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Interviewing NGO Leaders in Bishkek

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I have recently returned from a research trip for my dissertation comparing US civil society assistance in Russia and Kyrgyzstan. My field work was supported by the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), as well as the MacArthur Foundation and Princeton University's Center for International Studies. The dissertation, titled "Civil Society from Abroad: Western Donors in the Former Soviet Union," examines cultural and organizational dimensions of the interaction between US donors and recipient NGOs in Russia and Kyrgyzstan. A significant portion of my empirical evidence comes from in-depth interviews with representatives of donor and recipient organizations. To conduct the interviews I spent 4.5 months in Moscow and one month in Bishkek. In this report I will discuss some of the problems I confronted doing this kind of research in Bishkek and their broader implications.

At first I found it far easier to work in Bishkek than in Moscow. For one thing, Bishkek is a much smaller city. Although the donor presence is large relative to the size of the city and of the country, it is not too big numerically and I quickly understood what key organizations and people I should contact. People were for the most part very open to my inquiries and could usually find a time to meet with me the same or next day when I called to introduce myself and request a meeting (which almost never happened in Moscow). That said, in Bishkek I observed a pattern that had not manifested itself to the same degree in Moscow: local NGO leaders were far more apprehensive about meeting with me than were representatives of the donor community, who were mostly but not exclusively Westerners.

Several prominent activists repeatedly declined my requests for interviews, usually citing hectic schedules and pressing deadlines. I initially took these explanations at face value and began to wonder if these were in fact the real reasons only

after I had heard them several times. Like anyone else in my position, I accepted that some people I wanted to interview were not interested in meeting and speaking with a researcher. At the same time, I began asking myself whether this unwillingness represented something that I, as a researcher, needed to understand. Just at the moment when these thoughts started taking shape in my mind I had a fortuitous encounter with a respondent who was willing to address these issues head-on and without my asking. It had taken several phone calls to arrange the meeting, and when we met the respondent opened the conversation by informing me that she (most NGO leaders are women) had no interest whatsoever in talking to me; that the meeting took place only because of my doggedness; that she had talked to many a researcher in the previous ten years and nothing useful for her work ever came out of those conversations; and that she was no longer willing to pour her heart out to visitors and spend hours explaining to them the basic facts about Kyrgyzstan's political life and society. Surprising as it may sound, after this opening salvo we actually had a very interesting and informative conversation about Kyrgyzstan's NGOs and politics.

I feel immensely grateful to this person for putting these issues on the table. The conversation opened my eyes to a certain perception of Western researchers that exists in Kyrgyzstan's NGO community and helped me formulate questions that I could pursue in subsequent interviews. When I raised this subject with other respondents, several were ready to discuss it. Their very readiness and thoughtful arguments were, in my view, a strong indication that this issue is a "social fact" of which Western researchers need to be cognizant.

According to my interlocutors, there is a fairly common concern among local NGO leaders that Western researchers come to interview them with

the purpose of purloining their ideas, which they then use to produce publications and advance their careers. In part this attitude is related to the fact that researchers in the post-Soviet context are less respected than they are in the West. However, there are several other dimensions that are specific to Western involvement in Kyrgyzstan. One is what I would call interview fatigue caused by the feeling of being exploited by foreign researchers. The stream of Western researchers passing through Bishkek over the last ten years has been large relative to the size of the local NGO community, so that NGO leaders — especially because they are more likely to speak English than, say, academics or politicians — are approached again and again with similar inquiries but rarely see the outcome. As a result, they feel that Westerners come to pick their brains and then leave, never getting back in touch to share the product of their research. There was an undercurrent of the same attitude toward Western researchers in Moscow, but it became far more obvious and explicit in Bishkek because researchers' presence looms larger in this much smaller city.

This attitude about exploitative Western researchers is reinforced by the way international organizations conduct their research on Kyrgyzstan. In the words of a respondent with firsthand experience of the procedures of the European Union and the UN for gathering data, international organizations use local social scientists as "plantation slaves" for the most basic tasks of data collection and entry and almost never involve them in analysis and writing which usually take place outside of Kyrgyzstan. According to this person, this arrangement compromises the quality of information

in the resulting studies. Local researchers, having no stake in the final product, do not have a strong incentive to be responsible and meticulous about their work and do on occasion falsify data, for example, by filling out questionnaires themselves.

A related concern, which I heard several times in Bishkek, is that knowledge about Kyrgyzstan is predominantly produced in the West, that what is produced is rarely brought back, and that so far there has been very little, if any, development of the capacity for local knowledge production. This concern was also recently voiced here in the United States: in her presentation at the SSRC-sponsored thematic conversation on the Caucasus and Central Asia at the November 2002 annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, Cynthia Buckley discussed the pervasive lack of access by Central Asian researchers to "public access" data produced by international organizations, which "can both diminish the participation of regional scholars in policy debates and encourage researchers to repeat, often at significant costs, data collection efforts."

My motivation in writing this report for CESR has been two-fold. First, my research experience suggests that Western scholars (including Central Asians, like myself, who are now working in the West) should be aware of the broader context in which their individual research projects take place and that each of us contributes to shaping that broader local context during our field work. Secondly, the Central Eurasian Studies Society is an ideal forum for discussing how to forge stronger links between scholarship here and in Central Asia and to foster the development of knowledge production capacity inside the region.

Bayani's *Shajara-ye khorezmshahi* and the Russian Conquest of Khiva: An Essay on Historical Production¹

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The Russian conquest of Central Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century drew considerable

attention from numerous eyewitnesses (Russians, French, Germans, English) and a great deal of scrutiny from scholars in Russia and elsewhere. Unfortunately, descriptions of the conquest in Central Asian sources were for the most part left out of scholarly inquiry, perhaps because too many of

¹ The following is a concise version of a paper read at the *Third Annual Conference of the Central Eurasian Studies Society*, October 17-20, 2002, University of Wisconsin-Madison.