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‘Why wave the flag?’: (in)visible queer activism in authoritarian Kazakhstan and Russia

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ABSTRACT
Western queer politics aspires to increase the visibility of queer subjects who have been highly regulated in Kazakhstan and Russia. Drawing on three interview studies conducted in 2017 and 2018 in Kazakhstan and Russia, respectively, this article examines and compares narratives on queer activism in both countries. Our findings reveal how visibility has an ambivalent meaning for queer people in these cases. For many, public queer activism is perceived as vulnerable and risky, therefore alternative, less ‘visible’, methods of activism are preferred and deemed more useful. For example, participants in our studies mentioned using social media, signing petitions and taking part in educational initiatives as alternative forms of queer activism. The article deliberates the pursuit and applicability of representational visibility politics within queer activism in Kazakhstan and Russia’s fluctuating contexts.

Introduction

Visibility and invisibility have been highly debated within feminist and queer literature (Ayoub 2016; Edenborg 2019; Wilkinson 2020). Western and Western-inspired movements pursue a representational visibility politics characterized by the idea that public visibility is essential to liberate and empower marginalized groups, increase awareness of injustice and challenge negative attitudes (Ayoub 2016; Edenborg 2019). However, representational visibility politics has been criticized for its potential to expose already vulnerable groups to more risks (e.g., Edenborg 2019; Stella 2015).

Poststructuralist feminists theorized visibility (and invisibility) as a tool of regulation and contestation, discussing how people are differentially affected and permitted or prohibited from the public realm of appearance (Butler 2015; Taylor 1997). According to those theorists, the capacity to regulate what is to appear in public is the very expression of power and domination, determining who can speak and be heard, who can be recognized and be intelligible, and who can and cannot be deemed as a politically qualified subject.
Whilst visibility is a tool of regulation, visibility can also be a way of resistance laying ‘claim to the public’ (Butler 2015, 41). Judith Butler believes that when people assemble in public, the mere fact of their bodies being out there and publicly visible claims the right to appear (Butler 2015, 37). At the same time, Butler writes about the vulnerability that is associated with resistance and visibility. Indeed, the very possibility of showing up with one’s body in public is contingent on physical and mental well-being (Hedva 2018). Hence, individual actors face the dilemma of weighing up the need to achieve one’s political goal against the risks to freedom, violence and security (Butler 2015), and even death (Majewska 2021). For queer people this dilemma has been described by several researchers (Richardson 2017; Wilkinson 2017).

The question of vulnerability associated with public agency and resistance is particularly poignant in authoritarian regimes, such as in Russia and Kazakhstan, where repressive legislation and regulations of collective action are constraining public protests (Article 19 2015; Clément 2015). In this article, we debate the relationship between (in)visibility and queer activism within authoritarian regimes using Kazakhstan and Russia as comparative case studies.

Debates about the visibility of queer people in the post-Soviet space have been the focus of several studies (Buyantueva 2018, 2022; Edenborg 2017, 2019; Stella 2013). For example, Francesca Stella criticizes representational visibility politics as being Eurocentric, analysing an example of the public backlash following the Moscow Pride in 2006 (Stella 2013, 2015). Debates about queer visibility in former Soviet countries are entangled with constructions of ‘West’ and ‘East’. The division between the ‘good’ West and the ‘bad’ or ‘lagging behind’ East incorporates the progressivist timeline and narrative (Kondakov 2021; Mizielinska and Kulpa 2011). In accordance with it, Western countries are represented as progressive, developed and inclusive of queer people, while non-Western countries are backward and homophobic. In addition, in non-Western countries, queer activism is expected to follow the path that the queer movement developed in the United States and Northern Europe. Indeed, Western queer activism is based on the concepts of visibility, public appearance and ‘coming out’ that are not always applicable in non-Western countries (Edenborg 2019; Stella 2013, 2015). Such ‘iconic’ (Butler 2015) public activism is often not inclusive of people of different religions, levels of ability, people of colour and immigrants. Gradskova, Kondakov, and Shevtsova (2020) highlight that in contrast to the West, where a sexual revolution occurred in a form of public expression, in post-Soviet countries a different kind of revolution emerged. Given the vigorous censorship and regulation of any public speech and discourses, particularly in relation to practices that deviated from ‘traditional’ gender and sexuality values (Healey 2018), Gradskova, Kondakov, and Shevtsova (2020) argue that the ‘revolution of intimacy’ took place in the alternative, private sphere in state socialist countries, where people engaged in political action in the intimate spaces outside of public sight. Criticizing representational visibility politics, Gradskova et al. argue that ‘when transformations are not seen, this does not necessarily mean that they are not happening at all’ (365).

While Russian queer activism has been the subject of several studies (e.g., Buyantueva 2022; Lukinmaa 2022; Soboleva and Bakhmetjev 2014) as well as substantial popular media attention, presently only a limited amount of scholarship focuses on queer activism in Central Asia (e.g., Levitanus 2022a; Wilkinson 2014, 2020; Sultanaliyeva 2023). At the same time, LGBT activism in Central Asia also remains underrepresented within the international
media. Currently, no studies explore narratives of queer activism in Kazakhstan and Russia in a comparative framework. In this paper, we address this gap by jointly analysing three narrative interview studies from these two countries. By presenting a joint analysis, it looks at the cross-overs and discrepancies within narratives of queer people in Kazakhstan and Russia. Moreover, analysing queer activism in a comparative framework illustrates the extent to which Russia influences Kazakhstan’s politics and discourses around queerness (or not).

This article raises the question of whether political action needs to be seen in order to ‘happen’ or if alternative forms of activism that occur within informal settings, private domains (Gradskova, Kondakov, and Shevtsova 2020) is an option. We debate the credibility of ‘uneventful activism’ (Mayerchyk and Plakhotnik 2021) or activism that is ‘low-key, small scale, and initiated by individuals or small, informal groups’ (Jacobsson and Korolczuk 2020, 130), which happens in a private sphere and that has little discussion within mass media and public discourse. Whilst interrogating the idea of queer activism, we do not subscribe to the binary view of visibility/invisibility. Instead, we question what (in)visibility means for our participants in relation to queer activism. We specifically look at participants’ narratives and conceptualizations of different forms of activism: visible, invisible and in-between.

Cai Wilkinson, when discussing the evolution of LGBT politics in the former Soviet Union, argues there has been a shift in the post-Soviet space from state-enforced erasure of homosexuality and gender variance to the emergence of public forms of queer activism in the mid-2000s to eventually a state of ‘hypervisibility’ where opponents of LGBT rights actively provoke moral panic in the name of defending reinvented traditional family and national values (Wilkinson 2020, 3). Within this article we critique Wilkinson’s identified trajectory and argue against the generalization of the post-Soviet region as a homogeneous space. Instead, we argue that Kazakhstan and Russia differ significantly in terms of their queer politics and discourses.

In the following two sections we present an outline of changes in queer representational visibility politics within Russia and Kazakhstan. We then discuss our methods and reflect on our positionalities before we present the main narratives on queer activism arriving from our interviews with queer people in Kazakhstan and Russia. The article ends by considering the shared features and divergences within narratives of queer activism in Kazakhstan and Russia.

**Contextualizing queer activism in Russia**

Over the last decades, traditionalist and homophobic sentiments have grown in Russia. Against this backdrop, Russian conservative groups developed propaganda pertaining to non-traditional sexuality, which also found expression in legal norms (Healey 2018; Wilkinson 2020). In 2013, a federal law banning the spread of propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships among minors was adopted in Russia. The adoption of this law led to an increase in censorship and self-censorship on non-traditional sexuality (Soboleva and Bakhmetjev 2014). In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, there was a new conservative turn and surge of homophobia: the term ‘Gayropa’ and the notion of the ‘deviant’ nature of the European gender order became popular in Russian discourse regarding the Ukrainian crisis (Martsenyuk 2016).

By the mid-2000s queer protest activities arose because of the development of a collective LGBT identity and increasing pressure on queer people (Buyantueva 2022). Each
year during the 2010s, queer public actions were held in Moscow and St Petersburg. For example, the 1st May marches from 2011 to 2019 in St Petersburg included a rainbow column where people walked with flags and placards advocating queer rights, though in 2019 some participants encountered obstacles from the police that prevented LGBTQ+ symbols from being brought to the march (Gay.ru 2019).

At the same time, in the 2000s and 2010s, the visibility of feminist initiatives and discourses increased. This included the case of Pussy Riot (Yusupova 2014), new forms of feminist activism with less formal types of organizations (Sperling and McIntosh Sundstrom 2021), and the MeToo Movement (Muravyeva 2020). Since the mid-2000s, feminist and queer online activism has been developing, and the number of public queer accounts in social networks has been growing (Andreevskikh 2018).

In 2019, the Levada Centre reported that almost half of Russians (47%) stand for equal rights for gay people (Levada 2019). It was the highest level of support for equal rights for LGBTQ+ people since 2005. This was explained by a decrease in the effect of the campaign around the propaganda law (Levada 2019). However, in 2021, the proportion of people supporting equal rights for LGBT people dropped to 33% (Levada 2021). It can be assumed that the reason for such change was the campaign related to amending the Constitution of the Russian Federation in 2020. One of the amendments of the revised constitution was the enshrining of the concept of marriage as a union of a man and a woman. Thus, in Russia, the rise and fall of homophobic sentiments is not a linear process. These social changes depend on political decisions and rhetoric, dominant discourses, as well as civil initiatives.

In addition to the law on propaganda, other laws of the Russian Federation are an obstacle to queer activism and protest. The ‘foreign agents’ law adopted in 2012 complicates the work of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and de facto banned foreign financing (Bederson and Semenov 2022). Since Russian state funding is completely unavailable for LGBTQ+ organizations and they are dependent on transnational donors, this law led to the necessity to hide donor names, as well as the porous boundaries between organizations and informal groups (Pakhnyuk 2019).

Russian legislation provides for the procedure for coordinating any public action with local authorities. In theory, this legislation should contribute to the ease of holding of public events, but in fact authorities use it to restrict the rights of Russians to assemble and express their opinions. The authorities refuse to approve unwanted protests, and the need to apply to hold a public rally in advance makes any spontaneous action prohibited (Buyantueva 2022). In 2014, an article determining criminal responsibility for repeated violation of the established procedure for organizing or holding street actions was adopted. Nevertheless, until 2020, protests, including LGBT actions, were sometimes allowed to take place.

In 2020, due to the COVID pandemic, restrictions were imposed on holding mass events, which were often used as a tool to censor and pressure political activists. These restrictions are still in place, although mask requirements have been dropped and mass events supporting the authorities take place unhindered.

Since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, military censorship has been preventing protest action, including those concerning queer rights, even in the form of single pickets, which were previously possible. As in 2014, the invasion of Ukraine and the disengagement from the ‘Western’ world led to a new round of homophobia. A
clear example is the updated ‘gay propaganda law’ which now sanctions heavy fines for ‘LGBT propaganda’ among people over the age of 18 (RBK 2022). Moreover, some LGBT activists and even organizations were forced to leave Russia (Coming Out 2022).

**Contextualizing queer activism in Kazakhstan**

Existing reports indicate that discrimination and the threat of violence remain a part of the everyday life for queer people in Kazakhstan, making invisibility and silence the only viable strategies to enable them to continue to live safely. While the constitution of Kazakhstan includes a definition of ‘discrimination’, it does not mention ‘sexual orientation and gender identity’ as a category to be protected against discrimination (Article 19 2015; Human Rights Watch 2015). These omissions allow government officials and law enforcement authorities to interpret this provision in various ways, often against queer people (Sekerbayeva 2017). Despite the lack of legislative protection and the portrayal of queer people in Kazakhstan as silent and invisible within the existing reports, the visibility of queer people in public and LGBTQ+ activism has increased over recent years (Wilkinson 2020).

Between 2013 and 2015, following the adoption of the ‘propaganda’ law in Russia, similar legislation was attempted in Kazakhstan, thus evidencing Russia’s ‘soft power’ in the region (Healey 2018). While the anti-LGBT ‘propaganda’ law was rejected, there appeared to be an increase in discourse around queer citizens both on a governmental and societal level (Human Rights Watch 2015).

Kazakhstan’s dominant discourse and relationship towards the West is significantly more lenient in comparison with that of Russia, with Kazakhstan’s national narrative of Eurasianism and foreign policy of multi-vectorism aiming to sustain good working relations with major international political players (Hanks 2009; Patalakh 2018). Elsewhere, we argue that Kazakhstan’s politics of Eurasianism and multi-vectorism challenged some of Russia’s soft power in relation to queer people (Levitanus and Kislitsyna, forthcoming). As highlighted by Patalakh (2018, 37), ‘while Russia is positioning itself as a strong opponent of LGBT rights domestically and abroad, Kazakhstan behaves far more neutrally’.

Existing reports point out that the invisibility of queer people is also linked to the lack of an organized queer community in Kazakhstan, resulting in limited social connections between queer people (Article 19 2015; Human Rights Watch 2015). However, the presence of organizations such as Amulet, Adali, Kaleidoskop and Community, as well as the Gay.kz website, signalled the existence of an organized queer community in the early 2000s (Buelow 2012). Since 2015, several other organizations have made prominent appearances, such as Kazakhstan’s Feminist Initiative, Feminita – a queer-feminist collective; Kok.team – LGBT website (Kok.team ended its work in March 2022 after five years); and Alma-TQ – an initiative group aiming to support transgender and gender non-conforming people. The above organizations have strong links with transnational LGBT networks, which have remained an important resource and support both financially and symbolically (Sekerbayeva 2017).

Despite an increase in the number of queer organizations in recent years, Sekerbayeva (2017) notes from private conversations with other representatives of NGOs in Kazakhstan, that given the ambiguity of the government’s position towards queer citizens, engagement with queer activism is often feared out of concern of being marginalized.
and representing anti-government political views. Furthermore, complicated and bureaucratic legal procedures surrounding setting up an NGO prevents organizations such as Feminita from being officially registered (Sekerbayeva 2019).

Another factor affecting the organization of a queer community and setting up NGOs is the availability of funding. Given that only certain forms of activism and organizations are recognized by foreign funders (Heap 2003), only a limited number of actors can access funding from foreign donors, facilitating a small group of queer activist organizations to achieve an ‘elite’ status (Lukinmaa 2022). Part of the expectations of foreign donors is the emphasis on transnational practices and methods of activism that emphasize human rights and an institutional development agenda, with little account of local specificities and needs (Lukinmaa 2022; Sekerbayeva 2017; Sultanalieva 2023). As pointed out by Sekerbayeva (2017), ‘[f]eminists, activists of gender NGOs – consciously and unconsciously – accept tools from Western feminism and use them for the purposes of recolonization of personal and political spaces’ (144).

Moreover, the law preventing engagement in peaceful assemblies that are not agreed upon and approved by the government prevents events such as Pride parades in Kazakhstan (Article 19 2015). At the same time, groups that are not formally registered in Kazakhstan are banned from organizing protests. Like in Russia, protests, assemblies and public performances not granted government approval are regulated.

Regardless of the regulations of public assemblies, during recent years International Women’s Day marches approved by the Almaty city authorities have been jointly organized by feminist and LGBT initiatives (Peshkova 2021) and have featured many queer activists and groups. Apart from an increase in public assemblies, LGBTQ+ visibility in Kazakhstan has been growing with the appearance of multiple queer-dedicated and openly queer social media accounts (Buelow 2012; Kudaibergenova 2019).

With the increase in queer visibility in Kazakhstan, there is also an increase in reinforcement of ‘traditional’ values in the country (Dall’Agnola 2020; Kudaibergenova 2019; Wilkinson 2020). Dall’Agnola (2020) looked at heterosexual citizens’ attitudes towards queer culture in Kazakhstan and found that LGBTQ+ visibility is perceived negatively by people in their 30s and older. Dall’Agnola’s (2020, 108) 30+ respondents saw the ‘origins of the phenomenon of LGBT’ as coming from outside, namely, Europe and other Western countries, and only tolerate queer people as long as non-heterosexual practices remain confined to the private sphere (see Levitanus and Kislitsyna, forthcoming, for more detailed discussion of association of queerness as coming from ‘outside’).

The effects of the escalation of Russia’s war against Ukraine and the full-scale military invasion in February 2022 on queer lives in Kazakhstan and queer activism remains to be seen. Furthermore, given the impact of the Russian media and the internet in Kazakhstan (Laruelle, Royce, and Bayssembayev 2019), it is unclear how the escalation of homophobic rhetoric and the passing of the full ban on LGBT propaganda in Russia will impact queer lives and attitudes towards non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender people in Kazakhstan.

Methodology
This article is based on semi-structured interviews with 11 queer people based in Almaty, Astana and Karaganda in 2017 (Levitanus 2020), and semi-structured interviews with 49 non-heterosexuals based mostly in Moscow and St Petersburg in 2018. The interviews
in Kazakhstan were conducted by Mariya; the interviews in Russia were conducted by Polina. We also draw on Polina’s master’s research from 2017 on LGBTQ+ activism in St Petersburg using semi-structured interviews with 34 queer people. We acknowledge that Polina’s study had significantly higher sample size than Mariya’s. However, given that the two studies are employing qualitative methodology, the number of participants is less important than the depth of narrative accounts. Whilst anonymising identifiable information, we kept participants’ self-identifications and self-descriptions to honour and respect their preferences. Both studies did not explicitly enquire into participant’s ethnic origins and identifications. However, this information was noted if participants brought it up in their interviews. While all participants discussed their ethnic origins in Kazakhstan study, ethnicity was not mentioned by most participants in Russian studies.

The Kazakhstan study used narrative interview methodology, focusing on everyday life experiences. Foucauldian-informed narrative analysis (Tamboukou 2013) was employed to examine the narratives of queer people in the light of specific power structures and discourses around gender and sexuality in Kazakhstan. The Russian study used biographical interviews that covered the lives of the participants from early childhood to the time of the research, with a focus on sexual biographies. Both studies used similar probes focusing on people’s narratives of their everyday lives.

Given the co-constructed nature of narratives in the way that the audience exerts an influence on what and how is said, as well as the way those narratives are later interpreted (Salmon and Riessman 2013), elements of the researcher’s positionality need to be acknowledged. We both have a close connection with Kazakhstan and Russia. Mariya was born in Kazakhstan. Polina’s parents were born in Kazakhstan, and although Polina was born in Russia, she lived in Kazakhstan in early childhood. Polina is ethnically Russian, as far as she knows; Mariya is ethnically half-Russian and half-Jewish. Considering the above, we cannot neatly classify ourselves as either being ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders’. Indeed, as Naples (1996, 140) points out, ‘[i]nsiderness or outsiderness are not fixed or static positions, rather they are ever-shifting and permeable’. Hence, the researcher has to continuously negotiate and engage with the whole spectrum of various social identities and their intersections.

One of the aspects of the authors’ positionality and limitations to acknowledge is that the interviews for studies in Kazakhstan and Russia were conducted in Russian due to the author’s insufficient proficiency in the Kazakh as well as other local languages spoken in Russia and Kazakhstan.

In Russia the language question is complex and cannot be addressed without Russia’s history of expansion and incorporation of peoples with distinct languages, cultures and religions (Khanolainen, Nesterova, and Semenova 2022). In Kazakhstan the debate about the status of Russian language in the country also involves complex arguments about Kazakhstan’s Soviet past, nationalism, ideological influence and legislation (Sabitova and Alishariyeva 2015). In short, while Kazakh is the state language, Russian has the status of the official language in Kazakhstan. The Russian language is widely spoken not only amongst the Kazakh population but also among Russian and other ethnic minorities living in Kazakhstan (Sulejmenova 2010). However, the spread of the Russian language in Kazakhstan is uneven. The Russian language dominates alongside Russian borders whereas in other regions (Kyzylorda, Shymkent, Dzhambul and Southern Kazakhstan), Russian is only used marginally (Shaibakova 2020). The choice to conduct
interviews in Russian is an obvious limitation to our studies. Apart from potentially reproducing problematic power dynamics, it precludes access to participants who are not proficient in Russian.

Another limitation is that interviews in both of our studies were conducted in major cities and urban areas of Kazakhstan and Russia. Existing studies from both countries indicate that queer experiences are likely to differ significantly for non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people living outside of urban environments and metropolitan centres (Dall’Agnola and Thibault 2021; Stella 2012).

When writing about Kazakhstan and Russia, it is essential to acknowledge Kazakhstan’s colonial past vis-à-vis the Russian Empire (Turayeva 2021) and the Soviet Union that has recently been re-evaluated as an imperial formation (Shchurko and Suchland 2021). Whilst postcolonial discourse has been adopted by key political players in Kazakhstan (Kudaibergenova 2016), there is still an ambiguous relationship between Kazakhstan and its former oppressors, including the Russian Empire and Soviet Union. Kudaibergenova (2016) argues that this is partly explained by Kazakhstan’s continuous relationship with Russia and its substantial Russian-speaking minority. Russia continues to hold a strong influence over Kazakhstan; one of the ways in which this influence is evident is in the impact of Russian media and the internet in Kazakhstan (Laruelle, Royce, and Beyssembayev 2019). Russia’s power and continuous influence in the region is also evident within the practices of knowledge production about queer lives and queer activism within Central Asian context both within academia and beyond, which remains Russian-centred (Sultanalieva 2023).

**Figure 1.** Kurmangazy–Pushkin poster designed by Havas Worldwide Kazakhstan. Source: ©2014 Havas Worldwide Kazakhstan.
Despite all the differences and power of Russia vis-à-vis Kazakhstan, we believe that those differences do not invalidate the comparison. In making a joint study of queer narratives in Russia and Kazakhstan, we follow the metaphor of the Kurmangazy–Pushkin kiss, as described by Shoshanova (2021). Shoshanova discusses a poster depicting Kazakh composer and folk artist Kurmangazy Sagyrbaiuly and Russian poet Alexander Pushkin kissing (Figure 1). The poster was created to advertise a gay club in Almaty in 2014 and was seen as a way to respond to the ‘propaganda’ law passed in Russia a year before. Shoshanova argues that since Kurmangazy and Pushkin are presented as equals, it disrupts the very idea of Russian superiority in relation to Kazakhstan. Similarly, within this article, by placing the two countries as equals, we disengage and challenge some of the established hierarchies of power. By writing about Russia in a comparative framework and analysing the case and narratives from Kazakhstan, we aim to disrupt the tendency of scholars to analyse post-Soviet space as monolithic (e.g., Wilkinson 2020). In the following section we present the main narratives on queer activism from our interviews with queer people in Kazakhstan and Russia.

Results

Activism = being out

At the time of the interviews in 2017 in Kazakhstan, there were still only a handful of people publicly ‘out’. One of the participants who was ‘out’ described that the mere fact of being ‘out’ in Kazakhstan means that they are an activist. For example, a cisgender homosexual man in his mid-30s who is now publicly open spoke about the time before he came out: ‘I just planned to live a peaceful life so that no one touches me and my partner. I did not plan to be an activist or be public [about his sexuality].’ Here, being an activist and being public is put in contrast to the ‘peaceful life’. This participant later explained that for him being open about his sexuality already meant that he was engaging in activism and therefore was changing society. This participant continued to tell an anecdote from his life:

We were once walking down the street and saw two guys walking and holding hands. My friends shouted, ‘they lost all shame, look at them!’ as a joke. Of course, this is what we actually want. We want normalisation. And just like that, step by step, thanks to guys like that, there is change [...] I can tell that I am completely open. And all this activism and being open is first for me, not for anyone else.

From this quotation it is evident that visibility was admired and strived for by some of our participants in Kazakhstan. The phrase ‘this is what we actually want’ indicates a direction and destination that this participant envisions for the queer community in Kazakhstan. It should be normal for queer people to be open in public. Similarly, a gay man from St Petersburg in his mid-20s spoke about being/coming ‘out’ as being a form of activism in itself:

Another one of the things you can do is be open. It hurts, it’s scary, but it’s very important. My friend’s father thinks that gays are aliens. If they exist, then somewhere far away, not here. And he has a gay son but he doesn’t know. And he [friend] says [...] as soon as he becomes autonomous from his parents, he will definitely tell them, because he understands
the importance and necessity. However, people in the regions can’t say this because there are rumours and bullying [...].

The participant supposes that being open about one’s sexuality could demystify some people’s assumption that gays do not exist and therefore address the problems of homophobia. Yet, he fears that it might be dangerous for queer people to come out publicly, especially in regions outside of Moscow and St Petersburg. Some participants from our studies reproduced the representational visibility discourse (Edenborg 2019) that ‘[g]etting out of the closet and into the streets’ (Lukinmaa 2022, 320) is a necessary way forward. They equated the idea of activism with being ‘out’ and being open about one’s queer identity in public.

**Most people want a quiet life**

Not everyone within the participants’ narratives was striving towards visibility. Participants in our studies highlighted the division within the community: those who pursue visibility and those who want ‘a quiet life’. As the cisgender homosexual man in his mid-30s from Astana points out:

> Most people in the LGBT community here [...] say, ‘Okay guys, if you want to do your activism, that’s fine, just don’t touch us.’ I mean, they are comfortable, they meet guys in clubs, on dating apps, and they don’t have to talk about it. They don’t need to assert themselves and fight for their rights. That’s okay; it is just a part of the community.

From this quotation, it appears that many in the community fear visibility. They do not mind activism as long as it does not directly concern their lives. This narrative echoes Sekerbayeva’s (2017) observation that people fear to engage in activism in Kazakhstan, because their activism might be interpreted as an anti-government political stance and associated with risk.

Another participant from St Petersburg in his early 30s who identifies as a gay man highlights that visibility comes with the risk of harming one’s professional career and personal life. He both promotes visibility and empathizes with those who ‘lead a closed life’. Indeed, being an activist, particularly in Russia, comes with many risks that are now further exacerbated by an increase in repressive legislation in 2022 (Buyantueva 2018, 2022). Below another participant speaks to their ambivalence towards activism:

> Someone thinks that LGBT activists are doing stupid things or nonsense. In part, of course, they are right because activism really attracts attention. [...] On the other hand, the historical process is irreversible. We live in a single field with Europe, and activists who want to speak out will still appear. [...] In that sense, making things worse is an inevitable process. [...] We need to try to minimise the negative and maximise the positive. But [...] have no other way.

Elsewhere in the interview this participant attributed partial responsibility for the repressive legislation and homophobic sentiments in Russia to queer activists’ activity. However, they also recreate progressivist narrative (Kondakov 2021; Mizielinska and Kulpa 2011) highlighting that queer people in Russia are moving towards Europe, and that queer visibility and public appearance is imminent.

Gulzada,3 a lesbian in her mid-40s who was interviewed in Almaty, also spoke about the division in the community:
We have split from other girls because they think that we are attracting danger. It’s like we are waving a red flag, that we are here and that our community is here. They probably think, why do that? We are living here; we are earning good money, going to restaurants, going abroad. […] They are questioning why we should cause problems. While we are thinking that if we don’t come together, the community won’t develop and grow. I personally think that it’s important to speak up and be visible.

Gulzada described a segment of the Almaty lesbian community who did not support queer activism. From Gulzada’s quotation, it is clear that activists are often seen as ‘causing problems’, attracting attention or waving the flag. This is consistent with existing research based in Russia and Kyrgyzstan, that highlight that many queer people do not express support for activists and their actions (Mamedov and Bagdasarova 2021; Soboleva and Bakhmetjev 2015) often out of fear of exposure and homophobic violence, harassment and humiliation.

**Tema: those who want to stay invisible**

As pointed out by Mamedov and Bagdasarova (2021), the Russian word ‘tema’ or ‘v teme’ is one of the most common ways to symbolize one’s non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identity. Mamedov and Bagdasarova conducted an ethnographic study with focus groups in Kyrgyzstan between 2017 and 2019. They write that often “LGBT” identity is opposed to “tema” that is seen as an “old” form of identification (3). The purpose of tema is not to increase public representation and defending civil rights, but to ‘remain unidentified by mainstream society in order to avoid negative consequences’ (Wilkinson and Kirey 2010, 486). Yet, according to Mamedov and Bagdasarova (2021), tema is not just an old form of representation but an identification that is evolving and changing, encompassing a complex form of lingo-cultural symbolization.

Most of our participants were well familiar with tema, irrespective of their age. Tema or ‘temasynda’ was used by both Russian and Kazakh speakers in Kazakhstan. For example, as Gulzada explains: ‘Yes, tema is also used in Kazakh. Once on Vkontakte [social media] I was asked something about “temasynda”. I didn’t even understand at the beginning and then realised that she meant tema.’ While some participants in this study referred to tema more broadly as a form of queer identification, other activists differentiated those who wanted a ‘quiet life’ as the ones identifying with tema. To remain in the closet and therefore in the tema, some queer people even marry and have kids, as the following quotation by cisgender homosexual man interviewed in Astana shows.

There are apps where men who have sex with men meet, and they ask: ‘Are you in the tema? [ty v teme]?). […] I think that a lot of gay and bisexual men are suffering from internalised homophobia. […] They basically occasionally meet other guys in secret for sex while being married to a woman. I have a couple of very good friends. They’ve known each other for fourteen years, and they live together. To everyone else they are brothers. They use this term ‘tema’, they can’t say the word ‘gay’, and they make up other terminology.

Here, the participant referred to those who identify themselves with tema as people who have internalized homophobia and who cannot or do not want to be open about their queer identity. Similarly, a cisgender gay man in his early 20s argued that tema only describes the act of two non-heterosexuals having sex with each other:
Tema is hypersexualised, it does not even mean sexual orientation, it’s more related to the term ‘sodomy’. It’s not a way of life. […] It’s just one singular act of sex. Hence people ask: ‘how long have you been in the tema?’ They mean when did you first have gay sex? Moreover, you can come in and come out of tema. And those who leave tema are heroes. They are able to overcome the temptation. It’s like they talk about cigarettes, ‘I want to give up, but I can’t’.

The participant linked tema to sodomy, comparing it to a temptation or addiction to give up. Participants in the Russian study also referred to tema, differentiating it from a more politicized identity of LGBT. Bisexual woman in her late 40s interviewed in St Petersburg explains:

If the tema is like: ‘Hurrah! There are people like me. I can go to a club, pick someone up and have a beer.’ LGBT is more like a human rights organisation. LGBT people are people in all countries, not only here, minorities who have come together to defend their rights. It is more of a political and human rights activity, and not a good party where you can meet interesting people.

Similarly, to Mamedov and Bagdasarova’s (2021) findings, our study indicates that tema is often viewed more broadly and contrasted to a more politicized identity of LGBT. Given that the interviews were conducted in relatively big cities, it is plausible to assume that the narratives around the use of ‘tema’ would have been different if we had gone outside of the main metropolitan centres of the two countries and interviewed non-activists.

**Queer activism ≠ political activism**

Some participants separated political activism from queer activism. For them, political activism (e.g., protests against unfair elections or corruption) was identified to be more important and useful, while queer activism was rated insignificant, useless or even harmful. In some cases, respondents’ negative attitudes towards queer activism were cause by their personal attitudes towards those activists who organized street actions, as in the quotation from a lesbian woman in her mid-40s from Moscow:

Well, of course, I always went to all these Bolotnye, all these Fields of Mars.¹ I never went to LGBT [protests] because […] I mean in the last few years. And I have already said how I feel about activists. I don’t even want to be around them. To political [protests], yes, of course.

While this participant went to the major political protests in Moscow and St Petersburg in 2011–12 (Gelman 2015), she criticized queer activists and protests. This participant expressed a strong personal dislike of specific individuals who are publicly engaged in queer activism in Russia. A younger participant from Moscow who identifies as gay man in his 20s echoed her dislikes of queer activism when speaking about his friend’s action to send pro-LGBT petitions to government officials. There are different kinds of activism, some being political and others being more practical. According to this participant, the participating in any political action is something inherently problematic:

And there is such LGBT activism, when people brought, I don’t remember exactly, letters to the prosecutor’s office. They were detained. […] This is also cool, but this is about the [political] struggle. […] Well, it is a different, rather global story about politics. It’s a pretty muddy swamp.
The above contradictory quotation indicates both appreciation and apprehension about queer activism. While the participant admired those who sent petitions, he was also weary of the political consequences of the activism. His use of ‘muddy swamp’ describes queer activists’ political struggle as something dirty and unsafe that is different from other more ‘useful’ forms of activism. In contrast to participants in Russian study, participants from Kazakhstan did not differentiate queer and political activism. Indeed, apart from Gulzada, who spoke about Zhanaozen, most participants did not mention Kazakhstan’s political sphere within their interviews.

**Activism does not have to be iconic**

Some participants separated visibility-oriented LGBT activism from queer activism that seeks to address ‘real’ community issues. For them, any public statements or street actions are not as fruitful as ‘quiet’, invisible activism that solves specific problems. For example, a pansexual man in his mid-40s from Almaty does not consider visibility-oriented activism as necessarily the most useful:

> Many understand activism as going on stage and saying loudly ‘I am gay’. For me, activism is something different. Let’s say there is a problem that needs solving and for that we need to gather as a group. Because if you just go on TV and say alone – ‘Here I am, and I am good and you are all bad’ – the problem will not be solved. In Kazakhstan, many problems need to be resolved first on a documentation or bureaucratic level, and not through some public performance. […] Indeed, this performance is not activism. It is just a public ‘coming out’. Of course, it can become activism if you inspire some people to start following you. It becomes activism if you move from ‘I’ to ‘We’.

In contrast to our previously discussed narrative of equating activism to ‘coming out’, for this participant queer activism should be less directed towards increasing queer visibility and more about structural changes in the country. He also highlights that queer activism should be a more collective-oriented activity than individualistic endeavour. Other participants in our studies spoke about more or less ‘useful’ forms of activism. For example, a gay man in his late 20s from Moscow mention several examples of ‘useful’ and worthy queer activism:

> LGBT activism can really vary. There is LGBT activism, when the story with Chechnya began and quite a lot of people were engaged. […] There were people who pulled poor boys out of there, found them housing, and collected money to relocate them somewhere. This is very cool. There is a guy […] and his activism is that he argues with people. He finds some kind of dispute about LGBT on Twitter, and he comes to the comments and calmly, without swearing, with facts and evidence, tells people why they are wrong. In my opinion, this is a super hard job. […] If he’s talked to a thousand people and ten people change their minds, that’s pretty cool.

This participant mentioned the example of an LGBT Network which helped LGBT Chechens escape violence (Scicchitano 2019). Using social media accounts to speak out against negative stereotypes about LGBTQ+ people was deemed to be another form of ‘useful’ queer activism by this participant. In writing about social networking sites as platforms for queer activism, Andreevskikh (2018, 14) points out that particularly in the light of repressive legislation and censorship ‘any attempt at promoting LGBTQ issues online and portraying LGBTQ individuals in digital media can be seen as LGBTQ-right activism’.
For several participants in our studies, online queer activism was seen as a safer option than offline activism. Apart from online activism, participants found other forms of activism that suited them. For example, a gay man from Moscow in his mid-30s points out that he was ready to engage in activism in the form of signing petitions on Change.org and similar platforms. Others spoke about educational activities, such as giving lectures and writing articles about LGBTQ+ issues on activist websites. Community events and discussions were also identified as an alternative form of activism.

Another participant, a lesbian in her early 30s from St Petersburg, points out that she does not understand how street actions work and how they can support her and the LGBTQ+ community more generally. She is engaged in sex education, writes articles about female and lesbian sexuality, and maintains a blog. Choosing to make educational activities, she does not consider political meetings valuable. This attitude can be related to a lack of positive examples when mass protests influenced political decisions. Besides, participating in street actions is unsafe; and the danger to which the protesters expose themselves may not be commensurate with the potential benefits of the event. She answered if she went to street actions:

No. [...] At this moment, I do not have enough input data, including motivation. [...] For me, it is not an inspiring thing. And I don’t see support for the community in it because I don’t see support for myself in it. I don’t see much of an effect in it. Again, I don’t see how it works. And that’s why I don’t get involved.

These quotations expand the narrow view of ‘political’ that sees political action only in terms of actions and activities that are openly declared as such, which often means missing out on the political life of subordinate groups (Scott 1990). Participants in our studies spoke about different kinds of activism, which they often classified as ‘political’ and implicitly ‘apolitical’, as well as ‘worthy’ or ‘useful’ and ‘pointless’ or ‘questionable’. As pointed out by Jacobsson and Korolczuk (2020, 131):

(it) is therefore necessary to extend our understanding of political engagement to include a wide range of activities oriented towards change by which people attempt to collectively challenge the status quo – even if for various reasons those engaged reject the label of ‘political’ activism.

Being Kazakh, being Russian and being a queer activist

Participants from Kazakhstan found it especially important to integrate their ethnic and queer activist identities. Sex, sexuality and queer identity in Kazakhstan is often associated with the culture of shame or Uyat and deemed taboo (Levitanus 2022b). Resources were devoted to writing and translating LGBTQ+ resources into the Kazakh language and increasing queer visibility in Kazakhstan. For example, often Kazakh national clothes were used by queer activists (e.g., Feminita activists wore chapan or shapan6 to a rally on 8 March 2022 in Almaty). A young cisgender gay man from Astana speaks about the importance of increasing the visibility of Kazakh queer people.7

In the future I want to be publicly open and be a public activist. I think it is simple Kazakh-speaking. [...] If a simple Kazakh guy says, ‘I am gay and I will fight for other gay people’, it will have an effect.

This participant emphasizes the importance of the public visibility of Kazakh queer people speaking Kazakh. The participant highlights that such activism in Kazakhstan is likely to
have more of an effect. They elaborated that writing in Kazakh and creating more visibility for Kazakh queer people is crucial for reaching people who do not have access to resources in languages other than Kazakh, as well as people coming from outside of the metropolitan centres. Another interesting division is highlighted between ‘public’ and ‘non-public’ activism here. At the time of the interview, this participant was involved with an alternative form of activism where he wrote articles in the Kazakh language anonymously on an activist website (Levitanus 2022a).

As pointed out within the methodology section, most participants in studies related to Russian LGBTQ+ did not talk about their ethnic origins. When speaking about being Russian, participants in Polina’s study referred to Russian national identity, which was perceived as being incompatible with being queer and open simultaneously. As described by Lukinmaa (2022, 320), ‘the common perception of LGBTQ+ activism is as ‘a rootless tree’ that is external, even alien, to Russian society at large’. Some participants talk about the inevitable unhappiness and closedness of queer people in Russia. A lesbian woman from Moscow in her mid-20s speaks about what it means for her to be a Russian lesbian: ‘Being a Russian [russkî] lesbian means manoeuvring between one’s nature and the surrounding people.’ Her Russian lesbian identity is having to be constantly negotiated. The participant mentions the need to sometimes hide her queer ‘nature’ which is embedded within the intersection of being Russian and her sexuality. Another participant – a gay man in his mid-30s from Karelia, spoke about his complex relationship with Russia: ‘All of Russia became a place “without love” where I got hurt all the time. I was thrown and humiliated, and not only in personal relationships.’ For this participant, love and happiness is not available to queer people who live and stay in Russia. He describes the deep pain associated with his past experiences while living there. Against the backdrop of state homophobia, Russian queer activists attempt to find their ‘roots’ in linking to historical and literary culture, and Russian and Soviet dissident history (Lukinmaa 2022). The role of national and ethnic identity for queer activists in Kazakhstan and Russia differ significantly, with Kazakhstan activists continually engaging with the creation of a distinctly Kazakh queer identity. Conversely, Russian queer people described their national and ethnic identity more ambiguously, mostly addressing the question of what it is like to be queer in Russia, and offering little insight into what it meant for them to be Russian and to be queer. Furthermore, given the uncertainty around the meaning and the use of terminology to signify what it means to be Russian, it is difficult to interpret whether participants in Polina’s study referred to ethnic or national identity and what these categories meant for them.

Conclusions

This article debates the centrality of representational visibility politics (Edenborg 2019) in queer activism in Kazakhstan and Russia. While many participants reproduce progressivist narrative in pursuit of a Western emphasis on queer visibility (Kondakov 2021; Mizielinska and Kulpa 2011), their narratives often express ambivalence towards participating in public queer activism. Another shared feature within narratives on queer activism in Kazakhstan and Russia is that participants are aware of the tensions within the queer community around activism and visibility, with most people being described as simply wanting a ‘quiet life’. Some referred to the portion of the queer community who do
not want to associate themselves with political activism as ‘tema’. Furthermore, participants in our studies separated queer activism from political activism, while others were involved in political activism while at the time condemning queer activist circles and methods. Participants from both countries argued that there is ‘helpful’ and ‘unhelpful’ queer activism, often referring to alternative forms of activism as being more workable, given the risks associated with public visibility. The narratives on queer activism differ mainly within the theme of Queer activism ≠ political activism. Kazakhstani participants rarely mentioned the relationship between LGBT activism and wider politics in Kazakhstan. Apart from a possible participant selection bias, this difference between the extent to which politics was spoken about among Russian and Kazakhstani participants may have arisen due to the fact that in 2017 when the interviews were conducted there were no political protests in Kazakhstan that were widely discussed in a public sphere, which contrasts to Polina’s context of ongoing protests in 2018 (Fomin and Nadskakula-Kaczmarczyk 2022). It is plausible to assume that had Mariya conducted her study in 2022 (Kudaibergenova and Laruelle 2022), the picture would have been drastically different with possibly more narratives featuring political engagement. Lastly, we addressed the question of the intersection of national, ethnic, and queer identities. This intersection was particularly important for queer people in Kazakhstan, who actively negotiated their ethnic, cultural and queer identities, whereas in Russia this intersection was less significant.

This article critiques the idea of a linear ‘evolutionistic and chronological path for an identarian emancipation’ (Lukinmaa 2022, 320) for queer people in Kazakhstan and Russia. The two countries display wave-like changes in the levels of the public appearance of queer activism. Russia’s conservative turn and increase in repressive legislation has impacted discourses around queer citizens in Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, Kazakhstan is not just mirroring Russia’s homophobic politics. Indeed, while at the time of collecting our data in 2017–18, there was an increase in queer visibility in Russia and there were still relatively few people engaging with public queer activism in Kazakhstan. Finishing this article in 2023, the situation is drastically different, with repressive legislation affecting Russian activists and with an increase in public queer visibility in Kazakhstan. Despite those fluctuations, alternative, often invisible or semi-visible, forms of activism are deemed to be consistently more important and useful in both countries.

Notes

1. In this article the use of ‘queer’ encompasses people who do not conform to normative sexualities and gender binary. Other terms such as ‘LGBT’, ‘LGBTQ+’, ‘gay’, ‘cisgender’ and ‘homosexual’ are used consistently with the self-identifications of participants and primary sources cited.

2. While Kazakhstan is identified in the literature as a hybrid regime that displays both democratic and non-democratic elements of governance (Cameron and Orenstein 2012), there are clear aspects of the authoritarian regime, specifically in the ability of the ruling elites to occupy and dominate the crucial discourses related to political and cultural governance (Kudaibergenova and Shin 2018).

3. All participants’ names and other identifiable details were either changed or omitted. One participant, Gulzada, chose to opt out of anonymization and requested we retain her actual name within publications.
4. Bolotnaya Square is the place in the centre of Moscow where the biggest meetings were held during the protests of 2011–12. The Field of Mars is the most popular location for demonstrations and protests in the centre of St Petersburg. The participant used the plural forms of these toponymes to encapsulate many different political protests.

5. The Zhanaozen massacre took place over the weekend of 16–17 December 2011 in western Kazakhstan’s region of Mangystau when protesters clashed with local authorities and the police during workers strike (Isaacs 2022).

6. A long robe typically made of beautiful fabrics and decorated with various ornaments and gemstones, which testified to the social status of its owner in society.

7. Terminology in relation to ethnicity is highly debated terrain Kazakhstan (e.g., Kesici 2011). In Mariya’s study she uses ‘Kazaks’ (‘Kazakhi’) and ‘Kazakhstani’ (‘Kazakhstantsy’), the former to refer to the Kazakh ethnic group and the latter to all groups (Kazaks as well as more than 100 other ethnic groups) who live within Kazakhstan’s territory and hold citizenship status. In Russia, the definition of Russian identity is highly debated and fluctuated with different political regimes and dominant discourses with divisions and inconsistent uses of ‘russkiĭ’ and ‘rossiiskii’ – both words meaning ‘Russian’ (see Teper 2016 for a more detailed discussion of Russian identity).

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