

Repressed Belarusian athletes and international solidarity.

Are Belarusian sports stay out of politics?

Before the 2020 presidential election, some Belarusians called Alexander Lukashenko the only politician in Belarus. Alexander began his presidency in 1994 and has been re-elected five times for 26 years. The first five presidential elections were held under his total control and did not provoke huge opposition protests. But something went wrong in 2020.

According to the [Olympic Charter](#), one of the fundamental principles of Olympism is that ‘sports organisations within the Olympic Movement shall apply political neutrality’. Despite this, Alexander Lukashenko has been combining the presidency of Belarus with the presidency of the National Olympic Committee of Belarus since 1997. During this time he, as the president of the NOC, was easily re-elected [5](#) times in a row. Meanwhile, the current first vice-president of the NOC is Alexander Lukashenko’s eldest son Viktor Lukashenko. Viktor also has been combining the first vice-presidency with [two](#) high-ranking positions in power: the Assistant to the President of Belarus for National Security since 2005 and a member of the Security Council of Belarus since 2007. Thus, at the moment, the NOC is ruled by the two most influential figures in the political, law enforcement and national security spheres of Belarus.



Source: www.belta.by

In 1997, Alexander Lukashenko in his first official statement as the head of the NOC [said](#): ‘There are no analogues in the world for Head of state to be elected as Head of National Olympic Committee’. By this act, Alexander Lukashenko himself erased the line between politics and sports. But today this does not prevent the NOC from [declaring](#) that ‘sports should always stay out of politics’.

The fact that the Alexander-Viktor tandem occupies the highest positions in the NOC of Belarus explains a lot about what is happening in Belarusian sports. The ongoing uncompromising struggle with representatives of the Belarusian sports industry, who do not recognize Alexander Lukashenko as

the legitimate President of Belarus, seems to be an inherent component of Lukashenko's authoritarian leadership style, which has been implemented for decades.

It is widely known that Alexander Lukashenko systematically have violated national and international law regarding elections and duties of both the President of Belarus and the President of the NOC of Belarus. The Olympic Charter [says](#) that 'The officers and members of the executive body of an NOC shall be elected <...> for a term of office not exceeding four years', but Alexander Lukashenko violated this rule [twice](#), since he had the six-year term of office in 2004-2010 and the five-year term in 2012-2017, respectively. The above examples show that Alexander Lukashenko's behavior is unethical and his political interests are above the law.

Today we are once again seeing how the NOC of Belarus, ruled by the Alexander-Viktor tandem, have violated the Olympic Charter, which [says](#) that one of roles of a NOC is 'to take action against any form of discrimination and violence in sport'. Instead, there are tens of representatives of the sports industry of Belarus who have been repressed for political reasons in recent months.

Self-organization of athletes and repression

On August 9, 2020, the presidential elections were held in Belarus. The results of the elections were mass falsificated. On and after the election day, there was a wave of police brutality across the country. In response to that, representatives of the sports industry of Belarus published the [Open Letter](#) in mid-August. In the Open Letter, the signatories demand:

- to recognize the 2020 presidential elections invalid and to conduct repeated presidential elections;
- to dismiss all representatives of the Central Election Commission and the law enforcement agencies responsible for the falsifications and the violence;
- to stop the illegal activities of the law enforcement agencies and carry out checks of legality of their actions;
- to release and rehabilitate all political prisoners and all citizens detained during the protests, which are not involved in illegal activities;
- to provide full-fledged assistance to all victims of illegal actions of the security agencies.

A little later, two independent organizations were founded from among those who signed the Open Letter: the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation to support repressed representatives of the sports industry and the Free Association of Athletes of Belarus «SOS_BY» to unite all representatives of the sports industry who support the Open Letter demands. As of December 19, 2020, [1777](#) representatives of the sports industry signed the Open Letter.

The Belarusian authorities, in turn, have started systematic and massive repressions against representatives of the sports industry of Belarus who signed the Open Letter and/or publicly expressed their civic position. As of mid-December, four months after the publication of the Open Letter, 70 representatives of the sports industry fell under repression: all [70](#) people were dismissed "according to the law", of which 17 athletes were sentenced for 7-15 days of administrative arrest "according to the domestic law" and about 10 people were expelled from the national team. At the same time, none of them was officially repressed for their political views. Instead, the official reasons for the dismissal/expulsion of the representatives of the sports industry are: [absenteeism](#), [poor athletic performance](#) or "[of one's own free will](#)".

Outstanding [athletes](#) (champions and prize-winners of the Olympic Games and other international competitions), famous [sports functionaries](#), [trainers](#) and [sports journalists](#) of all ages representing different sports predominate among the repressed.

The toughest example of repressions against the Belarusian athletes is the [double arrest](#) of Elena Levchenko, one of the best basketball players in the history of Belarus and one of the leaders of the Free Association of Athletes of Belarus «SOS_BY». On September 30, 2020, Elena was detained at

Minsk National Airport, from where she planned to fly to Greece for rehabilitation. On the same day, she was sentenced to 15 days in prison for her ‘demands for fair elections’ during the protests that took place in Minsk on August 23 and September 27. On October 15, 2020, exactly 15 days later, she was re-arrested in the jail for 72 hours. But soon, on the same day, the trial was held, according to which she was accused of participating in the protests that took place in Minsk on September 20. Furthermore, photographs from Elena’s Instagram [account](#) and the Pressball [newspaper](#) were used as evidence, and her right to a lawyer was repeatedly limited. In the end she was fined and released. After her release, Elena [commented](#) on the conditions of her detention and arrest: "This is creepy. This is a violation of all human rights".



Source: www.twitter.com/MarisNoviks

The prosecution of Elena Levchenko provoked an international solidarity campaign and attracted a lot of media attention. [WNBPA](#), [EU Athletes](#), national basketball federations of [Sweden](#) and [France](#) gave their support to Elena. Besides, influential media such as [CNN](#), [The Times](#), [Der Spiegel](#), [Deutsche Welle](#) and [Aljazeera](#) published news of her arrest. There is reason to believe that Elena was fined at the second trial, and not arrested only thanks to the international solidarity campaign and the media attention.

At the request of the IOC, the NOC of Belarus [commented](#) on the arrest of Elena Levchenko – ‘she was sentenced to 15 days in prison, in accordance with the national legislation of the country’. Formally, this is true. Elena took part in the protests that violated the national legislation due to a lack of the permission from the local authorities. But the problem is that getting the permission is almost impossible. Equally important is the fact that the NOC was silent about the numerous violations during the trial and arrest of Elena.

Since Elena Levchenko is a [basketball player](#) of Chinese Sichuan Wales and is not a member of the Belarusian national basketball team, her case differs from most others athletes associated with the national teams, national clubs or state bodies and organizations.

There are many examples when in such cases everything starts with psychological pressure – with a [request](#) to renounce own signature from the Open Letter in exchange for a promise not to use repressions against a signer. There is even the special "[intimidation group](#)" led by the Deputy Minister of Sports and Tourism Mikhail Portnoi. Those who refuse the offer are asked to resign of one's own free will. Those who refuse the second offer face one or more follow restrictive measures: [non-renewal of contract](#) or [dismissal](#) from sports organizations (there is the [example](#) when the director of Olympic Freestyle Center was dismissed under article of the Labour Code for “pure ideological work with the staff”) and/or from the KGB, the [Ministry of Sports and Tourism](#), the [Ministry of Internal Affairs](#) and the Ministry of Emergency Situations; [loss](#) or [reduction](#) of scholarship (including the scholarship from the special fund of the President of Belarus); suspension from competitions; [expulsion](#) from a national team and [squeezing out](#) of Belarus.

In addition, those who have used their freedom of speech to take part in the peaceful protests may face the following: [violent beatings and torture](#) from the law enforcement agencies and unknown masked people, [fine](#), administrative arrest up to 15 days, or even [criminal case](#).

Solidarity is stronger than repression

On October 7, 2020, the Free Association of Athletes of Belarus «SOS_BY» addressed the International Olympic Committee with a [statement](#) that the NOC of Belarus has violated the principles of the Olympic Charter. In particular, the Association stated that the NOC does not oppose any form of violence, discrimination and pressure in sports, while many Belarusian athletes have been tortured, beaten and arrested. In the statement, the representatives of the Association note that ‘the current President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko is fully responsible for what is happening in Belarus’.



Source: www.apnews.com

The Association respectfully [asked](#) the IOC ‘to show solidarity with athletes and the people of Belarus’ and:

- to make proper investigation of facts of discrimination and violence against athletes in Belarus;

- to take the measures provided for in the Olympic Charter regarding the NOC, in particular – suspend the financing membership of the NOC until the normalisation of the situation;
- to help athletes who have suffered from illegal reprisals to participate in sporting events under the auspices of the IOC in case they have been unfairly suspended from such events by the NOC of Belarus.

It is important to note that the statement was prepared and submitted with the participation of [two](#) German organizations: the German Athletes Association (provided advisory support) and the law company Klinkert Rechtsanwälte PartGmbH (sent Amicus Curiae to the IOC). Meanwhile, [EU Athletes](#) and the NOCs of Latvia, Lithuania and Poland expressed their support and solidarity with the Belarusian athletes. Representatives of the NOCs [stated](#) that they are ready to create conditions for training for Belarusian athletes who are persecuted in Belarus.

After receiving the statement, the IOC decided to conduct a proper investigation. The IOC contacted the NOC of Belarus with a request to clarify the situation with possible pressure on the athletes. In response to the request, the NOC [assured](#) that Belarus fully complies with the Olympic Charter. Despite this, the IOC came to the conclusion that the current NOC leadership has not appropriately protected the Belarusian athletes from political discrimination. On November 25, 2020, the Executive Board of the IOC began a [formal procedure](#) with a view to considering appropriate measures or sanctions against the NOC of Belarus.

On December 7, 2020, the IOC took [provisional measures](#) against the NOC of Belarus. In particular, the IOC decided to satisfy all requests of the Association of Athletes of Belarus «SOS_BY», and additionally:

- to exclude the currently elected members of the Executive Board of the NOC of Belarus (except Tatiana Drozdovskaya, since she is an ex-officio representative of athletes) from all IOC events and activities;
- to suspend any discussions with the NOC of Belarus regarding the hosting of future IOC events.

As stated in the statement, the provisional measures are applicable until further notice or until election a new NOC Executive Board in February 2021.

Who is to blame and what to do?

As mentioned earlier, the Free Association of Athletes of Belarus «SOS_BY» accuses Alexander Lukashenko of the political crisis in Belarus. Their position is adequate as well as their statements that all actions of the Belarusian representatives of the sport industry are secondary, since they were committed in response to the actions of the authorities. The chronology of the events confirms this point.

Moreover, the Free Association of Athletes of Belarus «SOS_BY» and the signers of the Open Letter have no political ambitions and are not political entities. Both of them do not use the sports infrastructure of Belarus in their activities and do not receive funding from Belarusian or foreign sports organizations or governments. As [stated](#) in the Open Letter, the undersigned express their civic position not as athletes, but as part of the people of Belarus - the only source of power in accordance with the Constitution of Belarus. Thus, the Free Association of Athletes of Belarus «SOS_BY» and the signers of the Open Letter do not violate the [fundamental principle](#) of Olympism, which says that 'sports organisations within the Olympic Movement shall apply political neutrality'.

Since the deep crisis in the sports sphere is only a small part of the huge internal political crisis in Belarus, a solution to the crisis in the sports sphere must also be found at the political level. Who should take the first step? The one who unleashed the crisis – Belarusian political and sports authorities.



Source: www.news.24tv.ua

If Alexander Lukashenko really wants that Belarusian sports stay out of politics, he should start with himself. The first step to address the crisis in the sports sphere may be a promise of Alexander Lukashenko not to run in the upcoming elections of the NOC Executive Board in February 2021. Otherwise, he should resign from the post of president of Belarus, since the occupation of both the post of president of the NOC and post of president of Belarus creates a conflict of interests.

In case the illegitimate President of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko abandons these scenarios and continue repressions against representatives of the sports industry, there is a high probability that Belarus will repeat the sad [example](#) of Russia, when the IOC banned Russian athletes from using their national flag, anthem and uniform at the 2018 Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea. Since after the imposition of the provisional measures, the IOC [stated](#): ‘The IOC will to continue to monitor the situation and reserves the right to consider any further action or to remove any of these provisional measures depending on the evolution of the situation’ in Belarus.