



Testimony to Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing:  
Human Rights in Russia on the 5th Anniversary of the Nemtsov Assassination  
Human Rights Campaign  
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Thank you to the co-chairs and the Commission for holding this important hearing on “Human Rights in Russia on the 5th Anniversary of the Nemtsov Assassination.” On behalf of the Human Rights Campaign, America’s largest civil rights organization working to achieve lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) equality, I submit this testimony on the human rights violations targeting the LGBTQ community in Russia and particularly in the Russian republic of Chechnya.

Vladimir Putin’s targeting of Russia’s LGBTQ community is, unfortunately, a fundamental part of his wider consolidation of power and his crackdown on human rights. He has attempted to position himself as the protector of “traditional Russian values,” and has made attacking the LGBTQ community a signature part of his dangerous self-image.

It is, therefore, crucially important that the Commission have a witness with LGBTQ-specific expertise at a hearing focusing on human rights abuses in Russia, and we hope that it will do so in future hearings on Russia and any other countries where anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and policies have become a core part of the government’s human rights violations.

Our concerns about Russian attacks on LGBTQ people date back many years, but they came to a particular head in 2013 when Russia enacted its “Gay Proaganda” law, which bans the “promotion of nontraditional sexual relations to minors” and is widely understood to mean information about sexual orientation or gender identity. The authors of this dangerous bill claimed to be acting in the name of protecting children, but it is clear that the law has done more damage to children than it has helped them. In a 2018 [report](#), our partners at Human Rights Watch outlined various ways in which the law has harmed children by undermining their mental health, by denying them access to critical information designed to help keep them safe, and by encouraging bullying and attacks on LGBTQ young people.

As of 2018, at least seven people have been convicted and fined under the law since it was passed. The government is currently pursuing a criminal pornography case against Yulia

Tstetkova, who runs a children's theater in Komsomolok-on-Amur in the far East of Russia and was administrator of two LGBTQ-focused internet communities despite the activities being unrelated. Police also used the law to justify their recent raid of a music video shoot by the band Pussy Riot, accusing them of "extremism" and "making an illegal video" but failing to provide legal justification for the group's removal from the studio where they were filming.

It is important to note that this law targets not only LGBTQ Russians, but ***all*** Russians. It restricts freedom of speech and expression for every Russian, from people who post information online about sexual health to those who merely wish to express their support for LGBTQ family members or friends. Such violations of freedom of speech and expression are clear violations of Russia's international obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and should be loudly condemned.

As is the case so often, this law has also helped to create a culture of impunity for non-state actors who harbor resentment toward LGBTQ people. In June 2019, a gay man named Roman Yedalov was stabbed to death outside a Moscow bar by a man yelling hateful anti-LGBTQ slurs. The following month, LGBTQ activist Yelena Grigoryeva was stabbed and strangled near her home in St. Petersburg. Since then, a jury acquitted the assailant of murder charges in the Yedalov case, and no one has even been arrested in the Grigoryeva case.

Just this month, Putin very publicly pronounced marriage equality would never come to Russia under his regime - something that Russian LGBTQ advocates have not even been asking for because of more concerning issues of violence and freedom of speech and expression.

The most disturbing situation is occurring in Russia's Chechen republic. Since early 2017, authorities in Chechnya 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.

Several survivors of the attacks have shared their harrowing stories, lending further evidence to the crimes that took place there. Amin Dzhabrailov was recently interviewed in CBS's 60 Minutes and Maxim Lapunov is the subject of a film that debuted in January 2020 at the Sundance Film Festival. Both have courageously spoken of the torture and humiliation they experienced and have called on the international community to speak out for human rights.

Although it appears that there was a break in the attacks during 2018, the attacks resumed in force late that year and continue. In 2019, 40 people were detained and at least 2 were murdered. Recent reports show that some victims now include 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.

The attacks have continued up until the present. Although it is extremely difficult to get information from Chechnya, there are still reports that the attacks have continued sporadically, with additional arrests and additional refugees fleeing from the area. The reporter who originally broke the story, Elena Milashina, was attacked this month by a mob at a hotel in Moscow, presumably due to her courageous reporting of the facts in Chechnya and Russia.

Local LGBTQ groups have been nothing short of heroic in responding to the attacks in Chechnya and to other abuses in Russia as well. The Russian LGBT Network in particular has helped to shepherd Chechen and other Russian victims to temporary safe locations and then connect them with international groups like Rainbow Railroad in Canada who can bring them to more permanent safe locations.

The international outcry has been strong as well, with a number of organizations helping to sound the alarm, from those of us at HRC to Human Rights First, Stonewall UK, Frontline Defenders, the Council for Global Equality, and many others.

Condemnations also poured in from U.S. Congressional leaders, as well as then-U.N. ambassador Nikki Haley, and from many other international leaders. We were proud to have worked with members of this body on bipartisan resolutions that passed both houses of Congress in 2017, condemning the violence and demanding that Russia investigate the crimes taking place there.

However, no investigation has taken place. Despite numerous demands, the Russian government has conducted no serious investigation and refused to cooperate with human rights groups and international organizations seeking to inspect the facilities where the crimes were alleged to have taken place, to meet with survivors, or to interview authorities there. Ultimately, 16 nations at the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) invoked the rarely-used “Moscow Mechanism,” authorizing a report that confirmed the allegations, called on Russia to conduct its own investigation and hold the perpetrators accountable. The report also called on other nations to welcome those fleeing these horrific crimes.

The response from the U.S. administration has been mixed. The Treasury Department did levy Magnitsky sanctions against certain Chechen leaders, including President Kadyrov, in part

because of their human rights violations. But the silence from the highest levels of the U.S. government has been deeply disturbing. While former Ambassador Haley and a number of other ambassadors have spoken out against the atrocities in Chechnya, President Trump, Vice President Pence, Secretary of State Pompeo and former-Secretary Tillerson have not made any public comments on the situation there. To our knowledge, none has called on Russia to investigate, despite the fact that Trump has met with Putin several times since the atrocities began.

The president, vice president and Secretary of State must break their silence. They must condemn these atrocities and Russian laws that violate human rights and target vulnerable groups for abuse. They must demand that Russia investigate the crimes that took place in Chechnya.

They must work with our allies in international bodies to put additional pressure on Russia, as we saw when European nations led the OSCE in invoking the “Moscow Mechanism” in 2018. The Equal Rights Coalition, an international coalition of 42 national governments (including the U.S.) that helps protect the rights of LGBTQ people, can also help to advance this work as well. The U.S. should also re-engage at the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC), a body that may be flawed but has done a great deal to advance human rights for LGBTQ people and others - for example, by establishing an independent expert on sexual orientation and gender identity in 2016. But this administration, unfortunately, decided to withdraw from the UNHRC, which has diminished our nation’s voice on human rights issues and made it easier for bad actors to claim the mantle of human rights.

The administration must also welcome the refugees fleeing the violence there, as well as refugees fleeing violence and persecution in other places in the world. Instead, though, this administration has shamefully turned its back on refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants, making it far more difficult for people to get here and find safety. Chechen refugees have instead found other countries to take them in - Canada and some countries in Europe - but it is absolutely shameful that this country has not been a leader in taking in these vulnerable people.

Congress and the administration should also help fund human rights work for LGBTQ people around the world. The Department of State and USAID can do a tremendous amount of good by providing funding for groups that are working for their own human rights and liberation, and for journalists who are trying to tell the truth about the human rights situation in their own countries.

In conclusion, I want to thank the Commission once again for focusing its attention on the human rights situation in Russia, which is deeply problematic for LGBTQ people, their allies, and anyone seeking to exercise their rights to free speech and expression. The U.S. can and must play a role in helping to advance human rights for people there and around the globe.

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