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**Author:** Saltanat Shoshanova

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# Geopolitics, Migrations and Identities in Central Eurasia: Reflections from the CESS- ESCAS Lisbon Conference 2025

Saltanat Shoshanova

University of Regensburg

*How are shifting geopolitics, migration patterns, and identity transformations shaping Central Eurasia today? At the Joint CESS-ESCAS Conference 2025 in Lisbon, UR researcher **Saltanat Shoshanova** joined leading experts to explore these pressing issues. From EU-Central Asia relations to authoritarian governance, digital surveillance, and diaspora politics, discussions spanned historical legacies and contemporary realities. She offers deeper insights on the issues of gender and queer identities as addressed at the conference, highlighting the evolving forms of resistance, activism, and artistic expression. In this post, Shoshanova shares key debates and emerging perspectives, offering a glimpse into the future of Central Eurasian and Central Asian studies.*

Some of these themes are being addressed in Regensburg at the Volkswagen Foundation-funded project [Light On! Queer Literary Cultures under Socialism](#), where Saltanat Shoshanova is a doctoral research. They will also be addressed in the new project [Transitions: Examining Changing Regimes of Sexuality in Post-Soviet Muslim Republics](#), funded as part of the DFG-AHRC UK-German Research Projects in the Arts and Humanities.

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The Joint Meeting of the Central Eurasian Studies Society (CESS) and the European Society for Central

Asian Studies (ESCAS) took place from 8-10 January 2025 in Lisbon. Scholars, researchers, and practitioners from diverse academic disciplines gathered to discuss the conference's central theme: Geopolitics, Migrations, and Identities in Central Eurasia. Against the backdrop of ongoing political shifts and cultural transformations, this international conference provided a critical platform for interdisciplinary dialogue and explored both historical trajectories and contemporary developments across Central Asia, the Caucasus, Siberia, and beyond.

The CESS-ESCAS Lisbon Conference 2025 reaffirmed the significance of Central Eurasian studies in global academic discourse. The event integrated historical analysis with contemporary sociopolitical debates, underscoring the urgency of addressing Eurasia's shifting landscapes through interdisciplinary and transregional approaches.

### **An interdisciplinary and multiregional approach**



*Photo by Saltanat Shoshanova. Interfaith ceremony for light and peace at the Church of Saint Dominic (Igreja de São Domingos), to open the conference.*

The conference opened with an interfaith ceremony for light and peace at the Church of Saint Dominic (Igreja de São Domingos), symbolizing the importance of dialogue across different cultural and religious traditions in Eurasia. This brief ceremony was organized in conjunction with the Working Group for Interreligious Dialogue of AIMA (Agency of the Portuguese Government for Integration, Migrations, and Asylum). This event was not only a moment of reflection but also an opportunity to visit one of Lisbon's most extraordinary churches and explore its layered history, one that includes both moments of splendor and darker chapters of the city's past. This church was the base of the Inquisition in the city and the location where the 1506 Lisbon Massacre of recent Christian converts began.

The first day of the conference, hosted at the Gulbenkian Foundation, was dedicated

to the European Union's evolving relationships with Central Asia and the Caucasus. The keynote talk by Raquel Freire and Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro (University of Coimbra) as well as plenary sessions and panels addressed bilateral and multilateral partnerships, cooperation agreements, and pressing geopolitical concerns. Featuring contributions from academic experts, policymakers, and representatives from various Eurasian nations, discussions highlighted the role of EU institutions in shaping economic and political networks in the region.

A particularly engaging plenary session on the opening day brought together institutional voices discussing the EU's interaction with Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The session featured scholars and policymakers reflecting on geopolitical shifts, economic partnerships, and security frameworks in the region.

Over the following two days, the conference moved to the University of Lisbon, where the IGOT (Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning) and ICS (Institute of Social Sciences) facilitated a broader spectrum of thematic panels. Sessions ranged from explorations of contemporary migration trends to discussions on identity politics, artistic expressions, and environmental concerns. The intersections between authoritarian governance, digital surveillance, and diaspora formations emerged as particularly pressing topics.

## Key debates and emerging perspectives

Queer and feminist perspectives added a crucial dimension to the discussions, as panels focused into questions of belonging, resistance, and alternative kinship structures. Scholars explored how LGBTQ+ activism operates within restrictive environments and how artistic interventions challenge normative constructions of gender and nationhood.

Another of the central themes to emerge across panels was the impact of geopolitical reconfigurations on *identity*. Researchers critically examined how post-Soviet nation-states continue to grapple with Soviet legacies while negotiating their positions within broader Eurasian power dynamics.

Simultaneously, scholars working on migration focused on networks of transnational mobility, illustrating how labor migration, displacement, and asylum-seeking reshape socio-political landscapes in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

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### Queer Identities and Cultures in Central Asia: A dedicated panel



Mariya Levitanus (University of Edinburgh) and Mohira Suyarkulova (American University of Central Asia) at the panel co-organized by the author, Saltanat Shoshanova.

A significant contribution to the conference was the panel *Queer Identities and Cultures in Central Asia*. This session brought together four scholars and activists and offered a multi-disciplinary exploration of queer experiences and cultural expressions in Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Mariya Levitanus (University of Edinburgh) and Mohira Suyarkulova (American University of Central Asia) presented *In Our Own Words: Documenting Everyday Lives of Queer People in Central Asia*, an art-based research project based on a workshop in Almaty. Their initiative aimed to create a network among local queer researchers, authors, activists, and artists, using participatory action research to document lived experiences.

Georgy Mamedov (American University of Central Asia) showcased student films exploring queerness and generational identity conflicts. His discussion highlighted how young Central Asians negotiate queer identities through the medium of film, revealing generational shifts in the understanding of gender and sexuality.

In my own presentation, *Queer Identity in Contemporary Art and Culture of Central Asia*, I analyzed how

artistic practices challenge national narratives through queerness. My talk examined how contemporary artists respond to global gender and sexuality debates and use artistic expression as both a tool for advocacy and a site of resistance.

## **Women's agency and gender identities in Soviet and Post-Soviet Central Eurasia**

Another insightful session, where I served as a chair and discussant, was the panel *Women's Agency and Gender Identities in Soviet and Post-Soviet Central Eurasia*. This panel brought together scholars examining gendered experiences, resilience, and leadership in the Soviet and post-Soviet space.

Zhanna Karimova (Grenoble Alpes University, France) explored how women navigated survival and resistance in forced labor camps. Elmira Otar (Ministry of Science and Higher Education, Kazakhstan) shed light on the intersection of gender and ethnicity in identity formation. Almira Tabaeva (Nazarbayev University, Astana) discussed *Decolonization of Gender Discourse in Uzbekistan through Family Narratives*, highlighting the role of personal and collective storytelling in challenging colonial legacies.

Drawing on her expertise in business studies, Anastasiya Lipovka (Almaty Management University) presented her research on *Managers' Leadership Competencies in Kazakhstan through the Gender Prism*, addressing gendered power dynamics in professional settings. Jade Cemre Erciyes (Center for Socio-Economic Studies, Sukhumi), meanwhile, analyzed how music serves as a medium of feminist resistance and social critique in the region.

## **Looking ahead**

The CESS-ESCAS Lisbon Conference 2025 reaffirmed the significance of Central Eurasian studies in global academic discourse. The event integrated historical analysis with contemporary sociopolitical debates, underscoring the urgency of addressing Eurasia's shifting landscapes through interdisciplinary and transregional approaches.

Questions surrounding migration, borders, and identity will remain central to scholarship on the region. The challenge lies in further expanding collaborative networks that bridge disciplines, methodologies, and geographical perspectives, ensuring that the study of Central Eurasia remains dynamic, critical, and engaged with the pressing issues of our time. These also include issues of identity, queerness and sexuality, the exploration of which is coming under pressure not only in Central Asia but also in the Global North as part of pushbacks against DEI initiatives and the "culture wars".

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About the author:



**Saltanat Shoshanova**

Saltanat Shoshanova holds a BA in Art History from the University of Vienna, MA in Art History in the Global Context from the Freie University Berlin. Her research interests include queer feminist and decolonial movements in Central Asia and beyond. From 2021 until 2023 she lead a project called Unit (n-ost), which was aimed at improving queer coverage and representation in the media of Eastern Europe, Central Asia and South Caucasus. Saltanat is a co-editor of “Queer-Feminist Solidarity and the East/West Divide” (2019) and authored several publications on Central Asian art and activism. As a PhD candidate in “Light On!” project she will focus on queer cultures in Central Asia.

[Website](#)