

SPORTS OUT OF POLITICS

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The image of a country in the international arena is shaped by its economic potential, cultural richness, and political reputation. One of the markers of success is hosting major sporting events, such as the Olympic Games or the World Cup. In addition to attracting investment and developing infrastructure and tourism, organizing international events helps to improve the host country's political reputation. Regular cooperation with global sports organizations, such as the International Olympic Committee and FIFA, sponsoring sports teams, and athletes' victories help a state to increase its symbolic presence and thus influence decision-making and global politics. Organizing a grand competition is like joining a prestigious club of those who pursue the most ambitious goals.

Take a look at the VIP dais during events, where almost all the top state officials are present. Why? First, they support the national team, encourage their country's youth in sports and a healthy lifestyle, and show that sports are an important part of national culture. Second, they use the visit to strengthen diplomatic ties and establish cooperation with other countries. And third, high-level politicians come to international competitions to show the importance of sports for their own political program and to demonstrate their involvement in the champions' success. Sporting victories increase the prestige and visibility of a country and its leader in the world and affirm a state's political vector.

Sports and propaganda

The Soviet Union collapsed over 30 years ago, but the Russian government continues to pursue its outdated imperial colonial ambitions. The desire to live in the past, to conquer, to take what is not theirs, to dominate, to control other countries, and to constantly rule has become a morbid obsession and a personal challenge. Russia continues the Soviet narrative of the race to the top. However, the stakes are raised each time and it needs more ambitious projects to demonstrate greatness. That is why it bid to host the Sochi Olympics in 2014 and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, to prove to everyone that Russia is the strongest, largest, and most powerful and influential.

The Sochi Olympics, in the year when Russia openly occupied Crimea and started its hybrid invasion of eastern Ukraine, became a way to propagandize the 'Russian world' and demonstrate Russia's power.

As a colonial power, Russia turns sports into a propaganda tool to achieve various goals: strengthen political influence and domination over other countries; preserve the ruling regime by controlling the population and distracting from internal problems; stir up patriotism and pride; whitewash its reputation and divert attention from Russia's military aggression against other independent states; and spread its culture and identity to show the large and powerful state that has strong potential and is therefore capable of achieving 'great results' in all other spheres, as well.

At the same time, Russia is constantly working on internal propaganda for its citizens: there is an 'external enemy' that encroaches on the great Russia and must be defeated on various 'fronts', and there is a 'constant threat' for which they must be prepared. For 20 years, the Russian government has been creating a deformed perception of reality and Russians have been living in an information bubble, which is why they are easily manipulated and controlled. They start seeing other countries as enemies and their intolerance and aggression increase. The national idea of Russian greatness is broadcast through the image of defenders and winners, so that Russia is feared, respected, and reckoned with. This applies to both the

military and sports. This legend is artificially maintained in the Russian information space, and many different [resources](#) are used to promote it in the West.

The success of athletes at major competitions, especially victories at the Olympic Games and World Championships, improve the image of the state, fueling national pride and patriotism in Russian society. The state supports sports and shows that it has ambitious goals for developing this area. The foundation is laid in childhood. Many children dream of being winners, being the first, being like professional athletes. Teenagers, who seem to have no authority figures, hang posters of sports idols in their rooms, follow their lives on Instagram, and dream of getting a coveted autograph. For them, successful athletes are like superheroes, and they want to copy their model of life. The younger generation attaches great importance to what sports heroes say and how they behave. This helps to promote sports and athletes' achievements in the country and serves as an effective tool for building national identity and uniting athletes and fans.

A sports and political alliance

Sport in Russia is unthinkable without politics. Political decisions affect budget allocations for developing sports in the country, as well as funding for sports teams and clubs. For example, some sports are funded more than others, depending on political needs. Contracts for international competitions always include a clause on guarantees from the government, which directly indicates the relationship between politics and sports.

Russia's politics also has a big impact on the results of sports competitions, and when big politics interferes with big sports, it becomes a threat. Fair sports competition is being replaced by political state orders. For Russia, with its imperial aspirations, a successful championship or Olympics is not enough. It needs an even more ambitious goal and absolute championship: winning the medal standings. As the Russian song goes: "We need one victory. One victory for all, we can't afford to lose!" And here, all means will do. If Russia is hosting the event, it must win. From the very top offices comes the state order for victories, medals, and champions, backed by unlimited funding. The world saw this when the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) investigation at the Sochi Olympics revealed that Russia, contrary to the generally accepted rules of sports competitions, had used a system of doping at the state level. It identified systemic violations by Russian state institutions and athletes regarding the use of prohibited substances. The reason for the investigation were the numerous cases of doping by Russian athletes exposed at the 2014 Olympics. WADA [concluded](#) that the Russian Ministry of Sport identified athletes for whom positive doping samples needed to be concealed, and the Ministry arranged to replace samples with traces of doping with clean ones.

Additionally, after several preliminary investigations in 2014-2015 and the publication of the WADA Commission report on the investigation of the Russian anti-doping agency on November 9, 2015, the World Athletics Council suspended the Russian national athletics team from competition. The report contained accusations of massive and systematic concealment of doping by Russian athletes. It also revealed that the Russian anti-doping agency had destroyed doping control samples. Based on the investigation, WADA recommended that World Athletics disqualify the Russian Athletics Federation (RAF), revoke the license of the Moscow Anti-Doping Laboratory, and suspend Russian athletes from World Athletics competitions. Also, no RAF representatives (including officials and staff) can participate in World Athletics international competitions or activities. Today, the attitude towards doping in Russia [has not changed significantly](#), and the Russian authorities do not only ignore the fight against doping, but also participate in spreading it! When one says that sports is out of politics, things like that cannot be done without the intervention of Russia's top leadership.

Sports and the army

The Russian government considers sports to be an important element of national security, using it to maintain internal stability and strengthen national defense capabilities. Most Russian athletes are [fully supported by the state](#), holding military ranks and receiving

[awards](#) from the Russian Defense Ministry. At the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, one-third of the Russian national team was military personnel, winning [61 out of 71 medals](#). Olympic champions, not forgetting to wear their medals, regularly participate in [pro-Kremlin events](#) and political campaigns. Like other popular athletes, they become Members of Parliament (MPs) and officials and use their success for political purposes. They are part of the system and they voluntarily accept the rules of the game, including doping. This is a contract for consent and silence. As long as an athlete is in the system, everything is fine, and if they want to leave it, the state knows what levers to pull to control them.

By involving athletes, the state skillfully uses them as agents of influence for the ruling regime. The most famous Russian sports club CSKA is not only subordinated to the Russian Ministry of Defense, but also has an obligation to [popularize military service among young people](#). Building-up a sports hero cult for teenagers now looks even more frightening.

The silence of Russian athletes, despite their suspension from international competitions and ruined international careers, is very telling. Where are their sporting principles, where are their courage, integrity, and all the personal qualities that sports is supposed to develop? In Russia, none of this matters, because sports in the country is subordinate to a strict power vertical and is part of the government's policy. If athletes are silent, they are part of the political machine. Many Russian athletes, such as international-level martial arts masters, went to fight against Ukraine. If [up to 100 athletes were sent to war](#) from the Luzhniki stage by a representative of the Russian president to the applause of members of the Russian Martial Arts Union sports federations, what kind of apolitical position and non-involvement in the war are we talking about?

Even those who stayed purely in sports, under the neutral flag of the Olympic Committee, as well as under their native tricolor flag, are symbolic soldiers of their state, designed to glorify the greatness of the 'Russian world.' Russia has unleashed a bloody, brutal war, sending its troops to destroy independent Ukraine, destroying entire cities, destroying infrastructure, killing hundreds of thousands of people, including tens of thousands of children and [hundreds of Ukrainian athletes](#), bringing with it only misery and death. Can you imagine this in the 21st century? Can you imagine it happening right now, while you are reading these lines? But the empire wants to pretend that nothing has happened, to talk about their greatness, to continue to boast of international events and victories, while at the same time violating generally accepted rules, denying the principles of international law, democracy, and freedom of speech. How touching, it turns out, that it is possible to simultaneously commit crimes against humanity in Ukraine and join the celebration of sports and improved understanding and trust between different states at the Olympic Games in Paris.

Russia has lost an immense sphere of influence due to its suspension from international competitions and the ban on its athletes participating. Therefore, it will do everything possible and impossible to return and strengthen its position. Now, knowing the policy pursued by the Russian government, the methods used by the state for which there are no rules or laws, allowing Russia to return to competitions means sharing its 'values and methods.' It means recognizing that it is possible to simply buy off the trampling of fundamental principles, murders, kidnappings, human rights violations, and violations of competition rules with the large sums of money invested in sports events. The main thing is to loudly proclaim that sports is out of politics, and no one will notice anything, right?