

“This is really dangerous territory”

UK government proposes Wimbledon ban on Daniil Medvedev, other Russian tennis players unless they repudiate Putin

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The UK government intensified its anti-Russian campaign last week by proposing to ban Russian tennis players, including the world’s top-ranking player Daniil Medvedev, participating in the Wimbledon tennis tournament unless they denounce Vladimir Putin.

When asked at a UK Parliament select committee meeting if Medvedev would be allowed to compete at Wimbledon in late June and early July, British Sports Minister Nigel Huddleston responded that Medvedev would need to provide “assurances” that he did not support Putin.

Seizing upon the Putin government’s reactionary invasion of Ukraine, the propagandists of American and European militarism have drummed up a hysterical campaign of anti-Russian chauvinism.

“Absolutely nobody flying the flag for Russia should be allowed,” Huddleston said in his screed last week against Russian athletes and tennis players. “Many of us would be willing and able to allow them to compete as non-aligned, non-flag-bearing entities.”

“But I think it needs to go beyond that,” he warned, adding, “we need some potential assurances that they are not supporters of Vladimir Putin, and we are considering what requirements we may need to try and get some assurances along those lines.”

Huddleston has not directed any of his ire against Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his own government, which has overseen the deaths of more than 160,000 people in the UK during the COVID-19 epidemic. Infamously, Johnson reacted with criminal indifference to the spread of the pandemic, “No more f—king

lockdowns. Let the bodies pile high.

Anti-Russia fever against Russian artists and professional athletes has gripped wide layers of the affluent middle class in the US and Europe. There is nothing progressive in the promotion of such nationalist hysteria to divide workers in Russia and Europe and the United States through reckless warmongering and brinkmanship.

The most recent victims of this appalling anti-Russia campaign include renowned conductor Valery Gergiev, who has been asked to denounce Putin, as well as pianists Denis Matsuev and Alexander Malofeev, conductor Tugan Sokhiev and cellist Anastasia Kobekina.

The anti-Russian campaign began even prior to Putin’s attack on Ukraine with the vicious and sensationalistic campaign against the talented 15-year-old Russian figure skater Kamila Valieva at the Beijing Olympics. The hysterical campaign against Russia and Belorussian athletes gained steam this month across multiple sports, including tennis, hockey and soccer.

A joint statement by the men’s and women’s governing tennis bodies, the Association of Tennis Players (ATP) and the Women’s Tennis Association (WTA), announced at the beginning of March they would suspend all tennis competitions in Russia.

The governing bodies also suspended the Russian Tennis Federation (RTF) and Belarus Tennis Federation (BTF) from membership. They added, “At this time, players from Russia and Belarus will continue to be allowed to compete in international tennis events on Tour and at the Grand Slams.

However, they will not compete under the name or flag of Russia or Belarus until further notice.”

The joint statement noted: “A deep sense of distress, shock and sadness has been felt across the entire tennis community following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in the past week. Our thoughts are with the people of Ukraine, and we commend the many tennis players who have spoken out and taken action against this unacceptable act of aggression. We echo their calls for the violence to end and peace to return.”

The hypocrisy of the joint ATP-WTA statement is all the more stark as neither organization ever bothered to denounce any of the innumerable illegal wars of aggression by the US, Britain, France over the last 30 years.

There’s growing opposition internationally on social media to the attacks on Russian tennis players such as Medvedev. One person said on Twitter, “This is weird. He isn’t a politician or a military leader; he’s a tennis player. I haven’t seen American or British players in any sport disavow their governments for any of the various military campaigns they have undertaken.”

Not a single US athlete or sports federation has been asked to denounce the war crimes of President George W. Bush when he invaded Iraq on the pretext of the most colossal lie of the 21st century, that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. Ironically, commenters have pointed to the hypocrisy of war criminal George W. Bush having a laugh with American tennis player Reilly Opelka recently.

There has also never been any outrage from the British sports federations about former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who backed Bush’s crimes in Iraq. Nor was Barack Obama held to account for his criminal drone strikes and conducting wars in more than seven countries.

WTA head Steve Simon, however, had to distance himself from the efforts of the UK government to impose outright bans on Russian tennis players. “I feel very strongly that these individual athletes should not be the ones that are being penalized by the decisions of an authoritarian leadership that is obviously doing terrible, reprehensible things,” Simon said.

Despite the hysteria against Russian athletes and tennis players, those who have spoken out have only expressed the most humane sentiments. Upon Putin’s invasion of Ukraine, Medvedev said: “By being a

tennis player, I want to promote peace all over the world. We play in so many different countries; I’ve been in so many countries as a junior and as a pro. It’s just not easy to hear all this news. I’m all for peace.”

The 26-year-old Medvedev recently became the top-ranked tennis player in the world but lost that ranking last week after a loss at the Indian Wells tournament in California. He won his first grand slam at the US Open last year, beating then- (and present) world number one Novak Djokovic. Born in 1996 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Medvedev is an immensely accomplished tennis player who has won 13 ATP Tour singles titles.

After a match in Dubai, Russian tennis player Andrey Rublev, looking distraught, wrote, “No war please” on a camera. At the Indian Wells tournament last week, when asked what he thought about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Rublev said, “What’s happening is terrible. I feel really bad for everyone. That’s why sports have to be an example: we have to be united, we need to be outside politics, to show example at least inside of sport. I think that would be a good message for a better world.”

Former Australian tennis player Todd Woodbridge criticized the UK government’s proposal to ban Russian tennis players. Speaking to *Sports Sunday*, Woodbridge said, “That is such slippery and dangerous ground. We all know they have families back in whatever part of Russia they are from, and you do not want to be on the wrong side of that, because your family will pay a price.

“This is really dangerous territory, and one that we have to be very sensitive about,” Woodbridge added.



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