

Statement prepared by the supervisor of Ramil Zamanov relating to their studies and dissertation entitled “*Queer in Azerbaijan: State Violence and Practices of Resistance*” submitted in 2024 at Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, Institute of Ethnology, Central European and Balkan Studies, Charles University

I. Overall evaluation of PhD studies

Supervising team: Zamanov organised Sabine Strasser’s appointment as their Ph.D. supervisor at Charles University in Prague even though she is professor in social anthropology at the University of Bern, Switzerland. Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer, assistant professor in gender studies, Faculty of Humanities, Charles University accepted to join the team as co-supervisor. Ramil and the co-supervisors conducted five (four to five hours-long) online meetings to discuss first, the literature on sexualities, nationalisms and war to prepare the candidate for the fieldwork and later to discuss the empirical material and different chapter drafts of the Ph.D. thesis in detail as well as plans and drafts for conferences, fellowships and publications. Ramil Zamanov started their Ph.D. Program at Charles University in October 2020 and finalized their Ph.D. thesis in less than four years and submitted it in June 2024.

Fieldwork: Zamanov conducted altogether 10 months of Ph.D. fieldwork with queer activists and NGOs in Baku, Azerbaijan (May-June 2021, September 2021-February 2022 and June-July 2022). During the pandemic in 2021 they undertook 3 months of online fieldwork with a youth group of LGBTQI+ activists located in Azerbaijan.

Exchange with Bern: Ramil benefitted from the close collaboration between Bern and Prague and thus across the universities and spent twice seven months as an Exchange Ph.D. student at the Institute of Social Anthropology (now: Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies) at the University of Bern where they were integrated in Strasser’s team. During their first visit (between September 2022 to March 2023), Zamanov completed the first chapter of the thesis on ‘Military, LGBTQI+ and State Violence in Azerbaijan’ and later submitted this chapter to a volume edited by Gabunia/Myrntinen and published and sponsored by the Heinrich Böll-Stiftung. Ramil Zamanov further participated in the workshop of the Swiss Graduate Program in Anthropology in September 2022 ‘Global mobility injustice. Affects and temporalities of deterrence, detention and deportation’, in which he presented a paper titled ‘Exploring Risks and Vulnerabilities: Gender and Power Relations in Field Research’ (organised by Sabine Strasser, Gerhild Perl and Moslem Ghomashlouyan). In 2023 Zamanov co-organised the workshop ‘Dis/Connectivities: Anthropological Perspectives in the South Caucasus’ at the University of Bern, Switzerland (organising team: Sabine Strasser, Dr. Zeynep Sariaslan, Ramil Zamanov, Manon-Julie Borel). Finally, during the second visit in Bern between March and September 2024, Zamanov worked on their Ph.D. dissertation to finalise the chapters and submit the thesis by June 2024.

Cooperation in Prague: Ramil participated in four Ph.D./advanced MA colloquia organised by Lorenz-Meyer and held at the Faculty of Humanities in the summer semester of 2022 and 2023 for which they submitted conference paper and chapter drafts. They received extensive comments by their peers. Lorenz-Meyer provided important input on the structure of the thesis

and detailed comments on all thesis chapters as well as introduction and conclusion that we in part jointly discussed with Sabine Strasser.

Brown University and London School of Economics (LSE): In 2023 Ramil Zamanov was a visiting research fellow at the Centre for Middle East Studies (CMES) at Brown University under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Nadjé Al-Ali (April-May 2023). Zamanov completed a chapter of their dissertation at CMES and participated in a roundtable ‘Emerging Practices in Middle East Studies’ organized by MESGSA at Brown University, Rhode Island, USA, 20 April 2023. Furthermore, Zamanov was accepted (after a competitive selection procedure) as visiting research fellow at the LSE under the supervision of Dr. Aiko Holkiviki (September-December 2023). At the LSE Zamanov completed their last two chapters drafts and received extensive feedback from Dr. Holkiviki, Dr. Henry and other members of LSE Gender cohort. Zamanov also attended the workshops of the ‘Participatory Research Series’ at the LSE.

Further conferences and workshops: Zamanov attended the International Studies Association (ISA) 2024 Annual Convention in San Francisco, USA (3-6 April 2024) presenting a paper on ‘Queer Nationalism in Azerbaijan after the second NK War’. Zamanov also co-organised (with Dr. Silvia Posocco) a workshop ‘Challenges of Doing Queer-Feminist Ethnography’ 26-28 June 2024 in Saas-Fee, Switzerland which was funded by the Swiss Graduate Program in Anthropology. Finally, in July 2024, Zamanov attended the European Association of Social Anthropologists’ (EASA) biannual conference in Barcelona presenting on ‘Everyday homo/queerphobia: violence and fears in Azerbaijan’.

Academic Employment/Lecturing: Between October 2021 and September 2023 Ramil was Lecturer at the Institute of Ethnology at Charles University (teaching courses for BA and MA students on ‘Gender and sexuality in the context of post-Soviet context’; ‘Gender, peace and conflict’; ‘Gender in the South Caucasus’; and ‘Introduction to Masculinity Studies’). Between October 2022 and July 2023, he was a Guest Lecturer and Expert at the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam in the Social Work programme (teaching in the series of ‘Gender in the Caucasus’ and leading the gender labs on masculinity and LGBTQI+ studies).

Publications during their Ph.D. studies: Zamanov published two book chapters, one ‘Militarised Masculinities: Analysis of Hegemonic Azerbaijani Masculinities During the II Nagorno Karabakh War’ in the edited volume *Memory in Central Europe and Eastern Europe* (edited by A. Markova and M. Kuznetcova 2023) and ‘Military, LGBTQI+, and State Violence in Azerbaijan in the volume *Masculinities in the South Caucasus* (edited by Davit Gabunia , Henry Myrntinen , Lasha Kavtaradze , Durna Safarova and Armen Ohanyan, 2024). They also published an article titled ‘Challenges in gender studies in Azerbaijan’ in *IN:SIGHTS (International Student Journal of Anthropology, 2022)*. Furthermore, they wrote a book review, several blog posts, and six online media contributions posted on chaikana.media, oc-media.org and gwi-boell.de.

List of Publications:

Zamanov, Ramil. (2024) ‘Military, LGBTQI+ and State Violence in Azerbaijan’. In Davit Gabunia , Henry Myrntinen , Lasha Kavtaradze , Durna Safarova and Armen Ohanyan (Eds.), *Masculinities in the South Caucasus: Forms, Hierarchies and Challenges*, Tbilisi: Heinrich Böll Stiftung

Zamanov, Ramil. (2023) ‘Militarised Masculinities: Analysis of Hegemonic Azerbaijani Masculinities

During the II Nagorno Karabakh War'. In Alena Marková & Mariia Kuznetcova (Eds.), *Memory of Central and Eastern Europe Past Traumas, Present Challenges, Future Horizons*. Prague: Karolinum Press.

Zamanov, Ramil. (2022) 'Challenges of Gender Studies in Azerbaijan'. In *IN:SIGHTS: International Student Journal of Anthropology*, 184–91. Strasbourg: Association d'Ethnologie.

Reviews, Newspapers, Blogs, Video materials:

Zamanov, Ramil. (2022). Book review: 'Anthropological Data in the Digital Age'. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 45.

Zamanov, Ramil. (2022). 'Understanding Intersectionality through LGBTQIA+/Queer Narratives in

Azerbaijan'. Heinrich Böll Stiftung South Caucasus. [link](#)⁸

Zamanov, Ramil. (2022). 'No safe space for queers'. ChaiKhana Media. [link](#) Zamanov, Ramil. (2022). 'The importance of masculinity studies' (in Azerbaijani with English subtitles). Akinchi. [Link](#)

Zamanov, Ramil. (2021). 'Feminism in the South Caucasus cannot succeed without queer rights'. OC Media. [Link](#)

Zamanov, Ramil. (2021). 'The other, even at home'. ChaiKhana Media. [link](#)

Zamanov, Ramil. (2021). 'LGBTQI+/Queer Experiences in the Context of Nagorno- Karabakh Conflict'. Feminist Peace Collective. [link](#)

Zamanov, Ramil. (2020). 'War from a distance'. ChaiKhana Media. [link](#)

Grants and Awards: Throughout the four years, Zamanov was awarded 13 grants, including one by the Charles University Grant Agency (GA UK) on 'Queer Masculinities in Azerbaijan' (GA UK 286521 in 2021; GA UK 2122, in 2022, 2023 and 2024); The Mobility Fund, of Charles University (CU) for a fellowship [February-September 2024] at University of Bern and for the completion of fieldwork; a travel award from the International Studies Association in 2023 and the 'Dean's Scholarship of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University for Research and Development Activities' in 2023.

Ramil Zamanov is an extremely gifted organizer and managed not only to locate grants and support for his different projects; they also expanded their academic networks continuously and won competitive fellowships at Brown University and the LSE. In addition to the professional conferences (ISA, EASA) and workshops already mentioned, they presented and participated in international roundtables (German Association of Social and Cultural Anthropology), online conferences (Stellenbosch, South Africa), the European Feminist Research Conference and at the Invisible Film Festival in Baku. They were invited to three talks, two at the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam and one at the Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy in Berlin.

List of International Conferences and Workshops (since 2020)

- 2024:

-Presenter at the 'The International Studies Association (ISA) 2024 Annual Convention' – San Francisco, USA, 3-6 April 2024 (Queer Nationalism in Azerbaijan after the second NK War)

-Presenter at the '18th EASA Biennial Conference EASA2024: Doing and Undoing with Anthropology' – Barcelona, Spain 23-26 July 2024 (Everyday homo/queerphobia: violence and fears in Azerbaijan)

- 2023:

-Attendee at the 'Abundance: Queer Worldings in Anthropology' – Berlin, Germany 8-9 March 2023

-Panellist at the 'Emerging Practices in Middle East Studies' organized by MESGSA at Brown University, Rhode Island, USA 20 April, 2023

-Attendee at the '12. Gender Studies Association Annual Conference' – Leipzig/Halle, Germany 15-17 June 2023

-Presenter at the 'Gender, Work, and Organisation Conference' – Stellenbosch, South Africa 28 June 2023 [online] (Military, LGBTQI+ and State Violence in Azerbaijan)

-Panellist at the 'Debating the Gender "Backlash": Sexual Politics, Anthropological Contestations (Roundtable)' part of 'Contested Knowledge: Perspectives in Social and Cultural Anthropology' Conference organised by German Anthropological Association – Munich, Germany 25-28 July 2023 (Challenges of Gender Studies in Azerbaijan)

- 2022:

-Presenter at the 'Exploring Risks and Vulnerabilities: Gender and Power Relations in Field Research' organised by the Swiss Graduate Program in Anthropology – Bevaix, Switzerland 12-13 December 2022

-Attendee at the 'Global mobility injustice: affects and temporalities of deterrence, detention and deportation' organised by the Swiss Graduate Program in Anthropology – Murren, Switzerland, 28-30 September 2022

-Attendee at the 'The 4th Eastern Partnership Youth Conference – Youth for Revitalisation of Democracy' – Prague, Czechia 11-12 July 2022

-Presenter at the '11th European Feminist Research Conference' – strand 10 (Citizenship, Nationalism(s) and Racism(s) in Milano, Italy 15-18 June (Queer Nationalism in Azerbaijan)

- 2021

-Presenter at 'Memory of Central and Eastern Europe: past traumas, present challenges, future horizons' in Prague, Czech Republic 10-12 June (Militarised Masculinities: Analysis of Hegemonic Azerbaijani Masculinities During the II Nagorno Karabakh War)

-Lecturer and presenter of 'Queer and marginalized masculinities in Azerbaijan' as a part of 'The Invisible Film Festival' in Baku, Azerbaijan, 6 February

Invited talks:

Guest lecturer/presenter on 'Queer Nationalism in Azerbaijan' at the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam – Potsdam, Germany 27 January 2023

Panellist at the 'Hegemonic Masculinities in Russia and The South Caucasus and Its Impact on The Region' organized by the University of Applied Sciences Potsdam – Potsdam, Germany 19 May 2023

Presenter at the 'Anti-Feminism and anti-democratic developments' workshop organized by The Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy – Berlin, Germany, 30 August 2023

Organised workshops:

- ‘Dis/Connectivities: Anthropological Perspectives in the South Caucasus’, 21- 23 September 2023, The University of Bern, Switzerland [organizational team: Prof. Sabine Strasser, Dr. Zeynep Sariaslan, Ramil Zamanov, Manon-JulieBorel]
- ‘Challenges of Doing Queer-Feminist Ethnography’, 27-29 June 2024, Basel, Switzerland; funded by the Swiss Graduate Program in Anthropology [organizational team: Dr. Silvia Posocco and Ramil Zamanov]
- Presenter at the ‘Exploring Risks and Vulnerabilities: Gender and Power Relations in Field Research’ organised by the Swiss Graduate Program in Anthropology – Bevaix, Switzerland 12-13 December 2022
- Attendee at the ‘Global mobility injustice: affects and temporalities of deterrence, detention and deportation’ organised by the Swiss Graduate Program in Anthropology – Murren, Switzerland , 28-30 September 2022
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II. Overall evaluation of the dissertation

Ramil Zamanov explored everyday life and activism among queer people (locally called *qiy* or *petux*) in Azerbaijan delving into LGBTQI+ people’s complex relations with and responses to an authoritarian and oil-rich state. This study is outstanding as it is based on novel ethnographic fieldwork for which Zamanov spent altogether about ten months in a largely welcoming social environment in the capital of Baku. Three repeat stays in Baku allowed them to foster contacts and relations, volunteer and observe day-day activities, join online and face-to-face discussions, organize and co-produce events and enjoy leisure time activities of queer people. Simultaneously, the LGBTQI+ community in the city of Baku was situated in a hostile national arena, a state apparatus combatting all kinds of social and particularly sexual deviance in manifold ways. Ramil Zamanov explored the lives of people under threat and experienced death, violence and exclusion but also shared resistance, celebration and joy. Zamanov’s aim was to analyze how their research participants’ queer lives are exposed to state violence and what kind of practices of resistance they develop in navigating multiple hostile terrains. Looking at what and where ‘the’ state is (see also Y. Navaro-Yashin) within and across different situations from this marginalized everyday allows to unearth the complexity and ambiguity not only of LGBTQI+ lives but also of institutions such as the military, police and family. This study was conducted in a country known for its wealth, corruption and inequality, and particularly for a strict reproduction of hegemonic masculinity as well as its protracted territorial conflicts with neighboring Armenia. The wars around Nagorno Karabakh and Armenia continued throughout the ethnographic fieldwork in Baku.

Conceptually, Zamanov focuses on state violence (R. Maynard) and nationalism (M. Billig) from a queer perspective. Here they develop the concept of “homo-nationalist attempts” (inspired by J. Puar’s homonationalism) to explain state strategies that exploit queer activists for military purposes and the “cruel optimism” (L. Berlant) of hoped-for recognition to simultaneously show how some queer people accept military service to achieve a better life and recognition. Methodologically, Zamanov employed Grounded Theory and immersed themselves in an intersectional study focusing on gender, sexualities, class, ethnic and religious differences and boundary drawings. Next to participant observation, Ramil conducted semistructured and informal interviews. Zamanov chose an “I will do what I can” approach during extremely strenuous fieldwork, including personal experience of homophobic violence, which allowed them to get access to a variety of organizations and individual activists to understand practices and share experiences of queer people exposed to authoritarian state practices.

The dissertation consists of an introduction (including the theoretical frame of state violence and gender (non)normativity, methodology and ethical considerations) and five thematic chapters. The first chapter provides an insight into the historical and legal background of this study, the second examines queer people's perceptions of homophobia in state institutions and state violence (primarily represented by the police), the third investigates state violence and the state institutions’ construction of “mental illness” in the military, the fourth chapter discusses nationalism, war and queer people’s participation. The application of the Puar-inspired concept of “homo-national attempts” in Azerbaijani war rhetoric is interesting and well developed and Berlant’s “cruel optimism” seems well suited to show how some queer people seek greater recognition by adapting to nationalism. Finally, the fifth chapter sheds light on the differences and tensions among different groups of queer activists and shows how the state acts to weaken and divide the unwanted queer community. This thesis and its five chapters shed light on state violence and nationalism in post-Soviet contexts from the nuanced perspectives of the queer community and contributes to queer theory through theses situated case examples. The conclusion summarizes the chapters convincingly and thus shows the reader again how and in which way this thesis contributes to a newly emerging ethnographic field (queer lives in postSoviet contexts) driven by a theoretical debate (on the meaning of state violence in queer studies). In my view, the committed attempt to make homonationalism fruitful for this context is not entirely convincing because the empirical basis for this is very limited and queer victims of war seem to be rather part of cruel optimism than of a successful state practice to exploit ‘gay friendliness’. But this can be discussed further during the defense (see question 3).

Zamanov came to Social Anthropology from Political Science (BA) and particularly Gender Studies (MA) where they learned critical thinking, developing research questions and conceptualizing research interests as well as conducting empirical research in worn-torn societies. Zamanov was utmost familiar with the city of Baku where they had grown up and which they had left for safety reasons only a couple of years earlier. On the other hand, the researcher had only little experience in anthropological research techniques and was a newcomer to ethnographic fieldwork. It was amazing to see how Zamanov worked hard to catch up with colleagues at this level and developed their skills in observing, participating and interviewing. The most difficult part was to develop the necessary distance and reflexivity for a study that focused on questions that made them simultaneously an insider (born and raised in

Baku and vulnerable as a visibly queer person) and an outsider (living and studying in Prague, seen as privileged by many research participants). Yet, distance after the fieldwork is as crucial as closeness and trust during the fieldwork to evaluate particular situations, practices and experiences critically. Sometimes, Zamanov became too much involved and explain their own feelings and sympathies with their participants instead of representing their field and their interlocutors' positions more critically. Of course, researchers today are closely related with their field and 'engaged ethnography' is common. Yet, in an ethnography the differences between the researcher's own opinion and the interlocutors' experiences and thoughts must be made clear.

Doing ethnography in Azerbaijan is not an easy task but doing ethnography on sexually minoritized groups and queer people in Azerbaijan is exceptional and in parts challenging and even dangerous. It is only due to their own positionality and closeness to the field that Ramil Zamanov could establish the relationships necessary to conduct this research at all and to share the everyday life with diverse small organizations and most of the activists in the city. Zamanov shows us how queer people in Azerbaijan organize, how they respond to nationalism and militarism and how they develop tactics when navigating their hostile terrain.

During the writing up period, Zamanov and the supervising team had several extensive discussions about re-considering research questions, analyzing and presenting the material, ethical challenges and finally finding and developing the author's own voice in the international field of social anthropology and queer studies. The Ph.D. candidate also got feedback in international contexts of fellowships, workshops, and colloquia. The interdisciplinary approach between queer and gender studies and social anthropology with an extended period of fieldwork allowed an extremely fruitful frame for the research and deep insights into the complexity of everyday experiences of violent homophobic practices as much as of joyful representations of alternative lives in Baku. Above all it provides an ethnography that deepens the understanding of post-Soviet contexts and queer lives.

III. Comments relating to the dissertation [if any]

The strength of this thesis is Zamanov's access to a field that is still underexplored. LGBTQI+ representation and activism in Muslim and non-European contexts do need further investigation from "within" to further diversify gender and queer studies and anthropology. Zamanov aims to link all chapters by claiming a contribution to 'post-Soviet nationalism' through a queer lens, yet the contribution of the thesis to scientific debates should be carved out in more detail in the conclusion. What is the banality of nationalism that Billig's notion helps to unpack and in what ways does Puar's homonationalism help us understand queer lives and how do these concepts contribute to understand Azerbaijan's state violence? Both concepts remain rather vague in the conclusion. Maybe Zamanov is also exaggerating the exceptionalism of Baku since we have similar studies among LGBTQI+ in Turkey, Hungary, and Russia also conducted under authoritarian and queerphobic regimes.

Finally, I want to underline that Zamanov looks at "state violence" through the eyes of people identifying as queer and does not much examine how state practices "*control and delegitimise queer lives*" (236). Here it is important to differentiate between a study that has access to state

institutions and street level bureaucrats and one that examines the state through the experiences and perceptions (i.e. through the looking glass) of *qiy* or *petux*. This differentiation should be made clear in the publication.

IV. Any questions for the defence

1. What exactly do you mean by “queer ethnography”, except the fact that queer people explore queer contexts. Does it change the methodology and how does it shape the methods applied or the ethical considerations? Is this a political or a methodological claim or mainly an issue of identity formation?
2. State violence, banal nationalism, cruel optimism and homo-national attempts: can you explain these concepts and, since they are the key concepts of your thesis, how precisely they are contributing to an understanding of queer lives in Azerbaijan? How could you strengthen your argument by rethinking their interplay?
3. Finally, I find the reflections on Puar’s concept of homo-nationalism as well as the outline of its critique in Eastern Europe promising. And yet, the empirical evidence for the Puar-inspired concept of “homo-national attempts” seems a bit thin and conceptually obscure. Are there other examples than the martyrs of the NK war that could confirm the complex conceptual suggestion in chapter 4? Why do you think the import of this concept to the post-Soviet context is rewarding?

V. Conclusion

Overall, this ethnography on queer lives in Baku as well as on anthropological debates in the field of the state, violence and nationalism through queer perspectives is a relevant contribution to queer studies and the anthropology of the state. It provides interesting conceptual attempts, original ethnographic evidence and creative theoretical analysis of queer lives in Azerbaijan.

We provisionally classify the submitted dissertation as *passed*.

Bern, 20 August 2024
Prof. Sabine Strasser



Prague, 3 September 2024
Dr. Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer