

Belarus: Crackdown on Athletes

Belarus: “Sport is the propaganda of the regime, and I no longer want to be part of that.”

In this, the final briefing in Amnesty International’s #StandWithBelarus campaign, we highlight the role Belarusian athletes have played in bringing to the world’s attention human rights violations committed by the government. Sport administration is under direct government control in Belarus and athletes who speak out put their careers and their freedom at stake.

In Belarus, following the disputed presidential election on 9 August 2020, hundreds of thousands of people across the country took to the streets to protest the results. The incumbent Alyaksandr Lukashenka claimed a landslide victory, while Svyatlana Tsikhanouskaya emerged as a popular candidate for protest voters. Peaceful protests were held across the country – and reprisals were severe. Riot police used unlawful force against peaceful protestors and over 27,000 people were detained, many in the notorious Akrestsina detention centre in Minsk. Allegations of torture and other ill-treatment in detention are widespread. In July the government intensified an already severe attack on civil society, subjecting a vast number of activists and journalists to criminal charges for their legitimate work, and arbitrarily closing close to 50 civil society organizations almost overnight.

The shocking government clampdown on dissent in Belarus demonstrates a blatant disregard for human rights: women and children, artists, pensioners, athletes, students and academics, trade unionists – almost every sector of society – have been targeted.

Sport is under the direct control of the government in Belarus and sporting success abroad is considered to legitimize the government. President Lukashenka is a keen amateur ice hockey player and until December 2020 he personally headed the Belarusian National Olympic Committee (NOC). When athletes spoke out about the brutal crackdown on peaceful protestors they suffered reprisals. In August 2020, over 1,000 athletes signed an open letter calling for new elections, and an end to torture and other ill-treatment and arrests of peaceful demonstrators. The letter was started by Alyaksandr Apeikin, a sport trainer and founder of a handball club, who shortly afterwards was warned that he should leave the country because a criminal case was being prepared against him. According to the Sports Solidarity Foundation 60 of those who signed were dropped from the national team, lost their funding, were forced to recant or were physically abused. To date, a total of 95 athletes have been detained for taking part in peaceful protests, seven of them have been charged with political offences for their peaceful opposition to the government, and 124 have suffered other forms of repression including 35 athletes and trainers who have been dropped from the national team.

Aliaksandra Herasimienia

“I decided to speak out and to support the Belarusian people in saying that the elections were falsified.”

Aliaksandra Herasimienia won three Olympic medals during her competitive swimming career and since giving up competitive sport two years ago she has been running swim training schools for Belarusian school children, employing 20 staff. She told Amnesty International that she was abroad when the demonstrations started, and when she saw the images of people being beaten by riot police, she found it hard to believe. However, after she talked to friends and family who had been at the protests, she faced a difficult choice:

“I had the choice to speak out or stay silent. I had a choice because I had my swimming school. We were training about 500 children. We rent swimming pools from the state to hold our courses. All swimming pools are state-owned in Belarus, and therefore I understood if I speak out my colleagues would suffer and the children too. At first, I didn't know what to do, but after a few days I realized that I couldn't stay silent.”

A week after she first spoke out on social media, the schools that she had contracts with initially telephoned to postpone their agreement. They claimed that it was because of Covid-19 restrictions, despite the fact that other activities in Belarus continued unabated. In the end all the schools cancelled their contracts.

“The children were left with nothing, they had no possibility of swimming. They needed to start training and they couldn't.”

Athletes started to organize, they set up the Free Association of Athletes, and took part in the protests. As a result, many suffered reprisals – they were dismissed from employment outside their sport, lost access to training facilities, were dropped from the national team and deprived of funding. That left them no option but to leave the country if they wished to continue training and take part in competitive sport. The Sport Solidarity Foundation was set up and registered abroad to support athletes suffering reprisals because of their political views. In September, Aliaksandra was appointed head of the Sport Solidarity Foundation, and Alyaksandr Apeikin was appointed director.

The Sport Solidarity Foundation began to lobby international sporting associations to express their concern about what was happening in Belarus. One of the successes of the Sport Solidarity Foundation was the removal of Aleksander Lukashenka as head of the NOC. In December 2020, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) ruled, that the Executive Board of the NOC should be removed, all financial payments suspended with the exception of funding for the Olympic games in Tokyo and Beijing, and to suspend any discussions about hosting future International Olympic events in Belarus. The government-appointed successor to Alyaksandr Lukashenka as chair of the NOC – his son Viktor – was not recognized by the IOC. Through its lobbying the Sport Solidarity Foundation along with others has also succeeded in ensuring that almost all sporting events due to be held in Belarus have been relocated. Among them are the International Ice Hockey Championships, the International Pentathlon, the European championships and the European Youth Football Championship.

It was hardly surprising that the government would seek reprisals for this blow to its pride. On 2 April 2021, the Belarusian Investigative Committee announced that it had opened a criminal case against Aliaksandra Herasimienia and Alyaksandr Apeykin. They have been accused of “inciting actions aimed at damaging the national security of Belarus” under

Article 361, Part 3 of the Criminal Code, which carries a maximum penalty of seven years' imprisonment. The investigative Committee stressed the role that the Sports Solidarity Foundation has played in convincing sponsors and organizers to remove their support from international sporting events in Belarus which "has caused significant damage to the finances and the image of Belarus".<sup>1</sup>

Aliaksandra Herasimienia first heard about the accusation against her from the news:

"At first it was an unpleasant feeling. I didn't feel very comfortable being on the wanted list, but then I started to think about it with humour and thought: 'at least they think we are worth something. They have put us on the list.'"

To mark the anniversary of the start of the protests the Sport Solidarity Foundation will be launching a virtual marathon on 9 August.

Yelena Leuchanka

"I am trying to be the voice of so many women and everybody who went through Akrestsina. My story is not unique, I am just using my voice to let the world know what is happening in my country."

Yelena Leuchanka is a two-time Olympic champion basketball player. She has also won numerous other accolades. On 30 September 2020 she was arrested at Minsk airport as she was about to leave for rehabilitation in Greece. Yelena commented in an interview with the Russian on-line news site Meduza: "I asked them, 'Why didn't you do this earlier to save me the trouble of packing?' It seems they waited until the last possible moment – it was a show arrest. They deliberately drove 45km to the airport and back again, just to make an example of me."<sup>2</sup>

Yelena was first taken to the Lenin District Police Station in Minsk. The hearing was held on the day of her arrest and she was sentenced to 15 days administrative detention for taking part in peaceful protest actions on 23 August and 27 September. Photographs from her Instagram account were used as evidence. Following the hearing she was transferred to the infamous Akrestsina detention centre where she served the rest of her sentence.

"Akrestsina is a black mark on my country, there are so many tears, so much pain connected to it. Everything that happened there on the day of the elections is madness. They may no longer treat people so badly, they don't beat them as they did, but everything that happens there can be called psychological violence and moral pressure. Basic human

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<sup>1</sup> <https://sk.gov.by/ru/news-ru/view/sledstvennym-komitetom-vozbuzhdeno-ugolovnoe-delo-v-otnoshenii-aleksandry-gerasimeni-9858/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/10/29/sdelali-iz-hleba-figurki-dlya-shashek-i-igrali>

rights are being violated.”

She told journalists how her cell was singled out for particularly bad treatment:

“On the first night we had mattresses, water and the toilet flushed, but on 2 October everything kicked off. After breakfast a guard came in and ordered us to roll up our mattresses.....Initially we thought that they had removed the mattresses to air them and to get rid of the fleas and bedbugs, but they never gave them back to us.”

On the same day the prison authorities turned off the hot water, the heating, and the toilet flush and from then on there were often five women in the cell which had four beds. Yelena told Amnesty International how they were forced to sleep on the metal frames of the bunk beds. To try and lessen the pain of lying on metal rods they used their clothing and newspaper and even resorted to using sanitary towels to cushion the metal. Every morning they needed to remove the clothes and carefully fold away the sanitary towels to prevent them being confiscated. They improvised flushing the toilet by filling water bottles with cold water from the tap. None of them were able to shower throughout the 15 days, and they were only able to take exercise five times during that period.

Yelena told Amnesty International that she thought her cell was singled out because of her public profile as an athlete.

“They wanted to scare me more and make me pay for raising my voice and being a voice for the people... They think they can control people with fear.”

Yelena was expecting to be released early in the morning following the last day of her sentence. Instead she was taken to a court hearing, sentenced to a fine for taking part in a further peaceful protest, and then only released much later that day. She asked the guards to inform her parents that she would not be released as expected, but nobody warned her parents who were left waiting for her to be released early in the morning only to find that she did not show up.

“When you are there you feel that anything can happen, and you have that fear that you may not get out because anything can happen in Belarus. There is no law in Belarus.”

Yelena Leuchanka is currently playing for the basketball team Panathinaikos in Athens, Greece. She wears jersey 20 in honour of the year 2020 when Belarusians protested against the electoral fraud and human rights violations. She is hopeful about the future for Belarus:

“Belarus is a marathon. As much as we want things to be over, in order to really realise how important it is to be involved in voting and knowing your rights and how you should be treated as people you need to go through difficult times..... We, as Belarusian people, are more united than ever before.”

Katsyaryna Snygina

“In 2020 I truly became a citizen. I took responsibility for what was going on in my country, and I understood that by being silent we were helping the regime.”

Katsyaryna Snytina, a medal winning basketball player and until March 2021 captain of the Belarusian national basketball team told Amnesty International why she felt that as a sportswoman she had a particular duty to speak out.

“People in Belarus look up to us athletes particularly in times of national hardship. We have strength of will, we don’t give up – we just keep trying and if we don’t succeed today we will win tomorrow. We mustn’t give up in Belarus even though it is hard and there are so many political prisoners and repression. Athletes never give up.”

Katsyaryna has been contracted to a Turkish basketball team for the past six years and until August she had not been very interested in politics. However, when the demonstrations started on 9 August 2020 she realised that she could not stay silent:

“I was in Turkey and I understood that I can’t just sit and stay silent. I decided I needed to express my opinion. The Belarusian people were suffering, but I understood that those were my fans, the people who had supported me in the national team. I decided that I needed to express my anti-government position.”

Katsyaryna worked with other athletes to spread information about what was going in Belarus. She signed the open letter and the holding of new elections, she posted on social media and became involved in collecting funds to support athletes who were losing their funding and not having their contracts extended because of their political opinions.

Together with other athletes she helped to set up the Society of Free Athletes, which has recorded videos and organized auctions of sporting memorabilia to raise funds. In December 2020 Katsyaryna auctioned the bronze medal she won as part of the Belarusian Team at the European Basketball championships.

Shortly before the New Year, Katsyaryna was sent a new contract as Captain of the National Team, however, the contract contained a clause that had not been used in previous contracts: it required that all her public statements be vetted by the Ministry of Sport and Tourism. Katsyaryna refused to sign on the basis that this would restrict her freedom of expression:

“It was a well thought out and intentional decision. I no longer want to represent Belarus internationally at the same time as my people are suffering and being subjected to torture and repression, when people are being killed with impunity (referring to at least three protestors who died as a result of police violence) and held in prisons. It doesn’t matter how often the bureaucrats say that sport is above politics, in our country, sport is the propaganda of the regime, and I no longer want to be part of that.”

**Andrei Krauchanka**

“We live everyday with the feeling that people will be coming for us anytime.”

Andrei Krauchanka is an Olympic silver medal winning track and field athlete. He won a gold medal in the European indoor decathlon in 2011. He has lost his employment outside athletics and his chance to compete in the Tokyo Olympics for Belarus, and he has been subjected to torture or other ill-treatment, because of his political views. He told Amnesty International that he felt very strongly that he could not stay silent in the context of the disputed election.

“I couldn’t accept the situation. We athletes are taught that the competition should be fair. I told myself that I would do everything possible to tell people that we mustn’t accept this, and we must not forgive it.”

He signed the same open letter that was signed by many athletes and as a result he was dropped from the national team and lost his job. He was never officially informed of this and only heard the news from other people. Deprived of all state support for his training programme, he has been training alone near his home in the countryside outside Minsk.

At the end of September, the Deputy Minister of Sport, Mikhail Partnoi, came to his home accompanied by two body-guards to try and force him to stay silent:

“I was shocked, I had the baby in my arms at the time and it was not nice. They threatened and intimidated me and asked me to withdraw my statements. They asked me not to go anywhere and to sit quietly. I didn’t listen to them and the next day I went to a demonstration.”

On 8 November 2020, he was arrested for taking part in an unsanctioned meeting, although as he told Amnesty International, he and his friends were detained in a car before they had even reached the protest:

“I was punched in the face even though my hands were tied behind my back in handcuffs. They just arrested everybody. That day they arrested a thousand people. We stood with our faces to the wall for 16 hours. We didn’t understand what was happening and then they took us to the prison (in Zhodzina). It took two hours and we were in handcuffs the whole time.”

Andrei Krauchanka, developed Covid-19 soon after his detention and he told Amnesty International that he believed the guards were deliberately trying to ensure that they were infected with Covid-19.

“We were made to stand face to face – they even pushed us so that we jostled up against each other. The whole time they were shouting insults at us. Calling us fascists and Germans. Then we were taken into a corridor and made to crouch down and to walk in that way. Some people were over 50 and they couldn’t do this. The man in front

of me had an injured knee and he was beaten. There were 60 or 70 of us, we were still in our outdoor clothes and we were sweating. It was the ideal environment for coronavirus. “

They were then made to sit down and get up repeatedly up to 150 times and those that were unable to do the exercises were beaten. They were also made to jump: “We linked arms and those who were stronger, like me, lifted the others. Even I found it very hard.” After this they were strip searched, and then made to put on their sweat drenched clothes back on and crawl on all fours to the cells. There were 20 people in a cell with four bunks, and the mattresses were removed for the first four days, and they were only fed after 30 hours. The treatment and conditions in detention violated the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment.

At the court hearing on the second day Andrei was accused of having taken part in the protest and of having shouted slogans, although he had never made it to the protest.

In April, Andrei declared a 10-day hunger strike to raise funds for political prisoners in Belarus: “I couldn’t watch this happening and I wanted to support people who are in prison. They have been there a year already and there are people there with small children like me. Their children are growing up without them. All they wanted to do was to show the truth. They didn’t do anything bad.”

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