

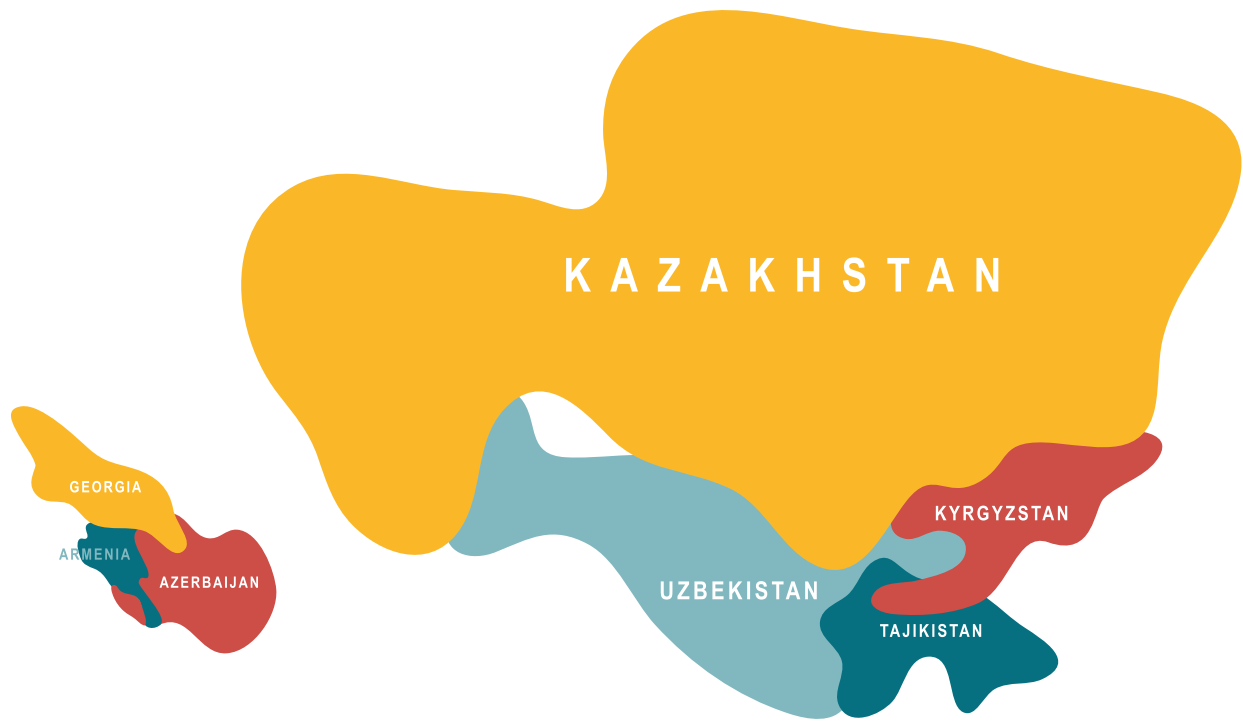


ASTRAEA LESBIAN FOUNDATION FOR JUSTICE

Mapping LGBTQI+ Activism in Central Asia & the South Caucasus

May 2024

Executive Summary



“I think about movement as moving, but is something moving somewhere? Or what are we moving? Where are we moving it to?” - Activist in South Caucasus

Four researchers and activists, Milena Abrahamyan, Saltanat Shoshanova, Mohira Suyarkulova, Nukri Tabidze, conducted ethnographic observations and group and in-depth interviews with 97 LGBTQI+ activists in seven countries across the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) and Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). Turkmenistan was omitted as it remains practically and ethically impossible to conduct fieldwork in the country or among diaspora groups.

LGBTQI+ communities in both regions face significant hurdles due to social, economic, and political factors. Limited access to healthcare, high unemployment rates, corrupt state institutions, safety risks, smear

campaigns against activists, and the rise of alt-right ideologies were identified as prevalent challenges. While Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan share a comparable situation with limited opportunities for activism, Armenia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan provide relatively favorable conditions for resource mobilization and organizing. Kazakhstan, with its multi-vectoral politics, falls somewhere in between.

The legislative landscape varies across the two regions, with Georgia being the only country with anti-discrimination legislation that includes sexual orientation and gender identity. Even in the formal presence of anti-discrimination legislation, the implementation of existing laws and combating hate crimes in practice is challenging in every country in question. Activists and lawyers emphasize the importance of international treaties and conventions in the pursuit of justice. However, some activists, especially those coming from authoritarian regimes

and/or smaller initiatives, challenge the idea of reliance on state policy.

According to activists from both regions, challenges to the movement include the formalization of activism, the absence of political possibilities beyond non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and difficulties in registering LGBTQI+ NGOs in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan. Security concerns also loom large for LGBTQI+ communities in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, due to attacks and discrimination, which in authoritarian countries can lead to imprisonment, torture, or murder. Activists and organizations employ diverse, even contradicting, strategies to address safety, varying from prioritizing invisibility for protection to advocating for visibility to demand social change.

Exchange and collaboration between the countries in the South Caucasus and Central Asia is fragmented, small, but constant. In Central Asia activists are more interconnected, while in the South Caucasus, Georgia is the meeting space for international and regional gatherings, because of the relative safety and its visa-free regime. However, activists in Georgia usually treat Europe as their reference point and do not really imagine themselves as part of the South Caucasus region. Additionally, there are no regional platforms or queer initiatives that unite the South Caucasus and Central Asia.

To address the current challenges, activists call for more equitable partnerships, improved understanding of local contexts, more flexible and core funding, and adequate compensation for their work:

“It is also important how they give funds, what they want in return, when they give funding and don’t make you project oriented or don’t create a situation in which you have to set up hierarchies and create an administrative burden, then it’s ok in my opinion. That’s actually really good. And you don’t feel that you have any limitations.” - Activist in South Caucasus

Activists share that it is essential to address low salaries and precarious employment conditions to prevent burnout and brain drain and to foster a sustainable, humane work climate. Due to political instability and on-going armed conflicts in the two regions, there is an urgent need for rapid and flexible

response and opportunities to support emotional well-being. Despite the difficulties faced, activists underscore the strength and resilience of queer communities in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. By addressing the complexities and advocating for a more inclusive and supportive culture, progress can be made toward advancing LGBTQI+ rights in the regions.

“I think we are so used to doing activism based on suffering. If we show how battered we are, how humiliated we are, how difficult our lives are, if we go out on dangerous protests, only then will our activism be seen as valid. In suffering activism, at some point, the goal of activism becomes suffering itself. But pleasure is activism, fun is activism, care is activism.” - Activist in Central Asia



ASTRAEA LESBIAN FOUNDATION FOR JUSTICE

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