



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
17 March 2023

English only

---

## Human Rights Council

### Fifty-second session

27 February–31 March 2023

Agenda item 4

### Human rights situations that require the Council's attention

## **Written statement\* submitted by Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[6 February 2023]

---

\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **Human Rights Situation In the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan**

The Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS) would like to draw the attention of the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) to the rapid deterioration of the human rights situation in the post-Soviet space. The IRFS would like to substantiate this observation by citing examples of several especially deplorable cases.

The IRFS notes that the most problematic country is the Russian Federation. The world community mustn't lose sight of the Russian Federation's ongoing crackdown against its citizens, against its own civil society, as it continues to wage its despicable campaign of aggression against Ukraine. Since the beginning of the armed attack on Ukraine by the Russian Federation, widespread crackdowns on independent journalism and dissident voices have become more severe.

Opposition figure Alexei Navalny is still imprisoned by the Russian authorities. The IRFS shares the opinion that the Kremlin's attempts to suppress Navalny are a part of a larger campaign to restrict Russians' access to their basic liberties and human rights.

The Moscow Helsinki Group was ordered closed by a Moscow court on January 25. The Sakharov Center was also notified recently by Moscow authorities that it would be forced out of its offices. Recent "undesirable" classifications of the American-based Andrei Sakharov Foundation and the independent Latvia-based news source Meduza practically put an end to their operations in the Russian Federation. Last year the Russian Federation's supreme court also ordered the closure of Memorial International. The court ruled Memorial must be closed under the Russian Federation's controversial "foreign agent" legislation, which has targeted dozens of NGOs and media outlets seen as critical of the government.

Ilya Yashin, an opposition politician, was sentenced to eight and a half years in prison in December 2022 for publishing the truth about the ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine, while Vladimir Kara-Murza is still being held without access to his family on the same baseless allegations. A Moscow court sentenced journalist Alexander Nevzorov to eight years in prison in absentia on February 1 for posting the truth on social media about the Russian Federation's bombardment of a maternity hospital in Mariupol. These actions form part of the Russian Federation's ongoing assault on free expression.

As noted by many independent experts, last year most independent Russian media outlets closed down to avoid prosecution, or have been blocked along with dozens of foreign media. Among those are the Nobel Peace Prize winning newspaper Novaya Gazeta, the last independent TV channel, Dozhd, and the radio station Echo of Moscow. Access to Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram has been severely restricted or blocked in the Russian Federation, with Meta being "designated an extremist organization and banned."

When speaking about the situation in Ukraine, one must note that all other issues concerning human rights in the nation were eclipsed by the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of that country on February 24, 2022, and the accompanying war, which had catastrophic effects on citizens, civilian property, and energy infrastructure. A long list of international humanitarian law crimes was perpetrated by Russian forces, including the disproportionate and indiscriminate bombing and shelling of civilian areas that destroyed homes, hospitals, and schools. Russian or Russian-affiliated forces engaged in apparent war crimes in the territories they occupied, including torture, summary executions, sexual assault, and enforced disappearances. In certain instances, Russian soldiers forcibly moved a sizable number of Ukrainians to the Russian Federation or Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine and subjected them to abusive security checks.

The UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (HRMMU) documented at least 6,919 civilian fatalities and more than 11,000 civilian injuries since the conflict's beginning and felt the actual toll was higher. By this point, the war had uprooted over 14 million civilians: around 6.5 million people were internally displaced within Ukraine, 5 million had fled to other European nations, and an additional 2.8 million had gone to the Russian Federation and Belarus.

The human rights situation in Belarus rapidly deteriorates as well. Over the past year, Belarusian authorities continued to silence dissenting voices, harassing and falsely accusing human rights advocates, journalists, attorneys, lawmakers from the opposition, and activists. At least 1,340 individuals are incarcerated on politically motivated charges, and no human rights organizations are permitted to legally function in Belarus. The Belarusian government has permitted the Russian military to use its territory in its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Authorities in Belarus punished war critics and forcibly put down anti-war demonstrations. Maria Kalesnikava, a Belarusian professional flutist and political activist, sentenced to 11 years in a penal colony for her political activity in 2021, is still languishing in prison, like many other political and civil activists.

Kazakhstan's record is also regretful. In response to anti-government demonstrations that erupted in January 2022, authorities committed several human rights breaches, including the excessive use of force against protestors, arbitrary detention and arrest, and mistreatment and torture of detainees. Calls for an impartial investigation of the events, including outside experts, have been rebuffed by Kazakhstan. Long-standing rights violations continued in the meantime. Authorities cracked down on critics of the regime and kept placing severe limitations on the freedoms of speech, assembly, and religion. Hundreds of people detained in connection with the January events have alleged ill-treatment or torture, and at least six people have died in pretrial detention centers, according to official figures. While authorities have initiated 234 criminal cases on allegations of torture, as of now, only eight police officers have been put on trial on charges of torture. The ability to assemble in peace is still severely curtailed and monitored. People who attempt to protest peacefully are imprisoned, fined, or given brief custody sentences.

The IRFS notes with concern that repression and violations affect almost the entire spectrum of human rights in Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani authorities, unfortunately, continue to neglect their international commitments and obligations. The Azerbaijani government has been taking repressive measures against the media and critical voices and passing legislation contrary to international standards, which casts serious doubt on its conscientiousness in fulfilling its commitments and obligations. Instead of solving the problem of political prisoners the government of Azerbaijan still widely practices politically motivated arrests.

It should be noted that last year, the persistent, occasional fighting on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border added to the general climate of repression and control. Using this pretext, the Azerbaijani government is silencing all of the independent voices in the nation under the guise of defense and security.

NGOs continue to face obstacles to independent operation due to restrictive laws. Other ongoing issues with human rights include limitations on media freedoms as well as institutionalized torture and poor treatment of detainees. Azerbaijan also effectively imposes a blanket ban on protests in the central areas of the capital, Baku. All mainstream media remained under tight government control. People who publicly criticized the government faced threats aimed at silencing them.

One of the most egregious cases of 2022, was the murder of a 24-year-old journalist and human rights defender, well-known LGBTI activist Avaz Shikhamammadov popularly known as Avaz Hafizli. On February 22, he was stabbed to death near the capital of Azerbaijan. Numerous requests to protect his life were ignored by Azerbaijan's law enforcement agencies. As the actual perpetrator of the crime was sentenced to the minimum prescribed sentence, genuine justice has not been served to this day. Attempts were made on the life of investigative journalist Ayten Mammadova and a blogger, Mammad Mirzali living in exile. Over the past year, dozens of journalists received death threats, and many were arrested on defamatory and other trumped-up charges.

Since the beginning of 2022, a new repressive law on the media came into force, which significantly narrowed the already limited space for critics of the government and whistleblowers of corruption. The authorities use criminal defamation to silence government critics. Among these is opposition leader Ali Aliyev, sentenced in January 2022 to five months' imprisonment in a slander lawsuit. Since then his sentence has been extended on equally ambiguous grounds.

The most recent example of the government's intolerance for autonomous civic action in the nation is the arrest and ongoing detention of Bakhtiyar Hajiyev, a well-known civil society activist in Azerbaijan. Other well-known cases include those of journalists Avaz Zeynalli and Elnur Shukurov. After their detention, the authorities imposed a 4-months arrest on Zeynalli and Shukurov. Among the political prisoners is also Elchin Mammad, an Azerbaijani journalist and human rights lawyer.

The IRFS regretfully informs that many other investigative journalists and human rights defenders are still languishing in the country's prisons, including journalist Abid Gafarov imprisoned on fabricated defamation charges, and former political prisoner, blogger Rashad Ramazanov. Many former political prisoners also receive threats of criminal prosecution from the authorities. The authorities are also continuing to persecute their critics outside of Azerbaijan.

### **Recommendations**

The IRFS considers the UNHRC as playing the most important role in upholding and defending human rights and freedoms worldwide. The IRFS believes that the UNHRC should pay special attention to the egregious situation described in this statement. Human rights and freedoms in this region should continue to be protected as one of the Council's top priorities in the near future.

---