



Popular geopolitics and nation branding in the post-soviet realm

Daniel Bos

To cite this article: Daniel Bos (2017): Popular geopolitics and nation branding in the post-soviet realm, *Social & Cultural Geography*, DOI: [10.1080/14649365.2017.1349038](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1349038)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1349038>



Published online: 07 Jul 2017.



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BOOK REVIEW

Popular geopolitics and nation branding in the post-soviet realm, by Robert A. Saunders, Oxon, Routledge, 2017, 259 pp., \$116.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-138-83017-2

Popular Geopolitics and Nation Branding in the Post-Soviet Realm explores the power of visual imagery in international politics and more recent practices in which nation states seek to differentiate themselves visually for social, political, and economic benefits through nation branding. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991, and the subsequent emergence of newly independent states of Eurasia, presents a fitting context in which to consider the various ways that visual imagery have become integral to the ways nation-states' are internally constituted, and how they become recognised on the wider global political stage. This monograph offers an original and important contribution to the study of visual culture and its implications on nationalism, geopolitics, and the framing of broader geographical imaginations.

The opening three chapters establish the theoretical and conceptual framework of the book, providing a detailed focus of: 'national image', 'nation branding', and 'popular geopolitics'. The 'national image' is defined as 'a fluid, socially constructed view of a nation' which 'exists on both the domestic and foreign level[s]' (p. 13). This national image emerges through two processes: the self-image which is how the nation views itself (Selbstbild), and secondly, by how the nation is perceived by others (Fremdbild). Considering the tension between the two remains the focus of the book. In recognising the importance of visual images, the practice of nation branding has become increasingly vital to a nation's reputation and constitution. Such practices have seen the strategic management, manipulation, and circulation of national images 'intended to alter global perception on the elite and mass levels' (p. 44). Successful examples, such as New Zealand and its uses of 'images of unspoiled nature' (p. 61), show how nations attempt to distinguish themselves and how they are becoming branded, commodified, and consumed within the international domain. The final conceptual discussion examines the field of popular geopolitics and the range of mass consumed cultural artefacts that are defined as key sources in framing geographical imaginations. An impressive number of examples and scholarly literature are presented and discussed. However, at times the sheer number of examples can be overwhelming, yet nonetheless they do help to frame the focus of the rest of the book. For those less familiar with the specific geographical case study, Chapter 4 provides an insightful overview of the emergent histories of the spaces and people of the post-Soviet Union.

The proceeding chapters provide empirical examples to illustrate the internalised and externalised imaginations of post-Soviet space. The 'post-soviet bogeyman' is the focus of chapter 5, whereby analysis of Western cinematic culture shows how films imbue post-Soviet people with villainous and distinctly 'othered' characterised traits. Here, a five-fold typology illustrates the varying ways this is achieved, whether this is the presentation of post-Soviet characters as 'mad scientists', 'terrorists', or 'revanchists' which are in stark contrast to Western depicted identities. The generic conventions of the film industry also offer a powerful means of framing geographical imaginaries of Post-Soviet spaces. Comedic and parodic cultural texts, such as the infamous *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* film which derided Kazakhstan, are suggested to produce 'laughable nations' and have real and long lasting implications for social and political relations (see Askarbekov 2016). Chapter 7 considers the

'geopolitical smear campaign' (p. 184) that has dogged the post-soviet spaces in popular culture, news media and academe. Landscape is presented as an integral way in which to consider the ways that post-soviet spaces are symbolically depicted as primitive, backward, and dangerous. The final empirical chapter focuses on the efforts of post-Soviet nations themselves and the ways in which they attempt to create their own national imagery. It offers an insight into the ways various state and non-state actors are enrolled into the complex processes of (re)writing and (re)imaging the nation via practices of nation branding. The examples of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania illustrate how these nations have attempted to overcome imaginaries that depict the Baltic States as homogenous and undifferentiated landmasses and how they have tried to carve out a distinct national identity.

Overall the book offers a compelling argument that draws attention to the interplay between visual culture, geopolitics, and nationalism. However, I would suggest there are a few limitations. The empirical chapters are mainly skewed towards examples that consider external western visualisations of post-soviet spaces. Further examples of post-soviet cultural depictions and internal practices of nation branding would have been good to see. Moreover, while the study of images, of visual cultures and representations remain important, there is a lack of empirical insights into the people who are involved in the production of these images, and how they are received by audiences, both internally and externally. Granted this is not the definitive focus of the book, yet this would offer further insights and areas of development that can further understand the role of visual imagery in the political world.

References

Askarbekov, Y. (2016). What Kazakhstan really thought of Borat. Retrieved May 31, 2017, from <https://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20161028-what-kazakhstan-really-thought-of-borat>

Daniel Bos
School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford
 daniel.bos@ouce.ox.ac.uk

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2017.1349038>

