

# Detained, Tortured, Killed: How Chechnya Cracked Down on Gays

**Activists struggle to overcome a North Caucasian cultural taboo and help gay men in Russia's most repressive region**

By [Matthew Kupfer](#)

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**Vusa Sadulayev / AP**

The crackdown seemed like something out of the Stalinist-era repressions: over 100 gay men brutally detained — and at least three killed — in Chechnya, perhaps Russia's most conservative and authoritarian region.

Gay Chechens were frantically closing their social media and messenger accounts out of fear that these online communities had been infiltrated by the local security services, the Novaya Gazeta newspaper, which broke the story, [reported](#).

Even if a person captured in the crackdown was released due to an absence of evidence, he

often faced another risk: a so-called honor killing at the hands of relatives seeking to wash the shame of being gay from their family.

The news has since attracted attention around the world. But rights activists struggling to help the victims face a nearly insurmountable cultural taboo — and fear much of the story remains untold.

“We have only found the tip of the iceberg,” says Yekaterina Sokirianskaya, the International Crisis Group’s North Caucasus project director.

## **From bad to worse**

Being gay in Chechnya was never easy — even before the crackdown. Traditional conservatism and a macho ethos have long reigned in the republic.

Since the mid-2000s, Chechnya has been ruled by Ramzan Kadyrov, an iron-fisted strongman who has promoted a reimagined version of Chechen traditional values as the Muslim-majority republic’s guiding ideology.

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In this environment, gays were never treated well, and honor killings against them were not unheard of. “But we have never registered such incidents of public aggression, multiple killings or mass arrests,” says Sokirianskaya.

That changed almost two weeks ago. Rights defenders began receiving messages — often anonymous — that security forces in the republic were detaining men suspected of being gay. Even some well-known public figures were reportedly captured in the homophobic dragnet. As more information flowed in from different local contacts, the rights defenders became convinced that these detentions were a mass occurrence.

They paint a grim picture of the situation: The security forces capture suspected gay men, take them to secret prisons, and torture them to get information on other gay men. Often they search through their victims’ phones for evidence of sexual orientation or to identify other targets for capture. Any man they find through the phone — gay or not — can become the next victim. Some of the detainees are freed, but only after incriminating others or once their families pay an enormous ransom. The scope of the detentions is “unprecedented,” says Igor Kochetkov, a board member and former chairman of the Russian LGBT Network.

“We are under the impression that this is a special operation to capture gays,” he told The Moscow Times.

## **Trigger**

Given the sheer number and diversity of the sources confirming the story, rights defenders say that the crackdown is undeniable. The general picture — the manhunt, the detentions, the torture — is also fairly clear. But the motives remain murky.

Novaya Gazeta suggests two events led to the crackdown. First, in late February, Chechen

security forces detained a drug user and discovered gay pornography and the contact information of dozens of local gay men on his mobile phone. In response, they launched the first wave of arrests. Novaya Gazeta believes that the first killings occurred during this wave.

Sources in the Chechen security apparatus [told](#) Novaya Gazeta that the second wave came as a response to the actions of GayRussia.ru, an LGBT advocacy group led by the veteran Moscow activist Nikolai Alexeyev. The group has been submitting requests to hold pride parades to regional authorities across Russia. It then gathers the rejection letters in order to build a case against Russia in the European Court of Human Rights.

GayRussia.ru filed requests in several cities throughout the Caucasus. However, the group entirely avoided Chechnya. Even so, the requests provoked major protests across the region. During this time, a command was given for a “preventative sweep operation” in Chechnya, Novaya Gazeta reported.

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But rights defenders remain somewhat skeptical of that story. Something obviously triggered the detentions, Sokirianskaya says, and witnesses name high level officials involved, but further investigation is needed to verify the scale and degree of personal responsibility for these crimes.

“To understand what happened, we need testimony from people who gave the orders,” says Kochetkov. “We won’t get that until we have an official and impartial investigation.”

So far, that seems unlikely. Ramzan Kadyrov’s press secretary, Alvi Karimov, has called reports of the anti-gay crackdown an “absolute lie.”

He added that it was impossible to persecute gays in Chechnya because they “do not exist in the republic.” Later, the Chechen Republic’s human right commission announced that it could find no confirmation of Novaya Gazeta’s story.

## **Closed closet**

If there is any hope for gay Chechens, it will likely come from Moscow. On April 3, there was one positive sign: President Vladimir Putin’s spokesperson, Dmitry Peskov, said that, although the Kremlin was not aware of the issue, law enforcement would now investigate the reports of the crackdown. He also encouraged anyone who believes his rights were violated to file a formal complaint and take the matter to court.

That is easier said than done, according to Tanya Lokshina, Human Rights Watch’s Russia program director. In the current “climate of fear” in Chechnya, “filing an official complaint against local security officials is extremely dangerous, as retaliation by local authorities is practically inevitable,” she [wrote](#) in an article for Open Democracy.

Even investigating the crackdown may prove a challenge. Gays in Chechnya live extremely secretive lives, hiding their identities from virtually everyone, says Ksenia Leonova, a journalist who spent a month living in Grozny, the Chechen capital, and wrote [one of the few](#)

[accounts](#) of Chechen gay life.

In her 2013 report, a Chechen gay man referred to as Umar recalled how one of his friends suddenly felt the macho “stirring within him” and called him a homophobic slur. “There’s no point in getting worked up about it, because he really can’t help it,” Umar told Leonova.

The anecdote emphasizes the degree to which, in Chechnya, being gay remains a taboo subject even among Chechen gays themselves, Leonova says.

This makes investigating the repression of gays in Chechnya — and helping the community — a particular challenge. The Russian LGBT Network has set up a hotline for LGBT people in the North Caucasus and is actively working to evacuate individuals in danger from the region.

But rights defenders admit their reach is limited. They are only just beginning to make contact with Chechen gays and learn more about their plight.

“Gay people in Chechnya don’t trust anyone,” says Sokirianskaya, “so they don’t know how to appeal for help.”

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