

Chapter 8

Safety, Security, and Self-Censorship as Survival Strategies



Aijan Sharshenova 

Abstract In this paper, I will discuss concerns of safety and security, and the resulting reluctant self-censorship as one of the many realities associated with the work of a political scientist in Kyrgyzstan. In doing so, I will combine the existing research on self-censorship and working in non-democratic environments with self-reflection as a local political scientist. In particular, this contribution dives into the intangible fear felt by researchers, who find themselves making difficult decisions on a daily basis, where personal security is an object of continuous and sometimes perceived negotiation with an invisible enemy.

Keywords Central Asia · Political science · Self-censorship · Authoritarian environment

Introduction

In December 2021, I was participating in an online political discussion on the recent parliamentary elections in Kyrgyzstan when the doorbell rang. At first, it was merely a loud noise that distracted me for a fraction of a moment, but few seconds later, I froze in fear. I was staying in a friend's flat in central Bishkek as I was doing an extensive renovation in my own flat that winter. Nobody knew I was there apart from my friend, the flat owner. She never came unannounced. It was after 11 p.m. Bishkek time. This was hardly the time for the mailman, head of condominium, salespeople, local mosque activists, or any other person who was likely to knock on your door without a formal invitation. I carried on with the discussion as if nothing had happened but checked the door afterwards and messaged the landlady to check whether it was her (it was not). I did my best to push away and disregard my fear, but struggled to figure out why this doorbell ring had gotten me so scared. Deep down,

A. Sharshenova (✉)
OSCE Academy Bishkek, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
e-mail: a.sharshenova@osce-academy.net

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I probably knew I was worried that my work as a political scientist might affect my safety and security, but was not ready to face those gnawing concerns.

In this chapter, I engage with the existing literature on both non-local (Dall’Agnola, 2023b; Gentile, 2013; Glasius et al., 2018; Menga, 2020) and local researcher (Janenova, 2019; Norov *in this edited volume*) positionality and on doing research in non-democratic environments, and discuss how the shrinking space for rights and academic freedoms in Central Asia informs researchers’ choices of what to say and what not to say. When we research and speak about our places of origin, we have to consider a variety of concerns. It could be public shame at the societal level that researchers might face (Kudaibergenova, 2019), or the very real threat of repression, physical safety concerns (see more in the next chapter by Norov and in Antonov et al., 2021), and/or post-colonial and neo-imperial hierarchies of knowledge production (Kim, 2019a), which shape our professional paths.

My experiences, as well as fears, concerns, and survival strategies, might not necessarily be shared by all fellow researchers, but they might be something some of my colleagues, and especially those who are local to the region, can relate to. While acknowledging that this is potentially an uncomfortable topic to discuss in an expert community, I am convinced it is important to raise the issues of safety and security of local researchers and explore how it affects their choices around self-censorship.

Safety and Security Concerns

In June 2022, while browsing through Kyrgyz newsfeeds as per my daily ritual, I stumbled upon a piece of news that shook me to the core: My former Applied Politics lecturer, Professor Marat Kazakpaev, had died in hospital after 14 months’ detention in a Kyrgyzstan Security Services detention facility (also known by its Russian abbreviation as SIZO GKNB) on high treason charges (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2022). A few days after Kazakpaev’s death, the head of security services, Kamchibek Tashiev, gave a long interview to the *Litsa* (Russian term for “faces”) media outlet (Litsa, 2022). Tashiev stated that the security services had nothing to do with Kazakpaev’s untimely death and that they “did everything to save him” (Litsa, 2022). Tashiev shifted the blame for Kazakpaev’s death to the medical council, which had released him back to the temporary detention facility after a medical examination and the pressure of being locked up in detention. While he was alive, Kazakpaev requested that the Ombudsman’s office investigate the case of his detention and insisted that he was persecuted for his expert opinion on the Security Services’ border management policies (Ombudsman’s Office, 2022). Similar opinions were expressed by other political observers in April 2022 soon after the detention of the political scientist (Nurmatov, 2021).

I did not stay in touch with Professor Kazakpaev after my graduation as life got in the way of maintaining any social relationships of the past. I doubt he would even remember me as we, politics and international relations students, were many. But I always remembered him as one of the most knowledgeable, professional,

and competent educators in my undergraduate university. Professor Kazakpaev was truly passionate about his subject—Politics—and shared his knowledge, passion, and experience generously with his students.

His death was shocking to both civil society and academia in Kyrgyzstan as it was every local and regional political expert's worst nightmare—persecution for doing our jobs. This was my deep-seated, bottled fear too. It made me slower, less open, often reluctant to share my work or opinions publicly or even behind the closed doors. I have learnt to consider every word carefully, to speak less, to alternate sensitive topics such as the questionable policy choices of the ruling elites with something less “dangerous” like post-Soviet nostalgia, and to take breaks from analytical work and do something else, something less public, like teaching research methods or doing project management jobs.

Safety concerns are very much real for Central Asian researchers. Doing research in more “closed” environments is an emerging body of literature, which often focuses on access to information and fieldwork. Some literature has focused on cooperation, networks, and research framing as a way to navigate safety and security issues (Bekmurzaev et al., 2018). Other publications have focused on a variety of dilemmas associated with doing research in authoritarian environments (Dall’Agnola, 2023b; Gentile, 2013; Glasius et al., 2018; Janenova, 2019). Doing research in seemingly democratic regions seems to have deep-seated and often invisible challenges too, which often remain under-researched.

These challenges relate to physical safety, integrity, social position, financial stability, visibility, and many other factors which contribute to hushing, devaluation, and erasure of the voices of local Central Asian researchers from public domains at the local, regional, and global levels. Norov, in this book (see next chapter), provides a chilling account of how security services can suppress, silence, and even recruit local researchers to promote pro-government narratives or spy on fellow researchers. Antonov et al. (2021) explored the concepts of suppression, acquiescence, and incorporation of academics into the service of an authoritarian state in certain depth. Norov’s and Antonov et al. (2021) reflections on the state of academic freedom in Central Asia certainly resonate with my personal experiences, albeit (thankfully) not to the same extent.

Persecution of academics is not a recent phenomenon. The Central Asia Political Exile (CAPE) database compiled by a research team at the University of Exeter lists at least two academics who had to flee their countries due to grave security concerns as early as the 1990s (Exeter Central Asian Studies Network, 2023). Turkmen historian and journalist Shokhrat Kadyrov had to flee his country in 1993, at the dawn of Turkmenistan’s independence. Given how the political situation led to one of the most oppressive political regimes in the world, his decision was probably the most suitable one.

Safety concerns are very much linked to the positionality of each researcher. Positionality can be defined in various ways, but largely refers to how a person’s multilayered identity shapes and informs their relations with others (Dall’Agnola, 2023a). Safety concerns can be very different depending on a researcher’s positionality and their field or area of study. For example, the concerns of foreign researchers

in the field might be very different from the concerns of local researchers. After all, a foreign researcher might be able to leave the field if the field gets too dangerous or uncomfortable. For a local researcher, removing themselves physically, intellectually, and emotionally from the field is almost unimaginable because the field is home, where everything we care about is.

In addition, female researchers potentially have to take more precautions and develop more sophisticated safety protocols when doing research compared to their male colleagues (Turlubekova, 2023). Security goes beyond physical safety as it can refer to a range of aspects that affect our sense of fear and absence of real or perceived threats. Security can thus refer to and be associated with physical integrity, mental well-being, financial stability, and many other factors which affect our ability to live, work, and function.

Being a female local researcher is accompanied with a wide range of visible and invisible safety and security threats and concerns. At the most fundamental level, female researchers, foreign and local alike, have to take into consideration their physical safety and well-being (see chapter by Dall'Agnola in this book). Other aspects of being a female local researcher can vary across disciplines, career levels, regional knowledge production domains, and many other factors. For example, female academics in Central Asia can face a very considerable pay gap, which might affect their financial security and empowerment (as reported by Suyarkulova, 2019). Or, if they find themselves in early career positions, they could be required under threat of dismissal to share their intellectual products with their seniors (as told by Kim, 2019a). Injustice and inequality (including inequality rooted in the colonial past, see Marat & Aisarina, 2021), as well as alienation and loneliness (both literal and professional), are very much real and not often discussed publicly. Coupled with fears for physical safety, potential societal and state persecution, and shaming, it makes it much more difficult for a female researcher to be heard, taken into account, and listened to.

In my case, being a female political analyst has brought me an unexpected, albeit very thin, level of safety. Women can be disregarded in a traditional patriarchal society and, in my very specific case, it gives me less visibility where I want to have it. Unlike my fellow male political commentators like Norov or Kazakpaev, I am less visible and less likely to be taken seriously by security services or those in power back home.

Nevertheless, to secure both my physical and mental well-being in a more closely monitored society, I have adopted several preventive mechanisms. First, I made an effort to build an extensive professional network of both local and foreign colleagues who might (or might not, as it is their right, not their duty) help me reach out and make my plea visible in the worst-case scenario. As a young researcher, I closely followed the fate of Tajik political scientist Alexander Sodiqov, who was detained during his fieldwork at home in Tajikistan. His friends and colleagues made his case visible (see Heathershaw, 2014), signed a petition, and eventually managed to get him out of the country. I learnt from Sodiqov's case and did my best to stay in regular touch with like-minded people around the world. I also made sure not to be publicly visible when talking to foreign researchers: When meeting with a foreign colleague

in a public space, I tend to face a wall and keep my face away from any incoming human traffic. This is to ensure I am not accused of conspiring with foreigners. Unfortunately, law enforcement and security services can be very blind when they want to and might ignore that these foreigners are PhD students, who might struggle to buy me a cup of coffee, let alone purchase some state secrets (to which I do not have any access, just to make this clear¹). Similar to other local female scholars (Turlubekova, 2023), I have also adopted a habit of reporting my location and day plan to my family when engaged in fieldwork, interviews, or any other work-related travel. This is a habit I fostered as a solo female traveler and it is there to ensure somebody who cares about me knows where to start looking for me if I disappear. In everyday life, I have adopted the practice of self-censorship, which accompanies me in my daily professional and personal lives.

Self-Censorship

In April 2023, I got invited to give oral evidence in front of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Parliament of the United Kingdom. As someone who has hardly ever been invited to their own country's parliament in the capacity of an expert, I was certainly very honored. It felt like I had achieved something—if nothing else, I had made myself visible and heard as both a Central Asian and Central Asianist. However, once the initial excitement subsided, my thinking turned toward what I might be asked about and what I should say. Thankfully, the committee hearing focused mainly on the UK's engagement with the region rather than the political situation in Central Asia, so I felt safe to share an open and honest expert opinion.

However, limitations to what we can and cannot say accompany local researchers researching Central Asia continuously. “Is this going to be recorded?” “Do you know who will attend this event?” “Who else will talk at the event?”: These are probably a set of most frequently asked questions when one tries to organize an expert event on politics in Kyrgyzstan. Publications, participation in conferences, interviews, and even class discussions are subject to continuous internal negotiation between the aspiration to do our job well and the concern for our safety and security. Walking the fine line between keeping oneself safe and doing one's job in an open and honest manner is an exhausting challenge, which has probably pushed a number of brilliant researchers out of the profession in Central Asia.

Researchers arrive at the decision to self-censor due to a variety of reasons. Some would like to avoid criticism, dissension, and problems (Kim, 2019b, 64). Others observe the all-pervasive formal censorship (e.g., as described in Janenova, 2019) and have to factor that in when researching their field. Bekmurzaev provides an

¹ High treason or espionage are the most likely charges which could be used against an expert, a translator, a civil society activist, or anybody else working with foreigners, even though they are very unlikely to have access to classified information. For example, Marat Kazakpaev's charge was high treason—the details of his case are still not public.

account of how it struck him that he had to worry both for his research and its participants: “it became obvious to me that research on this topic and factors of conflict would provoke the authorities’ interest and, in the worst case, lead to my research being obstructed and participants being endangered” (Bekmurzaev et al., 2018, 110). In some cases, self-censorship is dictated by the legal and normative frameworks of non-democratic countries, where states attempt to seize an increasing amount of control over knowledge production (Bekmurzaev et al., 2018, 102). Out of the fear of angering the local authorities, some local scholars see themselves forced to publish under a pen name, as Ruslan Norov’s account in this book shows. In more democratic countries, legal systems are often used to censor too, albeit to serve the interests of businesses and elites rather than the state. For example, in the United Kingdom, the so-called SLAPPs—strategic lawsuits against public participation—have become one of the weapons of the wealthy to censor academic scholarship that does not serve their interests (Williams et al., 2020).

I learnt to self-censor very early in my career. My first publication in 2007 was in an academic journal issued by my undergraduate university press and focused on the state of democracy in Kyrgyzstan under President Bakiev, while President Bakiev was still in power. I hardly remember the process of writing that first academic publication. I do keep memories of that sticky feeling that I had to choose my words wisely and find a way to deliver my critical arguments and evidence without risking the paper not being published. It was probably a clumsily written and wishy-washy piece of work, but it was my first experience of public expression and self-censorship.

Since then, self-censorship has become a part of professional and personal life. In professional life, it informs what I publish and how I express myself, which probably impedes me from holding more honest conversations with my potential readers and interlocutors (e.g., podcast hosts or journalists). I publish less on politically sensitive topics for the same reason. It affects my personal digital life too: I possibly post only one in five tweets I actually write. My social media usage is limited for the same reason: Only Twitter is fairly open, the rest are rather hidden. I mostly write in English and avoid doing interviews or any other public appearances in Russian because I am less likely to be spotted by “those in power” if I speak in a language they do not normally use. My vanity has had to take a blow too: We have a newspaper in Kyrgyzstan which regularly publishes stories about Kyrgyzstanis who have made it abroad—achieved something in sciences, sports, or arts, or just managed to get a scholarship and get a prestigious Western education for free. I am not likely to ever get featured there because I actively hide myself from the gaze of the general public and the state back home.

Conclusion

Before June 2022, my personal perception was that academics and experts in Kyrgyzstan could be critical of the ruling elites to an extent as we were often disregarded by the authorities. Or, at least, one could test the ground and prod the limits

of our “boldness.” Kazakpaev’s case prompted me to take an uncomfortable look into my deep-seated fear of potential persecution for any public expression of opinions. While these fears might never come true and might not be even real, given my limited visibility and capacity to make a real difference in Kyrgyzstan, these fears very much inform the application of self-censorship to my publications, my choice of communication formats and languages, and career decisions.

When Jasmin suggested we could put together a volume of essays on doing fieldwork and research in Central Asia, I thought it could be a chance to reflect on my fears and concerns, which might be shared by fellow political scientists, analysts, and other experts in Central Asia. Writing this chapter has been challenging to say the least, as once more, I had to choose what I could safely say. This book still feels like a “safe haven”—a space for free and open expression because it is an academic publication in the English language whose readers are more likely to be compassionate or non-violently critical.

A political scientist in Kyrgyzstan can choose a variety of career paths. Some choose to teach; others prefer to carry out academic or policy research. Quite a few of us combine both with public engagement in the form of media interviews, podcasts, and analytical and other publications. This part of our jobs requires us to speak up and to comment on politically sensitive events, trends, and political actors. Doing this part can come at a cost. Sometimes, it can be minor, for example, fleeting comments by your concerned fellows that you should probably be more careful when expressing your positions. Other times, it can be irreversible and incommensurate, and simply not worth it.

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Aijan Sharshenova is a Bishkek-based political analyst and a Research Fellow at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, the Foreign Policy Centre in London, and the European Neighbourhood Council in Brussels. She holds a Ph.D. in Politics awarded at the University of Leeds, UK. In addition to her academic background in international studies, she has worked at the UN and UNDP

country offices in the Middle East. Her research interests include foreign policy, public diplomacy, democracy promotion, autocracy diffusion in Russia and Central Asia.

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