

Anti-Russian propaganda campaign intensifies in professional sports

Matthew Brennan
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The Russian invasion of Ukraine has set into motion a chauvinist anti-Russian campaign that was prepared well in advance by the Biden administration. The witch-hunting is particularly pronounced in the arts and in sports, with the aim of dehumanizing Russian workers and dividing the global population. This is seen as critical in enabling imperialist and capitalist governments to prepare larger and even more deadly wars.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has reported on the vicious campaign underway against famed Russian conductor Valery Gergiev and pianist Denis Matsuev. In professional sports, the anti-Russian campaign has steadily escalated over the past week.

This campaign was already underway prior to the invasion. During the Winter Olympics in Beijing, the American press seized upon an unclear and unresolved drug test failure by the exceptionally talented 15-year-old figure skater Kamila Valieva. This was used to whip up a tabloid-style media campaign against the young athlete and her team, with the intention of stoking anti-Russian sentiment in the American population.

On Monday, February 28, four days after the invasion of Ukraine, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) urged sports bodies to exclude Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials from international events.

The Olympic Committees of the United States, Great Britain and Germany quickly endorsed the call for a ban, which the IOC said was needed to “protect the integrity of global sports competitions and for the safety of all the participants.”

Both the US and Saudi Arabian militaries were engaged in bombing attacks on sovereign countries, in Syria and Yemen, respectively, on the same day that

Russia invaded Ukraine. The US and Saudi bombings are part of years-long terror campaigns by the two countries, with the aim of toppling the existing Syrian and Yemeni governments. Yet the IOC has never felt the need to “protect the integrity of global sports” in response to American or Saudi war crimes.

The IOC’s insistence that Russian and Belarusian athletes be banned from international competition opened the door for other agencies. The International Skating Union (ISU) decided to exclude all Russian athletes, including five Olympic medal winners and Valieva, from the upcoming world figure skating championships in France at the end of March.

In soccer, the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) and the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) jointly announced that they would suspend both men’s and women’s Russian teams from international play. This includes trial matches for the World Cup games in Qatar this November and the upcoming European championships. The only precedents for FIFA suspending teams on explicitly political grounds involved Yugoslavia in 1992, amid the outbreak of war in Bosnia, and South Africa in 1961 in connection with the country’s apartheid policies.

In basketball, British Home Secretary Priti Patel canceled visas issued to the Belarusian men’s team ahead of a scheduled World Cup qualifier match with Britain. The Netherlands followed suit in connection with an upcoming game with Russia.

In tennis, the Association of Tennis Professionals (ATP) and the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA) suspended the 2022 Kremlin Cup on Tuesday. The International Tennis Federation (ITF) also announced the suspension of the Russian Tennis Federation and Belarus Tennis Federation from its membership and

from participation in international team competitions. Players will be allowed to compete in professional matches, but not under their national flags.

In hockey, a nasty campaign swiftly materialized in the sports press attacking Russian-born players if they did not quickly enough or forcefully enough denounce Russia. In the National Hockey League (NHL), where approximately 55 players are from Russia, many are already citing threats against themselves and their families.

Ukrainian-born sports agent Dan Milstein, who represents nearly 75 percent of the Russian and Belarusian players in the NHL, remarked on Tuesday: “The discrimination and racism these Russian and Belarusian players are facing right now is remarkable. We’re being set back 30 years. I have players calling me, parents calling me. They’re concerned whether they’ll be able to play, whether they’ll be safe.”

One of the most popular hockey players in the world, Russian Alex Ovechkin of the Washington Capitals, has already been dropped from multiple business partnerships in the US and Canada since the invasion.

Former NHL goaltender Dominic Hasek, originally of the Czech Republic, tweeted on Tuesday: “The NHL must immediately suspend contracts for all Russian players! Every athlete represents not only himself and his club, but also his country and its values and actions. That is a fact. If the NHL does not do so, it has indirect co-responsibility for the dead in Ukraine. I also want to write that I am very sorry for those Russian athletes who condemn V. Putin and his Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, at the moment I also consider their exclusion a necessity.”

This hysterical and backward campaign comes on the heels of several bans of Russian hockey players at lower levels. On February 28, the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) banned Belarus and Russia from participation in “every age category and in all IIHF competitions until further notice.”

The IIHF also canceled the world junior hockey championships in Russia, to be rescheduled elsewhere and to exclude players from Russia. Former NHL Hall of Fame player Wayne Gretzky publicly called for Russians to be banned from the upcoming World Junior Hockey games in Alberta, Canada.

For their part, most of the Russian athletes have reacted to the February 24 invasion with sympathy for

the Ukrainians and pleas for an end to war. Ovechkin gave a press conference in which he stated, “Please, no more war. It doesn’t matter who is in the war—Russia, Ukraine, different countries—I think we have to live in peace and a great world.” This was largely denounced in the American press as “too easy on Putin.”

Russian tennis star Danil Medvedev, the number one ranked tennis player in the world, specifically worried about the impact of war on children in a Twitter post, noting, “I want to ask for peace in the world, for peace between countries...”

Tennis player Andrey Rublev, seventh-ranked player in the world, concluded a semi-final victory in Dubai by using a marker to write “No more war please” on the camera lens near him.

But even if these athletes had said nothing, they are not responsible for the conduct and decisions of the ruling class of their countries. The whipping of backward nationalist sentiments in sports has always been used to demonize a supposed “moral enemy” and create hostility between workers of different countries. This is the foul and war-mongering purpose of the current anti-Russia campaign in sports.



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