



**Members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe**

**21 April 2017**

**Re: ADDRESSING THE HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION IN THE NORTH CAUCASUS**

Dear Assembly Member,

**We are writing, ahead of the spring session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), to call upon you to participate in the Plenary debate on the report of the Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights on “Human Rights in the North Caucasus” to be held on Tuesday 25 April, and to fully support the adoption of the resolution and recommendation that reflect the concerns raised by the report and renews the Council of Europe’s attention and reporting on the dramatic human rights situation in the region.**

Our organizations welcomed the PACE Bureau decision to reinstate the report to its Plenary agenda. PACE had remained one of the few international forums that could regularly expose the situation in the turbulent region and support victims in their quest for justice. We were deeply concerned that the suspension of the debate in June 2016 on the report was a disservice to human rights professionals, activists and journalists striving to document and address the human rights violations committed in the region.

The upcoming debate therefore represents a unique opportunity to put the authorities in the North Caucasus on notice that the Assembly is effectively monitoring the grave violations committed in the region, as well as to urge the Government of the Russian Federation to ensure that North Caucasus authorities fully comply with Russia’s domestic legislation and international human rights obligations. This is even more important as waves of violence have shaken the region, including in advance of the September 2016 regional elections in Chechnya and the recently documented brutal attacks on men in Chechnya who are perceived to be gay.

The Parliamentary Assembly should adopt a strong resolution that addresses the persistent impunity and deteriorating human rights situation in the region, in particular the human rights crisis in Chechnya. The Parliamentary Assembly should also offer detailed recommendations to the authorities of the Russian Federation, including on the urgent need to bring perpetrators to justice and put a resolute end to attacks on human rights defenders, lawyers, and journalists working to expose and eradicate abuses in the region. Finally, the Parliamentary Assembly should also decide to continue to pay attention, monitor and report on the human rights situation in the North Caucasus region, especially in the Chechen Republic.

We therefore call upon you to raise the following concerns during the 25 April debate and ensure that they are duly reflected in the resolution put up for adoption:

- In the **Chechen Republic**, local authorities are viciously and comprehensively cracking down on critics and anyone whose total loyalty to Kadyrov they deem questionable. These include local residents who express dissenting opinions, critical Russian and foreign journalists, and the very few human rights defenders who challenge abuse by Chechen law enforcement and security agencies. Those attacks increased in the run up to the September 2016 elections for the local authorities in the Chechen Republic. Local authorities even attacked ordinary people expressing dissenting opinions, as well as critical Russian and foreign journalists and human rights defenders. Non-governmental organisations documented increased practices of unlawful detention and enforced disappearances, cruel and degrading treatment, death threats, collective punishment by targeting family members of alleged insurgents, public humiliation practices and retaliation against family members of local critics.
- The Chechen leadership also intensified its **onslaught against the few human rights defenders** who still work in the region and provide legal and other assistance to victims of abuses. Unidentified pro-government thugs destroyed the office of the Joint Mobile Group of Human Rights Defenders in Chechnya (JMG) in December 2014 and again in June 2015. The authorities did not carry out an effective investigation. It is regrettable that JMG had to withdraw its teams from the Chechen Republic in early 2016 for security reasons.
- **Repeated attacks on journalists** fostered a climate of fear. In March 2016, a group of masked men attacked a minibus driving a group of Russian and foreign journalists from Ingushetia to Chechnya, dragged the journalists from the bus, beat them, and set the bus on fire. In September, following an unfair trial, a court in Chechnya sentenced a 23-year-old local journalist, Zhalaudi Geriev, to three years in prison on fabricated drug possession charges, apparently in retaliation for his work for Caucasian Knot. On January 7, Magomed Daudov, the speaker of Chechnya's parliament, publicly threatened Gregory Shvedov, editor-in-chief of Caucasian Knot.
- On 1 April, the Russian independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* reported that over a hundred men believed to be gay had been recently abducted, as part of a coordinated campaign. According to multiple, confidential, and credible sources, the abducted men were tortured and otherwise ill-treated, and forced to disclose other LGBTI individuals known to them. *Novaya Gazeta* was able to verify that at least three men had been killed by their captors, two as the result of treatment in custody and one killed by his family in an "honor killing." On 4 April, *Novaya Gazeta* published several testimonies of eyewitnesses revealing details of secret detention sites in Chechnya where abducted gay men are held and tortured. These reports merit serious investigation by Russian federal authorities. Chechen Republic officials' response to reports about persecution against gay people underscores just how serious the situation is. They have expressed rage not at reports of kidnapping, beating, and killings of people, but at the very idea that there could be gay people in Chechnya. A statement by a member of the State Duma from the Chechen Republic, Magomed Selimkhanov, illustrates this. He [said](#) : "There are no gay people in Chechnya, so no one can have any views about them. I personally believe that they belong 2 meters underground." Statements by Chechen authorities regarding the violence appear to constitute incitement to hostility and further violence against LGBT people.
- Following international outrage about the brutal attacks against men in Chechnya perceived to be gay, Chechen officials and clerics have **threatened the newspaper *Novaya Gazeta***, the newspaper that first exposed the brutal campaign.

- The authorities have continued to harass and intimidate perceived Salafis. In **Dagestan**, law enforcement and security officers have largely equated Salafi Muslims with insurgents or their collaborators. Police put Salafis on special watch lists, repeatedly detaining, questioning, photographing, and fingerprinting them—often without grounds – and raided Salafi mosques across the region, using excessive force to detain suspects and then holding them incommunicado in undisclosed locations. The crackdown on activists and journalists reporting on abusive treatment of Salafi Muslims intensified. Several left Dagestan for security reasons.
- To date, there has been **no or little accountability** for such egregious abuses as extra-judicial executions, enforced disappearances, torture and cruel and degrading treatment. Persistent impunity has served to perpetuate these abuses and contributed to the gradual loss of trust in domestic and international law by victimized local communities.

We continue to regret the lack of cooperation by the authorities of the Russian Federation with the Council of Europe, as well as the non-participation of the Russian delegation to PACE. In this context, we deeply value PACE’s continued reporting on the dramatic situation of human rights in the North Caucasus. While many of the recommendations presented by the Committee have not been implemented by the local and Russian authorities, we firmly believe that they are fully relevant.

We hope that you can echo those concerns, and participate in the Plenary debate to support PACE’s continued reporting role on this egregious situation. Your voice will matter for those who work to defend the victims of violations and abuses in the North Caucasus.

Yours sincerely,

- Amnesty International
- Article 19
- Human Rights Watch
- Human Rights Center “Memorial”
- Norwegian Helsinki Committee