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The Olympic question

There have been long discussions in Ukraine about boycotting the Olympics. However, the country can achieve much more by competing in Paris

In Ukraine, the issue of participation in the Olympic Games in Paris should individual representatives of Russia and Belarus be admitted to them, albeit in a neutral status, has been heatedly and emotionally discussed, which in itself is not surprising.

While the warm relations between the International Olympic Committee (IOC), its president Thomas Bach and Moscow until 2022 can neither be forgotten nor unnoticed. It is also the case that, Ukrainian society even before the full-scale war demonstrated a tendency for heated discussions driven by emotions, and the constant tragedies of the last two and a half years have intensified them many times over. Therefore, it is not surprising that the sports authorities in Kyiv for some time adhered to a clear position: Ukrainian athletes should categorically not be present at the same competitions with Russians and Belarusians. This position was corrected at the end of July 2023, when the Ministry of Youth and Sports issued an order that Ukrainians can still compete in the same tournaments with Russians and Belarusians, competing under a neutral flag.

The change of position came not least due to pressure from a large part of the Ukrainian sports community, which considered a full-fledged boycott a shot in the foot rather than a rational position. Kyiv could not agree to the participation of athletes who openly supported the war against Ukraine and Vladimir Putin's policies under any circumstances. There was no such question. But a complete ban on the participation of all Russians and Belarusians, including, for example, some tennis players who compete in an emphatically individual sport and often have long lived abroad, was never a truly realistic option that was really on the table.

Following the path of sports diplomacy

The case of the fencer Olga Kharlan, who refused to shake hands with the

Russian Anna Smirnova on the very first day after the new order of the Ministry of Sport and was therefore excluded from the World Championships, thus winning the sympathies and hearts of many sports fans all over the world, showed in all clarity: If you take away the opportunity to represent Ukraine with decency at one of the most important sporting events during the war, this would have rather detrimental effects and would mean that Ukraine would lose opportunities.

In fact, a full-fledged boycott would make sense if a large number of countries, especially key Western states, joined in. Given that a full-fledged admission of Russia and Belarus initially seemed unthinkable, it also seemed highly unlikely that Russia and Belarus would be allowed to participate. It is good that Ukraine eventually followed the path of sports diplomacy, achieving a result that is important not only here and now, but will be important in the future. And still, the IOC special commission that dealt with the admittance of Russians and Belarusians and scrutinised the adherence of specific athletes to the established criteria was not entirely faultless. Among 36 initially admitted Russian athletes, there were enough controversial cases, in which they, for example, liked pro-war posts. However, almost all of them declined the invitation to take part in the Olympics, so the participation of 15 athletes from Ukraine and 17 athletes from Belarus under a neutral flag can't be called a disaster, although there are some controversial cases among them.

The Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) included the so-called regional organisations of the partially occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions in its membership in the autumn of 2023.

The work of Ukrainian sports diplomacy led by Matvey Bedny, who has been the acting head of the Ministry of Sport since November 2023, as well as the active position of France as the organiser of the Olympic Games are really important in another sense. The sheer number of face-to-face and extramural negotiations, as well as open, institutional or behind-the-scenes pressure, has resulted in the IOC commission, with all reservations, literally examining the cases of several hundred athletes under a magnifying glass. This gives Ukraine the tools for long-term and systematic pressure on the relevant international federations in the future. In a situation where there is already a specific IOC decision on the ineligibility of certain athletes for the Olympics, Kyiv will be able to use it as a precedent in the context of future competitions and tournaments. This cannot but be seen as a strategic victory.

Given the peculiarities of sports policy and the general international political situation, Ukraine will have to continue to make every effort to ensure that these decisions remain unchanged in the future. Nevertheless, the country has already created a foundation that will be extremely difficult to roll back. The Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) itself has made a big contribution by including the so-called regional organisations of the partially occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions in its membership in the autumn of 2023. The IOC was forced to respond by suspending the membership of the ROC because the IOC statute implies respect for the territorial integrity of its members. Since, for political reasons, it is hard to imagine a situation in which the ROC would roll back this decision, it is also hard to imagine circumstances in which the ROC's suspension could be lifted in the foreseeable future.

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Despite the presence of absolute stars like the aforementioned Olga Kharlan or new world high jump record holder Yaroslava Maguchikh, it is difficult to expect Ukraine to perform brilliantly in Paris under the circumstances of a full-scale war. However, the very presence of the same Kharlan in France, who speaks excellent English and is a true ambassador of sports Ukraine, automatically gives more than her absence. The fact that there will be a Ukrainian House in Paris and outside the Olympic Village, which is intended to be a media and cultural space of attention to Ukraine and which is likely to be visited by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is another potential example of Kyiv's successful sports and cultural diplomacy.

But despite all its obvious successes, the Ukrainian side will have to remain vigilant and attentive. For there is no doubt that the IOC will still promote its traditional agenda for all good and against all bad, which is very far from the real realities of the Russian-Ukrainian war. The photo of IOC President Thomas Bach with Russian swimmer Evgeny Somov holding a sign reading 'Give Peace a Chance' has already shown this. This inherently legitimate and logical appeal cannot and should not be directed into the void, but should be addressed to the only person who can really end this war: Vladimir Putin.



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