

New accusations of Russian state-sponsored doping

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On Friday, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) published the second installment of a report accusing Russian athletes of the systematic use of performance-enhancing drugs as part of a state-sponsored program. The allegations have been seized upon by international sports authorities, governments and the Western media to call for stripping Russian athletes of medals and excluding the country from world athletics.

The investigation, led by Canadian attorney and sports arbitrator Richard McLaren, relies on scientific and forensic evidence drawn from the urine samples of Russian athletes as well as emails and other documents to substantiate the claims of Dr. Grigory Rodchenkov, the former head of the WADA-accredited anti-doping laboratory in Moscow.

Rodchenkov's testimony was the basis of the first installment of McLaren's report, issued in July 2016, in which the doctor alleged the existence of a vast conspiracy to dope and cover up the doping of Russian athletes, with a central role being played by the country's Federal Security Services (FSB). At that time, McLaren's report did not provide independent evidence substantiating Rodchenkov's statements, a failing that has supposedly been corrected in the current installment.

This latest stage in the investigation concluded that, as Rodchenkov stated, there was regular tampering with Russian athletes' urine samples collected in supposedly "tamper-proof" receptacles for the 2012 and 2014 Olympic Games. In addition to the swapping out of "dirty" for "clean" samples, salt and other substances were allegedly added or removed in order to hide chemical signs of performance-enhancing drug use. In several instances, for example, salt levels found in the samples were so high or so low as to be physiologically impossible. All of the 120 samples examined, McLaren claims, had been meddled with in some way, including those of 15 medalists.

The head of the International Olympic Committee, of which WADA is a subsidiary organization, declared that McLaren's findings showed "a fundamental attack on the integrity of sport." In addition to stating that Russian athletes' doping samples from the 2012 and 2014 would all be reexamined, he said that "any athlete who took part in such a sophisticated manipulation system" would be denied the right to participate in future Olympic events.

Sanctions against Russia that were put in place after the first

portion of McLaren's report was released are to be continued. There is currently a ban on Russian officials attending international sporting events and efforts have been underway to block international sports competitions from being held on Russian soil. On the basis of the presumption of guilt, the entire Russian Paralympic team was disqualified from this year's summer games. This came shortly after the country's track-and-field athletes were kept out of the Olympic competition in Brazil in August. There are calls for Russia to be excluded from the 2018 World Cup, which it is slated to host.

Moscow has denied that it is involved in state-sponsored doping and insists it is taking measures to clean up its sports activities.

Top sports officials in the US, Germany and elsewhere have seized upon the WADA investigation to denounce Russia. Travis Tygart, head of the US anti-doping authority, declared, "It's another staggering example of how the Olympic movement has been corrupted and clean athletes robbed by Russia's state-supported doping system."

The *New York Times*, which first published Rodchenkov's accusations, is at the forefront of press coverage attacking Russia. A December 10 front-page article by Rebecca Ruiz insists that there is "little doubt that Russia's doping program was among the most sophisticated in sports history, perhaps ranking only behind that of the East German regime."

Despite these declarations and McLaren's insistence that the investigation's findings are "irrefutable" and the facts "immutable," many questions remain. There are numerous claims in the WADA report deserving of critical scrutiny.

It is entirely possible that Russia has been engaged in the systematic doping of athletes. The right-wing Putin regime has sought to use sports to promote its brand of virulent Russian nationalism and divert public attention from the deepening economic and social crisis of the country. There was, moreover, a history of doping and other illicit activities overseen by the Stalinist bureaucracy in connection with the national sports program during the Soviet period.

Nevertheless, doping is rampant within the highly politicized and commercialized world of international sports. The attempt to present Russia as some kind of aberrant actor infecting an otherwise pristine realm is both hypocritical and absurd.

McLaren's report continues to rely heavily on the narrative put forth by Rodchenkov, who fled Russia in January 2016 and became an anti-doping whistleblower after having been, according to his own admission, at the center of Moscow's corrupt system for years. He is wanted in Russia on charges of abuse of authority related to his tenure as the head of the country's WADA laboratory, which in 2013 lost its accreditation and in 2015 was accused of destroying athletes' urine samples. The Russian Investigative Committee says that Rodchenkov pressured athletes to use banned substances.

The report acknowledges that it has no witness testimony apart from that of Rodchenkov. The author insists that individuals were "reluctant or refused to provide information for fear of retaliation and abuse." Despite this, Rodchenkov's entire account is presented as if it is the unassailable truth. While some of the details he provides appear to be substantiated by physical evidence, others, for instance those regarding FSB involvement in doping, are uncorroborated.

The physical evidence cited is itself open to questioning and interpretation. The fact that male DNA was found in the samples of two female athletes is presented as proof by McLaren—seconded by the *Times*—of urine-sample tampering. However, there are biological reasons why this might occur. Swyer syndrome and androgen insensitivity syndrome are naturally occurring conditions in which people with external female sex characteristics have an XY, i.e., male, chromosome. The sportswomen involved could also be transgender individuals. The report and the related anti-Russia media campaign uniformly fail to mention, much less consider, these issues.

McLaren also attempts to use the response of the Russian government to the first installment of his report as evidence of the country's guilt. "Indeed, corrective actions announced by the Russian Federation following the issuance of the 1st Report implicitly confirm the contents of the 1st Report. There was an immediate suspension of the Deputy Minister of Sport Yuri Nagornykh, Anti-doping Advisor to the Minister of Sport, Natalia Zhelanova, and the Deputy Director of the Center of Sports Preparation of National Teams of Russia ("CSP") Irina Rodionova. By the time of writing this Report, those suspensions turned into formal discharges from office," he writes.

This is an absurd line of argument. The fact that the Kremlin, in an effort to quiet the anti-Russian hysteria unleashed by McLaren's first report, fired top sports officials is not evidence of anything. These individuals may have been implicated in illegal activity or they may have been the victims of shifting political winds.

In addition, while charging "over 1,000 athletes" in 30 different sports with being "involved in" or "benefiting from" doping, the physical evidence presented by McLaren examines only the urine samples of 120 athletes. With a handful of exceptions, the report does not name specific individuals in the

investigation. It insists this is intended to protect the identity of the athletes.

However, this also means that those allegedly guilty have no ability to challenge the accusations and prove their innocence. Furthermore, it is unclear how exactly the forensic evidence presented translates into the guilt of 1,000 people. The terms "involved in" and "benefit from" are so unspecific as to be capable of ensnaring athletes and others with only a remote connection to whatever illegal acts may have been committed.

There is a tremendous amount of hypocrisy in the charges being leveled against Russia. The world of international sports is a thoroughly corrupt enterprise, in which billions of dollars worth of ticket sales, advertising revenues, construction contracts and the like are at stake. Doping is a widespread problem, with athletes, sports officials, industry regulators and government representatives in country after country regularly engulfed in scandals related to the issue. In the US alone, major league baseball, football and cycling are just some of the sports that have been implicated in recent years in the dirty business of securing victories, medals and lucrative contracts at the expense of fair competition and the physical health of athletes.

British cyclist turned anti-doping whistleblower Dan Stevens observed in remarks to *Russia Today*, "Obviously, Russia has got problems, but I think doping is clearly an endemic problem. It's wrong for WADA to allow anyone to focus on one nation. As far as I'm aware, there hasn't been any other analysis of any other nation to the level that Russia has experienced."

WADA's single-minded focus on Russia, with its charges sensationalized by state-connected media outlets such as the *New York Times*, points to the politically motivated character of the campaign. The WADA investigation is aimed at demonizing, isolating and humiliating Russia. In September, the *Times* branded Russia an "outlaw state." The anti-doping campaign is part of this ongoing effort to characterize Russia as a "rogue" nation worthy of being targeted by American imperialism for war and conquest.



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