

Sparing the Athletes: Revising the Russia-Belarus Sporting Ban

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Collateral damage? Deserving and worthy of their punishment? The exclusion and banishment of Russian and Belarusian athletes has become the acceptable prejudice of many governments and a slew of sporting bodies. After the invasion of Ukraine in February last year, a number banded together to find ways to punish Russia, and those of its ally, Belarus. Pitifully, and weakly, athletes were considered fair game, ironically enough by those obsessed by the idea of fairness in sport.

Initially, the International Olympic Committee [felt that an athlete ban](#) was in order. Its directive of February 28, 2022 was, according to IOC President Thomas Bach, a protective measure, rather than sanction. With such inverted logic, Bach could explain that the safety of both Russian and Belarusian athletes could not otherwise be guaranteed "because of the deep anti-Russian and anti-Belarusian feelings in so many countries following the invasion."

The mood has since changed. On March 28, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) Executive Board [issued a number of recommendations](#) to international sports event organisers and International Federations (IFs.) Russian or Belarusian passport holders could only compete as Individual Neutral Athletes who had satisfied all relevant anti-doping requirements. Teams collectively with such passports would not be considered, while those actively supporting the war would not be allowed to compete. "Support personnel who actively support the war," it was noted, "cannot be entered." Those contracted to Russian or Belarusian military and national security agencies were also barred.

In a news conference held after an IOC executive board meeting, Bach [noted](#) that, "We have taken note of some negative reactions by some European governments in particular." And there have been more than a few.

Ukraine's **Adriy Yermak**, chief of staff to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, seamlessly linked the sporting figures of his country: those who engage in symbolic conflict, and those who do

lethal battle. “Hundreds of Ukrainian athletes die defending their country from the aggressor,” [he claimed](#) in a statement. “However, the IOC prefers not to notice this. This is not fair. Injustice destroys the spirit of the Olympic movement in the same way that Russia destroys international law.”

Germany’s sports minister **Nancy Faeser** [offered her own](#) suggestion justifying the targeted ostracization of Russian and Belarussian athletes. To let them participate in international competition was “a slap in the face of Ukrainian athletes.” To let Russia “the warmonger ... use international competitions for its propaganda are damaging for the Olympic idea of peace and international understanding.” Forgotten here is the fact that some of these athletes, as they have done previously, can compete in a neutral capacity.

If the strict letter of the Olympian spirit was followed, all participant countries in *any* war should be excluded from participating in international sporting competitions that are supposedly pursued in the name of international peace and understanding. But that is simply not the case.

As the IOC executive board itself observed, there were as many as 70 wars and conflicts taking place. The scene of competition would be a very bare one indeed, were the letter of that law prosecuted to its utmost. In Bach’s words, “It cannot be up to governments to decide which athletes can participate in which competition.” To follow that line of thinking would “be the end of world sport as we know it today.”

Such a view has ample support, not least of all in Article 6 of the Olympic Charter, which states that, “The Olympic Games are competitions between athletes in individual or team events and not between countries. They bring together the athletes selected by their respective National Olympic Committees.” The argument that the governments of both Russia and Belarus are intertwined with the sporting establishment is a poor one, given that all governments are guilty, in some measure, of that measure.

The IOC has also justified its actions as being in line with the UN General Assembly [Resolution A/77L.28](#) entitled “Sport as an enabler of sustainable development.” Adopted on December 1, 2022, it recognises that “major international sports events should be recognised in the spirit of peace, mutual understanding, and international cooperation, friendship, tolerance, and without discrimination of any kind, and that the unifying and conciliative nature of such events should be respected”.

In the scheme of things, the IOC is always on slippery ground. Like such bodies as the world footballing federation FIFA, it has adopted the view that sports should be shorn of political content, the participating athletes naked and bald in their sporting prowess. It reiterates, for instance, the view that “athlete expressions are not permitted” in various instances, be they during the course of official ceremonies (Olympic medal ceremonies, opening and closing ceremonies), during the phase of competition, and in the Olympic Village itself.

Such a view has the effect of being both charmingly naïve and intellectually offensive, treating sporting figures as children at play, under the watchful eye of authorities. Yet the IOC is the very body insisting that countries and their governments not dictate the conditions under which their own athletes should participate under. Selfishness in sporting management is all.

A number of sporting bodies are beginning to see the light – in a fashion. The International

Table Tennis Federation is the first that [has relented](#), and will permit competitors from Belarus and Russia to resume competition from May “under strict conditions of neutrality”. For the ITTF, table tennis could “build bridges, leading to better understanding among peoples, and open the door for peacebuilding in ways that exclusion and division cannot.” That’s at least a start.

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