

Asian Texas: 'Borat' Misrepresents Real Kazakhstan

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Sixty percent of my students' queries nowadays relate to economics. Forty percent concern whether I've seen "Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan." (I haven't.)

Edgy, politically incorrect comedy is treasure. Those whose wit reoxygenates today's suffocated public discourse – Sacha Baron Cohen included – deserve thanks and praise. I like high-brow film but love the sophomoric humor of "Animal House" and "Airplane." But "Borat" . . .

My problem with "Borat" comes from having taught economics to Kazakh medical personnel, both in the U.S. and Kazakhstan. Unfortunately, for his fictional country, Baron Cohen chose a real country of which he chooses to know little and his audience knows less.

Until "Borat," Kazakhstan held the Guinness record for Largest Country No One Has Heard Of. Now, it is Best-Known Country No One Has Heard Of. When National Lampoon mocked French, Germans, British, and Americans in "European Vacation," the writers purposely recycled and amplified clichéd stereotypes. Audiences understood the veracity and excesses of the caricatures. In contrast, "Borat" plops pre-packaged stereotypes onto a random country -- as if some Asian director made a comedy about American Indians, but portrayed them as Germans, eating schnitzel and wearing lederhosen.

BARON COHEN probably chose Kazakhstan because the name contains two K's, one Z, and an S, rendering it harsh and strange to Western ears. Using a real country no doubt made it harder for the film's unwitting "stars" to confirm they were being duped. They could Google up Kazakhstan but wouldn't know enough about it to deduce that the "journalist" was a fake.

(Trivia fact: In 1997, "Air Force One" also arbitrarily borrowed the name "Kazakhstan." The president, Harrison Ford, was hijacked by "Kazakh terrorists" posing, like Borat, as journalists. Ironically, Kazakhstan is a U.S. ally and has no history of terrorism.)

Previously, mention of my time in Kazakhstan usually elicited the query, "Where's that?" Now, the usual question is, "Is it like the movie?" It is not.

The Kazakhs I know are warm, welcoming, and sharply aware of Western culture. Despite 75 years of communism, their intellects and humanity remain intact. In my experience, Kazakh doctors, nurses, and health administrators absorb economic concepts more quickly than American medical personnel. Why? Unlike Americans, no one ever told the Kazakhs that medical resources are limitless, and everyone can have the best care possible. They understand scarcity and the need to consider costs when making choices. This century, American health care will struggle to learn what the Kazakhs already know.

The fictional Borat is a hardcore anti-Semite. Like most countries, Kazakhstan has its share. But at the college where I taught, one professor, toasting his colleagues, referred to himself as "this old Jew from Odessa." The mostly Muslim audience smiled warmly and applauded his good wishes. The school's

students regularly visit Israel for training. Hasidic Jews walk Almaty's avenues and worship at the Jewish Community Center. Almaty's twin city is Tel Aviv. The Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, visited Israel and organized international conferences for Muslims, Jews, and others to talk over their differences; the chief rabbi of Israel awarded him the Maimonides Prize.

KAZAKHSTAN HAS problems, which I'll let others discuss. Its government probably overreacted to "Borat" (the Kazakh president's daughter said so publicly). But it's not hard to understand sensitivity from a people just emerging from two centuries of oppression and still relatively unknown to the world. Perhaps "Borat" will induce some to investigate the real Kazakhstan and acquire an image based on reality rather than a comedian's inventions.

My image of Kazakhstan is an Asian Texas. A few big cities amid thinly populated terrain of mountains, plains, and deserts. Horses and horsemen. Oil. Poverty next to nouveaux riches. Indigenous and immigrant peoples. Independent spirit. Humor as dry as the land. A government straddling benevolence and autocracy. Nostalgic poetry of a nomadic civilization. Reverence for history. Legendary hospitality. An ever-present sense of frontier.

In a sense, Kazakhstan is the world's ultimate frontier. Sputnik and Yuri Gagarin vaulted upward from Kazakhstan, not Cape Canaveral. Fifty years later, the country remains the launch site for most manned space flight.

This is all somewhat of a stereotype. But it's mine, not Borat's.

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