



University of St Andrews

Investigating Regional Identity in Nation Branding and Nation Building in Kyrgyzstan



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Introduction

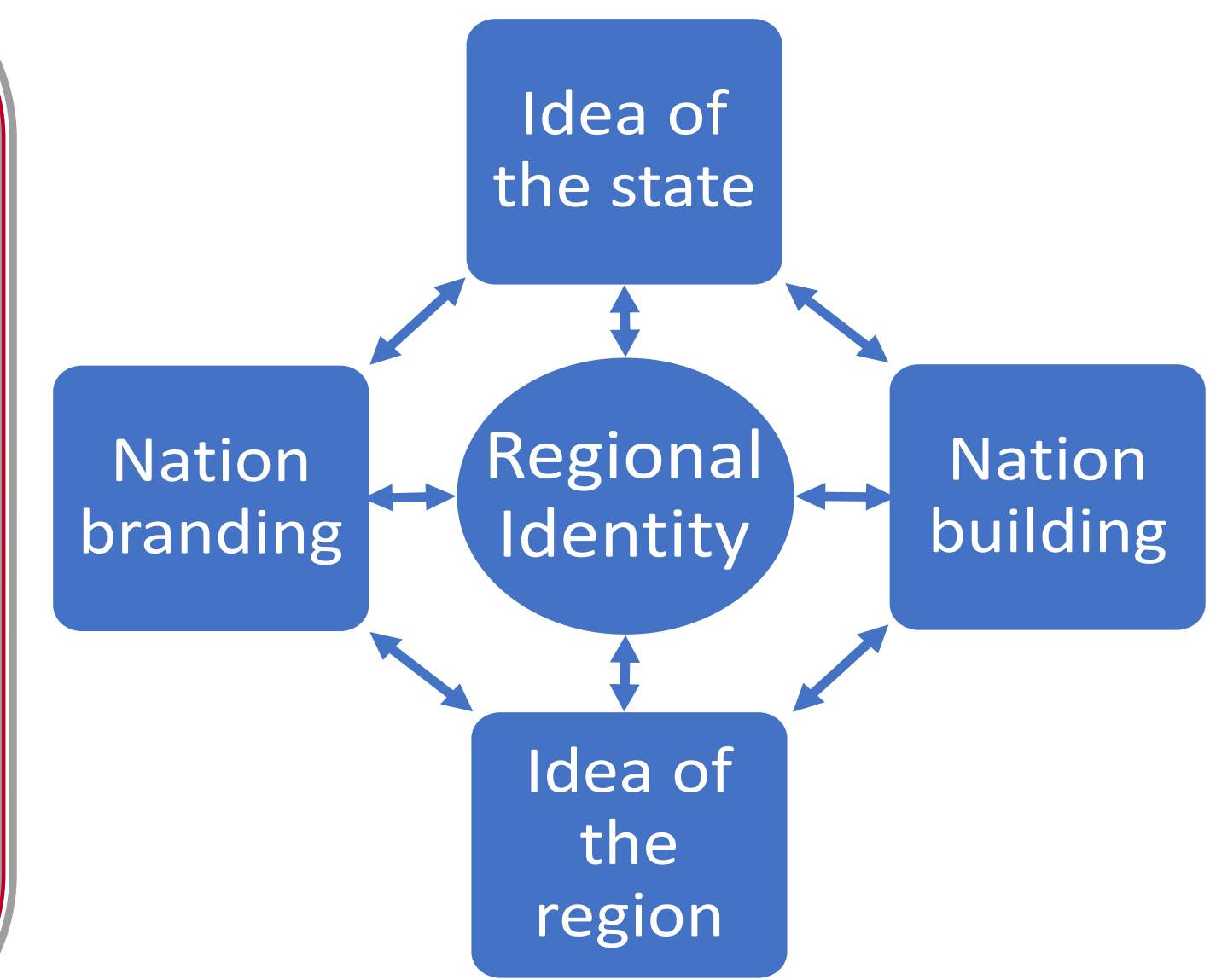
I wanted to explore “the construction of overlapping ‘regions’ in the Kyrgyz Republic’s foreign relations”- its membership multiple Regional Organisations (ROs), formal and informal, which are varied in orientation and identity- this is a characteristic of the post-Soviet space¹.

- Most existing literature explains this through state weakness and reliance on outside powers (in other words, it needs as many relations as possible).
- But this is part of a trend in Western academia, which tries to explain the actions of Central Asian states (CA) but denies them any agency
- I wanted to understand it better by looking and listening ‘to Kyrgyzstan’, rather than to theories.

Theory

To do this, I developed a conceptual model (shown in the diagram), where:

1. Regions and states are co-creative- you can’t separate them, as they make up each other.
2. Regions and states are both “imagined communities”²- they’re something social, where we decide who belong and who doesn’t.
3. These ideas are part of our identities, which form our interests- so we need to understand them to understand regions and states.



Methodology

I wanted to listen and understand, not just explain, so I analysed foreign policy and held fieldwork interviews in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in June and July 2022. I asked elites (academics and policymakers, who act as a bridge between “domestic” and “international” sphere) about how they viewed Kyrgyzstan, and we discussed this in relation to a wider region.

Multidimensional Nation Branding

• Kyrgyzstan is a member of 12 different formal ROs (shown below)

Organisation	Acronym	Orientation	Context of Joining
Shanghai Cooperation Organisation	SCO	Eurasian	Creation
Conference on Interactions and Confidence-building Measures in Asia	CICMA	Eurasian	Creation
Organisation of Islamic Cooperation	OIC	Islamic/ Turkic	Enlargement
Economic Cooperation Organization	ECO	Islamic/ Turkic	Enlargement
Organisation of Turkic States	OTS	Islamic/ Turkic	Creation
Türksoy/ International Organization of Turkic Culture	TS	Islamic/ Turkic	Creation
Collective Security Treaty Organization	CSTO	Post-Soviet	Creation
Commonwealth of Independent States	CIS	Post-Soviet	Creation
Eurasian Economic Union	EAEU	Post-Soviet	Creation
Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe	OSCE	Western/ European	Enlargement
Partnership for Peace	PFP	Western/ European	Enlargement
Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council	EAPC	Western/ European	Enlargement

Table 1- Orientation is derived inductively from the organisations’ membership, founding charters and available official documents.

Organisation	Acronym	Orientation
Central Asian Union	CAU	Central Asian
Central Asian Economic Cooperation	CAEC	Central Asian
Central Asian Economic Union	CAEU	Central Asian
Collective Security Treaty	CTO	Eurasian
Eurasian Economic Community	EEC	Post-Soviet
Organisation of Central Asian Cooperation	OCAC	Eurasian
Shanghai Treaty	SS	Eurasian

- It is also a member of a number of ‘informal’ state led regional projects, especially of CA states (the “Five Stans”)
- Some of these conflict, overlap or contradict in identity and aims.
- I call this multi-dimensional regionalism
- If having membership of these each projects a certain ‘identity’ or orientation, a sense of belonging in the world (more than just needing these relations), can we better understand how and why Kyrgyzstan has “so many”?

Ideas of the region – Multidimensional regions

Having all these different regional organisations leads to (and creates) an idea of a multidimensional region- one where there are many layers of identity and orientation coexisting.

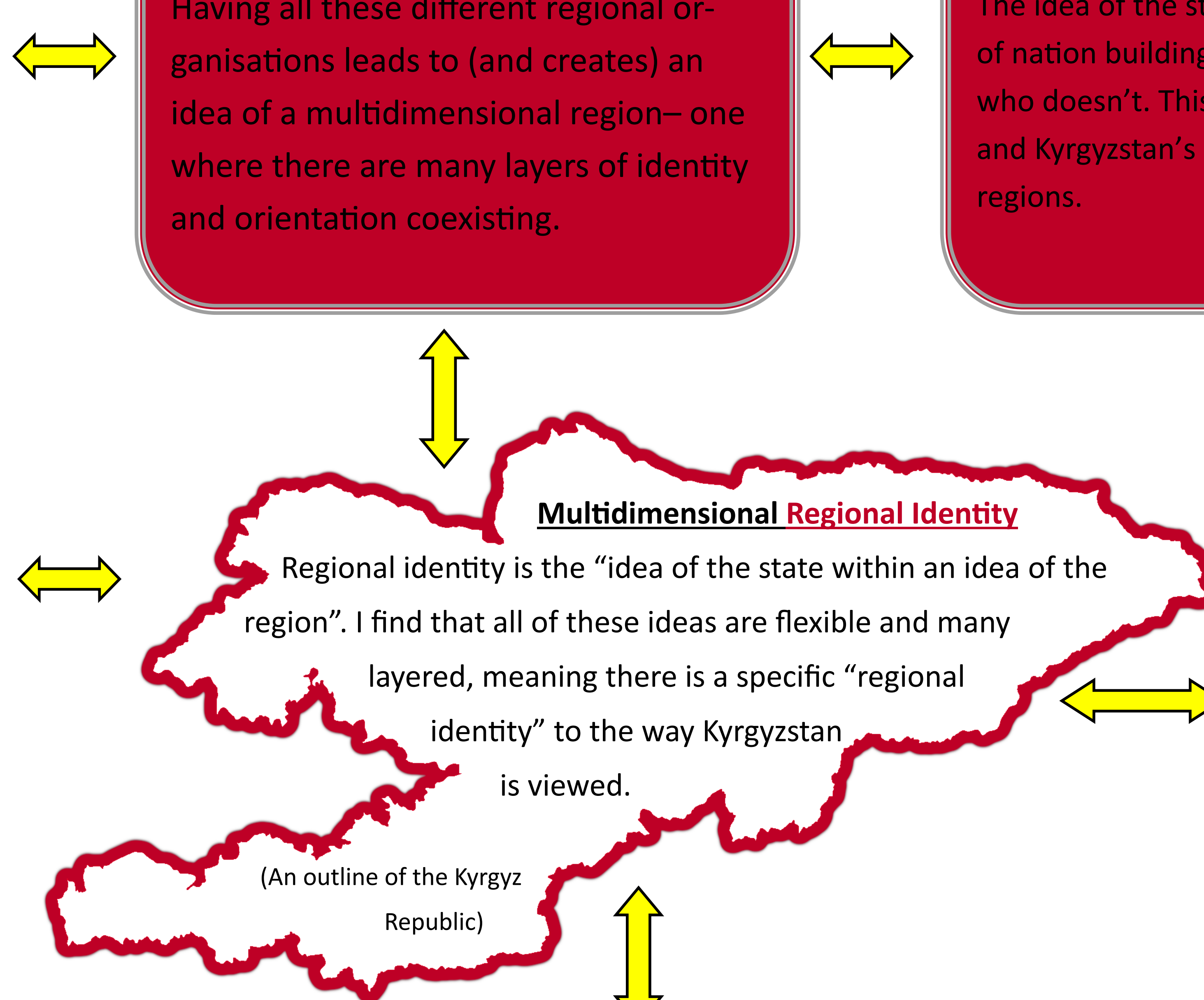
Nation Building – Multidimensional Regional Experiences

The idea of the state is developed through the process of nation building, making sense of who belong and who doesn’t. This is a product of historical experience, and Kyrgyzstan’s has always been interdependent with regions.

Nationhood- Participants pointed out early ‘Kyrgyz’ ‘nomadic’ heritage, the fact that there has rarely been a clear definition of a region, and the mutual interdependence of the pre- and Soviet periods.

Statehood— post-independence, Kyrgyzstan conducted vigorous diplomacy and worked closely with international organisation, and these all shaped the idea of the state. These are also important to its development and interests today.

Current attitudes— Divisions between generations and over the relationship to “great powers”, especially in light of the Ukraine Crisis.



Ideas of the state – Multidimensional regionality. I found a specific way that Kyrgyzstan’s elites view the state in relation to the region, through the way they viewed “state interests”:

• **In Foreign Policy**, in its 30 year history, Kyrgyzstan has had what is called a “multivector” foreign policy, where it pursues lots of different relations simultaneously.

• **In Fieldwork**, elites consistently referenced ideas of the state and its interests in relation to regions, regional groupings and other actors. Early on, most framed it in relation to wider social spaces, geographically (“the centre of a huge continent”/ “the point which the most distant point from any ocean”) and politically (post-Soviet/ Central Asian). There were differences in where they saw as important (by generation, discipline and politics), but whatever the interests and outlook, I was told that “other places, many places” were vitally important to Kyrgyzstan.

A journey to find Kyrgyzstan- These arrows show how I have found a relationship very similar to the above diagram!

Summary- To understand Kyrgyzstan’s multidimensional regionalism, we must understand the ideas of the region and the ideas of the state that inform this practice. To understand these, I found that it was necessary to understand the roots of these ideas- the ways that they have developed. All of these also involve a multidimensional aspect, where regions are changing, contestable, coexist, and are open to interpretation. A conceptual link can be drawn between these areas. If states and regions are co-constitutive, so do our ‘ideas’ of them, and their development. Policy, practice, and study should be more sensitive to overlapping social orders and foreign policies (discursive and/or instrumental) in Kyrgyzstan and Central Eurasia and their importance in the construction of “identity”, by understanding the history and local understandings where they operate.

This project would not have been possible without the support of the Laidlaw Foundation, including the generous travel bursary, and my thanks go to Lord Laidlaw, the Foundation, and the Laidlaw Team at the University of St Andrews for this opportunity. Also go to my supervisors for their guidance and to all those who gave their time to be interviewed as part of this research, including helping me in Bishkek in June and July 2022.

References– Kyrgyz Flag from <https://freesvg.org/flag-of-kyrgyzstan>. (1) Russo, Alessandra. Regions in Transition in the Former Soviet Area: Ideas and Institutions in the Making. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. (2) Wendt, Alexander. ‘Collective Identity Formation and the International State’. The American Political Science Review 88, no. 2 (1994): 384–96.