

THE PROCESS OF (DE)REGULATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY AND GENDER
IDENTITY ISSUES IN POST-SOVIET KYRGYZSTAN

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A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Russian and East European Studies in the Russian Studies Program in the Center for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies.

Chapel Hill
2015

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ABSTRACT

Anna Kirey: The Process of (de)Regulation of Homosexuality and Gender Identity Issues in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan
(under the direction of Dr. Jacqueline Olich)

This thesis discusses regulation and deregulation of homosexuality and gender identity issues in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan drawing on theories of political and medical regulation of sexuality and gender. The thesis draws on experiences of activists working on lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights in Kyrgyzstan and personal activist experience of the author. The thesis discusses how political instability and dependence of Kyrgyzstan on external funding created opportunities for organizing for lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights despite lack of support by majority of citizens.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is an exploration of a political and personal journey and I am grateful to dozens of lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in Kyrgyzstan who trusted Labrys and joined forces to organize a special group which put LGBT rights on the map of civil society in Kyrgyzstan. I would especially like to acknowledge Syinat Sultanalieva, Daniyar Orsekov, Akram Kubanychbekov, Dahn Pak, Sasha K., Anna Dovgopol, Jika T., Nazik A., Vika L., Tahira Sultanovna, Galina Sokolova, Selbi, China and Aijan, who made this journey special and successful. Cai Wilkinson, Erica Pelta Feldman and Cassandra Hartlbay were my academic aspirations and often peer advisors. Angel Collie was there for me when I got stuck with writing and did not think I would make it, very special thanks to him.

University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill has become a home for me while I was reflecting on what I witnessed and created in Kyrgyzstan and what forces were part of shaping Labrys and discourses around LGBT organizing. I would like to express my deep gratitude to my thesis supervisor Dr. Jacqueline Olich who supported me at every step of the way including my writing, career aspirations and leadership. I also would like to thank Dr. Bob Jenkins for long analytical discussions and ongoing support along with an excellent opportunity to learn more about history of political transitions in Eastern Europe and serve as a teaching assistant. Dr. Olich and Dr. Jenkins with Karla Nagy made me feel really welcome at UNC. Dr. Graeme Robertson and Dr. Michele Rivkin-Fish were challenging me in multiple ways through exposing me to new concepts in politics and medical anthropology. I also would like

to thank my wonderful classmates who became good friends and Dr. Jonathan Weiler with whom I worked as a teaching assistant for new perspectives on how global systems function.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, grandma and brother for always being there for me and tolerating only seeing me once or twice a year and my wife Yana for her love and believing in me and long-long discussions that helped me shape part of this thesis.

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Table 1. RECOMMENDATIONS ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER PEOPLE IN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION DURING THE FIRST CYCLE OF THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW BY THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL (2008-2012).....	69
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Introduction

On 15 February 2012, the office of Prime minister of Kyrgyzstan presented decree on “Change of gender for individuals with gender disorders” on its website for public discussion¹. Eight years before this occasion a group of friends, among them same-sex couples, was refused service in a café because two of them kissed. This group of friends became founders of Labrys, an organization that evolved into an important actor in filling the vacuum in Kyrgyz civil society regarding sexual orientation and gender identity matters. Political advocacy and legislature was not in their plan in the beginning but through variety of contributing factors, their activist efforts evolved into visible activism and successful campaigning for legislation change. This thesis explores the interaction between Kyrgyz state apparatus, state-funded medical institutions and LGBT² activists in defining state policy towards sexual orientation and gender identity issues. I chose medical regulation as the main focus of the thesis because medical regulation around homosexuality and transgender identities has been evolving at the same time as Kyrgyzstan underwent its transition from planned to market economy and from Soviet communism to democracy. LGBT rights issues are generally understudied especially in the context of the former Soviet Union.

My central argument is that through creating space for organizing and being influenced by western development agenda and its own instability, the Kyrgyz state provided unprecedented opportunities for activism and citizen engagement including

1 Website of the government decree on Change of gender for individuals with gender disorders <http://www.gov.kg/?p=7149> (accessed May 23d, 2015)

2 An abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. I use these terms as internationally recognized and acknowledged as operational terms for activists working on sexual orientation and gender identity issues.

on issues largely stigmatized in Kyrgyzstani society, such as LGBT rights. In the beginning of the 1990s when Kyrgyzstan invited western consultants to support its democratization process, the state largely followed their advice and developed inclusive and progressive policies. Specifically, the state removed an article that criminalized consensual sex between men from its 1998 Criminal Code and accepted that homosexuality is not a disorder as part of the World Health Organization's (WHO) implementation of the 10th version of International Classification of Diseases. Since 1998, the Kyrgyz state did not object to establishing organizations that address gender identity and sexuality issues first as part of HIV prevention efforts and later as a part of a women's rights/human rights discourse. In 2006 the Kyrgyz Ministry of Health positively responded to a letter from human rights organizations and the Soros Foundation – Kyrgyzstan about developing a new procedure for changing the gender marker and name in identification papers for transgender people. Medical specialists, Soros-Kyrgyzstan, LGBT organization Labrys and transgender people themselves were invited to participate in a working group that later developed a document that was endorsed by majority of Kyrgyz ministries.

Regulation of sexuality and gender in Kyrgyzstan has not been studied before; there are no particular disagreements in scholarly communities about it. There are, in contrast, disagreements about the role of non-governmental organizations and their dependency on foreign funders and western development agenda in defining and pursuing their goals. I will address some of them – particularly on defining which issues should be on government and civil society agendas – in my thesis by looking at oral history interviews with current and former staff of Labrys.

In the recent decade, in a number of countries and internationally gender and sexuality often become a vehicle through which conservative political groups gain votes during an election year or distract public attention from other matters. Such was the case with the recent Republicans focus on “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and marriage for same-sex couples during the 2008 U.S. presidential elections or United Russia party’s legislation that placed high-level fines against “propaganda of sodomy, lesbianism, bisexuality and transgenderism” in St. Petersburg recently. However, In Kyrgyzstan these issues are not debated so publicly; rather representatives of the state, such as law enforcement agencies, respond to vulnerability of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people by arbitrarily detaining them and extorting money. Kyrgyz state unlike its counterparts in most countries of the former Soviet Union does not engage in a systematic effort to re-regulate, criminalize or pathologize homosexuality. Its willingness to quietly allow for reform and engage with LGBT activists in establishing a legal procedure for recognition of transgender people’s identities is particularly interesting to explore.

States in transition are inherently fascinating to study because their institutions are developing and changing quickly in response to external and internal processes; this is particularly true in Kyrgyzstan. In Chapter 1 I discuss the history of diagnoses as regulatory measures and discuss how they were used in Soviet Union, post-Soviet Russia and post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. In Chapter 2 I look at criteria that may define post-Soviet states’ policies towards LGBT issues and why Kyrgyzstan is more open than most Post-Soviet countries. In Chapter 3 I discuss the emergence of Labrys from subjectivity perspective. In Chapter 4 I use the case of medical de-regulation of homosexuality and re-regulation of gender identity as a case study to understand how the state’s response to citizen’s initiatives changed over the course

of the first twenty years of the Kyrgyz state. Chapter 5 traces LGBT activists' pathways to addressing their rights claims through a non-governmental organization and analyzes how their motivations are shaped by Kyrgyz politics. In conclusion, I discuss how opportunities presented by instability may be used to further human rights claims and how they could be utilized based on Labrys' experiences.

Chapter 1. Regulation of gender identity and sexuality

In this chapter I discuss the origins of medical diagnoses that were invented to control those who are attracted to people of the same sex and who identify outside of their gender assigned to them at birth. “Homosexuality” as a category was invented by German physician and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. The term “transsexualism” was coined by Harry Benjamin, and “gender dysphoria” – by John Money. Harry Benjamin, a German-born endocrinologist who worked extensively in the US, studied transgender patients and in an attempt to help them suggested that there should be a diagnosis to describe their situation in order to access expensive hormonal treatment and surgeries. Incorporated into international medical standards after the World War II, these diagnoses were used by the governments to control non-reproductive citizens. Clinical psychologist Jane M. Ussher (2006) argues that the contribution of the medical field is that it described homosexuality as part of individual’s disordered self and not as a criminalized act as it was seen previously. Medical discourse also offered ‘treatment’ for homosexuality instead of punishment. It created a space for regulation that exerted social control over non-reproductive disordered bodies of citizens now claimed as pathological.

This chapter looks at how the diagnoses were created and how they are used in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan. Medical institutions in the Soviet Union represented an extension of the state and fused with the state in creating additional unquestionable regulation of dissent especially in the 1970s. Medical practice assumes superior level of knowledge about the human body. According to Bernstein, ‘the doctor’s role as evaluator, as interpreter, of the illness or health of the patient is not solely a

matter of adherence to science and its codes and knowledge, but is crucially, also, an intuitive capacity to make distinctions and to pass judgment, within ethical, moral, and even aesthetic frameworks that shift over time' (Bernstein 2010, 7). These layers of control and gate-keeping provide medical professionals with access to power by nature of their profession and the task assigned to them by the state.

Background of medical regulation efforts

The medical category of 'homosexuality' was invented by medical scientists in late 1800s to describe what they considered a psychiatric disorder. The creation of a diagnosis is preceded by social, political or economic developments that confirm the "diagnosed" phenomenon as something outside the norm. In the case of homosexuality, it was the processes of industrialization and urbanization that contributed to individual mobility enabling more people to sustain themselves outside of their natal or spouse's family (D'Emilio 1988, 11). Before these processes took place there were fewer options for people who were not attracted to those of another gender to seek others like themselves or form long-term relationships or an identity. Procreative sexuality was seen as the norm and medicine focused on understanding those whose sexuality was outside of this norm. Before 1800s this category did not exist. It was translated into some languages as 'homosexuality'³ and to this day it is used as a name of a disease in Slavic languages despite the fact that it is not considered to be a disorder any longer. (Bio)medicine⁴ has been used as a tool of social control for centuries especially in relation to women, people with disabilities, ethnic and other minorities which were considered 'abnormal'.

³ The Russian word is гомосексуализм (gomoseksualizm).

⁴ Prefix 'bio' is used with the word medicine because this prefix indicates that medicine is seen as fixed and based on scientific study that assumes absolute knowledge of the human body.

As a part of (bio)medical discourse, the field of psychiatry has been used to establish institutionalized social control through pathologizing bodies and behaviors that did not fit the white male able-bodied standard. (Lev 2006). For example, medical experts of 1800s believed that the Irish immigrants to the US were prone to mental illness and criminality. Psychiatrists believed that women's minds would change in pathological ways if they were allowed to vote (Ibid.). Both in Euro-American contexts and the Russian Empire, medical categories were assigned to people who lived in poverty without recognizing the social inequality that caused this poverty. Scientific knowledge was constructed as unquestionable by laypeople and this legacy continues to be present in current (bio)medical practices. This perception of the medical field makes it challenging for medical professionals to accept changes in diagnostics and subsequently alter their practice of medicine. Homosexuality was included in the first edition of DSM⁵ in 1952 as a "sociopathic personality disturbance", later became "sexual deviation" in DSM II and was removed from DSM IV in 1986. DSM is mostly used in the United States and Europe while International Classification of Diseases is used internationally and promoted as the standard of World Health Organization (WHO). ICD-9 included homosexuality in its 1977 edition. Thirteen years later, the Tenth Edition of International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), was the last body to remove homosexuality from its updated diagnostic manual.

In DSM, gender diversity has become pathologized starting from its third edition as "Transsexualism" (302.5x), "Gender Identity Disorder in Childhood" (302.60) and "Transvestism" (302.30). The last fifth version of DSM made a step

⁵ Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Diseases (used mostly in Euro-American contexts).

forward by renaming “Gender Identity Disorder” into “Gender Dysphoria”, emphasizing that dysphoria is a clinical problem, not the identity itself.

In ICD, “Transvestism” first appeared in the 8th edition, while “Transsexualism” and “Gender Identity Disorder in Childhood” – in the 9th, in the category of psycho-sexual disorders. In ICD-10 which is currently in use, “Transsexualism” (F64.0) is still listed as a psychiatric disorder. The latter is widely used throughout the world as a prerequisite for legal gender recognition. To be eligible for the diagnosis, trans people have to fit traditional gender roles associated with the “opposite sex”, which makes it extremely difficult to obtain a diagnosis (and thus the documents reflecting one’s gender identity) for gender non-binary and non-conforming people.

How was the diagnosis of ‘homosexuality’ used in the Soviet Union and what kinds of perceptions were prevalent about it? Neither ICD, nor DSM were used in the Soviet Union before 1980s. Post-Soviet states have a legacy of prioritizing the rights of the collective/society over the rights of individual rooted in communist principles. Soviet policies regarding issues like sexual maturity, homosexuality, abortion and recognition of transgender identities largely reflected the social and political realities of the specific historical period. For example, in 1922 new Bolshevik Russian criminal code applicable to European parts of the Soviet Union de-criminalized ‘sodomy’ (i.e. consensual sex between men). In this case the reasoning behind regulation of homosexuality was a political decision of the Bolshevik government to both negate Tsarist and the Russian Orthodox Church’s policies, yet continue to outlaw same-sex sexuality in customary practices in Central Asia and the Caucasus which they found not applicable to the Soviet ‘new world’.

As much as 1922 de-criminalization represented Bolshevik’s intention to move away from the ‘old ways’, the 1934 re-criminalization followed Stalinist politics of

suppressing dissent. Within twelve years homosexuality became an issue to be repressed because of the gay men's 'castelike exclusivity [...] for plainly counterrevolutionary aims⁶ and represented a class enemy both in urban and rural areas. Urban close-knit networks of men-loving men challenged social regulation by unsanctioned gathering (Healey 2001, 185) and 'purity of healthy Soviet young man' emerging in the idealistic new Soviet world. In the following years abortion was prohibited and divorce difficult to access, signaling a new era of sexual regulation in the Soviet Union. It could be argued that rapid urbanization that was facilitated by the Soviet state should have contributed to decrease in social control over citizens' sexuality. Yet the set up of collective accommodations and surveillance by propaganda personnel contributed to making same-sex relationships more stigmatized and more difficult to pursue. While gay and bisexual men were arrested based on criminalization provisions, lesbian and bisexual women were put in psychiatric hospitals. There is little written on the time period between 1945 and 1970s about experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. The texts that are available are mostly psychiatric textbooks describing treatment and "the disorder" itself.

In 1982, the Soviet Union started using ICD-9 as its diagnostic manual. Soviet psychiatrists used a version of ICD-9 adapted for use in Soviet Union inclusive of infamous "sluggish schizophrenia" and continued to 'treat' homosexuality especially in women (Kon 2010, Healey 2009). Late Russian sociologist and sexologist Igor Kon quoting 1983 Soviet sexopathology book wrote that psychiatrists aimed to 'restructure the personality' and 'weaken in the beginning and then eliminating of the pathological sexual attraction' followed by 'developing skills for simple, natural and

⁶ Letter of deputy chief of Soviet security police Iagoda to Stalin in Healey 2001, 184.

easy communication with persons of the opposite sex' (Kon 2008). The third stage of the treatment 'formed and reinforced an adequate erotic attitude toward the opposite sex'. Kon was one of the few Soviet sexologists with a strong stand on depathologization and decriminalization of homosexuality⁷. Despite his efforts and adoption of ICD-10 in the Russian Federation in 1999, a number of Russian psychiatrists continue to perceive homosexuality as a diagnosis. For example, as noted in a report of Russian LGBT Network to UN's Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), a current book by professor Il'in that is used as a textbook for psychologists discusses 'homosexualism' in a chapter called "Disturbance in Sexual Development of Men and Women" (Inter-Regional Social Movement 'Russian LGBT Network' 2011, 19). Kon (2008) also notes that Ministry of Health of Russian Federation issued its own clinical guideline in 1999 that continued to refer to homosexuality as a diagnosis. Yan Genrihovich Goland, honorary doctor of Russian Federation, continues to 'treat' homosexuality in his clinic in Nizhny Novgorod⁸. Russian government continuously pathologizes LGBT people's experiences and promotes its stance internationally along with enacting homophobic and transphobic legislation in Russia.⁹

There is less information about medical (mis)treatment of transgender people in the Soviet Union. The earliest source cited was a 1964 textbook on forensic gynecology that contained two examples of what it called "transvestites" (Serdyukov 1964, 47-49). The first case is of a person who now would be called a transgender

7 For a detailed discussion of Kon's experiences with Soviet psychiatric system regarding homosexuality see his biographical book *80 let odinochestva* (Kon 2008) (Eighty years of solitude).

8 <http://www.goland.su/index.html> (accessed 10 March 2012)

9 As of April 2012 seven regions of Russian Federation adopted or are discussing a vague legislation that limits dissemination of information about homosexuality and transgenderism and introduces large administrative fines for individuals, public officials and organizations that "create distorted perceptions about social equality of traditional and non-traditional family relationships."

woman from Kazan, who was permitted to wear female clothes and change her legal name to a female one (Soviet passports did not have gender markers at the time) after going to court. This person was diagnosed with “transvestism”, however, it is not clear whether the diagnosis was required to change the name or was obtained later. The second case is of a transgender man who was sent to a medical clinic by the police for sex determination. The book mentions that this person wants to be recognized as a man, but the outcome of the situation is unclear from the text. Both cases are discussed in a derogatory manner, referring to both according to the sex assigned at birth and giving detailed information about their genitals and sexual life. As was the case with lesbians and gay men, trans people were diagnosed with “schizophrenia”, as is evident from an article about a trans woman who was first tried to get medical help in 1961 (Mulina 1990).

According to Open Society Institute’s report on LGBT people’s access to health care in Kyrgyzstan, 9 per cent of interviewed lesbians and 20% of men who have sex with men in one study had to see a psychologist or psychiatrist (Alisheva 2007, 32) regarding their sexual orientation. In post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan some psychiatrists and psychologists still continue administering treatment despite the fact that ICD-10 is the main diagnostic standard. The diagnosis of ‘transsexualism’ serves as a key for accessing therapy and surgeries that would help transgender individual modify their body to be in line with their sense of self. Alisheva (2007) notes that the process of diagnosing ‘transsexualism’ is flawed by gender stereotypes expressed by psychiatrists through making comments about transgender individual’s height (‘too short to be a man’) or encouraging them to display birth gender-appropriate behavior like wearing make-up or wearing a dress

for transgender men¹⁰ (Ibid., 33). Medical diagnosis is the only way to change name and gender marker in state identity papers, therefore. Paradoxically, though it pathologizes their experience, many transgender people in Kyrgyzstan seek out diagnosis as a pathway to be accepted by their family.

Transgender people's bodies and identities are overregulated by the state in 'normalization' attempts including involuntary surgeries and other invasive medical procedures such as sterilization to obtain legal recognition of their gender and identity. Transgender people remain to be the only group of people in Europe that is legally prescribed to be sterilized (Human Rights and Gender Identity 2009, 19). In Kyrgyzstan for 'good' citizens sterilization would be considered illegal and 'harmful' to the people ('narod') because it would deprive transgender bodies of reproductive functions valued by the nation-state.

¹⁰ Transgender men are individuals who were assigned 'female' gender at birth but identify as men.

Chapter 2. Kyrgyzstan's position in the former Soviet Union: small, dependent and unstable

Kyrgyzstan is one of the smallest and most resource poor of all of the former Soviet republics. Since its first government overthrow in 2005 there has been little stability or consistency in state policies or continuity in state bureaucracies. How then, has it become a place for relative organizing success and innovation? I argue that since the break-up of the former Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan carved out a unique political niche in comparison with its Central Asian neighbors. For example, in the 1990s Kyrgyzstan was the first country to adopt its own currency in 1993 and country's first President Askar Akayev set the groundwork for democratic reforms to occur as Kyrgyzstan was opening up to the world. The World Bank arrived to Kyrgyzstan in 1992. The World Health Organization's standards were adopted and implemented in Kyrgyzstan with International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) used in Kyrgyzstan since 1993 (Molchanova 2009). Consensual sex between men was removed from the 1998 version of the Kyrgyz Criminal Code as part of legislative reform.

Unusually chaotic and democratic by Central Asian standards, Kyrgyzstan stands out as leader in democratic reform, media freedom¹¹ as well as frequency of changes in government posts. Kyrgyzstan currently has its fourth president, fourteenth prime minister and fifth elected parliament within the past 20 years. Two other Central Asian countries retain the same leader that was appointed under Soviet Union. In the other two presidents changed because of either conflict as in the

¹¹ Kyrgyzstan moved up 50 places in media freedom in 2011 <http://iwpr.net/report-news/kyrgyz-media-freedom-better-not-perfect> (accessed 18 March 2012)

case of Tajikistan or because of death of the leader inherited from the Soviet Union in the case of Turkmenistan.

Kyrgyzstan is also a pioneer in introducing and passing legislation that is rather progressive¹² for Central Asia because it is unlikely to enjoy support of its citizens. For example, the Law on Family Violence which was passed in 2003, created a system of protection orders to keep perpetrators away from victims of family violence. In addition, drug user groups in Kyrgyzstan were able to push for changes in Kyrgyz criminal code that decriminalized possession of drugs if the person in possession is caught no more than two times.¹³ The latter legislation would be considered progressive even for Western countries and given a strong stigma associated with drug use in the former Soviet Union, it is very unusual that it has been adopted.

I argue that Kyrgyzstan has a more favorable climate for LGBT activism than many other post-Soviet countries due to its size, dependence on foreign funding, stable population growth, lack of organized religious and nationalist opposition and, ironically, chronic instability of the state. I use state responses to recommendations on sexual orientation and gender identity issues in the process of UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review (UPR) as an indicator for the state's official position on LGBT rights claims. Absence or presence of criminalization of sex between consenting adults of the same gender and state response to legal gender recognition initiatives are the other two criteria used for analysis.

¹² <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/country-overviews/kg> (accessed 18 March 2012)

¹³ Article 246 of Kyrgyz Criminal Code.

Sexual orientation and gender identity issues in the former Soviet Union as reflected in the Universal Periodic Review process (2008-2012)

Universal Periodic Review is a human rights mechanism that reviews human rights record of each United Nations member state every four years. A relatively new mechanism, it only completed its first round of reviews in March 2012. Each member state has to present a national report about its human rights situation. International and national organizations working on variety of human rights issues are able provide 5 to 10-page stakeholder submissions and recommendations covering human rights issues. During the review process these submissions are summarized into one document. In addition to stakeholder submissions, various recommendations of other UN bodies are summarized and presented on the UPR website. This information is reviewed by other member states with three states heading the process. On the date of the actual review process the state under review presents its statement of its human rights record followed by 2-minute statements by member states with specific recommendations on how to improve that human rights record. Recommendations are recorded and presented to the government under review. The government has two days to decide which recommendations it accepts fully, partially or rejects. The governments are also allowed to take time between Human Rights Council's sessions to make a decision about certain recommendations. One way or another they have to respond to these recommendations in a consistent manner.

LGBT activists from many countries were able to use the UPR mechanism to have their government's position on LGBT rights stated at an international forum of this level for the first time. The process is very politicized and implementation of recommendations largely depends on political will of the state and activist efforts

inside the country. Other UN human rights mechanisms make recommendations to the governments but are too small to follow-up with each single state on every single recommendation. Since recommendations within UPR are specific to countries, they may become subject to further bilateral cooperation and follow-up.

For the purposes of this thesis I use the UPR process to help illustrate how Kyrgyzstan differs from other Post-Soviet states and look at factors that could explain these differences. I compiled a table of recommendations received within the first four years of the UPR by Post-Soviet countries and their responses to these recommendations in a table available in Appendix 1.

Size

Access to state institutions is easier in smaller countries because institutions that produce elites are smaller and the state apparatus itself is small as well. With a population of 5.36 million¹⁴ with about 800,000 increase since 1991, Kyrgyzstan remains a small country with high fertility rates. This population increase is a stark contrast to the demographic situation in Russia and Ukraine for the last twenty years, yet it reflects the overall trend of population growth in Central Asia. Politicians and religious groups in both Russia and Ukraine continue to see homosexuality as a threat to national security and already severely declining demographic situation. In Kyrgyzstan this argument would not be reflective of the demographic situation.

Only three countries out of 15 accepted most recommendations about sexual orientation and gender identity issues during the UPR process – Moldova, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan. Moldova has a population of 3.5 million people and Azerbaijan slightly over nine million people. Georgia and Armenia could fit this

¹⁴ World Bank data on Kyrgyzstan
<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/ECAEXT/KYRGYZEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20629311~menuPK:305768~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:305761,00.html> (accessed 18 March 2012)

criterion as well but they received no UPR recommendations. Yet Georgian parliament is considering hate crime legislation that includes sexual orientation and gender identity as aggravating circumstances to implement recommendation of the European Commission against non-tolerance and discrimination¹⁵. Armenia, on the other hand, decriminalized consensual sex between men only in 2003 as part of completing requirements for membership in the Council of Europe. In all three Caucasus countries decriminalization efforts met opposition from nationalist and religious groups. None of the three Central Asian countries that decriminalized consensual sex between men in 1998 had similar opposition efforts.

Influence of international actors

Small countries may also be more likely to be influenced by their commitment or lack thereof to implementing obligations under international treaties or membership in intergovernmental organizations. The European Union (EU) and, more recently, the Council of Europe (CoE) have been actively involved in promoting protection of LGBT rights in member states. The table clearly indicates that post-Soviet members of the EU – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – received many more recommendations than other post-Soviet countries. The nature of the recommendations they received is also very different from other countries, such as extending legal partnership privileges enjoyed by heterosexual couples to same-sex couples. EU members are also very active in recommending LGBT rights protection to others in the UPR process. Czech Republic, for example, recommended that Kyrgyzstan harmonize its minority legislation with its obligations under Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR). This recommendation specifically included minority status based on sexual

¹⁵ ILGA-Europe Country Guide http://www.ilga-europe.org/home/guide/country_by_country/georgia/parliament_of_georgia_to_adopt_anti_discrimination_amendment_in_the_criminal_code (accessed 18 March 2012)

orientation and gender identity. Though Kyrgyzstan does not have the EU or CoE membership obligations, the EU is its fourth largest trade partner with 4% share in its external trade and 20%¹⁶ of its direct foreign investment in 2008.¹⁷ Consequently, Kyrgyzstan accepted recommendation of the Czech Republic¹⁸. At the time of UPR process in May 2010 Kyrgyzstan had a provisional government which has not yet been legitimized by popular vote and there were many discussions about whether Kyrgyzstan is ready to participate in the process at all. Through this chaotic situation, however, the provisional government was open to discussing potential recommendations and NGO reports with NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, including Labrys. This could have been a factor to their decision to accept these two sexual orientation and gender identity recommendations fully¹⁹. Kyrgyz LGBT activists were able to contribute to the process and present their human rights agenda to fill the gaps in unstable state policies.

Demographic situation

Larger countries such as Ukraine and the Russian Federation are able to reject recommendations despite their membership in Council of Europe. To account for their opposition to LGBT rights, these countries point to their demographic situation.

Both of these countries suffered dramatic population decrease following the economic crises and shock therapy in the 1990s. The population of Ukraine

¹⁶ Delegation of the European Union to Kyrgyz Republic website
http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kyrgyzstan/eu_kyrgyzstan/trade_relation/index_en.htm (accessed 20 March 2012)

¹⁷http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kyrgyzstan/eu_kyrgyzstan/trade_relation/investments/index_en.htm (accessed 20 March 2012)

¹⁸ Azerbaijan also accepted Czech Republic's recommendation to train its police officers on sexual orientation and gender identity issues. The recommendation also listed other groups, such as women and children, whose issues that law enforcement and judicial officials would benefit from learning.

¹⁹ The second recommendation was proposed by Uruguay and addressed violence against women based on multiple statuses including sexual orientation.

decreased from 52 million in 1993 to 45.8 million in 2010.²⁰ The Russian Federation's population went from 148.7 million in 1992 to 141.8 million in 2010.²¹ In comparison, the population of Uzbekistan increased by 6 million within the years of its independence now accounting for 28 million people. While Uzbek government is known to forcibly sterilize women who gave birth to two or more children²², Ukraine and Russia are implementing policies to limit abortion and provide monetary payments for families with two or more children. As LGBT people's sexuality is perceived as non-procreative, securing LGBT rights is seen as a further threat to demographic situation and, consequently, national security.

Religious arguments and organized opposition as expressions of people's will

Another factor that contributes to state's decision about expressing its position on sexual orientation and gender identity issues is opposition to LGBT rights within the state. Fuelled by nationalist claims and security concerns (declining populations are said to make these countries' military weaker), the Russian and Ukrainian states support pro-natalist, homophobic and transphobic groups by enacting so-called "propaganda of homosexuality" legislation in Russia and parliament considering this legislation with strong media and general public attention in Ukraine. In both countries religious arguments are used to justify these laws. The Russian Orthodox

20 World Bank's resident population data

http://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=d5bncppjof8f9_&met_y=sp_pop_totl&idim=country:UKR&dl=en&hl=en&q=population+of+ukraine#!ctype=l&strail=false&bcs=d&nsem=h&met_y=sp_pop_totl&scale_y=lin&ind_y=false&rdim=region&idim=country:UKR:RUS&ifdim=region&hl=en_US&dl=en (accessed 22 March 2012)

21 World Bank's resident population data.

22 Antelava, N. Forced Sterilization of Women in Uzbekistan. Open Society Foundations. <http://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/reports/forced-sterilization-women-uzbekistan> (accessed 23 May 2015)

Church, for example, encouraged lawmakers to make this legislation federal.²³ Currently, individuals and legal entities may be fined for “propaganda of homosexuality” in four Russian regions. In St. Petersburg, LGBT organizations may receive a fine of up to \$17,000 (500,000 roubles) for disseminating information to underage individuals about

*public actions aimed at propaganda of sodomy, lesbianism, bisexuality, transgenderism [...] deliberate and uncontrollable dissemination in a widely available way of information capable of harming health, morality and spiritual development of underage persons including forming distorted perceptions about social equal value of traditional and nontraditional marriage relations.*²⁴

Decision-makers who initiated these pieces of legislation explain the need for regulation as expressing will of the people (*narod*), a common rhetoric for limiting minority rights. In the UPR process, it was Kazakhstan and Moldova officials who referred to the same ‘consulting narod’ rhetoric for rejecting in case of Kazakhstan or partially accepting in case of Moldova of recommendations to be involved with international declarations and committing to supporting LGBT rights internationally. No other recommendations made during UPR needed either a “thorough discussion, so that public opinion may be taken into account” (Kazakhstan) or “ensuring that this law is endorsed not only by the government, but also by the entire Moldovan society” (Moldova). LGBT rights may be one of the very issues when post-Soviet governments are willing to ‘consult the people’ to make a decision when queried about their position at the UN.

State instability

Religious and “will of the people” argumentation is present in Kyrgyzstan but the interim government’s delegation to the May 2010 session of the UPR did not refer to

²³ Ria News <http://en.rian.ru/society/20120312/172114388.html> (accessed 22 March 2012)

²⁴ Text of the law outlined at Stop Zakon blog entry <http://stopzakon.wordpress.com/regions/petersburg/> (accessed 22 March 2012)

it in deciding to accept recommendations that mention sexual orientation and gender identity. In fact, the interim government that came to power weeks before the UPR session used “will of the people” as one of its major reasons for political legitimacy. As an interim government, that particular delegation accepted over a hundred recommendations and left a dozen for further consideration. It is worth underscoring that Kyrgyzstan is the only country in Central Asia that accepted recommendations about sexual orientation and gender identity issues. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan rejected recommendations to decriminalize consensual sex between men and Tajikistan did not receive any recommendations about LGBT rights, yet mentioned their intention to improve gender recognition procedure for transgender people.

Based on an analysis of the criteria that may define state regulation efforts and response to recommendations to protect LGBT rights, Kyrgyzstan provides a unique environment for addressing LGBT concerns. Many criteria that give states legitimacy to regulate LGBT people’s lives through propaganda or criminalization laws are not present in Kyrgyzstan. Arguably and given the frequency of protests in Kyrgyzstan, it is possible for organized opposition to LGBT rights claims to develop. Yet due to pressure by the U.S. on Central Asian governments to keep Islamic groups weak, it does not seem likely that these groups would gain as much strengths as Russian Orthodox Church in both Russia and Ukraine. The argument about Muslim or Kyrgyz traditions (they are sometimes used interchangeably) is also used widely but there the idea of Islamic leadership’s involvement in making political decisions is discouraged. The Russian Orthodox Church as a minority church does not have much power over decision-making. Additionally, religious pluralism and sustained commitment to secularism by the Kyrgyz government as part of “war on terrorism” efforts, could be other explanatory factors.

In Kyrgyzstan religious and secular groups engaged in heated debates in summer 2010 about whether the word “secular” belongs to the new Kyrgyz Constitution. This constitution was written as part of legitimization process of the provisional government and attempt to improve the unstable political system in Kyrgyzstan in summer 2010. Yet it is unlikely that one particular route would prevail in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz politics may be characterized as maneuvering between different actors, Organization for Islamic Conference on one side and European Union, United States, Russia and China on the other. The website of Kyrgyz Ombudsman²⁵ features the flag of its major donor – the UN – while Kyrgyz government websites has a Swiss flag at the bottom of its homepage²⁶ and Kyrgyz Parliament’s website²⁷ features an UNDP sign and the EU flag.

Kyrgyz democratic institutions are sustained through international support which also brings certain responsibilities. In the case of the regulation of homosexuality and gender identity, Kyrgyzstan maintains an ambiguous position of not expressing its position publicly but instead making the state institutions open to cooperation as I show in this thesis. The most recent example of this is Ombudsman Tursunbek Akun’s change of position on LGBT rights. In a 2004 interview he expressed his discontent with LGBT rights being “one of those negative consequences of the western civilization what gradually comes to us together with elements of democracy. [...] Therefore, we should not admit the distribution of this phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan. Non-traditional sexual orientation offends the honor and advantage of men and women and historically developed interfamily relations of the

25 www.ombudsman.kg (accessed 22 March 2012)

26 <http://www.gov.kg/> (accessed 22 March 2012)

27 www.kenesh.kg (accessed 22 March 2012)

Kyrgyz²⁸. On March 23, 2012 he invited four LGBT groups from Bishkek to discuss human rights violations that LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan are facing.

28 Report 'Kyrgyzstan: a country of human rights ...but not for homosexuals!' p. 15 (CoC Netherlands, 2004) <http://www.iiav.nl/epublications/2004/Kyrgyzstan.pdf> (accessed 17 April 2011)

Chapter 3: History of Labrys and Subjectivity.

As someone who is involved with feminist research and knowledge production, I find it important to discuss my subjectivities of engaging with this project. My own path to becoming an activist in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan and what influenced this path could be both common and uncommon compared to the other activists whose voices I use in this thesis.

Becoming an activist

I came to Kyrgyzstan in 1999 to study at American University of Central Asia (AUCA) which at that time seemed as the only option for a former exchange student dissatisfied with the kind of educational systems that typical Ukrainian universities offered. AUCA offered liberal arts education modeled after US educational system and prided itself in combining both Soviet and US education systems. During my years at AUCA I was encouraged to be actively involved in student organizations, served two terms with student government and organized youth education projects and awareness-raising campaigns with student group of Amnesty International.

Student newspaper “The Star” that journalism students including myself founded was able to challenge university administration’s decisions and bring most urgent issues to their attention. The university also had a group of gay and lesbian students who were relatively open. In 2000 I organized a small project called *I love you the way you are ...* to raise awareness about LGBT people’s rights. My close friend came out as gay and was bullied by other guys because of his effeminate looks. I couldn’t watch it passively and decided to educate the student body about

discrimination that LGBT people experience. In October 2000 I started screening films about LGBT people's lives in AUCA's cafeteria every weekend. Each time the crowd of students in attendance grew. Eventually based on their feedback about the project I invited representatives of Oasis, a gay men's organization that was the only organization in Bishkek working on LGBT rights at the time. The "talk show" with three gay men from Oasis that I facilitated almost ended up in a fight. Some of the male students threatened to beat up "the gays" and during the discussion asked very hostile questions. Oasis became a welcoming place to AUCA students who identified as LGBT and in November 2000 a group of incoming students went to Oasis club to celebrate their Initiation. The project also raised the issue of ban on words 'gay' and 'lesbian' on AUCA internet and the university administration had to remove the ban. As a member of student government I requested that one day of AUCA Spirit Week would be a cross-dressing day. In 2000 I wrote a proposal for AUCA library to receive a collection of books on gay and lesbian issues from Open Society Institute²⁹. These were also the books that informed my activism and may still be found at AUCA library. None of these would be possible in an environment outside of AUCA which we at the time called our 'bubble'. In 2002 and 2003 I co-organized a project that was aimed at facilitating training in leadership, gender, human rights and sex education for young people in small towns and villages of Kyrgyzstan. One session out of four in this training was devoted to sexual orientation issues and it was usually the most popular session. Throughout these years I volunteered with Women's Crisis Shelter 'Sezim' as a translator and communications intern. None of the organization's staff knew English and were consumed in shelter work with 24-hour hotline and dozens of clients. Through this work I learned about issues that

29 http://www.osi.hu/nlp/Activities/2000/G_L_recipients.htm (accessed 29 February 2012)

women faced in Kyrgyzstan and how their lives were controlled by their natal and husbands' families.

L_foundation listserv

Learning about realities of Kyrgyzstani women also led me to pursuing a Master's degree in gender and peace building at University for Peace in San Jose, Costa Rica. The program introduced me to feminist studies and UN mechanisms that can be used to address women's rights. This was also the first time in my education when the classes addressed structural violence and challenged our prejudices to the point of emotional intensity that left my classmates and I crying. Determined to change the world I read books and discussed plans with two AUCA friends of mine both also pursuing master's degrees abroad. One of them, also a Ukrainian, Anna Dovgopol, was writing a thesis on coming out experiences of gay men and lesbian women in Bishkek. Through her research and contacts at AUCA she got in touch with a group of lesbian women and gay men who were connected to more groups of friends in Bishkek. One of these groups of friends including AUCA students was refused service in one of Bishkek's cafés in February 2004 and was looking for ways to address their discrimination claims. The head of this group was at the time a law student of Kyrgyz Slavonic University ethnic Korean Aleksey. One of Aleksey's university professors encouraged him to visit a legal clinic to receive a free consultation about this case of discrimination. The clinic was willing to take up the case but there wasn't anyone in the group who would be willing to engage with the judicial system or media because it would mean being associated with a case about sexual orientation discrimination. Aleksey gathered a number of lesbian women to attend a seminar at this legal clinic and this was the first attempt of the lesbian and transgender community to become more political and address its concerns. Aleksey

was one of Anna's contacts for her research and through him Anna started gathering contact information of other lesbian women. On 8 May 2004 an email listserv called L_foundation was established. The group on Yahoo was described as "Initiative and interested lesbians from Bishkek who joined together to share their opinions and ideas."³⁰

At present it is inactive and has 42 subscribers. I was part of this group on my mail.ru account which I used as a backup account. I sent an email to the group on 21 May introducing myself and wondering who the other people in the group were. I only received a response from Aleksey who wrote that he was Korean and 3d year Law student. He also stated that he would want to have a foundation in Bishkek which would address the problems of lesbian women, helped them and united them. During the first months of its existence the group mostly had newspaper articles circulated and uploaded pictures. Some emails were from women looking for a partner. In the end of May Anna got in touch with "Oasis" and agreed with its web editor to cooperate on the first issue of their web journal about lesbian women in Kyrgyzstan. Working together on a journal was the first time when the community produced a publication together. I wrote two articles for this journal and also was responsible for some of the photography. Both Aleksey and Anna were on the journal team along with AUCA students who were part of the group that was seeking redress for the discrimination case. The editor of the journal spoke fluent English and worked as an interpreter. His initiative to create a space for women in Oasis served to spark organizing. Another activist who was organizing meetings for lesbians informally through *Blits Info* newspaper also joined these efforts and his drawings were used for the journal cover. Unlike Aleksey, Anna, myself and the editor of the

30 http://groups.yahoo.com/group/L_Foundation/ (accessed 21 May, 2015)

journal Ilimbek was an ethnic Kyrgyz man from a village in Chui oblast. He studied English at the university but was not exposed to Western ideas as much as AUCA students. Ilimbek became the fourth founding member of what was to become Labrys.

Labrys beginnings and 2005 revolution

In September 2004 I was working with Women Support Center and met with a group of women's rights funders who were coming back from a meeting at Issyk Kul lake. During the 2-hour ride from Kemin (a town in north-east Kyrgyzstan) to Bishkek I spent time talking to Beata Baradzic, a program officer then responsible for Europe and Central Asia region at Mamacash Foundation. She asked me whether I knew women's organizations in Kyrgyzstan that do 'real' work. By 'real' she meant groups that work not on mainstream seminars, have elite leadership and have direct access to the government but those that are grassroots and support minority women. I took Beata for a tour of Bishkek's crisis shelter, sex worker organization Tais Plus, Oasis and also told her about the emerging group that we were organizing. Mamacash previously supported one of my *youth empowerment* projects at AUCA and I was familiar with their grant cycle. Following the visit Anna, Ilimbek and I wrote a proposal to Mamacash for empowering lesbians through uniting, assessing the needs of lesbians, reaching out to lesbian women and providing psycho-social and legal support and shelter in "most difficult cases"³¹. The proposal also mentioned that the group would "start a public discussion on rights of lesbians and our existence"³². The proposal also listed publication of a journal issue, seminars for lesbians, ads in

31 Labrys proposal to Mamacash (September 2004) – Anna Kirey's personal archives.

32 Ibid.

local newspaper, and the first meeting of 17 lesbians at Oasis and 24 subscribers to the list as the biggest achievements at the time.

Between the writing of the first grant proposal and its processing, L_foundation continued to gather lesbians for social events including Halloween celebration and creativity evening in the fall of 2004. An October 25, 2004, email from L_foundation listserv mentions that 129 soms (about \$3 at the time) were collected to print business cards to give to lesbians to inform them about the group³³.

On December 21st 2004 I announced on L_foundation listserv that Dutch organization Mamacash gave us a grant to start an organization for lesbians. “The project includes publishing of a magazine, psychological consultations, seminars and different social events. We would like for more women to learn about the organization and feel that this organization is created and run by us for us. We will be waiting for your proposal about how the organization should work”, read the email³⁴. The same email asked listserv members to contribute various office things, such as curtains, chairs, tablecloths, hangers etc. and announced that already ten women helped to clean the rented apartment and gave a trash can, toilet paper, map and air freshener to the office. Ilimbek and I went to the market and bought 10 old chairs at 100 soms each and a very butch lesbian fixed them so that they would not fall apart. The Mamacash grant helped us rent an office for six months which was a half-empty three-room apartment in a remote area of Bishkek. The office was officially opened on January 8th, 2005. Right from the very beginning of office work there were requests from the people in LBT community to stay there because a number of people had to stay with friends due to hostile atmosphere and often various kinds of violence in their natal family’s homes. The office felt as a home,

33 Anna Kirey’s email to L_foundation October 25, 2004 (accessed 23 May, 2015)

34 Anna Kirey’s email to L_foundation December 21, 2004 (accessed on 23 May, 2015)

there was always hot tea, cookies and plenty of activities. Bishkek lesbians were so excited about this space that every day there would be someone showing up at the door just to meet us and spend some time in the office. Some couples came to the office just to be alone in a safe space where they could hold hands and kiss. The meetings happened every weekend with a number of activities, mostly those learned by us while being trainers at American University of Central Asia. The more creative team members decorated the office walls with stars in addition to a large fabric where each new person who came would draw their hand to show how many we actually are in Bishkek.

2005 was a big year for Kyrgyzstan because of parliamentary elections and the events that followed. On February 11th, 2005 I wrote to L_foundation about the election encouraging the members to vote and observe what is going on. Children of the president of Kyrgyzstan at that time Askar Akayev ran in these elections and there were multiple instances of election fraud which led to popular discontent and demonstrations³⁵. On March 22nd I wrote to L_foundation listserv that there will be a solidarity protest with citizen protests in other cities and encouraged everyone to participate. Some people from the group went to the protest with the core Labrys organizers. At the time I was working for BBC Monitoring and regularly followed the news. On March 24th – on the day of what is known now as Tulip Revolution I was sending live updates to BBC colleagues about what I had been seeing on TV which was overtaken by the opposition groups. In the evening I ran out of internet traffic and went outside to get a new internet card which made me a witness to enormous looting that was happening on the streets of Bishkek. People grabbed valuables from the stores and ran to their homes, I saw people going from street to street looking for

³⁵ Eurasianet.org. Timeline of the events in February – March 2005
<http://www.eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan/timeline/index.html> (accessed 27 May, 2015)

something else to take. The very next day I received a call from a lesbian woman who told me that she was beaten up by the looters and needs to stay in the office to feel safe and rest. Her story was documented by Human Rights Watch and included in their report on violence against lesbian and bisexual women and transgender men in Kyrgyzstan that came out in 2008:

“They punched me in the head, cursing the whole time. They beat me badly before they took what they wanted. [At first] they thought I was a man, that’s probably why they beat me so badly. They did not beat any of the other girls... I had men’s clothes on. Maybe if they had realized from the beginning that I was a woman, they would not have beaten me so hard”³⁶.

I remember 2005 events as the first experience of chaos when the government was not in control and pain of knowing that women like us are targeted. At the same time it was a relief from authoritarian regime and a new beginning for civil society including Labrys. This is what I wrote in an email on March 25th 2005 to L_foundation listserv:

We are okay. Survived a night of looted shops. Many went to the square to support [the protests]. It seems that the opposition have a head on their shoulders [i.e. know what they are doing]. It is scary to see so much aggression.³⁷

On May 17th 2005 Labrys organized its first public event to commemorate International Day Against Homophobia. Labrys invited representatives of the Ombudsman’s office, Ministry of Internal Affairs and friendly organizations to the event. At the time I was too scared to be associated with Labrys but I also really wanted to be there so I came as a “gender specialist” who would speak up a lot during the event and clearly had opinions similar to speakers from Labrys. I was worried then that being associated with LGBT people could ruin my career. While I

36 Excerpt from an interview with Gulzat from Human Rights Watch Report These Everyday Humiliations Violence Against Lesbians, Bisexual Women, and Transgender Men in Kyrgyzstan <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2008/kyrgyzstan1008/index.htm> (accessed 29 May, 2015)

37 Anna Kirey’s email to L_foundation, March 25, 2005 (accessed on 23 May, 2015)

had a lot to say I often stayed away from the media interviews and referred journalists to others in our team.

In March 2005 I went to my first international LGBT event which happened to be for LGBT youth and in Strasbourg at the Council of Europe. There I met European activists and got introduced to new ideas and developed new activist friendships.

One of the activists from that meeting invited me to apply for a feminist camp called Girlz Get United (GGU) which was held in August 2005 in St. Petersburg. GGU was a life changing moment for me because I met other feminist activists from Russia, Ukraine, Poland and Germany. GGU political discussions about feminism, staging Vagina Monologues and giving out leaflets on the streets of St. Petersburg made me change my mind about visibility. I no longer wanted to hide and came out of GGU with rainbow pins and a new view of my own role in activism. I also met German trans activist there who helped shape trans rights activism through his ongoing support as I and others in Labrys were learning about trans rights.

Discovering human rights framework for Labrys' work

In October 2005, Acacia Shields, then a Kyrgyzstan researcher at Human Rights Watch, requested a meeting with us and asked tough questions which we did not dare to ask ourselves as a community. We sat on the floor in the largest room of the office and talked about violence that we had experience as women and as lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people. I could not believe the stories I heard. That conversation with Human Rights Watch sparked multiple discussions and one survivor led to the other as we were documenting stories of family abuse, sexual and physical violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. At the time I also worked for a project on response to violence against women in medical settings which also contributed to interest in the issue. Every time I would introduce myself to

a group of new women who came to Labrys and tell them about my work, they would have a story to share. I came to realize that many women and transgender men who came to Labrys had lived through severe violence and for some it was ongoing and needed immediate support. The office soon turned into a shelter and became a non-stop job for me. This work led to larger documentation efforts and 2008 Human Rights Watch report which became a basis for many dialogues with the government of Kyrgyzstan and various international institutions. At the time one of my biggest worries was that there was so much trauma in the community for Labrys to take on, that we would burnout quickly. I had been spending many nights in the shelter listening to survivors, trying to soothe the pain they were feeling and exploring ways to resilience with them. At that time I also realized how dangerous it could be to speak about LGBT issues in public, yet I really wanted to start these conversations with the media because of what I was seeing and hearing and my newly inspired ideas about personal being political.

In November 2005 I was invited to speak at a talk show on local Piramida TV station called The New Look together with the head of Oasis organization Vladimir Tyupin. This talk show was my first opportunity to speak about LGBT rights in public and present the work of Labrys to the audience. I showed the magazine that we were publishing at the time and spoke about the situation of lesbian women. After the talk show there were some people from lesbian community who were scared to walk next to me because they were worried of being associated with someone who just spoke about lesbian rights on TV. I myself expected a backlash and felt unsafe but thankfully I have not been targeted arguably due to my ethnicity because ethnic Kyrgyz LGBT people who came out publicly received threats and have been recognized and targeted in public on a number of occasions. In November 11th email

to L_foundation I mentioned that we should discuss whether it is worth to engage with the media and what others thought of the talk show.

Winter of 2005-2006 was full of inspiration as trans men and their partners started to organize in a support group after Labrys conducted seminars about trans identities and rights. The group met regularly to discuss living as a man in Kyrgyzstan, passing tips and situations that trans men encountered in everyday life. We also discussed ways forward for those who wanted to transition, start hormonal therapy and seek gender confirmation surgeries. This led to very concrete advocacy steps which are described in Chapter 4. Labrys was one of the few organizations in the former Soviet Union which started trans rights work very early since its establishment and achieved significant results rather quickly. My own role in the process was that of facilitator. I read books about trans activists in other regions of the world, mostly in the US, had some of the books translated into Russian and became acquainted with a number of transgender activists who worked mostly in Europe. Surprisingly a lot of them were in a similar situation with access to healthcare and restrictive legal gender recognition legislation.

Becoming visible

On May 17th 2006 one of the transmen from the support group agreed to come out publicly about violence he had experience in his family. He spoke to KOORT TV channel and Vecherniy Bishkek newspaper, both of which have a huge audience in Bishkek. Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia director (then) Rachel Denber attended an event titled "Different sexual orientation is not a reason for violence" that we organized to discuss violence against LBT people. The news piece was also picked up by the radio and various newspapers. I spoke on TV for the second time and was better prepared and managed to keep to the topic of violence

despite distracting questions from the media. Coverage was quite positive and journalists mostly appeared neutral or sympathetic to the issue. For example, KOORT TV channel as quoted in an email I sent to L_foundation on May 18th, 2006, wrote on their website "... it is not only fear and hostility that Kyrgyzstan homosexuals are feeling from the side of their compatriots. Many are subject to severe violence often in their own families. There were many arguments about why there are people who are 'not like others' but the scientists of the world came to a conclusion that homosexual orientation is a normal part of human sexuality."³⁸

In winter of 2006 Labrys had to close its first office and move due to violence and rape threats from a staff member's father. The office opened again in April. In an email on April 21, 2006 I wrote to L_foundation that Labrys is welcoming everyone to a new office and will present about future plans³⁹. These plans included fast organizational growth which was possible due to a larger grant from CoC-Netherlands (Dutch LGBT organization). I remember most of my year in 2006 being in the shelter and supporting LBT people who for different reasons left their family homes and sought refuge in Labrys. This was the time in my life when there were no weekends. I took inspiration in frequent trips abroad to various trainings and events. I also decided to take courses in social work at Gothenburg University in Sweden in order to become more professional in running a shelter. While I was away from Kyrgyzstan the staff became more focused on social events and less political. A number of organizational issues came up. In autumn 2007 Labrys had to undergo a major structural change which helped the organization be more strategic and define priorities. At that time the staff and membership of the organization became more professionalized and various organizational policies were developed including

38 Anna Kirey's email to L_foundation, May 18th, 2006 (accessed on 23 May, 2015)

39 Anna Kirey's email to L_foundation, April 21st, 2006 (accessed on 23 May, 2015)

conflict of interest, financial and volunteer policies. These changes made Labrys less responsive to community needs but stronger as an entity to be able to withstand external pressure.

Becoming an advocacy organization

As Labrys was becoming stronger and more visible, it started to be frequented by the police. Sometimes they were responding to reports by neighbors who were upset about individuals whose gender they were not able to easily identify walking past their doors every day. Police visits or going to police station became a regular activity for me as an activist because transwomen and gay men were detained on a systematic basis usually arbitrarily. The first police visit with rape threats happened in June 2006 on a Sunday afternoon when I was at home. Shelter clients were in the office and they called in horror saying that the police at the door threaten to rape and kill them. I had to rush to the spot and we continuously filmed the police as they were questioning us to protect ourselves. The video helped us prevent other raids because we showed the filmed threats to the police chief and he said that they will not bother us again. The scariest police raid happened on April 8th, 2008 during a festive dinner for partner organizations and funders attended by dozens of LGBT people, HIVOS, CoC Netherlands and local NGOs. As we expected a lot of guests, someone opened the door and saw three police officers who demanded to come in and check everybody's documents. I walked up to the officers and told them that they cannot enter the apartment without an order so they called for their chief to help them figure out the situation. We started filming and I started calling all the human rights activists and international organizations in my cell phone contact list. Within half an hour a number of prominent human rights defenders and friendly media along with OSCE representatives came to our office to find six police officers and dozens

of scared LGBT people who were panicking worried that they would either be detained or the police would extort money from them for being associated with Labrys. Scared Dutch funders immediately called their headquarters and the media and Kyrgyzstan made the news in the Netherlands the very next day⁴⁰. Police officers realized that they made a mistake by raiding Labrys and left after two hours. I remember feeling very vulnerable but also protective of people who did not want to be known to the police. This time Labrys decided to file multiple complaints against the raid and report it via international organizations. We wrote to United Nations Special Rapporteurs on Human Rights Defenders and Violence Against Women who communicated with the government of Kyrgyzstan. The Special Rapporteurs noted that “the warrantless raid of the community center of Labrys may be related to the activities of the organization in defense of human rights, in particular LGBT rights, and also that restrictions or breaches of the right to freedom of association may discourage defenders working on the protection of the right of marginalized or stigmatized groups to carry out their activities.⁴¹ While the government did not respond to the inquiries, we heard from partner NGOs that the district officer who led the raid has been fired. For many LGBT people who were present during the raid this was the first time when they felt safe and were able to fight back. Bishkek’s human rights community which experienced raids in 2008 as well realized that Labrys is also a human rights organization and faces similar risks.

40 News about the raid on CoC Netherlands website in Dutch <http://www.coc.nl/internationaal/kirgizie-politie-inval-bij-labrys> (accessed 24 May, 2015)

41 Summaries of concerns received by Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Human Rights Defenders A/HRC/10/12/Add.1 (4 March 2009) p.283, para 1565 <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G09/118/31/PDF/G0911831.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed 26 May, 2015)

April 2008 police raid and the session of UN Committee on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) prompted Human Rights Watch to complete a report on violence against lesbian, bisexual women and transgender men in Kyrgyzstan which came out in October 2008⁴². I wrote an article⁴³ in Huffington Post about my experience supporting survivors of violence in Kyrgyzstan which now comes up in any google search of my name. In this article I mentioned our efforts to address violence with international institutions and the fact that government does not recognize that LBT people exist in Kyrgyzstan. I wrote:

*Nowhere is safe: not the home, not the shelter, not the sidewalk. As an activist, sometimes I feel numb facing another threat, or hearing the story of another devastated 20-year-old. Sometimes I feel angry.*⁴⁴

After hearing Labrys' claims CEDAW Committee decided to issue a concluding observation urging the government to take "all necessary measures to protect women from discrimination" based on their sexuality.⁴⁵ Labrys had used this recommendation to engage with the government by writing letters and organizing meetings. 2008 became a year of visibility and political activism for Labrys.

Building Ally networks

In the end of 2008 Labrys started a project which defined its work for the next years to come. It was a sensitization training for medical specialists based on non-formal

42 Human Rights Watch report These Everyday Humiliations: Violence Against Lesbians, Bisexual Women and Transgender Men in Kyrgyzstan. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2008/10/06/these-everyday-humiliations/violence-against-lesbians-bisexual-women-and> (accessed 29 May, 2015)

43 Kirey, A. A Land Where Nowhere Is Safe: A Lesbian Activist Speaks About Gender and Violence in Kyrgyzstan Huffington Post, November 15th, 2008 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anna-kirey/a-land-where-nowhere-is-s_b_134972.html (accessed 29 May, 2015)

44 Kirey, A. A Land Where Nowhere Is Safe: A Lesbian Activist Speaks About Gender and Violence in Kyrgyzstan Huffington Post, November 15th, 2008

45 UN Committee on Elimination of All Forums of Discrimination. Concluding Observations – Kyrgyzstan. CEDAW/C/KGZ/CO/3 (November 7, 2008) <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/co/CEDAW-C-KGZ-CO-3.pdf> (accessed 29 May, 2015)

learning where doctors and LGBT people were able to learn from each other and build relationships. While I personally had multiple networks through American University of Central Asia and NGO communities, Labrys has been quite isolated because most people on staff were scared of being associated with Labrys mostly due to not being out to their families. This project helped Labrys to start reaching out to potential allies and groups of people whose expertise could help improve the lives of LGBT communities. A lot of the trainings were filmed and the ones in which I participated I emphasize non-formal learning and expertise of LGBT people in our own lives. Labrys trained hundreds of people including journalists, lawyers, medical professionals and even police officers over the years. In 2008 I also participated in a civil disobedience Equality Ride in the United States which went to faith-based universities in the south of the United States to talk to the students and faculty about discriminatory policies which could get LGBT students expelled if their sexual orientation or gender identity was discovered. I brought the idea of dialogues to Kyrgyzstan and an Equality Caravan was organized in 2011 together with NGOs working with people with disabilities, women who use drugs, feminists and LGBTI people. The Caravan solidified relationships with other movements in the landscape of civil society in Kyrgyzstan.

Originally the Caravan was supposed to take place in 2010 but it had to be postponed until summer of 2011 because of the second revolution in April 2010 followed by violent clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan. During the latter I encouraged a number of Labrys staff to volunteer at hotlines for people caught in between clashing sides in southern town of Osh and Jalalabad. Labrys had always been very ethnically diverse with ethnic Uzbeks, Koreans, Kyrgyz, Uighurs, Ukrainians and

Germans on staff to name a few. Summer of 2010 was a time to express solidarity and Labrys opened the doors of its shelter to people fleeing the south.

Throughout the years of its existence Labrys grew from a small isolated group that gathered mostly for social events and provided support and shelter to LGBT communities to an advocacy organization which engages in a variety of movements in Kyrgyzstan and is recognized nationally and internationally. Labrys' staff has grown, some people formed new organizations and joined mainstream human rights groups, others left the country in search of better future. Compared to 2004 now Kyrgyzstan boasts at least seven LGBT groups, two of them came out of Labrys. There are multiple activists available for media interviews, meet with the government and organize trainings. I am still closely involved with the movement but more as a supporter and resource person.

Chapter 4: The State and Regulation of gender identity in Kyrgyzstan

Medical assignment of gender at birth is rarely questioned by the biomedical field which aims to “normalize” the gendered bodies or many societies where defining gender of a fetus is an important defining moment in preparation of welcoming a new child. Binary gender system contributed to making the non-compliance with one’s assigned gender into a medical diagnosis.

Gender identity, as defined by Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Law in Relation to Issues of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, refers to “each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth, including the personal sense of the body (which may involve, if freely chosen, the modification of bodily appearance or function by medical, surgical or other means) and other expressions of gender, including dress, speech and mannerisms”. This definition was formulated by international lawyers and activists working on sexual orientation and gender identity issues. “Freely chosen” is not the case in most countries of the world because access to most states require surgical intervention to align the “transgender” body with the “norm” as part of the process of recognition of one’s gender identity that was not assigned at birth.

Assignment of a male or female gender category is part of the social construction of gender. It is usually done after birth in a medical institution by a medical expert who examines the infant’s genitalia and defines them as either male or female. Infants with ambiguous genitalia are usually further examined and the

medical specialist decides which gender category their genitalia would fit most closely. Often additional testing to determine the make-up of their sex chromosomes is administered and hormone levels are evaluated. These biomedical procedures seek to “normalize” the newborn body to fit the existing gender order. Parents of an infant with ambiguous genitalia depend on the biomedical knowledge of the medical specialist and later continuously engage with the medical system due to recommended necessity of surgeries and hormonal therapy.⁴⁶

This chapter examines how gender identity is regulated in Kyrgyzstan by looking at regulation legislation, public discussions of changes to the legislation, and transgender people’s accounts of how they perceive this regulation. Historian Dan Healey, who studied sexual citizenship and regulation of sexuality in the former Soviet Union, notes that both Soviet and tsarist Russian conceptions of citizenship are based on ‘communal’ and ‘collectivist’ ideology (Bernstein 2010, 112). Therefore, the rights of minority groups, especially those of minorities that could threaten the ‘morals’ or harm the people (‘narod’) through ‘imagined degeneration’ or ‘outright pathology’ to use Healey’s terms, are seen as not worthy of protection as opposed to the rights of majority that need to be protected from the presumed harm. Regulation of gender identity, as this paper aims to illustrate, is perceived in a similar manner by both the medical institutions and *narod*.

In the case of transgender people, their wish to live outside of the gendered reality that their gender assignment dictates, manifests itself at different stages of life. Therefore, they may avoid engaging with the medical system in societies where formal bureaucracies do not put much emphasis on identity documents. But in the Euro-American context and the former Soviet Union bureaucratic procedures require

⁴⁶ More information on children with intersex is available from Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), including charts outlining ‘concealment-centered model’ and ‘patient-centered model’ <http://www.isna.org/compare>

various forms of identification, including identification numbers, gender marker and gendered names in legal documentation. In Sweden, for example, each person is given an identification number that is not supposed to be changed. The ninth digit of the number is either odd for male or even for female.

In Kyrgyzstan, names and last names are gendered and gender is listed in most forms that are required by the state bureaucracies. Therefore, transgender people in Kyrgyzstan need to seek state recognition of their identities that is available only through a complex system of being diagnosed with a disorder of 'transsexualism' and often after undergoing surgeries that constitute what the state calls "smena pola"⁴⁷ "Smena pola" translates as "sex change" into English. The term "sex change" in English has been replaced with more neutral terms 'gender reassignment' or 'gender confirmation'. The legal term "smena pola" does not specify the types of presumably medical procedures that constitute the 'change' process. Yet often it is interpreted as genital surgeries because genitalia define whether someone is male or female for the state through the use of biomedical definitions of gender.

The diagnosis itself originates from the idea that one has to be "diagnosed" in order to seek medical treatment (Nelson 1998, Irving 2008, Lev 2006). Medical professionals could be accused of malpractice if they treated bodies that are not diagnosable. In the view of medical communities, 'transsexualism' is made into a disorder to protect the medical professionals and so that 'the socially unsettling request to "change one's sex" is domesticated and receives some cultural sanction' (Nelson 1998, 223). From a patient and societal perspective, the diagnosis is

47 Article 72. Conclusion of registry body of civil status acts about including corrections or changing the act of civil status. Civil Code of Kyrgyz Republic (2006, 2007)

medically justified which means that it is supported by scientific discourse and, therefore, not challenged (Nelson 1998, 223).

Transgender people, thus, while being pathologized by the diagnosis, also earn social value by striving to be 'healed' and socially productive. Irving (2008) argues that medical discourse used to conceptualize 'transsexuals' as 'parasitic' because their focus on identity issues prevented them from participating in labor force. Social reasons that lead employers to discriminate against transgender people are not questioned by biomedicine. In fact, some diagnostic instruments (for example, Standards of Care for gender identity disorders that are widely used in Euro-American context) encourage something called 'real-life test' before seeking surgeries or hormonal treatment. The 'test' is designed to see whether the individual is capable of leading a productive life, sustain a job and familial and social connections while living in 'desired gender'. In lobbying for transgender rights the narratives of being productive and self-sufficient are often used to "counter the marginalizing effects of pathologization". (Irving 2008, 54). The 'normalization', therefore, contributes not only to social construction of gender but also to neoliberal ideas (Irving 2008, 54) about individual's productivity.

How do the 'pathologization' and 'normalization' processes play out in Kyrgyzstan? In the following examples, I provide a discussion of how transgender people in Kyrgyzstan access medical and legal systems. Transgender activist Aleksey was encouraged to seek gender reassignment surgeries by the Bishkek city registry official. He persuaded a medical commission to allow him to have a hysterectomy which is one of the few surgeries available for transgender people in Bishkek. After the surgery he received a document from the medical Center where the surgery was performed as requested by the registry official. However, the same

official refused to assist Aleksey in the procedure of changing his name and gender marker because the phrase ‘passport gender change recommended’ did not provide sufficient legal grounds for the state official⁴⁸. Aleksey describes his experience as follows:

[the female civil registry official asked] at what medical institution I had my surgery - a polyclinic? What hospital I had surgery at? Some kind of gynecological/urological center? A document in accordance to their templates... I only had half of a piece of paper, with no signature, no header, no stamp, is that a document in accordance with their templates? What surgeries should be accomplished, at what stage, at what point was I allowed to change documents? Everything came to rest at that I did not have penis.⁴⁹

The Kyrgyz state does not define the requirements for accessing the system; it is the individual officials who make decisions about whether or not someone is ‘qualified’ to change documents and what in their case would constitute ‘smena pola’. Aleksey and seven other transgender men were able to change their documents in the past two years in Kyrgyzstan. Each of them accessed the system individually with the help of their diagnosis document that has been modified by the National Mental Health Center to incorporate official letterhead and official recommendations to “change passport gender.” The first official diagnosis document that Aleksey received at first referred to him in neutral gender ‘osmotreno’:

that very first document, I saved it, I still have it at home. It is an A4 sheet, a half of an A4 sheet, cut very unevenly, and there are no stamps and no header at all, nothing at all. "Examined", and not "she was examined" neither "he was examined" yet, but "examined", then "Diagnosis", period, "transsexualism". Then some scribble, no dates, nothing specified, just a piece of paper, because they were shocked themselves, they did not know anything they could write there, but since I was demanding them to give me a document, I got that piece of paper I still keep now.⁵⁰

48 Kim, A. Interview by Ilimbek O. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. July 20, 2010.

49 Ibid., page 7 of the transcript.

50 Ibid., page 6 of the transcript.

The gap in legal regulation of gender identity in Kyrgyzstan both facilitates access for transgender people to their identity recognition and also provides room for interpretation that may lead to a situation when individual views of a public official become a decisive factor in transgender person's decision to undergo invasive sterilizing surgeries.

In the construction of gender, this may be a linking factor between biomedical perspective on gender identity and the way the state and society ensure that the transgender bodies are 'normalized'.

The idea of modifying one's body is acceptable but it has to be modified 'all the way' to resemble the female or male body that one would see in an anatomy textbook. Another transgender activist, Aibek, recalls:

at Passport Office she [the official] asked "Have you had complete surgery, the full one?" Well, I did not lie, I told her that I had mammal glands removed and I have not done anything about the bottom part. And she said "Ok, clear. Why?" I said, medicine has not yet reached the level that would satisfy me. She said "Ok, no problem, perhaps it is difficult for you to live with a woman's passport. You are a man, and that's it."⁵¹

Aibek changed his documents in a small rural registry in his home district. He used medical reasoning to explain why he did not complete the 'full surgery'. His argument seemed compelling to the registry official and she agreed to help with changing Aibek's documents. Official concern about transgender bodies fitting within the imagined 'standards' of what male and female bodies look like is an illustration of how in construction of gender biomedically defined characteristics become the criteria that provide entitlement for a transgender person to be recognized by the state. These criteria need to be described in the documentation supplied by an individual transgender person to 'qualify' for the change of documents. In an urban

51 Kubanychbekov, A. Interview by Ilimbek O. Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. June 23, 2010. Page 5 of the transcript.

area such as Bishkek, where the representatives of state are more educated, the medical professionals also need to 'prescribe' change of documents and not 'recommend' them. Thus, medical professionals' expertise is affirmed by the state in both cases whether it has been documented or a medical explanation was provided by the applicant. A confirmation of a 'full surgery' would ensure that the 'pathology' of a transgender body was 'corrected' and that transgender individual may enter the social construction of gender with a name and gender marker in identification papers, that suit his or her appearance.

The Kyrgyz state, with its political instability and lack of resources, is unable to reproduce its bureaucracy in a unified manner. Therefore, individual medical specialists and state registry officials are able to interpret article 72 of the Kyrgyz Civil Code that allows change of passport gender for people whose medical transition has been certified. In the following part of this chapter I discuss how in the absence of state regulation activists with advocacy support from foreign funders and professional support of medical specialists are able to engage in the process of legislation change.

Case Study: Cooperation between Labrys, Soros Foundation-Kyrgyzstan and Ministry of Health

When describing theoretical trends in regulation of homosexuality and gender identity earlier, it seemed that many of them are applicable to states that have a functional state apparatus that is able to coordinate the work of various institutions and train its officials. Kyrgyzstan has been politically unstable since the first government overthrow in 2005. I analyze the process of interaction with the state that the LGBT organization Labrys started in January 2005 to illustrate how political instability makes it impossible to systematically and strategically engage with the state but also makes the state unable to control civil society.

In December 2005, following requests of transgender men involved in Labrys leadership, Labrys started engaging with the National Center for Mental Health (NCMH) to help support the diagnosis of 'transsexualism' for representatives of Labrys transgender support group. The process of obtaining the first official document with a diagnosis lasted from April till June 2006 due to psychiatrists' lack of knowledge about diagnosis procedure. On 1 June 2006 a group of psychiatrists issued a document that confirmed that one of the co-founders, Aleksey, was "examined" by NCMH⁵² (they used intermediate gender 'osmotreno') and his diagnosis was 'transsexualism'. The document did not have an official NCMH letterhead and was signed by NCMH deputy director, head of department No. 5 and a doctor. It also had a stamp noting that copying was prohibited. This document was not sufficient grounds for a change of gender marker and name that Aleksey sought. This precipitating incident started a journey that lead Labrys to cooperation with the NCMH and the Kyrgyz Ministry of Health.

On July, 17 2007 Kyrgyz Ombudsman responded to a query of another transgender person with the following:

*you have the right to acquire and to amend a passport or any other personal identity document in the interest of protecting and manifesting your rights and freedoms on the territory of the republic and beyond its borders. However, you do not have the right to change your surname or name to one of the opposite sex when acquiring or amending a passport.*⁵³

The letter also urged this individual to go abroad to obtain surgeries not performed in Kyrgyzstan and seek further assistance in case of employment discrimination.

52 Республиканский Центр Репродуктивного Здоровья, in English National Center for Mental Health

53 Labrys Blog Entry Response from the ombudsman's office about transgender documents change query. <http://kyrgyzlabrys.livejournal.com/10105.html> (accessed 28 April 2011)

In October of 2007 Labrys requested that the Kyrgyz Ministry of Health create a working group that would produce a document to enable transgender people to change their gender marker and name based on NCMH diagnosis.⁵⁴ The Ministry of Health responded positively and recommended a number of experts to be part of the working group. The Ministry asked Labrys to wait with starting the work of this group until Parliamentary elections in December 2007. The Ministry officials worried that there will be further changes in the cabinet of Ministers and did not want to raise controversial issues. After the parliamentary elections a new Minister of Health, Madamin Karatayev, was appointed. Labrys approached him with a request to continue with the working group but he refused, noting that the previous agreement had been reached with a different Minister. After presenting Karatayev with previous communication and conducting further meetings with the Ministry, another agreement was achieved. The group did not manage to meet in 2008 and was postponed till 2009, another election year.

In summer 2009 Labrys approached the new Minister of Health, Marat Mambetov, seeking to continue negotiations about the working group. This time the response was positive and communication with the Ministry was reestablished. The working group met and developed an internal document which would regulate the procedure of obtaining 'transsexualism' diagnosis and further legal recognition of transgender person's name and gender marker. The document was sent to the Ministry of Health to be signed on November 23, 2009. Communication with the Ministry continued until April 2010 when another government overthrow happened. Following the establishment of a provisional government, a new Minister of Health –

54 Labrys Blog Entry Expert group addressing problems of Kyrgyz transsexuals to be possibly established <http://kyrgyzlabrys.wordpress.com/2007/10/18/expert-group-addressing-problems-of-kyrgyz-transsexuals-to-be-possibly-established/> (accessed 28 April 2011)

Damira Niyazalieva – was appointed. She was the third Minister of Health since Labrys started its advocacy project. Due to clashes in the south of Kyrgyzstan and general political instability, it was impossible to continue communication with the Ministry of Health until the fall of 2010 when Labrys worked with a new Minister of Health, Sabyrbek Jumabekov.

After receiving the endorsement of thirteen other Ministries, the decree made its way to the Prime Minister’s table. Presidential elections took place in October 2011. While approaching the ministries, Labrys focused on receiving all the endorsements before the elections in order to prevent further fall-outs with new leadership. On February 15, 2012 newly appointed Prime Minister Babanov’s name appeared next to text of the decree on government’s website gov.kg. This text was endorsed by the Ministries and the last step was public discussion of the decree through its publication on government’s website.⁵⁵ The issue was discussed at Kyrgyzstan’s very popular internet forum Diesel where mostly very important or outrageous news are posted for discussion by the users. One forum user wrote: “Classical genre. In order to distract from the problems they talk either about language, or renaming of towns or about these “trans”. The country won’t exist soon and they are “concerned” with citizens “suffering from disorder of sex identification”.⁵⁶ The media immediately picked up the issue as Babanov’s “concern for “people suffering from disorder of sex identification””⁵⁷ which urged the government to issue

55 <http://www.gov.kg/?p=7149> (accessed 15 February 2012)

56 Text in Russian: “Классика жанра. Чтобы отвлечь от проблем говорят то о языке, то об переименованиях населённых пунктов, то вот про “транс”. Тут скоро страны не будет, а они зоботятся гражданах “страдающих расстройством половой идентификации”. ” <http://diesel.elcat.kg/index.php?showtopic=11950270> (accessed 15 February 2012)

57 <http://www.24kg.org/community/121518-premer-ministr-kyrgyzstana-ozabotilsya-sudboj.html> (accessed 15 February 2012)

a statement explaining the legislative procedure that this kind of decree requires.⁵⁸

The statement places responsibility for initiating this decree on the Kyrgyz Ministry of Health and away from the new Prime Minister (who is constantly attacked by the media and his political opponents).⁵⁹

Newly appointed head of the Ministry of Health, Dinara Sagynbaeva, was involved with developing this decree and familiar with the process and considerations put into the text. The decree was endorsed by thirteen other ministries and, therefore, enjoyed support of sufficient number of government bodies to be passed. The news about this decree reached Russia and was picked up by two major newspapers in Russia *Rossiyskaya Gazeta* and *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. On April 19, 2012 the office of Kyrgyz Vice Prime Minister Gulnara Asymbekova returned the proposed decree draft to the Ministry of Health for further revisions requesting them to focus on amending another piece of legislation through the Parliament. This may be a bureaucratic dead-end for the decree that took so long to be developed and endorsed.

This case study demonstrates that developing a strategy or a consistent regulation policy is particularly difficult in Kyrgyzstan due to chaotic changes in leadership both at national and at Ministry level. Since the beginning of healthcare reforms in 1996 Kyrgyzstan had 9 Ministers of Health.⁶⁰ The disjointed Kyrgyz state creates many opportunities for civil society engagement due to lack of mechanisms to restrict NGO activity. At the same time, meaningful policy changes may take years

58 <http://www.24kg.org/community/121609-v-pravitelstve-schitayut-nekorrektnoj-informaciyu.html> (accessed 16 February 2012)

59 Ibid.

60 Statement. Suyumjan Mukeyeva: in 15 years of reforms 9 ministers have changed in Kyrgyzstan <http://www.24kg.org/community/print:page,1,98835-suyumzhan-mukeeva-za-15-let-reform-sistemy.html> (accessed 28 April 2011)

to achieve because of frequent changes in leadership and procedures of developing policies.

Chapter 5: Pathways to activism: the case of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights activism in Kyrgyzstan

Collective action, specifically citizens' motivations for joining public organizations and social movements, have been a subject of study by scholars in various disciplines. There is a plethora of scholarly literature exploring collective action in democratic societies with stable governments. This part of the thesis focuses on sociologist Sidney Tarrow's theoretical frameworks as vehicles for exploring collective action and their application in the context of post-Soviet politically and economically unstable Kyrgyzstan. This part of the thesis focuses on exploring the motivations of activists that became involved with a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender organization Labrys based in capital city of Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. First, I lay the theoretical ground for collective action, look at political participation and collective action in the post-Soviet context and conclude with insights gleaned from oral history interviews conducted with LGBT activists in Labrys.

Why do LGBT people join a formal organization to protect their rights? Examining collective action that resulted in sustainable and successful LGBT organization, I want to understand what factors are at play when LGBT individuals decide to join an organization that creates a visible public space of a group hidden and often vilified in society. In many interviews, activists express frustration with LGBT communities being apathetic to activism if not hostile. The communities that interact with Labrys are relatively small: over 200 people are in close or in constant contact with the organization and attend different events; more than one thousand individuals are familiar with the organization and follow its work. In a small community, members are more likely to notice if someone is not active. This

particular community, however, is based in a large urban area and monitoring each other's involvement is not possible.

In fact, most LGBT people are unlikely to either be involved in activism or even criticize those who are involved. Wilkinson and Kirey (2010) argue that people who lived most of their life in the Soviet Union in the LGBT communities are more resistant to organizing especially if it is done by younger people and with foreign support. Young people who grew up in an environment where there was a visible presence of NGOs and available foreign funding are more willing to engage with the third sector and funders to pursue their collective interest.

Theoretical framework: why do individuals join social movements?

Sidney Tarrow, a theorist of social movements, argues that what he calls "contentious politics" emerges where changing political opportunities create a space for groups that lack resources on their own to engage. (Tarrow 1998, 2). People who are not able to access institutions whether based on their social status or political context of a particular society seek to create these new claims and ways that challenge the authorities and their opponents. This, I argue, was the dynamic in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan.

The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union created a space for different social actors to create new terrains of accessing institutions and formulating new agendas. As Kyrgyzstan became independent and the state structures started rapid reforms in the 1990s, the only visible presence of groups that pursued interests in the realm of gender and sexuality was that of international organizations that were seeking new ground for development and quickly establishing themselves in Kyrgyzstan. While Tarrow's approach focuses on national institutions that 'create' opportunities, I would also highlight the role of foreign funders and opportunities created by them. Western funding quickly became available and first study trips to the U.S. crisis shelters for emerging activists started in 1998 with the U.S. Department of State support. At the

end of the 1990s, the number of women's organizations increased exponentially and women's issues became part of the government agenda via funding channels but also through the actions of emerging women's groups.

The women's groups in Kyrgyzstan do not fit a definition of contention and the kind of issues that they raise may be dictated by funding and not by a shared common interest. Sometimes this common interest is difficult to define because their understanding of commonalities among them is blurred by a widespread belief that women as a group do not experience discrimination. On the other hand, groups based on common identity or a specific issue, such as disability, minority ethnicity or minority sexual orientation and/or gender identity, may be more likely to engage in Tarrow's "contentious politics" due to their lack of access to institutions and vulnerable position in society.

Contention may be public if the environment permits that or, alternatively, be expressed through means that may not be only through institutions and typical channels, according to Tarrow, but be manifested through forms of dress, private behavior and challenge the elites, other groups or cultural codes. In addition, contention is a reaction to intolerable situations and events:

Contention increases when people gain the external resources to escape their compliance and find opportunities in which to use them. It also increases when they are threatened with costs they cannot bear or which outrage their sense of justice. When institutional access opens, rifts appear within elites, allies become available, and state capacity for repression declines, challengers find opportunities to address their claims (Tarrow 1998, 71)

The emergence of the LGBT organization Labrys in 2004 was based on a need to address injustice of a group of lesbian women and transgender people being kicked out from a café for a kiss. At the time, this group was able to communicate about the incident with a legal clinic but did not take any further because initiating a court case would mean outing members of the group, none of whom were out in family or work contexts. Yet they had the opportunity to establish a new initiative group because the

government did not restrict organizing, this group of people had skills and resources to be able to contribute to organizing and they were connected to other organizations that served as allies and models.

This particular group of people also saw organizing as a valid method of gaining access to resources unlike many people from LGBT communities who do not see addressing discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity as a common interest. Negative attitudes about organizing and Labrys' kind of organizing are discussed by Wilkinson and Kirey in more detail and also addressed by the interviewees whose voices will provide more context to this debate further in the chapter. Some of these attitudes may be derived from the tradition of Soviet state-organized activism that has been frowned upon. As most activist initiatives were facilitated by the state, the activists' efforts were seen as solely for personal interest or as a way to gain access to privileges afforded by compliance with party rules. Miller et al. (1995) quote Di Franceisco and Gitelman argue that engagement of Soviet citizens with the state can be classified in three ways: "formal-ritualistic" initiated and funded by the government, citizen-initiated contact with officials and contacts over implementation i.e. "particularized contacting". They also mention that very few people who were members of the Communist party were politically active. Those who were may have been doing that for "sizable dose of careerism" (Miller 1995, 18). This created a situation when most people in society saw activism as "sticking one's neck out for no good reason" (Miller 1995, 18). This atmosphere contributed to weak citizen engagement in post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan as well.

Kyrgyzstan's civil society is relatively under-regulated by the state compared to other Central Asian countries. This creates opportunities for citizen initiatives to emerge quickly and work on virtually any issue. In the area of sexual rights Kyrgyzstan has at least three organizations registered as LGBT – Labrys, Indigo and

Pathfinder – and at least two, Tais Plus and Tais Plus II that officially address sex workers' rights⁶¹.

Given conservative attitudes among the Kyrgyz general public, it is rather unusual that sexual rights are not regulated by the state to an extent that they are regulated in other countries in Central Asia and even less conservative Ukraine and Russia. One explanation of this may be the impact of donor efforts to “democratize” Kyrgyzstan and the state’s inability to resist these efforts on issues that are not politically charged (at least not currently). In an article about civil society in Kyrgyzstan, Finnish scholar Maija Paasiaro notes “the NGO sector, created through donor sponsorship, is incapable of much more than delivering Western ideological agendas or assisting in aid distribution, and that it is therefore unlikely to achieve the desired outcomes of citizen empowerment and democratic consolidation” (Paasiaro 2009, 59). The disassociation created by this dynamic alienates the citizens who are neither employed by the government, nor part of Bishkek NGO communities. Yet it creates an entry point for at least formal securing of sexual rights issues that are unpopular with the general public. Both the NGOs and the government are encouraged by foreign donors to secure sexual rights.

Individuals employed by NGOs, according to Paasiaro, are urban specialists who used to be professionals in the Soviet Union and niches after its collapse. This group has little connection with citizens living in rural areas and do not take their interests into account. Returning to Olson’s argument about why individuals are likely to become “free riders”, in this case it could be that the elites do not create space for inclusive participation for other groups of people even those with vested interest in the type of goals that the NGOs pursue.

Another approach to looking at the dynamics of activism is presented by political scientists Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink who look at the connections

61 Ukraine is the only other country in the former Soviet Union that has a registered sex worker organization.

between national and transnational NGO networks. In their view, grassroots activist agendas in contexts where citizens are not able to access the state are addressed through networks working on similar issues outside the country. These networks utilize their access to international organizations and powerful governments to pressure the government of the country where a grassroots NGO is based. They call this process “boomerang method” (Keck & Sikkink 1998). In this case connections to transnational networks and ability to use the tools that they provide may be more important than Tarrow’s contention. I would argue that this method may only be available to organizations that have English-speaking staff with sufficient education level to communicate with transnational networks.

LGBT organizing around injustice experienced both individually and as a group is often based on the participant’s life experience, therefore, utilizes contentious politics and in contexts where democratic and participatory ways of addressing rights claims are unavailable may use the “boomerang method”. Each theory adds a new actor to the dynamic of establishment of a particular movement. While Tarrow’s framework is based on sense of injustice and opportunities created by the state, Olson argues that self-interest is the main driving force of individuals joining together to address common goals. The Soviet context in which the state created, controlled and facilitated activism complicates citizens’ perceptions of why others join movements and what kind of opportunities activism brings. The post-Soviet Kyrgyz NGO context that Paasiaro describes bring another angle to this debate, that of international donors’ agenda and also resonates with the transnational networks involved in exerting pressure on governments put forward by Keck and Sikkink.

Why Do LGBT People Join LGBT Rights Movements?

The answer to this question may seem obvious. However, as noted above only small groups of individuals comprise the moving force of social movements while others

are involved somewhat passively and with different levels of contribution of resources.

Based on theoretical frameworks available for analyzing citizens' motivations for engaging in activism, it could be implied that the people who join LGBT organizations in the former Soviet Union are motivated by a sense of injustice or career-driven, are educated, have access to foreign donors, possess foreign language skills to communicate with transnational networks and become mediators in transferring Western or neoliberal agenda to the citizens.

Additionally, based on Sullivan's analysis of motivations of LGBT activists in the US working on marriage equality, there are some additional criteria that could apply to citizens' motivations to join LGBT movements. Sullivan distinguishes two general types of motivations – altruism and self-interest. Altruism she defines as situating one's activism in "a concern for welfare of others" and self-interest is clear-cut – securing legal rights for one's family. (Sullivan 2011, iii). Sullivan's conclusions were drawn from interviews with activists and are based on their own perceptions of their activist path. She identifies four main patterns in their motivations for joining. These are:

1. Own personal experience of discrimination, from which they developed a sense of collective identity (Ibid., 67)
2. A psychological disposition that resists perceived injustice (Ibid., 72)
3. Growing up in a political home (Ibid., 74)
4. Exposure to political movements (Ibid., 76)

These patterns are relevant for US context and may not be as applicable to post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, yet Sullivan's findings support the theoretical frameworks that were identified in this paper as perspectives of looking at pathways to activism.

Why do LGBT people join Labrys? Activists' narratives about their personal pathways to activism

The interviews used for this paper were conducted in the period between December 2009 and July 2010 as part of a larger oral history project about women loving women's and transgender people organizing in Central Asia. All 10 interviews used for this paper are with former and current staff members. Most interviewees were aged between 21 and 30 at the time of the interview and one person was aged 38. Two out of ten had no higher education, three dropped out of university at different stages, one was studying part-time and four had completed higher education. Three speak fluent English, one can write in English at academic level. Three visited Western countries before starting their work in Labrys, two for study purposes as exchange students and one for a sports competition. Five out of ten identify as lesbians, one identifies as queer and has a transgender partner, four identify as transgender men.

In the following section of the paper I will discuss the interviewees' pathways to activism and motivations that they had to join Labrys or larger LGBT organizing based on the criteria offered by the theoretical frameworks discussed above. In the beginning I look at interviewees' views on formal activism and transnational networks and then move to personal motivations for joining Labrys. Most interviewees joined Labrys when the organization was just started and took part in establishing it and later. It is particularly interesting to look at the interviewees' reactions to formalization (or "NGOization" of Labrys) as it became better funded and professionalized.

From the very beginning of Labrys a lot of people who joined it as volunteers or staff members were part of larger groups of friends that created informal networks. They knew each other well and organized informal events – birthday parties, weddings and meetings for new friends who found each other through personal ads

in *Blits Info* newspaper. The two original leaders were well-known in the communities and trusted. Both of them were students in Bishkek universities with some knowledge of non-governmental organizations. Aleksey as a Law student knew of legal NGOs and of Oasis, an NGO working on HIV prevention and the rights of gay and bisexual men that existed at the time. In his interview Aleksey notes that the idea of responding to discrimination came to him after discriminatory incident in a café. He discussed what happened with his colleagues at legal clinic Adilet and with fellow law students. He organized the first meeting to respond to the incident in the office of Adilet. At the meeting with over 15 people present including students of American University of Central Asia (AUCA), the group of women over 30 said that there is no need to react because “our lives are not so bad”. AUCA students whom Aleksey calls the “new generation” supported the idea of creating an organization and “writing a project”. The latter phrase is part of NGO-donor language use and in the context of the first meeting could have been used by AUCA students and Adilet staff that were familiar with what was needed to start a new initiative.

And still of course me and D. were slightly lacking [expertise] exactly in the field of NGOs, promotion, of this kind of training at that moment. We generally worked with the guys, with community. And as for organizational work, administrative work, of course it was all done by the girls. And, paradoxically enough, it were, let's call them... foreign girls who took an active part in running the organization, in bringing Kyrgyzstan's Labrys to our lives. (Aleksey, 27)

As one of the “foreign girls” from AUCA, my role was to use connections to NGOs and knowledge of English in getting the organization’s first grant. The combination of knowledge of the communities in Bishkek with access to funders and NGOs through a Western-funded educational institution was crucial to creating a new initiative that was appealing to many lesbian, bisexual and transgender groups of friends in Bishkek and outside. Interviewees who were part of Labrys’ first year activities recall the organization and atmosphere in the office being “warm-hearted” and “a home” to them. The interviewees who came to Labrys after its official registration in 2006

position their participation in the organization more as employment and not as a “home”, despite mentioning that it is their “life” (Lena, 21). Interviewees note that Labrys becoming more formal and bureaucratic had an impact on their relationship with the organization.

I used to feel at home here, like a second family but now the staff is busy with their papers and reports (Artur, 27).

As Labrys became a “public association” according to Kyrgyz law, there had to be an accountant, monthly reports and official positions that created a hierarchy. As Labrys received more funding, there also had to be a system of “indicators” for how many people came to events and the staff had to spend more time filling reports, monitoring sheets, log-frames and other bureaucratic procedures required by funders and the government. With these more formalized structures, interviewees note, Labrys was losing its people who “burn”⁶². For example, as D. says “how it is possible to define who would be in the movement and who wouldn’t ‘It is clear who ‘burns’ and who doesn’t, it is not like ‘pay me and I will do this” (D, 28). The idea of professionalization meant that there would be a distance from the communities and less accountability through informal networks as the new staff members moved to an “NGO class” with “beneficiaries” and “indicators” instead of friends. Jika, one of the interviewees recalls her feeling when she first heard of Labrys as an office.

For me an office was like, well, there is some kind of secretary, some kind of [male] director sitting there, some sort of office room [...] I didn’t want to talk about my life to some random guy. [...] [when I came to Labrys] a young woman opened the door. I thought, “oh nice, at least it is not a secretary and there is no guy with a moustache here”. [...] We got acquainted and I understood that they are a couple, not only in our family⁶³ but also a couple.!!!

Labrys for many interviewees has been a space for finding others like themselves and a space to reach out to those who are in a similar situation in another town or village. Four interviewees who were part of transgender support group mentioned

62 «Горят» in Russian refers to people who are committed to a certain idea and continuously engage with it.

63 Referring to LGBT community.

that their most important achievement was making a film that helped reach out to transgender people in town of Jalalabad. Artur has been particularly proud of his contribution to availability of information in Kyrgyz language for transgender people in rural areas. Aibek sees his activism as being able to change his documents and educating civil registries about transgender rights.

I told them [civil registry office]: don't be surprised, there will be more people coming after me (Aibek, 22)

Both Aibek and Artur mention their experiences abroad with other transgender activists as formative to their activism. Trips abroad are valued as achievements by family members and while families of activists may not know what kind of conference their sibling or child is attending but they would be very proud of that. Trips abroad also brought contacts and solidarity of other LGBT activists and more NGO language and ideas that enabled Labrys to continue its work in a more strategic way. These connections also help build awareness about different approaches of working with the government and international support for human rights claims in Kyrgyzstan. Throughout the process of working with the Ministry of Health international transgender activists were involved in developing the decree, providing solidarity support through letter-writing and advice and consulting Labrys activists about other strategies to address the concerns that Ministry officials were raising. This kind of communication with international LGBT activists fits Keck and Sikkink's "boomerang" model, yet in the case of Kyrgyz state, it is relatively responsive.

Aibek and D. discuss in great detail in their interviews the connections between transgender people's transition process and "dissolving in the crowd". They argue that once an individual's transition is complete i.e. her or his needs for hormones, surgeries and legal gender recognition are met, it is likely that this individual will stop being an activist and "dissolve in the crowd" because their goal is "to be like everyone else" (Aibek). Only those with "messiah syndrome" (Aibek)

remain activists. This argumentation is in line with Olson's self-interest in collective action. The interviewees also note their frustration with general lack of participation of LGBT people in activist initiatives. Nazik who was involved with Labrys in the beginning but was not willing to be an activist believes that it is a personal responsibility of a lesbian woman to contribute to Labrys' cause to improve her life.

I envied people who could and were burning. They have the strength. Just simply say that yes, I am a human being and I have rights and it does not matter whether I love another girl or not, I am a human being and a citizen of this country. [...] Many people wait until something falls on them from the sky. I argue with a lot of people about. What did you for Labrys, as a lesbian, as a representative of this community? To improve your life so that you wouldn't be hurt, raped or fixed, so that people would not point fingers at you saying that you are a pervert (Nazik, 29)

Nazik also connects her activism to feeling of injustice and responsibility. She feels strongly about discrimination experienced by the lesbian community and speaks out against it. Nazik is one of the few people in the group who spoke at a press conference about LGBT rights.

Another activist Galina also feels that she needs to have an active position on LGBT rights because "most people I've been observing bow their head, will walk away and will be thinking about where to move from here" (Galina, 30). For her it is also a personal responsibility to be an activist and an out lesbian. Galina also speaks publicly and in the media about being a lesbian and is a part of a feminist group in Bishkek. Her position is a combination of reacting to injustice and altruism.

Another interviewee Syinat says that she was "drawn [to Labrys] by the word "challenging"". She was not satisfied by her job at a large intergovernmental organization where "they have high salaries but what they do at work is check email, talk to each other, drink coffee, then have lunch, go shopping for lunch, come back, make couple of phone calls, delegate the work to interns and then go home" (Syinat, 25). Joining Labrys was part of her commitment to her bringing "at least some sort of benefit to some part of humankind" (Syinat, 25). As the interviews suggest most Labrys activists were seeking a community or responding to discrimination that their

peers experienced and sense of injustice that they felt. Artur notes that Labrys contributed to LGBT community's awareness of discrimination and now more people stand up for their rights while LGBT activists are able to communicate with the government about human rights violations to prevent them from happening in the future. Many interviewees indicate that they now have the language to address human rights concerns and perceive their lives and role as citizens differently. Their actions are more political and their thinking more strategic. Whether this change in perceptions occurred through indoctrination of activists into funder-initiated human rights discourse or as part of uniting and understanding what kind of issues LGBT people in Kyrgyzstan face as a group, is a question for another research project. LGBT activists in Kyrgyzstan and specifically in Labrys utilize multiple strategies discussed above as theoretical frameworks for activism. They learn these methods through interactions with other activists abroad and AUCA alumni or English-speaking members of Labrys, yet adapt and own them as their local strategies and are more excited about reaching out to a transgender group in faraway Jalalabad than UPR recommendations which seems even more distant. They also perceive government as an accessible institution and engage with it to address their claims.

Conclusions and Future directions

Throughout the thesis I look at policy windows that open for LGBT activists as the unstable Kyrgyz state continues to maintain relative neutrality on LGBT rights. Heavily funded by the EU and the UN Kyrgyz reforms involved those who are present and visible in NGO communities. Presence and authority for LGBT activists is maintained through continuous UN reporting, statements, letters to the government and documentation of human rights violations. Looking at the factors that contribute to restriction of LGBT rights elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, it is possible to suggest that Kyrgyz state's position on LGBT rights will remain neutral as long as the big pro-LGBT actors such as the EU and as of recently the US are able to maintain their presence (and funding) in Kyrgyzstan. Their position on LGBT rights which is contrary to the position of Russia will continue to contribute to relatively favorable climate for LGBT activism in Kyrgyzstan. However, if Kyrgyzstan changes its political vector towards Russia, then the situation is likely to change.

One possible scenario, however, is homophobic and transphobic rhetoric of the Russian state and media translating into organized opposition to LGBT activism in Kyrgyzstan. In April 2012 pro-Russia Bishkek-based newspaper *Delo №* published a series of articles targeting Labrys and another LGBT organization Pathfinder as "militant gays and lesbians". The articles received negative feedback from the blogger community and some journalists, yet the journalist continues to publish them. If more newspapers and TV outlets including Kyrgyz language media pick up this rhetoric imported from Russia, there could potentially be further stigmatization of LGBT activism.

Kyrgyzstan will remain a small and resource-poor country with high fertility rates. Unless the EU and the US policies drastically change, it is unlikely that the government would develop a negative rhetoric toward LGBT rights on its own. Also given the level of systematic oppression of ethnic Uzbeks, the government currently does not need a new “other” especially as invisible as LGBT people. While sexuality discussions in general are a taboo in Kyrgyz culture, making populist claims on LGBT rights is not likely to have wide social support compared to nationalistic and religious rhetoric. Finally, as LGBT activists in Kyrgyzstan are strategic and vocal with government institutions while staying away from public visibility that could fuel negative response.

For future research it would be interesting to follow the process of cooperation between LGBT organizations and Ministry of Health and further work of LGBT activists with the government in the framework of UPR but also as a result of larger efforts within Bishkek NGO communities to be involved in formulating state policies. Additionally, further research on how psychiatric and other medical institutions in Kyrgyzstan respond to patients’ rights claims and international standards, could be interesting to pursue.

In this thesis I argue that the position of Kyrgyz state as unstable, dependent and small provides opportunities for issues unpopular with majority of the citizens to be raised as part of engagement of NGOs with the state. In the first chapter by looking at medical regulation of homosexuality and gender identity historically in Euro-American, Soviet and Post-Soviet context, I lay the background for understanding what kind of factors were at play in determining issues key to medical regulation. In the second chapter I discuss the unique position and context of Kyrgyzstan within the former Soviet Union and its response to sexual orientation and gender identity-related recommendations as part of the process of Universal Periodic Review. Kyrgyzstan stands out as open to reform in its instability and lacking strong

religious opposition. These factors make it possible for LGBT activists to engage with Kyrgyz state institutions, such as Kyrgyz Ministry of Health. In the third chapter I look at activism in Soviet context and neo-liberal development agenda being introduced in Kyrgyzstan and how individuals that join LGBT organizations adopt this agenda and use it to address their human rights claims.

As indicated by the recent response of the office of the Vice Prime Minister to a draft decree on legal gender recognition for transgender individuals, Kyrgyz state still may exercise its opposition to LGBT rights claims through bureaucracies as it comes up with new hurdles for activists to jump. One could also argue that the under-funded and corrupt state and relatively well-funded LGBT activist initiatives are moving at different speed which creates more obstacles but also more windows as activists are able to access larger actors that play a role in developing Kyrgyz state policies.

Appendix 1

Table 1 Recommendations about human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the former Soviet Union during the First Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review by UN Human Rights Council. (2008-2012)

No recommendations	Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Tajikistan
Rejections	Estonia, Russian Federation, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Ukraine
Acceptance	Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan, Moldova
Not fully/unable to provide a response	Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania mostly in regards to partnerships for same-sex couples

Country	Recommendation	Response	Statement
Armenia	None	None	None
Azerbaijan	96. 7. Provide law enforcement and judicial officials with specific education/ sensitivity training towards the protection of children, women and persons of minority sexual orientation or gender identity. (Czech Republic)	Accept	We accept recommendation and are already implementing it. According to Recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child presented at its 44th session there were held special courses delivered by experts of United Nations and OSCE in current field for police officers dealing with children within the framework of Juvenal Justice improvement program and were attended at least by 300 police officers.
Belarus	None	None	
Georgia	None	None	
Estonia	77.45. Take all necessary measures to combat discrimination against homosexuals (Belgium).	Accept	

	77.46. Develop public awareness and education programs that advance tolerance on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity (Netherlands).	Accept	
	77.47. Undertake awareness raising programs on gender identity and sexual orientation for civil servants , including security forces and bodies (Spain).	Accept	
	79.13. Develop comprehensive policy instruments based on the Yogyakarta Principles to combat discrimination against sexual minorities (Finland).	No answer	Estonia, at this moment, cannot give a definitive answer to the recommendation to develop policy instruments based on the Yogyakarta Principles to combat discrimination against sexual minorities
	79.14. Pay special attention to acts of violence against homosexuals (Belgium).	Not fully	Estonia is committed to taking measures to enhance the level of public awareness and protection of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons. Estonia pays attention and condemns all forms of violence, and has in place the respective legislative and policy instruments. The awareness raising activities with regards to tolerance towards LGBT community are carried out in cooperation with Human Rights Centre campaign Diversity Enriches.
	80.11. Accord the same rights and responsibilities to same-sex partners as are accorded to opposite-sex partners (Netherlands).	Reject	
	80.15. Give legal recognition to same-sex relationships (United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland).	Reject	
	80.16. Recognize same-sex marriages (Norway).	Reject	
Kazakhstan	97. 2. To join the declaration on sexual orientation and gender identity , while noting with congratulations the decriminalization of homosexuality. (France)	Reject	The issue of adherence to the declaration on sexual orientation and gender identity requires thorough discussion, so that public opinion may be taken into account. At the same time, it should be noted that there is no policy of discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation in Kazakhstan. Accordingly, Kazakhstan

			does not accept the recommendation.
Kyrgyzstan	76.62. Intensify in practice sanctions in cases of domestic violence, bride kidnapping, forced marriage, polygamy and discrimination against women due to sexual orientation , as well as promote mechanisms of protection that guarantee the rights of victims of domestic violence (Uruguay).	Accept	
	77.13. Review the compliance of its national legislation with provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on non-discrimination, in particular with regard to women and persons of minority ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity (Czech Republic).	Accept	
Latvia	93.27. Intensify its efforts to combat discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (Spain);	Accept	93.27., 93.28. Latvia accepts the recommendations. Under the Constitution, all human beings are equal. The principle of equality has also been integrated in sectoral laws, for instance, in the Labour Law. Latvia will continue providing information on combating discrimination based on person's sexual orientation in its next report.
	93.28. Increase efforts to combat discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation (United Kingdom);	Accept	
	93.29. Provide general information about anti-discrimination and reform the curriculum in schools to put regularly emphasis on information about gender equality, Lesbian Gay, Bisexual and Transgender and ethnic minorities (Norway);	Accept	93.29., 93.34. Latvia accepts the recommendations and at the same time indicates that educational measures are carried out concerning both hate crime against LGBT persons and the issues of intolerance, racism and anti-Semitism. Besides, it should be noted that the issues of anti-discrimination, gender equality and human rights, including the issues of sexual minorities, have already been included in the school curricula. Latvia will include information on the provision of general information on anti-discrimination issues in its next report.
	93.34. Engage in awareness raising activities such as stressing the aspect of diversity in curricula of schools in order to alleviate discrimination against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender persons (Finland);	Accept	

<p>93.30. Adopt legislation that recognizes homophobic and transphobic motivation as an aggravating circumstance in the criminal law (Finland);</p>	<p>No definitive answer</p>	<p>Currently, Latvia cannot provide a definitive answer to the recommendation to sanction under the Criminal Law homophobic and transphobic crime. Such amendments would require an open public debate and the hearing of the views of groups concerned. At the same time, the State Police is considering possibilities to introduce a special programme that would enable any resident to report a hate crime. In its next report, Latvia will provide information on the development of this discussion.</p>
<p>93.31. Amend the criminal law so that the law recognises hate speech against Lesbian Gay, Bisexual and Transgender persons (Norway);</p>	<p>No definitive answer</p>	<p>Currently, Latvia cannot provide a definitive answer to the recommendation to amend the Criminal Law in order to sanction hate speech against LGBT persons (to include sexual orientation in the definition of hate crime). Discussions on this issue have not yet been held and currently no amendments to legislation have been planned. In its next report, Latvia will provide information on the development in this matter.</p>
<p>93.32. Further strengthen measures to prevent and combat discrimination and hate crimes against ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups, including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender persons (Brazil);</p>	<p>Accept</p>	<p>Latvia accepts the recommendation. The Constitution and other laws contain the principles of equality and the prohibition of discrimination. Besides, work on the transposition of relevant European Union anti-discrimination directives is under way. Within its mandate, the Police will continue efforts in combating discrimination. In recent years, Latvia has succeeded in cutting back on the number of instances of national, ethnic and racial hatred, which is demonstrated by statistics on instituted criminal cases concerning incitement to national, ethnic and racial hatred or disharmony. At the same time, the Police cooperate with LGBT activists by providing security measures during LGBT public events.</p>

	93.33. Consider legislative and administrative measures to recognize violence on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation as a hate crime (United States);	No definitive answer	At this point, Latvia cannot provide a definitive answer to the recommendation on recognizing violence on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation as a hate crime. Discussions on this issue have not yet taken place and currently no amendments to legislation have been planned. At the same time, no violence has been reported against homosexual and transgender persons as such. In its next report, Latvia will provide information on developments in this matter.
Lithuania	88.4. Refrain from adopting legislative measures which criminalise homosexual relations or breach the rights to freedom of expression and to non-discrimination of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people (Belgium);	Accept	
	88.5. Refrain from legislative initiatives which may criminalise homosexual relations between consenting adults (Slovenia);	Accept	
	88.23. Develop public awareness campaigns to combat manifestations of discrimination and racism, including xenophobia, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and other forms of intolerance in order to further protect and strengthen the rights of members of minority groups, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and the Roma Community (United States of America);	Accept	
	88.24. Consider/study the possibility to take additional measures to combat discrimination against LGBT people (Argentina);	Accept	
	88.25. Take action in order to avoid discrimination of LGBT persons , in practice and through law (Sweden);	Accept	
	88.26. Carefully consider whether the right balance is struck when the main street of Vilnius is made available for annual marches by neo-Nazis on Independence Day, whilst vulnerable groups like the LGBT society are refused to use the same venue , and are referred	Accept	

to less attractive locations (Norway) ;		
88.27. Take further steps to eliminate discrimination against people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (Ireland);	Accept	
88.31. Take all necessary measures to prevent and prosecute all forms of violence and harassment related to sexual orientation and gender identity (Slovenia);	Accept	
88.33. Continue to ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are able to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and assembly (Australia);	Accept	
88.34. Ensure the full respect for freedom of expression and freedom of assembly for all, including LGBT people (Slovenia)	Accept	
90.10. Review the Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information in order to remove all possibilities that this law may be applied in such a way to stigmatise or discriminate against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people or to breach their rights to freedom of assembly or expression (Belgium);	Accept	Lithuania has already implemented recommendations 90.10 and 90.11 to review the Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information in order to ensure that its application does not violate the rights of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people. Discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation is prohibited in Lithuania. This law does not contain provisions that would allow discrimination of persons by reason of their sexual orientation. The implementation of the provisions of the law is supervised by the Journalist Ethics Inspector. The inspector also summarises the practice of application of the said law and performs the function of drafting legislation for the implementation of this law and submitting those drafts to responsible authorities. Thus, the law itself provides a mechanism for monitoring and improvement thereof.

	90.11. Introduce necessary measures to ensure full respect of human rights for all including for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, by reviewing the Law on the Protection of Minors against the Detrimental Effect of Public Information (Switzerland);	Accept	
	90.12. Take the necessary legislative measures and enact policies that recognise the diversity of families and provide same sex couples with the same rights and social security benefits as heterosexual couples (Netherlands);	Accept	
	90.13. Take steps to ensure that legislation protects the full rights of sexual minorities (Denmark);	Accept	Lithuania has already implemented recommendations 90.13 and 90.15 on the protection of sexual minority rights and on the repeal of statutory provisions discriminating persons on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity, at the same time noting that the precise evaluation of these recommendations depends on the interpretation of the terms “sexual minorities”, “gender identity”, “full rights” and “discrimination”. In Lithuania, discrimination on various grounds is prohibited by the Constitution and the list of grounds for discrimination given therein is understood as an open (non-exhaustive) list. The prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation is elaborated in the Law on Equal Opportunities.
	90.15. Repeal any discriminatory provision in existing laws on sexual orientation and gender identity (Slovenia);	Unable to provide a final response	Lithuania is currently unable to provide a final response concerning recommendation 90.12 on the recognition of the diversity of families, because there is an active discussion going on in the political and legal domains on the concept of family and respective legal amendments are being drafted and considered. Provision of the same rights to same sex couples and opposite sex couples is not envisaged.
Moldova	73.24 Prevent discrimination of social minorities, such as Roma people and LGBT persons and adopt a comprehensive anti-discrimination law (Poland);	Accept	

	73.26 Intensify its efforts to address discrimination against Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals and Transsexuals (LGBT), and investigate and prosecute crimes against LGBT-community members (Norway);	Accept	
	73.27 Redouble efforts to protect the rights of members of minority religious, ethnic and social groups, and particularly focus on protecting members of the LGBT community from both official and societal discrimination (USA);	Accept	
	73.28 Take action to build broad support for LGBT-rights in the new comprehensive anti-discrimination law (Sweden);	Accept	
	73.55 Allow members of the LGBT communities the right to freedom of expression and assembly (Australia);	Accept	
	73.56 Take concrete measures to raise public awareness about LGBT rights, including the guarantee of the right of assembly and association (Spain);	Accept	
	73.57 Ensure that public events planned by the LGBT, religious and other rights groups are permitted and adequately policed, according to the obligations of the Republic of Moldova under international human rights law (UK)	Accept	
	75.4 Adopt a law on the fight against all forms of discrimination and clearly guarantee, in its domestic law, the freedom of expression and therefore the right for LGBT persons to peaceful demonstrations (France)	Accept	
	75.11 Continue efforts to adopt and implement the legislative framework to prevent, punish and eliminate all forms of discrimination, with special attention to gender equality and discrimination based on sexual orientation and disability (Mexico)	Accept	

	76.4 Commit internationally to the rights of the LGBT community by signing the Joint Statement on LGBT human rights from the March 2011 session of the Human Rights Council (United States).	Accepted partially	As the consultations revealed certain sensitivities within the society, the Government has embarked on a path of broad consultations aimed at, among other, ensuring that this law is endorsed not only by the government, but also by the entire Moldovan society. From this perspective, the immediate efforts will be oriented towards promoting the human rights principles, including the core principle of equality and non-discrimination on all grounds, tolerance and avoid artificial distortion of LGTB persons
Russian Federation	85. 28. Increase its efforts and take concrete policy measures in order to promote tolerance and non-discrimination of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgender persons. (Sweden)	Reject	The Russian Federation does not accept this recommendation, since there is no policy of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation.
	85. 31. Provide prison guards and law enforcement officials in general, with human rights training specifically focusing on protection of human rights of women, children, national minorities and persons of minority sexual orientation or gender identity; and further to ensure investigation and punishment of all cases of violation of human rights by this personnel. (Czech Republic)	Reject	The Russian Federation has already established and is operating a system of educational establishments providing staff with further professional training in the needs of the institutions and bodies of the penal correction system, taking account of the requirements of international legal standards and rules relating to the protection of human and civic rights and freedoms. The Russian Federation is thus already implementing this recommendation and therefore does not accept it.
Tajikistan	None	None	Regarding the question of identity of transgender persons, the delegation noted that identity documents are issued on the basis of the Law on civil registration, and that a certificate of change of gender issued by a medical organization was required.
Turkmenistan	36.(b) Consider legislation and/or additional policy measures to promote tolerance and nondiscrimination of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons. (Sweden)	Reject	
	40.(e) Decriminalize consensual same-sex activity between adults and take measures to promote tolerance in this regard. (Czech Republic)	Reject	

Ukraine	58. 5. To consider applying the Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in relations to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity as a guide to assist in policy development. (Slovenia)	Reject	
Uzbekistan	79. (d). With regard to protection of right to privacy and non-discrimination, we would like to recommend decriminalization of consensual same-sex activity between adults and adoption of measures to promote tolerance in this regard which would also allow for more effective educational programmes for prevention of HIV/AIDS. (Czech Republic)	Reject	Uzbekistan rejected the following recommendation, stating that it is “not part of Uzbekistan’s obligations under internationally agreed human rights standards”:
No recommendations	Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Tajikistan		

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