Trip Report:

**OSIAF Branch Office in Baku, Azerbaijan 11/6/2013-11/9/2013**

The main objectives for the trip to Baku were to learn about the situation involving OSF’s work in Azerbaijan, meet the local consultant with whom we have been working to develop a grant-making strategy, and meet with local activists to get a feel for the current environment for civil society in the country. While I only had a short stay of three days in Azerbaijan, I feel that I was able to learn a lot and also that progress was made toward formulating a coherent grant-making strategy with our limited remaining funds for the country going forward.

From the beginning, it was clear that the environment in which we work in Azerbaijan can be extremely difficult. Almost every journalist and activist with whom we met reiterated this point. Contributing to this difficult environment are a few different factors, including a lack of resources and reach into the regions, inconsistent opportunities for funding for local activists, and the obvious and increasing repression of civil society coming from the Aliyev government. It is my understanding that OSF used to have a foundation in Azerbaijan, which was closed due to a variety of reasons. Instead of solving the problem, the closure of the foundation has instigated a variety of new legal problems for the remaining OSIAF representative office in Baku. I think that one could make a convincing argument for potentially closing the branch office in Baku. Perhaps OSF would be more effective in this context if we were to implement our grantmaking strategy from New York rather than continuing to maintain a presence in Baku. And while maintaining presence on the ground can be helpful in improving the reputation of OSF in-country, such a small presence as that we have now is negligible. We are currently involved in legal battles with former employees who refuse to reach settlement. While we have employed a capable, if not slimy, lawyer who has been able to handle these issues from a legal perspective, we still face problems of harassment and a consistent presence by the employee with whom we are engaged in legal proceedings.

Furthermore, a spin off organization of the former foundation has been put under investigation by the government, a development that occurred just before I arrived in Baku. It was unclear at the time why the government was targeting that particular organization—or whether it had anything to do with us. Another of our main former partners in Baku, AFU, has also been embroiled in a government investigation with accusations of tax evasion. Again, the reasons and driving forces behind the investigation are not wholly understood. However, it is believed that the government targeted them specifically due to suspected ties to NIDA, a radical youth organization that the government views as a threat. They suspected and accused AFU of transferring funds that were supposed to go toward paying taxes to NIDA, and that those funds in turn were used to create Molotov cocktails and engage in violent activities. However, this was obviously not the case. While AFU, being an organization for youths run by rather young people, did not have the highest professional level of accounting—a flaw that they have planned to fix going forward—they have not been involved in violent activities, the funding of such activities, or had direct ties with NIDA. Thankfully, it seems as if the case is currently being resolved and the organization will be able to return to its work of hosting lectures for youth thanks to the help of a number of embassy contacts.

In addition to the legal obstacles we and our partners have encountered, another point that resonated in many of our meetings in Baku was the weakening of the third sector as a whole in Azerbaijan. Instead of reducing the amount of pressure on civil society after the recent presidential elections, the situation instead has grown worse and the government’s repression of the opposition and independent organizations has increased. What is also disconcerting is that it seems the Azerbaijani government may have become more sophisticated in its tactics to attempt to control civil society. While in Baku we met with the leaders of an organization called AGAT, which aims to pursue projects that will further integrate Azerbaijan with the values and ideals of Europe. The leaders of the group were all young women, and had extensive experience working on a variety of projects with over 30 strategic partners in Europe and the US. These women have extensive reach and have worked on projects in many regions of Azerbaijan. On their website, they even have a page where you can donate money to specific projects through PayPal, something that is not an option for other civil society organizations. That, and the fact that they were able to register as an organization within a very short period of time suggest that while they may not be consciously working in alignment with the government, they could most definitely be (knowingly or unknowingly) acting as a poster-child for the government as a face for Azerbaijan in Europe and elsewhere. This, along with reports from the director of the Legal Society in Azerbaijan indicating that the number of independent organizations operating has dwindled due to a concerted effort on behalf of the government to buy and exert control over some organizations still remaining, indicate that the Azerbaijani government has been using both carrots and sticks in its efforts to maintain strict control over civil society.

Despite the obstacles we and our partners have been facing, there are still organizations that have been able to carry out important work, even without extensive resources. We had the opportunity to meet with a trio of women’s rights activists operating in Baku, and also in the regions. I was honestly impressed by the amount of impact they have been able to have despite receiving inconsistent funding and working with few resources at times. These women were not only accomplished and well-spoken, but they displayed a real ability to analyze and understand the problems facing women in Azerbaijan and articulate plans of action for change. One of the activists has worked as a trainer, traveling around the country training youth in human rights and skills needed for civic activism. Her work has been supported by grants from a number of international donors. The second woman lives and works in Ganca, a region of Azerbaijan far removed from Baku. Her work and story in particular was interesting and compelling because she has managed to continue to work on women’s rights and not only women’s rights in the region. They have opened a media center in Ganca, practically the only one of its kind producing original regional content, among other successes. They have also provided women with legal consultations and a support network as well. The issues on which they work are not limited to those of an economic scope but they also work on domestic violence, sex work, and access to medications and equal care. The third woman who works in Baku has led her network and organization in mainstreaming women’s rights into the general human rights discourse in Azerbaijan. They have worked to integrate women’s voices into debate and discussion of all important issues, establishing a women’s parliament consisting of members hailing from many different regions of Azerbaijan. Additionally, they have set up a hotline for women who have had their rights violated and they are working to get certification for the social work involved. I would say that more than anything else, the energy and tenacity of these three women came across as extremely potent in our conversation. Despite the fact that I was straight off the plane from Istanbul/New York, I was captivated and impressed by the accounts of their work and their particular expertise in the area of women’s rights (in a very patriarchal environment). They noted that one of the major difficulties that they face in pursuing their work, other than impediments stemming from the government, is the lack of consistent funding opportunities available for their projects, especially in the regions, either due to a lack of interest or awareness among international donors working in Azerbaijan.

AFU, though experiencing legal difficulties, also remains an active and promising partner in Azerbaijan. The success of their program of lectures and discussions from before the investigation, and their expressed plans for a renewal and regeneration of this program once they are officially in the clear, inspire some hope in the fight to keep space open for independent debate and discussion in Azerbaijan. I believe that the best strategy for grantmaking going forward would be a three-pronged approach: continuing to fund organizations like AFU, and the women’s rights activists; concentrating efforts on strengthening rule of law in Azerbaijan by funding projects aimed at building the capacity of lawyers working in the third sector, and also legal associations; and funding independent media outlets that can document and disseminate information about these efforts and further raise public awareness and the reputation of the third sector. Funding organizations like AFU, and by concentrating efforts towards strengthening rule of law in Azerbaijan, will provide the best chance at maintaining and defending the space for independent civil society as it stands, if we cannot hope for expanding it at the current juncture.

**Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan- 11/9/2013-11/15/2013**

The visit to the Soros Foundation Kyrgyzstan, like that to Azerbaijan, was geared towards building for myself an awareness and understanding of the current situation for civil society in the country, becoming better acquainted with the Foundation and Staff, and also understanding more fully OSF’s broader work there. Unlike Azerbaijan, I had been to Kyrgyzstan before and had a general idea of the political, economic and social environment. The situation for civil society in Kyrgyzstan is starkly different to that in Azerbaijan. Of all the countries in Central Asia in which we have foundations, Kyrgyzstan is the place where there is the most room to maneuver and be truly innovative in our work without fear of severe repercussions from the government. That being said, the situation in Kyrgyzstan is also not without its own unique set of difficulties. Kyrgyzstan, while more open, also tends to be more disorganized and at times erratic. This trend is not only reflected in civil society, but also in government and economy as well. It seemed that this disorganization is at times reflected in the way the Foundation operates. While it may just be that I received a limited view of the workings of the foundation, it seemed to me that there is very little collaboration and communication between programs regarding their work and also a disconnect between the Board and program staff that hinders successful grantmaking. From my short stay, I got the sense that the focus of the Foundation’s work has not been bound by a strategic vision, but it has rather tried to take advantage of the post-Bakiyev climate to engage in projects in almost every possible sector and on all possible issues. While the need is there for work to be done in such a variety of sectors, it would be impossible for the Foundation to achieve sustainable and lasting progress in any of these fields by spreading its resources so thin. I believe that this tendency could possibly have made the strategy and budget process this past year especially difficult and maybe even painful for Kyrgyzstan. But, it is for exactly this reason that I think the new process has been a highly rewarding challenge for the Foundation to actually formulate a strategy for its work. Given the political and social context the Foundation finds itself in, with a cohesive and focused strategy there is a very real opportunity for considerable progress and success in advancing in these fields and concepts going forward. However, in order to take advantage of this opportunity, the Foundation staff will have to think and act creatively and innovatively and while I feel that some programs will be able to meet this challenge, others might fall short.

One of the strengths of the SFK is its extensive contact and collaboration with other donors working in the country, and its clear ability to attract co-funding for projects. It was immediately apparent that the leadership of the Foundation is especially adept at identifying, pursuing, and attracting co-funding for large projects. In this sense, it appears as if the SFK is way ahead of the game compared to other NFs in the region. This came through in the meetings we had with all of the heads of the various programs, with the Executive Director—Shamil Ibraghimov—and with the Board. During our meeting with the Youth Program, we learned that the program is involved in a consortium of organizations that received a large grant from UN Peace and Development on inclusive education, and they hope to lead this consortium in developing and implementing the project. The Foundation has also been positioning itself to be included in the grant cycle for the World Bank, to be focused on early childhood education and social inclusion, and have received a very welcoming response.

Our meetings in Kyrgyzstan concentrated on receiving updates from program heads about the work of the Foundation over the past year and for work going forward with the new strategy. In our meetings, I was very impressed with the Media program, as it appeared to be very active and also very successful. The projects that the Media program have focused on involve supporting NGOs in the regions which work to generate original regional news content, and also supporting independent TV channels, electronic, and print media in the Uzbek language. While it is easier to work on independent media projects in Kyrgyzstan due to the relative ease of registering and the relaxed climate for censorship, many media outlets have very low ethical standards and use journalism for political rhetoric as opposed to presenting factual information. The program head whom we met with was able to point out tangible results of the projects that have been undertaken, and didn’t shy away from answering any of the questions we asked.

Another crucial focus of the trip was meeting with Board Members and identifying new candidates for those seats up for rotation. I was able to sit in on a board meeting, and was surprised by the dynamic of the board and how they interacted with program staff. The board was discussing two particular project proposals in this meeting, and it seemed (and was later confirmed in meetings with some program staff), that at times the board is not as cooperative as it could be when working with program staff. While it is important that the board challenge the program staff and ask pertinent questions regarding proposals, it should be constructive rather than confrontational. There appears to be a disconnect between some board members and the staff that results in an unnecessarily slow deliberative process when deciding which projects to fund.

It became apparent from our meeting that the Foundation has had a very active Youth Program, and also a very active interest in reaching out into the regions across its programs. We arrived the day after they held the fifth annual Joshtar Camp simultaneously in five different regions, attracting a lot of young people and a lot of buzz on social media. While the staff at the Foundation was excited about the results of the Joshtar Camp, they couldn’t quite articulate explicitly what the tangible results were, aside from bringing together groups of young people for discussion and generating publicity. While those are still considerable achievements in and of themselves, I wondered if there was a lack of vision or innovation behind these camps as it seemed as if the driving reason behind holding them was because they had held them for the past five years. It seems as if the work of the Foundation as a whole, and not just that of the Youth Program, could use an injection of creativity and innovation. This will be especially important in terms of youth outreach in Kyrgyzstan, because I feel that there is an immense need and opportunity to engage with youth, both in Bishkek and in the regions, in a way that builds their skills and capacity as active citizens committed to promoting open society values. Kyrgyzstan is a country that has fluctuated greatly on the spectrum between democracy and authoritarianism, and I believe that only by supporting and engaging the new generation of citizens will we be able to create the potential for sustainable—and stable—progress. Thus far, the program has done a lot of work involving higher education, providing trainings for youth on a variety of topics including PR, business and social ethics, and accounting, arranging internship exchanges in Germany, and focusing on projects that build the capacity for youth in politics. However, I think that it might be beneficial to include more experiential learning opportunities for youth in Kyrgyzstan, rather than focusing most of the efforts on short-lived trainings and internship exchanges for a smaller number of youth to go abroad.

There are organizations working in Kyrgyzstan that have done and continue to do amazing things. One such organization is Kloop.kg, an independent online news and blog portal that aims not only to generate individual news content from all regions of Kyrgyzstan that meet international journalistic standards, but also to train the next generation of journalists through experiential learning. Currently, this organization is not a grantee of the SFK, but it has been an OSF grantee in the past. While in Bishkek, we met with Bektour Iskender, one of the founders and editors-in-chief of Kloop.kg. It was clear in our meeting that Bektour has a clear vision for his organization and has identified the ways in which that vision can be achieved. It was also clear that this organization is extremely dynamic and has the potential to be self-sustaining—it has already made significant steps toward this goal. Kloop.kg runs an alternative journalism school which operates similarly to an apprenticeship program. The “students” are given coverage assignments and work with full-time staff editors until they are graduated to full reporters. This system is remarkable, and has resulted in talented 16 year old reporters covering the happenings on the Parliament floor with more journalistic integrity and skill than most any other news outlet in Bishkek. Recently, Kloop has partnered with local schools to make their journalism school a part of the daily high school curriculum. They work directly with teachers, offering incentive pay, and have managed to sign up a good amount of students to the program. In the next phase of this project, participation in the school program will require payment of a fee, and the sum of those fees will be able to sustain the program and cover the incentive pay for the teachers involved. Kloop has also initiated a new project in the regions with the support of another international donor which involves giving smartphones to locals so that they can report and access local news and can create original content. Why is it that we are not working with them at the current moment? They clearly meet our 1/3 rule requirement, have achievable aspirations to become financially self-sufficient, and consistently undertake innovative and creative projects that build upon their past successes.

By far the most interesting part of my time in Kyrgyzstan was our day-visit to Osh. We met with a series of human rights defenders and lawyers—some Kyrgyz, some Uzbek and some international—in order to gain a sense of the current situation and what needs to be done further in the region. While the southern region has normalized since the June 2010 events, it seems as if the wounds inflicted have not healed completely. One major thing that has impeded this healing process has been the perceived continued impunity for those who were responsible for crimes during the events and the corruption that has been suspected in the judicial proceedings that followed. A hugely disproportionate number of Uzbeks were charged and convicted of crimes from June 2010 compared to the number of Kyrgyz. Furthermore, it is a wide-held belief that any case brought before Bishkek courts involving the events was heavily biased against Uzbeks. A weak rule of law system persists in Kyrgyzstan, and many feel that justice has not been achieved from the proceedings following the 2010 events. At the same time, the after effects of the violence in 2010 are not only limited to judicial procedures and convictions. Noticeably, in Osh many of the restaurants and businesses that had previously been owned and operated by Uzbeks were appropriated during or immediately after the June 2010 events and are now run by ethnic Kyrgyz. There have been little to no attempts at correcting this injustice and a climate of mistrust between ethnic groups living in the south persists. Neither international organizations, nor the government have been able to actively right the wrongs that occurred and continue to occur since 2010—yet the local activists continue to try to document these human rights violations and attempt to further normalize the situation. This was the main point that I took away from our meetings with lawyers, journalists, and activists in Osh.

**Soros Foundation Kazakhstan- 11/15/2013-11/23/2013**

Our visit to Soros Foundation Kazakhstan had us based in Almaty, but included a two-day trip to Shymkent and Turkestan. Out of the foundations that I have visited, Soros Foundation Kazakhstan really stands out as the best-managed. Despite this capability, it does seem that the foundation could bear to take more risks at time, and tends to lean towards the conservative. This is understandable, given the situation in which SFK works and the dynamic of the Board, but at the same time, one could argue that this could be preventing truly innovative projects from being undertaken. During this trip I was focused on becoming acquainted with the projects and staff of the National Foundation and the climate in which they work. I also accompanied Michael Hall in meetings with potential candidates for the Board, which allowed me to meet with leading representatives of civil society in Kazakhstan, presenting me with immense learning opportunities.

I feel like I learned the most about the Soros Foundation Kazakhstan because I had the opportunity to really engage with some of the staff members on a two-day trip to Shymkent and Turkestan. The purpose of this trip was to hold a meeting of all of SFK’s partner organizations and civil society representatives in the South in Shymkent, and to show the film Shal (Old Man) by \_\_, with a subsequent active discussion on the social themes represented therein with local university students. The film focuses on the relationship between a grandson and his grandfather, and documents a few poignant social themes, speaking to generational differences in Kazakh culture. The film was shown at the Kazakh State University in Shymkent, and also at the University in Turkestan. At the former, there was a lively discussion that touched on the social themes after the showing. However at university in Turkestan, the director decided to show a new film (a comedy) that hasn’t yet been released, and so the event turned into a publicity tour for him rather than a jumping off point for active discussion amongst the students. While the project itself did not quite meet the initial expectations involved, the experience demonstrated the SFK’s ability to analyze and assess the impact of its projects, and adapt its activities as needed in order to achieve success. Going forward, the SFK was planning on showing the films in one or two other cities, but instead of showing them at universities they might try to find an alternative space that would attract an audience more interested in the social implications of the film, rather than the fame of the director. They have also suggested putting the successful art exhibition that they funded on tour as the main attraction, and including the director as a discussant. Both of these options will tweak the project’s activities in order to ostensibly achieve the goals set out in the proposal.

The meeting that the SFK held in Shymkent with participants coming from all of their partner organizations and other civil society representatives from the South was really remarkable. The large conference room was packed with people representing all generations. While I could not understand what some of the participants were saying because they were speaking in Kazakh, the dynamism and energy of the room was awesome. A lot of the concerns coming from the participants I did understand referred to the submission requirements for proposals and also reporting, which seems to be a normal gripe that many organizations have about OSF. The staff of SFK very clearly and effectively answered the questions of the participants and was able to explain the need for proposal and reporting requirements. The conference also generated a lively debate among participants about the main issues concerning civil society activists in the South. When speaking with SFK ED Anton after the session, he expressed his satisfaction with the turnout and progression of the meeting.

In Almaty, we met with at least 6 potential board member candidates to discuss their expertise and what activities they felt SFK should engage in. All of the potential candidates with whom we met provided an interesting insight into various aspects of the current climate depending on their expertise. When we met with Dinar, he informed us about the current political trends relevant to the work of civil society. He indicated that while the status quo is still intact, people have begun to question about potential change, especially given Nazarbayev’s advanced age. At the same time, in his opinion there is a lack of any real opposition because all those who would have been able to head an opposition front with any gusto have left the country. An insight that I was particularly struck by, was Dinar’s assessment that there is only a small cadre of people in the country that are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to lead the country and succeed Nazarbayev. This paired with the lack of any similarly equipped potential opposition leaders does not necessarily bode well in terms of an opening in post-Nazarbayev Kazakhstan. In terms of civil society development, he indicated the belief that the activities of donors have retracted from 8 regions to only 3-4, and that the main impediment to civil society growth is that donors have been supporting the same core group of established organizations in the regions, and those organizations have not been acting innovatively. His suggestion was to broaden our scope of support to new organizations and also to provide trainings to build capacities of people operating in the regions. While our meeting with Dinar was informative and very useful, I wasn’t as impressed by the idea of him as a board member candidate.

Our meeting with Joanna Lillis was similarly unimpressive in terms of board membership, but was informative in its own right. Joanna is one of the few international reporters that still has access to Uzbekistan in addition to Kazakhstan, and her work has gone largely unimpeded by the interference or repression by the Kazakh government. But while her work has not been subject to pressure from the government, she informed us that the authorities have mounted a major crackdown on native journalists over the past 2 years and exert a lot of pressure on them. Joanna works for EurasiaNet and stated that it has been an indispensable resource in terms of getting the story out both regarding Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

We also met with Asiya, a member of the SFK Media Program’s expert committee, and were very impressed with her. I felt that she would be a great addition to the SFK board, given her energy, expertise on multiple topics, and ability to engage with youth. Asiya is not only an expert on media issues, but also frequently works with women’s rights groups and youth activists in Kazakhstan. One of the issues we talked about with her is the activism and engagement of youth in discussions via social media networks. Asiya claims that the youth of Kazakhstan are much more open to having frank discussions about social and political topics via social media and that the activity on social media suggests to her that there is a lot of potential for the younger generation in terms of sparking change in Kazakhstan. Aside from her insights on the youth of Kazakhstan, Asiya was also helpful in describing the media situation and the growing tendency towards religiousness amongst disaffected youth.

Our meeting with Serikh Akhanov, a prominent economist and former member of government, was surprising in how impressive I found him. I would say that out of all the meetings we had with potential board members, I found Serikh to be the most interesting and he may just be exactly what is needed in the current SFK board. Serikh is clearly a reformist, interested in pushing Kazakhstan along the path of economic reform so as to meet international and European economic standards. He also expressed interest in funding studies done by Kazakh experts in the Kazakh language on economic and financial systemic problems in order to stimulate change in these sectors. Serikh, despite the portrait of Nazarbayev hanging over his desk, genuinely seemed to be a progressive expert with ideas for reforming the current economic and financial systems in Kazakhstan so as to eliminate corruption, maximize Kazakhstan’s economic potential, and create a sustainable and diversified economic system in the country. He could be especially useful in helping to navigate which projects to fund for the Transparency and Accountability program and the Youth Program, oddly enough, given his goal to stimulate economic opportunities for youth in Kazakhstan.

During the trip we also met with Murat and Beknur, specialists on media and youth/political dynamics, respectively. While I found them both to be interesting and in possession of unique perspectives, I did not necessarily find them to be suitable board member candidates. While Murat was extremely knowledgeable and had his finger on the pulse of what was going on in the regions and in media in general, he didn’t seem to be innovative or energetic enough to bring the right dynamic to the board. Oppositely, while Beknur was very energetic and also knowledgeable, it seemed as if he was almost too anecdotal and wouldn’t quite fit in with the board either.

After meeting with all the potential board candidates, we sat in on a Board Meeting in order to present recommendations. Michael had decided to put forth Asiya and Serikh as the two candidates to vote on for inclusion in the board, and to my surprise (I was expecting some pushback on Serikh given his former government ties), the board agreed after some debate and discussion of the suitability of all the candidates.

The climate in Kazakhstan for OSF’s work is different from both Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan. While work in Azerbaijan is at times prohibitively restrictive because of the authoritarian Aliyev government, and work in Kyrgyzstan can be erratic and broad because of the lack of constraints, our work in Kazakhstan falls somewhere in the middle. It is true that the Nazarbayev government is considerably authoritarian and does employ repressive tactics when engaging with certain aspects of civil society (especially native journalists), there seems to me to be much more room for maneuvering than there would appear to be at first glance. In terms of economic and social improvement, the SFK has the capacity and room to fund a number of successful projects. This is also true of transparency and accountability initiatives focused on the economic sector to an extent, given what I perceive to be the government’s interest in maximizing Kazakhstan’s potential to become a leading world economy that is viewed as an equal with those in Europe. There appears to be an openness to institution and state-building in Kazakhstan that does not exist in Azerbaijan. Furthermore while Kyrgyzstan may also possess this desire (with limited results), Kazakhstan actually has the tools, resources, capacity and middle class (at least in Almaty and Astana) to actually make progress in this arena.

**Meeting Recaps**

*Meeting with the Imam Ilqar Ibrahimoglu*

When we met with the Imam, he made sure that we knew that he is not pro-opposition but instead works to promote what is interesting and best for the Azerbaijani people from his perspective. Regarding the current situation, he argued that everyone is becoming increasingly dissatisfied but they do not necessarily want to take action for change. He argues that this isn’t a critical moment for Azerbaijan but instead is a symptom of a “fashion of dissatisfaction” in Azerbaijan without any real intentions for action behind it. In his opinion, political parties have also not yet reached their potential, not even in the protests which have occurred over the past year. The “Narodnii Front” for instance can only get around a thousand people to come out to a protest at any given time. While the opposition is visible, he does not believe that any one is really doing anything. The current system of political parties is based on personalities rather than ideologies and is therefore not sustainable and works to marginalize groups rather than unite them. According to the imam, there is a formula of failure in how the opposition works and they have not tried to correct their approach. However, he does believe that the time to address religious issues and problems could be now but instead of making grandiose plans for 2-3 years it is only possible to make plans for 6 months into the future at a maximum. He personally believes that there is the potential for other civil society groups and religious groups to work together at present to combat extremism and also the government’s reactionary policies toward religion because of the threat of extremism.

*Cavad Cavadov, expert on religion and youth, and Intigam Aliyev, Chairman of the Legal Education Society*

* Aliyev noted that the situation has become very complicated in Azerbaijan. In his opinion, there are no actual political parties in existence, which became clear during the elections; and while there was a strong civil society sector previously, the government has now extended control over a number of organizations through the use of support and funding coming from governmental sources. Large sums of money have been spent especially in the media sector, and there is no accountability. Despite these problems and the government’s attempts to buy control of the civil sector, a few good organizations still remain. Aliyev also noted that there is a definite deficit of lawyers able and willing to work on politically motivated arrest cases, because essentially they are working for free. Lawyers are reticent to take that are political in nature because of the bad PR that comes along with it. There is a very slim chance of winning in these proceedings and there is a large burden placed upon the lawyers themselves because they have to dedicate a lot of personal resources to it. We then asked them how to remedy this problem; what can be done to protect the lawyers who work on political cases and moreover, how can we attract young graduates to this aspect of the profession? Their answer to these questions was the need to promote and incentivize work in this aspect of the law. There needs to be an emphasis on recruiting and training young lawyers. They mentioned that currently the ECHR provides a stimulus for new lawyers to take on politically sensitive cases. And yet another problem is that some lawyers have little to no contact with mass media and the press have little to no access to information which limits both the channels for good PR for lawyers who take on politically sensitive cases and also for mass media to report objectively on such cases.
* The current problems in his opinion stem from the impunity of the government—it feels that it is above the law. Less and less independent civil society organizations exist now because of a lack of consistent financing and resources. Those that do exist tend to get very large grants from the EU for the creation of a completely new project. The major problem he sees with the civil society sector and with international donors’ approach to this sector in Azerbaijan is the lack of experience among a very young cadre of civil society activists and a general lack of continuity in the sector stemming from inconsistent financing and an overabundance of one-off projects.

*Meeting with Youth Activists—Adnan Hajizada and Vugar Salamli*

* We met with Adnan and Vugar Salamli, two youth activists working in Baku. Vugar and Adnan were heavily involved in organizing the AFU lectures and Vugar continues to be under investigation. Adnan is a former political prisoner who works with AFU and other youth activists. Currently, AFU remains shut down due to a government investigation into their activities and connections with NIDA. We are waiting for the investigation to end, and it is indeed winding down—the government has stopped actively investigating AFU and Vugar. We asked Vugar to describe the situation and the investigation. He indicated that at first he was not sure if he was being contacted as a witness or as a suspect. He was targeted because OSF wired money directly into his personal account and those funds were then used to operate the AFU lecture series. As for the NIDA connection, the government accused AFU of transferring money to NIDA that was supposed to go to paying taxes. They argue that those transferred funds were then used to fund destructive activities undertaken by NIDA. While this was not the case, the less than stellar accounting by AFU made the situation difficult to clear up. However, now the government has been satisfied that AFU does not have connections to NIDA and Vugar et al. will now only have to pay a large fine and their backed taxes. Vugar and Adnan have been focusing their efforts on designing a program plan for AFU after the investigation is fully resolved. Previously, all speakers who were featured at AFU were somehow involved in the protests, but given their tenuous situation vis a vis the government at present, AFU wants to update their speakers list to be less politically themed. They plan to get people from the US to speak on a more advanced set of topics highlighting a wider breadth of experiences. Once they receive approval from the government to restart their activities, they plan to begin programming with their new educational image. They had previously secured funding from donors for their work but had to put the grants on hold because of the investigation—but they plan to reapply once they get the ok to continue working. They also plan to register as a limited liability commercial entity and find a financial manager to handle all of the funding and finances. In formulating their speakers list, they plan on working with different embassies to invite respected speakers to be part of both foreign and local expert panels. If their past success is any indication, the next round of programming should attract a large crowd. Over the past four years they held up to 300 lectures, filming each one and broadcasting it online. AFU is also one of the few organizations creating a network or system in Azerbiajan—other youth organizations tend to be chaotic and disorganized.
* Adnan and Vugar stated that recent arrests have strongly discouraged people from becoming and staying active. There has never been such pressure exerted on NGOs as there is now. Furthermore, they argue that nothing is happening in the regions because all educated young people come to Baku for education and work. When we asked them what we could do further they advised that we could encourage young people to read books and support the translation of books into Azeri—possibly create a book club. We could also further try to engage with the creative community because of our failure to do so in the past.

*Meeting with Shahvalad Çobanoglu*

* In our meeting, he emphasized the need to continue to support investigative journalism in Azerbaijan. There is also a need to incorporate a youth component by forming discussion clubs and other initiatives to engage youth in dialogue. In addition to investigative journalism, he found that there is a lot of room to do comparative analysis as there are many comparisons that can be drawn between Azerbaijan and other countries. In this sense, he believes there are a lot of opportunities to do research on other countries that would be comparable or relatable to the situation in Azerbaijan. Another initiative that could reap good results would be sending journalists abroad on experiential learning trips so that they can draw comparisons between what is happening abroad as opposed to what is happening in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani government has been engaging in a PR campaign about how people in other countries do not live normally and how you can only have a good, normal life in Azerbaijan. He believes that it is therefore necessary to cultivate a trust among the population in Western institutions because the more trust people have in Western institutions, the more trust they will have in investigative journalism work and in the work of civil society organizations. He suggests that we could examine the role of social television and other effective projects to create this trust. Currently, there is a debate going on about public TV in Azerbaijan and he sees potential for Public TV to become a vehicle for information sharing and change. Overall, while I found this meeting to be informative, I wasn’t wholly convinced that there were many opportunities for the strengthening of investigative journalism within Azerbaijan given the current situation.

*Meeting with AGAT*

* We met with the ladies in leadership at AGAT, a relatively young organization focusing on integrating Azerbaijan with Europe. In their short history, AGAT has worked on a multitude of projects focusing on all kinds of topics including disability rights, youth empowerment, minority rights, education and environment. They boast that they have worked with 30 partner organizations in Europe and have also been a part of the EU Youth in Action Program and the Council of Europe Youth Foundation. One of their current projects is co-funded by TI Azerbaijan and focuses on anti-corruption efforts to establish a hotline in the regions to be used to report instances of bribery and other corruption. They are also currently applying for a grant from NED to work on a project on gender equality issues. Previously, they have collaborated with NDI on projects related to bringing together opposition and government elements for constructive dialogue on particular issues. In 2009 they established a National Council on Minorities with seven youth branches to establish a friendship dialogue. When asked why they have focused on integration of Azerbaijan with Europe, they responded that because of Azerbaijan’s geographic location, it’s options are to turn toward either Russia, Iran or Europe. Out of those three potential positions, they find Europe to be the best option because of the universal human values that it stands for. They stated that they founded their organization because they felt there was a lack of public awareness and information about why integration with Europe is a good option. They were also specific when pointing out that their goal is not to make Azerbaijan European in terms of culture, traditions etc. Instead, they want to integrate European values with Azerbaijani culture and identity. They also mentioned that they have a very good relationship with the government, were able to register in record time, were the first NGO in Azerbaijan to have a fundraising department, and have a paypal-like system set up on their website where people can donate money to specific projects.

**Kyrgyzstan**

*Meeting with Media Program*

* The Media Program has focused its grants and project of the past year on freedom of the press and cultivation of mass media in Kyrgyzstan. They believe that thus far their projects have been successful and they cite their work with 20 NGOs on alternative content and what’s going on in the regions to quantify their success. Their number one goal has been to publish alternative original content from the regions, as opposed to the centers of Bishkek and Osh. As a result, they have generated a lot of interesting content from Talas, Naryn, the South, Jalalabad, etc. on relevant local topics such as degradation of small cities, ecological issues, etc. The second goal that the Media Program has had has been to generate news content and access to information in the Uzbek language. This project has been especially focused on the Jalalabad region, and they have used their TV project 7 Kanal and other news outlets in achieving this goal. Over the past year, the mayor’s publication newspaper in Jalalabad brought back pages in Uzbek and many other Uzbek language newspapers have been established or reestablished. A new radio channel has also been founded with approval—but without funding—from the government. Some programs on this channel appear in Uzbek and there are open discussions in order to try to create a soft power cultural bridge between ethnic groups. The Media Program has also established a good working relationship with government ministries. They have worked with the Ministry of Culture to ensure the integrity of Kyrgyzstan TV and to include original Kyrgyz content as opposed to translated content from Russia or Uzbekistan. Many TV consumers in Kyrgyzstan currently prefer to buy receivers that can get 50 Uzbek channels in the South or to watch Russian TV in the north because of the entertainment and variety of content in comparison to Kyrgyz channels, and this is a problem they are trying to solve. Another problem they are trying to solve is the tendency in the media to use news as a means of political rhetoric instead of honest fact-based reporting. Many newspapers in Kyrgyzstan contain elements of hate speech, blatant lies, and other things of that sort. The lack of centralism that prevails in media is good because there is unparalleled freedom of the press compared to the rest of Central Asia, but it also works to perpetuate the lack of journalistic integrity and problems listed above. There is also a need to develop better mobile applications for news websites, especially for photos and videos, because many people receive their news via mobile phone or tablet in Kyrgyzstan.

*Meeting with the Higher Education Support Program*

* In terms of higher education, the Foundation has been mainly working on the development of new standards and the development of new materials. A new law on education was passed recently and they are trying to leverage this development to include their recommendations for higher standards. According to the new law, all BA and MA programs need to submit their papers for accreditation by September 2014. Thus far, the outlines for BA standards have been approved by the state but the MA standards are still pending. The program has received a large grant from UN Peace and Development along with partners and is in the running to receive another grant from the World Bank to focus on inclusive education. However, it has been difficult for them to garner funding and formulate projects in a field where the government’s own policy is not yet fully articulated. In terms of inclusive education, the Foundation has been taking up the usual role of creating models and presenting them to larger donors who have the resources to pick up the projects from there. They have already designed a model of early intervention starting from 0 year. In addition, they have been working on peacebuilding efforts in the south through post-conflict education projects. The resources at disposal in schools are becoming more advanced in this regard and they are better prepared to address the remaining tensions. Now they are focusing on how to better schedule leisure time and promote interethnic cooperation through extracurricular activities. Schools are now required to develop extracurricular programs but this work is more challenging because it has to become embedded in the core backbone of the institution to be effective, which obviously takes longer to be fully realized.

*Meeting with the Youth Program*

* We met with the Youth Program the day after they held their fifth annual Joshtar Camp, a large gathering of youth in 5 cities across Kyrgyzstan on the “Day of Youth.” This year it was hled in Kant, Batken, Karakol, Jalalabad and Bishkek. The conferences generated idea-sharing between attendees from Bishkek and the regions and also a lot of buzz on social media networks. The priority of the youth program has been developing and maintaining informal platforms for discussion and the format of the Joshtar Camps has been very effective for encouraging discussion of important issues. Over the past year, they have given 6 additional grants for youth civil initiatives and built youth capacity through trainings both in Bishkek and in the regions on topics such as PR and fundraising. They did note that they experienced budget issues with the youth organizations to which they gave the grants, which apparently always happens. This suggests that there might be more of a need for accounting trainings for youth organizations. The program has also coordinated projects with youth in NY and Germany focusing on youth in politics and as part of this project they gave working seminars etc. that would maximize the possibility for youth to reach their potential for civil control over government accountability. They also organized an exchange internship in Berlin for Kyrgyz youth to work for a year. Other projects that the Youth Program has been working on include a project focusing on the development of the potential of school aged students; creating a center for support of young women in the south whose husbands left for migrant work, helping them to find work and providing other support functions; a project focusing on Kyrgyz-ifying the internet and generating more content in Kyrgyz language by working with schools and administrations to hold computer classes on web design.

*Meeting with Public Health Program*

* The Public Health Program is unique because 80% of the projects they work on are co-funded. They work on issues such as sexual rights, monitoring and access to medicines. Because the medical industry uses a registration system based on residence, it has been extremely difficult for sex workers, LGBT persons, drug users, and other marginalized populations to receive healthcare. They have worked to get such populations access to registration in order to receive healthcare benefits. The program has also worked on palliative care and now has doctors focusing on this specialty, working in people’s homes and in oncological centers in Bishkek and elsewhere, which was not a reality previously. In terms of advocacy and legal projects they have advocated for less expensive medicines, using demonstrations and all other means to promote this issue. These efforts in conjunction with other forces working toward the same goal have resulted in an 18% reduction in the cost of medicines. Additionally, they have been heavily involved in a legislative project involving sexual health rights. They have partnered with East-West in this regard to fight against the legislative project that would criminalize sex work and would subsequently deny sex workers access to HIV meds among other things. In terms of mental health issues, they have been working with 2 organizations in giving consultations to those with mental illnesses in homes. They diagnose people with psychological problems and find the root causes of the illness while giving help to their families and trying to find the best way to proceed going forward. However, when it came to describing how their work fit into the new strategy going forward, they were relatively vague in coming up with specifics. They noted that they will be co-funding studies on the methods of sustainable intervention with the government and that they are working on fields with organizations that have been working on issues for more than 5 years but they did not specify in terms of projects or action plans.

*Meeting with Transparency and Accountability Program*

* We met with the Transparency and Accountability program to discuss their work over the past year and their planned work going forward. One of their main success stories has been their support for public discourse and analytical centers. As part of this work they brought together experts from government and civil society at a meeting which highlighted the strengths of each side, providing a complement for each side’s weaknesses. The meeting itself served as a highly communicative platform which resulted in the creation of a website for further discussion called the “Open Expert Analytical Space.” They also worked with the Ministry of Economics to prepare a national training with two charismatic trainers who went to the regions heavily affected by mining. As a result, they were able to impress the tools of self-governance on local governments. What they learned from this project was the need to make the industry more Kyrgyz-language friendly, because it is heavily dominated by Russian. Also resulting from this project were two grants—one given for the creation of a model and another focusing on making the public aware of internal business communications. Oftentimes in the mining sector in Kyrgyzstan, business decisions and communications are made behind closed doors and the local population is never consulted. People therefore lack access to information and our grantees were trying to create a normative atmosphere where all of this information is public. Inevitably, there were a few challenges in conducting this project because regional experts working on obtaining information from businesses involved in mining were slow to update the website (public resource) with the necessary information.

*Janesh at the Advocacy Center*

* The Advocacy Center was founded as a group of human rights advocates and were registered in 2005. They have received prior support from the OSCE and OSF and since 2005 have grown from a 3 person to a 22 person staff. Aside from the monitoring work that they do, they also operate an informational resource center and have lawyers who are available for consultations. The majority of their human rights work is focused on judicial reform and strategic litigation in international human rights courts. As a part of this work, they hold seminars and trainings for lawyers working in the courts, and have 30-35 lawyers working with them. Among their case work, they focus on cases of torture and collaborate with other NGOs on these.
* They have a program focusing on the lives of migrants and internal migration and have studied its effect on public life, concluding that internal migration is linked to instability. They argue that while the problem with internal migration remains unsolved in Kyrgyzstan, instability will prevail. According to their studies, 260,000-500,000 internal migrants have problems with registration, which in turn causes them to have medical, educational, and tax problems (they can’t get apartments, can’t visit doctors). Most of the internal migrant populations are concentrated in Osh and Bishkek.
* They also work on an Access to Information program in which they perform research and help journalists receive access to information. They act as a facilitator between government ministries and journalists—if journalists want to get access to budget information, for example, they work with the government to get that. They have found that one of the main problems is that people and journalists do not know what constitutes confidential/secret information and are therefore reticent to ask for access to any kind of information that they think might be sensitive. In an effort to solve this problem, they have held seminars in three regions for people who work in obtaining information for the public.

*Meeting with Uzbek lawyers and rights activists- Suleimanov*

* Suleimanov is a lawyer who heads a group of lawyers and other experts working on monitoring in the region since 2000. In 2003 they received OSF funding to complete their first monitoring project, and they continue to carry out monitoring work to this day. They also work on cases of torture, primarily occurring during pre-trial detention, and so they monitor cases from time of arrest until the trial starts. This group of lawyers has worked as a facilitator between the Prosecutor’s office and other NGOs, international organizations and others coordinating efforts in Osh and Batken. They monitored the judicial proceedings following the June 2010 events and found that those Uzbeks who were tried and convicted received harsh sentences, while those Kyrgyz who were convicted often did not receive sentences. Following the 2010 events, the heads of the Prosecutor’s office came to Osh and saw that 1800 homes were burned down, personal property was destroyed, and there were many cases of looting, but inevitably, the government did not take action to correct these injustices and there weren’t nearly enough investigative efforts. Currently, the government likes to say that everything is fine in the south, but that is not necessarily the case. According to Suleimanov, the international organizations working in the region following the violence were largely responsible for normalizing the situation. The public does not feel that the government has done anything to contribute to fixing the situation, and instead they feel as if the government has not been held accountable for its lack of action and also for the police taking part in the acts of violence.
* Suleimanov also elaborated on the general feeling among the public following the June 2010 events. Many weapons were given and taken during the violence, and there remain a lot of automatic weapons in people’s residences which has created a very difficult situation; on the surface, the situation looks much better but underneath, many problems still remain and little incidents could spark huge problems in the future.
* The government created a National Center to deal with minority issues in 2012 and they chose people for a committee from parliament plus one ombudsman. In April 2013 they chose a director and employees for the center from the oblasts, from Bishkek, and from Osh. They also set up a regional office in Osh and chose a director—who will be working with the incarcerated and those who have been arrested in essence to be a monitoring organization to prevent torture, bias and mistreatment. Suleimanov is hopeful that the National Center will take the place of the Prosecutor’s office in terms of investigating, documents, and monitoring human rights violations and torture cases. Aside from the National Center, Suleimanov believes that the international community is the only influence that will be able to enact change in judicial processes by releasing reports and promoting the results of monitoring studies.

*Meeting with Center for Support of International Protection- Akylbek Tashbulatov*

* We met with Akylbek Tashbulatov and his colleague at the Center for Support of International Protection in Osh in order to discuss the current situation between ethnic groups and the other various problems facing the southern region of Kyrgyzstan. In his view, there is still a lack of trust between ethnic groups even though a lot of efforts and initiatives have been undertaken in order to stabilize the situation (restaurants, stores, businesses have been reopened). He confirmed that the judicial processes have been woefully lacking, and indicated that many of those who were arrested and placed in pre-trial detention were subject to torture and mistreatment. In the Bishkek city courts, people were further able to pay a bribe to influence a court decision, be found not guilty, or to not receive a sentence.
* They also focus on monitoring the drug trafficking situation in southern Kyrgyzstan, which they state continues to rise. They have been monitoring the actions of President Atambayev in order to assess how these actions are directly relevant to their work—especially those involving narcotics and the relationship between women and narcotics trafficking. In their opinion, the current laws involving narcotics trafficking are illogical and inadvertently biased towards the women involved. Currently, the law states that possession of one gram of heroin would receive a maximum sentence of 5 years—but it doesn’t take into account the purity of the drug. Therefore, possession of one gram of pure heroin would receive a much lighter sentence than possession of 10 grams of cut heroin containing only one gram of pure heroin. This in turn results in women receiving the harsher sentences because they are the ones further down the power chain moving larger quantities of cut heroin.
* They also monitor the work of organizations focusing on migrant workers. There are currently 25 organizations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan working on internal and interregional migration/movement. They personally analyze the legal aspects of migration between source countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) and host countries (Russia, Kazakhstan). In doing so, they have formed a working group focusing on putting together a plan of action and have been working on monitoring projects, demonstrations, and providing legal help for migrants. Upon return from Russia/Kazakhstan, they help migrants get documents and host a hotline in three languages. They received the title of “best protection center in the world” as a result, because these services were unique after the June 2010 events.

*Meeting with Osh Human Rights Expert*

* We met with a colorful human rights activist working in Osh on issues pertaining to the judicial proceedings following the June 2010 events. While very interesting and informative, I couldn’t help but get the impression that he was a bit unconventional and sketchy. However, due to his close monitoring of the judicial proceedings following the 2010 events, he was able to say to us that there has been a vast inequality between the number of ethnic Uzbeks arrested and convicted of crimes and the number of Kyrgyz. He argued that most of the Uzbeks in prison are actually innocent and that the 2 Kyrgyz who were convicted and given sentences were not at all connected to actual crimes which occurred—but instead they were pawns used to show that the government put Kyrgyz in prison too.

**Soros Foundation Kazakhstan**

*Meeting with Dinar*

* Dinar is an expert on media and especially on media coming from the regions. He has monitored all major regional developments, and therefore has a unique insight into the goings on in Kazakhstan. Much of our conversation focused on political developments. Dinar argued that the current status quo remains and that the current elite maintain their formal values of stability and integration. Dinar also argued that there is a lack of any real opposition; any who would have been able to garner popular support for any real movement have left Kazakhstan. Current political trends also involve a nationalist streak. In his view, the question about a political alternative remains because the opposition is composed of those who have defected from the government and there remains the feeling that the “liberal experiment” doesn’t always work. He argues that the status quo remains, but there is an idea that there can be change
* In terms of our work in Kazakhstan, Dinar pointed out that previously donors had been working in 8 different regions but their reach has now been limited to 3-4 regions. Support in the regions is limited and foundations continue to support the same established groups, which do not quite understand how to be innovative. Dinar argues that we need to build better PR for the Soros Foundation because we need to promote an understanding that Soros isn’t taking a political position when giving grants, and we need to make clear that there is no need to adopt a party line if receiving a grant from us. Dinar also thinks that we need to have seminars and trainings to equip locals with the skills needed in order to grow the capacity of civil society in the regions. Along those same lines, we need to support regional journalism as well because the current journalistic efforts in the regions focus on achieving high ratings and therefore do not report on a wide array of topics based in fact. Finally he argued that we needed to work on communication, collaboration, and cooperation between all the major donors working in the area.

*Meeting with Joanna Lillis*

* Our meeting with Joanna Lillis was very informative. Joanna is a foreign reporter working in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan who contributes content to EurasiaNet among other outlets. We mostly spoke with Joanna about the climate for journalists in Kazakhstan. She noted that there has been a heavy crackdown on civil society, and especially journalists, over the past two years dramatically changing the situation. She argued that people working in civil society are now much more wary and cautious than they were previously, and they are hyper aware of what they are doing and that they are receiving money from “the West.” Joanna stated that EurasiaNet has been an indispensable resource for her in terms of getting the story out of Kazakhstan. Joanna indicated that she has held a personal interest in women’s rights groups operating in Kazakhstan. She argues that the social movement on women’s rights in Kazakhstan is more prominent and more influential than established NGOs have been recently.
* Joanna also spoke to us about the different situations facing native journalists in contrast to foreign journalists working in Kazakhstan. The current crackdown facing civil society has not affected the work of international journalists in the country, most likely because the authorities do not want bad PR in the international community. While a few ambiguous incidents have occurred, there haven’t been any major negative affecting foreign journalists in Kazakhstan. On the contrary, enormous pressure is being exerted on native journalists. Joanna also noted that the wider public seems to be turned off by politics in general and there is a pervasive political apathy. There is also a growing problem with religious extremism and there is a general consensus about a potential hotbed for this trend among disaffected youth.

*Meeting with Asiya*

* Asiya is a member of the expert committee for the media program at the Soros Foundation Kazakhstan. Our meeting with her was very informative and I was impressed by her energy, expertise, and vision. Asiya spoke with us not only about media, but also about the youth of Kazakhstan. She spoke on the differences between the older and younger generations in terms of technological savviness and their relationship to politics. She stated that people, and young people especially, tend to be more open and willing to engage in frank discussion on social networks. And in terms of how youth relate to national values, she argued that they see what is going on in Europe and the US and potentially want change in Kazakhstan as a result. She sees a lot of potential in young people based on the debates that occur on social networks. In terms of the religiosity of youth, she discussed that the older and middle generations do not understand why some youth are choosing to wear hijabs and traditional Muslim dress because those traditions were never common in Kazakhstan. Asiya argues that disaffected youth, i.e. those without jobs and economic prospects, are more likely to turn to Islam.
* Asiya also spoke about the problems that exist in mass media and for those in the journalist profession. She argues that while journalists would like to restore the integrity and independence of the media in Kazakhstan, they are not very eager to put their careers in jeopardy in order to pursue this goal.

*Meeting with Serik Akhanov*

* Serikh Akhanov is an economic expert with a history as a government minister. He clearly stated that he is interested in studying and implementing reforms in Kazakhstan that would move the country toward economic international standards—he wants Kazakhstan to be a European country in terms of economic and financial sectors. In our meeting, we mostly talked about economics and finance in Kazakhstan, and he spoke a lot about the current system of “non-transparent economics” that persists. In his belief, Kazakhstan is number 2 in the region when it comes to economic potential, but the current system has been prohibiting it from reaching this full potential. He cited the banking system as an example of where Kazakhstan cannot be competitive because native banks are small and foreign banks dominate the sector. This is because it is hard for local banks to be competitive due to the risks involved in business and in complying with international standards. Interestingly, Serikh believed that SFK primarily conducted projects in the arts and culture sphere and didn’t really fund studies or do work in the economic/financial sphere. This is interesting because it indicates that those involved in business do not see SFK as a donor that is funding practical work in these sectors. Obviously, this is not the case and SFK has funded a wide range of economic studies. Serikh demonstrated his interest in stimulating economic opportunities for youth and suggested funding roundtables, scientific studies of the problems in the financial sector, and publishing books analyzing the findings of these studies in the native Kazakh language by Kazakh authors.

*Meeting with Beknur*

* We largely talked about youth and religion with Beknur. He was the only one of those we met with to bring up the topic of religiousness among youth himself. He acknowledged that the topic of religion is the most dangerous, given the government’s sensitivity to the topic, but that it is the issue most needing attention at this point in Kazakhstan. While I was impressed with his knowledge and enthusiasm, I wasn’t necessarily impressed by his style. He chose to use some questionable metaphors and anecdotes when we were speaking with him.

*Meeting with Murat*

* When asked what he thinks will happen regarding Nazarbayev’s succession strategy and the possibility of a real opposition, Murat stated that while the country does have many serious economic problems that could be a platform for an opposition, the government has been pushing a lot of money into the development of the country. He also stated that channels for underground political opposition journalists do exist, like the TV channel called 31 Kanal. However, he also argued that the youth of the country are apathetic and are not edging towards politics🡪instead there is a lack of protest culture among youth and while they may all think it would be a good idea for someone to protest, they will not engage in such activities themselves.