

## **The issue of politically motivated prosecution of public figures in the OSCE region**

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In recent years, we are observing a severe crisis in relations between Russia and the West. The lack of meaningful dialogue, the increase of estrangement between our countries and the gradual formation of stable negative images of each other pose a great danger for the long-term relationship.

In April 2018 in Riga, the human rights activist, the head of “Latvian Non-Citizens’ Congress”, professor Alexander Gaponenko was arrested. He was in the Central Riga Prison until August 2018, when after numerous protests by activists struggling for Russian language schools, the court released Gaponenko from custody. He is known as a fighter for the rights of the Russian-speaking population of Latvia, and as a vocal critic of the Latvian school language reform and the transition of minority schools to the Latvian language of instruction. Let’s take into account that the Russian-speakers constitute about 25 percent of the population of Latvia. Dr. Gaponenko regularly finds himself under pressure from the authorities, and his arrest on the eve of the parliamentary elections in Latvia looks politically motivated.

Earlier, in December 2017, the Latvian Security Police launched a criminal trial against opposition journalist Yuri Alekseev. A criminal case was filed about “inciting interethnic strife by writing comments on the Internet”. Subsequently, he was released under a written undertaking not to leave the place. In view of the fact that Alekseev was known for his pro-Russian minority views, this case also seems politically motivated.

July 15, 2018 a Russian citizen, a graduate of American University Maria Butina was arrested in Washington, DC. In Russia, she is known as the leader of “The Right to Arms” NGO. She actively criticized the Russian arms legislation and laws on self-defense. She usually addressed the American traditional way of life, gun-culture and the 2nd amendment to the US Constitution as positive examples for Russia. However, she was arrested not by the Russian secret service, but by the American. The US Justice Department accused Butina of working as a foreign agent without notifying the US authorities, links with Russian intelligence services, and violation of the federal law on lobbying. She tried to make contact with the National Rifle Association. Perhaps I understand nothing about spycraft, but I think spies would hide the fact that they’re connected with Russia; however there was nothing covert about her activities. Butina’s attempt to improve relations between the two countries may seem ominous only if we look at it through the lens of the Cold War. The fact that Butina was arrested on the eve of the meeting of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin in Helsinki gives reason to believe that this arrest was politically motivated.

All the above-mentioned public figures are known for their pro-Russian position, and there are reasons to believe that their persecution has political motives. Yet I believe we should not sacrifice human rights to the crooked geopolitics. Russian lives matter.