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The US Must Stand Up For Political Prisoners in Russia

By Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.)

A few weeks ago I had the privilege of speaking at the launch of a deeply disturbing report titled “The Kremlin’s Political Prisoners: Advancing a Political Agenda by Crushing Dissent.” As Co-chair of the bipartisan Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission in Congress, I am deeply alarmed by Vladimir Putin’s growing authoritarianism and the brazen human rights violations committed under his rule.

But too often, I think we speak about these abuses in generalities, not feeling or fully understanding the harsh and sometimes deadly consequences of speaking up against his despotic regime.

That’s why this new report is so important. It pulls together in one place everything anyone needs to know about the Russian government’s practice of throwing people in prison for who they are or what they believe – the how, the why, who the victims are and the terrible mistreatment to which they are subjected.

The report, commissioned by credible human rights groups, is based on documentation by the brave staff of the Memorial Human Rights Centre in Moscow and complemented by thorough legal analysis.

It documents 236 cases of political prisoners as of March of this year, including 182 imprisoned for their religion and 54 on political grounds. The definition of “political prisoner” is precise and careful. If anything, there is an excess of prudence; the list of prisoners is surely incomplete.

Even so, that number of 236 constitutes a five-fold increase since 2015 – a clear indicator that the Russian government has doubled down on its repressive practices in recent years.

Those included in the report are people accused of crimes they did not commit or charged for engaging in activities that are protected under international law, such as expressing their views, practicing their religion or gathering in public.

Certain communities have been targeted: political opponents cast as “enemies of the state,” civil society activists, journalists, Ukrainian activists, religious and ethnic minorities, including Jehovah’s witnesses. And in Chechnya, suspected homosexuals. These are individuals who have done nothing more than follow their conscience, carry out their jobs or exercise their fundamental rights in peaceful ways.

Take the case of Alexey Pichugin, identified in the report as Russia’s longest-serving political prisoner. Pichugin was a mid-level security manager who was targeted because he worked at Yukos, an oil company owned by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, an opponent of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention recently released a detailed opinion that finds that Pichugin has been arbitrarily detained for nearly 16 years and calls for his “immediate and unconditional release.” President Putin will likely ignore the ruling – as he ignored two prior judgments of the European Court of Human Rights which held that trials to which Mr. Pichugin was subjected were unfair and violated due process and the presumption of innocence.

The U.S. has tools to address the kinds of abuses that are ongoing in the Russian Federation. The Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012 and the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act – both named for Sergei Magnitsky, himself a victim of human rights abuses who died in custody at the hands of the Russian government – authorize visa and financial sanctions against officials responsible for grave human rights abuses.

The Kremlin’s Political Prisoners identifies several Russian high-level officials, judges and investigators who bear direct responsibility for the persecution of political prisoners and so could be candidates for Magnitsky sanctions. By imposing consequences for their actions, the U.S. government would begin to chip away at the impunity that has enabled them to operate. Anyone who thinks the ongoing human rights abuses in Russia can safely be ignored is making a big mistake.

Under the Putin regime, it has become increasingly clear that Russia’s laws and judicial system cannot be counted on for protection and are being weaponized to crush dissent. In that kind of system, no one is safe.

America did not invent human rights. They are the birthright of everyone, no matter who they are or what country they happen to be born in. But I believe that if America stands for anything, we ought to stand out loud and foursquare for the dignity and rights of all people – that it is both our moral obligation and a political necessity to shine a light on victims of abuse and hold the perpetrators accountable.

We cannot remain silent. President Trump and all world leaders must stand up to human rights abusers like President Putin, and ensure that the values enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights continue to serve as powerful bulwarks against oppression and authoritarianism around the globe.

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