

HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 57th SESSION

Interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the Russian Federation

24 September 2024

Since her first report to the Human Rights Council, **Ms. Mariana Katzarova, Special Rapporteur on the Russian Federation**, the human rights situation in the country has significantly worsened. Her latest report painted a grim picture marred by state-led human rights violations, legalized by new or amended legislation, coupled with politically motivated repression that had completely shut down independent civic and political arenas in Russia. The country was now governed by a state-sponsored system of fear and punishment, including the resort to torture in full impunity.

Not only were **civil and political liberties** being restricted, but the severity of the Government's human rights violations had escalated. The government's tools had expanded to suppress free speech against its domestic political repression and foreign war-torn policies. Russian citizens were not free to express their opinions, form associations, assemble in peace, or participate in public life. Amendments to laws on so-called '**foreign agents and undesirable organizations**' had allowed the Government to force organizations to close. The **War Censorship Law** has been used to prosecute hundreds of persons claiming to be speaking the truth about the war against Ukraine, which may result in long prison sentences and pecuniary punishment.

Arbitrary arrests and detentions were widespread. Not only had the Russian authorities intensified their takeover of traditional sources of the opposition, independent journalists, human rights defenders, political opposition figures, and anti-Ukraine war activists, but they were also persecuting poets, artists, religious figures, indigenous groups, and immigrants with intense censorship, intimidation and prosecution for any perceived transgression. Russians were receiving long prison sentences for absurd reasons: seven years for a poem, a prayer, or a game perceived as anti-war; seven years for posting on social media a UN report on the war against Ukraine.

Of particular concern was the evidence of state-controlled violence and torture against **civilians detained for the peaceful exercise of their human rights**. Brutal assaults on detainees by law enforcement officers went unpunished. There was an increasing use of solitary confinement in prison and other treatments amounting to torture, including resorting to the latter during counter-terrorism operations. Those accused of the March 2024 terrorist attack in Moscow were shown on television with visible evidence of torture that occurred while in detention, thus clearly illustrating the State's endorsement and the normalization of torture. Another worrying trend was the increasing use of punitive psychiatry against those peacefully exercising their human rights - a practice alarmingly reminiscent of Soviet times when psychiatric treatment was also used to silence dissidents and government critics.

Foreign nationals and those with dual citizenship were being arbitrarily detained and used as a bargaining chip for prisoner exchanges. Despite the release of some political prisoners held in Russia, more than **1,300 others were still detained based on politically motivated charges**, including at least 30 journalists. The Rapporteur urgently called for the immediate and unconditional release of all these political prisoners. This appeal was especially critical for those whose health and lives were at risk due to ill-treatment in detention. The Rapporteur appealed to the world not to forget those still suffering behind bars for the sake of their human rights.

The 2024 presidential election was severely compromised by the authorities' approach to civil and political rights. The only two candidates who campaigned were banned from running in the election,

making of it ‘an election without an election.’ A month before this election, prominent opposition figure **Alexei Navalny** died in prison in the Arctic. Russian authorities had not accepted responsibility for Navalny’s arbitrary deprivation of life, further strengthening the perception of impunity and state-sponsored violence. His death sparked numerous peaceful gatherings across Russia which were met with brutal repression.

The risk of severe punishment for any act of (perceived) dissent or advocacy remained alarmingly high, particularly for individuals and groups already vulnerable to discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, political opinion, religion, indigenous or minority status. The situation had been dramatically amplified for LGBTI people, who had already suffered systemic discrimination in Russia. LGBTI persons were also facing criminal prosecution as ‘members of an extremist organization.’ This was the result of the Supreme Court’s decision last year that qualified the International LGBTI Social Movement as extremist. Moreover, the Russian State had enabled human rights abuses against indigenous nations and other minorities to escalate, through a new insistence on national unity and patriotism that was part of the war effort against Ukraine.

At least 170,000 prisoners had been sent to fight against Ukraine in exchange for pardons or reduced sentences. This practice has contributed to a rise in violence against women and girls. Convicts returning from war have committed new violent crimes against women, including murder and sexual violence. No protection against domestic and gender-based violence was anchored in Russian legislation, which had resulted in the deaths of thousands of women and girls. Prosecuted offenders received lenient penalties and participation in war was being used by judges as a mitigating factor. In the Northern Caucasus, women and girls continued to be subjected to forced domestic violence, female genital mutilation, and honor killings. Impunity was pervasive, as such acts were often condoned by government authorities or perpetrated with their complicity. It was impossible to understand the scale and implications of domestic repression in Russia without recognizing its strong connection to the aggression of Ukraine.

The Rapporteur documented acts of violence against captured Ukrainian military personnel and civilians, including children, who had been forcibly transferred or deported to the Russian Federation. Ukrainian soldiers did not have the status of prisoners of war according to the Russian authorities and therefore did not receive protection according to the Geneva Convention. As a result, hundreds were being prosecuted as civilians for criminal actions in Russian military prisons and faced up to 20 years in prison. The Rapporteur evoked widespread and systematic use of torture and ill-treatment, including sexual violence and human rights violations, committed against Ukrainians in Russian prisons. The Rapporteur called on the Russian authorities to bring to justice all those responsible for all acts of torture and ill-treatment and to immediately and unconditionally release all Ukrainian detainees and ensure their safe return, especially children. Reiterating her call for accountability, the Rapporteur recalled the impossibility of forgetting the painful legacy still facing Chechnya today of the almost total impunity for serious human rights violations and war crimes committed by the Russian authorities during the ten years of armed conflict in Chechnya, from 1999 to 2009. The international community must not allow history to repeat itself in Ukraine.

The escalating intimidation and persecution by the Russian authorities had forced many independent voices into exile. In response, several governments had made commendable efforts to offer a haven, allowing these individuals to continue their crucial work. However, their ability to advocate for human rights and democracy in Russia remained fragile. They increasingly relied on the international community for support and protection. Our continued solidarity was essential to ensure that these brave voices were not silenced and that the fight for justice, accountability, and human rights in Russia could continue beyond its borders.

In her **concluding remarks**, Ms. Katarova regretted that the Russian delegation did not participate in the interactive dialogue. In reply to some remarks on so-called ‘clandestine information’, she deeply regretted that the climate of repression, intimidation, and reprisals in Russia did not allow her to disclose the names of the brave victims, witnesses, and human rights lawyers who submitted information to her mandate. The Rapporteur also briefly mentioned the closure of organizations, including indigenous ones, who had just obtained their ECOSOC status. She further paid tribute to the brave voices of former political prisoners who spoke at an earlier side event such as **Vladimir Karamurza** - detained for writing five articles against the war on Ukraine - **Kevin Lik**, **Ilya Yashin**, **Andrey Pivovarov**, and **Evgenia Karamurza**.

On questions raised on **violence against women**, the Rapporteur explained that there was no specific law criminalizing gender-based violence in Russia. The return of mobilized men heavily traumatized from the war, and in particular thousands of convicted criminals who were sent to fight in Ukraine, was the source of additional concern. In fact, courts were considering their participation in the war as a mitigating factor of the violence against women committed after their return, thus resulting in lenient sentences. Moreover, federal authorities were closing their eyes on the use of FGM in the northern Caucasus. The Rapporteur also lamented the lack of federal legislation to specifically ban the practices of forced marriages and honor killings against women and girls - often committed by private actors with the acquiescence and complicity of the police and other government authorities - for which impunity was rampant.

Interactive dialogue

During the interactive dialogue, **46 country delegations** took the floor, the vast majority of which expressed grave concern over the rapidly deteriorating human rights situation in Russia. Deeply alarmed by the incessant criminalization, prosecution, torture, and ill-treatment of all dissenting voices, many country delegations called upon the Russian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release all political prisoners, Ukrainian prisoners of war, and civilians incarcerated. Widespread and systematic attacks against the rights to freedom of expression, association, and assembly were of utmost concern. Strong criticism was also voiced against the clampdown on free media, human rights defenders, indigenous peoples, minorities, and LGBTI persons as well as the systematic repression of dissenting voices on the war against Ukraine. Amidst a climate of persistent impunity, these repressive measures were seriously aggravated by the lack of judicial independence, a clear disregard for the right to a fair trial, and related fundamental legal safeguards. Several delegations recalled the tragic death of Mr. **Alexei Navalny** as a tragic reminder of the State’s repressive machine as well as of the harsh conditions of detention under which political opponents, human rights defenders, and dissenting voices were held.

Speaking on behalf of the Nordic-Baltic countries, **H.E. Ms. Baiba Braže, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia**, voiced grave concern over the dire human rights situation in Russia marred by a systematic stifling of dissent, the silencing of independent media and civil society organizations, and the spreading of disinformation. Peaceful protesters were facing brutal crackdowns, arbitrary arrest, detention, and long prison sentences – a domestic repression that was going hand-in-hand with external aggression. Against a backdrop of fear and repression across the entire country, political prisoners, human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, indigenous peoples and LGBTI persons faced persecution and harassment. The Minister called for the mobilization of all international instruments to hold Russia accountable for its grave human rights violations.

Italy requested Russia to grant the ICRC access to facilities where Ukrainian prisoners of war and civilians were detained. **Ireland** strongly condemned the judicial harassment of lawyers just for defending the cases of those victims of repression or human rights violations. The **United States** called upon Russia to ensure the immediate and safe return of Ukrainian children to their homes. **Japan** vocally affirmed that universal values such as human rights, freedom, democracy, and the rule of law must be upheld in every country regardless of culture, traditions, political and economic systems. Holding Russia directly accountable for the death of Alexey Navalny, **France's** thoughts went out to those still arbitrarily detained such as Alexey Gorinov, Maria Ponomarenko, Igor Baryshnikov and Yuri Dmitriev, as their courage was admirable. **Australia** and **Austria** called upon Russia to repeal the law on foreign agents. **Germany** deplored the inexistence of fair trials and the lack of independence of the judiciary. **Ukraine** called for Russia's accountability for all abuses committed against thousands of Ukrainians forcibly transferred to Russia, including unlawfully deported children and unlawfully detained civilians. Ukrainian prisoners of war had been subjected to the cruelest forms of inhuman treatment in Russian captivity.

Referring to paragraphs 87 and 100 of the report, **Kirghizstan** expressed hope that these issues currently discussed bilaterally with Russia would be resolved in a spirit of mutual friendship and respect, and that access to education for the children of Kirghiz migrants would be ensured in accordance with the Eurasian Economic Union Treaty. By referring to the rights of migrant workers from Central Asia mentioned in the SR's report, **Kazakhstan** encouraged Russia and Central Asian countries to work together to ensure the well-being of migrant workers.

China, Cuba, Syria, Iran, Venezuela, and Belarus stressed *inter alia* that the Council should avoid double standards and a confrontational approach of a mandate devoid of the consent of the country concerned. According to **China**, this Council's practice gravely undermined dialogue and international cooperation. In the same vein, **Cuba** stressed the importance of constructive dialogue and cooperation through which the Council could effectively promote and protect human rights. **Zimbabwe** condemned the imposition of unilateral coercive measures on Russia by stressing their negative impact on its population.

NGOs strongly condemned the designation of more than 50 indigenous rights groups as extremist organizations, the multiple waves of arrest and arbitrary detention of journalists, human rights defenders, and dissenting and opposing voices. NGOs applauded the Rapporteur's dedicated commitment to her mandate and urged the Human Rights Council to renew it, as the profound gravity of the human rights situation in the country required continued international scrutiny and accountability.

War Resisters' International and **Conscience and Peace Tax International** strongly condemned the criminalization of public anti-war expression or dissent of any kind, while calling upon all countries to grant asylum to conscientious objectors to military service having fled Russia. **Conscience and Peace Tax International** called on Russia to implement the Supreme Court's November 2023 decision acknowledging that the right of conscientious objection applied in a situation of mobilization. Despite Russia's continuous blocking of independent media, NGO websites, and other sources of credible information, the **Memorial Human Rights Centre** and the **International Federation for Human Rights** stressed that Russian civil society further needed international support to allow its continuous monitoring of the situation, the dissemination of information on human rights violations, and the provision of legal and other forms of assistance to victims. The **International Bar Association** and the **International Commission of Jurists** strongly condemned widespread and escalating attacks against and judicial harassment of independent lawyers, including members of Alexei Navalny's defense team who were facing criminal charges merely for performing their duties. According to the **International**

Commission of Jurists, such actions were part and parcel of a generalized pattern of attacks and represented a direct assault on the independence of the legal profession and the enjoyment of a right to a fair trial. In addition, the reform of the Bar Association further eroded the independence of the legal profession by enabling intrusive state oversight and undermined lawyer-client confidentiality. **Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada** urged Russia to immediately release more than 1,300 persons still arbitrarily detained and to repeal all laws that impaired freedom of expression, including the laws against fake news, discrediting Russian armed forces and extremism.

Delegations that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (46 country delegations):

Latvia (on behalf of the Nordic-Baltic countries), the European Union, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Czechia, Italy, Ireland, Germany, United States, Malta, Portugal, Poland, Slovenia, Austria, Japan, France, Australia, Canada, DPRK, Belgium, Moldova, Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Spain, Iran, United Kingdom, Bulgaria, Cuba, Belarus, Georgia, Zimbabwe, Venezuela, China, New Zealand, Montenegro, South Sudan, Greece, Syria, Slovakia, Nicaragua, Ukraine, Sudan, Kirghizstan, Kazakhstan.

NHRIs and NGOs that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (10):

Human Rights House Foundation, United Nations Watch, War Resisters' International, Conscience and Peace Tax International, International Federation for Human Rights (joint statement), International Bar Association (joint statement), Article 19 - International Centre Against Censorship, International Commission of Jurists, Human Rights Watch, Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada.

To watch the full meeting refer to UN WEB TV: [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)