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Russian Campaigners Use World Cup to Stage Sentsov Protest

By Reuters

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Reuters

Russian activists on Tuesday held a covert protest on a central Moscow thoroughfare popular with fans watching the World Cup, calling on the Kremlin to release a hunger-striking Ukrainian filmmaker held in a Siberian jail.

Street activists unveiled a 1.5 meter-tall mock-up World Cup trophy bound in barbed wire and carrying the slogan "#Free Sentsov" a reference to Oleg Sentsov, who was jailed in 2015 on what he calls political charges.

Sentsov has been on hunger strike since May 14 in a bid to highlight the World Cup host's human rights record while it is in the global spotlight, and to win the release of other jailed Ukrainians.

Related article: Russian Celebrities Join Flashmob in Support of Jailed Ukrainian Filmmaker Sentsov

Photographs posted on social media showed football fans posing with the mockup trophy on Nikolskaya, a pedestrianised street from Red Square to the old KGB headquarters at Lubyanka, that has become a late-night party area during the soccer cup.

"We're bringing attention to Oleg Sentsov who has been on hunger strike for 44 days. He could die at any moment," said Natalya Gryaznevich, a spokeswoman for Open Russia, a pro-democracy movement founded by Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Human rights activists and Ukrainian politicians hope that President Vladimir Putin might release Sentsov and others as part of a prisoner swap with Kiev.

Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko discussed a possible swap between the countries in a phone call last week, the Kremlin said.

Sentsov was not mentioned by name in the Kremlin statement. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has emphasised Sentsov was jailed for a very serious crime when asked if the Ukrainian could be handed over to Kiev as part of a prisoner swap.

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Sentsov was sentenced to 20 years in a maximum security prison in 2015 after being found guilty of setting fire to two offices in Crimea, including one belonging to Russia's ruling political party, after Moscow annexed the territory from Ukraine.

Sentsov was also convicted of plotting to blow up a statue.

Sentsov, 41, pleaded not guilty at the time and denounced his trial as politically motivated. The European Union said the case was "in breach of international law" and the U.S. State Department called it a "clear miscarriage of justice".

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