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Securing an LGBT Identity in Kyrgyzstan. Case Studies from Bishkek and Osh

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Abstract

The high level of homophobia in society and a contradictory state policy towards sexual minorities define the specific mode of existence of the LGBT community in Kyrgyzstan. The need to socialise and spend some time together is a big part of building and maintaining an LGBT identity, which requires collective security practices. The concept of "securityscapes", based on Arjun Appadurai's idea of "scapes", was used as a main instrument for the analysis of ethnographic data. LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan navigate quite complicated landscapes of security and insecurity, defined by encounters with various agents, and engage in different strategies of adaptation. During the field research two types of threats within LGBT securityscapes were identified: "outer" threats (such as the homophobic environment) and "inner" threats (such as some behavioural patterns that might expose community members to this hostile environment). LGBT people navigate within their securityscapes individually, yet community life requires specific measures. The collective securityscapes of the LGBT communities in Bishkek and Osh were examined, and it will be shown that despite the differences according to local conditions, similar strategies were developed in both places when responding to "inner" and "outer" threats.

Keywords: LGBT, Kyrgyzstan, securityscapes, everyday security, insecurity, Bishkek, Osh

Introduction

It is a well-known social phenomenon that belonging to certain types of groups can make one's life dangerous and insecure. The LGBT people living in Kyrgyzstan certainly belong to just such a group. The high level of homophobia in society and a contradictory state policy towards sexual minorities determine the specific mode of existence of the LGBT community. This mode is fluid and depends significantly on the current political situation as well as on the socio-cultural conditions of life in different locations in Kyrgyzstan.

During Soviet times, beginning in 1934, homosexual relationships were illegal and were prosecuted by criminal laws (in the case of male homosexual

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relations) or at least considered as a kind of pathology (more frequently in the case of lesbians and transgender people). Such relationships were decriminalised in Kyrgyzstan after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1998, although LGBT people had already become a part of the public scene since the late 1980s and early 1990s, as in almost all the post-Soviet countries. The liberalisation of the economy, with new commercial enterprises, and an open politics, allowing non-commercial projects of international donors, both contributed to the growing popularity of the LGBT sub-culture. In the late 1990s and early 2000s activities of LGBT-friendly NGOs – mostly on condom promotion and HIV-AIDS risk response – were quite visible and recognisable at many public events, including concerts and performances in all regions of the country. At one point several nightclubs and discos in Bishkek with entertainment programmes quite successfully attracted not only LGBT community representatives but the "general" public as well.

Homosexual and transgender people in Kyrgyzstan started moving towards identifying themselves as a community in the early 2000s, using the term "LGBT" as a unifying sign of common needs and problems (Kirey / Wilkinson 2010). Over the past two decades a specific LGBT identity developed, recognised and internalised by many people. This helped them to establish community-based NGOs and to engage in activism for the purpose of protecting their rights and meeting basic needs. At the same time the communication and networking went far beyond personal connections at the domestic level. Today LGBT-friendly organisations are part of a policymaking process that plays a significant role in all initiatives struggling for equality and non-discrimination. They are also part of the core structure of an "Anti-Discrimination Network" – the largest association of legal bodies and activists working in this field in Kyrgyzstan, including feminists, human rights defenders and people with disabilities. Still, activism in these fields is becoming increasingly difficult.

The diverse environment of the activist and informal life of LGBT people began to shrink quite rapidly after a chain of certain events. The political history of independent Kyrgyzstan began in 1991 under the rule of President Askar Akaev, who was considered a democratic leader who transformed Kyrgyzstan into an "island of democracy" in Central Asia. After 15 years of leadership he was deposed in the 2005 "Tulip revolution". The liberal policies of president Akaev shifted to the much more conservative rule of Kurmanbek Bakiev, which was full of nationalistic and traditionalistic rhetoric. His presidency was characterised by rising authoritarianism and he was overthrown in April 2010. This time dozens of people were injured and died during mass protests, and the political crisis deepened after interethnic clashes between the Kyrgyz majority and Uzbek minority groups in the south of Kyrgyzstan in June 2010. The political crisis that led to the overthrow of Bakiev's presidency

in 2010 and especially the interethnic clashes in the South further strengthened nationalistic discourses along with the idea of "traditional Kyrgyz values". These values include very patriarchal views toward gender and family roles as well as a high level of patriotism based on an ethnocentric understanding of the Kyrgyz nation as first and foremost a nation of people with Kyrgyz ethnicity (Abashin 2012, Jaquesson 2010).

Since 2010 the rhetoric of "true traditional values" of the Kyrgyz nation has developed in different directions to defend a patriarchal family model, the Kyrgyz language and certain folk customs quite aggressively. Feminists, ethnic minorities and LGBT people have become a significant element within "national security" discourses and have been presented as a "threat to the nation" alongside Islamic radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism (Kyrgyz Indigo 2018, Jogorku Kenesh KR 2016, Malikov 2013). The growing conservatism of Russia's politics has influenced the local situation as well. After the adoption of the "anti-gay propaganda" law in Russia in 2013, Kyrgyz politicians initiated a legislative process for an analogous law in 2014.The first hearing in favour of an "anti-gay propaganda law" in October of 2014 was presented in the popular local media "as a victory in the first battle for the sovereignty of the country" (Delo 2014). Although the law has been suspended for the time being, the attitude towards sexual minorities drastically worsened at that time. The aggressive rhetoric shifted to attacks against activists and LGBT NGOs (Kyrgyz Indigo 2015, 2016, 2017; Human Rights Watch 2014a, 2014b). Since 2014 these attacks have become increasingly serious, sometimes exhibiting features of organised persecution with the involvement of so-called "patriotic movements" led by organisations such as Kyrk Choro or Kalys, groups committed to the defence of traditional values (Labrys 2015, Azattyk 2015)[1].

Kyrgyzstan now calls itself "democratic" and participates in a number of international agreements concerning human rights. There has indeed been great progress from the official side in many ways. For example, in 2017 new rules for changing the documents of transgender people were adopted and it is much easier now to get a new passport without having had surgery or other medical intervention, but simply according to a certificate confirming the transgender status of the person. On the other hand, the discussion of the "anti-gay propaganda law" in Parliament is still not over and the rhetoric on "traditional" values is strongly supported by the authorities.

As one of the well-known activists, Georgy Mamedov, put it: "The state in Kyrgyzstan seems much more progressive than society", meaning that in many

1 In addition to attacking LGBT people they also intimidate young women, for example – such as threatening them if they date foreigners – or humiliate Kyrgyz who speak Russian publicly. "Kyrk Choro" refers to the "Forty Warriors" of the great Kyrgyz epic hero of Manas and his guard of forty most loyal fighters; the name "Kalys" ("The Expert") indicates that the members of this group regard themselves as the most competent in issues of Kyrgyz traditions and values.

cases authorities are following the "path of law" and do not impose unjust charges (interview by author, May 2016, Bishkek). Nonetheless, each case depends substantially on the attitude of specific authorities or even specific individuals among state officials. This concerns all the authorities that LGBT people deal with, including the police. The practices of police forces are also quite diverse and may include many factors that can lead to positive resolutions of LGBT issues as well as to negative ones. In the majority of cases it is difficult to predict whether an LGBT individual will be protected or blackmailed by the specific officers in question.

The attitudes of officials or "ordinary people" may differ even within Bishkek from one city area to another, as demonstrated by the materials collected during my research, in which respondents marked certain places as dangerous and to be avoided. More prominent differences may be found in different regions of the country, taking into account that Bishkek (the capital city, with a higher level of tolerance and a more neutral urban culture) is not in many ways a "typical" locality within Kyrgyzstan. The southern parts of the country, which are considered more traditional, or the Naryn region, with its high level of religiosity, are often more challenging and aggressive environments for LGBT persons (UNFPA 2016).

Thus LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan navigate quite complicated landscapes of security and insecurity that are defined by encounters with various agents, requiring them to employ different strategies of adaptation. In this regard my research question was specified as follows: "How might an LGBT identity be maintained in different social environments and conditions of everyday life?" For further exploration, the two largest cities in Kyrgyzstan – Bishkek in the north and Osh in the south of the country – were chosen. On the one hand, the LGBT communities are very well organised in the major cities and it is possible to look into activities that help people to maintain their identities through collective actions or events. On the other hand, the living conditions and social environments in these two cities are so different that comparison of these research sites might be helpful in discovering the specific characteristics of everyday security of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan.

Theoretical framework and methodology

Though the security of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan is one of the concerns included in state policy, it is actually much more a matter of everyday life. The concept of "securityscapes" has been suggested to describe and interpret "security" without direct connections to state security policies and with a focus on the everyday practices and the agency of "ordinary people". This concept

is based on the idea of "scapes" that Arjun Appadurai (Appadurai 1996) introduced in order to explain the contemporary modus of certain phenomena previously strongly connected to territories and specific actors.

"Scapes of security" might be understood as arrangements of concepts of threats that are shared by certain groups of people and lead them to produce and reproduce correspondent types of behaviour in everyday life. At the same time, thinking about security and navigating specific "scapes" is not only about the imagination but also about real spaces containing solid things and bodies. Another important point for understanding the concept of securityscapes is that people are not only trying to secure their physical lives and bodies but other components of life as well, which provide them with a sense of security and safety. These components may include various parameters, such as a feeling of community belonging, social connections with friends, and groups of people with shared values or religious practices. Any shift in these parameters might be perceived as an obvious threat.

From this point of view, a securityscape is a complex of ideas, objects and social practices that help life to continue. It functions to prevent interruptions to different aspects of human life including (1) bare life, as the physical presence of a living and unharmed body, (2) social life, as identity and belonging and (3) spiritual life, as religious experience or historical memory. So the structure of a securityscape might be described through existential threats to any of these aspects of life (objective as well as imagined or constructed).

The opportunity to spend time together in conditions that allow you to "express yourself" plays an important role for many LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan. This paper is aimed at studying those aspects of securityscapes related to social life and community belonging. The relation between individual and collective dimensions of securityscapes is a specific scope of analysis, but it is obvious that in many cases people connect their security (or insecurity) with their identities or the groups that they represent: social, cultural, economic, etc. This is why communal strategies of security-making matter for the understanding of securityscapes.

The spatial dimension of securityscapes of LGBT people is strongly connected to previous research on social aspects of spatiality. The socio-spatial perspective provided a research agenda with four basic categories of place, scale, network and territory (Jessop et al. 2008). All of these categories affect LGBT people at various points, from the networking at different scales with classmates or international NGOs to the territorial boundaries of country laws that define a search for specific places for work and social life. This approach brings together socio-spatial relations and is now used for studying spatial aspects of vulnerability (Watts / Bohle 1993), a new area of studies which looks very productive (Etzold / Sakdapolrak 2016). Our cases show how securityscapes reflect the "polymorphy of socio-spatialities" (ibid.: 241)

i.e. scales, networks and territories to maintain safe spaces for the vulnerable community of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan. The classification provided by the authors includes an "external side of vulnerability as exposure and sensitivity" and an "internal side of vulnerability as coping and adaptation" that are presented by different features and characteristics within each category (Etzold / Sakdapolrak 2016: 241). Concerning territories, these characteristics include for the external part of vulnerability, for example, the "[exclusion from] citizenship, identity politics (us vs. them), nation-states and borders, private land ownership, gated communities [...]" and for the internal part "preparedness, [...], political and labour market participation, 'secure territories' or 'humanitarian zones' in a war" (ibid.: 241).

Different scholars usually concentrate on one or two of the components within these classifications, such as "flows of capital, goods, ideas, people between hubs" as an aspect of external vulnerability for networks or the "mobilisation of funds, interest, political support across scalar levels" as an element of internal vulnerability (ibid.: 238–241). The concept of securityscapes covers all these aspects of vulnerability including both the external and internal aspects.

Polymorphic socio-spatialities also make up a significant part of much research in LGBT studies that is in many cases centred on scalar levels of LGBT networks. Although the LGBT community is now considered in many ways as a global phenomenon, locality still matters significantly in the everyday life of community representatives (Lewin / Leap 2009, Shah 2018). These approaches reflect the complexity of relations between the globalised vision of an LGBT community and local practices of maintaining a certain way of life in more patriarchal and traditional societies. Contradictory identities (such as being a Muslim or a good father and simultaneously a gay man) are negotiated in various ways at the individual and community levels, which help people "inhabiting – not resolving – incommensurability" (Boellstorff 2005: 583). This situation might be typical for many non-Western countries. Still, a comparison between different regions within one country might show the role of a certain social and political environment from new angles: the networks and places in the big cities might be completely different from those in the small towns or rural areas, with the same holding true for the environmental pressure to follow religious rules or social norms, as has been shown for Indonesia (Blackwood 2005, Boellstorff 2005).

A case study of Indonesia revealed another important observation: in addition to the regional variations, there was quite a strong social differentiation within the LGBT community in Indonesia – based primarily on class, whether the educated middle class or working class (Blackwood 2005: 234–235). The importance of class, gender and race identities was highlighted as well by Natasha Wilson, who studied Afro-American women in same-sex relationships in

New Orleans in the United States. Wilson noted that for the participants in her research project, “being black” is indeed the starting point of identity formation, and “being poor” the next. Indeed, many of the women who were the focus of this study were poor before “‘becoming lesbian’ by virtue of their racialised, gendered, reproductive (i.e., their status as mothers), and class positions” (Wilson 2009: 107).

These insights from LGBT anthropology – especially those works studying the role of gatherings and spending time together for identity formation and producing a specific sense of community (Leap 2009, Wilson 2009, Morgensen 2009) – formed an important starting point for my own empirical research, which is based on two case studies in different parts of Kyrgyzstan: the nightclub “London” in Bishkek and the so-called “circles system” in Osh. In Bishkek I conducted participant observation for several months in the LGBT nightclub “London” as well as conducting a series of interviews with the owners of the establishment. The materials collected in Osh by a research assistant provided another main source for the analysis of LGBT securityscapes presented in this text. Additionally I used empirical data collected during former field research in 2016–2017 in Bishkek and Osh, including expert interviews with activists, state officials and police officers. Volunteers from the LGBT community were trained according to the rules and routines of common ethnographic practice as research assistants to collect materials for this study through interviews and participant observation. The research process and data collection were organised around individual cases of homosexual, bisexual and transgender persons; all interviews were conducted in the Russian language.

Securityscapes of LGBT in Kyrgyzstan

In contemporary Kyrgyzstan, any deviation from sexual norms is dangerous. In many cases LGBT people have to hide their identities and mimic heteronormative appearances and behaviours in order to avoid abuse or violence (Von Boemcken et al. 2018). At the same time any gathering of LGBT representatives in Kyrgyzstan today is a risky enterprise by default. Even official meetings and NGO work are organised under strict security rules: there are cameras at the entries of the offices and thorough agreements with hotels’ hosts before each conference or seminar. According to interviews with LGBT activists, every meeting requires a lot of preparation in terms of security and these issues are always discussed specially. For example, the date and time of an event might be discussed via group email exchanges but the exact place, agenda and list of participants are always sent separately to each member along with the invitation and a request not to share the information with anyone not

on the list. Moreover, it is not an easy task to find an LGBT-friendly place to conduct an event. A lot of social capital in terms of "connections" and networking with relatives, classmates or friends is usually involved in this process. According to Arstan[2] (an NGO activist), the hosts should be trusted or at least reliable in keeping promises without sudden cancellations.

At the same time, the measures being taken involve not only communication with the "outside world", but internal communication as well. A satisfactory arrangement with external partners is only half the battle; the LGBT community members must also follow certain rules of behaviour to be accepted at the premises. As noted by one organiser:

> We always warn all our participants that there are strict rules of behaviour for living in the hotel and attending sessions in the conference hall. We ask them not to be "too visible", if you understand what I am talking about [...] the dress code and all these things [...] Also [they should] keep quiet in the rooms in the nights. That kind of thing. Like this is "just a seminar". It is of course, just a seminar, but still [...] Well, you know what I mean" (Arstan, 32 years, NGO activist, Bishkek, May 2017).

What Arstan says is a clear reference to the fact that for the majority of people a seminar covering LGBT issues is not "just a seminar" but something different or special. When organising a seminar it is necessary to exercise strict control over the behaviour of the community members. The same activist explained this with reference to one case when seminar participants were spotted in the hotel corridor "cross-dressed" (it was guys in girls' clothes). Later the hotel administrator explained to the organisers that "other customers do not want to have such strange people around in the same hotel". The respondent pointed out that the actual problem was not so much to do with misbehaviour or noise but with the "strangeness" of the people in the next rooms. Arstan was sure that the administrator used this word as a euphemism. The other customers had probably used much stronger expressions.

> They wanted us to move out as we cause trouble to other customers. [...] It was so difficult to solve the conflict and stay at this place. And do you know how hard it is to tell people not do certain things when they are gathered together? They do not have a lot of opportunities to spend time together in the way that they want. If you come from Osh to Bishkek, or from Talas, or Karakol or wherever [...] It is hard to resist engaging in certain behaviours that are almost impossible at home (Arstan, 32 years, NGO activist, Bishkek, May 2017).

Such examples of organising community events gives us an insight into how the collective securityscapes of LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan are structured: there are two types of threats that must be taken care of, one relating to "out-community", the other to "in-community" contacts. Both types of threats are interwoven: you would not need to control "internal" issues if you were not afraid of the "outside world" that perceives your differences as a

2 All the names of the interviewees have been changed.

provocation. But still, in terms of organisation, the security strategies for coming to terms with each of these threats are different.

In a way this constellation of conditions that need to be considered when organising a meeting of LGBT people reflects the connection between the categories of “place” and “network”. It is impossible to find a safe place for events without a certain amount of networking in order to deal with the “external side of vulnerability” and remain secure (Etzold / Sakdapolrak 2016: 241). At the same time the “internal side”, linked with coping and adaptation, is also noticeable here because people need to follow certain behavioural patterns in order not to be exposed. Yet the category of “territory” is involved in this case as well. The risk of “misbehaviour” is very high because people attending the event often come from areas where certain practices of spending time together are simply impossible and this difference between different territories within Kyrgyzstan is a key factor in the vulnerability of the LGBT community. All of these categories are significant components of the LGBT collective securityscapes, which include responses to external and internal aspects of vulnerability.

Common “out-” and “in-community” security practices can be further analysed in more detail through an ethnography of the informal gatherings of LGBT people. This distinction was further used for observations and for structuring interviews with respondents who were mostly people in charge of organising community life (primarily at the informal level), such as the proprietors of the gay nightclub in Bishkek.

“London” in Bishkek – a nightclub for LGBT

There is not a long but a rich history of gay nightclubs in Bishkek. After the decriminalisation of homosexual relations at the end of the 1990s, gay, lesbian and transgender people became much more visible. Around the beginning of the millennium there were several places that could be identified as gay clubs or gay discos. However, the number of these places decreased after 2010.

This case study is focused on the club that is now known as “London”. It was established in 2015 and quite soon “London” remained the only nightclub catering to the LGBT community. The club has changed its location several times over the last three years. It is currently operating in the fourth venue, which was found only several months ago. The story about losing the third place after an attack of the local young people was reported in the media (Guardian 2017, Azattyk 2017). However, the club moved into new premises quite quickly and the interrupted nightlife of the LGBT community was restored.

The club is run by a lesbian couple in their early thirties who decided to open it for several reasons. Before "London" they had a small café with quite ambitious plans but it went bankrupt. As one of the women was a cook they decided to start a new business, which was supposed to be a bakery. While they were looking for the premises they found a quite isolated venue with thick walls and without apartment buildings nearby. According to the interview, as they looked at the place a new idea began to form. "We decided: Why not? It's quiet and there aren't a lot of people around. Why shouldn't we try to organise a disco?" (Oksana, nightclub co-owner, Bishkek, December 2017). The bakery business was redefined as a nightclub for LGBT people. A coincidence provided them with this specific location, but they were already engaged as LGBT activists, being themselves an openly lesbian couple with the experience of organising LGBT parties in their previous café. They had noticed the lack of space for self-expression (if not for themselves then definitely for others).

> Though we tried to start a business it was never [meant to be] a commercial project [only]. It is still not very commercial. It was like: To gather all! To be together! And this would be great! Something like that. We were daring and impudent in a way, we called the place "Outreach" (Sasha, night club co-owner, Bishkek, December 2017).

Ultimately, they saw the opening of the club as more of a gesture of activism than as the starting of a new enterprise.

Yet the homophobic attitude of other people has created a lot of problems and is one of the main concerns of the club owners. The club has had to move to new locations several times for security reasons. The first time, the club was visited by young people who introduced themselves as "neighbours" interested in "maintaining order in their neighbourhood" and who threatened the staff and customers. The second time "London" was attacked by a mob of 30 young people that destroyed the furniture and injured one of the club's visitors. After moving into the second location the club's name was changed from "Outreach" to "London", choosing a more neutral word for security reasons.

> Usually the landlords [owners of the premises] ask us to vacate the venue. They provide different reasons, like that the residents in the houses nearby are complaining […] but to me it seems more like […] you know […] I believe it is about their own homophobia that they do not want to admit it openly. They hold these fears and just don't want us to be around (Oksana, night club co-owner, Bishkek, December 2017).

The number of difficulties that "London" faces is high; without the strong motivation of the nightclub owners to change the lives of LGBT community members for the better, it might have ceased to exist as a club long before. Most of these difficulties are connected to security issues.

When asked about "out-" and "in-community" threats, interviewees first mentioned the latter during the interviews. A major problem concerns regular fights among the customers. According to the hosts, the opening night of the

club “was just awful. So many fights […] about ten fights probably. One was quite serious – a bottle was smashed on someone’s head […] a lot of blood was everywhere” (Sasha, night club co-owner, Bishkek, December 2017). Observation confirmed that this problem is very serious. In the course of regular club visits, at least one fight occurred every night, which is not common for other nightclubs in the city. The host of the club responsible for security issues provided her perspective on this problem as such:

> Actually, if you are humiliated and demean yourself constantly you do not need a lot to explode. Here [in the night club] they feel relaxed […] the alcohol, you know […] Control is loosened […] The whole world humiliates them, but here […] They do not let anybody humiliate them! Like nobody has a right! And here any small thing like somebody looking at you strangely or touching you inadvertently […] it is BAM! It was Varia Petrova[3] who helped me a lot then in “Outreach”. She came and asked: “How are you?” I said: “Terrible. I want to disappear.” – “What’s up?” I said that this is so and so and too hard to bear. She said: “But it is logical. You cannot blame people for that. How can you blame them for being aggressive while they endure so much in the [outside] world.” I thought, “Yes, it is true” (Sasha, night club co-owner, Bishkek, December 2017).

Sasha faced a dilemma: On the one hand there was a need to continue the club. But on the other hand putting additional control over their customers seemed to be impossible. The whole idea of the club was to provide a place to relax and reduce tensions. The need to guarantee safety from internal fighting for the customers created additional difficulties for the club owners. However, recently the number of fights has significantly decreased. Applying a new strategy in order to reduce the fighting, the owners created a list of troublemakers and forbade them from visiting the club. In most cases this ban might be valid for one or two weekends (the club is working on the weekends only), but some people are banned from the club permanently as they are considered seriously dangerous, suspected of creating trouble on purpose, or of being “incorrigible fighters”.

> I know it is wrong and I should not try to sort out who is guiltier but I cannot help myself. I always try to understand what happened and who started a fight […] All sides are involved more or less and the one who hits first usually goes on the blacklist for a certain time (Sasha, night club co-owner, Bishkek, December 2017).[4]

Often it is not very easy to reconstruct the beginning of a fight and detect the initial troublemaker, though this strategy of banning fighters from the club – either for a limited time or permanently – seems to be working quite well so far and some progress in the behavioural patterns of the guests can be observed.[5] While many arguments and fights can be solved within the communi-

3 One of the activists (the name is changed).

4 She said that usually fights are about nothing and look more like releases of energy, which is why the criteria for suspension are more of a formality.

5 Partly this might also be a result of the high density of social connections between the club’s customers. The majority of them know each other quite well, even if they go there from time to time with different

ty itself, the problem of internal security often shifts to the scope of out-community relations, in particular to relations with the police.

The relations between LGBT community representatives and the police are complicated and ambiguous. Encounters with the police are often unpleasant and risky for two reasons. First, the high level of homophobia encourages an extremely negative and biased attitude towards community representatives by some police officers (Human Rights Watch 2014a). And second, the high level of corruption within the police force produces cases of blackmailing LGBT people, since the majority of them try to avoid being outed in different spheres of their lives. Still, in the event of certain crimes, including theft, robbery and (more often) attacks against community representatives, the police protect everyone according to the law. Indeed, according to Sasha, relations with the police are better organised and more reliable than those with the general public around the club. The police are more business-like and do provide assistance in difficult situations, such as aggressive behaviour or racketeering on the part of people living and working nearby. Nevertheless, the most common tactic in dealing with the police is avoidance.

> You know, in general we try to minimise our contacts with the police, as do all our people. There is usually nothing pleasant in it. For many of us it is just dangerous. I myself am in a much better position than others. First I know my rights. I know that they cannot do anything against me if I do not break a law. Second, I am not afraid to defend my rights: I am an open lesbian, I am not afraid of being exposed and they can't force me to do anything. But I am also aware of how difficult it is for many of us to contact the police. The threat of being exposed or even detained, you know […] "until things are clarified".[6] […] Prison is not a good place for our people. That's why LGBT is a permanent source of bribes or pay-offs. But our people are not angels, you know. They break laws sometimes, like anyone else. And here I maintain a very firm position. If our people really are involved in something bad I do cooperate with the police. And I warn people, everybody knows that I will cooperate if something happens. There was a robbery not long ago near the club and [some of] our customers were involved. I called the police and told them: "I will cooperate with you in this case. Yet I am now calling our lawyer to provide the maximum defence for our people. They should be responsible for their deeds but not for their orientation, so our lawyer will come to organise their protection. And you have to cooperate with our lawyer in turn" (Sasha, night club co-owner, Bishkek, December 2017).

To sum up, the securityscapes of the LGBT nightclub "London" might be characterised by a combination of two types of threats: the in-community relationships among LGBT people and out-community relationships with those on the outside. The former are dealt with through restrictions on access. Temporary suspensions from the club seem to discipline people quite well and negative behavioural patterns are currently changing for the better. Internal

companies. The atmosphere in the club is thus more similar to a friends' weekend party than to usual nightclub dancing.

6 According to the Kyrgyz criminal law a person can be detained up to 45 hours pending clarification or the bringing of charges. After 45 hours the decision regarding further detention is made in court.

communication also includes the support of community organisations (such as the help of activists working in LGBT NGOs). Out-community contacts involve not only informal networking and the use of personal connections but also formal and more official relationships with the police and business partners. An important role here is played by the club owners, who consider themselves as activists working for the community and who maintain open lesbian identities. If their identities were hidden a lot of problems could arise and it would be impossible to run the enterprise. Sasha and Oksana, the nightclub owners, are not afraid of blackmail because their families and friends know about and approve of their relationship. Their strong activist position is respected both within the community as well as outside it. The community members follow their decisions, even if they are unpopular (like having to deal with the police from time to time). At the same time, business partners and officials try to accommodate their requests because they are confident in receiving appropriate responses. Still the position of the club owners is rather atypical for members of the LGBT community, who are usually much more vulnerable and exposed to outer and inner threats and thus prefer to stay hidden.

"Circles" in Osh

Osh is the second largest city in Kyrgyzstan, situated in the south of the country. The population in the south is historically considered as more "traditional" and attentive to different hierarchies: social, gender and age-related. People here maintain much closer relations at the level of neighbourhoods or *mahallas*. There are "*mahallas'* councils" (*makhallinskiie komitety*) ruling the everyday life of residents by solving conflicts, providing support and helping with various difficulties. These councils are not just bodies for problem solving; they are responsible for the psycho-social atmosphere in their *mahalla* and their activities have an important impact on the everyday well-being and "moral state" of the people. The everyday life of Osh residents is usually closely observed and controlled through family hierarchies. As Aksana Ismailbekova draws out in this journal issue, for many Uzbek people the *mahalla* itself provides a space of security where people can feel safe and relaxed (see Ismailbekova 2018). One can easily conceive how for the LGBT Uzbeks this social system instead produces additional pressure and control. The same is true for Kyrgyz LGBT in Osh – the structure of neighbourhoods is very similar to that of Uzbek communities, with small differences only.[7]

7 E.g. instead of a *mahalla* commitee as in the Uzbek communities, the Kyrgyz neighbourhood's life is regulated by a street committee or analogous local body.

The collective securityscapes of LGBT people in Osh are closely connected to this social structure. According to statistics, the share in Osh of MSM (men having sex with men) who are married is significantly higher than in the capital (41 per cent in Osh and only 10 per cent in Bishkek). Among my respondents in Osh only the youngest ones (younger than 23 years old) were not married. The majority of interviewees have wives, children and a lot of obligations concerning their parents, parents-in-law and other family members. Many of them confirmed that being a bachelor in Osh after the age of 25 looks extremely suspicious. They highlighted the constant pressure of the need to "play roles":

> I am like a damned actor who performs at various stages. I have to behave differently and even speak in different voices. I have one voice at home talking to my wife and children, but I use another voice towards my employees at work as a state official, and sometimes I need a third one for my colleagues in the NGO [he is also working with a NGO that is not connected to LGBT issues]. I only stop controlling my voice and behaviour when dating [other men] or at private parties with close friends (Erik, 47 years, Osh, December 2017).

The dangers for LGBT people in Osh are very similar to the threats they experience in Bishkek, or in any other place in Kyrgyzstan. Also in Osh, the level of homophobia is high. However, the threat of exposure is much more severe in Osh than it is in Bishkek. Sometimes the level of aggression from the police and homophobic groups is so severe that NGO activities have to be managed secretly. Meetings and workshops are then cancelled and the offices closed until "this wave [of aggression] is over", as one of the experienced activists put it (Erik, 47 years, Osh, December 2017). During these "waves" gay people are attacked and beaten or blackmailed almost every day for several weeks. According to Erik this kind of homophobic outbreak takes place quite regularly every year or two, but for various reasons that are quite unpredictable:

> This might be a quarrel between business partners with exposure of gay owners to the police […] or just street fighting […] or some accidents, you know […] involving somebody belonging to an influential family (Erik, 47 years, Osh, December 2017).

During one of my visits to Osh I witnessed such a period of constant attacks against LGTB people and my impressions from contacting respondents were very gloomy. Yet, Erik demonstrated a rather philosophical approach to this phenomenon and told me that "you just have to survive this time and wait […] sooner or later it will go back to normal again". Of course in Bishkek the level of homophobia and violence against LGBT people fluctuates as well, but it is never as tangible as it is in Osh and this difference reminds us that the category of "territory" is very important for understanding and comparing LGBT securityscapes in both cities.

In Osh too, in addition to the regular threats from outside we find threats "from inside" the LGBT community. This may be when the behaviour of an

individual might betray others and make them visible to the hostile environment. But another serious problem here that was mentioned very often in interviews in Osh is the risk of HIV. An expert working in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention stated that the great attention to this issue is a peculiar characteristic of the Osh LGBT community: "They are thinking and speaking using HIV prevention terminology" (Bakyt, head of an LGBT NGO, 37 years old, December 2017). Although the level of HIV among men having sex with men in the Osh region is reported as almost zero, LGBT people use condoms there much more frequently than in Bishkek: 98 per cent versus 63.3 per cent respectively (Chokmorova et al. 2013). The same expert explained that this behaviour cannot be rooted only in the awareness built by the local NGOs (which is, nevertheless, extremely important), because, after all, NGOs in Bishkek raise the same issue as well. In his opinion the greater fear of infection in Osh is related to the generally more risky way of life for LGBT people there:

> If somebody knew that you had HIV your life would be hell. There are not so many HIV positive people in Osh, mostly among drugs abusers but still [...] (Bakyt, head of an LGBT NGO, 37 years old, December 2017).

It was very remarkable that HIV was mentioned in first place when talking about threats to the LGBT community in general with many of my respondents, even above negative attitudes and aggression from society, blackmailing and police brutality.

In general, identifying LGBT people in Osh was much more difficult than in Bishkek. Although Osh is quite a large city there is no special place for LGBT people to gather informally like the nightclub "London" in Bishkek. Which doesn't mean that the LGBT community doesn't meet in Osh, but rather that their everyday life follows its very own kind of securityscape.[8]

The basis of this securityscape is a collective of gay men organised in so-called "circles". All circles have a more or less stable membership and are organised around "leaders", persons who are older and usually well-secured in terms of income and social connections. From time to time they organise meetings to discuss and solve urgent community problems. Erik believes that a lot of people beyond the community (like the police or health care services) are aware of the circles' existence nowadays (Erik, 47 years, Osh, December 2017). It is difficult to say how and when these circles emerged historically but they seem very well established within the structure of social life in southern

8 Information on informal gatherings of gay people in Osh was collected with the support of a project research assistant, himself a community representative who works in one of the LGBT NGOs in Osh. All collected materials concern male gay or female transgender people in Osh. Lesbian women are not in contact with the NGOs that helped us to collect the data and according to the interviews are practically invisible in the city. The respondents explained that this is because of better opportunities to hide their relationships and the fact that they are almost not exposed to the HIV/AIDS problem and do not need community support for this health issue

Kyrgyzstan. According to several interviews conducted in Osh in 2016 and 2017, the circles' system was already quite well developed at the beginning of the 2000s.

Each "circle" (*krug*) includes around 40 to 50 people and the leader maintains regular contacts with all the members, although he has more regular contacts with some members than with others. Nevertheless, the circles are not organised in terms of a linear hierarchy. They are, instead, structured like a web, with one centre and several interconnected groups around it. It depends on the individual needs and readiness of each person to be in contact with other circle members: some people engage more frequently than others and some of them appear only episodically. And whereas the core of a circle is more or less stable, "peripheral" members may change from time to time. According to Rustam, a circle leader and one of our main respondents, the circles can be described in the following way:

> There are some groups within the whole circle, like "sub-circles". […] These groups are separated by certain interests or age or other reasons. The people in the groups contact [each other] more often and are close to each other. So I know what is going on in each of these groups. If I have not heard from somebody for several days I start looking for that person, trying to get to know what's happened. Maybe something is wrong and some help is needed. […] They all are so different! There are differences in interests, education, income, social status. […] There is an age, you know. […] And some of them may have nothing in common besides alcohol, for example. If you have some money you can go to a café, to a sauna, [or] rent an apartment or house. The poorer people have dates just at home, or if it is impossible then in parks, at the countryside, like picnics. […] Something like that. […] Of course this is possible only from March to October. Winter is difficult for them. There are a lot of encounters, changing partners, no relationships at all. This is not good for the development of the young people. And it could even be dangerous after all [both because of the risk of exposure and sexually transmitted infections, NB] (Rustam, 53 years, Osh, December 2017).

Rustam sees his role as keeping this large and diverse group of gay people together in order to create a certain sense of community among them, which he considers very important. Social networks on the Internet and mobile applications like WhatsApp and Odnoklassniki[9] are used and seem very convenient for communication purposes. Still, there are meetings "in person" when people gather and spend time together. Meetings take place in special venues, usually in rented flats. To rent a flat for a meeting is a task that requires a lot of security measures. Very often gay people become the victims of dishonest hosts or curious neighbours. These try to take them by surprise and then blackmail them to get money, threatening them with exposure before families, employers or the *mahalla* council.

9 A social network that is very popular in many post-Soviet countries. It is supported in Russian and involves a lot of people under the auspices of "common childhood school years", in many cases referring to having been raised together during the Soviet era.

> It is better if the leader rents the flat for a party (*tusovka*) by himself. For example, I have a long-standing contact with one Russian woman who provides us with a suitable venue. She knows about us but she does not mind, she is open. And she is very reliable. I have several such contacts. I am older, you know [...] more experienced. [...] I just know more people around and I am better at "reading" people, you know. [...] I can tell this person is going to cheat us or not (Rustam, Osh, December 2017).

In this case, the leader feels responsible for securing his circle from outside threats. But as noted above there are also "inside" community threats. At the beginning of the interview the "inside threats" and the leader's responses to them seemed very similar to those in Bishkek. Rustam recognised that during parties with alcohol and the ensuring lack of self-control, problems like arguments and fights occur quite often:

> Of course we have problems like that. And if I rent a flat it is me who is responsible for everything. I am responsible to the host for broken things, or for noise if neighbours complain, or anything. [...] I [therefore] try to control the amount of alcohol at the party. I also observe people's behaviour and try to prevent anything bad that may happen (Rustam, Osh, December 2017).

Rustam, too, uses a "blacklist" as a strategy to control unwelcome members of the circle:

> There are some people that we all try to avoid for the parties. We put them into "ignore status" in social networks before holidays. I would help them if something happened and support them but it is too risky to have them around with alcohol and these things (Rustam, Osh, December 2017).

Yet, later in the course of the interview the topic of HIV risk appeared again, and became more and more persistent. Speaking about what people did at these parties Rustam said that they were mostly interested in finding new partners for sexual intercourse. In this context the leader expressed a concern about what he referred to as a lack of a "culture of communication":

> It is necessary to instil a culture of communication. These young people, they are unaware that it is much better and safer to have one stable partner, but they are unable to establish real relationships. They do not have real skills for that. So they have this kind of life and these, you know [...] sporadic connections. It would be much better to have a stable partner because you are protected from HIV, you have interesting things to do together, maybe establish a business. [...] But they are mostly gathering to drink and relax [...] and find a new partner for sex (Rustam, Osh, December 2017).

Rustam openly referred to cases from his own sexual life to illustrate the level of this risk, claiming that some young people, especially with a poor education, not only refused to use a condom but were completely unaware that HIV even existed. When he spoke about the circle's gatherings (*tusovki*) he regretted that they were mostly about searching for short-term sexual adventures instead of stable partnerships. At the same time Rustam talked approvingly of and highly appreciated the LGBT-friendly NGO activities aimed at HIV pre-

vention and said that he is trying to encourage the members of his circle to participate in these activities and events.

Since most informants were quite young they talked about the circles as if they had always existed and took them for granted. Interestingly, some activists working in an LGBT NGO considered the circles as a kind of competitor:[10]

> We are struggling to involve people in our activities. We are interested in raising awareness within the community about many things. It is not only HIV and health issues, though many donors are working mostly in this area. [...] We watch movies together, conduct discussions, provide psychological support. [...] It is important to let young people know that they are normal, that nothing is wrong with them in spite of people's opinions. [...] This really helps. And we always have free condoms here, and express tests for HIV. People get used to trusting us. For me it seems that many leaders are just jealous. Some of them prevent people from coming here. They are afraid of losing their audience, it seems (Aibek, 19 years, Osh, October 2016).

It should be noted that the work and strategies of NGOs are more democratic and open than the circles. The "circle life" seems to mimic many characteristics of social life in Osh in general, where community support is very often combined with social control and obedience to certain rules. Rustam's stories about his circle demonstrated some distance between him and other circle members. This might be a result of age difference, since he is noticeably older and behaves like a helpful father of a large family towards other circle members. Although he insisted that he is a part of the circle and there is a kind of collective decision-making process among all members, his position was more about being a provider of things, whereas the "beneficiaries" (his own wording) were considered by him more as the receivers of these goods. According to other interviews with gay people in Osh the circles indeed reproduce a kind of "family" structure, with the old responsible person as the head of it and several members who might be considered as "older sisters or brothers" taking up some responsibilities from time to time as well, such as contacting other members or organising parties on their own.[11]

The circles thus play an important role in the community life of LGBT people in Osh. Their leaders help the members to survive and maintain their identities. They take responsibility for dealing with outside threats in order to provide safe environments for regular gatherings, and also participate in solving problems among the community members (like help with jobs or small businesses). At the same time the leaders are constantly dealing with internal threats. In addition to providing psychological support and advice for circle

10 Though some young respondents indeed saw the circles as a kind of competitor, the general picture showed that the NGOs and the circles seem to coexist very successfully, providing various opportunities to accommodate gay people.

11 In some way the circles are similar to the "houses" presented in Jennie Livingston's famous documentary "Paris is Burning" (1991), devoted to the Afro-American and Latin-American gay communities in New York. Some circle members in Osh (as well as the characters in the movie) refer to the leaders as "Moms" and keep quite close relations within certain groups.

members they are variously involved in NGOs activities on condom promotion and HIV/AIDS prevention. In general the "circle system" seems to have become established as a self-organising and self-reproducing structure supported by all its participants.

Concluding remarks

This paper looked at collective securityscapes for maintaining LGBT identities in two different places in Kyrgyzstan. It should have become obvious that the LGBT securityscapes in the capital Bishkek and the city Osh show many similarities, while differing in accordance to local conditions.

In Bishkek a safe place for an informal LGBT community life is provided by the nightclub "London". The network of LGBT people in Bishkek seems to be fairly loose and independent. People visit the nightclub as customers, whether in shifting groups or alone. Although the nightclub has faced severe problems in the past, the hosts continue to run it as an important part of the social life of LGBT people in Bishkek. Organising a similar club in Osh seems to be almost impossible for now, because of the strict system of social control within the city neighbourhoods. Community gatherings in Osh therefore have to be organised individually and the LGBT social network itself is quite rigidly structured by "circles".

Yet in both places the very possibility of having an informal community life at all depends on certain persons who are willing to be in charge of and provide this opportunity. In Bishkek the two owners of "London" regard running the nightclub as a part of their LGBT activism. In Osh there are the circles' leaders. In both cases the responsible people decide to take personal risks in order to provide a better life for the LGBT community as a whole. These informal key figures of community life – as well as other responsible people such as NGO activists – are constantly identifying threats to the community and organising relevant responses to them in order to help LGBT people to maintain their identities.

The analysis of the community life of LGBT people in Bishkek and Osh shows that collective securityscapes are structurally oriented alongside two general types of threats: "in-community" and "out-community" threats. Both are not isolated, but interwoven with each other. For example, the safety of the venue for a party depends on the good relations of the organiser with owners and neighbours (outer threat) as well as on the proper behaviour of the LGBT people gathering at the party (inner threat). In turn some behavioural problems, for instance fighting (inner threat) derive from the psychological

pressure and aggression that LGBT people endure beyond the community (outer threat).

These findings correspond with the descriptions of the polymorphy of socio-spatialities in vulnerability research (Etzold / Sakdapolrak 2016) based on categories of place, network, territory and scale (Jessop et al. 2008). Our data shows that the securityscape concept keeps the polymorphic character of vulnerability as a whole, including all these categories. It is quite obvious that for our respondents the external aspect of vulnerability for a specific place, connected to its location within city areas and neighbourhoods, does matter: it is indeed important where the nightclub venue or the apartment for a gathering is situated within the city. At the same time the internal aspect of this safe place is connected to the very opportunity to accommodate and keep the sense of belonging to the community.

The category of "territory" in terms of dependence on local customs and cultural norms could also been shown here: the conditions for gatherings or NGO activities in Osh are different from those in Bishkek. Even if all stakeholders involved are working within the same legal framework, the different local environments set up different levels of social pressure and expectations, and thus make the territoriality significant.

The inner side of the vulnerability within different territories might be illustrated by the attitude towards HIV/AIDS issues in Bishkek and Osh that provide completely different pictures of the internal threats in both cities. Similarly the network connections outside and inside the community are apparently important for shaping collective securityscapes. Security issues are solved at the scale of separate events (a Saturday night in the club, a gathering or a seminar) as well as at the level of local community within the city, or involve the security of the nationwide LGBT community as a whole. Though some data were not fully presented here it is apparent from certain interview fragments that the scale of cooperation within the cities and between LGBT people themselves and with NGOs in Bishkek, Osh and other locations plays an essential role in community building. Last but not least the scale of global partnership is extremely important for the entire system of NGOs helping people in legal defence and HIV prevention. For example, the strong position of the owners of "London" is based on their legal literacy and awareness of their rights, which result from the activities of international NGOs working with rights defenders and LGBT-friendly lawyers. At the same time the context that this global partnership is changing the local situation determines (in many ways) the activities and lives of LGBT people at the scale of everyday support or community mobilisation.

Yet if we move the territory dimension along the category of scale to compare the two cities within Kyrgyzstan we can see that the collective securityscapes in Bishkek and Osh are also dependent on similar environmental fac-

tors. Outer threats connected to relations with the police, landlords and ordinary people evoke a strategy of "boundary negotiation". When a strategy of avoidance is impossible to apply, different types of negotiation are used to keep the relationship with outer agents as close to avoidance as possible. This approach describes the relationships of the Bishkek nightclub hosts with the police, for example. They contact the authorities if necessary and otherwise try to keep a distance.

Further comparing the collective securityscapes of LGBT people in Bishkek and Osh we can notice that the perception of inner threats differ somewhat. In both cases there is a problem with the appropriate behaviour of community members when they gather. The "blacklisting" of troublemakers seems to be an effective strategy for dealing with this threat. But in Osh the perceived risk of HIV seems to play a more prominent part as a major internal threat. According to our interviews in the Bishkek LGBT community, the HIV risk is usually contextualised with reference to NGO activities. It is not particularly prominent when people talk about their informal relationships, even when these involve sexual contact. In Osh, by contrast, the HIV/AIDS issue is much more tangible, both in discussions of NGO projects as well as in conversations about the everyday life of our respondents.

The need to socialise and spend time together along with the search for safe places and networks is one of the basic similarities between our results and findings that were obtained in other regions (e.g. Leap 2009, Morgensen 2009). Still some differences should be briefly highlighted: in Indonesia, for example, informal gatherings for gay people are quite strongly ritualised and embedded into religious and local traditions (as in the case of birthday slametans, see Boellstorff 2005: 583). In Kyrgyzstan, even in more traditional regions like Osh, the gatherings are perceived by the participants as something that distinguishes them from the majority of the population and provide them an opportunity to celebrate their difference. They mostly avoid religious ritualisation and national traditions but celebrate the opportunity to be together. This is in a way connected with other findings that concur with studies of LGBT informal life in other parts of the world that show social differentiation and class division within communities (Blackwood 2005: 234–235, Wilson 2009: 107).

In Kyrgyzstan the sense of community that LGBT people gain when spending time together is very much about crossing class boundaries and networking actively in different directions. The audience in "London" or at private gatherings in Osh is very diverse in terms of social status and educational background. Sharing a similar lifestyle and sense of belonging while leaving aside the differences that might be important in other circumstances seems to be much more important here.

To sum up, the ethnography of LGBT securityscapes in two cities of Kyrgyzstan reveals similarities and differences in collective security practices that both communities produce according to "inner" and "outer" threats. Such threats are perceived as very much alike but occur within different territorial conditions, sometimes involving different safe places and types of networking at various scales.

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