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Cotler and Kara-Murza: To Free the Kremlin's Political Prisoners, We Must Sanction Their Jailers

By Irwin Cotler & Vladimir Kara-Murza

The world recognizes the many acts of Kremlin aggression today, in Ukraine, Syria, and Venezuela. But less is said about the internal repression that parallels this external aggression, suppressing and criminalizing fundamental freedoms within Russia. Monday in Ottawa and in other capitals around the world, we stand for a Day of Advocacy on behalf of the imprisoned and silenced, speaking out for the men and women who cannot at present speak for themselves, the victims of Kremlin human rights repression.

We are releasing a landmark report – *The Kremlin's Political Prisoners: Advancing a Political Agenda by Crushing Dissent* – in concert with Russia's Memorial Human Rights Centre, the country's leading human rights NGO, and launched with the backing of an unprecedented international civil society coalition.

This landmark report describes, in great and graphic detail, Vladimir Putin's unprecedented persecution and prosecution of political prisoners. In fact, the report documents how over the last four years alone, there has been a six-fold increase in the numbers of verified political prisoners from 50 to close to 300, with the reality on the ground, according to Memorial, expected to be even more pernicious and pervasive.

These are figures that would make most other despots blush.

The victims of Kremlin repression identified in our report cover the spectrum of society: political dissenters, civil society leaders, journalists, Ukrainian citizens, LGBT individuals, religious and ethnic minorities – and any who dare defy Putin's despotic dictums – are especially at risk.

The Kremlin's Political Prisoners report provides case studies for these targeted groups – and also individual political prisoners, who personify this persecution and whose cases and causes give particular expression to Putin's policies of oppression. They include Alexey Pichugin, Russia's longest-serving political prisoner, as well as Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov, journalist Igor Rudnikov, Jehovah's Witness Dennis Christensen, Prof. Svyatoslav Bobyshev,

activist Anastasia Shevchenko – for whom we serve as counsel and have filed a formal complaint to the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention to address and redress her jailing – and other courageous dissidents and human rights heroes unjustly languishing in prison.

This report exposes and unmasks 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.

The report also identifies the individual architects of this repression. 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.

But today we call for something more: their targeted sanctioning under Magnitsky legislation. The Governments of Canada, the U.S., U.K. and the other nations that have passed Magnitsky legislation should investigate these perpetrators and impose targeted sanctions under Magnitsky, grounded in the scope and scale of their abuses outlined in our landmark report.

While countless government officials are complicit in the Kremlin's persecution of political prisoners, for the first time this report identifies 16 individuals who bear particular responsibility. This includes four high-level officials liable under the principle of command responsibility, who have not yet been listed under Canada's sanctions regimes – Yuri Chaika, Prosecutor General of Russia; Gennady Kornienko, director of the Federal Penitentiary Service; Aleksandr Kononov, Minister of Justice; and Vladimir Kolokoltsev, Minister of Internal Affairs. The report also identifies eight judges, prosecutors, and investigators that have been involved in multiple Russian political prisoner cases.

At the apex of the Russian regime stands the man with whom the ultimate command responsibility rests: President Vladimir Putin.

The time has come for all governments that value freedom to take action. If we wish to free the Kremlin's political prisoners, we must sanction their jailers.

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