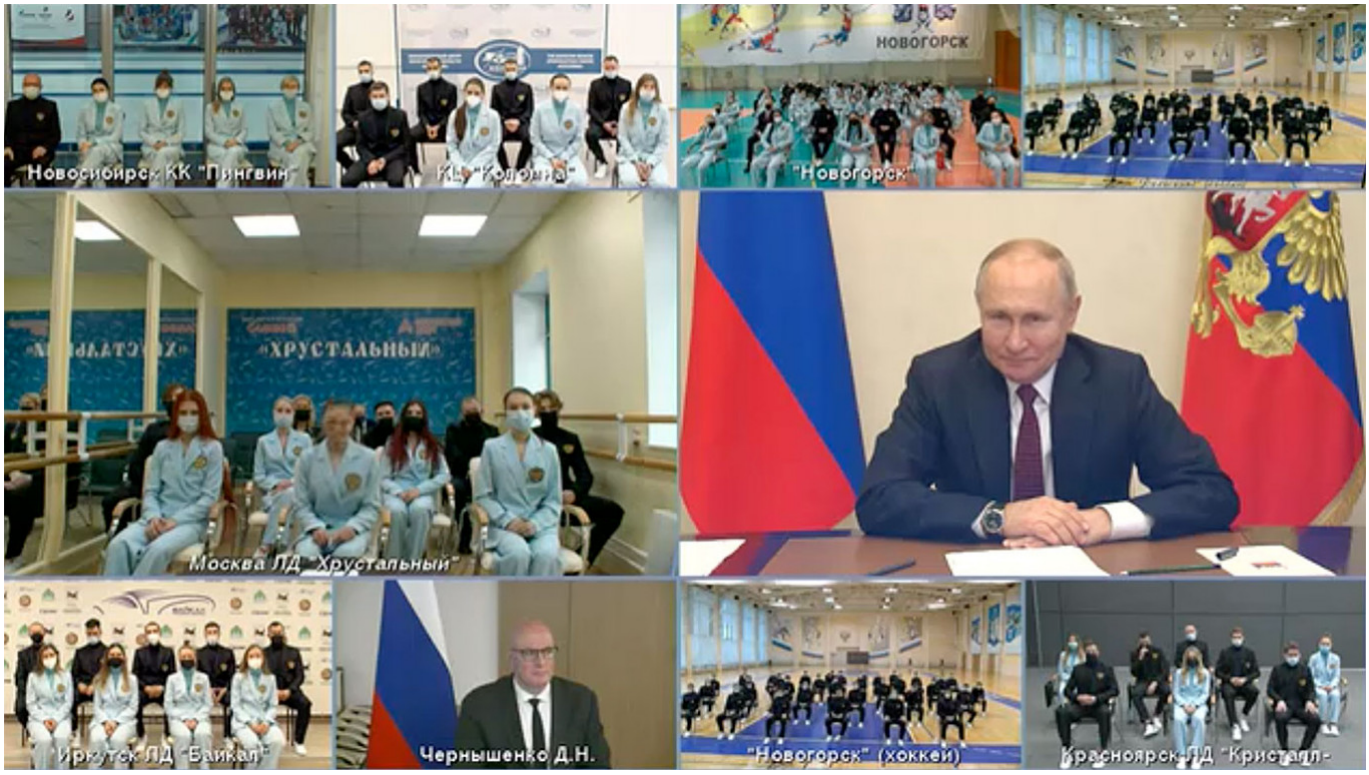
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Putin Wishes Russian Athletes 'Triumph' at Beijing Olympics

By AFP

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Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday wished his country's athletes "triumphant performances" at next month's Winter Olympics in China as he criticized the diplomatic boycott announced by several global powers.

Russian athletes are allowed to compete as neutrals — without the Russian flag or anthem — if they can prove their doping record is clean.

"We at home will be there to support you, to be proud of your successes," Putin said during a televised online meeting with Russian athletes.

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The Kremlin chief wished them "good luck, health and triumphant performances" at the

Games starting on Feb. 4, where Russia will be represented by 212 athletes.

"We are against any attempt to politicize sport and against any boycott," Putin added.

Beijing and Moscow have denounced the diplomatic boycott from several countries, including the United States and Britain, over what Western governments argue are widespread rights abuses by China.

Russia was found to have used a state-backed doping program at the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi and was banned from international competitions afterward.

Russian officials including Putin are banned from attending international competitions unless invited by the head of state of the host country.

China's leader Xi Jinping has invited Putin to attend.

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