

Sport as a totalitarian propaganda tool

As a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of the territory of Ukraine, **international sanctions against the aggressor country also affected the sports field**, which is probably causing the biggest contradictions among international sports federations and countries in general.



Today, **the international community does not have a unified position** regarding the ban of Russian and Belarusian athletes from competing in international events. Russian athletes, for their part, increasingly complain about "Russophobia" in the world, "unfair" treatment of them, "discrimination" and "violation of their rights", emphasizing that sport is outside of politics... As is known, this thesis is fundamental in the Olympic Charter, **but can we consider it viable in today's world? Can sport really be outside of politics?**

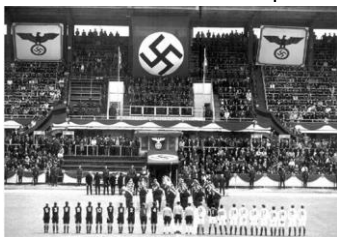
The characteristic feature of sports consists in the fact that it has actually become a global phenomenon that unites people of different age groups, nationalities, religions and views. At the same time, sport is a means of representation that ensures the country's image, contributing to the realization of its interests in the international arena. Thus, given its influence, sport is considered a "soft power" tool and occupies an important place in diplomacy and international relations of the modern world.

History shows that for many decades, along with democratic countries - **sport has been given considerable attention by dictators** who saw a huge potential to strengthen their regime in it.

When the authoritarian government began to acquire a more modern form, the sport began to be actively used **as a political tool and an element of propaganda** to strengthen national identity in countries around the world. Thus, it can be observed that in authoritarian countries with the tense political, economic, and social situations, people often refer to **sports as a force for national unity**.

Francisco Franco, Augusto Pinochet, Benito Mussolini, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Idi Amin, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, Alexander Lukashenko, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Kim Jong-un, etc., all used sport as an integral part of their politics and way of **strengthening the regime**.

Let's take the most famous example: Adolf Hitler used **sports as proof of "the superiority of the Aryan race"** and propaganda for the achievement of Nazism. In particular, Adolf Hitler used the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin to "unify" Germany around the idea of the superiority of the Aryans.



Before the Olympics, the international community did not yet know that the fascist swastika would be present throughout the Olympics, on signs and awards. At the same time, it is worth noting the fact that long before the Olympic Games, world Jewish and Catholic, religious and secular organizations united in the struggle for a boycott of the Olympic Games - precisely because of anti-Semitism, including in the sports field, because by the decree of April 28, 1933, Jewish membership was prohibited in sports organizations in Germany.

In addition, as is known, the construction of a concentration camp near Berlin began even before the start of the Olympics in order to use it after the Games. And the two weeks of the Olympics were a kind of break from the usual atmosphere of terror and persecution. However, despite everything, the Olympics were held in Germany. Only Jewish athletes refused to compete. For this move "rebellious" athletes were disqualified, and with the beginning of the war, they found themselves in concentration camps.

It is interesting that precisely at the time of the Olympic Games, it was forbidden to print racist or anti-Semitic texts in German newspapers, and citizens were ordered to refrain from negative statements about Jews and black athletes, which could potentially negatively affect the international reputation of Germany at that time.

Starting from those times, it was impossible to stop the influence of politics on sports.

In 2008, despite the fact that European countries and the United States demanded China stop violence against the people of Tibet, release political prisoners, and start negotiations with the Tibetan Buddhist leader, Beijing was chosen as the venue for the Summer Olympic Games. Already on March 10, 2008, anti-Chinese protests began in the capital of Tibet and spread to neighboring provinces of China, in order to attract the attention of the international community. During their suppression, about 130 people were killed. The situation with respect for human rights in China has not changed for the better since that time.



Pro-Tibet protesters strike as the Olympic flame is lit



Actions of solidarity with the Uyghurs take place in many countries of the world.

Thus, in August 2018, the UN stated that millions of Uyghurs and members of other local ethnic groups in Xinjiang are being held in "deradicalization centers," while others have been forcibly moved to so-called "re-education camps." However, the 2022 Olympic Games in Beijing, despite calls from the US and European countries to boycott them, took place with a demonstration of China's economic success, trying to overshadow all accusations of human rights violations.

Thus, it can be noted that in view of historical experience, boycotting international competitions with calls for the inadmissibility of human rights violations by authoritarian states or, on the contrary, continuing cooperation with them "in the spirit of sport" is actually an ineffective approach that endangers not only the fundamental sports principles but also universal human values. **The policy of pacifying the aggressors and the assertion that sport always remains outside of politics have already exhausted themselves.**

In contrast to many modern democracies, China, Russia, Belarus, and other **authoritarian states perceive international competition as an arena for continued geopolitical competition.** The successful hosting of the Olympic Games or large-scale competitions can demonstrate a country's growth and achievements by providing evidence of economic development and institutional competence. Therefore, authoritarian governments are willing to spend seemingly irrational amounts in pursuit of status. Thus, according to data, holding the Olympics in Sochi in 2014 significantly exceeded the costs of the 2008 Games in Beijing and cost a total of 50 billion dollars, which actually made these games the most expensive in history.

These countries, like other authoritarian regimes, are very concerned not only about conducting international competitions, the development of mass and professional sports, and increasing the number of medals but also **investing significant funds in the national and patriotic education of athletes.**

The turning point: Russia's war against Ukraine.

According to the Olympic Charter, "The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity." Sport carries the idea of peace. In the case of Russian athletes, we see the opposite.

Today, **sport is one of the main elements of Russian culture and Putin's ideology.** In Russia, the majority of athletes who have sports titles and compete in official international competitions are civil servants. Almost half of the Russian medals at the Olympics in Tokyo were won by non-commissioned officers, ensigns, and officers from the army, employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the Russian Guard.



Russian go-kart champion performs Nazi salute

Athletes and official representatives of the aggressor countries **openly and shamelessly support the bloody actions of the Russian dictator**, the killing of civilians, and the genocide of the Ukrainian people, and some even directly participate in it.



Even at the last tournament to which the Russians were admitted, in early March, during the award ceremony, the former junior champion of Russia, who underwent military training in 2021, came to the podium with the letter Z, a symbol of the Russian invasion, and **demonstratively expressed support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine.**

Since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian athletes have taken part in a number of propaganda events organized by the authorities. On March 18, a number of current and former athletes of Russia attended a pro-war concert-meeting dedicated to the anniversary of the illegal annexation of Ukrainian Crimea. The letter "Z" was depicted on the athletes' uniforms, which is a symbol of support for the war against Ukraine. And at the parade on May 9, one of the military columns was led by the titular gymnast Nikita Nagorny - a 3-time medalist of the 2020 Olympics.



At the end of April, the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation, Sergei Shoigu, awarded Russian skiers and biathletes military ranks. Among those present at the meeting was biathlete Eduard Latypov - one of the multi-medalists of the last 2022 Olympics, who received the military rank of lieutenant. He, like the rest of the invitees, belongs to the CSKA sports club, which is the central military club of the Russian army. In addition, **Russia plans to create volunteer battalions of professional athletes to participate in the war against Ukraine.**

It is interesting that on March 18 appeared a petition of Russian athletes in support of the "special military operation in Ukraine and the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics"! In addition, the petition notes the inadmissibility of Russian athletes performing at competitions of any level without state symbols and a proposal to colleagues from other countries **to form a new world sports movement.**

These narratives testify to the close connection between sport and geopolitics. Such countries as Russia, China, Iran, etc. seek to form their own order, in contrast to the West, which is facilitated even by "ordinary athletes".

So, doesn't the thesis of "sport outside of politics" reveals the cunning of our modern world? Where one is called another. Politics exists wherever there is mass influence on society. It exists in sports, and **every athlete is, in fact, a potential politician who carries a serious message to society.**

Russia's war against Ukraine became a kind of turning point for the sports community. By their behavior, Russian athletes have demonstrated that they have an absolute disregard for sports principles and fundamental human values, as they actively support and encourage people to aggressive policies that lead to millions of victims. Thus, they violate moral principles that are incompatible with the statutes of international sports federations, as well as with the principles of the Olympic movement in general.

Felt the consequences of such statements, athletes begin to point to the politicization of sports, "Russophobia" in the world, "discrimination" and "violation of their rights", stressing that sports should be outside of politics. And despite the lost reputation in the civilized world, Russia and Belarus are still making desperate attempts to return to the international sports community.



The world must realize that the unleashed war of Russia against Ukraine is **the collective responsibility of all Russians**, including athletes, and not only the leadership of the state. After all, as we can see, Russian athletes undoubtedly support not only the genocide of the Ukrainian people but also the struggle of Russia against the "collective West", **which makes them complicit in Russian crimes.**

Before the start of the war, they had every opportunity to adopt democratic values and spread them in their country, but today we are witnessing the genocide of the Ukrainian people by Russia. Therefore, every athlete must personally experience the consequences of supporting ruscism and other criminal regimes and be held accountable.

Athletes from aggressor countries no longer have a place at international competitions!