



# WELCOME TO CHECHNYA

(ДОБРО ПОЖАЛОВАТЬ В ЧЕЧНИЮ)



*“Welcome to Chechnya lays bare the horrific gay purges that have happened in Chechnya, and in greater Russia, in recent years. The American gaze toward that part of the world is more heated now than it has been in a long time, and France’s damning film could certainly intensify that. A major part of the problem, though, is that the global public hasn’t seemed to care all that much about what’s happening to gay men and women in Chechnya. This film could go just as unnoticed, then. Or it could change everything.” – Richard Lawson, Vanity Fair*

We developed the WELCOME TO CHECHNYA impact campaign with the input of activists and advocates working in Russia and elsewhere to bring an end to the anti-LGBTQ pogrom in Chechnya and to human rights abuses against LGBTQ people worldwide.

In other words, we want WELCOME TO CHECHNYA to change everything.

LGBTQ people are still at risk of harm in Chechnya — and around the world — but the film was successful in moving the needle in a number of ways: generating resources, access to decision makers, and platforms to share testimony for activists and survivors; amplifying the calls for accountability and justice from audience members, activists, and policy makers; creating greater political will for economic sanctions against the perpetrators; and motivating citizen activists to step up in the face of anti-LGBTQ policy and sentiment everywhere.

This case study outlines how we developed the campaign, identifies the partners with whom we worked, and demonstrates the progress we made toward meeting our goals.

The work is by no means over. We hope that activists and others will continue to use WELCOME TO CHECHNYA to impact social and policy change — and that we have laid the groundwork for them to succeed.

## **“A dirty and vile provocation”**

**– Chingiz Akhmadov, Grozny State Television  
and Radio Broadcasting Company, Chechnya**



## WELCOME TO CHECHNYA

In **WELCOME TO CHECHNYA**, author, journalist, and Academy Award-nominated filmmaker David France tells the story of a group of brave Russian activists and the Chechen LGBTQ people they are helping to escape with their lives.



## WHAT IS HAPPENING IN CHECHNYA?

In the spring of 2017, the *Novaya Gazeta*, an independent Russian newspaper, reported that government security officials had abducted, detained, and tortured more than 100 gay men in Chechnya. The officials demanded that these men share the names of other gay men who were, in turn, abducted and tortured as well. While some of the men were eventually released, many are presumed dead, murdered either by the state or by their families in “honor” killings encouraged and condoned by the government.

Ramzan Kadyrov, the leader of Chechnya (a formerly independent republic), immediately denied the accusations and, in fact, denied the existence of gay people in Chechnya. The Russian LGBT Network, a St. Petersburg-based NGO, began helping LGBTQ people to escape Chechnya and, internationally, human rights organizations and world leaders called for an investigation by the Russian Federation.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation conducted a sham investigation that faltered when witnesses and victims, fearing retaliation, did not come forward. Publicly, the Federation claimed that the lack of testimony confirmed that no human rights abuses occurred — despite reporting from the *Novaya Gazeta*, Human Rights Watch, and international media. In October 2017, Maxim Lapunov, a Russian man working in Chechnya, became the first torture survivor to come forward to share his story and to seek justice from the Federation. Since that time, others — including Amin Dzhabrailov, an ethnic Chechen — have spoken publicly.

While media attention is inconsistent, most global human rights and LGBTQ activists agree that the persecution of gay people in Chechnya is ongoing. In Russia, the Russian LGBT Network continues to operate a hotline for those at risk, partner with the Moscow Community Center to provide care and safe housing to survivors, and work with the Center and allies in other countries to facilitate survivors’ evacuations, and demand that those responsible be investigated and ultimately prosecuted.

## aggregate

David France and Public Square Films engaged Aggregate to develop and conduct the WELCOME TO CHECHNYA impact campaign. Aggregate works with NGOs, philanthropic foundations, authors, and filmmakers to build strategic partnerships that can contribute to social and policy change.

[whatisaggregate.com](http://whatisaggregate.com)



## CREATING THE CAMPAIGN

To develop the impact campaign, Aggregate conducted the following activities:

- Met with and reviewed materials from the film team to benefit from their understanding of the situation in Chechnya and the relationships they developed in the course of filmmaking;
- Watched rough cuts of the film to understand the filmmakers' unique approach to the story and how it could influence the impact campaign;
- Conducted interviews with experts;
- Read reports from international NGOs and intergovernmental agencies, as well as international media coverage of the purge and the response; and
- Researched potential partner organizations to understand and assess their missions, activities, accomplishments, and capacities.



## CONVERSATIONS WITH EXPERTS

The experts with whom Aggregate spoke (via encrypted apps to maintain secrecy about the film's production, generally for an hour or more, and often involving follow up calls and texts) included the following, listed alphabetically.

Olga Baranova, Moscow Community Center and Queer Women of the Northern Caucasus

Adrian Coman, Arcus Foundation

Julie Dorf, Council for Global Equality

Betsy Fisher, International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP)

Shawn Gaylord, Congressional LGBTQ+ Equality Caucus

Masha Gessen, *New Yorker* (and Executive Producer)

Ashton Giese, Outright International

Lyosha Gorshkov, RUSA LGBT

Neil Grungras, Organization for Refugee Asylum and Migration (ORAM)

Yuri Guiana, All Out

Fabrice Houdart, UNHCR

Kevin Jennings, GLSEN founder (and Executive Producer)

Jeremy Kadden, Human Rights Campaign

Anna Kirey, Amnesty International

Veronika Lapina, Russian LGBT Network

Tanya Lokshina, Human Rights Watch Russia

Victor Madrigal-Borloz, UN Independent Expert

Aaron Morris, Immigration Equality

Andrew Park, consultant to UNHCR, ILGA-World, and Human Rights Watch

Stephen Peters, Human Rights Campaign

Kimahli Powell, Rainbow Railroad

Graeme Reid, Human Rights Watch

Almut Rochowanski, Chechnya Advocacy Network

Anastasia Smirnova, ILGA-Europe

Bjorn Van Roozendaal, ILGA-Europe

Karlene Williams-Clark, The 519

Svetlana Zakharova, Russian LGBT Network

In our interviews, Aggregate focused on understanding the context for what was happening in Chechnya — within the republic, in Russia, and globally; potential calls to action to share with audiences; which organizations were having the greatest impact and why; and how the film could contribute to improving the situation in Chechnya and/or supporting the victims and their advocates. In addition to informing the campaign, these conversations contributed to building word of mouth about the film among influencers with an investment in having the story told.

Aggregate also maintained regular communications throughout the campaign with the Russian LGBT Network, the Moscow Community Center, and others to understand ongoing developments.

# WHAT WE HEARD

**Kadyrov will not change, and he is not going anywhere.** The overwhelming sentiment was that very little (and perhaps nothing) could be done to end the persecution of the LGBTQ community in Chechnya outside of a regime change. Unfortunately, Ramzan Kadyrov is young (44) and secure in his power, receiving 97.94 percent of the vote in 2016 — whether legitimately or not.

**Putin is not likely to be compelled.** Relatedly, there was skepticism that anything — and certainly not public will — could compel Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation to undertake a credible and thorough investigation. While some experts hold out hope that persistent pressure from world leaders could potentially move Putin, one of the experts with whom we spoke suggested it was a “fool’s errand” to try.

According to Human Rights Watch Russia, the international outcry following the first purge reports led Putin to call on Russia’s Prosecutor General and Interior Minister to undertake an investigation. However, the investigation was quickly brought to a conclusion citing the lack of victims willing to come forward and without acknowledging that these victims were justifiably in fear of losing their lives if they did so. Regardless, the lack of people willing to testify made it easier for the Russian Federation to dismiss the reporting as rumor.



**Activists believe the world’s attention matters.** Regardless of this skepticism, those with whom Aggregate spoke believed the film (and the media attention it would garner) could put pressure on world leaders to demand that Putin to take action. Chechen leadership are frustrated by their inability to control the narrative. They are shocked that the world’s attention has persisted.

A representative from the Russian LGBT Network stated publicly, “I truly believe that it was the international attention and support from all over the world that made the mass persecution stop last time. And now, we need this support again.” Aside from reports from NGOs and news reporting, the film was the most high-profile portrayal of what is happening in Chechnya, making the issue that much more difficult to ignore — and deny.

**We need to help get people out.** As opposed to policy change in Chechnya or a demand for leadership from the Russian Federation, advocates and activists made it clear that the priority was to get people who have been tortured or who were at risk of being tortured (or killed) out of Chechnya and to safety in a new country. The families of the victims — those who do not embrace the anti-LGBTQ belief system of the government — were also at risk and need help to get out of Chechnya as well.



**While the first reported purge in mid-2017 focused on gay men, the most recent waves have included lesbians and transgender women.**



**We must take our lead from those on the ground.** While the priority was to get those at risk out of the country, there were conversations about what could be done to support those who choose to stay and fight. If opportunities existed to contribute, we would respond.

**The persecution is ongoing.** The inconsistent news coverage led many to believe that the persecution stops and starts with the headlines and is not an ongoing issue.

Many with first or secondhand experience say, in fact, that the danger is worse than ever before. Because of the attention generated by the purge, people are “on the hunt” for gay people, encouraged to do so by government officials. The government, which has always condoned honor killings by family members, is broadening its definition of family, (“It could be a second cousin once removed,” said one advocate with whom we spoke.) leading to even more terror and lawlessness. Kadyrov has said that if there were gay people in Chechnya, their families would kill them and to say otherwise is offensive to all Chechens — adding further fuel to the fire.

**Human rights abuses of gay women in Chechnya have been underreported.** While the first reported purge in mid-2017 focused on gay men, the most recent waves have included lesbians and transgender women. In addition, there is ongoing abuse; women who have had relationships with other women have been victims of honor killings by their families and some have been forcibly institutionalized. These women have little autonomy — male family members generally accompany them when they are outside of their homes.

**Survivors cannot  
leave if they have  
nowhere to go.**

**The Russian LGBT Network is leading the charge and they need support.** Most of those with whom we spoke believed that the Russian LGBT Network was leading the effort to get people out, which they continue to do. The Network has both the willingness and the expertise, but to succeed, they need resources to cover the costs of evacuation, to pursue justice in the courts, and to lobby other countries' governments to grant visas to the victims and allow them to relocate.

**Nevertheless, the Russian LGBT Network works hand-in-hand with partners in Russia and around the world.** The Moscow Community Center, which serves the LGBT+ community, works with the Network to provide care and temporary housing to those who need to be evacuated — and needs further support to be able to do so. The Rainbow Railroad, based in Toronto, has been instrumental in relocating LGBTQ refugees from Chechnya, as well as from other countries around the world. Other organizations have partnered with the Network to pursue justice in the courts.

**Audiences will be moved to provide support.** We were confident that the film's approach to the story — a ground level, emotional, and intimate view versus a political tale of strong men and global politics — would contribute to the desire among audiences to support efforts to get victims out of Chechnya and to acknowledge the personal sacrifice of the featured activists.

While we believed U.S. audiences would want to make monetary donations, we were told European audiences would be less likely to make donations, primarily because they tend to believe their government is responsible for providing the necessary resources. Therefore, we needed to ensure that audiences have opportunities to demonstrate their support in a way that was most meaningful to them.



**More countries must be urged to provide sanctuary for those fleeing persecution.** Survivors cannot leave if they have nowhere to go.

While the United States and members of the European Union have been willing to make statements, many had not been willing to grant asylum to those who need to flee Chechnya and many who did so chose to remain quiet about having done so.

Ideally, governments should allow for immediate evacuation and treat the victims as an endangered group versus making decisions on individual basis. In addition to providing sanctuary, these countries should demonstrate leadership by supporting those who are working to protect the victims, speaking out strongly against the abuses inflicted, calling for a thorough investigation, and making regular inquiries regarding progress on investigations.



**Provide audiences with the opportunity to take action locally.** We knew that most audience members would be unaware of their country's policies regarding LGBTQ refugees from Chechnya. We had the opportunity to educate audiences about these policies, enlighten them to the presence of LGBTQ refugees within their own communities, and give them the opportunity to get involved in their own "backyard."

**Help audiences to understand the global context.** Audiences would not likely be aware of the other 70+ countries where being gay is criminalized and where, like in Chechnya, people who are LGBTQ are at risk of human rights abuses perpetrated by their governments.

There is also a lack of understanding and support for the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ refugees when they relocate to a new country. These refugees are often at risk of violence from other refugees from their own country, while also feeling like outsiders within the LGBTQ community in their new home. They are often here without other family members, and — like others who are LGBTQ — experience discrimination in finding housing and jobs.



**The LGBTQ community can be insensitive to the needs of LGBTQ refugees.**

Many members of the LGBTQ community have firsthand experience of the need to leave someplace — an unaccepting family, their hometown — for their physical and emotional wellbeing. Many others have imagined being forced to leave. Nevertheless, the LGBTQ community is as racist, classist, and sexist as the general population. Because WELCOME TO CHECHNYA would undoubtedly reach global LGBTQ audiences, we had the opportunity to call on them to reflect on — and address — their reception of LGBTQ refugees.

**Regardless of the political context, there is a need to remain outspoken.**

National governments worldwide — including the United States during the Trump Administration — have increasingly become more anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, racist, anti-gay, and anti-Muslim. All of this serves as an obvious deterrent to the evacuation and safe relocation of the victims of the purge in Chechnya, as well as other victims of anti-LGBTQ policies around the world. The advocates and activists with whom we spoke acknowledged this political context yet remained committed to persevering with their message and their efforts.

**It is likely the film would be banned in Russia.** One advocate suggested that, when the film was screened at the first festival in Europe, there would be someone in the audience recording the film and, soon afterward, putting it online. Others echoed this belief and suggested that we not try to intervene, but instead allow for the film to be pirated in Russia and Chechnya. Allowing the film to be spread would build word of mouth, particularly among the vibrant Russian LGBTQ and human rights activist communities, who could use the film to support their efforts — both to support victims in Chechnya and to protest the Russian Federation's "gay propaganda" law.

**There is an  
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rights abuses.**



**Do no harm.** There is an inherent risk in pointing out human rights abuses and trying to hold perpetrators accountable. In the context of human rights, advocacy is guided by the need to “do no harm.” This does not mean staying silent; it does mean weighing the risks against the benefits.

Aggregate asked those with whom we spoke whether they had concerns that WELCOME TO CHECHNYA could contribute to further violence. Repeatedly we were told that the value of telling the story was greater than the threat and that we should always follow the lead of those on the ground.

As one advocate said, **“It can’t get much worse.”**



## OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

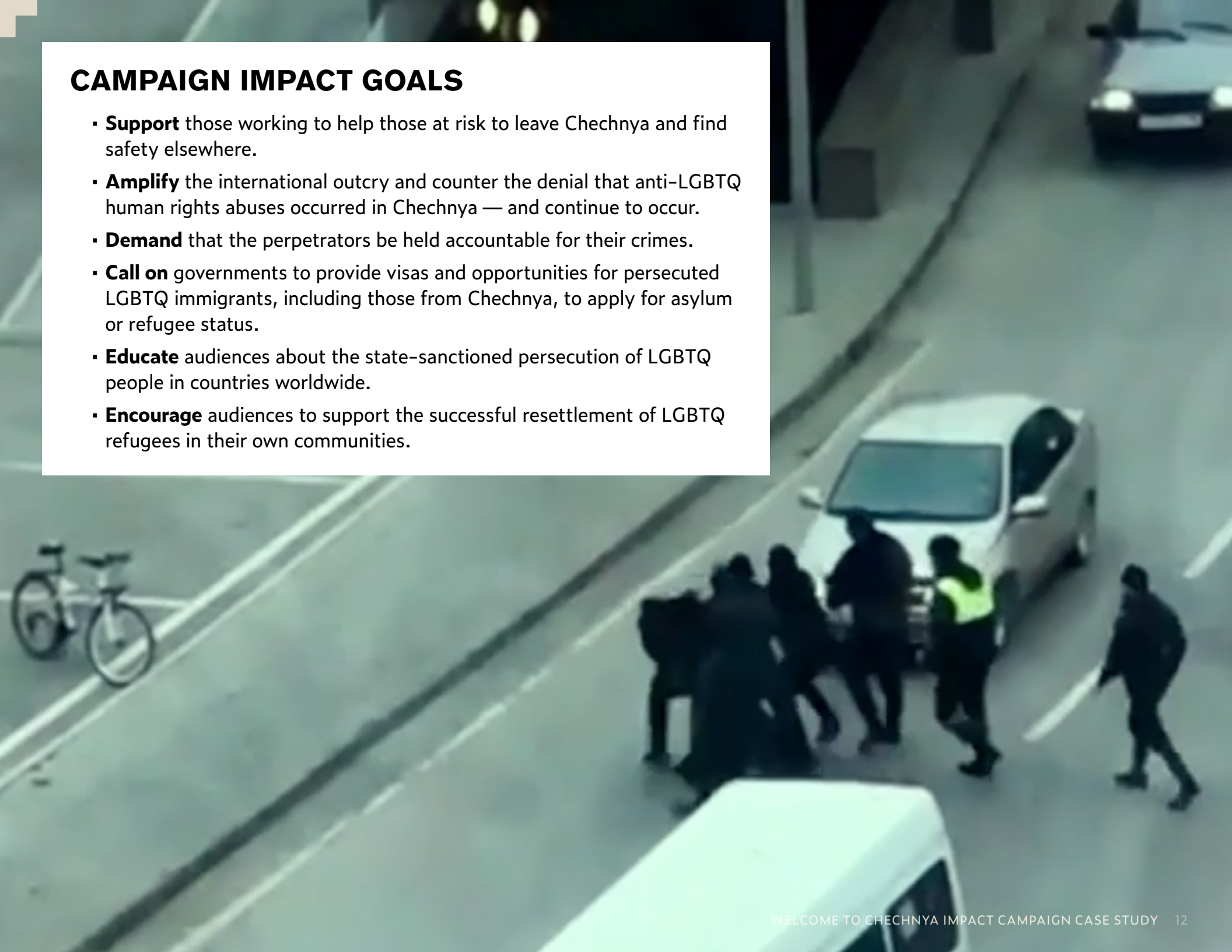
Regardless of the film, Aggregate develops impact campaigns based on the following principles:

- **The most important goal is to ensure that as many people as possible can see the film. The film cannot contribute to change unless people see it.**
- Before we began our work, there were people and organizations working on the issue we are trying to address, including those who are directly impacted. We should take their lead, contribute to and not distract from their efforts, and be cautious about cannibalizing their resources.
- We should not recreate the wheel; we should always look for opportunities to leverage existing systems, programs, and relationships versus utilizing valuable (and limited) resources to create something new.
- Whenever possible, we should compensate our partners for their work, either directly (e.g., sub grants) or indirectly (e.g., allowing them to use the film as a fundraiser for their organization).
- We are always open to new opportunities for how to achieve them, but we should stay focused on our impact goals.
- Raising awareness alone will not achieve meaningful change. In addition to awareness, we need to ensure people understand an issue, believe that change can happen, and are confident that they can contribute personally to that change. And we need to give them concrete opportunities to contribute to meaningful change.
- Regardless, we should be realistic about what we can achieve, which means not committing to policy or social change that is unattainable and remaining focused so we do not dilute the power of what we can achieve.



## CAMPAIGN IMPACT GOALS

- **Support** those working to help those at risk to leave Chechnya and find safety elsewhere.
- **Amplify** the international outcry and counter the denial that anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses occurred in Chechnya — and continue to occur.
- **Demand** that the perpetrators be held accountable for their crimes.
- **Call on** governments to provide visas and opportunities for persecuted LGBTQ immigrants, including those from Chechnya, to apply for asylum or refugee status.
- **Educate** audiences about the state-sanctioned persecution of LGBTQ people in countries worldwide.
- **Encourage** audiences to support the successful resettlement of LGBTQ refugees in their own communities.





## OUR IMPACT PARTNERS

As evidenced by the long list of experts and activists we consulted to develop the campaign, there is a significant community of individuals and organizations who have been working to save lives in Chechnya and to increase the flow of LGBTQ asylum seekers worldwide.

One of our core principles is that, before we began our work, there were people and organizations working on the issue we are trying to address, including those who are directly impacted. We should take their lead, contribute to and not distract from their efforts, and be cautious about cannibalizing their resources. The film is meant to be an asset to them, a tool to be used to help them to achieve their missions.

For WELCOME TO CHECHNYA, our core partners were a range of organizations that work on the ground in Russia to facilitate escapes, advocate for asylum seekers, seek justice for survivors, document and report on the human rights abuses, help LGBTQ refugees to resettle, and use their platforms to educate and mobilize grassroots support. As partners, they acted as spokespeople, participated on panels, hosted events, helped spread the word through social media, and enabled us to navigate a complicated global advocacy landscape. Any success we achieved with this impact campaign is entirely due to them and we are humbled by their commitment to their missions and to justice for LGBTQ people worldwide.

- **Russian LGBT Network**
- **Moscow Community Center for LGBT+ Initiatives**
- **Queer Women in the North Caucasus**
- **Rainbow Railroad**
- **Council for Global Equality**
- **Human Rights Watch**
- **RUSA LGBT**
- **LGBT World Beside**
- **OutRight Action International**
- **Hornet**
- **GLAAD**
- **Human Rights Campaign**



# MEETING OUR GOALS

## Support those working to help those at risk to leave Chechnya and find safety elsewhere.

Because the anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses persist in Chechnya, the activists working to get LGBTQ folks out of Chechnya persist as well — and they need help.

Our efforts to support the activists included raising money, but also extended to providing them with platforms to talk about their work with policy makers and influencers; facilitating valuable partnerships with organizations that could promote their work, support fundraising, and otherwise contribute to pursuing their missions; and promoting their work, events, and calls to action through social and mainstream media.

The core of our fundraising strategy was a partnership with OutRight International, which allowed us to use their existing fundraising platform and internal capacity to issue subgrants to collect donations through the WELCOME TO CHECHNYA website for the Russian LGBT Network, the Moscow Community Center for LGBT+ Initiatives and for Maxim Lapunov.

While our support focused on the Network, Center, and Maxim Lapunov — the central figures in the film — our support for activists included other groups that are integral to the work being done in Chechnya and worldwide to fight anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses.



### Highlights

- Through our partnership with OutRight International, we raised more than \$175,000 for the Russian LGBT Network, the Moscow Community Center, and Maxim Lapunov from audiences.
- At the Berlin Film Festival, the Network and the Center were the recipients of the Teddy Activist Award, which included a €5,000 prize.
- At the True/False Film Fest, Maxim Lapunov was the recipient of the True Life Fund, through which festival audiences donate to support those whose stories are told through a selected documentary film. Donations exceeded \$35,000.
- To support WELCOME TO CHECHNYA's US premiere on HBO, PFLAG promoted a social media campaign that highlighted the work of the Russian LGBT Network, Moscow Community Center, LGBT World Beside, RUSA LGBT, and Rainbow Railroad.
- We organized opportunities for the Russian LGBT Network to speak to the U.S. State Department, UK Parliament's All Parliamentary Group on Global LGBT+ Rights and the United Nation's LGBTI Core Group.
- Hornet, the gay dating app with the greatest reach in Russia, promoted the film to its users, as well as resources for those currently in danger.
- When two young gay men whom the Russian LGBT Network had helped to escape were abducted, brought back to Chechnya, and in mortal danger, the WELCOME TO CHECHNYA team reached out to political contacts in the U.S. and UK to lobby them to make statements calling on the Kremlin to intervene.



## MEETING OUR GOALS cont.

**Amplify the international outcry about the anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses in Chechnya and counter the denial it occurred — and continues to occur.**

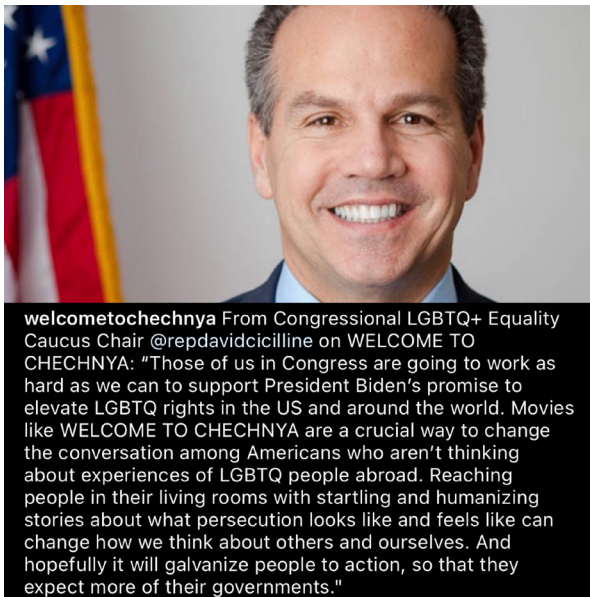
Clearly WELCOME TO CHECHNYA — and its global release and accolades — contributed greatly to increasing awareness and outrage about the state-sanctioned violence underway in Chechnya, but the impact campaign contributed to amplifying — and targeting — this outrage.

From the very beginning — the world premiere of WELCOME TO CHECHNYA at the Sundance Film Festival — we worked to ensure that coverage of the film provided context for what was happening in Chechnya and corrected misunderstanding and misinformation. This included producing an issue primer that the films' publicists shared with all media. (We also posted the primer to the film website as a resource for media.)

With each festival screening — and award — we garnered additional traditional and social media. We also leveraged as many festival panels as possible to provide a platform to the activists and to educate audiences about the issue and the actions they could take to contribute. While we called on those who could afford to do so to make donations, we made it clear that simply serving as a witness to the atrocities and countering the denial of the Chechen government and the Russian Federation by speaking up was a profound contribution.

Throughout the campaign, partner organizations generated word of mouth through social media, their online publications, screenings and panels. Influencers in entertainment, politics, LGBTQ and human rights — some of whom we proactively engaged and others who spoke up organically — also generated word of mouth online.

WELCOME TO CHECHNYA's distributors contributed by making the film available at no charge, either for abbreviated periods or on an ongoing basis. We worked with Music Box Films and Blueshift Education to produce an educational guide targeting university-level instructors.



**“Movies like WELCOME TO CHECHNYA are a crucial way to change the conversation among Americans who aren’t thinking about experiences of LGBTQ people abroad. Reaching people in their living rooms with startling and humanizing stories about what persecution looks like and feels like can change how we think about others and ourselves. And hopefully it will galvanize people to action, so that they expect more of their governments.”**

**– U.S. Representative David Cicilline,  
Co-Chair, Congressional LGBTQ+ Equality Caucus**

# “There is no better advocacy calling card for Chechnya than this film.”

– Rachel Denber, Deputy Director of the Europe and Central Asia Division of Human Rights Watch

The poster is for a virtual panel discussion titled "WELCOME TO CHECHNYA". It features a blue header with the title in white. Below the title, it says "A VIRTUAL PANEL DISCUSSION". The main body of the poster is divided into two rows of portraits. The top row features Jesse Tyler Ferguson & Justin Mikita (Executive Producers), Congressman David Cicilline (Co-chair of the LGBTQ+ Equality Caucus), and David France (Director, WELCOME TO CHECHNYA). The bottom row features Kimahli Powell (Executive Director of Rainbow Railroad), Olga Baranova (Russian human rights activist, former Senior Director of the Moscow Community Center), and Travis Merriweather (Moderator). The event is scheduled for Tuesday, December 15th, from 1:30pm PST to 4:30pm EST. At the bottom, it lists the sponsors: "Brought to you by:" followed by logos for ICM Politics, LGBTQ+ Equality Caucus, and InQlusion.

**WELCOME TO CHECHNYA**  
A VIRTUAL PANEL DISCUSSION

Jesse Tyler Ferguson & Justin Mikita  
Executive Producers

Congressman David Cicilline  
Co-chair of the LGBTQ+ Equality Caucus

David France  
Director, WELCOME TO CHECHNYA

**Tuesday, December 15th**  
1:30pm PST / 4:30pm EST

Kimahli Powell  
Executive Director of Rainbow Railroad

Olga Baranova  
Russian human rights activist, former Senior Director of the Moscow Community Center

Travis Merriweather  
Moderator

Brought to you by: ICM Politics LGBTQ+ Equality Caucus InQlusion

## Highlights

- Graeme Reid, Director of the LGBT program at Human Rights Watch published an opinion piece about WELCOME TO CHECHNYA, reaching the human rights community with news about the film. “David France has done justice to the outrage in Chechnya, facing the horror, but also the extraordinary courage of Russian activists working against all odds to get people to safety.”
- Global Pride shared the WELCOME TO CHECHNYA trailer and a statement from Maxim Lapunov during a worldwide event that reaches 300 million viewers.
- The Human Rights Watch Film Festival hosted a panel with director David France, Masha Gessen, Human Rights Watch Europe and Central Asia Associate Director Tanya Lokshina, and Human Rights Watch LGBT Program Director Graeme Reid.
- Bertha DocHouse hosted a screening and panel to educate young queer activists in the UK about what they can do to push their government to do more in response to the anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses in Chechnya.
- HBO and Crave made WELCOME TO CHECHNYA available for free to US and Canadian audiences for one month to allow for broader reach.
- The One World Festival screened the film as part of Prague Pride in cooperation with Centre for Human Rights of People in Need.
- The Bergen Film Festival hosted a panel discussion with members of the Norwegian parliamentary to discuss what Norway should be doing in response to the anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses in Chechnya.
- The International Anti-Corruption Conference (IACC) hosted a screening for heads of state, civil society and the private sector.
- ICM Politics hosted a panel for its celebrity clients to educate them about the anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses in Chechnya featuring Olga Baranova of the Moscow Community Center, Kimahli Powell of Rainbow Railroad, U.S. Representative David Cicilline, Executive Producers Jesse Tyler Ferguson and Justin Mikita, and director David France.
- David France participated in panel discussions about the anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses in Chechnya conversation with fellow journalists Masha Gessen (New Yorker), Fareed Zakaria (CNN), Charles Blow (NY Times), Chelsea Clinton, and human and LGBT rights activist Peter Tatchell.
- The U.S. State Department’s GLIFAA (LGBT employee affinity group) and Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor co-hosted a screening and discussion in partnership with the Council for Global Equality.



## MEETING OUR GOALS cont.

### Contribute to Efforts to Hold the Perpetrators of the State-Sanctioned Violence Accountable

Because Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation have refused to take action to hold Ramzan Kadyrov and his henchmen accountable for their crimes against humanity, activists have focused on calling on other world leaders and their governments, as well as multilateral organizations, to use the limited tools available to them to “punish” the Chechen strongman or to pressure Putin to do so. The outcomes have ranged from strongly worded statements to economic sanctions. Currently there is an effort by the Russian LGBT Network and the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights to lobby the General Prosecutor of Germany to file criminal charges against five men within Kadyrov’s inner circle.

While this work and its outcomes reflect the long-term and arduous efforts of activists around the world, the pace and potency increased following WELCOME TO CHECHNYA’s release in the United States and the UK and our work to reach and engage with policy makers in both countries and elsewhere.



**Crispin Blunt** Conservative, Reigate · 3:43 pm, 6th July 2020

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his excellent statement, which adds serious substance to underpin the values, particularly in respect of human rights, that global Britain will champion around the world. Does [Ramzan Kadyrov](#) appear on this list? Has my right hon. Friend seen “Welcome to Chechnya: The Gay Purge”? If he has not, I commend it to him. I also commend the incredible courage of the people who documented what happened in Chechnya’s gay purge, so that formal legal action can begin at some point, whether in the [European Court of Human Rights](#) or elsewhere. Clearly, there is a case for sanctions on Ramzan Kadyrov, and on [President Putin](#), who gives Kadyrov impunity for his actions. This is a jurisdiction that does not criminalise homosexuality, but there are 72 around the world that do, including 34 in the Commonwealth. I sincerely hope that this issue will be a leading part of the work carried out on human rights.



**James Roscoe** @jmsroscoe · Dec 10, 2020

Anyone who has seen [@welcomechechnya](#) [@bydavidfrance](#)'s searing window into persecution of [#LGBTIQ](#) community in [#Chechnya](#) will know today's sanctioning by [@FCDOGovUK](#) of Chechnya's security services sends an important signal that this state behavior cannot be tolerated. [@stonewalluk](#)



**Rita French** @RitaFrenchFCDO · Jul 2, 2020

Russian activists, filmmakers & LGBT people fleeing persecution demonstrated incredible bravery in [@welcomechechnya](#). Thank you [@ByDavidFrance](#) for shining a light on the appalling treatment of LGBT people in [#Chechnya](#).

The stands in solidarity with the [#LGBT](#) community in



## Highlights

- Days after a screening of WELCOME TO CHECHNYA for U.S. State Department and Congressional staff hosted by the Canadian Embassy in DC, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced new sanctions against Ramzan Kadyrov and his family, citing Kadyrov's anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses and calling on other countries to follow suit.
- The UK Mission to the United Nations hosted a panel for LGBT Core member states in which Maxim Lapunov shared his firsthand account of torture at the hands of Chechen officials. Lapunov was accompanied on the panel by Victor-Madriral Borloz, UN Independent Expert on Protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and Veronika Lapina of the Russian LGBT Network, as well as WELCOME TO CHECHNYA director, David France. Rita French, Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva and International Ambassador for Human Right, and James Roscoe, UK Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN, hosted the event.
- British MP Crispin Blunt cited WELCOME TO CHECHNYA in the House of Commons when he called on Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab to include Ramzan Kadyrov and the anti-LGBTQ atrocities in Chechnya in his list of those being sanctioned by the UK under the Magnitsky Act — which he did.
- The U.S. Treasury Department announced the country's third round of sanctions against Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov on International Human Rights Day 2020. "Following Kadyrov's previous designation, the Kadyrovtsy, under the guidance of Kadyrov, continued these egregious activities, to include kidnapping, torturing, and killing members of the LGBTI population in the Chechen Republic. The Kadyrovtsy are accused of illegal abductions, torture, extrajudicial executions, and other abuses, including the detention of journalists and activists." In addition to Kadyrov, the Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned six companies registered in Russia that "continue to provide Kadyrov pride and significant profit."
- That same day, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development office announced sanctions under the Magnitsky Act against those "responsible for gross human rights violations" against LGBTQ+ people in Chechnya. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab warn(ed) those who commit human rights violations that the UK will not hesitate to impose further sanctions. In Chechnya, the sanctions were imposed "against three individuals and the Terek Special Rapid Response Unit responsible for torture and other human rights violations against LGBT people in Chechnya.
- ICM Politics hosted a screening and a panel for its clients to educate them about the anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses in Chechnya. Congressional LGBT Caucus Co-Chair Representative David Cicilline (D-RI) used the event as an opportunity to promote his sponsored legislation, the Global Respect Act, which would help prevent international violators of LGBTQ human rights from entering the United States and enhance U.S. State Department tracking and reporting of violence and other human rights violations against LGBT individuals in foreign countries.
- The European Union issued sanctions against Kadyrov's henchman, blacklisting a senior official at the Russian Internal Affairs Ministry and deputy prime minister of the Chechnya region and the commander of a special security unit that the EU said was responsible for the persecution of LGBTQ people in the region.
- The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, in partnership with the Russian LGBT Network, hosted a screening and a conversation about what Germany should be doing in response to the anti-LGBTQ violence in Chechnya. Soon after, the two groups called on the General Prosecutor to file criminal charges against five members of Ramzan Kadyrov's inner circle.
- The U.S. Congressional LGBTQ+ Equality Caucus, the UK All Parliamentary Group on Global LGBT+ Rights, and the European Parliament LGBT Intergroup co-hosted a panel discussion about the role that parliamentary groups worldwide could play in bringing an end to the crisis in Chechnya.



## MEETING OUR GOALS cont.

### Educate Audiences that LGBTQ People in Countries Around the World Are at Risk of Human Rights Abuses Perpetrated by Their Governments

While we kept our focus on the anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses in Chechnya, we also took advantage of the film's platforms (e.g., website, social media channels, screenings, and panels) to educate audiences about the prevalence of similar abuses — and the growth of anti-LGBTQ policies — worldwide, including in Poland and Hungary.

We shared the research and reports of formal and informal partners and allies like ILGA, which publishes an annual report on state-sponsored homophobia and criminalization of homosexuality, and even contributed to new research that could have an impact on new policies and activism.

#### Highlights

- World Pride 2021 leadership screened WELCOME TO CHECHNYA for staff to remind them what Pride is ultimately about. Later, the group announced that the Human Rights Forum of Copenhagen 2021 (World Pride) would include an Immigration, Borders and Refugees Summit as part of the Forum to address those who are forcibly displaced and that an additional focus would be on anti-LGBT violence and killings. Olga Baranova and Maxim Lapunov were invited to attend and participate as guests of World Pride.
- A team of Australian academics at Monash University used the film in their research on state-sanctioned killings of "sexual minorities." The research was sponsored by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. We connect the researchers to Rainbow Railroad, the Russian LGBT Network, and ILGA to allow these groups to inform the research.
- We partnered with Blueshift Education to produce a university-level discussion guide that WELCOME TO CHECHNYA's educational distributor made available and that includes information from ILGA World about laws regarding same sexual orientation worldwide.
- In Poland, the European Solidarity Centre, a civil resistance museum, hosted a screening and promoted All Out's campaign to urge the European Commission to take action in response to Poland's "anti-LGBT ideology" zones.

**"The people of Poland are getting more and more impatient and frustrated with the politicians and the film serves as a great warning but also shows how by working together we can fight the cruel reality."**

**– Karol Piekarczyk, Millennium Docs Against Gravity**



## MEETING OUR GOALS cont.

### Ensure Governments Provide Appropriate Visas and Opportunities for Persecuted LGBTQ Individuals — Including Those from Chechnya — to Apply for Asylum or Refugee Status

Clearly, in order to escape anti-LGBTQ persecution in Chechnya, countries must provide those who are in danger with a new country to call home. While the global shutdown of many national borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to the movement of many asylum seekers, it was not absolute and it would not be without end, so we sought out opportunities to call on countries to improve their asylum policies.



#### Highlights

- The BBC hosted a screening and panel with introductory remarks from Stephen Fry and co-hosted by the British Group of the Interparliamentary Union and the All-Party Parliamentary Human Rights Group. During the discussion, Crispin Blunt MP (Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Global LGBT+ Rights) issued a call to action to his colleagues for the UK government to provide refuge from those escaping the human rights abuses in Chechnya.
- The Canadian Embassy hosted a screening and panel — in partnership with impact partners the Council for Global Equality and Rainbow Railroad — for U.S. State Department and Congressional staff that included a call to action for the provision of visas for LGBTQ+ victims of human rights abuses.
- The UK Mission to the United Nations hosted a panel for LGBT Core member states in which Maxim Lapunov shared his firsthand account of torture at the hands of Chechen officials and called on member states to open their borders to other LGBTQ survivors seeking asylum.
- The Bergen Film Festival hosted a panel discussion with members of the Norwegian parliamentary to discuss what Norway should be doing in response to the anti-LGBTQ human rights abuses in Chechnya, including offering asylum to those who have escaped.

## MEETING OUR GOALS cont.

### Encourage Audiences to Support the Successful Resettlement of LGBTQ Refugees in Their Own Communities

Recognizing that the anti-LGBTQ human right abuse in Chechnya could feel like an insurmountable crisis, we wanted also to provide audiences with the opportunity to take small actions that could contribute to improving lives in their own communities.

Many simply do not understand the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ refugees when they relocate to a new country. These refugees are often at risk of violence from other refugees from their own country, while also feeling like outsiders within the LGBTQ community in their new home. They have left behind all that they know and — like others who are LGBTQ — experience discrimination in finding housing and jobs.

#### Highlights

- The One World Festival of Documentaries on Refugees Issues partnered with UNHCR Canada, Amnesty International Canada, CARE Canada, and Oxfam Canada to host a screening and panel on the topic of LGBTQ refugees.
- RUSA LGBT hosted a screening and panel that raised money for their efforts to support new LGBTQI immigrants from Russia in New York City.
- The Verzio International Human Rights Film Festival hosted a panel on LGBTQ migrant rights.
- Following a screening of WELCOME TO CHECHNYA at the Seville European Film Festival, the LGBTQ rights group Fundacion Triangulo spoke about the unique challenges facing LGBTQ refugees to Spain.
- The Russian Speaking LGBT Support Group NYC hosted a screening and panel for their members.



## Reaching Russia

Our advisors told us that while there was a risk the Russian government would ban WELCOME TO CHECHNYA in the country, it was inevitable that the film would be pirated and seen regardless. We had no intention of getting in the way. From the very beginning, David France wanted the film to be seen in Russia— both by those in power and by those at risk who needed to know that the world was watching.

In late May 2020, HBO released the WELCOME TO CHECHNYA trailer, posting it to YouTube and generating — almost immediately — nearly a million views, along with thousands of comments, mostly from Russian-speaking viewers expressing their excitement about seeing the film and having the story told.

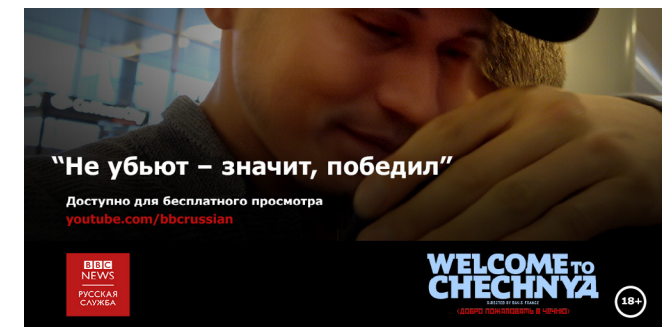
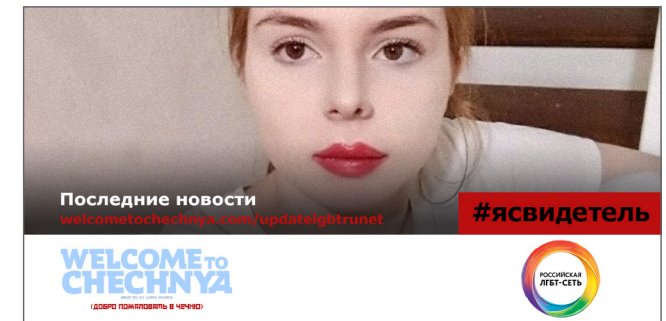
When HBO released the film on their streaming platform on June 30, our advisors were proven right when it was (again, almost immediately) pirated across Russia, becoming the one of the most top-viewed films in the country — without a distributor. Soon, a significant percentage of the followers of WELCOME TO CHECHNYA's social media accounts (particularly Instagram) were located in Russia.

In July, when asked if Vladimir Putin had seen WELCOME TO CHECHNYA, the Russian President's spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded, "We believe that there are a lot of far more important issues." This dismissive remark was not lost on the countless young people who had already seen the film and had been empowered to speak up. They quickly took to social media to both ridicule and condemn Putin for considering the atrocities experienced by gay people in Chechnya to be "unimportant."

Chingiz Akhmadov, the director of the Grozny State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, called WELCOME TO CHECHNYA "a dirty and vile provocation." Another official from the Grozny State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company stated, "Such dirty, so false things in relation to a person, nation, republic, how can they say that? It is very disgusting to talk about our people. It never happened among us for a guy to marry a guy or a woman to marry a woman. What does it mean to say that their rights are being violated? To say that their rights are being violated in Chechnya is a shame, a disgrace."

The excitement for the film in Russia was not lost on BBC News Russian (part of the BBC World Service) who made their first-ever film acquisition and, in November 2020, made the film available (for free) to audiences in Russia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

We were thrilled to partner with Hornet, the gay social network with the largest market share in Russia, to promote the BBC News Russian release. They geo-targeted news about the film to their users in the territory covered by BBC Russian News and provided information about resources like the Russian LGBT Network for users at risk of violence in Chechnya and elsewhere. Since then Hornet has partnered with the Russian LGBT Network to publish reports on ongoing abductions.





**“At its heart it’s about dehumanizing people. To put a face to the individual stories and to convey them in a way that an audience can directly relate is all the more important.”**

**– Graeme Reid, director of the LGBT Rights program at Human Rights Watch**



## **UNEXPECTED IMPACT**

WELCOME TO CHECHNYA’s groundbreaking use of artificial intelligence (AI) to disguise the human rights abuse survivors and activists in the film who chose to keep their identities secret captured the attention of the documentary film world, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences members, as well as human rights activists who recognized a new opportunity to enable survivors and activists to come forward and provide testimony.

As a result of his work on the film, visual effects supervisor Ryan Laney worked with groups like the Open Documentary Lab at MIT and the human rights organization Witness to explore how human rights groups could use the technology — and make it more widely accessible — to better protect vulnerable activists, everyday witnesses and civic journalists and allow more to come forward to hold perpetrators accountable.

WELCOME TO CHECHNYA became the first-ever documentary to be short-listed for Best Visual Effects by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

We are hopeful that this conversation continues.

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

WELCOME TO CHECHNYA was one of the lucky ones. The film premiered at Sundance in January 2020, had its international premiere at the Berlinale in February, and then screened at the True/False Film Fest in March before the world shut down due to COVID-19.

Nevertheless, our plans for the impact campaign needed to be reassessed. There would be no more live screenings. Any plans we had for on-campus outreach and engagement would need to be scrapped as college students attended classes from their childhood bedrooms. And the activists featured in the film would not be able to travel to attend screenings or events — even if there were any — due to the closing of borders.

But those closed borders had a more important impact: those who needed to flee Chechnya and, ultimately, Russia would be even more challenged in their effort to do so. LGBTQ people in Chechnya — particularly women — were at a greater risk than ever because they were forced to stay in their homes, often putting themselves at elevated risk of abuse at the hands of family members. Those the activists were able to ferry out of Chechnya had to be then kept in safe houses within Russia for longer periods of time, a situation that required additional and different resources. The activists running the underground railroad out of Chechnya needed to adjust quickly to their new situation and problem solve, and so did we.

While we were in a holding pattern for at least a month while festivals, distributors, and partners determined how they would proceed, opportunities picked up in early summer. In many ways, society's relatively quick adjustment to "virtual" events afforded us more opportunities: costs (e.g., venue rentals, travel, security) were lower and people's schedules were more flexible, allowing us to pull things off that we may not have otherwise been able to do.

**Social and policy change is a long and iterative process. As a community, we are missing a significant opportunity.**



## **IT'S NOT OVER: A CALL TO THE COMMUNITY**

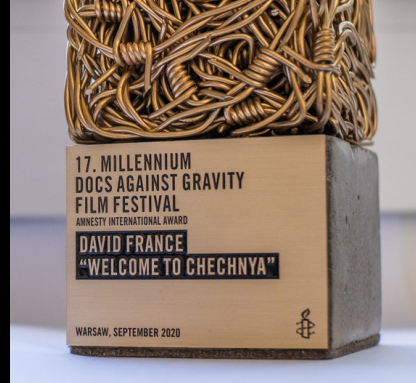
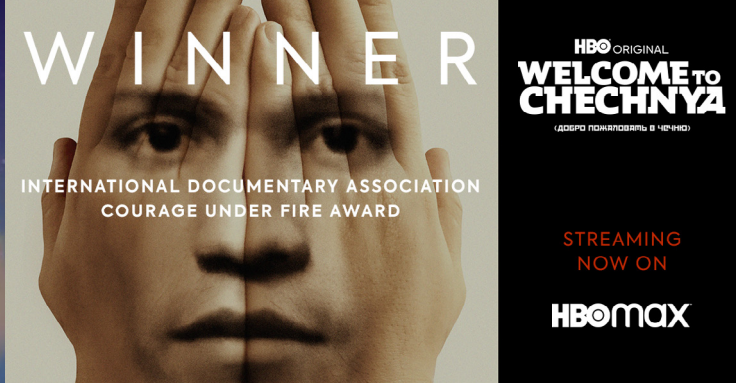
There is an important tension within impact producing. As impact producers, our focus is on the social and policy impact that a film can have; we may work with the marketing team and we may recognize that we cannot achieve our impact goals unless people see the film, but we assert that impact producing is NOT marketing.

Then why is it that the impact campaign generally comes to an end when the marketing concludes? Or, more specifically, where is the funding to ensure that partners can continue to use the film as a tool for their advocacy work? We sincerely believe that WELCOME TO CHECHNYA and the film's impact campaign made a difference. But the problem in Chechnya is not over. LGBTQ people are still being abducted and brutalized. Ramzan Kadyrov is still in power. The Russian Federation has held no one accountable — and has not been held accountable itself.

We want to see funding made available that supports NGOs to dedicate staff time to coordinate screenings, host and participate in panels, navigate distribution rights, and use films to raise revenue to support their work. Impact producers can prepare them to do so effectively.

Social and policy change is a long and iterative process. As a community, we are missing a significant opportunity.





## Ronan Farrow to Present Peabody Award to 'Welcome to Chechnya'



## IMPACT-RELATED AWARDS

- Amnesty International Media Award for Documentary
- Amnesty International Polska Award, Millennium Docs Against Gravity Festival
- Bergen International Film Festival Checkpoints Award
- Berlinale Teddy Activist Award
- Berlinale Amnesty Film Award
- Courage Under Fire Award, International Documentary Association
- George Foster Peabody Award, Documentary
- One World Human Rights International Film Festival "Right to Know" Award
- Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, John Seigenthaler Courage in Journalism Award – International TV
- Social Impact Media Award, Best Documentary Feature
- Television Academy Honor for "programs that use the power of television to inspire social change"
- True Life Fund (True/False Film Fest)

**The 18-month  
(Jan. 2020 - Jun. 2021)  
WELCOME TO  
CHECHNYA impact  
campaign had a  
budget of \$162,000.**

## **THANK YOU**

Thank you to David France for providing Aggregate with the opportunity to work with him on this project. We are honored.

Thank you as well to all of the partners, advisors, activists, and new friends who helped to make the WELCOME TO CHECHNYA impact campaign happen.

Thank you to Alice Henty, Igor Myakotin, and Tomas Naglis and the rest of the WELCOME TO CHECHNYA film team for your input and partnership and — with David France — for making a truly remarkable film. At the center of all successful impact campaigns are good stories that provoke audiences to care and act.

Thank you to the funders of the WELCOME TO CHECHNYA impact campaign: Bertha Doc Society, Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, JustFilms/Ford Foundation, and The Palette Fund. Thank you to Bertha Doc Society for funding the development of this case study.

Thank you most of all to Maxim Lapunov, David Isteev, Olga Baranova, and the other survivors and activists who allowed their stories to be told and, in doing so, moved others to act.

**“If you think that the Kremlin should drop everything to familiarize itself with an HBO series about gays in Russia, do let us know. We believe that there are a lot of far more important issues.”**

**– Dmitry Peskov,  
Kremlin Press Secretary**