

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > Russia > Anti-War Resistance (Russia) > **Europe: Halt returns of people from the North Caucasus to Russia where (...)**

Europe: Halt returns of people from the North Caucasus to Russia where they are at risk of torture and abuse

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Authorities in European states must immediately halt the transfer of refugees and asylum seekers from the North Caucasus back to Russia where they will be at risk of torture and other ill-treatment and potentially forced to fight in Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, said Amnesty International in a new research document published today.

[Europe: The point of no return](#) finds that authorities in Croatia, France, Germany, Poland and Romania, among others, have or have attempted to extradite or deport asylum seekers who had fled persecution in the North Caucasus to seek asylum in European states, thereby denying them the right to international protection. Due to their religious and ethnic identity - the majority of people from the region are Muslim and are Chechen, Dagestani, and Ingush, among other ethnicities - entire communities have been branded as 'dangerous extremists' that pose an existential threat to national security, allegedly justifying their return to a region where their rights are at real risk.

"It is scandalous that despite claims to have frozen all judicial cooperation with Russia following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, several European states are threatening to send people who fled persecution in Russia's North Caucasus back to the very place where those abuses have occurred. European countries must recognize that many individuals of such background would face arrest or abduction, torture, other ill treatment or forced conscription on their return," said Nils Muižnieks, director of Amnesty International's Europe Regional Office.

It is scandalous that several European states are threatening to send people who fled persecution in Russia's North Caucasus back to the very place where those abuses have occurred.

Nils Muižnieks, Europe Director, Amnesty International

"The situation facing those who have fled the North Caucasus has worsened dramatically due to the further degradation of human rights standards in Russia since its invasion of Ukraine. They face persecution through torture, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance, with no accountability at home, and have historically been stigmatized and targeted for deportation or extradition in European states.

The human rights situation in the North Caucasus is dire, particularly in Chechnya. Anyone who expresses critical views, engages in human rights activism or is perceived to be a member of the LGBTI community risks being targeted, as well as their friends and family members.

Since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, an already bad human rights situation in Russia has significantly worsened. The risk of torture and other ill-treatment – widespread in places of detention prior to the invasion – has increased and there are credible reports that ethnic minorities in Russia are disproportionately mobilized into the armed forces. Those who refuse or attempt to flee mobilization risk serious human rights violations.

One Chechen asylum seeker told Amnesty International: “People are taken off the streets, and you have two options, either go to jail for 10 years or go to fight. Jail in Chechnya...it’s like you no longer exist. But at least you might come out after 10 years. It’s probably better than to be mobilized, to fight, to die.”

Russia’s withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the crackdown on independent human rights monitoring in the country have dramatically increased the risk of human rights abuses and deprived victims of an important means of holding perpetrators to account.

Many people from the North Caucasus who have fled the dire situation at home are now at risk of expulsion, extradition or deportation from European countries, which would constitute a violation of the principle of non-refoulement. States’ threatening to return people to Russia is taking place against a prevailing backdrop of discrimination and stigmatization in Europe of people from the North Caucasus, who are for the most part Muslim. This risk has increased since Israel’s bombardment of Gaza and increasingly violent attacks, arrests and killings in the West Bank following the 7 October Hamas attacks on southern Israel.

The ban on returns to risk of torture and other ill-treatment is absolute and allows no exceptions, including on national security grounds. The legal basis for transfers to Russia is often opaque or spurious, including the use of secret evidence provided by security services and groundless allegations emanating from Russia itself, particularly in the form of Interpol “red notices”. Russia has instrumentalized such notices to target political opponents, dissidents, human rights defenders, journalists and their relatives and associates. Some European states also accept inherently unreliable “diplomatic assurances” against torture from the Russian authorities to justify returns of people from the North Caucasus. Coming from Russia, where torture is endemic and the criminal justice system is regularly abused, such “assurances” are merely an attempt to circumvent a state’s absolute obligation not to send a person to any place where they would be at risk of egregious human rights violations.

The risk of expulsion from France to Russia has increased substantially following the fatal stabbing of a schoolteacher in Arras by a man from the North Caucasus on 13 October 2023. In the days following the Arras attack, President Macron called for a “ruthless” approach to what he called “extremism”, with a “special approach to young men between the ages of 16 and 25 from the Caucasus”. The President also authorized his Interior Minister, Gérald Darmanin, to engage the Russian authorities on potential transfers. Plans have reportedly been put in place for the deportation up to 11 individuals to Russia.

France has a long history of cooperation with Russia on the deportations of Chechens suspected of being “extremists”. In February 2022, Daoud Muradov, a young Chechen man who had been deported to Russia by France, despite clear evidence that he would be at risk of torture or other ill-treatment, died in detention under suspicious circumstances. The French authorities had not only deported him, but also handed details of his asylum application containing the personal information of those who had helped him flee, as well as of members of his family, to the Russian authorities.

France is not the only European government prepared to send people to Russia in violation of the principle of non-refoulement – the absolute ban on sending people to any place where they would be

at risk of such serious abuse.

In Romania, national authorities detained Chechen asylum seeker Amina Gerikhanova in March 2022 on grounds that she posed an alleged threat to national security. She had fled her home in Ukraine in the aftermath of Russia's invasion in February 2022. The Romanian border guards separated her from her young son and detained her pending extradition based on a Russian Interpol red notice. Her extradition to Russia was only stopped following a massive public outcry and the imposition of interim measures by the European Court of Human Rights. Romania eventually granted her asylum.

Anyone returned to the North Caucasus faces grave risks and it is unconscionable to use the pretext of heightened tensions in the Middle East to justify the return of asylum seekers.

Nils Muižnieks

Magomed Zubagirov fled persecution in his native Dagestan in 2017. He settled in Ukraine with his wife, but in March 2022 was forced to flee again as Russia's full-scale invasion unfolded. Despite his plea for asylum at the Poland-Ukraine border, Polish authorities refused him entry on the basis of an Interpol red notice emanating from Russia, and instead deported him there.

"For a number of years, European governments and institutions have ignored or downplayed the grave risks facing anyone returned to the North Caucasus. Those risks are now even more acute and it is unconscionable to use the pretext of heightened tensions in the Middle East to justify the return of asylum seekers," said Nils Muižnieks.

"European governments must immediately halt all transfers to Russia of people who are at risk of torture or other human rights violations and recognize that such risks are considerably higher for individuals from the North Caucasus. People in Europe must have their protection needs fairly assessed in light of the poor human rights situation in Russia and the ongoing war in Ukraine."

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