

21 September 2022

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

Excellency,

Russian Federation: The Human Rights Council should take urgent action to address the dire human rights situation in Russia

We are writing to call on your delegation to stand with Russian human rights defenders, activists, and civil society organizations by supporting the resolution at the 51st session of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC51) on the establishment of a Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Russia.

Over the last several years, the Russian authorities have engaged in a systematic campaign of repression of human rights and restriction of civic space including by shutting down independent media, intimidating and harassing human rights defenders and activists, banning peaceful protest, and imposing impermissible restrictions on the operations of independent civil society organizations in the country, including those that seek justice and effective remedies for human rights violations.

Human rights defenders, activists, and civil society organizations targeted by the Russian authorities include those campaigning for free and fair elections, women's human rights, and the rights of religious, ethnic, sexual, and gender minorities, as well as those fighting against politically motivated persecution and against corruption and environmental degradation. During the last months, the intimidation, harassment, and attacks have risen to a new level. Indeed, it has never been more difficult or dangerous for human rights defenders, activists, and civil society organisations to operate in the post-Soviet Russian Federation. Today, we stand in solidarity with a growing chorus of Russian human rights defenders, activists, and civil society organizations calling for the establishment of a Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Russia.

Since the adoption of the March 2022 censorship legislation criminalizing the spreading of supposed "fake news" and independent media reporting on Russia's armed conflict with Ukraine, authorities blocked access to dozens of independent media and opened scores of criminal cases against human rights defenders, grass roots activists, prominent independent bloggers, journalists and opposition politicians, including Vladimir Kara-Murza, and over 1250 administrative cases throughout Russia. Bogus criminal cases against anti-war protesters are also being opened on various other charges, including criminal hooliganism. Over 15,000 anti-war protesters have been detained. The authorities have instrumentalized counter-extremism and counter-terrorism legislation to fabricate criminal cases against the dissenters. Scores of people, including political opposition figure Alexei Navalny, remain behind bars on politically motivated grounds.

The Russian Federation's growing repressive policies, combined with the country's exclusion from the Council of Europe – victims of new human rights violations committed by the Russian Federation from 17 September lost protection under the European Convention on Human Rights– and its diplomatic isolation from those States which have been supportive of human rights and civil society in Russia, make it increasingly difficult for Russian human rights defenders, activists, and civil society organizations to engage with the international community and there is no end in sight. Without robust and genuine international support, and a monitoring mechanism, independent Russian civil society organizations will continue to be left isolated and dangerously exposed.

Given the escalating repression, restrictions on the operations of independent civil society organizations and suppression of civic space, a rigorous monitoring of the human rights situation in Russia is imperative. A dedicated Special Rapporteur mandate would independently collect information and analyse the human rights situation in Russia, allowing Human Rights Council Members to be informed by in-depth and authoritative reports and to make recommendations on how to improve the rapidly deteriorating human rights situation in the country. A Special Rapporteur could also serve as a point of contact for Russian human rights defenders, activists, and civil society organizations, within the UN human rights infrastructure at a time when such a role is critical. A Special Rapporteur would provide an important independent voice to speak up against deepening restrictions to human rights in Russia and on behalf of those facing intimidation, harassment, and reprisal for their activism or their human rights work.

While it is important that existing thematic Special Procedures continue to address the situation of the Russian Federation within the scope of their respective mandates, it is critical that there be a single expert that can tie the various strands together and address the situation in a holistic manner and who can more fully engage with Russian authorities, as well as with human rights defenders, activists, and civil society organizations.

We count on your delegation to show solidarity with Russian human rights defenders, activists, and independent civil society organizations by supporting a resolution establishing a Special Rapporteur mandate on the human rights situation in Russia.

Yours sincerely, signed:

- Amnesty International
- Board of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum
- Freedom House
- Human Rights House Foundation
- Human Rights Watch
- International Commission of Jurists
- International Service for Human Rights
- Netherlands Helsinki Committee
- World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)