



## Merkel to Putin: Improve gay rights in Chechnya

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May 2, 2017

German Chancellor Angela Merkel called out Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian-controlled republic of Chechnya Tuesday over recent reports alleging grave mistreatment and even violence toward gay men, the LGBT community and Russian citizens, *The Guardian* reported.

Merkel was in Russia for the first time in two years as the nations appear to be grappling for power amid reports of potential Russian meddling in Germany's upcoming national elections in September—similar to the accusations it has faced over last year's U.S. presidential election.

During a press conference in Sochi, Merkel said she learned of “negative reports on the way that homosexuals are dealt with, particularly in Chechnya.”

Her visit came one day after Russian police arrested roughly 20 gay rights protesters in St. Petersburg who were demonstrating against alleged mistreatment of homosexuals by the Russian republic of Chechnya, over which Merkel criticized Russia's handling of its people's ability to rally and assemble against their government.

“It is important to have the right to demonstrate in a democracy, and the role of NGOs is very important,” Merkel said.

She specifically stated that Putin should investigate reports of as many as 100 Chechen men suspected of being gay being rounded up and tortured early last month, with three possibly being killed, as was reported by *The Independent*. The Russian newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* reported that men ages 16 to 50 were taken off streets, including some television and religious leaders.

A spokesman for Chechen leader Ramazan Kadyrov denied the report—and that there were even homosexuals in Chechnya.

“You cannot detain and persecute people who simply do not exist in the republic,” Alvi Karmov told Interfax News Agency. “If there were such people in Chechnya, the law-enforcement organs wouldn't need to have anything to do with them because their relatives would send them somewhere from which there is no returning.”

Merkel also addressed Russia's recent decision to ban Jehovah's Witnesses, with its supreme court ruling the prominent religious group is an extreme organization.

“I asked Mr Putin to utilize his influence to protect these minority rights, as well as in the case of Jehovah’s Witnesses,” Merkel said.

Allegations of human rights violations, most recently against members of the LGBT community, have become commonplace in Russia of late. In January 2016, a law was passed that meant jail time or fines could be imposed for “the public expression of non-traditional sexual relations, manifested in a public demonstration of personal perverted sexual preferences in public places,” according to Human Rights Watch.

And Russia was ranked No. 115 by the Cato Institute’s 2016 Human Freedom Index, a composite measure of citizens’ freedoms under categories like religion, relationships and association, assembly and civil society, among others. Under personal freedom, Russia was given a score of 6.13 out of a possible 10.