



# **SPORT AND HUMAN RIGHTS: overview of the human rights situation in Belarus 2023**

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# Introduction

Human rights violations in Belarus are unprecedented in scale and systemic in nature. The country's de facto authorities use repressive mechanisms to intimidate, pressure and censor, and restrict the fundamental rights and freedoms of those who disagree with the existing authoritarian regime. At the end of 2023, 1452 people [recognized](#) as political prisoners were in captivity.

In 2023, among those persecuted were representatives of the sports industry in Belarus. The grounds were participation in peaceful protests after the 2020 presidential election, promotion of “extremist” activities, support of Ukraine and condemnation of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and others. The issue of admission of Belarusian athletes to international competitions, including the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, remained topical.

We are representatives of the FairPlay human rights initiative and are engaged in research, analysis, education and advocacy activities on the topic of sport and human rights, including in Belarus. Research on this topic is necessary for a better understanding of the state of public institutions in general. In our material, we have collected the most important news and statistics from the world of Belarusian sport for 2023 in order to analyze the consequences of mass repression and state control of the sphere of sport in Belarus, to monitor trends and formulate recommendations in terms of ensuring the implementation and protection of human rights.

# Persecution of representatives of the sports industry

In 2023, politically motivated persecution of athletes, coaches and other representatives of the sports industry in Belarus continued. We know of at least 15 athletes who were subjected to repression by the de facto authorities of Belarus.

Some of the repressed Belarusian coaches, athletes, sports directors, administrators and bloggers are still under investigation in criminal cases, others were arrested in administrative cases or in criminal cases with prison terms. A large number of representatives of the sports industry have been prevented from practicing their profession.

The grounds for prosecution were:

- **facilitating “extremist” activities** by subscribing to resources or distributing materials recognized as extremist, or spreading “extremist” views:

Three employees of FC “Neman” (Hrodna) Dzmitry Kovalyonak, Dzmitry Belski and Julia Arlashina **were detained** for subscribing to resources recognized as extremist and imposing “absurd extremist ideas”.

Sportsman **Valery Jarotski** and football coach **Artur Mustyhin** were included in the list of citizens of the Republic of Belarus, foreign citizens and stateless persons involved in extremist activities. The sports media Tribuna.com was **declared** an “extremist formation” and the Instagram account of sports journalist Aliaksandr Ivulin was **recognized** as “extremist materials”;

- **participating in peaceful protests in 2020 after the presidential election:**

FC “Dynamo-Minsk” academy coach Artur Mustyhin was detained and subsequently **sentenced** to 3 years of “home chemistry” under Article 342 of the Criminal Code for participating in one peaceful protest in 2020;

- **supporting Ukraine and condemning Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine:**

The long-distance runner Andrej Bierazouski was **sentenced** to 13 days of arrest – the athlete published on his Facebook page his photo with the caption “Glory to Ukraine” on a blue-yellow background, **which was considered as “expression of civil-political, personal and other interests” and which the court considered an “offense”;**

- **defamation of the president and insulting the president:**

Gomel chess champion Valery Jarotski was **accused** of defamation under Article 188 and defamation against the president under part 2 of Article 367 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Belarus. Jarotski was sent for compulsory treatment in a psychiatric hospital. Bodybuilder Aliaksandr Sharabaiko was **sentenced** to 1,5 years in prison for “insulting the president”;

- **comments in Telegram channels and social networks:**

Rostislav Losev, a karate coach, was [detained](#) in Mahiliou for writing angry comments from 2020 and the fact of registration in the chatbot of the “Peramoga” plan<sup>1</sup>.

Belarusian lawyer Aliaksandr Danilevich was [sentenced](#) to 10 years in prison for “complicity in public calls for actions aimed at harming the national security of the Republic of Belarus” because Danilevich's clients were Belarusian repressed athletes Aleksandra Herasimienia and Aliaksandr Apeikin, who were previously sentenced in absentia in Belarus to 12 years in prison. Danilevich was accused **of intentionally assisting the athletes by providing legal advice in the field of international sports law.** This is an exemplary precedent, which is an example of the actual criminalization of the whole advocacy activity in Belarus and deprives people of the right to defend themselves and the advocates themselves of the right to the profession.

The detention of representatives of the sports industry in Belarus is often accompanied by the recording of so-called “penitential” videos. Such videos are a statement or confession on camera, made under pressure or coercion, in which a person confesses to the alleged offense, expresses remorse or regret. Often people are insulted and humiliated in the video. People are forced to confess to subscribing to resources recognized as extremist, writing comments on social networks, and participating in peaceful protests. Such videos are created by agencies within the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and distributed by pro-government Telegram channels and media, as well as state television broadcasts. These confessions recorded on camera are used by the de facto authorities of Belarus for propaganda and control purposes. The practice of creating and disseminating “penitential” videos is unacceptable and is an unlawful act that violates **freedom from degrading treatment, freedom of expression, and the right to non-interference in private life.**

After the 2020 presidential election and the peaceful protests that followed it and a new wave of repression against anyone who disagrees with the regime, Belarus has developed a system in which any opinion different from the state's is equated with “extremism”. Thus, the de facto authorities of Belarus began to use the definition of “extremism” to combat any form of dissent. At the same time, there is no unified definition of this concept in the Belarusian legislation. Such practice is a direct violation of **the human right to freedom of expression, the right to participate in political life and due process, contributes to the weakening of democratic institutions, and has a chilling effect on civil society.**

A vibrant and diverse media environment is an integral component of democratic societies. Recognizing independent media as “extremist” undermines **media pluralism, impedes transparency, and creates an environment of information control and self-censorship.**

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<sup>1</sup>“Peramoga” (“Victory”) plan is a situational-analytical center created by the ByPol initiative to restore law and order in Belarus through an organized and peaceful transfer of power to the people.

In addition, the de facto Belarusian authorities deprive representatives of the sports industry of the right to a profession through a repressive system. We know of cases of dismissal for subscribing to resources recognized as extremist, or not going to work during the period of arrest for subscribing to such resources, as well as for a message in Telegram chat “Zelensky is a beautiful surname”. **The right to a profession** is a fundamental aspect of an individual's ability to participate fully in society, including **the right to work** without discrimination on the basis of political opinion, ensuring that people can practice their chosen profession without fear of persecution or punishment for expressing their opinion.

# Admission of Belarusian athletes to international competitions

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the issue of admission of Belarusian athletes to various international competitions has been acute. There is no unified position on this issue, and each sports association or union solves the issue locally.

The UEFA Executive Committee [decided](#) not to exclude Belarusian football teams from international competitions, despite the letter of more than 100 European parliamentarians – it noted that the very fact of participation of the Belarusian national team in the qualifying matches of Euro-2024 would be used by the state propaganda to prove acceptance by the international community; it also emphasized Belarus' participation in Russia's aggression against Ukraine and internal political repression against its own citizens.

IIHF on the contrary [stated](#) that the admission of the national teams of Belarus and Russia to the competition is not safe for the time being. The risk assessment was carried out by a company specializing in the assessment of risks associated with various global issues. A similar process has already been carried out during the decision to move the World Hockey Championship in 2021 from Minsk to Riga. According to the IIHF President, it is about the safety of players, including those from Belarus and Russia, staff and fans. What exactly is a threat to security was not defined. The issue of reintegration of the national teams of Belarus and Russia into IIHF competitions will be considered again in the spring of 2024.

In May 2023, the conference [“Athletes for Peace and Freedom”](#) organized by the Belarus Sports Solidarity Foundation was held in Tallinn. The conference was a significant event and “an unprecedented international sporting platform that gives professional athletes the opportunity to gather and discuss how athletes and modern sport can use their potential to promote the ideals of peace and freedom”. Among other things, the conference discussed the place of Russian and Belarusian sport in the international arena. Within the framework of the conference, a declaration was adopted, which outlined possible conditions of admission of athletes to competitions and necessary measures to be taken by the IOC. The declaration was distributed among the key sports and political institutions on the identified issues.

On 28 March, the IOC [published](#) recommendations for international federations and organizations on the participation of athletes with Belarusian or Russian citizenship in international competitions.

On December 8, the IOC **decided** to admit athletes from Belarus and Russia to the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris **in a neutral status**. This means that athletes from Belarus and Russia will be able to compete if they do not have a contract with the Russian or Belarusian military or other national security bodies and do not support the war in Ukraine (in any form). In addition, athletes are forbidden to use flags, anthems of Belarus and Russia, other distinctive national symbols; the uniforms of athletes must be white in color; athletes are forbidden to give interviews to the media. No more than one athlete from Belarus and Russia can be entered in each discipline, which deprives athletes of the opportunity to participate in doubles or team sports.

The World Aquatics was the first organization to **adopt** a specific set of criteria allowing athletes with Belarusian and Russian citizenship to participate in international competitions in a neutral status. The set of criteria was developed on the basis of the IOC recommendations of March 28, 2023.

The proposed conditions are quite transparent and compromise during the period of Russia's military actions in Ukraine, providing a real opportunity for participation of athletes from Belarus. The decisions adopted by international federations and organizations, which allow the possibility of participation of Belarusian athletes on standard conditions, in essence can serve as an example of **sportswashing** (use of sports events to create a positive image) and be used by the authorities as a proof of their legitimacy and recognition by the international community, which is unacceptable during the period of Belarus' participation in Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the ongoing widespread violation of human rights inside the country.



# Recommendations

In the conclusion of our annual analysis on the state of sports and human rights in Belarus in 2023, we have made a number of recommendations that have the potential to influence the situation and provoke change.

## International pressure

- international pressure on the Belarusian government to ensure respect for and realization of the fundamental human rights and freedoms of representatives of the sports industry in Belarus;

## Introduction of sanctions

- introduction of sanctions against sports organizations and federations, targeted sanctions against officials in the sports sector of Belarus who are responsible for human rights violations;

## Public solidarity

- expressing solidarity with international sports organizations and federations, athletes, and raising awareness of widespread and systemic human rights violations in Belarus;

## Legal support

- providing legal assistance and support to athletes facing persecution in Belarus;

## Boycotting international competitions

- boycotting international sporting events held in Belarus or involving Belarus;

## Support for civil society

- strengthening support for civil society organizations and initiatives in Belarus that work at the intersection of human rights and sport in order to empower them and promote change from within;

## Media coverage

- continued media coverage of human rights violations in Belarus, including those targeting athletes, to keep the international community informed and interested;

### **Long-term engagement**

- recognizing that addressing human rights violations in Belarus will require the continued engagement and commitment of the international community.

Following the new wave of repression of Belarusian citizens after the 2020 presidential election, which entailed widespread and unprecedented human rights violations, and during the period of Belarus' involvement in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we consider such instruments of influence as dialog and negotiations with the state institutions of Belarus to be ineffective and impossible.

**FairPlay is a human rights in/through/for sports organization.**

**Our mission: empowering people in exercising sports and human rights for equal, inclusive, and fair Belarus and the World.**

**Our goal: human rights are respected in the sports industry.**

**To achieve our mission, we:**

- Analyze policies, laws and practices and share about them in clear and accessible language;
- Engage in human rights advocacy at the national and international levels;
- Educate and raise awareness, including through sporting events.

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