

Academic (Online) Conference  
**Value Transformation  
in Central Asia**

16-17 October, 2020  
Conference Rapporteur: Dr. Michael Lambert

Academy Papers #6

Academic (Online) Conference

# Value Transformation in Central Asia

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## Introduction

The conference of 16-17 October 2020, organised by the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan in co-operation with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Germany, was held online via the ZOOM platform, bringing together more than 42 participants from various locations. The event was held in English and aimed to address the issue of value transformation in Central Asia, a complex contemporary thematic covering questions related to the relationship of individuals to political structures, the influence of media, nationalism, the relationship between neighbouring countries in this region, as well as the role of environment, religion, and gender in social structures.

Due to their closeness to Russia, the People's Republic of China, and the Middle East, Central Asian societies are torn between competing influences and cultures. In this respect, the conference, which brings together many participants from the Western world, and relates to fundamental themes such as the respect for Human Rights and Democracy, contrasts with the geopolitical context, which essentially refers to the growing influence of Beijing and Moscow in this part of the globe. The conference must therefore be analysed in a more international framework and lead to a deeper debate than the name «Value Transformation in Central Asia» suggests. The purpose of the conference is to discuss how the implementation of Western values - in particular Democracy and the principles of equality between individuals - can be achieved outside the geographical proximity of the Western world.

The conference was successfully held over two days, with the number of participants remaining the same and without technical difficulties despite the simultaneous participation of guests, some of whom were located in Western Europe and the rest in Central Asia.

This report relates the content of the conference and explains the position of the participants, and must be understood in the contemporary geopolitical context that gives it its full meaning. It describes the mosaic of values that varies from one country to another due to the relationship of each Central Asian country with its neighbours, affecting the perception of Western values that were the main focus of the conference.

The conference was organized in cooperation with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Kyrgyzstan and was generously funded by the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs.

## On the Question of Democracy in Central Asia

Following the introduction by the Director at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, the debate opened on the core topic of Democracy, in the light of recent events in Kyrgyzstan. In this context, the Director did not fail to acknowledge the participants who attended the event from various countries, implicitly underlining the significance of new technologies and access to the Internet as a means of debating ideas and providing access to information. More than three decades after the fall of the USSR, the fear of a return of autocracy is present in the discourse, and the whole matter is concerned with how to establish values that support the promotion of democracy in Central Asian societies surrounded by countries with autocratic tendencies.

In addition to this, the contemporary context and the Covid-19 crisis, which limits individual liberties—namely the movement of people—undermines democratic ideals and provides an opportunity for arbitrary restrictions under the cover of health protection. Furthermore, as the correlation between democracy and the economy is a tangible reality, the economic consequences may lead to a rise in populism and radical tendencies, which would undermine democracies in Central Asia.

The DAAD Associate Professor at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek established the context for the Keynote I «*Value Transformation and Democratization in Global Perspective*». She elaborated on the cultural factor that needs to be taken into account, one question being to establish whether there are common values in different Central Asian countries. The question of local political actors is of primary importance, as is the fight against corruption. Corruption remains the main problem in the region and hinders equality before the law and leads to a feeling of inequality and spoliation, and hinders equal opportunities that are no longer based on qualifications.

The presentation of the first participant during the Keynote I reinforces the apprehension and confirms that Covid-19 can enhance the process of autocratisation. In her presentation, the DAAD Associate Professor also demonstrated a trend towards the return of autocratic regimes around the world, especially in Latin America and Russia. Following the same methodology, the results presented suggest that Kyrgyzstan is an exception in Central Asia and by far the most democratic society.

The role of the media and journalists was also highlighted, as they are the backbone of the national debate and provide information to citizens. This leads to the underlying question of who is in charge of the media and how to preserve their autonomy and the access to them, which in turn raises the underlying issue of funding and language of use (Russian versus national languages) and the segmentation between large cities and rural areas.

In many ways, the first presentation has been an introduction to the next presenter who mentions the use of computers and smartphones by citizens allows them to influence a whole nation, calling into question the previous relationship between the media and the governments in Central Asia.

A recurring characteristic is that political leaders are not able to control all the information and data circulating on the Internet and social networks, which leads to more democracy but also more risk, as evidenced by the presence of fake news and the rise of populism throughout the world. It should be added to this that elections do not make a country a democracy, since a true democracy is when the citizens are in charge permanently, not only at the time of the vote.

The question of equality and distribution of wealth is also central as poverty leads to a pattern of survival and does not leave time for social reflection and conceptualisation of the importance of living in a democracy compared to an autocratic system.

## **Media and the Internet**

The debate was resumed with the second panel on «*Autocracies on the Rise? Experience and Realpolitik in Central Asia*» which brought together speakers from the Open Society Foundation and the Central Asia Barometer.

During his intervention, one speaker mentioned that many citizens do not feel able to influence on a large scale, but are convinced that they can have an impact on a smaller scale. This reasoning is important because the empirical scheme shows that people who get involved on a small scale feel able to have a larger influence (small steps theory).

The question of language also returns with a characteristic of Central Asian societies where there is persistent fragmentation between the large cities and the rural communities, often reflected in the use of Russian in cities. This element is of crucial importance because it implies that citizens in urban areas listen more to the Russian-speaking and international media, while those in the countryside have a more national outlook.

The next presenter underlined that democracy and liberal values are developing in Uzbekistan in contrast to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and adds that economic matters are more prominent for the inhabitants than democratic issues. The macroeconomic environment remains the main source of concern for citizens throughout Central Asia, which confirms the first speaker's apprehension.

The last presenter agreed with the two previous presentations and added that access to the Internet and foreign media is essential in Central Asia because it allows for quality debate. He added that the economic crisis linked to Covid-19 will have consequences on the democratic process which are still difficult to assess. The algorithms on social networks raise the question of «hybrid media» and the inhabitants prefer conspiracy theories rather than technocratic discussions.

Another speaker pointed out that the internet does not necessarily lead to more democracy and pushes some citizens to live in bubbles, deciding to reject what they do not want to hear about.

Questions from participants focused on the role of the internet in the democratic process, and speakers underlined that the development of civil society in Central Asia will ultimately lead to more democracy.

The DAAD Associate Professor raised the question of Beijing's role in this process, as it appears to be missing, despite its geographical proximity and economic importance in Central Asia. One speaker believes this question will require an in-depth study, in contrast to another one who considers Beijing more active than in previous years but seems to limit its influence to the economic sector, as Chinese soft power seems to have less influence than that of the Western world.

## **Central Asia or Central Asians? The Question of Human Rights and Universal Values**

The second day of the conference brought together a comparable number of participants as the previous one, and following the same dynamics. The DAAD Associate Professor opened the discussion on the topic of values in Central Asia. This is a key issue given that since the end of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have evolved differently. The question is therefore to know what is similar and dissimilar in each of these nations to understand the underlying reasons for their respective differences.

The first panel was composed of speakers from the World Value Survey (University of Vienna, Austria) who presented the results of the World Value Survey for Central Asia. The presentation deserves a report given the quality and variety of the results obtained. The main points however remain similar to the findings of the previous day and life happiness stays low in Central Asia as a whole, the difficulty being to understand the reasons for these results (economy, political structure, other?).

The main values that prevail are those of conservatism in its comparison with Western countries. In this respect, having a family is a mark of achievement that outweighs financial success, and sexual transformations, including the subject of homosexuality, are taboo in all Central Asian nations.

One presenter did not fail to point out that values such as Democracy and women's emancipation are inter-connected, which raises the question of women's empowerment in conservative societies. However, she also does not omit to add that secular values can coexist with democratic concepts, and in this sense it is not necessary to embrace identical Western concepts but to adapt them in a different environment.

According to the results, some citizens are apprehensive about talking about politics including in the private sphere, which raises the question of fear of the political regimes in place. In Tajikistan, the inhabitants seem to prefer to confine the political debate to close circles.

The question of independent variables and methodology remains, as another speaker mentioned, and the results sometimes raise more questions than answers. She did not fail to point out that a detailed explanation is possible but outside of the conference framework because of the magnitude of the variables used in the World Value Survey.

During the next presentation on «*Human Rights in Value Transformation in the post-soviet realm*» a presenter confirmed the transition of Central Asia over the last decades and decided to focus his attention on Uzbekistan. According to him, law students must defend society and participate in the reflective spirit, as the government is sometimes not the one to succeed in doing so. We can thus see all the ambivalence in Uzbekistan where the «State is not always the protector of human rights, unlike the West, but sometimes the detractor of these rights». With regard to this, human rights are often considered to be an external influence, which is detrimental to their universal character and confines them to the rank of external or even antagonistic values, which proves to be detrimental to their dissemination.

Another presenter argued press freedoms have increased in Uzbekistan, which sends positive signals for the country, although there are still problematic elements such as inhabitants who reside in the country without citizenship. This is all the more positive as the improvements seem to come from the government itself, which shows signs of good leadership that suggest positive changes are gradually being put in place.

A presenter from the University of Tartu decided to focus his attention on the issue of universality. He argues there are different interpretations of what human rights are. As such, he indicated that the People's Republic of China, Russia and European countries all claim to respect human rights. The notion of universality therefore stepped away from the previous approach and raised the debate to a more philosophical level. As such, if human rights values are not universal, what model could be applied to Central Asian societies? The Occidental, Chinese or Russian model?

A fear that quickly emanates is that each country claims to respect human rights to have a positive public image, but to what extent does the reality match the actions on the ground and what about the real protection provided by governments? The presenter reminds us that Central Asia governments are the promoters and the detractors of human rights, which is a paradox.

A student participating in the conference made the point that those involved in the promotion of democratic values and human rights are often referred to as «Westerners» by opposition to the locals. This leads to confrontations between those who claim to be «nationalists», i.e. who disagree with the «progressives» who are subject to external influence(s).

## Value Transformation between China, Russia, the Middle-East and the West

The last panel on «*Is there a Value Transformation in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan*» began with a speaker mentioning the role of education in the process of establishing strong democracies and ensuring respect for humanity, although he also noted that obtaining a diploma is more important than the quality of the diploma itself. Therefore, studies are not a means to understand the world or to learn to bring something to the society, but rather a survival tool in a competitive environment.

The OSCE Academy Professor added that Kyrgyzstan is in a phase of profound changes and his presentation mentioned the Soviet Union had a major impact on societal and social structures with significant economic developments. However, it appears that the economic development desired and implemented by Moscow has not been as considerable as the social model, which remained almost the same. His presentation then raises the question of whether economic development was done too rapidly or should have been done differently on a regional level.

The role of religion, and Islam in particular, is therefore a major piece of evidence of the resilience of Central Asian societies to Soviet influence, and is a component of identity that is sometimes entering into altercation with neighbouring countries such as China and Russia. The complexity of Central Asia is therefore to succeed in adapting external influences, and in particular Western values, to Muslim societies.

The OSCE Professor underlined the combination of identities in Central Asia with: nationalism specific to each nation state; religion (Islam); universal and international values; values from the post-communist world; thereby confirming the variety in Central Asian countries.

China also seems to have an unexpected influence in all countries. As such, one presentation mentioned a feeling of Sino-Phobia in Kyrgyzstan. Beijing's presence is well established on an economic level, however soft power does not seem to be able to develop in Central Asia for a multitude of reasons.

Ultimately, there is a heterogeneity of values in this corner of the world, with each country having its approach, confirming the idea of «Central Asian societies» rather than a single standard model. Generations have different perceptions of values, especially those who lived during communism and people born afterward. The relationship between men and women is also undergoing change, which seems to continue a process that began during the Soviet period, although Islam influences gender equality.

Besides, there are disparities between urban and rural areas, with the use of Russian and local languages, but also in lifestyle, especially nomadism versus a sedentary life. Differences are widening between the champions of human rights and the nationalist radicals. The Western opposition between liberals and conservatives takes on a very different dimension in the four countries - Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan - in that it is not a question of values but nationalism with those who embrace the idea of internationalisation against regionalism.



Finally, the presentation concluded with this question of values and geopolitics. In this sense, do we choose values in our society or is it geopolitics that influences our perception of the world? This aspect is essential because it brings us back to the beginning of the conference and to the topic itself. If values are a matter of geopolitics, can we then try to measure them in Central Asia based on Western standards, or should we think of them on a more Russian or Chinese framework, or allow Central Asian societies to try to find their values in a post-Soviet context?

In any case, it appears that there are factors that impact on the implementation of values. These include strong or weak central governance and decentralization. Political instability also hinders the establishment of new standards. Finally, the development of values cannot take place without the financial means, echoing the paradox that the implantation of Western concepts, given the current context with China's growing economic influence in Central Asia, will probably take place with the indirect economic assistance of Beijing. It is clear from the conference that Central Asia will be economically dependent on Beijing in the future, and the development of Western soft power will rely on Chinese capability to increase the prosperity in Central Asian societies.

## Conclusion

As the the conference came to an end, more questions were raised than answers provided. As such, the geopolitics of Central Asia with Islam, the economic influence of China, the historical presence of Russia, and Western soft power suggest that a specific model remains in this part of the World. The question that emerged is therefore to know how and if the countries of Central Asia can develop outside the influence of these different worlds - Western, Russian, Chinese, and Middle Eastern - and whether the so-called universal values can be developed differently.

The DAAD Associate Professor concluded on the elements discussed, and then addressed the question of change at a unique moment in the history of mankind with the Covid-19 crisis. As the conference ends with participants from all over the world gathered on ZOOM, the question of the future of freedom of movement, the upcoming global and regional economic crisis, and the inter-connection between macroeconomic difficulties and respect for Democracy and Human Rights were raised. Will pre-Covid-19 and post-Covid-19 values be the same, and to what extent will this crisis impact the development of Central Asian societies?

## Conference Programme

### Chronological List of Participants

Venue: OSCE Academy in Bishkek (Online)

#### Friday 16 October 2020

- Alexander Rosenplaenter**, Director, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Kyrgyzstan
- Dr. Alexander Wolters**, Director, OSCE Academy Bishkek
- Dr. Anja Mihr**, DAAD Associate Professor OSCE Academy, Bishkek
- Dr. Anna Lührmann**, Assistant Professor & Deputy Director, V-Dem Institute, University Goetheburg, Sweden
- Dr. Saodat Olimova**, Sociologist, Director SHARQ (ORIENS) Research Center, Dushanbe, Tajikistan
- Shamil Ibragimov**, Director, Open Society Foundation Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
- Kasiet Ysmanova**, Researcher, Central Asia Barometer, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
- Anton Artemyev**, Open Society Foundation Central Asia Division, Berlin, Germany

#### Saturday 17 October 2020

- Dr. Christian Haerper**, President of World Value Survey, University of Vienna, Austria
- Dr. Ksenyia Klizirova**, Secretary of World Value Survey, Vienna, Austria
- Prof. Dr. Sergey Sayapin**, International Law Program Director, KIMEP, University, Almaty, Kazakhstan
- Dr. Lauri Mälskoo**, International Law Department, University of Tartu, Estonia
- Rakhim Oshakbayev**, Director and Founder, TALAP Research Center, Astana/Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan
- Dr. Emil Dzhuraev**, OSCE Academy in Bishkek and American University for Central Asia, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan
- Dr. Parviz Mullodjanov**, Independent Researcher, Tajikistan

## Biography of the Participants

**Alexander Rosenplänter** heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in Kyrgyzstan. Previously, he worked as a research assistant in the foundation's Shanghai office and in the International Policy Analysis Unit in Berlin.

**Dr. Alexander Wolters** joined the OSCE Academy in August 2013 as a Visiting Professor made possible by a partnership between the OSCE Academy and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). In March 2017 he was appointed as Director of the Academy. Dr Wolters teaches Political Theory, Contemporary Security Issues, European Politics.

**Dr. Anja Mihr** is a political scientist and DAAD long term Associate Professor (LZD) at the OSCE Academy, she graduated with a Ph.D. from Freie Universität Berlin. She joined the OSCE Academy in September 2018 and teaches International Human Rights Law, International Relations, Cyber Justice, Climate Justice, Democracy and Institutional Theories as well as Transitional Justice.

**Dr. Anna Lührmann** is lead author of UNDP's handbook *"Enhancing Youth Political Participation Throughout the Electoral Cycle A Good Practice Guide,"* published in 2013. In August 2015, she joined the Varieties of Democracy Institute at the Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, as Postdoctoral Research Fellow.

**Dr. Saodat Olimova** is a sociologist and the director of SHARQ (ORIENS) Research Center (Dushanbe, Tajikistan). Her main fields of activity and interest are migration studies, Islam, political and social issues in Central Asia, the post-Soviet transition of societies and states in Central Asia.

**Shamil Ibragimov** is the Executive Director at the Soros Foundation in Bishkek, an international non-governmental private foundation aiming to create conditions and open society by supporting the development of public institutions and initiatives in all spheres of public life in Kyrgyzstan.

**Kasiet Ysmanova** is a researcher and communication director at the Central Asia Barometer, an independent non-profit sociological project, whose mission is to measure the social, economic and political "atmosphere" in the countries of Central Asia and disseminate the results among various interested groups.

**Anton Artemyev** is the Division Director of the Eurasia Program at Open Society Foundations, the world's largest private funder of independent groups working for justice, democratic governance, and human rights.

**Dr. Christian Haerpfer** is Research Professor of Political Science in the Department of Political Science at the University of Vienna (Austria) since 2003 and the Founding Director of the Institute for Comparative Survey Research "Eurasia Barometer" in Austria since 1991. The network of "Eurasia Barometer" includes more than 25 countries and over 150 social and political scientists and social survey researchers.

**Dr. Ksenya Klizirova** is the secretary of the World Value Survey, Vienna, Austria. The WVS is an international research program devoted to the scientific and academic study of social, political, economic, religious and cultural values of people in the world.


**Dr. Sergey Sayapin** teaches and researches in the areas of international and criminal law, and is among Central Asia's leading experts on international conflict and security law. He regularly advises the ICRC, UNODC and Central Asian states' authorities on international law issues, and appears in national and international mass media.

**Dr. Lauri Mälskoo** works as Professor of International Law at the University of Tartu since 2009. He is a graduate of the University of Tartu (1998), has studied at Georgetown University (LL.M., 1999), Humboldt University Berlin (Dr. iur., 2002) and been post-doctoral researcher at NYU (2004-2005) and Tokyo University (2006-2007).

**Rakhim Oshakbayev** is the director of "TALAP" Center for Applied Research. He has served as Director of "TALAP" Center for Applied Research since 2016 and studied at the Economics Department of Moscow State University.

**Dr. Emil Dzhuraev** is a Senior Lecturer at the OSCE Academy. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Maryland in the United States and teaches Political Institutions and Processes, Central Asian Politics and Security and MA Thesis Seminar at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

**Dr. Parviz Mullojanov (Mullojonov)** has a Ph.D. in political scientist and is a senior advisor to the International Alert Bureau in Tajikistan and former chairman of the board of the Tajik branch of the Open Society Institute (Soros Foundation). He has been one of the most active civil society activists in the country since the mid-1990s.



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