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“They Have Long Arms and They Can Find Me”

Anti-Gay Purge by Local Authorities in Russia’s Chechen Republic



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**Anti-Gay Purge by Local Authorities in Russia’s
Chechen Republic**

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Summary

My life is ruined. I cannot go back. And it's not safe here either. They have long arms and they can find me and the others anywhere in Russia, just give them time...

– “Magomed,” victim of the anti-gay purge in Chechnya currently in hiding in an undisclosed location.

In February 2017, Chechnya's law enforcement and security officials launched an anti-gay purge. They rounded up dozens of men on suspicion of being gay, held them in unofficial detention facilities for days, humiliated, starved, and tortured them. They forcibly disappeared some of the men. Others were returned to their families barely alive from beatings. Their captors exposed them to their families as gay and encouraged their relatives to carry out honor killings. Although Chechnya's leader, Ramzan Kadyrov has denied the round-ups, the information presented in this report shows that top-level local authorities in Chechnya sanctioned them. Russia's federal government has pledged to investigate, but intense and well-founded fear of official retaliation and honor killings, and overwhelming stigma will prevent many victims from coming forward.

This report documents the violent purge and the local and federal government's response. It is based on interviews with men who had been rounded up, as well as with journalists who documented the round-ups and with representatives of a Russian LGBT organization who have helped these men and documented their ordeals.

The wave of punitive detentions continued at least through the first week of April 2017, with a lull in mid-March, and apparently affected over 100 people. Once they captured their victims, police would scour their cell phones looking for contacts of other men who might be gay, torture the men into naming other gay men, and capture those named. Hence the numbers of victims grew. Several individuals allegedly died as a result of the purge.

At time of writing, no new abductions have been reported but several of the men apparently still remain in detention. Many of those who have been released have fled Chechnya, but they still face the double risk of being hunted down and harmed by both Chechen security forces and their own families as long as they remain in Russia's territory.

Some gay and bisexual men chose to flee Chechnya despite not being directly affected by the purge because they fear information about them was found in victims' cell phones or revealed by victims under torture.

Police abducted and detained their victims unlawfully. Security officials kept the men in several unofficial facilities, which Chechen authorities have been maintaining for years to hold and torture individuals suspected of some form of dissent or sabotage. The men interviewed by Human Rights Watch were held in unofficial detention facilities in Grozny, Chechnya's capital, and Argun. They told Human Rights Watch that Chechen officials, including two high-level ones, visited these detention facilities and humiliated the detainees.

Chechnya is a highly conservative, traditional Muslim society; homophobia is intense and rampant, and homosexuality is generally viewed as a stain on family honor. People still carry out, or threaten to carry out, "honor killings" to "cleanse" perceived stains to their family's honor, including against young women suspected of promiscuity and family members who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT). High-level Chechen officials, including Ramzan Kadyrov, have repeatedly condoned honor killings.

However, longstanding societal homophobia does not explain the 2017 anti-gay purge. Rather it was ordered and conducted by officials in Chechnya. Although for years police in Chechnya have illegally detained men perceived to be gay to extort money from them under threat of exposing them to their families, the systematized round-ups and torture of gay men in 2017 are unprecedented.

Kadyrov has governed Chechnya for more than a decade and has gradually built a tyranny—ruthlessly eradicating even the mildest forms of dissent. Kadyrov has done so with the blessing of the Kremlin, which has given him free rein to engage in any human rights violations and repression he chose. Under Kadyrov's leadership, law enforcement and security officials in Chechnya have used illegal detention, torture, collective punishment, public humiliation, and other abuses against many "undesirables"—ranging from alleged Islamist militants and their family members to those simply perceived as Kadyrov's critics. In spring 2017, they specifically targeted men suspected of being gay.

Chechen authorities responded to allegations of the violent anti-gay purge by variously denying the existence of gay people in Chechnya, suggesting obliquely that families kill their gay relatives, and accusing people who document or express concern about the round-ups of seeking to destabilize the republic. *Novaya Gazeta*, a leading Russian independent newspaper, broke the story of the purge on April 1, 2017, and published several follow-up reports. Chechen officials and public and religious figures made repeated, public, and serious threats against the newspaper for its allegations.

Russian federal authorities initially dismissed reports about the violence. Following a growing international scandal, several federal agencies launched inquiries. On May 5, President Vladimir Putin said he intended to speak with the prosecutor general and interior minister about the reports. Kadyrov then claimed he is “ready to cooperate” with federal inquiries, but at the same time continued to deny the existence of gay people in Chechnya.

Russian officials do not appear to acknowledge the depth and legitimacy of victims’ fears about coming forward. There are grounds for concern that if victims remain fearful of coming forward, federal officials will simply dismiss the anti-gay purge as rumor.

The Russian LGBT Network, a leading LGBT rights group in the country, opened a special hotline to provide emergency support to those who find themselves in immediate danger. Through mid-May, the Russian LGBT Network provided evacuation-related assistance to nearly 40 persons, putting them up in safe houses in central Russia and/or taking care of their basic needs. The organization also arranged for the former detainees in their care to get medical assistance, as some of them had suffered injuries due to torture and ill-treatment while in captivity, and all of them appeared severely traumatized by their ordeal.

People targeted by the anti-gay purge in Chechnya are not safe in Russia. They remain at great risk of being hounded by Chechen authorities or their own relatives as long as they remain in Russia. The families of anyone who might step forward, and families who refuse to meet demands of officials or relatives to force their gay loved ones to return to Chechnya, may also be at acute risk of threats, harassment, and retaliation.

Russia’s federal investigation into the abductions, torture, and humiliation of people presumed to be gay in Chechnya should be thorough and investigative authorities should

bring perpetrators to account. Authorities should also go to special lengths to protect victims, witnesses, and their immediate families.

Foreign countries should do everything possible to provide safe sanctuary to victims of the purge, who are at immediate risk of grave physical harm as long as they remain in Russia. As “Magomed,” one of the former detainees, told Human Rights Watch, “They have long arms and they can find me and the others anywhere in Russia, just give them time.”

Recommendations

To President Vladimir Putin and the Government of the Russian Federation

- Publicly condemn in the strongest terms the 2017 anti-gay purge in Chechnya.
- Ensure a thorough and impartial investigation into the allegations of violence against gay men in Chechnya.
- Ensure genuine anonymity and other protections for that victims and witnesses of the Chechen anti-gay purge and their families so that they may participate in the investigation. This includes allowing them to testify remotely.
- Ensure all Chechen authorities, including law enforcement and security agencies, fully comply with Russia's domestic legislation and international human rights obligations.
- Ensure an immediate shut down of all unofficial detention facilities in Chechnya.
- Ensure Chechen authorities put an immediate end to the crackdown on free expression in Chechnya.
- Ensure Chechen authorities immediately stop collective punishment and public humiliation practices in Chechnya.
- Ensure victims have effective access to meaningful remedies and accountability mechanisms for violations of human rights, including cruel and degrading treatment, arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, and other violations perpetrated by security services and law enforcement agencies.
- Bring perpetrators of abuses in Chechnya to justice and ensure transparency regarding investigations and/or prosecutions undertaken, including their outcome.
- Ensure that journalists and human rights defenders who have reported on the anti-gay purge and other abuses by Chechen officials are protected from retaliation by Chechnya's authorities and foster a favorable climate for journalists and human rights defenders to do their work in the region.
- Publicly acknowledge the scope and gravity of the problem of violence and harassment against LGBT people in Russia, and commit to taking steps to end these abuses.

- Discipline all government employees who use hateful and discriminatory language in their public appearances, statements, interviews, and other public situations.
- Recommend that Russia’s Parliament repeal the so-called “gay propaganda” ban [No. 135-FZ of June 29, 2013 on “propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations,” which effectively prohibits disseminating positive information about LGBT people as it serves to fuel homophobia and homophobic violence and runs contrary to Russia’s international human rights obligations.
- Ensure effective implementation of European Court of Human Rights rulings on Chechnya including by bringing perpetrators of violations to justice and taking concrete steps to prevent similar violations from reoccurring.
- Take all appropriate measures to ensure that all police officers respect the rights to non-discrimination, equality, and privacy, and do not discriminate in the exercise of their functions.
- Resolutely condemn all acts of violence and discrimination against LGBT people and ensure accountability for all those responsible for homophobic and transphobic attacks.

To the International Community

- The European Union, its member states, Canada, the United States, Australia, and other democratic governments should advance the recommendations contained in this report in multilateral forums, including at the Human Rights Council, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Council of Europe, and in their bilateral dialogues with the Russian government.
- The European Union, its member states, Canada, the United States, Australia, and other democratic governments should take steps to provide safe sanctuary to victims of the purge in Russia who find themselves facing imminent risk.
- The European Union, its member states, Canada, the United States, Australia, and other democratic governments should make regular inquiries as regards the progress in the investigation of the anti-gay purge in Chechnya and publicly demonstrate their support for journalists and human rights defenders working to expose and counter abuses by Chechen authorities.
- The UN Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity should closely monitor the situation in

- Chechnya, the steps taken by the Russian authorities to stop the brutal abuses, and the response by other countries in providing safe sanctuary to the victims.
- The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe should appoint a new rapporteur on human rights violations in the Northern Caucasus and treat the human rights situation in Chechnya as a priority item on its agenda with a view to holding, as soon as possible, a public debate on the situation.

To Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA)

- In light of Russia's hosting of the 2018 FIFA World Cup, FIFA should press the Russian government to state publicly that it will ensure, without discrimination, the safety and the freedom of expression and association of all athletes, coaches, fans, journalists and others who will attend or participate in the competition.
- FIFA should issue a clear public statement regarding support for LGBT rights and calling on all future hosts, including Russia, to demonstrate an unequivocal commitment to LGBT rights.

Methodology

In April, Human Rights Watch interviewed six former detainees and two persons otherwise affected by the anti-gay purge, who all fled Chechnya (the exact dates and locations of the interviews are withheld for security reasons). Their accounts were consistent with the reports published by *Novaya Gazeta* in April 2017. We also interviewed Russian LGBT Network activists who worked with former detainees and persons otherwise affected by the purge and *Novaya Gazeta* journalists who had interviewed former detainees. We also used information received from sources in Chechnya and in the Chechen diaspora in Europe who cannot be disclosed due to security concerns. All the interviews were carried out in Russian by a native speaker of Russian.

Human Rights Watch informed interviewees of the purpose of the interview, that they would receive no personal service or benefit, and that the interviews were completely voluntary. Interviewees gave oral informed consent to be interviewed. We have given interviewees pseudonyms and withheld certain details from their testimonies in this report to protect them and their families from retaliation.

We also thoroughly examined media reports, statements, and comments by officials, and other materials pertinent to the topic of the report and available in the public domain.

I. Background

For more than a decade, Ramzan Kadyrov has run Chechnya and, with the tacit blessing of the Kremlin, gradually built a tyranny, ruthlessly eradicating even the mildest forms of dissent.¹ His power is built on brutal repression with law enforcement and security agencies under his de facto control carrying out abduction-style detentions, enforced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial executions, and collective punishment practices. For years, they used these methods against alleged armed insurgents and their suspected collaborators but over time, they also used these methods against other groups deemed “undesirable” by Chechen authorities, such as local dissidents, independent journalists, Salafi Muslims, people who use drugs, and people caught driving while intoxicated.

Ramzan Kadyrov’s Rise to Power

In the 1990s, two wars over Chechnya’s status in the Russian Federation devastated the republic. In the early 2000s, after Russia’s large-scale military operations brought Chechnya back under Russian federal rule, the federal government gradually began to hand responsibility for governing the republic and carrying out counterinsurgency operations to pro-Kremlin Chechen leaders. This process was completed by 2004.

Seeking a figure who could gain the trust of important strata within Chechen society, the Kremlin chose Akhmat Kadyrov, the former mufti, or leading religious authority, of Chechnya, who then became president of Chechnya in October 2003. The federal government aimed to place most responsibility for law and order and counterinsurgency operations on Chechen security structures. An important factor in this process was Akhmat Kadyrov’s personal security service, which was headed by his son, Ramzan, and initially consisted mainly of Kadyrov’s relatives and co-villagers.

In May 2004, a bomb attack killed Akhmat Kadyrov and Russian authorities held a presidential election to find his replacement. Twenty-seven-year-old Ramzan inherited his father’s influence but was too young to run for president, and instead was appointed first vice prime minister in charge of security. In 2005 and into early 2006, he gained direct

¹ Human Rights Watch, *Like Walking a Minefield: Vicious Crackdown on Critics in Russia’s Chechen Republic*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/08/30/walking-minefield/vicious-crackdown-critics-russias-chechen-republic>.

influence over local law enforcement agencies.² In spring 2006, Ramzan Kadyrov became prime minister of Chechnya. In April 2007, Kadyrov was sworn in as president of the Chechen Republic, following his nomination to the post by President Vladimir Putin. By 2008, Kadyrov firmly established himself as the only real power figure in Chechnya.³ He won 97.94 percent of the vote in a 2016 election for the post of head of the Chechen republic.⁴

Kadyrov's War on Opponents and Lawless Counterinsurgency Tactics

For the past decade, there have been persistent, credible allegations that while aiming to root out and destroy an aggressive Islamist insurgency in the region, law enforcement and security agencies under Kadyrov's control have been involved in abductions, enforced disappearances, torture, extrajudicial executions, and collective punishment. The main targets have been alleged insurgents, their relatives, and suspected collaborators.⁵

Kadyrov also largely equates local Salafi Muslims with insurgents or their collaborators. He instructed police and local communities to closely monitor how people pray and dress and to punish those who stray from Sufi Islam, traditional for the region. In recent years, police raids against Salafis—or suspected Salafis—have become widespread. Often the detentions are not officially registered, and the detainees' families are not informed about the detainees' whereabouts or well-being. When detainees are released or find themselves in officially processed custody they do not file complaints or want to discuss what happened to them due to acute fear of reprisals.⁶

² See, for example, Center Demos, "Chechnya. Life at War [Чечня. Жизнь на войне]" (Moscow: Demos, 2007), p. 150.

³ See, for example, Memorial Human Rights Center, "Impunity Mechanisms in the Northern Caucasus (2009-2010) – How They Work [Механизмы безнаказанности на Северном Кавказе (2009-2010 гг.) – как они работают]," June 18, 2010, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/170287/> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁴ "Ramzan Kadyrov won the election of the head of Chechnya [Рамзан Кадыров одержал победу на выборах главы Чечни]," *Interfax*, September 19, 2016, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/528958> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁵ For more information, see: Human Rights Watch, *Widespread Torture in the Chechen Republic*, November 13, 2006, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2006/11/13/widespread-torture-chechen-republic>; and Human Rights Watch, *What Your Children Do Will Touch Upon You*, July 2, 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2009/07/02/what-your-children-do-will-touch-upon-you>. See also: Memorial Human Rights Center, "Impunity Mechanisms in the Northern Caucasus (2009-2010) – How They Work [Механизмы безнаказанности на Северном Кавказе (2009-2010 гг.) – как они работают]," June 18, 2010, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/170287/> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁶ Memorial Human Rights Center, "Counterterrorism in the Northern Caucasus: Human rights defenders' view. 2014 – first half of 2016 [Контртеррор на Северном Кавказе: Взгляд правозащитников. 2014 г. - первая половина 2016 г.]," http://hro.org/files/doklad_severnoy_kavkaz.pdf (accessed May 12, 2017), pp. 23-27.

Autocracy Under Kadyrov

Numerous experts on the North Caucasus describe Kadyrov's orders as being, in practice, the only law in the republic. They label Kadyrov's rule over Chechnya as a "personality cult regime."⁷ One recent report describes contemporary Chechnya as a "totalitarian state within a state," featuring Kadyrov's interference in virtually all aspects of social life, including politics, religion, academic discourse, and family matters.⁸

The cult created around Kadyrov and his family consolidates his full control over the republic. The main engine of this cult is Grozny TV, the state television and radio broadcast company.⁹ Most of its news and "current affairs" programs are linked to Kadyrov, and it often broadcasts segments in which Kadyrov is shown giving orders and chastising people, including senior local officials, for their errors. Kadyrov also actively uses social media to set his public agenda, demand obedience, designate and vilify enemies, and basically dictate the law. His Instagram account, which he launched in February 2013, gained a million subscribers by spring 2015. He also has accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and VKontakte, and according to Chechnya's Ministry for Press and Information, his total number of subscribers on social media is over two million.¹⁰

Testing the Kremlin's Tolerance

Ramzan Kadyrov frequently and zealously professes his loyalty to the Kremlin and to President Vladimir Putin personally. However, Kadyrov's insistence on having free rein in Chechnya has apparently begun to test the Kremlin's patience. Starting in late 2014, the Kremlin, including Putin himself, began to respond to some of Kadyrov's more outrageous actions with words that, though seemingly mild, were unmistakable rebukes.

⁷ See, for example, the November 2010 testimonies at the trial in Vienna (Austria) on the murder of a Chechen refugee, Umar Israilov, by Dick Marty, member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and former rapporteur on human rights in the North Caucasus, and Lord Judd, member of the UK Parliament and former rapporteur on Chechnya for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, as quoted in *Novaya Gazeta* by Anna Shpitzer and Elena Milashina, "Vienna Process [Венский Процесс]," *Novaya Gazeta*, December 1, 2010, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2010/135/22.html> (accessed December 7, 2010). See also, "Soldatov: In Chechnya there are no laws besides the will of Kadyrov [Солдатов: «В Чечне нет никаких законов, кроме воли Кадырова»]," *Rosbalt*, November 18, 2010, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/2010/11/18/791437.html> (accessed December 14, 2010).

⁸ Memorial Human Rights Center, "Counterterror in the Northern Caucasus: Human rights defenders' view. 2014 – first half of 2016 [Контртеррор на Северном Кавказе: Взгляд правозащитников. 2014 г. – первая половина 2016 г.]" http://hro.org/files/doklad_severnoy_kavkaz.pdf (accessed May 12, 2017), pp. 23-28.

⁹ Grozny TV is the Chechen branch of VGTRK, All Russian State Television and Radio Company.

¹⁰ TASS, "The Number of Kadyrov's Followers on Instagram Reached 1 Million [Число подписчиков страницы Кадырова в Instagram достигло 1 млн]," April 30, 2015, <http://tass.ru/obschestvo/1943706> (accessed August 15, 2016).

On December 18, 2014, following Kadyrov's public pledge to destroy houses of insurgents' families and several highly publicized episodes of house burnings that followed, President Putin issued a mild rebuke saying that no one, not even the head of Chechnya, has the right to impose extrajudicial punishment.¹¹ The significance of that seemingly gentle reprimand cannot be underestimated, as this was the very first time the Kremlin criticized Kadyrov publicly.

Ten days later, Kadyrov gave a dramatic speech in Grozny's soccer stadium, in front of thousands of armed members of his security forces. "We're telling the entire world that we are the combat infantry of Vladimir Putin," he said. Several analysts assessed this flamboyant display of loyalty as Kadyrov flexing his muscles, as if to caution the Kremlin that withdrawing political or financial support could cost dearly.¹² Notably, less than four months later, in response to a special operation in Chechnya by federal security forces, Kadyrov ordered his law enforcement officers to "shoot to kill" if they encountered Russian federal law enforcement or security personnel from outside Chechnya who come to the republic to carry out operations without his consent.¹³

In February 27, 2015, Boris Nemtsov, a leading Russian political opposition figure and a staunch critic of Ramzan Kadyrov, was assassinated several hundred meters from the Kremlin. The investigation quickly identified seven suspects, four of whom were either active or former members of Chechen law enforcement and security agencies; the others were either also from Chechnya or of Chechen origin. The authorities arrested five of the suspects, however they have been unable to arrest or even question a key suspect, Ruslan Geremeev, who at the time of Nemtsov's murder served as deputy commander of a law enforcement battalion in Chechnya that is under Kadyrov's control. According to numerous media reports, Geremeev is in Chechnya. While denying any involvement with Nemtsov's killing, Kadyrov spoke of the suspects fondly, said Geremeev had no other choice than to go into hiding, and hinted that he had been framed. At time of writing, the case against the arrested suspects had moved to trial.

¹¹ "How they destroy houses in Chechnya" [Как разрушают дома в Чечне], *Kavkazskii Uzel*, December 24, 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/253822/> (accessed August 3, 2016).

¹² Joshua Yaffa, "Putin's Dragon: Is the ruler of Chechnya out of control?" *The New Yorker*, February 8, 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/02/08/putins-dragon> (accessed June 15, 2016).

¹³ Paul Sonne, "President Ramzan Kadyrov Gives Shoot-To-Kill Order on Outside Forces," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 23, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/chechen-president-ramzan-kadyrov-gives-shoot-to-kill-order-on-outside-forces-1429812489> (accessed June 21, 2016).

Although Kadyrov has for years sharply criticized, often in aggressive tones, Russia's political opposition, investigative journalists, and human rights defenders, these comments have become more menacing. In January 2016, when speaking to the press in Grozny, Kadyrov attacked Russia's political opposition, accusing its members of anti-Russian "sabotage" and calling them "enemies of the people and traitors."¹⁴

Also in January 2016, Chechen authorities organized a mass pro-Kadyrov rally at which local officials named leading Russian opposition activists, describing them as "paid puppets" of the West and "national traitors."¹⁵ When commenting on the rally, Kadyrov repeatedly called these individuals "enemies" and announced a "war in every sense of the word" against them.¹⁶ Several weeks later, Kadyrov published a video on his Instagram featuring Mikhail Kasyanov, one of the most prominent Russian opposition politicians, in a gunman's crosshairs, accompanied by the caption, "Kasyanov came to Strasbourg to get money for the Russian opposition."¹⁷ Towards the end of the same day, after wide coverage in the Russian and international media, the video was removed from Kadyrov's account, allegedly by Instagram's administration.¹⁸

In the months before the 2016 republic-wide vote for head of Chechnya, noted above, local authorities undertook a vicious and comprehensive crackdown on critics and anyone whose total loyalty to Kadyrov they deem questionable. These included ordinary people who expressed dissenting opinions through social media or mobile platforms; critical

¹⁴ The Head and Government of the Chechen Republic, "R. Kadyrov: Opposition in Russia is not interested in a prosperous and strong country [Р. Кадыров: Оппозиция в России не заинтересована в процветающей и сильной стране]", January 12, 2016, <http://www.chechnya.gov.ru/page.php?r=126&id=17475> (accessed August 4, 2016).

¹⁵ "More than 57 percent of Chechen population attend rally in Grozny, MIA reports," *Caucasian Knot*, January 22, 2016, <http://eng.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/34357/> (accessed June 22, 2016). See also: Khava Khasmagomadova, "Those who scold Chechnya have never been here! [Те, кто ругают Чечню, никогда здесь не были!]," *Chechenskaya Respublika Segodnya*, January 22, 2016, <http://chechnyatoday.com/content/view/289491> (accessed June 22, 2016).

¹⁶ "Kadyrov: Every patriot should slap enemies of Russia [Кадыров: Любой патриот должен давать по морде врагам России]," *Life*, January 22, 2016, <https://life.ru/t/%Do%BD%Do%BE%Do%B2%Do%BE%D1%81%D1%82%Do%B8/181242> (accessed June 22, 2016).

¹⁷ "Chechnya's leader posts chilling video showing Russian opposition politician Mikhail Kasyanov in a sniper's CROSSHAIRS," *MailOnline*, February 1, 2016, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3426255/Chechen-leader-posts-video-opposition-crosshairs.html#ixzz4G5EAgcga> (accessed August 4, 2016).

¹⁸ Alec Luhn, "Chechen leader Kadyrov posts video of Russian opposition leader in gun sights," *The Guardian*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/01/ramzan-kadyrov-video-opposition-mikhail-kasyanov-rifle-sights> (accessed August 4, 2016).

Russian and foreign journalists; and the very few human rights defenders who challenge cases of abuse by Chechen law enforcement and security agencies.¹⁹

Residents of Chechnya who showed dissatisfaction with or seemed reluctant to applaud the Chechen leadership and its policies were the primary victims. The authorities, whether acting directly or through apparent proxies, unlawfully detained many of them—including through abductions and enforced disappearances—subjected them to beatings and death threats, and threatened and physically abused their family members. One man targeted in this campaign died in late 2015, after law enforcement officials forcibly disappeared and tortured him.

Police Harassment of Gay Men

For years, Chechen law enforcement and security officials have persecuted individual gay men, mainly for personal gain, beating them, blackmailing them, and extorting money from them. All of the interviewees mentioned such instances to Human Rights Watch. However, these did not rise to the level of organized violence documented in this report.²⁰

At the federal level, Russian authorities have actively enforced a 2013 law that bans disseminating information among children that portrays same-sex relationships as normal or acceptable and of equal value to heterosexual relationships. At this writing, Russian courts have found at least six people guilty of violating the federal anti-LGBT “propaganda” law.²¹

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, *Like Walking a Minefield: Vicious Crackdown on Critics in Russia's Chechen Republic*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/08/30/walking-minefield/vicious-crackdown-critics-russias-chechen-republic>.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch interviews with men rounded up in the purge and other persons affected by the purge, April 2017, exact dates and locations withheld.

²¹ According to information gathered by Human Rights Watch.

II. The Purge

Overview

The anti-gay police round-ups began in late February, ebbed by mid-March, and intensified towards the end of March through early April. Figures vary regarding the number of people rounded up. The Russian LGBT Network, a leading LGBT rights group in the country, opened a special hotline to provide emergency support to victims of the anti-gay purge who found themselves in immediate danger. The organization told Human Rights Watch that within the first three weeks of April, 75 people affected by the purge had contacted them, including 52 who had been held and tortured in unlawful detention facilities. *Novaya Gazeta* sent Russia's Investigative Committee a list of 26 persons, including some of the people rounded up in the anti-gay purge, held in unlawful confinement.²²

Former detainees told Human Rights Watch that after their release they had learned that at least three persons died as a result of the purge—a Chechen TV personality and two individuals affiliated with Chechnya's *muftiat* (Muslim authority). According to them, security officials returned all three to their relatives in very poor physical condition; one apparently died soon afterwards and the other two were reportedly killed by relatives.²³ One man who had been rounded up told us that he was absolutely certain of one death, as the information was passed on to him by a family member of the deceased.²⁴ Human Rights Watch could not independently confirm any of the deaths.

Two men who had been detained told Human Rights Watch they personally knew individuals who, according to their information, had not been released by mid-April. Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, Russia project director at International Crisis Group, also reported that some of the victims still “remain in detention.”²⁵

²² Elena Milashina, “Prophylactic work in Chechnya [В Чечне идут профилактические работы],” *Novaya Gazeta*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/24/72263-v-chechne-idut-profilakticheskie-raboty> (accessed May 12, 2017).

²³ Human Rights Watch interviews with men rounded up in the purge, April 2017, exact dates and locations withheld.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with a man rounded up in the purge, April 2017, exact date and location withheld.

²⁵ Ekaterina Sokirianskaia, “Chechnya's Anti-Gay Pogrom,” *The New York Times*, May 3, 2017, <https://mobile.nytimes.com/2017/05/03/opinion/chechnyas-anti-gay-pogrom.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-left-region®ion=opinion-c-col-left-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-left-region&referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fm.facebook.com> (accessed May 12, 2017).

According to *Novaya Gazeta*, security officials in Chechnya operate as many as six unofficial detention facilities.²⁶ Three interviewees told Human Rights Watch that on several occasions high-level local officials participated in the humiliation and ill-treatment of the men captured in the anti-gay purge.²⁷

How the Purge Began

In the last week of February, police officials in Argun (approximately 18 km east of Grozny) detained a young man at the time under the influence of a euphoria-inducing controlled substance and in searching his phone, found intimate photographs and messages, which indicated he was homosexual. While they did not officially process his detention, they interrogated him and examined his communications on social media and messaging apps. Using the information from the man's phone together with information the man provided under torture, the officials established the identity of several of his gay contacts. The police officials reported their findings to their superior, who apparently raised it with Magomed Daudov, the speaker of the Chechen parliament, a close colleague and confidante of Kadyrov, who is still widely known by his *nom de guerre*, Lord, and is viewed as the second most powerful man in Chechnya.²⁸

Daudov seems to have played a key role in both securing and giving approval from the Chechen leadership to set in motion the purge. Most of the former detainees interviewed by Human Rights Watch reported hearing the police who held and abused them refer to Daudov and to orders he allegedly issued about violence against gay men. Three of the interviewed detainees witnessed his presence at detention sites in Argun and Grozny.²⁹ *Novaya Gazeta* also reported Daudov's repeated visits to the unofficial detention facility in Argun.³⁰

²⁶ Elena Milashina, "Prophylactic work in Chechnya [В Чечне идут профилактические работы]," *Novaya Gazeta*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/24/72263-v-chechne-idut-profilakticheskie-raboty> (accessed May 12, 2017).

²⁷ Human Rights Watch interviews with men who had been rounded up in the purge, April 2017, exact dates and locations withheld.

²⁸ Ibid. See also, Elena Milashina and Irina Gordienko, "Violence against Chechen gay men [Расправы над чеченскими геями]," *Novaya Gazeta*, April 4, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/04/72027-raspravy-nad-chechenskimi-geyami-publikuem-svidetelstva> (accessed May 1, 2017); and Elena Milashina, "Prophylactic work in Chechnya [В Чечне идут профилактические работы]," *Novaya Gazeta*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/24/72263-v-chechne-idut-profilakticheskie-raboty> (accessed May 12, 2017).

²⁹ According to conversations among police overheard by detainees, Daudov was in contact with Kadyrov on the issue, but no detainee interviewed by Human Rights Watch saw Kadyrov at any site. Human Rights Watch interviews with men rounded up in the purge, April 2017, exact dates and locations withheld.

³⁰ Elena Milashina, "Prophylactic work in Chechnya [В Чечне идут профилактические работы]," *Novaya Gazeta*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/24/72263-v-chechne-idut-profilakticheskie-raboty> (accessed May 12, 2017).

The first victim's contacts, whom police in turn abducted and tortured, also provided information about other people presumed to be gay in Chechnya.

One of the former detainees told Human Rights Watch:

It was like a chain. They get one person, go through his phone, torture him, make him name some others, get those others, and so it goes... In the place where I was held, we were four [gay men] at first, but several days later we were already 20. At night, when we were left alone, I tried to convince the new arrivals to buck up, deny everything, not name anyone. I kept telling them that the more people we name, the more information we give, the longer we'll spend in this hell hole, the longer we'll be tortured... I was telling them, can't you see, those who talk are tortured even harder... But the torture was bad—the beatings, and the electric shocks especially—very few could bear it without breaking.³¹

Unlawful Detention and Torture

Police officials seized their victims from their homes, work, or the street, unlawfully transporting them to unofficial detention facilities without any form of due process. They also held numerous others at these facilities—mainly suspected jihadi sympathizers and suspected drug users. Two of the former detainees interviewed by Human Rights Watch said security officials held them at an unofficial detention center in Argun, on the premises of the former law enforcement compound on Kadyrov Street. Two others were held in unofficial detention centers in Grozny—at the Terek riot police unit base and the premises of Chechnya's Interior Ministry. The period of detention varied from several days to two weeks. Two interviewees told Human Rights Watch that their acquaintances had been held in an unlawful detention center in the town of Tsotsin-Yurt (approximately 30 kilometers east of Grozny).³²

All of the victims suffered repeated beatings—security officials kicked them with booted feet, beat them with polypropylene pipes and sticks, and made other inmates beat them.

³¹ Human Rights Watch interviews with former detainees, April 2017, exact dates and locations withheld.

³² Ibid.

Most of the blows were delivered on the men' buttocks and legs.³³ Two men showed Human Rights Watch photographs of themselves after they were released, in which they are shown with severe bruises inflicted from the beatings.

A former detainee told Human Rights Watch:

Among ourselves, we called it the "carousel". They [security officials] put you face down on the floor and beat you with pipes. Then, they force other prisoners to carry on with the beating. Each man gets some 70-80 blows. And so it goes... And you literally turn black and blue from waist to toes.³⁴

The torturers also used electrocution devices, which the former detainees described as machines with a knob on one side and wires sticking out of it. At the ends of the wires were either clothespin-like clips, which the captors attached to their victims' fingers, toes, and ear-lobes, or roundish horseshoe-shaped clips which they made the victims hold in their palms. The torturers turned the knob, giving shocks to the victims until they fainted. Then they waited for the victims to revive, and repeated the process.

A former detainee told Human Rights Watch:

They turn the knob, electric current hits you, and you start shaking. And they keep turning the hellish machine, and the pain is just insane, you scream, and scream, and you no longer know who you are... Finally, you faint, it all goes dark, but when you come to your senses, they start all over again. And once they're done with you and you get your bearings, you hear other inmates screaming, and the sounds of torture are just there all day, and at some point, you start losing your mind.³⁵

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with a former detainee, April 2017, exact date and location withheld.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch interviews with a former detainee, April 2017, exact date and location withheld.

Security officials also humiliated their victims, called them offensive names, spit in their faces, and encouraged and forced other detainees, held for unrelated reasons, to mock and abuse them.³⁶

A former detainee told Human Rights Watch:

Beatings, electric shocks I could deal with—I didn’t name any other gay people and didn’t admit to anything, despite the daily torture session... But the humiliation was unbearable. The [police officials] spat in our faces, they called us disgusting, offensive names, they goaded us... When they finally released me, I was close to hanging myself. I cannot live with this, I just can’t.³⁷

Several men rounded up in the purge said other officials would drop by the facilities to mock and berate them. At least two detainees identified Daudov as being present at the Argun facility, watching as police punched, kicked, and humiliated the men and contributing his own verbal abuse. Another detainee saw Daudov on the premises of a security compound in Grozny as he watched police officials abusing presumably gay detainees.³⁸ Otherwise the visitors were low-ranking police officers and other officials or the captor’s friends. “We were like a bunch of monkeys in a zoo,” a former detainee told Human Rights Watch. “They [captors] bring in all those people, point their finger, and go like, ‘look who we’ve got here, a bunch of fags!’”³⁹

Forced Outing to Families, Threats to Families, Threats of Honor Killings

After protracted detention and torture, the detainees were released to families, and at least some were subjected to further humiliation by being forced to “confess and repent” in front of their elder male relatives (mainly, fathers, uncles, and brothers). Officials then shamed the relatives for having gay family members and made the relatives shame the victims, thereby fueling a climate in which family abuse, including honor killings, might occur.

³⁶ Human Rights Watch interviews with former detainees, April 2017, exact dates and locations withheld.

³⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with a former detainee, April 2017, exact date and location withheld.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch interviews with former detainees, April 2017, exact date and location withheld.

³⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with a former detainee, April 2017, exact date and location withheld.

A former detainee told Human Rights Watch:

They [officials] took us [the interviewee along with other inmates presumed to be gay] to this place and our male family members were there, fathers, brothers, uncles... So, they are there looking at you and they [officials] shout abuse at you, call you names, the most offensive names, and they order you to step forward, admit it to your relatives, admit that you're gay. And you know they're likely to kill you if you don't or they'll just keep torturing you... Then, they chastise your family members, tell them they brought shame on the family by rearing a pervert, that it's a huge stain on family honor, a stain that needs to be cleansed... They wouldn't say it directly but we all knew what it meant.⁴⁰

According to two of the former detainees, Daudov presided over that debasing ceremony.⁴¹

Aftermath: Continued Peril for Gay Men in Chechnya and Other Parts of Russia

Men who were released and whose immediate families were supportive hoped for a reprieve, but some fled Chechnya after a new wave of detentions started in the second half of March. Several interviewees told Human Rights Watch that after their escape from Chechnya, Chechen security officials paid visits to their respective family members asking hostile questions and indicating that the family could come to harm if they failed to convince the “wanted” man to return to Chechnya.

Two others separately told Human Rights Watch that they fled Chechnya to other parts of Russia after learning that compromising information about them was in the cellphones of captured men. For this reason, they had an intense fear of being detained.⁴² One of them told Human Rights Watch:

Early in April, I found out through the grapevine they [security officials] detained this friend of mine... He had my contacts on his phone and some of our correspondence... Well, I just knew they'd come for me, so I made a

⁴⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with a former detainee, April 2017, exact date and location withheld.

⁴¹ Human Rights Watch interviews with former detainees, April 2017, exact dates and locations withheld.

⁴² Ibid.

run for it. But I keep checking with the guy's relatives and they [security officials] still have not returned him.⁴³

All of the interviewees told Human Rights Watch that there is nothing worse for a gay Chechen man than his family finding out about his sexual orientation. Once released from detention, several of the interviewed former detainees were able to convince their relatives that they had been apprehended by mistake. One of the former detainees explained:

They [my relatives] know how it is in those prisons—people are tortured and they say all sorts of things. So, they believed me when I said another man had slandered me under torture, just because he needed to name someone for the torture to stop. But if they [my relatives] find out for sure, they'll kill me, one of them will take it upon himself and do it, to protect family, to wash the shame off. And I understand—it's a terrible shame on the family.⁴⁴

Victims' fears that Chechen security forces or family members would hunt them down wherever they are in Russia are well-founded. Human Rights Watch is aware of at least four LGBT people who, in 2016, fled from Chechnya to other cities in Russia and then had to flee Russia because their families directly threatened to kill them.

Selected case summaries

Aslan, 38

Aslan (pseudonym) told Human Rights Watch that on an evening towards the end of March, Chechen security officials in black uniforms stopped his car at a police checkpoint in Grozny, checked his documents, then dragged him out of the car and into their vehicle without providing any explanation. They forced his head down on his knees and drove him to a law enforcement unit in Grozny. There, they handed him over to other law enforcement personnel, saying that they were delivering a “faggot.” Two officers took away his phone, made him strip, kicked him, and called him offensive names. They stepped out of the room a few minutes later, leaving him there naked. He said:

⁴³ Human Rights Watch interview with a former detainee, April 2017, exact date and location withheld.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with a former detainee, April 2017, exact date and location withheld.

I knew I was done for. I knew I'd be tortured and my health is too frail, I just couldn't live through torture. I knew some of the others—those who got rounded up in late February—and what they went through. I couldn't possibly cope with anything like that... And then this other officer walked in—and he actually sort of knew me. That man saved my life.

Aslan also said the officer realized he was gravely ill, so he took pity on him, retrieved his clothes, ordered him to dress quickly, led him into a corridor, opened the door, and told him to “run quickly.” Aslan went into hiding. Several days later, he contacted the Russian LGBT Network hotline and fled to a city in central Russia with their assistance.

Zurab, 32

Zurab (pseudonym) spent a week in an unofficial detention facility in Grozny. On the evening of March 1 or 2, he was at home in Grozny when a neighborhood police officer came for him. The police officer ordered Zurab to come with him, saying other security officials had some questions for him. Zurab asked what it was about, but the officer said he did not know. As Zurab was getting dressed, he quickly deleted from his cell phone all evidence of his communications with other gay men. The police officer drove Zurab to a security compound in Grozny and handed him over to officials there. The officials dragged Zurab into a room, where he saw two of his gay acquaintances. One of them was bloodied and bruised from a recent beating. Also, a very high-level Chechen official was in the room:

They [security officials] positioned me in front of those two guys while the powerful man was watching us and told me to tell the truth about who I was and my relationship with them. I never had any sexual relations with those two and I said they were just business contacts.

Zurab also described the torture he was subjected to:

They beat me, they gave me electric shocks attaching wires to my ear-lobes. I was actually very surprised how high my tolerance for pain is. I would not give in. I insisted those two lied about me—and they eventually confessed they had lied just to avoid more torture.

The electric shocks and the bad beatings were only on the first day. During the rest of my time there, it was mainly random kicks and punches and being hit with a plastic hose. But the humiliation was the worst part of it. They called me a ‘woman,’ a ‘fag,’ an ‘ass-bugger’... the most offensive things one can call a man. They mocked me, taunted me. I could not stand it. I wished they just killed me.

Zurab spent seven days in a cell with bars at the front. The other two gay men were held in identical cages next to him. There were several other detainees in other cages whose detentions were unrelated to the anti-gay purge. According to Zurab, his captors did not feed him the entire week, and he lost ten kilograms while in captivity. They gave him water for ablutions in accordance with Muslim ritual and allowed him to drink it after the prayers.

When security officials released Zurab they said they found no evidence proving that he was indeed gay but that they would keep an eye on him. They also told him to “stay put” in Grozny. A couple of weeks later, a gay friend got in touch with him saying that security officials had rounded up a common acquaintance. Zurab fled immediately because that man was likely to have some “compromising information” about him on his smartphone. “I could not face another detention... And then, there is now this new information about me at their disposal and if they showed [it] to my relatives... If my father doesn’t kill me, my uncle will,” Zurab said.

Khasan, 20

In the fall of 2016, Chechen security officials beat Khasan (pseudonym), a university student, and forced him to pay them a large sum of money under threat of informing his family about his homosexuality.

Khasan told Human Rights Watch that he met a man online and agreed to go on a date with him, but the man turned out to be a provocateur.

When we met, he told me there was an apartment outside the city limits where we could spend some time together. I did not suspect anything . . . He drove from Grozny towards Argun for some 30 minutes, then suddenly turned off the road into a field saying he needed to take a leak. Three

security officials in black uniforms were waiting for us there. I understood everything as soon as I saw them, I begged him to turn back, I cried—but he pushed me out of the car. They beat me, kicked me, and punched me in the face. They stripped me naked and filmed me on a cell phone, as they gave a running commentary about having caught a ‘faggot.’

The officials took Khasan’s smart phone and found numerous, intimate photographs and some of his correspondence with other gay men. They then drove off, leaving Khasan with a broken jaw and multiple bruises. They gave him a few weeks to deliver several thousand dollars, saying that if he failed they would show his relatives the video of his humiliation and the photographs on his phone. Khasan sold all his valuable electronic equipment, borrowed some money, and came up with the sum his blackmailers demanded. “I did not have a choice. If my relatives found out about me being gay, the shame for the family would be unbearable,” he said.

Afterwards, Khasan stayed in a town in central Russia for several months, and finally returned to Chechnya just as the anti-gay purge began towards the end of February 2017. Soon after his return, he learned that security officials had abducted several of his gay acquaintances. Then, on April 1, a friend’s mother called him in tears saying police had dragged her son away. Khasan immediately went into hiding because this friend had images and other information on his phone indicative of Khasan’s homosexuality. He could not run far because he had no money and was desperate from fear of being caught. His contacts told him about the LGBT Network’s hotline, he sought their assistance, and they arranged for his immediate evacuation to a town elsewhere in Russia. At the time of the interview, he knew from his friend’s mother that his friend was still in unlawful detention.

Magomed, 35

Chechen security officials detained Magomed (pseudonym) during the last week of February. He spent 11 days in the unofficial detention facility in Argun, where numerous other men presumed to be gay were held and tortured.

Three security officials, one of them in a black uniform, accosted Magomed in a public place in Grozny. They had a gay acquaintance with them, in hand-cuffs. The officials asked Magomed whether he understood what they were after. When he said no, one of the men

hit Magomed on the head. The officials handcuffed him, dragged him into a car, and drove him to a law enforcement compound in Grozny. Later that evening, security officials moved Magomed, his acquaintance, and two other men, whom they had also abducted presuming them to be gay, to an illegal detention facility located on the premises of a former law enforcement and security compound in Argun. According to Magomed, they were the only gay inmates there that night, but starting the next morning new detainees kept arriving and by the end of the week, the number of gay detainees at the facility stood at 20. They were held together with other unofficial detainees, including drug users and suspected Islamist radicals. The total number of detainees at the facility generally fluctuated between 40 and 50 persons, with some being taken away and others brought in.⁴⁵

Based on Magomed's observations and conversations with inmates held for other reasons, drug users generally were released after a few days, but some of those suspected of supporting jihadists had been there for weeks or months before the arrival of gay inmates. According to Magomed, security officials tortured and otherwise abused all the inmates. He specifically described the treatment of gay men by their captors:

Every day it was torture, torture, and more torture. We were left in peace only at night. They electrocuted us, beat us with pipes, kicked us, and punched us, they made other inmates beat us, they called us names, spat in our faces. They humiliated us so badly that the humiliation was in a sense worse than physical abuse.

According to Magomed, on one occasion, security officials drove the men they presumed to be gay from Argun to a law enforcement facility in Grozny, where high-level local officials berated them and watched them being tortured.

Magomed was released after 11 days of unofficial confinement. The release took place in Grozny, where family members of many of the detainees, including Magomed's relatives, had all assembled in an official facility on orders of local security officials. The officials shouted abuse at the detainees while their family members were forced to stand and

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch has no information as regards the fate of those individuals that were "led away." They could have been released, moved to another unlawful detention facility, or moved to official custody, with their detentions finally processed and some charges brought against them.

listen. Each detainee had to step forward, face his family and “confess” his sexual orientation. The officials would then shame him and shame his relatives for bringing up a “pervert” and thereby tainting family honor. “Our relatives were in tears and they [officials] were telling them, ‘You know what to do now.’ They didn’t say ‘kill’ but it was all crystal clear,” Magomed said. One of the detainees refused to “confess” and security officials refused to release him to his relatives. Several other detainees were not released because their family members did not show up.

Magomed, whose immediate family proved to be supportive, returned home. Officials ordered him not to leave Chechnya. After a few quiet weeks, he started hearing about repeat detentions of gay people. At the end of March, an acquaintance told him that security officials were on their way to get him. He immediately fled Chechnya for a neighboring region without even stopping to pack a bag, and from there went to central Russia. “My life is ruined. I cannot go back. And it’s not safe here [in central Russia] either,” Magomed said.

Reaction by Chechnya’s Officials and Public Figures

Chechen officials and public figures responded to the anti-gay purge allegations by denying the very existence of “non-traditional sexual orientation,” in Chechnya and by accusing journalists and human rights organizations of slandering the Chechen people and seeking to destabilize Chechnya by spreading lies. Their remarks were viciously homophobic. Some of the speakers also indirectly encouraged or condoned honor killings of LGBT people.

On April 1, in his very first response to the allegations, Ramzan Kadyrov’s spokesperson called the *Novaya Gazeta* report “absolute lies and disinformation,” contending that there were no gay people in Chechnya and then adding, “If there were such people in Chechnya, law enforcement agencies wouldn’t need to have anything to do with them because their relatives would send them somewhere from which there is no returning.”⁴⁶ Later, he said in another interview, “There are no LGBT at all in the Chechen republic. To be honest, I’m not sure what the acronym stands for, but I know it’s

⁴⁶ “In Grozny, they called lies the information about detentions of gay men in Chechnya [В Грозном назвали ложью сообщения о задержаниях гомосексуалистов в Чечне],” *Interfax*, April 1, 2017, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/556385> (accessed May 12, 2017).

something bad. And no such community exists in Chechnya.”⁴⁷ Magomed Selimkhanov, a State Duma deputy from Chechnya, made similar comments, “In Chechnya, there are no gays, so there is no attitude towards them. Personally, I think that they belong two meters under the ground.”⁴⁸

Chechnya’s official news agency, Grozny Info, quoted numerous local commentators bashing *Novaya Gazeta* and other “enemies” of Chechnya and Russia for supposed attempts to discredit the Chechen people, “foster sodomy,” and undermine “traditional values.”⁴⁹ Ramzan Kadyrov’s Council on Civil Society Development and Human Rights also issued a statement describing the allegations as “part of a large-scale provocation aimed at destabilizing public and political stability in the republics of [Russia’s] Northern Caucasus.”⁵⁰

On April 22, in a media interview, Kadyrov flagged that the allegations “offended [Chechen] people as whole” and said with reference to homosexuality, “These are not traditional things, psychiatrically abnormal things. We don’t understand them. Our people do not understand.”⁵¹

Journalists from *Novaya Gazeta* the newspaper that first exposed the purge have been threatened and subjected to a hate campaign by Russian and Chechen officials as well as clerics and public figures close to Chechen authorities. In addition to accusing the paper of false reports and slander, leading local powerful figures directly threatened the journalists. On April 3, Chechen television broadcast a gathering of Chechnya’s religious leaders and public figures, together with what it said was 15,000 people at the main mosque in Grozny,

⁴⁷ “Alvi Karimov responded to the UK Foreign Minister statement [Альви Каримов ответил на заявление замглавы британского МИДа],” *Grozny Inform*, April 26, 2017, <http://www.grozny-inform.ru/news/politic/84351/> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁴⁸ “State Duma member Selimkhanov: Gay men belong two meters under the ground [Депутат Госдумы Селимханов: «Место геев в двух метрах под землей»],” *МК*, April 14, 2017, <http://www.mk.ru/politics/2017/04/14/deputat-gosdumy-selimkhanov-mesto-geev-v-dvukh-metrakh-pod-zemley.html> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁴⁹ “Novaya Gazeta changed orientation [“Новая газета” изменила ориентацию],” *Grozny Inform*, April 2, 2017, <http://www.grozny-inform.ru/news/society/83453/> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁵⁰ “Statement by the Council on Civil Society Development and Human Rights before the head of the Chechen Republic [Заявление Совета при Главе Чеченской Республики по развитию гражданского общества и правам человека],” *Russian Presidential Council on Civil Society Development and Human Rights*, April 4, 2017, <http://www.president-sovet.ru/presscenter/news/read/3844/> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁵¹ “Ramzan Kadyrov commented on the situation around Novaya Gazeta [Рамзан Кадыров прокомментировал ситуацию с «Новой газетой»],” *РБК*, April 22, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16zUoOyXNA&feature=youtu.be&t=315> (accessed May 12, 2017).

to protest the April 1 article in *Novaya Gazeta* on the anti-gay purge.⁵² In a speech to the crowd, a local religious authority and an adviser to Kadyrov called *Novaya Gazeta* journalists “enemies of our faith and of our motherland.” The crowd adopted a resolution that threatened retribution against the journalists “wherever they are and without any statute of limitations.”⁵³

On April 15, Chechnya's press and information minister, Jambulat Umarov, published on Instagram his open letter to *Novaya Gazeta's* editor, demanding that the newspaper “apologize to the Chechen people” for suggesting that gay men exist among Chechens, calling it a “filthy provocation.”⁵⁴ Umarov also demanded that *Novaya Gazeta* reveal its sources, and warned that if the newspaper did not stop publishing “hysteria” about “non-existent threats,” then people who are “more annoyed by your newspaper than we are” would “take care” of them.

In an April 13 statement on its website, *Novaya Gazeta* said it feared for the safety of the entire paper's staff because of the threats.⁵⁵ The newspaper called on the Russian authorities to “do everything possible to put an end to the actions aimed at inciting hatred and hostility against journalists.” Once the statement was published, numerous users experienced problems with access, as the site was apparently targeted in a DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) attack.⁵⁶

On April 14, Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said the Kremlin had received a letter from *Novaya Gazeta's* chief editor about the threats, and that

⁵² Chechen ‘Grozny-TV’ broadcasting video was deleted from the YouTube video hosting. See footage from the video at “No threat to journalists shall be ignored [“Любыми угрозами в адрес журналистов нельзя пренебрегать”. Как “Новая газета” будет защищать своих репортеров после угроз из Чечни],” *Current Time TV*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/28431483.html> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁵³ “Novaya Gazeta Statement on open threats to its editorial team [Заявление «Новой газеты» в связи с открытыми угрозами, прозвучавшими в адрес редакции],” *Novaya Gazeta*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/13/72146-zayavlenie-novoy-gazety-v-svyazi-s-otkrytymi-ugrozami-prozvuchavshimi-v-adres-redaktsii> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁵⁴ Jambulat Umarov (djambox), “Mister Muratov! As an official person myself... [Господин Муратов! Я, как должностное лицо...],” *Instagram*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/BS4KTjFBS7T/> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁵⁵ “Novaya Gazeta Statement on open threats to its editorial team [Заявление «Новой газеты» в связи с открытыми угрозами, прозвучавшими в адрес редакции],” *Novaya Gazeta*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/13/72146-zayavlenie-novoy-gazety-v-svyazi-s-otkrytymi-ugrozami-prozvuchavshimi-v-adres-redaktsii> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁵⁶ “Novaya Gazeta reported about possible relation between DDoS attack and the publication about gay men in Chechnya [“Новая газета” заявила о возможной связи DDoS-атаки с публикациями о ситуации с геями в Чечне],” *Kavkazskii Uzel*, April 14, 2017, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/301041/> (accessed May 12, 2017).

the Kremlin was following the situation closely.⁵⁷ He also deplored any action that would “threaten the life or safety of journalists.” He emphasized that anyone who was offended by the publications should turn to the courts and act within the law.

Later, various local officials denied that the anti-gay protest in Grozny involving religious and public figures, the resulting resolution, and other overtly aggressive official rhetoric represented any threat of retaliation. For example, Chechnya’s ombudsman, Nurdy Nukhazhiev, told the press, “The statement by *Novaya Gazeta* that ‘the resolution [by the anti-gay protest in the mosque] pushes religious fanatics to attack the journalists’ is nothing but cheap populism, with no legal foundation.”⁵⁸ Chechnya’s press and information minister invited *Novaya Gazeta* journalists to come and investigate the situation on the ground, provided that they show respect for traditions and mentality of the Chechen people and refrain from using words that could offend [such as “gay”].⁵⁹

On April 17, Russia’s Investigative Committee spokesmen told the press that the agencies were running an inquiry into the allegations of threats against *Novaya Gazeta* journalists.⁶⁰

On April 19, *Novaya Gazeta* received an envelope in the mail with the sender’s address listed as Grozny. The envelope contained an unidentified white powder clearly meant to intimidate.⁶¹ The next day, the newspaper received another, identical envelope with white powder in it.⁶² Investigation officials took the envelopes for examination as part of the inquiry.

⁵⁷ “Peskov commented on Novaya Gazeta complaint about threats from Chechnya [Песков прокомментировал обращение “Новой газеты” об угрозах из Чечни],” *Vedomosti*, April 14, 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2017/04/14/685713-peskov> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁵⁸ “Chechnya ombudsman: there are no threats to journalists coming from the religious meeting resolution [Омбудсмен Чечни: в резолюции собрания богословов нет угроз журналистам],” *TASS*, April 16, 2017, <http://tass.ru/obschestvo/4186680> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁵⁹ “J. Umarov: We welcome Novaya Gazeta journalists [Д. Умаров: Мы готовы принять журналистов “Новой газеты”],” *Grozny Inform*, April 17, 2017, <http://www.grozny-inform.ru/news/society/84030/> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁶⁰ “Russia’s Investigative Committee started to check information about the threats towards Novaya Gazeta [СКР начал проверку сообщений об угрозах в адрес «Новой газеты»],” *Vedomosti*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2017/04/17/686055-skr-novoi-gazeti> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁶¹ “Novaya Gazeta received an envelope with white powder and ‘Grozny’ signature [В редакцию «Новой газеты» прислали конверт с белым порошком и подписью «Грозный». Мы вызвали МЧС и полицию],” *Novaya Gazeta*, April 19, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/2017/04/19/130855-v-svyazi-s-obnaruzheniem-konverta-s-neizvestnym-poroshkom-v-zdani-redaktsii-novoy-gazety-rabotayut-mchs-i-politsiya> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁶² “Novaya Gazeta received one more suspicious envelope [Редакция «Новой газеты» снова получила подозрительный конверт],” *Rosbalt*, April 20, 2017, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/moscow/2017/04/20/1609393.html> (accessed May 12, 2017).

In an April 22 media interview, Kadyrov accused *Novaya Gazeta* journalists of inventing threats for the purposes of “self-promotion.”⁶³ He said they “receive petty cash from Western security services” for their false reports and reproached other media workers for not “asking those mercenary devils to apologize to the Chechen people, get on their knees because they offended, humiliated, and brought [false] accusations.”

Elena Milashina, the *Novaya Gazeta* reporter who wrote the first article about the anti-gay purge, was personally named in numerous aggressive statements by Chechen officials and public figures. Milashina began reporting on Chechnya after her colleague and mentor who had covered Chechnya, Anna Politkovskaya, was shot dead in a contract killing in Moscow in October 2006.⁶⁴ In recent years, Milashina has received numerous death threats in connection with her Chechnya work.⁶⁵ The authorities have not effectively investigated the threats against her. Fearing for her safety after numerous threats related to her reporting on the anti-gay purge, Milashina’s colleagues convinced her to temporarily move to a safe country and Milashina left Russia towards the end of April.

Reaction by Federal Officials

Russian federal authorities initially dismissed reports about the violence. Then, after the international outcry described below, they made some commitments to investigate. However, two weeks later, when victims did not step forward to participate in the investigation, officials rushed to dismiss reports about the anti-gay purge as unsubstantiated.

Soon after *Novaya Gazeta*’s April 1 article exposing the anti-gay purge, President Putin’s spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, stated that the Kremlin was previously not aware of the situation, but that law enforcement authorities would look into the media reports and

⁶³ “Ramzan Kadyrov commented on the situation around Novaya Gazeta [Рамзан Кадыров прокомментировал ситуацию с «Новой газетой»],” *RBK*, April 22, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16zUoOyXNA&feature=youtu.be&t=315> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁶⁴ Tanya Lokshina (Human Rights Watch), “Why Anna Politkovskaya Still Inspires” commentary, *CNN*, October 7, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/10/07/why-anna-politkovskaya-still-inspires>.

⁶⁵ “Russia: Investigative Journalist Facing Death Threats,” Human Rights Watch press release, June 10, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/10/russia-investigative-journalist-facing-death-threats>.

recommended that those who “in their opinion” suffered abuse by law enforcement officials should report the cases to authorities.⁶⁶

On April 17, the Prosecutor General’s Office told the media that the prosecutor’s office of the Chechen Republic had launched a preliminary inquiry into the allegations.⁶⁷ At the same time, Russia’s chief criminal investigation agency, the Investigation Committee, launched a preliminary inquiry, conducted from federal offices in Russia. A week later, *Novaya Gazeta* reported that the designated investigator from the Investigation Committee questioned their journalists and received detailed information, including personal details of some of the victims.⁶⁸

On April 18, Russia’s ombudsperson, Tatyana Moskalkova, told the press that she had received official responses to the letters of inquiry she had sent two weeks earlier to “the competent authorities” in connection with the allegations of the anti-gay purge. She said that the Prosecutor General’s Office, Russia’s Investigation Committee, Chechnya’s Interior Ministry, and Chechnya’s Prosecutor’s Office had all informed her office that they had received no individual complaints on the issue.⁶⁹ She encouraged alleged victims “not to be afraid to contact law enforcement agencies” and pointed out that they could resort to the governmental protection program for victims and witnesses of crimes, which, if necessary could provide bodyguards and changes of identity.⁷⁰ Two days later, at a meeting with members of parliament, Moskalkova said that in light of the continued absence of individual complaints, she suspected that the allegations were “a provocation,

⁶⁶ “Peskov admitted he has no expertise to respond to the question about gay men in Chechnya [Песков признался в отсутствии квалификации для ответа на вопрос о геех в Чечне],” *Izvestia*, April 3, 2017, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/556565> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁶⁷ “Prosecutor’s Office of the Chechen Republic started to check the information about the persecution of gay men [Прокуратура Чечни начала проверку информации о преследовании геев],” *Vedomosti*, April 17, 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2017/04/17/685967-prokuratura> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁶⁸ Elena Milashina, “Prophylactic work in Chechnya [В Чечне идут профилактические работы],” *Novaya Gazeta*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/24/72263-v-chechne-idut-profilakticheskie-raboty> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁶⁹ “Moskalkova will forward an inquiry about cases of abduction in Chechnya [Москалькова направит запрос в Генпрокуратуру о похищениях людей в Чечне],” *RIA Novosti*, April 6, 2017, <https://ria.ru/incidents/20170406/1491663764.html> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁷⁰ “Moskalkova called on Chechen gay men not to be afraid to contact law enforcement agencies [Москалькова призвала геев в Чечне не бояться обращаться к правоохранителям],” *RIA Novosti*, April 18, 2017, <https://ria.ru/society/20170418/1492473890.html> (accessed May 12, 2017).

a false report.”⁷¹ On April 24, Russia’s deputy prosecutor general, Alexander Buxman, stated that the prosecutor’s office was not aware of any individual complains by victims of the alleged purge in Chechnya.⁷²

On April 19, against the backdrop of a staggering media outcry and statements of concerns by international actors (see below), President Putin met with Ramzan Kadyrov. Official reports indicate that they mostly spoke about economic issues—housing, unemployment, and agriculture. But in the middle of the seemingly routine conversation Kadyrov mentioned “provocative articles about the Chechen Republic, the supposed events... the supposed detentions...”⁷³ Kadyrov indignantly denied the allegations, and Putin did not ask him any questions about it.

The next day, the Kremlin’s spokesperson told the press that with no official complaints lodged by the alleged victims, the Kremlin perceived the allegations as “phantom.”⁷⁴ “We know that when a law is violated, people go to the police,” he stressed. On April 24, Peskov said, “We have no reasons to believe that Kadyrov could provide false information to the head of the State. Until there are some personal complaints in that respect... not abstract, impersonal, but personal, we have no grounds to distrust the head of the [Chechen] republic.”⁷⁵

In a meeting with President Putin on May 5, federal ombudsperson Moskalkova requested that the president appoint an inter-agency group in central Russia, rather than in Chechnya, to look into the allegations “and receive people’s requests if any are made.” She

⁷¹ “Moskalkova suspects that information about Chechen gay men was a provocation [Москалькова заподозрила донос в сообщениях о преследованиях геев в Чечне],” *Interfax*, April 20, 2017, <http://www.interfax.ru/russia/559213> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁷² “Prosecutor’s Office: there were no official complaints about LGBT persecution in Chechnya [Генпрокуратура: официальных заявлений о притеснении в Чечне представителей ЛГБТ не было],” *Kommersant*, April 24, 2017, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3281145> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁷³ “We found common ground today: Kadyrov discussed ‘RosNeft’ and ‘murders in Chechnya’ with Putin [«Сегодня мы нашли общий язык»: Кадыров обсудил с Путиным «Роснефть» и «убийства в Чечне»],” *TV Rain*, April 20, 2017, <https://tvrain.ru/news/vstrecha-432835/> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁷⁴ “Peskov on anonymous gay men persecution in Chechnya: Are they afraid to ask for protection? [Песков об анонимных притесненных геях Чечни: Они что, боятся, что их возьмут под защиту?]” *REN TV 4*, April 20, 2017, <http://ren.tv/novosti/2017-04-20/peskov-ob-anonimnyh-pritesnennyh-geyah-chechni-oni-chto-boyatsya-chto-ih-vozmuet> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁷⁵ “Peskov: Kremlin has no ground to doubt Kadyrov [Песков: у Кремля нет оснований не верить Кадырову],” *TASS*, April 24, 2017, http://tass.ru/politika/4206948?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=smm_social_share (accessed May 12, 2017).

acknowledged the reluctance of victims and witnesses to come forward and publicized witness protection provisions in Russian criminal procedure. In an unprecedented move, Putin agreed to speak with the prosecutor general and interior minister about the allegations. Ramzan Kadyrov claimed he was “ready to cooperate” with federal inquiries, but at the same time continued to deny the existence of gay people in Chechnya.⁷⁶

On May 13, Ruslan Alkhanov, the head of Chechnya’s Interior Ministry, asserted that the ministry looked into the allegations but could not confirm any facts of persecution of gay men in Chechnya. He described the allegations as a “provocation” by “so-called human rights defenders.”⁷⁷ A week later, *Novaya Gazeta* reported that Chechen officials tried to undermine the investigation by ignoring the federal investigator’s initial requests to speak with them, and that local security officials had pressured the families of some of the men who had fled Chechnya.⁷⁸

On May 16, the federal ombudsperson told the press that she had received new information from *Novaya Gazeta* and passed that information on to the country’s chief investigation agency. Moskalkova reiterated her readiness to speak to “anyone who wants protection and official investigation” and pledged to ensure these people can benefit from state protection.⁷⁹

All interviewees told Human Rights Watch they could not contemplate filing official complaints while they are still in Russia, as they feared local authorities would find them and retaliate against them. Most also said that even from abroad they would not feel safe enough to file a complaint because they fear the consequences of being exposed to their respective family members and local communities (and of their whole families being thereby publicly shamed).⁸⁰

⁷⁶ “Putin vows to discuss gay rights issue in North Caucasus with prosecutor general,” *TASS*, May 5, 2017, <http://tass.com/politics/944803> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁷⁷ “The Chechen Ministry of Internal Affairs did not reveal persecution of gays in the republic [МВД Чечни не обнаружило преследования геев в республике],” *Meduza*, May 13, 2017, <https://meduza.io/news/2017/05/13/mvd-chechni-ne-obnaruzhilo-presledovaniya-geev-v-respublike> (accessed May 15, 2017).

⁷⁸ Elena Milashina, “In Chechnya, there is panic and sabotage [В Чечне паника и саботаж],” *Novaya Gazeta*, May 22, 2017, <https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/05/22/72521-panika-i-sabotazh> (accessed May 22, 2017).

⁷⁹ “Moskalkova gave the Russian Investigative Committee new information on gays in Chechnya [Москалькова передала в СК России новые данные о геях в Чечне],” *Rosbalt*, May 16, 2017, <http://www.rosbalt.ru/russia/2017/05/16/1615502.html> (accessed May 22, 2017).

⁸⁰ Human Rights Watch interviews with men rounded up in the purge, April 2017, exact date and location withheld.

Their fears of official retaliation are well-founded. In recent years, Human Rights Watch has documented numerous cases of Chechen authorities retaliating against local residents for filing official complaints, including in cases when the complainants fled Chechnya for another Russian regions.⁸¹ We have also documented a case in which Chechen gunmen in Vienna shot and killed a Chechen refugee who was seeking justice for torture he had endured in Chechnya.⁸² For this reason, with very few exceptions, victims of torture and other horrific abuses refrain from seeking justice or withdraw their complaints as a result of threats, including death threats and threats of retaliation against family members. Moreover, as described above, LGBT people are particularly vulnerable in Chechnya, where homophobia is intense, rampant, and fueled by local authorities. They are in danger not only of persecution by Chechen officials but also of falling victim to “honor killings” by their own relatives for been seen to tarnish family honor.

International Outcry

The anti-gay purge in Chechnya prompted a strong international outcry.

Representatives of the intergovernmental institutions, including the European Union, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the United Nations, expressed grave concern regarding the allegations. They urged the Russian government to ensure the safety of those at risk due to their sexual orientation, conduct prompt, effective and thorough investigations into the reports of abductions and killings, and bring to justice all responsible in such crimes.

“The Russian Federation must officially state that it does not tolerate any form of incitement to violence, social stigmatization of homosexuality or hate speech, and does not condone discrimination or violence against people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity,” stated UN human rights experts Sètondji Roland Adjovi, Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Agnes Callamard, Special Rapporteur on

⁸¹ Human Rights Watch, *Like Walking a Minefield: Vicious Crackdown on Critics in Russia's Chechen Republic*, August 30, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/08/30/walking-minefield/vicious-crackdown-critics-russias-chechen-republic>; See also, Tanya Lokshina (Human Rights Watch), “Tyranny Versus a Village Man in Chechnya” commentary, *Open Democracy*, December 12, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/12/tyranny-versus-village-man-chechnya>.

⁸² The indictment stated that the victim, Umar Israilov, “was to be kidnapped and taken out of Austria, where he was to be handed over to the authorities of the Russian republic of Chechnya. If the plan could not be carried out, murder was seen as an alternative. The prosecutor called it a “political murder.” See “Austria: Press Russia on Chechen Murder Link,” Human Rights Watch press release, June 2, 2011, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/06/02/austria-press-russia-chechen-murder-link>.

extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions; Nils Melzer, Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment; David Kaye, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; and Vitit Muntarbhorn, Independent Expert on violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.⁸³

Numerous Western governments, including Canada and the UK, deplored acts of violence based on sexual orientation and called on Russia to honor its international law commitments and uphold the rule of law.⁸⁴ Canada's foreign minister called the alleged detention and killings of gay and bisexual men in Chechnya "reprehensible" and urged Russian authorities "to immediately ensure the safety of all persons in Chechnya who may be at risk due to their sexual orientation."⁸⁵ In his statement on the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, Canada's prime minister specifically deplored "the recent, reprehensible reports of violations of the human rights of gay and bisexual men in Chechnya."⁸⁶

The foreign ministers of France, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and Sweden sent a joint letter to Russia's foreign minister urging the Russian government to ensure an effective investigation into the allegations.⁸⁷ German chancellor Angela Merkel at her meeting with President Putin urged Putin to use his influence to protect rights of LGBT people: "...in particular that we are getting negative reports about how gay people are

⁸³ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "End abuse and detention of gay men in Chechnya, UN human rights experts tell Russia," April 13, 2017, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=21501&LangID=E> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁸⁴ Government of the UK, "Minister condemns persecution of LGBT community in Chechnya," April 7, 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/minister-condemns-persecution-of-lgbt-community-in-chechnya> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁸⁵ Government of Canada, "Canada calls persecution of LGBTQ2 people in Chechnya reprehensible," April 15, 2017, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/04/canada_calls_persecutionoflgbtq2peopleinchechnyareprehensible.html (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁸⁶ Justin Trudeau, Prime Minister of Canada, "Statement by the Prime Minister of Canada on the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia," May 17, 2017, <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2017/05/17/statement-prime-minister-canada-international-day-against-homophobia-transphobia-and> (accessed May 18, 2017).

⁸⁷ "Five EU countries call on Moscow to protect homosexuals in Chechnya," *UAWIRE*, May 4, 2017, <https://uawire.org/news/five-eu-countries-called-on-moscow-to-protect-gays-in-chechnya> (accessed May 12, 2017).

being treated in Chechnya. I asked President Vladimir Putin to use his influence to protect these minority rights....”⁸⁸

The US State Department expressed concern about “local authorities’ statements that apparently condone and even incite violence against LGBTI persons,” and called on the Kremlin to “protect all people from discrimination and violence.”⁸⁹ Nikki Haley, US ambassador to the UN, issued a statement in which she called on Chechen authorities to “immediately investigate these allegations, hold everyone involved accountable, and take steps to prevent future abuses”.⁹⁰ US Senator Marco Rubio took to the Senate floor to denounce the “horrifying acts” committed against gay men in Chechnya and urged the US government to do more to ensure that victims are protected and perpetrators brought to justice.⁹¹ Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi called on the US government to provide refugee to those fleeing the purge.⁹²

In their communications with Human Rights Watch, LGBT Network and other rights groups, Canada and several EU member states expressed their willingness to seek ways to provide safe sanctuary to victims of the purge who find themselves at immediate risk. However, at time of writing, the victims, with very few exceptions, are still in Russia and in desperate need of refuge.

⁸⁸ Kate Connolly, “Merkel presses Putin over anti-gay purge in Chechnya,” *The Guardian*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/02/angela-merkel-vladimir-putin-russia-investigate-lgbt-torture-claims-chechnya> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁸⁹ Neal Broverman, “State Department Condemns LGBT Killings in Russia,” *Advocate*, April 5, 2017, <http://www.advocate.com/world/2017/4/05/state-department-condemns-lgbt-killings-russia> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁹⁰ Mark Hensch, “Haley: Anti-gay abuses in Chechnya ‘cannot be ignored’”, *The Hill*, April 17, 2017, <http://thehill.com/policy/international/un-treaties/329195-haley-anti-gay-abuses-in-chechnya-cannot-be-ignored> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁹¹ Marco Rubio, “On Senate Floor, Rubio Highlights Human Rights Abuses Against LGBT Community In Chechnya, April 24, 2017, <https://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=B21A38D4-EFA6-409B-8244-972D37CAC3Do> (accessed May 12, 2017).

⁹² Nancy Pelosi, “Pelosi Letter to President Trump: Take Action on Chechnya Horrors, Provide Priority Refugee Status for LGBT Russians Immediately,” May 5, 2017, <https://www.democraticleader.gov/newsroom/5517-3/> (accessed May 12, 2017).

III. International Standards and Domestic Legal Framework

Russia has ratified numerous international human rights treaties that place obligations on it to protect the rights of individuals against violence and other types of abuse. Russia is obligated to take appropriate measures to prevent, punish, investigate, and redress the harm caused to individuals' rights and provide effective remedies to victims of human rights abuses.

Russia has clear obligations under human rights law to act with due diligence to protect the human rights of LGBT persons to live free from violence, to uphold nondiscrimination, and to provide effective judicial remedies. Individuals should never be denied protection, or enjoy lesser standards of protection from violence or access to justice on the basis of their sexual identity.

Russia is a party to the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).⁹³ Both the ECHR and ICCPR impose negative and positive obligations on governments with respect to the right to life, prohibition of torture, right to liberty and security of a person, and freedom of expression.⁹⁴

The ICCPR obligates Russia, a state party, to protect all persons within its territory or jurisdiction, including members of marginalized groups, from violence, in upholding their rights to life and to security and freedom from cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment. The treaty gives states the responsibility to investigate and prosecute violence, whether by state or non-state actors.

⁹³ Council of Europe, Treaty list for a specific state: Russia, http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/treaty/country/RUS?p_auth=KLSucytz (accessed July 8, 2016). See also, UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Human Rights Committee, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CCPR/Pages/CCPRIndex.aspx> (accessed July 8, 2016).

⁹⁴ ECHR, art. 1, and ICCPR, art. 2 (2).

Right to Life

The ICCPR includes guarantees to the right to life (Article 6) and also states in Article 9 that “everyone has the right to ... security of person.” These guarantees impose obligations on Russian authorities not to ignore danger to the life of people under their jurisdiction, and to take reasonable and appropriate measures to protect them.

The Human Rights Committee (the United Nations authoritative body which interprets the ICCPR and monitors the countries’ compliance with it) has long held and emphasized on several occasions that sexual orientation is a status protected against discrimination under these provisions.⁹⁵

The UN Human Rights Committee has found states in violation of their obligations under Article 9 on security of the person if they fail to take adequate steps to protect people in the face of repeated threats to their lives.⁹⁶ The committee has criticized states’ failure to protect people from violence based on sexual orientation, noting its concern at “the incidents of people being attacked, or even killed, on account of their sexual orientation” (Article 9), “the small number of investigations mounted into such illegal acts,” as well as at laws “used to discriminate against people on account of their sexual orientation” (Article 26). It has urged states to “provide effective protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation.”⁹⁷

Article 2 of the ECHR imposes legal obligations on the state to protect the right to life.⁹⁸ The European Court of Human Rights emphasizes the determinant character of Article 2 for the realization of other rights in the Convention and stresses that, “Article 2 ranks as one of

⁹⁵ See *Toonen v. Australia*, Communication no. 488/1992, adopted April 4, 1994; *Young v. Australia*, Communication no. 941/2000, adopted September 18, 2003. The Human Rights Committee has also urged states to pass antidiscrimination legislation that expressly includes sexual orientation and to prohibit in their constitutions all discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations: Slovakia, CRC/C/SVK/CO/2, June 8, 2007, para. 28; Concluding Observations: Namibia, CCPR/CO/81/NAM, July 30, 2004, para. 22; Concluding Observations: Trinidad and Tobago, CCPR/CO/70/TTO, November 3, 2000, para. 11; Concluding Observations: Poland, CCPR/C/79/Add.110, 66th Session, para. 23.

⁹⁶ Human Rights Committee, Concluding Observations: El Salvador, CCPR/Co/78/SLV, July 22, 2003, para. 16.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR), 213 U.N.T.S. 222, entered into force September 3, 1953, as amended by Protocols No. 3, 5, 8, and 11 which entered into force on September 21, 1970, December 20, 1971, January 1, 1990, and November 1, 1998, respectively, ratified by Russia on May 5, 1998, art. 2.

the most fundamental provisions in the Convention.”⁹⁹ Obligations to protect the right to life include not just desisting from unlawful taking of life, but proactive measures to prevent and deter unlawful killings and threats to life including from third parties, and to investigate and punish unlawful killings and threats that occur.

The Constitution of the Russian Federation stipulates the right to life for everybody,¹⁰⁰ and the Russian Criminal Code criminalizes murder and other forms of deprivation of life.¹⁰¹

Freedom from Torture and Cruel and Degrading Treatment

Article 3 of the ECHR, Article 7 of the ICCPR, and Article 21 of the Russian Constitution guarantee freedom from torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment as well as the right to bodily integrity.¹⁰² The right to bodily integrity and the prohibition on torture is absolute in international law and both the ECHR and the ICCPR allow no derogation from the obligation on the right to life and freedom from torture, including in times of emergency.¹⁰³

The Russian Criminal Code Article 117 criminalizes “infliction of physical or psychological suffering” and Article 286 prohibits abuse of power by officials.¹⁰⁴

This report documents instances of prohibited ill-treatment and cruel and degrading punishments against people in retribution for their supposed homosexuality.

In 2012, the UN Committee against Torture expressed concern at the Russian police’s failure to “promptly react to, or to carry out effective investigations and bring charges against all those responsible for violent attacks against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) persons.” The committee urged Russia to “take effective measures to ensure the protection of all persons at risk, including ... LGBT persons ..., including through enhanced monitoring. All acts of violence and discrimination against [LGBT people] should

⁹⁹ European Court of Human Rights, *McCann and others v. The United Kingdom*, no. 18984/91, Judgment of September 27, 1995, available at [http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-57943&%7B%22itemid%22%3A%5B%22001-57943%22%5D%7D#{"itemid":\["001-57943"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-57943&%7B%22itemid%22%3A%5B%22001-57943%22%5D%7D#{), para. 147.

¹⁰⁰ Constitution of the Russian Federation (Constitution), adopted December 12, 1993, <http://constitution.kremlin.ru/>, art. 20.

¹⁰¹ Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, № 63-FZ of June 13, 1996, art. 105-109.

¹⁰² ECHR, art. 3; ICCPR, art. 7; Constitution, art. 21 (2).

¹⁰³ ECHR, art. 15 (2), and ICCPR, art. 4 (2).

¹⁰⁴ Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, arts. 117 and 286.

be promptly, impartially and effectively investigated, the perpetrators brought to justice, and redress provided to the victims.” It also called on Russian authorities to “publicly condemn attacks against ... LGBT persons ... and organize awareness-raising campaigns, including among police, promoting tolerance and respect for diversity.”¹⁰⁵

The European Court of Human Rights has repeatedly held governments accountable for violations of the right to bodily integrity arising from attacks on LGBT persons including by third parties and for failing to investigate such attacks effectively.¹⁰⁶

Prohibition of Unlawful Detention/Arrest

Under Article 5 of the ECHR, Article 9 of the ICCPR, and Article 22 of the Russian Constitution, everyone has the right to liberty and inviolability of person.¹⁰⁷ Accordingly, arrest or detention should be sanctioned by a court of law.

The UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has deemed that deprivation of liberty is arbitrary, “[w]hen the deprivation of liberty constitutes a violation of international law for reasons of discrimination based on...sexual orientation; or disability or other status, and which aims towards or can result in ignoring the equality of human rights.”¹⁰⁸ The Working Group has noted that police often round up LGBT people on the basis of their appearance alone,¹⁰⁹ and urged governments to pay specific attention to avoid arbitrary arrests and detention of people based on their sexual orientation under laws that vaguely prohibit public indecency.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Concluding observations on the fifth periodic report of the Russian Federation, adopted by the Committee at its forty-ninth session (October 29- November 23, 2012), CAT/C/RUS/CO/5, December 11, 2012, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/droi/dv/83_unconcluding2_/83_unconcluding2_en.pdf (accessed May 12, 2017), para. 15.

¹⁰⁶ See the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights regarding the prohibition of discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation at http://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/FS_Sexual_orientation_ENG.pdf, and in particular the case of *Indentoba and Others v. Georgia*, Judgment of May 12, 2015, Application No. 73235/12.

¹⁰⁷ ECHR, art. 5; ICCPR, art. 9; Constitution, art. 22.

¹⁰⁸ UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Individual Complaints, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Detention/Pages/Complaints.aspx>; See also, UN Economic and Social Council, “Civil and Political Rights Including the Question of Torture and Detention,” E/CN.4/2003/8.

¹⁰⁹ Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, A/HRC/10/21/Add.3, February 16, 2009: Colombia.

¹¹⁰ Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, A/HRC/13/30/Add.3, February 8, 2011, Senegal.

Russia’s Constitution and the Criminal Procedure Code specifically limit detention without court sanction to 48 hours.¹¹¹

This report documents instances of unlawful detention and torture in retribution against people for presumed homosexuality. Article 5 of Russia’s Criminal Code stipulating for “principle of guilt” provides that persons can be punished solely for “socially dangerous actions (lack of action) and resulting socially dangerous consequence” and only if their individual guilt has been established by a court of law.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Constitution, art. 22 (2); Criminal Procedure Code of the Russian Federation, № 174-FZ of December 18, 2001, art. 10.

¹¹² Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, art. 5.

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This report was researched and written by Tanya Lokshina, senior researcher and Russia program director with Human Rights Watch's Europe and Central Asia division. Kyle Knight, researcher with Human Rights Watch's LGBT rights program, wrote the recommendations and contributed to the sections on legal standards and international response. Anastasia Ovsyannikova, research assistant at the Russia office of Human Rights Watch, contributed to desk research for the report.

The report was edited by Rachel Denber, deputy director of the Europe and Central Asia division, and reviewed by Graeme Reid, director of the LGBT rights program. Aisling Reidy, senior legal advisor, provided legal review and contributed to legal analysis and Tom Porteous, deputy program director, provided program review.

Production assistance was provided by Vladislav Lobanov, research assistant in the Europe and Central Asia division, and Kathryn Zehr, senior associate in the Europe and Central Asia division. Layout and production were undertaken by Olivia Hunter, photo and publications associate, Fitzroy Hepkins, production manager, and Jose Martinez, senior coordinator. The map was designed by John Emerson.

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“They Have Long Arms and They Can Find Me”

Anti-Gay Purge by Local Authorities in Russia’s Chechen Republic

Starting the last week of February and continuing until at least through the first week of April 2017, law enforcement and security officials in Russia’s Chechen Republic conducted a purge of gay and bisexual men, abducting and then detaining them in secret locations, beating and humiliating them, and forcing them to hand over information about other men who might be gay. When they returned some of the men to their families, authorities encouraged relatives to conduct “honor killings.” Most of those who have escaped Chechnya remain in danger elsewhere in Russia, with threats continuing against them and their relatives. In *“They Have Long Arms and They Can Find Me,”* Human Rights Watch documents the purge based on first-hand accounts of victims and civil society activists attempting to help them. The report puts the 2017 anti-gay purge in the context of Chechnya’s tyrannical state-security architecture and brutal repression of dissent and diversity by the Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov. With the Kremlin’s tacit approval, Kadyrov aims to control virtually all aspects of social life, including politics, religion, academic discourse and family matters. Human Rights Watch has called on Russian authorities to ensure that the investigations they have started into the anti-gay purge in Chechnya are effective and thorough and will ensure accountability of Chechen authorities for egregious human rights violations. Human Rights Watch has also urged foreign governments to provide safe sanctuary to the victims who remain in immediate danger of persecution.



A victim of the purge telling his story in a safe house in central Russia in April 2017.

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