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15 January 2021

René Fasel
President
International Ice Hockey Federation
Via email

Dear Mr. Fasel,

Your organization, the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF), is planning the 2021 Ice Hockey World Championship which is scheduled for 21 May to 6 June 2021 in Latvia and Belarus. On 25-26 January, the IIHF Council will meet to make a decision on whether Belarus meets the conditions to co-host this event. I am writing to urge you to cancel the event in Belarus on account of the country's increasingly grim human rights situation, and issue a statement in support of the democratic opposition to the 26-year-old regime of Alexander Lukashenko.

I am sure you are well aware of the dire human rights situation in Belarus. On 17 December, the Belarus Sport Solidarity Foundation wrote a [letter](#) detailing the human rights violations of the Lukashenko regime. Since then, the situation has only deteriorated.

According to Human Rights Centre "Viasna," more than 33,000 individuals have been detained, including more than 70 professional athletes. Fifteen athletes have received prison sentences, and many more have been fired from their jobs for their support of the demonstrations. More than 1,000 cases of torture have been documented, and at least seven people have been killed since the beginning of the protests.

Most recently, on 28 December, you received a [letter](#) from Alena Leuchanka, a professional basketball player and a victim of the Lukashenko

regime's violent crackdown. In her letter, she asked whether it was "appropriate to hold the World Ice Hockey Championship in a country where violence, human rights violations and legal default have become commonplace."

You are also well aware that there exists a vast gulf between the stated values of the IIHF and those of the Belarusian regime. On 23 December, a [letter](#) signed by 51 MEPs from all across Europe noted that the charter of the IIHF condemns "any form of harassment [...] physical, verbal or sexual abuse; moral or mental injury; acts of violence or illegal activity," and urged you not "to act in a manner likely to damage the IIHF's reputation or bring ice hockey into disrepute." Moreover, the IIHF bylaws state that an event should be cancelled if "there is reason for concern that the well-being or the safe freedom of movement of the players, officials, travelling spectators and media is in doubt." It is not appropriate to hold the World Ice Hockey Championship in a country wracked by political violence and brutal oppression. You have a responsibility to live up to your own principles as outlined in your charter and bylaws.

Despite all of the above, on 11 January, you met with Lukashenko to discuss the Championship, not only violating the principles in your charter, but also, by doing so, indirectly dismissing the thousands of Belarusians who have languished in prison under his rule. We would like to take a moment to explain why what you said in that meeting, and in a subsequent interview published on your website, were in violation of your own principles.

In your meeting with Lukashenko, you said that you do not "want to mix sport and politics." Unfortunately, the truth is that sport and politics are inseparable, especially in a country like Belarus, where hockey has for years been used as a propaganda tool of the Lukashenko regime. Top officials in the Belarusian Ice Hockey Federation are close associates of Lukashenko, and are directly involved in the crimes of his regime. For example, Dmitry Baskau, the Head of the Belarusian Ice Hockey Federation, has been identified as one of the thugs who beat peaceful protester Raman Bandarenka to death in November. Despite the fact that the IIHF has already started an investigation into his actions, he was one of the officials you met on your visit to Minsk.

The Ice Hockey World Championship is not important to Lukashenko just because he is a fan of the game. Rather, the Championship provides his government with international legitimacy, and gives him the opportunity to portray an image of stability and normalcy. Your organization has tremendous media influence, and Lukashenko hopes to use and manipulate that influence — as he has repeatedly done with numerous organizations, music festivals, and business summits — to bolster his own reputation and regain credibility, both locally and abroad. For a few weeks, international media will focus on the athletes and their accomplishments, instead of the political prisoners and brutalized peaceful protesters. Lukashenko will use the images of packed stadiums to distract from the packed prisons where he tortures anyone who stands up to him. Do not give him that opportunity.

In your meeting with Lukashenko, you also said that “sport should unite nations not divide them.” The Belarusian nation already stands before you, united against the tyrant Lukashenko. Since August, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians have taken to the streets to protest the cruel dictatorship of Lukashenko, who has ruled the country for the last 26 years. His regime is not legitimate, and is not recognized as such by most European countries. Unlike in your native Switzerland, citizens of Belarus do not have the right to an independent judiciary, to vote for their leaders, to protest peacefully on the street, or even to wave a certain flag. You will be able to confirm this if you meet with representatives of the Belarusian democratic movement, as you have promised to do, and read the thousands of messages from Belarusian hockey fans that you have received, begging you to cancel the tournament. You will find that it is not merely sport that unites nations, but rather a common commitment to freedom and human rights.

In the [FAQ](#) section published on the IIHF’s website on 13 January, you said that you think “that a lot of people are underestimating the capacity of the Belarus government to move forward, modernize, and build a new constitution in the country.” The people of Belarus have made it clear that they want free and fair elections and the end to political violence. “Modernization” and a “new constitution” is language that the Lukashenko regime uses to cover up its illegitimacy. How can Belarusians talk about moving forward, if they cannot talk about an end to censorship, government repression, and massive electoral fraud? These are the real preconditions for dialogue and change, not vague assurances made by authoritarians.

Taking this and the information above into consideration, holding the Hockey Championship in Minsk damages the reputation of the IIHF, which has articulated a strong commitment to respecting human rights and human dignity. Dozens of European politicians and sports officials, including the Prime Minister of Finland Sanna Marin, the vice-president of the IIHF Kalervo Kummola, and the head of the Danish Hockey Union Ulrik Larsen, have already called for the cancellation or postponement of the Championship.

We respectfully urge you and your organization to use your platform to advance human rights in Belarus and contribute to a mission of increasing global democratic freedoms. The Lukashenko regime expects you to be indifferent to the atrocities being committed in Belarus in order to continue repressing its own people. Canceling the World Ice Hockey Championship in Minsk will prevent Lukashenko from whitewashing its crimes with your support. Your organization's influence in Belarus gives you the opportunity to make a hugely influential condemnation of Lukashenko's regime, and to greatly enhance the cause of freedom in Belarus. Call for the release of all arbitrarily detained citizens, an end to political violence, and new free and fair elections.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (212) 246-8486 or by e-mail at info@hrf.org.

Sincerely,

Garry Kasparov
Chairman
Human Rights Foundation

