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RUSSIAN FEDERATION: OPEN LETTER ABOUT SERIOUS THREATS TO INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST ELENA MILASHINA AND HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES IN CHECHNYA

To:
Frank Schwabe, Rapporteur on human rights in the North Caucasus' for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE),
Teresa Ribeiro, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

On behalf of Russian and international NGOs addressing human rights violations in the North Caucasus,

Committee against Torture
Human Rights Centre "Memorial"
The "Sphere" Foundation/Russian LGBT Network

Amnesty International
Civil Rights Defenders
Human Rights Watch
Norwegian Helsinki Committee

We would like to draw your attention to very serious threats by Chechen authorities to Novaya Gazeta and one of their leading investigative journalists, Elena Milashina, in connection with their reporting on human rights abuses in Chechnya.

On March 15, 2021, Novaya Gazeta published Ms. Milashina's article "I served in the Chechen police force and I didn't want to kill people." The article sheds light on unlawful arrests, torture, and extrajudicial executions of civilians carried out by Chechnya's Second Special Patrol Regiment personnel. It is based largely on the testimony of a former patrol officer, Suleyman Gezmakhmayev. Mr. Gezmakhmayev's testimony provides crucial insights into the abuses perpetrated by Chechen police and security officials in 2017, including acts of torture, enforced disappearances and extra-judicial executions. Mr. Gezmakhmayev stated that he had personally witnessed torture and inhuman and degrading treatment inflicted by his colleagues on several dozen terrorism suspects who were held unlawfully in the gym of the regiment's base in the Shali district of Chechnya in January 2017 and that at least twelve of those individuals were killed by the end of the month (two shot dead and the rest strangled with a rope). Mr. Gezmakhmayev's statement corroborates and complements the findings of an independent investigation into the January 2017 alleged extra-judicial executions, The ongoing investigation is being carried out jointly by Novaya Gazeta, Human Rights Centre "Memorial," Foundation "Sphere"/Russian LGBT Network, and the Committee against Torture since 2017.

In response to the article, top Chechen officials started a smear campaign against Ms Milashina and Novaya Gazeta. For instance, on March 17, Mr. Akhmed Dudayev, the Minister of Information and Press of the Chechen Republic stated that the information presented in the article is false and demanded that Russian federal authorities shut down Novaya Gazeta, claiming that the media outlet "denigrates honour and dignity of heroic law enforcement officers, who for a long time have defended the integrity of the Russian Federation."

On the same day, Chechnya's Human Rights Ombudsperson, Mr Nurdi Nukhazhiev, called Novaya Gazeta "biased" and said that there was no trust "in those people and organizations that in their subservience to the West are ready to sell out in order to harm their own country."

In addition, on March 17, the Chechen authorities staged a public rally against Novaya Gazeta, which received extensive coverage by the local broadcaster, Grozny TV. The rally participants - described as “relatives of policemen on active duty and law enforcement officers who died while serving their country” – called on President Vladimir Putin to “shut down” Novaya Gazeta. A video widely circulated on social media featured apparent police officers from the Second Special Patrol Regiment calling on President Putin to “stop” Novaya Gazeta and “those people,” making thinly veiled death threats against Ms. Milashina and Novaya Gazeta journalists, and asking the president “to pay attention to those despicable attacks [on Chechen authorities] by the fake media” [Novaya Gazeta].

On March 18, the Chechen Parliament published a letter to President Putin describing Ms Milashina’s article “insulting and libellous” and maintaining that Novaya Gazeta aimed to “destabilize the social and political situation” in Russia. On the same day, the head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, addressed President Putin’s spokesperson, Mr. Peskov, on social media calling Novaya Gazeta journalists, calling them “agents of the western special services” and stating that they were conspiring against the Chechen authorities and had an anti-Russian agenda.

Also, Chechen authorities put pressure on Mr. Gezmakhmayev’s family members. As was reported by Human Rights Centre “Memorial,” on March 16, 2021, Chechen law enforcement officers rounded up three cousins of Mr. Gezmakhmayev and demanded that they disclose the current location Mr. Gezmakhmayev’s immediate family members and convince Mr. Gezmakhmayev to draft an open letter stating that the statement he had made to Novaya Gazeta was false. The law enforcement made explicit threats to Mr. Gezmakhmayev’s family, suggesting that “the family will suffer.” Chechen authorities also launched a smear campaign against Mr. Gezmakhmayev, claiming he was a heavy drug user and a gambler.

We welcome Mr. Gezmakhmayev’s testimony as it is instrumental in uncovering the truth about the events of January 2017 and offers a unique insight into the actions of the perpetrators. We applaud Novaya Gazeta’s tireless dedication to highlighting human rights abuses in the North Caucasus and the Chechen Republic. As there are strong grounds to fear retaliation by Chechen authorities against the whistleblower, Mr. Gezmakhmayev, and Novaya Gazeta, we urge you to:

- issue a strong statement in support of Novaya Gazeta and Ms Milashina condemning the threats and smear campaign against them and calling on the Russian authorities to effectively and impartially investigate the new and the past threats and attack against Ms Milashina and ensure her and her colleagues’ safety;
- call on the Russian authorities to open a criminal investigation into the reports of extrajudicial executions and torture exposed by Novaya Gazeta; and
- urge Russian authorities to protect media freedoms in Russia.