

❖ **"If they're collecting all of this information, they're surely using it, right?" WikiLeaks' impact on post-Soviet Central Asia**

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Abstract

WikiLeaks' massive leak of United States Department of State diplomatic cables was met with a wide range of journalistic and audience reactions in post-Soviet Central Asia. These tended to be informed by dynamics unique to the region as well as media conditions specific to each of the five republics. In general, initial curiosity and goodwill has given way to more toned-down feelings, including scepticism and cynicism. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in particular, it appears to have accomplished one goal – putting corrupt and secretive regimes on alert – while undermining another – helping journalists, civil society activists, and human rights defenders. Since the leak is still on going, it is impossible to make a definitive statement about WikiLeaks' ultimate effect upon the region. Nevertheless, it does appear that so far the organisation has had the paradoxical result of reinforcing Central Asia's marginalisation in global media consciousness yet giving Central Asians, both journalists and audiences, an opportunity to get a real sense of how the world perceives them.

Introduction

No one will ever accuse post-Soviet Central Asia of being a boring place to work in journalistically. A quick glance at the map and a perusal of an ethnographic manual immediately shows that the region lies at several crossroads – geopolitical, linguistic, cultural, and conceptual. The region is a bubbling stew of Slavic, Turkic, Farsic, Mongolian and Sinic ingredients. The five Central Asian states are struggling with the outer forces of global capitalism and integration and the inner forces of their many different Islamic and pre-Islamic traditions, but they do so while standing upon a worn-out carpet of infrastructure, demography, and most of all, governmental and informational behaviours that they inherited from the Soviet Union.

These are societies that were for generations succored on media that was pedagogical, ideological, and often in denial, where too much classical music on the radio meant there was a crisis – Tchaikovsky's "Swan Lake" signified the death of a leader; on August 19, 1991, the death of the Soviet Union. Content may change, as well as values – gone is the shared destiny of fifteen nations merged into *homo sovieticus*, replaced now with the Altyn Asyr (Golden Age) or the glittering future embodied in the city of Astana – but media forms persist, morph, mutate, adapt.

Press freedom statistics provide a usable overview for the neophyte: of the 178 countries ranked on Reporters Sans Frontières' 2010 Press Freedom Index, Turkmenistan lurks at 176th, rummaging between Iran and North Korea, while Kyrgyzstan (159th) continued its long tumble from a record position (110th) in 2007 (as a consequence of its well-known political upheaval and subsequent ethnic fragmentation). Kazakhstan (162nd) dropped as well *despite* its touted chairmanship of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and is now ranked only slightly better than Uzbekistan (163rd). Only Tajikistan ranks highly, relatively speaking (115th) (ironically, for basically the same reasons as Kyrgyzstan's decline) (Reporters Sans Frontières, Press Freedom Index, 2010).

What statistics don't capture, though, is how "press freedom", much less "independent journalism", are philosophical concepts: journalists in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are 'free' to report on anything they like, but that doesn't mean they will professionally prosper, or as the tragedy of Alisher Saipov highlights, survive. As for 'independence', this is often superficially taken to mean mere *variety*. For example, in Kazakhstan, this can take on Rupert Murdoch-like media hoarding, with most of the private media outlets owned or otherwise controlled by family and associates of President Nursultan Nazarbayev (International Foundation for Protection of Freedom of Speech [Adil Soz], "Freedom of Expression Situation in Kazakhstan", 2009: section 1).

In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, meanwhile, both these concepts are simply treated as contradictions in terms. There is some plurality of news sources allowed in the former, but these are widely suspected as being lures for malcontents and so are generally avoided by the general public (and accessed only via proxy server by the brave). In Turkmenistan, critical media

outlets of any type are simply unavailable, as the government has maintained a stunning and disturbing amount of control over the press since the forced closure of the country's only two independent newspapers in 1992. All media is devoted to one mission: glorifying the government. Television shows are devoted to the exploits of the presidents or mythological heroes from the past, and newspapers, despite their different names, routinely run the same content verbatim – a veritable echo chamber.

Perhaps surreally, there's also a ubiquity of satellite-broadcast media seeping into all the countries (even Turkmenistan), particularly from Russia, Iran, Turkey, and China, but it's having a rather Fox News-like effect, splintering consciousness into self-reinforcing narratives and quietly corroding civic discourse. In April 2011, I had dinner with a group of Kazakh bloggers in Astana. They wanted to know how I felt about Kazakhstan's media situation, and I surprised them by instead criticising the American one, comparing their media moguls to those in the West and even Barack Obama (who, in my opinion, had exerted an incredible and disturbing amount of influence over mass media on either side of the Atlantic Ocean during his presidential campaign). Some of them took to my tactic very well, but one of them smirked and said, "Ah, so it's just as Ahmedinijad has been saying all along" – a disconcerting reminder of the appeal of identity politics and underdog syndrome in audiences' information choices.

As for the online world, Internet penetration still has a mountain to climb: according to the website Internet World Statistics, as of 2010, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan boast the deepest penetration, but that is only at 39.8% and 34.3%, respectively, followed by Uzbekistan at 26.8%, Tajikistan at 9.3%, and Turkmenistan at a paltry 1.6%. With the exception of Kazakhstan, which according to the OpenNet Initiative can boast the widest (although still very limited) distribution, Internet access is largely concentrated in major and secondary urban centres (EurasiaNet.org, "Central Asia: Internet Influence Grows Despite Official Pressure" 2007) – which also happen to be infrastructural hubs. There is hope, particularly in terms of mobile internet: according to the Central Asia branch of the "Universal Newswires" news service, as of 2010, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were nearing full mobile penetration, while Business Monitor International reported this past Spring (northern hemisphere), rather sunnily, "mobile broadband services ... will make a strong contribution to the growth of internet services in Central Asia" (oddly, Kyrgyzstan was the last to achieve 3G status, coming after, of all places, Turkmenistan). Yet, given the politicisation of telecommunications in the region, in which, for example, an entire Russian mobile phone service provider can have its operations suddenly and inexplicably suspended in Turkmenistan (not to mention frequent censorship and snooping by intelligence services across the entire region), the internet could very well end up less Tenzing and Hillary and more like Sisyphus. Nevertheless, citizen journalism is increasingly becoming a noteworthy force within the region, whether challenging the official view out of Ashgabat or helping overthrow it altogether in Bishkek.

It is this complex and often unhappy tapestry that WikiLeaks has been attempting to unravel with its on-going United States diplomatic cables leak – but with, in my view, very mixed results. From my dual position as a stringer-blogger for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), one of Central Asia's largest and well-resourced independent news and analysis organisation, and managing editor of the English site of *NewEurasia*, the region's first and largest citizen journalism network, I've had a unique vantage point from which to assess the impact.

Here's what I see so far: despite some intriguing remarks about the former Soviet Union circulated internally within the organisation, Julian Assange and company have not been handling Central Asia very well, at least not yet. In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as far as I and other journalists can see, the cables have had almost zero effect on either audiences or the media; in Tajikistan, it's re-ignited old anger toward the Russians and called into question the purported mission of the whistleblowing entity; and in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, it appears to have possibly had one of Assange's desired effects – frightening the hell out of the secretive ruling elite – but possibly at a subtle, hard-to-measure cost to civil society activists and human rights defenders who must live the hard day-to-day realities under renewed governmental fears of an American digital panopticon. At stake here is whether WikiLeaks has actually contributed to the marginalisation of the region, both internally and globally, or whether it has presented a unique opportunity to counter that process; this essay is an attempt, however brief, to try ascertaining which.

I should note that the leak is far from over: as of this writing (July 22, 2011), the WikiLeaks site says it has revealed 19,585 of 251,287 cables, or 7.8% of its total claimed cache (WikiLeaks, Cablegate website, accessed July 22, 2011). (Ed note)

That means it's impossible to make a firm assessment of WikiLeaks' *ultimate* impact upon the region; instead, I can offer what it seems to have brought about so far. Toward that end, I've collected reactions, some previously published and many newly given to me for the purpose of this essay (at my solicitation), from colleagues working in the region. They are Westerners and Central Asians working professionally in the 'old' and 'new' media sectors, that is, traditional journalists and bloggers, and mostly from three organisations: RFE/RL, *NewEurasia*, and Transitions Online (TOL), a large journalism training operation working in transitional countries that is a close partner with the first two.

WikiLeaks' "primary interest"

Before proceeding, a word needs to be said about how WikiLeaks once related to the region, or rather, how it appears to have envisioned a potential relationship. I'm now reaching back a few years ago, to 2007 and 2008, wherein we find some interesting if not wholly conclusive remarks. To begin with, according to AsiaMedia, the WikiLeaks website in 2007 had specifically professed interest in post-Communist/transitional societies, alongside other regions: "Our primary interests are oppressive regimes in Asia, the former Soviet bloc, sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, but we also expect to be of assistance to those in the West who wish to reveal unethical behaviour in their own governments and corporations." Likewise, in a purported June 9, 2007, email to WikiLeaks volunteers that has since been published on Cryptome (another, much older website specialising in revealing sensitive and secret information), an anonymous author speaking for the operation explained its strategy in the West as ultimately serving the purpose of its strategy in regions precisely like Central Asia: "Apart from the beneficial effect on Western democracies, we believe this will provide a strong, consistent base where we can operate

efficiently and freely, permitting us to concentrate our efforts on the most repressive regimes” (WikiLeaks [anonymous], “Why are the WikiLeaks founders anonymous?”, June 9, 2007). And more than a year later, a purported anonymous editorial to WikiLeaks volunteers, also published on Cryptome, evinces some understanding of the peaks and pitfalls of journalism in the relatively more open post-Communist/transitional nations, like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where too many journalists have been intimidated, unjustly tried and jailed, and even murdered, and often as much for unclear *reasons* as under unclear circumstances:

In transitional states, journalistic freedom and journalistic persecution appear to stem from the same root cause: the inability of power groups to defend themselves from journalists by using means more sophisticated than arrest or murder. Because [arrest or murder] comes at some cost to the persecutor, [such tactics] are rarely employed. In other words, all but a few ‘off limit’ subjects can be reported freely and these limits are not yet well understood, which is why some journalists are murdered (WikiLeaks [anonymous], “Fear in the Western Fourth Estate”, November 24, 2008).

As far as I know, these are the only pieces of information to have emerged so far regarding WikiLeaks’ views on/relationship to post-Communist/transitional or post-Soviet countries. Obviously, they’re not much, but they do evidence the organisation’s originally global worldview and agenda. Assange and company’s eventual shift in focus in 2010 to the United States was probably inevitable considering the sheer scale of electronic data pouring out from that society (although from Assange’s perspective, undressing the United States is not necessarily inconsistent with a global agenda, as I’ve argued elsewhere).

Initial reactions to WikiLeaks

When WikiLeaks can be said to have truly burst onto international consciousness with its release of United States digital military logs from Afghanistan, Central Asian journalists had a range of reactions, from a kind of *pre-blasé blasé* to unabashed fascination. The nationals who impressed me as particularly smitten were the Tajikistanis. Despite the meagre Internet penetration and online experience of their nation – or perhaps because of it – they were fascinated by how something like WikiLeaks could even be possible.

When the story first broke and shortly after I managed the impossible feat of getting Assange on the phone for an interview, Salimjon Aiubov, a former newspaper editor from Tajikistan who has worked many years for RFE/RL’s Tajik Service, interviewed me to discuss the details of how a digital dead letter drop box like WikiLeaks works. The discussion, however, was specifically contextualised for Tajikistan, with an emphasis on possible methods by which would-be whistleblowers could physically smuggle material to Assange and company without anyone, including WikiLeaks itself, knowing who they were. It was a none-too-subtle hint to his listeners that there was now a new and more secure way that they could get important information to journalists (and I must confess, I was happy to serve as the hint giver).

Meanwhile, *NewEurasia* and TOL asked our teams to give us a sense of how they hoped WikiLeaks could help the region. What we received was essentially a Ded Moroz list of dream scoops, ranging from the shady business dealings behind a deeply unpopular toll road outside of Dushanbe, Tajikistan, to the truth behind the alleged coup attempt against Turkmenistan’s first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, by his former foreign minister Boris Shikhmuradov. Noteworthy was the intensity with which the Turkmenistanis and Uzbekistanis responded to WikiLeaks, especially when compared against the coolness of the Kyrgyzstanis. For example, *NewEurasia*’s country coordinator for Kyrgyzstan, Tolkun Umaraliev, was more concerned about whether patchy Internet access would end up undermining anything WikiLeaks could uncover about his nation, rather than what it could actually end up revealing. Contrast this with Abulfazal and Humane, two of our bloggers in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, respectively, who were concerned that WikiLeaks could be used to reinforce existing ideological messages of isolationism. “They’re going to be accused of being Russian or CIA stooges and of trying to undermine our ‘paradise’ here,” predicted Abulfazal. “Trust is something we don’t have in Turkmenistan,” said Humane. “There’s no trust in one another, so how can there be any trust in this mysterious website? They need to acquire good contacts here, in “big places”, and earn a good reputation” (Schwartz, “Punching Holes in Airtight Central Asian Elites”, *Transitions Online*, July 30, 2010). WikiLeaks symbolised the promise of the unknown finally becoming known, to which the Uzbekistanis reacted with mingled hope and terror, as Abulfazal explained,

... in principle [WikiLeaks] is exactly what Uzbekistan needs, and if they can maintain their impartiality and really expose the corruption here, the public will see them for what they truly are. Imagine what would happen if someone in the Kyrgyz government actually has proof right now of who started the violence in Osh and managed to sneak it to WikiLeaks? I’m afraid of what the reaction in the streets would be (Ibid.).

To which Turkmenistanis reacted with yearning anguish. *NewEurasia*’s main blogger for Turkmenistan, Annasoltan, referring to the arguments between Assange and the United States Department of Defence over the ethics of the Afghanistan leak, cried out:

The people of Turkmenistan are hungry even for simple information that’s not the least bit sensitive to the government. How about our nation’s real history, rather than the epics and extravagant cults of personality that have been taught to us for over a generation? Even if all the newspapers and school textbooks would be put together, you would still not find enough facts to write even a page. [...] The West is already awash in information; Turkmenistan is dying of data thirst. Right now it seems WikiLeaks is engaged in some kind of tit-for-tat with the United States. I just hope they don’t get distracted from their real mission, because we need their help (Annasoltan, “Turkmenistan Needs WikiLeaks”, *NewEurasia*, August 25, 2010).

The above taxonomy of journalistic desires, hopes, and fears, although very brief, suffices to demonstrate that the very first reactions depended greatly upon each country’s media conditions and experiences.

As Autumn came and the Iraq War military digital logs were leaked, in my experience, Central Asian journalists were impressed. Shortly after, a "Christian Science Monitor" report emerged which alleged that WikiLeaks was sitting upon a massive pile of *kompromat* (compromising materials) that included the Central Asian states. Appetites had already been wetted by an earlier report on EurasiaNet.org concerning some not-especially-revelatory but nonetheless embarrassing remarks about the Central Asians in the Afghanistan military logs; everyone was hankering for something they could sink their teeth into. Since I head up a citizen journalism network, I would be remiss if I did not somehow mention those *other* independent journalists in the region – our readers, each of whom is already an active media participant and in some sense a reporter *in potentia*.

The independent regional news site Ferghana.ru solicited and published online readers' anticipations, some of which are worth translating and re-publishing here (Ferghana Information Agency, "Wikileaks грозит раскрыть секретные документы о коррупции в правительствах стран постсоветской Средней Азии", November 25, 2010; original translations into English by Abulfzal, "Is WikiLeaks a Tool of Influence on Central Asian Governments?", NewEurasia, November 26, 2010):

666, 25.11.2010: The *kompromat* against Central Asian governments might be a falsification. Americans reside on their island and [all they] want is to see Eurasia on fire of the Third World War. Central Asia is a good place for revolutions and wars [on its territory].

Aziz, 25.11.2010: WikiLeaks leaks reminds me of a controlled and organised process by some Western circles. [...] They [leaked] that civil losses [in Iraq] were 160 000 when realised that the number was way more huge than that and that no one believes their fairy tales about "Baghdad being quiet", that's how they decided to redirect people's attention from [what they did]. Political technologists, website's goals are totally different.

Djumshud Tashkentskiy, 25.11.2010: So what will change? In Central Asian countries WikiLeaks will [soon] be banned... [T]o figure out the level of corruption it's enough to live in Tashkent for [just] one month. Moreover, for most people corruption in the higher echelons of power isn't as important as on the local level, which is becoming more and more horrible: it's impossible to solve anything without a bribe. [...] I think that for the most [of Central Asians] this topic is more actual [than] how much Americans paid Karimov to get their base in Karshi.

Karim, 25.11.2010: The only country in Central Asia that isn't afraid of WikiLeaks is Kyrgyzstan. Everybody already knows everything; nobody is afraid to speak out the truth. [...] Karimov's children are probably afraid.

Nurlan, 26.11.2010: It's a tool of influence on the Central Asian politicians.

These are the voices of people who believe an earthquake is imminent but don't know how to prepare for it. There are some distinctively Central Asian tropes here: frustration with their nations' marginality or exotification in global media consciousness (Djumshud), anti-imperialism-tinged conspiracy theorising (666 and Aziz), and blunt cynicism (Nurlan). An anthropologist would probably be intrigued by Karim, as his voice sounds like truly that of an independent nation with its own identity and stance (in this case, the supposed transparency of the region's only official liberal democracy), and not a *post-* country in search of itself with bittersweet feelings about its past and present. These tropes, alongside the media conditions I described above, backgrounded (and continue to background) the journalistic reaction that emerged after the tremors hit on November 28, when the leak began, and the topic to which I now turn.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Considering that the media spheres of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are closely linked – KyrgyzTelecom buys international traffic from KazakhTelecom, and according to the OpenNet Initiative, on a number of occasions, the former has been affected by the latter's filtering practices (the strange WordPress ban from June 11 – July 18, 2011, is a recent example) – it's suitable to deal with them together. In Kyrgyzstan, response has been muted. When the leak first began, Firdevs Robinson, a former editor with the BBC's World Service's Central Asia and Caucasus Service, says she was surprised by the under-reaction of the Kyrgyzstani media. "There was greater interest [about the cables] in the West," she says (Firdevs Robinson, personal communication [email], July 15, 2011). She gives the example of 08BISHKEK1095, a cable detailing the United Kingdom's Prince Andrew's gruff personality and comments about official corruption in Kyrgyzstan. While the cable "raised eyebrows in the UK" (Ibid.), in Kyrgyzstan, general audiences had no idea who Prince Andrew was, while those in the business sector, as the cable itself indicates, were already in the know. It was my own impression that journalists were somewhat more interested in what WikiLeaks revealed about the United States military's Manas Transit Center. This facility is a major source of revenue for Kyrgyzstan's government, but it is also a geopolitical chess-piece between the Americans and Russians.

The Kyrgyzstanis struck me as generally surprised to discover that the Chinese also seemed to be playing the game, as revealed in 09BISHKEK135, a cable detailing Chinese Ambassador Zhang Yannian's response to claims that China offered to pay Kyrgyzstan \$3 billion financial in return for closing the facility. Ultimately, though, this revelation was hardly a blip on the radar for Chinese-Kyrgyzstani relations; of much greater concern was (and remains) whether the customs union between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan would cripple Kyrgyzstan's transit industry and thus detriment its special status with China as a key gateway for Chinese goods entering the former Soviet Union. As for the general impact, "From my perch, I think it's been like in most other places, where there are lots of "oh THAT'S what they think about us"-type comments," says Joshua Foust, an American blogger with Registan.net and a fellow with the American Security Project (Joshua Foust, personal communication [email], 15 July, 2011).

This general *blasé* could also be felt in Kazakhstan, says Robin Forestier-Walker, al-Jazeera's Central Asia correspondent. The

leak coincided with the country's much-vaunted OSCE summit in Astana. Walker remarks,

In the absence of anything meaningful to talk about (Kazakh organisers love to showcase their capital and their regional "success story", but that's about as meaningful as it gets), the WikiLeaks cables provided a welcome canvas with which to pin the pointless summit to. It also proved a damage-limitation exercise for Secretary Clinton, who was the headliner at the security body meeting (Robin Forestier-Walker, personal communication [email], July 19, 2011).

Alas, the canvas remained basically blank, as coverage was minimal. I should note that at least part of this can be attributed to Kazakhstani media law: in a move that I understand to have been ostensibly intended to emulate a Turkish regulation restricting negative criticism of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Kazakhstan has banned negative criticism by the press (and particularly by online sources like blogs) of the president and his family. Unsurprisingly, Kazakhstan's for-profit and government-sanctioned media sectors appear to have defanged or completely ignored 08ASTANA760, whose sarcastic title, "Lifestyles of the Kazakhstani Leadership", was all the warning they needed.

Nevertheless, Walker feels that insofar WikiLeaks "[made] public a lot of what we already guessed but couldn't say" (Robin Forestier-Walker, personal communication [email], July 23, 2011), the leak may not have been a waste of time. Asqat Yerkinbay, NewEurasia's country coordinator for Kazakhstan, strikes a resonant tone: he doubts that WikiLeaks will have made any impact on journalistic practice in the country because of media's dependency upon the government, but at the same time, "reading WikiLeaks, I realised how our policy-makers are very intelligent and worried about Kazakhstan's image" (Asqat Yerkinbay, personal communication [sms], July 20, 2011). There also persists some modicum of interest about WikiLeaks as an entity among journalists. For what it's worth, I was interviewed this past April by the large Kazakh-language daily *Aikyn* regarding my views on WikiLeaks (note: the interview was published in May). The reporter was especially curious about the character of Assange (it was my impression that I was one of the few journalists she had met who had actually communicated with him – more about this below), and the ethics of the cables leak – and leaking in general – with a view to her nation's current media situation (note: *Aikyn* is theoretically an independent newspaper but was founded by the ruling party, Nur-Otan). As for the future of WikiLeaks in Kazakhstan, Walker says, "There has been talk of WikiLeaks collaborating with Kazakh-exiled oligarch-funded publications – in order to give Central Asia-related material a ready outlet, but so far as I know that has not yet materialised" (Walker, communication, July 19, 2011).

Tajikistan

The experience of WikiLeaks in Tajikistan highlights an entirely different aspect of the whistleblower organisation's impact on Central Asia. In general, the arrival of the leak in the region was immediately complicated by a key strategic misstep on the part of WikiLeaks, namely, to my knowledge it appears that not a single *Central Asian* journalist or agency was involved in the original preparation and publication of the Central Asia-related materials. Rather, Assange and company appear to have made the blunder of working entirely with agencies in the Russian Federation, specifically *Russian Reporter* (Rusrep.ru), a young weekly journal, and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, a daily tabloid which has the distinction of being Russia's top-selling newspaper but also the dirty past of serving as the official organ of the Soviet Central Committee (the irony of this will probably not be lost upon my readers, and I expect Assange himself got a good laugh out of it). In Tajikistan, this had the effect of stoking old anger dating from the Soviet era. Aioubov explains the widespread rage and loathing among his colleagues:

WikiLeaks made a big mistake giving the right to some Russian journalists to be the first to know the cables, to read them and write stories about them for the Russian media. Probably, Mr. Assange did not know any Tajik, Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen journalists, but aren't we in the age of the internet? Why did he decide to include a Russian journalist in his extended team, giving him the right to see cables about Central Asia? Does he still consider our region as a part of the Russian neo-empire? [This act immediately] created an atmosphere of distrust around WikiLeaks in Central Asia (Salimjon Aioubov, personal communication [email], July 13, 2011).

However, at stake was far more than emotions, for WikiLeaks appears to have also given Russian journalists access to unpublished cables well in advance of their publication. For example, on December 1, 2010, Centrasia.ru cited a cable in which the United States warned Tajikistani President Emomali Rahmon in 2005 that the head of the Antinarcotics Agency and of the National Olympic Committee, General Ghaffor Mirzoev, was a threat, whereupon Rahmon fired him (Eden Kron, "Wikileaks: Таджикиский посол в США Хамрохон Зарипов заменит Эмомали Рахмонова на посту Президента страны", Centrasia.ru, December 1, 2010); the cable (07DUSHANBE1420) was not published until two weeks later. This simultaneously gave the Russian press more than enough time to frame and interpret the information as they saw fit – essentially, a narrative of creeping American influence in Russia's corrupt and incompetent backyard – and dis-enfranchised the press establishment of an entire country. If I may be so bold, it is unhappily ironic that an organisation that presented an opportunity to work around the increasing rigidities and distortions of traditional access journalism and re-empower journalists appears to have (probably unwittingly) created/fallen into a new access-related trap (cf. Nicholas Jones, "Plea to WikiLeaks: access for all journalists; end exclusive deals", April 18, 2011; take note of WikiLeaks spokesperson Kristinn Hrafnsson's remark, as reported by Jones, "There will always be material of specific interest to specific regions of the world where we want to have the collaboration and assistance of the journalists who know the area"). Ed Note 2

On August 31, 2011, WikiLeaks unleashed the entirety of its digital cables cache – 251,287 files in total – in unredacted form, apparently in response to a security breach on the part of their media partners in *The Guardian* newspaper. As indicated in the text of my essay, at the time I wrote it, WikiLeaks had only released 19,585 cables in redacted form. Strangely, as I write this note (6 September, 2011), the Central Asian journalism community has so far met the new dump with near total silence: there are barely any mentions of it on Central Asian news portals or services, including the region's largest and most dedicated news

agency, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), and *none* of my colleagues have brought it up without my prompting. The dump is probably too huge, overloading the most intrepid journalists and excusing the more avoidant ones.

It has nevertheless cast light upon one mystery, mentioned in my essay: an alleged cable describing a coup offer by Tajikistan's Foreign Minister, Hamrokhon Zaripov, against his nation's President, Emomali Rahmon. I have been unable to find this cable in the unredacted cache. One possible explanation is that it exists, but at a security level higher than those cables in the possession of WikiLeaks, and somehow its contents slithered to the Centrasia.ru analyst who reported it. Yet, this scenario is not without riddles of the *who* and *why* variety. Occam's Razor suggests that perhaps the analyst misinterpreted the contents of two cables to which he had been given special access: 09DUSHANBE957, in which opposition leader Hoji Akbar Turajonzoda mulls the ineffectiveness of a *theoretical* coup, and 06DUSHANBE322, in which the State Department official describes Zaripov as being seen as "a little too ambitious to be a fully trusted and vetted 'ultimate insider'" by the Rahmon regime. Whatever the truth, such misinformation, whether intentional or unintentional, can be destructive, and it now appears to be one of the chief pitfalls of WikiLeaks' approach to Central Asia.

Yet, despite this widespread sense of disappointment, even betrayal, it appears that Tajikistan's journalists retain some begrudging interest in WikiLeaks. It has been the experience of both myself and Aiubov that they routinely check the website, almost everyday (including Aiubov himself, who is one of the more devoted archivers of all-things-Assangian that I know). At the risk of sounding Orientalist, the Tajikistanis are legendary in the region for their hard-headedness and stubbornness – I have actually been head-butted by a Tajik ex-pilot as an apparently traditional form of enthusiastic salutation – and without fail when you ask them why they still bother with WikiLeaks, they'll answer that they're looking for this mysterious Zapirov cable. Meanwhile, it appears that WikiLeaks did eventually make some effort to redress their mistake. In May 2011, the a Tajikistani wing of "Asia-Plus" news service claimed to have cut a deal with WikiLeaks to publish Tajikistan-relate cables exclusively in Tajik. According to Aiubov, since then, the content of some other as-yet unpublished cables has appeared in Tajik-language press (Aiubov, communication, July 13, 2011).

Moreover, there are spikes at the bottom of the trap. The same Centrasia.ru report also cited a cable detailing an alleged 2006 conversation between an unnamed senior official from the United States' Department of State and Tajikistan's then-ambassador to the United States, Hamrokhon Zaripov (later re-named to Zarifi) in which the latter apparently promised to overthrow (the report alleges that the cable uses the word 'замена', 'replacement') Rahmon and place himself in power so as to re-orient the country more strongly toward the West. Needless to say, this was an explosive revelation,

but unfortunately for Tajikistan's journalists, as of this writing, the cable has yet to materialise. According to Aiubov, the consequences of this on-going lacuna for the reputation of digital whistleblowing in general and WikiLeaks in particular has been massively negative. "The track is gone," he says. "There are no differences between WikiLeaks and 'OBS News Agency' [i.e., 'odna baba skazala...', 'a woman in the street said...'] in Tajikistan" (Salimjon Aiubov, personal communication [email], July 22, 2011).

Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan

Similar to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, being as they are, in a sense, in one sphere in terms of political orientation, can also be treated together. At first glance, the two countries would appear to be impervious to any revelations from WikiLeaks, or for that matter, any other whistleblower, no matter how light or devastating. This is due in no small part to their intense media censorship. However, it is Robinson's impression that their leaders just did not care: "There was little sign that authorities got overly concerned or embarrassed" (Robinson, communication, July 15, 2011), certainly not when compared to the Arab uprisings that were, as it turned out, right around the corner, and which appears to have prompted a light crackdown from the authorities. Robinson believes that Uzbekistan in particular had already weathered worse during the Craig Murray controversy of 2005 (Ibid.).

A deeper look, however, reveals something much more interesting and complex. Several of my colleagues describe two regimes that were made (and remain) hyperactively self-conscious. "Uzbekistan's leadership once again realised that everything it does is under the close monitoring of the diplomatic community, international organisations, and even its own citizens," says Abulfazal (Abulfazal, personal communication [email], July 14, 2011). With regards to Turkmenistan, Adalat Seeker, who manages a secret electronic newsletter and claims that among his in-country subscribers there are government officials (Christopher Schwartz, "'Blogs can be blocked in two clicks': return to samizdat in Turkmenistan", July 18, 2011), says that the leak has been internally perceived as an unmitigated public relations disaster for his nation. He compares this against the interests of everyday Turkmenistanis, which in his view have varied between the soap opera-like details of the president to the inner workings of the government (Adalat Seeker, personal communication [email], July 14, 2011). Annasoltan adds that the 'Turkmenet' (the Turkmen-language community of social websites) was especially buzzing:

There was quite a great amount of interest in these cables on Turkmenet social sites. For most people around the world, the WikiLeaks cables made interesting reading literature, but for the Turkmenis who live isolated and in a perpetual information blackout, to learn the real face of their government and especially the president was incredible. They really wanted to know the real power and influence of three individuals: the presidential aides Viktor Khranov and Vladimir Umnov, and Alexander Zhadan, deputy head of the presidential administration. These men are Russians, not Turkmen, but they are the power behind the throne and do not show themselves in public.

Turkmenizens were really interested in any indications of how close Berdimuhammedov may really be to Russia, whether there are secret agreements with China, any idea of the scope of corruption in Turkmenistan, and the nature of the United States' goals in Turkmenistan. For some Turkmenetizens, WikiLeaks has once more proven that Turkmenistan is not even slightly following its purported "policy of neutrality" proclaimed" (Annasoltan, personal communication [email], July 14, 2011).

As far as I know, there has been as yet no reaction from Turkmenistan's government, not even through back-channels. There have been, however, behaviours that could be interpreted as evidence of real anxiety. Consider the mysterious suspension of MTS operations mentioned above. It coincided with the release of 09ASHGABAT1288, a cable detailing the arrest of former Deputy Chairman for Oil and Gas, Tachberdi Tagiyev, and part of Turkmenistan's complicated dealings with the Russian natural gas company Gazprom, a key player in the country's economy. It should be noted that often Turkmenistani web users can access censored websites through mobile Internet services, and according to "Cellular-News", at its height MTS may have had as many as 2.4 million users – out of a population of a little over five million.

The biggest impact, however, appears to have been in the Uzbekistani and Turkmenistani governments' perceptions of the foreigners within their countries, especially diplomats, and those locals who interact with them. There has been some debate within the Western press as to whether the US violated diplomatic protocol by using its embassies and diplomatic representatives as intelligence-gatherers (e.g., *Global News Journal*, "WikiLeaks Scandal: Is the United Nations a Den of Spies?", November 19, 2010). What may be more important, though, is that as a result of the leak, certain governments could now be inclined to *perceive* the US as doing so, and that is a very dangerous development for everyone – from the civil society activists and human rights defenders who work on a regular basis with American diplomatic services, to the journalists who try to cover their struggles (and in Central Asia, very often the two groups are the same people).

Unfortunately, according to my colleagues, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have reacted precisely in this paranoid fashion. In the case of the former, Abulfazal believes WikiLeaks has caused a clash between diplomacy and national interest: "Had Karimov reacted radically and announced all American diplomats in Uzbekistan *personas non gratas*, he would have faced severe isolation from the international community and a threat to international recognition of his regime's 'legitimacy'" (Abulfazal, communication, July 14, 2011). Meanwhile, in Turkmenistan, Adalat Seeker concurs: "From the government's perspective, WikiLeaks files reinforced the already strong feeling and view that the Americans are bad, that they are all spies" (Adalat Seeker, communication, July 14, 2011). The Turkmenistani government has already long-exhibited antagonism toward the American University of Central Asia, located in the capital of Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek. Now, according to an independent Turkmenistani journalist who wishes to remain anonymous, the leak might have made the state security agencies "more hesitant" toward foreign offices in the country. Worst of all, he says it might have been interpreted as a terrifying warning by those who would otherwise turn to the Americans for help in opening up their society:

Local activists now might be afraid of sharing ideas and information with diplomats to avoid similar leakage, because they have now a risk of having their identities published (Anonymous, personal communication [email], July 17, 2011).

What may be at work here are several things. On the one hand, the authorities of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have become habituated, partially by Soviet-era indoctrination and experiences and partially by their own actions and the negative consequences therefrom, into a cynical and deep distrust of the outside world. On the other hand, they view the Americans in particular as a pervasive and intrusive octopus, intent upon breaking into their inner worlds. Unfortunately, WikiLeaks may have unwittingly 'confirmed' this viewpoint. In the words of Asher Kohn, another American blogger with Registan.net and a law student in the Transnational Law Program at Washington University-Saint Louis,

The United States is already seen as a sort of *deus ex machina*, a latent superpower who can swoop in at a moment's notice and Change the Face of History [sic]. WikiLeaks adds to the theorizing of living in an American panopticon: 'If they're collecting all of this information', one could reason, 'they're surely using it, right?' (Asher Kohn, personal communication [email], July 14, 2011).

Reinforcing marginalisation?

How to *ultimately* assess the leak's impact upon Central Asia? Certainly, the above discussions show that it has been far from positive. Sarah Kendzior, a Washington University-Saint Louis doctoral student who studies the effects of the internet upon Central Asian politics, believes that the ways in which external media has treated the Central Asia cables reveals more about their respective societies than Central Asia itself.

Specifically regarding Western media, she gives the example of Uzbekistan, whose long-standing contempt for human rights is new only to Western consciousness, and it becomes 'news' only because WikiLeaks is the source (Sarah Kendzior, personal communication [email], July 21, 2011). Referring to the recent uproar about music performer Sting's intended performance at the Nazarbayev's birthday celebration, she strikes an Edward Said-like tone: "The real question here may be why Central Asia's human rights violations only draw world attention when they are relayed via the exploits of pompous Western blonds (Sting, Assange)" (Ibid.). Central Asia thus becomes a media-interfaced mirror for the world.

However, the story doesn't stop there: in my view, Orientalism is only one twisting side of a Möbius strip-like paradox of marginalisation that is unique to the Central Asian states. There is much bemoaning among journalists and officials in the region that the world's news agencies sideline or exoticise Central Asia, and that is certainly true, but by manipulating debate and squashing real press freedom, Central Asia's authorities and state-sanctioned news agencies are actually complicit in this distortion, for they do little to really correct the narratives being imposed upon them. Additionally, we must not forget that Central Asia itself tells stories about the outside world – state-enforced Occidentalism, if you will. Of course there are many Central Asians who fully participate in globalisation, interacting with Russia and the West in particular via the Internet and travel, but as indicated above, these tend to be the urban middle-class and elites; what about the general audience?

H.B. Paksoy, an Oxford-trained historian of Central Asia who also periodically blogs for NewEurasia, is instinctively cynical. "The reading public was already sceptical [at the time of the leak], believing that it would be an 'intelligence operation' designed for the benefit of the leaker or the leaking nation," he says. "Not much penetrated the minds of the populations in

general, as they are already weary of such headlines” (H.B. Paksoy, personal communication [email], July 13, 2011). Barbara Frye, TOL’s managing editor, however, has an entirely different view – one I’m inclined to agree with. For her, WikiLeaks may have offered the first true correction of narratives at a somewhat mass level, regardless of any scepticism or cynicism:

[I think] that WikiLeaks forced some to rethink black and white notions of Great Power games. It seems to me that Central Asia often feels like a pawn, or maybe a pretty girl whose virtue is under threat from the rapacious Russia, the United States and China. They all want what Central Asia’s got, at the lowest possible price, but what does that mean for the ordinary person in Dushanbe or Astrakhan? Who is looking out for their interests, and should they believe what their governments tell them about these foreign powers?

WikiLeaks was the first chance, probably since independence, for people to get an unfiltered answer to those questions. People could eavesdrop on diplomatic conversations that touched on human rights and energy resources. They could see who really cared about what. The wonderful exchange between the Chinese and American ambassadors in Kyrgyzstan about the Manas air base (just give them the money and shut up about the conditions and you can stay at Manas forever) is a great example of those countries’ approaches. They are not all the same” (Barbara Frye, personal communication [email], July 15, 2011).

Thus, beyond panopticons and mirrors, perhaps the ultimate impact of WikiLeaks shall lie in this eavesdropping-like effect and the deeper encounter it has afforded many Central Asians. If so, time will tell whether this encounter becomes a confrontation or even a reconfiguration, especially as the leak continues to drip.

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Editorial Note

1 The author identifies the further leaking of cables by WikiLeaks on p. 12 of this essay.

2 See Kristinn Hrafnsson's presentation to the Sydney Ideas Forum: How WikiLeaks will transform Mainstream Media June 17, 2011 this issue.

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