



May 6, 2013

Honorable John Kerry
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary,

As you travel to Russia, we strongly urge you to highlight the importance of civil society in a democratic society, publicly and privately, during your upcoming visit. An unprecedented crackdown on human-rights groups and activists continues unabated. Many civil society groups under attack are targeted simply for having received support from support from foreign donors. A clear voice from the highest levels of the U.S. Government condemning the Russian government's systematic campaign against fundamental human rights is desperately needed.

Your visit coincides with the anniversary of one of the largest crackdowns on peaceful protesters in Russia's recent history on May 6, 2012. On that day, dozens of activists were beaten and detained as provocateurs attempted to destabilize the demonstration and provoke unrest. Trials of those arrested continue to this day; two multi-year sentences have already been awarded. Charges remain active against 25 more people for their participation in a demonstration against abuse of civil liberties, human rights violations, and pervasive corruption in Russia.

The Russian authorities are methodically eliminating key civil-society organizations; ironically it is those who seek to make Russia a more transparent and democratic country who are the ones facing the greatest threat. Hundreds of Russian nongovernmental groups have been inspected by tax, justice, interior, and health authorities, occasionally accompanied by NTV camera crews. Already, some have been fined and forced to identify themselves as "foreign agents" for their work which involves defending the rights of citizens, uncovering arbitrary implementation of the law, abuse, and torture,; and advocating on behalf of millions of Russians. All of the groups labeled as "foreign agents" risk not only fine but closure. This is an existential threat to Russian civil society and therefore to a healthy and vibrant democratic Russia.

The screws are tightening in many other ways. In an effort to shut down any discussion about the rights or existence of LGBT people in Russia, several Russian regions have passed laws prohibiting so-called "homosexual propaganda," and a similar law is being considered on the national level. Russia recently introduced an internet blacklist which can easily be used to censor content without a court order. Last year, the Duma reintroduced criminal penalties for libel in an effort to strike fear into the hearts of critics of the government and officials. The leading anti-

corruption blogger, Alexei Navalny, faces a slew of politicized charges brought by authorities seeking to silence him and stifle public dissent overall.

In light of this ruthless assault on independent groups and activists in Russia, the U.S. government must speak out against such abuses of civil and political liberties in Russia and stand behind its convictions and those it has supported for over two decades. We urge you to state unambiguously to the Russian government and the Russian people that attacks on civil society will hamper efforts to develop bilateral relations.

Respectfully,

The undersigned:

Freedom House
National Endowment for Democracy
Committee to Protect Journalists