



ASTRAEA LESBIAN FOUNDATION FOR JUSTICE

# Mapping LGBTQI+ Activism in Central Asia & the South Caucasus

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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<sup>1</sup> (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan).

<sup>1</sup> Turkmenistan was omitted as it remains practically and ethically impossible to conduct fieldwork in the country or among diaspora groups.

***“We don’t want to be saved by white people, we want to struggle for a better world alongside our comrades from all over the world.”- Activist in Central Asia***

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.

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. 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.

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:

***“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***

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.