

The Washington Post

December 1, 2017

Ban Russia From the Olympics

By Jared Genser

Next week, Russian President Vladimir Putin will learn from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) whether Russia will be banned from competing in the Winter Olympics in February in PyeongChang, South Korea, for orchestrating a state-run doping program that helped at least 695 athletes dodge drug testing. In recent weeks, Putin has rather ironically said that the United States is pushing for Russian athletes to be disqualified to interfere in Russia's presidential elections in March.

For decades, the Russian state has engaged in a systematic effort to pump its athletes full of performance-enhancing drugs in search of Olympic gold. Whistleblowers have alleged that up to 99 percent of Russian athletes have taken performance-enhancing drugs, with one explaining, "You can't be on the national team without using [performance-enhancing drugs]. If you don't take them, you have no future in sport."

This culture of cheating was fostered from top to bottom. The stunning Netflix documentary "Icarus" reported that the doping program was supported by Putin himself. The head of the Russian anti-doping organization's Moscow lab admitted that he had devised drug cocktails and administered steroids to athletes. Russian security forces facilitated the swapping of urine samples to prevent athletes from getting caught. And coaches told athletes that they wouldn't be successful without drugs.

Yet the Russian state has evaded all culpability from the IOC for corrupting the Olympics. Instead, Russia's athletes have personally borne the brunt of the consequences. More than 100 Russian athletes were banned from competing in the 2016 Rio Olympics, including the full weightlifting and track and field teams. And many others have had medals stripped from them for doping in prior Olympics.

While athletes deserve strong penalties for doping, the IOC has patently refused to address the culture of contempt fostered by Putin. Not only did he reject the evidence proving that Russia ran the country's doping program, but also state-owned media even fabricated news reports saying that the World Anti-Doping Agency's lead investigator had "dropped his charges of Russian state alleged participation in the doping abuse."

Ultimately, the Russian athletes who were pumped full of drugs by the state will pay the highest price for Russia's quest for gold. Studies on the use of performance-enhancing drugs indicate that long-term health impacts can be severe, including kidney failure, liver damage, increased likelihood of heart attack and deterioration of essential brain systems.

Putin has long understood that Russia's hosting and winning the Olympics generate national pride and garner Russian support for his expansionist foreign policy. From 2013 to March 2014, Putin's domestic approval rating skyrocketed after the February 2014 Sochi Olympics and Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014.

Putin's approach to the Olympics is just another example of his disregard for the international order. In short, he expects international institutions to bend to his will. When they don't, he dissociates from them. In just the past two years, Putin signed a law enabling Russia's top court to ignore its obligations under international human rights treaties, withdrew from the International Criminal Court the day after it concluded that Russia's annexation of Crimea was an occupation and terminated Russia's cooperation with the United States on a key nuclear pact that had required Russia to destroy its plutonium stockpiles.

But the Russian people care enormously about the Olympics, and Putin can't just refuse to compete. The IOC, therefore, is doing no favors to anyone if it responds to Russia's impunity with a mere slap on the wrist. Unfortunately, reports suggest that it is unlikely to impose a total ban on Russia — and may instead merely impose a financial penalty, which would be the practical equivalent of a free pass for the Russian state.

The only serious response would be for the IOC to ban the Russian team from competing under its own flag. If individual Russian athletes are found to be clean under rigorous international standards, they should be allowed to compete as neutrals. The sight of a Russian winning Olympic gold but standing on the podium without the Russian flag or national anthem would show that the Olympics stand for principle and fair play. It would also set an important example for Putin that there are consequences for flouting the rules of the international community.

Jared Genser is a Washington lawyer and senior fellow at the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights.