

Wimbledon bans Russian and Belarusian players in foul anti-Russia campaign

Robert Stevens
26 April 2022

Britain's prestigious Wimbledon tennis tournament has banned Russian and Belarusian players from competing in this year's event, which takes place in London from June 27 to July 10. The decision by the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club (AELTC) accompanied a ban from *all* UK tennis events announced by Britain's Lawn Tennis Association (LTA).

The announcements deepen the Russophobic crusade in all professional sports being driven by the NATO powers. The International Olympic Committee has called on sports bodies to exclude Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials from international events. UK Conservative government Home Secretary Priti Patel, while finalising her plans to send desperate asylum seekers to Rwanda, found time to cancel visas issued to the Belarusian men's basketball team ahead of a scheduled World Cup qualifier match with Britain.

The AELTC said in imposing the ban, "Given the profile of The Championships in the United Kingdom and around the world, it is our responsibility to play our part in the widespread efforts of Government, industry, sporting and creative institutions to limit Russia's global influence through the strongest means possible."

Originally the government had planned to force players from Russia and Belarus to sign a statement before competing declaring their opposition to Russian President Vladimir Putin, thereby proving themselves "genuinely neutral". They would also have had to provide assurances that they did not receive financial support from Putin or the Russian government. UK Sports Minister Nigel Huddleston commented last month, "If some individual sports or entities choose to do an outright ban of Russian or Belarusian athletes, then we will support that as well."

The Wimbledon ban placed the Association of Tennis

Professionals (ATP) and Women's Tennis Association (WTA) in an embarrassed position, outflanked by their own filthy anti-Russia campaign.

On March 1, together with the International Tennis Federation (ITF), the ATP and WTA banned Russian and Belarusian teams from their competitions "until further notice", while decreeing that Russian and Belarusian individuals would be allowed to play—without displaying their national flag or having their national anthem played.

The ATP said as Wimbledon's ban was announced, "We believe that today's unilateral decision by Wimbledon and the LTA to exclude players from Russia and Belarus from this year's British grass-court swing is unfair and has the potential to set a damaging precedent for the game. *Discrimination based on nationality* also constitutes a violation of our agreement with Wimbledon that states that player entry is based solely on ATP Rankings [emphasis added]."

The ATP seemed not to notice that their own ban on teams from those countries was "discrimination based on nationality" and nothing else.

This year's Wimbledon tournament has been rendered absurd and meaningless, given that a host of the best tennis players on the planet are among those banned.

Russian star Daniil Medvedev is ranked number two in the world and was second favourite to take the men's Wimbledon trophy. Russian Andrey Rublev is the seventh-ranked men's player in the world, Belarusian Aryna Sabalenka the women's number four, and Russian Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova ranked 15th. The 18th ranked woman, Belarusian multiple Grand Slam winner Victoria Azarenka, twice a Wimbledon semi-finalist, is also barred.

Overall, nine of the best 30 players in the world are

banned, and nearly a fifth of the top 100.

As the WSWS noted previously, “most of the Russian athletes” banned from competing in the world’s most prestigious sports events “have reacted to the February 24 invasion with sympathy for the Ukrainians and pleas for an end to war.”

Among them is Rublev, who denounced the ban on himself and the other players as “complete discrimination”, adding, “The reasons they gave us had no sense, they were not logical.” On his way to winning the Dubai Championships in February, Rublev concluded his semi-final victory by using a marker to write “No more war please” on a TV camera lens.

Medvedev said in a Twitter post, “I want to ask for peace in the world, for peace between countries...”

The most significant opposition to the ban has come from defending champion Novak Djokovic, a six times Wimbledon winner and holder of 20 Grand Slam titles.

Djokovic was born in Belgrade and said as he competed in this month’s Serbia Open tournament, “I will always be the first one to condemn the war. As a child of war, I know what kind of emotional trauma a war leaves. Us in Serbia, we know what was happening here in 1999. Ordinary people always suffer—we’ve had lots of wars in the Balkans. That being said, I cannot support the Wimbledon decision. It’s not the athletes’ fault. When politics interfere with sport, it usually doesn’t turn out well.”

Others have drawn a line in their opposition between banning individuals versus national teams.

Alexander Zverev, the leading German player and men’s number three, said that while he did not oppose bans on Russian teams competing in team sports, including tennis, he opposed the “general” exclusion of individual players from Russia and Belarus, saying, “I don’t think that’s correct.”

Eighteen-time grand slam winner Martina Navratilova said in an interview with London’s LBC Radio, “The Russian and Belarusian players, some have even expressed, vocalised, their opposition to the war... I understand the banning of teams, of course, representing the countries, but on an individual level, I just think it’s wrong.”

Among the legends of the game opposing the ban are former Wimbledon champions Michael Stich and Billie Jean King.

While declaring that “The decision of the LTA and

the AELTC regarding the Russian and Belarusian players at this year’s tournament was a difficult and complex undertaking, and I appreciate the challenges and pressures they are facing,” King insisted, “One of the guiding principles of the founding of the WTA was that any girl in the world, if she was good enough, would have a place to compete. I stood by that in 1973 and I stand by that today. I cannot support the banning of individual athletes from any tournament, simply because of their nationality.”

It testifies to the enormous pressures being placed on individuals in the public eye that even many of those who react against bans applied in their own sphere feel required to carefully limit their opposition. In truth there is no division between bans on individuals and teams, all of which drip with hypocrisy and carry with them profoundly reactionary implications.

None of the athletes or national team members participating at Wimbledon, now and in the past, are or were responsible for the conduct and decisions of the ruling class of their countries—some of which involved monumental crimes far beyond any that Russia may have committed in the war in Ukraine.

While inevitably reflecting the impact of incessant anti-Russia propaganda, the opposition of some of tennis’ leading figures to the banning of Russian and Belarusian players is nevertheless a healthy response to a filthy and polluting campaign. It must be strengthened and carried forward by workers and youth internationally, against any and all bans of Russian and Belarusian teams and individuals from participating in global cultural and sports events.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact