**She broke the story of Chechnya’s anti-gay purge. Now, she says she has to flee Russia.**

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Novaya Gazeta is no stranger to hostility and controversy. The crusading Russian newspaper is known for powerful investigations — and in Russia, this sort of work can provoke an angry reaction. The paper's star reporter Anna Politkovskaya was shot dead in her apartment building in 2006. Exactly who ordered her murder has never been confirmed.

Even so, the wave of threats now being made against the paper and its reporters comes as a shock even to those who work there. This week, the newspaper put out a statement that warned religious leaders in the Russian republic of Chechnya were attempting to incite people to “massacre journalists” after a meeting in a Grozny mosque on April 3.

Shortly after the statement was published, [Novaya Gazeta's website](https://meduza.io/en/news/2017/04/14/novaya-gazeta-religious-leaders-encourage-retaliation-against-journalists-at-grozny-mosque-meeting) went down in a suspected distributed denial-of-service attack.

This backlash had been sparked by an [April 1 story](https://www.novayagazeta.ru/articles/2017/04/04/72027-raspravy-nad-chechenskimi-geyami-publikuem-svidetelstva) from reporter Elena Milashina and her colleague Irina Gordienko. In March, Milashina had discovered evidence that gay men were being detained, tortured and even killed in an anti-homosexual purge in Chechnya.

After spending weeks checking the story with her sources, Milashina says they could confirm that hundreds of people had been detained; at least three are now thought to have died.

Despite corroborating evidence from[nongovernmental organizations and Western publications](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/13/they-called-us-animals-chechens-prison-beatings-electric-shocks-anti-gay-purge?CMP=share_btn_tw), Chechen authorities have dismissed the allegations out of hand — not because the violence is wrong, but because they say gays do not exist in Chechnya.

So far, the Kremlin has shown little willingness to investigate further. But the reports of this anti-gay purge have sparked widespread international concern, with the U.S. State Department and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights calling on Moscow to put an end to any persecution.

WorldViews spoke to Milashina via phone on Friday. The Russian reporter was speaking from an undisclosed location, having fled her home in Moscow because of threats. She described how the threats had affected the lives of her and her colleagues — and how she hoped that international attention could force Moscow to take action.

**WorldViews: Could you describe the reaction you've had from Chechen authorities since you published the story at the start of April?**

Elena Milashina: Well, the reaction was very panicked and hysterical, but at the same time very threatening. We've covered Chechnya for many years at Novaya Gazeta — many years, decades. We started to cover it in 1994. This was the first time our history, however, that they used religion. Fifteen-thousand people got together in the main mosque of Chechnya and announced a jihad against the staff of Novaya Gazeta.

Not just me, but all the people working at the newspaper are now in danger, because this was a clear jihad message. We will persecute you for tarnishing the honor of the Chechen nation, this nasty thing that you said. There are gays among Chechen people? We will persecute you until the last person at Novaya Gazeta dies. It's unbelievable. It reminds us of the situation with Charlie Hebdo.

**WV: What sort of precautions are you taking now?**

EM: After the second article was published, I had to be very careful while moving between home and work in Moscow. I finished all the important things that I had to do and left Moscow for a while. Now I think I will leave the country for a while, too. It doesn't matter that Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov announced clearly that journalists are under the Kremlin's protection and that no one can kill them for their professional duty. The threat still exists.

So, I will just live for a while in another country. Still working on Chechnya — I can come from this country to the region. I have a lot of sources, and I have a lot of information. I will continue my work.

I know that some security measures are taking place. We've started being more careful and paying attention if someone follows a journalist or if there is someone strange around Novaya Gazeta, things like that. We already had the experience of the murder of Anna Politkovskaya. We are experienced with people murdering our colleagues, so we know a little more now about how killers operate. We will pay attention to those things. Sad to say, but we will.

**WV: You've reported a lot about Chechnya in the past, and you've written a lot of stories that have angered authorities. Is this the same sort of reaction you've seen, or is it bigger?**

EM: It's the biggest reaction than we've had in all these years. It's very disturbing, because we've never had this in the years we've reported on Chechnya.

**WV: Why do you think the reaction is so strong this time?**

EM: I have an idea. It's because we are talking about the extrajudicial murder of people, extrajudicial detaining of people. And it's not just one or two persons, it's hundreds of people. This is new, but it's happening in Chechnya and has been happening in Chechnya for the past two years. I personally have information that waves of repression on the Chechen people are becoming more and more open. And more and more aggressive.

That's the main thing we uncovered. It's not that there are gays among Chechen people. It's that there are a lot of people who are under repression, being detained, tortured and killed.

It's not just me that's noticed it. This situation is seen by all the federal security structures that collect information on Chechnya. I know that in their reports that they predict that if things continue like that, there could be a revolt in Chechnya, because the population of Chechnya is in an awful situation. It can't last for long.

**WV: Do you think Moscow will step in to do something about this situation?**

EM: One day they will have to. And that's why we are working. People in Chechnya are dying. Because they are gays, because they are suspected of sympathies with ISIS, because they are suspected of using drugs, because of many reasons.

At the Novaya Gazeta, it's our position that we have to write about those crimes and put them in front of our society, in front of the powers. Today or tomorrow, the Kremlin will have to deal with the situation. I'm very sure of this. We will continue to apply this pressure.

Right now what I'm seeing is that — for probably the first time — the Kremlin said very clearly that journalists who write about Chechnya and Novaya Gazeta in particular should not be the aim of any attacks or threats. If you don't like it, go to the courts, but don't dare to take any other measures aimed at the press.

If the Chechens threatening us don't listen to this, it means they won't listen to the Kremlin at all.

**WV: Your story has sparked a lot of international attention. Do you think this pressure can help?**

I think this pressure comes from real fear. This situation reminds the Western world of the same situation that was in Nazi Germany, where people were killed just because of their race and religion. It's a huge crime, and it's happening right now in Russia — part of Europe!

At first, people are scared of the information. They can't believe it. A lot of people asked me if it was true or a joke, because we published the first story on April 1. That reaction I could understand, because its very hard to imagine it's real. But it is clearly real, and I think that's why people are raising their voice now.

I think the pressure is just beginning. We already have around 100 people who we have helped escaped from Chechnya due to this. I don't know how many people are still there, being detained and tortured.

The Russian government should be pushed more. They haven't done anything. They haven't started the investigation; instead they say they are waiting for the names of victims. But they know very well that people in Chechnya are scared to death, and they won't tell their names unless the government offers them protection. The international pressure needs to be really hard on the federal government to start the investigation. We know facts but we can't talk for them. If the Russian government will offer protection, people will talk.