A World Away

LGBTQA Kyrgyz Delegation travels to U.S. for answers and hope

By **Art Martori**

LGBTQA Kyrgyz Delegation members. (left to right) Nurbek Omurov, Aleksandr Shilo, Chynara Bakirova, Lilia Ten, during their visit to the United States. Photo courtesy of Nurbek Omurov.

That night in April 2014 began as an ordinary outing with friends, remembers Nurbek Omurov, a 33-year-old resident of Bishkek, the capital and largest city of the Kyrgyz Republic.

Public sentiment in his Central-Asian homeland, formerly known as Kyrgyzstan, is decidedly against the LGBTQA community. Harassment or worse is common. But to avoid it, they headed to the gay club late at night, long after most people were in bed.

Approaching the club, however, they spotted a group of shady characters loitering near the entrance. The thugs, as Omurov describes them, seemed to be looking for trouble. Instinct told Omurov and his group to walk the other way.

"We were trying to bypass them and go around the other side, but they noticed us because, maybe, they saw the way we were dressed," he recalled. "Usually people dress very conservatively. We were very bright."

The thugs intercepted them. Without much warning, they started to beat Orumov and members of his group. What started as a low-profile visit to the local gay club had quickly turned into a fracas that harkened back to the pogroms of early 19th century Russia.

"We immediately called the police office. They were very negative," Omurov explained. "They were harassing us, not physically, but telling us we were not the right kind of people. Why did we choose to live like this? This was wrong. Later, they closed the case because they didn't find enough evidence."

Rights At Risk

Stories like this are common out of the now-democratic Kyrgyz Republic, which was once a part of the Soviet Union. LGBTQA people are frequently persecuted and, as in neighboring Russia, have little recourse to protect themselves or discourage further attacks.

Their situation gained mainstream attention in 2013, with a report from the humanitarian nonprofit Human Rights Watch (HRW). It revealed instances of "entrapment, extortion, beating and sexual violence" toward gay men, and "forced marriages and 'curative rapes'" targeting lesbian and bisexual women. Another report from HRW followed in January 2014, exposing police violence toward gay and bisexual men.

Some in the Kyrgyz Republic say it was this negative exposure that prompted anti-LGBTQA legislation, introduced in October 2014, by the Kyrgyz Parliament. The measure is similar to existing Russian laws. While same-sex relationships wouldn't be illegal, the legislation severely limits LGBTQA people's freedoms of assembly and speech; any type of activism or celebration would be outlawed.

The Kyrgyz measure has been described as tougher than its Russian counterpart due to the harsh penalties that come with it, including heavy fines and prison time.

It has already passed two out of three required rounds of voting, with the third and final reading on hold pending a Parliamentary election Oct. 4, 2015. It's expected to pass through Parliament sometime after the election, Kyrgyz sources say, and then must be signed by the President and upheld by their Constitutional Court. Those last two stages, they say, are the only chances of it being struck down.

The U.S. embassy to the Kyrgyz Republic was quick to issue a statement after the measure was introduced.

"... People everywhere deserve to live in freedom. No one should be silenced or imprisoned because of who they are or whom they love," the statement reads. "Laws that discriminate against one group of people threaten the fundamental rights of all people. Sweeping limits on civil society harm democracy.

"We urge MPs and the people of the Kyrgyz Republic to stand on the side of justice and equality, to stand for progress and compassion, and oppose legislation that would criminalize expressions of identity or limit civil society."

Editor's Note: An email seeking comment from the Kyrgyz Republic's embassy to the U.S. remained unanswered at the time this story went to print.

Like castaways venturing out to bring back help, a delegation of representatives from Kyrgyz LGBTQA non-governmental organizations recently visited the United States on a fact-finding trip sponsored by the U.S. State Department.

With stops in Portland, Ore.; Scottsdale, Ariz.; Little Rock, Ark. and New York City, the delegation was tasked with learning how acceptance of the LGBTQA community evolved in the U.S., and then, hopefully, returning home in time to spark change.

An International Interview

The Paloma Conference Room at Chaparral Suites in Scottsdale is completely empty one September evening when I arrive to meet the Kyrgyz delegation, yet evidence of a busy day is strewn along the long conference table.

After a few minutes of waiting, the tall double doors swing open to reveal two men and two women who appear to be in their late 20s or early 30s, dressed in casual, stylish Western clothing. It takes a halting exchange in English before I realize they're the Kyrgyz delegation and they realize I'm the American journalist.

Shortly thereafter, we're joined by two translators and things proceed smoothly. First, I want to know, why did the Kyrgyz Republic choose its LGBTQA community as a target?

"The situation in Kyrgyzstan is quite challenging in that the society is still very conservative and not accepting toward LGBTQA issues," explains Omurov, the only member of the group who speaks fluent English. "So is the Parliament, the main decision-making branch of the government of Kyrgyzstan."

Omurov is the chairman of Kyrgyz Indigo, an NGO that advocates for LGBTQA rights and provides general support for the Kyrgyz Republic's LGBTQA population. If the aforementioned measure passes, Kyrgyz Indigo, along with each of the delegates' organizations, would be outlawed.

"It will significantly change our lives, especially those who are out," Omurov says of being one of few openly gay men in his country. "It would prohibit, for example, dating on websites and talking about these issues on social media. If our rights are violated because of our identity, our sexual orientation, it would be really difficult for us to defend ourselves. Our lives would be very difficult."

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>
> **The U.S. embassy to the Kyrgyz Republic**

Finding A Scapegoat

The conservative climate in the Kyrgyz Republic is likely due to dogma and a general sense of dissatisfaction among its public. Of the more than 5.6 million inhabitants, according to the Central Intelligence Agency's World Factbook, 75 percent are Muslim and 20 percent are Russian Orthodox, two religions noted for their intolerant stances toward homosexuality.

Further souring public opinion might be an unwillingness to accept a lower standing in the world following the early-1990s dissolution of the Soviet Union, under which Kyrgyzstan enjoyed significant upticks culturally, economically and socially.

In recent years the Kyrgyz Republic has clashed with foreign entities, including Canadian investors and a U.S. military base, over preserving its sovereign rights. Today, per capita GDP in the Kyrgyz Republic hovers around $3,400, compared with $54,600 in the U.S. Some 7.6 percent of the Kyrgyz population is unemployed and nearly 34 percent lives beneath the poverty line.

It's as if the Kyrgyz Parliament found a scapegoat in its LGBTQA community, explains Lilia Ten. Ten is the executive director of The Grace, an NGO based in Bishkek that works to raise awareness for LGBT rights, and also a part of the visiting Kyrgyz delegation.

"With the upcoming elections, it was very convenient to use that report as a pretext," she explained through a translator. "They used it not to change the situation for the better, as far as LGBTQA people were concerned, but they did the opposite. They used some kind of cheap populism in order to gain more votes by introducing a topic that is neutral and doesn't concern any of the candidates personally."

The parliament's agenda was easy to initiate quickly because Russia had already laid the groundwork, notes Chynara Bakirova, executive director of the Kyrgyz Republic-based Anti-AIDS Association, and the third member of the visiting Kyrgyz delegation.

"In a poor country, they are always going to welcome very radical solutions. Nationalism. Maintaining the tradition. Referring to the cultural roots. And a promise of a better future," Bakirova said through a translator. "In that sense, it is definitely easier to promote the negative agenda, aggressive bills, not something that would improve the social situation."

Bakirova continues.

"Russia is very close geographically, and that anti-gay idea had been there for quite some time," she adds, again through her translator. "Our parliamentarians decided to use that idea because the mass media in Russia had already prepared the ground. A lot of Russian media are popular in our country, so the local parliamentarians didn't even have to spend any money on campaigns."

A Matter of Life or Death

One subtle but devastating effect that anti-LGBTQA sentiment has created is an unwillingness to seek out treatment for HIV, said Aleksandr Shilo, the fourth member of the Kyrgyz delegation, through a translator. Shilo is an outreach worker for the USAID Dialogue on HIV and TB Project.

"There are a lot of people we work with, and sometimes you grab them by the hand and bring them there," he explained. "We're telling them, 'This is a priority. Please go through with treatment.' These people don't have the community to talk to, to support them. We try to unite them. We try to gather them."

The stigma attached to being a gay man has even created a rift among those infected, Bakirova added.

"Inside this group of HIV-infected people there is a lot of division based on how they got it," she explained. "This is a huge problem for us. There are several issues we need to monitor at the same time, and that is homophobia and internal stigma and psychological state of mind."

Bakirova notes that while HIV and AIDS aren't an epidemic among the general Kyrgyz population, in 2013 an estimated 6.6 percent of gay men were infected.


Photo courtesy of Nurbek Omurov.

Members of the delegation admit it has been hard to grasp a true sense of what it's like to be openly LGBTQA in the U.S. due to the whirlwind itinerary of their trip. Ten points out the nature of conservatism varies quite a bit between countries, as well as its impact.

"We have quite a lot of things that are similar," she said. "But when you compare Kyrgyzstan and Arizona, I think it's easier to get justice than in our country. That's the most important difference, in my opinion."

In laconic fashion, Omurov agreed.

"There is rule of law," he says. "But in Kyrgyzstan, rule of law is complicated."

Fear Versus Fate

Our time is up in the conference room. There's an uneasy moment when members of the Kygyz delegation and I realize it's unlikely we'll see each other again. Somebody suggests I meet them for the complimentary happy hour. Possibly sensing the ethics involved with American journalism, they insist on sneaking me in with their room keys so I can get free drinks.

One of our translators, a gracious, motherly native of Kiev, excuses herself and a few of the delegates. They'd heard about T.J. Maxx and remain determined to walk the few blocks there from the hotel before it closes. Apologetically, I produce my phone to show them what one block means – Scottsdale Road to Miller Road – in an urban sprawl. The group confers a moment in rapid-fire Russian before deciding to catch the hotel shuttle.

Omurov and I find ourselves the only ones left in the lounge, daintily sipping thimble-size cocktails. As a few other hotel guests are transfixed by the American football game on a couple flat screens, Omurov tells me about his coming-out experience. Two years ago, after being closeted for 12 years, his devoutly Christian mother insisted on performing the washing of the feet rite, kneeling before him, begging forgiveness for the way she'd raised him. When Omurov refused to renounce being gay, she disowned him.

He hasn't heard from her since.

But that's what he's come to accept.

"I did not expect to hear such horrible words from a mother. It was very difficult to hear all that from a person who you think should love you," he later tells me from Vienna via Facebook, on his way back home.

"As a gay person, coming out is my fate."

Echo would like to extend a special thanks to Kirill Flerov and Anna Richardson, Russian language interpreters, for their patience, humor and supreme professionalism.

TAKE IT ONLINE

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