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## Homophobia seethes in Kazakhstan

ALMATY/Kazakhstan, APRIL 30 2015 (The Conway Bulletin) — In Kazakhstan's former capital, the weekend is for parties but, it appears, not everybody is invited.

Down a side street, just off one of the main streets running through Almaty, a group of five or six young men wearing leather jackets smoked cigarettes and shouted insults at the men queuing to enter a gay bar on the opposite side of the road.

The insults grew louder and stronger. Nobody stepped in to stop the abuse.

Being homosexual in Kazakhstan is far from easy. The Soviet legacy of the punishment of buggery and the revival of the strong traditional values of the country's macho nomadic heritage both play against homosexuality.

This, though, according to a gay rights activist in Almaty goes against the tradition of the city itself.

"Almaty has a history of more than 100 years of mild tolerance towards homosexuality," the activist who preferred to stay anonymous said in hushed tones below chatter floating across a central Almaty coffee shop.

"During the Tsarist times, Panfilov Park (then Pushkin Park) was used as a pick-up place by Russian men. This was the most gay-friendly city in the whole of Central Asia."

But now momentum across the former Soviet Union, led by Moscow, has triggered a raft of legislation against homosexuality. Kazakhstan's lower house of parliament has been holding an ongoing debate on just how to repress homosexuality in society.

A university professor in Almaty described the impact. "There are several professionals who conceal their sexual orientation in the workplace," he said. Almaty's former reputation as a tolerant city appears broken.

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