



human rights *first*

American ideals. Universal values.

June 30, 2017

LTG H.R. McMaster  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Lieutenant General McMaster:

You have said that President Trump has three goals for his upcoming engagement with President Putin: confronting Russia's destabilizing behavior; deterring Moscow from confrontation that could slide into large-scale war; and fostering areas of cooperation, including on Syria. Each of these goals—and American interests more broadly—would be advanced by pressing Moscow to adhere to international norms on human rights.

At the heart of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act is a simple truth: governments that violate human rights and the rule of law at home are more likely to flout the agreed rules of the international system abroad, thereby imperiling the security and prosperity of us all. Unfortunately, under President Putin's leadership Russia has proven the wisdom of the Helsinki accords.

President Trump should use his upcoming meeting with President Putin, and any public statements the White House issues surrounding that meeting, to make clear that the United States condemns Russia's defiance of international norms and commitments—at home and abroad—and views these violations as a threat to U.S. interests. Specifically, I urge President Trump to raise the following issues, each of which would contribute to advancing one or more of his three stated goals:

**Meddling in foreign elections.** As you know, the U.S. intelligence community has assessed with high confidence that President Putin ordered an influence campaign before the November, 2016 presidential election aimed at undermining public faith in our democratic process and influencing the outcome of our election. Short of physical attack, there is no graver threat to the American way of life and the universal right to freely choose one's political leaders. NSA Director Michael Rodgers has suggested that, far from being deterred, Russia may have also sought to tip the balance of the recent French presidential election. In order to ensure that such behaviors are not repeated in the United States or elsewhere, it is essential to demonstrate to President Putin that there is a cost to be paid when he interferes in the election processes of another state. President Trump should make clear to President Putin that Russian meddling in our elections or in those of our allies—including Germany, which holds its federal elections this September—will not be tolerated.

**Holding Assad to account in Syria.** The war in Syria began six years ago, when Bashar al Assad responded to peaceful protests, sparked by the regime's torture and murder of a 13-year old boy, with overwhelming repression and violence. Since that time, roughly 400,000 men, women, and children have been killed and 11 million have been forced to leave their homes. Countless others have been subjected to the most appalling violations of their rights and dignity. While ISIS and other extremist groups bear much of the blame for these atrocities, credible reporting indicates that government forces under Assad's command have killed the overwhelming majority of civilians during the conflict. President Trump should insist that Russia join the international community in supporting multilateral efforts to hold the Assad government to account for war crimes and crimes against humanity, including large-scale torture, extrajudicial killing, and starvation, while seeking a diplomatic solution to the war. President Trump should further set out a clear policy that prioritizes civilian protection in Syria, and demand that Russia and its allies end indiscriminate attacks on civilians, while allowing humanitarian agencies rapid, safe, and unhindered access throughout the country, in accordance with UN Security Council resolutions.

**Systematic abuses of gay men in Chechnya.** Since early April, the world has become increasingly aware of a human rights crisis in Chechnya, where local authorities have detained and tortured more than one hundred gay and bisexual men. At least six have died. Many of those targeted have left Chechnya and are desperately trying to flee Russia, where they continue to be at risk. President Putin's government has backed denials by Chechen authorities of any abuses, and has cynically suggested that people with such claims should take the dangerous step of filing reports with the police. We very much welcomed the statements of concern about this crisis from the State Department and from Ambassador Haley. But it was both surprising and disheartening to hear from Secretary Tillerson during recent Congressional testimony that he had not raised this issue with his Russian counterpart. It is clear that in order to change President Putin's calculus and end these abuses, the U.S. must do more. President Trump should make clear to President Putin that the United States will hold him responsible for the failure of Chechen authorities to end all detention, torture, extortion, and persecution of gay and bisexual men in Chechnya and for the safety of all journalists reporting on these crimes.

**Human Rights Violations in Russia-controlled Ukraine.** As the President discusses implementation of the Minsk agreements, Russian aggression in eastern Ukraine, and Russia's attempted annexation of Crimea, it is important that he raise continued human rights violations in all Ukrainian territories controlled by Russia and its proxies. According to UN monitors, conflict in the Donbas fueled by Russia has taken more than 10,000 lives; roughly a third of those are civilians. The UN has also documented recent accounts of summary executions, arbitrary detentions, and torture in Russian-held areas (as well as similar acts in Ukrainian-held territory). Likewise, it remains vital for the U.S. government to continue to express concern over the treatment of Tatars in Crimea. The Tatar Mejlis has been labeled a terrorist organization, and individual Tatars continue to be harassed, detained, disappeared, and forced into psychiatric treatment. At present, at

least 15 Tatars remain unaccounted for, while at least three have been found dead, their bodies showing signs of torture.

**Repression of peaceful protest.** On June 12, tens of thousands of Russians in more than 200 cities across the country protested the Putin regime’s systemic, high-level corruption. The demonstrations were the largest the country has seen since the mass demonstrations of 2011-12 against the perceived rigging of Russian elections. Civil society groups—which have faced increasing harassment and other forms of repression unseen since the end of the Cold War—have reported that Russian authorities arrested at least 1,500 people on June 12, including anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny and hundreds of young people. In the wake of the demonstrations, the government has targeted the parents of these minors with harassment, fines, and prosecutions. President Trump should use his conversation with President Putin to condemn politically-motivated arrests of peaceful protestors, which violate Russia’s international commitments, and convey to President Putin that arresting one’s critics is a sign of weakness, not of strength.

LTG McMaster, you have written that President Trump is “unequivocal in declaring that America’s primary interest is the safety and security of our citizens.” As a student of history, you know well that, in today’s interconnected world—whether it’s transnational terrorist organizations, global pandemics, or actors eager to replace the rule of law and a rules-based international order with the standard that might makes right—the security of Americans is inextricably linked to the security of others. Russia is a key case in point. There is a straight line between Russian repression at home, the Kremlin’s ability to wage war on a neighbor largely hidden from domestic public scrutiny, and its ability to act with impunity in backing a murderous tyrant in Syria.

As you prepare for the President’s meetings in Hamburg, I urge you to place these connections front and center on the bilateral agenda. Leading with our values makes our country stronger and more secure. Thank you for the work you and other members of the national security team do to keep Americans safe.

Sincerely,



Elisa Massimino  
President and CEO

Cc: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, Deputy National Security Advisor Dina Powell