



United States Mission to the OSCE

Continued Efforts to Silence and Intimidate Independent Voices and Civil Society in Russia

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires a.i. Kate Byrnes
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
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The United States is deeply troubled by reports that Ildar Dadin, a Russian activist who is serving a two-and-a-half-year prison term, has been subjected to threats, mistreatment, and torture in prison. Last week, in a letter he wrote and smuggled out of prison, he reported shocking conditions and widespread mistreatment of prisoners, including himself. Mr. Dadin's long and detailed account of the abuse to which he was subjected is truly horrific. He wrote, "...employees cuffed my hands behind my back and hung me up by the handcuffs. Being suspended in this manner brought about terrible pain in the wrists, twisted my elbows, and caused horrible back pain. I was suspended like that for half an hour. Then they took off my underwear and said they would bring another prisoner to rape me unless I stopped my hunger strike."

Rather than taking actions to ensure these kinds of incidents do not happen in Russia's prisons, the government has recently taken steps to weaken the very government oversight institution responsible for investigating claims of abuse in penal institutions. On October 21, the government removed prominent human rights activists and journalists from the Public Oversight Commissions, the regional bodies empowered to investigate prison conditions. The new members of the Moscow commission include Dmitriy Komnov, who ran the notorious prison in which lawyer Sergei Magnitsky died in 2009. His death was linked to mistreatment while in custody. The United States sanctioned Mr. Komnov under the Magnitsky Act for his involvement in that appalling case. Human rights defenders fear that these moves to weaken the oversight commissions symbolize the closing of space for independent oversight of the penal system in Russia, and we share these serious concerns.

We are further concerned that independent voices who speak out about torture and other human rights violations and abuses in Russia face growing levels of harassment, restrictions, and intimidation. On November 1, Amnesty International issued a statement calling on Russian authorities to investigate Mr. Dadin's claims of torture. The next day, Russian authorities, without any prior notice, sealed off and cut power to Amnesty's Moscow office. Authorities ultimately permitted Amnesty to reopen its office on November 3, after the issue was raised with President Putin. The arbitrary seizure of Amnesty International's office is a clear act of intimidation and harassment, and represents an escalation in ongoing government efforts to restrict Russia's civil society in general. Amnesty International, along with all other human rights and civil society organizations, must not be prevented from carrying out their essential work.

Another troubling indicator of the closing space for dissent in Russia is the prominent human rights group Memorial's updated list of political prisoners, which it released on October 31. There are 102 names on this list – more than twice the number that was on last year's list. Ildar Dadin is among those on this list; Memorial has considered him a political prisoner since 2015, when Mr. Dadin became the first person convicted under new legislation that provides strict penalties for repeated violations of the law on unsanctioned peaceful protests. For their advocacy of Mr. Dadin's case and so many others, the government placed several branches of Memorial on the so-called "foreign agents" list – a list that stigmatizes and impedes the work of civil society groups. This list too has grown at an alarming rate - two years ago at this time there were only 15 NGOs on the foreign agents list; now there are 148.

In closing, we call on Russian authorities to conduct a thorough and impartial investigation into Ildar Dadin's disturbing allegations of torture and abuse in the IK-7 penal colony in Karelia, and to bring to justice those responsible for any abuses. Moreover, we call on Russia to cease restricting the work of organizations and individuals who bring such abuses to light and seek to promote respect for human rights in Russia. We remind the Russian government of its international obligations and OSCE commitments to refrain from the use of torture, and to protect and promote the human rights and fundamental freedoms of everyone, regardless of political affiliation or personal views.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.