



The 12th Annual Life in Kyrgyzstan Conference 2026

*Promoting Research, Exchange, and Evidence Based Policy Making
in Central Asia*



07-08 October 2026

Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Conference webpage:

<https://lifeinkyrgyzstan.org/conference/lik-conference-2026>

WELCOME

On behalf of the University of Central Asia, welcome to the 12th Annual Life in Kyrgyzstan Conference. It is especially good to welcome researchers, students and policymakers back to Bishkek for two days of serious discussion about the economic and social changes shaping our region.



Now firmly established as one of the region's important platforms for research and policy dialogue, LiK brings together an exceptional community of researchers, students, policymakers, development practitioners and civil society representatives from Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia and beyond. What continues to make this conference distinctive is its commitment to understanding the economic and social transformations shaping people's lives through rigorous evidence, open discussion and engagement across disciplines and institutions.

This year's programme reflects both the breadth of the challenges facing our region and the range, quality and methodological ambition of the research being undertaken across the region. Over two days, we will explore economic growth and household welfare, migration and labour markets, gender and social change, climate risks and agriculture, demographic change, sustainability, education and social cohesion. We will also see increasing attention being paid to new analytical approaches, including machine learning and other data-driven methods, and to the opportunities they create for research and evidence-informed policymaking.

These developments resonate strongly with UCA's own ambitions. As we strengthen our research and postgraduate education, we are seeking to bring economics, data and policy analysis into ever closer conversation. Our new Master's Programme in Economics and Data Science is one practical expression of that ambition: to develop people who can combine economic reasoning, rigorous quantitative analysis and contextual understanding to address real problems. LiK exemplifies the intellectual environment we want our students to enter: one in which data are examined critically, methods and assumptions are challenged, and research is ultimately judged by whether it improves our understanding of the lives and choices of people across Central Asia.

For UCA, LiK therefore represents much more than an annual conference. It embodies our commitment to high-quality research, regional and international collaboration, and the translation of knowledge into meaningful impact. It also provides a space in which established scholars and emerging researchers can meet, challenge one another, develop new ideas and build partnerships that continue long after the conference itself.

I would like to thank our partners, supporters and organising team, as well as the many speakers, moderators, discussants and participants whose contributions make LiK possible. The continued strength of this conference rests on this remarkable community and its shared commitment to understanding a rapidly changing Central Asia.

I hope that the discussions over the coming two days are stimulating and constructive, that they generate new questions as well as answers, and, above all, that they lead to new collaborations and research that matters.

Welcome to LiK 2026!

Professor Christopher J Gerry

Rector

University of Central Asia

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends of Life in Kyrgyzstan,



It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the 12th Life in Kyrgyzstan Conference here in Bishkek. Every October since 2015, this conference has brought together researchers, policymakers and practitioners who share an interest in evidence about Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia. I am delighted to see so many familiar faces again, and even more delighted to see so many new ones.

The world around us keeps changing quickly, and Central Asia is no exception. In such times, we need to understand how people actually live and how they cope with shocks, how they earn a living, raise their children and plan for the future. High-quality microdata helps us answer these questions. The Life in Kyrgyzstan Study has followed the same people and households in every region of the country since 2010. Today it is the longest-running panel study in the former Soviet Union outside of Russia, a unique data infrastructure for the region.

This year, I would like to celebrate something that matters to me personally: the people who use these data. LiK was always meant to be a public good. More than 400 registered users at 178 institutions in 35 countries now work with the data, and over 55 peer-reviewed articles have been published using them. What makes me proudest, though, is how many of these users are here in the region. Researchers at UCA, AUCA, the OSCE Academy, KIMEP, Nazarbayev University, Westminster International University in Tashkent and other universities in Central Asia use LiK for their research and teaching. Many of them are students, PhD candidates and early-career researchers writing their first papers and theses with these data. This is exactly why we invest in data user workshops, webinars and student competitions alongside the data collection itself. A dataset only creates value when people use it, and it creates the most value when the people who know the country best use it to ask their own questions. To the young researchers in this room: you are the future of evidence-based policy in Central Asia. Please use the data, challenge our findings, and tell us what we should ask in the next wave.

On that note, I am pleased to share that the seventh wave of LiK, collected in 2025 with the generous support of the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank, will be released towards the end of 2026. It brings new information on climate change, energy use, childcare and polarization. The data are also moving to a new home at the GESIS Data Archive, which will ensure that LiK remains openly available for research and teaching for many years to come.

I am deeply grateful to our partners, above all the University of Central Asia and its wonderful team, who have once again made this conference possible, and to all of you for being part of this community. I wish us all an inspiring conference, full of good discussions and new collaborations!

Tilman Brück

Principal Investigator, Life in Kyrgyzstan Study

Professor, Humboldt-University of Berlin, Germany

Group Leader, Leibniz Institute of Vegetable and Ornamental Crops, Germany

Director, ISDC - International Security and Development Center, Germany

PLENARY SESSION 1. Keynote Speech

07 October 2026, 09:30 - 10:30 (Karkyra)

Dr. Damir Esenaliev

Scientist at the Leibniz Institute for Horticultural Sciences (IGZ) | Senior Researcher at ISDC - International Security and Development Center



Welfare and Social Cohesion: Two Decades of Research in Kyrgyzstan

This keynote reviews two decades of research on household welfare and social cohesion in Kyrgyzstan, much of it based on the Life in Kyrgyzstan (LiK) Study. The welfare component examines trends in poverty and inequality over more than two decades and discusses research on intergenerational mobility, job quality, the effects of public-sector wage reforms, social benefits, and horizontal inequality. The social cohesion component draws on experimental evidence from community-driven development, peace education, and interventions to promote women's participation in local decision-making. It also presents findings on local budget participation and the relationships between social cohesion, individual personality, and life satisfaction. Across both research areas, the keynote identifies gaps and opportunities for future research, highlighting the potential of the LiK panel data and other micro-data sources to help address these questions.

Bio: Dr. Damir Esenaliev is development economist with expertise in household and panel survey methodology and quantitative microeconomic research. His research interests include food security, agricultural and rural development, social protection, labor markets, social cohesion, poverty, horizontal inequality, and intergenerational mobility. He has served as the Academic Coordinator of the Life in Kyrgyzstan Study since 2013. His geographical expertise includes Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uganda, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. He previously worked at SIPRI (Sweden), DIW Berlin (Germany), the World Bank (Kyrgyzstan), and National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic. I hold a PhD degree in Agricultural Economics from Humboldt-University of Berlin (Germany), an MA degree in Development Economics from Williams College (USA), and University Diploma in Applied Math from the Kyrgyz National State University.

PLENARY SESSION 3. Keynote Speech

08 October 2026, 11:00 - 12:15 (Karkyra)

Dr. Olga Popova

Senior Researcher in the Economics Department of the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (Regensburg, Germany)

Informality and women's empowerment in Central Asia



This keynote talk focuses on the economic and social impacts of informality across Central Asia. It categorizes informality into informal employment, informal enterprises, and informal institutions. I first define these dimensions of informality, discuss their prevalence in the region, and then outline their economic implications based on my current and earlier research. At the firm level, product quality certification and informal market competition encourage manufacturing businesses to adopt energy-efficiency measures. At the individual level, traditional social networks - such as Uzbekistan's gap gatherings - significantly enhance life satisfaction, financial satisfaction, and wealth, while helping cushion against economic shocks. Women's employment also strengthens household resilience. However, informal employment is more common among women, who often face structural barriers and work in informal services and agriculture. While informal social structures foster community cohesion, formal policy interventions remain necessary for social protection and women's labor market empowerment.

Bio: Dr Olga Popova is a Senior Researcher in the Economics Department of the Leibniz Institute for East and Southeast European Studies (Regensburg, Germany), a Research Fellow of the Global Labor Organization and the IZA@LISER network, and a coordinator of the research trajectory "Uneven Economic Flows" within the Leibniz ScienceCampus "Europe and America in the Modern World". She is an Associate Editor of the Journal of Population Economics, Comparative Southeast European Studies, and the Journal of Happiness Studies, and has served as a consultant for the World Bank. RePEc ranks her in the top 5% of female economists and in the top 6% of all economists globally (based on publications in the last 10 years). Her research focuses on the role of the environment and institutional legacies in economic development and individual behavior, with a focus on Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. It has been published in leading peer-reviewed journals, including the Journal of Public Economics, Journal of Population Economics, Energy Policy, Small Business Economics, Journal of Comparative Economics, and Ecological Economics, among others.

LIFE IN KYRGYZSTAN STUDY



The Life in Kyrgyzstan (LiK) Study is a research-based, open access, multi-topic longitudinal survey of households and individuals in Kyrgyzstan. It tracks the same 3,000 households and 8,000 individuals over time in all seven Kyrgyz regions (oblasts) and the two cities of Bishkek and Osh. The data are representative nationally and at the regional level (East, West, North, South). The survey interviews all adult household members about household demographics, assets, expenditure, migration, employment, agricultural markets, shocks, social networks, subjective well-being, and many other topics. Some of these topics are addressed in each wave while other topics are only addressed in selected waves. The survey was first conducted in 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2016, 2019, and 2025.

The LiK Study received funding from the Volkswagen Foundation for the first three waves (2010-2012) when it was hosted by the German Institute of Economic Research (DIW). In the period 2013-2015, Wave 4 was funded by DFID and IZA as a part of the Growth and Labour Market-Low Income Country (GLM-LIC) Programme. The consortium included the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) as the lead institution, UCA as the main Kyrgyz partner, and several research institutions from Asia, Europe and North America. Since then, the study has been hosted by the Leibniz Institute of Vegetable and Ornamental Crops (IGZ) for Waves 5 and 6 and has received funding from UN-FAO, IFPRI, DFID, IZA and, internally, from IGZ and UCA. Wave 7 was funded by the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.

The Life in Kyrgyzstan (LiK) survey data are publicly available for non-profit research, policy analysis, and teaching purposes. Data from the 2010–2013, 2016, and 2019 waves were hosted by the International Data Service Center (IDSC) of the Institute of Labor Economics (idsc.iza.org/lik). Following the closure of IZA in early 2026, efforts are underway to transfer the LiK data to the [GESIS Data Archive](#) in Germany.

The LiK Study today is a global knowledge and research infrastructure, with panel dataset made available for public access. This has resulted in the wide use of the LiK Study for academic research. As of October 2026, over 55 scientific academic articles using the LiK data were published in international peer-reviewed journals such as *Agricultural Finance Review*, *American Political Science Review*, *Demography*, *Demographic Research*, *Economic Journal*, *Economics of Transition*, *Food Security*, *Journal of Comparative Economics*, *Journal of Development Studies*, *Problems of Post-Communism*, *Review of Development Economics*, *Social Science & Medicine*, *World Bank Research Observer*, and *World Development*. The LiK data are used for research and teaching purposes in 35 countries by 178 academic, research and development institutions. The list of journal articles based on the LiK data is listed below.

JOURNAL ARTICLES BASED ON THE *LIFE IN KYRGYZSTAN* STUDY

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ORGANISERS OF THE CONFERENCE



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA
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Institute of Public Policy and Administration

Institute of Public Policy and Administration at the University of Central Asia (IPPA UCA) was established in 2011 to strengthen public policy in Central Asia. It provides in-depth analysis on current and

emerging policy issues facing the region, and improves the analytical capacity of governments and civil society to use evidence in decision-making processes through professional development. The Institute has produced a series of peer-reviewed research papers on social and economic issues, public administration and public policy relating to Central Asia and Afghanistan. More information can be found at <https://www.ucentralasia.org/Research/ippa>.



IGZ – Leibniz Institute of carries out research supporting the sustainable production of vegetable and ornamental plants and the rational use of natural resources. It contributes to the success of horticulture in various countries, understanding fundamentals of horticultural and plant science, sustainability in production and use of plants, healthy nutrition and wellbeing of the population. Its work is rated by acceptance and appreciation by professionals in practical horticulture and by the society, publications in high-ranking scientific journals and acquisition of competitive grants. More information can be found at <https://www.igzev.de>.



ISDC - International Security and Development Center is a non-profit academic institute. We conduct research to improve lives and livelihoods shaped by violent conflict, fragility and humanitarian emergencies. We conduct research to improve lives and livelihoods shaped by violent conflict, fragility, and humanitarian emergencies. We believe in the power of data and evidence for understanding and alleviating suffering around the world. We combine quantitative and qualitative methods and work with international partners from multiple disciplines and sectors. More information can be found at www.isdc.org.

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Ala-Too International University (AIU) is one of the leading international universities in Central Asia. Established in 1996, the University is recognized for its excellence in teaching and research. Its mission is to educate well-rounded professionals equipped with relevant knowledge, strong critical thinking skills, and the ability to adapt to rapidly changing environments. AIU comprises five faculties, 22 departments, one professional college offering six academic programs, 10 master's programs, and five doctoral programs, serving over 4,600 students. The University's two research centers and academic journals actively contribute to regional and national research development. For more information on AIU, please visit: <https://alatoos.edu.kg>.



American University of Central Asia (AUCA) is a multi-disciplinary learning community in the American liberal arts tradition with the mission of developing enlightened and impassioned leaders for the transformation of Central Asia. AUCA is the first university in Central Asia to offer US accredited degrees in liberal arts programs through a partnership with Bard College in the United States. With a current enrollment of approximately 1,500 students from over 25 countries AUCA offers students a quality education based on an American college model with a credit-hours system, a liberal arts curriculum and a commitment to freedom of expression and inquiry. The University offers 15 undergraduate educational programs and 10 graduate programs. More information can be found at www.auca.kg.



The World Bank is an international organization dedicated to providing financing, advice and research to developing nations to aid their economic advancement. By giving loans, and offering advice and training in both the private and public sectors, the World Bank aims to eliminate poverty by helping people help themselves. Since the Kyrgyz Republic joined the World Bank in 1992, the Bank's financial assistance has amounted to over US\$2.1 billion. The World Bank support has helped the country to maintain macroeconomic stability, invest in strategic infrastructure, and improve access to social services. More information can be found at www.worldbank.org.



UNFPA is the United Nations sexual and reproductive health agency. Its mission is to deliver a world where every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe and every young person's potential is fulfilled. UNFPA presence in the Kyrgyz Republic dates back to 1992, and it has assisted the country by supporting the preparation of the first national census, by delivering reproductive health commodities, and by building national capacity in integrated SRH and youth-friendly health services, in the development of policies in youth and gender equality areas, and on data collection and analysis. More information can be found at www.unfpa.org.