

Smearing Russia in the Eyes of Public Opinion: Politics, Propaganda, and the Weaponization of the Rio Olympics

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The [decision](#) by the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) to ban the Russian track and field team from competing in the Olympics in Rio de Janeiro is as much about politics as it is about doping and fair play. Indeed, while the International Olympic Committee (IOC) [upheld the ruling](#) with caveats that might allow some of the athletes to compete, the public relations damage has already been done. Russia has been cast as a serial violator of doping rules, and must be a country that is dishonest and cheats routinely; those sneaky Russians just can't be trusted. Or so the propaganda subtext implies.

But a closer look at the manner in which the Olympics has been politicized reveals that it is, in fact, the US and its allies, not Russia, who have done the most to use this quadrennial competition of the world's best athletes for political gain. And in so doing, it is Washington that bears responsibility for tainting the Olympics.

While the allegations of Russian doping may or may not be true, and the country's attempts at addressing the issue may or may not be ineffectual, the fact remains that it is politics and geopolitics, not banned substances, that now befouls the games. A quick survey of recent history shows just how serious this politicization has become.

The Olympics as a Weapon

This is not the first time (nor is it likely the last time) that the Olympics have been politicized. And, considering the recent deep freeze in US-Russia relations thanks to Ukraine, Syria, Edward Snowden, and other key issues, one cannot help but reach the conclusion that the US has used its considerable influence behind the scenes to jab a thumb in the eye of Mr. Putin and the Russian Government. Moreover, even if this were entirely the actions of the relevant international athletic bodies with no interference from Washington, could anyone seriously blame Moscow for concluding that the ban is politically motivated?

Consider for a moment the recent history of the Olympics, Russia, and the US. In 2014, the western media was replete with columns and television news stories calling for a boycott of the Winter Olympics in Sochi. Literally dozens of op-eds were written with titles like [Send Athletes to the Sochi Olympics, but Boycott the Games](#), ostensibly in an attempt to put pressure on the Kremlin in the wake of the passage of controversial legislation regarding LGBT rights in Russia. In fact, the generally aggressive position of the West came through clearly in decisions by leaders such as Barack Obama and David Cameron [not to attend the games](#), despite the invitations.

It should be remembered that the Sochi Olympics, which took place in February 2014, proceeded against the backdrop of intense upheaval in Ukraine, right on Russia's border, not far from Sochi. In fact, the coup that forced former President Yanukovich, widely seen as a key ally of the Kremlin, took place roughly 48 hours prior to the closing ceremonies in Sochi. The general feeling in Moscow, and among many political observers internationally, was that the US-backed coup in Kiev was timed to coincide with the Olympics in the hopes that the Russian Government would fear responding too harshly given the precarious question of public opinion globally.

At the time, many had likened the series of events around Sochi 2014 to the start of the Beijing Olympics in 2008 which coincided with the launching of attacks by Georgia's government under then President Mikhail Saakashvili against the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Indeed, almost at the very moment that the Russian President Putin was sitting in a stadium in Beijing along with other world leaders, a key US-NATO ally and partner initiated a war of aggression. However, as one might recall, the western corporate media, with its dutiful adherence to the war party line, endlessly droned about Russian aggression against Georgia.

But within a few months, [independent investigations](#) showed that in fact Moscow's assertion that Saakashvili launched an unprovoked attack on Russian peacekeepers and unarmed civilians had been accurate. Could it be mere coincidence that at the very moment that the Russian leader was in Beijing a war on Russia's border and against Russians was launched? Whether coincidence or not, it was not interpreted that way by Putin and his advisers. And, of course, they had good reason to be suspect of the timing and motives behind the attack.

Undoubtedly, Russian leaders had in their minds the not too distant memory of the US boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Ostensibly a move designed to punish the Soviet Union for its intervention in Afghanistan, the US Government under then President Carter made the decision to boycott the Moscow Olympics, and attempted to get other countries to do the same. In hindsight however, the move is remembered as a disastrous blunder by an administration seen as inept in terms of foreign policy while being dominated by Cold War ideologues such as Zbigniew Brzezinski.

In an article aptly titled [Jimmy Carter's Disastrous Olympic Boycott](#), which purposefully was published on February 9, 2014 (two days after the start of the Sochi Olympics), Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, associate professor in the strategy and policy department at the U.S. Naval War College, wrote that:

[Jimmy Carter's national security adviser Zbigniew] Brzezinski also saw an opportunity for Carter to assert himself on matters of foreign policy. But what could the United States hope to do?... the West German ambassador to NATO suggested an Olympic boycott. The White House was intrigued. In a meeting of the National Security Council, Lloyd Cutler, the White House counsel, argued that the United States should boycott the Olympics only if it were combined with other strong action. Vice President Walter Mondale was enthusiastic...As for the president, according to White House notes of the meeting, Carter said the idea sent "cold chills" down his spine...Almost instantly, the press supported a boycott.

Two points brought out by the above excerpt bear closer scrutiny. First is the fact that Brzezinski - a calculating strategic planner at the uppermost echelons of the political

establishment, whose hatred of all things Russia is internationally renowned – saw the Olympics as a means of further undermining Russian/Soviet standing internationally at precisely the moment that the US proxy mujahideen were battling Soviet military in Afghanistan. In effect, Brzezinski saw an Olympic boycott as war by other means. The fact that the national security team, led by Brzezinski, was the driving force behind the decision to boycott the Moscow Olympics reinforces the perception that the boycott was less about defending Afghanistan than it was about scoring political points against the Soviet Union.

Secondly, one should pay close attention to the final sentence of the excerpt which really bears repeating: “Almost instantly, the press supported a boycott.” In other words, the corporate media – significantly freer and more diverse in opinion in 1980 than it is in 2016 – was critical in selling the American public on the idea of a boycott. Perhaps another way of saying it would be that the media acted as the public relations mouthpiece of the US Government, in much the same way it does now. And without that compliant media making the case for such action, it is unlikely that Americans would feel anything other than anger at being cheated out of an opportunity to watch their country’s best athletes compete against the top competition in the world.

But the politicization of sports vis-à-vis US-Russia relations is not restricted solely to the Olympics. In fact, as recently as last year the US, UK, and other allies led an effort to discredit Russia’s hosting of the World Cup, the most watched sporting event in the world, with claims of corruption and bribery. Never mind the fact that it was [Mi6 operatives engaged in spying against Russia](#) who created the dossier used to implicate Putin & Co. in the illegal “buying” of the World Cup. Indeed, this scandal was the death knell for former FIFA boss Sepp Blatter who, because of seemingly friendly ties with Russia, was quickly [shown the door](#) after 17 years.

Naturally the media has stepped in with calls to strip Russia of the 2018 World Cup on every possible pretext. Witness the following headlines: [FIFA should for once do the right thing and strip Russia of World Cup](#) and [Could the Litvinenko Murder Verdict See Russia Stripped of the 2018 World Cup?](#) and [The growing calls to strip Putin and Russia of the 2018 World Cup](#). What was that phrase in the Politico article? “Almost instantly, the press supported a boycott.” Again, we see today the media playing the role of US policy cheerleader, providing the necessary marketing for a clearly anti-Russian foreign policy move shrouded under the pretext of sports and fairness.

It’s the Propaganda, Stupid

But what’s the point of all this? Who cares if some Russian athletes can’t compete in Rio? A valid question, to be sure. To think of these moves by the US and its allies as purely designed to embarrass Russia is to completely misread the intent behind them. Certainly, bad publicity for Putin is part of the rationale, but it is not the real goal. Instead, the targets are the citizens of western countries whose ideas, opinions, and attitudes towards Russia will be shaped as much by sports and popular culture as by anything else.

And so, the real objective is to portray Russians as crooked cheaters whose dishonesty and insidious intentions are overshadowed only by their mindless loyalty to their country. It is to make Americans and Brits and Europeans – already Russophobic in their outlook thanks to decades of Cold War propaganda and the current onslaught of “Putin did it!” politics – view Russian athletes as little more than a bunch of steroid-injecting Ivan Dragos whose deceit is merely a reflection of the treacherous double-dealing of their political leadership.

In short, the move to ban the Russian track and field team is part of a broader project to discredit Russia in the eyes of the public at large. The issue is not so much about whether there is doping in Russia's track and field program – doping is widespread in many countries, including the US – but rather about how to undermining and weakening Russia in the court of public opinion on the eve of the Olympics. Furthermore, the negative attitudes promoted by the media will justify further aggressive policies in Ukraine, Syria, and beyond. And that is precisely the point.

Walter Lipmann, the renowned writer, commentator, and theoretician of public opinion and propaganda defined the term “stereotype” in the modern psychological sense as a “distorted picture or image in a person’s mind, not based on personal experience, but derived culturally.” And it is just such a distorted picture which the US and its partners are cultivating against Russia, using the Olympics as the pretext.

Moreover, that the distortion is “derived culturally” rather than from personal experience demonstrates that it is the propagandists of the corporate media whose job it is to manufacture and perpetuate such distortions for political reasons who are the arbiters of truth. George Orwell would be proud.

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