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Olympic Fencers Who Fled Russia After Invasion Seek U.S. Citizenship

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Russian fencer Violetta Bida. **Yegor Aleyev / TASS**

The U.S. Olympic Committee and the fencing association it governs have asked Congress to grant American citizenship to three Russian fencers who face wartime criminal charges at home, USA Today reported Friday.

Konstantin Lokhanov, Sergei Bida and Violetta Bida — who fled to the United States after Russia invaded Ukraine — may be able to compete with the U.S. team at the 2024 Paris Olympics this summer if their citizenship bids are approved and if they pass the team selection process.

"All three of these individuals have made sacrifices at great personal cost and put their lives at risk to be able to represent our nation," Phil Andrews, CEO of USA Fencing, said in a letter to Congress cited by USA Today.

"[W]e ask you to make every effort to support them in the extraordinary circumstance," Andrews said.

Sarah Hirshland, CEO of the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC), wrote in a separate letter that the Russian athletes' U.S. citizenship bid was endorsed so that they could compete at the Paris games and other future international competitions, according to USA Today.

Russia's Fencing Federation said it has not been notified of the athletes' intention to switch nationalities, according to the state-run news agency TASS.

Related article: World Olympic Body Shortens List of Russian Neutral Athletes Cleared for Paris Games

In late December, Russia's Interior Ministry issued an arrest warrant for Sergei and Violetta Bida on unspecified criminal charges.

Citing anonymous law enforcement sources, Russian state media later reported that the pair was accused of abandoning a military unit without authorization.

Before leaving Russia, Violetta Bida was listed as a soldier with the Defense Ministry-affiliated sports club CSKA, while Sergei Bida was a Russian National Guard officer and member of Dynamo Moscow, another club with links to Russia's security services, according to the news website RBC.

Jack Wiener, an attorney representing all three fencers, told USA Today his clients have signed a letter denouncing Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

For Lokhanov, Bida and Bida to receive U.S. citizenship, the Senate and House of Representatives would have to pass a bill that President Joe Biden would then need to sign.

Sergei Bida was ranked No. 1 in the world for men's epee in 2019 and 2020. He won silver in the men's team epee competition at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and the individual epee competition at the 2019 World Championships.

Violetta Bida told USA Today she was six months pregnant and would have to miss out on the Paris Olympics.

Lokhanov is a two-time junior world champion who placed seventh in the men's team saber competition and 24th in individual saber at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

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