**Trip Report**

Kyrgyzstan

June 6, 2014

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**BACKGROUND**

**KYRGYZSTAN (June 6, 2014)**

From a political standpoint, Kyrgyzstan has typically been considered the most open of the Central Asia countries. Nevertheless, the country has navigated major upheaval and hiccups in transition since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2005 and again in 2010, mass protests and deep-rooted frustration with the leadership, as well as pervasive issues of economic and parliamentary corruption, catalyzed the ousting of two presidents. Kyrgyzstan’s southern region remains restive, with periodic outbreaks of interethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. In terms of civil society, Kyrgyzstan has the most vibrant activists and groups in Central Asia, and they have comparatively more space in which to advocate for their rights as well as political, economic, and social reforms.

The Foundation’s main priorities include judicial system reform; freedom of information; equal access to quality primary and secondary education; access to justice for the poor and marginalized; natural resources governance; and youth engagement for social change. The priorities are not dissimilar to those of the Foundation in Kazakhstan, albeit the Foundation in Kyrgyzstan has considerably more room to carry out creative programs. An EP staff member who visited Kyrgyzstan in 2013 observed that while Kyrgyzstan has the most open political environment, some of its programs seem unfocused. I was quite impressed with the Media Program because it addressed complex themes, including increasing the quality and pluralism of content; fostering dialogue between journalists, activists, and parliamentarians on the issue of the digital switchover; and supporting minority media, particularly Uzbek-language radio, TV stations, and newspapers. In contrast, the Education and Social Inclusion Program is less innovative, as the Program Director said that strategy for 2014 was drawn predominantly from the strategies of years past, and the aim of the program has for some time been to institutionalize educational best practices on a national level.

Nevertheless, the Kyrgyz Foundation seems to be the most eager to cooperate with the other Foundations, particularly those in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Several of the Program Directors I spoke with shared that they would like to exchange best practices with other Foundations, particularly those in Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, and scale up their partnership with EP in relevant areas, including national-level initiatives for transparency in education; cultivating experts on media law in academia, the government, and civil society; and addressing grand-level corruption. Even the two Board Members we met with seemed eager to meet with their counterparts at the other Foundations who comprise the Eurasia Program in order to discuss cross-cutting political, economic, and social themes, and what the Foundations’ respective strategies should be in the face of these events.

The Foundation seems to have strong partnerships with international donors, project implementers, and other organizations. Among them are UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA, the U.S. Embassy, USAID, Internews Kyrgyzstan, National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Hivos, OSCE, and Freedom House.

The general purpose of this visit was to become acquainted with the Foundation, the Executive Director, and its program staff. We visited the capital, Bishkek, where the Foundation is based.

**VISITS**

**BISHKEK, KYRGYZSTAN (June 6, 2014)**

I had all-day meetings with the **program directors and coordinators for the Kyrgyz Foundation’s programs**. The program staff explained the main strategies and issues for their respective programs, as well as their plans for 2014 and 2015. I also met a Board Member as well as the Board Chair.

**Staff:**

* Elina Karakulova, Freedom of Information Program Manager: [ekarakulova@soros.kg](mailto:ekarakulova@soros.kg)
* Nuriana Kartanbaeva, Law Program Director: [nkartanbaeva@soros.kg](mailto:nkartanbaeva@soros.kg)
* Takhmina Ashuralieva, Law Program Coordinator: [tashuralieva@soros.kg](mailto:tashuralieva@soros.kg)
* Christopher Weed, Evaluation and Development Officer: [chris@soros.kg](mailto:chris@soros.kg)
* Valentin Deychman, Education Reform Program Director: [valya@soros.kg](mailto:valya@soros.kg)
* Kumushkan Konurbaeva, Natural Resource Governance Program Director: [kkonurbaeva@soros.kg](mailto:kkonurbaeva@soros.kg)
* Ainura Sulaimanova, National Resources Governance Program Coordinator: [asulaimanova@soros.kg](mailto:asulaimanova@soros.kg)
* Tynymgul Eshieva, PR Coordinator: [teshieva@soros.kg](mailto:teshieva@soros.kg)

**Board Members:**

* + - * Ulan Ryskeldiev, Board Chair: [uryskaldiev@soros.kg](mailto:uryskaldiev@soros.kg), [ulana2000@gmail.com](mailto:ulana2000@gmail.com)
      * Gulnara Baimambetova, Board Member: [wesa@elcat.kg](mailto:wesa@elcat.kg)

**Freedom of Information/Media Program**

* The main priority for the program is media reform and pluralism, focusing on content and public service broadcasting. The media program makes small grants based on the principle of “change through technology.” Akin to their counterparts at the Tajik Foundation, there is an interest and growing emphasis on ICT tools/social media as a way to increase access to information and alternative viewpoints. USAID is a co-donor for this project, and Internews KG is an implementer.
* OSF is the only donor directly working on this issue of the digital switchover in Kyrgyzstan. Once the switchover is complete, 80% of the country could be without access to TV, and there is also the worry that the TV outlets in Kyrgyzstan could be taken over by Russian TV networks. In tandem with their partners, the Foundation presented a draft of analysis before the parliament in April 2014 that included recommendations from civil society as well as a larger working group. The analysis also had key questions from decision-makers. The Foundation worked with the Ministry of Culture on this initiative.
* There are very few professional experts on media law within the KG government, so the Foundation wants to foster exchanges and conversations with Foundations and relevant partners in the Baltics, Georgia, and Moldova. There used to be some cooperation with the Georgia office on fostering media independence from the state structure.
* Elina mentioned that there is collaboration with the Tajik Foundation on legal media challenges, and also with Dariya in Kazakhstan on the digital switchover. Lessons from the current state of media in Kyrgyzstan are of great interest to the Kazakh Foundation, as they are hopeful that the work can be used as a roadmap for them someday.
* The Foundation also tries to limit room for corruption in the media by working closely with partners and leading trainings in cooperation with partners on budget effectiveness. They lead more technical trainings focused on content as well.
* Another important focus for the KG media program is media and diversity, and using media as a means for peacemaking, peacebuilding, and equal representation. SF-KG is working to create a positive, constructive discourse on diversity, especially through action. The issue is that economic and political themes are not represented in media platforms based in southern KG, and there have been very few efforts made to discuss the violence of the recent past openly. There is little multiplicity of points of view. There is also the challenge of pervasive Kyrgyz nationalism, but the immediate needs of minorities in the south are not met. Kyrgyz-language resources are also lacking, as many language books are not modern. In the south, SF-KG works mainly with radio and TV platforms. Major themes include education and youth; lead trainings in these areas.
* The last component of the media program is called OAR (Media Field Oversight), and it focuses on oversight and protection of journalists in courts. SF-KG collaborates with UNESCO on this program. Open Educational Resources, geared towards KG journalists: work within Creative Commons License. This is not just for blogs, but also interactive infographics in Kyrgyz language. The pilot for this aspect of the program will be in October 2014. Akin to the Tajik Foundation, the Kyrgyz Foundation is also helping to develop Kyrgyz-language Wikipedia, which has been very popular. There are no large-scale donors working on these issues yet.
* Challenges with plagiarism: the repository described above is supposed to help minimize plagiarism and raise the standards of journalism.

**Law and Justice Program**

* The Law Program’s two big concepts are: 1) legal and judicial reform (particularly support to the judicial reform process, and examining the codex system, election of judges, and other forms of legal corruption within the judicial branch); 2) prevention of torture, and monitoring the legal reform process and how it addresses anti-torture initiatives, for which the Foundation collaborates closely with human rights lawyers; 3) offering free legal aid to those in need.
* The Law Program started a new concept as part of its legal/judicial reform area: they want to publish recommendations and policy papers that resulted from six expert working groups they convened starting in 2009. The working groups addressed challenges in legal reform and how to incorporate international norms and standards into the reform process. The Foundation wants the WG to share their results with parliament. During the second half of July, the Foundation is planning a large forum for the working groups to present the results of their discussions. If the parliament considers the suggestions presented in the policy papers, then the project will be considered a success.
* The SF-KG also addresses increasing the capacity of civil society to not only engage with parliament on certain issues, but to be able to sustain the discussion and foster allies/partners within the parliament. In Kyrgyzstan, there is a lot of dissonance in terms of what is discussed versus what is enacted in parliament.
* In February 2014, SF-KG created a new working group (the seventh). It is a mini-group that features two donors. HRI colleagues from Budapest helped with this working group (Zaza Namaradze). The group’s topic focuses on free legal aid. Tanya recommended that the KG Foundation get in touch with the Foundations in GE on UK on the question of free legal aid.
* Co-funders include UNDP, OCHR, OSCE, IDO/USAID, ABA-ROLI, and NED. They’ve coordinated with these donors regarding the question of legal reform in Kyrgyzstan, which is a major area for donors right now. SF-KG is honing their collaboration and exchange with other organizations and donors both within OSF and outside of the OSF family, because it is not always clear who is doing what.
* For their torture prevention initiatives, the Foundation works with partners on strategic litigation on torture cases. They collaborate with *Nota Bene* in TJ (which is part of the TJ Foundation’s human rights coalition), and they also work with a Russian group that works mostly in the North Caucasus (name not mentioned). The also carry out cross-regional anti-torture strategic litigation, which is relatively new. They just held their first conference in Almaty in May (Ana and Kristin attended).
* Physicians for Human Rights also works on the Istanbul Protocol within Kyrgyzstan. Ana and Kristin recommended that the Foundation collaborate with PHR. PHR has successfully provided a relevant link between civil society and the Ministry of Health. There is a lot of political will in the Ministry of Health right now, so SF-KG wants to get involved where possible. One big area for them is the medical documentation of torture. They’re also discussing collaborating with lawyers on that front. They also worked with JI on legal remedies for torture, particularly with Masha Lisitsyna. The JI project is ending this year, and the director is worried about it in terms of institutional memory.
* The framework is in place, so the overarching strategy of how it should be implemented and the role of donors in this implementation is what needs to be clearly illustrated.
* On the national level, their partners are: MPs, ombudsmen, civil society, doctors and lawyers. They anticipate that their colleagues in Budapest and NYC will be part of the coalition. Within civil society, partners include Spravedlivost, Kylym Shamy, Youth Human Rights Group, Golos Svobody, and others.

**Natural Resource Governance**

* Formerly, there used to be a Budget Accountability Program, but it has now been merged with the National Resource Governance Program. The main focus of this program is on the concept of governance, with a sub-focus on mining.
* The program’s approach is two-fold: 1) assisting governance institutions to build an attractive environment for the mining industry, which involves working with governing bodies; 2) supporting local initiatives that aim to bring more transparency and accountability into the mining industry, which involves working with local communities.
* The NRG Program runs a small grants competition on analytical projects, especially when it comes to improving strategy.
* They are also developing programs on how to manage information content. They are currently doing it on a small level but hope to integrate some sort of system/set of practices onto a higher level, thus creating a model for larger systems.
* First pilot was for the mining industry. The program works with local administrations on this issue, but there is very high potential for conflict in the regions with regard to mining. As a result, they also work closely with the companies in order to understand the context and keep things open. They’re hoping to also address business processes in the State Agency on Geological and Mineral Resources. There is an expert group working together on this issue to reduce the lack of access to information. One of the main problems is that there is no institutional design: the job descriptions and criteria for hiring at the State Agency do not exist. This is a holdover from Soviet times.
* The NRG Program also works with OSF thematic programs. Previously, NRG worked with RWI. They co-led a training on IPDO via Eurasia Hub. RWI shared some good instruments that were useful for furthering the program.
* NRG exchanges ideas and best practices with their colleagues at the Foundation in TJ. This is especially relevant because TJ’s major corruption issues relate to electricity and water. The IMF also works in KG on issues of natural resources, so there is crossover and communication there. Previously, NRG sent some of its grantees to Georgia and Armenia for information exchange purposes.
* 60% of NRG’s grantees are based in Bishkek. They are looking to work more in the regions, which is where a lot of these issues are happening. NRG is hoping that the competition will help to foster partnerships with actors out in KG’s regions.
* NRG also wants to do more work on extractive industries, but they need to work on growing a critical mass. They currently work with 14 NGOs and the Association on Mining, but they are very dependent upon donors. Also, a lot of them are academic experts, and not practitioners. Another issue is the challenge of dealing with Chinese companies, since they take a very closed approach to investment.

**Education Reform and Social Inclusion**

* The strategy for 2014 is drawn predominantly from last year. The major goals of the program include: 1) inclusive education (*spets*-practicum, referral mechanisms, teaching methods/trainings), and 2) mobilization of state resources to increase access to education in Kyrgyzstan.
* The primary aim of the program: Kyrgyzstan has education best practices on the local level, but the challenge has been institutionalizing them on a national level. Direct collaboration with schools already exists, so the national level is now the focus of the program, i.e. mobilizing the government and community to come up with a model that will apply throughout the country.
* Social cohesion and integration is an enormous problem in KG, and there is no concrete, country-wide strategy as to how to address this, namely how to find a solution for post-conflict school situations in southern KG in particular. Extracurricular activities are also important for children in southern KG. The program places a lot of emphasis on pedagogical tools to prevent conflict. Extracurricular programs are key because they contribute to a sense of community and belonging, also gets children off of the streets, increases their immunity to violent conflict.
* Valentin mentioned that SF-KG is the main facilitator of this work, and the Eurasia Foundation collaborates with them on education programs.
* Once a year, they get together with the TJ and KZ Foundations in order to exchange ideas. They also took a trip to Latvia in order to learn more about best practices in that country. There is not much collaboration with Georgia, Armenia, Ukraine, or Moldova. The Latvian experience was good to see, but the experience was so different from that of KG that staff questioned whether or not it was truly relevant.
* They would like to exchange ideas with other Foundations, and they would also like to scale up their partnership with EP.

**Gulnara Baimambetova**

* Her NGO focuses on empowering women entrepreneurs to develop small/medium enterprises (SME) and ultimately help them to become part of the development of a market economy in Kyrgyzstan. The organization works on issues of agricultural reform, property rights, small businesses, increasing women’s ability to engage in debate and advocacy. She has never received an SF-KG grant. They were a longtime partner of CIPE, and are looking to become partners with Transparency International.
* Gulnara has been a member of the Board of SF-KG for a year. She took part in the online forum, which addressed procedures/manage of SF-KG. She mentioned that SF-KG strives to be a very transparent and open organization, and the website is a demonstration of that. A lot of the staff are studying English. Gulnara is happy that this process is happening.
* She seemed very excited about SF-KG’s media projects, particularly working with national media, implementing trainings/workshops for journalists to improve content and give them stronger technical skills.
* Gulnara emphasized that offering news platforms in both Kyrgyz and Uzbek is important, because outside of Bishkek most people don’t speak Russian. There is a lot of info-propaganda in the south in Kyrgyz and Uzbek.
* After 2010, there was no careful examination/transitional justice initiative shedding light on the violence that occurred. There is little information available on the matter in Russian, and even less in Kyrgyz and Uzbek. A lot of Uzbek children in the south do not have access to the system, and there are lots of problems with the laws in place because they undermine social inclusion. A lot of Uzbeks also don’t have political rights. Human rights issues, especially torture, are still very commonplace and prevalent in the south. Gulnara said that when there is no social/economic access, it fosters political instability.

**Ulan Ryskeldiev**

* Ulan joined the Board of Directors in 2007. At that time, the Foundation was in crisis, and the Board was in the midst of creating a new strategy for the Foundation.
* The Board of Directors also manages the Foundation’s internal and legal operations. Kind of like Chris Stone, they also look at and approve larger grants. The Board also works with network-type programs. Since the Foundation is a grant making organization, the Board has to impose neutrality and impartiality.
* The makeup of the Board changes every two years. They meet infrequently (once a month). All of the members of the Board work at other organizations. Shamil, the ED, acts as the liaison between the program staff and the Board of Directors.
* He thinks that some of the best programs are the media and youth programs; also, he is impressed by the work on palliative care.
* Ulan said that Kyrgyzstan is probably the best country in the Central Asia region to work on political issues, because there is a lot more leeway in comparison with TJ and KZ. Currently, a priority for SF-KG is increasing political pluralism.
* The economic situation on the other hand, in his opinion, is in shambles. He thinks that KG needs Polish shock therapy. It’s a bitter medicine, but it is necessary, and in the long run a better choice than signing the Eurasian Economic Union Agreement.
* He is concerned about copycat foreign agent laws being passed in Kyrgyzstan, so Ulan’s strategy is to keep SF-KG the most open of the donor organizations in Kyrgyzstan by publishing reports, keeping the information on the website up-to-date, and answering all questions when asked. He suggested that other donor organizations should do this. It is important to combat accusations such as “George Soros organized the revolution in Ukraine” with facts.
* He brought up the possibility of convening all of the Chairmen of the Eurasia Foundations to discuss the role of the Foundations in the region, esp. given the political climate (and Ukraine), and fostering a greater information exchange between them.
* He also suggested looking at the principles of the Foundations: 1) do we need a Board of Directors? 2) does a “Global Board of Directors” for Eurasia make more sense instead?

Next steps:

**Board Members**

* Ulan Ryskeldiev brought up an excellent suggestion, namely convening a meeting of the Chairpersons of the Boards of the Eurasia-based Foundations. This would be a good way to increase information exchange between the Foundations beyond the program staff and EDs.

**Transparency and Accountability**

* Connect Gulnara to Alisher if she is looking to lead any activities on transparency (property rights, transparency in local business, etc.).
* Kumushkan, the Program Director for Natural Resource Governance proposed that there should be a global event where the EP, relevant Foundation staff, and those who work on transparency/accountability (RWI, JI, etc.) come together for a retreat or conference to discuss best practices and cross-cutting issues addressing grand corruption in Eurasia. She mentioned that the Foundation would offer to help pay for such an event. International donors tend to fund infrastructure programs, but they don’t address grand-level corruption. This is a big gap for the Foundation.
* Follow up with Kumushkan once the Regional Academy of Good Governance is launched, as she will be able to provide some suggestions for participants in the network (especially from civil society).

**Media**

* If we fund a convening for the Foundations Program Coordinators/Directors on the digital switch (which is likely, given that the EP media team will probably cut the budget line item for it), Elina and her colleague, Lira Samykbaeva, would be good people to bring into it. I will have a Skype chat with them this week to learn more about some of their regional ideas, especially those focused on ICT.
* Elina mentioned that the KG partners had participated in trainings led by the Foundations in Moldova and Ukraine, and that they communicate with those Foundations but haven’t really had a chance to work with them directly. She demonstrated a particular interest in working with the Foundation in Ukraine.

**Human Rights**

* Tanya recommended that the KG Foundation get in touch with the Foundations in Georgia and Ukraine on the question of free legal aid.

**Itinerary of Meetings: Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan**

**Friday, June 6**

**Meetings with Soros Foundation – Kyrgyzstan staff**

* Address: 55A Logvinenko Str., Bishkek, 720040 Kyrgyzstan
* Contact: +996 312 66 3475

**Schedule:**

* 9:00 a.m.: Meeting with Freedom of Information Program: Elina Karagulova, Program Director
  + I had a separate Skype chat with Lira Samykbayeva, joint Program Director (manages ICT component of the program, specifically Open Educational Resources, OAR, and Social Media for Development)
* 10:00 a.m.: Law and Justice Program: Nuriana Kartanbaeva, Program Director
* 11:15 a.m.: Meeting with Board Member: Gulnara Baimambetova
* 12:30 p.m.: Lunch with Christopher Weed, Evaluation and Development Officer
* 2:00 p.m.: Education Reform Program: Valentin Deychman, Program Director
* 3:00 p.m.: National Resources Governance (Transparency and Accountability): Kumushkan Konurbayeva, Program Director
* 4:30 p.m.: Meeting with Chairman of the Board of Directors, Ulan Ryskeldiev