



Sport and soft authoritarian nation-building

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A B S T R A C T

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

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Introduction

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

generally, is that it allows ordinary people to see their support for the 'nation' as something 'objective,' i.e. detached from the deeply political system that is the condition of its possibility.

The soft authoritarian toolkit

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

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

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

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

For these reasons, I propose to add a sixth tool to Schatz's (2009) soft authoritarian toolkit: the leadership sets in motion a nation-building project that successfully links the people to a homeland (territorial bonding) and to the state (statist bonding). Adding this sixth element challenges us to take a less elite-centered approach to understanding authoritarian regime resilience, insofar as it assumes a key role of the general population in the practices of state-building project. As Schattschneider (1975: 2) once observed about the nature of politics, the 'audience' (here the disenfranchised and thus seemingly 'passive' citizenry) "is never really neutral." Although nation-building strategies may be initiated by elites or 'ethno-political entrepreneurs' (Brubaker, 2004), nationalist projects rapidly become a broader social force as they take on meaning and material significance for ordinary people, for whom they become instrumental to performing and reasoning about one's self and one's role in the world (Billig, 1995; Brubaker, 2004). At its core, an effective nationalist project abstracts various feelings, desires, and motivations to a geographical imaginary of the 'state' as an 'objective,' 'natural' territorial entity. This allows people to see their actions as supporting something beyond the elite, who have captured (constructed) the 'state' and its territorial and social body (Gramsci, 2008). Thus, when people come to interpret their own actions as supporting some broader, moral order (like nationhood or statehood), these actions are likely to support authoritarian state–society relations, regardless of the fact that this frequently entails supporting their own subordination.

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

Democratic Republic (Grix, 2008), fascist Italy (Cardoza, 2010), and the Soviet Union (Keys, 2003) – but Gagen (2004) also notes a similar theme in physical education reform in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Where sport is appropriated by nationalist agendas, ideological narratives are mapped onto the bodies of citizens (of the masses and/or world-class athletes) and 'broadcast' for international consumption. Nationalism in general is an international ideology (Billig, 1995), but as the sixth tool of the soft authoritarian toolkit, it tends to be more strongly articulated through the language of international 'prestige' and 'ranking,' when other sources of legitimacy are lacking. In this article, I will give the example of Kazakhstan, where the Nazarbayev regime has made ample use of the strategy of promoting sport as a means to simultaneously increase nationalist sentiment and international prestige (and thus popular legitimacy). Through this discussion, in which I jointly consider elite and popular practices and discourses, I aim to provide a fuller answer to the question posed above by Ed Schatz (2009: 203): "what allows a nondemocratic system that does not rely centrally on coercion to perpetuate itself?"

Sport and transnational image-making

Large-scale sporting events like the Olympics or the World Cup have long been ascribed the symbolic power to put a place 'on the map' (Eisinger, 2000; Maennig & du Plessis, 2009; Modrey, 2008; Müller, 2011; Ren, 2008). Athletes' performances at international events have also historically been framed as a way for a nation to 'broadcast' itself to the world (Cardoza, 2010; van Hilvoorde, Elling, & Stokvis, 2010; Hobsbawm, 1990; Jutel, 2002; Wong & Trumper, 2002). Success at international sporting events frequently factors into nationalist myths, as well as their performance in geopolitical 'primacy' narratives (Agnew, 2003). During the Cold War, for example, sporting victories were seen as advertisements for the superiority of the political system that produced the athletes, ostensibly working to win support for communism or capitalism elsewhere in the world (Caldwell, 1982; Keys, 2003; Riordan, 1991, 1999). In the USSR, so important was success that "Soviet sportsmen were not permitted to enter into international competition without reasonable expectations of victory" (Caldwell, 1982: 182). Yet the notion of sporting events being a dimension of states' international 'self-promotion' raises a number of questions about precisely who is broadcasting what, to whom, and why.

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

Where other channels have been closed, success in sport would seem to have helped such countries as the USSR, China, Cuba and the GDR as well as many other states of the developing world to attain a measure of recognition and prestige internationally, both at home and abroad. The German Democratic Republic is perhaps the prime example. Boycotted for so long by

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