



The University of World Economy and Diplomacy
**Institute for Advanced
International Studies**



MUNIS
World Bank
Projects

THINK ROAD FORUM

**RETHINKING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
IN CENTRAL ASIA IN THE AGE OF EMERGING REGIONALISM**
18-19 November 2025

Rethinking Sustainable Development in Central Asia in the Age of Emerging Regionalism

18-19 November 2025

UWED Cinema Hall, Building B

About the Forum

THINK ROAD FORUM is the flagship annual event of the Institute for Advanced International Studies (IAIS), designed as a dynamic platform for exchanging ideas among think tanks, civil servants & civil society, and business leaders across the historical Silk Road region and beyond. The name reflects our dedication to thoughtful engagement as a think tank committed to creating a roadmap for development along – and beyond – the historic Silk Road. Each year, the Forum centers around critical themes shaping the future of the region. In 2025, we focus on Rethinking Sustainable Development in Central Asia in the context of strengthening regional cooperation.

Conceptual Framework of 2025 Theme

Central Asia stands at a pivotal crossroads in its journey toward sustainable development. With vast resources, rich cultural diversity, and strategic location, the region holds immense potential for leading a sustainable development agenda. However, persistent challenges—ranging from environmental degradation to geopolitical volatility—require integrated, forward-thinking solutions.

As sustainability became a global imperative, Central Asian states must rethink their development paradigms. Achieving long-term, inclusive growth in the region demands cross-border and cross-sector collaboration, informed policy innovation, and active intergenerational participation and cooperation.

Our Vision

To establish a sustainable platform that brings together strategic actors across the policy ecosystem, including Think Tanks generating evidence-based insights, the Business Community contributing funds and applied expertise, Civil Society advancing inclusive and grassroots engagement, and the Civil Service ensuring policy implementation and institutional coherence, to collectively shape and sustain long-term development in Central Asia.

Format

The event will center around interactive panel discussions, where speakers will address questions posed by the panel chair. This will be followed by an audience Q&A session. Over the course of two days, the program will include keynote speeches, thematic panels, closed-door discussions, and hands-on workshops. Participants will collaborate to reimagine a sustainable future for Central Asia—one that is inclusive, innovative, and resilient.

PROGRAMME

Conference language: *English*

DAY 1

Tuesday, November 18, 2025

09:00 - 09:30	Registration
OPENING SESSION <i>Chaired by Akram Umarov, First Vice-Rector of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Director of the Institute for Advanced International Studies</i>	
09:30 - 10:20	<p>Opening Remarks and Keynote Speech by H.E. Sodyq Safoev, First Deputy Chairman of the Senate of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Rector of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy</p> <p>Opening Remarks by H.E. Javlon Vakhobov, Deputy Advisor to the President of Uzbekistan on Foreign Policy, Director at the International Institute for Central Asia</p> <p>Keynote Speech by Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, Director of the Center for Governance and Markets, University of Pittsburgh</p>
10:20-10:30	Photo Opportunity
10:30-11:00	Coffee Break & Networking
SESSION I: Geopolitical and Security Considerations for Sustainable Development in Central Asia <i>Chaired by Akram Umarov, First Vice-Rector of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Director of the Institute for Advanced International Studies</i>	
11:00-12:00	<p><i>Guiding questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the key geopolitical trends in Central Asia today? - How do Russia, China, the US, EU, and Türkiye influence the region's development and security? - What role do organizations like SCO and OTS play for regional stability? - How is the growing trend of regionalism in Central Asia - through closer cooperation and integration among states - shaping the region's progress toward sustainable development, and what opportunities or challenges does it present for joint action on regional priorities? - What strategies can the region adopt to enhance sustainable development and manage external pressures? <p><i>Panelists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Elena Korosteleva, Professor of International Politics and Director of the Institute for Global Sustainable Development, University of Warwick, UK - Duman Zhekenov, Associate Professor, Al-Farabi National University, Kazakhstan - Yang Cheng, Executive President, Shanghai Academy of Global Governance and Area Studies (SAGGAS), Shanghai International Studies University - Fabienne Bossuyt, Associate Professor at Ghent University, Belgium
12:00-12:15	Q&A

SESSION II: Sustainable Economic Development of Central Asia

Chaired by **Bakhrom Mirkasimov**, Vice-Rector for Research and Innovation, Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT)

12:15 - 13:15	<p><i>Guiding questions: Investment, Trade, Business, Transport</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the key sectors attracting foreign and regional investment in Central Asia? Why is investment crucial for sustainable economic development, and what risks deter investors? - Why is regional economic integration (e.g., Eurasian Economic Union, Economic Corridors) vital for Central Asia's growth? Why are economic corridors geopolitically and economically significant? When will Central Asia fully capitalize on its potential as a Eurasian transit hub? - Which national/regional policy initiatives or partnerships best promote long-term prosperity and environmental sustainability? - How can economic development strategies be made inclusive—benefiting youth, women, and vulnerable communities? <p><i>Panelists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mansurjon Rasulev, Acting Director, Investment Promotion Agency - Asif Razzak, Senior Researcher, CAREC Institute - Kamalbek Karymshakov, Vice-Rector, Kyrgyz Turkish Manas University - Adham Khudaykulov, Rector, Tashkent University of Technology (TashTech) - Koen Schoors, Professor at the Department of Economics of Ghent University
13:15- 13:30	Q&A
13:30 - 14:30	Buffet Lunch

SESSION III: From Fossil Fuels to Renewables: Accelerating Central Asia's Energy Transformation

Chaired by **Shakhboz Akhmedov**, Head of Centre for Sustainable Development, IAIS, UWED

14:30 - 15:30	<p><i>Guiding questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the key challenges hindering the sustainable transformation of Central Asia's energy sector? How do geopolitical factors and regional cooperation (or lack thereof) impact energy security and transition efforts? - How can governments and private sector stakeholders accelerate the shift from fossil fuels to clean energy while ensuring economic stability? - What policies, incentives, or regulatory frameworks are needed to attract investment in renewables? - How can think tanks, civil society, and youth contribute to shaping a future-oriented energy strategy in Central Asia? <p><i>Panelists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Abdullajon Otaboev, Deputy Director of Energy Market Development and Regulatory Agency (EMDRA) of the Republic of Uzbekistan - Farhod Aminjonov, Associate Professor of Strategy and Security Studies, National Defence College, Abu Dhabi, UAE - Nargiz Azizova, Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Development and Diplomacy, ADA University - Abdurashid Bozorov, Head of Sector at the Center for Economic Research and Reforms under the Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan - Ibrahim Mammadov, Head of Turkic-Western Engagement Initiative, Danube Institute, Budapest, Hungary - Roman Vakulchuk, Head of the Research Group for Climate and Energy, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (<i>online</i>)
15:30 - 15:45	Q&A

15:45 - 16:00	Coffee Break
<p>SESSION IV: Regional Climate Change Adaptation and Water Resource Management <i>Chaired by Barbara Janusz-Pawletta, IWMI Country Representative -Uzbekistan</i></p>	
16:00 - 17:00	<p>Guiding questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How can Central Asian countries strengthen cooperation on shared water resources (e.g., Amu Darya, Syr Darya) amid growing climate pressures? - What role should regional organizations (e.g., ICWC, IFAS, SCO) play in facilitating sustainable water governance? - What are the key obstacles to effective transboundary water agreements, and how can they be overcome? - How can climate adaptation and water management policies be better integrated at regional and national levels? What new approaches can improve data sharing, science-based decision making, and technology adoption for water management in Central Asia? - How can capacity building, youth engagement, and civil society participation strengthen resilience against floods, droughts, and water scarcity? <p>Panelists:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dinara Ziganshina, Director of the Scientific Information Center (SIC) of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia (ICWC) - Iskandar Abdullaev, Senior Researcher, IWMI - Takayoshi Kato, Environmental Economist, OECD - Jennifer Sehring, Associate Professor of Water Governance and Diplomacy, IHE Delft Institute for Water Education
17:00 - 17:15	Q&A
17:15 - 17:30	Wrap up of the day
19.00 - 21:30	Reception by invitation only

DAY 2

Wednesday, November 19, 2025

<p>Book Launch <i>chaired by Akram Umarov, First Vice-Rector of the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Director of the Institute for Advanced International Studies</i></p>	
10:00 - 10:30	<p><i>"The Transition Trap: Three Decades of Transition in Central Asia"</i> by Adham Khudaykulov, Rector of TashTech</p>
<p>SESSION V: Social Dimensions of Sustainable Development in Central Asia <i>Chaired by Gulnoza Ismailova, Executive Director of the "El-Yurt Umidi" Foundation</i></p>	
10:30 - 11:30	<p>Guiding questions: <i>Education, Youth, Social Protection</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What are the key challenges (quality, access, digital divide) in Central Asia's education systems? What strategies (entrepreneurship programs, skills training, digital literacy initiatives) are most effective for engaging youth in economic and social development?

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How can governments ensure inclusive social protection for vulnerable groups (women, rural populations, disabled individuals)? How can promoting gender equality, civic engagement, and youth leadership strengthen regional sustainable development? - What policies or partnerships can better integrate marginalized groups into mainstream education, employment, and social safety nets? - How is technological innovation reshaping access to education and social services in remote and underserved areas? What role can civil society, academia, and multilateral organizations play in building resilient communities and responsive social policy?
	<p><i>Panelists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Simon Sottas, Sr. Social Development Specialist, the World Bank - Khurshid Zafari, Director of Social Policy Lab, under the National Agency for Social Protection, Uzbekistan - Aigerim Kopeyeva, Deputy Chairperson, TALDAU National Centre for Education Research and Evaluation, Kazakhstan - Ventzeslav Sabev, Associate Director of the Observatory on Security, Geneva University
11:30 -11:45	Q&A
11.45 -12.00	Coffee Break & Networking
<p>SESSION VI: Harnessing AI and Digital Connectivity for Sustainable Development: Opportunities and Ethical Challenges</p> <p><i>Chaired by Muzaffar Djalalov, Vice-Rector for Digital Transformation and Economy, UWED</i></p>	
12.00-13.00	<p><i>Guiding questions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What policies are needed to ensure digital connectivity supports SDGs and inclusive development? What are the risks of AI dependency for sustainability efforts, including exclusion, bias, and resource use? - How can developing nations leverage AI and digital tools without falling further behind in the global digital divide? How should governments and regulators approach AI ethics, data protection, and transparency? - What impacts can AI have on education, health, and climate action in Central Asia? How can multistakeholder partnerships (public-private-academic-civil society) drive equitable digital transformation within the region? - What lessons can be drawn from other regions on building responsible, resilient, and ethical AI ecosystems?
	<p><i>Panelists:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Gabriele Carboni, Co-Founder, CEO and Impact Manager, WEEVO S.R.L. Benefit Corporation - Behzod Ismoilov, Managing Director, Central Asian Association for Artificial Intelligence (AICA) - Nino Gomarteli, Founder, Ego Consulting, Georgia - Eldaniz Gusseinov, Head of Research at Nightingale Int. - Sarvarbek Sadullaev, Director of AI Department, Ministry of Digital Technologies
13:00 -13:15	Q&A
13:15 -13:45	Closure of the Conference
13.45 - 14.45	Buffet Lunch

LIST OF BIOGRAPHIES



H.E. Sodyq Safoev is a distinguished statesman, diplomat, and academic who currently serves as the First Deputy Chairman of the Senate of the Republic of Uzbekistan and Rector of UWED. He holds both a Bachelor and Master of Science in Economics from Tashkent State University and completed his doctoral research on labor productivity in industry. He further enriched his academic credentials as a visiting scholar at the Harvard University Institute for International Development. Over the course of his career, Prof. Safoev has held numerous high-ranking positions in the diplomatic and political spheres. He served as Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, Ambassador to Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, and the OSCE, and later as Ambassador to the United States and Canada. Professor Safoev is the author of numerous publications on economics, international security, and diplomacy.



H.E. Javlon Vakhobov is Deputy Advisor to the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Foreign Policy and Managing Director of the International Institute for Central Asia (IICA) in Tashkent. He holds Bachelor and Master of International Law from the University of World Economy and Diplomacy. Since joining the Ministry of Foreign Affairs he has held senior positions including Director of the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies under the President, Deputy Minister and First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Deputy Secretary of the National Security Council. From 2017 to 2023, Ambassador Vakhobov served as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Uzbekistan to the United States, with concurrent accreditation to Canada and Brazil. He has been closely involved in driving Uzbekistan's foreign policy modernization, strengthening regional connectivity, and deepening the country's engagement with key international partners.



Prof. Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili is the founding director of the Center for Governance and Markets and a professor at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. She is a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a contributing editor at The National Interest magazine. In the policy world, Prof. Murtazashvili served as a democracy and governance officer for USAID in Tashkent and worked as a senior researcher for the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit in Kabul. Other policy work includes service for the World Bank, the US Department of Defense, the United Nations Development Program, UNICEF, and as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Samarkand. Currently, she is a member of the executive board of the American Institute for Afghanistan Studies, a board member at the Collins Institute for Abrahamic Heritage, and a member of PONARS Eurasia.



Dr. Akram Umarov is the First Vice-Rector for Academic Affairs at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy and the Director of the Institute for Advanced International Studies. Dr. Umarov has a great interest in security studies, conflict management, public diplomacy, Afghanistan, Central Asian studies, CIS countries, and development. Previously, Dr. Umarov was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at the Center for Governance and Markets, University of Pittsburgh in the United States, a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies and Academy of Public Administration under the President of Uzbekistan. He has earned an MA and PhD in International Relations from the University of World Economy and Diplomacy. He also received an MA degree in Governance, Development and Public Policy from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex in the United Kingdom.



Prof. Elena Korosteleva is the Director of the Institute of Global Sustainable Development (IGSD). In April 2024 she was appointed Chair for the Sustainability Spotlight, Warwick-wide interdisciplinary research-focused network to address planetary challenges collectively; and in July 2024 she was elected to be a member of the Scientific Council for COP29. Prof. Korosteleva is also a Visiting Professor at Oxford University, and Jean Monnet Chair, which she was awarded twice by the European Commission in recognition of her research and teaching excellence. Before joining IGSD in 2022, she was a Professor of International Politics and a founder of the Global Europe Centre (Professional Studies) at the University of Kent for ten years. Prior to that Elena worked as Senior Lecturer in International Politics, and Founder/Director of the Centre for European Studies at Aberystwyth University. She is a founder of the ECR Sustainability Training School at Warwick, a platform that brings together global Early Career Researchers for creative skills, interdisciplinary training and networking-building opportunities at Warwick, supported by Research Culture Development Funds in 2023 and 2024 and cosponsored by COP29 Scientific Council in 2025.



Dr. Duman Zhekenov is Head of the Secretariat Office and Associate Professor at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. He holds Bachelor's and Master's degrees from Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and earned his PhD in International Relations in 2016. A scholar of international relations and political science, his research focuses on China's global role, Central Asian regional dynamics, transport and logistics connectivity, and the post-pandemic evolution of the international system. He also serves as an Associate Professor and expert at the International Center of Science Development, where he provides policy-relevant analysis on Eurasian politics and regional cooperation.



Prof. Yang Cheng is an Executive Dean of Shanghai Academy of Global Governance and Area Studies at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU), “Zhiyuan” Leading Scholar, and Distinguished Professor of the “Oriental Scholar” Program by Shanghai Municipal Higher Education Institutions. He serves as: Director and Chief Expert of a National Think Tank; Director of a National Discipline Innovation and Talent Introduction Base; Director of a Shanghai Key Cultivating Think Tank; Director of a Shanghai University Think Tank. He also holds concurrent positions such as Vice-President of the Area Studies Research Branch of the China Association for Higher Education, and Vice-President & Secretary-General of the Shanghai Area Studies Society.



Fabienne Bossuyt is Associate Professor at and co-coordinator of the Ghent Institute for International and European Studies (GIES). She holds a PhD from Aston University (UK) and Ghent University based on a doctoral dissertation on the EU's influence in Post-Soviet Central Asia. Previously, she obtained a Master's degree in Translation Studies (Ghent University, 2004) and a postgraduate degree in International Relations and Conflict Management (KULeuven, 2005). She is a senior lecturer in the MA programme in EU Studies and the MA Programme in Global Studies. In addition, she is co-director of the Eureast Platform of Ghent University. She is also a Professorial Fellow at UNU-CRIS and is active as an affiliated researcher of EUCAM and a member of the Academic Board of the European Neighbourhood Council.



Bakhrom Mirkasimov has been appointed Deputy Rector on Research and Innovation of Westminster International University in Tashkent (WIUT) from April 2024. Previously, he was the Managing Editor of the international peer-reviewed open-access journal - Silk Road: A Journal of Eurasian Development, published by the University of Westminster Press. He was also a Global Labor Organization Fellow. Previously, he visited CERGE-EI, Duke University, Leibniz University Hannover and Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO) as a Research Scholar, worked at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin) and served as a consultant to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Asian Development Bank, World Bank, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund, International Labour Organization and International Food Policy Research Institute. He has studied economics at Humboldt University Berlin Vanderbilt University Boise State University and published in academic journals like the Journal of Comparative Economics and Demography.



Appointed in January 2025, **Mansurjon Rasulev** serves as an Acting Director of the Investment Promotion Agency under the Ministry of Investment, Industry and Trade. In this role, he coordinates efforts to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) across various sectors and improve Uzbekistan's investment climate. Mansurjon holds a bachelor's degree in Business Administration from the University of Westminster, UK. In 2019-2020 as a Deputy Head of Department of Strategic analysis and planning, Mansurjon initiated and coordinated the development of the Strategy for the Development of Agriculture sector of Uzbekistan for 2020-2030, which was later adopted by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. He also led efforts in securing EU's budget support of €40 mln to support sector reforms.



Asif Razzaq is a Senior Research Specialist at the CAREC Institute. He has a PhD in Economic System Analysis and Management from Dalian University of Technology, People's Republic of China. His research portfolio includes climate change, green investments, technology spillovers, and digitalization. He is currently leading several research projects in the CAREC countries. Mr. Razzaq has also published numerous policy research reports and academic papers in reputable journals and is a highly-cited researcher with more than 10,000 citations. He is also listed in the top 2% of high cited researchers globally by Stanford University and Elsevier in 2023-2025.



Prof. Kamalbek Karymshakov is Vice-Rector of the Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University. Prior to his current position, he was an economist at CAREC Institute. Kamalbek holds PhD in Economics from Yeditepe University (Istanbul, Türkiye). He also had post-doctoral research fellowship at Free University of Berlin (2010-2011). His research interests include labor economics, migration, economic integration, infrastructure development, economic growth, and development in Central Asia. He has applied economic analysis experience. He has project and consultancy experience on various topics of labor market, migration, public policy, and rural economic development.



Dr. Adham Khudaykulov is Rector (President) of the newly established ToshTech Technical University (TASHKENT TECH). He served as Director of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education under the Presidential Administration, where he was responsible for building a new national system of quality assurance in higher education. He previously headed the Education Projects Centre and has been actively involved in international higher education cooperation, including the Uzbekistan-UK Education Forum. Dr. Khudaykulov holds a PhD from the University of Cambridge and maintains an academic profile with publications on economic transition, development, and education.



Prof. Koen Schoors is a Belgian economist and Full Professor at the Department of Economics of Ghent University. His fields of academic interest are banking and finance, law and economics, development economics, institutional economics, economic complexity, energy economics, the political economy of Russia and economic and financial crises. He publishes on these topics in international peer-reviewed journals and is also an active contributor to the public debate on economic and social policies in his field of expertise. He has served on various expert committees for the Belgian and the Flemish parliaments and under the auspices of the Prime Minister. He serves as the Chairman of Gigarant and Trividend and Vice Chairman of FPIM, the sovereign wealth fund of Belgium.



Shakhboz Akhmedov serves as Head of the Centre for Sustainable Development at the Institute for Advanced International Studies. With nearly 15 years of experience, he has spearheaded initiatives within multiple regional intergovernmental structures, leading projects on climate and water issues and teams on resource mobilization, projects, and knowledge management. As a seasoned strategist, communicator, and researcher, he advocates for multi-stakeholder partnerships to foster climate actions and sustainable future, integrating research, technology, and innovation. He holds a postgraduate diploma in Organizational Leadership from the Said Business School, University of Oxford, UK, along with an MA degree in Public Policy from the Willy Brandt School of Public Policy, Germany, where he was a DAAD scholar. He earned his BA degree in International Relations from the University of World Economy and Diplomacy.



Abdullajon Otaboev is Deputy Director of the Energy Market Development and Regulatory Agency (EMDRA) of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the national regulator responsible for developing competitive electricity and gas markets. Previously, he served as Head of the Department for Development of Generation Based on Renewable Energy Sources at the Ministry of Energy, where he oversaw the expansion of Uzbekistan's solar and wind portfolio. In this capacity, Mr. Otaboev has been closely involved in major public-private renewable energy projects and international tenders with partners such as Masdar and ACWA Power. His work focuses on building a transparent, investor-friendly energy market framework, strengthening regulation, and accelerating the country's green energy transition in line with Uzbekistan's long-term decarbonisation goals.



Farkhod Aminjonov is an Associate Professor of Strategic and Security Studies at the National Defense College, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. As a specialist in energy governance and international affairs, he works on issues pertaining to energy security, multilevel policy analysis and regional cooperation in Eurasia and the Arabian Gulf. He has led research projects with German, Canadian, Norwegian, American and Turkish top-tier think tanks and research institutes. His work has appeared in the *Journal of Contemporary China*, *International Affairs*, *Social Science Quarterly*, *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, *Asian Perspective*, and *RUSI Journal*, as well as in multiple edited volumes by internationally recognized academic and policy-focused presses.



Nargiz Azizova is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Development and Diplomacy at ADA University (Baku, Azerbaijan). Her work examines how connectivity, pragmatism, and emerging regionalism reshape the geopolitics of the Silk Road region and the European Union's engagement with it. At ADA University, she teaches courses on EU Foreign Policy and External Relations and contributes to research on sustainable development and strategic interdependence across Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Her current work focuses on how new corridors, power shifts, and regional initiatives are redefining Eurasia's place in the changing global order.



Dr. Abdurashid Bozorov is the Head of Sector at the Center for Economic Research and Reforms under the Administration of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. His work focuses on agricultural economics, climate change, water management, and the decarbonization of key sectors of Uzbekistan's economy. He holds a Master's degree from the University of Hohenheim (Germany) and a PhD from Peking University (China). Dr. Bozorov has led and contributed to a series of analytical studies that have informed and shaped national economic and environmental policies in Uzbekistan. He has been involved in numerous research collaborations with international partners, including the German Economic Team, IDDRI (Paris), and the United Nations Development Programme.



Ibrahim Mammadov is the Head of Turkic-Western Engagement Initiative and a Visiting Research Fellow at the Danube Institute. Previously, he served as a Research Fellow at the Caucasian Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies (QAFSAM), Young Scholar at Institute for Development and Diplomacy (IDD) and Research Assistant at the Caucasus Policy Analysis Center (CPAC) in Baku, Azerbaijan. He is a Doctoral student at the Ludovika University of Public Service and finalized his MA in International Relations studies at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary.



Roman Vakulchuk is the Head of the Research Group for Climate and Energy at the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI). A Research Professor with a PhD in Economics, he specializes in energy transition, climate change, and governance, with a particular focus on Central and Southeast Asia. He is also the co-founder of the Central Asian Development Institute (CADI) and has advised numerous international organizations and governments, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the OECD.



Dr. Barbara Janusz-Pawletta acts as International Water Management Institute Country Representative for Uzbekistan, and Head of the Regional Representative Office for Central Asia. She is a researcher focusing on Water law, International environmental law, water governance and diplomacy, transboundary cooperation. Barbara is Team Leader for the Blue Peace Central Asia 2.0 regional project funded by Swiss Development Cooperation. Previously, she acted as a Vice-president on International Cooperation and Sustainable Development at the Kazakh-German University (DKU) and UNESCO Chairholder for water management in Central Asia. Barbara is a member of International Law Association, International Water Law association, Center for International Sustainable Development Law (CISDL) and DAAD Scientific Committee on academic cooperation with post-soviet countries; Barbara is one of funders and the Editor in Chief of the Central Asian Journal of Water Research (CAJWR).



Dr. Dinara Ziganshina is Director of the Scientific Information Centre of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (SIC ICWC) in Central Asia and has served as a member and Deputy Chair of the Implementation Committee under the UNECE Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes. She has more than twenty years of experience as a legal and policy expert on water resources management at national and transboundary levels, including the management and coordination of complex regional projects in multi-stakeholder environments. Her academic work and teaching focus on international and national water law and policy, water resources management, water security and water diplomacy, and she holds advanced law degrees from the University of Oregon and the University of Dundee. She has also represented SIC ICWC in global water governance, including as an Alternate Governor at the World Water Council. Dr. Ziganshina initiated and coordinated the first Gender and Water Resources Initiative in Central Asia, helping to mainstream gender equality concerns into regional water policy debates and practice.



Dr. Iskandar Abdullaev is a Senior Researcher at the International Water Management Institute. He is a water professional with around 30 years of experience. His professional career includes positions such as Professorship at Giessen University, Germany, and Deputy Director of Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) from 2019-2023, Executive Director of the Regional Environmental Center (CAREC) for Central Asia. Dr Abdullaev's research interests include water sector developments and transformations, socio-technical aspects of water management, water history, water saving, and climate change.



Takayoshi Kato is an environmental economist and Programme Lead at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Over the past 20 years, he has worked extensively on green and sustainable finance in both OECD member and non-member states. He currently manages an OECD-led programme called 'Water, Energy and Land-use Nexus in Central Asia' financially supported by Germany. His current work focuses on policies to enable investment in climate resilience and sustainable management of natural resources in the Eastern Europe, Caucasus, and Central Asia regions. Over the past 13 years, he has also led several other OECD projects, including those on nature-related finance, ESG disclosure and reporting, climate change adaptation and resilience, development co-operation and the environment, among others.



Dr. Jenniver Sehring is an Associate Professor of Water Governance and Diplomacy. She holds an MA in Political Science and Social Anthropology and completed her PhD in 2008 at the FernUniversität in Hagen (Germany) with a thesis on the politics of water institutional reforms in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Jenniver worked for different organisations engaged in supporting water cooperation, including the Council of the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the German Federal Foreign Office, and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). In these positions, she analysed and advised on security-related aspects of water and environment, and was involved in several water governance and diplomacy programmes, particularly in Central Asia. Before that, Jenniver was affiliated with several German universities. Jenniver is an editor of the Central Asian Journal of Water Research (CAJWR), and a research fellow at the Center for Natural Resources and Sustainability of the Kazakh-German University (Kazakhstan). She is also a visiting scientist at the International Forest Policy Research Group at the University of Helsinki (Finland).



Prof. Gulnoza Ismailova is an Executive Director of the “El-Yurt Umidi” Foundation for the Training of Prospective Personnel under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan and a leading legal scholar and public policy expert. She previously served as Vice-Rector for Science and Innovation at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy and is a Doctor of Law, specializing in constitutional and administrative law, public governance and electoral law. She has been a member of Uzbekistan’s Central Election Commission and took part in the Constitutional Reform Commission in 2022–2023, contributing expert input to the modernization of the country’s basic law and institutions. In recognition of her leadership, she was among the winners of the European International Women’s Leadership Awards 2021.



Simon Sottsas is a Senior Social Development Specialist at the World Bank, where he leads and supports operations focused on inclusive, community-driven development and post-crisis recovery. His work concentrates on strengthening access to basic services, social inclusion and citizen engagement, particularly for internally displaced persons and vulnerable communities. Mr. Sottsas has been closely involved in knowledge exchange and capacity-building initiatives on community-driven development in Central Asia, collaborating with governments and partners to adapt global good practices to local contexts.



Khurshid Zafari is Director of the Social Policy Laboratory under the National Agency for Social Protection of the Republic of Uzbekistan. He has over ten years of experience in research and analytical work in Uzbekistan, including projects with private companies, international organizations, and government agencies. He holds an MA in regional economics from the Tashkent State University of Economics and a BA in management from the Namangan Engineering Pedagogical Institute. His current work focuses on evidence-based social protection reforms, poverty and vulnerability analysis, and the design of integrated social policies.



Aigerim Kopeyeva is Deputy Chairperson of the TALDAU National Centre for Education Research and Evaluation in Kazakhstan, where she works at the intersection of data, policy, and equity in education. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Education at the University of Cambridge and holds an MA in Education Management from King’s College London and has authored several studies and policy papers on educational inequality and the use of assessment data for informed decision-making.



Ventzeslav Sabev graduated from the Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland, and then at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Boston, USA. He started his career at the United Nations, before transitioning to the corporate world in management positions in Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Singapore and the USA. For nearly two decades he has been engaged in public diplomacy, business facilitation and cross-cultural dialogue, as adviser or Board member of various Swiss and international think tanks. His recent research focuses on the evolution of national branding as a public diplomacy tool and a reflection of deeply rooted values of every country. In January 2025, he was appointed as Associate Director of the Geneva University's Observatory on Security. One of the flagship projects of the Observatory is the role of trans-regional corridors as effective and agile models for multilateral diplomacy.



Dr. Muzaffar Djalalov is Vice-Rector for Digital Transformation and Economy at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy, where he oversees the university's digital agenda and innovation in teaching and learning. A specialist in information and communication technologies, he previously served as Rector (and earlier Acting Rector) of Inha University in Tashkent. Dr. Djalalov is a graduate of the Tashkent University of Information Technologies and holds a PhD in technical sciences, with research focusing on digital image processing and intelligent monitoring systems. He has led and supported numerous initiatives on engineering and IT education, entrepreneurship and start-up ecosystems, and the development of human capital for the digital economy.



Gabriele Carboni is an Honorary Professor of Marketing at Georgian American University and a leading expert in generative artificial intelligence. Over the past decade, he has collaborated with Philip Kotler, the father of modern marketing, to develop the concept of Impact Marketing – a strategic framework that unites profit generation with measurable social and environmental value. He is the Co-founder and Director of the Impact Marketing Awards, which celebrates Italy's most responsible and forward-thinking companies, and the creator of G.L.I.M.P.S.E., the world's first AI-driven tool for evaluating brand narrative and sentiment. With more than 12 years of experience in digital strategy, he has trained or advised top international brands, including Armani, Lamborghini, Danone, and Fedrigoni. His professional background also includes bestselling co-authored works such as *Enlightened Management* (with Philip Kotler). A frequent speaker at the World Marketing Summit and numerous global forums, he is also a member of the Sustainability and Internationalization Commissions of Confindustria.



Behzod Ismoilov is Managing Director of the Central Asian Association for Artificial Intelligence (AICA), a regional platform promoting AI development and cooperation across Central Asia. In this role, he leads initiatives to advance AI education, support innovative start-ups and build cross-border partnerships between technology communities. An AI enthusiast and product owner by background, he has professional expertise in financial technologies, blockchain solutions and agile management. Under his leadership, AICA has helped launch initiatives such as the AICA AI Ambassador youth programme, the AICA Awards for entrepreneurs and strategic collaborations with partners including Astana Hub and TechnoWomen to strengthen the Central Asian AI ecosystem.



Nino Gomarteli is a leadership and communication educator from Georgia and the founder of EGO Consulting, a boutique training company helping leaders and professionals navigate change in the age of AI. Drawing on her background in media and organizational leadership from the University of Oxford, she bridges human insight with technological awareness - teaching how emotional intelligence, strategic communication, and AI literacy can work together to shape sustainable futures. Her work across Georgia and neighboring countries focuses on preparing individuals and organizations for the next era of leadership - one where technology amplifies, not replaces, human potential.



Eldaniz Gusseinov is a political researcher and Chief of Research at Nightingale Int., specializing in data-driven analysis of foreign policy, diplomacy, security, and economic development across Eurasia. He also serves as a Non-Resident Research Fellow at the Haydar Aliyev Center for Eurasian Studies at Ibn Haldun University in Istanbul, focusing on Central Asia and the South Caucasus. Eldaniz is a Delegate of the Youth Sounding Board of the European Union in Kazakhstan, contributing policy recommendations to strengthen EU-Kazakhstan cooperation, and a Political Researcher at Outpost Eurasia, providing consultancy on geopolitical and energy developments in the region.



Sarvarbek Sadullaev is Head of the AI Department at the Ministry of Digital Technologies of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Previously, he held senior roles in both the public and private sectors, including Deputy Director for International Relations at Unicon-Soft and CEO of the national Assessment Centre. Trained in applied mathematics and computer science (Lomonosov Moscow State University, Tashkent) and holding an MBA from the University of the West of Scotland, he has over a decade of experience in digital transformation, e-government, and education reform.