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New Report Documents 'Ever-Increasing Array Of Laws' Used In Russian Political Repression

By RFE/RL

The number of political prisoners in Russia has reached above 230 as President Vladimir Putin's government implements an "ever-increasing array of laws specifically designed to criminalize acts of everyday life," according to a new report created with input from the Moscow-based rights group Memorial.

The report, released on April 29, says that political opponents of the government, civil society activists, and journalists are at particular risk of being targeted.

Also in the crosshairs are Ukrainian activists, religious and ethnic minorities, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists, all of whom face potential prosecution under laws that "allow the authorities to arrest, detain, and imprison anyone they want."

"There has not yet been a sustained effort to sanction the officials responsible for the persecution of political prisoners more broadly. This must change," it said. "Unless serious consequences are imposed on these officials, the Kremlin will continue to believe it can act with total impunity."

The report, titled *The Kremlin's Political Prisoners: Advancing A Political Agenda By Crushing Dissent*, was written by Washington-based public-interest law firm Perseus Strategies with support from the Memorial Human Rights Center, one of Russia's oldest and best-known human rights advocacy organizations.

The report highlighted how the Kremlin and lawmakers in parliament -- both houses of which are dominated by the ruling United Russia party -- have used new legislation, amendments to

existing laws, and changes in administrative regulations as a tool to target dissidents and political opponents.

Since 2012, the report said, the list of new and updated crimes and violations added to the country's Criminal Code and code of administrative offenses includes:

- Mass simultaneous presence in public causing a violation of public order;
- Criminal defamation;
- Illegal receipt of a state secret;
- Insulting the religious feelings of believers
- The promotion of "non-traditional" sexual relations among minors;
- Public calls for actions violating Russia's territorial integrity;
- The deliberate dissemination of false information regarding the U.S.S.R.'s activities during World War II;
- Public desecration of the symbols of Russia's military glory; and
- Spreading information about Russia's military or memorial commemorative dates that is disrespectful of society.

The report also focused on two laws in particular: the 2012 Foreign Agent Law, which requires Russian organizations to register with the Justice Ministry if they receive foreign funding and engage in broadly-defined "political activity."

'Undesirable Organizations'

That law was followed three years later by the so-called Undesirable Organizations Law, which gives the Prosecutor-General's Office authority to designate organizations as "undesirable" and ban their activities if they are deemed to threaten "Russia's defense, security, or constitutional system."

Among the political prisoners highlighted by the report are Aleksei Pichugin, whom Memorial considers to be Russia's longest-serving prisoner. A former security chief for Mikhail Khodorkovsky's now-defunct oil giant Yukos, Pichugin was arrested in 2003 and later convicted on murder charges in a trial that right groups say was marred by serious due process violations.

Others include Ukrainian filmmaker Oleh Sentsov, who is serving a 20-year sentence in a Russian prison after being convicted of plotting terrorist attacks in a trial that supporters called absurd and politically motivated, and Anastasia Shevchenko, who was arrested in January and is the first person to face criminal charges under the "undesirable organizations" law.

Established in the late 1980s by Soviet dissidents including the late Nobel laureate physicist Andrei Sakharov, Memorial itself has come under growing pressure from Russian authorities in recent years.

Several of its regional branches have been labeled "foreign agents" under the 2012 law, and several regional directors have been prosecuted on charges that supporters say are dubious and politically motivated.

On April 25, Russian state TV launched a blistering attack on the group, accusing it of betraying Russia by highlighting the topic of repressions and brainwashing Russian children. The attack followed a decision by the group to bar a reporter from state-run Russia television from attending its essay competition for children.