

Top of the Class

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In an article published recently in the Central Asian web magazine Oasis, a Kyrgyz journalist expressed frustration at remarks made by the current OSCE Chairman-in-Office, Alexander Stubb, who is Finland's foreign minister, after visiting Kyrgyzstan for the first time.

"As western leaders are prone to do, Stubb described Kyrgyzstan as a 'flagship of building an open, democratic society, ensuring freedom of speech and protecting human rights in the region'," Almaz Kalet said in the article.

Kalet went on to ask why Kyrgyzstan must always be compared with its Central Asian neighbours. It's a fair question.

Certainly, compared with Uzbekistan, and even with Kazakstan - soon to take over as chair of the OSCE - Kyrgyzstan boasts relative freedom.

But when one compares the situation in Kyrgyzstan now with the state of affairs prior to the "Tulip Revolution" of March 2005, it is clear things have taken a turn for the worse.

As a Finn married to a Kyrgyz citizen, and thus with an interest in both those countries, I feel the chairman-in-office would do well to speak to someone outside government circles in Bishkek.

As we always say when training our journalists at IWPR, just talk to the ordinary guy.

To the west of Central Asia, in the Caucasus, Georgia seems to be in the same boat as Kyrgyzstan.

Any of us who witnessed the November 2007 on anti-government demonstrators in Tbilisi would find it hard to call Georgia a true democracy. And anyone who has followed the clampdown on Imedi and other prominent TV stations will agree that freedom of speech is suffering.

Until last November, few western politicians would have agreed that there were any serious problems in Georgia, not least because the situation in Armenia and Azerbaijan is so much worse.

Eight months later, the dust seems to have settled. Remarks by President Mikheil Saakashvili like "democracy is Georgia's wealth" are taken at face value and go down well. There is, after all, the threat posed by Russia looming in the background.

The main difference between these two small countries, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia, is the amount of western attention they get.

Because of its problems with Russia, Georgia is constantly under discussion by governments in Europe and United States. From the perspective of someone living in Tbilisi, it's easy to form the impression that Georgia is the only issue ever discussed in the west.

Kyrgyzstan is a tiny country of whose very existence many Europeans and Americans are unaware. What it shares with Georgia is that both are regarded by western experts as islands of democracy in their respective regions. For human rights defenders in both countries, that is a frustrating characterisation.

In early July, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Tbilisi and reiterated US support for Georgia's ambition to join NATO and for the country's progress towards democracy. When Rice met opposition leaders, however, they sent her what amounted to a request to "take away Saakashvili just as you installed him".

Less than a week after this Rice's visit, Georgia's Public Defender or ombudsman, Sozar Subari, delivered his report on the state of human rights in 2007 to parliament. His account of deteriorating media freedom, violations of the right to freedom of assembly, and assaults on property rights prompted a wave of animosity from the ruling National Movement party.

One National Movement member of parliament, Petre Tsiskarishvili, said the human rights report was "biased, one-sided, politically motivated and incompetent", according to the [civil.ge](#) website.

Another parliamentarian, Levan Vepkhvadze, representing the minority Christian Democratic party, even

accused Subari of “discrediting his office” by getting beaten up during the November 7 demonstration. The logical conclusion seemed to be that despite evidence that Subari was deliberately assaulted because of his position, it was somehow his own fault.

Something Georgia has in common with Kyrgyzstan is that officials in both places are allergic to criticism. As the case of the Georgian ombudsman – a civil servant appointed by parliament itself – demonstrates, officials regard their campaign to build democracy as a sacrosanct mission that is not to be questioned under any circumstances. Opposition journalists are generally dismissed as “unprofessional” and alternative voices are best not heard.

This policy of showing only the positive is sustained by excessively encouraging statements from the West.

As Kalet put it in his article, “compared with our neighbours, our problems seem childish and not serious” to western leaders. But to the ordinary person living in Bishkek or Tbilisi, they do not seem childish at all.

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