

Published on *World Affairs Journal* (<http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org>)

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## The Winners and Losers of 'Nation-Branding'

Alexander J. Motyl



The following is an interview with [Robert Saunders](#) [1], a professor in the Department of History, Politics, and Geography at Farmingdale State College–SUNY and an expert on “nation-branding.”

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MOTYL: *Harper's* once called you the world's premier Boratologist. How and why did you come to study [the Borat phenomenon](#) [2]?

SAUNDERS: Shortly after returning to the US from my first visit to Kazakhstan in 2002, a friend told me I should check out HBO's *Da Ali G Show* because there was someone on the program pretending to be a Kazakhstani. At the time, I had only known Sacha Baron Cohen through his connection with Madonna, but soon I started paying attention to his farcical treatment of Kazakh culture via the character of Borat. A couple of years later, as I was wrapping up my dissertation on Russian national identity in Kazakhstan and other post-Soviet republics, Borat's hosting of the MTV Europe Music Awards triggered a major international imbroglio. Kazakhstan accused the British comedian of being the agent of foreign powers meaning harm to the country and then removed his website from Kazakhstani servers. Baron Cohen reacted swiftly, delivering a hilarious riposte in which he (as Borat) praised the government's decision to “sue this Jew” (i.e. himself) before inviting “captains of industry” to come to Kazakhstan, thus wryly skewering Astana's nation-branding efforts. Witnessing the ninth-largest country in the world (Kazakhstan) do battle with a satirical character (Borat), I decided it was important enough to start writing about from an academic perspective. By treating the subject as a serious event in international relations (despite the ridiculousness of it all), I started to be recognized as the “go-to” person for commentary on the Borat phenomenon, ultimately [authoring a book on the subject](#) [3] as well as

penning two articles, including one in the journal *Slavic Review*.

MOTYL: What are some of the Borat phenomenon's lessons for what you call "nation-branding"?

SAUNDERS: Kazakhstan was lucky enough to have Roman Vassilenko, an eloquent and forward-thinking press attaché, in the embassy in Washington when Borat started becoming a global phenomenon in 2005–2006. As the country was already spending millions on branding activities targeting economic elites and policymakers in the US and Great Britain, Vassilenko saw an opportunity to reach out to the masses as well. Every time Baron Cohen appeared in character, whether to sing an anti-Semitic song in a saloon or threaten the government of Uzbekistan on the steps of the embassy, Vassilenko was there to tell Kazakhstan's real story, and it worked. Today, Kazakhstan continues to reap the benefits of the free press it received as part of Baron Cohen's innovative marketing campaign for the [2006 Borat] film [4], though the Borat connections still stings a bit. Two years later, Baron Cohen made another film based on his character Brüno [5], a flamboyant fashionista with a Nazi fetish. Shortly before that film came out, I asked several of my undergraduate classes to identify five things they *knew* to be true about Kazakhstan and Austria, respectively. As I suspected, my students were able to provide more accurate facts about Kazakhstan than about Brüno's homeland. For good or ill, this testifies to the power of popular culture in global affairs.

MOTYL: What has Kazakhstan learned from the Borat "disaster"? How have the Kazakhs tried to turn it to their advantage?

SAUNDERS: When *Da Ali G Show* first premiered in the UK, Kazakhstan's top diplomat in London tried to have the comedian banned by the British government, clearly not understanding England's long history of freedom of expression and fondness for parody. Consequently, Kazakhstan appeared like a Sovietesque tin-pot dictatorship (a prejudice held by many in the West at the time). By the end of the Borat controversy, we saw President Nursultan Nazarbayev joking at a press conference that he would like meet Borat, realizing that, despite the initial bitterness, it was possible to make lemonade when you get (satirical) lemons thrown at you. Around the time of the film, currency exchanges in the UK were running out of *tenge* due to increased requests from British travelers to the country whose interest had been piqued by the Cambridge-educated mountebank Baron Cohen. Once that incontrovertible piece of evidence of the benefits of Borat presented itself, Astana moved quickly to leverage the spotlight for the benefit of the republic, ultimately synthesizing an elite-focused branding campaign with outreach to a much wider audience. New foci in the branding campaign included fashion, international sport, eco-tourism, and the country's proven track record on religious tolerance. They were folded into the existing messages associated with natural resources, political stability, and a well-educated workforce. In the decade since *Borat* stormed into theatres, Kazakhstan has effectively distinguished itself from the rest of the Central Asian republics and is well on its way to achieving many of the lofty goals Nazarbayev set for the country back in the late 1990s.

MOTYL: Your current book deals with nation-branding in the post-Soviet states. How and why have different states adopted different strategies? Who's been most successful? Least successful?

SAUNDERS: The Baltic states have certainly embraced state-branding with gusto. Estonia has been extremely successful in giving itself an international makeover, being recognized for its achievements far beyond the region. Being small and European helps. Lithuania and Latvia have also made great strides, but are still often conflated. Other than Kazakhstan, the Central Asian republics have performed poorly due to a number of factors, not least of which are the association with Afghanistan (the quandary of the geographical suffix "-stan"), massive

corruption, and regional instability. In recent years, Azerbaijan has done very well due to massive investment in sport infrastructure, including hosting some high-profile international events. Like Kazakhstan, the country benefits from its oil wealth and minimal risks associated with the global Islamist insurgency. Russia claims to be engaged in nation-branding, but is unable or unwilling to behave in a way that will achieve the results one associates with becoming a “brand state” (the same can be said of Belarus, which is constantly framed as Europe’s “last dictatorship,” a difficult mantle to shed). Ukraine and Georgia have both invested enormous resources into nation-branding, often employing similar strategies (including Eurovision and tourism), but their efforts have been undermined by geopolitics, specifically problems with Russia, including the 2008 Georgian War, interruptions in natural gas shipments, economic boycotts, and of course the recent Russian interventions in Crimea and the Donbas. Armenia and Moldova barely register beyond the region.

MOTYL: What are the key factors of a successful nation-branding strategy?

SAUNDERS: Nation-branding is a lot like fandom. You need to get people to *feel* something about your country. Customers are loyal to Apple products because they have positive, often intangible, associations with the brand. Even when your iPhone gives you problems, this esprit does not fade. The same goes with nation-branding. For the countries of post-socialist Europe and Eurasia, brand identity is step one. Other than Russia, many in the West and other parts of the world are hard-pressed to tell you something that distinguishes Tajikistan from Turkmenistan or why you should visit Slovenia over Slovakia (or vice versa). The third wave of decolonization that came with the breakup of the USSR and Yugoslavia placed a host of new countries on the map, and they are all seeking to make themselves known and valued. Naturally, this has resulted in many voices speaking at once, with almost none being heard. State-branding takes vision, time, money, and effort. Public-private collaboration is a must, and the head of state needs to be behind any nation-branding effort. Inbound tourism is a great way to get the message across and the Baltics have done very well here. Ukraine also has a lot to offer, but the two revolutions and the war in the east have short-circuited the benefits gleaned from the past two decades of the country’s openness to Western visitors.

MOTYL: How would you characterize Russia’s nation-branding efforts?

SAUNDERS: Russia has *adapted* rather than *adopted* the idea. Moreover, since [Vladimir] Putin came to power, nation-branding in Russia has been compromised by the Kremlin’s political technologists. Certainly Russia has invested heavily in promoting the country’s openness to investment via expensive inserts in venues like the *New York Times*, hosting the Olympics and other global sporting events, and a variety of other traditional methods for improving its national image. However, when placed in the context of information management—dare I say postmodern propaganda—such efforts have a different effect from that of a smaller country’s efforts to become a brand state. Whether we speak of [the broadcaster] Russia Today’s promotion of Russia’s national interests, the Valdai Club’s outreach to Western academics, or the deployment of Russkii Mir centers <sup>[6]</sup> around the globe, it is clear that nation-branding in Russia also means promotion of the country’s status as a great power with a global reach. Russia never has been and never will be a “normal country,” and so its nation-branding does not fit within the standard praxis. That being said, in recent years Russia has done a good job of promoting its literary and cultural heritage, the splendor of St. Petersburg, and the country’s growing IT capacity. However, the self-imposed embargo on European agriculture and the dimming of [former president and current prime minister] Dmitry Medvedev’s program for fiscal transparency has severely damaged Russia’s image.

MOTYL: And Ukraine’s?

SAUNDERS: I have followed Ukraine's efforts quite closely for some years, including conducting multiple interviews with Vasyl Myroshnychenko, one of the major architects of the country's nation-branding strategy. Geographically, Ukraine is the largest country in Europe and, as such, it has worked diligently to be seen as European. Ukraine has focused on culture first, using popular music, fashion, and folk art, utilizing what Myroshnychenko calls "universal languages" to open up dialogue with the rest of Europe. Kyiv always stresses its openness to the West, and until recently, its being a bridge to the post-Soviet East (i.e., Russia, Belarus, Central Asia, and the Caucasus). As part of this "open country" branding, it seems that the Ukrainian people actually bought into the message at home, with Euromaidan being the dramatic result. While the current situation in the country is dire, a sustained approach to burnishing its national image will certainly result in long-term dividends. Assuming a return to normalcy, Ukraine will soon be repositioned to resume its focus on branding an audience that is not distracted by "little green men" and the drums of war emanating from the Kremlin.

MOTYL: What are the major obstacles to a successful nation-branding strategy in Ukraine and Russia?

SAUNDERS: The tragic irony of the recent conflict with Russia is that Ukraine has finally shed its "Little Russia" brand, most likely for good. With the bloodshed associated with the Maidan uprising, the annexation of Crimea, and scenes of death and destruction in the country's east, Americans, Canadians, and Britons all are now acutely aware of the differences between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Despite the frightful cost, Ukraine has been able to step out of Russia's shadow while simultaneously sloughing off the "neo-Soviet" patina the country had been developing since Viktor Yanukovich came to power [in February 2010]. All my sources in Russia tell me that the Kremlin is quietly winding down its adventurism in the Donbas, hopefully guaranteeing that things will start to get back to normal in Ukraine over the next few years. This will be good for the branding efforts of both Ukraine and the Russian Federation. Despite the chaos of the past decade, Ukraine has persevered in its efforts at achieving the status of a brand state. It will likely reap the benefits that come with such status. Russia is not in a position to do so due to its larger ambitions on the world stage. While Moscow may play lip service to the idea of nation-branding, Russia has proved to be a country where this postmodern method of statecraft cannot function as intended. Changing Russia's brand, which is rooted in hundreds of years of history, is not likely to work no matter how much money is thrown at the problem.

#### OG Image:



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[Europe and Central Asia](#) <sup>[7]</sup>,

[North America](#) <sup>[8]</sup>,

[US](#) <sup>[9]</sup>,

[Kazakhstan](#) <sup>[10]</sup>,

[Russia](#) <sup>[11]</sup>,

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**Links:**

[1] <http://boratologist.com/>

[2] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Borat>

[3] [http://www.amazon.com/Many-Faces-Sacha-Baron-Cohen/dp/073912336X/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&amp;qid=1449614308&sr=8-1&keywords=sauanders+borat](http://www.amazon.com/Many-Faces-Sacha-Baron-Cohen/dp/073912336X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&amp;qid=1449614308&sr=8-1&keywords=sauanders+borat)

[4] <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0443453/>

[5] <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0889583/>

[6] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruskiy\\_Mir\\_Foundation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruskiy_Mir_Foundation)

[7] <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/world-news/region/europe-and-central-asia>

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