

# The geopoliticization of Central Asian scholarship

On 16 June 2014 Alexander Sodiqov, a PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of Toronto, was taken into custody by Tajik security services while conducting a field interview for a research project on local responses to conflict management. Sodiqov was reportedly accused of treason and espionage – crimes that carry a possible 20 years prison sentence. On 22 July, Sodiqov was released from prison and his case was taken up by an international coalition of scholars, human rights activists and press freedom watchdogs, who viewed his detention as a fundamental infringement on academic freedom in Central Asia. After sustained international pressure, Sodiqov was allowed to return to Toronto in September, with the case still legally open.

Alexander Cooley



THIS MEMO ARGUES THAT SODIQOV'S CASE is the result of the decade-long shrinking of academic and journalistic freedom in Central Asia, a trend largely rooted in the region's securitization and Central Asian authorities' increasing concern with controlling the information space and narratives about political trends, in order to ensure their own survival and stability. In these efforts, crackdowns on information dissemination, journalism and, now, academic research have become justifiable responses to alleged foreign interference and 'external meddling' in internal affairs. The cumulative impact of this crackdown is likely to have chilling effects on future efforts by social scientists and regional specialists seeking to analyze, interpret and gather data in the region.

The current assault on academic freedom can be considered the result of three distinct events in Central Asia, each contributing to the geopoliticization of scholarship and shrinking of the information space.

## 9/11, GWOT and the securitization of Central Asian politics

The first significant markers were the 9/11 attacks and the US-led military response in Afghanistan that immediately ensued. For the United States, Central Asia went from being a relatively isolated and low-priority area, to occupying the frontline of operations in Afghanistan and the Global War on Terror (GWOT). During the fall of 2001, the United States negotiated logistical access arrangements with all of the Central Asian states, including formal basing agreements (with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan), fly-over and emergency landing agreements, and refueling agreements.<sup>1</sup> The United States also provided military assistance to the Central Asian governments and security services, much of it in the form of training, border assistance, and special forces outreach. The securitization of US relations with Tajikistan had a number of secondary effects directly relevant to Central Asian studies. First, it increased, for about a decade, the amount of resources and funding available to scholars and specialists trained in Central Asian regional studies and languages. Defense contracting and intelligence jobs, most of them now routed through private subcontractors, became alternative sources of employment for scholars and analysts trained in Central Asian studies.

Second, securitization and the ongoing GWOT disproportionately privileged and rewarded the study of political Islam and its potential for mobilization across the region. This funded serious and high quality research on these topics, but it also rewarded proposals and scholars who took a more alarmist view of the region and its potential for destabilization. Third, securitization also encouraged US scholars and analysts to tone down criticism of escalating political rights abuses in the region, in the interest of maintaining Western engagement. Finally, US engagement and security cooperation raised con-

cerns in Moscow and Beijing that the United States was interested not only in engaging with Central Asia for its Afghanistan operation, but was also seeking to project power and influence throughout the region. The US State Department's decision in 2006 to shift the Central Asian states away from the Eurasia Bureau and bundle them into a new South and Central Asian bureau, so as to emphasize links with Afghanistan, further fueled suspicions that Washington harbored geopolitical ambitions to sever the region from Moscow's political reach.

## The color revolutions, regime insecurity and fears of foreign influences

The second marker of Central Asia's shrinking political space was the regional upheaval and backlash caused by the so-called 'color revolutions' of 2003-05. The collapse of governments in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005) as a result of mass protests, especially the March 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan, sent shockwaves throughout the region. The Uzbek government's crackdown in Andijan just two months later was, at least in part, motivated by the demonstration effects and fears of these political upheavals. Within 18 months of the Tulip Revolution, all Central Asian countries, with Uzbekistan the most aggressive, passed new restrictions on the media and operations of NGOs. Fears of 'foreign-funded' groups destabilizing the country under the pretense of promoting democracy, civil society or human rights became a recurring public meme. Tajikistan's restrictive new Law of Associations (2005) required all NGOs to re-register in a cumbersome process, effectively shrinking the sector by 70% within a year.<sup>2</sup>

The backlash led to the closing of a number of organizations that had actively been supporting academic research in the region, such as the Open Society Institute in Tashkent, and Freedom House. The backlash also emphasized the blurring between internal and external threats to regime security, with Russia and China backing the Central Asian governments' new restrictions, while Western governments were forced into an increasingly difficult balancing act of maintaining security cooperation with the Central Asian governments, while registering concern about the slide in the region's respect for civil liberties. In other words, internal policies towards political opponents, human right advocates and civil society also became geopoliticized.

## Post Arab Spring, US disengagement and budget cuts

We are now in a third distinct phase, one we could term the 'Post-Arab Spring' era. Just as the color revolutions sent tremors throughout the region, so too did the Arab Spring and Middle Eastern upheavals of 2011-12. The toppling of long-standing rulers in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya sent signals

about the lack of Western political commitment to these governments, but also ushered in a new level of concern about the potentially subversive effects of social media and online mobilization, for example, Facebook and Twitter. Bloggers and online communities were targeted throughout the region, as new tools to regulate, monitor and censor the internet were adopted. Regulating the 'information space' had become as important as cracking down on formal political opposition.

At the same time, there is a growing focus on US future interests and engagement. US and NATO withdrawal from the region in 2014, for example, will decrease instrumental interest in adjacent Central Asia (despite renewed interest in Eurasia as a result of the Russia-Ukraine crisis). US policy makers have an acute bout of 'Central Asian fatigue'; US Congress has dramatically reduced levels of assistance for all of Central Asia and Eurasia. More relevant to the issue of the future of Central Asian studies, the budget sequestration has led to unprecedented cuts in the funding of Eurasian scholarship. All this at a time when both Russia and China are increasing their official cultural and educational engagement with Central Asia. Thus, the confluence of geopolitical interest in Central Asia and government support for Central Asian studies that characterized Western engagement with the region in the 2000s, appears to be gone.

## Conclusion: blurring the lines, chilling the future

Ironically, then, Alexander Sodiqov finds himself at the unfortunate convergence of increasing paranoia and concern within Central Asian governments about the boundaries of political dissent, and growing Western indifference and disengagement from the region. Simply put, while regional security and intelligence services exaggerate the destabilizing role of so-called agents of foreign influence, and take concrete measures to further restrict the activities of foreign-based and funded organizations, the actual interest in the region is palpably waning. To be sure, some of this decrease is a corrective from the excessive security focus that was heavily supported and promoted in the 2000s. However, it is difficult to underestimate the long-term damage that will be inflicted on Central Asian studies in the United States from recent cuts in government funding. In this era of diminishing interest in regional studies and strong disciplinary boundaries, the lack of official support is likely to significantly curtail the growth of a new generation of scholars engaged with Central Asia across all disciplines.

At the same time, this new media and information age is proving difficult to regulate and categorize. Sodiqov himself has been a widely-read blogger and policy commentator, leading some to wonder whether his plight should be covered more as a 'media freedom' issue or that of a detained journalist, rather than as an academic. The case highlights, as Anne Nelson, former Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, emphasized at Sodiqov's New York event (organized by Scholars at Risk), that scholars and scholarly networks lack the same types of legal protections, umbrella societies and best practices guidelines that loosely govern and monitor the international media. Whether academics should adopt similar types of 'best practices' is something that will now be debated, but with existing Institutional Review Boards at Western universities increasingly hesitant to sanction research in areas where researchers might encounter 'risks', the Tajik government's actions are likely to have an impact on International Review Boards' decisions across the country. One rather disturbing possibility might be that IRBs, in the future, might ask for clearing letters from host governments explicitly asking for authorization for the proposed research.

Alexander Sodiqov's case can be regarded as the culmination of a steady deterioration of academic freedoms and civil liberties across Central Asia, many of which have been intertwined with the geopolitical situation in the region and host governments' responses. In addition to the current challenging political environment faced by social scientists who ask uncomfortable questions and gather data that challenge official government narratives, Western research on contemporary regional political and social issues is also likely to be stifled by declining Western engagement with the region and reduced official support for Eurasian-based scholarship.

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## References

- 1 See Cooley, A. 2012. *Great Games, Local Rules: the New Great Power Contest for Central Asia*, New York: Oxford University Press, chapter 3
- 2 *ibid*, appendix 2

Inset: Alex Sodiqov. Surrounding images show groups of supporters from various universities promoting the twitter tag #FreeAlexSodiqov. All images taken from the website <http://freealexodiqov.org>