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# AL-FARABI'S VIRTUOUS CITY AS THE PROTOTYPE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses the social model developed by al-Farabi, which identifies the principles of civil society. It considers the feasibility of al-Farabi's concepts for the dissemination of the principles of civil accord in the modern Muslim world. The article reveals the basic concepts of al-Farabi's philosophy, which can be claimed by modernity with the aim of building a civil society. The concept of 'happiness' is considered in the political and social context as a future project, as the achievement of social and cultural level, where the principles of civil harmony will prevail. The problem of al-Farabi's planetary thinking of moral topics as defining world politics was investigated. In this vein, we discussed the concept of al-Farabi's 'Great Society' as a project of global civil society.

*Keywords:* virtuous city, political leader, global, great society, intercultural dialogue

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## **1. Introduction**

The principle of personal freedom is an European idea and such a principle can be developed only in a community with other individuals. In all historical stages of development of civil society the authors and analysts were represented by European thinkers, philosophers and politicians. To protect personal freedom it is necessary to have a public association, union, to coordinate constructive activity. In reviewing the history of Europe, one can trace the desire of the individual to legal security, improvement of civic culture, self-governance, etc.

In this regard, the East looks like the antithesis of the Western development. The cyclical nature of the perception of history, the priority of the spiritual quest, the search for inner ideal, no revolutions, production jumps, etc. determined the eastern society to be 'frozen' for a long time. For Asia the beginning of the twentieth century was called 'awakening' in the books. But now, when the whole oriental studies have a sufficient conceptual framework, we have an opportunity to consider trend towards social freedom in the

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philosophical writings of Eastern thinkers, the individual attempts to instill a culture rate at which society can self-organize and self-manage.

Al-Farabi's developed a model of the state and society called 'virtuous city'. The thinker outlined the positive qualities of the individual, which help him/her to be a 'citizen', called virtues, and the negative qualities are called ignorance, vices ('Ignorant cities'). Thus, the 'virtuous city' is not only the social environment, but also the inner microcosm of the individual. Borrowing ideas of Aristotle, al-Farabi became a teacher of Persian, Arab and Turkish scholars; in this regard he can be referred to as 'cultures connecting thread'.

In recent years, the scientific vocabulary included the concept of 'global civil society' that characterizes the output of civil institutions beyond a single state. Thus, national, religious and ethnic criteria do not create barriers to integration in order to address socio-economic and cultural problems. In this regard, Al-Farabi is a humanist, a reason and morality follower with clear prospect for the 'Great Society' future thinking.

It is believed that to create something similar to 'virtuous city' and 'happiness' was not possible during al-Farabi's life, and now it is also unrealistic. And the idea of the 'perfect ruler' can only be an inspiring factor for Muslim leaders to lead according to justice and generosity [1]. We can say that the treatises should not be taken too literally. Al-Farabi used the religion language for the credibility of their arguments, to bring them to the majority [2]. Al-Farabi did not separate religion from politics [3], since at that time only religion taught virtues. The hermeneutic method allows looking at the idea of a thinker with a more objective position. The categories and concepts analysis used in the treatises, include seeking analogies with the reality. Accordingly, the objective of this study is the analysis and interpretation of political philosophy of Al-Farabi in time and space, revealing aspects that characterize the state and the social model of 'virtuous city' as the prototype of the civil society.

## **2. Methodology**

The research methodology is presented by complex approaches and methods. First of all, they are important as historical and philosophical methods. These methods allow through al-Farabi's life and work to review his treatises identifying factors that influenced his formation as a thinker.

In the study the basis of methodology was comparative philosophy, which allows considering the historical layers of cultures beyond the text. Each 'cultural layer' carries its own content, thus intercultural communication can be traced in the text. Al-Farabi's treatises contain two 'cultural layers'.

Theorists, whose methodology we use, are Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes. Archaeology of Michel Foucault method allows through a text to reconstruct the structure of thought, defining the scope of the concepts of a certain epoch [4]. Archaeological method allows identifying 'discursive practices' that have created political and social, cultural atmosphere forming Al-Farabi's point of views.

Referring to the concept of Roland Barthes's 'The Death of the author' [5], every age will give rise to new 'readers', systematically releasing for itself from treatises some new meaning. The philosophical text is not in demand because of its 'origin', but because of its 'destiny'. Several concepts of al-Farabi, such as the 'virtuous city', 'happiness', 'the first head', 'great society', etc. can be interpreted under the prism of the present. From the treatises, one can trace an analogy with our time, to highlight the most useful for the formation of ideal model.

### **3. The basic principles of civil society in the content of the concept 'Virtuous City'**

Under the civil society we mean the level of the population socialization, in which the society, having a civic culture, is capable to constructively defend the rights and freedom, to organize themselves and to govern, to lead an active political activity. Civic culture which is acquired based on intellectual development of the population provides the relevant duties and responsibilities to other members of society and the state. The sense of civic responsibility and awareness needs to be raised in public.

Consequently, the aspect of the interaction between the state and civil society is particularly important because it requires the civil identity formation, which creates the basis for civil accord. Principles of civil accord are represented by mutual trust, compromise and tolerance [6].

Al-Farabi argued that only urban residents are able to enjoy the virtues to achieve true happiness. Like Aristotle, the thinker believed that people, not living a urban life, do not have the qualities of self-organization and education of civil culture. Both philosophers argued that only urban residents are the components of the state and involved in politics because without politics an individual wouldn't be a citizen. City ensured cohesion, unity of people, all are interconnected and interdependent. Therefore, under the state Aristotle understood the 'communication' of people, which is necessary to achieve the good [7].

The main component of civil society is social justice. John Rawls wrote that justice is the first virtue of social institutions [8]. Al-Farabi meant under justice the distribution of 'public goods'. Under the benefits he understood prosperity, wealth and honour. Every resident of the city has the right to its share of the benefits, "equal to its merits" [9]. Each subject of the 'city', according to Al-Farabi, relates to propertied class. Protocivil basis of society can only be the subject of property [6, p. 40]. An individual, who owns property, is socially active and can defend own rights and freedoms. The main social base is the middle class. In this regard, al-Farabi also relied on the middle class. Thinker uses the 'middle' category and the 'measures'. The correct combination of excess and lack was considered by al-Farabi the optimal balance. The middle layer of the population should be the vast majority, all his teaching is directed to

the middle layer, the ruling class is presented separately; also, al-Farabi did not take slaves into account.

The next important concept of civil society is self-governance. Al-Farabi distinguishes the great, middle and small society; he also designates complete and incomplete society. 'Small community' is represented by one city [9, p. 108-109]. The thinker focuses on society as a self-organizing system. Among the parent companies there are determined 'villages, neighbourhoods, streets', which are parts of the city. According to al-Farabi, the 'city' is compared to the human body, where all the 'organs' operate only in interaction. If the 'city' is called the body, the house (family), streets, neighbourhoods are 'organs'. Only with mutual members of the same home, family benefits can be achieved, and city-wide interaction of the individual 'houses' will lead to the achievement of a common goal [9, p. 191-192]. Thus, Al-Farabi understood that unity of the citizens is the basis of the state. The unity should be mutually beneficial and complementary. Thus, from the inhabitants of the town organization and independent solution of local problems is required.

Following the principle of tolerance, Al-Farabi focuses on interethnic and interreligious harmony. Thinker allocated large and small nations. Al-Farabi is a supporter of geographical determinism in establishing differences between nations. The value of al-Farabi's argument is in denial of racist and chauvinistic promises. Thus, the thinker, starting from scientific research and evidence, recognizes the equality of all people regardless their ethnic or racial origin. In Muslim countries the main criterion of identity was Islam, the race was not significant.

Regarding interreligious harmony let's look at the definition of religion. Al-Farabi mentions the category of 'the beginning of the existing things', which are understood as the basis of the Universe, and are recommended to be known by everyone. These 'principles of existing things' can have different images generated by the people as the formation of the peoples' world views. Thus, the thinker believed that all people regardless of religion think in similar concepts. Because al-Farabi's 'happiness' was associated with the highest good, therefore by religion he understood faith in goodness and justice. He invested in the concept of the meaning of religion moderation, following the virtues, call for the mastery of knowledge.

An integral component of the civil society is personal freedom, freedom of choice. The concept of 'free will' and 'free choice' described the basis of 'happiness'. 'Free will' is an internal human desire to comprehend anything; it is based on feelings and imagination. 'Free choice' is based on the reasoning and thinking [10]. In turn, the 'happiness' is characterized by a special state of the human soul, which is achieved when the perfect man prefers action in all that he does, and throughout his life [9, p. 7]. However, al-Farabi's 'happiness' can be viewed in a political context as a leitmotif of the state development. Al-Farabi's 'happiness' is represented as an every citizen goal. The happiness of the philosophy of al-Farabi is submitted to each citizen [10, p. 3]. The philosopher put moral and intellectual content that could collectively describe the formation

of the mentality and the state ideology. The path to the 'happiness' is indicated by the enlightened, fair leader. 'Happiness' is promoted by educated, proprietary classes and perceived by the people. Thus, the 'happiness' could be compared with the notion of the national idea, which provides the best inner state balance and improved centralized system. Thus, al-Farabi's model of the state offers the freedom of choice for every citizen. 'Choice' is offered only to an educated, wise man. 'Freedom of choice' is relevant only in an appropriate, creating direction. Al-Farabi does not accept the 'freedom' that leads to destruction. Personal freedom must harmonize with the 'happiness' because "happiness is a good sought for its own sake" [10]. Thus, personal freedom is allowed, but it must not infringe the freedom of others, must not violate the general harmony of society.

Al-Farabi offers to teach and educate civic virtues. Considering the tradition of Islam, people perceived virtues as a revelation from above. Obviously, in this regard, al-Farabi assigns the mission of training and education of Imams and rulers. He elevates them to the rank of 'elite', owning the necessary 'theoretical knowledge'. Education gives "theoretical virtues" and bringing up gives "ethical virtues" [9, p. 320]. 'Elite' should get a fundamental education, should have distinctive high moral qualities, being examples of education. Al-Farabi imposes great responsibility on the state leaders, as the vast population of the period was ready to accept the civil virtues in the form of prophecy. In this regard, the imams, and the rulers should fully possess these virtues. Partially, al-Farabi idealized the 'city' of the rulers, but in the circumstances of the time, to instil parameters of thinking and behaviour of the population 'protocivil society' was impossible. Therefore, the definition of Imams and rulers as the sole carriers of true knowledge was correct.

Al-Farabi gave the main function in the transformation of society to knowledge and education. Education was seen by a thinker as the process of establishing an ideal society, achieving personal excellence and freedom [11].

The main goal of the political philosophy of al-Farabi was the education of the citizens by means of reason and moral virtues. Philosopher dreamed of creating a society in which the desires and aspirations of the people will be appropriate positive principles, that society, with its freedom, will direct their actions and efforts for the benefit of the common good and virtuous. He called this society the 'virtuous city'.

#### **4. Al-Farabi's 'happiness' in the political context as an achievement of civil society**

We offer Al-Farabi's review of 'happiness' as a political goal, the keynote of the state and social development. Before considering the definition of 'happiness' by al-Farabi, we will consider Aristotle's 'happiness'. Stagirite realized 'happiness' as the 'beginning', because it is directed by the whole human activity; happiness is a kind of activity of the soul in the fullness of virtue [7, p. 74]. Aristotle argued that only the people with virtue can be citizens, create

universal happiness. The main emphasis is made on the human potential, the state residents create for themselves the benefits that are collectively referred to as happiness. According to Josiah Ober, Aristotle's 'happiness' in the political aspect can be regarded as a status quo, that is, stable life under the rules of civilization (social justice, personal integrity, etc.) [12]. According to Aristotle, 'happiness' is the starting point and the process of activity itself, 'the highest good', which is already available, but it is necessary to maintain and operate for its continuation.

Al-Farabi took happiness quite differently as the aim sought by everyone, as it is called perfection and the highest good [9, p. 3]. In addition, the thinker formulated that "the end is happiness" [9, p. 223]. Thus, under the happiness the result was implied. It is to be understood as the future which should be built. 'Happiness' was as a blueprint for the future, a higher level of social and cultural development. In his treatise 'Civil Politics' Al-Farabi gives a definition of happiness: "Happiness is an absolute good. All that is needed to achieve and obtain happiness, is equally good, but not for its own sake, but because it is necessary in order to achieve happiness. Yet, that whatever prevents happiness is an absolute evil. Kindness helps achieve happiness." [9, p. 113] Al-Farabi includes general 'happiness' for all citizens, and it must be created by joint efforts. The public need to learn and cultivate virtue to be in the future the owners of 'happiness'. Thus, obviously, Al-Farabi meant by 'happiness' intellectual and moral level of the people, which would be sufficient for the construction of a 'virtuous city' or a prosperous state, where citizens themselves create order and harmony, enjoying personal freedom and benefits of the state that resembles civil society.

The ancient heritage will always remain a historical benchmark for the development of human civilization. The spiritual and material culture of Ancient Greece will always be admired. The basis of Greek democracy and its institutions (people's assembly) is an example of building democracy and civil society in our days. All this is the basis for social organization and spiritual culture of the Greeks. There is no doubt, if we assume that al-Farabi highly appreciated the spiritual heritage of the Greeks, especially Aristotle's work. Aristotle was familiar with the state system of Athens, Macedonia and Atarney state. Stagirite designed the ideal state system, he relied on the fact that Greece has already had one. Al-Farabi in this regard, having learned by Aristotle's writings of the life of the Greeks, was looking 'forward' in the future. The thinker thought that the Muslim community had yet to learn the true 'happiness'.

In the context of the collapse of the unified Arab Caliphate, al-Farabi was thinking about a state which used to be united, the basics of which were laid by the Prophet Mohammed. The thinker tried to synthesize the teachings of the ancient Greeks and Muslim traditions. The Prophet of the Muslims is the standard of perfection, a perfect man. The power of the caliphs, left after the prophet to rule Muslim state, was also sacred. For this reason, al-Farabi imputes 'function' to specify the path to happiness to 'the head', the governor of the state.

Thus, the way to achieve 'happiness' can be presented by a state program. In this regard, the image of the 'the head' is found as the key. Following the state traditions of the caliphate, the Caliph's will was unconditional. Disagreement with his course often created new religious movements and sects. An example may be a different flow of Shiism. In this regard, in order to achieve the ideal state and civic culture the function of the 'the first head' was needed. The instructions of the Caliph would be most effective in the civil virtues' education. Therefore, al-Farabi saw an opportunity to instil the principles of civil concord by the population activities of 'the head'. 'The head of the city' (i.e. 'the first head') has the makings of a leader and a natural leader. He must have a 'mental virtue', 'theoretical knowledge', which he can transmit to the population. According to Al-Farabi, 'mayor' should be universal, at the same time be a philosopher, legislator, governor, Imam [9, p. 343]. Furthermore, according to al-Farabi, the political leader is like a father of a family, who is a teacher and educator of the population. The Eastern society also happens to be a patriarchal one. The governor acts as the father in the family, the family as a unit of society, the state, and the state also means family.

In the 'Treatise on the views of virtuous city residents' al-Farabi represents the 12 qualities of 'the head' which are required for each, without exception, head of a state [10, p. 317-319]. Having good health, the ability to comprehend what is heard, memory, a keen mind, a good and clear presentation of ideas, love for learning and training, to the truth, justice and honour, simplicity, self-control, determination are all together the image of the ideal leader to which one can have aspiration.

We believe that al-Farabi really assessed the conditions of the era. The image of the ideal ruler can be regarded as part of the political technology. The population perceives only prophecy from the lips of 'perfect' people's faith in their prophetic mission as a major imperative. The idealization of a political leader at that time was the only effective way of people's beliefs. The image of 'the God on Earth protégé' inspired people with spiritual support. Consequently, the provisions of the 'the first head' as 'the perfect man' would be productive in explaining civil virtues. The difficulty in al-Farabi's 'project' is only in the moral foundations of leaders. Rulers and imams have been aware of the importance of the mind power, so that is a reasonable basis to transform society, to instil virtue and create a civil society. The thinker presented a model of the state in which the power in the face of rulers, imams and people has a common goal; this is the harmony by al-Farabi. Equal dialogue between the authorities and the public, civil consent, the high level of education people can make the 'happiness' concept of al-Farabi's.

The concept of 'ignorant cities' is opposite 'virtuous city'. In the 'Treatise on the views of residents in virtuous city' he identifies the following 'ignorant city': the city of need, the city of exchange, the city of misery, ambitious city, the city for power, seductive city, immoral city, the lost city, the city of change [10, p. 323-325]. According to al-Farabi, people of these cities did not know happiness, and they have never tried to strive for it [10, p. 323]. Under the the

term of 'ignorant cities' social strata of medieval towns, or moral qualities, can be meant. We are inclined to think that the 'ignorant cities' mean the personal qualities that prevent the formation of the citizen. These defects, which decompose society from the inside, prevent the establishment of civil accord.

The relationship of ethics and politics in al-Farabi's philosophy creates a complete picture of the possible transformation of society. The thinker, based on humanism, believed that humanity is able to create a balance of relations between citizens, between the people and the state. The basis for this is the intellectual potential and high morality, citizenship.

## **5. Al-Farabi's 'The Great Society' and the global civil society**

Three types of global civil society can be identified: 1) as a replacement for statist features of the international system; 2) in opposition to the state system; 3) as a subsidiary organ of the International Society [13]. We are more inclined to the third type of global civil society; this model is the most appropriate. There is also a proposal of global governance in order to counter the challenges of globalization such as terrorism, poverty, economic crises [14]. However, we see the best option in peer community, socially active part of the population, in dealing with internal and external problems.

Once again, repeating al-Farabi's universal understanding, it should be noted that the thinker assessed the problems of humanity across the world. The thinker highlights the 'great', 'middle' and 'small' society. 'Great Society' is a world society that is the community of all people on Earth. "Average (middle) society" is one nation, and the "small society" may be the society of the city [9, p. 304]. The thinker, expressing the determination of 'virtuous' and 'ignorant' cities, created a universal philosophical work, applicable to all companies, regardless from geographic location and ethnicity. It is therefore particularly important for the world cultural policy to consider al-Farabi's heritage as the dialogue of cultures between East and West, as an object to promote mutual understanding and tolerance.

If in the heritage of al-Farabi's civil society features borrowed from Aristotle can be traced, and the language of Islam transformed, the 'The Great Society' can be compared with the global civil society. The East philosopher compares virtuous city with a healthy human body, all the organs that help each other in order to save the life of a living being, and make it the most complete [9, p. 305]. In view of this, if the city is an integral part of the people, and the people are the part of population of the Earth, the 'virtuous great society' should be considered also as a healthy body. The thinker also supposed to reach as 'common good' the reciprocity of cities and peoples. He believed that the nation, all the cities of which that help each other in order to achieve happiness, is a virtuous nation. And the whole Earth can become virtuous, if all the people help each other [9, p. 305]. Further, Al-Farabi wrote: "... parts of the body differ, surpassing each other in their nature and their abilities" [9, p. 305]. In this context, it can mean peoples and states, at different cultural and social levels,

with different socio-economic structures. The main 'organ' is called the heart, by which we should understand the centre of high culture and education.

Incredibly correctly, al-Farabi notes the development of the whole Earth only with the direct participation of all its components. Only the joint efforts of states and nations really transform the world space, leaving aside the hatred and thirst for political, economic superiority. Viewed aspect can be regarded as ideal, the essence of which is simple and clear, but the pursuit of which, is always postponed to the next stage of human development. We need to discern the very widespread pattern of permanent coexistence and confrontation 'virtuous' and 'ignorant' as the cities on the planet, states, towns, villages, and even a single person in whose soul both exist.

Accessibility of perception of the world through a global network has an immense range of benefits. However, some information releases are not always adequate to the 'noble' view of life and worldview. Restriction of access to information sources is impossible. In this regard, there is a need to develop categories of civil and moral absolute that could serve as a guiding imperative. In this vein, the most important aspect should be the principle of the right intellectual distinction.

In this case, it is important to appeal to such concepts as Al-Farabi's 'initial intelligence' and 'actual intelligence'. The East philosopher made comparison concepts. 'Initial intelligence' is compared to the human ability to see objects that have this vision. A person can see everything only in sunlight. The light of the Sun, which allows distinguishing objects, colours, objects, is called 'actual intelligence'. The connection between these two concepts is similar to light due to the vision [9, p. 285-286]. Thus, the ability to correctly distinguish between sensible things and phenomena is like 'the light emitted by the Sun'. 'Initial intelligence' as human vision is the only possibility of perception of reality, while the differentiation between positive and negative is within the scope of questionable 'actual intelligence'. 'Actual intelligence' can objectify the moral prescriptions through goodness and justice, humanism, understanding and tolerance, etc. Incorporating all the positive traits of the man as the bearer of true spirituality, 'actual intelligence' today must become the prism through which people will absorb the surrounding real and virtual world. Accentuation on virtual reality is appropriate, since the population of the planet takes global information from the mass media through television and the global information network, which is known to process the images created often by means of simulacra. Simulacra evoke the veil, which is a barrier to understanding and awareness of the objective reality. 'Actual intelligence' may be a concept which will contain the principles of the civil consent, taking into account the objective realities. Higher values of the conceptual provisions should be a person's rights and freedom, personal integrity, exclusion tendencies contrary to these values for the sake of the interests of any. 'Actual intelligence' should be assimilated by the party which incorporates new principles of social and political structure, which are the principles of civil society, reconciliation and democracy. But, in addition, the centre of the spread of civil accord and the

ideas of civil liberty must also be guided by the ‘actual intelligence’, ‘sunlight’. ‘Civil society export’ action centre may be called the ‘heart’ (al-Farabi’s language). Thus, the dialogue must be equitable, taking into account only the human being as the highest value creation.

## **6. Discussion**

Strive to the creation of a global civil society comes from ‘bottom’ of ordinary citizens’ activity [15]. This process is inevitable. People, who have access to the information, think about a solution to their problems. In this situation, you need to help them find the right direction. The interdependence of social, economic and political processes between modern states is the need of the most general conceptual provisions. Here it is especially actualized the theme of regional integration. In the post-socialist countries of Central Asia is the problem of building a civil society. In this respect, Al-Farabi’s concept on the ‘virtuous city’ would give this process a humanistic character [16]. Al-Farabi’s legacy is recognized as a national treasure of the Central Asian nations. The principles of ‘moral’ of al-Farabi’s state could have put the basis for the development of the concept and a long-term program of gradual, evolutionary construction of civil society.

## **7. Conclusions**

Despite the adequate study of al-Farabi’s philosophy, researchers are turning again and again to his legacy. The uniqueness and universality of his philosophy can give some guidance for the solution of contemporary problems. Focus on what the philosopher’s concept creates, idealization looks superficial. The thinker soberly assessed the needs of the time; and the realism of his philosophy is quite simple and straightforward. Al-Farabi’s main priority is the man and his freedom as the highest value of life. It should be noted that the second teacher pointed to the underlying, fundamental causes of conflict and social upheavals. He said bluntly that morality defines the basic outline of not only human life but also the life of the state. As the state is the same ‘body’ in which everything is interconnected. Morality of citizens and political elites, namely, the political leader, is the main criterion of a successful, harmonious functioning and prosperity of the state. This is the simple and profound essence of al-Farabi’s philosophy.

In the future, it would be significant for the study of a hypothetical implementation of al-Farabi’s citizenship principles on the example of a particular region. For this propose we need a multidisciplinary approach. This may be a field for philosophers, sociologists, political scientists, historians and culture experts. The first stage of the proposed research must be a comparative analysis of social relations and local government policies in a given region, country. In the future, it is possible to predict how al-Farabi’s concepts are effective in resolving and stabilizing the situation in the Middle East.

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