



## Researcher safety in peace, conflict and security studies in Central Asia and beyond: Making sense and finding new ways forward

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The safety of researchers is a pressing issue, with ever new incidents of scholars and journalists being detained, interrogated or otherwise scrutinised by security forces both in Central Asia and the world over. We present here the overview of a roundtable held during the [Joint CESS-ESCAS Conference in Bishkek in June 2017](#). Panellists and audience provided critical reflection on present contradictions and new ways forward for scholars interested in social and political dynamics in Central Asia. Participants discussed the different actors involved in the global political economy of knowledge production in, and on the region. Besides, they attended to the practical and ethical dilemmas of whether and how to adjust to the increased publicity, exposure and danger faced by researchers.

### PART I — PRESENTATIONS

**T**HE first speaker, John Heathershaw (University of Exeter), reminded attendees of the detention of Alexander Sodiqov in 2014, his research partner at the time, by the Tajik GKNB

(State Committee for National Security) on charges of espionage. Without going into the detail provided in [other discussions](#), Heathershaw demonstrated how this case exemplified the dilemmas and

trade-offs of critical research on politically salient topics in Central Asia. Given the widely-perceived necessity to produce research that influences practices and policies of governments and other actors, academics find themselves compelled to generate publicity and open debate, e.g. by writing blog-posts and other online formats that present investigative findings. On the other hand, as government actors are increasingly keen to control narratives (see *The closure of academic space in Tajikistan: How should foreign scholars and institutions respond* by John Heathershaw and Edward Schatz, to be published soon) about their actions or events in their country, protecting one's identity by e.g. publishing under a pseudonym becomes increasingly important. Research done in cooperation with authorities would not be less risky, at least for research participants, argued Heathershaw, as the latter's anonymity and safety in the aftermath of such projects is hard to guarantee. Overall, currently prevalent ways of dealing with issues pertaining to peace, conflict and security research appear to be insufficient, as Ethical or Institutional Review Boards maintain their formalistic approaches, which make students adapt their research frameworks but are ultimately unable to prevent risks, insecurities and actual incidents in field sites. In this light, Heathershaw emphasised the need to further explore possibilities of activism and solidarity among academics and of gathering and sharing researcher's experiences and knowledge about dangers faced in different field sites.

This view was corroborated by Karolina Kluczevska (University of St Andrews), who told about her six-months-long ethical review procedure in her institution, during which she was repeatedly instructed to provide detailed questionnaires and lists of interviewees, as

well as consent forms signed by interviewees. Such measures and the overall process appeared to be of little use given the evolving dynamics of fieldwork, especially in Kluczevska's case, as her fieldwork is based on long-term residence in Tajikistan and cooperation with local NGOs. She presented this approach, including affiliation with a local institution/university and engagement with the domestic academic community, as the most reasonable for gathering genuinely new insights about international development programming in Tajikistan. Issues of danger and legal action against researchers were not always due to authorities' overzealousness, she argued, as many researchers undertake research without any deeper knowledge about the country's customs and local languages, and conduct research after simply obtaining tourist visas instead of a research permission. This approach is particularly dangerous for researchers and research participants, as it circumvents legal restrictions and thus puts everyone involved into a vulnerable and potentially dangerous situation. Kluczevska also highlighted the fact that international NGOs and international organisations in Tajikistan **rarely provide substantial information** on their activities and, in her experience, their staff are the 'people most difficult to reach'; a fact which makes surreptitious research and publication practices of researchers more understandable.

A further example of research with profound safety implications was provided by Sam Fife from Search for Common Ground Kyrgyzstan. He explained how the organisation took a careful approach towards its research on radicalism among Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik labour migrants in Russia by allowing enough time to lay the groundwork and developing a credible methodological approach

together with its partners in Russia and the UK. Partnering with an in-country research institution, which received assurances from state security that they would not object to the research project during the inception phase, was indispensable for preventing irritation during the research. Local researchers accompanied Central Asian research teams to assist with logistics and ensure that local law enforcement would allow the fieldwork to move forward unhindered. But such cooperation also required careful consid-

eration of the confidentiality and possible safety issues arising for participants in the study. This was partly achieved by providing outputs with different levels of detail to the respective government or local governments and the public, and by conducting interviews in Central Asian languages. Agreeing on research framings and questions that did not seem threatening or dangerous for local authorities in this case proved productive to avoid issues of safety and irritation.



Lucas Verheij, Yurt near Issyk Kul, (CC) 2017

Zhyldyz Tegizbekova, Associate Professor in International Law and Human Rights at the International Alatau University in Bishkek presented her perspective on the legal framework for academics doing research in Kyrgyzstan. She affirmed that researchers were generally free to do any kind of research they wanted. However, she added that the law on national security agencies describes the latter's task to protect individuals, society and the state from unlawful acts which negatively af-

fect or damage social order and national security. This meant, according to her, that agencies deemed it necessary to control research on certain topics by way of 'cooperating' with researchers so as to ensure that they do not breach laws pertaining to public order. Besides the increased importance of aspects of national security since 2010, the incitement of 'interethnic enmity' — after article 299 of Kyrgyz Republic's Criminal Code — was increasingly seen as an issue in academic

research. While lists of indexed research topics are kept secret, and no one can know which kind of research will come under scrutiny, Tegizbekova posited that ignorance of the country's laws (including the above) would not exempt any researchers from being queried by security or law enforcement organs. She further argued that researchers should keep in mind that when doing interviews in the country's communities, there is a realistic possibility that people complain to the police and investigations are opened.

The final panel speaker, Alisher Khamidov, shared his experience from doing research on Islamic identities in Northeast England. A key encounter for him was a conversation with two imams in a Newcastle mosque, which turned into an interview during which the imams queried him as to the reasons and intentions of his research, given that it was funded by the British government. He soon ended the interaction and himself, as he had not expected such an experience in a country and Muslim commu-

nity he thought would be more open for conversation. This bears resemblance to the situation in Kyrgyzstan, where building trust with interlocutors takes a long time and requires some kind of peer pressure, e.g. befriending the wider social circles of research subjects. Khamidov further pointed out how doing research supported by governments – or other major actors – is not always a liability but can also prove an asset when interlocutors see interviews as a chance to voice their grievances and make use of the researcher as a mouthpiece, if not a counselor. Another contradictory aspect of field research, as Khamidov pointed out, are the widely perceived dangers associated with going to certain 'criminal' areas or places/events known for hostilities or attacks by nationalists, e.g. football games, all of which turned out to be harmless in his case. This once again underlined the issue that, until they materialise, dangers and risks of fieldwork rarely appear significant and might seem non-existent all along.

## PART II — DISCUSSION

**I**N the discussion following the panelists' statements, Emil Djuraev (AUCA and OSCE Academy in Bishkek) put forward the poignant question as to whether research on Central Asia was confronted with an irresolvable 'multi-lemma' given the increasing danger associated with fieldwork activities and the diverging interests of different stakeholders (most importantly governments, policy makers, researchers and society at large). He invoked the examples of peace and conflict research in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Especially in the latter case, the censoring of critical voices in research interaction is problematic, because social re-

search is supposed to reveal and present such critical perspectives in the first place. In practical terms, especially when thinking about the way to manage fieldwork-based dissertation projects of students in Central Asia, Djuraev raised another provocative question, as to whether it was necessary to cover up research activities and anonymise one's own and research participants' identities in order to maintain one's freedom to research.

The alternative, more long-term and cooperative approach was endorsed but also further scrutinised: Irna Hofman (University of Leiden) and Isaac Scarborough (London School of Economics)

added that getting affiliations with local research institutes – as suggested by the panellists – was subject to significant difficulties, could take up to one and a half years or be precluded completely depending on one's research topic. In the first year of her fieldwork, Hofman faced the paradox of being told to obtain a research permit, but no one being able to tell her how. Without strong institutional backing from her home university, and without Tajik institutions working on her discipline (rural sociology/rural development), she experienced that it was difficult to secure cooperation with a local academic partner in the first year. Furthermore, even in later years, formal research approval depended on permission from the Tajik MFA and backing by the Dutch embassy (based in Astana), which entailed even more uncertainty and bureaucracy. Overall, she experienced that it was necessary in all circumstances to reformulate the research focus to “de-politicize” the terms.

One anecdote shared by the panel chair, Dr Nick Megoran (University of Newcastle), exemplified the problems researchers and especially those people they simply socialise with can face even when long-term cooperation and dialogue are sought. In this case, over two decades ago, Megoran had written an academic article critically discussing a social problem in a particular region of Uzbekistan. The article was written for an English-language journal in the pre-internet days but, without either his permission or that of the publishers, it was translated and reprinted into a Russian-language journal with circulation in Uzbekistani university libraries. Its arrival in Uzbekistan evoked the indignation of the local authorities and led to repercussions for Megoran's host institution and individuals who had cooperated with him. People he had so-

cialized with or simply just met for tea were queried by Uzbek security services. Megoran admitted that he made a serious mistake here, and this was a salutary experience which almost made him abandon academic research for fear of causing harm to others. Nowadays, he is still granted visas to visit the country but has become aware of the wide reaching and attentive activities of security services, which include screening of English language publications about Uzbekistan. This is not simply the case of Uzbekistan. He added that he was once offered an interview with the President of a neighbouring, more liberal, country in return for compiling a list of foreign scholars writing critically about the regime. Of course, he refused this, but it served as an indication that all states in the region are interested in what researchers write, even if some have better-resourced monitoring systems than others. It should thus always be assumed that everything we write will be seen by governments and may be followed up on.

What ways forward are there for research on a region whose authorities, security services but also populations become increasingly, and sometimes overly, alert about the activities of both foreign and local researchers? One theme in this vein was the reflection on the institutional architecture and practices of research regulation and ethical approval. Further experiences of interaction with Ethical/Institutional Review Boards were shared to affirm that there was little to no scope of relying on the decisions taken by them. The most illustrative case was offered by a senior researcher, whose request to approve a student group trip to post-Maidan Kiev in spring 2016 was rejected, while the group was allowed to visit the (Autonomous) Republic of Abkhaziiia, whose separation from Geor-

gia and gradual fusing of administrative and economic structures with the Russian Federation do not seem to pose any less of a risk and conflict potential. The same Review Board also approved research projects conducted in Crimea since 2014, where detentions and abductions among the population and of journalists have been reported. Isaac Scarborough further highlighted that the Ethical Review Boards (ERBs) at European universities are mostly preoccupied with the

**safety issues faced by researchers** in order to minimise them according to the frameworks of the insurance companies they work with. A conception of research subjects and the interests they have in research, as well as possible repercussions they may face, is largely absent from these bodies' guiding concerns and better addressed in US universities' Institutional Review Boards (IRBs), according to Scarborough.



Mark Horrell, Lenin Peak's summit ridge, (CC) 2015

Scarborough also shifted the focus back to the issue of what constitutes research that is relevant or threatening to (national) security. He argued that this was ultimately up to the decision-makers in a given country and that researchers can do nothing but accept this prerogative. Tegizbekova affirmed this and pointed to the arbitrariness of this situation: 'One cannot know what constitutes security-relevant research!' This is something inherently depending on the respective context, agreed Heathershaw. The discus-

sion also revolved around ways to prevent and mitigate safety risks; most importantly by building up long-term partnerships that aide the development of careful and sensitive approaches (Heathershaw), and by overcoming the fixation on semi-structured interviews usually employed by Western researchers, as well as their sense of superiority over under-developed and misconceived Central Asian societies and politics, which feeds into orientalisng discourses that are most apparent in the BBC documentary

'Dictatorland' (Kluczewka).

Marc van Boemcken from the Bonn International Centre for Conversion (BICC) presented the approach of the centre's project on 'securityscapes' in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In light of the knowledge about previous detentions and interrogation of researchers, the key focus is on researching meanings, experiences and understandings of security **without invoking the term explicitly**. Researchers thus identified various other frames as proxies for this key subject, e.g. 'coping strategies' and general 'everyday practices'. Both von Boemcken and Heathershaw also pointed to the dilemmas occurring when publishing such research, however. The best example is Heathershaw's recent co-authored book, *Dictators without Borders*, whose title accurately captures the argument made but can also, as he pointed out, serve to provoke discontent or even backlash among the examined countries' authorities. 'Careful' and 'nuanced framing' or simply 'writing' the main research theme 'out' of the field research questionnaires, and back in when analysing them, thus provide productive ways of dealing with the dangers and risks of fieldwork. However, it is also necessary to reflect on the possible blind spots, risks and misunderstandings associated with such methodologies which, similar to the Search for Common Ground research project presented, operate on different levels or with different version of discourse, if not different realities. Exploring the entire repertoire of **accidental ethnography** and **covert research** techniques promises further potential for finding better solutions.

Reflection on new ways of doing research under difficult conditions and in 'closed contexts', is urgently needed. At the same time, there do not appear easy

solutions or straightforward practices or standards that would yield themselves to be communicated in more formal or official ways, as for instance via an online platform or information exchange system, as was suggested in conclusion of the **CESS Task Force** on Fieldworker Safety. Participants largely agreed that maintaining and intensifying exchange on conferences and in other settings – e.g. university-based working groups – is the best way to accommodate the fast-changing nature of the problem. Jeanne Féaux de la Croix (University of Tübingen) further remarked that, after she had experienced difficulty in realising one cooperative project of her own, it occurred to her that published accounts of negative field experiences were largely lacking and confined to the informal realms of academic life. Picking up the theme of rejection of and resistance towards field research in teaching and publication outlets would be another way forward in trying to prevent researchers from taking too high risks in the field. Whether in **written form**, during panels or in fieldwork labs, seminars, research group meetings, it is clear that researcher (and research participant) safety need to receive more attention. The roundtable made an important first step in identifying issues and possible ways forward.

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