

Political invention of the World Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan

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Abstract

This paper examines ‘invention’ of a new ‘tradition’, that is of nomadic games in Kyrgyzstan blessed by its prehistoric past of nomadism. Since 2012 the Kyrgyz government had introduced the World Nomad Games (the WNGs) in Kyrgyzstan. The country hosted three spectacular games in the northern oblast of the country – Yssyk-Kul. Hundreds of sportsmen worldwide took part in these events and thousands of tourists rushed into the country to watch the games. In fact, Kyrgyz nomadic games are more than just a revival of old nomadic traditions, but they are political inventions. Using Hobsbawm’s framework of ‘invented traditions’ (1983), I examine the World Nomad Games as invented tradition. I argue that the Kyrgyz leadership invented tradition of nomadic games to tackle with contemporary issues, such as a need for attraction of foreign investment and promotion of tourism. As I illustrate the WNGs project was a timely response to improve the country image after a series of political instabilities the country underwent in its recent history.

Keywords

invented traditions, games, nomad, nomadic, the World Nomad Games, foreign investment, tourism, Kyrgyzstan

Introduction

The early years of Kyrgyzstan’s independence were marked by large national projects, such as Manas epic’s 1000-year anniversary celebration in 1995, Osh city’s 3000-year anniversary in 2000, and Kyrgyzstan’s 2200-year anniversary in 2003. After a nearly a decade of ‘silence’, it was only in 2012, when Kyrgyzstan again invested into spectacular mass events under the slogan of nomadism. Almazbek Atambaev’s leadership introduced to the world the World Nomad Games¹ during the Summit of the Turkic Council in 2012, and the Turkic Council member-states unanimously supported this idea. It was only on 19th of May 2014 when the Kyrgyz government issued a decree announcing preparations for the first WNGs. The decree

¹ In Kyrgyz *Duinoluk Kochmondor Oiunday*, in Russian *Vsemirnye Igry Kochevnikov* (in brief *VIK*).

outlined the Organization Committee of the WNGs and other responsible bodies. It was decided that the nomad games project would ‘sell’ to international spectators Kyrgyz nomadic history, nomadic culture and traditions. Thus the World Nomad Games offered three main thematic components: sports games, a cultural part and a scientific part. Overall, the project was aimed at promotion of international tolerance and diversity. These games claimed to be a nomadic alternative of the World Olympic Games, with 37 kinds of nomadic sports, starting from hunting and horse riding, and finishing with arm-wrestling and intellectual games.

There is a large literature on cultural performances and sports. Major group of existing scholarship examines theatre and performances as politically active and points out to their ability to affect national identities.² For instance, a volume edited by Nadine Holdsworth states that “theatre is part of an ongoing dialogue, a constant *re-imagining* of what the nation is, constitutes and means in any given moment.” (emphasis original)³ This collection of essays illustrates how theatre and performances present and contest ideas about nation and national identity:

“The theatre, taking place in a communal public arena, can be one of the ways that members of a nation contribute to public discourse, a national conversation, which opens up the possibility for reflection and debate.”⁴

Helen Gilbert’s remarks are also strong in this sense:

“Always ... theatre becomes, at formative moments in the ongoing narrative of nationhood, a means by which communities register, reiterate and/or contest modes and models of national belonging.”⁵

As Billig put the power of performances or theatres in inducing a national identity lays in overstatement of the word ‘we’ and ‘us’ as people belonging to one nation⁶. Likewise Hurley⁷ in her study observed that performances become ‘national’ due to ‘representational’ and ‘emotional’ ‘labors’. She wrote that representational labors which induce nationness are performances which are based on largely accepted existing beliefs or ideas about a nation. Emotional labors are those performances which also generate and experience strong shared emotions and feelings of unity. This is especially true in small nations like Scotts and

² see Gounaridou 2005, Hurley 2011, Holdsworth 2014

³ HOLDSWORTH, Nadine. *Theatre and National Identity. Re-imagining Conceptions of Nation*. New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 3.

⁴ HOLDSWORTH, Nadine. *c. d.*, Introduction.

⁵ HOLDSWORTH, Nadine. *c. d.*, p. 2.

⁶ EDENSOR, Tim. *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. Berg: Oxford, 2002, p.11.

⁷ HURLEY, Erin. *National Performance: Representing Quebec from Expo 67 to Céline Dion*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.

Catalans who see theatre as a way of expressing their national distinctiveness vis-à-vis big nations⁸.

In his seminal work Smith wrote that “distinctive ethnic histories, ethnic myths and territorial associations”⁹ are key resources of modern nationalism. National heroes, national myths and national histories are sources of deep feelings of dignity (ibid.). Theatres and performances representing these ‘deep’ motifs might serve as powerful tools for the emergence of nationalism. As Smith put nations glorify their ‘golden age’ or are proud of an “era distinguished for its collective dignity and external prestige”¹⁰. Golden ages are important because they inspire and motivate national ‘regeneration’:

“This is important, exactly because most nationalisms, viewed from inside, start out from a sense of decline, alienation and inner exile, and go on to promise renewal, reintegration and restoration to a former glorious state.”¹¹

And they emphasize a feeling of ‘collective destiny’:

“The road that the community expects to take in each generation is inspired and shaped by its memories of former heroic ages. Their values and symbols form the basis and spur to heroic feats of communal self-sacrifice in the future, a future that can become as glorious and fulfilling as the days of old.”¹²

In post-Soviet space too theatre and performances were used to build new ideologies and nationalisms. For instance, Laura Adams¹³ examines how the Uzbek state used so-called ‘spectacles’ on national celebrations to construct a new nation. For Adams it was striking to observe that the same officials who were involved in building communism during the Soviet era were involved in building a new Uzbek nation after the Soviet collapse¹⁴. In the age of nationalism, nations which do not possess rich ethno-histories, lack beliefs of religious election or do not have shared myths or sacred lands had to ‘invent’ them.¹⁵ Post-Soviet Central Asian states were not exceptions to this rule. During a period of early independence, the leaders of these countries re-wrote national histories, invented national myths and

⁸ BLANDFORD, Steve. ed. *Theatre and Performance in Small Nations*. Bristol: Intellect, 2013.

⁹ SMITH, Anthony. *Myths and Memories of the Nation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 255.

¹⁰ SMITH, Anthony. *c. d.*, p. 263.

¹¹ SMITH, Anthony. *c. d.*, p. 264.

¹² Ibidem

¹³ ADAMS, Laura. *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

¹⁴ Ibidem

¹⁵ SMITH, Anthony. *c. d.*

heroes¹⁶. Theatres and performances among many other forms such as festivals, celebrations and sports also become key events of expressing distinctive national identities¹⁷. For some states, however, these big spectacular events were more than a mere nation-building efforts. They served to address a much broad umbrella of national issues, namely economic and political ones. As I illustrate further in the paper, in Kyrgyzstan, WNGs were also projects aimed at promotion of tourism and foreign investment. Using, Hobsbawm's framework of 'invention of tradition' I argue that the Kyrgyz leadership 'invented' these games in order to address present-day issues.

I start my paper by discussing Hobsbawm's framework of invented traditions and explain why the World Nomad Games are better explained as invented tradition. Then I give a brief information and statistics about the World Nomad Games. Later, I recap certain modern domestic needs which led to creation of nomadic sports and I analyze president Atambaev's keynote speech delivered during the opening of the first nomadic games through content analysis to find out more about the official narratives of the invented tradition of nomadic games. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on a broader implication of the WNGs in Kyrgyzstan and in the region. Namely, I comment about increasing 'trend of nomadism' among citizens and use of 'nomadism brand' by other states.

Invented traditions and Invention of the World Nomad Games

In their influential volume called "The invention of tradition" Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger¹⁸ present number of examples of inventing traditions and rituals in Europe and Africa. Hobsbawm writes that traditions "which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented"¹⁹. The authors use a term 'invented tradition' in the following meaning:

"It includes both 'traditions' actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period – a matter of a few years perhaps – and establishing themselves with great rapidity."²⁰

¹⁶ see Akaev 2002, March 2002, Horak 2005, Kokaisl and Kokaislová 2009, Blakkisrud and Nozimova 2010, Jacquesson 2021.

¹⁷ Adams and Rustemova 2009, Adams 2010.

¹⁸ HOBBSAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

¹⁹ HOBBSAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 1.

²⁰ *Ibidem*

‘Invented tradition’ is symbolic in its nature and it is aimed to indoctrinate or encourage “certain values and norms of behaviour” among societies through an act of “repetition”.²¹ According to Hobsbawm ‘invented traditions’ are “responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition”.²² Inventing traditions is “a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past”.²³

Why do ruler need traditions? Hobsbawm observes that it is the “constant change and innovation of the modern world” that pushes the governments to “attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant”.²⁴ In other words, it is a wish of the rulers to maintain some ‘traditions’ static and fixed, not impacted by modern patterns, which make the rulers interested in keeping traditions. Hobsbawm notes increase of inventing of traditions in the era of a “rapid transformation of society” because the transformation or modernization abolishes “the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed”.²⁵ Very important is to highlight application of “ancient materials” in inventing traditions “of a novel type for quite novel purposes”.²⁶ For example, among novel traditions for novel purposes Hobsbawm lists national symbols, such as flags, anthems which are new inventions.²⁷

As per Hobsbawm there are three kinds of purposes of inventing traditions: a) founding national cohesion or nation-building, b) institution-building or legitimizing institutions, c) socialization.²⁸ Hobsbawm points application of “history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion”.²⁹ He observes that political actors, various movements and factions historically used to invent fake or semi-fake historic past, not only for nationalism purposes. By history Hobsbawm means “the people’s past,” “heroes and martyrs,” and “memories”.³⁰

Hobsbawm’s work deserves a more detailed attention here because it lays down a conceptual framework of the paper, in particular it stresses a deliberate nature of inventions. In other words, Hobsbawm points to instrumental function of invention of tradition. Most of

²¹ HOBSBAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*

²² HOBSBAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 2.

²³ HOBSBAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 4.

²⁴ HOBSBAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 2.

²⁵ HOBSBAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 4.

²⁶ HOBSBAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 6.

²⁷ HOBSBAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*

²⁸ HOBSBAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 9.

²⁹ HOBSBAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 13.

³⁰ HOBSBAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 13.

rituals and traditions which are perceived as ancient are not ancient indeed claims Hobsbawm. He states that invention of traditions is more a political act and they are “deliberate” and “systematic”³¹, invented traditions serve certain social and political objectives.³² His chapter illustrates the 19th century Europe which under social transformation from empires into republics underwent ‘mass-generation of traditions’ such as: public ceremonies, production of monuments, anniversaries, commemorations, rituals and public festivities. According to Hobsbawm, these innovative ‘devices’ or traditions were needed for newly introduced modern states in order to obtain political loyalty: “the state ... raised unprecedented problems of how to maintain or even establish obedience, loyalty and cooperation of its subjects or members, or its own legitimacy in their eyes.”³³ Especially ‘new states’ were lacking political legitimacy.³⁴

Kyrgyzstan being a relatively ‘new state’ which underwent series of political instabilities in 2005 and 2010 needed a tradition of nomadism for rather practical or economic purposes, namely for promotion of tourism and branding the country. Originally, the term “World Nomad Games” was coined during the scholarly-practical conference titled “National physical culture and national sports games: current situation and prospects of future development” which was held in Bishkek in 2007 under the support of the Kyrgyz State Academy of physical culture and sport. The idea of nomadic games belonged to Askhat Akibaev, the head of Ethno-games confederation.³⁵ Akibaev proposed the concept of “World Nomad Games” as a means of promoting national (ethnic) sports on the international level. For the Kyrgyz leadership, the idea of World Nomad Games was more than just a promotion of ethno-sport abroad. In particular, the President’s Apparatus wanted to make the WNGs Kyrgyzstan’s ‘business card’ (in Russian *vizitnaia kartochka*).³⁶ In addition, there were also other public opinions who shared the view that the WNGs should be associated with Kyrgyzstan and should not be passed to other countries, like the Olympic Games are. For example, the former minister of culture of Kyrgyzstan, Sultan Raev suggested to host the WNGs only in Kyrgyzstan in order to make the WNGs a new national brand of Kyrgyzstan. This idea was shared by then deputy-head of Ministry of culture, tourism and information of

³¹ HOBBSAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 282.

³² HOBBSAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 307.

³³ HOBBSAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*, p. 265.

³⁴ HOBBSAWM, Eric; RANGER, Terence eds. *c. d.*

³⁵ World Ethnogames Confederation: О проекте Всемирные Игры Кочевников [About the project World Nomad Games], n.d., <https://weconfederation.com/wec/vik> (accessed 14 January 2021).

³⁶ *Ibidem*

the Kyrgyz Republic, Azamat Zhamankulov. For instance, in 2016, during the meeting of the Council on Tourism in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)³⁷ Zhamankulov said:

“We have to have a kind of annual brand-event [in Kyrgyzstan] about which tourists are aware and plan their trips accordingly. There are many similar events in the world which are associated with one country. For instance, we watch carnivals from Brazil but not the USA. Bullfighting is held only in Spain, and many tourists go there to watch them. The World Nomad Games should become a similar brand-event.”³⁸

Similarly, in 2016 during the press-conference after the first World Nomad Games Sapar Isakov, the deputy-head of the President’s Apparatus, stated the following:

“The entire world has learned about such a small and democratic country as Kyrgyzstan. The games pushed a genuine interest in all countries in the world. Each country has its ethnic games. A decision was made to hold them [the World Nomad Games] once in two years and *only in Kyrgyz land*.”³⁹ (emphasis are mine)

Askhat Akibaev, the author of World Nomad Games, currently the head of Ethno-games confederation, later also emphasized that the WNG is ethno-sport tourist festival and is a touristic brand of Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁰ He noted the following:

“World Nomad Games – *is our product*. For instance, Kazakhstan arranged Great games of the steppes. While *nomad games – are ours*. One does not need to prepare for these games for eight years. They are more democratic games. Olympics – is for rich [countries]. There are more than 200 countries in the world – and only very few can afford Olympics. But in the format of world ethno-games *each country can be represented*. It is *a new format* [of games], each country can display own settlement [culture] – wigwams,urts, tents. We have to demonstrate diversity and beauty of each nation.”⁴¹ (emphasis are mine)

Finally, Sapar Isakov during the interview for a media outlet stated that the World Nomad Games became Kyrgyzstan’s brand:

“the World nomad games should be held twice a year *only in Kyrgyzstan* ... I think that the initiative about holding *World nomad games will be written in golden letters*

³⁷ CIS established in 1991 by the initiative of former Soviet states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan.

³⁸ Sputnik Kyrgyzstan: Глава департамента туризма: Игры кочевников должны остаться в Кыргызстане [Head of the tourism department: Nomad games should remain in Kyrgyzstan], 8 July 2016, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/culture/20160708/1027457694.html> (accessed 15 January 2021).

³⁹ Sputnik Kyrgyzstan: Исаков: Игры кочевников будут проводиться только в Кыргызстане [Isakov: Nomad Games will be held only in Kyrgyzstan], 8 September 2016, <https://ru.sputnik.kg/society/20160908/1029088777.html> (accessed 15 January 2021).

⁴⁰ RIA Novosti: На Всемирные игры кочевников в Киргизии пригласили представителей 40 стран [Representatives of 40 states were invited for World nomad games in Kyrgyzstan], 21 June 2016, <https://ria.ru/20160621/1449422477.html> (accessed 12 January 2021).

⁴¹ Ibidem

in the history of our state. In addition, I can say for sure that *this initiative will be written in the history of world development and global peace*. To document this event and to mention about it in the history of the UN, Kyrgyzstan suggested about this idea during the 71-st General assembly of the UN Kyrgyzstan.”⁴² (emphasis are mine)

Thus, for the Kyrgyz leadership, nomadism became an opportunity to create a new national brand and a new country image, which the country lost in the course of series of coups in 2005 and 2010, and the bloody inter-ethnic conflict in Osh. Since turmoil in 2005 Kyrgyzstan became internationally known as the country of political instabilities which put at risk a potential of international investment and tourism. Apart from these major country image-related issues, Atambaev’s rule also lacked a popular support. First Atambaev’s policies, namely his decision about the entrance to the Eurasian Economic Union⁴³ (the EaEU) in 2015 was largely criticized by local entrepreneurs and farmers. Kyrgyz agricultural products were blocked on the borders with Kazakhstan preventing their further export to Russia. As noted by the head of the business association “Jash Ishkerler Assotsiatsiasy” local entrepreneurs faced a big loss within the EaEU because of new bureaucratic regulations, such as certification of products.⁴⁴ Finally, during the presidency of Atambaev international relations of Kyrgyzstan with several countries had worsened because of Atambaev’s ‘emotional’ speeches addressed to presidents of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkey and Tajikistan.⁴⁵ As a result, the Kyrgyz leadership needed a new grand project to ‘overshadow’ an umbrella of existing national issues, such as improving the national image of the country tourism and foreign investment, improving complicated international relations with neighbouring states. A timing was right and accurate to invent and invest into the project of the World Nomad Games –games inspired by its prehistoric past of nomadism. Before we move on to discuss in detail the President Almazbek Atambaev’s opening speech at the first World Nomad Games, in the following section I briefly present related information on the first WNGs.

⁴² Cabar: Сапар Исаков о Вторых Всемирных играх кочевников [Sapar Isakov about the Second World nomad games], 11 October 2016, <https://www.for.kg/news-383021-ru.html> (accessed 22 January 2021).

⁴³ The Russian-led union was established in 2015, other member-states are Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus and Armenia.

⁴⁴ Azattyk: Кыргызстан и ЕАЭС: плюсы и минусы четырехлетнего пребывания в организации [Kyrgyzstan and the EaEU: pros and cons of four-years membership in the organization], 30 August 2019, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/kyrgyzstan-economy-eurazes/30137604.html> (accessed 7 February 2021).

⁴⁵ See the video here to watch Atambaev’s impolite speeches addressed to the presidents of neighbouring states. Source: AzattyqTV, <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kyrgyzstan-atambaev-rezkie-vyskazyvaniya/28873846.html>

Kyrgyzstan's new 'business card': The first World Nomad Games

The first WNG were held in September 9-14th in 2014 and attracted 583 sportsmen from 19 countries.⁴⁶ 1,200 people were involved into the mass performances under World Nomad Games. Ten kinds of ethno-sport games were played.⁴⁷ International TV broadcasting channels⁴⁸ from 40 countries with auditory of 230 million people reported about the WNG from Cholpon-Ata city. The opening ceremony of the first WNG lasted for two hours and included 14 theatrical performances. The ceremony was staged at the city hippodrome. Performances reflected the history of nomadic Kyrgyz, the epic Manas, and national songs and dances. After the WNG's official opening sports tournaments lasted for six days. Tournaments were split into two locations: the city hippodrome for horseback games and the historical cultural centre "Ruh-Ordo" for intellectual games. Simultaneously in Kyrchyn ethno-village a special nomadic programme was organized. 150 decorated *boz ui* representing all regions of Kyrgyzstan were installed in Kyrchyn and displayed national traditions and customs. Various festivals, such as "Nomad folk"⁴⁹ and "Dastarkon"⁵⁰ were held in Kyrchyn valley. In addition, "Ruh-Ordo" centre hosted an exhibition of nomadic craftsmen, "Ethno Fashion" fashion show and "Ordo-Sakhna" folk theatre. Kyrgyzstan spent 200 million KGS for the organization of the first WNG. In addition, around 11 million KGS were spent for the reconstruction of old city hippodrome. Entrance to the tournaments and to other festivals and events under the first WNG were free of charge, except for opening and closing ceremonies. The closing ceremony was accompanied with a laser-show and a concert featuring local and international singers and dancers. Kyrgyzstan took a leading position in the first WNG. In total Kyrgyzstan earned 55 medals (16 gold, 20 silver and 19 bronze). Kazakhstan took the second place with total 28 medals (10 gold, 9 silver and 9 bronze). Turkmenistan earned in total 6 medals (3 gold and 3 bronze) and received the third place. The total prize fund

⁴⁶ Afghanistan, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Brazil, France, Germany, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Mongolia, Russia, South Korea, Sweden, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, USA, Uzbekistan. For more details about the first WNG visit: <http://worldnomadgames.com/ru/page/VIK-2014/>

⁴⁷ *Alysh* (wrestling with belts), *alaman baige* (horse racing for a long distance), *jorgo salysh* (horse-racing on footsteps-horses), Kazakh *kurosh* (Kazakh wrestling), Kyrgyz *kurosh* (Kyrgyz wrestling), *kok boru* (a horseback team game with a headless goat), *kunan chabysh* (horse racing of three-year old horses), *ordo* (Kyrgyz national game in the knucklebones), *toguz korgool* (Kyrgyz national intellectual table game), *er enish* (horseback wrestling).

⁴⁸ 250 international journalists from foreign TV broadcasting channels such as BBC, CNN, The Guardian, Washington Post, Al Jazeera and others broadcasted WNG from Cholpon-Ata.

⁴⁹ A nomadic music festival

⁵⁰ A nomadic food festival

consisted of 16 million KGS. Following the success of the first World Nomad Games in 2014, the Kyrgyz leadership decided to hold these games once in two years. Consequently, the games were held again in 2016 and 2018. However, during the closing event in 2018 then President Sooronbai Jeenbekov declared that these games will be transferred like the Olympic Games from one participating state to another, and announced Turkey as the second destination. At the moment, the games scheduled for 2020 were rescheduled by Turkey because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Official narratives of the Nomad Games: Atambaev's keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the first World Nomad Games in 2014

In this part of the paper, I examine President Atambaev's speech delivered on September 9th 2014 during the opening ceremony of the first WNGs.⁵¹ As noted earlier the opening speech of Atambaev provides an official account on the invented tradition of nomad games. The official account versus the real-world accounts mentioned in the section two of the paper (namely a need for improving the national image of the country to develop tourism and foreign investment, improving complicated international relations with neighboring states) is especially noteworthy.

Opening speech of Atambaev consisted of three main parts delivered in turn in Kyrgyz and Russian languages. In the first part of the speech, Atambaev welcomed the guests and the spectators and thanked the presidents of Kazakhstan, Turkey and Azerbaijan for supporting the initiative on the WNGs which he proposed during the Bishkek summit in 2012. Atambaev noted that the WNG was a great event in the life of Kyrgyzstan and the country was very proud of it. Then Atambaev paused on who nomads were:

“The nomads stayed at the beginning of the human civilization history, and are nations which had a distinctive contribution to humankind's development. We are responsible for studying lives of our ancestors and nomadic philosophy. The ones who know own roots and their past can find a way to the future.”

Then Atambaev emphasized about a special relationship between Kyrgyzstan and nomads, he said:

⁵¹ To access a full text of Atambaev's keynote speech at the first WNG visit the following link: President.kg: Выступление Президента Кыргызской Республики Алмазбека Атамбаева на открытии I Всемирных игр кочевников [Speech of President of the Kyrgyz Republic Almazbek Atambaev during the opening of the I World nomad games], 9 September 2014, http://president.kg/ru/sobytiya/novosti/2276_vistuplenie_prezidenta_kirgizskoy_respubliki_almazbeka_atambaeva_na_otkritii_i_vsemirnih_igr_kochevnikov (accessed 27 January 2021).

“It is not just a concurrence that the beginning of nomad games is taking place in Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz nation – is the one of those who founded the nomadic civilization, it is one of nations which led it [the nomadic civilization], it is rich in history and traditions and customs.”

Concluding the first part of the speech Atambaev highlighted that a better future was only in unity and cooperation between the countries:

“Let us together build a future by remembering heritage of our ancestors and their sacred words! Let the God to bright our way! Only in unity with kin nations and partner states we can pass this path! We have a common background. Similar to the Father Manas who “made a nation from split tribes,” let us make our lives together with other nations and kin nations!”

In the next part of his speech Atambaev called the WNG – a unique game because of its new format. He described in brief that the games had unique spectacular events. The president noted that most of modern sports emerged from ancient war tournaments. Atambaev believed that sports would unite nations, strengthen friendship and harmony between the nations. Then Atambaev again paused to speak about nomadic civilization and its importance:

“Many states had disappeared from the world map for the last centuries. Many nations had vanished. However, the spirit of nomadic civilization is going on. Its strength – is its ability be in a harmony with the nature and ever-changing world. This is in particular is important in our century – the century of transformations and globalization. Nomadic nations had always respected their past, had remembered own ancestors, they had generated legends about own heroes and passed them from one generation to another. Thus, for Kyrgyz nation a spiritual power comes from the millennial epic Manas, other nations also have own great heroes and works. Even if our history is not reflected in ancient stone cities, it lives in our hearts, in memory of peoples. It is important for us to remember our past, remember our roots. We have many things in common. We have common roots. I am sure that our future is also one!”

In the second part of his speech Atambaev emphasized importance of cooperation and friendship in the following way:

“Today we – the descendants of nomadic nations, are responsible for reviving in our hearts spirits of our fathers and mothers, souls and are responsible for reviving civic feelings. Let us learn to live in peace, let us stop conflicts, let us remember our history and roots, and *only* then we can have a bright and great future. It seems that the ancient and the present eras are facing each other in the shores of a sacred Yssyk-Kol! These games will disseminate to the world the history, talents, culture and nature of nomadic nations, and will improve our unity and exercises our peace.”

In the third part of his speech Atambaev turned to Kyrgyz citizens and noted that the World Nomad Games are a special occasion which would improve tourism and development of the Yssyk-Kol region and advertise Kyrgyzstan worldwide, therefore, he asked the citizens to be helpful in making the games successful:

“World Nomad games which we are launching today will certainly develop tourism to our country, especially will contribute to Yssyk-Kol oblast’s development. It is the best advertisement of Kyrgyzstan to the world! Therefore, for the sake of our country, we ask you not do breach public order, respect our guests and let us hold [the games] on a high level.”

Afterwards, Atambaev turned to participating sportsmen and wished them a good luck. He reminded them that they were descents of great nomads such as – Attila, Oguz Khan, Manas, Chenghiz Khan and Babur. He closed his speech by praying for a successful event, praying for prosperity, unity and peace for all, and declared the games open.

In the Table 1. below I identified five key themes in the keynote speech of the President Atambaev which provide a glimpse into official narrative of the invention of the nomadic tradition. These themes cover: nomadic civilization, nomadic heritage, Kyrgyz and nomadism, future (international) and future (domestic). Atambaev explained importance of the WNGs to the Kyrgyz nation both by economic benefits for the country and by nomadic spiritual judgements as descents of a great nomadic civilization. Atambaev stressed the spiritual rationale behind the WNGs by noting that Kyrgyzstan was not just a first random place to host these games, but it was a sacred nomadic land with a great history, unique culture and past and the Kyrgyz nation was one of founders of nomadic civilization and nomadic culture. Economic rationale behind the WNGs was noted by the President Atambaev too because the event would attract tourists and improve Kyrgyzstan’s international prestige making attractive country for investing. Atambaev saw these games as a means of international cooperation and partnership, and a prosperous future, he hoped that the WNGs would boost economic partnership with other states and increase international investment to Kyrgyzstan. To do so Atambaev attempted several times to highlight other states about their common nomadic background and (potentially) their common future. For that very reason Atambaev was also eager to hold the games annually and even declared the games annual in front of international guests, international mass media during the opening ceremony (although later it was decided to hold the WNGs once in two years but not annually). Thus the official reasoning of importance of the WNGs communicated to the nation was economic and spiritual ones (as a spiritual duty of nomadic descents). The central themes raised in the

speech support these claims: first, Atambaev reminded who were nomads, then he noted about nomadic heritage and mentioned about responsibility/duty of nomadic descents [also Kyrgyz nomads] and, finally, Atambaev discussed a future of nomadic states and the country's future, in particular how the WNGs would contribute to a better future.

Table 1. Central themes in Atambaev's speech during the I WNGs in 2014

Central themes:	Key words and phrases (rephrased and summarized):
Nomadic civilization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - founders of human civilization - had a contribution to mankind's development - the spirit of nomadic civilization goes on - nomads can stay in harmony with the nature - great nations
Nomadic heritage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - nomadic philosophy - we are responsible as descents to revive and remember - to know our past and our roots - legends from one generation to another - to respect and remember the ancestors and the past
Kyrgyz and nomadism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Kyrgyz are among the nations which founded, headed nomadic civilization - Kyrgyz have a rich nomadic culture and traditions
Future (international)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - we have a future if we know our past, if we remember our past - we have a better future if we [nomads] unite and cooperate - we can pass the path only in unity - we have a common background/roots and future - unity of nations, friendship and harmony - to learn to live in peace - to stop conflicts
Future (domestic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - development of tourism - development of regions - the country's advertisement on the global level (the WNGs is great, unique event) - Kyrgyz are proud of the WNGs - improvement of the country image

In this manner, the invention of the World Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan was a calculated political decision rather a pure cultural or social event. The Kyrgyz leadership invested in nomadism because it believed it will create a new national brand and a new country image, both of which are important for attracting foreign investments and tourism. The country lost its prestige as a stable country due to series of political coups in 2005 and 2010 which were followed by violence, looting and seizure of foreign businesses.

Conclusion

I examined the World Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan as a deliberate ‘invented tradition’ by the country’s leadership. I argued that the nomadic games were revived in order to tackle with contemporary issues, such as a need for attraction of foreign investment and promotion of tourism. In my paper I illustrated that the WNGs project was a timely response to improve the country image after a series of political instabilities in its recent history which undermined Kyrgyzstan’s international image and challenged it as a tourist and investment destination.

Two final remarks are essential to be mentioned here. First, the invention of the World Nomad Games led to increase of ‘trend of nomadism’ in Kyrgyzstan. Nomadism became associated with local businesses because they used official symbol of the World Nomad Games in producing T-shirts, souvenirs and other items which were sold to tourists and were used by local population. In addition, many new private tourist companies were opened in Kyrgyzstan after the WNGs which proudly present a special ‘nomadic’ programme, such as horse-riding, demonstration of hunting falcons, tasting nomadic cuisine, etc. Second point relates to the use of ‘nomadism brand’ by other states. The Kyrgyz government managed to successfully present idea of nomad games not only on national, but also on international level because nomadic sport and culture became increasingly popular outside Kyrgyzstan after a presentation of the WNGs. For instance, the Saudi Arabia expressed its interest in promoting nomadic culture. In 2019 the Saudi Arabia launched its International Ethno-festival “Nomad Universe” where more than 2,200 people from 95 states took part⁵². Similar to the WNGs, the Arabic ethno-festival combined both nomadic sport activities and nomadic cultural activities. Another important international development in promotion of nomadic culture which occurred after the WNGs was the initiative of UNESCO to hold the first World Ethno-sport

⁵² World Ethnogames Confederation: Международный этнофестиваль «Вселенная Кочевников» [International ethno-festival “Nomad Universe”], n.d., <https://weconfederation.com/wec/nu> (accessed 13 January 2021).

Games in 2021. Among the countries which applied for hosting UNESCO's World Ethno-sport Games are Kazakhstan, Turkey, Canada and South Korea.⁵³

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⁵³ Azattyk: Казахстан подал заявку на проведение первой этноолимпиады [Kazakhstan applied for hosting the first ethno-Olympics], 4 June 2018, <https://rus.azattyk.org/a/29269689.html> (accessed 16 January 2021).

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