

BY RONALD MEYER

THE ROAD TO ALMATY

The 15-foot tall Kalon Minaret from inside the Kalon Mosque, Bukhara, Uzbekistan.

Eli Keene, Columbia College '11, graduated with departmental honors in Slavic Studies. A Harriman Undergraduate Fellow, Keene received a research fellowship from the Harriman Institute to conduct interviews in Moscow for his senior thesis, "COIN in the Caucasus: A New Approach to Stabilization in Ingushetia," which was directed by Harriman faculty member Professor Kimberly Marten (Political Science, Barnard). The Institute's undergraduate fellowship program, which is open

to Barnard College, Columbia College, and General Studies students, is designed to provide research support on a competitive basis to juniors and seniors who have a serious interest in the post-Soviet and/or East-Central European regions. It is expected that students will use the fellowship to assist them in researching and writing their senior thesis, or to complete an equivalent major research project, and then present their findings to the larger Harriman community.

ELI KEENE ('11) AND THE CARNEGIE PROGRAM IN CENTRAL ASIA

Ronald Meyer: You've been with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace for just over a year now, stationed in both Washington, D.C., and Almaty, Kazakhstan. What is the mission of the Carnegie Program in Central Asia, and what is your role in the program?

Eli Keene: The Carnegie Endowment opened a program in Central Asia in 2011 in partnership with al-Farabi Kazakh State University in Almaty. The program encompasses a fairly broad range of issues, including trade, migration, sustainable development, and regional security, to name a few. The overarching goal has been to generate more dialogue on Central Asia's future, both within the region itself, and between Central Asia and the United States.

The program is small—there are three Washington-based staff working under the directorship of Dr. Martha Brill Olcott—so we all wear many hats. I'm our program coordinator, which essentially makes me the bridge between Almaty and Washington for all our programming. Sometimes this has just meant juggling logistics and navigating bureaucratic hurdles, but more frequently it has meant helping to design programming with a mind to what is going on in the region and what impact we are capable of making.

Currently, we're setting up a unique Track II diplomacy effort called the "Network of Experts for Central and South

Asia" (NECSA). The idea is to bring together scientists, social researchers, and NGO workers from all five Central Asia countries, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India to develop and implement cross-border cooperation projects. The project is really exciting, and because I am our one contact point in the correct time zone, I've had the chance to play a big role in our outreach to new participants.

Meyer: I see that you've published two articles this year, one on the Eurasian Customs Union within the World Trade Organization and another on Tajikistan's energy crisis. Could you say a few words about these pieces? What are you working on now?

Keene: The Eurasian Customs Union is something I've worked on a lot during my time in Central Asia. It's a really polarizing topic, which makes it interesting, and it's also a question that looms over every conversation about economic development in Kazakhstan. The article you're referring to was an op-ed I produced for the EUROBAK (European Business Association of Kazakhstan) *Global Monitor*, a business magazine based in Kazakhstan. The piece was very much my attempt to balance the host of legitimate concerns over what the Customs Union means for Central Asia's future with many people's legitimate desire to see greater integration in the region.



From left to right: The Trans-Ili Alatau mountains visible from downtown Almaty; Keene in front of the Almaty State Opera House; watching a game of *kokpar* at the Nowruz festivities in Shymkent, Southern Kazakhstan Oblast. (Photos by Eli Keene)

The piece on Tajikistan was the first major article I produced for Carnegie. It delves into the controversy surrounding Tajikistan's proposed construction of Rogun Dam and Uzbekistan's objections to the project. It was also my first experience publicly wading into international controversy, which was an instructive experience in itself. The article got a great reception among the Washington crowd, followed by a massive wave of ridicule from commenters on RFE/RL's Tajik service.

I'm currently working on a white paper for Kazakh policymakers that discusses technical regulation in the oil industry. The paper aims to analyze what Kazakhstan can gain by adopting international standards published by organizations like the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). I'm still in the beginning stages of the research, but it's been interesting to work on the technical side of the issues concerning the country's economic development. The paper should be published sometime in late December.

Meyer: You received a Harriman Institute Undergraduate Fellowship for travel to Moscow in January 2011 to conduct fieldwork in Moscow. What precisely brought you to Moscow that January and was this work in connection with your senior thesis?

Keene: I wrote my senior thesis on security policy in Ingushetia under republican president Yunus-bek Yevkurov. While I couldn't get to Ingushetia itself at the time, the Harriman Undergraduate Fellowship gave me the chance to interview some of Russia's most active human rights workers in the republic, including representatives of *Grazhdanskoe deistvie* and the Russian Justice Initiative. I also had the chance to interview several journalists, among them Ellen Barry, whose feature on Yevkurov inspired my thesis topic in the first place.

The fellowship allowed me to turn my thesis into a solid piece of research. My interviews put me in contact with people who had been working in Ingushetia for years and thoroughly understood the development of the conflict there. They also exposed me to important parts of the equation that I think I would have missed on my own—things like the effect that women's inability to work due to cultural and religious norms has on the region's economy. It was a great introduction to fieldwork.

Meyer: With the exception of your field research in Moscow, you seem to have avoided the "center" on your various study stays in Russia: Kazan, Yaroslavl. Was that a conscious decision? What in your opinion are the benefits of looking at the center from the outside?

Keene: I think, as is true in most post-Soviet countries, the concentration of wealth and power in Russia's capital can blind you to what is going on in the rest of the country. If I am in a small Russian city, I can always pick up a paper and read what is happening in Moscow. The reverse is not true. So I do think

there are definite benefits to being outside the center.

That said, Russia is a big country, and different places give you different benefits. I went to Yaroslavl because I wanted a truly "Russian" experience. I got exactly what I was looking for, even if I quickly realized that living in die-hard Putin country in a place that was nearly 100 percent ethnic Russian was going to make for a difficult semester. Kazan was a totally different experience, and it was genuinely fascinating to see the split between Tatar nationalism and a general sense of loyalty to the Kremlin. It seemed to be a place that was completely capable of swinging in either direction.

I haven't been back to Russia since 2011, but I would love to see how things have changed in these places after Putin's return to the presidency.

Meyer: In your senior year you won the Columbia Slavic Department's Pushkin Prize for your translation of Andrei Voznesensky's "Parabolic Ballad." What role does translation play in your work? Any plans to pursue another literary translation project?

Keene: Since I'm working between two countries, translation plays a pretty much daily role in my work. I regularly translate letters, grant proposals, and project descriptions for Carnegie, as well as academic articles for professors at al-Farabi University. At one point I was even roped into interpreting at a meeting between a Carnegie Endowment administrator and a senior official from Kazakhstan's National Security Council. That was really a trial by fire for me, since I'd never met with anyone that high up in the government before and never had any experience with interpretation. All told, it could have gone much worse.

Translating the Voznesensky poem was a pretty terrifying thing for me. Russian poetry is such a beautiful thing, and as soon as I started the translation I was overcome by this nagging fear that I would end up mercilessly butchering every part of it. It was hugely rewarding when it got a positive response. Some day, I'll build up the nerve to try another poem or two.

Meyer: You're applying for law school now. What are your plans for the future and how does a law degree fit into them?

Keene: I would obviously like to continue working with the former Soviet Union. The big question I had when trying to decide what to do next was, what approach allows me to do the most practical work in the region? The fact that so much of the work I've done in Central Asia is tied to legal issues (particularly global governance and environmental regulation) really pushed me to go with the law school track.

But as for where exactly I'll be five years down the line—I have no idea. I like to think that if I stay flexible and keep following my interests, life will eventually bring me back to the region.