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NATION BRANDING: AN INSTRUMENT OF SOFT POWER OR NATION-BUILDING?
THE CASE OF KAZAKHSTAN

ҰЛТТЫҚ БРЕНДИНГ: ЖҰМСАҚ ҚУАТ НЕ ҰЛТ-ҚҰРЫЛЫС ҚҰРЫЛҒЫСЫ?
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Abstract

Nation branding is a process by which countries seek to create an attractive image and manipulate its external perception. The process of branding a nation involves a broad array of activities from an advertisement on TV and journals to much more extensive public diplomacy initiatives. In effect, since it deals with international positioning and perception of a state, nation branding is often referred to as an effective soft power building tool. At the same time, however, nation is a complex political and social construct that can hardly be branded as a usual commercial product. Indeed, nation branding is inherently intertwined with the political discourses within the state, and in the case of Kazakhstan, the enthusiastically implemented branding initiatives took place in the backdrop of the post-Soviet nation-building efforts of the government.

In this thesis, I have critically examined Kazakhstan's nation branding efforts mainly controlled and implemented by the government. This has been done by analyzing the content of the official documents as well as interviewing civil servants, experts, and individuals that have been directly engaged in the branding processes. In doing so, I argue that nation branding in the context of Kazakhstan serves as both a soft power-enhancing and nation-building tool of the state. By depicting Kazakhstan as a progressively developing, forward-looking and peaceful country with a rich history, the state elites seek to position the country as a legitimate international player. But also, such an image is fully consistent with the internal state narrative on nation-building thus allowing the state elites to reproduce and consolidate their vision of the nation and path of its development.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Nation branding is a comparatively new academic field that combines a broad range of disciplines including but not limited to marketing, international relations, and psychology. It mainly deals with the development and promotion of a country's image to draw the attention of foreign audiences and increase its commercial and political influence (Anholt 1998). Today, an increasing number of states employ nation-branding initiatives not only to attract investments and tourists but also to position themselves as legitimate members of the international system (Cull 2018). Certain images of states exist irrespective of whether or not they engage in branding activities; however, if not controlled and managed by the government, those images are likely to be based on erroneous stereotypes and ultimately have negative repercussions for the states (Papadopoulos and Heslop 2002). Indeed, as the Borat incident in 2005 demonstrated, when states, particularly developing and newly independent ones, do not take care of their images, they virtually allow others to create and convey whatever images they want (Saunders 2005). As such, nation branding largely functions as an advertisement - by first raising awareness of the nation, the governments seek to attract people and ultimately to influence their perception of the nation (Dinnie 2015). In this regard, it is closely related to the notion of soft power and often perceived as an effective strategy to enhance the latter.

Yet, at the same time, it is questionable whether it is possible to brand a nation just as any other commercial product and, thus, the process of branding inevitably brings up various questions related to the nature of the projected image as well as those involved in the process. Indeed, by engaging in nation branding, a state is virtually saying what it is, and in many cases, what it is not. Thus, although being perceived as a mainly outward-oriented practice, nation branding strategies often highlight distinctive narratives of nation-building (Jordan 2014). In the process of creating a particular country image, state leaders convey a specific vision of

what their nations represent and disseminate this amongst their citizens through their statements, addresses, interviews as well as within the media; thereby creating and imposing, from above, in Benedict Anderson's (1983) term, an "imagined community" amongst the population. Hence, nation branding activities are closely intertwined with the process of nation-building in that it articulates what constitutes national identity and how it is understood.

In this thesis, I will focus on the enthusiastic nation branding practices of Kazakhstan and critically examine what image is being projected and how it is linked to nation-building within the country. The case of Kazakhstan is particularly interesting, given that while older states possess firmly established national images at both domestic and international levels, many newly emerged states, including those produced as a result of the dissolution of the USSR and Yugoslavia in 1991, faced "a double challenge" (Saunders 2017, 45). Indeed, in addition to transmitting the country image to other actors of the international system, this young state had to clearly articulate a cohesive national image within the borders of the state through determination of a national identity accepted by the great majority of the population.

By examining Kazakhstan's numerous nation branding initiatives, I argue that, in Kazakhstan, nation branding serves not only as an instrument to construct and manage the country's international perception but also as an important part of the state elites' nation-building practices reinforcing their domestic legitimacy. All the image-building initiatives of the country are mainly controlled by the government and they have been taking place in the wider context of the post-Soviet nation and identity building. In fact, by depicting Kazakhstan as a progressively developing, forward-looking and peaceful country with a rich history, the state elites seek not only to position the country as a legitimate international player but also these efforts reflect major aspects of the internal discourse on nation-building. That is, in addition to producing and transmitting a positive and recognizable image to the world community; by conveying "values and identity narratives" to citizens within the country

(Browning 2015, 196), nation branding practices are inherently linked to the nation-building efforts of the Kazakhstani government. To demonstrate this, I have analyzed the official governmental documents such as Kazakhstan – 2030, Kazakhstan - 2050, Foreign Policy Concept 2014-2020, Rukhani Zhangyru 2017, as well as the documents on separate branding initiatives. Moreover, by drawing on the interviews with the government officials and people that were directly engaged in the process of implementation of certain branding initiatives, I have discussed the factors significantly undermining the potential of the Kazakhstani nation brand and their implication for both international and domestic legitimacy of the state.

The thesis proceeds as follows. In Chapter 1, I will discuss the existing literature on national images and the practice nation branding by emphasizing both international and domestic implications of the practice. Next, I will introduce the research questions and the chosen research methods to answer them. The following Chapter 2 will cover the theoretical framework of the research by addressing the relationship between nation branding, soft power, and nation-building before applying it to the close examination of the case of Kazakhstan. After that, in Chapter 3, based on the interviews and the content analysis of the documents, I will discuss the three major elements of the Kazakhstani brand, such as (1) multiculturalism and peace; (2) innovation and education; (3) and the unique Kazakh history and culture, and demonstrate that they are fully consistent with the complex and ambiguous nation-building efforts internally. Moreover, these elements of the image serve to symbolize the successful development of the country, which, in turn, is continuously linked to the wise and future-oriented regime leaders. I will then move to the discussion of the limitations of the Kazakhstani brand by particularly focusing on the issues of corruption and governance in Chapter 5. And, finally, after providing some policy recommendations, the conclusion will summarize the findings

Chapter 2. National image and the rise of nation branding

National image refers to an array of associations that comes to mind when a particular country is referenced. It persists only when a major proportion of humanity agrees on a particular set of characteristics that allow differentiating a certain state from another. National image is a complex construct formed by various factors such as a country's "geographical position, history, proclamations, art and music, famous citizens and other features" (Kotler and Gertner 2002). That is, as Saunders (2017, 13) broadly defines it, "national image is a fluid, socially constructed view of a nation that exists on both the domestic and foreign levels." A country's image, and hence reputation, is argued to have a significant influence on international relations and is employed as an important instrument for achieving a state's foreign policy objectives. Indeed, as Joseph S. Nye (1991) famously claims, the country's ability to project a positive image allows promoting its interests through the attraction. At the same time, the way others perceive a country inherently affects its citizens' perception of their own nation and identity (Rusciano 2003). As O'Shaughnessy (2003, 196) states, "a national image is not just for external consumption, as it can be used to infuse a nation with a sense of pride that helps unite it. The promotion of national image can help generate a sense of solidarity with others". That is, national reputation is not only a significant aspect of alliance-building and even has implications for international conflict and peace, but also, is a source of national pride binding the domestic population together.

Moreover, due to the proliferation of new information technologies and increasing economic interdependence, the national image seems to matter more than ever. Indeed, it is now a significant element of contemporary diplomacy, and governments pay growing attention to their images by seeking to manipulate the way they are perceived globally. This, in turn, gave rise to a new field of research, namely nation branding, that focuses on the management

of national image through various public diplomacy initiatives and branding campaigns. By employing marketing and brand management tools, many countries are now striving to shape, change, and protect their images. Nation branding, hence, implies commodification of national image and attempts to turn it into a “profitable asset” “a competitive identity” (Aronczyk 2013, 3; Anholt 2007).

Over the last two decades, the importance of nation branding has widely been recognized with many countries engaging in branding campaigns that often involve slogans such as “Malaysia: Truly Asia”, “Incredible India”, “Amazing Azerbaijan” and the most popular being “Cool Britannia” (van Ham 2008, 133). Moreover, this trend has entailed the emergence of an industry of nation branding companies offering states attractive brand creation services, while various nation brand metrics (such as Future Brand Country and Nation Branding Index) provide measurements and comparisons of different national brands, thereby presenting how well countries are performing in the global branding contest. Although closely related, the notion of national “brand” is different from that of national “image”. National images typically refer to perceptions randomly formed in the minds of individuals based on their particular associations and information about a country. That is, the image of nations can be developed without those nations’ awareness via “a myriad of different sources, such as word of mouth, education, mass media, travel, product purchases and dealing with its people” (Loo and Davies 2006, 198). National brands, in turn, are the result of strategically planned and deliberate activities directed at specific audiences.

Moreover, branding activities are different from general advertising campaigns seeking to attract tourists by portraying pictures of beautiful scenery, friendly and welcoming people, and tasty food, in that they seek to generate some kind of emotional attachment to a place or product (van Ham 2001). This difference is reflected in how some consumers are more concerned with brands than the actual product since the brand is often associated with a certain

way of life. Similarly, by branding itself, a state seeks to produce some kind of emotional connection to a nation and its values (culture, policies, and so on). Successful branding efforts are perceived to stimulate economic development by increasing the amount of foreign direct investments, attracting visitors, and promoting exports while lacking a nation brand is argued to be one of the causes of economic backwardness in an era of globalization (Dinnie 2008). As such, most of the academic literature on nation branding focuses on questions such as how to create a successful national brand as well as when and why brands fail to accomplish the given tasks (Anholt 2008). Since the concept of nation branding has its roots in business and marketing fields, the emphasis on such types of questions is not surprising. However, while nation branding seeks to develop a national image by employing marketing theory and strategies originally designed to promote corporations and products, Aronczyk (2013, 10) warns that “the nation is still the container for rights and claims that are not yet possible at other levels of organization”. Hence, a general conclusion is that nation branding attempts often fail to succeed because policymakers rarely recognize that the process of branding a nation is distinct from and far more complex than branding products for the marketplace (Moilanen and Rainisto 2014, 1).

The emergence of nation branding and the wide engagement of growing number of states in branding activities also raise questions concerning deeper political implications of nation branding, such as to what extent the advent of nation branding indicates and reflects the changing nature of the international environment (Browning 2015, 196). Hence, political science and international relations scholars note that branding a nation is not solely about creating an image, but it also involves broader issues of identity and recognition in an international setting where being unknown and ‘invisible’ is perceived to be essentially problematic. Indeed, the fact that states are increasingly spending governmental resources and using the services of international branding companies demonstrates that for state leaders

image matters. The important questions, hence, are why and how. In this regard, Peter van Ham (2001, 4) claims that the rise of nation branding indicates “a shift in political paradigms, a move from the modern world of geopolitics and power to the postmodern world of images and influence”. In such a context, caring about the nation's reputation and strategically managing its image is ultimately driven by the desire to promote national interests in the international arena (van Ham 2001; Wang 2008). Moreover, as Aronczyk (2013) argues, although nation branding is largely associated with some material benefits, many states engage in image-building activities to demonstrate to the world that they are “normal” and that they “work”. This is especially the case for small and newly independent states that seek to overcome the issue of international ignorance. As Jordan (2013) argues, by constructing and projecting a certain image, states seek to set themselves in a broader geopolitical setting as a legitimate entity of the international system. That is, the states’ status and position in the postmodern world of politics are determined not only in terms of its military power but also in terms of its ability to project the desired image and draw the attention of others.

At the same time, nation branding is not only about influencing foreign public opinion. Most literature on nation branding focuses mainly on its contribution to a state’s material well-being and soft power enhancement, thereby emphasizing the external audience as a primary target. However, the recent works in the field also seek to examine nation branding through the lens of identity politics and nation-building. In this context, nation branding is perceived to serve as “a space for practicing and highlighting nationhood” (Press-Barnathan and Lutz 2020). Such literature highlights that by creating an image internationally, state leaders also expect that the reaction elicited abroad will ‘boomerang back home’ (Aronczyk 2013, 16), thereby promoting domestic approval of their actions as well as strengthen citizens’ sense of ontological security (Browning 2015, 196).

Ontological security refers to the ability to maintain a sense of self-certainty in an evolving world by upholding a stable understanding of one's own identity (Mitzen 2006). As Giddens (1991 cited in Browning 2015, 198) claims, possession of ontological security implies having "a sense of continuity and order in events," which, in turn, provides the capacity to be resistant to conditions of the changing world. Hence, the key idea here is that having a persuasive story (or self-biography) situating the self in relation to others contributes to the stable sense of ontological security, while, in contrast, the absence of such biography can make actors feel overwhelmed (Browning 2015). Yet, the maintenance of individuals' ontological security is largely built upon the collective identities these individuals feel to belong to. Accordingly, many international relations scholars explored the concept at the state level. That is, in the International Relations domain, ontological security emphasizes the importance of securing and stabilizing a sense of collective identity. As Steel (2008, 2) argues, while security defined in terms of physical capabilities of the state is certainly important, states' actions are also driven by the desire to "maintain consistent self-concepts" that claim a state's identity. Moreover, the concept also sheds light on the state-society relations by emphasizing the important role states play in securing their citizens' sense of security by framing their national identity. Indeed, in addition to welfare and physical security, citizens also expect those in power to convey a coherent narrative of society, its essence, and position in the world by providing a sense of common national mission (Marlow 2002 cited in Browning 2015). Political leaders, in turn, although not speaking in terms of ontological security, are well-informed about the importance of "reinforcing identity markers for citizens" and hence rationally and deliberately engage in image-building activities thereby addressing the nations' ontological insecurities (Russo and Stoddard 2018, 25).

The aim of this thesis, hence, is to shed light on the process of image-building in the context of Kazakhstan. In particular, I am interested in reasons behind extensive public

spendings on projects claimed to improve the country's perception. The literature review demonstrated that governments engage in nation branding mainly for two reasons: international recognition and internal national cohesion. Thus, by analyzing the numerous branding initiatives of Kazakhstan, I examine the messages conveyed through them and question the way the projected images are linked to the national identity discourse within the country. In a broader perspective, I seek to discover what Kazakhstan's nation branding processes look like from within: is there any consistent branding strategy and who are the main stakeholders.

Research methods

To generate this kind of data, I have used a qualitative research strategy since it provides an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the phenomenon under research. The purpose of my research is to explore how the process of nation branding is understood by actors involved in the process as well as what image of the nation and why those actors construct and seek to project. The most appropriate way to accomplish these tasks is to analyze related the official documents and websites of the governmental bodies involved in the process as well as to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with nation branding experts and policy-makers. These research methods imply two broad approaches to qualitative data collection - one that examines "naturally occurring data", while the other produces knowledge by "the intervention of the research" (Ritchie and Lewis 2014, 34). That is, while content and discourse analysis draw on existing materials, such as official documents, newspaper/media articles, speeches, interviews generate data by asking the interviewees to reconstruct, re-process, and interpret their attitude towards the phenomenon under study. During interviews, individuals "mentally re-process and verbally recount" their experience and, hence, this method is particularly useful

to gain insight into decision-making processes, motivations, and, ultimately, to understand the meaning interviewees give to the social phenomenon (Ritchie and Lewis 2014, 36).

In-depth interviews

To explore the process of nation branding in greater detail I have conducted semi-structured interviews with government officials working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Information and Social Development and the Ministry of Culture and Sports (the main bodies involved in the process of NB) as well as with the people that directly participated in the organization processes of Kazakhstan's branding activities in major cities worldwide. Interviewing is one of the most common and powerful tools employed to explore and understand the experiences and perspectives of individuals or groups of people. Increasingly, interviews are perceived as a tool for generating negotiated and contextually based results stemming from active interactions between interviewer and interviewee, rather than a neutral method of collecting 'objective' data. Indeed, as Fontana and Frey (2005, 115) claim, interviewing is "inextricably historically, politically and contextually bound". That is, changes in social, historical, and political environments will inevitably lead to changes in the type of data generated by interviewing. And hence, since the results of interviews are contingent on the framing of the issue under investigation, achieving 'scientific neutrality' through interviewing is hardly possible. However, my ontological position holds that there is no objective truth in the interpretation of the Kazakhstani government's efforts in constructing a national brand. Rather, the purpose of using interviewing in my study is to understand nation branding by exploring the ways this concept is interpreted by the respondents. I have conducted 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews with nation branding practitioners, state officials, and individuals engaged in branding initiatives. The questions were open-ended so that respondents

could take any direction in answering them. Most of the interviews were face to face, but because two of the respondents were out of the county, I have interviewed them via phone call. I have coded and analyzed the interviews by first identifying the main ideas from each sentence of the transcribed data. Later I have combined the identified labels into broader themes that allowed to spot patterns and answer my research questions. I was not able to record the interviews conducted in the building of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs due to the prohibition of electronic devices. I have nevertheless taken notes of on paper. Some respondents also shared the documents including reports on the completed work of their department.

Content analysis of official documents and statements (Foreign Policy concepts 2014-2020, Kazakhstan 2030, 2050 strategies, Presidential Addresses)

Also, to explore the extent to which the image of the country matters for the government, what is being done to manage the national brand as well as what image is being constructed by branding initiatives, I have examined the content of official documents, such as the Foreign Policy concept - 2020, the Kazakhstan 2030 and Kazakhstan 2050 strategies, and the Presidential Addresses retrieved from the official website. In my research, I have employed qualitative content analysis - a systematic investigation of documented materials with the purpose of understanding the meaning circulated in them (Levy 2017, 146). This research method is referred to as naturalistic since the data exists independent of research (i.e., it is out there even if the research is not taking place) (Levy 2017, 146). In accordance with the interpretive epistemology of this research, the analysis of the material will involve the description of what data is there, how it is presented as well as interpretation of that data in relation to my research questions. In analyzing the content, I have focused not only on textual material but also on other modes of information, including images and layout, thereby adhering

to the multimodal critical approach to the analysis. The critical multimodal approach to analysis emphasizes the relationship between different modes of communication by recognizing that each of them is a source of meaning (Jancsary et al. 2016). This is especially relevant in the context of my research since I have analyzed the promotional videos about the country and news reports that, in addition to written and spoken text, involve other forms of “meaning resources” (Jancsary et al. 2016, 3). The focus of this thesis is the official state narrative on national identity and nation branding, and thus I have analyzed documents retrieved from the websites of the relevant government ministries, including the Kazakhstan 2050 strategy, Foreign Policy concept 2014-2020, the Rukhani Zhangyru program and other documents on separate branding initiatives shared by my respondents.

Chapter 3. Theoretical framework: Soft Power, Nation Branding and Nation Building

Soft power, a term introduced by Joseph Nye (1990), refers to the capacity of a state to influence other states without resorting to military and economic coercion. In contrast to hard power that “shapes what others do,” soft power seeks to shape what others want (Nye 2004). While states have always cared about their image and perception, a strategic approach to attractive image building has gained particular prominence in the age of globalization and increased competition among states. This prompted the wide incorporation of the nation branding process into national and foreign policies of states globally. Nation branding is a relatively new and complex concept that has its roots in the marketing field and is closely related to many other fields such as public policy, PR, international relations, and diplomacy. Just as companies engage in the creation of appealing brands for their products to facilitate consumption, so do states strive to build strong and reliable brands and manage their international reputation. Nation branding mainly involves the actions directed at conveying messages about the state’s competitive advantage to foreign and domestic audiences. As such, both soft power and nation branding are concerned with the image and perception of the country on the international stage. In this regard, Fan (2008) argues that carefully designed nation branding strategy can form an attractive and lasting image of the state, thereby serving as an effective soft power building tool.

At the same time, nation branding equally concerns national identity and hence is intertwined with internal state legitimacy and nation-building. Nation-building involves complex processes of development of all aspects of society, including the social construction of a national identity (Talentino 2004). By conveying a certain identity vision of a nation, the governments seek to promote its acceptance, thereby creating a connection between the population and the state through the sense of national identification and belonging. Hence, soft

power building through nation branding, especially in developing countries, is linked to internal state-building and thus is not only about external perception of the country, but also has critical importance domestically. I will further discuss soft power, nation branding, and nation-building and the relationship between these concepts in greater detail.

Soft Power

Soft power is fluid and ambiguous concept that has no single definition. Nye (2004) himself gives various interpretations to soft power by vaguely describing it as “the ability to attract,” which, in turn, would allow a state to get what it wants by “shaping the preferences of others”. At the individual level, it is more or less clear how, for example, a famous person with a positive reputation can influence others. However, when it comes to nations, which is a far more complex construct, an array of questions arise regarding the way the attractiveness of its image leads to power. In the context of a nation, whom that soft power belongs to? What soft power is composed of? And who exactly is targeted by soft power?

Nye (2004) notes that the effect of soft power can only be assessed by considering the preexisting preferences of the targeted audience. He provides the example that requiring an excited kid to jump or run does not demonstrate power since the kid is happy to play anyways. That is, soft power can be considered as a power only if it persuades the other parties to change their mind and do what they otherwise would not.

Although the concept of soft power is mainly associated with the work of Joseph Nye, the idea about intangible sources of power appears in the earlier works of prominent international relations scholars such as Morgenthau and Carr (Melissen 2005). These scholars recognize that in addition to military power and wealth, various characteristics of a state such as, for instance, its national spirit and the nature of its government play a significant role in

achieving its political goals. At the same time, the effectiveness of employing the means of identification and attraction instead of coercion to get what one wants has long been discussed by scholars in the fields of psychology and business administration (Fan 2008).

The whole idea of soft power assumes that by attracting others, it is possible to influence their behavior. However, as Wang (2008) notes, in the context of a nation, the relationship between attraction and power is not easy to trace. A state is composed of various actors, and each of them finds different things appealing. That is, the effect of soft power is not universal, and hence its ultimate effect is contingent on who is attracted and how much power they have over the decision-making process at the government level. Moreover, critics of soft power claim that policymaking is mainly driven by rationality rather than emotions, and hence soft power have only a limited impact on it. However, Nye (2004) responds by claiming that soft power does not necessarily intend to influence specific policies, but rather it has an impact on the “environment for policy”.

According to Nye (2004), soft power mainly stems from the attractiveness of the states’ culture, social values, and the nature of their foreign policies. He provides a long list of factors that would potentially allow measuring soft power, such as the number of immigrants, tourists, and international students, the popularity of the country’s music, movies and books, the number of resources spent on public diplomacy, and so on. It is, however, important to distinguish between resources for soft power and actual soft power since having the former in the form of, for example, rich history and culture does not directly imply soft power. Instead, such resources have the potential to be translated into soft power. Whereas whether or not a state can extract soft power from the existing resources depends on the range of different factors (Treverton and Jones 2005). Indeed, this is exactly where nation branding comes into play.

Nation Branding

Before discussing the concept of nation branding at length, it would be useful to briefly mention what a 'brand' means in the first place. There is no single definition of the term, but the existing definitions can be broadly classified into two groups. The first one emphasizes the visual characteristics of the brand, whereas definitions in the second group focus on the features that go beyond its visual representation, such as some kind of emotional attachment to it (Dinnie 2010).

The most frequently cited definition of a brand is given by Doyle (2001), who states that "a successful brand implies a symbol, design, or some combination, which identifies the 'product' of a particular organization as having a sustainable differential advantage". Similarly, Macrae et al. (2003 cited in Dinnie 2010) claim that brand is necessary for producers to define their product as well as differentiate it from competing providers of a similar product. Another definition that covers the emotional aspect of a brand is given by Lynch and Chermatory (2004) - they refer to a brand as a set of both tangible and intangible values that indicate the uniqueness of a product and promise positive experience between a producer and a consumer.

Brands certainly cannot effectively work in isolation from the environment within which they exist. To accomplish its tasks, brands have to work with and correspond to the existing spirit of the age. As Holt (2004 in Dinnie 2010) demonstrates, creators of successful brands are always aware of the trending themes in society and creatively interact with them in order to generate the needed effect. He calls this process 'cultural branding' and argues that it is especially relevant and applicable in the case of nation branding. Due to the very essence of national identity, nations have rich and much more diverse cultural resources that can be usefully utilized to build their brands than producers of any other products or services.

At the same time, it is crucial to acknowledge that although the process of brand creation is managed by marketers and brand developers, it is the target audience who ultimately

formulates a mental vision of the brand (Dinnie 2010). That is, whether or not the projected image has intended effect depends on the reaction of the targeted audience. At the national level, the perception of a nation brand can often be influenced by the existing stereotypes about the country in people's minds. Hakala et al. (2013), in examining the link between nation branding and image, found that stereotypes play an important role in forming the image of the country and thus, depending on their nature, should either be countered or reinforced. As such, in the context of nations, the process of brand creation and promotion requires considerable time and effort. To produce the intended effect, nations have to implement a long-term branding strategy since unsystematic image-enhancing attempts are not likely to have a lasting effect (Anholt 2006).

National images exist regardless of the presence of nation-branding efforts and will always develop from various sources in one way or another. However, without the intervention of the governments themselves in the process of reputation management, those images are likely to be built on misconceptions and will eventually result in adverse consequences for the nations (Papadopoulos and Heslop 2002). When the governments fail to build recognizable and attractive nation brands, they virtually allow target audiences and competitors to convey whatever stereotypes they want about those nations. Indeed, it can be clearly illustrated by the case of Kazakhstan, which, in the absence of the recognizable image in the minds of foreigners, significantly suffered from the Borat film produced by the alternative narrator in 2006 (Saunders 2008). Hence, it appears logical that each nation has to take care of their image by strategically managing their brands.

Today the process of branding has become increasingly widespread with the areas of its application ranging from simple products, services, and destinations to diverse nations. Nation branding most closely resembles corporation branding since both are concerned with developing an image of a complex entity and have multiple stakeholders involved in the

process. At the same time, however, nation branding is not only about marketing techniques. As Simon Anholt (2007) claims, the term nation branding was originally derived from the simple observation that the image and perceptions of countries operate just like the brand images of companies and are no less important for the development and well-being of those countries. Yet, he later came up with the concept of competitive identity instead, as he argued that the process of country image management was more related to national identity and politics of competitiveness than to the branding in a purely commercial sense (Anholt 2007). Indeed, many nation branding scholars note that while almost every nation seeks to improve its image, most of them fail to understand how to effectively do it and to what extent commercial branding strategies are applicable at the national level. It is often mistakenly perceived that country branding is a simple analogy of product branding, where the product is a country.

Many countries nowadays face image-related problems either due to the internal changes linked to their political, economic, or social spheres or their external perception based on erroneous stereotypes. In fact, in the age of globalization, technological progress, and pervasiveness of the Internet, there is a surprisingly high level of misunderstanding between countries and cultures regarding their true nature. In particular, developing and newly independent countries suffer from international ignorance and strive to build a strong, unique, and recognizable image. These countries may have various sources that can be used to build their soft power; however, converting those sources into actual soft power requires considerable commitment on the part of the government (Dinnie 2010).

Although the practice of image building is hardly new, and countries have been seeking to influence their perception by perceiving reputation as an important source of state power for centuries (Melissen 2005), the academic field of nation branding has gained prominence relatively recently. By drawing on the literature on national identity, marketing, communication, and international relations, nation branding represents a multidimensional and

complex subject for academic research (Papadopoulos and Heslop 2002). Indeed, scholars still argue about what the process implies and whether it is actually possible for a nation to have a brand (Fan 2006). As such, some perceive nation branding as an alternative term for country-of-origin effect, whereas others claim that nation branding is more than that. In the latter case, nation branding refers to a consistent strategy implemented as an element of national policy. It involves the process of determination of the most realistic and most competitive vision of the nation and seeks to achieve its realization by ensuring that such vision is supported and strengthened by every communication act between the country and the outside world (Anholt 1998; Dinnie 2015).

Nation branding is often associated with a range of related but distinct concepts such as product-country image, destination branding, and political propaganda. Product-country image refers to the use of the country's name by manufacturers and service providers to highlight the country of origin (Loo and Davies 2006). In this case, the image of the country is used with the clear aim of promoting sales and increasing the number of consumers. Destination branding, in turn, refers to the process of advertising a certain place, country, or a particular part of it, mainly to attract visitors. It is usually perceived as an element of tourism marketing. And finally, in the context political propaganda, states have long been building their image against those of adversaries by drawing comparisons and negatively depicting the latter (for example, the evil Soviet Union during the Cold War or the 'axis of evil' referred to Iran, Iraq and North Korea) (Nye 2004).

Nation branding, by contrast, is not about promoting specific products, services or perspective, but rather it is about developing a country's entire image that embraces a wide range of factors associated with the nation: its geography, history, economy, political, economic and cultural values, people and so on. Dinnie (2015) defines nation branding as "the unique, multi-dimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded

differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences”. Hence, many states, from developing ones that seek recognition to developed ones with a strong international image, increasingly engage in nation branding to enhance their competitiveness through public policy initiatives and other marketing tools. In this sense, nation branding implies the process similar to an advertisement - by first raising awareness of the nation, the governments seek to attract people and ultimately to influence their preferences.

As such, nation branding can serve as an effective soft power building tool that seeks to influence the foreign audience by creating and projecting an attractive image of the country. It is conducted not only by conveying fancy slogans portraying the nation positively but requires careful scrutiny of the nation’s soft power sources that can be exploited to develop a coherent image. Governments often seek to enhance soft power by public diplomacy initiatives such as the provision of educational grants, cultural and sports events, disaster aid, etc. Nation branding, in turn, allows communicating the desired image of the state in a more coordinated and effective way. And although some authors argue that soft power is mainly associated with developed democracies (Raman 2005 cited in Fan 2008), in reality, any country has the potential to convert its values and cultural resources into soft power. Moreover, as Nicholas Cull notes, newly independent and weaker countries strive to build soft power not only with the purpose of competing for tourists and investment but also they perceive soft power as an important asset enhancing their core security. Cull (2018), in the 2018 Soft Power 30 report, argues that reputational security is a crucial component of soft power that allows states to be perceived as “legitimately sovereign over its territory, not just in law but also in international public perception”.

As such, this leads us to the first hypothesis this research seeks to examine:

H1: The government of Kazakhstan employs nation branding to project soft power internationally

The domestic implications of nation branding, in turn, have been researched by several scholars in relation to countries as diverse as Qatar (Eggeling 2017), Germany (Dinnie 2008, 154), Estonia (Jordan 2014) and Japan (Valaskivi 2013, Iwabuchi 2015 cited in Eggling 2017). Eggeling (2017) argues that cultural diplomacy initiatives of Qatar are inherently linked to the official national identity discourse within the state and that by projecting the image of the country to foreign audiences, the government seeks to reaffirm the state-constructed identity narrative internally. Similarly, Valavski (2013, 490) demonstrates that the Japanese government by constantly promoting certain national image abroad, and thereby “affirming certain values and shunning others”, is also engaging in the nation-building project in addition to soft power enhancement. Indeed, as Iwabuchi (2015) claims, projecting national identity abroad ultimately leads to its consolidation at home, since it serves as an instrument for communicating a particular vision of the nation in both directions. This is also reflected in Germany's nation branding efforts that portrays itself as moving away from ethnocentrism in order to fight its negative perception associated with the past (Dinnie 2008, 155). Jordan (2014), in turn, demonstrated on the example of Estonian branding campaigns that nation branding can sometimes backlash when some groups in the country feel excluded. In the case of Estonia, Jordan (2014) argues that branding served as a tool of nationalism, as many local Russians did not feel represented in the campaign. As such, in addition to public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy, IR, and marketing fields, nation branding is closely linked to national identity formation within a state.

The idea that national identity building projects are sustained and implemented not only within the borders of a state but also at the international level by employing nation branding initiatives underpins the second hypothesis of the research:

H2: The ruling regime in Kazakhstan employs nation branding to consolidate official discourse on national identity thereby enhancing its legitimacy

As such, nation branding is utilized to enhance states' soft power by influencing the way they are perceived internationally, while, at the same time, it can be seen as an extension of the internal nation-building, and, in the case of Kazakhstan, regime-building processes. In the next Chapter 4, I will examine the purpose of Kazakhstan's nation branding initiatives by testing the above mentioned hypotheses.

Chapter 4. The case of Kazakhstan

The case of Kazakhstan

The idea of “branding” the nation has become an ongoing element of the Kazakhstani government discourse. Kazakhstan has engaged in a broad array of branding initiatives to enhance its international profile ranging from advertisements on mass media outlets to rapid urbanization of its capital city and hosting mega-events to proactive participation in a disproportionately wide number of international organizations and regional integrations. As nation-branding scholars claim, today, the image of the country is a significant factor affecting its economic, political and cultural development and well-being to the extent that states should strategically manage their brands by allocating sufficient resources for it (Anholt 2006). And the government of Kazakhstan, which annually spends a considerable amount of public funds on image-building projects, appears to take such advice very seriously. In 2015 the state spent around \$50 million on branding campaigns, including the distribution of information about Kazakhstan’s economic growth, political stability, and unique cultural heritage via international TV channels and newspapers (Adilov 2015). Mega-events such as Expo-2017, Asian Winter Games - 2011 and Winter Universiade - 2017 cost the country \$3 billion, \$1.7 billion, and \$47 million accordingly (Insebayeva 2016). In its image-building efforts, Kazakhstan even decided to establish a special department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Committee on International Information - responsible for controlling and managing the country’s international perception. Due to its huge investment in branding initiatives and employment of companies providing professional brand management services, such as Tony Blair Associates, BGR Gabara, and Portland Communications (Tynan 2012), Kazakhstan has gained the reputation of “a PR government” (Fauve 2015). Indeed, Kazakhstan was the only

Central Asian country included in the Brand Finance's national brands ranking in 2014 as well as in the top 75 Future Brand Country Index in 2019. And yet, the government of Kazakhstan is not planning to reduce the scope of its activities aimed at improving its image. Instead, "achieving sustainable international position and maintaining a positive global image of Kazakhstan" is one of the goals outlined in the country's Foreign Policy concept 2014-2020, which itself is part of Kazakhstan's 2050 strategy. This is reflected in the way the country strived to secure a seat as the first Central Asian non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council in 2017-2018 and hosted the Syrian Peace Talks - 2019 in its capital city to further promote the country in an appealing light.

In this regard, questioning the purpose of Kazakhstan's intensive branding endeavors is not surprising. Why is the country so enthusiastically seeking to use every opportunity to present itself positively and maximize its visibility among other states? Government officials claim that a successful country brand promotes economic development by increasing the inflow of tourists and foreign direct investments as well as facilitates international cooperation (Adilov 2015). Hence, according to the Kazakh Tourism national company, promoting Kazakhstan as an attractive destination by showcasing its cultural and ethnic diversity, nature and historical places and creating a recognizable brand is a state policy priority (Kazakhstan 2050). To that end, the former president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev even suggested changing the name of the country to Kazakh Eli by claiming that the suffix 'Stan' decreases the number of tourists and investors. While, interestingly, the tourism brand campaign #Explorestan presented at the Astana Travel Media Talks - 2018 suggested instead to "take the sting out of 'Stan'" by associating the suffix with something positive and use it in the country's favor (Zhussupova 2018). As such, the overall concern is that Kazakhstan lacks a historically well-defined image in the minds of foreigners, and thus it needs to create a unique national brand that would distinguish it from other countries. Kazakhstan is one of the five new "Stans" that

emerged after the dissolution of the USSR, and it is often confused with these countries, as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Thus, as Saunders (2008, 118) notes, “Kazakhstan, by its very name and geopolitical location, is constantly forced to contend with negative stereotypes of authoritarianism, corruption, and instability”.

All of the Post-Soviet countries, to a different extent, have aspired to create a positive and distinct national image (Saunders 2016) and for that purpose, they have used various tools among which hosting and organization of various sports and cultural mega-events and building impressive architectural buildings appears to be most notable ones. At least one of these tools have been used by the Post-Soviet states in an attempt to draw increased attention to their countries in the so-called “global supermarket of nation brands” (Anholt 2006; Dinnie 2008). Kazakhstan, in turn, has enthusiastically employed each of the mentioned techniques, thereby becoming a “market leader” among the Central Asian countries. At the same time, however, besides similar nation branding techniques, these countries also have some similar characteristics that undermine positive image-building attempts, including the problem of corruption, the “Just Russia” framework and, most importantly, challenges associated with building a persuasive national identity within the country (Matveeva 2009; Nair 2020).

It is, indeed, hardly possible to imagine a successful national brand without a persuasive national identity in place. Hence, it would make sense first to shed some light on the development of national identity in the post-independence Kazakhstan, as the country, after the collapse of the USSR, had to replace a communist ideology with a national identity that would be accepted by the majority of the population and would not exclude any of the many ethnicities residing on its territory. Thus, the next section takes a historical perspective to briefly discuss what Kazakhstani national identity implies and what its main pillars are, before examining its relationship with the nation branding efforts of the government.

Kazakhstan, Kazakhs, and Kazakhstanis

In post-Soviet Kazakhstan, national identity formation was a challenging endeavor, given that the country emerged to be a home for more than a hundred nationalities. The ruling regime of the newly independent country hence faced a number of crucial tasks, such as how to build a sovereign and independent Kazakh state, that had no previous experience of existence in a Westphalian sense, even though the territory of the state had historically been inhabited by nomadic Kazakhs. That is, Kazakhstan had to develop its statehood from scratch, unlike some other post-Soviet states such as Latvia, Georgia, and Estonia, which had enjoyed some periods of statehood (Russo and Stoddard 2018, 27).

Historically, the Kazakhs emerged as a distinct ethnic group between 1465-1474 when Janibek and Kerei khans founded the Kazakh Khanate, which was approximately located on the current territory of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Later, in 1511, a son of Janibek Khan, Kassym Khan, was the first ruler who united the Kazakh tribes, thereby developing a cohesive political entity (Svat 2000). This, in turn, was a significant factor distinguishing the Kazakhs from the Uzbeks, who were very similar to Kazakhs in linguistic, economic, and cultural terms. And even after the collapse of the Kazakh Khanate, which led to the organization of Kazakhs into the three major groups based on their kinship ties (known as *juzes*), the Kazakhs preserved a remarkably high level of traditional and cultural cohesion, while, at the same time, remained separate from the Uzbeks (Cummings 2005; Collins 2006).

The vast territory where the Kazakhs had traditionally resided was integrated into the Russian state during the 18th century as a result of the Kazakh leaders' decision to seek protection from invasions of numerous enemies (Svat 2000). This was the beginning of the massive immigration of Russians into the Kazakh lands and the subsequent process of

Russification of ethnic Kazakhs. Due to the fact that the Kazakhs were primarily historically nomadic and illiterate, they were substantially more prone to be affected by the Russification policies compared to other sedentary Central Asian ethnicities. The integration completely disrupted the traditional nomadic lifestyle of the Kazakhs. When, in 1916, the Russians forced the Kazakhs to serve their state, in contradiction to the agreements they made, the Kazakh rose in revolt resulting in more than ten thousand deaths of ethnic Kazakhs. And further attempts of Kazakh elites to establish an autonomous republic under the Russian state did not succeed. Moreover, when the Bolsheviks came to power, the Kazakhs suffered from the implemented collectivization law, which led to a huge man-made famine, also known as the Kazakh catastrophe, resulting in the further reduction of the ethnic Kazakh population during the early 1930s (Cameron 2018).

Due to the disruption of the traditional form of living and transition from the nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle, the Kazakhs had no other choice but to embrace the emerging industrialization imposed by Russia (Suny 2010). A few years later, in 1936, due to the “trusted” relationship between the Kazakhs and the central Russian authority under Stalin, the Kazakhs got to establish the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. Granting the Kazakhs, the status of an autonomous republic allowed them to obtain many qualities of a sovereign state.

The Second World War and the resulting immigration of other nationalities to the Republic also lowered the proportion of Kazakhs in relation to other ethnicities. During the Second World War, Stalin commanded to deport the whole population of eight different nationalities to Soviet Asia, and most of them were moved to the territory of the Kazakh Republic. The number of people forced to move to Kazakhstan also comprised those considered “politically unreliable” from the Baltic states. Ironically, the Russian propaganda later exalted Kazakhstan as the land of various ethnicities after using it as a “human dumping grounds” (Conquest 1970, cited in Saunders 2008, 88).

The last significant flow of non-Kazakhs to Kazakhstan was facilitated by the Khrushchev's (who came to power after Stalin's death) campaign that sought to utilize Kazakh lands for developing agricultural farms. However, the campaign was not successful and, by the 1970s, those who arrived in the republic started to steadily return back to their homelands. Since then, improvements in nutrition and overall social services along with the increased fertility rate among ethnic Kazakhs led to a reversal of the long-lasting decrease of the Kazakh population. There were no major inter-ethnic clashes, however, in 1986, when Dinmukhamed Konayev, an ethnic Kazakh, who had long served as General Secretary of the Communist Party, was replaced by non-Kazakh Gennady Kolbin, who had never lived and worked in the Kazakh Socialist Republic before, massive riots organized by ethnic Kazakhs took place in Almaty (Olcott 1995). Although the uprisings, referred to as "Jeltoqsan" (Kazakh for "December"), were suppressed, Gorbachev did not allow Kolbin to massively wipe out the party ranks and eminent nationalist activists. Today, the Jeltoqsan is largely associated with the beginning of the USSR dissolution. In 1990, Nursultan Nazarbayev became the head of the Communist Party and later the first President of independent Kazakhstan, who has ruled the country for the following three decades.

Here starts an uneasy project of national identity creation. Since its independence, Kazakhstan began to nationalize, although very carefully so that the safety of other nationalities was ensured, thereby founding an ideological basis required for state existence (Olcott 1995). The nationalization mainly implied elevation of the interests of ethnic Kazakhs primarily at a symbolic level by replacing Soviet symbols by native ones, renaming the streets after prominent Kazakh figures, and nominating the Kazakh language as an official state language (along with the Russian language). However, in the context of co-existence of representatives of 130 nationalities, although greatly promoting the interest of native Kazakhs by restoring their traditions, culture, and history, the state has sought to develop a civic national identity,

rather than the one based on ethnicity to avoid both internal indignation and external criticism. But, at the same time, it was ensured by the state that most of the top state positions were held by native Kazakhs by means of promotion through kinship and clan links, rather than through outright ethnic discrimination (Collins 2006). Hence, the process of indigenization of the state was not associated with explicit racism and did not entail major ethnic strife. In addition, due to the massive emigration of non-Kazakh nationalities from Kazakhstan after the dissolution of the USSR as well as the government's expatriation programs (Diener 2010), there has been a notable change in the proportion of native Kazakhs in relation to other nationalities. Today, around 65 percent of the population are native Kazakhs. And although Russians mainly resided and constituted the majority in the north of the country, the flow of the ethnic Kazakhs to that region was facilitated by the relocation of the capital city from southern Almaty to Astana (currently Nur-Sultan) and deliberate creation of job opportunities in the north. This tactic arguably significantly weakened the discourses associated with separatism both in the north of the country and neighboring Russia (Anderson 1999; Saunders 2008).

The government continuously claims that it is committed to the civic type of nationalism and, indeed, policies exclusively prioritizing interests of ethnic Kazakhs are implemented very carefully and to a comparatively limited extent in comparison with other Post-Soviet states. At the same time, however, Nazarbayev clearly expressed that Kazakh culture is a vital identity aspect uniting all the Kazakhstani citizens. He claimed that

With respect to the integrating role of Kazakh culture, this is genuine pragmatism; it is not some kind of nationalist exercise...This is the culture of the majority of the country... Therefore, it is no paradox, nor is there anything politically incorrect in the assertion of the integrating role of Kazakh culture. We need to say this directly and without any ambiguity (Nazarbayev 2010).

In this regard, as Schatz (2000, 490) states, post-independence Kazakhstan can be described as "internationalism with a Kazakh face". Such an approach to state-building was the most pragmatic one that allowed to prevent inter-ethnic tensions given the country's

demography and neighborhood with powerful Russia. However, while this strategy appears effective in terms of maintaining peace, in the context, where there exists a significant gap between civic and ethnic nationalism, defining national identity becomes a challenging undertaking. Indeed, as Surucu (2002) claims, this ambiguity leads to a discursive field whereby various interpretations of national identity compete for supremacy. In Kazakhstan, those discourses mainly include ethnic nationalists, the Islamic nationalists, Republic nationalists as well as Slavist and Liberal discourses (Insebayeva 2016).

However, the national identity narrative promoted by the government is the one based on the idea of diversity and multiculturalism, along with stability and pragmatism. That is, while other national identity narratives entailed some degree of “othering” and exclusion, the official state discourse embraced various ethnicities and religions. Interestingly, the competing liberal discourse was very similar to the one of Nazarbayev’s administration in terms of inclusion and economic/social policies. However, while the former strongly emphasized the importance of establishing a democratic government to prevent power abuse, the main pillar of the latter was security in the era of globalization, which can only be ensured by a strong state (Akorda 1997). Nazarbayev stated that rapid power dispersion would “result in chaos,” and for now, it is sensible for the state to be guided by “only one conductor” (Insebayeva 2016). However, the state does not reject the prospect of democracy altogether, but rather claims that the government is guided by a clear formula “economy first, then politics”. It is articulated in the strategies Kazakhstan 2030 and Kazakhstan 2050, as well as presidential addresses that the country is on its way to “the highest standards of democratization and human rights” *in the future* (Kazakhstan 2050).

As such, the official state narrative emphasizes pragmatism, stability, security, and articulates unshakeable confidence in the positive future. It holds that the survival of the state can only be ensured by internal interethnic peace and unity. That is, since the number of

different ethnicities living in the country hindered the process of national identity creation, the Kazakhstani government sought to unite the nation under the idea of the common pursuit of a bright future. Yet, the official state discourse on national identity remains shaky, and citizens still have a weak association with it (Matveeva 2009). Hence, although the official state discourse is the dominant one, it constantly risks being overridden by alternative narratives and thus needs to be continuously reinforced. Nation branding, which in Kazakhstan is primarily an elite-driven project initiated by the government, in turn, provides the state space for projecting and reinforcing its vision of the nation.

Data Collection and Discussion

From the very beginning of this research project, I was driven by the idea of exploring the concept of nation branding in the context of Kazakhstan in greater depth. The reason behind this interest was that branding initiatives had become a constant element of government activities and, consequently, a commonly discussed topic in the media as well as among the general population. Indeed, while some considered the numerous mega-events as a way to improve the image of the country, others were bewildered and even frustrated by the unreasonable and inefficient use of public resources, especially given the uneasy economic conditions within the country. As such, I was concerned with the broader implications of the image-building activities of the government. When I began searching for the sources of data that would potentially provide insights into the field, I found out that there was an entire department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Committee on International Information - dealing with the country's perception at the international level. However, there was nothing on their website about their activities and responsibilities. After not receiving any response to my

e-mails, I contacted one of my friends working at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (in a different department) to ask more about the “image” department of the Ministry. Ultimately, I was fortunate to get the two-weeks internship offer at that department, where I conducted most of my interviews. However, I was told that I could not use my phone, laptop, or any other electronic devices that were not the property of the Ministry. When I asked about conducting interviews for my research project related to nation branding, one of the workers said I could only take notes using a pen and a paper. During the internship, I have talked to the people from different branches of the Committee. The primary task of the department is the control of the information flow about the country. While one branch of the department runs the accounts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on various social media platforms, others are responsible for communication with Kazakhstan’s embassies abroad. There is even a special department on analytics and statistics that is responsible for controlling how many times and in what context Kazakhstan is mentioned in foreign media materials. The officials working in that department said that it allows for tracking the country’s position in the informational space.

Overall, the interviewees from the Committee on International Information revealed that the image of the country plays a significant role, and there are various public diplomacy initiatives taking place globally. Several times they referred to the Foreign Policy Concept 2014-2020, in which the achievement of “sustainable international position and positive global image of Kazakhstan” is one of the priorities of the country’s multi-vector foreign policy. Essentially, their job involved the management and control of the global perception of Kazakhstan through the country’s numerous embassies around the world. The main target audiences are the political elite, the business sector, and major international mass media sources that can influence decision-making processes and affect the perception of people in their countries. The respondents referred to positive image formulation as a crucial element of foreign policy, that enhances the country’s soft power and attracts investments, tourists, and

sets Kazakhstan as an important international actor. The image that is being projected mainly depicts the country as having “a dynamically developing economy, favorable investment climate, stable political and social systems,” as well as promoting important international initiatives that contribute to global and regional peace and security. Moreover, there is such thing as an “informational priority list” that includes the list of the main events that the Kazakhstan’s embassies should focus on and convey. One of such list shared with me included, for example, the 175th anniversary of the great Kazakh poet and enlightener Abay, celebration of which had to be organized by the Kazakhstani embassies.

Interestingly, when I asked questions formulated in terms of nation branding, the respondents mainly answered that for now, Kazakhstan could not be said to have a strong brand. They did not deny the success of major foreign policy initiatives in gaining substantial international attention; however, the officials note that the country still lacks a coherent and unified image in the minds of foreigners. As one of the respondents said,

the events like EXPO and participation of Kazakhstan in many other international initiatives, of course, contributed to its positive standing at the global stage... but the many image-building efforts are not unified and lack internal coordination and thus do not generate a deep impression...they sometimes even convey contradictory messages.

Indeed, the fact that there is no any coherent nation branding strategy, given that the positive image of the country is a foreign policy priority, is surprising. Yet, the respondents acknowledged that this was one of the significant drawbacks of nation branding efforts:

Yes, the image-building initiatives are a bit chaotic and are not guided by the unified framework. This is one of the reasons of why it so hard to articulate what Kazakhstan is all about in a simple and understandable manner.

At the same time, the other respondent noted that

The main responsibility of this department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is communication - it does not create a brand, but simply translates the created product abroad, the national brand and its content, in turn, are the issues that have to be addressed internally.

I found out that the government launched a coordinated process of the national brand development in 2019 that seeks to create a clear and persuasive national image. However, the Ministry of Foreign affairs was only one of the responsible bodies for the process. The process of the national brand development has been coordinated primarily by the internal governmental bodies. The Committee workers shared that the numerous ministries, including the Ministry of Culture and Sports, the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Information and Communication along with National Tourism agency, and KazakhInvest National Company, were the main stakeholders of the process. This again confirms that an international image of the country is inherently linked to the domestic politics of the country. Indeed, the nation brand has to be reflected in and reproduced by the state's domestic politics. For now, they only developed the strategic concept of the brand, which outlines the main components of the Kazakhstani brand and the main target audiences. This has been done by conducting a comprehensive analysis of "strong" and "weak" sides of the country. According to its results, the main components of the nation brand should highlight (1) the multiculturalism, high level of tolerance and the strategic location at "the heart of Eurasia," (2) the openness toward innovation and education, and (3) a rich history and unique culture. Interestingly, a consistent theme developed from the interviews is that all the outlined aspects of the brand are in line with the ruling regime's vision of the nation articulated in the governmental strategies. Moreover, as I later found out, some of the major outward-directed initiatives are part of the broader internal national identity project.

Hence, to critically examine the wider implications behind the image-building efforts, I will focus on the outlined major elements of Kazakhstan's nation brand and examine the way they are linked to internal discourse on nation-building more explicitly. The analysis of the

governmental strategies Kazakhstan 2030, Kazakhstan 2050, as well as the latest Rukhani Zhangyru (Kazakh for “Spiritual Renaissance”) program on the national identity modernization, provided a comprehensive state perspective on nation and identity building. Thus, while discussing each element of the nation brand separately, I will discuss its external and internal effects and the link between them.

Multiculturalism, tolerance and responsible international player

By stressing that “today representatives of more than 100 ethnic groups and 18 confessions live in peace and harmony in Kazakhstan”, the country put forward the idea to convene the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions every three years in the capital city Nur-Sultan. Its primary purpose is to serve as “the platform for interfaith dialogue” that gathers the authoritative representatives of different religions and promotes the idea of unity, cooperation, and security (Akorda 2003). Last time the Congress was held in 2018 under the framework of “Religious Leaders for a Safe World” and the participants came from 46 different countries. Nazarbayev stressed that the initiative provides an important opportunity for efficient cooperation between various cultures and civilizations. Domestically, such initiative reinforces the top-down identity narrative emphasizing the importance of inter-ethnic harmony and peace for national unity, as reflected in the 2010 Doctrine of National Unity (Rees and Burkhanov 2018). In his presidential addresses, Nazarbayev continuously emphasizes that the Kazakhstani patriotism is based on the principle of equality: “*We are a multi-ethnic society there should be no double standards when it comes to interethnic relations...This issue for me is not negotiable*”(Akorda 2012). In this regard, the initiatives promoting interethnic and interreligious peace internationally clearly articulate that Kazakhstan has managed to maintain

peace among its ethnically and religiously diverse population and is ready to share its experience with the world (Akorda 2003).

Importantly, as Kassen (2018) argues, the landlocked position of the country between major powers such as Russia and China, although severely constraining the country's foreign policy directions, allows it to adopt the unique soft power strategy. Indeed, Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy served as a major tool for claiming state legitimacy and building a Kazakhstani identity both domestically and internationally. The former president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, clearly articulated the contours of the country's overall foreign policy approach by claiming that by virtue of its geopolitical location and economic potential, it would be irrational for Kazakhstan to focus solely on narrow regional issues. He claimed that the security and prosperity of the country could only be ensured by building close political and economic ties with various great and regional powers (Weitz 2008). Hence, rather than taking the country's landlocked position as 'a curse', Kazakhstan sought to convert such challenges into opportunity and reap the benefits from it by developing multidimensional foreign policy. Thus, although Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy is mostly discussed by realist scholars assessing the extent to which it contributes to the state's physical and material security, it can also be argued that Kazakhstan's proactive stance in foreign relations is a deliberate and strategically planned nation branding effort.

As such, by developing not only post-Soviet but also pro-Asian and pro-European vectors, Kazakhstan has become a member of different international organizations, and enthusiastically promoted many regional integrations. By leveraging its landlocked geographical position, Kazakhstan conveyed the message that it is the heart of Eurasia and branded itself as a "transportation hub between Europe and Asia" (Kassen 2018). Similarly, being located at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, the country portrays itself as having the Eurasian identity that combines the best characteristics of the East and the West (Marat 2009).

Such rhetoric is further reinforced by proactively proposing and supporting various regional and international initiatives such as annual economic and media forums, the main purpose of which is the promotion of security and economic development.

One example is the idea to organize the annual Astana Economic Forum, which emphasizes that Kazakhstan is a bridge on the modern-day Silk Road that strives to become the “financial hub” of the region. The event is promoted as an international platform for the global economic dialogue that every year brings together prominent economists, politicians, and academics from more than 100 countries. Moreover, the establishment of the Astana International Financial Centre (AIFC), which is based on the principles of English law and has independent dispute resolution court, was announced during the forum in 2018. As its governor, Kairat Kelimbetov claimed, AIFC “undoubtedly brands Astana as a truly global city, reaching high rankings in the level of attractiveness of the global investment networks” (Kelimbetov 2018). Internally, such a branding effort highlights the role of the regime in the successful development of the country’s economy as well as in overcoming the issue of invisibility and achieving international recognition.

Similarly, being partly located in Europe, Kazakhstan did not miss the opportunity to join the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Moreover, the country was the first Post-Soviet and largely Asian state to chair this authoritative organization in 2010. As the interviewee from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs noted, considerable efforts were put to achieve this, given that *for now*, Kazakhstan can hardly be described as an exemplary country in terms of its human rights records. Thus, the decision to join the OSCE was purely pragmatic, allowing the state to bolster its international and domestic legitimacy by positioning itself as the country respecting democratic values and moving towards the implementation of political liberalization in the future. Moreover, such initiative further promoted the country’s role as the transcontinental transit corridor as well as reinforcing its Eurasian identity.

Likewise, by arranging the numerous global initiatives such as Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Asia (CICA), Conference of Islamic Cooperation, securing the two-year membership of Kazakhstan in the UN Security Council during 2017-2019, the Syrian Talks 2019 as well as creating the KazAid agency in 2014 and actively participating in the reconstruction of war-torn Afghanistan, Kazakhstan has employed its multidimensional foreign policy to enhance its image and prestige by portraying itself as a responsible international actor promoting global peace and stability (Laruelle 2011, Kassen 2018). Domestically, such a position of the state and its contribution to international security is inextricably linked to the pragmatic and forward-looking nature of the ruling regime. In his presidential address 2018, Nazarbayev emphasized these achievements by claiming that

We have managed to strengthen the international standing of Kazakhstan and its geopolitical role in the region. We have proved to be a responsible and international partner, in-demand to address regional and global challenges. (Akorda 2018)

This, in turn, demonstrates the way Kazakhstan employs its proactive stance in international relations to brand itself both internally and externally. Essentially, as Russo and Stoddard (2018) argue, such foreign policy initiatives are often motivated by informal and non-material incentives. That is, despite resulting in limited functional benefits, the so-called “virtual regionalism” serves as a means of regime-boosting (Russo and Stoddard 2018). Various regional initiatives generate “an image of national leaders fully in charge of their sovereign states” thereby allowing state leaders to support one another and their regimes (Russo and Stoddard 2018, 22). Hence, by engaging itself in various regional integrations and hosting numerous foreign policy events, Kazakhstan seeks not to miss the opportunity to exhibit its statehood. By publicly expressing the pragmatic and voluntary nature of cooperation as well as demonstrating that major powers of the international system accept such a stance, the ruling regime can significantly boost its legitimacy (Anceschi, 2014). While, at the same time, by

promoting security and peace initiatives, the country improves its perception by external audiences, thereby significantly enhancing its soft power potential.

Innovation, education, and competitiveness as an important component of the nation brand

Another aspect of the nation's brand enthusiastically emphasized by the government is the country's Today education is perceived as an important instrument of soft power. A strong education system that conforms to the demands of the contemporary economy based on knowledge and human capital serves as a crucial competitive advantage of the state. The importance of education for the stability and prosperity of the nation is emphasized in all of the government's strategic documents of Kazakhstan. In this regard, the former president Nazarbayev asserted that

Our nation has always strived to acquire knowledge... However, the cult of science and education has to become the common characteristic of the whole nation. It is the requirement of the new era we are entering. Every Kazakhstani citizen must understand that a high-quality education is a cornerstone of a successful future...and if education becomes the number one priority, the nation will undoubtedly succeed. (Akorda 2012)

The quote clearly demonstrates the attempt to unite the nation by emphasizing the challenges of the future that have to be met together. By claiming that the pursuit of education should characterize the whole nation for the sake of a "successful future", the government sets a common goal for the nation. To this end, there is a consistent strategy involving initiatives such as a transition from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin alphabet by 2025, trilingual education, and a strong emphasis on computer literacy at schools. The main purpose of these initiatives, according to the state officials, is a modernization of collective identity without which Kazakhstan's continued development cannot be ensured. As such, by switching to the Latin alphabet, the country will be in line with most of the developed countries, and "it will certainly

result in new opportunities in business, education, and science” (Rukhany Zhangyru 2017). Similarly, the focus on IT skills and the English language is an important step in preparing the nation for the future, and, indeed, these policies seek to ensure its competitiveness in the highly globalized and interdependent world. In his speech on the identity modernization program, Nazarbayev asserted that students are the primary engine of the process of modernizing the Kazakhstani identity “based on the principles of openness, pragmatism, and competitiveness” (Akorda 2017).

Kazakhstan has ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention, the main legal agreement on higher education credential evaluation in Europe, in 1997; Tokyo Convention 2018 that seeks to foster international mobility of students in higher education in the Asia Pacific; as well as it is an active participant of global dialogue aiming to establish Convention on the Recognition of Qualification in Higher Education (Nair 2020, 98). As such, Kazakhstan positions itself as an innovative and forward-looking country that is able to compete and cooperate at the international level. Similarly, by hosting forums such as the International Education Fair, Kazakhstan brands itself as “a main educational hub in Central Asia” (Kazakhstan 2050). The event that gathered all the Ministers of Education of the EU and Central Asian countries took place in Kazakhstan for the first time in 2017. Its main purpose was to further integrate the country into the global educational space and facilitate international cooperation in the education sector. In this regard, Baskaran Nair, a public policy and marketing specialist, engaged in various branding campaigns of Singapore and a visiting professor at Nazarbayev University said that

Education is a powerful institution in modern society, and the government of Kazakhstan recognizes this by taking education policies seriously. Kazakhstan has the highest number of higher education institutions as well as foreign students in the Central Asian region. In effect, education in Kazakhstan is a potential source of its soft power. Just take the Bolashak program or Nazarbayev University, which in themselves have become an important aspect of the Kazakhstani brand.

The Bolashak program (Kazakh for “future”) that allows talented Kazakhstani students to study at the top higher-education institutions around the world was introduced in 1993. Kazakhstan was the first post-Soviet country to implement such an initiative. In the early days of independence, the country was in need of highly-skilled professionals able to conduct further reforms as well as “worthily represent the country at the international arena” (Bolashak 2016). The government clearly points to the importance of investment in human capital for the strength and well-being of the economy and the nation as a whole. When the scholarship program was first launched, the applicants mostly chose social science and humanities disciplines. It was mainly due to the lack of English language proficiency of the students interested in engineering and other technical disciplines. Hence, later, the program coordinators lowered the language requirements to attract more applicants that would potentially graduate with technical degrees. Overall, this was in line with the governmental strategies aimed at diversification and development of the industrial sector of the economy (Sagintayev and Jamakulov 2015).

Nazarbayev University (NU), in turn, established in 2010 in the capital city, invites scholars from around the world to provide its students with the best quality knowledge in academic fields as diverse as engineering, business, social sciences, public policy, and medicine. On the NU’s official website, the university is described as contributing to the establishment of Nur-Sultan as the regional innovation and education hub. As Fauve (2015, 117) notes, Nazarbayev University has further contributed to making Astana (now Nur-Sultan) “a central symbolic place”. Nazarbayev himself refers to NU as a crucial national project that will significantly influence Kazakhstani citizens as well as serve as a foundation for further development of the state (NU 2012). He claimed that the opening of a world-class university

within the country that would be able to compete with the top universities worldwide was a well-reasoned next step following the implementation of the Bolashak program.

Nazarbayev's speech during the announcement of the plan to establish NU explicitly demonstrates the relationship between national identity, the increasingly globalized world and image of the country - "*the NU will become the national brand reflecting a harmonious combination of Kazakhstani identity with the leading international educational and scientific practice*" (NU 2013). In effect, this highly innovative center of science and education has become a symbol of the high level of modernization the government claims to have achieved. In this regard, education serves not only as an important element of Kazakhstan's nation brand enhancing the country's soft power potential but also represents the government's success at de-Sovietisation and state-building, thereby legitimizing the regime's rule. Indeed, as the very name of the institution suggests, the discourse around such achievements is repeatedly constructed as being the result of the effective work of the progressive state elite. Moreover, positioning of the country as the Central Asian "education hub" at the international stage is consistent with the internal top-down narrative heavily emphasizing that the nation's future competitiveness depends not on the natural resources, but increasingly on the intellectual achievements of its citizens.

Rich history and unique culture as an aspect of nation brand

The official state narrative continuously highlights the importance of the cultural and traditional aspects of national identity and articulates that while adapting to the changes of the modern world, it is important to preserve national culture (Akorda 2012; Akorda 2017). It is claimed that the historical roots of the nation that differentiates it from others should serve as

the foundation of national identity. As such, Nazarbayev emphasized that “national traditions and customs, language, music and literature, in a word our national spirit should remain with us forever” (Akorda 2017). At the same time, however, he notes that the features that hinder the development of the nation, such as tribalism and divisions within the nation, should be left in the past, as citizens of Kazakhstan are part of a great nation based on meritocracy. As such, the Spiritual Revival program reflects the ambiguous nature of national identity in Kazakhstan, by clearly promoting its ethnic components, but at the same time deliberately de-ethnicizing the collective identity (Rees and Burkhanov 2018).

The Modern Kazakh Culture in the Global World project is part of the wider Spiritual Revival program, the main purpose of which is formation and consolidation of a collective national identity in light of the challenges brought about by globalization. As the interviewed coordinator of the program said

The basic idea behind all the projects initiated within the framework of this project is the preservation of our cultural legacy... It is important for every citizen to know the history of the nation he or she belongs to. By no means, it means that we should reject innovation and new ideas. Instead, the program seeks to adapt national identity to the new realities so that the unity and cohesion of the nation will not be undermined.

The cultural renaissance program involves six distinct projects; the purpose of each of them is reinforcing the ties of Kazakhstanis to their homeland and strengthening the sense of belonging to the nation. Hence, the projects such as, for example, *Tugan Zher* (Kazakh for “homeland”) and *Sacred Geography* are implemented to attract the citizens’ attention to the uniqueness of Kazakh culture thereby reinventing a civic myth reflecting Kazakhstan’s rich history to maintain coherence, unity, and pride of the nation. The Sacred Geography project involves the restoration of national holy sites across the country. Nazarbayev claimed that all nations have holy sites that are known and respected by every representative of those nations,

whereas many Kazakhstanis are still hardly aware of the numerous historic places on the territory of the country (Rukhany Zhangyru 2017).

At the same time, however, the government acknowledges the nation branding and soft power potential of culture and history and, thus, required the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to stay involved in the realization of the program. Hence, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is actively engaged in cultural projects that target foreign audiences and seek to popularise Kazakh culture at the international stage. On Kazakh culture as soft power, Nazarbayev claimed that

Hollywood played a major role in ensuring the success of the US during the Cold War. If we want to be a nation with a unique place in the global map of the 21st century, we need the world to know about us not only because of oil resources but because of our cultural achievements as well. (Akorda 2017)

Thus, the number of cultural diplomacy initiatives was organized in collaboration between the Ministry of Culture and Sport, National Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The initiatives involved major projects such as traveling art exhibitions, Global Tour of the Golden Man, the presentation of Kazakhstani films at the film festivals, as well as translation and dissemination of the books of major Kazakh authors into six UN languages.

The “At the Crossroads of Asia and Europe” exhibition that took place in New York in 2018 is one example of Kazakhstan’s efforts to promote its cultural brand. It was organized in honor of the 20th anniversary of the capital city of the country. During one month of the exhibition, the American audience had a chance to learn about the history of Kazakhstan that dates back to centuries ago as well as the lifestyle of its people. Similarly, the international exhibitions titled “Nomads of Eurasia” and “Culture of the Great Steppe” were held at the British Museum and the Museum of Islamic Arts of Istanbul. Overall, as the names of the exhibitions reveal, the conveyed message highlights the geographical position of the country

and its Eurasian identity, which, in turn, implied the unique culture combining the best features of different continents.

Likewise, the Global Tour of the Golden Man, a 5th century BC warrior's costume found not far from Almaty, visited 12 countries and sought to make the world know about Kazakhstan. Interestingly, although this costume may not even belong to a person that had a genetic link to contemporary Kazakhs, the government refers to it as being an important national symbol. Indeed, just as the celebration of the 550th anniversary of Kazakh nationhood in 2015 within the country and internationally through Kazakhstan's embassies around the world, such initiatives mainly seek to emphasize that the nation has a long history and great ancestors to be proud of. On the one hand, such exhibitions certainly contribute to the creation of a certain image of Kazakhstan in the minds of foreigners by telling the story of the country. However, on the other hand, those efforts are consistent with the state's internal discourse on the complex national identity-building project. Nazarbayev continuously emphasizes that although equality and peace among the numerous ethnicities within the country is a priority and "the epoch of single-ethnic states has gone" (Akorda 2012), achieving such an inter-ethnic harmony would be impossible without unity of the Kazakhs themselves. The historical division of Kazakhs along the kinship and tribal lines is a challenge for the government that strives to establish a coherent collective identity. In this regard, reminding the common roots of Kazakhs is an important nation-building practice persuading Kazakhs that they all have a shared history and great ancestors, thereby instilling a sense of belonging to a single nation.

In order to find out how the art pieces presented at the international exhibitions are selected, I have interviewed the workers of the National Museum of Kazakhstan. One of the respondents revealed that promoting excellent works of artists reflecting the contemporary reality of the country is challenging since the state leaders often favor and insist on presenting the works that contribute to the "national mythmaking".

One telling example of such practice took place during Expo 2017 when the collection of contemporary arts was moved to a remote space in the basement of the National Museum so that other “representation” of the nation would be at the center of attention

As such, cultural diplomacy initiatives by the government are employed not only as a foreign policy tool striving to shape a country’s perception internationally, but also serve as a policy instrument of the Kazakhstani state elites that seek to convey and reinforce their vision of the nation.

Similarly, the government-sponsored the production of the series of films within the framework of the Sacred Geography project with the involvement of BBC World News. A producer of those films noted their potential contribution to the popularisation of the tourist cluster of the region as well as that nomadic culture would be very exciting to learn about. Similarly, the Kazakhstani Minister of Culture and Sports said that those films would shed light on the sacred objects of Kazakhstan, thereby significantly increasing the recognisability of the country’s cultural context among the foreigners (Boteu 2018). The films are released in six UN languages and broadcasted on popular platforms such as National Geographic and Discovery with an audience of approximately 750 million people. The ads of the films are broadcasted on the Euronews TV channel. Later in 2018, the BBC World News launched the Travel Show of Kazakhstan program, that showcased the UNESCO world heritage sites as well as demonstrated what touristic tours to the region look like (BBC 2019). In this regard, the respondent from the Committee on International Information said,

Promotion of the national culture and raising awareness of our cultural brands are a part of the work that is being done by the image department... reaching wider audiences is a crucial task that would attract investors and tourists. Ultimately, it is about soft power and the overall influence of our country at the international stage.

Yet, again, if we pay attention to the content of all the film demonstrations, it becomes clear that the branding initiatives implemented by the government convey similar messages on national identity internally. As such, although the potential of these places to attract tourists to the country is obvious, Nazarbayev clearly articulated that:

This is not only about the restoration of monuments, buildings, and constructions... The point is to unite, in the national conscience, monuments surrounding the Ulytau and the Mausoleum of Khoja Ahmed Yassawi, ancient monuments of Taraz and Beket Ata burials, ancient compounds of East Kazakhstan and sacred sites of the Zhetysu and many other places. All of them help shape our national identity. (Akorda 2017)

That is, the analysis of the government's nation branding initiatives demonstrates that nation branding in the context of Kazakhstan, along with positioning the state as a legitimate entity capable of implementing global-wide projects, serves as an instrument of the elites employed to consolidate the official vision of the nation. Externally, by showcasing all the cultural and historical heritage consisting of the unique nomadic culture and ancient civilizations, the state has strived to counter international ignorance and negative stereotypes associated with the country. Yet, such an active promotion of the image of the country also has internal implications, essentially allowing the state to use nation branding as a governance technique contributing to domestic compliance. In effect, by projecting a certain vision of the nation to foreign audiences, the government is claiming that its own population has to conform to that image. Indeed, such an approach to nation branding is highlighted by the critical scholars of the field, which recognize the internal consequences of branding and refer to nation branding as an inherently political practice targeting citizens within the country (Volvic 2011; Varga 2013). Hence, while nation branding implies commodification of national identity and marketing techniques targeting foreign audiences unfamiliar with the main characteristics of the nation, it is also an attempt to encourage its own population to "live up to the brand" by behaving in accordance with its main principles (Aronczyk 2013, 76).

The next section of the paper will mainly draw on the findings retrieved from the interviews with people that were involved in the process of implementation of certain branding initiatives. I will mainly discuss the potential of the Kazakhstani brand as well as the factors that undermine the country's branding efforts. In particular, I focus on the two main issues: corruption and weak execution capabilities (or lack of coordination) of the government. Overall, due to the two mentioned problems, the branding efforts of the country may result in the opposite effect by making Kazakhstan known for its corruption scandals and unprofessionalism.

Chapter 5. The potential of the Kazakhstani brand

The interviews and content analysis of the key governmental strategies revealed that Kazakhstan takes its international reputation seriously by adhering to proactive foreign policy and implementing numerous nation branding initiatives. Yet, there are also crucial factors that severely undermine the government's efforts to build a strong nation brand. As Nair (2019) claims, major challenges to Kazakhstan's brand are high levels of corruption and weak execution capabilities of the government. Indeed, as major branding experts note, governance of the country is an important element of a nation's brand along with its culture, people, touristic potential, and contribution to global security (Dinnie 2008). The rule of law and transparency of the governmental processes are important factors depicting the country as having an equitable society, thereby influencing the flow of investment and overall perception of the country.

Like in many post-Soviet countries, the culture of corruption is widespread within Kazakhstan's weakly coordinated governance system. The government perceives corruption as a serious issue directly threatening national security and urges both the governmental bodies and Kazakhstani citizens to collectively eliminate it (Kazakhstan 2050). Kazakhstan established an anti-corruption agency and implemented a number of initiatives as well as the Presidential addresses continuously emphasize the destructiveness of corruption for the state and its future (Akorda 2012). President Tokayev warned that if civil servants are found guilty of corruption, their chiefs will be held accountable for their subordinates, too, and must resign right away. By weakening the public trust in the government and its leaders, corruption not only erodes state legitimacy and jeopardizes stability, but also intensifies a brain drain due to people's frustration (Johnson and Gentles-Peart 2019).

According to Transparency International, the corruption perception index, Kazakhstan was ranked 113th out of 180 listed countries by scoring 34 (100 being the least corrupt and 0 the most corrupt). Thus, although demonstrating the best results among Central Asian states, Kazakhstan has a long way to go in its efforts to eliminate corruption. The perception of corruption severely disrupts Kazakhstan's image-building efforts. As one interviewed state official said,

Expo and OSCE... all of these are great, and we got what we wanted. The number of times Kazakhstan was mentioned in international media has grown significantly, and the world has heard about us. It is indeed a valuable achievement. But, at the same time, a truly strong brand requires complex measures, including the quality of governance. The brand embraces many different aspects of the country. Just think how anyone could be convinced to do business here if we have such a perception of the rule of law and corruption in the country.

Moreover, besides being a separate element of the nation's brand, branding initiatives implemented in other spheres can suffer and have opposite effects due to corruption scandals associated with them. The corruption case during EXPO-2017, a branding initiative held in the capital city under the theme of 'Future Energy', is one example. The event that was expected to bring millions of tourists to Kazakhstan and improve the country's international reputation has ironically become known for corruption during the construction stage in 2015. A chief executive of the Astana EXPO-2017, Talgat Yermegiyaev, was accused of embezzlement of around \$22.4 million. The case received increased attention since the Yermegiyaev's family was close to the then-president Nazarbayev. They were co-owners of several businesses with Nazarbayev's daughter and son-in-law (Sorbello 2015). In addition, the director of the construction company that had won a public tender was also accused of corruption. A similar case took place during another mega-event, the 2011 Asian Winter Games, when its chief organizer was found guilty of embezzling more than \$3million (Bartlett 2015). In this regard, the interviewed public policy expert claimed that

Kazakhstan has huge potential and resources to build its soft power, yet it must overcome the problem of corruption. Otherwise, the needed effect from branding campaigns would be impossible to achieve.

Similarly, the interviewed coordinators of the latest cultural initiatives, such as Focus Kazakhstan 2019 and Venice Biennale 2020, also revealed how the culture of corruption and unprofessionalism of the involved government bodies damaged the Kazakhstani arts society's international reputation. Focus Kazakhstan, the project implemented within the framework of the Rukhani Zhangyru program, is a major exhibition that traveled to London, Berlin, South Korea, and New Jersey in 2019. The main purpose of the project was to familiarise the global art elite with the country's largely unknown culture. The project was sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and Sports and the National Museum of the Republic. Yet, again, the company that won the tender to organize the project and was responsible for transportation, storage, and payments ended up not paying the local and international partners for their work during the exhibition and the logistic company that, in response, refused to return the art pieces to their owners. The international art-related news website published the article in the aftermath of the exhibition, in which the New York and Berlin-based curators of the exhibition expressed their discontent with the situation (Aisarov 2019). The New York-based curator claimed that "it was unexpected given that the governmental body such as the Ministry of Culture as well as the National Museum was involved. I was sure that it would go smoothly". The hired logistics firm also claimed that the contractor company had not paid it, and thus it refused to return more than 200 pieces of art. In this regard, the respondent from the National Museum shared her resentment

The BBK Pro, a private company, which nobody knows was hired by the Ministry of Culture and Sports. It was paid all the budget allocated for the project and had to manage the project from its start to the end, although the company has no experience in organizing events of that

level. Not only did it not pay for the transportation of the works, but it also avoided payment of debts to international partners, who fully fulfilled their obligations. The situation is scandalous. The reputation of the country and Kazakhstani art institutions were severely damaged by such unprofessional behavior.

A similar incident occurred this year with the Venice Biennale 2020, the world's prestigious forum of contemporary art. Yet this time, Kazakhstan's participation was abruptly canceled just one month before the opening of the event for no clear reason (Davies 2019). The Ministry of Culture approved that Kazakhstan would participate and have its pavilion at the event. The representatives of the Ministry signed contracts with two international organizers that had to manage the event. A lot of work has been done by the international organizers and the local artists: they had to develop the whole concept of Kazakhstan's pavilion, select the art pieces that would have been presented, as well as translate all the documentation into Italian. However, when the participation of Kazakhstan had to be confirmed and the rent as well other fees had to be paid, the government suddenly said that the project would not be funded and refused to provide any explanation. The costs of the work that had been completed for five months of preparatory work were not covered too. The curator of the project said the incident significantly disrupts Kazakhstan's image among the global art elite, and it is unlikely that the country's bid to participate will be accepted in the future since it is an international scandal. The interviewed Kazakhstani artist that is often involved in the processes of various projects of National Museum shared that

It was a major opportunity for the country to boost its international image. It is literally a PR event effectively enhancing the country's profile in the eyes of foreigners. But the opportunity was missed, and I think it once again highlights the seriousness of a deeply rooted corruption problem and ineffective post-Soviet centralized governance system.

Indeed, the path the Kazakhstani government has taken to enhance its soft power is controversial and brings up many questions. The branding efforts of Kazakhstan mainly strive

to project the image that emphasizes the country's zeal for innovation and knowledge for the sake of economic development, its rich history, and unique culture, touristic sites, and a friendly foreign policy. State elites allocate considerable resources to convey such a vision of the country, while at the same time, the country remains unknown for its, for instance, human rights records, improvement of which is likely to undermine the government's capacity to manage and control its citizens. Such an approach to nation branding, however, starts to make sense if we look at it through the prism of nation-building and power legitimation.

The analysis of national strategies reflecting the state narrative on nation-building and the country's path of development, clearly demonstrated that the primary priority for the state is economical and social stability that can only be achieved by the unity of the forward-looking nation, whereas democratic institutions will allegedly be developed steadily in an "evolutionary, not revolutionary" pace (Akorda 2017). Hence, the implemented nation branding initiatives selectively highlight the aspects of the nation, thereby reinforcing the internal official discourse on nation-building. In fact, this is reflected in the leading nation branding indexes which reveal that Kazakhstan's nation brand value is strengthened mainly by its multi-vector foreign policy, active stance on global security and peace, as well as the internationally recognized cultural heritage sites, whereas the indicators of, for example, freedom of speech and governance lowers the overall effectiveness of the brand (CountryBrand 2019; Future Brand 2019). Indeed, domestically, the social contract between the Kazakhstani regime and its population is based on the consensus that the general stability of the nation is more important than the individual rights of those who reject such consensus (Laruelle 2015). In this context, heavily investing in soft power initiatives allows the regime to remain in power by ensuring the acceptance and constant reinforcement of the conveyed vision of the nation without resorting to coercion. Yet, such kind of social contract is shaky and can be challenged by an economic crisis and revolutionary moods when the population does not witness the

expected economic development and improvement in living standards promised by the state. Hence, in case of various issues that might appear to challenge the state capacity to provide “the number one priority” - economic progress and social stability - it is questionable whether soft power initiatives would prove an effective instrument for regime legitimation. Thus, truly positive perception of the country both at the international and domestic realms can effectively be ensured only by taking a complex approach that implies a serious commitment to large-scale reforms within all aspects of the government.

Chapter 6. Conclusion

Nation branding is a relatively new academic field that has received increasing attention from scholars from numerous different disciplines. The most basic interpretation of the concept underlines its roots in the corporate business domain and goes to compare the nation to the product that has to be marketed to consumers (Anholt 2016). As such, nation branding is commonly defined as a process by which countries seek to create an attractive image and manipulate its external perception. The process of branding a nation involves a broad array of activities from an advertisement on TV and journals to much more extensive public diplomacy initiatives. In effect, since it deals with international positioning and perception of a state, nation branding is often referred to as an effective soft power building tool. As Szondi (2008) claims, by engaging in branding activities, most developing states seek to overcome the problem of international ignorance and portray itself as a legitimate entity not only on paper but also in the minds of the public. At the same time, however, while the branding part of the concept is comparatively straightforward, the nation is a complex political and social construct that can hardly be branded as a usual commercial product. Hence, the process of nation branding entails numerous questions regarding what the promoted image should look like and who decides. Indeed, nation branding is inherently intertwined with the political discourses within the state, and in the case of Kazakhstan, the enthusiastically implemented branding initiatives took place in the backdrop of the post-Soviet nation-building efforts of the government.

In this thesis, I have critically examined Kazakhstan's nation branding efforts mainly controlled and implemented by the government. This has been done by analyzing the content of the official documents as well as interviewing civil servants, experts, and individuals that have been directly engaged in the branding processes. By doing so, I argue that nation branding

in the context of Kazakhstan serves as both a soft power-enhancing and nation-building tool of the state. As such, the constructed image depicting Kazakhstan as a progressively developing, forward-looking and peaceful country with a rich history and unique culture not only increases the country's visibility and positions it as a responsible and legitimate international player; but also, such an image is fully consistent with the internal state narrative on nation-building thus allowing the state elites to convey and consolidate their vision of the nation and path of its development. Proactive foreign policy stance and numerous public policy initiatives of the state are employed to differentiate the country from other post-Soviet "stans" and to build a unique brand. At the same time, all of these efforts have been taking place in the multi-ethnic social environment that hindered the process of building a cohesive national identity. Thus, nation branding has enabled the state to reproduce the official identity discourse characterizing the Kazakhstani nation as tolerant, pragmatic, and future-oriented. Furthermore, the achievements showcased by branding initiatives are continuously linked to the leadership of the state by emphasizing their effective rule. This, in turn, leads to the further reinforcement of the legitimacy of the regime.

At the same time, by interviewing nation branding specialists and individuals that have been participating in the government's numerous branding activities, I have discussed what significantly disrupts the Kazakhstani brand value. Brand of the nation is complex and embraces all aspects of the country, thus selectively focusing on certain aspects of the brand while neglecting others is unlikely to result in a successful brand. Indeed, the Kazakhstani government often justify spending public resources on branding projects by referring to their importance for the economic well-being of the country. Yet, the quality of governance, corruption level, and the overall infrastructure within the country still requires major improvements. The point is that nation branding has indeed become an essential part of modern states' national policies, yet it can hardly be employed as a panacea since an effective brand

should reflect reality. The nation branding initiatives of, for example, Spain, often referred to as the most successful case (Dinnie 2008), were implemented after numerous significant transformations took place within the country. That is, while certainly necessity of the highly globalized world, nation branding is, above all, a marketing strategy that only works when it delivers what has been promised.

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