

Social and Political Perceptions of the Borat Phenomenon in Kazakhstan: Evidence from a Case Study of University Students

Donnacha Ó Beacháin*

Abstract

This article begins by chronicling and evaluating the reaction of the government of Kazakhstan to Sacha Baron Cohen's film *Borat—Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. It then compares and contrasts the official government reaction with the expressed attitudes of local members of Kazakhstan's young English-speaking elites. This study is based on the results of a survey of almost five hundred young university students conducted in March 2007 at the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP), the most prestigious university in the country. The sample gives a snapshot of those most likely to have been aware of Borat - the young, internet-savvy, educated urban elite - and inter alia provides insights into how respondents in Kazakhstan thought the movie impacted their country and would influence how they were treated abroad. The survey results suggest that while responses to Borat were heterogeneous, most students accepted that the choice of Kazakhstan as a target for satire was coincidental rather than conspiratorial. Despite official efforts to ban the movie, a majority of the respondents had seen the film and believed that the ban was a mistake. Also, while recognising that Borat would raise Kazakhstan's profile in the world, respondents doubted it would increase knowledge, and some feared a change in their treatment when travelling abroad.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Borat, KIMEP, Sacha Baron Cohen, Nazarbayev.

Introduction

Though the Borat phenomenon has inspired several academic articles, most notably a Slavic Review special issue,¹ comparatively little has been written on how this cinematic sensation, which catapulted Kazakhstan to the forefront of Western consciousness, has impacted upon the Kazakhstani general public. Even those that have tried to partially focus on Kazakhstan's response (Saunders 2007, Schatz 2008) have almost exclusively concentrated on the reaction of the Nazarbayev regime. The fact that no research has been conducted to determine how non-government actors received the Borat phenomenon has led some like Paula A. Michaels to detect a new orientalism at play:

Like the nineteenth-century orientalist scholars whose writings established the image of the east in the European imagination, Borat hijacked Kazakhstan's ability to define itself in the Western world. The mass media then further silenced Kazakhstan by circumscribing the debate about the film in such a way as to place Kazakhstani concern and sentiments outside the frame of discussion. (Paula A. Michaels 2008: 82)²

* E-mail: donnacha.obeachain@dcu.ie

1 Volume 67/1 (Spring 2008)

2 Michaels criticises the foci but also the lack of Kazakhstani writers contributing to the debate.

The survey on which this article is based was carried out to gauge whether the actions of the government of Kazakhstan mirrored popular sentiment amongst those most likely to have seen Borat - young, internet savvy, English-speaking students. There has been a tendency to equate government with popular outrage (for example Manat, 2006), but did those who were sampled agree that the movie constituted a slur on their nationality? This article is a modest effort to direct the microphone towards the Kazakhstani public, to capture and quantify the diversity of views on this major event in the branding of Kazakhstan in the international arena.

The Borat phenomenon and the Kazakhstan government's response

Borat is based actually on a guy I met in southern Russia. I can't remember his name. He was a doctor. The moment I met him I was totally crying. He was a hysterically funny guy, albeit totally unintentionally. (Sacha Baron Cohen, BBC 2006)

Anti-Semitic, misogynistic, chauvinistic, homophobic – these are just a few characteristics of Borat Sagdiyev, the faux Kazakh character that is the brainchild of British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. Borat had been a regular feature in Cohen's popular Channel 4/HBO series *Da Ali G Show* but was relatively unknown in Kazakhstan even among young internet users before the advent of the Borat movie.³ The Kazakhstan embassies in London and Washington kept a watchful eye on his activities, issuing ritual denunciations that produced little publicity and fewer results. Battle was only truly enjoined when 'Borat' hosted the MTV Europe awards, arriving in an 'Air Kazakh' plane piloted by a one-eyed drunkard. An apoplectic Kazakhstan foreign ministry stated that 'we do not rule out that Mr. Cohen is serving someone's political order designed to present Kazakhstan and its people in a derogatory way,' and threatened legal action to prevent 'new pranks of this kind' (Saunders 2006). It was unclear at what court and on what grounds Kazakhstan would or could sue, but the threat reflected a determination to meet the Borat challenge head on. The official borat.kz website was shut down in the same manner the government successfully contained domestic opposition; rather than confessing to political censorship or intolerance of critical views, technical reasons were devised for the closure (Daily Mail 2006a, Cukier 2005). However, as the government was quick to discover, it was now facing a challenge quite unlike that of regular opposition politics in Kazakhstan.⁴ As Borat was not a citizen of Kazakhstan and not even a real person, the Kazakhstani authorities could not intimidate him. The website was simply reopened on another server (borat.tv) from which the sniping could continue uninterrupted. The response of Nazarbayev's regime merely breathed more life into the Borat phenomenon. Cohen, always in character, posted a web video applauding 'his' government's decision to 'sue this Jew,' and invited 'captains of industry' to come to Kazakhstan for its 'incredible natural resources, hard working labour and some of the cleanest prostitutes in whole of Central Asia'.⁵ These were the opening salvos in a surreal duel between an entirely fictional character and a very real national government. How could a regime, which constitutionally prohibits offending the 'honour and dignity' of the president, handle a satirist who told the world that Nazarbayev offered 'hand-relief' for three quarters the price of similar service providers in Amsterdam? The simple answer is 'not well'.

Dariga Nazarbayeva, the president's daughter, cut a lonely figure within Kazakhstan's political elite when, in April 2006, she lamented that Borat's website 'damaged our image much less than its closure, which was covered by all global news agencies'. Her then husband and deputy foreign minister Rakhat

3 The author, an Associate Professor and Director of Undergraduate Studies at KIMEP at the time, occasionally asked classes whether they had encountered the Borat character on TV or the internet, but prior to the MTV awards no student claimed to have seen it.

4 For recent overviews of politics in Kazakhstan see Issacs (2010) and Ó Beacháin and Kevlihan (2011).

5 The video response can still be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFVN59sR4IY>. At time of writing well over 3 million people had watched the clip.

Aliev chimed in by inviting Cohen to come and see the 'real Kazakhstan' (Kennedy 2006). Their views did not predominate, however. When the film opened at box offices around the world in early November 2006, it was banned not only in Kazakhstan but also in Russia. In both cases, politics not art predominated, but rather than issue official edicts, both governments hid behind the decisions of other bodies. In Russia, the Federal Culture and Cinematography Agency simply refused to grant the film a licence, while Kazakhstan's main movie distribution chain Otau Cinema instigated the ban saying that 'we consider this movie offensive, a complete lie, and nonsense' (Pallavi 2006, Moscow Times 2006). Nazarbayev's regime spent millions (it will never be established how much) on countering the Borat phenomenon by buying lavish paid supplements in Western newspapers and journals such as the *New York Times*, *International Herald Tribune* and *Foreign Affairs*. Nazarbayev visited the US shortly before the film premier and, remarkably, it was reported that the Borat movie would be discussed during the Bush-Nazarbayev summit (Daily Mail 2006a). Outside the White House, Cohen – as always in character – upstaged Nazarbayev as he fed the news-hungry media scrum with a press release denouncing suggestions that the Kazakhstani president was displeased with the film as lies propagated by the 'evil nitwits of Uzbekistan' (Daily Mail 2006b). Roman Vasilenko, the Kazakhstani embassy's indefatigable press secretary, was denounced as an Uzbek impostor for claiming that Kazakhstan provided equal rights for women and religious freedom. The Kazakhstani government continued the counter-offensive; two Western PR companies were hired, and additional 'educational' advertisements were purchased for television and print media. But while Kazakhstan advertised in glossy supplements full of charts and statistics, Borat was boasting of his country's recent '2003 Tulyakev reforms', which included allowing women to travel on the inside of buses, removing regulations requiring homosexuals to wear blue hats, and raising the age of consent to eight.

Borat the movie was an instant commercial success, making over a quarter of a billion dollars at the box-office, obtaining an Oscar nomination for the best adapted screenplay, and winning a Golden Globe for Cohen's performance. Globalisation, the internet and media power had, in this battle at least, inverted the power balance so that a national government with huge oil resources found it difficult to combat a solitary comedian. Unable to suppress the laughter, the Nazarbayev regime finally – albeit reluctantly and very self-consciously – tried to join in. When it came, the change was as sudden as it was unexpected. In an article on 4th October in the *Guardian*, Kazakhstan's ambassador to the UK complained bitterly of how it was 'apparently permissible to paint the people as a bunch of rabid Jew-haters and serial sexual molesters' (Idrissov 2006a). However, exactly a month later the same ambassador in an article published in *The Times* shifted the tone and emphasis significantly. Not only was Cohen described as 'a remarkable comic talent [...] capable of making many of – myself included – laugh out loud,' but his spoof had provided 'the kind of media attention of which previously I could only dream' (Idrissov 2006b). Borat was based on a Russian not a Kazakh, the ambassador pointed out, the village scenes were filmed in Romania not Kazakhstan, and 'Borat does not look remotely like a Kazakh'. He denied any attempt to sue Cohen or that the government had spent millions on a PR counter-offensive. The volte-face represented a belated recognition that by refusing to take the joke and beating its breast, Kazakhstan was simply digging itself into an ever-deeper hole of ridicule and advertising its intolerance of criticism. It also laid the groundwork for Nazarbayev's impending official visit to the UK – his first since 2000. The *Kazakhstan News Bulletin* reprinted a Reuters story reporting that Nazarbayev 'welcomed the attention lavished on his country by the comedy film 'Borat''. At his joint press conference with Tony Blair, Nazarbayev cited the old adage that there was no such thing as bad publicity, though he also repeated the now jaded counterpoints of how Cohen had never visited Kazakhstan and that the Kazakhstan scenes had been shot in Eastern Europe. Nazarbayev had been well schooled at this stage and invited journalists to express amusement with him: 'This film was created by a comedian so let's laugh at it, that's my attitude [...] Maybe the journalist himself, Borat Sagdiyev is here representing Kazakhstan? I would very much like to speak to him if he is' (*Kazakhstan News Bulletin*, 22 November 2006: 1-2).

Despite the apparent penitence, Kazakhstan's government battled on, the mantra now being presenting the 'real Kazakhstan'. The *Kazakhstan News Bulletin* and *Kazakhstan's Echo*, published weekly by the embassy to the US and Canada, faithfully reflected official attitudes. On 2 November, 2006, the Bulletin devoted an entire issue to reprinting articles refuting the Borat line on Kazakhstan with headlines such as 'Take that, Borat'. The 11th December issue of *Kazakhstan's Echo* was dedicated entirely to a reprint of an article by Nazarbayev that rattled off Kazakhstan's achievements with the rather unfortunate headline 'Who Needs Borat? Here's the Kazakh President'. On 16 January, 2007, a renewed round of the culture war was heralded in a banner headline of the *Kazakhstan News Bulletin*. Entitled 'Nomad vs. Borat: Showdown in Theaters Near You', the former being described as 'an epic movie about the struggle of Kazakhs for their survival as a nation' and an opportunity for Americans to see 'the real Kazakhstan' (January 16, 2007: 1-2). A 9-minute propaganda video 'Kazakhstan: Reaching for the Future' was produced, posted on *youtube* and made freely available on demand from the embassy (*Kazakhstan News Bulletin*, 16 January, 2007: 6). The video was also shown by Kazakhstan's US Ambassador Kanat Saudabayev during his February 2007 university tour to highlight the differences between Borat and official Kazakhstan (*Kazakhstan Echo* special issue, 22 February, 2007). Well-placed op-eds penned by 'ordinary' Kazakhs, and almost certainly officially inspired, proliferated in the American media to be reprinted and circulated by the Kazakhstani government (Abdygaliyeva 2006, Sadybekova 2007).

This apparent change in the official government line was hollow rather than heartfelt; Kazakhstan is not a democracy, and censorship is generally aimed at protecting regime prestige as much as public sensitivities. The Kazakhstani government found Borat threatening because, as Schatz has pointed out, 'international perceptions and image making may spill over into domestic discursive space in unpredictable and unimaginable ways' (Schatz 2008: 52). We now turn to the survey to examine what exactly were these unpredictable and unimaginable effects on those young, computer-literate and English-speaking Kazakhstani most likely to have seen the Borat film. Through them we may understand more the full impact of the phenomenon on Kazakhstan's population and the extent to which the government's fears were justified and combative efforts successful. The survey was conducted at the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research (KIMEP) during a single week of the Spring 2007 semester, when the Borat movie was still running in movie theatres across the world.

The survey: profile of KIMEP and those surveyed⁶

Founded on 1 January, 1992, by a resolution of President Nazarbayev, KIMEP quickly distinguished itself from other universities, particularly in the high percentage of foreign faculty, and is generally considered the premier educational institution in Kazakhstan. Classes are conducted entirely in English and the university has led the way in providing Western-style education in Kazakhstan, using the American credit system. Tuition fees are high, and although some scholarships are provided, the university has a reputation for catering to the country's wealthy elite, many of whom no doubt will play influential roles in Kazakhstan's future development. In all, 479 students participated in the survey, representing about 10% of the total student body. Students from all departments in the social sciences and business colleges were surveyed. The vast majority of respondents were undergraduates and under the age of 22 (94%), while the mean age of the sample was 19.35 years. Twenty-one different majors were listed and, reflecting the gender imbalance at the university, female respondents outnumbered males by almost two to one. Of those who indicated their ethnicity (95.4%), Kazakhs were the largest group with 73.7% of the total, followed by Russians (14.7%), Koreans (3.7%) and Tatars (2.6%). This reflects

⁶ Each survey respondent was assigned a number and throughout subsequent sections the contributions are identified by their number, which is listed after each quotation or point of view.

Table 1: Respondent's city of origin

Almaty	224	46.8%
Shymkent	33	6.9%
Astana	23	4.8%
Karaganda	20	4.2%
Aktau	13	2.7%
Taraz	13	2.7%
Ust-Kamen	13	2.7%
Aktobe	12	2.5%
Atyrau	11	2.3%
Uralsk	10	2.1%
Kostanai	8	1.6%
Zhezkazgan	8	1.6%
Pavlodar	7	1.5%
Other	53	11.1%
No Answer	31	6.5%
Total	479	100%

Source: author's compilation

an over-representation of Kazakhs in the university and under-representation of ethnic minorities, particularly Slavs and Germans.⁷ Almost all of these ethnic minorities were citizens of Kazakhstan. Students from 43 cities and towns participated, though Almaty students were by far the largest group constituting almost half (47%) of respondents (see Table 1).

International students made up just over 3% of the respondents, almost exactly the amount for the entire university. While not a representative sample, the value of the survey is in taking a snapshot of Kazakhstan's most elite student populace, and how they reacted to their country's newly found notoriety as the Borat phenomenon played out globally.⁸ It represents a modest, though unique, attempt to gauge opinions in Kazakhstan while Borat was still playing in movie theatres.

Why Kazakhstan?

Why has Baron Cohen chosen Kazakhstan as the vehicle for his comic talents? (Edin Idrissov, Kazakhstan's Ambassador to the UK 2006b)

When Borat put Kazakhstanis under the global spotlight, they were unsure of what to do with their fifteen minutes of fame. The question 'why Kazakhstan' evoked a myriad of answers. Some students were simply bewildered, 'I cannot understand why exactly Kazakhstan was chosen. I was angry and confused,' (56) opined a Kazakh female, while her ethnic Korean classmate fumed, 'I don't know why they chose Kazakhstan, but if they so decided they should consult our government and tell trustworthy and right things' (58). A large body of students accepted that the choice was most likely random, and dozens used the metaphor of twirling a globe and Baron Cohen's finger landing on an

⁷ According to the 1999 census, ethnic Russians constituted 30% of the population and there still existed sizeable minorities of ethnic Ukrainians, Germans, and Uzbeks (see Ó Beacháin 2007)

⁸ The survey, which contained both open-ended and close-ended questions, is a coincidence sample, conducted in over twenty classes across a variety of disciplines, colleges and subjects. It does not pretend to constitute an accurate demographic reflection of the Kazakhstani population.

unfortunate Kazakhstan. While some argued that Baron Cohen, like Westerners generally, treated all the 'Stans' as a unified whole in terms of culture and way of life, others derived succour from believing that Kazakhstanis were singled out for their maturity and level of development compared to their Central Asian neighbours. As one respondent put it, 'I think that Kazakhstan is a more interesting issue to interpret, than Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan. I'm sure that this choice is not random, I mean it is special' (162). Others attributed more sinister motives like an attempt 'to defeat the Kazakhstani people with this film' (468) or the result of 'chauvinistic, fascist temptations' (131).

A large proportion of those surveyed attributed political motives to the choice. As one student put it, 'it was an order from the US government to show Kazakhstan in such a way, that we are uncivilised, we are wild. I think this film is so stupid, because Americans are stupid /.../ Maybe they wanted to alarm all countries that Kazakhstan is not a democratic country, but they could do it in another way' (120). Others attributed the decision to broader international relations; Kazakhstan alternately had betrayed an ally (276), was the victim of a misunderstanding (477), had been chosen for its 'neutral political influence in foreign affairs' (359), or because Kazakhstan pretends to be something it is not' (192). Other suggestions included neutralising Kazakhstan's ambitions to become one of the world's top 50 developed countries or punishing Astana for aligning itself more with Russia than the United States (358, 359, 465). An ill-defined conspiracy to damage the image of Kazakhstan and thereby take control of its natural resources was regularly articulated. Many took pride in Kazakhstan's achievements and wondered whether there was a plot afoot to halt the stride of this new Asian tiger. 'Kazakhstan is becoming more powerful every year,' a respondent noted, 'it may be some policy to make our reputation weak' (21). An ethnic Russian claimed that 'maybe the reason is that the Americans used our territory, our resources (oil). Why can't Kazakhstani people rule these resources? Maybe [the movie was made] in order to show the weaknesses of Kazakhstan' (249). These types of responses suggested a current of opinion in Kazakhstan that questioned America's dominant role in the world and perceived its influence in Central Asia as detrimental to Kazakhstan's national interest. A variation of the 'Kazakhstan is persecuted' type of argument was the common suggestion that Kazakhstanis had been singled out by the filmmakers as a peace-loving or politically weak people who would not retaliate for the scurrilous attacks on their national honour. According to this view, the screenwriters and their sponsors had chosen Kazakhstan as it was 'the only country in Asia that is able to react normally to such things, without starting a war or making terror acts' (190) or 'because we wouldn't do anything bad to them; we are not aggressive, as we are supposed to be' (419). Another respondent claimed that Kazakhstan had tried to build friendly relations with all countries and was, therefore, perhaps 'the only Muslim country that would do nothing, and the Kazakhstani government would not pay any attention to it and maybe look at it with humour' (397). These views very much echoed those of Kazakhstan's ambassador to the UK, when he wrote that 'critics' of Kazakhstan, including Baron Cohen, were more likely to be invited on an all-expenses paid trip to Kazakhstan than to receive a *fatwa* (Idrissov 2006a). Another twist on this theme was that the movie was somehow devised to determine Kazakhstan's commitment to peace and harmony in the face of provocation: 'Kazakhstan is known to be preaching its hospitality, peacefulness and positive attitudes to other nations (no radicalism)', one student argued, 'this was some kind of experiment to test whether Kazakhstani citizens are inclined to be nationalistic' (348).

Many respondents understood that the movie had little to do with Kazakhstan, which was chosen for its anonymity, arguing that 'the major goal of this movie is to show American life, their feelings, ideals and thoughts' (12), and that 'the filmmakers wanted to laugh at the Americans because they don't know countries like Kazakhstan' (227). A latent anti-Americanism was evident in many of the responses, however, and students often couched their objections in dismissive portrayals of American society. While asserting that Cohen had exploited American ignorance of Kazakhstan, scores of students took offence at their unjustified lack of recognition, which they duly attributed to American 'stupidity':

They think we are nomads or part of China or Russia (157)

They still think it's the same as Iraq or etc (168)

The stereotype is that Kazakhstan is only like a desert (202)

Such respondents were clearly frustrated with Kazakhstan's obscurity; students regularly claimed that the country was a leader within the post-Soviet or Central Asian world, but that its accomplishments had gone largely unnoticed and now were submerged by the Borat phenomenon. Some turned this against Americans; was it not indicative of American ignorance that they did not know of the world's ninth largest country (this statistic was routinely cited)? At times, Americans, Westerners and filmmakers were often rolled into one as 'they': '[the movie was made] because they think that we are a young country and have no strong power. But they are mistaken. They think we are stupid and live in a steppe without any understanding of the whole world. And also they are mistaken' (123). Another contribution put Borat in the context of Asian migration to England: 'Very soon England will be overcrowded by people from the Asiatic states, and there is nothing else left for Englishmen but just laughing at how they incorrectly speak English' (198). A small number (though often claiming to reflect popular gossip) thought that Cohen was extracting revenge for negative experiences with Kazakhs (121, 127, 217).

Only a few students debated whether the character Borat had some basis in either locally stereotypical or actual Kazakhstani national characteristics. Some respondents argued that Cohen had identified something in Kazakhstan worthy of satire: according to one student it was 'always easier to find something strange and funny in alien culture,' and Kazakhstan was an easy target as 'culturally we are extremely different' (119). An alternative spin was the suggestion that Kazakhstan was chosen because 'people [had] got used to the humour and jokes about Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan' (369), indicating that the student believed that comic yarns about their neighbours had managed to travel outside the post-Soviet sphere. International students sometimes offered a different perspective, but rarely did they form a consensus. Conflicting attitudes were common even between visiting undergraduates from the same country. One international student claimed that Kazakhstanis 'should not blame these film-makers, because as I'm living in Kazakhstan I see many people whose behaviour is very similar to the heroes shown in the film' (218), but their compatriot was much more sympathetic: 'maybe people living in other countries might think that all Central Asian people behave like Borat, but as a foreign student [in Almaty] I know that it's not true' (370).

Beating the Borat ban

Despite the ban in Kazakhstan and Russia, almost half (46.6%) of those surveyed had seen the Borat film. Most had watched the movies on a computer using a legal (bought abroad) or pirated disc, while smaller numbers had downloaded the movie from the internet or watched the movie on a foreign channel, in an internet café or in the university dormitory. A couple of students had seen the movie abroad. The figures demonstrate the importance of access to the internet and computers, facilities still unavailable to many Kazakhstanis. According to the CIA Factbook, Kazakhstan was estimated to have only 400,000 internet users in 2005. This limited penetration is partially due to exorbitant costs,⁹ but familiarity with the internet is disproportionately high among the 16-24 age group (McGlinchey & Johnson 2007).

Some of those surveyed, like the Kazakhstani government, had difficulty in distinguishing between the film-makers and the country where the film was made. These respondents often assumed that if it was permitted to produce or watch such a movie, government endorsement of its contents could be

⁹ Cost in 2005-6 was about \$2 an hour at internet cafes and about the same for home connection (author's experience).

Table 2: Do you agree with the Borat ban?

	Yes	No	Don't Know	No Answer	Total
Men	58 (34.7%)	101 (60.5%)	3 (1.8%)	5 (3%)	167
Women	106 (35.0%)	170 (56.3%)	5 (1.7%)	21 (7%)	302
Ethnic Kazakh	124 (36.8%)	192 (57%)	3 (0.9%)	18 (5.3%)	337
Ethnic Russian	20 (29.9%)	39 (58.2%)	5 (7.5%)	3 (4.4%)	67
Ethnic Korean	4 (23.5%)	12 (70.6%)	0	1 (5.9%)	17
Ethnic Tatar	1 (8.3%)	10 (83.3%)	0	1 (8.3%)	12
Other Ethnicity	12 (50%)	11 (45.8%)	0	1 (4.2%)	24
Ethnicity not stated	5 (22.7%)	14 (63.6%)	0	3 (13.6%)	22
KZ citizen	157 (35.1%)	258 (57.7%)	8 (1.8%)	24 (5.4%)	447
Non-KZ citizen	5 (31.3%)	10 (62.5%)	0	1 (6.2%)	16
Citizenship not stated	4 (25%)	10 (62.5%)	0	2 (12.5%)	16

Source: author's compilation

assumed. Ethnic Kazakhs were more likely than other nationalities to have seen the movie, suggesting that they may have felt more of a vested interest in how Kazakhstan was portrayed. Almost half (48.5%) of the Kazakhs found a way to watch the movie compared to the other major groups - Russians (34.3%) and Koreans (29.4%). Moreover, Shymkent, arguably the most traditional city in Kazakhstan, stood out with 72% (24 of 33 students) having watched the movie, while Ust-Kamemorgorsk and Pavlodar, two of the most Russified cities in the east and north of the country, had the lowest viewing rates (16.6% and 14.3%, respectively).

Most students surveyed (71.6%) believed that the majority of people in Kazakhstan were familiar with Borat. It is unlikely that this accurately reflected reality and may simply mirror the fact that as young, English-speaking, computer literate, and generally affluent students, they as a body knew of the Borat phenomenon. Certainly, the written responses suggested that Borat was known primarily to the urban young. As one commented, 'journalists, young people, politicians are aware of this, but the majority is busy with something different rather than wasting time on [sic] such movies, my parents do not know about Borat' (153). Another said that the majority could not know as 'they live in rural areas, and have much more important problems to deal with' (356), while another noted that 'most people, especially in rural areas, are indifferent to external affairs' (348). Almost half (45.7%) knew the name of the actor who played Borat but were less clear on his origins. Thirty students stressed that Cohen was Jewish (6.3%) while another three (0.6%) identified him as Israeli. Over a third of students surveyed (37.2%) correctly identified Cohen as British, 7.3% thought him American. More than half (51.1%) claimed not to know where the scenes depicting Kazakhstan were filmed, over a quarter (26.9%) correctly identified Romania, while the remainder answered erroneously.

A clear majority disagreed with the decision to ban the movie with just over a third agreeing (see Table 2 below). There was no substantial difference in attitudes towards the ban between those who had seen the movie (35.4%) and those who had not (34%).

Some agreed with the government prohibition, considering the movie 'an abuse of national dignity' (37), while another claimed it would reduce 'panic /.../ and people won't hurt as much' (295). A large body of students, both for and against the ban, emphasised that the movie was easily available to all those who wanted it. Others pointed out that the prohibition had simply increased its popularity. Those who were against the ban cited freedom of speech arguments, the damage to Kazakhstan's image, and argued that the health and maturity of a nation could be measured by its attitude towards issues like the Borat film. As one young Kazakh woman from Almaty put it,

Preventing the film from broadcasting in Kazakhstan was a huge mistake. We showed the rest of the world that we really have no humour (particularly our officials), rather than laugh with others about

ourselves. Kazakhstanis have known about this film anyway. The Government should prepare citizens to objectively react to the movie. As we know, the first sign of humour is the ability to laugh at yourself. Kazakhstan showed that we don't have it, unfortunately. (158)

Putting Kazakhstan on the map

A majority of the respondents believed that the movie would increase awareness of Kazakhstan, but students were less sure if it would enhance knowledge. Whereas many said Kazakhstan was now on the map, others felt that 'it's better to be unknown altogether than known in such a way' (124). Some students had digested Nazarbayev's refined position on Borat: 'As our president Nursultan Nazarbayev said, "It's just a movie, who really wants to see Kazakhstan, you're welcome"' (450), stated a Shymkent respondent, while another claimed that 'Borat's movie was good advertising for our country ... everybody understands that it's just a joke! Moreover, our president Nursultan Nazarbayev spoke positively about the movie and even invited Mr. Cohen to Kazakhstan' (241).

Most respondents (55.5%) thought that the movie was bad for Kazakhstan's image. Only 15.4% thought Kazakhstan's image would benefit from the movie, though this was slightly more than those who didn't know (15%) or those who thought there would be no change (11.3%). For some, the answer was dependent on their perception of how the film would be received in the West. If Westerners thought Borat reflected typical Kazakhstanis, the impact would be negative. An 18-year-old Kazakh student from Almaty spoke in apocalyptic terms:

I think that the Borat movie humiliates Kazakhstan, its culture and people. I know absolutely that some American people think everything shown in the movie is true. So, they are shocked when they find that Kazakhstan is a civilized, modern, high-culture, fast developing country. Many people – even the majority – know nothing about Kazakhstan, and then they start to think that they know our country. The perception of Kazakhstan is bad, as a weird savage country where people are crazy and stupid. They may even come to Kazakhstan to have some fun. No big investor will after that be interested in Kazakhstani enterprises. Who will want to invest in a country where people are like Borat? And then, how will Kazakhstan develop without interacting with rich Western countries? Economic growth could stop or become lower (151).

Dozens of respondents, on the other hand, claimed there was no such thing as bad publicity. A large number believed the film would enhance tourism, and several cited a survey conducted by a UK travel website, which asked 2800 people to select the country they'd most like to visit; Kazakhstan came third, beating such traditional favourites as Spain, France, Greece and Turkey (*Kazakhstan News Bulletin*, 2 November, 2006: 1-2, 1 February, 2007: 5) Certainly, there was much room for improvement; only 15,000 Americans visited Kazakhstan annually, and most of these were not tourists but businessmen or prospective adoptive parents.¹⁰

Foreigners and Kazakhstan post-Borat

A greater number of students (52.4%) felt that the film would influence how they were treated abroad. Only a quarter (26%) felt that they would be treated no differently, while most of the remainder (18.6%) didn't know. Some added that they would only find out during their next foreign trip. Kazakhs were more likely to predict a change (55.19%) than other ethnicities, though the difference was not as

¹⁰ Roman Vassilenko, quoted in 'Inaccurate Borat puts Kazakhstan on map', *USA Today*, November 10, 2006. Over 4000 children from Kazakhstan were adopted by American parents between 1998 and 2006, '4000+ American Families with Children Adopted from Kazakhstan Personally Feel Impact of Borat', *Kazakhstan News Bulletin*, 2 November 2006, p. 3. Restrictive and expensive visa requirements have also suppressed demand.

great as one might have expected. About half of the Russians (47.77%) and Tatars (50%) also expected to be treated differently, and only a third (31.3%, 33%) were sure they would not be. This suggests that respondents believed that because foreigners did not know much about Kazakhstan it would not matter that they did not look ‘Kazakh’ or ‘Asian’, it would suffice that they were from Kazakhstan. What is also interesting is that many of the small number of other (non-Kazakhstani) Central Asian students thought the movie would impact how they were treated; these included all three students from Turkmenistan, the solitary Tajik and one of two Kyrgyz students, indicating that these students believed foreigners outside the region would not be able to appreciate the difference between the ‘stans’. There was a strong link between how one expected to be treated and whether one viewed Americans in the Borat movie as representative of American society. Indeed, those who thought the Americans representative were much more likely (64.5% vs. 43.5%) to expect to be treated differently abroad as a result of the Borat movie. Correspondingly, those who thought the Americans in the movie unrepresentative of US society were generally almost twice as likely to rule out the possibility of such a change (39.1% vs. 22.1%).

Several students were enthusiastic about the increased attention, and most seemed to agree that for better or worse the days of Kazakhstan’s obscurity were over. ‘It will be easier to meet new friends,’ enthused one student (129), while another reported that ‘my friend who studies in the UK says that the British started to be interested in her, just because she’s from Kazakhstan’ (399). Expectations often depended on the perception of Westerners; those who thought Westerners are gullible and undereducated feared the worst. Those who had travelled to the West since the movie release testified to the extensive publicity afforded to Kazakhstan and were usually subjected to a barrage of questions, not all of them polite or welcome. Other students had relatives and friends abroad who had communicated how they were received. Foreign friends wrote to some of those surveyed inquiring about the accuracy of the movie. One student was asked by a group of men in the US whether she could marry her brother in Kazakhstan (373), while another whether she was afraid of a vacuum cleaner (437). ‘My sister travelled to the USA and some of their teenagers laughed at her when she said that she was from Kazakhstan’ (170), said one Kazakh, while a young ethnic Russian reported that ‘everybody laughs when they hear ‘Kazakhstan’, I feel very upset about it’ (478). Despite such occurrences, those who had travelled to the West were much less likely to anticipate changed responses than those who had never left Kazakhstan (47.77% vs. 63.9%). But many of those who have felt the brunt, directly or indirectly, of Borat-inspired foreign prejudice were difficult to assuage:

The whole film is stupid, it humiliates the feeling of being Kazakh. It discriminates [against] our country and the Kazakh people [...] If such [a] movie was about any European country, they would sue Mr. Cohen for humiliation of dignity and human rights. My brother is studying in [name deleted] school in London, when he says that he is from Kazakhstan, many people laugh now. He feels he is being discriminated against. Is it really funny, Mr. Cohen? (152)

When asked whether the views of those featured in the movie were representative of Americans generally, the largest section of students (41.3%) didn’t know (in part explained by not seeing the movie, in part having insufficient first-hand experience of the US or Americans). Those who had seen the movie, however, were almost twice as likely to believe the Americans depicted were representative (47.5% vs. 25.8%). In terms of ethnic breakdown, Kazakhs were more likely than Russians to think the views representative (36.8%, 29.86%), though less likely than Tatars (41.7%) and others (41.7%). Those who wrote comments on this subject generally had a poor opinion of Americans. ‘Regular Americans are stupid guys with Big Macs and cokes. They don’t even know that Kazakhstan is outside of America,’ offered a young Kazakh from Shymkent (374). Many bemoaned American ignorance of world geography, which was attributed to the ‘fact’ that most Americans were under-educated (374), though some made a distinction between urban and rural Americans. Others who had spent time in the US cited flaws in the American way of life. Frustration was expressed that many Westerners felt

that Kazakhstanis 'live in the desert and go to school on camels' (200) or 'live without a civilisation' (329). Some respondents, however, urged their fellow-citizens not to take the movie personally: 'I think American movies show American culture from the bad side too. If it were a movie about any other country, it would be funny for us. Why should we behave as if someone hurt us?' (404).

Perfidious Uncle Sam

The issue of outside involvement reflected the early position of the Nazarbayev regime, which had suggested that some (unnamed) foreign government was behind the Borat skits. This was perhaps symptomatic of what Andrew Wilson has called 'virtual politics' in many parts the post-Soviet sphere (Wilson 2005). Since elections are a charade, democracy purely a façade, and freedom of expression heavily circumscribed, little politics occurs in Kazakhstan that does not have the government stamp of approval. As one Almaty student put it, 'It's possible [a foreign government is involved], because he is really popular! How can he become popular without [such] support?' (230). Rather than being spontaneous, variable, and diverse, politics for the Kazakhstani government is something to be managed, manipulated and contained. Thus, when confronted with the Borat phenomenon, something so subversive to the regime's pretensions, there was a reactive twitch that blamed external sabotage. This may be also partly attributable to the Soviet training of Nazarbayev regime; after all, the USSR regularly blamed domestic embarrassments on foreign subversion. It is also possible that the Kazakhstani authorities were influenced by the film antics of Aleksey Mitrofanov. In the same year as Borat's MTV performance, this former Soviet Interior Ministry official turned Russian right-wing parliamentarian produced a semi-pornographic movie involving the sexual adventures of Misha and Yulia, who bore an uncanny resemblance to Mikheil Saakashvili and Yulia Timoshenko, Georgian and Ukrainian leaders, respectively, and the *betes noires* of Russia's political elite. Official protests from Georgia and Ukraine followed, and rumours circulated that Ukrainians were planning a retaliatory gay movie starring doubles of Vladimir Putin and Viktor Yanukovich (Smith 2005, AFP 2005, O'Flynn 2005). The political skirmishing that accompanied this erotic parody and the fact that the figures of fun were also top targets for Kremlin attacks may have played a part in convincing Nazarbayev's regime that these spoofs represented a new type of 'political technology' designed to discredit opponents.

Many students dismissed the idea that a foreign government was behind the Borat film and argued that it was most likely a purely commercial venture with no political overtones. While less than a fifth of students (19.4%) thought a foreign government was certainly involved in the making of the movie, less than half ruled out the possibility (44.3%). Kazakhs were far surer than Russians of foreign government involvement (22.5% vs. 3%), while three quarters of Tatars ruled it out, as did all five Ukrainian students. Of the 93 students who thought a government was involved, fifty (10.6% of total) mentioned the United States. Marketing and journalism majors were least likely to suspect foreign involvement (5.2%, 6.2%). One respondent wondered if some US government figures might have supported Borat so as to exert 'ideological leverage on Kazakhstan re human rights' (348), while another blamed Central Asian states which, jealous of Kazakhstan's predominance, sought to block its 'recognition by the world' (361). America, and to a lesser extent the West generally, was the usual suspect, however.

Conclusion

As one might expect from a government untutored in the joys of critical thinking, the Nazarbayev regime responded to the Borat movie with a mixture of fury and disbelief. Desperate to replace its image as a corrupt backwater country, Kazakhstan tried hard to develop the image of a regional

leader, but Borat challenged efforts by political elites to create an attractive 'brand' for the new state (Economist 2006). In a battle of satire, the Nazarbayev regime was comprehensively outgunned, and in the end, after considerable foot stamping, somewhat graciously accepted defeat.

Survey participants didn't offer a homogenous reaction to the Borat phenomenon but responded with a wide range of emotions and viewpoints. Despite the Borat ban in Kazakhstan and Russia, almost half of the students surveyed had watched the film and most, irrespective of whether they had seen the movie or not, disagreed with the ban. Some were unsure why Kazakhstan had been singled out for ridicule, but many accepted that the film was a commercial enterprise with no foreign government involvement. Others felt that Cohen had simply capitalised on Kazakhstan's obscurity and that as a young, developing country, Kazakhstan was an easy target. Enthusiasm for the increased attention was for many tempered by a fear that many foreigners might develop negative perceptions of the country. In many cases, there was an underlying frustration at Kazakhstan's lack of recognition despite its successes and a latent disregard for perceived American ignorance. Yet another version of this tale of exploiting Kazakhstan's vulnerabilities was the suggestion that as a weak state in international affairs Kazakhstan could not respond effectively to the propaganda assault. The random nature of the choice compounded the injustice for some; Kazakhstan, it seemed, was chosen for ridicule not as part of a conspiracy or contempt but simply for no reason at all.

References

- Abdygaliyeva, G. (2006). My "Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan", *Washington Post*, 8 November: A27 reprinted in *Kazakhstan's Echo*, 8 November 2006, 30: 1-2.
- AFP (2005). Ukraine gets steamed up over planned Russian porn film, 12 August
- BBC (2006). Interview with Sacha Baron Cohen. Available at http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2006/11/01/borat_borat_2006_interview.shtml accessed at 6.11.2011.
- Cukier, K. N. (2005). No Joke, *Foreign Affairs*, 28 December.
- Daily Mail. (2006). Bush to hold talks on Ali G creator after diplomatic row, 12 September.
- Daily Mail. (2006). Spoof Kazakhstani reporter Borat sparks White House crisis talks, 3 October.
- Economist. (2006). A new sort of beauty contest, 11 November.
- Kazakhstan News Bulletin (2006a) Take that Borat, Sayat Announces Tours to 'Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan', 2 November, 6(39): 1-2.
- Kazakhstan News Bulletin (2006b). 4000+ American Families with Children Adopted from Kazakhstan Personally Feel Impact of Borat, 2 November, 6(39): 3.
- Kazakhstan News Bulletin (2007a). Nomad vs. Borat: Showdown in Theaters Near You on Jan. 26, 16 January, 7(3): 1-2.
- Kazakhstan News Bulletin (2007b). Things to Watch, 16 January, 7(3): 6.
- Kazakhstan News Bulletin (2007c). Kazakhstan is One of the Hottest Holidays Spots in Europe? Thanks to Borat, 1 February 2007, 7(6): 5.
- Idrissov, E. (2006a). Offensive and unfair: Borat's antics leave a nasty aftertaste, *The Guardian*, 3 October.
- Idrissov, E. (2006b). We survived Stalin and we can certainly overcome Borat's slurs, *The Times*, 4 November.
- Isaacs, R. (2010). Kazakhstan, in D. Ó Beacháin & A. Polese (eds.) *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics: Successes and Failures*. London: Routledge.

- Kennedy, R. (2006). Learning to Love Borat, *Central Asian-Caucasus Analyst*, 29 November: 3-4.
- Manet, E. (2006). I Like! You Like?: British Comedian Cheers, Disgusts Kazakhs, *Central Asian Caucasus Analyst*, 18 October: 14-15.
- McGlinchey, E. & Johnson, E. (2007). Aiding the Internet in Central Asia, *Democratisation* 14(2): 273-88.
- Michaels, P. A. (2008). Is the Subaltern Speaks in the Woods and Nobody's Listening, Does He Make a Sound?, *Slavic Review*, 67(1): 81-83.
- Moscow Times (2006). Borat Banned From Russian Movie Theaters, 9 November: 1.
- Ó Beacháin, D. (2007). Transformation of Status: Ethnic Russians in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan, in B. Sanghera, S. Amsler & T. Yarkova, *Theorising Social Change in Post-Soviet Countries: Critical Approaches* (111-134). Bern: Peter Lang.
- Ó Beacháin, D. & Kevlihan, R. (2011). *State-building, identity and nationalism in Kazakhstan: some preliminary thoughts*, Working Paper No. 2011/1. Dublin: Dublin City University. Available at <http://doras.dcu.ie/16243/> accessed at 6.11.2011
- O'Flynn, K. (2005). Yulia and Misha, A Mile-High Sex Tale, *The Moscow Times*, 10 August: 1.
- Pallavi, G. (2006). Banning Borat, *Business Week Online*, 7 November.
- Sadybekova, S. (2007). Being a Woman in Kazakhstan, *Washington Times*, 3 January as reprinted in *Kazakhstan's Echo*, 3 January.
- Saunders, R. A. (2006). Welcome to Boratistan, *Transitions Online*, 13 November.
- Saunders, R. A. (2007). In Defence of Kazakhshilik: Kazakhstan's War on Sacha Baron Cohen, *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 14(3): 225-255.
- Schatz, E. (2008). Transnational Image Making and Soft Authoritarian Kazakhstan, *Slavic Review* 67(1): 50-62.
- Smith, G. (2005). Ukraine, Georgia fuming over planned Russian sex film, *The Globe and Mail*, 15 August.
- USA Today. (2006). Inaccurate Borat puts Kazakhstan on map, 10 November.
- Wilson, A. (2005). *Virtual Politics: Faking Democracy in the Post-Soviet World*. New Haven: Yale University Press

Donnacha Ó Beacháin is a faculty member of the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, where he lectures on post-Soviet politics and Irish foreign policy. He currently holds a three year (2008-11) Marie Curie Fellowship awarded by the European Commission to conduct research on the colour revolution phenomenon in the post-Soviet space. He is also a recipient of an 18 month major research grant from IRCHSS/Department of Foreign Affairs Conflict Resolution Unit to lead a research team to examine the role of the OSCE and EU in the post-Soviet 'frozen conflicts'.

Dr. Ó Beacháin's research interests encompass domestic politics in unrecognised or partially recognised post-Soviet states, elections in authoritarian regimes, and political systems in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Recent books include *The Colour Revolutions in the Former Soviet Republics: Successes and Failures* (co-editor, Routledge, 2010); *Destiny of the Soldiers: Fianna Fáil, Irish Republicanism and the IRA* (Macmillan, 2010) and *Life in Post-Communist Eastern Europe after EU Membership* (co-editor, Routledge, 2012).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dmitriy Federov, Brian Farley, Stuart Graham, Ustina Marcus, Renata Matuszkiewicz, Shiraz Paracha, and Kristopher White for distributing, monitoring and collecting the surveys and/or helping compile the statistical data. He would also like to acknowledge the constructive comments afforded by Rico Isaacs, Ryan Kennedy, Rob Kevlihan, Renata Matuszkiewicz and two anonymous reviewers who read earlier versions of this paper.