

The Central Eurasian Scholars and Media Initiative: Building Bridges between Scholars and Journalists

by Till Mostowlansky

The media play a key role in shaping perceptions of Central Asia. When important events such as the April 2010 revolution in Kyrgyzstan occur, the media has a tendency to misrepresent them. In this article Till Mostowlansky writes about the Central Eurasian Scholars and Media Initiative, a project set up to help increase dialogue between academics and the media.

The image of Central Eurasia in the mainstream media produced outside the region is often either that of an obscure and dangerous place, or reflects romanticising stereotypes of empty landscapes and nomads. Yet generally, the region only tends to be represented in the “Western” media in extreme situations. Such a situation occurred when in June 2010 violent conflict broke out in Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan and divided a once cosmopolitan city into a cluster of barricaded districts. The effects of the Osh riots quickly found their ways into academic circles and in October 2010 a group of scholars met at the Central Eurasian Studies (CESS) conference in Michigan in order to discuss the meaning of media reporting on the violence in Osh.

As evident from the minutes of this meeting, the organisers of the event were motivated “by the lack of access to media and gaps in reporting on the violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 2010” and by the sense that scholars could have done more to contribute to a balanced coverage of the conflict. Having drawn the conclusion that superficial and one-sided reporting was likely to fuel conflict and that it had led to inappropriate policy decisions, the group of scholars decided to launch an initiative whose purpose was “to bring together scholars, journalists and other representatives of the media who work on Central Eurasia (including the Caucasus).” While the meeting in Michigan itself was primarily attended by scholars and journalists working in English out of European and American institutions, an initiative committed to attracting participants working from Central Eurasian bases and in Russian and other regional languages was launched.

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However, it took another year before a second event was organised in the framework of the European Society for Central Asian Studies (ESCAS) conference in Cambridge (UK) in September 2011. Now named the Central Eurasian Scholars and Media Initiative (CESMI), the initiative became better known among scholars and journalists of Central Eurasia due to a roundtable which involved well-known journalists such as Hamid Ismailov (BBC Central Asia) and Bruce Pannier (Radio Free Europe / Liberty) and included subsequent forms of collaboration. As a result of the roundtable, CESMI soon began with the construction of a website and the publication of the joint blog format “[My Take On...](#)” together with BBC Kyrgyz and Uzbek. In “My Take On...” scholars submit short pieces on their current research in a style that is accessible to a wider audience. The articles are simultaneously published in English, Kyrgyz and Uzbek.

Not long after the roundtable in Cambridge a newly formed group of scholars began to work on the institutionalisation of CESMI and in April 2012 the initiative became a society under the Swiss code of civil law. CESMI now had a clearly defined mission and goals which were laid down in the statutes of the society. As stated there, CESMI’s primary purpose is to “encourage competent communication and reporting on Central Eurasia by strengthening the ties between media professionals and academics reporting in and about Central Eurasia.” At the same time, accurate information and sensible reporting are considered “essential for good policy-making and a peaceful future in Central Eurasia”. These goals are related to a number of questions that reflect more general issues on the access to information and flows of knowledge in a broader Central Eurasian context.



CESMI roundtable 'Scholarship for a broader public' at the European Society of Central Asian Studies conference in Astana, 5th August 2013. From left to right are: John Schoeberlein (Nazarbayev University), Judith Beyer (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology), Dinara Tussupova (Nazarbayev University), on the screen in the background is Tynchtykbek Tchoroiev (independent scholar, former head of Radio Azattyk).
Credit: Jeanne Féaux de la Croix

The first question which arose during the establishment of CESMI was that of language. While none of the involved scholars suggested that English should be CESMI's only language, it remained unclear which other languages had to be integrated. Dealing with Kyrgyz and Uzbek, for instance, was possible in regard to the blog format which was translated and published in cooperation with the BBC. However, it was doubtful to what extent the use of particular regional languages could be institutionalised, a question which arose by virtue of the linguistic complexity of Central Eurasia. On its website, CESMI decided to use English and Russian as *linguae francae*, since the two also link Central Eurasia with other parts of the world. Languages of local relevance are considered of high importance and are being used in CESMI's specific sub-projects and activities.

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Another crucial question arose with regard to the goal of fostering accurate reporting. To be sure, the joint blog format with the BBC caters to this goal by involving scholars in web-journalism, but the direct link between scholars and journalists was still left untouched. In order to strengthen this link, CESMI began to establish an [expert directory](#) on its website which lists scholars who work on Central Eurasia. The main audience are media professionals from all outlets who can find the scholars' fields of expertise, CVs and contact details listed in the directory. This way the directory provides a gateway for journalists to quickly access competent commentary from knowledgeable scholars on specific topics and countries in Central Eurasia.

In addition, for the future CESMI plans to organise scholar-media encounters on the site itself. Such encounters could include webinars on current issues as well as joint online workshops for young scholars and journalists. These are meant to address the scholars' frequent lack of training to create simple statements from complex information and to offer an easily digestible analysis for lay audiences. In this regard, the building of bridges is envisioned as multilateral and should include scholars and journalists from within and outside Central Eurasia.

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If CESMI's vision is to strive “for real impacts in public awareness and policy-making” – not only in Euro-American settings, but in larger parts of Central Eurasia – it needs to develop strategies to include countries which provide neither a scholar-friendly nor a media-friendly environment. This is a challenging task and requires work on virgin territory far away from ideologically-driven organisations promoting media freedom. However, it is only through the integration of settings in Central Eurasia that are difficult to access that CESMI can pursue its foundational goal to foster accurate, non-stereotypical and balanced reporting on lesser-known spots in the region.

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