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AUTHENTICITY AND ECO-CULTURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN KAZAKHSTAN: A COUNTRY BRANDING APPROACH

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ABSTRACT: The country of Kazakhstan is not a well known tourism destination, either globally or within Central Asia. Although the number of inbound tourists is relatively small, the country possesses numerous eco-cultural tourism attractions based on its past Soviet times, nomadic culture and a variety of unique landscapes. As heritage is inherently a contested phenomenon, especially when communities are comprised of multiple ethnic groups, belief systems, cultures and social norms, the concept of authenticity applied to cultural heritage in Kazakhstan has become particularly relevant to the specialists of cultural and sustainable tourism in the country. Whereas the tourism industry tends to provide its own definitions of the traditional or typical, the question of authenticity in eco-cultural tourism practices becomes crucial as they tend to be negotiated through what is locally perceived as authentic and what tourists and developers view as key travel experiences. The proposed exploratory study aims at recording and reviewing through semi-structured in-depth interviews the perception of authenticity of community members, policy makers and tourism developers of eco-cultural tours in Central Kazakhstan. In particular, the research relates to how the concept of authenticity can contribute to position Kazakhstan as a tourism destination and develop its brand equity on the international tourism market. Recommendations will be made to the different stakeholders involved in the development of Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices through a better incorporation of the notion of authenticity when attracting new visitors in the country.

Keywords: authenticity, eco-cultural tourism, country branding, Kazakhstan.

RESUMEN: Kazajistán no es un destino turístico muy conocido, sea a nivel global, sea en Asia Central. Aunque el número de entrada de turistas sea relativamente pequeño, el país tiene inúmeras atracciones turísticas eco culturales basadas en su pasado soviético, la cultura nómada y una variedad de paisajes únicos. Como el patrimonio es inherentemente un fenómeno

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controvierto, especialmente cuando las comunidades son compuestas por variados grupos étnicos, sistemas de creencias, culturas y normas sociales, el concepto de autenticidad aplicado al patrimonio cultural en Kazajistán se volvió particularmente relevante para los especialistas del turismo cultural y sostenible del país. Mientras la industria del turismo tiene tendencia a fornecer sus propias definiciones del tradicional o típico, la cuestión de la autenticidad en las prácticas de turismo eco cultural se vuelve crucial, una vez que tienden a ser negociadas a través de aquello que es percibido localmente como auténtico y aquello que los turistas y los empresarios consideran experiencias-clave. El estudio exploratorio propuesto visa el registro y análisis, a través de entrevistas profundizadas semiestructuradas a miembros de la comunidad, políticos y empresarios de turismo eco cultural, de la percepción de autenticidad en la zona Central del Kazajistán. En particular, la pesquisa se relaciona con la forma como el concepto de autenticidad puede contribuir para posicionar el Kazajistán como un destino de turismo y desarrolla el patrimonio de la marca en el mercado de turismo internacional. Serán hechas algunas recomendaciones para los diferentes agentes envueltos en el desarrollo de prácticas de turismo eco cultural de Kazajistán a través de una mejor integración de la noción de autenticidad cuando se pretende atraer nuevos visitantes al país. **Palabras-clave:** autenticidad; turismo eco cultural; marca de país, Kazajistán.

RESUMO: O Cazaquistão não é um destino turístico bem conhecido, quer a nível global, quer na Ásia Central. Embora o número de entrada de turistas seja relativamente pequeno, o país possui inúmeras atrações turísticas eco-culturais baseadas no seu passado soviético, na cultura nómada e numa variedade de paisagens únicas. Como o património é inerentemente um fenómeno controverso, especialmente quando as comunidades são compostas por vários grupos étnicos, sistemas de crenças, culturas e normas sociais, o conceito de autenticidade aplicado ao património cultural no Cazaquistão tornou-se particularmente relevante para os especialistas do turismo cultural e sustentável do país. Enquanto a indústria do turismo tende a fornecer as suas próprias definições do tradicional ou típico, a questão da autenticidade nas práticas de turismo eco-cultural torna-se crucial, uma vez que tendem a ser negociadas através daquilo que é percebido localmente como autêntico e aquilo que os turistas e os empresários consideram experiências-chave. O estudo exploratório proposto visa o registo e análise, através de entrevistas aprofundadas semi-estruturadas a membros da comunidade, políticos e empresários de turismo eco-cultural, da perceção de autenticidade na zona Central do Cazaquistão. Em particular, a pesquisa diz respeito à forma como o conceito de autenticidade pode contribuir para posicionar o Cazaquistão como um destino de turismo e desenvolver o património da marca no mercado de turismo internacional. Serão feitas algumas recomendações para os diferentes agentes envolvidos no desenvolvimento de práticas de turismo eco-cultural cazaque através de uma melhor integração da noção de autenticidade quando se pretende atrair novos visitantes no país. **Palavras-chave:** autenticidade; turismo eco-cultural; marca de país, Cazaquistão.

INTRODUCTION

The development of the global economy, the importance of relationships and interdependence between countries have forced governments to closely monitor and manage how other countries perceive them as a tourism destination. It has triggered scholars, academics, and politicians to research the field of national branding and introduce strategic marketing plans that help to shape and change the global perception of a particular country in the eyes of the global audience. It is a new phenomenon that is different from national image in a sense that nation branding involves a proactive approach to the formation, alteration, and management of the country's image (Saunders, 2008). Despite the efforts of the government of Kazakhstan to promote the country worldwide and to establish a recognizable national brand, still few people are aware of its existence, let alone its location and history. Since gaining

independence in 1990, Kazakhstan has engaged in numerous activities in order to distinguish itself from other post-Soviet Union countries and has struggled to build a strong national brand.

Porter (1998) argued that the national image is closely related to the country-of-origin effects, which both contribute to the competitiveness of products and services produced in a certain country in the eyes of a foreign consumer. Insofar, the country of Kazakhstan is not a well known tourism destination, either globally or within Central Asia. Although the number of inbound tourists is relatively small (The Agency of Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2010), the country possesses numerous eco-cultural tourism attractions based on its past Soviet times, nomadic culture and a variety of unique landscapes. As heritage is inherently a contested phenomenon (Keir, 2010), especially when communities are comprised of multiple ethnic groups, belief systems, cultures and social norms, the concept of authenticity applied to cultural heritage in Kazakhstan has become particularly relevant to the specialists of cultural and sustainable tourism in the country. Particularly, since the second half of the nineteenth century, the cultural landscape of Kazakhstan has undergone a tremendous process of transformation from being shaped by pastoral nomadic activities into agrarian and industrial land (Beisembiev, 2001). The nomadic lifestyle that was prevailing in the beginning of the 1930s was slowly transformed during Soviet times into a semi-nomadic lifestyle which incorporated many new commoditized cultural habits and changes in nomadic traditions (Laruelle, 2008).

One of the issues at stake for visitors when they visit culturally and environmentally remote regions is the question of authenticity regarding eco-cultural tourism practices. Wallace and Russel (2004) argue that 'eco-cultural tourism reflects present-day practice, but also acts as a model for how cultural and eco-tourism could be employed by local people to build an empowered, sustainable future in similar settings' (Wallace & Russel, 2004, p. 236). What tourists usually see is the performative aspect of local cultures presented to visitors and while this 'performed authenticity' is created, staged and carried out for external consumption (MacCannell, 1976), it is important to place it in the context of how and why the tourism industry defines and presents its version of the genuinely local in both ecological and cultural aspects of tourism experience (Jamal & Hill, 2002).

Our empirical analysis will encounter an overview of the various meanings of authenticity community members, policy makers and tourism developers of eco-cultural tours in Kazakhstan have been giving to the Kazakhstani landscapes and cultural artifacts (craft-making, architecture, rituals and traditional games). We then move on to examine how these different perceptions of authenticity can be used to position

Kazakhstan as a tourism destination and develop its brand equity on the international tourism market. A review of these perceptions of authenticity reveals how the concept of authenticity can influence some of the impacts associated with tourism development in the region and in particular be used in the country branding strategy. Consequently we will examine the degree to which Kazakhstani tourism stakeholders can shape the creation of eco-cultural landscapes that stick to the realities of Kazakhstan cultural heritage and link it up with the notion of authenticity while developing their tours in Kazakhstan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Authenticity and the commodification of culture

While the issue of authenticity pervades the discourse of heritage, cultural and nature tourism, there is no simple, objective way of defining what is real, traditional or natural. Insofar as authenticity is defined in terms of the existence of alternative (non-modern) forms of life, or of untouched wilderness, then the very presence of the tourist makes such experiences problematic (Smith & Duffy, 2003). Of critical importance in the development of indicators of authenticity are *the politics of representation in authenticity*, particularly in cultural and heritage sites and attractions (Richter, 1999). Having control over the heritage and over the commodification and commercialization of the material and symbolic culture is integral to the ethnicity and identity issues (Lanfant, 1995). This dynamically constitutive nature of heritage (both past and living) is a similarly important consideration for other national and public spaces characterized by emergent economies, globalizing cultures and hybrid populations like in Kazakhstan.

The attribute “authentic” is usually given to something that is genuine and original, that can be certified by evidence, or remains true to a tradition (Smith & Duffy, 2003). Whereas the tourism industry tends to provide its own definitions of the traditional or typical, the question of authenticity in eco-cultural tourism practices becomes crucial as it seems to be negotiated through what is locally perceived as authentic and what tourists and developers view as key travel experiences (Smith & Duffy, 2003). It is essential to understand the role of the private and public sectors in the packaging and marketing of tourism attractions and destinations, particularly in the country branding identity.

Sense of place and Kazakhstan country branding identity

According to Anholt (2007), the nation’s brand is the combination of various elements that make up the image of the country as a whole. This includes its culture, history, people, government, and business. In

other words, national branding is the practice of building a positive reputation of a particular country and its people in the international community. Saunders (2008) claims that unlike commercial brands, nation brands are unique and cannot be replicated; moreover, they need to be realistic and be free of any misinterpretations or confusing messages, because failure to do so might result in serious reputation damage. Dinnie (2008) has identified that the most effective approach for building a nation brand is “cultural branding”, which involves the blending of cultural and social aspects of the country for the creation of a brand image. Others argue that the development of a country’s brand should be done through the development of various areas such as tourism and exports, and significant attention should be paid to the natural resources and landscapes (Kotler & Gertner, 2002; Porter, 1998).

Konecnik and Go (2008) highlight that ‘place identity can contribute importantly to the creation and sustenance of a distinctive competitive edge. Raising awareness of the historical nature of the concept of culture in relation to the ‘extraordinary’ (Smith 1989) that tourists are in search for, is relevant in the process of identity formation at both global and local levels’ (Konecnik & Go, 2008, p. 177). The brand identity building should not only be driven by the political side, but should also satisfy a broad range of stakeholders implied in eco-cultural tourism development in Kazakhstan. A supply side, governmental and managerial perspective on country branding can be justified for this study as the concept of authenticity applied to the Kazakhstani brand identity strategy involves community members and a local insight.

As modern tourists want to experience ‘a sense place’ when visiting a destination, therefore experiential and symbolic benefits play as functional benefits in a destination brand’s identity (Keller, 1993). Kapferer highlights (1998, p. 71), ‘before knowing how we are perceived, we must know who we are’ to convey that the surveying of the supply side regarding the country branding concept is particularly important, in particular for a young country like Kazakhstan who does not have a clear brand image yet. Brand identity can also be conceptualized by its vision and culture, which in turn ‘drive its desired positioning, personality and subsequent relationships, all of which are later presented to reflect the stakeholders’ actual and aspirational self-images’ (Konecnik & Go, 2008, p. 179). As the image formation goes well beyond the tourist-perceived approach to encompass the destination image, as projected by the destination management organization’ (Govers, 2004), the present study aims at surveying various Kazakhstani tourism stakeholders involved in the development of eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan. Particularly, the present study applies a theoretical framework to examine the concept of authentic-

ity and to apply the study's findings to respond to the issue on how Kazakhstan can incorporate the notion of authenticity to develop its tourism destination brand identity.

METHODOLOGY

The research method for the study is explorative/ interpretive, following a qualitative methodology approach. Initial meetings and discussions with key informants and a visit to study sites provided context to develop the research design, identifying the most suitable study sites and participants. The fieldwork has taken place in Almaty, Karaganda and Astana cities as well as eco-villages developed in Kazakhstan. Besides documentation and secondary data including travel brochures, interviews represented the most important information sources. The study employed 15 semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions with various stakeholders who were directly and indirectly involved with the development of eco-cultural tourism and Community-Based Tourism (CBT) in Kazakhstan. Different members (the director, marketing and logistics specialists) of the tourism operator "Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan" selling eco-cultural tours, international and local NGOs including the German Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU), "Eco-museum Karaganda" and "Avalon historic-geographical society" were interviewed. International experts in nomadic culture and eco-cultural tourism selected from their publications about tourism and eco-tourism development in Kazakhstan have been included in the panel. The political side was represented by government officials from the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of Kazakhstan as well as the promotional director of the Kazakhstan Tourism Association (KTA) responsible for eco-cultural tourism in the country. Community members selling local souvenirs, running local guesthouses and working in partnership with the operator "Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan" in the eco-site of Kyzylarai, have also been interviewed for the study.

The duration of the interviews was approximately one to two hours and they were conducted in August 2011. Notes were taken during the interviews and subsequent analysis of the interviews was employed to identify themes of interest including identifying ecological and cultural aspects of the Kazakhstani culture that can be incorporated into an authentic eco-cultural tourism experience for local and international visitors. The interviewees were probed with additional questions such as how the perception of authenticity could be incorporated into the branding of eco-cultural tours developed in the country. As culture is produced by individual residents, especially small-scale artisans and artists who sell their crafts sale to tourists (Clarke 2003), the researchers decided to interview in particular the 'insiders' who jointly represent

the destination culture (Anholt, 2002; Konecnik, 2002) as distinct from the outsiders: tourists. In order to investigate a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2003) and provide valuable understandings of people, events experiences and organizations in their social and historical context (Veal, 2006), the researchers participated in one of the eco-cultural tours “Kyzylarai” organized by “Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan” and managed to get in touch with the local community, experiencing as well some of the CBT activities prepared for prospective tourists.

As the researchers had limited available information about the population from which the sample will be taken, non-probability sampling was used for the research, in particular purposive or judgmental sampling method that is used in situations in which an expert uses judgment in selecting cases with a specific purpose in mind (Neuman, 2009). This method has been chosen to select unique cases that are especially informative about the development of eco-cultural tourism projects in Kazakhstan. A multiple stakeholders approach (experts in nomadic culture, tourism brokers and local community) has allowed the researcher to interview all the different groups of population involved in the development of the Kyzylarai eco-cultural tour detailed further in the paper. In particular, one critical question the researchers have asked the different stakeholders is what sort of involvement locals had in the establishment of the tourism experience that is being offered and how the notion of authenticity could be used in the Kazakhstan country branding strategy.

Case studies can provide valuable understandings of people, events experiences and organisations in their social and historical context (Veal, 2006), which has been essential for the present research project. Case study research in tourism tends to have a local focus, adopt a one-time or cross-sectional approach and single-case research is usually preferred (Xiao & Smith, 2006). A case study may adopt several collection methods such as a combination of secondary data with surveys and/or interviews, which is particularly true for those case studies that rely on two or multiple sources. Because authenticity is a socially, individually-constructed and evaluated perception or experience and because managers can influence authenticity (claimed, presented, assured, authorized and promoted), the researchers have adopted a post-positivist stance, which maintains that objectivity, although desirable, can only be approximated.

CASE STUDY - “KYZYLARAI” ECO-CULTURAL TOUR

Eco-cultural tours in Kazakhstan have been developed by the Ecological Tourism and Public Awareness in Central Kazakhstan (ETPACK) project and are looking into the development of Community-Based eco-tourism in Kazakhstan promoted by national and international

organizations. The two-year project started in September 2008 by the European Union, the German Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU) and the Kazakh NGO Eco-museum Karaganda. During the project implementation, three eco-sites (Kyzylarai, Ulytau and Kent) with a network of home-stays and one souvenir production of traditional handicrafts were built up in the Karaganda region in Central Kazakhstan and an official eco-tourism operator, “Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan”, is now marketing offline and online (www.nomadic.kz) the Kyzylarai tour as well as the tourism products of the eco-sites. The local population has managed to preserve skills of producing articles out of felt and numerous national fermented milk products: ‘kumyz’ (horse milk), “shubat” (camel milk) and local dairy products that are made available to the visitors. The tour brochure notes ‘such combination of pristine nature, ancient historical monuments and well-preserved way of life of the local population makes the “Kyzylarai” eco-cultural tour a great place to visit for those who like to explore something new and interesting for themselves’ (ETPACK, 2010).

Research findings and discussion

According to the main stakeholders interviewed, the notion of authenticity is deeply linked with the eco-cultural tourism practices and tours offered in the country. As former nomads used to live in harmony with the nature in a sustainable way, their lifestyle is deeply engrained with the steppe landscapes and this blend creates a unique tourism experience for international visitors who often had no previous knowledge about the traditional nomadic culture before arriving in the country. In particular, the “Kyzylarai” tour matches the definition of eco-cultural tourism (eco-cultural tourism can be presented as a concept in which ecological and cultural aspects of a landscape are combined to create a site for tourists, (Wallace & Russel, 2004)), mixing ecological and cultural aspects of the Kazakhstani landscapes.

Themes identified to be potentially authentic for Kazakhstan branding strategy

The three following themes have been identified by the respondents to be potentially authentic regarding an eco-cultural tourism experience for local and international visitors, and can be used as well in the Kazakhstan country branding strategy.

1. The “geographical imagination”

“Nomadic Cultural landscapes”: ‘Before it can be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock’ (Schama, 1995, p. 7).

Culture and scenery are inextricably integrated in the expectations and perceptions of locals and tourists alike (Buckley, Ollenburg, & Zhong, 2008). From a geographical perspective, it is useful to argue for greater attention to the situated place and space in which the object is experienced (Crouch, 2000). All the different stakeholders have been interviewed regarding their perception of the scenery (for example whether Kazakhstani landscapes can be viewed as “abstract mental landscapes”, (Ringer, 1998)), the environment as well as the wildlife they have experienced during the eco-tour of “Kyzylarai” in Central Kazakhstan.

According to the tourism operator “Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan”, objective authenticity can be found in the cultural landscapes that are witnessed by the visitors. This view is shared by local home-stay providers for whom steppes landscapes are recognized to be one of the most authentic themes for local and international tourists. The archeological site of “Begazy” from the Bronze Age included in the “Kyzylarai” tour offers a unique opportunity for visitors to witness ancient authentic historical sites. As the tourism brochure mentions on the official website of “Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan”, *‘historical heritage is presented in a quite interesting way: monumental granite sepulchers of Begazy and rock paintings, dating from the Bronze age, stone statues of the Turkic period and mausoleums of the period of the Kazakh-Jungar wars. Such an amazing combination of pristine nature, ancient historical monuments and rather well-preserved way of life of the local population makes the Kyzylarai eco-site a great place to visit for those who like to explore something new and interesting for themselves’* (Kazakhstan, 2012).

2. Performative spaces and the politics of cultural sites

“Nomadic home-stays” with guests (local home-stays):

According to the main stakeholders involved in the development of eco-cultural tours, the notions of eco-cultural tourism and authenticity have a real meaning together as most of the villages in Central Kazakhstan are still looking the same as they were since the 1930s. Unlike some of the eco-cultural villages or open-air museums developed by the Ministry of Tourism and Sport of Kazakhstan in the region of Balkash Lake and Burabai (Baravoie), the villages that are part of the tours are points where visitors can stay. There are no ‘staged’ parts either from the home-stay brokers or the tour operator “Nomadic Travel Kazakhstan” point of view, in particular any significant signs aiming at emulating a “typical” Kazakhstani village. Furthermore, the local population has managed to preserve skills of producing articles out of felt and numerous national fermented milk products: “kumyz”, “shubat”, kurt” (Kazakhstan, 2012). In particular, some of the home-stay brokers are highlighting the fact that more yurts (mobile dwellings from nomadic times known as gers in Mongolia) should be set in the steppes as they are matching some of the visitors’ expectations when traveling in Cen-

tral Kazakhstan. By staying in the guesthouses sharing a “nomadic lifestyle” and interacting with the local population, the visitors are strongly participating in an authentic tourism experience.

“Nomadic food”: The researchers have been looking at different dimensions of authenticity experienced by local and international visitors regarding traditional Kazakhstani nomadic food (ingredients, links to the past, as well as new food traditions) made available to the tourists during the eco-tour. According to the tourism operators interviewed, the experiential part of the tourist experience lies in sharing traditional meals (“*beshtarmak*”, “*kuyrdak*” based on horse meat) prepared by the host people which are the same across generations as well as being able to witness traditional games like horse festivals and hunting during the feasts periods. Quoting the “Eco-tourism Resources of Kazakhstan” brochure for visitors developed by the official Kazakhstan Tourism Association (KTA), ‘understand you can find happiness from simple things’ welcomes visitors to experientially participate and share the life of local people. The traditional “*Dastarkhan*” (table filled with horse meat dishes) allows visitors to discover the traditional way of cooking within the village and experience an authentic meal with the host population. As tourists involved in active participation rather than observation are more likely to experience a sense of existential authenticity, Ooi (2002) notes that there is more chance of this happening if cultural mediators absent themselves and allow tourists to feel they are both part of the local community and experiencing culture bodily. Quoting some of the home-stay brokers, ‘national traditional food is the best expression of our culture, and the meals we are preparing for the visitors are still prepared in the same way generation after generation’. The experience itself is, from MacCannell’s (1976) point of view, not ‘staged’, as the home-stay brokers who are members of the village are serving the meals according to the traditions of the ancestors and there is a meaning behind each of the cooking and eating experiences.

3. Crafts purchased by tourists

Hand-made crafts in the forms of ‘*Kilems*’ and ‘*Korpes*’ (carpets) made of fur materials are produced in the village of *Kyzylarai* for tourists on demand. They are following the embroideries and ornaments from ancient times, but are now mostly made out from cotton instead of camel textile. The souvenir articles are individually owned by local villagers and members in the village who sell a choice of hand-crafted souvenirs including hand-made fur carpets, fur products in the form of “sleepers” and mobile phones boxes. As some of these crafts might be seen as reproductions of some ancient traditional crafts, some shops also sell ethnic tee-shirts and sleepers with Kazakhstani ornaments that

can participate in experiential authentic tourism experiences when they are worn by the visitor's outside of the village or back home.

Shaping Kazakhstani brand identity

We have examined how tourism spaces in this region of central Kazakhstan can be constructed by community members, policy makers and tourism developers around the question of authenticity and eco-cultural tours in Central Kazakhstan. Of particular relevance for this study is that tourism stakeholders shouldn't distort the reality but provide a depiction of the true social and economic situation in the destination (Britton, 1979; Silver, 1993) that redefines the social meanings of places, though creating an image of the country that would be exposed to the international arena. As Milne (1998) highlights, 'cultural landscapes are viewed and shaped as commodities that can be consumed by potentially malleable consumers. The construction of tourist landscapes in peripheral regions and areas where indigenous peoples live has focused on the fact that this commodification process involves the elaborate creation of "fantasy", (Milne, Grekin, & Woodley, 1998, pp. 102, 103).

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, as a new state, has faced a need to identify itself in the eyes of the world community and to put itself on the world map. Saunders (2008) states that the Kazakhstani government has put much effort into creating a '...unique, recognizable, and credible national brand' and the government has indeed approached the process of forming a national brand strategically. According to Marat (2009), the country's government has so far monopolized the process by limiting the participation of the domestic audiences in the development of its country brand image. The government chose to position the country as a resourceful, stable and multi-ethnic country located in a fairly unstable region of the world, which also serves as a crossroad between West and East, combining diverse cultures and beliefs (Marat, 2009; Saunders, 2008). Furthermore, Kazakhstan has a unique role of acting as a bridge between Asia and Europe and it cannot be perceived as a typical Central Asian country. In order to promote this image, the Kazakhstani government has adopted the message "Kazakhstan – the Heart of Eurasia" that highlights the country's favorable geographical location and the efforts of the government to be recognized for its vast territories, rich natural resources and political stability (Marat, 2009).

A need for rebranding Kazakhstani image

According to Saunders (2008), the government plans to change the target audience of the advertising campaign and try to attract a young-

er public by focusing more on cultural and tourism aspects rather than political issues. One example is the OSCE chairmanship which Kazakhstan obtained in 2010 and the reason for applying for chairmanship, as Marat (2009) claims, was to prove that Kazakhstan has managed to be the home for numerous cultures and ethnicities. Furthermore, Kazakhstan has also hosted the Asian Olympic Games in 2011 and applied to host the Winter Olympic Games in 2014; all of these activities being actively involved in the hosting of international events have helped the process of establishment of the country's brand.

As Kahn (2006) points out, re-branding is not a simple process which can be achieved by introducing new advertising campaigns or printing new leaflets, it is a complicated process that needs to be backed up by real results – change in policies, reforming legislation, improving infrastructure, reducing unemployment and poverty rates – only the combination of these procedures can produce real results that would eventually lead to gaining a better global reputation. Cultural and heritage places and spaces, like time, are always 'in the making' through meaning, constructing and participatory activities that occur within them, generating a variety of personal, heritage and identity relationships including a sense of ownership or emotional attachment, empowerment, value, and feeling (Crouch, 2000, p. 65). These aspects of authenticity will be important for Kazakhstan as the country keeps defining the dynamic nature of its cultural heritage and the potentialities for its eco-cultural tourism practices.

CONCLUSIONS

Kazakhstan recently celebrated its 20 years of gaining independence and indeed the country has come a long way since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The country has faced numerous challenges in the search for self-identification and in determining their place in the global arena. The national image of Kazakhstan has been a subject of concern for the country's government and a lot of resources and effort has been put into developing a strong country image; however, the brand is still in its infancy stage (Saunders, 2008). Therefore, every event that might affect it needs to be closely managed and monitored, because Kazakhstan still has a long way to go before it can develop a truly effective and recognizable national brand. Indeed, the present research is proposing the inclusion of the concept of authenticity into Kazakhstan's country branding strategy and the development of its brand equity as a unique tourism destination on the international market. This approach applied to Kazakhstani eco-cultural tourism practices could help shape the nation's brand identity and position the country as a destination that favors tourism experiences based on crafted tours emphasizing genuine Kazakhstani cultural heritage.

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