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International Judo Body Allows Russian Athletes to Compete Under Flag Again

By AFP

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Vladimir Putin spars with members of the Russian national judo team in 2019. **Mikhail Metzel / TASS**

Russian judokas are once again allowed to compete under their national flag, the International Judo Federation (IJF) said Thursday, ending the neutral status imposed after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

"The IJF Executive Committee has therefore voted to permit Russian athletes to compete under their national flag once again, with anthem and insignia in place, beginning with the 2025 Abu Dhabi Grand Slam," the federation said.

Russia's judo community welcomed the move, a significant gesture in a sport closely associated with President Vladimir Putin, who holds a black belt.

"Judo is one of Russia's favorite sports. Around half a million citizens regularly take part in it," Russian Sports Minister Mikhail Degtyarev wrote on Telegram. "It's important to our

country. Judo is a presidential sport."

Russian Judo Federation president Sergei Soloveychik called the decision "historic," saying he was pleased Russia had been reinstated.

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The IJF said the change followed its recent move to restore full national representation for Belarus, a close ally of Moscow.

"Following recent developments, including the reinstatement of full national representation for Belarusian athletes, the IJF considers it is now appropriate to allow the participation of Russian athletes under equal conditions," the federation said.

"Historically, Russia has been a leading nation in world judo, and their full return is expected to enrich competition at all levels," IJF added.

Russian athletes have largely been barred from international sports events since the 2022 invasion, with organizations including the International Olympic Committee (IOC) prohibiting them from competing under their national flag.

Judo is not the first sport to ease restrictions. The International Boxing Association has also allowed Russian boxers to compete under their flag and anthem.

The IJF said individual judokas should not be punished for the actions of their government. The IOC, however, has imposed strict conditions for any Russian athletes cleared to appear at the Paris Olympics, including excluding those who voiced support for the war.

"Sport is the last bridge that unites people and nations in very difficult conflict situations," the IJF said. "Athletes have no responsibility for the decisions of governments or other national institutions, and it is our duty to protect the sport and our athletes."

This year's Abu Dhabi Grand Slam takes place this weekend.

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