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Ukraine Tells Winter Olympic Athletes to Shun Russian Rivals

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Ukrainian officials have warned athletes against celebrating with their Russian rivals at the upcoming games. **Valery Sharifulin / TASS**

Ukrainian athletes should avoid standing next to their Russian rivals at the 2022 Beijing Olympics next week, Ukraine's Sports Minister said Monday.

Minister Vadym Gutzeit told the national broadcaster Suspilne that the 45 Ukrainian athletes heading to the Winter Games have been briefed on how to behave in case of "provocations."

"They should not stand together when athletes from Russia are standing with a flag," Gutzeit was quoted as saying.

"This is not the first time we've met with athletes since the Summer Olympics and discussed it," he added, referring to a controversy when two Russian and Ukrainian athletes who won the gold and bronze high-jump medals were pictured embracing.

Russia's Foreign Ministry slammed Ukraine's recommendations as "an act of

totalitarianism."

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Ukraine's advice to shun Russian athletes comes amid heightened tensions over tens of thousands of Russian troops massed near the Ukrainian borders. Compounding the fears, Russia and Belarus have also announced joint large-scale military drills near Ukraine in mid-February.

Western governments have in recent months warned of an imminent invasion of Ukraine, leading some embassies to urge an evacuation of diplomatic personnel's family members Monday.

Diplomatic efforts this month have so far failed to diffuse the crisis, with Russia seeking a written response to its "binding" security demands this week while Western diplomats request more talks and continue to threaten "severe" sanctions against Moscow.

The Kremlin denies planning military action in Ukraine and accuses NATO of exacerbating tensions by putting forces on standby and sending warships and fighter jets to eastern Europe.

A recent Bloomberg report, which the Kremlin and Beijing deny, said that Chinese President Xi Jinping may have urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to avoid invading Ukraine during the Olympics.

Putin is expected to join Xi at the Feb. 4 opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics.

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