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Standing Against Putin's Tyranny

The ranks of political prisoners grew fivefold in four years.

By Irwin Cotler and Katrina Lantos Swett

Russia's attempts to interfere in the U.S. election have been in the news, but its internal abuses deserve more attention. According to a report published today, the ranks of Russian political prisoners have grown over the past four years from 50 to more than 250.

The report was commissioned by four leading Western human-rights organizations, including ours, and written with the help of the Memorial Human Rights Centre, one of the most important rights groups in Russia. It documents in extraordinary detail how President Vladimir Putin has turned Russia's legal system into a tool of repression, using it to suppress dissent, undermine political opposition, and detain anyone the Kremlin views as a potential threat.

Mr. Putin began building this system from the moment he took the presidency in 2000. During his first term, the Kremlin imprisoned Alexey Pichugin, who is now Russia's longest-serving political prisoner, having spent almost 16 years in jail on what all the evidence points to being fabricated murder charges. In reality, he was jailed as part of Mr. Putin's personal vendetta against the outspoken executives of the Yukos oil company, where Mr. Pichugin was the head of Internal Economic Security.

The report also highlights the case of Oleg Sentsov, a Ukrainian film director and activist imprisoned on false terrorism charges as punishment for his vocal criticism of the Russian occupation of Crimea. Held in Moscow, Mr. Sentsov was tortured, tried and convicted. Last year he went on a 145-day hunger strike to demand the release of the Kremlin's 26 Ukrainian political prisoners. They remain in prison, as does Mr. Sentsov.

Anastasia Shevchenko was arrested in January for her involvement with Open Russia, a nonprofit that promotes democracy. Ms. Shevchenko was the first person charged criminally for repeated violations of Russia's new Undesirable Organizations Law, which targets any organization Mr. Putin dislikes. If convicted, she faces up to six years in prison.

In the report we identify 16 Russian officials who are responsible for detaining these political prisoners. Eight are high-level officials with command responsibility, including Mr. Putin. The other eight are judges, prosecutors and investigators who have been involved in multiple political-prisoner cases and are foot soldiers in the Kremlin's war against its own people.

Condemnation of these key perpetrators is insufficient. They must face meaningful consequences for their actions. An important first step would be for other countries to impose targeted financial

sanctions and travel bans against those officials identified in the report under global Magnitsky laws. They qualify due to their gross human-rights abuses, and it's fitting as these laws—currently on the books in the U.S., Canada and Lithuania—are named after Russian whistleblower Sergei Magnitsky, who was tortured and killed while imprisoned on phony charges.

Many of the men and women caught in the Kremlin's brutal grasp sacrificed everything to stand up to its tyranny. It's only decent that those of us safe in the U.S. and elsewhere do everything we can to stand with them.

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