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"I love my country even if it does not love me back"

Queer (Inner) Emigration Narratives in Kazakhstan and Russia

ABSTRACT

This article aims to understand how the (im)possibility of emigration impacts queer post-Soviet identities, narratives, and everyday life. It is based on two studies: one biographical interview study conducted in Russia, and one conducted in Kazakhstan using in-depth narrative interviews. As a result of the high rate of homophobia, queer people from both countries contemplate emigrating to the West. According to our findings, the West is imagined as an "ideal place." For some queer people, it is the only place where they can imagine a future, while for others emigration is hypothetical. The findings reveal the effects of this potentiality of emigration on the life and relationships of queer participants. For those who want to leave but are unable to do so due to practical obstacles or a lack of resources, inner emigration appears to serve as a survival strategy for managing a reality that is difficult to tolerate. The article applies postcolonial optics to explore the complex relationship between Kazakhstan, Russia, and the West, and the intersections of national, gender, and sexual identities.

Keywords: post-Soviet gender and sexuality, emigration narratives, LGBTQI+, precarity, the idealised West

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HISTORICALLY, THE GROWING body of literature has engaged with the relationship between emigration and queer identity (see for example Manalansan 2006; Gorman-Murray 2009). This growing field has mainly focused on migration, experiences, and the meaning-making of queer migrants (Stella, Flynn & Gawlewicz 2018), migration being one of the impacts of state-sponsored homophobia (Novitskaya 2021), and the motivations and adaptation of "queer diasporas" from post-Soviet countries (Mole 2018; Novitskaya 2021). There is a lack of literature concerned with understanding the narratives of emigration of those who have not left their homeland. Against this backdrop, this article aims to understand how the (im)possibility of emigration, or inner emigration, impacts narratives and everyday life practices of queer people living in Kazakhstan and Russia. At the time of writing, there were significant changes in the region: the Russian military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, undoubtedly affected queer lives in both countries. While the data that inform this article were collected in 2017 and 2018, we will consider some of the effects of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on queer lives and emigration in Kazakhstan and Russia.

Dichotomies and juxtapositions within queer studies, where West and North are portrayed as progressive and inclusive while East and South signify violence and a lack of freedom for queer citizens, have been well documented and critiqued (Mizielinska & Kulpa 2011; Kondakov 2023). There are two intertwined dimensions to this debate, spatial and temporal, which are also interconnected with the question of coloniality.

From a spatial perspective, it is important to ask where the boundaries and relations between those locales are (Mizielinska & Kulpa 2011, 21). The same place can from different viewpoints be more "Western" or more "Eastern" and occupy different positions in global relations. For example, Russia is west of Kazakhstan and east of Europe. Tlostanova (2012, 136) describes the ambiguous position of Russia as a "secondary empire": the state "even when claiming […] superiority, has always been looking for approval/envy and love/hatred from the West."

From a temporal viewpoint, it is, when considering queer narratives in Kazakhstan and Russia, crucial to acknowledge Kazakhstan's colo-

nial past vis-à-vis the Russian empire. Since the dissolution of state socialism, the question of postcoloniality has re-emerged with the re-evaluation of Soviet modernity as an imperial formation (Shchurko & Suchland 2021). This shift in analysis, in which Soviet state socialism is viewed as colonial in nature, is an important corrective, allowing us to expose oppressive power relations and inequality. Tlostanova (2010, 188) notes that post-Soviet gender studies often affirm the "progressivist model of development" that disregards understandings of sex and gender from a racialised and colonial perspective by offering a simple dichotomy of "archaic gender discourses", as opposed to a modernised Western discourse of liberation. In this article, we follow Tlostanova's (2012) call for focusing on local subjectivity and the narratives of Eastern European and Central Asian people when addressing issues of postcoloniality.

In our analysis, we aim to question both spatial and temporal dimensions of the linear logic of the progressivist narrative within queer and gender studies. We do this by analysing narratives of emigration and inner emigration of queer people living in Russia and Kazakhstan, tracing how the progressivist narrative is reproduced and disrupted.

The article engages with research on queer migration and post-Soviet gender and sexualities, and provides an original contribution to both, by focusing on the narratives of emigration of queer people who still live in Kazakhstan and Russia. We do not offer a comprehensive overview of the literature on queer lives in Kazakhstan and Russia here (see for example Stella 2015; Levitanus 2022a, 2022b; Kislitsyna 2021). Instead, our focus is on how the geographical division of gender and sexual norms between West versus East and North versus South, as well as the juxtaposition between Europe and Asia, shape queer lives in Kazakhstan and Russia.

Methodology

The article is based on two interview studies conducted in Russian as part of our respective doctorates: a 2017 Kazakhstan study using in-depth narrative interviews with eleven queer people based in Almaty,

Astana, and Karaganda (Levitanus 2020), and a 2018 biographical interview study conducted in Russia involving forty-nine non-heterosexuals based in Moscow and Saint Petersburg.

In the former study, eleven participants were recruited using two different sampling strategies, namely snowball and purposive sampling. These participants' identifications include cisgender gay men, bisexual women, lesbians, pansexuals and transgender people. Other characteristics, such as ethnicity, religion, and profession, were not noted unless they were deemed important by the participants. Moreover, any identifiable information was omitted to prioritise anonymisation and safety.[1] The study used narrative interview methodology, focusing on everyday life experiences within settings such as the online dating scene, university, workplace, or home. Foucauldian-informed narrative analysis (Tamboukou 2013) was employed to examine the narratives of queer people in light of specific power structures and discourses around gender and sexuality in Kazakhstan.

The latter study used biographical interviews to cover the lives of the participants from early childhood to the time of the research, with a focus on sexuality. Participants from Saint Petersburg and Moscow, recruited with the snowball sampling method, talked about their plans and perspectives. All were cisgender (twenty males and twenty-nine females) and non-heterosexual. The study used biographical methods and narrative analysis (Riessman 2015) to reveal how non-heterosexual people in Russia narrate their life stories and explain their sexuality and personality.

While the aims of our studies and sample sizes differed, the focus on the narratives of queer people makes the two studies suitable for a joint or synthesised narrative analysis (Phoenix et al. 2016). In placing the two countries side by side, we aim to disrupt the historical and present view of Russian influence and power vis-à-vis Kazakhstan. Furthermore, given that the two studies employ qualitative methodology, the number of participants is less important than the depth of the narrative accounts.

Considering the co-constructed nature of narratives, the researchers' positionalities need to be acknowledged; they embody the complexity and "hybridity" (Narayan 1993, 30) of various identities intersecting,

interconnecting, and diverging from one another. We both have close ties to Kazakhstan, the experience of emigration, and share a queer identity (see Levitanus & Kislitsyna 2023 for a more in-depth discussion of our positionality and the role of ethnicity and language within our studies).

Along with our positionality, completing our doctorates in the United Kingdom and Russia, we need to be actively aware of the danger of replicating inequality associated with the competing dominance of Western and Russian knowledge production in the Central Asian region (Suyarkulova 2018). We endeavour to focus on the way queer people express agency in their narratives, and how they creatively resist and adjust to the reality they inhabit. We resist the tendency to portray post-Soviet sexualities as radically different and exotic, and steer away from discourse about queer people in Kazakhstan and Russia being passive victims of their regimes (Stella 2015; Levitanus 2022a).

Locating Russia and Kazakhstan

Over the last twenty years, Russia has seen an increase in traditionalist and homophobic sentiments. This has been accompanied by the resurgence of nationalism, which is a source of political legitimacy; the reinvention of the Russian national identity includes the retraditionalisation of gender roles (Mole 2019). Both Healey (2018) and Mole (2019) argue that, within official discourse, homosexuality has been perceived as a threat exported from the West to Russian nation and culture. Moral panic around homosexuality regularly arises in Russian media, with rhetoric in support of increasing the birth rate and rhetoric about saving children from indecent assault emerging simultaneously (Healey 2018). In this context, conservative groups have created concepts of traditional values, which have later been expressed in legal norms. A federal law banning the spread of so-called propaganda of non-traditional sexual relationships among minors was adopted in 2013. Thereafter, the Code of the Russian Federation on Administrative Offences prescribed fines for violations of the gay propaganda ban. This law has led to many other negative consequences, such as an increase in instances of everyday

homophobia and a greater need for self-censorship in the public sphere (Soboleva & Bakhmetjev 2014). Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, anti-queer and anti-Western rhetoric has increased among Russian authorities. In October 2022, the "propaganda law" was expanded to incorporate heavy fines for "LGBT propaganda" among people over eighteen years of age. In addition, bills targeting gender-affirming healthcare as well as legal transitioning were passed in May 2023.

Nevertheless, the position of the Russian state on sexuality is more complicated than simply opposing "Western-imposed" gay rights. For example, Emil Edenborg (2018, 71) discusses Russia acting as a "force of order and civilization" in relation to the Chechen Republic and other Muslim regions of the Russian Federation. Edenborg (2018) analysed political discourse and argues that the image of an anti-gay Muslim "other" who is not ready for cultural change makes it possible for the Russian government to externalise homophobia and explain homophobic laws by the need to ensure social balance in the context of Russian multiculturalism.

Kazakhstan occupies an ambiguous position in the region geographically, frequently referring to itself as a "bridge" between Europe and Asia (Nazarbayev 2006). Moreover, Kazakhstan deliberately portrays itself as a Eurasian state pursuing the politics of Eurasianism, which aims to develop and maintain friendly relations with major neighbouring states as well as interethnic peace (Golam 2013). Kazakhstan's ambiguous position is evident in its politics regarding queer people.

In February 2015, the draft of a law that included a broad ban on the publication or sharing of information relating to LGBT issues in settings where children might encounter that information was sent to President Nazarbayev for signature, along with a second bill amending related legislation (Human Rights Watch 2015). In May 2015, Kazakhstan's Constitutional Council found the two pieces of pending legislation unconstitutional. The timing and the very possibility of passing this law have been interpreted as a consequence of Russia's "soft power" projection in the form of political homophobia (Healey 2018). Furthermore, given the impact of the Russian media in Kazakhstan (Laurelle,

Royce & Beyssembayev 2019), it is plausible that the LGBTQI+-hostile discourses prominent in the Russian mediascape have had an effect on Kazakhstan's population.

However, it appears that Kazakhstan's politics of Eurasianism have challenged some of Russia's soft power. As highlighted by Patalakh (2018, 37), "while Russia is positioning itself as a strong opponent of LGBT rights domestically and abroad, Kazakhstan behaves far more neutrally." For example, in October 2014, Kazakhstan's representative in the UN Human Rights Council abstained from voting on a resolution to combat violence and discrimination based on sexual and gender identities, in contrast to Russia's vote against it (Patalakh 2018).

Buelow (2012) writes about how Kazakhstan's ambiguous position influences its queer citizens and cultural producers. Buelow (2012, 107) echoes a progressivist narrative within his own analysis: "[w]hile 'Europe' is portrayed as advanced, and 'Asia' as backward, Kazakhstan is often placed somewhere in the 'middle'." This ambiguity in Kazakhstan's position is evident in the space Kazakhstan tends to occupy within the Central Asian region. Kazakhstan is considered to be relatively "gay-friendly" in comparison to some neighbouring states. Indeed, in the media, Almaty, the former capital located in the south of Kazakhstan, has even been referred to as the "gay capital of Central Asia" (Dearden 2014).

Emigration and queer emigration from Kazakhstan and Russia

The hegemonic understanding of migration focuses on economic motivation as the primary reason people move abroad (Stark & Bloom 1985). According to the National Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the number of emigrants from Kazakhstan increases every year; over the past decade, approximately 366,000 people have emigrated. Given that many emigrants possess higher education and specialised skills, the regulation of migration is considered an "urgent issue" in Kazakhstan today (Aznabakiyeva & Beimisheva 2020, 264). Statistics on Russian emigration are unavailable, but reports indicate that increasing numbers have been leaving Russia since 2012.

Research on queer migration does not discount economic motivations; it does however demonstrate that factors related to sexuality and gender may play an equally important role in the decision to leave one's country of origin (Gorman-Murray 2009; Stella, Flynn & Gawlewicz 2018). Existing research indicates that the main motivations for people from post-Soviet countries to emigrate include, but are not limited to, economic reasons, the desire to live in a country with queer-affirmative legislation, escaping stigma, a sense of insecurity, and negative attitudes towards LGBTQI+ people within their country of origin (Mole 2019; Novitskaya 2022; Stella, Flynn & Gawlewicz 2018). At the time of writing, there are no statistics on queer emigration from Kazakhstan or Russia.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has triggered a surge of emigration from Russia. Whereas the West was previously perceived as one of the priority destinations for Russian immigrants, with the airspace of most Western countries now closed to Russian planes, Central Asian countries and the South Caucasus are now considered possible safe spaces (Salapaeva 2022). It is likely that the expanded "gay propaganda" law and the bill targeting gender-affirming healthcare have further exacerbated the trend of queer emigration from Russia.

Inner emigration

The term "inner emigration" has been interpreted differently in Soviet and European scholarship. In the Soviet context, it was often related to the intelligentsia, dissidents, and others who were pressured by the authorities yet continued living in the Soviet Union. Yurchak writes that "inner emigration" is a metaphor used to describe extreme examples of how Soviet people managed to lead a creative and imaginative life outside the literal meanings of Soviet authoritative discourse (Yurchak 2005). He suggests the term "*vnyenakhodimost*" (i.e., being *vnye* or outside) as a broader concept that includes both inner emigration and less extreme examples of such existence outside the authoritative discourse, where people are involved in activities within the Soviet system but ignore most of the authoritarian discourse (Yurchak 2005,

133). *Vnyenakhodimost* is the state of being inside and outside at the same time.

Elsewhere, the term "inner emigration" has been used to refer to writers, poets, and intellectuals who remained in Nazi Germany while distancing themselves from the totalitarian regime (Scholdt 1994). The term in itself raised significant contradictions around the distinction between complicity and resistance, expressed, for example, in post-war confrontations between inner emigrants and those writers who had been driven out of Germany into "real" exile (Brockmann 2003). Hannah Arendt (1983) approached the phenomenon of inner emigration by critically questioning inner emigrants' contemplative detachment from the realities of totalitarianism. What concerned Arendt was not the act of retreat itself, but the way in which one migrates from the world (Stonebridge 2016). Arendt warns that in the face of "seemingly unendurable reality," the temptation is to "ignore the world in favour of an imaginary world 'as it ought to be' or as it once upon a time had been" (Arendt 1983, 19).

In this article, we apply the term "inner emigration" to encapsulate the inner or psychological dissent from their country of origin of individuals not willing or able to leave their country.[1] Our conceptualisation of inner emigration is inspired by *vnyenakhodimost* in its emphasis on being neither "in" nor "out", highlighting the liminality of the position of the subject.

Emigration in the future: Where livable lives are possible

Thoughts and fantasies about emigration become a way to tolerate living at the limits of norms. Most of the participants had thoughts about emigration in one form or another, and these thoughts accompanied them throughout their lives. For example, after one participant sharply criticised the law on gay propaganda, she answered the interviewer's question about whether she thought about emigration: "I think about emigration all the time".

Another participant in her forties, who identifies as a lesbian and lives in Moscow, noted:

> I haven't thought about emigration yet, but I'm collecting information just in case. Because I don't know what will happen tomorrow. […] I like to travel around different countries, but as for leaving Russia forever, I have no such desire. My mother really wants us to leave, although she does not plan to do it herself. [...] I've only recently started to consider a situation where I will not just leave Russia but be a refugee when it becomes impossible for me [to live in this country].

The instability of the situation in Russia forces the participant to think about emigration. She has no desire to live elsewhere, but realises the time may come for her to leave. It is worth noting that the informant's mother wants her to emigrate; the participant did not clarify why (see next section).

Some participants expressed that their reason for wanting to flee was not just due to state policy and legislation but also to society itself. In their opinion, people are not ready to accept queer individuals and their rights in Kazakhstan and Russia. A participant from Moscow in his late twenties, who identifies as a gay man, optimistically noted that the authorities might change, but that people – including those close to him and their homophobic beliefs – would not:

> In an ideal country, even if you can't earn much, you'd still get support from people. [...] But here, the opposite is true and, therefore, it's not clear what we can do. Considering this is not the government or Putin [...], but this includes your parents. I can change Putin but I cannot change that my dad is my dad. […] That's why I'm thinking of leaving this country.

In Kazakhstan, where there is no "propaganda law," emigration is seen as a "Plan B" in case political and social changes affect the precarious position of queer citizens. In the narrative of the cisgender gay man in his early twenties from Astana, the future is uncertain as he fears societal changes:

> If it happens this way, nationalist-populists will come to power. They might start pushing this narrative of the "Kazakh man" and patriarchal society and all. Then I don't see myself here in Kazakhstan. I see myself here for now. [...] But sooner or later the country will change and nobody will care about human rights, especially the rights of gays. But the most important thing is in what direction the country will go afterwards [...] Things like the Kazakh "spirit", traditions, language – those things will become pivotal. Because this personality of a Kazakh that the country has created so far does not include [LGBTQI+ people]. [...] Because populism always presupposes an enemy, and history shows that gays, Jews, and I don't know… are always easy targets. Of course, I don't know if any of this will happen. Maybe it will all be fine or get better.

This narrative highlights the fears of further traditionalisation in Kazakhstani society, as well as wider changes in traditions and language. It also emphasises the perceived incompatibility of being both queer and Kazakh within this traditionalist discourse (Levitanus 2022b; Levitanus & Kislitsyna 2023). Those fears are not unfounded and are supported by existing literature that argues that retraditionalisation discourses in Kazakhstan have become tools for the collective targeting and shaming of "deviant" or non-heteronormative behaviour (Kudaibergenova 2019; Levitanus 2022b). In this passage, the participant is expressing the inevitability of the demise of queer rights in Kazakhstan, while simultaneously acknowledging uncertainty about such a trajectory this ambivalence echoes some of the ambiguity surrounding queer rights in Kazakhstan.

If a person plans to start a family and have children, these plans often become associated with plans to emigrate. That is, non-heterosexual people see going abroad as the only solution when it comes to starting a family. In many cases, the decision to emigrate stems from the lack of legal guarantees of security and the inability to legalise same-sex marriage and formalise same-sex parenthood. The participants discussed parenthood mostly hypothetically, but in their reflections, the birth of a child was directly connected to the idea of leaving their country of origin.

The inability to legalise relationships and parenthood causes not only legal inconveniences but also moral suffering. As one participant in her mid-twenties, who identifies as a lesbian and lives in Moscow, recounted:

> In the long term, I want to leave Russia. Although I don't have a partner right now, I have already realised that I want to start a family – in comfortable conditions, where I can represent the interests of my partner, visit her in the hospital, share all kinds of rights and obligations with her officially and with dignity, and not testify against her in court. All of this is impossible in contemporary Russia and may be for a very long time.

Emigration is a constant possibility, yet thinking about it creates uncertainty for queer people. The main reasons for emigration in this study echoed those identified in previous research, for example, the homophobic politics of the government and societal attitudes, the desire to get married and have children, and a sense of insecurity (Mole 2019; Novitskaya 2022; Stella, Flynn & Gawlewicz 2018). In writing about LGBTQI+ subjects, Butler (2004) analyses the ways in which norms can enable or restrict the way queer lives can be lived and imagined. Subjects who do not conform to the dominant norms become "unintelligible" (Butler 2004, 30) unless they adapt to those norms. Such individuals occupy precarious positions and become "differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler 2015, 33). Butler (2004) emphasises the importance of understanding how gender and sexual norms are shaped in everyday life by the material conditions of "livable lives." Participants in our studies can be described as precarious subjects actively seeking and imagining livable futures for themselves and their potential future families.

West constructed as an ideal space

Europe, and the West in general, were considered ideal emigration destinations by many of the participants. The West appeared in their narratives as developed, civilised, and progressive, while their homelands

were viewed as lagging behind. For example, one participant in his mid-forties, who identifies as gay and lives in Saint Petersburg, spoke about queer activists in Russia:

> It is very cool that there are people fighting for [LGBTQI+] rights. I understand that our country is a hundred years behind the civilised European Union.

This participant emphasised the immense development gap between Russia and Europe. In his eyes, the European Union seemed like a homogeneous political space. In participants' narratives, the West as a place of progress could be understood as a more abstract geographic category. For example, one participant in his twenties, who identifies as a gay man, compared his hometown with Saint Petersburg, where he now lives:

> Here [in Saint Petersburg] there's no hate, no blame. But the further into the outback you go, the stronger the Soviet stereotypes and standards. And the more European the city is, the freer and airier everything is.

The word "European" is sometimes used as a synonym for "tolerant" and "progressive" and as an antonym for "Soviet", "outdated", and "lagging behind", reproducing the progressivist narrative (Mizielinska & Kulpa 2011; Kondakov 2023).

In Kazakhstan, narratives of the West as an "ideal space" often emerged indirectly. For example, participants would remark "for you in the West it is different, but here…", or "I imagine this is unheard of for you people in Europe" when discussing the homophobia and transphobia they encountered in the workplace or other settings. A bisexual woman in her mid-thirties from Karaganda recounted:

> I don't have many hopes or illusions and I even lived in a family that was aware [of her sexuality]. I always knew that it could never be like it is in Europe… In our post-Soviet space, it's perceived as a very difficult thing.

Here, "Europe" is imagined to be antipodal to post-Soviet reality. Those passing remarks indicate a fantasy of the West as tolerant and void of discrimination (Suchland 2018).

In the narratives of queer people from Kazakhstan, the West was also imagined in a non-linear way. For example, even though some regions of Russia are north and west of Kazakhstan, Kazakhstani participants did not consider Russia as part of the West when referring to it. On the contrary, parts of Russia, such as Chechnya, are contrasted with Kazakhstan in terms of the political oppression of queer people (see Edenborg 2018). A participant in his early twenties, who identifies as a cisgender gay man and lives in Astana, described fearing that the situation in Kazakhstan might worsen and become more similar to that in the Chechen Republic. This narrative emerged in response to a question about personal experience of abuse or violence:

> Not personally, but you hear about stuff, people talk about it. I think sometimes people overstate the danger. But we all hear about what's going on in Chechnya. […] and Chechnya isn't that far away, and we're not so different from Chechens. Everything is possible. And if something starts, if gay pogroms begin, then activists will be targeted first.

Even though this participant does not have any personal experience of abuse, he is aware of the abuse that occurs in other post-Soviet countries. The proximity and similarity of Chechnya to Kazakhstan are emphasised, as is the precarity of visible queer citizens in Kazakhstan. None of the Kazakhstani participants mentioned Russia's "propaganda law," and the option of immigrating to Russia was not considered. The queer migration preferences of participants in this study contrasted with the general trend in migration in Kazakhstan prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, when Russia was generally considered an attractive destination (Zhunussova 2021) with approximately 72 percent of all Kazakhstani emigrants moving to Russia between 2014 and 2017 (Diener 2022). When discussing potential emigration, participants referred to Northern Europe and North America as primary options,

some considering Eastern Europe. This extract is a vivid illustration of how the dichotomies of West versus East and North versus South (Tlostanova 2012) are constructed. Imaginary borders between East and West are flexible, depending on different points of view and are not necessarily tied to geographic positions. Queer people in Kazakhstan do not see Russia as part of "progressive" Europe, while the Russian colonial view of Kazakhstan as a "backward" East prevails within the narratives of queer Russians in our studies.

It was not just queer people themselves who saw the West as the only suitable place for non-heterosexual and non-cisgender individuals; others in their lives often believed the same. Several participants from Kazakhstan recounted experiences of being "sent" to Europe. For example, an informant in his early twenties, who identifies as a homosexual man and lives in Astana, spoke about his experiences at university:

> Well, in my group [at university], there was a guy figuring out [his sexuality], which made us quite close. We were told by our mutual friends that people say we're together, that's "bad" and that we're "sick." They say it would be better for us to move to Europe or something.

While homophobic responses to being perceived as queer are not unusual for queer people, the suggestion to move to Europe is more specific. This suggestion can be understood in the context of a common discourse in Russia around "Gayropa" – a moniker for Europe that depicts it as a place where queer rights are affirmed, in contrast to "purely heterosexual" Russia (Healey 2001, 253), which actively promotes anti-queer propaganda (Suchland 2018). This is echoed by heterosexual citizens' views on queer culture in Kazakhstan. In Dall'Agnola's study, over 30 respondents viewed the "origins of the phenomenon of LGBT" (2020, 108) as coming from the West and only tolerated queer people as long as non-heterosexual practices were not displayed in public. The West, therefore, is seen as the place where queerness belongs. The "sending to Europe" narrative, however, takes on different meanings in different contexts. A participant in his early twenties, who identifies as a cisgen-

der gay man and lives in Astana, recounted a conversation he had had with his father not long after he came out to his family:

> My father told me once that it would be best for me and for the rest of the family if I went to live abroad. He said I could do anything I wanted there: marry or have kids. His words were "it would be better for you and for us; we wouldn't need to explain anything to anyone."
>
> I knew it came out of concern for me. […] They told me on one occasion, "we know what you want to achieve in your life, and we're absolutely sure it will happen, but not here in Kazakhstan."

The participant's father was expressing fears for his son's safety while also suggesting that leaving would be a better solution for him; his gay son's emigration would preserve the family's honour and ensure his safety. Indeed, these fears for safety are not unfounded, according to existing reports (Human Rights Watch 2015; Alma-TQ 2021). Consequently, the West becomes not only a place where queerness is seen as acceptable but also a safe space for parents to imagine their queer children.

"I love my country even if it does not love me back"

Participants emphasised that while they often think about emigration, there are many factors limiting their choice to leave or remain. The idealised West could turn out to be too expensive for some. According to a participant in his mid-forties, who identifies as a gay man and lives in Saint Petersburg:

> Citizenship in the European Union, with a residency permit and property, is very expensive, and I don't have that much money. [...] Integrating into another society and using a foreign language is very difficult. [...] Despite all the terrible aspects of Russia, I feel free and easy here. I don't feel any aggression; I do what I want, I live how I want, I earn good money. And in principle, if I move, I'll live less well there.

Downward social mobility and deskilling are common concerns among migrants moving from the East to the West, including queer people (Stella, Flynn & Gawlewicz 2018). Emigration to Europe could lower a person's social status and financial situation. Leaving is easier for those who have nothing to lose in their homeland or who expect to improve their financial situation after emigration; those with a stable income may not risk material deprivation in search of a more tolerant society or queer-affirmative legislation. A single narrative can combine different reasons for staying, both pragmatic and ideological. An example of such a narrative comes from a participant in her mid-forties who identifies as a lesbian and lives in Moscow:

> I think we [she and her partner] could probably do it. But, on the other hand, firstly, I have a mother [who needs care]. Secondly, we are Russian speakers. It is how we live and how we work. [Her partner] has her own business, which she can only run in Russia. Come on, if in the end we will leave, who will remain?

Although this participant constantly thinks about emigration, there are practical issues holding her back. The comment about who will remain is ambiguous. It could refer to the practical need to stay with her mother and maintain her partner's job, but it could also be interpreted as signalling a sense of duty to her homeland.

Many participants in our studies expressed ambivalent feelings about emigration. On the one hand, they talked about the difficulties that queer people face in Kazakhstan and Russia, while on the other, they were firm about not wanting to leave their country. Some expressed very strong feelings. For example, according to a lesbian woman in her early twenties who lives in Saint Petersburg:

> When I think about emigration, anger boils inside me because I don't want to leave. I'm forced to do it and I don't like being forced. I haven't found a solution yet and I'm trying to live in the here and now, doing the best I can.

There is often a sense of resistance to the material conditions: feeling pressured to leave but not wanting to go. For example, a participant in his early thirties, who identifies as a transgender man and lives in Almaty, spoke about the manifold difficulties that transgender people in Kazakhstan encounter when trying to transition, and how some of them, despite that, also express a desire to stay:

> This is still a village here. Yes, we have some options for [medical] procedures here, but they are mostly inaccessible and very expensive. There is a monopoly and a [medical] commission only in Almaty. This is tricky for people from other regions who need to travel here. Almost no one performs surgeries here, so basically the surgeries that need approval from the commission [for juridical recognition] are not performed in Kazakhstan. They can use you as a guinea pig and test things on you. But at the same time, the government requires it [surgery]. And of course, before transitioning, the scariest question is where can I have it [the surgery] done? But I like living here in Kazakhstan. I think it's possible to change everything. The most important thing is to not be silent about your own needs.

One of the primary barriers to transgender people exercising their gender identity rights is the complexity of the legal gender recognition procedure (Alma-TQ_2021). The current procedure requires individuals to undergo hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgery to obtain a legally recognised gender identity, which is possible only if the diagnosis of "transsexualism" is made following inpatient observation in a psychiatric hospital (Alma-TQ_2021). Almaty is the only location where the medical commission is held. Yet, despite sex reassignment surgery being one of the conditions for receiving documentation, surgery is not accessible to many transgender people in Kazakhstan, who must often travel abroad to have surgery (Levitanus 2020). Despite these difficulties, this participant remains hopeful, believing in the possibility of change in Kazakhstan.

For some participants, "getting out" is seen as running away – as

weakness and failure in the fight against an authoritarian regime. For example, a participant from Saint Petersburg in her early thirties who identifies as a lesbian reflects on the idea of fleeing:

> I don't want to leave Russia. I want to live here all my life, but when people run, they run "from" not "towards." That's how it is in my case. There is "emigration towards" when a person wants to live in a country for some reason. In my case, it may be a forced escape "from".

The theme of resistance to being forced to leave or escape is evident in this passage. Another participant, from Astana, who is in her late twenties and identifies as bisexual, holds no illusions about emigration and is not planning to leave:

> I have thoughts, especially when something happens and I think: "Oh God, I'm so sick of this society, I want to leave." But on the other hand, I know that I love my country even if it does not love me back. My family is here and I'm close to them. [...] Even if I do go [...], I think I'd return. Of course, I don't know the future, but I have no desire to leave. Besides, there won't be a place where I'll be completely safe, right? Even in Canada or somewhere else, all of it is still there.

Staying is, therefore, an agentic choice of the participants who see leaving as a last resort. The narrative of "not running from" and the desire to stay also reflects a more nuanced view of the West, which is no longer seen as a "queer heaven."

Effects of inner emigration

In this article, we interpret inner emigration as a form of defence, that makes the often precarious reality that queer people in Russia and Kazakhstan face more tolerable. The impossibility of realising one's plans, dreams and desires often leads to a sense of unlived life, as highlighted in the narrative of a gay man in his thirties from Moscow:

> It pains me to know that, at least in this country [Russia], I will never have a husband and child. And all this pain impacts my life. My work. My creativity. Even my rest. In the moments when I can forget about it, I really live.

While this quote does not explicitly mention emigration, it illustrates inner emigration by highlighting the participant's inability to live a full life in Russia. He talks about the constant pain that accompanies his daily life. This pain is partly caused by the impossibility of realising his dreams of a husband and a child. Such a dream can be seen as an embodiment of the normative family model. The only time life feels more bearable for him is when he disconnects from the painful "reality" of his life in Moscow, thus illustrating the workings of inner emigration. Russia is described here, and in many other narratives, as a place where love and happiness are not available to queer people (see Levitanus & Kislitsyna 2023). For many, emigration is always on the horizon as an ongoing possibility; however, living in anticipation of it has various effects, as exemplified by the narrative of Gulzada, a lesbian woman in her mid-forties, interviewed in Almaty:

> I was introduced to some women in Almaty. But my contact with this circle didn't work out. [...] They wanted to get rich, earn money quickly, and get out [*svalit' kuda-to*]. My life, on the other hand, was here. [...] Only later did I meet people who actually wanted to be here, who wouldn't look "out there," "Oh, Spain!" or something. You see, when a person is directed elsewhere, they feel far away. When you live in the here and now, it's different. [...] I don't feel I connect with those people who try to find money then go somewhere far away to look for happiness. Somewhere out there, where everything is set up for them. I like people who are working here, building their relationships here. Their life is actually here.

While Gulzada is open about her sexuality, she recounts her interactions with people who live with the prospect of "get[ting] out" by sav-

ing money to start a life elsewhere. This extract connects to Yurchak's (2005) notion of "*vnyenakhodimost*" in that while the women in Almaty described by Gulzada live in their country of origin, they are neither "here" nor "there," mirroring *vnyenakhodimost*, as they look to the near or distant future to "start" their lives. There can be a sense of frustration and contempt for those who leave, which relates to the sentiment of resistance expressed by other participants from both Russia and Kazakhstan, such as is evident in the question "who will remain here?"

Conclusion

The West, in the narratives of participants in our studies, is both an "ideal" space and a real solution for those who are in a relatively precarious position. Idealisation is connected to reality in that moving, for example, would allow participants some rights and freedoms; however, it does not cease being a fantasy. The West is often imagined as a space of unquestionable tolerance and freedom, free of homophobia. Within the narratives of queer people, Kazakhstan and Russia are often portrayed as "lagging behind the West" (Buelow 2012, 115); hence, they are reproducing the progressivist narrative. Spatially, the West is not necessarily tied to a geographical location, which is evident in the narratives of queer people from Kazakhstan, who do not consider Russia a potential destination but often look towards other countries. The logic of the progressivist narrative has been further questioned since the onset of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. On the one hand, with further crackdowns on LGBTQI+ people following the invasion, the very idea that queer rights in Russia are on a developmental trajectory towards Europe has been eroded. On the other hand, the trajectories of queer migration from Russia have changed with mobility restrictions imposed on Russian citizens. While Central Asian countries and the South Caucasus were previously perceived as "less developed" and not considered potential destinations for emigration, these regions now seem to be viewed as comparatively safe for Russian LGBTQI+ people fleeing the regime.

Not all respondents want to leave their countries of origin, and some condemn those who "run away." Many hope to see a change in their

home countries that would make queer people's lives more "livable" (Butler 2004). While precarity characterises the lives of all queer participants in our studies, some are experiencing more limitations in their lives than others (for example, couples who are planning to have children or individuals who are seeking to transition). Our findings show that the intersection of class, social position, and access to resources plays a role in one's image of the West and decisions about emigration. Those who occupy relatively privileged positions are less likely to idealise the West, having a more nuanced perspective on the future and on emigration. Our findings demonstrate that material conditions, such as family responsibility, jobs, and language, prevent queer people from leaving their homeland. Even if they aspire to leave one day, the plan remains hypothetical.

Another key narrative emerging "against emigration" is the participants' sense of duty and responsibility to remain and make a difference in their countries of origin. A sense of belonging to one's country and the local community can be a strong barrier against emigration. Conversely, a feeling of helplessness, an inability to change situations, and awareness of one's precarious position drive emigration. In the absence of material resources, the only option for living a "livable life" is inner emigration. Alternatively, inner emigration occurs when someone has already decided to leave, yet is unable to realise their plan. In this situation, they are living neither "in" nor "out," echoing Yurchak's (2005) "*vnyenakhodimost*." This concept is particularly relevant now, as LGBTQI+ Russians cope with the increasingly volatile conditions following Russia's ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine. However, further studies are needed to understand the dynamics of queer emigration and the impact of these events on queer lives in Russia and Central Asia.

A common theme of being "on the run" emerges in both studies. Different types of emigration are discussed: actual exile, contemplative or hypothetical emigration "in the future," and inner emigration. It is useful here to return to Arendt's reflections on emigration and inner emigration:

> Flight from the world in dark times of impotence can always be justified as long as reality is not ignored but is constantly acknowledged as the thing that must be escaped. [...] They must remember that they are constantly on the run, and that the world's reality is expressed by their escape. Thus, too, the true force of escapism springs from persecution, and the personal strength of the fugitives increases as the persecution and danger increase. (Arendt 1983, 22)

For Arendt, the essence of reality is expressed in the effort to escape from it, transforming this "escapism" into an act of defiance or resistance. Returning to the context of Kazakhstan and Russia, it is tempting to focus solely on the act of escape without engaging with the underlying reality that necessitates it. This paper argues that both emigration and inner emigration should be viewed as more than merely "escapism" and be recognised as agentic choices employed by queer individuals living under precarious conditions to ensure their survival. As highlighted above, the degree of precarity often dictates whether emigration is a choice, an option, or a necessity.

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NOTES

1. One participant, Gulzada, chose to opt out of anonymisation.
2. Note the difference between "inner" and "internal" emigration, the latter denoting the movement of individuals within a country's borders. Here, we only discuss the phenomenon of inner emigration.