Robert Saunders is an assistant professor in the Department of History, Economics & Politics at Farmingdale State University of New York and arguably the world’s leading scholar on Borat, the fictional Kazakh TV reporter and alter ego of British comic Sacha Baron Cohen. Saunders contacted me last week after reading my post about the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev's visit to Washington. We discussed his research into the ongoing conflict between Borat and the world's ninth-largest country, which appears to be nearing collapse under the comic's assault.


Last year, Sacha Baron Cohen, star of Da Ali G Show, a ribald interview-based comedy series, landed himself in hot water with the government of Kazakhstan. Hosting the 2005 MTV Europe Music Awards in the guise of his fictitious character Borat Sagdiyev—a blundering Kazakh reporter whose anti-Semitism, Gypsy-baiting, and misogyny mock Kazakhstan in particular and post-Soviet culture in general—earned him the rancor of the Kazakh elite. The Kazakhs had long been aware of Borat's antics on Da Ali G Show, such as his rendition of the “Kazakh national anthem” in garbled Hebrew and his country-and-western ballad “Throw the Jew Down the Well” (which includes the refrain: “Throw the Jew down the well; So my country can be free; You must grab him by his horns; Then we have a big party”).

The MTV appearance, which included Borat's arrival on an Air Kazakh prop plane piloted by a one-eyed drunkard, and a performance by the (fake) Astana Dancing Heroes doing their rendition of the “Official Government Dance of Kazak,” was the last straw. Kazakhstan sees itself as categorically different from its troubled fellow 'Stans to the south and has worked hard to brand itself as a resource-rich, multicultural, and stable outpost in an otherwise troubled portion of the globe. The Borat shtick, said Yerzhan Ashykbayev, a Kazakh foreign ministry official, was “degrading Kazakhs' ethnic identity.” The threat was apparently so grave that Ashykbayev threatened legal action.

Cohen replied to the criticisms in character, issuing a response as Borat via his “official” website borat.kz (later taken down, reportedly under the orders of the Kazakh president, Nursultan Nazarbayev). Against the backdrop of a Kazakh flag and dueling pistols, the “Number 2 TOP Television Reporter in Kazakhstan” exhorted: “In response to Mr. Ashykbayev's comments, I'd like to state I have no connection with Mr. Cohen and fully support my government's decision to sue this Jew.”

The Kazakhstan–Borat war quieted down in the first half of 2006. However, last week, Cohen began a guerrilla-style promotion of his new movie Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan, which premieres on November 3. Making the most of President
Nazarbayev's September 29 visit to the White House, Borat called a press conference outside the Kazakh embassy in Washington, where he denounced Kazakhstan's new multimillion-dollar “Heart of Eurasia” advertising campaign (which, ironically, was intended to counter Borat's characterization of the country) as a vicious “propaganda campaign” undertaken by the “evil nitwits” of Uzbekistan.

Borat attacked Kazakhstan's central Asian neighbor for spreading “disgusting fabrications” that Kazakhstan treats its women equally and tolerates all religions. “If there is one more item of Uzbek propaganda,” Borat said, “claiming that we do not drink fermented horse urine, give death penalty for baking bagels, or export over 300 tonnes of human pubis per year, then we will be left with no alternative but to commence bombardment of their cities with our catapults.”

Cohen's Boratistani burlesque will likely provoke quiet outrage in official circles, but wary of further undermining “Brand Kazakhstan,” it is unlikely that the Nazarbayev government will once again publicly respond to Cohen's taunts. Uzbekistan, however, is a country with an abysmal human rights record, and a paranoid despot for a ruler. It may not be as restrained as Kazakhstan now that Cohen has called for war with the ruling Karimov regime.

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