



CESS Elections 2021 – Candidate statements

Candidates for President (one vacancy)

Listed in alphabetical order by last name

Aksana Ismailbekova

I am writing to express my interest in being a candidate for the position of President of CESS. It is a great honor for me to be nominated for the CESS Presidency.

As a Kyrgyz national, with anthropological training in Kyrgyzstan (B.A., 2005), Scotland (M.A., 2006) and Germany (Ph.D., 2012), I am in a unique position to contribute to the success of CESS. As my CV demonstrates, I already have a clear record of independent and innovative research (led a project, supervised final theses, and worked with students). Based on my Ph.D. dissertation, I wrote a monograph *Blood Ties and the Native Son: Poetics of Patronage in Kyrgyzstan*, which was published by Indiana University Press in 2017, and has been reviewed, very positively, in at least five journals.

For my doctoral thesis, completed in 2012 at the MPI for Social Anthropology in Halle, I conducted ethnographic research on Kyrgyz kinship and networks of political patronage in rural Kyrgyz communities. As a post-doctoral researcher at the Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO) in Berlin, I conducted research from 2012–2015 on local Uzbek communities in Osh, Kyrgyzstan, as well as in Yekaterinburg, Russia. My research illuminated the importance of kinship, migration, and marriage alliances among Uzbeks as coping strategies in the face of violence/conflict. Based on my extended project among Uzbeks in Fergana Valley, I co-edited a manuscript titled *Surviving Everyday Life. The Securityscapes of Threatened People in Central Asia*, published with Bristol University Press.

I continued my research on kinship as part of the international project on “Informal governance, kinship and corruption” (funded by the British Academy - DFID), traveling back to Kyrgyzstan to do an ethnography of kinship, corruption and informal governance. All previous projects were successfully completed and delivered scientific results in the form of a manuscript, peer-reviewed articles (*Anthropology Today*, *Central Asian Survey*, *Focaal: Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology*, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, and *Nationalities Papers*), and mass media articles. Additionally, I have taught several courses in anthropology at the Martin Luther University (Halle) and Freie Universität Berlin, I act as Ph.D. supervisor of several students at Kazakh State University, as supervisor of B.A. and M.A. students at the American University in Central Asia, and serve as board member of the Central Eurasian Studies Association, Central Asia & Siberia Specialized Information Service, and *Central Asian Survey*. Currently I am a postdoctoral researcher at the Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin. My current project is on “Future Building in Central Asia: Intergenerational Cooperation, Infrastructure, and Translocal Mobilities,” which would lead me to a habilitation.

I believe that CESS members will find me to be an active and engaged colleague. As a board member of CESS, I addressed several priorities: 1) the advancement of young researchers from the region – my most central concern; 2) the integration of researchers from Central Asia, Russia, the Caucasus, and

China into larger international research projects; and 3) the promotion of interdisciplinary research excellence in Eurasia; serving on article awards committees and other committees, including the Academic Freedom, Advocacy, and Scholars at Risk (AFASAR) Committee and the Regional Outreach Committee.

In the context of Covid-19, I want to introduce the most effective use of digital tools so that CESS members can promote and publicise their work, organise online mentoring for young scientists and access a diverse and unique collection of publications. Within CESS, I would like to contribute to the organization of online seminars or workshops for “writing peer-reviewed articles” and “getting funding from international funding agencies,” together with my colleagues in the CESS network. By inviting local and international scholars from diverse disciplines and places to CESS, I hope to promote online intellectual dialogue across fields of specialization and between area studies and the systematic disciplines. If elected, I will continue to build formal and informal collaborations between established CESS members and young scholars in Central Eurasia. I also want to play an active role in fundraising, as our previous presidents have done so far.

In sum, I am confident that my language skills, my deep historical understanding and knowledge of the region, established contacts in Central Asia as well as in outside, will enable me to make a contribution to the work of the CESS, which at the same time will provide me an unparalleled environment in which to expand my academic networks, broaden my scientific thinking, and strengthen my leadership skills.

Igor Jelen

I'm working as a geographer of CA since my first fieldwork in Pamir Alaj in summer 1994, followed by periodical stays in post-soviet republics, almost in any region. Some results of such (almost) 30 years dedication to CA is in my publication (together with Angelija Bučienė, and my pupils Chiavon, Silvestri and Forrest, *The Geography of Central Asia. Human Adaptations, Natural Processes and Post-Soviet Transition*, Springer 2020): it intended to be a kind of collection of the researches carried out in the time. In the meanwhile, I did my career, writing, studying and publishing about several geography matters, conducting, as usual for geographers, fieldwork in several places in the world; however, I maintained always attention on the area. I usually published in Italian, Slovenian and Austrian scientific circles, as my site of study and career is Trieste University in Italy (just on three-corner area), where my current position is associate professor in geography. I also visited several times other universities (among the others, South Carolina at Columbia, with Prof. Julian V. Minghi, and Innsbruck Geography Institute, directed by Prof. Ernst Steinicke), cooperating with several other universities in Italy and abroad; I've got Habilitation as full professor in 2014. Last year I was hosted by Kent State University (OH) for a conference organized by Prof. David H. Kaplan (who incidentally is also President of AAG), where I'm planning for a sabbatical in the next future (considering the sanitary circumstances). I am currently a member in good standing of CESS, but for the last decades I was involved in a deal of organizational duties at my university and in similar commitments - organizational, either than scientific. But now, having stabilized my position and (almost) completed my career, I have definitively much more chance to dedicate myself to CESS activity: I'd be especially interested in such questions as academic and research freedom, which - my opinion - are critical topics in the area.

Curriculum vitae is on: www.units.it/persona/index.php/from/abook/persona/4413
while list of publications on: <https://arts.units.it/>

The descriptions are in Italian, which I hope is understandable, but I can anytime provide a punctual translation. Then, I think, I'm ready to present my candidacy bid as President, Board of Directors, and for any other commitment at CESS. Thank you for your attention!

Jeff Sahadeo

Central Eurasia faces a turbulent start to the 2020s. Covid-19, Afghanistan and climate change only pose the most recent immediate challenges, among others our members know so well. CESS plays a critical role in connecting leading global researchers and scholars to the region, and regional scholars to the world, expanding our knowledge and effecting positive change. I seek the CESS presidency to maximize the organization's impact in analysis and engagement. I have been a CESS member since 2000 and have spent my career researching and teaching both Central Asia and the Caucasus. I have conducted fieldwork in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. My scholarly production has included two monographs, *Russian Colonial Society in Tashkent, 1865-1923* and *Voices from the Soviet Edge: Southern Migrants in Leningrad and Moscow*. With Russell Zanca, I co-edited *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*, a collection designed to introduce the region to a broader audience of undergraduates and laypeople.

I have also actively engaged with Central Asia through the Global Centre for Pluralism (GCP), spearheading efforts to promote understandings of the benefits of diversity in Kyrgyzstan following the 2010 riots. With GCP, we have engaged policymakers and educators alike. Work in the country has grown more difficult, of course, and I learned lessons about how to view issues of pluralism and tolerance through locals' eyes. As CESS president, I would seek to engage members on how to work at the grassroots, to use our regional knowledge and our intimate understandings to help those in Central Eurasia who seek to confront the multiple challenges facing them. We need more than ever to support our members in the region, who face, it seems, ever-growing challenges to academic freedom in addition to just carving out lives. I would be fortunate to work with an excellent team already in place. I would spend the first year as president-elect learning from and working with Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, whose expertise on Afghanistan is welcome as we witness a country now under Taliban rule, and Morgan Liu, who has given so much to Central Asia through his research and activities. I remain an active researcher, with a current project on the intersection between rivers and society in tsarist and Soviet Georgia. I would seek to mobilize my own knowledge to expand our understandings of the effects of environmental change on the region and engage with numerous projects already ongoing. I will also actively engage members and listen to their concerns and ideas as we continue to broaden and deepen the impact of our organization.

Candidates for Board members (two vacancies)

Listed in alphabetical order by last name

Barbara Junisbai

My circuitous professional and personal trajectory has brought me to Pitzer College, where I am currently faculty co-director of the Center for Teaching and Learning and associate professor of Organizational Studies, an interdisciplinary field that brings together insights from political science, economics, history, anthropology, and psychology to interrogate and improve the institutions that govern our lives. As I continue to study and write about politics and society in Central Asia, my interests have expanded into community-engaged teaching, liberatory education, and organizational development—including advocating for policies that promote the thriving and advancement of faculty from historically marginalized populations; creating inclusive, anti-racist, and trauma-informed teaching and community spaces; and implementing appreciative inquiry as a powerful method of organizational self-assessment and envisioning.

Before finding a home at Pitzer, I taught for two years in the department of Political Science and International Studies at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan (where I was also department chair during my first year), served for three years in academic administration (as assistant dean of faculty) at a private liberal arts college, and held a year-long fellowship at the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. Prior to that, I completed my dissertation research in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Belarus, funded by Fulbright, Title VII, and the Smith Richardson Foundation. For many years post-Ph.D., I was plagued by uncertainty—did my scholarly contributions matter; would I ever find an academic position that would allow my family to stay together; were the disparate set of jobs I'd held was an asset or a liability? It has been a long road, but each of these experiences and uncertainties make me who I am today: a scholar-teacher who embraces interdisciplinarity, mixed research methods, and close, contextual knowledge of the places and communities that have shaped me; a determined mother who moved her family from city to city and from country to country to pursue work and scholarship; and a responsive administrator who is committed to building community, drawing forth our collective expertise, and helping community members meet their best potential, as they understand it.

If elected to the board, I would bring to CESS the de-centered, appreciative, and inclusive approaches to creating and sustaining community across difference that I have had the honor of studying, practicing, and living in recent years.

Nargis Kassenova

I am a great believer in the value and importance of regional studies. Local contexts and agency do matter, and world affairs cannot be understood without in-depth knowledge and granular analysis of its parts. As a board member of CESS, I would like to support the development of regional studies, the incorporation of new tools and approaches, and push for the wider recognition of their relevance.

I was born and grew up in Soviet Central Asia, living through the Brezhnev stagnation, Gorbachev's reforms, and the collapse of the USSR. My entry into adulthood coincided with the start of the

independence of Central Asian republics. The memories of the dramatic changes and the ways people processed them in their everyday lives are my treasure-box. I draw on them in my efforts to understand 20th century developments in Central Asia and beyond. One of my current projects is the study of state-making in Central Asia, focusing on the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s. My other project focuses on current affairs and looks at China's Belt and Road Initiative, the evolution of its governance, and its impact on Central Asia.

My generation was most lucky to graduate from school when the region was opening up to the world and developed countries started providing assistance in different areas, including education. I could go and study in the United States and Japan; these experiences helped me to appreciate both the diversity of local environments and the unifying role of research. The recognition and appreciation of diversity is at the core of regional studies.

Upon completing my graduate studies, I returned to Kazakhstan. For ten years I taught at KIMEP University, where I founded two centers: Central Asian Studies Center and China and Central Asia Studies Center. These centers hosted public talks, roundtables and conferences and served as hubs for connecting international and local research communities.

In 2018 I moved to the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard. I am currently directing the center's Program on Central Asia. While the program aims at generating and disseminating knowledge and resources on Central Asia spanning different periods of its history, its main focus is on the independence period and current developments. The states, economies, and people of Central Asia are now an integral part of the globalized world, and developments in the region cannot be properly understood without tracing and analyzing different forms of connectivity, influence, and interdependence.

Omar Sadr

I am an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the American University of Afghanistan (AUAF), where I teach courses on democracy, democratization, statebuilding and governance, the history of Afghanistan, and cultural and identity politics. I have been incessantly conducting research on the governance arrangement and nature of polity in Afghanistan from republican, intercultural and multicultural perspectives. My papers have been published in the three edited books, treatises have been published by the Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS), and opinion pieces have appeared in both national and international magazines and newspapers. My latest book *Negotiating Cultural Diversity in Afghanistan*, published by Routledge, analyzes the problematique of governance of cultural diversity within the modern state of Afghanistan and traces patterns of national integration. Similarly, *The Republic and Its Enemies: The Status of the Republic in Afghanistan*, my recent treatise, published in January 2021 by the AISS, analyzes the key features that define a civic republic and examines the extent to which these features are present in Afghanistan and their potential implications for the concept.

I would like to nominate myself as a board member of the Central Eurasia Studies Society (CESS). It would be an honour to be elected and to serve under the ambit of CESS and contribute towards CESS objectives including enhancing academic cooperation and provision of institutional support; and infrastructure for scholars from the region; and working on Eurasia.

Originally from Afghanistan, I speak Persian which is the primary language of people in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, Iran and parts of Uzbekistan. My engagement with Central Eurasia started when I was working as a researcher at the Afghanistan Institute for Strategic Studies (AISS). I had the opportunity to participate in a couple of events in Central Asia on Afghanistan including a seminar on Central Asian and Afghanistan relations and a Track II dialogue on Regional Cooperation Around Afghanistan in the Support of the ongoing Peace and Reconciliation Effort. I am also a Rumsfeld Foundation fellow and will be a part of their one-month program that is planned to take place in fall. The program brings emerging leaders, the business community, academia, civil society activists and professionals from the region to not just familiarize themselves with the US and know how to engage with US policy-makers but also to establish a Central Eurasian network that can engage and cooperate with one another.

Akram Umarov

I am a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the Center for Governance and Markets of the University of Pittsburgh. At the same time, I am non-resident Senior Research Fellow at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (Tashkent, Uzbekistan). Previously I worked as a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies and Academy of Public Administration under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. I received B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. Degrees in International Relations at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy. I also graduated with an M.A. degree in Governance, Development and Public Policy from Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex (U.K.) in 2019.

I have a great interest in security studies, conflict management, public diplomacy, Central Asian studies, CIS countries, governance, peace and development. My policy briefs have been published in such international journals and newspapers as *The Diplomat*, *The Foreign Policy Research Institute*, *The Oxus Society*, *European Eye on Radicalization*, *Cabar.asia*, etc. I am the author of the monograph *Afghanistan and Regional Security in Central Asia: The Beginning of the XXI century* (in Russian) (UWED, 2017). My articles have been published in *Asian Affairs*, *Central Asian Affairs*, *Asia and Africa*, *National Strategy Issues*, *Comparative Politics*, *Defence Journal* and other peer-reviewed journals.

I have been involved in CESS activities starting from 2019. Despite relatively short period of my engagement, we have proposed to conduct the CESS regional conference at the UWED in Tashkent in summer 2020. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we would not be able to organise it, but we are still committed to conduct it as soon as the current situation will allow it. I am dedicated to promote Central Asian Studies in the scholarly world. I think it is especially important to widen the presence of regional scholars from Central Asia in the global academy. If elected, I would like to contribute strengthening cooperation between academia and policy world as research should influence political decisions, make our world more secure, resilient and developed. I am also planning to promote CESS within Central Asia and increase its members among regional scholars as the voice of the region should be more vocal and reach wider international community.