

Activism, Civil Society and Rights Based Work in Central Asia



*Welcome to the
exhibition **Activism,
Civil Society and
Rights Based Work
in Central Asia!***

This exhibition is about four Central Asian countries' (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) civil society and its struggle for change and influence in the region. The aim is to shed light on Central Asian actors, their analyses, how they organize themselves and what methods they use to achieve change. All too often people in developing countries like countries in Central Asia are viewed as passive victims in need of help. This perspective fails to account for humans' capacity to take charge of their own lives and determine their path.

In this exhibition we introduce groups, organizations and activist networks that are doing exactly that.

This exhibition was created by *Central Asia Solidarity Groups (CAG)*, with financial support from Forum Syd. It toured Sweden's major cities in the fall of 2016 and 2017 and will continue doing so throughout 2018.



Central Asia Solidarity Groups

Central Asia Solidarity Groups (Swedish: *Central-asiengrupperna*, CAG) is a politically and religiously independent non-profit organization founded in 2012. Our aim is to advance a democratic Central Asia with a vibrant and inclusive civil society, where human rights are respected, exclusion is minimized and social justice is extended to all. Our geographic focus is on Central Asia, in the sense of the five post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. For several years now we have been organizing projects and collaborations, first mainly in Kyrgyzstan, but since 2014 in the other Central Asian republics as well.

Our efforts consist primarily of long term solidarity work, exchange programs, as well as trainings and capacity building, all conducted in close co-operation with civil society actors in Central Asia. we currently pursue five thematic working areas:

1. **Democratic organization of youth**
2. **Girls' and women's rights**
3. **LGBTQ+**
4. **Conflict transformation**
5. **Culture**

Aside from our work in Central Asia we also engage in a number of local projects in Sweden, as well as international information and advocacy work. Our ambition is to function as a platform for people who want to get engaged in issues concerning the region – should you be interested in getting active, there are plenty of ways for you to develop and launch projects with us! While we prioritize ideas that fit our five thematic areas of focus, we would of course love to hear any other ideas or suggestions you may have as well!

Check out www.centralasien.org or contact us at info@centralasien.org for more information!

Rights Based Approach (RBA)

For many years there have been lively debates within the international aid community about what the relationship between aid organizations and aid benefactors should look like. For a long time the understanding was that aid was to satisfy needs of people who themselves were incapable of satisfying them. However, this approach has been criticized for creating a relationship of dependence, and preventing structural change in the long term. The so-called Rights Based Approach (RBA) is an attempt to get away from charity and change the world sustainably and long term.

RBA defines the two main parties in the development context as rights-holders and duty-bearers. While all humans have rights, the term rights-holders here is meant to signify marginalized groups whose rights are not fulfilled. The term duty-bearers describes those with power, such as the state. Within RBA, and in contrast to older development models, the challenges faced by rights-holders are not seen as unsatisfied needs, but as unfulfilled rights.

RBA emphasizes both the importance of structural change, and the process of change itself, rather than focusing solely on problem solving. This means that right-holders receive support in the form of knowledge, contacts, and methods in order to empower them to demand of duty-bearers the fulfillment of their rights. This exhibition wants to illustrate what a Rights Based Approach to development can look like in practice.



About Central Asia

The region of Central Asia is composed of five countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – that became independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It stretches from the Caspian Sea in the west to China in the east and from Afghanistan in the south to Russia in the north. The total population of Central Asia is around 68 million with Uzbekistan being the most populous country in the region. Central Asia has a long, rich history based on its geographical location along the ancient Silk Road and was part of Mongol Empire, Iranians, Turkic people, Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, thus it boasts a very vibrant culture. The majority of Central Asian population is muslim, with a significant minority of orthodox christians.

For most, religion has a cultural, rather than political significance. Older shamanistic and animistic traditions are still being practiced in some parts of the region too. Kazak, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Turkmen and Tajik languages belong to Turkic language group, with the exception of Tajik, which belongs to Persian language family. Russian is de facto lingua franca throughout the region.

Some of Central Asian countries such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are the most repressive countries in the world with rampant corruption and notorious record of human rights violations. Tajikistan has been affected by civil war that lasted from 1992–1997 and left the country impoverished, while being ruled by the dictator and his closest allies. Kazakhstan is by far the largest country in terms of geography and richest in terms of GDP per capita due to its vast oil resources and being ruled by authoritarian kleptocrat. Kyrgyzstan has been described as an open and democratic oasis in comparison with its other Central Asian neighbors with an active civil society, with several independent unions, a number of competing political parties, and many politically independent organizations.

While women and men are legally equal in all Central Asian countries, women still experience serious discrimination in education, on the labor market and through traditions like bride kidnapping, in which women are forced into marriage through abduction and rape.

Homosexuality is criminalized in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and is being punished by up to two and three years in prison respectively. Homosexuality in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is not criminalized, but LGBTQ+ community suffers discrimination in public and private contexts. Often they are the targets of violent reactionary groups, and at times even the police. For some time there have been discussions in Kyrgyzstan about whether to introduce a law similar to Russia's infamous legislation, criminalizing "propaganda for non-traditional relationships", which would make it impossible for LGBTQ+ community to demonstrate or organize.

Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have rigid control over civic space and activities of civil society organizations, who are required to report their funding from international organizations, while being surveilled with individual activists being harassed, tortured and in some cases killed. Kyrgyzstan has witnessed attempts to introduce controversial Russian law that demonizes local organizations with international funding as "foreign agents" or "spies". Even though the proposal has been defeated, smear campaigns against human rights activists, accusing them of being unpatriotic, are increasingly common.

How You Can Help

There are several ways to support the groups featured in this exhibition. To start with, you can follow them on social media, and stay up to date with their work and the situation in the region.

In cooperation with BFI and Labrys, two of the groups portrayed below, CAG has also initiated a fund to assist activists in cases of acute threats to their personal safety. The money is used exclusively and without deductions for that purpose, for instance to cover the costs of evacuating activists at risk. Since donors do not provide grants for this type of relief, we are entirely dependent on private donations to be able to continue this work. The fund has previously helped with the evacuation to Sweden of LGBTQ-activists being persecuted in Central Asia.

If you would like to donate to this fund, please transfer an amount of your choice to the below account, marked with the word "activist".

Swish: 1233698479

Bankgiro: 316-1338

You can also become a member of CAG. For your convenience, and to ensure a stable budget for our long term efforts, the membership fee is paid via monthly direct debit. Within CAG, untied funds such as membership fees are used directly to cover the costs of our projects and collaborations in Central Asia (that is, not for administration in Sweden). In other words, it is thanks to your support that we can facilitate people's struggle for influence, democracy and rights in post-Soviet Central Asia. The membership fee is 25kr a month or more.

You can apply for membership online, at www.centralasien.org



Kazakhstan

The area of present day Kazakhstan was conquered by Russia in the 18th century. Later, Kazakhstan became a Soviet Republic in 1936. Due to the vast territory of Kazakhstan, Soviet citizens were encouraged to cultivate northern parts of the country. Immigrants from Russia eventually outnumbered ethnic Kazakhs. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, large non-Muslim ethnic minorities departed Kazakhstan, while the national program has repatriated about a million ethnic Kazakhs back to Kazakhstan. This dramatic demographic shift has also undermined the previous religious diversity and made the country more than 70 percent Muslim. Kazakhstan's economy is considerably larger than those of all five Central Asian countries due to the country's vast natural resources.

Kazakhstan took few meaningful steps to tackle a worsening human rights record over the past years, maintaining a focus on economic development over political reform. Presidential elections in April 2015 extended President Nursultan Nazarbaev's rule for another five years. Opposition leaders are being imprisoned after unfair trials. Despite some efforts by the government to tackle torture, including by prosecuting some officers, torture remains a pressing issue and impunity is the norm.

Having a constitution that guarantees equality before the law and courts, and prohibits discrimination based on gender and having ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and having a nationally coordinated gender equality Action Plan, women in Kazakhstan still face gender-based discrimination that is widespread in the country. Kazakhstan's anti-discrimination laws have failed to produce any prosecutions, and Kazakhstani NGOs have long called them insufficient to address gender inequality. The rise of non-consensual bride kidnapping is an increasing problem in Kazakhstan. Although, consensual kidnapping is regarded as tradition, very few Kazakhs support the practice of kidnapping a woman against her will. The majority of young women who are kidnapped against their stay in these marriages to avoid the shame and stigma of returning home.

Kazakhstan highly restricts media freedoms and civic space. Independent journalists and media outlets face harassment and interference in their work, and outlets have been shut down in recent years. A new access to information law was adopted in November, 2015. Moreover there is a strict control over peaceful assembly. In 2017 Kazakhstan has been facing the growing prospect of an international backlash over a crackdown on trade unions, closing down Confederation of Independent Trade Unions and imprisoning multiple trade union activists.

LGBT+ people in Kazakhstan live in a climate of fear fuelled by harassment, discrimination, and violence. On the rare occasions when LGBT+ people report abuse, they often face indifference and hostility. Parliament passed bills that sought to introduce a broad ban on "propaganda of non-traditional sexual orientation", but final drafts were not made public and the end-stage of the legislative process was non-transparent.

Kazakhstan was the first country in the region to put forward the idea of creating the Eurasian Union back in 1994. From the very beginning, Kazakhstan wanted the Eurasian Union to be purely economic, without any political dimension. Together with Belarus and Russia, Kazakhstan signed a treaty establishing Eurasian Economic Union in May, 2014.



Tajikistan

Present-day Tajikistan came under Russian rule in the second part of 19th century. Tajikistan was first created as an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan in 1924, and only in 1929, Tajikistan received status of the republic. After the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, Tajikistan became independent and experienced a civil war between regional factions from 1992 to 1997. The civil war was a chaotic, complex and multi-sided affair. It was a power struggle between clans and regions, neo-Communists, moderate Muslims, democrats and intellectuals. There were clans and warlords who took side of the neo-Communists and the opposing Islamic force.

Tajikistan has endured several domestic security incidents since 2010, including armed conflict between government forces and local strongmen in the Rasht Valley and between government forces and criminal groups in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast. Recent incidents were a series of attacks on security personnel in September 2015 led by a former high-ranking official in the Ministry of Defense. Tajikistan remains the poorest country in the post-Soviet region. The economy of Tajikistan faces major challenges, including dependence on remittances from Russia, high levels of corruption, and the major role narco-trafficking plays in the country's informal economy. Despite the fact that Tajikistan is heavily depended on remittances from Russia, integration prospects of the country in Eurasian Economic Union remain blurred.

According to Human Rights Watch, Tajikistan's human rights record continues to deteriorate amid an ongoing crackdown on freedom of expression and political opposition and pressure on the independent media. Authorities use torture to obtain confessions and it remains a serious concern. The government continues to block various websites, adopted amendments to the Law on Public associations that requires NGOs to register all sources of funding from foreign sources, subjected human rights groups to harassment, restricted media freedoms, and continued to enforce serious restrictions on religious practice, as it had in previous years. Based on this background, civil society organizations remain largely closed and are subjected to rigorous reporting guidelines that hamper their activities. Groups must operate inconspicuously, toeing the line between doing good work and evading scrutiny from authorities.

Domestic violence against women also continues to be a serious problem. There has been an attempt to combat domestic violence against women and children in 2015 that included establishing several police stations staffed by female police inspectors who received training in gender-sensitive policing. However, it is reported that Tajikistan's 2013 law on the prevention of violence in the family remains unimplemented and victims of domestic violence continue to suffer and do not receive adequate protection.

LGBT+ community is subjected to discrimination and homophobia. In 2014, the State Committee for Religious Affairs informed imams across the country to preach against "nontraditional sexual relations." Public beatings and discrimination as well as detention, harassment, and extortion by police are commonplace. Police routinely arrest men under suspicion of "homosexual acts" and charge them with "moral crimes." In 2015, more than 500 individuals, who were suspected of being part of LGBT+ community were arrested in order to eradicate "immoral behaviour" in the country.



Uzbekistan

The territory of present-day Uzbekistan was conquered by Russia in the late 19th century. Resistance to Red Army was eventually suppressed after the Revolution in 1917 and Uzbek Socialist republic established in 1924. Uzbekistan was the main producer of cotton in the Soviet Union with dramatic consequences for environment depleting water supplies, which have left the land and Aral Sea degraded and dried certain rivers. After receiving its independence in 1991, Uzbekistan managed to slightly diversify its economy and lessened its dependence on the cotton monoculture. Until recently the country was ruled by Islam Karimov, who remained loyal to the concepts of a command economy and totalitarian rule and left behind a legacy of repression, slavery and kleptocracy. The new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, took over the power without introducing significant changes in country's established authoritarian regime.

According to Human Rights Watch, Uzbekistan's human rights record is atrocious. Torture is endemic in the criminal justice system. Muslims and Christians who practice their religion outside strict state controls are persecuted and freedom of expression is severely limited. The government forces more than two millions adults to harvest cotton under abusive conditions. Uzbekistan has a lower score than Saudi Arabia in Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index and a worse score in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Moreover, Uzbekistan also found itself among the 17 worst countries internationally for religious freedom, per the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, and, according to the Com-

mittee to Protect Journalists, was one of only two post-Soviet countries in the top 15 globally for the total number of journalists jailed. And according to Freedom House, Uzbekistan was not only one of ten nations labeled as the "Worst of the Worst" in 2015, but has received the worst possible score several years in a row since 2006.

Women in Uzbekistan are denied their fundamental right to be free from violence. Current legal, economic, and social structures prevent women from receiving appropriate services for domestic violence crimes. There is a lack of understanding of the phenomenon of domestic violence on the part of the Uzbek legal system, and that is why it fails to respond appropriately. Inappropriate prosecution of domestic violence and failure to provide state support for organizations that offer aid to victims, the Uzbek government did not follow its obligations as a member of the United Nations and is not in accord with international human rights law.

LGBT+ community is subjected to severe discrimination and homophobia. Consensual sexual relations between men are criminalized, with a maximum prison sentence of three years. It is often reported that police use blackmail and extortion against gay men, threatening to out or imprison them.

Uzbek authorities continue to crackdown on civil society activists, opposition members, and journalists. Justice for the 2005 Andijan massacre is still denied by authorities that shot and killed hundreds of protesters. Non-governmental organizations in Uzbekistan face notorious registration requirements and legal restrictions. Organizations are forced to join a government-controlled umbrella group, the National Association of Nongovernmental Noncommercial Organizations. All organizations are required to register with the government, but new groups are allowed to operate for six months while registration is pending. NGOs are required to submit quarterly reports to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) describing their activities and face the threat of closure if they fail to do so.



Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan is a post-Soviet country of natural beauty and nomadic traditions. Most of the territory of present-day Kyrgyzstan was annexed to the Russian Empire in 1876. The Kyrgyz revolted against the Tsarist Empire in 1916. It resulted in killing of almost one-sixth of the Kyrgyz population. Kyrgyzstan is the most liberal state in Central Asia, and its independence is marked by coups, most frequently referred as "revolutions" and inter-ethnic clashes. Nationwide demonstrations in the spring of 2005 resulted in the ouster of President Askar Akayev, who had run the country since 1990 and was replaced by Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who manipulated the parliament to gain new powers for the presidency. In April 2010, protests in Bishkek led to the ouster of Bakiyev. His successor, Roza Otunbaeva, served as head of interim government until Almazbek Atambayev was inaugurated in December 2011, marking the first peaceful transfer of presidential power in independent Kyrgyzstan's history. Several months after the 2010 coup, inter-ethnic clashes between Kyrgyz and Uzbek minority took place in Southern region of the country and took lives of around 400-1,000 people (74% Ethnic Uzbeks), 400,000 were displaced and 1,900 were injured.

Kyrgyzstan enjoys the most vibrant civil society in Central Asia. Non-governmental organizations were established after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and strive to bring justice, fairness and equality in their thematic areas of work. These organizations are usually led by highly-qualified personnel and funded by international donors, which in turn managed to establish a large, professionalized, institutionalized and measurable form of civil society, which is vibrant and active, and most importantly, affects political processes, voicing the needs of the groups they work with.

Kyrgyzstan has witnessed only few meaningful improvements in human rights record in 2016. Authorities targeted and harassed some human rights groups, journalists, and lawyers. Impunity for ill-treatment and torture persist, and there is still no justice for victims of interethnic violence in 2010. Human rights defender Azimjon Askarov is still wrongfully serving a life sentence.

Domestic violence against women and girls remains a serious problem. The absence of services and the authorities' inaction or hostility toward victims obstruct survivors' access to protection and justice. Police do not systematically enforce protection orders and few domestic violence complaints reach the courts. Pressure to keep families together, stigma, economic dependence, and fear of reprisals by abusers hinder some women from seeking assistance. To curb violence against women, Law on the Prevention and Protection against Family Violence was introduced in 2017 and replaced a 2003 version, which had significant pitfalls.

LGBT community in Kyrgyzstan experience ill-treatment, extortion, and discrimination from both state and non-state actors. There is widespread impunity for these abuses. For the past three years, parliament has been considering an anti-LGBT bill banning "propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations," which aims at silencing anyone seeking to openly share information about same-sex relations in Kyrgyzstan. The bill was condemned by international community and local civil society activists.

Constitutional referendum took place in December 2016. According to Venice Commission the introduced amendments would negatively impact the balance of powers by strengthening the powers of the executive, while weakening both the parliament and, to a greater extent, the judiciary. Human rights are no longer the only highest values of the state, instead they are mixed with other nine values such as sovereignty, independence and national interests of Kyrgyzstan etc. International agreements on human rights will no longer be prioritized over other international agreements. Kyrgyzstan will no longer be responsible for execution of decisions on human rights of international bodies and will no longer be responsible for compensating for the harm caused.

In August 2015, Kyrgyzstan became a member of the Eurasian Economic Union, a common market of five Eurasian states, enabling Russia to exert its "traditional" sphere of influence in the region.

Adil Soz

Adil Soz is one of Kazakhstan's most veteran rights organizations, standing up for freedom of expression and the press, and defending journalists from increasing repression.

Kazakhstan has recently been witnessing a government crackdown on independent media. When in 2016 the country was shaken by large scale protests against a planned land reform, over 50 reporters covering the demonstrations were detained. Several prominent journalists have since been sentenced to long prison terms. In addition, countless social media users and bloggers are serving sentences for posts critical of the president or discussing other sensitive matters. Others have fled the country to avoid repression.

Due to these developments, the work of NGOs like Adil Soz is more important than ever. *The International Foundation for Protection of Freedom of Speech* Adil Soz, as it is officially known, was started in 1999, which makes it one of the most senior civil rights groups in Kazakhstan. Based in Kazakhstan's main city, Almaty, with a staff of about a dozen jurists and (former) journalists, the group monitors freedom of speech violations, provides legal aid to media organizations, and does advocacy on behalf of the independent press and persecuted journalists.

With authoritarian tendencies in the country on the increase, however, their work has become more and more difficult in recent years. "We used to be able to hold rallies", Tamara Kalayeva, the group's chairperson, remembers, "but now, all forms of protest are basically banned." Pickets, even of single individuals, require official permits, which are practically never granted. In order to get their message out, rights defenders like Adil Soz need to get creative. To protest the recent imprisonment of high profile journalists, Tamara Kalayeva and her colleagues wore matching t-shirts with the prisoners' faces on them. "Wearing t-shirts is still legal", she laughs.

In addition to actions like this, Adil Soz frequently works with artists to bring the plight of journalists to the public's attention. The walls of the organization's headquarters are adorned with frames displaying the winning submissions of past cartoon competitions dealing with freedom of speech, organized by Adil Soz. On May 3rd, World Press Freedom Day, the organization cooperated with an independent theater company to put on a play to mark the day.

Given the authoritarian nature of the regime, though, rights defenders like Adil Soz are themselves always at risk. Various never ending bureaucratic audits are a common form of state harassment. Extreme diligence and obedience to the letter of the law is paramount to avoid giving the authorities a reason to shut them down.

But even though almost everything ultimately depends on the will of those in power, and although the general outlook is gloomy, Tamara Kalayeva remains optimistic. "Many of the court cases our legal experts work on end successfully", she says. There have been some victories in the legislative realm as well. According to recent changes, which Adil Soz had long lobbied for, it is now more difficult to sue journalists for defamation when somebody does not like how they have been portrayed. "Offending somebody no longer carries a potential jail sentence either. It is a modest success, but it shows that improvements are possible", Tamara Kalayeva says.

Follow Adil Soz on facebook (posts in Kazak and Russian): @adilsoz.kz or visit their webpage: <http://www.adilsoz.kz/site/index/lang/en>

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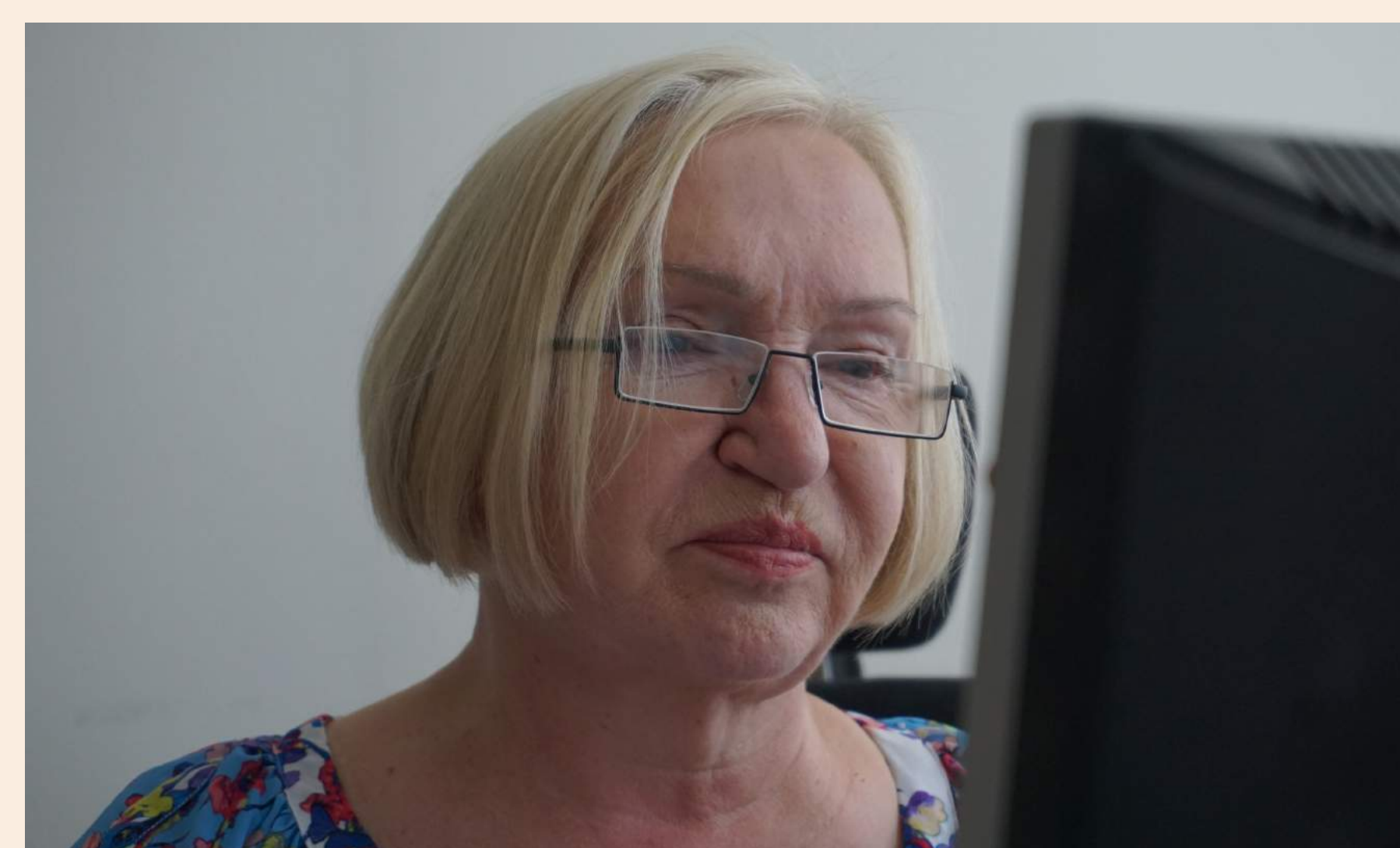
An Adil Soz protest action in support of jailed journalist Zhanbolat Mamay.



Adil Soz protest action in support of journalists.



"Together we are strong"; Adil Soz protest action.



Adil Soz President Tamara Kaleyeva, at her office in Almaty.

Alma-TQ



Alma-TQ presenting its collection of "Living Stories", composed of 15 interviews with Kazakhstan's transgender persons, Astana, 2017.



Round table on "Provision of medical assistance to transgender persons in Kazakhstan" with activists and volunteers from Alma-TQ, "Health Institute", representatives from the medical commission for the examination of transgender persons of the Republican Center for Mental Health in Kazakhstan, Astana, 2016

"People have had to hear patronizing comments like that they would never be a real man since they had too pretty eyes", one of Alma-TQ's activists explains.



Transgender people visit friendly endocrinologist. Support group Alma-TQ, 2016

The Transgender Initiative Alma-TQ is the first advocacy group of and for trans-persons in Kazakhstan.

Life for trans-people in Kazakhstan is marked by stigma and complicated bureaucratic hurdles. Like in other countries in the region trans-people risk social sanctioning and being ostracized by their families. Most of them therefore decide to keep a low profile. Changing one's gender in official identification documents involves a complicated and often humiliating bureaucratic process.

In 2014 a group of trans-persons in Kazakhstan's biggest city Almaty decided to do something about this, and started the country's first advocacy group of its kind: The Transgender Initiative Alma-TQ. While based in Almaty, the small group of activists have a network of supporters across the country, and cooperates with likeminded organizations across the post-soviet region.

For security reasons Alma-TQ's activists do not come out publicly, and most of their work takes place behind the scenes. "We pursue various goals", one of the group's members, who is a social worker by profession, explains. "For example, we find reliable doctors for trans-persons to get help from, and help people get in touch with them. We also provide trans-people with information about their rights when it comes to officially changing their gender."

As things are now, anyone seeking to transition is required to appear and plead their case before a government commission based in Almaty. Though this appearance is supposed to initiate the transition process, people have previously been turned down for not already looking male or female enough. "People have had to hear patronizing comments like that they would never be a real man since they had too pretty eyes", one of Alma-TQ's activists explains. Fear of being refused by the commission has put people in a position where they began transitioning in preparation for

their appearance. However, transitioning without the corresponding identification documents can lead to serious problems in other spheres of life, such as a person's chances of finding and keeping employment. One of Alma-TQ's key successes has been a reform to the functioning of this commission.

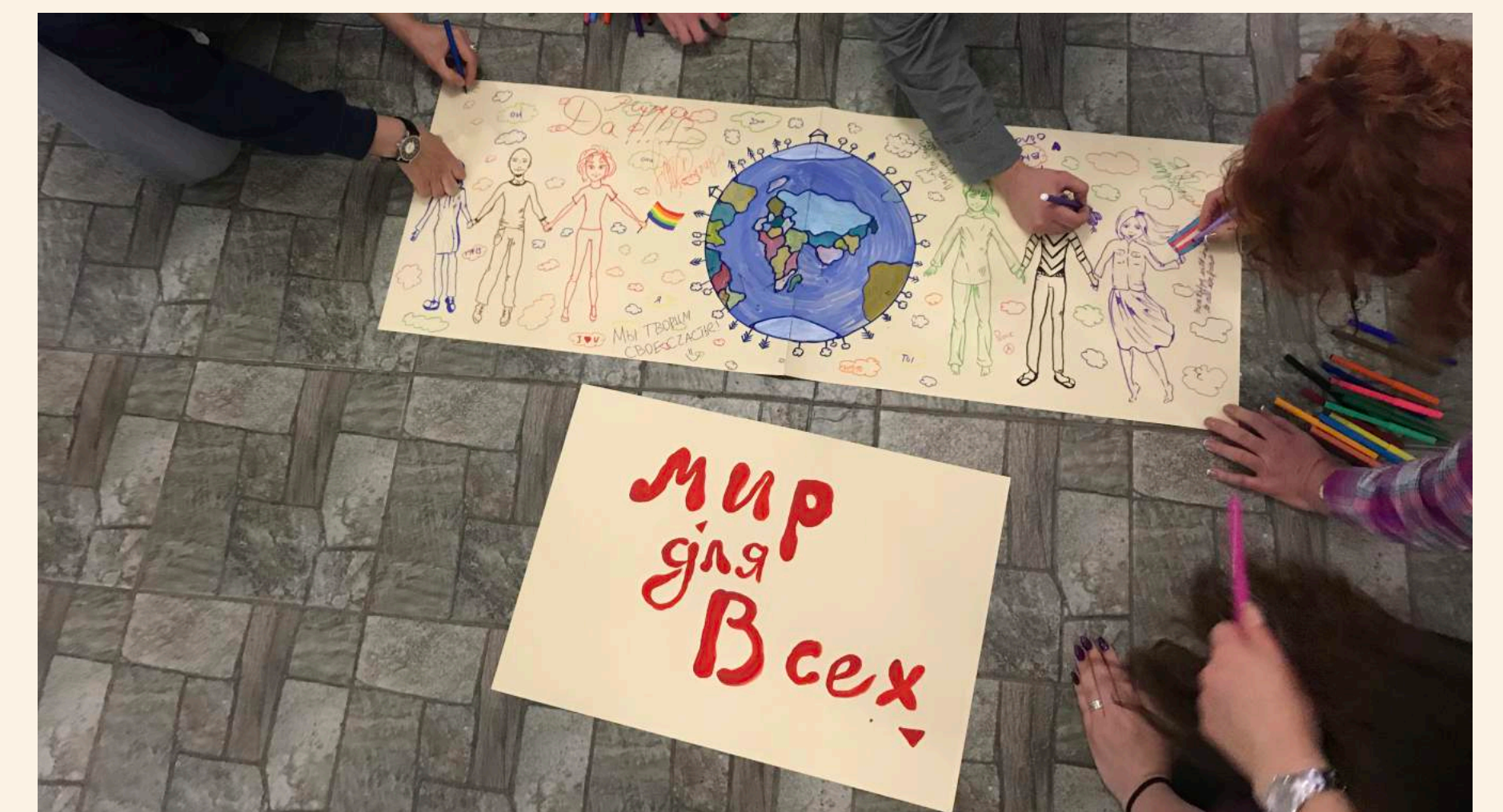
While gender transition prospects used to have to appear in front of twelve experts, the commission is now usually smaller. In addition, Alma-TQ's activists have been able to get more competent experts to join the commission. By building relationships with these government experts Alma-TQ has been enabling them to receive people more sensitively and come to more considered decisions. "Our greatest goal would be to have corrective genital surgery scrapped as a requirement for officially changing one's documents, and for the entire process to be de-pathologized" one of the activists says. "But unfortunately abolishing this entire procedure is not a realistic demand at this point", he continues.

While Kazakhstan is certainly no easy place for trans-people, the activists of Alma-TQ feel that things are moving forward. "There is no legislation directly targeting LGBT people, and attempts to have such legislation introduced have been defeated", one of the activists says. Some victories have even been won in unexpected places. When a trans-woman from a small town in northern Kazakhstan had her request to change her identification documents changed refused, a local court ruled in her favor, citing international principles on trans-rights, setting an exciting precedent for the whole country. When government officials there held a roundtable to further discuss the matter, members of Alma-TQ were invited to participate as expert advisors.

Follow Alma-TQ on facebook: @AlmaTQKZ



Alma-TQ on site training with a psychologist for LGBTQI community. Mountains, Almaty region, 2016



The first Kazakhstani trans camp, Almaty, 2017

Feminita

Feminita is a newly launched queer-feminist initiative based in Almaty, Kazakhstan, intended to function as a platform for the country's feminist activists.



Two of Feminita's founders, Zhanar Sekerbayeva, left, and Gulzada Serzhan.

In Kazakhstan, it is undoubtedly the men that hold power. Politicians and businesspeople are overwhelmingly male. Women get paid about 70% of what their male colleagues get for the same work. Often enough, motherhood is considered women's primary role in society. For queer women who do not conform to traditional gender roles, this results in double discrimination.

It is to combat this double discrimination that in March 2016 a small group of women started the *Kazakhstan Feminist Initiative Feminita*. According to Zhanar Sekerbayeva, one of *Feminita's* co-founders, the initiative has two main tasks: international advocacy and educational work on the issues of sexuality, identity, feminism, and queer theory. "We see feminism as a human rights movement. Since in Kazakhstan, women, and especially lesbian, bi and queer women, do not count as people, this is what we focus on", Zhanar Sekerbayeva explains.

As the country's first organization dedicated specifically to the struggle for lesbian, bi and queer women's rights, one of *Feminita's* first major project was to survey the field and learn more about the lives and challenges faced by the LBQ community. In a large-scale research project, they conducted surveys and in-depth interviews with over 200 women across the country, the results of which are to be published as a book in the fall of 2017. While researchers have previously investigated conditions of the LGBT community in general, this is the first time the particularities of female members of that community are looked at more closely.

In the long run, such work is intended to provide a basis for an independent, alternative report to the official one Kazakhstan will be submitting to the UN as part of the country's commitments to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Another aspect of *Feminita's* work has been to conduct trainings for open minded psychologists. "We know many LBQ women are in need of psychological support, but finding psychologists that can help is difficult", Gulzada Serzhan, another one of *Feminita's* co-founders explains. "Many psychologists are either apprehensive to help for fear of being associated with lesbianism, or are very insensitive, telling their clients to just find a man and get married, like a normal woman."

In order to be able to do such work long term, *Feminita* is currently preparing to officially register as an NGO. However, in a country where patriarchy and homophobia are as pronounced as they are in Kazakhstan, this is no easy matter. "While our approach is to try and be as open about our work as possible, some of our friends are advising us to formulate our application in general terms, and hide what it is specifically we stand for", Gulzada Serzhan explains. "We are currently still making up our mind about the right way forward."

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Luckily, things in Kazakhstan are not as dire as, for example, in Russia. Homophobic hysteria is not part of public discourse to the same extent as it has been made to be there, and in some cases the stereotypes of those in power actually can work in favor of groups like *Feminita*. "Since it is men that traditionally hold power, we are not seen as a serious threat" Gulzada Serzhan explains. "While this does not do us justice, it can work in our favor" she says with a smile.

On the whole, Gulzada Serzhan is hopeful about the future. "The young generation, growing up with the internet, have access to so much more information. They are more open minded", she says.

Follow *Feminita* on facebook (posts in English and Russian): @kazfeminita

Ghamkhori

Ghamkhori is a non-commercial care, education and development organization based in Tajikistan's third largest city, Kurgan-Tyube. Its mission is to enable vulnerable segments of the population to take control of their lives.

Although Kurgan-Tyube, a three-hour drive south of Dushanbe, is Tajikistan's third largest city, it has none of the glitter of the capital. Many of the large factories that used to provide employment during the Soviet era lie in ruin. Power outages are common. Many of the city's decaying apartment blocks are still riddled with bullet holes from the civil war. It is in one such unassuming building that *Ghamkhori* has its office.

"It's not Paris", Bahodur Toshmatov, co-founder and chairperson of *Ghamkhori*, laughs "but it is here we are needed most. Due to the hot climate and the lack of big city comforts, few international aid organizations are active here." Started by a group of medical professionals and teachers at the end of the civil war, in 1996, *Ghamkhori* today employs over 50 staff, including pedagogues, medical professionals, social workers, agronomists and legal experts. With the range of challenges in this part of the country being as broad as it is, *Ghamkhori* runs numerous projects tackling different social issues. Three of the currently most central ones involve working with Tajikistan's migrant labor population, operating a center for children with disabilities, and the issue of domestic violence.

Due to its dysfunctional economy, Tajikistan is one of the most remittance-dependent nations in the world, with as many as 1.5 million (of Tajikistan's roughly 8 million citizens) migrant laborers at one point working in Russia. With the Russian economy in stagnation many of these mostly young men from rural areas are now returning home. In order to help reintegrate returning migrants *Ghamkhori* is currently running a project that aims to help them stand on their own feet. This includes assistance in starting small businesses and farming lots. At the same time *Ghamkhori* works to spread information on legislative changes to Russia's migration policies, to ensure that potential future migrants have a realistic understanding of their chances in attempting to find work there, before making the expensive and potentially risky journey.

Another one of *Ghamkhori's* main projects is a center for children with disabilities, which the municipal administration in Kurgan-Tyube has entrusted the organization with operating. At this center, children with all kinds of disabilities receive vocational training to prepare them for a life independent of the meagre pension provided to them by the government. In addition, *Ghamkhori's* social workers provide various kinds of support to the children and their families, to help them cope with the stigma which much of Tajik society associates with disability. The long-term vision that guides the work at the center is to effect a change in attitudes so its clients are accepted for who they are – normal children, with some special needs.

Another key focus for *Ghamkhori* is working with the issue of domestic violence. To this end the organization runs a crisis center and shelter for those needing to get away from an abusive environment. The number of people seeking the services offered there, including psychological, medical and legal support, has grown steadily in recent years. In 2016 over 1000 individual clients received help. According to *Ghamkhori*, this to be taken as a positive sign, since it is indicative of a greater willingness to see domestic violence as a serious problem, rather than a private matter. Interestingly, it is not only women that seek help, but also men who suffer abuse from relatives. Aside from acute harm reduction work and rehabilitation of survivors, *Ghamkhori* works with families, communities and religious leaders to de-normalize and combat domestic abuse in the long-term.

Ghamkhori is guided by rights-based principles, meaning that sustainable social change is understood to rely on empowerment and enabling clients to take charge over their own life, rather than having their problems addressed for them. *Ghamkhori's* work has been recognized with several prizes by municipal and national authorities.

Visit the webpage of *Ghamkhori* for more information: www.ghamkhori.tj/en



Agricultural educational programs are one of *Ghamkhori's* areas of work.



Ghamkhori staff working with one of their clients.



Ghamkhori staff in contact with local law enforcement.

The long-term vision that guides the work at the center is to effect a change in attitudes so its clients are accepted for who they are – normal children, with some special needs.

Ilkhom

When Ilkhom Theatre first opened its doors in 1976, it was the Soviet Union's only independent theatre. Since Uzbekistan became independent this institution of Tashkent's cultural scene has remained a hub for critical and high quality creative production, and continues to attract theatre lovers from across the region.

Back in the Soviet days, the Uzbek capital of Tashkent was a good place for creative minds who wanted to push the strict limits imposed by the state. The Kremlin was far away, and the bureaucrats in Moscow were less aware of what was happening in the plains of Central Asia. So, in 1976, at the height of the Brezhnev era stagnation, a young director named Mark Weil decided to do what seemed impossible: with a group of local drama graduates he founded the first independent Soviet theatre. *Ilkhom Theatre* quickly became legendary across the country: Its unique and daring productions, often dealing with sensitive political and social topics, attracted theatre enthusiast from as far as Moscow and St Petersburg. The long corridor leading to the theatre's main stage is still covered in countless messages of love and admiration, scribbled there by its many fans over the years.

Much has changed since then. When the Soviet Union was dissolved, many former Soviet states developed a thriving and independent cultural scene, while independent Uzbekistan remains an authoritarian regime. Today, *Ilkhom Theatre* is the still the only independent theatre in Uzbekistan. But despite all odds, *Ilkhom* is still going strong, even after suffering the most tragic imaginable loss: in 2007, *Ilkhom's* founder and director Mark Weil was murdered, according to officials, by religious fundamentalists upset about his work. "Mark Weil was an innovative mastermind, and a true patriot of Tashkent. His death was a tragedy," Nikita Makarenko, one of *Ilkhom's* staff musicians explains. "He was irreplaceable, really, and many thought that without him *Ilkhom* would have to close its doors," Nikita remembers, "but *Ilkhom* kept going, and is continuing his work."

The word "ilkhom" is Uzbek for "inspiration". Since 2011, this has been meant to include other art forms as well, and today *Ilkhom* is home to musicians and visual artists too. The venue is a veritable hub for Tashkent's independent and creative spirits. The audience of the frequently sold out performances typically consists of people of all ages.

But while *Ilkhom* is supported by a dedicated community of friends, it is still struggling. Though the government generally tolerates the free-spirited atmosphere there, some plays have previously had to be adapted to pacify state bureaucrats displeased by offensive language they featured. Financing is also a challenge. Since *Ilkhom* gets no funding from the government, most of its staff hold other jobs to make a living. In addition, the ongoing emigration of Uzbekistan's Russian diaspora eats away at *Ilkhom's* core group of fans, many of whom are ethnic Russians.

"If you want to do your thing, get productive creatively, without having to deal with a lot of bureaucracy, this is the place to be"
Nikita Makarenko concludes

Despite the many challenges, Nikita is optimistic. "There are now several really strong creative collectives, trying to out-do one another. This has led to really big audiences, and helps us financially", he says. "If you want to do your thing, get productive creatively, without having to deal with a lot of bureaucracy, this is the place to be", he concludes.

Follow *Ilkhom Theatre* on facebook (posts in English, Uzbek and Russian): @ilkhom.theatre or visit their webpage: <http://ilkhom.com/en>



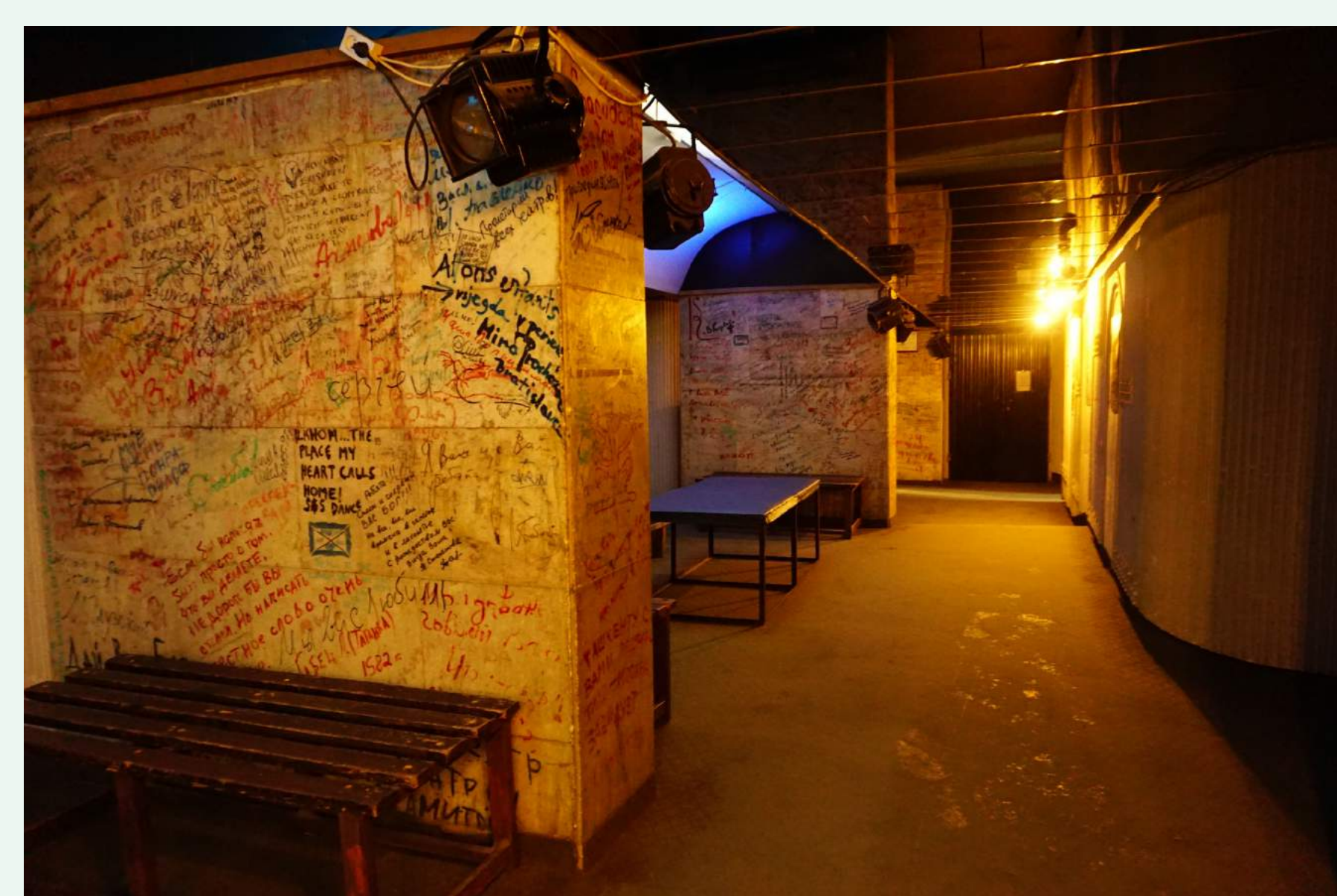
The late Mark Weil, founder of Ilkhom, in the theatre's lobby.



Upcoming shows.



Ilkhom Theatre, in Tashkent.



Over the years, fans have left their mark on the walls of Ilkhom Theatre.

Independent Center for Human Rights Protection

The Independent Center for Human Rights Protection is a human rights organization in Tajikistan, fighting against the use of torture, for greater public access to information, and for the rights of those forcibly evicted from their homes.

Founded in 2010, and based in an office building in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe which houses several of the country's top rights organizations, the *Independent Center for Human Rights Protection* pursues three key directions: the fight against torture, improving public access to information, and assisting the victims of forced evictions.

One of the *Center's* key areas of focus is the fight against torture, inhumane and degrading treatment. The organization is part of the civil society Coalition against Torture, which unites a number of groups and individuals seeking a commitment from the state to a zero-tolerance policy on torture. Partly due to this work, Tajikistan recently saw an amendment to the country's criminal code to include torture as a criminal offense. In addition to coordinating the Coalition against Torture's working group on media, the *Independent Center for Human Rights Protection* works with citizen complaints of torture, inhumane or degrading treatment perpetrated by officials, represents victims in investigations, and assists them in securing compensation.

The *Center's* second concentration is on access to information. Tajikistan's authorities do not always observe the public's right to access to information about their work. *The Independent Center for Human Rights Protection* therefore assists journalists as well as ordinary members of the public to gain access to such information.

While the *Center's* first two directions of work are also pursued by other likeminded organizations, its third area of focus is quite unique. Mass forced evictions are a very problematic but common occurrence in Tajikistan. The reasons for such evictions vary: sometimes it is the municipal authorities tearing down older buildings to make room for new construction, in other cases people's homes are in the way for the construction of administrative buildings. Cynically, one of the justifications given to

displace people which has become increasingly popular with the authorities, is to say that their resettlement is necessary for environmental reasons – even when they have lived in the given spot for generations. To make matters worse, those forced to leave their homes are frequently denied adequate compensation, forcing them to move to a distant part of town, or worse yet, into homeless.

Given the disastrous consequences such evictions often have for those affected, forced evictions are both a human rights and a social rights issue. "We are currently the only human rights organization in Tajikistan working actively with social issues like this", Shoir Davlatova, the *Center's* executive director says. While often an uphill battle, the organization's work with evictions is both vital and rewarding. In several cases they have been able to secure compensation where none was initially offered. A common and valuable side effect of the *Center's* work in such cases is the facilitation of ordinary people's own potential to stand up for themselves. Not infrequently former evictees, who turned into activists while working with the *Center* on their own case, later come to the aid of their neighbors when they become threatened with the same fate. In some cases, these citizens have then been able to carry on this struggle with only occasional advice from the experts at the *Center*.

Given that international financial support for Tajikistan's civil society organizations has been declining, and government audits of their activity have been on the rise, this development is crucial. "These ongoing contacts with citizen-activists really help. The greater the number of people involved, the greater the resonance among the population", Shoir Davlatova says.

Visit the webpage of *Independent Center for Human Rights Protection* for more information <http://notorture.tj/en/page/po-independent-center-human-rights-protection>



The executive director of the Center for Human Rights Protection, Shoir Davlatova.

"These ongoing contacts with citizen-activists really help. The greater the number of people involved, the greater the resonance among the population", Shoir Davlatova, executive director of Independent Center for Human Rights Protection says.

Light

Light is the first and only initiative for the rights of Trans-persons in Tajikistan, organized by trans-people.

Like elsewhere in the region, trans-people in Tajikistan face stigmatization and discrimination. With society deeply traditional, most live a double life, some of them hiding their gender identity from even their closest family members. While not officially, directly persecuted by the state, social ostracization and sanctions by other members of society and state authorities are common.

In September 2015, a small group of trans-persons in the country's capital Dushanbe decided to start the initiative *Light*, to advocate and advance their rights. In a place like Tajikistan, this comes with many challenges. Without official government registration, the group cannot rent office space, and is forced to meet at activists' homes or in public places like parks and cafes. In spite of this, the activists of *Light* do what they can to achieve progress for the trans-people.

Inspired by, and with support from the well-established "LGBT-advocacy group, in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, *Light* has been working to strengthen the trans-community of Tajikistan. This work has included networking with trans-persons in other cities, searching for trustworthy psychologists, gynecologists and endocrinologists, and establishing contact with lawyers willing to defend trans-persons facing discrimination. Given the level of stigma attached to transsexuality in the country, this is a very difficult task. "Most jurists are very apprehensive", one of the trans-woman who co-founded *Light* says. "While we know some friendly lawyers, who are willing to consult us in secret, hardly anyone dares to defend us in court, for fear of being associated with us", she continues.

With legal support limited, part of *Light's* work has revolved around improving security practices. Together with allied groups from other Central Asian countries, the group has participated in workshops dealing with organizational and cyber security, and with how to dodge the wrong kind of attention.

Given the prevalence of negative attitudes toward trans-people in society, most of *Light's* work needs to take place outside of public view. As a way to make their voice heard without risking their personal security, *Light* now plans to produce video material, to be posted on social media, highlighting their situation. "That way we can show that we exist", the activist says. "Perhaps even some government officials, who we could never meet openly, will reluctantly take a peek and notice us, sort of in the corner of their eyes" she says with smile.

"While we know some friendly lawyers, who are willing to consult us in secret, hardly anyone dares to defend us in court, for fear of being associated with us" say one of the trans-women who co-founded Light.

NANSMIT

The Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan, NANSMIT, has been the country's leading defender of freedom of the press since the 1990s.

The impoverished mountain nation of Tajikistan is not an easy environment for independent journalism. Still recovering from a devastating civil war that followed independence, the economic outlook is dire. The lack of perspective for young people and the ongoing war in neighboring Afghanistan have provided a fertile ground for militant Islamism. Volatile borders with post-soviet neighbors are an additional source of instability. The government's attempts to strengthen the state have mostly made themselves felt in the form of growing authoritarianism. In this context, independent journalists have come under increasing pressure, and the need to defend them is ever more acute.

The Association of Independent Media of Tajikistan, NANSMIT for short, has been working to defend freedom of expression, the media and its representatives since its foundation in 1999. Based in the capital Dushanbe, this NGO's work consists of variety of activities, including monitoring, legal support and capacity building.

One of the main challenges for journalistic work in Tajikistan consists of the constant risk of legal repercussions in response to critical coverage of the powerful. Due to problematic defamation legislation, those wanting to suppress public scrutiny of their affairs often resort to lawsuits against journalists. At the same time, to avoid undesirable coverage, the state frequently puts pressure on uncomfortable journalists by charging them with ostensibly unrelated, fictitious offenses. This has led to widespread self-censorship among the media.

NANSMIT tries to confront this by providing legal counseling and aid to those facing defamation lawsuits and government pressure. To this end, NANSMIT runs three mobile legal aid clinics, based in the country's biggest cities Dushanbe, Khujand, and Kurgan-Tyube. Each consisting of one legal expert and several volunteers, these clinics have successfully defended journalists in several high-

profile cases. Another important way the organization works to protect journalists from repression, in the context of widespread government surveillance, is to conduct trainings in digital security.

However, where possible, NANSMIT also cooperates with state structures to improve the working environment for journalists. One common problem when it comes to reporting on official matters is that state press offices and the country's courts usually provide little access to information on their activities. NANSMIT has been working with these institutions to develop better practices, like allowing for more thorough question periods during official press briefings.

While NANSMIT's main goal is to defend the rights of journalists, they also do not neglect the serious responsibility that comes with the journalist profession. In May 2017, for instance, the organization participated in an interregional initiative that brought together Tajik journalists with their Kyrgyz colleagues to discuss how to cover the frequent conflicts involving the local populations along their common border without inflaming tensions.

One of NANSMIT's main goals for the future is to help establish a country-wide union of journalists. Though there is apprehension among media professionals to such attempts, due to negative connotations stemming from the Soviet legacy of state control over journalist unions, they hope that existing local unions can be united into a strong independent force for independent journalism in Tajikistan.

Follow NANSMIT on facebook (posts in English, Tajik and Russian): [@nansmit.tj](https://www.facebook.com/nansmit.tj) or visit their webpage: <http://eng.nansmit.tj/>



A workshop on digital security for journalists, organized by NANSMIT.



Some of the literature produced by NANSMIT.



International conference on the issue radicalization, co-organized by NANSMIT.

Notabene

Notabene is one of Tajikistan's leading non-governmental organizations, working to promote human rights through research, analysis and advocacy.



Compared to its Central Asian neighbors, Tajikistan used to receive little attention from the international community. "Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have been facing widespread international criticism for serious human rights violations, Kazakhstan has received a lot of attention for its global business ambitions and investment potential, and Kyrgyzstan has been seen as a dynamic and interesting country", Nigina Bakhrieva explains. But in recent years the human rights situation in Tajikistan took a very challenging turn, and the country's civil society is in great need of international solidarity. "We have managed to attract more international attention to our country – recently the EU passed its first resolution on the human rights situation in Tajikistan and we hope this will translate into a constructive dialogue with the authorities", Nigina Bakhrieva continues.

In 2009, following many years of managing a different human rights organizations in Tajikistan she had helped establish, Nigina Bakhrieva started *Notabene*. Rather than providing assistance to victims of human rights violations, their mission is to carry out monitoring and analysis of the situation, to identify the key issues and gaps in legislation, policy and government practice and to advocate on the international level on behalf of Tajikistan's civil society.

With over 18 years' experience as a rights defender, Nigina Bakhrieva helps civil society actors and colleagues that work with various vulnerable groups and individuals, express their work through the language of human rights. For instance, while much work has been done by various actors in Tajikistan on the issues of people with disabilities, it is only recently that this work has been formulated increasingly in terms of rights, rather than in medical or social welfare terms. A similar transition to a more rights focused approach, according to Nigina Bakhrieva, can be observed in the area of sexual and reproductive health. "This is a very important change", she says.

Civil society actors working directly with marginalized groups of the population, such as sex workers, drug users, or LGBT persons, often face stigmatization by association. However, through partnering with *Notabene* they are able to contribute to human rights advocacy work without some of the pressure usually associated with their area of work.

Despite these positive developments, *Notabene* and other civil society actors have been under increasing pressure related to the overall turn in Tajikistan human rights practice. Examples of this type of pressure include negative press NGOs receive in state-owned media, often accusing civil society of subverting moral values and stability. They are also subjected to inspections by various state agencies related to finances and taxes, labour laws, and internal procedures. The frequency of these inspections and lack of clear legal procedures for conducting them puts a great burden on the NGOs, preventing them from focusing on their human rights work.

In this situation, solidarity and close cooperation among civil society organizations is key. *Notabene's* office is located in a building that houses many of the country's top rights groups, allowing them to drop by, and support one another at any moment. One of the greatest examples of this strength in unity is the Coalition against Torture, of which *Notabene* is an instrumental member. "We are proud to be a member of the Coalition, which has helped secure compensation for victims of torture and change laws and practice of state agencies in this area" Nigina Bakhrieva says.

Visit the webpage of *Notabene* for more information: <http://www.notabene.tj/en/>



"Say No to Torture" action, 2014

SHYRAK

SHYRAK is an advocacy group, based in Kazakhstan's largest city, Almaty, that represents the interests of and unites women with disabilities.

Like in many other parts of the world, attitudes toward people with disabilities in Kazakhstan are often marked by stereotypes. Wheelchair users and others with visible physical disabilities, for example, are used to being offered handouts by passersby who see them as helpless victims, or having busses go past them without stopping, as drivers cannot imagine them having their own errands to run. The Association of Women with Disabilities SHYRAK fights to eradicate such attitudes and ensure people with disabilities, especially women, are able to live their lives as equal members of society. Founded in 2001 and headquartered in Kazakhstan's former capital and largest city Almaty, SHYRAK unites around 300 women and girls with various types of disabilities.

"Part of our mission is to show that we are normal people, with a different lifestyle", Zakhira Begaliyeva, SHYRAK's project coordinator, says. One of the ways the organization has spread this message has been to organize flash mobs in shopping malls and on city squares, offering hugs to people passing by. "At first people would try to avoid us, thinking that we were asking for something", Zakhira Begaliyeva remembers with a smile. "But then they understood we were actually there to give something, and their attitudes changed." On other occasions SHYRAK has been involved in monitoring and public campaigns aimed at highlighting accessibility issues on public transit.

Even though stereotypes and accessibility in public space are still major issues, especially in rural areas, Zakhira Begaliyeva is hopeful. According to her things are better in Kazakhstan than in neighboring countries. Kazakhstan, for example, has ratified the international Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, and SHYRAK often plays the role of expert advisor to different state institutions when it comes to implementing policy. "It is possible to affect change for women with disabilities", Zakhira Begaliyeva says, citing as examples the recent appearance of an accessible gynecological chairs and a maternity ward especially geared toward mothers with disabilities.

Aside from tackling public attitudes and external obstacles, SHYRAK itself also provides active support to its community. Among other things the organization offers stipends for vocational trainings, allowing young women with disabilities to gain the qualifications necessary to become economically independent. Another venue for this type of work has been reoccurring summer camps, aimed at improving the self-confidence and independence of girls with disabilities. SHYRAK's camps are specifically held at sites that host other youth groups as well, something which according to Zakhira Begaliyeva caused confusion at first. "The staff at these sites originally suggested our group eat at specific times, as to not have to share the cafeteria with the other kids." Since SHYRAK's mission is to normalize, rather than stigmatize disability, they declined. "Nowadays you see these kids hanging out together and mingling. It's just become natural", Zakhira Begaliyeva says fondly.

Visit the webpage of SHYRAK for more information:
<http://shyrak.kz/eng/>



Fourth school of independent life for girls with disabilities from Central Asian countries, session on reproductive and sexual health of women with disabilities, Almaty, 2016.



"Hug me" action at closing ceremony of the first school of independent life for girls with disabilities from Central Asian countries, Arbat, Almaty, 2013

"Part of our mission is to show that we are normal people, with a different lifestyle", Zakhira Begaliyeva, SHYRAK's project coordinator, says



"Hug me" action organized together with partners and volunteers at one of the shopping centers in Almaty, 2014



Seminar of leaders on issues of people with disabilities in Central Asia, Dushanbe, 2014.



International seminar on creation of Central Asian forum for people with disabilities, Almaty, 2012.