



April 29, 2019

## Human Rights Groups Call For Response To Russia's Rising Number Of Political Prisoners

Michele Kelemen

*The number of political prisoners is on the rise in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Activists say it is time for the U.S. to step up the pressure with targeted sanctions to reverse this trend.*

AILS CHANG, HOST:

Human rights groups say the number of political prisoners in Russia has risen sharply in the past few years. They want the U.S. and others to punish the Russian officials they hold responsible for this trend. NPR's Michele Kelemen reports.

MICHELE KELEMEN, BYLINE: In his Nobel Peace Prize lecture in 1975, Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov listed the names of over 120 political prisoners he knew of at the time. Now the Russian human rights group Memorial has come up with a current list of 278 names. Both those tallies are low estimates, says Vladimir Kara-Murza, a Russian human rights activist.

VLADIMIR KARA-MURZA: And if we compare those two estimates, then there are more political and religious prisoners in Vladimir Putin's Russia today than there were in Brezhnev's Soviet Union in 1975.

KELEMEN: Kara-Murza, who says he's been poisoned twice, says in Soviet times, the topic of political prisoners was high on the agenda at summits. These days, that's not the case.

KARA-MURZA: Whatever else is talked about in the context of U.S.-Russia relations, the issue of Russian political prisoners is absent from the agenda, as if it's OK that in a 21st century European country holds nearly 300 people in prison for their political views or their religious affiliations. It is time to end the silence.

KELEMEN: Kara-Murza and other activists are lobbying the U.S. to impose targeted sanctions on 16 Russians, including prosecutors, judges and investigators. The political prisoners on their list includes activists, journalists and bloggers as well as Ukrainians, members of Crimea's Tatar minority and Chechnya's LGBT community. Sergei Davidis of Memorial says the number of political prisoners is rising, and the average sentences are getting longer.

SERGEI DAVIDIS: We see that usage of tortures against political prisoners is getting more blatant.

KELEMEN: Natalia Arno could have been on that list of political prisoners. She ran the Moscow office of a U.S. democracy promotion group and was accused of treason in 2012.

NATALIA ARNO: So I was given the choice back then between 20 years in jail for treason or fleeing from Russia immediately and losing my motherland.

KELEMEN: She's been living in exile ever since. And as she joined her colleagues in releasing the report today, she had a message for Putin.

ARNO: He shouldn't be worried about people for their tweets and Facebook posts and those who catch Pokemons and blog about it. These are the signs of a desperate dictator.

KELEMEN: A confident Russian leader, she said, wouldn't do this. Michele Kelemen, NPR News, Washington.

*Copyright © 2019 NPR. All rights reserved. Visit our website terms of use and permissions pages at [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org) for further information.*

*NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by Verb8tm, Inc., an NPR contractor, and produced using a proprietary transcription process developed with NPR. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Accuracy and availability may vary. The authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio record.*