

SAMUEL BUELOW

## Locating Kazakhstan:

The role of LGBT voices in the Asia/Europe debate

**IN HIS ESSAY** "Queer Resistance to (Neo-)colonialism in Algeria", Jarrod Hayes ends with a call for US queer activists to look to Algeria, "rather than always assuming the history of US lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer resistance holds a monopoly on inspiration for a global queer politics" (Hayes 2001, 94). While not exactly "Western," and not looking to Algeria for inspiration, LGBT activists and cultural producers in Kazakhstan seem to understand Hayes well – to be part of a "global queer politics," one must cast one's gaze "globally." For inspiration they look to the United States as just one country on a long list, including Russia, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, and Brazil – all of which seem to offer something original in relation to the sexual politics and the construction of the LGBT identity/activism. This multi-directional gaze is not surprising, since Kazakhstan routinely looks to other cultures for inspiration; such adaptability is portrayed as uniquely Kazakh and is seen as part of Kazakhstan's role as the "bridge" between Europe and Asia (Sancak 2007). As Kazakhstan is often compared to, or contrasted, with Western European, Eastern European, East

Asian, and South American nations, these comparisons are situated within a hierarchical, spatialized, and temporalized understanding and representation of "East" and "West." Although Kazakhstan is not unique in this regard (see for example the rich literature discussing such ambivalent locus of the "Balkans," e.g. Wolff 1994; Bakic-Hayden 1995; Todorova 1997; Fleming 2000), it is this ambiguity that proves the most inspiring. Portrayed alternately, or even simultaneously as a uniquely Eurasian state, a European state, or an Asian state – I suggest that it is this ambiguity as to what/where Kazakhstan is, that allows Kazakhstan's LGBT cultural producers to look in so many directions, and which is productively used for the shaping of the sexual politics that develops beyond the dominant Westernised models of activism.

I situate the forms of the online LGBT activism analysed in this article in relation to the on-going debate, illustrated here by an example from KIMEP University, as to whether Kazakhstan is Asian, European, or Eurasian, a category that is simultaneously both European and Asian, and yet neither European nor Asian. This positioning is then situated in broader discussions of "East" and "West," the ideas of "liberal, humanitarian Utopia" and "Oriental Utopia," and reflects how they are internalised and reproduced in the discussed materials.

Out of the many forms and spaces of the LGBT activism and presence, I have chosen to look at the Internet, for it has proved one of the most vibrant outlets of sexual politics in Kazakhstan. Although nightclubs and resource centres exist, they tend to maintain a low profile, perhaps due to the legacy of 63 years of sodomy laws (Healey 2001), even though they were abolished in 1997. Significant numbers of users are registered on both the information-focused site Gay.kz and dating website Love.mail.ru, however it is the photo

blog website Voxpopuli.kz where some of the most visible and perhaps important examples of LGBT culture and activism are to be found. The importance of these articles is reified by the republishing of their photos with adapted text on the English-language blog Englishrussia.com. In addition, I will also refer to Gay.ru, a Russian gay website for community and information (with some dating infrastructure elements, which actually connect to the Love.mail.ru database). It also has to be noted that the Internet is a volatile medium, and the lifespan of many websites differs significantly. For example the original Gay.kz disappeared at the end of 2006 after years of existence. The more recent Gay.kz, which is examined here, was activated in 2008, but appears to have disappeared in October of 2012, although it may yet reappear.

Apart from the textual analysis of the websites, this article builds on my ethnographic data, gathered mostly through participant observation and informal interviews (in Kazakh and English), which I conducted in 2002, 2008, 2011, and 2012 with LGBT and MSM people. As the reflexive positionality is a critical element of my work as an anthropologist (for wider, feminist-inspired debates about the role of reflexivity in the academic work, please see Cohen 1992; Perreault 1995; Reed-Danahay 1997; Applebaum 2001; Plummer 2001), I need to mention that I have a limited command of the Russian language. Unlike other foreigners, I have been approached in Kazakh and the conversations that I initiate in Kazakh are generally accepted. However, my limitations in the use of Russian immediately mark me as "foreigner," although I am usually assumed to be an ethnic Kazakh coming from outside of Kazakhstan. Additionally, I identify as a gay transsexual American man of a European and Asian descent. In Kazakhstan I am generally (mis)taken for a straight cisgendered Kazakh man, although other gay men tend to

read me as gay. Because of my gendered, racial, and linguistic position I am better acquainted with gay, bi, and MSM Kazakhs than with LGBT people of other genders and ethnicities. All of the Russian, lesbian, and transgender people I have met have been through my collaboration with the LGBT organisation Amulet. Because I have been working in Kazakhstan for the last 10 years, I have experienced living there as a masculine, straight woman (2002) and as a somewhat feminine, gay man (2008–2012). Both embodiments have coloured the way I see, understand, and analyse gender and sexuality in Kazakhstan. In short my gender, race, sexual orientation, and linguistic ability create a specific vantage point from which I perform the analysis and write this article.

### **Politics of language and naming**

Throughout the article, I will use the term "LGBT" since this is the term used by the resource centres Amulet, Adali, and Community, and it also appears on the Gay.kz website. That said, outside of conversations with staff members of Amulet, I have yet to hear the term used in casual conversation. LGBT is basically the same acronym in Russian as it is in English. B is uncontested as *biseksual*, however LGT are rendered differently in different texts. In many written texts L is written as *lesbi* or *lesbiiyan*, though I have also come across *lesbiyanka*. When an explanation for the acronym is provided, G usually stands for *gei*; however, I have also seen *gomoseksual* used. In casual conversation, I have often heard the term *gei* but never *gomoseksual*, and thus I am unsure if the difference is the same as in English, where homosexual (*gomosexual*) is older, more medicalized, and sometimes pejorative. T can stand for either *transgender* or *transseksual*. *Transgender* seems to be a newer, more modern, and more explicitly political term, but less widely used than *transseksual*.

It seems to me that there may be substantive differences in meaning as well, though these are generally not explicitly evident from context. Additionally, the shortened forms *trans* and *TS* are also often used as screen names on Love.mail.ru, but are not used in articles explicating LGBT.

The English language term "MSM," men who have sex with men, is used in this paper to designate people who engage in same-sex sexual practices but do not necessarily identify as *gay/gei*. *Goluboi*, a Russian language term also used in Russia, literally meaning, "light blue" and approximately meaning "gay," also appears on the websites. Although it is mentioned that the label may be pejorative in Kazakhstan, my own observations do not decisively indicate that. Perhaps the circulation of *goluboi* may be similar to the way the word "fag" is used, still pejoratively by some, but also affectionately, in a performative act of revamping social meanings. For men, sex role descriptors *aktiv*, *passiv*, and *universal* [versatile] also seem to carry some form of sexual identity, although my observations suggest they do not appear to be strongly gendered, the way active and passive in Turkey (Bereket and Adam 2006) or in Russia (Healey 2010) seem to be related to masculinity and femininity, respectively.

As far as Kazakh is concerned, in written texts, mostly if not exclusively, produced by non-LGBT people, the terms *qyzteke* and *erkekshora* often appear. *Qyzteke* has been translated to me in a variety of ways. Sozdik.kz (2012), an online Kazakh-Russian dictionary, translates *qyzteke* as "*biol. germafrodit*" [biological: hermaphrodite]. During many discussions I held, *qyzteke* was described as a man who dresses or acts like a woman, or as a homosexual man. As I understand it, it comes from two words, *qyz* – girl, and – a young goat, used derogatively to describe someone who is flighty, inconstant, or hyperactive. Here we therefore see that the popular stereotyping of

homosexual men as effeminate, gender confused, and so forth, found in many cultures (Segal 1990; Bird 1996), is also present in Kazakhstan. *Erkekshora*, as either a noun or an adjective, means "like a man" and is used to refer to lesbians. Voxpopuli.kz uses the terms "gay" and "lesbian" in their English texts (Romanov 2011c), while deploying *qyzteke* and *erkekshora* in their Kazakh texts (Romanov 2011a).

Finally, sexual identities are not the only realm of contested terminology used in Kazakhstan, ethnic and national labels are also debated and contested, impacting on the deployment of the above-described labels. In the article, I try to avoid the term "Kazakhstani," favouring the more descriptive "people from Kazakhstan," or "originating in Kazakhstan." I do this because the term "Kazakhstani" is somewhat controversial and ideologically loaded. There is a debate as to whether Kazakhstan is a multicultural country, home to over 130 ethnic groups, or whether it is the land of the Kazakhs that hosts 130 plus guest ethnicities (Diener 2007; Peyrouse 2007). Additionally, the discussion also refers to a "bi-cultural society," encompassing Kazakhs and Russians, the two largest ethnic groups (Kolst 1998). Consequently, in such a contested terrain of national identities, Kazakhstani has come to indicate either the siding with the idea of the multi-ethnic state; or the transcendence of ethnicity altogether, replaced with a statist identity (Peyrouse 2007).

Further note on the use of the term "Kazakh" and "Kazakhstani" is important here too. The former indicates the belonging to the Kazakh ethnic group, while the latter indicates a citizenship status. Kazakhs, while residing mostly in Kazakhstan, are also found in several other neighbouring countries, such as China and Mongolia, and more distantly in Turkey and Germany. The distinction between the "formal participation" (state-oriented citizenship) and "cultural belonging" (nationality) (cf. the discussion in Anthias, Campling

and Yuval-Davis 1989 on the difference between the "citizenship" and "nationality") impacts the intergroup relations within Kazakhstan, the politics of language, and consequently, as I suggest in this article, also the sexual politics, spread along the "Europe"- "Asia" continuum. Also of historical significance is Kazakhstan's conquest by the Russian Empire beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and its status as a state in the Soviet Union. As the consequence of the historical turmoil and the "post-communist transformations," Kazakh is the official state language, and Russian is the official language of inter ethnic communication and is widely spoken by all ethnicities (including Kazakhs), particularly in urban areas and in the Northern part of the country. This has a direct impact on the LGBT cultures of Kazakhstan. Partly because they are mostly urban and multicultural, almost all LGBT cultural productions are in Russian.

### **Europe? Asia? Eurasia?**

The dual population, the dual linguistic status, and the fact that Kazakhstan is geographically in both Asia and Europe with a small portion lying west of the Ural Mountains, lead (unsurprisingly) to the debates about whether Kazakhstan is a European, an Asian, or an Eurasian nation-state. Less commonly, Kazakhstan is portrayed as part of the greater Middle East, based on Turkic, Muslim, or oil related connections (Laumulin and Laumulin 2009, 34). The LGBT movement does not seem to construct Kazakhstan as "Middle Eastern" though (e.g. none of the LGBT organisations ever used that description), therefore I will not explore this connection in this article. Perhaps it has something to do with a general lack of discourse surrounding the issue of Islam, among LGBT cultural producers in Kazakhstan. Sergei Vanner's (2009) publication explores Muslim attitudes towards LGBT people by non-LGBT people, but

LGBT Muslim's views are not explored. Mark Berry's (2011) question about circumcision with regards to MSM hints at the idea that many MSM were raised or identify as Muslim, but it is not explored further. This absence is not necessarily out of place, and could be said to be typical also of the (lacking) discussions of LGBT Christians relationship between faith and sexuality.

Although the president, Nursultan Nazarbayev (2006), refers to Kazakhstan as a Eurasian nation and the bridge between Europe and Asia, the debate still rages on – is Kazakhstan really European or really Asian? On their website, KIMEP University, one of Kazakhstan's premier universities, poses the question: "Kazakhstan's International Perspective: Europe or Asia?!" The answers in both directions rely on stereotypes of Europe as "Western" and Asia as "Eastern," as shown in the following quote:

Kazakhstan's business culture is becoming more Eurasian: the western values of short-term planning (or more American), the aggressive manner of high risk investment, the development of the international market orientation, and the immediate result orientation are basically grounded on the Asian values of respect to the elder and empowered and are parallel to the democratic management hierarchy.

The article ends:

Today, Kazakhstan's philosophy is that it wants to have the smoothing balance from both continents, Asia and Europe. We claim ourselves to be Eurasian and, indeed, the balance of the Asian and European features is represented in Kazakhstan! This is the unique place where cultures of the East and the West meet and trade. We

are thrilled that today we can use our international expertise in the growing globalization process! (KIMEP 2012)

The conclusion that Kazakhstan is Eurasian is reached only after exploring and weighing the claims that Kazakhstan is Asian and that Kazakhstan is European. The role of Russian colonialism is weighed, as is the "Asian" appearance of Kazakhs, for whom, as we read on the same pages, "[i]t has been proven on a genetic level that Kazakhs are 50% Asian and 50% European [...]." A membership in Asian sport associations is weighed against membership in the European football association; economic structure (Asian) is weighed against language (European), etc. As the article demonstrates, "Europe," "Asia," and "Eurasia" need not be mutually exclusive. People can, and do, construct Kazakhstan as alternately and simultaneously, European and Asian, without necessarily resorting to a Eurasian construction (but also without necessarily denying or avoiding it). This is well exemplified by the LGBT organisation Amulet, which maintains links to both the European and the Asian branches of ILGA – International Lesbian and Gay Association. However, pointing towards all three geo-cultural spaces does not necessarily indicate the same equality in terms of their temporal framings and narrations. While "Europe" is portrayed as advanced, and "Asia" as backward, Kazakhstan is often placed somewhere in the "middle." At once portrayed as European to stress its advancement in comparison to "Asia," it is also framed as "Asian" to chastise it for its failures in advancing along the Western European models.

### **Voxpopuli.kz and Englishrussia.com**

In order to orient the following discussion of temporality and spatiality of progress, I would first like to describe the content of the

Voxpopuli.kz photo-essays and their reinterpretation on the website Englishrussia.com. The photo essays, "Mum, I smoke" and "Ban on prejudices" are both by Aleksei Romanov (2011c; 2011b). The photos are reprinted, but with different text at Englishrussia.com. This new text was written by someone with the username "kulichik" and are renamed "A guy with a difference" and "Gay love leaves Kazakhstan" (2011a; 2011b) respectively. These articles are significant because, outside of online personal ads, they are the only photographic representation of LGBT people from Kazakhstan that I have been able to find on either LGBT or non-LGBT specific websites. Additionally, although produced by presumably non-LGBT people, the essays foreground the voices of LGBT people, speaking from, and not only "in the name of" LGBT people, and for this reason I am considering them part of LGBT cultural production. Moreover, they appear in Russian, Kazakh, and English, and while there are a variety of newspaper articles about LGBT people written in Kazakh, Kazakh language representations featuring the voices of LGBT people are extremely rare.

### **"Mum, I smoke"/ "A guy with a difference"**

"Mum, I smoke," (Romanov 2011c) is told predominantly in the first person, from the perspective of Kazakh drag queen<sup>1</sup> Dauren's point of view. The title of the essay comes from a joke in the last line, where Dauren expresses concern that once the photo essay is published, his<sup>2</sup> mother will learn that he smokes (rather than that he is a drag queen), thus defusing the inexplicit tensions about the possible "real life" consequences associated with LGBT visibility (see Vanner 2009 for a discussion of those consequences). The essay is framed with the introduction: "For March 8 [International women's day] we were planning to make a fun report about transvestites' life

in Almaty. It seemed witty to show how men dressed like women celebrate this holiday. But having got to know better one of the heroes we realised that there was little fun in their lives..." This seems a somewhat unfair assessment of their portrayal of Dauren, whose life seems marked with both angst and fun, portrayed somewhat dichotomously, as before and after becoming a drag queen. "My new life began. I was reborn, I was free."

The essay follows Dauren from a young age, the death of his grandfather, trouble with puberty, the feelings of isolation and loneliness, suicidal ideation. At 19, Dauren is invited to his first gay club and sees his first drag queen. Two months later, Dauren is performing as a drag queen. Isolation is replaced by acceptance in a community. Rather than suicidal thoughts: "I am satisfied with everything, I live two very interesting lives. If only it was not for this ridiculous homophobia, I would be the happiest person on Earth."

In addition to stressing his transformation, some effort is taken to portray Dauren as just an average guy. There are 27 photos in the essay – Dauren is depicted at home using the computer, watching TV, eating, sewing dresses. He walks around his neighbourhood, a hoodie covering his feminine haircut. At the club, he and his friends are depicted in various states of dress and undress preparing for the show. The at home pictures lead up to the club pictures, easing the reader in, establishing Dauren as human before establishing his Otherness. "I realize that the majority of people will react negatively on me and my story, but if even one person start treating gay and lesbians more tolerantly, understand us and accept us the way we are, I will think that I have not done it in vain."

### **"Ban on prejudices"/ "Gay love leaves Kazakhstan"**

"Ban on prejudices" (Romanov 2011b) follows Roman (nee Reshetov) and Maxim Tseplik, a same-sex couple who have moved from Kazakhstan to Brazil. The couple met in Almaty, but have lived in Brazil for the last eight years (as of 2011). They own a home, a business, and two dogs. They recently registered their relationship and plan to apply for Brazilian citizenship. This essay tells the story of their meeting and move to Brazil. The central thesis of the essay is that Brazil is a place of equality for everyone: "This country's motto is '*Brasil. Um país de todos*', which means 'Brazil. A country for all.' For black and white, rich and poor, straight and not so straight." The article even begins:

"According to the law No3.629, discrimination on the ground of race, gender, skin colour, social status, age, origin or sexual orientation is forbidden in the elevators. Breaking this law will be punished in accordance with penal code of Brazil", this is the inscription on a plate in a Brazilian elevator situated in the house of one Kazakhstani family who have recently registered their relationship.

Thus immediately situating equal treatment as the primary theme for the article.

The photographs and narrative depict Roman and Max in a variety of everyday activities, unfolding in much the same way as "Mum, I smoke". We learn that Roman does the cooking, but Max does the dishes. "How are we different from normal family? I think we are not", shrugs Max. "We get the same bills for electricity and gas at the end of each month." Mundane details of daily life are stressed: "You have to clean up after your dogs in Brazil. Max has got a roll of garbage bags in his pocket." Yet, in the "land of wild monkeys

and Don Pedros”, they live in a beautiful two storey, three bedroom house with a swimming pool, for which they pay \$1000 per month, as much as a new one room apartment in Almaty. The pictures of cooking, doing the dishes, walking the dogs, and working on an iPad are interspersed with scenic shots of Brazil – boats along the coastline, the Christ the Redeemer statue, mountains, breath-taking city vistas, skyscrapers, and tropical plants.

Finally, we get to the essay’s climax, a trip to a gay club, where we get the long awaited (by the photographer as well, perhaps, as the reader) photo of Max and Roman kissing. Subsequent photos show Roman playfully hanging on Max’s neck, riding on his back. After a few more shots of the city and the dogs, we are left with: “Are we happy? Definitely yes. Obviously we have some problems, rows and misunderstandings. It is not so easy to live together for nine years. Only those who do not love do not quarrel. We do not have indifference in our family. And we hope we will never have it.” One final note reminds us: “In Brazil homophobia is punished with up to seven years in prison. Homophobia equals racial, religious, gender and other intolerances.”

### **Temporality and spatiality**

“West” and “East” are two discursive categories that are used to describe not only Europe and Asia, but Europe alone as well. West can mean Europe, Western Europe, and/or Anglophonic North America. East can mean Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, and East Asia. I would like to expand East and West here to mean conceptual, rather than geographic, categories. As the world is increasingly divided in North and South, as opposed to East and West, the global South can take on characteristics originally associated with the East, and below I suggest a slippage between East

and South, particularly in places already regarded as East, with the South becoming, in essence, the East's East. East and West are relative categories conceived of both temporally and spatially. They are also hierarchical. West is both above and ahead of East. Temporality and spatiality are intertwined, as time is spatially conceived as well. Below I examine how temporality, spatiality, and Orientalism appear on the above websites as well as on the websites *Gay.kz* and *Gay.ru*.

In "'Contemporary peripheries': queer studies, circulation of knowledge and East/West divide," Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielska discuss the temporal dimension of the relationship of Central and Eastern Europe to Western Europe or the West more broadly. The West follows a "Time of Sequence" in which history unfolds in a linear fashion and eastern Europe follows a "Time of Coincidence" in which past, present, and future get jumbled together occurring simultaneously and out of order (2011, 15). For instance, the emergence of LGBT movements (rather than queer movements) is seen as both a step forward and a step back in time (16). Eastern Europe is seen as trying to catch up to the West, "although living in the 'common present', the feeling is of being sort of 'retarded', in the 'past'" (17) is put upon Eastern Europe. This is a spatial presentation of time as both linear and non-linear, and can be read as hierarchical with linear time being seen as superior.

In "Mum, I smoke," Dauren demonstrates the concept of hold-up, where Kazakhstan (East) is behind Europe (West) with an Eastern present equalling a Western past. "Attitude towards sexual minorities in Kazakhstan is better than before, but much less tolerant than, let us say, in Europe. They are ahead of us in this issue for 30 years. In the future I am going to move there because of security reasons." Here Dauren explicitly makes a temporal statement about Kazakhstan vis-à-vis Europe, showing that the idea of

the temporal pause has been internalized by people in Kazakhstan.

While Dauren implicitly positions Kazakhstan in Asia, the category of Eastern Europe or of Eurasia can serve as a category in between the West of Western Europe and the East of East Asia. This relies on the historic ambiguity of "East" as Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East (Torodova 2009). An example of this positioning can be found in the article "Coming out in Japanese" (2012) on Gay.kz. The author compares Kazakhstan with Asia without actually saying that Kazakhstan is Asian: "Asian society (and the Japanese in particular) is really very much like ours." This discursive move allows the author to highlight the cultural connections to Japan without compromising a construction of Kazakhstan as European or Eurasian. He also compares Kazakhstan to Russia, which can be read as either Eastern European or as Eurasian:<sup>3</sup> "In Russia, the human rights movement is extremely underdeveloped, however, attitudes toward gay men there are no different from ours..." The author of "Coming out in Japanese" then chastises Russia for not setting a good example, reinforcing the idea of Russia as centre and Kazakhstan as periphery. Kazakhstan should be able to look to Russia, but Russia fails to set the standard so both countries must "look with envy on the West, where open gays become ministers, mayors, millionaires."

This equation of the status of LGBT people in Kazakhstan and Russia contradicts the Russian website Gay.ru's implicit claims that Russia is more LGBT friendly than Kazakhstan. In the article "Almaty," (2012) we are told: "However, please note that Alma-Ata<sup>4</sup> is an eastern city and that the people of the East are not very welcoming to wild emotions, especially to homosexual themes." Here, Kazakhstan is cast as an Asian nation with Asian people and Asian (backward) attitudes. The above statement is followed with a warn-

ing to be careful, but also a contradictory assertion that "Alma-Ata in terms of gay tradition is not worse than other major cities" is made. This "gay tradition" is not discussed further, as the article moves on to talk about mountains and multiculturalism, vegetables and winter sports.

Russia gets read simultaneously as equal and superior. Writing about Kyrgyzstan, Kreindler (1991) connects the internalization or expression of Russian superiority to Soviet education. In "Coming out in Japanese" we see both the desire to place Kazakhstan as Russia's equal; "however, attitudes toward gay men there are no different from ours," and the desire to look to Russia for inspiration. This desire for equality can also be seen in "Gay love leaves Kazakhstan," (kulichik 2011b) the Englishrussia.com version of "Ban on prejudices." While Kazakhstan is not portrayed explicitly as either European or Asian, it is portrayed as Russian. For instance, the article starts: "The attitude to same-sex unions in Russia and former Soviet Republics is extremely negative. As of today, Russian legislation does not allow same-sex couples to marry. Those of them who don't want to hide have to go abroad like the heroes of our today's post." Also, connections to Russian language are stressed. Max and Roman complain about Russian-speaking sex tourists and the article notes that their dogs have Russian names. Here the slippage between Russia and Kazakhstan is presumably coming from a Russian perspective rather than one from Kazakhstan, though I have witnessed this slippage in casual conversation in Kazakhstan, particularly in the northern city of Kokshetau.

In "Ban on prejudices," (Romanov 2011b) there is a greater separation between Kazakhstan and Russia: "For us Kazakhstan is like a father, Russia is a *baibishe* [first wife] and Brazil is a beloved *tokal* [second wife]. You should not confuse one with another and con-

sider us to be traitors,” says Roman. Earlier in the article, Russia and Kazakhstan are compared, but not conflated: “There are not so many Kazakhstanis wishing to visit Brazil. Russian citizen already do not need a visa to come, but our compatriots still need it. Moreover, flights from Almaty and Astana are not the most convenient ones. There is a direct flight from Moscow to Rio. But Transaero airlines opens it only from November to May.” The connection between Russia and Kazakhstan is taken for granted.

Whether Kazakhstan is Eurasia or Asia, it is still East of (Western) Europe, and thus caught in the temporal halt. Kazakhstan, Russia, and Japan are portrayed as lagging behind the West. In addition to this temporal positioning, we see also a spatial positioning. In Attila Melegh’s *On the East-West slope: globalization, nationalism, racism and discourses on Central and Eastern Europe* (2006), this difference is spatialized, as well as temporalized. He conceives of the East/West divide as a slope, which he connects to Karl Mannheim’s “liberal humanitarian Utopia” (18). As one moves up the slope (Westward), one moves into an increasingly civilized realm. The slope is drawn between two poles, which can be constituted by many different characteristics:

The reliance on externally and historically given differences, in addition to the used or evoked and partially overlapping, partially contradictory geocultural categories, always assumes some kind of axis with two end points: “East” and “West,” “white” and “not white,” “cleanliness” and “dirt,” “emerging” and ready or “fully developed,” “nationalist” and “postnationalist”[...]. (Melegh 2006, 14)

If we look back to the KIMEP debate referred to earlier, we see a deliberate positioning of Kazakhstan as between these poles – for

instances Kazakhs are 50% white, 50% not white.

While there discursively exists a Utopian slope, the "liberal humanitarian Utopia" is not the only discursive depiction of Utopia at play. Another Utopia is described by Maria Todorova in *Imagining the Balkans* (2009). While both Melegh and Todorova draw on Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), they depict two different Utopias:

Closely linked to the intangible nature of the Orient, in contrast to the concreteness of the Balkans, was the role the oriental image served as escape from civilization. The East, in general, was constructed for the West as an exotic and imaginary realm. The abode of legends, fairy tales, and marvels; it epitomized longing and offered option, as opposed to the prosaic and profane world of the West. The Orient became Utopia [...]. (Todorova 2009, 13)

One Utopia, the liberal humanitarian one, is not only viewed as achievable by "civilization" it is seen as achieved by Western Europe. The other Utopia exists outside of civilization and is itself a product of fantasy only. While it may incorporate elements of the truth (if it exists at all) it can at best be seen as romanticization. While the former Utopia is also likely a romanticization, it is perceived in terms of belonging to the Self, rather than the Other.

For Todorova, the Balkans is East, but not as far East as the Oriental Utopia. Kazakhstan is situated in a similar position, particularly in Romanov's photo essays. Here, the concept of slope can be invoked again although this time in the form of a V or an inverse parabola. On each side exists a Utopia, with the centre looking longingly in each direction. Romanov's articles offer exactly this kind of configuration. One, "Mum, I smoke" (2011c) the story of Kazakh drag queen Dauren, looks longingly to the presumably achievable

liberal humanitarian Utopia of the West. The other, "Ban on prejudices," (2011b) looks not East, but South to an Orientalized Brazil, the Utopia beyond civilization's grasp, where "black and white," "natural and gay" are equal.

While equal treatment for races and sexualities is part of the Utopia, it is not the only Utopian quality that Brazil is said to possess. Kazakhstan is held up against Brazil and found lacking in every quality from geographic beauty to safety to quality of meat, a characteristic on which Kazakhstan traditionally prides itself. Even the photographs, which portray beautiful ocean views, rainforest, helicopters, skyscrapers, palm trees, swimming pools, and a gay nightclub, suggest Brazil as an Othered Paradise. They possess an otherworldly quality, suggestions of beauty too pristine to be real.

The Brazil of "Ban on prejudices" makes a stark contrast to the Kazakhstan of "Mum, I smoke." The outdoor pictures are grey and dismal; one is even in black and white. Here we see rundown building entrances and garbage dumpsters. The inside pictures, both of Dauren's apartment and of the gay club, pale in comparison to Roman and Max's upscale Brazilian house and Brazil's colourful gay nightclub. While several of the Brazilian night club pictures are in black and white, it is immediately obvious that this is not to underscore its drabness, but rather because the many colours detract from the human action.

This creation of an Oriental Utopia in Brazil that is beyond the reach of civilization and thus may in some ways be less threatening than the liberal humanitarian Utopia, toward which Kazakhstan may feel pressure to strive. The exotification of Brazil through palm trees, monkeys, and grass fed beef makes it clear that this Utopia is not achievable. Thus, Kazakhstan is not behind Brazil, the way it is behind Europe. In "Ban on Prejudices," there are no attempts

to chronologize the divide between Brazil and Kazakhstan the way "Mum, I smoke" chronologizes the difference between Europe and Kazakhstan (30 years). Thus, sometimes spatiality is temporalized, and sometimes it is not, whereas temporality perceived here as linear (West) and nonlinear (East) is spatialized.

## Conclusion

Kazakhstan's LGBT cultural producers look to a variety of sources for influence. This is reflected in the dominance of imported terminology such as "LGBT," *gei*, *lesbian*, *aktiv* and *passiv*, over more local terminology such as *qyzteke* and *erkekshora*. This gaze is not always directed towards the West, as "Coming out in Japanese" and "Ban on Prejudices" demonstrate. Gazing to the West, the East, and the South positions Kazakhstan at different places along an East/West continuum and within the categories of Europe, Asia, and Eurasia. The KIMEP University website sums up the Europe, Asia, Eurasia debate more broadly, whereas the above mentioned articles, as well as "Mum, I smoke," represent the salience of this debate within LGBT-related discourses.

As "Coming out in Japanese" demonstrates, the way Kazakhstan is positioned relative to Russia and to Japan is exploited to make claims to Kazakhstan's advancement and lack thereof simultaneously. "Mum, I smoke," unambiguously positions Kazakhstan as Asia and places it in a temporal relationship to Europe. Europe is ahead of Kazakhstan temporally, up the slope spatially, and represents the liberal humanitarian Utopia. This Utopia is contrasted with the Oriental Utopia, represented by Brazil. Here, East and South get conflated, with the South becoming the East's Orient. However, the presence of an Orient serves as a Westernizing move, giving Kazakhstan the voice to describe its Other.

In short, LGBT discourses participate in broader national trends. They actively negotiate Kazakhstan's ambiguous relationship to both East and West. Spatiality and temporality are invoked explicitly and the concept of Utopia is invoked implicitly. The question is whether Kazakhstan is Asia, Europe, or Eurasia is ultimately more important than the answer, since it is through this ambiguity that people in Kazakhstan are able to make arguments about the progress of the nation.

**SAMUEL BUELOW** is a graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University Bloomington. His research focuses on LGBT issues in Kazakhstan, where he has been working on and off over the last ten years.

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## NOTES

1. I use the English term "drag queen" since Dauren is a male identified performer who performs in women's attire. The term used in the English, Russian, and Kazakh articles is "transvestite"/transvestit and is not meant pejoratively as it often is in English.
2. The blog in English and Russian uses masculine pronouns. All pronouns in Kazakh are gender neutral.
3. For a discussion of LGBT issues and Russia's position regarding East and West, see Baer 2002.
4. Prior to 1993, Almaty was known as Alma Ata. It is still sometimes referred to by this name.

### ABSTRACT

Spanning both Europe and Asia geographically, Kazakhstan can be and is interpreted as an Asian, European, and/or Eurasian state. This debate as to what/where is Kazakhstan continues in LGBT themed cultural production and the ambiguity is used to make statements about the conditions for LGBT people in Kazakhstan. This article situates this debate in a broader discussion of East and West and of Orientalism. LGBT themed websites contest the position of Kazakhstan, using available discourse that places East and West in a spatialized, temporalized, and hierarchical relationship in which West is above, ahead of, and superior to East. Both East and West are portrayed as different forms of Utopia, an achievable Western form and a fantastical Eastern form, with Kazakhstan occupying a non-Utopian middle ground. In this article, the global South, represented here by Brazil, also becomes Orientalized and in essence becomes the East's Utopian East. Photo essays about a Kazakh drag queen and gay couple who have moved from Kazakhstan to Brazil are examined in detail. The LGBT websites Gay.kz and Gay.ru are also used to demonstrate the way that Kazakhstan is positioned in LGBT discourse along the East/West slope, particularly in relation to Russia.

### SAMMANFATTNING

Denna artikel undersöker hemsidor med LHBT-tema gjorda i Kazakstan. Eftersom det geografiskt omspanner både Europa och Asien kan, och blir, Kazakstan uppfattat som en asiatisk, en europeisk och/eller en euroasiatisk stat. Denna debatt om vad/var Kazakstan är fortsätter inom kulturell produktion med LHBT-inriktning och osäkerheten används för att göra uttalanden om förhållandena för LHBT-personer i Kazakstan. Inledningsvis undersöker artikeln den ryska och kazakiska terminologi som används på LHBT-relaterade hemsidor. Russifierad, internationell terminologi, som *gei*, *lesbian*, *biseksual*, *transgender* och *LGBT*, används oftare än ryska termer från Ryss-

land (*goluboi*) eller kazakiska ord (*gyz.teke, erkeksbora*). Därefter presenteras debatten om vart Kazakstan hör med en sida från ett av Kazakstans främsta universitets, KIMEP, hemsida som exempel. På sidan argumenteras för både Asien och Europa, och slutligen placeras Kazakstan i Eurasien. Sidan använder stereotyper av Europa och Asien, tillsammans med bevis för anknytning både till Europa och till Asien, för att klargöra sin synpunkt. Denna debatt förekommer även i LHBT-producerad media och media med LHBT-inriktning. Två fotoessäer av Alexei Romanov från hemsidan Voxpopuli.kz analyseras ingående. En av dem beskriver en ung, kazakisk dragdrottningens väg till självinsikt. Den andra visar tillvaron för ett bögpar som flyttat från Kazakstan till Brasilien som beskrivs som ett land med lagstadgad jämlikhet. Dessa artiklar fungerar som illustrationer till en större diskussion om öst och väst, och om orientalism. LHBT-inriktade hemsidor utmanar Kazakstans position, och använder tillgängliga diskurser som placeras öst och väst i ett spatialiserat, temporaliserat och hierarkiskt förhållande till varandra där väst är över, före och bättre än öst. Meleghs föreställning om öst-väst-slutningen och hans diskussion runt Mannheims "liberala humanitära Utopia" tas till hjälp för positionerandet av Kazakstan, som hamnar på olika ställen längs öst-väst-slutningen beroende på vem som positionerar. Todorovas diskussion om ett orientaliskt Utopia tas också till hjälp. Sammantaget bildar de två begreppen en V-formad positionering, med ett Utopia på var sida och Kazakstan i mitten. Ett Utopia, den liberala humanitära sorten (väst), ses som realistiskt och något som Kazakstan bör söka efterlikna. Det andra Utopia, det orientaliska (öst), ses som ett fantasteri och något som inte går att efterlikna. I Romanovs essä är det inte östern som är orientaliserad, utan södern, företrädd av Brasilien. Eftersom Kazakstan positioneras som öst, och orienten måste vara fantastisk, framstår Brasilien som österns orientaliska Andra, alltså österns öst. Fastän det aldrig befinner sig vid någondera polen, representerad av de två Utopia, glider Kazakstan fram och tillbaka på slutningen. Denna förmåga att glida utnyttjas av LHBT-kulturskapare för att måla upp en bild av

ett Kazakstan där LHBT-personers status är annorlunda. Kort sagt, LHBT-hemsidor utnyttjar allmänt spridda diskurser runt öst och väst för att beskriva LHBT-personers status i Kazakstan och arbeta för reformer.

**Keywords:** LGBT, Kazakhstan, Orientalism, Utopia, Internet, representation