

# Meryl Streep backs campaign to free Ukrainian filmmaker Oleg Sentsov

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U.S. actress Meryl Streep poses with a #FreeSentsov sign with Ukrainian lawmaker Mustafa Nayyem. Streep on April 25 publically backed the campaign to free Oleg Sentsov, a Ukrainian from Crimea who was subjected to a sham trial by Russia and jailed in Siberia for 20 years in August 2015. (Facebook, Mustafa Nayyem)

Photo by Beowulf Sheehan

One of the world's top actresses, Meryl Streep, has called for the freeing of Oleg Sentsov, a Ukrainian filmmaker sentenced to 20 years in jail after being subjected to a sham trial in Russia.

The U.S. actress and renowned philanthropist was pictured alongside Ukrainian lawmaker Mustafa Nayyem with a "Free Sentsov" sign in a photograph taken during the PEN America Annual Literary Gala on April 25, at which Sentsov was honoured with a 2017 PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write award.

Nayyem, who posted the photograph on his Facebook account on April 30, said that the actress was genuinely interested in Sentsov's case, and eager to help.

"She was already aware of the fact that one of the nominees is an imprisoned filmmaker, but didn't know (Sentsov's) entire story," Nayyem wrote, "I told her about the case, (Sentsov's) family, Crimea, (Russian) nationality being forced upon him, and his two children stuck in the annexed territory."

Nayyem said that Streep asked him how she could help, which is when the lawmaker told her about the Pen America campaign for freeing Sentsov and suggested they take a photograph with a “Free Sentsov” sign to raise awareness.

“She agreed without hesitating,” Nayyem says, adding that she also asked Nayyem to be in the photograph too.

“Who will believe that I came up with this sign myself?” Nayyem quoted Streep as saying.

According to Nayyem, Streep later spoke with him again and said that she was ready to join the Pen America campaign for Sentsov’s freedom. The lawmaker says he saw her crying during the screening of a video about Sentsov at the award ceremony.

Crimean-born Sentsov, who has been vocal about his Ukrainian views, was detained in Crimea in May 2014 and taken to Russia together with another Ukrainian Crimean-born activist Oleksandr Kolchenko. In August 2015 he was charged with terrorism by the North Caucasus District Court of Russia, which accused him and Kolchenko of setting up a terrorist group in Russian-occupied Crimea, committing two terrorist attacks, and planning another one with the use of explosive devices.

The charges, which were accompanied by serious physical abuse and a lack of evidence, have been condemned as fabricated by many global human rights groups. After the sham trial, Sentsov was sentenced on Aug. 25, 2015 to 20 years in prison in Yakutsk, Siberia. In May 2016 both he and Kolchenko, who was jailed for 10 years, applied for extradition to Ukraine, but five months later, in October 2016, the Russian government refused, claiming that the Ukrainian Crimeans had automatically become Russian – just like the annexed peninsula where they were from.

Streep’s support comes months after another prominent Hollywood actor supported Sentsov. In a photograph imitating a mugshot and published on [voiceproject.org](http://voiceproject.org) on Nov. 16, the Hollywood star Johnny Depp is seen holding a sign that says “Yakutsk, Russia. 20 years” (indicating the place where Sentsov is imprisoned, and the length of the sentence). The photograph is a part of the “Imprisoned for Art” photo campaign, initiated by the Voice Project international human rights organization.

Since the launch of the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom to Write Award in 1987, renamed as PEN/Barbey Freedom to Write Award in 2016, PEN America has honored more than 50 individual writers, recognizing their “struggle in the face of adversity for the right to free expression.”

Thirty-seven out of the 41 imprisoned writers presented with the award were later released due to the pressure and attention it generates.