

6 September 2023

To Permanent Representatives of Member and Observer States of the UN Human Rights Council

Excellency,

We are writing to call on your delegation to support the renewal of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation during the 54th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC).

Since the establishment of the mandate of the Special Rapporteur at the 51st session of the HRC, Russia has continued its widespread and systematic curtailment of human rights and civic space. Russia has continued to dissolve independent media and arbitrarily imprison journalists and civic activists. It continues the widespread harassment of human rights defenders and the shuttering of their organisations, including organisations such as Memorial, Moscow Helsinki Group and Sakharov Centre. Organisations such as Agora, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace have been designated as an “undesirable organisation”. Russia also continues to ban peaceful protest, including by issuing large-scale fines and detaining peaceful protestors, as well as attempting to eradicate any form of dissent.

New legislation has recently been introduced to further exacerbate so-called “foreign agent” legislation. In the past year Russia has added more than 230 individuals and organisations to the “foreign agent” registry and imposed widespread fines for “non-compliance” with current legislation relating to foreign agents, and criminal prosecution for involvement with “undesirable organisations”, even as it continually moves to expand the scope and reach of this legislation. Just recently, in early August, a new piece of legislation was enacted to provide for administrative and criminal liability for “involvement” in the activities of any foreign or international non-governmental organisation not included in a Russian registry of accredited foreign organisations, effectively banning Russian civil society from engagement with many of their international counterparts.

Authorities have continued to obstruct access to numerous independent media platforms and opened scores of criminal proceedings against human rights defenders, grassroots activists, prominent independent bloggers, journalists and opposition politicians. Nearly 20,000 anti-war protesters have been detained and over 600 have faced criminal charges for expressing anti-war opinions. On 28 August 2023, a joint press release by Special Procedures mandate holders stated that “the decision to deny constitutional protection of the right to freedom of expression constitutes a new low in Russia’s clampdown on the freedom of expression and the free flow of information”.

The authorities have instrumentalized counter-extremism and counter-terrorism legislation and used a barrage of other laws to fabricate criminal cases against dissenters, including political opposition figures such as Alexei Navalny and Vladimir Kara-Murza, who remain imprisoned with lengthy sentences on politically motivated grounds. Journalists are also imprisoned, and the violent attack against journalist Yelena Milashina and lawyer Alexander Nemov in Grozny in June 2023 was just the latest example of the grave consequences facing independent journalists and lawyers in Russia today.

The Russian Federation’s repressive legislation, policies and practices leave Russian civil society facing a wide range of human rights violations for undertaking its independent work. This is compounded by reduced options to seek redress for violations at an international level, mainly as a result of Russia’s departure from the Council of Europe. Victims lost protection under the European Convention on Human Rights for human rights violations committed by Russian authorities after 16 September 2022 and, correspondingly, they lost an avenue of redress through the European Court of Human Rights for those violations. Russia’s non-compliance with many of its international human rights obligations, including non-engagement with the Human Rights Committee under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights in 2022, also means less protection for victims. In April 2023, the Russian Federation adopted legislation criminalising assistance to and cooperation with international bodies, including the International Criminal Court and potentially the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms. These concerns are exacerbated by restrictions on the ability of lawyers to effectively defend human rights activists arbitrarily arrested, systematically denying access to clients held in

police stations for peacefully protesting, and for their human rights work in violation of international human rights standards.

Given the scale of the repression, restrictions on the operations of independent civil society organisations and suppression of civic space, rigorous monitoring of the human rights situation in Russia continues to be imperative. Since the mandate holder, Mariana Katzarova, began her work in May 2023, she has become a critical point of contact for Russian human rights defenders, activists, and civil society organisations - which is indispensable given that other forms of international cooperation have been comprehensively curtailed by the Russian authorities. The Special Rapporteur's first report to the HRC at its 54th session will provide an important, authoritative, and independent appraisal of the human rights situation.

The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation has had very limited time to undertake her work, as there have been just four months from the appointment of the mandate holder to the publishing of her first report. We, therefore, call on your delegation to provide the mandate holder with further time to conduct her analysis and reporting, and to ensure that the space for such independent scrutiny at the HRC continues, in the context of widespread and systematic human rights violations occurring across Russia, by extending this mandate at the 54th session. We also urge your delegation to ensure that the Special Rapporteur is provided any additional resources necessary to fulfil this challenging role.

Yours sincerely, signed:

- Amnesty International
- ARTICLE 19
- CIVICUS
- DefendDefenders (East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project)
- Freedom House
- Human Rights House Foundation
- Human Rights Watch
- Index on Censorship
- International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI)
- International Commission of Jurists (ICJ)
- International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)
- International Service for Human Rights (ISHR)
- Netherlands Helsinki Committee
- PEN America
- People in Need
- World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)