

To the President of Russia
Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin

Dear President Putin,

In the last week of December 2021, dozens of relatives of five activists who have dared to criticise the leadership of the Chechen Republic were abducted in Russia, and the fate and whereabouts of many of them remains unknown.

They are the relatives of two opposition bloggers, Tumso Abdurakhmanov and Khasan Khalitov, the founder of the human rights association "Vaifond", Mansur Sadulayev, and the director of the human rights organization Human Rights Center Ichkeria, Aslan Artsuev, all of whom reside outside of Russia; and the relatives of Abubakar Yangulbayev, an employee of the human rights organization, Committee against Torture, who resides in Russia but outside of the Chechen Republic.

Several sources told Memorial Human Rights Center that these relatives--ranging from in-laws to distant cousins-- were abducted on the territory of the Chechen Republic and in other regions of the Russian Federation, including the city of Astrakhan. While the circumstances of these abductions are still emerging in many cases as human rights defenders continue to seek confirmation about the details of what exactly happened, the evidence available to date already indicates that these could be enforced disappearances carried out by agents of the state. It is clear that at least some relatives were taken from their homes, and there are unconfirmed reports that many were brought to local police stations. Some were later released after they had been forced by threats and humiliation to agree to ensure that their relatives will stop all activities that displease Ramzan Kadyrov.

The fate and whereabouts of those who have not yet been released remains unknown. We fear that they are being tortured and otherwise ill-treated: Abdurakhmanov and Khalitov have received text messages, presumably from those behind the abduction, alleging that their loved ones are being ill-treated and stating that they will be released only when Abdurakhmanov and Khalitov stop all public criticism of the leadership of the Chechen Republic. Another activist received a text message with death threats against his relatives that were abducted.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Chechen Republic has denied that they have the abducted people in their custody. However, there are strong grounds to believe that the law enforcement structures controlled by the Head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, are responsible for these abductions. In its concluding observations on Russia's state reports in 2012 and 2018, the UN Committee against Torture had already identified a lack of effective investigations into abductions perpetrated by public officials

in Chechnya. Several of the organizations signing this letter have documented incidents in which these law enforcement structures have abducted critics or other individuals who do not conform to Chechen government policies. In most cases, the victims reappear later, having publicly renounced their loved ones or apologized for their actions.

The abductions in December are consistent with this long-standing pattern of collective punishment, by which the Chechen leadership persecutes entire families, even distant relatives, for the alleged actions of one of their members. In 2015 the UN Human Rights Committee, in its concluding observations on Russia, noted this practice. Russian and international human rights organizations and journalists have also extensively documented it.

Mr. President, abductions by Chechen authorities who then deny information about the fate and whereabouts of those concerned constitute enforced disappearances and as such amount to a crime under international law and a grave violation of human rights protected under the laws of the Russian Federation and international treaties it has ratified.

Responsibility for these actions lies not only with the Chechen authorities, but also with Russian federal authorities, including you, as the Russian President and guarantor of the Constitution and the rights and freedoms enshrined therein. The Chechen Republic is a subject of the Russian Federation, and the head of it is your subordinate. It is firmly within your remit and obligations to stop actions that Chechen authorities take that violate Russian laws, including the abductions and possible enforced disappearances that took place in December. Any unwillingness to do so would send a concerning message that the Russian authorities use, approve of, and tolerate one of the most egregious offences used as a brutal form of repression to silence critics.

We urge you to take all necessary steps to stop the ongoing repression in the Chechen Republic, starting by urgently disclosing the fate and whereabouts of all those abducted and ensuring a prompt, full, impartial and effective investigation into the December abductions and other human rights violations committed by the Chechen authorities. We urge you to ensure that all those responsible – irrespective of their rank and including those who may have ordered the acts – are brought to justice in a fair trial.