

## **External Examiner's Report on the Dissertation of Ramil Zamanov**

### ***“Queer in Azerbaijan: State Violence and Practices of Resistance”***

**Submitted in 2024 at the Faculty of Arts Institute of Ethnology and Central European and Balkan Studies at Charles University**

#### **External examiner:**

*Dr. Maryna Shevtsova, Senior Research Fellow, KU Leuven, Belgium*

#### **I. Brief summary of the dissertation**

The dissertation offers a comprehensive examination of the everyday lives, struggles, and forms of resistance among queer individuals and communities in Azerbaijan. It delves deeply into the complex interactions between queer people and state institutions within the context of a homophobic and authoritarian regime. The work focuses particularly on the encounters queer individuals have with various arms of the state, such as the police, military, and healthcare institutions, and the ways in which these institutions perpetuate and enforce state violence and discrimination. To articulate its central argument, the dissertation situates the experiences of the Azerbaijani queer population within a broader historical, cultural, and geopolitical framework, revealing how state violence and oppressive techniques are not isolated incidents but are instead part of a larger systemic practice. The research employs an intersectional approach to explore how multiple axes of identity and social stratification — including class, ethnicity, and economic status — intersect to shape the specific vulnerabilities and resistances of queer individuals in Azerbaijan.

#### **II. Brief overall evaluation of the dissertation**

This dissertation is a much needed contribution to the study of queer lives, particularly within the context of the South Caucasus, offering a rich tapestry of ethnographic data that brings to life the everyday realities of queer individuals and communities in Azerbaijan. The author's strong engagement with existing literature, both locally and internationally, reflects a deep commitment to advancing scholarly conversations beyond the confines of the Global North. By critically engaging with Western theories, such as homonationalism — and offering a locally grounded alternatives to them, the dissertation challenges and expands these frameworks, demonstrating their limitations and the need for more nuanced approaches to understanding state homo-, bi- and transphobic violence in non-Western contexts. The research is further strengthened by its intersectional approach, addressing the ways in which multiple identities and socio-economic factors shape the experiences of queer people, thereby deepening our understanding of how state violence is enacted and resisted. Through its well-developed methodology and theoretical rigor, the dissertation makes a solid addition to the fields of queer studies, anthropology, and global human rights, offering new insights that are vital for scholars, activists, and policymakers alike.

#### **III. Detailed evaluation of the dissertation and its individual aspects**

##### *1. Structure of the argument*

The dissertation is clearly structured and easy to follow. The author builds a compelling case, gradually introducing the reader to key concepts, unpacking the theories applied, and meticulously justifying the methodological and theoretical choices made. The clear objectives of the dissertation are set from the outset: to unravel the complexity of state-sponsored violence against queer people in Azerbaijan<sup>1</sup> by examining their struggles and experiences with various state institutions, such as the government, police, military service, and the state-sponsored NGO sector (specifically, one such NGO). The dissertation offers a thorough and nuanced discussion of each of these institutions, explaining their functions in a way that is accessible even to readers unfamiliar with the region, while effectively connecting these explanations to the overall argument about the multi-layered nature of homo/bi/transphobic state violence. It also sheds light on the diverse ways in which queer people in Azerbaijan perceive, navigate, and resist this violence.

Additionally, the author successfully argues for the necessity of situating this study within a broader regional context, demonstrating the interconnectedness of the state system, its institutions, and their violent practices with historical, geopolitical, cultural, religious, and political dynamics. The dissertation makes a persuasive case that existing Western theories and concepts, such as homonationalism, fall short in fully addressing or explaining the complexities of the situation in the South Caucasus. Instead, the author argues for the importance of developing grounded theories informed by local experiences to understand the specific challenges faced by queer communities in Azerbaijan, as well as in other countries in the region. This approach significantly enriches our understanding of queer struggles in contexts beyond the Global North, highlighting the importance of context-sensitive frameworks that account for local realities.

Finally, it is important to comment on the well-developed and justified methodology section. I appreciated the author's being reflective about their own experiences and potential biases, demonstrating a commitment to reflexivity and transparency throughout the research process.

## *2. Formal aspects of the dissertation*

The dissertation is consistently coherent in its use of abbreviations, the syntax of bibliographical references, and the transcription of foreign terms, adhering to a clear and uniform style throughout the text. The footnotes are correctly formatted, providing accurate and relevant supplementary information that supports the main argument while maintaining readability. The language of the dissertation is grammatically precise and free of any linguistic infelicities, demonstrating a high level of clarity. Visually, the dissertation is well-presented. The use of headings, subheadings, and other structural elements is effective, helping to guide the reader through the content smoothly and logically. Overall, the dissertation meets all formal requirements of academic writing, presenting its findings and arguments in a clear and accessible, manner.

---

<sup>1</sup> I use wording queer people throughout this report to avoid ambiguity, however, I would like to stress that the author is very clear and meticulous with explaining the local categories of *petuxs* and *qiys* that are used in the dissertation

### *3. Use of sources and/or material*

Throughout the dissertation, the author actively engages with existing literature on state-sponsored homophobia, homonationalism (based on works of Puar), power (drawing on Foucault), and state violence (the choice of this type of violence is well justified in the theoretical part) in a concise and transparent manner. The work demonstrates a strong familiarity with studies relevant to the region, citing scholars (among others) such as Buyantuyeva, Edenborg, Luciani, Kondakov, and Shirinian. The referencing is consistently accurate, and the use of secondary sources is both clear and appropriate. When primary sources are employed, references to the original versions are consistently provided, and the rationale behind any translations is clearly justified. I also appreciated the explanation and discussion of local terms, such as *devka*, *natural*, *mentalitet*, *tema*, etc. and the ways in which those are incorporated into the text and discussion of the main argument.

The dissertation is primarily grounded in rich ethnographic data collected by the author over several years through participant observation and in-depth interviews. The author is very transparent about the research process, detailing how participants were selected and thoroughly discussing the challenges and obstacles encountered during the study. The inclusion of numerous direct quotations from the interviews, translated by the author, not only makes the dissertation more engaging but also allows readers to form their own judgments about the interpretation of the data.

One limitation of the study, stemming from the focus on state institutions and their violence against queer people, is the inability—due to safety risks well-explained in the dissertation—to directly engage with individuals working within these institutions or to study them from within (for a very good reason). Consequently, the analysis is primarily based on the perceptions of those affected by this violence and the external activities of the state, military, and police. However, the author is explicit and honest about this limitation, which adds to the credibility of the research.

Overall, the methods of data collection and processing are well-aligned with the main research questions, demonstrating a strong coherence between the chosen methodology and the study's objectives. The interpretations provided are derived logically from the empirical data and sources used, with the author presenting compelling, evidence-based arguments that flow naturally from the findings.

### *4. Personal contribution to the subject*

The dissertation is far more than a mere compilation of information; it is a significant and original contribution to the field, grounded in rich ethnographic data collected through years of participant observation and in-depth interviews connected to the personal experience of the author. The author's direct engagement with queer communities in Azerbaijan provides a nuanced and in-

depth understanding of their experiences and struggles with state violence. The use of primary data, including numerous direct quotations from interviews, not only adds depth and authenticity to the research but also allows for a more complex and contextualized portrayal of the realities faced by these communities. This empirical foundation makes the dissertation a critical and innovative piece of scholarship that provides fresh insights into the lived experiences of queer people in a context that has been underrepresented in the literature until now.

In addition to its solid empirical base, the dissertation also engages deeply with existing theories, such as those on state violence, homonationalism, and power, while simultaneously enriching and expanding these frameworks with local knowledge. By incorporating the lived experiences and perspectives of local queer communities, the dissertation not only adapts these theories to fit the Azerbaijani context but also offers new theoretical developments that can be applied to other non-Western settings. This dual engagement with both empirical data and theoretical innovation positions the dissertation as a substantial and original contribution to the fields of queer studies, anthropology, and global human rights.

#### **IV. Questions for the author**

1. **Methodological Limitations and Reflexivity:** While you are transparent about the challenges and limitations in accessing people working within state institutions, how might your research have differed if direct engagement with these actors had been possible? What alternative methods could have been employed to gain more insights into the perspectives of those who enact state violence?
2. Autoethnography often provides valuable personal insights and reflections within ethnographic research and, as I understand, you used it a lot. How has autoethnography been incorporated into your study of queer communities in Azerbaijan, and in what ways do you believe your own experiences and positionality have influenced the research findings? Can you discuss how integrating autoethnographic elements has shaped your interpretation of the data and contributed to the overall analysis of state-sponsored violence against queer people?
3. **Intersectionality and Nuances within the Queer Community:** Your dissertation takes an intersectional approach, considering socio-economic stratification within the queer community in Azerbaijan. However, could you further explore the ways different intersections (e.g., ethnicity, age, religion) affect how queer people experience state violence? Are there specific groups within the queer community whose voices or experiences are less represented in your study?
4. **State Violence Beyond Direct Confrontation:** The dissertation focuses heavily on direct state violence against queer individuals. Could there be other, less visible forms of state control or coercion that are also important to consider? How might subtle forms of

biopolitical control, such as those related to health care or economic marginalization, operate alongside overt violence?

5. **Local vs. Global Narratives:** You argue for the importance of grounded, locally informed theories to understand queer struggles in Azerbaijan. Could you critically reflect on how global queer rights discourses are received and interpreted locally? Are there tensions between local and global narratives that could be further explored?
6. **Engagement with Broader Social Movements:** The dissertation primarily focuses on the queer community's struggles with state institutions. How do these struggles intersect with other social movements or political issues in Azerbaijan, such as women's rights, political dissent, or ethnic minority rights? Are there opportunities for solidarity or tensions that could be explored more deeply?
7. **Implications for Policy and Activism:** Based on your findings, what specific recommendations would you make for local activists or international human rights organizations working to address state violence against queer people in Azerbaijan? Are there strategies or areas of focus that you believe have been underexplored or inadequately addressed?

## V. Conclusion

Based on my evaluation of the submitted dissertation, I find it to be a well-structured, methodologically sound, and theoretically engaging piece of research. Given its substantial contribution to the field and overall academic rigor, **I provisionally classify the submitted dissertation as passed.**

*Leuven, Belgium, September 10, 2024*

*Maryna Shevtsova*