



Organization: Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada
Item 3: Interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression
Date: 23 June 2023
Speaker: Catherine Morris

Oral Statement to the 53rd Session of the UN Human Rights Council from Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada (LRWC), International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI), Lawyers for Lawyers (L4L), and The Law Society of England and Wales, NGOs in special consultative status, endorsed by OVD-Info, NGO without consultative status

Russia: Halt suppression of expression by human rights lawyers and defenders

Mr. President,

Lawyers' Rights Watch Canada, the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, and Lawyers for Lawyers, and The Law Society of England and Wales with endorsement by OVD-Info, welcome the Special Rapporteur's emphasis on the vital voices of human rights defenders for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).¹

In too many countries, human rights lawyers and defenders are threatened, harassed, attacked, prosecuted, imprisoned, tortured or ill-treated as a result of their legitimate work and expressions upholding human rights.

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has disrupted progress towards the SDGs throughout the world.² Russian authorities systematically weaponize laws and courts to repress voices of human rights lawyers, defenders, and civil society, thereby:

- punishing peaceful expression of dissent and anti-war opinions,³
- denying access to information about rights violations,⁴
- suppressing the right of access to effective legal representation,⁵
- subjecting Russian lawyers and defenders to repressive "foreign agent" designations,⁶
- and even prosecuting lawyers for statements made in court while defending clients.⁷

We urge the Council to insist that all States, including Russia:

- halt the illegitimate use of laws to curtail expression;
- ensure the independence of judges and lawyers;
- release all arbitrarily detained lawyers and defenders; and
- withdraw all charges and fines against those engaged in peaceful anti-war expression.

Thank you, Mr. President.

¹ Sustainable development and freedom of expression: why voice matters - Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, A/HRC/53/25, 19 April 2023, available at: <https://undocs.org/en/A/HRC/53/25>. See the UN Sustainable Development Goals, The 17 Goals, particularly Goal 16, available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>.

² UN Global Crisis Response Group on food, Energy and Finance, Global impact of the war in Ukraine: Billions of people face the greatest cost-of-living crisis in a generation, 8 June 2022, available at: <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/global-impact-war-ukraine-billions-people-face-greatest-cost-living-crisis>; UN General Assembly calls for immediate end to war in Ukraine, UN News Service, 23 February 2023, available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/02/1133847>.

³ LRWC et al, Amicus brief to the Russian Constitutional Court, 5 June 2023, available at: <https://www.lrwc.org/russia-amicus-brief-to-the-russian-constitutional-court-the-law-on-discrediting-the-armed-forces-violates-international-human-rights-law-joint-amicus-brief/>.

⁴ Russian Human Rights Group's Websites Blocked for Unspecified Reasons, RFERL, 8 June 2023, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-human-rights-ovd-info-websites-blocked/32450159.html>.

⁵ International Commission of Jurists, Access to Lawyers for Anti-war Protestors in the Russian Federation,” June 2022, at 11-12, available at: <https://www.icj.org/access-to-lawyers-must-be-ensured-for-anti-war-protesters-in-the-russian-federation/>.

⁶ International Commission of Jurists, Russian Federation: Authorities must end attacks on lawyers and abuse of foreign agents law, 19 April 2023, available at: <https://www.icj.org/russian-federation-authorities-must-end-attacks-on-lawyers-and-abuse-of-foreign-agents-law/>

⁷ Human Rights Watch, What can get you in trouble for anti-war speech in Russia?, 22 August 2023, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/video-photos/interactive/2022/08/22/what-can-get-you-trouble-anti-war-speech-russia>.