

## NATION BRANDING AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION VIA THE WORLD NOMAD GAMES

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### Introduction

In an era defined by intensified global interconnectivity and strategic competition for cultural visibility, nation branding has emerged as one of the central instruments through which states seek to shape their international image, assert their cultural uniqueness, and gain symbolic capital in the global arena. Particularly for small or mid-sized states, the ability to distinguish themselves through cultural narratives, historical legacies, and unique national symbols has become a critical component of contemporary public diplomacy. Within this context, the World Nomad Games (WNG) have evolved into a remarkable platform through which participating states—most notably the Kyrgyz Republic—engage in identity construction and international image formation. The Games provide an avenue for articulating cultural distinctiveness while simultaneously embedding national narratives within broader regional and global discourses.

The rise of the World Nomad Games since their inception in 2014 illustrates the increasing strategic importance of cultural mega-events as tools for nation branding. Unlike conventional sports competitions such as the Olympic Games or regional championships, the WNG derive their legitimacy and symbolic power from their grounding in nomadic heritage—a civilizational

tradition that possesses both historical depth and transnational resonance across Eurasia. This unique positioning allows states to project themselves not merely through athletic performance but through the presentation of a cultural worldview rooted in mobility, resilience, communal identity, and harmonious relations with nature. Thus, the WNG represent a hybrid cultural-political arena where intangible heritage is transformed into a diplomatic and communicative asset.

For the Kyrgyz Republic, the initiator and original host of the Games, the WNG serve as a strategic mechanism to reinforce a post-Soviet national identity rooted in indigenous traditions. As scholars have noted, newly independent states often employ historical symbolism and cultural revivalism to differentiate themselves from former hegemonic structures. The prominence of Kyrgyz nomadic culture—expressed through sports such as kok-boru, er enish, and traditional equestrian rituals—functions as a foundational narrative that legitimizes the country's modern identity while also promoting an international image anchored in authenticity and cultural continuity. By staging the WNG on a global platform, Kyrgyzstan effectively transforms local heritage into a tool of soft power, strengthening its visibility and credibility in the international system. In this respect, the WNG resonates strongly with



UNESCO's definitions of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that the internationalization of cultural heritage not only contributes to preservation but also facilitates the reinterpretation and revitalization of traditional practices within new socio-cultural contexts. The WNG exemplifies this dynamic: it enables the safeguarding of nomadic traditions while simultaneously adapting them to globalized modes of cultural consumption and representation. This process reflects the fluid nature of cultural identity and expands the repertoire of soft power tools available to states seeking greater international visibility and influence.

Ultimately, the World Nomad Games provide a dynamic setting in which states can engage in identity construction, symbolic competition, and cultural representation. Through the revival and internationalization of nomadic traditions, participating states articulate narratives of authenticity, resilience, and historical depth—narratives that are essential for achieving effective nation branding in the contemporary world.

### **The Origins and Institutionalization of the World Nomad Games**

The World Nomad Games were officially proposed for the first time on October 2, 2010, during the Issyk-Kul Interethnic Cooperation: Unity and Tolerance conference held in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan. At this conference, official delegations from Kyrgyzstan and Turkey announced and supported the initiative to host an event aimed at preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Turkic peoples. In this context, Article 19 of the conference declaration explicitly stated that the Turkish side supported the organization and its goal of fostering closer relations among Turkic peoples, marking the first official document endorsing the World Nomad Games (Issyk-Kul Interethnic Cooperation Declaration, 2010).

Subsequently, on January 12–13, 2012, during high-level meetings held in Turkey, the presidents of Kyrgyzstan and the Republic of Turkey signed a joint declaration to organize the

event under the name International Turkic Games – Nomad Games. Article 24 of this declaration indicated that the Turkish side would assist in enhancing cultural and humanitarian relations and supported hosting the Nomad Games in Kyrgyzstan in 2012 (Kyrgyzstan–Turkey Joint Declaration, 2012).

Later that year, on August 23, 2012, the Summit of Heads of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States was held in Bishkek, attended by the presidents of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkey, as well as the prime minister of Azerbaijan. During the summit, the proposal by Kyrgyzstan to host the 1st World Nomad Games was supported. The decisions made aimed to revitalize the traditions, history, and cultural heritage of Turkic peoples and encouraged the regular organization of the games (Turkic Council Leaders' Summit, 2012).

### **UNESCO Recognition of the World Nomad Games**

The World Nomad Games, first decided upon during the second meeting of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-Speaking States (Turkic Council) in 2012 and first held in 2014 at Cholpon-Ata and Kırçın Plateau in Kyrgyzstan, were inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity on December 16, 2021, during the 16th Intergovernmental Committee session (UNESCO, 2021). The Kyrgyz Ministry of Culture, Information, Sports, and Youth Policy began preparations for this nomination in 2019, with the aim of revitalizing, safeguarding, and promoting nomadic heritage, as well as transmitting cultural richness to future generations and bringing it to the international stage. The World Nomad Games can be considered one of the largest international projects initiated and hosted by Kyrgyzstan (Sputnik, 2021).

Speaking at the meeting online, Azamat Jamankulov, the Kyrgyz Minister of Culture, Information, Sports, and Youth Policy, emphasized that the inclusion of the Games on UNESCO's list was the result of two years of intensive work. He acknowledged the efforts of all national federations, government bodies, UNESCO representatives, and local authorities, stating, "This is wonderful news

for all of us. Over the last two years, all national federations, government agencies, our UNESCO representatives, and local authorities in Kyrgyzstan have worked tirelessly, and as a result, we received this nomination. We thank the secretariat, public institutions, ethno-organizations, and associations involved in organizing the Nomad Games” (Sputnik, 2021).

### **Kyrgyzstan’s Nation Branding Strategy and the Revival of Nomadic Identity**

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan faced the challenge of asserting a distinct national identity in an environment marked by political instability and limited international visibility. The launch of the World Nomad Games in 2014 represented a bold nation-branding initiative aimed at projecting Kyrgyzstan as the epicenter of global nomadic civilization. This strategy aligns closely with Anholt’s (2007) argument that nation branding relies on presenting unique, differentiating cultural attributes on the global stage.

Through its orchestration of the WNG, Kyrgyzstan reframed nomadism not as a relic of the past but as a living cultural resource and a marker of civilizational pride. The decision to highlight horseback sports, falconry, archery, traditional handicrafts, and epic storytelling transformed Kyrgyz heritage into a coherent cultural brand that appeals to global audiences seeking authenticity and exoticism (Peyrouse, 2019).

Kyrgyzstan’s use of the WNG as soft power follows Nye’s (2004) logic: attraction through culture. The elaborate opening ceremonies—complete with yurt villages, theatrical performances of the Manas epic, and reenactments of nomadic clans—function as staged cultural diplomacy. International visitors experience Kyrgyz culture not abstractly, but embodied through performance, strengthening the country’s cultural legitimacy (Japarov, 2021).

Moreover, the Games offer Kyrgyzstan an avenue to transcend its geopolitical marginality. As a small, resource-limited state situated between China, Russia, and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan uses the WNG to cultivate symbolic leadership by positioning itself as the “guardian of nomadic civilization.” This form of symbolic capital is crucial in regions where hard power resources are limited.

### **Turkey’s Participation: Pan-Turkic Identity and Geopolitical Influence**

Turkey’s active involvement in the WNG reflects its broader geopolitical strategy of strengthening ties within the Turkic world. The Games provide a cultural framework for reinforcing Pan-Turkic solidarity, echoing Anderson’s (1983) theory of imagined communities: a sense of collective belonging constructed through shared symbols, narratives, and rituals.

By participating in and later hosting the WNG (2022), Turkey positions itself at the center of a transnational cultural identity that spans Central Asia, the Caucasus, Anatolia, and beyond. Turkish media and government officials frequently frame the Games as evidence of a “shared Turkic heritage,” strengthening the imaginary of an integrated cultural space (Aydin, 2022).

The WNG also enhance Turkey’s soft power. As Nye (2004) notes, culture becomes influential when it is both distinct and widely disseminated. Turkey leverages the Games to showcase its economic capacity, organizational strength, and cultural leadership—projecting itself as a modern yet traditional civilizational center.

By hosting the 4th WNG in Bursa–İznik, Turkey used the event to:

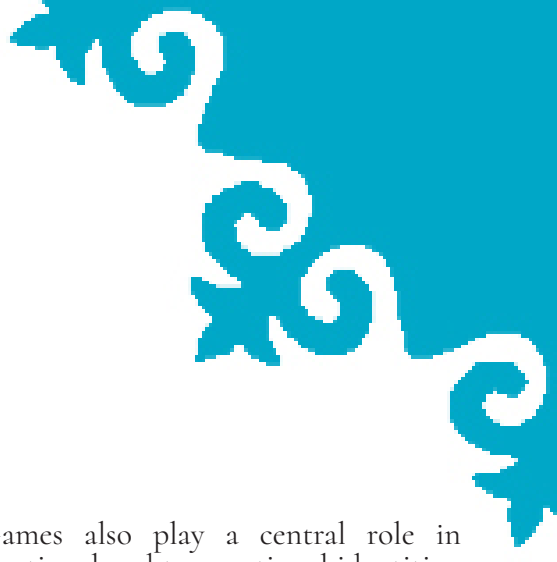
- strengthen political influence in Central Asia,
- reinforce cultural diplomacy within Turkic institutions (e.g., the Organization of Turkic States),
- and project a hybrid identity combining modern statehood with deep-rooted cultural heritage.

This aligns with nation branding scholarship arguing that mega-events create platforms for projecting state-led images globally (Roche, 2017).

### **Global Visibility and the Performance of Nomadic Heritage**

According to mega-event theory, events gain power through visibility, spectacle, and media circulation (Horne & Manzenreiter, 2006). The WNG’s dramatic visuals—combined with traditional sports rarely seen in global media—create a unique cultural spectacle that differentiates the Games from Western-dominated sporting traditions. Events such as: Er Enish (horse wrestling), Kok Boru (goat-carcass polo), and traditional eagle hunting offer globally distinctive visuals that strengthen the brand identity of the Games. Global media coverage, including features from the BBC, National Geographic, and Al Jazeera, amplifies this visibility, fulfilling the basic conditions of a successful mega-event.

Although smaller than the Olympics, the



WNG produce measurable economic and tourism impacts. Kyrgyzstan's tourism sector saw significant spikes during the 2016 and 2018 Games, consistent with mega-event literature stating that cultural events act as catalysts for regional economic activity (Preuss, 2019). Moreover, the Games create job opportunities in hospitality, transportation, and cultural industries, contributing to local development.

The WNG stage cultural identity through ritualized performance, echoing Turner's (1982) cultural performance theory. Opening ceremonies serve as liminal spaces where past and present merge into a symbolic narrative of national and civilizational continuity. The reenactment of nomadic migrations, warrior clans, and mythic heroes turns collective memory into public ritual.

One of the most important aspects of the WNG is that they recreate nomadic traditions through modern aesthetics. Goffman's (1959) notion of "presentation of self" is applicable here: states curate an idealized version of their heritage for global audiences. This is not an exact historical reconstruction but a strategic reinvention—a conscious production of tradition aimed at achieving political and cultural objectives.

Thus, the WNG do not simply preserve nomadic culture. They create a new, modern version of nomadism that serves the branding goals of participating states.

## Conclusion

In a rapidly globalizing world, where modernization often relegates traditional practices to the margins, the World Nomad Games (WNG) have emerged as a significant platform for the preservation, revitalization, and international promotion of ethno-sports—traditional games and athletic activities deeply embedded in cultural heritage. These events serve as more than mere spectacles; they act as vital conduits for transmitting collective memory, social values, and communal identity across generations. By integrating historical practices into a contemporary, international arena, the WNG create a bridge between past and future, ensuring that nomadic traditions remain visible, relevant, and appreciated both within their native communities and on the global stage.

The Games also play a central role in strengthening national and transnational identities. Among Turkic communities, in particular, the WNG have fostered renewed enthusiasm for shared cultural heritage, reinforcing a sense of unity, belonging, and collective pride. By celebrating these traditions in a modern context, the Games illustrate how ethno-sports can simultaneously support cultural preservation and contribute to the construction of a cohesive, transnational identity. Moreover, the WNG exemplify how strategic cultural events can serve as instruments of soft power, nation branding, and international diplomacy, providing participating states with a platform to project narratives of authenticity, historical continuity, and civilizational depth.

In summary, the World Nomad Games demonstrate the multifaceted potential of heritage-based mega-events. They not only safeguard and revitalize traditional practices but also enhance global visibility, strengthen social cohesion, and promote intercultural understanding. Future research should examine the long-term sustainability of these cultural practices, the socio-economic impact on local communities, and the broader role of the WNG in shaping perceptions of nomadic civilization in the twenty-first century. Through their careful curation of tradition and performance, the Games exemplify the capacity of cultural heritage to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, serving both as a vessel for memory and a tool for contemporary identity construction.

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