Dear friends, dear colleagues. We are glad to welcome you today in Moscow, at the press-center of the news agency Rosbalt. Today our press conference is devoted to the anniversary of the beginning of investigation of persecution of Russian citizens in Chechnya because of the homosexual orientation. Before we start, I would like to ask you to turn your mobile phones into the silent mode. There is a livestream of our press conference on our YouTube channel.

Today our speakers are human rights defender and co-founder of the Russian LGBT Network Igor Kochetkov and special correspondent of Novaya Gazeta Elena Milashina.

Igor Kochetkov

Dear friends, as it was already mentioned, I represent Interregional Social Movement Russian LGBT Network.

A year ago, approximately in the middle of March, we started to receive messages, and then there were more and more of them, that in Chechnya the authorities illegally detained and tortured men who were suspected of being involved in sexual relations with other men, that they were detained and tortured on the sole ground of that.

Already that time we have heard about numerous cases of killings. Together with our colleagues from other human rights organizations and journalists from Novaya Gazeta, we started to verify this information, and by the end of March it became clear that this information was true, and that we were dealing with mass detentions, tortures and killings of people just because of their sexual orientation.

In the end of March, we opened a hotline, and asked everyone who suffered within this mass campaign to contact us. From the very beginning, it was clear that it was pointless to appeal to the Chechen law enforcement agencies. The only way to help those people in need was to evacuate them from Chechnya and subsequently from Russia. We are doing that starting from April 2017.

During this year, (I am sorry) we evacuate 114 people from Chechnya, 92 people have already left Russia. Who are these people? 41 persons faced illegal detention, tortures and beatings. They were released and managed to flee from Chechnya.

14 people were visited by the police, they were threatened with the arrest or were invited to cooperate in exchange for security. It meant that they were expected to name others. In some cases, their homes were visited when they were away, they were warned and managed to leave.

Another 7 people contacted us when some people they knew were detained. They were afraid that they names would be named under tortures.

Those who were detained witness that the only thing that was of interest of the police officers and militants were the names of other homosexuals. They were not interested in anything else, they did not put any charges, and they just demanded to name other gays. Therefore, the anxiety of those who contacted us in fear to be next was well grounded.

Another 7 people who contacted us were threatened by their own relatives who was going to execute them.

Another 35 people are the family members of victims – wives and children who were also under threat.

When the police officers and Rosgvardiya militants were releasing the victims, they were giving them to family members, and demanded the relatives to punish them.

Those who were released were told not to leave Chechnya. And when the police was getting information that someone of them left Chechnya, they were visiting relatives and persuading them to contact those who left, their sons and brothers, to force them to return or to send statements, written statements or
video statements saying that they don’t have any claims against Chechen police. Therefore, family members were subjected to pressure.

When these people were with us, there were attempts to kidnap them and to return them to Chechnya. Unfortunately, three people were kidnapped. They were taken to Chechnya against their will. We have information that at least one of them is already dead.

Due to unclear reasons, 5 people willingly returned to Chechnya after being evacuated. Presumably, one of them is dead.

In addition, everything I told was about Chechen people, they lived in Chechnya. We were also contacted by people from other Caucasian republics. Those people were hunted by the Chechen police because of their contacts with Chechen men even though they resided in other republics. 8 people contacted us because of that. Therefore, this mass campaign exceeded the boarders of the Chechen Republic.

It is important to understand that people in Chechnya were persecuted because of their sexual orientation long before 2017 too. However, before those persecutions were the personal initiatives of some law enforcement officials.

For instance, of Chechen criminal investigation department. Blackmail was the only goal. So the law enforcement officers received information about sexual relations between men, threatened them and demanded money in exchange for silence.

The ransom, if I can call it that way, depended on social status. So more or less reach and wealthy person was expected to pay more.

What are the features of persecution that started in January-February 2017?

First, detentions and tortures were organized at different places at the same time. We know at least 4 such places, 4 so-called illegal prisons where people were detained under suspicion of homosexual relations.

It means that it was a coordinated campaign, which could be coordinated only by the authorities.

People were detained at spaces controlled by the police, by local departments of internal affairs or by Rosgvardiya, namely military troops Terek.

Moreover, at different stages of this campaign various high-ranking Chechen officials participated, they talked to victims and their relatives, threatened them, and persuaded the relatives to punish victims.

We can name these officials because many times our informants named them to us. There is a speaker of Chechen Parliament Magomed Daudov, the head of the Argun division of Ministry of Internal Affairs Ajub Kataev, and the head of the Special Rapid Response Detachment Terek Abusaid Ismuratov.

It suggests that it was not a personal initiative of some malevolent law enforcement official, but rather a campaign organized and approved by the Chechen authorities.

Moreover, when this mass campaign was already in place, after the first publication made by Novaya Gazeta, the high-ranking Chechen officials starting from Ramzan Kadyrov and his environment, made several public statements, where they were saying at first that there were no homosexuals in Chechnya, and adding that they should have been killed if they had existed. That their relatives were expected to kill them themselves. In that case, they were public calls to violence, permission to violence against homosexuals.

Probably, the most explicit statement during these first days after the publications by Novaya Gazeta was made by the member of the Chechen Human Rights Council Heda Saratova. She said that she did not receive any such claims, but she would not even consider such a claim. “I am a Chechen woman, I live in
this society, and things you are talking about are scarier than war. I can reassure you, in our Chechen society any person with self-respect, with a respect to our traditions and customs, would himself persecute without any agencies, will do everything to ensure that there are no such people in our society.”

I want to stress that. It is the direct instruction; the statement that there should be no such people in Chechen society. And what happens if such people do exist? They should be eliminated.

Later on Ramzan Kadyrov stated that if there are such people, they should be taken away to “purify the blood”. This is the citation. “Take them to Canada”.

Therefore, at first there is a direct call to killings. Secondly, it suggests that the Chechen authorities, Chechen law enforcement agencies are not willing to investigate this crime. Even if they would get such applications, they would not consider them. This crime cannot be investigated in Chechnya.

Above all, it is important to point out, that in that case people were not only illegally detained, they were tortured, including beatings, tortures with the electric current, beatings with various objects. Quite often, the victims mention plastic tubes they were beaten with.

All this circumstances allow us to conclude that we are dealing with the crime against humanity as it is defined by the Article 7 of the International Criminal Code’s Rome Statute.

There is an organized systematic persecution of people based on the precise characteristic, in that case – sexual orientation, which includes kidnappings, tortures and killings. It is a crime against humanity.

I also would like to pay special attention to the situation of lesbians and transgender women in Chechnya. They are rarely mentioned with regard to these events because from the very beginning exclusively men were targeted by Chechen police and militants. However, 12 women, both lesbians and transgender women, contacted us and reported on the domestic violence and special interest from the police.

People who share with us information about the secret prisons reported that there are also lesbians in these prisons. We started to receive this information in January 2018. They face the same tortures as men and sexual violence.

The situation of women, both lesbians and transgender women in Chechnya, in some ways is worse that the situation of men. A man can fool his relatives; man can say that he is going to work in Moscow, and that is how we can take him out. But women are under total control of their relatives. We have to invent very difficult mechanisms for them to be able to leave. For the same reason, we have far less information about the situation of women in Chechnya. They have fewer opportunities to share their stories, even to complain.

That is what I wanted to share. I am ready to answer questions. First Elena will talk about the official investigation.

Elena Milashina

On April 1 and 3, 2017, Novaya Gazeta published two articles devoted to persecution of homosexual men, Chechen citizens, because of nontraditional sexual orientation. Shortly afterwards, we filed claims to the Federal Investigative Committee and to the Federal Prosecutor’s Office. Why did we apply to the Prosecutor’s office? Because we know how the Investigative Committee deals with the crime reports, in accordance with the internal policies it does not react in a lawful manner. Therefore, we applied to the Russian Federation Prosecutor General Yuri Chayka, for him to oblige the Investigative Committee to implement the law and to initiate investigation of the facts outlined in our publications.

There were evidences of the fact that there was an organized mass persecution of Chechens because of or on suspicion of homosexuality.
An international outcry caused by our publications and by the fact that the situation became known, resulted in the first in 10 years reaction of the Investigative Committee. For the first time in 10 years, when we have been publishing loads of articles about the practice of extrajudicial executions in Chechnya, the pre-investigation check was initiated. It was initiated on April 18, 2017.

It is very important to say that it was based on our claim. From the formal point of view, we, Novaya Gazeta, were supposed to be applicants within this pre-investigation check.

However, despite the fact that on April 19 three correspondents of Novaya Gazeta who contacted the victims were interrogated, it did not happen. The pre-investigation check started with our evidences. However, Novaya Gazeta did not become an applicant. The same thing happened with another case, when the journalists of Novaya Gazeta were publicly threatened at the many thousands meeting of religious and social leaders of Chechnya that took place in the main mosque of Grozny on April 2.

At the meeting, the resolution was adopted; that resolution contains threats to all the employees of Novaya Gazeta, not only to the correspondents that prepared the articles. We filed a claim to the Investigative Committee, and the same pre-investigation check considered this claim too. Therefore, the investigation was supposed to verify if there was mass persecution of men because of their sexual orientation in Chechnya, and if there were public threats to the journalists of Novaya Gazeta.

For many years, we have been writing about the practices of extrajudicial executions in Chechnya, about illegal detentions, kidnappings, tortures, month and years of detentions, killings.

That is why that time we had information about the situation not connected to LGBT persecution in Chechnya, but it was connected to this practice of extrajudicial executions. We had information about 27 Chechen citizens who were detained in December 2016 – January 2017. They all were executed in the end of January 2017 on suspicion of terrorism and extremism.

There were no official detentions, there were no official charges, and these people were just killed. And we passed their names, 24 names, to the investigators. We conducted our own journalist investigation, and we passed their names because we wanted to confirm this fact of extrajudicial executions, and we hoped for help. We believe that it was a terrible crime, and that the investigation of this crime should take place.

At the same time, on April 19, we passed the first two names to the investigators, the names of men, who were killed because of their real or alleged homosexuality.

Why we managed to name only two people, even though we ourselves wrote about mass detentions, and this fact that was later confirmed by the high number of evacuated people, witnesses and victims.

Because persecution of LGBT people in Chechnya was a unique situation. When we were writing about extrajudicial executions in Chechnya before, the victims’ relatives were on our side. They provided us information, they talked about the things that happened to their relatives: that they were detained, that they were kidnapped by the law enforcement officials, that they were illegally imprisoned, that they might be killed. Relatives provided us information and confirmed information.

In case with LGBT persecutions, relatives were against us for two reasons. First, in the Chechen society a family member’s homosexuality is a shame not only for this person but also for the whole family. That is how homosexuality is perceived in Chechnya, in the Caucasus, and in many ways in Russia too. It is very crucial in the Caucasus because of the peculiarities of the local society. I will show you later by example of the criminal case materials that it is dangerous even to talk about homosexuality. That is why family members will never reveal information about someone’s homosexuality.
It is important. However, there is also another thing. Family members were often forced to become accomplices of these crimes; they were forced to kill their close ones, those whom the police officers and representatives of Chechen authorities considered homosexuals.

I am going to cite the materials of the pre-investigation check, the interrogation of the Grand Mufti of Chechnya Salah Mezhiev. Igor has already mentioned the statements made by various public figures, including Heda Saratova. She was also interrogated within this pre-investigation check. However, she tried to mitigate her words; probably she realized that her statements could cause criminal consequences. She did it before already, and she said that she would probably help such people.

Mufti Mezhiev did not find it necessary to change his position, so that is what he replied to the question of the investigator. I cite. “How the publications of Novaya Gazeta insulted the foundations of Chechen society and dignity of Chechen men”? Here is the reply. “According to the tenets of Islam, persons involved in non-traditional sexual relations should be executed. In our society, law prohibits execution, so we condemn those people’s actions, and the Almighty will punish them. According to Chechen adats, if there is one homosexual person in a family, all the family is stained. A family eliminates this person”.

I see it as totally uncompromising, clear and telling position of the Grand Mufti of Chechnya. In fact, Chechen authorities, Chechen law enforcement officials and Chechen society share this view. That is why it was very difficult to verify information about the victims, about people who were killed.

That is why then, right after the first publications, we had only two names, the two names we had no doubts about. We had information about other people killed but we could not prove it. We were afraid to make a mistake. However, we were 100% sure about those two names. We passed these names to the investigation. I am ready to name those people now; their names are already in the public space.

The first person was a Chechen person and he was a very famous Chechen - Arbi Altemirov. He was a jury member of one very popular TV show in Chechnya; this show can be compared to “Golos” in Russia. He was a poet, a novelist. I am reading this out from the official Chechen news agency website – ChechnyaToday, he was an honored figure in education, member of the Council for culture under the head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov.

Ramzan Kadyrov liked this person, liked his poetry and supported this person a lot. That is why Arbi Altemirov was well known in Chechnya.

During the investigation process, many people were interrogated, including numerous high-ranking officials.

They told that they did not know Arbi Altemirov, and have never heard about him. The Federal Ombudsperson Tatiana Moskalkova was also asking questions about him and she was told that he was nobody, just a villager.

This villager or indeed a well-known person in Chechnya died on March 8. Our data suggests that he was killed on March 8. He was detained in the Argun prison, he was beaten terribly. We have numerous testimonies from people who were detained together with him. They told us everything about his conditions. We passed all this information to the investigation.

When the investigation started, it turned out that Arbi Altemirov was truly dead. That he died on March 8. However, his death certificate attached to the materials was issued on April 4; it was right after the publications by Novaya Gazeta. We did not name him in our publications. We wrote that he was a famous showman who became the victim of this campaign. So the death certificate was issued on April 4, and according to the investigation materials, he died at home. The relatives said so. According to the investigation materials, pulmonary embolism caused his death.
At the same time, there was no autopsy. The physician who issued his death certificated explained that it was diagnosed over the course of visual examination. The materials suggest that he was not beaten, that he was buried. Within this investigation, it is not the only case when physicians without an autopsy diagnosed quite complicated diseases. It seems to me that physicians in Chechnya have some paranormal capacities, that for them just visual examination is enough to diagnose complicated diseases, which are usually impossible to diagnose without autopsy.

To support my words, I will tell you about another part of this investigation. It is not about LGBT, it concerns mass killing of Chechen people on suspicion of terrorism.

In December 2016, there was an attack on Chechen police officers, and as a result, many people were detained, including the two people who were injured and taken to the hospital. Both subsequently died of closed craniocerebral injury that was caused by the leg injury. They both had the same diagnosis.

There was no autopsy, and this diagnosis is absurd. It shows how easy it is Chechnya to get any official paper, any diagnosis. The investigation did not question anything.

When we passed the information about mass killings to the investigation, we said right away that exhumation was the only way to establish the cause of death. The investigation has never done it. They identified the fact that all these people were dead, they identified that the reasons of death were unclear because those death certificates did not explain anything. That was it. The investigation decided to rely on such an absurd paper: closed craniocerebral injury that was caused by the leg injury! The same absurd diagnosis for two people. It is unbelievable, but the investigation believed.

It was about the first name. The second name is very important even though in the very beginning we did not know even how to spell it correctly. The investigation identified all the personal data. This person was Zelimhan Ustarkhanov, the citizen of Argun. According to our data, he was the first person detained, and it happened in the end of February 2017. His mobile phone became the source of contacts of many other Chechen homosexuals, and many of those people were detained later on. That is how the campaign against homosexuals in Chechnya began.

What did the investigation find out. It found out that this person existed, that he lived in Argun, that he worked in Grozny. At some point, he quitted his job, presumably had a conflict with a father and afterwards disappeared.

Firstly, it is such an unusual for a Chechen person behavior – to leave home and to break all the contacts with relatives. Chechen people are tightly connected to their families. However, this is not the most important thing.

The investigation did not even try to find out what happened to Zelimhan. They interrogated the relatives, interrogated the former employer... But they did not even look for evidences, they did not try to understand where he went, how he left. Did he leave by foot, by train, by car, by bus... And we know that today you need an ID even to buy a bus ticket. There is no information about that.

The investigators interrogated parents. The investigators asked if their son was a gay. The response was negative. The investigation found out that Ustarkhanov disappeared. A criminal case was opened in connection with possible killing and kidnapping. The investigation also found out that the motive of the crime was not connected to homosexuality. How did they find out? They asked his parents if their son was homosexual. The answer was negative, and for the investigation, it was enough to exclude the hate motive.

Moreover, from the very beginning we asked the Federal Investigative Committee and the Chairperson of the Investigative Committee to exclude the Chechen investigative committee and Chechen police from
this pre-investigation check. The best thing would be to involve the inspectors of the Federal Investigative Committee, but we would be happy with everything but not the Chechen law enforcement agencies.

As a result, the forces of the Chechen police accomplished this pre-investigation check. In fact, the Chechen police officers investigated our charges made against the Chechen police officers.

The investigation made something we were trying to avoid. All the information, all the names were passed to the Chechen police. All the information that allowed identifying the victims, both dead and alive, the relatives – everything was given to the Chechen police. As a result, the majority of the relatives experienced huge pressure. There are evidences of this pressure in the materials. However, the investigation did not pay any attention to that.

I can give you an example of such pressure. It concerns an alive person; this person at the time was in our shelter, in the shelter of the Russian LGBT Network. This person was detained and later on evacuated from Chechnya. Now this person is outside of Russia. That time he got a call from his brother, who told him that he was visited by the police officers who demanded this person to return to Chechnya. The police officers identified this person themselves; we did not provide his name. This person said that he could not return to Chechnya. Then his brother replied that the police officers threatened him, that they threatened to take him, to detain him, even to kill him.

The person we evacuated did not return to Chechnya even though I want to stress once more that for a Chechen person family is very important. You can do whatever to a Chechen person by manipulating with his family. For us it is difficult to understand that, but it is a very crucial thing for Chechnya. They are ready to die themselves, but they would do whatever to protect their relatives.

The person we evacuated filmed a video. He said that he was in Moscow, that he went to Moscow to work, that everything is good with him and that he refuses to contact the investigation. His brother passed this video to the investigation, and the police officers were satisfied.

The materials of this pre-investigatory check suggests that the investigators have done great work, there are 18 volumes of the investigation materials, minimum 300 pages each. The investigation interrogated all the high-ranking officials; probably Ramzan Kadyrov himself was the only exception. They interrogated all the chiefs of police of Grozny, and of all important district police offices. They requested all the lists of registration of detainees even though we stated many times that all the people we reported of were detained illegally. However, at least 5 volumes of the investigation materials are the lists of registration of detainees. However, at least 5 volumes of the investigation materials are the lists of registration of detainees.

The investigation inspected all the places where as we reported people were and still are illegally detained. It is an exceptional situation for Chechnya. The base of Rosgvardiya Terek, Argun prison, where the majority of the victims were detained, prison of Tsotsin-Yurt... They inspected many places. The problem is the investigation inspected them in a wrong way. It would be reasonable to inspect those places unexpectedly. It means that inspection was supposed to come without warning and to check if there were people detained illegally.

However, the investigation inspected these places after the Chechen police inspected them, the police we put the charges against. We published our articles on April 1 and 3. On April 12, the head of Argun District Department of Internal Affairs Aby Kataev inspected his own territory. Aby Kataev is the person we accuse of organization of all these illegal detentions and tortures. On April 14, he inspected this prison again. Then this place was inspected by the Chechen public figures headed by Heda Saratova, and then this place was visited by foreign journalists. Then it was inspected by the investigation.

Therefore, the investigation inspected all these prisons a month after. Of course, the investigation did not find anything, not even traces of humans, everything was staffed, all the premises were empty, and it looked like there was no one for a long time.
Everyone understands that one month is enough time to cover all the tracks. In general, the investigation have done a lot of formal work. In fact, when the first investigator started to work on this case, he realized one very important thing; it was he, not us.

When men in Chechnya were detained because of their homosexuality, they were tortured to get names and contacts of other homosexuals. Mobile phones were important sources of such information. These phones were turned on all the time. When a person was detained, his mobile phone was working; the police officers were waiting for other people to call. These mobile phones were working all the time.

The first investigator Igor Sobol pointed to the fact that these mobile phones could play a crucial role in the investigation process and provide opportunities to understand if people where really detained in these particular places, if at least their phones were in these particular places. It is easy to verify this information. The investigation had these mobile phone’s numbers but they did not even request this information. They did not even checked that.

So how was the pre-investigation check organized? For instance, they summoned a high-ranking Chechen official Magomed Daudov, the one who was named as perpetrator by many witnesses, and asked him if he committed this crime. He replied no. The investigation had no other questions. Then the investigation summoned Chechen police officers. Did you commit this crime? No. All the investigation consists of such questions and answers. That was it. But what was the point? There were technical opportunities to investigate this case, numerous opportunities. Many things can be done if there is a will.

I can talk about that a lot. As I said, there are 18 volumes, 300 pages each, it is very interesting. We will write about that in details later on. However, here are the first results, and we are very lucky to know about them, because as I said in the beginning we were not recognized as applicants within those two cases united in one pre-investigation check. We were first to write about the persecution of homosexual people in Chechnya, we were first to apply to the Investigative Committee, we were supposed to be recognized as applicants. The same thing happened with the case of the threats of Chechen religious and political leader and Chechens authorities. This situation is also absurd. There was a linguistic examination in the materials of the investigation, but it disappeared. The Ombudsperson referred to this examination, I made a slip; the Chairperson of the Human Rights Council Fedotov referred to this examination, he said that there is such an examination, which did not find that there was a threat, but we cannot even challenge it. We are deprived of this right.

Moreover, we and other applicants were not notified about the course of the investigation. No one was notified, and it is significant because in such socially important cases the Investigative Committee must notify the society and especially the applicants each time when the decision not to initiate a criminal investigation is made. It did not happen. In the course of the year, the Investigative Committee kept silence and now by miracle I got the materials of the pre-investigation check. Now I briefly described those materials. I am sorry, maybe there are too many facts, but I did my best to tell you how this investigation went.

Igor Kochetkov

I would like to add few things. First, I would like you to pay attention to this brochure; we have already given it to you. It is the generalized results of our own investigation. There are eyewitness testimonies and our analytics; you are free to use it.

Another thing, in addition to Elena’s words about the so-called investigation. I say so-called because no criminal proceedings were initiated. Some investigatory actions are impossible without initiated criminal proceedings.
That is how they conducted their pre-investigatory check. We, our organization, worked with more than 100 people from Chechnya last year, with people who shared their experiences with us. How do you think, were we interrogated?

Did they contact us? No. There was no single attempt to contact us, to talk to us. Officially, we cannot talk on behalf of victims; in most cases, we cannot even name them. However, we definitely have some information; we even voice it publicly. The investigation did not find it necessary to contact us. We can conclude that the task of the Investigative Committee was to close this case. All the things Elena told us about suggest so.

I also want to pay attention to the fact that we also applied to the investigative bodies regarding public statements made by Heda Saratova, by the spokesperson Alvi Karimov and by Ramzan Kadyrov because we believe that they are direct calls to homicide. It did not lead to anything. No one even pointed to the fact that such statements are unacceptable. These people continue to make similar statements; maybe they just soften some words.

The last thing. The fact that the victims of homophobic and transphobic hate crimes do not apply to the police, and even they apply the police ignores them, it is not the exclusively Chechen problem. It is not the problem of the North Caucasus. Our monitoring reports we prepare annually for already 10 years shows that 90% of victims do not go to the police because they are afraid. They are afraid to face more humiliation and even physical violence.

The lawyers that accompany the victims tell that often the police officers make homophobic and transphobic statements, something similar to “I would kill such people myself”. Even if the victim is willing to file a claim, and even if we provide legal support, quite often criminal proceedings are not initiated. Criminal cases are usually opened only when there is a killing, but even in such cases the hate motive is not taken into account. Right now, there is one case at the ECHR, we entered this case as a third party, and it is devoted to the attack on the St. Petersburg community center that happened in 2013. Because of this attack, one person lost his eye. The criminal proceedings were initiated, but the investigation did not do anything to find perpetrators and closed the case. Now this case was communicated by the ECHR. It illustrate the fact that all the things we were talking about is a problem not only for Chechnya.

Thank you.