



The Honorable Hillary R. Clinton  
Department of State  
2201 C Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20520

January 29, 2009

Dear Madam Secretary,

Human Rights First is writing to urge you to take up the promotion of human rights in Russia as an integral part of the bilateral relationship between the United States of America and the Russian Federation.

We share your view that “the world we want is a world where human rights are respected.” The strong signal sent by the closing of Guantánamo must be sustained through further action on behalf of the U.S. government aimed at “making human rights a centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy.”

The urgency of human rights promotion in Russia was tragically underlined with the brazen shooting of the prominent human rights lawyer Stanislav Markelov in downtown Moscow on January 19, 2009. Anastasia Baburova, a young freelance journalist for the independent *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper, was also killed in the attack.

Human Rights First, joined by some 1,400 of our supporters, sent an urgent appeal to President Medvedev, calling on the Russian authorities to carry out a prompt, thorough, and impartial investigation into these murders, and to find and prosecute those responsible.

These killings join a growing list of unresolved, politically motivated, targeted assassinations of independent journalists and prominent critics of the Russian government in recent years. The killings are just the tip of the iceberg of a constant stream of threats and physical assaults made against human rights

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defenders, anti-racism campaigners, nonviolent political activists, and independent journalists in today's Russia. A pervasive atmosphere of impunity and lawlessness contributes to the alarming frequency of these types of incidents. These threats and acts of violence are occurring in an overall deteriorating human rights environment characterized by serious restrictions on the activities of nongovernmental organizations, an all but nonexistent independent media, and rising levels of xenophobia.

In addition to taking on some of the most politically sensitive human rights cases, Markelov represented victims of violent hate crimes and those who sought to combat skinhead violence. Hate crimes have proliferated in the Russian Federation in recent years—with nearly 100 racist and other bias-motivated murders committed in 2008—and the government response has been sorely inadequate. As a cosponsor of the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act when you were in the Senate, you are well aware of the efforts that are necessary to combat bias-motivated violence. The Russian authorities have refused to fully recognize the danger of this growing human rights problem.

In our view, the U.S. government cannot afford to soft-pedal issues relating to human rights promotion in the face of resistance from the Russian authorities. An increasingly authoritarian Russia risks spreading instability amongst its neighbors and beyond. A lawless, autocratic Russia cannot be a reliable strategic partner in dealing with the many serious challenges that face both Russia and the United States. In the case of Stanislav Markelov, Anastasia Baburova, and others, we invite the United States government to join us in urging the Russian authorities to hold accountable those who threaten, assault, and kill human rights defenders and other nongovernmental critics in Russia.

Human Rights First believes that human rights promotion in Russia can and must be an integral part of a positive, cooperative relationship between Russia and the United States. As you noted in your recent confirmation hearing, the framework of the Helsinki Accords proved invaluable in the transformation of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the latter part of the last century. The Helsinki Final Act draws its strength from the integration of respect for basic human rights into a broad agreement touching on many issues of vital concern to Russia, the United States and the other member states of what has become the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

The lessons of the Helsinki process—that setting up a framework for human rights is in America's interest—should be carried forward in the development of new bilateral relationship with Russia that includes a strong human rights component. In this spirit, we would like to share with you some recommendations in two areas that are crucial to enabling Russians to secure human rights and promote rule of law. The first is greater support for

independent human rights defenders, a task made all the more urgent by these latest brutal assassinations. We recommend:

- consulting with Russian human rights defenders now as you develop a strategy for U.S. – Russia bilateral relations;
- demonstrating support for human rights defenders by meeting with them when you and other senior State Department officials travel to Russia;
- providing financial support to independent human rights organizations and strongly protesting any attempts to silence them.

The second area is increased efforts to combat racism, xenophobia, and violent hate crimes—a seriously escalating human rights problem on which coordinated cooperative action between the United States and Russian governments is both possible and necessary. We recommend:

- engaging in a regular dialogue to raise individual hate crime cases and promote a stronger response to violent hate crime. This dialogue can be supported with offers of technical assistance and other opportunities to exchange experiences and best practices.
- expanding funding and other support to build the capacity of Russian civil society groups to combat violent hate crime.

Further recommendations are available in Human Rights First’s *Blueprint for Promoting Human Rights in Russia* that we are attaching to this letter. Human Rights First looks forward to engaging with you and your staff on these vital issues in the months and years ahead.

Sincerely,



Tad Stahnke

Director of Policy and Programs

CC: William Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

David Kramer, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor