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The Olympic Ban on Russia Is a Design Triumph (Op-ed)

Russians might consider how their government has let them down

By Leonid Bershidsky

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Valery Sharifulin / TASS

Countries trying to develop an effective format for sanctions against President Vladimir Putin's regime in Russia should look no further than the International Olympic Committee's decision to ban the Russian Olympic Committee from the Pyeongchang Winter Games.

It strikes a difficult balance between hurting the regime and not punishing Russians themselves, as a people of great accomplishment and value to the world. It also forces the regime to show domestically whether it cares more about itself or the Russian people.

The report of the IOC's Disciplinary Commission, on which the ban is based, avoids politicized generalizations about the existence of a "state-run" doping system in Russia, made in an early version of Canadian law professor Richard McLaren's report for the World Anti-Doping

Agency that set off reprisals against Russian athletes competing in multiple sports.

It does, however, say that various Russian institutions such as the Sports Ministry and the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) failed to fulfill their legal responsibility to make sure Russian athletes were clean.

It sweeps aside assurances from former Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko that the situation wouldn't be repeated and makes the point that the Russian institutions that failed to assure fair play have to be held responsible.

Having made the point that it's not punishing the country, just its tarnished institutions, the IOC banned Mutko and his former deputy Yury Nagornikh from future Olympic Games, told Sports Ministry officials not to come to Pyeongchang, and suspended the IOC membership of ROC President Alexander Zhukov.

Russian athletes, by contrast, are not banned. Since they will not be competing under ROC auspices, their uniforms cannot bear the Russian flag, and the Olympic anthem, rather than the Russian one, will be played for them if they place in the top three. But they will be competing as "Olympic athletes from Russia" — that is, as Russians.

Nothing in the wording of the ban stops them from draping themselves in the Russian flag after winning, or from singing the Russian anthem, as hockey player Ilya Kovalchuk has suggested the team do "if it's God's will that we perform well."

Besides, the IOC decision says the ban may be lifted before the Games' closing ceremony — and if it is, the Russian athletes can march under the national flag.

Nor are Russian athletes banned from accepting government funds — in effect, taxpayers' funds — so they can travel to the Olympics and compete in them.

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The Olympic Charter says the Games are "competitions between athletes in individual or team events and not between countries." But for most athletes, the ability to represent and celebrate their country is a major part of the Olympic thrill.

The IOC does not take that away from individual Russian athletes, who can apply directly to the IOC to compete. It only takes away official institutions' claim to ownership of that pride. In effect, the athletes — those who haven't been suspended for doping and whose tests show they're clean — will compete for their country, not for the regime that failed them by being unable to root out a doping conspiracy.

This approach, much more so than Western sanctions on Russia with their financial restrictions on banks and companies that employ hundreds of thousands of people, or potentially on government borrowing, sets up an important dilemma for the regime.

Sweeping sanctions allow the regime to say to Russians: "These measures are against you as well as us; they are imposed by your enemies, Russia's enemies." Such sanctions only consolidate the regime's support.

But when only officials are sanctioned, as in the case of the IOC ban, that spin doesn't work. It's already being pushed by state television, which talks about Russia's enemies trying to humiliate it.

But I doubt the Russian government will go as far as to declare a boycott of the Pyeongchang Olympics; it will try to convince high-profile athletes to withdraw from competition for propaganda purposes, but it won't stop or defund those who want to go.

If it did, Russia would face further Olympic suspensions, and other nations would recruit Russian athletes keen on Olympic glory.

Viktor An, the short-track champion Russia itself recruited from South Korea in 2011, says he wants to go to Pyeongchang, neutral flag or no: "I prepared for this for four years, I can't just drop everything."

Besides, numerous comments on the social networks — for example, this thread under a pro-boycott post by an account parodying Mutko — show that a sizable number of Russians would take exception if athletes were held back from competing for the sake of deeply unpopular officials. According to a poll-based ranking of Russian ministers compiled by pollster VTsIOM, Mutko is Russia's 21st most popular minister out of 31.

In the absence of a boycott, the Russian public will watch Russian athletes compete in Korea and inevitably be reminded of why the Russian flag is not flying at the Games. Sure, that's a propaganda opportunity for the regime — but also a reason for Russians to consider how their government has let them down.

It's a risk the Kremlin will have to take, betting that the moments when Russian athletes wave the flag of their own accord, and perhaps a triumphant march at the closing ceremony, will provide a powerful patriotic boost to compensate for the initial humiliation.

That will be fine with the IOC: Sports fans, not just government propaganda machines, live for such moments.

Olympic functionaries have no problem with Russian pride or Russian achievement — quite the contrary. They've made it clear they only want to enforce the rules, and to make sure the right people are waving the Russian national tricolor.

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