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Written statement submitted by Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status*

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[19 January 2026]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

The Inhumane Detention of Konstantin Rudnev in Argentina

The principles of truth, justice, and human dignity apply to spiritual minorities whose members face discrimination, false accusations, and the misuse of state power. These rights are violated not only in cases of violence but also when administrative or judicial systems are used against individuals because of their beliefs or their reputation abroad. The case of Russian spiritual teacher Konstantin Rudnev, who is currently detained in Argentina without clear charges and in conditions that severely threaten his health, highlights this issue.

Rudnev was known in Russia for attracting students to his esoteric and spiritual teachings. His group was often called “Ashram Shambhala,” even though no formal organization existed under that name. International academic research and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) report from 2020 show that the Russian Orthodox Church has long worked with state authorities to label independent spiritual movements as “cults” and suppress them as competitors (<https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/2020%20Anti-Cult%20Update%20-%20Religious%20Regulation%20in%20Russia.pdf>). Rudnev’s explicit criticism of the Putin regime made him even more vulnerable.

He became the target of a prolonged smear campaign in Russia, fueled by media outlets and anti-cultist like Alexander Dvorkin, identified in the USCIRF report as an activist who instigates legal actions against minority religious groups through false claims. In 2010, Rudnev was arrested in Russia and was sentenced to 11 years in prison in 2013 on charges of running a “cult,” drug dealing, and rape—charges that independent scholars reviewing the case largely consider to be false. Despite this, he served his full sentence under harsh conditions and was released in 2021.

Looking for peace and privacy, Rudnev first moved to Montenegro and then to Argentina. In Bariloche, Argentina, he lived quietly, teaching no one, forming no group, and spending his days walking, meditating, and recovering from years of persecution.

His arrest in Argentina was not due to any actions of his own. It started with a tragic misunderstanding involving a young Russian woman, E., who had escaped an abusive relationship and traveled to Argentina to give birth safely. Due to language barriers, improvised translations, and cultural misunderstandings, hospital staff misinterpreted her reliance on friends as “submission,” assumed she was a minor despite her passport, and mistakenly viewed a simple gesture—giving a nurse a white rose—as a coded plea for help. These assumptions were treated as facts, leading to police involvement.

E. was taken into custody, separated from her newborn, and the investigators created a theory of a human trafficking network allegedly linked to Rudnev—a man she had never met.

Argentina’s anti-trafficking law, which is overly broad and often misapplied to spiritual minorities, provided a framework for a baseless narrative. A nurse’s insistence that E. include a father’s surname on the birth certificate was later recast as an attempt to forge documents. When E. asked staff to correct the grammatical gender of her child’s surname, which is typical in Russian naming conventions, the doctor tore up the form. Prosecutors later accused one of E.’s friends of destroying the document.

The hospital kept threatening E., claiming she would not be allowed to return home unless she provided a document about the father, a request she later realized was not legitimate. E.’s landlady knew Rudnev and was assisting him in obtaining a residence permit in Argentina. Thus, a copy of Rudnev’s passport was found in E.’s home. In desperation, E. gave it to the hospital as the child’s father’s passport. This, she reports, and her friend and the landlady have confirmed, was the only indirect connection between E. and Rudnev. E. claims she never met Rudnev in person and was certainly not part of any spiritual school or

“cult.” However, when Rudnev’s name surfaced through the passport and became part of the file the hospital sent to the authorities investigating a possible trafficking of pregnant women, it was linked to his past as a “cult leader” in Russia and triggered speculation that he was reforming the “cult” in Argentina.

The first judge tossed the case due to lack of evidence. Instead of narrowing the inquiry, authorities expanded it. In March 2025, police arrested fifteen more Russians at the Bariloche airport—mostly women, many of whom were tourists who did not know each other. Media headlines announced the discovery of a “Russian cult,” echoing disinformation from Russian sources. None of the detainees were, or had ever been, part of “Ashram Shambhala” or any spiritual organizations led by Rudnev.

In multiple interviews, the detained women described being seized without warrants, yelled at, physically abused, denied interpreters, and pressured to “confirm” that they were trafficking victims. Some were asked to sign blank documents. One woman was falsely accused of carrying cocaine pills that later toxicology tests showed were ordinary sleep aids. Others faced degrading conditions: cold cells without mattresses, inadequate food and water, lack of hygiene and medical care, humiliating searches, and treatment they felt threatened their physical or sexual safety.

In the end, only one person remained in custody: Konstantin Rudnev.

He was arrested at the airport without a warrant, without charges being read, and without access to an interpreter or legal help. He was strip-searched, placed in solitary confinement, and given food he could not eat. For ten days, he survived on bread and tap water. Hearings went on from morning until after midnight in a language he couldn’t understand. He lost around 30 kilograms in nine months.

Doctors in prison misunderstood his consistently high blood pressure and forced him to take three strong antihypertensive medications daily, which caused fainting spells. When he collapsed, staff dismissed it as unrelated to his treatment. He was denied pain medications, antibiotics, and food suitable for his medical condition. Sanitary conditions were terrible: prisoners shared a single cup for drinking. Eventually, he refused all treatment, signing daily forms that guards misinterpreted as rebellion.

Throughout this ordeal, he remained calm, polite, and, respectful. He spoke no Spanish or English and spent his days in prayer and meditation.

To this day, neither he nor his wife has been clearly informed of the specific facts behind the accusations. The supposed primary victim denies knowing him. The detained women also deny any connection to him. The trafficking story fell apart. The drug claim collapsed. The birth certificate theory collapsed, too. Prosecutors admit they lack concrete evidence but insist the case is “complex” due to its international aspects. They requested—and received—a full year of pretrial detention, until March 2026, to examine seized devices, many belonging to unrelated Russian tourists. Much of the material is in Russian and is being translated with automated tools, a legally invalid practice.

In reality, Rudnev is imprisoned not for anything he did in Argentina but because of a narrative imported from Russia, replicated in Montenegro, and uncritically taken up by Argentine authorities. The portrayal of the “international cult leader” has proven more enduring than the factual record.

He sits in a cell in Rawson, his health declining, waiting for a process.

This case represents a serious violation of the right to liberty, due process, and freedom of religion or belief. It also raises urgent humanitarian issues: Rudnev’s health is in danger, and continued detention could have irreversible consequences.

CAP-LC urges Argentina to release Konstantin Rudnev immediately, for substantial reasons—he has committed no crime in Argentina and is being pursued solely because of a smear campaign initiated in Russia—and for humanitarian reasons, as his life and health are at risk.
