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Putin Is Learning the Hard Way That in Sports Rules Still Matter

We promised to be honest but fabricated the truth, again.

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It is now highly likely that the Russian team will be banned from competing in the Olympics in 2020 and 2022, or will be allowed to participate only under a neutral flag. Russia may also miss out on the 2022 FIFA World Cup and other high-profile international tournaments. It may come as a surprise to Russian officials, but the "hybrid methods" that have brought success in the country's foreign policy are not so effective in world sport.



Stanislav Krasilnikov / TASS

On Nov. 23, a committee from the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) recommended that the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) be stripped of its status. As The New York Times reported on Nov. 26, the committee has recommended that Russia be banned from participation in international competitions for four years. Russian athletes will be able to compete in the Olympics in Tokyo under a neutral flag.

The WADA executive committee will review the issue on Dec. 9 in Paris. According to RUSADA director Yury Ganus, the recommendations of the committee have been met in 100% of cases.

The reason? The Moscow anti-doping laboratory's database for 2012–2015, which Russia' Sports Ministry handed over to WADA in January as part of the punishment for the previous doping scandal, has been found to have been altered.

Many data entries on samples have been retrospectively "cleaned up," with changes made all the way up to the final day before the database was turned in.

In September, WADA demanded explanations from the Sports Ministry. Clearly, these did not satisfy the agency. The committee has reached the conclusion that there was deliberate manipulation with the aim of concealing positive doping tests from Russian athletes.

Russia pretty much recognized ⊠the accusations ⊠of state-assisted doping and agreed to cooperate. The Russian Olympic Committee and a completely reorganized RUSADA had their rights restored — on the condition that Russia hand over to WADA the old database from the Moscow laboratory. For the last two years the database has been with Russia's Investigative Committee, which appears to have been unable to protect it.

Related article: WADA Committee Calls For 4-Year Russia Olympic Ban

At first glance the behavior of Russia's sporting officials seems strange. You've just been seriously punished, you've agreed with the punishment and promised not to do it again. And then, just like before, you cover up likely doping by a particular athlete and brazenly alter a database which you had promised to hand over unchanged.

We should not forget that it is the clean athletes who suffer the most as a result, it is they who will miss the main event of the next four years, and for some, of their lives. Their fans also want to experience the highs and lows along with their Olympians.

This whole incident resembles the behavior of a driver who has been stripped of his license for drunk-driving, who, having "served" his time and got his license back, celebrates it with half a liter of vodka and two minutes later crashes into a police car. That kind of story wouldn't surprise us really, would it? And how are Russian officials any better than Russian drivers?

What would a Russian official do if caught drunk behind the wheel? They would pay off the traffic police or the court, arrange expert witness to shows it was not them that was drunk but the child they knocked down, and so on.

Why should the behavior of officials be any different when it comes to doping? Doping amounts to corruption, and corruption has long been our specialty.

Sochi is not Crimea

The situation begs yet another comparison. The Winter Olympics in Sochi took place a month before the annexation of Crimea, after which Russia became a global pariah for some time. The "Crimean" sanctions imposed by the West remain in force today.

But this has not stopped Russia, which has earned itself even more sanctions linked to the Donbass, the assassination attempt on the Skripals and interference in the 2016 U.S. elections. Russia also stands accused of financing far-right radicals in Europe, an attempted coup in Montenegro, undercover operations in Africa and providing secret support for the Venezuelan government.

Related article: Russia, Facing Possible Olympic Ban, Pledges to Work with Anti-Doping Authorities

On the whole, Russia's foreign policy is centered around breaking the rules that are generally accepted in international relations.

But the Kremlin has realized that it has every chance of escaping punishment for this behavior — Vladimir Putin has practically been welcomed back into the international community.

The West is, in principle, ready to set Crimea aside, to reach some kind of agreement on the Donbass and not pay too much attention to all the rest. Five years after Crimea, Putin can nod to himself contentedly: the geopolitics of the Leningrad backstreets is completely acceptable in the international arena.

But with sport, for some reason, there are problems. While Russia won the right to host both the Winter Olympics and the FIFA World Cup, there were, of course, accusations of corruption during the selection process. But nobody could prove anything.

So why isn't it working out with doping?

Despite all the corruption scandals in world sport — and thanks to the scandals as well — doping is one area where you can't break the rules. In foreign policy you can: if you have nuclear missiles, nobody's going to completely ignore you, even if you're Kim Jong-un.

For competitions it doesn't matter if there's a Russian participant on any given day or not, a match will take place in any weather.

President Putin, who has recognized the problem with doping, could have given a clear signal that something honest would be dome about the problem. But a corrupt system does not stop being corrupt after it has been exposed. Those involved will do the honest thing today, and tomorrow it'll be business as usual.

As it happens, Putin will also be in Paris on Dec. 9, for the latest Normandy format summit on the Donbass. While he might have a good grip on everything in the Donbass, in the realm of sport things leave a lot to be desired.

I wonder if he will drop into the meeting of the WADA executive committee, to look into the Olympic flame, so to speak.

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