

## **Amidst Manas, Aitmatov, and Lenin: Nationalism and Belonging in Kyrgyzstan**

### Introduction

“At last the old era of Lenin has passed...Now we begin a new era of national history, which is connected to our state, to our independence, having concluded the old one.”<sup>1</sup> These were the words of the Secretary of State of Kyrgyzstan in 2003, explaining his support for the removal to a nearby location of a monument to Lenin, which had stood in the main square of Kyrgyzstan’s capital, Bishkek, since 1984. Like many other cities in the former Soviet Union, Bishkek has been engaged in a process of “‘postcolonial’ nation-building and globalization as represented in public places, museums, advertisements, and cultural events” (Darieva and Kaschuba 2011, 10). However, unlike many other post-Soviet countries there has been a unique lack of erasure of Soviet symbolism in the public sphere in Bishkek (Cummings 2013); instead, images and objects of the Soviet past are selectively removed or moved, and many exist alongside new monuments, museums, and national events that emphasize various aspects of the country’s history and culture. Twenty-eight years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the city has become so full of monuments that local agencies struggle to find places to erect new ones, and almost every year harkens the advent of new ideological programs, encouraging the populace to honor a famous person, or a tragic event.

### Argument

In light of this ever-growing production of cultural symbols in the post-Soviet period, I ask why and how these symbols are produced, and how people who live in Bishkek come to understand and make sense of the near-constant output of official ideological objects. This work builds on, and departs from, theories that link nation-building and political legitimization to symbolic and material representation (Geertz 1980, Lane 1981, Kligman 1988, Molnar 2013, Zubrzycki 2017) as well as classical 20<sup>th</sup> century works on nationalism (Deutsch 1966; Weber 1976; Hobsbawm 1990; Gellner 1997, 2008).

Ideas of nationalism have historically been used to describe projects of nation-building and ideologies of governments or elite groups. They provide a basis for thinking about the necessity of creating an idea of a nation to promote and encourage particular ways of belonging, understandings of the nation’s history and its role in the present, often with respect to the globalized world. These ideas generally presume a co-extension of territory, government, and some combination of religion, ethnicity, language, culture, history, or economic relationships (Smith 2003). However, over the years scholarship has sharply criticized 20<sup>th</sup> century works on nationalism, illuminating the ways in which these ideas

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<sup>1</sup> “Не Просто Столкнуть Ленина Со Своего Пьедестала” *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*, October 3, 2003.

presuppose an overly homogenous society within a specific territory (Calhoun 1993; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Wimmer 2008a, 2008b) or do not allow for the possibility that members might reject or be ambivalent to nationalist projects (Brubaker 2004, Zahra 2010).

My project intervenes in these debates in two significant ways. First, I provide an account of nationalism from the bottom-up. Attending to the perceptions and understandings of those who do not have the political or financial capital to create symbols on the national level, I hope to move ideas of nationalism beyond the common divide of cosmopolitan nationalism versus ethno-nationalism (Billig 1995, Smith 2003 Levitt 2015), and am currently exploring other dichotomies that may better account for the diversity of understandings seen in my field research, which do not fall along solely linguistic, ethnic, or economic lines.

Secondly, I hope to add to literature on the connection between symbolism and political power by showing that while political symbology does distill an abstract idea of the nation (Zubrzycki 2017) and in so doing, attempts to form “the people” of the nation (Geertz 1980), these processes must be further understood as negotiated processes with multiple stakeholders. In this, I utilize theories from the production of culture literature (Fine 1992, Peterson and Anand 2004) to expand the idea of nationalism from the top down, to show how historic, political, and aesthetic considerations come into conflict with quotidian issues of space and finances when multiple professional spheres collaborate in the creation of national symbols.

### Design and Methods

My research has two parts. First, to understand the perception of nationalism, I conduct in-depth interviews that employ three sites as probes as well as sites for ethnographic research. These sites: the center of the city, the hippodrome, and bazars, give me access to different populations and are integral to the design of the project in that they can be thought of as places which are potentially reflective of ways in which citizens experience the nation. The center of the city, where many monuments stand and the hippodrome, where the national game of kok-boru is played, are two examples of open spaces in which the government attempts to create an image and ontology of the nation, and where citizens interact with these attempts. The bazars of the city are strong drivers of the local economy and offer a space in which to investigate concretely the possibility of nationalism as an economic relationship. I use photo-elicitation in my interviews to bring the experience of multiple possible lenses to the interview site itself. Thus, respondents create their own stories using these symbols to illustrate what they think is important for the nation, thereby elucidating various logics of understanding the nation.

Secondly, I use interviews and archival research to understand the production of nationalism in the form of monuments in the city center and games of kok-boru. Research on monuments is focused on four central monuments that currently stand in Bishkek and one additional monument that is currently under discussion and utilizes interview and archival data. Research on kok-boru has focused on games held in the hippodrome in Bishkek and interviews with players and stakeholders. These examples of attempts to produce understandings on the part of the government and elites show a complex system in which certain aspects of history and tradition are being selectively chosen to represent the nation to the citizenry and the international community, and the ways in which diverse political and professional mandates complicate their actualization.

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