

Belarus Olympic Athlete 'Happy to be in Safety' in Poland

By [Dario Thuburn for AFP](#)

August 05, 2021



Krystsina Tsimanouskaya **Valery Sharifulin / TASS**

Belarusian Olympic sprinter Krystsina Tsimanouskaya said she was "happy to be in safety" in Warsaw on Thursday, a day after arriving in Poland where she took refuge after saying she feared for her life if forced to return home.

The 24-year-old athlete has been at the center of a diplomatic drama in the middle of the Games since seeking the protection of Tokyo 2020 staff on Sunday, saying her team was trying to bundle her onto a plane after she publicly criticized her coaches.

"I am also happy to be here, happy to be in safety," she told reporters in the Polish capital where she arrived from Tokyo via Vienna.

Tsimanouskaya said she was "surprised that the situation became such a political scandal because it started out as a sporting issue", and revealed that she was "not thinking about

political asylum" in EU member Poland, which has granted her a humanitarian visa.

"I just want to pursue my sporting career," she said, adding that her husband, Arseny Zdanevich, was "already on the road to Poland — he will be here today".

The Polish government said Zdanevich had also been given a humanitarian visa after he fled to Ukraine on Wednesday.

"I hope we can stay here and I can pursue my career and he can find work," Tsimanouskaya said, adding that she was "willing to return to Belarus once I'm sure that I will be safe there."

Holding up a T-shirt saying "I just want to run", Tsimanouskaya revealed that she hoped to compete at two more Olympic Games, and vowed to do "everything to get back in shape and continue my career."

'Messages of support'

Before leaving Tokyo, the sprinter spent two nights sheltering in the Polish embassy after calling for international help.

Belarus has been wracked by political upheaval and a crackdown on dissent after disputed elections that returned strongman Alexander Lukashenko to power last year.

Tsimanouskaya was one of more than 2,000 Belarusian sports figures who signed an open letter calling for new elections and for political prisoners to be freed.

But her trouble in Tokyo came after she posted on her Instagram, criticizing her coaches for entering her into a race without informing her first.

"My parents told me that they're saying bad things about me on television... I got a lot of bad messages but I got even more messages of support," Tsimanouskaya told reporters.

"I'm very worried about my parents, particularly since my dad has a heart condition and it has got worse in recent days," she said.

The International Olympic Committee has said it will investigate Belarus's Olympic team, as activists call for the country's Olympic committee to be suspended and its athletes to compete as neutrals.

'Stop being afraid'

Lukashenko and his son Viktor have been banned from Olympic events over the targeting of athletes for their political views.

Shortly before the Tokyo Games, Lukashenko warned sports officials and athletes that he expected results in Japan.

"Think about it before going," he said. "If you come back with nothing, it's better for you not to come back at all."

The alleged attempt to return Tsimanouskaya to Belarus has prompted condemnation, with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken accusing Minsk of "another act of transnational repression."

In power since 1994, Lukashenko sparked international outrage in May by dispatching a fighter jet to intercept a Ryanair plane flying from Greece to Lithuania to arrest a dissident on board.

The Olympic saga came as police in Ukraine said missing Belarusian activist Vitaly Shishov, whose NGO helps his compatriots flee the country, had been found hanged in a park in Kiev.

Police said they had opened a murder probe and would pursue all leads including "murder disguised as suicide", while activists accused authorities of "an operation... to liquidate a Belarusian who presented a true danger to the regime."

Speaking to the press for the first time since arriving in Warsaw, Tsimanouskaya urged her fellow "Belarusians to stop being afraid and to speak out if they feel some pressure."

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