2014 Civil Society Graduate Fellowship: International Crisis Group (ICG), Bishkek

As a recipient of the Civil Society Fellowship for the summer 2014, I chose to work as a research intern with International Crisis Group (ICG) in Bishkek. Based in Brussels, ICG hosts offices around the world, focusing on preventative research to stem potential inter- and intra-state conflicts, as well as analyze current security trends within states and regions. ICG has maintained an office in Kyrgyzstan for over a dozen years, and the office in Bishkek is the only one ICG hosts in Central Asia.

Upon arrival, I was immediately thrust into work on ICG’s (now-published) report on water infrastructure, rights, and tensions in the Ferghana Valley. Focusing on inter- and intra-governmental relations in the region, the report sought to examine existing reasons as to why Central Asia served as the most wasteful region within water usage, and offer potential recommendations to local governments, international partners, and the donor community. As it is, I’d had no prior exposure to either examining or analyzing water usage, access, or infrastructure. The extent of my prior regional analysis pertaining to water relations served to examine the 2012 statements from Tashkent, in which Uzbek President Islam Karimov threatened, in public statements against an undefined counterpart, a potential war over water resources. However, it did not take long to familiarize myself with both geo-physical realities and key players, as well as trends extant and possibilities to ease tensions. Dove-tailing off of a similar report from nearly a decade earlier, I parsed numerous academic reports and spoke with multiple experts, looking at glacial structures and runoff in the Pamirs and southern Kyrgyzstan and potential means of corruption within hydro infrastructure. I pored through original documentation – World Bank documents, United Nations transcripts, statements from Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tajik officials – to examine the funding and potential impacts on proposed hydropower projects. From a purely journalist standpoint, I broke the news of the World Bank’s draft paper on the Rogun Dam, proposed for construction along Tajikistan’s Vakhsh River.
Plotted as the world’s largest dam, the World Bank endorsed a height of 335m for Rogun – the highest within Tajikistan’s existing options – which prompted vitriolic and pedantic retaliation from Tashkent, whose officials belittled the World Bank’s “elementary” methodology. The research also allowed me to parse the US State Department’s New Silk Route policies, which have, thus far, seen markedly little success. Between the removal of American troops in Kyrgyzstan’s Manas Transit Center and continued failure of proposed regional electricity and pipeline projects – to say little of increasing Chinese largesse and Russian outreach – the quality and breadth of American influence and policy in Central Asia has waned considerably within the past four years.

Additionally, I had the opportunity to contribute to ICG’s forthcoming report on security threats to Central Asia. I conducted multiple interviews with regional specialists examining potential Islamist spill-over from Afghanistan; the existing and expanding threat of Central Asian nationals who have opted to fight in Syria and Iraq; as well as potential implications following Russia’s invasion and occupation of Crimea. I monitored and analyzed online communications pertaining to potential recruitment of Central Asian nationals by IS-related factions, as well as the continued uptick in Central Asian nationalism as a result of both the expanding concepts of Russkiy Mir and the Eurasian Economic Union. I also contributed coverage and analyses of continued border skirmishes and casualties between Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, which saw a significant uptick in 2014.

My Civil Society Fellowship also allowed me considerable opportunity for freelance journalistic coverage from and on the region over the summer. From pieces analyzing the Eurasian Union in Foreign Policy and Moscow Times to coverage of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in China’s Global Times to an in-depth look at Russia’s blinkered attempts at geopolitical expansion in Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty – as well as coverage of the US’s regional departure with Al Jazeera – I was able to expand my journalistic credentials far more than prior. Further, the research this summer with ICG has allowed the continuance of publication, and allowed me to since be hired by The Diplomat as a Eurasian analyst. I also recently participated in a podcast on IS recruitment in Central Asia with RFE/RL.