

MAJOR GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS LAUNCH LANDMARK REPORT ON THE KREMLIN'S POLITICAL PRISONERS

Washington, D.C. – Today, in a press conference at the National Press Club, major rights groups launched a 282-page report on the Kremlin's political prisoners. The report – *The Kremlin's Political Prisoners: Advancing a Political Agenda by Crushing Dissent*– was authored by the public interest law firm Perseus Strategies, with support from Memorial Human Rights Centre (Russia), and was commissioned by the Free Russia Foundation, Human Rights Foundation, Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice, and Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights.

Writing in an oped in today's *Wall Street Journal*, **Irwin Cotler** (Wallenberg Centre) and **Katrina Lantos Swett** (Lantos Foundation), representing two of the co-sponsoring organizations said:

“At a moment when Russia's nefarious attempts to interfere in the U.S. electoral process are top news, we could easily overlook the horrific ways in which Russia tramples on fundamental human rights within its borders. Case in point: the growing ranks of political prisoners in the brutal grasp of Vladimir Putin's expanding police state.”

The Coalition to Free the Kremlin's Political Prisoners, a group of more than a dozen major global NGOs who have joined together advocating for their freedom, added in its statement:

“The Coalition highlights the report as a novel piece of scholarship that analyzes how, particularly in the last few years, the Kremlin has increasingly imprisoned . . . [its] opponents with absolute impunity.”

The report documents how, decades after the last Soviet-era political prisoners were released, the Kremlin, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, is once again engaged in the widespread detention of activists, regime opponents, and disfavored minorities. In the last four years alone, the number of political prisoners has increased five-fold from 50 to more than 250. While some of these political prisoners were convicted of fabricated crimes they simply did not commit, the majority are detained as a result of engaging in activities that are clearly protected under international law, such as posting on social media, participating in peaceful protests, practicing their religion, or associating with certain groups. This persecution is enabled by an ever-increasing array of laws specifically designed to criminalize acts of everyday life and, therefore, allow the authorities to arrest, detain, and imprison anyone they want.

While anyone in Russia or Russia-occupied Crimea can become a victim of politically-motivated prosecution, certain groups are more frequently targeted. Political opponents, civil society activists, journalists, Ukrainian activists and citizens, religious and ethnic minorities, alleged spies, and LGBT individuals are at particular risk. The report provides individual case studies for these commonly targeted groups, including Alexey Pichugin, Oleg Sentsov, Anastasia Shevchenko, Igor Rudnikov, Dennis Christensen, and Svyatoslav Bobyshev.

The Kremlin's arrest, trial, conviction, sentencing, and imprisonment of political prisoners violates several multilateral treaties to which Russia is a state party, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, European Convention on Human Rights, and Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. In particular, the Kremlin is violating political prisoners' rights to political participation and freedom of expression, association, assembly, and religion. Moreover, political prisoners are routinely denied basic due process rights – including access to counsel, the presumption of innocence, the presumption of bail, and a fair trial, and political prisoners are often subjected to torture to force them to falsely confess.

While countless government officials are complicit in the Kremlin's persecution of political prisoners, this report identifies 16 individuals that may bear particular responsibility. This includes eight high-level officials potentially liable under the principle of command responsibility – President Vladimir Putin; Alexander Bortnikov, Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB); Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council; Yuri Chaika, Prosecutor General; Gennady Kornienko, Director of the Federal Penitentiary Service; Aleksandr Konovalov, Minister of Justice; Vladimir Kolokoltsev, Minister of Internal Affairs; and Alexander Bastrykin, Chairman of the Investigative Committee. The report also identifies eight judges, prosecutors, and investigators that have been involved in multiple political prisoner cases.

The international community has spoken out forcefully against the Kremlin's detention of political prisoners, but thus far taken only limited concrete action. One of the most promising developments for potential accountability has been the enactment of "Magnitsky" laws in an increasing number of countries; these laws allow targeted individual sanctions (*e.g.*, asset freezes and travel bans) to be imposed on perpetrators of gross human rights abuses. Within Russia and Russia-occupied Crimea, activists, independent media, and opposition leaders continue to work in an increasingly hostile environment to provide reliable information to the outside world, support political prisoners and their families, and where possible, secure the release of prisoners.

The Kremlin has been highly resistant to international efforts and outside pressure to release political prisoners. However, a sporadic but significant pattern of pardons, amnesties, and other early releases demonstrates that dedicated advocacy can have tangible results. The report makes five specific recommendations to increase the pressure on the Kremlin to release its political prisoners:

1. Individual countries and multilateral institutions should investigate the 16 perpetrators identified in the report and, if appropriate, consider imposing targeted sanctions.
2. Like-minded governments should work collaboratively through key bodies. This includes adopting statements and resolutions through the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), European Parliament, UN General Assembly, and UN Human Rights Council.
3. National governments throughout the world should frequently and consistently highlight the

Kremlin's political prisoners through statements by high-level officials, legislative resolutions, and public hearings and by raising the issue in every meeting with relevant Kremlin officials.

4. To coordinate advocacy and amplify their impact, civil society organizations should join the Coalition to Free the Kremlin's Political Prisoners.

5. Civil society organizations and government officials should engage with the media and share information about the Kremlin's political prisoners.

Sergei Davidis, Head of the Political Prisoners Support Program at Memorial Human Rights Centre and Galina Starovoitova Fellow at the Kennan Institute, stated: "This report is the most comprehensive analytical description of the Kremlin's political prisoners ever made. I admire the work done by the authors. It is especially important that this report is addressed directly to Western audiences. The report marks a new level of attention to the problem of political prisoners and human rights in Russia."

Natalia Arno, President of the Free Russia Foundation, added: "This new report on political prisoners does an incredible job of bringing the Kremlin's increasing repression to light – the current Russian regime is employing an entire arsenal of coercive tools and adopting an ever-growing list of repressive laws to imprison and silence its opponents. It is my hope that this report will help show Russians and the international community the scale of the Kremlin's brutal abuses and lead to meaningful actions to support the victims of the regime. The continued existence of political prisoners in Russia in the 21st century is shameful and should not be tolerated."

Thor Halvorssen, President of the Human Rights Foundation, noted: "The Human Rights Foundation is grateful for the opportunity to co-sponsor this groundbreaking legal report which tells the story of some 250 of Vladimir Putin's political prisoners, and denounces the torture and degrading conditions that many of them suffer routinely. The report honors the legacy of great human rights heroes like Elena Bonner, Andrei Sakharov, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who exposed the Kremlin's twentieth century crimes. Unfortunately, such horrific crimes have continued under Putin's authoritarian rule."

Katrina Lantos Swett, President of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice, observed: "Magnitsky sanctions are the single most effective weapon in our modern human rights arsenal, and no country is more richly deserving of being singled out for widespread Magnitsky action than Russia. This powerful report is a stunning and revealing reality check on the Putin regime's brutal persecution of political prisoners that turns the focus from the persecuted to the persecutors. This very significant perspective does more than name those responsible for these abuses; it also allows for a thorough examination of the environment that has allowed this vile behavior to not only continue, but to flourish under Putin's watchful eye. We call on the United States Government to immediately review those identified in the report for Magnitsky action, and to continue to prioritize human rights and the rule of law in all interactions with Russia."

The Honorable **Irwin Cotler**, former Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada and

Chair of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights remarked “This landmark report describes, in great and graphic detail, Putin’s unprecedented persecution and prosecution of political prisoners. Indeed, over the last four years alone, there has been a five-fold increase in the numbers of verified political prisoners from 50 to more than 250 today, with the reality on the ground expected to be even more pernicious and pervasive. These are figures that would make most other despots blush. This report also exposes and unmask the Kremlin’s culture of corruption and criminality that underpins it all, where mass domestic repression and the crushing of dissent are enshrined in law. We have identified the individual architects of this repression, and are calling for their targeted sanctioning under Magnitsky legislation. Naming and shaming these human rights abusers is a crucial expression of solidarity with their victims and of ending the culture of impunity that underpins such criminality.”

Jared Genser, Managing Director of Perseus Strategies, concluded: “For too long the world has focused on the Kremlin’s nefarious activities around the world and failed to highlight that the biggest victims of Vladimir Putin are his own people. From Alexey Pichugin, the Kremlin’s longest-serving political prisoner, held in captivity since June 2003 despite rulings calling for him to receive a fair trial by the European Court of Human Rights, to Anastasia Shevchenko, imprisoned just this year, these cases can no longer be ignored. It is time for the international community to impose serious consequences on the government officials responsible for the widespread detention of political prisoners in Russia and Russia-occupied Crimea and demonstrate unequivocally that such repression will not be tolerated.”

For further information contact:

Jared Genser
Perseus Strategies
+1 202 320 4135
info@perseus-strategies.com

###