



Decolonisation of Central Asia

Policy Notes for Media

Decolonisation of Central Asia: Policy Notes for Media

The publication is intended for young experts and consultants, researchers, decision makers, as well as a wide range of readers interested in politics and international relations in the Central Asian region.

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IWPR is an international non-profit organization that provides support to independent media and civil society in countries in transition. It operates in 28 states; in Central Asia, IWPR began operations in 1999.

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Introduction

On 15-17 March 2023, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) held a conference in Almaty, Kazakhstan, entitled 'Decolonising Central Asia: Reshaping Narratives'. 'Decolonisation' has been a topic of discussion in certain circles of Central Asian scholars, activists and artists for some time, and Russia's full scale military intervention in Ukraine in 2022 has provided a significant impetus for intensifying such debates in the region. The issue is very sensitive for Central Asians, and there is no social agreement on the nature, depth and consequences of the colonial past of Central Asian countries. Local governments are also reluctant to openly discuss their countries' history from a colonial/decolonial perspective.

In this context, the event organised by IWPR brought together public sector representatives, journalists, civil society organisations, activists, artists, scholars and researchers to openly discuss the issue of 'decolonisation' in Central Asia. For three days, participants from all five countries of the region and from different backgrounds shared their reflections on different aspects of decolonisation, including language and identity, knowledge production, foreign propaganda, history, gender, urban issues and other similar topics. On the final day of the event, participants also discussed future steps to continue and facilitate dialogue on decolonisation in Central Asia. The conference participants came up with practical recommendations on how to further promote the region-wide discussion, involving different stakeholders and wider audiences. The proposed recommendations are addressed separately to representatives of the public sector, civil society, the media, international organisations and donors. This document is a summary of the recommendations offered by the conference participants to Media.

During the discussion of recommendations for media coverage of decolonisation, participants were divided into two camps: the first suggested open discussion and acknowledgement of the controversy, even if it is traumatic for certain groups of people. The second camp was in favour of avoiding the word decolonisation, which could cause anxiety in the audience, and of discussing it less explicitly in order to avoid harm to individuals.

However, all participants agreed that the issue of decolonisation can be highly sensitive and can evoke negative emotions in people who have personal experience of colonialism or its aftermath. Therefore, the media should be prepared for an open and respectful dialogue. As a result of the discussion, the participants formulated the following recommendations for the media to cover decolonisation in Central Asia.

- Media in Central Asia should establish a common lexicon for discussing decolonisation and determine how to address various events and processes, taking into account the heightened sensitivity to such issues in the region. Central Asian media should demonstrate solidarity among themselves and develop a common editorial policy.
- The media are advised to refrain from using emotionally charged language that may provoke negative reactions from readers. It is important for the media to maintain objectivity and neutrality in their presentation. The media are also encouraged to include different perspectives and opinions, while respecting cultural diversity.
- The media are encouraged to produce extensive educational content on decolonisation theory. In Central Asian countries, there are large populations with a Soviet heritage and the issue of decolonisation has not been widely discussed. Therefore, it is recommended to initiate the coverage of decolonisation with informative explainers.
- The media in Central Asia should report on the process of decolonisation by highlighting the authenticity of their culture, shedding light on issues that were tabooed by colonialists, re-evaluating literature and imperial holidays, and de-stigmatising traditions, groups (such as the Basmachis^[1]) and communities. Creating content through a retrospective lens, with in-depth research and historical explanations, can help readers gain a deeper understanding of current events and approach the information with a sense of equanimity.

[1] <https://www.caa-network.org/archives/24257/basmachi>

- Central Asian media are encouraged to prioritise the production of content in national languages. Furthermore, the use of Russian and English for communication with the global community is recommended, as it is crucial for the rest of the world to understand the ongoing decolonisation processes in Central Asia. Participants also emphasised the importance of decolonising the Russian language, as it serves as the language of all Russian-speaking people, regardless of their ethnic origin.
- Central Asian media should exclude the consumption and dissemination of Kremlin content and abandon colonial narratives. Participants noted the need to stop the retransmission of Russian propaganda in Central Asian countries.
- Central Asian journalists are encouraged to consolidate and create a common space to discuss and acquire up-to-date knowledge on decolonisation. There is a need to educate and train journalists on how to better cover decolonisation processes in the region. Training journalists will enable them to produce content with a decolonisation lens.
- The media are encouraged to create content that adapts to the characteristics of each audience and to change communication channels to reach a wide audience. This can include video essays, memoirs, films, series, games, social networks and even newspapers. However, Central Asian countries are still in the process of coming to terms with their colonial past. Different countries may be at different stages of decolonisation. It is therefore necessary to take into account the characteristics of each audience.

In general, media coverage of decolonisation processes is crucial and necessary for acknowledging and reflecting on the colonial experience. The consolidation of Central Asian media can facilitate this process with less trauma for the populations of the five countries.



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