

Doping allegations cited to ban Russian track and field team from Rio Olympics

By Barry Grey
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The council of the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) on Friday retained its earlier suspension of the Russian Federation's track and field body on the basis of charges that Russian government and sports authorities oversaw the doping of athletes with performance enhancing drugs at the 2012 London Olympics and other international competitions.

The decision means that the Russian track and field team is banned from the Summer Olympics to be held in August in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The action, barring an entire national team from competing in the games on grounds of cheating, is unprecedented.

At a press conference in Vienna following a meeting of the 27-member council, IAAF President Sebastian Coe, a British lord, said, "Although good progress has been made, the IAAF council was unanimous that RUSAF (Russian Athletic Federation) had not met the reinstatement conditions."

The IAAF suspended the Russian track and field federation from international competition last November following the release of a report by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) alleging that Russia had carried out systematic doping of its athletes at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. Russian sports authorities at that time agreed to enforce enhanced anti-doping standards and submit to outside testing of its athletes by British officials.

The IAAF set up a task force to determine whether Russian sports authorities had reformed their system and set July 17 as the date for the council to review the report of the task force and decide whether to lift the suspension. On Friday, Rune Andersen, the chairman of the task force, told the press that "the deep-seated culture of tolerance, or worse, for doping that got Russian athletics suspended appears not to have changed." He added that no track and field athlete would "compete in Rio under a Russian flag."

Russian officials, who had lobbied intensively for the IAAF to lift the suspension, denounced the decision and said they would appeal it to the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the highest body overseeing the games, which meets Tuesday in Lausanne, Switzerland. Russian officials also indicated they might lodge an appeal with the Court of Arbitration for Sport in Switzerland.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, speaking Friday in St. Petersburg, denied that the Russian government had condoned or facilitated doping by Russian athletes.

The Russian sports ministry issued a statement declaring, "We have done everything possible since the ban was first imposed to regain the trust of the international community. We now appeal to the members of the International Olympic Committee to not only consider the impact that our athletes' exclusion will have on their dreams and the people of Russia, but also that the Olympics themselves will be diminished by their absence."

WADA largely based its November 2015 report on alleged Russian doping on a series of documentaries broadcast last year by the German public television channel ARD. Those documentaries relied heavily on allegations by Russian sprinter Yulia Stepanova and her husband, Vitaly Stepanov, a one-time Russian anti-doping official.

The statement released by the IAAF on Friday indicated that it would be prepared to allow Stepanova and other Russian athletes who provided evidence against Russian authorities or who had trained outside of Russia and been subject to drug testing by Western authorities to seek exemption from the ban, on the condition that they compete, if accepted, for a "neutral" team.

It is entirely possible that Russian government and sports officials were involved in the doping of athletes and the cover-up of their use of steroids and other banned substances. There is a long history of such practices in Russia dating back to the Soviet period. The Putin government, the political instrument of right-wing and semi-criminal capitalist oligarchs, largely bases its rule on the promotion of Russian nationalism and has a strong interest in using Russian sporting achievements toward that end.

That being said, there is no doubt that the virtually exclusive focus of international sporting authorities on Russian violations and the decision to ban the Russian track and field team—and threats that other Russian Olympic teams could also be banned—are driven by political interests. There is a large degree of coordination between major imperialist media outlets and Olympic and anti-doping agencies in the campaign to exclude Russia from the Rio games.

Just last week, on the eve of the IAAF council meeting, ARD broadcast a further documentary on alleged Russian doping charging that Russian Sports Minister Vitaly Mutko covered up a positive drug test by a football player from Russia's top league. ARD also claims to have videos of banned coaches training Russian athletes.

Mutko denied the accusations and denounced the airing of the documentary as an “information attack.” He charged, “The aim of this and other publications is clear to me. It is to influence the athletics committee on the eve of the meeting.”

The ARD film was followed by the release of a new WADA report on Wednesday alleging a pattern of interference and resistance by Russian Olympic athletes and officials to British efforts to oversee testing for doping.

On Thursday, the day before the IAAF council meeting, the *New York Times*, which has spearheaded the media campaign in the US for a ban on Russian athletes at the summer games, ran a story that began as the page-one lead and filled two entire inside pages criticizing WADA for being insufficiently aggressive in going after Russia. The story cited the ARD films, the whistle-blowing claims of the Stepanovs, and interviews given to the *Times* by Grigory Rodchenkov, a former head of Russia's anti-doping lab.

Rodchenkov was fired from his position by the Russian government after the publication of WADA's exposé of doping violations last November. He fled to the US and is collaborating with an American writer in Los Angeles who is preparing a book on Russian sports doping. Last May, the *Times* ran another extensive front-page article laying out Rodchenkov's claims to have supervised the systematic doping of Russian athletes and falsification of their drug tests during the 2014 Winter Olympic games at the Russian Black Sea report of Sochi.

The article was accompanied by a separate piece by one of its authors, “Sports of the Times” columnist Juliet Macur, calling for Russian to be banned from the Rio games and the 2018 Winter games as well. Macur was also a co-author of the article published on Thursday.

That *Times* article from last May prompted a WADA investigation of Russian practices at the Sochi games, the findings of which are slated to be released next month.

The political agenda here is clear. The campaign to bar Russia from the Olympics is part and parcel of the economic, diplomatic and military offensive being led by the United States and involving its NATO allies to isolate and encircle Russia and prepare for a military attack. The aim is to remove Russia as an obstacle to Washington's drive to establish hegemonic control over the Eurasian continent, reduce Russia to neo-colonial status and dismember it.

This campaign was massively escalated beginning in February 2014 with the US- and German-orchestrated right-wing coup that overthrew a pro-Russian government in Ukraine and installed an ultra-nationalist, anti-Russian regime

in Kiev. The ensuing revolt by Russian-speaking regions in eastern Ukraine and the secession of Crimea, which subsequently voted to join the Russian Federation, became the occasion for a massive NATO militarization of Eastern and Central Europe, which continues to escalate and threaten a war between nuclear powers.

In the pursuit of this bellicose policy, the US is seeking to criminalize Russia and cast it as a rogue state.

More generally, the pretense that Russia is some kind of outlier and affront to the “Olympic spirit” is an absurd and cynical fraud. The Olympics have long been an exemplar of the money-grubbing corruption and national chauvinist politics of the professional sports racket. Doping is rampant and practiced by virtually every country.

Since 1986, when the International Olympic Committee changed the rules to allow professional athletes to compete in every phase of Olympics competition, any lingering connection to the principle of amateur sports has been repudiated. The Olympics have become a crass spectacle of corporate commercialism and flag-waving patriotism. In the process, the pressure on athletes to win at any cost—and the pecuniary reward for winning a gold medal—have immensely intensified.

Bribery scandals have become routine. One of the worst was the payoff by US officials and boosters to members of the International Olympic Committee for voting to locate the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City. An ensuing investigation found the IOC members accepted bribes as well during the bidding for the 1998 Winter Olympics and 2000 Summer games.

The Americans are past masters in using the Olympics for political purposes, going back to the US-led boycott of the 1980 Moscow games over the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—an invasion that was deliberately provoked by the Carter administration's funding and arming of Islamist opponents of the pro-Soviet government in Kabul.

As for doping, there is nothing that compares to the decade-long fraud carried out by Lance Armstrong, who rode for the team of the US Postal Service, a government-sponsored corporation. In October 2012, the US Anti-Doping Agency released a report declaring that the US Postal Service cycling team had run “the most sophisticated, professional and successful doping program the sport has ever seen.”

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