

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

Ref.: UA RUS 9/2025

(Please use this reference in your reply)

16 June 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 **the arbitrary deprivation of liberty and criminal prosecution of a 64-years-old lawyer, Maria Bontsler, in what appears to be a direct retaliation for her professional legal work in politically sensitive cases, as well as the imminent risk to her life due to lack of access to timely and adequate medical care**. Maria Bontsler is suffering from a severe form of chronic hypertension; she had recently been hospitalized in a state of hypertensive crisis and requires continuous medical monitoring and treatment, including access to essential equipment such as a blood pressure monitor.

According to the information received:

Maria Bontsler is a prominent lawyer from Kaliningrad, known for defending clients in politically sensitive cases. In 2013, she became the only recipient in her region of the Moscow Helsinki Group Award for her work in the field of human rights. She has been closely cooperating with the Memorial Human Rights Centre (hereinafter – Memorial) and is one of the few lawyers in Kaliningrad willing to represent individuals facing politically motivated prosecution.

Among her most high-profile cases is that of Igor Baryshnikov, a human rights activist who was sentenced on 22 June 2023 to seven and a half years in a penal colony for allegedly spreading “fakes” about the Russian army on social media. Baryshnikov was recognized as a political prisoner by Memorial. His case was accepted for review by the United Nations Human Rights Committee in 2024, which issued interim measures in view of his serious health condition. In June 2022, Bontsler herself was fined on charges of “discrediting the armed forces of the Russian Federation” after she used the word “war” twice during an open court hearing. The Leningradsky District Court of Kaliningrad fined her 60 000 RUB (850 EUR) under article 20.3.3(1) of the Russian Code of Administrative Offenses.

On 28 May 2025, law enforcement authorities searched the home and office of Maria Bontsler in Kaliningrad, seizing mobile phones, computers, and other electronic equipment. The following day, on 29 May 2025, she was arrested and brought before the Leningradsky District Court of Kaliningrad, which ordered her pre-trial detention until 26 July 2025. The hearing was held behind closed doors at the request of the prosecutor, who cited the alleged presence of state

secrets in the case file.

Bontsler was charged under article 275.1 of the Criminal Code of Russia, which criminalizes “cooperation on a confidential basis with a foreign state with the intent to assist in activities knowingly directed against the security of the Russian Federation.” The prosecution claims that in August-September 2024, Maria Bontsler allegedly established a confidential relationship with a foreign intelligence officer and passed on information about members of Kaliningrad’s security forces, which she had obtained through her legal work. The name of the foreign state involved has not been disclosed. Maria Bontsler maintains her innocence of the charges against her and that they were fabricated to punish her for her human rights work as a lawyer defending Russian political prisoners, anti-war activists and other cases on politically-motivated charges. If convicted, she faces up to eight years in prison.

Coincidentally, in August 2024, Maria Bontsler provided information to a number of international human rights organizations about the case of political prisoner, Igor Baryshnikov, and his life-threatening health condition. Based on the lawyer’s information, the civil society have petitioned the UN Committee on Human Rights and provided submissions to my mandate and Special Procedures.

Notably, a week before Bontsler’s arrest, on 20 May 2025, the European Union updated its sanctions list in response to human rights violations in Russia. The list included 28 individuals – judges, prosecutors, and investigators – accused of fabricating cases against activists. Among them was the judge Olga Balandina, who sentenced Igor Baryshnikov. On 28 May 2025, searches were conducted at Bontsler’s home as well as at the homes of Roman Morozov and Ekaterina Selizarova, who, like Bontsler, were involved in Baryshnikov’s defence.

Maria Bontsler is 64 years old and suffers from severe form of chronic hypertension. She had recently been hospitalized due to a hypertensive crisis. Despite her condition, she was placed in a pre-trial detention facility without access to essential medical equipment, including a blood pressure monitor.

On 2 June 2025, the International Association of Russian Lawyers issued a public statement demanding the immediate release of Maria Bontsler, condemning her arrest as politically motivated and a direct attack on the legal profession. The petition, published on the Legal Petition platform, has been signed by over 200 individuals, including prominent lawyers such as Vadim Prokhorov, Ivan Pavlov, Andrey Ragulin, and Mikhail Benyash.

By means of this urgent appeal, I call on the Russian authorities to ensure, without further delay, Maria Bontsler’s release from detention and all charges against her being dropped as her arbitrary detention was based on criminal charges punishing her for the performance of her professional duties as a defence lawyer in a politically sensitive case.

However, while in the custody of the State, the Russian authorities should ensure immediate access for Bontsler to timely and adequate medical care, 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.

Despite Maria Bontsler's severe form of medical condition and its current critical state, she was placed in a pre-trial detention facility without access to essential medical equipment, including a blood pressure monitor. Her condition requires continuous monitoring and access to emergency care, which are unavailable in her current place of detention. The failure to provide such care places her at imminent risk of a life-threatening health episode and raises serious concerns about the adequacy of the authorities' response to her health needs.

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. The placement of a seriously ill elderly woman in detention without access to necessary medical care may amount to inhuman and degrading treatment, particularly when such detention appears to be politically-motivated and punitive in nature.

I also 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).

In light of the above, I urge your Excellency's Government to take immediate steps to ensure that Maria Bontsler receives the medical care she urgently requires, and to consider alternatives to detention in view of her age, health condition, and the non-violent nature of the charges against her. Her continued detention under these circumstances may constitute a violation of the Russian Federation's obligations under

international human rights law.

The application of article 275.1 of the Russian Criminal Code in this context appears to violate internationally recognized legal standards, including the right to a fair trial, and the right to freedom of expression. As has been observed in my 2024 report to the Human Rights Council, “the broad, vague wording [of criminal provisions penalizing “confidential cooperation” with international or foreign organizations or foreign States] and hefty sanctions of up to eight years’ imprisonment could be used to prosecute anyone involved in international advocacy relating to the Russian Federation” ([A/HRC/57/59](#), para. 78).

Furthermore, the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers provide that lawyers must be able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment, or improper interference (principle 16), and that they shall not be identified with their clients or their clients’ causes as a result of discharging their functions (principle 18).

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.

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

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 Bontsler, and explain how these measures comply with Russia’s obligations under international human rights law.
3. Please provide information on the conditions of detention of Maria Bontsler, including her access to medical care and her ability to communicate freely with the lawyer of her choosing and her family.
4. Please provide information on the measures taken to ensure that lawyers in the Russian Federation can carry out their professional duties without fear of harassment, intimidation, or retaliation.
5. Please indicate what steps are being taken to ensure that the legal profession remains independent and protected from political interference, in accordance with international standards.

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