

May, 30, 2025

Statement

**We demand to stop persecution and
release lawyer Maria Bontsler**

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The International Association of Russian Advocates condemns the arrest and subsequent detention, interrogation and searches of the premises of lawyer (advocate) Maria Bontsler, as well as searches of the premises of her colleagues Roman Morozov and Ekaterina Selizarova.

On May 28, 2025, media outlets reported on searches conducted at the premises of Kaliningrad lawyers Maria Bontsler, Roman Morozov, and Ekaterina Selizarova, along with the seizure of their phones, electronic equipment, hard drives, and computers.

The following day, the court ordered the pre-trial detention of lawyer Maria Bontsler. The hearing was closed at the request of the prosecutor, citing the alleged presence of state secrets in the case. She was placed in a pre-trial detention facility, despite her age (64 years) and serious health condition. Ms. Bontsler suffers from a severe form of chronic hypertension and had recently been hospitalized in a state of hypertensive crisis. She now remains without even a blood pressure monitor, giving rise to serious concerns for her life and health.

On May 29, 2025, the Investigative Committee of the Russian Federation for the Kaliningrad Region confirmed the proceedings, stating that «a criminal case has been opened against a 64-year-old lawyer [Maria Bontsler] on charges under Article 275.1 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation — cooperation on a confidential basis with a foreign state with the intent to assist in activities knowingly directed against the security of the Russian Federation. The decision to open the case was reportedly based on materials obtained through operational-search activities conducted by the regional department of the Federal Security Service of Russia. Investigators claim that in 2024, the lawyer transmitted information about security agency employees — information allegedly obtained through her legal work — to the intelligence services of an «unfriendly» foreign state».

Meanwhile, media sources noted that a week before Maria Bontsler's arrest, the European Union updated its sanctions list in response to human rights violations in Russia, adding 28 individuals, including Olga Balandina, a judge of the City Court of Sovietsk (Kaliningrad Region), who in 2023 sentenced Igor Baryshnikov to seven and a half years in a penal colony for «anti-military fakes».

Mr. Baryshnikov was defended by lawyers Maria Bontsler, Roman Morozov, and Ekaterina Selizarova. In 2024, his case was accepted for review by the UN Human Rights Committee, which issued interim measures based on his health condition.

The application of Article 275.1 of the Russian Criminal Code in the case of Maria Bontsler clearly violates the principles of internationally recognized legal standards. According to Article 5(1) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which remains in force in the Russian Federation, no State may engage in any activity or perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms recognized in the Covenant, or impose limitations beyond those provided for therein. Alongside the right to freedom of expression, the Covenant guarantees the right to a fair trial and other procedural safeguards in criminal cases, as well as the absolute prohibition of torture and discrimination. All of these rights were violated in the case of Igor Baryshnikov.

Lawyers play a critical role in defending human rights and are obligated to report violations of their clients' rights and exhaust all available lawful remedies, including the use of international mechanisms such as those of the United Nations.

The absurd accusation of a lawyer for allegedly disclosing information about violations of a client's rights demonstrates the repressive and politicized nature of the charges, undermining both individual human rights and the professional duties of legal advocates.

The collection, analysis, and use of information by a lawyer in the course of legal representation aimed at defending a client's rights and freedoms must not be criminalized, as doing so would undermine the core of the legal profession and the fundamental principles of justice. Given Maria Bontsler's known engagement in human rights advocacy, the charges against her appear to be nothing more than punishment for her professional activity.

The criminalization of her legal work is politically motivated and aims to produce a «chilling effect», discouraging other lawyers from defending clients in politically sensitive cases. To intensify this effect, a propaganda campaign has been launched in the media, spreading absurd and unsubstantiated claims, including the allegation that information obtained by lawyers like Maria Bontsler was used to organize assassination attempts on high-ranking military officials.

Lawyer Maria Bontsler has already faced harassment for her professional activity: in 2023, she was held administratively liable (under Article 20.3.3(1) of the Russian Code of Administrative Offenses) for statements made during open court proceedings in defense of her client.

According to the UN Basic Principles on the Role of Lawyers, governments must ensure that lawyers «...are able to perform all of their professional functions without intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper interference; [...] and (c) shall not suffer, or be threatened with, prosecution or administrative, economic or other sanctions for any action taken in accordance with recognized professional duties, standards and ethics» (Principle 16). Furthermore, lawyers, «shall not be identified with their clients or their clients' causes as a result of discharging their functions» (Principle 18).

Harassment and intimidation of lawyers strike at the heart of the human rights protection system (see, for example, the European Court of Human Rights decision in *Kolesnichenko v. Russia*, application no. 19856/04, para. 31).

On this basis, the General Council of the International Association of Russian Advocates declares the prosecution of lawyer Maria Bontsler to be inappropriate and unlawful, and demands her immediate release. Additionally, all property seized during the searches must be returned to the affected lawyers.

We call upon the United Nations, international and national associations of lawyers and jurists, and human rights organizations to protest the persecution of Maria Bontsler and her colleagues, and to demand her immediate release.

General Council of the International Association of Russian Advocates