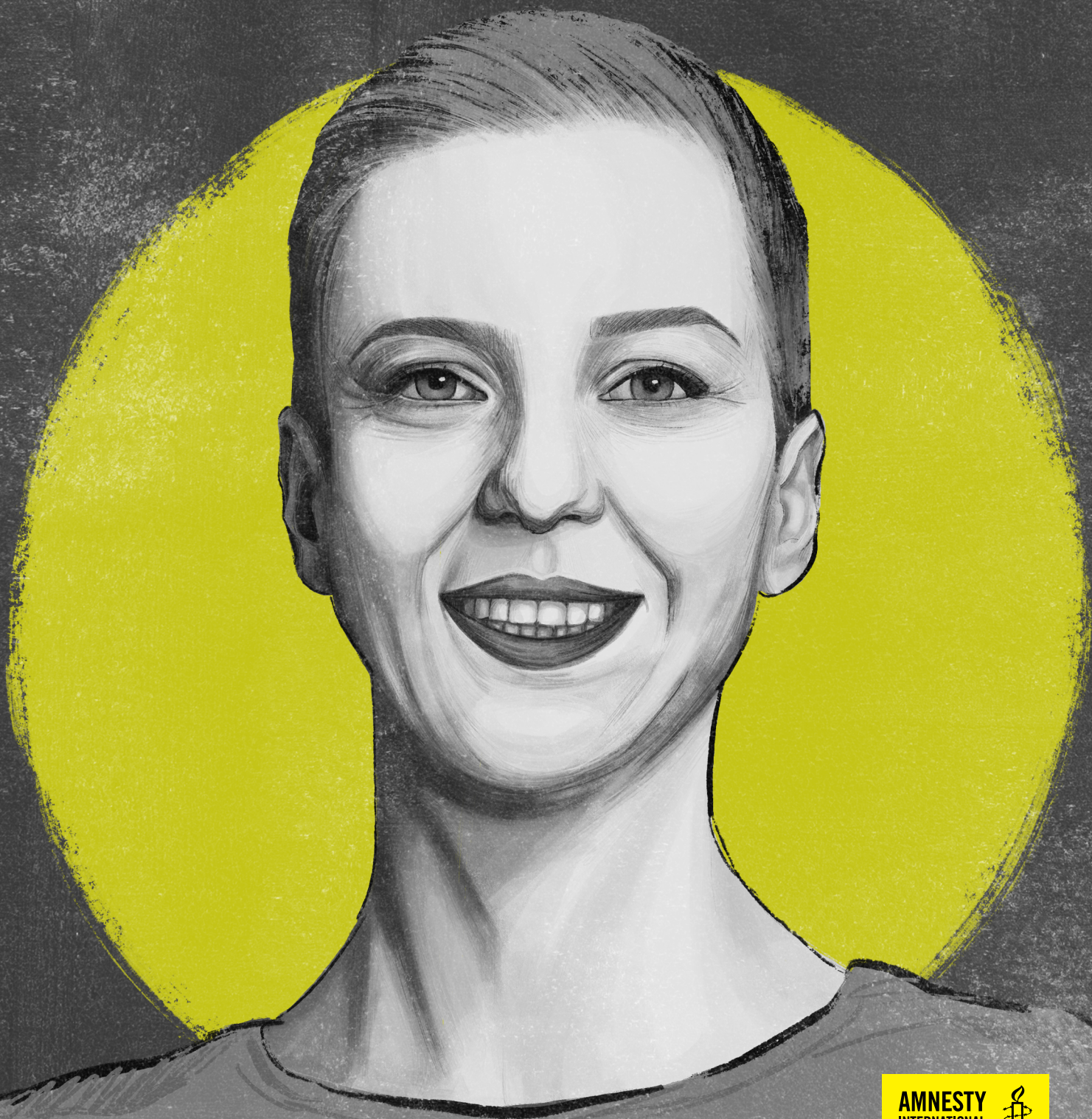


**POLITICAL ACTIVIST ABDUCTED
AND LOCKED UP FOR 11 YEARS**

Maryia Kalesnikava, Belarus



KEY CONCEPTS

- Right to peaceful protest
- Freedom of peaceful assembly
- Freedom of expression
- Human rights defenders and activists

ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

Participants will learn about human rights, with an emphasis on two of the rights that enable peaceful protest: freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. To fully understand these rights, the participants will get to know Maryia Kalesnikava from Belarus, who was arrested after exercising her right to peaceful protest. As part of the activity, participants are encouraged to write letters in support of and showing solidarity with Maryia.

AGE

14+

TIME NEEDED

45 minutes

MATERIALS

- Flipchart paper or whiteboard with two intersecting circles, one titled „FOR ME” and the other „FOR SOCIETY”
- Papers with the Article 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Maryia Kalesnikava’s story
- Flipchart or whiteboard markers
- Post-its
- Papers, pens and pencils
- Optional: video of Maryia Kalesnikava
- The Right to peaceful protest (Background information)
- The Right to protest in Belarus (Background information)

PRECAUTIONS

This activity discusses the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of expression. It assumes that participants generally experience a high level of freedom in expressing their thoughts, ideas, identities, religious beliefs, and so on. However, some participants may have faced significant limitations on their right to protest and other human rights, which can evoke a strong emotional response. Facilitators should be mindful of participants’ backgrounds and experiences, adjust questions and discussions to be sensitive to these experiences, provide a safe space for participants to express their feelings and offer support as needed.

1. UNDERSTANDING THE RIGHT TO PROTEST

🕒 15 minutes

According to the size of the group, create pairs or small groups. Give them a copy of Articles 19 and 20 of the UDHR, along with post-its and pens. Ask them to read the Articles, discuss why these two rights are important to them personally and for society, and ask them write their ideas on post-its.

When they are done with this task, ask the groups to share their ideas in plenary and stick the post-its on the relevant part of the circles.

Summarize and reflect on the ideas, then ask participants to discuss the following questions:

1. What happens when these rights are violated by those in power?
2. What could be done to protect these rights? Who could protect them?

Summarize and follow up with the most important information about the right to peaceful protest.

2. MARYIA KALESNIKAVA'S STORY

🕒 15 minutes

Share the most important facts about the political situation in Belarus. Outline some of the human rights violations perpetrated by the authorities there, and explain how the right to protest is being violated by the repressive government.

Distribute copies of Maryia's story to the participants and let them read it.

Then, ask the groups to discuss the following questions:

- What are your thoughts after hearing Maryia's story?
- What do you believe gives Maryia the strength to protest?

Bring the participants back together and ask the groups to share their thoughts in plenary.

If time allows, show them a [short clip about Maryia](#).



3. TAKE ACTION

 15 minutes

Explain about Amnesty International's Write for Rights campaign. Explain that Amnesty International is encouraging people to show Maryia that they support her. They can send her their message of solidarity and hope. Be creative!

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS (UDHR)

ARTICLE 19

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

ARTICLE 20

“Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association. No one may be compelled to belong to an association.”

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

THE RIGHT TO PEACEFUL PROTEST

Peaceful protest is a dynamic and public way of exercising our human rights. Throughout history, protests have allowed individuals and groups to express dissent, opinions and ideas, expose injustice and abuse, and demand accountability from those in power. Peaceful protests cover a wide spectrum of activities, from letter writing and organizing petitions, to pickets, rallies, marches and strikes. They include colourful and noisy mass demonstrations, silent vigils, sit-ins, flash mobs and media stunts. They also include Twitter storms and online organizing to share similar slogans and messages, as well as hunger strikes, banner drops and street art. They can be individual or collective and can take place online or offline. All these and other forms of protest are protected under the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, and sometimes other human rights as well.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND PEACEFUL ASSEMBLY

Article 19 of the UDHR protects your right to hold your own opinions and to express them freely, without government interference. This includes the right to express views through public protests or through written

materials, media broadcasts, the internet and works of art. We need a free flow of ideas to ensure that different opinions are taken into account and different ideas are aired. Limiting the right to freedom of expression undermines transparency and accountability and makes the fight for human rights even more difficult. Freedom of expression is important not just to society as a whole, but also to the individual. Our opinions and thoughts are a fundamental part of what makes us human and stopping people from expressing these is equivalent to cutting off a part of their personality!

The right to freedom of expression is not an unlimited right. Sometimes, governments have a duty to protect other people's rights or certain public interests which requires some expression to be prohibited or restricted. But the circumstances in which the authorities can restrict the right to freedom of expression are very narrow and must be considered as exceptional rather than the norm.

The right to freedom of expression is closely linked to the right to freedom of peaceful assembly, which is the right of people to come together in a public place for a common expressive purpose, such as for meetings, strikes, processions, rallies and sit-ins. The right to peaceful assembly means that someone can gather together with others peacefully without fear of being arrested or harassed by the police. In fact, the authorities have a positive duty to facilitate peaceful assemblies, so the police may be required to take special measures to ensure the safety of the people assembling and the general public.

THE RIGHT TO PROTEST IN BELARUS

Maryia's story is about standing up against a repressive government and being at the forefront of the 2020 peaceful protests in opposition to the widely disputed results of the presidential election held in Belarus in August 2020.

Maryia's belief in freedom of expression and human dignity inspired many Belarusian people to stand up for their rights. Following the disputed 2020 presidential election, tens of thousands of Belarusians peacefully took to the streets to protest using poems, songs and other creative expressions. Weekly peaceful protests continued across the country, both on the streets and within enterprises, theatres, universities and elsewhere. The police arrested thousands of peaceful protesters and artists who were performing during political events, violating their right to freedom of peaceful assembly. The police also arrested journalists and human rights defenders who were documenting what was taking place.

MARYIA KALESNIKAVA'S STORY

Maryia Kalesnikava has a dream for her country, in which Belarusians can enjoy human rights and feel free from oppression. Now, she is in prison for protesting peacefully and for believing in her dream.

Maryia was living in Germany as a professional musician but chose to return home to Belarus to create space for art and music. It was this passion, along with her dedication to human rights, that led her to

join the opposition before the August 2020 presidential elections. The results of the election were strongly disputed, and afterwards many opposition figures had to flee the country. Maryia stayed, and suddenly found herself the main public opposition figure, standing on the frontline of peaceful protests, confronting police officers by making a heart-shaped symbol with her hands. Mariya told people that “love is stronger than fear”. She called for change and offered hope to many.

On 7 September 2020, Maryia was forcibly disappeared by the Belarusian authorities. She was dragged into a van by masked men. She escaped, but was soon arrested, detained and sentenced to 11 years in prison on charges including “undermining national security” and “extremism”.

Maryia is not the only one. More than 1,300 people are imprisoned in Belarus on politically motivated charges. These people are bloggers, political activists, human rights defenders, journalists, businesspeople, artists, students and peaceful protesters, locked up because they exercised their human rights.

Maryia is imprisoned in poor conditions, with limited access to the healthcare she needs and isolated from other inmates. Her family and friends have not heard from her for more than a year.