

Rebuilding dreams: prioritising the needs of Ukraine's Olympic sports amidst war

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The ongoing conflict in Ukraine, sparked by Russia's unprovoked invasion in February 2022, has not only wrought devastation on the nation's infrastructure and population but has also cast a long shadow over its Olympic sports community. As Ukraine grapples with the harrowing realities of war, its athletes and sports professionals face unparalleled challenges, with their dreams and aspirations hanging in the balance. In addition, this conflict has left its mark on the nation's sports landscape, with significant damage inflicted on infrastructure, athletes displaced, and training schedules disrupted. Despite these challenges, the upcoming Paris Olympics serve as a beacon of hope for Ukrainian athletes, offering them a platform to showcase their resilience and talent to the world. Their participation not only underscores the transcendent power of sports but also fosters unity across borders in the face of adversity.

As Ukrainian athletes prepare for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, they confront both symbolic significance and practical hurdles. Amidst the turmoil of war, they strive to rebuild and represent their nation with pride and resilience on the global stage. As of 15 March 2024, Ukraine holds 58 licenses for the Olympics across 17 sports, with swimming, athletics and shooting each boasting 8 licenses. Football leads with 18 athlete representations.¹ This stands in contrast to the 158 licenses the Ukrainian national team held for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics, highlighting the impact of the conflict on sports participation.² This commentary aims to raise awareness regarding the many challenges

experienced by Ukrainian athletes, the complexity and questions of Russian athlete participation in the Olympic Games and the priorities to rebuild the Ukrainian sports infrastructure.

UPHOLDING THE OLYMPIC PRINCIPLES: WHO SHOULD PARTICIPATE?

The International Olympic Committee (IOC's) Solidarity Fund for the Ukrainian Olympic Community has provided a range of support and assistance to athletes as they prepare for and Milano Cortina 2026. As of February 2023, approximately 3000 Ukrainian athletes and coaches have benefitted from this support and the direct assistance of National Olympic Committees and International Federations, enabling them to continue training and competing in major events, including the World Athletics Championships, the World Games and the Summer European Youth Olympic Festival.³

On the other hand, the IOC also will permit the participation of Russian athletes under a neutral flag at the³ Paris 2024 Olympics in accordance with a number of conditions, such as: Athletes who actively support the war will not be eligible to enter or compete; and support personnel who actively support the war will not be entered.⁴ IOC's decision was influenced by United Nations experts on human rights, claiming that the ban discriminated against Russian athletes.⁵ This decision has sparked controversy and raised questions about the normalisation of Russia's position within the international community.

One-year earlier in 2022, the IOC recommended 'that International Sports Federations and sports event organizers not invite or allow the participation of Russian and Belarusian athletes and officials in international competitions'.⁶ The reason was Russia's breach of the ideals in the Olympic Charter, and 'a blatant violation of the Olympic Truce that was in effect at the time'.⁵

As a response to the decision of the IOC permitting Russian athletes to participate under a neutral flag,⁴ a group of Ukrainian athletes published a letter of appeal to the

President of France Emmanuel Macron, Mayor of Paris Anne Hidalgo, Minister of Sports of France Amélie Oudéa-Castéra and the organisers of the 2024 Olympic Games regarding the exclusion of Russian athletes from the competition. In the letter, Ukrainian athletes expressed their respect and gratitude to government leaders and requested an unwavering stance and comprehensive support of the Ukrainian state in its fight for sovereignty and independence against the actions of a brutal aggressor. They stated: 'In July 2024, the XXXIII Olympic Games will begin in Paris. We, Ukrainian athletes, seek your continued support in the fight to uphold Olympic principles and prevent athletes from terrorist states from participating. No athlete from these countries has publicly spoken out against the killings, against the genocide of the Ukrainian people during the war'.

There is currently disagreement in the international sports world about whether Russian and Belarusian athletes should be admitted to international competitions. Sports federations are invoking their autonomy on this issue, with some following the IOC's advice, some maintaining a ban and others allowing unconditional participation.⁷ For example, the Conference of German Sports Ministers supports a ban from competition by stating that 'the warmonger Russia must not use international sporting events as a stage for its propaganda'.^{7,8}

DEFINING PRIORITIES TO SUPPORT UKRAINIAN ATHLETES

Given the prevailing circumstances and the imperative to establish aid priorities and to help organise the allocation of international funds and aid to Olympic athletes in Ukraine, a Delphi study was carried out with 42 experts, both international and Ukrainian, in this context of turbulence and uncertainty. The study aimed to distill the complex array of challenges facing Ukrainian athletes into a coherent framework for action.⁹ The resulting top 10 priority needs (table 1) offer a roadmap for both immediate intervention and long-term development, aimed at safeguarding the career prospects of Ukrainian athletes and revitalising the nation's Olympic sports landscape. Foremost among these needs is the imperative to develop and maintain the fitness levels of Ukrainian athletes, ensuring their readiness to compete at the highest levels despite the adversities of war. Additionally, the implementation of a robust system for athlete recovery emerges as a pressing necessity, safeguarding the

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Table 1 Top 10 needs of Ukraine's Olympic sports in hostile conditions identified by a Delphi study⁹

No	Needs of Ukraine's Olympic sports in hostile conditions
1	Develop and maintain the athlete's fitness level.
2	Implementation of a better system for athlete recovery.
3	Ensure a safe training place for athletes.
4	Improve the quality of athlete training programmes.
5	Develop the logistical and technical base of specialised sports education and organisation.
6	Provide sports facilities with modern equipment and inventory.
7	Increase the level of funding to Olympic Reserve Sports.
8	Provide financial support to sports teams and talented athletes.
9	Prohibit international competitions on the territory of the aggressor country.
10	Foster a better cooperation between the National Sport Federation of Ukraine and International Sports Federations.

well-being and performance optimisation of athletes amidst the rigours of training and competition. Moreover, the provision of safe and secure training environments for Ukrainian athletes is paramount, mitigating the threats posed by armed conflict and military aggression.⁹

In outlining these critical needs, it is important to acknowledge the geopolitical considerations that further complicate Ukraine's path to recovery. Ukrainian leaders are now faced with the challenging task of navigating this complex landscape and weighing their options in the run-up to the Games. While the prospect of a boycott has been raised, its effectiveness remains uncertain, particularly considering the limited support from Western allies. However, leveraging the Olympic arena as a platform for advocating against Russian aggression may offer a more impactful avenue for Ukraine's sports community. By amplifying their voices for peace and justice on the global stage while also demonstrating an inspiring resilience, Ukrainian athletes can shine a spotlight on the atrocities unfolding in their homeland

and galvanise international support for their cause.

The Olympic Games represent one of the most heated and intense forms of international competition, but they are also used as a symbol to promote peace. While Olympic sports attempt to be apolitical, they are constantly politicised. It is precisely these paradoxes that make the Olympics much more than a sporting event, but an important political, social, economic and cultural phenomenon.^{10 11}

CONCLUSION

Efforts to prioritise the needs of Ukraine's Olympic sports must include immediate humanitarian assistance and long-term investments in rebuilding infrastructure, providing training opportunities and ensuring the well-being of athletes affected by the conflict. International solidarity and support are crucial as Ukrainian athletes prepare to embark on their journey to³ Paris 2024 and other important competitions, embodying the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of sports.

In the face of adversity, Ukraine's Olympic sports community stands as a beacon of resilience and determination, refusing to let conflict extinguish their dreams. The results of the Delphi study provide a solid foundation for targeted interventions and long-term planning, ensuring that the identified needs align with the aspirations and challenges faced by Ukrainian athletes. Together, let us rally behind Ukraine's athletes, supporting their aspirations for peace, justice and a brighter future for generations to come.

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