

Putin Will Be Forced to Act on Chechnya's Anti-Gay Purge

But international pressure is the key to saving lives.

By [Tanya Lokshina](#)

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Members of the LGBT community protest outside the Russian Embassy, for the constant discrimination and violence against the gay community in Chechnya and other regions of Russia, in Mexico City. **Jose Luis Gonzalez / Reuters**

Reports of at least three deaths and hundreds of arrests of gay men in Chechnya have shocked the world. Those well versed in the tyranny of Ramzan Kadyrov's rule were perhaps less surprised.

With the Kremlin's blessing, Kadyrov has run Chechnya as a personal fiefdom for over a decade. In that time, he has installed a regime of fear, punishing anyone with different views or lifestyles. Chechnya today is the most lawless subject of the Russian Federation.

That doesn't mean that the Kremlin has no leverage over what goes on there. Indeed, all

it would take to end this anti-gay purge is for Putin to tell Kadyrov: “This has to stop.”

The official reaction from Moscow has been contradictory.

The first signals coming out of the Kremlin were positive. Putin’s spokesman Peskov basically said: “We don’t know much about what is going on here, but law enforcement agencies will look into it.” But then he said something very peculiar: Those who claimed they were abused by Chechen officials “should file official complaints.” It was hard not to conclude he had presented authorities with a convenient loophole.

But then, yesterday, Putin met with Kadyrov, where the issue was at least discussed. This in itself is a breakthrough.

Homophobia is extreme and rampant in Chechnya, and LGBT people have faced prosecutions and blackmail for a long time. We know of some cases where gay men have been hunted down by police officials, who have then demanded regular payoffs, lest they tell their families.

But an organized campaign on this scale is unprecedented, and clearly sanctioned by top Chechen leadership. We know the campaign began towards the end of February. It lasted several weeks, before stopping. Then, by mid-March, it picked up again.

It isn’t clear why it began. We could speculate it was designed among other things to consolidate Kadyrov’s support base. There are signs of dissatisfaction in the Kremlin, and the number of insurgent attacks is on the rise. Kadyrov is possibly not as secure in his power as he was a few years ago and is now taking desperate measures to reassert himself.

But the methods Chechen authorities are using are not new at all. They are the same tricks the regime has employed against critics, Salafi Muslims, drug users and suspected jihadist sympathizers.

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The widely reported detention centers where Chechen gays were brought have existed for some time. These are not “gay concentration camps,” as reported by some Western outlets. Such hyperbole devalues the suffering. What we are talking about are unofficial prisons where people are tortured: electrocuted, beaten, humiliated. The aim is to get them to give information on other supposedly gay people. Or, if they are presumed jihadists—to spill the beans on other supposed jihadists. If they are drug users—on supposed drug users.

Of course, gay people in Chechnya are especially vulnerable. They are caught between two fires—persecuted by the local authorities and in fear of their own relatives. The official reaction from Kadyrov’s spokesman to the reports speaks volumes. There are “no gay people in Chechnya,” and even if there were, “their relatives would send them to a place from where there is no return,” he said. Such statements from local officials essentially fuel honor killings.

And this is why the Kremlin has things the wrong way round. You cannot ask victims to come forward if you fail to provide proper and comprehensive security guarantees.

Homophobia remains a big issue in Russia, even if not as extreme as in Chechnya. Many Russians consider gay people second class citizens and the country has discriminatory legislation and policies against them. Based on human rights experience, there is no reason to be optimistic about prosecutions.

The West needs to play an informed role. First, governments should do everything they can to provide sanctuary to the victims in danger. Those who have relocated to cities in central Russia have access to activist networks. But they aren't safe. While they are in Russia, Chechen officials can easily find them. Their relatives, pumped on official propaganda to "cleanse family honor," could also turn on them.

Second, the West needs to keep the pressure up on Putin. If all the key international organizations and international actors continue to raise the issue with the Kremlin in one way or another, Russia's president will be compelled to put an end to Kadyrov's anti-gay purge.

As told to Oliver Carroll

Tanya Lokshina is Senior Researcher at Human Rights Watch.

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