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# The international sporting boycott of Russia after the Ukraine invasion: a case study on impact, legal frameworks, and media framing

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This paper investigates the international sports boycott imposed on Russia following the 2022 Russia–Ukraine war, focusing on its legal legitimacy, political implications, and media framing. It aims to assess the boycott's impact on Russia's soft power, its alignment with international sports law and public international law, and the extent to which it redefined the principle of neutrality in global sport. The research also examines how the media shaped global and domestic perceptions of the sanctions and their ethical justifications. A qualitative, multi-method approach was employed. The paper combines a doctrinal legal analysis of relevant frameworks, including the Olympic Charter, FIFA, and UEFA regulations, and Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) decisions, with a comparative historical review of prior sports sanctions such as those against apartheid South Africa and the 1992 embargo on Yugoslavia. Additionally, a media discourse analysis of Western and Russian state outlets was conducted to evaluate framing narratives and influence on public opinion. Findings reveal that the Russia boycott signified a turning point in sports governance, effectively ending the notion of political neutrality. The sanctions reduced Russia's international representation while exposing inconsistencies within existing legal standards. Media framing played a pivotal role in legitimizing or contesting the sanctions, reinforcing political divides. Sports boycotts can advance political and moral objectives but raise complex legal and ethical issues. The study recommends establishing consistent global guidelines for conflict-related sanctions and promoting responsible media practices that uphold justice, peace, and human rights through sport.

##### KEYWORDS

FIFA, international sports law, IOC, media framing, Olympic Charter, political neutrality, public opinion, Russia

## 1 Introduction

Sports and politics have long been intertwined; the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 brought this relationship to a critical juncture. Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has invested heavily in global sporting events, hosting mega-events such as the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, to boost national and international standing and improve its global standing on human rights issues (Katsarova, 2022). The war against Ukraine, however, triggered a swift and nearly unified backlash from the international sporting community, effectively “putting an end to sport’s neutrality” (EOC EU Office, 2022). Within days of the invasion, the IOC Executive Board recommended that Russian athletes and teams be banned from competition, citing “the exceptional circumstances” and “the extremely grave violation of the Olympic Truce” by Russia’s government (International Olympic Committee, 2022). Major sports federations followed suit, excluding Russia from competitions and stripping it of hosting rights in an effort to isolate the country on the global stage (EOC EU Office, 2022). This represented an extraordinary convergence of sports governance with geopolitical action, depriving Russia of a precious tool of soft power and international legitimacy.

The 2022 invasion of Ukraine was not an isolated rupture in Russia’s relationship with the sporting world; rather, it was the third in a sequence of aggressive episodes, following the 2008 war in Georgia and the 2014 occupation of Crimea. This geopolitical history, combined with Russia’s long-standing state-sponsored doping scandals, created a cumulative momentum for international sanctions. Previous WADA investigations and CAS rulings had already resulted in the partial isolation of Russian sport, including the loss of national symbols and the transition to neutral-athlete participation. As Lebed and Morgulev (2024) observe, Russian sport has frequently been used as a mirror for state propaganda and military identity, making the 2022 response an unequivocal culmination of years of mounting tension regarding Russia’s adherence to international norms.

This research paper examines the Russian sports boycott as a case study to understand its multifaceted impact and implications. First, it outlines the scope of the boycott and its immediate effects on international sport and on Russia’s athletes, teams, and sporting ambitions. Next, it delves into a legal analysis of the boycott frameworks, assessing how measures taken by bodies like FIFA, UEFA, and the IOC align with or challenge existing rules of sports organizations, international sports law, and broader international legal principles. Key questions include whether these sanctions constitute permissible actions under organizations’ statutes and the Olympic Charter, and how CAS rulings addressed Russian appeals. Finally, it explores the role of media in framing the boycott and shaping public opinion, both internationally and within Russia. Media coverage and commentary not only reflected public sentiment but arguably influenced policymakers and sports officials, from Western outlets lauding the boycott as a moral stand, to Russian state media casting it as discrimination or propaganda fodder.

By reviewing both historical precedents and the unfolding developments since February 2022, this paper situates the Russian case in a broader context of sports and international relations.

Previous instances, such as the Olympic ban of apartheid South Africa and the sports sanctions against Yugoslavia in the 1990s, offer valuable comparisons for understanding the efficacy and fairness of sporting boycotts (Both, 2020). In the discussion and results, the paper synthesizes findings on how effective the boycott has been in achieving political or humanitarian goals, what legal justifications or controversies have arisen, and how media narratives have impacted the longevity and perception of the sanctions. It concludes with recommendations aimed at sports governing bodies, legal practitioners, and media organizations for handling similar situations in the future, emphasizing the need to uphold both the integrity of sport and the values of peace and non-discrimination.

## 2 The conceptual contest of sport neutrality

The ideal of “sporting neutrality”, the notion that international athletic competition exists in a vacuum separate from geopolitical conflict, has long been a contested myth rather than a fixed legal reality. Historically, the claim of institutional neutrality has often served as a shield for governing bodies to avoid the moral complications of state-sponsored violence or human rights abuses. However, this boundary has been repeatedly challenged when participation was seen as a tacit endorsement of oppressive regimes. Notable examples include the 1936 Berlin Olympics, which served as a propaganda tool for the Nazi regime, and the 1978 FIFA World Cup in Argentina, held under the shadow of a military junta’s “Dirty War.” Similarly, the 1968 Mexico City Olympics followed the violent repression of student protesters, and the use of National Stadiums as detention centers in post-coup Chile demonstrated that the physical architecture of sport is often inseparable from state violence (Allison, 2005). In these instances, the “apolitical” stance of sports organizations was widely criticized as a form of moral negligence.

Crucially, the tension surrounding neutrality is rarely defined by objective legal thresholds alone; instead, it is socially and politically constructed. The boundary between “sport” and “politics” is consistently blurred and fluctuates based on media attention, public pressure, and the formation of a broad moral consensus. From an ethical standpoint, the decision of when neutrality must yield is often relativistic and context-dependent. As Boykoff (2016) suggests, sports governing bodies do not apply universal rules of exclusion; rather, they react to “accumulated momentum” when the actions of a state become so egregious that the reputational cost of inclusion outweighs the benefits of neutrality. Consequently, the suspension of a nation from the global sporting community is less a legal “automaticity” and more a reflection of a shifting normative landscape where participation is no longer viewed as a neutral act, but as a symbolic grant of legitimacy.

Viewed through this lens, the 2022 boycott of Russia should not be treated as a uniquely exceptional rupture, but as the culmination of a decade-long erosion of Russian sporting legitimacy. This response was built upon a “cumulative perspective” of non-compliance and aggression, beginning with the 2008 war in Georgia

and the 2014 occupation of Crimea, and further exacerbated by the state-sponsored doping scandals that led to prolonged sanctions by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) and the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS). As [Lebed and Morgulev \(2024\)](#) argue, the use of sport as a mirror for aggressive state propaganda made the 2022 invasion a “breaking point” for international federations. By 2022, the broad international consensus against the Russian state had reached a level where the traditional institutional defenses of neutrality were no longer tenable, leading to a decisive, albeit relativistic, shift toward exclusion to protect the “integrity and safety” of global sport.

### 3 Literature review: sports, politics, and precedents of boycott

Scholars widely document the instrumentalization of sport for diplomacy, propaganda, and soft power. Countries host or excel in mega-events to project prestige, normalize contested policies, and cultivate influence ([Grix and Brannagan, 2016](#)). This logic-underpinned Russia’s strategic investments in Sochi 2014 and the 2018 FIFA World Cup, framed domestically as symbols of resurgence and internationally as image rehabilitation ([Boykoff, 2016](#)). Yet, the same visibility renders states vulnerable: when access to global sport is severed, reputational and material losses can cascade across sponsorships, audiences, and domestic legitimacy ([Black and Peacock, 2013](#)).

Historical boycotts provide antecedents. The Olympic exclusion of apartheid South Africa institutionalized moral censure and, alongside economic and cultural embargoes, contributed to regime pressure ([Booth, 1998](#); [Van der Westhuizen, 2016](#)). The 1980–1984 Olympic boycotts revealed limits of state-led withdrawals, signaling condemnation but imposing heavy athlete costs and ambiguous policy affect ([Keys, 2006](#)). A closer institutional parallel is UNSC Resolution 757 (1992), which barred Yugoslavia from international sport and forced neutral participation at Barcelona 1992, an early template for decoupling athletes from pariah states ([Sugden and Tomlinson, 1998](#)). These precedents shape today’s debates about collective punishment vs. human rights, neutrality, and consistency ([Makhadmeh and Khwaileh, 2025](#)).

The Russia–Ukraine case accelerated a normative shift from avowed neutrality to value-driven governance. The IOC’s 28 Feb 2022 recommendation to exclude Russians, FIFA/UEFA suspensions, relocations of events, and sponsorship exits marked a cross-sport alignment rarely seen ([Fédération Internationale de Football Association, 2022](#); [Katsarova, 2022](#)). Legal scholarship situates these decisions within *Lex Sportive*: emergency/force-majeure powers, “integrity and safety” rationales, and the autonomy of sport ([Mitten and Opie, 2010](#)). Yet they collide with non-discrimination and equal treatment principles in the Olympic Charter and federation statutes ([Wiater, 2025](#)). CAS jurisprudence in Russia-related appeals has largely upheld federation measures as proportionate in *sui generis* circumstances, while cautioning against arbitrary, inconsistent selectivity, thereby sketching a fragile doctrinal balance.

Existing scholarship examines the media’s agenda-setting and framing power in sport crises ([Billings et al., 2015](#); [Hutchins and Boyle, 2017](#)). In 2022–2024, Western outlets framed exclusion as moral necessity and anti-propaganda, amplifying athlete/ministerial calls and public polling; Russian state media counter-framed the bans as Russophobia and “politicization of sport,” reinforcing siege narratives ([Ingle, 2023](#); [Reuters, 2022](#); [EOC EU Office, 2022](#); [Government of the Russian Federation, 2022](#)). Communication studies warn that over-enforcement and symbolic politics can chill legitimate speech and entrench polarization ([Boykoff, 2016](#)).

A growing body of policy analysis interrogates consistency, time-limits, and pathways to neutral return, especially after the IOC added human rights to the ([International Olympic Committee, 2023](#); [Institute for Human Rights Business, 2018](#)). Proposals include clearer triggers (UN findings, broad interstate consensus), narrowly tailored eligibility (exclude those linked to armed forces/propaganda), and transparency in blocking orders and due process for athletes ([Goretti, 2022](#); [Katsarova, 2022](#)).

This paper treats impact, law, and media largely in silos: (i) historical narratives of boycotts; (ii) doctrinal analyses of federation powers/Charter principles; (iii) descriptive media accounts. Few studies integrate these components into a single, comparative framework that (a) maps pre/post-boycott outcomes across multiple federations (FIFA/UEFA/IOC/WA/IIHF), (b) tests the legal reasoning against CAS outcomes and non-discrimination norms, and (c) quantifies/qualifies media framing effects on organizational decisions and public consent, while incorporating Russian governmental communications as primary sources. This paper addresses that gap by triangulating institutional measures, legal justifications, and media frames to assess the effectiveness, legality, and legitimacy of sport sanctions, and to propose criteria that reconcile human rights with sport integrity ([Khwaileh et al., 2025a](#)).

### 4 Methodology

This research employs a qualitative research design focusing on documentary and content analysis, moving away from a mixed-methods approach to ensure depth in critical discussion. The paper analyzes the period from February 2022 to October 2025, capturing the immediate and evolving international responses to the invasion. Data were extracted from three primary areas: institutional frameworks such as the Olympic Charter and FIFA/UEFA statutes, legal rulings from the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS), and media communications from both Western and Russian state outlets. This timeframe and selection of sources allow for a comprehensive evaluation of how sporting bodies balanced their regulatory autonomy with international legal norms and political pressures ([Khwaileh et al., 2025b](#)). To ensure a systematic analysis, the data were processed using a specialized codebook that categorized information into specific themes. These themes included the legal authority of sports organizations, the proportionality of sanctions, and the media’s use of diagnostic and motivational framing. By coding the documents against these predetermined categories, the research identifies how the concept

of “neutrality” was redefined during this period. This structured approach to data extraction allows for a clear signposting of findings, demonstrating how the boycott transitioned from a temporary safety measure to a broader instrument of international diplomacy and human rights enforcement.

## 5 Finding and non-discrimination: legal compatibility and media framing

The unprecedented sporting boycott of Russia from 2022 to 2025 reveals a complex interplay between the principle of non-discrimination, the exigencies of war-related sanctions, international law compatibility, and media framing. The measures produced three major outcomes. First, Russia’s presence and reputation in global sports suffered a sharp decline as its teams, athletes, and symbols were removed from international competitions. This effectively curtailed a key soft-power outlet that Russia had cultivated through events like the 2014 Sochi Olympics and 2018 FIFA World Cup. Second, the country sustained significant financial and commercial losses. Russia was stripped of hosting rights and saw sponsorships and broadcast deals terminated, depriving it of investment and revenue streams (Silverman, 2022). For instance, the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) ended its long-standing sponsorship with Gazprom, and Formula One canceled its Grand Prix in Russia—developments which signaled to other stakeholders the reputational risk of associating with the Russian state (Silverman, 2022). Third, the boycott’s impact on athletes was disproportionate. Russian athletes faced either outright exclusion or strict conditions for “neutral” participation without national symbols, disrupting careers and earnings (Zhou, 2022). Meanwhile, Ukrainian athletes endured even more acute hardships—from destroyed training facilities to personal displacement and danger due to the war, which dramatically affected their ability to compete (EOC EU Office, 2022). This juxtaposition reframed debates on fairness: concerns over Russian athletes’ rights had to be weighed against the existential threats faced by their Ukrainian counterparts (International Olympic Committee, 2022). In sum, the sporting sanctions achieved a near-total international isolation of Russian sport but not without collateral consequences for individual athletes.

Legally, these measures tested the boundaries of sports law and the Olympic principle of non-discrimination. On one hand, the Olympic Charter guarantees equal access to sport and prohibits discrimination, including on the basis of nationality. On the other hand, the wartime context prompted exceptional sanctions that, by excluding athletes due to nationality, ran counter to the non-discrimination norm. The Russian side repeatedly pointed to a perceived double standard, asking why similar actions had not been taken in other conflicts. Despite this tension, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) consistently upheld the bulk of the sanctions as lawful and proportionate in light of Russia’s *sui generis* aggression against Ukraine. In a series of appeals, Russian athletes and federations claimed that the bans were an unlawful form of collective punishment and nationality-based discrimination.

CAS panels rejected those claims, finding that the measures did not amount to unlawful discrimination given the extraordinary circumstances and the aim of protecting sporting integrity. At the same time, CAS affirmed that sports bodies do not wield unlimited authority: any emergency exclusion must be justified by clear reasons, narrowly targeted to the threat and subject to periodic review rather than open-ended. This jurisprudence underscored that even in emergencies; sanctions must observe the principles of proportionality and equal treatment. In essence, CAS signaled a fragile doctrinal balance—broad autonomy for federations to act in exceptional cases, constrained by the duty to avoid arbitrariness or permanent exclusion.

Multiple legal and normative factors combined to bolster the legitimacy of these unprecedented measures. First, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine was widely deemed an exceptional breach of international peace, unlike other conflicts. It drew nearly universal condemnation from governments and international organizations, creating an extraordinary consensus that action was necessary. In practical terms, the war also generated operational impossibilities in sports—for example, teams from other countries refused to play against Russian teams, and security risks were cited for events involving Russia. Together, these factors distinguished the Ukraine invasion from past conflicts and helped justify the sports sanctions as extraordinary steps rather than a new routine. Second, international federations relied on their broad statutory emergency powers and discretion to safeguard competition integrity under force majeure conditions. Both FIFA and UEFA, for instance, argued that keeping Russian teams would have made it impossible to run fair and safe competitions, invoking clauses about the “best interests” of sport and force majeure to suspend Russia (Wiater, 2025). Importantly, these actions were framed as administrative measures to preserve scheduling and safety—not as punitive bans, which reinforced their legal validity under sports governance rules. Third, adjudicators took a context-sensitive approach to the principle of equivalence (treating like cases alike). The courts recognized that while fairness dictates similar treatment for similar situations, the Ukraine war constituted a uniquely grave context; thus, different treatment (compared to other conflicts) was warranted. This implies that if a comparable situation arises in the future—one with a similar level of international outrage and sport disruption—similar sanctions should follow. In other words, CAS’s reasoning intimated that consistency will be expected going forward: like cases must be handled alike. The absence of pre-existing criteria, however, made these 2022–2023 decisions appear ad hoc, feeding the perception of selectivity.

From the perspective of international law, the sports boycott operated in a gray area but aligned with broader legal condemnation of Russia. No treaty explicitly prohibits or mandates sporting boycotts during war. However, Russia’s invasion clearly violated Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter, which forbids the use of force against sovereign states (United Nations, 1945). Sporting bodies thus found themselves on the same side as the international community’s legal and moral consensus. The nearly unanimous diplomatic sanctions and United Nations resolutions against the invasion created a normative backdrop that made the sports sanctions appear a natural extension of global measures, rather than a rogue or purely political move. Notably, the IOC’s

decision was buttressed by the violation of the Olympic Truce—a tradition, endorsed by the UN that calls for peace during the Olympic Games. Russia breached the Olympic Truce by launching the invasion during the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, reinforcing the IOC's stance that the aggression contradicted the fundamental values of sport (International Olympic Committee, 2022). In recent years, sports governance has also been increasingly informed by human rights standards. The IOC amended the Olympic Charter in 2023 to explicitly reference the respect for human rights, signaling that the era of absolute political “neutrality” in sports is waning (International Olympic Committee, 2023). This so-called “rights shift” (Institute for Human Rights Business, 2018) means that sports organizations are expected to consider human rights and humanitarian principles in their decisions. Nevertheless, a blanket ban based solely on nationality does raise legitimate concerns under international human rights law—particularly the athletes' right to non-discrimination and the right to practice one's profession or sport. The challenge going forward is reconciling these rights with the collective interest in condemning state wrongdoing.

A central criticism of the 2022 sports boycott has been the allegation of double standards. Observers and affected parties asked, “Why Russia and not others?” pointing out that comparable sports sanctions were not deployed in other conflicts or human rights crises involving states. In response, sports authorities emphasized the unprecedented nature of the international reaction in this case and the tangible risks to competitions had Russia remained involved. They noted that no other recent conflict triggered the same level of united response from governments, nor the same degree of disruption to the sports calendar (operational impossibility), as the Ukraine invasion did. CAS decisions have essentially accepted that context is the determining factor, meaning each situation must be evaluated on its own merits. However, the lack of clear pre-set criteria undeniably left sports federations open to accusations of inconsistency. This has prompted scholars and governance experts to call for the development of transparent guidelines to handle future crises more consistently (Goretti, 2022). Any such framework would likely define triggers for sports sanctions across multiple dimensions (Lebed and Morgulev, 2024). For example, an international trigger could be a formal finding or condemnation by the UN Security Council or General Assembly, indicating a broad consensus that a state's actions violate international peace or human rights. A competitive trigger might be evidence that a conflict directly undermines the integrity or safety of sports events—such as teams refusing to play, or significant security threats to competitions. Additionally, a sectoral trigger has been suggested, wherein sports sanctions would be considered if the sports domain itself were abused for war efforts or propaganda, (e.g. if athletes are co-opted into the military or if sporting success is heavily used to fuel wartime nationalism). Alongside these triggers, legal safeguards are crucial. Researchers advocate for neutral athlete pathways that allow individuals from aggressor states to continue competing under certain conditions—for instance, under a neutral flag and only if they have no affiliation with the military or war propaganda (International Olympic Committee, 2022; Penney, 2023). Such athletes would undergo transparent scrutiny to ensure they meet the neutrality criteria, thereby preserving their rights as individuals distinct from state actions. All sanctions should also

be subject to periodic review, meaning the measures are time-bound and regularly re-assessed against evolving circumstances. These steps would make future responses more predictable, proportionate, and fair, mitigating the impression of selectivity.

Throughout this period, the media has played a dual role in both legitimizing the international consensus and advancing counter-narratives. Western and international media outlets functioned as an informal governance lever by framing the sports boycott as a moral imperative and an extension of broader economic and political sanctions. Major Western newspapers and broadcasters emphasized that excluding Russia was necessary to uphold international law and the “rules-based order,” often citing voices of athletes and officials who argued that sport could not stay neutral in the face of aggression (Ingle, 2023; Reuters, 2022). This diagnostic framing portrayed Russian sport as complicit in state propaganda, and the prognostic framing presented the boycott as a way to enforce norms and isolate an aggressor. Such coverage put additional pressure on sponsors and sports bodies, highlighting the reputational risks of continuing business-as-usual with Russia (Silverman, 2022). In effect, media narratives amplified the moral and practical justifications for sports organizations to act, thereby reinforcing and consolidating the unprecedented unity across federations. In contrast, Russian state-aligned media advanced a counter-frame that cast the boycott as an illegitimate and biased politicization of sport. Official communications and news outlets in Russia characterized the bans as evidence of Russophobia and Western double standards (Government of the Russian Federation, 2022). This narrative sought to rally domestic public opinion by depicting Russian athletes and fans as victims of discrimination, and by extension, to shore up support for the Russian government's policies. The Russian media also attempted to discredit the sanctions internationally by arguing they violated the apolitical spirit of sport, though these arguments found little traction outside of sympathetic or allied countries. Over time, the media discourse in the West began to evolve. After the initial shock and punitive consensus, some Western commentators and journalistic pieces started questioning how long such exclusions should last and under what conditions Russian athletes might return. These more nuanced discussions pushed for clearer criteria for neutrality and reintegration—effectively echoing the calls for principled consistency (Penney, 2023; Goretti, 2022). This evolution demonstrates the media's ability not only to legitimate governance decisions in the heat of a crisis but also to later calibrate and analyze those decisions, encouraging policymakers toward more refined solutions.

In brief, the Russian sports boycott case offers important lessons at the intersection of sport, law, and global governance. It has shown that the international sports community will not remain neutral in the face of a flagrant breach of peace, especially when there is overwhelming global consensus on the issue. The measures taken by federations were largely deemed compatible with sports law and aligned with the United Nations' normative framework so long as they remained bounded by fundamental principles of non-discrimination, proportionality, and respect for human rights. Moving forward, the challenge is to transform this reactive response into a principled, consistent approach. This means establishing clear, pre-defined criteria for when sports sanctions are triggered;

designing careful mechanisms for neutral athlete participation to safeguard individual rights; ensuring transparency and reasoned justifications in decision-making; and committing to periodic reviews to lift or adjust measures as situations change. By adopting such an approach, sports governing bodies can preserve the integrity and credibility of international sport while fulfilling an evolving duty to stand up for universal values. In doing so, they will be better prepared to confront future geopolitical crises in a manner that is both effective and equitable, avoiding ad hoc reactions and upholding the trust of athletes and global audiences alike.

## 6 Discussion

Within days of Russia's invasion, an unusually broad coalition of sport-governance actors converged on exclusionary measures: where the IOC urged federations to bar Russian athletes and withhold hosting rights ([International Olympic Committee, 2022](#)). FIFA and UEFA also suspended national teams and clubs and relocated flagship events ([Fédération Internationale de Football Association, 2022](#); [UEFA, 2022](#)); other federations followed with parallel steps ([EOC EU Office, 2022](#)). In aggregate, this produced a rare, cross-sport alignment that effectively ended the presumption of "political neutrality" in practice ([Goretti, 2022](#); [Ingle, 2023](#)). The speed and breadth of the measures distinguished 2022 from historical cases, even when compared with the UN-mandated exclusion of Yugoslavia in 1992.

The suspensions curtailed Russia's participation in world and regional championships, nullified hosting ambitions, and truncated visibility of symbols (flag/anthem), thereby shrinking a key soft-power channel cultivated via Sochi 2014 and the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Commercially, the termination of sponsorships (e.g., Gazprom/UEFA) and cancellations (e.g., Formula One) signaled reputational risk contagion, public and partner-facing actors sought distance from the Russian state ([Silverman, 2022](#)). Soft-power scholarship anticipates such reversals when the "projection" infrastructure is withdrawn ([Black and Peacock, 2013](#)).

The boycott imposed direct costs on Russian athletes, ranging from outright bans to neutral-status constraints, which disproportionately harmed less marketable competitors reliant on federation events for earnings, and ranking ([Zhou, 2022](#)). Domestic sport turned inward, with discussions of re-routing to Asian circuits (e.g., football's mooted AFC shift) hinting at fragmentation risks for the global calendar ([Goretti, 2022](#)). Meanwhile, Ukrainian athletes faced existential harms (facility destruction, displacement), prompting targeted solidarity funds, training bases, and access initiatives across Europe and the Olympic Movement ([EOC EU Office, 2022](#)). The juxtaposition reframes non-discrimination debates: fairness concerns for excluded Russians coexist with the imperative to mitigate extraordinary harms to Ukrainians ([International Olympic Committee, 2022](#)).

As for the legal characterization under sports law and public international law, sports federations based their actions on emergency/force majeure and integrity/safety grounds, emphasizing impossibility of enforcement (such as competitors refusing to hold matches) and risk management rather than

punitive intent. UEFA leaned on residuary executive powers (best interests of competition), while FIFA invoked force majeure to preserve scheduling integrity ([Wiater, 2025](#)). The IOC adopted a dual track: (i) administrative recommendations to preserve fairness and safety and (ii) disciplinary action suspending the ROC for breaching Charter-based principles by integrating annexed-region sports bodies ([International Olympic Committee, 2022](#)). In CAS appeals, panels largely upheld federation measures as proportionate responses to sui generis aggression, while underscoring the equality/consistency constraint going forward. This jurisprudence sketches a doctrinal equilibrium: broad autonomy in emergencies, bounded by non-discrimination and reason giving. Public international law does not mandate sports sanctions, but the near-universal legal condemnation of aggression under the UN Charter supplied a normative backdrop for sport's alignment ([United Nations, 1945](#)).

Furthermore, the Charter-level ideal of political neutrality has been progressively circumscribed by human-rights commitments ([International Olympic Committee, 2023](#); [Institute for Human Rights Business, 2018](#)). The IOC's exploration of neutral pathways for individual athletes (with exclusions for military affiliation or propaganda support) reflects a rights-balancing turn, limiting collective penalties while maintaining pressure on state-linked representations ([International Olympic Committee, 2022](#); [Zhou, 2022](#)). Scholars warn that ad hoc selectivity invites double-standards accusations; proposals therefore stress transparent triggers (e.g., UN findings, critical-mass interstate consensus, and demonstrable impact on safe/fair competition) and due-process safeguards ([Goretti, 2022](#)).

Media framing and policy responses were particularly important. Western outlets amplified an Ethical framework, exclusion as part of a comprehensive sanction regime, while foregrounding athlete/ministerial calls and favorable public opinion ([Silverman, 2022](#)). Russian state communications counterframed the bans as politicized "Russophobia," reinforcing siege narratives and potentially dampening domestic policy elasticity ([Government of the Russian Federation, 2022](#)). Communication research suggests such diagnostic/prognostic/motivational frames can both legitimate governance choices and harden in-group attitudes ([Billings et al., 2015](#); [Hutchins and Boyle, 2017](#)).

Compared with apartheid South Africa and Yugoslavia 1992, the Russia case demonstrated faster coordination, broader sport-ecosystem reach, and heavier reliance on private-association autonomy rather than UN compulsion. Unlike state-led boycotts in 1980–1984, 2022 primarily featured federation-led exclusions designed to stabilize competitions and signal norm defense ([Keys, 2006](#)). CAS's equality guidance implicitly warns that if like cases arise, like responses should follow, pressing sport governance toward clearer, more generalizable criteria.

Empirically, the boycott (i) substantially reduced Russia's soft-power projection and access to elite competition (ii) produced athlete-level inequities and incentives for circuit realignment, with fragmentation risks ([Goretti, 2022](#)); and (iii) mobilized media frames that legitimated rapid policy while intensifying narrative polarization ([Ingle, 2023](#)). Legally, the measures fit within Lex sportiva emergency/autonomy doctrines yet remain normatively bounded by non-discrimination, proportionality, and a nascent

human-rights lens. Historically, the case consolidates the view that sport will not remain neutral amid egregious breaches of the peace, though it spotlights the need for predictable triggers, tailored neutral-status pathways, and transparent review to protect athlete rights and institutional legitimacy.

The key actors, their specific measures, can systematically break down this coordinated response across the sports ecosystem and the primary justifications offered. The following table synthesizes these major sanctions to provide a clear overview of the scope and nature of the exclusionary measures enacted in 2022.

The consolidated view in [Table 1](#) underscores the unprecedented scale and coordination of the 2022 sporting sanctions. This multi-front exclusion, targeting state symbols, team participation, commercial partnerships, and hosting rights, represents a paradigm shift in sport governance, effectively ending the operational presumption of political neutrality in the face of egregious state aggression. The measures, while legally grounded in the autonomous emergency powers of sports bodies, were normatively underpinned by the near-universal condemnation of Russia's invasion, creating a new precedent for the role of global sport in geopolitical crises.

In conclusion, the 2022 sporting sanctions against Russia demonstrate a complex interplay of normative power, institutional autonomy, and profound human consequence. Empirically, they successfully curtailed a key soft-power channel and demonstrated sport's capacity for rapid, coordinated action. However, they also exposed inherent tensions, between collective punishment and individual athlete rights, between stabilizing the global sports order and risking its fragmentation, and between the moral clarity of a unified response and the legal necessity for consistent, principled application in future cases. The case establishes that modern sport will not remain neutral amid grave breaches of international peace, but it also presses governance bodies to evolve beyond ad-hoc measures toward a more transparent, rights-based framework for future interventions.

## 7 Conclusion

The case of Russia's invasion of Ukraine showed that rapid, unified exclusions by sports bodies could curtail an aggressor state's soft-power advantage and protect competitive integrity. Yet these extraordinary steps also placed uneven burdens on athletes and revealed gaps in rule clarity and consistency. International federations invoked emergency powers to impose bans and event relocations, and CAS (Court of Arbitration for Sport) scrutiny has generally upheld such actions when they were framed as proportionate, time-bound protections rather than open-ended punishments ([Makhadmeh and Al-Hadabi, 2025](#)). Still, many stakeholders pointed out apparent double standards, insufficient due-process safeguards, and the lack of clear pathways to separate state symbolism from individual participation. Addressing these concerns will require moving beyond ad hoc reactions. Sports bodies must establish clear, codified protocols anchored in international law, transparent decision-making, athlete-focused policies that respect human rights, and structured links to credible fact-finding. With these

principles in mind, several key reforms are recommended to ensure that responses to geopolitical conflicts are swift but predictable, firm but proportionate, and principled rather than ad hoc. Firstly, sports institutions should define explicit conflict-response criteria and embed due-process safeguards in their statutes. Triggers for sanctions could include a flagrant breach of the UN Charter or Olympic Truce, a broad international consensus such as a United Nations resolution condemning aggression, or concrete risks to competition integrity or athlete safety, paired with proportionality tests, periodic review, and requirements for reasoned decisions ([International Olympic Committee, 2022, 2023](#); [United Nations, 1945](#); [United Nations Security Council, 1992](#); [Wiater, 2025](#)). Predictable criteria of this kind reduce accusations of "double standards" while preserving the ability to act swiftly in emergencies ([Wiater, 2025](#)). In tandem, federations should clarify and entrench their emergency powers, aligned with CAS guidance. Force majeure or integrity clauses should explicitly authorize temporary protective measures (like event relocations or team suspensions) and distinguish them from punitive disciplinary sanctions ([Fédération Internationale de Football Association, 2022](#); [UEFA, 2022](#); [Wiater, 2025](#)). Likewise, the grounds and procedures for suspending National Olympic Committees (NOCs) or National Paralympic Committees should be predefined, to be invoked if a country's regime commits egregious violations of the Olympic Charter ([International Olympic Committee, 2023](#)). Secondly, sports bodies should separate state representation from individual athletes. This means continuing to suspend national federations, teams, and official delegations and withdrawing hosting rights when conflict-related triggers are met, while providing a pathway for individual athletes from the offending state to compete in a neutral capacity under strict conditions. Such conditions include verified independence from the state's military or propaganda apparatus, signing a neutrality declaration, and undergoing individualized vetting with a right to appeal ([International Olympic Committee, 2023](#); [Ingle, 2023](#); [Penney, 2023](#)). Strict neutrality must also be enforced at events: no flags or anthems, neutral uniforms without national colors, and no national identification of neutral athletes by organizers or broadcasters ([International Olympic Committee, 2023](#); [Penney, 2023](#)). This dual approach, banning official state involvement while allowing vetted individuals to compete, helps uphold non-discrimination and an athlete's right to work, yet prevents sporting platforms from being used as propaganda tools by an aggressor government ([Zhou, 2022](#)). Thirdly, any conflict-related sanctions should rest on credible evidence and be accompanied by effective communication. International federations should liaise with the United Nations and other authorities so that measures align with authoritative findings (e.g. UN resolutions or ICJ rulings) ([Katsarova, 2022](#); [United Nations, 1945](#); [United Nations Security Council, 1992](#); [International Olympic Committee, 2022, 2023](#)). In parallel, governing bodies must explain decisions to the public. Publishing the rationale, outlining the criteria and evidence used, and setting timelines for review will show that any exclusions are rules-based and temporary. Proactive communication, enlisting respected athletes as ambassadors, providing factual briefings, and countering misinformation, can ensure the public understands why a given conflict warrants a particular sporting response ([Billings et al., 2015](#); [Hutchins and Boyle, 2017](#); [Silverman, 2022](#); [EOC EU Office,](#)

TABLE 1 Created by authors: major international sporting sanctions against Russia (2022).

Sanctioning body	Key measures	Primary impact/justification
International Olympic Committee (IOC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recommendation to International Federations (IFs) to ban Russian athletes.</li> <li>- Suspension of the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) for integrating sports bodies from annexed regions.</li> <li>- Withdrawal of hosting rights (e.g., planned events).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Impact:</b> Breach of Olympic Charter; removal of state symbols and collective representation.</li> <li>- <b>Justification:</b> Upholding integrity, safety, and the political neutrality of the Olympic Movement.</li> </ul>
FIFA and UEFA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Suspension of Russian national teams and clubs from all competitions.</li> <li>- Termination of sponsorship with Gazprom.</li> <li>- Relocation of the UEFA Champions League final.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Impact:</b> Exclusion from global football, major financial and reputational losses.</li> <li>- <b>Justification:</b> Force majeure; “best interests of football”; impossibility of organizing fixtures safely and fairly.</li> </ul>
Other international federations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Widespread bans and exclusion from World Championships and other events across numerous sports (e.g., athletics, swimming, Formula One).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Impact:</b> Drastic reduction in competitive opportunities and global visibility for Russian athletes.</li> <li>- <b>Justification:</b> Emergency powers; integrity of competition; alignment with broader international response.</li> </ul>
European Olympic Committees (EOC) EU Office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coordination of support for Ukrainian athletes (solidarity funds, training bases).</li> <li>- Support for exclusionary measures against Russia.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Impact:</b> Highlighted the dual reality of sanctioning Russia while providing existential support to Ukraine.</li> <li>- <b>Justification:</b> Mitigating extraordinary harms to Ukrainian sports system; normative alignment.</li> </ul>

2022; Wiater, 2025). Finally, sanctions should be paired with measures to mitigate harm to athletes and a plan for principled reintegration. Providing financial and logistical assistance (e.g. training or relocation programs) can help athletes from war-torn regions or sanctioned countries continue their careers as neutrals (EOC EU Office, 2022; Institute for Human Rights Business, 2018; Zhou, 2022). Meanwhile, sports bodies should lay out conditions for lifting sanctions and re-admitting teams once peace is restored. Any reinstatement should be tied to verifiable progress toward peace and justice, for example, a ceasefire or peace agreement and compliance with international law. Post-conflict sporting exchanges can aid reconciliation but must be managed carefully to avoid “sport-washing” past transgressions (Boykoff, 2016; International Olympic Committee, 2023; Wiater, 2025). The response to Russia’s war in Ukraine showed that when confronted with a breach of peace, sports organizations will abandon neutrality and impose sweeping measures, banning teams and barring national symbols, to uphold international norms. CAS panels largely affirmed these actions as lawful and proportionate under the circumstances, provided they were applied evenhandedly and tied to legitimate integrity or safety concerns. Meanwhile, the IOC’s own evolution, amending the Olympic Charter in 2023 to include human rights commitments and establishing neutral-athlete pathways, illustrates an effort to reconcile collective security measures with individual athletes’ rights. Media scrutiny and athlete activism also shaped the process: global media coverage and athlete activism bolstered support for isolating Russia and Belarus, then later urged a more nuanced approach to re-admitting athletes, while Russian state media portrayed the bans as Western persecution. This convergence of law, morality, and public sentiment makes clear that “sport and politics” inevitably do mix in times of crisis. The key lesson is not that politics can be kept out of sport, but that sport’s engagement with politics must be guided by clear principles and consistency. Sporting sanctions are no panacea, but they remain a powerful symbol of censure and solidarity whose legitimacy depends on consistent application in line with universal

values. By implementing the reforms outlined above and upholding commitments to fairness and human rights, sport can navigate crises swiftly and fairly, safeguarding its integrity while reaffirming commitment to peace, dignity, and non-discrimination.

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KMK: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. NehM: Methodology, Writing – review & editing. NahM: Investigation, Funding acquisition, Writing – review & editing. ZA-M: Writing – review & editing, Methodology.

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