

Annual Security Conference 2025

Coming of Age: Central Asia and the OSCE in a Shifting Security Landscape

25-26 November 2025, Bishkek
Conference Rapporteurs: Aigerim Assanova and
Kairat Berdishaliev

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Introduction

With 2025 marking the 50th Anniversary of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act – the foundation of the OSCE – the OSCE Academy in Bishkek proudly hosted an in-person Annual Security Conference in Bishkek from 25 to 26 November. The conference boasted over 40 participants, among which were scholars, researchers, and other esteemed guests. The speakers focused on the current shifting global security landscape around Central Asia and beyond. Each participant offered new ways of looking into challenges and providing potential solutions for stability amidst pressing global issues. Hosted in partnership with the University of Siena, and with generous support from the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), the conference concluded with successful, productive debates.



Dr. Pal Dunay, OSCE Academy Director, addressing the opening of the conference

“Once you move to Central Asia, it never lets you go — in the end you keep coming back, and you feel aligned with it...”

Dr. Pal Dunay

With such opening remarks, **Dr. Pal Dunay, Director of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek**, kicked off the conference. Reflecting on the ever-lasting relevance of the organization, he emphasized that, despite the existing challenges, the OSCE continues to play an important role in the region: *“The OSCE has its niche in helping states in need, especially in regions where no other organization could carry out such work.”* However, it remains true that, for its 50th anniversary, the OSCE did not hold a high-level celebration, e.g., a meeting of heads of state and government or foreign ministers, as the relations between its 57 participating States are overshadowed by deep-seated disagreements and tension. The problems extend to violations of shared values, financial and operational weaknesses, and the absence of good political leadership as reflected in the abuse of the consensus rule. This notwithstanding, Dr. Dunay underscored the importance of operational activities on the ground and highlighted the significant contribution of the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek, as well as the OSCE

Academy's commitment to supporting Central Asian states through dialogue, capacity-building, and regional cooperation.



“The OSCE will continue to have an important role, and I look forward to discussions on how it can adapt, remain relevant, and contribute to security and stability in Central Asia and the broader region.”

Ambassador Dr. Volker Frobarth, Head of the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek

Ambassador Frobarth began his speech by reassuring everyone in the audience of the OSCE's relevance and the resilience of the OSCE in today's challenging security environment. He highlighted that *“the OSCE has faced crises and conflicts, but the OSCE has also been living from crisis to crisis — I would not be too much concerned about the OSCE in general.”* Reflecting on the region, he noted the ongoing instability, stating that *“looking back over time, one has to say that this area of the world still hasn't really come to rest — the current war in Ukraine is the most tragic and significant manifestation of it.”* At the same time, he affirmed the OSCE's role in Central Asia: *“The OSCE has proven over the years that it has a very important role to play in Central Asia — supporting democratic institutions, rule of law, human rights, conflict prevention, early warning, and contributing to regional stability ... When we are looking to the future and when we are thinking about what it means for the OSCE, I think we should not underestimate the role which the OSCE can play, also in a changing security environment. And, I think in particular when we are looking to Central Asia, the OSCE has proven over the years that it has a very important role to play in this region, not only in terms of supporting democratic institutions, supporting rule of law, supporting human rights, but also in terms of conflict prevention, in terms of early warning, in terms of also contributing to stability in this region.”*

Dr. Fabio Indeo, a long-time friend of the Academy, proudly came to the conference representing the University of Siena. Located in the heart of Italy in the beautiful province of Tuscany, the University of Siena is the first and oldest publicly funded university in Italy. Dr. Indeo participated in the conference not only as a listener but also a speaker and moderator of later panels. In his opening speech, he aligned himself with earlier speakers with regard

to the importance of the OSCE and its relevance to all. He noted that *“since 2022, we have worked together to have a common approach and spread knowledge about Central Asia in Italy, enhancing the role of the OSCE in the reshaped global order.”* Dr. Indeo also highlighted the involvement of OSCE Academy students in knowledge-sharing initiatives, stating that *“we involved students from the Academy in publishing papers at an Italian think tank, giving them the opportunity to spread their research and insights internationally.”* Finally, he praised the conference papers, noting that the papers presented at this conference were *“fascinating and cross-cutting,”* offering the possibility for broader discussions on our common issues.

KEYNOTE SPEECH

The keynote speech was delivered by the former Director and now Visiting Lecturer of the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, **Dr. Alexander Wolters**. Titled **Filling the Void: Central Asian Agency and the OSCE**, Dr. Wolters’ presentation centred around what Central Asian states can contribute and how this can affect the OSCE rather than what the Organization should do in Central Asia. Dr. Wolters highlighted that the on-going OSCE debates remain largely Eurocentric and often fail to incorporate the security perspectives of Central Asian states. He proactively argued that Central Asia should play a more active role in shaping OSCE agendas, especially given the region’s increasing coordination and its unique security priorities.

Dr. Wolters presented two cases that illustrate this gap and how it can be “filled.” First, after the Taliban takeover, Afghanistan largely disappeared from OSCE discussions, even though Central Asian states continued pragmatic engagement with the country due to their shared borders, connectivity, and security concerns. The West, meanwhile, continues to avoid engagement due to existing human rights violations under Taliban rule. Secondly, OSCE water initiatives tend to frame water issues mainly through climate change, while in Central Asia water scarcity is a long-term structural security challenge that requires independent attention. With speedy population growth, deteriorating and often bad infrastructure, and immense glacier melt, water insecurity has become one of the region’s biggest strategic risks. Hence, regional leaders (especially Uzbekistan’s President Shavkat Mirziyoyev) increasingly treat water as a standalone security issue and propose major regional initiatives that offer mutual beneficial use of shared water resources.

It is necessary to ensure that Afghanistan-related issues remain on the agenda in relevant OSCE fora and to conduct a strategic review and needs assessment of OSCE engagement in and on Central Asia in a manner involving Central Asian participating States, field operations, OSCE structures and institutions, and other key participating States.

Dr. Wolters offered that Central Asian states should use their growing regional cohesion to contribute more systematically to OSCE policymaking, offering contextual expertise, coordinating positions, and asserting leadership in areas where the region holds direct experience and high stakes. This would strengthen both the OSCE’s relevance and regional security outcomes. Overall, Dr. Wolters’ message frames a proactive approach where the OSCE welcomes more context from Central Asian states. However, unless Central Asia steps up, Eurocentric frameworks will continue to dominate.



PANEL I - The OSCE at a Crossroads: Evolving Approaches to Security, Diplomacy, and Engagement in Central Asia

The first panel was dedicated to the OSCE and its evolving approaches to security, diplomacy, and engagement in Central Asia, and was moderated by **Dr. Shairbek Dzhuraev, the Deputy Director of the OSCE Academy.**

Dr. Katerina Veljanovska Blazhevskaja, Professor at the Faculty of Security Studies of MIT University in Skopje, delivered her presentation, titled *“Adaptive Resilience: The OSCE’s Evolving Role in Central Asia through the Context-Specific Engagement Strategy.”* She examined the OSCE’s operational adaptability in Central Asia as a region located at the intersection of conflicting geopolitical interests, considering the global security architecture that is undergoing significant changes as well. The institutional robustness and context-sensitive capabilities of the OSCE’s engagement in the region were examined with a focus on three interconnected dimensions: institutional adaptation, normative resilience, and cross-regional learning. With this considered, Dr. Blazhevskaja compared the OSCE’s post-conflict engagement in the Western Balkans with its cooperation activities in Central Asia. The experience in the Western Balkans is exemplified by such lessons as Community Policing in Kosovo, Media Regulation in Bosnia, and the Ohrid Agreement in North Macedonia. These lessons can be applied to Central Asia as well, but in a contextualized form accounting for the region’s political realities. Moreover, missions in both regions have evolved from a traditional monitoring role to capacity building, training, and local governance, further demonstrating the OSCE’s adaptability in the face of challenges from changing global/regional power dynamics and sensitive internal issues in participating states. As the speaker emphasized, the organization’s resilience is not from resistance, but rather a renewal process, which involves adaptation to sustain legitimacy.

Mr. David Shakarishvili, Lecturer at the Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, shared his findings on the topic *“The OSCE at 50: Lessons Learned from Central Asia’s Peacebuilding Efforts.”* *The OSCE, at its 50th, remains* a pivotal actor in promoting security and cooperation across divided regions. The organization’s peacekeeping mandate can be particularly well evaluated through the prism of Central Asia, taking into account factors such as the so-called

post-Soviet political landscape, ethnic diversity, and the history of local conflicts. Central Asia continues to bear the consequences of post-Soviet legacies that include the coexistence of internal, transnational, structural (limited institutional capacity), and geopolitical challenges. Mr. Shakarishvili first presented two theoretical frameworks of analysis: Hebrew peace-building theory and consultation theory. The first reveals the OSCE's role in supporting once transitional states such as Georgia, and the Baltic and Central Asian states after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The OSCE made these states more "visible" as members of the international community by incorporating them into shared norms and institutions. The second theory explains why some of the organization's norms face resistance, reinterpretation, or selective implementation in some participating States. Further, two case studies, on cross-border tensions and the 2010 crisis in Kyrgyzstan, illustrated both the OSCE's successes in mediation and its structural limitations, particularly in a situation where local political resistance hinders deeper reforms. Furthermore, the speaker presented his own, i.e. Shakarishvili's Governance Radar (SGR), formula for assessing governance quality using a three-dimensional model (security, rule of law, and trust in government/institutions). Given that the OSCE operates in three dimensions corresponding to these models, the formula demonstrates how the OSCE impacts the overall governance architecture in the region. Finally, Mr. Shakarishvili highlighted how, despite persistent obstacles such as political volatility, limited institutional capacity, and competing geopolitical influences, the OSCE's engagement remains fundamental to long-term dialogue, stability, and gradual transformation in Central Asia.

The third contributor, **Dr. Tobias Kollakowski, research fellow at the German Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies**, discussed *"Utilising the OSCE's Co-Operative Approach to Security in the Area of Arms Control as a Way to Strengthen EU-Central Asia Security Relations."* Intensifying great power competition and the rise of unilateral aggression, or the threat thereof, have led to instability in international security. In this context, Europe, and in particular Germany, recognizes the strategic importance of diversifying its foreign policy agenda with other regions, including Central Asia. Examples of diversification in this direction include such projects as the Germany-Central Asia Platform launched in 2023, the EU-Central Asia summit, and numerous bilateral initiatives. In the context of geopolitics, as the speaker noted, the region was fragmented by the collapse of the USSR, and Russia and China are now strengthening their influence in Central Asia, relying on institutional, economic, and military instruments. In such a situation, the role of the OSCE as a multilateral institution is expressed through its unique cooperation tools, which can ensure stability, diversification, and predictability. Dr. Kollakowski pointed to the OSCE's role in areas such as expert training through the Academy, political dialogue, weapons verification, and trust-building measures. However, he also presented some difficulties: the consensus principle complicates decision-making and the modernization of existing arms control measures. Nevertheless, successful practices have been clearly demonstrated as well, such as ammunition storage training for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the former with the support of Germany and the United Kingdom. Moreover, Dr. Kollakowski highlighted how three areas could form the basis for future confidence- and security-building measures under the auspices of the OSCE in the region: small arms and ammunition management, complementary projects to the IAEA on nuclear safety and energy, and regional resilience. Thus, the OSCE's cooperative approach remains a relevant tool for building confidence and security from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

Anna Sobko, international lawyer and political affairs specialist with over 16 years of experience across multilateral diplomacy and human rights litigation, delivered a presentation on *“Diplomacy at the Edge: The Role of Embassies and International Legal Cooperation in OSCE Field Engagement.”* The OSCE’s field presence relies not only on institutional mandates but also on informal interactions with diplomatic actors, especially bilateral embassies. Ms. Sobko’s key idea is that systems can be perfectly structured, but it is trust between people that makes the system function effectively. Given her considerable work experience in embassies, the speaker noted that genuine diplomacy advances through an atmosphere of trust, citing one diplomat as an example: “We support an initiative not only based on its importance, but also out of trust in the people working on it.” Thus, the OSCE’s potential lies in its role as a neutral platform for linking embassies, civil society, and domestic actors in regions where it is necessary to balance politically sensitive issues with technically necessary reforms. In this context, international legal cooperation serves as a strategic tool for ensuring security and human rights. Coordination of legal and political approaches between embassies and the OSCE can and is carried out according to three principles of modern diplomacy: flexibility as far as the ability to adapt, a focus on partnership, and a focus on people, society, and citizens. In conclusion, the speaker proposed three ideas for strengthening such cooperation: monthly meetings between embassies and OSCE missions to avoid duplication; round-tables /working groups involving the OSCE, embassies and local government agencies; and coordination of initiatives aimed at supporting civil society.

Finally, the **Q & A session** emphasized the continued importance of multilateral engagement through international and regional organizations such as the OSCE given the increasing geopolitical competition. Trust, being a result of the OSCE’s long-standing presence in the region, was recognized as a crucial component of diplomacy and a security-enhancing mechanism.



PANEL II – Regionalism, Afghanistan & Political Change

The second panel, moderated by **Dr. Eleonora Pennino from the University of Siena**, continued the discussion on the security changes, regional approaches, and the role of Afghanistan. As first speaker, **Dr. Sergei Golunov of the Suleyman Demirel University** began with his presentation titled: “*Beyond Eurocentrism: Reimagining Central Asian Cross-Border Cooperation for Context-Sensitive Practice.*” Dr. Golunov highlighted that mainstream episteme, Eurocentric definitions of cross-border cooperation, does not reflect Central Asian realities, where unresolved borders, weak institutions, and limited multi-level governance burden the formation of functional cross-border regions. He emphasized the cross-border income inequalities in Central Asia, with the biggest income discrepancy between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and the smallest between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Dr. Golunov introduced the term “trust paradox,” as cooperation is expected to build trust while simultaneously addressing sensitive issues such as disputes, identity politics, and corruption which cannot be addressed without the presence of such trust. Central Asian governments often treat cross-border flows as security risks, leading to restrictive controls and the view of borderlands both as peripheries and strategic “gates.” The Soviet legacy of capital-centric governance, reinforced by poor infrastructure and few formal mechanisms, further limits direct ties between neighbouring border communities. As a result, regional cross-border institutions remain far less influential than bilateral cooperation, which Central Asian states prefer due to its practicality and lower political sensitivity. Dr. Golunov emphasized that it would be to the benefit of the region to move beyond this situation.

Dr. Michael Hilliard from the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs spoke on “*Armed Forces Reform in Central Asia: Drivers, Patterns, and Implications for Regional Security.*” Dr. Hilliard presented findings from a comprehensive 1,200-page study on the armed forces of the five Central Asian republics, which is available online (<https://oxussociety.org/projects/the-armed-forces-of-central-asia/>), emphasizing how long-term political, geographic, and infrastructural factors shape state defence policy, military spending, and deployment patterns across the region. He highlighted several major variations in military expenditures, particularly Uzbekistan’s consistently high spending, and post-Batken spikes in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and explained how legacies of the Soviet era, internal loyalties, and border challenges with Afghanistan and neighbouring states continue to define force structures and procurement priorities. Using Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as examples, he showed how terrain, poor logistics, and internal political dynamics create fragmented, independently operating units, while Uzbekistan’s stronger infrastructure and the legacy of events like those at Andijan drive rapid-response capabilities over heavy artillery. In Turkmenistan, highly fragmented command structures aim to prevent power consolidation, with deployments concentrated along the M37 highway to protect vital transport corridors. Turning to Kazakhstan, Dr. Hilliard noted that despite public fears of Russian aggression, defence planning remains shaped by economic pragmatism, the cost of new infrastructure, and reliance on affordable Russian equipment. Overall, he argued that Central Asian defence policies are driven less by shifting administrations and more by enduring structural constraints such as borders, logistics, historical legacies, and the persistent need for long-term security planning.

The third speaker, **Mr. Otabek Akromov, PhD Candidate in Political Science and International Relations from the Australian National University**, offered his presentation entitled “*Central Asian Regionalism Reimagined: Regionalism from Within?*” Introducing a work-in-progress project on “regionalism from within,” he argued that mainstream international relations theories cannot fully explain why Central Asia shifted so rapidly from fragmentation to cooperation after 2017. He frames the core puzzle as understanding the conditions under which regional orders change, noting that although structural incentives, security interdependence, and great-power dynamics (Russia’s decline, China’s rise) have long existed, they fail to explain the timing of renewed regionalism. Instead, he highlights the importance of leadership perspectives and Stacie Goddard’s brokerage framework, which emphasizes how leaders activate new ties, break with old competitive patterns, and construct shared regional identities. Mr. Akromov contrasted the pre-2017 landscape, marked by border disputes, water-energy tensions, personal rivalries among presidents, and minimal connectivity, with the Mirziyoyev era, where C5 cooperation became internally driven, pragmatism increased, borders normalized, and “give-and-take” diplomacy replaced zero-sum attitudes. He argued that President Mirziyoyev acted as a key broker due to his neutral interpersonal standing and multi-vocal framing, which reduced mistrust and enabled states to reconfigure regional ties. Overall, his talk emphasized that understanding Central Asia’s new regionalism requires combining structural context with leadership-driven brokerage mechanisms that reshape networks, identities, and cooperation patterns.

The subsequent **Q & A session** focused on why the Central Asian states struggle to fix infrastructure and defence vulnerabilities, concluding that this was mainly due to limited budgets and low-probability risks that are hard to justify politically. Discussion then shifted to the rapid rise of drones, changing regional military balances, and how Russia and China shape security dynamics differently, with Tajikistan becoming especially dependent on China. Afghanistan’s role was highlighted both as a risk factor and as essential for regional connectivity, with Uzbekistan leading the engagement while others hesitate. The final questions centred on defining regionalism, the role of leadership (especially post-2016 changes in Uzbekistan), and the gap between top-down political cooperation and weak bottom-up societal integration.



Panel III – Connectivity, Competition, and Cooperation: Central Asia in the Evolving Eurasian Security Landscape

The third session, moderated by **Dr. Sebastian Mayer, DAAD Associate Professor at the OSCE Academy**, was dedicated to the topics of connectivity and the position of Central Asian countries in the Eurasian security landscape, covering such cases as the CKU railway, migration resource centres, and economic border zones.

The first presentation, on *“The CKU Railway and Kyrgyzstan’s Emerging Role in Eurasian Connectivity and Regional Stability,”* was delivered by **Przemyslaw Ozierski, an expert at the Central Asia Strategic Centre for Analysis, Dialogue and Development (CASCADD) in Kyrgyzstan**. In the presentation, he analysed the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway as a test case for how infrastructure development intersects with regional stability, economic diversification, and institutional resilience in Central Asia. In Kyrgyzstan’s National Development Programme 2030, this project is identified as a strategic decision to transform the country into a regional logistics hub integrated into global trade networks. There remain reservations in some strata of the Kyrgyz society due to the contribution of the project to an increase in the country’s dependence on Chinese credit. Mr. Ozierski highlighted how, in order to alleviate these concerns, it would be necessary to provide evidence that the CKU will not only contribute to transit but also generate economic development inside the country “on the ground.” The project is particularly important given the region’s landlocked status, which impacts economic development and access to foreign markets. The CKU has the potential to restructure transport links and reduce dependence on a limited set of existing corridors and northern routes. Furthermore, the project could create a positive spillover effect, strengthening interdependence and accelerating economic integration in Central Asia, which will lead to long-term GDP growth for all economies in the region. However, Mr. Ozierski emphasized how the railway’s significance will depend not so much on its technical implementation as on whether it truly becomes a platform for collaborative governance, rather than a source of rivalry or unilateral dependence. Overall, the CKU is expected to reduce transit distances to 900 km and shorten delivery times by 7-10 days. Successful implementation requires harmonizing customs procedures and digital documentation, developing southern logistics clusters, and establishing a tripartite CKU management council.

The presentation of **Dr. Aziz Mirzaev, legal scholar and practitioner** with over two decades of experience in judicial reform, human rights, and international legal cooperation in Central Asia addressed *“Human Security and Regional Connectivity: The Role of Migration Resource Centres in Central Asia’s Evolving OSCE Landscape.”* Dr. Mirzaev spoke about how mobility is not only about movement but also about informed decisions and addressing vulnerabilities at all stages of the migration cycle. Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs) are becoming a key tool for migration management in Central Asia, providing access to information and step-by-step support as a form of protection. In Uzbekistan, the MRC opened in August 2025, quickly integrating into regional standards. It provides consultations on safe and legal migration, contract and document verification, pre-departure training programmes, and career guidance. Attention is paid to rural areas with limited access to verified information. Additional support for the Centre’s work is provided by EU-funded initiatives such as Bomca 10, Intilish, and CBC society projects, which promote women’s entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and community cohesion in various regions, demonstrating how migration governance impacts

local development. The MRCs in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, serving from 2023 and 2024, respectively, also provide comprehensive support to migrants. Overall, the three centres in the region demonstrate that Central Asia is no longer just a recipient of international assistance but is also developing its own models and expertise. In addition, Dr. Mirzaev highlighted the importance of understanding the centres' work in the context of the three OSCE dimensions. The political-military basket: reducing vulnerabilities by combating fraud and illegal schemes contributes to strengthening community stability and building trust through risk prevention. The economic and environmental basket: safe mobility as a contribution to sustainable economic development, increasing formal employment rates, and predictable migration decisions. The human dimension: labour rights, preventing exploitation, supporting women and youth, and reintegrating migrants. Despite some local nuances, the centres operate as a unified regional system with common standards, compatible methodologies, and coordinated communication, facilitating connectivity and cooperation across borders.

Mr. Keshav Kumar, PhD Candidate at the South Asian University, explored "*Regional Cooperation through Border Economic Zones: A Case Study of the Khorgos International Centre of Boundary Cooperation.*" Starting with the question of whether there are global border management institutions, Mr. Keshav noted that, in the absence of such institutions, the nature of borders varies across regions, and there is no universal institutional architecture in this area. Border studies consider borders not as dividing lines, but as channels of interaction, platforms for trade, and contact between communities. This approach is particularly important for Central Asia, where mobility, logistics, and transit are strategically crucial aspects. He cited the Khorgos-ICBC as an illustrative example, having historically evolved from a part of the Silk Road to a modern logistics hub. New Regionalism theory, in this case, emphasizes bottom-up integration, as businesses and local communities themselves stimulate cooperation. Neofunctionalism points to functional spillover effects, as economic ties contribute to improved logistics, unification of trade requirements, and the digitalization of borders. Trade facilitation is demonstrated in the reduction of trade barriers and transit times, resulting in an increase in intraregional trade. Mr. Keshav highlighted the ICBC as a key element of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy. However, he made note of a few challenges: the risk of China's dominance in trade flows, and uneven development, as the Chinese side is developing faster than Kazakhstan's. Nevertheless, he emphasized that this remains an excellent example of how interaction in border areas is the best way to understand the real functions of borders, which are becoming not a barrier, but a tool for development.

During the **Q & A session**, conference participants discussed some financial, institutional, and strategic aspects of Central Asian countries' interactions with China, given that the CKU and ICBC are both associated with concerns about the consequences of China's economic influence. Furthermore, the audience expressed interest in the concept of Mahalla - a traditional system of local self-government and mutual assistance in Uzbekistan, mentioned by Dr. Mirzaev.



Panel IV – Water, Agriculture & Environmental Security in Central Asia

Dr. Emil Dzhuraev from the OSCE Academy moderated the fourth panel. This session focused on the current environmental challenges that Central Asian countries are facing in addition to climate change, and how this is shaping the security agenda.

Dr. Dilmurod Ernazarov from the Tashkent State University of Economics presented on “*Construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal in Afghanistan: Worsening Water Crisis and Environmental Challenges in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.*” Dr. Ernazarov explained that the main regional challenge is how much water Afghanistan plans to take from the Amu Darya, especially as the Qosh Tepa Canal could drastically alter the river’s balance. Afghanistan currently uses about 23 percent of the water but intends to take more, which could account for up to 75 percent of the projected shortage, directly threatening irrigation-dependent agriculture in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Fourteen percent of the population of the two countries works in agriculture, adding to the socio-economic sensitivity of the matter. The canal’s construction quality is also poor, raising fears of future conflicts and environmental damage, especially given the lack of legal frameworks regulating the shared water use. With no agreed upon water limits between the countries, declining rainfall and shrinking river flow are already affecting communities, highlighting the urgency of negotiations. Dr. Ernazarov argued that a regional legal framework, modern water-saving technologies, and cooperation with international organizations are essential to ensure fair and sustainable water distribution.

Ms. Kamila Irgebaeva of the National Institute for Strategic Initiatives under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic talked about the “*Rational Use of Natural Resources as a Basis for Environmental Security in Kyrgyzstan.*” Ms. Irgebaeva introduced environmental challenges related to Kyrgyzstan’s natural resources, especially its water, glaciers, and mountain ecosystems, which are crucial not only for the country but for the security of the entire Central Asian region. She highlighted major environmental threats such as soil degradation, water pollution, unsafe tailings, shrinking glaciers, and rising environmental crimes. To address these challenges, she outlined key measures including forest and land restoration, modern water treatment, green energy development, digital environmental monitoring, and stricter mining sector reforms based on the principle “if you extract – you restore.” As water availability has been reduced, and ecological damages – partly caused by ecological

violations – rise, the state is left without any choice but to fine perpetrators. Fines for nearly three-quarters of the damage caused thus far has been collected by the state (72 million of 102 million soms worth of total damage in 2024). Ms. Irgebaeva concluded by stressing the importance of public participation and international cooperation, reaffirming Kyrgyzstan’s readiness to adopt advanced, sustainable solutions.

The final speaker of this panel discussion was **Dr. Igor Taranov from the Department of Processing Industry and Organic Agriculture under the Ministry of Water Resources, Agriculture and Processing Industry**. His presentation, titled “*Kyrgyz Agriculture in the Framework of Sustainability and Circular Economy*,” focused on Kyrgyzstan’s agricultural sector. Dr. Taranov noted that Kyrgyzstan is facing challenges due to fragmented small farms but is moving toward greener, smarter, and more circular models of development. He outlined sustainability as a balance between nature’s capacity and human consumption, supported by four pillars: ecosystem-based agriculture, sustainability, circular economy, and ecological ethics. Dr. Taranov demonstrated that Kyrgyzstan is already developing circular agricultural practices through clusters, Organic Aymaks, and bio-based technologies, turning agricultural waste into valuable resources. He concluded that these integrated approaches form the country’s pathway to sustainable agriculture, aligning modern innovation with traditional knowledge. The speaker finished his contribution by pointing out: “There will never be a post-agricultural world.”

During the **Q & A session**, participants asked questions related to environmental security threats and how they are shaping the current security agenda. Some of the questions were very emotional and provocative, asking about multilateral dialogue with Afghanistan and how ready the Central Asian states are for such discussions amidst the lack of recognition of Taliban. Further discussion addressed how consistent Kyrgyzstan’s policies have been with the changes and whether we really have any real results.



Panel V – Human Rights, Security & Justice

The fifth session was dedicated to human rights, with an emphasis on such aspects as healthy environment, values, and gender equality. It was moderated by **Dr. Fabio Indeo, a researcher on energy security and connectivity issues at the University of Siena and analyst on Central Asian Security at the NATO Defense College Foundation.**

Dr. Najiba Mustafayeva, Assistant Professor at the Law Faculty of Bahçeşehir University, explored *“The OSCE and the Right to a Healthy Environment: A New Pillar of Human Rights Regionalism.”* She emphasized the central role of regionalism in human rights in advancing the environmental agenda. Regional human rights systems ground international norms, making them applicable in national contexts while also elevating local and regional practices to the level of international law. Environmental challenges are particularly pressing for Central Asia, so the Helsinki legacy is significant as a path to collective security and human rights protection. Linking these issues, ecology and human rights, Dr. Mustafayeva noted that UN General Assembly Resolution 76/300 (2022), albeit advisory in nature, recognized the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment as a universal human right. Dr. Mustafayeva further noted the fragmented nature of international environmental law, which combines both mandatory and non-mandatory norms, resulting in uneven standards and limited enforceability. Even such key documents as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Kyoto Protocol, and the Paris Agreement contain almost no explicit human rights language. In this regard, the role of regional organizations is growing, particularly that of the OSCE, which actively integrates environmental issues into the human rights agenda through its comprehensive approach to security. For example, the Organization helps participating states implement multilateral environmental agreements, monitors climate security risks, and promotes transboundary adaptation measures. In conclusion, the speaker noted that the OSCE has the potential to become a key platform for recognizing and implementing the right to a healthy environment in the region, thereby strengthening states’ support in the spirit of UN General Assembly Resolution 76/300.

Dr. Aijan Sharshenova, a Leading Visiting Researcher at the Populist Encounters research group at Riga Stradins University, delivered her speech on *“The Rise of the Political Far-Right Movements in Europe as a Threat to EU Core Values and Democracy.”* In 2024, a year of elections, nearly half of the world’s population voted for their political leadership. Particularly noteworthy was the far-right shift in European Parliamentary elections, marking the rise of populist parties and contributing to the erosion of European democracy. Dr. Sharshenova emphasized the unexpected role of female leaders in these parties, such as Marine Le Pen, Giorgia Meloni, and Alice Weidel, noting that populism does not always conform to stereotypical traditionalist patriarchal models. The examples of Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands demonstrate how far-right wings are increasingly occupying the political space. The key problem here is the erosion of fundamental EU values such as democracy, the rule of law, equality, and the protection of minorities. In response to this risk, the EU is attempting to strengthen normative resilience, for example, by launching the EU Democracy Shield initiative. However, it is important to note that this initiative is aimed more at protecting democracy within the EU than promoting it externally. For Central Asia, the erosion of European democracy will mean the withdrawal of the region’s main democracy-promoting actor and the end of assistance for democracy-related development. Furthermore,

the consequences could include reduced funding for certain programmes and support for civil society, as well as the weakening of international and regional organizations. Dr. Sharshenova highlighted how this erosion within the EU could inevitably weaken democratic influence globally, and how the subsequent restoration of such institutions, once destroyed, will be a difficult process, if achievable at all.

The third contributor, **Ms. Aizirek Erkebaeva, a decolonial feminist activist from Central Asia, interdisciplinary researcher and lawyer**, addressed the issues of *“Is CEDAW Failing Incarcerated Women in Kyrgyzstan? Rethinking the Committee’s Individual Complaints Mechanism and the Call for Abolition Feminism.”* Ms. Erkebaeva noted how the rights of incarcerated women remain largely unexplored in academic knowledge and neglected in human rights practice despite the high level of vulnerability of women in prison. The context of Kyrgyzstan’s modern penal system cannot be understood without reference to the Soviet legacy, which, as the speaker highlights, shaped a repressive, hierarchical, and patriarchal system. Prison infrastructure has historically been created for men, resulting in the nuances of women’s needs being systematically ignored, especially for those who have experienced violence or are socio-economically vulnerable. Even with formal progressive norms, such as conditions for pregnant women or separate placement for women and men, many incarcerated women still face some threats. Given this gap between law and practice, especially taking into account weak national mechanisms, international instruments such as CEDAW play a significant role in ensuring human rights. However, the implementation of the Committee’s recommendations is limited, as everything depends on the will of the state. Moreover, the universalistic approaches of some recommendations, which fail to fully consider regional historical and social nuances, create additional problems. Ms. Erkebaeva’s analysis, based on abolitionist feminism, emphasizes the need to shift from repressive models to preventative and supportive systems, and to develop regional approaches.

Ms. Durdonabonu Abdumutalova, a researcher at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy on gender and policy issues delivered a speech on *“Gender Equality as a Pillar of Regional Security and Inclusive Development: Regional Approaches in Central Asia with Emphasis on Uzbekistan.”* Ms. Abdumutalova noted that gender equality should be perceived not only as a social priority but also as a strategic foundation for security. Three ways in which the lack of such equality impacts state resilience include the prevalence of gender-based violence, which leads to weak trust in state institutions; the economic exclusion of women, leading to a decline in national competitiveness; and the digital gender gap, leading to cybersecurity vulnerabilities. Significant progress in addressing these issues has been noted in recent years in Uzbekistan, including increased female representation in parliament and government, the adoption of key laws on preventing domestic violence, the criminalization of violence in 2023, and the introduction of protective mechanisms in 2024. However, Ms. Abdumutalova highlights how the gap between formal norms and their practical implementation remains a problem to be addressed, which is true for other countries in the region as well. For example, labour markets remain segregated, limiting women’s economic resilience; the digital gender gap continues between rural and urban areas; and only 42% of countries in the broader region systematically collect sex-disaggregated data, which negatively impacts evidence-based policymaking. In this regard, the speaker offered some recommendations: expanding collaboration with local women’s and civil society organizations,

including digital inclusion and cybersecurity on the agenda, and building long-term pipelines for women’s leadership in governance and peacebuilding.

During the **Q & A session**, participants discussed the influence of social attitudes and institutions on the perception of incarcerated women, the effectiveness of democratic advancement through the “naming and shaming” mechanism, pragmatism in EU policy, and the prospects for democratization in the region.



Panel VI — Terrorism, Digital Borders & Hybrid Threats

The final panel of the conference was moderated by **Dr. Milena Marzovilla from the University of Siena**. This panel provided rich information on the issues and challenges that Central Asia and regions beyond are facing amidst digital & hybrid threats, both external and internal.

Dr. Lijun Shang from the London Metropolitan University spoke about the “*Analysis of the Gaps that Need to Be Closed in Global Biosecurity Education.*” He explained that biosecurity has expanded far beyond bioweapons to include public health, food safety, environmental protection, and emerging technologies like AI and synthetic biology, yet education in this field remains fragmented and insufficient. To close this gap, his team is building the International Biosecurity Education Network (IBSEN), which provides open-access resources, a global database, newsletters, and the first foundational biosecurity education textbook, now being translated into multiple languages. He concluded by noting that this work supports the goals of the Biological Weapons Convention and aims to create a coordinated, global approach to biosecurity education.

The next speaker of the panel was **Dr. Elena Zhirukhina from Ca’ Foscari University** who spoke about “*Navigating the Complexity: Repatriating and Prosecuting Foreign Terrorist Fighters.*” Dr. Zhirukhina explained that the international counter-terrorism framework is fundamentally flawed because there is still no agreed definition of “terrorism,” allowing many governments to misuse it for repression. She described how 5,000–7,000 people from Central Asia joined ISIS, and thousands - including many children - remain detained in camps and prisons in

northeast Syria, where the situation is legally and morally complex. She emphasized that individuals linked to ISIS cannot be viewed simply as perpetrators or victims: men, women, boys, and girls all experienced different combinations of coercion, trafficking, indoctrination, and active participation in crimes, including genocide. States face major challenges in prosecution – especially in terms of access to evidence – and must choose between tailored, case-by-case approaches or broad, blanket policies, with Central Asian countries tending toward the latter.

The third speaker of the panel, **Dr. Anna Romandash from the Centre for International Governance Innovation** spoke about “*Algorithmic Borders: Digital Infrastructures, Information Security, and the Future of Sovereignty in Central Asia and Beyond.*” Dr. Romandash explained that Central Asia is becoming a key case study in digital sovereignty as countries modernize their digital infrastructure while remaining deeply dependent on Russian transit routes and increasingly influenced by China’s Digital Silk Road. She showed how historical Soviet-era networks still shape the region’s connectivity, leaving Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan with limited routing diversity and varying degrees of state control. Beyond infrastructure, she introduced the idea of algorithmic borders – political boundaries created through platform governance, biometric systems, and AI-driven moderation. She concluded that future trajectories for the region will include deeper internet fragmentation, growing geopolitical competition, and a need for greater diversification and transparency to build digital resilience.

The final speaker of the panel was **Dr. Fabio Indeo**. In his presentation, titled “*Central Asia’s Security and Stability in the Context of Pragmatic Foreign Policies Toward the Taliban,*” Dr. Indeo explained that Central Asian states have adopted a new pragmatic approach toward the Taliban since 2021, markedly different from the isolationism of the 1990s. He noted that Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan began engaging with the Taliban even before their return to power, seeing cooperation as essential for advancing regional transport and energy projects such as the Termez-Mazar-i-Sharif railway and the TAPI pipeline. Dr. Indeo highlighted that Kazakhstan has cautiously expanded trade with Afghanistan, while Kyrgyzstan, and even Tajikistan – despite political mistrust – maintain dialogue due to shared security concerns, particularly the threat posed by ISKP. He emphasized that, although all Central Asian countries actively cooperate with the Taliban, none besides Russia have formally recognized their government, resulting in a functional but ambiguous diplomatic environment. According to Dr. Indeo, these policies reflect the broader goals of overcoming landlocked geography, diversifying trade routes, and reducing reliance on Russian transit through new initiatives such as the Middle Corridor and the emerging Kabul Corridor. He concluded that Afghanistan could become a key regional hub for connectivity, but the success of these projects ultimately depends on stability inside Afghanistan, the Taliban’s ability to guarantee security, and the evolving roles of external actors, including China, Russia, the EU, and the United States.

Annex: Conference Programme

25 NOVEMBER 2025	
Venue: OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Botanicheskiy pereulok 1A	
9:30 – 10:00	Arrival at the OSCE Academy and Registration
10:00 – 10:30	<p>OPENING REMARKS</p> <p>Pal Dunay, Director, OSCE Academy in Bishkek</p> <p>Ambassador Volker Frobarth, Head of the OSCE Programme Office in Bishkek</p> <p>Fabio Indeo, Research Fellow, University of Siena</p>
10:30 – 11:00	<p>KEYNOTE SPEECH</p> <p>Alexander Wolters, Visiting Lecturer and former Director, OSCE Academy in Bishkek</p> <p><i>Filling the Void: Central Asian Agency and the OSCE</i></p>
11:00 – 11:10	Group Photo
11:10 – 11:30	Coffee Break
11:30 – 13:00	<p>Panel I – The OSCE at a Crossroads: Evolving Approaches to Security, Diplomacy, and Engagement in Central Asia</p> <p>Moderator: Shairbek Dzhuraev, OSCE Academy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Katerina Veljanovska Blazhevaska, MIT University – Skopje (North Macedonia) <p><i>Adaptive Resilience: The OSCE’s Evolving Role in Central Asia through the Context-Specific Engagement Strategy</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dato Shakarishvili, Klaipeda University (Lithuania) <p><i>The OSCE at 50: Lessons Learned from Central Asia’s Peacebuilding Efforts</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tobias Kollakowski, German Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies (Germany) <p><i>Utilising the OSCE’s Co-operative Approach to Security in Arms Control as a Way to Strengthen EU–Central Asia Security Relations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anna Sobko, Memorial Italia (Italy) <p><i>Diplomacy at the Edge: The Role of Embassies and International Legal Cooperation in OSCE Field Engagement</i></p>
13:00 – 14:00	Lunch

<p>14:00 – 15:30</p>	<p>Panel II – Regionalism, Afghanistan & Political Change</p> <p>Moderator: Eleonora Pennino, University of Siena</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sergei Golunov, Suleyman Demirel University (Kazakhstan) <i>Beyond Eurocentrism: Reimagining Central Asian Cross-Border Cooperation for Context-Sensitive Practice</i> • Michael Hilliard, The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs (USA) <i>Armed Forces Reform in Central Asia: Drivers, Patterns, and Implications for Regional Security</i> • Otabek Akromov, Australian National University (Australia) <i>Central Asian Regionalism Reimagined: Regionalism from Within?</i>
<p>15:30 – 15:45</p>	<p>Coffee Break</p>
<p>15:45 – 17:15</p>	<p>Panel III – Connectivity, Competition, and Cooperation: Central Asia in the Evolving Eurasian Security Landscape</p> <p>Moderator: Sebastian Mayer, OSCE Academy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Przemyslaw Ozierski, Central Asia Strategic Center for Analysis, Dialogue and Development (Kyrgyzstan) <i>The CKU Railway and Kyrgyzstan’s Emerging Role in Eurasian Connectivity and Regional Stability</i> • Aziz Mirzaev, International Centre for Migration Policy Development (Uzbekistan) <i>Human Security and Regional Connectivity: The Role of Migration Resource Centres in Central Asia’s Evolving OSCE Landscape</i> • Keshav Kumar, South Asian University (India) <i>Regional Cooperation through Border Economic Zones: A Case Study of the Khorgos International Centre of Boundary Cooperation</i>
<p>17:15 – 17:30</p>	<p>Day 1 Highlights and Reflections</p> <p>Pal Dunay, OSCE Academy in Bishkek</p>

26 NOVEMBER 2025	
Venue: OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Botanicheskiy pereulok 1A	
9:00 – 9:30	Arrival at the OSCE Academy and Registration
09:30 – 11:00	<p>Panel IV – Water, Agriculture & Environmental Security in Central Asia</p> <p>Moderator: Emil Dzhuraev, OSCE Academy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dilmurod Ernazarov, Tashkent State University of Economics (Uzbekistan) <i>Construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal in Afghanistan: Worsening Water Crisis and Environmental Challenges in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan</i> • Kamila Irgebaeva, The National Institute for Strategic Initiatives under the President of the Kyrgyz Republic (Kyrgyzstan) <i>Rational Use of Natural Resources as a Basis for Environmental Security in Kyrgyzstan</i> • Igor Taranov, Department of Processing Industry and Organic Agriculture under the Ministry of Water Resources, Agriculture and Processing Industry (Kyrgyzstan) <i>Kyrgyz Agriculture in the Framework of Sustainability and Circular Economy</i>
11:00 – 11:30	Coffee Break
11:30 – 13:00	<p>Panel V – Human Rights, Security & Justice</p> <p>Moderator: Fabio Indeo, University of Siena</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Najiba Mustafayeva, Bahçeşehir University (Turkey) <i>The OSCE and the Right to a Healthy Environment: A New Pillar of Human Rights Regionalism</i> • Aijan Sharshenova, Riga Stradins University (Latvia) <i>The Rise of Far-Right Movements in Europe: Implications for Central Asia’s Relations With the EU</i> • Aizirek Erkebaeva, Project “Erkin Kyz Koomu” (Kyrgyzstan) <i>Is CEDAW Failing Incarcerated Women in Kyrgyzstan? Rethinking the Committee’s Individual Complaints Mechanism and the Call for Abolition Feminism</i> • Durdonabonu Abdumutalova, University of World Economy and Diplomacy (Uzbekistan) <i>Gender Equality as a Pillar of Regional Security and Inclusive Development: Regional Approaches in Central Asia with Emphasis on Uzbekistan</i>
13:00 – 14:00	Lunch

14:00 – 15:30	Panel VI — Terrorism, Digital Borders & Hybrid Threats Moderator: Milena Marzovilla, University of Siena <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lijun Shang, London Metropolitan University (UK) <i>Analysis of the Gaps that Need to Be Closed in Global Biosecurity Education</i>• Elena Zhirukhina, Ca' Foscari University (Italy) <i>Navigating the Complexity: Repatriating and Prosecuting Foreign Terrorist Fighters</i>• Anna Romandash, Centre for International Governance Innovation (Canada) <i>Algorithmic Borders: Digital Infrastructures, Information Security, and the Future of Sovereignty in Central Asia and Beyond</i>• Fabio Indeo, University of Siena (Italy) <i>Central Asia's Security and Stability in the Context of Pragmatic Foreign Policies Toward the Taliban</i>
15:30 – 15:45	CLOSING REMARKS Pal Dunay, Director, OSCE Academy in Bishkek

