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CODIFYING ORIGINS: GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATIONS AND THE REINVENTION OF TRADITION IN POST-SOVIET CENTRAL ASIA

Heiko Fritz (heiko.fritz@lnu.se)

In recent years, international organisations and national actors have widely promoted the use of geographical indications (GI) for food products in Central Asia. Based on the concept of terroir and collectively agreed upon by actors across the production chain, a GI labels and institutionalises a unique place-people-product relationship, which can be a key determinant of the product value as numerous case studies demonstrate. In addition to unique soil characteristics and the local microclimate, terroir often links the 'origin product' to cultural food heritage embodied in local traditions of food production and processing. Potential benefits of GI include higher incomes at all stages of the value chain, environmentally and socially sustainable rural development, enhanced food security, and the protection of cultural heritage.

This paper puts forward a critical perspective on GI in Central Asia, developing and empirically substantiating three arguments. First, the concept of terroir is not

sufficiently flexible to allow for context-specific adaptation. Traditionally, food production in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan has been invariably linked to nomadic pastoralism. However, nomadic livelihoods are characterised by a peculiar people-place relationship that terroir does not accurately reflect. Second, while national identity-building in parts of Central Asia draws much on a rather nostalgic embellishment of nomadic descent, the vast majority of GI-certified food products in the region are sedentary agricultural produce. Rather than adopting the 'invented tradition' of nomadic livelihoods, reference to local tradition often relates to production methods imported by Russian colonial settlers and substantially altered during the Soviet period. Third, geared towards trade in international markets, the rigid legal codification of a GI risks crowding out informal institutions that, in fact, associate specific qualities of food products with their place of origin and, hence, establish regional preferences and price differentiation.

Palavras-chave: rural development; intellectual property; agri-food governance.