

Russia: LGBT activists detained in Moscow while petitioning against Chechen purge

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Five people detained as they tried to submit a petition calling for an inquiry into a violent crackdown on gay people in the southern Russian republic.

Five LGBT activists were detained in Moscow on Thursday while trying to submit a petition signed by two million people calling for an investigation into the torture and persecution of gay men in Chechnya.

A violent crackdown on gay people in the region was first reported in the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* last month [1]. It alleged more than 100 Chechen men suspected of being gay had been rounded up, and at least three killed. *The Guardian* independently spoke to gay Chechen men who gave accounts of beatings and torture in the ultra-conservative, predominantly Muslim southern Russian republic [2].

The activists delivering the petition had met outside a central Moscow metro station and were planning to deliver boxes of signatures to the prosecutor general's office close by, activist Irina Yatsenko told reporters [3]. Almost immediately police accused them of holding an unsanctioned protest and detained them, she said.

One of the activists detained, Yuri Guaiana, is an Italian citizen. Two others are members of the Open Russia group – run by the self-exiled oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky – which was banned by the prosecutor general as an “undesirable” organisation last month.

Open Russia said the five activists had been charged with an administrative violation for holding a public event without permission. They were released later in the day.

Police told the RBC newspaper they had no information about the activists, but pictures posted online appeared to show police confiscating boxes labeled “Justice for the Chechen 100” [4].

The global campaigning organisation Avaaz, which helped circulate the petition, described the detentions as a “blatant attempt by Russia to intimidate those standing up for gay people, [which] will only draw more global attention to the horrors unfolding in Chechnya”.

Amnesty International said the detentions followed a familiar pattern of the Russian authorities crushing activism.

“It is aggravated by the fact that the detainees merely wanted to support gay men in Chechnya, one of the country's most marginalised groups, and call for their protection,” said Denis Krivosheev, Amnesty's deputy director for Europe and Central Asia.

“The LGBTI activists should be allowed to deliver their petition. And crucially, the authorities must

respond to the petition itself and investigate the allegations of horrific human rights violations against gay people in Chechnya which have rightly sparked a global outcry.”

Chechnya’s strongman leader Ramzan Kadyrov has dismissed reports of an anti-gay purge. His spokesman has suggested that there are “no gay people” in Chechnya, and that if there were their relatives would kill them.

Last week Angela Merkel urged Vladimir Putin to investigate what was going on in Chechnya [5]. The Russian president subsequently told his country’s human rights ombudswoman, Tatyana Moskalkova, that he would speak to law enforcement officials about the reports.

Speaking to the Guardian, two men who escaped Chechnya recounted being tricked into meetings with gay acquaintances, who had been forced to become police informers.

One was taken to a detention facility with dozens of others, beaten with metal rods and given electric shocks through clamps on his fingers and toes. Police tried to blackmail the other man, and threatened to hold a family member hostage. Both men fled Chechnya, fearing honour killings at the hands of their families.

Alec Luhn in Moscow

AFP contributed to this report

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* The Guardian. Thursday 11 May 2017 17.22 BST First published on Thursday 11 May 2017 13.28 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/11/lgbt-activists-opposed-to-chechen-crackdown-detained-in-moscow>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 41053), [Chechen police ‘have rounded up more than 100 suspected gay men’](#).

[2] ESSF (article 41052), [Chechens tell of prison beatings and electric shocks in anti-gay purge: ‘They called us animals’](#).

[3] <https://ovdinfo.org/express-news/2017/05/11/v-moskve-zaderzhali-pyatelyh-lgbt-aktivistov>

[4] <http://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/59142c7c9a79473c4fd56423>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/02/angela-merkel-vladimir-putin-russia-investigate-lgbt-torture-claims-chechnya>