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# The Sochi Syndrome Afoot in Central Asia

## SPECTACLE AND SPECULATIVE BUILDING IN BAKU, ASTANA, AND ASHGABAT

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 371
July 2015

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> "Baku has a historical beauty. Ancient Baku has its own beauty, and it is a source of our pride. At the same time, the rejuvenating and modernizing Baku has already secured a rightful place on the world map....We are turning Baku into a city of gardens, parks, and boulevards. Baku is our beautiful city, and I can say with full responsibility today that it is one of the most beautiful cities around the world....So we are creating an unprecedented environment in the city that will be very difficult to match. Such development and such investments really show the dynamic development of our country over a short period of time." – *President Ilham Aliyev (2012)*

"Urban boosterism" is defined as the active promotion of a city, and it typically involves large-scale urban development schemes, including constructing iconic new buildings, revamping local infrastructure, and creating a new "image" for the city. Long a popular tactic of free market liberals to justify speculative building (that is, in the absence of existing demand), the logic of urban boosterism hinges on freedom of movement of both capital and individuals. Curiously, though, it is increasingly at work in settings less committed to such freedoms. Urban planners in authoritarian countries are increasingly seeking to create new images for their cities and states through grandiose urban development and the hosting of major international spectacles (or "mega-events"), such as World's Fairs, Olympic Games, or the World Cup. As citizens and their leaders in liberal democracies grow increasingly fatigued by—and intolerant of—the skyrocketing expense of hosting such spectacles, leaders in non-democracies have been quick to pick up the slack and are beginning to win first-tier event bids (like the 2008 Beijing Olympics; the 2014 Sochi Olympics and Russia's 2018 World Cup; and Qatar's 2022 World Cup). While urban boosterism in liberal democratic settings is also used to solidify the position of "growth machine" elites, the unprecedented $51 billion price tag

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for Russia's Olympic Games in Sochi shows that resource-rich, non-democratic states are positioned to develop such projects on a dramatically larger scale.

The "Sochi syndrome" is a sign of what we can expect as more and more nondemocratic, illiberal states host these events. Taking the cases of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan—all of which rank among the world's least free countries in the classification system of Freedom House, a U.S. nongovernmental organization—this memo illustrates how these events serve as a convenient platform to consolidate authoritarian systems and to promote state-dominated, elite financial interests. Boosterist agendas in Baku, Astana, and Ashgabat serve two related purposes: (1) distributing financial and political patronage; and (2) promoting a positive image of the state for both international and domestic consumption.

**Symbolic Cities: Baku, Astana, and Ashgabat**

> "The transfer of the capital to Astana is a landmark event in the history of a new Kazakhstan. For us, the construction of Astana has become a national idea which has unified society and strengthened our young and independent state. This has become the stimulus for our people and it helped them believe in their strength. Today, Astana is the symbol of our high aspirations, our competiveness, and unity....The most important thing is that Astana, throughout its development, has indeed become the major city of Kazakhstan. In their hearts, our people have truly nurtured sincere love for our capital. Every year, thousands of people in Kazakhstan seek to come here just to see this majestic symbol of our state. Foreign guests admire Astana, and this suggests that we have done everything well." – *President Nursultan Nazarbayev (K Magazine, 2010)*

While many post-Soviet cities have experienced significant decline since the 1990s, Baku, Astana, and Ashgabat have stood out as regional exceptions in the years since the demise of the Soviet Union. Drawing on the tremendous resource wealth they inherited, independent state planners have overseen ambitious transformations in their capitals. Astana became the new capital of Kazakhstan in 1997, and the scale of government investment has since stunned international observers and citizens alike. Ashgabat has likewise seen monumental development with its opulence displayed on the white marble facades lining its grand new avenues, a project initiated by late President Saparmurat Niyazov and continued under Gurbanguly Berdymuhamedov. Baku, for its part, is also undergoing a rapid transformation, with numerous iconic new buildings erected alongside a selective preservation of its impressive architectural heritage.

Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan are like other rentier states around the world, where infrastructure development is inextricably linked to (more and less official) patronage practices around the exploitation of natural resource reserves. This phenomenon is especially visible in the capitals, where construction and development contracts are a favorite conduit for these relations. For example, although much of Astana's new urban infrastructure has been officially sponsored by the government, it is commonly referred to as normal business practice in Kazakhstan for private companies

to develop local infrastructure. Indeed, Astana's earliest phase of construction was funded through various "contributions" that were solicited from various oil companies, which were viewed as deal-sweeteners to win favorable terms in new contracts. Patronage practices aside, the symbolic dimensions of iconic urban development offer important insights into how these political and economic practices are made legitimate in the public sphere.

Elites actively frame the boosterist development in their capitals as a sort of "business card," advertising their new orientations in the post-Soviet era as "reformed," "modern," and "competitive." This is apparent in the quoted passages above by Presidents Aliyev and Nazarbayev, and also from Ashgabat:

> "Ashgabat gets new breath and according to many indications has been achieving the level of world standards; our President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov has done a great service for this. It is the result of his political will, diplomacy, distinguished organizational skills, and permanent attention to the problems of the capital and, of course, to architecture. The love of each Ashgabat inhabitant to [their] native city doesn't leave [their] heart. And it is huge earnest [sic] of success that the city in spite of any difficulties will overcome all obstacles and will confidently make a step into [the] future."
> – *Ashgabat Official Website (2014)*

Through such flowery rhetoric, the allocation of state funds is justified on the symbolic grounds of needing to impress "the world." This symbolic scripting notwithstanding, finances do matter. However, the question we must ask is not *whether* ordinary citizens benefit, but more generally: *who* benefits?

**Who Benefits? The Sochi Syndrome in Baku, Astana, and Ashgabat**

Urban boosterist development most directly benefits the top elites in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan and, in many cases, a select group of well-connected foreign firms and individuals. Infrastructure developed for international spectacles makes this particularly apparent because the facilities have an extremely limited public use—despite the narrative that they are "for the people." The "people," however, will never recoup the funds their governments spend on such tremendous facilities. Yet across Central Asia an increasing number of major iconic sporting venues are going up, and planners in Baku, Astana, and Ashgabat have been vigorously pushing for more events, which they see as ideal conduits for diffusing positive images of the countries' development agendas.

So far, planners in the region have not been able to win bids for first-tier mega-events. Instead of waiting, however, they have used the boosterist "build it and they will come" approach to justify the investment of extraordinary sums of money into *second-tier* events. These events, they argue, are stepping-stones for developing the infrastructure and gaining the experience required to compete for first-tier mega-events. This narrative

was clearly at work in Kazakhstan, for example, when it hosted the 2011 Asian Winter Games in Astana and Almaty. Early reports suggested that the government allocated $726 million for the construction and renovation of facilities, but the figure was more likely in the range of $2 billion. Similarly, figures for the EXPO-2017 (a second-tier World's Fair) suggest that the government will spend approximately $2.3 billion, although this is likely to be a gross underestimation.

Such extraordinary sums for second-tier events have clearly shown elites the power of the boosterist logic. In Kazakhstan, as in the other countries, the president harbors ambitions to host the Olympic Games (indeed, Almaty is among the two remaining contenders for the 2022 Winter Games, but critics are widely suspicious of its viability). Elites are able to leverage this information, together with the government's long-term effort to develop Kazakhstan's international prestige (the regime's so-called "image project") to promote boosterist development. In the case of the country's new multi-million dollar sporting facilities, however, the results are far more symbolic than functional.

Most buildings around Astana look fine from afar, but upon closer examination they uniformly reveal serious flaws in design, engineering, workmanship, and materials. The Saryarka Velodrome, for example, was "completed" for the Asian Games in winter 2011, but the site was in complete disarray by the summer: much of the exterior was incomplete, building materials were strewn about, and exterior roof-support beams were already broken or falling down, leading to concerns about whether the poorly-designed roof would withstand Astana's heavy snow. Although there is widespread awareness of the low construction quality among Astana residents—those who must live and work in these buildings—their opinion is clearly of little concern to decision-makers. Developers and planners are far more preoccupied with the structures' appearance from a distance, and its ability to deliver the desired visual image demanded by state procurement officials: as long as photographs of facilities from afar look nice, developers are positioned to make large sums of money by keeping construction costs down.

Planners in Baku and Ashgabat have also pursued opportunities to host international sporting spectacles. Like Kazakhstan, these are largely second-tier events, for which officials have justified mammoth investments through the same "stepping stone" narrative that one day they will host first-tier events like the Olympics. This is amply illustrated in Ashgabat's new 157-hectare "Olympic Complex," under construction for the 2017 Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games. The complex includes the expansion of the Ashgabat Olympic Stadium, which was built in 2003 for 35,000 spectators, as well as the construction of a velodrome, indoor and outdoor arenas and sports fields, a medical center, hotel, and so on. There is little reason to believe that these grand new facilities will be used to any extent that might justify their cost, but this is of little significance to planners who are not operating on a strict neoliberal market rationale. Since the state is

funding their development without an eye to popular demand and income generating potential, contractors and other actors commissioning these projects are positioned to make a great deal of money by developing these iconic facilities, regardless of their illusory profitability in the long-term. So while elites themselves profit in the short term, they are neither impacted nor held accountable for the hollowness of their claims of future pay-offs "for the people." Their profits are already secured, and they face no danger of being voted out of office.

Urban elites in Azerbaijan have also sought to position Baku as a major city, ostensibly seeking first-tier mega-events but mostly slated for second-tier events, such as the 2012 Eurovision song competition, the 2015 European Games, the Formula 1 European Grand Prix from 2016, and the 2017 Islamic Solidarity Games. As in the other two cities, the hosting of sporting events in Baku is understood as having longer-term boosterist potential—not just the site of global spectacle for a month, but also an ideal opportunity for the "growth machine" elites to promote their real estate development schemes and various other business interests. In fact, Baku's business elite has long maintained a tight grip on the country's Olympic Committee and other sporting organizations, which are seen as a rich source of potential profit and international prestige. The Crystal Palace, for example, was specifically built for the Eurovision contest, at a cost of $350 million, while the city's newly opened national football stadium, capable of seating 68,000, had an impressive $300 million price tag. Estimates suggest that the government will spend around $8 billion overall on preparations for and hosting the European Games. As with Astana and Ashgabat, these investments have been strategically accompanied by a narrative of Azerbaijan's modernity and its rise to international prominence.

**Conclusion**

In the capitals of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan, patterns of development are made possible by resource-based economies and elite-dominated patronage patterns common to rentier states around the world. These three countries all highlight the need to take political geography seriously if we are to understand boosterist urban development in nondemocratic settings. In gearing development around international mega-events, state and city planners in Astana, Ashgabat, and Baku are able to draw on the credibility of a global discourse about boosterist development, justifying speculative building that functions locally as an important means of enriching top officials and distributing patronage.

We have also argued that the symbolism of an internationally-esteemed capital city is central to understanding how elites have been able to use these projects in their state-making efforts—using resource wealth, officially and otherwise, to cultivate the credit for transforming the country and setting it on track for a new era of "modernity," all the while painting the three capital cities' development as a "gift" to the people from the state. The use of urban boosterism narratives in the absence of a neoliberal logic of

freedom is far less paradoxical when it is viewed as a set of opportunities to both distribute elite patronage and engage in domestic and international "branding." Although resource-rich states of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan have only yet seen second-tier events, they illustrate that the Sochi syndrome is afoot in Central Asia.

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