



# Aleksandr Minkin: A pioneer of investigative journalism in Soviet Central Asia (1979–1991)

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Riccardo Mario Cucciolla 

National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia

## Abstract

In the 1980s, Aleksandr Minkin was a young Russian journalist at the beginning of a brilliant career as a literary and theater critic. During his tours in Central Asia, he turned to investigative journalism, reporting on the unstable circumstances in Soviet peripheries, painting a picture for the Soviet public of the brutal side of Bolshevik modernization, such as cotton monoculture in Uzbekistan, the exploitation of peasants, the spread of deformities and disease in children due to the abuse of defoliants and pesticides in rural areas, widespread corruption, as well as the general social backwardness of the most remote areas of the USSR. In 1988, the magazine *Ogonek* published Minkin's famous piece 'khlopkorab' (cotton slave) – denouncing for the first time in the Soviet press the exploitation of child labor in the cotton fields – as well as other articles revealing the use of dangerous Butifos defoliant, and the spread of illness in the republic. These articles caused a sensation and were at the center of a political debate during perestroika that both thrilled Soviet readers and frightened the Communist party. Minkin was viciously attacked by the official press and endured the surveillance of Soviet security authorities, as well as of foreign intelligence agencies. However, the campaign to discredit him could not cover the scandals up entirely, and Minkin became a symbol of free journalism, and a liberal intellectual figure in post-Soviet Russia, raising public awareness of social and environmental issues in Central Asia that had been officially hidden for decades.

## Keywords

Child labor, corruption, cotton monoculture, investigative journalism, Minkin, Uzbekistan

## Corresponding author:

Riccardo Mario Cucciolla, Postdoctoral Research Fellow at The International Centre for the History and Sociology of World War II and Its Consequences, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Staraya Basmannaya str. 21/4, 105066, Moscow, Russia.

Email: [rcucciolla@hse.ru](mailto:rcucciolla@hse.ru)

## A journalist ahead of times

In 1988, I wrote a short article in the magazine ‘Ogonek’ about the exploitation of the children of Uzbekistan who picked cotton that described how they were hungry and sick, and how the Soviet government poured defoliants on them, like America had done to the Vietnamese. The whole article was about half a page, but the title was ‘Khlopkorab’. I had changed just one letter, turning the pride of the famous Soviet cotton-growers instantly into a condemnation of the brutal, cannibalistic power of the CPSU. Nishanov yelled from the podium of the Supreme Soviet, he complained to Gorbachev and the Gensek called the chief-editor Vitaly Korotich ... then, my life changed just for one letter [...] and the word ‘khlopkorab’ entered the common language. (A. Minkin, 2015, personal communication, 4 December)

During the glasnost revolution, media events created resentment and division in Soviet public opinion, which was increasingly divided and politicized (Gibbs, 1999; McNair, 1991; Urban, 1992). Scandals and tabloid narratives abusing of ‘appealing’ words thrilled Soviet readers and at the same time offered different perspectives of reality. Moreover, quite often these stories emerged from outside political circles or were the expression of civil society, scientific communities, or the intellectual world. A young journalist named Aleksandr Minkin became one of the main interpreters of those times, describing the dramatic situation in the farthest Soviet peripheries of Central Asia. Indeed, his story is an exemplary case study to read the birth of a new generation of perestroika reporters as a founding moment of free journalism in Russia.

This accidental reporter anticipated in his articles many of the debates that would later engulf the Uzbek political firmament, exposing stories, scandals, and critical issues that had never been revealed to the Soviet public before, unveiling some of the most brutal aspects of Bolshevik humanism and inexorably becoming a pioneer of Soviet investigative journalism that emerged during glasnost, while disavowing decades of totalitarianism and official lies.

Aleksandr Viktorovich Minkin was born on 26 August 1946 to a muscovite family of scientific and technical intelligentsia. Despite growing in a nonhumanistic background, he developed a sincere passion for classical and clandestine literature (*samizdat*) and began to frequent the theater often. In his youth, he had ‘no plans to be a writer or a journalist’ and after arduously completing his primary studies in 1964, he graduated from high school and accepted several unpleasant jobs as a laborer on the construction site of the Ostankino television tower and in 1968–1978 in the VNIISintezbelok, an institute that was engaged in obtaining food protein product from nonfood raw material. He recalls as

I had no career ambitions. I had no higher education. I was working in black as a loader and I did everything to earn some money. [...] It was a very harmful job for the lungs and skin, and for the whole organism. The pay was not enough. I had never considered becoming a journalist; I just ventured to the newspaper to earn some extra money. (A. Minkin, 2016, personal communication, 24 September)

As luck would have it, in 1978, Minkin landed a writing position at the newspaper *Moskovsky Komsomolets* (MK) where he published his first articles and literature criticisms focusing on the theatrical vanguards all across the Soviet periphery. In Tashkent,

he witnessed the renewed Navoi theater, the cultural ‘revolutions’ of the Ilkhom theater – the first independent theater company in the USSR – and the first critical signs of crisis of the socioeconomic system underpinned by cotton monoculture, to which he turned his investigative eye. He recalls how

In the USSR, almost all the ‘investigations’ were initiated from above and journalists almost never started a case on their own initiative. If they did, it could relate only to very particular cases: a plant or a store – or better its director, its sales manager, its accountants. In short, we could write about a bad employee, but it was impossible to write about a bad system. [...] In 1978, the Soviet censorship excluded the possibility of writing the truth about politics [...] and I just wanted to write about the theater. Only by accident did I uncover incredible stories about corruption in Central Asian republics that harvested cotton. This set me on the path of my first investigations. (A. Minkin, 2016, personal communication, 1 July)

## Cotton and corruption in Uzbekistan

Under Brezhnev, the Soviet system transitioned to a more peaceful, decentralized, and tolerant pattern of control over the farthest regions of the country. Republics were autonomously ruled by local elites which were included in a system that offered them great benefits while creating a bond of loyalty with the center. During the long and stable ‘reign’ (1959–1983) of the Uzbek first secretary Sharaf Rashidov, Moscow required constant progress from the ‘white gold’ monoculture while promoting huge investments plans to improve artificial irrigation networks, industrial machinery (cotton sowers, harvesters, cultivators), cotton processing plants, chemicals (for fertilizers, pesticides, defoliants), textile mills, and so on.

Essentially, cotton was the effective social, economic, and political strength of Uzbekistan within the Soviet system, and all the forces of the republic were devoted to the cause of ‘white gold’. Additionally, for the 10th 5-year plan (1976–1980), the republic had to face the challenging commitment of reaching an annual crop of six million tons of raw cotton, and the defeat on the ‘white gold’ front was deemed unacceptable. Indeed, reaching this target at any cost was a matter of political stability, legitimacy, and survival for the Uzbek ruling elite at local and central levels. Consequently, the cotton quota could be often reached just on paper while corruption and falsification of cotton figures rose to stratospheric levels and led to the famous ‘Uzbek cotton affairs’ of the 1980s (Buttino, 2015; Clark, 1993; Graziosi, 2011; Holmes, 1993; Riccardo Mario Cucciolla, 2017). In the late 1970s, these dynamics were mostly hidden from the public, while ‘developed socialism’ appeared triumphant, heralding a stable and prosperous future.

At that time, Minkin became one of the first observers to tie falsifications, report padding, and social costs in a comprehensive explanatory framework, describing a republic that had been imprisoned in a ‘cotton trap’. Minkin showed how honors and prizes – an important source of material benefits for the establishment – were on sale and could be illegally bought or acquired through trading and bartering cotton production quotas among kolkhozes and sovkhozes. At the end of the 1970s, the situation went out of control and corruption expanded together with report padding, over-reporting, or falsification of statistics. According to Minkin, the pivot of the cotton scams was in the cotton cleaning factories that received and processed ‘ghost cotton’ from kolkhozes and that

inserted falsified figures directly into the state economic system by paying bribes or staging a ‘cotton carousel’:

A kolkhoz truck arrived, claimed to deliver a quantitative of cotton from a certain kolkhoz, downloaded it, and recorded the figure in the delivery registry. Then, the same truck went around the factory at its warehouse, reloaded another load of cotton – that had been already deposited at the factory – by paying a bribe. It did a round of the building, and delivered the ‘new cotton’ at the same factory. Doing it this way, the kolkhoz had documents that claimed to have supplied much to the state [...] and won orders and monetary awards that were used to cover the costs of corruption. (A. Minkin, 2015, personal communication, 5 December)

Successively, factories and warehouses had to justify deficiencies in cotton production and often denounced losses, robberies, and fires that destroyed the precious – and nonexistent – stock of ‘white gold’. Minkin even witnessed how the source of money often originated from salaries of collective farmers. In 1978, during a business trip in Uzbekistan, he investigated these issues and collected many stories, describing a typically common situation during the payment of salaries:

Too often, workers were forced to sign in the payment registry saying that they had received, for example, four rubles from the kolkhoz’s management. They deceived simple peasants! Then, the accountant wrote figures on the left – for example ‘20’ in order to have a final result of ‘204’ – or, easier still, added a couple of zeros on the right, making it appear that the employee had taken 400 rubles. The difference was always to the advantage of the system because the remaining 396 were put in the kolkhoz treasury and served to fill the pockets of someone at the top. Basically, many *kolkhozniki* were simply working as slaves, forced to sell their labor for some miserable kopeks and often blackmailed by the kolkhozes’ management that – in addition to the salary – could remove other primary services to the workers and their family. [...] The story of Adylov was just a case in a myriad of injustices that afflicted Uzbek kolkhozniki. (A. Minkin, 2015, personal communication, 5 December)

In 1979–1980, Minkin could craftily publish some parts of these stories and to some extent anticipated the judicial course of events in the anticorruption campaign in the Moscow trade offices. At that time, he had to present them as ‘isolated cases’, and he was not allowed to write about a ‘criminal system’, facing censorship and even the anger of political leaders who had a tolerant attitude toward corruption and did not want journalists to publish stories that could discredit the regime. Minkin’s curiosity in the ‘cotton affairs’ was a potential threat that put him in serious danger. He recalls,

In 1979, I was a young and hopeful dupe who did not understand the size of scandals I was facing. In November, I was on a business trip in Central Asia to make theater reviews and to follow leads on some corruption stories. One evening I was in a hostel in Urgench, Khorezm, and suddenly I started to feel very bad. The innkeeper brought the thermometer. I put it under my arm and it indicated a body temperature of 39.5°! I felt like I was going to die. Then, the lady left the room and went to fetch a doctor. Suddenly, the telephone in the room rang. I took the phone and I heard an unknown voice with an Uzbek accent saying ‘*now a doctor will come, he will take you to the hospital, and no one will see you alive anymore!*’ It seemed that someone had poisoned me and someone else knew about this attempt and was warning that if I went to

the hospital I would never exit that place on my feet. In silence, I kept listening to the stranger's voice that indicated that I should 'go out of the hotel, a black car is coming ... don't say a word and jump inside it'. I could not hesitate and I did not have time to think and no other option than trusting the stranger's voice. I had nothing particular with me, I just took my bag, and I went out of the hostel where I saw a Volga [the typical KGB car]. I jumped into the car and we sped like a rocket from Uzbekistan to Tashauz [now Dashoguz] in Turkmenistan. Then, we immediately went to the airport where I realized that there was a plane full of people who were waiting just for me. When the passengers suddenly saw the Volga speeding across the airstrip and me with straight hair like a crazy man, they were all surprised. There, an airport employee brought me a bag full of melons and another full of watermelons. And so, this 'accidental tourist' flew back to Moscow. (A. Minkin, 2015, personal communication, 5 December)

Minkin is convinced that somebody wanted to kill him, the only saving grace being that one telephone call prompting him to flee Uzbekistan – where airports had already been warned to stop him leaving the republic – in a large passenger aircraft that had been waiting 2 hours on the tarmac for him to arrive. Such an incredible one night story verifies the divergences between the central KGB – that was going to launch one of the heaviest investigations on Uzbekistan – and the local one that was protecting the republican establishment. As well, this story recalls the practice of mock executions – a psychological game of punishment and grace even experienced by Dostoyevsky – aimed at frightening the victims. Evidently, the Soviet regime preserved rigid censorship institutions – including the *Glavlit*, the KGB led 'First Department' and the self-censorship mentality – until the 1986 Chernobyl disaster while official lies persisted until the Soviet collapse (Azhgikhina, 2011; Blyum, 2003; Golovskoy, 1985).

Therefore, despite his intuitions – lately confirmed during the mediatic 'Uzbek cotton affairs' (1983–1989) – Minkin was disillusioned by the hard censorship and the lack of effective freedom of expression that still characterized a Soviet regime. Hence, he dropped his ambition to be an investigative journalist and returned to theater. In the early 1980s, he began studying theater criticism by himself and in 1984 graduated at GITIS with a specialization in drama. In parallel, he collaborated with the publishing house *Sovetskii Pisatel'* and expanded his knowledge and networks within Soviet artistic society. Nevertheless, he retained an interest in political issues and had a clandestine correspondence with Western colleagues such as the Swiss journalist Eric Hésli. In 1984–1988, he (illegally) published articles in the Paris-based newspaper *Russkaya mysl'* and in the Lausanne newspaper *L'Hebdo*, writing political notes under a pseudonym Boris Maksimov. Despite his role as theater critic, he was able to read the cultural life of the Soviet Union within its political context, and in spring 1986, he published an important article in *Sovetskaya kul'tura* titled '*Ministerskaya drama*' – 'a Ministerial drama' (Minkin, 1986) – where he denounced corruption in the upper echelons of culture in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan, generating a political earthquake in Central Asia where, in the immediate aftermath, three ministers and several deputy ministers were ousted. Then, in 1987, he became a regular columnist of the weekly *Moskovskiy Novosti* and had a special section (*Afisha*) dedicated to theater, cinema, painting, and music where he enjoyed complete autonomy in work.

In 1988, the theater critic – and accidental investigative journalist – started to collaborate with *Ogonek*, the oldest illustrated magazine in Russia that during perestroika was directed by the editor-in-chief Vitaly Korotich and assumed a more liberal approach,

becoming a symbol of the glasnost revolution in publishing and investigating issues that were being denounced in thousands of letters received from readers all across the USSR (Lovell, 1996). Basically, at the end of the 1980s, *Ogonek* and other magazines – such as *Literaturnaya Gazeta* and *Moscow News* – emerged as the front lines of freedom of expression and glasnost (Azghikhina, 2017; Buhks, 1988), offering a different perspective from the official press – mainly represented by the newspapers *Pravda* or *Izvestiya* – and being in high demand among Soviet readers. These magazines were the first to broach taboo topics such as debates on the 1930s and Stalinism, the war in Afghanistan, drug addiction, prostitution, child abandonment, and other social problems (Dejevsky, 1989: 27–30; Oberg, 1989). Readers were thrilled. The huge literature that emerged on criminal stories related to the ‘Uzbek cotton affairs’ were thus set in this framework. Nevertheless, the victims among the Uzbek people were largely absent from these stories, while Minkin’s articles were again ahead of the times in a new context that allowed him to freely write.

### Denouncing a harmful culture

Parallel to the criminal stories about the ‘cotton affairs’, many scandals about the economic and ecologic consequences of cotton monoculture in Uzbekistan had been published in the late 1980s, and most referred to the ‘ecocide’ of the Aral Sea. Nevertheless, the effects of cotton monoculture in the regions of high agricultural production were even more catastrophic because of intensive overuse of biochemical agents such as fertilizers, defoliants, herbicides, and pesticides that were spread right across fields in which millions of Uzbeks worked. Fertilizers increased soil salinity and often changed its chemical composition while the use of antibiotic agents (such as defoliants) was encouraged during the 1970s to facilitate the mechanized cotton harvest, becoming one of the main propaganda issues of the Soviet Uzbek regime until the 1980s. The most famous defoliant was Butifos, an organo-phosphate chemical agent that left behind a nauseating and unmistakable stench in the fields and villages. Its use was excessive in most Uzbek fields, causing exceptionally high rate of infant mortality (46.2 per thousand in Uzbekistan in 1986). As well, also the 2,4,5-T – a component of the more sadly famous ‘agent orange’ used in Vietnam – was experimented in Uzbekistan together with a massive abuse of pesticides, all in the interests of boosting agricultural productivity. The cotton fever left on average 20–25 kg of poisonous chemicals per hectare in Soviet Central Asia (the Soviet average was 3 kg) or about 7–8 kg of poisons per capita (Lubin, 1991: 56). Nevertheless, the figures were much higher in those rural areas with greater population density – such as the Ferghana Valley with an average of 308 people per square kilometer in 1979 – where ‘upwards of 230 kilograms of fertilizer per acre [... with pesticide] usage per hectare of arable land in places exceed[ing] the safe level of 1.3 kilograms per hectare by 40–50 fold, and the USSR average by 26 times’ (Lubin, 1994: 8). Indeed, the toxic legacy of chemical fertilizers, defoliants, and pesticides produced dramatic environmental and health consequences on the population exposed to these poisonous agents for years, such as the high rates of tumors, birth defects, and maternal and infant mortality in Uzbekistan. However, these facts were unknown to most Uzbeks, and Minkin’s articles were central in public dissemination of the most dramatic consequences of cotton monoculture and their impacts on the lives of Uzbekistan residents.

In 1987–1988, Minkin reviewed theater shows in Central Asia where he met many people and befriended actors, directors, and other local journalists, hearing many horrific stories that were linked, again, to cotton monoculture. Thus, Minkin began to ferret around the major gynecological and obstetric centers in Tashkent and discovered frequent cases of girls born with serious genital malformations (and in some cases with no vagina), of abnormally high infant and maternal mortality rates that were connected to workers who had been exposed to chemical agents in the cotton fields. Nevertheless, he hesitated in putting pen to paper until his return from Uzbekistan. The risks of this kind of work were laid bare when a second attempt on his life was made in 1988. He commented,

There is a famous Russian saying: ‘If you don’t pitch [them], you will be pitched [put in jail], if you don’t pick them, you will be picked [taken out]’. This sentence well suits to cotton that is a ‘particular culture’. In Uzbekistan, I have never written anything about the cotton harvest but I had the occasion to look into the material and to collect many stories and notes. For the very first time, the situation was clear! [...] Much like the plague that silently wiped out half of Europe, I realized that another silent ‘infection’ was affecting everyone indiscriminately. I had to inform people what was going on. (A. Minkin, 2015, personal communication, 7 December)

Once he arrived in Moscow, Minkin wrote one of his most important articles denouncing the terrible scenes to which he had borne witness: *Zaraza Ubiistvennaya* (‘A deadly infection’) appeared in *Ogonek* on March 1988. It denounced the condition of Uzbek scientists working at the Research Institute of Obstetrics and Gynecology in Tashkent, which had basically been ostracized in order to hide uncomfortable truths and prevented from publishing dangerous information in relation to the extraordinary rates of special respiratory and gastrointestinal diseases and excessive maternal and infant mortality, laying all the blame for the ‘abortions, child freaks, ectopic pregnancy, stillbirths and other horrible facts’ (Minkin, 1988d: 26) at the feet of cotton dust and pesticides. Minkin revealed that maternal and infant mortality trends in Uzbekistan were growing,<sup>1</sup> all attributable to the dangerous Butifos defoliant – officially restricted in 1987 – and other dangerous pesticides. Thus, he reported an annual use of pesticides in the Uzbek cotton fields more than 54 times higher than the Soviet average, while this sort of ‘cotton allergy’ was silently claiming victims. Worse still, authorities were hell bent on concealing these facts, and the Ministry of Health of Uzbekistan had forbidden its employees, medics, and physicians to talk to journalists about these facts. Unlike other authors who highlighted the culpability of the Uzbeks themselves, Minkin instead presented the people as the real victims of a system that was cynically inefficient in assessing the costs of cotton on the health of citizens and given to concealing the effects when they arose.

Minkin’s article had a profound effect on Uzbek society and was translated into the national language. His popularity soured and hundreds of letters arrived in *Ogonek* to confirm the facts as told in the article and to add further details. However, parallel to the letters of solidarity, Minkin felt the pressure of a still powerful system that even then could still mobilize propaganda against any inconvenient information that might destabilize or delegitimize Soviet regime. In reply to the heat the magazine had received following the original piece, in August 1988, *Ogonek* published a sequel titled *Posledstviya*

*Zarazy* – ‘The effects of the infection’ (Minkin, 1988c: 2–3) – in which Minkin responded to the charge he had defamed the republic and defended those scientists who had been further ostracized from the scientific community and presented in the official press as slanderers. Thus, Minkin (1988b) gave additional data polemicizing the supposed improvements in the republic:

In 1986–1987, the volume of pesticides was reduced to 36 items, compared to 64 in 1964, including a reduction in types of highly toxic agents from 10 to 6. That’s fine. I will only note that just the list of poisons has been reduced, not the ‘volume’ used. Moreover, one does not need six highly toxic substances to pass to the next world – one is enough. (p. 25)

Minkin also sought to shed light on the particular question of child welfare in the cotton harvest, noting USSR Ministry of health figures that indicated that the republic was still short 87,000 pediatric and obstetric beds in the health facilities and how, despite the usual promises, every year Uzbek high school students – and even young children – were still engaged in unhealthy labor in the cotton fields. This seemed to be Minkin’s major concern.

## **When a vowel makes the difference: The case of Khlopkorab**

Soviet history was no stranger to child labor although the regime was at pains to deny such realities in its ‘socialist utopia’. However, no real progress was in evidence, and Minkin focused on the intergenerational social cost of these labor practices as well as the health risks for these young cotton pickers who were forced to work with dangerous chemicals. In September 1988, the Uzbek literary newspaper *O’zbekiston Adabiyoti va San’ati* published an interview with Minkin titled *Maqola ortidagi fikrlar* – ‘Behind the article’s points’ (Khuzhambardiev, 1988: 2) – where he explained his wish to inform the people about the risks of workers in the cotton fields. Admitting a general problem of misinformation, he then supported the cause of many parents who tried to make their children to stay away from the cotton fields because warned of the illnesses and the deadly consequences of the cotton harvest. His was an invitation to consciously choose to avoid this work, even a call to peaceful disobedience in what was supposed to be the main duty of every Soviet Uzbek citizen. This call was spread in the media – such as *Izvestiya* and *Radio Ozodlik*, the Uzbek version of Radio Liberty (FBIS, 1989a: 55–56) – and was strongly opposed by the party. In fact, the problem of child labor – and other improper ‘auxiliary’ labor forces – was still involving about a million young workers (Bhat, 2015) forced to spend more than 2 months every year in the Uzbek cotton fields instead of learning at school.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, despite official bans since 1986, child labor was tolerated by the party as a last resort to achieve the white harvest at any cost. In 1988, this debate emerged as an inconvenient issue for the party, and even *Pravda Vostoka* (PV) admitted that many children had been exploited, made ill, and even killed in the cotton fields, although these were referred to as isolated cases (Pravda Vostoka, 1988a: 1, 1988b: 4). Differently, Minkin was the first journalist to narrate these events as a systemic problem of Soviet Central

Asia, awakening the collective conscience of the readers about facts that were already known but that had never been presented to the public in such a comprehensive way.

In September 1988, the Uzbek literary gazette published his article *Bolalar etagidagi pakhta* – ‘Cotton is in the children’s aprons’ (Minkin, 1988a: 2) – documenting in a short reportage the weak conditions of young boys working in the cotton fields and highlighting the hazards for their health. This was just the first draft of an article that probably became the most famous of Minkin’s early career. In October 1988, *Ogonek* published – under the pseudonym of Aleksandr Treplev<sup>3</sup> – a very short article titled *Khlopkorab* (Treplev (Minkin), 1988) that became a milestone in the history of Soviet journalism. The title itself was very provocative and disavowed the rhetoric of equality and justice in the country of real socialism. In fact, *Khlopkorab* is a pun that starts from the Russian words *khlopkorob* (cotton grower): without changing the pronunciation, but simply substituting the final vowel, the meaning became ‘cotton slave’. His article reproduced an emblematic picture of child labor through the portrait of Damir, a hopeless boy who lived and worked in miserable conditions as a slave (FBIS, 1989a: 53). *Khlopkorab* became a sensation: for the first time, the Soviet public realized the problem of child labor in the Uzbek cotton fields and Minkin’s popularity soared:

Just after the first article *Zaraza ubiistvennaya*, some Uzbeks proposed that I become a deputy of the Supreme Soviet of Uzbekistan. There was no nationalism and they supported me, a Jew from Moscow, to represent their interests. I had popularity and this was just because I went to photograph the cotton fields and I wrote *Khlopkorab*, which became a political case [...] and a real event. In fact, a normal copy of *Ogonek* cost 50 kopeks but that issue became so rare that only a photocopy of my article could be had, fetching 10 rubles. (A. Minkin, 2015, personal communication, 7 December)

In the aftermath of *Khlopkorab*, the Uzbek unofficial press presented the first statistics of child labor in cotton fields, revealing that schoolchildren commonly spent more than 60 days out of the school year in the cotton fields (Rumer, 1991: 83), embarrassing the communists leaders in Tashkent and Moscow. In this phase of deep cleavages and tensions within Soviet society, the party tried to marginalize *Ogonek*’s position and mobilized the official information channels against Minkin’s articles.

## The ‘Minkin affair’

*Khlopkorab* inflamed a media quarrel that saw *Ogonek* line up against the Uzbek official press that published a series of articles to discredit Minkin’s allegations. On 3 November, the UzTAG correspondent Yu Kruzhilin defined the ‘misuse of glasnost’ disregarding Minkin’s testimony on the use of Butifos and affirming that this dangerous defoliant had been completely banned since 4 March 1987 (FBIS, 1989a: 53–54). Again on 16 November 1988, Kruzhilin blasted Minkin and accused him of mocking the republic with his ‘strong and odorous [words]. Like everything that comes from the pen of this author who seemingly has elected himself to poke fun at Uzbekistan’s open wounds’. Then, he claimed to have found the real Damir (Sharapov) and reported a poignant story of a young orphan who had no reason to ‘smile at the command of an unfamiliar uncle’

who ‘would spit on Damir and his problems from the Volga’s window’. Thus, Kruzhilin accused Minkin and *Ogonek* of writing ‘word for word from Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ and suggested Damir was, in fact, being better treated in terms of food and life conditions in what was supposed to be a ‘training farm’ where the boy lived (FBIS, 1989a: 54–55). The article went on to recall how child labor has been officially banned and described Minkin as a liar who had prostituted himself to *Ogonek*

covering himself in a cowardly fashion under the pseudonym of ‘Aleksandr Treplev’. [...] Minkin and his local sponsors are active for the sake of this – suggesting that we do not have [perestroika]. Those for whom reforms in the republic are a sharp knife stand behind them [...] The hope of Minkin’s inspirers is to destabilize the situation with a lie at a time when things are taking a turn for the better. It would do no harm for the newspaper *Uzbekiston Adabeyeti Va Sanyati* and the magazine *Ogonek* to apologize to their readers for Minkin’s trickery. (FBIS, 1989a: 54–55)

This sharp and well-crafted article used ambiguous arguments, deceptive reasoning, and political allegations against the journalist. Hence, the ‘Minkin affair’ escalated beyond this local media scrap to involve also the apex of Soviet politics while it was even followed from the Western agencies (FBIS, 1989b). The Uzbek First Secretary, Rafiq Nishanov, expressed his disagreement with Minkin’s articles during the Special Session of the USSR Supreme Soviet of 29 November 1988:

There are reassuring changes in our cotton industry. A good crop has been harvested, and without the application of butifos ... Basically with machines. Our cotton growers are proud of this. However, they were insulted when the journal *Ogonek* called a cotton grower a ‘cotton slave’. The cotton growers have never been and will never be slaves. And *Ogonek* ought to burn with a blazing flame and comfort the people with its warmth by inducing them to achieve labor exploits in the name of [perestroika], not to emit smoke and poison the people with its toxic smoke (Applause). (FBIS, 1989b)

The irritation of Nishanov was evident. After committing all the Uzbek energies to supplying the Soviet state with cotton and after a long campaign to normalize the situation in the republic against corruption and malfeasance, the republican party was challenged by a half-page article in a magazine. This frustration emerged even during the Politburo session of 16 February 1989 when Gayrat Kadyrov, the chairman of the council of ministers of Uzbekistan, replied to Gorbachev stating,

our cotton gives the country 70 billion rubles, but we get from the center [just] 1 billion. Previously, 1 million children were used in the harvest, now only 53 thousand. Nevertheless, the press attacks persist against us! (Gorbachev Fond, 2008: 463)

Minkin understood he had crossed the ‘Uzbek Rubicon’, waging a media war that involved politics and the official press on one side and the free press and readers on the other. In his words,

A scandal erupted in its full extent, humiliating Korotich who had been considered a hero of perestroika – but factually he did what the Gensek said – and Gorbachev himself, who began

banging his fist on the table, did not know what to do because I was mentioning people without naming them. I knew that I was writing the truth, but I could not make names. Thus, I was accused of inventing stories. In parallel, people from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan started writing to the *Ogonek* editorial board to support my position, and these letters were so many that were collected in sacks that looked like trash bags. For every magazine, there was a letter office with two women who opened the envelopes and wrote notes. But when these articles were published, *Ogonek* had to hire 15 people because every day hundreds of letters arrived. We had the idea that these articles were revolutionary for Central Asians because they were finally feeling free to read the truth and to express their concerns. Especially after Nishanov's words and Gorbachev's anger, the official press started to publish more and more articles that contradicted the use of defoliants, stating that all that I had written was a lie. It was madness. The powers that were discrediting my job. (A. Minkin, 2015, personal communication, 7 December)

In this phase, Minkin's attitude was effectively challenged by the mobilization of propaganda by the Soviet regime. Nevertheless, these articles were awakening the consciousness of the people who, in turn, began to show sympathy and solidarity with the journalist. Minkin recalls how

Readers confirmed the facts I was writing. [...] People from Uzbekistan started to sympathize with the *Ogonek* investigations and, at that time, thousands of letters arrived in the editorial staff to denounce other facts, to demand for further investigations and even to provide evidence of the stories that we were publishing. Between the thousands of pieces of mail, an anonymous letter arrived in early December [1988]. Inside there was a message pleasing me to be at Domodedovo airport to wait for a person arriving from Tashkent. My curiosity was deeper than my fear, I jumped on a train and I went there. I arrived at the location indicated in the letter and suddenly a person came and gave me an envelope. Without saying a word, that person disappeared. I could see that there was no money inside because the envelope was too thin. I run into the train and I opened that mysterious message. I was speechless! There was an official document of a kolkhoz that had been posted on the bulletin board: It still had the marks of glue on all four sides. It was the official order of defoliation using butifos. And it was signed, stamped etc. (A. Minkin, 2015, personal communication, 7 December)

Despite the official (or at least formal) reprimands of the *Ogonek* executives, in December 1988, the magazine published a two-page-long article titled *Do i posle aplo-dishmentov* – 'Before and after the applause' (Ogonek, 1988) – to defend Minkin's honesty, replying to the allegations made by Kruzhilin in the articles appeared in PV that accused Minkin of being a specialist in 'the fabrication of spiritual pesticides which do not poison the body, but the soul', and that 'A. Minkin and the editorial staff started a rumor poisoned by pesticide'. *Ogonek* replied that 'it is impossible to argue with Yu. Kruzhilin. His tone is disgraceful and his expressions are insulting. But we must prove to our readers that we have not been misleading them'. Then, the response proceeded dismantling word by word the PV articles and published evidence about the use of Butifos and its toxicity, marking how the ban was not effective and even reproducing the order no. 230 for the 'Pakhtaaral' Sovkhoz–Tekhnikum of 3 September 1988 that testified the still intensive use of Butifos. Then, the magazine showed the existence of an UzTAG directive that ordered the reproduction in the national press of Kruzhilin's

article, denouncing the practice at national and local levels to publish similar articles, and alleged letters from the readers who had the same narrative tones to discredit Minkin (FBIS, 1989b: 85).

This long defense of Minkin's work was a first won battle in a longer war with the official press – and above all PV – which kept accusing *Ogonek* of misleading information and creating 'a generalized image, voluntarily or not, of a people evilly torturing their children and depriving them of their childhood, schooling, rest, and even normal nutrition' (FBIS, 1989b: 87). This narrative was in line with the Nishanov's tendency to present any further criticism to the republic – which was at the center of the scene during the 'cotton affairs' – as a negation of the 'normalization course' or as an offense to Uzbek national dignity (FBIS, 1989b: 85). While Minkin was effectively becoming a symbol of free journalism in USSR and earned sympathy in liberal circles, the official Uzbek press kept accusing him of instigating discontent in his articles, defaming the positive improvements in the republic, fomenting political passions, creating a false impression of the economy, ecology, and cultural life in Uzbekistan and even being responsible for inflaming interethnic tensions during the Ferghana events of June 1989 (Pravda Vostoka, 1989: 8).

## Conclusion

Therefore, Aleksandr Minkin, a theater critic who wrote about sensitive social problems in Uzbekistan, was at the center of a political and media firestorm. This accidental reporter was the first journalist to reveal to the Soviet public some of the most tragic aspect of Bolshevik modernization related to the imposition of cotton monoculture in Uzbekistan and its impact on public health. His case was one of the major and most debated discussions that emerged during the perestroika period, in the press, in the media, and in the unofficial channels of information. The Russian sociologist Lev Gudkov comments that the real revolution was not only in the stories themselves but even came

from the acknowledgement that has been given from the higher stands of politics and civil society [...] The possibility to discuss about such sensitive topics was the most important fact. [...] Basically, only the people living in Central Asians knew these facts and nobody in Moscow was imagining what happened there. These information campaigns showed the real situation about the war in Afghanistan, drug addiction, corruption, organized crime etc. These magazines were able to avoid the censorship – that was still effective – and were finally making connections among facts. Something that until a few years before was impossible because newspapers were forced to treat the cases as sporadic and isolated. These magazines were thus awaking the consciences of readers to facts that were already known but had not been analyzed systematically. (L. Gudkov, 2015, personal communication, 24 November)

After the Soviet collapse, Minkin kept his main job as theater critic and worked as a journalist for the magazines *Stolitsa*, *MK*, and *Novaya Gazeta* for which he also wrote a series of important articles about corruption in the upper echelons of the Russian Federation and books on literature and politics. Today, he is a well-known journalist and political commenter, famous for his letters to the President (Minkin, 2007), his satirical opposition and photomontages which mock the Russian establishment, while he is

considered one of the most liberal faces of Russian journalism and collaborates with *Ekho Moskvy* and *Radio Liberty*.

Despite his articles about Uzbekistan having been substantially forgotten by the younger Russian memory, his legacy is still important for a generation of perestroika youngsters who believed in the liberal changes of the 1980s. He was after all the first 'accidental' reporter, bringing a delicate problem to public attention in a country in transition and contributing to freedom of information and the press in Russia and in the Soviet Central Asian region. In fact, this story shows how a virtually 'foreign' theater critic was able to read the world around him and is a great testament to the years of perestroika and the effective level of freedom among citizens who were finally at liberty to express their thoughts, whether they were right or wrong. Thus, Minkin concludes,

Thanks and fame came from the readers, while from the top I just received recriminations ... the latter floated away while the first remained. All the official Central Asian newspapers wrote that I was simply an 'enemy', while from people I got so many 'Rakhmat', calling me 'Minkin-Aka' [...] An investigator is a bad character. I just wanted to know the structure of the society and its dynamics and to present these stories to the public. [...] I was not claiming to change the world. I just wanted to narrate about important issues that could sensitize the future generation of Uzbeks. However, to know what was the effect of that rowdy media campaign, we have to go back to Uzbekistan in October and see if the kids are in school or in the cotton fields. (A. Minkin, 2015, personal communication, 7 December)

Although perestroika having been generally analyzed as a failed revolution, the work of some brave journalists did contribute to a real opening in Soviet society in terms of information, public debate, and freedom of thought and, to many extents, becomes a test to read the evolutions of a changing regime. The social and environmental problems publicized by Minkin had been generally underestimated in West where the self-censorship of intellectual groups and leftist parties avoided to criticize the country of real socialism in these systemic aspects, while presenting the fight against some critical problems as a sign of moral integrity of the system. This Andropov's legacy lasted until the Chernobyl disaster, after which glasnost became effective, and even journalism changed its attitude evolving from being scandalistic literature at service of the regime to a free and open critique of a moribund system.

Indeed, after 1986, Soviet journalists could freely present the world for what it was and Minkin's story becomes a useful example to read the transformation of the perestroika era. His case also provides an effective survey of the legacies, the impact, and the disillusion of that liberal and dissenting generation of journalists grown in the 1980s: Glasnost was probably the first – if not the only – truly liberal period for Soviet journalism. However, its influence in Central Asia had largely disappeared (Shafer, 2011: 29) whereas Uzbekistan 'ranks among the worst in the world for press freedom' (Freedman, 2011: 9). In Russia as well, the glasnost generation of free journalists was undoubtedly the most disappointed by the subsequent tightening of the scope of journalistic freedom endorsed by the Kremlin and became the most exposed to violence, murders, obstacles, and increasing pressure from the authorities in the 1990s and 2000s while witnessing the impairment of that media revolution. Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the 2014 Ukrainian

crisis, these liberal and dissenting journalists are much more involved in fighting Putin's neo-authoritarianism (Slavtcheva-Petkova, 2017), becoming again frontliners in defense of freedom of press and information.

Evidently, history of Soviet journalism is an important litmus test through which it is possible to read the developments of an opening society, and Minkin's and others' contribution is undeniable in challenging the ideological – or dogmatic – lies of the Soviet regime, in developing a civic consciousness, in informing people, and in giving them the possibility to critically and freely judge while laying the foundations for a more democratic society.

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### ORCID iD

Riccardo Mario Cucciolla  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5948-5311>

### Notes

1. At the end of the 1980s, infant mortality has been estimated at 118 deaths per 1000 births in some intensive agricultural regions of Uzbekistan. The Soviet average was 25.4 (Akiner, 1990: 221).
2. Minkin recalls,

The level of education was terrible, especially in the provinces. I remember when I went to visit a tenth-grade class in a school near Samarkand. I wrote on the blackboard  $7 \times 8 = ?$  and no one in a twenty-five student class could answer a question that was supposed to be easily solvable by second graders. And by asking students what they did in the previous autumn, they said that they had harvested cotton, responding with a terrible accent. I asked a student to write it on the blackboard. The sentence was ‘я убираю хлопок’. (I pick cotton) and he made three mistakes in a simple three words sentence that he was supposed to know. Evidently, there was a big problem in their educational system. [...] In Uzbekistan, as throughout the USSR, the school year began on September 1 by law. But in Central Asia no school opened until cotton was on the plants. And sometimes they began the lectures in December, while already in March it was necessary to sow cotton. Basically, illiteracy was catastrophic because the students always had to work in the fields. (A. Minkin, 2015, personal communication, 7 December)

3. Minkin signed the article Aleksandr Treplev, a tribute to Konstantin Gavrilovich Treplev, a character in Chekhov's *Seagull*. In that issue of *Ogonek*, Minkin already had an article titled *Aktorskaya birzha* (Actor Exchange). *Ogonek* had an editorial policy prohibiting two articles

being published by the same author in the same issue, hence the need to use a pseudonym for one of them. The journalist had wanted to sign *Khlopkorab* with his name and to use a pseudonym for the literary piece. Unfortunately, the article had already gone to press because the middle of the magazine was typically printed a week earlier than the first pages. It was too expensive to reprint the whole circulation. As Minkin commented, ‘for me this solution was a big disappointment. However, everyone knew that the author of *Khlopkorab* was me and in the following numbers of *Ogonek* my name was restored’ (A. Minkin, 2016, personal communication, 1 July).

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## Author biography

Riccardo Mario Cucciolla is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at The International Centre for the History and Sociology of World War II and Its Consequences at the National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow. In 2017, he obtained a PhD in political history at IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca defending a thesis entitled “The Crisis of Soviet power in Central Asia: The ‘Uzbek Cotton Affair,’ 1975-1991” and also taught Russian History and Politics at LUISS university in Rome.