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Home Office

Country Policy and Information Note

Chechnya: Critics of the state

Version 1.0

August 2022

Preface

Purpose

This note provides country of origin information (COI) and analysis of COI for use by Home Office decision makers handling particular types of protection and human rights claims (as set out in the [Introduction](#) section). It is not intended to be an exhaustive survey of a particular subject or theme.

It is split into 2 parts: (1) an assessment of COI and other evidence; and (2) COI. These are explained in more detail below.

Assessment

This section analyses the evidence relevant to this note - that is information in the COI section; refugee/human rights laws and policies; and applicable caselaw - by describing this and its inter-relationships, and provides an assessment of, in general, whether one or more of the following applies:

- a person is reasonably likely to face a real risk of persecution or serious harm
- that the general humanitarian situation is so severe that there are substantial grounds for believing that there is a real risk of serious harm because conditions amount to inhuman or degrading treatment as within [paragraphs 339C and 339CA\(iii\) of the Immigration Rules](#) / Article 3 of the [European Convention on Human Rights \(ECHR\)](#)
- that the security situation is such that there are substantial grounds for believing there is a real risk of serious harm because there exists a serious and individual threat to a civilian's life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence in a situation of international or internal armed conflict as within [paragraphs 339C and 339CA\(iv\) of the Immigration Rules](#)
- a person is able to obtain protection from the state (or quasi state bodies)
- a person is reasonably able to relocate within a country or territory
- a claim is likely to justify granting asylum, humanitarian protection or other form of leave, and
- if a claim is refused, it is likely or unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under [section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002](#).

Decision makers **must**, however, still consider all claims on an individual basis, taking into account each case's specific facts.

Country of origin information

The country information in this note has been carefully selected in accordance with the general principles of COI research as set out in the [Common EU \[European Union\] Guidelines for Processing Country of Origin Information \(COI\)](#), April 2008, and the Austrian Centre for Country of Origin and Asylum Research and Documentation's (ACCORD), [Researching Country Origin Information – Training Manual](#), 2013. Namely, taking into account the COI's relevance, reliability, accuracy, balance, currency, transparency and traceability.

The structure and content of the country information section follows a [terms of reference](#) which sets out the general and specific topics relevant to this note.

All information included in the note was published or made publicly available on or before the 'cut-off' date(s) in the country information section. Any event taking place or report/article published after these date(s) is not included.

All information is publicly accessible or can be made publicly available. Sources and the information they provide are carefully considered before inclusion. Factors relevant to the assessment of the reliability of sources and information include:

- the motivation, purpose, knowledge and experience of the source
- how the information was obtained, including specific methodologies used
- the currency and detail of information
- whether the COI is consistent with and/or corroborated by other sources.

Multiple sourcing is used to ensure that the information is accurate and balanced, which is compared and contrasted where appropriate so that a comprehensive and up-to-date picture is provided of the issues relevant to this note at the time of publication.

The inclusion of a source is not, however, an endorsement of it or any view(s) expressed.

Each piece of information is referenced in a footnote. Full details of all sources cited and consulted in compiling the note are listed alphabetically in the bibliography.

Feedback

Our goal is to provide accurate, reliable and up-to-date COI and clear guidance. We welcome feedback on how to improve our products. If you would like to comment on this note, please email the Country Policy and Information Team.

Independent Advisory Group on Country Information

The [Independent Advisory Group on Country Information](#) (IAGCI) was set up in March 2009 by the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration to support him in reviewing the efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of approach of COI produced by the Home Office.

The IAGCI welcomes feedback on the Home Office's COI material. It is not the function of the IAGCI to endorse any Home Office material, procedures or policy. The IAGCI may be contacted at:

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Information about the IAGCI's work and a list of the documents which have been reviewed by the IAGCI can be found on the Independent Chief Inspector's pages of the [gov.uk website](#).

Contents

Assessment.....	5
1. Introduction	5
1.1 Basis of claim	5
1.2 Point to note	5
2. Consideration of issues	5
2.1 Credibility	5
2.2 Exclusion	5
2.3 Convention reason(s).....	6
2.4 Risk.....	6
2.5 Protection	7
2.6 Internal relocation.....	7
2.7 Certification	7
Country information	8
3. Current situation	8
3.1 Introduction.....	8
3.2 Journalists, bloggers and NGOs.....	9
3.3 Abductions.....	10
3.4 Detention	10
3.5 Fair trial.....	11
3.6 Family members of government critics.....	11
3.7 Chechens abroad	12
Annex A	14
Interview questions	14
Terms of Reference	15
Bibliography	16
Sources cited	16
Sources consulted but not cited	16
Version control	18

Assessment

Updated on 23 August 2022

1. Introduction

1.1 Basis of claim

- 1.1.1 Fear of persecution and/or serious harm by state actors in Chechnya because the person is, or is perceived to be, an opponent or critic of the 'state'.

[Back to Contents](#)

1.2 Point to note

- 1.2.1 This report focusses on critics of the state in Chechnya only. For information about the state critics and political opposition in the rest of Russia, see the Country Policy and Information Note on [Russia: Critics and opponents of the government](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2. Consideration of issues

2.1 Credibility

- 2.1.1 For information on assessing credibility, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).
- 2.1.2 Decision makers must also check if there has been a previous application for a UK visa or another form of leave. Asylum applications matched to visas should be investigated prior to the asylum interview (see the [Asylum Instruction on Visa Matches, Asylum Claims from UK Visa Applicants](#)).
- 2.1.3 In cases where there are doubts surrounding a person's claimed place of origin, decision makers should also consider the need to conduct language analysis testing (see the [Asylum Instruction on Language Analysis](#)).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.2 Exclusion

- 2.2.1 Decision makers must consider whether there are serious reasons for considering whether one (or more) of the exclusion clauses is applicable. Each case must be considered on its individual facts and merits.
- 2.2.2 If the person is excluded from the Refugee Convention, they will also be excluded from a grant of humanitarian protection (which has a wider range of exclusions than refugee status).
- 2.2.3 For guidance on exclusion and restricted leave, see the Asylum Instruction on [Exclusion under Articles 1F and 33\(2\) of the Refugee Convention, Humanitarian Protection](#) and the instruction on [Restricted Leave](#).

Official – sensitive: Start of section

The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use only.

Official – sensitive: End of section

[Back to Contents](#)

2.3 Convention reason(s)

- 2.3.1 Actual or imputed political opinion.
- 2.3.2 Establishing a convention reason is not sufficient to be recognised as a refugee. The question is whether the person has a well-founded fear of persecution on account of an actual or imputed Refugee Convention reason.
- 2.3.3 For further guidance on Convention reasons see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.4 Risk

- 2.4.1 Persons who are perceived to be critical of the government are likely to be at risk of treatment which is sufficiently serious, by its nature and/or repetition, or by an accumulation of various measures, to amount to persecution or serious harm. Their family members may also be at risk of such treatment. Each case must be considered according to its individual facts.
- 2.4.2 Under the leadership of Ramzan Kadyrov, those perceived as critical of the authorities, including human rights defenders, journalists and bloggers may be detained, prosecuted, convicted on fabricated charges, abducted or killed. Citizens who complain about local issues, such as the closure of a hospital, can be harassed or humiliated (see [Chechnya: introduction](#), [Chechnya: journalists and NGOs](#) and [Chechnya: abductions](#)).
- 2.4.3 In December 2020, Jeroen Boender, Ambassador of the Netherlands to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, spoke on behalf of 34 states when he expressed alarm at reports of a significant increase in enforced disappearances in Chechnya. He stated that the authorities were particularly targeting young people who were linked with criticism of the government online. The US Department of State reported further instances of abduction and torture in 2021; those affected included political activists and critics of Kadyrov. Persons facing politically-motivated prosecutions are unlikely to receive a fair trial (see [Chechnya: abductions](#), [Chechnya: detention](#) and [Chechnya: fair trial](#)).
- 2.4.4 The USSD reported that incommunicado detention, which can last for weeks, sometimes takes place before detention is registered, and that torture is used during this time. The same report recorded the widespread use of torture of both militants and civilians in detention (see [Detention](#)).
- 2.4.5 Family members of the relatives of alleged terrorists are required by law to pay the cost of damages caused by an attack. Such collective punishments are routinely imposed on relatives, who may also be expelled from Chechnya. Various sources reported other actions taken against family members of perceived government critics. Open Caucasus Media reported that up to 50 family members of government critics may have been abducted

in December 2021. Kadyrov publicly threatened those who criticised him and their family members (see [Chechnya: family members of government critics](#)).

- 2.4.6 For further guidance on assessing risk, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.5 Protection

- 2.5.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution from the state they will not, in general, be able to obtain protection from the authorities.
- 2.5.2 For further guidance on assessing the availability of state protection, see the instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.6 Internal relocation

- 2.6.1 Where the person has a well-founded fear of persecution or serious harm from the state, they are unlikely to be able to relocate to escape that risk.
- 2.6.2 For further guidance on internal relocation, see the Asylum Instruction on [Assessing Credibility and Refugee Status](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

2.7 Certification

- 2.7.1 Where a claim is refused, it is unlikely to be certifiable as 'clearly unfounded' under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002.
- 2.7.2 For further guidance on certification, see [Certification of Protection and Human Rights claims under section 94 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 \(clearly unfounded claims\)](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

Country information

This section was updated on 23 August 2022

3. Current situation

3.1 Introduction

- 3.1.1 The BBC published a 'Chechnya profile' in January 2018 which stated, 'After a decade of unsuccessfully fighting for independence, the autonomous region is now firmly under the control of its Russian-appointed leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, although separatist groups continue low-level guerrilla attacks.'¹
- 3.1.2 In the World Report 2022, covering events of 2021, Human Rights Watch reported that 'Chechen leadership under governor Ramzan Kadyrov continued to ruthlessly quash all forms of dissent.'²
- 3.1.3 The news website 'The Week' published an article in March 2016 which stated that Kadyrov '...disdains democracy altogether. "We do not have an opposition," Kadyrov says. "Such a system was invented to undermine authority." The article continued, 'Russian President Vladimir Putin personally anointed [sic - appointed] [Ramzan Kadyrov]... Because Kadyrov firmly controls a Muslim-majority province that gave Putin nightmares in the past, he enjoys a degree of independence that Putin would not tolerate in any other Russian leader. Kadyrov claims to be fanatically loyal to Putin, and Putin has showered him with awards...'³
- 3.1.4 In June 2015, International Crisis Group (ICG) published an account of an interview with ICG's Russia and North Caucasus Project Director, Ekaterina Sokirianskaia. When asked whether there was any 'significant opposition' to Ramzan Kadyrov in Chechnya, Ms Sokirianskaia responded, 'For the time being, Kadyrov enjoys absolute power in the republic and there is no visible opposition.' She further stated, 'The current leadership was not chosen in free and fair elections, but installed after a political process characterised by open conflict, intimidation and reported mass fraud. There is still strong if quiet dissent among many Chechens at home and abroad...'⁴
- 3.1.5 In the 'Freedom in the World' 2022 report, Freedom House stated, 'Parts of the country, especially the North Caucasus, suffer from high levels of violence; targets include officials, Islamist insurgents, and civilians. Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has been accused of using abductions, torture, extrajudicial killings, and other forms of violence to maintain control.'⁵
- 3.1.6 An undated article by Amnesty International stated:

'Under the leadership of Kremlin-appointed Ramzan Kadyrov, Chechnya is the place where numerous human rights violations are being committed, with virtually total impunity for their perpetrators, and free speech has been brutally suppressed for years. Amnesty International and other human rights

¹ BBC, [Chechnya profile](#), 17 January 2018

² HRW, [World Report 2022, Russia](#), 13 January 2022

³ The Week, [Ramzan Kadyrov: Putin's strongman in Chechnya](#), 6 March 2016

⁴ ICG, [Turning Chechnya's Precarious Stability into Peace](#), 2 July 2015

⁵ Freedom House, [Russia: Freedom in the World 2022](#), 28 February 2022

organizations have documented multiple instances when critics of the regime, including human rights defenders, journalists and bloggers, have been prosecuted and imprisoned under fabricated criminal charges, or abducted and killed. Members of the general public who dare to criticise Ramzan Kadyrov, members of his administration, his relatives or associates, or complain about local problems such as the closure of a hospital, or even ask for help in ways which reflect negatively on Chechnya (for instance, ask for help to provide for a large family), are often being forced to humiliate themselves in front of a camera and publicly “apologise” for their actions, which is recorded and then broadcast on the local television or via social media. This practice has been widely used since 2015.⁶

[Back to Contents](#)

3.2 Journalists, bloggers and NGOs

3.2.1 The US State Department’s Country Report on Human Rights Practices for 2021 (USSD HR Report 2021), covering the year 2021, reported:

‘Journalists reported threats in connection with their reporting. For example, Amnesty International considered journalist and human rights defender Yelena Milashina to be a “case of concern” due to repeated threats against her for documenting Chechen officials’ abuses in Novaya Gazeta. In 2020 Milashina received a death threat on Instagram from the head of the Chechen Republic, Ramzan Kadyrov, and was physically attacked in Grozny along with human rights lawyer Marina Dubrovina. Chechen officials began a defamation and intimidation campaign against Milashina after she published the testimony in Novaya Gazeta on March 15 of a former police officer who said he witnessed extrajudicial executions, torture, and other grave human rights violations in 2017.’⁷

3.2.2 The report further noted:

‘On February 4, police in the city of Nizhny Novgorod arrested 20-year-old Salekh Magamadov and 17-year-old Ismail Isayev and forcibly transferred them to Chechnya, where their whereabouts were unknown to their lawyers and family members for several days. According to human rights organizations, the two men were targeted for having operated a social media channel critical of the government and for their real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity. As of December, Magamadov and Isayev remained in detention in Chechnya’s capital Grozny for having allegedly aided an illegal armed group, charges that human rights organizations called fabricated.’⁸

3.2.3 See [Chechnya: Chechens abroad](#) for further information on this subject. See [Chechnya: abductions](#) for information about abductions of journalists.

[Back to Contents](#)

⁶ AI, [Russian Federation: Victim Of Videotape Torture Is Still Missing](#), no date

⁷ USSD, [HR Report 2021: Russia](#), 12 April 2022

⁸ USSD, [HR Report 2021: Russia](#) (section 1D), 12 April 2022

3.3 Abductions

- 3.3.1 An address delivered by Jeroen Boender, Ambassador of the Netherlands to the OSCE, on behalf of 34 participating States at the OSCE Permanent Council on 17 December 2020, noted that they were:

‘...alarmed by reports of a sharp increase in enforced disappearances in Chechnya. Ramzan Kadyrov’s security forces continue to routinely engage in appalling acts of violence to punish any form of dissent. The Chechen authorities appear to be targeting primarily young persons who have engaged with content on the Internet criticizing the Chechen authorities. According to the human rights group Memorial, at least twenty-two individuals have been unlawfully detained in recent months. Some reportedly remain in incommunicado detention under the control of Chechen authorities.’⁹

- 3.3.2 The USSD HR Report 2021 stated, ‘Enforced disappearances for both political and financial reasons continued in the North Caucasus...

‘There were continued reports of abductions and torture in the North Caucasus, including of political activists, LGBTQI+ persons, and others critical of Chechnya head Kadyrov.’¹⁰ For examples, see the [report](#) (Section 1.B).

- 3.3.3 In the World Report 2022, covering events of 2021, Human Rights Watch reported: ‘In April, Chechen security officials abducted Magomed Gadaev, an asylum seeker and key witness in a high-profile torture case against Chechnya’s leadership, two days after France deported him to Russia. They took him to Grozny and apparently coerced him to refuse the services of his trusted lawyer. In June, a court sentenced him to 18 months’ imprisonment on spurious weapons charges.’¹¹

- 3.3.4 See [Chechnya: journalists and NGOs](#) for further information about state treatment of these groups.

[Back to Contents](#)

3.4 Detention

- 3.4.1 The USSD HR Report 2021 stated ‘There were reports that security services sometimes held detainees in incommunicado detention before officially registering the detention. This practice usually coincided with allegations of the use of torture to coerce confessions before detainees were permitted access to a lawyer. The problem was especially acute in the Republic of Chechnya, where incommunicado detention could reportedly last for weeks in some cases.’¹²

- 3.4.2 The report also noted the issue of abuse in pre-trial detention, stating, ‘The problem was especially acute in the North Caucasus. According to the Civic Assistance Committee, prisoners in the North Caucasus complained of mistreatment, unreasonable punishment, religious and ethnic harassment,

⁹ UK Delegation to the OSCE, [Human rights violations and abuses...](#), 17 December 2020

¹⁰ USSD, [HR Report 2021: Russia](#), 12 April 2022

¹¹ HRW, [World Report 2022, Russia](#), 13 January 2022

¹² USSD, [HR Report 2021: Russia](#), 12 April 2022

and inadequate provision of medical care.’¹³ The report added, ‘In the North Caucasus region, there were widespread reports that security forces abused and tortured both alleged militants and civilians in detention facilities.’¹⁴

- 3.4.3 Amnesty International’s annual report 2021 stated, ‘In February, brothers Salekh Magamadov and Ismail Isaev were abducted by police in Nizhnii Novgorod and taken to Chechnya where they were remanded on false charges of aiding an armed group. They complained of torture and other ill-treatment, but the Chechen authorities refused to open a criminal investigation.’¹⁵

[Back to Contents](#)

3.5 Fair trial

- 3.5.1 The USSD HR Report 2021 noted, ‘Authorities particularly infringed on the right to a fair trial in Chechnya, where observers noted that the judicial system served as a means of conducting reprisals against those who exposed wrongdoing by Chechnya head Kadyrov.’¹⁶
- 3.5.2 An article published by Institute of Modern Russia (IMR) on 29 March 2022 reported that Russia had announced its withdrawal from the Council of Europe, noting that, ‘This will have a particularly strong impact on residents of the North Caucasus, for whom the ECHR remained the last resort where they could count on justice.’¹⁷

[Back to Contents](#)

3.6 Family members of government critics

- 3.6.1 The USSD HR Report 2021 noted that ‘The law requires relatives of terrorists to pay the cost of damages caused by an attack, which human rights advocates criticized as collective punishment. Chechen Republic authorities reportedly routinely imposed collective punishment on the relatives of alleged terrorists, including by expelling them from the republic.’¹⁸
- 3.6.2 In the World Report 2022, covering events of 2021, Human Rights Watch reported on the case of Salekh Magamadov and Ismail Isaev who posted anti-government messages on social media, noting that ‘In March, Chechen authorities temporarily detained and threatened their family members.’¹⁹
- 3.6.3 On 28 December 2021, Open Caucasus Media (OC Media), a news outlet focussing on the North and South Caucasus, reported on actions taken against family members of government critics:
- ‘Up to 50 family members of government critics may have been abducted in Chechnya in a wave of mass kidnappings that began on 22 December. Chechnya Head Ramzan Kadyrov acknowledged reports of the abductions but brushed them off as potential reprisals against “personal insults”...

¹³ USSD, [HR Report 2021: Russia](#) (section 1C), 12 April 2022

¹⁴ USSD, [HR Report 2021: Russia](#) (section 1C), 12 April 2022

¹⁵ AI, [Annual report 2021](#), 29 March 2022

¹⁶ USSD, [HR Report 2021: Russia](#), 12 April 2022

¹⁷ IMR, [February-March 2022: War, censorship, increased repression...](#), 29 March 2022

¹⁸ USSD, [HR Report 2021: Russia](#) (section 1F), 12 April 2022

¹⁹ HRW, [World Report 2022, Russia](#), 13 January 2022

‘Law enforcement agencies have yet to comment on the abduction reports.

‘The head of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, meanwhile equivocally responded to a question about kidnappings at a press conference yesterday.

“‘I also saw these reports and asked the Rosgvardiya [Russian National Guard] and FSB [Russian Federal Security Service] - they do not know [anything about it] either. If they were kidnapped, then we will look for them”, Kadyrov commented on the issue.

“‘They [opposition bloggers] should understand that if they touch the honour of my family, I will never leave this person at peace, even at the risk of being put on trial. Probably, those they insulted are the ones who took their relatives”.²⁰

3.6.4 On 2 February 2022, The Guardian published an article which stated:

‘A Chechen politician has threatened to “rip the heads off” the family of an anti-torture activist whose mother was arrested and forcibly returned to the tightly controlled republic.

‘Zarema Musayeva, the mother of Abubakar Yangulbayev, an exiled former lawyer for the Committee Against Torture, was detained by Chechen forces in mid-January in the Russian city of Nizhny Novgorod...

‘Police said Musayeva was detained in connection to an old fraud case. But after Kadyrov alleged the 59-year-old attacked a police officer and “almost rid him of an eye”, a Chechen court on Wednesday ruled she would be behind bars for two months.

‘Chechen authorities accuse another one of their sons of leading an anti-Kadyrov social media account from abroad...

‘Following the arrest, Kadyrov vowed to go after the entire Yangulbayev family. “This little family has a place waiting for them either in prison, or under ground,” he wrote on Telegram the day after the arrest...

‘Yangulbayev has alleged that in 2015 he was taken to Kadyrov’s residence with his sons, where they were beaten. He said one of his sons was tortured and beaten by Kadyrov himself, and said he came home “almost not alive”.²¹

3.6.5 See [Chechnya: Chechens abroad](#) for further information on this subject.

[Back to Contents](#)

3.7 Chechens abroad

3.7.1 In the ‘Freedom in the World’ 2022 report, Freedom House noted human rights abuses carried out by Chechen leader, Ramzan Kadyrov, and added, ‘...his activity sometimes extends to other parts of Russia and foreign countries, where Kadyrov is suspected of arranging the assassination of asylum seekers and political opponents living in exile.’²²

²⁰ OC Media, [Dozens of relatives of government critics reportedly kidnapped...](#), 28 December 2021

²¹ The Guardian, [Chechen politician threatens to ‘rip heads off’ family of activist](#), 2 February 2022

²² Freedom House, [Russia: Freedom in the World 2022](#), 28 February 2022

- 3.7.2 In an undated report, Amnesty International stated, 'Ramzan Kadyrov's critics are not safe abroad either, and numerous suspicious attacks and assassinations which appear to have been instigated from Chechnya, have been reported.'²³ Examples can be found in the [report](#).
- 3.7.3 In September 2019, The Guardian published an article which stated:
- 'Zelimkhan Khangoshvili spent a long time living on the edge. He survived several years of partisan warfare against Russian forces in Chechnya during the early 2000s. He survived an assassination attempt in Georgia's capital Tbilisi in 2015, a spray of bullets hitting him in the arm and shoulder. He survived a stint living in Ukraine, where he was tipped off about another planned attack and went into hiding. Finally, he arrived in Germany towards the end of 2016, and breathed a sigh of relief...
- 'But it was here, in the centre of Europe, that Khangoshvili finally met his end. Late last month, shortly after leaving home to go to the mosque, a man approached him in Berlin's Kleiner Tiergarten and shot him twice in the head. He died immediately.
- 'The suspected assassin ... was travelling on a Russian passport apparently issued under a false identity, boosting suspicions about a hit ordered by Russian security services or by the Kremlin-backed leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov...
- 'Khangoshvili was the latest in a trail of killings over the past decade in which insurgency figures and other enemies of Kadyrov have been shot dead, wherever they may be hiding...
- '[In 2009], a political rival to Kadyrov, Sulim Yamadayev, was shot dead in Dubai. Local police accused a Chechen politician close to Kadyrov of supplying the murder weapon. There have been half a dozen prominent Chechens killed in Istanbul over the past decade, with Turkish authorities believing Russian security services are involved. And in Ukraine, where Chechens have joined volunteer battalions fighting pro-Russian forces, the Chechen fighter Amina Okuyeva was killed in an ambush of her car in 2017. Her husband and battalion commander, Adam Osmayev, was wounded but survived. Previously, the pair had been targeted by a Chechen hitman pretending to be a French journalist from Le Monde who had come to interview them.'²⁴

[Back to Contents](#)

²³ AI, [Russian Federation: Victim Of Videotape Torture Is Still Missing](#), no date

²⁴ The Guardian, ['We can find you anywhere': the Chechen death squads ...](#), 21 September 2019

Annex A

Interview questions

Official – sensitive: Start of section

The information in this section has been removed as it is restricted for internal Home Office use only.

Official – sensitive: End of section

[Back to Contents](#)

Terms of Reference

A 'Terms of Reference' (ToR) is a broad outline of what the CPIN seeks to cover. They form the basis for the [country information section](#). The Home Office's Country Policy and Information Team uses some standardised ToR, depending on the subject, and these are then adapted depending on the country concerned.

For this particular CPIN, the following topics were identified prior to drafting as relevant and on which research was undertaken:

- Chechnya
 - Head of state
 - Groups at risk, eg journalists / bloggers and NGOs, and state actions taken
 - Detention conditions and treatment in detention
 - Possibility of a fair trial / avenues of redress

[Back to Contents](#)

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[Back to Contents](#)

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[Back to Contents](#)

Version control

Clearance

Below is information on when this note was cleared:

- version **1.0**
- valid from **23 August 2022**

Official – sensitive: Start of section

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Official – sensitive: End of section

Changes from last version of this note

This is the first CPIN produced on this subject.

[Back to Contents](#)