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EUCAM Watch



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**What does a 'good life' mean
for Central Asia?**

Can life in Europe serve as a guide for development policies towards Central Asia?

Amid concerns and uncertainty about one's own health and that of our loved ones, the COVID-19 pandemic has made us reflect on what really matters and what essentially makes a 'good life'. Many things that seemed natural such as going out with friends or going to a concert or a football match are now restricted or forbidden. At the same time, other activities that many of us had perhaps forgotten such as reading or handicrafts are being rediscovered. Meanwhile, appreciation for crucial professions such as doctors and nurses, as well as teachers, has risen enormously. Most of these developments are probably common to all countries affected by the pandemic. With this in mind (and time on our hands during lock-down), EUCAM in cooperation with the European Neighbourhood Council (ENC), decided to look into the notion of a 'good life' as it is perceived in Central Asia, and try to discern if Europe is seen as a (of course imperfect) model. Hence, for this EUCAM newsletter, we asked scholars and EUCAM associates to give their opinion on what a 'good life' means in Central Asia and how the concept could be used in European development policies.

Connecting the concept of 'good life' to Europe's engagement with Central Asia comes from Emil Dzhuraev, who took up the issue during one of the seminars held by the EU Special Representative for Central Asia to gather ideas from civil society with regard to the formulation of a new European Union Strategy document for Central Asia (2019). Dzhuraev, citing Hannah Arendt's three-level model of 'active life' (*vita activa*) in *The Human Condition* (1958) as inspiration, proposed three 'good-life levels' in the present context: 1) a safe life (rule of law, human rights, etc.); 2) a comfortable life (economic conditions, healthcare, education); and 3) a meaningful life (participatory citizenship, associational life, religion, etc.). He then went on to argue that the EU might be able to close the gap in the tense relationship between promoting democratic values and pursuing pragmatic economic and security interests by making the pursuit of a 'good life' the focal point of its external policies. By using relevant European achievements in attaining a 'good life' to support development aspirations in Central Asia, the EU could also boost its visibility in the region and secure local buy-in. Since then, the idea is often mentioned by civil society and EU policy-makers alike, and, while the EU Strategy does not mention 'good life' as such, its emphasis on resilience and prosperity could be linked to the first two levels of a secure and comfortable life.

In a survey in which we asked Central Asian respondents to rank the essential ingredients of a 'good life' for Central Asians, as well as what they thought constituted a 'good life' for the average European, we saw two overarching trends. For Central Asians, a 'good life' seems to be foremost connected to family: being part of a family, marriage, children, and contributing economically to the family. This idea also transcends to the community, as status is often measured by the role a family plays in the community (wedding parties, funerals). Meanwhile, our respondents saw Europeans as more individualistic, with many opportunities for education and travel and a safety net in terms of healthcare, benefits, and pensions. Beyond these stereotypes, there are some nuances, but the ingredients that

make up a 'good life' were largely similar.

For this EUCAM Watch, we asked five experts – one from each nationality – to tell us how they see the concept of a 'good life' in EU-Central Asia relations. Whereas they see merit in using the concept in EU policies and development cooperation, it does come with several warnings and pitfalls to avoid. *Selbi Hanova* argues that the concept would need careful fine-tuning as perception of a 'good life' depends on who you ask and could thus lead to misunderstandings. *Rashid Gabdulhakov* makes it clear that 'a good life-approach' should not be used as an excuse to close one's eyes to human rights offenses by playing the 'things work differently here' card. *Emil Dzhuraev* sees it as crucial that the process be locally-developed and implemented, with Central Asians making the changes themselves and Europe supporting the development of broadly agreed matters like healthcare, based on its values and experience. This is echoed by *Nushofarin Noziri* who argues that asking Central Asians for their take on what should be done is important (though uncommon for the region) to create local ownership and sustainability of development and reform processes. In those cases where Europe wishes to steer and influence the process, it should use education, argues *Nargis Kassenova*, for example via summer camps for kids or the establishment of a College of Europe.

Enjoy the read, think about what you consider a 'good life', and stay healthy!

*Editorial by **Jos Boonstra**,
EUCAM Coordinator,
Centre for European Security Studies, Groningen*

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Interviews

Nargis Kassenova, Senior Fellow, Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, United States; Associate Professor, KIMEP University, Kazakhstan

Is Europe specifically seen in Kazakhstan as a place where life is good? If so, how is this reflected?

Europe has traditionally been seen as the epitome of a 'good life'. It is a place where four aspects intersect: opportunities for improving one's economic status, social solidarity made of functioning welfare states and environmental consciousness, arts and culture, and justice and freedom from oppression. The order changes depending on the person to whom the question is asked. Europe is considered as a place where all the basic necessities of life in a democratic political community are guaranteed, and then more. If before it was a shiny, often impossible dream for people to see Europe, now trips to European countries, studying and working there have become more normal for Kazakhstan's middle class. The growing familiarity makes people realise that there is diversity to European life, and while not everything there is perfect, it still provides the best approximation to what a good life can be.

What are the top ingredients for a good life according to Kazakhs? Do you think these ingredients are similar or very different from what Europeans might list as a good life?

There is no universal answer upon which every Kazakh will agree, obviously. Depending on the social, economic, and cultural affordances or deprivations, some will focus on economic growth, some on social values, some on culture, and others on justice and freedom. The same applies to Europeans. So, the list of elements that are part of a 'good life' is the same for Kazakhstanis and Europeans, but the order and priorities change depending on the life circumstances and preferences of each. A generalisation would not make justice to individual conditions or idiosyncrasies. That said, the overall circumstances in Kazakhstan are quite different from those in Europe. There is a lower level of economic development with many citizens busy with survival, a much higher level of injustices in the system and a perception that they are 'normal', authoritarian politics, lower trust in the state, underdeveloped public services, etc. These are the circumstances in which Kazakhstanis have to shape their strategies of pursuing a 'good life'. Sometimes they have to make a choice: try to foster a 'good life' in the country or move elsewhere to live this 'good life' or to give their children this opportunity.

Is the notion of a good life helpful to guide EU policy and development cooperation towards Central Asia? If so, why, and how?

I think it can be helpful to use the notion of 'good life' to explain European policies and engagement to the people in the region. The most effective avenues for doing this are education and communication. Establishing a College of Europe/European University in the region that would serve as a platform for expanding knowledge about Europe and fostering scholarly and cultural links would be one big step in the right direction. European summer

camps for school children studying European languages can also be a good way to expose younger generations to 'good life' in Europe and motivate studying these languages. There can be many more ideas...

Emil Dzhuraev, Senior Lecturer, OSCE Academy, Kyrgyzstan

Is Europe specifically seen in Kyrgyzstan as a place where life is good? If so, how is this reflected?

In general, from a bird's eye view, Europe is certainly considered among Kyrgyzstanis as one of the more developed parts of the world, where people generally enjoy a 'good life'. While there are no concrete data on Kyrgyzstanis' perception of European quality of life, there are different circumstantial and anecdotal ways to note such a view of Europe: from wanting to visit European destinations, to aspiring to study at European universities, to high regard for goods made in Europe, to even calling good-quality home renovations 'Evroremont' (Euro-renovations). For those with a higher level of education, Europe is the cradle of modern art, music, and civilisation. For the average Kyrgyzstani, Europe is where people are safe, healthy, rich (or at least not poor), and do not have to worry about the next day. Again, this is my view of how people perceive European life and is not based on any hard data unfortunately.

What are the top ingredients for a good life according to Kyrgyz? Do you think these ingredients are similar or very different from what Europeans might list as a good life?

There are many ingredients, but for the Kyrgyz population some important ingredients of a 'good life' would be happiness in family, a stable and good income, safety from crime and arbitrary domination by others, good housing, access to good education for their children, peace in the society/country. Most of these ingredients would be applicable for Europeans, too. Indeed, the criteria included in the OECD's 'Better Life Index' are what any Kyrgyzstani would also care for, albeit the order of priority is likely to differ. While some issues, such as gay marriage or LGBTQ rights, might be perceived as essential European values but would be unacceptable for the average Kyrgyz, in general there is likely to be a strong overlap in what is considered a 'good life'.

Is the notion of a good life helpful to guide EU policy and development cooperation to Central Asia? If so, why, and how?

Yes, cooperation for a 'good life' can be an attractive framing for EU engagement with Central Asian countries. However, it is a potentially very unwieldy, broad concept that would require careful conceptualisation and clear language. It must not be communicated as 'Europeans offering their version of a good life to Central Asians'. On the contrary; it needs to be 'Central Asians striving for a good life as they understand it, with European support on the basis of European values and achievements'. Furthermore, in EU-Central Asia cooperation, the concept of a 'good life' does not need to be a strict bottom-up inductive procedure. It could be enough to begin with broad and agreeable ingredients such as physical safety and health, economic security, individual autonomy or freedom from arbitrary power. Precise

measurement, exhaustive cataloguing and ranking are not necessary for the framing and communication of international cooperative agendas.

Nushofarin Noziri, former EUCAM Research Fellow, Tajikistan

Is Europe specifically seen in Tajikistan as a place where life is good? If so, how is this reflected?

Europe is seen as a place where freedom of speech is respected and where there are more possibilities for professional development based on merit. In addition, access to quality healthcare is important, as we are seeing with the COVID-19 pandemic. The crisis has shown countries' capacity to deal with the pandemic. In Tajikistan, it became clear how dependant the healthcare system is on donations.

Europe has affordable and quality education; a high school graduate without a big budget can attend a good university. Meanwhile, in Tajikistan, university education is of poorer quality, and scholarships are almost non-existent. Regardless of that, education is very expensive, and bribery is commonplace in the education system.

What are the top ingredients of a good life according to Tajiks? Do you think these ingredients are similar or very different from what Europeans might list as a good life?

Tajiks put a lot of emphasis on family. Building a family is probably the most vital aspect for young Tajiks, and everything else revolves around that. While family is important everywhere, I see that in Europe many young couples choose not to marry; this is something incomprehensible for both older and younger Tajik generations.

Parents' authority is central, which may not always be a good thing. Kids are taught from a very young age to always obey their parents and respect authority. Even if parents are wrong, they cannot be questioned. This system is then perpetuated in schools and universities, where students are taught to obey and nothing is questioned. As a result, our society does not question anything. It would be good if a gradual shift is made: Parents listen to their children and allow them to have a voice; universities that encourage critical thinking; and workplaces that value the opinion of staff. In this way, we could empower Tajik citizens to speak up and make their voices heard. Here, Europe could maybe serve as an example.

Financial success is also seen as a key ingredient of a good life. However, in Tajikistan this is measured often solely by one's capacity to afford luxury brands or expensive cars.

Is the notion of a good life helpful to guide EU policy and development cooperation to Central Asia? If so, why, and how?

Identifying and understanding what Tajiks (or Central Asians) value and what problems they face is the first step to developing a truly comprehensive and sustainable policy (sort of like winning 'hearts and minds'). For example, with this questionnaire, you have shown

that you value Central Asians' opinion. Such questionnaires that ask for people's views are a rarity in Tajikistan. Foreign policy development needs to gather inputs from the very people it is trying to help. In that sense the EU would do well to include the Tajik take on issues as it is important to create local ownership and sustainability of development and reform processes.

Selbi Hanova, Researcher, Turkmenistan

Is Europe specifically seen in Turkmenistan as a place where life is good? If so, how is this reflected?

In Turkmenistan, Europe is seen as a place for good quality but also very expensive life. For many, the United States is seen as the best place for a 'good life', while others might also mention Russia, Turkey, or the United Arab Emirates (Dubai). These opinions are mainly based on work or holiday considerations. Europe is seen as a high-end destination that is limited to those who have a good financial position, are educated and speak languages.

What are the top ingredients for a good life according to Turkmenistan? Do you think these ingredients are similar or very different from what Europeans might list as a good life?

Components of a good life in Turkmenistan are not that different from the rest of the region or Europe: economic and financial well-being; good and accessible healthcare; employment opportunities; and opportunities to travel and go on holiday. Family and society play a crucial role as well, and 'good life' means social acceptance and a favourable status in the community; a happy marriage; positive family relations and bonds. All these elements contribute to the predictability of one's future, which is often regarded as important in the Turkmen context.

More generally in Central Asia (and beyond), a 'good life' has different meanings to people depending on their background and circumstances. A 'good life' for a villager might entail moving to a big city or moving abroad for work. A 'good life' for a Western educated professional working in the capital might mean the provision of services to make life more comfortable. For entrepreneurs, a 'good life' might mean wealth and leading a 'nouveau riche' lifestyle. For young people in Central Asia, who were the actual products of socialisation in the 2000s and 2010s, the concept of a 'good life' might encompass a wide range of answers, from digital resistance to actual social problems. The difference between what people see as a 'good life' most likely depends more on background and circumstances than on nationality.

Is the notion of a good life helpful to guide EU policy and development cooperation to Central Asia? If so, why, and how?

Because the meaning of a 'good life' is subjective, it is a difficult concept to use in a uniform manner. The logic of the EU acting as a power promoting democratic values is clear, but the notion of a 'good life' is much harder to decipher for policy-makers and citizens alike.

It would also inherently create misunderstandings, since most people see Europe through Russian eyes (media, etc.) and, hence, it is often demonised as the continent of instability (because of the refugee crisis) and loose morals (for example because of LGBT rights). Promoting a European 'good life' would evoke irony at least in this context, unless it is carefully planned and targeted. It would require some thorough thinking with experts from the region. Another risk is of promoting a European 'good life' is that it could indirectly allude to the global hierarchy, downplaying other regions and adding to the already present criticism of 'neo-colonialism' of development assistance.

Rashid Gabdulhakov, PhD Candidate and Lecturer, Erasmus University Rotterdam, and EUCAM Advisory Group Member, The Netherlands

Is Europe specifically seen in Uzbekistan as a place where life is good? If so, how is this reflected?

Millions of Uzbek citizens seek employment opportunities abroad due to the country's economic situation. The traditional destination for labour migrants has been Russia. Lately, even though more complicated, South Korea has also become a highly-desirable destination. Europe is perceived as a rich place, but one that is very hard to reach – a 'high-hanging fruit'. Life in Europe is seen as comfortable, where people do not have to worry about shortages of electricity, water, gas, etc. Europeans are viewed as sophisticated, educated, with lots of opportunities. Concrete indicators of a 'good life' in Europe in an average Uzbek citizen's eyes include: high salary, ability to travel, good pensions, healthcare, education, infrastructure, good products, and rule of law.

What are the top ingredients for a good life according to Uzbeks? Do you think these ingredients are similar or very different from what Europeans might list as a good life?

The basics for a 'good life' are universal. In my view, people want to have a roof over their heads, warmth, food on their table, and health for themselves and their loved ones, clothes to wear, etc. Unfortunately, some of these basic ingredients such as qualified medical care are still inaccessible to many in Uzbekistan.

Of course, society is not homogenous. There are differences depending on who you are and where you live. Life in the administrative centres and the periphery differs significantly. Life in Tashkent is very different from the rest of the country. When I have asked people about everyday concerns in different regions of Uzbekistan, they mostly replied: gas, water, electricity.

If the basics are covered, there is the next layer of a 'good life'. Uzbekistan has a collectivist society and public celebrations are a big part of it. Being able to enjoy food with friends and family and share meals in huge gatherings is important in Uzbekistan. This is perhaps different from North-West Europe, but similar to Southern European – alike the Uzbek, European society is also diverse. Owning a house, a car or two, and having a family with lots of children are also some of the most significant elements of 'good life' in Uzbekistan. When

the first layer of the basic indicators is met, the second one becomes easier to realize.

Is the notion of a good life helpful to guide EU policy and development cooperation to Central Asia? If so, why, and how?

This notion is helpful in all engagements, including development, and should be seen as the ultimate goal. What should be avoided is using the argument of 'difference in perceptions' or 'things work differently here' as reasons to ignore human rights violations or other unacceptable practices. The idea of 'good life' should not be a substitute for arguing that things work differently in Uzbekistan. A 'good life' is a goal for all, and I would like to once again stress the universality of the basic indicators for such a life. People want good education, healthcare, to be able to travel, to have a good income, some good prospects for retirement, access to basic needs such as clean water, electricity, gas, etc. Are these desires exclusive and nation-specific? I highly doubt it.

EUCAM News

Welcome to Rashid Gabdulhakov as EUCAM Advisory Group Member

Rashid Gabdulhakov (<https://www.plovism.com/>) is a PhD candidate and lecturer at Erasmus University Rotterdam. He is researching the phenomenon of digital vigilantism (citizen-led justice manifested online) in Russia and Central Asia. Rashid has been actively involved with the EUCAM fellowship programme designing and delivering a 'Media and Security' workshop. He holds a master's degree in International and European Security from the University of Geneva and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, and a master's degree in Politics and Security from the OSCE Academy in Bishkek.

Delaying EUCAM fellowships

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to postpone the visit of our fifth group of EUCAM fellows to Groningen. Fellows from Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan now plan to do their fellowship from September to November in a hybrid on site / online fashion.

New CESS website

Since 2016 EUCAM has been a programme of the Centre for European Security Studies from Groningen, the Netherlands. CESS has recently launched a new website (<https://cess.org/>). Please visit our website to learn more about EUCAM and also CESS research and activities on the Western Balkans (<https://cess.org/projects-and-programmes/decos/>) and Ukraine (<https://cess.org/research-and-publications/cess-policy-briefs/>).

Latest publications

www.eucentralasia.eu

How the EU links Central Asia to Afghanistan's development

EUCAM commentary No 38, January 2020

Muslimbek Buriev

The 2019 EU strategy for Central Asia stresses cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia. Beyond addressing security concerns, there seems to be new potential to develop tri-lateral cooperation in areas such as cross-border trade, education, and civil society.

<https://eucentralasia.eu/2020/01/how-the-eu-links-central-asia-to-afghanistans-development/>

Right to Privacy in Kyrgyzstan

EUCAM Commentary No 39, January 2020

Bermet Zhumakadyr kyzy

Kyrgyz citizens' right to privacy is at risk, especially as the country's weak rule of law offers few safeguards. The installation of facial recognition cameras in Bishkek has led to a first, short-lived spark of discourse on citizens' privacy rights. It will be important for Kyrgyzstan that its vibrant civil society further shapes the debate, while creating awareness on the importance of privacy rights.

<https://eucentralasia.eu/2020/01/right-to-privacy-in-kyrgyzstan/>

Invisible migration with visible consequences

EUCAM Commentary No. 40, January 2020

Zhypariza Zhumagazieva

The 2019 EU strategy for Central Asia stresses cooperation between Afghanistan and Central Asia. Beyond addressing security concerns, there seems to be new potential to develop tri-lateral cooperation in areas such as cross-border trade, education, and civil society.

<https://eucentralasia.eu/2020/01/invisible-migration-with-visible-consequences/>

EUCAM partner work

Also have a look at the publications on Central Asia published by our partner institute, the European Neighbourhood Council (ENC), Brussels. For instance, their recent work on Uzbekistan in the sphere of renewable energy development (<http://www.encouncil.org/ourwork/enc-analysis-renewable-energy-development-uzbekistan/>) and on the December 2019 parliamentary elections (<http://www.encouncil.org/ourwork/enc-analysis-uzbekistan-examining-parliamentary-elections-mirziyoyevs-move-towards-controlled-transition/>).

ENC also runs an in-depth podcasts series (<http://www.encouncil.org/blog/>) with regular episodes on Central Asia. EUCAM fellows often present and discuss their research in this format with ENC host Andreas Marazis.



EUCAM

Established in 2008 by FRIDE as a project seeking to monitor the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, EUCAM has grown into a knowledge hub on broader Europe-Central Asia relations. As part of CESS, EUCAM will continue to raise the profile of European-Central Asian relations in general, and more specifically to:

- Critically, though constructively, scrutinize European policies towards Central Asia;
- Enhance knowledge of European engagement with Central Asia through top-quality research;
- Raise awareness on the importance of Central Asia and Europe's engagement, as well as discuss European policies among Central Asian communities;
- Expand the network of experts and institutions from Europe and Central Asia and provide a forum for debate.



CESS

The Centre for European Security Studies (CESS) is an independent institute for research and training, based in Groningen, the Netherlands. CESS seeks to advance political development, democracy, human rights and in particular security, by helping governments and civil society face their respective challenges.

CESS is an international, multidisciplinary and inclusive institute. Its work is part of the European quest for stability and prosperity, both within and outside Europe. CESS encourages informed debate, empowers individuals, fosters mutual understanding on matters of governance, and promotes democratic structures and processes.



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