

Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation

Ref.: UA RUS 8/2025

(Please use this reference in your reply)

7 November 2025

Excellency,

I have the honour to address you in my capacity as Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Russian Federation, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 57/20.

In this connection, I would like to bring to the attention of your Excellency's Government information I have received concerning **1) the arbitrary deprivation of liberty of Maria Ponomarenko, merely because she has exercised her right to freedom of expression guaranteed under international human rights treaties binding upon the Russian Federation, 2) her poor conditions of detention, amounting to torture and ill-treatment, including arbitrary compulsory psychiatric treatment and beatings by prison and medical officers, and 3) her rapidly deteriorating health, due to a lack of access to timely and adequate medical care and appropriate monitoring of her health while in detention, which is placing her life at risk.** Her detention conditions have led to severe mental health decline, resulting in multiple suicide attempts, with the most recent attempt occurring on 9 August 2025, when she cut open her wrists. She remains at high risk of suicide due to ongoing violations of her rights.

Maria Ponomarenko is a journalist at RusNews and mother of two children. I have previously mentioned her in my report in the context of her forced transfer to a psychiatric hospital, amounting to torture ([A/HRC/57/59](#), paras 42, 150 (g)). On 15 February 2023, Maria Ponomarenko was convicted for posting about Russian armed forces destroying the regional Drama Theatre in Mariupol on her Telegram channel, and on 27 March 2025, for allegedly using violence against prison staff.

According to the information received:

Maria Ponomarenko resides in Saint-Petersburg. She is known for her anti-war stance and reporting on sensitive topics related to the actions of the Russian armed forces in Ukraine.

On 24 April 2022, Maria Ponomarenko was arrested, and on 27 April 2022, the Oktyabrsky District Court of Saint Petersburg jailed her ahead of her trial on accusations of spreading “fake” news about the war in Ukraine in a social media post, dated 17 March 2022. The post claimed that Russian forces bombed the Donetsk Regional Academic Drama Theatre in Mariupol, southern Ukraine, this morning, where hundreds of civilians had been sheltering. It contained a video from the theatre made before the attack and a short comment denouncing civilian deaths. The Ministry of Defence of Russia denied that its armed forces were responsible for the strike, asserting that Ukrainian “nationalists” bombed the building.

A criminal case was initiated under article 207.3 (2) (d) of the Criminal Code of Russia, which prosecutes “public dissemination of knowingly false information containing data about the use of the armed forces of the Russian Federation to protect the interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens and to maintain international peace and security and about the operation of any Russian State agency abroad,” committed with motives of hatred or enmity.

Ponomarenko was transported to the Pretrial Detention Centre No. 1 in Barnaul in a crowded train carriage (the so-called “Stolypin wagon”) without ventilation, where there was not enough space to sleep: six sleeping places for ten persons.

On 2 June 2022, Maria Ponomarenko was subjected to compulsory psychiatric treatment at the Altai Regional Clinical Psychiatric Hospital named after Y.K. Erdman, although the court had only ordered a mental health assessment. At the hospital, she was forcibly injected with an unknown substance for demanding personal clothing, utensils, hygiene products, and pads. During the assessment, she was diagnosed with histrionic personality disorder.

In the Pretrial Detention Centre No. 1 in Barnaul, she was kept for two months in a cell with the windows taped shut, preventing sunlight and causing an attack of claustrophobia. As a result, Ponomarenko broke a window and was placed in a punishment cell (kartser) for a week. In September 2022, her mental health declined, and she cut open her wrists. She was then prescribed tranquilizers.

On 15 February 2023, Ponomarenko was sentenced to six years in prison. After the verdict, she was transferred to the Pretrial Detention Centre No. 2 in Biysk, where she was forced to undress during a search, which made her indignant. The officers used force against her and sent her to a psychiatric hospital, where she spent three days without treatment. Medical officers summoned by the detention centre staff used force against her, throwing her on the search table, twisting her hands, and tying her up so tightly that her ears were ringing. They beat her while dragging her to the ambulance, hitting her on the back, chest, stomach, and head, and throwing her against the stairs. In the ambulance, the officers threw her on the floor, but half of her body fell on the bench, and they pressed on top of it. During the first 24 hours in the psychiatric hospital, the medical attendant hit her on the cheeks, stomach, and chest for not finishing her cocoa in time.

On 6 September 2023, Ponomarenko was transferred to the Shipunovo Penal Colony No. 6 of the Altai Region, where she was given a summer uniform despite the cold temperature in her cell. As a result, her lower back pain worsened, but the medical officer ignored her complaints and did not prescribe any treatment, explaining that her condition “was not terrible”. Due to increased pain, Ponomarenko was once unable to get up quickly enough at the request of a colony officer. This was treated as a violation of internal regulations, and she was sent to the punishment cell for ten days.

On 27 September 2023, Ponomarenko developed cystitis due to constant exposure to the cold. It was so cold in the punishment cell that she could see steam coming out of her mouth when she breathed. On 3 October 2023, she was given seasonal clothing, but the shoes did not fit, causing constant excruciating

pain.

On 11 October 2023, Ponomarenko went on a hunger strike demanding an end to the “lawlessness against her”. The next day, she lost consciousness. Instead of providing her with medical assistance, colony officers considered this a violation of the prohibition of lying down during the day. Ponomarenko was summoned to a disciplinary commission but refused to attend due to her unsatisfactory physical condition. In response, the officers pinched her arms, damaging the shoulder joint of her right arm, and dragged her forcibly to the commission. She was strangled on the stairs and lost consciousness again. Ponomarenko stopped her hunger strike.

Consequently, authorities opened another criminal case against her under article 321 (2) of the Criminal Code of Russia, “causing harm to a prison or detention centre officer not dangerous to health.” For the purposes of investigation, Maria Ponomarenko was transferred to the Pretrial Detention Centre no. 1 in Barnaul. The indictment alleges that she refused to go to the disciplinary commission hearing, and the colony staff took her there by force, and in response, Ponomarenko attacked them.

After the incident, Maria Ponomarenko was sent for a psychiatric assessment at the Altai Regional Clinical Psychiatric Hospital named after Y.K. Erdman. In addition to the mental health assessment, she was also treated with psychotropic medication. She was eventually released from the hospital due to “orderly behaviour, stabilisation of her emotional state”.

On 14 September 2024, it was revealed that Ponomarenko was placed in a punishment cell until 22 September. The reason and start date are unknown. She was also prohibited from discussing her condition, her placement in the punishment cell, and political matters in her letters. Soon after, Ponomarenko went on a hunger strike, though its duration is unknown.

In January 2025, Ponomarenko’s communication with the outside world was restricted: no letters were delivered to her, and her letters did not reach their addressees. In February 2025, the prison administration again placed Ponomarenko in a punishment cell for 15 days, until 6 March. Subsequently, on 6 March, they repeated the punishment for another 15 days. This time, the reason for disciplinary penalties was that she threw dishware against the wall.

As of today, Maria Ponomarenko has been detained for over 3 years and 5 months. She continues to suffer from violations of her rights, which are exacerbating her mental health condition given her mental state diagnoses. Her condition is currently critical, as she is at risk of suicide.

To prevent suicide attempts, the prison administration has removed the curtain covering the sanitary facilities in the punishment cell, allowing for constant observation. The conditions in the punishment cell are poor: there is no hot water, and her communication with the outside world remains limited. Due to ongoing violations of her rights, she keeps having panic attacks.

On 17 March 2025, Ponomarenko had cut open her wrists for the second time. She had begun a hunger strike; its exact start date is unknown. She ended it on 21 March. In addition, Ponomarenko reported that in April 2025 she would be placed in the punishment cell twice for 15 days each.

Ponomarenko's lawyer submitted complaints to the Prosecutor's Office of Russia and the Commissioner for Human Rights for the Altai Region regarding her being driven to suicide.

On 27 March 2025, the Shipunovsky District Court of the Altai Region sentenced Maria Ponomarenko to 1 year and 10 months of imprisonment, thereby extending her total sentence by approximately one month. She was also ordered to undergo compulsory outpatient psychiatric treatment after serving her prison sentence.

On 13 April 2025, Ponomarenko began another hunger strike due to the lack of curtains in the punishment cell, which would ensure privacy when using the sanitary facilities, as well as ongoing communication restrictions – she is not receiving the letters sent to her, nor the special forms required to respond. She ended the hunger strike on 16 April 2025.

On 21 April 2025, the prosecutor appealed the conviction delivered on 27 March 2025, requesting that the sentence be increased to four years.

Between 30 July and 9 August 2025, Maria Ponomarenko made three suicide attempts while in custody. The first two occurred in the pre-trial detention facility of Penal Colony No. 9 in Rubtsovsk (ПФРСИ (помещение, функционирующее в режиме следственного изолятора) ИК-9 г. Рубцовска), where she was repeatedly placed in solitary confinement under degrading conditions, including constant construction noise and the presence of rats. These conditions, combined with her diagnosed hysterical personality disorder, led to a nervous breakdown. A complaint on these conditions has been submitted to the Investigative Committee in Rubtsovsk.

The third suicide attempt took place in Penal Colony No. 6 in Shipunovo, following a conflict with prison staff allegedly related to a previous incident and criminal charges for allegedly causing harm to a detention centre officer. This attempt resulted in significant blood loss, requiring emergency medical intervention and a blood transfusion.

On 12 August, Ponomarenko was urgently transferred to Regional Tuberculosis Hospital No. 12 (КТВ-12) in Barnaul, where she remains under observation, primarily for psychological and psychiatric reasons. Her current condition requires psychiatric care that cannot be provided in detention settings.

Access to visit her in the hospital for Maria Ponomarenko's lawyer was initially restricted. Only after he reached out to the Altai Public Monitoring Commission (ONK) did staff at the detention facility contact him and facilitate communication with the detained journalist.

On 31 August, a third criminal case was opened against Maria Ponomarenko, again under article 321(2) of the Russian Criminal Code. It appears that the case concerns IK-9 in Rubtsovsk, and Maria is accused once more of using force against a prison officer.

By means of this urgent appeal, I call on the Russian authorities to ensure, without further delay, Maria Ponomarenko's access to timely and adequate medical assistance, with due recognition of her inherent human dignity as provided by the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), both ratified by the Russian Federation on 16 October 1973. The Russian Federation is legally bound to implement its provisions in good faith, ensuring that individuals enjoy their rights on an equal basis with others, without discrimination or undue restrictions.

In this regard, I would like to remind your Excellency's Government of its obligations under article 10 of the ICCPR, which provides that all persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person, and article 12 of the ICESCR, which guarantees the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. This includes ensuring access to timely and adequate medical care and appropriate monitoring of health while in detention. Denial of medical assistance constitutes a violation of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), rules 1, 24, 25, 27 and 30 in particular.

Maria Ponomarenko's detention conditions have led to severe mental health deterioration, resulting in multiple suicide attempts, with the most recent attempt occurring on 9 August 2025, when she cut open her wrists. The repetitive suicidal attempts, driven by the poor conditions of detention and physical abuse by prison and medical officers, raise serious concerns and highlight the urgent need for immediate and comprehensive treatment to address her deteriorating mental health condition.

Furthermore, I remind your Excellency's Government of the absolute and non-derogable prohibition of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment, enshrined in article 7 of the ICCPR. Maria Ponomarenko has been subjected to severe and degrading treatment during her detention, including forced psychiatric treatment, physical abuse, and prolonged periods in punishment cells under harsh conditions. These actions, if proven, constitute violations of her rights under the ICCPR.

I remind your Excellency's Government that States have a heightened duty of care to take any necessary measures to protect the lives of individuals deprived of their liberty by the State. By arresting, detaining, imprisoning, or otherwise depriving individuals of their liberty, States parties assume the responsibility to care for their lives and bodily integrity. States must take all necessary measures to protect the lives of individuals deprived of their liberty (see CCPR/C/GC/36 para. 25). Loss of life occurring in custody creates a presumption of arbitrary deprivation of life by the State authorities, which can only be rebutted on the basis of a proper investigation that establishes the State's compliance with its obligations under article 6 of the ICCPR (general comment No. 36).

Moreover, article 19 of the ICCPR guarantees the right to freedom of expression, which includes the freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, and this right includes the expression and receipt of communications of every form of idea and opinion capable of transmission to others, including political opinions. It protects the holding and expression of opinions, including those which are critical of, or not in line with the government policy.

I would like to remind your Excellency's Government that any limitation 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. Restrictions to the exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, listed in paragraph 3, may not put in jeopardy the right itself. They must be "provided by law" and they must conform to the strict tests of necessity and proportionality. Restrictions may never be invoked as a justification for the muzzling of any human rights advocacy (see Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 34 (2011), para. 23).

I wish to reiterate the principle enunciated in Human Rights Council resolution 12/16, which calls on States to refrain from imposing restrictions which are not consistent with article 19(3), including on 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. Moreover, in a joint declaration on freedom of expression and "fake news", disinformation and propaganda, adopted in Vienna on 3 March 2017, several experts (including the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression) stated that general prohibitions on the dissemination of information based on vague and ambiguous ideas, including false news or information, are incompatible with international standards for restrictions on freedom of expression and should be abolished.¹

I note that Maria Ponomarenko was convicted on the basis of article 207.3(2)(d) of the Criminal Code of Russia, that was introduced in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 to specifically target those who publicly criticize the Russian Government and armed forces in connection with the war in Ukraine. This article prohibits the distribution of any information that is not identical to the official position of Russian authorities in connection with the war in Ukraine. As it stands, it appears that criminal prosecutions and imprisonment provided in article 207.3 of the Russian Criminal Code are intended to serve the political purpose to silence dissent through curtailing the exercise of the right to freedom of expression, including artistic expression, and the right to take part in cultural life, rather than a legitimate aim in line with the international obligations of the Russian Federation.

In this respect, the Human Rights Committee has emphasized that the form of expression is highly relevant in assessing whether a restriction is proportionate. As stipulated by the Human Rights Council, certain types of expression should never be subject to restrictions, such as "discussion of government policies and political debate [...] peaceful demonstrations or political activities, including for peace or democracy".²

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Expression/JointDeclaration3March2017.doc>

² A/HRC/14/23, para. 81(i).

The Committee has also called on States to refrain from imposing restrictions under article 19(3) of the Covenant that are not consistent with international human rights law.³

In my reports to the Human Rights Council in 2023 and 2024 (A/HRC/54/54, para. 112(c), A/HRC/57/59, para. 150(o)), I have repeatedly called for the repeal of article 207.3 of the Criminal Code of Russia and immediately releasing those detained under these provisions, quash their convictions and expunge their criminal records. I have also recommended ceasing judicial harassment and the instrumentalization of the court system for political purposes to silence civil society and dissenters. Additionally, I have called for the immediate release of all detained journalists, including those subjected to forced psychiatric detention, such as Maria Ponomarenko (A/HRC/57/59, para. 150(g)).

In addition, arrest and any deprivation of liberty as punishment for the legitimate exercise of the rights as guaranteed by the Covenant is arbitrary, including freedom of opinion and expression. Egregious examples of arbitrary detention include imprisonment for the peaceful expression of anti-war statements that call for peace and highlight the harmful impacts of war (see opinion No. 78/2022 concerning Alexey Gorinov adopted by the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention).

My previously raised concerns have demonstrated that article 207.3 of the Criminal Code of Russia provides restrictions which are incompatible with article 19 of the ICCPR. Therefore, no trial against Maria Ponomarenko should have taken place, and her deprivation of liberty for expressing her opinion by sharing a post on social media is arbitrary. Additionally, I note with concern the allegations of irreparable harm to Ponomarenko's health resulting from the inadequate regimen and denial of access to medical care in detention. In light of the concerns detailed above, I call for the immediate release and rehabilitation of Maria Ponomarenko as being arbitrarily deprived of liberty for the sole fact of expressing her opinion on the wrongful actions of the Russian armed forces.

The full texts of the human rights instruments and standards recalled above are available on www.ohchr.org or can be provided upon request.

In view of the urgency of the matter, I would appreciate a response as soon as possible on the initial steps taken by your Excellency's Government to safeguard the rights of the above-mentioned person in compliance with international instruments.

As it is my responsibility, under the mandate provided to me by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to my attention, I would also be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please provide any additional information and any comment you may have on the above-mentioned allegations.
2. Please provide detailed information on the legal grounds for the arrest, criminal prosecution and detention of Maria Ponomarenko, and explain

³ Human Rights Committee resolution 12/16, para. 5 (p)

how these measures comply with Russia's obligations under international human rights law.

3. Please provide information on the conditions of the detention of Maria Ponomarenko, including information on her mental and physical health, and her ability to communicate freely with her lawyer and family; and measures that have been taken, or are envisaged to be adopted, to protect her life and preserve her health and her physical and psychological well-being, including timely access to adequate medical care, as appropriate.
4. Please inform us of plans to ensure a full and independent investigation of the circumstances surrounding the physical abuse of Maria Ponomarenko by the prison officers and the psychiatric hospital staff and to take appropriate measures against those responsible for the violation of her rights. Please provide information on what measures are taken to prevent torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment from being perpetrated against Maria Ponomarenko.
5. Please also advise what measures are taken to bring Russia's law in compliance with its binding obligations, in particular article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as recommended by the United Nations human rights mechanism in their recent country reviews.

This communication and any response received from your Excellency's Government will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) within 60 days. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

While awaiting a reply, I 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 responsible of the alleged violations.

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

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

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