

Donors' LGBT Support in Tajikistan: Promoting Diversity or Provoking Violence?

Written by Karolina Kluczevska

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/08/12/donors-lgbt-support-in-tajikistan-promoting-diversity-or-provoking-violence/>

KAROLINA KLUCZEWSKA, AUG 12 2019

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Umed misses the Soviet times: “I wish the Soviet times came back. I know that everyone says it, people had jobs, education and hospitals were for free. But for ‘our people’ [nashi] it was also a good time, because no one knew about us and no one paid attention to us. We could spend the whole day lying in a park in Dushanbe and cuddling with friends. Everything started changing in mid-1980s, with perestroika.[1] People started reading foreign newspapers, watching American movies, they discovered about our existence.”[2] The 55-year-old man claims that it was a period of freedom for him and his friends who are homosexual. In the Soviet period, homosexuality was criminalised by law and treated by doctors as a psychiatric disorder. At the same time, the topic of what in Russian is described as ‘non-standard’ or ‘non-traditional’ sexuality (*nestandartnaya/netradiconnaya orientaciya*) was practically nonexistent in the society, and a lack of public awareness about it offered a certain degree of freedom to LGBT people, as labelled in mainstream activism. Umed believes that nowadays, the situation is reversed. While same-sex relations were decriminalised in independent Tajikistan in 1998, it is the growing visibility that provokes a social backlash.

This chapter touches upon a problematic relationship between international norms and local practice, putting norms promoted by international donors face to face with popular beliefs in Tajikistan. Can the promotion of social inclusion and LGBT activism by donors lead to more violence? To answer this question, I focus on why and how international norms are contested in Tajikistan, by looking at popular discourse on sexuality. It is important to recognise that sexuality includes not only aspects of personal life charged with erotic meaning, but also the social construction of them – history, practices, discourses, and identities (Andermahr et al. 1997, 245). Thus, to understand the public stance on LGBT people, I look at the local normative order concerning family and social relations more broadly, as they reflect a collective understanding of behaviours that the society considers proper. I argue that, first, donors have taken a wrong approach to promoting LGBT rights. Their approach has been based on the promotion of social activism and has drawn on the experiences of social movements in the Western world, such as the Gay Liberation Movement (1969–1974) and the LGBT rights movement (1970s onward), that have pushed for acceptance of LGBT people in society. This approach is viewed as confrontational in Tajikistan, and has led to a growing social backlash against a growing visibility of LGBT issues. Secondly, the adverse public reaction to LGBT issues in Tajikistan should not be interpreted as homophobic. Instead, this reaction is an expression of public objection to foreign interference in the local normative order and what is seen as an arrival of Western values threatening local culture and beliefs.

The chapter proceeds in the following way. First, it shortly explains the historical and legal framework of LGBT issues in contemporary Tajikistan, referring to the Soviet history of the country, and influences from and parallels with post-Soviet Russia. Second, it describes the arrival of international donors and outlines their approaches to LGBT issues. In turn, by drawing on interviews with social leaders in Tajikistan, the chapter explains common assumptions about sexuality in Tajikistan, in accordance with popular beliefs and social arrangements. Finally, the chapter draws conclusions as to why, despite the undoubtedly good intentions of the donor community, foreign projects aiming at the emancipation of LGBT persons, the promotion of tolerance and the public recognition of the civil rights of LGBT

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persons in Tajikistan have had a contrary effect in the country.

Historical and Legal Framework of LGBT Issues in Tajikistan

A quick look at the Soviet past of Tajikistan provides a necessary background to understand the state's and the public's current attitudes toward LGBT people. The Soviet era imposed the first form of statehood on modern Central Asia and fundamentally reshaped Central Asian societies (Mamedov and Shatalova 2016). Over a quarter of the century since independence, the Soviet social and cultural legacy, as well as Russian influence, continue to affect politics and society in Central Asian successor states (Akyildiz and Carlson 2014).

Since 1934, homosexuality was illegal in the Soviet context. Although Soviet morality did recognise sexual freedom, this freedom was limited to relations between people of different sex (De Jong 1982). Same-sex relations were seen as a mental disorder which needed to be healed through social engineering, education, and medicine (Healey 2003, 4). Homosexual discourse was absent from public life, to the extent that state statistics on homosexuality were treated as top-secret information similar to data on abortion and prostitution (Baer 2009, 1). The choice of Gorbachev as the General Secretary of the Communist Party in 1985 and the subsequent *perestroika* opened a flow of information from abroad, including art and movies, and contributed to public awareness about alternative forms of sexuality.

In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed. Tajikistan is one of five countries that emerged as independent states in the Soviet Central Asian region. Following the dissolution of the Soviet state, the 1990s were characterised by complex processes of political and economic transformations in Central Asia (Cummings 2013). These transformations proved to be even more challenging in Tajikistan because they were accompanied by the atrocities and destruction of a civil war (1992–1997), as well as mass labour emigration after the conflict (cf. Bahovadinova 2016). Because over one million out of eight million Tajik citizens are labour migrants in Russia, the Russian influence over the country continues to be upheld even now (Kluczevska 2014).

Under Western influence, Russia decriminalised homosexuality in 1993. In 1998, three Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) did the same. Since 1999, Tajikistan has been a part of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of the United Nations, which does not allow discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Still, in recent years, multiple cases of arbitrary detention of homosexual men and lesbian women, as well as verbal and physical abuse of transgender people by Tajik authorities have been reported (Heartland Alliance and Equal Opportunities 2013). LGBT persons who manifest their sexuality in public places have also experienced sporadic acts of violence by ordinary citizens (Vechernyy Dushanbe 2011; Asia Plus 2013).

In 2013, the Russian State Duma unanimously approved the law 'for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values', which bans the promotion of same-sex relations, and which became famous in English-language media as the Russian anti-gay law (cf. Wilkinson 2014). In 2014 and 2016, a similar bill was proposed in the parliament of the neighbouring Kyrgyz Republic, but was held up. Despite a high level of Russian influence, there have been no signs that the government of Tajikistan is planning to re-criminalise same-sex relations.

Tajikistan as a New Battlefield in the Fight for the Rights of LGBT people

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan, like many other post-Soviet countries, drew the attention of international donors (cf. Heathershaw 2009; Kluczevska 2017). Donors, mainly American and European development agencies and international organisations, adopted a 'socialisation approach' (cf. Lewis 2012) towards the country. This approach assumes that similar to Eastern Europe, Tajikistan could, over time and with the help of Western donors as mentors, be socialised to participate in the neoliberal world order. This includes not only the adoption of democracy, free elections, and a market economy, but also the acceptance of a range of liberal norms, from women's empowerment to private entrepreneurship. As part of the 'socialisation package', international donors have been paying attention to civil liberties, which include the rights of LGBT people.

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In the recent years, donors such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department for International Development (DFID), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and Global Fund, as well as the German embassy and a number of European LGBT foundations, have been launching calls for proposals for NGOs working on LGBT issues or themselves implementing projects aimed at empowering LGBT people whose everyday lives in Tajikistan are marked with stigma, discrimination, and violence.[3] Such projects included components such as legal protection, promotion of social inclusion and changing of cultural norms and attitudes among the public, and strengthening the organisational skills of local LGBT community members by teaching them marketable managerial and fundraising skills, with the aim of improving social mobilisation.[4] It is difficult to calculate the funding provided for these projects, as well as their overall impact because they have been implemented without publicity, and were, in many cases, officially framed as medical or youth projects.[5] However, I estimate that projects supporting LGBT rights in Tajikistan receive only a small part of the overall development assistance to the country. Nonetheless, donor attention led to the creation of the two first local Dushanbe-based NGOs working with LGBT people in 2011, and later to three to four NGOs operating in the region.[6] These NGOs also do not announce their target groups publically and frame their work as help to youth and other vulnerable groups.

Through providing funding to LGBT projects, donors literally created LGBT people in Tajikistan. At the level of language, LGBT people in Tajikistan, who are not related to the NGO circle and thus are not linguistically influenced by donors, do not identify with the label 'LGBT', but refer to their community as 'our people' (Russian 'nashi') (Oostvogels and Kluczevska 2014). Furthermore, the new 'LGBT' label could not grasp alternative constructions of sexuality and homosexuality in Tajikistan that differ from Western codifications of 'gay' identity and activism. For instance, in Tajikistan, it is a standard practice among homosexual men (and often a strong desire) to be married to women and have children (Oostvogels and Kluczevska 2014). In this respect, their homosexual identity refers to their second, secret life, that remains known exclusively to other 'nashi'. 'Nashi' seek the attention of heterosexual men, and do not want intercourse with other 'nashi', whom they see as brothers.

As for the impact, projects funded by donors could not achieve their aims of emancipation of LGBT people in Tajikistan and promotion of tolerance and public recognition of civil rights of LGBT people, because they draw on Western European and American experiences rather than on an understanding of the local reality in Tajikistan. Despite the fact that only in 1990 did homosexuality stop being treated as a mental disorder by the World Health Organisation, homosexual activism for the recognition of homophile feelings has been taking place in Europe since 1945. Furthermore, women's and sexual liberation movements in Western countries in the 1960s and 1970s were accompanied by the rise of a gay liberation movement. This movement encouraged coming out, and gay pride marches became the origin of a 'gay' identity (Ayoub and Paternotte 2014, 8). Nowadays, projects aimed at empowering LGBT people in Tajikistan by supporting social movements and campaigns carry a similar blueprint. This indicates that for donors, the universality of the freedom of sexuality is strictly related to the universality of the forms of manifesting it. This approach goes, however, against the needs of LGBT people in Tajikistan who do not wish for any attention from outside, and, in terms of social mobilisation, see the solidarity network provided by their own community as sufficient (Oostvogels and Kluczevska 2014). Furthermore, an approach based on campaigning risks causing a social backlash because it goes against the local normative order concerning family and social relations more broadly, as described in the next section.

Common Assumptions about Sexuality in Tajikistan

Interviews with key leaders from different public spheres[7] indicate that history, practices, and discourses around sexuality are important in order to understand public attitudes toward LGBT people in Tajikistan. These conversations point to three inter-connected assumptions about dominant social norms concerning family and social relations that inform public opinion.

Interestingly, all interviewees were hesitant about which words to use to talk about LGBT people, and often referred to them as 'they' and 'these people' (Tajik: *onho*, *in odamon*). Tajik language is missing an appropriate vocabulary, which indicates that the topic is not officially discussed. Some interviewees used the term 'non-traditional sexual orientation' (Tajik: *akhalliyathoi/munosibathoi jinsii ghayriyan'anavi*), which is a direct translation of the commonly

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used Russian term (Russian: *netradicionanaya seksual'naya orientaciya*).

'Right' and 'Wrong' Sexualities

Perhaps surprisingly for a foreign gaze, the distinction between what are seen as 'right' and 'wrong' sexualities in Tajikistan does not refer to heterosexual vs. homosexual relations. It refers, instead, to a broader category, which concerns all kinds of social and sexual relations including marriage, dating, romantic affairs, and polygamy. 'Right' here becomes a synonym for relationships which, in the popular understanding, lead to reproduction and are sanctioned by Islam, which experienced a revival in Tajikistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union. One of the interviewees explains this point of view: 'When we want to create a family, there is only one purpose. It is to give birth to a child'.^[8] In this light, according to the popular discourse, the aim of the 'right' sexuality is to guarantee the continuation of genes, and the survival of the nation. The 'right' sexuality is not necessarily exercised in a legally binding relationship. However, ideally, the 'right' sexuality is sanctioned by religion, through an act of 'nikoh' – a ritual accompanying the Muslim marriage which usually precedes civil registration.^[9] A professor of psychology is explicit about this: 'The only standard sexuality is a sexual relation with *nikoh*'.^[10]

As a result, the 'wrong' sexuality is viewed as the one which is not approved by religion and does not guarantee new generations. LGBT people enter into this category because they are seen as the ones who, as argued by an interviewed lawyer: 'go against nature',^[11] meaning, they cannot produce offspring. According to several interviewees, the 'wrong' sexuality is not limited to LGBT people, but includes (although to a lesser degree) any non-reproductive sex, such as extra- or pre-marital sex.

What is Allowed in Private is Not Allowed in Public

Growing awareness of the existence of LGBT people in Tajikistan contributes to the perception among the broader public that their number is increasing and threatens social norms concerning reproduction. Some interviewees expressed compassion for LGBT people, while relegating them to an inferior and vulnerable space. For instance, an interviewed editor-in-chief of a local boulevard newspaper said: 'To be honest, I feel sorry about *them*. It is difficult for *them*. I think LGBT is a terrible disease'.^[12] At the same time, the impression among the public that 'LGBT' is a new trend has encouraged a defensive reaction. A professor of psychology argues: 'How can we be tolerant if *their* number is increasing? (...) If we accept *this new tradition*, slowly it will turn damaging for our society. It will have effects on next generations, the number of births will decrease. We will have a demographic and social problem'.^[13] Another interviewed professor of social work reveals his dilemma: 'I should support tolerance, but the existence of *these groups* cannot be accepted. (...) Despite my background in social science and my scientific degrees, my national culture does not allow me to accept *their expansion*'.^[14]

These comments point to the issue of visibility and, thus, suggest that the rejection of LGBT people is strongly related to a growing visibility of LGBT issues, which creates an impression that 'LGBT' can become a new social norm. The issue of visibility needs to be put in the local context.

First of all, there is a strong parallel between Tajikistan and contemporary Russia. Baer (2009) claims that the rejection of LGBT people in Russia needs to be seen in the context of the ideological and socio-economic decline the country has been experiencing since 1991. After decades of silence around LGBT people, 'effeminacy and emasculation, appeared as a symptom – and a metaphor – of the decline of post-Soviet Russia in general and of the post-Soviet male in particular', as put by Baer (2009, 2). Tajikistan represents a similar case, if not a more acute one. Destruction caused by the civil war and a still on-going economic decline resulted in a mass labour emigration of young men (Mahmadbekov 2012). The strong social pressure put on males to take care of extended families, and frustrations resulting from an impossibility to provide for their families, has contributed to a similar crisis of masculinity in Tajikistan.

Secondly, the issue of visibility in Tajikistan is related to a fundamental difference between the private and public spheres of life. In Western European and American societies, the distinction between public and private started to blur over time with the increase of consumerism and the transformation of the media (Habermas 1991). This

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tendency was aggravated by the rise of social media. In the case of sexuality, particularly since the second wave of feminism in the late-1960s under the slogan 'the personal is political' (Hanisch 1969), issues previously considered intimate, such as childcare or abortion, started to be discussed publicly. Yet, in Tajikistan the distinction between private and public remains rigid. Walls of flats and fences surrounding houses remain boundaries of the private sphere, where outsiders have no right to interfere – these are spaces where people can act freely (cf. Harris 2005). In contrast, in the public sphere, there is a social pressure on people not to show emotions or affection.[15] This unwritten rule applies to all people, irrespectively of their sexuality, who are expected to behave neutrally in the public space and not to attract attention. An interviewed lawyer explains why visibility of LGBT people breaches this rule: 'Let *them* do all actions they want, but in a discrete manner. (...) *They* don't have to do it in public. I am of a *standard* orientation, but I do not announce it to everybody'.[16] In this respect, the formation of a distinct 'gay' identity and activism, supported by donors, is an extreme case of the exposure of one's sexual identity – an action which is not socially acceptable in Tajikistan.

Return to Tradition or Westernisation?

The third important theme in the popular discourse in Tajikistan concerns a conflict stemming from two trends which have taken place in Tajikistan since independence in 1991 – a return to tradition, on the one hand, and Westernisation, on the other.

The collapse of the Soviet Union facilitated religious revival and a return to tradition in Tajikistan. A member of a religious party expresses this point of view in relation to LGBT people: 'Our society is a Muslim society. By default, there is no space for *such people* in our society'.[17] In this regard, another factor which has contributed to a cementing of popular understanding that LGBT people transgress the tradition, has been the state ideology with procreation and continuity of the nation as central themes (cf. Roche 2016). Similar state-led discourses about the importance of protecting 'traditional values' and moral development of the youth can also be observed in Russia (cf. Wilkinson 2014) and other post-Soviet countries. In Tajikistan, starting from 2015, the state narrative regarding the importance of a 'healthy family' (Tajik: *oilai solim*) and children as the future of the country (see Figures 1 and 2) have been regularly displayed in public venues in the capital city. They need to be analysed in the spirit of a unifying nationalism and opposition to what are perceived as Western values: consumerism and a rise of individualism.

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Figure 1. Quotation by the president of the country: 'All of our struggles and efforts are for the prosperous future of children. Emomali Rahmon', Rudaki avenue in Dushanbe, June 2017. Author's photograph.

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Figure 2. Decorations for the 26th anniversary of independence. Posters saying 'Creating a family is a guarantee of stability' and 'Independence is our pride'. Saadi Sherozi Avenue in Dushanbe, September 2017. Author's photograph.

From the donors' point of view, in the rhetoric accompanying a transfer of liberal norms to aid-receiving countries, the latter are often portrayed as a 'backward' object of Western development interventions, 'in transition' to Western progressive modernity (Escobar 2011). In contrast, in Tajikistan, international donors promoting liberal norms are identified by the broader population and policymakers as representing 'the West' (Russian: *Zapad*) and Western values which threaten local traditions (cf. Kluczevska and Juraev, forthcoming). A complaint by one interviewee summarises this point of view: 'These [international] organisations constantly invest money here and spread their propaganda. At this point the country cannot really prevent *this* [rise of LGBT people]'. [18]

Thus, the issue here concerns a normative conflict between a foreign codification of LGBT discourse and local traditions. This rejection of what are perceived as Western values in Tajikistan refers to a broader trend of resistance, which can be observed in Muslim countries and communities, to Western 'homocolonialism' (Rahman 2014) which refers to Western exceptionalism legitimising the expansion of LGBT rights worldwide (cf. Bosia 2014). In Tajikistan, the confrontation of the two, tradition and Westernisation, leads to a strengthening of the local order in resistance of liberal norms which are imported to the country.

Conclusion: What Instead?

LGBT rights projects funded by donors in Tajikistan have been more so an outcome of Western imagination than of an understanding of local realities. Problem-solving approaches preferred by international donors followed a simple logic. Donors defined the Tajik society as homophobic and promoted social inclusion by attempting to change norms and public attitudes, and enhancing LGBT activism.

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For donors, sexual freedom should be as universal as the techniques used to manifest it (i.e. social movements, campaigns, and awareness raising). Yet, as the Tajik picture has shown, the negative social attitude toward LGBT people needs to be viewed within the broader normative picture, which includes such elements as the importance given to the family, reproduction, and the continuity of generations; the unwritten rule to keep one's private life private; as well as contrasting trends in the society, with tradition on the one hand, and Westernisation on the other. Seen in this light, the rejection of LGBT people in Tajikistan does not necessarily equal a rejection of a universal freedom of sexuality, but is first and foremost a rejection of its public manifestation and the interference of outsiders. The good intentions of donors and their devotion to the promotion of diversity and social inclusion may strengthen existing social divisions and even provoke violence.

The case of Tajikistan and donors' support for LGBT people raises three practical questions. The first question is *who?* Can foreign-sponsored activism lead to real social changes, in the absence of an indigenous movement for recognition of civil rights of LGBT people? The second question is *how?* Are there universal means of promoting the social inclusion of LGBT people? Does Tajikistan need to repeat the Western experience of the fight for the rights of LGBT people based on confrontations of norms and the social mobilisation of LGBT communities – or might there be other ways? The third question is *what instead?* This question is the most difficult to answer. While it is easy to criticise the activities and approaches of the donor community, it is more difficult to offer alternatives.

At this point it is useful to come back to the opening quotation by Umed. He believes that the Soviet period when homosexuality was criminalised was a period of freedom for LGBT people, unlike today, when, despite decriminalisation, a growing social awareness of LGBT people places them in a position of vulnerability. This might be a suggestion for donors. To avoid causing more harm, donors should reconsider intervening in countries with complex social dynamics which they may not fully comprehend.

Notes

** I am thankful to Robert Oostvogels for his invaluable role in designing the research and comments on an earlier draft of this chapter, to the editors of E-International Relations for their support in finalising the chapter, and to all people who agreed to participate in the research despite the high political sensitivity of the topic.*

This research was conducted with the support of the Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia-Tajikistan and finalised within the EU Horizon 2020 programme 'Around the Caspian' [grant number SEP-210161673].

[1] A political movement for reform in the Soviet Union, instituted by Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s.

[2] Interview with Umed, a 55-year-old homosexual man from Dushanbe, 29 October 2013. Apart from Umed and seven NGO outreach workers, all other interviewees identified themselves as heterosexual. Given the sensitivity of the topic in Tajikistan, all interviewees were anonymised for safety reasons. Interviews were conducted in Tajik, Russian or a mixture of these languages. All translations of quotes reported in this chapter are mine.

[3] My personal observation working in the development sector in Tajikistan 2013–2017; interviews with five outreach workers from a Tajik NGO working with LGBT persons, 31 October 2013; interviews with a leader and two outreach workers from another Tajik NGO working with LGBT persons, 19 July 2017; and an interview with a former employee of Global Fund in Tajikistan, 1 December 2016.

[4] Idem.

[5] Idem. During my working experience, as well as while conducting my Ph.D. field research, I realised that this refers not only to LGBT-related projects, but to many projects in areas such as human rights, freedom of media, and elections, which are considered extremely politically sensitive in the local context.

[6] In autumn 2016, one of them was closed by the government in unclear circumstances.

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[7] Fourteen interviewees from the department of social work, sociology, and psychology at the Tajik National University (TNU); private psychologists; HIV-prevention centre under the government; Collegium of Lawyers "Siper"; cultural centre *Painter's Union*; State Centre of Clinical Psychiatry; political parties (Communist Party, Islamic Revival Party) and local newspapers (gossip newspaper *Oila*, city media outlet *Digest Press*, independent newspaper *Aziya Plus*).

[8] Interview with a psychologist and a professor of psychology at TNU, 26 December 2013.

[9] Although the government insists on civil registration of marriage, for many years in rural areas of Tajikistan the ritual of *nikoh* was seen as sufficient.

[10] Interview with a professor of psychology at Tajik National University, 26 December 2013.

[11] Interview with a lawyer from the Collegium of Lawyers "Sipar", 22 November 2013.

[12] Interview with an editor in a local newspaper *Oila*, 13 November 2013.

[13] Interview with a private psychologist and a professor of psychology at TNU, 26 December 2013, emphasis added.

[14] Interview with a professor of social work at TNU, 09 November 2013, emphasis added.

[15] In the capital city, not on rare occasions I noticed policemen make remarks to heterosexual couples showing affection in public spaces, by for example cuddling or kissing (participant observation in public venues in Dushanbe).

[16] Interview with a lawyer from the Collegium of Lawyers, 22 November 2013. My emphasis.

[17] Interview with a politician from the Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan, 14 November 2013. My emphasis. The party was founded in 1990 and banned in 2015.

[18] Interview with a member of the Painters' Union, 19 November 2013. My emphasis.

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