

## WELCOME TO CHECHNYA Media Primer

There is very little information (and some disinformation) available about the Russian republic of Chechnya and the persecution of LGBTQI people there. Please refer to this resource guide.

### THE BASICS

**Understanding Chechnya:** Chechnya, also known as the republic of Chechnya or the Chechen Republic, is located in the south of the Russian Federation. It borders Georgia in the North Caucasus region, near the coast of the Caspian Sea. The republic had been part of the Soviet Union and after its fall in 1991 Chechnya was briefly independent. Two disastrous wars with Russia followed, ending in 2003 when the secessionist movement was put down. The Kremlin installed pro-Russian leadership.

Grozny is the capital of Chechnya and the home of nearly one-fourth of the republic's population. Although there is a dispute about the accuracy of the count, the 2010 Census reported that Chechnya's overall population is nearly 1.3 million people. More than 95 percent of this population belongs to the ethnic Chechen bloodline. Islam is the overwhelmingly predominant religion.

Assuming just 3% of Chechens are LGBTQI, considered a conservative estimate elsewhere in the world, there are an estimated 39,000 LGBTQI people in Chechnya today, each living in utmost secrecy and fear.

Homosexuality was decriminalized throughout Russia in 1993, and the Russian constitution prohibits discrimination of any kind. These measures are theoretically in force in Chechnya. In practice, the Kremlin grants Chechnya autonomy and federal courts have been unreceptive to claims there.

In 2013, the legislature passed a draconian ban on "gay propaganda," which prohibits exposing minors to materials normalizing LGBTQI lives. In effect this silences pro-LGBTQI advocates. The law was condemned by multiple world bodies, including the [Venice Commission](#) of the [Council of Europe](#) and the United Nations [Committee on the Rights of the Child](#) as well as by [human rights](#) groups [Amnesty International](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#).

Anti-LGBTQI sentiments have since hardened throughout Russia. Three years after the law's passage, in December 2016, Chechnya began its open campaign to "purify our blood" of LGBTQI people.

The first news reports of the atrocities there came on April 1, 2017. (See below)

**Chechnya's President Ramzan Kadyrov:** Now 43 years old, Ramzan Kadyrov has governed the Chechen Republic as President (comparable to Governor) since 2007. He assumed the office previously held by his father, Akhmad Kadyrov, who served until he was assassinated in 2004.

Kadyrov is an autocrat who has been repeatedly implicated in the torture, murder, rape, and kidnapping of political opponents, human rights lawyers, journalists, drug users, and women. He controls a private army (known as The Kadyrovites) that commits abuses on his behalf with impunity to ensure that he retain power.

Citing evidence of torture and "extrajudicial killings," the US and Europe have barred entry to him and his senior leadership team. He has faced no such sanctions inside Russia. Critics say Putin looks the other way in part because he needs Kadyrov to continue fighting separatist efforts in the region.

**The Gay Pogrom in Chechnya:** On April 1, 2017, the *Novaya Gazeta*, an independent Russian newspaper, [reported](#) that government security officials were abducting, detaining, and torturing gay men in Chechnya, demanding that these men divulge the names of other gays whom they would then abduct, detain, and torture as well. Kadyrov has openly described the goal of this campaign as an effort “[to cleanse our blood](#).” He has called upon family members to carry out so-called “[honor killings](#).”

Some news accounts have reported that the campaign has stopped and restarted from time to time, but activists on the ground say it is ongoing and uninterrupted. In addition, there is evidence that the violence has spread to neighboring Russian republics in the North Caucasus region.

There are no estimates of the number of the dead. Hundreds of Chechens have simply disappeared since the atrocities began, and hundreds more have escaped.

Leaders of the St. Petersburg-based Russian LGBT Network established a hotline in the early days of the pogrom. They set up a series of secret safehouses through the country, in partnership with other LGBTQI organizations, especially The Moscow Community Center for LGBT+ Initiatives.

In the first two years, they moved 151 people out of the Chechnya and beyond the Russian border. Countries receiving them include Canada, Germany, France, Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Argentina, and elsewhere. The US government rejected all applicants stemming from the pogrom (although at least [one transgender Chechen won asylum earlier](#)).

**Response from Chechen Leadership:** Ramzan Kadyrov immediately denied the accusations when they first surfaced, calling them “lies.” What’s more, [he says](#) it is impossible to carry out such crimes because they “don’t have those kind of people here. We don’t have gays.”

Despite these statements, Kadyrov has publicly endorsed so-called “honor killings,” urging families to murder relatives suspected of being gay, lesbian, or transgender. [His press secretary stated](#): “If there were such people in Chechnya, the law-enforcement agencies wouldn’t need to have anything to do with them, because their relatives would send them to a place of no return.” Those who commit such murders face no criminal ramifications.

**Response of the Russian Federation:** Russian President Vladimir Putin accepted Kadyrov’s denials. Yet under pressure from international leaders, Putin briefly moved forward with a widely criticized investigation, which found no witnesses and victims willing to give testimony, fearing retribution. The Kremlin claimed the lack of testimony was proof that no human rights abuses had occurred.

Then, in October 2017, Maxim Lapunov, a gay man from the north of Russia who had been living and working in Chechnya, [came forward to assert](#) that he had been detained and tortured, becoming the first person to speak out publicly. A group of NGOs led by the [Committee Against Torture](#) filed a criminal complaint on his behalf.

In 2018, a North Caucasus court ruled against opening a criminal investigation into Lapunov’s case, stating a lack of evidence, effectively thwarting any effort to evaluate Lapunov’s evidence. A subsequent independent investigation by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe supported his allegations. In May 2019, Lapunov’s lawyers moved his case to the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. In November 2019, the court gave Russia until March 2020 to respond to his complaint. Increased international attention may increase the likelihood of a successful outcome for Lapunov.

**Response of the US:** Washington was silent when the atrocities were first reported in April 2017. Rights groups [waged a campaign](#) for an official statement. On April 17, Nikki Haley, then America's UN Ambassador, finally spoke for the administration; [she called upon Chechnya to investigate itself](#).

Months later, in September 2017, then-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson [expressed "concerns"](#) about the reported atrocities to his Russian counterpart. That December, the State Department put [Kadyrov on a US travel ban](#). In April 2019 the department – now under the leadership of Mike Pompeo – [added Kadyrov's leadership team to the travel ban](#). No further action has been taken by Washington.

## **REALLY IMPORTANT THINGS TO UNDERSTAND**

**Lesbians and Transgender Women and Men are Also Targeted:** Although much of the reporting on this subject has focused on gay men, Chechen lesbians and transgender women have reported similar treatment. Survivors have commonly spoken about forced religious exorcisms and involuntary commitments to psychiatric hospitals, as well as torture and detention. Evidence has also surfaced of so-called "honor killings" of lesbians.

Women have little autonomy in Chechnya's interpretation of Islam. Male family members generally accompany them when they are outside of their homes, making their efforts to escape to safety even more difficult — and dangerous — than for men.

**The Victims are Being Hunted Around the World:** Since the operational goal of Kadyrov's government is the elimination from the Chechen bloodline of LGBTQI people, fleeing the country doesn't give victims safety. Authorities pressure Chechen families to hunt them down and return them for execution. And their reach is surprisingly far. There is a vast global diaspora of people who fled during the two Chechnya wars.

In November 2019, officials called upon diaspora members to enforce Chechen mores wherever they live. In remarks widely seen as referring to gay people, [Kadyrov's right-hand man said](#): "I'm telling you, those who live in Europe, America and Canada: Stop such people! By law, with our traditions and customs, we should resolve their problem," said Adam Delimkhanov. "We implore you, don't let them embarrass the honor of our nation." There have been cases of Chechens being tricked into returning or being forced in their new country to record denials of their homosexuality. Some have been [attacked](#) in their host countries.

**It's Not a Good Time to be Gay in Much of the World:** The persecution of gay people is not exclusive to Chechnya. According to ILGA-Europe, there are 70 countries worldwide where being gay is criminalized, including 11 countries where the death penalty could be imposed.

However, what is happening in Chechnya is categorically different. It is the only government since Nazi Germany to round up LGBTQI people for extermination.

**Gay Asylum Seekers and Refugees Have Unique Challenges:** When LGBTQI refugees relocate to a new country, they are often outsiders to — or even at risk of violence from — other refugees and immigrants from their own country, while also feeling like outsiders within the LGBTQI community in their new home. They are often estranged from family, and experience discrimination in finding housing and jobs.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

Masha Gessen, "The Gay Men Who Fled Chechnya's Purge," New Yorker, July 3, 2017  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/07/03/the-gay-men-who-fled-chechnyas-purge>

Masha Gessen, "Fleeing Anti-Gay Persecution in Chechnya, Three Young Women Are Now Stuck in Place," New Yorker, October 1, 2018 <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/fleeing-anti-gay-persecution-in-chechnya-three-young-women-are-now-stuck-in-place>  
"They Have Long Arms and They Can Find Me: Anti-Gay Purge by Local Authorities in Russia's Chechen Republic," A Human Rights Watch Report, May 26, 2017 <https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/05/26/they-have-long-arms-and-they-can-find-me/anti-gay-purge-local-authorities-russias>

"Honor Kill: How the Ambitions of a Famous LGBT Activist Awoke a Terrible Ancient Custom in Chechnya, Elena Milashina," Novaya Gazetta, April 1, 2017  
<https://novyagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/01/71983-ubiystvo-chesti>

"Novaya Gazetta Learned of New Gay Persecution in Chechnya," Novaya Gazetta, January 11, 2019  
<https://novyagazeta.ru/news/2019/01/11/148260-chechnya>

ILGA Europe, "Sexual Orientation Laws in the World, 2019"  
[https://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA\\_Sexual\\_Orientation\\_Laws\\_Map\\_2019.pdf](https://ilga.org/downloads/ILGA_Sexual_Orientation_Laws_Map_2019.pdf)