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## ***Belarus: Drop Charges Against Sports Group Founders***

### ***Sports Governing Bodies Should Call for an End to Criminalizing Athlete Rights Defenders***

(Nyon, Switzerland, 8 June, 2021) — The Belarusian authorities should immediately drop all criminal charges against Aliaksandra Herasimenia and Aliaksandr Apeikin, chair and executive director of the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation (BSSF), the Sport & Rights Alliance said today. On April 6, 2021 the Investigative Committee of the Republic of Belarus opened a criminal case against the group's founders. If convicted, they risk up to five years in prison.

“The accusations against Aliaksandra and Aliaksandr for their courageous work are part of a wider crackdown against civil society in Belarus, including human rights defenders, independent journalists and lawyers, to intimidate and silence critics,” said Minky Worden, director of global initiatives at Human Rights Watch. “The crackdown on human rights defenders is a source of great concern and simply unacceptable.”

Belarusian athletes, coaches, and other people involved with sports are suffering reprisals for exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association. About 60 have lost their jobs, more than 20 have been detained, six are currently detained, and two are facing criminal prosecution. The authorities have also abused children - [media reported](#) that Belarussian riot police detained a 14-year-old student, who is also a football player, ill-treated him and forced him to confess to fabricated charges of petty hooliganism.

The BSSF provides critical legal, financial and logistic support to athletes who are suffering reprisals by the Belarusian regime. The bogus charges against Herasimenia and Apeikin are based on a politically motivated misrepresentation of their support for athletes targeted by the authorities. Belarusian authorities allege that through their human rights advocacy, the duo caused “harm to the national security of the Republic of Belarus.”

“We stand in deep solidarity with Aliaksandra and Aliaksandr and their families. We are determined to protect their freedom, health and safety,” said Brendan Schwab, executive director of the World Players Association. “We call upon the authorities in Belarus to drop these completely fabricated criminal charges against BSSF immediately. The crackdown in Belarus is symptomatic of an incremental trend of targeting athletes for political purposes that must end. Sport governing officials must urgently exercise their influence and use all available means to ensure that athletes and those who defend their rights are protected.”

Earlier in 2021, Viktor Lukashenka, replaced his father, Aliaksder Lukashenka, as head of the [National Olympic Committee \(NOC\) of the Republic of Belarus](#). “It is not the first time we see how failure to separate sporting authorities from governmental roles puts athletes in harm's way,” said Sylvia Schenk, sport expert for Transparency International Germany. “Sports bodies need to review their governance regulations to ensure adequate protection of athletes. Mechanisms and systems capable of responding quickly to cases of urgent crisis and address such situations need to be made available.”

Since the beginning of the protests against the disputed presidential election in August 2020, the human rights situation in Belarus has been rapidly deteriorating. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has [reported](#) mass detention, intimidation and torture. UN Experts [repeatedly expressed](#) their concerns about the persistent pattern of police brutality and

impunity for the abusers. Tens of thousands of peaceful protesters have suffered reprisals, and the Viasna Human Rights Centre has documented that [more than 400 people](#) are still in detention because of the peaceful exercise of their political rights. The [IOC itself has recognized](#) that the Belarus NOC has not appropriately protected its athletes from political discrimination and decided to implement provisional measures against them. In the meantime, [UEFA awarded](#) the Women's Under-19 European Championship 2025 tournament final to Belarus.

*The **Sport & Rights Alliance** is a coalition of leading global non-governmental organizations, including the Committee to Protect Journalists, Football Supporters Europe, Human Rights Watch, the International Trade Union Confederation, Transparency International Germany, and World Players Association, UNI Global Union.*

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