

Russia's war on Ukraine: Impact on athletes and sports competitions

Under Vladimir Putin's watch, Russia hosted the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi and the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Other authoritarian regimes, such as China's and Qatar's, have engaged in similar 'sports-washing' activities to gain international credibility and divert attention from their troublesome human rights records. However, Putin's decision to invade Ukraine put an end to sport's neutrality. In the past few weeks, multiple sports governing bodies and international federations have moved to exclude Russia from major sporting events, thus depriving its regime of a precious soft power.

The end of sport's neutrality

Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, a year after the International Olympic Committee (IOC) had awarded the 2014 Winter Olympic Games to Sochi. Six years later, on the day of the games' closing ceremony, Russia invaded and subsequently annexed Crimea. Notwithstanding Russia's continuing occupation of the region, FIFA – the international football governing body – decided to hold the men's World Cup in Russia in 2018. Fast forward to 24 February 2022: Russia's military assault on Ukraine provoked a somewhat different response, which put an end to sport's neutrality. Indeed, the IOC [condemned](#) Russia's breach of the [Olympic Truce](#) adopted by the UN General Assembly and, after initial hesitation, on 28 February it [called on](#) individual federations to ban Russian athletes from participating in any international events until further notice. The International Paralympic Committee followed suit on 3 March: in a [reversal](#), citing threats by several federations to boycott the 2022 Winter Paralympics, it banned Russian (and Belarussian) athletes from competing in the games.

Similarly, in a joint [statement](#) of 28 February, FIFA and UEFA (the Union of European Football Associations) announced their decision to suspend 'all Russian teams, whether national representative teams or club teams ... from participation in both FIFA and UEFA competitions until further notice'. In recent history, only [South Africa](#) faced similar sanctions during the apartheid era. The Russian Football Union unsuccessfully appealed the ban to the Court of Arbitration for Sport, which [upheld](#) the sanctions.

FIFA and UEFA's decision came after they came under intense pressure from individual countries to go further in their sanctions, with FIFA initially having stated that Russia could compete as the 'Football Union of Russia' and play matches outside the country. Indeed, Poland, Sweden and Czechia [refused](#) to play World Cup play-off games against Russia. England, Scotland and Wales quickly [followed suit](#). UEFA also decided to strip Putin's hometown, St Petersburg, of the Champions League final, the most important club football event of the year. Similarly, UEFA [terminated](#) a deal worth €40 million a season with energy company Gazprom (see box), a major sponsor of the Champions League since 2012.

Experts [argue](#) that the IOC's, FIFA's and UEFA's latest reactions have been opportunistic: seemingly, the bodies remained neutral for a long time to preserve their commercial ambitions and only reacted when they felt the need to move in line with global opinion.

Liaisons dangereuses

Sponsorship is a handy tool for regimes seeking to cleanse their reputation, and Russia has used it to this end while also promoting its business interests. The way Russian state-owned gas producer Gazprom has invested in some European national leagues often speaks of these [business interests](#).

Gazprom was the main sponsor of Schalke 04 – a football club based in one of Germany's coal-producing districts – since 2007, when Germany was shifting away from coal to natural gas and when the Nord Stream 1 pipeline – owned and operated by Gazprom – was entering its final design stage. On 28 February, Schalke 04 [announced](#) that it had terminated its partnership with Gazprom.

Similarly, in 2010, Gazprom became the main [sponsor](#) of FC Red Star Belgrade, just when the Serbian government was considering signing agreements for the construction of the South Stream pipeline. The club has resisted [pressure](#) to distance itself from Gazprom, with UEFA arguing 'it is a matter for individual clubs'.

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In parallel, almost 40 sports and culture ministers from around the world – including from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the UK, which together with the US make up the G7 club of most developed economies – published a [statement](#) calling on international sports federations to cut ties with Russia and 'show solidarity with the people of Ukraine'.

Spurred on by the overwhelming global public outrage against the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the spirit of solidarity with the Ukrainian people, dozens of [international sports federations](#) severed their ties with Russia and banned its national teams from participation in international competitions.

The Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) [relocated](#) the 2022 St Petersburg Open to Kazakhstan. The International Tennis Federation (ITF) [cancelled](#) all events in Russia, excluded its team from international events and suspended the Russian Tennis Federation's membership. However, the ATP and the World Tennis Association (WTA) [refused](#) to yield to international pressure and allowed individual players to continue taking part in competitions, but not under the Russian national flag. The ATP, the WTA, the ITF and the four Grand Slam tournaments [donated](#) US\$700 000 in support of the [Tennis Plays for Peace](#) campaign, which aims to provide humanitarian relief to Ukraine, and to the Ukraine Tennis Federation.

Three of Russia's most popular winter sports – [ice hockey](#), [biathlon](#) and [figure skating](#) – were also impacted. The International Ice Hockey Federation, the International Biathlon Union and the International Skating Union banned all athletes from Russia from events until further notice.

The International Volleyball Federation [suspended](#) all Russian national teams, clubs and officials; stripped Russia of the right to host the 2022 Volleyball Men's World Championship in August 2022; and will relocate games that were to take place in Russia in June and July. The [European Volleyball Confederation](#) announced a similar ban. The [International Basketball Federation](#) and the [International Gymnastics Federation](#) followed suit.

EU and sports movement's response

On 4 April, under the [French Presidency of the Council](#), the [EU ministers](#) for sport backed initiatives to help Ukrainian athletes continue their activities. The French Minister for Sport, Roxana Maracineanu, praised in particular sports clubs from EU countries for receiving Ukrainian sportsmen and women, providing them with the necessary infrastructure and equipment, and integrating Ukrainian athletes into clubs and teams.

Initiatives undertaken by the sports movement

The [Hungarian Swimming Association](#) has helped host Ukraine's junior national swimming team to enable athletes to continue their training. The [Italian Swimming Federation](#) has offered a training camp to 12 elite swimmers and four coaches from Ukraine. Italy has also hosted Ukraine's national [artistic swimming team](#) and 30 young Ukrainian [volleyball players](#). Similarly, a semi-professional female soccer team that fled the war in Ukraine has found shelter and a new training ground at the [German Bundesliga](#) club 1.FC Cologne. National [canoe federations](#) across Europe have also offered joint support to Ukrainian athletes affected by the ongoing conflict. The International Canoe Federation is coordinating assistance provided to over 120 people, including 51 senior athletes, 51 juniors and 25 paracanoe athletes. Senior athletes have been offered accommodation in Romania and Bulgaria, while junior ones have been welcomed at various sites in Poland, Hungary, France, Germany and Estonia.

EU ministers also watched a video [testimony](#) from their Ukrainian counterpart, Vadym Huttsait, who called for more sanctions against Russian and Belarussian athletes.

Spyros Capralos, president of the European Olympic Committees, recalled the [collaboration](#) with national Olympic committees from Poland, Finland, Estonia, Romania, Austria and Italy in offering accommodation and sports equipment to Ukrainian athletes.

Assistance from the Olympic Movement

The wider [Olympic Movement](#) has also provided [humanitarian assistance](#) to the Ukrainian sports community. Olympic champion and IOC Member Sergii Bubka, in his capacity as president of the National Olympic Committee of Ukraine, has been tasked by the IOC with coordinating the various [projects](#). The IOC has already released an initial [US\\$200 000](#) to address the most pressing issues and is prepared to help coordinate all humanitarian action in the long term through the [Olympic Refuge Foundation](#).

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