

February 21, 2024

Mr. Antony Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken:

Human Rights First has appreciated your vocal defense of human rights in Ukraine and in Russia since President Putin's full-scale invasion. In the wake of the horrific killing of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, I am writing about the fate of Vladimir Kara-Murza, another renowned political prisoner who as you know has been a powerful voice for freedom in Russia and an outspoken critic of Russia's aggression in Ukraine. Vladimir has also been a senior advisor to our organization since 2020, as you may recall from your time serving on the Human Rights First board.

As Vladimir's colleague and as an advocate in the fight against authoritarianism, I am writing to urge you to take a step that is entirely within your power: designate Vladimir as a "wrongfully detained" U.S. national, as a step toward negotiating his urgent release alongside other detainees with U.S. ties and other Russian political prisoners.

You and your team have helped keep a spotlight on Vladimir's situation since his arbitrary arrest in April 2022. It was powerful to see Vladimir included in the Department's January 2023 "Without Just Cause" initiative highlighting the cases of political prisoners around the world. The Treasury and State Department's March 2023 sanctions on the Russian officials responsible for violating Vladimir's rights were especially meaningful, given his long advocacy for Magnitsky-style targeted sanctions. We believe these actions helped keep attention on Vladimir and discourage his captors from killing him.

As you know, though, time is not on Vladimir's side. His health is poor due to poisonings he only barely survived and the harsh treatment that his jailors have recently imposed. The killing of Navalny has shown that Russia's political prisoners face lethal conditions and determined enemies – and that, without some intervention, voices like his and Vladimir's will not last to see the new dawn in Russia that they have been fighting for. As *The Economist* wrote last week: "Western governments should start by treating people like Mr. Kara-Murza as prisoners of Mr. Putin's war who need to be exchanged with Russian prisoners in the West or prisoners of war in Ukraine." The Biden administration has an urgent role to play to that end.

As a U.S. legal permanent resident, Vladimir is an obvious candidate for designation as "unlawfully or wrongfully detained" using your authorities under the Levinson Act, which we understand to be a proxy for the cases you are pursuing in your hostage-release diplomacy. The State Department's persistent silence on this topic has become a source of intense frustration for Vladimir's family and colleagues. His supporters in Congress and in civil society have held hearings,

organized letters, and hosted commemorative events, all organized around this same call for action. Yet in public and in private, U.S. officials have expressed general support for Vladimir but remained evasive on this central point.

Vladimir meets the vast majority of the Levinson Act's exemplary list of criteria for a "wrongfully detained" designation. We understand that Vladimir has been denied this status so far because the Russian government's motivation for his arrest may not have been specifically related to his U.S. ties. As you know, though, the Levinson Act does not require that a U.S. person have been detained *because of* their U.S. ties for the administration to seek their release through hostage-affairs channels. Indeed, that was not a requirement in the case of Paul Rusesabagina, whom the Rwandan government arbitrarily detained because of his political activism and who now owes his freedom to U.S. diplomacy.

The killing of Alexei Navalny marks a dangerous new chapter for political prisoners in Russia and for the fate of a free Russia in the future. I urge you to recognize that it is in the U.S. interest to take and signal greater ownership of Vladimir's fate and to designate him as a wrongfully detained U.S. national.

We know there are other cases of wrongful detention in Russia that also demand your focus and advocacy. It is a gross injustice that the Russian government is able to empty American and European prisons of genuine criminals simply by threatening the lives and freedom of reporters, activists, and ordinary people. We believe the hope of a democratic future for Russia nonetheless requires extraordinary action to save lives like Vladimir's.

Thank you for your service in these difficult times. Given the urgency and the life-and-death stakes of the situation, I request a response to this letter at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Breen", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Michael Breen  
President & CEO  
Human Rights First

CC:

Donald F. Donovan  
Co-Chair, Board of Directors  
Human Rights First

Sanja Partalo  
Co-Chair, Board of Directors  
Human Rights First