

Nikita Odintsov

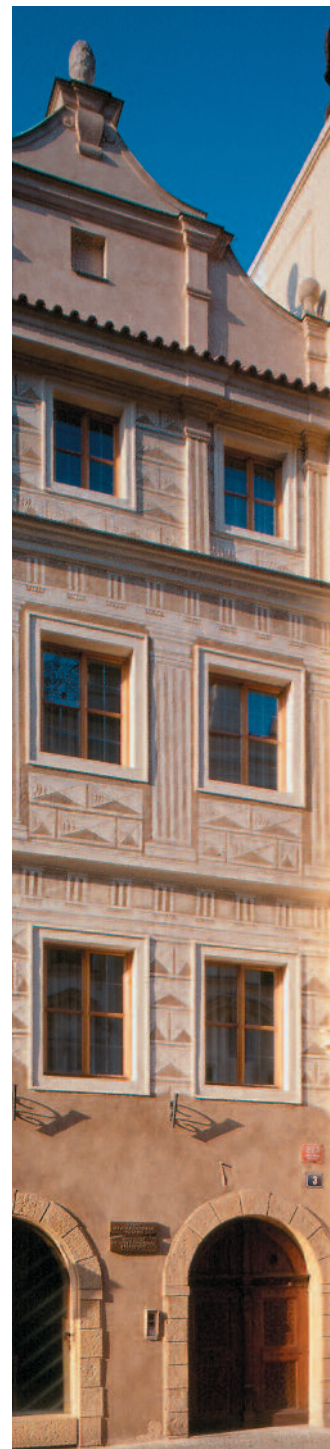
Ensuring the Stability of Central Asia after the 2014 Withdrawal from Afghanistan

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The prospects of stability in Central Asia after the 2014 withdrawal will be influenced by the developments in Afghanistan. Yet the overall fragility of the states in the region necessitates taking preventive measures.

The previous strategies of the terrorist groups in the region allow us to identify a few focal points of strategic importance which must be protected. To achieve this, it is necessary to use private military companies and return Russian border guards to Tajikistan.

Also, the Collective Security Treaty Organization must prepare for possible massive security and refugee crises. The implementation of state social policies can be outsourced to NGOs, which shall refrain from any political activity.



Introduction

Approaching the US and ISAF withdrawal from Afghanistan invokes concerns over the security situation in the neighboring countries and particularly in Central Asia. There is much skepticism regarding the ability of the Afghan National Army and the central government in Kabul to ensure the security and integrity of the state. Their failure in this respect can create a breeding ground for Islamic extremists and terrorists, some of whom have Central Asian origins and might try to return back home. This would exacerbate the security situation in these states, some of which (particularly Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) are balancing on the edge of state failure.

2

Despite the fact that the future of Afghanistan is still unknown, it is necessary to implement the related measures immediately in order to be prepared for the direst development. Particularly the poor border controls and the weakness of the state apparatus make Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan a gateway to the rest of the region for various terrorist groups but mainly for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The situation in Tajikistan is further exacerbated by the continuation of its “warlordism.”

However, if we know the previous strategy of the terrorist groups, it is possible to identify a few focal points of strategic importance that must be protected. They include the Tajik-Afghan border, the two main highways from Tajikistan to Kyrgyzstan, the Tajik provinces of Tavildara and Rasht, and the villages in the Fergana Valley.

The next section will outline the security situation in the region and the danger of the *status quo* approach. This will be followed by a discussion of the strategic locations in the region, which are objects of the terrorists’ interest. Finally, at the end of the text, a few recommendations for containing the instability are provided.

The Current Security Situation and the Main Challenges

According to the expert community Central Asia currently faces external and internal sources of instability. Drug trafficking and the incursion of terrorist movements from Afghanistan into the neighboring states are among the external threats, while the internal threats include poor governance, underdevelopment, popular discontent, domestic radicalization, and the instability of the countries’ regimes.¹ The salience of all of these threats will heavily depend on the situation in neighboring Afghanistan.²

¹ Dynkin, Alexander et al. (eds)(2013): *Challenges to Security in Central Asia*. Moscow, Imemo ran.

It is difficult to assess the impact of the withdrawal of ISAF on the security situation in Central Asia. Particularly the questions relate to the attitude of the Taliban and whether other Islamists will focus their militant activities on Central Asian states. For these reasons it is necessary to hedge against the worst possible outcomes.

Nevertheless, some experts with a skeptical attitude towards a possible “spillover scenario” claim that in the 1990s the neighboring states were relatively successful in their containing of threats inside Afghanistan, and they contained the threats despite the civil war in Tajikistan.³ Thus, according to this logic, today all these states are better prepared and have established capable institutions to counter any incursions of radicals.

It is necessary to hedge against the worst possible outcomes.

However, this “*status quo* approach” has a few flaws. The situation in many Central Asian states is in fact still very complicated, and some of these states are not less fragile than they were in the 1990s. Firstly, the Tajik border with Afghanistan at that time was controlled by Russian border guards. While the Tajik-Afghan border was secured by 18,000 Russian troops in the 1990s, today Tajikistan is able to deploy only 5 thousand border guards along the *whole* Tajik border.⁴ Furthermore, in contrast to the Afghan borders with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which go through desert areas, in Tajikistan’s case the dividing line is a mountain range which is very difficult to secure against illegal crossing.

After the years of political turmoil the military and the police are too demoralized and underpaid to fulfill their duties

Moreover, in contrast to Uzbekistan, which has the largest army in the region and is capable of securing its border, both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have military and police forces in very poor conditions.⁵ This can be easily measured against the enormous amount of drug trafficking that goes through these two countries. Although the main drug routes are known, neither of these states are able or willing to stop this activity.⁶ In fact these routes are also used by terrorist organizations for their penetration into Central Asian states from Afghanistan.⁷ It also seems that the law enforcement authorities and governments in both countries receive significant

² Laumulin, Murat (2013): “Bezopasnost’ tsentral’noi’ Azii v kontekste situatsii v Afganistane posle 2014 goda.” *Tsentral’naia Aziia i Kavkaz* 16, no. 3: 7–23.

³ Radnitz, Scott (2013): *Why NATO Withdrawal from Afghanistan Does Not Pose a Threat to Central Asia*. Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo No. 301. Online: <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/spinning-spillover-why-nato-withdrawal-afghanistan-does-not-pose-threat-central-asia>; and Stratfor (2013): *Central Asia and Afghanistan: A Tumultuous History*. Online: <http://www.stratfor.com/analysis/central-asia-and-afghanistan-tumultuous-history>.

⁴ Makkambaev, Pulat (2013): “Sostoianie pograničnoi’ bezopasnosti gosudarstv tsentral’noi’ Azii nakanune zaversheniia vyvoda mssb iz Afganistana.” *Tsentral’naia Aziia i Kavkaz* 16, no. 3: 61–75.

⁵ Stepanova, Ekaterina (2013): “Afghanistan after 2014: The Way Forward for Russia.” *Russie.Nei.Visions* 71.

⁶ Mankoff, Jeffrey (2013): *The United States and Central Asia after 2014*. Center for Strategic & International Studies. Online: http://csis.org/files/publication/130122_Mankoff_USCentralAsia_Web.pdf.

⁷ Cornell, Svante E. (2005): “Narcotics, Radicalism, and Armed Conflict in Central Asia: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan.” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 17, no. 4: 619–639.

rent from the drug barons.⁸ Generally, after the years of political turmoil the military and the police are too demoralized and underpaid to fulfill their duties properly.⁹

Tajikistan: the Weakest Link

The composition of the security apparatus in Tajikistan is an outcome of a peace agreement with the opposition that was signed at the end of the civil war. Hence, the border guard and the anti-organized crime directorate are in the hands of the local warlords.¹⁰ President Rakhmon's attempt to eliminate these remnants of the opposition led to an armed resistance with a massive escalation after 2008. And to make things worse, this situation was made use of by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other former participants of the civil war led by Mullo Abdullo, who, in 2009, invaded Tajikistan from Afghanistan. The government forces were overstretched and suffered heavy causal-

During the Afghan conflict the IMU and other groups from Central Asia became more resilient and adopted the experiences and practices of the Taliban and other terrorist groups.

ities. In the end Rakhmon was forced to make a deal with the warlords M. Akhmadov and S. Iskandarov, who, in exchange for high posts in the army, helped with the defeat of Abdullo in April 2011.¹¹ However, fighting occurred again in 2012 and the central government is getting more dependent on the local "loyal"

warlords and community leaders in its ensuring of security.¹² This situation is disturbing, as it further undermines the "state monopoly on violence", which only weakens the already very fragile state.

In this respect, Tajikistan's government has to face continuous "rebellions" of local warlords – former members of the UTO – who challenge the central authority. The last major battles took place at the border town Khorog in the volatile Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province in 2012 after the assassination of the general of the Tajik State Com-

⁸ Marat, Erica (2006): "Impact of Drug Trade and Organized Crime on State Functioning in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan." *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 4, no. 1: 93–111.; and Paoli, Letizia, et al. (2007): "Tajikistan: The Rise of a Narco-State." *Journal of Drug Issues* 37, no. 4: 951–979.

⁹ Dynkin Alexander et al. (eds)(2013), *ibid.*

¹⁰ International Crisis Group (2014): *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*. Asia Report No. 205, May 24, 2011. Online: [http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/205%20Tajikistan%20-%20The%20Changing%20Insurgent%20Threats](http://www.crisisgroup.org/~/media/Files/asia/central-asia/tajikistan/205%20Tajikistan%20-%20The%20Changing%20Insurgent%20Threats).

¹¹ International Crisis Group (2014), *ibid.*

¹² Dubnov, Arkady (2012): "Potryasenny vnov' Pamiir." *Moskovskiye Novosti* (349), August 24, 2012. Online: <http://www.mn.ru/oped/20120824/325731683.html>.

mittee of National Security (KGNB) and the government's military response. The military operation ended in failure, and the government had to declare a ceasefire and pledge a military withdrawal in order to reestablish peace.¹³ In two months, however, the peace almost erupted in a new conflict after one of the informal leaders of the Province – I. Imomnazarov, a former member of the UTO – was assassinated – allegedly by the KGNB – In an act of revenge.¹⁴

Another development in the region that stands in contrast to the 1990s is the significant change in the nature of the terrorism itself. At that time newly formed IMU and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) were not entrenched in the local society and largely depended on their leaders. Consequently, as Presidents Karimov and Rakhmon were able to expel them or accommodate them, respectively, the majority of the group members followed their leaders' path.¹⁵ During the Afghan conflict the IMU and other groups from Central Asia became more resilient and adopted the experiences and practices of the Taliban and other terrorist groups.¹⁶ Moreover, it seems that the IMU also participates in and benefits from drug trafficking, and thus it could establish "business relations" with some law enforcement authorities in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.¹⁷

Awaiting Massive Incursions from Afghanistan

Looking at the number of terrorist attacks in Central Asian countries, which is quite low,¹⁸ is not the best way to measure the terrorist threat in the region. As long as the foreign presence in Afghanistan continues, the local radical groups will focus on the fight against the "infidel invaders" because Khorasan has an important symbolic meaning in Islam.¹⁹ But the "Andijan events" in 2005, which were marked by an armed uprising in the Uzbek city Andijan, which is located in the Fergana Valley, prove that unexpected events can emerge rapidly in the region.²⁰

It seems that the IMU is already in the process of preparation for a massive incursion into Central Asia. In the last three years their activities in northern Afghanistan increased

¹³ Yanovskaya, Mariya (2012): "Kak possorilis' general Nazarov i pogranichnik Ayembekov, i chem Eto zakonchilos' dlya zhiteley Pamira." *Fergananeews*. July 27, 2012. Online: <http://www.fergananeews.com/article.php?id=7433>.

¹⁴ Dubnov, Arkady (2014), *ibid*.

¹⁵ Amanbayeva, Aida (2009): "The Collision of Islam and Terrorism in Central Asia." *Asian Journal of Criminology* 4, no. 2: 165–186.; and Zenn, Jacob (2013a): "On the Eve of 2014: Islamism in Central Asia." *Hudson Institute, Center on Islam, Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World* 24.

¹⁶ Zenn, Jacob (2013a), *ibid*.¹⁷ Cornell, Svante E. (2005): *ibid*.

¹⁸ Institute of Economics and Peace (2012): *Global Terrorism Index*. Online: http://www.visionofhumanity.org/sites/default/files/2012_Global_Terrorism_Index_Report.pdf.

¹⁹ International Crisis Group (2014), *ibid*.

²⁰ For a detailed analysis of this, see Akiner, Shirin (2005): "Violence in Andijan, 13 May 2005: An Independent Assessment." *Silk Road Paper*. Online: <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/inside/publications/0507Akiner.pdf>.

rapidly.²¹ Among their targets are former members of the Northern Alliance, so it can be argued that they “are cleaning the ground” before the establishment of their base in the north. The number of penetrations into Tajikistan will also probably increase, but it is hard to measure, since the border is poorly guarded. What is important is that those terrorists who were actually intercepted seemed to have prepared the logistics and supplies in Tajikistan and also probably in the Uzbek exclaves in Kyrgyzstan (which were targeted in the late 1990s and early 2000s). The IMU has already organized raids against Tajikistan several times in the last few years.

The new processes also touch Turkmenistan’s security. While during the era of President Niyazov Ashgabat had good relations with the Taliban, which ensured stability on the border, since the last winter, unusual clashes between the Taliban and Turkmenistan’s border guards can be observed. These clashes resulted in heavy casualties on both sides.²² The clashes happen in the context of the increasing presence of Taliban forces in the two Afghan regions Badghis and Faryab, both of which border Turkmenistan.²³ This development might confirm the suggestions that the incursion into Central Asia is under preparation.

Geographic Patterns of the Threat

Due to their poor border security and the general weakness of their state institutions, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are the most volatile states in the region, and they can thus serve as a gateway into the region and beyond for terrorists.²⁴ According to Professor Mirskii, who spoke to some Islamists in Fergana, their ultimate aim is to establish a *Khalifat* by toppling local regimes in Central Asia and further expanding into Russian Muslim regions – particularly Tatarstan and Bashkortostan.²⁵ But by analyzing the history of the terrorist activities in Central Asia, it is possible to identify certain focal points of strategic importance.

During the 1990s the safe havens and major terrorist attacks against targets in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were often along important traffic routes. During the civil war

²¹ Zenn, Jacob (2013b): “The IMU Expansion in Afghanistan’s Takhar Province: Jumping Off Point to Central Asia?” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 79 (10). Online: [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=40802&tx_ttnews\[backPid\]=7&cHash=6d7dedc9559d3ab7920b0b75ace47129#.UsINcdjN5ew](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=40802&tx_ttnews[backPid]=7&cHash=6d7dedc9559d3ab7920b0b75ace47129#.UsINcdjN5ew).

²² Kucera, Joshua (2014): “Turkmenistan Armed Forces Reportedly Cross Afghanistan Border.” *EurasiaNet*. September 18, 2014. Online: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/70056>; and Satanovsky, Evgeny (2014a): “Turkmenskiy interes Islamskogo gosudarstva.” *VPK 555*, no. 37: 2–3. Online: <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/22159>.

²³ Satanovsky, Evgeny (2014a), *ibid.*

²⁴ Makkambaev, Pulat (2013), *ibid.*; and Syroezhkin, Konstantin (2013): “‘Problema 2014’ i bezopasnost’ v Tsentral’noi’ Azii.” *Tsentral’naia Aziia i Kavkaz* 3, no. 16: 23–37.

²⁵ Mirskii, Georgy (2002): “Tochka zreniya. Central’naya Aziya, Mezhdru Vostokom, Zapadom I Rossiey.” *Aziia i Afrika segodnia* 006 (2002), 42.

in Tajikistan the UTO was located in the Tavildara district near the highway connecting Dushanbe with Kyrgyzstan, which is used today as a main drug supply route.²⁶ A currently important safe haven might be provided by the neighboring Rasht district (close to the city of Garm), where, in 2010, some battles with Mullo Abdullo took place.²⁷ The Dushanbe-Kyrgyzstan highway, as the main “highway of drugs,” also goes through this location.²⁸ A second route goes along the highway connecting Khorog, a Tajik town at the Afghan border, with the Kyrgyz city Osh. It was in Khorog where the abovementioned heavy fighting happened in 2012.²⁹

In the late 1990s and early 2000s the main targets for terrorists were the Uzbek exclaves in the Fergana

Valley in Kyrgyzstan.³⁰ They are important because they provide access to Uzbekistan’s “mainland” and also to Osh; and their population is also very pro-Islamic. Both the exclave of Sokh and that of the city of Osh are also important transport and drug hubs.³¹

By analyzing the history of the terrorist activities in Central Asia, it is possible to identify certain focal points of strategic importance.

The Looming Central Asian Spring

As the previous discussion suggests, the stability of the regimes in power is in question. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, due to the old ages of their leaders, will soon have to go through their first changes of their heads of state. This leads to an intensification of the battles between various clans over who will succeed the current leaders. Despite its ability to seal the borders Uzbekistan is particularly vulnerable due to the unprecedented struggle inside the ruling

family over the succession that threatens to undermine legitimacy of the current regime.³² This weakness could lead the IMU to use the situation and begin a massive in-

Tajikistan and especially Kyrgyzstan (after its two revolutions) are known for their notorious weakness.

²⁶ Stratfor (2013), *ibid.*, and Cornell, Svante E. (2005), *ibid.*

²⁷ International Crisis Group (2014), *ibid.*

²⁸ Cornell, Svante E. (2005), *ibid.*

²⁹ Dubnov, Arkady (2014), *ibid.*

³⁰ Makkambaev, Pulat (2013), *ibid.*; and International Crisis Group (2014), *ibid.*

³¹ Cornell, Svante E. (2005), *ibid.*

³² Dubnov, Arkady (2013): “Gul’nara Karimova – doch uezbekskoho ‘Korolya Lira.’” *Ria Novosti*, November 22, 2013. Online: <http://ria.ru/analytics/20131122/979053536.html#ixzz2pOKo1QYC>.

vasion into the Fergana Valley from Kyrgyzstan (passing through Tajikistan). This plan of attack was actually already used in the late 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s. At the same time Tajikistan and especially Kyrgyzstan (after its two revolutions) are known for their notorious weakness.

The problem is also exacerbated by the fact that the region is in the process of a creeping Islamization, which often takes the form of charity.³³ In this regard, what is especially interesting is the recent activism of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the region, as these states are known for their support of Islamists in the Middle East for their own geopolitical reasons.³⁴ In this respect E. Satanovsky, the president of the Russian Institute for the Middle East, warns against the eruption of a “Central Asian spring”.³⁵ In the light of the rise of the Islamic State, one should also pay attention to whether the IMU or other groups with Central Asian origins would pledge their loyalty to it.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis presented in this policy paper suggests that the current level of security is not sufficient to ensure the stability of the region. The most volatile countries in it are Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The weakness of their state and security apparatuses makes these two countries the gateway into the rest of the region for the Islamic movements that are currently fighting in Afghanistan. In the last few years the increased activity of the Islamic insurgence in northern areas of Afghanistan and also in Tajikistan could be seen. This, in combination with the inherent weakness of the local regimes, makes the security situation in Central Asia increasingly volatile. However, a certain advantage for the other side is that the terrorists’ “handwriting” is already known, and the geography of the region not only provides them with a sanctuary but also limits their activities. Therefore, the following recommendations can be outlined:

1. The Tajik government must establish control over the key infrastructure. Here the Pakistani highway police can serve as an example. Pakistan is also a very corrupt country with a tribal society and an inefficient and corrupt police force. However, it was still able to establish the disciplined and efficient National Highway and Motorway Police.³⁶

³³ Zenn, Jacob (2014): “On the Eve of 2014: Islamism in Central Asia.”; and Singh, Kuldeep, and Sushil Bodh (2014): “Politics of Islamisation in Uzbekistan.” *The Journal of Central Asian Studies* 19, no. 1.

³⁴ Henderson, Simon (2014): “The Battle for Iraq Is a Saudi War on Iran.” *Foreign Policy*, June 12, 2014. Online: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-battle-for-iraq-is-a-saudi-war-on-iran>; and Satanovsky, Evgeny (2014b): “Destabilizaciya Central'noy Azii.” *VPK 524*, no. 6: 2–3. Online: <http://vpk-news.ru/articles/19189>.

³⁵ Satanovsky, Evgeny (2014b), *ibid.*

³⁶ Lieven, Anatol (2011): *Pakistan: a Hard Country*. Public Affairs, 2011: 105.

2. The other option is to use a private military company (PMC) for securing not only the highways but also the Uzbek exclaves/enclaves. Here a cooperation of all the countries in the region is required. Therefore the members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) should consider the possibility of the establishment of a joint venture with equal shares for the member governments. The SCO would then develop the rules of conduct, establish the limits for the PMC and provide finances for the project. This approach can calm the worries of the Central Asian states that Russian troops would represent “imperial domination,” while in many conflicts in Africa, PMCs have already proved their efficiency.³⁷
3. Tajik forces, with the assistance from the PMC, must prevent the establishment of safe havens in Rasht and Tavildara. If Tajikistan is unable to control the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province, then the highway police and/or the PMC shall guard the main highway at least on both sides of the Tajik-Kyrgyz border. The use of surveillance drones with information sharing is also important here.
4. It is possible that the real motivation behind the withdrawal of the Russian border guards was the intention of some members of the Tajik elite to get the trafficking under their “control”. For this reason Russia, along with the international community, should press Tajikistan to return these guards to its territory. Recent developments along the Turkmen-Afghan border also suggest that it is necessary to focus on the “western front” of the theater. In this light military assistance in the form of equipment supplies to Turkmenistan and personal training are essential.
5. In case of more massive battles with terrorists in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan or in case of another revolution it is necessary to be ready to tackle the related refugee crises. The development of the peacekeeping capabilities of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is a step forward in this respect.³⁸ But the Organization must outline clear guidance and learn the lesson from the Osh crisis in 2010, in which the Organization failed to react, and the humanitarian aid which was sent by Russia was not delivered to the people in need.
6. The use of the CSTO or Russian forces in combat operations is very sensitive for the Central Asian states. For this reason, the CSTO rapid deployment forces should be used only in a case of extraordinary danger such as a massive incursion of combat-

Tajik forces, with the assistance from the PMC, must prevent the establishment of safe havens in Rasht and Tavildara.

³⁷ Taulbee, James Larry (2002): “The Privatization of Security: Modern Conflict, Globalization and Weak States.” *Civil Wars* 5, no. 2: 1–24; and Weber, Jeffrey A., and Eliasson, Johan (eds) (2010): *Handbook of Military Administration*. CRC Press.

³⁸ Pop, Irina I. (2009): “Russia, EU, NATO, and the Strengthening of the CSTO in Central Asia.” *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 3, no. 3: 278–290.

ants (as we can see such incursions in Iraq) or in a situation similar to the civil war in Tajikistan. Other incidents shall be tackled by the local forces with possible assistance from the PMC.

7. While many governments are not able to fulfill the social needs of their people, it is possible to outsource these tasks to NGOs. The SCO should consider financing these kinds of organizations with, for example, EU participation. These NGOs, however, must be strictly forbidden to engage in political activities because these actions would only undermine regimes and further destabilize the region. In this regard it is necessary to reestablish a “social contract” between the governments and their societies in order to prevent a shift of the people’s loyalty to radical Islamic groups who are also engaged in charity. So preferably there should be some nominal connection between the NGOs and the governments. Acknowledging the fact that this pattern is not perfect, one shall also remember the experience of the “Arab Spring”, in which the fall of the corrupt governments did not necessarily bring any improvement.

10

Nikita Odintsov is a student of the master s program in “Security Studies” at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Charles University in Prague, and a research assistant at the Institute of International Relations, Prague.

Contact: odintsov.n@gmail.com