

The Olympics of Discontent: Paris 2024 and Russia's War against Ukraine

by Leo Goretti

When the Paris Olympics will open on 26 July 2024, there may – and, in all likelihood, there will – be some Russian and Belarusian athletes attending it. Having postponed the decision on the matter several times in the last year, the Executive Board of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) eventually took its stance on 8 December 2023.¹ Under neutral flag, having met some eligibility conditions, only as individual competitors – and yet, some athletes from the country that has been waging a brutal war of aggression against Ukraine since February 2022 will be allowed entry in the most important event of international sport. Although Russian authorities immediately

decried the IOC's announcement as "unacceptable" and "discriminatory",² the decision arguably represents a not unexpected yet worrying step forward toward the normalisation of Russia's position within the international community. In light of the IOC decision, Ukrainian leaders should now carefully consider what the best line of action may be in the run-up to next summer's Olympics.

Multilateral sanctions against Russia – and their lifting

As had already happened with Crimea's annexation in 2014, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 took place amidst the "Olympic truce" called for by the United Nations General Assembly

¹ International Olympic Committee, *Strict Eligibility Conditions in Place as IOC EB Approves Individual Neutral Athletes (AINs) for the Olympic Games Paris 2024*, 8 December 2023, <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/strict-eligibility-conditions-in-place-as-ioc-eb-approves-individual-neutral-athletes-ains-for-the-olympic-games-paris-2024>.

² Karolos Grohmann, "Russians, Belarusians to Participate at Paris Olympics as Neutrals – IOC", in *Reuters*, 8 December 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/sports/russian-belarusian-athletes-participate-paris-olympics-neutrals-ioc-2023-12-08>.

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for the duration of the Beijing Games.³ Unlike 2014, however, the 2022 invasion initially led to an unprecedentedly firm reaction by international sports organisations, prompted and supported by Western governments, sporting bodies and athletes. Within a matter of days, the IOC as well as the majority of international sports federations introduced ad-hoc recommendations that led to the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes from most international events. Although officially aimed at protecting the “integrity” of international sport, these measures de facto were a comprehensive set of multilateral sanctions signalling the international community's condemnation of Moscow's war and Minsk's support for it.⁴ Excluding Russian athletes from international sport also denied Vladimir Putin one of its preferred propaganda turf: since the beginning of his Presidency, he has systematically instrumentalised international sport to bolster his leadership, arguing that Russia's sporting achievements would be proof of its restored great power status.⁵

³ UN General Assembly (UNGA), *Solemn Appeal Made by the President of the General Assembly on 20 January 2022 in Connection with the Observance of the Olympic Truce (A/76/648)*, 6 January 2022, <https://undocs.org/A/76/648>. See also UN website: *UN and the Olympic Truce*, <https://www.un.org/en/node/139430>.

⁴ Leo Goretti, “The Sporting Sanctions against Russia: Debunking the Myth of Sport's Neutrality”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 22|09 (May 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/15324>.

⁵ Leo Goretti and Sofia Mariconti, “Let's Learn Judo with Putin. Sport, Power and Masculinity in 21st-Century Russia”, in *IAI Papers*, No. 23|03 (January 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16482>.

As the months went by, however, the IOC started considering options for a possible reintegration of Russian athletes. The main preoccupation of the Olympic Committee was to safeguard the self-professed “unifying” mission of international sport⁶ – and, therefore, its role as the chief authority governing it. Indeed, since March 2022, the Russian leadership has repeatedly voiced the idea of hosting its own international events open to “friendly” countries, thus raising fears about a permanent split in global sport.⁷

Amidst this debate, of great significance were the concerns expressed by the UN Special Rapporteurs in the field of cultural rights and on contemporary forms of racism, who criticised the decision to ban Russian and Belarusian athletes as a potential form of discrimination based on nationality.⁸ While other international law scholars questioned this stance by emphasising the rights of Ukrainian athletes,⁹ the IOC directly referred to the UN Special

⁶ Thomas Bach, “There Is No Peace without Solidarity”, in *IOC Opinions*, 28 September 2022, <https://olympics.com/ioc/opinion/there-is-no-peace-without-solidarity>.

⁷ Patrick Burke, “History Repeats Itself as Russia Reveals Plans to Launch World Friendship Games in 2024”, in *Inside the Games*, 3 May 2023, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1136610>.

⁸ UN Special Rapporteurs Alexandra Xanthaki and E. Tendayi Achiume, *Information Received Concerning the Decisions Taken by the Executive Committee of the International Olympic Committee Imposing and Recommending Sanctions on Russian and Belarusian Athletes (AL OTH 90/2022)*, 14 September 2022, <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TmSearch/RelCom?code=OTH%2090/2022>.

⁹ Patricia Wiater, “Peaceful and Neutral Games”, in *Verfassungsblog*, 23 March 2023, <https://verfassungsblog.de/?p=71508>.

Rapporteurs' opinion to revise its own recommendations in March 2023. International sports federations were now invited to reconsider the ban, allowing the participation of Russian athletes in international events only as individual athletes and under neutral flags. To assuage concerns about the possible inclusion of pro-war or combatant athletes, specific eligibility conditions were included: Russian athletes who "actively support the war" and those "contracted to the Russian or Belarusian military or national security agencies" should not be allowed participation. No decision, however, was taken with regard to Paris 2024.¹⁰

The IOC move tested the reaction of the different parties, with a view to the next year's Games. Ukrainian leaders – including President Volodymyr Zelensky himself – were understandably vocal against the new approach. Ukraine's government initially introduced a policy according to which members of Ukrainian national teams would not be allowed to compete in events where Russian "neutrals" are present; the policy was later reverted once it was evident that it would only jeopardise the qualification of Ukrainian athletes to the Paris Olympics.¹¹ The threat of a

boycott of Paris 2024 in case Russian neutrals would be admitted to the event was also raised, looking for a common front with Western allies.¹² While most Western governments reiterated (albeit with different nuances) their support for measures against Russian participation, however, the possibility of a collective boycott was reportedly ruled out during a dedicated meeting in February, with only some Nordic countries explicitly mentioning the intention to join it.¹³ For its part, the Russian government was also critical of the IOC's stance, denouncing it as "discriminatory" and a violation of Olympic values. Russian "neutrals", however, were not prohibited from taking part again in international events.¹⁴ In a remarkable statement, IOC President Thomas Bach described

Owen Lloyd, "Ukraine Path to Paris 2024 Made Easier after Ban Competing against Russians Lifted", in *Inside the Games*, 27 July 2023, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1139280>.

¹² "Ukraine's 2024 Paris Games Boycott Call against Olympic 'Principles': IOC Chief Bach", in *France24*, 9 February 2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230209-ukraine-led-2024-boycott-call-is-against-olympic-principles-ioc-chief-bach-1>.

¹³ Patrick Burke, "Australia Distances Itself from Calls for Russia and Belarus Ban at Paris 2024", in *Inside the Games*, 11 February 2023, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1133568>; "Zelensky e il 'no' ai russi alle Olimpiadi: il braccio di ferro con il Cio e l'ombra del boicottaggio. Abodi: 'Ne parlo con Meloni'", in *La Stampa*, 13 February 2023, https://www.lastampa.it/esteri/2023/02/13/news/zelensky_no_alla_russia_ai_giochi_braccio_di_ferro-12641349.

¹⁴ Neil Sheffer, "Russian Sports Minister Matytsin Believes Country's Athletes Have Chance of Featuring at Paris 2024", in *Inside the Games*, 17 July 2023, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1138995>; Geoff Berkeley, "IOC Accuses Governments of 'Double Standards' in Opposition of Russia Return", in *Inside the Games*, 13 July 2023, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1138881>.

¹⁰ International Olympic Committee, *Following a Request by the 11th Olympic Summit, IOC Issues Recommendations for International Federations and International Sports Event Organisers on the Participation of Athletes with a Russian or Belarusian Passport in International Competitions*, 28 March 2023, <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-issues-recommendations-for-international-federations-and-international-sports-event-organisers>.

¹¹ Veronika Melkozerova, "Ukraine Bans Its Athletes from Tournaments where They May Face Russians, Belarusians", in *Politico*, 14 April 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2913453>;

criticism from both sides as evidence of the righteousness of his approach¹⁵ – as if standing “middle ground” vis-à-vis a major violation of international law would be the correct course of action.

The road to Paris 2024

Several months on from its revised recommendations, the IOC has now extended its policy of “individual neutral” participation to Paris 2024. It motivated it in a rather exhaustive way, referring not only to the UN Special Rapporteurs’ opinion, but also the (alleged) view of an “overwhelming majority” of athletes, the communique of the latest Olympic Summit, consultations with relevant stakeholders, the Leaders’ Declaration at the G20 in New Delhi as well as the recent UNGA resolution about the Olympic Truce for Paris 2024. It also highlighted that, so far, only eight Russian athletes have qualified for Paris 2024 (compared with over 60 Ukrainians), and that the IOC reaffirms its commitment to supporting Ukrainian athletes through the dedicated Solidarity Fund.¹⁶ Overall, this approach paves the way for a limited participation of Russian athletes without an outright ban.

For Russia, there are a few benefits to reap from such a decision. The Kremlin can still lament discrimination and unfairness toward Russian nationals, while having them participate in one of the most watched events globally.

¹⁵ Patrick Burke, “Governments ‘Deplorable’ for Criticism of IOC’s Russia Stance, Bach Says”, in *Inside the Games*, 30 March 2023, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1135378>.

¹⁶ International Olympic Committee, *Strict Eligibility Conditions in Place*, cit.

The IOC eligibility conditions may look strict at first, but their actual implementation in the past months by international federations has been contested.¹⁷ According to Vladyslav Heraskevych, the Ukrainian skeleton racer who called for “no war in Ukraine” at the Beijing Olympics, among the eight Russian athletes who have already qualified for Paris 2024 are individuals who took part in pro-Putin rallies after 24 February 2022.¹⁸ The extent to which one can reasonably expect Russian athletes to distance themselves from the war is minimal, due to the political situation in the country; and despite the IOC reassurances, propaganda stunts, if not outright anti-Ukraine provocations, cannot be ruled out.

For Ukraine, the real question is whether to go ahead with a boycott or not. From a public diplomacy point of view, a boycott may only be beneficial to Ukraine if there were such a wide-ranging front of boycotting countries to substantially undermine the significance of the event and remind the global sporting audience that a murderous war of aggression is still raging on elsewhere in Europe. Instead, as evidenced by the overall unsuccessful policy of Ukrainian

¹⁷ Geoff Berkeley, “EJU Rejects Claims of Allowing Pro-War Russian Athletes at European Championships”, in *Inside the Games*, 23 October 2023, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1141987>.

¹⁸ Vladyslav Heraskevych, “The IOC Is Rotting”, in *Twitter*, 9 December 2023, <https://twitter.com/heraskevych/status/1733260993206141120>. See also Graham Dunbar, “Wrestling Body Explains Why It Let Russian Champions Compete at World Champs Despite Pro-War Rally”, in *AP News*, 20 September 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/6cd6d8151996b985f067f261398f2f00>.

non-participation in international events along with Russian "neutrals" in spring 2023, a limited boycott, only involving Kyiv and perhaps a few close Nordic allies, would likely receive little coverage in international media; furthermore, it may leave a propaganda space open for pro-Putin participants on Paris' sporting grounds. Given that the possibility of major Western allies joining a boycott looks quite uncertain now, other options should also be explored.

Leveraging the Olympic arena in all possible manners to press forward the message for an end to the Russian aggression – after Heraskevych's own example in Beijing – may be an alternative strategy for Ukraine's sport. True, the IOC has historically acted firmly against any protest gestures (broadly defined) by athletes. At the same time, however, punishing Ukrainian calls for a just peace and against Russia's blatant violations of international law would be detrimental to the IOC's already dented credibility – especially given that the 2024 Olympics will be held in a city where most of the spectating crowds will likely support the Ukrainian cause. Appropriating the Olympic arena for its own good would possibly be the best response that Ukraine's sport may give to the IOC's expediency.

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