

Queer.
stories
from
Central
Asia,
Eastern
Europe
and
South
Caucasus

Unit.

**Queer
stories from
Central Asia,
Eastern
Europe
and South
Caucasus**

Berlin 2023

Concept and Editorial

Unit is a network of journalists and activists focusing on LGBTIQ+ topics in Central Asia, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus. Our goal is to establish long-term and constructive partnerships among journalists, activists, media and organizations working on human rights and marginalized communities.

Unit is a part of **n-ost**, an international network connecting journalists and media initiatives from Europe and beyond. As a media NGO, we campaign for independent foreign reporting, media pluralism and access to information. Our network provides training and supports journalistic research with a cross-border approach and media monitoring.

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Opinions expressed in the articles are solely the authors' and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Unit team. That said, any and all feedback is very welcome, reach us at unit@n-ost.org.

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Foreword

Dear reader,

In your hands lies a collection of stories capturing the queer realities of Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and the South Caucasus. These narratives come in various forms, including interviews, essays, photo projects, podcasts, and short documentaries, initially in different languages. We've translated them into English to offer readers, who may not have access to stories in local languages, a closer look at the realities, struggles, and joys of queer communities in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine.

We collaborated with authors, editors, and media who contributed to the issue during challenging times marked by significant political shifts. While Ukraine is defending itself in a full-scale Russian invasion, Azerbaijan is pursuing its military interests in Armenia. Several countries have introduced or keep going back to discussing laws against “foreign agents” or the so-called “LGBT propaganda”. Moreover, state pressure on the media and limitations on freedom of speech are intensifying. LGBTIQ+ people are actively engaged in these complex social and political processes, and queer bodies are at the forefront of political battles worldwide.

This book is divided into three parts *Home*, *The Personal Is Political*, and *Art & Culture*. In each part, you will find three stories from one of the regions printed in full. Additional stories on the topic are included in the form of a ‘teaser’ with a QR code linking to a full version on our website.

Home is dedicated to the feeling of belonging to a particular space and how one claims it or even fights for it. It tells stories of war, migration, imperialism, urban spaces, and histories of decolonisation from Soviet and Russian influences.

The Personal is Political touches upon complex subjects, such as incarceration, disability, medical transitioning, and police brutality. However, it also celebrates self-discovery, acceptance, coming out, and the joy of finding one's own community.

Art & Culture features interviews and essays by poets, writers, photographers, fashionistas, drag queens, and kings. Despite financial challenges, state pressure, and opposition from hate groups, these queer individuals remain creatively resilient and find healing in their artistic expressions.

Please enjoy reading, looking at and playing with this book, and keep the queer fire alive.

*With solidarity,
Unit Team
Saltanat, Vika and Pavel*

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“This Is My Feminist Manifesto”

**The story of Violetta Tarasenko,
a Ukrainian LGBTQ activist and a lesbian
woman in the Armed Forces of Ukraine.**

Text by Inga Daraselia

Photos by Violetta Tarasenko

The original article was published in Ukrainian on *Women Platform*



Violetta Tarasenko is an activist and openly gay woman. She has been fighting Russian propaganda with journalism and videos for nine years, and now serves in the Ukrainian Armed Forces. This text is an abbreviated but frank biography of Violetta, from the moment she became interested in human rights to the realisation that she is now forced to defend them with arms.

1 Bydlany – a colloquial expression, roughly translates to lowlifes, rednecks, white trash, etc.

2 Euromaidan was a wave of demonstrations in Ukraine, sparked by President Viktor Yanukovich's sudden decision not to sign the European Union–Ukraine Association Agreement.

3 Titushky – a Ukrainian slang word for thugs for hire

4 Ukrainian civic activist, killed by a stabbing by pro-Russian militants during a Euromaidan rally in Donetsk. Proclaimed the Hero of Ukraine posthumously

I come from a small town in Donetsk Oblast, Avdiivka, where I lived for twenty years. I had a happy life and didn't think about moving to another place, because Avdiivka was a small, cozy city where everything was calm and quiet. If we needed some action, we went to Donetsk.

I came out when I was in middle school, and later at work and to my mom. I have hardly ever encountered homophobia, which comes as a surprise to everyone. I dated girls from secondary school, gave them presents, and talked openly about my partners. Even in the company of so-called 'bydlany',¹ they just spoke to me about it, and nobody acted aggressively, as I was also part of that group.

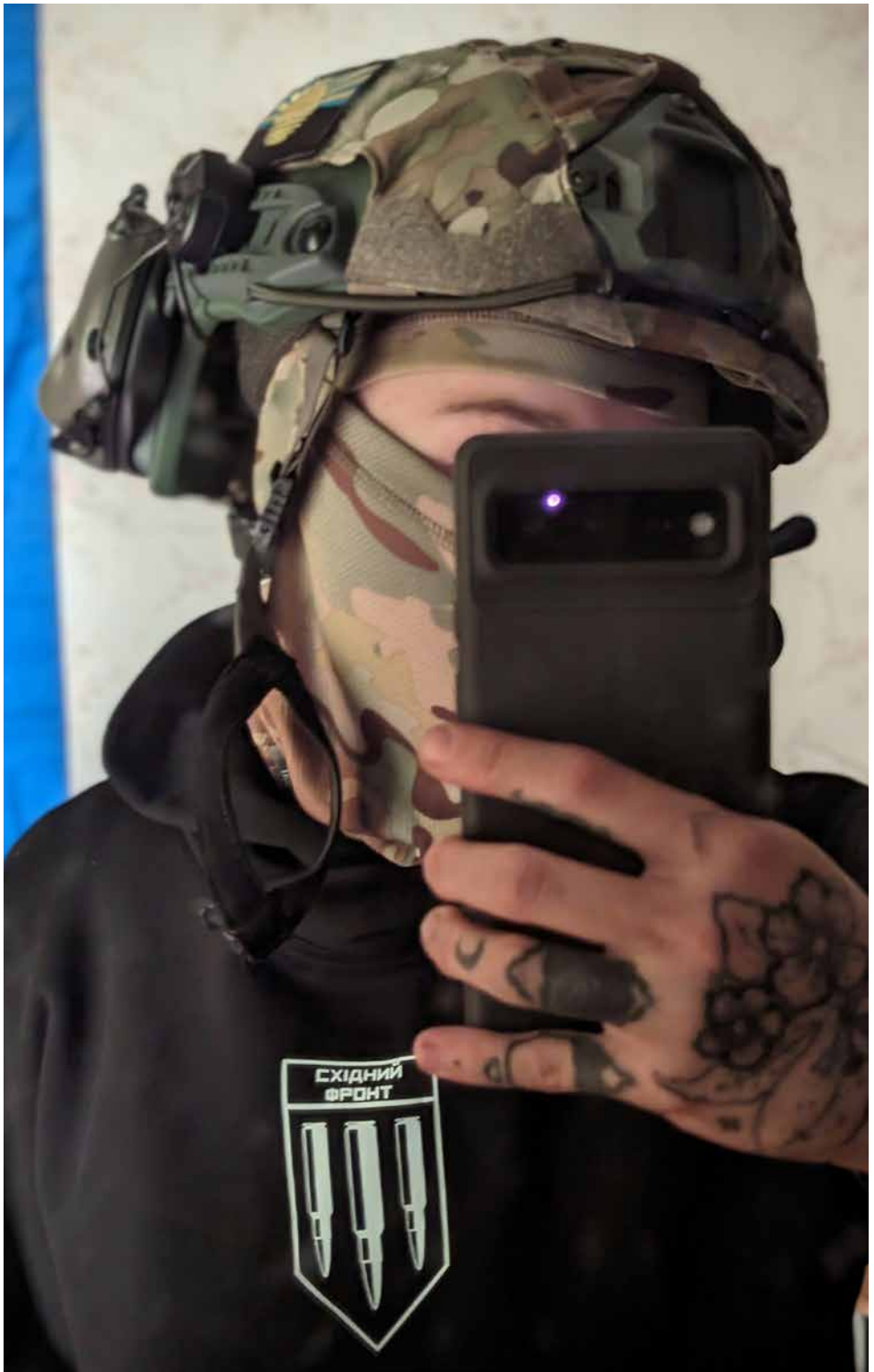
After high school, I entered the Faculty of Political Science at the University of Donetsk. At that time, I was not an activist and took no interest in politics, urban development, or legislation. During my second year of study, I completed an internship at the sole independent media outlet in Donetsk. This experience sparked my interest in activism.

Soon after that, when the occupation began in 2014, I began to expose Russian propaganda through my journalism. I covered Donetsk's Euromaidan rallies,² attended by 150 people on better days. They were opposed by 200 'titushky'.³ They threw paint at us, followed people after the protests, and beat us in the stairwells. The police did nothing about it, did not stop them. I was at the rally when Dmytro Chernyavsky was stabbed to death.⁴

I saw everything with my own eyes. I witnessed the city getting taken over, with all that had been constructed during decades of independence being demolished. For the past nine years, I have carried this pain. Therefore, I have worked to oppose Russia and the conservative values it promotes, specifically within Ukrainian society. For instance, the conservative ideas of extreme nationalism seem identical to those of Russia but expressed in Ukrainian.

I also went to all the pro-Russian rallies, covered them live, and showed what was really happening there. Due to this, my private information and photographs were shared across pro-Russian social media groups, which identified my location and made the call to locate and harm me.

Over time, I left Donetsk and returned to my native (then occupied) Avdiivka. At the time, the occupation authorities were actively searching for me. They referred to me as a spotter because I identified



the locations of checkpoints, the people responsible for them, their funding, and other details.

Once, I was trying to take my grandmother to a secure location when a van arrived at the bus stop and two individuals with firearms disembarked and attempted to coerce me into going with them. I replied that I was not going anywhere because I had an old lady here who needed to be taken to the train. Then one of them made several shots in front of my face, trying to intimidate me. But my face did not move. It was the first time I realised that I don't panic in stressful situations. I stayed put and persisted that I had to send off my grandmother first before I joined them wherever they wanted to go. And they just left! I think what helped me was that there were a lot of people at the bus stop, and I'm a one-and-a-half-meter-tall girl. They just couldn't push me into the car in front of everyone.

After the liberation of Avdiivka, I moved to Kyiv. You could say that my beloved city was dead. Cut off from Donetsk which is still occupied, Avdiivka didn't develop much. There was only work available at the factory and most of my friends left. It was just a border point between Ukraine and the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" that was being gradually destroyed by Russian artillery.

In Kyiv, I kept up with my activism, but things were different than in Donetsk where we only protested Russia. I started going to rallies for women's and queer rights. It is interesting that in Donetsk, separatists tried to intimidate me, but in Kyiv, they were replaced by right-wing radicals. But after being threatened with an assault rifle, the attacks of teenage radicals only made me smile.

5 Update is a media venture backed by the Ukrainian organisation Insight, which works to safeguard the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals.

6 TU platform was an art space in Mariupol, which operated from 2016 to 2022.

I also did not stop working as a journalist, and overall, I dedicated nine years of my life to opposing Russian propaganda. Also, I worked for Update,⁵ a website that discusses human rights, mental well-being, and drug regulations, which is renowned among the LGBT community.

But Kyiv did not become my home. In 2019, I decided to move to Mariupol because I really wanted to go back home to the Donetsk Oblast. I spent three happy years there and I loved my life in Mariupol. It was a really calm European city by the sea. Every two months new venues opened there. There was a continuous effort to fix and renew the space. We saw that money was really being invested in the city.

We also had our own space, the TU platform.⁶ It was a place for LGBTQ+ individuals and anyone who felt uneasy in their homes, workplaces, or town in general. It was a place for lectures, parties, film screenings, workshops, and a wide variety of art.

Several times we were attacked by local right-wing radicals, who smashed everything and hit the staff. But later, the police interfered and the attacks stopped. Over time, the whole city knew that there was a platform called TU, that gays were 'hanging out there' and

7 Some of these teenagers were forcibly displaced to Russia during the occupation. The TU platform staff assisted in returning them to Ukraine.

holding their ‘gay parades’ every year. In fact, we organised events about human rights on different issues. In the last year of the platform’s existence, we had a fantastic programme for teenagers, which drew in plenty of enthusiastic young people.⁷

This art space was created by IDPs from Donetsk, and I think it was the experience of struggle that made us more active. We wanted to do something for society, not just sit around. We liked living in Mariupol.

On 24 February 2022, my partner and I woke up at 6 a.m. to a call from a friend who asked if we had heard explosions in Mariupol. I went online and saw on Telegram news channels that a full scale war had started. We woke up calmly, I was preparing our breakfast, while my partner contacted her friends abroad. I knew what to prepare for, so I didn’t panic, I had already packed my things and my ‘survival kit’.

There is probably no point in talking about the occupation of Mariupol. Everyone already knows what happened there. Heating, water, gas, and other utilities were shut down almost immediately. So were the Internet and mobile communications. No one counted the dead there. People were buried in their yards, there were cemeteries in every park, and people burned in their own homes. No one will ever find them.

It was also difficult because I was at my partner’s house, with her family. Because there was a military unit in my yard. Her family didn’t like me very much, so I had a feeling that I was out of place and I had nowhere to go. We were under occupation until March 17, and then miraculously managed to leave.

When we got out of Mariupol, we broke up. I think I couldn’t cope with the stress and she saw our life differently and decided not to continue the relationship. While we were there, I didn’t feel supported, and that’s probably why I couldn’t be a support for someone else.

From Mariupol, I went to Zaporizhzhia, then to Kyiv, then to Lviv, then across the border to Greece, where my mother has lived for many years, and then I stayed with friends in Georgia for a few months, and finally, I ended up in Berlin for the first time. But I decided to return to Ukraine. I don’t want to flee, I don’t want to live another life abroad and be displaced again. Again! Ten more times. I have the strength to fight them [the Russian occupiers].

At the end of last summer, I started preparing for the army. I did some training with my neighbour, borrowed body armour from my friends, and wore it for a few hours every day to become accustomed to it.

I was accumulating anger at Russia and at what happened in my relationship. For the whole year before I joined the Armed Forces, these emotions fueled me, I had no other life. Apparently, I did not fully process what happened to me with a therapist, neither in terms of





what I experienced in Mariupol, nor in terms of breaking up with my girlfriend, nor in terms of the fact that my hometowns were destroyed. The rage just kept accumulating inside me and I decided that I was ready to go to war.

I cannot say that I am not afraid to die for Ukraine, because I want to live for Ukraine. But I can't imagine any other life now, where I would be in a safer place, for example, in Kyiv, working a civilian job, going on dates and parties. I tried to do all that when I came back to Ukraine, but I realised that I couldn't because my mind was always on the war.

When people asked me why I was joining the Ukrainian Armed Forces, I answered, "Who else but me?" Because I saw Kyiv living a peaceful life again, with parties and recreation. I saw robust men come up with the excuse that they were holding the economic front by donating. We do need donations, without them we would be fighting with our bare hands, but without people, there would be no army and no one to donate to. The war became something far away again when the Russians withdrew from the Kyiv and Chernihiv Oblasts. We are running low on willing men to fight, and sometimes the ones who are called up do not behave honourably. They drink, leave their post without permission, and desert their positions.

At the same time, many of my friends tried to dissuade me and did not believe in me because I was a woman, because I was one-and-a-half-meter-tall and weighed fifty kilos. Even if women join the army, commanders are hesitant to assign them to combat roles or send them on combat missions. I don't want stereotypes to stop me, I've been fighting them all my life and will continue to do so, just now I will do it in the Armed Forces.

To officially register in the Armed Forces, I went to the Military Commissariat for two months – they refused to enlist me by contract. They were looking for different reasons to refuse, I had to provide a lot of documents. At first, they wanted to mobilise me as a combat medic. I said that if I became a medic, it would be of my own free will, not because they wanted to make me a medic because I was a woman. Only after that, I was offered a three-year contract.

After signing the contract, I was finally sent to training. It felt like a prison. They don't train or prepare for war, but rather for a military-style service like in the Soviet Union. All we did was dig trenches and carry things back and forth, and we had no right to talk back to our superiors. The chief instructor kept repeating during the training that he did not really believe in women in the army and was suspicious of the fact that there were now so many of us. That's all the training we had.

Now I have arrived at my unit. I serve in the Ivan Bohun First Separate Special Forces Brigade, part of the Dyke Pole (Wild Fields)

battalion, in an assault company. Our battalion holds positions in the Lyman sector on the border of Donetsk and Luhansk regions. I'm a soldier of this battalion, I'm not allowed to say more. I cannot say that I am in my proper place, because I don't think anyone belongs in war. But for sure I feel better here.

Of course, everyone tries to take care of me, I'm the only woman here, but other than that, I'm treated like everyone else. The only thing is that I get to be treated with candy more often. In fact, everyone here is polite and nice, and everyone is just doing their job. But there was one case where, on my first night on duty, I was told by a fellow soldier that I should be "producing children instead of sitting there, that there was no need for a 'skirt' in the position".

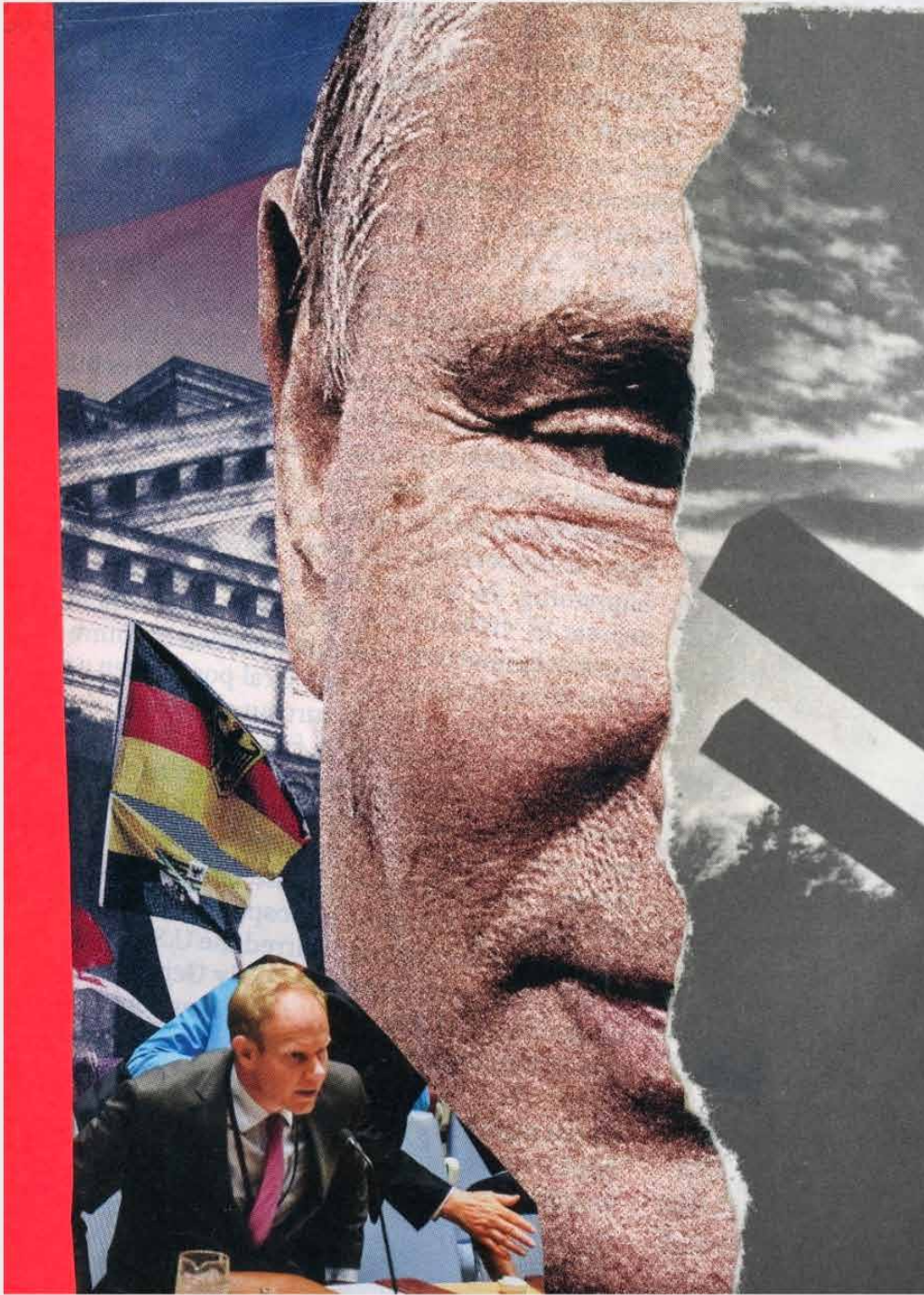
I didn't tell anyone about my orientation, but one of my brothers-in-arms, with whom we share all our meals, found me on Twitter. I post there about queer feminism and all that. I was very embarrassed, but he turned out to be an okay person, and he even started following me. I mean, not everyone here is homophobic, he didn't stop communicating with me because he saw what I shared on Twitter.

There was another story. One guy liked me and asked asked for my Instagram. Then one night he came and invited me for tea, and asked if I was gay. I admitted honestly. It is not something I tell everyone, but neither will I be a liar and a denier. It was my first coming out here and I was very nervous waiting for his response. His first words were, "The guys will be shocked," and I said, "Yes, they will." I couldn't sleep all night and didn't understand what would happen tomorrow. If he told anyone, the whole company would talk about it. But he turned out to be decent, and we still hang out, train together and are friends with each other.

The key message for everyone to understand is that it's not the Nazis aiming to seek retaliation against the Russians, as some assume abroad, but rather regular Ukrainians who are tired of being targets. I want to take revenge for everything the Russians did to our country, to its people, for all the broken lives of my friends and my own.

For nine years, my friends and I have been dreaming of going back to Donetsk and strolling on the Kalmius riverbank. Now this feeling has become very real and it keeps me going. The main thing is to stay alive and prevent our country from becoming a military dictatorship or becoming conservative after winning.

That is why I need to show that LGBTQ people are just like everyone else, like other Ukrainians who are ready to lay down their lives. That women are ready to lay down their lives, that this is not only a man's business, but everyone's business. This is my feminist manifesto. I am here to defend the values of freedom and equal rights for all. Maybe others are fighting for something else, but I am here for this.



From "Emotions. Feelings. Uzbekistan".
Read it via the QR code on page 154

Stop



WAR



Немилостивость

Russian Colonialism and Homophobia in Moldova

An attempt to see if homophobia in Moldova is linked to Russian colonialism and cultural policy since the annexation of Bessarabia in 1812.

Text by Ecaterina Pislari and Maxim Totoc-Cuclev

Illustrations by A.Mur

The original article was published in Russian on *Women Platform*



Intolerance towards non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities in the Republic of Moldova is a burning issue. It can be expressed in street attacks, hate crimes, suicides, microaggressions, the normalisation of homophobic and transphobic slurs, and patriarchal attitudes in society supported by the church and conservative politicians.

Since 2021, the pro-European government amended the law on non-discrimination to prohibit harassment based on sexual orientation and gender. The Code of Offences introduced penalties for harassment and victimisation. Since 17 January 2023, Moldova, as a member of the Council of Europe, has been obliged by the European Court of Human Rights to pass laws to protect all families, including those started by people of the same sex and, as a result, to recognise same-sex marriages. To set a precedent and speed up the adoption of such laws, some LGBTQ+ activists have filed an application to enter into a same-sex marriage. They now intend to challenge the rejection in court.

Despite welcome changes in legislation, non-cisgender people do not feel safe in Moldova. Reforms are slow and some aspects are not yet considered at all.

For example, there is no legislation to regulate the procedure of changing identity documents for trans people. If the government changes to a more conservative and pro-Russian one, the situation is likely to worsen. And the implementation of laws already passed could be sabotaged.

What follows is an attempt to see if homophobia in Moldova is linked to Russian colonialism and cultural policy since the annexation of Bessarabia (the eastern half of the Principality of Moldova) in 1812.

Principality of Moldova

The Principality of Moldova was formed in the 14th century and is culturally closely linked to the Principality of Wallachia (Țara Românească) and Transylvania. At the beginning of the 16th century, Moldova and Wallachia came under the control of the Ottoman Empire. However, it did not extend to religion, language and culture, but was expressed in economic and gradually increasing political dependence: the payment of tribute, the obligation to supply wheat to Constantinople and the enforced political loyalty of the elite. The Sublime Porte¹ had little or no influence on the formation of the legal custom and written law of the Principalities of Moldova and Wallachia concerning sexuality and gender roles.

¹ Also known as the Ottoman Porte or High Porte, the government of the Ottoman Empire.

Culturally and religiously, the principalities were firmly bound to the Byzantine tradition. The most important institution was the Orthodox Church, and oral law was largely based on Byzantine law. The first written law in Moldova, the “Rule of Vasile Lupu” (Pravila lui Vasile Lupu) adopted in 1646, was a hybrid of legal customs, Byzantine civil law and church canons.

The family code, control of marginalised groups, sexuality and punishment for sexualised crimes were all based on ecclesiastical canons.

They criminalised not only rape, incest, paedophilia (the age of consent was 12 for girls and 14 for boys)[1], abduction (usually of girls) for marriage, but also sexual relations outside marriage, defilement and childbearing outside marriage, cohabitation, abortion and homosexuality, both male and female.

“Sodomy” (homosexuality) was considered both a mortal sin and a civil crime and was punishable by death through beheading and burning of the body. “Sodomites” were first condemned by an ecclesiastical judge, who excommunicated them, and then by secular tribunals which sentenced them to death. Sex outside marriage was also

considered a grave sin punishable by church canon law and a crime punishable by civil penalties: fines, beatings or imprisonment. The Church tried to confine sexuality to the patriarchal family. [2]

Note: Marginalised groups included not only gay men and lesbians, but also people involved in prostitution and women perceived as witches – usually widows who practised sorcery, casted spells and made potions. “Witches” encroached on the Church’s power over family and love life, performing love spells and charms, increasing or decreasing female fertility, destroying and restoring married couples, and provoking conflict in the community.

The extent and meticulousness of the punishments inflicted on marginalised groups is unknown. There is very little evidence of the actual use of such punishments in late Byzantium. [3]

Stephen Morris notes that the Byzantine view of homosexuality as a sin was often combined with various non-heterosexual – but also not gay in the modern sense – relationships among the clergy. Such as, for example, adelphopoiesis – a fraternal spiritual union. [4]

Tsardom of Muscovy and the Russian Empire

In the Slavic Orthodox tradition, on the other hand, homosexuality attracted much less negative attention up until the 18th century. The Council Code did not mention homosexuality at all. The Church did not consider homosexuality a more serious sin than adultery, an extramarital affair. [5]

Peter the Great, who wanted to modernise Muscovy along the lines of the Western European empires, introduced laws and penalties for “sodomy”. In 1716 he imposed disciplinary restrictions on sailors and soldiers. Sexual intercourse between them was punishable by burning at the stake. Ten years later, the death penalty was replaced by corporal punishment or eternal exile. Nicholas I extended this prohibition to the civilian male population of Russian Empire in 1835. [6]

Closer to the Byzantine canon, the Principality of Moldova experienced its harshness to a greater extent.

The Church and cultural policies of the Russian Empire after the annexation of Bessarabia

Moldova and Wallachia, eager to rid themselves of tightening Ottoman control, entered into situational anti-Ottoman alliances with either Austria-Hungary or the Russian Empire. [Victor Taki] Initially, Moldovan elites pinned on Russia their hopes for freedom from Ottoman tyranny and the restoration of local institutions of power. This was promoted by Russia's status as "intercessor of Orthodox Christians", the empire's main soft power tool in the Balkans and the Romanian principalities. Hopes were not fulfilled, and instead of liberation, the eastern half of the Principality of Moldova was annexed and absorbed into the Empire, and the truncated Principality of Moldova, along with Wallachia, came under Russian military occupation.

In the Principalities, the Orthodox Church maintained a strong connection with the Moscow Patriarchate for many centuries. In annexed Bessarabia, it was the Orthodox Church that became the main conductor of imperial cultural policy. It also continued to regulate social life in many ways, despite formalising civil justice.

The extension of the ban on homosexual relations to the entire civilian population of the Russian Empire in 1835 coincided with the introduction of the policy of unifying Bessarabian laws with imperial ones, the Russification of the service class, keeping of records only in Russian, the settlement of the south of the territory by Bulgarian, Gagauz, Ukrainian, Russian and German peasants, the complete Russification of towns, the expulsion of the Romanian-speaking population to villages and the deprivation of the "Bessarabian province" of what remained of the autonomy it had enjoyed as part of the Empire since 1812.

Thus homophobic Russian laws came to apply in the colonised territory, although homophobia was nothing new for them.

Bessarabia as part of the Kingdom of Romania

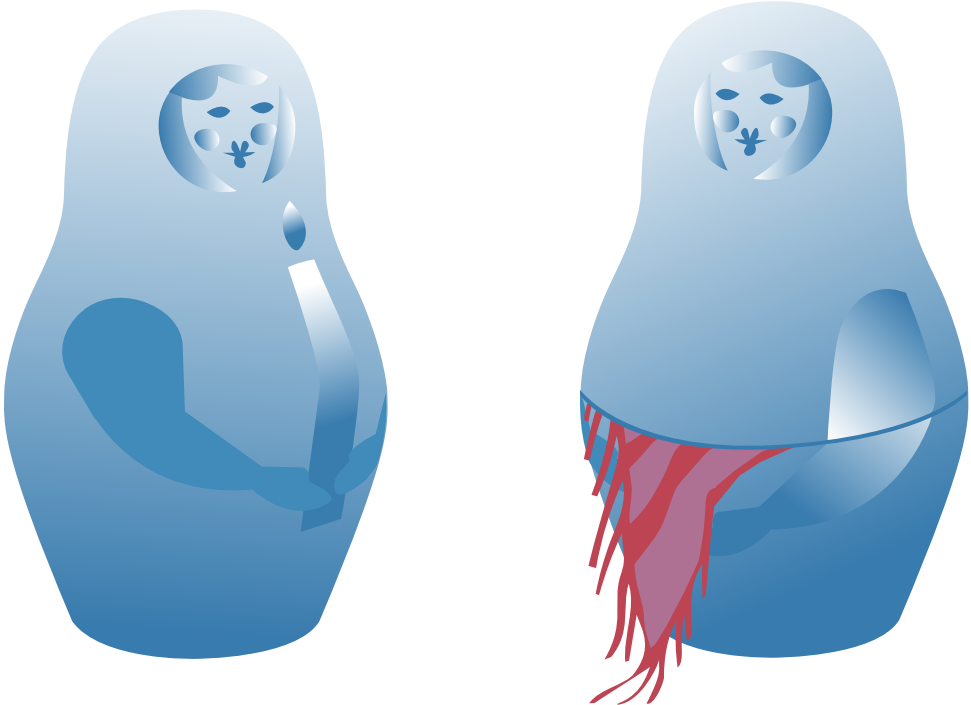
In 1858, the truncated Principality of Moldova, having lost Bessarabia to Russia, united with Wallachia. In 1866, the united principalities became a unitary state, Romania. Romania gained independence from the Sublime Porte in 1878 and became a kingdom in 1881.

In 1917, after the Russian Empire ceased to exist, Bessarabia declared its independence as the Moldovan Democratic Republic. Later,

it became part of the Kingdom of Romania. Florin Buhuceanu [7] notes that from the second half of the 19th century until the mid-1930s, Romanian laws treated gay and heterosexual people alike. Inspired by French law, which made no mention of private sexual relations, the Romanian Penal Code of 1864 did not include penalties for homosexual acts. Since 1878, the law in Transylvania punished gay men only for participating in violent sexual acts – rape or attempted rape.

Buhuceanu believes that this demonstrates the lack of a strong and continuous homophobic tradition in Romania, a narrative that is currently supported by conservative forces in the country.

However, by the 1930s, as the kingdom was winding down towards a nationalist dictatorship and then a fascist military regime, the law had also changed. In 1937, the Romanian Civil Code criminalised homosexuality. The penalty was six months to two years' imprisonment and applied only if the homosexual acts caused a “public scandal”. The punishment was much milder than in Nazi Germany, where gays and lesbians faced the death penalty. Homosexual acts involving minors were punished in the same way as similar heterosexual acts.



Moldova as part of the USSR

In 1939, the Soviet Union annexed Bessarabia as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. On the night of June 12-13, the deportation of “undesirable elements” began, including Romanian-speaking Moldovans, Gagauzs, anyone who opposed the annexation, and “potential spies”. Housefathers were exiled to labour camps, the remaining family members were sent to settlements in the Kazakh SSR, Komi ASSR, Krasnoyarsk Krai, Omsk and Novosibirsk Regions. Some 29,839 people were expelled from the country.

In 1941 Bessarabia was invaded by the Romanian military regime of Antonescu and then again by the Soviet Union in 1944, and remained part of it until 1991. From 6 to 7 July 1949, as a result of “Operation South”, the USSR deported 32,423 people: “former landlords, large merchants, active supporters of the German invaders, <...> White Guardists, as well as families of all the above categories”. That is, all the opponents of the Soviet regime.

By the time the Moldovan SSR was formed as a result of the de facto seizure of territory, homophobic legislation had already been in place in the Soviet Union since 1933. Gay contact entailed forced psychiatric treatment as well as incarceration in the GULAG labour camp system.

The Soviet criminalisation of homosexuality was fundamentally different from the homophobic laws of the past. Exile to multiple labour camps gave rise to a specific prison homophobic culture.

The legacy of prison “etiquette”

The code of conduct or “etiquette” of the prison subculture, previously concentrated in penal institutions, took a new turn under the Soviet regime. It has also left a strong imprint on the socialisation on the territory of the modern Republic of Moldova.

The prison caste system automatically assigned any male prisoner who had sexual intercourse with another man (consensual or as a result of sexualised violence) an inferior position in the hierarchy. The stigma of the so-called “turned out” could be passed on to others if someone noticed them interacting with the “turned out” as equals or sharing household items, such as utensils, with them. In communities of current and former prisoners, even in today’s Moldova, “etiquette” remains a moral fibre.

The dynamics were different in women’s prisons. While in men’s prisons, any hint of homosexuality (real or perceived by other prisoners) led to violence and humiliation, in women’s prisons some

prisoners, with some reservations, chose to become “wives” of more powerful female prisoners. The role of “wife” could also involve a sexual relationship. This alliance guaranteed security from harassment, theft and physical abuse in the prison community. The more vulnerable prisoners may have been forced to take this step. Often these influential women prisoners had an expressive socialising style that was stereotypically interpreted as masculine and therefore gender non-conforming. “Marriage” did not, however, declass the “wives” in the prison social hierarchy. Some of these couples continued to live together even after their release, although they did not introduce their female friends as spouses on the outside. Some “wives” noted that they stayed together because they developed romantic feelings for their girlfriends.

“Prison etiquette” seeped into society’s prejudices outside prisons. The Soviet totalitarian regime and the machine of repression spared literally no one. Huge numbers of native Moldovans, especially villagers, were deported by the Soviet authorities. For dissent, one could be shot or imprisoned in labour camps for decades. The camps were full of people convicted of crimes that also exist in modern democracies – including repeat offenders – as well as political prisoners and marginalised people.

They were released, if at all, after serving long sentences with a new value system shaped by prison etiquette. While the subcultural hierarchical system did not always resonate with people outside the closed prison community, the severity of the stigma and the trauma experienced affected the wards and the children still growing up, especially the boys.

(Foul) language shapes the mentality

Increasing Russianisation and the subsequent coexistence of Russian and Romanian led to a gradual overlapping of the vocabularies of the two languages in oral speech. Romanian speech was affected to a greater extent. The accent and pronunciation of Romanian in the Republic of Moldova is not much different from Romanian in the Moldovan region of Romania. But there are many Russian semantic borrowings, both lexical and grammatical, in modern Romanian. Among them, profanity can be singled out separately.

The colloquial foul language of Romanian in Romania and Romanian in the Republic of Moldova is significantly different. The latter adopted a large amount of Russian swear words, influenced by the described prison “etiquette”. For natives of Moldova who grew up speaking and swearing in Romanian with Russian borrowings, Roma-

nian foul language sounds unusual – stilted and not rude enough. The colour of the swear words borrowed from Russian feels tougher and harsher. This is probably a reflection of the culture of violence and its normalisation in Russia that spread, as a result of colonisation, beyond its modern borders in Russian-speaking areas.

The sense of greater proximity to Russian-language swearing adds a peculiar spice to homophobic perceptions. For example, the Russian pejoratives *pidor* (fag) and *petukh* (turned out) in relation to non-cisheteronormative males have been fully adopted as Russisms in colloquial Moldovan Romanian. Romanian pejorative *poponar*, similar to the Russian *petukh*, is extremely rare in Moldovan colloquial speech. Perhaps the reason for this is also the yoke of the “turned out” stigma (also known as “downcast”) rooted in the prison subculture of the post-Russian colonial space. This makes these two homophobic pejoratives different in terms of their perceived degree of offensiveness.

These obscene pejorative Russisms are often used in the statements of openly homophobic politicians in Moldova. They rally their electorate around fears of LGBTQ+ people and populist promises of “protection of traditional values”. Such rhetoric in the political sphere, broadcast by the media, remains the main driver of homophobic attitudes in Moldova today.

Pro-Russianism and hate speech in the contemporary political arena

Conservative pro-Russian parties such as the Party of Socialists and the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova (which function as a political bloc in the current assembly), as well as the Şor Party, have seats in the Moldovan parliament as of 2023. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russian troops, all three parties have advocated maintaining diplomatic and economic relations with Russia without openly declaring a specific position on Russian military aggression and crimes. They either support the presence of Russian troops as a “peacekeeping force” in the Transnistrian region or observe silence on the point.

It is MPs from these pro-Russian parties who make statements full of hate speech against LGBTQ+ people, sometimes including foul language. This rhetoric is broadcast on television. In Moldova, as in Russian politics, television is used to increase support, influence and power by rallying the public against an imaginary, fabricated common threat and diverting attention from existing crises.

Since autumn 2022, the Şor Party has organised pro-Russian protests against the pro-European Party of Action and Solidarity that

is currently in power. Şor uses populist rallying tactics amid rising gas and energy prices to attract participants, offering financial incentives and arranging transportation to the demonstrations from different parts of the country. The police have also repeatedly identified citizens of the Russian Federation among the protesters. The Party of Communists and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova have long supported the activity of Rossotrudnichestvo (Russian Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation) in the country. With the support and funding of the Congress of Russian Communities, Rossotrudnichestvo has access to cultural education in Russian-speaking schools in the republic.

Russian-language education for national minorities

The Constitution of the Republic of Moldova guarantees the right to choose the language of education. In the laws, Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian and Romani appear as national minority languages.

However, in Ukrainian, Gagauz or Bulgarian schools – there are no state Roma schools in the Republic, as in many other countries – a number of subjects are taught in Russian, and the Russian language is part of the curriculum. A mother tongue is added to the range of subjects studied. But the number of lessons per week does not exceed – or is often well below – the number of Russian lessons per week. Russian is often spoken in families due to the colonial displacement of the mother tongue. Such a linguistic background contributes to the dominance of Russian over other spoken languages in social life and to the preference for receiving information mainly from Russian-language sources.

The same principle applies to students in Russian schools. Moreover, the culture that is instilled there is Russian, and funding and extracurricular activities can be provided by the Russian community and Rossotrudnichestvo. This creates a platform for the dissemination of narratives of Russian propaganda, Russian imperialism and a culture of violence.

Generally, Russian schools ignore the ethnic diversity of Russian speakers in Moldova. Thus, students are brought up in an environment where the language they speak is equated to ethnicity. The school does not provide space for reflection on this aspect of identity.

Most of those who studied in Russian at school continue their studies in Russian when they enter Moldovan universities. Many Russian school leavers enter Russian universities, mainly in Moscow and St Petersburg, using quotas provided by Rossotrudnichestvo, and emigrate to Russia. Many of the emigrating applicants come from the Transnistrian Territory.

Crisis of national affiliation

One can argue that modern Moldova doesn't have its own single nation. It is still young as a political entity, and the events that led to its creation, as well as those that have occurred since, have sharpened the divisions in terms of language (note that the conflict is usually generalised into a Romanian/Russian dichotomy, with national minorities using Russian for inter-ethnic communication due to the phenomena described above) and political orientation (pro-European/pro-Russian). At the same time, both Romanian-speaking and Russian-speaking Moldovans are experiencing a certain identity crisis, reflecting on the colonising effect on their own people or coming into contact with other members of their ethnic group outside Moldova.

For many Russian speakers who define themselves as Russians, there is a disconnect: they realise that Russian Russians do not see them as “fellow nationals”.

Among them, some Russian speakers do not know their ancestral history and/or are not aware of their Ukrainian/Bulgarian/Gagauz roots.

Russian imperialism, with its chauvinism and stereotypes, tends to see all Moldovans as “poor guest workers”, construction workers, and repairmen and to assume (especially about those who come to Russia) that they are uneducated and come to do “low prestige” work.

The experience of alienation may estrange Russian-speaking Moldovans from their self-identification with Russia and Russianism. In such cases, some find meaning in the identity of “Moldovan” only because they grew up in Moldova. Notably, their ethnicity may not play a role.

As for the Romanian-speaking population of Moldova – ethnic Moldovans, Romanians, and some Roma communities – after a long period of living outside Romania and the parallel development of the other half of the Moldovan population within Romanian territories, they also face the problem of national identity, defined by a combination of a feeling of ethnic exclusion in Moldova and a similar feeling towards the majority from which they were forcibly separated.

Conclusion

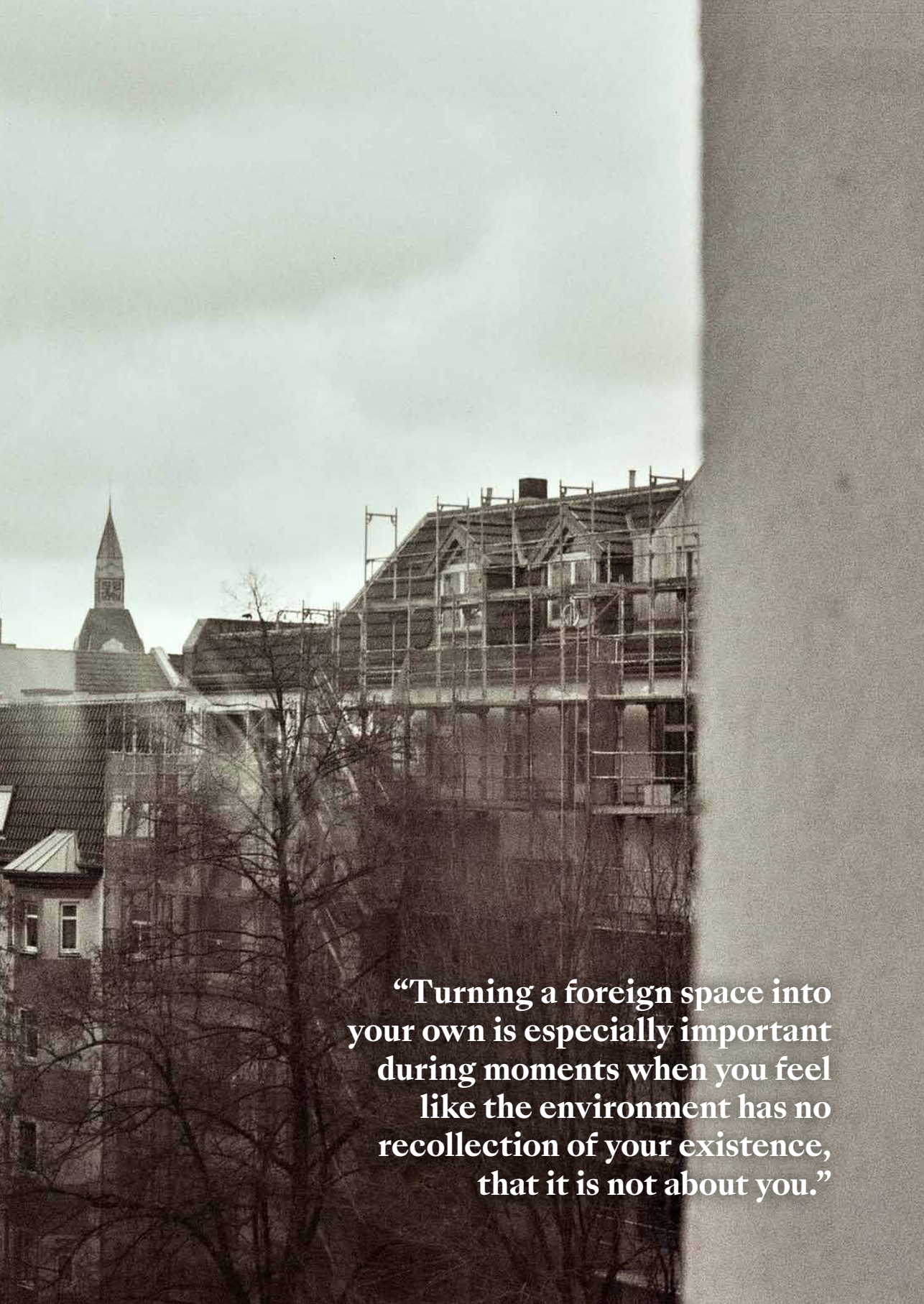
One cannot claim that the Russian colonisation of Moldova caused the emergence of homophobia in the country. The concept seems to have been brought by the Byzantine Orthodox canon, rather than Russian colonialism. However, specific Soviet policies aimed at criminalising and stigmatising LGBTQ+ people have unequivocally shaped the homophobic culture, practices and syntax of hate speech relevant to contemporary Moldova. These artificial differences are fuelled by an identity crisis and the resulting political divisions. Meanwhile, pro-Russian political forces and the Orthodox Church, while maintaining close ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, remain primary opponents of LGBTQ+ rights.

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Kateryna on her experience of migration.
Read it via the QR code on page 155



“Turning a foreign space into your own is especially important during moments when you feel like the environment has no recollection of your existence, that it is not about you.”

A Story of One Migration

**A story told between cities and refugee
camps, between identities, vulnerability,
and privileges.**

Text by Anonymous

Illustrations by A.Mur

The original article was published in Russian on *Women Platform*



My wife, my child, and I have been out of Belarus for almost three years. We applied for political asylum almost a year ago and are still waiting for a decision.

For almost a year we have been living in the “in-between”: between cities and refugee camps, torn between our identities, between vulnerabilities and privileges, across bureaucratic institutions. Among people and their stories. Like a fishing float between waves...

In the international protection system, as in many aspects of life, there is a theory and a practice of humanitarianism. In theory, the system is designed to protect people facing danger to life, freedom, or health. Nominally, it excludes the possibility of economic migration, because in this case there are ‘easier’ ways to regularise one’s stay linked to the level of our usefulness and competitiveness in a foreign market. The god of capitalism has taken care of everything.

From the inside, the international protection system looks like a scene from a horror film, when the main character goes down to the cellar and suddenly discovers a hatch in the floor under a pile of old boxes. In other words, you open the door thinking that this is the basement of your life, only to find dozens of mysterious-looking glass floors below, each having its own rules and laws.

What was once your vulnerability can become currency in this strange grey world. What was once a source of pride or simply a meaningful part of your identity can disappear, be devalued, or become a source of constant stress. All the shells of fantasies about being a good enough person fall off when you realise that the most painful thing you have to say goodbye to is not your home or your passport, but your privileges.

“Cleaning is a good job for you,” K. assures me. K. is an elderly parishioner from a neighboring village. She looks surprisingly vibrant and strong for her age. I can’t help but think that in my country women over seventy look and talk very differently. We had arrived at a meeting organized by a church community for the families of refugees, and during our first small talk, K. asked me what I did for a living. In my country, I had an academic degree, but after a short period of teaching, I worked in the civil sector for almost ten years. “It’s not a profession,” K. is confident, “and one has to sing for her supper”.

I think I’ve heard enough refutations of this worldly wisdom, but I don’t have the heart to say it to someone who pays taxes in a country where my child is fed for free. I also find it hard to explain why these words demean me and devalue my ‘past life’. In general, the term ‘past life’ best describes how I feel in the here and now: like a phantom. As a child, I was very fond of the fantastic theory that some natural objects, because of their crystalline structure, can ‘record’ and reproduce past events, and people living today would consider these ‘projections’ to be phantoms. My whole life is now recorded within the walls of a

house I haven't entered for several years. I think I am still reliving it: through photographs, memories, and conversations. I am recreating projections of a future that will never happen. I am a crystal structure, but for seventy-year-old K., I am a phantom.

The hierarchies we are familiar with – those of race, class, gender, age, and physical or mental impairment – do not disappear in emigration. Their impact on your life goes hand in hand with the declaration of equality for first-world citizens. In a system where you no longer have a passport, you begin to feel the difference between being a citizen and a whole spectrum of legal statuses with limited rights. Vulnerabilities build up in hierarchies and accrue on the familiar patriarchal system like polyps on a shipwreck.

In the refugee camp, our identity made some people squeamish and others envious. The inverted propaganda idea of 'gayropa' implies the holy conviction of Belarusian schemers that satiated Western capitalists favor 'perverts,' which means that in the eyes of some neighbors, we have a mysterious 'immunity' from the 'terrible D-words': Dublin¹ protocol and deportation. I could use some of that reassurance, although I have to admit that for the first time in my life, I was confronted with the fact that heterosexual people think my identity is 'privileged'. "There's no point in asking them about a lawyer, the girls are here for a different reason. They don't have that problem". Once we were in the dormitory, this magical air of 'happiness' dissipated: the Eastern Bloc locals assumed that my partner and I were 'prison wives' and wouldn't believe our references to the civil society organizations. Of course, they wouldn't cause "she has tattoos".

1 'Dublin', short for the Dublin Regulation, is an agreement between states that determines which country is responsible for processing an asylum seeker. The Dublin Agreement legalizes forced movements of refugees within the EU zone.

Contrary to my expectations, political conversations in the refugee camp are surprisingly naive. At times like this, I try to lend my political body to my research self.

A young caretaker starts a canonical small talk with me, the one suggested by German textbooks: he asks me where I am from. His family had once been granted international protection in Germany, too. The name of my country makes him speculate about the war in Ukraine. The man is convinced that European countries are "sponsoring the war" by supplying arms to Kyiv. "Politicians must negotiate with Russia," he says weightily. I ask him if he is familiar with the history of World War II and if he knows about the treaties signed with Nazi Germany before the '40s, or the occupation of Poland in 1939.

His predictable ignorance is fair because I don't know the history of his homeland either. I don't know when and why the war started there, or which countries sponsored the armaments. I don't know how his ancestors died or how his family feels about his life in Western Europe. I think about how human beings have been separated and

segregated by colonial politicians for centuries, and also about how the modern refugee system that this man went through and that I am going through today is based on a concept of humanism that came out of the European Enlightenment. The same Enlightenment gave birth to the idea of the nation-state and capitalism and made colonial Western thinking the standard of human civilization.

Incidentally, according to the Swedish International Peace Research Institute, my country earned \$1.5 billion from arms sales to African countries in the 1990s alone. And my ill-considered and naive ‘ignorance’ of the likely fact that Lukashenka’s officials have been selling assault rifles for years to the people this man’s family was fleeing from, and my education, which makes his arguments about Russia naive to me, are also colonial privileges. There’s something of Schrodinger’s Cat story about existing simultaneously in the symbolic space of post-colonial trauma and white privilege.

It is impossible to draw a unified portrait of a person seeking asylum in EU countries. Victims, adventurers, idealists, trauma survivors, romantics, kapos,² people who did not decide to apply for refugee status from a place of informed consent, people whose ability to make informed decisions can be questioned, people who had no choice, and people who consciously chose to be here. Human beings. Esse homo. A sea of human stories expands in front of me. I let them pass through me like waves, I become part of them just like they become part of me. The corpuscular, wave-like, dual nature of this experience is both mesmerizing and depressing.

S is an Uyghur³ who was born in Kazakhstan. Before coming to Germany, she and her children spent more than four years in another EU country. When we met her for the first time, she was very sympathetic to the protests in Belarus. “We experienced that too. And my husband never returned”. S.’s eyes widen at the word “that” and her voice lowers when she talks about her husband. “They took him away”. The unspoken rule of the Fight Club is to avoid clarifications or asking about ‘past lives’. Just superficial conversations about the ‘here and now,’ because you never know what would trigger a person.

S and I go to see her lawyers together – I am there to interpret. I write “lawyers” in plural intentionally: S. signs up for dozens of counseling sessions that she doesn’t attend because of her mental state, and then she reschedules using her children’s phones. I don’t understand the point of these reshuffles, but it’s none of my business. My business is accessible interpreting. In my communication bubble from my previous life, I considered myself a “non-English speaker,” and my conversational level would barely qualify as B1. But our room at the camp is the only one on the floor where adults speak English.

According to the Dublin Protocol, S.’s case is to be examined by another country: the one she came to Germany from and which has already rejected them three times. Today we are going to see another

2 Kapo – literally, a prisoner in a concentration camp who received privileges in exchange for cooperating with the administration. Symbolically, a person who collaborates with the power system to the detriment of people from their social class.

3 The Uyghurs are a Turkic ethnic group. Their religious tradition is Sunni Islam.



lawyer. As we walk through the grey morning city, S. suddenly tells me that her son was only 14 years old when first interviewed. I try to imagine what someone else's child is going through in this situation and I want to run back to my room and hug my kid. I feel heartlessly glad that his warm, sleepy, pink little body is still legally an extension of my adult body. At that moment, the fact that of the two mothers, only one of us has the right to him, and the difficulties associated with this, seem to be small and surmountable.

Now S.'s son is almost 18, and her lawyer is trying to make her comfortable with the idea of separate deportation: once he reaches the age of majority, decisions about his status and period of stay will be made separately from his mother. For European security systems, based on colonial notions of humanity, his gender, ethnicity, and religion are an issue. On the way back, S. asks me about the church asylum procedure,⁴ and what Protestantism is. "So have they also, I mean, protested?" I tell her about the dogma of the Pope's sinlessness and the Reformation.

The next time I am taking S.'s daughter to a lawyer. Her mother and sister had to go to a health center – the girl has a documented mental illness. The diagnosis certificate is almost treasured because it protects two family members from deportation at the same time. "You have to decide who will be the guardian of your sister: you or the mother. That person will be able to stay," the lawyer explains to the girl. I am thinking about how scary it must be to have to make these decisions when you are 19... When I was her age, I could afford to be afraid of other things: coming out to my parents or taking exams. I am also thinking about how sickly ironic it is that stories of escaping authoritarian states are often described as something done 'for children's safety'.

4 Churches in Germany can offer temporary protection from deportation to refugees in difficult situations.

The last time I heard about S., I was told that she and her family had been granted church asylum. I never knew S.'s real name – only its Russianised, 'understandable' to us version, a colonial legacy of the USSR.

When you enter a distribution camp for refugees, you have to be quarantined. In the dark – we arrived at night – a guard led us through several barriers into a metal wagon. "Don't worry, it's only until tomorrow". Inside were two bunk beds with dirty mattresses, food bags, and two chairs. When my partner asks me which of the two chairs I want to sit in, the nervous tension of the day is broken with laughter.

In the morning, a terribly beautiful woman in a security uniform takes us in for a PCR test. "Golden head," she says in surprise, touching our baby's hair. "Your baby has a golden head". I tell her about the Russian poet Yesenin, the "golden head" of Isadora Duncan.⁵

Once we were out of the quarantine zone, the next step was to have a measles vaccination. Several young men from Russia and a fellow Belarusian were also queuing with us. The Russians ask him cheerfully if there is mobilization in Belarus. "It will start soon," they laughed.

After the quarantine, we lived in a camp block with two families from Belarus. It turned out that the expansion of the Russian-speaking area automatically meant the expansion of the patriarchal agenda. A neighbor teaches a child to shake hands in a 'manly' way. In the evening, a woman from the floor came over to ask the other one if she had figured out that we were lesbians and how we had conceived the child. Every day for the following week, I repeated to a grown man that our kid was "not a girl". "I just forgot".

⁵ Isadora Duncan was an American dancer at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. In the 1920s, Duncan visited the USSR and married the Russian poet Sergei Yesenin. According to contemporaries, when she first saw Yesenin, Duncan called him "the golden head".



By the end of the week, I realized that he was bullying our son in this strange way because he couldn't be explicitly homophobic to us. Stories circulate about children being "taken from refugee families and given to LGBT couples to raise them".

Half an hour before the bus was due to arrive, we were told about a transfer to another camp. Part of me heaves a sigh of relief.

Our new neighbors come from Cuba. A young man and his partner, a very beautiful transgender woman. When she walks into a communal dining room full of single men, the room fills with whistling and howling. We don't go to the dining room for the same reason. We're sitting in a room on the eighth floor and can't get enough of the silence after having lived in barracks. Our child is running around the room screaming, but after a room shared with 16 people, it almost sounds like 'homely comfort'.

The eighth floor has a perfect Wi-Fi connection and just the right morning light for photos – "a TikTok house for refugees". In the mornings, when everyone is asleep, I lie in bed for a long time, looking at the brand-new plastic unicorn my child left on the windowsill. Lying in bed, having a mattress, and knowing that no one will knock on your door is a great privilege.

In the corridor, I meet the cleaner, a young woman from Ukraine. She warns me to "be careful" because "we have a child and this floor houses queers". I am one of those, I reply.

In the evening, a young man from Uzbekistan cries on the shared balcony. In his 'past life,' he was a French interpreter. Today he has been sent to a very small village in the middle of nowhere, and he seems to be lamenting his hopes for returning to his profession. He's been in a camp for almost three years – a system failure, he was simply forgotten. In the cinematically beautiful light of sunset, the cleaning lady silently approaches him – through the glass, I can see their dark silhouettes embracing.

At night, the dormitory is evacuated because of a fire alarm. We run down the stairs holding the sleeping kid. We are joined by the crying man, the Cuban beauty, and the cheering boys, the familiar homophobic family from Belarus. I wonder if it was difficult for them to move into the dorm with a floor assigned 'for these people'... I look up at the black winter sky while listening to the howling of the fire alarms and think of Immanuel Kant. "Two things fill the mind with ever-increasing wonder and awe, the more often and the more intensely the mind of thought is drawn to them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me".

N refers to herself as a "gypsy" and to me as a "Russian". When I ask her if she is familiar with Roma rights organizations in Belarus,

she does not understand me on several linguistic levels at the same time. N.'s family is from Mahilou. There, in 2018, the Ministry of Interior raided the settlement and arrested all the men, leaving the women to search for their sons and husbands for a day, only to pick them up all blue and beaten. I tried to find contacts of a Roma human rights organisation I knew for N.: a few years ago I met them at a joint meeting of human rights defenders and Foreign Ministry officials. I found out that the organization was not active anymore. The people who had founded it had moved on to other projects. They were, of course, gadjo.⁶

6 Gadjo is a term in Romani philosophy for a person who has grown up outside the Romani culture and does not belong to the Romani community.

One day I told N. how after graduation I had worked in a company selling Korean cosmetics for six months, and in a fit of temper I called my former boss a fraud because he asked us to write fake reviews of dietary supplements and shampoos. "I see", said N. "Our girls would do the same: one sells cosmetics, another sells pots to pensioners. And then they rob the flats they visited".

I can literally see an existential crack creeping across the communal kitchen floor between us: despite the strong stigma attached to LGBT people, I can't imagine what it is like to be born and raised in such a marginalised community, where breaking the law becomes the expected social norm.

7 A quote from a public rebuke by Ihar Shunevich, former Minister of the Interior of the Republic of Belarus, following a pogrom organized by law enforcement officers in a Roma settlement.

Members of N.'s culture and Belarusian social institutions are parallel lines in non-Euclidean geometry. Ignoring each other, they intersect at the point of devaluation and dehumanization. "The minister has no reason or excuse to apologize to the gypsies. Is that clear?"⁷

Sometimes our daily life resembles a potlatch.⁸ "It is one thing to steal from the state, but it is a great sin to steal from the elderly", says N. I am surprised to note that in the current crazy reality of 'abolished' law, this woman perhaps feels the disposition of the state and the people more vividly than those trying on state regalia in political exile.

8 Potlatch – a ceremonial exchange of gifts among indigenous peoples of North America.

N.'s family's concepts of property, state, and law seem to lie somewhere between a childish worldview and everyday anarchism. Her understanding of humanism emerges from the smells of the kitchen, a glass of hot tea that she has after crying, and the nightly washing of the shared corridors – "I can't stand it when it's dirty". Her life is about taking risks and gratuitous sharing of resources, whereas mine – the neighborly one – is about accepting other people's experiences without moralizing and putting ethical contradictions aside. The second rule of the club is to share your food. The third rule is to never ask where it comes from.

During an interview at the Migration Department, an official reads out a human rights report on Belarus to emphasize that Belarus is a safe country for LGBTQ people, "just predominantly heteronormative". The irony is that I am the author of that 2016 report. In that year, as an LGBT activist, it was very important to me that our country was



not put on the back burner in terms of democratic change. If someone had told me in 2016 that six years later my organisation would cease to exist and my activist work would become invisible even to former colleagues, I would not have believed it.

9 Political police are represented in Belarus by the Main Department for Combating Organised Crime and Corruption. This unit was most involved in the mass repression of activists after the 2020 uprising.

Before the interview, a young activist from a local LGBT organisation trains us for possible questions about our sex life. They weren't asked in the interview, and she was bored – she didn't understand what all these regime supporters and political police⁹ had to do with our lesbian identity. I don't get it either: my activist risk management never included the words “coup d'état”, but somehow that didn't work as a protective amulet against the defeat of the human rights sector. It turned out that it was impossible to be “an activist but not a human rights defender” in the authoritarian power discourse. The interview goes on for ages, and when we leave the building it is dark and cold outside.

Moments from my childhood automatically appear in my head: I am five years old, Lukashenka is not yet president, and on a winter's evening, my mother brings me home from kindergarten. The sky above my childish head is full of stars, the snow creaks under my feet. I shake the responsibility of this hard day off my shoulders. I am small and light.

A very drunk man is standing at the exit of the migration office. He follows us through the squeaky snow, shouting in Russian to someone invisible: “What the hell am I doing here?” Perhaps he too fell straight out of a crystal picture from my childhood.

K is from Belarus, but we hardly had time to talk. A grim-faced man in boxer shorts enters the kitchen and throws a curt “Get back in the room right now” at her. It's K.'s husband.

In August 2020 he “disappeared” on one of Minsk's epic marches, and after serving his sentence he tried to challenge it. He and his

family are refugees as a result. K.'s husband also seems to be a domestic abuser... My doubts dispel when K. starts crying in the laundry room and her husband threatens to punch her in the face in front of other people.

I see him systematically engaging in fights with half the dorm, complaining, yelling at other people's kids, and being squeamish about communal areas because they're too multicultural. Several times we have silly domestic conflicts: K. and her husband try to convince me that the amount of dirt someone leaves in the kitchen is related to skin colour. I ask them to stop spreading racist nonsense. As a result, she and K. stopped saying hello to us. For several months, my neighbors have lived in a state of 'siege'. Contact with the 'outside world' is forbidden, the hatches are sealed.

Then I suddenly realize that K.'s husband's behavior is not about "a squabbly character," and not even about overt xenophobia – at least not only that. Psychopathic behaviour, increased agitation and aggressiveness, sleep disturbances, headaches, muscle tension, constant vigilance, hostility and distrust of others, inability to get close to people, avoidance of talking about traumatic events, blaming others, and exaggerating fears – these are all symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder that my compatriots develop in prison.

Today we have a 'women's circle' in the dorm – activists from a local NGO have come to talk to us about contraception. The trainer pulls out a plush uterus and talks about the process of ovulation. I remember 2018 when I was a guest trainer at a UNFPA training on sex education for teens. I came to the training after my third failed attempt to get pregnant using Assisted Reproductive Technologies, and since then training sessions that show "how every woman's womb should work" have seemed to me like a dark zone of diminished empathy.

I'm the only one in the circle who needs an English interpreter, so I'm told in great detail about all the different types of hormonal spirals. I note that I'm a lesbian. The trainer laughs and changes the subject, asking the women in the circle which of them had undergone female circumcision in their home country. A young woman timidly raises her hand. The trainer continues by asking: "Does it hurt to urinate?" I realize that I'm just a sweet summer child with my previous ideas of what a lack of empathy might be like.

During the break, a local volunteer pursues N.: "You have too many children, you have to listen very carefully". N. ostentatiously comes to the meeting wearing a headscarf and leaves when it comes to contraception. The juxtaposition of values might seem funny if they were on an equal footing, but they are not.

Here I see better than ever that, in the field of social work, it is very important to study the intersectional theory of discrimination. This is the only way to recognize the activist position not only as a helping one but also as a position of power. The problem is not even that we have no idea of our burnout without this reflection. The problem is that the public sphere of care in the age of capitalism is part of a dehumanizing machine.

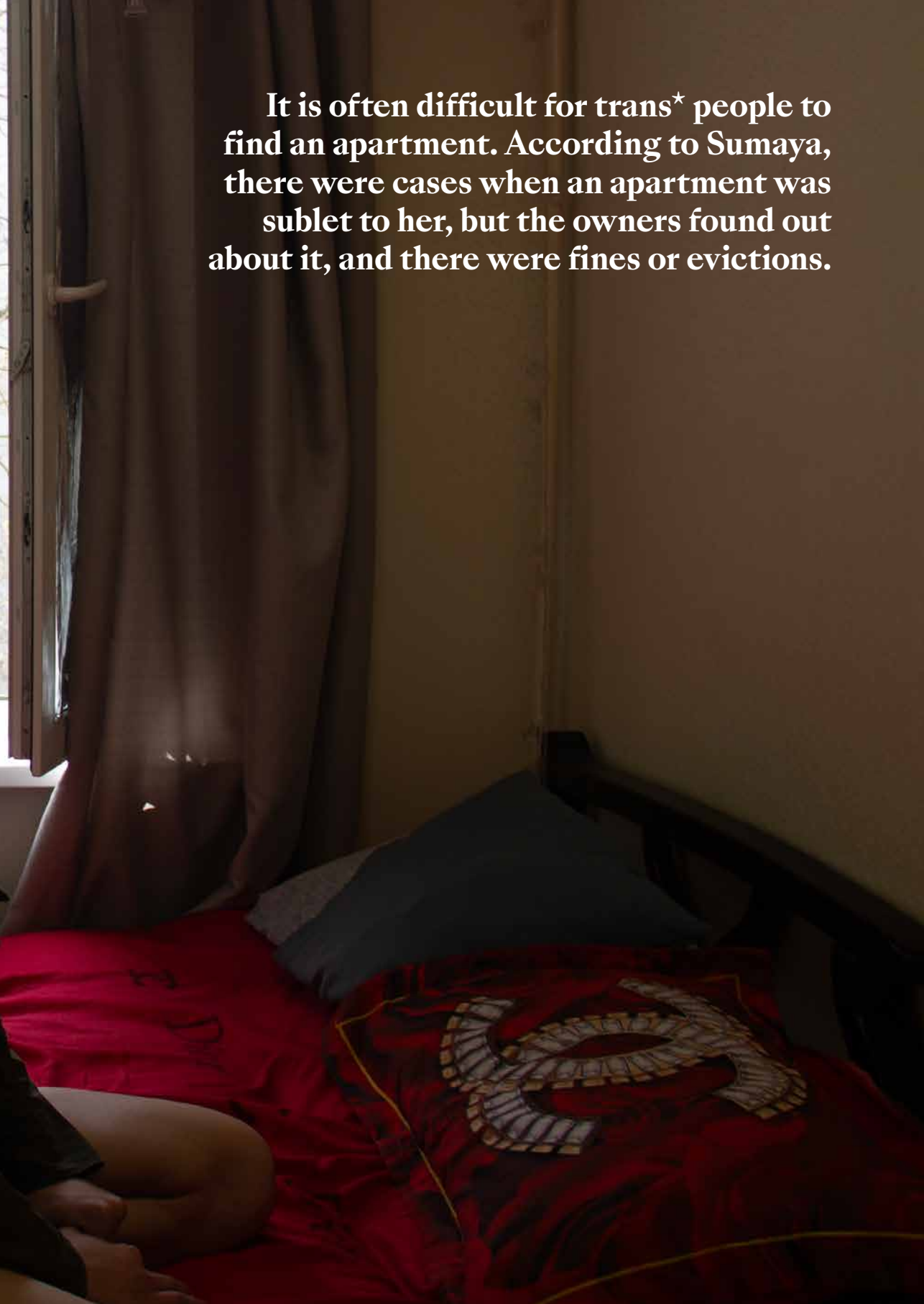
Our bodies – on both sides of the demarcation line – are supposed to be useful, comfortable, and normal. By depriving people of subjectivity and self-respect, we can “do them good” by nurturing our egos. This is how the colonial discourse of humanity works. This is how we work – becoming the “robot bodies” of an impersonal system of power.

The facilitator of the women’s circle asks us whether we feel safer here. M., my neighbor from Eritrea, explains that she feels much safer here than in Italy, where she and her child arrived by boat. She is asked to compare the level of safety with her country of origin. M. bursts into tears. There are no napkins in the training – this was a formal question with the expectation of a formal answer about equality. There was no room in the question for stories of child rape or street shootings. The stories hung in the air like splashing waves...



Sumaya on her life in Russia.
Read it via the QR code on page 51

It is often difficult for trans* people to find an apartment. According to Sumaya, there were cases when an apartment was sublet to her, but the owners found out about it, and there were fines or evictions.



Non-traditional Values: Did Uzbekistan Inherit Homophobia and Family Concepts from Soviet Union?

By Sarpa.media

A review of changes in the LGBTIQ+ rights legislation over the last century and the roots of the homophobic paradigm the society lives in.



Gay Pride Parade, “Dazhynki” or White March: Which Holiday Suits “Belarusians of the Future”?

By WomenPlatform

An observation of the words, signs and meanings that fill the media space at the conventional hash-tag #belarusian.



I Am Queer, but Am I Safe?

By Constanta Dobotaru and Mariana Agleanov



Four interviews on the relationship between LGBTQ+ communities and public spaces in Chişinău bring to the fore the need for a safe and inclusive public landscape for all.



Influence

By Greta Harutyunyan

The short documentary tells the story of Leo, a young stand-up comedian from Armenia.



Russia's Homophobic Law Inspires Azerbaijani Political Elites

By Chichak Mammadova



Among political actors in Azerbaijan, the anti-queer sentiments are on the rise. How much of a role does the legacy of Russian colonialism play in this?



Beyond Blurred Existence

By Tamar Shatberashvili



Meet the queer people disrupting the patterns of post-Soviet coloniality and imperialism and reconnecting with multicultural and inclusive roots of Georgia.



Kazakhstan's and Russia's LGBTIQ+ Legislation: Why It Matters

By Batyr Jamal

An analysis of the Kazakh and Russian realities and laws in regards to discrimination and lack of protection of queer people.



What if Homophobia in Central Asia Is a Product of Colonialism?

By Zarina Mukanova



A look at Soviet prison culture, colonial experience and Orientalism as roots of homophobia in Kazakhstan.





Russian Propaganda's Influence on Soviet and Post-Soviet Homophobic Narratives in South Caucasus

By Queer.ge

Examining the roots of anti-LGBTQI agenda propagated by present-day Russia, and how it spreads in the South Caucasus countries.

Migration Is the Path to Freedom. A Photo Report About Sumaya

By Mamatkazy Rasul uulu

Sumaya fled Kyrgyzstan for Moscow, forced to hide from her family who didn't accept her trans identity. This photo report tells about her life and dreams.



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Rewriting Media LGBTQI+ Narratives*

“In Prison, They Named Me Rayhon”

In Uzbekistan, sex between men carries a prison sentence. Three ex-inmates who were imprisoned under Article 120 share their stories.

Text by an anonymous author

Illustrations by an anonymous artist

The original article was published in Russian on *Sarpa Media*

“I had a good job and managed multiple companies. Now I have to save every penny of my salary of 1 million sums (~\$100) as 15 per cent of it is taken by the government. Nobody wants to hire individuals who have been in prison, especially under this article,” Amir said.

He used to work as a production director one and a half years ago but currently holds a watchman position at a warehouse. Unlike other young people his age who are advancing in their careers, he had to bear 2.5 years of imprisonment under Article 120 of the Criminal Code. This experience has had adverse effects on his health and left him with many stories, which, as he says, can fill a whole book. He also was blackballed in many ways.

In Uzbekistan, homosexuality is considered a criminal offence. According to the Criminal Code, consensual relationships between adult males can result in imprisonment of up to three years. Only Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, among the post-Soviet countries, have kept the article violating human rights in their legislation. Other countries, including those in Central Asia, abolished it three decades ago.

The acronym “LGBT” has turned into a bogeyman in Uzbek society. This is incompatible with national values. Obviously came from the West. “Perverted.” Spoiling children. Spreading propaganda! False ideas about members of the community are especially prevalent online on the eve of significant political occasions. At the same time, actual individuals from the LGBTIQ+ community in the country live in the most subdued way feasible due to the danger of being criminally charged, and the overall disapproving nature of the conservative society.

This state of affairs prevents the slightest information about LGBTIQ+ rights in the country from leaking into the media. Just a year ago, the first-ever published data showed that 36 people were found guilty under Article 120 in 2021. Earlier, the precise count of criminal cases stayed undisclosed – officials declined to give this data to reporters.

What happens to those who were sentenced under this article and served their time in Uzbekistan’s prison system? Do the problems end there or is this the start of more stigmatisation?

Two young people who received a sentence of 1 to 2.5 years under Article 120 talked to us about the detention conditions, attitudes, investigation, courts and their lives after prison. We have kept their identities anonymous.

Vocabulary

Remand centre – a place where defendants on trial and convicts are held while awaiting transfer to correctional facilities or penal settlements. Remand Centre No. 1, also known as Tashkent Prison, is mentioned in the text. People can spend several months here, waiting for their court decision or a transfer.

TDF – temporary detention facility. People suspected of committing crimes are kept here. They can be held there for a maximum of 10 days.

CIAD – Central Internal Affairs Directorate

Article 120 of the Uzbek Criminal Code (“sodomy”) criminalises consensual sexual activity between two adult men and carries a penalty of up to 3 years in prison.

Article 113 of the Uzbek Criminal Code criminalises the transmission of venereal disease and HIV/AIDS.

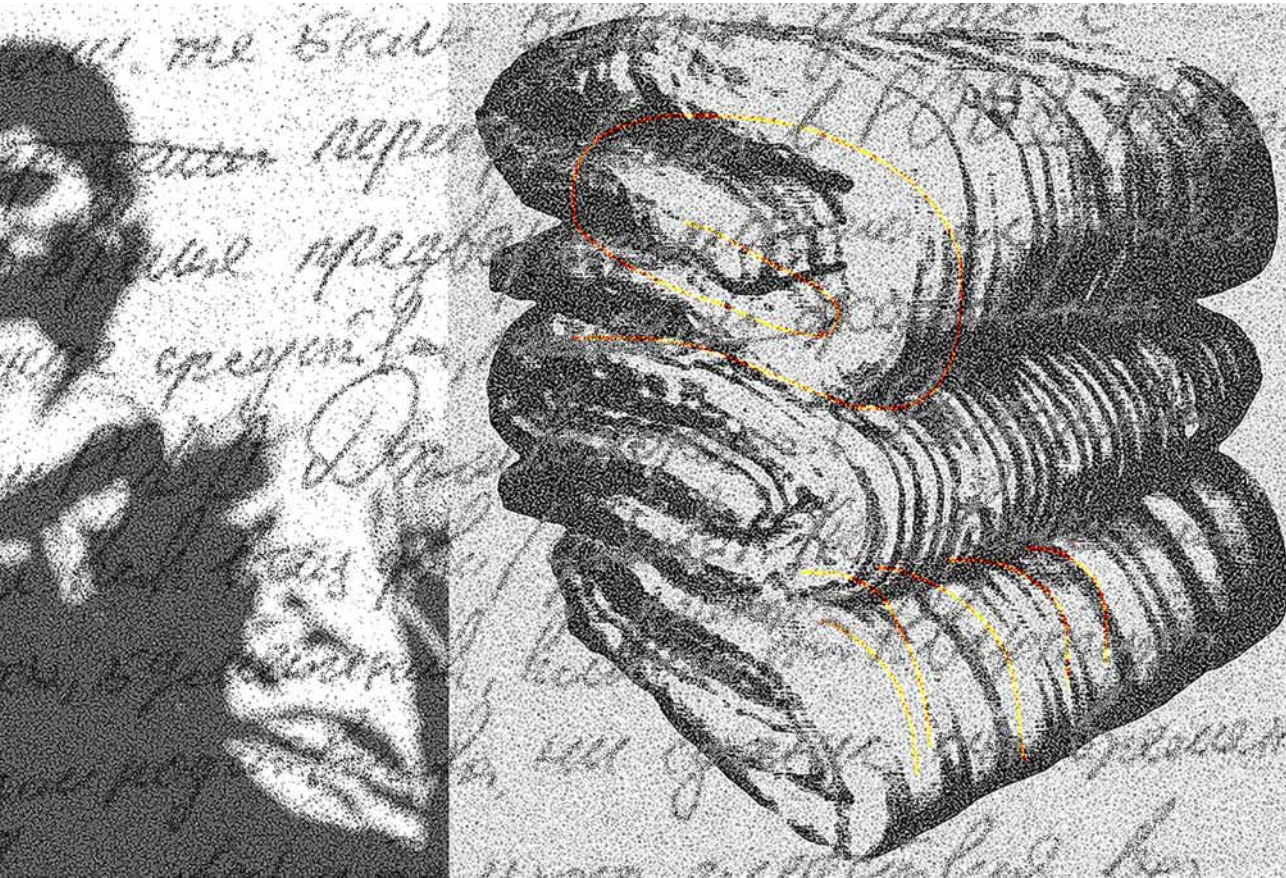
Count refers to a single occurrence of the crime. For example, under Article 120, one “count” could be one alleged instance of consensual sexual activity between two adult men.

Penal settlement is the least severe type of correctional institution. Inmates are allowed to wear regular clothes and move around freely. They can even work and use money.

“Muzhiki” (rus. labourers) is the biggest group of prisoners and is less powerful than the “blatnye” (rus. crime lords). However, they are also respected.

“Downcasts”, “turned out” are prisoners who are declared to be members of a lower caste in the prison hierarchy. It is generally believed that “downcasts” are prisoners who engage in homosexual activity in a passive role, whether willingly or forcefully.





Amir

Received a two-and-a-half-year sentence in a penal settlement under Article 120 of the Criminal Code in Uzbekistan.

Was held in Remand Centre No. 1 for most of his imprisonment and continued serving his sentence in Penal Settlement No. 49.

On 7 April 2021, men in plain clothes arrived at Amir's house. "I thought they were going to kill us," he says. He remembers how they put him on the ground in the corridor and handcuffed him, while his friend was beaten in the kitchen. The people who entered said they were from the AIDS department of the Central Internal Affairs Directorate (CIAD).

As the young man remembers, at first the officers tried to "negotiate". Later, according to him, they changed their mind and took everything from the flat without negotiation or payment. Amir provides a list of items that were taken: a laptop, Apple Watch, golden items, cash, headphones, iQOS electronic cigarette, and even a charger. The flat wasn't sealed, and there was no witness or video recording.

Plain-clothed police called a taxi using Amir's phone to the Ministry of Interior's headquarters and told him to only take his passport and phone. "They grabbed the laptop and asked me if it was borrowed or bought. They said I would not need it for a while." The young man also showed us screenshots of payment applications: within a month of his arrest, they had transferred all the money from his bank cards to other cards, sent 59,000 sums (~\$5) in cash backs from the Soliq application to his card, and linked his Google account to a different number. There have also been applications to the Tax Commission on his behalf, two attempts to take out a loan from one of the online banks and regular attempts to access his Instagram account from other devices.

sarpa has all the screenshots at its disposal.

LGBTIQ+ activists face extortion, violence, police brutality, robbery, blackmail and have no right to legal recourse – almost any complaint to the police will result in disclosure of their sexual orientation and the risk of prosecution under Article 120. As a result, most do not seek help from law enforcement, even after being beaten, tortured and threatened with death.

In 2022, 80 cases of violations of the rights of LGBTIQ+ people were registered in eight regions of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Karakalpakstan. This is only the data that has been collected and documented, but in reality, there are more violations – as there are very few human rights defenders working in this area in the country,

the real situation remains unclear. ECOM provides data on violations of the rights of LGBT people in its report.

According to the document, in 47 cases of rights violations, Article 141 of the Uzbek Criminal Code “Violation of equal rights of citizens” was violated, in 24 cases Article 206 of the Uzbek Criminal Code “Abuse of power and office” was violated, and in 21 cases Article 165 of the Uzbek Criminal Code “Extortion” was violated. Human rights defenders also stress that there is no clear and specific anti-discrimination legislation in the country, nor is there a definition of hate crimes.

In the Mirzo-Ulugbek police department, the young men were put into a cell. On the way their wallets got confiscated: the officers said they took them “for the time spent on processing the detainees, petrol and not having time to eat because of them”. There, Amir and his friend Kamil were assigned an investigator and a lawyer. According to them, the latter stopped paying attention to them when he found out what article they were charged under. Meanwhile, Amir’s parents started looking for him; he was not allowed to make a phone call or report his whereabouts. The detainees also say that they were deprived of food and medication that is needed to treat Amir’s chronic illness. Amir was kept in the holding cell of the police station for six days until his bruises disappeared: detainees have to be sent “clean” to the next reception point.

“Then they took us to the CIAD, and that was the most frightening place,” the young man recalls.

CIAD

Amir faced charges under multiple articles. He was accused of committing sodomy in three instances, indicating a violation of Article 120. Additionally, he faced two charges under Article 113, as he was found to be HIV-positive. He was also charged with causing someone to commit suicide, as the young man, whose testimony led to Amir’s investigation, killed himself after his first interrogation. “The young man was only 17 years old and had a very religious family. His father and brother physically assaulted him when they found out about his sexual orientation,” said Amir, who had only met the boy once. Even with such limited interaction, Amir was accused solely based on this individual’s testimony. Eventually, the suicide and HIV-related charges against Amir were dropped for lack of evidence. “Although his death was caused by the police and his father, they tried to shift the blame on me by accusing me under this article,” he explains.

As per Amir, lawyers refuse to take on such cases. Those who do charge a significant fee. Amir's initial solicitor requested a lump sum of \$1,000 and additionally charged 500,000 sums for each visit while he was in custody. Moreover, as per the ex-convict, law enforcement officials provide a simple method to get a charge dropped: collaborating and snitching on ten other individuals. But he thinks it's not worth it because they'll group you with each of these people later on for a separate charge. Amir remembers how he felt furious about the treatment he got at CIAD:

“They called us ‘faggots’ and yelled that we were spreading diseases.”

Thus, the young man was only charged with Article 120 for “sodomy”. He stressed that there was no proof of his sexual interaction with other men, and the prosecution relied solely on his and Kamil's testimony obtained under duress and the so-called “forensic examination” done by a pathologist at Tashkent Medical Academy in the morgue building. This examination involves forcibly inspecting the anus, but it is difficult to determine sexual activity through such a method because physical evidence can result from the use of intimate toys or medical procedures.

In 2017, the World Medical Association passed a resolution denouncing forced anal exams as a basis for proving same-sex relations. They deemed the practice “unscientific”, “useless” and “a form of torture or cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment”.

The organisation serves as a kind of parliament for doctors and represents medical practitioners worldwide. Its objective is to establish agreement on quality standards in medical ethics and professional competence. At present, it boasts a membership of around nine million medical professionals.

During the last court session, Amir remembers the judge saying that in Uzbekistan, it's acceptable to marry another woman under certain circumstances, as permitted by God, but this [homosexuality] is prohibited. The judge added that Amir would be luckier to be charged under Article 119 (rape). The trial lasted for eight sessions, but the defendants could not be present at three of them. Although the young men made statements during the trial about torture and robbery, the investigators were never summoned for questioning.

Ruslan

Sentenced to one year of imprisonment in a penal settlement under Article 120 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan. He spent six months in jail before being transferred to Penal Settlement No. 42 located in the Zangiota District.

Ruslan, who was 18 at that time, faced charges under Article 120 for engaging in “sodomy”. The charges were pressed against him after he got tested HIV-positive at the Republican AIDS Centre. Psychologists and epidemiologists used fictitious names and tricked Ruslan into confessing his sexual orientation. They then shared his personal information with the law enforcement agencies. Ruslan agreed to cooperate with the investigation and confess in exchange for freedom. However, he was deceived, as he received a one-year sentence in a penal settlement at the trial.

Read more on Ruslan’s story in Code 103, an article published by sarpa in 2022.

“I was shocked because the investigator had promised me a suspended sentence. I was planning to go home, when they said to me, ‘Where are you headed? You’re going to prison!’ I was handcuffed and taken to the remand centre. The courtroom and the temporary detention centre, where convicts are held after the trial, are two different dimensions.

“Upstairs everything is clean, beautiful and spotless, but downstairs, in the basement, it’s an actual nightmare – filled with sweat, smoke and prisoners shouting ‘Have you received a real prison sentence?!’

At the detention centre, they removed my shoelaces and my expensive belt, which was never returned. I was taken to the police department in a police wagon and put in a metal cage with just one seat in which all movement is restricted. I started to feel claustrophobic.”

Ruslan describes how he was taken to an investigator. The room at the CIAD was not fitted with surveillance cameras. Suspects are required to sign a paper stating that they have not been tortured before entering the room. It is written as directed by the officers. You must sign it, refusal is not an option.

Ruslan states that he was undressed and forced to stand on all fours in an office without cameras. His clothes, including his jeans and sneakers, were cut with a blade and thrown in his face before he was taken to his cell.

He claims that the holding cell at CIAD is quite clean. You are only allowed to sit on the edge of the bed. You cannot lie down on the bed between 6:00 and 22:00. The mattress should be rolled up during this time. If you break the rules, you will be sent to the basement. In the basement, they will have you learn the national anthem. If you cannot sing it all the way through, they will hit your heels with truncheons. But this is considered to be okay treatment.

Things are better now. Under Karimov's rule, people were electrocuted in the basement.

Kamil

Sentenced to two years of imprisonment under Article 120 of the Criminal Code. He spent almost 7 months in Remand Centre No. 1 and some time in a penal settlement.

When Amir was pinned down in the hallway of his apartment, his friend Kamil was simultaneously beaten in the kitchen. "He had just had spinal surgery and had a scar on his back, and they intentionally attacked him and literally jumped on him. Then they became scared that they might kill him, so they tried to stop each other," Amir explains.

Kamil and Amir were taken to the CIAD where they were grilled further. After that, the officers requested an ambulance. The doctors were not permitted to take the young men to the hospital. The police officers ordered the paramedic to carry out the "examination" on the street. All of this was recorded by surveillance cameras. According to the young people, their lawyer found the video recordings and presented them in court. However, the judge did not consider them as evidence of violence and torture.

Kamil grew up in an orphanage and lived with his sister. His friends believe that his challenging childhood impacted his mental well-being, and he took the incident particularly harshly. Following his arrest, he attempted to hang himself on his turtleneck in the cell. He found a blind spot on the CCTV camera and waited till the end of the roll call before attempting. He was saved on time, but later his file was marked as "suicidal". Kamil still does not want to discuss his time in jail, even though he has been released for several months.

Meeting

Amir, Ruslan and Kamil met at Remand Centre No.1, commonly known as Tashkent Prison, which was relocated to a new building in 2018. The new facility is situated in the Zangirot District of Tashkent Region, an area filled with correctional facilities. This new prison is distinctive for its “camomile” shape – reportedly the only one of its kind among correctional facilities in post-Soviet countries, as stated by the builders. The cell blocks’ layout guarantees a uniform supply of light and air to the cells.

Ruslan remembers his first day in detention. “They shouted from the windows – Andijan, Samarkand!” Like it’s a railway station. They do blood tests, examine lungs and shave the heads of everyone in a mechanised manner. I never cried before, but at that moment, I did. They forcefully cut my hair with a trimmer similar to the one used for shearing sheep. They moved it over my head three times until there was no hair left. It was a humiliating experience.”

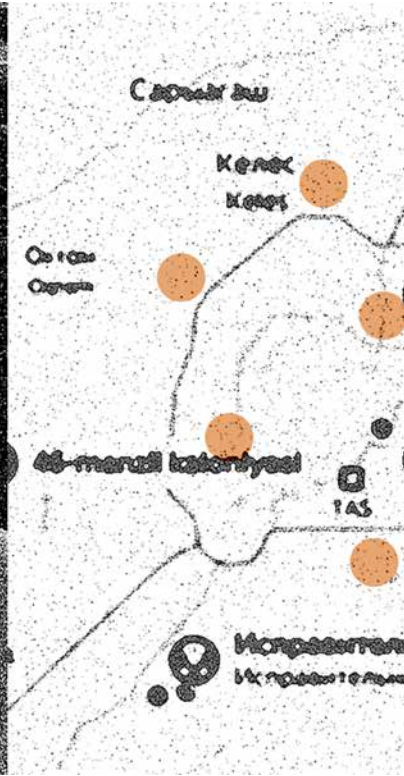
He was taken to a temporary cell where prisoners stay together until their test results are received and they can be assigned to other cells. There he faced his first conflict with other prisoners who were shocked to hear about his charge. “Jalyab [uzb. slut], either knock on the cell door now and ask the guards to get you out of here, or you are getting hurt.” The young man banged on the door from the inside and the guards took him out of the cell.

The guards were confused about where to take him next, saying “We have a gay here!” In prison, the staff treat you differently depending on your category and social status. Money is not a factor. This kind of corruption seems to have been eliminated, so one cannot buy better treatment. Ruslan’s charges were not the most prestigious, so he was given a rusty cup and a torn mattress.

After some thinking, the guards sent him to a cell where people like him were held.

Tashkent Prison has two cells where defendants with similar charges are held: 81/04 and 81/06. Ruslan was sent to one of these cells and met Amir there. “The door opened and he appeared – still small and with good teeth (teeth quickly decay in detention). He was standing there with a mattress and crying.” Amir remembers giving him bread, a stock cube and sweets.

Amir was held in the Tashkent Prison for several months. The trial had already taken place, after which the prisoner was to be transferred to a penal settlement where the conditions of detention are not so harsh. However, it took a long time for it to happen. In the end, he decided to start a hunger strike and, as he claims, “banged his head against the wall.” Eventually, it was successful, and he was moved to Penal Settlement No. 49. You can walk around here in casual clothes, have your family visit you, receive parcels, and use the phone. But

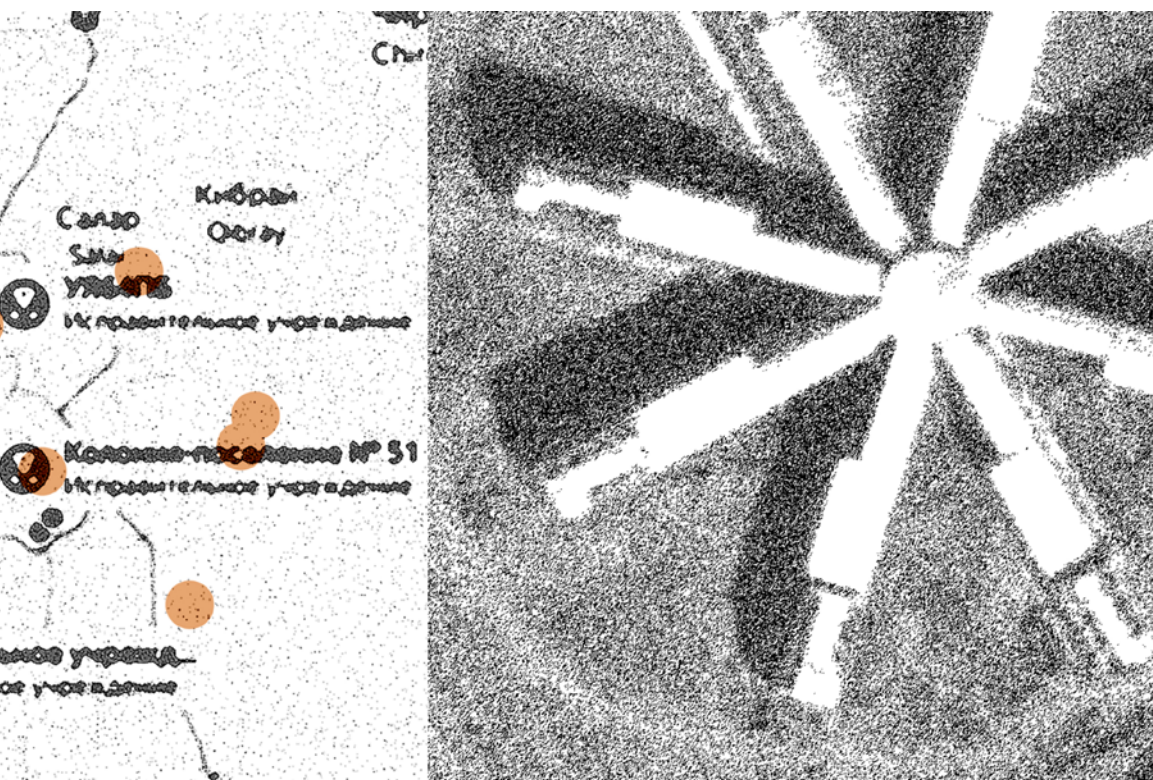


according to the young men themselves, it is safer to be in solitary confinement for people with Article 120 – in a penal settlement they may face abuse for being gay.

Ruslan and Amir said that they became friends right away. Ruslan recalls that he realised he would not be alone there when he saw that a fellow inmate had tattoos and was dressed stylishly.

However, they had to hide their companionship because they feared being punished for knowing each other from the outside. They shared the cell with a transgender man who was convicted of fraud and waiting to be transferred to a correctional facility for some time. He is still serving his sentence.

When discussing their daily life in prison, Amir and Ruslan mentioned how “fortunate” they were to have a relatively new prison with a two-person cell for the three of them, as compared to the usual



larger cells which house around 6–12 people. Ruslan had to sleep on the ground. Amir remembers that it was constantly cold, as the windows were removed from the frames in early April and only installed in October to let fresh air in.

The young men said that while physical violence was not used in the prison, there was psychological violence happening there. Basic necessities, such as toilet paper or medication that the young men had to take for their treatment, were not easily available. The family had to provide them with everything they needed. The boys said they were taken for a walk every week or two, but the walk only lasted for half an hour and took place inside a concrete box with no ceiling. Three of them had 15 minutes for showers, but only one stall was working and the water was predominantly cold. The prisoners could tell the time by looking at the movement of shadows in the cell, similar to a shadow clock, or by listening to the 102 FM radio, which the guards could switch off at any time.

The settlement staff gave Ruslan the female name “Rayhon” and only addressed him by that name. To maintain good relations, one had to behave respectfully with the guards. One example of appropriate behaviour was shining the staff’s shoes while they were smoking.

The young man said he was immediately told “how he should behave” because of his article. He could greet other inmates only by feet – by touching their shoes with his boot. Shaking hands was unacceptable. Cigarettes must only be offered in closed packets. Eating in the canteen was only allowed at the “clearance table”. At this table, newcomers are asked about their identity and their charges. Those who have committed murder are allowed to the common table. Ruslan remembers being asked if he had any boundaries or not at the clearance table. “Having boundaries” means that you only engage in oral sex with men. However, if you are open to other sexual practices, you are considered someone who doesn’t have boundaries.

Inmates also ask this out of personal interest. Ruslan says that even inmates convicted under different charges, who do not identify themselves as gay, harass gay men. Apart from attention and harassment, a convicted murderer even gave Ruslan gifts like flip-flops and cola. Ruslan could not refuse these gifts because of the existing hierarchy in the prison. Because he had been sexually assaulted in the bathhouse, the young man avoided bathing for an extended period. Ruslan remembers that rapists were strangely respected there. Particularly if they spend time with individuals who have committed multiple murders.

Prison etiquette, which emerged in Russian prisons in the 1930s, introduced the notion of a “turned out”, i.e. a person who is either gay or has been sexually assaulted for violating prisoner ethics. Such prison etiquette is still common in “black” prisons controlled by crime lords, where, unlike in “red” prisons – with stronger prison administration – the rules of conduct are dictated by influential prisoners rather than the administration.

At the same time, the influential prisoners themselves (such as those convicted of murder or fraud) may rape an inmate convicted under Article 120 because their “etiquette” requires them to “downcast” him. According to Ruslan, this allows them to engage in same-sex sexual intercourse without losing their status. In Uzbekistani prisons, those found guilty of rape are considered as “muzhiki”, meaning they have a comparably high status among other inmates, which is completely the opposite in Russian prisons.

“In prisons, the most precious items are matches, naswar, cigarettes and lighters. Money holds no value,” the young men shared their experience in detention. To make life in prison bearable, inmates try to find ways to bring some comfort to their circumstances. Some of these methods include making cakes from biscuits and butter, saving sugar and brewing stewed tea – a strong drink made from black Tashkent tea that is known to have awareness-inducing and narcotic properties.

Prisoners are allowed to make a 10-minute phone call once a month. As this allocation is insufficient, prisoners resort to blackmail to obtain more time. Some former prisoners have reported extreme measures such as swallowing a spoon or cutting their veins to achieve this.

For a long time, the number of correctional facilities in Uzbekistan and the number of inmates they housed were not known. In 2021, the Interior Ministry disclosed that there were 54 operating correctional facilities in the country. There are 18 closed-type facilities, 25 penal settlements and 11 remand centres. At that time, 22,000 people were serving sentences in these facilities.

Although mainstream publications report that prisons and correctional facilities offer inmates, including women, satisfactory conditions, independent human rights groups claim that correctional facilities continue to witness torture, forced abortions, suicides, hunger strikes and inadequate conditions. This field is highly restrictive, and it is unpopular among human rights defenders.

In prison, time goes by for inmates without understanding what is happening outside the facility. “They serve long terms, unaware of what’s happening outside. They’re not aware of the new bridge on Chilanzar, the Tashkent City development in Mahalle, or that the Malika fair is not being held on Alisher Navoi Street anymore. They’re not even aware of the metro line extending to Kuilyuk. In their world, time froze when the Samsung Galaxy S4 was released. They only get information through Zor-TV and the radio. On Saturdays, they watch movies,” Ruslan exclaimed.

Amir shared that they tried to have a good time, listened to the radio and chose to remain positive. Kamil, who was in the adjacent cell, was unable to accept the new situation.

Sangorod

Due to the harsh conditions in prisons and penitentiaries, many prisoners dream of getting to Sangorod, a facility that offers treatment services for dental and chronic illnesses.

Ruslan was sent to Sangorod when he fell severely ill. In Sangorod, the inmates are served grilled chicken and can watch TV every day. Sangorod is a desirable destination, as some inmates can relax there. However, the facility only admits inmates for a maximum of six months, and not everyone is eligible. The situation at Sangorod is distinct for younger prisoners who have been convicted under Article 120, though. Ruslan was given the most unpleasant job of washing the corpses of people who had end-stage HIV and died within the institution.

“When you are sick and have only a month or two left to live, the institution usually discharges you to die at home to keep their statistics looking good. However, some people are not discharged in time. One person, named Sasha, began to die and was moaning in pain all night. Unfortunately, the institution did not provide him with pain relief and only moved him to a different ward. The isolated room was located in the tuberculosis department, where patients with tuberculosis are monitored if they are unsure whether their disease is active or latent. Ruslan was tasked with watching over Sasha in the quarantine unit.

“I gave him food from a spoon, cleaned him up, changed his bed, and washed the orange cloth. He passed away during the night. He was examined only the following day, but by then he had swollen up and had a very bad smell.” Ruslan was instructed to flip the man’s body over to capture pictures from various angles. At that moment, Sasha’s lymph nodes ruptured, and black fluid gushed from his mouth and eyes, hitting the people around him. “That’s when I understood that if I remained here, a similar end was waiting for me as well. It was frightening.”

After prison

Ruslan left prison in October 2022 weighing only 45 kg and struggled to find a job for a while. He is currently on parole. Amir, on the other hand, is serving his sentence while on probation, which means he transfers 15 per cent of his earnings to the state.

He explains that it’s almost impossible to find a job after being in prison. Although the employment office offers some vacancies, employers tend to deny applicants with a criminal record under flimsy pretexts. The only work opportunities accessible are as a security guard that pays 1–2 million sums or as a worker at a waste disposal

site with a salary of 800,000 sums per month. However, obtaining an official employment contract is essential, as, without one, you will be unable to make payments to the state.

Ruslan has shifted through multiple companies because every attempt to obtain a job was thwarted during the paperwork stage when his criminal record was discovered. “They cannot legally refuse to hire me due to my criminal record. Therefore, they resort to bullying me, making jokes, blaming me for any problems, openly discussing my failures, and eventually coercing me to resign on my own.”

While still in prison, Amir began writing petitions to the Prosecutor General’s Office hoping to get back his belongings that were stolen during the search. Subsequently, he received back his phone, empty wallet, and passport. The second appeal he made went unanswered.


Amir wrote to the Prosecutor General’s Office again, but this time through the “presidential portal”. Afterwards, he was informed of an ongoing investigation against the officer who had overseen the theft. Later on, Amir began receiving phone calls, and pressure was put on him. It turned out that the father of one of the thieves was a former security agent. “You can appeal to whoever you want, it will not give results,” they threatened over the phone. He also was offered 3 million sums as compensation for keeping quiet. He had to accept the offer, as the costly lawyers he consulted with earlier stated that he had hardly any chance of winning the case.

“I don’t have a social circle,” the young man concluded his account. He resides with his parents in Termez and sometimes commutes to Tashkent for job interviews. Now, the people who previously requested his services refuse to hire him. “You are afraid of ID checks, requests for additional certificates, and interaction with government agencies. Since my town is small, everyone knows everything now. They have labelled me unfavourably. It’s frightening.”

International human rights law clearly forbids criminalisation of sexual relations between male adults, and in recent times, the treaty bodies of the United Nations have asked the Uzbekistan government to annul Article 120 of the Criminal Code, create laws that comprehensively prohibit discrimination, investigate cases of torture and other forms of violence accurately, bring those who commit these crimes to justice, and fight against discrimination, harassment, hate speeches and violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

The recently released draft of the Criminal Code, published in February 2021, still treats voluntary sexual intercourse between men as a criminal offence. However, the Uzbekistan authorities, until they pass the new Criminal Code, have a chance to delete this paragraph from the draft legislation and ensure that Uzbekistan adheres to its global human rights obligations.



A photograph of a laundry room. In the foreground, the left arm and shoulder of a person wearing a blue and white horizontally striped t-shirt are visible. In the background, a white front-loading washing machine is positioned against a light-colored wall. On top of the machine, there is a wooden cutting board and some other items. To the right, a white cloth or towel is hanging on a hook. The lighting is somewhat dim, and the overall tone is candid and personal.

“It had already been a year since I had been transitioning without a doctor. Even then, I wasn’t sure if the doctor had overcome their transphobia. I just wanted to make sure everything was fine with my liver and internal organs.”

Azad on his experience of transitioning in Turkey and Azerbaijan.
Read it via the QR code on page 104

“There Are Things One Doesn’t Choose”

Three persons from Kyrgyzstan on the profound impact of queerness and disability on their life and worldview, and the things that help to carry on.

Text by Artur Kazakbaev

Illustrations by Akbermet Mederbekova

The original article was published in Russian on *QueerQyz*



Aigul K.: “Focus on the next step, not the whole staircase”

Please introduce yourself.

I am Aigul K., 22. I have a law degree and I am currently working as a teacher’s assistant. I want to work in my profession and build my career.

Tell us about your sexual and gender identity.

I am a non-binary, gender-fluid person, and my sexual orientation is lesbian.

Could you describe your disability?

I have several chronic autoimmune diseases, arrhythmia, hypermobile joints and ADHD.

What’s it like to be a queer person with a disability in Kyrgyzstan?

Feels quite lonely. It feels like I can’t be fully accepted by any society. Because my disability is invisible, people just perceive me as a perfectly healthy person who just ‘acts weird’.

That’s why they put labels on me: people think I am lazy, not a person who is in pain, who is tired every day and tries their best to get on. Ableism and homophobia are so commonplace that society doesn’t even realise how accustomed it is to excluding disabled people from many things.

I have a certain sense of not even belonging to the queer community. I am one of the very few people who still accept the pandemic as a new reality, so I am vaccinated and wear a mask – my condition makes me vulnerable to sickness. However, masks work better when everyone wears them, and I rarely meet people who still wear masks regularly, which gives me the feeling that people around me do not care about my health, are willing to exclude people like me from many areas of life, and are unwilling to take measures to improve the safety of people with low immunity and those who are likely to suffer infection with long-term consequences.

What challenges do you face in your work as a queer person with a disability and how do you handle them?

I felt the difficulties at my very first job interview. The interviewers immediately became tense when I told them I had a health problem. Also, because of ADHD, I stand out and people perceive me differently, they think I'm weird. That's probably why I couldn't fit in.

How have queerness and disability affected you as a person? Where do the two parts of your identity intersect? What conclusions have you been able to draw?

First of all, because of ADHD, I have problems understanding my feelings and emotions, so it took me a long time before I realised I was queer.

It is also very hard for me to open up to other queer people about my health, I feel like I will be judged or people will stop talking to me, so just a few people are aware of my condition.

To be satisfied with your life, what are the needs that you have that are not being met in your country? What is missing in Kyrgyzstan?

Many things are lacking. There is a lack of safety for people with low immunity and a lack of awareness of the problems of people with disabilities, especially those with 'invisible' disabilities. When people hear 'a person with a disability' they think of a person with a mobility aid (wheelchair / crutches / cane etc.), not a person who looks exactly like others but has special needs. And hardly anyone can imagine a queer person with a disability, people just don't think of us.

What or who has helped you to carry on, to live and to grow?

My friends support me every day, believe in me when I face a wall and never judge me, for which I am eternally grateful.

What advice would you give to people with a similar background?

Don't give up, you're not alone, even if you feel lonely. Don't put too much pressure on yourself. The fact that you have survived another day is a real victory.



Zeeé: “Just do it with love”

My name is Zeeé. I’m a creator, a blogger, an influencer, and a TikTok vlogger. People also give me other labels. I don’t try to hide my queerness, instead, I use it as a tool to tell stories employing ‘affectation’ and language associated with queers. I’m a media expert, a content writer who advises big companies and bloggers on growth and creating content that goes viral. In short, I’m popular, girl 🙌

I identify as a non-binary person. In terms of sexuality, whatever goes. That means I don’t have an attachment to a particular gender. It depends on the person.

I have infantile cerebral palsy. It is a childhood disability, it is not acquired. I was injured at birth. As a child I couldn’t walk, I was dragged around, but physiotherapy helped me to get on my feet. That is how I am today.

On being a queer person with a disability in Kyrgyzstan

You become part of two vulnerable groups, and social pressure is doubled. No allowances are made. You get the disadvantages of disability and the disadvantages of being queer at the same time. When it came to expressing basic things, there was some physical overlap.

When I was a child, there were things I couldn’t do because I was ashamed. When you are ashamed of your disability, it has a cumulative effect. Emotionally, it’s hard to shake off, and all those traumas and limitations carry over into adulthood. I spent my teens getting used to the impact of disability on my life. The queerness manifested itself at the age of reason. In short, I’m like ‘Nescafe: 2in1’ or Hannah Montana.

People with disabilities are treated with pity. When one helps people with disabilities, they feel like heroes: “Look, we have a disabled person working here, give us a pat on the back”. I don’t feel any social or commercial barriers in that respect.

Of course, being queer hinders my financial and professional development. I am becoming popular, but my personal indicators of success are hard to reach. I’m losing ad offers because of my queerness and freedom of expression. My colleagues respect me, but when it comes to clients, my pool of opportunities shrinks considerably.

On queerness and disability

I perceive my queerness not so much in terms of sexuality but rather of gender identity. It's a determining factor for me in how I move in this world, how I perceive my appearance, and how I relate to my body. Sexuality floats and changes over time and I don't 'pin it down'.

Disability, on the other hand, has produced a lot of complexes, traumas and constrictions that I am still dealing with. When I start relationships with people, or when it comes to sex, I have to teach the person: to explain where the boundaries are, what is comfortable, and where there is no need to be shy.

To be satisfied with your life, what are the needs that you have that are not being met in your country? What is missing in Kyrgyzstan?

Compared to other people with disabilities, I am mobile and quite privileged. I will not break it to you if I say that on a social level, I would like to be accepted, not tolerated. We don't need to be tolerated, we need to be accepted.

What or who has helped you to carry on, to live and to grow?

It wasn't until I was an adult that I understood my parents' upbringing strategy. It often happens that when a child has a disability, they are pitied and not allowed to do much. In my case, I did what my brothers did. I never felt deprived or special. I was given a healthy attitude as a child about who I was and what I could achieve. That's a credit to my parents.

Relatively healthy self-esteem and the understanding of “Oh my goodness, I can do a lot” helped me to gradually gain confidence later on.

What advice would you give to people with a similar background?

If you have inhibitions in your head, anxiety, problems, if you don't want to accept anything new, to compromise or take risks, to change, then really go and see a therapist. I don't know anything better than therapy. Most people with disabilities desperately need it. People with disabilities, especially in our region, are very traumatised. Even 'invisible' disabilities imply certain traumas. Therapy is needed to understand your mental weaknesses and strengths.

It is important not to give up and to be as open as possible to new things.

Rapunzel: “There are things one doesn’t choose”

I used to have long blonde hair, but when disability came into my life I had to cut it short. My people joke about it and call me Rapunzel. I’m 25 years old. I’m a young woman with a disability. I use exactly that phrase, I am not ‘disabled’, and my abilities are not limited. First of all, I am a girl and disability is just my status. I am involved in project management. I also volunteer in several initiatives that support young people with disabilities. My lifestyle is dynamic, I have a higher education in a field that is useful for my work, I travel, I even publish scientific articles in magazines, I volunteer, and I am an organiser of many cool events.

I’m a cisgender woman. Bisexual.

I have an acquired disability – cerebral palsy caused by a viral neuro-infection and complicated by a brain aneurysm. I was about 10 years old then. It just happened and divided my life into ‘before’ and ‘after’. A long period of rehabilitation followed. Now, after a long journey of pain and trials, I have survived. I don’t run or dance like I used to, but I live a full, free, independent and fulfilled life.

On being a queer person with a disability in Kyrgyzstan

Perhaps because I don’t want / need to be out at the moment and am a ‘closeted’ bisexual person, I don’t generally encounter the problems that openly queer people face. In the LGBTQ+ community, I have never experienced overt discrimination because of my disability. I don’t know exactly how many queer people with disabilities there are in the community, maybe not that many, and it doesn’t make sense to choose a party venue with a ramp or an accessible toilet, for example. But there is a big problem with the inclusivity and accessibility of a lot of community events. That aspect is not given enough attention.

Harrow and alas, I encounter discrimination, stigma and stereotyping about disability all the time outside of the community. It seems to me that everyone understands everything.

I want to talk about relationships, it is very difficult to find a partner for a queer person with a disability. Many potential candidates are simply afraid of the responsibility. Afraid that I’ll need support, even though I’m quite a self-reliant person. Probably, they are afraid that I won’t always be able to (physically) help them. I’m talking specifically about the relationship with the girl who broke my heart. This is where

I experienced discrimination based on ability, not so much from her as from her close friends. She and I were doing great up to a point when I met her terribly toxic company. These people were looking me in the eye and saying, “You’re a great couple! She takes such good care of you!” while gossiping about me behind my back, “Honey, why do you need this handicapped girl?”. It all happened the way it was supposed to. Honestly, I was very much affected by the experience.

On queerness and disability

I have a strange relationship with my disability and queerness. I have to say that it has greatly influenced certain attitudes and my worldview. Without the disability, I would not have acquired most of my current life principles. Because of the disability, you just start to see the world differently. You start to see things that are in the background for others. You see much more flaws in the world than the average person, and your sense of justice is sharpened immensely.

Your worldview changes once and for all. And you suddenly start to notice discrimination not only against people with disabilities but also against women, LGBT+ people, people of colour. You start to question not just your ‘beloved’ state, but society as a whole; you start to care not just about your life, but about the world.

To be satisfied with your life, what are the needs that you have that are not being met in your country? What is missing in Kyrgyzstan?

Again, it comes down to inaccessible infrastructure. As a woman with a disability, I face many challenges. Sometimes I can’t go to the places I want to go. I can’t use public transport. There are times when I can’t use the toilet. I could go on and on about the needs of a person with a disability that are not met in Kyrgyzstan: education; a decent job that pays a decent wage; respect for my rights. Speaking of queerness, there is of course ‘covert’ discrimination, aggression, manipulation and stereotyping of the whole LGBT+ community. And the fact that I can’t speak openly about this side of my identity is in itself indicative of discrimination.

What or who has helped you to carry on, to live and to grow?

Of course, my mother, who is always by my side, was the most engaged. She has supported and encouraged me in all my endeavours, even the craziest ones. My psychologist is generally one of the best people in my life, who also introduced me to a stranger girl with a disability that I was. Many thanks to my friends with and without disabilities, I couldn’t have done it without them. The Kyrgyz Indigo team, especially one staff member I met at a human rights training.

I have become friends with her and she has started inviting me to various community events.

Most importantly, I am grateful to myself! I was the one who helped me to go on and to live instead of existing!

What advice would you give to people with a similar background?

In general, mental health is a priority. For everyone, for able-bodied people, for people with disabilities, for queer people, etc. Take care of your mental health!

Also, although the experiences of different people with disabilities vary, a sense of community can help people with disabilities cope, especially given the systemic barriers and stigma that persist. Accept and respect yourself, accept and respect the uniqueness of each person and see everything as a natural and beautiful part of human diversity, including disability and queerness and beyond.



“There have been cases when people went to the hospital and doctors refused to serve them, just kicked them out.”





Transpeople from Armenia share their stories of medical transitioning.
Read it via the QR code on page 103

“I Gave Up a Lot To Be Who I Am”

**A personal story on internalized
homophobia, self-acceptance, and the
LGBTQ+ community in Kazakhstan.**

Text by Alexandra Akanayeva

Photos by Ophelia Zhakayeva

The original article was published in Russian on *The Village Kazakhstan*



Despite progress in many areas and the gradual improvement of living conditions for LGBTQ+ people, Kazakhstan continues to be a relatively homophobic country in which queer people face discrimination, contempt, and cruelty.

Our interlocutor, Askar, lives in Almaty and is openly gay. He told a difficult but inspiring story of how he served in the army and struggled with internalised homophobia, but eventually accepted his identity and began to live an honest and happy life.

Askar, 21

I am an openly gay man living in Almaty. I was born in Ekibastuz in the north of Kazakhstan. I work as a sales manager in a floristry business. I studied to be a programmer at a vocational school, but I didn't work in my profession – I did it for the sake of a degree. I had a scholarship for the first three years of my studies and things were looking up.

On Coming out

I was 17 years old and applying for my fourth year at a vocational school.

On a summer night, I was going out with my friends. My mother was outraged: “Why? Who are all these guys? They're all wearing make-up, they don't look normal”. Those were my first queer friends. When you meet someone like you, it's very valuable because they understand you. I was a rebellious teenager and I liked to stand up to my mother. She would ask, “Why do you have long hair? Why are your ears pierced?” That night, in a fit of rage, I shouted, “Because I'm gay”. I said I was leaving home. I moved in with a female friend, working and paying my part of utility bills and food.

I had a male friend at the time, also a queer person. He had tattoos all over his arms. My mother's view was that he was a bad person and that he was on his way to prison. Before I left, she used to say, “He's spoiling you. He's a bad influence on you. Who is he? Is he your boyfriend?” She kept asking me if I was sleeping with him. Even though he was just a friend of mine.

After a month of living apart, my mother started writing long texts, calling me, and making me feel guilty. On the one hand, I felt sorry for her, but on the other, I realized that I wouldn't be accepted in the family. My parents are very conservative. At the time, I thought I would never go back home. They seemed like enemies to me, I hated them.

How I got into the Army

One day I got a call from the military recruiting office. They said they were going to enlist me. I had to go to the military recruitment office with a draft registration slip saying that I was going to do my fourth year at my school. Looked like they backed off, but it didn't last long.

I was at work when two men in uniform came in, asked for me, and tried to take me away. They said I had to go once again to the military recruitment office to confirm that I was a student, and then I could go back to work. I went, and in the car, they said, "That's it. You are joining the military service". I started arguing and pushing for my rights, which I wasn't aware of at the time.

They said, "Your mother called us". At that moment my brain just shut down. I could not comprehend how my own mother was able to make such a call behind my back. Later I called her, but she pretended not to understand. I asked her, "Why? Why would you do that?"

Mum confessed, "Well, service will change you". I started to cry, "Mum, I'll say I'm gay and they won't enlist me". There is a practice of not allowing LGBTQ+ people to serve in the military, as far as I know.

But in the end, I didn't say anything. I passed the medical examination and was found to be able-bodied for military service. I resisted, but the draft board officers said, "We'll send you to a shithole where you'll be beaten up and you'll come back crippled". It was very frightening. But I manned up and decided to prove that I could serve, I turned high-minded.

Before going to the military unit, I called my mother again and told her that I needed some stuff. She came and burst into tears. I said, "Why are you crying? You sent me here yourself". My mother came to visit me once in 2020 with my stepfather and my sister.

There were no problems related to my sexual orientation in the army. I wore a social mask for a year: facial expressions and affectation were erased in the army. I suppressed my emotions to survive so that no one would identify me as gay, so I wouldn't get killed there. I know I wasn't the only one who was gay, there were other guys. I even talked to one of them about it, but after two days he said he didn't want any trouble and we stopped communicating.



Back from the Army and Dealing with Trauma

1 A traditional Kazakh dish made out of meat and dough

2 From Kaz. "My Child"

I was 19 when I returned to Astana from the army. The first night we sat down to dinner, my mother made Beshbarmak.¹ She was very happy and said, "Askar, good job, you served your country, Balam."² I am so proud of you. Soon you will bring home a fiancée, you must get married". I replied, "Mum, nothing has changed. A year in the army didn't and won't fix me. It's not a disease, it can't be cured. I liked boys before the army and I like them now".

I saw how upset my mother was and I thought I should not have said that. That's where internalized homophobia comes into play. You have no hope of being accepted. You think you're sick, even though you know you're not.

Finally, my mother said, "Okay, just don't tell anyone else". After that night she didn't speak to me for a week or two.

I continued to live with my mum, and I got a job. I would go out with my friends, but I found it very difficult to express my feelings. They would make jokes and I physically couldn't laugh. It was hard to cry too. My friend's father died, I knew him very well. The friend was crying and I was sitting there stone-faced. I thought, "What's wrong with me?" Now it's over, but for about eight months after I left the army, it felt like I had no emotions at all.

The misunderstandings between me and my family continued. My mother used to say, "Let's get you a job as a policeman, you've got a military record. We'll figure something out". I didn't want to do that. I said, "Mum, I'm 19 years old. I've served in the army like you wanted me to. Here's my diploma, here's my military service card. What else do you want from me?" We fought all the time. I moved out again.

On Relationships with Girls

I had a thing for boys from childhood, but it was easier to communicate with girls: we could discuss which boys they liked. But I didn't talk about my preferences, I just listened.

I started relationships with girls twice. The first one happened when I was in seventh grade. I was in love, but I wasn't sexually attracted to her. When I was 16, I started seeing another girl. I liked her too, but I didn't feel what I wanted to feel. It bothered me. I thought, "Here's a beautiful girl, I'll go out with her". A lot of guys in our clique were jealous of me. In the end, I broke up with her. I said, "Sorry, I'm gay". She was very upset, but we remained friends.







For a long time, I blamed myself for hurting that girl. After that, I was very depressed about my orientation and the relationship. I stayed at home and thought about what I'd done. I couldn't imagine having sex with a girl. I fantasized about boys, but rather unconsciously, and when I realized it, I pushed those thoughts away and felt ashamed.

Now I realize that I was dating girls because I was trying to change who I was. At the time, I really wanted to change. But I couldn't.

On Internalized Homophobia

In our family it was taboo to talk about sex, so there was no sex education. Once a guy in our clique told me he was gay. I started reading a lot about bisexuality, and homosexuality. I read and thought, "No, that's not my thing at all". When someone I knew said they liked another guy, I judged them.

All gay people have internalized homophobia. I would even say that the gay community is toxic, although that sounds very homophobic on my part. I think most LGBTQ+ people don't accept themselves, so they have a lot of communication issues.

There are also a lot of straight people around me, which is a bit surprising. In Kazakhstan, if you are gay, you are usually friends with either queer people or girls. I am not only friends with girls but also guys, and boys from the hood. They only care about my personality. Above all, I am Askar, not gay Askar.

It was a year and a half ago that I fully accepted that homosexuality or any kind of queer identity is normal. Before that, I had been a raging transphobe for a while and couldn't understand how you couldn't be a man if you were born a man. It helped to realize that other people were thinking the same thing about me, "How can you be gay?" It helped me to see my own double standards.

Now I feel for trans people. Compared to gays and lesbians, they have much stronger internalized homophobia. They take a very long time to accept themselves. Some even get married, have children, and then go through a gender transition. It is very hard not to be able to live at peace with yourself and have to go through a constant internal struggle, give hope to your wife and children and then leave your family.

On Gay Propaganda

Gay propaganda doesn't work, and neither does heterosexual propaganda. I spent my whole childhood watching films with scenes of men kissing women and saw only heteronormative couples around me. But that didn't make me heterosexual. I've never quite understood why public displays of affection aren't propaganda for heterosexual couples but are for queer couples. The only thing that the lack of so-called gay propaganda had on me as a child was that I hated myself for too long.

On Relationships with Men

Very few people in Kazakhstan actually agree to give an interview or give their real names. Sometimes you meet someone on a website, you text for a week, and then it turns out that his name isn't Aidar, but Kairat. People often ask me, "Is your name really Askar?"

Many fear what will happen if someone else finds out. If you are gay, you cannot be employed in many places, such as government offices. Although I had the chance to socialize, sleep or go on dates with officials, they asked me not to talk about it, to avoid mentioning their name to anyone. LGBTQ+ people who are closeted are very common, even in my experience: teachers, the military, and the police.

On Self-Acceptance

First of all, my people helped me: friends, the queer community, and my own sister, who did not turn away from me, even though the news came as a shock to her. Other straight people also supported me. For example, a classmate from Astana. He was not a queer person, just a guy from the south with a traditional Kazakh mentality. He was the first friend I confided in and told him I was gay.

He said, "Askar, no problem". This is despite the fact that he comes from a religious family, just a backyard kid who lived "by the code of the streets". It was very important for me to see that a person from such a background could accept me so easily.

LGBTQ+ hangouts and socializing with like-minded people help a lot. It's helped me to accept not only myself but also others, and to be more aware. For people with internalized homophobia, parties like this are thrice as important.

About a year ago I moved to Almaty and started going to Amirovka [a queer safe space in Almaty – ed.] and I realised that nobody cares

who you are or what your sexual orientation is. The local queer community is more enlightened than in other regions of Kazakhstan. Here I can go out on a date without worrying about how I look. Of course, it's not all so perfect, but Almaty is relatively fine and safe.

In November 2022 I started to see a psychotherapist. At the end of our first month, I came out to him. Although he didn't identify as LGBTQ-friendly, he acted professional and said, "It's OK. Come back next month and we'll talk about it". The therapist helped me to work on accepting myself and on other aspects of my life. I didn't know what to do with myself before. Now I feel much better.

Living in a Homophobic Society

I try to spend less time with homophobic and toxic people who express unrequested opinions, or people who ask inappropriate questions. It's not like I ask guys on the street who they have sex with and in what positions. There have been times when I've been stared at in a shop because of my pierced ears. I used to check out and leave as quickly as possible, but now I ask myself, "Why do I have to leave? It's not like I'm going to look in their bag to see what they're buying". The stupidest question I've ever heard is "Were you molested as a child?" Homosexuality is not a result of trauma.

Most of the time I avoid conflict, I'd rather walk away and keep quiet. For my own safety and peace of mind, I think this is the most sensible thing to do in most situations when living in a homophobic country.

On the Present and the Future

I would like to stay in Kazakhstan. It is very comfortable here, especially in Almaty. I don't share the idea that we have to leave Kazakhstan for Europe. But if I encounter severe homophobia or persecution, I will have to move. It's the worst thing to leave a country that you love but that doesn't accept you. For me personally, it's a nightmare.

I love walking in the mountains, it calms me down a lot. I love long journeys, I love trains and planes. In January, my friends and I are planning a trip to Vietnam, the first one for me. I want to travel and get to know other cultures, nature, and interesting places. Right now I am concentrating on myself and my peace of mind. I don't have any global plans like getting married or having children.

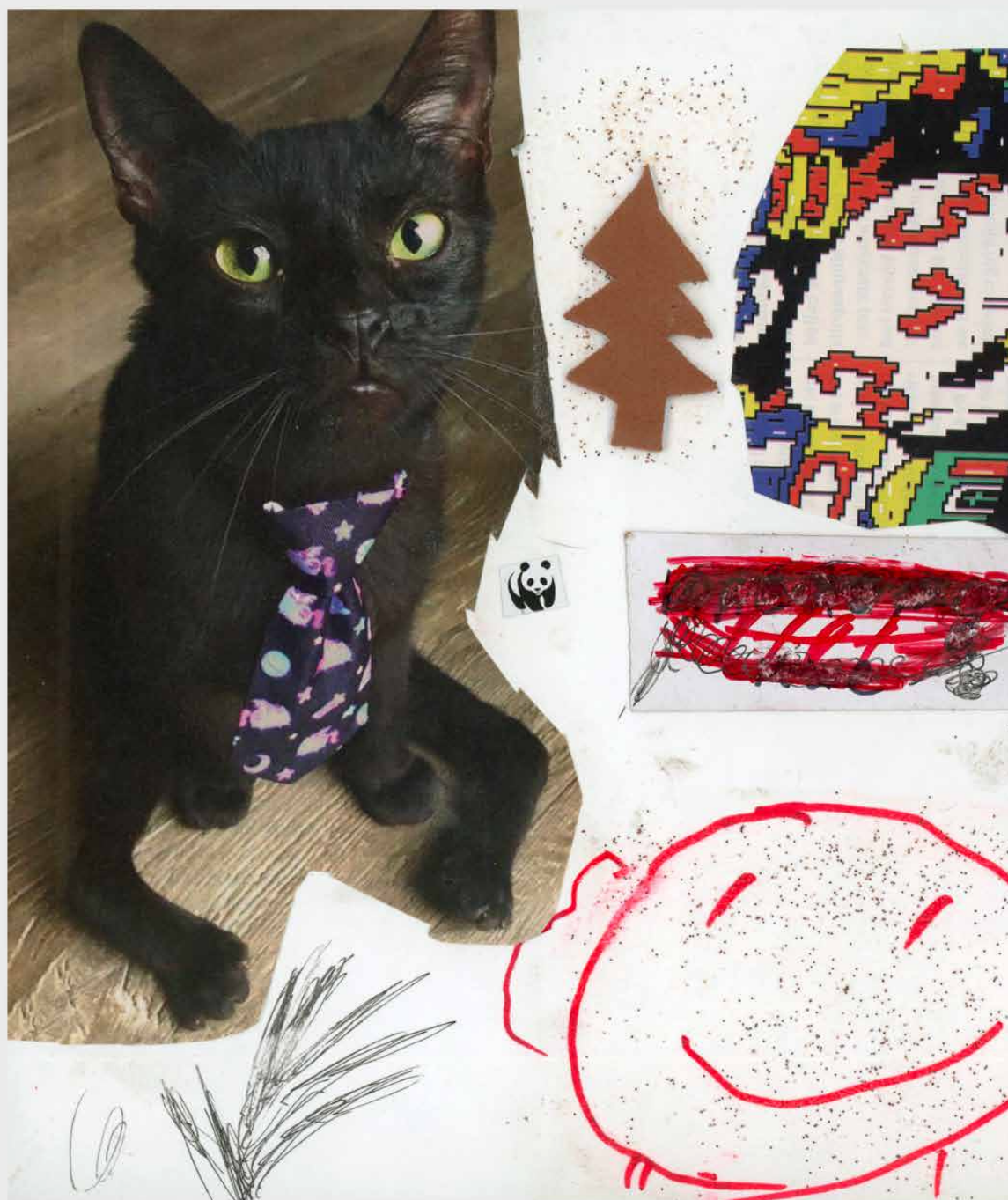
Why I am Talking About It

I agreed to do this interview because I want my parents, the guys in my circle, and the whole of Kazakhstan, in general, to see that homosexuality is normal. Accepting oneself is a big step. I was really scared when I gave an interview to AIRAN: I was afraid of my family's reaction, but I wanted to be seen. I'm not talking about popularity, I'm talking about visibility for the queer community, so that other people who have realized themselves as queer understand that this is normal. I'm just a normal guy who served in the military and grew up in a pretty homophobic family, but I keep going and I'm not afraid.

It is normal to be gay or lesbian. Being a transgender person is also normal. To be afraid, to hide, is terrible. By living in fear, turning a blind eye, and deceiving yourself - you only ruin your happiness and live a completely alien life. I wouldn't want that. I have given up a lot to be who I am.

But at least I can be honest and say, "Yes, this is who I am and there is nothing wrong with it". I smile more often. I live in a city I love and I don't fool myself. I'm surrounded by wonderful people. And no matter what anyone says, I'm not changing my mind. I will not back down, I will keep talking, I will keep taking risks, and I will keep living.





From "Emotions. Feelings. Uzbekistan".
Read it via the QR code on page 154

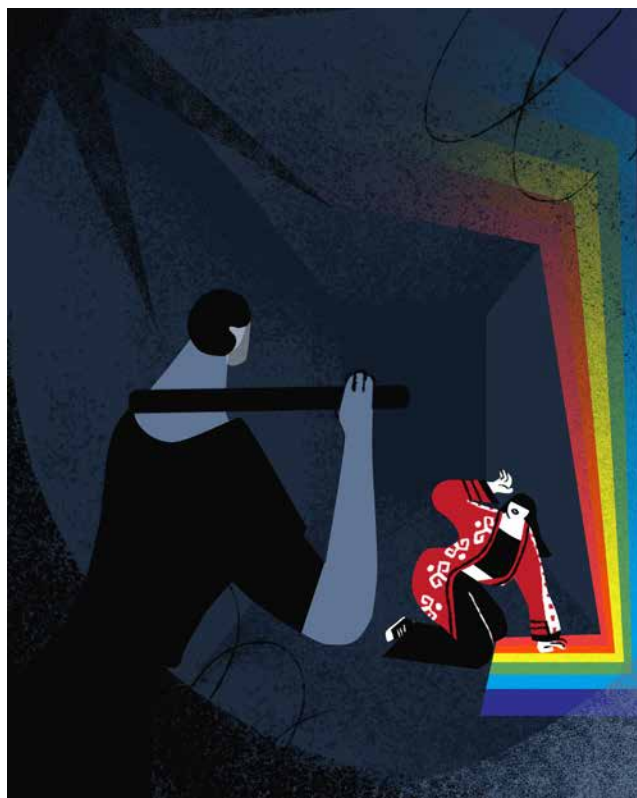


Наслаждение

“I Was Told I Had Disgraced Kazakhstan”

By Aidar Yelkeyev

Cases of police harassment, extortion, and surveillance of members of the queer community in Kazakhstan.



“If We Call the Police, They Laugh at Us”

By Mairambek Musa



Three queer people from Kyrgyzstan talk about their lives and the problems they face, personally and as a group.



“If Your Protesting Hand Gets Tired, I’ll Be There To Take It”

By Sevgi Ismailbeyli



Ali Malikov tells their story of self-discovery, fighting for their rights and queer activism in Azerbaijan.



In Armenia, Trans Community Faces Fear, Neglect

By Anna Yeganyan

Transgender people in Armenia face discrimination both in hospitals and by psychological services and therapists. Trans activists fight the stigma every day.



Trans Solidarity Against Bigoted Institutions

By Vabid Aliyev



Azad on his experience of transitioning in Turkey and Azerbaijan, lack of access to HRT, and potential allies of trans people.



“I Put a Lid On My Sexual Orientation, I Buried It”

By Anna Vorobyova

After the start of Russia's all-out war against Ukraine, Serhii's identity became a deadly threat. Anna Vorobyova tells his story of evacuation from Mariupol and explains how the invaders target queer people.





“The Most Important Thing For Me Is That My Son Is Happy”

By Alexandra Akanayeva

A mother of a queer person from Kazakhstan shares her story on acceptance, love, and trust.



No Trauma, No Drama. Rewriting Media LGBTQI+ Narratives

By Ella Kanegarian

Nora Petrossian and Mischa Badasyan advocate for a more nuanced portrayal of queer individuals in media.



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From Street Violence to Stand-Up Scene

Meet Nata Talikishvili, a trans woman who started doing stand up after years of trailblazing activism in Georgia.

Text by George Baskhajauri

Photos by Tako Robakidze

The article was originally published in Georgian and English on *Chai Khana*





After years of trailblazing activism for the Georgian queer community, Nata Talikishvili is now using humor and storytelling to bring the everyday challenges of queer people to a wider audience in Georgia.

In the intimate space of the Klara Bar in the capital Tbilisi, Nata brings the audience in – inviting them to experience the difficult and dangerous life of the LGBTQIA+ community in Georgia today.

“At first, I was terrified,” Nata recalls. “I didn’t think I could do it, but the audience adored me, and it made the process much easier.”

Stand up is a new profession for Nata, a trans woman who has also been a chef and activist. Her show, *Call Me Nata*, was born when the owner of Tbilisi’s well known Club Basiani, Naja Orashvili, and a queer activist, Giorgi Kikonishvili, overheard Nata speaking with people at the club. When Klara Bar opened in 2022, Nata’s show opened with it.

“As they told me, the reaction of the crowd, the focus on me, the sound of applause and laughter were indicators that we could start something new,” Nata recalls. “Klara Bar was created around this concept, as a space that would be more focused on socializing rather than entertainment or music.”

For Nata, the show has offered a new way to be an activist and push for a better life for Georgia’s queer community. Georgia, where homophobia remains widespread, has been slow to protect the LGBTQIA+ community from discrimination and hate crimes. While Nata was raised by two grandparents who accepted her as she was, few others accepted her in her native village of Norio, in eastern Georgia. After her grandparents passed, a relative sold their house and left her homeless. She was just 15.

“I was sure of my gender identity from such a young age that I had no idea what the fear was, so I didn’t have any problem sharing with others that I was a girl. My grandma and grandpa supported me from the start and tried to provide me with the information I needed. Their attitude helped me to accept myself,” she says.

“Everything changed after their death. Soon I realized that people I thought loved me were only thinking about themselves – some of them even stole things from the house where I grew up.”

She decided to move to Tbilisi. It was 2006, and at the time, the queer community in Georgia faced daily harassment as well as physical assault. Police often treated them violently, and no one was held accountable. When she first arrived in the city, Nata lived on the streets for a few days before moving in with two older trans women.

Life was difficult. Nata supported herself through sex work and learned she had to depend on herself for her survival.

“Soon after arriving in Tbilisi, I realized that there was danger at every step, and I shouldn’t have faith in anyone. The instinct of self-preservation led me to stand up, engage in sex work, and sustain

myself independently,” she says. “Even in the LGBT+ community, everyone wanted to get ahead, to prove their superiority over others. The cisgender women who worked at the circus area were resentful, and we had to deal with them.”

She recalls a time when women engaged in sex work, especially trans women, were exploited by all sides, from the police and political groups to men sent to attack them by cisgender women.

“Those people, particularly, benefited from exploiting queer people who were not out. Many people who were engaging in sex work were constantly terrified because their family members were unaware of their gender identity or sexual orientation, forcing them to live a double life. Members of criminal groups could easily blackmail them, force them to agree to sex, or use them to assert power,” she recalls.

“I lost everything, everyone dear to me and had nothing to lose, nothing for them to scare me. I was out, underage, and could use police protection for me or others around me – trans women who were constantly beaten and insulted, and gays who were subjects of humiliating attitudes from the other members of the community. I had to fight all the time, and I don’t even remember much from those years. My memories have faded.”

Nata traces her fingers along the wounds she received from street fights and explains that it taught her the value of knowing one’s rights and the necessity of being as direct as possible when interacting with the police in order to get their attention and urge them to take action.

“Selective approach is the one of many problems; if we conduct an experiment, go out and call the police separately about an attack, you say you’re a journalist, and I say I’m a transgender woman, we’ll see which one they respond to quickly,” she says.

Georgia passed an anti-discrimination law in 2012, which includes a number of protections for LGBTQI persons, however its efficacy is still up for debate.

A 2019 survey conducted by the Tbilisi-based non-government organization Equality Movement found that 11 out of 18 respondents had interacted with law enforcement officers. All 11 reported that police treatment was demeaning and abusive.

Today, the threat of daily attacks is much lower compared to the past and public surveys show positive changes in how society views LGBTQI people. A 2021 report by the Tbilisi-based Women’s Initiatives Supporting Group found that attitudes towards LGBTQI people in Georgia improved compared to 2016. For instance the number of people who perceive talking about the LGBTQI community’s legal equality as “propaganda” and “pushing their way of life on others” reduced from 66.5 percent to 55.9 percent in five years.

However, problems and threats remain very real.







In the months of May and July, queerphobia is at its peak, especially around Pride Week, celebrated the first week in July. This year the closing ceremony was disrupted by far right protesters, and violent groups attacked journalists covering Pride Week in 2021. The organizers of the attack have yet to be punished, and only some of the attackers have been charged. Furthermore, the leaders of an aggressive, pro-Russian group, Alt-Info, continue to issue violent calls and openly threaten those who spread “propaganda of depravity.” Over the past few months, private businesses have come under attack for spreading queer “propaganda.”

Trans people in particular have struggled to find security and sustainability. It is difficult for them to secure jobs or pay for hormone therapy, hair removal, or plastic surgery. These “luxuries” are particularly crucial for some trans people to visually align with their own gender, but priced at \$12,000 to \$20,000, the procedures remain out of reach for most.

Many of the trans women Nata grew up with in Tbilisi either left the country or were killed because they did not receive the support they needed. For instance, her friend Sabi Beriani, a 23-year-old transgender woman, was murdered in Tbilisi on November 11, 2014. Another trans woman, Zizi Shekhiladze, died on November 23, 2016, as a result of injuries endured in Tbilisi on October 14, 2016.

“You had no time to mourn or unwind. After just a few days, you have to start all over again, otherwise you wouldn’t survive,” Nata says.

“When Sabi was killed, I was in Turkey and it was hard for me, but it was even harder when Zizi was killed...I started looking for pepper spray, life started again, I blocked out all the emotions I had felt up until that moment. For the past 15 years I’ve always carried pepper spray, even in the most peaceful places.”

By 2016, Nata decided to work with non-governmental organizations to support the queer community and work with people who needed help. As Nata says, her personal experiences helped her to better understand others in need.

“I know what it’s like to live on the street when no one is there to support you and you don’t have a family to lean on to. There have been times when those I’ve helped disappoint me, but I chose to turn a blind eye just because I understand them.”

She started at the organization Identoba, which was dissolved soon after she joined. She then started working as a coordinator at the Women’s Initiatives Supporting Group. Over the years, she says she realized that most of the people she has helped cannot develop because they spend all their energy simply surviving.

“How are you supposed to think about self-development when you have to constantly think about making a living?!?” she asks.







“It’s more challenging to fit into a different schedule when you work as a sex worker, and at the same time you have to deal with mental health issues, lack of motivation. You need a supporter who won’t let you stop and will motivate you. Even some of the trans women who are able to work in different fields get such dismal salaries that they are forced into sex work.”

In Nata’s scenario, in addition to personal concerns, she has to think about other people’s problems as an activist, which frequently leaves no room for anything else.

“I started learning English, but quickly discovered that I didn’t have any resources, so I left. Constantly concentrating on your own and other people’s issues makes personal development or personal life impossible. You reach a point where no one wants to be in a relationship with you. It’s like a dead end.”

Along with having fewer possibilities for romantic connections, trans women, according to Nata, find it much more difficult to develop a connection with people, to trust, and often the relationships are far from honest.

“Perhaps because we often do not have a relationship with our family, we lack warmth and connection, so we forgive those who give little attention. Such relationships tend to be less honest, with the partner trying to ‘use’ you. For example, sex is less essential to me; I am looking for a housemate with whom I can talk and share emotions, share the responsibilities and with whom I will not be constantly in the role of caregiver – but I haven’t met such a romantic partner yet.”

Nata manages to live independently by working multiple jobs as well as various projects at the same time, but it is difficult and does not leave any time for a personal life.

“I work on a variety of projects, mostly on little pay, in order to support myself. It’s unfair since I’m one of the most visible trans activists with years of expertise, yet I’m always worried about money,” she says. “Many people, however, do not have even that. Even temporary housing for queers is not designed to meet the needs of trans women. What should they do if they are unable to work at night? Furthermore, there are no appropriate services focused on empowering trans women and providing them with the knowledge they need to be economically empowered.”

“Confrontation, division between LGBTQI organizations weakens the community,” Nata explains, noting that “when especially visible events are planned, it is necessary to listen to the ideas, needs, and opinions of the community so that they do not feel isolated from the process. We should assess the dangers carefully, in order not to jeopardize the community’s interests.”

After years of activism, Nata decided to find different ways to protect LGBTQIA+ rights and spend less time working as an activist.

“Progress is slow, but I hope we will be able to build a country in which people who left can return without fear of being hit with a stone,” she says. “Personally, my goal is to have my own house, possibly somewhere in the quiet village, where there are fewer people.”

Until that day, Nata is using the stage and her power as a storyteller to build bridges between the queer community and wider Georgian society.

“I can’t deal with all the crying, so laughter sounds good to me. I never imagined that some people would discover that they had been victims of sexual violence after listening to my stories, some of them were embarrassed to share their experiences, but my monologues helped them to open up,” she says, noting that her performances are so unplanned she normally does not even remember the conversations afterwards.

“The topics of discussion are purely unplanned. I accumulate stories from my personal experiences or conversations with friends – so there is always something to talk about... and so a conversation is born.”

Sister of mine, can you see me?
Not in your dreams, but somewhere there
where we pretend to coexist.
Sister of mine, space
can you question and then unlearn me?
To be able to find me again
in new forms, in a new phase.
Sister of mine, community
do you accept me?
For solidarity and liberation,
where we get lost in mutual esteem.
Sister of mine,
provide some room,
and give me some space
to exist.

A director's note from "Chemo Dao".
Watch it via QR code on page 153



Drag in Armenia: an Evolution of the Artform

**An interview with drag artists
from Armenia**

Text by Aram Amirbekian and Hayk Sargsyan

Photos by Maria Zakaryan

The article was originally published in Armenian and English on *Chai Khana*



Gigi Aries before a performance in December 2022.



Lady Die, February 2023

When Margo Patchi* started performing travesti in Armenia in 2016, drag and travesti shows were just beginning to gain popularity. Drag and travesti artists were largely limited to performing for free at spaces provided by LGBT+ non-governmental organizations or queer-friendly bars, she recalls.

Margo, a travesti performer, notes that while the two art forms gained popularity together, travesti is fundamentally different. Its roots are in theater and it centers around classical or stereotypical femininity. Travesti is often performed by straight people for the sake of comedy and hasn't always been a part of queer culture. Drag, which includes cross-dressing as well, has almost always been done by queer people in mostly queer spaces.

Leona Love Vodkahouse started performing in drag shows in 2017. She recalls that she and her fellow performers were viewed as the “freaks” of the LGBT+ community at that time. Not a lot of people, even in the community, were familiar with either art form. Many confused drag artists with transgender women.

“It was fun back then because there was a lot of hate toward us. Now it’s boring. Everyone loves us. Hate motivated me more to do drag as a protest rather than a celebration,” Leona recalls.

“Doing drag is always expensive and we were doing it without a budget, using our own resources,” she continues. “All art forms need financial support to exist and grow, and without that, we were not able to create new looks or elevate our drag.”

Margo Patchi notes that there was one queer-friendly bar before the 2018 Velvet Revolution where most drag shows took place. It was closed down due to tax evasion not long after the new government came to power. However, this left performers dependent on the non-government organizations that supported them – and they did not always give drag queens total creative freedom. “There was always some kind of censorship which created obstacles for the art form to be free,” she said.

After 2018, major performers, like Leona and Margo, stopped putting on shows because it became too difficult to find safe places for them. Many even left the country.

Drag queen Sisi (a play on the Spanish word for “yes” and Russian slang for “breasts”) decided to use her last public performance to reveal her male persona, an attempt to show the audience how difficult it was to live the life of a drag queen.

“I knew I was moving to Ukraine and no longer wanted to do drag. I had accomplished my mission – I had motivated others, so I felt free to step aside,” she recalls.



After a four-year break, new artists have started performing in Yerevan.

Her inspiration was a song by the ethnic Armenian singer, Charles Aznavour, “What makes a man a man.” Throughout the years, many travesti divas have performed this number, during which they change into their casual clothes while the song talks about the difficulties of doing drag. By the end of her performance, much of the audience was in tears.

Four years later, new opportunities for drag artists began to appear. Old artists, such as Leona, started to perform again at new venues, like Poligraf, a techno club that hosts some queer events.

During a party to celebrate the anniversary of Pink Armenia¹ in December 2022, five people performed, including new artists such as Frigid Bardo, Lady Die, Gigi Aries, and Remi Gelathoe.

The new artists are taking inspiration from Western drag performers while also looking for ways to express their own voices.

Remi Gelathoe first saw drag in person in 2021 in Saint Petersburg, Russia, where they lived for almost six years. After coming back and finding a queer community here, drag became a serious part of Remi’s life.

They decided to create a weekly drag event in Pink Armenia’s¹ community center to give new artists a secure platform to discuss drag culture and watch films about drag history.

¹ A community-based LGBT organization in Armenia



Lady Die and Remi Gelathoe during a rehearsal in Yerevan.



Remi Gelathoe, February 2023

Lady Die, a cis woman in and out of drag, is working to challenge the norms in the queer community. She is inspired by her life and the concept of hyper-femininity, but sometimes she has to explain her drag to more experienced queens.

She notes that her everyday makeup could easily be an exaggerated drag makeup on the faces of the assigned male at birth artists, which shows the effort that she has to put into her art to fit in.

She adds that she faces slut-shaming because the freedom of femininity is associated with sex work, which is also highly stigmatized in the country.

Gigi Aries seeks to keep Armenian culture and society in her performance, although it is a challenge.

“Since childhood, we have been taught what Armenian art and culture is and how pure it is. Now, as a queer adult, who sees all the influences and layers that our culture has, it is very hard to find what speaks to my heart and which parts of national culture would be smartly used in my drag,” she says.



Leona doesn't see her drag as activism. Instead, she views it as a personal way to connect with the queer community.



A wig hangs on the wall in a drag queen's apartment.



Gigi Aries, February 2023

Gigi thinks that drag can be used not only to reclaim the presumably queer aspects of the Armenian history, such as Parajanov's cinema but also to challenge aspects of a culture that have rejected the queer community, for instance by referencing popular Armenian comedy shows in their performances.

In Gigi's view, right now globally drag is trying to be classified as art. She wants to perform in Armenia, even though safe spaces are still hard to find.

“In the past, drag queens were freaks and existed only underground. Now I have the impression that drag artists all around the world are trying to say that they're valid artists too, that they can both make money with what they do and create art, not ‘a freak show,’” Gigi says. **“We're all together in this journey in a way, even though we're in different stages.”**

Right now there are individuals who are trying to keep the emerging art form alive in Armenia. Active artists believe that safe spaces and sufficient payment for performers are necessary to ensure that drag culture grows and develops in the country.

For instance, Sisi worries about safe spaces. She notes that if artists cannot find venues and aren't paid, drag in Armenia will eventually fade away.

“We need to be smarter as a society,” she says. “First, it would be very beneficial for venues from a business point of view, because it would bring flows of people and money... For us artists, it'll also be beneficial in another way, because it will provide a space for us.”

Leona doesn't see her drag as activism. Instead, she views it as a personal way to connect with the queer community.

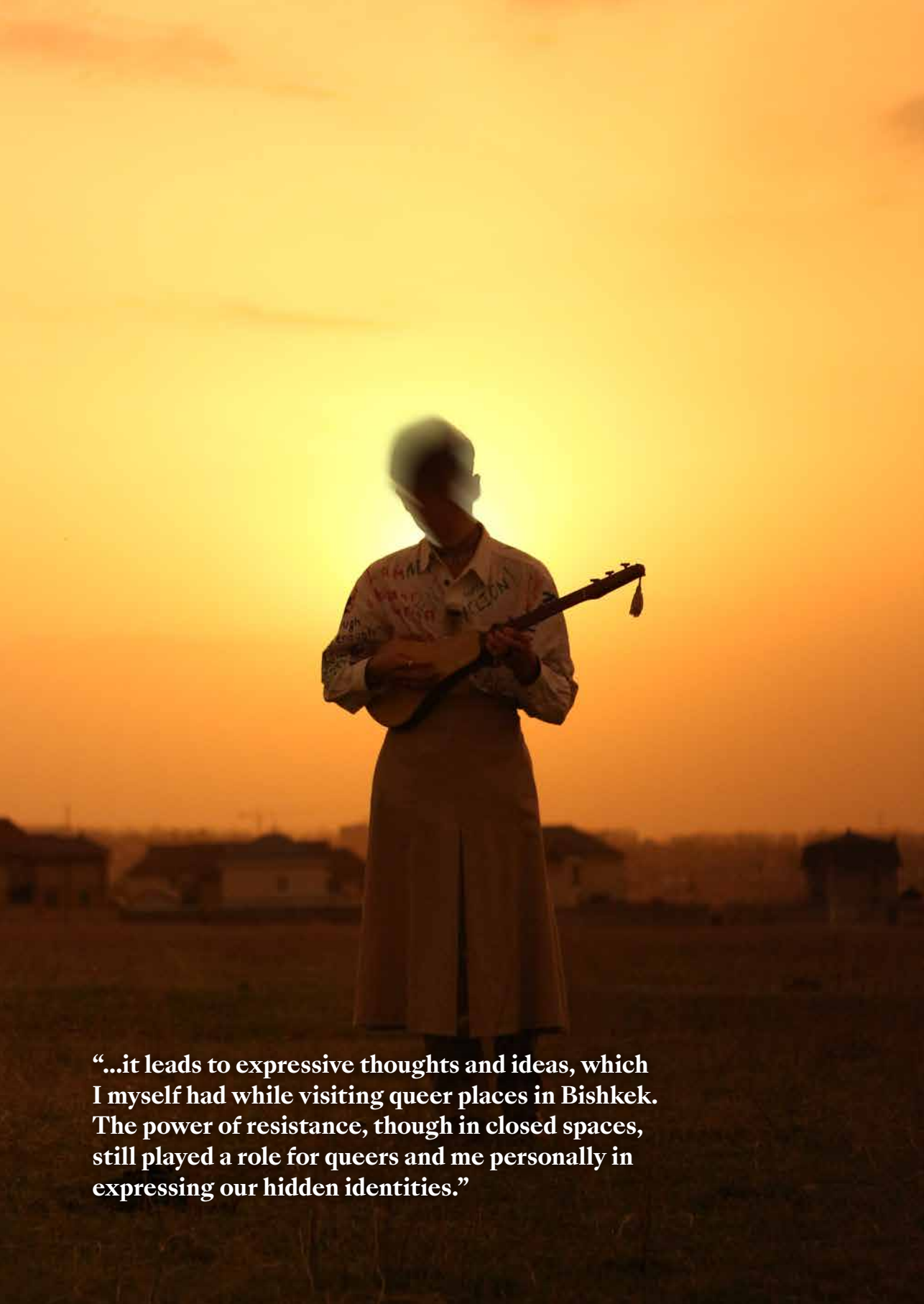
** All respondents are identified by their performance names for their safety.*



Gigi Ariès performing at a club in Yerevan.



A pair of Gigi Ariès' high heel shoes.



“...it leads to expressive thoughts and ideas, which I myself had while visiting queer places in Bishkek. The power of resistance, though in closed spaces, still played a role for queers and me personally in expressing our hidden identities.”



From an essay on queer self-expression.
Read it via QR code on page 153

Defying boundaries: Azerbaijan's drag star

**Lady Slim, an Azerbaijani drag queen,
pushes back against growing anti-queer
restrictions to perform at home and abroad.**

Text and photos by Tati Sattar

Afsana Tahirova contributed to the text and Elturan Mammadov assisted in the photoshoot
The article was originally published in Azerbaijani and English on *Chai Khana*



Hidden amidst the conservative landscape of Azerbaijan's cultural scene, a few drag queens defy societal norms and push the boundaries of expression.

LGBTIQ+ activist Ali Malikov says there are several queer dancers, performers, and DJs in Azerbaijan, but they either have to hide their identities to be able to perform safely, or they are viewed as "marginal entertainers."

Ali believes that the unsafe environment has curtailed the development of queer culture in the country. "You may have noticed that news coverage of queer people is about either death or arrests or any other survival-related issue. We are trying to survive and in these circumstances, it is hard to organise ourselves into wider activism or queer culture development," they say. "Even when we attend usual clubs open to the public, the police raids them, attacks us and pushes us out of these clubs. We are not wanted here."

However, a few brave performers have forged a unique path, captivating select audiences in private gatherings and occasionally venturing beyond their homeland's borders. One star among them is Seymour, the first drag artist in the country known by a stage name, Lady Slim.

“My nickname Lady Slim was created by my mother. When my mother came up with this stage name for me, it seemed very original to me. Then slimming teas and women’s pads came out. It was like everyone was waiting for me.”

Her journey into the world of drag artistry showcases the resilience and determination of those who dare to challenge the status quo.

Born in 1987 in Azerbaijan, Lady Slim’s introduction to drag began unexpectedly, in Russia. After graduating from Baku State University with a degree in history, her passion for dance led her to explore the world beyond her homeland. It was in Moscow that she encountered drag culture for the first time, an encounter – she describes it as “fate” – that changed the trajectory of her life.

Drag queens, such as Lady Slim, are performers who dress in feminine clothes to dismantle societal norms surrounding gender. With heavy makeup, “falsies” to enhance their appearance, and daring outfits, these queens boldly challenge the patriarchal notions of femininity. Lady Slim’s natural dancing talent, combined with her dedication to perfecting her craft by studying performances of famous show-business stars like Lady Gaga, Ani Lorak, and Madonna, have earned her a devoted following.

Lady Slim’s performances have reached a broader audience through appearances on national TV channels in Azerbaijan. In 2010, for the first time, she performed on Azerbaijani Space TV in an entertainment competition called “Who Can Do What.”

She notes, however, that as attitudes towards queer individuals worsened in the country starting in 2015, doors began to close for artists like her. Invitations to perform dwindled, and recordings of her performances were erased from public platforms. Today, her work can only be found on her own social media channels.



Lady Slim's handmade mirror



She says her parents gradually got used to her job and now see it more as a form of parody.



A close-up photograph of a person with dark hair pulled back, wearing a bright orange t-shirt. They are leaning forward, focused on applying eye makeup with a thin brush to their right eye. The background is a light-colored fabric with a subtle, repeating pattern. The lighting is soft and even, highlighting the person's concentration.

“My first makeup experience started in my university days. At that time, I only used foundation and eye pencil. But, I gradually learned to put on makeup like a drag queen when I started my drag queen shows.”

“After graduating I travelled to Moscow and there, for the first time, I discovered drag queening. It was fate,” she says.



In Azerbaijani theatre, in the 19th century, female characters on stage were portrayed by male actors. The scarcity of actresses at that time prompted this cross-dressing phenomenon, but as the number of female performers grew, the practice gradually diminished. Today, there are times when male performers don women's attire for comedic and light-hearted scenes, but it is essential to distinguish these characters from the revered drag queen art form.

Azerbaijan's stance on queer rights remains problematic, with phobic sentiments prevailing within the government and society at large. Although same-sex sexual activity was decriminalised in 2000, discrimination, harassment, attacks, and arrests have become common for LGBTIQ+ citizens.

"The government, the media, the society consistently "others" us, and the result, unfortunately, is mass queerphobia," notes LGBTIQ+ activist Ali Malikov.

Despite these adversities, Lady Slim has remained resolute in her passion for performing, pushing forward, and making a name for herself both in Azerbaijan and internationally. She continues to captivate audiences worldwide, gracing stages in Turkey, Switzerland, Hungary, and even taking home awards from drag competitions in Ukraine and Moldova. Her success in the face of adversity serves as a signal of hope for those navigating the same challenges.

Within her own family, Lady Slim found acceptance and understanding. At first, her parents struggled to understand her career choice, but over time, they grew to appreciate it as a form of parody and embraced her journey. Lady Slim's story stands in stark contrast to others in the community who have experienced rejection from their families, leaving her grateful for the love and support she receives from her parents.

In Azerbaijan, Lady Slim's performances predominantly cater to all-female private parties. Though she occasionally receives invitations to perform at children's birthday parties, she believes that it is the women attending the events who seek her captivating show. She cherishes the open-mindedness and curiosity of young children, who watch with fascination, free from the societal biases that often plague adults.

As Azerbaijan grapples with its stance on LGBTIQ+ rights, artists like Lady Slim remain at the forefront of a cultural movement that challenges norms, fosters acceptance, and paves the way for a more inclusive society. Despite the adversity and bigotry she encounters, her talent and determination shine through, reminding the world that drag culture is more than just entertainment; it is an embodiment of courage, freedom, and the power to redefine social norms.

“I love decorating my costumes with rhinestones, sewing new costumes from scratch, and coming up with new original looks.”







“Since my earliest childhood, I have possessed a natural flair for mimicking people, particularly women, and this talent was well known among my relatives and friends. They constantly reassured me that I was destined to become an artist.”



Lady Slim, a natural dancer with no formal dance education, developed her performances by attentively watching videos of the dances of famous stars whom she wanted to impersonate. Her favorites include American singer Lady Gaga and Ukrainian singer Ani Lorak, although her most loved performer is Madonna.



There was a time when Lady Slim performed shows on national TV channels in Azerbaijan but eventually, they stopped inviting her and recordings of the performances were erased from the channels' websites and social media pages. Today, videos of Lady Slim's previous performances are only available on her own social media channels.



Lady Slim's awards from drag show competitions in Odessa, Ukraine in 2010.



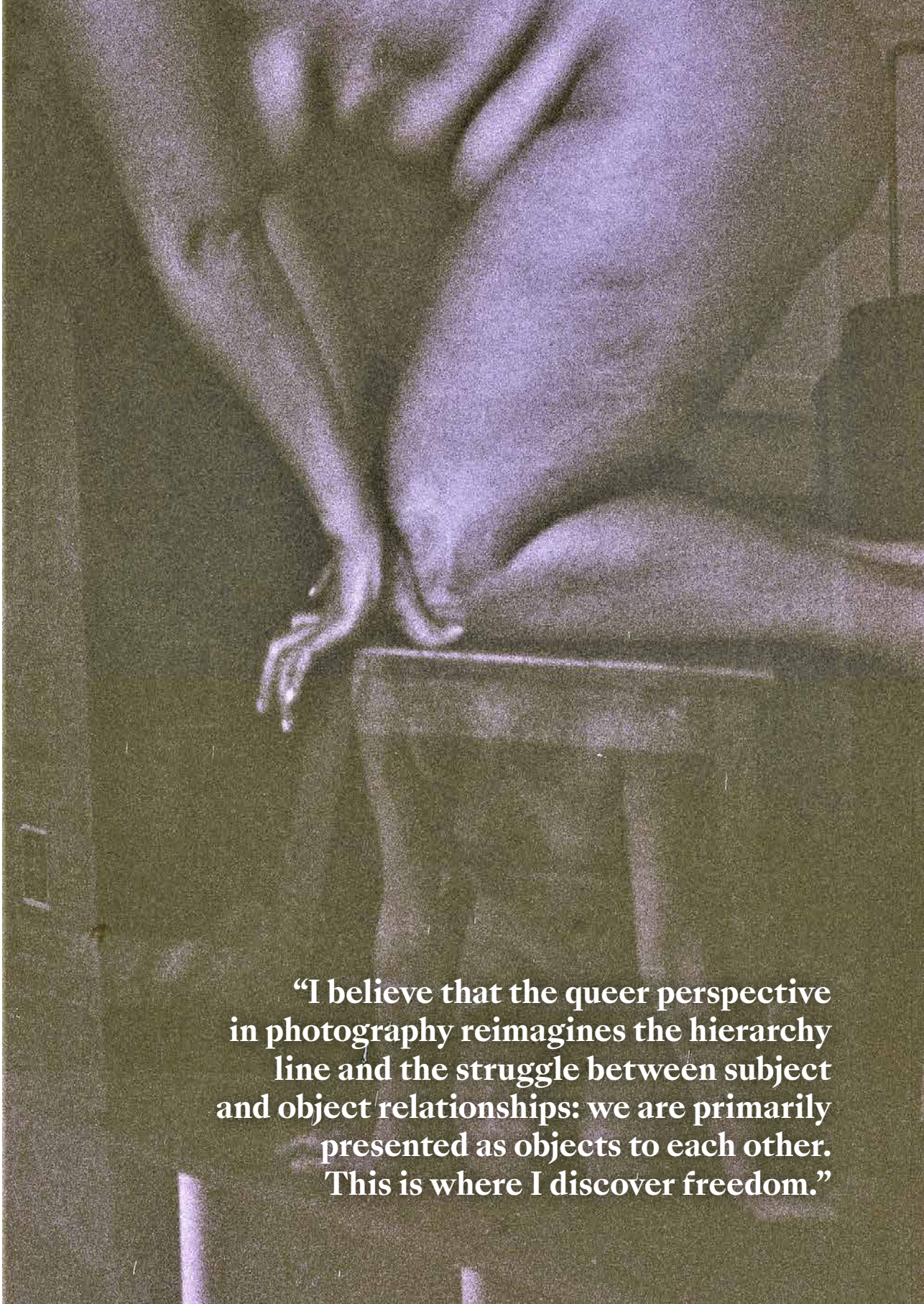
Lady Slim loves to decorate her home herself. She made all the decorations in her apartment.

“I always try to go to the event location about half an hour before because all the dressing and makeup take a lot of time.”





Kateryna on what makes photography queer.
Read it via the QR code on page 155



“I believe that the queer perspective in photography reimagines the hierarchy line and the struggle between subject and object relationships: we are primarily presented as objects to each other. This is where I discover freedom.”

Peculiarities of Running LGBTQ Spaces in Kazakhstan

By Aidar Yelkeyev

LGBTQ activists told Masa Media how such spaces work for their community, and if heterosexual people are welcome there.



Three Stories from Moldova: Drag, Cinema, Literature

By Aliona Ciurca



Interviews with drag dancer Jenny, film festival director Max Cârlan, and writer Sasha Zare.



Colourful Petals

By Artur Kamaroŭski

A Belarusian poet reflects on the ways to create queer poetry using no historical precedent, and on finding that precedent, nonetheless.



Chemo Dao

By Hermine Virabian

A short film about the flourishing drag scene in Tbilisi.



Queer Self-Expression in Kyrgyzstan: Between Cultural Norms and Personal Values

By Anonymous

A personal essay about the desire to live out queerness clashing with cultural context and family needs.





Guess the fact – Queer artist edition

By Queer Qyz

Watch a video where queer artists learn different facts about each other through a game of “Guess the Fact”.



Emotions. Feelings. Uzbekistan

By Sarpa Media

A compilation of collages and sketches made by LGBTQ+ individuals from Uzbekistan. Those artworks conveyed what it feels like to not be able to openly express different emotions and feelings in the everyday life.



Agapon



“Discover Your Own Point of Tension and Pleasure. Trust Both”

By Katerina Turenko

In this candid and personal text, Kateryna shares how she uses erotic photography to understand herself and others on a deeper level.



Behind the Mask: Contemporary Drag Culture in Kazakhstan

By Tolganay Talgat

A documentary, in which artists and performers of different ages, ethnicities, and genders share how they find ways to self-expression and activism in drag.



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