

EU: ‘We need to formulate a left-wing idea of happiness’

Thursday 6 May 2021, by [BAGDASAROVA Nina](#), [MAMEDOV Georgy](#), [SUYARKULOVA Mohira](#) (Date first published: 11 March 2021).

A new book focuses on what makes people really happy: solidarity

For the past two years, three researchers have tried to understand what ‘happiness’ looks like for residents of Kyrgyzstan, and particularly for LGBT and queer people in this Central Asian state, who regularly face rejection and violence.

The result of their work is [A Book About Happiness: For Young \(and not so\) LGBT \(and not only\) People](#), which draws on interviews from members of LGBT communities in Kyrgyzstan, but also touches on broader topics: How has the idea of happiness changed in the post-Soviet space? What might happiness look like from a left-wing perspective? Why doesn’t the global positive thinking industry make people happier – wherever they are?

We talked to the authors – Nina Bagdasarova, Georgy Mamedov and Mohira Suyarkulova – about their new book, and why our understanding of happiness is intimately linked to our living conditions and communities.

I’d like to start with an observation: it seems that people have never known more about happiness than they do today. Every bookstore has shelves of books with tips on how to achieve it, and even new ‘happiness-making’ professions have emerged, such as happiness managers in large companies. But apparently, we are not becoming happier: depression and emotional burnout are problems that are very common in modern developed societies. What’s happening? Why is finding happiness such a struggle?

Mohira Suyarkulova: One of the researchers who inspired us to pursue our study of happiness is British clinical psychologist David Smail. In [The Origins of Unhappiness: A New Understanding of Personal Distress](#), he writes that society is interested in the emergence of institutions and systems that would distract attention from systemic problems – social inequality, poverty and other “misfortunes” that it produces – and shifts responsibility on to individuals.

Smail says that questions like “how to be happier” or “how to deal with depression” aren’t technical questions, but ethical ones. How to live well, how to live a good life – these are philosophical fundamental questions about human existence. We try to solve them with some tricks on an individual level, but this is impossible.

If you are just chasing happiness, then this is basically an empty signifier with nothing behind it – it’s just an illusion, a myth

Georgy Mamedov: Smail is a famous critic of psychotherapy, although a clinical psychologist with extensive experience himself. He developed his own school of materialist psychology, and its main thesis was this: no individual therapy, no treatment of individual patients will be effective if you do

not react to what is happening in society.

But at the same time, in his criticism of psychotherapy, Smail recognised its contribution, emphasising that psychotherapy can help at least in the sense that a person has the opportunity to be heard with compassion. In Smail's opinion, psychotherapy will work only if the therapist helps the client to see that the causes of his unhappiness are of an external, social nature, in order to remove the individual's sense of guilt. The next step: the person needs to be helped to identify and find available resources to overcome their situation. Our book largely reproduces Smail's psychotherapy model, although we do not directly refer to him.

In our book, we are trying to refute the myth of unhappiness or happiness as some kind of personal achievement, that happiness is only an individual work. After all, we become happy or unhappy largely at the intersection of social factors, rather than personal ones. And that's why, in our book, we don't give advice about how to be happy, but we try to outline the resources that people can use in order to become as happy as possible: set clear personal boundaries, organise communication with people, find communities, understand the social causes of their unhappiness.

In terms of the happiness industry, this is rather an indicator that the social problems of unhappiness are becoming more and more evident and less and less regulated at the social level. A marketised response thus appears, trying to offer an individual some kind of pill, anaesthesia, in order to mitigate the effects of social processes. The more pop psychology, personal growth coaches and positive thinking we have, the more likely our societal situation becomes worse.

Sociologists Eva Illouz and Edgar Cabanas, authors of the excellent book on the happiness industry [Manufacturing Happy Citizens](#), believe that “the moral meaning of our existence is not in the pursuit of happiness, but in increasing the knowledge of the pursuit of justice”. Do you agree with this thesis? Are we not being told once again to give up our personal happiness and sacrifice ourselves for the sake of some idea?

Nina Bagdasarova: In psychology, there is an understanding that if you make happiness the goal of your life, then most likely you won't find it. Happiness is an effect that accompanies your life, it arises if you are engaged in some meaningful activity and you have goals in which you see meaning. And if you are just chasing happiness, then this is basically an empty signifier with nothing behind it - it's just an illusion, a myth.

You also need to be able to distinguish between pleasure and happiness. Nobody has cancelled the fact that life can be pleasant or unpleasant, difficult, problematic. The hedonistic aspect is important - why shouldn't I enjoy life? - but this has nothing to do with happiness. There are a lot of unhappy people who have everything and who at the same time feel deeply depressed and do not know where to apply their energy.

Virginia Woolf wrote: “one cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well”

Mohira Suyarkulova: Yes, there's a contrast between the hedonistic understanding of happiness and the [eudemonic](#) [an ethical philosophy that suggests contentment is the highest human good which is desirable for its own sake]. Virginia Woolf wrote: “one cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.” This is the “[pyramid of needs](#)” according to Abraham Maslow: there are basic needs and simple pleasures without which we cannot strive for a meaningful life. Until we reach a certain minimum level of wellbeing, we simply won't have the resources for some kind of ideal, meaningful life.

Georgy Mamedov: One of the goals that we pursued in our book is to outline the parameters of a left-wing or socialist understanding of happiness. All political projects involve some idea of happiness, even if they don't articulate it. For example, the conservative idea of happiness consists of 'morals': be part of a community, family and nation, obey and accept the existing order, love your Motherland and you will be happy. Then there's a motive that opposes this conservative happiness, a liberal one - pursue personal success, put yourself above everything else, engage in self-development, personal growth in order to earn more money, and this will make you happy.

We are now in a situation where left-wing ideas are generally discredited at different levels, including due to the impossibility of providing a real project of happiness. All left-wing discussions really boil down to what was said above: people need to "eat" in order to get some kind of pleasure, and many cannot afford it. It is clear that "eating" means a whole range of basic life resources that are inaccessible to an increasing number of people. It turns out that any left-wing agenda is about the lower levels of Maslow's pyramid.

As Bertolt Brecht said: "First food, then morality".

Georgy Mamedov: Yes. And this is not very attractive. We still really strive for happiness, but we do not really understand what it can be, what idea of happiness is embedded in a socialist political project. It was important for us to define this.

At the same time, we still have to admit that the idea of happiness 'on the left' will never be as simple, simply because it cannot be illusory, no one can promise you quick pleasure. The answer we have tried to formulate focuses on finding happiness in solidarity. We can only be happy by being in solidarity with other people.

For happiness, it is not individualism that is important, but personal autonomy, which cannot be equated with selfishness, individualism or personal success. And personal autonomy cannot exist without solidarity and collective efforts.

Autonomy is the ability to defend your personal boundaries, to have enough material resources in order not to become dependent on other people. By this, I mean direct dependence, which often makes us unhappy, precisely because we do not have collective solidarity.

Parents depend on children, children depend on parents, spouses or partners depend on each other, and then we depend on work that brings us neither happiness, nor satisfaction.

How have ideas of happiness changed with the advent of capitalism in the post-Soviet space?

Mohira Suyarkulova: A specific example from our book is the post-Soviet idea of female happiness. Probably, in our region it has some peculiarities, but I think that wherever people speak Russian, this idea that there is some kind of gender-tinged personal happiness is very recognisable. It is no coincidence that it became especially popular precisely in the 1990s - during the arrival of capitalism. This happened because other doors were slamming, other opportunities for self-realisation disappeared for women.

There is also a recognisable idea of finding happiness in emigration; now, perhaps, there are already fewer illusions about this, but I remember when I was a schoolgirl, or studied at the university, many of my peers had the idea that you had to go abroad and stay there at any cost. And now it is becoming clearer that success and happiness are not to be found there either.

Nina Bagdasarova: Under capitalism, happiness is very much privatised. Through conservative

morals, through the institution of the family, people become very tied to each other and, as it were, separated from environments of solidarity, from public interests and other things, all this fades into the background. And private life comes to the fore, the house is behind the fence – and people become more and more closed in this very narrow circle. Even the concept of friendship has changed.

In Soviet times, there was a huge discourse about friendship: what is a real friend? A lot of children's books were written about this. Who's talking about this now? At least judging by my students, I am not sure this conversation about friendship is happening.

“People are not having children because they want to have children out of love – although these motives, too, are still present – but economic considerations of survival”

Georgy Mamedov: We all teach at university, we communicate with young people, and it was a serious revelation for me that young people of 19-20 years old are absolutely fine with the fact that their parents perceive them as a kind of investment in their own future.

We often deal with students who would not like to study where they study. At the same time, by our standards, our university is quite prestigious and quite expensive. But this is the choice of their parents. And if you start to unpack this logic, then you come to the fact that the students themselves say: “Yes, they want us to support them in the future, they hope that we will become successful.”

It turns out that the idea of this private happiness in parenting is also changing, and is becoming completely functional. That is, people are not having children because they want to have children out of love – although these motives, too, are still present – but economic considerations of survival.

In this scheme, there is no room for friendship, because there is no implied direct benefit from this relationship. While family relationships, in general, are more and more reduced to survival in conditions of codependency. Conservative values become a screen in order to force people to survive without the ability to build a completely different type of relationship.

Nina Bagdasarova: Friendship is possible only between free people who consider themselves independent. This is the highest degree of personal choice – you choose a person because they are really dear to you. And no other motives are present there, neither their wealth, nor any other factors – only their personal qualities. Roughly speaking, if people have nothing to eat, then perhaps they are not interested in friendship: they will look for other contacts, other connections, and do other things. Only now it is becoming more or less obvious that friendship is really a “luxury of human communication” that only people who have something can afford. And if I have nothing, then everything is very problematic. Or my friend and I have nothing at all, then you can also be friends.

You refer to [researcher Kristen Ghodsee](#) in your book, who claims that under socialism, people were more likely to feel happy – at least in their sex lives, for example. Are you proposing that we begin to strive for life under socialism again?

Nina Bagdasarova: There were different periods in the history of the Soviet Union, which is far from homogenous. There are several moments when one could observe a societal surge, comparable to a feeling of happiness. And this feeling was shared by the whole society. Let's say in the 1920s, 1960s and the 1980s just before the collapse of the USSR. The rest of the time, the authorities and people were quite alienated from each other, the declared goals of the socialist state existed on their own, and people lived in a subordinate state. But at certain points, in the 1960s, for example, people had the feeling that everyone was building communism. And it doesn't matter what you did there, you could plant beets in the field, but at the same time you did not just plant beets – you were

building communism. This is a completely different quality of existence.

These moments are possible under socialism, but under capitalism – I don't know, I'm not sure what this could look like. There should be a form of society – not Soviet state socialism – where people care about each other, not just their narrow circle, but in general, care about humanity. And I think that socialism is inevitable, if, in principle, we want to survive at all... At least from the point of view of the environment. If there are no shifts towards socialist public administration, then it seems to me that we will have nothing to talk about in two or three generations.

Georgy Mamedov: We do not perceive Soviet socialism as some kind of model that can guide us. Rather, it helps us to see the differences in how relations between people can be arranged.

For example, Kristen Ghodsee cites Russian researchers who showed that partnership or marital relations by the late Soviet era, by the end of the 1970s-1980s, were perceived primarily as friendships. We are far from idealising Soviet socialism, but nevertheless this is an important point: people at that time could build intersubjective relationships under conditions of a certain personal autonomy. And here we see that individual freedom was not associated with freedom of speech or freedom of movement. Instead, even under the conditions of Soviet socialism, people had resources for their own autonomous survival, and this contributed to the formation of completely different relationships at different levels. And this should be taken seriously, and not only as propaganda.

In addition, today we all – and not only in the post-Soviet space, but throughout the world – have lost the prospect of the future as something stable and predictable. We are sinking more and more into a generational gap, given that we now have the first generation whose living conditions are not improving compared to their parents. Even we 'millennials' feel it; we are the first generation of this kind, and subsequent generations are in even worse conditions. And this is a generally global phenomenon that certainly affects happiness.

For example, my grandmother is constantly worried about my pension, and it's quite difficult for me to explain to her that I'm not expecting much on that front, and it will be even more difficult for people who are now 20 years old. For them, it seems, a pension will be some kind of exhibit in a museum or a concept from a history textbook. It would seem that all this is not connected with happiness; but in fact, it is directly connected.

The feeling of a future, the ability to look at our life ahead – we are deprived of this feeling, it is constantly shrinking. And it certainly makes us extremely unhappy, and you can't change it with some pop psychology book or start thinking 'positively' about it. For us, the answer is this: we need to form an idea of socialist politics, of leftist politics, which would include the idea of happiness.

Many large employers are now introducing “wellbeing” and “wellness” in the workplace, and “employee care” departments are emerging in corporations. Google, for example, [feeds employees coconut blossom juice and scallops with parmesan sauce](#). Is this not enough?

Nina Bagdasarova: There is nothing wrong with that, it's just that the circle of people affected is catastrophically narrow, against a background of work, of course, becoming more and more precarious. Even programmers who work in these companies are guaranteed to receive some benefits, they are still exploited. When everyone is working on short-term contracts or freelancing and generally does not know what will happen to them tomorrow, and you have a job where everything is cool, then, of course, for the sake of this work you will do many things that you maybe would not have done otherwise.

Mohira Suyarkulova: I recently read Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower*, which [outlines](#) a

future where people's survival directly depends on corporations. The heroine's father works on a seasonal basis in an online college, and they live in a community, surrounded by a high fence, and outside the fence a complete nightmare - homelessness, destitution, hunger, violence - is happening. The family have some elementary benefits only because the father has a job. As soon as he loses this job, they lose everything and their whole more or less prosperous life will disintegrate. We see things like this in the US, where access to healthcare is completely dependent on the employer. Lose your job - you lose your insurance, and you can die without basic medical care.

Georgy Mamedov: This 'corporate happiness' has another more prosaic aspect: feeding your employees, giving them free smoothies, creating ping-pong rooms and so on, is much cheaper and more profitable than letting employees organise a trade union, hire them on long-term contracts and provide them with social guarantees. Slavoj Zizek, it seems, has long called this "[liberal communism](#)" - a situation in which these illusory benefits are created for a limited number of people, but which in fact do not lead to any serious social transformations. Besides, this all tends to look like a feast during a plague.

Moreover, even those people who are allowed to feast, in fact, are in very precarious conditions. The [new union of Google programmers](#) is a big step towards a collective happiness project that all these leaders of neoliberal capitalism are fiercely resisting. What workers really need are long-term contracts.

Nina Bagdasarova: We need a pension.

Georgy Mamedov: You need a pension, yes. And we must not forget: by focusing on the trends set by these companies, we forget that this is only the tip of the iceberg.

The global telecommunications industry is heavily dependent on semi-slave (if not slave) labour - workers who assemble and manufacture the equipment we use. Minerals for semiconductors are literally mined by child labour, where is no talk of managing your happiness and wellbeing. There is 19th-century-style exploitation in its most terrible forms out there.

I think we need to resist corporate happiness, and we see that, including for white-collar workers, this is becoming more and more obvious. It is unlikely now that anyone can be lured by a nap room, ping-pong tables or smoothies, this illusion is becoming more transparent for most people.

The idea of happiness you propose is through belonging to a certain community, a circle of like-minded people. In this scheme, happiness is like complicity in, or belonging to, something. What is the difference between this idea and the version of happiness, according to a conservative morality, of the need to be part of a collective?

Georgy Mamedov: The difference between these ideas lies in the possibility of choice.

From a left-wing perspective, you can choose to belong to this or that community, but the conservative version does not offer this: where you were born, that's where you're needed. The whole idea of conservative happiness is built on the essentialisation of a person's belonging to a particular group, while the left-wing idea is based on the fact that you can choose and construct this belonging.

It seems to me that in the left-wing project, in the left-wing understanding of happiness, you do not *find* yourself, and you do not *find* your belonging - you *create it*. Maybe from a liberal point of view, intentionally or accidentally, this significant difference is pushed out and only collectivism remains visible. But collectivism comes in different forms. Leftist collectivism is not collectivism at birth.

“The idea of a chosen family is an important component of the queer agenda, and others can learn from queer people in this regard”

Mohira Suyarkulova: This is where another aspect of our project becomes important: the idea of a chosen family is an important component of the queer agenda, and others can learn from queer people in this regard. The theorist Lee Edelman [has the concept of “reproductive futurism”](#) – a vision of the future as infinite reproduction from which queer people are excluded and that they resist. This is why they are stigmatised: “They cannot or refuse to reproduce.”

Queer communities are a radical seed that is already present, and one that breaks this obligatory reproductive chain.

Georgy Mamedov: Our project of left-wing happiness is not utopian, we are talking about practices that already exist.

There are people who cannot find themselves, who never find themselves, because they are denied the possibility of searching for it, and they are forced to create communities, create their own collectivity. And there are many such people. We constantly look at it as some kind of marginal phenomenon, perversion or misfortune and say: “You are forced to just be friends or you are forced to create fake circles of friends, families and communities, because you cannot create a real family.”

But the essence of happiness is that you can find collectivity, and not just individual happiness, and not with people you grew up with or you’re related to.

Nina Bagdasarova: It can be even more difficult to leave behind your illusions “from birth” if you are not a queer person. If you’re a queer person, it’s easier for you to break away from your familiar environment and start choosing. And if you are straight and grew up in a traditional family, then it is very difficult to break with these connections and it is very difficult to see a way out. And a lot of so-called “normal” people are just suffering.

(pull quote in here): The essence of happiness is that you can find collectivity, and not just individual happiness, and not with people you grew up with or you’re related to

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures are partly forcing people to be happy in the Biedermeier style - to be happy in a nuclear family, stay at home and take care of your loved ones, do not try for anything more. It seems to many that this is the way it should be - not only during the pandemic, but always. Do you think the current situation has somehow changed our understanding of happiness?

Georgy Mamedov: I think that we are at a fork in the road where two scenarios are possible, but will people make a choice in favour of the left-wing project? It’s unclear.

Obviously, dissatisfaction with the current situation is growing. There has been no lockdown in Kyrgyzstan for a long time, but educational institutions are closed. We teach online, students study online, schools and kindergartens are closed. Parents can no longer cope and it is clear that they want to return their children to school, they want to return their children into public care. The problem is the same with students. Part of our project was dedicated to LGBT students, for whom the university was a place where they could free themselves from constant contact with toxic parents. Now they no longer have this opportunity.

There is also a gender aspect: female students complain that they are expected to constantly do something around the house. If before they had an excuse that they might not do some housework because they are studying, now they have no such excuse. Therefore, this Biedermeier does not

particularly attract anyone – neither parents, nor children, nor young people – but rather is a source of universal stress. Will this be a reason to demand some drastic changes? This is another question, and this is why we are writing this kind of book – to somehow summon this opportunity and notice it, but for the most part people do not consider themselves happy. In any case, those who are forced to be at home all the time.

The pandemic has shown that many of the hopes for equality that we have associated with digital technology are highly illusory. The fact that we can now talk online, give interviews online, is good, it's progress. But when you are forced to study online, then on the contrary, all the inequality factors that were present and were somewhat mitigated by the fact that you came to university, studied and were distracted from your home environment are intensified. Online learning and online work does not equalise, but rather exacerbates already existing material and economic inequality.

Mohira Suyarkulova: In our context, in fact, a few very privileged people, like us, have the opportunity to work online, but for everyone else the pandemic is a huge crisis and loss of earnings.

For example, when there was a strict lockdown and quarantine in Kyrgyzstan, many people employed in the informal sector simply lost their earnings. For the country's million labour migrants working abroad, many have had to return, and now there is no way to go back to Russia – airlines have raised their ticket prices and it is simply impossible to buy them now. This is actually a huge catastrophe.

This is the difference: we do not have such a large middle-class stratum engaged in white-collar work that can be done remotely.

Nina Bagdasarova: I have some students who attend classes on Zoom from their bathrooms. At first I could not understand why I could see some strange plastic curtains on my screen, and then I realised that they simply have no other place that's both quiet and private.

Mohira Suyarkulova

Nina Bagdasarova

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