

# sustainable japan

ESG promotional content produced by The Japan Times Cube

## No exceptions to equality: lawyer Alexander Dmitrenko

### Roundtable

WARREN MEEHAN  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Growing up as a Ukrainian during the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Alexander Dmitrenko sensed an air of freedom and hope for a better future for Russians and the citizens of the former Soviet countries. This sense of freedom inspired him to become a lawyer, believing it would be the ideal discipline to make a difference in the fight for human rights. This led him on a journey working in law firms in New York and on pioneering marriage equality cases in Canada. Now a partner with the international law firm Ashurst in Tokyo, Dmitrenko has brought his fight for marriage equality and LGBT rights to Japan, an issue that both is important to him from a human rights perspective and also is deeply personal to him as a gay man.

Dmitrenko took time out of his busy schedule to sit down with Ross Rowbury for The Japan Times Roundtable's 31st incarnation to discuss his multifaceted roles in the gay rights area, the progress being made on LGBT issues and what motivates him in his work.

### Using law to change the world

"In Ukraine, I had done well academically, and I wanted to go to the United States to gain foreign experience," Dmitrenko began. "I left on a program under the Freedom

Support Act, which supports future leaders. After living overseas, I didn't really want to go back home, mainly because I was a gay man, and that was because it hasn't changed for Russia — it's changing for Ukraine, slowly. But in Russia, it feels dangerous to be a gay man. I felt I couldn't really have a career there as a lawyer or achieve the things I have."

Dmitrenko explained that many gay professionals in Russia would marry and have kids and live a double life, just to be able to succeed. "That wasn't an option for me — I wanted to be honest to myself, I wanted to fully contribute to society without hiding." Determined to have a career overseas, he began working at a large law firm in New York. "[As] anyone who starts out as a lawyer at a big firm knows, the first couple of years are not glamorous," he said. "You begin working in some of the most mind-numbing tasks, and I just thought, 'This can't be my life.'"

While working in "big law" was not easy, Dmitrenko felt that the experience was great training for the future. "In order to work in big law, you need to focus narrowly. I don't have a narrow personality — I wanted to utilize my skill set and languages, I didn't want to be in a box." When a friend from the international trading and development company Sojitz Corp. suggested that Dmitrenko would be perfect for its Tokyo office, he jumped at the opportunity. "Wow, this is quite phenomenal," Dmitrenko recalled thinking when he first arrived in



Alexander Dmitrenko YUICCO TAIYA

Japan. "That was over 15 years ago, and I'm really quite happy here."

### A 'pull' for gay rights

Following his experience in helping litigate Canada's first successful gay marriage case and having worked for marriage equality and LGBT rights in New York, Dmitrenko arrived in Japan to find a legal landscape largely lacking in terms of LGBT rights and quickly set about co-founding the Lawyers for LGBT and Allies Network. "LLAN is one of the most visible NPOs for 'lawyers-plus,' and we were one of the first organizations here to put marriage equality on the agenda," he said. "Seven years ago, when we

started, you wouldn't have heard anything about marriage equality, but it's nice to see that it's really on the agenda now and it's come a long way. It's not really a 'push' for gay rights, it is more a 'pull' as Japan looks out to see where the U.S. and Western Europe are in terms of marriage equality, and we can pull Japan in that direction."

Rowbury and Dmitrenko reflected on how Japanese society can be very accepting, but it is often an acceptance within a framework of playing by the rules of societal expectations, and on how to change those rules. Dmitrenko said, "The acceptance levels of marriage equality in Japan are phenomenal — polls indicate that there is over 70%

support for gay marriage." This compares to only 50% support in the United States when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of marriage equality over a decade ago.

Despite the slow pace of change from both governments and the courts, corporate Japan has taken up the cause of marriage equality and is now leading the government on the issue. "There is a business case for equality," Dmitrenko insisted. "Gay and lesbian people will work better, will stay in Japan, will come to Japan, and Japan will be more competitive globally. What's important is your skill set, and you can't compete fully in the workforce if you are hiding something."

### Where are we now?

Dmitrenko highlighted the five marriage equality cases so far, with courts essentially ruling in all five that denying marriage equality is unconstitutional. This mirrors the opinion of the lawyers at the Japanese Federation Bar Association, who agree that the wording of the Japanese Constitution essentially requires marriage equality. "The articles in question emphasize the consent and equal rights of two people getting married," Dmitrenko explained — "it doesn't require a couple to be of opposite sexes."

Rowbury asked if there is a danger that rushing ahead with legislation before society is ready, if it might lead to discrimination despite the changes in the law, similar to the experiences that racial minorities have faced after laws against discrimination were passed. Dmitrenko disagreed: "Equality isn't manufactured. People deserve equality now." He told of his own experiences of wanting to visit his mother in critical condition in the hospital with his partner, but the doctor insisted on referring to his partner as a "friend" and refused to let his partner in because only family members were allowed visitation.

"I constantly being referred to as a 'friend.' A marriage certificate isn't just a piece of paper, it gives that person rights, rights that



Dmitrenko also worked at major international law firms in New York. YUICCO TAIYA

are taken for granted by married couples."

### Life in Japan

Along with his work with LLAN, Dmitrenko is also the chairperson of TELL, a nonprofit mental health organization that serves Japan's international community. "TELL has two main pillars, the call center and counseling, and what we have found is that up to 25% of callers to our helpline had LGBT issues," he explained. "It may not be the issue that prompted them to call, but when you combine it with another issue, it becomes too much, especially when your relationship has no recognition at all."

Being so engaged in his adopted country, Dmitrenko likes to take time to gauge how far along the journey he is to becoming accepted by the Japanese community. Having recently been made the tourism ambassador for the island of Hachijojima, which he calls the most beautiful place in the world, he thinks he has come pretty far. How does he have time to fit it all in? "I'm a Gemini. We Geminis have two personalities, so that helps us to accomplish quite a bit."

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Cube. Each month an exclusive audience of up to 10 people join the discussion live. For more information or to participate, visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/roundtable>



Dmitrenko is a partner at Ashurst (Tokyo) focusing on compliance issues and dispute resolution matters. He began his career in Canada, including working on same-sex marriage. YUICCO TAIYA

### Times Gallery



Indonesia's deputy chief of mission, John Tjahjanto Boestami (center rear), meets with 16 Japanese students who have received Darmasiswa scholarships from the government of Indonesia on June 21. They will study for a year at various universities in Indonesia. EMBASSY OF INDONESIA



Jamaican Ambassador Shorna-Kay Richards and State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shunsuke Takei recently announced the winning logo for the 2024 Japan-CARICOM Friendship Year. Takei recently announced the logo in Jamaica. EMBASSY OF JAMAICA



Liszt Institute Hungarian Cultural Center Director Anita Nagy and cultural attaché Emese Kovacs (center) stand with models at an exhibition introducing modern fashion inspired by Hungarian folk art at the institute in Tokyo's Azabu Juban area. The exhibition started June 28 and will run through Nov. 10. EMBASSY OF HUNGARY, MACIEJ KOMOROWSKI



Panamanian Ambassador Carlos Pere and Carmen Vergara, the general administrator of ProPanama, during their visit with Yutaka Kase (second from left), the committee chair of Keldanren. EMBASSY OF PANAMA



The Ecuadorian Embassy celebrates Inti Raymi, a festival for the sun god, on June 23, sharing the cultural heritage of the Andean people with compatriots, members of the diplomatic corps and Japanese authorities. EMBASSY OF ECUADOR



Toshiaki ("Tom") Kato (center, in scarf), a member of the Entrepreneur Organization's Tokyo Metropolitan chapter, with friends at his new Kanikato Asakusa Japanese restaurant, where he shared his vision and presented his menu before it opens in late July. EOTM



Jarman International's Charity Golf Cup at East Wood Country Club in Utsunomiya, Tochigi Prefecture, sponsored by AKA Virtual, benefited two nonprofits — Mirai no Mori (Japan) and Common Grace (Hawaii) — that empower marginalized and vulnerable youths. JARMAN INTERNATIONAL



A reception to celebrate the 35th anniversary of the establishment of the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in Tokyo is held on June 19. HONG KONG ECONOMIC AND TRADE OFFICE (TOKYO)

## Industry group CLOMA aims to cut plastic waste in Japan and beyond

### ESG/SGDs

HIROKO NAKATA  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The coastline of a tropical islet in southwestern Japan is filled with litter washed ashore — PET bottles, plastic packages and bags — mostly carried on currents from neighboring countries. Such waste once was rarely seen on the white sand beach surrounding the deep-green island.

"I remember the beach when it was clean and beautiful 40 years ago," said Michitaka Sawada, chair of the Japan Clean Ocean Material Alliance (CLOMA), an industry group for recycling marine plastic waste. He is also chair of the toiletry maker Kao Corp. "What I've seen recently was the beach full of driftage, which makes me so surprised."

The islet, Tomogashima, about 8 kilometers from a Wakayama Prefecture port where one of Kao's plants is located, is just one example of many places suffering from plastic refuse.

Sawada said there has been a growing perception in the world that not only climate change but also ocean plastic waste urgently need to be addressed. "The foundation of CLOMA was backed by a sense of crisis that if we didn't do anything we would see a terrible outcome," he said in a recent interview with The Japan Times. In September, CLOMA received the ESG Spe-

cial Award in the Sustainable Japan Award 2022, sponsored by The Japan Times.

CLOMA was established in 2019 as a joint initiative by companies connected with consumer products — food and toiletry makers using plastic containers, package makers, trading houses and distributors. The number of member companies has more than tripled from the original 156 to the current 497.

CLOMA's goal is to achieve zero plastic waste by 2050 through what it calls the "3R" of plastic: reduce, reuse and recycle. "We will reach the goal by establishing the Japan model by making the best out of Japan's strong points," Sawada said, adding that its strength comes from its attitude of taking care of others and the "mottainai" spirit of trying not to let anything go to waste. Last year, the industry group formed a task force and is working on predictions and schedules for reaching the goal. To gain support from policymakers, it is also working on a proposal to be submitted later this year.

Many people are aware that plastic waste is not an easy issue to solve. Because plastic has a number of good points — its ability to protect food and keep smells from escaping from packages, its light weight and low price — many companies use plastic packages. That is why it is necessary for companies along value chains to cooperate with each other. Sawada said they also need further support from local governments, which collect and deal with garbage, as well as for consumers to reduce their use of plastic containers and separate them for reuse and recycling.

What makes recycling plastic waste hard is that it comes in many types — polypropylene and polyethylene, to name two — in various shapes and combinations, so recycling is time-consuming and costly.

Plastic waste not only emits carbon dioxide when it is burned, it also pollutes the environment when it is not. It flows into the ocean especially when torrential rains and typhoons wash garbage away, which is happening more often due to climate change. Moreover, plastic waste breaks down into microplastic over time, which causes serious problems for the health of human beings as well as marine creatures. To reduce such marine waste, CLOMA is building cooperation with other nations. By



Michitaka Sawada, chair of CLOMA COSUFI

Indonesia's request, it is working with the government and nonprofits to deal with the waste issue. It is also slated to cooperate with Vietnam and the Philippines.

According to a study published in the journal Science in 2015, out of 275 million tons of plastic waste that was estimated to have been generated in 192 coastal countries, 4.8 million to 12.7 million tons entered the ocean. The largest amount was expected to have come from China, totaling 1.32 million to 3.53 million tons, followed by Indonesia's 480,000 to 1.29 million tons.

CLOMA supports cooperation among member companies to create new business and innovation. The number of cases resulting in new business partnerships increased to 35 in 2022, from six in 2019.

For example, in 2021, a joint project to examine technologies to renew plastic bottles was launched in western Tokyo. The city of Higashiyamato collects used bottles at 10 collection boxes and sends them to a plant of the Japan unit of the French water major Veolia, which separates and rinses the bottles and seeks ways to produce new ones in cooperation with four toiletry makers: Unilever, Kao, P&G and Lion. Other cities, such as Kobe in Hyogo Prefecture and Kitakyushu in Fukuoka Prefecture, also have launched projects with the alliance together with makers of daily goods and retailers to collect used packages for recycling.

The Sustainable Japan Award commends individuals, companies and organizations who have made advances in sustainability efforts. To learn more, visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/saward2023>

