

## Original Research

# An Exploration of the Eligibility Conditions for the 2024 Olympic Games: Russians out, Belarussians in

Verner Møller, [Aarhus University], [Denmark]

Paul Dimeo, [University of Stirling], [Scotland]

**Abstract:** In 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The attack was facilitated by Belarus, the territory that was used as a launchpad for Russia's assault from the North on Ukraine's capital Kyiv. In response to the invasion, some international sports federations decided to exclude athletes from these two countries, while others continued to regard them eligible. In early 2023, International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach spoke out in favor of including Russian and Belarussian athletes in the Olympic Games under a neutral flag. He later explained his position as a defense of the Olympic principles as formulated in the Olympic charter. In this article, we examine if Bach's position is justifiable, based on the Olympic charter. Our analysis leads us to the conclusion that it is not. Although we concede that individual athletes should not be held responsible for the unlawful acts of their country, we find that because of the way Russia conducts the war and exploits their athletes in its war propaganda, the principles outlined in the Olympic charter nevertheless justifies the exclusion of Russian athletes from the Paris Olympics. However, the exclusion of Belarussian athletes cannot be justified by the same principles as Belarus was not responsible for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, does not actively take part in the war, and has not been at war with anyone since it reclaimed sovereignty after the breakup of the Soviet Union.

**Keywords:** [Russo-Ukrainian War, War crimes, Olympic Charter, Olympic Principles, Russia, Belarus,, Eligibility, Olympic Games]

[Final page breaks will be addressed when all corrections are complete]

## Introduction

Around 3:00 p.m. local time on August 21, 2016, Soslan Ramonov stepped down from the wrestling mat at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Ramonov had won the gold medal in the men's freestyle 65-kg wrestling competition. He could not have realized at the time that his step down from the mat was the last time for eight years—and probably more—that a Russian athlete had represented the Russian flag at any Olympic Games. Even more so, he was the last Russian to stand on top of an Olympic medal podium, looking up at the Russian flag and listening to the Russian anthem a few minutes later.

This is not to say that Russian individuals have not competed at the Olympic Games since 2016. In fact, they were present at all subsequent summer and winter editions. But their national symbols had been removed. In 2018, Russian athletes competed as “Olympic Athletes from Russia” under the Olympic flag and anthem because of state involvement in doping practices. For the same reason, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) only allowed the Russian Olympic Committee to represent athletes in 2020 and 2022. At the 2024 Paris Olympic Games then, viewers will have to get used to yet another term for athletes from Russia. Those Russians who qualified for the games will be known as “Individual Neutral

Athletes” (AIN). This time, the punishment is a response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in March 2022. Since the IOC ruled that only athletes who have no associations with the Russian military or no public support for the war can participate, it is unlikely that we will see Ramonov as an AIN athlete. He is listed as senior lieutenant of the Russian army by a Ukrainian government website (gov.ua, n.d., sine anno).

Importantly, Russian athletes will not be the only nationals competing as AIN athletes. They will be joined by qualified participants with a Belarussian passport. The IOC considers Belarus a facilitator and supporter of Russia’s military actions in Ukraine. In almost all official communication on the war, the IOC speaks of “Russian and Belarussian athletes.” The matter is not so simple, however.

In this article, we examine the IOC’s rationale for its decision-making on the inclusion of Russian and Belarussian athletes and measure this in relation to the principles stated in the Olympic charter which the President of the IOC Thomas Bach has referred to in his defense of the inclusion of athletes from the two countries. We provide background information on Russian aggression in the past decades, particularly toward the Ukrainian people. We also explore the political relationship between Belarus and Russia. We argue that athletes of the respective countries should be considered as two distinct groups rather than being viewed as one. Whereas Russia’s clear violation of human rights principles should not leave any other conclusion than a complete ban on Russian athletes, participation of Belarussian nationals can be justified considering the principles outlined in the Olympic charter.

## **The IOC’s Case for Inclusion**

In March 2023, the IOC expressed its view that Russian and Belarussian athletes who did not have any clear ties to the military should be allowed to re-enter the international world of sport. The IOC executive board suggested some additional limitations. Only individual athletes and coaches who had not expressed vocal support of the war and were willing to accept to compete under a neutral flag should be accepted, whereas teams of the two countries should still be ineligible no matter how the individual athletes in these teams have declared themselves in relation to the war (Ingle 2023). These further demands by the executive board came after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reacted in February to IOC’s announcement that it was exploring ways to allow athletes from the two countries to take part in the 2024 Paris Olympics as neutrals. In a video address to sports ministers from around thirty countries, Zelensky urged the ministers to oppose the IOC’s plan telling them that accepting Russian athletes would be the same as condoning violence and lawlessness, which, he said “cannot be covered up with some pretended neutrality or a white flag.” Very few Russian athletes had spoken out against the war much less condemned it, Zelensky maintained, and those “isolated voices that have are quickly fading away.” Considering this, Zelensky foresaw that: “If Russian athletes are allowed to participate in any competitions or

the Olympic Games, it's just a matter of time before the terrorist state forces them to play along with the war propaganda" (AFP 2023). This prediction was not plucked out of thin air. Russia had previously exploited athletes in its war propaganda.

In March 2022, just a few days after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, gymnast Ivan Kuliak sported the Russian pro-war Z-symbol on the chest of his gymnastics suit during the World Cup in Doha. Later that same month, Putin held a rally to mark the eighth anniversary of the annexation of Crimea and promote his newly launched "special military operation." The rally took place at the Luzhniki Stadium, which had been at the center of the 1980 Olympics. Several Russian medalists who had taken part as neutrals at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and 2022 Beijing winter Olympics due to Russia's doping sanction in the wake of the Sochi Olympics 2014 went on stage with their medals around their neck. On this occasion, they certainly did not act as neutrals. They were honored with the national anthem that had been banned at the victory ceremony during the Tokyo and Beijing games and all of them had a Z in the colors of the Russian flag embroidered on their jackets (*Guardian* 2022).

Despite this blatant demonstration of disregard for the sporting sanction imposed by the IOC, the IOC was steadfast in its view that a contingent of individual athletes from Russia and Belarus should be offered a way into the 2024 Paris Olympics. In a letter to the Ukrainian National Olympic Committee's Vadym Guttsseit, IOC President Thomas Bach lamented Ukraine's effort to pressure other countries to boycott the games in the event Russian athletes were allowed to take part in any shape or form. He called this campaign extremely regrettable and reminded Guttsseit that: "Threatening a boycott of the Olympic Games, which, as you inform me, the NOC of Ukraine is currently considering, goes against the fundamentals of the Olympic Movement and the principles we stand for" (AFP 2012).

Yet, the IOC was not only under pressure from Ukraine. Several countries backed Ukraine's position and wanted every Russian and Belarusian athlete barred. In response, Bach defended the IOC's position by urging politicians to keep politics and sport apart. "If politics decide who can take part in a competition, the sport and athletes become tools of politics," Bach argued, adding:

It is then impossible for sport to transfer its uniting powers. We must be politically neutral but not apolitical. We know well that politics rule the world. We know well that our decisions have political implications and we have to include that in our thinking. ...But we should not make the mistake of raising ourselves to referees of political disputes because we will be crushed by these political powers. ...If we exclude athletes for political reasons, we face the decline of the international sporting system. ...We feel, suffer with, and understand the Ukrainian people and athletes. On the other hand, we have, as a global organization a responsibility towards human rights and the Olympic charter. (Schmidt and Mncwabe 2023)

Bach's position is not unreasonable. It surely would put the IOC in an impossible position if it was required to assess all kinds of conflicts between countries and, accordingly, exclude athletes from countries it judged to be cause of these conflicts. Nevertheless, in the current context, Bach's argument is self-defeating for two reasons. First, if he was truly concerned about the politicization of the Olympics, it would be suitable to reflect on how the IOC historically has allowed the games to be used by Russia and other authoritarian regimes for domestic and international political purposes (Riordan 2010). This might lead to further considerations about the harm this exploitation has done to the integrity of Olympic sports. Little has been revealed about how the Soviet sport system used unsporting measures to increase its sporting success during the Cold War period. However, pentathlete Boris Onishchenko's disqualification from the 1976 Montreal Summer Olympics is an indication of this regime's willingness to manipulate results for propaganda purposes. Onishchenko was disqualified after it was revealed that his épée had been illegally modified with a switch fitted to the hilt so that he could claim points without his weapon having to hit his opponent (Møller and Dimeo 2013). It is unlikely that Onishchenko had built the electronic switch into the épée. Had he engineered the weapon's switch himself, one would imagine that he would also have familiarized himself with the use of it. He apparently had not. The Onishchenko scandal only broke because the athlete accidentally switched the contact while the épée was right up in the air far from the body of his opponent. Nevertheless, the incident was treated as an unfortunate isolated incident. Onishchenko was handed a lifetime ban as if he was the sole culprit.

Revelations of state organized doping regimes in the socialist "brother nation" GDR following the German reunification adds to the suspicion that sports cheating was endemic in the Eastern Bloc that Russia controlled. Worse for faith in Russian fair play was, of course, the revelation of Russia's systematic manipulation of the antidoping system during the Sochi Olympics that saw Russia win the largest number of winter Olympic medals ever, also beating the Soviet Union's best tally. Reflections on these past incidents should lead Bach to reconsider whether it is even possible for the organization to maintain its apolitical posture or if it was time to discard the illusion of neutrality and accept that it operates in a hyper-politicized world in which declarations of neutrality are also inevitably a political position. Such reconsiderations seem particularly pertinent at a time when the IOC attempts to strengthen its apparent commitment to human rights (James 2023).

Second, if Bach really meant that the IOC has an obligation toward human rights, it would be appropriate for him to first consider the horrendous human rights violations Russia has committed during the war in Ukraine. Then after having done so, measure these violations against potential infringements of the Olympic charter IOC would commit should the organization decide to exclude all Russian athletes. In what follows, we will examine what such consideration would logically lead to. Before we turn to the Olympic principles formulated in the Olympic charter, we provide some background while reviewing some of

Russia's most vicious crimes in order to examine Bach's proposal to reinstate Russian athletes in international sport as neutrals.

## **Human Rights Violations of Russia**

Much to the chagrin of Moscow, many of its former vassal states have fought to break free from Russian hegemony and shield themselves from Moscow's influence. In 1990, the Baltic states Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia—annexed in 1940 by the Soviet Union—became the first former Soviet states to declare independence. In 1991, the republic of Georgia became the fourth, and the first Caucasian state, to do so. Following the recognition of the Baltic states' secession, Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine recognized each other's independence and formed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In December 1991, all ex-Soviet republics apart from the Baltic states and Georgia formally joined the CIS. It is beyond the scope of this article to account for the turmoil, uprisings, conflicts, and crackdowns that took place in the former Soviet republics in the 1980s and 1990s. However, it is important to consider how Russia and Belarus have conducted themselves following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the resulting erosion of Moscow's superpower status.

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the wake of President Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika policy in the 1980s, Russia had committed several violations of international law, to keep the remains of its empire together, prior to its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. In 1991, rebels in the Russian Republic of Chechnya proclaimed the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and declared its independence. Three years later, Russia intervened militarily to restore control over the region. After two years of fighting with heavy losses on both sides, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) brokered a ceasefire that in 1996 saw Russia sign the Khasavyurt Accord that granted de facto independence to Chechnya (Walker 1997). Due to the rise of militant Islamic groups in the largely Muslim breakaway republic, the following years were characterized by power struggles and armed conflicts on the border of neighboring regions. The unstable situation exacerbated tensions between Chechnya and Russia. In 1999, Russia launched a second military offensive to oust the Chechnyan leadership and regain control over the area that de jure remained part of Russia. The prelude was a series of bombings of apartment buildings in Moscow and other Russian cities. These bombings were attributed to Chechnyan militants. Compelling evidence, however, suggests that the bombings, which killed three hundred people, were carried out by Russia's Federal Security Bureau (FSB) on behalf of the Russian Government to justify a second invasion of Chechnya. For instance, the FSB "was caught planting a bomb in the basement in an apartment building in Ryazan under circumstances nearly identical to those of the Moscow bombings" (Satter 2002, 2).

The second Chechen war was even more brutal than the first as Russia showed its disregard for international law by indiscriminately bombing Grozny, the capital city of

Chechnya, resulting in vast destruction and plenty of civilian casualties. Breaches of the Geneva Convention and international humanitarian law were committed by both sides including “extrajudicial executions, forced disappearances, murder, rape, and torture” (Knight and Narozhna 2005, 89).

To protect its economic and political interests, Russia was also actively involved in the Tajikistani civil war from 1992 to 1997. At the same time, while formally endorsing the Georgian and Moldovan government, Russia backed Abkhazian and South Ossetian separatists in Georgia and Transnistrian separatists in Moldova thereby destabilizing these countries and bringing them under control. In both instances, Russia was “simultaneously provocateur, enabler, aggressor and peacemaker” (Dunn and Bobick 2014, 410). In 1992, separatists in the mainly Russian-speaking Transnistria began an armed conflict with aiming to secede the region. Before the Moldovans could put down the rebellion, Russia—uninvited by the Moldovan government and without a United Nations (UN) mandate—intervened in the conflict on what Russia described as a peacekeeping mission. In 2018, twenty-six years after the UN had declared the Russian intervention illegal, the UN general assembly adopted a resolution demanding “the complete and unconditional withdrawal of foreign military forces from the territory of the Republic of Moldova.” Russia tried to prevent the resolution being put to a vote. When this attempt proved unsuccessful, Russia, together with some of its allies including Belarus and Syria, voted against the resolution that, notably, among its proponents counted former Soviet republics, such as Estonia, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine (United Nations 2018). It goes without saying that Russia did not oblige to the resolution as its troops remain stationed in Moldova in violation of the republic’s sovereignty to this day.

Russia’s lack of respect for international bodies and agreements were nothing new at this stage. One of the most serious concerns in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union was its nuclear arsenal. Republics, previously under Moscow rule, became not only sovereign states but—due to the nuclear weapons placed on their territory—nuclear powers as well. Ukraine held the world’s third largest number of nuclear warheads. To prevent nuclear proliferation and contain the risk that states emerging from the ruins of the Soviet empire in an unstable and potentially conflict-ridden situation would have such weapons at their disposal, the OSCE facilitated the negotiation of the “Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances.” This memorandum signed by the US, Russia, and Britain was meant to guarantee Ukraine’s security by a commitment “to respect the independence and sovereignty and the existing borders of Ukraine” and “to refrain from the threat or use of force” against the country (Pifer 2019). This security guarantee was key to persuading the Ukrainian government to hand over their nuclear weapons to Russia for dismantling. By its conquest of Crimea in 2014 and its attempt to conquer the entire country in 2022, Russia once again proved an unreliable partner in international affairs. To add insult to injury, Russia has conducted its so-called “special military operation” with the same ruthlessness that they

practiced in Chesney and again in 2015 in Syria (di Giovanni 2022). According to the OSCE (2022), the Russian army has committed a vast list of war crimes in Ukraine. Hospitals, schools, kindergartens, drama theaters, churches, apartment buildings, critical power infrastructure, railway stations, and dams have been targeted without regard for civilian lives and property or the disastrous effects the destruction has on the environment. They have put global food security in peril by systematically attacking Ukraine's agriculture export facilities such as grain silos and shipping ports. Summary executions, rape, torture, castration, and other kinds of mutilation of civilians and prisoners of war have also been widely reported. Forced deportations of Ukrainian children from occupied territories to Russia is another established fact that in October 2022 caused the International Criminal Court (ICC) to issue an arrest warrant for Russian President Putin and Russia's children's commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova. While this warrant made Putin stop traveling to countries that recognize the jurisdiction of the ICC, it did not make him stop the abduction program. According to Maria Lvova-Belova herself, from the outbreak of the war until July 30, 2023, more than seven hundred thousand Ukrainian children have been taken from Ukraine to Russia (Current Time 2023).

Other agencies have also called out Russia for human rights offenses during the ongoing war. In late March 2024, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights accused Russia of violations of humanitarian laws in its invasion of Ukraine. The report's accusations include unlawful killings, torture, enforced disappearances, and arbitrary detentions (United Nations 2024a). The UN has also pointed to individual judicial harassments as in the case of Oleg Orlov, co-chair of the Nobel Peace Prize-winning organization "Memorial." Russia has staged a show trial to punish Orlov for "discrediting the use of Russian armed forces." According to the UN, the accusations have no grounds in international law and constitute a violation of Russia's international obligations to protect freedom of expression (United Nations 2024b). Considering such an environment, how can we expect athletes to disassociate themselves from the Russian regime?

In simple terms, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was a consequence of the Russian leadership's unwillingness to accept that the biggest of its former vassal states was trying to free itself from Russia's hegemony in search of a more prosperous future within the frameworks of the European Union and secure its status as a sovereign state by joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Since it became apparent to the Russian leadership that it could not easily conquer its neighbor and prevent the Ukrainian people from exerting its right to decide its own future, Russia has attempted to break their will to fight for land and identity by pounding cities and turning entire towns and villages into rubble in the hope that brute force and destruction will eventually persuade the Ukrainians to surrender. These examples of war crimes and human rights violations should suffice as backdrop for an exploration of Russia's compliance with the Olympic principles as we will now demonstrate.

## Fundamental Principles of Olympism

The first of the Olympic charter's seven guiding principles states that by blending "sport with culture and education Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example, social responsibility and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles." This implies that the governors of the Olympic movement, first and foremost the IOC, are assigned an educational mission. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has shown that Russia acts without regard for the value of good example, social responsibility, and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles. It is often said that educators should lead by example. If this is true, it would be principled by the IOC, precisely for educational reasons, to exclude Russian athletes from the Olympics. Further it would be in accordance with the second principle that states that: "The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity." In defense of the IOC's position, it may be tempting to argue that excluding Russian athletes would undermine the prospects and opportunities for the Olympics serving to promote peace, harmony, and human dignity. However, this argument neglects the immensely unequal power relationship between state and individual. In peacetime, sport can promote exchanges across nationality, culture, religion, etc. and can contribute to foster and preserve good international relations, but has often failed to do so in times of conflict and war. Prior to the 1936 summer and winter Olympics in Berlin and Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Hitler made no secret of his expansionist ambitions (Krüger and Murray 2010). Immediately after the games, "Germany's expansionist policies and the persecution of Jews and other 'enemies of the state' accelerated." Poland's participation in these games did not protect it from being invaded by the host country. In fact, it has been argued that the Nazi regime used the 1936 Olympics "to bedazzle many foreign spectators and journalists with an image of a peaceful and tolerant Germany, suggesting that this blunted international resistance to Nazi tyranny." As a result, just "three years of the Olympiad, the 'hospitable' and 'peaceable' sponsor of the Games unleashed World War II" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2023).

Fast forward to 2014. Russia hosted the winter Olympics in Sochi that took place from February 7th to 23rd. Four days after this lavish soft power event, it sent in troops to occupy the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea. Ukraine's friendly participation in the spectacle did nothing to protect its territorial sovereignty. The impotence of the Olympics as promoter of peace was further amplified in the wake of the Beijing 2022 winter Olympics. Once again, Russia demonstrated its disdain for the charter when for the second time it invaded its neighbor four days after Russian and Ukrainian athletes met in Olympic competitions that were supposed to foster peace.

The third principle states that the Olympic movement "is the concerted, organised, universal and permanent action...of all individuals and entities who are inspired by the values



of Olympism.” That is, the movement does not simply include everybody. Time and again Russia has confirmed by its actions that it does not share the values of Olympism. Russian sports federations are financially supported by the state (Peshin 2018). That is, those sporting “entities” are not separate from the state but part of it. Hence, those “entities” cannot meaningfully claim to hold different values than the state. When it comes to individuals, it may be different. It goes without saying that individuals living in a dictatorship do not necessarily share the same aspirations and values as their ruler. It therefore requires more consideration to exclude individual athletes. The need to be considerate in this regard is reinforced by the fourth principle which says: “The practice of sport is a human right. Every individual must have the possibility of practicing sport, without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with the spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.”

Because the practice of sport as a human right is mentioned in the Olympic charter, one could be led to believe that participation in the Olympics is a human right. This, however, is clearly not the case. Only a select few athletes who dream about participating in the Olympics manage to qualify. So the right to participate in the Olympics, if it is indeed a right, must be understood as limited to those who are athletically qualified. Based on performance, several Russian and Belarusian athletes qualify. Therefore, if it was true that it is a human right for qualified athletes to participate in the Olympics, it would be impossible to justify exclusion of athletes from any country regardless of what their country of citizenship has been guilty of. However, IOC's decision to preclude Russian and Belarusian team sport athletes from the games shows that the fourth principle shall not be interpreted as if participation in the Olympics is a universal right for qualified athletes. Instead, the principle is probably meant to convey the idea that all people should be able to play sport where they live regardless of gender, age, talent, ability, etc. This interpretation fits the second part of the principle where the importance of the concept of the Olympic spirit is explained. If taken seriously, it seems to be too much to ask Ukrainian athletes to face Russian athletes in competition in a spirit of friendship and solidarity. Some of them may have friends or relatives who have been killed or maimed on the battlefield, or as civilians in an apartment building, a theater, hospital, train station, or have been raped, tortured, and executed for no other reason than that they are Ukrainians. And certainly, all of them will have compatriots who have suffered that fate because of Russia's invasion. Some Russian athletes, on the other hand, will have comrades or family members who have committed horrendous atrocities on the Ukrainian population and all of them will have countrymen who have. Given this, it is unimaginable that Russian athletes who agree to go to the Olympics as neutrals will go there and face Ukrainians in a spirit of friendship and solidarity. This is not the same as saying that there are no qualified Russian athletes who in heart and soul condemn the invasion and empathize with the Ukrainian people, have friendly feelings toward their neighbors and are in solidarity with them. But those Russian athletes who genuinely stand in solidarity with Ukraine are the ones

who would welcome a blanket ban on all Russian athletes and in any case will stay away to atone for the crimes committed by the regime they live under. We are aware that this claim may sound more normative than scientific, but it is in fact logical if we take the word “genuinely” literally. Because if ambitious Russian athletes who wish to compete at the Olympics are not willing, given the circumstances, to sacrifice their ambition they cannot be said to be wholeheartedly in solidarity with Ukraine. Accordingly, if the IOC decided to ban all Russian athletes indiscriminately, it would only be felt as punishment by athletes who support the invasion or at best halfheartedly sympathize with the Ukrainian cause.

In keeping with this, by excluding all Russian athletes and thereby siding with Ukraine, the IOC would rather uphold than violate the charter and it would have demonstrated that it was not empty words when Bach said the IOC “feel, suffer with, and understand the Ukrainian people and athletes.”

At first glance, this appears to go against the fifth principle that says:

Recognizing that sports occurs within the framework of society, sports organizations within the Olympic movement shall apply political neutrality. They have the rights and obligations of autonomy, which includes freely establishing and controlling the rules of sport, determining the structure and governance of their organizations enjoying the right of elections free from outside influence and the responsibility for ensuring that principles of good governance be applied.

If the organizations within the Olympics are obliged to apply political neutrality, the IOC must be under the same obligation. Or so it would seem. However, IOC's exclusion of South Africa from the Tokyo Games 1964 based on the South African governments' apartheid policy shows that IOC are not bound by the fifth principle. In fact, South Africa was only reinstated at the 1992 Barcelona games after the apartheid policy had been abandoned. So here, the IOC took a political stance in opposing a sovereign state's internal affairs. With this precedent, and given the scale of the Russian crimes against humanity both inside and outside its own borders in the twenty-first century, it would sound hollow if the IOC insisted that it could not take a political stance in the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

It is true that the charter's sixth principle justified the exclusion of South Africa as a nation as it determines: “The enjoyment of the rights and freedoms set forth in the Olympic charter shall be secured without discrimination of any kind such as race, color, sex, sexual orientation, language religion, political or other opinion....” Yet this principle does not justify the exclusion of individual South African athletes. In fact, this sixth principle, if the charter were to be taken seriously, was suited to serve as another reason why Russia ought to have been removed from the Olympic family after the 2014 Sochi games as the event “was tainted by migrant worker abuses, media crackdowns, forced evictions, and discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community” (Hsiang 2023). Amplified by the seventh and last

principle: Belonging to the Olympic movement requires compliance with the Olympic charter and recognition by the IOC that neither Russia nor its athletes in so far as they do not publicly denounce the invasion of Ukraine belong to the Olympic family.

## **Difference Between Russia and Belarus**

Following the same Olympic principles, we will now argue why Belarusian athletes, contrary to their Russian peers, should not be excluded from the Olympics and why the IOC, rather than insisting on its neutrality, should allow the Belarusians to compete under the country's original red-white flag, which is the color the Belarusian democratic movement has adopted as a symbol.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the IOC has dealt with the Russo-Ukrainian war as if Russia and Belarus were the same. However, the two countries' responsibility and involvement in the crises are markedly different. For starters, Belarus did not initiate the war.

The Ukrainian capital, Kyiv, is located about 380 kilometers from the Russian border but less than half that distance (about 150 kilometers) from Belarus. In the lead up to the invasion, Belarus allowed Russia to amass troops, tanks, combat vehicles, and other military equipment on its territory. Thus, Belarus became a launchpad for and, consequently, complicit in the assault on Kyiv in February 2022. As the war dragged on, Belarus got further involved. First, it was persuaded to host and train Russian conscripts and sign a protocol that legitimized the military presence of Russian troops and equipment in the country. Later, Belarus agreed to make their stockpiles of artillery available for the Russian armed forces (Kłysiński and Zochowski 2023). The alliance between the two countries were further strengthened in June 2023 when Russia deployed tactical nuclear weapons in Belarus for the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1989. This exposed the erosion of Belarus as a sovereign state. The country has in effect become a puppet state in what Russia with increased emphasis after the breakup of the Soviet Union insists is its "privileged sphere of influence" (Cooley 2017).

To be true, according to Ukraine's ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets among others, Belarus has assisted Russia's genocidal abduction of children (Fornusek 2023). Yet, Belarus is a much different case. With a population below ten million people and a military that ranks behind Hungary and Bulgaria in the 2024 global firepower index, Belarus does not really pose a military threat to its neighbors (GFP 2024). It is undeniable that Belarus has facilitated the Russian war effort by giving Russia access to its territory and accepted Russian military's use of its resources. But since it emerged as an independent state in 1991, Belarus has not initiated any war of its own.

Belarus is member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (successor of the Warsaw pact) that is centered around a similar collective obligation as expressed in its counterpart the NATO (1949) article five which establishes that an armed attack on one

country shall be considered an attack against them all. Despite Belarus being a CSTO member, the country's proximity to Ukraine, Ukrainian's defense intelligence's assertion that they see "measures being taken by the Russian Federation to force the leadership of Belarus to enter an open war" (*Jerusalem Post* 2022), and NATO officials' claim based on intelligence that the Belarusian government "is preparing the environment to justify a Belarusian offensive against Ukraine," Belarus has not assisted the Russian war effort with troops on the ground in Ukraine (Bertrand et al. 2022). The country's apparent unwillingness to become directly involved in the war undermines the Kremlin narrative that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a preemptive strike of existential necessity (Knott 2023). Hence, if it is true that Belarus is getting closer to joining Russia's war effort directly, it is in all likelihood a decision forced upon President Alexander Lukashenko whose presidency depends on Putin's support (Avdeeva 2021).

Lukashenko's reluctance to commit his army to the war may be due to his awareness that such a decision could alienate him further from his people. Historically, the relationship between Ukraine and Belarus has been good. Many Belarusian citizens have family and friends in Ukraine and, generally, there are relatively few backers of Russia's invasion in Belarus as confirmed by a survey conducted in the country in August 2022. In this survey, Belarussian citizens were asked: "What should Belarus do in the context of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine today?" (*Statista* 2022) If we keep in mind the fear that repressive regimes install in their citizens, it is hardly surprising that 23 percent declined to take a stand on the issue by declaring themselves "not sure" and that another 25 percent chose the option: "Support Russia's actions but not engage in the conflict." Notably, however, only 3 percent chose the option: "Take part in the conflict on Russia's side," which is little more than the 2 percent who choose the contrary option: "Take part in the conflict on Ukraine's side." With 28 percent, the most preferred option was: "Declare complete neutrality, expel all foreign troops." An additional 12 percent preferred to: "Condemn Russia's actions, but not engage in the conflict." In view of these results, further domestic troubles could be on the cards for Lukashenko should he decide to enter the war on Russia's side. Belarusian military analyst Aliaksandr Alesin assesses "that if the country's 45,000-member army is sent into Ukraine, there might be 'mass refusal to follow orders.'" Hence Alesin finds it unlikely that Lukashenko will commit troops to the war "because he fears to stir up discontent among the military, who could turn their weapons in a different direction" (Karmanau 2023).

During the 2020 to 2021 uprising in the wake of the presidential election, the Belarusian people had already demonstrated they wanted an end to the authoritarian system Lukashenko has built since he came to power in 1994. Lukashenko claimed he won the 2020 election with 80 percent of the votes. However, the result is widely understood to have been rigged. No international observers were invited to oversee the election, but evidence suggests that fraud was widespread. A poll worker in the capital told she was ordered to sign a blank document summing up results several days before the election took place. A second poll worker located

in the province admitted she had signed a document with falsified results, while a third was fired on the spot when she pointed out irregularities in the vote-counting (Manenkov and Litvinova 2020). Activists monitoring the election reported they received complaints about vote-rigging from a quarter of the polling stations. There was even an audio recording of an official at a polling station who instructed the poll workers to swap the vote numbers for Lukashenko and Tikhanovskaya.

Prior to the election, the opposition candidate Sergei Tikhanovsky was detained, accused of being a foreign agent (Alfar Rodrigues 2020). After a sham trial, he was sentenced to eighteen years in prison (BBC 2021). In the wake of Tikhanovsky's imprisonment, protests broke out in the capital Minsk and other major cities. Tikhanovsky's wife Svetlana Tikhanovskaya decided to stand in her husband's place as leader of the opposition and enter the presidential race. Her political rallies drew "some of the largest crowds since the days of the Soviet Union" (Roth 2020). Tikhanovskaya's public support stood in sharp contrast to the meager 10.09 percent of the votes the country's election commission reported for Tikhanovskaya. After the official announcement of the election result, hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets.

This new wave of protests was initially peaceful, but as the regime tried to curb the protests by arresting more opposition politicians, the protests started to get violent. There was some resemblance to the 2014 Ukrainian Maidan-revolution in Kiev that began when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with pro-Russian President Victor Yanukovich and his decision, after Russian pressure, to withdraw from the ready to be signed association agreement with the EU (Gardner 2013). These protests also began peacefully but turned violent when Yanukovich ordered the police to clamp down on the protests. Around a hundred people were shot dead and many more wounded when special police units opened fire at the crowd. However, instead of ending the protest, the situation culminated with Yanukovich fleeing to Russia, which paved the way for Ukraine's continued effort to develop ties with the west (Pifer 2020).

Mainly due to Russia's backing of the Belarusian regime, the outcome of the Belarusian uprising was different. Having been unprepared for the Ukrainian protesters' successful toppling of Yanukovich, Russia was swift to provide crucial support to Lukashenko when protests began in Belarus. Not only did Putin offer to ensure Lukashenko's continued leadership by military means if needed, he also agreed to help by establishing a police force. This emboldened the shaken president amidst widespread calls for him to resign. So, instead of stepping down, he ordered riot police to end the protests by any means. As a result, more than 6,000 people were detained, 450 were brutally beaten and tortured, and several were killed (Leukavets 2022). The massive use of force to suppress the public was unprecedented in Belarus but followed the Russian playbook. The same is true, albeit in a more subtle fashion, as regards Russia's assistance to control the situation when the second wave of protests spread across the country. This wave began on August 12 with "the human chains of

solidarity.” Women dressed in white with flowers and pictures of detained protesters in their hands took to the streets calling for an end to police violence. These peaceful demonstrations culminated with the “March of Freedom” on August 16 and the “March of the New Belarus” on August 23 that were joined by more than two hundred thousand people. The public dissatisfaction with Lukashenko’s unwillingness to accept democracy was also expressed in strikes that paralyzed production across the country. However, this powerful weapon was also blunted by Russia that immediately replaced the goods that, due to the strikes, were no longer produced in Belarus. Similarly, when journalists, in solidarity with the pro-democracy movement, resigned from Belarusian state media *en masse*, Russia sent its own team of reporters and spin doctors to sustain pro-regime messaging across the nation’s media platforms.

Nevertheless, solidarity marches continued to take place on a weekly basis. Although the participants were careful not to act in ways that could legitimize police use of violence to stop them, these marches were not tolerated. Intimidation by detention and interrogation were used as tactics to persuade regime opponents to flee the country. Opposition leader Tikhonovskaya, who had been detained in the wake of the election, fled the country on August 11, 2020 before the second wave of protests began. As Lukashenko ramped up efforts to quash opposition to his rule—including giving “clearance to security forces to use lethal weapons”—many more of Lukashenko’s leading oppositionists followed her example and went into exile. Due to the domestic security forces’ firm suppression, dissent protests have since simmered down, but from abroad exiled politicians led by Tikhonovskaya try to keep the vision alive of an independent democratic Belarusian state.

## **Conclusion**

As our analysis has shown, Russia under Putin has violated all values expressed in the Olympic charter. Furthermore, Russia does not respect human rights at home or abroad. Russia under Putin can justly be labeled both a terrorist state and a mafia state. It uses sport as a propaganda tool. Without regard for the Olympic fair play principles, it has weaponized sport as shown by the country’s state-sponsored doping program. Russia has not complied with the restrictions the IOC has previously subjected Russian athletes to. Finally, Russia’s illegal war in Ukraine has led to so much pain, death and destruction, that it appears inhuman to require Ukrainians to compete in a spirit of friendship and solidarity against Russian athletes who have not openly and forcefully condemned the war. Hence IOC President Thomas Bach’s reference to the defense of the Olympic principles for inclusion of Russian athletes as neutrals is unprincipled. In accordance with the values expressed in the Olympic principles, we therefore conclude that Russian athletes should not have been eligible for participation in the 2024 Paris Olympics.

Belarus under Lukashenko is a de facto dictatorship, and a police state, which does not respect human rights at home. As other nations, it uses sport as a propaganda tool, but there is no indication of state-sponsored doping or other indications that the country has weaponized sport. Belarus has been used by Russia as a launchpad in Russia's war against Ukraine, but Belarusian troops have not taken part in combat on Ukraine's territory.

The Belarusian population's attempt to topple Lukashenko's regime by peaceful means has effectively been prevented by Russian aid and support. Large parts of the Belarusian population share the same aspirations as the Ukrainian people. Belarusian athletes who have not given vocal or shown other support of Russia's war in Ukraine should therefore be eligible to compete against Ukrainians in a spirit of friendship at the 2024 Paris Olympics.

## Acknowledgment

We would like **to thank** Jörg Krieger for excellent editorial work and for providing an appealing opening to the article.

- AI Acknowledgment
- The authors declare that generative AI or AI-assisted technologies were not used in any way to prepare, write, or complete this manuscript.

**Informed Consent** The authors declare that informed consent was not required as there were no human participants involved

Conflict of Interest:

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## REFERENCES

- AFP. 2012. "World Anti-Doping Agency Says 'Lacks Funding.'" November 14. <https://www.sportskeeda.com/cycling/world-anti-doping-agency-says-lacks-funding>.
- AFP. 2023. "Zelensky Says Russian Athletes at Olympics a 'Manifestation of Violence.'" *France 24*, February 10. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230210-zelensky-says-russian-athletes-at-olympics-a-manifestation-of-violence-1>.
- Alfar Rodrigues, A. 2020. "The Past, Present and Future of the Impact of Russian Geopolitical Influence: A Cold War in Modern Times." CEDIS Working Papers—VARIES—No. March 2020. [[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4045659](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4045659).]
- Avdeeva, M. 2021. "Is the Kremlin's Takeover of Belarus Complete?" *Ukraine Analytica* 04 (26): 21–27. [<https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=1025298>.]

- BBC. 2021. "Belarus: Opposition Leader Tikhanovsky Jailed for 18 Years over Protests." December 14. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-59650238>.
- Bertrand, N., V. Cotovio, J. Hansler, and J. Sciutto. 2022. "Belarusian Military Could 'Soon' Join War in Ukraine, US and NATO Officials Say." *CNN*, March 22. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/22/europe/belarus-ukraine/index.html>.
- Cooley, A. 2017. "Whose Rules, Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States." *CNN*, June 30. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/30/whose-rules-whose-sphere-russian-governance-and-influence-in-post-soviet-states-pub-71403>.
- Current Time. 2023. "More Than 700,000 Ukrainian Children Taken to Russia Since Full-Scale War Started, Official Says." *Radio Free Europe*, July 31. <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-children-taken-ukraine/32527298.html>.
- di Giovanni, J. 2022. "Putin's Gruesome Playbook." *Foreign Policy*, April 18. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/18/ukraine-war-russia-syria-chechnya-grozny>.
- Dunn, E. C., and M. S. Bobick. 2014. "The Empire Strikes Back: War Without War and Occupation Without Occupation in the Russian Sphere of Influence." *American Ethnologist* 41 (3): 405–413. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12086>.
- Fornusek, M. 2023. "Ombudsman: Ukrainian POWs, Abducted Children Transferred Through Belarus." *Kyiv Independent*, May 31. <https://kyivindependent.com/ombudsman-ukrainian-pows-and-abducted-children-transferred-through-belarus>.
- Gardner, A. 2013. "Russia Behind Ukraine U-Turn on EU." *Politico*, November 23. <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-behind-ukraine-u-turn-on-eu>.
- GFP. 2024. "2024 Military Strength Ranking." *Global Firepower 2024*, Retrieved August 2. [https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php#google\\_vignette](https://www.globalfirepower.com/countries-listing.php#google_vignette).
- gov.ua. n.d. "Soslan Ramonov." <https://mms.gov.ua/russian-and-belarusian-athletes-who-support-the-war-in-ukraine/freestyle-wrestling/soslan-ramonov>. [Retrieved September 26, 2024.]
- Guardian*. 2022. "Russian Athletes Face Backlash After Wearing 'Z' Symbol at Putin Rally." March 23. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/mar/23/russian-athletes-face-backlash-after-wearing-z-symbol-at-putin-rally>.
- Hsiang, E. 2023. "The Social Contract Between Human Rights and International Sports Tournaments." *Harvard Political Review*, August 28. <https://harvardpolitics.com/human-rights-sports/>.
- Ingle, S. 2023. "Russian and Belarus Athletes Should Be Allowed to Compete as Neutrals, Says IOC." *Guardian*, March 28. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2023/mar/28/russian-and-belarus-athletes-should-be-allowed-to-compete-as-neutrals-says-ioc>.



- James, M. 2023. "Human Rights and the Olympic Charter." *International Sports Law Journal* 23 (3): 267–270. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40318-023-00254-5>.
- Jerusalem Post*. 2022. "Russia Pushing for Belarus to Enter War—Ukraine Intel." October 10. <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-719291>.
- Karmanau, Yuras. 2023. "Belarusians Wary of Being Drawn into Russia's War in Ukraine." *PBS News Hour*, April 26. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/belarusians-wary-of-being-drawn-into-russias-war-in-ukraine>.
- Kłysiński, K., and P. Zochowski. 2023. "The Reluctant Co-Aggressor: Minsk's Complicity in the War Against Ukraine." *OSW Commentary—Centre for Eastern Studies*, Number 488, February 10. <https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/OSW%20Commentary%20488.pdf>.
- Knight, W. A., and T. Narozhna. 2005. "Rape and Other War Crimes in Chechnya: Is There a Role for the International Criminal Court?" *Space of Identity* 5 (1): 89–99. [DOI: 10.25071/1496-6778.8002]
- Knott, E. 2023. "Existential Nationalism: Russia's War Against Ukraine." *Nations and Nationalism* 29 (1): 45–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12878>.
- Krüger, A., and W. Murray. 2010. *The Nazi Olympics: Sport, Politics, and Appeasement in the 1930s*. University of Illinois Press.
- Leukavets, A. 2022. "Crisis in Belarus: Main Phases and the Role of Russia, the European Union, and the United States." *Kennan Cable* 74: 1–11. [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/KI\\_220125%20Crisis%20in%20Belarus\\_Cable%2074-V1r1.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/KI_220125%20Crisis%20in%20Belarus_Cable%2074-V1r1.pdf).
- Manenkov, K., and D. Litvinova. 2020. "Belarus Poll Workers Describe Fraud in Aug. 9 Election." *Associated Press News*, September 1. <https://apnews.com/article/international-news-ap-top-news-europe-72e43a8b9e4c56362d4c1d6393bd54fb>.
- Møller, V., and P. Dimeo. 2013. "Anti-Doping—The End of Sport." *International Journal of Sport Policy*. Vol. 6, p 259-272
- <https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2013.798740>
- NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organizations). 1949. "The North Atlantic Treaty." Retrieved June 23. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_17120.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm).
- OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe). 2022. "Report on Violations of International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law, War Crimes, and Crimes Against Humanity Committed in Ukraine Since 24 February 2022." April 13. <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/f/a/515868.pdf>. [Note that the provided web address is redirected to another web page. Please provide a specific URL address.]
- Peshin, N. L. 2018. "Russian Governmental Sport Policy." In *Ethics, Education, and Governance in the Olympic Movement, 57th International Session for Young Participants*

(*Ancient Olympia*, 17/6-1/7/2017), edited by K. Georgiadis. International Olympic Academy.

- Pifer, S. 2019. "Why Care About Ukraine and the Budapest Memorandum." *Brookings*, December 5. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-care-about-ukraine-and-the-budapest-memorandum/>.
- Pifer, S. 2020. "Ukraine: Six Years After the Maidan." *Brookings*, February 21. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/ukraine-six-years-after-the-maidan/>.
- Riordan, J. 2010. "Russia/The Soviet Union." In *Routledge Companion to Sport History*, edited by S. W. Pope and J. Nauright. Routledge.
- Roth, A. 2020. "Belarus Opposition Candidate Rejects Election Result After Night of Protests." *Guardian*, August 10. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/10/belarus-opposition-candidate-rejects-election-result-protests-svetlana-tikhanovskaya-lukashenko>.
- Satter, D. 2002. "The Shadow of Ryazan: Who Was Behind the Strange Russian Apartment Bombings in September 1999?" *Project on Systemic Change and International Security in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*. April 19. [chrome-extension://mhnlakgilnojmhinhkckjpnpcpbhabphi/pages/pdf/web/viewer.html?file=https%3A%2F%2Fecirtam.net%2Fautoblogs%2Fautoblogs%2Fwww.wikistrikecom\_6d6844999cd2a53466ce2887da7418fa5623f8c4%2Fmedia%2F3ee8be23.Satter\_edited\_final.pdf]
- Schmidt, N., and S. Mncwabe. 2023. "IOC President Thomas Bach Defends Plan to Include Russian and Belarusian Athletes at Paris Olympics." *CNN*, March 23. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/23/sport/thomas-bach-paris-olympics-russia-ukraine-intl-spt/index.html>.
- Statista. 2022. "What Should Belarus Do in the Context of the Conflict Between Russia and Ukraine Today?" Retrieved August 1 2024. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1299648/opinion-on-belarus-participating-in-russia-ukraine-war/>.
- United Nations. 2018. "General Assembly Adopts Texts Urging Troop Withdraw from Republic of Moldova, Strengthening Cooperation in Central Asia." June 22. <https://press.un.org/en/2018/ga12030.doc.htm>.
- United Nations. 2024a. "Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 1 December 2023 to 29 February 2024." March 26. <https://ukraine.un.org/en/264355-report-human-rights-situation-ukraine-1-december-2023-29-february-2024>.
- United Nations. 2024b. "Russia: Oleg Orlov's Trial a Textbook Example of Politicisation of Law Enforcement and Justice to Silence Anti-War Voices." February 26. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/02/russia-oleg-orlovs-trial-textbook-example-politicisation-law-enforcement-and>.

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 2023. "The Nazi Olympics Berlin 1936." August 22. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-nazi-olympics-berlin-1936>.

Walker, E. W. 1997. "Constitutional Obstacles to Peace in Chechnya." *East European Constitutional Review* 6: 55. [chrome-extension://mhnlakgilnojmhinhkckjpnpcpbhabphi/pages/pdf/web/viewer.html?file=https%3A%2F%2Fisees.berkeley.edu%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fwalker\\_1997-constit.pdf](https://mhnlakgilnojmhinhkckjpnpcpbhabphi/pages/pdf/web/viewer.html?file=https%3A%2F%2Fisees.berkeley.edu%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fwalker_1997-constit.pdf)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Verner Møller:** Professor, Department of Public Health, Sport Science, Aarhus University, Aarhus, Denmark  
Corresponding Author's Email: [vm@ph.au.dk](mailto:vm@ph.au.dk)

**Paul Dimeo:** Professor, Faculty of Health Sciences and Sport, Stirling University, Stirling, Scotland  
Email: [paul.dimeo@stir.ac.uk](mailto:paul.dimeo@stir.ac.uk)