

Equal rights for gays still distant dream in Ukraine

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Weekend summer mornings along the riverside promenade in Kyiv's Obolon district usually include scenes of strolling families and 20-something crowds. But on June 6, tension, violence and blood ruined this idyll as two opposing views clashed over gay rights and the right to publicly support them.

Equipped with rainbow flags and posters, 200 Ukrainians gathered at a Kyiv pride "March of Equality" to advocate for the rights of all people to be respected as they are — including lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender.

Armed with nail bombs, flares, and donning balaclavas, some 80 militant and violent homophobes attempted to disrupt the march.

Hundreds of police took the brunt of the immediate attack, with one officer suffering a life-threatening shrapnel wound to an artery in his neck. A total of 11 police officers received injuries that day.

Police acted swiftly, but couldn't protect all the demonstrators as they scattered from the scene. At least 10 gay rights activists were hunted down and beaten.

One of them, Rostyslav Milevskiy



At least 200 Ukrainian gay activists held a gay pride March of Equality in Kyiv's Obolon embankment on June 6. (UNIAN)

from Zaporizhzhya, told the Kyiv Post that their exit strategy was poorly planned.

Milevskiy was run down and beaten by a group of eight anti-gay militants.

He took part in a similar event in 2012, which also ended in violence, he said.

Seven militants — mostly from a variety of small nationalist groups — were

arrested by police. Volunteer battalion soldiers and Right Sector activists were placed under house arrest and charged with hooliganism. One suspect was

bailed out by lawmakers from the Radical Party, led by Oleh Lyashko.

In a year of great upheaval and change, conservative attitudes towards different sexual orientations seem fixed.

Ihor Kryvoruchko, 28, head of the right-wing Center Youth Assembly, was present at the march on June 6. He's certain that most Ukrainians consider homosexuality an aberration.

"Such parades could only take place on the territories of the self-proclaimed republics (in the east)," he told the Kyiv Post. "The real purpose of the organizers of the gay parade is to force more people to support the rights of the necrophiles, zoophiles and pedophiles," he said.

Milevskiy was certain that many in Ukraine still have "dark age stereotypes towards gays."

Bohdan Ovcharuk, spokesperson for Amnesty International Ukraine, said that the Right Sector seemed to be "the consolidating force" in the clashes.

A number of social media groups urged people to oppose the pride parade on the Russian-owned social network VKontakte. One of them, called Zero Tolerance, had posted a photo album of at least a dozen people the group's moderators say are gay activists. The group has more than 2,800 followers.

Right Sector spokesman Artem Skoropadsky insisted that the → 11

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Leaders talk: "What I don't believe in — is lies"



AMINAT SULEYMANOVA
Managing Partner,
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Can we start with an introduction of yourself and an overview of your company?

My name is Aminat Suleymanova, I am a lawyer. My professional career in law started almost 20 years ago. I have been practicing law since I was a student, combining my studies at a law academy with a legal position in a law firm. We are happy to announce that this year AGA Partners is celebrating its 10-year anniversary.

The basic idea when I started the firm was to make a boutique law firm, that supports companies engaged in international trade activity with their outbound transactions and investments overseas. Recently we expanded our activity with a private clients' practice.

Today the legal market is saturated with a number of law firms, which I would refer to as "legal supermarkets". So you can be offered any kind of legal service within one firm. But we have a different concept in the course of rendering legal services. We limited our activities to 3 practices — international trade, arbitration, and family law. To meet the needs of our client, we engage with reputable law companies in England on a cooperative basis. It is worth mentioning that our legal expert report on Ukrainian family law issues was cited in a judgment of the English High Court.

Our primary rule is to approach each client individually. Clients can address any partner at a time of their convenience. For us, legal practice is not just another business, but an opportunity to assist clients in their business or private issues. The greatest reward for us is the loyalty of our clients; we have some clients who have been with us for almost a decade.

AGA Partners was ranked by Legal 500 as being among the leading law firms of Ukraine in the area of dispute resolution. How did you gain this success?

The thing I like about that is that we weren't only mentioned in the area of dispute resolution, but we were the only one highly praised for GAFTA arbitration practice (the Grain and Feed Trade Association, a London-based trade organization). Ukraine is one of the biggest exporters of grains on the global level and we have been occupying a special niche in terms of providing legal support to outborder grain traders. That is another reason why this acknowledgment is so valuable to us. By the way, it was for the first time we've been nominated for this kind ranking.

We never seek people out, we grow them.

What law services have been the most in demand over the last year?

Actually it's hard to say because we don't practice everything. Still from year to year we are becoming stronger, more professional and better. Along with rapid professional development of the firm you can witness an increase in the number of our clients every year. And I don't think that decrease or increase in any particular area of the economy is the main reason for this, it is rather because clients get to be more careful about who they employ for assistance.

Clients are always looking for someone, the person who is the best in a particular area of practice. Let's use a hypothetical: if you are fond of tea, you are trying to buy it, you will not go to the supermarket, but to the special tea shop, where you will have a possibility to smell it, and ask the seller from where this tea leaves come from. (P.S.: I chose this example because I am a tea fan myself.) We do not assist each and every client who addresses us, we provide our services to those who share our values and our style of work.

If you look ahead five years, how do you see the future of AGA Partners?

In a couple of years we are planning to open an office in London, due to the close relation of our practices in both family law issues and international trade, due to the London activities of our clients. At the moment our partners are flying to London at least once per month, so I think in 5 years we shall open a little office in London. Also we will definitely expand the number of employees, though by not more than 3-5 more people. But we don't want to become a big law firm. Personally I want to know everyone in person. We never seek people out, we grow them.

Do you believe that "honesty is the best policy"?

Definitely. What I don't believe in — is lies. I believe that in a particular situation everybody may just say: "I'm not ready to discuss that or those issues.../ It's too personal for me...". I feel comfortable with people saying that. If you say it in a soft way, people will understand, they might be a bit shocked at first, because in our mentality it's not usual, but still it's a better option.

What has been the most important management lesson you have learned?

1. You can't force a person to be happy if they don't want to be
2. Being a manager myself, I can tell that you don't have the luxury of not being in a good mood. Try to control yourself, even if you are in a bad mood. Remember that people can take it personally.
3. You are not God to judge. You can just make your own choice but must be frank to yourself, and say: "it's personal". Very important — I treat everyone as an equal person, it's just that we may have different positions.

What is your management style? And what qualities do you appreciate the most in people?

I try to make the people around me feel comfortable. Usually a person straight from the university joins our firm but it's essential that everyone likes the new person in the company, as we will work together for 8 hours a day. I take into consideration the point of view of every member of our team. I may not always agree but I will definitely listen to what a person has to say. You always need to remember that the look from the outside is important; it can show you something new, something you haven't seen before and can even help your personal growth. There is always a tutor available from the partners to help the new associate or young lawyer. And you can discuss everything, even personal issues. If needed, they can work from home. What I appreciate the most in people is a good family background and education. We have to speak the same language and understand each other.

How do you keep a healthy balance between your family and career?

My own priority is family. We will always assist on different issues. And everybody in my firm, including myself, can say: "Ok, guys, I need some time for my family. This week I will be out of the office".

If you have responsibility, you can keep that balance. If all members of the team are honest with each other, we will not have to lie to each other and keep family as a priority. Every year we have our vacations, we don't hold some corporate meeting for 3 days outside without families, it's not our style. I think that the best corporate event is to give more time to people to spend time with their families. Family is the priority and I do underline that. Our working day starts at 10 and lasts till 6. Certainly emergencies can happen, but it doesn't have to be a rule. The right manager has to organize an 8-hour working day. Otherwise, you don't organize your job well. Also if someone is important for me, in most cases I will make some allowances for them and follow their suggestions. You can ask for respect.