In his typology, nationalizing states can be distinguished from “civic” states (Kuzio, 2001, 136). Other scholars have adopted Brubaker’s concept to examine the way in which elites promoted a kind of nationalism that privileged the titular group. Examples hereof include studies on language policies (Dave 2007), privileging the titular majority in the constitution (Bohr, 1998), and the re-writing of history textbooks (Blakkisrud & Nozimova 2010). The idea of nationalizing states is however disputed. Kuzio (2001, 136), for instance, argues that all states, even civic ones, have an ethno-cultural core and therefore, all states are nationalizing to a certain degree.

Strongly related to the issue of nationalizing states is the theoretical divide between “civic” and “ethnic” nationalism. This idea assumes that among nations, two types can be distinguished: civic and ethnic states. A civic state is defined by the equality of citizens, regardless of their descent, the language they speak, and the cultural practices they perform (Beacháin & Kevlihan 2013, 338). In ethnic states, on the other hand, a common descent is emphasized and reflected in culture and language (ibid). According to Brubaker (1999, 64), ethnic states are often viewed as illiberal, ascriptive, particularist and exclusive, while civic states are seen as liberal, voluntarist, universalist, and inclusive. This, he has argued, gives the distinction a strongly normative dimension. As for its analytical use, Brubaker (ibid, 59) has argued that both terms are defined so ambiguously, that they cannot be considered mutually exclusive. Furthermore, the ethnic-civic dichotomy is criticized for overlooking the multiplicity of nationalisms and identities (Isaacs & Polese, 2015, 374). Considering the above criticism, Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan (2013, 338) have argued that the concepts can be useful for analysis when they are perceived as ideal types.

As mentioned previously, most of the literature on nation-building in Central Asia uses a statist, top-down perspective. This approach is however disputed. Some scholars argue that just looking at politics and policies is not sufficient, because citizens and non-state actors have the agency to accept, negotiate or reject efforts by the state (Isaacs & Polese 2015, 375). Therefore, they propose to analyze both state-led policies and the ways in which different audiences receive these policies (ibid).

2.1 Banal nationalism

But even if nation-building is only seen as a top-down process that is imposed on people, examining state policies and practices is not the only way to analyze it. Michael Billig, for instance, was among the first scholars to move away from the macro-level and focused on “banal” elements instead. In his book *Banal nationalism*, Billig (1995, 175) has argued that nationalism is “embedded in routines of social life”, allowing members to reproduce an imagined sense of belonging to the nation through “banal” habits. According to Skey (2009, 334), Billig has made an important contribution to the debate by highlighting the problem that the nation was often taken for granted in everyday life, as well as in social theory. Accepting Billig’s idea that nations are constructed through banal symbols and practices, more and more scholars have published empirical-based studies on nationalism (Skey, 2009,

333). Studying nation-building through performance, rituals, culture, and other forms of everyday life seems to be especially relevant in post-Soviet Central Asia. In this region, Sally Cummings (2009, 1083) has stated, “[a]n externally imposed collapse of certainty led to a scramble for internally invented signs of certainty”. An example of such a study is Denison’s (2009, 1167) analysis of how political symbols, such as monuments, are used to create a national identity and collective memory in Turkmenistan.

3. Nation-building in Kazakhstan: different conceptions of national identity

Kazakhstan was only established as an independent nation-state after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. To get a better idea of Kazakh national identity, however, it is necessary to go further back in history. The history of the Kazakh people can be traced back to the fifteenth century, when the Kazakh Khanate was founded by a number of Turkish-speaking tribes of Uzbek-Turkic origin. The Khanate lasted for about two centuries, but fell apart as a result of internal divisions and invasions (Isaacs 2015, 402). The Khanate period is not only viewed as the time in which the Kazakh nation was born, but also as the peak of pastoral nomadism (Ferret 2016, 180). In the second part of the nineteenth century, the Russian empire began to colonize the steppes inhabited by the Kazakhs (Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan 2013, 340). From that period up until the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Kazakh nation and national identity have been largely shaped by Russia and the Soviet Union (Isaacs 2015, 402). Kazakhstan's geographic boundaries, for instance, were established under Soviet rule in the 1920s and 1930s, and Kazakh history was often written by Russians or Russian educated Kazakhs (Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan 2013, 340). During 1920s and 1930s, the traditional pastoral nomadic lifestyle of the Kazakh people was abruptly and violently ended as a result of Stalin's collectivization drive (Dave 2007, 1). According to Ferret (2016, 184) the Kazakhs' nomadic pastoral system ceased to exist as a mode of production, but continued to exist as a form of folklore.

While the Soviet regime put such a mark on Kazakh society, it simultaneously promoted a specific sense of Kazakh national identity and gave ethnic Kazakhs certain privileges over other groups (Dave 2007, 5). The Soviets' policies of "national self-determination" were aimed at winning the support from ethnic minorities and preventing the rise of nationalist or religious movements (Werner, Emmelhainz & Barcus 2017, 1563). Thus, the Soviets followed a dual policy of promoting both an "international" Soviet identity and a "national" Kazakh identity.

Another factor that shaped perceptions of the Kazakh nation was demography. Mass immigrations of Russians and mass deportations of other ethnicities under Russian colonization resulted in a rising share of the Slavic population and a decline of the Kazakh population (Isaacs 2015, 402, Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan 2013, 340).

Therefore, Isaacs (2015, 402) has argued that Kazakh nationhood at the time of independence was shaped both by external and internal agents; it was influenced just as

much by Russian and Soviet colonization as by the historical legacy of the Kazakh Khanate. These ambiguous conceptions of the Kazakh nation should be taken into account when looking at the country's post-Soviet nation-building process (ibid).

3.1 Ethnic conceptions of national identity

After independence, a new national identity had to be established. As noted before however, the rulers of the newly independent state were able to build on an already existing "imagined political community" established by the Soviet regime, which linked identity to territory, language and ethnicity (Werner et al. 2017, 1565). However, defining Kazakhstan's position towards the former coloniser was also an important aspect of nation-building. Kudaibergenova (2016, 917) has focused on this subject in her study on the use of postcolonial discourses by the ruling elite, the opposition and national patriots. She argues that the Nazarbayev regime used postcolonial language to distance it from the immediate past and present it as modern and innovative (ibid, 924).

Cummings (2006, 177) has mentioned three state-building goals that were formulated by Kazakhstan's ruling elites shortly after independence. The first goal was to promote a civic, all-Kazakhstani state identity. Second, different ethnic groups were encouraged to discover their cultural identities, and third, a special place in the state was reserved for the ethnic Kazakh population, where a cultural reawakening had to take place. These ambiguous goals reflect the debate on civic and ethnic conceptions of the nation and nation-building in Kazakhstan.

Cummings (ibid, 197) has argued that independent Kazakhstan has given priority to the ethnic dimension of nationality over the civic dimension, a position she has shared with many other scholars. In her 1998 study, Bohr has described how nationalizing policies in the sphere of language and the exclusion of other nationalities from power gave the titular Kazakh group a status of first among equals. This status is even explicitly formulated in the constitution: "We the people of Kazakhstan, united by a common historic fate, creating a state on indigenous Kazakh land." (Laruelle 2014, 2) Similarly, the Doctrine of National Unity of Kazakhstan states: "The Kazakh people, having given their proud name to the country, have the responsibility to become the consolidating centre of unity for the Nation" (Diener 2016, 131).

Sarsembayev (1999, 329) has defined the ethno-centric process that favours ethnic Kazakhs in economic, cultural, educational and political spheres as a process of “Kazakhification” (sometimes alternatively referred to as “Kazakhization”, e.g. Davenel 2012, 19). Surucu (2002, 389) has associated policies of ethno-nationalism with “nationalists” within the regime. While their nationalism gave rise to a wave of counter-nationalism by so-called “cosmopolitans”, the latter group was more associated with the opposition. In Surucu’s typology, cosmopolitans are defined by attributes such as urban, inter-ethnic, and Russian speaking, while nationalists are seen as rural and Kazakh speaking (ibid, 391). Kuzio (2002, 248) makes a similar distinction between Kazakh-speaking “nativists” and Russian-speaking “assimilados”.

Cummings (2006, 184), views language policies as the most notable examples of the state-led Kazakhification process, but also mentions the renaming of street names after Kazakh historical figures, the rewriting of history and the commemoration of the suffering of the Kazakh people under Soviet rule. Other scholars point at the introduction of a new flag and national anthem, and the privileged position of ethnic Kazakhs within the state apparatus (Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan 2013, 342). Isaacs (2015, 404), who has analyzed the representation of national identity in Kazakh films, has associated the ethno-centrist discourse with the promotion of certain historical figures and events. Some of the most prominent films since independence, such as *Nomad* and *Myn Bala*, glorify the nomadic past and are set against the spectacular backdrop of the steppe. This corresponds with Ferret’s (2016, 182) claim that the state considers nomadism to be the basis of Kazakh national identity. According to her study, however, the celebration of nomadism in modern-day Kazakhstan is reduced to emblems like the yurt and the horse, and completely misses the most important aspect, which is residential mobility (ibid, 193). Examples of nomadic emblems that are promoted in Kazakhstan can be found in the nation’s coat of arms, and (more implicitly) on the national flag (ibid, 182).

Considering the ethno-nationalist processes discussed above, Kazakhstan seems to fit Brubaker’s (1996) definition of a nationalizing state. Scholars such as Commercio (2004), Cummings (2006), and Peyrouse (2008) have supported this position. The priority the regime has seemingly given to the ethnic aspect of nation-building can be explained by the idea that the Kazakhs have a primordial right to govern Kazakhstan, which literally means “land of the Kazakhs” (Diener 2016, 131). Diener (ibid, 136) has even suggested that governments led by

elites from the titular nation are “implicitly encouraged to embrace ethno-national state-building state-building strategies as the most expedient path to legitimacy and sovereignty.”

Another explanation for the regime’s emphasis on ethnic conceptions of the nation, is the fact that at the time shortly after independence, the titular Kazakh group did not make up a majority of the population (Kolsto 1998, 13). Both Kazakhs and Russians made up roughly 40 percent of the population, which further constituted of tens of other ethnic groups, including Germans, Ukrainians, Uzbeks, Tatars, and Uighurs (Svanberg 1999, 11). Therefore, according to Diener (2016, 134), the promotion of an ethnic Kazakh identity is or was also aimed at preventing Russian irredentism or secessionist movements.

3.2 Civic conceptions of national identity

Apart from the ethnic Kazakh notion of identity, recent studies have focused on the civic, more inclusive “Kazakhstani” identity and the related process of “Kazakhstanization” (Davenel, 2012, 19). As noted before, creating a Kazakhstani identity was formulated as the main goal of newly independent Kazakhstan, and still is the official government policy (Koch 2013, 49). After independence, all residents of Kazakhstan were awarded Kazakhstani citizenship, regardless of their ethnic descent or the language they spoke (Werner et al. 2017, 1564).

The civic paradigm is often seen as a heritage from the Soviet nationalities policy, which created a difference between citizenship and ethnic identification (Laruelle 2016, 155). Davenel (2012, 17), for instance, has made a link between the way in which ethnic groups are encouraged to develop their own culture and language, and the Soviet concepts of inter-ethnic harmony and internationalism. This paradigm thus presents Kazakhstan as “the harmonious homeland of various ethnic groups and religions” and is used both at home and abroad (Laruelle 2016, 155). According to Isaacs (2015, 406), the civic paradigm does not only depict Kazakhstan as multi-ethnic and multi-religious, but also links Kazakh national identity to characteristics such as openness, friendliness and hospitality. Isaacs (ibid) has argued that the civic conception of national identity is linked to the country’s nomadic heritage, the steppe and its geographic location between East and West. As a resting place for travellers, and thanks to its openness and lack of boundaries, the steppe has contributed to typical Kazakh traits like friendliness, tolerance and hospitality (ibid). The fact that the

steppe and nomadism are connected to both civic and ethnic conceptions of identity, highlights the ambiguous nature of symbols.

Laruelle (2014, 8) has argued that there is a strong relation between the civic paradigm and the notion of “Eurasianism”. By this she means that in the international context, the notion of multi-nationalism is translated into a paradigm of Kazakhstan as the “crossroads of Eurasia, a meeting point of Russian/European, Asian/Chinese and Islamic civilizations” (ibid, 9). Koch (2010, 770) also links the Eurasian paradigm to civic nationalism. In her view, the notions of modernity and progress, which are reflected for instance in the architecture of the country’s new capital Astana, are used to elide national differences.

According to Davenel (ibid, 20), the promotion of a civic identity has not only been a propaganda effort, but has also resulted in a sense of civic belonging among minority groups. Rees and Webb Williams (2017) come to a similar conclusion in their study on how the state’s promotion of a civic Kazakhstani identity is received by citizens. They argue that citizens have adopted some, but not all of the state’s policy efforts, which demonstrates the limitations of the state in creating a national identity (ibid, 835).

3.3 Hybrid, transnational and religious conceptions of national identity

As mentioned in the introduction, scholars have argued recently that Kazakhstan’s regime has not chosen an ethnic or civic trajectory, but applies both strategies at the same time. Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan (2013, 351) for example, have argued that the regime in Kazakhstan has followed a policy of “strategic ambiguity” in its nation-building process., which they illustrated with a metaphor of “threading a needle”. This ambiguity is mainly demonstrated in the slow or partial implementation of language policies (ibid, 346). This argument seems to be widely accepted in recent literature. Spehr and Kassenova (2012, 136) have described the nation-building project as a “political hybrid”, where state-builders neither chose a nationalizing or civic course. In other recent articles, the nation-building project in Kazakhstan is described as a “balancing act” (Diener 2016, 134).

Laruelle (2014, 1) also accepts the notion of a hybrid state identity, but has added a third discourse to Kazakhstan’s nation-building strategies, which, according to her, has become the state’s main discourse since the mid-2000s. This third paradigm, which Laruelle has defined as “transnationalism”, emphasises the country’s connections to the world community and is aimed at gaining international prestige. As international prestige is used to

strengthen the regime's legitimacy at home, this discourse is strongly related to the regime's soft-authoritarian nature and Nazarbayev's personality cult (ibid, 10). The efforts to gain international prestige are often framed as "nation branding" (Marat 2009, 1123). According to Laruelle (ibid, 11), the transnational narrative is most clearly reflected in the country's futuristic capital Astana, which displays Kazakhstan's "path of progress". Apart from the capital's monumental architecture, Laruelle (ibid) argues that the state's focus on development is also expressed in the strategic documents Kazakhstan 2030 and Strategy 2050 and the country's nation branding efforts. Understood like this, transnationalism seems to be strongly related to Koch's (2010) previously mentioned understanding of Eurasianism, which she connected to the civic paradigm.

The notion of transnationalism also seems to overlap with a paradigm defined by Adams and Rustemova (2009, 1254). According to these authors, Kazakhstan's initial focus on ethnic perceptions of the nation has transformed in the late 1990s into a paradigm that is more focused on economic progress, but with respect for ethnic heritage. Furthermore, the concept of transnationalism seems to be related to March's notion of "teleocracies" (Koch 2010, 770). This definition is used to describe authoritarian Central Asian regimes that "are organized and legitimated in relation to the realization of certain hallowed goals", and where progress is defined in terms of economic development (ibid). The focus on progress and development is also reflected in the concept of "developmental regimes" (Koch 2013, 44). Developmental regimes are nondemocratic regimes that are fixated on international status and articulate development as a major goal. The idea that developmental regimes are able to realize progress is the basis of their legitimacy. In this context, sport is seen as an ideal way to gain international prestige (ibid).

A conception of national identity that is not so prominent in academic literature is a paradigm that explores the religious foundations of the nation (Isaacs 2015, 407). According to this author, the religious identity connects Kazakh identity with the pre-Islamic spirituality of the Turkic-Mongol religion Tengrism, where humans, animals, plants and spirits exist in a symbiotic relationship. This discursive paradigm is often represented through animals like wolves, owls and crows, and through symbols of the past such as nomadism, yurts, cattle breeding and contact with nature (ibid, 408). As such, this paradigm seems to overlap with the ethnic paradigm. A similar notion of national identity is found in Laruelle's (2015, 330) study on television in Kazakhstan. This author has noted the emergence of a new genre,

“patriotic entertainment”. According to Laruelle (2015, 340), this genre is built on knowledge of the nation’s vast territories, the rise in domestic tourism and especially in healing pilgrimages, the supernatural being in vogue, and the celebration of the Kazakh “mentality” and so-called “traditional Islam.”

4. Sport and nation-building

The role of sport in constructing and popularizing nations has been widely recognized (Arnold, 2018, 3). Bairner (2001, 1) has noted a strong link between sport and the construction of national identity, but has argued that the types of nationalism involved and the way they interact with sport are often poorly specified (ibid, 163). The majority of academic work on sport and nation-building has been focused on the promotion of national identity through the organisation of mega events (Arnold 2018, Orttung & Zhemukhov 2014, Casula 2016, Gorokhov 2015). While the potential of hosting mega-events to present a nation to both national and international audiences is recognized, and is also relevant in the context of Kazakhstan, this section focuses on the ways in which sport can contribute to the construction of imagined communities.

In this context, Hobsbawm (1990, 143) has argued that between the two World Wars, “sportsmen representing their nation or state [became] primary expressions of their imagined communities”. According to Hobsbawm (ibid), this has proved to be a “uniquely effective” way to inculcate national feelings, because “even the least political or public individuals can identify with the nation as symbolized by young persons excelling at what practically every man wants [...] to be good at.” By identifying with the sportsmen and cheering for the nation, individuals become symbols of the nation themselves (ibid). A similar argument is made by Adams (2010, 96), who has argued that sport has the power to mobilize citizens and create an illusion of participation. By passively participating as spectators or actually performing in sports, citizens are allowed to participate in the nation.

Hobsbawm influential concept of “invented traditions” is also highly relevant in the context of sports. In fact, he has noted that sport was one of the most significant “invented traditions” of his time (Hobsbawm cited in Maguire 2011, 979). The different ways in which sport can contribute to the construction of identities is underlined by Houlihan (1997, 135), who has stated that sport is a “highly malleable source of cultural symbolism and a powerful signifier of identity”.

4.1 Civic and ethnic conceptions of nationhood in sport

Sport can be used to promote different conceptions of national identity. Koch (2013, 49) has argued that sport appears to be a tactic to promote civic nationalism, “for its malleability”

and the fact that it can be easily isolated from ethnic culture. A similar argument is used by Arnold (2018, 2), who has stated that sport can be seen as a unifying factor in multi-ethnic states, and has the ability to emphasize a civic conception of the nation. Houlihan (1997, 120) has also defined a civic way of nation-building through sports. In what he has called the “Western model of nationalism”, nationality is defined more by commitment than by genealogy. As a result, nationalist feelings remain in place even when certain players in a national or club team are born outside of a nation’s territory.

Houlihan (ibid) and other scholars have however challenged the idea that sport is always a unifying factor. As shown by various studies, sport also has the ability to emphasize social divisions, such as class and ethnicity, and regional differences (Koch 2013, 49). Houlihan (1997, 118) has also argued that sport, apart from promoting civic elements of nationalism, can be used by regimes to fit in with the symbolism and mythology of the ethnic community. In this context, one would expect the promotion of traditional sports or the invention of a unique sporting tradition, but Houlihan has demonstrated that states actually use a similar range of sports to express cultural distinctiveness (ibid, 124). Nevertheless, traditional sports can still be used to emphasize a nation’s distinctiveness. The promotion of Gaelic sports in 19th century Ireland, for instance, was partly a recovery of existing traditions, but was also used to resist the popularity of English sports and the cultural dominance of England (Houlihan (ibid, 128). According to Arnold (2018, 3) “national sports” that are developed in a given country can grow into symbols of recognition and esteem if they are taken over by other countries. He has argued that this is especially relevant in globalizing societies, where local identities are threatened by global culture.

Cronin (1998, 170-71) has argued that national sports can contribute to creating a national identity, but that the lack of competition with other countries limits national pride. Another interesting study in relation to national or “heritage” sports is Koch’s 2015 study of falconry in the Gulf states, in which she has argued that local elites “have harnessed the global discourse of “heritage” to construct an ethnicized and gendered vision of a primordial Arab homeland” (Koch 2015, 522).

4.2 Sport and nation branding

In another body of academic work, sport is linked to nation branding and image-making on the international stage. Arguably, this links in with the discursive nation-building paradigm of

transnationalism. For instance, competing athletes at international events are often ascribed the ability to “broadcast” their country to international audiences (Koch 2013, 43).

Furthermore, it is argued that a country that is good at sports can present itself as strong and leading in other realms as well (Gorokhov 2015, 273). As sporting success is easy to measure – in medal tables for example – sport provides an ideal opportunity to compare countries to each other (ibid). A concept that is often used in this context is “sporting nationalism”. Sporting nationalism can be generally defined as “a nation’s aspiration to display excellence in sports” (Gorokhov 2015, 270). More specifically, Cho (2009, 349) has defined it as “a nationalist sentiment or ideology that is configured and promoted through sport”.

Koch (2013, 43) has noted that soft-authoritarian regimes like Kazakhstan are more concerned with this kind of nationalism than democratic regimes. As the former fall outside the international order in terms of democracy and liberalism, they use sport as a way to achieve international recognition. Therefore, Koch argues that nation-building through sports can be added to Schatz’s (2009) “soft-authoritarian toolkit”. While sport might seem to be a neutral way to construct national identity, Koch (2013, 49) claims that it is not: while banal signifiers in sport, such as flags, are used to bond citizens to the homeland and the nation, it does not allow them any input, apart from being a passive spectator.

5. Sport and nation building in Kazakhstan: introducing two case studies

As noted in the previous chapter, sport as a way to gain international prestige is especially relevant in soft-authoritarian settings, such as Kazakhstan (Koch 2013, 43). Despite this notion, Koch's article from 2013 is just one of the few articles that has analyzed nation-building in Kazakhstan by focusing on sports. In her study from 2013, she has analyzed the role of Astana Pro Team in the nation-building process, and how ordinary citizens receive this project.

According to Koch (2013, 49) the Astana Pro Team project is representative of the nation-building process in Kazakhstan. This process, she has argued, operates on the basis of a synecdochic relationship, where "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" (Koch 2013, 50). This has led Koch to the conclusion that sport plays a crucial role in the nation-building process in Kazakhstan and in maintaining the regime's legitimacy.

Similarly, Fauve (2015) has argued that Astana Pro Team can be seen as a nation branding project aimed at promoting a broader, global Astana brand. While both authors have recognized the importance of Astana as a means of nation-building, they have not discussed the project in relation to one of the dominant discursive strands. Other sports, such as traditional wrestling, are even less studied in relation to nation-building in Kazakhstan. Petrov (2014, 417) has described how traditional wrestling was used to construct ethnic and national identities "from above" in Soviet times, and how links to the mythological and distant historical pasts of Central Asian nations were added in post-Soviet times to emphasize the nationally unique character. However, Kazakh kures nor nation-building was the focus of his study. As such, there seems to be a gap in the literature.

5.1 Selecting the case studies

The case studies are mainly selected based on the hypothesis that both cases represent different nation-building strategies and promote two very different sides of Kazakhstan. The cyclists of the Astana Team are recruited from all parts of the world, and take part in some of the most prominent global sports events, such as the Tour de France and the Giro d'Italia. Like other professional cycling teams, they are equipped with state-of-the-art bicycles, helmets and sunglasses, which evoke associations with modernity and speed. As such, the

cycling team, dressed in Kazakhstan's national light-blue and yellow colours, seems to represent the modern, outward-looking Kazakhstan of the 21st century. Another reason to focus on Astana Pro Team, is Koch's (2013, 46) argument that Astana Pro Team is representative of the broader nation-building strategies that are pursued in Kazakhstan.

Wrestling, on the other hand, is often associated with attributes like struggle, strength and masculinity. Combined with the traditional-looking suits and attributes that the wrestlers wear on and around the mat, Kazakh kures seems to present an authentic, traditional image of Kazakhstan. The previously mentioned tension between the various paradigms, however, also seems to be represented in this sport itself. This can be illustrated by a photo of president Nazarbayev and wrestler Beibut Ystybayev (Karimkhan 2015). Ystybayev is dressed in a richly decorated traditional suit, wearing a champion's belt and showing the traditional "Taituyak" trophy. Nazarbayev, holding his hand, is dressed in what Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan 2013, 337) have called "the uniform of the post-Soviet technocratic elites": "a well-tailored business suit and clean shaven visage". Additionally, there seems to be tension between the efforts to promote Kazakh kures as a modern, international sport on the one hand, and the efforts to promote it as an ancient, typically Kazakh sport on the other. In the following section the background of the two projects and the role of the regime is sketched.

5.2 Introducing Astana

Astana was founded in 2006 on the initiative of Alexander Vinokourov, one of Kazakhstan's most prominent athletes. Shortly before the 2006 Tour de France, his team Liberty Seguros had lost its sponsors due to a doping scandal and at that moment, Vinokourov turned to Kazakhstan to look for sponsors (Fotheringham 2010). Thanks to Vinokourov's political connections and Kazakhstan's desire to improve its international image, the Astana team was established just before the 2006 Tour de France. Despite the hard work to replace the Liberty Seguros logos with Astana logos, the team was not allowed to start that year as a result of another doping scandal (ibid).

Since then however, Astana has developed into a successful and high-profile cycling team with a group of international and Kazakh riders. Over the years, it employed some of cycling's most prominent names, including Alberto Contador, Lance Armstrong, Oscar

Pereiro, Levi Leipheimer, Fabio Aru, Miguel Angel Lopez and of course Alexander Vinokourov himself.

According to cycling journalist William Fotheringham (2010), one of the distinctive traits of the Astana Pro Team is the fact that it is positioned as a “de facto national team, with a core of Kazakhs on a mission to promote their homeland”. This is not completely unique in cycling however; Euskadi-Euskatel, for instance, functioned as the national team of the Basque country, and only hired riders and staff from the Basque regions in France and Spain. Another exception is the Russian team Katusha, which originated from the Russian Global Cycling Project and laid “special emphasis on promoting Russia as a powerful sports country, one of the leaders of world sports community” (Koch 2013, 46).

The regime’s involvement with the Astana nation-building project is indicated by a number of factors. In 2007, the team was sponsored by Kazakhstan’s rail and air companies, as well as by state-owned mining and oil and gas companies. In 2008, National Welfare Fund Samruk-Kazyna (which also seems to be the main contributor to the Kazakh kures project) became Astana’s main sponsor (Fotheringham 2010). In 2010, Samruk-Kazyna’s estimated expenditure on the cycling team was 15 million GBP (ibid).

The crucial role of the state for the team was also emphasized by Vinokourov: “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. [...] 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.” (Koch 2013, 47).

In 2009, the close ties between the state-owned company and professional cycling in the country were illustrated when Samruk-Kazyna chairman Karim Kalimbetov became head of Kazakhstan’s cycling federation (Fotheringham 2010).

5.3 Introducing Kazakh kures

According to Bromber, Krawietz and Petrov (2014, 392), “sporting traditions in general and forms of “traditional” wrestling in particular”, are sets of social practices “that seek to celebrate and inculcate certain behavioural norms and values, implying continuity with a real or imagined past and are usually associated with widely accepted rituals or other forms of

symbolic behaviour”’. As such, traditional wrestling can be regarded as a construct or an invented tradition.

The extent to which traditional wrestling is constructed is also highlighted by Petrov (2014), who has written the only academic article on Kazakh kures so far. Petrov has studied the traditional Kazakh sport within the broader context of other Central Asian wrestling styles. His study is particularly useful because it has outlined the various transformations of the sport in Soviet and post-Soviet times. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet regime transformed local traditional activities into “national sports” for the purpose of nation-building (Petrov 2014, 407). In most cases, one from among the many local traditional styles that existed in a country was chosen to be structured and organized as a national sport, and attributed with national meaning. Analogous to Hobsbawm’s idea of “inventing traditions”, Petrov (2014, 410) has defined this as a process of ‘selecting traditions’.

In another section, Petrov (ibid, 407) has pointed at the fundamental changes national wrestling styles underwent during the Soviet period. In what he defines as a process of ‘enrichment’ and ‘perfection’, many new moves, holds and rules borrowed from Olympic wrestling and judo were introduced (ibid, 410). Kazakh kures, for instance, was established in 1928 as a belt-wrestling style, but in 1957, rules that obliged the wrestlers to hold the belt were abolished. As a result, Kazakh kures transformed from a belt-wrestling style into a jacket wrestling style. In the same time period, the criteria to win a match gradually changed from making the opponent touch the ground with any part of the body above the knees, to throwing him on the shoulder blades. As a result, Petrov (ibid, 410) noted, the entire concept of the sport was changed. Due to parallel developments in other Central Asian wrestling sports, which used the same sources of enrichment, the sports that were conceptualised as nationally unique became more and more uniform (ibid).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the national kinds of wrestling were, again, used for nation-building and identity construction. Due to the process described above, however, the officials of the newly independent Central Asian states inherited wrestling styles that had become highly similar. But instead of changing the rules again, officials tried to emphasize the uniqueness of their national wrestling styles by changing the discourse surrounding the sports (ibid, 412). Thus, the way of talking about national wrestling and the presentation of the sports changed.

The post-Soviet discourse on Kazakh kures is the focus of the following case study. Petrov (ibid, 412) has noted some general trends, however, that are useful to build upon. A first way in which the narratives on wrestling changed, was the introduction of invented histories, “uncritically drawing upon every available source, making particular use of folklore (epic songs and heroic legends), archaeological finds and medieval images”. A second way to link national wrestling styles to distant historical pasts noted by Petrov (ibid) is using symbolic elements that aim to signify the ancient origin of the style. The last trend Petrov (ibid) notes, is emphasizing the uniquely national character of the styles by changing the outfits of wrestlers and referees.

According to the Kazakh consulate in New York, Kazakh wrestling is one of the most popular forms of combat sports in the country today (Consulate General of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2018). One of the sport’s promoters estimated in 2015 that there were around 120.000 practitioners of the sport (Eskendir 2015). Important tournaments are often broadcasted live on national television for hours in a row (ibid).

Kazakh kures is organised and structured in Kazakhstan by the national (republican) Kazakh Kures Federation (Federation of Kazakh Kures 2018). Most of the major events are however organised by Kazakhstan Barysy, the Kazakh kures Development Foundation (Kazakhstan Barysy 2018). Based on the media coverage in Kazakhstan, “Kazakhstan Barysy”, the Republican competition in name of the President, seems to be the sport’s most prestigious event.

Besides this national competition, international events are regularly held in and outside of Kazakhstan. The most prominent examples hereof are Eurasia Barysy, the Eurasian championship, and Alem Barysy, the world championship for heavyweights, and the World Championship for all weight categories. In 2017, the International Kazakh Kures Federation was founded in Astana (International Federation of Kazakh Kures 2018). This federation is responsible for the organisation of international tournaments, such as world championships, Asian championships and world cups. There is also a World Kazakh Kures Federation, which resides under the United World Wrestling organization, but there is very limited information on this organization (United World Wrestling 2018).

It is difficult to prove to what extent the state is involved in creating the narratives presented through Kazakh kures, but there are indicators that the regime plays an important role in the project and attaches great value to it. Kazakhstan’s Energy Minister Kanat

Bozumbayev, for instance, heads the International Kazakh Kures Federation (Kazinform 2017), and the Minister of Culture and Sport and the mayor of Astana also play major roles in the promotion of the sport. Furthermore, the state has requested the inscription of Kazakh kures on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage, which UNESCO approved in 2016 (UNESCO 2018).

President Nazarbayev is also personally involved with the project. As mentioned before, the prestigious tournament “Kazakhstan Barysy” is held in name of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Kzakhstan Barysy 2015) and Nazarbayev has personally expressed his sympathy for the project. Usually, he awards the trophy to the winner of this tournament (Karimkhan 2015, Kazinform 2015). Nazarbayev’s son in law, Timur Kulibayev is the director of the Confederation of Combat and Power Sports, an organization that oversees the Kazakh Kures Federation and other fighting sports federations.

Another indicator of the state’s involvement is the financing of the project. The main sponsor of the Kazakhstan Barysy tournament, the most prestigious tournament on the calendar, is Samruk-Kazyna, the National Welfare Fund. Samruk-Kazyna was formed in 2008 as the result of a merger between the company that managed Kazakhstan’s state assets, Samruk, and the sustainable development fund, Kazyna. Samruk-Kazyna is wholly owned by the state (Kazakhstan Barysy 2015, Samruk-Kazyna 2018). The amount of money that is involved is arguably reflected in the prizes that are awarded. In 2015, the winner of the President’s tournament won 150.000 USD (Karimkhan 2015), and in 2016, the winner was awarded approximately 63.500 euro, an apartment in Astana and a golden trophy. On the same event, the participant who made the best technique won a brand new SUV (Dyussebekova 2016).

A similar process of recreation and professionalization can be noted in other traditional sports. The game of Kokpar, for instance – a sort of polo with a headless goat – has been modernised and professionalised in recent years. This process included the establishment of federations, the promotion of the sport by government ministers, the introduction of salaries for players and the broadcasting of matches on television (Boast 2017). The importance that is attached to traditional sports is also reflected in the fact that Nazarbayev appointed his nephew Kairat Satybaldy to head the Kazakh Association of National Sports, the organization that oversees Kazakhstan’s traditional games (ibid).

6. Research aim and methodology

The goal of the study is not to declare either project civic, ethnic or transnational, but, in line with what Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan (2013) have argued, to identify diverging tendencies tending towards characteristics in each type, and to demonstrate the fluidity of the discourses related to nation-building promoted by the state (Isaacs 2015, 400). Even though the agency of the state cannot always be directly proven, this thesis accepts the idea that states are the key actors in constructing national identity (Adams 2010, 10). In post-Soviet societies, the role of the state is even stronger, as they have often inherited a monopoly on ideology and the room to communicate alternative discourses is limited (ibid, 6). Thus, this study is less concerned with the acceptance of the nation-building efforts among citizens. Rather, it focuses on the agents of nation-building in these sport projects and tries to connect them to state policies and actors. Nevertheless, in some cases, this study also addresses the way in which nationalist narratives are received, accepted or negotiated by ordinary citizens.

The nation-building strategies are systematically analyzed by looking at the practices, symbolism, performance and narratives that are connected to the two projects, as presented in documents from federations and organizations (such as rules and statutes), interviews with officials, descriptive texts in the media, reports of competitions, photos, and videos. In the case of Kazakh kures, I will occasionally draw from my experience as a participant in international Kazakh kures tournaments in 2004, 2006 and 2008. In the case of Astana, the existing academic literature is also used to link the sport projects to certain nation-building strategies. When examples are given, these examples usually stand for a broader trend. If this is not the case, this is explicitly mentioned.

As there is not much information available in the English language, especially in the case of Kazakh kures, the text sources are selected mainly on the basis of availability. When looking at videos and photos however, language is not an issue. In one case, a Russian-language source is used. Here, someone who speaks Russian has checked if the essence of the text was captured.

Due to the limited availability of sources, no specific time frame is used. The majority of the sources that are used, however, are produced in the period 2010-2018. One of the reasons for this could be that older websites seem to have been replaced by newer ones. In the case of Astana, new management structures that have replaced older ones, possibly

wanted to start with a clean sheet. Due to the limited amount of sources, this study does not claim to be comprehensive or representative. Rather, the results that are presented in this exploratory study can be used as a starting point for further research. In this case, I would suggest a research based on fieldwork or a systematic analysis of Kazakh and Russian language sources.

6.1 Research method

The method that is used to systematically analyze the source material is a qualitative content analysis. This research method typically uses “codes” to organize and group similarly coded data into categories (Saldana 2015, 10). In this case, the codes and categories are deduced from the literature beforehand. The data are grouped together and further examined through an interpretative analysis. Using this approach, this study fits in with other recent studies that have focused on how regimes in Central Asia have created a sense of belonging and identity through “symbolic representations, reinterpretations of myths and broad discursive narratives” (Isaacs 2015, 401).

Based on the literature discussed in the third chapter, three main categories are defined: an ethnic/religious conception of the nation, a civic conception and a transnational conception. The ethnic and religious paradigms are grouped together because there seem to be overlapping elements. As shown in chapter three for instance, the ethnic and religious discourses are both associated with symbols that refer to the past and the steppe, such as yurts and animals.

A second justification for grouping paradigms together is the notion that they are often complementary and transgressive (Isaacs 2015, 400). The three categories that are created here therefore represent three theoretical paradigms. Based on this categorization, it is argued, the diverging strategies that are pursued in Kazakhstan can be distinguished. Of course, the groupings are created as ideal types that can only be used as a means of analysis (Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan 2013, 338). In reality, there is a less strict division between the categories, as they are often used at the same time, and can be both competing and complementary.

6.2 Operationalization

In this section, the main characteristics of each paradigm are discussed and translated into codes that can be used for analysis and further interpretation. The main characteristic of the ethnic paradigm is the promotion of the Kazakh nation over other ethnic groups. This is most notably reflected in the promotion of the Kazakh language, but also in the re-writing of history and the promotion of Kazakh historical figures and the commemoration of the suffering of Kazakh people under Soviet rule (Cummings 2006, 184). Furthermore, the ethno-centrist discourse is associated with rural areas, a glorification of the country's vast territory and its nomadic heritage, the introduction of new national symbols, and the privileged position of ethnic Kazakhs in the state apparatus (Kuzio 2002, 389, Ferret, 2016, 182, Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan 2013, 342).

The ethnic paradigm is grouped together with the religious paradigm, as both are associated with ancient symbols and link Kazakhstan's national identity to the past. The religious conception of national identity is symbolically represented through animals, nomadic symbols, and knowledge of the country's territory (Isaacs 2015, 408, Laruelle 2015, 330).

Based on these notions, the following codes are defined:

1. An emphasis on Kazakh ethnicity and the promotion of the Kazakh nation, also reflected in notions of "Kazakhness"
2. The re-writing of history, references to a distant past, promotion of historical figures and myths
3. The use or promotion of the Kazakh language
4. An emphasis on rural areas and populations
5. References to Kazakhstan's nomadic heritage and the country's vast territory, such as yurts, horses and other animals
6. References to religion, spirituality and holidays

The civic paradigm revolves around the idea of inter-ethnic harmony, and connects Kazakhstan's national identity to characteristics like openness, friendliness and hospitality, and is often seen as an ideology inherited from the Soviets (Isaacs 2015, 406). The civic paradigm is also linked to the use of the Russian language and a connection to urban areas

and cosmopolitans (Surucu 2002, 391), and the idea of Eurasianism, which presents Kazakhstan as a place where European and Asian cultures meet (Laruelle 2014, 8).

Based on these notions, the following codes are defined:

1. An emphasis on Kazakhstan's inter-ethnic composition and multi-national harmony, reflected in the use of the word "Kazakhstani", and an emphasis on friendliness, openness and hospitality
2. Notions of Eurasianism
3. The use of the Russian language
4. An emphasis on urban areas and "cosmopolitan" people

The transnational paradigm is focused on international prestige and connections to the world community (Laruelle 2014, 1). This conception of national identity is reflected in notions of (economic) progress and development and references to the future, and is strongly connected to the idea of nation branding.

Based on these notions, the following codes are defined:

1. A narrative of progress and an orientation on the future
2. An emphasis on international prestige and connections to the world community

7. Kazakh kures: struggling to hold on to the past

This chapter analyzes the different nation-building strategies that are reflected in the project to promote Kazakh traditional wrestling or Kazakh kures through a qualitative assessment of the narratives, symbols, rituals and practices that are used in the sport. The sources are grouped together by using the codes defined in the previous section and further interprets them in the context of ethnic, civic and transnational nation-building.

7.1 Re-writing history and the promotion of historical figures

The ethnic conception of nation-building is most clearly reflected in historical narratives and symbolism that suggests a link with the past. Two historical narratives were found about the history of Kazakh kures, which both seem to demonstrate a large degree of invention. The first account is published by archaeologist Potapov on the National Digital History Portal of Kazakhstan. Potapov traces the history of Kazakh kures back to the middle of the second millennium BC (Potapov 2014). As evidence, he refers to rock paintings that show a particular form of wrestling, which were found in Central Kazakhstan. While Potapov raises the question if it is fair to call this ancient form of wrestling Kazakh kures, he argues that the distinctive characteristics of Kazakh wrestling already emerged in the Bronze Age. According to his narrative, steppe life and the training of warriors on chariots determined the nature of wrestling. The use of chariots forced the warriors to train their balance and master fighting techniques with both hands. As both hands were often occupied to control the chariot and to carry weapons, leg techniques were introduced. According to Potapov (ibid), the requirement to put the opponent on his shoulder blades to obtain a victory was already present in the Bronze Age. Thus, he argues, the main characteristics of present-day Kazakh kures can be traced back to the 16th and 15th century BC. This is remarkable in light of the fundamental changes the sport underwent in the Soviet period, as described by Petrov (2014, 410).

A second, elaborate account on the history of the sport was found on the website of the national Kazakh Kures Federation. The anonymous author draws on different sources to prove that Kazakh wrestling has ancient origins. As an example, he links Kazakh kures to the national games of the Huns that were practiced in the fourth century, but also refers to the history of wrestling in other parts of the world (Federation of Kazakh Kures 2018). According to this narrative, the history of wrestling goes as far back as 3000 BC, a statement the author

supports by pointing at paintings that were found on the tomb of an Egyptian pharaoh. Furthermore, this narrative uses the work of ancient Greek writers, the history of the Maya civilization, and the travel reports of Marco Polo and Ray Gonzales Clavdijo to prove the ancient roots of traditional Kazakh wrestling (ibid).

A more specific link to Kazakhstan is made by referring to the writers Zhansugarov and Musrepov. According to the account of the federation, these writings demonstrate “how traditional wrestling has been an integral part of the nation and lives in the hearts of its people” (ibid). These two different narratives on the sport’s history seem to confirm Petrov’s (2014, 412) observation that the histories on national sports “uncritically draw from every available source”. Other organizations or websites do not go into much detail about the history of the sport, but simply state its ancient roots as a fact. On the website of the international Kazakh kures federation, for instance, the following, concise description can be found: “Kazakh kures is a Kazakh national wrestling, which is one of the ancient sports” (International Federation of Kazakh Kures 2018).

References to the sport’s long history can also be found in match reports. Those accounts often seem to correspond with official narratives, but also draw from other sources. An article on the site Astana News, for instance, opens with the following sentence: “Kazakh kures, or Kazakh wrestling, is an old sport with roots stretching deep into history.” (Eskendir 2015). In the same article, the wrestling style is linked to the Kazakh Khanate, of which the 550th anniversary was celebrated in 2015. Another match report is concluded with a paragraph on the history of the sport: “We notice that Kazakh kures is one of the most ancient sports which history is closely related to the history of the Kazakh nation.” (Karimkhan 2015).

Next to invented histories, the promotion of historical figures, regarded as a marker of ethnic nation-building by Cummings (2006) and Isaacs (2015), is reflected in the narratives on Kazakh kures. The national federation, for instance, links the history of Kazakh wrestling to Balamber, a leader of the Huns who ruled before Attila in the fourth century. According to the author, Balamber used to celebrate successful campaigns with national games that included wrestling (Federation of Kazakh Kures 2018 2018). The same account states that Timur, a nomadic conqueror that ruled over Central Asia in the early 15th century, attached great value to wrestling.

In a video on the UNESCO intangible heritage page, the tale of Tausoghar Baluan is mentioned. He was said to be undefeatable and lifted a mountain to show his strength. In the same video, two wrestlers from the early 20th century are introduced (UNESCO 2018). The first is Baluan Sholak, a skilled wrestler, horse rider, composer, poet, singer and dombra player. Quite similar to the story of Baluan, Sholak is said to have lifted a 830 kg rock. The national sports palace in Almaty, where many kures competitions are held, is also named after Baluan Sholak. The second wrestling legend is Kazhymukan Munaitpassov. According to the video, Munaitpassov became a world champion in wrestling and was known all over the world. Both wrestlers also feature prominently in a promotional video for the Kazakhstan Barysy foundation from 2013 (Kazakhstan Barysy 2013), and President Nazarbayev has named the two as an example for young Kazakh kures practitioners (Karimkhan 2015). It is however questionable if the two wrestlers actually practiced Kazakh kures. In the provided photo and video material, they are only shown practising regular wrestling.

The history of the sport is also emphasized in certain rituals and practices. President Nazarbayev has once stated during an award ceremony: “The traditions to present the Taituyak trophy to the winner of Kazakh kures tournament has really a long history. Our ancestors started it long time ago. According to this tradition, I would like to present this Taituyak trophy to the best wrestler of the tournament.” (Kazinform 2015). The golden Taituyak trophy is just one of the symbolic elements designed to represent the sport’s ancient origins. The symbolism is most notable in the way the sport is presented at events. One example hereof is the clothes that are worn during the events. The women who accompany the wrestlers to the mat often wear traditional clothing that is characterized by lots of embroideries and decorations, and a high, cone-shaped hat. During the opening ceremonies, men in fur clothes and hats often perform traditional rituals, play traditional instruments or fight with traditional weapons. I observed other, anecdotal evidence for the value that is attached to historical costumes. During the banquet after the wrestling competitions, people who had made a valuable contribution to the sport (e.g. establishing a national federation) were awarded traditional costumes and swords.

The outfits of the wrestlers themselves consist of short trousers and a jacket with short sleeves, tied together with either a red or blue band. In the videos of competitions that were analyzed, wrestlers often had an emblem provided by the organisation on the back (e.g. Kazakh Barysy). On the chest, the jackets often showed the Kazakh flag. At the time I

competed in Kazakh kures tournaments myself, the Kazakh eagle and sun were embroidered on the back. The flag has a very ambiguous meaning however. It can be seen as a marker of ethnic identity (as it refers to nomadic symbols and was introduced in the “nationalizing” process) but also as a more neutral symbol that unifies all citizens of Kazakhstan. But no matter how the flag is interpreted, the nationalist character of the wrestler’s uniforms correspond with Petrov’s (2014, 412) argument that outfits can be used to emphasize the nationally unique character of the sport.

Many of the symbols that are used in the discourse of Kazakh kures also refer to nomadism and the steppe. As both of these elements are seen as another marker of ethnic nation-building, they will be discussed in more detail later. It has to be noted however, that the use of symbolism seems much more prominent during the tournaments organized by the Kazakhstan Barysy organisation (Kazakhstan Barysy, Alem Barysy and Eurasia Barysy) than during international competitions such as the world championship. This was concluded after looking at the video material of the different competitions and from personal observations.

In general, it can thus be concluded that narratives, rituals and symbolism are all used to suggest the sport’s ancient roots. These elements are enthusiastically drawn from a variety of sources. Sometimes, scientists are used to give the traditions more legitimacy. At the same time, some of the “authentic” elements are clearly invented, as is demonstrated by the following quote from Kazakhstan Barysy founder Armand Shurayev: “Considering all the wishes of the fans and participants, we plan to hold a big scientific and practical conference, having brought together athletes, trainers, historians, scientists, and ethnographers to accept all together any innovations.” (Wrestling.com.ua 2013)

7.2 Orientation on the future

Besides a strong orientation on the past, the discourse on the Kazakh kures also, to a lesser extent, reflects the idea of a future-oriented, progress-making Kazakhstan that can be linked to the transnationalism paradigm. As stated in the regulations of the 2017 World Championships in Astana, for instance, one of the objectives of the tournament were to realize the “Strategy Kazakhstan-2050”, which is aimed at creating a “modern state for all” (International Federation of Kazakh Kures 2017a, Strategy 2050 2015). How the tournament

could contribute to the modernization of the country is however not further specified in the regulations.

The Strategy 2050 website gives a better insight in this idea. According to a number of articles on this site, traditional activities like Kazakh kures fit within the discourse of modernization of Kazakhstan's national identity, a programme that was recently initiated by Nazarbayev. According to the website Astana Times, the "Rukhani Zhangyru" programme aims to strengthen national identity by "putting a new emphasis on the rich history, both ancient and modern, of our country and its people" (Astana Times 2018). Nazarbayev himself has illustrated this idea with the following words: "Dreaming of the worthy future, let's remember the worthy past" (Strategy 2015, 2017a). The explicit role of Kazakh kures in this context is mentioned by the mayor of Almaty, who has stated: "'Rukhani Zhangyru" programme of the Head of State helps to strengthen the independence through the preservation and promotion of the distinctive culture and traditions of our people. The state will always pay attention to the development of national sports such as [...] Kazakh kures, contributing to the patriotic education of the younger generation." (Strategy 2050 2017) Similarly, the president of the International Kazakh Kures Federation, Kanat Bozumbayev has stated: "Kazakh President Nazarbayev said that modernisation is impossible without national-cultural tradition in the policy article [...] Modernization of Kazakhstan's identity. History and national traditions must be always taken into account. Thus, we are reviving the martial arts of our ancestors." (Tukpiyev 2018)

Paradoxically, the role of Kazakh kures in the modernization process of Kazakhstan thus seems to be to symbolize and emphasize the country's heritage and traditions. Therefore, it can be concluded that a focus on the past is dominant in the discourse on Kazakh kures, and in this sense, it represents an ethnic nation-building course over a transnational one.

7.3 Ethnicity and the role of the titular nation

Another important signifier of an ethnic nation-building course is an emphasis on Kazakh identity and the promotion of titular group over other groups. The term "Kazakh", which some academics see as an indicator of ethnic nationalism, is very prominent in the discourse on traditional wrestling. In its account on the history of the sport, for instance, the national Kazakh kures federation states that, "the history of Kazakh traditional wrestling is closely

connected to the history of evolution of the Kazakh nation” (Federation of Kazakh Kures 2018). In another section, they state that the sport is “a precious heritage of the Kazakhs”.

In this context, it is not clear if the term Kazakh is used to refer specifically to the ethnic group, or is used to refer to anybody from Kazakhstan. In other words, it cannot be proven that federations, officials and reporters use the ethnic “Kazakh” and the “civic” Kazakhstani in the same way scholars do. It is however remarkable that the term “Kazakhstani” is hardly found in the sources related to Kazakh kures.

While this may suggest that an ethnic Kazakh identity was promoted over a more civic understanding of identity, an example that pointed to a more civic course paradigm was also found. Armand Shurayev, the initiator of the Kazakhstan Barysy tournament has stated in this context: “We looked for decades for national projects which would unite and rallied the people. Here Kazakhstan Barysy is one of those ideas that became a driver to increase the number of patriots in our country. It is the international project and it was noticeable on the tournament [...] especially when Maxim Gerber from the Kostanay region acted. He was supported by inhabitants from other regions, in spite of the fact that he is not from among the titular nation. It certainly is the project that unites all Kazakhstan citizens.” (Wrestling.com.ua 2013).

In this context, the term “national project” seems to refer to the state of Kazakhstan instead of the ethnic Kazakh nation, while “international project” most likely refers to the different ethnic nationalities within the country. Here, a multi-ethnic identity is thus promoted. Paradoxically, however, Shurayev emphasizes the fact that the fans supported an athlete who did not belong to the titular nation. This leaves the suggestion open that the event is primarily meant for ethnic Kazakhs, but that citizens of other ethnicities are “allowed to participate”.

7.4 Language

A third signifier of an ethnic nation-building course is the use and promotion of the Kazakh language. It can be argued that the dominant position of the Kazakh language is reflected in the terminology of the sport, as the most important terms used in the sport are of Kazakh origin. The word “kures” for instance, prominently featured in the name of the sport, is a Kazakh word of Turkic origin that literally means “wrestling” or “struggle” (Petrov 2014, 407). On the website of the national Kazakh kures federation, it is emphasized that the word

“kuresh” was already used by the Huns in the fourth century (Federation of Kazakh Kures 2018). “Baluan”, the Kazakh word for wrestler, is another prominent term that is used in most official documentation. It is said that the word is derived from the ancient Turkic word “blbl” meaning “huge” or “strong” (Potapov 2014). Language is also seen as a cultural factor that is closely linked to identity. In one case, this was demonstrated by the promoter of a Eurasian championship, who noted that his event “brought together eight teams from Turkic-speaking countries.” (Eskendir 2015).

In official communication however, Russian and Kazakh seem to have an equal status. The information and documents on the websites of the official federation are available in both languages, and to a lesser extent, also in English. When I requested an interview with the director of the national Kazakh Kures Federation, however, I was told that the interview could only be conducted in the Kazakh language (NB: this is the main reason this interview did not take place). In this case, Kazakh was thus promoted over Russian.

In one other case, however, Russian was prioritized over Kazakh. The official rules of Kazakh kures, which are provided by the international federation in Russian, Kazakh and English, state that when a dispute arises over the meaning of the rules, “only the meaning of the articles provided in the original in Russian will be considered as correct” (International Kazakh Kures Federation 2018a).

While the evidence is very thin, this could suggest that the Kazakh is used in a symbolic way to emphasize the nationally unique character of the sport, but that Russian as the main language in the organisation and governing of the sport.

7.5 Rural areas and people

In a couple of sources, there seemed to be an emphasis on rural areas and populations. With Surucu’s (2002) dichotomy between urban “cosmopolitans” and rural “nationalists” in mind, this could point at a more ethnic conception of nationhood. Promoter Armand Shurayev, for instance, has stated that the Kazakhstan Barysy tournament was “initially positioned as the “social elevator for rural youth” (Wrestling.com.ua 2013). According to him, this strategy has been a success, since in 2013, “all participants of the tournament” were “natives of small auls” (villages).

In another article, Shurayev stated that the Kazakhstan Barysy tournament is specifically aimed at remote parts of the country: “We used to talk about cities where the

sport infrastructure allows people to play any kind of sport. But the particularity of our project lies in the fact that we start from the very bottom, from the villages.” (Witte 2013). Due to this organisational structure, he states, the competition is not only for professional athletes, but also for “non-professionals from the distant countryside”. President Nazebayev has also emphasized the rural character and history of the sport. According to one of his statements, Kazakh kures has been practiced “since early times” by “boys in villages” (Karimkhan 2015).

7.6 Nomadic heritage and territory

As argued by scholars like Ferret and Isaacs, references to Kazakhstan’s nomadic heritage and the country’s vast territory can also be seen as markers of an ethnic nation-building course. In the Kazakh kures project, the references to nomadism are numerous. In the major historical narratives, the emergence of the sport is strongly linked to a nomadic lifestyle. The national Kazakh kures federation has stated on its website for instance: “A nomadic lifestyle prone to being severe has taught the Kazakhs to be brave and strong from the early age. Thus skills in horseback riding, archery and wrestling became equally acceptable for both boys and girls.” Another section states: “Endless steppe which was the major territory of the Kazakhs, households based on the nomadic lifestyle of people and the influence of traditions and customs of the neighbouring states have all contributed to the emergence of several traditional kinds of Kazakh wrestling.” (Federation of Kazakh Kures 2018).

Potapov (2014) of the National Digital History Portal of Kazakhstan also explains the unique character of Kazakh kures by the characteristics of nomadism and steppe life. According to him, the nomadic lifestyle made military training (including wrestling) a must for every man, and not just for professional soldiers. The nomadic influence on the sport is also reflected in Potapov’s following statement: “Nomads knew from childhood that what makes a human a warrior is not a weapon, but the ability to fight in any condition.” (ibid)

Besides the official narratives of federations and history writers, the connection between nomadism and wrestling is also found in news articles and interviews. In one interview, Kazakhstan Barysy promoter Shurmayev stated: “Since ancient times, nomads of the Great Steppe have mastered martial arts, which helped them to survive in an environment of constant conflict and warfare. The 2015 celebration of the 550th anniversary

of the Kazakh Khanate serves to highlight the significance of Kazakh kures in the life of Eurasian nomads.” (Eskendir 2015)

Apart from its prominent role in the narrative on Kazakh kures, nomadic symbolism is frequently used in the presentation of tournaments and competitions. At some tournaments, the wrestlers can be seen entering the mat from a yurt, and at many events, a prominent place in the venue is reserved for one or more yurts. Sometimes, a “shanyrak” is placed in the middle of the round mat. This symbol represents the circular opening at the top of a yurt, and is also incorporated in Kazakhstan’s coat of arms. When seen from above, this symbol makes the mat look like the top of a yurt (Kazakhstan Barysy 2016).

Apart from explicit references to a nomadic lifestyle, the steppe and Kazakhstan’s vast territory play a prominent role in the presentation of the sport. During the opening ceremony of the 2014 and 2015 Kazakhstan Barysy tournaments, for instance, videos of the steppe were shown alongside images of horses and eagles during a performance of traditional music (Kazakhstan Barysy 2015, Kazakhstan Barysy 2016a). Similarly, eagles, wolves and traditional nomadic warriors were shown in the opening sequence of the registration of the Alem Barysy tournament in 2016. For a promotional video of the Kazakhstan Barysy foundation, a group of wrestlers went to the steppe to train and dance (Kazakhstan Barysy 2015).

A similar connotation with animals and the steppe arises from a tradition at the Kazakhstan Barysy tournaments, where wrestlers enter the mat with a wolf’s hide over their shoulder (Kazakhstan Barysy 2015). According to promoter Shurayev, the invented ritual where the winner carries his opponent’s hide like a military trophy, “organically fitted in” with the tournament. The tradition further evolved as bronze medallions with the names of the wrestlers were sewn onto the hides (Wrestlingcom.ua 2013).

The term “barysy”, which plays an important role in the promotion of Kazakh kures (e.g. the Kazakhstan Barysy foundation and its logo, the Kazakhstan and Alem Barysy tournaments), is Kazakh for snow leopard. This rare animal, personally chosen by president Nazarbayev as a symbol of Kazakhstan (Follath and Neef 2010), could be seen as another reference to the country’s territory. In one of his statements, Nazarbayev has connected the animal to the defence of the territory and the need to be physically strong: “However, any time when his freedom, habitation or descendants come to be threatened, the animal would defend them with all his 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.”

(Nazarbayev 1997)

On the other hand, the snow leopard also symbolizes Kazakhstan’s path of progress. Nazarbayev has first used the imagery of the snow leopard in the context of the Kazakhstan 20130 strategy, and stated that, “by 2030, Kazakhstan will become the central Asian snow leopard.” (Follath and Neef 2010). As a marker of progress, the snow leopard could thus also be seen as a marker of a transnational nation-building course.

7.7 Religion, spirituality and holidays

Linking in with a desire to reconstruct the past, it is argued here that references to religion and spirituality can also be seen as marker of an ethnic nation-building strategy. The role of religion is especially interesting, as it could demonstrate the transformations in the Soviet and post-Soviet eras. In the pre-Soviet period, wrestling competitions were mostly held within the framework of festivities and rituals: rituals of the agricultural cycle, feasts of the religious calendar, and life-cycle rituals. In the Soviet period, however, the regime detached the competitions from their connections with religion, rituals and feasts, and created associations with socialist holidays (Petrov 2014, 409). This process of secularisation was reversed in some parts of the post-Soviet era, where wrestling is often re-embedded in Christian, Muslim and Buddhist holidays, and in the context of shamanic or totemic rituals (ibid).

In the case of Kazakh kures, the role of religion seems to have been partially reconstructed as well. In the narratives on the history of the sport, for instance, wrestling is strongly linked to religion. The national Kazakh Kures Federation, for instance, has argued that ancient Kazakhs perceived the strength of wrestlers as “an extraordinary gift they were endowed with by God” (Federation of Kazakh Kures 2018). At the same page, wrestling is linked to the spread of Islam in the region, as one ruler and his entire population reportedly reverted to Islam after one of his strongest wrestlers lost a battle to a Muslim sheikh (ibid).

References to rituals and holidays are also found in the sources. The international federation has stated for instance that Kazakh kures competitions are typically held on holidays and celebrations (International Kazakh Kures Federation 2018), just like in pre-Soviet times. Similarly, Kazakhstan Barysy promoter Armand Shurayev has argued that this tournament is distinctively different from other tournaments because “it is a unique holiday

and it is impossible to call it only sports” (Wrestling.com.ua 2013). The celebratory nature of Kazakhstan Barysy is also emphasized by Shurayev in another article, when he tells how he got inspired by a similar event in Mongolia: “It wasn’t just a regular tournament fight; it was a national, colourful show. [...] The celebration inspired me.” (Witte 2013).

The references to nomadism and animals that were described in the previous section can also be interpreted as links to religion, as Isaacs (2015, 407) has argued that the nomadic spirituality of Tengrism is symbolically represented by elements like yurts and contact with nature.

7.8 International prestige and connections to the world community

The most notable example of a transnational discourse of international prestige and connections to the world community in the context of Kazakh kures, are the efforts to present and promote it as an international sport. According to Petrov (2014, 415), the internationalisation of national wrestling styles was a process that emerged in the 1990s, but really took shape in the early-mid 2000s. Petrov has argued that the internationalization of wrestling styles was aimed at showcasing “national heritage” and gaining both international and domestic prestige.

The various Kazakh kures organisations also joined this trend, and organized various international tournaments from 2005 onwards, including the first World Championship in Almaty in 2006 (Federation of Kazakh Kures 2018). Other World Championships have taken place in Orsk, Russia in 2008 and in Astana in 2010 and 2017. In 2018, European, Asian, Georgian and Polish championships were announced (International Kazakh Kures Federation 2018b, 2018c). International events like this are prominently mentioned on the websites of the national and international federation, and suggest that Kazakh kures is a truly international sport. In this sense, the places where the competitions are held are used to demonstrate the sport’s international popularity, as is shown by the following quote: “The popularity of this martial art is gaining momentum. This can be illustrated by the expanding geography of its tournaments.” (Eskendir 2015) According to this author, this has shown that, “the sport is not only gaining momentum among Kazakh people, but has gone global”.

Another way to emphasize the international character of the sport is referring to the different nationalities of the competitors. Arman Shurayev, promoter of the Kazakhstan Barysy fund, has stated for instance: “ We hold the Eurasia Barysy annually and athletes

from many countries of Europe and Asia enjoy coming to this tournament. In turn, Alem Barysy gathers heavyweight fighters from all five continents of the planet. In most cases, those athletes who came to our tournament are now engaged in the promotion of this form of martial arts at home.” (Eskendir 2015) Another example hereof is found in the announcement of the 2017 Alem Barysy tournament, where it was stated that fighters from over 60 countries would compete in the “colossal event” (Expo 2017 2017). The supposed international enthusiasm for Kazakh kures is also emphasized through the establishment of an International Federation in 2017 and the establishment of federations in other countries, such as Poland (International Kazakh Kures 2018a).

Linking in with the supposed international popularity of the sport, Kazakh officials have expressed the hope that the sport would be included in the Olympic games. President Nazarbayev, for instance, has stated: “I hope that the tournament will reach the international level and become a part of Continental and Olympic Games thereby glorifying our country.” (Karimkhan 2015) On a similar note, promoter Shurayev has called for the inclusion of the sport in the Asian Games, and possibly the Olympics: “If approaching it objectively, our wrestling is no less entertaining to watch than Greco-Roman wrestling, which is included in the Olympic programme. Kazakh kures is not inferior to judo, freestyle wrestling or sambo. I think we have a good chance to at least make it part of the programme of the Asian Games. Then, we will see what will happen.” (Eskendir 2015) In 2017, Kazakh kures did indeed enter the programme of the Asian Games. Therefore, according to the definition of Bromber, Krawietz and Petrov (2014, 392), Kazakh kures can be seen as “modified” form of wrestling: a style that is connected to tradition and antiquity, but also desires to be modern or even Olympic.

Arnold (2015, 3) has argued that when other countries adopt national sports, this can become a symbol of recognition and prestige. This is also reflected in Nazarbayev’s hope that international recognition for the sport would “glorify our country” (Karimkhan 2015). As such, Kazakh kures can be seen as a way of nation-branding and a way to gain international prestige.

On the other hand, Petrov (2014, 415) has noted that the attention for international competitions in national wrestling is far less than the attention for events on a national level. To some extent, this also seems to be the case in Kazakh kures. Photos and videos of competitions show that the Kazakhstan Barysy and Alem Barysy tournaments attract a lot of

spectators, while the interest for the Eurasia Barysy tournament and World Championships seems to be significantly smaller. A video of the 2017 Kazakhstan Barysy tournament, for instance, shows an impressive two-ring sports palace where it is hard to find an empty seat on the stands (Qazsport TV 2017). The photos of the 2017 World Championship on the website of the International Kazakh Kures Federation on the other hand, show the complete opposite: the stands are completely empty, except for three or four spectators per photo (International Kazakh Kures Federation 2017b).

. The limited attention for international tournaments is also supported by my personal experiences as a competitor in two World Championships.

The Alem Barysy tournament for heavyweights seems to be an exception in this case. Observing the audience on Youtube videos, these tournaments seem to attract sizeable audiences (Kazakhstan Barysy 2016). Here, the idea that international competition can serve to increase national pride possibly plays a role. The idea that an Olympic medallist from Cuba participates in the contest, or that a wrestler from Kazakhstan beats a “favourite” from Georgia, probably gives a victory more prestige (Kazinform 2017). On a general level, it can be stated that notions of international prestige are mostly used to increase the sport’s prestige at home, which can in turn serve to increase national pride and support for the regime.

7.9 Conclusion

This case study has shown that the ethnic nation-building paradigm seems to be dominant in the case of Kazakh kures. This is most notably expressed in a strong focus on the past an emphasis on rural communities and references to Kazakhstan’s nomadic heritage. Other, sometimes conflicting narratives that seem to point at a civic or transnational nation-building course, are also reflected in the sources. These alternative narratives are however so ambiguous, that they can be interpreted in different ways. The emphasis on multi-ethnicity for instance, also seems to point at a privileged position for ethnic Kazakhs, while the modernization paradigm seems actually aimed at creating a stronger link with the past. As a final example of ambiguous narratives, the internationalization of the sport seems to be primarily meant for domestic audiences.

8. Astana Pro Team: racing towards a bright future

8.1 International prestige and connections to the world community

Notions of international prestige and connections to the world community, strongly related to the concept of nation branding and the transnationalism paradigm, seem to play a crucial role in the discourse on the Astana Pro Team. As a reminder, nation branding is understood as shaping a country's reputation and the way they are perceived by international public opinion (Kobierecki and Strozek 2017, 697). The efforts are however not only aimed at gaining international prestige, but also serve to strengthen the regime's legitimacy at home (Fauve 2015, 121-122). As a team aimed at putting Kazakhstan on the map, the Astana Pro Team project in its entirety could thus be seen as a nation branding effort. This idea is also confirmed in academic literature (Laruelle 2014, 13, Fauve 2015).

Besides the academic literature, the cycling project is also linked to notions of prestige on the global stage and connectedness to the global community in the primary sources. On the Facebook page of the team, for instance, it is stated that Astana was "created in 2006 to promote the image of Kazakhstan and its capital all around the world and to develop Kazakh cycling on the international level" (Astana Pro Team Facebook 2018). Alexander Vinokourov, who has initiated the team, has also acknowledged the team's role in shaping Kazakhstan's brand: "The Astana team is one of those projects that have huge value for the way our country is seen throughout the world." (Fotheringham 2010) Similarly, Kairat Kalimbetov, the head of Kazakhstan's cycling federation has explicitly stated that the team's mission was to promote the country abroad and inspire its people at home: "Your achievements are important for enhancing Kazakhstan's image worldwide. The cyclists have set a very high standard, which we must all attain." (Fotheringham 2010) One official explicitly spoke of a brand in the context of Astana. Umirzek Shukeyev, who manages the Astana Presidential Club that oversees the Astana team and other high-profile sports projects, said that the Presidential club "will eventually be ranked among such global brands as Real Madrid and Barcelona" (Polonskaya 2013).

In the earlier years of the team, however, the team seems to have been even more explicit in its nation branding strategy than today. In 2008, for instance, the website featured a how-much-do-you-know-about-Kazakhstan quiz (Roth 2009). Today, the most direct link to Kazakhstan seems to be the slogan "The most beautiful sun in the most blue sky in the

world” (Astana Pro Team 2018). A similar development can be seen in the design of the team jerseys. In earlier years, the shirts in national colours were decorated with the Kazakh flag, whereas today, the light-blue and yellow shirts show a stylized version of the eagle’s wing on the flag. The flag is however different to interpret in the relation to specific kinds of nationalism.

Besides a marketing instrument aimed at international audiences, the flag seems to carry a multiplicity of meanings, and seems to fit in with all three of the paradigms. On the one hand, it can be perceived as a signifier of ethnic identity, as the flag was introduced shortly after independence and refers implicitly to nomadism (Ó Beacháin & Kevlihan 2013, 342, Ferret 2016, 182). On the other hand, it could be seen as a banal, neutral (if not in the political sense) symbol of the nation, which has the ability to unite all people of the country and bond them to the state and its territory (Koch 2013, 49).

Considering the explicitly formulated mission to brand Kazakhstan on the global stage, which is also confirmed by scholars as being part of nation branding strategy, this seems to indicate that Astana fits within the transnational nation-building paradigm. The idea that the team effectively promotes Kazakhstan’s image on the international stage is not only expressed by officials and scholars, but is also shared by common citizens. In the focus group interviews held by Koch (2013, 47), people were cited saying, “now the whole world knows us” and similar expressions.

8.2 Progress and orientation on the future

Strongly related to notions of international prestige and the transnationalism paradigm, are notions of progress and an orientation on the future. In this context, Koch’s (2013, 43) idea of developmental regimes is useful. Seeking recognition in other spheres than democracy or liberalism, “developmental” regimes are preoccupied with progress, which should always be measured in relation to other states. Sport, Koch has argued, is often used as a way to demonstrate development. As an “outward-looking” project initiated by elites with connections to the government, the Astana project as a whole can be seen as a way to show Kazakhstan’s path of progress to the world (ibid).

The way performances in sport are linked to the development of the entire country is also illustrated by the following words on the site of the Astana team: “These are only the first steps of a long way development of professional sport in Kazakhstan. Every time when

we see our athletes on the honour pedestal, it strengthens the image of the country and serves as an enormous constructive impulse for the future.” (Astana Pro Team 2018) As such, these notions of progress and future seem to correspond with the transnational nation-building paradigm.

8.3 Ethnicity

In his 2010 study on professional cycling and national identity in Italy, Cardoza (2010, 359) has noted that the fame and appeal of cycling stars has the ability to “cut across the divisions of class, region and ethnicity”. As such, cycling seems to fit in with the civic nation-building course, which understands national identity as being inclusive, and based on citizenship. The fact that Astana Pro Team was built around the ethnic Russian Alexander Vinokourov is telling in this context. After his silver medal at the 2000 Olympics, Vinokourov was received as a national hero by President Nazarbayev and was awarded a captain’s rank in the national army (Fotheringham 2010). According to Koch (Koch 2013, 47), Vinokourov is known as a “staunch nationalist” and “tends to frame his career decisions in the language of nationalism”. However, Vinokourov has lived in France since the mid 90s, and Koch (ibid) has argued that this shows how Vinokourov’s “ambiguous territorial presence and citizenship are overlooked in the political deployment of his success”. It can also be argued however, that his status as Kazakhstan’s star athlete has demonstrated a more civic conception of national identity in Kazakhstan, as his status as hero of Kazakhstan is primarily built on his citizenship, rather than ethnicity or territorial presence.

The fact that foreign cyclists are hired to “fly the national flag” is also telling. According to Koch (2013, 47), who has held focus group interviews in Kazakhstan, the team’s international roster did not prevent Kazakhstanis from seeing Astana as “our” or “the national” team. When the Spaniard Alberto Contador won the Tour de France in 2010, for instance, a common remark was that “we” or “Kazakhstan” had won the Tour de France (ibid). Some members of the international roster have also recognized that they did not just ride for a commercial team, but represented the country. Former team manager Johan Bruyneel has stated for example that, “it is a true honour for every rider and staff member to represent Kazakhstan” (Roth 2009).

On a deeper level, foreign riders are even said to represent certain characteristics of Kazakhstani identity, which is built on multi-national harmony. This is for

instance expressed in the words of the Minister of Sport, Mukhamediuly: “Successful performance of the team during the Tour de France is evidence that the Astana team headed by Vincenzo Nibali demonstrates good results and, first of all, of the team spirit that characterizes truly multinational unity of Kazakhstan.” (Nurbekova 2014) The emphasis on multinational unity can be seen as another signifier of the civic notion Kazakh identity.

The term “Kazakhstani”, another marker of civic nation-building found in academic literature, is also found in the discourse on the team (as opposed to the discourse on Kazakh kures). President Nazarbayev, for instance, has called one of Vinokourov’s victories “a wonderful present to all Kazakhstanis” (Akorda 2012). In another speech, he mentioned that cycling is a very popular sport among Kazakhstani youth. The term “Kazakh”, linked to ethnic national identity in academic articles, is however used as well in the context of Astana. In a recent article, both the team manager and another official refer to “Kazakh riders” while it is not clear if they refer to ethnic Kazakhs or simply riders from Kazakhstan (Abdrakhmanov 2017). The use of the term Kazakhstani in relation to Astana Pro Team is still relevant, as it was not found in the discourse on Kazakh kures.

Kazakh ethnicity, linked to the ethnic paradigm, does however also play a role in the context of Team Astana and is sometimes unconsciously emphasized. As noted before, sport is not always a unifying factor, but has the ability to emphasize ethnic and class disparities. This is also the case in Kazakhstan, where the fact that ethnic Russians dominate elite sports is often seen as a marker of the second-class position of ethnic Kazakhs (Koch 2013, 49). The role of Kazakh ethnicity was also highlighted in Koch’s focus group interviews. Here, people remarked that Vinokourov is “not Kazakh”, but is a “patriot” that represented ethnic Kazakhs (ibid). Thus, instead of unifying people through a civic sense of nationhood, the Astana project also highlights the issue of ethnicity. The under-representation of athletes from ethnic Kazakh descent is however a sensitive issue that is rarely openly discussed, as it touches the nationality question and could be perceived as critique on the Nazarbayev regime (ibid).

Due to the previously mentioned uncertainty about the meaning of the word Kazakh, it is hard to determine the role of Kazakh ethnicity in primary sources. For instance: when Amanbek Kulchikov, the Executive Director of the Presidential Sports Club, stated that “Next year, Astana’s Tour de France lineup will be half-Kazakh” (Abdrakhmanov 2017), this could mean that special attention would be paid to ethnic Kazakhs, but it could also mean Kazakh

in the civic sense of the word. Overall, this examination of ethnicity in relation to the Astana Pro Team thus seems to point at a dominance of the civic paradigm.

8.4 Language

In the civic paradigm, a dominance of the Russian language is expected. At first glance, however, the status of Russian, Kazakh, and English seems to be equal in the official communication of the Astana Pro Team. The team's official website, for instance, is available in three languages. On the social media channels, however, English seems to be dominant over Russian and Kazakh. Among the 39 videos that were published in the last year, for instance, only three were in Russian, and more significantly, none was in Kazakh. On the Instagram account, a similar pattern can be noted, with most messages published in English, some in Russian and none in Kazakh.

In some cases however, the Kazakh language is actively promoted. One video on the team's Youtube channel, for instance, is entitled: "Want to visit EXPO 2017 in Astana? Learn to speak Kazakh with the Astana Pro Team!" (Astana Pro Team 2016) This title suggests that anyone who wants to visit Expo 2017 – another nation branding effort by the government – should be able to speak Kazakh. However, the video introduces only the most basic words, such as "hello", "good", "thank you", and "goodbye". The way in which the words are taught however, mostly by foreign riders, suggests that they do not even speak Kazakh themselves. Therefore, the use of Kazakh seems to be merely symbolic and more of a marketing gimmick.

8.5 Urban areas and cosmopolitanism

As opposed to the rural nationalists that were found in the ethnic paradigm, the civic paradigm is more associated with urban areas and cosmopolitans. In the case of Pro Team Astana, this link is most clearly made by its name, which is lent from the country's capital city. Other references to urban areas, most notably Astana, can be found on the team's Youtube channel. The most watched video (87.000 views) on the channel provides a significant example. This video has nothing to do with cycling but is actually a promotional video for the Expo 2017 world exhibition in Astana (Astana Pro Team 2016). Thus, instead of cycling, this video showcases the modern character and monumental architecture of

Kazakhstan's capital, which in itself is often seen as a prime example of Kazakhstan's transnational nation-building course and the country's nation branding efforts.

The modern image of the city Astana is also highlighted in other videos. The presentational video of the 2015 (Astana Pro Team 2015) season for instance, opens with spectacular shots of some of the city's most famous buildings and monuments. In another video, stunt rider Vittorio Brumotti is followed as he rides through the city and performs spectacular stunts against the backdrop of the capital's spectacular buildings. Recurring symbols in this video are the Kazakh flag and the "I love Astana" monument, which can also be perceived as symbols of nation branding (Astana Pro Team 2017).

8.6 Re-writing history

Besides the clear orientation on the future that was shown in a previous section, the sources also show references to the past. In contrast to the case study on Kazakh kures, however, references to the ancient past are rarely seen. One of the few exceptions is a video on the team's Instagram channel dedicated to the national holiday Nauryz. This video shows Astana riders and ordinary people doing what, according to the text, a typical Kazakhstani does on this holiday: "Dress up, visit close people, eat national dishes, play national musical instruments and keep wishing well." (Instagram 2018) Accordingly, the riders are shown eating big pieces of meat and playing the dombra, a typical Kazakh string instrument. The scenes of the riders are interchanged with images of people performing traditional dances in authentic clothes, a falconer, and children playing around a yurt. The video ends however with images of the Astana riders on their bicycles and victory podiums. Thus, as this is one of the few videos that refer to a distant, pre-Soviet past, it seems as if modern imagery is added to balance the image. This video is also one of the rare references to holidays and rituals found in relation to Astana Pro Team.

Another rare example of references to a distant past can be found in the video of the team presentation of 2013. On this event, the riders posed with women in traditional clothes and men dressed like nomadic warriors. The riders themselves however, are shown in modern cycling gear, and later on in suit and tie (Astana Pro Team 2012). As such, the dominant narrative of a modern and future-oriented team was not conflicting with the traditional images.

The sources on the Astana team also show references to the not so distant past. This could be significant, as references to the Soviet Union were hardly found in the context of Kazakh kures. One example hereof is Alexander Vinokourov's claim that Kazakhstan's current success in cycling results from the cycling tradition that was established in the days of the Soviet Union (Fotheringham 2010).

Another link to the recent past can be seen in a photo session that pictures the "Astana management in retro style" (Astana Pro Team 2018a). Here, Vinokourov and other managers are pictured in black-and-white on old bicycles and retro outfits. While this is not a direct link to the Soviet past and it is not clear what the team wants to communicate with these images, the 1950s-style photographs arguably evoke strong associations with the time of the Soviet Union. The Soviet past is less challenged in the civic paradigm than in the ethnic paradigm, where the sufferings under Soviet rule are emphasized. The Soviet past is less controversial to ethnic Russians and other ethnicities, and is the time where the friendship among peoples was established. Therefore, the links to the Soviet past seem to link in more with the civic paradigm.

8.7 Territory

References to Kazakhstan's vast territory are often found in the discourse related to the Astana cycling project. This is quite surprising, as references to the steppe and the territory were coded as markers of ethnic nation-building. It can be noted, however, that the territory is used in a different way than in the context of the Kazakh kures project. Alexander Vinokourov, for instance, sees the country's landscape as one of the factors that have contributed to Kazakhstan's success in cycling: "We have the countryside and the climate you need to progress. We have everything: flat roads, high mountains, fine roads." (Fotheringham 2010) In this case the landscape is thus not mentioned to make a connection to the ancient past or religious practices, but rather to emphasize its favourable conditions for cycling and the modernity of the country's infrastructure. As such, this reference to the territory seems to fit in more with the transnational paradigm than with the ethnic one.

In this context, it is notable that Astana Pro Team's cyclists mainly race abroad. Koch (2013, 46) has argued in 2013 that the reason that Kazakhstan does not host international cycling events is that this would show "extremely unflattering views of the country and the state of its infrastructure" on television. Since 2013 however, Kazakhstan is home to an

annual international cycling event, the Tour of Almaty (Expo 2017, 2015). In 2017, another international race was held in Astana in honour of the Expo 2017 (Expo 2017, 2017a). As these are one-day events however, the organisation can control exactly what they want to broadcast. The territory of Kazakhstan is also highlighted in some training and racing videos on the team's Youtube channel. This can hardly be considered significant however, as the channel shows far more videos of the riders racing through spectacular landscapes in Europe and other parts of the world.

The symbolic use of animals living on Kazakhstan's vast territory is also reflected in the discourse on the Astana Pro Team. The Kazakh ambassador to France, Erlan Idrissof, for instance, has compared Vinokourov to a snow leopard, Nazarbayev's favourite symbol. In the same speech, Idrissof said about Vinokourov: "He is called a dark horse by the media. For the Kazakhs, this is a good thing. In our culture, horses symbolise independence and strength." Again, it is probable that these references have a different meaning in the context of the Astana Pro Team than in the context of Kazakh kures. In the latter context, horses and snow leopards are not used to symbolize a connection to the nomadic heritage or the country's religious roots, but to signify strength, independence and progress.

8.8 Conclusion

This case study has demonstrated that a paradigm of transnationalism seems to be the dominant nation-building strategy reflected in the Astana cycling project. This is mainly suggested by the notions of progress, orientation on the future and international prestige. This conclusion is also supported by academic literature, which has defined the Astana project as a nation branding effort. However, elements of civic nation-building were also quite prominent in the sources. These elements were most notable in issues like language, ethnicity and an emphasis on urban areas. This is not surprising as the civic and the transnational paradigms are sometimes overlapping and often complementary.

The ethnic paradigm is however reflected in the sources as well. It is for instance expressed by the promotion of the Kazakh language, references to the past, and references to the country's territory. However, some of these notions of ethnic identity seemed to be more of a symbolic nature, and others were used in a different way than in the case of Kazakh kures.

9. Conclusion

This analysis of two of Kazakhstan's influential sport projects has demonstrated the complex nature of nation-building in post-Soviet Kazakhstan. The narratives in the sport projects seem to reflect the elite-led nation-building process in Kazakhstan, and can thus serve to prove how the regime "imagines" the nation. Since independence, the ruling regime has pursued diverging nation-building strategies, of which the most prominent are related to three discursive paradigms, based on an ethnic conception of national identity, a civic one and a transnational one. The diverging narratives are often seen as a heritage from the period shortly after independence, when the Kazakhs composed only 40 percent of the population and there were fears for secessionist movements. The ethnic paradigm promotes the ethnic foundation of the nation and prioritizes the titular Kazakh nation over other ethnicities. The civic paradigm is based on inter-ethnic harmony and characteristics like friendliness and hospitality. The transnational paradigm, which emerged in the 2000s, is focused on international prestige, which is in turn used to increase the regime's legitimacy at home.

The case studies have shown that all three of those strategies were reflected in the sport projects. The analysis of the wrestling project has suggested that an ethnic conception of national identity was dominant, while the analysis of the Astana cycling team hinted at a dominance of the civic and transnational paradigms. The fact that both sport projects prioritized different nation-building objectives, seems to confirm the argument that diverging courses are pursued as a form of "strategic ambiguity".

Besides the dominant paradigms found in the two projects, the fluidity of nation-building and national identity in Kazakhstan was also reflected in the narratives, symbolism and practices of each project. The analyzed elements were often ambiguous, sometimes complementary and sometimes conflicting. The tension that is prevalent in Kazakhstan's nation-building process was mainly expressed in the conflicting narratives in relation to ethnic and civic conceptions of the nation. It seems therefore logical for the regime to focus on the transnationalism discourse. As this paradigm is closely linked to the persona of president Nazarbayev, who is often portrayed as the father of the nation, the question remains how sustainable such a course would be.

As an exploratory work, this study has noted trends in the available source material. Further research would be needed to find out if these trends are truly representative of both

projects. Furthermore, a comparative study could be conducted to analyze if Kazakhstan is unique in this case.

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