



## Joint Letter

### **Russia's Role in Human Rights Abuses and Impunity Raise Questions About the Legitimacy of Future HRC Seat**

The United Nations General Assembly will elect new members for the Human Rights Council in October 2020. Russia is running in a closed slate together with Ukraine for two seats, virtually granting Russia a seat at the Human Rights Council without scrutiny and challenge.

The undersigned organizations call upon the UN Member States to not vote in favor of Russia as a message that human rights violations in a number of countries cannot go unpunished, and that Russia should not see its election and membership of the Human Rights Council as a reward to further impunity for the human rights violations committed in Syria, Ukraine, and Georgia.

UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251 asks that those voting for members of the Human Rights Council "take into account the contribution of candidates to the promotion and protection of human rights." This guidance applies to candidates' efforts to protect and promote human rights in their own countries and abroad. However, as referenced below, Russia's actions in Syria, Ukraine, and Georgia stand in clear contrast to the Human Rights Council's commitment to human rights.

The UN Member States should particularly take into consideration Russia's indiscriminate attacks and war crimes in Syria and its ongoing efforts to prevent accountability for human rights violations in Syria; Russia's occupation of Crimea and ongoing human rights violations in Crimea and the Donbas (Ukraine), Russia's military invasion and occupation of Georgia's two-breakaway territories, continued grave human rights violations against Georgian population in the occupied regions, and creeping borderization inside the Georgian territories.

Since the military intervention of Russia in Syria in 2015, Russian-Syrian military joint operations had committed indiscriminate attacks against civilians, protected sites, and civilian infrastructure in [Aleppo](#)<sup>1</sup>, [Eastern Ghouta](#)<sup>2</sup>, and Idlib<sup>3</sup> in Syria. In March and July 2020, the UN Independent and International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic<sup>4</sup> had found [Russian forces directly responsible for war crimes](#) in Idlib and provided further and detailed information on the role of Russia in committing war crimes and aiding the Syrian government in conducting [airstrikes against civilians and the civilian population in Idlib](#)<sup>5</sup>. It is shocking that a State found responsible for war crimes by an HRC investigation mechanism should be granted a seat in the same UN venue without scrutiny from the international community.

Protection of civilians in Syria and fulfillment of victims' rights for justice have been averted by the continuous efforts of Russia to prevent impartial accountability for crimes in Syria, abusing its veto power and using it in contexts of war crimes and crimes against humanity (in defiance of the [ACT Code of Conduct](#) for the Responsibility to Protect<sup>6</sup>), for instance with a veto to [refer Syria to the ICC](#) in 2014<sup>7</sup>, additionally using a veto to cancel a UN inquiry mechanism on the use and adjudication of responsibility for the [use of chemical weapons](#) in 2017<sup>8</sup> and more recently its [withdrawal from the deconfliction mechanisms](#)<sup>9</sup> to protect hospitals, schools and other civilian infrastructure from indiscriminate attacks in Syria, and its veto on the [cross-border humanitarian aid delivery authorization](#)<sup>10</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> HRW, "Russia/Syria: War Crimes in Month of Bombing Aleppo: UN General Assembly Should Organize Emergency Special Session" (December 1, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> HRW, "Russia/Syria: Airstrikes, Siege Killing Civilians: Allow Urgent Aid Into Besieged Eastern Ghouta and End Indiscriminate Attacks" (December 22, 2017)

<sup>3</sup> Amnesty International, "Nowhere Is Safe For Us: Unlawful Attacks and Mass Displacement in North-West Syria", (May 2020)

<sup>4</sup> Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, A/HRC/43/57 (January 2020)

<sup>5</sup> Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, "Special Inquiry Into Events in Idlib and Surrounding Areas - Attacks Impacting Civilians and Civilian Infrastructure (November 2019- May 2020)"

<sup>6</sup> Responsibility to Protect, "The ACT of Conduct"

<sup>7</sup> HRW, "UN Security Council Vetoes Betray Syrian Victims: In Face of Mounting Pressure, Russia, China Block ICC Referral", (May 12, 2014)

<sup>8</sup> The Guardian, "Russia uses veto to end UN investigation of Syria chemical attacks", (October 24, 2020)

<sup>9</sup> Reuters, "Russia quits U.N. system aimed at protecting hospitals, aid in Syria" (June 25, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> Reuters, "Russia, China veto U.N. approval of aid deliveries to Syria from Turkey" (July 8, 2020)

Since occupying Crimea in 2014 Russia has pursued a policy of changing the peninsula's demographic composition. This is being done, among other things, through [illegal transfer of Russian citizens](#)<sup>11</sup> to the occupied territory of Crimea as well as through [expulsion](#)<sup>12</sup> of representatives of Ukrainian, [Crimean Tatar](#)<sup>13</sup> and other ethnicities that are opposed to the occupation. Arbitrary detentions, torture and interrogations of [journalists and bloggers](#)<sup>14</sup> as well as systematic [freedom of speech](#)<sup>15</sup> violations have become common practice for the occupying authorities.

In 2014 open hostilities broke out in eastern Ukraine against the militants of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, which are [unofficially supported by Russia](#)<sup>16</sup>. [Russia has been providing them](#)<sup>17</sup> with armaments and funds as well as carrying out political coordination of the republics' actions, while [Russian troops have been directly involved in the conflict](#)<sup>18</sup>. The presence of Russian troops in Donbas indicates Russia's involvement in an [international armed conflict](#)<sup>19</sup>. According to the UN, the number of victims has already reached [40 thousand \(including 13 thousand killed\)](#)<sup>20</sup>. According to the [UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission's report Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Conflict-Related Criminal Cases in Ukraine April 2014 – April 2020](#)<sup>21</sup> published on 27 August 2020, the most widespread violations in the temporarily occupied territories of Donbas and Crimea are abductions, [torture](#)<sup>22</sup> and [lack of effective legal remedies](#)<sup>23</sup>.

In August 2008, Russian previous aggressive policy of supporting secessionist movements in Georgia's two territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, climaxed into the military invasion and subsequent recognition of the two so called independent republics. This marked the first instance of forceful change of borders in Europe since World War II, in grave violation of international law and practice. The military actions against Georgian armed forces resulted in [408 immediate casualties and 20,000 displaced persons](#).<sup>24</sup> What is more, the subsequent steps on those territories have taken the form of effective [ethnic cleansing](#)<sup>25</sup>, when the houses formerly owned by ethnic Georgians are being annihilated in an attempt to change the history and erase the past.

<sup>11</sup> RCHR, UHHRU, CHROT, the thematic review of the human rights situation under occupation "Crimea beyond rules": Transfer by the Russian Federation of parts of its own civilian population into the occupied territory of Ukraine

<sup>12</sup> RCHR, UHHRU, CHROT, the research of Special issue of the thematic review "Crimea beyond rules": Forcible Expulsion of the Civilian Population from the Occupied Territory by Russia

<sup>13</sup> Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Resolution 2198, Humanitarian consequences of the war in Ukraine (2018)

<sup>14</sup> CHR, Chronology of pressing the freedom of speech in Crimea

<sup>15</sup> RCHR, UHHRU, CHROT, the thematic review of the human rights situation under occupation "Crimea beyond rules" Issue No 4 Information occupation

<sup>16</sup> The BBC, "Russian soldiers 'dying in large numbers' in Ukraine - Nato", (March 5, 2015)

<sup>17</sup> Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Resolution 2198, Humanitarian consequences of the war in Ukraine (2018)

<sup>18</sup> Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Resolution 2214, Humanitarian needs and rights of internally displaced persons in Europe (2018)

<sup>19</sup> Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Resolution 2214, Humanitarian needs and rights of internally displaced persons in Europe (2018)

<sup>20</sup> The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine 16 November 2018 to 15 February 2019

<sup>21</sup> The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Report on Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Conflict-Related Criminal Cases in Ukraine April 2014 – April 2020

<sup>22</sup> The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Report on Human Rights in the Administration of Justice in Conflict-Related Criminal Cases in Ukraine April 2014 – April 2020

<sup>23</sup> UHHRU, RCHR, MIHR, Alternative report for the UN Committee against Torture 64th session «REVIEW OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION COMPLIANCE WITH THE CONVENTION AGAINST TORTURE AND OTHER CRUEL, INHUMAN AND DEGRADING TREATMENT OR PUNISHMENT»

<sup>24</sup> EHRH, RCHR, RCHRights (CRDo), UHHRU, HRF «Public Alternative», HRIC, Report "Crimean Process: Observance of Fair Trial Standards in Politically Motivated Cases"

<sup>25</sup> <https://dfi.ge/en/information-about-war-between-russia-georgia-in-august-2008?fbclid=IwAR1MlewuzS-yOAt1tmd-YcLmUSoIT6JRJte1GqXE-lacnOSzplZ7byzFo2Q>

<sup>26</sup> <https://russianoccupation.ge/>

Unfortunately, this human tragedy is not over and continues as we speak, with the Russian armed forces advancing further into the territory of Georgia, occupying houses, gardens and pastures of the local population, kidnapping them regularly and depriving them the possibility to visit the houses of worship and the cemeteries of their ancestors. Those ethnic Georgians living beyond the occupation line - most of them ill or extremely old - are in even worse condition, with their daily lives heavily disrupted and gravely endangered.

Under UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251, which established the Human Rights Council, members elected to the council “shall uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights” and “fully cooperate with the council.”

As part of its 2020 campaign for election to the Human Rights Council, in January 2020 Russia published a position paper with a pledge to “ensure the protection of human rights and freedoms under international law and in strict compliance by States with their international human rights obligations”. Russia’s ongoing cooperation with the Syrian government in indiscriminate attacks over the civilian population and attempts to prevent impartial accountability in Syria; its military occupation of Crimea and ongoing human rights violations in Crimea and Donbas (Ukraine), its occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia) and ongoing human rights abuses against ethnic Georgians, do not fulfill the terms of the pledge.

Electing Human Rights Council members that are truly committed to improve and respect human rights is the responsibility of each UN Member State as provided in Article 8 of the UNGA resolution 60/251. Russia will be granted a seat at the Human Rights Council only because of its candidacy in a closed slate context without the much-needed scrutiny and challenge.

The undersigned organizations call upon the UN Member States to not vote in favor of Russia, in order to send a clear message that human rights violators undermine the UN Human Rights Council and that they are not legitimate members of the Council.

**Signatories:**

1. Action For Sama Campaign
2. Atlantic Council of Georgia
3. Caesar Families Association (CFA)
4. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
5. Dawlaty
6. Democratic Republic Studies Center
7. Educational Human Rights House Chernihiv (EHRHC)
8. Families for Freedom (FfF)
9. Foundation to Restore Equality and Education in Syria
10. Fraternity Foundation for Human Rights (FFHR-Birati)

11. Human Rights Center (HRIDC)
12. Human Rights Guardians
13. Impunity Watch
14. Kawakbi Center for Transitional Justice and Human Rights
15. Media Development Foundation (MDF)
16. Musawa
17. SHAML Syrian CSOs Coalition
18. Society and Banks Organization - Georgia
19. Syria Civil Defence (The White Helmets)
20. Syrian Lawyers Aggregation
21. Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR)
22. Syrian Women Political Movement (SWPM)
23. TEVNA KURDÎ
24. The libyan center for freedom of press
25. The National Commission on Detainees and Missing Persons
26. The Rehabilitation Centre for Victims of Torture (RCT/EMPATHY), Georgia
27. The Syria Campaign (TSC)
28. The Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression (SCM)
29. Transparency International Georgia (TI Georgia)
30. Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights
31. Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations (UOSSM)
32. Union of syrian coordinators around the world
33. World Experience for Georgia (WEG)