

The Sporting Sanctions against Russia: Debunking the Myth of Sport's Neutrality

by Leo Goretti

ABSTRACT

In response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the International Olympic Committee and international sports federations took a number of exceptional measures: among them, the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes from most international sports competitions and a ban on organising events on Russian territory. These measures were officially framed not as sanctions, but rather as a way to defend the neutrality of the sporting domain. In reality, they were the result of pressures from Western governments, public opinions, sports organisations and athletes, and highlighted the constitutive entanglement between international sport and international politics at both the organisational and symbolic level. Setting an important precedent, the sanctions against Russia may carry significant implications for the governance of international sport in the future, potentially leading to greater attention to humanitarian and human rights considerations, but also to increased fragmentation.

International sport | International Olympic Committee | Russia | Vladimir Putin

keywords

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Introduction

On 8 March 2022, ministers and secretaries of state from 37 Western¹ countries signed a "statement on Russia's war on Ukraine & international sport" calling on those International Sports Federations (IFs) that had not already done so to take the following measures in response to Russia's "unprovoked and unjustifiable war of choice" against Kyiv "enabled by the Belarusian government": (i) excluding Russia and Belarus from hosting, bidding for or being awarded any international sporting events; (ii) banning "individual athletes selected by Russia and Belarus" as well as administrators and teams representing officially or "effectively" the Russian and Belarusian states from competing in sporting events held in third countries; (iii) limiting "wherever possible" any sponsorship agreements or financial ties with entities connected to the Russian and Belarusian states. Such exceptional measures should be in place "until cooperation under the fundamental principles of international law has become possible again".²

In the previous two weeks, a number of such initiatives had been promoted by IFs and other relevant bodies, the most notable being perhaps the early decision by the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) to relocate the 2021–2022 Men's Champions League final from Saint Petersburg to Paris³ and the exclusion of the athletes entered by the Russian and Belarusian Paralympic Committees from the

¹ Including Japan and the Republic of Korea.

² Australia et al., *Statement on Russia's War on Ukraine & International Sport*, 8 March 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-on-russias-war-on-ukraine-international-sport>.

³ Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), *Decisions from Today's Extraordinary UEFA Executive Committee Meeting*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.uefa.com/insideuefa/mediaservices/mediareleases/news/0272-148740475a92-1b97baa3e9d7-1000>.

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Beijing 2022 Winter Paralympics the day before the Games were due to commence.⁴ As of 9 March 2022, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), no fewer than 38 IFs with Olympic recognition as well as the International Automobile Federation (*Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile*, FIA) had taken some kind of action in response to Russia's invasion.⁵ This arguably amounts to one of the most comprehensive and harshest waves of sanctions⁶ in the history of international sport.⁷

The introduction of the sporting bans against Russia met with mixed reactions. They were often compared with or subsumed into parallel initiatives taken in the cultural and arts field, questioning the appropriateness and effectiveness of this kind of 'informal' sanctions. Limiting or cutting altogether ties with the Russian cultural, artistic and sporting world may in fact be perceived as a form of unjustified and discriminatory retaliation against ordinary Russian citizens, fuelling resentment on both sides – including potential waves of Russophobia and idiotic restrictions on the study of Russian literature⁸ – and ultimately playing into the hands of the Russian government's propaganda.⁹

Nonetheless, such a perspective fails to take into account the specificities of international sport – especially that based on national representation – as an arena that is *constitutively entangled* with international politics, at both a symbolic and organisational level. Departing from this assumption and based on an extensive analysis of newspaper articles and commentaries,¹⁰ an effort is warranted to

⁴ International Paralympic Committee (IPC), *IPC to Decline Athlete Entries from RPC and NPC Belarus for Beijing 2022*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.paralympic.org/news/ipc-decline-athlete-entries-rpc-and-npc-belarus-beijing-2022>.

⁵ Centre for Sport & Human Rights, *The Russian Invasion of Ukraine: Responses from the Sport Ecosystem*, last updated 9 March 2022, <https://www.sporhumanrights.org/media/rs1bwrf3/sport-ecosystem-responses-to-the-invasion-of-ukraine.pdf>. An updated version of the document was released on 30 March: <https://www.sporhumanrights.org/news/sport-ecosystem-responses-to-the-invasion-of-ukraine>.

⁶ In this paper, the term "boycott(s)" is used with reference to the refusal by the sporting organisations, teams and athletes of one or more countries to participate in international competitions along with/against another country's representatives; the term "sanction(s)" with reference to official measures introduced by national and international sports organisations excluding one country's sporting officials or representatives.

⁷ Daniela Heerdt and Guido Battaglia, "Reactions of International Sport Organisations to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine: An Overview", in *Asser International Sports Law Blog*, 1 April 2022, <https://www.asser.nl/SportsLaw/Blog/post/reactions-of-international-sport-organisations-to-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-an-overview-by-daniela-heerdt-and-guido-battaglia>.

⁸ Paolo Nori, *Per aprire la mente degli studenti* [To open students' minds], 2 March 2022, <https://www.paolonori.it/per-aprire-la-mente-degli-studenti>.

⁹ See for example Vanessa Thorpe, "Mikhail Baryshnikov: Do Not Punish Russian Artists and Athletes for War", in *The Observer*, 20 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/y49zj>; Tyler Cowen, "Cancel Culture Against Russians Is the New McCarthyism", in *Bloomberg*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-03-01/canceling-performers-because-of-their-ties-to-putin-is-un-american>.

¹⁰ This paper has hugely benefitted from the information shared in the Facebook group "Sport, cultura e politica", especially by its administrator Nicola Sbetti: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/90025144830>.

understand the rationale underlying sporting sanctions and boycotts in the context of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, their limitations and implications for future sports governance.

1. Putin's Russia and the symbolic and political significance of international sport

International sport was famously described by George Orwell as “war minus the shooting” and “mimic warfare”.¹¹ While this metaphor is surely a provocation that overlooks the indisputable potential for friendly interaction and détente among states offered by sports diplomacy,¹² there is at least a grain of truth in it. Indeed, in mega-events based on national representation such as the Olympics or the International Federation of Association Football (*Fédération Internationale de Football Association*, FIFA) World Cup, athletes and teams representing different countries are *physically* pitted against each other competing for victory and glory in front of a quasi-global audience. Although the Olympic Charter (OC) argues that the Games are competitions between individuals “and not between countries” (art. 6),¹³ there is little doubt that in this type of international sports events a country's athletes and teams are also perceived as (more or less official) representatives of their country.¹⁴ The choreography of national flags and anthems, as well as most journalistic narratives, further contribute to emphasising the significance of international sport as a unique arena for symbolic competition between states. As Richard Arnold has written, in international sport “sporting teams stand as proxies for the performance of the nation”.¹⁵

Not surprisingly, since its early days international sport has been fertile terrain for political propaganda – most famously, that of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. Literature on the political use of international sport in Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy and the Soviet Union abounds. But international sport turned out to be a powerful political tool for democracies as well, especially through the Cold War period.¹⁶

¹¹ George Orwell, “The Sporting Spirit”, originally in *Tribune*, 14 December 1945, now in <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/?p=1184>.

¹² Barrie Houlihan, “Politics and Sport”, in Jay Coakley and Eric Dunning (eds), *The Handbook of Sports Studies*, London, Sage, 2000, p. 213-227.

¹³ International Olympic Committee (IOC), *Olympic Charter. In force as from 8 August 2021*, Lausanne, IOC, October 2021, <https://olympics.com/ioc/olympic-charter>.

¹⁴ Robert C.R. Siekmann, *Introduction to International and European Sports Law. Capita Selecta*, The Hague, TMC Asser Press, 2012, p. 392-393, 418.

¹⁵ Richard Arnold, “Nationalism and Sport: A Review of the Field”, in *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (January 2021), p. 2.

¹⁶ On Fascist Italy see Maria Canella and Sergio Giuntini (eds), *Sport e fascismo* [Sport and fascism], Milan, Franco Angeli, 2009. On Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union in the 1930s, see Barbara J. Keys, *Globalizing Sport. National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s*, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 2006. On the Cold War see Robert Edelman and Christopher Young (eds),

Having strong roots in the Soviet past, the political use of international sport, and sport more broadly, has been a hallmark of Vladimir Putin's Russia, where – especially in the last fifteen years – sport has been systematically used “as a source of patriotic myth, a symbol of Russia's ‘great-power’ status, to connect to the Soviet past, and to promote social consolidation and regime strengthening”.¹⁷ The Russian President himself repeatedly voiced this kind of discourse: in 2008, for example, he stressed that Russia's recent resurgence in sport was “a symbol of success” and Russia's sports policy was “commended by the international sports community”.¹⁸ In 2012, he expressed the hope that Russia has “major, memorable sports victories” ahead; in his own words, “they help to boost moral fortitude and patriotism at home and strengthen our nation's prestige abroad”.¹⁹ According to Grigory Rodchenkov, the former head of the Moscow Anti-doping Laboratory turned whistle-blower, it was in the context of Putin's thirst for international sports success and belief that “Russia must win at any cost” that the Russian Sports Ministry set up a widespread state-sponsored doping programme.²⁰ This was especially the case for the 2014 Winter Olympics, held in the Russian resort city of Sochi.²¹ Russia was eventually able to top the (unofficial) medal table of both the Sochi Olympics and Paralympics, which Putin celebrated by thanking Russia's athletes and their coaches for having “accomplished the mission”, proving that Russia had finally “left the difficult period in the history of national sports behind” itself and had thus “defend[ed] the honour of their nation”.²² As has been noted, this narrative of national resurgence was the same that informed Putin's decision to annex Crimea in February-March 2014, which he claimed to have made a few hours before the closing ceremony of the Sochi Olympics.²³

The instrumentalisation of sport for political purposes is not limited to the celebration of sporting ‘heroes’ and victories, it also encompasses the organisation of mega-events, which can be used to signal and bolster a country's stature

The Whole World Was Watching. Sport in the Cold War, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2020.

¹⁷ Richard Arnold, “Sport and Official Nationalism in Modern Russia”, in *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (2018), p. 133.

¹⁸ Russian Presidency, *Speech Given at the Ceremony for Awarding the Laureus World Sports Awards*, St Petersburg, 18 February 2008, <http://www.en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/speeches/24841>.

¹⁹ Russian Presidency, *Meeting of the Council for the Development of Physical Culture and Sport*, Novo-Ogaryovo, 6 November 2012, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/deliberations/16760>. See also Richard Arnold, “Sport and Official Nationalism in Modern Russia”, cit., p. 134.

²⁰ Statement delivered by Jim Walden, Attorney for Dr. Grigory Rodchenkov, quoted in US Congress, *The State of Play: Globalized Corruption, State-Run Doping, and International Sport*, Hearing before the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 25 July 2018, p. 16, <https://www.congress.gov/event/115th-congress/joint-event/LC60142/text?s=1&r=4>.

²¹ Robert W. Orttung and Sufian N. Zhemukhov, *Putin's Olympics. The Sochi Games and the Evolution of Twenty-First Century Russia*, London/New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 120-123.

²² Alexei Anishchuk, “Olympics-Putin to Sochi Athletes: Mission Accomplished”, in *Reuters*, 24 February 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/olympics-putin-idUSL6N0LT1E020140224>.

²³ Robert W. Orttung and Sufian N. Zhemukhov, *Putin's Olympics*, cit., p. 97-99.

at the global level, as well as to generate soft power.²⁴ The narrative of the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, for example, was that of a "rite of passage" that signified Japan's definitive re-entry into the post-war international community,²⁵ as had been the case for Italy beforehand with the organisation of the Cortina Winter Olympics in 1956 and the Rome Summer Olympics in 1960.²⁶ Likewise, Beijing 2008 arguably heralded China's new status as a modern country and economic powerhouse.²⁷ In the case of Putin's Russia, a long-term strategy centred on bidding for mega (sport) events can be observed in the last fifteen years. Putin himself was involved in the organisation of sports events already before becoming president, having been among the organisers of the 1994 Goodwill Games in Saint Petersburg.²⁸ As Russia's President, in 2007, he personally flew to Guatemala City to secure Sochi's bid for the 2014 Winter Olympics – an event which, according to Robert W. Orttung and Sufian N. Zhemukhov, Putin saw somewhat as a revanche for the 1980 Moscow Olympics, which had been boycotted by several Western countries in retaliation against Russia's invasion of Afghanistan.²⁹ Two years later, Putin asked Minister of Sport Vitaly Mutko to prepare Russia's successful bid for the 2018 FIFA World Cup, which he personally supported by meeting with then FIFA President Sepp Blatter.³⁰

The political significance of organising such events for the Russian regime was twofold: they were aimed to bolster the government's legitimacy at home and prestige on the global scene,³¹ as well as to promote 'developmental' projects at the local level which most often turned into opportunities for rent distribution among key allies of the regime.³² The Russian regime's politics of organising large international sports events has continued to date: in 2022, Russia should

²⁴ See among others Scarlett Cornelissen, "The Geopolitics of Global Aspiration: Sport Mega-events and Emerging Powers", in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. 27, No. 16-18 (2010), p. 3008-3025; Jonathan Grix and Paul Michael Brannagan, "Of Mechanisms and Myths: Conceptualising States' 'Soft Power' Strategies through Sports Mega-Events", in *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2016), p. 251-272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2016.1169791>.

²⁵ Christian Tagsold, "The Tokyo Olympics: Politics and Aftermath", in William W. Kelly and Susan Brownell (eds), "The Olympics in East Asia. Nationalism, Regionalism, and Globalism on the Center Stage of World Sports", in *Yale CEAS Occasional Publications*, No. 3 (2011), p. 63, https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/ceas_publication_series/3.

²⁶ Nicola Sbeti, *Giocchi diplomatici. Sport e politica estera nell'Italia del secondo dopoguerra* [Diplomatic games. Sport and foreign policy in post-war Italy], Roma, Viella, 2020, p. 289-302.

²⁷ Scarlett Cornelissen, "The Geopolitics of Global Aspiration", cit., p. 3015-3017.

²⁸ Richard Arnold, "Sport and Official Nationalism in Modern Russia", cit., p. 134-135.

²⁹ Robert W. Orttung and Sufian N. Zhemukhov, *Putin's Olympics*, cit., p. 6. A transcript of Putin's speech is available here: Russian Presidency, *Speech at the 119th International Olympic Committee Session*, Guatemala City, 4 July 2007, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24402>.

³⁰ Michał Marcin Kobierecki, "Diplomatic Subjectivity of FIFA in the Context of Selecting World Cup Hosts", in *Athenaeum*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (2019), p. 225, <https://doi.org/10.15804/athena.2019.64.13>; Russian Government, *Prime Minister Vladimir Putin Met with FIFA President Joseph Blatter*, 15 October 2009, <http://archive.government.ru/eng/docs/7913/>.

³¹ Bo Petersson, "Still Embodying the Myth? Russia's Recognition as a Great Power and the Sochi Winter Games", in *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (2014), p. 30-40; Vitalii Aleksandrovich Gorokhov, "Forward Russia! Sports Mega-Events as a Venue for Building National Identity", in *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (March 2015), p. 267-282.

³² Robert W. Orttung and Sufian N. Zhemukhov, *Putin's Olympics*, cit., p. 7-10.

have hosted the UEFA Champions League final in Saint Petersburg as well as the Volleyball's Men World Championship in ten host cities.³³ Furthermore, in summer 2021, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that several Russian cities were considering the possibility of submitting a bid for the 2036 Summer Olympics and Paralympics.³⁴

Finally, Russian companies, gas giant Gazprom chief among them, became increasingly enmeshed in the realm of international sport, sponsoring teams (such as Schalke 04 in Germany) and competitions (for example, the UEFA Champions League) abroad. This web of international sponsorships was arguably intended as a means of indirect political influence in Western countries, especially Germany.³⁵

Far from being a 'neutral' activity, international sport has been systematically instrumentalised for political purposes for decades, and considerably so in Putin's Russia. This politics of international sport, however, has only been possible as long as other countries have accepted to play against teams and athletes representing Russia, and to take part in events held in the country. Indeed, sport is by nature a relational activity. While international sport symbolically represents competition, hierarchisation and sometimes even physical confrontation between countries, it also requires their interaction and mutual recognition as 'equal' contenders, as well as a fundamental agreement on the 'rules of the game'. In other words, their representatives must be willing to play against each other according to the same rules.

In the context of a major violation of international law principles, such fundamental understandings may be wanting. Other countries' athletes, teams and/or sporting organisations may decide that they are no longer prepared to compete against the violating country's representatives and/or to attend sporting events in that country, leading to sporting boycotts, intended "as a means of registering disapproval of a state's actions".³⁶ This is what happened right after Russia's aggression on Ukraine: as early as 26 February 2022, for example, the Polish men's national football team, in agreement with the Polish Football Association, expressed their intention not to compete against Russia in the upcoming World Cup qualifiers as a result of Moscow's aggression against Ukraine, and was soon joined by the Swedish and

³³ A list of the major sporting events that Russia should have hosted in the next years is available at: <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1112086/russia-hosting-events>.

³⁴ "Russia Eyes Organization of 2036 Summer Olympic Games – Lavrov", in *TASS*, 13 August 2021, <https://tass.com/sport/1325503>.

³⁵ Simon Chadwick, "Gazprom and Its Sponsorship of Football. From Sex without a Condom to Major Strategic Threat", in *GeoSport*, 12 February 2021, <https://www.iris-france.org/154279-gazprom-and-its-sponsorship-of-football-from-sex-without-a-condom-to-major-strategic-threat>; Simon Chadwick, "The Geopolitical Economy of Russia's 'Seduce and Shock' War with Sport", in *GeoSport*, 18 March 2022, <https://www.iris-france.org/165946-the-geopolitical-economy-of-russias-seduce-and-shock-war-with-sport>.

³⁶ Barrie Houlihan, "Politics and Sport", cit., p. 217.

Czech football associations and teams.³⁷ Faced with this kind of initiatives, the organisations in charge of governing international sport and of 'setting the rules of the game' had to produce some kind of institutional response, which would inevitably call into question the self-professed principle of sport's 'neutrality'.

2. The response of international sports organisations to the Ukraine War

Formally, international sport is a self-regulating institution under the authority of the IOC and IFs. The IOC and IFs are full-fledged international non-governmental organisations with their own charters, regulations and bureaucracy, whose membership is primarily – although not exclusively – made up of national affiliates representing sovereign states.³⁸ The IOC, in particular, fashions itself as a sort of overarching organisation, to the point that its statute, the above-mentioned Olympic Charter, also claims to be “a basic instrument of a constitutional nature” for the Olympic Movement.³⁹ The OC mandates that the Movement is composed of the IOC (“an international non-governmental not-for-profit organisation” based in Lausanne, art 15.1 and 15.2 OC), IFs (“international non-governmental organisations governing one or several sports at the world level”, art. 25 OC) and National Olympic Committees (NOCs), which have “have the exclusive authority for the representation of their respective countries at the Olympic Games” (art. 27.3 OC), where “country” is defined as “an independent State recognised by the international community” (art. 30.1 OC).

In the OC, the IOC strongly asserts the principles of “political neutrality” and “autonomy” of sports organisations (principle 5 of Olympism). It also requires its individual members to stay free of government interference (art 16.1.5 OC). It is evident, however, that the IOC and IFs must entertain some kind of relations with national governments, if only because it is national governments that must provide guarantees for the organisations of mega-events such as the Olympic Games (art. 33 OC). Moreover, individual IOC members not rarely have some kinds of connection with the national governments of their country of origin: in his official biography published on the IOC website, for example, Russian IOC member

³⁷ Luke McLaughlin, “Poland and Sweden Will Refuse to Play Russia in World Cup 2022 Playoffs”, in *The Guardian*, 26 February 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/kzqg5>; Robert Lewandowski, “It is the right decision!”, Twitter post @lewyofficial, 26 February 2022, https://twitter.com/lewy_official/status/1497500343726452744; Czech Football National Team, “The Czech FA executive committee”, Twitter post @ceskarepre_eng, 27 February 2022, https://twitter.com/ceskarepre_eng/status/1497875324947865605.

³⁸ David Black and Byron Peacock, “Sport and Diplomacy”, in Andrew F. Cooper, Jorge Heine and Ramesh Thakur (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Diplomacy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 709-711; Robert C.R. Siekmann, *Introduction to International and European Sports Law*, cit., p. 10-12; Lorenzo Casini, “Global Hybrid Public-Private Bodies: The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA)”, in *International Organizations Law Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2009), p. 421-446.

³⁹ IOC, *Olympic Charter*, cit., p. 6.

Shamil Tarpishchev claims to have been serving as "Counsellor to the President of the Russian Federation on physical training and sports" since 2008.⁴⁰

Similarly, NOCs and national affiliates of IFs are usually autonomous of, but more or less closely associated with and funded by, their respective state authorities. The OC requires that "governments or other public authorities shall not designate any members of an NOC" (art. 28.4) and that "NOCs must preserve their autonomy and resist all pressures of any kind" (art. 27.6). At the same time, however, NOCs "may decide, at [their] discretion, to elect as members representatives of [governments or other public] authorities" (art. 28.4) and are invited to establish "harmonious relations" with governmental bodies as long as this does not "associate [NOCs] with any activity which would be in contradiction with the Olympic Charter" (art. 27.5).

While the number of NOCs headed by presidents and secretary generals with formal ties to their national governments is indeed rather limited,⁴¹ there is little doubt that – especially but not limited to authoritarian regimes – national governments retain a degree of informal influence over the respective NOCs and affiliates of IFs.⁴² In Belarus, for example, governmental control is blatant. President Alexander Lukashenko was also the NOC's President from May 1997 to February 2021, just to be replaced by his son Viktor. Notably, the election of Viktor Lukashenko was not recognised by the IOC, which nonetheless did not suspend Belarus's NOC altogether.⁴³ Governmental control extends to Belarusian affiliates of IFs: according to a report of the Belarusian Sport Solidarity Foundation, for example, leading officers of the Belarusian Football Federation are closely linked to the country's security services.⁴⁴

In Russia's case, as already highlighted, Vladimir Putin's longstanding influence over national sporting organisations is widely documented. The current President of the Russian Olympic Committee Stanislav Pozdnyakov was elected in 2018 as Putin's "favoured choice", with his opponent reportedly running as a straw candidate.⁴⁵ The influence of Russia extends beyond national borders, reaching the

⁴⁰ IOC website: *Mr Shamil Tarpishchev*, <https://olympics.com/ioc/mr-shamil-tarpishchev>.

⁴¹ Mads A. Wickstrøm and Stine Alvad, "Autonomy in National Olympic Committees 2017. An Autonomy Index", in *Play the Game Reports*, June 2017, <https://www.playthegame.org/knowledge-bank/publications/autonomy-in-national-olympic-committees-2017-an-autonomy-index/14ecc367-b607-49a3-915d-a78b00ac8924>.

⁴² Jean-Loup Chappelet and Brenda Kübler-Mabbott, *The International Olympic Committee and the Olympic System. The Governance of World Sport*, London/New York, Routledge, 2008, p. 52-55; Henk Erik Meier and Borja García, "Beyond Sports Autonomy: A Case for Collaborative Sport Governance Approaches", in *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2021), p. 504-505.

⁴³ Belarus Presidency website: *President of the National Olympic Committee*, <https://president.gov.by/en/president/nok>; Michael Pavitt, "IOC Refuses to Recognise Election of President's Son as Belarus NOC Head", in *Inside the Games*, 8 March 2021, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1105144>.

⁴⁴ Pjotr Sauer, "Belarus Regime 'Has Used Football as Propaganda'", in *The Guardian*, 13 October 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/j87dy>.

⁴⁵ Nick Butler, "Pozdnyakov and Popov Confirmed as Two Candidates for Russian Olympic Committee Presidency", in *Inside the Games*, 15 May 2018, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1065074>.

governing bodies of several IFs. Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, three Olympic IFs were headed by Russian nationals: the International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF), led by oligarch Vladimir Lisin (a steel tycoon and Russia's richest person according to *Forbes Billionaires 2022*); the International Boxing Association (IBA), headed by Umar Kremlev; and the International Fencing Federation (*Fédération Internationale d'Escrime*, FIE), of which Alisher Usmanov (also a billionaire and reportedly "one of Vladimir Putin's favourite oligarchs") had been elected president for the fourth time in November 2021.⁴⁶ At a symbolic yet no less significant level, Putin was Honorary President and Ambassador of the International Judo Federation (IJF).⁴⁷

All this suggests that, despite their self-claimed autonomy, international sports organisations are far from free from government influence which, in Russia's case, is conspicuous. Against the backdrop of the war of aggression launched by Moscow and faced with numerous calls for boycotts and sanctions against Russia coming from Western athletes, federations and governments, the IOC and IFs were faced with a dilemma. Acting against Russian affiliates would mean taking sides in a non-sporting dispute, thus breaking the self-professed principle of neutrality. Not taking action at all, however, would imply the risk of exposing themselves to public criticism from the Western political and sporting world, as well as from Western media and audiences, potentially leading to unilateral boycotts and even organisational breakups by Western affiliates. This would have been extremely concerning considering that, after all, the United States and Europe still account for a very significant share of the global sports market.⁴⁸ Notably, the 37 countries that signed the 8 March 2022 letter calling for sporting sanctions against Russia had won 649 out of 1,080 medals awarded at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and 277 out of 327 medals awarded at the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics.⁴⁹

The way out of this dilemma was 'damage limitation', that is, limiting sanctioning measures at the organisational level to a few prominent individual cases and presenting them as "ad hoc",⁵⁰ thus denying the *structural* entanglement between sporting organisations and politics. Indeed, during an emergency meeting held on 1 March 2022, the IOC reportedly recommended IFs not to target all their Russian affiliates and Russian officials in their governing bodies indiscriminately,

⁴⁶ Joanna Partridge, "Alisher Usmanov: Ex-Fencer Who 'Solves Putin's Business Problems'", in *The Guardian*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/kqgt3>.

⁴⁷ International Judo Federation (IJF), *Official Announcement of the International Judo Federation*, 27 February 2022, <https://www.ijf.org/news/show/official-announcement-of-the-international-judo-federation>.

⁴⁸ IOC, *Olympic Marketing Fact File. 2021 Edition*, updated March 2021, p. 23, <https://library.olympics.com/Default/doc/SYRACUSE/735120>.

⁴⁹ Author's calculations based on IOC website: *Tokyo 2020 Medal Table*, <https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/tokyo-2020/medals>; and *Beijing 2022 Medal Table*, <https://olympics.com/en/olympic-games/beijing-2022/medals>.

⁵⁰ IOC, *IOC EB Recommends No Participation of Russian and Belarusian Athletes and Officials*, 28 February 2022, <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-eb-recommends-no-participation-of-russian-and-belarusian-athletes-and-officials>.

but rather to focus sanctioning actions only on individuals “directly implicated in the violation of the Olympic Truce”, which was therefore framed as a sort of ‘constitutional tenet’ of the Olympic Movement.⁵¹ Accordingly, Putin was stripped of his IJF Honorary Presidency and Olympic Order, FINA and World Taekwondo awards,⁵² and Usmanov had to step down from the FIE Presidency.⁵³ However, Lisin, Kremlev and Tarpishchev were still in office at the end of March.⁵⁴ Overall, as highlighted by Jens Weinreich, in the first six weeks after the Russian invasion, only seven out of forty Olympic IFs suspended their Russian and Belarusian affiliates, and another seven suspended officials from the two countries in their governing bodies.⁵⁵ The official positions taken by those federations upon which Russian influence is paramount such as Fencing and Shooting were notably milder, falling short of even mentioning the ongoing war as the underlying motivation for the measures adopted.⁵⁶ To the contrary, the International Luge Federation (*Fédération Internationale de Luge de Course*, FIL), led by Latvian Einars Fogelis, took an especially strong position against Russia’s aggression, which it “condemned in the strongest possible terms”.⁵⁷

As time went by and the war and killings have continued, the lasting presence of Russian bureaucrats in the IOC and most IFs has become increasingly contentious, especially on the occasion of these organisations’ official meetings and congresses. At the 72nd FIFA Congress held in Doha at the end of March, for example, Ukraine’s delegate Andriy Pavelko sent a video message from Kyiv donning a flat jacket in which he lamented the “deaths of Ukrainian football community representatives”, while Russian delegates were able to attend the Congress in person.⁵⁸ In April, in the aftermath of the discovery of civilian bodies and graves in Bucha, a suburb of

⁵¹ International Cycling Union (Union Cycliste Internationale, UCI), *The UCI Takes Strong Measures in the Face of the Situation in Ukraine*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.uci.org/pressrelease/6V8FrkqsPb hbeMIc8rgb3t>. See also IOC, *IOC Strongly Condemns the Breach of the Olympic Truce*, 24 February 2022, <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-strongly-condemns-the-breach-of-the-olympic-truce>; and the comment by Nicola Sbeti, *Le sanzioni allo sport russo* [The sanctions against Russian sport], 2 March 2022, <https://wp.me/p7nIx6-Qv>.

⁵² Ben Church and Aleks Klosok, “Vladimir Putin Is Being Stripped of His Honorary Sporting Titles amid Ukraine Invasion”, in *CNN*, 1 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/01/sport/vladimir-putin-ukraine-sporting-titles-spt-intl>.

⁵³ Patrick Burke, “Oligarch Usmanov Stands Aside as FIE President in Wake of EU Sanctions”, in *Inside the Games*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1119924>.

⁵⁴ Duncan Mackay, “Vladimir Lisin Is Under Pressure at Both the ISSF and in Russia”, in *Inside the Games*, 7 April 2022, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1121585>.

⁵⁵ Jens Weinreich, “Most Olympic Federations Suspend Russian Athletes, But Officials Go Free”, in *Play the Game*, 5 April 2022, https://www.playthegame.org/news/comments/2022/1027_most-olympic-federations-suspend-russian-athletes-but-officials-go-free.

⁵⁶ International Fencing Federation (Fédération Internationale d’Escrime, FIE), *Decisions of the FIE Executive Committee*, 2 March 2022, <https://fie.org/articles/1158>; International Shooting Sport Federation (ISSF), *ISSF Official Statement*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.issf-sports.org/news.ashx?newsid=3712>.

⁵⁷ Patrick Burke, “FIL Joins List of International Federations to Ban Russia”, in *Inside the Games*, 2 March 2022, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1119975>.

⁵⁸ Tracey Holmes, “FIFA Calls for End to Ukraine War as Russia Attends Annual Congress in Qatar”, in *ABC News*, 1 April 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/100958862>.

Kyiv, sports ministers from several Western countries asked for a blanket exclusion of Russia from the IOC and IFs until a peace settlement was reached. For example, Viola Amherd, Head of the Swiss Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport, wrote a letter to IOC's President Thomas Bach asking to take a "further step" and exclude high-level officials from Russia and Belarus from international sports bodies, with the Swiss Olympic Committee underlining that Russian and Belarusian top sporting officials may actually be more closely connected to the respective governments than individual athletes. The IOC responded that its individual members are not to be considered "representatives of their country" and that "the IOC scrupulously followed the rule of law" basing its sanctioning measures not on "country of origin" but on the fact of "supporting the war" or not.⁵⁹ This alleged focus on individual responsibilities in the ongoing war, though, calls into question the rationale behind the ban on Russian athletes in international sport, which was, in the majority of cases, indiscriminate.

3. Sanctions against Russian athletes and politics on the sporting fields

The initial focus of the measures adopted in response to the invasion of Ukraine was directed away from the IOC and IFs headquarters to the sporting grounds: on 25 February, the IOC recommended the cancellation or relocation of all international events to be held in Russian and Belarusian territory⁶⁰ and, on 28 February, the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes, teams and officials from international sports events.⁶¹ These measures were implemented by an overwhelming majority of IFs, with some of them – especially in sports where participation in international events is not primarily organised around national representatives – still allowing participation of Russian athletes competing for non-Russian teams or as individuals under neutral flag (this is the case, respectively, of professional cycling and tennis).⁶²

Officially, the rationale behind these dramatic measures was to be fair to those Ukrainian athletes who would not be able to participate in international sporting

⁵⁹ Patrick Burke, "Swiss Sports Minister Amherd Calls on IOC to Exclude Russian and Belarusian Officials", in *Inside the Games*, 17 April 2022, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1121976>. See also Elliott Brennan, "Polish Sports Minister Wants Russia Excluded from All Olympic International Federations", in *Inside the Games*, 5 April 2022, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1121480>.

⁶⁰ IOC, *IOC EB Urges All International Federations to Relocate or Cancel Their Sports Events Currently Planned in Russia or Belarus*, 25 February 2022, <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-eb-urges-all-ifs-to-relocate-or-cancel-their-sports-events-currently-planned-in-russia-or-belarus>.

⁶¹ IOC, *IOC EB Recommends No Participation of Russian and Belarusian Athletes and Officials*, cit.

⁶² UCI, *Measures against Russia and Belarus: Ad Hoc Rules*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.uci.org/regulations/3MyLDDrwJCJJ0BGGOzOat#measuresagainstrussiaandbelarus>; International Tennis Federation (ITF), *ITF Suspends Russia, Belarus from ITF Membership and Team Competition*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.itftennis.com/en/news-and-media/articles/itf-statement-itf-suspends-russia-and-belarus-from-itf-membership-and-international-team-competition>.

events due to the war situation as well as “to protect the integrity of global sports competitions and for the safety of all the participants”.⁶³ This statement hid between the lines the mounting pressure also from below – that is, from athletes themselves – that played a key role in shaping sporting sanctions against Russia. It was sportswomen and sportsmen, in the end, who were subject to, and at the forefront of, the boycotts and sanctions, which highlights their agency in international sport.

Being watched by millions, when not billions, of international spectators, international sports events potentially provide a platform for making powerful political statements – the most iconic of which is perhaps Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s black power salute at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics. Historically, in order to preserve the principle of neutrality of the sporting sphere, the IOC introduced article 50 of the Olympic Charter that prohibits any “kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda” at Olympic events and sites. Notably, this rule has been partly qualified and relaxed in recent years, especially after the practice of taking a knee in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement became common among athletes.⁶⁴

In the early days of the war in Ukraine, sporting events potentially provided a platform for Russian athletes to distance themselves from their government, as exemplified by Andrey Rublev’s writing “No War Please” on the tv camera during the Dubai Tennis Championships on 25 February 2022. A number of other high-profile Russian athletes (especially tennis players) took a pro-peace stance, although most of them came short of openly condemning their country’s government.⁶⁵ The IOC itself somehow encouraged this trend, officially expressing its admiration and support for “the calls for peace by Russian athletes”.⁶⁶

As time passed, however, the reality of a brutal regime clamping down on internal dissent and fostering war propaganda kicked in. The turning point was probably Russian gymnast Ivan Kuliak wearing the infamous ‘Z’ symbol – associated with support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine – on the podium of an Artistic Gymnastics World Cup event in Doha, where he was standing next to Ukrainian winner Illia Kovtun. Kuliak’s behaviour prompted international outrage as well as disciplinary proceedings by the International Gymnastics Federation.⁶⁷ A couple

⁶³ IOC, *IOC EB Recommends No Participation of Russian and Belarusian Athletes and Officials*, cit.

⁶⁴ Payne Lubbers, “Olympic Athletes Are Testing Rules and Taking a Knee for BLM”, in *Bloomberg*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-07-29/black-lives-matter-racial-justice-protests-take-stage-at-tokyo-olympics-2021>; IOC, *IOC Extends Opportunities for Athlete Expression during the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020*, 2 July 2021, <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-extends-opportunities-for-athlete-expression-during-the-olympic-games-tokyo-2020>.

⁶⁵ For an overview see Tracey Holmes, “With Russian Athletes Speaking Out against the Ukraine Invasion, What Good Would Banning Them Do?”, in *ABC News*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/100866956>.

⁶⁶ IOC, *IOC EB Recommends No Participation of Russian and Belarusian Athletes and Officials*, cit.

⁶⁷ Ben Church, “Ivan Kuliak: Russian Gymnast Says He Has No Regrets about Wearing ‘Z’ Symbol

of weeks later, the attendance of numerous high-profile Russian sportsmen and sportswomen – some of them donning jackets with the Z symbol – at the rally celebrating the eighth anniversary of the annexation of Crimea was also notable.⁶⁸ In parallel, in response to the bans, the Russian government started organising its own 'international' sporting events, beginning with a 'replacement' event for the Winter Paralympics in the Siberian city of Khanty-Mansiysk featuring athletes from Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan,⁶⁹ and a number of appeals against the bans from international events were filed by Russian federations and athletes at the Court of Arbitration for Sport based in Lausanne.⁷⁰

Against this backdrop, the space for pro-peace demonstrations by Russian athletes has shrunk, its cost has grown. Indeed, in the context of a protracted war and faced with the tightening grip of an authoritarian regime, Russian athletes who are still allowed participation in international sports events – even in a personal capacity, as in the case of professional tennis – may find it almost impossible to distance themselves from the Kremlin's propaganda.⁷¹ Their participation comes under constant scrutiny from both sides; they are pressured into taking a stand of some kind, and even not doing so and remaining 'silent' may be interpreted as tacit complicity.⁷²

Apparently, it was also this kind of concerns that, after long debates and calls by British Sports Minister Nigel Huddleston for "assurances" that any Russians to play at Wimbledon did not support the war in Ukraine,⁷³ motivated the eventual decision of the All England Club – the private members' club that organises the Wimbledon Championships – to exclude Russian and Belarusian players from the 2022 tournament, going against the official policy of international tennis organisations. In the words of the Chairman of the Club Ian Hewitt:

on Podium Next to Ukrainian Athlete - State Media", in *CNN*, 9 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/09/sport/ivan-kuliak-no-regrets-russia-ukraine-spt-intl>.

⁶⁸ "Russian Olympians Face Backlash after Vladimir Putin Rally", in *AP News*, 23 March 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/22860075081be288ceb96f328b226ca2>.

⁶⁹ Geoff Berkeley, "Hosts Russia Win over 100 Medals at Paralympics Replacement Event", in *Inside the Games*, 21 March 2022, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1120852>.

⁷⁰ "Russian Appeals against Sports Bans to Be Heard by CAS", in *AP News*, 5 April 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/1860cd51eb539ca147eeea945f50d57c>.

⁷¹ Gerald Marzorati, "Should the Tennis Tour Ban Russians from Competing?", in *The New Yorker*, 21 March 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/sports/sporting-scene/should-the-tennis-tour-ban-russians-from-competing>; Amelia Merrill, "How Russian Athletes Are Aiding Putin's Propaganda War", in *Mic*, 1 April 2022, <https://www.mic.com/impact/russia-athletes-putin-ivan-kuliak>.

⁷² Daryl Adair, "Is Banning Russian Tennis Players from Wimbledon the Right Call?", in *The Conversation*, 25 March 2022, <https://theconversation.com/is-banning-russian-tennis-players-from-wimbledon-the-right-call-17955>; Marta Kostyuk, "Dear Tennis community", Twitter post @marta_kostyuk, 20 April 2022, https://twitter.com/marta_kostyuk/status/1516757492516196354.

⁷³ Ben Church, "Daniil Medvedev: UK Government Wants Assurances that Russian Tennis Star Is Not a Supporter of Vladimir Putin", in *CNN*, 16 March 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/16/tennis/daniil-medvedev-vladimir-putin-wimbledon-spt-intl>.

We have very carefully considered the alternative measures that might be taken within the UK Government guidance but, given the high profile environment of The Championships, the importance of not allowing sport to be used to promote the Russian regime and our broader concerns for public and player (including family) safety, we do not believe it is viable to proceed on any other basis at The Championships.⁷⁴

The Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) and the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) took immediate issue with this "unilateral" and "unfair" decision, with the former pointing out that tennis players "compete as individuals to earn their place in tournaments based on the ATP Rankings" and therefore the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian players would potentially be "a damaging precedent". The ATP and WTA's position points to an important distinction between international sports events where participation is based on national representation (as in the case of the Davis Cup and Billie Jean King Cup, from which Russian players had already been banned by the International Tennis Federation [ITF] on 1 March) and those where athletes participate in a personal capacity: in the latter instance, the exclusion of a country's nationals may indeed be regarded as a form of "discrimination based on nationality".⁷⁵

Furthermore, unlike the 'multilateral' bans introduced by the IOC and IFs, the All England Club acted unilaterally, in disregard of the policy set out by the relevant international sports organisations and – as is made explicit in its own communique – taking into account the 'guidance' provided by the UK's government.⁷⁶ The fact that Daniil Medvedev was one of the tournament favourites and subsequent royal family fears about possible photo-ops to the benefit of the Russian regime reportedly played a role too.⁷⁷ The Wimbledon's ban is probably the most striking instance of direct influence of a Western government – perhaps the most hawkish

⁷⁴ All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club (AELTC), *Statement Regarding Russian and Belarusian Individuals at the Championships 2022*, 20 April 2022, https://www.wimbledon.com/en_GB/news/articles/2022-04-20/statement_regarding_russian_and_belarusian_individuals_at_the_championships_2022.html.

⁷⁵ Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP), *ATP Statement on Decision to Ban Russian & Belarusian Players*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.atptour.com/en/news/atp-statement-wimbledon-british-grass-swing-april-2022>; see also Women's Tennis Association (WTA), *WTA Statement on Decision to Ban Russian & Belarusian Players*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.wtatennis.com/news/2582411/wta-statement-on-decision-to-ban-russian-belarusian-players>; Therese Raphael, "Is Wimbledon Ban on Russians a Double Fault?", in *Bloomberg*, 22 April 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2022-04-22/is-wimbledon-s-ban-on-russians-a-double-fault>; for a different perspective see Jelena Damjanovic, "The Politics of Sport: U of T's Simon Darnell on Wimbledon's Ban of Russian and Belarusian Players", in *U of T News*, 2 May 2022, <https://www.utoronto.ca/news/politics-sport-u-t-s-simon-darnell-wimbledon-s-ban-russian-and-belarusian-players>.

⁷⁶ Nicola Sbetti, "Regno Unito, ma antisportivo" [United but unsporting Kingdom], in *Limes*, 22 April 2022, <https://www.limesonline.com/notizie-guerra-ucraina-settimana-russia-germania-regno-unito-wimbledon/127597>.

⁷⁷ Jeremy Wilson, "Royal Family Fears Prompt Wimbledon's Decision to Ban Daniil Medvedev and Russian Players", in *The Telegraph*, 20 April 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/tennis/2022/04/20/wimbledon-ban-daniil-medvedev-russian-players>.

one in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine⁷⁸ – in prompting sporting sanctions against Russia. It is notable that the organisers of the French Open quickly distanced themselves from the decision of the All England Club stating that they would allow participation of Russian tennis players under "a regime of strict neutrality";⁷⁹ as well as the fact that, while several Ukrainian players were supportive of Wimbledon's decision, a number of top Western players – among them, Rafa Nadal and Andy Murray – publicly questioned it,⁸⁰ unlike what had happened in several other instances right after the outbreak of the war.

Indeed, one of the driving forces behind the 'multilateral' bans introduced by IFs in late February-early March had been sportswomen and sportsmen, not only from Ukraine, but from Western countries more generally, usually in agreement with their national federations. The aforementioned refusal of the Polish football team to play Russia in the World Cup qualifier is one notable example; less talked about, but equally significant, were the refusal of France's women's foil team to compete against Russia at a World Cup event in Guadalajara⁸¹ and the collective boycott against the Russian teams at the European Junior & Cadet Fencing Championship in Novi Sad in response to an appeal by the Ukrainian Fencing Federation and in protest against FIE's President Usmanov.⁸² The most prominent example, however, was the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes from the Beijing Paralympics. On 27 February, a group of Ukrainian athletes, together with the progressive athletes' movement Global Athlete, released an open letter addressed to the IOC and IPC calling for the exclusion of Russian and Belarusian athletes from all sports events, including the 2022 Beijing Paralympic Games, as well as the suspension of the respective NOCs. In the next days, the letter was signed by several active and former athletes from other Western countries as well.⁸³ Amidst tensions running high in the athletes' village and entire teams suggesting they would walk out of matches featuring Russian athletes, the IPC was eventually forced to reconsider its initial decision of letting athletes compete under neutral flag and excluded the

⁷⁸ Mark Landler, "U.K. Takes a Hawkish Lead on Russia, but Will Europe Follow?", in *The New York Times*, 8 April 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/08/world/europe/boris-johnson-scholz-russia.html>.

⁷⁹ Geoff Berkeley, "French Open Refuses to Follow Wimbledon in Banning Russian and Belarusian Players", in *Inside the Games*, 29 April 2022, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1122502>.

⁸⁰ Issy Ronald, "Nadal, Djokovic and Murray Slam Wimbledon Decision to Ban Russian and Belarusian Athletes", in *CNN*, 2 May 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/02/tennis/nadal-murray-djokovic-wimbledon-ban-spt-intl>.

⁸¹ Alessandro Gennari, "Fioretto femminile: la Francia non scende in pedana contro la Russia per la finale terzo-quarto posto a Guadalajara" [Women's foil: France does not take the piste against Russia for the third-fourth place final in Guadalajara], in *Pianeta Scherma*, 28 February 2022, <https://www.pianetascherma.com/?p=61747>.

⁸² Alessandro Gennari, "Campionati Europei Novi Sad: l'Italia e le altre federazioni non tirano contro la Russia" [European Championships Novi Sad: Italy and other federations do not fence against Russia], in *Pianeta Scherma*, 1 March 2022, <https://www.pianetascherma.com/?p=61843>.

⁸³ Global Athlete, *Open Letter to IOC and IPC from Ukrainian Athletes*, 5 March 2022, <https://globalathlete.org/our-word/open-letter-from-ukraine-athletes>.

Russian and Belarusian delegations altogether.⁸⁴

Athletes' boycotts were motivated not only by humanitarian considerations related to the Russian aggression, but also by security concerns, especially in the case of events to be held in Russia.⁸⁵ In the case of the Beijing Winter Paralympics, between the lines of the IPC's motivation for introducing the ban – "to ensure that in sport practiced within the Paralympic Movement the spirit of fair play prevails, violence is banned, the health risk of the athletes is managed and fundamental ethical principles are upheld"⁸⁶ – one can see the incendiary potential that sports events involving both Ukrainian and Russian teams and athletes may have in the context of a war of aggression. Any match or competition featuring Russian representatives would imply the risk of some kind of confrontation – both symbolic and physical, both within and outside the field. Notably, already since 2014, UEFA had taken measures to keep Russian and Ukrainian teams apart in international football, citing "concerns about safety and security".⁸⁷ Such concerns were even more pivotal to the suspension of competitions on Russian territory. In an international environment marked by sheer confrontation, travelling to Russia may imply unsupportable risks for the athletes of those countries that have taken a firm stance against Moscow – as demonstrated by the imprisonment of US basketball star Brittney Griner due to the possession of vape cartridges containing hashish oil, which was described by former US officials as a potential "high-profile hostage".⁸⁸

4. Conclusion and implications

Right after the outbreak of the war against Ukraine, exceptional sanctioning measures were introduced against the Russian and Belarusian sporting world. These sanctions, which mostly targeted the two countries' teams and athletes rather than their sporting bureaucracy, were adopted at the multilateral level by the leading international sports organisations: the IOC, the IPC and IFs. Their underlying rationale and framing deserve attention. In IOC President Thomas Bach's words, such measures – which he did not refer to as 'boycotts' or 'sanctions' – were supposedly taken also to keep politics out of sport, as the participation

⁸⁴ Eddie Pells, "Athletes Force a Change in Ban of Russians at Paralympics", in *AP News*, 3 March 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/409d6e5467b6f024a52b69b0368b0a05>.

⁸⁵ See for example Pippa Field, "World Cup Skiing Farce as Only Russian Athletes Compete amid Mass Boycott over Ukraine", in *The Telegraph*, 25 February 2022, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/skiing/2022/02/25/world-cup-skiing-farce-russian-athletes-compete-amid-mass-boycott>.

⁸⁶ IPC, *IPC to Decline Athlete Entries from RPC and NPC Belarus for Beijing 2022*, cit.

⁸⁷ Dmitriy Rogovitskiy, "UEFA Keeps Russian and Ukrainian Clubs Apart", in *Reuters*, 17 July 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-soccer-uefa-russia-ukraine-idUKKBN0FM1V520140717>.

⁸⁸ "US Basketball Star Brittney Griner's Detention in Russia Extended until May", in *The Guardian*, 17 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/y44y7>; Danielle Gilbert, "Brittney Griner Was 'Wrongfully Detained.' What Happens Now?", in *The Washington Post*, 6 May 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/05/06/brittney-griner-wnba-russia-detained-hostage-putin>.

of Russian representatives would carry the risk of a “politicisation of sports competitions by athletes or teams, some of them being encouraged by third parties”. This framing, centred on the principle of sport’s “neutrality”, also explains why the sanctioning measures fell short of addressing the structural entanglement between sport and politics at the organisational level.⁸⁹ Ironically, President Putin – a leader who has systematically instrumentalised international sport for political purposes – responded to these sanctions by also resorting to the narrative of sport’s neutrality, citing the “fundamental values of sport, free of politics and discrimination”. In his words, the suspension of Russian and Belarusian athletes would be the last of a streak of “aggressive acts and outright provocations” that had plagued international sport in recent years, including the establishment of “a politically biased dictatorship of the anti-doping bureaucracy”.⁹⁰

Despite the IOC’s and Putin’s conflicting yet converging narratives about the fundamental neutrality of sport, the sporting sanctions against Russia were arguably the consequence and the proof of the *inherently political* nature of international sport, especially that based on national representation, which turns it into an extremely sensitive field in the context of a war of aggression. International sport provides a uniquely spectacular arena for interaction and cooperation, but also *physical competition* between representatives of nation states that is profoundly charged with symbolic values. Its fundamental preconditions are mutual recognition and basic agreement on norms between the participating countries. Russia’s aggression against Ukraine undermined such foundations, leading to a strong reaction on the part of not only Ukrainian, but more generally Western governments, officials and athletes alike. This concomitant pressure from both above (Western governments and sports organisations) and below (Western teams and athletes) forced the IOC and IFs into taking sides – although officially denying doing so. A significant exception in this respect is the position of the International Luge Federation, which underlined that its leading bodies “cannot and do not want to behave neutrally regarding the war of aggression by Russia against the Ukraine” and made the general point that “it should be possible to impose sanctions on sports associations and members of a country’s association that demonstrates behavior contrary to international law that has been confirmed by a UN body [...] or the IOC”.⁹¹ In some instances, such as the All England Club’s ban on Russian tennis players, individual Western governments went beyond the policy of IFs and unilaterally pushed for the introduction of sanctions that focused merely on athletes’ nationality. The strong reaction of the ATP, WTA and prominent Western players against this type of measures calls attention to the risk of discrimination and arbitrariness inherent in sanctions that concern sporting

⁸⁹ Thomas Bach, “Give Peace a Chance”, 11 March 2022, <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/-give-peace-a-chance>.

⁹⁰ Russian Presidency, *Greetings to Participants in Winter Paralympics Titled We Are Together*. Sport, 18 March 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68013>.

⁹¹ Michael Pavitt, “FIL to Explore New Ways to Sanction Russian Luge Federation after Court Defeat”, in *Inside the Games*, 11 April 2022, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1121746>.

events where participation is not based on national representation and in sanctions that are merely the result of specific governmental concerns.

While adopted mostly at the multilateral level, the sporting sanctions against Russia also highlighted the lasting and dominant influence of Western governments, sports organisations and athletes in the IOC, IPC and IFs. The West's firm commitment to sporting sanctions against Russia laid bare double standards in international sport too – as was widely noted, this kind of outrage and such comprehensive sporting boycotts and sanctions have not materialised in the case of wars, illegal occupations and fundamental violations of international law occurring outside the Western world.⁹²

In this respect, the sporting sanctions against Russia may set an important precedent. In the future, it may become more difficult for the IOC and IFs to resist calls for taking humanitarian (and human rights more widely) concerns into greater consideration in the governance of international sport – especially, but not limited to, assigning mega-events to dubious regimes. This trend had already emerged in the run-up to the Beijing Winter Olympics, with several Western governments launching diplomatic-only (that is, not involving athletes) boycotts citing the “ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses” as the underlying concern.⁹³ The upcoming World Cup in Qatar is going to be a revealing testing ground from this point of view.

Furthermore, handling a possible reintegration of Russia into the international sporting community will be a delicate matter. Sport has been a key tool of the Russian regime's politics, with the Kremlin being involved in a long streak of illegalities, both in the sporting (state-sponsored doping) and non-sporting domains (for example, the annexation of Crimea in 2014 immediately after the Sochi Winter Olympics). International sports organisations have long turned a blind eye, providing the Russian regime with numerous propaganda opportunities. At the same time, not tracing a path towards future reintegration may pave the way for a long-term split of the sporting world, not just between the West vs. Russia and its closest allies, but possibly along a West vs. non-West divide. Russia's recent attempts at launching its own calendar of international paralympic events and speculations about its football federation leaving UEFA to join the Asian Football Confederation are a concrete testimony to this possibility.⁹⁴ To prevent a long-term

⁹² See for example “Sports Sanctions against Russia Spark Debate over Sports and Politics”, in *TRT World*, 10 March 2022, <https://www.trtworld.com/article/55420>.

⁹³ White House, *Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki*, 6 December 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2021/12/06/press-briefing-by-press-secretary-jen-psaki-december-6-2021>. See also Quint Forgy, “White House Announces Diplomatic Boycott of Beijing Olympics”, in *Politico*, 6 December 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/12/06/white-house-boycott-beijing-olympics-523817>; Louis Westendarp, “Who's Boycotting the Winter Olympics?”, in *Politico*, 20 January 2022, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=1954774>.

⁹⁴ Michael Pavitt, “Russian Paralympic Committee Says Athletes Invited to China with Joint Events Proposed”, in *Inside the Games*, 15 April 2022, <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1121924>; Steve Price, “Why Russia Joining the Asian Football Confederation Makes Little Sense”, in *Forbes*,

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fragmentation of the sporting world and to send a message of goodwill, a road map for the selective easing of sporting sanctions in response to conflict de-escalation – perhaps having the readmission of athletes and teams under a neutral flag where they have been banned as the first possible step, and the ban on events hosted by Russia as the final measure to be lifted – could be outlined at the multilateral level.

Finally, the sporting sanctions against Russia may be considered less an exceptional circumstance than the result of wider trends that are bringing the constitutive entanglement between international sport and international politics into the spotlight. Growing humanitarian and human rights concerns on the one hand and a future international system plagued by increased fragmentation on the other will inevitably put more and more pressure – both from below and from above – on international sports organisations into taking a stand, piercing the veil of their self-professed neutrality and autonomy.

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