

Mandates of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation

Ref.: AL RUS 2/2026

(Please use this reference in your reply)

23 January 2026

Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacities as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders and Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 52/4 and 60/21.

In this connection, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information we have received concerning **the arrest, detention, and criminal prosecution in December 2025 of three human rights defenders Mr. Alexei Sokolov, Ms. Larisa Zakharova, and their colleague, in Yekaterinburg, Sverdlovsk region of Russia, associated with the non-profit organization "Pravovaya Osnova" ("Legal Basis"), which appear to be directly linked to their human rights work, namely monitoring places of detention in the Sverdlovsk region and reporting on torture and ill-treatment and the conditions of detention in the Russian penitentiary facilities.** Mr. Alexei Sokolov has been charged with treason (article 275 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) and organizing the activities of an "undesirable organization" (part 3 of article 284.1 of the Criminal Code). Ms. Larisa Zakharova and another colleague, have been charged with organizing the activities of an "undesirable organization" (part 3 of article 284.1 of the Criminal Code).

Mr. Alexei Sokolov is a human rights defender based in Yekaterinburg, Russia, who focuses on the protection of prisoners' rights. He previously served as a member of the Public Monitoring Commission of places of detention in the Sverdlovsk region, mandated to carry out public monitoring and reporting on the conditions of detention and the treatment of detainees, and to advocate for enhanced compliance with human rights standards. He was also the Head of the civil society organization "*Pravovaya Osnova*" ("Legal Basis"), which was shut down by the Russian authorities in October 2025.

Ms. Larisa Zakharova is a defence lawyer and human rights defender based in Yekaterinburg, who focuses on the protection of prisoners' rights. She is a member of the human rights project "Human Rights Defenders of the Ural", where she documents allegations of violations of prisoners' rights and reports on violence within the penitentiary system.

The Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation and the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders previously raised concerns with your Excellency's Government regarding the detention and ill-treatment of Mr. Sokolov in July 2024 on charges of "repeated demonstration of extremist symbols" (part 1 of article 282.4 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation) for displaying the Facebook logo online. During a police search at his

home, law enforcement officers seized documents authorizing him to represent victims before United Nations treaty bodies, raising significant concerns of reprisals for cooperation with the United Nations. These concerns were transmitted in communication [RUS 5/2024](#). We regret that no response was received.

According to information received:

Detention of Alexei Sokolov and Larisa Zakharova

On 16 December 2025, law enforcement officers conducted searches at the homes of Mr. Alexei Sokolov, Ms. Larisa Zakharova, as well as at the residence of another colleague. The searches were reportedly authorized by a court in connection with a criminal investigation into the alleged “organization of the activities of an undesirable organization” under part 3 of article 284.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.

Following the searches, all three individuals were detained. On 17 December 2025, the Leninsky District Court of Yekaterinburg ordered the pre-trial detention of Ms. Zakharova and one other of her colleagues until 15 February 2026 on charges of “organization of the activities of an undesirable organization” under part 3 of article 284.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. The charges reportedly relate to allegations that, while conducting human rights monitoring in places of detention, they apparently used funding from the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and the US-government funded National Endowment for Democracy, both of which are designated as “undesirable organizations” in the Russian Federation.

On 18 December 2025, the Verkh-Isetsy District Court of Yekaterinburg ordered the pre-trial detention of Mr. Sokolov until 15 February 2026, on charges of treason under article 275 of the Criminal Code. The charges and Sokolov’s targeting apparently relate to his reporting - including to the United Nations and other international organizations - on allegations of torture and ill-treatment and other human rights violations within the Federal Penitentiary Service of Russia, which the Federal Security Service (FSB) allegedly considers to constitute a threat to State security. Both court hearings were held behind closed doors.

Mr. Sokolov has denied all charges and stated that he considers the criminal prosecution to be in retaliation for his human rights work on exposing torture and other human rights violations against prisoners and detainees within the Russian penitentiary system as well as his engagement on the international level. He further asserts that the detention of his colleagues is intended to intimidate them and to exert pressure on him, while also obstructing their legitimate human rights activities.

Since 1 December 2025, the Leninsky District Court of Yekaterinburg has been examining the merits of a separate criminal case against Mr. Sokolov on charges of “repeated display of extremist symbols” under article 282.4(1) of the Criminal Code. This case, initiated in mid-2024, concerns the publication of links to the social media platform Facebook, which is banned in the Russian

Federation as part of Meta, a foreign company designated as an “extremist organization” since 2022. Mr. Sokolov was held in pre-trial detention in this case from July 2024 until 4 January 2025, which was a subject of our mandates’ communication [RUS 5/2024](#).

Without prejudging the accuracy of the above-mentioned allegations, we wish to express our serious concern regarding the allegedly arbitrary arrest, detention and criminal charges brought against the human rights defenders Mr. Alexei Sokolov, Ms. Larisa Zakharova and their colleague. From the information available to us, it appears that the charges against them are directly linked to and brought in retaliation for their legitimate activities as human rights defenders, including documenting and disseminating information on torture and ill-treatment and the conditions of detention in the penitentiary system in the Sverdlovsk region, as well as for engaging and cooperating with the United Nations human rights mechanisms and other international organizations. Such activities constitute a legitimate exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly. In this context, if the allegations raised by our mandates are substantiated, the three human rights defenders should be released immediately from detention as being targeted with arbitrary arrest and detention in a reprisal for their cooperation with international organizations, including the United Nations and to punish them for the exercise of their legitimate human rights work.

We are concerned that the deprivation of liberty of Mr. Alexei Sokolov, Ms. Larisa Zakharova and their colleague appears to be arbitrary, within the meaning of article 9 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by the Russian Federation on 16 October 1973. In particular, we note that pre-trial detention appears to have been ordered in connection with activities that are peaceful in nature and form part of the lawful exercise of human rights monitoring, documentation and advocacy. The Human Rights Committee has clarified that detention is arbitrary not only when it is unlawful, but also when it is inappropriate, unjust, unpredictable or disproportionate, including where it results from the exercise of rights guaranteed under the Covenant (general comment No. 35, para. 12). We are concerned about the use of arbitrary arrest and detention against human rights defenders and recall that pre-trial detention must be an exceptional measure, based on an individualized assessment of necessity and proportionality. In this context, the use of pre-trial detention in cases arising from peaceful human rights activities raises serious concerns as to compliance with article 9 of the ICCPR.

We are further concerned that the conduct of the court proceedings, including the holding of hearings behind closed doors, may violate article 14 of the ICCPR. While article 14(1) allows restrictions on the publicity of hearings for limited reasons, such as national security, the Human Rights Committee has clarified that such exceptions must be strictly necessary and proportionate and must not compromise the overall fairness of the proceedings. Public hearings remain a fundamental safeguard against arbitrariness, and any departure from this principle must be narrowly construed (general comment No. 32, para. 28).

We notice with concern the increasing disproportionate and vague application of national security legislation to criminalize cooperation with international organizations and the receipt of foreign funding for peaceful human rights activities

raise concerns regarding judicial harassment and intimidation. The treatment of Mr. Sokolov and the secrecy surrounding his proceedings may create a chilling effect on Russian civil society, particularly on human rights defenders and organizations documenting conditions of detention and other abuses.

We are also concerned that the charges brought against Mr. Sokolov and Ms. Zakharova may constitute an unjustified interference with their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association under articles 19 and 22 of the ICCPR. The allegations reportedly relate to their documentation and dissemination of information on torture and conditions of detention, engagement with international organizations, and the alleged use of funding linked to foreign entities. The Human Rights Committee has underscored that the right to freedom of expression protects the ability to seek, receive and impart information of public interest, including information concerning human rights violations, and that individuals must not be penalized for exercising this right (general comment No. 34, paras. 11, 19 and 34). Any restriction must be provided by law, pursue a legitimate aim, and be strictly necessary and proportionate (*ibid.*, paras. 22 and 33). We are concerned that the application of criminal sanctions in this context may not meet these strict requirements.

In this regard, we are concerned that the case of Mr. Sokolov appears to take place against a backdrop of the dramatic expansion and abuse of article 275 (treason) of the Criminal Code following the Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In her 2025 report to the General Assembly, entitled [A/80/382: Rule of fear: silencing dissent and anti-war expression in the Russian Federation in the name of national security](#), the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation noted that, since February 2022, treason, as defined under article 275 of the Criminal Code, has been transformed from a narrowly applied provision, previously used in a limited number of cases involving access to State secrets, into a broad instrument of political repression, reflecting a systematic effort to suppress dissent under the guise of national security protection (A/80/382, paras. 8, 11).

We are particularly concerned that the charge of treason against Mr. Sokolov appears to be linked to his reporting of alleged torture and other human rights violations to the United Nations mechanisms and other international organizations. If confirmed, this would raise grave concerns that engagement with international human rights mechanisms is being treated as a threat to national security. Such treatment may amount to reprisals for cooperation with the United Nations, contrary to international standards and repeated resolutions of the Human Rights Council calling on States to prevent and refrain from all acts of intimidation or retaliation against individuals who seek to cooperate with the UN and its mechanisms. The Committee against Torture has similarly expressed concern about harassment and reprisals against human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists, including in connection with their communication with United Nations treaty bodies (CAT/C/RUS/CO/6, paras. 28–29).

We are concerned that the criminalization of alleged cooperation with organizations designated as “undesirable” may amount to an impermissible restriction on the right to freedom of association under article 22 of the ICCPR. The Human Rights Committee has previously expressed concern that legislation in the Russian Federation – including vague and broadly framed provisions on extremism and foreign involvement – unduly restricts the legitimate work of civil society organizations

(CCPR/C/RUS/CO/7, para. 22). Vague and overly broad offences that fail to clearly define prohibited conduct undermine the principle of legal certainty and allow arbitrary application. Their use to target human rights defenders for peaceful cooperation with international partners or for receiving resources for human rights work may therefore violate article 22, read alone and in conjunction with article 19 of the Covenant. We also recall the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, which affirms the right of individuals and associations to communicate with international bodies and to seek, receive and use resources for the promotion and protection of human rights (General Assembly resolution 53/144, arts. 9 and 13).

In her 2023 report to the General Assembly, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation highlighted that the activities of Russian civil society organizations have been severely restricted by Federal Law No. 129-FZ of 2015, which permits the designation of foreign and international organizations as “undesirable” on vague national security grounds. Organizations declared “undesirable” face severe consequences, including a complete ban on operations in the Russian Federation, but the designation of “undesirable” does not require a ground for the decision, and organizations found to be “undesirable” learn about the decision post facto, whereas participation in any activities of an “undesirable” organization is criminalized, albeit the law does not clarify what constitutes such “participation” (A/HRC/54/54, paras. 26-27). According to available information, no organization has succeeded in having its designation overturned. Furthermore, in the 2025 report to the Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur stressed that since 2022, Russian authorities have pursued a deliberate strategy to wipe out dissent through intensified censorship, politically motivated prosecutions under broad public safety and national security provisions, including through expansion of legislation on “undesirable organizations”, resulting in human rights defenders, among others, facing torture and ill-treatment in custody and imprisonment with long prison sentences, while civic space has been systematically and purposefully destroyed (A/HRC/60/59, para.135). Since 2022, the application of this legislation has reportedly expanded significantly, affecting independent media, human rights organizations, educational institutions and humanitarian actors.

We reiterate our concern over the ongoing judicial proceedings against Mr. Sokolov on “extremism” charges, which appear to be in connection with his human rights activities, for displaying a Facebook logo on his social media post, whereas Facebook and Meta have been designated as “extremist” in the Russian Federation since 2022. In this context, we recall that “the term ‘extremism’ has no purchase in binding international legal standards and, when operative as a criminal legal category, is irreconcilable with the principle of legal certainty; it is therefore per se incompatible with the exercise of certain fundamental human rights” (A/HRC/43/46, para. 14). We further note that the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation in her 2025 report to General Assembly noted that the deliberate and systematic abuse of national security and public safety (“extremism”-related and counter-terrorism) legislation to silence dissent and dismantle independent civil society reflects a calculated strategy explicitly designed to persecute and marginalize specific groups within the Russian Federation (A/80/382, para. 65).

In this context, the initiation of proceedings related to treason, “undesirable organizations” and “extremism” against human rights defenders Mr. Sokolov,

Ms. Zakharova and their colleague raises serious concerns that national security legislation is yet again being abused to penalize legitimate human rights activities rather than to address genuine threats.

In this regard, we draw your Excellency's Government attention to the recommendations of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation contained in her 2025 report to the General Assembly: (a) Urgently revise national security legislation to align it with international law, including by narrowing the scope of offences related to treason, espionage and confidential cooperation and eliminating vague and imprecise language. Ensure its application exclusively to conduct presenting a genuine and demonstrable threat to national security and never as a tool to stifle peaceful expression or civic activity and especially anti-war expression (A/80/382, para. 144), and the 2025 report to Human Rights Council: (b) End censorship and the crackdown on dissent; release all those who have been detained for exercising their rights, including to freedom of expression and assembly; ensure that human rights defenders, lawyers, journalists, media workers, anti-war activists, academics, political figures and others are able to operate free from harassment, intimidation, arbitrary detention and torture and ill-treatment; (c) Repeal all legislation concerning "foreign agents" and "undesirable organizations", immediately release and rehabilitate individuals convicted on such charges (A/HRC/60/59, para. 141).

We remain concerned that treason, "extremism", and "undesirable organizations" provisions are being applied in an overly broad, vague and punitive manner, incompatible with the principles of legality, necessity and proportionality. We further express concern that the cumulative prosecutions against Mr. Sokolov may amount to judicial harassment, and that such actions contribute to a broader chilling effect on human rights defenders in Russia in connection with their legitimate human rights activities.

In connection with the above alleged facts and concerns, please refer to the Annex on Reference to international human rights law attached to this letter which cites international human rights instruments and standards relevant to these allegations.

As it is our responsibility, under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide detailed information on the legal and factual basis for the criminal proceedings against Mr. Aleksey Sokolov, including the charges under articles 275 and 284.1(3) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.
2. Please provide detailed information on the legal and factual basis for the criminal proceedings against Ms. Larisa Zakharova under article 284.1(3) of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation.
3. Please indicate whether Mr. Sokolov was afforded access to legal counsel during his interrogation on 16 December 2025 and, if not, please explain the reasons for the denial of such access.

4. Please provide information on the searches conducted in relation to Mr. Sokolov, Ms. Zakharova and their colleague, including safeguards in place to prevent intimidation, interference or obstruction of their human rights activities.
5. Please clarify how the activities attributed to Mr. Sokolov, Ms. Zakharova and their colleague are considered to constitute a threat to national security and explain how the charges brought against them comply with the principles of legal certainty, necessity and proportionality.
6. Please describe the safeguards in place to prevent the abuse of treason and national security legislation against civilians, including human rights defenders, lawyers and other civil society actors.
7. Please explain how the Government ensures that the law on “undesirable organizations” is not applied in the manner that criminalizes legitimate international cooperation, access to funding, or lawful human rights activities.
8. Please indicate what measures are in place to guarantee public scrutiny and fair trial rights in cases involving national security, including any limitations on closed hearings and the use of military jurisdiction over civilians.
9. Please provide information on the measures taken to ensure that human rights defenders in the Russian Federation are able to carry out their legitimate activities without fear of reprisals, in accordance with international human rights standards.

We would appreciate receiving a response within 60 days. Past this delay, this communication and any response received from your Excellency’s Government will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#). They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, we urge that all necessary interim measures be taken to halt the alleged violations and prevent their re-occurrence and in the event that the investigations support or suggest the allegations to be correct, to ensure the accountability of any person(s) responsible for the alleged violations.

We may publicly express our concerns in the near future as, in our view, the information upon which a public statement will be based is sufficiently reliable to indicate a matter warranting immediate attention. We also believe that the wider public should be alerted to the potential implications of the above-mentioned allegations. Such public statement or a press release will indicate that we have been in contact with your Excellency’s Government’s to clarify the issue/s in question.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Mariana Katzarova
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation

Mary Lawlor
Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders

Annex

Reference to international human rights law

In connection with above alleged facts and concerns, we would like to remind your Excellency's Government of its international obligations under articles 9, 14, 19, 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), ratified by the Russian Federation on 16 October 1973, which guarantee the rights not to be arbitrarily deprived of liberty, to a fair trial, to freedom of expression, and to peaceful assembly and association.

We wish to emphasise that any restrictions to the exercise of these rights must be provided by law and be necessary and proportionate to the legitimate aim. As the Human Rights Committee observed in general comment no. 27 (CCPR/C/21/Rev.1/Add.9), "restrictive measures must be appropriate to achieve their protective function; they must be the least intrusive instrument amongst those which might achieve the desired result; and they must be proportionate to the interest to be protected" (paragraph 14).

We would like to draw the attention of your Excellency's Government to article 9 of the ICCPR, which in its first paragraph guarantees the right to freedom from arbitrary detention and establishes that no one shall be deprived of their liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as established by law. As interpreted by the Human Rights Committee in general comment no. 35 (CCPR/C/GC/35), the notion of "arbitrariness" is not to be equated with "against the law" but must be interpreted more broadly to include elements of inappropriateness, injustice, lack of predictability and due process of law, as well as elements of reasonableness, necessity, and proportionality (paragraph 12). According to the same general comment (para. 17) and the jurisprudence of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, arrest or detention of an individual as punishment for the legitimate exercise of the rights guaranteed by the ICCPR, including freedom of opinion and expression, is arbitrary. Further, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has reiterated that a deprivation of liberty is arbitrary when it constitutes a violation of international law on the grounds of discrimination based on birth, national, ethnic or social origin, language, religion, economic condition, political or other opinion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, or any other status, that aims towards or can result in ignoring the equality of human beings. In this respect, the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention has concluded that being a human rights defender is a protected status under article 26 of the ICCPR.

Article 19 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to freedom of expression, which includes "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice". Under article 19 (3) of the ICCPR, any restriction on the right to freedom of expression must be: (i) provided by law; (ii) serve a legitimate purpose; and (iii) be necessary and proportional to meet the ends it seeks to serve. In this context, we would like to recall that in its general comment no. 34, the Human Rights Committee emphasized that article 19 protects inter alia, political discourse, commentary on one's own and on public affairs, discussion on human rights, journalism, cultural and artistic expression, teaching and religious discourse among others. The rights to freedom of opinion and expression also form the basis for the full

enjoyment of a wide range of other human rights, including the right to freedom of association, as also stated in general comment no. 34. In this connection, we recall that the Human Rights Council, in its Resolution 12/16, called on States to refrain from imposing restrictions which are not consistent with article 19(3), including: discussion of government policies and political debate; reporting on human rights; engaging in peaceful demonstrations or political activities, including for peace or democracy; and expression of opinion and dissent, religion or belief, including by persons belonging to minorities or vulnerable groups.

The Human Rights Committee has affirmed that “States parties should put in place effective measures to protect against attacks aimed at silencing those exercising their right to freedom of expression and that paragraph 3 (of article 19) may never be invoked as a justification for the muzzling of any advocacy of multi-party democracy, democratic tenets and human rights” (id. para. 23). The penalisation of individuals solely for expressing critical opinions about the government or the social system espoused by the government is incompatible with article 19 (id. para. 42).

We would like to remind your Excellency’s Government that any restrictions to the right to freedom of expression must meet the criteria established by international human rights standards, such as article 19 (3) of the ICCPR. Under these standards, restrictions must be provided for by law and conform to the strict tests of necessity and proportionality. Article 19 (3) may never be invoked to justify the muzzling of any advocacy of human rights (paragraph 23). Nor, under any circumstance, can an attack on a person, because of the exercise of his or her freedom of opinion or expression, including such forms of attack as arbitrary arrest, torture, threats to life and killing, be compatible with article 19 (Id.). In addition, in its general comment No. 34, para. 49, the Human Rights Committee stated that laws that penalize the expression of opinions about historical facts are incompatible with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which does not permit general prohibitions of expressions of an erroneous opinion or an incorrect interpretation of past events. The Siracusa Principles on the Limitation and Derogation Provisions in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights also state in para. 30 that national security cannot be invoked as a reason for imposing limitations to prevent merely local or relatively isolated threats to law and order.

We would also like to refer to the fundamental principles set forth in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognised Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, also known as the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders. In particular, we would like to refer to articles 1 and 2 of the Declaration, which state that everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realisation of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels and that each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Likewise, we would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government the following provisions of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders:

- Article 5(b), which provides for the right to form, join and participate in non-governmental organisations, associations or groups
- Article 6(a), which provides for the right to know, seek, obtain, receive and hold information about all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including having access to information as to how those rights and freedoms are given effect in domestic legislative, judicial or administrative systems.
- Article 6(b) and (c), which provides for the right to freely publish, impart or disseminate to others' views, information and knowledge on all human rights and fundamental freedoms; and to study, discuss, form and hold opinions on the observance, both in law and in practice, of all human rights and fundamental freedoms and to draw public attention to those matters.
- Article 9(1) and (3), which provides for the right to benefit from an effective remedy and to be protected in the event of the human rights violations, and inter alia individually and in association with others:
 - (a) to complain about the policies and actions of individual officials and governmental bodies with regard to violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, by petition or other appropriate means, to competent domestic judicial, administrative or legislative authorities or any other competent authority provided for by the legal system of the State, which should render their decision on the complaint without undue delay;
 - (b) to attend public hearings, proceedings and trials so as to form an opinion on their compliance with national law and applicable international obligations and commitments;
 - (c) to offer and provide professionally qualified legal assistance or other relevant advice and assistance in defending human rights and fundamental freedoms, and
- Article 12(2) and (3), which provides that the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection of everyone against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure, or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of their legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the Declaration. In this connection, everyone is entitled, individually and in association with others, to be protected effectively under national law in reacting against or opposing, through peaceful means, activities, and acts, including those by omission, attributable to States that result in violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and acts of violence perpetrated by groups or

individuals that affect the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.