

The recent scandal with feminnale in Bishkek again emphasised fundamental problems in culture, which cannot be solved systematically.

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Two weeks passed after the opening of feminnale “Foster Mothers. Economic Freedom. Women” in the Gapar Aitiev Museum of Fine Arts. The exhibition involved over 50 art masters from 22 countries. It will definitely be remembered for the scandal that led to the dismissal of Mira Dzhangarcheva, director of the museum.

In the interview to AKIpress, she noted that she was “asked” to do it by minister of culture, information and tourism Azamat Zhamankulov:

He said the situation got worse. I made this decision to make my staff feel safe. However, it doesn't mean that I am afraid or support the policy of those who made me do it. I did it only for the safety of my staff and the museum. They could commit violent attacks, arsons, battery.

“They” referred to by Dzhangaracheva are activists-traditionalists, whose feelings were hurt by the feminnale. The performance by the Dane Julie Savery caused the most indignation: she walked out naked, and then got dressed slowly, thus trying to draw attention to the vulnerability of female sex workers.

As a result, the activists forced the authorities to censor the exposition. A specially established committee reviewed the feminnale works and removed some of them from the exhibition.

Some deputies of Zhogorku Kenesh showed their reaction to the exhibition. Last week, Makhabat Ergeshova, deputy of faction “Respublika-Ata Zhurt”, said at the parliament session that actions with naked women are inconsistent with the national traditions and mindset of the Kyrgyz. The deputy also suggested to consider if the minister of culture, information and tourism was responsible for that.

However, this suggestion seems to be late now. On Monday, December 9, minister of culture Azamat Zhamankulov supported the action organised by the traditionalists.

## **Is nation supreme over rights?**

Civil activists acting against the feminnale with a naked girl gathered dozens of women wearing national costumes in a bus and drove around the city. Inside the bus, they discussed the problem of education of the younger generation, the morals of modern Kyrgyzstanis. This action was called "Belgiluu marshrut. Ukutan birinchi ulut turat (Prominent route. Nation supreme over rights)."

The bus started its route from the Kyrgyz drama theatre, where they were greeted by minister of culture Azamat Zhamankulov. He said that the society has faced negative events lately and the Kyrgyz should make efforts to keep their traditions and values. According to him, the disputes that the Kyrgyz won't be able to join in the world culture if they keep their traditional culture are unreasonable.

The minister thanked participants of the action for their active civic position and their efforts to popularise the Kyrgyz culture.



*The slogan on the bus reads: "Don't get undressed. It's a shame." Photo: Facebook*

Political analyst **Mars Sariev** said the reaction to the feminnale was quite expected and the system of beliefs played a big role in this situation. The organisers of the feminnale were a certain layer of Russian-speaking city dwellers, who were brought up according to European and liberal values, while those who were raised traditionally responded critically to the event.

"Therefore, such slogans as "balkonskie" (people who live in multi-storey buildings - editor's note) and "zhertamskie" (people who live in detached houses - editor's note) appear during protests. Here we see the confrontation between the two mindsets: traditions and customs vs. views of people who were raised by the European culture," Sariev said.

In his opinion, it wouldn't have happened if the head of the cultural agency had been a "more sophisticated" person.

**Elena Voronina**, culture expert and specialist in communications, has a different opinion. According to her, this is the result of the lack of knowledge and critical thinking.

“Any powers that create uncontested existence are making chaos and violate the human dignity. They trigger such actions as intimidation, censorship, threats, destruction. The minister of culture came under pressure and showed his weakness as a public manager and submitted to them. This is much uglier than intimidation,” Voronina said.



*Elena Voronina. Photo: sputnik.kg*

Moreover, according to the culture expert, the minister of culture who censored the feminnale violated the national Constitution.

#### **Article 37.**

1. Folk customs and traditions in the Kyrgyz Republic that do not prejudice human rights and freedoms are supported by the state.**Article 49.**
  1. Everyone is guaranteed the freedom of literary, artistic, scientific, technical and other kinds of activity, teaching.
  2. Everyone has a right to take part in the cultural life and access to cultural values. The state ensures the integrity of historical monuments and other heritage sites. Intellectual property is protected by law.

“The far-right group may not know the law, but the public servant must know it, including international law and everything that is related to the protection of cultural rights. The minister that submits to the far-right groups who want to dictate their own rules has created a precedent of flagrant lawlessness and arbitrary behaviour and seriously deteriorated the image of the republic on the international stage,” Voronina said.

However, cultural scandals are not rare in Kyrgyzstan.

#### **The burial of the mummy**

In October 2017, the ministry of culture, information and tourism decided to bury the mummy that was stored in the State Historical Museum of Kyrgyzstan. They explained their

decision by the fact that the mummy was kept in the museum for 60 years and was never studied as there was no equipment and anthropologists.

“Special embalming procedures are needed to preserve the mummy, which were not carried out due to the lack of specialists and money,” the ministry’s press service said.

The agency specified that the scientists would still have access to the mummy after its burial in case of future studies.

According to **Kadicha Tashbaeva**, head of archaeology department of the Institute of History, National Academy of Sciences, the mummy dates to 4-5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. It was preserved naturally due to the climate of the southern region.

The mummy was handed over to the Ministry of Emergency Situations for burial, and the ministry carried out the burial procedure together with the local authorities of Batken region.



*The burial of the mummy in Batken region of Kyrgyzstan, October 14, 2017. Photo: RFE/RL*

Afterwards, archaeologists asked the then president Almazbek Atambaev to get back the medieval mummy of a woman and to bring to account those people who decided to bury the

museum specimen.

Scientists equal the decision of the ministry of culture with vandalism, as they told during the press conference. They also said that the committee that made the decision to bury the museum specimen didn't have any subject matter scientists as its members.

The then minister of culture, information and tourism Tugelbai Kazakov held a press conference in turn and said the thing was not the mummy, but his removal from office. He also emphasised that he deemed his decision about burial as proper one and "would think the same even if he's to be shot."

### **"Shameless" Zere**

In September 2018, the public was deeply shocked by a video clip of 19-year-old singer Zere Asylbek. She made a video of her song "Kyz" ("A girl").

The video got viral on social media and caused contradictory reaction of users. Some were delighted with this manifest of women's rights and freedoms. Others focused not on the song content, but on the singer's look. This category of users thought the girl's outfit - short skirt, jacket and bra - was provoking and even immoral.

Some supporters of traditional morals even threatened Zere. The singer posted a screenshot of her messages where a man threatened to kill her in the Kyrgyz if she didn't remove her video. Her father, Asylbek Zhoodanbekov, had to go to the police.

Afterwards, the press service of the ministry of interior affairs reported they were investigating the case. However, it was reported later that the police rejected opening of the criminal case into threats directed against the singer.

According to the agency, police investigators didn't find any signs of a criminal case in the actions of people who threatened to kill the girl for her video. The materials were handed over to the public security service of Issyk Ata local police precinct, which the girl asked to take administrative measures.

While the society discussed the video of Zere, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of the Discrimination against Women criticised the authorities of Kyrgyzstan for their violation of human rights by "accepting the cases of abduction of women and forced marriage". They expressed concern about the lack of legal education and that offenders are not duly punished even if the abducted girl went to the police.

## Cyber tournament

In early 2019, another cultural scandal occurred in Bishkek. In January, Dota-2 cyber competition took place in the Kyrgyz capital for the first time. Four teams with 20 participants took part in the tournament with big prize money.



Photo: [culture.akipress.org](http://culture.akipress.org)

The event was held in the National Opera and Ballet Theatre, which by surprise caused anger of users of social media, as well as some deputies of the Zhogorku Kenesh, who thought that cyber tournaments may not be held on the “sacred scene”.

The Dota tournament drew attention of the authorities after the Kyrgyz media started writing about it in a preachy manner. They didn't like that the computer game tournament was held inside the theatre building.

The scandal started when the principal dancer of the theatre, Tair Beisheev, posted a video, in which he called the cyber tournament a “terrible event” on the tournament day.

Later on, April TV channel used the sentence “Where are we heading?” in the heading, and quoted opera singer Elnura Samarbekova in its material, who said, “I am shocked! Please

tell me, my dear, is it fine to hold computer tournament inside the temple of high music art?"

Bolotbek Osmonov, who was then the director of the A.Maldybaev Kyrgyz National Academic Opera and Ballet Theatre, tried to excuse himself. He said he rented the building of the theatre out on legal grounds.

However, minister of culture, information and tourism Azamat Zhamankulov said that he would prohibit such things in future as "only cultural events should be held inside the cultural establishment."

As a result, Bolotbek Osmonov resigned from office. Although, the day before the staff of the theatre wrote an open message to the minister asking him to monitor the situation of the alleged resignation of the director of the theatre. They said that "according to some information, he is forced to resign voluntarily."

### **Censorship of art?**

Culture expert Elena Voronina said that current situation with the culture of Kyrgyzstan shows direct censorship of art by the state represented by ministry of culture and information.

Today contemporary art is being censored and vandalised by far-right groups, tomorrow they can do the same with the contemporary theatrical performance or music.

According to her, national policy regarding culture, education and science must not be as it is now. And the state must create favourable conditions for artistic people.

"Today artists have no studios. They have no public contracts. The state doesn't buy things from exhibitions. Museums have no money to complete their funds, collections. The culture is being financed with whatever funds remain, nothing has changed actually. Ministers of cultures change - one comes, another goes. But the cultural policy doesn't change," she said.

Sociologist **Reina Arturova** thinks that unpunished provocative acts of traditionalists can be explained by the fact that such activists actually help the authorities to divert public attention from persistent problems.

“It’s advantageous for the ruling groups to have such destructive organisations at hand that can mobilise their supporters and promote the ideology that is against liberal and democratic ideas. It’s obvious that the authorities not just ignore such organisations, but support them. Otherwise, the parliament would have raised this topic or made a statement a long time ago,” the sociologist said.



Рейна Артурова. Фото взято с личного аккаунта Facebook

In her opinion, every citizen in this situation must understand their position and express it in a way that is available to them.

“We should take part to show that we do care about what is happening and the majority of us are not satisfied with the situation. It’s important to exercise our rights and to show the authorities that we do exist. We are not sitting at our homes, we are ready to take out to streets and hold them liable. The countries that are on the top of democracy rankings have also gone through similar processes. It’s important to maintain the conflict at a peaceful level while holding discussions and disputes,” Arturova said.

Main photo: sputnik.kg

*This article was prepared as part of the Giving Voice, Driving Change - from the Borderland to the Steppes Project.*



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