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America must hold Russia accountable for its political prisoners

By Jared Genser

Given the fallout of the Helsinki Summit and an [espionage scandal](#) in the heart of Washington that could easily have come straight from *The Americans*, it's easy to lose sight of the most revealing stories coming out of Russia -- the [torture](#), [arbitrary detention](#), and gross human rights abuses that President [Vladimir Putin](#) and his government commit against the Russian people with impunity. This isn't a coincidence. Putin is teaching a master class about how to divert attention away from his authoritarian rule and totally dodge responsibility for his relentless efforts to destabilize our country and its position in the world.

It's time for the U.S. to stop letting Putin define the narrative, and for us to stand in solidarity with the Russian people -- and their aspirations for government to simply respect their fundamental human rights and the rule of law.

The bellwether case of repression in Putin's Russia today is that of the country's longest-serving political prisoner, [Alexei Pichugin](#), who recently marked 15 years in detention and whom I represent. Pichugin, though never political himself, remains a hostage in a battle between Putin and his most prominent political opponents, including former Yukos oil executive [Mikhail Khodorkovsky](#), who was one of the first casualties in Putin's campaign to quash dissent in Russia.

At the time of his arrest in 2003, Pichugin worked as a mid-level security manager at Khodorkovsky's company. This thin connection to Putin's real enemies was enough to destroy Pichugin's life. Early in the morning on June 19, 2003, nearly two dozen armed security officials showed up on Pichugin's doorstep. They arrested him without a warrant, and took him to a detention center where he was interrogated repeatedly without a lawyer. And that was only the beginning.

Over the next several years, Pichugin was accused of nearly a dozen murders and attempted murders. There was no physical evidence to connect Pichugin to the crimes, and witness testimony came from co-defendants and convicted felons who spontaneously recalled – en masse

and years after the purported murders – that Pichugin had commissioned all these crimes. They later recanted and said that Russian investigators had coerced their testimony against Pichugin. Nevertheless, Pichugin was convicted and sentenced to life in prison in a series of sham trials marred by blatant due process abuses. He was repeatedly denied access to counsel, couldn't cross-examine witnesses against him, and was blocked from presenting key evidence to dispute the charges. Even while one trial was still in progress, Russia's Deputy Prosecutor General [publicly stated](#) that Pichugin was guilty of murder.

The European Court of Human Rights [has ruled](#) -- [twice](#) -- that Pichugin is being held illegally by Russia, in violation of international law. And Russia's relentless requests for extradition of others connected to Khodorkovsky or Yukos have all been denied, reaffirming the political nature of the very cases on which Pichugin stands convicted.

The question is not whether Pichugin can ever have his rights vindicated and his convictions expunged in Putin's Russia. The answer to that is clearly no. Instead his only hope is to persuade the international community to stand together and pressure Putin to relent from his systematic and egregious violations of his people's civil and political rights. To that end, just today, I have filed a petition with the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, seeking a declaration that Pichugin's arbitrary detention must end. There are also several simple actions that could catalyze action to rescue Pichugin from his Kafkaesque nightmare, as a start.

First, Pichugin is more than a political prisoner. Despite repeated urging by Russian officials to testify against Khodorkovsky and his business partners, Pichugin has stood firm and refused to provide false testimony. Organizations like Amnesty International should recognize him as a prisoner of conscience, as the [Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights](#), Freedom House and others have done.

Second, the Trump Administration and U.S. Congress must take a stand. As a nation we cannot afford to keep putting human rights on the back burner – our diplomatic efforts, international relationships, and integrity abroad depend on it. Putin has already proven to be especially thin-skinned about targeted sanctions imposed on Russian officials responsible for gross human rights abuses. Those efforts should be expanded dramatically.

And finally, we must not get distracted. Putin has created a firestorm of drama to shift the world's attention away from his record at home, where he rules by fear and violence. As U.S.-Russia relations take center stage this summer and fall, the United States must not ignore the plight of Russia's political prisoners and should stay true to our own values and stand strongly in solidarity with the Russian people.

Jared Genser serves as counsel to Alexey Pichugin. He is Managing Director of Perseus Strategies, LLC, a public interest law firm, and previously founded Freedom Now, an independent non-governmental organization that works to free prisoners of conscience worldwide. His past clients have included former Czech Republic President Vaclav Havel and Nobel Peace Prize Laureates Aung San Suu Kyi, Liu Xiaobo, Desmond Tutu, and Elie Wiesel.