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Russian Skaters Allowed to Compete as Neutrals in 2026 Winter Olympics

By AFP

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Russian skaters Olga Fatkulina, Angelina Golikova and Daria Kachanova. **Toru Hanai / AP / TASS**

Russian athletes will be able to qualify for the ice skating competition at the 2026 Winter Olympics as neutrals, the sport's governing body said Friday.

The International Skating Union (ISU) announced "a pathway to allow a limited number of individual neutral athletes (AIN) to participate under strict conditions in designated Olympic qualifying events for the 2025/26 season." The decision applies to figure skating and speed skating disciplines, the ISU said.

"Recognising that competing in the Olympic Winter Games is the pinnacle of any skater's career, the ISU has carefully examined the feasibility of implementing the IOC's recommendations on creating a pathway to facilitate the participation of athletes affiliated with ISU Members in Russia and Belarus in the Olympic Winter Games Milano Cortina 2026," the governing body added.

Just 15 Russian athletes were permitted to take part in the Paris Olympics this summer, competing as neutrals. To qualify for those Games, athletes had to pass a double check, first by the international sports federations and then by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), to prove they did not actively support the war in Ukraine or have any links with the military.

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The ISU said it "noted the peaceful participation of AINs at the Olympic Summer Games in Paris 2024 and with this perspective in mind, reaffirms its commitment to fostering safe, peaceful, and fair competitions at Milano Cortina 2026."

Only one neutral athlete, including one pair in pairs skating and one couple in ice dancing, from Russia and its ally Belarus will be eligible to participate per event in designated qualifying events for the 2026 Games with no relay or team participation, the ISU added.

At the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, Russian athletes had to compete under the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) flag due to a two-year ban imposed by the World Anti-Doping Agency for state-sponsored doping.

Russia's Sports Minister and head of the Russian Olympic Committee Mikhail Degtyarev welcomed the ISU decision.

"The process of a full return to international sport will be difficult, but events such as the ISU decision... are important steps on this path," Degtyarev was quoted as saying by the RIA Novosti news agency. "This is better than a permanent break and isolation. We will continue to develop this pathway."

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