

PEOPLE WITHOUT A FUTURE: THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY IN KAZAKHSTAN

Igor A. Kotler

Kazakhstan, a former republic of the Soviet Union, possesses a long and deeply entrenched history of hostility toward homosexuals and other members of the LGBTQ community. During the Soviet period, homosexuality was criminalized and systematically used by the authorities as a tool of social control against both sexual minorities and political dissidents. Charges related to homosexuality were frequently employed to remove individuals from public life and place them in prisons, labor camps, or psychiatric institutions under deeply stigmatizing accusations. Historically, homosexuality constituted a criminal offense under the laws of the Russian Empire, which governed the territory of present day Kazakhstan beginning in the nineteenth century. Although the Bolshevik Revolution initially led to the formal decriminalization of homosexuality in portions of the Soviet Union, Soviet authorities simultaneously classified homosexuality as a pathological condition incompatible with the ideological and moral foundations of socialist society. Moreover, decriminalization did not occur uniformly throughout the USSR. In several Soviet republics, including Tajikistan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Georgia, homosexual conduct continued to constitute a criminal offense.

In 1934, the Stalinist government restored criminal liability for homosexuality throughout the Soviet Union through the adoption of the notorious Article 121, which imposed prison sentences of up to five years for consensual same sex relations between men. Soviet authorities and society at large subjected homosexuals to intense stigma, social exclusion, surveillance, and

humiliation, forcing many individuals to conceal their identities entirely in order to survive. The second edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia characterized homosexuality as a “sexual perversion” incompatible with the “healthy morals” of Soviet society and explicitly described it as shameful and criminal. Similar rhetoric continued to appear in later Soviet publications, including the Soviet Encyclopedic Dictionary of 1984, which described homosexuality as a form of “sexual subversion.”¹ Thousands of homosexuals were imprisoned under the Soviet regime, where they frequently occupied the lowest levels within prison hierarchies and experienced abuse from both guards and fellow inmates.

These ideological frameworks reinforced widespread hostility toward both gay men and lesbians throughout the Soviet period. Scholars such as Dr. Igor Kon, one of the leading sociologists of sexuality in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, noted that lesbians were subjected to ridicule, exclusion from universities, dismissal from employment, threats involving the removal of children, and broader social ostracism comparable to that experienced by gay men.²

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan formally decriminalized homosexuality in 1998. Nevertheless, deep rooted hostility toward LGBTQ individuals persisted and in many respects intensified within the context of rising Kazakh nationalism, increasing religious conservatism, and the growing influence of traditionalist interpretations of Islam in a society that is approximately seventy percent Muslim.³ Although same sex relations are no longer criminal offenses under Kazakh law, homosexuality continues to be widely regarded by many segments of society as morally unacceptable and contrary to traditional social and religious

¹ Sovetskii entsiklopedicheskii slovar', 3rd edition. Moscow, 1984, p. 320.

² Igor Kon. Soviet Homophobia. 1998 <http://www.gay.ru/english/history/kon/soviet.htm>

³ http://www.stat.kz/news/Pages/n2_12_11_10.aspx

values. Numerous reports by human rights organizations, activists, and sociological surveys indicate that LGBTQ individuals in Kazakhstan remain highly vulnerable to intimidation, violence, social exclusion, and abuse by both private actors and state authorities.⁴

According to research conducted by the Soros Foundation, more than 81 percent of LGBTQ respondents stated that society treated LGBTQ individuals with prejudice and disrespect, while over half reported concealing their sexual orientation from others out of fear. Nearly one quarter of respondents stated that they had experienced physical or psychological violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Approximately fifteen percent of reported attacks were allegedly committed by law enforcement officers themselves.⁵ Oleg Ivanov, a coordinator of social and educational projects at the Community Fund, an LGBTQ organization in Kazakhstan, stated that many victims seeking assistance from the organization described abuse by family members, classmates, healthcare workers, and police officers. He further observed that complaints submitted to the police frequently failed to produce any meaningful results and, in many cases, worsened the situation for victims.⁶ These conditions have forced many LGBTQ individuals in Kazakhstan to remain effectively invisible within society, creating a “gray zone” in which reliable information about abuses remains difficult to document because victims fear exposure and retaliation.

⁴ State-sponsored Homophobia: A world survey of laws prohibiting same sex activity between consenting adults, ILGA Report, May 2010, available at http://old.ilga.org/Statehomophobia/ILGA_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_2010.pdf [last accessed on January 27]

⁵ Невидимые и незащищенные: лесбиянки, геи, бисексуалы и трансгендеры в казахстане (Invisible and Unprotected: LGBTQ in Kazakhstan), SOROS, November 2009, http://www.soros.kz/sites/default/files/LGBTQ_report_web_RU.pdf

⁶ Психологическое и физическое насилие — основные проблемы геев в Казахстане (Psychological and Physical Violence is the main problem of gay people in Kazakhstan), Amulet, January 2012 http://www.gay.kz/psihologicheskoe_i_fizicheskoe_nasilie_osnovnie_problemi_geev_v_kazahstane.html

Several organizations advocating for LGBTQ rights operate within Kazakhstan, including the Amulet Non-Governmental Association, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance, and the Community Fund. However, these organizations have repeatedly encountered pressure, harassment, and intimidation because of their activities. In November 2011, Kazakh police raided the office of the Community Fund, searched the premises without a valid warrant, and collected personal information concerning staff members. The raid was reportedly followed by threatening phone calls and extortion attempts.⁷ In January 2012, three employees of the organization reportedly disappeared under unclear circumstances.⁸ LGBTQ activists in Kazakhstan continue to describe a climate in which advocacy itself exposes individuals to significant personal danger.

Openly gay and lesbian individuals frequently report that public spaces in Kazakhstan are unsafe. Denis Kokorin, a resident of Temirtau interviewed in the documentary “Ich bin nicht krank, ich bin schwul” (“I am not sick, I am gay”),⁹ stated that he relied almost exclusively on taxis because using public transportation as an openly gay person was, in his words, “borderline suicidal.”¹⁰ The documentary portrays an intensely hostile social environment in which sexual minorities are frequently subjected to robberies, assaults, extortion, and violence while police officers often demonstrate little willingness to investigate such incidents. Numerous cases reported by local media and activists illustrate the severity of this hostility. In 2014, media outlets reported the brutal murder and dismemberment of lesbian woman Kristina Chernysheva

⁷ Сотрудники полиции производят незаконную проверку в штабе ЛГБТ-организации (Police officers conducted warrantless search in the headquarters of the LGBTQ organization), Amulet, November 2011, http://www.gay.kz/sotrudniki_policii_proizvodjat_nezakonnuju_proverku_v_shtabe_LGBTQorganizacii.html

⁸ Пропали сотрудники Фонда "Community" (Employees of the Community Fund Disappeared), Aulet, January 2012, http://www.gay.kz/propali_sotrudniki_fonda_Community_1.html

⁹ Немецкий фильм о гомофобии в Казахстане (German Documentary about Homophobia in Kazakhstan), August 2013, <http://dw.de/p/19LId>

¹⁰ Немецкий фильм о гомофобии в Казахстане (German Documentary about Homophobia in Kazakhstan), August 2013, <http://dw.de/p/19LId>

after she and her partner publicly held a symbolic wedding ceremony in Karaganda.¹¹ In 2015, a gay club in Karaganda was forced to close only two days after opening due to threats from local residents.¹² In 2016, homophobes in Semey reportedly lured a gay man to a meeting under false pretenses, assaulted him, and attempted to rob him.¹³ LGBTQ activists and community members have repeatedly reported incidents involving physical assaults, dismissal from employment, threats of violence, and pervasive social hostility.¹⁴ LGBTQ rights activists also say the community is subjected to physical and psychological abuse, social isolation, and aggressive condemnation.¹⁵

The lack of openly available information concerning the LGBTQ community in Kazakhstan should not be interpreted as evidence of tolerance or safety. On the contrary, many LGBTQ individuals conceal their identities precisely because exposure may lead to abuse, loss of employment, intimidation by authorities, violence from private actors, or rejection by family and community members.¹⁶ Human rights organizations continue to document harassment directed not only at LGBTQ individuals themselves but also at organizations and activists attempting to support them. Kazakhstan's Ministry of Defense classifies homosexuality as a "mental disorder" and bars openly gay individuals from military service, further reinforcing

¹¹ Kazakhstan: Brutal killing ends first 'gay marriage', BBC, May 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-news-from-elsewhere-27426534>

¹² В Караганде гей-клуб из-за угроз жителей закрылся через два дня после открытия (A Gay Club in Karaganda was Closed Two Days after Its Opening Because of Threats of the Locacals). Nur KZ News Agency. July 23, 2015. <https://www.nur.kz/828480-v-karagande-gey-klub-iz-za-ugroz-zhitele.html>

¹³ В Семее парни выманили гея на интимное свидание, избили и вымогали деньги (Young Men in Semey Lured a Man to an Intimate Date, Beat Him Up and Extorted Money). Nur Kz News Agency. September 20, 2016. <https://www.nur.kz/1257410-v-semee-parni-vymanili-geya-na-intimnoe.html>

¹⁴ Гомофобия в действии. Каково быть геєм или лесбиянкой в Казахстане (Homophobia in Action. What It Is Like to Be a Gay of a Lesbian in Kazakhstan?)

¹⁵ Что такое гомофобия и как она проявляется в Казахстане (What is Homophobia and How It Is Expressed in Kazakhstan). Inform Byuro News Agency. May 17, 2018. <https://informburo.kz/cards/chto-takoe-gomofobiya-i-kak-ona-proyavlyaetsya-v-kazahstane.html>

¹⁶ Невидимые и незащищенные: лесбиянки, геи, бисексуалы и трансгендеры в казахстане (Invisible and Unprotected: LGBTQ in Kazakhstan), SOROS, November 2009, http://www.soros.kz/sites/default/files/LGBTQ_report_web_RU.pdf

institutional stigma. Reports of beatings, workplace exclusion, bullying, online harassment, and violent assaults remain common.¹⁷

The rise in violence directed at LGBTQ individuals in Kazakhstan in recent years has been especially alarming. Reports indicate increasing incidents involving physical assaults, torture, sexual violence, conversion practices, and attacks with weapons. One particularly disturbing case involved a gay man named Ayan, who reported that individuals posing as potential romantic partners lured him to an apartment where he was brutally tortured throughout the night. According to his account, he was beaten, burned with an iron, strangled, sexually assaulted, and pressured to identify other LGBTQ individuals.¹⁸ Such incidents illustrate the extreme vulnerability faced by sexual minorities in Kazakhstan and the atmosphere of impunity surrounding anti-LGBTQ violence.

Daniyar Sabitov, editor of the LGBTQ focused website Kok.team, has described homophobia in Kazakhstan as existing both “at the state level and in society.” According to Sabitov, state level hostility includes public statements by lawmakers condemning LGBTQ individuals and unlawful police raids on gay clubs, while societal hostility ranges from verbal insults to severe violence and murder. He argues that official rhetoric contributes directly to legitimizing broader societal aggression.¹⁹ Experts analyzing attacks on LGBTQ activists in cities such as Shymkent have pointed to multiple contributing factors, including conservative

¹⁷ Anastasiya Fershtey, Khamza Sharifzoda. Life in the Closet: The LGBTQ Community in Central Asia. The Diplomat, January 29, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/life-in-the-closet-the-LGBTQ-community-in-central-asia/>

¹⁸ Sholpan Orazbekova. "Мы из тебя сейчас будем делать натурала". Гей из Казахстана рассказал о пытках и изнасиловании ["We Are Going To Make You Natural (Straight)." Gay from Kazakhstan Told about Torture and Rape]. Nastoiashchee vremia, September 30, 2019. <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/beatn-gay-kazakhstan/30189708.html>

¹⁹ Zhanara Kangtarbay, Farangis Najibullah. Life On Hold: Fearing Discrimination, Kazakh Pair Keeps Gender On The Q.T. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 19, 2020. <https://www.rferl.org/a/life-on-hold-fearing-discrimination-kazakh-pair-keeps-gender-on-the-q-t-/30621098.html>

social norms, economic frustrations, growing religiosity, and the influence of Russian nationalist and anti LGBTQ propaganda.

LGBTQ individuals in Kazakhstan also face severe difficulties within the healthcare system. A 2020 study examining the experiences of transgender individuals found that more than eighty percent of respondents had experienced violence or mistreatment connected to their gender identity. Seventy percent reported psychological abuse, while approximately one third experienced physical violence.²⁰ The experiences of the Feminita organization in 2021 further demonstrated the risks associated with LGBTQ advocacy. Activists Gulzada Serzhan and Zhanar Sekerbaeva attempted to hold a meeting concerning the rights of lesbian, bisexual, queer, and transgender individuals in Shymkent. After the venue owners canceled the meeting under pressure, the activists were attacked by a hostile crowd, physically assaulted, and detained by police officers rather than protected. Video footage from the incident showed aggressive individuals surrounding the activists while police officers forcibly removed them from the premises. Meanwhile, crowds gathered outside police facilities demanding that the detainees be handed over to them.²¹

Many LGBTQ individuals in Kazakhstan continue to conceal their identities in order to avoid violence, humiliation, and social exclusion.²² Reports indicate that anti-LGBTQ violence increased significantly in 2022 compared to previous years, including incidents involving forced

²⁰ Дискриминация и насилие в медицинских учреждениях в отношении транслюдей в Казахстане (Discrimination and violence against transgender people in medical institutions in Kazakhstan). Alma-TQ, July 16, 2021. https://www.alma-tq.org/post/_3236

²¹ Bagdat Asylbek. Нетерпимость и агрессия к ЛГБТ+. В чем причины гомофобии в Казахстане? (Intolerance and aggression towards LGBTQ+. What are the causes of homophobia in Kazakhstan?). Radio Azatyk, July 7, 2021. <https://rus.azattyq.org/a/kazakhstan-homophobia-causes-of-aggression/31292952.html?nocache=1>

²² Sexual Minorities In Kazakhstan Hide Who They Are To Avoid Abuse. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 19, 2021. <https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-LGBTQ-hide-from-abuse/31316186.html>

“conversion” practices and severe physical assaults.²³ In April 2024, members of the Mazhilis, Kazakhstan’s parliament, proposed introducing criminal liability for so called “LGBTQ propaganda.”²⁴ LGBTQ individuals in Kazakhstan continue to face severe hostility, abuse, and systemic mistreatment. Members of the LGBTQ community are subjected to violence and intimidation both by segments of the general public and by law enforcement authorities..²⁵ In July 2025, the state affiliated National Endowment for Prosperity claimed that a majority of respondents supported restricting “LGBT propaganda,” though the organization declined to publish the full methodology or underlying data. Several members of parliament subsequently expressed support for preparing restrictive legislation.²⁶

LGBTQ individuals in Kazakhstan remain an extremely vulnerable and socially isolated group living in an atmosphere marked by fear, hostility, intimidation, violence, and persecution. Many avoid reporting abuse because exposure of their sexual orientation or gender identity may result in even more severe repercussions within an increasingly conservative and religious social environment. Individuals whose identities become known frequently face persecution, harassment, coercion, exclusion, and aggressive hostility from both private actors and state authorities. Entrenched homophobia at both societal and institutional levels places LGBTQ persons in Kazakhstan at constant risk of violence and severe mistreatment. Recent political and social developments further suggest that the situation of LGBTQ individuals is likely to

²³ Report on Violations of LGBTQ People's Rights in Kazakhstan in 2022. ECON, April 25, 2023 <https://ecom.ngo/news-ecom/report-violations-rights-kazakhstan>

²⁴ Alina Shashkina. Лишать свободы за пропаганду ЛГБТ могут начать в Казахстане [Imprisonment for LGBT propaganda may begin in Kazakhstan]. TengriNews, April 10, 2024. https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/lishat-svobodyi-za-propagandu-lgbt-mogut-nachat-v-kazahstane-531833/

²⁵ Leila Mekhdi. Dark Times Are Looming over the LGBTQ Community in Kazakhstan. The Caspian Post, February 14, 2024. <https://caspianpost.com/en/post/dark-times-are-looming-over-the-LGBTQ-community-in-kazakhstan>

²⁶ Joint statement: Kazakhstan must withdraw its plans to adopt anti-LGBTI laws and uphold its human rights commitments. OMCT, September 2, 2025, <https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/joint-statement-kazakhstan-must-withdraw-its-plans-to-adopt-anti-lgbti-laws-and-uphold-its-human-rights-commitments>

deteriorate in the foreseeable future. The growing influence of conservative ideology, increasingly hostile public rhetoric, and support for restrictive measures targeting LGBTQ communities indicate an escalating climate of persecution against sexual and gender minorities in Kazakhstan.

May 8, 2026