

THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES

Resolution 494 (2023)¹

The plight of anti-war political activists and prisoners of conscience in Russia and in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine

1. Since Russia's large-scale military invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, which Russians are legally obliged to call a "special military operation", the systematic repression of opposition voices and of civil society has significantly escalated.

2. Legislation was passed in March 2022 criminalising the so-called "discrediting" and dissemination of "knowingly false information" about the Russian armed forces. Alexei Gorinov, municipal councillor of the Krasnoselsky District, Moscow, who had spoken against the war during a council session, was the first to be sentenced to seven years' imprisonment under this new legislation. Ilya Yashin, another municipal councillor from the same council as Alexei Gorinov, was also sentenced for "disseminating false information" to eight and a half years in prison. Councillors from other regions faced the same charges, including Oleg Nepein from the Saratov region, who is currently in pre-trial detention, and Anatoly Arseev from the Arkhangelsk region, who is currently under criminal prosecution. Many others have been persecuted or have left the country, fearing imprisonment.

3. Further legislation has been enacted to restrict demonstrations and the activities of non-governmental organisations and civil society activists. Voicing criticism of the war and speaking out against human rights violations became "crimes" for which activists such as Vladimir Kara-Murza, sentenced to twenty-five years' imprisonment in April 2023, and numerous other human rights defenders, journalists, youth activists and political opponents may now be arrested, prosecuted and convicted.

4. Other critics of the war, while not arrested, have been branded as traitors, spies or foreign agents, with these labels leading in many cases to loss of employment and to restrictions being placed on their personal lives and those of their families.

5. Ukrainians in the territories occupied by the Russian Federation, who include Crimean Tatars, the indigenous people of Ukraine, have also greatly suffered from the escalating repressions. In May 2023, a Russian court sentenced blind Crimean activist Oleksandr Sizikov to seventeen years in prison. On 10 February 2023, Crimean Tatar Dzhemil Gafarov died in a Russian prison after almost four years of illegal detention in appalling conditions on fabricated charges.

6. With these coercive measures, the Russian regime has to a large extent managed to suppress internal opposition to its aggression against Ukraine. Freedom of speech and assembly are significantly limited, complicating expressions of opposition to Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

7. The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe:

a. deplores and most emphatically condemns the escalating repression by Russian authorities, due to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, of all those who express dissent and criticism;

b. stands in solidarity with all those who are unjustly imprisoned for expressing their opinions, with their families and with all those who are currently silenced in Russia and in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine;

c. calls on the Russian authorities for the immediate and unconditional release of all peaceful civic and political activists and political opponents deprived of liberty in Russia and in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine;

d. calls on the Russian authorities for the repeal of all legislation incompatible with the right to freedom of expression;

e. calls on European cities and regions, and in particular "refugee cities", to extend their protection also to pro-democracy activists respecting the values of the Council of Europe and the territorial integrity of its member States;

f. calls for active involvement of the international community in pressuring the Russian authorities to release political prisoners and stop their war of aggression against Ukraine, fully restoring Ukraine's territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders;

g. invites European cities and regions to promote political sponsorship programmes for threatened and detained human rights defenders, thereby drawing attention and paying tribute to the commitment of human rights defenders in Russia and abroad;

h. expresses its hope that democracy can prevail in Russia, thereby bringing about peace in Ukraine and safeguarding stability in Europe;

i. instructs its President to forward this Resolution to the Russian authorities.

1. Debated and adopted by the Congress during the 45th Session on 24 October 2023 (see document [CG\(2023\)45-19](#)), rapporteur: Leendert VERBEEK, Netherlands (R, SOC/G/PD).