

Queer Studies in Central Asia: activists and scholars explore the development of LGBT community in post-Soviet republics

“In the Know: Sex, Politics and Life of LGBT People in Central Asia,” held 22-23 March 2019, gathered activists, academics, and artists in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, for two days of intense discussions, presentations, and displays of art, publications, and even a fashion show. The Kyrgyzstan LGBT organisation Labrys and the Center for Critical Gender Studies of the American University of Central Asia (AUCA), Bishkek, sponsored the conference. With 32 speakers packed into two ambitiously long days the meeting demonstrated the range and quality of LGBT studies in the region – from Central Asia to Ukraine and Moldova.

The conference took its focus as “the theme” – *tema* in Russian, the language of the conference and the lingua franca of the region. *Tema* is LGBT slang in the Russian-speaking queer world for “the scene,” “queer,” “in the know about LGBT.” This blog features a full report of the papers presented, as observed by Dan Healey, Oxford Faculty of History and School of Global and Area Studies.

“Historical Theme: LGBT-chronicling”.

The first panel of the conference tackled historical issues and practice. In “Fake History? How Should We Understand the Desire for History in the LGBT Movement of the Post-Soviet Region?” Healey argued that historians, activists, and artists have good reasons to build bridges and tear down disciplinary conventions when it comes to constructing usable pasts drawing on examples from Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. Geo Sharovara (Kyiv) described the role of Ukraine’s most successful pre-digital magazine (*Odyn z nas*) in building community. Sasha Toivo Fainberg, also of Kyiv, analysed the experience of composing and conducting LGBT-history tours of Kyiv. Yuliia Serdiukova and Nadia Chushak argued for the creation, not discovery, of archives that are meaningful to LGBT communities. In the ensuing discussion the ethical problems involved in doing queer histories in hostile environments were aired and the element of invention, fantasy, and emotions in generating usable pasts was explored.

“Typical Theme: LGBT-Ethnography”

Conference co-organiser Mohira Suyarkulova (AUCA, Bishkek) spoke about her survey of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan and their understandings of safer sex education work in the local context. Her interpretation of the data led her to question the use of LGBT as a package of labels, and suggest “tema” as a more useful umbrella term. Migration within and beyond Central Asia, a lack of safe-sex awareness, and violent sexual contacts were among the issues uncovered by a team of co-researchers. Nina Bagdasarova (AUCA, Bishkek) offered a rich study of “the informal life of LGBT-communities in Bishkek and Osh.” Her paper revealed the pressures of a hostile environment and their mitigation in the “heteroptia” of LGBT-friendly clubs. Freedom and physical, emotional, security are experienced only sporadically in such spaces; the only queer club in the Kyrgyz capital is called “London” which hints at the powerful draw of Western models in the imagination of the “thematic” people she interviewed. Finally Gulzada Serzhan and Zhanar Sekerbaeva (Almaty, Kazakhstan) described their incredibly ambitious survey of 227 LBQ women across Kazakhstan, revealing a range of struggles to build viable lives among various ethnic, linguistic, and class demographics. For LBQ Kazakhs, the information environment hampers self-realisation: Kazakh has the word “kisé” – an honoured, respected person for whom one feels tenderness – that operates in

the space occupied by “tema” in Russian, but the researchers commented how “broken Russian” and a lack of adequate conceptions of the self, structured people’s lives. Discussion after the papers flowed between questions of the need for more ethnographic work across Central Asia, based on local realities, and drawing on participant observation and digital sourcing of informants.

“Typical Theme: Auto-Ethnography”

In this powerful session, two Ukrainian speakers and two Kyrgyz speakers described diverse experiences of activism and personal reflection. Diana Arsen’eva (Labrys, Bishkek) spoke of her love of women’s football and the culture of homosociality between girls it engenders from school age into adulthood. Her experience of “silences” and evasions among coaches observing lesbian affairs, and the tensions created by affairs between members of different teams, were among the many issues she encountered. Galina Sokolova (Kyiv, Bishkek) spoke of her joy and sorrow at engaging in activism; as a young person she abandoned her “heterocamouflage” and created a domestic and social environment that elevated her, and when she left activism it was like leaving a lover, emotionally wrenching. Yuri Frank (Kyiv) set out his life of activism and self-exploration as a female-to-male trans person, working in the privileged NGO sector in Ukraine. He commented on his rejection of gender-binarity (*binarnost’* in Russian) and the challenges of doing so in heavily gendered Slavic languages. Anastasia-Eva Kristel’ Domani (Kyiv) presented a detailed and searing account of her journey from male to female in contemporary Ukraine as the medical and legal regime for transitioning was reformed after the Revolution of Dignity. In the ensuing discussion the questions of LGBT mental health and self-reflection in personal writing and online blogging dominated the debate.

“Cultural Theme: cinema, art, fashion”

This rich section began with Kazakh political art and ended with a Kyrgyz fashion show! Saltanat Shoshanova (Almaty/Berlin) described how Kazakh nationalism was a state project in reaction to Russian President Vladimir Putin’s denigration of Kazakhstan’s statehood. Artists and LGBT activists have generated memes, art projects, and videos challenging the Russian-versus-Gayropa political binary and mocking local Kazakh invented traditions as heteronormative and dangerously conservative. Yuliia Tolikina (Barnaul, Russia) spoke about a range of female underground and indie pop groups and performers in Russian music, and their development of feminist rap styles. Julie Cassiday (Williamstown, Mass.) presented a queer reading of the arthouse film “Pyl” (Dust) directed by Sergei Loban in 2005. Usually read as an allegory about Putin authoritarianism, Cassiday argued Dust also carries a politically relevant queer narrative as the demasculinised hero’s degradation at the hands of the FSB progresses. Tonia Melnik (Kyiv), artist-activist, described her experiments in generating queer feminist pornography and the obstacles to its reception in her art college (in St Petersburg). The session finished with 8 models - representing the various permutations of L, G, B, T, and Q identities – wearing fabulous clothes by designers Adyl and Din, embodying “How to Dress Bishkek Tema-style”. The discussion that followed focused on the barriers and challenges to political activism in Central Asia as seen in the artwork, fashion designs, and pornography projects presented.

“Official Theme: post-Soviet LGBT institutions”

This session looked at three different styles of activism in the wider region. Aleksei Marchkov (Kishinev, Moldova) set out the history and activity of “Genderdok-M”, an LGBT archive established

in the late 1990s on the model of a Moscow analogue. Genderdok-M, one of the most successful such collections in the former USSR, houses material archives of the pre-digital 1990s queer communities and publications; and it also has worked closely with European partners in Holland to transfer skills and raise funds. Anna Dovgopol (Kyiv) and Anna Kirei (London) described how they were involved in setting up “Labrys” in Bishkek in the early 21C. They moved from university-sponsored projects to finding international support that resulted in the rental of office space in a flat, providing “a safe space to be ourselves” and offering refuge during the 2010 Bishkek revolution. As non-Kyrgyz members of the ethnically diverse Kyrgyzstan community they felt able to express themselves more boldly, and yet they insist Labrys became a “uniquely Kyrgyz organisation” unlike western LGBT organisations, because of the forms of self-help and work Labrys does. In Prague and Almaty-based Anatolii Chernousov’s presentation, he surveyed the online presence of information about queer organisations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Certain groups have significant self-curated web-presences plus extensive mass-media mentions, while others seem to avoid online expression either from a lack of resources or a decision to remain below the radar. Post-presentation discussion revolved around the problems of handing down queer information to the next generation; of the role of institutions in community building; and of access to essential information online via Wikipedia and other platforms.

“Foreign Theme: LGBT- organisations as foreign agents?”

This session considered impacts of recent (Russia-inspired and local) conservative, anti-Western politicisation of foreign influence on LGBT communities in the region. Karolina Kliuchevskaia (Dushanbe, Tajikistan) described her research work in the HIV-education sector in the country and the donors’ “provocative effect” in seeking to produce a Western style LGBT-movement in this still relatively traditional setting. The problem of donor agendas versus those of local communities stood out in sharp relief. Dulat Ilyasov (Astana, Kazakhstan) gave a superb reflective talk about the meaning of “tema” versus “gei” in Kazakhstan queer community understandings; the talk exposed the confrontation between the fact that LGBT Kazakhs manage liveable lives using “tema” and the powerful global “import” of the “gay” label and lifestyle. “Tema” has its limitations as it cannot adapt to human-rights discourse, but in local and pragmatic terms it is inclusive and builds interesting solidarities. Ruslana Panukhnik (Kyiv), director of Kyiv Pride, defended the adoption of the “pride march” model of western-style activism as a means of achieving visibility, solidarity, mainstreaming awareness, and as connecting with an international movement. The vigorous discussion after this session concentrated on decolonising Central Asian LGBT movements, questioning the search for “conservative local authenticity” in the face of political pressures, reflecting on Western divisions over the strategy of “Pride,” and finally insisting on the LGBT community’s right to adopt and adapt foreign concepts and ideas in a global world with highly mobile activists.

“Radical Theme: LGBT activism beyond the politics of identities”

The final, two-part session of the conference turned to the political economy of doing LGBT activism in the region, and thinking critically about the economic structures that obstruct and enable LGBT politics. Elena Gapova (Ann Arbor, Michigan) spoke about the theoretical underpinnings behind the identity politics of the 1970s onwards, and the “new social movements” that focused on culture rather than class. Class analysis needs more sophisticated modelling based on lifestyle and other

markers: “We started dressing much better under Putin” expresses the class outlook of the contemporary Russian. Olga Sasunkevich (Goteborg, Sweden) offered an analysis of a recent 8th March demonstration in St Petersburg (Russia) as an intersection of identity and class politics, with an emphasis on precarity as a condition of the demonstrators’ existence. Conference co-organiser Georgy Mamedov (AUCA, Bishkek) presented a rich commentary on the precarity of LGBT movements in the region, operating against the backdrop of globalisation and suffering from the long neoliberal disconnect between sexual and class politics. “Tema” might be imbued with a class-critical content as well as a queer agenda, he argued. The ensuing debate considered the various uses of “tema” in the Central Asian context, with the building of belonging and solidarities offering its most optimistic potential; and the problems of precarity, and extreme poverty of some activists contrasted with the privilege of some academics also stimulating lively reflection.

In the second part of this session three speakers addressed methods of radical activism. Elena Kim (AUCA, Bishkek) discussed the activism of Toronto sociologist George W. Smith, who led a political campaign against the state’s assault on gay bathhouses in 1981 in Toronto. His methods of pragmatic analysis based on Dorothy Smith’s “sociology for people” deconstructed police tactics and illuminated pathways to the fightback. (As a young man I served as George Smith’s secretary in the Right To Privacy Committee he directed, and it was extraordinary to hear this sophisticated commentary on his work, half a world away from Canada! – DH) Anara Moldosheva (Bishkek) presented “an activists’ notes” reflecting on the recent 8th March demonstration (2019) in Bishkek which had a rainbow flag – getting a sharp response from conservative parliamentary deputies in the process. Vishnia Vishnia (Kyiv) set out an online platform for radical feminist and “organisations whose politics we like” from Queer Anarcho-feminists to radical music groups. The discussion following this section expanded on the problems of in-group fragmentation and innovation, and finding methods that build solidarities that last.

Concluding thoughts

This intense two days left me dazzled by the range and promise of LGBT activism in post-Soviet space. Four themes seemed to stand out as I left the conference:

a) The confidence and pride in a locally set agenda of activism was an upbeat, palpable, and inspiring feature of this conference. The activists described a host of accomplishments local to their environment that owed much to their own energy, creativity, and desires. There seemed to be less fragmentation between people than a close solidarity of common causes and understandings of possibilities. By talking about what activists do and want, the conference avoided an all-too-easy focus on homophobia, damage, and limits. This was uplifting.

b) “Tema” offered ways of thinking positively about how LGBT people live and work in the region. Individuals have to negotiate safety versus “visibility” and find ways of transferring knowledge between generations of LGBT people – and *tema* helps with its local meaning and flexibility. *Tema* also addresses the context of decolonisation across the region: a double colonisation that subordinates many post-Soviet countries to both the old “metropole” Russia and the “new centre” – the West.

c) Decolonisation of the LGBT movement agenda in the region is also reflected in the transnational movement of ideas and activists. As the stories of several presenters showed, activists are highly

mobile and no post-soviet republic stands entirely alone (although some, like Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, are more isolated than others). Russian as a medium of communication in the region is a multivalent and potentially progressive language, not merely a conduit for Kremlin messaging.

d) The fast pace of change in the region is something that all parties at the conference recognised. There was pride in what has been achieved in a short period and excitement about the potential for collaboration and progress despite the negative political atmosphere. At the same time there is no linear vector of “progress” toward a “Western” style LGBT-rights agenda or environment. As the papers demonstrated, many forms of LGBT advance are taking place within some very traditional or conservative societies that have little space for “queer visibility” or “coming out”; the future looks as likely to be as complex as the present is.

Dan Healey

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