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## INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TRIGGERS OF GEOPOLITICAL INFLUENCE ON THE COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL ASIA

*Annotation:* Modern information and communication expansion is a tool of geopolitical influence, which is used along with military and economic expansion to achieve dominance in the target region. The article deals with the question of the West's information and communication expansion in the Central Asian arena, where its collective strategy is focused on the maximum separation of these countries from the Russian Federation in order to hinder Russian influence and its integrating impact. The article analyzes the transformation of the strategies of relations between the US and the EU with the Central Asian countries in modern conditions. The main structures of Western information influence in Central Asia (the OSCE Academy, Internews Network International, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) in Central Asia, the Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting (CABAR-Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting), EurasiaNet, etc.) are presented. The article concludes that the creation of a Western, primarily American, information impact infrastructure in the Central Asian region is a natural process, which can only be answered by the creation of a Russian infrastructure of this kind. The author, however, emphasizes that the best way to influence information could be joint practical activities and not aggressive propaganda, first in the humanitarian sphere, and then in other areas of mutual interest for all parties involved.

*Key words:* EU, information expansion, Central Asian, USA, mass-media, Russia.

### Institutions of influence

The role of information triggers in the development of socio-political processes in modern society is extremely high. Nowadays, even countries with

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a long-standing democratic tradition suffer from information manipulation, especially during key events such as elections. The election campaign does not end with the election results tabulation, but instead devolves into a persistent information war, which leads to the erosion of voters' confidence in the election results and the destruction of democratic society's basic foundations. Those countries that do not have a deep democratic tradition, as a result of subtle attempts to manipulate voters in general, risk moving from the principles of popular democracy to a democracy of the square (we have examples of presidential elections in 2016 and 2020 in the US and, for example, Kyrgyzstan with its most recent parliamentary elections).

Therefore, speaking about the information expansion of the West in Central Asia, it is necessary to understand that this is an instrument of geopolitical influence, used along with military and economic expansion to achieve dominance in the target region. The main thing that currently determines the attention of Western politicians, especially American politicians, to the Central Asian region is its proximity to Afghanistan, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other. This makes it possible to use this platform for multidirectional influence. The general strategy of the collective West is focused on stimulating the maximum separation of these countries from Russia in order to hinder Russian integrating influence. All this predetermined the information expansion of the West in the region, which proceeded under the slogan "transit from dictatorship to democracy" and gave rise to a whole series of color revolutions or attempts to carry them out in the Central Asian countries.

In Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, the information field has been and is controlled by state structures. In these countries, despite the widespread growth of nationalist sentiments and, as a result, the rejection of Soviet and, in modern realities, Russian cultural influence, the role of the Russian language, Russian information flow and Russian culture is still quite large. Therefore, the West pays close attention to the formation of an informational and analytical space in Central Asia to its advantage. It sees this task as growing a new generation of experts and analysts, including influencers<sup>2</sup>, which would defend the positions of Western countries and international organizations, explain their advantages to the population, and give favorable

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<sup>2</sup> An influencer on social networks is a user who has a large and loyal audience. Both properties are important: an influencer is a blogger whose publications have a noticeable impact on subscribers.

forecasts for the West. Various structures – centers, academies, institutes, etc., specially created for this purpose, as well as other Western foundations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – were called upon to unite such experts and form a pool of them. However, the various types of activities of NGOs sponsored by the West are not enough to achieve strategic goals, to create a springboard for regional intervention of a humanitarian (and not only) nature. To effectively manage this process, the cultivation of a local pro-western “intellectual elite” has been activated, since, first, the judgments of local media personalities always arouse more trust in the population than foreign speeches, and second, Western emissaries’ activities remain quite difficult in the Central Asian countries due to the specifics of the local political system.

In 2004, shortly before the “Tulip Revolution”, there were reports that Kyrgyzstan had not given its consent to the deployment of American AWACS reconnaissance aircraft at the Manas air base. It was alleged that the authorities at the time stated that this was beyond the authority and objectives of the U.S. operation in Afghanistan and did not comply with Kyrgyzstan’s obligations under the CSTO. In addition, President Askar Akayev said at the time that the airbase should have been dismantled because the main terrorist centers in Afghanistan had already been destroyed. Also, in 2004, the U.S. State Department awarded 53 grants to Kyrgyz non-governmental organizations to support the independent media, disseminate information, train journalists, ensure human rights, and provide legal education. Support came from the NED and the National Democratic Institute (NDI).

In March 2005, The New York Times wrote that an opposition newspaper published pictures of the luxurious mansion of President Askar Akayev, who is extremely unpopular with the population, provoking a wave of public indignation and mass protests. The same publication, according to the NYT, received a grant from the United States government and was printed in a Printing House financed by the U.S. government and run by Freedom House, an American organization dedicated to the promotion of democracy. The Times of London reported that American money funds civil society centers where citizens can meet with activists, receive training, and read independent newspapers. The Wall Street Journal also pointed to assistance to NGOs and the “independent media” from Freedom House and the U.S. Government’s Agency for International Development (USAID) [1].

Washington signed a new agreement on Manas with other post-revolutionary authorities. This example illustrates quite eloquently the causes, goals, and means of Western, primarily American, information influence in the region, especially in Kyrgyzstan, where due to the weakness of political institutions, the media space has been particularly vulnerable.

During the reigns of the first and second presidents of Kyrgyzstan, the West, primarily the US, had a very good position in this country's information space. The Americans actually managed to create some small media holdings consisting of local media outlets that had their owners who were Kyrgyz citizens, but ideologically reflected pro-western ideas. This was achieved primarily through the employment of personnel trained by Western media organizations, and assistance in the form of equipment or grants for the production of "necessary" content was often provided to such media outlets. That means, in fact, that the Americans managed to form their own media space through which they actively influenced society's mood and presented their vision of political processes, which in turn played an important role in the revolutions of 2005 and 2010.

After 2010, the Americans had a losing streak. They failed to form and support a new opposition to replace the discredited one, and they lost control of some media outlets. Accordingly, the task was to regain the former position. This is what they are doing now, paying more attention to the expert community, creating their own team of analysts who will interpret what is happening in the countries of the region from the "right" perspective.

In turn, in mid-June 2019, the European Council approved a new strategy for the European Union's relations with Central Asia. One of the main directions of the updated document is to strengthen security in the region. In particular, this implies the development of cooperation between the regional countries and Afghanistan, as well as joint participation in programs and the European Union's projects [2].

The decision of the EU foreign ministers emphasizes that the framework of EU relations with the region depends on the willingness of the individual Central Asian countries to carry out reforms, strengthen democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the courts, as well as modernize and diversify their economies. The draft strategy was presented by the European Commission on 15 May 2019. With its help, Brussels has planned to build stronger, modern and non-exclusive partnerships with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The wording implied that the EU was

not going to put these countries before an “either/or” choice. The draft strategy noted that the EU’s new partnership and cooperation agreements with the Central Asian countries are also compatible with other integration initiatives, such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which includes Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The previous strategy for EU relations with the Central Asian region was adopted in 2007. Maja Kocijancic, an official representative of the European Commission, explained that the situation has changed significantly since then, so that the need for a new strategy corresponds to the current situation, challenges and the states’ relations, while the desire to deepen cooperation was also voiced by the Central Asian countries themselves.

Despite the region’s territorial remoteness from Europe, Brussels has a geopolitical interest in this issue related to the situation’s settlement in Afghanistan. Cooperation with the Central Asian countries could help to resolve the situation in Afghanistan and stop the refugees’ flow to Europe. The EU has supported bilateral and regional education programs and research in Central Asia since the beginning of mutual cooperation in 1991. Education plays an important role in bilateral partnership agreements as well as in the EU-Central Asia strategy. At the regional level, the EU promotes education through the Central Asian Education Platform (*link is external*), including support for the implementation of the 2017 Astana Declaration and the Central Asian Research and Education Network (*link is external*).

The EU is also the largest donor to the Global Partnership for Education (*link is external*) (GPE), the only global partnership that involves representatives from all education stakeholders groups, including partner countries, donors, international organizations, civil society and the private sector. The GPE plays an active role in supporting education systems in Central Asia with funding in excess of 100 million euros.

Separately, it is necessary to mention the increasing focus of the Western media mainstream on combating Russian influence. Back in 2016, during the events in Aktobe, the Western media (including Reuters and the Kazakhstani editorial board of Radio Liberty) and, following them, the Ukrainian media began to discuss “Russian separatism” in Kazakhstan. Since the fiscal year 2017, the U.S. State Department has annually requested funds to continue cooperating with the media in Central Asia, where the “Russian propaganda machine” is said to be active, as stated by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Rosenblum, who oversees the region [3]. It should be noted that the concept of “Central

Asia” in the US traditionally includes Kazakhstan, the situation of which after the events in Aktobe caused concern in the political circles of the West. Daniel Rosenblum, among other things, emphasized: “It is important that Central Asian media and the people for whom they work have access to different sources of objective information, rather than relying on each other”. [3]. According to the diplomat, in such a case, the news may be presented as “one-sided” or incorrectly. Therefore, the new budget request included funding to continue cooperation with Central Asian publications. Rosenblum acknowledged that this region’s states have strong historical, political, economic and cultural ties with Russia, and that Russia’s well-funded propaganda machine has had a significant impact on public opinion in Central Asia. At the same time, he believes, these states understand that they also need relations with other countries, which will bring mutual benefits.

A few words about the main structures of Western information influence in Central Asia. *The OSCE Academy in Bishkek* was established in 2002 on the basis of an agreement between the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Kyrgyz Republic’s Government. The parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding that formalized the establishment of the Academy as a regional center for postgraduate education and a forum for regional dialogue on security issues and research. In 2004, the Academy launched its flagship Master’s Program in Political Science with a focus on Central Asia. In 2011, a second graduate program, the Master of Arts in Economic Governance and Development, was launched [4].<sup>3</sup>

*Internews Network International* is an international organization set up to support media development around the world, with 21 affiliates with offices in 34 countries (mostly in so-called emerging democracies) [3].<sup>4</sup> The organization

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<sup>3</sup> The OSCE Academy actively works with young journalists and journalism students from the region’s five republics, organizing summer camps for them and holding three- to four-day seminars and conferences. Media trainers with explicitly pro-Western sentiments are invited as moderators, and sometimes outright Russophobes, including opposition politicians and journalists from the Russian Federation itself. Consequently, young people develop a sharply negative attitude toward Russia.

<sup>4</sup> The Russian office of Internews Network International was closed in 2007 in connection with a case of currency smuggling, the main figure in which was the general director of the Russian branch Manana Aslamazyan, who was detained while importing a large amount of cash currency to Russia from Europe. She hid from the investigation and left Russia, leaving for permanent residence in Paris.

is headquartered in Arcata, California, US. Internews Network International's mission is to work to protect press freedom, to improve the professionalism of journalism around the world, and to carry out various humanitarian projects in the field of electronic media. In the Central Asian region, Internews Network International works in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, implementing various programs aimed at improving local media operations. In particular, the Central Asian Media Legislation Improvement Program was launched in 2012 to, as stated on the organization's website, "promote legislative change in the Central Asian countries over a three-year period; strengthen the capacity of the media to function under current legislation; and broaden discussion of media legislation and related issues. The project analyzed media legislation in all five regional countries. To the extent possible, the project will try to find not only shortcomings in the law, but also problems that are a priority for the media community as a whole." [5]

Internews is active in holding various events for students and practicing journalists. In particular, in Kyrgyzstan, Internews held the "Stremlenie" contest as part of a long-term project to develop independent media in Kyrgyzstan, which is implemented by Internews in partnership with FHI360<sup>5</sup> and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

In 2019, Internews Kyrgyzstan presented the TRACK (Transparency through Reporting & Advocacy Campaigns in Kyrgyzstan) project, presented as follows: the TRACK (Transparency through Reporting & Advocacy Campaigns in Kyrgyzstan) is a multi-component project aimed at supporting domestic investigative journalism for its quality development, involving society in the fight against corruption and strengthening its control functions to achieve greater responsibility and accountability of the authorities [6]. As you know, similar "investigations" with the help of Western financial aid are being carried out in other countries. The main purpose of these initiatives is to discredit the authorities.<sup>6</sup>

In Kazakhstan, the International Center for Journalism MediaNet, which launched the ONLINE MediaSchool project for all regions of Kazakhstan to form a new generation of independent journalists: versatile, socially active,

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<sup>5</sup> American non-governmental organization in the field of ecology, health and education.

<sup>6</sup> Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation presents its activities in virtually the same words: "The Anti-Corruption Foundation is the only non-profit organization in Russia that investigates, exposes, and suppresses corruption offenses in the highest levels of government.

professional and independent, operates as part of Internews. The training is conducted in the format of webinars in Kazakh and Russian [7].

Another important activity of Internews is considered to be supporting “citizen journalism” in the region, where anyone with a smartphone “can become a reporter and report important incidents in their social networks before the most advanced media”, as stated in one of the flyers of the Citizen Journalism School project created in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan in 2018 [8].<sup>7</sup>

*The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) in Central Asia* was founded in 1991 as a charitable educational organization that promotes development problems, providing the world community with greater access to information about events in the regions of the CIS and other countries of the world. The main representative offices of the Institute are in the US and the Netherlands, and the headquarters are in London [9]. The IWPR is on the ground in more than 30 countries and has programs in Afghanistan, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Iraq, the Balkans, Sudan, Uganda and elsewhere. The IWPR was founded in 1991 under the name Yugofax, and was originally a newsletter that reported on troubling developments in the Balkans, covering them from a pro-western perspective. When the Balkan conflict turned into a full-scale war, the Yugofax newsletter changed its name to the Balkan War Report. In late 1995, after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement to end the war in Bosnia, the newsletter expanded its interests to other global problem regions (originally focused mainly on the former Soviet republics) and adjusted the title – War Report. In 1998, the newsletter changed its name again, this time to the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) and was registered as a non-governmental organization. The IWPR has a board of trustees consisting of leading journalists and human rights experts, political scientists, as well as business consultants and NGO specialists. The chairman of the International Board of Trustees is Sir David Bell, the former chairman of the Financial Times. As stated on the organization’s website, “The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) promotes democracy in countries gripped by conflict and change through the power of professional journalism. The IWPR programs provide intensive hands-on training for reporters, in-depth coverage and release of relevant information, and initiate projects aimed at building the competence of local media outlets.

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<sup>7</sup> In Uzbekistan, Internews operated from 1995 to 2005, when it was shut down by court order for illegal television production and publishing activities.



By supporting peace, development, and rule of law processes, the IWPR gives the competent local media a voice” [9].

In late February 2018, the IWPR and the OSCE Academy in Bishkek announced that they were launching a three-year project to build the capacity of a new generation of analysts and journalists in the Central Asian region. Over the next three years, the IWPR’s Central Asia office and the OSCE Academy have planned to implement a series of intensive theoretical and practical programs to build a new pool of young experts and journalistic analysts (as stated in their official bulletins) capable of providing high-quality analysis for state authorities and the general public. In addition to the theoretical part of the training, there is a practical part which participants must undergo in Eastern Europe and, of course, in their region’s countries. At the moment, the IWPR Central Asia is intensively recruiting local staff. In particular, there are openings for an SMM specialist to maintain social media accounts and promote the organization’s products online; for the position of freelance editor-coordinator of investigative journalism; and for a team of journalists and a camera-editor to create video footage [10].

One of the Institute’s full-fledged projects for war and peace reporting is the **CABAR Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting** [11], whose team consists mainly of Kyrgyz and Tajik participants who have received training in the West. Within the framework of the CABAR, the **CABAR Media School operates**, which conducts online and offline training for journalists and everyone interested in analytics tools, reportage journalism, new media and digital journalism. The CABAR portal has an **Analytics** section, where articles are published containing a critical assessment of the integration projects of Russia and the Central Asian countries [12].<sup>8</sup> The CABAR organizes **Conflict Sensitive Journalism Trainings** (in Terez in Kazakhstan, and in Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan). The purpose of the trainings (as stated in the announcement on the organization’s website) is to prepare a pool of Central Asia journalists capable of writing high-quality analytical pieces on religious diversity, respect for the religious freedom

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<sup>8</sup> For example, “The consequences of Russian-Chinese rapprochement for Central Asia.” “The carrot and stick policy could be the beginning of joint Chinese-Russian rule, with the Central Asian countries having no say in decision-making processes concerning them or their future development”, notes Serbian (Serbia sic!) researcher Nina Miholcic in her article, written specifically for CABAR.asia. See <https://cabar.asia/ru/posledstviya-rossijsko-kitajskogo-sblizheniya-dlya-tsentralnoj-azii/> (date of access 10.10.2019)

of citizens, and countering violent extremism. The training program is focused on gaining practical experience in writing analytical articles and journalistic investigations for local and foreign media.

**EurasiaNet [www.eurasianet.org].** EurasiaNet's editorial office is based in New York. EurasiaNet advocates an open and informative discussion of the region's problems. One of EurasiaNet's goals is to bring information to decision-makers, as well as to awaken interest in the region in wider society. EurasiaNet publishes news and analysis materials on political, economic, social and environmental developments in Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as in Russia, Ukraine and Moldova. EurasiaNet operates under the Eurasian Program supported by the Open Society Foundations.<sup>9</sup> EurasiaNet is one of the most popular and influential media outlets for the Central Asian countries. Thanks to its developed network of correspondents, which EurasiaNet has both in the West and in the countries of Eurasia, the publication provides its readers with up-to-date information, as well as the opportunity to get acquainted with different points of view on the current situation. Materials on the Internet portal are published in English and Russian [13].

Thus, the creation of Western, primarily American, infrastructure of information influence in the Central Asian region is a natural process to which we can respond only by creating our own infrastructure. Unfortunately, our information and analytical work in these regions is carried out sporadically and not enough specialists and relevant structures are involved in it compared to similar structures in the United States and the European Union. And there they are much more in demand by the state. It is necessary to establish the systematic work of different profile expert centers, which would constantly keep their hands on the pulse of the situation in the regions. Moreover, the post-truth that is imposed by the Western media mainstream cannot compete with reality, after all. Therefore, the best method of information influence is not aggressive propaganda, but joint practical activities in the humanitarian sphere and in other areas of mutual interest to the parties involved.

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<sup>9</sup> Open Society Institute, OSI), The Soros Foundation is an international charitable organization established by the financier and philanthropist George Soros. The Foundation has representative offices in more than 30 countries. The headquarters is located in New York.

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