

CIVIL SOCIETY

GEORGE SOROS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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George Soros is well known in Central Asia, primarily as a prominent philanthropist, the creator of the charity foundation of the same name, and a champion of new democracy. The Open Society Institute he founded is a conspicuous element in the region's public life. And

Soros's protest against the combat actions in Iraq, the current critical attitude toward him in Russia, and his participation in the change in power in Georgia have only riveted the attention of the local political elite on this outstanding individual even more.

The Philosophy behind His Presence in the Region

George Soros is particularly critical of two extremes—totalitarianism and market fundamentalism. The first is characteristic of the newly independent Central Asian states as a remnant of their feudal and socialist past, and the second as a social threat. The truth, says George Soros, lies somewhere in between these two extremes, so at this particular moment in time, the region's countries should be putting up particular resistance to the remnants of communist dictatorship and the administrative and command system.

Central Asia "became acquainted" with the capitalist philosophy as early as the beginning of the 20th century. "Asia's awakening" helped the region's republics to turn to democratic values, including constitutionalism and parliamentarianism. Both the crisis of Islamic fundamentalism and the transformation of traditions coincided time-wise, in our opinion, with the "ennoblement" of Sufism, on the one hand, and with acquaintance with the philosophy of positivism, on the other.¹ In this way, if the scales had tipped in favor of positivism, it might have become the dominating philosophical system.

¹ Works by the representatives of positivism came to Central Asia (in Turkish translations) against the background of active non-acceptance of Marxism. For example, in the 1890s, Akhmad Donish was the first to doubt the feasibility of the socialist experiment for Turkestan, and even predicted the "bloody consequences" of future revolutions.

The three components of Henri Bergson's conception, one of the leaders of positivism and founder of the idea of an "open society"—constructive pluralism, supremacy of the law, and conscious participation—left their mark on local public thought, both due to the traditional respect for French philosophy, and to the tenacious freedom-loving strivings of our region's intelligentsia. It was particularly inspired by Bergson's appeal for "citizens to consciously adopt any decision providing it does not violate the rights of others." Old-timers recall that the Central Asian state university even fought positivism (including that of H. Bergson) during the years of Stalinism.

By opposing the Bolshevik form of colonialism, the most prominent figures of the dissident movement in Central Asia of the 20th century, Mustafa Chokaev, Vali Kaiumkhan, and Boimirza Khait, were also against lawlessness, inequality, and injustice. Criticism by emigrant oppositionists of the institutions of control and punishment and the organizational-ideological structures of the Stalinist system logically led to the thesis that all property, exchange, consumption, and distribution relations were defective in a socialist society.² And in its appeal to public associations and citizen self-government structures, Stalinism was responsible for corrupting the even limited understanding of democracy.³

Karl Popper's philosophy, which nourished George Soros's world outlook, spread to Central Asia as the original philosophy became disseminated in Western Europe.⁴ Popperism attracted the intellectuals of our region and filled the ideological vacuum created by the Marxist crisis with a critical way of thinking, a peaceful style of public organization and social regulation, a democratic way of distributing power, and a market economy, which guaranteed feedback between the authorities and the people. Popperism promulgated a social model that ideally combined discussion, pacifism, order, and activity, something which was highly evaluated even in the medieval East. The Central Asian intelligentsia was inspired by the respect for thought promulgated by the author of this trend, and the intellectual elite as a whole was impressed by the fact that Popperism presented itself only as a code that enriched its own essence. However, certain elements of K. Popper's teaching (in particular on the individual's role in society) gave rise to repulsion. Apparently for people long under the influence of Marxism-Leninism, individualism was quite naturally equated with egoism, private property with personal property, freedom with doing as you please, criticism with anarchy, and parliamentarianism with a decrease in the role of the government.

Expansion Strategy of an "Open Society"

George Soros was inspired by the idea of carrying out charity work in the U.S.S.R. and launching a Cultural Initiative program in 1987, after reading a newspaper report that C.P.S.U. leader Mikhail Gorbachev had decided to return well-known Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov from exile. In our opinion, this date also marks the beginning of the triumphant procession of Popperism into Central Asia. If we keep in mind that Andrei Sakharov was interested in this region and had his own point of view on the events going on in it, a certain spiritual kinship between Andrei Sakharov and George Soros in turn reinforced the popularity of K. Popper's books in the Soviet republics.

The Open Society Institute (OSI) existed in Russia from 1995 to 2002, whereas it has been functioning in Central Asia for nine years now. Public opinion has an ambiguous attitude toward the evalua-

² The historical role played by Mustafa Jemilev, leader of the Crimean Tatars and prominent human rights activist of the Turkic world, in the spiritual life of the peoples of Central Asia is a particular one. We do not think that the publications about him reveal all the aspects of this Soviet dissident's participation in the regional democratic processes.

³ During socialism, philanthropy was qualified by official propaganda as a "way for the bourgeoisie to mask its parasitism by means of hypocritical and humiliating assistance to the poor in order to distract their attention away from the class struggle."

⁴ The author remembers discussions on this topic that were held at the Regional Institute of Advanced Studies for Professors of Social Sciences (Tashkent) and at the Philosophical Department of Lenin Tashkent State University.

tion of George Soros's role in the region. Some believe that through his OSI network, the philanthropist has rescued the academies of sciences, as well as their scientific research institutes, in the Central Asian countries from collapse, while others think that this was what provoked the crisis in these institutions. Some believe that he stemmed the "brain drain," while there are others who claim that the philanthropist has been instrumental in the theft of intellectual property. Nevertheless, despite such an ambiguous assessment of Soros's activity, his popularity among the local elite has risen, and he has become an idol of the intellectual youth.

It can be said that the Open Society Institute began actively spreading in our region in July 1995, after its branch opened in Almaty, which was instigated by the special features of the democratic processes in Kazakhstan.⁵ Much later (in January 2004), in an interview with the French weekly *Le Nouvel économiste*, the republic's president, Nursultan Nazarbaev, stated that his country was "consistently moving toward an open society,"⁶ maintaining that not only did his country take credit for this, but it was also due to the influence of Popper's ideas. Today, the branch of the Soros Foundation created in the Republic of Kazakhstan has seven subsidiary structures, including the National Debate Center, which is extremely popular in the region. The Central Asian Educational Resource Center is also quite active, which is meant for the regional consumer, and enjoys many grants from the Soros Foundation. What is more, among the programs specific for Kazakhstan, experts note those designed for unblocking Internet publications, which helps to democratize the printed matter published in the republic, as well as the essentially unique projects for supporting the Kazakh diaspora in Mongolia.

But in our opinion, the most favorable conditions for the activity of the Soros structures have been created in Kyrgyzstan. Here the American University-Central Asia (AUCA), financed by George Soros, has opened, which acquired a regional status in the fall of 2002. The PEN Center also functions in the country, which is a public association with well-known literary figures, critics, and journalists among its members. One of the most successful projects in the republic is the one drawn up by the Soros Foundation on the conception of the "Principles of Ethnic Development of the Kyrgyz Republic." Since 2003, the Bishkek Consensus Institute of Economic Policy has been in operation, and in April 2004, a presentation took place in the republic's capital of an information project called Open Kyrgyzstan. Its purpose is to "develop transparent and accessible standards for discussing the proposals being drawn up and finding new ways to raise decision-making efficiency based on ensuring public access to information." During his visit to Kyrgyzstan in June 2003, George Soros supported the idea of opening an Institute of Public Policy in the republic. Writer Chinghiz Aitmatov, in turn, suggested that George Soros build a cultural center "anywhere on the shores of Issyk-Kul Lake." Incidentally, the newspapers reported that this visit was "extremely constructive." Suffice it to say that Kyrgyz President Askar Akaev awarded George Soros a 3rd Degree Manas Medal. And the itinerary of Soros's visit to Kyrgyzstan (26-27 April, 2004) included meetings with Askar Akaev, as well as with professors and students of the American University-Central Asia and the Bishkek Consensus Institute of Economic Policy, and participation in a round table with journalists.

During its existence the Soros-Kyrgyzstan Foundation has gratuitously allotted the republic more than 40 million dollars.

The Open Society Institute has been operating in Uzbekistan since 1996, implementing projects in many spheres of the republic's public life, in particular in education, culture, public health, and so on. The so-called debate clubs and library enhancement programs are enjoying particular success.

In Tajikistan, the Soros structures are also actively participating in replenishing libraries. In June 2003, George Soros visited Dushanbe, where he met with the country's prime minister, R. Akilov, vice premier, S. Zukhurov, and leader of the Tajikistan Islamic Revival Party, S. Nuri, and discussed with them

⁵ But even before this, at the end of 1993, 182 Kazakhstani academics received financial support from George Soros. And his visits to Kazakhstan (October 1996 and June 2003) played a large part in strengthening the OSI network in Central Asia.

⁶ For more detail, see: [www.president.kz].

the question of doing more charity work in the republic. According to Tajik experts, George Soros is one of the main sponsors of the local cultural and enlightenment programs.⁷

In 2003, the Soros structures organized several major religious events in Central Asia. For example, in May, a contest of projects among NGOs and learning-educational, cultural-enlightenment, and other organizations of these states was held, in June, an international conference called “New School-New Teacher” was organized, and in September, the International Summer School “Street Law” was in operation.

Attitude of George Soros and the Central Asian Leaders to the War on Iraq

On the same day, 24 April, 2003, the leaders of two Central Asian countries made essentially identical statements about the situation in Iraq. For example, Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbaev noted: “A change of regime in Iraq should help to reduce tension in Central Asia.”⁸ And head of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, said that his country was participating in the anti-Saddam war for essentially four reasons: Saddam Hussein’s ongoing “game” with the world community; the feebleness demonstrated by some of the members of the U.N. Security Council when resolving chemical disarmament problems; living next door to Afghanistan and the difficulty of stabilizing the situation in the Middle East; and the urgent need to reform the United Nations in order to bring it into harmony with the realities of the international situation.

It was not easy for the heads of these two largest Central Asian countries to make these official statements. First, the matter concerned the U.S.’s war against a Muslim country in close geographical proximity to them. Second, for Central Asia, Baghdad has historically embodied the capital of the Arab caliphate, a city where the greatest thinkers of the medieval East studied. Third, Tashkent and Astana again, as in the case with Afghanistan, permitted themselves to come face to face with international terrorism. Fourth, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were not only going against Russia’s will, but also against the majority in the U.N., becoming even more pro-American. Fifth, they were becoming more fundamentally involved in global policy. Even before this, on 12 March, 2002, official Tashkent signed a declaration On Strategic Partnership and the Principles of Cooperation between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the U.S., which in particular envisages that our country should “continue active democratic changes, taking into account the commitments ensuing from international agreements and the requirements of national legislation.” With respect to the topic under discussion, this meant placing globalization over and above domestic problems and taking an approach toward George Soros’s strategy based on his view of the U.S. leadership.

During his visit to Baku on 29 May, 2003, George Soros negatively evaluated George Bush’s position when commenting on the situation in Iraq, calling for the military strikes to be juxtaposed by a series of constructive preventive measures and rendering the democratic forces help in their struggle against totalitarianism. In order to protect ourselves against terrorism, George Soros was to write later, we need preventive measures, awareness, and information. All of this ultimately depends on support from the population among whom terrorists act. It is a big mistake to declare war on those very people whose support we need to fight terrorism. This cannot help but lead to innocent victims, and the more there are, the greater the discontent and the chances that some victims will become new criminals.⁹

⁷ Specialists considered the conference held at the beginning of May 2004 on questions of labor migration, at which representatives of the Tajik government were present, constructive.

⁸ From a speech at the 11th Eurasian Media-Forum [www.president.kz].

⁹ See an excerpt from George Soros’s book *The Bubble of American Supremacy*, published in the British newspaper *The Guardian*.

George Soros, who plays an important role in global policy, possibly does not define his attitude toward a particular post-Soviet regime depending on the latter's viewpoint on the Iraqi problem.¹⁰ According to him, the war on Iraq is an indication of the attitude toward an "open society," in particular an indication of tolerance. He says that if George Bush loses the election in 2004, his policy will be written off as an accident, and the U.S. will again take its true place among the other states of the world. But if George Bush is elected president again, he will receive a mandate from his voters to continue such actions, and we will have to take full responsibility for their consequences.¹¹

George Bush Jr.'s war, believes George Soros, ensues from the above-mentioned market fundamentalism, a doctrine which has led to many erroneous political decisions. Our country, he writes, has proven to be in the hands of a group of extremists, whose certainty that their mission is true can only be compared with their erroneous conviction that they are right... Religious fundamentalism, as strange as it may sound, literally pushed the "market advocates" to make erroneous decisions. As a result, concludes the author, we have been sucked into a nightmarish quagmire strongly reminiscent of Vietnam, a war that did not reap a single benefit.¹²

Does the "Georgian Scenario" Suit Central Asia?

"It was Soros's plan. Everything was accounted for. Money as well. How much was needed... There was a whole strategy, how to hold the elections so that new people would come to power," said Eduard Shevardnadze in an interview for the program *Vesti nedeli* on the Rossiya television station after M. Saakashvili came to power in Georgia. The elite of the Central Asian countries took it literally. Astana, Tashkent, and Bishkek were facing the parliamentary and presidential elections, and these capitals took these words as a kind of warning by Georgia's overthrown president, after which, of course, the prospects for further coexistence with George Soros's structures, which had become "ensconced" in the region, did not look too promising for the local political authorities.

For example, in an interview with the newspaper *Egemen Kazakstan* (3 December, 2003), Nursultan Nazarbaev, apparently hinting at the negative role of several international organizations in the Georgian events, noted: "Branches of foreign structures do not have the right to create scenarios for our country, for we are an independent state with our own traditions and values." An article entitled "Devotion to the National Spirit," published under a pseudonym on 16 December, 2003 in the Uzbekistan government paper *Khalk suzi*, was also perceived in the spirit of a cautious attitude toward international organizations. Its author noted in particular that the projects of several charity foundations "are not in keeping with national values."

In this way, Astana and Tashkent had a negative response to the continued activity of the structures "involved in the Tbilisi events" in the region. Even in Dushanbe, where there is a more liberal attitude toward the OSI, there were rumors about the involvement of the Soros structures in distributing leaflets promulgating a "Georgian scenario for Tajikistan."

And at the 10th Assembly of the Peoples of Kazakhstan in December 2003, Nursultan Nazarbaev was even more specific, demanding that several western structures "not interfere in the republic's internal affairs." And although the matter concerned international organizations accredited in the country which demanded that radical changes be made in the legislation on mass media, the tone itself was unexpectedly severe. A day later, on 24 December, with the obvious support of the authorities, M. Tinikeev, a deputy of the republic's Majilis, sent a request to the Republic of Kazakhstan General Prosecutor's office, asking

¹⁰ This was clearly shown by the events in Georgia. The power of President M. Saakashvili, who enjoys the favor of George Soros, has only reinforced the presence of the local contingent among the foreign troops in Iraq.

¹¹ See: G. Soros, *The Bubble of American Supremacy*.

¹² See: *Ibidem*.

for measures to be taken against the local branch of the Open Society Institute, which “is manipulating public conscience in the region in order to introduce amendments into the legislation.” Society was clearly electrified by a negative attitude toward the “Georgian scenario writers.”

On 14 April, 2004, employees of the Tashkent Open Society-Assistance Foundation Institute received a response from the Uzbekistan Ministry of Justice to its re-registration application. An official letter signed by Deputy Minister P. Samatov contained a denial.¹³ Incidentally, even before this, speaking at a press conference in London, George Soros told journalists that the Uzbek authorities had asked the organization to re-register, and this, in his words, will mean the authorities can close down all the projects they don’t like. As the Reuters Information Agency reported, the George Soros Foundation has spent 22 million dollars on projects in Uzbekistan since 1996, including 3.7 million in 2003.

George Soros’s Prospects in the Region

The facts show that Soros essentially had no reaction to all the negative statements about him in the CIS countries at the end of 2003. Otherwise, he would not have continued rendering (already openly) financial aid to the new Georgian president, M. Saakashvili. What is more, he stated that “we can begin implementing similar (anti-corruption.—*S.A.*) projects in other countries of the world.”¹⁴ George Soros’s future in the CIS, strangely enough, depends on him continuing his active support of the Georgian oppositionists who have come to power—the philanthropist must prove he is adhering to constructive values.

In the meantime, Central Asia was continuing to recoil from natural democratic processes, which was essentially “provoked” by George Soros. During Russian President Vladimir Putin’s visit to Astana on 9-10 January, 2004, Nursultan Nazarbaev noted that “controllable democracy has been created in Kazakhstan.” And although by this the Kazakhstan President meant the planned and coordinated nature of the democratic processes, on the one hand, and showed the achievements of these processes, on the other, a policy aimed at adhering to conservative values could be observed. For “controllable democracy” in the CIS essentially “demonstrated” itself in November 2003 when people in camouflage stormed the office of the Open Society Institute in Moscow, thus starting a new anti-liberal revolution.

In the interview mentioned above with the weekly *Le Nouvel economiste*, the Kazakhstan President also noted that “western democracy is possible only in countries with a western culture and with a western mentality, and Kazakhstan is not striving to transform the country along Western lines.” In Uzbekistan, several branches of international organizations tried to show that the demand to re-register these structures with the Ministry of Justice was the “fear of provoking events like those in Georgia.”¹⁵ In Kyrgyzstan, the authorities and the communist opposition had a nervous reaction to the activity of a branch of the National Democratic Institute (U.S.), similar to the Soros Foundation, which made ultimatum statements about introducing amendments into the republic’s legislation on elections.

George Soros is 74. As early as 2001, he began thinking about his successor. If the Republicans lose at the upcoming U.S. presidential elections, the Soros structures will stand firm, at least until 2008 (when the term of the next U.S. president expires). But even if the gloomy forecasts about the fate of the current

¹³ According to some data, one of the main reasons for the denial was that banned publications praising the activity of international terrorist Tohir Yoldosh and religious fundamentalists were included in the literature sent by the local OSI to higher learning institutions, which functionaries of low-level Soros structures were possibly involved in.

¹⁴ During his visit to Kyrgyzstan, George Soros denied the possibility of “anti-corruption payments” to this country. But he admitted that similar payments to the M. Saakashvili regime were increasing the assignations to the Georgian budget. “There is no such need in Kyrgyzstan, nor are there the conditions for introducing such measures,” said George Soros.

¹⁵ This demand was fully in the spirit of the Law on Nongovernmental Nonprofit Organizations, which was adopted with significant help from international experts.

U.S. president are not confirmed, George Soros (with his acumen for “regulating financial markets”) will continue to have an influence on world policy, including in the Caspian region.

What might be the consequences of closing the branch of the Open Society Institute in Tashkent? First, it is doubtful that, with the different levels of socioeconomic development in the Central Asian countries, at least three of them will close their branches of this organization at the same time. (The absence of their unanimity was once more graphically manifested in their viewpoint on Iraq.) Second, there will be the usual re-channeling of Soros funds into contiguous or subsidiary structures. In this event, it is unlikely that any country of the region will agree to the activity of a hypothetically closed OSI being financed by a similar structure still functioning in a neighboring country. This is impermissible with respect to ensuring national security.¹⁶

What steps can the Soros structures take if one of the regional regimes acts “anti-democratically?”

1. Ascertaining the failures of the current political authorities, which will be expressed primarily in searching out the odious features of the official authorities, in particular instances of corruption. By way of example we can present the statements by George Soros, which have political implication, on ensuring the transparency of oil revenue and the statistics of the Caspian countries.¹⁷ (We will remind you that George Soros is financing the publication of annual international reports on oil revenues.)
2. Attempting to focus attention on general interstate problems which are concealed from society due to mental-ethic norms. This particularly refers to hydroelectric, ethno-religious, land-agrarian, and several other questions. Financing projects for “spreading Kyrgyzstan’s positive experience in building an open society” can be qualified as having a political ring (due to the obvious difference in the approaches of the region’s countries to enhancing democratization).
3. Supporting opposition groups and publications. By way of example, we can present the help rendered by the Soros structures to Kazakhstan’s *Assandi Times*, *SolDat*, and *Kazakhstan*, which confirms the likelihood of an identical approach to neighboring countries. If we also take into account the unfortunately frequent negative attitude of the authorities to the advanced trends in political science, sociology, philosophy, culturology, and so on, the simple distribution of textbooks in these disciplines may also be perceived as having “destructive intentions.”
4. Assisting in destabilizing the economic and political situation in the region’s countries, which could be expressed in particular as shaking the financial system. In our opinion, the most vulnerable in this respect are Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. There is also the possibility of intentionally causing a “brain drain” in Uzbekistan (one of the greatest threats to national security). The situation with Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma could also be used as an example for Central Asia, against whom George Soros started a discredit campaign.
5. Conducting joint political campaigns with other western structures. When implementing their projects, the branches of the Soros Foundation cooperate (or could cooperate) with international organizations. (For example, George Soros could find a common language with some of them

¹⁶ During George Soros’s visit to Kyrgyzstan, representatives of the regional mass media focused their attention on his evaluation of the situation in Uzbekistan. He said that his Foundation “can work in Kyrgyzstan, but cannot work in Uzbekistan.” What is more, George Soros accused the region’s heads of state (obviously hinting at Uzbekistan) of attempting “to see their posts as lifetime positions.” The press actively commented on a statement by U.S. State Department spokesman Richard Baucher of 23 April, 2004 in which a negative assessment was given of ceasing the activity of the Soros structure in Uzbekistan.

¹⁷ In Kazakhstan, the Soros structures are implementing the Kazakhstan Revenue Project, which is encouraging a public discussion about the use of funds obtained from the oil sector, as well as other measures, in particular seminars for the republic’s parliamentary deputies aimed at strengthening government control over these funds.

on building a post-revolutionary society in Georgia.) At the same time, it is unlikely that the philanthropist will permit financing of anti-American campaigns in the region's countries (despite the fact that 2004 was declared the "Fight Against Bush Year").

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George Soros is a phenomenon in Central Asia's most recent history. The course of democratic development in the region's countries largely depends on the attitude toward Popper's ideas and the actions of the Soros structures. Desirable tempestuous economic growth is brought about (among other things) by adhering to freedom-loving principles. As experience shows, a strategy of "coexistence" with the Soros structures is needed. Otherwise, recoils, regression, and capitulation to communism, totalitarianism, and other enemies of an open society will be inevitable.
