

#EyesOnChechnya Backgrounder¹

Since early 2017, men suspected of being gay or bisexual have been rounded up, tortured, and even killed in the Russian republic of Chechnya. As the atrocities continued into the new decade with detentions and human rights abuses targeting a wide cross-section of the Chechen LGBTQ community, HRC members have taken action to help put an end to the violence.

From working with Congress to activating our membership and raising up our voices together, HRC has sent a clear message that we have our #EyesOnChechnya, the human rights violations must stop, the perpetrators must be held accountable, and the international community must recognize that these constitute crimes against humanity. [Click here](#) to learn more about how you can get engaged and help put a stop to the violence.

The Situation

Since early 2017, authorities in Chechnya, a federal republic of Russia located in the North Caucasus, have rounded up and detained men suspected of being gay or bisexual. There are [widespread reports](#) that some of the men have been tortured and up to twenty may have been murdered in the cities of Argun and the capital Grozny. Chechen officials have also reportedly [encouraged](#) families to murder relatives they suspect might be gay or bisexual with [at least one family](#) seemingly acting on it. While it appeared that there was a break in the attacks during 2018, the attacks resumed in force late that year and continued into 2019 with another [40 people detained](#) and at least 2 murdered and [reports](#) that some of the victims are now women.

Chechen leaders have denied these reports, going so far as to [deny the very existence of LGBTQ people in Chechnya](#). Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov [said](#) in a 2017 interview, “We have never had them [LGBTQ people] among the Chechens.” A Russian official [repeated that claim](#) at the United Nations Human Rights Council in May 2018, saying that a Russian investigation into the crimes “did not confirm evidence of rights’ violations, nor were we even able to find representatives of the LGBT community in Chechnya.”

While the initial detentions and attacks targeted men suspected of being gay or bisexual, the campaign has also brought about a surge in lesbian women sharing stories about humiliation, abuse, and threats they have faced from relatives and friends. In early 2019, there were [reports of lesbian](#), bisexual, and transgender women being detained and tortured as well.

Trump-Pence Administration Response

The response from the White House and Trump-Pence administration leadership has been inadequate. Trump’s two Secretaries of State have never made a public statement on Chechnya and former Secretary Rex Tillerson [admitted in a Congressional hearing](#) in June 2017 that he had not raised the issue with his Russian counterpart - despite receiving numerous letters from HRC and others. In July 2017, the State Department acknowledged that Tillerson had sent a letter to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov but the State Department has refused to share the text of the letter. HRC has [filed a request for the letter](#) under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), which has not yet received a response.

¹ Revised January 2020. This document will be updated to reflect new information.



President Donald Trump has similarly failed to make any statements on Chechnya. In May 2017, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders revealed that President Trump [may not have even been aware of or been briefed](#) about the violence in Chechnya. In a June 2017 Congressional hearing, then-Secretary Tillerson stated that he did not know if the president had raised the issue with Putin. In July 2017, Trump met with Putin at the G-20 summit in Germany and, despite HRC's [renewed call for Trump to raise this issue](#) with his Russian counterpart, there are no reports that he did so. The two met again in July 2018 in Helsinki, Finland with the same disappointing result. On the eve of that summit, [HRC projected images](#) onto Helsinki's Presidential Palace, calling on the two leaders to condemn the crimes against humanity in Chechnya and to initiate a serious investigation into the atrocities. The director of HRC Global, Ty Cobb, also [spoke at a rally](#) in Helsinki that day, calling on Trump to speak out.

The Trump-Pence Administration has also been unhelpful toward those fleeing the violence. In May last year, BuzzFeed [reported](#) that conversations between the Russian LGBT Network and the U.S. embassy “have led [the Network] to believe that visas to the United States are out of reach for gay Chechens fleeing” the purge. This is in stark contrast to the governments of [Canada](#), [Lithuania](#), [France](#), and others who have opened their doors to resettling these refugees.

Nonetheless, on December 20, 2017, the U.S. Treasury Department announced sanctions under the Magnitsky Act against Kadyrov and another Chechen official, Ayub Kataev, whom the Treasury Department [stated](#) was “involved in abuses against gay men in Chechnya during the first half of 2017.” At HRC's urging, Congress had called on the Treasury Department to sanction Chechen officials in the resolutions they had passed condemning the atrocities in Chechnya. (More on those resolutions below.)

Who is Speaking Out?

Despite the silence from President Trump and his top appointees, there has been a large number of statements from other American leaders, including a mid-level statement from the [U.S. State Department](#) and one from former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. [Nikki Haley](#). Former U.S. Vice President [Joe Biden](#), Senate Democratic Leader [Chuck Schumer](#) (D-NY), House Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) (D-CA), and House Democratic Leader [Steny Hoyer](#) (D-MD) have also spoken out. U.S. Senator Marco Rubio and former-Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, both Republicans of Florida, each highlighted the issue on the [Senate](#) and the [House](#) floors as well.

On June 27, 2017, the U.S. House of Representatives [passed](#) a resolution, [H.Res.351](#), which condemned the atrocities and “calls on Chechen officials to immediately cease the abduction, detention, and torture of individuals on the basis of their actual or suspected sexual orientation, and hold accountable all those involved in perpetrating such abuses.” The resolution was introduced by former-Rep. Ros-Lehtinen and had 85 bipartisan cosponsors. During debate on the resolution, a number of speakers from both sides of the aisle also condemned the atrocities, including the outgoing chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA), [calling them “brutal,” “outrageous,” “shocking,” “inhumane,” “barbaric” and “unthinkable.”](#)

On October 30, 2017 the U.S. Senate passed [an identical resolution](#) (S.Res.211) that had been introduced in June by Senators Pat Toomey (R-PA) and Ed Markey (D-MA) with more than 35 of their colleagues.

Many voices in the international community have also condemned the arrests, including a [joint statement from 23 nations in the Equal Rights Coalition](#) in April 2017 calling on Russia to investigate. There have also been statements from the [European Union](#), the [European Parliament](#), the [Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe](#), German Chancellor [Angela Merkel](#), British Prime Minister [Theresa May](#), Canadian Prime Minister [Justin Trudeau](#), French President [Emmanuel Macron](#), and a number of U.N. human rights [experts](#).

In December 2018, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) issued a [report](#) focused on the atrocities in Chechnya, which was authorized by 16 OSCE countries, and which said that there is “overwhelming evidence that there have been grave violations of the rights of LGBTI persons in the Chechen Republic.” The report also calls on Russia to establish a special investigative committee to “undertake an effective, impartial and transparent investigation of the allegations” and “bring to justice the alleged perpetrators.” There are also a number of recommendations for other OSCE nations, including the United States, such as welcoming refugees from the Chechen republic and providing them with safe housing as well as medical and psychological support.