



June 11, 2021

Mr. Eric F. Green
Deputy Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Russia and Central Asia
National Security Council

Ambassador Philip T. Reeker
Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs
U.S. Department of State

Re: Amnesty International USA calls on President Biden to raise human rights concerns with President Putin at June 16 Geneva summit

Dear Mr. Green and Ambassador Reeker:

On behalf of Amnesty International USA and our members, activists, and supporters across the United States, we are writing to draw your attention to the swiftly deteriorating human rights situation in Russia. We note with appreciation the Biden administration's commitment to press the Russian government to respect human rights and urge President Biden to put human rights firmly on the agenda during his meeting with President Putin on June 16.

The wide-scale [clampdown on dissent](#) in Russia is unfolding against the background of new laws signed by President Putin since December 2020. These laws have drastically expanded the scope of individuals and groups that can be designated as "foreign agents" and increased the restrictions imposed on such designees, granted the authorities near total control over independent civil society, empowered the Russian government's federal media watchdog to block online content, and curbed the right to protest. Currently, further restrictive [bills](#) are being passed through the Russian parliament. If signed into law, these laws will further shrink civic space.

Against the backdrop of a sweeping crackdown on dissent and deepening restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly in Russia, human rights defenders, LGBTI activists, journalists, civil society activists, lawyers, and religious minorities are facing threats, harassment, prosecution on spurious charges, and unfair trials on a growing scale.

The crackdown is exemplified by the poisoning, arbitrary arrest, and imprisonment of [Alexei Navalny](#) and the brutal repression of [peaceful protesters](#) demanding his release and an end to government corruption and human rights violations. Navalny has committed no recognizable criminal offence and has been deprived of his liberty solely

for being an outspoken critic of the Russian authorities. On June 10, a Russian court [designated](#) three organizations founded by Navalny as “extremist,” placing tens of thousands of Navalny’s supporters at risk of prosecution.

The Russian government actively uses laws on “foreign agents” and “undesirable organizations” to smear independent NGOs, deprive them of funding and severely penalize their members. The list of “foreign agents” currently includes 76 NGOs, as well as independent media outlets such as Meduza and VTimes and individual journalists. The “undesirable organizations” register includes 34 organizations, some of which are registered in the United States.

The law has been actively used against individuals, too. Civil society activist [Mikhail losilevich](#) continues to face prosecution and detention under charges of “participation in the activities of an undesirable organization” for providing premises for a training of election monitors. Russian authorities claim that the training was conducted by one such “undesirable organization,” Open Russia. While this is a crime only under Russian legislation, which itself contravenes Russia’s international human rights obligations and must be repealed, the prosecution of losilevich is also based on false grounds. He insists that the training had been conducted by another organization, Golos, a Russian movement of election monitors, and that there is no evidence of his involvement with the [recently disbanded Open Russia](#). In more than one way, his case exemplifies the reprisals faced by many in Russia.

The abusive application of the “undesirable organizations” law was repeated on June 2, when the former leader of the Open Russia movement, [Andrei Pivovarov](#), was placed in pre-trial detention under charges of “carrying out activities of undesirable organization” after authorities forcefully removed him from a flight.

Russian authorities’ repression of civil society targets LGBTI rights defenders in particular, through smearing, trumped-up charges, and the application of the “gay propaganda” law previously condemned by the [European Court of Human Rights](#), the United States, the EU, and others. LGBTI rights activist [Yulia Tsvetkova](#) is facing up to six years in prison on absurd “pornography” charges for posting body-positive drawings of the female body on social media as part of her women empowerment campaign. Tsvetkova’s case is emblematic of the persecution of LGBTI rights defenders in Russia.

Members of the LGBTI community face severe violence at the hands of Russian government. In 2017, security forces in Chechnya arrested around 100 men who are gay or perceived to be gay. The men reported being beaten, tortured, and forced to disclose the names of other LGBTI individuals. Some of those detained were killed. Despite massive international condemnation, Chechen authorities resumed the crackdown in 2019. Over 40 individuals were arrested, and at least two people are reported to have

been tortured to death. Despite abundance of compelling evidence of these crimes, Russian authorities refused to investigate the allegations.

Award-winning journalist and human rights defender [Elena Milashina](#) has been targeted on numerous occasions for documenting Chechen officials' abuses in the Russian newspaper Novaya Gazeta. Most recently, following the publication of her March 2021 article titled "I served in the Chechen police force and I didn't want to kill people," Chechen officials began a defamation and intimidation campaign against Milashina and Novaya Gazeta. In 2020 Milashina was the target of a death threat made on Instagram from Ramzan Kadyrov, the Head of the Chechen Republic, as well as being physically attacked by a mob in Chechen capital, Grozny. Despite Milashina's immediate complaint to the Russian Investigation Committee, there has been no effective and impartial investigation into these threats and attacks.

The threats against Elena Milashina constitute an archetypal example of the intimidation of journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders in the Chechen Republic. There are grave human rights violations occurring in Chechnya, and Elena Milashina is being targeted for being one of the few journalists still reporting on them. The Russian government must act to ensure that the threats and physical violence stop and are investigated, and that Milashina can carry out her journalistic duties without fear of attack.

We note with appreciation the several statements of concern that [President Biden](#) and [administration officials](#) have already [issued](#). We believe, however, that stronger international pushback—especially from the United States—is needed to prevent the human rights situation in Russia from deteriorating even further.

For this reason, we hope that human rights will be a U.S. foreign policy priority and a significant focus of President Biden's first bilateral meeting with President Putin on June 16. Specifically, President Biden should:

- Call on President Putin to immediately and unconditionally release Alexei Navalny, and all protesters and activists detained solely for exercising their right to freedom of assembly. Russian police must stop using unlawful force against demonstrators, and all instances of unlawful use of force by Russian authorities must be promptly and effectively investigated.
- Call on the Russian authorities to bring its law on NGOs in line with Russia's international human rights organizations, including by repealing the abusive legislation on "foreign agents" and "undesirable organizations." Further, President Biden should urge President Putin to stop using these laws to silence civil society organizations, and call for the charges against Mikhail Iosilevich and

others prosecuted under the “undesirable organizations” law to be dropped, and for him and Andrei Pivovarov to be immediately released.

- Urge the Russian authorities to repeal “gay propaganda” laws and ensure non-discrimination and the full enjoyment of human rights by the LGBTI community; express concern about the persecution of LGBTI rights activists like Yulia Tsvetkova, and call on Russian authorities to drop the charges against her.
- Condemn the threats against Elena Milashina and call on the Russian government to effectively and impartially investigate the threats and attacks against her and other instances of intimidation of journalists, lawyers, and human rights defenders in Chechnya, and to ensure their safety, as well as to investigate all human rights violations reported in Chechnya.
- Urge the Russian president, as a guarantor of the Russian Constitution and the rights and freedoms enshrined therein, to ensure that human rights are respected, protected and fulfilled and that the government fully observes Russia’s international human rights obligations.

For more information, please contact Deniz Yuksel at dyuksel@aiusa.org.

Sincerely,



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