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EUCAM Watch



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Fellowship focus

A learning experience

Towards the end of my studies in the nineties, I was fortunate to be able to do a research internship in Russia and then an organisational internship in the Balkans. These experiences largely shaped my professional interest and career. Living abroad and experiencing life in Bucharest, Moscow, and Sofia helped me to understand local contexts and compare different perspectives. It resulted in a lifetime interest in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and later Central Asia. Today, many students in Europe have the opportunity to study or do an internship abroad. These experiences help to understand and appreciate other European countries and cultures, and are likely to further cement European integration. At the same time, Europe also hosts students and young professionals from all around the world (and vice versa) – also fostering experience, knowledge, and understanding – though in much smaller numbers.

In 2018, the Open Society Foundations provided the EUCAM programme of CESS with the opportunity to develop a fellowship curriculum for researchers and NGO representatives from Central Asia. This has been a rewarding exercise for our centre, the fellows we have hosted, and the partners with whom we have interacted. Twenty-four fellows spent three months in the Dutch city of Groningen and twenty fellows benefitted from an online training programme during the covid lockdowns. The fellowship in Groningen consisted of joint training exercises on policy-oriented research and civil society-outreach skills; fellows embarked on individual research projects; and, together, we made trips to The Hague and Brussels to meet with policymakers, NGO representatives, and other researchers. So, what were the gains for those involved: fellows, interlocutors, and organisers?

The young research fellows from Central Asia acquired useful skills to work in civil society (as a trainer, a project developer and manager, a researcher, etc.), knowledge about the EU and Europe, and contacts in Europe. In short, it was a valuable experience that is different for each person. Truth be told, often, fellowships are not immediate life-changing experiences. Some fellows felt a bit lost, far away from home, while others were sometimes disappointed upon return by the meagre opportunities to use their newly-gained expertise at home. Surely, each person is different, and that also applies to how fellows chose their research subject (from women's empowerment to tourism development, and from EU instruments to energy security) and how they used their free time (from discovering Groningen's nightlife to painting in the countryside, and from crisscrossing Europe to a good book at home). In the end, I dare say, all of them took away an experience that helped shape their views and understanding of Europe (for better or for worse).

Fellows met many Europeans. Coming from Central Asia, this often involved some pedagogy, as both local-market traders and policymakers argued that they found Central Asia an exotic place about which they knew little. For many people meeting our fellows, it offered an opportunity to learn something about a region that all that came to mind was 'silk road'. For European policymakers, it was an opportunity to hear first-hand about political developments in Central Asia and the population's economic and social concerns. Meanwhile, meeting different experts and policymakers who took an interest in their views made the research fellows feel appreciated and respected.

For us at CESS and people in The Netherlands and Belgium connected to the EUCAM programme, the fellowship also brought many benefits. The CESS office is lively with research fellows drinking tea and discussing political developments or going out together during weekends. But EUCAM also gained a network of experts that is being used for our research. Alumni fellows either provide us with written input or help us point the way to relevant expertise. At the same time, we were happy to see that our interlocutors, from policymakers to researchers, have made use of this network by inviting alumni fellows to their events and using their expertise.

This newsletter marks the conclusion of the Open Society Foundations-funded fellowship programme. We hope that the conclusion is temporary and that opportunities will arise for a renewal of the programme. One of our most recent fellows, Adina Masalbekova, makes a case for fellowships for Central Asian researchers. Her op-ed is followed by a series of interviews focused on fellowships. First, Oleksandr Dobroier of the Prague Civil Society Centre explains how they shaped their fellowship programme in the Czech Republic. Second, Alina Belskaia, political advisor to the EUSR for Central Asia, discusses the cooperation her office maintains with civil society and how they regarded the regular visits of EUCAM fellows. Third, Kristina Vaiciunaite of the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) – also a donor of EUCAM fellowships – outlines EED’s work with civil society as well as her own engagement with EUCAM fellows. Last, three alumni fellows with whom we regularly work in EUCAM explain their fellowship experiences. I hope that this issue of EUCAM Watch inspires more interaction between Europe and Central Asia, not only in terms of research, but also to learn about different cultures and build friendships.

Jos Boonstra is EUCAM coordinator and senior researcher at the Centre for European Security Studies, The Netherlands

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Fellows – ‘a partner in a business’

Adina Masalbekova, EUCAM 2023 research fellow

According to [britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com), a fellow is a partner or associate. The Old English féolage meant ‘a partner in business’. This is exactly what Europeans need when trying to build ties with Central Asia, and it is what Central Asia needs to develop its youth potential in an integrated manner.

The few fellowships available in Europe for Central Asian scholars and civil society actors bring strengthened capacities and increased knowledge to Central Asia. They either directly contribute to the development of Central Asia by applying their skills at home or are indirectly an added value through their international networks. From a European perspective, hosting young Central Asian scholars and civil society actors offers an opportunity to learn about a region that is not familiar among many Europeans. Russia hosts many low-paid workers from Central Asia and China increasingly invites Central Asian students. Europe could develop its own niche by building an informal network of young professionals that have studied and/ or worked in Europe.

Now that we have established the ‘why’, let’s investigate the ‘who’ and ‘what’ of fellowships in Europe. Young Central Asians who pursue a fellowship in Europe are often highly-educated and speak English fluently. Fellows have often attended international (oriented) universities in Central Asia that help prepare students for internationally-oriented careers. Many Central Asians who do a fellowship have already studied abroad and are aware of the international opportunities available to them. Whereas fellows are often not part of the region’s political elite, they do belong to an intellectual elite.

Interestingly, Europe-based fellowship programmes seem to attract more women than men. In Central Asian countries, there are few opportunities in the political and economic sectors for highly-educated women. In contrast, civil society does include many women, also in leading positions. Academics who are fluent in English are also often women. Experiences in Europe, whereby fellows see that women occupy senior positions in ministries or are vocal members of parliament, help do away with ideas that ‘men do politics, women social activism’.

The few fellowship opportunities available in Europe that are open to or aimed at Central Asian people are often short term and focused on knowledge transfer via training. Programmes can be distinguished as having either a public policy, research, or a civil society emphasis. Public policy-oriented fellowships provide participants with the opportunity to learn from experts in their fields, connect with public officials in European institutions, and develop their skills to promote effective policy analysis and implementation in their home countries. Examples are fellowship programmes at the Riga Graduate School of Law and the Transparency International School on Integrity in Lithuania.

There are several fellowship opportunities with a focus on research and Central Asia. The University of Zurich hosts Central Asian fellows to conduct one semester of research at the Centre for Eastern European Studies and present their findings to students.

At the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) in Oslo, fellows attend for one year, and often work on climate change and energy transition, and its impact on Central Asia. The Tbilisi-based think tank Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) organises roundtables for young Central Asian experts to reflect on socio-political matters as part of a two-week study visit on regional cooperation and democracy. Lastly, the Lane Kirkland Scholarship Programme offers a public policy and research mix addressing democratic governance, while granting access to various university classes across Poland and professional training in Polish public or private institutions for early and mid-level professionals.

The third group of fellowships emphasises strengthening skills that are important to work in civil society. Most notably here are fellowship programmes by the Prague Civil Society Centre (see interview below), the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, the Data Communication Fellowship at ForSet in Tbilisi, and Front Line Defenders in Dublin. The countries where these fellowships take place have vibrant civil societies and are known for their expertise and promotion of democratic development and human rights, making them attractive destinations to improve competences in these areas. The identified projects largely focus on organisational development, advocacy, and networking by connecting civil society actors in Central Asia with experts and activists in Europe. The EUCAM fellowship seeks to mix this category of fellowships with a policy-oriented research component.

Offering fellowships that sit in-between education, internship, and employment would be a niche for Europe to work with Central Asia in a different way. Here are three suggestions to further develop fellowship opportunities: *First*, it would be good practice if projects funded by the EU or national European donors implemented by European and Central Asian partners included a fellowship component. Knowledge and expertise would be transferred in both directions, projects would likely become more sustainable, and networks developed or strengthened. *Second*, more engagement by EU delegations and European embassies in offering fellowships at diplomatic missions would be a great way to boost the number of exchanges. Embassies could also fund and coordinate fellowships at educational or research institutions in their own countries. *Third*, the EU could make funding available to support fellowship programmes. As this practice probably does not fit any of the current EU instruments, the EU could, for instance, support organisations like the OSCE (with its OSCE Academy in Kyrgyzstan) or the European Endowment for Democracy (with its contacts in the region) to manage the funds and fellowships.

As neighbours of neighbours, Central Asia and Europe often feel far apart, separated by linguistic, cultural, and geopolitical barriers. Nevertheless, there has been a natural push to bring the two regions slightly closer, as Europe increasingly becomes a popular destination for Central Asians seeking better education and job opportunities. Fellowship programmes serve as an economical and impactful alternative to Europe-based degree-level education. Europe gains from first-hand input on Central Asia, while young Central Asian professionals gain expertise and knowledge; clearly a win-win.

The author spoke to several alumni of European fellowship programmes.

Interview

Oleksandr Dobroier, programme director (learning & exchange), Prague Civil Society Centre (PCSC)

Can you tell us about your fellowship programme?

The Prague Civil Society Centre works with civil society and independent media from 17 countries in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. This includes countries where authoritarian rulers seek to eliminate civic engagement and liquidate independent media, and we support those who resist. We believe that civil society and independent media are key drivers of social change and progress in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. We want to help drive this change by empowering civic groups and independent journalists to connect with their communities, reach new audiences, and build their resilience.

One such tool is our fellowship programme. Fellowships are designed for leading civil society representatives, researchers, and journalists from Eastern Europe and Central Asia to undertake intensive research, writing, and networking. We invite fellows from Eastern European and Central Asian countries to Prague so that they can focus on their projects in a safe location, away from the daily routine of their organisations and the pressures in their home countries, including the difficulties and dangers of war in the case of the Ukrainians.

What challenges do you encounter?

The current situation of Russia's war on Ukraine, several armed conflicts in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, and strict rules for obtaining visas for participants from some countries complicate the opportunities for some of our potential candidates to participate in this programme. Nevertheless, we still receive many applications, and can invite strong candidates from many countries to Prague for the programme. The range of fellows and types of projects we support is diverse, including journalists, lawyers, entrepreneurs, activists, and former political prisoners who are working on everything from articles and books to films and educational programmes.

What are the main benefits of the programme? Do you keep in touch with alumni?

The main benefit of our programme is the opportunity for civic activists to distance themselves from their daily work and spend three months in Prague working on a project of their choice. The curriculum is very balanced. On the one hand, our fellows have enough time for independent work. On the other hand, we offer them a rich programme that includes meetings and exchanges with experts from Czech civil society and independent media, as well as plenty of opportunity to interact and share with their peers from other countries on the fellowship programme.

We are convinced that the long-term future of the region depends largely on the creation of networks of informed citizens, collaborating with each other and thinking critically and strategically. Therefore, after the completion of the fellowship, we continue to maintain contact with our alumni. Many go on to participate in our capacity building workshops or apply to the Centre's grants programme to support their projects. When we organise a reunion of former comrades from different years and cohorts, they prepare presentations for each other on various topics of mutual interest and communicate in informal formats.

Interview

Alina Belskaia, political advisor to the EU Special Representative to Central Asia

How does your office interact with civil society actors and Central Asian researchers?

Interaction with civil society, academic institutions, think tanks, and students has always been an important part of the work of the Office of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia. Strengthening people-to-people connections has always been an essential part of EU-Central Asia relations. The annual Civil Society Forum has been an excellent platform to bring together civil society from both the EU and Central Asia to discuss pressing issues on our agenda. We always organise this gathering in the region to be able to engage with as many organisations as possible. We have already held the Forum in Bishkek, Almaty, and Tashkent.

What input by Central Asian civil society would be helpful to your work?

During our visits to the region, meeting with civil society is always part of the agenda. We also like to meet organisations and activists based in the regions whenever we travel beyond the capital. I am always surprised about how many amazing people committed to making their communities a better place are out there wanting to connect. For us, this engagement is like a barometer to measure what societies are going through as Central Asian countries go through many multifaceted changes. The EU wants to be a partner on this journey.

We benefit from our interaction in many other ways too. Research is crucial for the development of Central Asian countries. It is difficult to make informed policies without solid data and research. I would like to see more collaboration between EU and Central Asian universities, research centres, and think tanks in as many areas as possible. This engagement helps us to better understand our Central Asian partners. We follow what is written in the EU about Central Asia, and I would like to see not only a wider range of topics being covered about Central Asia in European think tanks and academia, but also more strategic thinking on EU-Central Asian cooperation.

Have EUCAM or other fellowship visits and contacts been useful to you and colleagues?

Engaging with young Central Asian researchers and civil society actors is always very enriching. Explaining how the EU works can be quite a challenge sometimes, but there is growing interest among young people in the EU as a peace project, as a model for development and as a community of values. Meanwhile, we learn from research fellows and other visitors about what issues they regard important and how they approach these. Over the past few years, we have expanded our cooperation with civil society, but we can do more. And this is where we also count on the students and research fellows who engage with us through programmes such as EUCAM. I encourage your fellows to think big. As future elites of their own countries, we count on them to take our friendship forward.

Interview

Kristina Vaiciunaite, senior programme manager (Eurasia), European Endowment for Democracy (EED)

What are the EED's activities with Central Asian partners?

EED was established 10 years ago as a flexible mechanism supporting independent media and civic activism. Unlike many other donors, EED does not have pre-decided thematic priorities; we are a very much demand-driven donor. With the help of a network of local consultants, EED closely monitors the situation on the ground and carefully assesses each initiative in the context of local communities and their needs. Over the past eight years, when EED started its programming in Central Asia, we have supported independent media, which has contributed to the pluralism of opinions within society, and have provided funds to local civil society groups working on civic engagement, advocacy, and community initiatives.

What sort of activities would you like to see from Central Asian civil society actors?

Being a flexible donor, we seek to fund innovative ideas. We can engage with individuals and non-registered groups, communities, and civil society organisations. Submitting an application to EED is the first step to start communication with us. We do not perform an administrative assessment of applications; if we see a good idea, we will coach the applicant on how to better structure the initiative, how to set an action plan, and how to monitor its impact. We are very much looking for active youth willing to pioneer ideas. EED can provide grants to implement existing initiatives or seed funding to start something new.

Have EUCAM or other fellowship visits and contacts been useful to you and colleagues?

Meeting people from the countries where we work is the most rewarding part of our job. We learn a lot from their views, opinions, success stories. EED always seeks to make well-informed decisions. Thus, discussions with fellows brought by EUCAM helped us better understand the socio-political situation on the ground, local needs, and funding gaps experienced by civil society and independent media. We greatly appreciated their ideas and advice.

Alumni views – how did the fellowship impact you?

Critical thinking

Khurshid Zafari, Uzbekistan

The EUCAM fellowship gave me an opportunity to study in-depth a topic that had captivated me for long. A commentary that I produced for the fellowship put me under the spotlight in terms of border dynamics in Central Asia. Once conflicts erupted on the borders, I was asked to give interviews to local and international news agencies on the complex nature of Central Asian enclaves. During my stay in Groningen, I also had the chance to visit European enclaves and interview local municipalities on the ways they cope with border complexities. This broadened my understanding of alternative scenarios of border developments.

Since the fellowship, I have worked in different positions, including as a project manager for a UN cross-border peacebuilding project between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. But what I am particularly thankful to EUCAM for is the enormous impact the fellowship had on shaping values and attitudes towards both life and work such as critical and free thinking, and Dutch straightforwardness. The value level through an immersion into the culture and work environment of The Netherlands makes this fellowship outstanding. I really hope that the alumni community of EUCAM fellows in Central Asia will continue growing.

A rare opportunity

Nushofarin Noziri, Tajikistan

The EUCAM fellowship has significantly impacted both my professional and personal life. The fellowship provided me with a unique opportunity to study the gendered impact of migration in Tajikistan and, in the process, conduct policy analysis and interview important stakeholders and decision-makers who contribute to policy making. Such pragmatic and results-oriented opportunities like the EUCAM fellowship are very rare, especially for citizens from Central Asia. Coming from Tajikistan, where civic engagement in policy making is rarely practiced, I felt empowered to be contributing a small part to the EU-Central Asia Strategy. As a young Tajik woman, I felt that my voice was heard.

Upon finishing my fellowship, my commentary was translated from English into Tajik and published at Radio Liberty, growing the audience among Tajik-speaking stakeholders. Personally, having a commentary published with my name has impressed many organisations, where I would later be hired. In addition, I was trusted to develop other policy-based documents focusing on gender and security at OSCE and UN Women. I am hopeful that other people from Central Asia will get the same opportunity the EUCAM fellowship offered me in 2018.

Debating at the kitchen table

Jipariza Jumagazieva, Kyrgyzstan

A three-month fellowship might seem short, but it had a profound impact on my life, both personally and professionally. It was my first time in Europe, and during this period, I had the opportunity to explore Dutch culture in the charming town of Groningen. At the CESS office, the prevailing tradition was to have coffee together in the mornings and engaging in conversations and sharing our thoughts. This simple ritual fostered strong connections among us. The programme itself was intense and meaningful. It encouraged deep introspection, helping me gain knowledge and, most importantly, confidence. I attended numerous meetings with EU officials and civil society members, which provided me with valuable insights into EU-Central Asia relations and the European Union as a whole.

Upon my return home, I secured a position as a legal specialist at UNHCR in Kyrgyzstan, focusing mainly on analysing legislation. After a while, still inspired by my fellowship, I decided to further pursue my academic aspirations. In 2022, I obtained a scholarship, enabling me to graduate with a master's degree in Human Rights from Central European University in Vienna. EUCAM has had a profound and instrumental impact on my achievements to date. The alumni support and network have been very helpful in further shaping my career and academic path. It's safe to say that EUCAM's role in my life has been nothing short of transformative.

'I still trust the Russian media more'. Narratives and perception of Russian propaganda in Kyrgyzstan

EUCAM policy brief No. 38, June 2023

Rashid Gabdulhakov

Russian propaganda is dominating the media landscape in Kyrgyzstan, stirring anti-Western sentiment, promoting Russian narratives about its war in Ukraine, and emphasising Kyrgyzstan's dependence on Russia. This policy brief outlines the scope of Russian propaganda, discusses its narrative, and assesses how it is perceived by the Kyrgyz people. It urges action by the Kyrgyz authorities, donors, journalists, civil society, and researchers.

This publication is one of the outcomes of the project 'Analyse and Amplify: Countering Russian Propaganda in Kyrgyzstan', implemented by the Institute for War & Peace Reporting and EUCAM. The brief is also available in Kyrgyz and Russian.

Mission impossible: The Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy, and Climate in Central Asia

EUCAM commentary No. 54, July 2023

Shyngys Zipatolla

In November 2022, the EU launched a Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy, and Climate. Central Asia's environmental problems, amidst challenging economic and political contexts, raise doubts over Brussels' capacity to have a positive impact on such broad areas with only a limited budget at its disposal. Instead, the EU should focus on a few specific tangible projects that are realistic, while ensuring that Central Asian partners continue to regard Europe as a neutral and innovative partner.

The European Union and Central Asia: Bridging the Digital Divide

EUCAM commentary No. 53, July 2023

Alouddin Komilov

Digital transformation has become a major international development topic. In November 2022, the EU launched a Team Europe Initiative on Digital Connectivity in Central Asia. Whereas the initiative presents an opportunity to bridge the digital divide between Europe and Central Asia, there are also risks, particularly related to the diverging interests of other external actors and the region's poor governance performance.

EUCAM podcast

A chat in the Yurt

Step into our Yurt and join us for a monthly conversation on Europe-Central Asia developments. In the EUCAM podcast, Yelena Kilina, Rashid Gabdulhakov and Andreas Marazis welcome guests from both regions to discuss exciting new research and the latest developments in Europe and Central Asia. Guests range from academics to policymakers and from journalists to civil society activists. What is happening in Europe that Central Asians should know about? What events are unfolding in Central Asia that Europeans should understand? Together, we discuss society trends, political developments, and economic turns, while assessing the past and looking ahead to what may unfold.

Join EUCAM in the Yurt via SoundCloud, Spotify and Google Podcasts and be part by posing questions and sharing your thoughts on our social media channels (Facebook and LinkedIn).



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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