

“Everyone’s involved and everyone stays silent”: Igor Kochetkov on Chechnya, LGBT activism and neotraditionalism

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This year, brutal repressions against LGBT people continued in Chechnya. Here, the director of the Russian LGBT Network speaks about why this keeps happening.

Today, LGBT people in Russia are facing unprecedented levels of hate crime.

In the North Caucasus Republic of Chechnya, the authorities carried out repressions against LGBT people - at the [start of 2017](#), and then again in [January 2019](#). But while Chechnya leads in terms of the numbers of victims and the level of brutality, it is far from an exception.

I spoke to Igor Kochetkov, director of the Russian LGBT Network, about activism, Chechnya and homophobia in Russia today.

Igor, for me - like many - you’re a kind of Don Quixote figure. I can see how ready you are to defend your principles with dignity, how thoughtfully you think about our struggle as a whole. What made you leave your job as a university lecturer and become one of the most prominent rights defenders in Russia today?

I’ve been asked a lot recently about what made me get into activism, and I’m more and more convinced that something like this was bound to happen to me. What comes next are some big words about rights defence.

The socio-political context in which I grew up fostered the development of these principles. I’m a child of Perestroika. That period and my teenage years began at the same time. I remember, my friends and I organised a revolt against our school’s Komsomol committee, and my first street action was in 1988. It wasn’t a protest in the strict sense of the word. My classmates and I went out onto Nevsky Prospect to collect money for people affected by the Spitak earthquake in Armenia. But we still ended up in the police station, it was still the Soviet Union after all.

I was involved in other rights defence actions in my student years. But I thought about my life mostly in terms of research and teaching back then. For me, research was also a field of battle for the truth – or what might be called justice. And the more I grew into the academic life, the more I became convinced that justice and truth aren’t the most important things for academia. It was right at the beginning of the active phase of my disenchantment with academia that I accepted my homosexuality. I accepted it late (I was 30), dramatically and very enthusiastically. I think this was my own form of emancipation. The intimate very quickly became public and political.

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was at the same time that the LGBT movement in the west started moving out of the margins and into the mainstream.

Once again, context played a big role here. Roughly at the beginning of the 2000s, the generation of Russian gays and lesbians (there was practically no talk of bi-sexuals and transgender people then), who came of age in the liberal 1990s, after decriminalisation, began talking on the internet. It was at the same time that the LGBT movement in the west started moving out of the margins and into the mainstream, and becomes one of the possible role models for our generation, which came of age under decriminalisation. Right then, though, a wave of reaction was already gaining ground in Russia. This closed off other role models and provoked a thirst for justice, which had been carried from childhood through the time of changes.

In the end, I came across yet another discussion about marriage on an online forum, which invited people to write articles for a gay site on social and political topics. This is how I met Ruslan Zuyev and Maxim Gubin – we started the website gayclub.ru, which contributed to the foundation of the Russian LGBT Network. But that's another story. No one tried to remove me from anywhere. I left research and teaching myself, that was my choice, when I was carried away by a new cause at the same time that I reached the end of my disappointment [with academia]. This is how freedom and fate combined for me.

I often see online how you respond calmly and rationally to obvious trolling, at times direct accusations and insults. This doesn't only come from outsiders or homophobic trolls, but from people who have the courage to speak for the whole community.

Tell me, is this your internal conviction that you have to maintain dialogue with different members of the community or is it a general position, that you have to speak to everyone always. And do you think that we should try and seek unity? Or should there be many different strands to LGBT activism in Russia, and that there's no reason to agree with one another?

I'm actually a very impatient person: I react painfully to criticism, and it takes a lot of effort to explain what I think are simple things several times. We're not talking about the insults here.

My husband Kirill knows how angry I can get when I come across some kind of attack, or just another opinion on an issue I find important. At the same time I know that there's no truth in debate. A conversation is a different thing. A conversation only happens if both sides aren't preparing for an argument, but have questions and want answers. You have to answer the questions. Sometimes it's hard online to figure out if your interlocutor really needs your answer. The only thing left to do is to pay attention to whether there's a question mark at the end of their sentence.

If someone asks a question, I answer, trying to ignoring my own assumptions about the other person and their aims. I can ask a clarifying question at the start, to figure out the other person's aims and why they're contacting me. And this can lead to a conversation. Sometimes – not. You never know in advance.

In the past two years, the Russian LGBT Network has faced a challenge that has been hard to process even for rights defenders. The recent [repressions in Chechnya](#) have been taking place en masse, with a claim to solving the "issue" once and for all. I know that you've thought a lot about this, drawing parallels between attitudes to LGBT people and the Holocaust. Could you explain your ideas further?

Chechnya is only one extreme manifestation of what I think is right to call an exception. We can use

the term “discrimination”, which literally means the same thing, but its basic meaning is washed out by frequent legal use, where discrimination is any biased attitude that is banned by law. By exception, I mean something qualitatively different.

To create and maintain its identity, any community requires an Other. This refers to those people who don't exist in the sense that if, unfortunately, they're here, then they shouldn't. The Other defines the absolute border of any given community.

Relations to the Other can form in different situations differently. In peacetime, when nothing threatens collective identity and the legitimacy of power, the Other is allowed to live among us on the condition that they will remain hidden (and not declare their presence), completely imitate us and/or reside in areas that are isolated from us (prison ghetto, closed club – it's not important). When collective identity and the basis of legitimacy begin to collapse, the community restores and renews itself through the destruction (exile) of the Other, and the ensuing collective remorse for what has happened.

For centuries, Jews were the Others of Christian Europe, but when European national identities and statehoods came under question as a result of world war and revolution, that's when the Holocaust happened. Prior to that, Jews, including those living in Germany, were allowed to assimilate on the condition that they, in Hannah Arendt's expression, no longer resembled Jews. Today, the same thing is happening to LGBT people in the West: there is forming a socially approved image of a gay man, lesbian and so on — they're married, they're bringing up children, they're masculine (not camp) and so on. On the whole, a gay man who is surprisingly similar to an upstanding heterosexual gentleman. Gay men tend to accept this image for a model, because it gives them a chance to satisfy their desire for safety, belonging and acceptance.

This image of the “good gay man” was finalised in the 1990s and 2000s – a time when western societies became concerned for their collective identities as they celebrated the victory over Communism and waited for the end of history. The 1980s, by contrast, was a time when western societies were ready to call an end to LGBT people during the Aids epidemic.

In the global south, life for LGBT people has been less happy, but there weren't any campaigns of political homophobia until the last decade. But times are changing.

It's important to understand that this respect and acceptance exists as long as heterosexual public opinion sanctions it and is ready to respond to the demands of the LGBT movement with conditions for peaceful coexistence which are acceptable for it. The concept of tolerance describes the essence of the situation: LGBT people remain outside of society, but they are tolerated on certain conditions. It's the same situation with Muslim people migrating to western societies.

Scapegoats need to be protected and fed until the moment of sacrifice. In the global south, life for LGBT people has been less happy, but there weren't any campaigns of political homophobia until the last decade. But times are changing. The fear of losing collective identities, the search for new identities is spreading everywhere – both in the west and in the global south. This fear is manifest, in particular, in different forms of neotraditionalism. In the west that's debates about the threat to European (western) values, which are placed in opposition not only to Islam, but universal human rights. In the global south, it's Islamic fundamentalism. In both cases, scapegoats are held responsible. In the west, the first people (and by no means the last) to be held responsible are migrants and Muslims, in the global south – it's LGBT people. The persecutions of LGBT people in Chechnya is a clear example of this.

But still, why Chechnya?

As we entered a new millennium, Chechens have been experiencing hugely powerful shocks to their collective identity: an unsuccessful attempt to create their own state, two wars and a genocide, they have been scattered across the whole world. Their society is divided by family ([teip](#)), politics (do they support the Kadyrovs or [independent Ichkeria](#)) and religion (school of Islam). The Kadyrov policy of purging Chechen blood of vices and the “resurrection” of Islam is a typical example of neo-traditionalism. What Kadyrovites call Chechen traditions has no relationship with historical tradition. The source for this new tradition are orders given by Ramzan Kadyrov himself, which are then backed up by violence. As in the case with other totalitarian regimes, this violence is effective because the whole society is involved in carrying it out.

The repression campaign against LGBT people fulfils two tasks at once: consolidating Chechen society and making society a co-participant in the regime’s crimes. Even Kadyrov’s fiercest opponents, those in exile who support the idea of Ichkeria, mostly support the repression against LGBT people, or publicly repeat Kadyrov’s phrase “we don’t have LGBT people here”. At least I haven’t heard or read any public condemnation of what’s happened from anyone who identifies as Chechen.

After being tortured and humiliated, the Chechen police hand over the victims to their relatives, who are, of course, informed about the real reason their sons and brothers were detained. There’s a whole ritual for this: angry speeches, spitting in the victim’s face and so on. That’s followed by an order to kill the “defective” family member, in order to save the family’s honour. The police then check to see if the order has been carried out. You need courage in order not to carry the order out, and help your son, daughter, brother or sister to run. As a result, everyone’s involved and everyone stays silent.

I think that the Chechen case of neo-traditionalism is perhaps the “most prominent”, but at the same time we can see these tendencies in other regions of the Russian Federation. I’m talking about attitudes to LGBT, rather than their implementation. But given Russia’s history, can we consider it a part of the Global South? And if so, what makes it so? Only attitudes to LGBT people?

Neo-traditionalism is a global phenomenon. The concept of western/European values is also, by the way, a form of neo-traditionalism, and one that is no better than its Islamic or Orthodox Christian counterparts.

This isn’t a cultural, nor geographic phenomenon. It’s a political one. And when I talk about the Global West or South, I use these definitions in speech marks, because we’re not talking about geographical regions, but political ones. Perhaps, using these geographical terms isn’t the best idea. Whatever others say, the bipolar world, by all accounts, is returning. The poles have switched, but there’s still two of them. Positions on gender and sexuality issues are the new (or one of) basis for division.

I agree with your criticism of the “good gay”. But, to be honest, I find it hard to imagine that everyone who has same-sex relations will be politically active. Today, people who aren’t involved in protest can continue living their own lives, but then there’s a huge amount of people coming into activism and want to be involved in struggle, even in western societies, where they act in solidarity with ethnic minorities, people who are refugees or homeless, and so on. Here, I’d like to return to what we were talking about at the start. What do you think, can we have a society without the Other? How do you imagine it or would like to see it?

In this case, I have been using the term assimilation without a value judgement. Perhaps I

emphasised the negative side of assimilation precisely because people don't usually pay attention to it. But it's obvious that it's better to live in a same-sex marriage than in prison, or in fear of ending up there. I myself live in a same-sex marriage and I like it. But there's always another side of the coin. All I wanted to say was that given a certain confluence of circumstances, we can end up in some kind of concentration camp. Firstly, because no assimilation has taken place and it is, in fact, impossible. And secondly, because it's not us who defines the conditions for peaceful co-existence, and the situation can, at any moment, be changed. And this is where nothing has really changed so far.

Igor, I'm sure that you've had to deal with the idea that the Russian LGBT Network dreamed everything up in Chechnya in order to carry out a successful fundraising campaign. And sadly, this is an opinion that certain members of the LGBT community share.

Some people still believe that the Holocaust didn't happen. And this is why those accusations don't surprise me, and neither does the fact that they are repeated, or that they are encouraged at the official level in Russia. Experts at the UN, OSCE, the Council of Europe, and at international human rights organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have made repeated statements about their complete faith in our information about what's happening in Chechnya. They talked to people who suffered, they studied documents from the official pre-investigation reports and agreed with our conclusions. There's nothing to discuss here.

The people who still doubt us or demand further evidence, I invite them to join our call to open a criminal case for the complete investigation of [Maxim Lapunov's statement](#), publications by Novaya Gazeta, our statements. We can only get evidence that has legal implications if a criminal case is opened. And we've been trying to do this for two years.

How far did visibility and media campaigns help defend LGBT people in Chechnya?

Making information about the persecution of LGBT people in Chechnya, the international attention saved dozens, if not hundreds of lives and helped start an international investigation. This is a fact. Publicity is the only method of influencing the situation. Several people, victims of persecution, didn't like the fact that we publicised their names. But there's no good moves in this whole story. We name people only when we are convinced that it will save someone's life.

You recently received death threats. You responded to them with dignity, passing them onto the police and publicly stating that you are not afraid. Can you give any advice to people who are only just getting into rights defence, how should they develop this skill of looking at hate and danger, including lethal, straight in the face?

I can't advise anyone coming into activism. [Lyudmila Alexeeva](#) used to say: we don't have the right to demand courage (or activity) from others. Work on yourself. Everyone has their own threshold of what can be sacrificed. Both life and circumstances are different for everyone. This is why you can't ask anyone, apart from yourself, to do anything. So no advice from me. Every individual coming into activism has to define their level of responsibility and risk.

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