

# Crackdown on Gay and Bisexual Men in Chechnya

## Gay and Bisexual Men Targeted in Chechnya

On April 1, 2017, independent Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* reported that Chechen authorities had detained more than one hundred gay men “in connection with their nontraditional sexual orientation, or suspicion of such.” According to the reports, three of the men had been killed, and the death toll could be even higher. Survivors reported that they were beaten, tortured, and forced to disclose the names of other local gay men.

Per *Novaya Gazeta*, the crackdown came after a Russian LGBT group filed requests to hold LGBT pride parades in various cities throughout Russia. While the group did not plan a parade in Chechnya, the announcement was widely publicized, sparking outrage and homophobic protests. Sources within the Russian secret service explicitly linked the detentions to these events, calling them “a preventative sweep” and that other sources question whether this episode triggered the crisis.

## The Current Situation

In June new detentions paused and many men were released from custody, often after paying bribes to Chechen authorities or returning to their families who promised to deal with the issue themselves (a reference to the continued practice of “honor killings”). However, in early July, Russian activists reported that new arrests had resumed.

Over the last three months the Russian LGBT Network has operated an emergency hotline for people in need of support services and assistance fleeing the region. The Network has coordinated with several foreign embassies to evacuate victims of the crisis and those at risk. Already, more than 60 people have been evacuated out of Chechnya and 12 out of Russia altogether.

## The Context

Though homosexuality is no longer criminalized in Russia, LGBT people face widespread homophobia and transphobia. In 2013 Russia passed a federal law banning “propaganda of nontraditional sexual relations to minors.” The law breeds a permissive climate for violence and discrimination against Russian LGBT people.

Chechnya is known for its poor human rights record, with security forces acting with impunity against marginalized populations.

## Russian Authorities Deny the Abuses

A spokesperson for Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov referred to reports of detention and abuse as “absolute lies and disinformation.” He denied the existence of LGBT people in the region and stated that “if such people existed in Chechnya, law enforcement would not have to worry about them, as their own relatives would have sent them to where they could never return.”

A spokesperson for President Vladimir Putin questioned the veracity of the reports, saying they are “a question for law enforcement” and “not on the Kremlin’s agenda.” Later, federal officials suggested that those who felt they had been abused should file reports with the local authorities. An initial investigation conducted by Chechen authorities uncovered no evidence of any crime and was widely understood as illegitimate. A new federal investigation is underway. Russian LGBT activists, while wary, are hopeful that there will be results.

## International Outrage and Response

The U.S. Department of State condemned the violence and urged the Russian authorities to conduct a thorough investigation. The Department of State also expressed concern about “the widespread discrimination and violence against LGBTI persons in Russia or any society” and called on the Russian government “to protect all people from discrimination and violence.” U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley later issued a statement calling on Chechen authorities to “immediately investigate these allegations, hold anyone involved accountable, and take steps to prevent future abuses.”

In July Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sent a letter to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov expressing U.S. concerns about the credible reports of widespread detention and torture. He further called for swift and independent investigations into these reports

Numerous world leaders, including German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, have expressed outrage and called for an investigation. President Donald Trump has yet to make a statement on the crisis in Chechnya. In mid-June Secretary of State Rex Tillerson acknowledged that he had not raised the situation in Chechnya with his Russian counterparts.

The president of the European Parliament strongly condemned the abuse, while the Secretary General of the Council of Europe urged Russia’s High Commissioner for Human Rights to investigate the attacks. The spokesperson for the European Union also called for “prompt, effective and thorough investigations into the reports of abductions and killings of gay men in Chechnya.”

## Congressional Action

Congress has championed the fight against the detention and torture in Chechnya. On the 2017 International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia, Representative Sean Patrick Maloney (D-NY) and twenty-two of his colleagues filmed a video campaign raising awareness about the crisis and encouraging the Trump administration to speak out against these atrocities.

In June Representatives Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-FL) and David Cicilline (D-RI) led a resolution condemning the violence and persecution of gay and bisexual men in Chechnya. This resolution passed with remarkable bipartisan support. Shortly after, Senators Pat Toomey (R-PA) and Ed Markey (D-MA) introduced a partner resolution co-sponsored by a bipartisan group of over forty senators.

Prior to Secretary Tillerson’s meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in May, Senators Kamala Harris (D-CA) and Susan Collins (R-ME) wrote the secretary a letter asking him to raise the issue in meetings with Lavrov. Senators Todd Young (R-IN) and Markey and twelve colleagues also wrote a letter to Ambassador Haley and Secretary Tillerson asking them to condemn the abuse of gay and bisexual men in Chechnya as a human rights violation. In response to the secretary’s continued inaction on the issue, Representative Cicilline introduced a letter calling on senior members of the Trump Administration to raise Chechnya abuses with Russian and Chechen authorities.

## Ensuring Justice

Despite international condemnation, the persecution of gay and bisexual men in Chechnya continues. The United States should work with the international community to develop a coordinated response to the crisis, ensuring the safety of the victims and accountability for the perpetrators of these egregious human rights violations. In addition, the United States should engage in efforts to relocate these men to safety—both by assisting them in travel to safer countries and by providing opportunities for them to come to the United States.