

Chechnya - Repression without borders⁵⁴

Civil Rights Defenders

You are the ones who are hurting yourselves. Someday, in five-ten years, you will have to return, or your parents will tell that it is time for you to come back home, or you will be kicked out of Europe. You will have nowhere to go then, and we will make you answer for every single word of yours and for your every action. I know all the webpages of all the young people who are residing in Europe, every Instagram and Facebook profile, every account of every social network, we are writing down your every word and putting them on record, we have all data on you, who you are, and what you are doing, we know everything. Nowadays, the modern age and technologies allow us all of that, we know everything and can find anyone, so do not make it worse for yourselves.

Ramzan Kadyrov, the Head of the Chechen Republic, in a video published to YouTube⁵⁵

The Head of the Chechen Republic does not need to exaggerate. Ramzan Kadyrov has ruled the North Caucasian republic of 1.2 million people with an iron fist since 2007, when he was appointed by Russian President Vladimir Putin. His legitimacy largely rests on his ability to keep Chechnya, which fought two bloody wars with Moscow in the 1990s, firmly a part of the Russian Federation.

Kadyrov, who fought with his father against the Russian state until 1999, has also worked to ensure that his security apparatus is not limited by national borders. When the Head of the Chechen Republic wishes to punish those he deems guilty of even minor personal insults, location has not proved to be a serious limitation.

I know because I am one of them. In Russian, the word is *vinovny* – ‘a guilty one’. I cannot speak freely as to why I have left my home, as it is not just my own safety that is at stake, but that of my relatives, my colleagues, and my friends.

The *vinovny* include journalists, human rights activists, intellectual or religious regime critics, and the occasional rival warlord. We are far from homogenous, and joining our club is not difficult – often, a sharply-worded post on social media will suffice.

Much has been written, both in Russia and abroad, about how the *vinovny* are persecuted in Chechnya, but here I would like instead to discuss the persecution of Chechens abroad. From our perspective, abroad encompasses not just Europe and the Middle East, but also the rest of the Russian Federation. If it is as claimed that Ramzan Kadyrov can reach Boris Nemtsov on the steps of the Kremlin, - and the Nemtsov family believe there is strong evidence to suggest the head of Chechnya was responsible⁵⁶ – then he will have no issues doing the same to a near-anonymous Chechen in a suburban flat in Moscow or Rostov-on-Don.

Kadyrov has developed several strategies for intimidating, harassing, and when needed, murdering Chechens abroad. In recent years, he has become more proactive than reactive, as spectacular assassinations have given way to the more mundane practice of constant surveillance. It is this method we will discuss first.

Today, the Chechen state keeps close tabs on its people abroad through constant surveillance of both social media and ordinary telecommunications. The Chechen security services, whose members are a mix of former rebels who moved to Moscow’s side in the 2000’s – for a variety of reasons ranging from greed to blackmail, and not always of their own volition – and newer recruits simply desperate for a job of any kind, operate largely as Kadyrov’s private army. They are largely autonomous from federal Russian security services, and what interaction does happen between the structures is largely limited to training and intelligence sharing. Free from legal restraints, they are able to tap the phones of all relatives and friends of *vinovny* abroad.

This extends now to social media and blogs, formerly a place for dissident Chechens to organise and discuss social problems openly. Since the early 2000s, he has recruited teams of programmers and bloggers to control and

⁵⁴ The author is a Chechen human rights activist living abroad. They are writing anonymously for their and their family’s safety in cooperation with Civil Rights Defenders

⁵⁵ See on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZo5DE6OpEw>

⁵⁶ Shaun Walker, Boris Nemtsov murder investigators name Chechen mastermind, December 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/dec/29/boris-nemtsov-investigators-name-chechen-mastermind>

shadow all Chechens online. There is even a state apparatus, the Security Council of the Chechen Republic, for this very purpose.

Not all Chechens are deterred by constant surveillance, however. Once they have decided to move beyond general surveillance to direct action, Kadyrov's men gather all available information and weigh all possible options for punishing their target. The initial goal is to find *kompromat*, or compromising material, which can be used to shame or discredit critics on social media. If none exists, they will fabricate it.

An illustrative case is that of Chechen refugee Minkail Malizaev, who gained asylum in Germany with his family several years ago. Outraged by accounts of public humiliations, arrests, and other human rights abuses back home, he took to Facebook in May 2016 to condemn Kadyrov and his supporters using a very strong Chechen slur that roughly translates as 'Putin's bitches'.⁵⁷

The retribution began immediately after the Facebook posts were published. Chechen security services rounded up all Malizaev's relatives still living in Chechnya, including women and children, and forced them to beg Minkail to return and apologise to Kadyrov. He refused, and his relatives were eventually released – with the exception of Malizaev's brother, whose fate is still a mystery, as his family does not know whether he is alive or dead.

His family has not publicly testified about how they were treated in captivity, but we can speculate based on reports from other Chechens who have been punished in the place of their relatives. If, like Malizaev, the *vinovny* fails to return, his relatives can be deprived of their social security benefits and property, their houses can be burned down, and in some cases, they can be expelled from Chechnya entirely.

Minkail Malizaev still refuses to apologise, and the threats against him continue. Years ago, these measures were more effective, and *vinovny* would often return to protect their family – often at the risk of their own life.

Returning *vinovny* can expect to be severely beaten, and after a bit of cleaning up, perhaps with makeup to hide cuts and bruises, to be forced to apologise on television. Following that, the ultimate fate of each person differs: he can either leave Chechnya forever, or with Kadyrov's pardon, he can try to resume his life at home – but later, when the public has forgotten the incident, he could still be kidnapped, murdered, or sent to prison on some new charges, usually related to drugs or financial fraud.

Most Chechens abroad are aware that their relatives will be punished for any perceived crimes they may commit against Ramzan Kadyrov or the Chechen state, and choose to proactively sever all communication with friends and family at home for their own protection.

The government also actively interferes in online media in order to create the illusion that dissident Chechens abroad are the exception, rather than the rule. In late 2015 and early 2016, Chechen emigrants held a number of public demonstrations against Ramzan Kadyrov's rule in several European cities.⁵⁸ Almost immediately, a simultaneous phenomenon sprung up: videos on social media of Chechens living in Europe, who instead praised Kadyrov as the true benefactor and leader of his people.

The videos appear to have been directed both at Europeans who might sympathise with Chechen refugees, as well as to remind the refugees themselves that they are not beyond Kadyrov's reach in places like Oslo or Vienna. One video, entitled 'Chechen Joke 2016' and posted to YouTube under the 'comedy' category, is 16 seconds of a Chechen living in Hamburg, Germany, brandishing a pistol and threatening to murder any Chechens in Europe who dare to criticise Kadyrov.⁵⁹

Prominent Chechen activists and human rights defenders who move abroad face further difficulty escaping Kadyrov's reach. All refugees, regardless of status, are often kept in common camps where they must stay until

⁵⁷ Minkail Malizaev, who called the Kadyrovtsy "Putin's bitches": I will not disown my words! - Leon Adam, YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2o1topjKyXQ>

⁵⁸ The humiliation of Chechens. Kadyrov. The story continues – Current Time TV, YouTube video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uc6AiADC7Ww>

⁵⁹ Chechen joke 2016. Kadyrov's guard Petukh Hamburgskij – YouTube video - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UpFP8C-mLck>

their case is decided. As many activists and journalists are well-known people, it does not take long for them to be recognised by fellow Chechen, Ingush, Dagestani, or Russian refugees.

I can say from personal experience that refugees spend most of their spare time on social media communicating with relatives at home. Due to widespread wiretapping and monitoring of social media, often all it takes is for one refugee to innocently mention they've seen a certain human rights defender or journalist, and the *vinovny's* anonymity is lost. Unfortunately, it is also common for people to report on others for Kadyrov, in order to obtain certain rewards.

However, such opportunistic informants are only complementary, as the Chechen government also sends its own agents to Europe disguised as refugees. Sometimes they stay undercover in order to monitor the emigrant populations' political sentiments or act as informants. Other times, they make themselves known in emigrant communities as a reminder that escaping from Chechnya does not mean an escape from political violence.

There is also the case of Said Emin Ibragimov, a harsh critic of both the Kremlin and the Chechen government who obtained political asylum in France years ago. In 2015, he was kidnapped while fishing near his home in Strasbourg. His captors, who he says spoke with Moscow accents, coaxed him to agree to stop his criticism; when he refused, they spent two days torturing him, beating him with iron bars and burning his fingers with cigarettes. His tormentors left his body in a forest near where he was taken. It is unclear whether he was supposed to survive.

Ibragimov insists his captors were FSB agents, not Chechens. Although Kadyrov's agents have unquestionably taken the lead in intimidating Chechens abroad, they are by no means the only ones trying to stamp out dissent around the world.⁶⁰

If the punitive methods described thus far prove impractical, the Chechen state can pressure uncooperative Chechens abroad through the lobbying, blackmail, or bribery of public and religious figures in the country where the dissident resides.

Take the case of Dzhafar, an ethnic Chechen with Jordanian nationality. After posting videos on social media criticising the Chechen government on what may seem to be mundane matters to outside observers – primarily regarding the difficulties the Chechen diaspora has obtaining visas to visit relatives at home – Adam Delimkhanov, a member of the Russian Duma who is widely regarded to be Kadyrov's right-hand man, travelled to Jordan with his entourage specifically to force Dzhafar to recant.

When death threats failed to convince Dzhafar to apologise, Delimkhanov reportedly informed the Jordanian government that Chechnya would cease to subsidise the thousands of Syrian Chechen refugees currently living in Jordan.⁶¹ In response, the Jordanian government communicated to Dzhafar that they would not protect him from Delimkhanov, and it was in his best interests to publicly apologise.

Dzhafar met with Delimkhanov and agreed to repent. After apologising, he received a phone call from an unknown person in Chechnya, telling him:

I do not want to have your blood on me, so I am telling you what I heard and what I know. You did not have to apologise, you were innocent and you did not have to make any excuses. This was done with the aim of making a public image of you apologising and being forgiven. But in three-four months, when everyone forgets about the incident, you will be killed anyhow. And no one will be held accountable for your death.

At the end of the video telling his story, Dzhafar states his plans to give up Jordanian citizenship and move to Turkey.^{62,63}

⁶⁰ BBC Russia, Chechen human rights defender: I have been tortured by the Russian agents via <http://videolike.org/view/yt=DxhNsc.h7qr>

⁶¹ According to Dzhafar, ethnic Chechen refugees receive 250-300 USD 'personally' from Kadyrov.

⁶² During the editing process, Dzhafar Yordanskiy's YouTube account was suspended on grounds of "multiple third-party notifications of copyright infringement." At the time of writing, his videos have been uploaded by YouTube accounts, but it is unclear if they will be taken down before publication.

⁶³ Dzhafar Yordanskiy – how it happened. YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZV0XxBqPDpE>