Navigating Challenges: Queer Security Dynamics in the South Caucasus and the EU's Role in It

Introduction

In the South Caucasus, queer security serves as a crucial perspective for unravelling the intricate interplay of geopolitical dynamics and diverse cultural narratives. This article explores solidarity within the queer community, green visions for European security, resilience during regional wars and emergencies, and the role of the European Union in all three. It aims to provide insights into the multifaceted landscape of queer security in the region, examining what distinguishes the experiences of queer communities in the South Caucasus when discourse on security is brought to the forefront.

Diverse Landscape: General Regional Context

The challenges faced by LGBTQI+ communities in the region are deeply entrenched in historical and political contexts, with the lingering impact of the Soviet era playing a significant role in shaping the current situation. Queerphobic practices, rooted in legislative measures during the Bolshevik and late Soviet periods, continue to influence how LGBTQI+ discourse is approached in politics and media, directly impacting the lives of the community. The criminalization of male homosexual acts during the Soviet era not only drove the LGBTQI+ community underground in the region but also fuelled a hostile and hateful public atmosphere, which continues today (Caucasus Edition, 2018). Legal prohibition was lifted in Georgia in 2000, in Azerbaijan in 2001, and in Armenia in 2003 (Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 2016). While these legal changes represented a significant step forward, societal attitudes toward the community have shown limited progress.

Following the Soviet era and the subsequent decriminalization of same-sex acts, the South Caucasus region grapples with challenges related to queer security. All three countries — Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia — share some similar challenges as well as facing distinct issues concerning the community. At present, the community encounters direct attacks and harassment, encompassing physical, psychological, and symbolic violence, highlighting the hostile environment in the region and emphasizing the critical focus on the topic of queer security. Consequently, LGBTQI+ safety in the South Caucasus is alarming.

Since 2014, ILGA Europe's Rainbow Europe Index ranks Azerbaijan as having the least stringent LGBTQI+ protection laws, putting the country at the bottom of all 46 Council of Europe member states (ILGA-Europe, 2023). The same index puts Armenia 44th, providing a mere 7% rights protection for the LGBTQI+ community. Despite being the regional leader, Georgia only holds 25% of surveyed legal and policy protections for LGBTQI+ people. These numbers underscore the urgent need for examining queer security in the South Caucasus. Although there has been increased visibility and vocalization of LGBTQI+ communities compared to a decade ago, the public and state attitudes toward the community remain largely unchanged, with documented hate crimes and hate speech indicating a rise in discrimination, violence, and persecution each passing year. Consequently, this reality continues to shape the lives of LGBTQI+ people, especially trans individuals, in both subtle and significant ways, exacerbating their situation and pushing them further away from public life.

Queer Solidarity in the Region

In the face of considerable challenges imposed by both the respective governments and societies in the region, queer solidarity plays a pivotal role in enhancing resilience and amplifying voices within the South Caucasus queer community. However, achieving queer solidarity is a significant challenge in each respective country and in the region as a whole.

Internally, the governments in each country provide minimal support to queer movements, and particularly in Azerbaijan, the community is not recognized as a social group. On the contrary, state officials, state-financed institutions, and mass media actively support and propagate actions targeting the community. Government officials and Members of Parliament, for instance, perpetuate harmful stereotypes against the community, further endorsing laws and policies that aim to restrict fundamental rights and freedoms. This situation fosters an environment where the community primarily seeks support from Western countries, leading to an ecosystem where organizations compete for limited resources, resulting in segregation rather than solidarity.

Moreover, queer ideology is underdeveloped in each respective country, reflecting a significant gap in gender and social studies. These studies intentionally remain apolitical, placing high pressure on activists to self-develop while engaging in activism. This sometimes leads to clashes, with queer-feminist communities opposing trans-exclusive radical feminists. These ideological differences further divide the community.

The field also suffers from a lack of human resources due to the dangerous nature of the work and the need for skilled activists proficient in English and with a profound understanding of social topics. Building trust with the people they work with becomes essential to ensure everyone is on the same side and not working hand-in-glove with the government. This challenging environment for new activists to grow, coupled with mental health issues and security concerns prompting experienced activists to leave the country, results in shrinking human resources, slowing down the queer solidarity process. Reduced human resources also mean less capacity to organize community-building events, creating a negative feedback loop that affects the communities.

Another significant question in the region revolves around how people perceive and practice LGBTQI+ rights activism. Some adopt a low-key strategy due to the high danger level, working away from the public eye to safeguard community safety and worker identities. Others advocate for a louder activism approach, aiming for increased public visibility to ensure the queer community is more prominent, despite recognizing the sacrifices involved. These strategic differences significantly impact efforts toward queer solidarity in the region.

Amidst these challenges, the community struggles to build connections with fellow activists from the region. Queer solidarity within the region develops slowly due to a lack of human resources, with many organizations not prioritizing the topic in their agendas. Overall, regional cooperation faces obstacles, including the ongoing conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as challenges such as restricted space for queer NGOs in Azerbaijan.

Resilience Amidst Emergencies: Queer Survival

Confronting the adversity of a regional context with shrinking space for solidarity and queer activism, the security of the LGBTI+ community faces exacerbated threats during state security emergencies. The recent armed conflict, the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia from September 21 to November 10, 2020, compounded with the challenges posed by the global pandemic, has disproportionately impacted the queer community in the region, magnifying vulnerabilities on multiple fronts.

Economic discrimination is a formidable initial hurdle, particularly affecting trans people, leaving many with limited options for employment in queer-friendly spaces, often prevalent in the service industries. With the pandemic forcing closures of numerous venues, including those in the mass tourism sector where many from the community were employed, financial insecurity has been heightened. The systemic violence endured by queer people, coupled with limited coping and support mechanisms, has contributed to precarious mental stability, further intensifying the security risks they face during emergencies.

Amid these challenges, many people from the community, seeking refuge, returned to their homes or

regions, which are often more conservative environments for LGBTQI+ people. Family reunions, however, were fraught with tensions as family members exerted pressures regarding unemployment, self-expression, and relationship status, creating an inhospitable domestic environment.

The LGBTQI+ community, known for forming new 'chosen' families to find care and safety, were separated from these support networks during the pandemic, intensifying feelings of isolation and depression. Financial constraints further restricted social interactions, limiting access to public transport, and impeding their ability to engage with friends and take part in social activities.

The challenges persisted during the war, as the military institution exhibited strong queerphobia, rendering military service a hostile environment for the community. To evade conscription, members often underwent humiliating procedures or, in some instances, were falsely reported as mentally ill and sent to rehabilitation facilities.

The war also presented unique challenges for LGBTQI+ activists, as advocating for peace garnered hostility and subjected them to additional dangers. The discourse on LGBTQI+ rights was pushed aside, overshadowed by the urgency of the conflict, leading to an increase in nationalistic and patriotic practices. This surge in nationalism posed an additional threat to the queer community, making them more susceptible to targeting.

In conclusion, queer communities, grappling with financial insecurities, mental health challenges, and heightened vulnerability as easy targets are facing extra hurdles during emergencies, emphasizing the imperative need for inclusive and protective measures to safeguard the LGBTQI+ community in times of crisis.

EU Support on Queer Security in the South Caucasus

The security situation for queer people in the South Caucasus and other parts of Europe is significantly different, reflecting varying levels of commitment to LGBTQI+ rights among EU member states. While certain EU countries stand as safe spaces for the community, others grapple with challenges in championing queer rights. Notably, within the Eastern Partnership countries — Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia — the EU has provided efforts to advance LGBTQI+ rights through dedicated initiatives. Despite lacking uniformity among EU Member States, the overarching commitment to gender equality and queer rights positions the EU as one of the key advocates for the community. This commitment is manifested through the EU's support for the Eastern Partnership region, encompassing financial resources and a focused approach toward LGBTQI+ issues. The EU's green vision promotes the fostering the same kind of progress rights and regulations seen within the EU to the South Caucasus region, ensuring a comprehensive elevation of queer rights.

Given the lack of government support for LGBTQI+ activism in the South Caucasus, the EU plays a significant role in sustaining the movement, providing essential resources and advocacy platforms. The EU's support fosters regional and international collaboration, empowering the queer community to engage in impactful advocacy for LGBTQI+ rights. The support extends beyond financial resources, creating spaces for community building and networking. Conferences such as ILGA gatherings, organized events by EU-based organizations, and embassy initiatives serve as crucial platforms for queer activists in the South Caucasus to connect, share experiences, and build solidarity.

Embassies of various EU countries contribute to addressing LGBTQI+ issues in the South Caucasus, organizing receptions and gatherings that provide the community with opportunities to articulate their challenges and explore avenues for support. The EU's multifaceted support not only provides resources but also facilitates a collaborative environment, empowering activists in the South Caucasus to navigate and challenge the unique security issues faced by queer people in the region. In essence, the EU's commitment underscores the interconnectivity of queer safety, reflecting the principle that "if some of us are not safe, none of us are safe," and emphasizing the importance of collective efforts in securing LGBTI+ rights across diverse geopolitical landscapes.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the South Caucasus queer community faces ongoing challenges on the path to achieving inclusive and progressive rights and ensuring security. Prioritizing queer solidarity and building a resilient movement is crucial for amplifying the voices of queer communities. The significant role played by the EU in providing support has already led to notable achievements. With continued efforts and dedication, the community aims to leave no one behind, fostering a more inclusive and secure environment for all.

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