

## REFLECTIONS FROM A MELIKIAN CENTER UNDERGRADUATE FELLOW



*2021 Undergraduate Fellow, Sofia Walsh*

In Spring 2021, I had the opportunity to work with Dr. Beibit Shangirbayeva, the Melikian Center's visiting Fulbright Scholar. Prior to receiving the Melikian Undergraduate Fellowship, I did not have any research experience. I was not sure what to expect and was nervous about the tasks and responsibilities that might be asked of me. However, as the semester progressed, I developed the research skills necessary to be an effective assistant.

On a practical level, my research assistantship with Dr. Shangirbayeva made me more familiar with the vast resources the ASU library offers; I realized that up until this point, I had barely scratched the surface of the tools the library provides. Through my fellowship, I learned how to navigate the library website and catalogue, as well as familiarize myself with various databases and request external items. I will continue to take advantage of them going forward, particularly as I continue with more advanced classes and eventually my honors thesis.

I also feel that my fellowship experience gave me a wonderful glimpse into the process of writing and publishing an academic article. One part of this process I found particularly

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interesting was determining which scholarly journals Dr. Shangirbayeva could potentially submit her finished work to. This gave me a sense of the wide variety of academic journals that exist, the factors a scholar might consider when choosing a journal to submit to. I also appreciated the chance to attend the workshops in which Dr. Shangirbayeva presented her drafts. It was a privilege to see how scholars work together and support each other.

While my fellowship was a fantastic opportunity to develop my knowledge of the research process, it also allowed me to explore a diverse array of topics and interesting content areas,



*Beibit Shangirbayeva, Assistant Professor at Eurasian National University (Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan), visiting Fulbright Scholar at the Melikian Center (2021), and Sofia's faculty mentor*

which included Kazakh culture; human rights; the Eurasian Economic Union; free expression theory; policy transfer and diffusion; and even the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and his theories on nomadism. I had not anticipated exploring such a wide range of topics, and had assumed that most of the tasks I would be assigned would focus closely on Russia's relationship with Kazakhstan. Looking back, I appreciate having had the chance to explore so many topics, particularly as I am not sure I would have gravitated towards them on my own initiative. For example, learning about the legal culture of Kazakhstan was fascinating and I would not be at all surprised if there came a time in my future studies or career when having this background knowledge will prove useful.

Most excitingly, my work with Dr. Shangirbayeva introduced me to the field of policy transfer studies. Exploring research in this field was one of my favorite tasks. Many of the sources I found were focused on the diffusion of democratic principles, laws, or institutions, but there is also a growing body of work focused on authoritarian policy transfer. Considering global trends of illiberalism and authoritarianism, I found this topic fascinating and important. Due to my fellowship experience, I am now considering

writing my honors thesis on this type of policy transfer.

My fellowship experience and the skills it helped me develop were a wonderful complement to a separate internship I pursued in the spring of 2021. Specifically, I had the chance to intern remotely with the London-based NGO Index on Censorship, which is dedicated to promoting freedom of expression and combatting censorship across the globe. My Melikian fellowship experience was the perfect background for this internship (and may have even played a role in my being chosen for it in the first place). The two experiences mutually enhanced each other and allowed me to gain a comprehensive understanding of free expression issues.

Ultimately, I am incredibly grateful to the Melikian Center and Dr. Shangirbayeva for this fellowship experience. Not only has it improved my research skills, it has also given me great insight into avenues of research I would love to pursue on my own. I have no doubt that I will continue to look back on my fellowship as one of the most beneficial experiences of my college career.

**Sofia Walsh**

## ALUMNA REPORT

Completing the Russian and East European Studies (REES) Certificate, the Undergraduate Fellowship program, and a summer at the Critical Languages Institute at the Melikian Center overprepared me for the work I do now as a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs. Through the REES certificate, I was exposed to a wide breadth of history, literature, and culture of the Russian and East European region that now forms the backbone of my knowledge when I engage in high-level political discussions. Moreover, doing research with Dr. Hilde Hoogenboom for the undergraduate fellowship program taught me how to effectively collect and organize sources of information. This skill has become particularly useful in the research I'm now partaking in with the FBI. Finally, CLI, even in an online format, gave me the foundation to continue taking Russian courses with my graduate course load. More than anything, the time I spent at the Melikian Center allowed me to engage with the Russian and East European region and appreciate its complexities and relevance today. And it is why I am now on the board of the Graduate Organization for the Study of Europe and Central Asia (GOSECA) at Pitt.

**Jamie Horowitz, ASU '21**